

**Skating in the Sun: Examining Identity Formation of National Hockey League Fans in Sunbelt States**

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As the National Hockey League (NHL) has made concerted efforts in recent years to expand into the Sunbelt region of North America, its teams still face tremendous challenges to build up their fan bases. Adopting a qualitative research protocol, this study explored the phenomenon of NHL fandom formation in the Sunbelt region. Research findings revealed key patterns and trends that influenced individuals to become fans of NHL teams in this strategic region of growth. A model of fandom was developed based on the themes and assertions derived in the study, which suggested that the fan community would play a significant role in fan identity formation and be a major driving force of the league's market penetration into new marketplaces. The findings offer practical implications for teams to build and expand their fan bases and also provide a foundation for future quantitative investigations.