The Emotions of Trade: Exploring Fan Sentiment Disparities in Social Media Reactions to the Knicks-Raptors Swap

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I. INTRODUCTION

TRADES between two sports teams, by nature of both teams agreeing to the transaction, are meant to be mutually beneficial. In theory, both teams are attempting to maximize value and achieve their franchise goals. In practice, however, it is often the case that reactions to a trade are very different between fanbases. To understand why this might be, it is important to examine the themes that emerge among fanbases following a major trade. On December 30, 2023, the New York Knicks and Toronto Raptors of the National Basketball Association (NBA) finalized a trade with each other. In this deal, the Knicks sent RJ Barrett, Immanuel Quickley, and a second-round draft pick to the Raptors, receiving OG Anunoby and Precious Achiuwa in return. The varying emotional reactions from both fanbases make this trade an interesting focus of analysis.

Extensive research has previously been completed in regards to sentiment analysis of sports fans. Brown and Billings performed content analysis on the University of Miami fanbase via Twitter to measure public reaction to the 2011 NCAA investigation against the school [1]. They found that members of the Miami fanbase were prone to act emotionally and irrationally in reaction to a scandal presented against the school they supported [1]. Similarly, Gibbons attempted to quantify sentiment changes towards a player after being traded from a small market to a large market team in Major League Baseball [2]. However, little to no content analysis projects have focused on comparing different fanbase reactions to a blockbuster trade in an attempt to understand why some trades are viewed as more favorable than others. This paper attempts to address this gap by examining the emotional responses of Knicks and Raptors supporters in the immediate aftermath of the recent trade between the two teams.

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do social media comments from New York Knicks fans differ from those of Toronto Raptors fans in terms of sentiment towards the recent trade between the two teams?

III. METHOD

A. Data

The data for this project comes from the subreddits r/nyknicks and r/torontoraptors. These subreddits serve as dedicated forums where fans can gather to discuss the performance of each respective NBA team. Both subreddit communities contain a near identical post sharing NBA insider Adrian Wojnarowski's tweet breaking the trade news on 12/30/2023 at 12:18 PM EST. In the implemented sampling method, the top 50 comments from each subreddit post announcing the trade were collected.

The choice of the top 50 comments was based on the weighting of reddit comments by upvotes, as posts that resonate more with the community receive more upvotes. Therefore, the top 50 comments were deemed to most accurately capture the overall emotions of each fanbase. Only comments directly replying to the post were considered; any comments responding to other comments were discarded. This ensured that the analysis focused on fanbase reactions to the trade rather than responses to others' opinions. Additionally, only comments consisting of words were collected, with comments containing only pictures, videos, or GIFs being excluded.

B. Analysis

Following data collection, quantitative content analysis was performed to explore the emotions of Knicks and Raptors fans upon learning about the trade between the two teams. A customized codebook was created based on a subset of the data. This codebook breaks responses into three main sentiment categories: negative, neutral, and positive. Additionally, 6 subcategories were used to further explore the emotional themes present among both fanbases: sad, upset, bittersweet, indifferent, excited, and relieved.

The negative sentiments were broken down into two subcategories: sad and upset. Sad responses were characterized by feelings of sorrow or nostalgia. This sentiment often arose when fans expressed a particular emotional attachment to a player who was traded away. An example of a response characterized as sad is "Losing Quickley legit hurts my soul." Upset responses reflected feelings of anger, frustration, or disappointment. For example, "Trading IQ is beyond stupid. This franchise is cursed man." Table 2, located in the Appendix, provides additional examples and detailed definitions for each subcategory.

Neutral sentiments were categorized as either bittersweet or indifferent. Bittersweet comments were defined as containing a mixture of positive and negative sentiments, such as "I'm very sad to see our guy OG go.... But the return seems to be pretty good." The other type of neutral response coded for was indifferent. This is an encapsulating category including comments which do not express positive OR negative sentiment, as well as comments unrelated to the trade, such as discussions about team logistics or upcoming games. An example of an indifferent comment is "Wow wtf this was unexpected, crazy trade", which expresses surprise without taking a positive or negative stance towards the trade.

Finally, positive sentiments were distinguished as either excited or relieved. Excited comments include positive and enthusiastic reactions expressing eagerness towards the trade

outcome for their respective team, such as "Hometown RJ is going to be something special. Y'all manifested this years ago." Lastly, relieved comments express a sentiment of contentment and release from some perceived burden or dissatisfaction. Rather than being excited for the new players aquired, relieved commenters are excited that their team got rid of the players who are leaving. One example of a relieved comment is "I DONT HAVE TO WATCH PRECIOUS FOR 50 MORE GAMES THIS IS THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS GIFT ANYONES EVER GIVEN ME!"

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results from a quantitative content analysis of the data. Overall, the prevailing sentiment among New York Knicks fans was negative; whereas Raptors fans were much more positive in comparison.

	Fanbase	
Sentiment	Knicks	Raptors
Negative	**54%**	**28%**
Sad	22%	26%
Upset	32%	2%
Neutral	**32%**	**28%**
Bittersweet	16%	14%
Indifferent	16%	14%
Positive	**14%**	**44%**
Excited	8%	34%
Relieved	6%	10%
Total	100%	100%

TABLE I
SENTIMENT DISTRIBUTION AMONG FANBASES

In particular, 32% of all comments from the New York Knicks subreddit were categorized as upset, compared to only 2% of the comments from the Raptor fans. The breakdown of emotional responses for each fanbase can be further visualized in Figures 1 and 2.
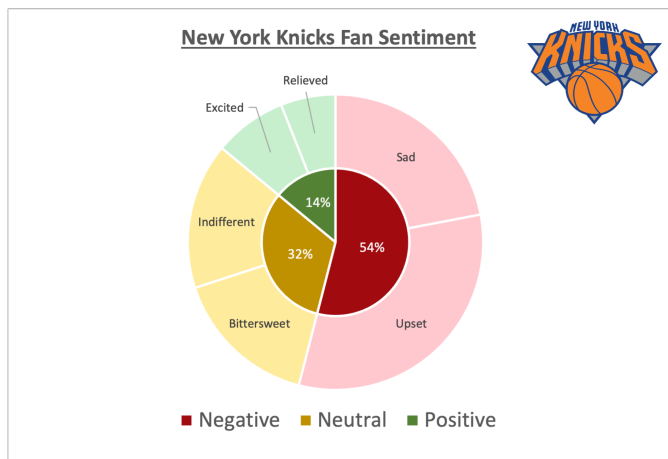

Fig. 1. New York Knicks Fan Sentiment Distribution

V. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The disparity in emotional reactions between the two fanbases indicates that NBA fans may view trades as a zero-
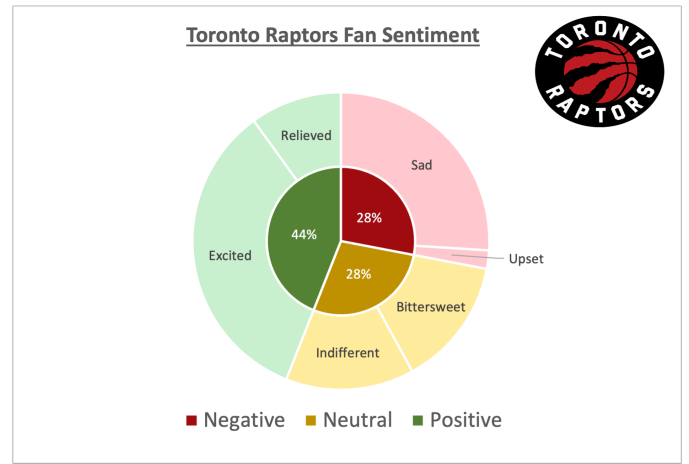

Fig. 2. Toronto Raptors Fan Sentiment Distribution

sum game rather than a mutually beneficial transaction. If one side is perceived as substantially gaining, it is easy for fans of the other team to feel as though they have been taken advantage of or outmaneuvered. Another factor that could help to explain these results is the amount of trust each fanbase has towards their front office. The Toronto Raptors have recently enjoyed many successful seasons, including winning an NBA championship in 2019. The Knicks, on the other hand, have struggled for much of the past decade, recording only 2 playoff appearances in the past 10 years. It is plausible that these recent trends have led Raptors fans to place more trust in their team's management, and react more positively as a consequence.

Interestingly, the actual performance for each team on the court in games played after the trade reflect an inverse pattern compared to the sentiments expressed by each fanbase. In the 15 games played following the trade, the Knicks secured an impressive 13-2 record, while the Raptors managed just 5-10. While the long-term impact of this trade for both sides remains to be seen, the early returns have been positive for New York. This could potentially indicate that fanbase reactions are more-so emotional than rational, as was found in the study performed by Brown and Billings [1].

There are, of course, limitations to a study like this. First, the content analysis is based on subreddit comments and may not be representative of these fanbases as a whole. Secondly, the sample size is limited to just 50 comments from each fanbase. A larger sample would likely lead to a more robust analysis. Finally, this paper only addresses the Knicks and Raptors fanbases. In order to further explore the dynamics and emotions of trades within the NBA or other athletic organizations, it would be necessary to expand the scope of this study to include other trades and teams.

REFERENCES

[1] Brown, N.A., & Billings, A.C. (2013). Sports fans as crisis communicators on social media websites. *Public Relations Review*, 39(1), 74-81.
[2] Gibbons, P. (2022). Quantifying fanbase reactions to controversial blockbuster trades across different major sports markets. *Kenyon College Digital Archives*.

APPENDIX

Sentiment	Code	Definition	Examples
Negative	Sad	Responses characterized by feelings of sorrow or nostalgia. This sentiment often arises when fans have a particular emotional attachment to a player who is traded away. Examples include expressions of grief associated with a player's departure or nostalgic reflections about the memories associated with that player.	• Losing Quickley legit hurts my soul. • This is so sad. OG is one of my absolute favorite Raptors. • Farewell our sweet prince.
	Upset	Strong negative emotional responses reflecting feelings of anger, frustration, or disappointment. These comments are motivated by a belief that the trade decisions made by the team's management are not in the best interest of the franchise or may have an adverse impact on the team's performance.	• Trading IQ is beyond stupid. This franchise is cursed man. • This is a terrible trade. • Not even the biggest RJ guy but to send him AND quick for fuckin OG is absurd. Leon wtf man.
Neutral	Bittersweet	Complex comments which contain a mixture of positive and negative sentiments. This characterization most often occurs when fans acknowledge the potential benefits of a trade while at the same time expressing disappointment in the loss of outgoing players.	• I'M GOING TO MISS YOU OG. The haul is crazy though. • Losing Quickley HURTS, but he deserves to start and get paid. At least it's good to know we aren't losing him for nothing. • I'm very sad to see our guy OG go.... But the return seems to be pretty good.
	Indifferent	The "indifferent" category captures comments which do not express positive OR negative sentiment. This includes fans who express curiosity or surprise towards the trade without taking a stance on how they feel about it. This category also includes comments unrelated to the trade, such as discussions about team logistics or upcoming games.	• Wow wtf this was unexpected, crazy trade. • I thought everyone said Toronto would never deal with us. • Achiuwa in the deal as well.
Positive	Excited	Positive and enthusiastic reactions. Comments that express a strong sense of joy or eagerness towards the trade outcome for their team. Examples include expressions of satisfaction towards the players acquired, enthusiasm for addressing team needs, and optimism regarding the team's future.	• Hometown RJ is going to be something special. Y'all manifested this years ago. • WE FINALLY DID SOMETHING AND GOT A POINT GUARD! • Good trade for both sides. Toronto gets quickly and RJ that fill our needs Og helps a lot of the Knicks.
	Relieved	A sentiment of contentment and release from some perceived burden or dissatisfaction. Rather than being excited for the new players acquired, "relieved" commenters are excited that their team got rid of the players who are leaving. Examples include relief at the departure of a specific player or a sense of liberation from team-related challenges.	• I DONT HAVE TO WATCH PRECIOUS FOR 50 MORE GAMES THIS IS THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS GIFT ANYONES EVER GIVEN ME. THANK YOU MASAI AND BOBBY. • Need to start doing something different if we want to be taken seriously. Thank god we are DONE with Barrett. • Yall slandered RJ so hard and now mad he's gone?? Chill out guys. This is a good trade. We weren't paying IQ anyway and RJ has plateaued on this team. Paying OG next season is way more logical than paying IQ the same to sit on the bench.

TABLE II
CODEBOOK