

2020

Strategies for Increasing Revenues for Sun Belt National Hockey League Teams

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Dwayne A. Gantz

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Strategies for Increasing Revenues for Sun Belt National Hockey League Teams

by

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2009

BA, Trinity Western University, 1985

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2020

Abstract

Failure to increase revenues negatively impacts the sustainability and viability of businesses on a long-term basis. Some organizational leaders of the United States Sun Belt National Hockey League (NHL) teams do not possess the skills or experiences to take advantage of the opportunities developed from successful business applications to increase revenues. Grounded in Porter's 5 forces model and Porter's competitive strategy theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies used by organizational leaders of Sun Belt hockey teams to increase revenues. The participants comprised 5 organizational leaders from NHL teams located in Sun Belt locations of the United States who effectively used strategies to increase revenues. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, publicly available NHL information, and Sun Belt team websites. Yin's 5-step data analysis was used to analyze the data with 5 themes emerging: customer acquisition and retention, market segmentation, promotion, unique value proposition, and product differentiation. A key recommendation is for Sun Belt organizational leaders not to rely on the traditional hockey fan to sustain or grow revenue but focus on women, families, and fans' ethnicity. The implications for positive social change include Sun Belt leaders' potential to increase meaningful employment to enhance the quality of life for local members of the community.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my wife, daughter, grandsons, mother, and my family. To my wife, Rosemary, you are the most loving person I know. Your unwavering support has made it possible for me to achieve this dream of ours, I could never thank you enough. I am forever grateful to have you as my wife, my best friend, and my pillar of strength. To my daughter, Emily, thank you for being my motivation in life, and who said I could do this no matter what it takes. I am blessed to be your father. To my grandsons, Chance and Wyatt, thank you both for understanding that there were times when I needed to do homework, and for your doing your homework with me. To Dr. Robert Banasik, your commitment, encouragement, and motivation to reach success, served as examples to achieve my goal. To my mother who always believed that I could achieve whatever I wanted. To all my family members and friends, thank you for your encouragement and contribution to the achievement of this academic journey. This is also dedicated to my birth country, Canada, which shaped my character, and gave me the love of ice hockey. To God, who always gave me the strength to keep moving forward, giving me joy, peace, and love for others which helped me meet the challenge and reach the goal.

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There are many people that supported me throughout this journey, and the completion of this study would not be possible without them. To my wife, Rosemary, thank you for always supporting me with joy, smiles, love, and a sense of humor. I want to express my gratitude to my chairs for their feedback, direction, support, and guidance. Many thanks to my Chair, Dr. Robert Banasik, for his mentorship, patience, understanding, brilliance, and sense of humor, while at the same time providing me with motivation, hope, and encouragement at the most critical times during my doctoral study. To Dr. Lisa Cave, Second Committee Member, thank you for your patience, feedback and support. To my University Research Reviewer, Dr. Ronald Jones, thank you for your support, expertise, and advice that has made the completion of this study possible. Lastly, my sincere thanks to the organizational leaders from Sun Belt National Hockey League teams for sharing their time and knowledge.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

A primary challenge for organizational leaders is ensuring that the business is sustainable and viable on a long-term basis (Captureanu, Ceptureanu, Orzan, & Marin, 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt National Hockey League (NHL) teams to increase revenue. I explored, using a qualitative study method and multicase study design, the phenomenon of successful strategies that increased Sun Belt NHL team revenues and extracted themes regarding these initiatives.

Background of the Problem

Light, Chernin, and Heffernan (2016) indicated that while NHL teams in Canada and the Northeastern United States have fairly steady revenues, teams in the Southern United States (the Sun Belt) regularly rank in the bottom of league revenue and attendance lists. The average annual revenue for the 2013-2014 season was \$123 million, and the lowest was \$80 million (Light et al., 2016). Additionally, five of the bottom six teams in merchandise sales were Sun Belt NHL teams, ranking 30, 29, 28, 27, and 25 (O'Reilly, Foster, Murray, & Shimizu, 2015). One Sun Belt NHL team declared bankruptcy in 2009 and had the lowest 2014 revenue in the NHL (Light et al., 2016). According to King, Rice, and Vaughan (2018), NHL team popularity as measured by the number of Twitter followers indicated that Sun Belt teams made up seven of the bottom nine teams in Twitter popularity. With almost a third of the NHL teams located in the Sun Belt, the significance of the revenue generated by these teams has increased in

importance (NHL, 2019). Several of the successful Sun Belt teams might be using strategies that could add value to other Sun Belt teams that are currently struggling.

Problem Statement

In 2004, the NHL was moving toward financial disaster as three teams had filed for bankruptcy with several other teams nearing default (Treber, Mulcahy, & Sharma, 2018). The Arizona Coyotes declared bankruptcy in 2009 and had the lowest 2014 revenue in the NHL at \$80 million (Light et al., 2016). The general business problem was some NHL teams were struggling financially. The specific business problem was that some organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams lacked strategies to increase revenues.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams to increase revenues. The targeted population consisted of five hockey organization leaders who have implemented successful strategies to generate revenue for NHL teams in the Sun Belt region of the United States. The implication for positive social change could be the opportunity for Sun Belt team organization leaders to acquire new strategies to increase revenue, which could result in job creation and improved economies in the local communities.

Nature of the Study

There are three research methods in academic research, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Williams, 2007). Researchers use the quantitative methodology to examine the relationships between dependent and independent variables or groups' differences using statistical models to explain observations (Berneth, Cole, Taylor, &

Walker, 2018). I did not use statistical analysis to examine relationships among variables or groups' differences because my focus was on the analysis of participants' experiences. Therefore, a quantitative methodology was not an appropriate research choice. The qualitative approach uses an inductive process that employs data collection through documentary and interview evidence (Cooper, Grenier, & Macaulay, 2017). The mixed methods approach includes components of both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and data analysis (Alavi, Archibald, McMaster, Lopez, & Cleary, 2018). The mixed methods approach includes quantitative inquiry, and because I was not considering quantitative information, the mixed methods approach was not appropriate for the study. I selected a qualitative method because I explored the analysis of the organizations' and participants' actual experiences.

I reviewed three types of qualitative research designs, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. Researchers use the ethnographic design to explore interpretations, intellectual patterns, and beliefs of groups' cultures (Cardoso, Gontijo, & Ono, 2017). Because I did not study groups' cultures, the ethnographic design was not suitable for this study. Researchers use the phenomenological design to extract data about the meanings of participants' lived personal experiences from the participants' recollections and interpretations (Forster, 2019). I did not explore the meanings of participants' lived experiences of participants, so the phenomenological design was not suitable for this study. Researchers use qualitative case studies to explore detailed phenomena in real world situations (Yin, 2018). I used the case study design because it was appropriate for understanding successful strategies from the participants' actual

experiences as described by Yin (2018). I focused on learning more about successful strategies used by Sun Belt NHL teams that increased revenues. According to Yin (2018), multiple types and sources of data collection achieve a more complete and multifaceted understanding of a phenomenon. According to Mason-Bish (2018), using multicase study design has advantages because a researcher can make conclusions by comparing views of different participants' organizations. The multiple case study research design involves collecting data from multiple organizations and sources within the organizations (Clarke & Higgs, 2016), individuals, or groups bound by time or space (Yin, 2018). Researchers use case study designs to study what, how, and why questions regarding a set of events over which the researcher has little control (Mason-Bish, 2018). Researchers use a multiple case study instead of a single case study design to conduct a deeper analysis of the phenomenon under investigation by evaluating similarities and differences of the information among the cases (Yin, 2018). The multiple case study design was the most appropriate for this study because I collected data from multiple organizations and sources to explore the strategies that NHL team organization leaders in Sun Belt locations have used successfully to generate revenue.

Research Question

The following central research question guided the study:

RQ: What strategies do organization leaders of NHL Sun Belt teams use to increase revenues?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to increase your team's revenues?

2. Which of those strategies and processes have been most successful in the increasing of revenues?
3. What, if any, strategies for revenue generation are unique to the geographic location and size of your team?
4. What key challenges did you encounter when implementing your strategies?
5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing your strategies for generating revenue?
6. How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies for generating revenue?
7. What additional information can you provide to help me understand your team's strategies in increasing revenues?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Porter's model of competitive strategy, specifically Porter's five forces. Porter (1980) developed the five forces model in 1979. Leaders striving for a competitive advantage using Porter's model focus on five primary forces: (a) threat of new entrants, (b) bargaining power of suppliers, (c) bargaining power of buyers, (d) threat of substitutes, and (e) competitive rivalry (Downing, 2018). Business leaders using Porter's five forces analyze the key issues within each force to develop strategies for success and to identify new areas of revenue and profitability (Azadi & Rahimzadeh, 2012). Additionally, in 1985, Porter introduced competitive generic strategies consisting of cost leadership, differentiation, and focus used by organizations to establish and maintain competitive advantage (Hales &

McLarney, 2017). Because Sun Belt NHL teams' leaders seeking effective marketing initiatives for sustainability could benefit from the framework of Porter's five forces and competitive strategies as they strive for revenue producing opportunities, Porter's model was useful for understanding the findings from my study.

Operational Definitions

Throughout this research study, I utilized several key terms found in scholarly literature. These terms are helpful in understanding the background of the problem.

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage is the edge an organization has on its competitors in terms of reducing cost and attracting customers to increase profits (Makhmoor & Rajesh, 2017).

Competitive rivalry: Competitive rivalry is when businesses use a similar type of resources to compete in the same market and for the same products or services (Chen, Liu, & Wu, 2016).

Customer relationship management: This is the process of developing and maintaining customer relationships by enhancing value and delivering customer service satisfaction (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016).

Omnichannel strategy: An omnichannel strategy is the interaction between channels and helps brands optimize the customer experience, redesign channels, touch points, and value proposition from the customer perspective (Picot-Coupey, Hure, & Piveteau, 2016).

Relationship marketing: Relationship marketing is marketing with an emphasis on customer retention, loyalty, and satisfaction with the objective of developing long-term customer relationships (Jones et al., 2015).

Sports Fandom: Sports fandom refers to the state of being a fan or spectator, which involves having an interest in a sport, team, or specific player or players (Toder-Alon, Icekson, & Shuv-Ami, 2019).

Sun Belt NHL Teams: The ten current NHL teams in the Sun Belt region are: Anaheim Ducks, Arizona Coyotes, Carolina Hurricanes, Dallas Stars, Florida Panthers, Los Angeles Kings, Nashville Predators, San Jose Sharks, Tampa Bay Lightning, and Vegas Golden Knights. There are defunct NHL teams previously located in the Sun Belt: Atlanta Flames, Atlanta Thrashers, and California Golden Seals (NHL, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

According to Feller, Mealli, and Miratrix (2017), assumptions are elements that are outside of the researcher's control and without proof. Assumptions are facts considered to be true for which sufficient evidence to support the inference does not exist (Thomas, 2016). The first assumption of this study was that participants would answer the interview questions honestly and without bias. I assumed the participants understood the interview questions and had a realistic and authentic recollection of their experience. I assumed the participants provided information that was accurate and reflected the reality of their experience pertaining to the phenomenon in the study. I assumed that the

participants provided valid data. Another assumption was that the participants selected for the study possessed the knowledge and information pertaining to the research topic.

Limitations

Limitations of a study include influences that are not within the control of researchers but affect the results (Yin, 2018) and are potential weaknesses of the research study (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018). Limitations are items out of the researcher's control that may restrict or impact the study (Wolfer et al., 2017). A key limitation was that participants could provide information that may contain bias because of subjective responses. Another limitation was that the participants could impact organizational success by providing proprietary strategies. To actively manage this situation, I interviewed each participant using a secured telephone number of their choice. I assured them that their responses were confidential and that any information would remain secure and confidential. Another limitation was my inexperience in conducting interviews. Another limitation was that research participants could withdraw from the research study at any time during the research process, which would be mitigated by replacing them with other willing participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the elements of a doctoral research study that determine the boundaries and limit the scope of the research (Gutierrez, Marquez, & Reficco, 2016). According to Wolfer et al. (2017), delimitations are boundaries developed by the researcher that limit the scope of the study or cannot answer the research question. One delimitation was the restriction of the geographic location of the participants to the Sun

Belt region of the United States. A second delimitation was the industry, which is the NHL. Yoo (2017) indicated that the industry specificity is a delimitation in a research study. All participants have worked in the NHL for a Sun Belt team or teams. Another delimitation was that I studied a small number of organizational leaders of NHL Sun Belt teams in this multiple case research study.

Significance of the Study

My study's findings could be of value to business because the findings may have implications for the development of strategies for facilitating the growth and competitiveness of NHL hockey into additional Sun Belt cities. The potential significance of this study lies in the possibility that organization leaders of current Sun Belt NHL teams who implement these strategies could improve their earnings potential and increase revenues and eliminate the revenue disparities that exist between the Sun Belt teams and the Northern United States and Canadian teams.

Contribution to Business Practice

The potential contributions of this study to business practice included providing more insights into successful competitive strategies and practices that organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams used to increase revenues. Organization leaders implementing marketing strategies regarding product, location, promotion, price, and possibly the framework of Porter's five forces could increase competitiveness, enhance revenues, and satisfy the needs of current fans. Organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams could use the findings of this study to equip themselves with the knowledge to

develop appropriate strategies and techniques to compete more effectively in the sporting market through increasing revenues and profits.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include increasing employment rates and contributing to local communities' economic development through increased employment and tax revenues. Revenues generated by Sun Belt NHL teams support employment. Increased employment could lead to sustainability and revitalizing the social and economic conditions of communities (Mikolajek-Gocejna, 2016). Sustainable businesses could also lead to team longevity, which may lead to increased meaningful employment to enhance the quality of life for local members of the community. Organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams have opportunities to improve local economies and to contribute to positive social change.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I conducted a critical analysis and synthesis of the professional literature pertaining to the following research question:

RQ: What strategies do organization leaders of NHL Sun Belt teams use to increase revenues?

I explored literature pertaining to Porter's five forces model and competitive strategy theory for use as the conceptual framework. The review of literature focused on Porter's five forces model and Porter's competitive advantage theory and a synopsis of prior research on the topics. The review included an overview of the background on the historical operation of the NHL and the impact on Sun Belt located teams. The purpose of

the literature review was to assess, analyze, and summarize the literature, as well as to compare and contrast the sources that related to the research study (Wee & Banister, 2016).

According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017) and Yin (2018), the literature review is the analysis and synthesis a combination of similar works from numerous scholars that analyzes, synthesizes, and provides additional knowledge. The literature search comprised business and management information accessible through the Walden Library, EBSCO Host, ProQuest Central, Google Scholar, Emerald Management, Business Source Complete, and SAGE Premier databases that have peer-reviewed articles. I used Ulrich's Periodicals Directory to provide confirmation of peer-reviewed status of referenced journals. Key words used in the literature search were words based on the conceptual framework of Porter's five forces and competitive advantage theory: *Porter's five forces model, Porter's competitive advantage, Porter's competitive strategy, competitive strategy theory, innovation, customer, cost leadership, differentiation, competitive rivalry, blue ocean strategy, National Hockey League, Sun Belt hockey teams, professional hockey, the business of sports, and NHL revenue.*

The literature review included peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2020 with at least 85% peer-reviewed. The 72 peer-reviewed sources composed 86.7% of the 83 total sources, and 85.5% had publication dates of within 5 years or less (2016 or later) from the study's expected completion date. In addition, the full study contained a total of 235 references with 88.9% peer-reviewed and 90.2% of the total references published within 5 years (2016 or later) of my anticipated 2020 year of chief academic

officer approval. Table 1 has the summary of the breakdown of the sources in the literature review section and in the full document.

Table 1

Publication Breakdown for Full Document and Literature Review

	Total sources	Year published (2016-2020)	Percentage published 2016-2020	Peer-reviewed sources	Percentage peer-reviewed
Full document	235	212	90.2%	209	88.9%
Literature review	83	71	85.5%	72	86.7%

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams to increase revenues. Porter's five forces model includes the bargaining power of buyers, the bargaining power of suppliers, the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitutes, and competitive rivalry (Wee, 2017). Using Porter's five forces model, leaders can analyze external factors that impact their business strategies (Haleem & Jehangir, 2017). According to Alexandroa and Metaxas (2016), leaders want to maintain a sustainable competitive strategy, especially when changing how the business operates. Utilizing Porter's five forces has aided researchers in determining the strategic approach, effectiveness, and efficiency of the problem analyzed (Downing, 2018). Prasad and Warriar (2016) indicated that when a company wants to analyze their operating environment, Porter's five forces model provides a snapshot of the different forces impacting the company and shaping its profits. These five forces prevailing in an industry can help determine the profitability of the company.

Light et al. (2016) indicated that while NHL teams in Canada and the Northeastern United States have fairly steady revenues, teams in the Southern United States regularly rank in the bottom of league revenue and attendance lists. Hockey may not be of interest to individuals living in cities in the Sun Belt. The average annual revenue for the 2013-2014 season was \$123 million, with a Sun Belt team the lowest at \$80 million followed closely by another Sun Belt team at \$83 million (Light et al., 2016).

The NHL has league-imposed constraints on expansion, team movement from one market to another, player drafts, and revenue sharing (York & Miree, 2018). Revenue sharing occurs first between the players and owners by the means of a salary cap and between teams in large revenue markets and teams in small revenue markets (York & Miree, 2018). The collective bargaining agreement (CBA) mandated that 57% of league revenue is paid to the players each season (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). The objective of revenue sharing is to encourage revenue-poor markets to acquire players, improve player retention, improve player salaries, improve team performance, and to make improvements in their playing venues (York & Miree, 2018).

According to O'Reilly et al. (2015), there are six factors that impact merchandise sales: (a) overall fan satisfaction, (b) media exposure, (c) on-the-ice performance, (d) strength of a club's brand, (e) local market dynamics, and (f) fan capacity to pay. The top five teams in terms of merchandise sales were: (1) Montreal, (2) Chicago, (3) Pittsburgh, (4) Toronto, and (5) Detroit (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Additionally, five of the bottom six teams in merchandise sales were Sun Belt NHL teams, ranking 30, 29, 28, 27, and 25 (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

According to Kelley, Harrolle, and Casper (2014), game day spending is critical for NHL teams' profitability as nearly half the NHL franchises generate more than two-thirds of their annual income from ticket sales. Revenue is influenced by the day of the week, special promotions, opponent, month in season, time of the game, merchandise per cap sales, and food and beverage per cap sales for the NHL team (Kelley et al., 2014). Concession sales can account for between 10% and 28% of revenue with NHL concessions ranging between \$5 and \$12 per game which is behind Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Football League (NFL), but ahead of the National Basketball Association (NBA; Kelley et al., 2014). Strategies to increase game day spending on concessions and merchandise could have a significant impact on NHL team revenue.

According to King et al. (2018), NHL team popularity as measured by the number of Twitter followers indicated that a Sun Belt team ranked eighth with another Sun Belt team at 14th, however, Sun Belt teams were seven of the bottom nine teams. Several of the successful Sun Belt teams might be using strategies that could add value to other Sun Belt teams that are currently struggling.

Maxcy and Milwood (2018) indicated that in the year 2007, 15 NHL clubs had negative operating income, which meant that half the league were in a loss situation. The NHL clubs with negative operating income increased to 18, or 60% of the league, in 2011. Maxcy and Milwood argued that the large number of clubs losing money was the cause for the 2012-2013 owner lockout. For example, by 2008, the owners of the Phoenix Coyotes had advanced more than \$300 million to operate the franchise, which was in a

tenuous financial situation despite such funds (Desgrosseilliers & Pape, 2016). The NHL showed a gain in profitable clubs following the implementation of the 2012 CBA when in 2015 eight clubs (26.6% of the league) reported negative operating income (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). In comparison, MLB only had three clubs with negative operating income in 2007, 2011, and 2015, which was 10% of the league (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018).

King et al. (2018) examined the NHL average attendance from the 2013 hockey season through the beginning of the 2017 hockey season to understand the main variables of attendance. The findings indicated that the team name, the number of Twitter followers, median ticket price, and arena capacity were the four main predictor elements. Additionally, other elements were determined to be significant such as: (a) there is a positive relationship between past performance and attendance, (b) ticket price and television coverage were found to have a negative effect on attendance, (c) per capita income positively impacts game attendance, (d) a successful record is not necessary for high attendance, (e) marketing efforts can positively affect attendance, (f) stadium design and services are of great importance, and (g) scheduling of games and promotional activities were found to be the most important determinants in attendance variation (King et al., 2018). The findings indicated that fan loyalty and the ability of the team to entertain and promote are important drivers of attendance.

Porter's Five Forces Model

Porter (1980) developed the five forces model in the late 1970s and early 1980s by focusing on the external business perspectives to understand why some firms were

successful while others failed. According to Evans (2016), leaders used Porter's five forces model and competitive advantage theory to develop relevant business strategies. There have been few works other than Porter's book *Competitive Strategies* (1980) that had five forces, which are three forces of horizontal competition, the threat of substitute products, threat of rivals, and the threat of new entrants, and two forces of vertical competition of bargaining power of suppliers and the bargaining power of customers (Wee, 2017).

Competitive advantage strategies consist of three types: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus (Porter, 1980). According to Rizea (2015), Porter's five forces are interrelated and developments in one force have an impact on the other forces. Analyzing all five competitive forces leads to a comprehensive view of what is impacting the industries' profitability. Allowing for identification at an early stage can provide ways to mitigate constraints or even positively reshape the forces (Porter, 2008). Awareness of the five forces can help marketers to better understand the structure of an industry and develop a position that is more profitable, sustainable, and less vulnerable to attack.

The threat of substitutes. According to Porter (1980), the threat of substitutes exists when similar goods or services can provide the similar function at a lower price. Product alternatives have required leaders to explore differentiators in the products and services, thus offering a product or a service with differences that are hard to replicate or with no close substitutes available (Prasad & Warriar, 2016). As the attractiveness of the alternative product with a better price and or performance increases to the consumer, the

reduced price makes it difficult for the competing firms to maintain the profit margin and continue to make the same or increased profit (Evans, 2016).

Manoli (2018) estimated the global sport industry in 2015 to be worth \$145 billion and the sports industry appears to have cemented its value and potential around the world, while differentiating itself from the wider service and entertainment industries. Manoli argued that sport marketing was no longer just a commercial tool, but instead part of an umbrella of promotional elements such as commercial sponsorship, advertising, and publicity. According to Manoli, marketing in sports has three unique elements: (a) promoting fan interest, (b) promoting sport participation, and (c) promoting consumption of products through sport. Manoli (2018) argued that promotion of fan interest required a deeper understanding of the sport's psychological, social, and cultural aspects in order for sport marketing to be effective.

According to Gautam (2016), substitutes have limited potential returns in an industry by placing a ceiling on the prices that firms can charge to make a profit. Knowing why customers leave can be a competitive advantage with products or services enhancements that might alleviate the problems (Gautam, 2016). Bowman, Lambrinos, and Ashman (2018) argued that greater competitive balance is in the best interest of the NHL by creating the most fan interest. According to Bowman et al., fans prefer to attend games the home team could win with all other things being equal.

Mills and Winfree (2016) posited that consumers of professional sports are not always better off with more sellers because market power is exerted in many ways, especially with fan substitution within and across leagues. Mills and Winfree argued that

sports leagues and teams have a vertical relationship with television, internet, and radio companies with each team selling the rights to their games. The findings indicated that profits and market power of a league depend on the loyalty of the fans and that it is not just fan substitution across leagues or teams that matters, but also the method by which fans substitute (Mills & Winfree, 2016). MLB does not allow fans to watch local games on line or via MLB.tv but rather the fan must select the national broadcast or local cable providers, thus MLB is limiting competition and maintaining high prices for regional contracts (Mills & Winfree, 2016). Mills and Winfree indicated that some team's recent local contracts are valued at well over \$1 billion. The local contracts are the highest source of revenue for many teams (Mills & Winfree, 2016).

Mills and Winfree (2016) indicated that substitution effects are found when new teams move to or leave an area and that within-league substitution evidence exists that markets with more than one NFL team experience lower broadcast rating for those games than markets with only a single team. Mills and Winfree found that the availability of substitutes within and across leagues decreases both attendance and broadcast viewership of NBA games. Mills and Winfree indicated that the NHL is impacted by cross-quality and cross-price substitution when considering attendance across leagues featuring different sports.

According to Wallrafen, Pawlowski, and Deutscher (2019), neutral spectators have a preference for quality, will consume the popular product, and prefer known quality to unknown new talent. If the games are happening in close geographic proximity, then the fans choose to attend the top division game. This type of substitution is a spatial

dimension, which is the location of substitutes (Wallrafen et al., 2019). Substitution can also occur between attending a lower division game in person and watching a top division game live on television. This type of substitution is a temporal dimension that does not require any spatial proximity (Wallrafen et al., 2019). Wallrafen et al. indicated that significant substitution effects exist with rivalry from local games and rivalry from television broadcasts.

There is substitution across game broadcasts and other television entertainment options, which gives teams more power within their local market than when competing with a magnitude of broadcasters and television options (Mills & Winfree, 2016). Single ownership over multiple local teams could result in less investment in talent than separate ownership in the same market and the monopoly position that team owners leverage for public funding of stadiums makes the consideration of single ownership of multiple sports even more relevant in the public policy landscape (Mills & Winfree, 2016). Mills and Winfree (2016) indicated that fans are very loyal to a particular team, which creates a very narrow market and makes it very difficult to curb any market power, which basically creates teams with monopoly power.

Competitive rivalry. According to Porter's five forces framework, the intensity of rivalry among firms is one of the essential forces that shapes the competitive structure of any industry. Rivalry that exists among competitors could be strong enough to create disruption and limit profitability. The pricing of services could impact product availability, while reducing prices can lower profits (Diener & Luttgens, 2016). Porter (2008) indicated that a key element of competitiveness is the driving factor of

competitive rivalry concentration within an industry. According to Mills, Mondello, and Tainsky (2016) the presence of local competition has the advantages of rivalry and cross team ownership but has the disadvantage of fan substitution of price or competition in quality.

The NHL competes with sporting events and other entertainment such as movies, concerts, and live theatre for viewership and revenue. An objective of a strategic plan is to develop the optimal approach to managing competition or the extent of rivalry (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2018). Foster, O' Reilly, Shimizu, Khosla, and Murray (2014) examined the television broadcasts of regional sport network (RSN) average annual ratings of MLB, the NBA, and the NHL. A marketing management framework was used over a 12-year period from 1999 to 2011 to obtain the information. The research indicated that for the NHL, club winning relative to other professional clubs in their local market appears to better capture how winning drives RSN ratings (Foster et al., 2014).

Sports leagues that operate in cities with other professional sports have overlapping identities and there is competition for fans, advertisers, media coverage, sports facilities, and other material resources. Wade, Harrison, Dobbs, and Zhao (2018) indicated that teams located in the same city may benefit from (a) sharing facilities, (b) developing joint ventures, (c) cost savings from ownership of local teams, (d) similar media outlets, and (e) fostering the development of a strong sports identity in that region. There is an interesting issue of the extent to which local and regional teams' effects may be diluted by the nationalization of audiences from the expanding media and internet coverage (Wade et al., 2018).

The celebrity factor as a ratings element was highest in the NBA; as of May 2012, nine of the top 25 athletes on Facebook were from the NBA while zero were from the NHL (Foster et al., 2014). According to Foster et al. (2014), the key to how the NHL club fares in relation to other professional clubs depends on the lower popularity of ice hockey in many U.S. markets. The average annual RSN ratings for the leagues over the period 1999-2011 was highest for MLB at 4.05, followed by the NBA at 2.48 and the NHL last at 1.55 (Foster et al., 2014).

A rivalry is the adversarial relationship existing between two teams, players or groups of fans (Cobbs, Sparks, & Tyler, 2017). A rivalry gains significance through on-the-field competition, proximity, demographic makeup, or historical occurrences (Cobbs et al., 2017). Additionally, professional sport competitive rivalry is three dimensional: conflict, peer (geography), and bias (Cobbs et al., 2017). Conflict consists of defining moments, competition frequency, parity, and star factors, while peer consists of geography, competition for personnel, and cultural similarities. The bias dimension consists of cultural differences, dominance of one team, and perceived unfairness (Cobbs et al., 2017). Fans aggravated by a rival are those who share a high degree of identification with their favorite team as a personal characteristic (Cobbs et al., 2017).

According to Kang, Bennett, and Peachey (2016), sport brands have meaningful connections for fans, such as community pride, socializing with family or friends, vicarious achievement, wholesome environment, and identifying players as good role models. The definition of animism and anthropomorphism is attributing life to the nonliving and attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman. Kang et al. indicated

that a brand has emotional and symbolic human personality aspects that influence consumer behaviors with marketing strategies and encourage consumers to think of a brand as having human personality. Brand personality could be an effective marketing tool for differentiating brands from competitors and for developing marketing strategies for sustainable competitive advantage (Kang et al., 2016).

According to Ratten (2016), the growing area of sports marketing, sport entrepreneurship, and sport management link to other industries such as manufacturing, tourism, education and technology. Ratten argued that for sport organizations, marketing consists of planning and forecasting for future demand. Sports marketers need to identify the features that attract spectators, participants, and views and how consumers identify with sport to market it more effectively (Ratten, 2016). According to Ratten, there are three major types of sports marketing: (a) interest, (b) participation, and (c) consumption. Sport marketing links sport products and services with fan behavior (Ratten, 2016). Sport marketing promotes the purchase of sport related products, services, and merchandise (Ratten, 2016).

The threat of new entry. According to Porter (1991), an industry is more attractive when there are barriers to entry. The threat depends on the extent of the barriers to entry and current competitors' reactions (Diener & Luttgens, 2016). Hsu, Tan, and Mohamad Zailani (2016) indicated organizations should try to prevent the entrance of new competitors because they can decrease the profitability of the firm. According to Stringham, Miller, and Clark (2015), Porter's five forces identified several factors that create a barrier to entering an industry such as lack of human capital, availability of

supplies, inability to offset expenses used to build products, and economies of scale.

Porter (2008) argued that low demand for products or service might be a barrier to entering an industry.

Professional sports franchises in North America benefit from favorable anti-trust treatment that protects the cartel behaviors that limit the number of teams within a league which allows the franchises to operate with less competition (Mills et al., 2016). For example, most markets have only a single team from each of the four main professional leagues and have little to no competition with other same-league franchises within their local market (Mills et al., 2016). However, there are multiple professional teams sharing their local market with in their own market such as the New York Jets and Giants, as well as markets with cross-league competition such as the New York Rangers, New York Islanders, and New York Knicks (Mills et al., 2016).

Hernandez Irizarry (2017) reviewed how the construction of new facilities, such as arenas and stadiums, bring in dollars to the city, but indicated that perhaps they bring in only a feeling of pride and economic redistribution of wealth. According to Hernandez Irizarry, in 2014 the amount spend on stadium construction was \$12.9 billion with public tax funds contributing \$6.7 billion. The public tax fund amount did not include the additional costs beyond the stadium itself of parking facilities, luxury boxes, dedicated highway ramps, and other amenities (Hernandez Irizarry, 2017). Hernandez Irizarry argued that amenities such as parking facilities, highway ramps, and roadways overburdens local governments to cover these costs and recommended that governments should require the private sports teams to contribute more financial resources toward

building, operating, and managing the arenas. Hernandez Irizarry indicated that local governments should require teams to pay real estate taxes on the stadiums much like other business owners pay these operating taxes.

Hernandez Irizarry (2017) indicated that the amount of negotiating power and tools held by the teams and leagues aggravates the financial burden on the municipalities. The professional leagues control the supply of teams, and the threat of relocation acts as a powerful lever when renegotiating or renovating stadiums (Hernandez Irizarry, 2017). Hernandez Irizarry provided insight into how the previous Arizona Coyotes and the city of Glendale, AZ deal benefited the NHL team. For example, the city must pay the team \$6.5 million a year to manage the arena, the city financed, while the teams retains all revenue from ticket, parking, and naming rights, however, the new mayor and city council issued a new request for proposals to manage the Glendale arena (Hernandez Irizarry, 2017). Tension remained high between the team and the city especially when the owner expressed some uncertainty regarding the Coyotes future in the Glendale arena.

Supplier power. Suppliers are important to an industry by the quality of products provided, availability of inventory, or by increasing prices (Porter, 1980). Industries such as airlines and travel services have used dynamic pricing for decades, but professional sports is now just starting to adopt dynamic pricing. Dynamic pricing is the concept of flexible pricing that shift based on supply and demand metrics and the elements that have an impact on supply and demand (Bouchet, Troilo, & Walkup, 2016). The use of analytics to improve team performance by professional sport organizations has increased, however, there is less impact on revenue maximization to generate the greatest ticket revenue

(Bouchet et al., 2016). According to Bouchet et al., development of dynamic pricing for professional sport organizations is impacted by the existence of secondary markets such as Stubhub and SeatGeek. Stubhub and SeatGeek provide the consumer with additional information that reduces the information advantage from the team.

Bouchet et al. (2016) found that teams have outsourced dynamic pricing responsibilities to third party firms and sport industry seating information is more readily available to the customers such as the number how many seats in the arena and have an idea about the supply and demand of tickets for certain games. According to Bouchet et al., dynamic ticket pricing is an area that organizations are committed to investing in as well as partnering that with the food and beverage as well as merchandising to increase potential revenues.

Buyer power. According to Diener and Luttgens (2016), buyers can impact an industry by (a) requiring more services, (b) higher quality goods or services, (c) matching competitors against each other, and (d) forcing down prices thus reducing profitability. According to Morris and Wakefield (2018), the big data provided by a NHL team is used to model consumer behavior of admission-based membership services from the initial single game purchase to a full-season membership. This indicated that as customers have committed points of contact, they are prepared to move to the next purchase level, but rarely skip steps in the relationship journey (Morris & Wakefield, 2018). Additionally, sales practices and marketing automation may burn leads and alienate future members with frequent text-based contact without voice or real person interaction may hinder the consumer journey and work against relationship building (Morris & Wakefield, 2018).

Marketers can better allocate resources, motivate contact strategies, and target campaigns to send the right message (Morris & Wakefield, 2018).

According to Moreno-Izquierdo, Ramon-Rodriguez, and Perles-Ribes (2016), additional factors such as the Internet, new technologies, and big data as well as the quality and analysis of data can modify the changes in the buyer environment.

Armstrong, Delia, and Giardina (2016) illustrated the collaborative efforts of the hockey organization, its brand, and their consumer in regard to between brand development and the hockey community social media space. Armstrong et al. indicated that social media should not only serve as a communicative tool but as a promotional mechanism for the Sun Belt team. Social media can develop and encourage interaction between consumers, fans, the brand, and organization that may ultimately strengthen the brand within the community.

Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) examined if female sport fans' experiences involve marginalization, empowerment, or both and what factors contribute to these experiences. Female fans are becoming more significant in the world of sport. Female fans make up almost half of the NFL fan base, and slightly less than a third of the NHL fan base (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Sveinson and Hoeber indicated that there is an increase in female fans who attend the games, are season ticket holders, buy merchandise, and play fantasy pools. The increase in female interest in sports has challenged the gender order in sport fans. The findings indicated that all female participants experienced some form of marginalization and some form of empowerment as female sport fans (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

According to Sveinson and Hoeber (2016), marginalization of women sport fans occurred from the assumption that female fans are inauthentic. Empowerment of women was demonstrated by experiences of confidence, independence as a sport fan, challenging gender norms, and mastering skills (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). Men introduced the women to sports, but the women no longer felt the need to exclusively engage in being a fan in the presence of males. Sveinson and Hoeber provided insight of how a sport team can market and commercialize their product to women to provide a better understanding of how the cultural context of sport impacts fan experiences.

Armstrong et al. (2016) argued that since the lockout of 2005 NHL season, hockey is no longer prominent on cable sport network ESPN and that hockey is relegated to outsider status within the sporting mainstream. The NHL is visible only in hockey-fond regions such as the Northeast, New York, Boston, Pennsylvania, Chicago, and Detroit. Additionally, only 17 % of 2014 NHL revenue came from television that has not been much of change in mix of revenue sources for the NHL over the past 30 years (Bowman et al., 2018). One Sun Belt team encouraged the digital team to be creative, interactive, and to have a sense of humor. The Twitter feed was an extension of the team and the fans should have an opportunity to interact rather than just a place for updates, scores, and team information (Armstrong et al., 2016).

Historically dominant media such as television, radio, and newspaper have interacted with the consumer as being passive participants who consumed produced material. Whereas new media has provided for the development of the active media consumer. Platforms such as Twitter have magnified the voice of the customer as a result

of its public nature (Armstrong et al., 2016). Platforms such as Twitter allow for the flow of information horizontally between consumers by sharing information and pooling knowledge in a collective intelligence. The conversations among sports fans are now happening in a digital form of tweets, likes, blog posts, or comments whereas historically these once took place at stadiums, bars, or around the television (Armstrong et al., 2016). The popularity of the Twitter Sun Belt team grew from 70,000 followers in 2012 to 322,400 followers in 2016 (Armstrong et al., 2016). The Sun Belt team's unique use of Twitter, has removed barriers that alienated the hockey fan from their favorite players and teams and produced a new culture of fandom that is a participant or co-producer of information.

Spinda and Puckette (2017) examined the uses and gratifications approach to the motivations sports fans have for using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat to follow sports. Spinda and Puckette indicated that the uses and gratifications approach is based on five elements: (a) communication is purposeful and motivated, (b) active participants who select their media and their content, (c) social groups, personal involvement, societal structure mediate communication behavior, and effects, (d) social media compete with other forms of communication, and (e) people are typically more influential than the media. For example, the Minnesota Wild of the NHL used Snapchat spectacles to provide unique content through a game day such as pregame warm-up routine, close-up shot of player getting his skates sharpened, views of a ride on the Zamboni, or the mascot during shirt giveaway in the arena (Spinda & Puckette, 2017). Sports teams, individual athletes, and sports organizations have launched accounts on

Snapchat to post sports stories for fans to view and interact. Spinda and Puckette indicated how social media is used in sports marketing in promotion of the team brand, development of loyalty, and interaction of the fans which creates strong connections with the users.

Morris and Wakefield (2018) argued that membership also generated indirect revenues through concessions, parking, and merchandise sales as well as providing forecasts of advance revenues and inventory availability in terms of time and space. Utility theory explains the movement of customers from one purchase group to another with the two most important motives for season ticket purchase being financial, the price, and the performance of the team and the players (Morris & Wakefield, 2018). The higher number of events attended, the higher the derived utility. The customer-owned contacts such as group admissions, playoffs admissions, package plans, and quantity and price impact the consumer's motivation to purchase tickets (Morris & Wakefield, 2018).

Hales and McLarney (2017) elaborated on Porter's generic strategies by arguing that buyers react to both price and perceived quality in making purchase decisions. This compared and contrasted Bowman's Strategy Clock to Porter's generic strategies in regard to the eight potential strategies defined by price and perceived value (Hales & McLarney, 2017). Bowman's Strategy Clock integrated various strategic components into an effective value proposition. Rockerbie (2016) argued that profit-maximizing team owners may consider violence an important shift that increases ticket demand through greater on-ice success and through the blood lust of fans. A study indicated that both Canadian and American hockey fans preferred watching fighting in hockey with

American fans more responsive about 4,700 more fans per game than Canadian fans per game of 3,100 (Rockerbie, 2016). This increase in fans could be part of the reason why the NHL condones fighting to a greater extent than other professional sports leagues.

According to Giesler and Thompson (2016), an annual event like Comic-Con International, consumer behavior experiences are fundamentally shaped by the prevalence of social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and other forums. Giesler and Thompson argued that institutional reconfiguration changes the consumer by reshaping the intersecting marketplace discourses, conflicting goals composed of multiple practices, beliefs, and rule systems. Recursive disruption is where consumers move from obeying governmental prescriptions to rejecting them and are subject to compromises between countervailing utilitarian and possessive ideals (Giesler & Thompson, 2016).

Porter's Competitive Strategy Theory

A central determination of whether a company's profitability is higher or lower than the industry's average is the company's relative position within an industry (Lillestol, Timothy, & Goodman, 2015). According to Rizea (2015), the purpose of strategic planning is to establish, sustain, and grow a company's competitive advantage over its competition. Additionally, competitive advantage is when a company can deliver the same benefits as its competitors but at a lower cost or deliver benefits that exceed those of competing products (Rizea, 2015). For example, Ryan Air focuses on the cost sensitive commercial travelers by offering flights at the lowest prices in a niche market (Rizea, 2015).

According to Kaya (2015), generic strategies look for either efficiency or differentiation in the marketplace. Kaya indicated that the more businesses focus on productivity the less they focus on differentiation and the cost leadership strategy focuses on cost minimization. The differentiation strategy emphasized superior quality and image through value chain and that the two strategies of cost leadership and differentiation are used simultaneously and in a profitable way (Kaya, 2015).

Differentiation strategy. Business leaders use differentiation strategy to (a) indicate their business is unique, (b) emphasize customer satisfaction, and (c) gain the loyalty of customers. According to Hales and McLarney (2017), Porter contended that cost leadership and differentiation are incompatible while other strategists maintained that organizations who combine low costs and differentiation develop synergies. Prajogo (2016) indicated that differentiation is appropriate for a dynamic or growing environment. Hales and McLarney indicated that Uber's business strategy contains both cost leadership and differentiation. Uber had the simultaneous pursuit of low cost and differentiation by using the cost leadership elements of reduced capital expenditures, low cost structure, and reduced Human Resources Expenditures with the differentiation elements of Uber Application Program Interface, flexible employment, and creating an enhanced customer experience (Hales & McLarney, 2017).

Katz, Ward, and Heere (2018) argued that the interpersonal relationships among fans may be a better predictor of attendance behaviors than individual-level attitudes. Consumers interact and build relationships with other consumers while maintaining the sport brand as the focal point of the relationships. Sport marketers should examine the

importance of fan-to-fan relationships in understanding sport consumption behaviors (Katz et al., 2018). As fan-to-fan relationships increase in strength, so should loyalty, and positive behavior towards the brand; those who are passionate about a team are more likely to remain a passionate follower of the team and attend games (Katz et al., 2018). Networks and interpersonal relationships can influence sports fans' decisions and attitudes (Katz et al., 2018). Teams should allow fans the ability to sit with who they choose, develop neighbors in stadiums, develop fan-to-fan relationships, reward rows or sections who purchase tickets together, and encourage strangers to develop sustainable relationships in the crowd (Katz et al., 2018).

Zboja, Laird, and Bouchet (2016) examined one Southern United States NHL franchise season ticket holders, who generally receive special treatment in exchange for their loyalty and the revenue realized from their patronage. The data collected by sending a customer survey to 750 season ticket holders with a final sample size of 234 which represented a response rate of 31% (Zboja et al., 2016). The sample was predominately male (71%) and Caucasian (97%) with a mean age of 47 years, highly educated with 75% holding at least a 4-year college degree, and 51% reporting an income over \$100,000 (Zboja et al., 2016). The authors reviewed consumer entitlement, satisfaction, service quality, value, and the impact of consumer entitlement. Zboja et al. found that consumers low in entitlement behave as predicted by relying on a comparison of expectations to perceived performance to assess their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Zboja et al. argued that entitled consumers tend to rely more on their original expectations to assess their satisfaction level, independent of perceived performance. Zboja et al. found that

service quality and perceived value with customer satisfaction relationships had a positive impact on customer retention and profitability.

Friesl, Lenten, Libich, and Stehlik (2017) examined the NHL current downward scoring and how to enhance the game's attractiveness. The total season attendances for 2014-2015 in Canada and the United States exceeded 21 million with revenues of \$4 billion that does not include amounts from related trade such as stadiums, merchandise, retailers, and media (Friesl et al., 2017). The combined team goals scored per game average fell to 5.19 in 2014-2015 from above 7.5 in the first half of the 1980s with the average number of goals per game have been declining over time. Friesl et al. recommended moving the benches to always be closer to the offensive zones, that is currently only in the second period, the other two periods are closer to their defensive zones. The change in bench location closer to the offensive zones would add 327 additional goals each season that would induce more offensive play and more goal scoring and enhance the game's attractiveness (Friesl et al., 2017). This strategy would increase the average number of goals and the excitement level of the NHL by expanding the amount of offensive changes by each team. This could provide great fan interest and ultimately result in higher team and league revenues.

According to Kim, Walker, Heo, and Koo (2017), the development of an appealing sports website has become an important issue in competing with organizational rivals and 87.9% of North American consumers use the Internet to communicate, connect, and search for product and services. Sports organizations are increasing their web presence to solicit sponsorships such as banner advertisements, online commercials,

and links to corporate websites (Kim et al., 2017). Sponsorship allows corporate organizations to access a young, captive, and internet-savvy consumer base while increasing numbers of fans access major sports league websites as a way of keeping up with current team news, watching videos, checking results, and purchasing league merchandise (Kim et al., 2017). The advantage is the ease and accuracy that website users are tracked by the products and services they search for and purchase (Kim et al., 2017). According to Kim et al., the dollars allocated to online sponsorships can provide a greater return for corporate sponsors if they align with core demographics for a given product or service.

Andrews and Ritzer (2018) indicated that sport fans become prosumers by using social media, in that they are no longer only consumers of media content but also actively participating by producing content that shapes the meanings within the sporting universe. Additionally, Andrews and Ritzer found that social media technologies provided the users the potential to influence the interactions with sport and disrupt the traditional broadcast hierarchies (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). Sporting teams have reached out to fans in an intimate and social level as not only customers but as coproducers of messages, brands and identities. The Los Angeles Kings use social media as a two-way interaction opportunity by establishing relationships with consumers and fostering a brand community (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). Sport broadcasters view social media as part of an integrated and holistic branded content delivery mechanism that engages the largely younger prosumers (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

Manoli (2018) examined the developments in technology with the creation of social media that explored the motivations and dimensions of fan's social media behavior and interactions with football clubs on Facebook to understand why and how fans engage with the clubs. Manoli argued that grasping customer engagement behavior and motivation can deepen the understanding of fan engagement and be a valuable tool for sports marketers. It is the need for information, empowerment, and brand love that drive fan engagement through social media, with the interactive and collaborative nature of communication with information on how social media marketing strategies are developed (Manoli, 2018).

Cost leadership strategy. According to Kyengo, Ombui, and Iravo (2016), business leaders use the cost leadership strategy to (a) achieve business sustainability and increase profitability, (b) obtain greater than average returns over competitors, and (c) emphasize price-sensitive or cost-conscious customers. A source of competitive advantage is the fit of a firm in Porter's generic strategies of cost reduction or value addition, cost leadership or differentiation, or radical innovation, incremental innovation, or imitation (Cavaleri & Shabana, 2018). According to Prajogo (2016), a cost leadership strategy is applicable for mature or stable environments.

Cavaleri and Shabana (2018) indicated that achievement of organizational competitiveness in Porter's strategy framework is by identifying cost leadership and differentiation. Bayraktar, Hancerliogullari, Cetinguc, and Calisir (2016) indicated that cost leadership minimizes cost in areas such as service, advertising, research and development, and environmental standards. Cost leadership is compared to Venkatraman

forms of fit of matching, moderation, and mediation. Matching is when two variables have a relationship that has a positive effect on company performance. Moderation is the extent of a predictor variable on the dependent variable is contingent on a third variable and mediation that the impact of a predictor variable on a dependent variable is only observable through an intermediary variable. Cavaleri and Shabana argued that sustainability initiatives that enhance a firm's cost advantage are most closely aligned with a cost leadership strategy and that taking a strategic perspective on sustainability is a necessity for any true sustainability.

Dombrowski, Krenkel, and Wullbrandt (2018) argued that Porter's model of generic competitive strategies has two basic strategies for satisfying customer requirements which are cost leadership and the differentiation strategy. In order to have a clear competitive advantage, companies must decide on one of the two strategies and a company without a clear positioning is therefore not competitive because it is between the chairs (Dombrowski et al., 2018). However, a so-called hybrid competitive strategy is used that simultaneously pursues the cost and differentiation advantages. Dombrowski et al. (2018) argued that manufacturing companies use generic competitive strategies at the same time to be competitive and thus strategic positioning of production within the cost leader and differentiation strategy can be made.

Coghlan (2017), indicated that limiting the number of NHL teams, forces cities to compete for franchises through relocation and expansion that increases the expansion value. The NHL shares central revenue evenly among the existing 30 teams thus when Las Vegas paid an expansion fee of \$500 million each team received \$16.67 million.

Additionally, the top ten revenue earners distribute some of that revenue to support struggling teams, as well as 35% of playoff ticket sales are distributed to the financially weaker teams. According to Coghlan (2017), the Atlanta Thrashers expansion team struggled early on and that financially stronger teams provided Atlanta with financial support beyond their share in league revenue. The Atlanta team relocated to Winnipeg in 2012-2013.

Since 2005-2006, the NHL has had a payroll cap that is the upper limit of the payroll range and also has a payroll floor that is the lower limit of the payroll range (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). The ranges indicate that a team can spend no more than a calculated amount, but also indicate that teams must spend at least a minimum amount on player salaries (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). The NHL agreement indicated that the players receive 57% of total league revenue each season (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). The amount is not fixed but rather is adjusted each year based on revenue projections for the upcoming season (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018).

The floor amount has been argued to have caused low-revenue clubs' financial hardship and to assist the lower revenue teams, the NHL has a marginal revenue transfer system (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). Under this system, the ten largest revenue-producing clubs contribute 50% of the subsidy funds on a sliding basis with the top revenue producer making the largest contribution and the tenth largest, the smallest (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018). The remaining 50% of the subsidy comes from league-generated revenues that include 35% of each playoff home team's gate receipts (Maxcy &

Milwood, 2018). The high revenue producing teams redistributed about \$200 million to the lower revenue producing teams (Maxcy & Milwood, 2018).

Focus strategy. The focus strategy provides customers unique service and products in a small segment of the market (Morgan, 2015). According to Al Balushi (2018), that customer cognition refers to the mental processing of information needed for the selection of a response disposition and that consumers make many purchases decisions based on their habits, without involving conscious intervention, without seeking information, and without evaluating alternatives. According to Fort (2017), the willingness for a consumer to pay varies geographically by income, population, substitute opportunities, and most importantly preferences. Al Balushi argued that consumer behavior is the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and habitual decisions within a particular social context.

Ostergaard and Bode (2016) indicated how Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is a part of a strategy for interpretive research to be legitimate and be more pragmatic in the move from a marginal research only position into the consumer mainstream. CCT concentrates on the branding and marketing of science and to understand the impact on knowledge production with the final step being systematic integration in the marketplace. According to Ostergaard and Bode, CCT has become an influential point of reference and a how-to-do guide for interpretive consumer research and has become a powerful, influential label, and framing device.

MacIntosh, Abeza, and Lee (2017) examined how the NHL's Ottawa Senators Twitter activity influences their followers' activity online, influences their perception of

and inclusion within the central fan group, and their commitment to the team. MacIntosh et al. found that the only predictor that was significant of the Senators fans' social identity was the number of minutes spent reading the team's tweets per day. The findings were that expansion of the network with other fans is a critical factor in increasing the fan group identity and that the team should concentrate on increasing the engagement of fans with others (MacIntosh et al., 2017).

Dickerson (2016) examined the ways that sports fans of the NHL and the NBA construct and circulate discourses of race and masculinity in cyberspace. Internet memes are visual texts of still images, videos, or animated GIFs as a form of participatory media culture and allow fans to have an influence on sport media construction and presentation. Dickerson argued that the Internet memes celebrate white masculinity, while portraying the African American athletes as individualistic, selfish, and unwilling to sacrifice their bodies for the benefit of the team. Dickerson indicated that the marginalization of hockey among the major sports in the United States has perpetuated a sense of insecurity within hockey fans. For example, the author shared a story of a Dallas Stars hockey player Rich Peverley who had collapsed on the bench during a game from a heart complication and after regaining consciousness asked to reenter the game, especially compared to when LeBron James being carried off the court with a leg cramp. Dickerson indicated why hockey players are strong and that basketball players considered soft or weak.

Dickerson (2016) argued that new media like Internet memes provided consumers an opportunity to create content rather than just consuming it and that social media has significantly altered how fans engage with sport media. Dickerson (2016) found that

physicality and toughness has long been a cultural component of hockey and that playing through pain is performing a form of masculinity, while players who refuse to put their bodies on the line risk alienating their teammates and being labeled as feminine. Dickerson indicated that the images portray that White hockey players are more masculine and that hockey players are self-less.

In the 2014 Harris Poll, which has asked adults their favorite sport since 1985, the poll found that the sport of hockey lagged behind the NFL, MLB, and the NBA in popularity (Dickerson, 2016). Dickerson concluded that both the NFL and NBA have a larger population of African American men and the poll suggests that the Black male sporting body is at the center of the national sport imaginary. Hockey could have a cultural identification issue by lack of alignment with the African American audience but seems to align close to a white culture, especially in Canada. This could be a significant gap in the hockey sport fan that is not addressed effectively. The NHL could be missing an opportunity to develop African American fans and expand the nationality of the game.

According to Gemar (2018), sports can deliver key sociological insights about social class, gender, and race which should not be under-estimated or overlooked. Gemar found that an individual's habitus leads to homologies of taste and consumption across the domains of culture, including sport. Gemar argued that the socially privileged use their cultural capital to consume more popular forms of culture in a more exclusive manner. The study used latent class analysis by creating clusters by grouping together respondents who share commonality of variables such as education, household income, age, geographic region, language, gender, race, and population center (Gemar, 2018).

Economic capital and cultural capital are the greatest predictive measures for membership in these clusters.

Other Relevant Theories

McCarthy's four marketing mix model. According to Haleem and Jehangir (2017), the development of marketing strategies begins by identifying the target market for the product or service and then developing a marketing mix. E. J. McCarthy developed McCarthy's four marketing mix model in 1960 and is a combination of product, price, promotion, and place that is designed to enhance sales to the target market (Haleem & Jehangir, 2017). The internet can have a significant impact on the structure of this marketing mix, internet companies should take this unique nature of on-line marketing into account.

A company assesses Porter's five competitive forces in the industry and then tries to create the market at those points where the forces are weak. Each of the paragraphs included in McCarthy's four marketing mix model section provides an indication how items such as social media, sales and marketing alignment, relationship management, customized sports marketing, and hockey season work stoppage had on McCarthy's four marketing mix of product, price, promotion, and place. This is complementary to Porter's five competitive forces model: (1) the threat of new entrants, (2) rivalry among existing firms, (3) threat of substitute products/services, (4) bargaining power of suppliers, and (5) bargaining power of buyers.

Abeza, O'Reilly, and Seguin (2019) examined the use, opportunities, and challenges related to social media in achieving relationship marketing objectives in MLB,

NBA, NFL, and NHL. Social media has changed the speed and scope of interaction among and between individuals and organizations (Abeza et al., 2019). Relationship marketing is about building a collaborative relationship through communications and interactions between stakeholders and organizations. Two-way dialog has provided businesses a method to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and increased stability and security (Abeza et al., 2019).

Snyder, McKelvey, and Sutton (2016) examined alignment between sales and marketing departments among professional hockey teams. Snyder et al. found that there was high alignment between sales and marketing by structural elements of proximity, cross-functional tasks, financial incentives, and new technologies. Snyder et al. use of qualitative interviews produced insight into how the teams attempt to create high levels of alignment. Snyder et al. found that a team sport is more volatile and cyclical, largely to the importance of wins and losses both intra-season and across multiple seasons when compared to marketing a traditional product.

According to Snyder et al. (2016) that in a collaborative league setting the teams have an information advantage when compared to other industries and that organizations with a successful history and high demand invest more in marketing, while teams with significant inventory hire greater numbers of sales personnel. Snyder et al. found that the sales and marketing functions of NHL teams have strategies for alignment by exploring inventory, customer knowledge, and volatile demand.

Relationship management benefits the customer by providing choice reduction, purchase decision efficiency, reduced search costs, and increased cognitive consistency in

decisions (Abeza et al., 2019). Professional sport fans display their commitment through repeat ticket purchases, continued game attendance, viewership, and the purchase of merchandise and social media provides an opportunity for sport marketers to reach customers anywhere and anytime for direct and real-time conversation (Abeza et al., 2019).

Abeza et al. (2019) interviewed 26 managers of professional sports teams that included managers from eight teams in the NBA, four teams in MLB, five teams in the NFL, and nine teams in the NHL. Abeza et al. conducted phone interviews between January and April 2016. The interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes with the data transcribed from the audiotapes into 387 pages of text. Abeza et al. found that all 26 teams are on at least five social media platforms with some using more than nine social media platforms with Twitter being the most popular in terms of frequency of use, followed by Facebook, then Instagram, and Snapchat. According to Abeza et al., teams used social media for six types of communication such as interaction, news updates, ticket sales, sponsorship, public relations, and customer service. Abeza et al. found that there are seven opportunities that social media could provide to the teams such as knowledge of fans, feeling the pulse, brand humanization, ongoing dialogue, fan nations, content delivery, and customer service.

There were seven challenges identified by the team managers such as change management, operational management, actionable data, and lack of control, influential opinion leaders, internal conflict of interest, and anonymity (Abeza et al., 2019). A significant finding from the study on social media is that sport teams can listen to and

understand fans' needs, respond accordingly, and create value for consumers (Abeza et al., 2019). According to Abeza et al., that enables teams to design an informed strategy and develop customized approach in their marketing while creating added values for the fans through real-time customer service, exclusive team-related content, play-by-play updates, highlights, and live transmissions. Abeza et al. found that teams should personalize their brand with humor, wittiness, and topic comments in their interaction with fans.

Jin (2017) examined 282 articles on sports marketing and sponsorship published in the *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship* from 1999 through 2015. The most common sports/game/event types were soccer with 66 articles or 23.4%, followed by the Olympics at 50 or 17.7%, football with 42 or 14.9%, hockey was the eighth most popular sport with 21 articles or 7.4%, that trailed basketball at 11.7% and baseball at 10.3%. Jin analyzed the trends to understand the practices and future research directions to improve knowledge and gain valuable insight into the challenges marketers face when they implement a more market-centric business strategy.

Sponsorship has emerged as a prominent marketing tool that leverages favorable images, increasing the awareness and understanding of firms and their products and the effect of sponsorship on consumer behavior is relevant because sponsorship has become an increasingly visible element of the marketing communication mix (Jin, 2017). Jin (2017) argued that sports sponsorship plays an important role in sports marketing as a critical communication channel for capturing consumer attention or driving a corporate brand image.

Propheter (2017) indicated that owners in the five major professional sports, NBA, NFL, MLB, Major League Soccer, and the NHL have regularly justified their needs for subsidies on the basis that existing facilities are outdated and fail to meet the league standards. Subsidizing construction reduces sport franchises' fixed costs allowing the organization to allocate the cost savings to other expenditures like payroll or reducing ticket prices (Propheter, 2017). The argument for public funded or subsidized stadia is based on three economic justifications which are: a) spur tourism, b) increase the bond between citizens and facility, and c) convey a perception of national and global importance being a world class city (Propheter, 2017). The findings indicated that the greater stadia opulence is returned to attendees by contributing to a heightened game day experience (Propheter, 2017).

Jasina and Rotthoff (2016) examined how the NHL lock-out that lasted the entire 2004-2005 season had an economic impact on county employment and payroll in sectors such as accommodation, drinking places, restaurants, and spectator sports. The initial premise was that the shutdown of the entire NHL season would be a significant decrease in the four sectors reviewed. The findings indicated that there was little evidence that the NHL lockout had a significant negative impact on county employment (Jasina & Rotthoff, 2016). Stadium boosters often use increase in accommodation sector as one of the primary benefits of publicly financed sport stadiums and the findings indicated there was not a material decline in employment during the NHL lockout. According to Jasina and Rotthoff, the NHL lockout had no significant impact on employment in NHL counties.

Exchange theory. According to Jensen and Turner (2017), the exchange theory concept is based on a successful exchange between parties and is dependent on both parties agreeing that the price paid for the goods or service is equal to the value offered in exchange. The most comprehensive development of the exchange theory was by Thibaut and Kelley in 1959. Jensen and Turner indicated that the exchange theory complements Porter's five forces model intersect by an exchange of goods and the relationship can provide rewards. Therefore, both sides of the exchange must feel that the relationship is beneficial. The exchange theory analyzes the probability of the percentage of sponsoring companies who renew but when sponsorships are most likely to continue and when the probability that the sponsorship will end is the highest (Jensen & Turner, 2017).

According to Jensen and Turner, announcements of continued sponsorship agreements had a positive impact in shareholder value in the short-term period after the announcement. Additionally, a longer-term sponsorship relationship may become a source of competitive advantage as the consumer has multiple opportunities to see the product-sponsorship relationship, thus developing stronger associations in memory (Jensen & Turner, 2017). Based on the exchange theory the relationship between the sponsor and the organization would be most tenuous in the partnership's initial period where as longer-term relationships provide both sides greater understanding of each other's motives and expectations.

SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis helps organizations obtain greater insight to their internal and external business environment by analyzing and placing resources into four areas: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (Phadermrod, Crowder, &

Wills, 2019). The SWOT framework is one of the oldest and best-known frameworks in management. The development of the SWOT framework began in the early 1960s at Harvard Business School to help formulate strategy between internal and external factors (Bell & Rochford, 2016). Over time SWOT shifted from an integrative framework to a set of checklists (Bell & Rochford, 2016). According to Abdel-Basset, Mohamed, and Smarandache (2018), SWOT is a decision-making tool that can be used in developing strategies to enhance strengths, eliminate weaknesses, seize opportunities, and avoid threats.

Bell and Rochford (2016) indicated that a SWOT analysis is a threshold concept idea that has the following dimensions; (a) transformative, (b) irreversible, (c) integrative, (d) bounded, and (e) troublesome. There are various strategies that can be developed from a SWOT analysis such as those that link Strengths and Opportunities (SO Strategies), linking Weaknesses and Opportunities (WO Strategies), those that focus on Strengths and Threats (ST Strategies), and those developed from Weaknesses and Threats (WT Strategies) (Bull et al., 2016).

Oneren, Arar, and Yurdakul (2017) indicated that developing competitive strategies based on SWOT analysis of Porter's five forces model should concentrate on those elements that belong to Strengths and Opportunities. Gurel (2017) indicated that the organizational strengths and weaknesses are management information systems, management team, operations, finance, human resources, marketing, and research and development while the opportunities and threats are economic, societal, governmental, competitive, supplier, and market changes. According to Czajkowska (2016), there are

internal factors that are strengths and weaknesses of an organization that includes the customer, employees, capabilities, resources, and processes. An organization should pay more attention on those items when developing a competitive strategy. Additionally, competitors play a considerable role in developing a strategy as well as being an expert in its field, brand position, as well as successful partnerships (Oneren et al., 2017).

Other Contrasting Theories

Blue ocean strategy. According to Wee (2017), the most direct challenge to Porter's five forces was from the groundbreaking article, blue ocean strategy (BOS) by Kim and Mauborgne that shifted strategy from competitive analysis to value innovation. The BOS had two important aspects of strategy omitted by Porter that was the need to find and develop new demand thus avoiding fierce competition and second, how to exploit and protect the blue ocean aspects of the strategy (Wee, 2017). Wee (2017) indicated that the BOS contradicts Porter's competitive strategy and five forces model which focus on analyzing competition within an existing industry.

According to Hales and McLarney (2017), BOS indicated that there are industries not in existence today that are an untapped market space, demand creation, and the opportunity for highly profitable growth. Whereas the red ocean strategy are industries in existence today that the industry boundaries are accepted and competitive rules of the game are known (Hales & McLarney, 2017).

McLin (2017) examined the organization of the four major sports leagues as unincorporated non-profits without the ability to raise capital via investors with the alternative of the leagues and teams going public. According to McLin, there are benefits

of an incorporated league that included the elimination of the collective action problem, a massive influx of capital via initial public offering, and additional future opportunities for capital infusion. McLin opined, that incorporated leagues may remove the burden on local taxpayers to pay for new stadiums and for expansion outside of Canada and the United States. Additionally, McLin examined whether sports franchises act in a win-maximizing or a profit-maximizing capacity, with the conclusion that team owners appear unlikely to admit that the team's primary interest is profit.

Sustainability Issues

According to Cwynar (2017), live sports contests consistently draw audiences and increase cable subscriptions when viewers are finding a variety of ways to watch their favorite programs on their own terms. There is a new approach that sports rights are increasingly valuable with the pairing of the broadcast with the digital rights for online streaming via computer, tablet, and smartphone (Cwynar, 2017). By offering exclusivity as part of the agreements, the NHL could obtain a higher price than through the traditional mix of packages. The previous NHL television agreement with Versus had paid \$70 million per year for the cable rights, the new deal with Comcast/NBC Universal was a 10 year/\$2 billion or \$200 million per year, that is almost three times as much as the prior television broadcast agreement (Cwynar, 2017). The NHL signed a 12 year/\$5.23 billion deal with Canadian telecommunications giant Rogers Communications Inc (Cwynar, 2017).

Rockerbie and Easton (2017) discussed how the sports leagues in North America operate by spanning an international border, with the NHL operating 23 teams in the

United States and seven teams in Canada. Rockerbie and Easton indicated that teams who operate in different countries, such as Canada, are subject to exchange rate risk because the majority of their revenues are in the local currency but their payroll costs are paid in another currency such as American dollars. NHL teams that operate in Canada are vocal about the exchange rate, with the Toronto Maple Leafs calling the exchange rate one of the toughest risk factors for the company (Rockerbie & Easton, 2017). All of the four North American leagues that feature teams in Canada stipulate that all player compensation is to be paid in U.S. dollars.

According to Wade et al. (2018), individual team failure is largely under league control, as poorly performing teams, that means financial difficulties for team owners, are either replaced by the league with new owners, or the teams relocate, with league approval, to more promising locations. Therefore, influences on team failure are league strategy and policy, since the leagues control team entry, relocation, and by temporarily assuming team control until new owners can be found. The leagues have a closed cartel structure that means the teams are bound to their leagues and cannot move across leagues (Wade et al., 2018). MLB is exempt from the anticompetitive provision of the Sherman Antitrust Act since 1922 in exercising control over its teams (Wade et al., 2018). Additionally, the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 put authority for national broadcasting agreements with the leagues rather than the individual teams (Wade et al., 2018).

Rockerbie and Easton (2017) indicated that the NHL with the adoption of the 2012-2022 CBA has the most complicated revenue sharing system of the four leagues. The NHL league revenue sharing pool is 6% of total league revenue with the top 10

revenue teams in the NHL, evenly contributing 50% of the revenue sharing pool, while the remainder is from the playoffs (35%) and other league revenues (Rockerbie & Easton, 2017). The pool paid out to the bottom 15 revenue teams based on attendance and revenue. The United States teams will share in the loss of the US\$ value of Canadian revenues and this will reduce the demand for talent and lower salaries for players and the Canadian team's talent stock will decline by more than that experienced by the United States teams, further reducing the Canadian team's winning percentage (Rockerbie & Easton, 2017).

Potential Themes from the Literature Review

Some of the potential themes that emerged from reviewing the academic and professional literature include the ability of NHL teams to use Porter's five competitive forces, such as the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitute products, threat of rivals, the bargaining power of suppliers, and the bargaining power of customers. Other emerging themes are (a) inadequate differentiation strategies, (b) ineffective marketing strategies, (d) ineffective league branding strategies, and (d) inadequate implementation of a social media strategy. Other themes were the (a) a salary cap and revenue sharing, (b) development of an NHL team branding strategy, (c) competing internal and external strategic marketing developments, (d) use of the marketing mix model of product, price, promotion, and place, (e) competition with other entertainment and sporting events for discretionary spending by consumers, (f) lack of economic benefit for the construction of new facilities, (g) impact and use of big data in pricing of tickets, (h) impact of Twitter,

Facebook, and Snapchat, and (i) the changing dynamic of fans who have transitioned from observers to participants through social media.

Transition

In Section 1, I included the background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research and interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, the significance of the study, and the review of the professional and academic literature.

In Section 2, I included a restatement of the purpose statement of the purpose statement, discussion of my role as the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data analysis, reliability and validity, and the transition and summary.

In Section 3, I included the research findings, the study's application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams to increase revenues. The targeted population consisted of five hockey organization leaders who have implemented successful strategies to generate revenue for NHL teams in the Sun Belt region of the United States. The implication for positive social change could be the opportunity for Sun Belt team organization leaders to acquire new strategies to increase revenue, which could result in job creation and improved economies in the local communities.

Role of the Researcher

According to Isaacs (2016), in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument. The primary role of the qualitative researcher is to collect and analyze data from participants (Greenwood, 2016; Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). A qualitative multiple case research study requires appropriate selection of participants, the selection of an appropriate research method, transcription of the recordings of interviews, analyzing data, and reporting of findings in a clear, concise, and unbiased manner (Spiers, Morse, Olson, Mayan, & Barrett, 2018).

I leveraged my existing network of hockey leadership contacts as a method of recruitment to obtain access to participants; this was similar to the approach used by Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold, and Malshe (2017). I have spent over 50 years playing hockey at very competitive levels for my province, country, university, and still play in a master's over the age of 40 hockey league. I have interacted with thousands of players on

and off the ice. When I lived in San Jose, CA, I volunteered as a ticket taker and usher for the San Jose Sharks hockey team. I advocate for the development and advancement of Sun Belt NHL hockey teams. I live in Southern Texas and am familiar with the challenges of Sun Belt NHL teams' business operations in the region.

According to Brinkmann (2016), researchers can obtain information pertaining to the participants' experiences from interviews. I used an interview protocol checklist (see Appendix A) that contains questions, procedures, and guidelines to enhance the reliability of the findings as described by Yin (2018). Researchers conducting interviews use an interview protocol as a guideline for face-to-face interviews (Dikko, 2016). An interview protocol is a strategy for interview questions, interview procedures, collecting data, and interpreting data to maximize an interviewers' efficiency while mitigating bias (Algozo, Peters, Ramjan, & East, 2016). An interview protocol is fundamental to mitigate bias, enhance reliability, and ensure repeatability for future research (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Excessive familiarity with the participants could impact the objectivity of the study causing bias and data validity concerns (Teusner, 2016).

I fully abided by the ethical principles of the *Belmont Report*. Due to unethical research practices, the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare commissioned the *Belmont Report* (Metcalf, 2016), which is a guide for performing research in an ethical manner. There are three basic ethical principles for practice, research, and applications: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

The principles are comprehensive and generalizable so that stakeholders in the research process understand the ethical issues contained in research (Polikoff, 2016). The ethical principle includes issues of access to participants, informed consent, and confidentiality (Polikoff, 2016). Beneficence ensures the personal well-being of the participant with the requirement of protection of participants, maximization of benefits, and minimization of harm (Polikoff, 2016). Justice requires the researcher to understand the benefits of the research by determining the requirements for inclusion and exclusion of participants from the study (Polikoff, 2016).

In conducting the research, I used a process called epoche to refrain from personal judgement and help mitigate bias (see Jackson, Vaughen, & Brown, 2018). Epoche is described as bracketing or setting aside personal biases to explore the participant's experience (Jackson et al., 2018). According to Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2018), researchers mitigate bias by using an interview protocol that has structured interview questions with the same questions for each of the participants. Yin (2018) indicated that making analytical judgments during data collection helps to identify themes and to interpret the information in an unbiased manner. I performed member checking of the interpretive summaries of interview transcriptions to verify the accuracy of the data obtained during the interviews (see Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Participants

The participants in a qualitative multiple case study must meet eligibility requirements within the scope of the population. According to Yin (2018), the participants in a qualitative study need to possess real-world experiences in the subject

matter. The criteria for inclusion in the research study was five hockey organization leaders who have implemented successful strategies to generate revenue for NHL teams in the Sun Belt region of the United States. I gained access to these participants using public sources such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Researchers use eligibility criteria to select participants who can provide relevant and useful data (Latiffi, Brahim, & Fathi, 2016).

Selecting participants who have experience in the phenomenon under research is important (Yin, 2018). I used a purposive sampling strategy to select participants from the selected Sun Belt NHL teams. According to Benoot, Hannes, and Bilsen (2016), researchers use purposive sampling to select applicable participants who can provide relevant information for analyzing the phenomenon under study. Maramwidze-Merrison (2016) indicated that the seniority and experience levels of participants in organizations of interest are significant to obtain contextually rich data related to the research objectives. I gained access to the participants through e-mailing, calling, or texting. According to Hershberger and Kavanaugh (2017), speaking to participants by face-to-face or telephone is more personable and effective than electronic contact in acquiring participation in a research study. The criteria used for the sample was that the individual was a current or former Sun Belt NHL team organization leader who had used successful strategies to increase revenues. The participant's willingness to contribute to the study could depend on their connection to the study topic (Santos, 2016).

The strategies I used to gain access to participants included contacts established through the LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. According to Kalkbrenner and Roosen

(2016), with a connection and a strong identification to the study topic, participants may collaborate fluidly with the interviewer. I shared my hockey experience and that I selected the topic to study because of my love of hockey, financial industry training, and living in Texas that has an NHL team in Dallas. I sent a letter of invitation to the organizational leader with the research and interview questions (see Appendix B). I provided those volunteering to participate in the research study an informed consent form via e-mail that explained the informed consent process. I obtained an e-mail confirmation response from the organization leader volunteering to participate. After I received the approved consent form, I scheduled the telephone interview at mutually agreed date and time.

I established a working relationship with the participants by creating an understanding of the study, gaining trust, and creating a comfortable atmosphere. Gaining access to participants is specific to individual researchers and the contexts of their studies (Peticca-Harris, deGama, & Elias, 2016). According to Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016), the participant-researcher relationship in qualitative research requires the researcher to use rapport and reputation management. There are critical steps to obtain access that include an open attitude toward learning, demonstrating resilience, embracing ambiguity, and exercising an accepting attitude (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016). I emphasized the significance of protecting and upholding participants' rights during the interview and research process. The participants selected for the study aligned with the criteria of the study, which was to explore the strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt teams

to increase revenues. All of the participants in the study had experience in leadership of a Sun Belt NHL hockey team.

Research Method and Design

A researcher selects a method and design that is appropriate to answer the research question. According to Yin (2018), the choice of a correct method and design is critical to obtaining credible findings. Halcomb (2016) stated that a research method is the technique used by the researcher to collect and evaluate data in order to develop facts and findings. Rosenthal (2016) indicated that the researcher can utilize the qualitative research method to gain more insight into the reasoning behind people engaging in common actions and behaviors. Researchers can use the qualitative inquiry to explore individual's thoughts or feelings by capturing their words through interviews (Vass, Rigby, & Payne, 2017). According to Hasani and Khosrojerdi (2016), business scholars recommend the case study design as an effective research strategy to gain in-depth knowledge of real-life experiences. I used a qualitative multiple case study approach to explore the successful strategies used by organization leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams to increase revenues.

Research Method

The three primary research methods available to academic researchers are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods (Isaacs, 2016). Park and Park (2016) stated that researchers use qualitative research to indicate the essential nature of the investigation and questions to explore the meaning of experiences. Yin (2018) indicated that the qualitative method is an effective way to explore individual experiences. Boddy

(2016) opined that a qualitative research method involves the deep understanding of a phenomenon. According to Cooper et al. (2017), the qualitative approach uses an inductive process that uses data collection through documentary and interview evidence. Park and Park (2016) described the qualitative method as subjective, unstructured, contextualized, and consisting of an inductive and interpretative process. Researchers using the qualitative method interact with the research participant with a personal voice, which has a high potential for bias. Researchers use qualitative methods to find truth through interpretations of the social action of participants in a study (Toye, Williamson, Williams, Fairbank, & Lamb, 2016). The qualitative approach is appropriate to gain an understanding of the business strategies that leaders use to maintain their competitive position (DeJean, Giacomini, Simeonov, & Smith, 2016).

Quantitative methods are most applicable for studies involving large groups using mathematics to measure trends employing rating scales or preference ranks (Yin, 2018). Quantitative methods are most applicable when the objective is to quantify and examine the relationship between dependent and independent variables using statistical models and tables to explain observations (Berneth et al., 2018). The quantitative research method involves statistical data and defined variables (Park & Park, 2016). Giorgi (2017) stated that researchers use a quantitative method to test hypotheses, describe numerical changes, and find causal relationships between variables. According to Yin (2018), researchers reject or accept hypotheses from answers to closed questions from valid and reliable instruments. A quantitative research study was not a means for me to provide a broad understanding of the research phenomenon. Depending on the variable studied, a

researcher using the quantitative method may not obtain reliable information on experiences or explore the complexity of the phenomenon analyzed (Giorgi, 2017). The objective of this study was not to formulate a theory, explain relationships among variables, or quantify my findings but rather to explore successful solutions to a business problem. Therefore, I did not select the quantitative research method for the study.

In mixed-methods, scholars examine existing theories and test hypotheses to achieve valid statistical results while also qualitatively exploring participants' perceptions and opinions (Yin, 2018). Researchers using the mixed-method utilize components of both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and data analysis (Alavi et al., 2018). Skalidou and Oya (2018) stated that researchers use the mixed-methods research methodology to bring meaning to complex social phenomena, however, the mixed-methods has challenges for novice researchers because of the high level of complexity in design, integration, and rigor. Researchers using the mixed-method can obtain and analyze data to determine the difference between variables and gain an understanding of the participants' experiences (Pickard, Wainer, Bailey, & Ingersoll, 2016). Giorgi (2017) stated that in performing mixed-methods research, researchers use more time and expense to complete the study. The use of the mixed-method approach is beneficial when researchers need to have an integrated view of the information with the qualitative and quantitative approach (Bastian, Munoz, & Ventura, 2016). According to Venkatesh, Brown, and Sullivan (2016), researchers using the mixed-methods approach have the opportunity to develop new theoretical perspectives by combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods. The focus of this research study was not the

relationship between variables; therefore, the mixed-methods approach was not appropriate for this study.

Park and Park (2016) indicated that qualitative research methodology is suitable for obtaining a better understanding of the underlying meaning of a situation. According to Hsu, Lee, and Chen (2017), in the qualitative method, researchers do not use numerical data but use interviews, open-ended questionnaires, or observations to interact with participants. Langer (2016) stated that qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity to obtain first-hand knowledge on participant experiences and perspective related to the topic. Latiffi et al. (2016) opined that qualitative research allows the researcher to dig deep into other elements, that other methods cannot reach. I selected the qualitative method to gain a greater understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and thoughts of NHL organization leaders.

Research Design

The designs I considered for this qualitative study were narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, and case study (Yin, 2018). The design I selected for this research study was the multiple case study because data came from different participants who know and understand the phenomenon analyzed (McKim, 2017). According to Yin (2018), one aspect of the multiple case study design is that it includes interpretations of information obtained from interviews. Researchers use case study designs to study *what*, *how*, and *why* questions regarding a set of events (Mason-Bish, 2018). Researchers use a multiple case study instead of a single case study design to conduct a deeper analysis of the phenomenon under investigation by evaluating similarities and differences of the

information among the cases (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2017; Yin, 2018). McKim (2017) stated that case study design is applicable to learn the experiences of participants through data collection from semistructured questions.

According to Chien and Hassenzahl (2017), the narrative design relies on the skills of the narrator. Researchers use the narrative design to understand the lives of individuals as relayed through their stories (Yin, 2018). I did not examine the individual lives of participants; therefore, the narrative design was not appropriate for my study.

A research design considered for this research study was the ethnographic approach. According to Abdulrehman (2017), ethnography is most suitable for studies in which the researcher wants to explore and understand the culture of a group in their natural setting. The ethnographic design explores interpretations, intellectual patterns, and beliefs of the entire culture (Cardoso et al., 2017). Yin (2018) indicated that ethnographers explore the culture of a unique group in their natural surroundings over a period of time to gain insight of the members of that culture. I did not select ethnography because the objective of my study is not to understand a group or culture.

Another research design considered for this research study was the phenomenological research design. Chien and Hassenzahl (2017) stated that researchers used the phenomenological design to explain the view of an individual or group experiencing a common phenomenon. Forster (2019) stated that the phenomenological design approach obtains insights into participants' attitudes, experiences, opinions, and processes under study. The objective of my study was not to explore participants' lived

experiences or personal stories; therefore, the phenomenological research design was not appropriate for this study.

According to Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016), data saturation occurs when researchers do not obtain any new information, codes, or themes from data collection. Data saturation occurs when there is no new information in the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Malterud et al. (2016) opined that it is more likely that data saturation will occur in small studies with interviews more easily than in more intense research studies. To obtain data saturation, I asked probing questions in the telephone interviews and conducted additional follow up interviews as needed. To obtain data saturation, I compared the information obtained from the interviews with each participant until there were no new themes. Similar to Fusch and Ness (2015), I used the member checking, also called member validation that is the validation of the researcher's recording of the interview with the participant and provides for dependability and credibility of the study.

Population and Sampling

Defining the Population

For this qualitative multiple case study, the target population consisted of five organizational leaders of NHL teams located in the Sun Belt region of the United States. The target population, NHL teams in the Sun Belt region, provided alignment with the criteria of the study that is to explore the strategies to increase revenues. De Medeiros Albano and Caten (2016) noted that researchers need to align the participant's professional experience, background, and skills with the research objective and design.

Sampling

I selected the participants by using purposeful sampling. Rosenthal (2016) used purposeful sampling to gather pertinent information while targeting the study's inquiry towards a specific audience. Researchers use purposeful sampling to select participants based on the participants' expertise and knowledge that the researcher can gain detailed knowledge of a phenomenon (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that purposeful sampling is an advantageous method of gaining information from participants who can provide detailed information to answer the research question.

Malterud et al. (2016) indicated that unlike quantitative studies that use a calculation to determine sample size, qualitative studies do not have similar standards or sample size assessment. According to Etikan et al. (2016), the use of purposeful sampling in qualitative research is where small sample sizes are common. Boddy (2016) noted that researchers need to select an appropriate sample size that provides in-depth analyses. According to Latiffi et al. (2016), obtaining interview information from experienced participants should enhance the relevance of the data. According to Yin (2018), qualitative researchers performing multiple case studies, with a sample size of three to five participants can expect to obtain in-depth data using two data sources, such as conducting interviews and reviewing relevant company documents.

I conducted semistructured, telephone interviews with five Sun Belt NHL team organizational leaders. According to De Massis and Kotlar (2014), the ability to conduct research in its natural settings is one of the qualities of case studies. Yin (2018) indicated that conducting interviews in the participants' natural every day environment requires

catering to the participants' schedules and availability. Researchers must be accommodating to the participants' choice of dates, times, and location of interviews (Yin, 2018). According to Dikko (2016), a comfortable interview environment can help interviewees develop trust that allows for greater reflective and insightful information. I conducted the telephone interviews on dates and times that was most accommodating to the participants. The privacy, confidentiality, and ethical standards of the participants are ensured in this study.

Data Saturation and Sampling

Hagaman and Wutich (2017) noted that data saturation is the process of collecting information to the point where there is no new information from the participant from answering the interview questions. Fusch and Ness (2015) indicated that a researcher satisfies data saturation after gathering enough information to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Saunders et al. (2018) indicated that data saturation is when the findings are repetitious and the outcomes signify the quality and comprehensiveness of the study. According to Wu, Thompson, Aroian, McQuaid, and Deatrick (2016), to reach data saturation, participant interviews should continue until no new themes emerge from the data. Additional follow-up questions are asked to ensure no new themes will be presented. Constantinou, Georgiou, and Perdikogianni (2017) noted that researchers achieve data saturation when the results are valid, robust, and further research fails to produce new data. I used member checking that provided the participants the opportunity to review the analysis of the interview for accuracy (see Simpson & Quigley, 2016). I also provided the interviewees a second opportunity to review the information again for

accuracy if there were any changes to the analysis during the interview (see Hadi & Jose Closs, 2016).

Ethical Research

According to Bender (2017), ethical accountability concerns every element of the research study, including recruiting, data collection, analysis, and publication, and is about the character and principles of the researcher. Yip, Han, and Sng (2016) defined ethical research as respect for the persons participating in the study, avoiding harm, optimizing benefits, and applying justice towards the individuals and their societal level. Before conducting the research, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

For my study, my IRB approval number is 02-21-20-0434527. After obtaining IRB approval, I invited, sent an e-mail with the informed consent forms to the participants to obtain their agreement for the study. According to Yin (2018), a consent form is a contract between the participants and the researcher that will provide verification that candidates participated in the research study. The informed consent form components are (a) information about the research aspects, (b) verifying that the participants review, understand, and agree to the consent form prior to the interview, and (c) obtaining permission from the participants to conduct the interview (Rowley, 2012).

Included on the participant consent form was information about the estimated duration of the interviews, follow up interview if necessary, and that the interview will be audio recorded. The consent form indicated that the participants will receive no incentives for their participation. As described by Oye, Sorensen, and Glasdam (2016),

participation in a research study is voluntary, and the participant can withdraw from the study at any time. I informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Included in the informed consent form was the withdrawal process. The withdrawal process indicated that the participant can notify the Walden representative on the informed consent form or me if they decided to withdraw. The data obtained from the participants who withdraw from the study will not be used in the study and the same process for data security and destruction will be used as the process described for ultimate data destruction 5 years after study completion. I informed the participants that I may e-mail the findings and results to them. I answered any questions the participants had prior to consenting to their participation in the study. According to Tolich et al. (2017), the central principles of research ethics include doing no harm, confidentiality, autonomy, and beneficence.

To safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and their teams, I referred to each respondent as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 and to their teams as Team1, Team2, Team3, Team4, and Team5, respectively (see Thomas, 2016). I stored the interviews digitally on a password-protected portable hard drive and secured the hard drive and other documents in a locked file cabinet drawer. The hard drive and other material will be locked away for 5 years with me having sole access to the cabinet during this period. After 5 years, I will burn the documents, and wipe the hard drive using software that makes the data irretrievable.

I adhered to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes that will ensure ethical standards compliance prior to conducting research. I submitted the

IRB application and research to the IRB which included the outline of data collection tools, participants, and an electronic informed consent form that met the ethical standards.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument for the study and conducted semistructured interviews to collect the data from participants in one-on-one telephone interviews. According to Yin (2018), data collection from participants in semistructured interviews provides participants the flexibility to answer questions freely and describe concepts for the researcher to collect complete data. Shah, Sundmark, Lindstrom, and Andler (2016) opined that the use of open-ended interview questions increases the opportunity to ask follow-up questions that could allow the participants to provide examples from their experiences. Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning (2016) indicated the researcher needs to use active listening, provide a comfortable environment for the interview, and conduct a comprehensive review of the interview process. I collected the data in a secure, safe, and stable interview environment.

I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to show how I functioned as the data collection instrument. I audio recorded the interview sessions, transcribed the recordings, and documented my impressions that provide a complete record and audit trail of the data collection process. Castillo-Montoya (2016) argued that in qualitative research, the reliability of interview protocols can enhance the quality of interview data. Yin (2018) indicated that the use of an interview protocol allows the researcher to establish the validity and reliability of the information. I used NVivo software for data

validation and reliability. According to Chandra and Shang (2017), qualitative researchers use tools like NVivo for identifying themes and to demonstrate the validity and reliability of data collected.

Additionally, Castillo-Montoya (2016) indicated that a 4-point framework for interviews included the following: (a) aligning the interview and research questions, (b) conducting an inquiry based conversation, (c) obtaining feedback, and (d) piloting the interview protocol will strengthen the reliability and increases the quality of the obtained data. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure a well-organized process during the interview phase. I provided a summary of the interview to the participants for member checking. I did member checking to ensure that I accurately interpreted the participant's responses. I used data triangulation to compare and analyze data collected from multiple sources such as NHL information, team specific information, and participant provided revenue and profit information. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data triangulation enhances the reliability and validity of results.

Data Collection Technique

Cyr (2016) indicated that in interviews, the researcher describes the type of interview to the participants, records the events, and transcribes the interviews for participant verification. According to Wilson et al. (2016), the individual interview is the most frequently used data collection instrument in qualitative research. Semistructured interviews are the most common interview techniques used in qualitative studies and consist of predetermined unrestricted questions, where the participants give their responses in their own words and from their perspectives (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, &

Kangasniemi, 2016). Silverman (2017) indicated that semistructured interviews provide the perspectives, expectations, and assumptions of the participants while building rapport.

There are advantages and disadvantages using the qualitative semistructured interview methods of data collection and analysis. By using interviews, researchers can (a) obtain in-depth knowledge of the subject under study, (b) observe visible and verbal cues, (c) minimize noise, and (d) minimize impacts to validity and reliability of the study (Birt et al., 2016). Another advantage of the semistructured interviews is the freedom for the participants to openly express ideas, views, and experiences without limitations of the conversational format with the interviewer (Alaiad & Zhou, 2017). Interviews are the collection of lived experiences and knowledge of best practices from the participants (Yin, 2018).

According to Yin (2018), a disadvantage of the interview process is that the primary data collection instrument is the researcher that could lead participants in giving reflexive responses that could impact data quality and introduce bias. I actively managed bias by performing audio transcript verification and obtaining member checking approval from all participants. Yin (2018) indicated that interviewees may only tell the interviewer what they want to hear. Another disadvantage could be finding meeting times that are convenient for the interviewer and participants. To overcome this disadvantage, I let the participants select from several dates and meeting times.

I was the primary data collection instrument by conducting in-depth semistructured interviews using the interview and discussion protocol (see Appendix A). The interview process consisted of an introduction, rapport building, opening script,

interview questions, follow up questions, and a closing. Once I received from the participants an e-mail approved informed consent form, I asked the same interview questions of the participants in the interviews (see Appendix B). I audio recorded the interview using a digital recording device and documented any other participant behaviors. The settings for the telephone interviews were in a private location that provided security for the participant.

I used member-checking as a tool for ensuring reliability and validity of the data collection process. After the completion of the transcription of the recorded interviews, I did the process of member checking to enhance accuracy and ensure that I properly and accurately interpreted the participants' answers. I created a short summary of the transcriptions to describe the essence of the collected data that I shared with each of the participants for their verification. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), member checking is necessary for verifying that the interpretation of the data collected during the interview accurately reflects the views of the participants.

Data Organization Techniques

Kimball (2016) indicated that conducting qualitative case study research involves collection and organization of empirical data. Yin (2018) stated that the researcher is responsible for data collection, storage, and analysis. I used an interview protocol during the interviewing process (see Appendix A). I recorded the interviews using an audio recorder (see Miller, 2016). I analyzed the transcripts using an analysis process that identified common themes by using NVivo software that was a similar process used by Hampton et al. (2017). I stored the data consist with the use of the NVivo database.

Zamawe (2015) indicated that NVivo is a software to analyze data and generate themes from transcripts and audio recorded files. Muqadas, Rehman, Aslam, and Ur-Rahman (2017) indicated that researchers use NVivo software for the capability to code and analyze qualitative data.

I used MS Word documents and Excel spreadsheets to develop a catalog of footnotes on collected data that include the documents name, date of creation, source of data, and the physical location of the data. I assigned a code to each participant that included a letter and a number. I encoded participants as P1, P2, and so forth, and encoded teams as Team1, Team2, and so forth. Tjldink et al. (2016) indicated that there should be a file-naming convention for stored data that is an important data organization technique for easy identification and retrieval of the contents.

Tjldink et al. (2016) stated that researchers should safeguard participants' confidentiality and privacy. The data is secured in a locked file cabinet for 5 years. After 5 years, the data is destroyed in a secure manner that is consistent with destroying sensitive information. According to Tjldink et al. (2016), the destruction of data is one of the ethical considerations for maintaining the confidentiality of research participants in a qualitative study.

Data Analysis

According to Guo and Guo (2016), data analysis involves reviewing data to discover patterns and themes to assist in answering the central research question. Yin (2018) indicated that researchers compare data with information from multiple sources, such as archival records, industry websites, company websites, and journal articles to

validate study findings. Researchers analyze data for three central purposes that include becoming familiar with the data, documenting relationships, and summarizing participant interviews (Foley et al., 2017). I used the four-stage data analysis process for analyzing data: (a) reviewing the data, (b) organizing the data, (c) coding the data, and (d) developing themes from the data as described by Yin (2018).

According to Nelson (2016), researchers use NVivo software to help code the data, develop the themes, and analyze the interviews. I used NVivo software to code, organize, manage, and store collected data that can improve research dependability. The NVivo software is a tool that researchers use to develop themes from the interview data and group raw data into categories and themes from participant's experiences (Waller, Hockin, & Smith, 2017). According to Yongxin, Deschamps, de Freitas Rocha Loures, and Pierin Ramos (2017), the use of computer software aids the researcher with coding and identifying themes from the interview data. Qiu and Wang (2016) indicated that selection of the proper databases and approach for performing literature search is necessary for mitigating biased results and incorrect conclusions. According to Lensges, Hollensbe, and Masterson (2016), researchers use the NVivo software application to analyze unstructured data and apply thematic identification.

I used NVivo software to organize and code unstructured data, from the interview transcripts, interview notes, and relevant company information to indicate emerging themes. After coding, I organized and categorized the coded interview data to identify patterns and themes. Woods, Paulus, Atkins, and Macklin (2016) indicated that coding helps researchers identify emerging themes, patterns, trends, and divergent participants'

interpretations. I used a thematic analysis technique to analyze the interview data. Braun and Clarke (2016) stated that thematic analysis helps indicate repeated patterns, themes, and keywords to gain insight and knowledge from the acquired interview data. According to Vaughn and Turner (2016), thematic analysis describes the data set in full details and provide a more detailed account of a group of themes or individual specific themes contained in the data.

I reviewed information that is readily available through the NHL website and team reports. Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, and Gonzalez (2018) indicated that obtaining triangulation is through the comparison of organization documents with findings from interviews and observations. According to Johnson et al. (2017), triangulation compares data collected from document review, interviews, observations, and digital diaries to analyze different types of information for the findings. Pepin et al. (2018) indicated that data triangulation is the review of data from different elements of time, space, and the individual. As described by Stewart, Gapp, and Harwood (2017), triangulation occurs when researchers use several methods of data collection to study a phenomenon. The literature review was analyzed and correlated for themes, patterns and trends by using NVivo software.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Yin (2018) described reliability as the consistency and repeatability of research procedures. Chatha, Butt, and Tariz (2015) indicated the purpose of reliability in a research study is the ability for a procedure, instrument, or measure is repeated using

similar conditions which will produce the same results. I strictly adhered to my interview protocol (see Appendix A) when gathering my data. The interview protocol guides the interview process. According to Yin (2018), qualitative researchers obtain reliability by (a) recording the data collection and analysis, (b) specifying a research strategy, (c) detailing participant selection, and (d) accentuating the researcher's role. McCullough et al. (2017) indicated that member checking increases reliability and trustworthiness. I used standard interview questions (see Appendix B) with wording of the questions consistent with the foundation of my doctoral study that added to the reliability of the study. I used member checking to ensure reliability.

Dependability. As described by Nelson (2016), dependability is the reliability of the findings of the study. Stewart et al. (2017) indicated that a study is dependable when other researchers agree with the result, research processes, and activities. Sharifirad, Mortazavi, Rahimnia, and Farahi (2017) indicated that dependability is the rational, traceable, and prudently documented research process. I ensured reliability and dependability through the documentation of my processes and by using a multiple case study design, semistructured interviews, observations, and transcript review. I provided the participants a short summary of the research study interpretations in order for them to review the interpretation of the interview responses. According to Birt et al. (2016), member checking is a process of determining whether the collected and analyzed data is congruent with the interviewers' perceptions. Thomas (2016) indicated that member checking helps to ensure that the transcripts accurately represent the participants' experiences. I used member checking for dependability.

Validity

Yin (2018) indicated that researchers ensure validity through the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data obtained to mitigate research bias. According to Savage and McIntosh (2016), contextual validity refers to the credibility of case study evidence and research results. Le Roux (2017) indicated that validity is as important as accomplishing the goals of the study as it ensures unblemished knowledge of any assumptions used in the research method. Fusch and Ness (2015) indicated that validity is accomplished through the thoroughness and adequacy of the data, sound sampling, and data saturation. According to Mayer (2015), validity measures include member checking and triangulation. Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey (2015) indicated that the use of triangulation provides confirmation and completeness to the data obtained from multiple sources enhancing the validity of the research. I was the data collection instrument, used an audio recorder to capture the participants' answers, and used a written journal for each participant.

Credibility. Drisko (2016) indicated that credibility is the trustworthiness of research findings. According to Stewart et al. (2017), credibility is representing and interpreting data accurately through participant views in a convincing manner. Credibility is the value and believability of the study results and what guides the truthfulness of the data (Houghton et al., 2015). Researchers should conduct their research with competence, goodwill, and trustworthiness (see Sorenson, 2016). I demonstrated trustworthiness by verifying participants' responses through a member checking process. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and documented each question and answer provided by the

participants. I provided a summary of the interview to the participants for their review of the accuracy and verification of their responses. According to Birt et al. (2016), providing participants the opportunity to give feedback on the data enhances the trustworthiness of the results.

Transferability. According to Drisko (2016), transferability refers to the extent that qualitative research is applicable to other environments. Savage and McIntosh (2016) indicated that transferability is when the study results are transferable to different settings or groups in future research. To obtain transferability, researchers use purposeful criterion sampling for data analysis of research participants. I used purposeful criterion sampling and reflective journaling to achieve transferability. I followed the interview and data collection protocols designed for my research study.

Confirmability. According to Yin (2018), confirmability pertains to actual research results without the researchers' perspective interfering with the findings. Yin indicated confirmability is obtained by researchers using methodical triangulation. As described by Yin, the methodical triangulation process includes semistructured interviews and supporting documents to develop an evidentiary trail. Wan, Marco, and Cheng (2016) indicated that confirmability requires the researcher to demonstrate that the conduction of the research occurred in good faith and that no personal values influenced either the research or the findings. According to Le Roux (2017), using an audit trail can ensure confirmability. To guarantee confirmability, I used semistructured interviews, supporting documents, and a log to journal and review interview results. I also used member checking to ensure confirmability.

Data saturation. Data saturation is when the researcher observes the same patterns of data repetitively and concludes that there is nothing new obtained from additional data collection (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Hagaman and Wutich (2017), data saturation is when no new information is obtained. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that data saturation should assist in the validity and confirmability of the research. I used the following processes to ensure data saturation. I asked probing questions in the interviews and conducted follow-up interviews as appropriate. I knew when I achieved data saturation when no new information obtained and when data was repeated during the interview; however, if data saturation was not accomplished during the initial sample, then I would expand the number of interviews until data saturation is achieved. This was not required as data saturation was achieved during the fourth interview. I also reviewed advertising, websites, and social media applicable to the participants' team.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I provided details of the research methodology and the research design to explore how NHL Sun Belt teams increase revenues. In Section 2, I included explanations of the elements of qualitative study validity, including credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Additionally, in Section 2, I included a restatement of the purpose statement, discussion of my role as the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. In Section 3, I provided the research findings, the study's application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for

action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and conclusions followed by appendices containing pertinent documents.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the strategies employed by the organizational leaders of Sun Belt NHL teams to increase revenue. I also explored publicly available data from the team websites and NHL.com. To understand the leaders' strategies, I executed a data analysis process that included collecting, organizing, coding, and interpreting data. The findings of the study indicated the following five themes: (a) customer acquisition and retention, (b) market segmentation, (c) promotion, (d) unique value proposition, and (e) product differentiation. The NHL Sun Belt teams should continue to expand their market segments, use social media in conjunction with personal community involvement, provide outstanding customer service, innovate, continue to expand customer products, and understand that the team is in the entertainment business, not just the business of sport. The subsequent paragraphs provide information on the main findings and themes, applications to professional practice, social change implications, recommendations for action and further research, and my reflections and the conclusion.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was as follows:

RQ: What strategies do organizational leaders of NHL Sun Belt teams use to increase revenue?

In this section, I present and interpret the study findings concerning the interview data, additional research, and conceptual framework. I first present each theme and explore

how each theme connects to previous research on the topic. I then detail how each theme relates to the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework applied in this study was Porter's (1980) five forces model and Porter's model for competitive strategy. The findings of this study align with the conceptual framework and most of the studies included in the literature review. Most participants in the current study provided responses linked to at least four elements of Porter's five forces model: (a) product substitutes, (b) competitive rivalry, (c) supplier power, and (d) buyer power. Furthermore, all five of the participants referenced elements of the differentiation strategy and focused strategy in Porter's model for competitive strategy. The findings indicated that most participants had developed a targeted product marketing mix. McCarthy (1960) indicated that a marketing mix combines product, price, promotion, and place.

In performing data analysis, I coded participant interview statements into common nodes. The nodes were then aligned into themes. I developed the following five themes from the data: (a) customer acquisition and retention, (b) market segmentation, (c) promotion, (d) unique value proposition, and (e) product differentiation.

Theme 1: Customer Acquisition and Retention

The customer acquisition and retention theme indicated a linkage between attendance and developing a sustainable market in a Sun Belt location. All participants emphasized the importance of the attendance of the right fans as a significant success factor for the franchise. P1 added that the economics of hockey are different from those of other sports franchises such as the NBA, NFL, and MLB because hockey does not

enjoy the large television and media rights deals of the other leagues. For most of the other leagues, the largest revenue source is national television or local media deals. Meanwhile, in hockey, the largest revenue source is ticket sales. According to Kelley et al. (2014), nearly half of NHL franchises generate more than two-thirds of their annual income from ticket sales. Only 17% of NHL revenue in 2014 came from television, a figure that has not significantly changed over the past 30 years (Bowman et al., 2018).

Specifically, P1 commented that the biggest challenge is to create and retain fans. P2 and P3 reported a similar focus on attendance, entertaining the fans, and encouraging them to return. According to P4, leaders must be creative to combat the geographical challenge of the team being located in the Sun Belt region of the United States. P3 mentioned that, as the organization educates fans on the game and the sport of hockey, they become addicted to it. Educating potential fans can, therefore, increase fan interest, with the impact of additional ticket sales, which support increasing revenues. According to Wening (2019), the daily education of the consumer is significant in how it can be used as a guide in the customer making the decision to spend money. Wening indicated that the five fundamental principles of consumer education are: (a) critical awareness, (b) activity involvement, (c) social concern, (d) environmental concern, and (e) solidarity. The education of Sun Belt hockey fans appears to satisfy three of these principles, critical awareness, activity involvement, and solidarity, which can have a positive impact on attendance and revenues. Additionally, Kim, Magnusen, Kim, and Lee (2019) indicated that fan knowledge was a determining factor in making a purchasing decision. Similarly, P4 shared that the organization aims to determine the best strategy to deliver basic

hockey education because it is extremely important to have the fans attend viewing parties. P4 indicated that the organization had gained some additional fan exposure, which increased team interaction with the community by persuading 50 to 60 people to attend their viewing parties at partner restaurants to watch away games. This additional fan interaction has had a positive impact on the interest of fans in watching games on television or purchasing a ticket to a game. P3 noted the following:

Getting butts in seats [attendance] is our primary strategy. Our strategy is to leverage all those data to make sure that we are reaching the right people we need to reach and the people watching on NHL Network, whether it is our team or not. We have different ways that we can identify who is a hockey fan; whether they are a [Team3] fan or not, if they are a hockey fan then we can at least get them to a game.

According to P3, knowing who purchases tickets is critical information, and the organization accomplishes this through the ticket sales system, which is integrated with their customer relationship management (CRM) system. These interconnected systems allow the organization to track opened e-mail, what people purchased, and whether the customer bought a ticket to a single game, four tickets, or a concert ticket. P3 explained that, because customers use the same Ticket Master account, the organization knows when they buy concert and other tickets. They use the CRM system to track this type of activity. P3 emphasized that the organization tracks CRM data very aggressively. The participants' responses regarding strategies to obtain knowledge on the fans corroborated previous findings in the literature that suggest sports marketers must identify the features

that attract spectators, participants, and viewers and to understand how consumers identify with hockey to market it more effectively (see Ratten, 2016).

All participants acknowledged that the target audience has shifted from hardcore hockey fans and “snowbirds” to long-term, sustainable local fans. Each of the participants identified a related shift in goals from fan attendance to specifically targeting local and loyal fans to attend the games. The participants’ views substantiated the findings in the literature that sports brands offer meaningful connections to fans, such as community pride, socialization with family or friends, vicarious achievement, and a wholesome environment (see Kang et al., 2016). P4 mentioned the following:

One of the biggest strategies is just being smarter in whom we are targeting. So, we have gone through a pretty significant shift, getting away from the model of trying to target the snowbirds who were in town and watching their hometown team. We are trying to grow the local fan base and sell out the arena that way and have growth and be sustainable.

P3 shared an even more aggressive strategy of developing local fans through restricting ticket sales to out-of-area zip codes that were not within the local city or television market. P3 stated the following:

We had several thousand of the opposing fans in our building, so about 5 years ago a targeted purchasing plan was implemented, so we don’t allow out-of-market purchasers through Ticket Master. When you provide a credit card and you do not have a State3 or television viewing zip code on your credit card, you are unable to purchase tickets to our games.

P1 noted that City1 is a nontraditional hockey market; therefore, the biggest challenge is always acquiring fans and having a sufficiently large local fan base to support a hockey team with a 15- to 20-thousand-seat arena for over 40 nights a year. P4 stated that the organization's vice president of marketing was visiting a Red Robin and asked for the Team4 hockey game on the television. The hostess responded that she did not think that the restaurant had that channel. He asked, "You do not have NHL hockey?" and she responded, "Yeah, we have some Blackhawks games sometimes, but I do not think that we have college games." P4 concluded that it is a geographical stigma that the organization must constantly address. To accomplish the goal of maximizing attendance, P1 reflected:

I think the long story short for us is that we have to be smarter about how to capture our fans who are engaged with us to ensure that we are not missing any of the opportunities such as using best practices, social media, sustainability, and innovation.

P3 stated that organizations always desire the opportunity to pick up that new fan, to continue growing, and to be sustainable. For example, P1 highlighted a contest to win four tickets to a special hockey event, which received 47,000 entries over a span of two months, of which only 800 were from current season ticket holders. Most of the names generated from the contest were new data that allowed Team1 to market to potential new customers after they captured their information. The organization was able to generate \$1.2 million in new season ticket sales. P3 also noted:

We looked at being in a southern market and understanding the high school and college football were big and other things that existed, such as Wednesday nights that people went to church, so [we] adopted our game schedule to play our games on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights.

All of the participants mentioned awareness of regular area events when scheduling home games, such as Friday-night high school football, Saturday-afternoon college football games, and NFL games on Sunday afternoon.

P3 argued that the measure of success of a strategy is whether the team is more profitable than before implementing the strategy:

It was pretty obvious that, when you sell more tickets, that is the bottom-line driver for our industry, as hockey does not have the richest television deal. Not to say that it is not an important piece, but ticket sales and sponsorship sales are the two biggest revenue sources.

P4 reflected, “Our city is a very dynamic market with people moving there from all over the country and you have to continuously learn your audience, know who your customers are, and adjust your strategy accordingly.” The participants’ views substantiated the previous findings in the literature indicating that understanding why customers leave can provide a competitive advantage through informing product or service enhancements that may alleviate the problems (see Gautam, 2016). According to Manoli (2018), the promotion of fan interest requires a deeper understanding of the sport’s psychological, social, and cultural aspects for sports marketing to be effective.

Regarding sustainability, P2 indicated that the organization's service and retention team focuses on helping the current season ticket holders and answering any questions or issues they might have. P3 also stated the following:

There a lot of ways to capture additional revenue like new money once they are in the doors and then, from a conversion perspective, how to have that person spend more money with you. That is just a simple business perspective, that it is easier to keep an existing customer than it is to find a new one. So, we look at those single-game buyers as exiting customers who can spend more dollars with us, as the start of the sales funnel, and increase revenues.

The theme of customer acquisition and retention is consistent with Porter's five forces specifically the bargaining power of suppliers and the bargaining power of buyers. According to Zhang, Leng, and Zhou (2020), the bargaining power of a supplier or buyer depends on the various characteristics of market conditions and the relative importance of the sales or purchases. All of the participants mentioned the evolving dynamic of the customer base from opposing hockey fans to development of local and loyal fans. The alignment of the conceptual framework includes consideration of the buyer when determining the scheduling of the games to avoid negative impacts of traditional events such as Wednesday night church, Friday night high school football, and Sunday afternoon NFL football. Porter (1980) indicated that important supplier factors are the quality of product, forward integration, size of the supplier, and the level of support. Front office management of professional sports teams such as those in the NHL establish

the products, inventories, and prices to the customer that can impact the acquisition and retention of fans.

Theme 2: Market Segmentation

All participants in this study shared the common view that market segmentation has a significant effect on the development of revenue and the sustainability of the hockey market. P5 indicated that the team had to refocus on the targeted audience by focusing on the family. Four of the five participants indicated an increased emphasis on the female members of the family. P4 stated, “As you know, our spouses tell us what to do and so that is what we leaned on. So, we focused on the female fan.” According to Naraine (2019), mothers have significant purchasing power in family households and many brands have already targeted this subgroup. These participants’ views supported the research findings by Sveinson and Hoeber (2016). Sveinson and Hoeber indicated that there was an increase in female fans who attended games, became season ticket holders, bought merchandise, and played fantasy pools. Sveinson and Hoeber findings indicated that the increased interest in sports by female fans stemmed from an independent choice, a sense of belonging, pride, and empowerment, and allowed the female fan to stand out. Additionally, Sveinson and Hoeber indicated that sport leagues and teams have become more open to different types of female fans and avoid stereotyping. Each of the participants mentioned the importance of a strategy to develop hockey fans at an early age. Four of the five participants discussed a shift away from hardcore hockey fans to concentrate on the Hispanic community. The participants’ views support (a) the argument by MacIntosh et al. (2017) that the expansion of the network with other fans is a critical

factor in increasing the fan group identity and (b) the recommendation that teams should concentrate on increasing the engagement of fans with others.

According to P4, the organization is concentrating locally and growing a loyal fan base that is more sustainable than relying heavily on marketing to snowbirds. A snowbird is a person who lives in the northern United States or Canada in the summer and then lives the winter months in a warmer climate. P5 explained that the previous strategy was only targeting hockey fans from a fan's perspective, and in their area, hockey is only the fourth most-popular sport. To continue targeting only a small segment of sports fans made no sense and was not sustainable. P4 added that the hardcore hockey fans will attend games regardless, therefore, there is less need to promote the sport of hockey to these fans.

Family. Four of the five participants concluded that the strategy that has worked the best for increasing revenue is to focus on the family. According to P5, "The focus on the family had been the best strategy. It had been very consistent in how we are reaching them: be fan-friendly, be family-friendly, and people will come back." Four of the five participants reported growth in ticket sales and revenue from such a strategy. Families represent the majority of people in the market and the largest market segment, thus, family-oriented organizations are starting to observe increasing interest in the team. For this reason, P3 stated that the organization refocused the target to families.

The views of P4 support those of P5 and P3 concerning the strategy to focus on families. P4's organization has shifted away from hardcore sports or hockey fans and has emphasized families, especially female members of the family. P3, P4, and P5 mentioned

that families are searching for things to do and have a great deal of resources to spend on these activities. P5 shared that the family strategy is working because more families are attending games rather than just the hardcore hockey fans with their friends. P3 and P4 mentioned that they are witnessing more kids participating in hockey in the marketplace and more merchandise sales by women and kids, which has increased the revenue.

According to P3, the organization differentiates itself by having converted people from 20 years ago into lifelong sustainable fans, referring to people who were fans when they were kids and now have a family and kids of their own. They now have multiple generations of fans for the first time as an organization. P4 shared that, when they put someone on the Jumbotron, they ensure everything is really fun and family-friendly. P5 stated the following:

We are not only competing for the hockey fans who will be coming to the building but are competing for the time from the family who is constantly looking for things to do and will be sustainable for the long term.

Young fans. According to P4, the first introduction to hockey for kids is often a “learn to play hockey” program, which is an NHL-wide initiative. This is where the team creates their first touchpoint with a kid who will start playing hockey. P4 shared that, once the organization has the kid’s information in the contact database, they have the kid and their parents’ contact data permanently. P5 commented that the strategy of increasing the number of kids playing hockey and developing more fans at a younger age means that watching hockey becomes a generational hobby:

We now have kids who are the children of our initial fans during these 20+ years of operation. By providing more kids the chance to play hockey gets their parents involved and interested in the sport of hockey. We are also getting more Team5 team members involved with the community. The community appreciates the fact that we are here because we do so many great things in the community.

Three of the five participants noted that they are earning higher revenues from the purchase of merchandise items for kids. Reifurth, Wear, and Heere (2020) indicated that exposure to, and familiarity with a brand will only increase with age, as time gives individuals more opportunities with which to become familiar with a brand, product, or service. P4 contended that, if the organization ensures that enough kids are playing now, it will manifest in additional revenue in 10 years, when the kids have buying power as their parents start bringing them to games. Both P4 and P5 noted that they keep this timeline in mind when sponsoring youth hockey; although there is not an immediate return on investment (ROI), in the long term, it is effective.

Hispanic. According to P4, targeting the Hispanic market is unique to them and the other Sun Belt markets. According to P3:

Reaching out to the Hispanic community is not something that we had ever really tried to tap into, and if we do not start getting more diverse in that way then we are going to miss out and not have the growth or be sustainable because it is such a huge part of our community.

P4 stated, "I have no idea how long this Hispanic marketing strategy is going to take, but you have to be very careful and it takes time." P5's organization uses the strategy of

marketing to the Hispanic population. The organization did not conduct any Hispanic marketing at all until a year and a half ago, although the Hispanic population represents 41% of the market area. P4 also noted that Hispanic marketing is particularly challenging because, as the Hispanic population did not grow up playing hockey, not many Hispanic people are working in or playing hockey. Three of the five participants indicated that they had to confront the challenge of trying to be genuine while finding the right person who understands hockey terminology, hockey culture, and the hockey experience and can blend these with the Hispanic culture.

According to P5, the Hispanic community strategy appears successful because more people in that segment are talking about hockey. More participation is occurring among Hispanic kids in the programs on learning how to play ice hockey and in dedicated Hispanic events. P5 indicated that the organization has been observing increases in viewership of games on television and the number of Hispanic fans attending games.

Packages. P2 reported many different buying options exist for fans. The products are segregated into a full-season, half, quarter, and other special plans. They also have group plans that focus on one specific game and try to attract as many members of one particular group as possible. P3 mentioned that many different segment plan packages exist. P4 supported the views of P2 and P3; the strategy is to offer full-season, half-season, quarter-season, and four-game packages. P5 stated, “We have a weekender package since we wanted to give fans an opportunity to get some savings and be locked into more games by offering all weekend games at a certain price.” P5 commented that an

increase in revenue from the weekend attendance has occurred as a result of offering these special weekend packages. P4 explained that the mini-plans each have unique characteristics, such as the Canadian mini-plan, which provides the opportunity to see all three Canadian teams that are playing in a given month. P4 noted that the mini-plan strategy has worked well, with more young families purchasing the weekender package. The package strategy has fostered attendance growth and increased revenue.

Sponsorships. The strategy of P3's organization is to be aggressive in how the organization sells sponsorships. According to P3, significant amounts of cross-over revenue opportunities exist because they are one of the top five or six busiest buildings in North America. P4 argued that they cannot just decide that digital marketing has the highest ROI and that they will only do digital advertising to boost attendance at the door. Instead, they must continue to be creative and innovative, while determining the most appropriate methods to track the success of the unique strategies that they employ rather than trying a strategy for one year and concluding that it did not work. Three out of the five participants mentioned that when an organization builds a brand, the organization must be consistent year after year, track the success, and create a sustainable product. The participants' views regarding sponsorship strategies substantiated the findings in the literature that online sponsorships can provide a greater return for corporate sponsors if they align with the core demographics for a given product or service (see Kim et al., 2017).

The theme of market segmentation is consistent with Porter's five forces model especially the bargaining power of the buyers. According to Porter (2008), the bargaining

power of buyers refers to the influence consumers have on price, quality of service, and products. According to Mahat (2019), the customer demonstrates bargaining power by demanding better quality products or services. All participants mentioned the purchasing power of the fans, customer service, and diversity of products as areas of emphasis. Wellner and Lakotta (2020) indicated that the bargaining power of buyers can also determine the organization's profit potential. The buyers can be powerful in price negotiation, purchase from standardized products, and have extensive product knowledge (Wellner & Lakotta, 2020).

The organizational members must be visible in the community at local events, such as town festivals, charity races, and other special events. The Sun Belt teams cannot rely on the history and tradition of the team and should focus on in-person relationships in the community. Four of the five participants indicated that this is what their teams are doing to represent their team in the community and increase their brand recognition. The findings indicate that their organization has a greater influence on buyer fan base development and are on the front lines of building developing that fan base.

Four out of five participants indicated that their strategies are beginning to pay off with a growth in the people involved in hockey in the following categories: youth programs, street hockey teams, families coming to games, female fans, and television viewership. P3 and P5 noted that they now see more people in the stands, which leads to increased game revenue, household engagement, social media engagement, and Hispanic community involvement.

Theme 3: Promotion

One common message shared by all participants was that promotion positively influences revenue. Each participant mentioned that traditional marketing methods have become costly and ineffective, and the results of traditional promotions are difficult to measure. As part of the document review for this study, I reviewed the Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages for each participant and team. Both P5 and P4 stated that they use digital advertising in addition to their focused in-person, “boots-on-the-ground” marketing approach, and indicated that digital advertising refers to social media advertising, including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Google Search. P1, P2, and P3 indicated that they also use traditional advertising via television, radio, and directly to the home. All participants used Instagram for promotions, and P3 highlighted the promotional effectiveness of a new daily post on Instagram. According to Balan and Rege (2017), business leaders encourage customer engagement on social media when asking for product feedback, posting videos, and frequently communicating with their customers.

Social media promotion and marketing. Emphasizing that the organization tries to understand the audience, P3 stated that, even if a fan is a single-game purchaser, the fan is captured in the CRM system database. This CRM application provides an effective method to continue to reach out to the fans regarding future games and special promotions. All participants mentioned that they try to persuade single-game purchasers to upgrade their purchases to increase revenue. This goal is pursued by encouraging fans to purchase at least another single-game ticket at a higher premium seat price and

eventually persuading them to become season ticket holders. Malshe and Al-Khatib (2017) opined that effective promotional strategies lure consumers to purchase more products, help business leaders earn a good reputation in the community, and enhance the performance of a business. Thus, the sustainability and survival of a business depend on the marketing approaches adopted to promote company products and services.

All participants mentioned the importance of analytics that provides information to ensure that organizations are appropriately targeting the right people. All participants indicated that they now use much more digital social media advertising than in the past. According to P3, “this has been the biggest shift in strategy in how they are increasing revenues and that every team is trying to go more digital.” The participants’ views aligned with the research findings that indicate that sports teams can listen to and understand fans’ needs, respond accordingly, and create value for consumers through social media (see Abeza et al., 2019). P5 explained that the advertising promise of social media is that when a customer attends a game, the attendee will have a good time and be entertained. All participants indicated that they have worked strenuously on making the fan experience a great deal of fun. According to Barnes (2017), satisfaction is an intensely positive emotional state, and customer delight is an experience that exceeds customer expectations.

Using technology is important in nurturing fans after their initial socialization. Engaging fans online is a way to use social media to bring those people together and provide them a platform to express their fandom. All participants indicated that digital marketing or a social media strategy is beneficial to organizations because they can

become more familiar with their fans. Such strategies provide the capability for organizations to track customer activity and more effectively monitor the revenue stream. To remain competitive, teams must configure their businesses to leverage social media. The participants' responses aligned with the findings from previous studies, revealing that teams use social media as a two-way interaction opportunity: establishing relationships with consumers and fostering a brand community (see Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). P3, P4, and P5 noted that they can observe how a fan is engaged via social media advertising by tracking when the fan saw the ad, clicked on the ad, and progressed through the purchasing process. All of the participants mentioned the importance of capturing customer information and using that information to proactively contact customers using email or texts. This finding is consistent with the need to develop an appealing sports website, as 87.9% of North American consumers use the Internet to communicate, connect, and search for products and services (see Kim et al., 2017).

The strategy of P4's organization for digital and social media marketing includes Facebook ads, Google AdWords, and Instagram ads. P3 mentioned that the organization has prioritized social media that allows them to target fans who are attending games. P3 noted that about half of the home games are typically geo-zone restricted that restricts the purchases of tickets to certain zip codes in the primary and secondary markets. This restriction allows Team3 to control who purchases tickets. P3 acknowledged that this strategy is unique, but it works for them because they prioritize having their fans at the games that provides sustainable revenue. P4 stated that the strategy for growth and

increasing revenue is heavily focused on the organization's hockey development and grassroots marketing.

P3 noted that it is now simpler to determine the influence of social media or marketing and whether the organization is receiving a good return on the investments. All participants acknowledged that a dramatic change has occurred over the past five or six years in technology, digital social media, and marketing. The e-market analytical tools that are included in Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have made tracking marketing more effective. The tracking capability can indicate what item was opened, what the customer clicked on, and whether that activity resulted in a sale. According to Musonera and Weber (2018), social media has enhanced the customer's negotiating power through customer feedback either positive or negative. P5 mentioned that an additional strategy that the organization has begun to adopt is to target the games that are a challenge on a Tuesday night and are a bigger draw, such as against Vancouver, Toronto, or Chicago. In the past, the organization ignored such games unless they were on the weekend. They did not market or promote these games. However, they now use the marketing capability of digital advertising and social media, resulting in record revenues for the past two seasons.

P3 argued that digital marketing is efficient since it facilitates marketers' jobs and can demonstrate the need to adjust promotional activities quickly. P3 noted that the organization can segment the population into several elements, such as by purchasing demographics, day of the week, or even whether a customer is a music fan. The organization also knows whether someone opened an e-mail on the front end and how they obtained tickets. P3 stated the following:

Metrics are in place so we follow that from the perspective of are you selling more Saturday tickets on straight from Ticket Master than you are off of Instagram on a Tuesday; maybe the college special on a Tuesday is working based on demographics of people that are buying.

P5 explained that when the organization spends a million dollars in advertising, they can observe that the single-game tickets are up by half a million dollars and the season ticket sales are up by over a million dollars. P2 added that, from the obtained information, they can develop an ROI on that individual advertising program. P3 noted that much more analysis can be performed very quickly compared to using a direct mailer, newspaper ad, or television commercial. According to P4, “in digital social media marketing advertising, you can see six times your return on digital advertising as far as ROI is concerned compared to the other more traditional advertising.” This finding supports the argument that marketers can better allocate resources, motivate contact strategies, and target campaigns to send the right message (see Morris & Wakefield, 2018).

Traditional promotion and marketing. P5 noted that the organization does some print advertising, but the organization is not a big fan of print advertising because of its continued decline. P5’s organization is not spending much money on print media because it is not receiving a great return on the marketing dollars. For example, P1 explained this in more detail:

What we have done is to make very strategic decisions on where we spend our marketing dollars and what that has meant for us is to move away from traditional

media assets such as billboards, television commercials, and radio and print, and we are moving into making investments into business intelligence, database marketing, social media, and digital advertising.

According to Konert and Kaiser (2017), the most effective promotional strategies are (a) right-time delivery, (b) targeting a specific demographic and audience, (c) using appropriate communication channels, and (d) focusing on the customers' interests. P4 noted that the organization does not want to exclusively use digital advertising without grassroots marketing efforts. Achen (2019) indicated that while marketing on social media networks should not replace other channels, it can supplement an already strong marketing communications plan. P4 explained that it can be difficult to understand why someone visits the team home page. The visit could result from several sources, such as (a) a targeted digital ad, (b) a billboard, or (c) attending a promotional event. The new social media promotional tools have fostered active media consumers (see Armstrong et al., 2016). Three of the five participants stated that they make the first touchpoint with prospective fans and are as visible as possible in the community. P5 shared that another strategy that has helped is attendance at community events. In one year, the organization attended about 170 events, transforming from invisible to present in many locations in the community.

Four of the five participants indicated that their organizations have changed how they interact with potential customers. This finding is consistent with the argument that business leaders can outperform their competitors and achieve long-term business sustainability by implementing effective promotional approaches (Fier & Pooser, 2016).

P5 explained that, in the past, the organization put the team representatives behind a table, and the fans had to approach them while separated by this table. In contrast, now, “they are initiating the contact with the fan. This is done by proactively seeking the fan out, or being part of the crowd, rather than waiting for them to come to them.” The majority of the participants mentioned that they now reach out to fans and no longer take a passive marketing approach but are aggressive in reaching out to the fans. This approach leads to a positive experience dynamic that could lead to a future purchase. The participants’ views are aligned with the findings from previous studies that indicates that understanding customer engagement behavior and motivation can deepen the understanding of fan engagement and be a valuable tool for sports marketers (see Manoli, 2018).

Several of the participants elaborated on other marketing strategies that have helped increase the visibility of hockey in their regions. P4 and P5 shared that they created a street hockey team, a group of people who travel with their new account activation group with street hockey, inflatables, mascots, and other hands-on hockey activities at community events. Each of the participants affirmed that a significant change in strategy has been the departure from a passive model of waiting for people to come to them. Both P3 and P5 concluded that waiting for the fan to reach out has not been sustainable and has not generated the level of revenue needed. The organizations are now more aggressive with their grassroots marketing. This finding is consistent with the argument that media, such as television, radio, and newspaper, engage consumers as passive participants who consume the produced material.

P5 indicated that the organization reaches people in other ways beyond social media advertising such as former and current NHL and university hockey players who played youth hockey in the area. According to P5, these hockey success stories have helped sell hockey in the region. In addition, P4 noted that the organization frequently promotes buy one, get one vouchers that help track the revenue sources.

All participants acknowledged that sales and marketing have become much more sophisticated in the digital social media environment. It is fairly easy for organizations to understand how the budget is being spent. Another benefit is that they can be agile with their marketing mix that allows the organizations to move and manipulate dollars across different digital media opportunities.

The theme of promotion aligns with the conceptual framework of Porter's five forces model pertaining to the threat of substitutes, bargaining power of suppliers, and bargaining power of customers. Promotion can emphasize differentiators in the product that demonstrate the product is hard to replicate or substitute. Sun Belt NHL teams complete with sporting events and other entertainment such as movies, concerts, and live theatre for viewership and revenue. An effective promotion plan provides a mechanism that attracts spectators and participants. Additionally, a promotion plan can illustrate how consumers identify with the team. Promotion impacts the bargaining power of suppliers by demonstrating the quality of the products, availability of tickets, and benefits derived from the products. Promotion, using social media, could modify the buyer environment by encouraging interaction between consumers, fans, the brand, and organizations that impacts the bargaining power of the buyer by providing additional links to the products

and services available. The promotion theme helps in developing and strengthening the irreplaceability of the product or service in order to ensure continuous competitiveness (Zhang et al., 2020).

Theme 4: Unique Value Proposition

All of the participants shared a common theme emerged concerned the development of a unique value proposition. P1 stated:

As a hockey franchise in a nontraditional market, every day we have to have our “A” game, because the minute we stop pushing and stop trying to take risks and big promotions, we could be forgotten. We run as lean from an expense perspective and resource standpoint but are an effective sports organization as any out there.

All participants noted that their organization effectively and efficiently manages their operations to maximize the use of limited resources to be cost-effective. The participants' views aligned with Porter's generic strategies for cost leadership as follows; (a) achieving business sustainability and increasing profitability, (b) obtaining greater than average returns, and (c) emphasizing price-sensitive or cost-conscious customers (see Porter, 2008). According to Bartunek (2020), a cost leadership strategy involves the organization winning market share by appealing to cost-conscious or price-sensitive customers.

P3 revealed that the organization must be entertaining and provide the fans with a good time when they come to games, even if the fans may not have much knowledge about hockey. P2 affirmed this, stating: “As a sport, the fans know it was fast, they know

there were hits, there were fights, excitement, and energy and that could permeate that gap of hockey knowledge.”

P1 shared that Team1 uses dynamic pricing for all tickets. All of the participants’ responses regarding dynamic pricing corroborated the previous findings that suggested that dynamic pricing is an area in which organizations are committed to investing, in addition to partnering with food, beverage, and merchandising to increase potential revenue (see Bouchet et al., 2016). All of the participants mentioned that a half member package of 21 games, a quarter membership package of 10 games, and a flex package that allows the customer to pick four games are options. P1 indicated that Team1 is also experimenting with a subscription-type product. P3’s views echoed those of P1; P3 explained that the organization created many different pricing strategies because the organization was initially concerned about filling the building and attracting as many people as possible to attend. This approach affected the revenue, producing low attendance for some games. The organization shifted away from that model to the model of offering assorted products for different fans. According to Morgan (2015), Porter’s Competitive Strategy Theory of the focus strategy includes offering customers unique service and products in a small segment of the market. This focus strategy aligns with the participants’ views of providing unique service to their Sun Belt market and links to the conceptual framework of the research study.

P2 mentioned that having a good experience is fundamental from the second the fan arrives at the game, throughout the game, to the moment the fan finally leaves the game. All participants acknowledged that they cannot control what the team does on the

ice, but they can control the experience and entertainment. P5 shared that the organization offers renewals to customers who had different packages to encourage them to renew their current package. At that time, the sales representative encourages customers to upgrade the purchase. If the fan has a four-game package, then the sales representative encourages the fan to buy a quarter-season package; if the fan has a quarter package, then the representative promotes a half-season package. P2 stated the following:

I did the best I could to ensure that before every game that the fan knew where to park, had their tickets, they were entertained, and the fans were taken care of with the best possible service with a direct line to P2 if anything comes up.

According to Agnihotri, Gabler, Itani, Jaramillo, and Krush (2017), exceptional customer service increases the sales volume because customers keep returning. P1, P3, and P4 explained that the revenue strategy with the season ticket holder plans is to provide more premium options. P1 noted that the organization has a lounge downstairs underneath the bleachers for season ticket holders, providing a unique and exclusive dining experience. In addition, fans can ‘fist-bump’ the players as the players come out for warm-ups or the game. According to Kramer, Jung, and Burgartz (2016), a value-added proposition through service performance is one of the best measures to combat price erosion.

P3 emphasized that the organization has created a plethora of purchasing options and tried to add value to the ticket and game experience. All participants indicated that coming to the game is only one element and that the live entertainment aspect and level of fun experienced during the game are not always tied to winning or losing. All

participants indicated that their organizations emphasized the entertainment element and focused on customer service.

The findings in the current study indicate that service quality and perceived value through customer satisfaction have a positive effect on customer retention and profitability (see Zboja et al., 2016). Providing exceptional customer service is directly bound to the conceptual framework of Porter's (1980) five forces, specifically the threat of substitutes, customer power, and competitive rivalry. More extensive interaction with the customer develops a closer bond between the organization and consumers and allows the organization to offer exceptional services to their clients (see Braun, Hadwich, & Bruhn, 2017).

P2 details the organization's approach to making the very important person area or business area have more of a country club atmosphere as a social gathering spot with higher-end food and drinks and easier access to seats. This approach made the area more of an event and a trending spot before and after the games that generates additional revenue. P2 argued that innovation is critical to remaining competitive such as the implementation of digital ticketing. In the past, no professional team had provided digital ticketing, but now not only is the sports industry using digital ticketing, but every form of entertainment is moving toward digital ticketing. Team2 was the first to do it, and this provided a great fan experience. P3 also stated:

Monetizing a single-game purchase revenue and converting it into a higher dollar ticket or converting it into the next level of seat that has always been the goal. The single-game ticket buyer is truly really the growth and revenue funnel. This is

your sales funnel. The new business leads are not just that one single game purchase but can evolve to the four-game package, then maybe a quarter season, then moving up to a half-season and a full season.

P3 described that monetizing somebody in the facility, revenues increase in various ways, such as through selling concessions, merchandise (including jerseys), and experiences within the facility. Additional revenue items may include a foundation auction, puck throw, signed game-worn jerseys, or a ride on the Zamboni. Many different methods exist to capture additional revenue throughout the game. P2 noted that revenue can be obtained from up-selling unattended seats. Up-selling describes the process whereby a fan comes to a game on a \$20 upper-level seat and is then upgraded for additional money to a better seat that has gone unsold.

P3 mentioned that discounted ticket pricing and discounts on concessions are available, which is about 20% off food items. Other strategies to add customer value are allowing customers into the building earlier and offering themed merchandise giveaway items for season ticket holders. Six or seven different season ticket holder gifts include a season kick-off gift, holiday gift, playoff gifts, and summer gifts, which provide the season ticket holder a better experience. According to Porter (2008), customers who feel satisfied with services and products provide longevity, especially when sellers differentiate their products and services. P3 stated:

Another strategy is to provide access to different special events. A season ticket holder has presale options for any music concert earlier than the normal general

public. Other premium items are Teamfest, which is a meet and greet with the players, 2 hours of autographs, and a free concert.

There are different access and segment levels for season ticket holders that add value. All participants confirmed that they use dynamic pricing for every game of the year. Dynamic pricing is flexible pricing that shifts based on supply and demand metrics and the elements that affect supply and demand (see Bouchet et al., 2016). All participants indicated that they take notice of historic buying, single-game tickets, and fluctuating ticket prices day to day. The participants' views substantiated the findings from the existing research that indicates big data is used to model consumer behavior in admission-based membership services from initial single-game purchases to a full-season membership (see Morris & Wakefield, 2018).

There is a science to dynamic pricing. The organizations have business analytics departments that calculate what they believe the market will sustain for a single-game ticket price. The analytics can be performed for a Tuesday game against Toronto versus a Saturday game against Chicago or another Sun Belt team in March. The organizations pay close attention to what they are pricing against. P3 explained that the organization always pays attention to ticket prices and that the price is not set once and then not changed. P3 mentioned that they can change the ticket price using dynamically priced tickets, be it month-to-month, week-to-week, or day-to-day based on what they observe regarding the purchasing trend.

P3 added that the organization completes capital upgrades, such as replacing seats, replacing the scoreboard, or upgrading their mascot, every couple of years so that the fans can see improvements. P3 stated:

We try to continually re-invent the wheel of what and who we are by knowing what are core competencies are and knowing what going to a Team3 game feels like and how do we keep making it a rowdy, good, fun time, and entertaining.

P3 indicated that the organization tries to focus on ensuring that people are entertained and leverage giveaways to entice customers to attend. Strategies include promoting a fan foodie night when everybody with discounted food concessions, a free Zamboni ride lottery, discounted parking, merchandise discounts, or other items that can encourage people to make the purchasing decision.

The theme of unique value proposition is consistent with Porter's focus strategy including offering customers unique services and products in a discrete segment of the market (Morgan, 2015). This focus strategy aligns with the participants' views of providing unique service to their Sun Belt market and links to the conceptual framework of the research study. Customers who feel satisfied with services and products provide longevity, especially when sellers differentiate their products and services (Porter, 2008). Providing exceptional customer service is directly bound to the conceptual framework of Porter's (1980) five forces, specifically the threat of substitutes, customer power, and competitive rivalry.

Theme 5: Product Differentiation

All of the participants shared a common viewpoint that organizations must employ a distinct and efficient product differentiation strategy. P1 and P2 mentioned that organizations must rely on personal relationships and investments in their sales staff and customer service associates. All participants indicated that the entire organization must have a great customer service mindset. According to Jeon and Choi (2017), satisfied customers tend to remain loyal and patronize the services of a business often, while also recommending the business to other potential customers. P1 stated, "When we have fans that become season ticket holders, that we are able to keep them, so they do not come and go." P4 indicated, "We have found less and less people wearing the opposing team's jersey and a lot more people wearing our jerseys in the arena." All participants indicated that the fans are proud to root for the home team.

P1 reported that they sell a full menu of products and that the main product is labeled the "club" membership that is essentially the branding name for a full-season ticket holder. To be a club member is to have tickets to all the games with the best seats, best price, and an elevated experience and entertainment. P1 stated, "We hope the experience is more than just having tickets to the games." Season ticket holders are part of a club that obtains special perks, access to players, special events, and added value. Those fans who commit to attending every game comprise about 70% of the total ticket revenue. P3 noted that the season ticket holder plan means the customer pays less for each ticket than on a single-game basis. The person in the seat next to a season ticket

holder might be paying \$50 to \$100 more a game on a single ticket basis versus the full season.

P3 indicated that the organization has a strategy pertaining to premium and high-dollar products that includes product segmentation and dynamic priced tickets. All participants mentioned that their organizations they have full-season tickets that are next to the glass seats and behind the players' benches. A wide segment of purchasing options exists, including full season, suites, and single-game, same-day purchases that may appeal to a young adult who does not have anything else to do at night and who is impulsive. This person says, "Yes, I want to go to that game, and it is only \$25 to get in the door." All participants mentioned having a wide variety of ticket plans for people to purchase and different options for group sales and other items that increase revenues. P5 explained:

They still offer a wide variety of products that appeal to all different levels of their customer segmentation, from the entry-level buyers to season buyer, from smaller discretionary dollars to larger amounts, because there is a time frame when we do not want to stop gaining fans we want to as a brand continue to grow and be supported in all times.

P4 shared that the organization performs an annual analysis of the customer demographics because they want to validate that they are employing relevant strategies in capturing valuable opportunities. According to Taneja, Pryor, and Hayek (2016), innovation is the primary factor that leads to increasing a company's visibility, profitability, and sustainability.

P2 argued that the NHL is behind on innovation in general and working in old traditional ways, such as only offering a full-season ticket without any additional package options. P2 stated that the NHL is behind other sports in this way. One of the biggest strategic innovations that Team 2 made was to renovate an old restaurant that was rarely used and quickly became a location that fans could purchase tickets. P4 mentioned that one must be willing to think outside of the box. According to Dhochak and Sharma (2016), leaders require innovative strategies to be competitive and be successful in the long-term. P4 elaborated that the executives who have failed in the Sun Belt region are the ones that come in and say, “This is how we did it in [Northern Team A].” According to P4, this region is not [Northern Team A] and will never be [Northern Team A]. All participants affirmed that one must be willing to think differently, to be creative and innovative, and to adjust with the times. Many teams are starting to experience that.

P4 concluded that the organization views the competition more broadly than just other sports. This stance is key when creating the marketing plan and game presentation entertainment package. P1 highlighted that their geographic location has many options that people can use their discretionary spending on entertainment. According to Bolisani and Bratianu (2018), product differentiation assists in establishing customer loyalty and mitigates the influence of competition. P3 indicated that merely trying to be the best sport in town is different from being the most fun and entertaining activity to enjoy in town. The participants’ views aligned with research findings that stated that strategically positioning a business within a specific industry or location by developing defenses against the competition is essential for sustainability (see Salim, 2017). P5 stated:

Our strategy is that we try not to compete with the other teams. We are an entertainment product and so are they. I am more worried about people going to play golf or selecting another entertainment option. However, we want to be the most entertaining sports option, so if they decide to attend a sporting event, they think of us and attending a hockey game. As far as an entertainment standpoint, I am very confident to say ours is the best in town. There are a lot of other things to do in our area, so that is a challenge for us, so that can be relevant for us, so we put this on ourselves to be fun and entertaining then we can become relevant.

The threat of substitutes refers to the consumer's ability to select an alternative business or buy another product or service. According to Milimu and Theuri (2017), a business owner must evaluate the product or service differentiation and switching costs for consumers. Dessain and Fishman (2017) argued that the higher the switching cost, the less likely a consumer is to use another service or product. P5 stated that the strategy is not to compete with the other teams because both organizations are an entertainment product. P5 was more worried about people playing golf or selecting another entertainment option.

P2 argued that providing digital ticketing offers the fan a better experience and makes the experience better every year. Company leaders who focus on developing innovative strategies to create value for their customers manage to stay ahead of the competition (see Kachouie, Mavondo, & Sands, 2018). P3 stated that the objective is ensuring the fans are taken care of and are having the best possible experience. P4 contended:

You are always going to go through this growing pain period where you are battling against old mentalities. You are always going to have the traditionalist hockey fan who wants things to be a certain way and does not want things to change.

The top strategies that P2 used in achieving ticket sales were communication and the provision of exceptional customer service. P3 contended that the best approach is to offer a high level of customer service to all season ticket holders. P5 indicated that the organizational strategy is all about touchpoints that equates to e-mail and texts from their sales representatives to the customers. According to Santouridis and Veraki (2017), communicating constantly and establishing a trustful relationship with consumers and suppliers are essential for long-term sustainability and growth. The strategy of personalized service as a competitive advantage also aligns with Porter's strategy of product differentiation of indicating the business is unique, emphasizing customer satisfaction, and gaining the loyalty of the customers. According to Bartunek (2020), a differentiated product strategy is appropriate when the target customer segment is not price-sensitive, the market is saturated, customers have specific needs, and the company has unique resources and capabilities that enable it to satisfy these needs. The findings from my study indicated that the Sun Belt market is not price-sensitive, is saturated, customers have specific needs, and the teams have unique capabilities to satisfy these needs.

The theme of product differentiation is consistent with Porter's differentiation strategy, which, according to Hales and McLarney (2017), is organizational leaders

demonstrating how their business is unique, emphasizing customer service and gaining customer loyalty. The bargaining power of suppliers refers to the influence suppliers have on charging higher prices, limiting quality or services, or shifting costs to industry participants (Oyadomari, Silva, Neto, & Diehl, 2017). The uniqueness of their business, customer service, and customer loyalty were mentioned by all five participants and aligns with Porter's model for competitive strategy. There is alignment of the current study with the theories of Porter's five forces model (Porter, 1980) and competitive strategy model (Porter, 2008). According to Converse and Reinhard (2016), using Porter's five forces analysis, could help a leader to evaluate the effects of a business problem could have on achieving a competitive advantage.

Applications to Professional Practice

Sun Belt NHL organizational leaders may benefit from this study by expanding their knowledge of strategies employed to increase revenues. The results of the study could assist NHL Sun Belt team organizational leaders when developing strategies to address how to acquire new fans. The application to professional practice could be the development of segmentation of the target markets such as families, young fans, and Hispanics. The relevance to improved business practice is effective communication and customer service, customer relationship management, and efficient promotional strategy. The research findings could be used to help organizational leaders address saturation of their current fan base by creating new segments of fans. This is relevant to improved business practice to ensure revenue growth and ensure long-term sustainability of the team. The findings of the study could contribute to professional business practices by

providing practical strategies to grow and sustain the business. Application to professional practice could also combat competition and overcome product substitution by introducing either the differentiation, the cost leadership, or focus strategy.

Additional application to professional practice may be that northern NHL teams could be leaving a great deal of revenue unexplored without using these strategies. New or growing leagues, such as Major League Soccer and the National Lacrosse League, could also consider applying these business applications when trying to develop a larger fan base in relation to the NFL, MLB, and NBA. The findings are relevant to sport organizations such as NASCAR, with strong regional fan bases, that could use the findings to develop a larger national presence.

The findings align with evidence from the reviewed literature and expand the knowledge gained from previous studies. The knowledge gained from this research could provide NHL Sun Belt leaders with a holistic view of revenue strategies that could enhance and increase long-term sustainable revenue sources. Guenzi, De Luca, and Spiro (2016) indicated that the hallmarks of long-term business sustainability are: (a) proficient relationship management, (b) good communication, (c) high quality customer service, (d) efficient promotional strategies, and (e) the right teammates onboard. Additionally, the findings for the study could contribute to professional business practice by illustrating practical strategies to grow and sustain revenue.

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change of this study include assisting the local economy by creating employment opportunities, economic revitalization, and economic

growth. According to Lee (2018), the sustainability of business activities may also have many effects on other stakeholders, such as suppliers of products and services, and might contribute to the promotion of other social activities. Community leaders could use the taxes that Sun Belt NHL teams pay to provide social amenities and infrastructure, such as libraries, roads, hospitals, housing, and schools. He, Standen, and Coetzer (2017) opined that a common thread among business leaders is the emphasis on the commitment to strengthening society and the community. Sustainable businesses could also lead to team longevity that may lead to increased meaningful employment to enhance the quality of life for local members of the community.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this study are examples of strategies that some NHL Sun Belt organizational leaders are using to increase revenues and provided the basis for the following recommendations. The first recommendation is for Sun Belt NHL leaders to develop a holistic strategy that could be shared universally with other Sun Belt teams and all 31 NHL teams. Such a strategy could consist of sharing information and the successful implementation of promotional programs that increased revenues. The second recommendation is to combine social media and digital advertising with in-person promotion and events. This strategy could show the linkage of the NHL team with the community. The third recommendation is that the organizational leaders could implement an effective strategy with great emphasis on the family that could have a positive impact on the saturation of the hockey market in their geographic region. This strategy could encourage the development of women and children's engagement in the hockey

community. The fourth recommendation is to stimulate interaction between the hardcore or traditional hockey fan and the new fan. This could develop a sense of community between the new and the more tenured hockey fan. This strategy could expand the market into non-traditional markets such as the Hispanic community. The fifth recommendation is to stimulate interaction with the community in regard to hockey throughout the entire year. This strategy is about being visible in the community the entire year, and not only during hockey season. The sixth recommendation is the expansion of hockey product alternatives. This strategy could include innovative products like ticket sharing programs, a subscription membership service, and ticket trading options.

The findings and recommendations will be shared directly with the study participants. The study will be available in the ProQuest database for researchers, Sun Belt team leaders, NHL leaders, hockey fans, and students to review. According to Rose and Flynn (2018), researchers should disseminate the research findings to influence managerial and professional practices. One of the participants requested permission to use the results of this study to develop a consolidated revenue review that they indicated had never been conducted. Three of the participants requested a consolidated overview of the findings of my research study. Additionally, several of the participants indicated I should do a presentation to Sun Belt team leadership on the research findings. I also intend to convert this study into an academic paper suitable for publication in journals to make the findings available to a broader range of business leaders. My objective is to submit articles for publication to NHL Sun Belt organizations and seek opportunities to share the results at meetings and conferences.

Recommendations for Further Research

Little research about Sun Belt NHL teams' strategies for increasing revenue have been conducted. There appears to be a need for further research about Sun Belt NHL team strategies for increasing revenues. Additionally, further studies could also include researchers with more research experience. Limitations identified were that participants could provide information that may contain bias and that the participants may not be willing to discuss proprietary strategies. These limitations appeared to be adequately addressed by the participants being fully transparent and candid on the strategies implemented.

Researchers aiming to repeat this study could recruit a larger study population comprising a broader demographic and geographic representation of the teams located in the Sun Belt. Another recommendation is that researchers could conduct further studies beyond the Sun Belt NHL teams. Because Sun Belt NHL revenue is not a widely researched topic, it could be beneficial to review the entire NHL in every market and region. Studying all the NHL teams could provide information to the league as a whole. Additionally, further insight into the research question could offer nationwide NHL results to compare to this study. Future research should be done to obtain a better understanding of and insight into the revenues of other NHL teams to help the league and teams improve the game, gain an understanding of customer saturation, and brands.

Conducting a study using a quantitative survey or mixed-method research could also offer more insight. Researchers could use the study findings to develop a survey to collect types of data that could assist with the proactive development of revenue-

producing strategies. Future researchers could use a different research design, such as ethnography or a phenomenology design, to identify and explore further revenue and sustainability strategies. Additionally, mixed-method studies are useful in expanding the sample population in the Sun Belt market relating to consumer behavior on key performance indicators. Future researchers should examine the interaction between traditional in-person marketing and social media that could identify consumers' behaviors among the Sun Belt hockey population.

Reflections

My experience with the DBA doctoral study process served as a great learning and growth opportunity. The DBA program was the most demanding yet rewarding learning experience I have had thus far. I gained knowledge and understanding of the revenue sources for Sun Belt NHL teams. The research method used to obtain the information required meticulous work and diligence. During the study, I became acquainted with the concept of research bias and did all I could to minimize bias. I ensured that my preferences did not influence the research findings. The findings from the study, aligned with the data collected from the audio-recorded interviews, interview transcripts, and notes.

During this research, finding qualified participants to commit to an interview date was challenging. This challenge was magnified by the effects of COVID 19 and the postponement of the NHL regular season in the spring of 2020. Persuading potential participants to take time away from their busy schedules while managing the effects of the virus was a substantial challenge. Nonetheless, once I found the appropriate

participants, the participants were delighted to share their experiences engagingly and pleasantly.

Prior to the DBA program, I had no experience conducting research. During my doctoral journey, I gained experience in the uniqueness of academic research. Some of the skills I acquired from this experience included using different data collection techniques, selecting and applying various research designs, and ensuring reliability and validity in the research.

I also reflect on the words of the hockey great Wayne Gretzky: “You miss 100% of the shots you never take,” and “Skate to where the puck is going, not where it has been.” In completion of this study, my thinking changed about the topic of how the Sun Belt teams could increase revenue. My thinking shifted from concentrating on the hardcore and life-long transplanted hockey fans to the belief that long-term sustainable local fans, such as families, females, young kids, and the Hispanic community need to be the target audience. I was pleasantly surprised by the findings from the five participants.

At times, the workload appeared insurmountable; however, I persevered. There was persistent support and encouragement from the one I love most, Rosemary, my wife. The process has equipped me with tenacity and resolve. While I held no preconceived views on the possible results of this study, completing the last section was exciting because I understood the research process better as a completed product. Furthermore, the results of this study motivated my interest in the NHL to continue obtaining additional information regarding the sustainability of professional hockey in the Sun Belt.

Progressing in my career, I will take the lessons learned at Walden University with me on my professional and personal journey.

Conclusion

In my qualitative multiple case study, I explored the strategies that NHL Sun Belt organizational leaders use to increase revenues. In conclusion, the participants emphasized the importance of developing new fans, additional customer product offerings, increasing market segments, and growing their local markets. My contribution to this study is to provide NHL Sun Belt leaders with more information to sustain their success. A key learning from the study was that Sun Belt teams should not rely on the traditional hockey fan to sustain or grow revenue. The traditional or hardcore hockey fan involvement has reached saturation and the success of the Sun Belt teams and NHL holistically could depend on developing and nurturing a new generation of fans. The findings of this study also indicated that the NHL Sun Belt teams should continue to expand their market segments, use social media in conjunction with personal community involvement, and provide outstanding customer service. Additional findings indicated that the Sun Belt NHL teams should continue to innovate, expand customer products, and understand that the team is in the entertainment business not just the business of sport. The findings of this study could create positive social outcomes and improve the longevity of the Sun Belt NHL teams.

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Appendix: A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What I will do	What I will say – The Script
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin with Script. • Introduce the interview. • Set the stage in an appropriate location to produce a quality digital recording. • Obtain email Consent Form approval. • Indicate the use of audio recording and note taking. 	<p>Hello, nice to meet you Mr. or Mrs. _____. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.</p> <p>I want to restate the interview format and make sure that you are still ok with it.</p> <p>I will indicate that the interview will take no longer than one hour. I will be asking seven semistructured open-ended questions. This will be an open discussion which will include additional drill down questions in a conversational manner.</p> <p>I will remind the participant that the interview will be recorded to ensure I capture all the information you provided correctly.</p> <p>I will state that this interview will be strictly confidential, and nothing will be used in this study to specifically identify you or your organization.</p> <p>Any information obtained during this study will be destroyed after five years. To confirm, you do choose to participate in this research study?</p> <p>Do you have any questions you would like to ask me before we get started?</p> <p>Ok, then let's begin.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paraphrase as required. • Ask follow-up probing questions to obtain more in-depth information. 	<p>Start by asking the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question 1: What strategies did you use to increase your team's revenues? • Question 2: Which of those strategies and processes have been most successful in the increasing of revenues? • Question 3: What, if any, strategies for revenue

	<p>generation are unique to the geographic location and size of your team?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question 4: What key challenges did you encounter when implementing your strategies? • Question 5: How did you address the key challenges to implementing your strategies for generating revenue? • Question 6: How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies for generating revenue? • Question 7: What additional information can you provide to help me understand your team's strategies in increasing revenues?
<p>End Interview with following script:</p> <p>Inform participant how I will proceed from here and what to expect after the interview.</p>	<p>Thank you for your time and consideration. I really appreciate the information that you provided to me. I will analyze the responses and schedule a follow up interview in the upcoming days. This will provide you the opportunity to verify your responses. I will forward you a copy of the summary of the transcript prior to the call.</p>
<p>Schedule member checking follow-up interview</p>	<p>When will you be available to review your responses?</p>

Member Checking Follow-up Interview

What I will do	What I will say – The Script
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email the participant the transcript summary with instructions. 	<p>Hello participant name:</p> <p>I have attached the interview summary as we had discussed. I look forward to getting your thoughts during our follow-up call. Thanks again for your participation.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce follow-up interview and thank for the call. 	<p>Hello. It is a pleasure to speak with you again.</p> <p>Thanks for your time. As mentioned in our last interview, this follow up session is an opportunity for you to review my interpretations of your responses.</p> <p>Appreciate you returning the interview summary back to me. This discussion should be no longer than 20 minutes.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will go through the summary of items from our initial interview. I will not review the seven interview questions. I will inquire if I left out any information? 	<p>I will open up the conversation with an ice breaker hockey item or some other item that will build on the relationship that has been established. This should develop an easy, open, and friendly dialog.</p> <p>Then, I will listen to the participant about what they feel is important to discuss. After that, I may have one or two questions that are specific to their initial responses, or that has been generated by the analyses.</p> <p>Additionally I will ask, if there is any additional information they would like to add?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide participant with a copy of the research results 	<p>Thanks for your time and information. Do you have any additional questions or comments?</p> <p>If I have any additional questions, would it be alright if I reached out to you again. Upon my completion of the study, I will provide you with a copy of the research results. I really appreciate your help with helping me to keep moving forward with my research study.</p>

Appendix B: Interview Research Questions

Research Question

What strategies do organization leaders of NHL Sun Belt teams use to increase revenues?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to increase your team's revenues?
2. Which of those strategies and processes have been most successful in the increasing of revenues?
3. What, if any, strategies for revenue generation are unique to the geographic location and size of your team?
4. What key challenges did you encounter when implementing your strategies?
5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing your strategies for generating revenue?
6. How did you measure the effectiveness of your strategies for generating revenue?
7. What additional information can you provide to help me understand your team's strategies in increasing revenues?