# Heated Rivalry – Business vs. Community:

# Hockey Fans Perceptions of the NHL's Pride Jersey Ban

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## Abstract

Professional hockey has been rocked by numerous scandals in recent years, with one of the biggest being the NHL's Pride Jersey ban. After a number of teams began to wear Pride jerseys in pregame warmups, several players refused to wear the jerseys, citing their personal beliefs. This thesis will examine fans' perceptions of and attitudes towards the NHL's Corporate-Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts in general, and the players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys and the subsequent ban in particular. This project used 5 semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis to provide insight into fans' perceptions of these events. My participants rooted their criticisms in the belief that sports should benefit their community, and that failing to live up to that belief leads to criticism of players and teams. My findings suggest that fans' perceptions of the Pride ban are rooted in the expectation that sports teams give back to their communities. They saw Pride initiatives as an important tool in making hockey more inclusive, despite seeing the culture of hockey as exclusionary and deeply rooted in conservatism. However, fans were critical of initiatives that were driven by business interests rather than community interests, which were seen as performative. They saw the Pride ban as the NHL abandoning their relationship with the community by breaking from community norms of inclusion, in the name of business interests that see straight white men as the core demographic of hockey and the only ones with capital.

My participants found that players' refusal to wear the Pride jerseys centred hockey's conservative culture and exposed how the league tried to align with community values of inclusion, but their actions did not align with those values. This resulted in criticism of players and the NHL for breaking their relationship with the community. My participants felt that the NHL was catering to its core demographic, straight white men, as they are the main demographic

that enables teams to make money. My participants were critical of various CSR efforts that leveraged the relationship between team and community for business purposes but remained positive about ones that put the community first, such as Pride jerseys. These findings suggest that the relationship between team and the community is very important for fans and that there is a strong expectation for teams to both support and uphold their community and its values. When teams fail to do so, fans often criticize teams and players for failing to help their community and uphold their values.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The hockey world has been rocked by numerous controversies within the past decade, from teams covering up sexual assault allegations against a coach to the 2018 Canadian World Junior players' sexual assault trial (Westhead, 2025). One often lesser-discussed controversy is the NHL's Pride jersey ban, where the league prevented players from wearing Pride jerseys and other jerseys to support social causes starting in the 2023-2024 season. The NHL's Pride jersey ban originates from the inclusivity initiatives under the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone" which states that "the NHL and NHLPA work to provide the sport in a positive environment for players, families and fans of every race, colour, religion, national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and for those with disabilities (Minuk, 2018, para. 1)." The initiative's goal is to promote the game to communities that have been traditionally excluded from hockey in order to grow the game (NHLPA, 2017). One of the most common initiatives undertaken by franchises was Pride Nights, meant to demonstrate support for LGBTQ+ hockey fans (Mendes, 2023).

The advocacy for LGBTQ+ inclusion at the NHL level became front and centre in 2009 when Brendan Burke, the son of legendary General Manager Brian Burke, came out as gay while working at the University of Miami's hockey program (Mendes, 2023). At the time, Brian Burke was the General Manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs, one of the most prominent and visible positions in the NHL. When Brian Burke marched in the 2009 Toronto Pride Parade with Brendan, it came as a shock to the hockey world at the time (Buccigross, 2009). Brendan Burke died in a car accident in 2010, accelerating Burke's support for the LGBTQ+ community and leading him to, found the organization You Can Play, meant to address LGBTQ+ discrimination in sports (Burke, 2020).

LGBTQ+ advocacy in the NHL took its next major step when the first Pride Night was hosted by the San Jose Sharks in 2011. Although they did so reluctantly, as there was very little marketing about the game being Pride Night, it did not involve any players and was largely seen as a ploy to sell more tickets (Mendes, 2023). But with the urging of Burke and You Can Play, the Sharks were one of the first teams to use Pride Tape in 2017, and the NHL led the charge in professional North American sports when it came to LGBTQ+ support (Mendes, 2023). By the 2018-19 season, all 31 NHL teams at the time hosted a Pride Night. In the 2022-23 season, 14 of 32 teams wore Pride jerseys in warmups, first popularized by the Vancouver Canucks when they were worn in March of 2019 for their Pride Night (Mendes, 2023).

However, in 2023, several NHL players refused to wear Pride Jerseys for warmups. First, Ivan Provorov of the Philadelphia Flyers refused, citing religious beliefs as his reason, so he did not participate in warmups while all his teammates wore the jersey (Kennedy, 2023). It did not end there, as James Reimer of the San Jose Sharks refused, citing his religious beliefs. What was once an isolated incident was now becoming part of a pattern where players' refusal to wear jerseys sent a homophobic message that could not be isolated from the broader societal backlash against LGBTQ+ people in the United States (Kennedy, 2023).

Several other players refused to wear Pride jerseys for their respective teams, many of whom were Russian, citing the “Anti-Gay Propaganda” law, under which they feared reprisals from the government if they wore the Pride jerseys (Kennedy, 2023). This caused several teams to outright cancel their Pride Nights over security concerns for their Russian players, despite numerous Russian players wearing a Pride jersey the very same nights other players refused, citing Russian law (Kennedy, 2023).

In response, the NHL banned the use of any accessories or jerseys related to theme nights that sent a political message to be worn by the players on the ice for the season, including jerseys supporting the military and Pride jerseys (Ziegler, 2023). This was met with swift condemnation by many, with *Outsports* calling it "…the most stifling, anti-LGBTQ policy any pro sports league in North America ever issued (Ziegler, 2023)." Players as well joined in the condemnation, as Scott Laughton of the Philadelphia Flyers said he would buy Pride Tape himself and use it if he must, with the creator of Pride Tape offering him free tape for him and his teammates (Mendes, 2023). Brian Burke offered to pay any fines a player may receive for using Pride Tape and described the league's move to ban themed jerseys: "…this is not about inclusion or progress… (Brian Burke [@Burkie2020], 2023)." This led to Travis Dermott testing the waters to see what the NHL would do if he did use Pride Tape during warmups. He was the first player to wear Pride Tape despite the ban, and less than 72 hours after the memo banning Pride Tape was put out, the NHL rescinded the tape ban but maintained the ban on themed jerseys (Clipperton, 2023).

This leaves the NHL at a crossroads, where the league was once pushing boundaries in the world of sports when it comes to LGBTQ+ activism has rapidly eroded and become a significant lightning rod in discussions about the place of inclusion within the sport. Further compounding this discussion is the lack of openly gay NHL players, with no openly gay players ever playing and only one openly gay player ever being under contract with the NHL (Leblanc, 2021; Lebrun, 2026).

Before delving deeper into the Pride jersey ban some clarification about language is necessary as to what I refer to exactly. First, the NHL's Pride ban is the league's wide-reaching efforts that prevented players from wearing Pride jerseys and using Pride tape during warmups

and the game. When referring to the Pride jersey ban, this refers to the league's ban on Pride jerseys that players wore during Pride Night warmups which remains in effect to this day. Finally, the Pride tape ban refers to the NHL's ban on Pride tape that players put on their sticks for Pride games during warmups and some even during play, which was overturned in 2023.

This research project aims to begin to build our understanding of fans' perceptions of the Pride jersey ban. In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I outline the current literature on the relationship between hockey and the community and corporate-social responsibility initiatives undertaken by these teams. This leads to athletes engaging in social justice efforts to attempt to call attention to local and global issues (Cunningham et al., 2021). However, athletes often face steep backlash and the risk of consequences for their advocacy (Kaufman, 2008). Much of this backlash is by fans online; however, the majority of fans support athletes engaging in social justice advocacy (Cashmore et al., 2024). Finally, I cover the necessary literature on hegemonic masculinity in hockey, which centers straight white men as the dominant group within the sport (MacDonald, 2014).

In Chapter 3, I describe my methodology for this project. I conducted 5 semi-structured interviews to collect my data about my participants' perceptions of the Pride jersey ban. I then describe my approach to thematic analysis to find relevant themes to describe my participants' perceptions of the Pride ban. I conclude with the ethical considerations and limitations of this project.

Chapter 4 is my analysis section, in which I describe my data about my participants' perceptions of the Pride ban. What emerged was that participants expected franchises to support their local communities, often through Corporate-Social Responsibility (CSR) and charity initiatives. This shapes the relationship between hockey and the community, where teams are

expected to abide by community norms. However, teams often utilize the relationship to help benefit business interests rather than to benefit the community, betraying the relationship. This sets up the Pride ban as the betrayal of the community in the name of business interests that centers hockey's conservative culture rather than the progressive community values such as inclusion.

Chapter 5 is my discussion where I put the findings into conversation with existing literature. I build upon Coakley's (2015) Great Sport Myth to demonstrate that the myth does not protect sports from criticism but articulates an expectation from communities and grounds their criticism of how sports teams operate in their communities. Second, I discuss hegemonic masculinity in relation to the Pride ban, especially highlighting players' agency in resisting the Pride ban. Finally, I discuss my participants' perceptions of Pride initiatives, noting a divide where some see these as acts of CSR while others see them from a social justice aspect.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Hockey and Community

Sports fans often speak of the benefits that sports have for participants and their communities (Misener and Doherty, 2012; Coakley, 2015; Knoester et al., 2024). Some examples of these perceived benefits include creating a sense of shared identity, developing relationships between different groups, preventing youth crime and generating income for local and national economies (Heritage Canada, 2025). These perceived benefits are wide-reaching, with 95 percent believing it promotes healthy living, 94 percent believing it builds social skills, 88 percent believing it strengthens communities, and 86 percent believing it builds a stronger society (QMI Agency, 2013). Many Canadians saw the healthy lifestyle and community building as the most beneficial (Heritage Canada, 2025).

Because of the perceived benefits of sports, they are often seen as a pure institution that is beneficial for communities, especially by sports fans (Coakley, 2015; Davis and Knoester, 2024; Räikkönen and Hedman, 2025). Coakley (2015) coined the term the Great Sport Myth to describe the belief that sports is an intrinsically pure and beneficial space that benefits both individuals and communities through their engagement with sports. However, Coakley argues (2015) that the Great Sport Myth also acts as a protector of sports, as the perceived benefits prevent fans from critically engaging with sports; sports is seen as operating as it should be, thus no harm can occur. This can be seen as there is often a backlash against those who speak critically of sports – players, teams or leagues – and such a critical stance is sometimes seen as an attack on the community itself (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993).

As sports is seen as intertwined with the community, it is well positioned to help build said communities. Räikkönen and Hedman (2025) position sports at the intersection of shared

spaces, community competence and the sense of community. First, sports operates as a third space which allows for the formation of social and community connections. This allows for sports to foster community competence, which sets out the expectations of how to act within a given space (Räikkönen and Hedman, 2025). This creates the necessary framework for people to search for a sense of community, which many find within sports and allows them to foster positive relationships with others, thus creating their community (Räikkönen and Hedman, 2025). This can ultimately lead to local sports clubs being able to stimulate social change within their communities, as sports acts as the necessary infrastructure (Räikkönen and Hedman, 2025). This helps me gain an understanding of sports' community-building process and the intersection between the two.

However, the community-building aspect does not operate the same way in all communities. For example, Gruneau and Whitson (1993) discussed the importance of hockey within rural and urban communities in Canada. The transformation and urbanization of Canada in the post-war period turned urban centres into entertainment hubs with restaurants, movie theatres and professional sports, but rural communities that do not have these amenities often look for local entertainment in the form of local hockey teams (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). This has led many small rural towns to focus on their local teams as a form of community renewal with the hope of benefiting large parts of the community. However, this has its limits, as towns still require economic development to maintain the town (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). This demonstrates that hockey is not just about building community but also maintaining it, as hockey is the social currency used to maintain the social bonds in the community.

Yet, in urban centres, professional sports teams have become part of the civic-corporate project where traditional civic groups promote local sports teams as they see a natural connection

between public entertainment and the promotion of community (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). This points to some form of relationship between hockey teams and community organizations that is seen as mutually beneficial for both.

Sports also often plays an integrative role in the community. (Szto, 2020). As Szto (2020) argues, hockey is a powerful tool for integration for newly arrived Canadians and allows them to become part of the larger Canadian community. However, the broader Canadian community can resist this integration, often only giving new Canadians conditional acceptance into the hockey community (Szto, 2020). This exclusion invalidates their claim to their Canadian identity due to hockey being so deeply intertwined with Canada (Szto, 2020). This resistance is typically linked to those who are seen as the stereotypical hockey fan (straight, white, born-in Canada, male and increasingly more females) always have space within hockey, while those who do not often have to carve out their own space within the sport they love (Szto, 2020). As much as hockey is about community, it is also about managing who is considered part of the community and who is not. This opens up questions about how strong the integrative power of hockey is and whether it can paradoxically reinforce marginalization by shutting down access to those who are not considered part of the hockey community.

The latter is explored by Gruneau and Whitson (1993). Despite rural arenas being seen as community hubs, Gruneau and Whitson (1993) argue that they act as a space for men in the community but not for women. This is particularly marginalizing because the locker rooms are a male-dominated space where community building takes place. They contrast this with the community building of curling because both genders compete together and share the same space (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993).

Nonetheless, professional sports teams and leagues have recognized the power of sports as an integrative force for marginalized groups and have begun to incorporate it into their branding. The Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) has recognized the importance of community within sport and has used it to cultivate a strong and loyal fanbase (Schmit et al., 2026). The league has taken a strong stance on social justice, which drives fan engagement as fans' interests align with the league's core principles, which creates a strong unifying force for fans (Schmit et al., 2026). This commitment to shared values by the league and teams, it aids in the development of a community for fans that upholds these values, often through engagement in social media posts advocating for social justice (Schmit et al., 2026). This demonstrates an intersection between the community aspect of hockey and the business interests of franchises as incorporating community into the business model fosters a strong relationship between the two. As well, it hints that franchises may attempt to leverage the community aspect of hockey for business purposes.

Now that business interests of teams are intentionally engaging with the community, it is important to define the concept. In the context of sports literature, community has been defined as focusing on interpersonal relationships (Kalman-Lamb, 2021; Gruneau and Whitson, 1993), the network of organizations within a community (Wolbring et al., 2022) and community as a geographic location (Wu et al., 2021). The common thread of the concept is that people within communities have something in common - whether it is living in a specific area, having the same friends or being part of the same organizations - and the use of the concept remains malleable within sports (Skile and Fahlén, 2020).

With these varying focuses on the definition of community, it is important to understand how we come to understand the concept of community. Skille and Fahlén (2020), argue that

community as a concept has both concrete and abstract understandings that are part of a master system of relationships (Delanty, 2010). Concrete understandings of community are rooted in locality and belonging, while abstract understandings focus on the transcendent nature of community (Delanty, 2010; Skille and Fahlén, 2020). However, Cohen (1985) says community is both concrete and abstract, as it is socially constructed around community members' conceptions of commonality with one another. Researchers in sports management have emphasized the importance of considering both the concrete and abstract notions of community in recent years to better understand communities (Skille and Fahlén, 2020).

This begins to outline one of the key concepts within my study, community. For the purposes of this project, I am pulling from Gruneau and Whitson's (1993) definition of community, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships for the formation of community, as the relationships lay the foundation for the shaping of community through shared personal experiences and creating a sense of identification. This definition is useful to my project because, as Kalman-Lamb (2021) argues, sports fans are drawn to the community aspect of sports fandom to satisfy interpersonal connections that have become more difficult to maintain in late-stage capitalism. This is particularly relevant because Kalman-Lamb (2021) argues that these communities are created for the purpose of generating capital from the exploitation of labour from players and to accrue the capital of fans as consumers. This will provide me with a way of exploring the experience of hockey both as a sport and as an economic enterprise.

This also opens the door for two important concepts within this study; economic and social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the potential or actual resources one possesses through their social networks and their membership within a group. Bourdieu (1986) also defined economic capital as resources that can be "immediately and directly convertible

into money" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.242). Another key formulation of these forms of capital is how they are able to be transformed into one another that can be beneficial to those who possesses it (Bourdieu, 1986). This will provide me with the necessary comments to build up how hockey's community relationship intersects with its business interests.

The discussion about social capital also sets up the concept of social currency. For this study, I am pulling from Lobschat et al.'s (2013) definition of social currency which focuses on the information consumers share with each other about a brand and the advantages one gains by sharing said information. However, I am focusing on the shared aspect of social currency and its benefits, in this case how hockey is shared amongst fans as a way to build community.

**Corporate-Social Responsibility and Sport**

Given the close connection between hockey as part of the community and as a business, Corporate-Social Responsibility (CSR) helps explore the kind of expectations that fans can place on teams when it comes to living up to community-held values. CSR is defined as "the extent to which an organization meets the needs, expectations, and demands of certain external constituencies beyond those directly linked to the company's products/markets (Ullmann, 1985, p.543)." CSR practices emerged in the 1960s' as part of a debate to expand corporate responsibility beyond corporations' financial responsibilities to shareholders alone, to include responsibilities to those who are impacted by corporations. (Babiak and Wolfe, 2013). In recent years, CSR is viewed as a marketing tool by corporations (Babiak and Wolfe, 2013). The four key justifications for CSR are: moral obligations, as businesses should act in an ethical manner; sustainability, as corporations should not act based on short-term gains that are detrimental to others; reputation, as it allows businesses to build a positive reputation and a license to operate, as businesses require special permissions to operate (Babiak and Wolfe, 2013). In addition,

corporations adopted CSR not only as a good business practice but also as a form of insurance against future misdeeds.

CSR is similar to another corporate practice known as corporate philanthropy. Corporate philanthropy is defined as voluntary acts on the part of business organizations to promote community welfare through contributions of money, time or in-kind goods (Madden et al., 2006). This differs from CSR as it is more focused on the use of capital to generate social change rather than the expectations of corporations to act responsibly. This gives me a basis to ground the practices of franchises that use capital to create change within their communities.

In North America, certain elements of the organization of professional sports lead to strengthened CSR efforts by franchises. First, fans are increasingly aware of social-corporate initiatives and sensitive to social-corporate messaging (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). Second, the relationship between professional sports and government often increases the perception of responsibility in a community for franchises, as they are given special protections from local governments and the use of public funds in their business leads fans to see increased responsibility by teams (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). Third, because team decisions are often public, CSR initiatives can be used as a tool to maintain a positive public image (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). This puts sports franchises in a unique position within their communities to engage with CSR initiatives.

Because of franchises' special position within the community, various forces attempt to shape sports teams' CSR initiatives. Yang and Babiak (2021) argue that external forces can impact how and what kind of CSR initiatives sports teams undertake as they exist within broader institutional environments. First, regulative forces stem from the political climate and/or policy that influences organizations through regulative pressures and forces (Babiak and Yang, 2023).

As Clelland et al. (2023) argue, sports are not mutually exclusive from politics; politics can influence sports because of their reliance on political connections for lax regulations. Second, socio-normative forces are norms that are internalized by people with a given community that guide organizations to deem actions appropriate (Yang and Babiak, 2021).

External forces are not the only forces that shape CSR initiatives. Internal forces within organizations play a similar role. Yang and Babiak (2021) discuss cultural-cognitive forces, which are frames of reference, sometimes unconscious, that guide organizations in their decision-making (Yang and Babiak, 2021). Lee and Cunningham (2019) argue that the team environment is an important factor with respect to activism, as players are more likely to engage when franchises are supportive of it (see also: Cunningham and Sartore, 2010). From this perspective, team culture and business interests can influence how and when teams and players choose to engage with CSR initiatives. This demonstrates that both internal and external forces shape how sports franchises engage with CSR initiatives.

CSR initiatives can also provide personal benefits to athletes. Gulliver et al. (2025) found that athletes who participate in CSR initiatives cultivate a sense of belonging to an organization, develop community mindfulness, create networks and gain transferable skills (Gulliver et al., 2025). Athletes also benefit from charitable work as they receive tax breaks for making such donations and an image boost for creating and managing charities (Babiak and Sant, 2021).

CSR activities can also generate a lot of press coverage, which tends to frame these initiatives in specific ways for franchises. The most common is a human-interest frame that portrays CSR work as meant to benefit specific individuals or groups who are affected by a specific issue (Babiak and Sant, 2021). A second frame expects athletes to engage in these issues as a moral obligation because of their unique position in society. A third frame focuses on the

economic consequences of CSR as either benefiting funding recipients or the athlete who, for example, receives financial incentives for making donations or faces staunch criticism when their charities fail to distribute the funds to aid the community (Babiak and Sant, 2021). This positions sport franchises as uniquely positioned to engage in CSR activities. However, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) argue that the perceived benefits of CSR mask corporate irresponsibility and how corporations can harm their communities.

To attempt to benefit from the positive press coverage of CSR initiatives, various hockey stakeholders have launched their own initiatives. For example, equipment manufacturers and leagues have begun participating in CSR initiatives designed to combat the exclusion of marginalized people from the sport (Kabetu et al., 2021). The NHL in particular has launched several initiatives that attempt to make hockey more inclusive for many different groups, including commemorating Black History Month, hiring Kim Davis as an executive vice president for social impact, growth initiatives and legislative affairs and founding the Hockey Diversity Alliance by Black NHL players (Kabetu et al., 2021). However, these initiatives have faced staunch criticism due to a lack of substantive support, making them seem merely performative in nature (Kabetu et al., 2021). Szto (2020) argues these programs fall short because they see equality as a problem of numbers, rather than a problem stemming from power imbalances and hurdles to access hockey. Levermore (2013) concludes that CSR is unable to make lasting change and distorts power imbalances within sports in ways that prevent in-depth critiques of CSR and how it operates within sports.

These critiques have been applied to both the NHL's "Hockey is for Everyone" initiative and the practice of wearing Pride jerseys. For example, Phillips (2025) criticizes the Hockey is for Everyone campaign and the Pride jersey initiative for failing to actually address systemic

issues in hockey. Phillips (2025) argues that the NHL "fetishize[s] Queerness to articulate desires for tolerance, acceptance, and representation for heteronormative bourgeois audience commodities" (Phillips, 2025, p. 524). Phillips (2025) concludes that the NHL's efforts are merely attempting to access LGBTQ+ fans' money rather than making the NHL more inclusive. As discussed in the Introduction, when the use of Pride imagery became an irritant for the core fanbase of straight white men, the NHL instituted the ban to protect its capital interests (Phillips, 2025). Phillips' argument aligns with criticisms of Rainbow Capitalism and Pinkwashing, where corporations utilize Pride imagery to market themselves to progressive and LGBTQ+ consumers without substantively supporting initiatives to counter LGBTQ+ discrimination (Falco and Gandhi, 2020).

**Social Justice and Sports**

The limits of CSR have ultimately created space for broader social justice activism to take place within sports. Social justice is defined as "advocating for people without power or voice, while also cognizing a sense of responsibility to combat the problems and injustices of society (Lee and Cunningham, 2019, p.253)." Social justice can be fostered through various different mechanisms such as promoting the need to serve one's community, to cultivate cultural capital and to create social networks (Lovato et al., 2024). The goal is to engage with the community, use its resources to maximize collective power and push for social change (Fullwood, 2002).

Sports is a key battleground for social justice due to its immense reach and the influence it has on people's lives, even if they do not consider themselves fans (Cunnigham et al., 2021). The global sports market is estimated to be about 1.5 trillion dollars globally, and roughly 80% of Americans engage with sports on a regular basis, making it a social institution that many

people interact with (Cunningham et al., 2021). Sports have become an important part of many people's lives, as entire organizations revolve around sports, such as television stations, newspapers, magazines, etc., that cover the teams and athletes day and night (Cunningham et al., 2021). Given this amount of focus and capital investment, athletes and teams are thrust into a unique position where they are considered celebrities, and many look to them to use their celebrity to influence social movements within and outside of sports (Cunningham et al., 2021). In addition, studies of youth's perceptions of athletes found that youth often saw athletes as effective role models that demonstrate pro-social behaviour that youth are likely to mimic (Melnick and Jackson, 2002; Stevens et al., 2003).

Professional athletes do not always realize their social status until they advocate for social change. As Brown-Devlin (2023) found, NFL players realize the power of their social status because of their social media networks have massive reach, and they can use that to advocate and sway decision-making. As well, Kim and Walker (2013) found that athletes' participation in philanthropic activities made fans more likely to donate to these organizations. Thus, players can have impacts on social movements by boosting the visibility of the movement because of their involvement

### ***History and Present of Social Justice in Sports***

As much as athletes have boosted the visibility of social movements using social media, it is important to remember that this is not a new phenomenon. Sports has long been used as a space to advocate for social change from addressing food insecurity, to women's empowerment, acknowledging people with disabilities and combating racial injustice (Darnell and Millington, 2019). However, the origins of sports involvement in social justice are rooted in the civilizing processes of colonialism, especially in relation to the British Empire where sports were used as a

mechanism to transform the young ruffian into a proper Victorian man (Darnell and Millington, 2019). This points to sports as a space that advocates for social good, but it also establishes that sports can shape social structures and reinforce inequality (Darnell and Millington, 2019).

For example, in post-war Britain, sports were used to combat social disorder, but the government used it to support disadvantaged citizens without addressing the underlying systemic inequalities that maintain unequal social structures (Darnell and Millington, 2019). Social justice in sports is not the use of sports must accordingly not just uplift the disadvantaged but call out and address social inequalities that place people in marginalized positions (Darnell and Millington, 2019). This is best demonstrated by the black-gloved power salute at the 1968 Olympics to put focus on racial discrimination in the United States, and the 1980 boycott of the South African Olympics to call for the end of the South African Apartheid regime by Tommie Smith and John Carlos (Darnell and Millington, 2019).

The current wave of activism is exemplified by athlete celebrities who advocate for social change on their social media platforms (Lee and Cunningham, 2019). This fourth wave focuses on various social issues such as race, gender equity, human rights and environmentalism (Hartmann, 2024). As Ferguson et al. (2024) found, Division I collegiate athletes see social media as a tool for activists, where they can use their platform and social following to educate others and to express their opinions, especially if athletes are racialized, as many others in their communities do not have the same privileges. As well, social media is an important empowering tool for athletes who use it to publicly present themselves in an authentic way by demonstrating their commitment to social justice. Social media gives the athletes a space to enact their agency by making posts using their own image to convey their message (Ferguson et al., 2024). Finally, social media posts also serve as a starting point for social justice as, over time, athletes often

begin to participate more in other social justice activities (Ferguson et al., 2024). This suggests that athletes can use their position as celebrities and role models to advocate for social justice both online and more broadly.

This kind of social activism pushes against the traditional view that sports should be separate from politics and that it is inappropriate to use sports as a platform for activism (Hartmann, 2022). For example, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos did the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics, they faced severe backlash for bringing attention to racial injustice in the United States from a wide range of actors such as other athletes, the American Olympic Committee and the media covering the Olympics (Hartmann, 2022). However, in recent decades a significant shift has occurred, and many media outlets are now tolerant or even supportive of athletes using their platform to call for social change (Hartmann, 2022). Yet the argument that athletes need to stick to sports remains an ongoing narrative that has not completely disappeared; Hartmann (2022) suggests that this is being driven by right-wing ethnonationalists.

In sum, we see that social justice in sports is not a new phenomenon, as sports has been used to advocate for social good since professional sports emerged in the late 1800s. However, activism is not a stable phenomenon, as it comes in waves and often focuses on different social inequalities through different mechanisms based on their time period (Lee and Cunningham, 2019; Darnell and Millington, 2019). The current wave consists of athletes who are seen as role models by fans, and who use their celebrity in general and social media platforms in particular to advocate for a wide range of topics.

### ***Backlash to Social Justice in Sports***

However, activism does not come without consequences to athletes. Athletes can face a multitude of punishments for participating in social activism, such as becoming a social outcast

on their teams due to a lack of support, being booed by fans, receiving death threats against them and their families, being forced to resign from positions, and being kicked off teams or even blacklisted from entire sports competitions (Kaufman, 2008).

One of the most significant threats to athletes' involvement in social justice is the loss of sponsorships, as it threatens players' sponsorships, which are a massive source of wealth for athletes (Serazio, 2020). This is best exemplified with Michael Jordan's response to criticism that he was not using his position to help marginalized people; Jordan said, "Republicans buy sneakers, too" (Serazio, 2020, p.235). Jordan's quote points to the fact that social justice advocacy can be seen as a barrier to the business interests of both players and franchises, as advocacy can create barriers for fans who disagree with the advocacy.

Other barriers also exist. For example, some argue that conservative ideology is often seen as the natural position in sports and from that perspective left-wing ideologies will be seen as intrusive (Gillet, White and Young, 1996; Serazio, 2020). This is exemplified by commentators such as Don Cherry (Gillet, White and Young, 1996) and organizations such as *Barstool Sports* who continue to promote sports as a conservative space (Crawford, 2024). Researchers conclude that even after Cherry was fired, conservative ideology has continued to be a mainstay in sports, as numerous organizations and announcers have filled the vacuum by maintaining sports as a politically neutral space that takes a neutral or hostile stance towards social justice (Hartmann, 2007; Kusz and Hodler, 2023; Garcia and Proffitt, 2022).

This conservative and right-wing ideology in sports repeatedly constrains athletes who use their platform to advocate for social justice (Hartmann, 2024). For example, racialized athletes are often attacked in ways that use racist dog whistles and critique sports media for having a liberal bias (Hartmann, 2024). This coincides with a shift in how politicians approach

sports; previously, politicians used sports as a unifying force but now interact with it as if it is an open battleground between progressive and conservative ideologies (Hartmann, 2024). This was seen with *OutKick*'s coverage of Megan Rapinoe. *OutKick* set up a Rapinoe vs. Trump dichotomy and slotted the two sides into left vs. right political ideologies in ways that populist right-wing politicians rely upon to create social division (Crawford, 2024).

Conservative politicians have taken a keen interest in using the deeply conservative culture of sports for their own benefit. Right-wing populist movements use sports overtly to help them promote their own ideology (Crawford, 2024). Whether opposing advocacy for progressive social causes by athletes or attacking racialized players, this counter-advocacy reasserts the current power structures that privilege white men (Henry, 2024). This is seen in Trump's comments about Kaepernick taking a knee during the anthem. The President's words combined both overt racial stereotypes and colorblind racist tropes that redefined Kaepernick's reason for kneeling as disrespect for the American military (Henry, 2024). This same trope reverberated down to sports commentators who reinforced it by raising the same grievances and reasserting the belief that athletes should focus only on their performance and not participate in social advocacy (Henry, 2024). From this perspective, various actors within the world of sports benefit from amplifying conservative tropes and attempts to maintain the current social structures for their own gains.

## Sports Fans and Social Justice

Traditionally, sports fans have seen sports as an apolitical field, and this division has been reinforced by organizations like the International Olympic Committee (Cashmore et al., 2023). However, in recent years, as more athletes are engaging in social activism, most sports fans generally accept the idea that sports can serve as an effective platform for social advocacy.

However, a minority continue to want to maintain sports as an apolitical space (Cashmore et al., 2023).

***Fans' Perceptions of Social Justice in Sports***

Cashmore, Dixon and Cleland's (2023) study discusses the impact of social justice activism in sports and fans' perceptions of such activism. The fans surveyed were generally supportive of athletes' ability to advocate for social change (62% of 1067 participants). The majority of fans do not believe athletes in pursuit of social justice should be silenced, ultimately believing that it is up to fans to decide whether they want to listen to the message or reject it. From this perspective, it is not the athlete's responsibility to censor themselves (Cashmore et al., 2024). This view is especially prevalent in younger generations who expect both athletes to take a stand in social justice movements and sports and organizations to join them in reshaping sports into a platform for social change (Cashmore et al., 2024). In addition, when athletes do choose to remain silent, some fans see it as a political stance, as they reinforce the status quo by not speaking out (Cashmore et al., 2024).

Marxist theorists challenge this view. They see sports as an escapist fantasy and the modern form of religion, as it serves as "the opiate of the masses" (Serazio, 2020, p.229). From this perspective, sports is the new form of pacification of the masses, as it is used as a political release valve for the working classes' frustrations and abuse under the current capitalist system and to prevent class unity through the use of fandom as a source of division among the working class (Serazio, 2020). Thus, when players use their platform in sports to advocate for social justice, fans become resistant, as it is a breaking of this escapism that alleviates their disenfranchisement under the capitalist system (Serazio, 2020).

However, social identity theorists would argue that the backlash is driven by fans feeling their social identity is under attack. This theoretical perspective asserts “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69 as cited in Cleland et al., 2023, p.35). When fans feel their social identity comes under threat because of a player’s activism, they are more likely to reject the message, while if player activism supports their identity, they are more likely to accept it (Cleland et al., 2023).

Whether fans support or challenge athletes’ activism, much of the discussion takes place on social media. Seaton et al. (2022) examined the social media reaction to the NFL’s social advocacy around racial justice. The majority (67.2%) criticized the NFL for BLM-related activism. This is despite polls that show a similar percentage of fans (61%) are generally supportive of social activism in sports (Seaton et al., 2022). This disavowal of athletes’ participation in social justice allows for fans to criticize the messaging by casting sports as an apolitical space for entertainment. However, this is actually an assertion of sports as a political space, as proponents are asserting that sports should be political in a way that they see fit; in other words, excluding BLM related advocacy is part of a political position (Seaton et al., 2022).

Despite backlash to BLM advocacy by athletes, many fans still support players' participation in social justice initiatives (Cleland et al., 2023). Research about athletes who kneel during the anthem reveals that race plays an important role in perceptions of protests. Park and Kwak (2024), for example, report that Black participants were more likely than non-Black participants to be supportive of athletes who kneel during the anthem. This difference is believed to arise because when fans emphasize sports as an apolitical space, it allows for racial biases to arise because fans are not cognizant of said biases (Park and Kwak, 2024). Another theory

Cleland et al. (2023) put forward is that fans are more resistant to forms of activism that are in direct view, such as kneeling during the anthem at games, compared to social media activism that can be largely ignored.

Nonetheless, a variety of researchers report that sports activism can influence a fan's belief system and change fan perceptions of social justice movements (Cleland et al., 2023; Park and Kwak, 2024; Seaton et al., 2022; Cashmore et al., 2024). This is particularly important to think about in the context of hockey, as a lack of openly gay players in the NHL means that fans continue to rely on stereotypes of what a gay man, especially a gay hockey player, looks like Leblanc (2021). Leblanc (2021) found that despite a general shift away from the effeminate gay man stereotype in broader society, fans continue to rely upon these harmful stereotypes for their conception of what a gay hockey player looks and acts like (Leblanc, 2021).

### ***Sports Fans and LGBTQ+ Activism***

While most of the literature focuses on fans' perceptions of racialized protests, some academics, like Leblanc cited above, are beginning to explore LGBTQ+ activism in sports in general. Melton and McCharles (2021) describe the many types of initiatives teams undertake, such as Pride nights, donations to LGBTQ+ charities and the use of Pride symbols beside team iconography. They argue that these kinds of initiatives signal to sports fans that teams are making a stronger effort to support the LGBTQ+ community and to make their respective organizations more inclusive (Melton and McCharles, 2021).

One of the first studies to examine fans' perceptions was Sherwood et al.'s (2020) study that discussed fans' reactions to the introduction of Pride games in Australian football. They found that the vast majority of media coverage of the Pride game focused on how Pride games make the sport more inclusive (Sherwood et al., 2020). Fan sentiment was similar, with the

majority of fans supporting the Pride game initiatives with comments online and both the LGBTQ+ and broader community welcoming the game (Sherwood et al., 2020).

However, about one-third of comments (34%) on Facebook were unsupportive of the Pride game initiative. This group of fans often did not engage in direct homophobic attacks but rather continued the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ fans by repeating the narrative that the team should "stick to football" and not engage with political agendas. However, when homophobic language was used, many fans pushed back to reassert that the Pride games were a welcome initiative (Sherwood et al., 2020). The authors of the study theorize that fans posting homophobic comments are attempting to maintain the hegemonic masculinity present in Australian football, which in turn reinforces the marginalization of LGBTQ+ players and fans.

## Hegemonic Masculinity within Hockey

Scholars like Sherwood et al. (2020), seeking to understand the conflict caused by social justice initiatives in sports, often use the notion of hegemonic masculinity to frame the conflict. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a dominant form of masculinity that takes hold in certain social spaces and causes other forms of masculinity to be excluded or marginalized in that space (Connell and Messerschmitt, 2005). Scholars examining hockey tend to link hegemonic masculinity to the privileging of white, able-bodied, cis-het, straight men (Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014). Thus, other forms of being, such as BIPOC men, women, disabled people and LGBTQ+ people, are marginalized in the social context of the sport (MacDonald, 2014). For example, sport creates its own definition of what it means to be masculine, a definition in which heterosexuality is a central component of the conception of masculinity in which players reject notions of femininity and homosexuality out of fear of being seen as queer or as not masculine

enough; this dominant understanding is what marginalizes LGBTQ+ people in hockey (MacDonald, 2014).

This makes hockey into a space in which heteronormativity and queer identity are in conflict over whether or not queer identity is acceptable in hockey, and where straight players are in control of what constitutes those acceptable forms of queerness (Leblanc, 2021). To conform to the masculinity of hockey, gay players often adopt hypermasculine performances of masculinity to camouflage their identities from teammates and fans alike (Leblanc, 2021; MacDonald and McGillis, 2021).

Cheryl MacDonald's (2021) interview with openly gay hockey player Brock McGillis reveals the impact that the culture of the game has on queer hockey players. McGillis conformed as much as he could to the conceptualization of masculinity in hockey to the detriment of his own mental health, often leaving him depressed during his time in the minors (MacDonald and McGillis, 2021). McGillis was good friends with Brendan Burke, who, before his death, had texted that he hoped one day McGillis would come out to his family so he could be his true, authentic self. This led McGillis to start touring Canada to speak to youth hockey players about support of LGBTQ+ acceptance in hockey (MacDonald and McGillis, 2021).

McGillis was speaking to his interactions with teammates. However, hegemonic masculinity does not exist just within the locker room but can also be found in the fanbase. For example, Dickerson (2016) found that fans often supported White hockey players playing through injury while admonishing Black NBA players for not playing through injury. Dickerson concludes that fans support the current hegemonic order in hockey by demonstrating the toughness of NHL players (mainly white men) while NBA players (mainly Black men) are seen as weak (Dickerson, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity also impacts whether or not fans feel welcome in hockey. Desjardins (2022) reported that some LGBTQ+ fans experienced alienation because of their sexual or gender identity. Those who experienced alienation described feeling uneasy in an arena as a heteronormative space and used coping strategies to navigate the space, such as minimizing their visible queerness (Desjardins, 2022).

Although initiatives like Pride games are openly challenging the heteronormativity of men's hockey, the dominant conception of masculinity in the game continues to reflect a narrow conception that excludes queer men (Leblanc, 2021).

## Conclusion

This literature review indicates that many fans and community members see sports as beneficial for their communities, which provides support for the concept of the Great Sport Myth. However, in recent years, franchises have begun to utilize the Myth for business purposes. Corporate-Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts in particular are used to enable franchises to position themselves so as to be seen supporting their community. These efforts are subject to internal and external forces that influence whether they can promote change or whether they are merely a marketing tool that fails to address systemic issues in sports.

The ambiguity around CSR has created an environment where many athletes and teams are individually participating in their own social justice efforts. Current activism often involves sports players using social media to spread awareness about social issues and attempt to address systemic injustice. However, athletes often face harsh backlash over their activism, and both business imperatives and politics often serve as barriers to social justice efforts.

Although many fans accept and support players' activism, there is still a strong vocal contingent of largely conservative fans who oppose players engaging in social justice initiatives. This is seen with the highly vocal contingent of fans who remain resistant to LGBTQ+ activism as it challenges the current hegemonic order within sports.

Scholars theorize that hegemonic masculinity in hockey continues to position straight white men as the dominant group within the sport. This leads to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ fans and players as they are seen as "other". This also creates an atmosphere where LGBTQ+ fans and players must conform to the culture of the sport or risk being ostracized. At the same time, this position is being challenged by LGBTQ+ fans and allies through initiatives like Pride games.

The literature review reveals three significant gaps in the literature which this project aims to address. First, the majority of the literature focuses on racial protest by athletes and other social justice initiatives to call for racial equality. However, this is just one social movement within sports and is not the same as other social movements that may operate and be perceived differently. The project aims to address this gap by focusing on LGBTQ+ activism in sport. Second, research in North America often focuses on American football, and little work has been done to explore Canada and the sport of ice hockey. There are significant differences between Canadian and American politics that may influence how social justice in sports operates and how the public views it. Accordingly, my project will explore the broader societal attitudes and movements that may influence how LGBTQ+ activism manifests in Canada. Third, there is a significant lack of literature on the public perceptions of LGBTQ+ activism in sports in North America, as the only study on this subject done to date focuses on Australian Football. This is a significant gap, as sports play a significant role in many people's lives and understanding how

fans make sense of this activism is important, especially in the context of a broader moral panic surrounding the LGBTQ+ community in Canada.

For this project, I am ultimately interested in how Canadian fans make sense of the NHL's Pride ban. The ban provides a unique opportunity to understand fans' perceptions of advocacy and the CSR initiatives that the NHL has undertaken and, more recently, sought to distance itself from. It also allows for an in-depth discussion with fans about how the NHL chooses to engage with the community through charitable and CSR initiatives. As well, the ban provides a unique moment to explore with my participants their perceptions of the forces that shape hockey and how it chooses to engage in charity and other public good initiatives.

The guiding question for this project is:

1) How do fans perceive the NHL's Pride ban?

With the following subsidiary questions:

1) How do fans see NHL franchises and the league engaging with the community?
2) Why do fans believe the NHL implemented the Pride ban?

# Chapter 3: Methods

## Introduction

To answer my research questions about how hockey fans saw the NHL Pride jersey's ban, I conducted 5 semi-structured interviews to gather data from participants recruited from social media. Using the data collected from the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis to find the general themes and commonalities between my participants to be able to access participants' perspectives on the Pride jersey ban. This chapter will document the process, providing an overview of the study's research design, how participants were recruited and how I interviewed them. Next, I will explain how I conducted my thematic analysis, and then I will conclude with limitations to my project.

## Research Design

As discussed in the literature review, there is a significant research gap in the corporate-social responsibility literature regarding fans 'perceptions of these initiatives in general and the NHL Pride jersey ban in particular. Due to this gap, my research project is exploratory in nature so I can begin to craft an understanding of fans 'perceptions of the NHL's Pride jersey ban. To this end, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis informed by the constructivist paradigm to make sense of my participants 'understanding of the NHL's Pride jersey ban.

Qualitative research refers to approaches undertaken by researchers to understand the social settings and lives of their participants (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). It has several key characteristics: data collection takes place in a natural setting; communication for data collection is not fully structured; the researcher's interest is to capture meanings and perceptions; and it produces insight into a social phenomenon (Berkovich, 2018).

Compared to a quantitative study, which would not allow me to ask in-depth questions about my participants 'experiences in the social setting of hockey, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of the social rules and forces that shape people's understandings and concerns. Accordingly, fans were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to allow for a more in-depth understanding of the Pride ban (Kallio et al., 2016; Stebbins et al., 2008).

As my study focuses on fan's perceptions of the Pride jersey ban, I grounded my project in the constructivist paradigm. This paradigm operates from a relativist ontology where realties are constructed by individuals or groups through social interactions and experiences (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). From this perspective, we come to know reality through our social interactions with others. From this perspective, we make sense of the world around us through our own experiences with others (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This also positions that these constructions are not fixed but rather remain under constant construction because of people's own experiences (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Because constructions are always under construction, this leads to a subjectivist epistemology, where the findings are created through the research process rather than discovered such as in the positivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This means that, as the researcher, my own experiences also play a role in the generation of findings as my own constructions play a role in how I see and interpret my data. This paradigm will ultimately guide me through my research process as I begin to build an understanding of how my participants construct the meaning of the NHL's Pride Jersey ban.

## Data Sampling and Collection

The choice to interview hockey fans was driven primarily by my research question. However, earlier phases of the project looked at interviewing hockey players or franchise

employees about the Pride jersey ban. Yet, as Robinson (1998) described hockey as a mobile total institution, the difficulties in the project became apparent quickly. As Allain (2014) described, there are numerous challenges to interviewing those within hockey, such as gatekeepers of the sport who can control access, and the fact that participants are media-trained, thus leading to a possible halo effect where participants want to answer questions in a way that fits conventional norms. These would act as barriers for my study and for me to access the truth about the Pride jersey ban; thus, the decision to interview fans as participants was made.

However, that does not mean I position hockey fans completely outside the world of hockey. Rather I position fans as part of the hockey world and their own experiences being part of that world dictate their constructions of hockey. This ultimately became important when conducting my interviews because fans experiences as part of the hockey world ultimately influenced the meaning they made of the NHL's Pride Jersey ban.

### ***Recruitment Process***

I employed a convenience sampling process to recruit my participants from X (formerly Twitter) and Bluesky. Both are microblogging platforms with sizeable hockey communities. Social media recruitment allowed me to reach a large population of hockey fans in a fast and efficient way (Darko et al., 2022), as my participants were easily accessible via social media (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As well, my participants freely decided to participate, as they were the ones to reach out to me to join the study and not the other way around.

In September 2025, I made several posts from Twitter account @pridejerseyban and Bluesky account @pjbrecruitment.bsky.social asking for participants to reach out to me via email to express their interest. See Appendix A for recruitment posts. Requirements were that participants were (1) a minimum of 18 years old, (2) Canadian citizens and (3) able to speak

English. Once my participants agreed to participate, they were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix B) and, upon signing it, they were provided a copy, and I retained a copy. A total of five participants agreed to be interviewed, and all were recruited from Bluesky.

Of my recruited participants, three identified as women and two as men. All three women identified themselves as LGBTQ+ (two lesbian, one bisexual), while one man identified as straight and the other did not identify their sexuality. Preference was not given to participants based on their LGBTQ+ identity, as recruitment worked on a first-come, first-serve basis. Finally, 4 of my participants identified themselves as Ottawa Senators fans, while the fifth identified as a Vancouver Canucks fan, but they still followed the Senators. Upon completion of my 5 interviews, I considered data saturation was complete as no new significant data or findings were being discussed in my fifth and final interview; thus, recruitment was closed (Saunders et al., 2018).

***Interviews***

Interviews took place online on Microsoft Teams or Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour to 1 ½ hours. The interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed using the built-in feature on Microsoft Teams, and the Zoom interview used Microsoft Word's auto-transcribe function. After transcriptions were saved, the video portions were deleted through the video editing software CapCut, and only audio files were kept. At this point, transcripts were cleaned and removed any personal information to protect my participants' identities.

To help with my interviews, I created an interview guide that focused on five key areas of questioning. First, participants were asked about themselves and the importance of hockey to their lives and fandom. Second, participants were asked about NHL teams 'involvement in their communities, with examples given of how the Ottawa Senators engaged in this type of work.

Third, participants were asked about their understanding of the slogan “Hockey is for Everyone” and the various initiatives that fall under the slogan. Fourth, fans were asked how they felt about Pride jerseys, individual players ’refusals to wear Pride jerseys and the NHL’s eventual Pride jersey ban. Finally, participants were asked what they thought the NHL’s course of action post-Pride ban should be. See Appendix C for the question guide.

When creating the guide, I focused primarily on open-ended questions, as they are the most important because they are the ones that participants would first respond to and give me the necessary background to ask probing questions (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). I also had to be careful with the language I used, as I did not want my participants to answer in the manner, they thought appropriate or how I wanted them to answer (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). I also had to be careful about my probing questions for the same reason, as I did not want my participants to answer how they perceived I wanted them to answer. Thus, I took a careful look at the use of my language when writing and asking my questions to ensure no demand biases such as social-desirability or acquiescence bias existed within my questions or phrasing.

Furthermore, the interview guide allowed me to standardize the questions I asked my participants that focused on the main research question and sub-questions. With the standardization of questions, it allowed me to better access the external reality, as each participant would be asked the same questions to help answer my research questions. This gave me a baseline of all the topics that participants would touch on. Furthermore, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions to better understand external reality through my interviews. As I was asking open-ended questions, my participants would respond with the most important information (Sanchez-Ayala, 2012). With them responding with

the most important information, it gave me a better understanding of their perceptions of the Pride jersey ban. Furthermore, the semi-structured nature allowed me the necessary flexibility to ask my participants follow-up questions and to better probe their understanding of these events and how they felt about them (Kallio et al., 2016). As well, it allowed me to ground my participants' understandings of the ban and the NHL in the experiences they have as hockey fans (Kaillo et al., 2016).

Furthermore, while conducting the interview, I had to ensure that my participants felt comfortable answering my questions to generate the best data (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). First, I had to ensure that my participants were comfortable within their environment, which was helped by the fact that I conducted online interviews where my participants were in comfortable surroundings to conduct their interviews and could make changes if necessary (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). This occurred in one of my interviews where a participant asked for a short break to be able to close their window as their neighbour was smoking and they could smell it. Thus, I took note of what we were discussing and continued from that point onwards. This is also part of what Berkovich (2018) discusses as qualitative research in a natural setting, where participants are in a comfortable setting so that they provide researchers with the best data.

Second, I also had to ensure that my participants did not feel like they were being interrogated, as they would feel uncomfortable answering my questions (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). To help ease into the interview, while doing the introduction, I told them a little bit about myself as well as why I was conducting this research, which helped ease the tension. As well, the question guide was designed to open with the participants telling me about themselves with guidance, as the opening questions were about hockey, such as favourite team

and player. This helped break the ice (pun intended) and ease my participants into the interview, which helped them answer the questions to their fullest extent as they felt comfortable in the interview environment.

Upon completion of four of the interviews, I used Microsoft Teams to generate a transcript. For the interview of Zoom, the audio file was generated using Microsoft Word's auto-transcription feature. I then reviewed the transcripts, and I cleaned up the transcripts to ensure they fully captured what my participants had said.

## Thematic Analysis

To analyze my data, I used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis refers to a straightforward and flexible analytical approach that identifies and groups patterns within the data into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes are patterns of shared understanding within my data that are organized around a central concept (Braun et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is a descriptive analysis, which meshes well with the constructivist paradigm as it follows an inductive method that allows findings to emerge naturally from my data and for new understandings to emerge (Naeem et al., 2023). It also allowed me to revisit my conclusions as I made them, to ensure the findings were grounded in the data. However, there remains no clear consensus about how to approach thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), so let me explain my method.

First, while cleaning up the transcripts, I began familiarizing myself with the data. Drawing from Naeem et al.'s (2023) use of thematic analysis, I was making note of the quotes that I believed were important, as well as the keywords that my participants were using. This helped break my lengthy transcripts into manageable chunks that I could sort and analyze.

I then conducted open coding, in which I began to write down all the themes and key phrases that I saw within my transcripts (Van Den Hoonaard & Van Den Scott, 2022). Breaking my data down allowed me to begin to develop my sensitizing concepts, which are concepts that my participants used to articulate their perceptions and attitudes of the Pride ban (Van Den Hoonaard & Van Den Scott, 2022), in this case, the NHL Pride ban. I also used NVivo's word cloud feature to look for commonly used words to help me in my coding by seeing which words commonly appeared. But did not find this helpful, as it did not draw out any main concepts. This comes from an inductive approach in which no preconceived concepts or themes are used; rather, the themes emerge from my data (Van Den Hoonaard & Van Den Scott, 2022). Naeem et al. (2023) referred to this as coding, where keywords are now placed together into codes, but I will refer to these small codes as sensitizing concepts, as I have not yet reached my final themes. These sensitizing concepts better helped me access the range of perceptions, as I could look at it through small pieces rather than attempt to look at all of it at once. This helps my themes emerge more organically, which allows me to better organize and discuss my participants' perspectives on the Pride ban.

With my sensitizing concepts in place, I got to my second phase of coding, in which I began to group sensitizing concepts and phrases together into "buckets" that were based on the similarities that they shared. For example, my participants' descriptions of players as role models, heroes, etc. were grouped together as they spoke to the players' position within the community. This is where I began to develop my themes as I grouped sensitizing concepts together through their commonalities as described above. This approach allowed me the flexibility to group sensitizing concepts together that would best describe my participants ' perceptions of the Pride ban.

However, there still remained too many themes to handle and effectively code. Thus, a third round of coding further grouped my second phase of coding into a smaller number of groups. For example, any mention of the Pride jersey was grouped together under the one theme of “Pride Jerseys”. This allowed me to better code my data into a manageable number of distinct themes rather than having to handle multiple overlapping themes at once. This is what Naeem et al. (2023) referred to as theme development, where I begin to move away from the descriptive parts of the code towards a more abstract understanding of my data and how they link back to my research question.

Ultimately, 17 major themes emerged from my coding process (see Appendix D) and were then uploaded to NVivo, which helped with my organization as it was digitized. I then went back through my transcripts and placed all my data into their corresponding themes. I then uploaded a Microsoft Word document from NVivo that contained all my data for each theme. This helped with my conceptualization, as it allowed me to begin to create the story of each theme and the key points that arise independently of one another (Naeem et al., 2023). These 17 themes were key components of my participants' perceptions of the Pride ban and better helped me explain the origins of their viewpoint and how they influenced their view of the Pride ban.

I could also see where each piece of data fits, as some quotes were placed within multiple themes, which allowed me to see how the individual themes interacted with one another. This helped me with the conceptualization of my project as it allowed me to begin to name and describe what was arising in my data (Naeem et al., 2023). This allowed me to better understand my participants' perceptions, as overlap between themes in a singular quote would demonstrate that the two themes interact with one another.

Ultimately, I reached my final stage, which is my analysis of my data in my analysis chapter (Naeem et al., 2023). This comes back to my first step, in which I began selecting important quotes that would justify my findings of my research project.

## Ethical Considerations

As I was developing my research project and as I was gathering my data I had to keep in mind the core principles of ethical qualitative research: respect for the persons, concern for human welfare and justice. (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). Respect for persons refers to recognition of my participants as human beings and treating them in such a manner to demonstrate the intrinsic value of their lives (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). This arose when I had to ensure that their privacy was upheld. Hence, I removed any identifying information that might reveal my participants' true identity and gave them pseudonyms that reflected their gender identity. As well, any personal information was stored on the University of Ottawa OneDrive servers to ensure maximum data protection.

Second is concern for human welfare, where a researcher should be concerned about the impact their research may have on their participants (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). Due to the nature of the content, I was primarily concerned with participants discussing negative experiences they have had participating in hockey. With these potentially harmful experiences being discussed, they could be psychologically harmful or upsetting to my participants; so, they were provided with information to contact the Canada Mental Health Hotline should they be experiencing negative thoughts or harm after the interview.

Finally, there is the principle of justice, which is concerned with the obligation to treat participants in a fair and equitable fashion as well as the distribution of benefits of research (Van den Hoonard & Van den Scott, 2022). As I could not benefit them directly with the research, I

chose to thank my participants and to compensate them for their time. Thus, all my participants were given a 25$ CAD gift card to Starbucks.

**Project Limitations**

Due to the nature and the scope of the project, several limitations exist. First, my participants were all Canadian, and most were living in or from the Ottawa area. This means that the majority of my data has been shaped by my participants' experiences living in Ottawa, and thus my findings may not be replicated in different communities, such as among southern American hockey fans.

Second, all 5 of my participants were recruited from Bluesky, which has a reputation for being a more liberal social media platform. This is reflected in my data, as none of my participants did not support the Pride jersey ban. Thus, fans who support the Pride ban were not captured in my data and could have influenced my findings. As well, social media recruitment may skew my data in the sense it captures the ways in which online sports fans construct the meaning of the ban and not the sense made of the ban by those who are not active on social media.

Third, my recruitment was done on a first-come, first-serve basis, which means no special conditions were given to LGBTQ+ fans for their recruitment. However, all three of my female participants identified as LGBTQ+. It is important to engage with marginalized communities on issues impacting them; it is important to disclaim that my participants were not fully representative of LGBTQ+ fans (no gay men/trans fans/two-spirit etc.), so this project does not reflect the full range of perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

The interviews took place in October 2025. This is important to note as it was the beginning of the 2025-2026 NHL season and a few key events occurred between October and the submission of this project that may have changed my participants' perceptions of the Pride ban. First, the Ottawa Senators signed James Reimer in January 2026, one of the players who had refused to wear the Pride jersey. Second, Canada lost the Gold Medal game at the 2026 Milan Olympics in both men's and women's hockey, and there was significant public backlash against the U.S. men's team for aligning itself closely with Donald Trump. Third, the popularity of the Crave Original show, *Heated Rivalry*, began in the Winter of 2025. Fourth, in the summer of 2026, Ottawa Senators captain Brady Tkachuk was traded to the Florida Panthers, and many fans turned against him as he had requested a trade. These are important to note, as these events had not occurred and may have shaped my participants' perceptions of the Pride jersey ban and hockey's relationship to the community.

Despite the limitations of my sampling, I engaged in moderate generalizations to avoid the risk of overgeneralizations that may not be true and thus undermine my ontological position. I was able to draw conclusions about how my participants, as Ottawans/Ottawa fans, perceived the ban, but not all findings will be generalizable. For example, support for the Pride jersey ban exists within some parts of the community but not the full community.

Even with several limitations to my findings, I still believe they are beneficial to our understanding of sports and my participants' understanding of the Pride jersey ban. The next chapter will discuss these findings in greater detail.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

This chapter will outline the key findings of this thesis based on the empirical evidence collected from the interviews with my participants. In the first section, *Canadian Communities and Canada's Game*, I present that hockey is often a source of joy for those in the community and a source of social currency that allowed my participants to build their own communities and to integrate into the existing hockey community. This relationship took the form of charity work done by teams and players in the communities that demonstrates hockey as a form of community infrastructure, but my participants remained critical of these practices. This ultimately led to a conflict in the community over how franchises and players conduct themselves in respect to their relationship with the community.

In *Corporatization of Inclusivity,* I discuss how my participants viewed the slogan meant to make hockey more inclusive; however, ultimately, it resulted in the slogan becoming an instrument to make hockey more inclusive. They felt Pride Nights are instrumental in teams selling tickets to games and have lost their effectiveness as they have become watered down by ownership and politics.

In *Dimming the Rainbow,* I outline the importance of the Pride jerseys as symbols of inclusion and how players' refusals sent a message of exclusion that my participants criticized. This set the groundwork for the Pride ban as my participants believed the league was attempting to mitigate the backlash to the players' refusals. They also believed that hockey's conservative culture was an important systemic factor in the NHL's Pride ban.

Finally, in *Growing the Game,* I present the aftermath of the NHL's Pride ban as players resisted the chilling of their autonomy to advocate for social causes, namely with the use of Pride

tape. My participants also discussed the importance of the PWHL in shaking up the status quo in hockey and how they are enjoying the PWHL experience more than the NHL.

## Canadian Communities and Canada's Game

*"Sports is community, and part of the community, and in the community." – Chloe*

As the opening quote illustrated, sports are interwoven with the community. The following section discusses how my participants saw hockey as a source of joy because of the entertainment it provides them and the social aspect of watching the game with others. However, the data also suggests hockey is a social event that communities organize around, which allows community members to become fans by socializing and forming friendships through hockey. This led my participants to see hockey teams and players as part of the broader community, especially when they participate in charity work. However, when that charity work conflicted with community values or fragmented who was considered part of the hockey community, criticisms of how teams engage in charity work emerged. This was particularly true with respect to the Pride jersey ban and provides context for understanding the meaning of the event to fans.

### *Hockey Sparks Joy*

To begin our discussion about the Pride jersey ban, participants were asked the question, "If you could pick one word to describe what hockey means to you, what is it?" Charlie responded:

> I'm gonna say escape. And I feel like it's cause, I never did hockey competitively or anything that like I hardly played as a child. The idea of trying to understand tactics and a bunch of those things is very new to me. And I'm very much not like, even though, you know, I ran a blog for a bunch of years, wrote for it for a bunch of years. Besides that, like media, sports was never anything. That was like a career path for me at all. And so it was very much like, this is something I do for fun. That's separate. It lets me unplug. It lets me focus on something that it's for the most part, like, you know, if I'm watching hockey, I'm just kind of forgetting

> about the other things that are going on in my life and living in that. So yeah, that's why I go with escape. – Charlie

For Charlie, hockey was a form of entertainment that allowed him to escape from his day-to-day struggles. Even though Charlie did not play hockey growing up, he still enjoyed watching the game, and that is where he found his love of the game. But as Jim further explained, entertainment is not the only factor at play, as fans even watch when it is painful:

> You know, some people might call that, I guess, bandwagon or something like that. But I mean, I've watched [the Sens] for years and there's just certain years I'm like, no, this is not fun. Why am I spending three hours of my evening? So, I think that's why it's because when they're at their best, my God, they've been fun. And there's also been some bleak years where it's like, nah, I don't feel like doing this that often. - Jim

Although Jim watched the Sens less frequently in years as they played horribly and did not win, he remained engaged as he would still periodically watch games and still consider himself a fan. This suggests that hockey is more than simply entertainment seeking.

Hockey is more than just entertainment for fans, as Skylar and Cynthia explained their deep attachment to a team through the notion of community. For example, Skylar said:

> I'm gonna go with community and I'm actually thinking of the Sens Pride game that I went to. It was a couple people from Twitter, back in the day and [Skylar's friend] organized us and we went and it was the Sens Pride Night a couple years back and the only person I knew was [Skylar's friend]. There were like five or six people and just like experiencing a game with a group of other fans like that and fans had been fans for a lot longer than me, right? And it was a really fun game, like, there's so much excitement. – Skylar

From this perspective, hockey is a shared event, and the pleasure of it is as much rooted in the belonging it gives to fans as it is in the game itself. For Skylar, there was a fun aspect of hockey in going to the game with her friends and being able to attend the game in person. This illuminates how entertainment and community are intertwined, as she saw her interpersonal relationships tied to her entertainment through hockey.

This notion of community extended to online spaces as well. As Skylar elaborated:

> … I think it's that I got into hockey participating like via Twitter and that's how I kind of learned how the game worked. And so just like ridiculous hockey moments, like it's a sport on ice, you know, that's what, I always say that I'm like, it's a sport on ice. What do you want them to do? And so it just leads to some really like fun stuff. And I find that the Sens players, cause they're a younger team, like they just have a lot of fun with it. They're like media content is always very fun. They seem to be close, like the relationships [between players] are fun to watch and then also just like seeing them build their skills and get really better at their sport. - Skylar

Skylar's joy from hockey came from the fact that hockey is a community experience both on the ice and in the stands and not just an activity to be enjoyed by herself. Because hockey is a sport that is played on ice, it takes place in a chaotic environment, which leads to entertaining highlights that the team capitalizes on, making the Senators an enjoyable team. But it was also the ability to enjoy the game with others, whether in the stands or online, that enriched Skylar's hockey experience, and she became more invested in hockey. This points to community as an integral part of the hockey experience for fans; their experience is enriched by building and being part of the hockey community.

### ***The Making of Community and the Making of Hockey Fans***

The growth of this hockey community starts young. For example, Skylar said:

> It started for me as a kid growing up in [Skylar's Hometown] and going to [OHL Team] games, if you can believe that, like because school fundraisers and stuff, there'd always be tickets for [OHL Team] games and like we would go. So even when I wasn't super into hockey, it was like a community thing and something that we went out to do so, yeah. - Skylar

For Skylar, going to games was part of the community she grew up in and part of both socializing and strengthening ties within her community as she went to games with her friends from school or with her family. Skylar's experience growing up in the GTA indicates that hockey is not a separate entity from the broader community, but it is intertwined with the broader

community. Hockey is an activity that enables players and fans to organize and create a shared identity.

In addition, it is often through this collective attendance that members of the broader community become hockey fans. As Skylar described her experience when she moved to Ottawa, she said:

> … [My brother] is a huge Habs fan, unfortunately. And for his birthday, which is in April every year that we lived together, I would buy him tickets to a Sens v. Habs game and we would go together and that's how I got into hockey and I saw, you know, Sens Twitter and such and it got really fun and exciting to know who the players were. And that's kind of how I came to be a fan of hockey. It's been a really big part of building like a home and community in Ottawa for me and yeah. – Skylar

From this perspective, hockey is not only a form of social currency that can be shared with friends and family. It is also a mechanism that engages people in wider networks, helping build and strengthen community ties with previously unknown others. As Cynthia noted:

> I've like met a lot of friends through hockey and like hockey fan communities. You know, like one of my like, friend groups is like from hockey. So yeah, it's kind of like I see it as like, a way to like, hang out with my friends relate to my friends. – Cynthia

My data suggests that fans build their community through interactions with other fans and sharing their mutual love of the game. When asked to describe hockey in one word, Cynthia chose the word “social” as she has made many friends through hockey. Hockey for participants is therefore not just about the product on the ice but the community of fans around the game. Because of this, hockey can be used to help build real-world community when moving to a new city such as in Skylar’s case. Once again, this means that hockey is both a separate community and, at the same time, part of the broader geographic community, and the two continuously interact with and shape each other.

From my participants' perspectives, just as hockey is social currency and capital within the community, it also is social currency for hockey players. Moreover, the two are combined through fans' perceptions and experiences. As Cynthia states:

> … I think like especially in a city like Ottawa that is like we don't have like we have like our only celebrities are like our hockey team and the government. So there's not a lot of like local like figureheads to like look up to for like kids and like even not kids, even like adults. And so, like these guys are very revered in the city and stuff like that. And so I think like having those role models for people and like those like, you know, celebrities essentially for people speaking out on certain things. It's more likely for like kids to see that and say like, oh my gosh, like, you know, Brady Tkachuk supports this and 'I love Brady Tkachuk' like that's great. I'm going to you know I want to be like him like I'm going to support that and then like you know even like the adults that like maybe were on the fence or whatever who like tie a lot of their identity to the team you know seeing that kind of stuff can like open their mind a little bit so I think it's important. – Cynthia

Cynthia saw players as important role models within her community. As she saw it, her community lacked traditional celebrities that other communities often have, and Senators players have filled that role. One such player is Brady Tkachuk[1]; he has become a person that young fans look up to and is recognizable not only to hockey fans, but to members of the broader community as well. Moreover, as Tkachuk is recognized within the community, he is given immense social capital, which can sway community sentiments for young fans who see Tkachuk as a role model. This is also true for older fans who see their teams as part of their community and align themselves with team and player values. But with this status, players are expected to reflect their community's values. As Chloe explained:

> I think fans have every right to say you are a public figure and you do not reflect my values and it is important for me that you understand why. – Chloe

[1] It is important to note that interviews were conducted in October 2025, before Brady Tkachuk was traded from the Ottawa Senators to the Florida Panthers.

When players do not uphold community values, Chloe argued it is important to criticize players for their actions and to for players to understand the reasoning behind their critiques of the players. From this perspective, the criticism originated from the players breaking the shared identity that fans and players hold through the relationship between hockey and the community. When the players break their communities' values, the criticism is meant to help restore the relationship between hockey and the broader community. One-way players often attempt to align themselves with community values is through charity work done in the communities that they play in.

### ***Charity as Community Infrastructure***

Given the interrelated nature of community on the ice and in the stands, all the participants saw the charity work done by NHL players and teams as a positive contribution to the broader community. For example, Charlie said:

> I think this [charity work] is a good thing. Like it is important to have some community involvement. It definitely, I mean, for like the kids at CHEO [Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario], the benefit to them on an individual level of having one of the hockey heroes come in, it's hard to really put an idea on like how like you can't quantify what that means to them. - Charlie

As Charlie explained, the players are considered heroes in their community and bring a level of joy when the players visit CHEO to the patients there. In a similar vein, Skylar saw the work of the Ottawa Senators Community Foundation (Sens Foundation), which mainly focuses on youth and sports initiatives within the community (Ottawa Senators Community Foundation, n.d.), as a "natural connection". The foundation links players and the franchise to various community initiatives, which connects the hockey community to the broader community.

Jim, who grew up in the Montreal area, vividly remembered the Montreal Canadiens being similarly involved in the community. And Chloe, who grew up near Vancouver, recalled a

personal connection to the Canucks' charity work as they knew someone who spent their final days in Canucks Place, a hospice centre for youth.

Most of my participants also felt that there was an expectation that teams and players would participate in charitable activities, as a way of supporting the community that supports both the players and the franchise.

> I would also add maybe that, like I perceive it a little differently because of the salaries in the NHL in particular, like they make so much money. Doing what they do, I think that makes my perception think a little bit more along the lines of like, oh, yeah, this is like the this is the return on that, right? – Skylar

As Skylar saw it, because of the multimillion-dollar contracts often awarded to players, there is an expectation for players to give back to their community in some way. Cynthia expanded on this as she said:

> Yeah, I think it's like the most important thing, in my opinion, especially in like a smaller market, I think reaching out to the community is like very important, especially like the knowledge that the team is owned by like a billionaire, someone like extremely wealthy and like, you know, there's the, the players are extremely rich. – Cynthia

The expectation is not only for players but also team owners, who are often billionaires, to give back. Skylar and Cynthia both expressed an expectation that those in the community with access to large amounts of economic and social capital would give back to the communities that support hockey in some manner. This expectation was often fulfilled through players making financial donations to charities or by donating their time to charities. As Charlie described:

> Like the involvement of, say, Turris, or Mark Borowiecki with the Capital City Condors, I think actually got like it made people think about the idea of like, oh yeah, like there are kids with special needs who also want to play hockey. I hadn't thought about this. I think in that kind of case it actually makes a difference. - Charlie

Charlie remembered former Ottawa Senators Kyle Turris and Mark Borowiecki's involvement with the Capital Condors, who provide access to hockey to those who are unable to play due to cognitive and physical disabilities (Capital Condors, 2026). For my participants, this work is a natural fit that allows teams to give back to the community in some way. They felt that fans want to see players mobilize the immense social and financial capital that they have access to help build and improve their community, especially services and groups that are marginalized in the community. Turris and Borowiecki's involvement also contributes to another important aspect of hockey's charity involvement, which is to bring attention to often overlooked charities.

As such, the data suggests that sports teams are well positioned to do charity work in the community and can help other organizations to achieve their objectives. For Charlie, players' involvement with charities can bring attention to these organizations just by the attachment of their names to the charity. This demonstrates the strength of the social currency that the Senators and their players have in the community, as simply using the name of the team or a player brings attention to the charities that they choose to work with and is beneficial, as fans may be more likely to donate to them. Yet the social currency of hockey also brings validity to the charities, as teams' social currency within the community becomes attached to the charities, thus making the charities more visible to the broader community.

My participants felt that the charities supported by teams and players in the community are the most visible form of how sports is 'within' the community, as Chloe describes it. Because of this, they also felt that if the team disrupted this relationship, there would be consequences. Charlie made this point with respect to the former owner of the Ottawa Senators, Eugene Melnyk:

> And there was an article, oh man, a bunch of years ago that like they were looking into. This would have been the previous Sens Foundation back before they had their falling out with Melnyk, but like, the ratio of how much money actually went to charity versus how much money comes in and they said that they were pretty bad as a charity. Like, I think it was something like 70-80% of the money that comes in doesn't go to a charity; it goes to overhead. - Charlie

Melnyk had a complicated history as owner of the Senators for various reasons.[2] In 2020, Melnyk ended his relationship with the Sens Foundation and halted most community initiatives done by the team (Warren, 2020). Charlie touched on a key point of Melnyk's ownership, which was a strained (at best) relationship with the community and how it was reflected in the original Sens Foundation. When fans donate their money to charities, the intent of those funds is for them to be reinvested into the community in some manner. However, the Sens Foundation was keeping or using over 50% of the funds for themselves[3]. This fractures the relationship between franchise and community, as the intent for those funds was to benefit the community in some way. As Charlie stated, this leads fans to criticize the team's use of charity as an instrument for the team to market themselves as positive community members merely to increase revenue.

**Instrumental Charity**

From my participants' perspective, when teams fail to uphold the reciprocal relationship between the team and the community, it opens the charity work up to criticism by fans. Three main critiques arose in my data: teams only chose safe charities that would not invoke backlash from fans; charitable events focused on upper-class patrons and fans rather than those who

[2] For example, when Melnyk threatened to move the team to a different city, fans bought a billboard to tell Melnyk to sell the team so he would stop interfering with the relationship between the team and the community.
[3] Charity Intelligence Canada estimates only 46% of funds raised went to charitable causes (Beata, 2018)

benefit from the charity; and teams used charity as a way to clean up a player's reputation after a scandal.

***Go Woke, Go Broke: Safe Charities***

My participants were aware of the fact that the Sens Foundation often partners with charities that focus on youth within the community. For example, when Skylar began to outline the types of charities the Sens Foundation is involved in, youth organizations stood out to her:

> Generally, I think I would say that the Sens [charity work] is usually pretty youth-focused. I could speak to like, I feel like Christmas is when I see a lot of it, like the gift drives that the WAGs [wives and girlfriends of the players] all do. I feel like I saw that last year and that was really sweet. I think that was specifically the Sens too. - Skylar

Skylar described the relationship between the Sens charitable work and the community as one where the Sens Foundation and community work focus on youth within the community. As she further elaborated:

> I would say I've never thought of it as a bad thing necessarily, especially when you think CHEO and stuff, right? Like even if you're like gonna do analysis of like the issues in the NHL, like it's hard to criticize like the joy that you see in those visits on the part of like the players and the community, right? - Skylar

Skylar pointed to CHEO as one of the key partnerships between the community and the Sens Foundation. From her perspective, it is an important relationship for the Sens as it brings joy to the children and families at CHEO during the difficult time of treatment for serious illness in children. However, she raised a key point about the relationship as she pointed out that fans are not going to criticize this relationship as CHEO aids sick youth in Eastern Ontario.

Cynthia described the types of charities the Sens are involved in, like CHEO, as "safe charities", i.e. ones that will not elicit backlash from fans when teams work with them.

> Yeah, I would just say like image wise, there's probably none of the charities they're involved with, like they're involved with very like kind of safe charities, but like if they were involved in something like a little bit more, you know, yeah, like what political it working with a hockey team, like there would be kind of questions. – Cynthia

My participants were aware of the way that these charities allow the Sens to build a positive image within the community. This image is important for the Sens because it strengthens community support for the franchise and players. However, when franchises choose to work with more political charities, such as LGBTQ+ charities, this can elicit backlash from fans and damage the teams' image within the community. Teams work with "safe charities" points to charity work as a tool to build a positive public image for franchises and players in their community.

***Cleaning the Ice: Laundering Player and Franchise Reputation***

My participants recognized the positive public reputation that teams garnered with their charity work in the community, which is why teams choose to engage with 'safe charities' that do not risk public backlash. However, that boost in public image is sometimes used by teams and players to launder their reputations when players face accusations of wrongdoing.

Take, for example, Evander Kane, a hockey player who has faced numerous controversies for being accused of domestic and sexual assault, violating the NHL's COVID-19 protocols by using a fake vaccine card and being sued for a gambling debt of over $500,000, as well as allegations of throwing games he bet on (Srinivasan, 2022), who was discussed by a number of my participants.

> … I feel like I've seen like Evander Kane and stuff like at whatever hospital and taking pictures of the kids. And I'm like, oh, I feel a little iffy about that cause I've heard some stuff about him, but like, who's gonna be like, no, don't do that … - Skylar

> So, Evander Kane, for example, who is now a member of the Vancouver Canucks, has on the record a horrible, horrible history of sexual violence, domestic violence, gambling abuse, you know, circumventing Canadian laws on vaccine records. And also, then what will happen is if you bring up any of this, his wonderful supporters online will be like, but he gives to charity. But look at his involvement in the community. And it's very frustrating because it is evident that the way in which the next generation of players are being brought up is through the mindset that they need to perform X amount of charitable work and contribution in order to receive Y amount of, you know, benefit of the doubt type of thing… - Chloe

My participants felt that Kane was attempting to rehabilitate his image with his charity work, as they were aware of the allegations against him. Chloe noted that she saw that players are taught that the relationship between the community and the players is transactional: if players do charitable work in the community, then players earn a certain amount of social capital in the community that can be cashed in for community forgiveness. Chloe saw this dynamic with Kane, where fans used Kane's charity work in the community as a social currency to clean his image against these allegations.

Chloe's comments illustrated the importance of the relationship between hockey teams and the community to hockey fans. Chloe stated that the way Kane acted is not how members of the community should act, directly contradicting the special role that sports teams and players have as part of the community. Second, she noted that teams and players publicly engage in charity work to draw on their special standing in the community to repair their tarnished reputation. This strains the relationship between the community and the team, as fans see the charity work being done not for the betterment of the community but to improve players' reputation within the community after breaking from community norms.

The relationship between community and hockey is an important one for my participants and simply using that relationship for good public relations by teams and players can further

strain the relationship if it is not perceived as authentic. As Charlie said, “I guess partly I don’t love performative charity”, which speaks to the fact that teams’ charity work should reinforce community norms and improve the community rather than serve as a marketing tool for teams to launder their reputations. Performative charity pulls at the tension between the business realities of a sports team that is intended to make a profit while simultaneously striking a balance with community interests.

### ***Golf and Galas: Charity and Fans with Capital***

My participants saw the business realities of sports emerge within how teams attempt to raise funds for their charities. An example of this is the Canucks auctioned off game-worn Pride jerseys to raise funds for LGBTQ+ organizations in their community. However, Chloe saw this as marketing to rich fans, as she said:

> Vancouver is pretty good at, like, incorporating an aspect of their various celebrations to include community members. So, for example, you might remember with our Pride Nights, we've had some pretty cool jersey designs like the gay orca (Gorca) that was designed by Mio. Yeah, like that's exactly like that awesome jersey and it looks very cool. And in those regards, so that like those jersey sales with Lunar New Year. … Now we can also talk about the fact that like those jerseys cost anywhere between 700 to $1000. OK, there is charitable efforts that are happening during these nights, but it is it's the access to be able to contribute to those charitable causes is reserved for an upper class individual who's able to one attend these games to even purchase the jerseys or to the people who can drop $1000, which is not a ton of people nowadays. Let's be real. – Chloe

When teams market their charity work to fans with the most economic capital, it begins to stretch and warp the relationship with community. Chloe showed great admiration for the Gorca, the Vancouver Canucks 2022 Pride jersey design and how these initiatives incorporated the community. However, she saw the business reality of the auction as jerseys quickly became expensive and out of reach for many fans, as they cost hundreds of dollars. The auction reserved

jerseys for rich fans due to the cost, while leaving other fans out for not being able to afford the luxury jerseys. The Pride jerseys are reserved for fans with capital, even though they are meant to represent the community. This calls into question the reasons for charity: is it an event meant to support the community or an exclusive event for rich fans? As Charlie raised similar concerns:

> I don't know if you know who Dave Barry is; he's a comedian. He wrote for the Miami Herald for a whole bunch of years, but he had a quote that sticks in my mind that was a rich people are a big fan of charity because then it allows the headlines to say, you know, like evening in Paris ball raises money for gout rather than rich people amuse themselves. - Charlie

Charlie's comments focused on a main source of fundraising by charities, the use of galas. Charlie mentioned the Sens annual casino night, gala and golf tournament as some of their bigger fundraising activities for the foundation. However, Charlie saw this method of fundraising as focusing on the rich fans as a way to amuse themselves and not being about the actual charities that they are raising funds for. As he further explained:

> I guess partly I don't love performative charity and so I think I would like to see more of like the Sens actually putting the organizations that they're helping front and center, as opposed to it being like the big gala nights or the golf tournament. That's the thing that's front and center, and then it just happens to benefit someone at the end. – Charlie

Charlie felt these events were an excuse for the team to have a fun night out, and the byproduct of the events is helping the community. These events further strain the relationship between team and community, as these events meant to benefit the community are not putting it front and centre but are events for the wealthy of the community to amuse themselves. This leads my participants to see these types of fundraising activities as performative, where the focus is on the amusement of the rich and not on the charities meant to help the community.

The three critiques of charity raised by my participants all orbit around the hockey's relationship with the community and how the community sees hockey compared to how teams

act in the community. The relationship between the two is meant to be reciprocal, where the franchises' immense access to capital is used to benefit the community and, in return, the community supports the team. However, teams and players use the relationship for the improvement of their brand image, with their work being seen as performative by some fans that does not necessarily improve the community. This calls into question the authenticity of the charity work being done by franchises, whether it is actually to improve the community or if it is just to improve the teams' and players' image within the community. The relationship between teams and communities is important. However, fans see the teams taking advantage of said relationship and communities not fully benefiting from charity.

**Heated Rivalry: Conflict in the Community**

A key point that continues to emerge in the data is a tension between how hockey operates and the values that a community holds. Participants often hold progressive values which originate from broader community values. As Cynthia explained:

> I think for like you know Ottawa is a fairly like a progressive city and so I think it's like for everyone else it's kind of saying like you know our values align with your values you know like you feel good about like you know supporting an organization that you think shares your values and stuff like that so I think that's like probably the goal. – Cynthia

Cynthia explained that Ottawa is a city and community that holds progressive values, which means most fans of the Senators should hold these values as well. From this perspective, there is an expectation for the Senators to align themselves with these values, as fans expect the franchise to uphold the same values as they are part of the same community. One of these core values is for teams to recognize diversity within the community, as Charlie said:

> I don't think the NHL does more nights to celebrate marginalized groups than the other leagues. I think it's more just kind of like this is this is something we expect

> more of our sports teams now is that they're going to put some effort into noticing the diversity in the society around them. – Charlie

Charlie saw an expectation for professional sports franchises to recognize different groups within the community and to notice the diversity that is within the community. Since hockey is part of the community and a space in which communities organize, it is important for fans that teams recognize the diversity in the community. This reinforces my participants' view that NHL teams should be in sync with their community values.

However, tension arises when teams do not align themselves with community values. As Skylar explained the franchises' goal with Pride Nights:

> I feel like such a piece of shit cause my honest, my honest answer is I think that they do it to show face. Like, I know I've been talking about community and stuff and I believe that hockey is about communities. I also believe that these teams, these organizations are organizations and they work like businesses and I kind of do think they're checking a box when they host a Pride Night. Like when the Sens organization decides we're gonna host a Pride Night, I think it probably has more to do with this is checking a box. This is looking like we're supposed to look more so than actually giving a shit about the Pride Night. – Skylar

Skylar saw a tension between teams' actions and community values. As she explained, at the end of the day, these teams are businesses, and these initiatives are to "show face" to the community to align themselves with community values. From this perspective, inclusivity efforts are less about actual alignment with the community and more about appearing to align themselves with the community, even when they are not. So why 'show face' to the community? As Charlie elaborated:

> Yeah, I mean like the ultimate goal, I think of any pretty much anything that a team does is like in the end hockey teams are capitalist ventures, like the goal is money. – Charlie

Charlie saw the reason why teams continue to show face, is the business goals of the franchise. This comes into direct conflict with community values, as the undercurrent of inclusivity efforts is that the teams' ultimate goal is to make money. Initiatives are not about making hockey for everyone, but as a tool for teams to make more money. From this perspective, the conflict in the community is between the business interests of the franchise and the values the community holds.

In conclusion, we see that hockey is an activity that fans enjoy often through the community aspect of the game, which intertwines hockey as part of the broader community. One way this reciprocal relationship between hockey and the community materializes is the charity work done by professional hockey teams. However, the work begins to highlight a tension between teams and the community as criticism around the charities focuses on the use of community to improve the team's financial position while failing to uphold community values. This is further underscored by fans in the community holding progressive values, yet teams mobilize these values as a marketing tool, which creates further tension between the team and the community. The next section takes a deep dive into the Hockey is for Everyone campaign, NHL theme nights and the Pride jersey ban as initiatives taken up by the NHL and franchises that further heightens the tension between team and community.

## Corporatization of Inclusivity

In recent years, the NHL has launched the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone" meant to encapsulate various initiatives meant to make hockey more inclusive. However, the initiatives have come under criticism as merely a tool to make hockey appear inclusive without putting in the hard work. This section discusses how my participants saw the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone" from the idealist perspective to make hockey more inclusive versus the practical view

where it is seen as a broad corporate slogan that supports business goals while it simultaneously fails to uphold inclusivity. As well, my participants discussed NHL theme nights and how they are a marketing tool to sell seats for games, which my participants saw followed the ebbs and flows based on ownership and politics.

### ***Drafting a Bust: Hockey is for Everyone***

To begin, it is important to understand how my participants saw the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone". As Skylar described the slogan:

> I am aware of the slogan, Hockey is for Everyone. To me, I take it quite literally that hockey is for everyone, that there should be no exclusion in hockey based on any of your intersecting identities or experiences. – Skylar

Skylar saw the slogan as the NHL and teams demonstrating that hockey is a space that is meant to be inclusive and not to exclude community members based on their identities. The slogan works hand-in-hand with the previous chapter about community, as hockey is part of the community; therefore, it should not exclude anyone. Skylar's comment touched the slogan on the surface, as participants very quickly dove into how the league fails to live up to the slogan.

First, Chloe pointed out that the slogan is very broad in its appeal. As she said:

> Rather, hockey is for everyone is the kind of slogan that can be put on that like it doesn't ruffle any feathers. It is so milquetoast. It is incredibly just it's an umbrella. It's an umbrella that everyone can try and fall under, and certainly for some individuals who aren't brought into an uncomfortable situation, they can be like, Oh yes, hockey's for everyone. Of course I support that statement, but when you actually dig further into that, you can see one, they don't actually believe that. – Chloe

Chloe saw that the slogan has broad appeal to fans because very few fans would oppose the messaging. However, she felt the slogan ultimately holds no actual meaning as the league consistently undermines efforts to make hockey for everyone. For her, the slogan is an umbrella

in which many different fans can sit under without creating too much conflict within hockey. My participants shared a similar view; they saw the slogan less about making hockey inclusive, and more about making hockey appear inclusive. When asked about the slogan, Charlie said:

> I feel like mostly it makes me roll my eyes. I feel like it was kind of a performative slogan the NHL was concerned about trying to seem like they were being involved in progressive causes without actually doing anything to be involved in them. – Charlie

Charlie felt that the slogan allows the NHL to claim it is a progressive league, while not putting in the necessary effort to uphold the claims. From this perspective, the slogan is about the NHL and its franchises attempting to align themselves with their communities' values, without doing the work to uphold these values. This led Charlie to have a negative view of the slogan, as he explained:

> Yeah, on the whole, I feel like it's probably been more negative. I don't think it's done very much to actually make hockey more inclusive, and I think it's also riled up a lot of backlash. It's kind of managed to piss everyone off, regardless of what their opinions are. I don't think it's accomplished very much and I think it's also. Yeah, like it's. I think you end up with a lot of people who then respond and hate to these initiatives that aren't really doing much in the first place. – Charlie

Charlie felt that the slogan had a negative impact on hockey because it has drawn backlash to inclusivity efforts. For him, the slogan has brought the worst of hockey to the forefront for fans to deal with as hateful comments become something hockey fans must navigate. An example of the backlash is social media comments under teams' inclusivity posts. As Skylar explained:

> I wouldn't say there's been efforts from the NHL to mitigate any of the hate and hateful, like communication that's been happening around these kinds of nights. Like I see just foul comments on social media anytime one of these nights happens and not just Pride Night. Like I am thinking about like Black History Night. I've seen some really gross shit said about the yeah, about Black History Night and others as well. And so it's like, well. If you're not going to manage that

> well, then harm is going to be done to these communities. So I think that's like worth noting. – Skylar

Skylar felt the league and teams have failed to uphold the slogan on the most basic level by allowing hateful comments on their social media posts. The hateful comments became front and center for these nights and subjected fans to a backlash that they have no part in besides trying to enjoy hockey. From this perspective, the hateful comments left by fans strained the relationship between the community and teams, as hockey is now a space that harms the community, especially those that are marginalized. However, the slogan was part of a broader initiative to make hockey more inclusive, and one initiative was theme nights.

### ***Getting Butts in Seats: NHL Theme Nights***

NHL theme nights are one of the most visible ways the slogan 'Hockey is for Everyone' materialized into concrete actions by franchises. For example, Cynthia and Skylar both discussed the Ottawa Senators "Pride Bowl" where the team laid out Sens Pride T-shirts along the seats in the colours of the Pride flag for their Pride game. Furthermore, these games may be young fans' first experience with LGBTQ+ representation in hockey, as Cynthia described her experience at a Sens Pride game.

> I was there with my friend and behind us, this family was like explaining to their young daughter, like what pride was and like why she should like be happy about it and like support it and stuff. And I just remember it being like such a great moment. – Cynthia

Cynthia illustrated the power and value that Pride Nights have on young fans to be able to understand the importance of inclusion in hockey. The Pride game may have been a young fan's first-time seeing LGBTQ+ representation, which opens the conversation about the importance of inclusivity in hockey and the broader community. As Cynthia's example demonstrated, these nights can provide families an opportunity to support their community by attending Pride Nights

and opens up the conversation about LGBTQ+ inclusivity within hockey with their kids and its importance. The value of Pride Nights for young fans was partially supported by Jim's comments about his intent to bring his kid to the 2026 Sens Pride Night.

However, Jim's comment also illuminated the incentive for teams to use Pride Nights for fans to buy tickets. As Chloe explained:

> And it seems to be it's like [Pride Nights are] the equivalent to Star Wars night. It's a thing that they can put on for one night. They can make themselves feel better about themselves and they hope, ownership desperately hopes that this is not a controversial thing, but like, because they want to equate the way that an individual's identity exists to the same way that an individual's identity might exist as an extension of like a capitalist, you know, a Star Wars fan. – Chloe

Chloe equated Pride Nights to theme nights tied to pop culture like "Star Wars" nights. She saw that teams market the two in very similar ways and that teams see LGBTQ+ identities as similar to being a Star Wars fan, a characteristic for teams to market to. She saw this equation as problematic because teams see LGBTQ+ fans as the same as Star Wars fans and as merely groups to be marketed to and not about making hockey more inclusive.

From this perspective, Pride Nights are not about demonstrating support for the LGBTQ+ community, but they have become an instrument for NHL franchises' business goals. This further strained the relationship between the community and its franchises, as profits have become the primary goal of inclusivity efforts, not making hockey more inclusive. With business goals being a dominant force behind Pride Nights, they can be influenced by various external and internal factors within the organization.

### *Ebbs and Flows of Theme Nights*

Four of my five participants identified as Sens fans, and they discussed changes to theme nights under the past three ownership regimes: Eugene Melnyk, the Melnyk sisters and Michael

Andlauer. First, under Eugene Melnyk, my participants saw that Melnyk was hesitant to have theme nights and to have inclusivity efforts. As Cynthia explained:

> So under like Eugene Melnyk, there was like rumors and stuff like he was extremely or I don't know, there was rumors of that administration or whatever being against the idea of Pride Nights. And like very little effort, if any, was put in. And the sentiment was kind of just like, we have to check this tick box for the league essentially. – Cyntha

Cynthia felt that under Melnyk's ownership, the Senators put little effort into Pride Nights and inclusivity efforts. This was reinforced with her mentioning a quote that surfaced after Melnyk's death, where he said: "They think we are so desperate that we must advertise to gays now. Dogs and gays" (Mendes et al., 2022). The quote demonstrated Melnyk's hesitancy toward efforts to market to LGBTQ+ fans that Cynthia felt was a key characteristic of his ownership.

However, when his daughters became majority owners of the Sens, there was an increase in investment in Pride Nights and similar nights, most visibly seen by the Sens' Pride Bowl[4]. As Cynthia elaborated:

> And then the year in between where the younger Melnyks owned it before it got sold to Andlauer, there was like one year where it was probably like the best. It was like the standard. They had the like t-shirts in rainbow like spread over the seats. - Cynthia

Cynthia saw a significant shift between Eugene Melnyk and his daughters, where the sisters invested their time and capital into the Senators Pride Night, with every fan getting a Sens Pride t-shirt. This raised the bar and set a new standard for what Sens fans expected for Pride

[4] It is important to note that Olivia Melnyk identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Night initiatives. However, since Michael Andlauer took ownership, Cynthia saw a retreat in the visibility and investment in Pride Nights. As she said:

> And then once Andlauer took over, it's kind of like decreased from there. Like they still do, a Pride Night, but like a notable drop in effort every year. and basically none of the players use the tape anymore so. – Cynthia

Cynthia noted a shift under Andlauer with less effort put into Pride Night as compared to the Melnyk sisters. As she elaborated on this retreat under Andlauer:

> Yeah, like, I mean, I noticed it even just like in the social media, like any of these types of nights, like especially Pride Night, like I remember noticing specifically on Pride Night that like, um, they didn't post about it on social media. There was like maybe like one ad that called it Pride Night. And then like after that, like there was just like very little talk of it being Pride Night at all. Like they almost just kind of wanted to like glaze over it and like not deal with the backlash. … So it's like, I think, like social media strategy, like they have clearly tried to limit any like posts about it. And then, like, even at the game and stuff like they just have. you know, there was less there like they didn't do the give everyone a Tee, a pride T-shirt. You know the actual event itself, like had very little like substance to it. – Cynthia

Cynthia noticed that under Andlauer's ownership, the Senators are putting less focus on the fact that they are hosting Pride Night, with less social media presence using Pride Night imagery in the advertisement of their Pride Nights. She felt that the Sens did not want to deal with the backlash for hosting a Pride Night, hence the watered-down marketing of Pride Nights. Because of the Sens scaling back, Cynthia viewed the Senators' Pride Nights as lacking actual substance and are seen as performative inclusion, as they have scaled back their efforts into Pride game initiatives. From this perspective, ownership is a factor that influences the effort put into Pride Nights.

Another factor my participants often pointed to as an external factor influencing Pride Nights is the political climate. As Chloe explained:

> And particularly, I'd say with hockey, it's regressing because it follows. It does in many ways follow the politics of the moment that like during the Obama years and during this kind of like more in why mainstream embrace of liberalism. It was. It was monetarily beneficial to take on these initiatives. – Chloe

Chloe pointed out that "Hockey is for Everyone" gained momentum in the Obama years, where liberalism and inclusion were the dominant position in the political space. She felt hockey tried to follow suit with whatever the current political climate is, as the league sees it to be monetarily beneficial for them. Jim further explained this point:

> I would say mid to late 2010s I think is when between especially not to blame everything on Trump, but I think when he was elected, I think that's when you started to see a lot of backlash online, which led to companies being more cautious and then just general political environment companies like, we don't want to piss off some of these, you know, these people we're donating money to. So it didn't stop entirely, obviously. I mean, I think, Pride Nights and all that continued and have continued because but I think the activity level involved has slowed down in the late 2010s and then into the 2020s. – Jim

Jim pointed out a recent shift towards far-right ideologies in the current political climate, namely Donald Trump, and he saw it coincide with a lot of teams rolling back their involvement and commitment to Pride Nights and similar initiatives. He saw the shift towards Trump as the primary reason for many corporations scaling back their efforts to market and include LGBTQ+ consumers, including the NHL. This shift in the political climate is what sets the stage for the NHL's Pride jersey ban.

## **Putting Pride on Thin Ice: NHL's Pride Ban**

To understand the Pride jersey, it is important to understand that my participants saw Pride jerseys as important symbols of inclusion within hockey and as something that sets it apart from other inclusivity efforts. When players began to refuse to wear Pride jerseys, my participants felt that the players' actions were homophobic, which led them to criticize players because they did not align themselves with community values. My participants felt their criticism

of players led to negative publicity for the league and the players, which the league responded to with the Pride jersey ban. My participants saw this as a gross overreaction by the league, as it destroyed any goodwill created by the jerseys. Finally, my participants believed that the conservative culture of hockey is a driving force behind the ban and that the league is catering its marketing to this conservative base.

### ***Importance of Pride Jerseys***

First, to understand the importance of the Pride jersey ban, it is necessary to understand that all of my participants saw Pride jerseys as symbols of inclusion. As Charlie and Chloe described Pride jerseys:

> Yeah, so I think [Pride jerseys] were supposed to represent an idea of, yeah, being welcoming of there being a culture shift to be more accepting of people. So that's kind of how they seem to me as you know, as someone who also does identify as heterosexual. That's how they seem to me was the idea of like I want, people who have different orientations for me to also feel safe and welcome in this space. – Charlie

> So yeah, all this is to say, I think, especially in hockey, it is valuable and important to maintain these symbols because it is allowing for more individuals to engage in this sport and at the institutional level of hockey to say, hey, there's gonna be queer people and women in this arena, do not punch them. We actually want them here. – Chloe

Moreover, all my participants saw Pride jerseys linked to hockey's commitment to becoming more inclusive. They felt that the jerseys sent a message to the LGBTQ+ community that they are welcome in hockey space. The message of inclusivity went beyond individual actions by players, as fans saw it at the institutional level of hockey to welcome new LGBTQ+ fans into the league. As well, the message was sent to the already existing fanbase of LGBTQ+ fans that they are welcome to NHL games if they were hesitant to go to one before. This message was interpreted as the affirmation that the LGBTQ+ community should be welcomed by the

NHL and its players, and that the league is attempting to align itself with the community value of inclusion.

From my participants' perspectives, the message Pride jerseys sent to fans set them apart from other inclusivity initiatives, making them important symbols of inclusivity. Where they saw theme nights and the slogan as instrumental initiatives to increase profits, they saw Pride jerseys as important symbols of inclusivity beyond the typical business goal. However, the jerseys themselves were only an important first step in this direction. As Cynthia noted:

> I think [Pride jerseys] are important in that they're like the bare minimum. In my opinion, like, I think most teams don't like even at their best, never went much further than that. And so I think that's what's like kind of the most upsetting about it is like, Like it was already the bare minimum. And so less than the bare minimum were like begging for the bare minimum back. So I think it's like compared to what's happening now, which is basically nothing, it's extremely important to like take that first step. – Cynthia

With Pride jerseys now banned, it solidified Cynthia's perception of Pride jerseys being the minimum for inclusion efforts in hockey. This is reinforced through the limited use of Pride jerseys, as Chloe mentioned that Pride jerseys were only ever worn in warmups and not for actual game use. Cynthia felt that to make hockey truly inclusive, it needs to go beyond the first step of wearing Pride jerseys, but they remain an important first step. Because of this, players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys came into direct conflict with my participants' perceptions of the jerseys as symbols of inclusion.

### ***Hate Takes Centre Ice: Players' refusals to wear Pride Jerseys***

Charlie explained that when players refused to wear the Pride jerseys, a message was being sent to fans:

> In my mind, because [Pride jerseys] was supposed to be more about the inclusivity more than anything else, it did seem like regardless of what message

> the players claimed they were trying to send, I think the message they ended up sending was: I don't want LGBTQ people in hockey. I don't want them watching my games. I don't want them cheering for me. I definitely don't want them playing. Whether or not that was the intended message, I think that's the message that came across. – Charlie

Charlie saw the Pride jerseys as important symbols of inclusivity within hockey. However, when the players refused to wear the Pride jerseys, Charlie saw the opposite message being sent by the players; LGBTQ+ fans are not welcomed within hockey. From this perspective, the players were significantly out of sync with the community, as the message is one of exclusion. As Charlie further elaborated:

> Yeah, my thought was always that the jerseys were more about the welcoming environment. Like, I guess part of it is also that, you know, things like, I know things change in politics, but like the legality of gay marriage has been, I think in Canada for more than 20 years. Like it's not about that it's more just about like, we are not OK with harassment. And so that it seemed like guys refusing to play wear them. And then the NHL deciding that they were going to listen to the wishes of them was kind of the NHL saying, OK, we're OK with people being OK with harassment. – Charlie

From this perspective, the players' refusals to wear the Pride jerseys not only sent a message of exclusion to LGBTQ+ fans but one that also gave a green light for the harassment of LGBTQ+ fans who are already part of the hockey community. This however goes directly against community norms; as Charlie noted, gay marriage has been legal in Canada for at least 20 years, so inclusion should be the norm.

My participants noted that some players recognized the importance of community values and attempted to align themselves with the community on this issue while still refusing to wear the jersey. This is seen in James Reimer's statement about his refusal to wear the jersey:

> In this specific instance, I am choosing not to endorse something that is counter to my personal convictions which are based on the Bible, the highest authority in my life. I strongly believe that every person has value and worth and the LGBTQIA+

> community, like all others should be welcomed in all aspects of the game. – James Reimer (2023) (as cited in San Jose Sharks [@SanJoseSharks], 2023)

However, this kind of statement was not well received by my participants who thought it was inauthentic. As Chloe said:

> That one's a more challenging question because Canada prides itself on being such a multicultural, pluralistic society. That I believe the Canadian players are really banking on the idea that their individual freedom of speech and freedom of religion can excuse them from like or that can supersede the right of others to exist. Well, it is. It's a belief that their own priorities and their own comfort takes precedent over the belief that other people deserve the right to exist. – Chloe

Chloe felt that players' statements like Reimer's attempted to shield the player from criticism through his invocation of freedom of expression and the idea of Canadian multiculturalism. Reimer invoked his own personal rights to validate his refusal to wear the Pride jersey. However, she saw Reimer's actions as incongruent with the Canadian values of multiculturalism despite his attempt to align himself with the value. My participants believed that the players' actions revealed their true intentions, despite their statements.

Furthermore, participants felt the players' refusals overshadowed Pride Nights and the inclusive message of the Pride jerseys. As Skylar explained:

> … I don't know how I feel about the players refusal to participate, as it overshadows the intention of the Pride Night. I think at the time what I remember actually thinking and feeling about that was I would have preferred that they just didn't participate and didn't make a statement about it and just opted not to for their personal reasons and continue the Pride Night and to leave it at that, to be honest, like I actually personally thought that that would have been fine with me, that that if an individual player wanted to opt out. I'm under no illusions that most or many NHL players have similar political beliefs to me. If I needed that, I would not be watching NHL hockey, right? And also on the flip side of that, like, you can't force someone to wear a gay jersey if they really don't want to. So, like, OK, like, I don't want him to pretend he's not a homophobe. If he's a homophobe, that's fine. Just don't wear it. - Skylar

Skylar felt that when players released statements about their refusals, they focused on their own beliefs rather than the purpose of Pride Nights and jerseys, welcoming the LGBTQ+ community into hockey. She is not disillusioned that not all players share the same values as the community and that players are going to act how they want to. Her main criticism was that by refusing to participate, players' actions overshadowed Pride Nights and the jerseys with their statements about their refusals to participate.

Skylar also felt that players should not be forced to wear jerseys, as she did not want to pretend that they were not homophobes and were not taking a homophobic stance. From this perspective, when players masqueraded as allies, it is just as harmful as players' refusals because the players are pretending to accept the LGBTQ+ community. This prevents fans from criticizing the players' beliefs that are seen as homophobic and allows players to align themselves with community values, despite them being out of line. Skylar elaborated on the harm done to the LGBTQ+ community:

> You don't have to wear a jersey if you don't want to, but queer people are here and invited to be here, and some of us want to celebrate that like that to me would have been. Fine enough, you know, like that would have actually probably been a little impressive to me personally. And obviously everybody is different and queer people are gonna feel really differently about this. But I remember feeling this way at the time, and I think I still do that like. The Jersey ban, it felt like it felt like queer fans were being punished for something that we had no control over. – Skylar

Skylar felt that the players were never being forced to wear the jerseys, and Pride Night is an explicit invitation for LGBTQ+ fans and is meant to celebrate the community. From this perspective, the players' actions are homophobic because they refute the invitation to LGBTQ+ fans to come to hockey games. This is a key element in understanding why my participants

criticized players' refusals to wear jerseys. Their refusals not only overshadowed the community but also shifted focus away from the community aspect of hockey.

> I think when you're a public figure, people are gonna have opinions about that. Like I said, I think I would have been fine with players opting out. I recognize that some people would not have been comfortable with that and that wouldn't have been OK with some people. But like, yeah, I mean, people are gonna. If you can criticize the Pride Night, then we can criticize you back for not wanting to do the Pride Night. – Skylar

Skylar's quote appley summarized my other participants' sentiments about the players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys; they were ok with players opting out because they have the legal right to, however, players are not free from the criticism about their refusals. With the message sent by players being one of exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, Skylar and others felt it appropriate to criticize the players' actions, as it no longer aligned with the community.

### ***The Coward's Option: NHL's Pride Jersey Ban***

When players refused to wear Pride jerseys, it generated increased press coverage of the Pride jersey controversy, and much of it was negative press. As Cynthia explained:

> But like, I think it was an overreaction, to be perfectly honest. I think they didn't like that the players that were choosing not to wear them were getting negative press. But I think that's like the other side of like, if you feel very strongly convicted in expressing your opinion, which they did, like they felt strongly enough that they publicly were like, I will not put on this jersey, then like, you know, natural consequences say that like people are allowed to have opinions on your opinion. Like that's just like how it is. – Cynthia

Cynthia saw the players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys as generating bad press for the league, as the players' decisions were being critiqued by fans. She saw the backlash to players' refusals as a natural consequence of the players' actions, in which fans were allowed to criticize the players and the league for their actions. In this sense, fan statements were fair comment.

However, once the league banned all Pride jerseys, that space for dialogue was shut down, and my participants saw the ban as the league's attempt to mitigate the backlash. As Charlie said:

> And then it kind of became an issue of can a player opt out of wearing these? Especially cause some of these guys like Eric Stall had worn a pride jersey in previous years and then was saying no that I can't do this like it disagrees with my morals. And then the NHL's response as far as I know was to get rid of all of these team jerseys and say, OK, we're not gonna do this at all anymore, and that way we'll just avoid the controversy completely. – Charlie

Charlie saw the players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys as a controversy which the NHL needed to respond to. Yet, the league's course of action was to ban Pride jerseys, which he saw as the league's attempt to merely address the backlash. From his point of view, the ban was an attempt to completely avoid the controversy created by the players rather than engage with the criticisms raised by fans. This was not well received by my participants. Chloe and Jim described the league as "cowards" for banning Pride jerseys, as Jim explained:

> I think their goal was to protect the players who weren't wearing the jerseys, I think, no matter what, even if it was somewhat of a distraction and you can you can raise concerns about the media handled it, how fans handled it, the criticism and whether they should have focused more on the night, canceling the night altogether, or at least getting rid of the jerseys altogether still hurts the cause, I believe, more than having. Some players not wear them, especially since it wasn't every team. Mostly, I think the league is protecting itself from the backlash. – Jim

Jim saw the league's ban as a mechanism to protect the players from any consequences for their actions, and a way to protect the NHL's image. This view was shared by all my participants; the players' refusals to wear Pride jerseys and the negative press were a driving force for the NHL implementing the ban to deal with the negative publicity.

However, the ban only made the controversy worse.

> I kind of think that would have just blown over. So, the way that the league handled it, to me, I was like, oh, you've made it so much worse. Like, to me that was also like kind of being complicit and taking the easy way out rather than doing the kind of work that is needed to push back to fight for inclusion to say to people who would like things to stay more. - Skylar

Skylar felt the ban made matters worse. She believed that if the league had stayed the course, the bad publicity would have "blown over". To her, the ban was the league trying to take the easy way out and avoid more backlash to the players or the league. This attempt to avoid backlash caused many of my participants to see the ban as an overreaction by the league to deal with a few players' refusals. As Charlie explained:

> I mean, it seemed kind of like a silly response to me. I don't know, it's. I know that it's in some ways it made like the fact cause I'm pretty sure it was four players across the NHL who refused to wear a Pride jersey that year and maybe the number would have gone up like maybe more guys would have felt emboldened the next year. But it seems like a very extreme reaction to four incidents across many, many years of these things existing. – Charlie

Only a few players refused to wear Pride jerseys, and yet the league chose to ban them. Charlie believed the league may have been motivated by the possibility of more players refusing next season. So, the league was trying to get ahead of any future backlash that may or may not have actually happened. Cynthia agreed that the NHL overreacted:

> I think it's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater a little bit. Like, you know, all the positive that like seeing these players wear those jerseys, being able to like buy those jerseys for charity. Not to mention the fact that like it also meant that they threw away the Hockey Fights Cancer jerseys, which like seems completely insane. – Cynthia

Cynthia highlighted how the ban destroyed any goodwill the jerseys had created for the league. As she pointed out, the jerseys were often auctioned off for charity, and the ban eliminated all jerseys that supported social causes like Hockey Fights Cancer jerseys. Given how important a symbol the Pride jerseys were for fans, the ban damaged its relationships with the

broader community of fans, especially the LGBTQ+ community. The ban caused a schism between the community and hockey, as hockey had alienated itself from the community norms by banning the symbol of inclusion within hockey. As Skylar explained:

> The Jersey ban, it felt like it felt like queer fans were being punished for something that we had no control over. And also on the flip side of that, like, you can't force someone to wear a gay jersey if they really don't want to. So, like, OK, like, I don't want him to pretend he's not a homophobe. If he's a homophobe, that's fine. Just don't wear it. You know what I mean? Like, that's kind of how I feel is that I kind of wish that that had been how it, played out and I think that the allowing players to just continue making public statements about how they weren't going to wear the jersey. I think it just added fuel to the fire and made it worse. I think it made things worse. – Skylar

Skylar explained her view that LGBTQ+ fans were being punished, for the players' actions were the reason they were being banned, and not anything LGBTQ+ fans did. As discussed above, my participants often discussed how LGBTQ+ fans were harmed by the players' actions. From Skylar's perspective, the ban became a formal mechanism of this harm as it punished the LGBTQ+ fans.

## Stickhandling Through Hate: Centring of Conservative Hockey

### *The Conservative Aspect of Hockey Culture*

My participants talked about the culture of hockey being a barrier to inclusivity initiatives like Pride jerseys. As Charlie described this barrier:

> I think the NHL wants to appear inclusive with without actually always being inclusive. I think that there are forces that hold it back. I do think part of it is the homogeneity of hockey. Well, men's hockey especially that it has been the same for a long time. I do think a big issue with hockey. – Charlie

As Charlie described, the NHL is more focused on the appearance of being inclusive than making concrete efforts to be inclusive. He saw the source of this performance as the "homogeneity of hockey", which resonates with older concerns about hockey privileging white

male values. Participants often used the term “hockey culture” to describe this systemic barrier to inclusivity efforts. As Cynthia described it:

> The way that I'm, you know, invoking [hockey culture] right now, it means, you know, extremely masculine, like focused on manliness and, you know. I mean, violence in certain capacity, like, you know, not very open minded. Yeah, not a great place for like, you know, negative attitudes, maybe about like women and gay people and people of color and, you know, very kind of homogeneous, I guess. – Cynthia

Cynthia’s experience of the hockey community was marked by its diversity, and yet she experienced a culture obsessed with masculinity and violence. She saw this culture through negative attitudes towards marginalized community members, specifically women, LGBTQ+ and BIPOC fans. Charlie agreed:

> Interviewer: So from what you know of the [Hockey is for Everyone] initiative with that, would you say that hockey's been living up to that slogan?
>
> Charlie: No, no, I don't. And it, yeah, it does scare me a little bit. Like, even with, I don't know, like, um, like my wife is black. We just had our first kid. I don't think I would put my kids in hockey. Specifically, because knowing people who've grown up in it and experienced racism, I'm like, I don't know if I could in good conscience put my child through the same thing.

Charlie’s view of hockey culture was highly personal, a negative force that would inflict harm on his child, with negative consequences for the sense of community fans enjoyed. For example, Skylar explained:

> But like when that was happening it, I think it felt more like a team thing, whereas now it feels more like an individual thing. Like you notice who has pride tape on and you notice who’s participating and you notice who isn’t. And I think that's a that's a shame because it takes away the community aspect and it takes away that inviting everybody in and being really proud of these different groups. I think that conservative people really see these kinds of themed nights as like making it about that group and now there's no space. Space for you and who you are, and I don't think that's ever been the intention. I think it's just that, well, your space is cishet masculine 364 days out of the year

> and one night. We'd like to make this space a little more queer and for other themed nights. – Skylar

She felt the Pride ban removed the community aspect of hockey as it pushed out groups that were once invited to the games. This is because she saw hockey as a space that tailored itself to the "cishet masculine". From this perspective, hockey culture is centred on straight white men as the dominant identity within the sport, which explains why Skylar felt the conservative culture would not cede space to fans who do not fit into this identity. This meant that she could become part of "hockey culture" only if she did not stick out from the crowd. As Skylar and Chloe explained:

> … In an NHL space, I wouldn't say that I felt personally excluded, noting that I'm a very straight passing white woman. So I'm not perceived as not being in a space that is for me when I'm in NHL spaces, but I am very aware of the history of discrimination against queer athletes. – Skylar

> … And basically, what I know about hockey is for everyone is that it is. It's not really the affirming of an LGBTQ+ community. Rather, it is as if you can subsume yourself into hockey culture, oh yeah, that's fine. And we will tolerate and we will support you into doing that. - Chloe

Both Skylar saw themselves being able to at least "pass" within hockey spaces by being able to subsume themselves by presenting as straight white women. But they both saw LGBTQ+ acceptance within hockey based on this condition of being able to "pass" within hockey spaces. LGBTQ+ fans were only allowed to access the space when they were able to be seen as straight conforming, and not as someone who could be identified as LGBTQ+ based on their looks.

My participants felt that this need to pass was rooted in the fact that the majority of players are white middle class. As Jim explained:

> … Also, obviously the players are majority white, generally speaking, are from a relatively, I don't wanna say rich, but a well to do upbringing, which is also going to bring out more conservative players. So there and it's also known that hockey players are very much trained not to rock the boat as compared to other sports. So

> they're not necessarily the first to speak out on social issues. But I think it creates an entire environment where fans are very neutral to conservative. – Jim

From this perspective, hockey reflects the demographics of the players, rich and white. This expanded out from the players and into the fanbase, which he viewed as being neutral to conservative on social issues. The homogenous culture of reassured itself by minimizing the visibility of LGBTQ+ fans. A consequence of the minimization of LGBTQ+ visibility is that they are an afterthought in marketing initiatives by the NHL and its franchises.

### ***Pure Capitalism or Bad Capitalism: Conservatism and Capital in Canada's Game***

One point raised by some of my participants was that the NHL does not want to market to LGBTQ+ fans as they are not seen as conducive to capital. My participants often discussed the Eugene Melnyk quote "They think we are so desperate that we have to advertise to gays now. Dogs and Gays." (Mendes et al., 2022), and how it strained the relationship with the community. But this quote also revealed a general disposition by Melnyk to not market to the LGBTQ+ community. Chloe explained this disposition as she said:

> They want your money and they really, really, really want your money, but they don't actually want you to be participating in this sport because they don't actually see anyone who isn't a white man as conducive for the gaining of money. Which is really, yeah, really, from a, like, from a pure capitalist standpoint, it's a bad business decision that the NHL is doing by catering to this [conservative] base. Because they fear that if they don't, they're going to isolate their core audience and like the NHL and all of these levels fears that their audience is going to move to the bigger sports. – Chloe

Chloe felt that the NHL and its Pride ban was a bad business decision and that the NHL continuously caters to a conservative fanbase. She believed this because the league saw the conservative fanbase as their core demographic and that implementing the Pride ban as Pride initiatives agitated the conservative core of hockey, as previously discussed. However, she felt that catering to the conservative base was bad business because the league is choosing to market

to one base rather than for broad appeal, such as Pride Nights and jerseys. She explained the league's rationale for catering to this conservative hockey culture because they fear losing this base, which the league sees as the only legitimate base to make money: the conservative white male fan. Chloe saw this in team merchandise, as she explained:

> It seems to be catering then to their, you know the 6-year-old to 66-year-old fan demographic. We can even look at that in the context of gear and merchandise that are for women like it. I'm sorry folks, I do not need a Sens bikini. Thank you very much. This is ridiculous. I would like an actual jersey that fits my body without it being seen as like, this is a secondary byproduct thought. Yeah. So no, like, for example, you know, been okay with the fact that none of my jerseys are actually gonna fit me properly because I, you know, get the extra small men's, which are, you know, the more authentic jersey style, rather And, you know, boobing breastily through the women's jersey. – Chloe

As Chloe explained, those who do not fit into the core audience are an afterthought when it comes to marketing, as demonstrated with ill-fitting merchandise for women. As she described, products for women are an afterthought by teams and are marketed towards women. Yet, she had a great hatred of them as she found the products sexist and reduced women to their body parts, like jerseys that accentuate women's bodies or a Sens bikini. She saw this as the league only marketing to women as an afterthought and not making them part of the core hockey fandom. As Chloe further elaborated in relation to the Pride ban:

> Like [the Pride ban] has really impacted how I perceive the NHL and affirms my previous belief that the NHL is just a soul-sucking industry in and of itself, and that it is only going to maintain the status quo, and that they like they will not ever think that I am a fan in the same way that a cishet white man is a fan. – Chloe

Chloe believed the ban maintained the status quo within the league, one that continuously pushes out fans that do not fit into the league's core base. She felt only conditionally accepted because the league was trying to get her money, and the efforts for her did not make her feel

welcomed. They only affirmed her belief that hockey will continue to cater to what the league sees as its core audience, conservative white men.

In conclusion, my participants saw the Pride jerseys as important symbols of inclusion and hockey's commitment to inclusion. However, players' refusals to wear them sent a message that LGBTQ+ fans were not welcomed and overshadowed Pride Nights and jerseys. The players were criticized by fans for their refusals, resulting in increased media coverage and bad publicity for the league, forcing them to act. The league chose the ban to avoid controversy, but it only caused more backlash from fans. My participants felt hockey's conservative culture was a dominant force in why the NHL issued the ban to maintain the status quo and continue to cater to its core audience of straight white men.

## **Growing the Game: Building the inclusive future of hockey**

This section discusses the fallout of the Pride ban, which my participants felt interfered with player autonomy to advocate for social causes. However, players resisted the Pride tape ban, and my participants emphasized the importance of players using their own autonomy to advocate for social change. Finally, several participants discussed their support for the PWHL and how it is a more enjoyable form of hockey than the NHL.

### ***Changing on the Fly: Players' Resistance and Autonomy in the Era of the Pride Ban***

Despite the NHL's implementation of the Pride ban, the story of the Pride ban did not end there. As part of the ban, the league prevented players from wearing Pride tape, hockey tape colored like the Pride flag, often on their sticks and/or hockey socks in warmups or in games. Pride tape was an important part of Pride games, as Cynthia explained:

> Yeah, yeah, certainly. I mean, I do like it's, it's something like I'm not necessarily proud of it because it never really ends up well for me. But like, I care a lot about

> like the players that I support and if they're choosing to like even support, you know, in a tiny, tiny, like minute way, which is like with the tape, like I care a lot and it, and it does like hurt my feelings when I see the players that I like, like, making the decision not to, you know, like, there's been players on the team that like, have never done it. And so those players, it's like, okay, whatever, like, you've never done it. But like, the most depressing for me is the players who have done it for a long time and are now making the choice to not. I think that's like, it's made me feel really bad. And like, you know, I feel like I enjoy the players on my team like a little bit less because I don't think of them as highly essentially because they don't think of me as highly clearly. – Cynthia

Cynthia invested herself in which players were using Pride tape and which ones were not. When players chose not to use Pride tape, Cynthia expressed that her feelings were hurt. She identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community and felt the players choosing not to use Pride tape disrespected her sexual orientation. Even though Cynthia saw players' use of Pride tape as minor demonstrations of support, it still sent an important message to LGBTQ+ fans about the respect for their sexual identity.

On the flip side, Cynthia said: "… like when a player has Pride tape on, like my opinion of them soars forever." When she saw players make an effort to use Pride tape, it created a positive experience as she felt that players were engaging with the LGBTQ+ community in a positive manner and showing respect towards the LGBTQ+ community.

When the NHL decided to implement the Pride ban, players spoke out against it, especially Pride tape, as Skylar described:

> Was it Crosby[5] that did a big order or something? Or like, there was resistance from players. Like, I know that there was resistance from players and two names at least two names came to mind, I think may have been involved were Crosby and McDavid. I also think there was a team that placed a big order of pride tape and basically like it sort of was like a push back. – Skylar

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[5] Here Skylar refers to the player Sidney Crosby but it was Scott Laughton who made a comment about he will buy the tape if he has to do it himself in which Pride Tape offered to send him as much as he and his teammates wanted

Skylar's comments highlighted players' resistance to the NHL's actions and players' autonomy in their ability to shape the NHL's policy. Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid, the two players Skylar named, both made statements about their views that the bans are "disappointing (Clipperton, 2023)" and "unfortunate (HockeyFeed, 2023)". Crosby and McDavid are two of the biggest Canadian hockey stars, so their opposition to the ban was important. Players speaking out against the ban was a big deal, as Cynthia described:

> Well, like when the pride tape ban was in effect like there were a few of them that very vocally said like I'm going to wear the tape no matter what um and I thought like in this political climate like that's like pretty brave and then most of them have like actual outreach into like actual LGBTQ+ communities in their areas um and I think like that's like the step that like doesn't really exist in like a lot of markets including Ottawa. – Cynthia

Cynthia saw the players that spoke out and continued to use Pride tape as a brave act because of the current political climate. Like Skylar, Cynthia held the players that used Pride tape in high regard because she saw it as outreach to the LGBTQ+ community because it was seen as genuine and not performative just to look good. When players break away from the league's Pride ban, fans saw this as genuine outreach by players to the LGBTQ+ community. However, participants also believed the ban interfered with players' autonomy, as Cynthia explained:

> Well, start by not prohibiting players to show any supportive things via tape or the jerseys. I think generally having a better attitude about these kinds of topics, I think again, like money and you know. statements that are in support of like certain political causes, I think, could have a lot of impact. – Cynthia

Cynthia felt the Pride ban interfered with the players' ability to support political messaging as a negative, as the players' support can be persuasive in the messaging. However, Chloe believed that the players' autonomy was both a blessing and a curse, as she explained:

> [Players] have the autonomy to maintain the status quo. They do not have the autonomy to challenge it. So that's we can see that evidenced in. Actually, like you can see that in both a like positive and negative way in terms of social progress and social justice. So for example, Ivan Provorov had the autonomy to not participate in warmups or practice or whatever. And that is a level of employee autonomy. However, that does seems to indicate that players could choose to not participate in warm up and not face any repercussions. That has never been challenged accordingly, and I wish a player like Alex Ovechkin would of just be like, yeah folks, I'm not doing this today. But you know when Travis Dermott wants to have autonomy to use rainbow colored tape, he was allowed to do that. I think. Was he fined? I cannot remember. – Chloe

Chloe saw players use their autonomy to both maintain the status quo and to challenge it as she described the difference between Ivan Provorov's and Travis Dermott's actions. She saw Provorov's use of his autonomy as a way to maintain the status quo whereby refusing to wear the Pride jersey and not participating in warmups, he advocated for the status quo. However, when Dermott wanted to use his autonomy to challenge the status quo by using Pride Tape, he faced the risk of punishment by the NHL. She saw players who used their autonomy to challenge the status quo as being at risk of punishment, as she elaborated on players' use of autonomy:

> We would like players to be supporting the kinds of causes that are in like that build better communities and better systems and a better future for everyone, not just the rich. So, you want [players] to have the autonomy to make that right choice. Sadly, in our current environment, both societal and from a hockey perspective, it is discouraging because they do not make that right choice. But to answer the original question, yes, I do believe that players in fact have quite a bit of autonomy over their actions. For better or for worse. – Chloe

Chloe grounded her view of players' autonomy in the fact that she believed players should use their autonomy to build better communities and more inclusive systems that do not only benefit themselves. But when players like Provorov use their autonomy to maintain the status quo, she felt players could not be completely trusted to make decisions that are beneficial for their communities. On the other hand, Dermott's use of Pride tape was seen as a positive use

of their autonomy to build more inclusive communities and to challenge hockey's status quo. Dermott's use of Pride tape despite the ban was successful, as Jim explained:

> They're going to back down if it's going like they had a controversy, so they backed down in one direction and then they were faced with, well, this is going to make us look really bad if we ban, we suspend a player for wearing Pride tape. So let's actually undo that ban. – Jim

When Dermott chose to use his autonomy to challenge the status quo, it caused a controversy that the NHL had to address yet again. And because of the negative connotations of suspending a player for wearing Pride tape, the league chose to allow players to wear Pride tape to avoid yet another controversy. This was not the only way my participants talked about hockey's status quo being challenged, as they also discussed the rise of the PWHL.

### ***Guilt Free Hockey: Rise of the PWHL***

Although not part of the study, my participants often brought up the PWHL, especially the Ottawa Charge. As Skylar explained her love of the Charge:

> Interviewer: So then who's your favorite hockey player or team and why did you? What do you like about them?
>
> Skylar: OK, my favorite hockey team is actually the Ottawa Charge, and my favorite player is Emily Clark. And I love the energy at Charge games. I love the community. It feels like a massive queer space. Um, which is a lot of fun in comparison to NHL games where it's just a little bit. It's a little bit more like a shit head masc[uline] space. So um, I think that's why I'm drawn there. My favorite NHL team is the Sens, and I like them because they are so silly. – Skylar

Skylar did not default to the NHL as her preferred hockey team, but rather the PWHL was her preferred way to interact with hockey. She attributed it to the community in the PWHL and how welcoming it is for her, an LGBTQ+ community member, which is the direct opposite of how she saw the NHL as a primarily "shit head masculine space". Skylar felt more at home in

the PWHL, and part of the community compared to the NHL, which has an impact on the NHL. Cynthia shared a similar point as she said:

> Like even my friends, I bring some of my friends. I used to bring some of my friends to Sens games. And like now when I'm like looking for, you know, my friends who aren't necessarily like hockey people or like don't necessarily care about sports, but just want like a fun night out, we go to the PWHL games instead of the NHL games because like for my friends who are mostly women and like progressive people, some of which are gay, like, you know, it's a much nicer environment to go to, you know, women's league games than it is to go to the men's league at this current moment with everything in the news and stuff. – Cynthia

Cynthia explained that when looking at going to sports games for a fun night out with friends, she would often go to Sens games, but since the Charge have begun to play games, she is more inclined to bring her friends to a Charge game than a Sens game. She attributed this to the fact that the community and environment felt much more welcoming for her and her friends than an NHL game. From this perspective, the PWHL gives my participants the ability to build stronger communities as they see fit, as they felt it to be a more welcoming space in hockey compared to the NHL. This speaks to the impact the PWHL is having on the NHL, as Chloe explained:

> Now, the problem that the NHL is going to be facing soon is that there is competition now. They are not the only market in town, and the PWHL exists in Vancouver and is going to be existing and that is a team that I 100% am going to support. And if I lived in Vancouver, I would be getting them. I would be getting season tickets, and I would be throwing my support towards them much more. – Chloe

Chloe saw the NHL as the only large-scale professional hockey league in North America for a long time[6]. But this monopoly on professional hockey is now being challenged by the

[6] There has been numerous Professional Women's hockey leagues, but the PWHL is the most prominent of them in terms of fanbase and sustainability.

PWHL, which Chloe wanted to support, and she mentioned she had just received her Vancouver Goldeneyes jersey the day before the interview. Cynthia shared a similar view as Chloe, as she said:

> I, at this point, it's like I'm more likely to go buy like a PWHL merch than I am to buy NHL merch because I feel that like as a person, they're more aligned with like how I see myself and you know, what I want to support essentially. – Cynthia

For Cynthia, she found it easier to support the PWHL by buying merchandise than the NHL because the PWHL has aligned itself with her core values; because of how PWHL has aligned itself with her own values, she finds it easier to support. Chloe saw the PWHL's alignment with progressive community values as a natural fit for the league, as she explained:

> I have to wonder then, with say the introduction of the PWHL into Vancouver and the way in which women's sports tend to take on those social issues much more prominently than men's do. Both because, you know, I was thinking about the Victoire, for example, who resigned Marie-Philip Poulin (MPP) and Lauren Stacy[7] of like. Yeah, this is a lesbian couple who are concerned with LGBTQ plus issues because this is not abstract. This is their day-to-day lives and so they have to be on the frontline of advocacy because this isn't theoretical. This is their existence and I have to wonder if the inclusion, for example, the PWHL Vancouver will help push the Vancouver Canucks into thinking about these kinds of initiatives more. – Chloe

Chloe saw the PWHL making a significant push for LGBTQ+ inclusion as a natural fit because MPP and Laura Stacey, two of the most recognizable players for the PWHL, both identified as LGBTQ+, so the advocacy from players is not abstract but stems from their own experiences. She also wondered if the PWHL being a more progressive organization, that it may cause the NHL and its teams to rethink their community initiatives to push for more inclusion and to be more progressive than just theme nights and jerseys.

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[7] Marie-Philip Poulin and Laura Stacy are married to each other.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, participants emphasized the importance of the relationship between hockey and its community as one that allowed fans to build their own communities and to integrate into their new communities through their mutual love of hockey. This relationship is further reinforced through franchises' charity work in the community; however, this work was criticized for not completely fulfilling the promise of bettering the community. Yet, the relationship between the community and teams can be strained when the team acts in a way that is disrespectful of the community and its values.

Second, participants saw the slogan “Hockey is for Everyone” as a broad corporate slogan that was meant to demonstrate hockey’s commitment to inclusivity but has failed to live up to the hype. Also, theme nights were seen by participants as a marketing tool to sell tickets rather than a night meant to demonstrate inclusivity. My participants also felt Pride Nights have become watered down in recent years due to pressure from ownership and politics.

Third, my participants saw Pride jerseys as important symbols of inclusivity that sent a message to LGBTQ+ fans that they are welcomed. However, when players refused to wear the jerseys, they sent the opposite message: that LGBTQ+ people were not welcomed into hockey. This led to increased press coverage of the players, which the NHL saw as negative publicity; thus, they banned Pride jerseys and tape to quell the backlash. However, my participants felt the ban only made matters worse and punished LGBTQ+ fans for the players’ actions. Participants believed hockey’s conservative culture was an institutional factor in the NHL’s decision to implement the Pride ban.

Finally, my participants discussed how the Pride ban interfered with players’ autonomy to advocate for social change and highlighted their resistance to the Pride tape ban, ultimately

reversing the ban on the tape. Some of my participants also discussed the importance of the PWHL, which they saw as a more enjoyable form of hockey than NHL hockey because of the welcoming community atmosphere and not having to navigate the conservative culture of hockey.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

To begin, a key part of my participants' understanding of the importance of hockey is the relationship with the community. This relationship is expected to be reciprocal; when fans support the team, in turn the team supports the community. This follows previous research that communities often think of their local rinks as sources of renewal (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993), but rather it is the sport itself that is seen as the tool to build and improve communities.

My participants held a strong belief in the Great Sports Myth (GSM) and that sports should be used to improve and build communities (Coakley, 2015). This is seen with their strong belief in the positive work done by franchises' charity work. However, my participants also raised criticisms when charity was used instrumentally for organizations to profit through these endeavours rather than improve their communities. This led to criticisms of teams and players failing to live up to the GSM and franchises using the relationship for instrumental purposes such as profit-making.

However, one barrier my participants saw that prevented hockey from living up to the GSM is the culture of the game. They saw hockey as a conservative sport that often centred straight white men as the dominant group within hockey, aligning with previous research on hegemonic masculinity in hockey (Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014). However, they saw this culture shape how hockey markets itself to marginalized communities, with executives thinking that these groups lack capital, thus continuing their focus on straight white men as the core demographic.

However, my participants also saw players with the agency to advocate for change and community improvement, as seen with players' resistance to the Pride ban. However, not all players will use this autonomy, and some will continue to use their agency to advocate for the

status quo. This ultimately leads to a breakdown in hegemonic masculinity, and I argue for a new way to think about the culture in hockey as a contested terrain. This contested terrain is seen in how the current political climate has influenced the NHL in its decision to implement the Pride ban, as the league is following the current political shift towards conservative/fascist ideals and away from liberal values such as inclusion.

Finally, my participants did not see all Pride initiatives as the same, where some were seen as commodified while others were seen as important symbols for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ fans. The difference between the two was that the ones seen as commodified were inclusion efforts that were seen as an instrument for business goals of accumulating capital, while the ones that were not seen as commodified were seen as respecting the relationship between community and hockey. Finally, my participants discussed the instrumentalization of inclusivity efforts to make the NHL appear inclusive without making the necessary effort to be inclusive.

## Charities and Coliseums: Charity Work for Community Improvement

As noted in Chapter 4, many of my participants discussed the community aspect of hockey. As Skylar explained:

> … [My brother] is a huge Habs fan, unfortunately. And so for his birthday, which is in April every year that we lived together, I would buy him tickets to a Sens v. Habs game and we would go together and that's how I got into hockey and I saw, you know, Sens Twitter and such and it got really fun and exciting to know who the players were. And that's kind of how I came to be a fan of hockey. It's been a really big part of building like a home and community in Ottawa for me and yeah. – Skylar

This part of my data supports how hockey can work as a social currency for community building and integrating herself into the already existing community. This supports Gruneau and Whitson's (1993) argument about how hockey is a mechanism for community building through the commonality of experience it engenders. However, my findings suggest that it is the

community aspect of the game is not locked into physical spaces but operates in virtual spaces as well, where the commonality of watching and learning about hockey on social media can be a driving factor for individuals building community in their own cities.

At the same time, my participants also talked about the importance of sharing the game in the real world. When Gruneau and Whitson (1993) made their arguments about hockey being used to build relationships and communities, they centred their discussion around rural arenas and their importance for their communities. In their discussion about the importance of hockey arenas in rural Canada, they argue that the arenas were seen as community hubs in which their communities heavily invested because they saw the arena as a mechanism of renewal (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993).

When asked about charities, my participants' explanations provided a similar logic but in an urban context. For example, Charlie said:

> Like at some point the Sens are gonna be moving downtown. Then it's kind of like, yeah, you're moving right into an area where like services for the unhoused could be offered. You should have a little more thought about, what you can do to try to be more of a benefit than a burden while moving downtown? – Charlie

Charlie's comments echo Gruneau and Whitson's (1993) arguments about rural arenas where they can provide the tools to improve and renew the community, as the Sens are given this opportunity. However, Charlie does not see the arena as the source of community renewal; rather, hockey itself can be a catalyst that can provide support for the community.

This can be explained by the differences between the rural arenas of Canada and the 18,000-seat arenas of NHL teams in the cities in which my participants lived. The rural arena is a public space while NHL arenas are private spaces: you require a ticket to enter an NHL arena, whereas rural arenas are typically public spaces in which the community congregates for a

variety of purposes. However, as my participants noted, with their massive reserves of capital, franchises create foundations that once again position hockey as a source of community improvement. For example, Charlie's comments echo Gruneau and Whitson's (1993) arguments when Charlie attributes to hockey teams both the opportunities and the tools to improve and renew the community. Accordingly, for my participants, hockey itself is the catalyst that can – and more interestingly, should – provide support for the community. This makes sense from the perspective of the Great Sports Myth (GSM), as Coakley (2015) argued that sports are meant to benefit the community; thus, when teams are unable to use the arena to do so, they look for alternative ways such as charities. It also underscores the two-way direction of the fan relationship. Fans both give support to the team and expect community support and engagement in return.

## Mythologizing Canada's Game: Hockey and Great Sports Myth

Throughout my interviews, the Great Sport Myth (GSM) emerged as a key component of how my participants perceived the world of hockey. As just discussed, the GSM posits that sports are beneficial to the community and able to provide solutions to community problems. My participants saw hockey as an important vehicle for social change and community improvement, which coincides with the Great Sport Myth and supports previous research that sports fans are more likely to believe in the Great Sport Myth (Davis and Knoester, 2024). Skylar touched upon this when she said:

> I would also add maybe that, like I perceive it a little differently because of the salaries in the NHL in particular, like they make so much money. Doing what they do, I think that makes my perception think a little bit more along the lines of like, oh, yeah, this is like the this is the return on that, right? – Skylar

Even taking into account the “business” of hockey, Skyler identified a relationship between hockey and the community that was meant to be reciprocal. This was particularly apparent when my participants discussed organizations’ charities. All my participants viewed the charity work done by franchises as a positive for their communities, rooted in a reciprocal relationship, where hockey is used to uplift and improve the community. This also explains my participants' expectation that franchises should uphold the community’s values when going about the business of hockey.

This reciprocal relationship, where fans provide loyalty and support while players and organizations give back to the community, creates a socio-normative institutional force (Babiak and Yang, 2021). These forces guide an organization in how to engage with corporate-social responsibility efforts, based on internalized norms from social relations within the community that create a sense of what is appropriate (Babiak and Yang, 2021). In this case, the values within the community are that the team is expected to give back because of their access to capital; in turn, this puts pressure on teams to engage in community efforts in ways that will align with broader community values.

From my participants’ perspective, this reciprocity is made possible because of the social capital that players and teams possess. My participants reported that, since players are seen as role models, players are given immense social capital within the community (see: Melnick and Jackson, 2002; Stevens et al., 2003; Cunningham et al., 2021). Moreover, although my participants saw players mobilizing this social capital in various ways, the most evident was the work that was done with charities. This was a tangible way for players, by associating themselves with certain charities, to transfer their social capital to a particular charity to increase the charity’s legitimacy and visibility. From my participants’ perspective, the charity could then

transform that social capital into financial capital since donations increased after a player became involved with it. One example of this was the Turris and Borowiecki partnership with the Ottawa Condors. This belief coincides with previous research that athlete philanthropy is more likely to lead fans to donate to the same organizations (Kim and Walker, 2013).

Although my participants' view of hockey aligns itself with the GSM, they were not "evangelists" of GSM (Davis and Knoester, 2024), as they remained critical of how franchises engaged in corporate philanthropy.

### ***Charitable Philanthropy or Instrumental Charity***

As set out in chapter 2, corporate philanthropy is defined as voluntary acts on the part of business organizations to promote community welfare, through contributions of money, time or in-kind goods (Madden et al., 2006).

Although my participants pointed to various acts of corporate philanthropy such as financial donations to local foundations or players volunteering their time, they recognized that these actions may not be motivated by a genuine concern for community welfare but by profit. As Charlie explained:

> I don't know if you know who Dave Barry is, he's a comedian. He wrote for the Miami Herald for a whole bunch of years, but he had a quote that sticks in my mind that was a rich people are a big fan of charity because then it allows the headlines to say, you know, like evening in Paris ball raises money for gout rather than rich people amuse themselves. – Charlie

Charlie's quote harkened to one of the questions my participants raised; who is the charity work really for, the players and franchise or the community? Charlie felt that the Senators Foundation was more focused on providing wealthy fans an additional experience that other fans could not afford. Fans could buy tickets to galas or golf tournaments with proceeds going to the

charity and other local organizations. From this perspective, charity events act as exclusive events for fans with capital, not as events beneficial for the community; this makes the charitable benefits the byproduct of the event and not the core purpose of the event.

This ambiguity can expose philanthropy as mere instrumentalism, especially when it is used to "launder" a player's reputation. Chloe provided an explanation when she said:

> So, Evander Kane, for example, who is now a member of the Vancouver Canucks, has on the record a horrible, horrible history of sexual violence, domestic violence, gambling abuse, you know, circumventing Canadian laws on vaccine records. And also, then what will happen is if you bring up any of this, his wonderful supporters online will be like, but he gives to charity. But look at his involvement in the community. And it's very frustrating because it is evident that the way in which the next generation of players are being brought up is through the mindset that they need to perform X amount of charitable work and contribution in order to receive Y amount of, you know, benefit of the doubt type of thing… - Chloe

From this perspective, players invest their social capital into charitable organizations which can then be used to protect their image when needed it as it cleanses their reputation in the community supported by fans who point to his charity work as a defence against the accusations. My participants were skeptical about this kind of interaction for two reasons. First, the relationship between players and the community becomes transactional (i.e. bad behaviour + charitable act = good reputation), and this does not align with the reciprocity of the relationship that is built between fans and teams. Second, the social capital that flows from the relationship is being used to benefit the players, not the community.

But once again, the GSM shapes participants' responses. Chloe pointed to numerous fans using Kane's charity work to defend his actions; in other words, they mobilized the GSM as a defensive instrument to protect players' reputations, just as Coakley (2015) argued. Furthermore,

players understand the importance of GSM and leverage it for their own benefit to protect themselves from accusations of wrongdoing.

This criticism is not unique to players. Cynthia mentioned “safe charities”; politically safe organizations that franchises work with to avoid backlash by fans for not participating in community aid or politically charged organizations. As organizations are aware of their optics, they are selective about which organizations they work with. This limits who in the community receives the benefits of sport, as those benefits are only given to organizations which will yield the highest return on social capital for the franchise to later use to increase profits or protect themselves from accusations of malpractice.

Coakley’s (2015) original work on the GSM posited that the myth is meant to support the community, but my data suggests that a select few can receive the benefits of sports because franchises act as gatekeepers and determine which partnerships are most beneficial to the franchise. One example of this is teams raising funds for specific communities, as Chloe described with Vancouver’s Chinatown:

> It does seem to be very like the ones that are chosen to be safe enough. So like for example, there's Vancouver has a very vibrant like Chinatown community. There's a lot of gentrification that is happening in that community, but every time that it's a Lunar New Year celebration. The money that is going for efforts that will continue this gentrification process in Chinatown, not the actual people who have lived there all their lives. – Chloe

Chloe’s comments tug at a specific tension. Where the Canucks market their Lunar New Year initiatives as benefiting Chinatown, Chloe saw them as part of the broader gentrification of Chinatown that was harming those who live in the community, often driving out existing community members as they can no longer afford to live there. From this perspective, the initiative is not actually meant to benefit the community as the community sees fit but is based

on the corporate goals of the franchise. This is where the GSM is being utilized negatively. The Canucks are used as a shield to prevent criticisms of the gentrification of the community, as they are literally taking funds and putting them into Canucks-labelled initiatives that shields the gentrification.

My participants challenge the legitimacy Madden et al. (2006) granted to players and franchises that participate in charitable philanthropy. It similarly challenges Gulliver and colleagues (2025), who discussed how Major Junior hockey players' charity work creates community mindfulness in the players' minds. Once again, my findings call into question this finding, as my participants saw this charity work for the community redirected to players' and teams' own goals. This is what I am referring to as instrumental charity; charitable actions undertaken by teams and players for their own benefits rather than the communities.

This does not undercut the GSM theory. Indeed, my participants' criticisms all involve how sports failed to live up to the GSM, which they strongly believe in. This suggests that the GSM is neither myth nor truth, but an expectation from community members who enter into a reciprocal relationship with a team, that at least some of the financial benefits will be used to improve their community. In fact, their criticisms when franchises fail to live up to the GSM are founded on the way my participants support the core ideals of the myth and expect to see it fulfilled. This becomes important to understand how the GSM played an influential role in how my participants viewed the NHL's Pride jersey ban

### ***Pride Jerseys and the Great Sports Myth***

As noted above, my participants shared a strong belief in GSM, i.e. where sports and athletes should live up to the myth through the reciprocal relationship between teams and their communities (Coakley, 2015). Indeed, failure to live up to the myth leads to criticism by my

participants because of the franchise's betrayal of the reciprocal relationship at the heart of fandom.

One key way in which sports is seen as beneficial to the community is through the integrative power of sports. Courtney Szto (2020) discussed the integrative power of sports, arguing that sports are seen as a bridge for the social integration of groups and a way to bring together communities. This is certainly one of the community values my participants identified with respect to hockey. However, Szto (2020) argues that, in spite of this belief, marginalized groups often need to consistently create the space for themselves within hockey. My participants saw this as a problem, despite their articulation of the GSM in many ways. They still critically engaged with the myth when they felt a franchise was not meeting its community commitments. In this, the integrative power of sport is seen as a benefit of sport and is part of the GSM, as it protects sports from critical examination (Coakley, 2015) about who is integrated and how.

A clear example of this is the symbolic importance of Pride jerseys. As Chloe said:

> So yeah, all this is to say, I think, especially in hockey, it is valuable and important to maintain these symbols because it is allowing for more individuals to engage in this sport and at the institutional level of hockey to say, hey, there's gonna be queer people and women in this arena, do not punch them. We actually want them here. – Chloe

The Pride jerseys are a symbolic manifestation of the integrative power of sports, where they demonstrate that LGBTQ+ fans are welcomed. This is one way my participants see hockey trying to live up to the GSM: by wearing the jerseys, franchises and players are reaching out a symbolic hand to welcome LGBTQ+ fans into the space without fear of retaliation. Yet, when players began to refuse to wear Pride jerseys, my participants felt that the players' refusals sent a homophobic message that LGBTQ+ fans were not welcomed. As Skylar said:

> I'm under no illusions that most or many NHL players have similar political beliefs to me. If I needed that, I would not be watching NHL hockey, right? And also on the flip side of that, like, you can't force someone to wear a gay jersey if they really don't want to. So, like, OK, like, I don't want him to pretend he's not a homophobe. If he's a homophobe, that's fine. Just don't wear it. – Skylar

The players' refusals invalidated the inclusion efforts made by the NHL, as the message sent by their actions was one that did not welcome LGBTQ+ people into hockey. The symbolic significance of Pride jerseys is important, as my participants saw the refusals as not just a rejection of wearing them, but as rejecting the message of inclusion that they had sent to LGBTQ+ fans.

This push and pull was also evident in my participants' discussion of the importance of the NHL's initiative to create space for marginalized groups. As Skylar said:

> I think they're very important. I think these spaces are like continuing to be leaning on the side of exclusive, right? Like, there's a Pride jersey ban like trans people are being pushed out of sports like now more than ever. I feel and it was never that great to begin with. I'm even thinking about like the, you know, the cultural nights and like the indigenous nights and people get really up in arms about those two and it's like. It's so stupid. And I think it's really important to make visible these identities and these communities who contribute to hockey spaces, right? - Skylar

From this perspective, the players' actions betray both the integrative power of sport and the GSM, as LGBTQ+ fans have had their inclusion invalidated publicly by the players' refusals and hockey is no longer seen as welcoming the whole community. The players are going against the integrative power of sports, as the message is one that does not welcome LGBTQ+ people into hockey, thus undercutting the perceived benefits of sports. This begins to break down the relationship between community and hockey as the players are perceived as sufficiently out of sync with community values, which leads to criticism by fans.

Furthermore, the players are aware of their failure to live up to the GSM, which helps explain why they released statements attempting to align themselves with the community by saying they accepted LGBTQ+ players despite their refusals to wear their Pride jerseys. This speaks to players being mindful about the community, as Gulliver et al. (2025) described. However, my participants did not interpret it that way. Instead, they saw this as an instrumental attempt to navigate these values to avoid substantial backlash from the community and fans about their actions.

For my participants, the backlash was an important message to the players that made it clear that even when players were seen as breaking community values and norms, the relationship between fans and players remained reciprocal. As Chloe explained:

> But I think fans have every right to say you are a public figure and you do not reflect my values, and it is important for me that you understand why, for me that you understand why. – Chloe

Chloe struck at the core of the criticism: the players' refusal to wear Pride jerseys was out of line with community values and the expectations they would uphold them. But her comment also shows how she expected the players to listen to fans, i.e. to act within the established relationship between players and fans.

The league was then faced with the decision of how to address this backlash from fans. When the league banned Pride jerseys because they were seen as "a distraction (Sportsnet Staff, 2023)", it broke the relationship because the interaction was no longer reciprocal; the league assumed fans would support franchises and the league, even if it was not willing to support the inclusion of LGBTQ+ fans. The relationship is fractured precisely because the league was not abiding by the GSM or mobilizing the integrative power of sport, which my participants expected from their teams. This caused the relationship to break down as the league did not live

up to the fans' expectations that hockey would help the community, and instead fans saw the league as instrumentally acting in its own self-interest.

## White Ice, Whiter Men: Hegemonic Masculinity in Canadian Hockey

During the interviews, my participants often described the culture of hockey as conservative. The literature has often used the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" to describe the culture that hockey players exist in (Robidoux, 2001; Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Alsarve, 2024). The core idea of this formulation of hockey culture is that straight white cishet men occupy the dominant masculinity within hockey (MacDonald, 2014). This masculinity is predicated on the physicality of the sport and violence within the sport (Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014). The theory suggests that this ultimately leads to the marginalization of other groups in hockey such as queer and racialized players (Allain, 2008). All of my participants reflected this view to some degree. As Jim said:

> … Also, obviously the players are majority white, generally speaking, are from a relatively, I don't wanna say rich, but a well-to-do upbringing, which is also going to bring out more conservative players. So there and it's also known that hockey players are very much trained not to rock the boat as compared to other sports. So they're not necessarily the first to speak out on social issues. But I think it creates an entire environment where fans are very neutral to conservative. – Jim

Jim identified a conservative culture that originates from the players, but that extends to many of the fans. This is important to note as previous research has focused extensively on the culture of the players, but my participants saw some form of hegemonic masculinity as a core part of the problem, both with the fans and players. This coincides with Sherwood et al. (2020) research into Pride initiatives in Australian football, which found some fans reinforced hegemonic masculinity in the sport. My participants saw a similar dynamic at play where fans

continued their support of this conservative culture in hockey in spite of the jersey controversy. As Skylar explained:

> Like there's been no, I wouldn't say there's been efforts from the NHL to mitigate any of the hate and hateful, like communication that's been happening around these kinds of nights. Like I see just foul comments on social media anytime one of these nights happens and not just Pride Night. Like I am thinking about like Black History Night. I've seen some really gross shit said about the yeah, about Black History Night and others as well. And so it's like, well. If you're not going to manage that well, then harm is going to be done to these communities. So I think that's like worth noting. – Skylar

Skylar's comments highlighted how this conservative culture of hockey manifests itself within fan groups of hockey. She perceived the hateful comments and backlash to Hockey is for Everyone nights as an attempt on the part of conservative fans to maintain the current culture of hockey by rejecting inclusivity efforts. This coincides with Sherwood et al.'s (2020) findings that Australian football fans who did not support Pride Night comments supported the current hegemonic order in sports.

For my participants, this was particularly problematic because they felt that the current culture of hockey has become a barrier to fans participating in the sport. As Skylar explained:

> … In an NHL space, I wouldn't say that I felt personally excluded, noting that I'm a very straight passing white woman. So I'm not perceived as not being in a space that is for me when I'm in NHL spaces, but I am very aware of the history of discrimination against queer athletes. – Skylar

Skylar pointed out that she has not experienced discrimination in hockey herself as a fan but recognized it as a real possibility that many fans may experience. She largely attributed this to her ability to pass as a straight white woman. This suggests that the hegemonic masculinity within hockey is not confined to the locker room but also exists within the fanbase. This supports Desjardins' (2022) findings that LGBTQ+ hockey fans modify their behaviour to minimize the visibility of their queerness within hockey spaces.

Skylar's experience and previous research (see Desjardins, 2022; MacDonald and McGillis, 2021) points to a culture within hockey that is resistant to inclusivity efforts. LGBTQ+ fans are often excluded based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, as my findings point out, it becomes further compounded as this conservative culture of hockey has ingrained itself into how franchises think about capital.

### ***Conservative Hockey and Capital***

Previous research into LGBTQ+ marketing has found that corporations are typically motivated by a desire to access DINK (double income, no kids) couples with higher-than-average salaries (Falco and Gandhi, 2020). On the surface, the NHL's pride initiatives could be seen as following suit, as the NHL attempts to commodify LGBTQ+ inclusivity (Phillips, 2025). However, my participants felt that the NHL typically falls back on stereotypes in this type of marketing. For example, Chloe explained this commodification in relation to NHL teams selling women's merchandise:

> We can even look at that in the context of gear and merchandise that are for women like it. I'm sorry folks, I do not need a Sens bikini. Thank you very much. This is ridiculous. I would like an actual jersey that fits my body without it being seen as like, this is a secondary byproduct thought. Yeah. So no, like, for example, you know, been okay with the fact that none of my jerseys are actually gonna fit me properly because I, you know, get the extra small men's, which are, you know, the more authentic jersey style, rather And, you know, boobing breastily through the women's jersey. – Chloe

Chloe's comments highlighted the underwhelming attempts to mobilize women's capital through merchandise. She felt the team was thinking of this attempt to market to women in very stereotypical fashion with a Sens bikini and jerseys that "boobing breastfully" but come off ill-fitting. This also suggests that franchises draw on notions of hegemonic masculinity (see: Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Alsarve, 2024) as they seek to accumulate profits.

This instrumental approach to mobilizing hegemonic masculinity can help better explain the Pride jersey ban, as it provides the context to understand how my participants saw the league operate in terms of navigating the Pride ban. As Chloe explained:

> They want your money and they really, really, really want your money, but they don't actually want you to be participating in this sport because they don't actually see anyone who isn't a white man as conducive for the gaining of money. Which is really, yeah, really, from a, like, from a pure capitalist standpoint, it's a bad business decision that the NHL is doing by catering to this [conservative] base. Because they fear that if they don't, they're going to isolate their core audience and like the NHL and all of these levels fears that their audience is going to move to the bigger sports. – Chloe

Chloe's comments position the culture of hockey and hegemonic masculinity as the cultural-cognitive institutional force that drives the reasoning behind the Pride ban, not only contained to the locker rooms but throughout the broader enterprise. She saw that franchises cater to the conservative base and that this works to exclude anyone who is not part of who they see as the core source of capital, straight white men.

With a conservative hockey culture acting as the guiding force for decision-making within hockey, this centres straight white men as the only group to hold capital. This prevents marginalized groups from meaningful engagement with the sport, as the culture does not see them as conducive to capital. Thus, they are effectively double marginalized, as LGBTQ+ fans are not seen as part of the hockey community and they are not seen as conducive to capital, which does not give hockey an incentive to market to them.

This can help explain my participants' view of the Pride ban. From their perspective, the ban was not just rooted in an individual notion of hegemonic masculinity, but a culture of hockey that has blended hegemonic masculinity with capital, creating a cultural-cognitive force that causes wide-reaching impacts within hockey. The ban originated from the backlash over the

players' refusals because they were out of step with the community's values. However, the ban was deeply rooted in the NHL's own perspective that straight white men are the NHL's core audience and the ones with capital. Thus, the NHL saw Pride initiatives as an irritant to the core audience (Phillips, 2025), making the ban an imperative way to prevent the NHL from losing what they consider their core audience and money makers, straight white men. Although my participants saw the ban originating in hockey's conservative culture, they also identified how that culture was further compounded by an instrumental approach that saw Pride initiatives as a threat to the league's bottom line. Franchises which are just following the money break with the community commitment to fans; however, the cultural-cognitive structure that exists marginalizes LGBTQ+ fans not just because of their identity, but also because they are not seen as sources of capital.

### ***Playing Within the Lines: Dermott and Agency within the NHL***

My participants felt that this instrumentality could be mediated by player autonomy. As Chloe explained:

> We would like players to be supporting the kinds of causes that are in like that build better communities and better systems and a better future for everyone, not just the rich. So you want them to have the autonomy to make that right choice. Sadly, in our current environment, both societal and from a hockey perspective, it is discouraging because they do not make that right choice. – Chloe

Chloe recognized that players are given a certain amount of agency[8] that they can use to push for change within the community they share with fans. However, they saw that players did not always use this agency for the benefit of their community. This is the most clear-cut example

[8] Here agency is thought of as from a relational perspective; where individuals produce effects on each other based on their relations with one another (Burkitt, 2016)

of how players are failing to live up to the Great Sports Myth (GSM), as they chose to use their autonomy to send a message excluding LGBTQ+ fans by refusing to wear the Pride jerseys. The players used their autonomy to advocate for the status quo that they benefit from, but not their community.

However, my participants also spoke highly of players who challenged the current social order, specifically those who wore Pride tape after the Pride ban was implemented. As Cynthia said:

> Well, like when the pride tape ban was in effect like there were a few of them that very vocally said like I'm going to wear the tape no matter what and I thought like in this political climate like that's like pretty brave and then most of them have like actual outreach into like actual LGBTQ+ communities in their areas and I think like that's like the step that like doesn't really exist in like a lot of markets including Ottawa. – Cynthia

It is very important to note that my participants did conclude that all players subscribed to this dominant conservative hockey culture, at least not the homophobic aspect of the sport.

This speaks to an important aspect often overlooked when discussing hockey culture, which is the agency that players have. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss the importance of recognizing the agency of subordinate groups when thinking about hegemonic masculinity. However, the players are not in a subordinate position in relation to the dominant group; they are the dominant group. When players like Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby spoke out against the ban, these are players who are the highest up the social order within the game. Furthermore, Travis Dermott, the first player to use Pride tape post-ban, is an NHL journeyman, so he would have more incentive to not wear the tape to protect his position within the league by positioning himself as part of the dominant group.

This supports my participants' conclusion that players do have agency to challenge the status quo. This is an important addition to the literature on hegemonic masculinity, as to date it has not addressed the ways that players have agency within the current conservative hockey culture. As Cynthia explained with the example of Morgan Rielly:

> I mean, the closest I can think of is Morgan Rielly using a slur, and then they sent him to the Pride game, to Toronto Pride a couple years in a row. And that seems to have redeemed him, like lots of people online like him. I don't because he's the Toronto Maple Leaf, but like, you know. That's a different point of time. Personally, I have like a pretty like fine opinion of Morgan Rielly despite him, you know, yelling a slur because he like put in the time and like clearly showed that he was like at least okay to like go do like a Pride event and stuff. – Cynthia

Cynthia discussed Morgan Rielly's use of a homophobic slur during a game and how he made the effort to improve his relationship with the community afterwards. In this example, the player used his autonomy to build community ties by appearing at multiple Pride parades and demonstrating his support for the LGBTQ+ community. This also mended his relationship with the community because he lived up to the Great Sport Myth in my participants' eyes. Even though Rielly said the slur, he put the work in and used his autonomy to improve his relationship with fans and to better the community.

Even though it was not universal, players who did refuse to wear Pride jerseys harmed the relationship between hockey and the community, as it created distinctions between who is and is not welcomed into hockey spaces. At the same time, players who advocated against the ban and wore Pride tape despite the ban were seen as using their autonomy to challenge the status quo and try to create a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ fans. Once again, my participants understood this as players fulfilling the Great Sport Myth, which in turn strengthened the relationship between the community and hockey. But the autonomy granted to the players also

calls into question how we think about hegemonic masculinity in hockey and the culture of Canada's game.

***Battles On and Off the Ice: Hockey Culture as Contested Terrain***

When my participants discussed the Pride jersey, they often discussed the ebbs and flows of capital within sports and in politics. As Jim said:

> I would say mid to late 2010s I think is when between especially not to blame everything on Trump, but I think when he was elected, I think that's when you started to see a lot of backlash online, which led to companies being more cautious and then just general political environment companies like, we don't want to piss off some of these, you know, these people we're donating money to. So it didn't stop entirely, obviously. I mean, I think, Pride Nights and all that continued and have continued because but I think the activity level involved has slowed down in the late 2010s and then into the 2020s. – Jim

Many of my participants discussed the changing political climate as a reason why players and fans are becoming more resistant to Pride initiatives in hockey. This speaks to hockey as a contested terrain, where power is under constant negotiation between people and groups within the sport (Szto, 2020; Messner, 1988). Approaching hockey culture as a contested terrain in which social structures are under constant negotiation, it allows for a more in-depth understanding of the Pride jersey ban.

First, my participants saw a shift in the political climate that favoured the conservative culture of hockey. This shift in the political climate is one way in which external forces reshape hockey. As Chloe noted:

> And particularly, I'd say with hockey, it's regressing because it follows. It does in many ways, follow the politics of the moment that like during the Obama years and during this kind of like, more in why mainstream embrace of liberalism. It was monetarily beneficial to take on these initiatives. – Chloe

Chloe pointed to hockey's use of Pride initiatives following broader political trends with a shift towards liberalism and LGBTQ+ inclusion. This pushes hockey away from the traditional hegemonic masculinity that is seen within hockey culture and towards a more liberal hockey culture, which would coincide with MacDonald's (2014) view that hockey is becoming more accepting of LGBTQ+. Here we see hockey as following the trend rather than setting the tempo for change.

However, Jim said earlier, the election of Donald Trump created a shift towards conservative/fascist ideologies. With hockey's shift away from liberalism back towards the conservative culture which many of my participants described as commonplace in hockey.

My participants identified this resurgence of the conservative hockey culture as the reason for many teams scaling down Pride initiatives and the ban. With the shift towards conservative hockey culture, Pride initiatives do not fit within this broader culture, as hockey experiences pressure from a conservative political climate to refocus on the white conservative male and eliminate Pride initiatives.

From this perspective, the Pride ban was an attempt to reestablish conservative hockey culture as the dominant position within hockey, tied to the fear of losing relevance because of a broader political shift to more liberal values like inclusion. The shift in the political climate towards more conservative ideologies allowed conservative hockey culture to be a driving force to reassert the dominant position of cis white men within hockey. However, this attempt to reestablish dominance did not go uncontested. Both players and fans spoke out against the ban, and some players used Pride tape despite the ban. As well, there was significant backlash from the community, as it was out of step with broader community values of inclusion in hockey.

The NHL is incentivized to follow this shift as the league and its teams can be subjected to regulatory pressure to ensure it falls in line with broader political goals, aka regulative institutional forces (Yang and Babiak, 2021). With the NHL following the shift in the broader political shift to conservative ideologies, it allows the NHL to be subjected to less regulatory pressure, as it is seen as an ally to the movement rather than in opposition to it.

Furthermore, the Pride ban would align with Crawford's (2024) finding that sport is an important instrument for modern right-wing populist movements to advance their agenda. With the implementation of the Pride ban, the NHL has aligned itself with these movements by greatly minimizing the visibility of queerness within hockey. Coupled with Gary Bettman and Matthew Tkachuk being a part of the Trump Fitness Council (The White House, 2026), my participants saw the NHL align itself with a political movement that does not align with the community's expectation that hockey is for everyone.

The second influence my participants identified was the money at play. As discussed in chapter 5, my participants felt that the Pride ban is in part the result of franchises and the league placating to straight white men, as franchises tend to see them as the best sources of profit. However, my participants did not believe that franchises' business interests should triumph over the community's values and needs. As Jim said:

> I think it's the nature that they always will and they have to. They're a corporation. But I think, I think it's not a dichotomy. I don't think they have to. I think in the end, if they do it properly, it's there the two are not mutually exclusive, I believe inclusivity. It has some short-term pains, but long-term it builds support regardless. – Jim

Jim positioned the business interests and community interests not as mutually exclusive but as potentially mutually beneficial. This is a view that many of my participants held whereby making hockey more inclusive, it is beneficial for both the community and the franchise as it

grows their fanbase. However, with franchises' profit-seeking being guided by hegemonic masculinity, they do not see how it is beneficial to the franchise by including those it does not see as conducive to capital.

This is another example of hockey as a contested terrain. As NHL franchises seek to accumulate capital, they see community values as a barrier to their goal, despite my participants seeing them as mutually beneficial; grow the game, grow the fanbase. This has led some of my participants to look for alternatives. As Cynthia said:

> Like even my friends, like I bring some of my friends, like I used to bring some of my friends to Sens games. And like now when I'm like looking for, you know, my friends who aren't necessarily like hockey people or like don't necessarily care about sports, but just want like a fun night out, we go to the PWHL games instead of the NHL games because like for my friends who are mostly women and like progressive people, some of which are gay, like, you know, it's a much nicer environment to go to, you know, women's league games than it is to go to the men's league at this current moment with everything in the news and stuff. – Cynthia

Cynthia highlighted the strong community atmosphere at PWHL games. The PWHL has invested in marketing that highlights the community, and its adherence to community values has been beneficial to their brand (Schmit et al., 2026). The PWHL is creating an alternative to the NHL that has previously not existed to this extent. My participants had positive experiences with the PWHL because it creates a hockey space that welcomes LGBTQ+ fans and adheres to community values. The difference between the two leagues is that the PWHL respects the relationship between hockey and the community, while the NHL does not.

Second, Cynthia highlighted the agency in choosing how they engage with hockey as fans and consumers. Fans have their own decision-making capabilities about how they choose to engage with hockey. When the culture becomes a barrier to fans' enjoyment of hockey, they will look for alternative ways to still enjoy hockey without the need to navigate the difficult culture.

Thus, some fans may choose to engage more with the PWHL than the NHL because of the more positively perceived culture that the PWHL has cultivated.

Third, Cynthia speaks to the importance of the relationship between hockey and the community. Desjardins (2022) spoke of how LGBTQ+ fans experienced alienation in NHL spaces but did not provide an explanation for why fans continued their engagement. My data suggests that the community aspect is one reason why fans continue to engage with hockey despite their view that the culture of the game is broken. For many of my participants, hockey was a social event they would go to with friends and a way they formed their communities within their cities. This is why some were more likely to go to PWHL games, as they felt a stronger tie to the community than at NHL games. Despite my participants' feelings of marginalization because of their sexual identity, they still found community.

Ultimately, by thinking about hockey culture not only in terms of hegemonic masculinity but also as a contested terrain allows for a deeper understanding of the forces that influence hockey culture and how hockey culture influences hockey practices. My participants pointed to the politically contested nature of the Pride jersey ban to illustrate how hockey is being pulled between a community desire to increase inclusiveness and a more conservative culture tied to the power and profitability of marketing to straight men. Because of this, my participants concluded that franchises use capital as a tool to suppress community values, despite my participants reiterating the importance of teams upholding community norms.

**Social Responsibility or Social Justice?**

When discussing the Pride jersey ban, my participants often discussed the importance of Pride initiatives from a social justice perspective. As mentioned in chapter 2, social justice is defined as “advocating for people without power or voice, while also cognizing a sense of

responsibility to combat the problems and injustices of society (Lee and Cunningham, 2019, p.253).” My participants often spoke of the marginalization LGBTQ+ fans experienced within hockey culture, especially once the Pride ban was implemented. As Skylar said:

> You don't have to wear a jersey if you don't want to, but queer people are here and invited to be here, and some of us want to celebrate that like that to me would have been. Fine enough, you know, like that would have actually probably been a little impressive to me personally. And obviously everybody is different and queer people are gonna feel really differently about this. But I remember feeling this way at the time, and I think I still do that like. The Jersey ban, it felt like it felt like queer fans were being punished for something that we had no control over. – Skylar

My participants often described the marginalization of LGBTQ+ fans even before the Pride ban took place; however, as Skylar pointed out, the Pride ban felt like queer fans were being punished, further entrenching the marginalization of queer fans. As well, as discussed in chapter 5, Pride jerseys were seen as important symbols of inclusion within hockey and demonstrated support for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

This is why my participants often spoke highly of players who spoke out against the Pride ban as they were seen engaging in social justice as they were seen as advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ fans in hockey. Players are then seen as engaging with social justice; they are speaking out against the marginalization of LGBTQ+ fans and players, as they call attention to this issue within hockey. This is also why players who spoke out were seen positively, as they are attempting to make hockey more inclusive and are mending the relationship that has been broken because of the Pride ban. However, that does not mean my participants saw all player engagement as social justice oriented.

***Community or Commodity: NHL Pride Initiative***

Ultimately, the tension between community and commodity drove much of my participants' concerns about the Pride jersey ban. Certainly, my participants agreed with Phillips (2025), whose article about the NHL's Pride controversy argues that queerness is commodified within the NHL through the appropriation of queer cultural symbols and that the NHL does this to grow its fanbase and revenue. Charlie put it this way:

> Yeah, I mean like the ultimate goal, I think of any pretty much anything that a team does is like in the end hockey teams are capitalist ventures, like the goal is money. – Charlie

Charlie's comments were further supported by the Ottawa Senators' heavy inclusion of Heated Rivalry tie-ins such as Rachel Reid (the book's author) appearing at the 2026 Pride Night after the show's viral claim to fame (Ottawa Senators [@Senators], 2026). Chloe built on this argument, articulating how Pride initiatives are seen as instruments of capital rather than inclusion when she said:

> And it seems to be like [Pride Nights are] the equivalent to Star Wars night. It's a thing that they can put on for one night. They can make themselves feel better about themselves and they hope, ownership desperately hopes that this is not a controversial thing, but like, because they want to equate the way that an individual's identity exists to the same way that an individual's identity might exist as an extension of like a capitalist, you know, a Star Wars fan. – Chloe

Chloe explained the cultural-cognitive institutional force that guides the reasoning behind NHL teams' Pride Nights. Teams see the LGBTQ+ identity as the same as other capitalist identities that allow teams to market themselves to fans. This is where my participants saw the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities, as they are synonymous with other capitalist identities in the eyes of the league and franchises. This undermines the relationship between community and franchises, as franchises use Pride Nights not to foster inclusive spaces but rather to attempt to market themselves to LGBTQ+ fans.

However, my participants remained positive about the importance of Pride initiatives as tools to make hockey more inclusive. This stems from their strong belief in the GSM, that sports can be a transformative good for their communities (Coakley, 2015), such as the advocacy of inclusion through sports. But not all initiatives are born equal. As Chloe described:

> Yes, and like not only like one, [Pride jerseys are] a really cool product. And again, the jerseys that were being created from it are art and are art in their own medium, their own design. And I love that and it's ability to show off local artists and give artists money in a time where a lot is taking away artists ability to have autonomy and money to community building, a place where individuals can feel welcome to be able to exist in hockey games. – Chloe

Chloe's comments moved Pride jerseys away from the commodification view of Pride initiatives that Phillips (2025) put forward. Rather, the Pride jerseys are seen as an important symbol of sport and as an extension of the community. The jerseys are community-oriented compared to Pride Nights that are business-focused. The jerseys are symbolic of the relationship between hockey and the community, as the jerseys are often designed and are representative of the communities that these teams are a part of. As well, they represent what hockey should be: a welcoming place for the community to come and make friends and build their communities over their love of the game.

What differentiates my participants' view of Pride Nights and jerseys is whether franchises make money from these initiatives and the relationship with the community. My participants saw Pride Nights as important nights to demonstrate the league's support for the LGBTQ+ community, but also as teams attempting to profit off these nights. Because of the capital incentives tied to Pride Nights, my participants saw them along the lines of commodification. On the other hand, Pride jerseys were not seen as being commodified by teams, as teams gained no profits from Pride jerseys as they were auctioned off to charity. This is

why they were not seen as commodified, as there was no financial incentive for the jerseys and teams were doing it as genuine demonstrations of support, not for financial gain.

Yet again, the importance of the relationship between hockey and the community is highlighted in whether initiatives are considered authentic or commodified. When teams were seen as leveraging the relationship between hockey and the community for profit, my participants viewed this unfavourably, as it was seen as only participating in inclusivity for capital. However, when Pride initiatives centre the community, such as the Sens Pride Bowl or Pride jerseys is they are seen positively, as it shows teams value the relationship between community and hockey.

### ***Performative Inclusivity***

Phillips (2025) argues the NHL's commodification of Pride initiatives is driven by the league's pursuit of profit. As just discussed, this is a partial truth, as the contested nature of hockey allows for multiple and contradictory meanings that can push back against simple commodification. However, those contradictory tensions illustrate how deep the gulf between the community of fans, and the hockey industry can be.

To begin, my participants were extremely critical of the NHL's use of the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone". Charlie said it best:

> I feel like mostly it makes me roll my eyes. I feel like it was kind of a performative slogan like the NHL was concerned about trying to seem like they were being involved in progressive causes without actually doing anything to be involved in them. – Charlie

Charlie's statement struck at the core critique of the slogan: that the NHL uses it to promote itself as a progressive institution without doing the necessary work. This statement is reflective of the critiques raised by Szto (2020) in her discussion about corporate-social

responsibility efforts in hockey, that it is to make hockey look good without addressing the underlying issues that result in discrimination and harmful behaviour to others. As Chloe elaborated:

> Rather, hockey is for everyone is the kind of slogan that can be put on that like it doesn't ruffle any feathers. It is so milquetoast. It is incredibly just it's an umbrella. It's an umbrella that everyone can try and fall under, and certainly for some individuals who aren't brought into an uncomfortable situation, they can be like, Oh yes, hockey's for everyone. Of course I support that statement, but when you actually dig further into that, you can see one, they don't actually believe that. – Chloe

Building on Szto (2020) and Chloe's statements, the slogan acts as a mechanism to maintain current hockey power structures. As Chloe described the slogan, it allows hockey to use the slogan as a point for fans to unite around, as many fans support the initiative. Here, the NHL is attempting to establish some form of hegemony in which inclusivity is somewhat accepted but not fully. However, this hegemony breaks down as many fans take the statement "Hockey is for Everyone" literally, as to mean hockey should be inclusive and welcome all, while some fans rejected this statement and attempted to maintain the current hegemonic masculinity.

This is where hegemonic masculinity literature begins to break down, as hegemony begins to break down, as many fans and players reject the current notion of hegemonic masculinity where LGBTQ+ people are not welcomed into hockey. Some players seek to make hockey more inclusive by welcoming LGBTQ+ fans into NHL spaces, as seen with the players' active resistance to the Pride ban. Where hegemonic masculinity sees hockey as one group, there are, in fact, multiple groups within hockey all with its own vision for the sport, including some that reject the old social order. My data supports a view that hockey is not hegemonic as previous research has approached, but rather hockey is made up of multiple groups attempting to shape

the game. Hence why in chapter 5**,** I approached hockey culture from a contested terrain perspective rather than hegemonic masculinity.

This is not to say that the masculinity described does not exist, but it is neither hegemonic nor the only masculinity in hockey. The characteristics described, such as homophobia and the centring of straight white men, were commonplace in my interviews. However, the current theorization of hegemonic masculinity is an outdated approach to looking at hockey culture that my data does not support, as many players, such as Connor McDavid and Sidney Crosby, who would be considered part of the hegemonic order, do not fit within this order, as they spoke out against the Pride ban, despite them being the most popular players. Players that spoke out against the ban were often spoken of highly by my participant, as they lived up to the GSM.

Building on this further, we see the tension between the community and hockey as franchises are not respecting the reciprocal relationship as they attempt to instrumentalize it to make profits. This leads the GSM to be a double-edged sword. First, the GSM allows for franchises and the NHL to instrumentalize inclusivity initiatives, as it shields teams from criticism, as on the surface it appears they are benefiting the community. However, as the GSM weaves itself into participants' understanding of the relationship between hockey and the community, there is an expectation that the NHL and its teams fulfill their end of the relationship. This is what grounded my participants' criticisms of inclusivity initiatives, as hockey fails to live up to the GSM and its role as a reciprocal actor within the community.

We see this with the slogan, as my participants took the meaning of it to be that hockey is for everyone, with no exceptions. However, my participants saw the league attempt to instrumentalize the slogan to make the league appear more inclusive than it is. Charlie touched on this point as he said:

> I think the NHL wants to appear inclusive without actually always being inclusive. I think that there are forces that hold it back. I do think part of it is the homogeneity of hockey. Well, men's hockey especially that it has been the same for a long time [and] I do think [its] a big issue with hockey. – Charlie

Charlie's comments highlight how the league attempts to instrumentalize progressive causes for their own goals. From this perspective, inclusivity efforts are used to protect the conservative culture of the sport from outside criticism by attempting to appear inclusive of marginalized communities. This is what I am referring to as performative inclusivity; franchises and teams use progressive initiatives to appear inclusive to protect the conservative culture of hockey.

This operates similarly to "pinkwashing[9]" where people often point to the progressive policies of a country that do not account for ways the country also continues the oppression and marginalization of LGBTQ+ people (Anderson, 2019). The NHL's use of Pride imagery operates in a similar fashion, as they attempt to use the imagery to protect their brand image from scrutiny over not respecting the relationship between hockey and the community to make the game more inclusive. However, my participants saw through these attempts to mobilize Pride imagery without addressing the systemic issues that cause LGBTQ+ marginalization, namely the conservative culture of the sport. This culture has ingrained itself deep into the sport, from groups of players to the executives that make decisions about how to operate the franchises; thus, the NHL uses Pride initiatives to protect this conservative culture and their business goals.

Performative inclusivity differs from pinkwashing as it is not just the use of Pride to make the league look progressive, but how the league has instrumentalized the GSM and the relationship

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[9] Here pinkwashing refers to the term in relation to LGBTQ+ marketing, not breast cancer.

with the community to make hockey appear inclusive of LGBTQ+ fans. Performative inclusivity allows for the masquerade to continue, as it allows the league to market itself and profit off the community, while simultaneously maintaining the marginalization of LGBTQ+ hockey fans.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between hockey and the community is an important one. My participants expect hockey to operate in accordance with their communities' values and norms, and in return fans will support the team. This builds on Coakley's (2015) Great Sport Myth as it further deepens the understanding of how sports are meant to be beneficial to the community; it is not just defence of sports, but an expectation from fans. However, teams often instrumentalize their charitable initiatives for their own goals, such as the use of charity galas to give rich fans exclusive access to the team. However, this betrays fans' expectations of how teams operate in the community, which leads to the GSM becoming the grounding point for many of the criticisms that my participants raised against the Pride ban. As the jerseys were seen as important symbols of inclusion, the ban betrayed the relationship as it sent a message that LGBTQ+ fans were not welcomed.

This ties into the literature around hegemonic masculinity in hockey, which positions straight white men as the dominant group, leading to the marginalization of groups such as LGBTQ+ fans (Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014). However, this culture exists not just in the locker room but also exists within the fanbase and at the executive level. At the executive level, it has become a key component in decision-making, as it guides the decisions that teams make and has blended itself with capital to the point that those who are not straight white men are not seen as conducive to capital.

However, unlike previous research, my participants highlighted the agency that players have through their resistance to the Pride ban. This is where hegemony begins to break down as players use their agency either to challenge or maintain the status quo. This is why I approached hockey culture not as a hegemonic group, but rather a contested terrain where outside forces continuously shape hockey and its culture, namely politics and capital.

Finally, my participants viewed Pride initiatives through a social justice lens that calls to question the current social order of hockey, especially post-Pride ban. This builds on Phillips (2025) argument about the NHL commodifying Pride for the league to appear progressive. However, my participants did not see all Pride initiatives the same way; those that allowed the team to profit were seen as commodified, while those that centred the community were seen positively, such as the Pride jerseys. This led to the discussion about performative inclusivity, where the league instrumentalizes the relationship with the community and its inclusion efforts to protect the league and its franchises from criticisms that they are failing to be inclusive to marginalized groups.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

My findings suggest that the NHL's Pride ban and fan perceptions did not appear out of nowhere and are deeply rooted in hockey's relationship to the community. My participants held a strong belief in the Great Sport Myth (Coakley, 2015), that sports should be used to help better their communities and that it is not just like other corporations within their communities. This speaks to a special relationship that exists between franchises and their communities: when fans support the team, there is an expectation that the team gives back to the community in some shape or form. This often takes the form of charity work and CSR initiatives that often focus on youth and sports in the community. However, when teams begin to utilize these initiatives for their own business goals, fans become more critical of these initiatives.

This was seen with "Hockey is for Everyone" initiatives, where my participants criticized teams for instrumentalizing efforts to make hockey more inclusive for the purpose of their business goals. They saw the term "Hockey is for Everyone" as a broad, inoffensive slogan meant to demonstrate hockey's attempts to become more inclusive. However, they did not see hockey living up to this promise, as the NHL has operationalized these initiatives not in the name of inclusion, but to make the NHL appear inclusive and align itself with the community without addressing the systemic issues within the NHL. Rather, the NHL has turned them into tools to accrue capital rather than to benefit the community.

This sets out the important context in which the NHL's Pride ban exists. When players began to refuse to wear Pride jerseys, my participants saw the action as homophobic and criticized players for not aligning with community values such as inclusion. Players attempt to skirt around this criticism by releasing statements that align with the inclusive values of the community, but fans focused on the players' actions rather than their words. This criticism is seen

by the league and franchises as a threat to their business interests, as it is an agitation for the core fanbase of straight white men. This resulted in the league choosing to implement the Pride ban as a tool to protect their methods of accruing capital. From this perspective, it is seen that the NHL views straight white men as the dominant group within hockey and the only demographic to market to, as they are the only ones with capital.

My participants also highlighted the NHL often following broader political shifts, such as moving towards more liberal marketing under Obama and then shifting to more conservative marketing under Trump. They often saw this take the form of teams rolling back the amount invested and the visibility into Pride Nights. This points to certain forces that can shape how the NHL engages with CSR initiatives and the broader community.

Finally, my participants did not see all CSR initiatives as the same as how they interact with the community was a key part of what influenced their perceptions. When teams were undertaking initiatives that focused on the community and put the community front and centre, fans praised them as their view more closely aligned with a social justice view of these initiatives. On the other hand, initiatives that were business-oriented or made to make the league and team look good were seen as performative and used for business purposes rather than benefiting the community.

This is important, as to conclude my interviews, I asked participants about what recommendations they would make to improve CSR initiatives by players, teams and the league. First and most importantly, all my participants wanted to see the NHL lift their Pride ban, as it had sent a message that LGBTQ+ people were not welcome in hockey. My participants took the slogan “Hockey is for Everyone” literally and saw the ban as forgoing the meaning of the slogan. Second, they wanted to see players and teams use CSR and their special positions within the

community to actually improve the community and not just to fulfill their business goals. Charlie brought up the fact that the Senators are planning on moving downtown with a new arena and pointed out that it would be an excellent opportunity for the team and the charity to support the unhoused living in the Lebreton Flats area. This speaks to the main outcome my participants were looking for; they wanted hockey to move beyond using CSR and Pride initiatives to look good and for hockey to actually live up to their expectations that sports be beneficial for their communities.

My project's key findings built on the previous literature by further elaborating upon Coakley's concept of the Great Sport Myth (2015). Where Coakley argues that the belief that sports are beneficial shielded it from criticism, my findings suggest that the belief in sports being beneficial is where my participants grounded their criticism of sports and CSR initiatives. This comes to light in the Pride jersey controversy, as my participants criticized the players' actions for failing to live up to their communities' expectations of the players.

Second, I build upon the existing literature of hegemonic masculinity in hockey. Where previous research positioned hegemonic masculinity within the locker room (see: Robidoux, 2001; Allain, 2008; MacDonald, 2014), my findings suggest it also exists within the business side of the game. It does not just end there, but this conservative culture guides the NHL's thinking about business goals, which focuses on straight white men as the core demographic and leads to them being thought of as the only core demographic with capital.

However, my findings also challenge the current literature on hegemonic masculinity. My participants often highlighted players who resisted or spoke out against the Pride ban, such as Travis Dermott, who wore Pride tape despite the ban and ultimately led the league to reverse it. This speaks to the fact that there is a lack of hegemony within hockey culture that has been

previously described as many prominent players did not support the Pride Jersey ban. This makes it possible that those who do not agree with the ban can thus distance themselves from it.

Third, I nuance Phillips' (2025) arguments about the NHL's Pride jersey ban. Where Phillips saw the NHL "fetishize queerness" for its own goals, my participants agreed and disagreed with this view depending on the specific initiatives. When initiatives were community-focused, my participants viewed them favourably and as beneficial to making hockey more inclusive. Yet, when franchises attempt to leverage these initiatives for business goals rather than helping their communities, my participants saw them unfavourably and as bastardizing the purpose of these initiatives.

My findings and discussion also open the door to further research. First, further research needs to be done to better understand the Great Sport Myth and how fans perceive the relationship between sports and their community. Second, as mentioned in my project limitations, Senators captain Brady Tkachuk soured his relationship with the Ottawa community with his association with Trumpian politics and requesting a trade. This would make an excellent research project on how players' political alignments affect their perceptions. Third, further research into more marginalized groups' perceptions of hockey's CSR efforts should be done to better understand whether they are improving hockey or not. Finally, a future direction for this research is to conduct research into the difference between Canadian and American hockey fans and CSR initiatives.

In conclusion, hockey has a special relationship to the community in which it is expected to uphold and improve, but often times fail to live up to this myth. This comes true in the Pride ban, where players' refusals were seen as homophobic and a rebuff to this special relationship. Fans criticized players for failing to respect the community values of inclusion and diversity,

which the NHL responded to with the subsequent Pride ban. My participants saw this ban as a gross overreaction and the NHL further rebuking its special relationship to the community by sending a message that LGBTQ+ fans were not welcomed. Ultimately, my particiapnts want to see the NHL and its teams live up to their promise to improve and better their communities.

## Appendix A: Recruitment Posts






## Appendix B: Consent Form Example

**Project Title:** Social Justice in Hockey: A Case Study of the NHL's Pride Jersey Ban

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by Rhys Traynor for the purpose of his master thesis project. The project is supervised by Dr. Valerie Steeves and it has received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to understand how hockey fans make sense of the involvement of professional hockey teams in charitable and social justice initiatives such as the "Hockey is for Everyone" campaign. It seeks to better understand what meaning Pride-themed game nights and Pride-themed team jerseys worn in support of the LGBTQ+ community had for fans, and how fans responded to the NHL ban of these activities. As well, it explores fans' viewpoints of the roles that players and teams have within broader society and whether these kinds of social justice initiatives do or do not have the potential to make hockey – and society as a whole -- more inclusive or not.

**Participation** My participation will consist of an interview with the principal investigator in which I will be asked various questions about social justice initiatives in hockey in general and the NHL's Pride jersey ban in particular. The interview will take place on an online video calling application (Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and will last approximately one hour. The interview will both be audio recorded to generate a transcript from the recording, and I will not be given the chance to review the finalized transcript.

**Benefits:** This study will help understand the fan's perception of the NHL's Pride jersey ban and hockey's role in social advocacy. This will help understand Canadians perceptions of social justice in sports more broadly and more specifically ice hockey.

**Confidentiality and Privacy:** I understand that the information collected for the purpose of this project will remain confidential. This will be accomplished through the anonymization of my identity. The content of our discussions will be used only for the writing of academic articles.

My name will not be included in any reports or publications. All identifying information from my quotes will be removed and a fake name will be used. Other identifying information will be removed to protect confidentiality. I understand that I will be recorded during the interview, and the video recording will be immediately deleted post interview with only the transcript being retained.

In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure my confidentiality, it is recommended that I use standard safety measures, such as signing out of my account, closing my browser, and locking my device when I have completed the study.

Conservation of Data:

I understand that the principal investigator will make an audio and video recording of my interview. The recording will be put through video editing software (CapCut) to separate the video recording from the audio recording at which point the video recording will be securely and permanently deleted.

My name and email address will be retained for 3 months after I sign this consent form, after which it will be securely deleted. This is to provide me with time to withdraw from the study after the interview, if I wish to do so.

The audio recording of the interview, my consent form, and an anonymized transcript of my interview will all be stored securely, as follows: any paper copies will be stored securely in a locked cabinet at the principal investigator's home, and all electronic files (including the audio

tapes and the transcript) will be kept on the University of Ottawa's secured servers. Only the principal investigator will have access to this information. This information will be kept for five years, after which it will be securely and permanently destroyed.

**Compensation:** By participating in this study, I understand that I will receive a $25 Starbucks gift card via email. If I choose to exit the study, I will still receive compensation.

**Voluntary Participation**: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset and destroyed and not used in the study. I understand that I have 3 months after consent was given to withdraw from the study

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or their supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via email (ethics@uottawa.ca) or telephone (613-562-5800 ext. 5387). It is recommended that I (keep/print/save) a copy of this consent form for my records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: _____ Date: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

## Appendix C: Question Guide

### Preliminary Matters

The interviewer will introduce himself and then explain the room, the process, the purpose, and the audio tape recorder to the participants.

The interviewer will ensure that participants understand that the session will be audiotaped. The interviewer will remind the participants that he will make a transcript of the tape recording, but that their names will be changed to protect their anonymity and that any quotes that are included in any publications that talk about the research will be anonymized.

The interviewer will advise the participants that if, at any time, they are asked a question that they would rather not answer, all they have to do is let the interviewer know, and he will just move on to another question. The interviewer will make it clear that each participant has the right to not participate, the right not to answer any question, and the right to opt out at any time without penalty, harm or loss of promised benefit.

### Part I: Break the Ice

1. Who is your favourite hockey player/team? What do you like about them?
2. If you pick one word to describe what hockey means to you, what would it be? Why? Is there a story that illustrates what you mean (game/player/moment)?

### Part II: Sports and Charity

Introduction: Many hockey teams are involved with various charities within their local community. For example, the Ottawa Senators have their own community foundation that donates money to various local charities and players are often involved in community events such as visiting CHEO during the holidays.

1. Is this kind of work a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
2. Do you think NHL team involvement strengthens or weakens the work of charities?
3. Do you think NHL team involvement in charities can create a social change in local communities?

**Part III: Hockey is for Everyone**

Introduction: Within the past decade, the NHL has adopted the slogan "hockey is for everyone" to show that hockey is a space for all and that all are welcome.

1. Are you aware of the "Hockey is for everyone" campaign? What does the slogan "Hockey is for Everyone" mean to you?
2. What kind of initiatives have you seen that fall within the slogan? Do you think the initiative has been positive/negative/neutral? Any stories or examples to illustrate what you mean?
3. From what you know of the initiative, would you say that hockey is or is not living up to the slogan?
    a. [Probe to see whether the participant thinks the NHL and teams are doing enough to live up to the slogan.]

Context: NHL teams have introduced themed nights to show support for marginalized communities as well as dedicated social media posts to promoting these communities.

4. In your opinion, why do you think a team would host a Pride Night? What do you think its goals are?

Context: In 2023, several players refused to wear Pride jerseys citing their personal beliefs and, in the context of Russian players, fear of reprisals from the Russian government. The NHL said

that the players' refusal to wear jerseys overshadowed the Pride Night celebration and decided to ban Pride Nights.

5. Were you aware of the NHL's ban on Pride jerseys? What do you know about it?
6. What do you think of the concerns the players raised? Were they justified or not in refusing to wear the jerseys?
7. Was the NHL justified in banning Pride jerseys after players refused to wear the jersey?
8. Do you think the NHL's stance on pride jerseys will affect your support for the league or specific teams?
9. How do you feel about fans criticizing players refusal to not wear pride jerseys?
10. How important do you think symbols like pride jerseys are in promoting inclusivity within professional sports?
11. Do you think professional sports leagues should prioritize business interests over promoting social causes like LGBTQ+ inclusivity? Why or why not?

**Part 4: The future of hockey**

1. Should the NHL consider lifting the ban on pride jerseys? Why or why not?
2. Do you think NHL teams should engage in other forms of community engagement?
    a. [Probe to see if the participant thinks other forms of community engagement are likely to create meaningful change in the sport and in the community.]
3. Is sport an effective avenue for creating lasting social change outside of sport?
4. If so, what more can players, leagues and teams do to create this lasting social change?

## Appendix D: Codebook

| Pride Jersey Qualitative Codebook | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Code** | **Definition** | **Example from Interview** |
| **Centering Hateful Politics** | This refers to what fans see as hateful politics being the primary focus in discussion about the Pride jersey ban | You're kind of making a statement that like, we don't want queer people at our games because we're refusing to do this. |
| **Charity** | Any fans mention charity work done by teams. Includes both positive views of the work done and criticisms of charity work in the community | I think it's OK. So on one level, it is a good thing. Yay. People who have immense social capital and immense economic capital are giving back to their community. On the other hand, the way in which sports figures can use this is the way in which they launder their reputation and the way in which they launder the kinds of, like, heinous acts that they're able to get away with. |
| **Community** | Captures how fans see hockey as part of the community as well as | I'm gonna go with community and I'm actually |

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| | outlines how their communities function | thinking of the Sens Pride game that I went to. It was a it was a couple people from Twitter. Back in the day and [SKYLAR'S FRIEND] organized us and we went and it was the Sens Pride Night a couple years back and I the only person I knew was [SKYLAR'S FRIEND]. There were like five or six people and just like experiencing a game with a group of other fans like that and fans had been fans for a lot longer than me, right? And it was a really fun game. |
| **Economic Capital** | This theme focuses on the money tied to hockey through charity work and money that franchises hold | I mean the ultimate, like the ultimate goal, I think of any pretty much anything that a team does is like in the end they're like hockey teams are capitalist ventures, like the goal is money. |

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| **Escapism** | Fans discussing how hockey is a form of entertainment and escape from their day-to-day struggles | And so it was very much like, this is something I do for fun. That's separate. It lets me unplug. It lets me focus on something that it's for the most part, like, you know, if I'm watching hockey, I'm just kind of. Forgetting about the other things that are going on in my life and living in that. So yeah, I that's why I go with escape. |
| **Exclusivity** | Centres around how fans see hockey as excluding certain groups of people, such as LGBTQ+ fans | I am aware of the slogan. Hockey is for everyone. To me, I take it quite literally that hockey is for everyone, that there should be no exclusion in hockey based on any of your intersecting identities or experiences. I think it means to me that there's a history of exclusion in in hockey, in the sport, to need to have a slogan like this. |

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| **Fan Autonomy** | Fans are granted autonomy within hockey spaces, often materializing in their critiques of players' refusal to wear Pride jerseys and support of players and teams | So on the one hand. Well, I think it is superficial. It can't be the last step, and I think it also is better to have them than to not, because to at least to have them is to break that that dream in the fantasy that sports is separate from real life. And like we can't, we can enjoy a thing and be critical of a thing. We are not children. We can hold multiple thoughts. |
| **Hockey Culture** | Descriptions of how fans see players and organizational attitudes and values by stakeholders within hockey | Yeah, I guess hockey culture, like as it pertains to the Pride stuff is like I mean just like against it you know like not you know like a lot of the like players and stuff are like seemingly like homophobic and stuff but like on a broader scale it's kind of more what I was saying like you know focus on you know manliness. |

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| **Hockey means to me** | Terms fans use to describe the importance of hockey for themselves | And that is actually how I came to be a fan of hockey. My younger brother was finishing his bachelor's at [UNIVERISITY], and he and I lived together, actually right next door to the apartment building I'm in now. And he is a huge Habs fan, unfortunately. Every year that we lived together, I would buy him tickets to a Sens v. Habs game and we would go together and that's how I got into hockey and I saw, you know, like Sens Twitter and such and it got really fun and exciting to know who the players were. And that's kind of how I came to be a fan of hockey. It's been a really big part of building like a home and community in Ottawa for me and yeah. |

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| **Hockey is for everyone and Theme Nights** | Quotes that describe initiatives that fall under the hockey is for everyone slogan and theme nights meant to demonstrate inclusivity in hockey | Just a broad corporate slogan that says we want fans from every, every walk of life and every, every demographic. |
| **Homophobia** | Data that discusses or demonstrates anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments or actions | I remember was when like Andrew Shaw used a gay slur and then I think it was the next year that he was named Montreal's like hockey is for everyone ambassador, which seemed silly. But I think there could have been real power in it if Andrew Shaw had then made a statement of like that was unacceptable what I did and cause of the people that I hurt and this is like this is what I want to do to try and achieve the opposite of what I did before. Instead of just kind of glossing over it and moving on and being like, well, now he's better. |

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| **Inclusivity** | Hockey's current efforts to make the sport more inclusive and how it fails to do so | That it's more just about like, we are not OK with harassment. And so that it seemed like guys refusing to play wear them. And then the NHL deciding that they were going to listen to the wishes of them was kind of the NHL saying, OK, we're OK with people being OK with harassment. |
| **Managing Perception** | Teams make efforts to be inclusive, but it is about the appearance of being inclusive | I'm not necessarily like, you know, it's not about like putting my money or my time into something that like I like 100% believe in. It's more about putting it like investing it in myself as like a social venue. But yeah, I've had to like, it's made it more difficult, you know, in some ways of just like, I think pulling back the curtain a little bit on like the reality. Bless him. |

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| **Player Autonomy** | Players making their own decisions and actions | And also on the flip side of that, like, you can't force someone to wear a gay jersey if they really don't want to. So, like, OK, like, I don't want him to pretend he's not a homophobe. If he's a homophobe, that's fine. Just don't wear it. |
| **Players position on Pride Jerseys** | Players either refusing to wear Pride jerseys or players speaking out against the Pride ban | You're kind of making a statement that like, we don't want queer people at our games because we're refusing to do this. |
| **Pride Jerseys** | Any data related to Pride jerseys, such as the importance of jerseys and the meaning of jerseys for fans | I yeah, I mean, I think they should consider it. It's for kind of the reason we talked about because they are symbolic, because there is some meaning behind it. I think there was some money raised, like probably not tons. But I think it's more about the messaging sort of idea of like the |

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| | | NHL as a whole wants to be inclusive, even if there's a handful of players who are detractors from it. I do think there's some power in that message. |
| **Recommendations** | Recommendations by fans about how to make hockey more inclusive | Okay, well, specifically for like, you know, pride initiatives or like LGBT initiatives, I mean, if it was like a 10 out of 10, like knock my socks off type of thing, they would be like speaking up against like, you know, the, the removal of like trans rights in like both Canada and the US. They would be working with local LGBT oh my gosh, what's the word, LGBT charities and stuff like that, like groups in the area, they would be attending Pride. |

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| **Social Capital** | Celebrity and importance of players and teams within a given community | We know that celebrity endorsements of things and like speaking out on things like brings attention to and can create social change. And so, you know, athletes and sports teams are celebrities. So of course, putting the weight of your celebrity behind you will help things. |
| **Sports as a Political Space** | Examples of political narratives and ideologies exist within sports | And particularly, I'd say with hockey, it's regressing because it follows. It does in many ways follow the politics of the moment that like during the Obama years and during this kind of like more in why mainstream embrace of liberalism. |

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