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The National Hockey League needs to help their LGBTQ+ fans feel safe online

A. Introduction

For the past decade, the National Hockey League (NHL) teams have hosted “Pride Nights,” a themed game day where members of the LGBTQ+ community are celebrated and given visibility. On January 17th, 2023, Philadelphia Flyers player, Ian Provorov, refused to wear a pride-themed jersey during warmups for the team’s “Pride Night.” Once the NHL’s inaction to hold Provorov accountable for his hateful action occurred, a night that was supposed to be a celebration of the LGBTQ+ community turned into a pattern of NHL league-wide homophobia with teams no longer celebrating marketed Pride Nights and players continuing to refuse to wear pride-themed jerseys citing religious beliefs. Following Provorov’s boycott, the New York Rangers, Minnesota Wild, Colorado Avalanche, New York Islanders, Tampa Bay Lightning, St. Louis Blues, and Chicago Blackhawks made organizational decisions to rescind their Pride Nights. On the player side, San Jose Sharks’ James Reimer, Florida Panthers’ Eric and Marc Staal, Buffalo Sabres’ Ilya Lyubushkin, Vancouver Canucks’ Andrei Kuzmenko, and Montreal Canadiens’ Denis Gurianov all decided against wearing pride-themed jerseys. Many players and teams cited religious beliefs, a common excuse used to defend anti-LGBTQ+ views, while others cited safety concerns due to their Russian nationality¹ (Kennedy, 2023). The result of these boycotts was an increase in media attention to anti-LGBTQ+ players. Social media has done a lot

¹ While Russia has a “gay propoganda law,” that is punishable by a \$6,500 USD fine, Russian players and their families would not be at risk while playing in North America.

of good, but in this instance, when anti-LGBTQ+ players are given an online platform and attention to share their views, it renders team-sanctioned “Pride Nights” ineffective, the goal of which is to promote allyship and community, thus harming LGBTQ+ fans, team employees, and players.

B. Methods

Through my research, I wanted to use the NHL Pride Nights to understand both the role of sports in social justice movements and the use of social media in being an ally. Due to the recency of the controversy surrounding the NHL Pride Nights, it was crucial to look at sources across sports and social justice movements to best make sense of how the NHL and LGBTQ+ activism fits into the bigger picture and to understand the societal impact of sports both in-person and online. I also wanted to understand the current landscape of LGBTQ+ culture at all levels of ice hockey. By reading articles and interviews with LGBTQ+ players, I was able to understand what needs to change in men’s ice hockey culture and how members of the community are advocating for themselves.

Per assignment instructions, I created a survey to understand how others felt about aspects of this complicated topic. I posted the link on both my Twitter account and my Instagram account. In total, I received 21 responses. I knew that my Twitter followers included many sports fans because I often tweet about that. On the other hand, my Instagram audience is primarily my in-real-life friends, some of whom are sports fans and others who are not. I also suspected that many of my survey responses were going to be by people who were not ice hockey fans and thus might not know the discourse happening in the ice hockey community. My suspicion was proven correct when only seven out of the 21 participants declared themselves ice hockey fans. My questions (see Appendix A.) were broad enough that knowledge of the NHL Pride Night

controversy wasn't needed, however, when looking at my results, it's important to recognize that many of the participants were likely unaware of the discourse.

I was hoping to have the opportunity to speak to Brock McGillis, a former Ontario Hockey League player who's widely considered the first openly gay player. Unfortunately, I did not hear back from him or his coworker at The Alphabet Sports Collective, Gabriela Ugarte. With time against me, I turned to a close friend and Sport Analytics and Women and Gender Studies dual major here at Syracuse University (see Appendix B for full interview questions). Anna Pierce is a lifelong ice hockey fan and is passionate about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) efforts in sports. Pierce believes that the media attention given to the boycotts has a negative effect on LGBTQ+ acceptance in the hockey community saying, "...if you're giving the attention to those that aren't showing acceptance you're taking away from the movement by giving the space to its counter and removing attention from the promotion of acceptance" (A. Pierce, personal communication, April 30, 2023). This is related to her beliefs about the role the media has in creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ fans. Pierce said, "I think the media chooses who to give airtime to and where, and I think by doing that more selectively they can create a better space..." (A. Pierce, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Pierce also stated that the media should've better supported the team's participation in Pride Nights via more positive coverage (A. Pierce, personal communication, April 30, 2023). When it comes to allyship, Pierce applauded the players who "came out and were like 'hey this is a thing we want to do and people we want to support,' [and] also recognizing the importance of Pride Nights" (A. Pierce, personal communication, April 30, 2023). From the discourse I've personally seen on Twitter, Pierce's sentiments reflect many ice hockey fans' beliefs.

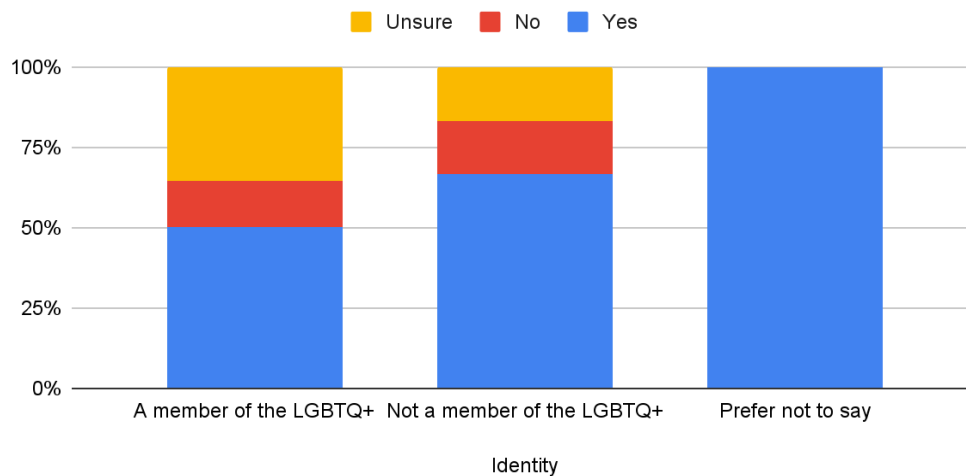
C. Results

My eSurvey consisted of six questions, three to get to know the responder and three about their opinions. Given the context of what I was trying to learn, it was important to me that I asked if the responder identified as LGBTQ+, what social media they used and how often, and if they were an ice hockey fan. The other three questions were about online allyship and acceptance of LGBTQ+ community members, professional athletes and allyship, and the role of media attention in activism (listen to the full questions [here](#)).

The majority of the participants (14) identified as LGBTQ+ and the minority of participants (7) were ice hockey fans. Unsurprisingly (because this survey was sent out on Twitter), the most used social media platform was Twitter with 17 participants answering that they use Twitter daily. The next most used was Instagram with 16 participants answering that they use it daily. The least used social media platform was Facebook with 16 participants answering that they never use Facebook. Every participant used at least one social media platform every day.

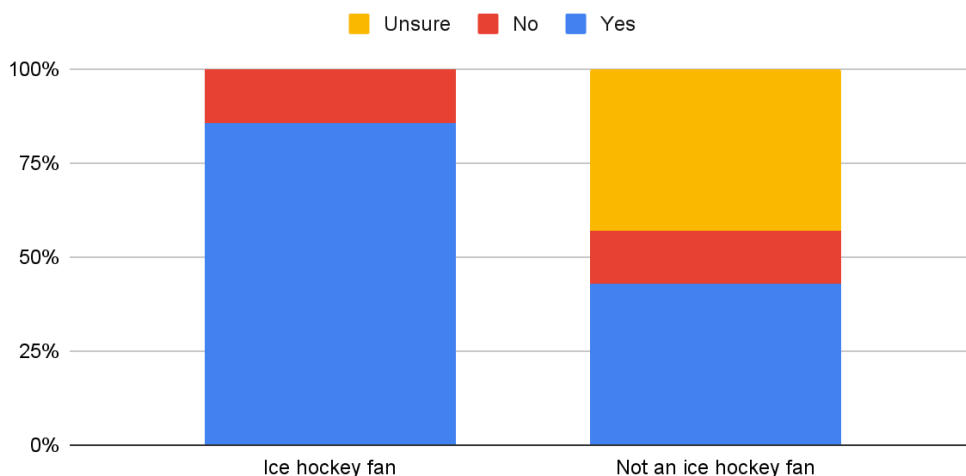
Four participants identified as both ice hockey fans and LGBTQ+. This is an important demographic to me as they are likely aware of the Pride Night controversy and are directly affected by the boycotts. When asked if it's important that professional athletes wear Pride-themed jerseys or use other Pride-themed clothing or equipment, all four participants answered "Yes". Of the rest of the LGBTQ+ identifying participants, three said "Yes", two said "No", and five were "Unsure" about the previous question.

Is it important that professional athletes wear Pride-themed jerseys or use other Pride-themed clothing or equipment?



Looking at the same question but from the perspective of whether or not the participant is a hockey fan, we find that only one of the seven hockey fans said that it was not important that professional athletes wear Pride-themed jerseys or use other Pride-themed clothing or equipment. This is compared to the non-hockey fans; six said it was important, two said no, and six said they were unsure.

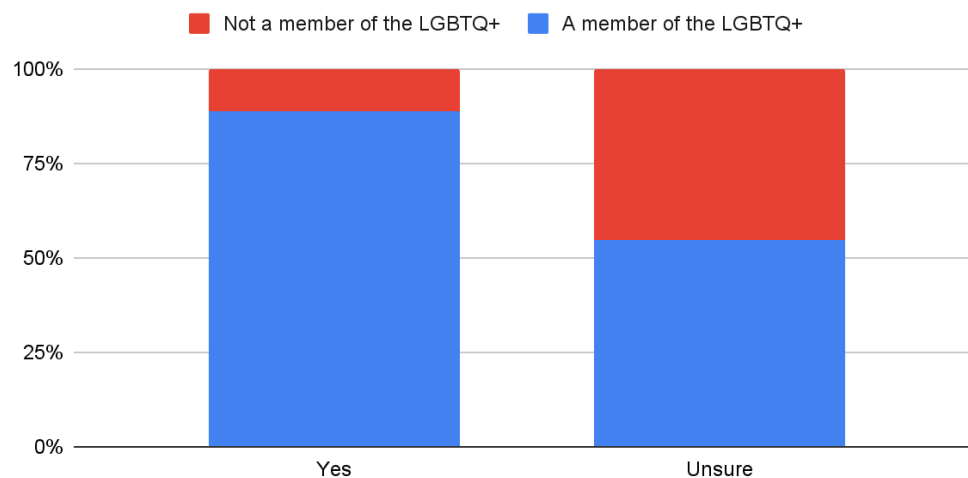
Is it important that professional athletes wear Pride-themed jerseys or use other Pride-themed clothing or equipment?



The majority (10) of participants who identified as LGBTQ+ felt the overall impact of social media on LGBTQ+ allyship was positive. The opinions of non-LGBTQ+ participants were more varied (See Appendix A for more).

The question I was most interested in was “Does giving positive or negative attention to anti-LGBTQ+ people take away from supporting LGBTQ?” Nine participants answered “Yes” while the other 15 said they were “Unsure.” No participants answered “No.” Only one of the nine participants who answered “Yes” didn’t identify as LGBTQ+.

Does giving positive or negative attention to anti-LGBTQ+ people take away from support LGBTQ?



If I were to do this eSurvey again, I would ask if they were aware of the controversy, and their feelings around it. I wanted the survey to be able to be taken by anybody, but in hindsight, it would’ve been helpful to understand who knew about the controversy and who didn’t. I would also ask if the participant was a sports fan. Non-sports fans may not realize the influence sports hold, and I would be curious to see if there were any patterns in the opinions of sports fans vs. non-sports fans.

D. Discussion

The conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of social media and the internet has been happening for as long as it's been around and the conversation will continue to happen far into the future. It's a conversation full of nuance and there will never be a right answer. The NHL Pride Night boycotts are just a small detail in a much larger picture. However, this doesn't take away from its importance and should be used as a lesson in the impact of sports, how to be a better ally online, and the influence of media.

These boycotts reflect the recent increase in anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and the increasing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation being introduced across America. In August 2022, the Human Rights Campaign, a leading LGBTQ+ organization, reported that harmful "grooming" narratives surrounding the LGBTQ+ community increased by 406% on social media following Florida's "Don't Say Gay or Trans" law (Berg-Brousseau, 2022). Despite this report being from 2022, the anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment hasn't slowed with states continuing to introduce many anti-trans bills.

Social media has allowed anti-LGBTQ+ views to spread like wildfire, and it's harmful to the community. As Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate said to the Human Rights Campaign, "Online hate and lies reflect and reinforce offline violence and hate. The normalization of anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in digital spaces puts LGBTQ+ people in danger" (Berg-Brousseau, 2022). While NHL players didn't directly post anti-LGBTQ+ views online, the media continued to interview the players who participated in the boycott and post those statements online, feeding into the growing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Much like what Ahmed said, players sharing harmful views normalizes anti-LGBTQ+ views, creating an unsafe space for LGBTQ+-identifying people, where anti-LGBTQ hate can be spread without repercussions. The purpose of NHL Pride Nights is to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and often times raise

money for local LGBTQ+ charities. When players create an unsafe space and the media amplifies it, suddenly Pride Night games are no longer a celebration and instead, a game where LGBTQ+ fans feel unsafe.

While NHL Pride Nights, as a concept, may be seen as performative, it's better than nothing. However when these Pride Nights occur and suddenly attention is shifted away from celebrating the LGBTQ+ community and given to players expressing anti-LGBTQ+ views, serious harm is done. A form of ineffective allyship, decentring refers to the diversion of attention away from the experiences of oppressed groups and towards the perspectives of privileged groups (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 13). In the case of this year's NHL Pride Nights, the decentring is diverting attention away from the perspectives of a privileged group and their allyship and towards the perspectives of another privileged group, only this one is rooted in hatred. This version of decentring almost entirely negates the already minimal allyship occurring. The National Hockey League has a long to go in engaging in effective LGBTQ+ allyship, but allowing players and the media to continue to spread anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, is a major step backward.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

The National Hockey League should've shut down Ian Provorov's boycott and immediately doubled down on the action. Not only did the lack of action lead to more hateful gestures, but the media attention given to anti-LGBTQ+ players completely negated any positive effects of Pride Nights by drawing attention away from activism and allyship. The NHL continues to preach "Hockey is for Everyone," but when they fail to hold players accountable, marginalized fans can't help but to feel as if they don't belong. Even if the NHL held Ian Provorov accountable, they would still leave much to be desired.

Following the recommendations of Shannon Jolly, Joseph Cooper, and Yannick Kluch in their paper titled “Allyship as Activism: Advancing Social Change in Global Sport Through Transformational Allyship,” which discusses how members of the sport industry should approach allyship and activism, the National Hockey League and its entourage should be trying to enact transformational allyship. Jolly et al. describe transformational allyship as “activism at both the individual and institutional level to drive strategic and systemic social change” (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 7). Embodying and fostering transformational allyship is a multi-step process, the first of which is for individual and institutional allies “to acknowledge and accept the privileged identities and power they possess” (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 11). Players have already begun this step of the process. Nashville Predators’s player, Tyson Barrie, spoke saying, “I know how hard it can be for people to come out and live their authentic lives” (Daugherty, 2023). In recognizing the challenge it is for LGBTQ+ people to come out, Barrie is recognizing the privilege he has as a cisgender, heterosexual man in not having to come out. It’s also important that players have these conversations amongst themselves. The next step Jolly et al. lay out is recognizing systemic injustices and how they oppress individuals both today and historically (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 11-12). This can be done through education and personal experiences with marginalized communities. If the NHL truly believes hockey is for everyone, they should be sponsoring educational opportunities for their players and staff to learn about oppression, especially in regards to the sport they play, which is plagued with socio-economic, racial, gender, and sexual injustices. The NHL can also expand this education to their fanbase with informational press releases and social media posts highlighting the systemic injustices that affect hockey, using social media positively. The NHL should also be trying to change on an institutional level. Being the highest level of professional ice hockey, they have a lot of power over the culture of ice

hockey and they have the ability to implement diverse hiring strategies and player education.

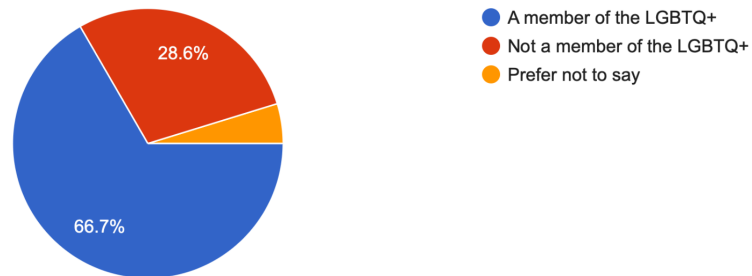
Jolly et al. suggests that transformational allyship should include a “lifelong commitment to positive social change” and that within sport organizations, it’s been noted that there are material, social, and political benefits to “creating workplaces of diversity” (Jolly et al., 2021, p. 12). The more diverse our workplaces become, the more diverse our interpersonal connections become and the easier it becomes to have challenging conversations with each. If the National Hockey League, it’s teams, players, and employees enacted a plan to engage in transformational activism both online and offline, there’s no doubt that hockey would truly become a sport for everyone. The media is part of the NHL entourage, and should do better in their own transformational allyship. The NHL should aim to create a safe space for their LGBTQ+ and other marginalized fans, and part of that includes holding their players and the media accountable for the hatred they spread.

Appendix A.

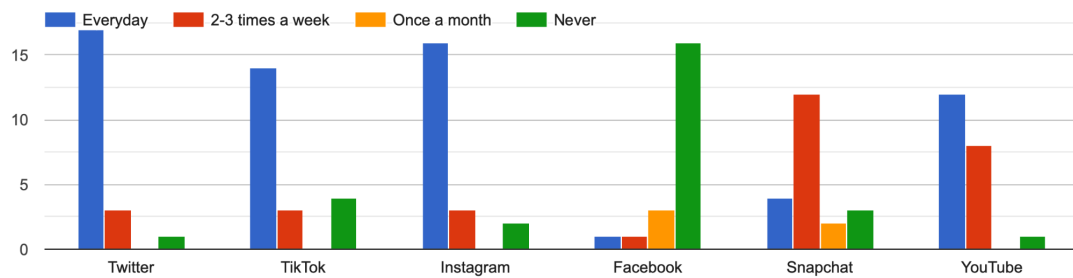
NHL LGBTQ+ Online Allyship Survey

How do you identify?

21 responses

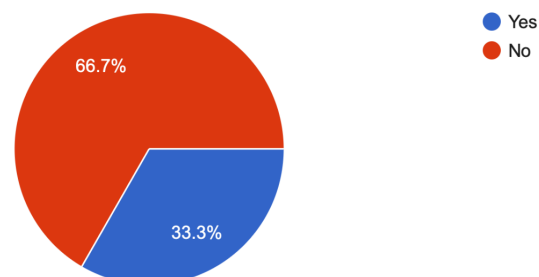


What social media do you use and how often?



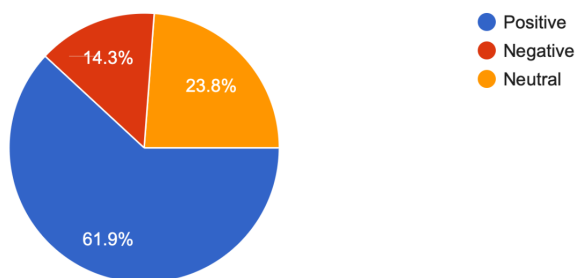
Are you an ice hockey fan?

21 responses



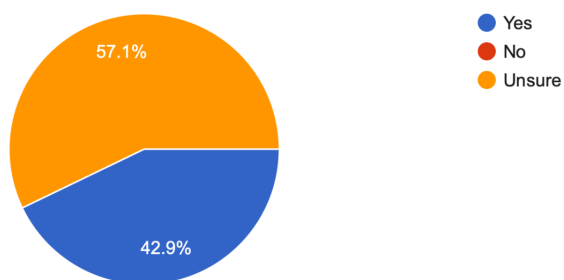
What has been the overall impact of social media on LGBTQ+ allyship and acceptance?

21 responses



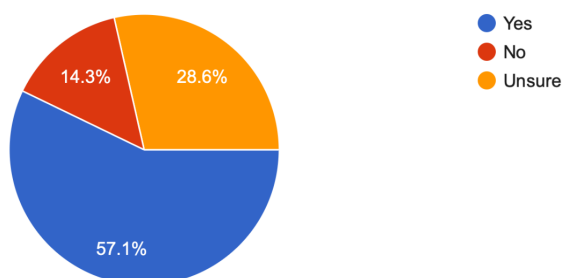
Does giving positive or negative attention to anti-LGBTQ+ people take away from supporting LGBTQ+?

21 responses



Is it important that professional athletes wear Pride-themed jerseys or use other Pride-themed clothing or equipment?

21 responses



Appendix B.

Anna Pierce Interview Questions

1. Is the media attention these boycotts are receiving positively or negatively affecting acceptance in the hockey community?
2. How can players, fans, and the media be better allies on social media?
3. What role does the media have in creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ fans?

References

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