

# **COVID-19 Impacts on Track and Field Sport Clubs in Finland and Sweden**

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Abstract  <p>The field of sport business experienced a rapid and sudden stop because of the coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19. Sport businesses and sport organizations have massively been impacted from the follow up to this pandemic. Many competitions and events have been postponed, cancelled, or rescheduled including events such as the Olympics and the UEFA EURO championship tournament.</p> <p>On the follow up to this, the aim of this research was to examine the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the Finnish and Swedish track and field sports clubs' operations. More in detail, the economic and social point of views and their impacts was studied. The research was assigned by the Finnish Athletics Federation.</p> <p>The research was conducted using the mixed methods model since the topic was such recent at the beginning of the research and with limited research data. Hence, qualitative semi-structured interviews gave foundation to the quantitative online survey used within the research. Altogether, four Finnish track and field executive directors were interviewed, and 26 quantitative survey responses were collected and analyzed. Although relatively small sample sizes were used, the amount of information and findings from such a current study can be emphasized.</p> <p>According to the research results, substantial evidence of economic and social impacts was recognized. Also, the shift to a more digitalized sports industry was noticeable. New trends and applications to adapt to the pandemic were seen and can be applied towards the future as well.</p> <p>The Finnish Athletics Federation and Swedish Athletics Association can take advantage of the results presented and implications on how clubs could expand their operations in the future was presented. The research results also provided a basis foundation and comparison to relevant countries operations.</p>		
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# 1 Introduction

The field of sports experienced a rapid and sudden stop to all sporting events organized in Finland on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 when the government of Finland issued a state of emergency, banned all sporting events, closed sporting facilities, limited gatherings to no more than ten persons, and enforced many other restrictions due to the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) (Valtioneuvosto 2020). The Finnish Athletics Federation wanted to define the more concrete impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on track and field sport clubs since then and wanted to get a more comprehensive overview of the definitive effects that the pandemic has brought. Since COVID-19 has had tremendous impact globally in our everyday lives, more detailed and deeper knowledge of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sport business world was desired to be identified. This was seen as an opportunity to deepen their knowledge in sport business and in research as well. Partly this was the main reason as well to accept this challenge in defining the impacts that the COVID-19 virus has had on the track and field sport clubs.

The Finnish Athletics Federation (Suomen Urheiluliitto, SUL) is the assignor of the thesis in hand. According to their websites, they are operating in Finland as an independent and international track and field federation. Their aim is to inspire and fabricate its member athletes and athletics activities towards international success. SUL is a member of the European Athletics (EA) as well as the World Athletics (WA), previously known as the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). Finnish Athletics Federation's mission is to work towards 600 athletics clubs and roughly 70,000 people who are involved in their operations all over Finland. On regional level, the member clubs are divided into 21 district organizations. (Finnish Athletics Federation 2015.) The federation's vision is "Yleisurheilu – liikuttavinta urheilua läpi elämän" [Track and Field – the most moving sport throughout life], which brings together athlete's path, interest for the hobby, and the whole lifecycle of following the sport (Suomalaisen yleisurheilun strategia 2017-2020 [The Finnish Track and Field Strategy 2017-2020] N.d, 21).

For the research purposes, in addition to just Finnish track and field clubs and also for comparison, Swedish clubs were included to further analyze and compare different strategies and outcomes these countries have faced. Prevention strategies of the pandemic has differed between the countries and to generate a full understanding of these countries' strategies and how these differ from one and another regarding to track and field operations, a detailed comparison and analysis was made. Although it is yet still very unknown to form the ultimate definition of the impacts that the COVID-19 virus has had on these countries' operations since the virus is yet evolving and impacting the world of sport business and people involved within it since its inception during the spring of 2020.

This study could be seen as a starting point to start a discussion and entuse more researchers to study this contemporary subject in hand. In order for any sport organization to learn from this occurrence, it is crucial to investigate and analyze the definitive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic more in detail. By that time, sport organizations can learn and possibly adapt to similar scenarios in the future and decrease its effects on their operations. Future studies could investigate this case into more in detail by expanding the research to multiple countries and even full continents. Hence, even more comprehensive, and detailed conclusions of the impacts could be derived. Also, the way how public funds have been aided towards different clubs' operations is a point to consider and study furthermore to see whether or not they have been aided and aimed successfully.

## 1.1 Track and Field Operations

The track and field athletic image is still strong around the world. In Finland, track and field operations are led by the Finnish Athletics Federation (SUL). According to their strategy to 2021-2024, the track and field image is still valid, and the image encompasses around the high-level sports along with hobbies, well-being of children and other ethical values that can increase the opportunity in popularity as a sport. Their future aim is to strengthen their clubs by supporting their work and hence strengthen the side of athletics in Finland. As mentioned in the previous chapter,

SUL's vision is track and field – the most moving sport throughout life and their business idea is to lead, enthuse, and support high quality and respected track and field activities that are close to their members as well as raise successful athletes internationally. (Suomalaisen yleisurheilun strategia 2021-2024 [The Finnish Track and Field Strategy 2021-2024] N.d, 4-10.)

Within their strategy, SUL emphasizes the meaning of track and field to children and young adults with clubs' support towards these activities including activities around track and field schools, club races, club cups, and school races that can ensure track and field operations and visibility around Finland. Notable is also that SUL wants to increase the level of full-time activities in clubs' operations and therefore support and provide alternative foundations to voluntary work. In the future strategy, the federation also wants to increase the level of social media and digital media commitment. Meaning that the federation actively works towards building and strengthening the social media offerings. Also, foundations to streaming services is a work in progress for the federation. (ibid., 4-10.)

In the fiscal year that ended in 2019, SUL's total incomes were €5 492 219.11 and total expenses were €5 449 886.53, which resulted in a surplus of €42 332.58 that was €39 682.58 over the budget. Major incomes and expenses can be seen illustrated in the table below. (SUL Vuosikertomus 2019 [FAF Annual Report 2019] N.d. 38-40.)

Table 1. Distribution of SUL's total incomes and expenses

<b>Income</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Expense</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Government Aid	€1 050 000	Staff	€1 311 340.33
Participation	€978 234.57	External Services	€1 160 473.17
Membership Fees	€745 343.49	Athlete and Coach Supports	€985 071.26

In Sweden (The Swedish Athletics Association), the strategy similarly follows the model to the Finnish Athletics Federation. In Sweden, their operations as well focus on creating the foundation for children and youth towards athletics as a sport. They also want to emphasize the meaning of equality in their operations and hence anyone is allowed to take part in a competition. In Sweden, they are also focusing on athletics schools and have created a “youth brand” in order to encourage more young people to participate in their activities. (Ungdomsmärket [The youth brand]; Vad är friidrott? [What is athletics?] 2007.)

On their 2020 annual report, the Swedish Athletics Association identifies their main goals for 2020, that were identified in the last year’s report, were to increase the number of audiences in competitions as well as to increase the number of participants in national competitions. As a result, only 50% of the planned events were able to be organized due to the pandemic and hence either of these goals were able to be accurately measured. In 2019, the Swedish Athletics Association reported their total incomes to be worth of kr50 924 000 (~€5 005 829.2) and total expenses to be worth of kr49 573 000 (~€4 873 025.9), which results into a kr1 351 000 (~€132 803.3) surplus. This was a 20% growth when compared to 2018 (Verksamhetsberättelse 2019 [Annual Report 2019] 2019, 29-32.) Major incomes and expenses can be seen illustrated in the table below.

Table 2. Distribution of the Swedish Athletics Association’s total incomes and expenses

<b>Income</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Expense</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Aids/grants	kr27 242 000 (~€2 677 888.6)	External costs	kr24 463 000 (~€2 404 712.9)
Sponsoring & Advertising	kr16 176 000 (~€1 590 100.8)	Staff	kr18 828 000 (~€1 850 792)
Activities	kr4 425 000 (~€434 977.5)	Athlete and Coach Supports	kr6 170 000 (~€606 511)



When these two countries are being compared economically, it is notable that the Swedish Athletics Association is financially larger than to the Finnish Athletics Federation.

## **2 Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

Towards the end of December 2019, the World Health Organization's (WHO) office in China detected an unidentified virus that spread from Wuhan, China. It was later defined as the start of the coronavirus outbreak also known as COVID-19. The coronavirus outbreak started to spread outside this town, first into Thailand in mid-January and from there on has affected millions of lives as an ongoing global pandemic. As of 20th of January 2020, 282 confirmed cases were identified: 278 cases in China, 2 cases in Thailand, 1 case in Japan, and one case in the Republic of Korea. (WHO 2020a, 1.) Although the Chinese government used drastic measures to attempt to limit its spread, the coronavirus was yet able to spread outside the borders of the country and hence it has been spreading around the world (Fanelli & Piazza 2020, 1).

Later the virus was characterized as a pandemic on 11th of March 2020, by the director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (WHO 2020b). As reported by Kelly (2011), the term pandemic does not refer to the severity of the virus but to the level of affected people. Seasonal influences and epidemics cannot be portrayed as a pandemic. The virus must be globally concerning, in order to be named as a pandemic, and hence the COVID-19 virus certainly fits to the description. (540.)

As of at the end of December 2020, more than 730 000 confirmed cases have been reported in the Nordic countries (THL 2020b). Conforming to European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (2020), at the end of December 2020, there were 36 919 confirmed cases identified in Finland and 469 748 cases in Sweden. There were 565 deaths reported in Finland and 8 985 in Sweden (ibid.) It is worth mentioning

how many more cases have been reported in Sweden in contrast to Finland, as illustrated in the figure below.

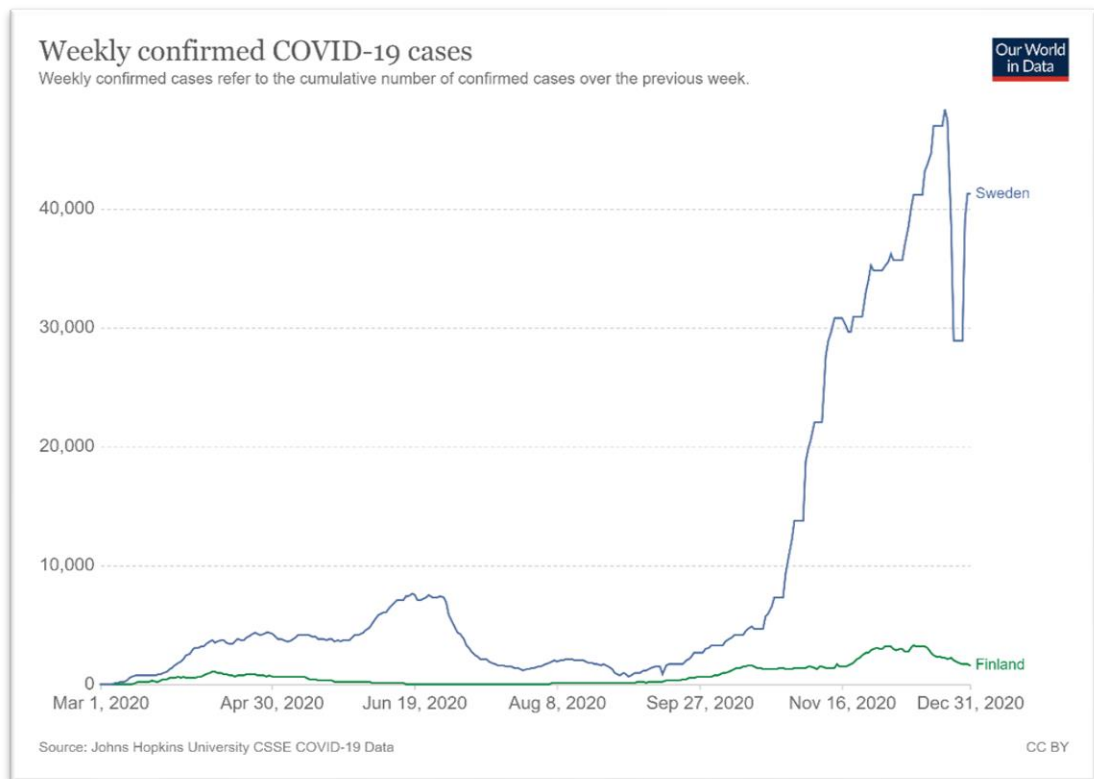


Figure 1. Weekly Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in Finland and Sweden. (Our World in Data 2020)

The number of cases in Finland rapidly rose in March (weeks 11-14), as seen in the figure below. At the end of March, the maximum number of cases recorded within a week for the first wave was 963. This occurred during 30th of March 2020 and 5th of April 2020. After that, there was a decline in the number of cases until the beginning of August when the second wave started to occur and raise the number of cases again gradually. The maximum amount of cases recorder for the second wave in Finland was on the last week of November, reaching more than 3000 cases. The number of patients in hospital care during the autumn's peak follows quite similar pattern as it did during the spring's peak when considering the total amount of cases. During the spring's peak, at the most, there were 162 patients in hospital care, with 82 of those patients in intensive care on 8th of April 2020. Similarly, during the autumn's peak, there were 249 patients in hospital care and from those, 35 were in intensive

care on 15th of December 2020. (Kanerva, Kempainen, Pietarinen, & Hämäläinen 2020)

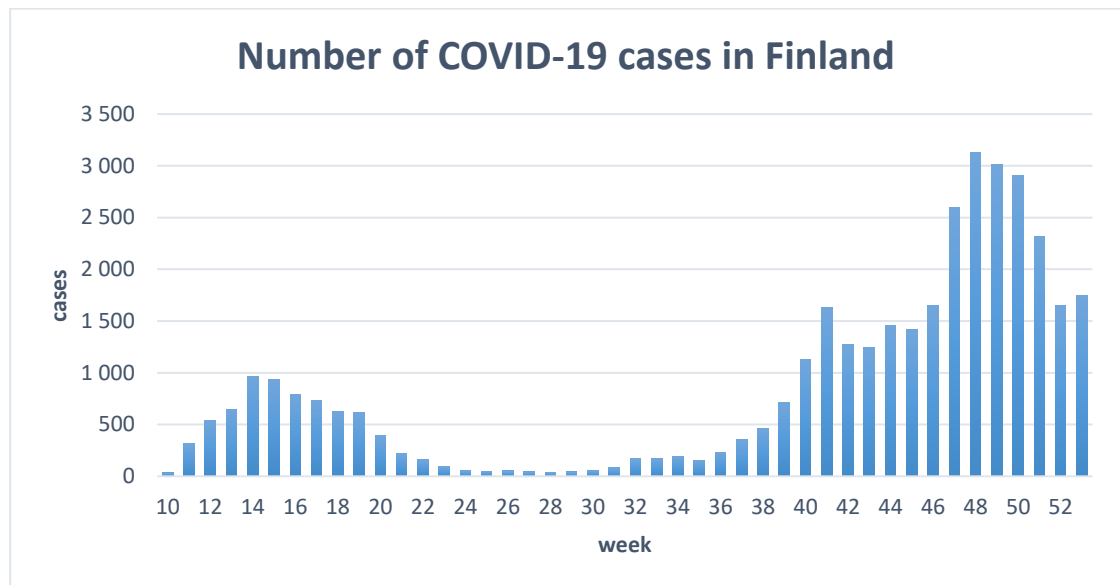


Figure 2. Number of COVID-19 cases in Finland (THL 2020c)

In WHO's scientific report (2020), it is mentioned that COVID-19 can spread through multiple different methods. One of the main ones are through airborne transmission, contact and droplet transmission, and fomite transmission. Airborne transmission occurs when an infected person exhales and hence releases infected aerosols in the air, this results into an infection when a susceptible person inhales an ample amount of infected aerosols. Contact and droplet transmission can appear through direct, indirect, or close contact with infected people. An infection can occur when an infected person sneezes, talks, or coughs from which the droplets are transmitted to a susceptible person's mouth, eye, or nose. Fomite transmission occurs when an infected person has touched a surface or an object and hence creates a contaminated surface also known as a fomite. The virus can be found from these fomites from hours to days depending on the circumstances. This indirect transmission can occur when a susceptible person first touches a fomite surface and then his/her mouth, nose, or eye. (1-2.)

In an attempt to prevent these modes of transmission, there have been many restrictions and disciplines on how to avoid and protect yourself from COVID-19. One of the main ones are the propositions to keep distance (at least 1 meter) away from other people, continuously cleaning your hands, wearing a face mask, avoiding public gatherings, and covering your mouth and nose while sneezing or coughing (WHO 2020c). Additionally, if a person is feeling any symptoms of the virus such as cough, muscle pain, headache, fever, diarrhea, difficulty of breathing, and loss of the sense of taste and smell, they have been instructed to stay at home. (THL 2020a).

## 2.1 COVID-19 Possible Impacts in Economy

In the following section, possible impacts that the COVID-19 has had in economy will be discussed. Holmes (2020) researched the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic globally, focusing on companies, employees, as well as consumers. The study included findings from 15 different office locations, 100 different countries, and 210 countries and territories altogether. Data was gathered into two parts, the first one in April 2020 and the latter in July 2020 with a total of 6817 professionals answering the survey. In an overall view, respondents expected that the COVID-19 will be worse than the financial crisis in 2008-2009 regarding global and country levels. On an operational level, one of the main considerations that rose within the research was the importance and ability to adapt to a new situation, which along the lines included the ability to work from home. On all levels, working from home rose and was a key factor in the future working environment as well. (3-33.)

In consonance with FitzGerald, Singer, & Smit's survey research (2020), 51 percent of the respondents (n=2264) predict that the global economic conditions will be better in the next 6 months following October 2020. This can be seen as a positive shift when compared to the spreading phase of COVID-19, since in March, 58 percent of respondents (n=1152), and in April, 66 percent of the respondents (n=2121) saw the next 6 months being worse than it was then. From this, it is notable that the predictions of the global economic conditions quite similarly follows the two waves of COVID-19 seen when heading into November 2020 but have shifted towards a more

brighter future economic wise. Although a rise in the COVID-19 cases were apparent during September and October, the executives surveyed kept a positive outlook on the economic future after the pandemic. (1-3.)

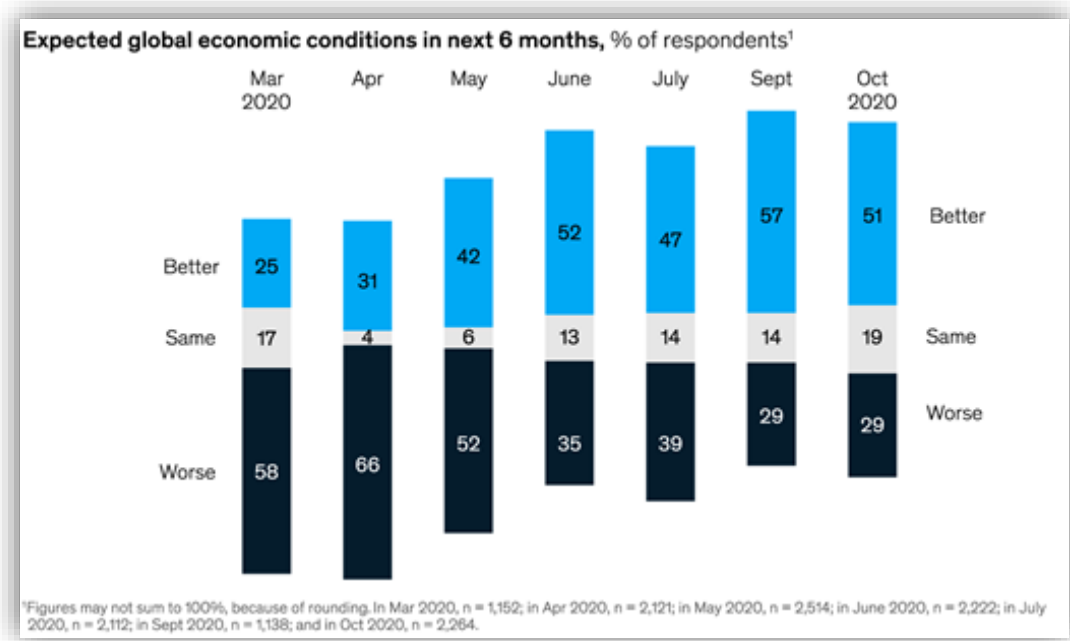


Figure 3. Global Economic Predictions (FitzGerald, Singer, & Smit 2020)

In terms of the World Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as reported by May (2020), it is expected that the autumn rise of COVID-19 cases may not have as massive of an economic hit as it did in March and April 2020. Nevertheless, it is expected that Q4 could be remarkably weaker than usual due to the increasement in regulations and restrictions in certain countries. (1-3.) In an overall view, as noted by to Duffin (2020), it is estimated that the most major economies could have at least a 2,4% loss in GDP due to the COVID-19 over 2020. This is largely due to the fact of overall loss in demand because of all the restrictions that countries have needed to put into practice. Travel restrictions and border closures have had an especially negative effect on the travel and tourism industry. Hence the COVID-19 virus has already impacted the economic in a very unusual way. Rodríguez (2020) articulates that even the 2008 global financial crisis cannot be really compared to the COVID-19 crisis and the economic impacts since the COVID-19 root causes are from health care. COVID-19 has caused more concrete and has had more sudden effects on both supply and demand

internationally. Since COVID-19 is globally so abrupt and concrete, the 2020 economic impacts could see a worse recession than the global financial crisis of 2008.

## 2.2 COVID-19 Possible Impacts in Sport Business

According to Euromonitor International (2020), sport business consists of three main aspects regarding to its revenue streams: live events, sponsorships, and broadcasting. With postponed and cancelled sporting events, the virus has noticeably impacted all three aspects and as an illustration matchmaking revenue have hence decreased. Euromonitor International assesses four key issues of the future's short and mid-term challenges that the sport business industry may face in the future. These issues include the following:

- The digital shift: With a complete digital strategy, a shift from a 'nice to have' to a necessity regarding engaging fanbases through social media.
- The sponsorship landscape: Sport business industry remains powerful, and brands need to keep this in mind when dealing with partnerships.
- The future of live attendance: How to bring fans back to the stadiums without being constantly afraid of infection.
- Economic impacts on fans: Fans as well have been hit economically and the sport business industry needs to take this into consideration in ticket prices for instance. (1.)

The aim of this study was to find out about the different impacts that the COVID-19 has had on track and field sport clubs and hence the main focus was on these core aspects.

Yet, there are relatively few research studies made on the impacts that the COVID-19 has had on sports industry or on the track and field operations in general. Although, the sport business industry faced a massive full scale stop during the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 virus was spreading around the world. Competitions were cancelled and some events were organized without any audience. In the follow up to these cases, major sport competitions were postponed including the 2020 Tokyo

Olympic and Paralympic Games and the European Football Championship tournament. These competitions were cancelled and moved to the summer of 2021. It is noticeable that the Olympics has been cancelled only three times in its full history, all of them during the World Wars. Furthermore, because of the circumstances of the pandemic, large scale associations and leagues were forced to either postpone, cancel, or suspend their games. Hence multiple aspects of the sporting industry has been affected from athletes, teams and leagues, to sponsorships, sporting goods, hospitality, and broadcasting. (Katsarova 2021, 1-3; Krnjaic 2020.)

The World Athletics Indoor Championships were obligated to postpone their event until next year as well as the Paris 2020 European Athletics Championships were forced to cancel because of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. Later to this, multiple golf, tennis, and football events were forced to postpone or cancel events. Altogether over 900 tennis tournaments were counted to be cancelled or postponed, as well as the Boston Marathon being cancelled for the exact purpose for the first time in 124 years. In mid-March, The National Basketball Association (NBA) was the first US major league that suspended their season after one player was tested positive to COVID-19. This started a chain reaction which led to the fact that the National Hockey League (NHL), the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Major League Baseball (MLB), and many other major leagues all either suspended or fully cancelled their ongoing seasons. (BBC 2020; Krnjaic 2020.)

In line with Krnjaic (2020), the German Bundesliga league initiated the actions to continue their season. Consequently, the NHL and the NBA continued their remaining season. Both leagues played the so called "bubble" playoffs, in which no audience was allowed in the stands and massive COVID-19 testing were required. When considering the numbers of different leagues, Futterman and Stein (2020) observes that "spectator spending brings in roughly 25 percent of the N.F.L.'s \$15 billion in revenue, about one-third of baseball's revenue and roughly 40 percent of the N.B.A.'s. For other sports, such as hockey, soccer and tennis, the share is substantially higher." Therefore, it cannot be prolonged for too long to play for empty stadiums without any audience in the stands or otherwise the clubs will face massive economic issues.

It is estimated that during the lockdowns and suspensions of sporting events and seasons that the pandemic has caused, the effects on the sports industry were quite massive globally. In 2018, the global sports industry grew by 7% mainly because of mega sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup held during that year in Russia. Optimistic analysts saw this as an opportunity for the whole sporting industry and estimated it to be worth of 627 billion U.S dollars by 2023, which meant a growth of 33% from 2018. (Katsarova 2021, 2.) Although, in line with Krnjaic (2020), the global sports market is evaluated to be worth \$756 billion on a yearly basis. However, the COVID-19 pandemic completely changed this manner and hence Statista (2020) conducted a worldwide research on the effects that COVID-19 has had on the sports industry. It is noticeable that nearly 50 percent of the total revenue was lost from the projected figures due to the pandemic. In 2020, the global sports industry's revenue was projected to rise up by 135,3 billion U.S. dollars, but instead the figure dropped to only 73,7 billion U.S. dollars in revenue after adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic. (2.)

When looking more in detail to these figures, according to Katsarova (2021), in the EU, COVID-19 pandemic is projected to have a loss of €47 million in direct sports-related GDP. Although when associated markets, which are connected to sports industry, such as travel, tourism, media, and catering, the same figure goes up to €79 million in GDP loss. More in detail, the European Olympic committees as well had to re-evaluate their work-related practices by over 93% and 63% announced that their top athletes could not use their designated training centers. "Larger clubs in major sports are likely to have the financial resources to cope with a temporary loss of income, the same is not true for grassroots sports facilities that rely on self-employed coaches and volunteers and face a greater risk of shutting down." (1-2.)

To cope with this pandemic and its restrictions, many sports clubs have been forced to cut down expenses and forced to adapt to a new situation by mixing the traditional sport with Esports. For example, the Futbol Club Barcelona stated that all of their staff members will face a reduction in salary. Their star player, Lionel Messi, also announced that all of the team's players are agreed to 70% salary cuts. (ibid., 1-5.)



The national and international governments have been aiding sports organizations globally as well in order for them to recover from the impacts that the COVID-19 has brought on their operations. Conforming to Government Offices of Sweden (2020), the Swedish government and the Swedish Sports Confederation distributed roughly €96 million in support to sport and culture organizations that have lost revenue because of public gathering restrictions. In Finland, the COVID-19 aids were split into two segments, the first aid was given in June and the second in December. The total amount of this aid was roughly €12 million, from which the Finnish Athletics Federation's part was €72 000 to cover lost revenue from cancelled or postponed events. (Saarinen & Lund 2020; Valtioneuvosto 2020)

It is noticeable that fan spending creates the biggest loss of revenue to the sports industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of revenue from fan spending was 3,25 billion U.S. dollars when 2,2 billion U.S. dollars was lost from national TV revenues as of May 2020. It is also compelling to see that in the U.S. major leagues, the major league of baseball faced the biggest loss in ticket revenue of 5,13 billion U.S. dollars. Relatively, the NHL and the NBA faced more compact impact in their loss of ticket revenue when the NHL had a loss of 1,12 billion U.S. dollars and the NBA 1,69 billion U.S. dollars. More in detail, the NHL teams are estimated to have a 1,312 thousand U.S. dollars revenue loss from ticket sales per game. For instance, the Toronto Maple Leafs are expected to have a total of 42,24 million U.S. dollar loss from ticket revenues, which is the highest in the league. (Statista 2020, 3-59.) In conclusion, although, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic for sure has affected the total revenue of the sports industry globally and the definite effects of it are yet to be seen.

When looking towards the future of the sports industry, Statista (2020) refers to four important milestones to be achieved before sports fans feel secure attending to a sporting event: decline of cases in one's area, treatment for symptoms becomes widely available, vaccine becomes widely available, and testing in one's area becomes widely available. It is also noticeable that 20 percent of respondents (n=2200) feel that it is expected to comfortably attend a live sporting event only after

December 2020. (9-82.) Euromonitor International (2020) shares the same viewpoint as in their four main challenges towards the future of sports industry include the future of live attendance. In an overall view, sports industry needs to find a way on how to ensure fans safety in live events after the pandemic and how to appeal fans engagement in future's live events as well. Technology will be a leading factor in this kind of a scenario in which technology will help to deliver the event safely. For instance, the future live sporting event may include such properties as facial biometric scanning and thermal temperature checks upon entry, food and drink deliveries for all stationary fans, and in-venue navigation solutions to help intelligently guide fans throughout the venue and minimising risk. (9.)

### 2.3 COVID-19 Possible Impacts in Physical Activity

Katsarova (2020) points out that the pre-pandemic physical activity levels in the EU are concerningly low. COVID-19 pandemic for the exact purpose does not make this situation any easier and based on a survey conducted by Eurobarometer, it demonstrates that almost 46% of respondents do not exercise or play any kind of sport. Also, on a sidenote, WHO considers that 25% of European adults and nearly 80% of European youth are not active enough. The activity levels in Finland and Sweden are on a relatively affirmative base when compared to the rest of the EU as seen in the figure below.

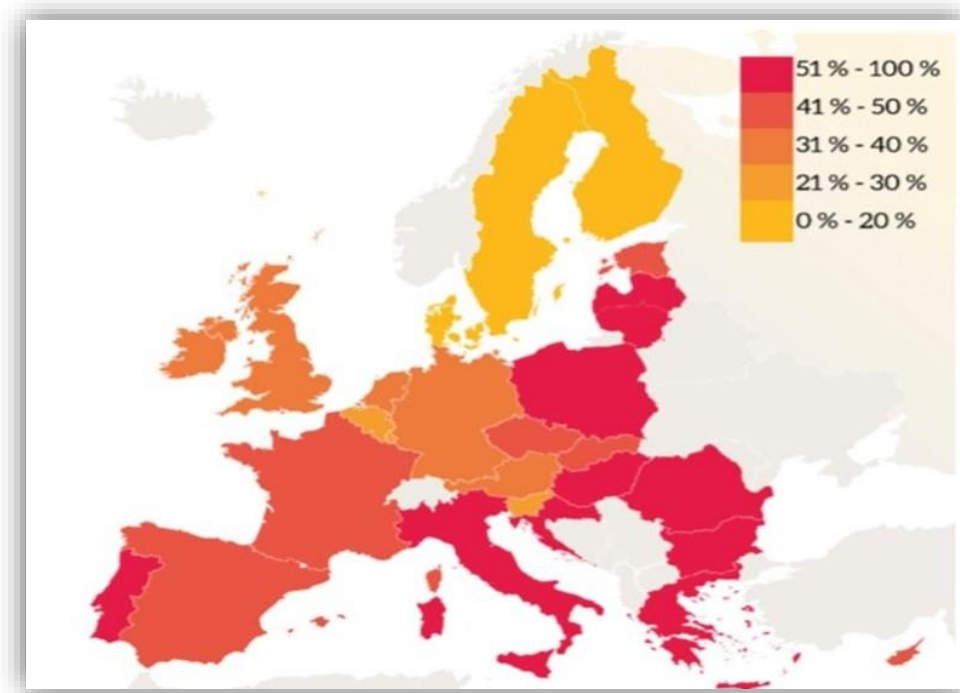


Figure 4. Physical activity levels in the EU (Katsarova 2020)

Due to the pandemic, in many countries, the public training facilities have been forced to closure including stadiums, gyms, pools, and other facilities. Hence individuals have not had the chance to maintain their physical activity in a way that they used to. Instead of maintaining physical activity, it is noticed that people tend to spend more time using electronics and have different kinds of uneven sleep behaviors partly because of the shift to telecommuting. Also because of different quarantine periods, people have been obligated to stay at home and minimize the time spend outside one's home. This as well leads to physical inactivity that can cause many health changes, such as obesity, loss of muscle strength and aerobic capacity, bone fractures, and cardiovascular vulnerability. (Katsarova 2020, 9; Maugeri, Castrogiovanni, Battaglia, Pippi, D'Agata, Palma, Di Rosa, & Musumeci 2020, 2.)

The physical inactivity levels during the pandemic are also established on a recent study executed in Italy, where the COVID-19 situation and restrictions were one of the worst in Europe, in which the total physical activity prior to COVID-19 dropped from roughly 2429 MET – min/week to only 1577 MET – min/week. During the quarantine periods, the percentage of low active (<600 MET- min/week) individuals increased from 23% to roughly 40%. However, the amount of categorized low active

individuals increased significantly during quarantine. This can be a factor of increased home activities and exercises due to being forced to stay at home. (Maugeri et al. 2020, 3-4,) In the USA and UK, experts are truly worried about the level of children's physical inactivity. Partly because of the lockdowns, many children have decreased the level of their physical activities and hence do not meet the criteria of activity levels. In the UK, every third children were identified as inactive during the pandemic. It was also notable from the study that 16% decrease was notable in different sporting activities including team sports and track and field activities. In the US, the results are similar, and it is also notable that a third of the children studied used distant services that enabled activity lessons and sessions during the pandemic. Decreases were identified in physical activities and a notable increase in sedentary behaviors in US children was recognized when an early stage of COVID-19 was compared to a period before the pandemic. (Dunton, Do, & Wang 2020, 5-13; Roan 2021.)

From these issues mentioned, many fitness centers and social media platforms have increased the level and variety of offering different home workout sessions and instructions. For instance, a social network platform, Strava, shows that 70 million people around the world share their training exercises and experiences. During April and June 2020, cycling and running have been increased by 50%. Interestingly, outdoor activities in general have been increased in interest during the pandemic, and 67% state that they have increased their interest among individual outdoor activities such as running, hiking, skiing, and cycling have been missed during the lockdowns in Europe. Luckily, the European Commission found a way to appeal people's mindsets allowing them to participate and share their experiences during the European week of sport, which was held distantly through social media with a slogan #BeActiveAtHome. (Katsarova 2020, 9-11.)

## 2.4 Digitalization of Sport Business Through COVID-19

Some sectors such as e-commerce, e-sport, food markets, and healthcare industry may have even gained benefits and provided support to the economic growth during the pandemic. With the fact that people have spent more time at home during the

COVID-19 pandemic, e-sport has gained more attention globally. In order for teams and players to stay connected and interacted with their fans, they have faced a need to shift and adapt their traditional models to a more blurred mix of traditional sports and esports. By this, esports have raised above others and is gaining more and more attraction in population. In 2020, roughly 67% of under-35-year-olds said that they have either watched or played gaming or esports content during lockdowns. Although, it is noticeable that even esports has not fully been able to organize their events during the pandemic since some of the events are physical-world tournaments, such as Fortnite World Cup, which was cancelled by Epic Games. (Katsarova 2020, 11.)

In a recent study done by Rietkerk, Zaumseil, & Hordijk (2020), esports is rapidly gaining more and more attention world widely and is expected to reach an audience of a total of 495 million people globally by the end of 2020, with an annual growth of +11,7%. With the growth in audiences, the global esports revenue will raise to \$1.1 billion in 2020, with an annual growth of +15,7%. Nearly 75 percentage of this revenue comes from broadcasting rights and sponsorship incomes and it is estimated that this amount will increase to \$1,2 billion by 2023. (5-11.)

Another factor as pointed out earlier by Euromonitor International (2020) is that the fan engagement through social media platforms is a necessity in the future of sport business. Meaning that sport organizations need to plan an effective digital strategy in order for them to leverage online fanbases. With well planned and executed digital strategy, the organization can more easily stay connected and engage with local and global fans even in a case when live sporting events is not possible. Supporting digital fan engagement can even help a team to leverage their growing online fanbase as an asset and be highly profitable after the pandemic is over. An example of this kind of increased social media interactions can most be seen in the European football leagues, for instance in Bundesliga, Premier League, and La Liga. These leagues have remained as the most active leagues in the social media platforms. With this they have increased and contributed their international brand value and visibility. (1-5.)

### 3 Methodology

As mentioned by Davies (2007), the nature of a research varies heavily on the subject that the researcher is concentrating on and on the topic at hand. The definition of research itself varies a lot and could be seen as a legion. Some of the main definitions include that a research includes a process where data is gathered in a firm and organized way, research includes a process of testing a hypothesis whether it is proven or not, and research includes a process, which includes interactive measures to prove and report interventions from real world. (17.)

#### 3.1 Research Problem and Questions

The basis of any research is to first formulate the research problem and/or question(s). This allows the researcher to clearly indicate the problem at hand and identify a solid groundwork for the whole research process. With clear research questions, it makes it easier for the researcher to find specific information about the topic as well as specify why such a study should be initiated. The research questions should be compatible to the researcher's own knowledge and capabilities but should not be too easy to answer. (Skinner, Edwards, & Corbett 2015, 33.) As reported by Lipowski (2008), who instructs that there are four essential S's that conduct detailed and precise research questions: size, scope, scalability, and sustainability. Therefore, in general, research questions should be clear, narrow, not too easy nor hard, and analytical rather than descriptive that fits into the researcher's mindset. (1669-1670.)

At the beginning of the research, the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) had yet not been researched much in detail especially within the world of sport business and the world of track and field. Therefore, mixed method approach was selected as the basis of this study due to the fact of limited previous research on the topic and to maximize the data by first interviewing four executive directors as a foundation to form a valid base for the quantitative survey itself. The main research problem within this study was to find out the economic and social impacts that the COVID-19 has possibly had on track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden thus far. To identify

key issues, problems, and validate the questionnaire from such a current issue - four different Finnish track and field club executive directors were first qualitatively interviewed on the impacts that the coronavirus has had on their club's operations. From these in-depth interviews, that lasted from 30 minutes to one hour, a larger quantitative survey was made and shared to different track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden.

The research problem of this study was to identify the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has possibly had on the track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden. The research problem tries to focus on the following research questions:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the operations of track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden?
- What kind of economic and social impacts has COVID-19 had on the clubs' operations?

To these research questions, the results were tackled with a two-fold research that first included a semi-structured interview and a larger quantitative survey was made afterward. From the findings of the research, key issues on such impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the operations of track and field clubs economically and socially should be gathered. From the study, it should also be notable what efforts and different ideologies clubs have created during this pandemic to keep their operations going and in prevention of virus transmission and infection.

## 3.2 Research Methods

### **Qualitative Research**

According to Veal & Darcy (2014), qualitative methods include information that is presented in the form of sounds, words, and images instead of information that is based on statistical number analysis. Usually, it contains a large amount of detailed information in a relatively few cases studied. Thus, it can also include a very large number of cases as well; for instance, when studying spectator activity and their behavior. (251-252.) In this research, the number of cases qualitatively interviewed was

low since four different track and field executive directors were interviewed, yet the information gained was very detailed and precise.

In qualitative methods research model, the data collection methods usually focus on but are not limited to interviews, observations, audiovisual materials, and document and artifact analysis. These styles can be applied in explorations, action research, and/or case studies. Mainly the qualitative research methods concentrate on small sample studies. (Davies 2007, 151; Skinner et al. 2015, 50.)

Qualitative interviews can be divided into three segments: structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews (Skinner et al. 2015, 54). In the current research, the focus was on qualitative semi-structured theme interviews. A semi-structured interview implicates that the questions within it are open questions that lead the general flow of the questionnaire in a way that the respondent can freely comment on them in relation to the topic. It also provides a possibility to discuss some topic more in detail, if needed. (Skinner et al. 2015, 55; Stokes 2011, 104.) The goal for the qualitative part of the study was to discover a profound understanding of the phenomenon and hence get a genuine foundation for the larger quantitative survey. The questions for the interviews were mainly chosen from the literature review and from current studies, which enabled to form a relationship to the track and field aspect as well. These questions were later identified to six large themes, which further created a flow of the actual interviews themselves.

The themes for the interviews were divided into six sections as illustrated below in Table 1. These themes formed a process for the interviews and created a base line for the whole study. After each theme, there was a possibility for the interviewee to open up their ideas and point of views in case such an issue would not yet have been included. For instance, one interviewee brought up the idea that whether or not clubs would have the courage to do long-term deals with private owned training facilities and hence be responsible to pay rent although not actually being able to go there because of possible restrictions. This kind of addition helped to consolidate the process of forming a more comprehensive quantitative survey.



Table 3. Interview themes and area of coverage

Themes	Topic of concentration
Theme 1	Background information
Theme 2	Events & Restrictions
Theme 3	Strategy & Outcome
Theme 4	Economics
Theme 5	Risk Management
Theme 6	Social Media & Future Thoughts

The interviews were organized either through Microsoft Teams or Zoom platforms. These platforms were chosen due to the ongoing and worsening coronavirus situation during the time and restrictions to travel between cities. Also, these platforms allowed a reasonably comfortable interview setting for the interviewees since they were able to be wherever they wanted to be at that moment, mostly at their workplace. The interviews were held in Finnish in order to secure the best understanding and validity of this part of the study. At the beginning of the interviews, permission to record the meeting was asked from all interviewees. This way a more precise note taking, and analysis of the data was preferred as well as focus on the actual interview setting itself rather than focusing on taking down respondents' answers. In any research, it is always necessary to ask for a permission to record such data as interviews.

### Quantitative Research

There are three different features to quantitative research methods, Skinner et al. (2015) state that:

*Creswell (2008) sees three main features of quantitative research that are prevalent today: (1) collecting and analyzing information in a numeric form; (2) collecting scores and then using them to measure the performance or attributes of individuals and organizations; and (3) procedures and processes by which groups are compared or by which factors common to individuals or groups are related through experiments, surveys, correlation studies and other methods. (248.)*

It is also relevant to quantitative research methods that the phenomenon needs to be already known in order to measure and analyze it statistically. Therefore, the researcher needs to identify what kind of factors play a key role in the phenomena itself. (Kananen 2011, 12.) Hence the application of qualitative research methods was applied to know the precise phenomena of this research since the topic was so new and not yet much researched. From the qualitative interviews, the background and different variables for the quantitative survey were formed. The quantitative survey was later statistically analyzed. The quantitative research model was chosen to get more detailed and validated data from a such new topic that the coronavirus is.

Quantitative research methods allow to gather information and trends from large number of individuals and hence the sample size tends to be large in quantitative studies. With larger respondent/sample size, the validity and proof of applying the results to a population is higher. (Skinner et al. 2015, 249.) On the other hand, quantitative research commonly presents only averages and ranges but does not give us detailed clarification of the study. Also, the findings tend not to be applicable to other settings and does not provide the full story behind since they represent only the respondents point of view in a particular study.

The quantitative part of the research was conducted as an online survey via the Internet by using the Webropol data analysis software. Some key issues that needed to be recognized when creating the design of the survey were that the wording should be simplified, ambiguity should be eliminated, and leading questions avoided. No multi-purpose questions should be asked meaning that only one question at a time is asked. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 295-303.)

All of the survey questions were translated by experts of native speaker comprehension to relevant countries languages. Hence, validity and better understanding of the topic was assured. Webropol data analysis software was chosen for the survey since it allows for the researcher to collect information from many individuals and gather their opinions on the matter. Webropol also allows the researcher to spread the survey outside of Finland without being forced to travel and collect data on site. Hence,

with a well-produced survey and large sample size, the results can be amplified to a given extent and the results can be extrapolated (Skinner et al. 2015, 251-252).

### **Mixed Methods**

Creswell and Clark (2011, 2) define mixed methods as a design in which at least one quantitative method and one qualitative method is being used. Furthermore, mixed methods is the model in which two or even more methods are being used within the research, and hence it usually combines at least qualitative and quantitative approaches (Veal & Darcy 2014, 151). In accordance with Skinner et al. (2015, 320), Creswell (2008) states that “a mixed methods approach is not just a process of collecting two types of research (quantitative and qualitative) but of a process of ‘merging, integrating, linking, or embedding the two “strands.”” Mixed methods is usually chosen to validate the data and strengthen the results within the research. It is usually designed in a way that a qualitative approach, such as an interview, is first made. It is then followed by a quantitative survey and finished with a semi-structured interview to clarify the findings from the survey. The idea with first designing a qualitative interview is that the researcher gains a basic knowledge on the topic that can be then applied in the more detailed qualitative survey. (ibid., 320.) Mixed methods model also distinguishes the difference in qualitative and quantitative model in a way that qualitative data contains more informed open-ended questions, and the researcher does not use pre-established scales in which the respondent can answer to (Creswell & Clark 2011, 176).

On the other hand, mixed methods model does have challenges and disadvantages to it and not all research can use this model. Mixed methods model does require more time and effort, skills, and other resources along with extensive data collection and analysis. In case of expenses, the mixed methods model usually costs more as well regarding resources needed, investments, and the expenses of quantitative and qualitative software programs. (Creswell & Clark 2011, 13-15.)

In this research, qualitative and quantitative methods were used since the topic of interest was new and the effects of COVID-19 had yet not been researched much in detail. To create a solid foundation for the research and gather valid data to solve the

research problems, mixed-methods model was chosen for the research. Mixed method model allows the researcher to gain much broader and more complete view-point to the topic when for example compared to just basic quantitative or qualitative research. Since the two forms of data are mixed, combined, and the data from qualitative interviews advocates and gives the basic foundation to the quantitative survey data, it can be said that the research follows the rules of mixed methods model (Creswell & Clark 2011, 5).

The basic idea and strategy for the research was divided into two stages: a qualitative interview stage that was followed by a quantitative survey stage. The overall interpretation of the research comes from these two stages. The first stage was to qualitatively interview different track and field executive directors in Finland to generate a basic foundation and data for the research's topic. Then these interview answers were analyzed and formed into survey questions as a basis for stage two. In the second stage, the quantitative survey that was made on the data collected from the interviews was sent out in order to exclusively gather more in-depth data on the impacts that the coronavirus has had on different track and field clubs in Finland and Sweden.

### 3.3 Implementation of the Research

In the figure below (see figure 2), the process of the research is illustrated including the different phases of the study in chronological order. The process started with contacting the thesis supervisor about the topic, and then familiarizing to the research process itself and its different phases needed. The preliminary plan was to include Estonia in the study as well but unfortunately it was noticed that insufficient amount of data was provided and hence the country was excluded from the study.

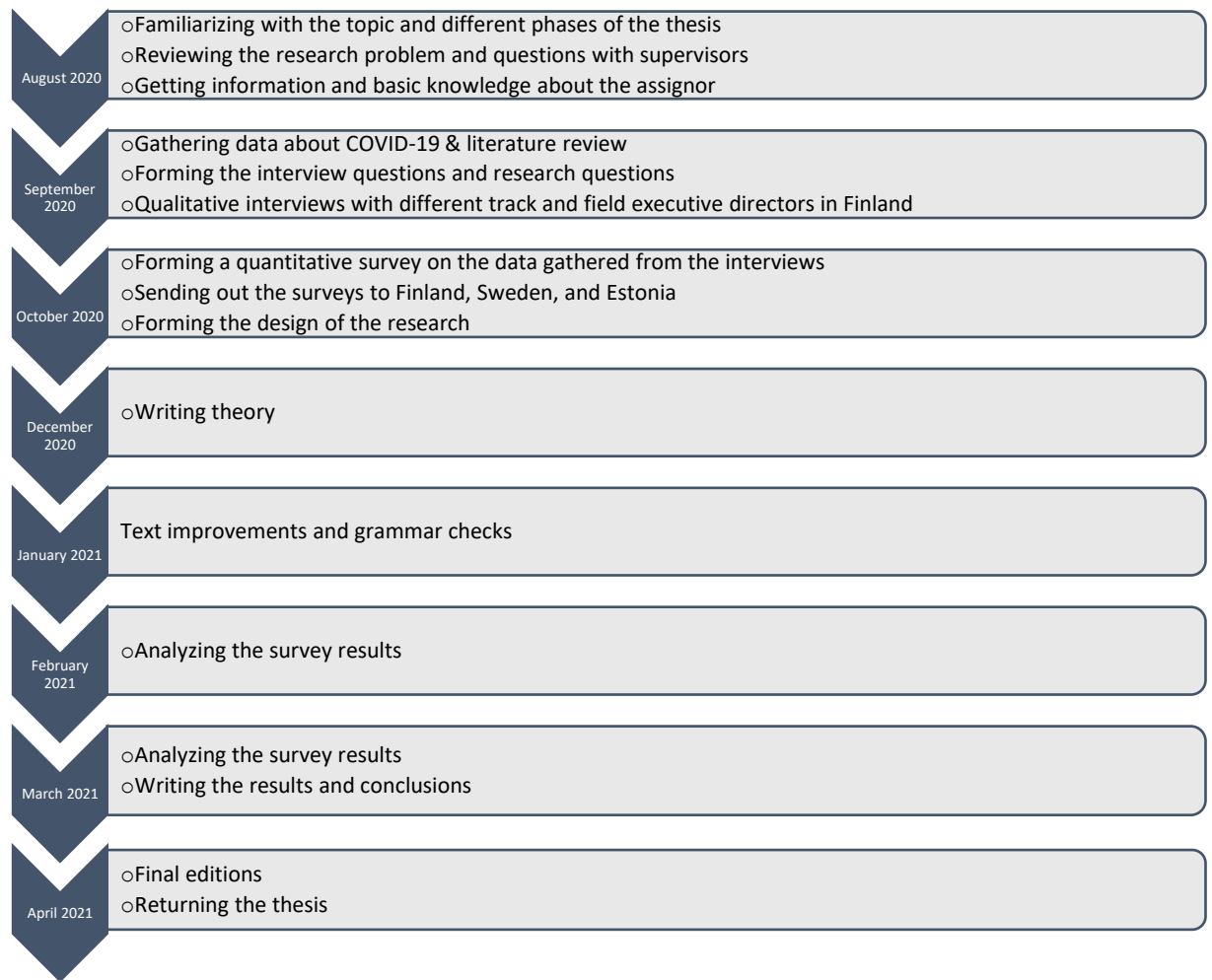


Figure 5. Process of the research

### Selection of Participants

To get a valid foundation and understanding of the phenomenon, the interviewees for the qualitative phase were selected to represent a part of Finland so that a more comprehensive picture and point of view was formed from the whole country's perspective. Hence, four different track and field executive directors were chosen from each part of Finland. One from the Northern part of Finland, one from the Western Finland, one from the Eastern Finland, and one from the Southern Finland. The main criterion of the respondents was that all respondents' clubs are part of the Finnish Athletics Federation, have more than 700 member athletes and have operations that are not keen on voluntary work and hence are financially eligible for the study as well. The interviewees were contacted through phone calls in order to agree on a

meeting time. After the phone conversation, an informative email was sent to the chosen interviewees that included information about the topic and the meeting place that was done either through Microsoft Teams or Zoom platforms.

The link to the survey was sent to Finnish, Swedish, and Estonian track and field clubs in late October through Webropol-survey creator (see appendix 2). The survey included two background questions, 18 open-ended questions regarding clubs' competitions and revenue streams, six multiple choice questions about social media, and three multiple choice participation questions. This style was chosen to get as detailed and precise answers as possible from different clubs' operations. With open-ended questions the respondent was able to clearly state their specific answer in numbers. The risk in this chosen style was that the respondent would perhaps describe their answer in words and that would then be problematic to analyze. As reported by Stokes (2011, 116), the number of open-ended questions should be minimized since they tend to be very problematic to analyze quantitatively because of the large subject amount. Yet, in this case, open-ended questions were chosen to be the best fit for these kinds of questions. The basic background questions (such as age and gender) were left out on purpose since it was seen as irrelevant information when considering the outcomes and the analysis of the survey. Hence it was important to know from which country the respondent was from to compare and find the differences between the three countries.

The respondents for the quantitative survey were selected with the criteria that were defined to the athletic federations of the countries. The survey was distributed by the athletic federations of the countries as well. It was instructed that the federation would distribute the survey in a way that the 30 largest sport clubs would be included in the point view of member amount, economic, size and rankings. This would then create a holistic and overall viewpoint of the possible impacts that the pandemic may have caused within the respondents' countries. Small voluntary based clubs were excluded from the criteria since they would not necessarily give meaningful data in regard to this study and its research problems.

According to the annual report of the Finnish Athletics Federation (2019), there were 555 track and field clubs in 2019. Out of these 555 member clubs, the survey was nationally sent to the 30 largest clubs. From these 30 clubs, 13 responses were gained, which resulted into a 43% response rate. In Sweden, the similar criteria was followed and according to the Swedish National Sports Association, in 2018 they had 999 track and field clubs (Riksidrottsförbundet [The National Sports Association] 2018). Out of these 999 clubs the survey was similarly sent to the 30 largest clubs. From these 30 clubs, 13 responses were gained as well and similarly resulted to a 43% response rate.

### 3.4 Reliability and Validity of the Research

In any research, reliability and validity is often measured. In terms they have a bit of difference in meaning when it comes to qualitative and quantitative studies. In qualitative reliability, it is often meant that the research is consistent, and it is implicated with as many steps as possible in order to sustain the best possible reliability. This could include multiple steps of cross-checking codes, transcript checks, and code defining and comparing data to the definitions gained. Reliability can also be controlled by having multiple copies of relevant documents, transcripts, and/or interviews conducted. This allows that in a case where such research would be conducted again, the same results would be discovered. (Kananen 2011, 118-119; Skinner et al. 2015, 80-81.) In quantitative studies, reliability refers to issues concerning for instance questionnaire design, correct measurements, and respondent's representation. Reliability can be measured with confidence intervals and poor reliability could for example result into decreases in precision of the study. (Skinner et al. 2015, 250-255.)

By validity, it is often meant that the research follows the right measurements and scales to measure the quality and accuracy of the research. In qualitative studies, validity refers to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability while in quantitative studies validity refers to internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. There are multiple ways to achieve proper validity in qualitative studies, but it can be achieved for instance with triangulation, member checking, thick

descriptions, and avoidance of biased information. In quantitative studies, validity seeks to measure proper content, criterion, and accordance of measures. It is important to ask proper questions in surveys for instance because misleading wording can result into misleading responses as well. (Skinner et al. 2015, 73-79, 255.)

In sport research validity is often hard to gain, when compared to natural sciences for example, since the data is often heavily dependent on people's behavior, experiences, and attitudes. To get the information and analysis needed, the researcher is very dependent on the responses from questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and other forms of data collection. Reliability, as well as validity, is difficult to obtain in sport research since human behavior and changing social situations tend to differ over time and not be constant. This actively demonstrates that a sport researcher needs to be cautious whenever conducting generalized statements about a population. Although there are measures to ensure validity and reliability of a research, it should be dealt with vigilance. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 49-50.)

## **4 Research Results**

The following results are presented from the qualitative interviews (see Ch. 4.1) and quantitative survey (see Ch. 4.2) findings. Results' area of coverage follows the pattern of each method applied and includes the main themes conducted within the studies.

### **4.1 Qualitative Study Results**

#### **Background Information**

The four interview respondents represented in the table below were all from Finnish track and field clubs that had more than 700 licensed track and field athletes and therefore the results presented only concerns Finnish track and field sport clubs. All of their roles were executive director of the club. Meaningfully, all clubs' revenue were roughly €500 000 in 2019. When considering their organized events from the



spring and summer of 2020, none of the clubs had any events that were organized without any audience or restricted audience. For instance, respondent 4 mentioned that they did not have directly restricted audience from coming to an event nor organized any events without any audience but in many cases the event was then fully cancelled instead. An interesting point is that all of the respondents have had to cancel multiple planned events because of to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4. Overview of the interview respondents

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Part of Finland Represented</b>	<b>Interview Platform</b>
Respondent 1	Western	Teams
Respondent 2	Eastern	Zoom
Respondent 3	Northern	Zoom
Respondent 4	Southern	Zoom

### **Events, Restrictions and Applications**

When considering all of the respondents' clubs' training routines for the spring and summer of 2020, all of the clubs had to move completely to distant coaching for a period of time and new methods were forced to be applied to deliver these sessions. When the government restrictions eased during the summer of 2020, most of the clubs delivered training sessions outdoors in small groups. For instance, respondent 1 comments that:

*During the spring, we applied actions to restrictions depending on different groups and age categories, but mainly we tried to reduce the sizes of the groups if it was just possible and move trainings outside since in track and field it was already possible. There we tried to keep safe distances and made such distance training activities that enabled independent training as well. New modes and operations were searched and renewed in many different ways. (Respondent 1)*

The respondent later continues that "The strategy was that exercise and movement should not be stopped unless it is impossible to organize. Changing its forms and procedures etc. in a way that all group trainings and other activities could still continue

although it was a bit different than in normal circumstances during the spring and summer.”

When it was asked whether clubs had placed any restrictions on their trainings, respondent 2 stated that:

*Yes, in May, when over 50 people could not gather together but from the beginning of June, we have only made sure that not too many groups are on the field simultaneously. Luckily, we have spacious and broad outdoor stadiums and training facilities, which easily enables safe distances and hence we have not faced a need to hamper groups' lives with large restrictions. (Respondent 2)*

### **Threats and Possible Impacts of the Pandemic**

In the interviews, all of the respondents mentioned that losing contact to young athletes is the biggest threat of the whole pandemic. Respondent 4 mentioned that the fact that children would not come to the training sessions is the biggest threat of all. Also, it is notable that organizing traditional events and/or a full stop of clubs' operations were seen as the main threats of the pandemic. Surprisingly though, respondent 3 mentioned that they have not seen any kind of economic impact yet from the pandemic because they have been able to adapt to the situation quite well and early enough. This was mainly due to the reason that the club worked hand in hand with their gymnastics operations since the Finnish Gymnastics Federation quickly provided clear and adequate instructions in regard to restrictions. Furthermore, when it was asked how badly the pandemic has encumbered all respondents' economics inside and outside of the club's operations on a scale of 1 being no impact at all and 10 being substantial impact, the mean for that was 5,6.

### **Risk Management**

When it was asked, if the clubs had any kind of a risk management plan in case of a pandemic such as COVID-19, all of the respondents answered that their club did not have any kind of a plan in case of it. Furthermore, it was asked whether they have modified their continuity or risk management plan, the main answer was that they have not. Some adjustments have been made “one the fly” so to say as respondent 1 stated in the interviews: “Well, we did not have such a plan for it (COVID-19) in

advance. When it started to appear, then we started to plan. So, it did come to us as a surprise.” Also, respondent 4 pointed out that: “No, no we did not have one and I think that very few had since this came out of nowhere. Partly, it is good that we now have to wake up to the fact that anything can come.” The respondent continues stating their advice to their clubs’ groups that the next team coming into a facility lets the prior group leave in peace before going in themselves so overcrowded situations are avoided.

### **Social and Digital Media**

The respondents were asked how their clubs’ social media behavior has changed during the pandemic; the result was that most of the clubs had seen an increase in their social media behaviors as well as social media usage in different operations. For instance, respondent 4 mentioned that their club has increased the level of YouTube videos used because of the shift to distant coaching.

*We had couple young instructors who made a really nice YouTube video series in which they presented different exercises, for example step trainings, through which other athletes could then follow and exercise individually on their own. (Respondent 4)*

All of the respondents also mentioned that they have increased the use of Teams-platform in their daily operations, mainly on the board of directors’ point of view. Respondent 3 mentioned about the use of Teams in their operations in the following way:

*It came to light in a way that we noticed that the Finnish Athletics Federation started to organize more meetings through Teams and hence more contact has also been made with other clubs. This all has increased. Also, parents’ evenings that will probably be organized in Teams in the future as well has increased. In addition, chamber meetings and board meetings has been organized through Teams. This has also increased the level of attendance in meetings. (Respondent 3)*

This meeting style is quite obvious since the restrictions forbid face to face meetings and hence Teams was a convenient way to still organize meetings remotely.

## 4.2 Quantitative Study Results

### Background Information

For the quantitative part of the research, Webropol survey was used to collect responses from Finnish and Swedish track and field sport clubs. The responses were collected and analyzed using Webropol analytics and Excel spreadsheets. In the survey, the first two questions state the respondents' country of origin and their occupation. Some of the numbers given within the answers were estimates but were still able to demonstrate a rough figure to each and every question provided. In some cases, the final figures of the fiscal year results were not able to be presented since the year was not yet over during the time of the survey. Luckily, many of the respondents were able to provide a valid estimate of the upcoming figures. It is also notable that some of the respondents did not provide an answer to some of the questions and/or left the survey before answering to all of the questions. It is also notable that Estonian clubs were able to provide insufficient number of responses and as a result of this, their answers cannot be categorized and included into the results of this study. On the follow up to this, the quantitative results are presented more as a comparative study.

Consequently, there were 26 respondents in the quantitative part of the research, 13 from both Finland and Sweden. From the respondents, 50% stated their occupation to be within management staff, 19% as coaching staff, 12% as board members, and the rest 19% stated some other occupation.

Table 5. Respondents' country of origin

Country	n	%
Finland	13	50
Sweden	13	50
All	26	100

Respondents' age was purposefully left out from the survey since it was considered not to add any value or meaning to the survey results. The number of licensed athletes within the respondents' clubs are illustrated in table 6.

Table 6. Number of licensed athletes

Licensed athletes	n	2018-2019	n	2019-2020	Difference	Difference %
Finland	12	377	12	337	-40	-10.64%
Sweden	12	419	12	409	-11	-2.52%

### Competitions

Altogether six questions were presented in the survey regarding to the number of competitions the clubs had in 2018-2019 and in 2019-2020 to see if any changes have happened in competition organizing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the questions were open-ended in order for the respondent to provide precise numbers. The results are presented in averages in the tables below (see tables 7&8).

Table 7. Average of competitions organized

Competitions organized	n	2018-2019	n	2019-2020	Difference	Difference %
Finland	13	19.2	13	14.7	-4.5	-23.29%
Sweden	12	13.5	12	7.5	-6.0	-44.44%

From this information provided, it is notable how many less competitions both countries' clubs were able to organize because of the pandemic. In Sweden, more than 44% less competitions were organized during the 2019-2020 season than in the 2018-2019 season. In Finland, this figure is also negative but not as worrisome.

Table 8. Averages of cancelled competitions

Competitions cancelled	n	2018-2019	n	2019-2020	Difference	Difference %
Finland	13	0.5	13	5.3	4.8	1050%
Sweden	13	0.4	12	6.8	6.4	1676.7%

As mentioned above, the number of organized competitions was lower during the pandemic and consequently the number of cancelled competitions is very high as well. In Finland and Sweden, clubs have been forced to cancel more competitions mainly due to the gathering and other government restrictions. The difference percentage to both countries is quite alarming but the actual number of cancelled competitions is yet manageable. What comes to organized competitions, the clubs for sure have faced massive issues because of the restrictions issued by the governments. Hence, they have faced a need to either reschedule, postpone, or cancel many of their competitions.

### Economics

Ten questions were asked about the clubs' economics in regard to fiscal years that ended/ends in 2019 and 2020. These questions as well were open-ended in which the respondents were able to provide precise and exact numbers. Though some respondents had to give estimates since the fiscal year was not yet over for all. Swedish currencies have been exchanged to Euros with an exchange rate of 1SEK = 0,0983 € to better see the comparison of the results.

Table 9. Total revenue of the clubs

Total Revenue	n	Fiscal year 2019	n	Fiscal year 2020	Difference	Difference %
Finland	11	€273 364.5	11	€256 462.7	-16901.8	-6.2%
Sweden	10	€730 106.7	10	€445 884.7	-284221.9	-38.9%

This data establishes the overall economic impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden thus far. Both Finnish and Swedish clubs' total revenue is notably negative compared to the last year's results prior to the pandemic. On the other hand, the Swedish clubs have lost more than 6 times more revenue than the Finnish clubs. It is quite worrisome to see such negative economic impact on both countries' operations from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 10. Competition ticket sales of the clubs

Competition Ticket Sales	Fiscal year		Fiscal year		Difference	Difference %
	n	2019	n	2020		
Finland	13	€6 100.0	13	€5 546.2	-553.8	-9.1%
Sweden	12	€3 604.3	12	€2 383.8	-1220.6	-33.9%

When looking at the figures from table 7 and 8, it is notable that the clubs have had to cancel many of their competitions during the pandemic and have organized notably fewer competitions than in the 2018-2019 season. Hence, the numbers from table 10 prove this statement since the competition ticket sales have dropped 9,1% in Finland and almost 34% in Sweden. Because of multiple public gathering restrictions and other restrictions caused by the pandemic, it is obvious that the clubs have faced issues organizing competitions and events the way they have used to organize. Hence, major readjustments have been made within the clubs' operations to minimize the losses.

Table 11. Sponsorship income of the clubs

Sponsorship Income	Fiscal year		Fiscal year		Difference	Difference %
	n	2019	n	2020		
Finland	13	€35 646.2	13	€32 869.2	-2776.9	-8%
Sweden	12	€48 650.3	12	€34 814.6	-13835.7	-28%

Both Finnish and Swedish track and field clubs have also faced a deficit in sponsorship incomes. 28% decrease in Sweden and 8% in Finland. This shows that public or private sponsors simply have not been able to provide as supportive financials to the clubs' operations as they have prior to the pandemic. This data also demonstrates the importance of sponsorship to the sport club operations.

Table 12. Membership fee income of the clubs

Membership Fee Income	Fiscal year 2019		Fiscal year 2020		Difference	Difference %
	n		n			
Finland	12	€106 658.3	12	€97 209.8	-9448.5	-9%
Sweden	12	€63 239.7	12	€64 912.0	1672.3	3%

Table 13. Public support income of the clubs

Public Support Income	Fiscal year 2019		Fiscal year 2020		Difference	Difference %
	n		n			
Finland	12	€11208.3	12	€11746.3	537.9	5%
Sweden	11	€61460.7	11	€87138.5	25677.7	42%

When looking at these data sets all in all, the pandemic has negatively impacted to both Finnish and Swedish operations from the economic point of view. In an overall view, the importance of membership fees and sponsorship incomes seem to have a crucial role in the Finnish track and field sport clubs' operations. In Sweden, public support can be seen as a major factor in the economic operations of the sport clubs. Especially after a year of a pandemic as the COVID-19 has been, the importance of public support cannot be overemphasized.

### Threats

In the survey, the respondents were asked to choose three biggest threats that they see from the COVID-19 pandemic. Altogether 75 answers were selected by 25 respondents. The range of options appeared in the literature review as well as in the



qualitative interviews and hence the variables given in this question were based on that data.

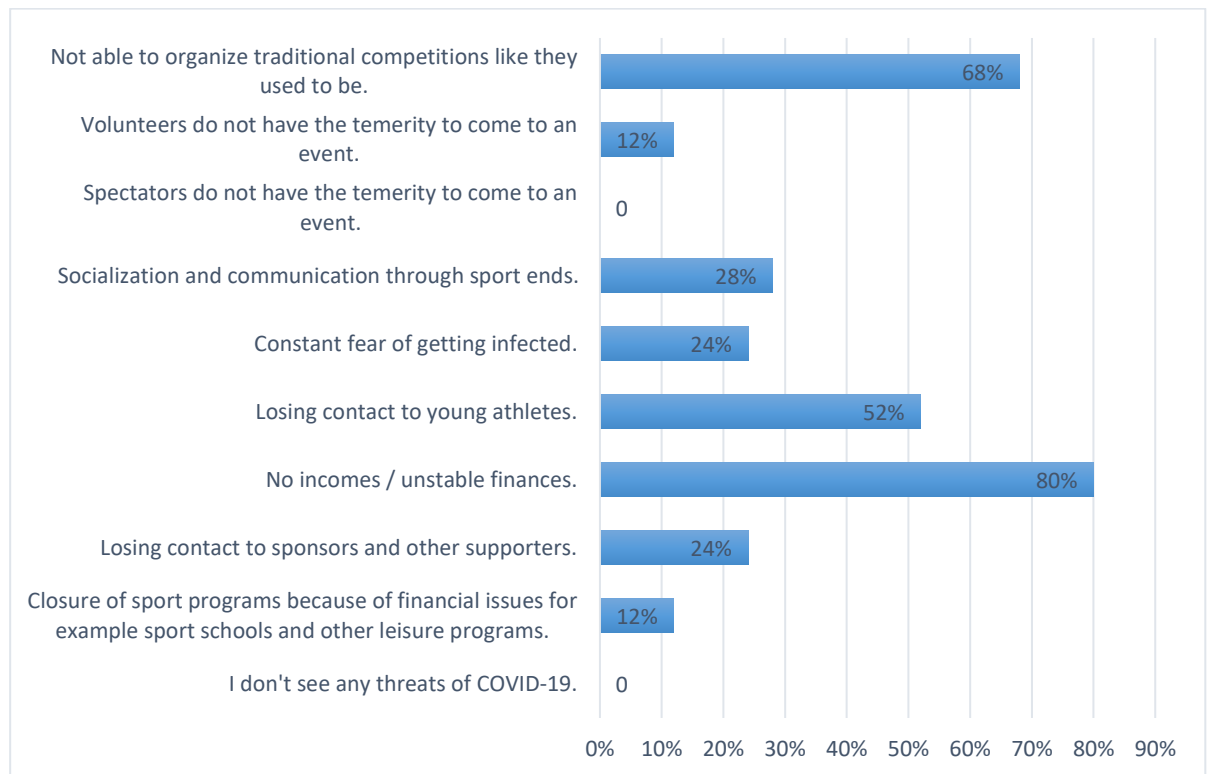


Figure 6. Biggest threats of COVID-19

From the figure, it is notable that almost all respondents (n=20) saw no incomes/unstable incomes as the biggest threat of the pandemic. This though can be assured by the results from the previous figures (see tables 9-12). As the second most answered choice (n=17) was not being able to organize traditional competitions like they used to be. From this it is notable to see the impacts of the pandemic's restrictions on public gatherings and hence respondents may have seen the risk of organizing live events in the future. Also, it was noticed in the literature review of how live events will be organized in the future and how fans for instance can come to the stadiums safely in the future. The third most selected choice (n=13) was losing contact to young athletes. This for sure can also be seen as a cogent threat of the pandemic since young athletes were not able to go to practices and attend competitions because of the pandemic and its impacts to the sport. This important point arose in the

qualitative interviews as a big threat of the pandemic as well. When the biggest threats were divided by countries, the following answers were given.

Table 14. 3 biggest threats of COVID-19

	Finland	Sweden
1.	No incomes/unstable incomes. (n=9)	No incomes/unstable incomes. (n=11)
2.	Not able to organize traditional competitions like they used to be. (n=7)	Losing contact to young athletes. (n=11)
3.	Losing contact to sponsors and other supporters. (n=6)	Not able to organize traditional competitions like they used to be. (n=10)

From this, it is notable that no incomes/unstable incomes is shared as the biggest threat of the pandemic by both countries. The Finnish respondents shared a more divided opinion while Swedish answers were mainly all divided to these three threats mentioned within the table.

To prove the meaning of the threat of losing contact to young athletes, the respondents were asked whether their club has seen a dropout in participation in different club activities. 76% (n=19) of all respondents affirmed that they have seen a dropout in participation. To clarify this statement, they were then asked in which age category biggest dropouts may have occurred. 40% (n=10) of all respondents mentioned that the age group "children" has seen the biggest dropout in activities and almost 28% (n=7) claimed that the age group "juniors" has seen the biggest dropout. Certainly, these figures prove the statement that losing contact to young athletes can be seen as one of the main threats of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Social and Digital Media

The usage of social and digital media has increased throughout the years and this point is proven here within the survey as well. Furthermore, during the pandemic it is notable that 71% (n=17) of the clubs have increased the level of social media usage. In Finland, this number was 85% (n=11) while in Sweden it was 55% (n=6). Consequently, it was asked, which social media platforms does the respondents' club use more than prior to the pandemic. The results were the following (see figure 7) with 61 answers altogether.

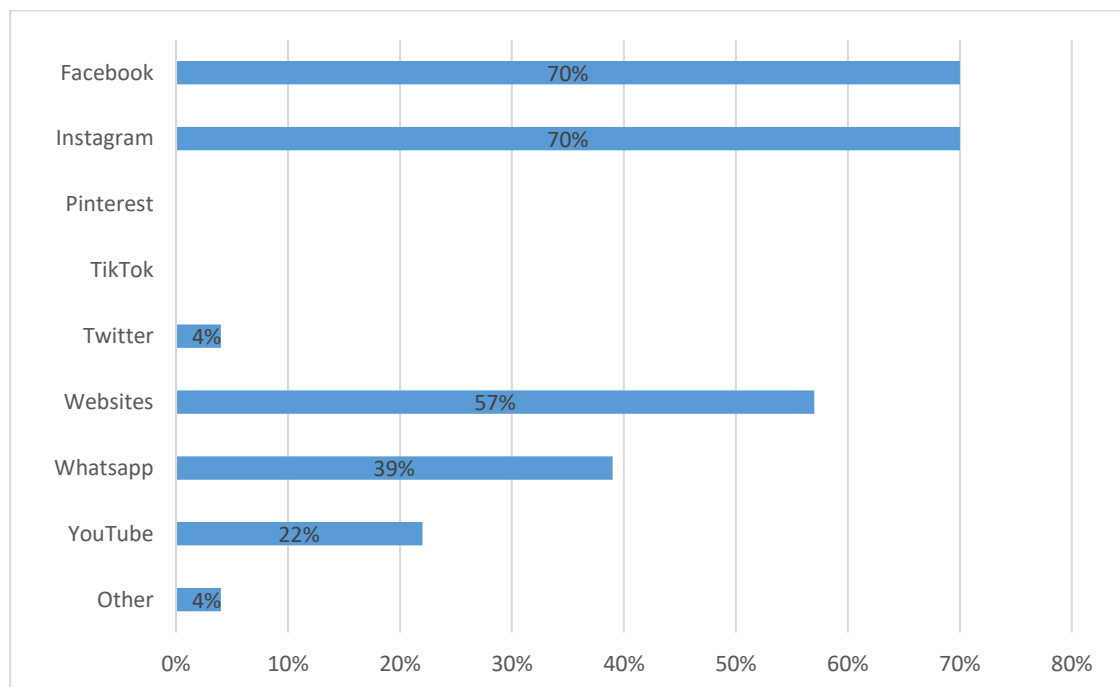


Figure 7. Acceleration of social media platforms' usage

From the data, it is notable that most of the clubs have increased the usage level of Facebook and Instagram. Many clubs have also improved their website usage, which can be seen as a positive shift when digitalization becomes more and more crucial. When considering these numbers per country, it is notable that in Finland 75% (n=9) use WhatsApp more than prior to the pandemic. In Sweden, Facebook and Instagram share the top spot with 73% (n=8) of the answers.

As mentioned in the qualitative part, the usage of Microsoft Teams has increased during the pandemic. This statement was also affirmed in the quantitative part since

80% (n=20) of the respondents indicate that they have used Teams as a new measure to organize meetings online. On the other hand, Teams platform was not as popular when it was asked about the distance coaching possibilities and its derivations. Only 8% (n=2) of the respondents had delivered distance coaching through Teams platform. The distant coaching possibilities were mainly mentioned to happen through “other platforms” with 32% (n=8) of the answers.

At the end of the survey, 88% (n=22) of the respondents thought that they will utilize these kinds of methods mentioned here in the future as well. This illustrates how crucially digitalization, and the usage of social media will have an increase and have an impact in the world of sports after the pandemic. All in all, the usage of social media and digitalization has placed a substantial role on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptation to the future’s usage of social media behavior after the pandemic would be an interest point to research hereafter.

## **5 Conclusions**

This research was conducted to obtain and gather information about the concrete impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on track and field sport clubs in Finland and Sweden thus far. The objective was to find the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on different track and field sports clubs’ operations economically as well as socially in Finland and Sweden.

As pointed out in the previous chapters, this study was done using the mixed methods model in which qualitative interviews and quantitative online surveys were used. Within these parts, altogether 30 respondents provided data for the study, as shown in the tables 4 & 5. The preliminary plan was to include Estonia into the research findings as well, but it unfortunately came to occurrence that it needed to be excluded because of insufficient number of answers provided. Therefore, the study formed out to be more of a comparative study between Finland and Sweden.

All in all, the sporting industry has faced some significant impacts because of the COVID-19 pandemic that the industry has not seen before, and the definite impacts are yet to unfold. The research allowed to investigate and discover impacts that the clubs have faced due to the pandemic. The summary of the main results and findings can be identified and discussed below.

Intrinsically, from a pandemic such as COVID-19, the impacts on businesses and operations can be very concrete and massive. Especially the sporting industry has been hit hard by the strict restrictions and other statutes on competitions and events to minimize the spread of the virus. In the track and field point of view, the impacts were following this pattern economically and socially. In theory, it was told that the spectator spending can bring in up to 40% or more of a team's revenue. Hence, it was notable from the quantitative results that competition ticket sales have been decreased by 9% in Finland and nearly 34% in Sweden. Furthermore, the total revenue of the respondents' clubs were dropped by 8% in Finland and slightly over 36% in Sweden. One could point out that the economic loss because of the pandemic could be notable since the main sources of revenues were restricted with the efforts done by the governments to minimize the spread of the virus. Consequently, the clubs have faced economic issues and will have to recover from these impacts for quite some time.

The differences between countries that were identified within the research economically were quite substantial and hence, Sweden seems to have been impacted more heavily because of the pandemic. Although, the respondents' average size of the clubs based on licensed athletes is greater in Sweden, the economic deficits still seems to have had a larger impact than in Finland. The biggest different and deficit found within the research in both countries seems to be in regard to competition ticket sales. This simply implies that competitions were not able to be organized the way they have been used to. Also, because of all the public gathering restrictions, it was almost impossible to organize large events with massive audiences. Hence both Finnish and Swedish clubs have had a deficit in this category. The way how public funds have been aided in both countries differ quite a bit and it is interesting to see how this will implicate and have a possible impact to both countries' operations in

the future. In general, together with the studies indicated in theory as well as in the research results, illustrate that the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic play a crucial role in different track and field sports clubs' operations in Finland and Sweden.

In both, quantitative and qualitative results, it was pointed out that the threat of losing contact to young athletes is a social impact that many clubs are concerned about. This threat for sure can be seen as a worrying impact of the pandemic. From the results, it was quite notable to see that the children age group had seen the biggest dropout in participation activities. Alarming is to consider that the pandemic would have caused such an impact that contact to young and potential athletes could be lost. Also, the fact that children would not come back to the training sessions provided after the pandemic, is an important finding that most certainly needs to be paid attention to in practice as well. This issue was presented in the results of both countries and hence actions should be taken in order to prevent this from escalating.

From the results of the study, it is noticeable how increasingly the amount of social media usage has increased during the pandemic. In the qualitative part, all respondents mentioned the increase of Teams usage. This occurrence was also relevant on the quantitative survey, in which results indicate that 71% (n=17) of the respondents have increased the level of social media usage in general during the pandemic. Also, the fact that meetings and even competitions could be shifted completely online cannot be fully exclude from happening. Furthermore, the respondents of the quantitative survey point out that 88% (n=22) will use these methods applied during the pandemic in the future as well. These aspects could be seen as a positive shift since the world of business and sports industry becomes more and more digitalized as it was mentioned within the theory.

In theory, it was mentioned that fan experience will be shifted in the future of sports business. A more digitalized and more engaging fan experience is therefore preserved. Also, the matter of how sport organizations can ensure the safety of fans in the stadiums was discussed. For the exact purpose for sports fans to safely come back to stadiums and rejoin the sports they love, the organizations need to verify the

safety of every individual fan and make sure that they feel comfortable coming into the stadiums. The sports industry needs to find ways to interact with fans in a new behavior, for instance through virtual technologies and digitalization. Although this aspect was not fully researched in this topic and hence this would be identified as a topic to investigate in future studies.

## **6 Discussion**

The outcome and the success of the research followed the pattern as planned and no major obstacles were faced when the study was executed. Although the pandemic caused some restrictions, for instance not being able to conduct the interviews face to face or collect data from live competitions and hence limited the actual implementation of the study itself. Also, some minor difficulties were faced at the beginning as well as when collecting the data but in the end, everything went accordingly. The fact that the qualitative interviews were able to be conducted almost immediately after the beginning of the research allowed to get valid a foundation and a start for the study itself. Hence this allowed equivalent time and thorough planning to prepare the quantitative survey. Although more time was consumed between the preparation and analysis of the quantitative survey than expected, staying on track was still identifiable. This slight delay also allowed to immerse more detail into the literature review section of the study.

From this research point of view, it can be difficult to determine how the different prevention strategies between the countries could or could not have impacted the research results. It is notable that the Swedish government had a different approach in preventing the spread of the virus than the Finnish government did. In general, the Swedish style was more laid back and no major lockdowns occurred during the pandemic, while the Finnish government put more strict restrictions and lockdowns into order for prevention of the virus.

The Finnish Athletics Federation and Swedish Athletics Association can gain lots of knowledge of the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the clubs' operations in Finland as well as in Sweden. It was unfortunate that Estonia had to be excluded from the results phase of the study because of insufficient number of responses. Although the number of respondents was lower than expected, the athletic federations can gain comprehensive knowledge of the impacts that the pandemic has caused and can hence adapt to the future scenarios accordingly.

The research results only included some of the clubs in Finland and Sweden and therefore cannot be fully categorized to represent the population of both countries. Future examination on the topic should be made as mentioned earlier because the pandemic is yet evolving and the define impacts to the industry cannot yet be concluded. This would allow a more comprehensive outlook of the impacts to be conducted. Similar study could be reasonable to be conducted after the pandemic is fully over to see the larger viewpoint of the ultimate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and see the impacts of the next couple of seasons for instance.

## 6.1 Reliability and Validity of the Research

In all research, reliability and validity as concepts play a crucial role. As pointed out in the chapter 3.4, in sport business validity as well as reliability is hard to gain. In this study, people's behavior, feelings, experiences, and attributes towards the topic of the study were very dependent on the content. This was because of the uniqueness of the topic at hand and hence not much literature was yet readily available on the area of coverage. For the study, the respondents were carefully chosen in a way that they would provide detailed, informed, and relative information to the study context. Although this does not directly exclude the possibility of poor answers from the respondents, it surely allowed access to detailed insights from "real-life" operations point of view and also distinguish a backbone for the whole research. The fact that the qualitative interviews were organized through reliable remote settings, and the quantitative survey was collected and analyzed through Webropol's software ensured that no data was lost nor misused at any point of the study.



The response rates for the quantitative study were able to be identified with a 43% response rate in both countries. Although the total amount of respondents in the quantitative part was a bit lower than expected, which was mostly likely due to the ongoing pandemic, the information gained from such a current topic was yet distinguished. However, such amount of data cannot be generalized nor provide absolute results. Neither can the results be extrapolated or generalized to full populations and hence can only provide context to samples alone. Therefore, a more detailed and explicit research should be undertaken in the future.

The sources used within the study were up to date and carefully selected for the research itself. With multiple sources used, proper insights and theory background for the study were identified. Absolute reliability though cannot be entrusted of all of the sources used because after all they are still heavily dependent on the creators themselves.

To identify validity for the research, careful analysis, vocabulary, design, and structure was used in both qualitative and quantitative phases. The qualitative interviews were executed in Finnish as well as the quantitative survey was translated by experts who had native speaker comprehension to Finnish, Swedish, and English to increase the validity of the content. Also, the respondents were able to provide exact figures in regard to their financials and number of licensed athletes for instance. This allowed more investigation towards specific figures instead of rounded up or categorized responses that could skew the figures thereafter.

## 6.2 Future Research Recommendations

Due to the fact that this study is done, but the pandemic is still ongoing and evolving and sports are yet adapting to the impact, it is seen evident that the topic should be investigated even more extensively and with more detail in the future. Especially the future research could focus on the track and field viewpoint but mainly the overall impacts to the whole sports industry are yet to define. In accordance with the topic, future research could expand to the Nordics viewpoint and expand the analysis even

further, if possible. It can be seen and is hoped that the track and field sports clubs investigated within the study will get through the impacts of the pandemic and can continue their operations entirely in the future.

When looking into the future decision-making process within the sports industry qualitatively and from managerial viewpoint, insurances, revenue creation through social and digital media, online streaming, sponsorships and other aspects of digitalization and revenue warrants should carefully be included and added to the future operations in order to sustain and manage through possible pandemic like circumstances within the future. The way how public funds have been aided towards different clubs' operations differ quite a bit between the countries studied and hence a more detailed research on this could be made whether one strategy has been more successful than another in the end. Due to the fact that the pandemic is yet continuing and the define impacts are yet to be unidentified, similar study should be conducted again in the future in order to see the full and overall viewpoint of the impacts that the pandemic has caused to the upcoming seasons.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Survey Questionnaire

Select survey language

English

Eesti

Suomi

Svenska

### **COVID-19 Impacts on Track and Field Sport Clubs**

Dear member of a track and field sports club,

My name is Joonas Rautiainen and I am studying sport business management here at JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Jyväskylä, Finland. I am currently doing my Bachelor's Thesis on the impacts that COVID-19 has had on track and field sports clubs in Finland, Sweden, and Estonia.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) stopped the field of sports globally at the beginning of 2020 and since then has been impacting everyone's lives all around the world. I am doing this thesis to understand the possible and concrete impacts that COVID-19 has had on different track and field sports clubs in Finland, Sweden, and Estonia. More specifically, I am focusing on the clubs economic, social and operational impacts and viewpoints. For the base of this survey, I have interviewed four different track and field club executive directors in Finland to get a valid foundation for the topic and the survey itself.

To have a complete understanding of the possible impacts, I need your viewpoints and expertise on the field. Your answers will be completely anonymous and analyzed with confidence. The results of this survey will be presented only in statistics, in which individual answers cannot be identified or individualized. I hope that you could take the time and effort to fill this survey despite your busy schedules. It only takes approximately 10-15 minutes to answer this survey.

I kindly ask you to answer to the survey by the end of January at the latest.

Thank you already in advance for your replies.

Kind regards and wishing you all the best,

Joonas Rautiainen

JAMK University of Applied Sciences

#### **Background information**

#### **1. Which country are you representing?**

- Estonia
- Finland
- Sweden



**2. What is your occupation in your sports club? (pick most appropriate)**

- Board Member
- Coaching staff
- Management staff
- Other, please specify

The following questions are about the track and field season 2018-2019:

**3. How many competitions did your club organize in season 2018-2019?**


**4. How many competitions your club had to cancel in season 2018-2019?**


**5. How many competitions your club had without any audience in season 2018-2019?**


**6. How many licensed athletes did your club have in all age groups in season**

The following questions are about the fiscal year that ended in 2019 (track and field season 2018-2019):

**7. How much was the total revenue in the fiscal year that ended in 2019? (In euros or kronas)**


**8. How much was the competition ticket sales income in the fiscal year that ended in 2019? (In euros or kronas)**


**9. How much was the sponsorship income in the fiscal year that ended in 2019? (In euros or kronas)**


**10. How much was the membership fee income in the fiscal year that ended in 2019?**

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**(In euros or kronas)**


**11. How much was the public support income in the fiscal year that ended in 2019? (In euros or kronas)**


The following questions are about the track and field season 2019-2020 (during COVID-19)

**12. How many competitions has your club organized during the season 2019-2020?**


**13. How many competitions has your club had to cancel during the season 2019-2020?**


**14. How many competitions has your club had without any audience during the season 2019-2020?**

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**15. How many licensed athletes does your club have in all age groups during the season 2019-2020?**


The following questions are about the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020 (track and field season 2019-2020)

**16. How much was the total revenue in the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020? (In euros or kronas)**


**17. How much was the competition ticket sales income in the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020? (In euros or kronas)**


**18. How much was the sponsorship income in the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020? (In euros or kronas)**




**19. How much was the membership fee income in the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020? (In euros or kronas)**


**20. How much was the public support income in the fiscal year that ends/ended in 2020? (In euros or kronas)**


**21. Choose the three (3) biggest threats of COVID-19 that apply best in your club?**

- Not able to organize traditional competitions like they used to be.
- Volunteers do not have the temerity to come to an event.
- Spectators do not have the temerity to come to an event.
- Socialization and communication through sport ends.
- Constant fear of getting infected.
- Losing contact to young athletes.
- No incomes / unstable finances.
- Losing contact to sponsors and other supporters.
- Closure of sport programs because of financial issues for example sport schools and other leisure programs.
- I don't see any threats of COVID-19.

**22. Has your club seen a dropout in participation in different club activities?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**23. Which age group has seen the biggest dropout?**

- Children
- Juniors
- Adults
- Masters
- No dropout

**Social Media**

**24. Has your club increased the level of social media usage during COVID-19?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**25. Which social media platforms does your club use more than prior to COVID-19?  
(choose all that apply)**

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- TikTok
- Twitter
- Websites
- Whatsapp
- YouTube
- Other

**26. Has your club taken new measures to organize meetings online?**

- Yes; Facebook
- Yes; Google Hangouts
- Yes; Skype
- Yes; Teams
- Yes; Zoom
- Yes; other platform
- No
- I don't know

**27. Did your club offer a distance coaching possibility?**

- Yes; Facebook
- Yes; Instagram
- Yes; Teams
- Yes; Whatsapp
- Yes; Youtube
- Yes; Zoom
- Yes; other platform
- No
- I dont know

**28. Has your club started streaming events through any digital platform?**

- Yes: Facebook
- Yes; Instagram
- Yes; Twitch
- Yes; Youtube
- Yes; something else
- No

**29. Will you or your club utilize these kinds of methods mentioned in the future after COVID-19 as well?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know