The Good Old Hockey Game: Nationalism, Gender, and Discourse Surrounding the PWHL

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ABSTRACT

On January 1st, 2024, the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) played their inaugural game for their inaugural season. The professionalization of women's sports has been a concerted effort for decades and is experiencing exciting traction. Despite this, stereotypes about the athletes, quality of play, and efforts to delegitimize the leagues persist. In addition, hockey specifically has been integrated into the cultural heart of Canada and is regarded as a national symbol. An important caveat exists here — hockey as a national symbol has only included the men's game. Whether it be the men's professional league, the infamous male players, or moments of glory for men's teams, these images in connection to the Canadian national identity are exclusively male. The PWHL presents a potential disruption of this, through the inclusion of women, if it is widely accepted and folded into the symbols we associate with hockey.

This research investigates social media discourses on Facebook and X to determine what Canadians are publicly saying about this league and what the implications are from that. The media events framework is used to conceptualize the first PWHL game and theories of nationalism to understand the relationship between hockey and Canadian national identity. Then, critical discourse analysis and autoethnography are applied to over 500 comments. Ultimately, this research suggests that those engaging with PWHL content are mostly supportive and do associate the league in a prideful way with Canada, with a minority of comments being hateful or patronizing. While the PWHL may have its naysayers, it has a lot of support to capitalize on and solidify its place in Canadian culture.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

JANUARY 1st, 2024

My car was absolutely filthy, as most vehicles become in the dirty slush and snow of Edmonton's roads. I was sitting in my car as it went through the automated car wash on New Year's Day 2024 when a male friend called to ask me to lunch. We met at a nearby restaurant to celebrate the new year. As we chatted and enjoyed the atmosphere, my eyes wandered to the television above the bar broadcasting a Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) game between Toronto and New York. I was surprised but happy. I had forgotten the new league's inaugural game was that day, which I had planned to watch. Luckily for me, I could see the game from where I was sitting in the restaurant. I recognized Toronto's Sarah Nurse, who is a cousin of professional basketball star Kia Nurse and her brother is National Hockey League (NHL) defenceman Darnell Nurse.

The PWHL teams were fast and evenly matched. Pleased to be witnessing the start of the league, I drew my friend's attention to the game and expected the avid sports fan to be equally excited. However, he did not know what the PWHL was. I asked how a sports nut like him had not seen any of the extensive advertising or coverage about the new league over the past few months. Offended by my remark, he made an offhand comment questioning the legitimacy of the league. I replied that the PWHL is equivalent to the NHL: they are both professional hockey leagues featuring Canadian and American teams, use similar rules for play, and see their games broadcast on the same television networks.

My former friend guffawed, like what I had said was utterly ridiculous. He adamantly disagreed! He claimed that the women players are not allowed to bodycheck, they skate slower, and they play hockey differently. In fact, he felt the PWHL should barely be considered hockey,

let alone an NHL equivalent. I was upset. How could he denigrate professional women's sports? We heavily debated whether or not the leagues could be considered equivalent. Tensions rose, and voices did too. I began to feel embarrassed as other diners looked at us. He then laid out his crowning argument: the NHL was the only hockey league that did not discriminate based on gender because they allow women players while the PWHL does not allow male players. The contentious debate was now a full-blown argument. I felt hot, angry, and out of control. Why could he not grasp that cisgender men are not the only people capable of being successful and entertaining professional athletes?

This experience was not only frustrating, but also extremely upsetting to debate this topic and try to explain why women might not be barred from playing in the NHL, but they are not welcome either. Turn the television on to any NHL game, and you will see the vast majority of the players are white men. The rest are racialized men. With the PWHL, a professional space had finally been created for women's meaningful participation in hockey. Yet, this person was trying to twist the new league into embodying the very quality that had kept women out of professional hockey for decades: gender discrimination. Even recalling this event brings back those feelings of anger and disappointment.

THE PWHL AND CANADA

Systems of oppression like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity structure our lives. My racial and class privilege has blinded me to how oppressive systems manifest in micro-interactions. This interaction with my now former friend sparked an interest in exploring reactions to the new professional league. I was curious about whether the sexist attitudes expressed to me over lunch that day could also be found in social media discourse surrounding the PWHL. The newness of this league, its inclusion of three Canadian teams — Toronto,

Montreal, and Ottawa (PWHL, n.d.) — and hockey's centrality to Canadian culture raises important questions about gender, sports, and Canadian national identity.

In this thesis, I will explore the dominant themes within social media responses to the PWHL's posts on X and Facebook marking the official start of the league. I expect that my real-life experience will be mirrored in social media comments from that day, including efforts to delegitimize the league. This research is personal for me, as I grew up playing sports but was repeatedly told there was no point in dreaming about becoming a professional athlete. This research also functions as a litmus test to see if the inclusion of women in professional sports is considered a positive development by the public when it comes to Canada's favourite sport of hockey. Lastly, this research advances our understanding of the inclusion and exclusion of gender in sports and of the ways in which women athletes are depicted in social media.

The PWHL is part of a growing focus on and movement for women's professional sports. A 2023 poll by Canadian Women and Sport found that "two out of three Canadians were fans of women's sport and, just as important for business, that fan base was diverse, educated, and affluent" (Spencer 2024). Sensing this growing interest, investors have created elite teams and professional leagues for women's hockey, basketball, and soccer in Canada (Spencer 2024). In addition to this, hockey specifically is Canada's winter sport (Justice Laws Website 1994). As exciting as these developments are, they raise questions about the traditional link between masculinity, sports, and Canadian national identity. Women's professional advancement in hockey threatens to disrupt men's traditional 'right' to be important symbols of Canadian national identity through excellence in hockey. An analysis of social media comments about the new women's hockey league should reveal if Canadians welcome this new representation or not.

Hockey is a central part of being Canadian for a majority of citizens and therefore a conduit for the expression of Canadian nationalism (Wong and Dennie 2021, 199-203). While this may not seem surprising, especially for anyone who has spent a significant amount of time in this country, it is a crucial context when considering the PWHL. Historically, only males were allowed to play hockey in Canada. To maintain hockey's gender boundaries, ringette was created in the 1960s to enable females to have their own winter sport (Demers 2017). A clear relationship thus exists between gender, hockey, and Canadian national identity: women's exclusion from hockey gave men the exclusive right to embody Canadian national identity through the country's favourite sport.

As Allain (2019, 512) explains: "hegemonic Canadian hockey produces privileged national identities, specifically those linked to the bodies of seemingly straight, able-bodied, young, white men." Therefore, some people are within this imaginary and some are outside of it (Allain 2019, 511). Interestingly, despite the exclusivity of this national identity, it has immense support within the population (Allain 2019, 514). This image cuts deep in Canadian culture: it can be found in questions on the citizenship test, songs, films, and even being pictured on the five-dollar bill at one time (Allain 2019, 516). Hockey is shown everywhere in Canada — how does the PWHL fit within this cultural context?

Women are not seen as part of Canada's imagined national identity, even though women play hockey too. In all the aforementioned examples, it is hockey being played by men (Allain 2019, 513). Simply, "national hegemony is tied more directly to the bodies of men than to the bodies of women — an argument supported by trends in the public celebration of Canadian sport heroes" (Allain 2019, 515). For example, one list of the 20 greatest Canadian athletes of all time features 17 men and only three women (Crumpley 2024). The PWHL disrupts the idea that

hockey, and Canadian national identity, is only for men; its existence and success push the boundaries of who is allowed to be an exalted Canadian. No longer are women relegated to ringette, recreational hockey leagues, or playing on the local community rink. The PWHL forces people to recognize that professional hockey is for more than straight, white men. The subsequent national identity that comes from hockey can also be challenged and changed to include women. Identifying instances of Canadian nationalism in the social media discourse about the PWHL points to the potential expansion of this imagined identity.

MEDIA EVENTS FRAMEWORK

Some moments are broadcasted over television that almost feel cinematic compared to other live broadcasts. During the 2024 NHL finals, I sat in a bar with a group of friends and at least fifty other people to watch the Florida Panthers beat the Edmonton Oilers to win the Stanley Cup. The playoffs went all the way to game seven, with the Oilers losing the first three and risking elimination. They fought back, and it was electric. Still, after all that resilience, they lost in that final game seven. Being in Edmonton, the aura of depression at the last horn was palpable. It felt like everyone's life in Edmonton paused to watch this game — the store where I worked closed early so employees could watch this one game.

This is just one example of many in moments that are memorialized through television. The PWHL had their first game on January 1st, 2024, in Toronto (The Canadian Press 2024). The game brought in over two million viewers worldwide and sold out the arena in which it took place (The Canadian Press 2024). To put it in perspective, the NHL playoff finals drew in over ten million people at its peak (DiCristoforo 2024). Despite this stark comparison in sheer numbers, I will argue that the PWHL event can be conceptualized under the media events

framework as it satisfies the requirements of being live, preplanned, and has reverence and ceremony.

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz developed and presented the media events framework in their book titled: *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992). They explain how we can understand certain types of media that go beyond the usual ones we see every day. People are constantly inundated with media: on our phones, on our televisions, on our computers. It is borderline inescapable. Just because an event is televised or broadcasted, it does not make it a media event. Media events have specific characteristics and consequences that go beyond the regular. Firstly, media events are disruptive: "they are interruptions of routine; they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives" (Dayan and Katz 1992, 5). There is something monopolistic and exceptional to media events whereas most television programs are repetitive. *Hockey Night In Canada* or *Saturday Night Live* are not media events - even if they may have moments of greatness in the public consciousness - because they are routine. Being disruptive is one of the many factors that make media events special.

Dayan and Katz (1992, 9) outline four characteristics required for qualifying as a media event: it must be live, preplanned, have reverence, and include ceremony. The first PWHL game was broadcasted live on YouTube and CBC from Toronto (Wawrow 2024). Furthermore, the league started its planning in June 2023 (Wawrow 2024), making that initial game preplanned. The game certainly had an atmosphere of ceremony and reverence as well. For example, one reporter describes the first goal as going "straight into the history books" (Donkin 2024). The tone of reporters was respectful, happy, and excited. The traditional media response, in this case the reporters, being overwhelmingly positive fulfills the reverence component. As for ceremony, some more context is required to demonstrate how the game satisfies this. Billie Jean King is a

legend in women's sports and an investor in this league (Donkin 2024). She did the ceremonial puck drop for the game and even kissed it before releasing it (Donkin 2024). King's appearance and function at the game serve as an example of the ceremony it was afforded.

The authors provide a typology to further classify and understand media events. The type of event can clue analysts in on what kinds of scripts are being used, the roles in the event, and what can be expected from the event (Dayan and Katz 1992, 25). Dayan and Katz (1992, 25) outline three options: contests, conquests, and coronations. The first game of the PWHL can be understood as a contest. It occurs at a fixed period of time, has agreed upon rules, takes place in a sports arena, involves humans in competition, the winner is not predetermined, and it frames conflict in a manageable and productive way (Dayan and Katz 1992, 34-5).

This framework argues that the audiences of contests "check, like an umpire, to see whether the performances are in conformity with the applicable rules" (Dayan and Katz 1992, 44). Given that the NHL stands as the traditional basis on which to compare the new PWHL, this idea is particularly intriguing. Audiences will watch with a very solidified expectation of what hockey ought to look like and hold it up against even the most basic components of the PWHL game. Aspects like jerseys, the referees, coaching, the brands of hockey sticks used, will all be scrutinized. These facets have salient implications for this study; the PWHL must conform enough to still be considered hockey, but be different enough to stand alone. The comments will act as a thermometer to determine whether the public believes women's hockey belongs to this broader category of professional hockey. Essentially, if this league belongs in the same box as the NHL.

The media events framework is also useful for thinking about the inaugural game at the macro-level. The first season of the PWHL operated in a precarious situation — first impressions

matter. The first game sets the tone for the first season, which is important for a couple reasons. Investment in the league and interest in expansion teams is dependent on the success of the first season, therefore making the first season critical for building a loyal fanbase. For these reasons, first impressions indeed mattered and there existed a lot of pressure. Dayan and Katz (1992, 119) explain this predicament as "rituals of coming and going." First time events enter the media space and if they receive the sort of grandiose reception that media events entail, they can continue.

NHL teams must win sixteen games for the championship in the Stanley Cup finals to win the league, this event would be an example of rituals of coming and going. With the proper support, the PWHL could reach this level as well. This requires public support and the league to be structurally sound. The public support can be estimated through applying the media events framework during analysis. Imagine if the PWHL championship game reached the level described here:

> Its call to prayer – if it is to succeed – must be echoed in the words of national leaders, by our friends, by the newspapers, by the schools that declare a recess, by employers who allow us to view on company time, by the flickering lights in all the neighbors' windows. (Dayan and Katz 1992, 120)

There are certainly many crucial aspects to media events, but this public reception, approval, and dialogue around the event is arguably the most important.

Dayan and Katz (1992, 147) describe how media events can uphold or reinforce hegemonic values, or they can challenge them and encourage change. The PWHL represents a fascinating overlap of these ideas. It is both an embrace of the institution of hockey and a challenge to it as well. The rules, the culture, the traditions are all an emulation of the NHL, yet

the very inclusion and centering of women is antithetical. Despite this, I would station it as more a vehicle of change than of hegemony. Even the focus on King and mentions of her wife in a CBC article, or the highlighting of Sarah Nurse, a woman of colour, as a key part of the negotiating process (Donkin 2024) demonstrates a shift. A shift away from the straight, white, male hegemony of the NHL.

Media events have agenda setting power (Dayan and Katz 1992, 199). They cue the public to talk about the event and issues surrounding it, and to ultimately form an opinion. This is largely what my research will focus on. What sorts of conversations begin, or begin again, on different platforms because of this media event? One example is that around the time that the PWHL started, there was a discourse on social media around some men claiming that they could compete with professional female athletes and win simply since they are men and naturally superior at any sport. Conceptualizing the start of this league as a media event lays down the foundation of how to think about it when analyzing the consequent media blitz. It is not just any old hockey game, and the media around it is not regular either. As Dayan and Katz (1992) point out, the success that leads to longevity for the league is dependent on our reaction. So, what was our reaction?

THESIS CHAPTERS BREAKDOWN

The research question guiding this endeavour is: does gender play a role in how the Professional Women's Hockey League was discussed in social media comment sections at its onset? I analyzed comment sections on four different Facebook and X posts and identified three key themes to discuss. The chapter breakdown for this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 will be the literature review, exploring the intersection of sport, gender, and nationalism in Canada as well as gender politics and sport. Chapter 3 will focus on the methodologies I used in the analysis,

such as critical discourse analysis and autoethnography. Moreover, I will discuss data collection and the technicalities around that. Chapter 4 will go over the findings and the three key themes of: Obviously Positive, Obviously Problematic, and Possibly Not So Obvious. Lastly, Chapter 5 is the final chapter and conclusion to the thesis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

HOCKEY CULTURE AND HISTORY IN CANADA

Hockey was a substantial part of my life growing up. My Dad often told us stories about how he used to play and how he could have made a career out of it if not for his knee injury. I thought this was fascinating and very very cool. Little did I know that this was a common story. I would spend all my years in elementary, junior high, and high school hearing about hockey stars in my classes. I would be asked to pick a favourite Oiler and know their number; mine was Jordan Eberle, who was number 14, mostly because we shared a first name. I could not even pinpoint when I became conscious of the history of the Oilers… knowing we now sucked but before my time there were glory days when most people in North America knew what Edmonton was and who Wayne Gretzky was.

Part of growing up here meant that we did class field trips to the community skating rink. One symbolic way that kids were shown that hockey was for boys only was through skates. There are many types of skates but, for the most part, kids either had figure skates or hockey skates. Hockey skates were for boys and figure skates were for girls. Despite knowing that men are involved in professional figure skating, I have never once in my lifetime seen a man wear figure skates. A few girls had hockey skates because they were hammy downs but were often adjourned with pink laces or something of the like. Even fewer had hockey skates because they played hockey, maybe one that I can remember. This simple but absolutely pervasive symbol categorized for me who belonged in hockey skates and who did not. Even the existence of ringette, developed as an alternative for hockey for girls, illuminates the exclusion of girls from hockey. It has always been there.

The role of hockey in my life, and the connection to Canadian nationalism, is evident through my experience watching the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament in February 2025. This was highlighted by the growing tensions between the USA and Canada, after President Trump's threat of the annexation of Canada which led to the viral booing of the USA national anthem (The Associated Press 2025). The 4 Nations Face-Off tournament is put on by the NHL, featuring players from the league representing their nation (Press Release 2025). The 4 nations were: Canada, the USA, Finland, and Sweden (Press Release 2025). The teams each played one another once, and then the top two teams played for the championship (Press Release 2025). My week was completely structured around watching Team Canada play. When I was not actively watching the games, I was consuming content like advertisements, social media posts, or talking about it with my friends and family. One advertisement from Rogers, a telecommunications giant in Canada, caught my attention for illustrating the salience of hockey and being Canadian. There are historical photos and videos of kids and famous hockey players; these are all symbols of hockey culture, and the dialogue opens with this: "Some countries say they love hockey, but we own it. It's who we've been, who we are, and who we'll always be" (Rogers Canada 2025). The writers are trying to generate a sense of patriotism for Canada through our devotion to hockey; hockey is who we are, and we are Canadians.

My friends and I watched the championship game, between Team Canada and Team USA, at my house over a few drinks and dinner. Connor McDavid, captain of the Edmonton Oilers and revered figure in hockey, scored the winning goal in overtime cementing Canada as the winners. Everyone jumped up out of their seats, yelling and cheering! I felt a distinct sense of pride and vindication — that is my country, winning at our sport, against our rivals! Canada, Canadian sovereignty, nationalism, and pride were all notable themes of the response to the

game. Former Prime Minister Trudeau tweeted this at the end of the game: “You can’t take our country — and you can’t take our game” (@JustinTrudeau 2025). Canada is ours, and hockey is ours too, and this relationship is the entry point into research on the PWHL. The PWHL is hockey, but is it hockey that represents what it is to be Canadian? The social media discourses will help uncover the answer to this question.

While that winning goal will likely be lauded for a long time, many examples exist of fantastic moments in Canadian hockey history. In 1972, Paul Henderson scored the championship winning goal against the Soviet Union in the Summit Series (Carha Hockey, n.d.). Mario Lemieux captured an epic win and secured the Canada Cup in 1987, getting the assist from legend Wayne Gretzky (Carha Hockey, n.d.). Another moment that is considered one of the greats is when Sidney Crosby scored the overtime goal against the USA winning the gold medal for Canada in 2010 (Carha Hockey, n.d.). This particular article tells the reader that “what makes debating the greatest hockey moments so enjoyable, is that there is no wrong answer to what is truly the greatest Canadian hockey moment” (Carha Hockey, n.d.).

Note, none of these moments include women nor women’s hockey. They claim there is not a wrong answer, but I would argue differently because the people and moments listed are categorically the same. They are all men, they are all NHL players, they are all moments where Canada as a nation was being represented. I could propose a few moments from women’s hockey, like the Wickenheiser story described in Chapter 5. Or, the Canadian women’s team winning gold in multiple Olympics (Hockey Canada, n.d.). Or, the twelve gold medals at the Women’s World Championships (Hockey Canada, n.d.) to enter onto this list, but I do not think it would be accepted given its exclusion in the first place.

In order to comprehend the significance of hockey in Canada, it is helpful to contextualize the history of the sport. Contrary to popular belief, the birthplace of hockey is not actually Canada (Martel 2019). The internationally accepted rules and how the game looks now is from Canada though (Martel 2019). The first, official, organized game was played in 1875 in Montreal, Quebec (Martel 2019). A white man from Nova Scotia is credited as the organizer and has been celebrated by the Government of Canada (Martel 2019). Using the search function, I looked up "women" and "girls" in this article from The Canadian Encyclopedia. No results were found from either. Women are not included in this narrative of the history of hockey in Canada, but that does not mean they were not present.

Based on the lack of female presence in my summary of hockey culture in Canada thus far, one may assume that women have not been active in the sport. When looking at the history of hockey, this could not be farther from the truth. The first recorded instance of women playing hockey was in 1891 from a reporter in Ottawa (Jamieson 2013). There is not even a twenty-year difference between the first organized and recognized men's game, and reports of women playing. This was not limited to informal matches, but women's hockey was institutionalized through university teams at this time as well (Jamieson 2013). It was not until the 1970s that there was an explosion in creating women's club teams (Jamieson 2013). By 1987, there was an unofficial women's world championship (Jamieson 2013). There were enough players, interest, and organizational capacity to create and hold this tournament, yet the International Hockey Federation (IIHF) refused to recognize it. Women were systematically excluded from what would be considered professionalized hockey. However, this did not stop players and fans from engaging in their sport. After 100 years of playing, the IIFH finally hosted and sanctioned the 'first' women's world championship in 1990, which Team Canada won (Jamieson 2013).

The NHL, which is the premier professional league in North America, has not been known for its inclusivity and making professional hockey a welcoming and open place for all. On a broader scale, the institutional culture of hockey is plagued with a myriad of problems that then manifest in places like the NHL. For example, one study found that over half of youth players list "misogyny, racism, exclusion and bullying" as part of the culture (Renfrew 2022). To make matters worse, over 60% believe these problems are stagnant or worsening over time (Renfrew 2022). From coaching staff to teammates to fans, racialized players have taken a slew of racially motivated abuse in the NHL (Doyle 2020).

Furthermore, the institution itself is fully aware of the systemic problems taking place within it (Doyle 2020). So, the most prestigious professional hockey league on this continent is known to be unwelcoming to anyone but the demographic that dominates it, straight white men. The consequence of this is that anyone who does not fit that mold, might not consider professional hockey to be attainable. Or, if they do, there is an explicit understanding that they will face backlash, aggression, or tokenism. The PWHL offers an alternative to women, and potentially an alternative institutional culture. The discourse taking place by everyday people on social media can help determine whether this is acceptable or not to the public. Additionally, whether the PWHL will be accepted into the image of Canadian nationalism.

HOCKEY AS NATIONALISM IN CANADA

Nationalism can be conceptualized as an imagined community. Benedict Anderson famously provides this conception in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2006). The basic idea is that a nation is composed of people who will never know, meet, or hear of one another, yet they feel they are all part of the same community (Anderson 2006, 6). These members share the same image of their community and

yet have all never sat in the same room and agreed upon it. Additionally, there is an affective affinity for one another where if you were to run across a stranger in a different context and both be members of said community, you would feel a closeness to them. For a country as geographically, socially, and culturally diverse as Canada, this imagined community is of the utmost importance for national cohesion. Anderson (2006, 12) tells us that cultural systems are the root of the imagined community. Sport is a subset of culture that is often overshadowed by aspects like religion and language. In Canada, where religious and linguistic pluralism is common, analyzing hockey as a universal manifestation of culture is useful. If culture precedes and builds the imagined community, then hockey in Canada precedes and builds our imagined community. A political analysis of hockey must consider the implications for Canadian nationalism.

In addition to the imagined community theory, Canadian nationalism has been classified as civic based nationalism. In political science, there are two ideal types of nationalism that can classify different populations across the world: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism binds people together through characteristics like shared religion, history, ancestry and is symbolic and emotional (Breton 1988, 86). On the other hand, societies of civic nationalism are bound together by legal citizenship, political and economic interests, and are utilitarian (Breton 1988, 87). Being a settler-colonial society, Canada fits much more within civic nationalism. However, Canadians are not devoid of symbols, emotionality, and history. In the absence of a strong ethnic culture and nationalism, Canadians had to build their sense of nationhood on other features. This is where hockey enters the narrative; it is a symbol of Canadian national identity that has developed in the place of something like a universally practiced religion.

Hockey was not always considered a part of Canadian culture or Canadian national identity, rather, it is a more recent phenomenon to think of it as integral to our understandings of Canada (Lorenz 2015, 2107). Moreover, outside of academia and analysis, hockey was not revered the way it is now in Canada (Lorenz 2015, 2109). However, as it became more and more celebrated "people across the country were exposed to similar cultural narratives about community representation, regional identity, violence and masculinity" (Lorenz 2015, 2111). As these became accepted and ingrained into the culture, hockey was officially solidified in the position it is now: one of national status and importance. The cultural narratives within hockey become disseminated as narratives that can be thought of as representing Canada as a whole.

For example, Earle (1995, 107) writes of hockey as "Canada's most distinctive gifts to the world," and how it "is considered to be one of the most telling things about us." Following this logic, the connection between nationalism, hockey, and cultural narratives are evident. Hockey being a gift to the world from Canada, takes this sport and makes it as big and as significant as the nation. It is not just a pastime that we shared, or a piece of our culture that we allowed to be practiced outside the country. It is not even a sport that we introduced, since hockey was not invented here. Hockey was a gift from us. Ownership is implied by this metaphor as well: hockey is Canada's to give out. In terms of being telling about us, hockey is understood as exclusionary, violent, masculine, white, a conquest (Allain 2019, 512). Thus, Canadian national identity is understood as possessing these characteristics too.

Hockey is a manifestation of Canadian national identity and embodies the traits of competition, violence, masculinity, whiteness, and athleticism, to name a few (Allain 2019, 512). The NHL is the forefront professional league in the institution of hockey. Thus, how people think about Canadian national identity is in part shaped by the cultural narratives in the NHL and

hockey more broadly. Historically and how it stands now, some people are allowed to embody this identity and some people are not (Allain 2019, 511). Interestingly, despite this exclusivity, it has immense support within the population (Allain 2019, 514). The PWHL has the opportunity to break into this space and alter those cultural narratives, making it more inclusive and attainable for everyone. If the PWHL is considered just as legitimate as the NHL for representing hockey, then suddenly women are part of and shaping those understandings. The Canadian national identity as exemplified by hockey would no longer be the sole purview of men. National identity must be widely accepted and spread by the majority, not just elites; imagined communities cannot be maintained by a small few. Social media reflects the discourse of more than a handful of reporters in traditional media, which makes social media a better medium to conduct my analysis on and determine if the PWHL has entered the space of Canadian national identity.

GENDER POLITICS AND THE PWHL

Outside of the discussion on Canadian nationalism, there is one to be had on gender politics and women's professional sports too. As discussed previously, the NHL currently defines the standards and culture of professional hockey (Theberge 2000, 133). Legitimacy is needed for the PWHL to rise to that same level, which can be accomplished with improved material conditions: better pay, better quality facilities, bigger arenas, the same quality experience as given to the NHL (Theberge 2000, 133). Part of the issue is that professional female hockey players face issues related to sexist stereotypes and preconceived notions of women in sports. For example, stereotypes related to being "mannish" and "lesbian" (Theberge 2000, 87). Additionally, some people simply believe that men's hockey is the real game and women's hockey is the other, less authentic version (Theberge 2000, 133). Challenging these assumptions

will be difficult but the payout would be worth it. One manifestation of this perceived inferiority is the reduced physicality of women's hockey (Theberge 2000, 135). People use this difference, and any others they can find, to justify the supposed inauthenticity of women's hockey and the superiority of the men's game. Women's hockey is then subjugated as naturally different and worse than the ideal standard of the men's, which creates barriers in developing and promoting the PWHL.

These discourses do not only exist in conversation or personal interactions, historically, they have been upheld and reinforced by the media (Kane and Lenskyj 1998, 186-7). Understanding the way that the traditional media has engaged in undermining women's professional sports provides language and certain themes to look out for when analyzing the social media discourses. Three different common techniques are used in the traditional media that are important to consider: ambivalence, collectivism, and symbolic dominance. Ambivalence refers to when compliments are paid to the athletes but are paired with "weakness descriptors" to basically neutralize the positive thing said (Duncan and Messner 1998, 175). For example, if someone said that an athlete was a terrific skater for her smaller build. Collectivism is when sports accomplishments are more likely to be attributed to luck, togetherness, and family for women than men (Duncan and Messner 1998, 177). For instance, people may assume women are more attuned to gymnastics because of their natural feminine grace rather than hard work and dedicated training. Lastly, symbolic dominance refers to when men's hockey is always positioned as the standard and women's as the other (Duncan and Messner 1998, 180). The most common example is calling it 'women's' hockey instead of hockey (Duncan and Messner 1998, 180).

Social media discourse research is obviously less common in the literature than ones conducted on traditional media. However, it is relevant to consider because it reflects the voices and opinions of anyone willing to comment, rather than a selection of authors or reporters. It has the potential to be more accurate of the discourse taking place in the general public. Breagh MacDonald (2022, 39) analyzed social media discourse through comment sections about hockey as well. Their research suggests that users engage in different language about women and are more polarized when doing so (MacDonald 2022, 39). Importantly, this different, polarized, language is hostile in nature (MacDonald 2022, 39). MacDonald (2022, 41) states that hostile discourse discourages participation for women. These findings and implications are based upon social media discourses taking place within comment sections. My research does the same and adds on to this growing body of literature on gender, sports, and Canada.

CONCLUSION

Recently, my class was discussing nationalism and when prompted to list representations of Canadian national symbols, the first thing my classmate said was hockey. While it has not always been the case, hockey has become one of the most substantial symbols of this nation. This has then shaped the ideal national identity to be one that reflects the ideal hockey player — white, male, able-bodied, presumably heterosexual. The PWHL has the power to challenge this image if it gains enough acceptance and legitimacy. In the past, athletes and women's leagues have struggled with legitimacy as sexist notions of innate inferiority have proliferated. The media was an active part of this process through means such as ambivalence, collectivism, and symbolic dominance. Lastly, all of these themes will be evaluated by analyzing social media discourse which has been successfully done in similar contexts. My study of social media discourse on the PWHL's official launch will thus be informed by theoretical understandings of

the cultural relevance of hockey, hockey as a manifestation of Canadian nationalism, trends in women's sports discourses, and social media as an important medium of public discourse. The next chapter, on methodology, will go over the mechanics of the analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I chose two different methods to explore my research question: does gender play a role in how the Professional Women's Hockey League was discussed in social media comment sections at its onset? I started with autoethnography because of the personal nature of the foundation of this research, i.e., the story I shared in Chapter 1. Autoethnography allowed me to situate myself, explore the relevance of my life and experiences, and balance both objectivity and subjectivity. Next, I chose critical discourse analysis as the means to assess the comments and organize the social media discourses occurring on Facebook and X. This chapter will provide an overview of both methodologies and explain my data collection process.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be used as the primary method of analysis for this research. I will use CDA to code and analyze comments on posts made by the PWHL about the first game on both Facebook and X. Language shapes our understandings and informs our opinions, this process and the language itself is discourse (Johnstone 2018, 2). Discourse analysis then involves taking a piece of text and taking it apart by analyzing the specificities of the language to find the latent messages and place them within a cultural context (Johnstone 2018, 36). Conclusions can then be drawn on what is being communicated beyond the obvious. Any given text could have an overwhelming amount of subtext for interpretation. Therefore, multiple kinds of discourse analysis exist that guide the researcher and preference certain themes — CDA:

> studies the way power relations in a society are reproduced, reinforced, or challenged through the varieties of discourse (such as speech, text, or graphics) employed in that

society. In particular, CDA focuses on exposing the way power inequalities are maintained through established forms of discourse (Groff, 2023).

CDA is ideal for this research because it allows the language to be analyzed in a way that pays close attention to systems of oppression that manifest through discourse. CDA is an effective way to analyze the choices made by authors of media to draw out their meaning and the intentions behind them in a deeper way that allows it to be criticized and challenged (Sriwimon and Zilli 2017, 141-2). The authors of media are not neutral nor objective; everyone writes from a specific position that informs their product. Often, stereotypes or prejudice are present in the discourse, and this can be gleaned from methods like CDA (Sriwimon and Zilli 2017, 136-7). Risks of CDA being not generalizable beyond the study can be mitigated "by being as truthful and transparent as possible in giving sufficient details about the sources of data, showing how the data are systematically obtained, and using an amount of data large enough to be a representative sample" (Sriwimon and Zilli 2017, 142). The use of CDA in this research will allow for a focused interpretation of the data in a way that reveals both explicit and more hidden forms of prejudice in the comments. This way, my analysis will not only present the discourse but problematize it as well.

The ways in which gender and the unequal distribution of power are manifesting in present discourses are harder to determine (Lazar 2005, 1). While in the past, it may have been the case that people comment sexist obscenities with impunity, that is not as common anymore. It still happens, but it is far more likely to produce a comment that is more subtle in the way that it subjugates women. It is important to name a feminist perspective in research (Lazar 2005, 2), and that is what my research will have. When engaging in CDA, I will utilize a distinctly feminist lens to evaluate the language in the comments. As Lazar (2005, 7) states, "based upon

sexual difference, the gender structure imposes a social dichotomy of labour and human traits for women and men, the substance of which varies according to time and place." Professional hockey has been the purview of men, the PWHL challenges this conception, and the comments will provide insight into how people are reacting to this. CDA with a feminist perspective as the methodology allows for this focused interpretation.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography will be the other method used for my research. Autoethnography allows the researcher to explore the relationship between themself and their project (Reed-Danahay 2020, 2). It rejects the notion that research must be objective (Reed-Danahay 2020, 2). Historically, studies on culture (anthropology or ethnography) were conducted by an outsider researching a given group. For example, a white researcher studying the culture of Indigenous peoples. The distance between researcher and researched was intended to foster this idea of objectivity and a perspective untainted by emotions, connection, and the self. Autoethnography challenges these Western ideals and "places self within a social and cultural context" (Reed-Danahay 2020, 2).

Autoethnography was originally used to describe the way an Indigenous man told the story of his life, focusing predominantly on cultural and sociological themes whilst doing so (Reed-Danahay 2020, 4). Following this, it was used to refer to someone undertaking an ethnographic study of their own cultural group (Reed-Danahay 2020, 5). From these initial examples, it becomes clear that autoethnography is not about oneself (Reed-Danahay 2020, 2). It is not a narrative about the author's experiences, that is an autobiography. Autoethnography "seek ways to place personal experience within wider sociopolitical contexts" (Reed-Danahay 2020, 3). It is a method that incorporates the researcher's life experiences (Reed-Danahay 2020,

3) to provide a fuller and richer account of the cultural context they are attempting to investigate. Furthermore, the emotional realities of conducting research are embraced rather than ignored (Reed-Danahay 2020, 4).

The type of autoethnography deployed in this research will be fieldwork autoethnography. This means that I will be giving time and space to my experience while undertaking this project. Gender and sexuality have been especially prevalent in autoethnographic work and the researcher's positionality is essential to their knowledge and the work they produce (Reed-Danahay 2020, 11). This is how autoethnography fits into my research specifically. My positionality as a white, queer, settler, woman in Canada, who is deeply entrenched in the culture of team sports and hockey is an important facet of this research. It will inform the way I code my analysis, and it will dictate my own emotional response to the data. More broadly, my positionality provides my passion for the project and is the main driving force behind it.

Autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent; "autoethnography leads to an overemphasis on the subjectivity of the researcher at the expense of the researched and therefore does not adequately address systems of inequality and domination in society" (Reed-Danahay 2020, 15). In comparison to research that does not mention the author(s) at all, even going so far as to avoid first person pronouns, autoethnography is arguably self-indulgent. However, this indulgence can provide a richer and more nuanced perspective of whatever is being studied. Being reflexive allows researchers to own their biases and even work to overcome them, rather than ignore them and allow them to flourish. Being a woman conducting my research, I may be more attentive to covert sexist language. Growing up with the culture around

hockey in Canada, I may be more aware of slang and cultural norms in the sport. Naming these things and using my experiences to ground the rhetoric I analyze is an addition to my research.

Social media is arguably a form of autoethnography where people go and document their own lives as situated in a specific context. As Reed-Danahay (2020, 18) puts it: "social media is, similarly, both a platform for performance autoethnography and a site for research on autoethnographic expressions by indigenous or 'spontaneous' autoethnographers." This perspective further justifies the use of autoethnography in my research as it argues that the authors of social media posts are saying something about themselves, their experiences, their culture, and their sociopolitical context. I spend hours on social media everyday taking in, analyzing, storing, and reacting to content. It informs the way I speak, the slang I use, the way I connect with peers, the way I understand other generational groups, and the way I am exposed to current events. Autoethnography is well situated as a method in this research as it will allow me to be reflexive, to write more freely and creatively, to analyze my experience of being on social media during the start of the PWHL, and to stay staunchly within and comment upon the cultural context of the research.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for this research was chosen with intention. The comments for this research were taken from four separate posts made on January 1, 2024: two from X and two from Facebook. The comments on Facebook were gathered using the Chrome extension "ESUIT" filtering for most relevant. I was able to access 200 per post for no cost. The first post (https://www.facebook.com/share/p/jaBRxwQSBHANtLnt/) had 322 comments in total, of which 200 were accessible for analysis. The second post (https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GAfvbgFZN/) had 567 comments in total, and again 200

were taken. On X, the first post (https://x.com/thepwhlofficial/status/1741948948338577835) is identical to the first Facebook one, and I imported all 28 comments manually. The second X post (https://x.com/thepwhlofficial/status/1741876862849102184) had 91 comments, all of which I manually copied as well.

The choice of these posts were specific and thoughtful. I chose posts made on the day of the first game, keeping in line with the media events framework. Posts made before or after the day are not part of the media event itself. Furthermore, these posts had more engagement on them than others made that day. These posts were not about a moment within the game itself, such as the first goal or announcing the winner, rather they were memorializing the event, which fits best within the media events framework. I did not include replies to comments within my analysis, bringing the total number of comments looked at to 521.

It is worthy to note that these apps are used by people all over the world. It is impossible for the scope of this research to determine whether the user making the comment is Canadian, American, or from some other place in the world. However, given that all the comments analyzed are in English and there were very specific mentions of Canada, the results still pertain to Canadian attitudes. It is not comprehensive nor infallible, but there were many examples of the Canadian flag emoji being incorporated into comments and not one American flag. Canadian nationalism was evident in this way and thus inspires confidence in the validity of the results.

While presenting the comments, I will not be using people's usernames despite it being public record. Furthermore, I will be paraphrasing the comments used as examples for the user's confidentiality. Since this research is on the discourses happening, not the actual people commenting, it is not required to seek out their consent (Buck and Ralston 2021, 8). When people are commenting on these posts, it is more than likely that they are not doing so with the

intention of being studied or researched. So, despite it being part of the public record, in order to respect their privacy and not have to obtain their consent, their usernames and verbatim writing will not be included. As Buck and Ralston (2021, 9) explain, "a tweet written by one user may have context-specific intentions and expectations about how the content she creates will be seen and shared." Usernames and verbatim language can both be used to find the author of the comment (Buck and Ralston 2021, 10), which is not my intention or fair to the user who made the comment.

The coding process occurred over the span of a week. I first read through the comments, then I developed the codes. Then, doing approximately 150 comments at a time, I coded them. After that was complete, I did one last read through. I documented different thoughts, struggles, and surprises as I engaged in this process. My different codes were:

1. Positive
2. Positive with a valid critique of the league
3. Neutral
4. Homophobic/transphobic/queerphobic
5. Critical
6. Sexist
7. Other

These seven codes allowed me to evaluate each comment, even the ones that were not written coherently. Some of the comments were difficult to code because they would be overtly and undeniably positive, but were highly gendered. There were also a plethora of comments that were advocating for an expansion team in a specific city. Those were hard to classify as well; it could be inferred that since they want an expansion team, they are supportive of the league.

However, unless they included a compliment or heart or something overtly positive, I coded them as neutral. I found the process more complicated than I initially expected, with lots of comments being nuanced and difficult to fit into one category. Processing them three separate times alleviated any doubts I had initially concerning categorization.

Determining the themes also proved challenging. Positive words like “congratulations” came up time and time again, but that does not make for a substantive theme. Moreover, it was important to me to capture the specific phenomenon of these gendered but positive comments; just because a comment referred to the gender of the players, does not mean it was necessarily malicious. In fact, many comments were kind towards the league or players but gendered the athletes or the league in a way that was unnecessary. In light of these considerations, I developed themes that were broad enough to include everything. Obviously Positive comments are just that. They include all the congratulations, gratitude, and excitement. Obviously Problematic houses the transphobic, homophobic, sexist, and overly critical comments. Lastly, Possibly Not So Obvious includes the comments that contain more nuance than a “congratulations!” or a “this is terrible.” Symbolic dominance, ambivalence, and collectivism all fit within this theme. These three themes will be detailed with paraphrased examples in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Understanding the first PWHL game on January 1, 2024, as a media event is crucial for rationalizing why the public discourse around it matters and is worthy of analysis. Media events are widely viewed, discussed, and evaluated (Dayan and Katz 1992, 199). They can either conform to the current culture or challenge it (Dayan and Katz 1992, 147), and in doing so generate reactions of either support or opposition. Hockey games are certainly within the cultural expectations of Canadians, what is not is the players being women. Outside of the Olympics, professional women's hockey has not garnered sustained attention in this country. Thus, I applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) and autoethnography to 521 comments between four posts from the social media platforms X and Facebook to determine what the general public's initial reactions are on the most democratic form of media. After coding them, I organized them thematically into three distinct sections: Obviously Positive, Obviously Problematic, and Possibly Not So Obvious. I will outline the results and discussion of each section without quotes to protect the identity of users and respect that they did not write these comments with the intention of being part of research. To conclude I will provide a holistic overview of all of the comments in this chapter by addressing the role of moderation policies and culture within different social media platforms.

OBVIOUSLY POSITIVE

The content of these posts included simple congratulatory messages like "congratulations," "congrats," or the use of heart emojis. Other short messages included ones with more sport lingo, like the common phrase "let's go." These comments indicate a general warmth and excitement towards the league. They are likely a function of the nature of the posts as well; posts regarding the start of the league and the first game are going to generate messages

of congratulations unlike other posts. This is in line with the media events framework that demonstrates the uniqueness and relevance of this particular moment for the league.

Additionally, aligned with the media events framework, were comments of reverence or ones showing deep respect for the league and/or players. In terms of the league, discussions of all the women it took to get to this point and the impact this will have for future generations were posted. These comments express both gratitude and acknowledge the effort and capital required to start the league. Mentions of how this can change the hockey environment for young girls growing up now shows that a portion of people believe that the league has already reached a level capable of longevity. Another common occurrence was people describing the emotions they felt while watching — hope, excitement, crying, happiness. For some people, this experience was very emotional, evidently something I can relate to as well. I teared up reading a few of the comments that came from older women reflecting on how they wished something like this existed when they were younger. Or, of the parents showing immense gratitude for the PWHL for their daughters. This game generated big feelings for some of the viewers, which points to how important the game was and how important this league is.

Some of the Obviously Positive comments explicitly stated that this was a historic day and a huge sports moment. These most clearly demonstrate the reverence given to the event which falls within the media events framework. Some people engaged in the discourse felt strongly enough that this was a turning point moment that they expressed it in these comment sections. Not only were these comments of reverence for the league, but there were also some for the players. People typed messages of pride for the players in general, or specific players, like Ella Shelton. The players were described as crucial role models for young women today; this also reflects the tacit belief that lots of people are watching, kids are watching, and that the

league is inspiring and will stay around long enough for people to develop attachments to the players. Other examples of reverence included complimenting the skill of the players, using phrases like “great game,” and even claiming the PWHL is the best hockey available to watch. Ultimately, there was no shortage of respect given to the players and league alike, which signals that it is not only being accepted, but embraced as well.

One of the biggest Obviously Positive aspects was the notable amount of Canadian nationalism. Tremendous usage of the Canadian flag emoji, comments about where in Canada they were viewing from, and calls to action for expansion within Canada were all present. Going beyond this, Canadian comments also included mention of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), another component of Canadian identity. Some comments also focused on praising Canadian players, as well. These included reference to players from Team Canada, and to specific individuals that are Canadian. It is evident from these comments that the strong relationship between hockey and Canadian national identity has extended to the PWHL. People made an effort to associate the league with Canada, their praise with Canada, and the talent coming from Canada.

No such association was made from Americans to their country. A pale comparison of moments of American nationalism existed in relativity. There was zero usage of the American flag emoji in the comments. Some people similarly mentioned a specific city they were viewing the game from or made calls to action for the league to expand to a particular city. Beyond this, there were no odes to America or as this game being representative of Americans.

The Canadian commenters are eager to claim the PWHL as theirs — the same way other professional hockey teams, leagues, and players are too. Any professional hockey league that includes Canadian teams would be at a natural advantage for capturing the favour of Canadians

given the relationship that exists here between hockey and Canada. This is especially evident given the lack of American patriotism in comparison. Despite the fact that this has been the purview of men thus far (Allain 2019, 515), these comments suggest that public discourse is embracing the PWHL and including it in those common exaltations about hockey and Canada. People are actively and intentionally connecting the PWHL to Canada and using their social media spaces as a place for patriotism. Even though the ideal type hockey player that has represented Canada in the national imagination has always looked one way, it does not mean it is static and the readiness of commenters to associate the PWHL with Canada demonstrates a crack.

The majority of comments were positive in nature (~67%). Separated by post, the breakdown is as follows:

1. 75% for Facebook Post 1 (https://www.facebook.com/share/p/jaBRxwQSBHANtLnt/) were coded as positive.
2. 74% for Facebook Post 2 (https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GAfvbgFZN/) were coded as positive.
3. 50% for X Post 1 (https://x.com/thepwhlofficial/status/1741948948338577835) were coded as positive.
4. ~38% for X Post 2 (https://x.com/thepwhlofficial/status/1741876862849102184) were coded as positive.

OBVIOUSLY PROBLEMATIC

Clear examples of problematic language were also present in the posts I analyzed — the comments sections were not without hateful rhetoric. Amidst the positivity and odes to Canada, examples of sexist and transphobic ideas concerning the league and the players were there.

Interestingly, transphobic comments were made much more often. This is likely due to the explosion of anti-transgender laws and bills coming from the United States, some specifically targeting barring transgender athletes from playing sports as their gender (Mellis 2023). American anti-trans activists and lobbyists have been semi-successful in generating fear of transgendered athletes taking over and harming women and girls' sports (Mellis 2023). Ironically, they are not so concerned with supporting and advocating for women's sports, but more with policing who qualifies as a woman. A silver lining was displayed when the negative and harmful rhetoric accounted for a minority of comments between all of the posts. Regardless, the following discussion will be on the Obviously Problematic comments within the social media discourses analyzed.

Transphobic comments were the most prevalent within the discourse that fall under this theme. People were adamant in saying that transgender women should not be allowed to play in this league. Whether it be phrasing it that way, or men pretending to be women, or biological men, this sort of rhetoric made up the majority of the Obviously Problematic comments. Some of them were questions of whether trans women were allowed to play, were playing already, or would be allowed to play in the future. Others assumed that there was already a ban, either formally or informally. Others were almost plea-like in their calls for trans women's exclusion from the league. One noteworthy opinion was the assumption that all the players are cisgender and congratulating the PWHL for that. However, a player appearing feminine does not mean that they are cisgender; gender is more than stereotypes around feminine or masculine ways of presenting oneself. Billie Jean King came under attack for being a supporter of trans athletes and some questioned why she was there and being lauded, clearly not aware of her position as a major investor of the league. While trans athletes are not actively allowed to play in the PWHL,

when the PWHL was first announced, they stated that a policy on transgender athletes was in progress and would be shared when it was finalized (Sadler 2023). There has been no update since then, so the league's official stance on the turbulent issue is markedly undecided. I would speculate that public discourse, including the one from this analysis, has a part to play on the lengthy hesitation from the league's elites.

As one CBC journalist aptly describes: "women's sports are having a moment, but sexism is still holding back success" (Stechyson 2024). The results of my CDA are in line with this appraisal. The most common theme in the sexist comments were ones that delegitimize the league and the athletes by diminishing them to junior levels of hockey. This level of hockey is for youth and implies that the players' skill levels are that of teenagers who are not even eligible to play professionally. Some posts expanded further and claimed that the PWHL teams could be beaten by boys playing at the junior level. This is not the first time I have personally come across this argument: professional female athletes are equivalent to teenage boys, and not men. This kind of rhetoric attacks the legitimacy of the athletes that play in this league. It also implies that it is inferior to the NHL, where grown men play after they have moved out of the junior level.

Additionally, some people commented that this was simply not the men's game. Usually, their comments did not go any further to specify why or how it is different, just that it is different and worse. One commenter suggested that this could be ameliorated by having more men involved in the league; the presence of more men could make this women's league better. Lastly, some people sexualized the athletes by asking for bikini calendars or chick fights, connecting women's value to the objectification of their bodies rather than their skills at playing hockey. These comments are particularly damaging as they completely reduce the athletes to sex objects. The implication is that the players are only valuable if they sexualize themselves, that the league

will be successful if it satisfies this condition. Clearly, this is problematic and the PWHL should have no issues avoiding succumbing to these 'suggestions' given it was 2 individual comments out of 521.

As a contest available to the public eye, people feel qualified to state their opinion. The media events framework suggests that given the game is classified as a contest, part of the public response will be contesting the rules of the game (Dayan and Katz 1992, 44). While not a remarkable portion of the social media discourse, this did occur as a way to attack and belittle the PWHL. Firstly, people commented multiple times on how the players wear full cage helmets as opposed to the players in the NHL. Some claimed that this would preclude viewers from forming a bond with players because they cannot view their face during game play. I argue that this likely has more to do with a reduced ability to objectify the players while they are playing. Anyone who was really interested in seeing what a player looked like could easily search them up online, rather than complain that the full cage helmet gets in the way of their viewing experience. Another component was criticizing the jerseys. Traditional team names were not present, rather the cities they represented were simply written on the jerseys. Therefore, people found them plain or in need of sprucing up. I am sure that similar critiques can be levied against the jerseys from the inaugural season of the NHL — some aspects of the game take time to build, especially something like branding. Lastly, a classic comment to delegitimize women's sports in terms of contesting the rules of the contest was mentioned, the lack of hitting or physicality in comparison to the men's game. Inferior is what the games were called due to this difference in rules. Although, if women did play with an intensified physicality, they would likely be attacked for that as well. This contestation is likely a double standard that can only fade away with time as the PWHL gains more respect.

The literature on women's sports pointed to three potential ways that the media frames female athletes as inferior in an inconspicuous way: symbolic dominance, ambivalence, and collectivism. These three concepts were used to structure the Possibly Not So Obvious comments. Symbolic dominance refers to when women are othered relative to men in sports: their inclusion is exceptional and different from men's natural inclusion (Duncan and Messner 1998, 180). Ambivalence can be conceptualized as a back handed compliment — she's so fast for her height, she's so strong despite being so small (Duncan and Messner 1998, 175). Finally, when an athlete's achievements are attributed to luck, togetherness, and family, that is collectivism (Duncan and Messner 1998, 177). Only one of these was present in the social media discourse I studied, which points to a need for refreshing these frames to be more applicable to social media and the 21st century. However, the sample was rife with examples of symbolic dominance, spanning both positive and critical comments.

"Ladies" and "girls" were used almost constantly when referring to the athletes. The congratulatory messages were often paired with ladies, girls, or the little girl emoji, which represents another way to delegitimize the players. Their gender is constantly in reference when complimenting them, they cannot just be talented hockey players, they are talented ladies. There is a silent part to these statements: they are talented, for a girl. This othering places the PWHL as firmly separate, and thus inferior, to the NHL. On top of the players facing symbolic dominance in the discourse, the league and game generally does too. Phrases like the "women's game" were also popular, especially in critiques or wholesale rejections of the league. Obviously, the PWHL is different from the NHL, and it ought to be. They should have different cultures, different players, different branding, different tournaments, and more. However, it is not a reality that

differences exist in the skill, talent, and quality of play between the leagues, with the PWHL being unquestionably inferior.

This part of the social media discourse may not appear to be problematic to the average person scrolling through their Facebook or X feed. Every time that the players and league are othered though, it presents a barrier for the PWHL reaching a level of equivalent admiration and coverage to teams in the NHL. As long as the discourse surrounding the PWHL positions it as different, it will never symbolize hockey in the same way as the NHL does. Connecting this idea in the nationalism literature reveals that the PWHL may not represent Canadian identity like the NHL does. The full implications of symbolic dominance are not available given the nature of this research or the temporal boundaries that exist for the PWHL. Only time will tell whether this othering ceases as the PWHL continues to develop and situate itself in the public consciousness.

MODERATION POLICY

When reviewing the comments holistically, a substantial discrepancy between the social media discourses taking place across platforms is present. For comparison, 24-25% of the Facebook comments were coded as something other than positive, whereas 50% and ~62% of the X comments were coded as something other than positive. That is double to triple the number of comments that were problematic (sexist, transphobic/homophobic/queerphobic, or critical), neutral, or other. At the time that the data was collected, consequential differences in moderation policies were there between the two platforms. Prior to January 2025, Meta (the parent company of Facebook) used fact checkers and had stricter content review policies (Duffy 2025). This has since changed and Meta has adopted a system closer to what X uses, called community notes (Duffy 2025). Essentially, the power to moderate most content – there are some exceptions around extreme things, like child pornography – has moved from employees with set rules to the

users of the platform (Duffy 2025). When this data was collected, Facebook used professional moderators who did this as a career, and X relied on its users to crowdsource and police the content. When Meta announced the changes in moderating policy, Mark Zuckerberg (the CEO) fully admitted that more harmful content would appear on the platform as a result of this move (Duffy 2025).

Comparing the comments from each platform perfectly demonstrates the difference that comes from applying user generated content moderation. The Facebook comments are overwhelmingly more positive and tamer than those on X. The most explicitly hateful comment on Facebook was someone using emojis to imply that the players were lesbians and engaged in a sexual act. On X, there was blatant transphobia, sexism, aggression, and name-calling (e.g., idiots). While this difference was in part due to moderation policies, I argue that platforms with lenient or user generated content review policies likely attract people who want to 'get away' with saying whatever they please. Not only is it a product of the policies, but it is also possibly a selection bias whereas those looking to comment hateful, ignorant, or incorrect things flock to spaces that will allow them to do so. Ultimately, the findings of this study indicate that moderation policies do have an effect on the substance of the social media discourses that occur online, with stricter moderation policies having significantly less hateful rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

My CDA on the social media discourses occurring in the comment sections of four different posts spanning both Facebook and X concerning the first ever PWHL game revealed interesting results. Numerically, the positive far outweighed the negative in terms of tone across all 521 comments. Obviously Positive comments included congratulations, deep moments of reverence, and an explicit connection to Canada and the Canadian identity. Obviously

Problematic comments were transphobic, sexist, or attacked the rules of the league for unclear reasons. Possibly Not So Obvious comments demonstrated the prevalence of symbolic dominance and othering of the PWHL. While it was regarded positively, it was still considered to be different in a bad or inferior way from the NHL, which is positioned as the ideal standard for professional hockey. Lastly, the noticeable differences in discourse between Facebook and X could be the result of differences in moderation policies and the resulting culture on each platform. With these findings in mind, the following chapter will explore some implications, outline the strengths and weaknesses, and suggest areas for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

2002 OLYMPICS

A critical moment in hockey history was when Team Canada won the gold medal for hockey in the 2002 Olympic Games (Lipscombe 2014). What made this moment unique and memorable for women's hockey was a post-game interview between hockey commentator Don Cherry and Team Canada captain Hayley Wickenheiser (Lipscombe 2014). A rumour circulated that the American team had put the Canadian flag on the floor of their dressing room and were walking all over it before the game (Lipscombe 2014), something obviously disrespectful and offensive to both the athletes and Canadian audiences more broadly. During the post-game interview, having just bested the Americans and won the gold for Canada, Wickenheiser asked if her opponents wanted the flag signed by her teammates (Lipscombe 2014). 23 years later, history repeats itself. After President Trump made threats against Canadian sovereignty and enacted tariffs, Canadians started booing the American national anthem at NHL games (The Associated Press 2025). Canadians' express patriotism at hockey games and specifically distinguish themselves from Americans, especially when they disrespect Canada. Politics are enacted at these sports sites, a phenomenon that was evident in this study as well.

This chapter will substantively summarize the findings of my research (recap of the game). I will also discuss some of the implications (game highlights) of this work, including national identity and moderating policies. Then, the strengths (top plays of the game) of my research will be outlined. I will suggest some areas for future studies (areas to practice) based on the limitations of my research. Following that, I will provide a brief reflection and will end with some final remarks and key takeaways.

RECAP OF THE GAME

My research question was: does gender play a role in how the Professional Women's Hockey League was discussed in social media comment sections at its onset? I employed three theoretical frameworks and two methodologies to explore and answer this question. Dayan and Katz's (1992) media events framework helped conceptualize that first game itself and why the social media discourse around it is so important to the reception and future of the league. Hockey as a characteristic of Canadian national identity provided an entry point into the politics of hockey. Further, how the PWHL has the opportunity to disrupt the white, male, heterosexual image we associate with hockey and Canadian national identity. Previous research on gender, politics, and sport revealed common ways female athletes are delegitimized and the harmful stereotypes associated with them. By using critical discourse analysis and autoethnography, I analyzed 521 comments spanning four posts between Facebook and X made by the official PWHL account on the day of the very first game.

To summarize the findings, there was huge variation in the 521 comments analyzed. Overall, the results confirmed my expectations that delegitimizing and problematic rhetoric was taking place in the discourse, but the vast majority of comments being positive was a pleasant surprise. I established three broad themes to encompass this variation and organize the results. Obviously Positive is the first, which comprised the majority of the comments, approximately 2/3 of the 521 analyzed. Praise, congratulatory messages, reverence, and phrases like "let's go" were common for this theme. The commenters expressed excitement, happiness, and my interpretation of their tone was positive. Canadians in the comment sections used the Canadian flag emoji, red and white heart emojis, referenced cities and places in Canada they wanted the PWHL to expand to, and generally exuded a pride about Canada and the league. In comparison,

American commenters did not identify themselves in this way and there were no instances of really pronounced American nationalism.

The second broad theme was Obviously Problematic. There were a number of transphobic comments as people questioned if there were any trans people playing, or if trans women would be allowed to in the future, basically looking for an answer on what has so far been silence from the PWHL (Sadler 2023). Some commenters were adamant that a formal ban should exist, and others believed it exists already, and were showing their gratitude for the league. There were also sexist comments, the majority of which were diminishing the athletes to the level of teenage boys or simply saying that the men's game was superior. Bikini calendars and chick fights were called for as well, but these were a small minority of instances.

The Possibly Not So Obvious theme included discourse that reflected symbolic dominance and the othering of the players and league. The athletes were referred to as "ladies" and "girls" instead of athletes or players which reflects another way of delegitimizing their talents, efforts, and skills. This results in othering: they are not just hockey players; they are female hockey players. The league and game itself faced this too, with wording like the "women's game." There is no doubt that the league is different, it is absolutely not the NHL, and nor should it be. However, this othering positions the PWHL and its players as different and thus inferior. It prevents the PWHL from attaining an equivalent status culturally as the NHL. Nonetheless, when reviewing all of the results together, the picture is clearly one of celebration, respect, and excitement with only ~33% of comments falling outside of that.

GAME HIGHLIGHTS

In terms of implications and contributions to political science, the most telling implication of this research was the expression of Canadian nationalism within the social media

discourse surrounding the PWHL. A long-standing acceptance exists that hockey is inextricably connected to Canadian national identity (Lorenz 2015, 2107). However, hockey has been traditionally exclusive white, middle-class, straight, able-bodied, cisgendered men (Allain 2019, 512). This was reflected not only in how people imagine what a hockey player looks like, but also in the structural makeup of the NHL. The NHL is simply not welcoming to players that are men of colour as they experience racism (Doyle 2020) and do not conform to the ideal type outlined above. The social media discourse present in my analysis points to some potential future change in this narrative.

As described previously, commenters were proudly identifying as Canadians and cheering on Canada. Even though the PWHL teams represent cities and not nations, people were using the Canadian flag emoji and Canadian colours in their emoji choices too. There was an unspoken understanding that because this was a hockey game, and there were Canadians playing, that it was a space for the expression of Canadian patriotism and pride for their nation regardless of current nationalist tensions evolving. This suggests that the cultural narrative around hockey is beginning to include women and the PWHL. It is not just men that get to be associated with the Canadian pride that comes with playing hockey, but women too. If this trend continues, it has the potential to break down the exclusionary image of a Canadian hockey player that currently exists and expand our cultural understandings. In sum, the explicit association between the PWHL and Canadian nationalism evident in the social media discourse points to an exciting development that our image of a Canadian hockey player worthy of representing the nation may be changing to include women.

This research expands our knowledge of the media events framework as well. Now more than ever narratives around media events are easier to guide with the explosion of social media

and the common practice of individuals, companies, organizations, and sports teams, having and using a social media account. Not only does the media event occur, in this case the first game, but the PWHL can release easily and broadly whatever discourse it wants to try to start on social media. The way we understand media events and how they either support or challenge common cultural beliefs has to go beyond the broadcast itself or even the traditional media released about the event. Social media discourses are crucial to applying the framework and really understanding the potential legacy of the event. For example, this research demonstrates how this media event is disrupting the notions of what an ideal hockey player is within the Canadian national imagination. Moreover, the framework was correct in predicting a contestation of the rules of the game for media events that fall under contests (Dayan and Katz 1992, 44). However, where it falls short is in the unequal and specific ways this occurs for some groups and not others. This research clearly shows that women in sport face a common piece of rhetoric that claims the differences in rules between leagues are reason to appraise them as inferior. This goes beyond simple contestation and is a full attempt to delegitimize the PWHL. Thus, the framework could be more nuanced in how the makeup of the actors within the media event come with differing expectations.

In a similar fashion, this research exposed some different ways that gender, sport, and politics are interacting. Out of symbolic dominance, ambivalence, and collectivism, only examples of symbolic dominance were present in the discourse. A shift has occurred from really plainly sexist language - although, it still does happen! - to a more insidious form of discourse. Commenters use formal language and provide an intellectual sounding argument about why women's sports are inferior in their eyes. It is not just that the women are slower or less aggressive per se, but it is that the plays are less sophisticated or that the reffing is too involved.

One prevalent example was the large focus on transgender athletes in connection with the PWHL. Despite no such policy around trans athletes existing (Sadler 2023), it was another way to attack the league within the context of gender politics that has no direct relevance to the actual game played that day. Gender politics and sports as a theoretical framework must be prepared to recognize the new and different ways that female athletes are delegitimized in the discourse. Additionally, attacks against transwomen athletes have their own tone and specific rhetoric that deserves singular focus in the future.

Another implication of this study is the role of moderation policies in creating internal cultures on different social media platforms. When considering the 521 comments holistically, a notable discrepancy became apparent between the social media discourses taking place on Facebook and X. At the time of the posts, and at the time when the data was collected, Facebook had a moderation policy that used professional fact checkers and relatively strict policies (Duffy 2025). Now, both Facebook and X employ user-generated moderation (Duffy 2025). At the time when Meta (the parent company of Facebook) announced these changes, the CEO expressed that there would be more harmful content on the platform as a result (Duffy 2025). My research, given the time at which the data was generated and collected, presents an opportunity to consider the differences that emerge due to these policies.

A staggering difference between the ratios of positive to problematic comments is observed on Facebook compared to X in my data set. The Facebook comments were overwhelmingly positive, with only a few examples of hateful or dismissive rhetoric. Furthermore, the comments that were sorted into Obviously Problematic were tamer in the language chosen and often framed more intellectually than on X. For example, transphobic comments were framed as a civilized discussion of PWHL policy and not simply spewing fear

and bigotry. On X, comments that were aggressive or used explicit language were front and centre in the social media discourse. The implication here is that stricter content review policies are necessary in curtailing harmful, problematic, and/or ignorant rhetoric. User-generated policies allow discourse that is hateful to be propagated and in doing so, create a culture that allows such practices and normalizes them. Studies suggest that negative rhetoric around female athletes discourages women from participating in sport (MacDonald 2022, 41), so by advocating for and implementing user-generated content moderation, these choices are actively part of creating the barriers for women in sport. This research provides evidence that moderation policies and problematic rhetoric are correlated, with the result being what is and what is not acceptable discourse in the culture of a given social media platform.

TOP PLAYS OF THE GAME

The main strengths of my thesis are the comparative aspect and the focus on social media discourse. The focus on social media discourse is distinct as standard media has been the traditional center of attention for discourse studies, although this has been expanding in recent times. The experience that led me to this research, where my former friend shared some stunningly sexist comments about the PWHL, made me interested not in what media trained professionals had to say, but about what the average person thinks. A survey or focus group could fulfill this, however, social desirability bias comes into play. Surveys would ask what participants recall discussing which relies solely on their memory and honesty in the moment, which can be faulty. Analyzing the actual social media discourse reveals what people actually said, which is more accurate. Social media comments are a special and noteworthy site of discourse where everyday people all have the same opportunity to voice their opinions and are free from the biases that come with knowing one is being researched. Lastly, by doing a

cross-platform analysis, I was able to bring forth a comparative aspect to my research that revealed an unexpected discussion on the relationship between moderation policy and discourse.

AREAS TO PRACTICE

This thesis was limited by the scope and time available to conduct the research as an undergraduate thesis. For example, not all of the comments under the Facebook posts were included in my data set given the limitations of the ESUIT extension. However, they were filtered for most relevant which is what is necessary when analyzing social media discourse. Not everyone reads every comment, and they are more likely to come across the ones that have been deemed most relevant by the algorithms at play. Only using four posts and focusing exclusively on ones made January 1, 2024, makes the focus of the research very specific and less generalizable. I was not able to explore the entire social media discourse around the PWHL by focusing on what I did. Future studies could increase the scope of this kind of research to be large-scale and quantitative, which would allow exponentially more comments (thousands to millions) and take from more posts. Potentially other PWHL posts, hashtags, players posts, or just social media discussion in general. Moreover, analyzing traditional media discourse would allow for greater insights into what people are saying about the PWHL and if it has the support of institutionalized media. Finally, digging into the expansion of moderation policies on current or future social media platform cultures, and the kinds of effects this has on what people consider acceptable rhetoric in their lives would be a fascinating direction for research.

FINAL REMARKS

After conducting this research, I do not think I will ever be able to watch a hockey game in the same way. From the singing of national anthems, to what companies advertise, to the commentary made during the game, everything has a deeper meaning now. When I was in

elementary school, my teacher showed the class the iconic Molson Canadian commercial featuring Joe Canada and his rant (Maimann 2025). The slogan of the campaign is "I am Canadian!" and explores what exactly that means, referencing stereotypical Canadian traits like hockey, maple syrup, and saying sorry (Maimann 2025). As a child, that was the first time I had ever thought about what it means to be Canadian and that commercial has stuck with me ever since. This year, Jeff Douglas, the actor for Joe Canada, did a sequel to this commercial (Maimann 2025). Hockey players are mentioned yet again with the same level of gumption (Maimann 2025). Douglas attempts a more "mature outlook on national pride" by admitting we are not perfect and showing pictures from a dark moment in Canadian history where an Indigenous Nation and the military had an armed stand-off, known as the Oka Crisis (Maimann 2025).

Unsurprisingly, the hockey clips are of men. A more mature outlook on national pride should also be more inclusive. No longer can I view videos such as those and remain ignorant of 1) what narratives are being pushed about who is Canadian, and 2) the people who are not included in that. For my research, gender unequivocally played a role in how the PWHL was discussed in social media comment sections at its onset. It was central in each theme — whether it be feminist rhetoric in the Obviously Positive ones, sexist remarks in the Obviously Problematic ones, or the unwavering practice of identifying the athletes through their gender as "girls" and "ladies" in the Possibly Not So Obvious comments. Gender was foundational to the discourse, albeit not in an exclusively negative way. Matter of fact, it was mostly in a positive and powerful way, which was the most surprising and uplifting part of this research. The PWHL is being discussed in these social media discourses like it is exciting, important, and here to stay. The league needs to capitalize on this support and continue to build momentum: a loud and

active fanbase is critical for success. Hateful, ignorant, and upsetting things will always be said, typed, or written down as long as those ideas circulate. However, for them to be in the minority is genuinely impactful for both the league and young athletes. Given the results of my research, I would speculate that the PWHL might outlive its predecessors for women's professional leagues and provide that dream for young hockey players to aspire towards.

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