HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO

”Best sport, worst league” — community, culture and change among marginalized NHL fans

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Abstract:
This thesis focuses on fan community experiences and understandings of NHL ice hockey and the culture surrounding it from the perspectives of fans with marginalized identities. It investigates how and why this community has formed, what kind of issues it identifies in the hockey culture they operate in and why, surprisingly, Finnish players are seen at times seen as representing the positive changes people are hoping to see in the culture. It aims to determine where the agency for change is located and how the culture of a sport reflects on its fandom spaces, and how the fans negotiate their affective position towards their favorite teams and players as well as other fans. Finally, it moves on to ask the questions of how does cultural change happen anywhere, and what kind of role do “ideas of” (*mielikuvat*) of change play in that change being realized. A major theme that arises in answering these questions is about sports status in modern societies as both reflecting surrounding society and reproducing some structures that wider societal change is attempting to move beyond.

The data for the thesis was collected as patchwork ethnography with participant observation online, questionnaire shared through social media and during a two week in-person fieldwork in Dallas, Texas and Raleigh, North Carolina as well as about 40 in-depth interviews of fans of NHL teams Carolina Hurricanes and Dallas Stars between November 2023 and February 2024. An extra focus was placed on the interlocutors fanhood and understanding of the two team’s Finnish players. The theoretical framework of this thesis borrows from anthropology of sport, sociological fan studies and finally, Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra (1994). The methodological choices and analysis of the data were informed by Feminist scholars and intersectionality.

Marginalized fans who identify a number of issues with hockey culture still engage with it strongly. I argue that this is possible due to a combination of creating fragmented safe spaces in the fandom where fans with marginalized identities where they can both enjoy the game but also acknowledge the issues in a productive way and in a belief of the culture slowly changing despite many constant setbacks. The Finnish players are presented in fan narratives as contributing towards both; their shared cultural habitus mark them as approachable as well as counter-hegemonic towards North American toxic masculinity at the core of hockey culture. While I conclude that too much optimism towards change based on "ideas of" change rather than real markers of it can hinder the potential of cultural change, following along Baudrillard's ideas I argue that since the reality outside of sport is also increasingly fragmented, the power of communal imagination can be surprisingly effective.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma käsittelee faniyhteisön kokemuksia ja käsityksiä NHL jääkiekosta sekä sitä ympäröivästä kulttuurista keskittyen eri vähemmistöjä edustavien fanien kokemuksiin. Siinä tutkitaan, miten ja miksi juuri NHL-kiekon kontekstiin on syntynyt tällainen aktiivinen vaihtoehtofaniyhteisö, millaisia ongelmia se tunnistaa jääkiekkokulttuurissa, jonka piirissä toimii, ja miksi hieman yllättäen suomalaiset ammattikiekkoilijat ovat nousseet ajoittain edustamaan tämän yhteisön toivomaa kulttuurista muutosta. Tämä työ pyrkii tunnistamaan missä mahdollinen kulttuurinen muutos sijaitsee, ja miten urheilulajin kulttuuri peilautuu sen faniyhteisössä. Lisäksi se pyrkii ymmärtämään miten fanit luovat affektiivisia suhteita toisiinsa sekä lempipelaajiinsa ja -joukkueisiinsa. Lopuksi se pyrkii vastaamaan kysymykseen siitä, mitä kulttuurinen muutos vaatii ylipäänsä missään kontekstissa, ja millaista roolia mielikuvat esittävät muutoksen edesauttajina. Suurena teemana näihin kysymyksiin vastatessa nousee lisäksi pyrkimys ymmärtää, millainen rooli urheilulla ja sen fanittamisella on nykypäivän yhteiskuntajärjestyksessä, kun sen ymmärretään sekä reflektoivan ympäröivää kulttuuria että toisaalta ylläpitävän joitakin sellaisia rakenteita, joiden merkitys ympäröivässä maailmassa on vuosikymmenien aikana vähentynyt.

Tutkielman aineisto kerättiin niin sanotulla ”patchwork ethnography” menetelmällä eli erilaisia etnografisia metodologioita yhdistelemällä marraskuun 2023 ja helmikuun 2024 välillä. Tähän sisältyi muun muassa sosiaalisen median kautta tapahtunutta osallistuvaa havainnointia sekä kahden viikon kenttätyö Raleighissa Pohjois-Carolinassa sekä Dallasissa Texasissa. Havainnointia tuki noin 40

haastattelua Zoomissa ja paikan päällä, jonka osallistujat ilmoittautuivat aiemmin sosiaalisen median kautta jaetulla kyselytutkimuksella. Haastatellut fanit olivat Carolina Hurricanes ja Dallas Stars faneja NHL-joukkueiden, jotka olivat korostuneen kiinnostuneita joukkueiden suomalaisista pelaajista. Työn teoreettinen viitekehys lainaa niin urheiluantropologiasta, yleisyhteiskuntatieteellisestä fanitutkimuksesta että osaltaan ranskalaisen jälkistrukturalismia edustavan filosofi Jean Baudrillardin simulaatio- ja simulacra-teoriasta (1994). Tutkielman metodologiaa ja analyysiä ohjaavat intersektionaalinen feminismi.

Vähemmistöfanit tunnistavat useita ongelmia jääkiekkokulttuurissa, mutta ovat siitä huolimatta intohimoisia faneja sekä tiiviissä kontaktissa muun faniyhteisön kanssa. Väitän tämän johtuvan osaltaan siitä, että fanit ovat pystyneet rakentamaan itselleen mielekkäitä pienempiä faniyhteisöjä laajemman faniyhteisön sisällä, joka mahdollistaa lajista nauttimisen kuitenkaan ongelmia vähättelemättä. Osaltaan tätä selittää myös fanien usko siihen, että muutos on pikkuhiljaa tapahtumassa, vaikka jatkuvat skandaalit tätä uskoa ajoittain syövätkin. Faninarratiivit suomalaisista tukevat kumpaakin tulkintaa, sillä fanit tunnistavat heidän jakamansa kulttuurisen habituksen lähestyttäväksi ja toisaalta osaltaan Pohjois-Amerikkalaista hegemonista maskuliinisuutta haastavaksi, jonka nähdään olevan jääkiekkokulttuurin ongelmien ydin. Vaikka väitän, että liika optimismi sellaisen muutoksen vääjäämättömyyteen, jonka pohjalla ovat ennemminkin mielikuvat kuin todelliset merkit muutoksesta ei ole mielekästä, jaan kuitenkin lopulta Baudrillardin ajatuksen siitä, että niin kauan kuin urheilun ulkopuolinen maailma on jatkuvasti pirstaloituneempi, yhteisöllisen mielikuvituksen muutosvoiman potentiaali on yllättävän voimakas.

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1 Introduction

The National Hockey League (from now on NHL) is one of the ”big four”[1] professional sports leagues of North America alongside baseball (MLB), basketball (NBA) and American football (NFL) as well as being the most respected league of ice hockey in the world. Despite the game itself having continuously developed to be in its current era faster and more skillful than ever before, out of the four big American leagues it has seen the fastest decline in popularity during the 2000s[2]. Ice hockey has not been able to attract new audiences in USA despite remaining popularity in Canada and mostly North and East Europe, such as Russia, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Czechia and so on.

Sports easily get intertwined in politics, and hockey is not an exception. It is an arena where nationality is emphasized in an unusual way in the current age – outside of them, an individual’s performance is not often interpreted to reflect a nation state in the 21st century. There has been ping pong diplomacy, ”soccer wars” (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 77-8), and even ice hockey was an arena of cold war when ”The Miracle on Ice” team USA’s win over the then unbeatable ”Red Army” team of USSR was reported as a victory of ”capitalism over socialism” (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 52; Besnier et al. 2017, 203). Sports competitions often take place in extremely gendered categories, and, for example, transgender athletes having to fight for their rights to be included in professional sports has been a recurring source of discourse for the past few years (see e.g. Barras 2024). The ideological separation of women’s and men’s sports informs a culture of homophobia, transphobia and racism when certain bodies do not perform to the set standards of femininity or masculinity (Besnier et al. 2017, 157; Kennedy 2007, 24). Athletes often represent the ultimate extent of the idea of body to be something to discipline and train, reproducing the category of disability as non-normative (Barras 2024, 19). In more recent years the political nature of sports has been made visible in more intersectional ways as well, for example by Black and Brown athletes in the NFL refusing to sing the national anthem under the Trump administration and instead taking the knee. Sports can be characterized as a microcosmic reflection of the society and culture they exist in (Besnier et al. 2017, 125-6; Aitchison 2007b, 1), and therefore they can highlight existing hierarchies regarding gender, age, race and other social intersections.

[1] https://www.sportsmediawatch.com/nba-market-size-nfl-mlb-nhl-nielsen-ratings/
[2] https://www.hockeypatrol.com/nhl/news/the-nhl-continues-to-lose-its-audience-at-an-alarming-rate-what-driving-fans-away

The NHL, however, has not been able to answer to the pressures of societal change according to surrounding society in the recent years beyond isolated events[3]. The NHL has never had an openly gay player throughout its existence of over 110 years. This has often been credited to the "locker room culture" actively sustained through a particular hyper-masculinity emphasizing socialization of hockey players since young age (Anderson 2005, 75). The first ever female coach Jessica Campbell was hired by the newest NHL team, the Seattle Kraken, as an assistant coach in 2024, and despite immense talent in women's hockey, particularly in North America, there is a massive gap in funding and popularity between women's and men's leagues[4]. Both the players and the fandom remain majority white which might be one of the reasons why anti-racist movements have not been able to reach the core of the league like in some other sports. A constant stream of scandals regarding sexual and domestic violence or homophobic and racist statements with no repercussions to the involved players keeps reproducing the culture that extends to the fanbases. The league's unwillingness to act in such cases has made it less interesting for new fans which has stressed the need to cater to the older viewership, creating a cycle that partly explains the fall in popularity, despite the game itself being better than ever.

Despite these issues I encountered a fan community of NHL hockey a few years ago that was largely made of women, proudly queer identifying people of a wide range of ages and nationalities, including people of color (PoC from now on) as well as allies of all the previously mentioned groups. I had been a passionate fan of many other things before and found that the new ways of expressing fandom had also found their way here. People were talking about the players in a friendly manner, making gorgeous fan-art or video edits, and all in all spectating and enjoying hockey teams as if it were their favorite K-pop band or tv-show. As I got more and more interested in this new world, I discovered something that surprised me even more: in the two teams I had set my eyes on, the Carolina Hurricanes and the Dallas Stars, a lot of people seemed to be gravitating towards their Finnish players. The seemingly massive contradictions between the object of affection and the fanbase instantly intrigued me.

I grew up in Finland, and I believe a lot of my fellow countrymen would agree that queer joy or social activism would not be the first things that people would associate with ice hockey. While immensely

[3] For example, game postponement and some players taking the knee in a single game, https://andscape.com/features/nhl-winger-ryan-reaves-aug-27-2020-was-more-than-a-moment-for-us/

[4] Though there are some signs this might be starting to change: the latest North American Women's professional league the PWHL has shown much more potential in remaining than its processors.

popular when looking at major tournament viewership (2024 Men's World Championship tournament reached 3,5 million Finns, 66% of the population[5]) or the number of kids who play (over 200 000 players from kids to professionals in 2023[6]), the national interest has remained largely on watching international (men's) hockey. The players are mostly white and middle-class (it is an expensive hobby especially for growing kids who constantly need new gear), and similar stories of racism and sexual harassment from juniors all the way to the professionals are as constant as they are in the NHL. During the world championships in the spring hockey also becomes an interestingly acceptable arena of national romanticism in a way it usually would not be allowed to, as outside of the championships the jersey's lion insignia is starting to be connected to far-right nationalism and its violence. In short, for the average critical viewers hockey is seen as a violent sport for privileged white men on the ice and in the audience. It remains a conservative arena for expressions of masculinity and works as a platform to reach status in Finnish society that is only possible for a successful hockey player, for which to be you need to fill the boxes of ("manly") man, straight, white, middle-class et cetera[7]. Yet somehow the Finnish players had (unbeknownst to themselves) ended up being interpreted as likeable and sometimes even socially progressive compared to their North American counterparts, despite taking no active political stances, while their status in Finland was similar to the ones foreign fans seemed to think of American and Canadian players. Again, this contradiction lured me in as a fan and later as a researcher.

While I found a lot of literature on hockey overall, I was surprised to see how little it has been researched previously from social and cultural perspectives. I will discuss in the literature review section more on the volume of works on the medical side of athletes like recovery improvement through physiotherapy or the long-lasting effects of repeated concussions amongst hockey players, or psychological-behavioral analysis of player-coach relationships. There are also some works on national hockey histories and particular athletes, but most of the works I could access focused on ice hockey from a social or cultural perspectives were other Master's level works from University of Helsinki (see e.g. Rantala 2024; Isotalo 2013; Salomaa 2004). Since I could not identify a key work from the field to base my own understanding on, I am combining elements of anthropology and philosophy of sport as

[5] https://www.leijonat.fi/index.php/maajoukkueet/a-maajoukkue/2023-24/mm2024/item/47660-mtv-julkaisi-mm-kisojen-hurjat-katsojaluvut-leijonat-on-kansakuntaa-ainutlaatuisella-tavalla-yhdistaevae-ilmioe

[6] https://www.superprof.fi/blog/suosituimmat-urheilulajit-suomessa-2023/

[7] Teemu Selänne is perhaps the most successful Finnish hockey player who has maintained his status as a national hero despite his Trumpist, transphobic and elitist comments that the public intellectually largely disapproves of.

well as sociological fan studies in my theoretical framing, supported by perspectives of intersectionally informed feminist scholars both in my methodological choices and analysis. I collected the data as patchwork ethnography, combining participant observations in social media, a questionnaire with subsequent interviews with responders, and finally, two weeks of in-person fieldwork in Raleigh, North Carolina and Dallas, Texas.

This thesis, for its part, aims to offer a new perspective into ice hockey culture and communities. I explore how this new fan community has evolved, how it understands the current state of hockey and finally asks the question: what does true cultural change require? To investigate this question, I needed to ask a lot of subsequent questions: Why does hockey attract these historically marginalized groups to offer an attractive platform for community building in a context they themselves identify as widely hostile? Why do people who recognize so many issues in the culture still engage with it so intensely? What part do the Finnish players play in all of this? I have divided the analysis into two categories: in the first section of analysis, "The Players", I detail how the community has formed, how they understand hockey culture, and what the Finnish players mean to them while in the second section, "The Play", I discuss some issues with what people are basing their belief in cultural change on and finally, make a brief analysis on the potential of cultural change by engaging with French post-structuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulacra* (Baudrillard 1994).

Despite the issues identified in the culture and the potential of the change for the better sometimes coming across as shared *idea of* something better rather than actual change, many queer, women, and PoC fans have found community and camaraderie within NHL ice hockey. While my view of the potential of true cultural change within ice hockey remains somewhat pessimistic, I also argue along with the works that I think with that the fans have many valid reasons for finding community even within a hostile culture, and a more diverse fanbase can be a first step towards positive changes even if the presence of marginalized identities alone might now be enough to promote true change.

1.1 Scope of the study

Since it is the background of this whole thesis, it is worth to start with the question: do sports matter? Social and cultural anthropology studies how people construct meaning for everyday life's actions and relations and has a long history of attempting to make sense of rituals, structures and cosmologies of

different communities and cultures. Sports, however, have not traditionally received a lot of attention from anthropologists despite being intimately connected to many of these themes (Besnier et al. 2017, 11; Sands and Sands 2010, 5; Sands and Blanchard 1999, 3 & 7). A pioneer of anthropology of sports Robert Sands argues that sports reflect the culture they are embedded in (Sands and Blanchard 1999, 3). Sports remain a major force in today's societies in constructing race, gender, age, sexuality, class, disability and nationality (see e.g. Barras 2024; Besnier et al. 2017; Aitchison 2007a; Anderson 2005), for example in reproducing stereotypes or valuing boys' masculinity through their performance in sports despite most athletic skills having lost their practical value outside of sports (Anderson 2005, 26). Beyond playing sports viewing them continues to be a popular past time; for example 70% of Americans consider themselves fans of sports (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 4), while Olympics and FIFA soccer World Cups have reached an estimated 50 to a baffling 70 present of the world's population (Besnier et al. 2017, 185). Fans identify their fandom as a source of strength and a way to connect with friends, family and places (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 34 & 38). Sports fandoms offer spaces in which people are allowed (or allow themselves) to both feel and express emotions more freely, which is usually discouraged in modern life (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 33; Heinonen and Godenhjelm 2001, 25). Sports and sports fandom create new communities and remain an important way through which people locate and distinguish their identity and place in communities and societal structures. Sands writes sports to be "ubiquitous, it transcends culture and is woven into all cultural fabric [- -]" (Sands and Sands 2010, 6), while Archer and Wojtowicz maintain that sports fandom contributes to a fan's understanding of meaningful life (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022). Anthropology offers great tools to construct nuanced understandings how sporting bodies, cultures and affects are made, and how they operate in the wider society (Besnier et al. 2017, 127 & 158).

As I have now established how sports remain significant in today's societies, a central question of this study emerges — does sport culture reflect the surrounding society, or is it rather a conservative arena where heightened gendered and oppressive systems are upheld *because* of how their oppressive power is being criticized in the surrounding society? Philosopher Stephen Mumford argues that sports are a "moral laboratory" as "the morality of sport is continuous with the morality of wider life, rather than distinct from it" (Mumford 2012, 7), and Besnier even concludes that "[m]odern sport is not just a product of the modern era; it helped to create it" (Besnier et al. 2017, 258). In his critical reflections on American Football culture Thomas P. Oates argues that sports do not just reflect surrounding politics

but are “sites where politics develop in the first place” (Oates 2017, 3). On the other hand, Mariah Burton-Nelson has argued that the more women have advanced their standings in other institutions “the more men have relied on sport in order to symbolically dominate women” (Nelson 1994; cited in Anderson 2005, 71), while Risto Isotalo’s informant insisted that increased equality in society in practice means that expressions of masculinity are less accepted but “on the ice a man can still be a man” (Isotalo 2013, 61). Sports could be understood to be “enriched in masculinity” and to be an arena of reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Heinonen and Godenhjelm 2001, 24), supporting Anderson in arguing that sport are ”theorized to be one of the last bastions of cultural and institutional homophobia in North America”, based on “homophobia and misogyny and is even theorized to be crucial to the reproduction of patriarchy in American culture” (Anderson 2005, 13). Aitchison also adds nationalism and racism to the list (Aitchison 2007b, 1). The myriad interpretations about whether sports culture should be understood as a reflection of surrounding society or rather as a final place to hide from it emphasizes that the two are not necessarily completely mutually exclusive, something I will come back to in the final analysis chapter. Establishing if sports cultures are a microcosm or a conservative haven leads to different implications about what cultural change in it would mean — do changes in sports happen naturally, or do they need to be advocated for, and what is their connection to the world outside of them? How one defines sports’ status within the modern societies also affects what we think fandom is: escapism or an arena to practice enhanced intersectional privileges.

As the interviews went on, I started to notice that many of the concepts used were quite ambiguous. My interlocutors used the words ”culture” and ”cultural change” a lot without ever really specifying what this meant for them. The most named thing that interested them in Finland was also the ”culture” they had encountered through their favorite Finnish players, and their explanations about why the culture was or was not changing were also quite vague. My understanding of this ambiguity was broadened by realizing that usually those who saw the most issues with hockey culture also had the strongest faith in it being in the process of changing. There is a contradiction, almost a disconnect there; many fans identified with the very same marginalized identities that they themselves saw as specifically targeted by hockey culture’s issues. This led me to start thinking about the significance of ”ideas of” (Finnish *mielikuvat*) in people’s construction of this alternative hockey community and culture, and the change of it. I am engaging with this ambiguity to ask the questions I need to answer first to get to my true research questions. How are the ”ideas of” of hockey culture, teams and players conceptualized and

understood by interlocutors informed by different sets of social intersections? Why, where and how do they locate the need and true potential of change in this cultural context they are a part of? What informs their ideas of the Finnish players and their agency in changing this culture? All of this leads to the ultimate question: do "ideas of" change catalyse actual change, or does getting tangled to the "ideas of" instead of reality hinder it when we think about cultural change anywhere?

Now, having 'culture' as a key concept is a nightmare scenario for an anthropologist — it is the central question of the whole discipline whether such a thing as culture exists naturally or does it only exist when it is written into existence as an academic interpretation, and the different views in favor and against would be senseless to start defining here. For the scope of this thesis it should suffice that we assume it does exist at least to the extent that it is the frame against which my informants shaped their own experience of belonging and change within their chosen community. Therefore, I engage with the concept of culture to the extent in which my informants understood it in their answers. The mechanics of that culture and the potential issues and developments of it were usually just as ambiguous as the concept of culture itself and is therefore useful tools of analysis.

I chose ice hockey partly due to my personal interest, partly because my assumption before starting to collect data was that ice hockey would be considered one of the most backwards sports cultures (this was both agreed and disagreed upon by my informants). Many of my informants also noted it was a "perfect sport for the TikTok age" due to its easy-to-follow rules, fast pace and usually eventful games — many of the people who I talked with said that they considered baseball and ice hockey to be the two extremes on the scale of pace in sports. The two teams I ended up focusing on the fans of were picked out quite naturally due to my personal pre-existing connections to their fan communities; the Carolina Hurricanes (from now on sometimes referred to with the nickname Canes) and the Dallas Stars (from now on sometimes referred to as just the Stars). These are the two teams that have historically had many Finnish players and in the present day emphasize their current Finnish players in their marketing — this also made sense for them because they happened to have many Finnish players while I was doing the data collection (the Canes' roster included forwards Sebastian Aho, Teuvo Teräväinen, Jesperi Kotkaniemi and goalie Antti Raanta; the Stars' "Finnish Mafia"[8] was made up by forward Roope Hintz and defensemen Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell and Jani Hakanpää). Out of these

[8] Nickname given first by fans and then being adopted by the team's social media

players, particularly Aho and Heiskanen are considered something of a generational talent amongst the Finnish ”golden generation” of players born between roughly 1994-2001. Just the number of Finns or their importance to their team was not what made an NHL team into a ”Finnish team”, however; at the time the Florida Panthers had 4 Finnish players including captain Aleksander Barkov, widely recognized as the best Finn currently playing in NHL as well as Tuomo Ruutu as an assistant coach, and the Colorado Avalanche’s Mikko Rantanen and Artturi Lehkonen with two other Finns had been establishing themselves as core players of the Stanley Cup champion team just one season prior. The Canes and the Stars had made a conscious effort to brand and market themselves through the Finns, and the effects of it were clear in the survey answers and interviews that I conducted. These dynamics and team brands have since changed, and, for example, the Florida Panthers have started to emphasise their Finnish players more in the last two years — I would argue that the success of the Canes and Stars making people invested through the Finnish players has influenced this due to the positive connotations associated with them.

As said, the focus on the Finnish players arose from the data naturally, but at the same time it should be acknowledged that I believe these types of ”ideas of” could be attached to European players on a wider scale as well had I interviewed fans of other teams. For the scope of this thesis, however, I chose to focus on the fans of the Finns to investigate the significance of conceptions of cultural change.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

After the introduction section I will continue into a brief literature review followed by defining the key concepts of the study and finally mapping out the theoretical framework used in this dissertation. From there I move on to the methodology section where I detail how I conducted my fieldwork and reflect on my own positionality. After that I move on to the analysis section where I discuss the key findings of my research, divided into the two sections detailed in the introduction, further divided into 5 analysis chapters in total. I will finish with my conclusions as well as some closing words about my suggestions for future research as well as some reflections on this research.

2 Background

In this section I will first introduce the main bodies of work I could access focused on ice hockey, fan theories and particularly sports fan theories. I will then move on to introduce the key texts and concepts regarding my own analysis building from these works, supported by some key theories of anthropology and social sciences more broadly.

2.1 Literature review

As noted in the introduction, I was surprised to find how little ice hockey had been researched in Finland or anywhere in the world from the angle of fans and fan cultures. Most research I found was focused on the physical improvement of an athlete's performance via physiotherapy or better coaching, medical concerns of repeated concussions or detailed accounts of histories of certain national teams. A popular work within the minorities of hockey fandom is a book called *Game Misconduct: Hockey's Toxic Culture and How to Fix it* (2023) by Evan F. Moore and Jashvina Shah, but as it is not an academic book, I will not engage with it throughout this study. In future works, however, I believe this could be discussed through having a book club around this work, for example, and I would certainly recommend it as a great introduction to the issues I also discuss here.

There are a lot of interesting Master's thesis level research from University of Helsinki graduates regarding ice hockey from a wide variety of angles, for example medical (Winberg 2023; Ilmola 2017; Heikkilä and Rautiainen 2010), contract juridical (Koivu 2010; Häkkinen 2008; Tjurin 2001), geography and accessibility (Talja 2018; Mäntyniemi 2015), coaching (Eronen 2016; Pehu 2014; Rostedt 2011; Kivekäs 2009; Juntumaa 2008) and developmental psychology of junior players (Mielonen 2023; Salo 201; Myntti 1999; Tervomaa 1995), theological approaches to how NHL logos are treated by media (Romunen 2022), the linguistics of fan nicknames (Virtanen 2020) and game commentators (Salo 2016). There were a couple of interesting more abstract approaches to it too, like the effect of chance in determining the outcome of a hockey game (Kari 2020) or how playing hockey builds basic understanding of mechanics (Savikko 2007). While these were not applicable to my own research, I would argue that the delightful number of perspectives to ice hockey studies emphasizes the importance of ice hockey in Finnish culture. Some research closer to mine in methodology and framing are Taneli Rantala's ethnographic Master's thesis on how the music played in hockey games connects

it to culture (Rantala 2024), Helena Herrala's Doctoral ethnographic research focused on a girl's hockey team (Herrala 2015) and Petteri Hård's Master's thesis on the die-hard fans following their team everywhere (Hård 2017).

Risto Isotalo's Master's thesis from 2013 on hockey's status in Finland is an interesting piece to compare my own research to. While Isotalo agrees with many of my theses about hockey's special status in Finland, for example, he seems to be reflecting from a place where he assumes and even seems to support the notions of hockey's conservative nature. I agree with him when he writes: "Ice hockey includes certain elements that speak to today's Finns regardless of gender. Some of these elements are the fast pace, physicality and masculinity" (Isotalo 2013, 2), for example, but he also writes that "supporting and following hockey is by its nature masculine and in the ice halls a manly culture prevails" and that "the most popular insults to chant deal with homosexuality and femininity, and calling the opposing players with homophobic slurs and girls/ladies are quite regular reflections of this" (ibid., 32). While this might be true, it is surprising to read such statements as unquestioned facts. Both of these nuances in his thesis provide ample room for reflection. Jenni Salomaa's Master's thesis from 2004 is about female fans experience of being included in the fandom of a Finnish team Jokerit. While her position is probably the closest to mine as she combines ethnographic methodologies to make an understanding of the experience of female fans in a culture that seems to belittle them, the work being over 20 years old did make it difficult to engage with it more throughout in this thesis. While there were similar observations about how the "inclusion" of new subgroups of fans usually means having to adapt to the existing culture, I will argue in the next chapter that social media has made a huge change in fandom dynamics.

A lot of the reading I did in advance and even after the fieldwork was focused on sports anthropology's basic works that I discussed in the "Scope of the Study" section, and while they provided good food for thought in preparation, I feel like the focus has shifted too much to only rely on sports anthropology any longer. Archer and Wojtowicz's book *Why It's Okay to Be a Sports fan* (2022) was a wonderful resource to think with as the two philosophers deal with the same questions as I do. They discuss the meaning of being a fan and fan communities, particularly in sports, while also being critical and theorizing ways of being a critical fan who do not want to end up being complicit in sport culture's issues. Stephen Mumford's *Watching Sport: Aesthetics, ethics and emotions* (2012) helped to frame my

understanding of sports in societies. His division of fans into partisan and purist categories is an important theoretical framing that Archer and Wojtowicz also borrow as do I now in this work.

For theories of fandom, I engage with a couple of different works. Kaarina Nikunen's doctoral dissertation *Faniuden aika: Kolme tapausta TV-ohjelmien fanituksesta vuosituhannen taitteen Suomessa*[9] (2005) is a wonderful introduction to fan studies as she focuses on the experience of fans, affects and gendered experiences as she studies the fans of tv-shows. While many of her points do not apply as such to my context of sports fans, there are surprisingly many points of connection. In the 20 years that have passed between her research and mine, the fan activities previously saved for fictional worlds have shifted towards mainstream and to all kinds of fandoms, partly, I would argue again, through the rise of social media. I discuss her work extensively in this thesis as it also helps to understand how fanhood has changed in the last two decades and thus offers implications about the future too. A bit more recent work on fan studies, *Understanding fandom: an introduction to the study of media fan culture* by Mark Duffett (2013) helped me to fill in the gaps when needed.

For the themes of masculinity, nationality and gender a number of works I have already briefly mentioned helped to make sense of the field of sports. Abby Barras' *Transgender and Non-Binary People in Everyday Sport: A Trans Feminist Approach to Improving Inclusion* (2024) and *Sport and gender identities: masculinities, feminities and sexualities* (2007) edited by Cara Aitchison helped to make sense of sport significance and the ways they reproduce certain categorizations. Nico Besnier, Susan Brownell and Thomas F. Carter's book *The Anthropology of Sport: Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics* (2017) informed me with not only the anthropology of sports but also the many ways nationality comes to be emphasized in the context of sports. Eric Anderson's book *In the Game: Gay Athletes and The Cult of Masculinity* (2005) provided me good introduction into sociological research on sexuality and masculinity in the context of sports. He argues that sports have not changed with the times due to its near-total system combined with top-down socialization of previous athletes coaching the younger ones, creating a closed-loop that rejects otherness. His work is prominent in my analysis throughout.

[9] *"The age of fanhood: Three case studies of being a fan of TV shows in the change of a millenia's Finland"*

2.2 Theoretical framework & key concepts

I will now move on to defining my key concepts that shape the theoretical framework based on the literature introduced in the previous chapter. The main concepts I engage with are ‘community’ and ‘fan’ with the additional definitions of concepts such as ‘parasociality’, ‘masculinity’ and ‘nationality’ to offer nuance in understanding how I engage with these complicated concepts in of this work.

I have detailed the problematic nature of the concept of culture in anthropology in the scope of the study chapter, but almost as difficult a concept, and a frequent theme in conversations with my interlocutors, was community. Community can be understood to mean different things and processes, and belonging to a community can mean different things too — for example in this case, being ”part of the hockey community” does not mean subscribing to any particular channel of information on a specific platform, but rather it is a very loosely defined group of people taking part or at least observing the same discourses and jokes in a particular social media platform. When reading about community, particularly in the context of fans, one will end up running into Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991) time and time again (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 35-6; Besnier et al. 2017, 204; Sumiala 2010, 10; Nikunen 2005, 329). Andersson describes “in anthropological spirit” nations to be imagined communities, as the members of said community – nation – do not know most of the other members of said community and yet their personal identity is partly tied to the membership of that community through the idea of nationality (Anderson 2016, 5-6 [1991]). He argues that through an idea of shared simultaneity of a similar life – people of the nation read the same newspapers and are thus informed by same truths – they imagine a shared connection, a culture between themselves and people who they do not know (ibid., 35). This in turn allows for a narrative of a nation and opens the possibility of constructing an imagined shared history that enforces the connection of the imagined community even more, simultaneously producing a dichotomy of “us” and “them”. Similar mechanics can be identified from the formation of smaller scale communities as well. Narratives, for example, could be argued to be a big part of making any community, and they definitely are in making sports fandoms. Phrases like “*our* team” and “*we* won” are commonly used among fans, suggesting an imagined affiliation (Anderson 2005, 32) – I elaborate on the importance of narratives in hockey fandom at later chapters.

What about online communities, then? Fan theorist Mark Duffett has noted that online spaces have greatly changed fandoms as they have made them more accessible and social media has democratized the communities as individual fan site owners are no longer the authorities in interpreting the object of fandom (Duffett 2013, 236-7 & 281). Johanna Sumiala's introduction to media anthropology focuses on the particularities that social media has brought to the anthropological understanding of community (Sumiala 2010). She argues that symbolic communication has always been the key mechanism of creating an imagined community (Sumiala 2010, 33-4), but the nature of social media has slightly reshaped the agency involved in communicating, as everyone is now not only a potential receiver of communication but also the contributor and deliverer of those symbols (ibid., 76). While virtual spaces are always imagined to some extent, it does not imply they are not real or do not interact with realities outside of the virtual spaces as well (Sumiala 2010, 79 & 89). Social media, then, creates new kinds of public or half-public spaces that are usually open for anyone to interact with, but the rules of community building still apply – there are unsaid rules and norms that must be met to be a part of a virtual community, too (Duffett 2013, 247-8; Nikunen 2005, 131 & 333). This understanding of a virtual community was reflected in my observations in the field.

Being a fan and being part of the fandom, in the fan community, are almost synonymous in the way my interlocutors spoke. Nikunen agrees: "The way being a fan is experienced is very tied to an individual fan's ability to share their fandom with others." (Nikunen 2005, 332; translated by me). In fact, Nikunen's definition of a fan includes 'community' along with affect, action and of course the object of the fandom (ibid., 46-56). She also notes that fan scholars have theorized being a fan to be a way to replace a sense of sociality lost in the modern world (Nikunen 2005, 88-90). Individual self-esteem and group esteem go hand in hand in intense fandom, contributing to feelings of belonging and community (Mumford 2012, 8). While no fan community is the same, for many the social, or communal, aspect of it is an important factor in one way or another. Sumiala connects fan cultures to the studies of "pilgrimage" in media anthropology as they gather fans together in physical or virtual places to experience something mystical together (Sumiala 2010, 103-6). She cites fan researcher Henry Jenkins in saying that being a fan is not just about watching something regularly, but rather, it means the act of making that habit into a cultural activity (Jenkins 1988; cited in Sumiala 2010, 104).

People can be fans in different ways, and there is a wide variety of possible categorizations of fans in the fan research literature I encountered. Kaarina Nikunen discusses what she calls “cult fandom”, (*kulttifanius*), to describe a fan community that includes active fan productivity and a tight community that operates on many different levels, one of them being online (Nikunen 2005, 319). Another category Nikunen identifies as the opposite is “trend fandom” (*trendifanius*) where the “fan” might follow something carefully but the emotional connection to the object is less important than the social capital that being up to date on the topic grants (ibid., 262). A good example of trend fandom is how most Finnish people follow the men’s world championships because it is 1) easily available and 2) probable topic of conversation at work the day after – being a “fan” of the topic does not invite fan production of community in the same way as cult fandom. Some sports theorists use the categorizing of fans within “partisan” and “purist” categories. Partisans are die-hard fans that love a particular team and its players and focus on that organization’s narratives, trying to follow the season game for game (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 20-1). Mumford adds to the description by noting that being a partisan fan is a scale and could be understood to include everyone from fans who check the scores after each game to die-hard fans that tattoo the team logo on their body (Mumford 2012, 9). Purists on the other hand are described as loving the game more than any particular team – they are interested in seeing good games and incredible performances rather than having a strong wish for who must win (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 22). While it seems like a simple way to categorize different kinds of fans, they do however admit that most fans combine elements of both categories and can also switch easily between the two (ibid., 71-2).

Another categorization that Archer and Wojtowicz make is between traditional and consumer fans. Traditional fans are local to the sports team and their main way of fandom is to go to the games; being a fan might be something they inherited from their parents. Consumer fans, on the other hand, they classify as fans who buy merch and therefore represent the team in their daily life but are not such avid game visitors due to distance or other reasons (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 22-3). They argue that this category of fans do not have the same power to influence the team’s identity, but I would argue against this interpretation in the modern age of social media. Consumerism is not a satisfying way to understand fandom (Duffett 2013, 278); buying merch and tickets to a game can be part of making belonging with the community, but it is not the whole truth of it. Teams are active in social media in replying to all kinds of fans from all over the world – unlikely fans sharing their experiences may gain

particular attention because it makes for a great feel-good story that builds the brand of the team. On the other hand, traditional fans who are going to the games a lot might experience a very consumerist side of being a fan just thinking of the opportunity to visit the store in the arena. While I am critical of this categorization, however, I do not claim consumerism is not a major part of modern fandom – just like modern life in general – and I will discuss the consumerist side of hockey's cultural change in the analysis chapters.

One of the ways "action" in Nikunen's definition of a fan could be realized is indeed buying merch and investing in game tickets, for example, but the creativity in fan cultures extends far beyond that. Fans spend a lot of time and effort on their sports, for example by dressing in the team colors (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 15-6 & 27) or in the case of hockey fans, making signs to bring to the games. Traditional fan activities could be seeking autographs or making fan art to give to the idol (Duffett 2013, 166). Some newer ways people's fandom fuels their creativity is writing fanfiction (Duffett 2013, 179; Nikunen 2005, 106-7), collecting trading cards (Duffett 2013, 178-9) or making video edits (ibid., 186), for example. Sumiala states that it is common for the viewers of a media to actively create new rituals (Sumiala 2010, 105), while Nikunen emphasizes that the main difference she identifies with "cult" and "trend" fans is the fact that cult fans create their own fandom while trend fans are fans in a given platform and extent (Nikunen 2005, 193). Hockey fans exchange knowledge and jokes amongst themselves to the extent they have created a particular kind of shared language within the fandom that might be difficult to fully grasp from the outside (and can even create some frictions within the fandom). Many of my English-speaking interlocutors mentioned being thankful for foreign fans translating the players interviews in their native language, too. Being a fan is far from passive (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 15-6; Heinonen & Godenhjelm 2001, 9-10) – Duffett defines fan as someone who expresses their emotional conviction with creativity (Duffett 2013, 18).

The final component of fanhood Nikunen identifies, then, is affect; the emotions involved (Nikunen 2005, 47-50). She relates her understanding of affect to that of Sara Ahmed's – affect is not a passive feeling but rather the interaction of the subjects' inner emotions and outer structures (Ahmed 2004, 46-50; cited in Nikunen 2005, 48). Duffett, also building on Ahmed, continues with nothing that affects are "socially constructed domain of cultural effects" (Duffett 2013, 136). Affect, then, is about reorganizing the relationship of self and other(s), potentially a source of creating community and

strengthening identity (and simultaneously defining difference from the other(s)). In the case of sports fandom, an example of this could be the way the narratives of "us vs them" are internalized and can potentially lead to real conflicts in fans' interactions with others (like fighting) (Mumford 2012, 16) or manifest as intense attachment to a particular player (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 85-6). Mumford argues that the intensity of emotions within a group increases the bigger the community gets (Mumford 2012, 8) while Archer and Wojtowicz describe being a sports fan as a form of love (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 9-10). Big emotions, and affects in which through the personal and the cultural experiences and expectations are negotiated, are certainly at play when talking about sports fandom.

Parasocial relationship in relation to fan behavior has been gaining popularity as a way of describing some fandom mechanics for the last few years. The term was first introduced in 1956 by Horton and Wohl to explain the new ways people were relating to "new mass media" like popular TV, radio or film characters (Horton and Wohl 1956). 'Parasociality' or 'acting parasocial' in a fan refers to blurring lines between themselves and the object of admiration, sometimes including an imagined intimacy or the dream of it with the idol (Duffett 2013, 89). When fans refer to each other as parasocial, it is usually used to refer to people crossing accepted boundaries of fan-idol interactions. An extreme example of this would be stalking, but these days it is also used to describe a fan's behavior even if it is not actively interacting with the idol – it can just be about the way the fan expresses their relationship to the idol towards other fans. Fandoms tend to create an illusion of knowing the object of admiration personally, and having more knowledge of the object of admiration might give social capital in the community (Nikunen 2005, 308); this might lead to fans fighting other fans on the basis of thinking they know their idol better than others and therefore understand how and why they act or react to any number of things. The fan, then, places the idol they do not actually know above the real person who they are talking with, for example when their idol is being accused of inappropriate behavior by another person, instead of listening they might double down on "protecting" their idol (Archer & Wojtowicz 2022: 129-130). It can also refer to simply being too invested in the idol's life even if it not (yet) manifesting as inappropriate behavior towards the idol themselves – it might contribute towards a tunnel vision that makes it difficult to see the problems with the object of adoration (ibid., 13-14, 17 & 67). All these aspects of parasocial relationships are interconnected: being obsessed with the idol might lead to an illusion of knowing them personally that might lead to stalking – though it usually does not. I argue that social media has greatly and quickly renegotiated fan-idol relationships over the last decade,

just as Horton and Wohl argued the then new mechanics of mass-communication did at the time. Returning to how social media has overall changed the relationship of contributing and consuming media, if fans are no longer passive observers but rather actively produce their idol and their fandom through narratives they share amongst the in-group and the out-groups, the idol's significance has also changed – they need to produce enough material to feed the fandom's needs but also confirm often enough to share the values their fandom has, not the other way around. The fans reflect on the idol and contribute to their public image (Duffett 2013, 249). The fandom has thus gained agency and knows they are the one who create the publicity to their idol, and they demand something in return. The renegotiation of those boundaries through the affects of fans have blurred, and therefore it is no surprise that parasocial behavior towards idols in all fields has become more normalized.

Before moving on, some intersectional identity categories in the context of sports must be defined and explain why I must return to them despite attempting to follow feminist methodologies detailed in the next chapter – fan studies have sometimes fallen into the trap of essentializing gender, for example, when turning the focus on different fractions of a fandom (Duffett 2013, 204), and I attempt to avoid this reproduction. As established, however, sports have remained a highly gendered space that determines where, by who and how sports are played and how their fans are viewed, and therefore gender remains a factor that cannot be ignored (Nikunen 2005, 339; Anderson 2005, 6). Sex refers to biological characteristics observed at birth with while gender refers to the social construct of a performance of manhood, womanhood or something beyond (Besnier et al. 2017, 127). Masculinity refers here to the socially and culturally constructed presentations of cis-male characteristics in the social domain where individual performing these characteristics is understood as a privileged identity. A concept that constantly reappears in my data is "toxic masculinity," which means the abuse of those categories of privilege to oppress others to the detriment of – according to feminist scholars – the surrounding society as well as the individual himself.

Nationality does not rise as an important category in fan theory, but it certainly does in the context of sports. Nation-state is a fairly new ideology, and it needs to be constantly reinforced to engage its members with that ideology (Besnier et al. 2017, 207). Sports have been argued to be "one of the key social technologies of constructing modern nationalism" (Dyreson 2003, 94; cited in Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 37), and some theorists draw strong parallels between patriotism and being a

passionate sports fan as both are based on the individual belonging to something while also feeling like the thing belongs to them (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 20). The biggest sporting events in the world see athletes representing their nations and wearing the symbols of the nations' flags on their gear. Even in NHL games where the athletes represent their teams affiliated with a state or city, each game starts with a performance of the national anthems of either the USA, Canada or both. The same type of patriotism is visible in team Finland's games when organizers play national anthems before games and include patriotic rhetoric in advertisements for big tournaments (Isotalo 2013, 32). I will elaborate in later chapters how nationality also reflects upon fandom dynamics.

Finally, a difficult key concept to define here is the ”ideas of”. The Finnish word *mielikuva* does not have an English translation that would capture the whole meaning of the concept I want to investigate here. Some translations suggested to me were ”conception”, ”association”, ”mental image” and ”impression”, all of which would be sensible translations for the Finnish word, but do not quite capture it on their own. While the ambiguity of the concept is exactly what I am considering here, it is difficult to engage with academically. In the final analysis chapter, I analyze its potential through Jean Baudrillard's work on the concept of ”simulacra”; it is an interesting tool to think with when it comes to the meaning of anything and implications of social change in a reality that has morphed into a simulation. He argues that we have moved into a simulacra, the realm of ”hyperreal” made of ”models of a real without origin or reality”, meaning that the information influencing our concepts of reality are so fragmented that reality has ceased to exist (Baudrillard 1994, 1). I will reflect on this with my data in the final chapter.

3 Methodology and ethics

In this final section before moving on to the analysis, I detail the reasons for methodological decisions I made while preparing for and conducting my research, then give an overview of the data I collected and finally, reflect on my own position and limitations.

3.1 Choosing methodology

Ethnography, a long-term immersive participant observation, has traditionally been the main methodology of anthropologists, and has been suggested as a productive way to approach fan studies as well (Duffett 2013, 260; Nikunen 2005, 36). For the scope of a 70-page thesis, however, conducting long-term in-person fieldwork is difficult for time and economic reasons. Since the community I was researching was anyway also active online, I decided to do what some anthropologists call ”patchwork ethnography” (f. ex Günel et al. 2020). Patchwork ethnography means ”processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process”, and a “decisive detachment from the traditional requirements of ethnography that demanded the anthropologist to stay at the site for months or years that also acknowledges that the way people are in the world has also become much more diverse and multi-sited, for example through internet” (Günel et al. 2020). Since I am also a fan, this thesis has some elements of an autoethnography though the focus is on the accounts of my interlocutors. Autoethnography has been developed particularly by Black feminist anthropologists to renegotiate their own position between the disciplines production of “other” and the “otherness” of themselves (Strong and Blanks Jones 2023). Choosing a partly autoethnographic topic was a consciously made decision to avoid creating othering by trying to establish an account of a “culture” from a completely out-group perspective (Duffett 2013, 271).

Another important methodological decision was to follow the guidelines of feminist anthropology. Like described in the previous section, emotions and affects are an important part of being a fan, and feminist scholars have been able to effectively argue for the informative importance of emotions in research (Petillo 2020; Nikunen 2005, 35). Feminist ethnography includes commitment “to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants’ lives” (Craven et al. 2013, 1). There are no specific set of guidelines to feminist

anthropology, and no methodologies are inherently feminist or non-feminist unless the commitment to considering power relations and marginalities is done throughout research and analysis by engaging with intersectionality (Davis and Craven 2022, 12-13 & 91). I attempted to honor this commitment in this research by thinking with it throughout the process, not only in the analysis but also in planning, executing, and writing my thesis while actively engaging with works of intersectional feminism (Davis and Craven 2022; Weiss 2022; Craven 2021). As a part of this engagement I also reflect on my position and intersections in the final chapter of this methodology section.

3.2 Overview of the fieldwork

The fieldwork took place between November 2023 and February 2024, starting with participant observation on the social media platform X (at the time of my research still Twitter) platform and questionnaire that gained 146 responses that lead 42 subsequent semi-structured interviews conducted between December and January over Zoom. Finally, I conducted a two-week in-person ethnography in North Carolina and Texas at the end of February where I attended games and met with fans at coffee shops, sightseeing in the two cities I visited and tailgating before games, for example. I was happy with how these methods complemented each other: with the amount of data I had after the interviews done before the in-person fieldwork I was critical about the need to go to the field, but eventually found it to be a valuable perspective for reading my data. The community exists in different forms online and in person; the games are thick with communal excitement but lack the platform for prolonged discourse among fans. It also revealed some practices that were normalized amongst certain fans (like going to watch the away-team leave their hotel, for example) that people were not always eager to share online or in the interviews: both social media presence and interviews allow for the interlocutors to build a narrative they choose, but in person it was easier to identify the things left unsaid. Gossiping and rumors have always been an important source of information for anthropologists about underlying dynamics in the communities they do their research with, and my experience was no different, as fans who disapproved of this behavior reported back their thoughts on other fans. On the other hand, social media interactions offer more detailed stances on contemporary issues with a very quick response time and highlight certain sides of fan interactions and culture, such as the ability to laugh at oneself.

My aim was to gain an understanding of how different social intersections informed interlocutors' impressions of hockey culture, and I believe I have collected quite unique data of the perspectives of particularly queer and female fans of NHL ice hockey. Out of 146 answers to the questionnaire 67% preferred she/her pronouns, 25% he/him and the final 8% different gender neutral or fluid pronouns. I received survey answers from 15 countries: Australia, Canada, Cuba, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Unites States and New Zealand. A clear majority of them (104) were American. The lessened significance of locality as a part of fanhood is a fascinating topic that I will touch on briefly here, but I hope to focus more on it in future works, as for the scope of the study and the data available, the American context of sport and cultural change is emphasized. While I thought asking about nationality would be the simplest way to get an idea about the general distribution of fans active the community, I learned that this, as any other concept, can be interpreted in a number of ways: for example, in Dallas people tended to emphasize the autonomous history of the state by calling themselves Texans first and Americans second. I did not get similar answers from my North Carolinian interlocutors: most had moved there for or after college and found hockey through the need to find new hobbies in a new area away from previous social contexts, leading them to build a lot of their North Carolinian identity around the shared pride and excitement for their hockey team. One of my interlocutors quite sternly told me in the interview that asking for someone's nationality is always political, especially in the US where people come from all over and find pride in calling themselves American no matter their origins. Another example of the politics of this question came as one of responders reported "living on Turtle Island in Lenapehoking" on the nationality question to emphasize their Native American identity.

The respondents were asked to disclose the decade of their birth, and everything between 1940s and 2000s was mentioned, with about third of the responders being born in 2000s (50 responders) and another third in 1990s (46 responders), the final third divided between 1940-1980. 62 interlocutors identified as a part of LGBTQ+ community, and 71 did not, 3 were "unsure". Among LGBTQ+ identifying fans, seven were born before the 1990s, 55 in 1990s or 2000s. 11 LGBTQ+ identifying responders reported preferring they/them or fluid pronouns, 12 he/him and the remaining 39 she/her.

Finally, respondents were free to name other intersections they thought affected their experience of hockey fandom, and here people disclosed, for example, religious beliefs, marital status, disabilities

and so on. Some interlocutors wanted to specify race (responses in this category included for example Black, White, Asian/Asian-American, Cajun, Latino/Latine, Mixed-race, ”racism hits close to home to me”) or religion (Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Atheism). Six people mentioned being disabled and two autistic. Some of the reported aspects were being an ally of LGBTQ+ people or specified their own identity as asexual, genderqueer or transgender for example. A couple of responders revealed to have currently or previously worked for the teams studied here. Some wanted to specify something about their national identity, for example being Finnish-Swedish or Texan. A couple of people also specified their socio-economic class as Middle-class, or mentioned being mother or wives.

It is worth noting that these are all broad, complex identities, and the impact of the combinations of them cannot be determined in a generalized way. People understand these categories differently as illustrated by the nationality question and gender identity, for example, is much more complex than just the preferred pronouns – it is a combination of experience, expression, culture and language. I have done this very simplified breakdown of the intersections to show that the community is made of different identities with different experiences; it would be, in my opinion, useless to draw more detailed conclusions about it. When quoting an interlocutor, I have added the indications of the main intersectional categories after their answers to emphasise the diversity of the community – preferred pronouns, nationality, identification as LGBTQ+ (marked with a +) and the decade of birth.

The questionnaire was divided into two categories: first, questions about hockey culture in general, (7 open ended questions) and then about Finland and Finnish players (12 questions including 9 multiple choice and 3 open ended questions). For Finnish speaking responders I had a third section with some questions about hockey’s status in Finland, but I do not have room to elaborate on those for the scope of this thesis. The questions were focused on understanding the fan’s favorite and least favorite things about their fandom and favorite players. In the 42 interviews that followed I asked the interlocutors to elaborate on their answers and detail how they had understood specific questions with a couple of additional ones, always tailored for the particular interlocutors based on their questionnaire answers. These gave me a better understanding of how some of the concepts, such as culture, community et cetera could be interpreted in the questionnaire answers that did not elaborate on those themes. I could, for example, ask if the interlocutor thought that their gender had influenced their experience of being a

hockey fan, or how they understood the concept of nationality. It was also easier to probe for further explanations and recognize when the silence was still pregnant with things unsaid.

As mentioned, going to the field and experiencing games live added a final valuable layer to my research. While I argue throughout the thesis that the internet community is just as real and meaningful to people experiencing it, it is impossible not to feel connected to the crowd of thousands of fans in a hockey arena during a game – the crowds are roaring, the excitement like electricity in the air, and strangers and friends celebrating alike after goals or great saves. I met with about 40 fans for different amounts of time in Raleigh; some I sat with in the games, some I met more briefly during warmups or intermissions, some I met just to hang out with. In Dallas I had a smaller local network but got the chance to spend longer times with each of them. I shared a room with my Italian friend made through mutual fandom of Roope Hintz and spent full days outside of the games with two different friends from the area. In the games (three in the Dallas Stars' home American Airlines Center and one watch party for an away game in Colorado) I spent time with additional 4 people. I also conducted an hour-long interview with the Dallas Stars' social media manager. While productive, my time in the field was also hectic and my notes were all over the place on my phone and notebooks after I came home. While it provided highly valuable perspectives and deepened my understanding of what kind of control of the narratives of self people can impose on social media, the main focus of analysis will be on the data collected through the questionnaire and the interviews with additional notes from the physical field.

109 of the questionnaire answers mentioned being fans of the Carolina Hurricanes, 49 being fans of the Dallas Stars. 11 people were not fans of either team whereas 26 mentioned being a fan of both. An interesting distinction was that a majority of Canes fans (63) were local to the team and 44 were not, but with the Stars a majority (37) were non-local fans and only 12 lived in the area. Stars fans also tended to be younger; many of them were living in their university or college town. Perhaps social media presence had something to do with that as well, because the Stars also had more completely foreign fans who had never set foot in Texas before. In person at the games the crowd seemed more diverse as well, though I happened to catch a Black History Month celebration game that might have contributed to this. Overall, however, I could not draw any more detailed conclusions about specific demographics of either team.

3.3 Reflections on my own position

I relate to a lot of what I discussed with my interlocutors. I first encountered hockey outside of my traditional understanding of it on X when I stumbled upon a fancam of Czech forward Martin Nečas, edited to the song ”That’s My Girl” by American girl group Fifth Harmony. Growing up in Finland, my idea of a hockey fan was a middle-aged man yelling at a TV or a group of young men getting wasted in World Championships around the world; to say I was surprised by a cutely done edit to a song empowering girlhood would be an understatement.

It is worth to noting that I was a fan of these two teams before getting to the field as an anthropologist and many people understood me as a part of the community already before coming to the field. Many people also noted that they had gained more interest in the Finnish players I was investigating the fans of after following my account. I have disclosed identifying as queer myself on my X profile as well which affected the conversations I had in the field — for example, one of my interlocutors informed me that I was the first person who he ever came out to, and we had an emotional conversation about this as we were doing the interview. On the other hand, somebody might have declined to take part in the questionnaire because this information about me was available. It is also worth to noting that since I shared the initial questionnaire through my fan account, it reached a lot of people who have similar ideas about hockey and these teams, and therefore the information discussed here should not be understood to be a presentation of a generalized experience of all ice hockey fans universally – I am offering a perspective on a specific fraction of the fandom in a specific moment in time.

Almost everyone named the biggest issues in hockey culture being sexism, racism and homophobia. While all these forms of oppression will be present in the analysis of this thesis, some of them would have deserved a more thorough analysis. I was initially meant to focus on racism in hockey culture a lot more, but while doing the interviews I realized that my methodological studies had not provided me with the sufficient toolkit to research it in-depth. If an interlocutor brought up their experiences with racism we discussed it, but I did not want to be the one to bring it up or assume — I would not have known how to compensate the researcher-interlocutor relationship’s balance to not turn extractivist from my part in case my questions had triggered a traumatic memory. Insufficient preparation of this part is my greatest regret on this thesis and something I can hopefully revisit in future research.

Me being a fan and a researcher also sometimes influenced to my willingness to take part in suggested activities with fans that would have been intriguing from an anthropological view but that I was uncomfortable with as a fan. As I went to spend time with some fans at a location they suggested during my time in Raleigh it turned out that the location had been chosen based on some of the players living in the same expensive neighborhood (I had no idea about the status of different city areas of Raleigh), and after some time of hanging out someone asked if I would like to go eat lunch to the restaurant where some of the players would be eating shortly. I was shocked by the suggestion and very quickly turned it down without thinking about it any more than that in the moment — for me, this would have been classified as behavior crossing the accepted boundaries between a fan and the idol. The fans I was with did not push the matter, but sometime later they asked if I would want to then go to watch the away team leaving their hotel and potentially get the autographs of the Finnish players in the team. Yet again I refused. I do not regret not going, but I recognize that this would have potentially triggered some interesting conversations that were then unrealized about what kinds of things were normalized as fan behavior.

Interestingly, my nationality was perhaps the main contributor towards how people interacted with me. I was sometimes treated almost like a mini-celebrity, especially in Raleigh, from my understanding only because I am known as a Finnish fan in the social media community. This also came up in the interviews and questionnaire answers: I got the sense that sometimes when I was asking about ideas of Finland, for example if the interlocutor found Finland to seem ”socially progressive”, people seemed to often assume that it was my understanding that it was socially progressive and therefore started to either bash or defend the USA instead of answering the initial question. My Finnishness also led to some awkward moments. After the last game in Raleigh, a particularly intense day of meeting informants finished by a Canes loss, I had agreed to meet some fans at the gate of the arena where the players can stop to sign stuff for the fans if they so wish. A couple of kind fans had made a sign saying something among the lines of ”I’m a Finnish fan, please stop your car and come say hello to me”. I was tired and embarrassed, and to the great confusion of the lovely people who had made the sign I could not have held it up for the players. I was exhausted and in retroperspect I believe I did not do a very good job of explaining myself, and I remain sorry if I hurt their feelings.

4 “The Players”: Making sense of a culture

Before we can start to determine how a culture can change, we must first understand how the community creating, experiencing, and changing it is formed. In this first section of the analysis I discuss how the community of NHL hockey fans has formed and what kind of issues fans identify with the hockey culture. In the final subchapter I pay special focus on how the Finnish players have come to represent positive change in the community and culture.

4.1 Making of a community: how and why people find ice hockey?

Q: Best thing about hockey fandom?
A:*”It’s a beautiful game and it has been there for me to watch and cheer for in my darkest of times. My whole family has loved it for 20+ years so it is our culture. We are educated, queer loving hockey rednecks. And we will not leave our post! We will defend goodness and resist!” (fluid pronouns, Lenapehoking, +, 1980s)*

Unsurprisingly, there were no correlations between how people found hockey based on their sexuality or gender. From the questionnaire I could identify three main categories of how people had gotten into hockey: they were ”born into it” (1), became fans in young adulthood after moving to a hockey market state or city (2) and finally, the newest batch of fans who came exposed to it through social media or other forms of media in the last 10 years (3). There was a trend of people becoming fans after the Covid-19 pandemic related boredom through the so called ”bubble playoffs,”[10] when the belated Stanley Cup finals were the only sports showing on television in the fall of 2020. The Dallas Stars made the final round of those playoffs, just missing out on the main prize to the Tampa Bay Lightning. These categories were not exclusive and had a lot of overlap: many people who had grown up with it had reconnected with it during the pandemic and some of the newer fans had only found what ended up being their ”own” team randomly through their success after initially getting into hockey for another

[10] The NHL regular season has 82 games for each team, and the best three of each of the four divisions plus an additional two wild card teams for both conferences move on to the playoffs. The playoffs are played in the best to 4 matchup format. There are four rounds of playoffs, the fourth and final one being ”The Stanley Cup finals”, where the best of the Eastern conference and the best of the Western conference determine the winner. The Bubble playoffs were all set in the same two arenas instead of the teams traveling between the states, and they played in front of empty audiences.

reason, well illustrated by this interlocutor: ”*Big part of local regions history and culture, social media fandom has allowed me to interact with it without worst elements of typically in the fandom*.” (they/them, American, +, 1990s).

People who were born into it were mostly Northern and Eastern European, such as Finnish or Slovak, where the National team games are commonly watched together with family and friends with high hopes due to the historical success of national teams, or Carolina Hurricanes fans born in late 1990s or 2000s after the relocation of the Canes (before that the Hartford Whalers) to North Carolina. In both cases interlocutors reminisced about ritually watching games with their family members at home and live in the arenas and could often name particular tournaments or even moments in a game that had stayed with them through the decades. Unsurprisingly the Canes' only Stanley Cup from the 2005-2006 season was named a lot as a moment that made an interlocutor fall in love with the sport: for Finnish fans a number of moments stood out from Olympic medals to World Junior Championships gold in 2016 (perhaps this came up a lot because Sebastian Aho of the Carolina Hurricanes and Roope Hintz of the Dallas Stars were alternate captains of the team) to Mikael Granlund's *ilmaveivi* (lacrosse/ Michigan goal) in the gold winning men's world championships of 2011. Availability to being exposed to the game was key in this category: all but one of such interlocutors said that their interest started with the national or local team's success. One exception was an informant who had seen ”The Mighty Ducks” (1992) ice hockey film as a kid and fallen in love with the sport despite not having access to the actual game for decades to come. People in this category were born across all different decades.

The other two categories form around people who became fans in their adulthood. Most of the fans in this group were Americans born between the 1960s and 1980s and had found hockey through moving to study or work into another state that had a hockey team or simply by being exposed to new people coming from all over the country that introduced them to hockey, or alternatively moved to a hockey market state, usually North Carolina, in late 90s and early 2000s. For some people hockey was a way to find a new hobby and friends in a new area; for some the fandom came only when the Canes had a promising Cup run in 2002 or when they won in 2006. Not only winning but big sports news overall attracted people during early adulthood in new states: some informants told me about moving to Los Angeles right before the Gretzky trade or getting to live the excitement of a new California team “The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim”. Less dramatic news worked too: two people told me that their local team

changing coaches had gotten them interested in seeing what was going on with the team that led to deep commitment. One informant did tell me that she wanted to watch hockey already in the 80s but coming from a rural area the only way was to watch it on TV and ”*the tv resolution wasn't good enough to be able to see the puck on tv*” (she/her, American, 1970s).

The other set of adulthood fans who found it from the 2010s onwards had a more varied way of stumbling upon the sport. Many had found a player or a team they liked on social media and eventually ended up with a team that might had have nothing to do with the original player they found interesting. People mentioned seeing moving ”edits”, meaning for example fancams (collage of videoclips of a particular player, pairing, or team edited to a popular song) or stylized pictures with poetry over them, posted on Tumblr, X and Instagram. This usually happened simultaneously with a success of a particular team or a player when the stakes were high and the fans doing the edits were emotional and productive in their creativity: some examples included Pittsburgh Penguins 2016 Cup Run, or watching Sebastian Aho “grow up” during his years in Carolina. A clear watershed moment was the pandemic and the bubble playoffs that people happened to see clips of on YouTube, other sport broadcasts or through friends streaming them on Discord during social distancing. Social media activity of both fans and the teams played a huge part in this, but other forms of media were also bringing people in. A couple of people mentioned having read romance books set in hockey contexts — a genre that got unexpectedly popular in the 2020s — or fan fiction of something else completely that had been set into a hockey team. One of my informants told me that her favorite character in a series she was watching was a hockey fan, and she simply wanted to understand the character better (she/her, American, +, 2000s). This group was mostly born in 1990s or 2000s, international and from non-traditional hockey markets like Southern European nations France, Italy, Spain or had for example Cuban, Mexican or Singaporean heritage or nationality, areas that have not have a lot if any history with ice hockey.

There are no specific factors I can identify that make hockey attractive to queer fans, but their way for finding community might be influenced by the imagined shared experience: ”*somehow I was able to find this niche of queer/poc/non-men hockey fans that made me feel welcome! but at the same time, i'm able to talk to straight white men in my community about the dallas stars also*”. (they/them, American, queer, 2000s).” Another fan wrote: ”*Sometimes I can't believe the number of queer hockey fans I meet, it's really such an interesting part of hockey fandom and I think there's something special about the*

sport that attracts LGBT folks of all ages" (she/her, American, +, 2000s). The queer part of the fandom, then, is thought to be both somehow special, but also not isolated from the wider community; if anything, it has broadened some fans' sociality to extend outside their usual interactions. While many fans enjoy the shared jokes within and outside of the queer community, some people have more conflicting feelings about it. "*I follow some fans but keep to myself. I don't really feel connected to the current ways that fandom expresses itself...the "babygirl," "her" stuff, etc, I don't get it and honestly it kind of upsets me, to misgender someone like that, even though I can tell it's done affectionately? I accept that I'm probably too old lol. So I don't interact."* (they/them, American, +, 1990s). They are talking about the popularized habit of pop culture fandoms referring to male presenting characters/celebrities/players with the feminine pronouns "she" or "her" as a sign of affection, or the reclaiming of words such as "babygirl" or "mother" by using them on men. While these are not specific to hockey fandom, I too was quite surprised when I asked why the interlocutor liked a specific Finnish player and the response was "*Sebastian Aho is such a babygirl!"*

Beyond the obvious appreciation of the game itself, another thing that a lot of people found inviting and particular to hockey was how approachable the players seem. Many agreed that ice hockey is in its prime right now, the quality and pace of the game being at an all-time high, and yet even the biggest superstars of the sport are not even close to national or international stardom, never mind the European players in small Southern markets. People mentioned their favorite thing about hockey being, for example, "*the humanization of the players – they're not treated like celebrities or these distant figures with 'god-like' abilities, but rather just your friend or someone you know and have heard about, they're "just a guy" or someone you feel you can connect with both outside and within the sport*." (he/him, American, +, 1990s, Latino), "*cult following a player whether it was a star or 4th liner*[11]" (he/him, American, 1990s) and "*hearing stories about players off the ice because they are heartwarming and hilarious"* (she/her, American, 2000s, disabled). One person even said that their *favorite* thing was the "*parasocial player relationships created by social media*" (she/her, American, 1960s). The athletes are simultaneously seen as highly skilled, and appreciative of their fans in real, human ways, and this also makes connecting with other fans over speculating and talking about them easy and approachable. One fan wrote a good summary: *"You can watch hockey in many different ways: sometimes you can be*

[11] 4th liner means a forward that plays on the 4th = "last" forward line, the trio of forwards consisting of a center and two wingers. 4th liners have the least ice-time and are traditionally players with least expectations when it comes to producing points. Often also referred to as"working men line", they are expected to provide physicality as the first three lines rest.

*focused on statistics and line formations, sometimes you watch highlights, you watch particular games from completely different perspectives either admiring or detesting your team; the successes of one's favorites and the individual narratives filled with dramatics that one finds when you follow them for a longer time are amazing; you can agree with experts or laugh at their ignorance."(*she/her, Finnish, 1960s*,* translated from Finnish by me.)

All fans in these groups would be categorized as the harshly named "cult fans" in Nikunen's distinction – hockey was certainly not something that was mainly a project of gaining social capital outside of fandom spaces, but rather, usually a niche that people came to share with each other on social media because they could not do so with other people in their lives. While all of my interlocutors would fall into some kind of variation of the category of partisan fandom introduced in the key concepts section, I argue that there is also quite a lot of overlap in hockey fandom between what Archer & Wojtowicz and Mumford categorize as partisan and purist fans. While people are extensively passionate about their own teams, many tune in to other games on the nights their team is not playing and are very aware of all the latest happenings all around the league. Many fans list multiple teams on their profiles with their own hierarchy of the teams they support – the main one might be an intense partisan fan relation, the next one more based on "they have a lot of interesting young players" where the interest is a more purist focus on the team's development, and the third team that just "has good vibes". While many are normalizing showing a mixture of both fandom types, however, this also creates conflicts with more traditional fans who do not share the sentiment that you can be real fan if you enjoy other teams as well. I woke up one day, for example, to an angry man and some of his friends having tweeted me numerous times saying I was not a real fan of the Canes since I also mentioned being a fan of Sidney Crosby, the Pittsburgh Penguins' longtime captain. Crosby is one of the best player of the current era that most – if not all – of the Canes and Stars players I am a fan of have named as their role model growing up. During the interviews a couple of people also asked me how I was able to be a fan of two teams: I did not identify any mal intentions in these questions but genuine wonderment. Perhaps this is where the distance plays an important part: when your main way of following the games is through highlights and social media content, it is easier to do so with multiple teams compared to committing to watching all 82 games of multiple teams live. Since fans of all teams are producing similar kinds of content it is easier to be introduced to players and their narratives while scrolling on X, too. While some argue that it is natural for sports fans to develop from partisan fans into "expert" purist fans as

they get older (Heinonen and Godenhjelm 2001, 30), this was not reflected by my interlocutors – fans in all categories had different ways of interacting with the fandom based on personal preference, not so much an expectation based on age.

Out of 146 respondents 135 said they regularly use social media platforms to interact with other fans, and 5 additional ones said they follow a lot of people but do not really interact with it. Since I reached out to people with the questionnaire shared through social media this is not a surprise. Social media platforms mentioned were X, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, Tumblr and Bluesky. The social media presence of fans of all three categories was similar — what people were posting had more to do with personal preference as some fans mass-produce memes, and others do deep analysis posts on the same platforms. The teams themselves are also active on social media and engage with fans and their inside jokes, encouraging the fans to be active in the social medias to keep up to date with the team.

There are evidently fans, and they interact with each other actively, but is there a community? The interlocutors thought so: 51 questionnaire answers named community as the best thing about hockey. This could mean several things: many simply mentioned shared inside jokes and memes as a source of community, while others described the joy of having made friends around the globe to share the highs and lows of their teams with people who cared as much as they did. On top of enjoying having people to be excited, with many interlocutors mentioned it being a great source of strength in life outside of hockey too, to have made friends in adulthood with whom they could have passionate discourse on the problems hockey culture one moment, and narrate player careers with other fans the next. The traditional ”us vs them” narrative of sports fandoms was also present in the answers, both with a particular team’s fans (many Canes fans mentioned their dislike for Rangers, for example) as well as the wider communal source of strength to fight the “bad side” of hockey culture together and create more accepting spaces than the NHL was making an effort for. This was well summarized by this interlocutor: *”friendships, common fandomhood. it'd be a lot harder to stay a fan without these human connections, conversations, ways to vent about love and hate alike for the things that are happening with/to hockey, our team and our players. and with that, the feeling of partial "ownership" ("our team", "our captain" and so on) that comes with the fandom, gives every fan some feeling of authority for their opinions, intensifies the feelings of loyality and togetherness within the fans all over the world and not just the ones attending the games live.”* (she/her, Finnish, 1990s)

As demonstrated here by the multiple ways fans of hockey experience the emotions and connections with each other, even a loosely defined social media community can have very real implications upon an individual's experience of belonging. Imagined communities are real (Sumiala 2010, 79), and being a fan in an imagined community can indeed be seen as a way of replacing sociality lost in modern life (Nikunen 2005, 88-90). Fandom has been theorized at best as a form of an utopian community (Duffett 2013, 245; Nikunen 2005, 131) where hierarchies of the world outside of the fandom are not as influential and therefore offer new ways of making community. While I see where this idea comes from – online spaces do have the chance of to erase visual signs of intersections that might alter behavior in real world subconsciously – the unsaid rules and hierarchies have not been removed from fandoms, they are just formed differently (Nikunen 2005, 137). As discussed in the theory chapter, social media has rewritten the rules of fandom. It has become more accessible and the potential of finding community has increased as the audience fragments to more specific sub-groups of fans that share values and intersections outside of hockey as well. At the same time, however, social media has created new hierarchies. I will next show some examples of how factors influencing fandom community dynamics such as language/nationality (access to "secret knowledge shared in athlete's native tongue), locality (rumors/sightings of the players), longevity (loyalty/not only being there for the good times), social media fluency and creativity (ability to create content that people want to engage with) among other things negotiate a fan's standing in the community.

The importance of locality has decreased strongly over the 2000s. The availability of the game become less and less tied to the place; you can watch games and highlights and follow the discourse from free platforms from anywhere in the world. This is further emphasized by local fans, especially young ones, struggling to attend the games due to the high cost of the tickets. When I was in Raleigh, we paid $70-240 for our tickets, and in Dallas we paid $120-340. The American Airlines Center in Dallas is located downtown so you can technically walk there (as we did with my friend, inviting a lot of confusion from local friends and strangers alike) but in Raleigh the Canes' home arena Lenovo Center (during my fieldwork still called PNC Arena) is about a 20 minute drive away from downtown, so you need to either drive there and pay an additional $40 for a parking pass or take an Uber that also costs money. T-shirts with the team's logo can go for about $40 and for a special event's t-shirt $50-60; a fan jersey starts from $180, special jerseys go for about $400. While I could not find data on the average money spent on food and beverages of NHL games, NFL fan's spending habits might give us an idea about it:

Carolina Panthers fans spent $60 on average on food and drinks at each game *as the lowest spenders* in the league (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 9). While all fans I talked with dream of going to watch games live, attending them all the time does not give a special status in the fandom as one might expect for these reasons. The content posted form warmups and shenanigans not caught on the official streams are appreciated by people who cannot go to the games, but not more so than fancams, translations and analyses of fans who might never see a game live. Despite the high costs, everyone who I met was wearing some kind of merchandise, usually a jersey and/or a cap for example, so the consumerist side of hockey fandom remains, but wearing the team's colors can be done these days in creative ways with on social media too. I therefore return to my earlier claim in the theory chapter and repeat that while the consumerist side of fandom still exists, I would not categorize it as the only meaningful relationship between a fan and a team anymore when talking about how fans view each other.

One thing that a lot of the fans in categories 1 and 2 brought up often was pride in having gone through "The Dark Ages" with the Canes — a period of the team being repeatedly at the bottom of the league after their Stanley Cup win between roughly 2006 and 2015. Anyone who was a fan throughout this period was sure to mention it as many of the newer fans have only experienced the Canes that are a Cup contender every year. While these fans usually also happened to be the people who attended most games, but it had more to do with age and the economic status reached after years in the workforce than about an expression of a true fan. They were the first ones to tell me that during the Dark Ages the arena was often empty, and the team had to give tickets away basically for free to have anyone in the audience and were indeed very aware of how much the average amount of money spent on hockey had risen over the years. Their interpretation of their own status did not come so much from attending the games either, then, but rather about what they themselves understood as a sign of loyalty that younger fans had not yet been able to demonstrate with the recent success of the team – longevity and loyalty provide context for the team's current level of success which is another way that can be thought to create "secret knowledge" and deeper understanding of the team as well as certain players and therefore contribute towards hierarchies in the community (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 92). I will return to the potential and problematics of loyalty in the second part of the analysis.

The main hierarchy I did recognize from my conversations did not have as much to do with location, then, but rather surprisingly, nationality and particularly language. People were quick to praise the

Finnish fans in the fandom for translating their favorite players' interviews or sharing local news about them. To me this seemed like an extension of the love for the Finnish players rather than anything specific in the content the Finns I interviewed and observed provided. I have no misconceptions about how my own status in the fandom has been formed around my Finnishness more than anything else, too. What I did not expect, however, was how it also affected my experience in the field. I do not think I paid for a single beverage or snack in PNC Arena: I was always with someone else who either insisted on paying or they told the person doing the sale I had come "all the way from Finland" and I would be given the products for free. For my birthday a friend surprised me by having arranged for me to go to a closed practice of the Hurricanes — she had contacted them saying she wanted to treat a Finnish fan, and I was provided an invite to come and watch the Hurricanes practice in the otherwise empty PNC Arena on a day between the games. That evening a group of friends and I attended a Q&A happening in a restaurant near the arena where Hurricanes forward Jordan Martinook was taking questions with Canes' play-by-play commentator Mike Maninscalo hosting. A group of strangers had reserved a seat at the front for our group after hearing I was in town through social media, and someone had submitted a question asking for the player to wish me happy birthday. I was welcomed to the arena on the Jumbotron during my first game, and a friend of a friend invited me to a fan tunnel event that invites fans to come and fist bump the players on their way to the ice. While my experience in Dallas was not quite this intense with the favors through the "pull" of being Finnish as I was not as used to bringing it up as my American friends in Raleigh, it does continue to provide me with unique experiences. While not unique to the American Airlines center, they played Finnish songs during one of my games there after my friends requested the DJ do so. The Dallas Stars official account regularly interacts with me in Finnish, and I have been featured in a couple of their videos, for example, a promotional video for the 2024 Global Series games held in Tampere. My Italian friend and interlocutor who I spent the week in Dallas with repeatedly drew attention to this and I could tell it slightly annoyed her that I was treated differently despite having travelled from just as far away. While I am endlessly thankful for the kindness of these near strangers to want to provide me with these experiences as a fan, it also made me feel like a con-artist — what did I have to provide in return? What is it that people think nationality affects in a person in this context? People regularly ask me what I think a certain Finnish player is thinking about a specific occurrence in the fandom, which I find fascinating — is my shared nationality/language and rough age group with a person who I do not know thought to give me some sort of deeper insight into his emotions and views? I discussed this with other

Finns in the interviews and tried to observe how other fans who travelled to the games from farther away discussed their travel on social media, and found some similarities and some differences in their experiences. While how kind people were to me can be explained by factors beyond nationality, of course, my point is that nationality is not commonly given this kind of attention in modern feminism's intersectionality discourse, and since it is not something I have previously thought as a major part of my identity, it provided interesting new insights.

The value placed in being able to translate interviews has parasocial implications if knowledge is considered social capital in the context of fandom. So is being able to provide other kinds of content, such as fancams, insights on the players outside the ice or consistently fun takes on the newest turns of events in the league. These factors might give certain fans more influence in the fandom overall. It might also invite people to engage in a borderline stalkerish behavior to be able to be the first one to deliver news of a player's personal life despite having no mal-intent. I am not implying that all fans are on the edge of falling into the stalker category, but I do argue that social media and the culture created through it encourages parasocial behavior in ways I discussed in the theory chapter. I am also not blaming fans or fandoms for this – teams encourage this to a certain extent too, in a way, as they take hold of certain narratives and engage with fans. Not all fans engage with this behavior the same way, of course, and the boundaries of fan-idol relations are constantly negotiated within the fandom. Fans both supervise and learn from each other. A good example of a controversial topic is the habit of making signs for warmups asking players for pucks, sticks or selfies. Many people see this as immature, especially if the fan then proceeds to post about a successful wish with a tone suggesting it was given to them because the fan and the players have a special connection. At the same time, when people keep seeing how this works through social media, more people end up making signs. A popular approach during my fieldwork was to do them in the native language of a foreign player, a communal effort as many consulted fans who were native speakers after struggling with online translators.

Internet communities used to be described as lesser social commitments due to it being so easy to leave one (Nikunen 2005, 333). While it is easy, my interlocutors were deeply engaged with the community and did not seem likely to leave it anytime soon despite how easy it would have been to simply stop checking the social media app of their choice. Interestingly, my research showed that people were very actively in contact with no intention of ever meeting, even if they lived in the same city and regularly

went to the same games. They could point the sections where they knew a certain shared acquaintance sat most games, for example, but when asking if they wanted to come and say hi when I went, they declined, almost confused by the question despite regularly talking on social media. On the other hand, many wanted to meet me when I visited, and while I have detailed why I suspect it to be due my nationality, it is still unwise to draw too many conclusions about where the community is or is not located. The camaraderie described by the online community had implications for reality as well even without the interactions never taking place in the non-digital world. The group I was with, for example, received someone else's parking pass through X, saving us a lot of money. It is also common that people who attend special event games grab some extra goods and post them to international fans. Other fandoms have also influenced hockey fandom's conducts, like the friendship bracelet boom that originated from Taylor Swift's fans and expanded to a wide cultural phenomenon — I received probably close to 30 homemade bracelets with player names and numbers during my two weeks in the field. This kind of fan creativity over fandom borders emphasizes that the fandom has become more diverse and the people in the fandom are also fans of a wider variety of things (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 15) – another contributor, perhaps, to why people find it easy to be fans of many teams, too.

While the fan community is clearly an important form of belonging, it is worth noting that the most mentioned 'worst thing about hockey' was also encounters with other fans. My interlocutors of all ages and origins in their hockey fandom were annoyed with drama between fans of different teams, echo chamber mentality, and "hot takes" that were made just to be hateful. Many were uncomfortable with other fans of their own team, naming, for example, parasocial treatment of their team's players. One interlocutor said that their day was ruined by "*reading the most terminally online takes known to man*" (they/them, Cuban American, +, 2000s). "Terminally online" is a modern fandom lingo term that describes behavior so outrageous that it is blamed to be a result of too much theoretical discourse online without actually understanding the reality of the situation one is talking about. It can also refer to a fan getting too involved in player's personal life. People were also reacting negatively to other fans if they found them to be overreacting to a single game or, on the other hand, if someone tried to explain to them why they should not be reacting a certain way — this was more of a common experience with female fans that identified this as mansplaining. There was both overlap and division through these lines: some fans recognized both the communal aspect as well as the issues with over-reactions and the parasocial behavior normalized through fans encouraging each other. However, some people also felt

the community as a whole was not inviting due to gatekeeping or the existing communal groups not wanting to let more people into their tighter circlers. One informant responded ”*it’s like family*” to describe what she found to be the best and the worst things about hockey fandom (she/her, American, 1990s). The fans are constantly reviewing each other’s actions and reviewing their assumed morality based on what kind of actions they defend and which they actively disapprove of. Discussing these issues is what creates the community and culture, though sometimes not in the ways the participants would hope — it is as much created when the people who agree with each other converse on how things should be as it is when one fights with someone they call ”*Neanderthal male fans*” who disagree with them on everything (she/her, American, 1950s).

Cult fandom is made by the fans (Nikunen 2005, 319). Fandom is messy, complex and contradictory – but what community is not? After defining that there is indeed a community, I can now turn to what that community understands as the culture they share.

4.2 ”Best sport, worst league” — making sense of a culture

To understand the contradictions in the context where this community exists, I will give some examples of horrifying scandals from the last few years. Please note that the following paragraphs will contain discussion of sexual violence, homophobia, racism, domestic violence, and mental health issues such as addiction and self-harm. If you want to avoid any of these topics, please skip the next 4 paragraphs.

The two biggest stories, arguably, to come out of the hockey world in the last few years have to do with sexual violence. In 2021 a former player, later self-identified as Kyle Beach, filed a lawsuit against his former NHL team the Chicago Blackhawks. Beach recounted being sexually assaulted by the team’s then video coach in 2010, shortly after which Beach’s moved to play in Europe instead of the NHL. The Chicago Blackhawks apologized for their lack of action and eventually the matter was settled outside of court[12]. In 2022 a woman sued Hockey Canada, Canada’s highest hockey institution, stating that she had been sexually assaulted by 8 members of Canada’s 2018 World Junior Team. An investigation reported that the organization had a special fund to pay for settlements[13]. Many members

[12] https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/16/sport/chicago-blackhawks-kyle-beach-nhl-settlement/index.html
[13] https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/3652366/2022/10/03/hockey-canada-second-fund-sexual-assault-claims/

of said junior team have advanced to the NHL, including four of the five that eventually had charges filed against them[14]. The process is ongoing, and several of the players from that team still play in the NHL. The latest such case that broke was when a dangerously intoxicated woman was found in Colorado Avalanche forward Valeri Nichushkin's hotel room during the 2023 playoffs[15] and hospitalized from the scene. Nichushkin continues to play at present.

Racist incidents are often not as high-profile, but they are a constant stream. They are noted as isolated incidents and if any further comments are made, the responsibility has often lain with individual Black and Brown players, such as PK Subban[16] and Ryan Reaves[17], both members of the NHL's Player Inclusion Coalition that promotes social change in the NHL[18]. An investigation of Finnish youth leagues' sanctions reported 24 cases of racist comments during a game in the fall season of 2024, and every fourth time the organization had to penalize someone it had to do with racism[19]. Not only Black and Brown players but also white players from across Eastern Europe face continuous slurs in Finnish leagues[20]. The controversies are noted after a public reaction but have not led to significant structural changes. From observing the discourse on social media, another theme of micro-aggressions and biases was in fan interpretations of the NHL's conduct – many argued that many players with Native American or Asian heritage, for example, would be promoted and talked about much more in the league if they were white, such as half-Filipino Stars' forward Jason Robertson. Another constant topic is the Chicago Blackhawks' logo, a stereotypical portrayal of a Native American man. Similar conversations have led to other sports teams' changing their names and logos (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 139), but Blackhawks have repeatedly cited the logo celebrating the legacy of Chief Black Hawk and that they have collaborated with local Indigenous people on decisions regarding the logo[21].

Pride ban, often mentioned by my interlocutors as an example of the backwardness of the league, refers to a chain of events that started out with a couple of players refusing to participate in Pride Night

[14] https://apnews.com/article/hockey-canada-sexual-assault-ca86ce1548e442db8d26030c3b9c8f05
[15] https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/kraken/avalanches-valeri-nichushkin-says-little-about-incident-in-seattle/
[16] https://eu.tennessean.com/story/sports/nhl/predators/2024/04/02/pk-subban-racist-incident-racial-slur-youth-hockey-nashville-predators-black-player-canada/73136777007/
[17] https://andscape.com/features/nhl-winger-ryan-reaves-aug-27-2020-was-more-than-a-moment-for-us/
[18] https://www.nhl.com/community/player-inclusion-coalition
[19] https://www.hs.fi/urheilu/art-2000010997931.html
[20] https://yle.fi/a/74-20076058
[21] https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/sports/blackhawks-making-effort-to-engage-chicagoland-native-americans/1965727/

celebrations which would have required possibly wearing a specifically designed jersey for the 15-minute warmups before a game and optionally putting on rainbow colored tape to the stick, also just for the warmups. The 6 players in total said their decision was based on either religious reasons or fear of consequences in Russia. After a public backlash towards these players NHL banned all theme jerseys from there on as well as using the pride tape in the sticks to avoid further controversy. Several high-profile players disapproved of the ban, but it was Arizona Coyotes' player Travis Dermott who refused the ban and wore the tape anyway, leading the league to lift the ban on using the tape only days after setting the rule[22]. This whole thing left a lot of people unhappy with how the league conducted each part of the controversy and contributed to interpretations of the significance of the theme nights in the first place as virtue signaling rather than actual commitment for positive development.

Other examples of controversies that have not contributed to players' chance of playing in NHL include domestic violence accusations and political affiliations. For example, Washington Capitals' captain Alexander Ovechkin's Instagram profile picture shows him smiling with Russian President Vladimir Putin that he has not changed it throughout the nation's assault on Ukraine. Despite Russia being banned from international play the topic of the war has remained completely ignored in the NHL). Tony DeAngelo who has played with the Carolina Hurricanes on two separate contracts has been openly supportive of, for example, the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, and he is not alone in openly supporting sometimes heavily right-wing politics on his social media. A tragic constant news flow has to do with retired hockey players who, after suffering multiple concussions during their career, are forced to quit playing hockey without a plan B or get addicted to the heavy medication used to treat them, eventually lead to bankruptcies and in many tragic cases suicides at a young age[23].

It is no wonder that many works on hockey culture have described it as enriched in (toxic) masculinity (Isotalo 2013, 60; Salomaa 2004, 3; Heinonen and Godenhjelm 2001, 24). While in everyday life these horrible stories might not be discussed in the flow of game reviews and memes on social media, they are not lost on the community. 128 of the informants taking the questionnaire stated thinking that hockey culture needs to change. Issues that they raised were numerous and covered many different aspects of the culture and the game itself, such as bigoted behavior of fans and players, financial

[22] https://www.espn.com/nhl/story/_/id/38734725/nhl-reverses-new-ban-pride-tape-warmups
[23] E.g. https://www.pucksupport.com/hockey-player-suicide-overdose-memoriam

inaccessibility and player safety – all the examples at the start of this chapter were mentioned in the responses. The culture was often described with the term ”locker room culture” with additional descriptions of interlocutors finding it closeminded, toxic, racist, homophobic and sexist. The culture was seen as catering to white men to fuel their machismo, promoting nationalism and militarization that left minorities feeling unsafe or at least unwelcome to the community. Many women noted feeling like they were not equally respected as fans due to ”gatekeeping,” for example men assuming they did not know as much about the game than them, or being called ”puck bunny”, meaning they were only assumed to be a fan with the motivation of finding the players attractive. Many also noted the biggest issue to be the taboo of raising these issues, and the insufficient change even when they were raised. Only 5 interlocutors said they did not think hockey culture needed to change, while another 5 responded with ”not necessarily”. People in the latter group pointed out that the issues seen in hockey culture were shared with all male dominated sports and wider culture overall, and the way men are socialized in and outside of sports. It seemed to be a slightly more popular view with men that ”*it will adapt with prominent changes in overall western culture”* (he/him, Italian Canadian, 2000s) and “*the outside has already come in*” (he/him, American, +, 1990s, Latino).

Again, there was a divide in how people understood the question of culture. During the interviews I noted that fans from category two tended to first discuss hockey as the sport itself when I asked about whether it needed change or not, for example, player safety and league regulations on what kind of hits were accepted. Once I brought up the broader fan culture they had a lot of comments about it, but they did not initially think of it in that context. Fans of categories 1 and 3, on the other hand, went straight to the issues they saw in the ”culture” such as homophobia, racism, sexism and so on. They were also worried about player’s safety but were more likely to also discuss mental health issues in a wider context of men’s competitive sports as well as the mental health taboos of people socialized as men overall. Many were worried about the dangerous hits still allowed in NHL games despite the game having cleaned up a lot over the last few decades. Interlocutors identified this as going hand in hand with a macho culture that encouraged players not to seek help for their injuries even if they were aware of how bad they were — there is a longstanding tradition of players revealing what type of injuries they were battling over playoffs once the championship has been settled. Beyond the structural issues some simply said that they hated how their team losing could ruin their day or the unclear rules on goalie interference and video review interpretations ruining games. Surprisingly few people mentioned the

problematics of funding that seem to gain more interest in football, for example, but rather were annoyed with over-pricing at the games themselves. Some European fans were annoyed that when people talk about hockey culture, they only mean the NHL.

People were clearly highly aware of the issues of the culture, then, but how do they influence the fan community? Most informants named the worst thing about the fandom to be either racism, homophobia or misogyny, usually a combination of all three of them, just like the worst thing about hockey culture in general. Many agreed with the prejudice that the culture was made for white male fans and felt that the league was constantly reminding the new fanbase of this by ending official celebrations of theme nights like Pride and Black History Month celebrations. Many also mentioned how the macho-masculine culture of the sport reflected on the fanbase; rowdy interactions at games, spreading hate towards players on off-nights completely out of proportions, and saying they need to "toughen up", for example. Many queer fans reported hearing slurs at games, and despite them not having been directed at them it made the games feel unsafe. In the heart of the discourse is the often-repeated mantra "hockey is not political". The people I spoke with represented all different sides of the argument. Some people thought it had gone too far, and people should not place as much attention on the political or religious views of the players, while some thought that even the minority celebrations events that had occurred before had been performative and purely a cash-grab. I can see why. The Canes have never had Pride jerseys, and the using of the rainbow tape was an individual choice for each athlete. In 2023, after the Pride ban incident, none of the players wore it. Dallas has been more forthcoming with their theme nights, but seeing their 90s theme night having more detailed celebrations than the Canes' pride night did not exactly emphasise the meaning of these events.

Many noted that NHL should make actual, active interventions towards sexist, homophobic and racist incidents to invite more PoC and LGBTQ+ fans to feel included and make a bigger point of promoting women's hockey along with men's, for example. The constant scandals and the lack of any real action from the league and teams was disheartening to many, and a regular wish for a change was simply to hold people accountable for their actions. Particularly, many female, queer and racially marginalized fans felt like the lack of action towards misbehavior or even actual crimes felt like a constant reminder the space was not in fact made for them, but the reactions to that were diverse – whereas some fans had distanced themselves from the fandom, for some this worked as ignition to fight back even harder. All

of them shared the sentiment that the inaction towards structural issues catered to the empowerment of the part of the fanbase who was actively spreading hate in the fandom as well. Some people already felt this change was happening: a friend of mine said he had noticed a change in the last few years in how safe he feels going to the games alone as a Latino man, and especially older long-term female fans from category two were positively surprised by the changes they had seen in the sport and in the fandom in recent years. Even interlocutors who found it to have gotten better were annoyed at the slow pace of the change, however: ”A *multinational league should have no problem being multicultural and inclusive”* (she/her, American, +, 1960s). A new fan said she had not yet seen anything concerning, and that overall she felt like it was much better than with American Football. An important thing to note is also that it was not only the league that fans found to be promoting inaccessibility. Gatekeeping, selective interactions, cliques and parasocial fans defending bigoted behavior by other fans on social media were among the main things people named as obstacles for the sport to grow.

While there is a lot of difference and discourse in the details of the biggest issues of NHL as a league and the fan culture it creates and supports, almost everyone had a shared understanding about the reason why hockey is getting less popular. Everyone agreed that the league needed more young fans — for some, to simply replace the older fans who would not be there forever to support their teams, for others so that the old guard would have less influence on the league’s culture with their buying power. To attract new fans the league would have to refresh itself to have more players with personality and more diversity that would interest younger generations. The NHL, however, fears promoting change, since right now they are dependent on the support of the older fans who they at least assume to not want to see any change — and the repression of Pride Nights and such events on social media reflects that this is indeed the case. The league then blocks the development of diversity initiatives. This in turn invites teams to be very careful with their involvement in promoting change which in turn reinforces players to double down on the classic hockey "team first” mentality that requires them think of themselves as part of the team first and as individuals after. This mentality extends to how you dress when you walk the few steps from your car to the arena on game days, to what kind of stances you do (=do not) take publicly that might disturb the locker room peace with external attention. This sends a message to lower leagues and junior development as to the kind of personality they want their players to have, and the young players are socialized to act accordingly from a young age. By the time they arrive to the NHL, they have internalized this mindset to the extent that they do not even want to show

any personality that might attract new fans to get invested in the players, teams and the sport itself. The league, then, does not renew itself or its values. By not intervening with controversies they make it less appealing for marginalized fans to financially support the sport by going to games or paying for expensive streaming services and merchandise. Hockey therefore does not attract enough new fans to replace the financial impact of the older fans, so the league caters to their wish for things to remain the same, which empowers these particular fans to feel superior, which… The cycle keeps going.

In short, hockey fans are divided in their understanding of hockey culture needing a change, but the consensus among my interlocutors was that it did need to grow. And, surprisingly, despite the previous detailed accounts of the issues, 115 interlocutors said yes when asked if they thought that it was already changing. Half of them remarked it being way too slow, though — ”2 steps forward and 1,5 steps back” is a common phrase that people use when talking about the snail pace in which they think positive change might be happening. In general, people saw positive changes with a more diverse fanbase than what the league was reflecting, but they were also skeptical about the internal change in the league itself. Many noted that while they had felt it changing in the last 10 years, they also were not convinced the change was permanent — the pride night ban was the most mentioned specific case that had made people distrust the league after a while of having hope for a change for the better. Many also noted that when controversies happen, fans do react to them, but the opposition is focused on those specific moments instead of being understood as a continuous cultural issue and internalized mechanic. In this understanding, creating an uproar against the scandals themselves turns the focus away from the systemic change that the league desperately needs. Marginalized individuals have not been able to fix ”the culture” itself nor the league. In short, in their smaller fraction units within the fandom some could feel the change but were skeptical about the wider potential of it. Consider these two quotes from fans, both around the same age: “*I mostly follow hockey news on Twitter and post-elon musk Twitter really highlights well everything that is wrong with the current hockey culture (racist, sexist, homophobia, you call it). The pride night jersey ban in 2023? Plus the entire Chicago thing. Anyway, needs a deap cleaning with bleach.”* (she/her, French, unsure, 1990s) and the quite different “*In my small bubble with my hockey friends it feels good!”* (they/them, Cuban American, +, 2000s).

Yet, the trend seemed to be a cautious faith in slow change happening outside of those bubbles as well. A common reassurance was people pointing at specific cases — an equipment handler of a team

coming out, a woman hired as an assistant coach — and many interlocutors believed those things could not have happened 10 years ago. The image drawn by these four interpretations is quite optimistic. "*I think it's starting to. I think conversations are happening now around equality (racial, gender, LGBTQ) that would not have been talked about 10 years ago. Some players are starting to take risks and be themselves, even when it means being different from the crowd. But there's still a lot of pushback from people who want to maintain the status quo, and the NHL leadership is not helping."* (they/them, American, +, 1990s). "*in some ways yes! i think all culture is always changing, but maybe hockey culture isn't changing as fast as we might like. even just the acknowledgement of women, POC, LGBTQ+, mental health in the game has been a really positive change in the last 10 years*" (they/them, American, +, 2000s). "*I mean we saw how a player (now I feel stupid because I forgot his name) wore pride tape even though NHL "banned" it. That would definitely not have happened 10 years ago."* (she/her, Finnish, +, 2000s). *"Teams in leagues other than the NHL do consistent pride nights and actually put effort into them. Thinking about the NHL, it is nice that they celebrate other cultures, such as native americans."* (she/her, Finnish, +, 2000s). The experience of change did not differ between different intersections, though I was surprised to find that among the Finnish interlocutors, young women and queer fans were much more trusting in change happening than middle aged men, despite both groups believing the culture needed a change. To highlight Black perspectives, it is also illustrated here how intersectional similarities can naturally still lead to very different experiences. "*Overall no. While there is some change it's more so to do with societal pressure than hockey culture itself evolving.*" (she/her, American, +, 2000s, Black); "*I think it's changing amongst the fans and players but not amongst the bigwigs at the head, except for certain teams*" (she/her, American, +, 1990s, Black). Change is not passively achieved by a change of demographic but it might be a place to start.

There was an underlying consensus about some teams being better than others when it came to promoting cultural change. The newest NHL team the Seattle Kraken was mentioned multiple times in interviews, conversations and questionnaire answers for actively working towards inclusivity in their social media presence, hiring choices and stances. People repeatedly expressed irritation at the bias of the "original six" teams[24] that they felt still dictated the overall hockey culture due to people respecting them more. As both teams I investigated were "small market" Southern teams this is understandable as

[24] The Boston Bruins, Chicago Blackhawks, Detroit Red Wings, Montréal Canadiens, New York Rangers and Toronto Maple leafs were the only teams in the league from 1942 to 1967.

all the original six teams are from North-Eastern parts of North America – for example the Chicago Blackhawks ability to get through any kind of issues was often attributed to their status as an original six team. The idea that some teams are less problematic than others and the hockey culture does not contaminate all of them the same way is another interesting and quite ambiguous one. An interesting sidenote here is also how people identified success with change. Whether it was about Southern hockey becoming more popular due to the Canes' or Stars' success or explaining to me they think "Chicago sucks now due to karma", there was a causality on how people viewed players/teams/the league dealing with controversial issues and their success. That is also what made Arizona's Dermott's decision to break the pride ban and just pay the fine that much more impressive to people: he was playing for a team that had been struggling for years, and had not established himself as a superstar like some other big market names. There was also a strong double standard of looking the other way if a player was good: while Tony DeAngelo's contract to the Carolina Hurricanes seemed to shock and disappointment to a lot of fans, you could always see an influx of "I'll give him this…" type social media posts when he was playing well by certain fans, but during his worst defensive moments he was torn to pieces by the very same people not only for his athletic performance but his views too.

The big theme of the second section of analysis is the attempt to locate where the potential cultural change would be located, but to finish this overview of the culture I must finally consider the league's status in it. "*Hockey is the the best sport, the NHL is the worst league*" (she/her, Singaporean, 1990s) was a commonly shared feeling. The NHL, in many ways, is the tip of the iceberg of hockey culture, and this could be interpreted to have many different implications towards its agency in changing the culture. Should the league change to show example, or is it not changing because the players are so socialized in the culture by the time they reach the league that they cannot be anything else but reproductions of it? Many felt like the change was more prominently happening in lower leagues and overseas while the NHL kept going back and forth and doing it for profit. One fan wrote: "*The league refuses to budge, which affects the culture as a whole and informs fans and players, not only doesn't it actively advance it but makes it worse; other leagues do more*" (she/her, American, 1990s, mixed) that seemed to capture a lot of dissatisfaction of the marginalized parts of the community.

Many pointed out that social media had allowed the change both to happen and to become visible. Seeing and hearing women in broadcasts made it more inviting, and social media managers that were in

tune with the current trends were named as a big reason for bringing new audiences in. It offers a platform for fans to immediately react to the messages that the teams and the league put out and have a public discourse about it — while this also allows for trolls and hateful speech to be voiced, the discourse holds a lot of potential for change. It has helped fans to connect with other hockey fans with similar values, creating a culture of solidarity and shared fight. Perhaps the people who are victimized by hockey culture find the most community in the part of it that shares the experience – when people suffer together, they are more likely to feel a shared identity with one another (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 93). On the other hand, many saw that the change of culture in the virtual sphere was not as impactful as they would have hoped and was not worth the bullying and toxicity that it also brought up. Social media has also allowed the players to show more personality in their personal accounts, contributing towards a possible broadened audience, but this has also made it more disappointing when they do not then take stances towards positive change even with the platform for it they now have. I will elaborate on the problematics of this player-first perspective in the second analysis section when I attempt to locate where the cultural change would potentially start.

For the final chapter before diving deeper into what cultural change would take to actualize, I must introduce one more player: the Finns as symbolizing positive change.

4.3 ”Fight without all the noise”: How does nationality become activism?

There have been Finnish players in the NHL since 1970s, but particularly in late 2010s and 2020s more Finns have established themselves as important parts of their teams as leaders, pivotal point scorers and reliable defensemen. This generation’s large number of talented players who were born in the 1990s and early 2000s has been attributed to the timing of ice hockey becoming the biggest sport in Finland in late 1980s and early 1990s through international success (Isotalo 2013, 1) and interesting Finnish League (*Liiga*) happenings through the “Jokerit phenomenon” (*Jokerit-ilmiö*) (Isotalo 2013, 18; Salomaa 2004, 12-4) that attracted new audiences and status for the sport. The 1995 men’s world championship has been credited as an important moment of interlacing hockey and Finnish national identity together – at the time Finland was deep in the worst economic depression of its history with tens of thousands of people unemployed, businesses going down and a wave of bankruptcies pushing suicide statistics to new highs, and the impromptu national celebration has been marked as an important

moment of healing. While most of the players now in their prime were born slightly after this, the status and respect hockey players had in the Finland they grew up in is easy to imagine having influenced their willingness to pursue their dreams: they grew up in a context that mythologizes perseverance through difficult times on a national level and celebrates ice hockey players as national heroes. Most of the now active Finnish players were either involved in the gold medal winning national teams of the World Junior Championships in 2014, 2016 and 2019, or the men's world championship team of 2011, and have sometimes even been dubbed "the golden generation" by Finnish media.

I am focusing here on the two teams that each had a league-topping four Finnish players in their roster at the time of my research, but "The Finns" are liked over team borders in NHL, a sign that people seem to recognize something like culture that ties them into a group. Out of the 109 Canes fans who took the survey a strong majority reported being fans of their Finnish players Sebastian Aho (105), Teuvo Teräväinen (99), Jesperi Kotkaniemi (90) and Antti Raanta (84). Since I did not make a separate questionnaire for Canes and Stars fans, people could also choose players of the other team, and all the Stars players in their roster at the time were named by Canes fans as well (Roope Hintz 47, Miro Heiskanen 40, Esa Lindell 19 and Jani Hakanpää 31 (Hakanpää played for the Canes in 2020)). Of the 49 Stars fans, 44 were fans of Hintz, 42 of Heiskanen, 26 of Esa Lindell and 18 of Jani Hakanpää. Numerally, then, more Canes fans mentioned being fans of Hintz and Heiskanen than fans of their own team, another sign of the overlap in liking "the Finns" beyond team loyalties. Amongst Stars fans, Canes players also found a lot of love: Aho (34) was mentioned more often than active players Lindell and Hakanpää while Teräväinen (23), Kotkaniemi (18) and Raanta (19) matched them in popularity. 11 people who reported not identifying as fans of either of the teams named specific Finnish players they were a fan of (Aho 6, Heiskanen 5, Hintz 3, Puljujärvi 2, Teräväinen 2, Lindell 2, and 1 for Luukkonen, Laine, Hakanpää, Kotkaniemi, Barkov and Rantanen). To the statement "*Finnish players have distinctive identity*" 44 responders agreed strongly and 83 more agreed. When asked if Finnish players were important for their team's identity, a clear majority of 95 people responded "strongly agree" and additional 31 agreed.[25] An overview of the more detailed statistics is in the charts in the attachments.

Why do the fans like their Finnish players? While many could not point out how exactly Finnish hockey itself was distinctive, the things that most came up was their "humble way" of carrying

[25] An overview of the more detailed statistics is in the charts in *Appendix 7.2*

themselves on and off the ice. The main reason for the interlocutors was the performance on the ice: they were thought of as team-first mentality players that didn't make a big deal out of themselves, skillful, reliable and hardworking without toxicity. Some specific skills were highlighted, such as skating ability: "*They all are absolutely sexy skaters if I may say it that way. [- -] Also the pace at which some of them play. For a scout like myself, those are traits that are almost automatically given to all Finns when it comes to NHL Entry Draft*." (he/him, Slovak, 1990s). Many mentioned the word "underdog" and felt like the players were under-appreciated, though this also made many fans happy because they thought the Finns were more likely to end up in smaller markets because big names from North America did not want to come to newer Southern teams – the fact they had come to "their team" made it feel like they were "one of us". Many were interested in the so called "narratives" of the players, for example in the way Jesperi Kotkaniemi came to Carolina with a big scandal from Montréal two years prior or the way Teräväinen and Aho or Hintz and Heiskanen had become best friends in their respective teams after arriving at the same time from very different backgrounds. Finally, a big part of many fans' description of why they are a fan of a particular Finn was their personality: people said the Finns were the funniest members of the team, their "camaraderie though shared nationality" brought out more personality in them, or the fan found them cute or kind based on meeting in real life or social media descriptions.

I find it interesting that the Finns are described as both quiet and shy but also having the most personality. What personality did the fans see in them, then? Roope Hintz is characterized in the data as an underrated superstar (*"i love roope hintz because of the way he plays, but also because he really seems not to care what people think of him as a person or how they might judge him for stuff. it is very refreshing."* (she/her, Swiss/French, +, 1990s); " *Love Roope Hintz's willingness to joke around and be himself."* (they/them, American, +, 1990s), while Sebastian Aho is an underrated and skillful future leader of his team that will take them to the next level ("*The Aho era – and I'm saying Aho era even if he's not yet officially the captain, for the fanbase he is*" (he/him, American, 1990s); "*In general, I find the Finnish players to be talented, but also calm, cool, and collected. Sebastian Aho, in particular, is elite."* (she/her, American, 1950s); "*I love Aho's leadership qualities, besides the fact that he's also one of the best players in franchise history at only 26*" (he/they, American, +, 1990s, trans)). Miro Heiskanen is a soft-spoken superstar ("*Miro Heiskanen was really influential in the Stars 2020 Cup run, and bc i started watching then I think I just latched on to him because of his skill, age, and soft-*

spoken demeanor.” (they/them, American, +, 2000s). Teuvo Teräväinen is funny and hardworking, while Jesperi Kotkaniemi has built himself up to be a solid player for the Hurricanes after being dubbed a complete failure for not being able to fulfill the expectations he faced after being drafted third overall in Montréal – a longer quote about them in the next page. Antti Raanta has “*sunshine personality*” and ”*was nice to my mom once*” (he/him, American, +, 1990s), and Esa Lindell “*has this 1000 watt smile you can't ignore*” (he/him, American, +, 1990s)). Some of the reasons for all of them were sillier. Comments such as ”*Sebastian Aho looks like a funny guy ngl*” (she/her, French, unsure, 1990s), *”They’re some of the stars on my team (how can someone hate Aho our lil Finnish Elf)”(he/him, American, 1990s)* or ”*Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is shaped like a friend and Teuvo is my standoffish virgo king*.” (he/him, American, +, 1990s, Latine) might seem nonsensical to a broader audience but include a lot of affective affection.

These examples illustrate the type of familiarity with which people discuss their hockey idols in general and could be quotes about any current age player, but since most people liked several of the Finnish players, a theme of their assumed culturally shared qualities starts to arise from the way the interlocutors discuss them in many regards. It could be about their play and temper (”*I consider my three favorite Finnish players - Sebastian, Miro, and Roope - to be "total package" players, meaning they just have everything I would want in a player. With Miro, his skating ability, his vision, the way he stays so calm and collected, even after a bad loss he's more likely to just roll with it and move on to the next one. He's also just so polite and nice in appearances and seems like the most grounded, sweet guy, he doesn't have any kind of superstar ego, etc. With Roope and Sebastian, I think they're such exciting players to watch; they both have the speed and talent that when you see them on a breakaway you know something amazing is about to happen. They also both have incredible tenacity, they never give up on plays, they don't get pushed around. Roope seems so jolly and fun, and Sebastian is more lowkey like Miro.”* (they/them, American, +, 1990s); “*Dry sense of humor and fiery playing style, takes a lot to get them mad but once they do you better WATCH OUT!*” (she/her, American, 1970s)) while some discussed this in terms of culture with more nuance (”*The stoic nature of Finns in general is kind of interesting. Somehow it's like Finns value a certain level of self-conduct which feels kind of familiar (I grew up in a culture which cares a lot about self-discipline so maybe that's why I find Finns easy to relate to.) You know that whatever they feel, at least on ice, has to be very strong for them to act out. Sebastian's fun to watch because he's very driven. He seems calm and unemotional a lot of the time, but*

whenever his ambition becomes apparent, it's very moving because it suddenly hits you how invested he is in what he's doing. I like how genuinely polite and tactful Finns are, I like that they attract attention for good reasons much more than for bad ones." (she/her, Singaporean, 1990s, Asian/Muslim)).

Building on the previous quote, I consider the following a fantastic example of how an interpretation of Finnishness is constructed: *"I think it's a* cultural thing*; I like Teuvo because he always manages his own expectations and doesn't allow anything to excite him so that when he's inevitably let down. Americans want their athletes to be all the things: good looking, funny, smiley, the best at everything. It's aspirational and hard to relate for common people. Teuvo has an attitude of "I just work here" which is extremely relatable for me and why I love him! I also love KK [Jesperi Kotkaniemi] because* he's not your typical Finn *(he's talkative and outgoing, LOL) but he also has something to prove- and it's fun when he riles up the haters."* (she/her, American, 1980s, Asian). KK is identified as "not your typical Finn" because he is talkative and outgoing, better confirming to the expectations of American culture. I think that is what a lot of people identify as culture in the context of nationality – the difference from their expectation in behavior. Through this is behavior that could very well be identified as rude, such as Teräväinen's stoic answers and the interpretation of his dispassionate attitude towards the work, it shifts to being understood like a shared joke between fans and the athlete. The power of national culture as an analytical category, then, is very strong in the way fans see these players both in terms of their on-ice abilities and off-ice personalities. It is fair to point out, however, that this is not necessarily as important to the fans outside of the social media community. Some fans in who I did not know beforehand asked me if I knew "the team had many Finns" after it came up I was from Finland – they thought of this as special information that not all fans would know, so I assume there is a lot of dispersion in the importance of culture in interpreting a player.

In the community I am focusing on, however, Finns seem to be marked as counterhegemonic to an American athlete, refusing to adapt to the culture completely, which in turn could imply a resistance that fans might then extend to the issues of the hockey culture they identify with North American culture overall. The sentiment was repeated in a number of responses beyond the one quoted before: "*I think Finnish players in general are humble, and the most self-deprecating, in the US, we have a culture of flashiest, Finnish players are the opposite & it's refreshing & I'm drawn to that."* (she/her, American, 1990s); "*Finns have more respect for the game and conduct themselves with higher level of*

dignity than US and Canadian Americans" (she/her, American, 1950s). Many noted that amid overall more relatable hockey players in the context of sports, the Finns in particular feel like "just some guys" rather than celebrities ("*I'd add that they're the outsiders of the Stars. Not American/Canadian, not big household names like Benn or Seguin, but they're hardworking and sometimes underappreciated players. I think we can all identify with that at times.*" (he/him, American, +, 1990s)). Similar expressions were shared by European fans. "*I do like how most of them (namely Roope Hintz, Sebastian Aho) show personality and humor similar to what I am used too in Germany. I like the behind the scenes and interviews with Finnish (Swedish and German of course as well) players because it feels familiar."* (she/her, German, 1990s).

The praise could come across quite backhanded in these comments – the Finns are refreshing because they do not have that American "need to be good looking and best at everything" – but it is clear these things are said affectionately. Relatability arises as an important category of distinguishing them as less complicit in the issues of hockey culture. I argue that this idea of them is partly constructed through parasocial interpretations – the mystery of them as foreigners and the less-flashy output leaves a lot of room for imagination. Teräväinen, again, is a perfect example of this beyond his stoic habitus in interviews. While an important part of the Carolina Hurricanes team, he was not the highest scoring player on ice, but rather a reliable pass-first mentality player. Beyond that, he was probably the most private of the Finns, and the whole team for that matter – he does have a public Instagram account but he posts rarely. A fan-favorite but certainly not the biggest star of the team, then, so I was surprised to find how many people named him as their favorite player, and that he was the player I heard the most gossip and speculation about. Over the fieldwork I heard three different versions of gossip stories of him dating someone's friend of a friend, for example. His privacy made him intriguing to people, and made it easy to come up with stories as there would be no way for other fans to debunk them – the blurring of the lines was built into being his fan as most of how the idol was perceived was drawn from the fan narratives. The affect is negotiated through the narrative of him: consider a fan describing him with "*Teuvo has such an interesting and relatable personality and it's really endeared me to him."* (he/they, American, +, 1990s, trans) while talking about someone who could just as well be characterized as a grumpy millionaire playing in a league which culture is seen as anti-everything. The object of fandom being peripherical allows the fandom to produce its own content and speculation (Nikunen 2005, 327).

Additionally, I argue that this impression is intertwined with the idea of European (and particularly Northern European) ideas of social progressiveness through which Finland is often presented in global conversations. The questionnaire answers support this idea. When asked if Finland seemed socially progressive, 38 said strongly agree and 72 agreed, and I was surprised to see this idea of European originated sports carrying less homophobia, for example, expressed also in some of the literature on sports culture (see f. g. Anderson 2005, 11). As noted before, the reason I am focusing on the Finns here came naturally from the two teams that I chose to study, but maybe there are some reasons for the way that Finns are seen as a particular cultural group. There are almost double the number of Swedes (97) in the NHL compared to Finns, making them the nation with the third most players after USA and Canada[26]. Perhaps there are too many of them to feel like they are a similar kind of cultural entity, and on the other hand, Swedish social culture could be argued to be more applicable to American culture, at least according to stereotypes that Finns as awkward and grumpy even amongst the Nordics. The fourth most players come from Russia, and while they are considered as funny and talented and certainly do have a strong shared culture, the political package that comes with them might hinder the idea of them promoting positive change in the culture. The 55 Finnish players rank them as 5th biggest nationality in the league – there are enough of them to identify repeated behavior as cultural compared to some lesser represented nations where the interpretation is made on a personal level[27] but also few enough that they have all played together at some point and often talk about each other in interviews, leaving a lot of room for the fans to enjoy imagining their friendships and histories. In the interviews Finnish culture was expressed as an exciting utopia of a welfare state and women-led government that extends to the ideas of the players and resonates with fans: "*Strong sense of community of all Finns in the league, I don't know if it's cultural product or being a minority but I like it."* (she/her, American, +, 1990s).

Here, it is worthwhile to stop for a second to consider the contradiction of this "easily approachable" Finnish hockey player in the US, and the status they have in Finland. While at the start I discussed how they are identified somewhat as national heroes when they are successful, they are also under a lot of media attention and speculation and often featured in gossip magazines, and dry spells on the ice are often criticized in a very personal way in national media. Critical audiences mark them as the main reproducers of the issues of the culture and people do register them as highly privileged individuals

[26] https://www.quanthockey.com/nhl/nationality-totals/active-nhl-players-career-stats.html
[27] German Leon Draisaitl has famously upset some North American reporters with his "rudeness", for example; compare to interpretations of Teräväinen.

within Finnish society; they are certainly not seen as symbolizing any kind of positive changes, quite the opposite. Adored and despised, I think this contradiction in their status in their personal and professional lives between Finnish and North American contexts can offer a perspective on why they are seen as showing more personality than some other players. They are more talkative in their native language interviews, because they might think their comments will not reach international or the NHL's local audiences while on the other hand, Finland is far away when the interviews are aired, so perhaps they find the situation to be more relaxed for discussing a broader variety of topics, for example. The exoticism, then, is combined with the feeling of reaching "secret information" about the players which gives social capital in the community and strengthens the affective interpretations towards the player. Finally, beyond the usual "I just play hockey, politics have nothing to do with it" expressions of all hockey players they are also "safe" from discussing issues of North American politics because "it's not their culture" but also "safe" from discussing Finnish politics because they are far away for most of the year.

Finnish fans are navigating their relationships between these contradictions while being offered a special status within the fan community as the messengers of this "secret information". This is inviting, as being Finnish usually does not equate to any social capital, and might lead to reproducing a certain kind of interpretations of the Finnish players that in turn strengthens the progressive understanding of a particular player from a "reliable" source – it is nice to share great news about a player to a wider audience but the urge to turn the other way when something less flattering comes out is strong even in my personal experience. The unusual affective interpretation of Finnish masculinity and the communal creativity around it might lead to intensified interest in it amongst Finnish fans too. Out of the Finnish interlocutors the most skeptical of the culture changing were men in their 40s and 50s, and all of them emphasized that they thought it *should* change but just could not see it happening any time soon. Queer and female fans were much more positive about the potential of the change, once again leaving me wondering about the meaning of community in achieving that change — does it inspire people to promote the change they want to see when they know it would benefit not only themselves but the people around them, or does it become an echo chamber where people have an idea of change that cannot be realized?

When asked if the respondents thought Finnish players represented positive change in NHL, 25 strongly agreed, 64 agreed, 46 were neutral and only 6 people disagreed. While the interlocutors were not unequivocally in favor of this interpretation, I still find it remarkable that a majority identifies them with positive change with very little evidence to go with it. The concrete example I was given repeatedly had to do with their use of pride tape (”*I have a lot of respect for the Finnish canes for consistently showing support on Pride Night — there's just a feeling I can count on them to go out there and show support somehow and that really means a lot! I think having players like that on the team is foundational to positive growth and making the franchise more inclusive.”* (she/her, American, +, 2000s); ”*Finns used pride tape despite pressure not to*.” (she/her, American, +, 2000s)). While small gestures go a long way in a culture so infested with issues, I conclude that more than any particular action it is their ”just some guy” nature that makes them feel less like millionaires and more like relatable friends despite them sharing basically all the intersections with the American and Canadian players aside from nationality and the assumed attached cultural traits. It is almost like the Finns are conceptualized as somewhat slightly less “white” when we talk about it in context of prevailing categories of privilege within American social politics — just by the virtue of not being American, they are somehow seen as less complicit in the listed issues of hockey culture, interpreted here to reflect the surrounding society. This attached to the idea of them as underdogs in the league and the implied resistance in that stance informs the idea of them as more progressive people off the ice as well. As an interlocutor put it: ”*They tend to be quiet and intense but kind, often not as famous or hyped as they should be but work hard and I admire the fight without all the noise.*” (she/her, American, +, 2000s).

This is naturally not as simple or some absolutely accepted and shared understanding, and in perfect contradiction to how hockey players are viewed by Finnish feminists, for example. Some interlocutors explicitly emphasized not knowing enough about the players to form an opinion on their progressiveness. ”*If you mean hockey culture in a socially progressive way, I've never heard any Finnish player's opinions other than Teemu, which were... not great. I cant pretend to know what any of these men believe privately, and don't follow any closely enough to know if they've expressed opinions publicly, but I tend to think most rich people have similar economic and therefore social opinions which I often disagree with and think of as regressive.”* (he/him, German/American, +, 2000s, trans). “*Don't know about their actual activism, that's why I can't comment on their progressive nature in the microcosm of the NHL*.” (she/her, American, 1990s). There was also a correlation between how

progressive the fan found their idea of Finland and how much they knew – some people brought up the issues of Finland's conduct towards the Indigenous Sámi people, and others have followed closely how the all-women led social democratic government was followed by the rise of conservatism. With this I want to highlight once again that there is a lot of dispersion within the community, but I am simply trying to offer perspectives to make sense of what is happening here.

The Finns are an important part of the fandoms of both the Canes (*"The Finnish boys have my heart, what can I say?"* (fluid, Lenapehoking, +, 1980s)) and Stars ("*it's hard to be a dallas stars fan and not be interested in finland*!" (they/them, American, +, 2000s)). The idea of the Finns, then, so far seems to be made of a positive cultural package, relatability and inviting personality, and I have argued how these narratives make them seemingly more progressive than their North American counterparts. I have shown how these narratives might not always be based on clear evidence and yet they inform the way a fan interacts with and views their idols. This, however, is nothing new; dramatized narratives have always been at the heart of sports, as victories and losses of teams have been narrated as epic tales of heroes and underdogs (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 35-6 & 69-70). A community reflects its own standings through their heroes (Sumiala 2010, 63), and the "us against them" narratives and being able to locate each success and failure of the object of adoration into a team history context emphasises the communal experience even more (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 63 & 69-70). The question that remains, then, is what kind of implications this offers for possible cultural change if the narratives steer too far away from the reality of things. In the second part of the analysis I will dig deeper into the realities of this question – where is change located, and what kind of a play can the players introduced here offer?

5 “The Play”: How does a culture change?

There is a culture, and it is identified as needing to change by the people engaging with it, and they have ideas of how and why that change might happen as well as thinking some people embody that change more than others already. The issue, however, seems to be that the contradiction, or at the very least the ambiguity, of whether that change is happening and who has the power to promote it. In this final analysis section I return to my main question: how does a culture change?

5.1 ”It’ll take the kids coming up” – locating potentials and hindrances of change

Locating where the change should happen is key to understanding what kind of implications it would have on the future of the sport. Should the players change? But does that not require the teams to be more accepting towards difference, too? Could it start from the fans putting pressure on the league, or does it have to come down from the top? Whether people believed in true cultural change had a lot to do with how they answered this question. All these factors – players, teams, league, fans – are deeply interconnected, of course. Anderson suggests that the very reason sports are slow to change is because of the “closed-loop system”, where the administrators at the top are the same ones who grow up with the sport and coach others as well (Anderson 2005, 8). The league sets a culture for the teams, and the teams establish a culture with their players who in turn are the heroes of the developing players and will eventually coach them or run the leagues where they play – and being a fan of the players and teams can be thought of as subscribing to the values and culture in which they exist, though I hope I have illustrated how this is not quite that simple based on my data.

So: who has the most power to disturb the loop? As discussed before, player/team identities in hockey tend to be very intertwined, which in turn can leave fan and team identities blurred through parasocial fan/player relations. The affective relation negotiations in the social media era of fandom are almost impossible to completely separate from these ideas of intimate relationships between the fan and the idol, particularly in the context of sports where fans are encouraged to imagine themselves within the narratives of the teams. No one identifies with a league – it does not invite a similar kind of human relation as your favorite team or player, and therefore it can appear in the discourse as the shared enemy of the fan and their favorite player, enforcing the idea of the fandom and the favorite players to be *both* victimized by the culture. This, in turn, strengthens the relations to the player, but also possibly

contributes towards developing a tunnel vision that stops one from holding their idol to a critical standard that acknowledges their part in reproducing that culture. Another example of the complicated relationship of player, culture, team, fan and league interactions is ice hockey players playing through injuries. Players are expected to perform despite injuries, by teams and traditional fans alike, despite an illusion of free will that goes with it (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 152), but in the end they are the ones to make the decision to play or not. It is difficult to determine whether the individual can be blamed for reproducing this violent culture of toxic masculinity, or is he the one being exploited as his injuries become entertainment for their teams' (and the league's) profit? Should the fans put more pressure on the league to stop treating concussions and broken bones as a natural part of the sport? At the same time, athletes in teams are always assuming a role within them (Mumford 2012, 51): they are teammates and opponents within days when the NHL season changes to international play, for example, and therefore it could be argued that there are a lot of narratives of self and team represented internally by the players themselves, too, so presenting them as victims of the culture with no agency is not convincing either. To simplify different interpretations of it; assuming the player can change it would imply player = culture, but if we think the culture changes the player, culture = league+fans. Similarly, if we think it is the league where the change is located, league = culture, but if the culture changes the league, culture = players+fans. Finally, if we think the fans can change the culture, fans = culture, but if culture changes fanbase, culture = league+players. Let's discuss these options.

Teams and players are almost a single entity in the current hockey culture as the team-first mentality is one of the key aspects of a good player, and it situates teams as interesting "filters" between the league and the players. It is difficult to determine how much influence a single player could have on the team's values outside of the sport as there is little precedent to draw from, and different players certainly have different kinds of pull in their organizations – the star forward making comments to the press about what the team should be changing increases the chance of it having any effect compared to a third pairing defenseman on a minimum contract trying to argue with the team policies. On the other hand, the star center is paid 10 million dollars a season, so he might feel more indebted to the team and therefore he might be less likely to voice his disagreement even if he had any. Then again, the lesser-paid player who knows his future with the team is not guaranteed might look to create connections by subscribing to the locker room culture simply to be part of the team. This returns to the previously discussed connection between success and allowing players leeway: if you know you are playing at the

level that you are paid for, you might be more confident than if people are questioning your value as a player and then you start arguing with your own team – fans can be quick to turn on you.

The uniform locker room culture contaminating players was a widely shared interpretation of the way hockey players themselves were seen to interact with the culture. ”*Traditionally, hockey players look at themselves as a clique above the rest of their peers and above rules. From a young age, if you were good at the sport you were treated better by everyone from your coaches to your gym teacher to your principal. Over-confidence has developed these kids into people who can't identify their privilege. Is this the case in ever hockey player? Of course not, but that is hockey culture in general*”, an interlocutor (he/him, Canadian, 2000s) told me. The NHL was often characterized as the tip of the iceberg of hockey culture, with the issues starting far further back in the development of the players as they were socialized by the closed-loop system. Anderson also argues that since athletes are socialized through this top-down model of a near-total institution, despite changing over centuries it has failed to incorporate modern developments of societal change, which has left homophobia, sexism, and racism to be continuously socialized in athletes who adopt them in order to get the respect of peers and coaches (2005, 7 & 75). Criticizing the system can be seen as form of weakness (ibid., 34). He quotes a professional hockey player in his book to describe the social culture of professional ice hockey to be “a ‘cocoon’ because the social pressure to adhere to a rigid masculine code frequently sustains all walks of an athlete’s life” (Anderson 2005, 67). Players might feel unsafe to bring contradicting views or identities up, because the culture itself encourages uniformity and the “hockey should not be political” mentality extends to the players socialized in that context. Non-heterosexual identity could be included as a taboo subject and “not sports related” all the while tales of sexual conquests of straight athletes are an ordinary topic in the locker room, recreating sexist narratives along with reproducing hegemonic masculinity in the culture (ibid., 114 & 160).

The idea of younger players automatically bringing change that was expressed by interlocutors seems to lose some of its potential under more detailed investigation, then. Even if they bring with them more personality and having grown up in a different political and cultural environment outside of sport, they were still socialized in the hockey culture at its current state understood as sexist, racist and homophobic. While some players have taken stances on particular topics, the activism seems to only extend to one of the issues at a time – players who have spoken up about structural racism in hockey

have also made comments that people found homophobic, and others have spoken in favor of the queer community but has also been exposed to having made xenophobic posts on social media. The culture is internalized deeply, and if on top of it the league is seen as resisting any form of change, and it will not change one comment at a time.

Putting the pressure to change on individual players seems problematic anyway. What kind of implications would an NHL player coming out have, for example? Anderson argues that "coming out in sport is to acknowledge an identity that challenges the nature of heterosexual masculinity and therefore challenges the masculinizing institution of sport as a whole" (Anderson 2005, 43). And yet while it might have massive transformative potential, it is easy to be sympathetic to those who might not want to take that pressure to be the precedent in the current culture – athletes representing minorities should also be allowed to just focus on their craft and not be expected to take on the possible backlash before being sure that their team, teammates and the league would have their back. Gay athletes have been theorized to even be overrepresented to emphasis their own masculinity that they fear is hindered by their sexuality in the eyes of others (Anderson 2005, 53-4), and to sacrifice that safe space for cultural change is a massive ask for an individual athlete. And if more athletes did come out, the same question arises as with the fandom: does more diversity automatically promote structural change, or does including queer people, for example, in the existing structure rather present it as progressiveness that only ends up "pinkwashing" the league? Anderson argues that "discourse regarding the 'gays in the military' issue proved beneficial for gay liberation politics" in showing that "homosexuality was compatible not only with masculinity, but with hypermasculinity" (Anderson 2005, 1); while representation in a particular respected arena influences attitudes in wider culture as well (if it is respected by hegemonic masculinity, at least), just having people with different marginalized identities (such as gay men) in the military did not automatically renew the institution (ibid., 2). He argues that the same goes for gay athletes: they are more accepted into sporting arenas if they subscribe to the culture they represent (Anderson 2005, 50). The potential there was to question the hegemonic understanding of masculinity, then, vanishes (ibid., 108 & 111). When Black athletes came to be accepted in baseball teams during segregation – it was not because the attitudes changed, but because the owners of the teams could benefit from their performances, and while it became normalized, it did not erase racism form the arena of sport (Anderson 2005, 100). Similarly, the Finnish team Jokerit gained more women fans in 1980s-1990s, but this did not change the culture but rather

they were accepted as new consumers as long as they subscribed to the existing culture, including the misogyny in it (Isotalo 2013, 33; Salomaa 2004, 28).

What kind of agency do the fans have, then? I would argue that due to the characterizations of sports as a masculine arena the part that emotions play in making sense of the culture surrounding it has been overlooked, both in terms of what is seen as accepted behavior and how it is justified. Many of my interlocutors mentioned hockey having been a major way of connecting with their family or hometown which might indeed have made the fan's identity quite intertwined with that of the team; they have been there longer than problematic players which might give an impression of ownership to the fan. It can it make it easier to ignore a bad player signing, but it might also make it difficult to identify the moments that do cross that ethical line one has set for themselves in other arenas of life. On a personal level it might feel important that the racist name and logo of a team remain because that is the team the fan went to see with their family, and that affective intimacy feels completely disconnected from the oppression Native Americans face (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 139-40 & 143). Continued support gives the team feedback of there being nothing wrong with what they are doing, and the structural racism and disrespect keeps new fans from coming in – here it is clear how the racism of the outside world bleeds into sports culture and the high emotions of sport make visible the racism internalized in it (ibid., 111). This, in turn, can lead to collective shame and the people who cannot stand for the promoted bigotry leave, once more empowering the fans who do not see anything wrong with the racist, sexist and homophobic currents of the culture. If on top of this the league also encourages this demographic, cultural change seems almost impossible (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 111-2). The big emotions can also manifest as violent speech that does not particularly signal a safe space for all. During the 2023-2024 season, the Canes' Sebastian Aho and longtime rival team New York Rangers' defenseman Adam Fox had a nasty accidental knee-on-knee collision on ice, leaving Fox injured and having to leave the ice. An angered Rangers fan tweeted "*i won't be happy until i see sebastian aho's lifeless body on center ice*", starting a lively conversation about the limits of what can be justified as spur of the moment anger. Sports are theorized to be the arena of free male emotional expression, but often it is the women who are accused of being overly emotional – the same rules do not apply.
A commitment to the culture of hockey within the fanbase is often measured through loyalty, whether it was in the traditional "through bad times and good times" way or the more parasocially colored "I will stand with this team/player no matter what they do" mentality. But does loyalty to a team mean

that you accept everything it does, or does it mean you hold it to a higher standard since it is a part of your identity? In the social media flow, you can see people slander each other for not believing in their team after a bad game, but also not criticizing the team's performance during a dry spell, and that is just about the sport itself – the "hockey should not be political" discourse often manifests in people fighting over any number of things, such as whether supporting a certain player or a team reflects on your values outside of hockey fandom as well. When you like someone and think you know them, it is more tempting to overlook their faults and double down in protecting them (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 129-30 & 136). Breaking the loyalty to your team by speaking against their action can mark you as an ingenuine fan with traditional fans, and your comment loses impact; yet supporting bigoted behavior can be impossible for an individual, pushing the people promoting change away from the sport (ibid., 2022, 94 & 113). Another roadblock is that these issues are so deeply embedded and reproduced by hockey culture that discussing them is automatized to the point where they do not raise big emotions anymore. "Racism-sexism-homophobia" is like a children's rhyme you have heard a thousand times to the point where it has become a concept in itself – it is noted but has lost most of the power the terms themselves should hold, as scandals connected to them are too frequently reoccurring to truly shock anyone. Uproars happen regularly when a particular case comes to light, but they remain a moment that does not lead to a movement. Here, the "idea of" hockey culture as inherently racist-sexist-homophobic seems to have stalled the transformative potential of the concepts.

Archer and Wojtowicz theorize being a sports fan as being unrequited (2022, 19), but I would argue that the relationship of fans and players or teams is not that one-sided. Athletes can affect fans and even their sense of self (ibid., 18), and while the affect in the other direction might not be as intense it does not mean it does not exist. Many of my interlocutors mentioned how their favorite athletes commonly acknowledge that they would not be able to do their dream job without the support of fans. A great example of the complexity of how these identity affects influence each other is the Canes' fans nickname "Bunch of Jerks". In 2019, the Canes, having found success after several tough years, started a tradition of a "Storm Surge" where after each home victory they would do a silly routine after the game to thank the fans who had stuck with them through the tough times – they clapped together, had special guests such as boxer Evander Holyfield "knocking out" forward Jordan Martinook, pretended to be bowling pins that one of them strcuk with his helmet, and so on. Angered by this, long-time sports commentator Don Cherry called the team "bunch of jerks" in a broadcast. The Carolina Hurricanes'

social media team ran with it: they made T-shirts, social media posts, and playoff towels with the slogan. Fans instantly adopted it, and it became a popular shared joke in the community. Sebastian Aho commented on it later in an interview: "… And it became a big thing you know, and of course amazing that we had that kind of unifying thing together with us and the fans… But in the team it wasn't such a big thing, or we didn't come up with it, that we shall now be a 'bunch of jerks'."[28] Funnily enough, this identity also came up during my fieldwork, but in Dallas. A visibly intoxicated woman was walking around the neighborhood we were also walking through and asking for help to reach her hotel. On the way she was very talkative, and ended up saying we should never go to North Carolina if we were hockey fans: "You guys are so nice, such nice hockey fans. You wouldn't do great in Carolina, though. The fans call themselves a bunch of jerks, and I'll tell you right now, it's for a good reason". My friend was holding back laughter as I remained silent. The identity as "bunch of jerks" had started out with something individual players planned and the team agreed to; it upset traditional hockey media, became a marketing technique, got fans excited, started to inform the players identity with their own team, and finally, informed how both the in-group fans and out-group fans of hockey saw the whole organization. Another example is the Dallas Stars' Finns' nickname "The Finnish Mafia": it was originally given by fans, adopted by the social media team of the Stars and eventually embraced by the players themselves as they dressed up as a mob for a team Halloween party.

The unrequited love analogy, I digress, is too simplified, because "identity of a sports team is at least partly constituted by its fans" (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 18). Fans are more than consumers in today's sports. They have empowered agency in team identity building; they produce the ideas of the teams to each other through narratives but also share their controversies, leaving the teams unable to hide them. This, naturally, has limits too: money still talks the loudest, and the league will continue to cater foremostly to the paying audiences for now, but there might be an unfixable issue in that relationship. The prices of the games are getting so expensive that affording to go is less and less of a symbol of loyalty to the team and more a status symbol – a status symbol that will lose its meaning if the NHL does not find a way to grow and reach new audiences and manage to stay relevant. Social media fans, through their creativity and intimate connections to the teams and players informed by the parasociality that the teams' social media encourage, are creating much more meaningful fanhood at the moment. The league cannot ignore this forever.

[28] Sebastian Aho I Hurrikaanin keskipiste, Viaplay 18.6.2020, https://youtu.be/KrBvmAZNTtI?si=XOardPpvvmBYhxqj

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to systemic change in hockey culture is the combination of partisan and purist fandom in a niche sport that connects fans over team loyalties for the love of the sport, but they are also fighting each other in the context of their more powerful partisan fandom. Which promotes change more, the passionate fan of a team or an appreciative fan of the sport – the emotion and passion or what is perceived as a more rational, analytic perspective (Mumford 2012, 17)? When a certain fraction of fans assumes to know more about the sport than new (marginalized) fans while also considering themselves the true loyal fans, and the fans who do identify the issues are stuck between criticizing the culture and having chosen their favorites to protect from said criticism, where does that leave the potential of change? As long as the league backs only the traditional fans, not great. Understanding the devotion of the newer fanbases would require acknowledging that all sports fandom is based on emotions, but for now big emotions are only accepted when they manifest as violence and not when fans imagine gentler a masculinity onto the players that challenges the assumed inherent nature of that violence. That being said, I admit that the difficulties of locating the change are more complex than this; the added layer of multinationalism and hockey being mainstream in some places and marginal in others while also operating in both local and international levels is not an easy puzzle to find the missing pieces from. With so many issues and levels in which these issues manifest it is tempting to point to others when one's own team or favorite player is being critically reviewed; yet these are all things that should be considered in the interest of wider structural change instead of a reaction to a certain controversy we are now seeing. Emotions and rationality must be balanced to achieve this change, and the first step is to acknowledge the importance of both.

Moving on now to the final analysis chapter, I have so far shown how complex league-team-player-fan relations can be in hockey and in sports beyond, making it difficult to locate where cultural change would potentially start. While the complex web of relations of these factors must be considered individually when reviewing different controversies and trying to make sense of the prevailing culture, I argue that the change would have to be simultaneous with all four factors – the players need to be more active in challenging the status quo of teams, the teams have to allow this AND protect their players against angry fans and unspoken league rules. The leagues and international hockey organizations need to be ready to face the music of angry fans and have uncompromisable values, and fans need to be active in promoting and supporting these changes as well instead of pointing fingers. In the final analysis chapter, I will consider the likelihood of this happening, try to finally figure out what

is the status of sports in modern societies, and how the thought of any cultural change being near-impossible can actually be encouraging.

5.2 Simulacra of change – sports and fans in society

I will start this final chapter by briefly rewinding my arguments so far. Fandom has been theorized to be replacing lost sociality and bringing a sense of community in the modern era of individualism (Nikunen 2005, 88 & 90). Sports have massive unifying potential due to the narratives of "us and them" that its drama relies on, and it has been argued to unify particularly men across class and race (Aitchison 2007b, 10) while rendering women invisible (Anderson 2005, 71). Anderson sees the contradiction in the masses cheering for the elite as a matter of in-group – out-group dynamics: even the marginalized are included in the in-group when fighting "the other" (Anderson 2005, 32). Therefore, sports also recreate dichotomies and reproduce conservative interpretations of gender, nationality and sexuality. I have shown how these are realized in the context of NHL hockey and the fans of it who represent different minorities. Now is the time to return to the final questions I introduced at the start: are sports a reflection of a surrounding society or do they harbor things that the culture has moved on from? What is the significance of being a fan in the context of sports? And finally: what does this imply towards cultural change?

A repeated sentiment in the interlocutors' answers was that change in hockey culture will occur with the western cultural change overall. This understanding further complicates identifying the need for cultural change in hockey. If sports are seen as a microcosm of society, the final arena of conservative ideas of gender, nationality and so on, reflecting the issues and culture of said surrounding society, would positive change in the smaller context of sports potentially promote change in the surrounding society? But if sports are seen mainly as escapism from real life issues to men who have lost their rights to open expressions of masculinity, is it a waste of energy to try to change a thing that is, by its nature, opposing that change, and channel that energy into opposing those structures elsewhere? Or does the need to fix the culture come from the feeling of control that the smaller context provides, where hockey culture represents something that could be fixed, unlike the surrounding society? In my study, sports emerge as a place for emotions that are theorized to be not allowed under hegemonic masculinity to people socialized as men in other areas of life. Feminist scholars claim that this

emotional investment and the affective renegotiations could potentially lead to change. However, the emotions in sports seem to be held acceptable only in the context of toxic masculinity – it allows outbursts towards players and fans alike, violence, and righteousness to imagine you know better. It makes visible the issues in surrounding society, like racism, sexism and homophobia, that come out in emotional outbursts, and while giving a platform for expressing those ideas it also serves as bastion of a nostalgic guiding light of how things used to be. When "woke" ideals enter this arena it receives a big reaction. Social media emboldens hateful conduct and the sharing of bigoted opinions against people's identities in a way they normally would not in face-to-face interactions, and this seems to be silently supported by a league that is mostly interested in the fans' wallets. While social media branding does engage with fans with all kinds of intersectional identities, it has not yet reached the cores of the culture. I wondered at the start whether sports would be a mirror or a historical monument of society: my conclusion as of right now is that it is not exactly either but has elements from both.

The question that arises, then, is why do fans oppressed by the culture engage with it? Is it to provide comfort as escapism or give a sense of control in its smaller scale? If some fans come to be able to engage with toxic masculinity in the way that they feel they no longer can outside of the arena of sports, maybe the queer fans come for the same reason from the opposite perspective – the structural violence in modern societies is so deep in the everyday functions of our lives that they are exhausting to track. When they are made as visible as they are in sports, it might invite a sense of agency. If the men representing toxic masculinity can be imagined as something gentler in the context they are supposed to symbolize the absolute peak of it, it gives comfort to the potential of masculinity's development into something softer outside of it, too. If Roope Hintz and Sebastian Aho can be "just some guys" while also playing in the toughest hockey league in the world, maybe there is hope for the political culture that they occupy outside of it as well? Or does it make the people promoting change blind to the realities that would help to realize that change? To discuss the "ideas of" in the context of cultural change I will now introduce French post-structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulations and simulacra.

Baudrillard suggests that true cultural change is only possible anymore in acknowledging that change is impossible, because reality as we understand it has ceased to exist and what remains is an endless loop of simulations where each of us lives our lives in slightly different realities informed by different

truths, and therefore the fight to change the structures is meaningless – the people in charge of them live by completely different rules of reality than the people affected by them, so the attempt to change it will not mean anything to them. As long as we think in the context of that impossible reality, we let our understanding of how things are be informed by insignificant factors, and no true alternative can be achieved (Baudrillard 1994, 150). He calls the version of reality that informs a certain individual's understanding of reality "simulacra", a loop of simulations. He uses Disneyland as an example of the simulacra: it is made to simulate a real place to the point where the indicators that it is not are faded, creating a "hyperreal" where real and non-real lose their meaning completely. Disneyland also illustrates the danger of simulacra: because Disneyland is marked as an unreal place, it implies that the world outside of it is somehow more real. Disneyland is a microcosm of America (Baudrillard 1994, 12) and hockey culture is a microcosm of wider culture of privileged masculinity.

That is not to say that Baudrillard would suggest that these structures would not have real effects on real people's lives – rather, he argues that different sets of markers of reality inform different people's lives: "It is the secret of a discourse that is no longer simply ambiguous, as political discourse can be, but that conveys the impossibility of a determined position of power, the impossibility of a determined discursive position" (Baudrillard 1994, 17). The conditions of simulations can be changed, but the nature of the reality as a simulation rather than reality remains, and therefore the change is also tied to the conditions of that particular context. This would give immense power to the "ideas of" in regards to change in (hockey) culture – it does not matter if things are true if we think of cultures as simulacra because it means that what informs fan understanding of reality *is* real in the context which informs it. This helps to understand why it is so difficult to find a determined answer to the question of the meaning of sports in society. Fans from different backgrounds could be understood to be living in realities with completely different rules, and the conversation of change in hockey culture might be nonsensical to some fans, or even threatening, when to others the potential of it is the thing that keeps them coming back. The matter of changing the NHL's conduct is a matter of whose reality is the most useful to them – which can make them more money, sure, but also what kind of future each interpretation of reality promises with getting more people (and with them, money) involved. The question, then, shifts to who owns the rights to interpreting the hegemonic simulacra of sports' status in modern societies which in turn will determine how much the fans could affect the structures at play.

All the arguments I have made based on my data so far have repeated the same understanding: imagined communities are real, because they inform an individual's understanding of the world and their place in it; their identity. Through affects, a fan positions themselves towards the simulacra of hockey culture as well as the players (or the ideas of them), not only in the context of that community, but also the society around it, too – that is if we understand being a fan as replacing sociality and making the individual's life more meaningful. Perhaps it is exactly the understanding in the back of your head that some of your passion is informed by ideas of something better. The fact that it is not "too real" might be the very thing that makes it so fascinating because you have your whole imagination to work with in a way that the reality around it usually does not encourage, and in cases when your interpretations of it ends up not being true it is still "only sports" and not the structural failure in the society you have to face. This would be a perfect example of Baudrillard's simulacra and the Disneyland effect simultaneously — sports are there to make us think that life outside of them is somehow more meaningful while also offering happiness and community vanishing int that "outside" (Baudrillard 1994, 12). And if the Finns or any other players are interpreted as representing a less toxic masculinity, and rejecting homophobia and misogyny, they might bring in new audiences through the fan representations of them regardless of whether it is true or not. While I have previously argued that the change in demographics of the audience is not enough to push structural change, thinking through the theory of simulacra offers a slightly more optimistic interpretation. Perhaps if the ideas of change are combined with enough true change – even if it is indeed 2 steps forwards and 1,5 steps back – it could be enough even if the idea of is not completely true.

On the other hand, getting too lost in the simulacra will also kill change. The issue is that we are so used to the simulations of real that we do not identify them as simulations (Baudrillard 1994, 5), and therefore the change we attempt to implement is misdirected – it is like making a play in a game you do not know the rules of. As Baudrillard poetically writes: "And beyond the ideal schema that is that of our culture, of all culture maybe, of the accumulation of energy, and of the final liberation, don't we dream of implosion rather than of explosion, of metamorphosis rather than energy, of obligation and ritual defiance rather than liberty, of the territorial cycle rather than of…" (Baudrillard 1994, 140) – waiting for the explosion creates passivity that blocks the potential of expected change. Baudrillard talks about breaking free from the simulacra, but I am simply suggesting that different interpretations of realities need to be considered when thinking about cultural change – the change I am suggesting

would happen within this simulacra, so I will not go further into his argumentation of how to stop the simulacra, but rather discuss how to change the course *of* the simulacra. Since I argue that sports can also be an important source of community and belonging, I do not argue for its destruction but rather believe in the potential of change within these different simulations of our lived realities.

An individual can do small things to start with to create agency (or a simulation of it) for themselves, making it more meaningful to act in the world. Archer and Wojtowicz discuss ways of being a critical fan who does not blindly accept the issues in their team or sports culture. Speaking out against the behavior of teams and players to hold them accountable starts discourse that might make someone think twice about their own opinion on the matter and maybe even forces one to think about why they are willing to defend such behavior: "Critical fans do not need to be resigned to fighting a losing battle, always accepting the bad behavior of others. They might not be able to stop the bad behavior, but perhaps sometimes they can. And if they cannot stop it, they can engage in other modes of fandom that insulate them from these bad fans" (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 123). One of my informants, for example, told me that a group of queer Canes fans who were unhappy with the team's lack of detail on Pride Nights have started their own group that makes their own celebrations on Pride Nights, and offers sporting opportunities throughout the season. A Texan queer fan had watched Finnish queer films after becoming a fan of the Finnish Dallas Stars' and found solidarity and shared emotions that made him feel more accepted, to the point that he could come out for the first time ever to me. These are small things in the grand scale of things, but massive for individual, lived realities. Even with the hegemonic simulacra being controlled by bigoted views, marginalized fans can still find community, solidarity and comfort from each other whether they see it as a reflection of wider society or an escape from it. Sports, and sports fandom, belong to everyone. If minorities are expected to wait until things get better, they will never get an equal opportunity to enjoy just being a fan of sports. While it is important to hold others accountable, it is also important to remember that policing a community that is supposed to be a source of belonging is exhausting. Not all kinds of behavior can be tolerated, and fans' own limits have to be respected, but being present as a critical fan in itself sends a message that loyalty to a team does not mean accepting everything they do (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022, 119-21).

6 Conclusion

In February of 2025, a year after I finished collecting my data, the NHL held the ”4-Nations Face-off” mini-tournaments instead of its usual All-Stars break. The 4 nations with enough players to make up a roster (Canada, Finland, Sweden and the USA[29]) played in the first best-on-best hockey tournament in 9 years. An occasion that fans had been waiting almost a decade for was eventually overshadowed by politics, however, as the newly re-elected United States president Donald Trump’s threats to annex Canada to be USA led to fans in Montréal booing the American national anthem, which in turn lead to president Trump calling team USA ahead of their final game against Canada and encouraging the team to bring the victory home and make their nation proud[30]. The conservative voices in the ”sports and politics do not belong together” conversation were silent as marginalized fans wondered why rainbow tape was seen as more inherently political than whatever was going on in that tournament.

I have detailed how the current hockey community of marginalized fans has been created, what kind of culture it produces and criticizes, and how the Finnish players of the Carolina Hurricanes and the Dallas Stars illustrate the ideas of change. I have discussed the issues towards change in that culture and suggested ways to interact with cultural change overall through Jean Baudrillard’s argumentation of simulations and simulacra. I conclude that while the change in the culture seems slow and sometimes impossible, the fact that people have made it their own gives it meaning enough to keep on the good fight. While cultural change anywhere is difficult if we think of the reality as fragmented like Baudrillard suggests, the comfort and support of community are important as they are. One person cannot change it, so fans also must allow others and themselves to have fun with it (Archer and Wojtowicz 2022: 123-4). Sometimes you have to blow the whistle but sometimes you can be a fan whose only concern is how the goaltending situation will be fixed before the playoffs. As Anderson writes, “hegemony is never seamless, there are cracks of resistance in every system” (Anderson 2005, 7), and while the way is long, the potential persists.

Beyond the analytic conclusion, I wish to have shown how considering intersectionality beyond sport’s researches’ traditional engagement with mostly only gender and nationality offers productive new

[29] Russia was excluded due to its ongoing attack war on Ukraine.
[30] Canada won the championship game 3-2.

perspectives. While I have thought with intersectional feminist scholars throughout this text, the this needs to be further pursued in future works particularly in reference to adding the experiences of Black, Brown and Indigenous fans and scholars to the center. I hope to have reinforced the idea presented by both fan scholars and sports anthropologists that (auto)ethnography is a valuable methodology for understanding the nuances and dynamics at play. I also hope I have managed to convincingly argue why I believe "ideas of" are an important factor in forming culture, community and change, whether it is how they influence an individual's affective negotiations towards the subject, or how the concepts of simulacra where all culture and sociality operates can be utilized in research of sports and fandoms.

I went through a lot of phases during this research, from being excited about the unavoidable change for the better, to complete rejection of the idea that it was possible. The political environment on X has shifted a lot since my research, particularly after Elon Musk took over the site, resulting in many of the previously active members of the community migrating to other social media or leaving hockey fandom completely after one scandal too many, and yet I now, for my great surprise, find myself having arrived to the conclusion that I will remain optimistic. Sports will always be enriched in politics in societies where bodies, identities and existences are. Sports are also really, really fun to be a fan of. Somewhere in the middle lies a chance of finding meaningful community, whether it is through sharing a victory of your favorite team, discussing the structural issues in the microcosm of the NHL or enjoying seeing silly little clips of the "Finnish Mafia". Both are needed to create change, and I hope I will come to see the day where the hegemonic simulacra of hockey comes around to fulfill the promise it makes: hockey is for everyone.

Dallas Stars themed friendship bracelets given to me by my interlocutors.

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8 Appendices

8.1 The Questionnaire

Introduction

Do you have opinions or views on today's hockey culture? Are you a fan of the Finnish players of Dallas Stars or Carolina Hurricanes? If yes, I kindly ask you to participate in my master thesis research by filling this survey!

The aim of my study is to explore today's hockey culture from the point of view of social change. Is hockey (fan) culture changing? Why does it seem to lag behind compared to other sports in incorporating social change, both within the game and in its fanbase? Is that changing now, and if it is, why and how? How are the old and the new fans reacting to it?

The second part of the survey focuses on the Finnish players of NHL teams Carolina Hurricanes and Dallas Stars especially. The hockey culture I have observed in social medias around the Finnish hockey players is very different from the discourses focused on them in Finland. Through this framing, I hope to look into the national narratives on Finland both from Finnish and non-Finnish perspectives; what kind of Finland is being conceptualized in the context of hockey?

The structure of the survey is as follows:

1) Loosely establishing intersectional positioning of the responder (purposely left quite vague)

2) Ideas and perspectives on hockey culture

3) Perspectives on Finland and the Finnish players

4) A couple of questions in Finnish for Finnish responders (ignore if not Finnish speaker)

I am student of social and cultural anthropology, a discipline of social sciences in which the main methodology is ethnography, usually meaning participant observation. I will be doing fieldwork in Helsinki, Raleigh and Dallas as well as over social media and Zoom interviews. Please add your contact information if you wish to also participate in an interview. Depending on the number of interested participants, I will be in contact with those who want to be interviewed before the end of November. The interviews will be held in December 2023 to March 2024.

The information gathered in this survey and possible interviews is used strictly for the academic thesis that I produce based on my research. You will not be identified based on it, and the information will not leave that context. I have left each question optional, so please skip any and all questions that you are not comfortable with. I kindly ask you to fill this survey in English or Finnish.

If you have any questions, please contact me at linneathesis@gmail.com.

Thank you in advance!

Basic information

Preferred pronouns: *She/her* / *He/him* / *They/them* / *Other:*

Nationality:

Decade of birth: *1940* / *1950* / *1960* / *1970* / *1980* / *1990* / *2000* / *2010*

I identify as a part of LGBTQ+: *Yes* / *No* / *Other*:

Other aspects of your identity you'd like to mention?

Please write down your email / Twitter username if you'd be willing to be interviewed!

Hockey culture

How and when did you become a fan of hockey?
Do you think hockey culture needs a change?
Do you think hockey culture *is* changing?
Do you use social media platforms to interact with other hockey fans?
Best thing about hockey fandom?
Worst thing about hockey fandom?
Something else?

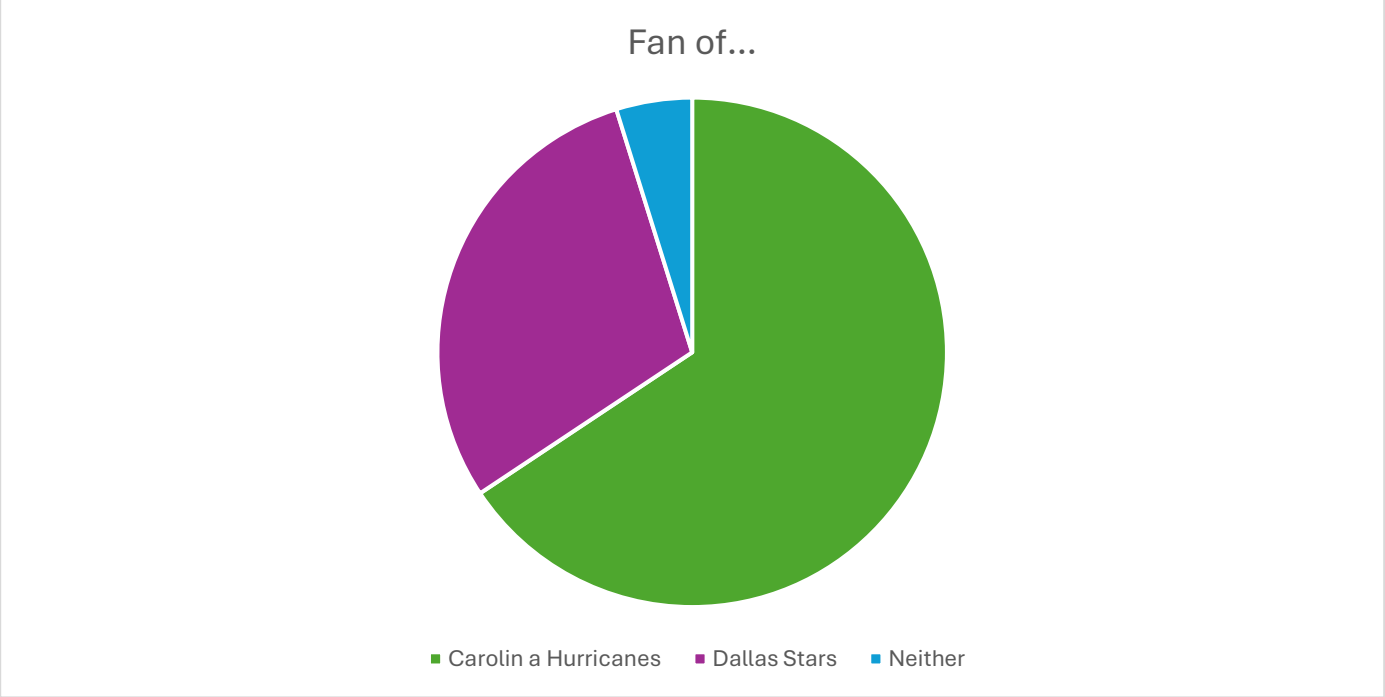
Finnish players of Dallas Stars and Carolina Hurricanes
The questions in this section are presented in a purposely provocative manner; please elaborate on any thoughts, confusions and nuances in the final question.
I am a fan of: *Carolina Hurricanes* / *Dallas Stars*
This team is my "local team": *Carolina Hurricanes* / *Dallas Stars* / *Neither*
I am a fan of: *Sebastian Aho* / *Jesperi Kotkaniemi* / *Antti Raanta* / *Teuvo Teräväinen* / *Jani Hakanpää* / *Miro Heiskanen* / *Roope Hintz* / *Esa Lindell* / *Other...*
I knew of Finland before I became a fan of these teams/players: *Yes* / *No*
Finnish players/hockey have distinctive identity.: *Strongly disagree* / *Disagree* / *Neutral* / *Agree* / *Strongly Agree*
Finnish players are an important part of my team's identity.: *Strongly disagree* / *Disagree* / *Neutral* / *Agree* / *Strongly Agree*
Finland seems socially progressive to me.: *Strongly disagree* / *Disagree* / *Neutral* / *Agree* / *Strongly Agree*
Finnish players in my team represent positive changes in the NHL hockey culture: *Strongly disagree* / *Disagree* / *Neutral* / *Agree* / *Strongly Agree*
Has being a fan of these teams/players made you more interested in Finland?: *Yes* / *No*
If yes, how? In what mediums (culture, language, politics, music, fim, etc)?
Is there a particular reason you are a fan of a particular Finnish player(s)?
Anything you'd like to elaborate?

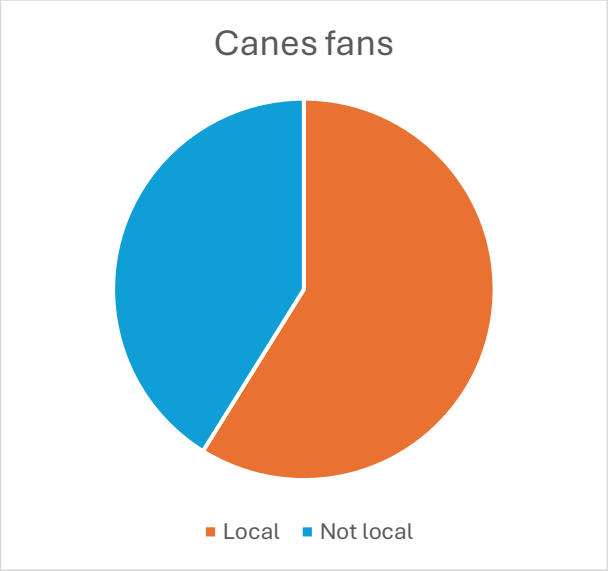
Suomalainen jääkiekko(fani)kulttuuri (Finnish ice hockey (fan) culture)
You can skip this part if you are not a Finnish speaker.

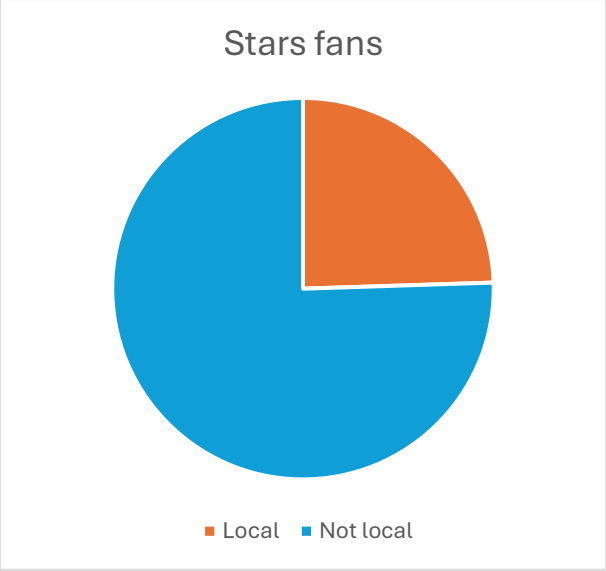
Miten seuraat NHL-jääkiekkoa? (Esim. valvotko pelien vuoksi, seuraatko tuloksia, kulutatko muuta fanisisältöä, jne?)
Mitä joukkueita seuraat? Onko joukkueesi valintaan vaikuttanut suomalaisten pelaajien määrä/menestys?
Tunnetko (kansallis)ylpeyttä suomalaisten menestyessä?
Seuraatko kansainvälisiä kilpailuja? Vaikuttaako mielenkiintoosi niissä NHL-pelaajien määrä?
Onko jääkiekolla mielestäsi erityisasema Suomessa/suomalaisessa urheilussa?

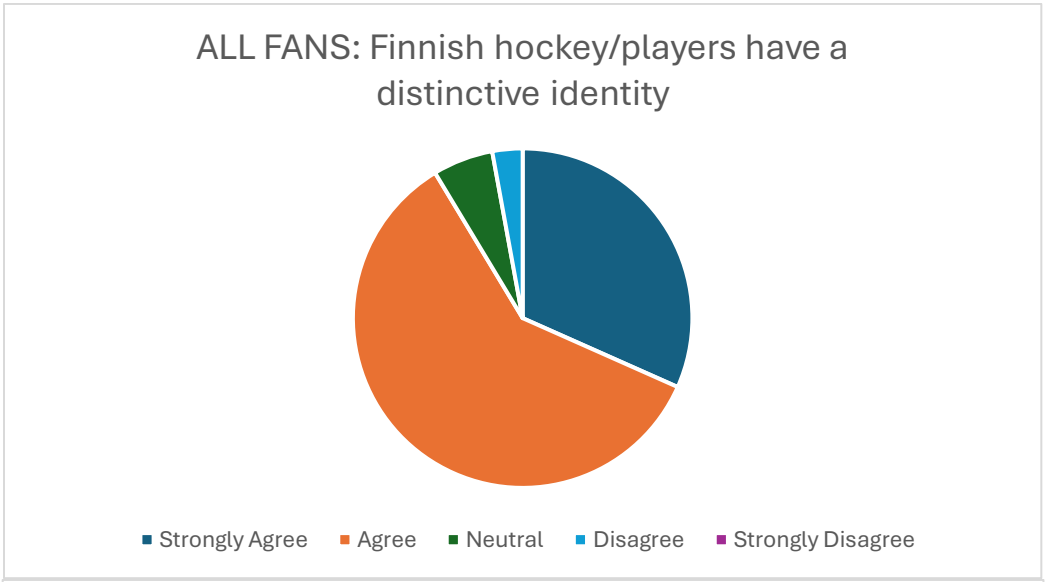
8.2 Further statistics on questionnaire answers

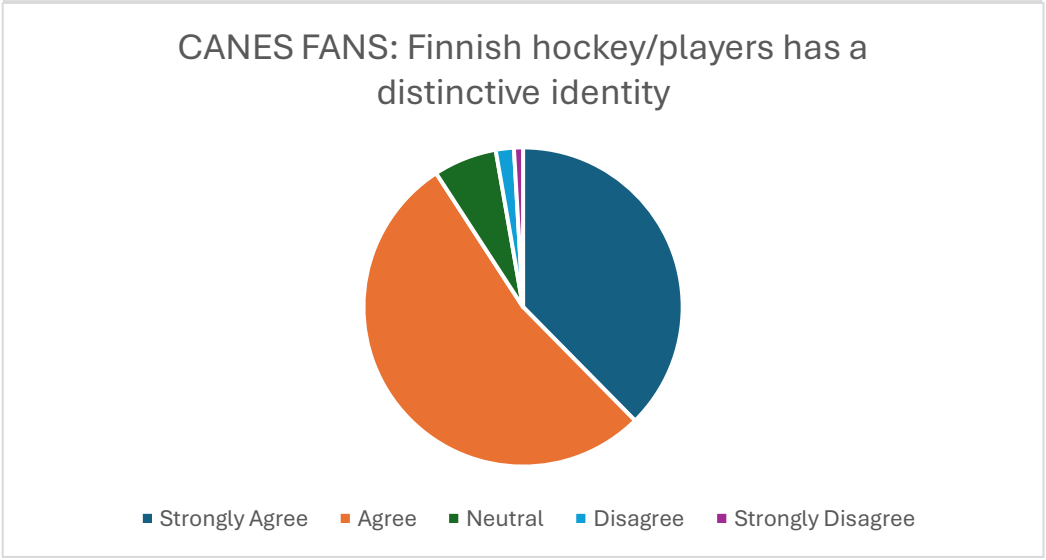
Here, I present pie chart visualizations based on the multiple choice questions of the questionnaire regarding the questions about fan identities and ideas of Finnish players and Finland.

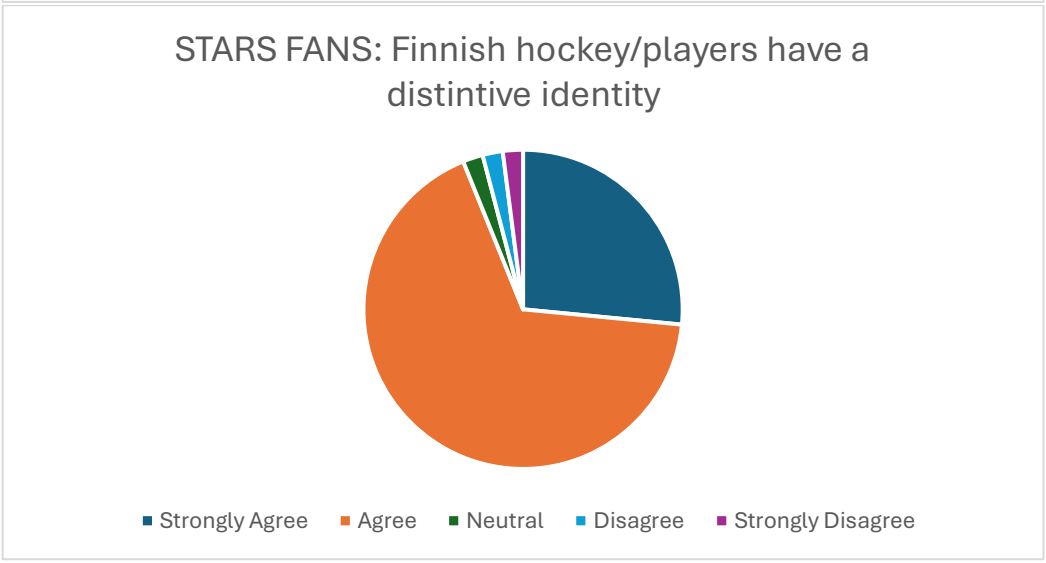


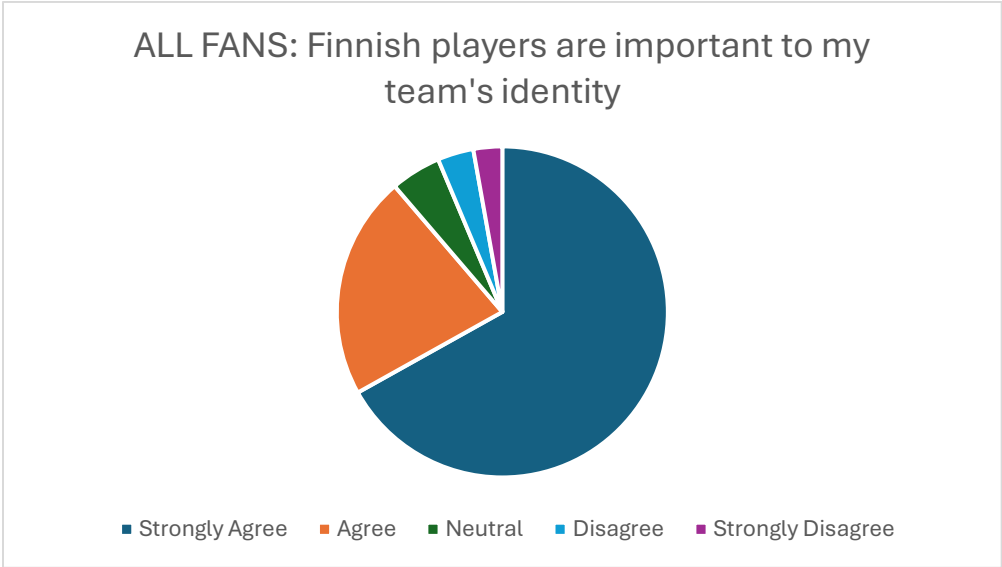


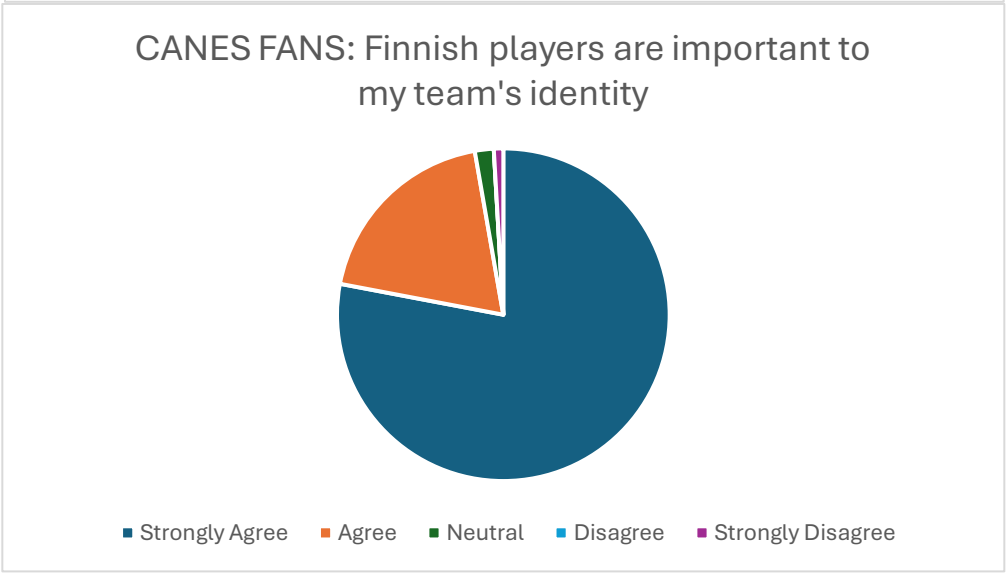


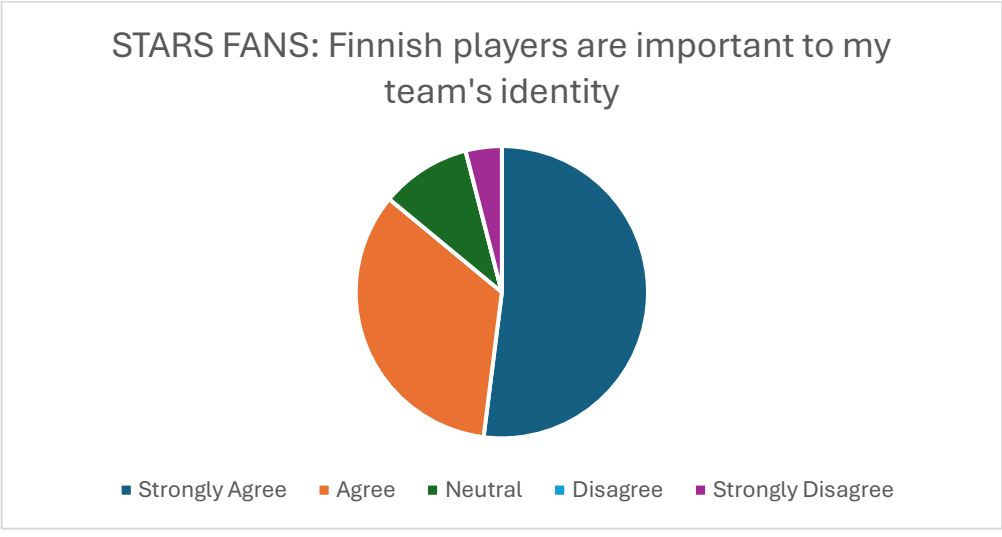

ALL FANS: Finnish hockey/players have a distinctive identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

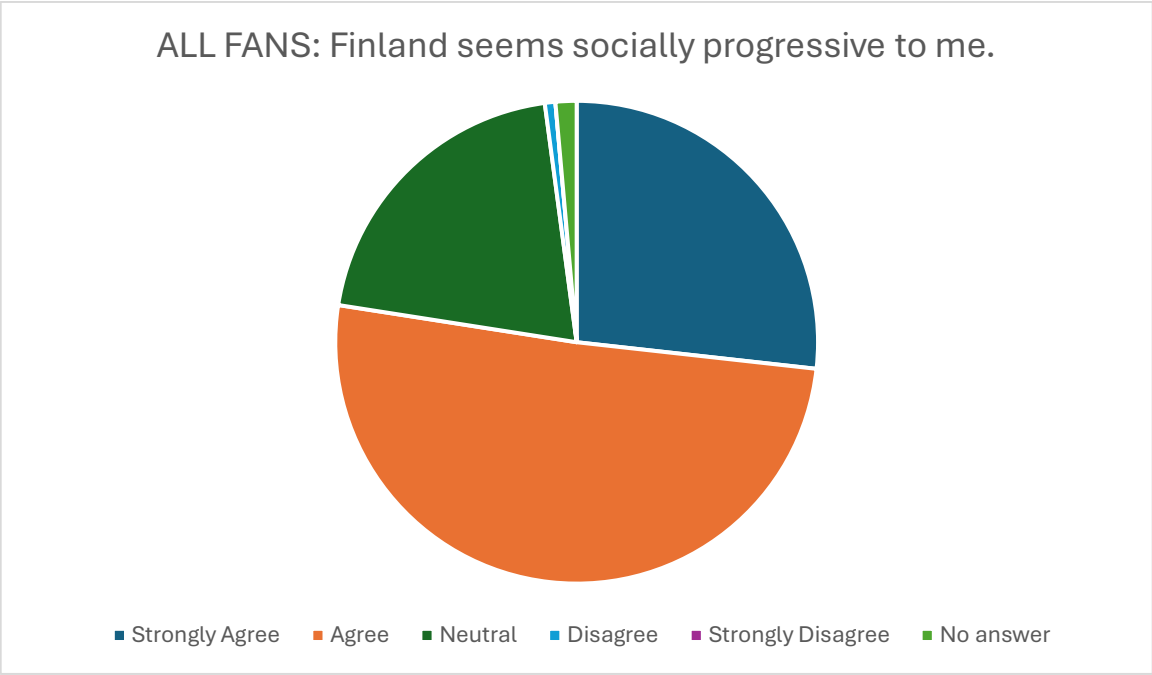

CANES FANS: Finnish hockey/players has a distinctive identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

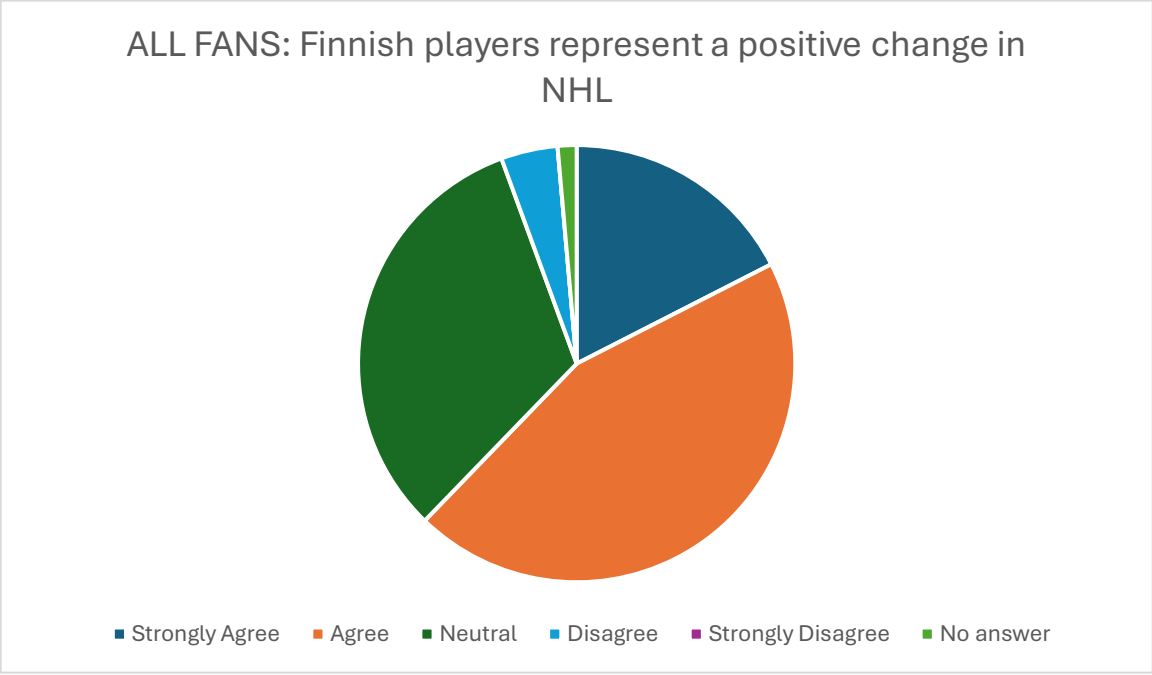

STARS FANS: Finnish hockey/players have a distintive identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree


ALL FANS: Finnish players are important to my team's identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree


CANES FANS: Finnish players are important to my team's identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree


STARS FANS: Finnish players are important to my team's identity
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree


ALL FANS: Finland seems socially progressive to me.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
No answer


ALL FANS: Finnish players represent a positive change in NHL
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
No answer

8.3 Interview base questions

Before starting

- I am interviewing a big body of people; I might not refer to you by name, but your contribution will be in the final work.
- More important than getting answers to particular questions for me is to hear your personal experience, that is what is the interesting information here. Don't think about what I think about these things; I am here as a researcher, my personal feelings have nothing to do with this.
- I might ask questions that seem stupid, where you can tell me that or try to answer anyway, or it might sound that the question would have a correct answer; this is never the case.
- Do you have any questions for me? If any come up later you can send me a message!

We'll start with hockey questions and then briefly touch on nationality and Finland, basically elaborating on what you already talked about in your survey answers. You can skip any question, if you're uncomfortable at any time please let me know!

Hockey

Personal

- Can you tell me about you becoming a hockey fan?
    - (Has your relationship with hockey changed as you've grown up with it?)
- Have you been to a lot of games?
- Do you think your gender has affected your experience as a fan? Has there been a change with age?
- Do you follow other sports?
    - Is hockey culture somehow special? Is the community special?
    - Does hockey emphasis 'team' more than other sports?
    - Do you agree with the often expressed sentiment on hockey Twitter that hockey players tend to not show personality? Is this an issue?
    - Does hockey have superstars, the kind that go beyond the hockey context?
- Has there been something special about hockey in terms of fandom? Or do you have similar experiences from elsewhere as well?
- Why do you think NHL is attracting an international fanbase right now?
- You've marked it that Canes/Stars are/are not your local team — are you fan of other teams? Do you think being a local fan gives something special to the experience?

Structural

- You said that you think hockey culture needs/does not need a change. Why? What would you say right now are the biggest issues?
- Do you think hockey has an accessibility problem? To who, why?
- Why do you think hockey has attracted new fans despite these issues?
- Do you find the initiatives — Pride Night, Black History Month, Heritage nights etc — to be performative?

- Some sports scholars say that sports represent a microcosmos of society, meaning that the issues in sports are just reflecting different scale issues in society. Do you think hockey simply reflects the issues of wider society? Are they more present in hockey? Why, why not?
- Should sports / hockey be separate from politics?
- Do the American and foreign players have same kind of responsibility in addressing political issues?
- Should the off-ice happening contribute to possibilities on ice/career-wise? What kind of consequences?
- (Have you ever made excuses for a player you like?)
- Do you think the culture can change? Does it start from the fanbase or the institutions?

Nationality

- How do you understand the concept nationality? You wrote your nationality down as ”----”; is that something that affects your identity?
- You mentioned in the survey that you find/don't find Finnish hockey to have a distinctive identity, can you elaborate on that at all? Is there something you can point at?
- You also said Finnish players are important to your teams identity, how?
- Are the Finns somehow ”similarly” different? Meaning that are the players you listed somehow similar, in ways that is distinctive from others of the team?
- Let's turn that around a bit: is there a distinct identity in American hockey, or Canadian hockey? Is it easier to identify in people from smaller countries?
- Does each nationality have something special, like Czech hockey, Russian hockey, Swedish hockey, is there something special about Finnish players?
- Do you think it's a good thing there are players of different nationalities in your team?
- Are you interested in international tournaments? Olympics, world championships?
- Do you think Finnish fans / of any nationality get special treatment in the fandom? Good or bad?

Finland

- You chose ”agree” when I asked if Finland seems socially progressive, would you be able to elaborate on that?
- Do the Finnish players represent a cultural change to you?

- Something else you'd like to mention?

Suomalaisille / For Finns

- Mikä on suhteesi Suomeen? Oletko ylpeä suomalaisuudestasi? (How is your relationship with Finland? Are you proud of your Finnishness?)
- Onko jääkiekolla erityisasema Suomessa? (Does ice hockey have a special status in Finland?)
    - Onko OK, että urheilijoilla etuoikeus armeijan suorittamisessa? (Do you find it OK that athelets have different rigths and freedoms when it comes to military service?)

    - Oletko ylpeä suomalaisista pelaajista? (Are you proud of the Finnish players?)
- Onko isoimmat ongelmat jääkiekossa erilaiset Suomessa ja NHL:ssä? (Are the biggest issues in ice hockey different in Finland and in the NHL?)
- Onko Suomessa kulttuuria? (Does Finland have a culture?)
    - Miltä tuntuu, että jotkut fanit esittävät ihannoivat suomea? (How does it make you feel when some fans seem to like Finland?)
- Maailmanmestaruuden 1995 on esitetty tuoneen Suomea yhteen laman jälkeen. Olisko jokin samankaltainen urheilun kautta mahdollista nyt, kun Suomi tuntuu olevan jakautuneempi kuin koskaan? (The 1995 Championship has been presented as something that brought the nation together after the depression. Do you think something similar could happen today through sports, when Finland seems to be more divided than ever?)