

# **Strategizing for better Fan Engagement.**

**Views through three Finnish sport organizations**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The purpose of the thesis was to study the fan engagement of three different sports organizations located in Jyväskylä. The goal of the thesis was to investigate how Central Finland's sports teams might increase fan engagement and benefit from it. The project's goal was to help these organizations to better understand how they could engage with their fans and how to acquire more. The subject of this study is important because of the commercialization of sports and increasing business possibilities within sports sectors.</p> <p>The theoretical section of the project looked at the existing condition and future of sports and fans, as well as their unique characteristics. It also investigated the value of sponsorship and branding for sports teams. The theoretical portion looked at fans and their current importance, as well as brand and marketing. The objective of the theory section was to show what possibilities there was for fan engagement.</p> <p>The personnel in charge of the management of three Finnish main series sports clubs were interviewed for the thesis. The study employed using a typical interview method with well-thought-out questions that yielded accurate and comprehensive data. Zoom was used to conduct the interviews, which were later transcribed into the text and results.</p> <p>The thesis's goal was to find out how the major Finnish sports clubs use their followers and what they do for them to offer value. According to the findings, Central Finnish sports teams recognize the value of the brand and the fans, but their ability to use it is restricted due to a lack of financial and human resources. Innovation behind these teams is also considered missing, and all these teams should be modernizing with the possible resources they have. The results and conclusions of this study can be used to engage fans with improved fashion and increase the retention.</p>		
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Miscellaneous ( <a href="#">Confidential information</a> )		

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# 1 Introduction

The sports industry is now facing a variety of challenges. As a result of the widespread availability of digital media, the sector has faced changes and difficulties. The digital era has thrown up a host of new opportunities in the sports industry. Most teams in a number of sports confront an issue with fan engagement. Because of the development of digital media, people may choose to play games in a number of ways. Most teams have a website, a social media platform, and even apps for live streaming events. Unlike in previous years, when fans had to physically attend the field to engage in a variety of events, digital technology has made things much easier.

Some watch in the stadiums while also sharing details to their friends. The fundamental focus of sport organizations is to fulfill their supporters and fans requirements through fan engagement strategies. The idea of fan participation is shifting away from only club and fan involvement and toward commercial and financial considerations. Various driving elements stimulate fan participation in a variety of sports. One of the driving elements is the desire to belong to a specific affiliation. Fans utilize athletic activities to link themselves with a certain sporting activity. Their presence or involvement at such games forms bonds between friends who have a shared passion in a certain athletic activity and certain organization.

Fan engagement refers to the actions taken by a sports team to form a stronger and longer-lasting bond with its supporters. Understanding the best ways to communicate with supporters is critical for every sports organization, as fans are the club's most valuable asset. The benefits of fan interaction to the sports team are numerous. Fan engagement encourages supporters to get more involved with the club by attracting more supporters and increasing the reliability of existing ones. A club may gain further insight into what they are doing well and what they could do to better the club by communicating with the supporters. To ensure the team's growth and continuing support, whether fans are attending games or following along at home, sports teams must develop tactics for connecting with their fans.

## 1.1 Context and Scope of the research

Fan engagement in sports and business possibilities within it, lies basically in hands of the teams, although success of the team is a big part of these possibilities. Engaging fans and marketing the team through them is a big part of these teams, and that is where relationship marketing comes to help these sport organizations to understand the needs of their fans. Teams have to understand also the importance of brand building and the value of brand. In this thesis all of these factors will be researched through relevant literature and interviews with three Finnish sport teams, from different sport categories.

Idea behind this thesis study is to get greater knowledge about fan engagement and business possibilities within it, and the marketing behind the teams by describing current situation in various sport teams in Finland. I will also focus on the brand of the team and relationship marketing behind it. To achieve best results, I will interview three professional sport teams from Finland, in three different sport sectors.

## 1.2 Research Motivation

The motivation for conducting this thesis is behind my interests to sports and businesses behind it. Sports have always been in some part of my life and I have always been interested in them. Conducting this thesis was crucial for my studies and kind of hard, because choosing the right idea and purpose of this thesis was hard. Fans, sports, organizations behind them, will be a part of my life in the future somehow. This thesis will give me more details about them and more information for the future.

### 1.3 Research Questions and Objective

- Research Question 1: Fan engagement, how do sport teams benefit from this and how can you see it in the organization?
- Research Question 2: Marketing, sponsors, and brand, and how do they affect to fan engagement?
- Research Question 3: How can be strategies considering fan engagement be explained?

In this thesis I will be presenting the current situation in various sport teams in Finland, to get a greater knowledge of fan involvement and commercial opportunities within it, as well as the marketing behind the teams. This thesis may be seen as exploratory and descriptive. Because qualitative data will be conveyed in words rather than figures, qualitative research is the best fit for this project. The goal isn't to uncover any numerical or quantitative generalizations; hence this thesis will use a qualitative approach. Interviews with the teams are used and studied to have a better knowledge of them and to present them with something fresh.

### 1.4 Structure of Thesis

There are six chapters in this thesis. Introduction, literature review, methodology, empirical data, data analysis, and findings/conclusions are all included in this report. The second chapter, the literature review, offers theories and findings from previous studies in relation to the thesis's goal and research questions. The reason for how data was obtained and later analyzed will be described and presented in the methodology chapter. The acquired data will be presented and shown as empirical data, and the data will be analyzed in the following chapter utilizing the theoretical framework from chapter three. The last chapter, titled results, and conclusions, summarizes the findings of this thesis and their implications for future research goals.



## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Sport Business

Sport business has changed in past years. From leisure activity to a way to make a living, and this is a huge thing for both sports and athletes. The connection of professional sport and “entertainment” has become much more noticeable and easier to comprehend. Entertainment industry, leisure, sport, and recreation as risen to become the world's third most important industry (Smith & Westerbeek, 2003). Strange part in this dilemma is that most of the people forget the fact that sport is a business also, and you can make a living inside sports. This also means that other than athletes are making their living inside the sports too. Most of the people are highly interested in sports but nobody talks about the business terms within sports, and they tend to take it as activity or entertainment only. Sports may be regarded as product by the commercialization of sports because of the high commercial value of sports that it has become. This can be seen in figure below.

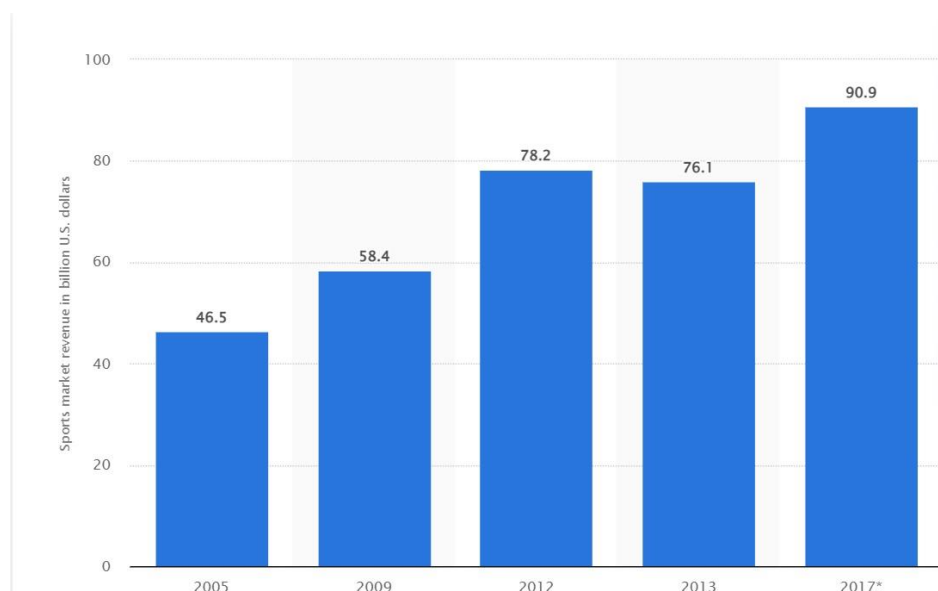


Figure 1: Global sports market - total revenue from 2005 to 2017 (Statista.com)

Sport organizations/companies began to organize in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and at the start they were ideological associations. Even today, that is still very

common style that they are talked about. Providing activities for public goods has lost its relevance to the idea that sport organizations are more of a business nowadays. Higher and more professional the level in sport, higher the fact that sport organizations are being treated as companies and sometimes it is even mandatory, because of the costs that athletes make. Looking back about 40 years, and referring to situation nowadays, sport organizations still do not depend on ticket sales on the gate. Live sports are still the most popular style, but Tv, social media and old media is still a common way to watch and engage with sports. For example: worlds leading football league, English Premier Leagues TV contract was £47 million in 1988. Price for a three-year TV contract in 2016, was £5,1 billion (sbibarcelona, 2019). There are a lot of football leagues in the professional category in Europe and all of them have a lot of money in their TV contracts. From the early days of sports, business has progressed, and exploitation of money is still present (Smith & Westerbeek, 2003). Nowadays commercialization of sport has expanded and speeded up. This shows also on the growth of professional athletes in sport teams and rise in sponsorships.

Economic success has become more of a norm in sports (Jucevicius & Karpavicius, 2009). Sport teams want to respond to customer needs and get more fans through business practices. Sports have turned more into leisure activities and sport as a business more consumer orientated. Amenities and other services have developed, and sport organizations have increased ticket prices because of this evolve and this may lead to the point where fans are not able to buy tickets anymore (Kim & Trail, 2011).

It is also much easier to find information about certain sport or team now, than it was fifteen years ago. Sports also has the great spectator appeal, and this is how they can collect profits through ticket sales, merchandise, tv rights, licensing, sponsors, etc. (Smith & Westerbeek, 2003, p. 89). When these sources are available, teams can employ more professionals in different sectors, and they can develop commercial activities even further. Game-attending fans that watch live sports are still the most important market for sport organizations (Da Silva et al, 2017). This eagerness to go along with sports leads to that other customers (media, sponsors, etc.), are interested to invest more in sports (Késenne, 2007).

## Sport Business in Finland

Business in sports in Finland is still kind of minor and new-found. Players, coaches, assistants, and other staff are making their living through the business within the team, but the amounts of money compared to other countries, is still low. Before this, players and teams were considered as amateurs, not professionals (for example: SM-Liiga and Veikkausliiga in 1980s). There are some exceptions nowadays, but mostly everyone in these teams are professionals now. Some young players are not kept professionals yet. In Finland, ice hockey is performing better than football. If we glance in Europe, football is doing way better than ice hockey. This can also be noticed on the fact how good Finland is at ice-hockey and how much better other European countries are in football.

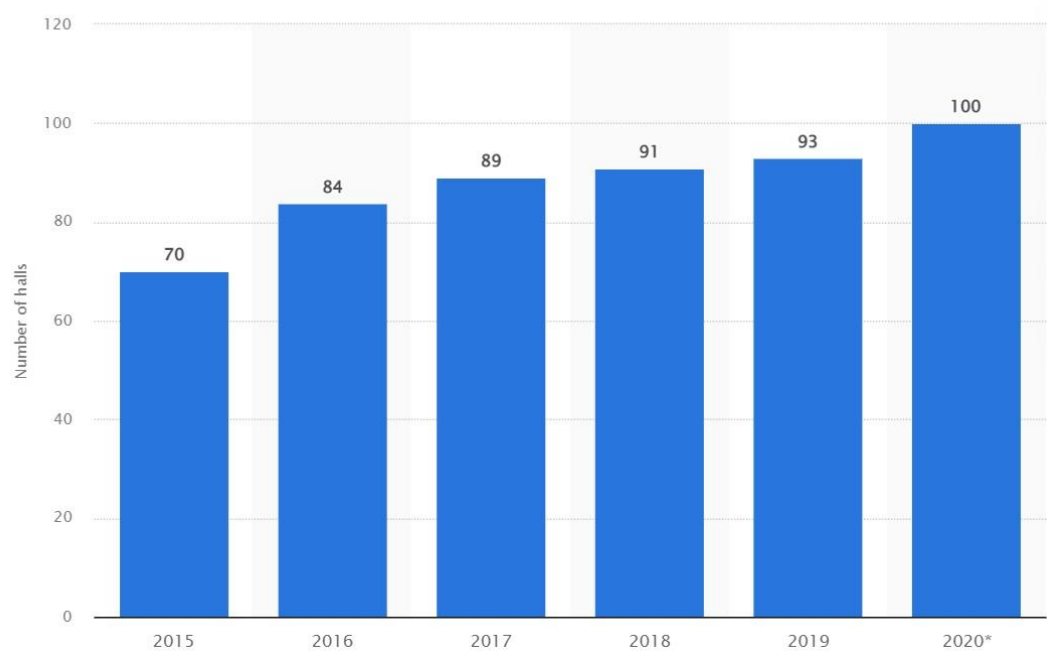


Figure 2. Number of football sports halls in Finland from 2015 to 2019, with a forecast up to 2020 (Statista.com)

Sport is an important aspect of Finland's economy as we can see from the figure above. Sport halls are being build yearly, and it is not slowing down, The Finnish sports market, which generates several million euros yearly, employs tens of

thousands of people, both indirectly and directly, and is a significant source of amusement for many. At least once a year, another Finn attends a sporting event on-site. A large percentage of sports clubs are non-profit organizations, however professional groups also exist. More than 95% of sports clubs are run entirely on a volunteer basis, with tens of thousands of individuals contributing each year. Sport employs thousands of individuals, and it indirectly employs tens of thousands more Finns as a result of numerous stadium upgrades. (Alaja 2001.)

## 2.2 Sport Marketing and Brand

Sport marketing seeks to communicate in the middle of the firms and desired consumers, and not only by selling sport products and services to customers. Fans and spectators of a sport team all have own sport role model or idol. Fans are crazy about their team, and they are living with their own team, favorite athlete and or sport. Nowadays sport teams are full of athletes that can be labeled as celebrities and that is why fans want to use same products and services as the athletes (Bashford, 2017). This also brings in the fact, how easy it is to market things with athletes. Fans can be cruel, and they can change their opinions and feelings about certain athlete or product fast. World Cup, Olympic Games, International and National tournaments, are being held continuously, and new athletes are coming out all the time.

Sports marketing is a combination of a marketing plan for sports services and products as well as sports sales of unrelated products at sporting events. It can be a normal means of marketing sports services and products or otherwise than through the marketing of sports services and products. Sports marketing differs from normal marketing in a place where I think sports can be done. In a way that is in sports marketing, a sales tool that utilizes and serves sports itself. (Mohammadkazemi, 2015, 345–346.) A good example of this is the use of top athletes in advertisements, for example Michael Phelps with Under Armour and David Beckham with H&M.

Playing sports and competing in them have always been part of people's lives in one way or another. In addition to exercise, sport has a wide range of social, health and

educational dimensions. Nowadays sport is a central part of Western culture, the media world, and the global economy. On the other hand, top sports in particular can also be seen in the true importance of detached sports moving into the entertainment industry as a productive business. The consumer culture associated with sport, in turn, is reflected in the fact that major sporting events increasingly include side-by-side programming, product marketing, guests, and a culture of support. Not everyone is interested in seeing the sports performances themselves, but many feels that it is more important to participate in the event, show off and network. (Tähtinen & Nevala, 2010). There can be found all kinds of different people from different business sectors and then it is a great place to network.

Organizations are implementing sport marketing campaigns into their companies because marketers can see that sport industry is growing and evolving rapidly (Beech & Chadwick 2007). There are various ways to market sports nowadays. TV, magazines/sport magazines, radio programs, social media platforms, billboards in arenas and stadiums, are all part of sport marketing and branding (Marketing Schools, 2020). There are two different types of marketing included in sport marketing concept, marketing of sport and marketing through sport according to Smith & Stewart (2015). Relationship between organization and the athlete, is the focus in both. Fullerton & Merz (2008) discussed that the most important goal in sport marketing is to increase awareness, by fulfilling sport consumers and their needs. Marketing in sports increases awareness in young people and adults mostly, but sport marketing also helps athletes (individuals and teams) to hold and increase their network. This also helps them to sign sponsorship deals and increase their network first and foremost.

Three concepts can help you understand the sport marketing sector. Nature of sport marketing, which encompasses marketing of and via sports, has already been highlighted. The second factor is the product, whether it is a sport or non-sport item. The third and final degree of integration is conventional or sponsorship-based integration.

### 2.2.1 Marketing of Sport

Because they supply and develop sports-related products and services, sport marketing facilitates communication between athletes and the sport (Smith & Stewart 2015). Companies like Nike, Adidas, and Puma for example, collaborate with players and teams specifically. This may be proven by utilizing Nike's marketing campaign from 2017. Nike recruited Russian female athletes in this commercial to encourage females to pursue a sport they enjoy. They also asserted that women are free to do anything they desire, with no restrictions or limitations. (NikeWomen 2017) Biggest objective of marketing of sports is to get more fans and spectatorship through marketing strategies and objectives. Mostly people are watching sports through TV, so that means that sports are interesting to watch without taking any part on it. Live sports will get more viewership through marketing of sports.

### 2.2.2 Marketing Through Sport

Engagement and interaction between players and non-sport related firms that manufacture non-sport connected products or services is referred to as marketing through sport (Smith & Stewart 2015). Organizations utilize the most well-known athletes to promote and engage with their followers since they are celebrities and everyone knows who they are. JBL, an American audio equipment firm, is an example of marketing through sport. As brand ambassadors, they work with NBA players like Stephen Curry and Damian Lillard. JBL also aided with the production of Lillard's rap record, so he's effectively incorporated into the league. They are continuing to expand as a result of their vertical integration, but others are still missing (Forbes, 2016).

## 2.3 Brand and Engagement

Constructing solid, encouraging, and exclusive viewpoints in fans, about the team and their athletes, is the best way to construct and develop brand image within the club. Branding is one of the most important factors on influencing fans and building the marketing plan for them. Organizations also need to know the facts behind constructing the strong brand in sports (Hans H Bauer, et al. 2008). As team loyalty and

merchandise sales operate together, there is a relationship between a great brand and the outcomes. A strong brand protects teams from the potentially disastrous financial consequences of losses, as well as providing a means for them to shield themselves from this. (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Rifkin, 1999). Sport teams are made of tangible and intangible benefits such as sport products are. Tangible benefits consist result of the game and merchandising. Intangible benefits are like emotions, feelings felt in the stadium, pride, joy and belonging (Bauer et al., 2005). Brand equity has the potential to be created by sport teams by this emotional connection, fan loyalty and positive word-of-mouth action. This also stimulates sales of derivative products and services (Richelieu and Pons, 2009). Identification with the brand increase the success of selling products to customers, they have attachment to brand logo and act simultaneously as ambassadors. (Cova and Pace, 2006). Fan engagement with a brand can be defined by an individual consumer's motivation, amount of brand connection and context dependency. Hollebeek (2011) presents it

*“the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions”.*

There are three clear different themes to engagement, passion, activation, and deepening. These three topics signify the level to which the consumer is willing to take advantage of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels to interact with the brand. The deepening theme is the customer's focus on the level of brand interactions towards. Passion reflects the level of the customer’s positive feelings about brand interactions. Activation is defined as the amount of power, endeavor, or period a customer is willing to put into a brand for certain interactions. Commitment is seen to lead the company and the customer together to create something new in the active interaction. Sashi (2012) suggests that engagement should focus on generating excellent value, compared to rivals, and to construct belief and dedication to prolonged relationships.

## 2.4 Relationship Marketing

From literary fields like sociology, psychology and economics, relationship marketing has surfaced and developed its own term. This term has been used since early 1990s, but it still has no settled a clear definition. There are several substitute definitions to relationship marketing such as: loyalty marketing, personalized marketing, interactive marketing, etc. all looking the same as relationship marketing from different views (Buttle, 1996). Bruhn (2013) states that "*relationship marketing includes all measures of analysis, planning, implementation and controlling in order to serve the company, regarding initiation, stabilization, intensification and recovery as well as termination of business relations concerning the stakeholders, especially the customers*".

In sport sector, relationship marketing has developed a key subject. Managing relationships with customers has been a topic in sport industry for a while through sporting goods industry, sport organizations have just started to adapt the term relationship marketing. These organizations have started to act like commercial enterprises, and it has influenced in the adoption of relationship marketing term (Buttle, 1996).

Relationship marketing is part of all sport marketing in some extent (Bee & Kahle, 2006). This means that sport marketing use or cite part of relationship marketing always. Sometimes this connection is clear, and sometimes connection can be concealed.


"*All marketing actions geared toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relationship exchanges*" is how relationship marketing is described in Morgan and Hunt's work (1994). Sports perspective in relationship marketing is formed between athletes, team, leagues, sponsors, and fans. These factors configure the relationship between each other. Analysis of these relationships and the composition in sports marketing can be improved. (Bee & Kahle, 2006)




Acquiring new customer is always more expensive than retaining one, so the relationship between the team and fan is crucial to maintain. There are three factors that define and increase the profitability of relationship marketing, loyalty, long-term relationship, and customer retention. (Jagdish & Parvatiyar, 2000). Bruhn (2003) states that customer share is always more important than market share, and long-term relationship between each other, must be win-win for both sides. This also means that respectful interactions and equal responsibilities must be held between all participants. Therefore, dealing with problems of business is effective for everybody.

## 2.5 Definition of Fan in Sports

Fan is a person who feels, discusses, and is focused on towards sports. Norris, Wann & Zapalac (2014) defines fan to a person who is not observing, reading, or listening to a sport, and can still be defined as a fan. Fan can be also defined as group membership, where it derives a tremendous deal of emotional importance and worth. There are three forms where sport fans show consistency, dedication, and loyalty. Even when the team is not performing well, fans are deeply committed to the team. Commitment demonstrates itself in prolonged affiliation. They use significant time and money to the team, even when they are not doing well, this is loyalty regardless of results (Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003; Johnston, 2004).




### What is another word for SPORTS FAN?




**Definition for sports fan**  
an enthusiastic devotee of sports

**Other synonyms**

- spectator, Rooter



See more synonyms for Sports fan at  
<https://www.thesaurus.net/sports%20fan>




**Synonyms**

- **nouns**  
  - person (noun)  
- fan, Rooter
  - spectator (noun)  
- fan

**Antonyms for sports fan:**

- **nouns**  
  - spectator (noun)  
- participant



**Thesaurus.net**  
<https://www.thesaurus.net/>

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Picture 1. What is another word for sports fan? (Thesaurus.com)

Professional sports allow supporters to be conceptualized. They are sports customers and are referred to as fans. Fans are devoted to the organization and live through the team they support, grieving over defeats and celebrating victories. They communicate and assist one another, as well as the happiness of the team's other customers (Sashi, 2012).

According to Bodet (2009), changing casual fans and creating fan loyalty is an issue for sport teams nowadays and casual fans need to be more identified to the team. Most widely used description of attachment of fans to sport teams is called team identification. (Gray & Gray, 2012)

Spectators only watch the event of the team, and then will most likely forget about it. Fans have the intensity. Fans are devoting themselves into the team every day. Differing levels of passion is the way to differentiate spectator from a fan. Fans are interested in and follow their favorite team or player, whereas spectators watch the event through the media or simply for fun or enjoyment. Spectators are also passive, they only watch, analyze, and appreciate, thus fans consequently build and form the experiences of sport. Fans desperately instruct emotional dynamism, encouragement, and diversion, whenever they can (Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003; Johnston, 2004).

When fans take part in game and be present in the event, fans make themselves to believe that they can help the team to win and success. Therefore, living being as a sport spectator or fan can be seen as effective and lived happening. (Yoshida & James, 2010). Fan's profile can also be determined by four characteristics. These are (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Johnston, 2004; Piipponen, 2011):

- Emotion, since fan connection with the team may escalate to a stage when team results impact mood and emotions. (Da Silva, 2017)

- Intolerance: Some fans are intolerant of other fans who aren't as dedicated. Fans may mistakenly believe that ordinary spectators are invaders. (Da Silva, 2017)
- Supportive social environments because fans pick their own friends, media, and collectibles. (Da Silva, 2017)
- Memorabilia, as fans collect items from their favorite teams and use them to relive memories. This is referred to as "capital collection." Books, garments, articles, posters, autographs, pictures, and other items can be purchased or collected. (Da Silva, 2017)

Fan is derived from the word fanatic, which is quite clear. It describes people who invest resources, either emotion based or financial, in support actions towards their favorite team. Fans, on the other hand, are a group of individuals who, over a long period of time, demonstrate their dedication and loyalty to the team of whom they are ardent supporters. They immerse themselves to communities of other fans, who share the same interests and passions about the team. They promote the team interests by going to live matches and buying team products and services (Giulianotti, 2002 and Leal & Moutinho, 2008). According to Funk (2008), fans are teams ambassadors where they generate awareness by their large number of people. He also stated that fans use team as business entity, by serving teams social and commercial interests through consuming the properties of the team.

## 2.6 Fan Engagement and Benefits

Value to the customers can be provided by customer engagement and this can be achieved by satisfying customers, establishing trust and loyalty using long-term relationships (Sashi, 2012). To show the process of developing fan engagement, Sashi (2012) created a customer engagement cycle. The graphic below illustrates the cycle. The interaction may be represented as a circle with seven separate phases. Connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement

are all crucial considerations.

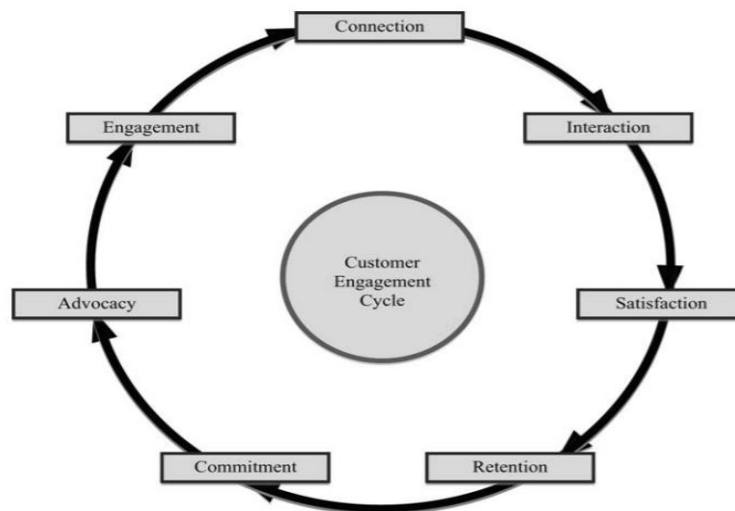


Figure 3. Customer Engagement Cycle

A prerequisite for the consumer and the brand to form a spiritual bond is a connection. This can happen through a vendor or social media. Customers' need for a solution can work as a trigger for finding a product or service. The connection is followed by an interaction, where the customer works with the company. Text messaging, email, blogs, and social media are all channels that allow interaction. Interaction between customer and between the seller is becoming the venue for value creation. Especially the internet allows for constant interaction. Only if the interaction between the parties works, then leads it to satisfaction. Satisfaction is an intermediate stage for a company as it achieves its goals for customers. The next step is retention, which leads to pleasure all over point in time, or definite and positive reactions. (Sashi, 2012)

A dedication to a company or organization does not mean that the customer is fully committed to it. The commitment can be divided into two parts. Deferred commitment, as well as emotional commitment. The first is rational, which can stem from a lack of alternatives or replacement costs. The latter, on the other hand, is emotional and stems from trust and reciprocity. Customer loyalty can be seen derived from a computational commitment, but the customer's pleasure stems from an emotional

origin. If both are combined, then the result will lead to strong and long-lasting emotional bonds. (Sashi, 2012)

Next, we move on to advocacy, where the customer is expected to recommend the company. However, this is not always the case. Loyal customers who lack emotional ties to the company do not necessarily recommend the brand to others very much. In order to become a supporter, the customer already requires both a calculated and an emotional commitment at the commitment stage, in order to create emotional ties, which while leading to advocacy for the client's advancement. (Sashi, 2012)

Last comes the most important point in the perimeter itself, the customer's final commitment. This requires that the customer gets pleasure from the brand, and he is loyal to it. Commitment expands the customer's role in co-production. Once the customer is committed, one can talk already a fan who stays with the brand despite its weak moments. Committed through the customer, it is possible to reach other potential customers. (Sashi, 2012)

Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that when a consumer starts communicating the brand to others, so does the company very easily control how the company is communicated. Traditionally, this control is having been exclusively with the company. In this case, it is important for the company to control its positives and negative valences. (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014.)

Customer engagement occurs when the emotional bond and relational exchange are both high. These types of customer can be called as fans. They include trust and passion into the organization, and they are supporting them completely. This relationship between organization and fans shares both success and problems. (Sashi, 2012)

Fans need to form a psychological attachment to the team, so organizations need to think about ways to change fans from casual stage to an identification stage. Team merchandise and success of the team are key points to influence the identification and organization must be obvious, appealing, and pleasing to the fans. Sharing values deepens the relationship between the team and the fans. This can be achieved

through internationalization (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Team values must be similar, to values of fans, because this is the way to reach the internationalization stage. Also, team values must be trustworthy and credible. This is how they can create a long-term support and meaningful relationship with fans, by sharing, also team information to them.

Fan engagement can be defined as activities and activities that aimed at influencing customers' input into the production and delivery of services, in order to achieve positive results. In this way, the brand should improve its service and mitigate the negative effects on the brand itself, as well as on the customer. (Mustak, Jaakkola, Halinen & Kaartemo, 2016.)

At a sporting event, the entire club staff collaborates with spectators when creating a sporting event. Spectators are less likely to arrive at the event alone. They participate in a network with similar fans and produce together. The value is produced at the sporting event by the fans, at the value that is already in use, and through co-production. The first means that everyone involved in a sporting event work together and create an end result of value in the eyes of fans. Fans can also participate in pre-match rituals and joint events with other fans in the community indoors. The sense of togetherness creates a chain of events formed by the pattern below. Traditionally, there is a shift from membership to brand consumption and word of mouth marketing, but through inclusion these can be jumped on without membership. (Hedlund, 2013)

Clubs should strive to create fan communities that transform into consumption communities also. At that time, consumers interested in the same things can work together and form meaningful relationships not only with each other but also with the club's staff. The club can achieve a competitive advantage by creating, as well as supporting these communities. When the staff is interacting with fans during a sporting event, so value is created in collaboration. Fans therefore participate in the activities of the club. Before a fan interacts with a community, he or she should feel connected to the community of others with members. To do this, the fan must be identified as

part of the community, so the fan has an emotional connection to the group. (Hedlund, 2013)

Fans also invest their resources towards the club and the community, in the same way as ordinary consumers towards businesses. The sense of togetherness increases the fan's participation in community activities, the activities take place in shared consumption, which increases the strength of the relationship. In other words, the more fans participate in community activities and consumption, the more likely they are to attend club matches themselves, buy club products and recommend club matches to others as well. When the club supports fan communities, so it also eases the workload of staff. Fans organize events for themselves, the club staff can only direct this activity in a way they want and support. When fans see other club fans of the club's products, they get it others also get active and want similar products so they can identify as fans of the club. It has also been studied that participation in fan community activities gets fans more to recommend the club to others than to attend club matches or buy club products. (Hedlund, 2013)



Picture 2. Fan engagement (Tappit.com)

When fans feel part of the group, they are empowered and through that, too more easily bonding. Fan engagement involves of three different elements. The first is administration collaboration. This means the desire of fans to participate in the

management of the club to ensure the success of the club. Behavior like this in fans is observed through positive feedback. Fans who give the management constructive feedback on how to improve the performance of the fans and the club in order to achieve a positive image for the club in its matches. The second is prosocial behavior. This represents the amount of contact at which fans interact with other individuals who care of their favorite team. This dialogue is intensive and takes place in discussions, for example on the digital platform. This is especially influenced by how the team succeeds and the fans associate success to themselves as well. The last is performance tolerance. This tells the fan loyalty even if the club is very poorly athletically successful. A long-term commitment to the club is eventually formed when the fan forms an emotional and cognitive bond with the club. (Stander & de Beer, 2016; Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa & Biscaia, 2014.)

Today, social media has a massive responsibility take part in engaging fans, as well as participating. For clubs to be able to make effective use of social media, then it is important to be able to manage the presence of fans online. This is done by increasing awareness of their own fan groups, their motivations and behavior. Social through the media, fans can be more closely connected with the club, and through this they become co-owners and co-producers. Fans are motivated to participate in social media information, entertainment, personal identification, and integration and social interaction. Creation is motivated by love to follow, while support is motivated by empowerment. Creation and love follow, are the strongest forms of commitment. In this case, the club can support this by providing fans with a collective identity and common symbols. This leads to a stronger commitment. Love follows the point appears as speaking in favor and sharing symbols. Also experiencing empowerment is essential to engagement as it gives a voice to the fans and thereby creates more value. Fans access social media to get information about the team, such as the starting lineup before the match or new transfers. Post-match conversations with other fans are also perceived as very important. (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Stander & de Beer, 2016.)

Through committed fans, clubs have the opportunity to achieve sustainable development, despite weak financial situations. Engaged fans are actively looking for time



participate in events provided by the organization, such as attending matches or more special events, such as meeting a new player. Engaged fans also spend a lot more assets and emotive vitality on being able to interact with their favorite team. Also, the use of money that follows the point is higher when the club is able to offer the fan something that matches his values. (Stander & de Beer, 2016)

## 2.7 Marketing Strategies for Fan Engagement

Strategy is the most important tool for management and owners to demonstrate action guidelines for all stakeholders in the organization. The strategy is a map of the direction of development and the means used to achieve the set goals. The development of the strategy identifies success factors that are superior and specific compared to competitors. A successful strategy includes elements with coping and is difficult or it takes a lot of time for competitors to catch up. The strategy does not have to follow a certain standard formula, but traditionally the strategies contain the following elements: analyzes (market, competitors, own operations); scenarios, mission, vision, business idea, strategic options, strategic description and emphasis of areas of excellence, strategy implementation and separate strategies.

### 2.7.1 Online

Building experiences is a technique for clubs to plan for fan involvement (Sashi, 2012). Sport teams may distinguish their marketing operations by using feedback and communication to cater to the wants and requirements of their followers. On the other side, the firm promotes marketing methods and fan communication. Getting to know their customers and what they want from their products and services takes time (Bernhardt, Mays & Hall, 2012).

New digital technologies have helped teams to perform successful strategies and make fan engagement into a greater area of interest. Progression of Internet in literature has been called "Web. 2.0" or "New media" and this could be called the generic term of these new digital technologies also (Sashi, 2012). Regardless of location

and time, teams have the possibility to interact with fans all the time with real time interaction through 24/7 forum, etc.

### 2.7.2 Social Media

This new medium, which includes websites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Linked In, and YouTube, is based on two-way communication. Chat rooms, blogs, discussion forums, and fan-run communities are among the other features in this section. Bernhardt et al. (Bernhardt et al. 2012)

In latest times, the fast and unpredictable creation of new social media websites and applications has resulted in increased user growth as seen. Facebook, for example, has grown from 750 million members in August 2011 to 1,69 billion by 2020. Instagram's user base has grown from 400 million in 2015 to 854 million by 2020. Figure 5 below shows the most favorite platforms to use. Social media gives sport teams the platform of easy and fast communication with fans, including more frequent updates and information about the teams and players. This is also the way to form new relationships with fans using new and exciting methods (Sashi, 2012). Using these methods will more likely bring new customers to the games and increase the revenue.

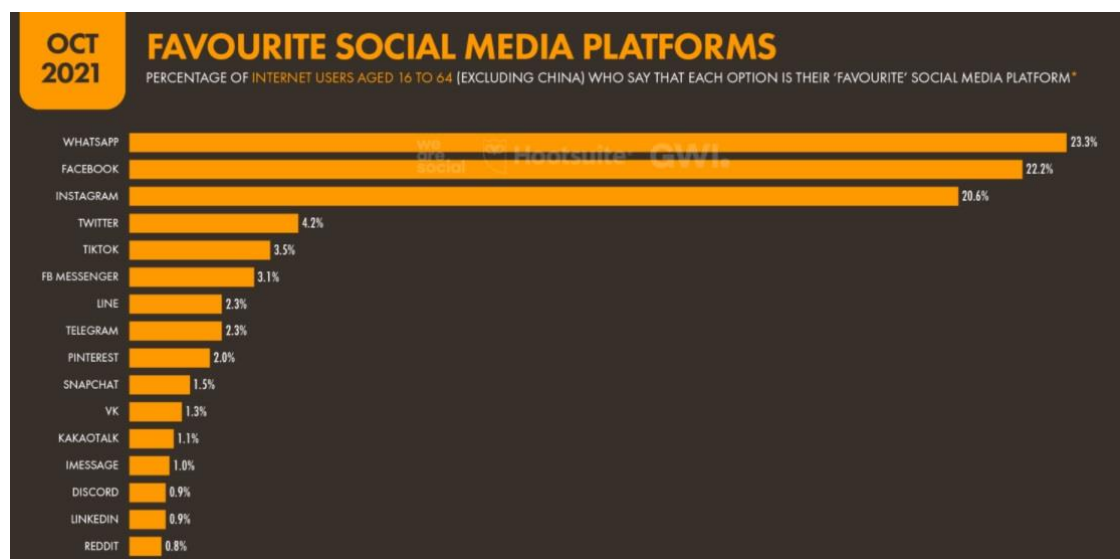


Figure 4. Favorite social media platforms. (Datareportal.com)

Teams and organizations should be taking advantage and many of them are, of all these new media opportunities and technologies (Bernhardt, et al, 2012). Close and deep engagement is easy to achieve, with the usage of social media because nowadays that is a tool to contact fans wherever they are, whenever they are. These advancements in technology such as smartphones, also gives the fans easier access to information and news.

### 2.7.3 Websites

New media also affects the visitors and affection at team websites and makes fans more intensified and passionate about the team (Iokadimis, 2012). This can also turn the team websites into a larger possibility in fan engagement. This brings more business opportunities and more engagement/interaction to the website and to other platforms they are using.

Iokadimis (2012) states that two important factors for developing team website are media related content and new openings for user collaboration. Fans may spend more time at the website, for example, if the team provides videos, highlights, and pictures on their website. This also affects the rates of fan interaction. These contents are made for fans, and they will notice it.

### 2.7.4 Events

Sporting events and winning in those events are the most important things for the fans and the organization. Displaying a spectacular show on the field always excites fans and the team (Bodet, 2009). This becomes the most beneficial publicity instrument for the business. When the team is popular where they play, they become a part of fans everyday life. Winning is also self-explanatory way to get more fans, although this is only result based satisfaction (Wann,1994).

## 2.8 Synthesis of knowledge base of Literature review

In practice, a sports club's main product is its sports team's matches, which it tries to attract as many spectators and fans as possible as seen in the literature review. This is a sports club's most important single source of revenue, and it also functions as the business organization's heart. As a result, the goal of a sport organization is to build a greater match event every time product and to make a match event the "primary star." For a professional sports club or player to perform professionally, they need a reputable brand and structure within the organization. Their brand establishes a follow-up point of interest, which aids sales in various sectors. A good match event and brand stimulates the interest of partners in the sports club's collaboration potential, while also intrigues the interest of private consumers in the substance of match events.

As discussed in the literature review section, the goal of sports marketing, like traditional marketing, is to suit the wants of the customer; however, the target group is a bit more defined, namely sports consumers. Sports consumers and partners, i.e., sponsors, are the two most important categories in sports marketing and sport business. The partners and sponsors of a sports club seek to advertise their product to sports consumers through the club, which is why they are one of the most significant sources of funding for sports. The brand is everything for a sports club: if the club is not engaging or can not be made exciting, there will be no major audience attendance at the club's match events and fan sectors.

As Sashi has showed and other literature considered, fan engagement is a diverse psychological process that combines different emotions. It is important for a brand to be supportive of the customer at every stage of engagement. A brand should be like a good seller who shows the customer what commitment can be achieved together, not just alone. When both parties are ready to commit, then it will ultimately benefit the brand to the customer themselves. It can therefore be said that that a successful brand reflects its committed customers, their values, their feelings, and their needs. Involvement requires the brand to closely monitor, support and enable

its customers. Customers' interests, values and motivations must be clarified accurately and in size a strategy for inclusion should be created based on these. Participation should also be done possible, for example by creating a digital platform for customers to interact that also for brand-related interaction. Interaction should be supported and monitored continually. The biggest significant difference between a fan and a traditional consumer is that fans experience things more emotionally and more passionately. However, there are also very different fans and there are for the club It is important to identify, segment and target them through their marketing messages and involving their means of engagement. However, it all starts with the fact that the fan experiences himself accepted among other members of the fan community. Thereafter, the commitment, as well as inclusion is much easier. This emphasizes the importance of that clubs should support fan communities and a sense of togetherness very strongly. Indeed, a strong club identity and fan community are the key to gaining more committed fans.

Sport is an important aspect of Finland's economy as can be noted from the literature. The Finnish sports market generates several million euros in revenue each year, employs tens of thousands of people either indirectly or directly, and is a significant source of amusement for many. At least once a year, every second Finn attends a sporting event on site. A large percentage of sports clubs are non-profit organizations, however professional groups also exist a lot. However, more than 95% of sports clubs are run entirely on a volunteer basis, with tens of thousands of individuals contributing each year.

Sporting organizations should be honored to represent one of the most dedicated and devoted clients in any market. However, the entertainment sector cannot rely only on consumer loyalty to promote ticket sales, renewals, and satisfaction. Instead, industry experts throughout all levels should develop end-to-end engagement strategies to guarantee that their fans feel valuable group members.

### 3 Research Approach, Design and Implementation

Quantitative research and qualitative research are two forms of study that are frequently used in conjunction. The research challenge specified in the study has an impact on the occasion used. Quantitative research examines the efficacy and interrelation of objects, whereas qualitative research seeks answers to what the issue under examination is.

#### Research Approach

The research will be carried out using the research method that best supports the study's goal. (Kananen, 2011). In a qualitative research approach, many research methodologies might be used. The use of written or other records, observation, and interviews are the most typical qualitative research methodologies. The methods employed rely on the issue being examined, the type of information accessible, and the type of data utilized to make the study's results as trustworthy as possible. This thesis will use interview as a data collection method.

Table 1. Interview (Yin, 2009)

Source of Data	Assets	Disadvantages
<b>Interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrates clearly on the thesis subject.</li> <li>• Provides casual inferences and explanations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bad questions</li> <li>• Responses are not good</li> <li>• Person may say exactly what interviewer wants to hear.</li> </ul>

#### Research Design, Data Collection and Analyses

Because there is minimal prior knowledge of the research issue and talks on the research topic might provide fresh views to the research, the interview is seen as a

trustworthy and valuable data gathering approach in this study. Furthermore, the area under investigation is continually developing, and any hypothesis stated about it can swiftly become obsolete. The interviews in this study are done as separate, individually agreed-upon interviews so that the respondents are prepared for the circumstance and have enough time to respond to questions without being rushed or otherwise inconvenienced. The target group for this research is experienced sports professionals that manage their own organization.

Data collected for this thesis will be analyzed with the theories. Data gathering will be studied and compared collected data. Existing theories and theoretical propositions will be used among the design with my study. Internal and external validity are addressed in pattern matching. This allows me to compare empirical facts (interviews), with the theory, to determine whether they may correspond with each other. Three procedures will be utilized to analyze the empirical data (Data Reduction, Data Display and Drawing Conclusions). The empirical data will be minimized to draw conclusions and answer the research questions, and only the most important sections will be displayed and compared to the theory that I employed.

## **Validity**

It is critical to guarantee that scientific research is trustworthy. It is more difficult to ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative research than it is to ensure the reliability and validity of quantitative research. Changes in the study environment, which cause people to respond in various ways, are contributing factors. Because it is impossible to increase the validity and reliability of a study after it has been completed, ensuring the study's dependability and strategies to preserve its reliability and validity must be carefully considered throughout the research. Validity is achieved in this study by doing the proper research, documenting the effort, and explaining the procedures utilized. The interviews of various experts in the subject and the comprehensive use of sources ensure the research's divergence. The theoretical section includes papers and research in addition to local information. The goal is also to compare the findings of the study with those of similar past studies.

The goal of this is to reduce study mistakes and biases. The study should be repeatable using the same methodology and yield the same results and conclusions (Yin, 2009). To improve the dependability of this thesis and make it easier to repeat the study, I created an interview guide. Interviews are also conducted in Finnish so that the interviewee and the person I'm interviewing may respond in their own tongue, avoiding misunderstandings and mistakes. Questions are also supplied prior to the interview in order to obtain the best and broadest replies possible, as well as to obtain as much data as feasible. Meetings are recorded, both audio and video, then transliterated, and then I can obtain a comprehensive perspective of the responses and ensure that nothing is overlooked when evaluating the data. When translating replies to English, there is a danger of inaccuracy, but with solid English abilities and understanding of the language, this risk is minimized.

## **Research Ethics**

When producing a research report, the researcher should correctly and honestly describe the research method and the results it creates. Citations should be properly indicated whenever referencing to the research that has been conducted, and any discrepancies or flaws in one's own results should be clearly disclosed. If more than one person is involved in the study, the members of the research team's tasks, obligations, and share of the work must be determined in advance and, if required, indicated in the research report. (Kuula, 2011). Ethics in this thesis are being met as supposed to. Research method and result are being correctly and honestly described and citations and referencing has been done correctly and notable. This study did not have any other participants than me, and all of the work is done by me.

## **4 Empirical Data**

### **4.1.1 Research Questions:**

- Research Question 1: Fan engagement, how do sport teams benefit from this and how can you see it in the organization?



- Research Question 2: Marketing, sponsors, and brand, and how do they affect to fan engagement?
- Research Question 3: How can be strategies considering fan engagement be explained?

#### 4.1.2 Respondents:

1. JPS: Club manager and informer.
2. JYP: Customer Service and Development Manager. Main responsibility for sales and match events. Marketing also to some extent.
3. Kirittäret: Manager in a baseball club at highest level (females). The next person in charge after the board.

#### 4.2 JPS



Picture 3. Logo of JPS.

JPS have played 32 seasons in the highest league. The club won the first Finnish men's championship in the 2018-19 season. In addition, JPS has won silver in the 2013-14 season and bronze in the 2016-17 season. The team won the Finnish Cup 2017. The club has achieved 5 women's and numerous youth championships. Club was founded in the early 1960s as a successor to the Jyväskylä Ball Association (JyP). (jps.fi)

#### 4.2.1 Fans

Respondent 1 viewed that a loyal fan is classified by us as one who attends games and encourages JPS on the field. About fans, of course, they appreciate the euros they receive, but this is not all. It is hoped that fans will participate in other club activities, both outside the games and during the games. Assisting the club in both ups and downs is also important because they are the ones that help the team to thrive better. According to Respondent 1, the relationship with the fans is close because everyone in the club community knows each other both from the games and from outside the games. True fans are known from everyday life and. Respondent 1 also strives to have a lot to do with the direction of the fans. He attempts to receive all messages and attempts respond to them to the best of his ability.

For JPS, Good success in games is the key to fan satisfaction. Throughout the organization, they try to keep fans happy through their game performance. Other little things, such as the comfort of match events, are also being organized to promote fan satisfaction, with existing resources. The success of the game affects the presence and satisfaction of the fans a lot. JPS, always known as a team of success, can cause a great deal of variation here as well. Before all these championships and medals, the fans have not seen so much on the spot.

#### 4.2.2 Brand and Marketing

For a brand, JPS means selling a product and is a broad concept. It is considered more than just a logo, a website, and colors in a shirt / field. JPS's brand is based on locality, vicinity, and authenticity. The JPS brand aims to get a good image of the club's people and players. Although the representative team is now being explored, junior work is reflected in the brand and marketing. Players are raised to the representative team through junior activities. The aim is to reflect communality through and between different age groups. The sponsor world and partners are heavily involved in the construction industry, where the largest partners can be found. Constant updating and finding sponsors are, of course, ongoing, but the current ones are being taken care of and served to the best of their ability.

Fan product sales in this case are not a huge deal. Fan products will be ordered in the fall and updated at the same time. Most of these are sold in home games, but there are also a small number of products going through the online store. They also have special tickets, streams, and support tickets during the corona pandemic. The aim is to organize co-operation afternoons and events for the partners, to make them feel satisfied like fans are.

#### 4.2.3 Strategy

There is no bigger strategy for fans because Respondent 1 is the only one who takes care of it. They run their own model and the website aims to inform the club about fans, from juniors to League team. Websites are not that popular anymore, but the aim is to provide information through social media channels nowadays, and to get people to the websites as well. For the fans, they have websites, Instagram and twitter. Information is sought strategically through all channels. Juniors will then have their own pages. Through the league team, the aim is to make this wider, because through their visibility comes everything else. Respondent 1 states that the aim is to get fans to participate in the voting of the best players, for example through Instagram. Social media is considered a really close-knit bustle that is easy to approach. This will help fans to participate more, even if they are not in the games or the games are not played at this moment of time.

Construction work on the home stadium is currently underway and will be developed to be better for both players and fans. The aim is to make the match event a non-game event as well. There is a booth in the stadium and music plays whenever possible. During the Corona, streams were made of the games, including commentaries, and this is still being developed for better fan satisfaction and retention. Respondent 1 also noted that of course, fans make money, but that's not the most important thing. Money follows money and people follow people. A good atmosphere and successful match events will get more fans and thus more business. In the near future, the corona is expected to end, and the audience will be able to get on site for the games. Renovations are progressing slowly, and restaurant facilities are being built. Every effort is made to improve and develop everything, taking advantage of the

opportunity in Viitaniemi. New ticket types are being considered for fans of all levels, so different types of fans can be differentiated.

### 4.3 Kirittäret



Picture 4. Logo of Kirittäret.

Kirittäret is a women's Superpesis club in Jyväskylä. It separated from Jyvaskyla's Kiristä in 1999 as its own club. The official name of the club was Jyväskylän Pesis ry in 1999–2021, until Kirittäret was also adopted as the official name of the club. The team's home games are played on the Hippos sports field in Jyväskylä. (Kirittäret.fi) Accommodations include 19 medals in women's main series and a whopping number of Finnish Championships: 2020, 2019, 2018, 2016, 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005 and 2003. They are indeed, the most successful women's baseball team of the 21st century (Most medals and championships.)

#### 4.3.1 Fans

Respondent 2 viewed that a loyal fan is considered to be a person who is a big consumer of baseball, but in this case mostly a big consumer of women's baseball. There are people on the stadium from child to elderly and this is where the importance of baseball as a family-oriented sport helps. Fans of Kirittäret also have their own Facebook group, where the average age is probably over 50. There are fans from side to side and the group is really balanced. Respondent 2 states that as an individual, as a

club and as a team, the aim is to have as much contact with the fans as possible. Fan participation is largely based on thanking fans and informing them about upcoming meetings / games during the games. The fan culture has grown significantly over the last couple of years through events and offers / benefits that have been given to the fans. The aim is to increase this in the future as well.

Respondent 2 noted that there is a lot to do in the community and that is one of the biggest priorities in their strategy work. In their work, they show their three core values, equality, tolerance, and community. The fourth value can be considered sportiness in leisure and everyday life. They are also constantly working to increase all of these. Respondent 2 viewed that they have not noticed any variation in the number of fans, even though the past season brought "only" silver medal in the championship. This also developed a positive side in the season card campaign and the increase in demand was surprising. Respondent 2 noticed that the fans can be considered loyal because they don't take the championship for granted. This development, too, is seen as a good sign for the future.

#### 4.3.2 Brand and Marketing

Brand of Kirittäret has really received a lot of praise from partners. A fresh, bright and colorful (orange) brand has been seen as positive everywhere. Superperis (Finnish league) and the City of Jyväskylä have also praised the Kirittäret brand and it is considered one of the most important brands in women's baseball. Sportiness, freshness and outward-lookingness are thus evident in everyday doing. There is a desire to strengthen these things in the future, and through this, the brand will also grow. In sponsorship category, they are constantly contacting and giving facts to partners. Bids are made and companies are shown value of their organization. They have been surveyed through media and this is how they can give potential partners information about how much they are seen on TV channels, Ruudussa (Finnish service to watch sports) and in magazines / website. Respondent 2 states that this also shows their reliability and real value on the marketing side of this business.

Respondent 2 defines that fan products are not a business for them, although they may be a little on the profit side. Large stocks of products cannot be found, and they only buy what is needed. The main thing in this job is to add orange to the city streets and gaming events. There is still a lot of work to be done, but growth can also be seen in this area. The lack of junior activity is also reflected in fan products. They have no junior business of their own to use / buy their products. Respondent 2 argues that in the last three years, they have doubled the number of followers and likes on social media channels. Quality is an important part of this activity and regular updates keep fans and followers aware. In their updates, they tell you about sporting things (games, lineups, players) and financial and partner work. It is also important for them to be aware outside of the games and the season that they will not be forgotten during the winter. There are a couple of updates every week on all channels (Instagram 6,500 followers, Facebook 4,500 followers, Twitter a couple of thousand followers and a couple of hundred on in YouTube). Tiktok they are also considering because it is growing so rapidly at the moment. They have about 14,000 thousand followers, which makes them the second most watched in the women's baseball and even the sixth most watched if men are included.

#### 4.3.3 Strategy

Respondent 2 noted that more should be done for the fans, but the human resources are lacking in this case. Sometimes they have competitions where fans can win product awards. They have also worked with Suomipop (Finnish radio channel) in the past, and this gave them more followers. Channels are used more for outreach right now, and the number of followers isn't everything. They want them to follow those who are really interested in their club, and this is more important than the number of the followers. During the games, the fans practically are informed about things. The game will be announced in the morning in every channel to reach as much fans as possible. Later, there will be preliminary interviews, lineups, and other news. After the games, the results are reported, and interviews are given. Respondent 2 informed that there will be about 5-6 updates to every channel on game days. There is no other bigger activity for fans, but there is also a booth for them to buy food and drinks.

Respondent 2 states that a fan is a broad concept. Fans can be those who go to games, follow on social media, or even talk about their activities. He classifies as true fans who buy season tickets and come to the games, it rains or shines. The action of the fans is everything to them. The team appreciates the fans, and the fans club / players are really a big part of their lives. Fans make the events and without them, events would be just empty and numb. Fortunately, baseball has survived the corona pandemic well because the summers have been calm. The importance of the fans then correlates only when they are no longer available, and Respondent 2 notes that this has not been a problem for them, luckily.

#### 4.4 JYP



Picture 5. Logo of JYP.

JYP Jyväskylä is a member of the SM-Liiga and a gem for the inhabitants of Jyväskylä. In the spring of 1985, the team was promoted to the league and has been playing there ever since. JYP has been one of Finland's most successful clubs over the past several years. JYP has won the league title twice (in 2012 and 2009), as well as the European Trophy in 2014 and the CHL in 2018.

##### 4.4.1 Fans

Respondent 3 states that a fan is a person who buys a season ticket and make a financial contribution to the team. Familiar faces, if you come across them, can

already be considered true fans, as seen in the other teams as well. Respondent 3 viewed that they want to contact fans through their own work, especially those who go to games from night to night and bring contribution to the team. Attempts are being made to reward them with benefits and possible additional events. He also tells that for the fans, they should be able to add more value and let them to meet the players on the team, because they are considered as their heroes.

Now, JYP has done badly athletically. In Finland, success is still very important for fan satisfaction and participation. The best marketing for them is winning and if there are any losses, no financial investment in marketing will help to satisfy their fans. Events, benefits, and listening to fans are important and they have a couple of fan groups amongst them. Meetings should be held with them and throughout this their voice should be heard and they should be more involved.

#### 4.4.2 Brand and Marketing

Respondent 3 argues that JYP is a real sports flagship in Central Finland. Their brand is valued and has strong roots from the past in this area. Of course, it is not enough to settle for this, but they need to modernize and develop the organization. Keeping up with the times helps the organization and really follows a lot. Their athletic success really has a big impact on the brand. The last couple of years have gone badly in the League, and then the value of the brand is declining. Hockey is such a big sport in Finland now (the biggest), but there is a negative story about it in the media. This also affects their brand and business.

Respondent 3 states that the partners and the sponsor side are a big part of their business. Long traditions can also be seen on this side. The partners have stayed together for a long time, but the strategy is being renewed in this area as well. More visibility is needed in the provinces because Central Finland is such a large economic area. Respondent 3 notifies those certain partners have been involved for a long time, but still, they should come up with new ways and new things to give. Sports marketing is starting to be such a big deal these days that sponsorship is a bit of an old word for the industry. The ads on the ice rink are no longer enough, they need to



be given more value during the support period. The values of companies and the visibility they seek are a big part of their collaboration discussions. Development and partners are extremely important to them.

Fan products are an important part of the business for them. They even have a fan product manager who designs and develops various fan products. The hall has a fan shop, you can order from the online shop, and fan products are sold next to the restaurant / offices. Again, repeating the same mantra, the development of products and services is extremely important. The aim is to make as many fan products visible in Central Finland as possible. This helps with old and new fans. The website they have serves as an informative platform and this is not used to marketing. The aim here is only to inform about the future and the team. They also have social media channels and all of them aim to grow JYP's story for fans to follow. Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook work in this daily basis. Keeping fans involved in everyday life is important to get visitors to your website through social media as well. The importance of websites is declining these days, but not everyone uses social media.

#### 4.4.3 Strategy

Match events are being developed for fans all the time. In Sweden, this has already been done. This model is also being pursued at JYP, but technology, old stadium / old equipment, brings challenges. The aim is to get the fans in the hall before the start of the games, so that they can take part in the business that has already grown up through it. During the breaks, fans will be raffled off with partner gift cards and products so that even during the breaks, fans can participate. The mascot entertains the younger crowd in the hall, and the restaurants have something to do for the older crowd. Attempts are made to serve fans through existing resources as well as possible. Respondent 3 states that online, they are not organizing anything at the moment. When the decision came from empty stands during the corona pandemic, a pregame studio was set up for season ticket buyers to get their money's worth. Existing hall spaces were used for this, which were then streamed to fans worthy of the

logo. Through this, true fans were shown that they wanted to be served despite exceptional circumstances. Respondent 3 also noted that the fans create events with their presence. When the hall is full, fans, players and other employees will enjoy it. Without fans of such a business, it would be pointless to run.

## 5 Data Analysis

In this section, I will be researching the interviews and trying to see the differences based on the answers provided. This section will be used for the conclusions, to give the teams answers for the future.

Organization/ Theme area	Fans	Brand and Marketing	Strategy
JPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attends games and supports.</li> <li>Interested in other club activities also.</li> <li>Close relationship.</li> <li>Constant communication</li> <li>Game performance as the biggest satisfaction point.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brand = locality, vicinity, and authenticity</li> <li>Junior work.</li> <li>Communality is the key.</li> <li>Sponsors are coming from Central Finland area.</li> <li>Fan products are not a big deal.</li> <li>Events for biggest sponsors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little bit strategized.</li> <li>Usage of social media channels.</li> <li>Websites are for "older people" and for information.</li> <li>Aim is to make the match event a non-game event as well.</li> <li>New ticket types.</li> </ul>

Kirittäret	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Big consumer of women's baseball.</li> <li>Family oriented sport.</li> <li>Aim is to have as much contact with the fans as possible.</li> <li>Loyal fans, not after only championships.</li> <li>True fans are the ones who buys season tickets and come to the games every time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community and locality.</li> <li>Brand is seen as fresh, bright, and colorful.</li> <li>Constantly contacting and giving facts to partners about their value.</li> <li>Fan products are not a revenue stream.</li> <li>No junior activity.</li> <li>Being aware outside of the games and the season.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offers and benefits.</li> <li>Increasing the three core values, equality, tolerance, and community.</li> <li>Quality in the social media and informing the fans.</li> <li>Competitions and partnerships.</li> </ul>
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JYP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fan is a person who buys a season ticket and make a financial contribution to the team.</li> <li>Contacting fans through everyone's own work.</li> <li>Success is the most important thing.</li> <li>Fan groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Best marketing for them is winning the games.</li> <li>Flagship in central Finland area.</li> <li>The partners and sponsors have stayed on their side for a long time, but the strategy is being renewed all the time.</li> <li>Value and visibility for partners.</li> <li>Fan products are important business for them.</li> <li>Social media as marketing tool.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Benefits and possible additional events.</li> <li>Player meetings.</li> <li>Developing products and services.</li> <li>Making the event as non-game event as well.</li> <li>Using social media and websites.</li> </ul>
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Table 2. Interview analysis.

JPS, Kirittäret, and JYP have realized the necessity of including supporters and fans in the club's long-term partnerships by making them feel more connected and linked to the organizations. In addition, all these clubs believe talking about the club between fans to be extremely important and crucial advantage of active supporters. All the participating teams are aiming to produce something special and new at the home games that will go above and beyond the expectations of the spectators, resulting in total satisfaction and the retention of existing fans as well as the acquisition of new ones. All three teams are looking for new sponsorship and partnership opportunities. According to data, JYP is working on new sponsorship models that allow for greater connection and engagement with their fans, spectators, and sponsors/partners. JPS and Kirittäret are not expressing the chance for more than typical contact between the club, sponsor, and supporters at games. JPS and Kirittäret, on the other hand, are still voicing fresh ideas for development and engagement.

Official team websites are not managed as an interactional interaction or marketing tool by any of the three major sports clubs. On the other hand, all clubs regard their official team website as a vital source of information and information tool for their fans. All the sports teams use social networking sites, JYP and Kirittäret have a well-defined and specified strategy for the social media, JPS does not have a specific social media strategy, despite the club's belief that it is a vital information tool. These organizations are using social media for collaborative and innovative reasons for fans and their supporters, and this is considered as a crucial aspect.

To improve the engagement and experience of fans, all clubs believe that it is important to provide an appealing game experience, before and after the game. All three sides are always attempting to improve the spectators' perception and retention of the event through pre-game, in-game, and post-game events. Interacting with fans at athletic events is vital to all of the clubs researched.

Different qualities, such as heritage, good attitude, and "hometown," are important to supporters, as stated in these interviews. They may even ascend beyond the

team's achievements, unlike casual observers. It's often preferable to win with a lesser team so that the supporters can feel connected. Fans' objectives and values frequently clashed with activities that necessitated competitive success, such as particular player acquisitions and playing styles. Clubs can take needless risks in their pursuit of sports achievement, believing that if the team triumphs, supporters will be satisfied, even if they are unfavorable.

## 5.1 Fan Engagement

According to the interviews, it is critical for all of these organizations to develop more dedicated supporters and convert regular spectators into fans who can form a long-term bond with the club. It is critical for these teams to increase fan retention. This is accomplished by exceeding their supporters' expectations in and out of the game. All these clubs' main goals are to develop their relationships with current fans and, as a result, get additional supporters through positive word of mouth. Sponsors and players are underutilizing their potential, and there is a lack of opportunities to exploit their participation and contact with fans during games. On the other side, all these clubs' brands and marketing tactics are seen as key factors. Fans and spectators become more connected, loyal, and emotionally linked to their organizations when they engage with their brands, which leads to increased fan engagement.

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion

### 6.1 Answers to Research Questions

Each question is addressed and answered individually, followed by theoretical and practical contributions, assessment of research process and results quality and directions for the future research.

#### 6.1.1 Research Question 1: Fan engagement, how do sport teams benefit from this and how can you see it in the organization?

Fan engagement is an essential issue for sport organizations to consider. Another element exists as the definition of the term "engagement and fan". In accord with prior hypothesis, this strengthens seen difficulty and the lack of a standard explanation and how the phrase differs as of similar concepts like involvement and interaction. I discovered throughout this thesis that this is a confusing field of study, with no clear definitions of some of the studied matters. The value of fans is far bigger than may be anticipated, as this thesis has demonstrated. The fans direct influence was immediately reflected in the collapse of game day income, but the indirect consequences were equally notable when looked at their importance in each of these sports.

#### 6.1.2 Research Question 2: Marketing, sponsors, and brand, and how to they affect to fan engagement?

Even though organizations represent their brand in various aspects, the appearance and insight these teams' brands remain regarded essential issues for the teams to attract supporters that are more faithful, passionately linked, and also interested. All of these organizations want their brands to be associated as a Central Finland community so that their fans can identify with each other within these clubs. These organizations and teams want to be known as a successful, local organization with a strong commitment to the sport. These clubs that took part in the interview proved to be quite imaginative in this study, and they wanted to do everything they could to keep the supporters happy, well-served, and interested. This also demonstrates the

necessity for sport to be changed and expanded in a commercial perspective, as competition heats up and the wealthiest clubs benefit from their position. Indeed, these three teams have observed that social media and innovation are the ways by which they may reach out to a growing number of varied fan bases at their level.

### 6.1.3 Research Question 3: How can strategies considering fan engagement explained?

Club fan awareness also implies that clubs know their own supporters well and have distinct customer personas, which helps clubs grow their own operations while simultaneously competing against other clubs, according to the interviews. Overall, they can connect various people to each other more and more owing to their broad reach and number of supporters on a Finnish scale. According to the interviews, the greatest method to engage fans right now is to encourage them to attend more games. This, in turn, leads to more consumption and deeper commitment, according to the data. However, the clubs must have a defined plan in place. When it comes to recruiting new fans, the good distance between the clubs and the fan organization must be maintained in the future, because the fan's word always carries a lot more weight. Clubs could also try to track the purchasing transactions of each player in the match at some level, since this would be beneficial to the organizations.

## 6.2 Theoretical and practical conclusions

This thesis relies on the following key constituents of the theoretical base – derived from prior-art and literature that have informed the author of key elements to be studied further empirically in the context of the thesis. Literature findings listed below:

- Digital era and using available technology (website, social media, and the events)
- Event planning and increasing value with other services than the game.
- Marketing through players and promotion of local standards and communality.
- Grouping fans and increasing the word-of mouth actions.

- Collaborating and communicating with the fans and acquiring long-term commitment
- Managing the brand through engagement, passion, and activation.
- Commercialization of sports.
- Defining the fans and increasing their loyalty and retention.
- Passion in the sport and the organization
- Added value to the fans

It is critical for teams that their supporters are linked in many ways. Increasing fan involvement, for example, might be a good example. Special events, such as student games or family games, might be organized by the team. Those family sports, such as an outstanding scrimmage kick-off, may be more child friendly. When it's not game day, there are still methods to engage the fans. When the game is on, it is feasible to provide extra options for the fans. For example, the team may request a playlist for the game from the fans. One possibility is to arrange a tournament in which the winner receives a game jersey or other item with the player's autograph.

When it comes to matches, the key question for fans is the price. The second reason is that you don't want to go to the games by yourself; you want to be surrounded by friends or family. Lowering ticket costs is one strategy for attracting more fans and supporters to the stadium. However, by selling ticket packages to groups of friends or families, the issue may be carried even further. The bundle may contain, among other things, tickets for four separate persons or the entire family, with each person's fee being lower than the regular price. Clubs will be able to attract more fans to the venue as well as lower the entry barrier for supporters to participate.

These organizations can reward people of getting there. The idea may be to sell a package in which the first match, for example, costs 15 euros, the second match 14 euros, and so on. In terms of pricing, the barrier to attend the next match would be lower each time. Clubs might use this method to organize individuals into groups. This improves the mood by allowing everyone to watch and live the action with their own group of friends in the background. Cohesion has proven to be a powerful motivator for participation, and it is feasible to foster this through a group of friends. Clubs might also keep a close eye on the above-mentioned purchases and classify

customers accordingly. They might be contacted for marketing purposes and asked for thoughts on how they could get more involved in these clubs.

The organization could also introduce a concept to Finland that I learned about during my exchange in the United States. Before the start of the season, the teams hold a "scrimmage," which is a free practice match inside the team. The event had a pleasant atmosphere, and free entry allowed individuals who would not otherwise be able to witness the bouts to attend. Furthermore, because the squad is split into two groups, there are many players in the training ring who would not otherwise be allowed to play on the actual team. Seeing these prospective players and actual team players for free in a lighthearted practice match would undoubtedly be an intriguing experience for the fans and supporters of these teams, elevating the mood. This kind of "scrimmages" could be held also during the off season.

To increase the growth of content produced by clubs on social media, clubs should focus on the interaction of social media with fans and users as viewed by Sashi 2012. Active commenting, liking, and sharing content has the potential to inspire followers to interact more with the club. However, social media interactions need to be planned and genuine. After you've established an emotional connection with your audience, social media involvement is a foregone conclusion. This is simply accomplished by presenting the team's past and current. Mention milestones, name players, and use visuals to create lasting memories. Users use social media to watch videos, so it's a great method to keep existing followers engaged while also attracting new ones. It can also lead to a successful sponsorship and affiliate marketing campaign. Another useful component for brand awareness is audio marketing. Consider acquiring music to add to the setting instead of obtaining television and radio rights. To round out the experience, provide a tale using voice, photos, and video.

Fans care more about their teams and players than we may realize, so make sure their voices are heard and that they understand how important this is to you. To create a dialogue, ask for input via surveys or post questions on social media. This may be a terrific approach to obtain immediate feedback from fans. Pay attention to what they're saying, what's trending, what questions they're asking, and how they're



reacting across social media platforms, with a focus on Facebook and Twitter. This will not only increase interaction, but it will also provide sports marketers a solid idea of what material will be most popular with your audience. Another wonderful method to offer your followers a voice is to invite them to share tales about nice thoughts and memories they've had, such as their first game as a youngster. Make sure it fits in with your overall plan and transform it into amazing content to share on social media and on your website to increase interaction.

Providing fans with access to the athletes they like, and worship is a powerful method to increase engagement, and it may take various forms. This can be seen in the theoretical study also, studied by Bashford 2017. Videos including player tales or interviews will generate more clicks and social media comments, but the most compelling (and viral potential) player stories are those that are emotionally motivated. Don't forget about direct player contact. Fan activities where fans can meet players, snap pictures, and receive signed autographs produce a lot of memories for fans and a lot of social media shares.

### 6.3 Assessment of research process and research quality

Through transparent documentation of the research stages and explicit justification for how the data collecting, analysis, and research methodologies were chosen, this study aimed to increase validity. The research strategy and research methodology are carefully examined so that you can be confident that the correct topics and approaches were investigated in the study. The research's discrepancy could not be investigated further in this study since no previous exact and trustworthy investigations on the same issue had been conducted. In addition to the interviews, the study's dependability has been enhanced using broad and diverse source material to back up the replies.

The interviews, as well as the design of the interviews, had a significant impact on the study's conclusion. The body of the interview was carefully designed, and the identical body was used with all the participants, to ensure the trustworthiness and

validity of the interviews. The respondents were given enough time to allow for open conversations and for the responses to be examined more thoroughly. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and so that the content could be addressed in depth. Experts with substantial expertise from respective clubs were chosen to assure the validity of the interview replies. Three clubs specialized in different sports were chosen. By interviewing three experts, the interviews were able to attain the required saturation. The interviews yielded similar or extremely similar results, and no more interviews were judged required. The results of the study are expected to be repeatable and unchanging throughout time.

#### 6.4 Directions for future research

Limitation of this study is that it only looks at organizations in the Central-Finland. Thesis may possibly be extra complete if more organizations from more diverse teams would have been studied. There could have also been comparison through teams in other cities. Another thing is that I only studied and collected data from three different teams, studying for example 10 teams, would have given more data and bigger picture of the situation.

In the future, research could be consisted of:

- Game attendance and time consumption.
- Needs of the fans.
- Comparing different countries.
- Looking at for example ice hockey fans only.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview template in Finnish

Haastattelu:

Nimi:

1. Kuvaile asemaasi ja vastuutasi organisaatiossa

2. Millainen on teidän mielestänne lojaali fani?

3. Kuvaile omaa suhdettasi faneihin?

- Mikä on tärkeintä tässä suhteessa?
- Miten olette yrittäneet vahvistaa tätä suhdetta?
- Mitä tavoitteita fanien suhteen organisaatiollanne on?



4.Miten työskentelette fanien tyytyväisen suhteen ja miten saatte heidät tulemaan takaisin?

5.Oletteko huomanneet fanien määrässä vaihtelua, jos joukkueella menee huonommin/paremmin?

6.Mikä on brändinne peruselementit ja voitko kuvailla brändiänne?

7.Mitä brändi teille merkitsee?

8.Miten toivoisitte, että brändinne otetaan vastaan / mitä se muille kuvastaa?

9.Minkälaisia sponsoristrategioita teillä tällä hetkellä on ja miten houkuttelette uusia sponsoreita?

10.Yritättekö aktiivisesti kasvattaa fanituotteiden myyntiä? Jos kyllä, niin miten?

- Entä muiden palveluiden ja tuotteiden myyntiä?

11.Onko Joukkueellanne omat nettisivut ja onko teillä verkkomarkkinointi strategiaa?

12.Mitä tavoitteita nettisivuillanne on?

- Informaation suhteen?
- Fanien suhteen?

13.Onko teillä strategiaa sosiaalisen median suhteen?

- Jos kyllä, mitä sivustoja/sovelluksia käytätte?

14. Minkälaista näkyvyyttä haette sosiaalisen median kautta?

- Informaation tarjoamisen suhteen?
- Faneille?

15. Työskentelettekö aktiivisesti sosiaalisessa mediassa, fanien mukaan ottamisen suhteen ja saadaksenne heidät osallistumaan enemmän?

16. Kuinka aktiivisesti otatte fanit huomioon myös pelien aikana?

17. Teettekö tällä hetkellä mitään tapahtumia verkossa?

18. Onko teille tärkeää saada fanit osallistumaan ja sitoutumaan? Hyödyt?

19. Onko muita tekijöitä, joilla työskentelette parantaaksenne suhdettanne fanien kanssa?

## Appendix 2. Interview template in English

Interview:

Name:

1. Describe your position and responsibilities in the organization

2. What do you think is a loyal fan?

3. Describe your own relationship with the fans?

- What is most important in this regard?
  
  - How have you tried to strengthen this relationship?
  
  - What goals does your organization have for fans?
4. How do you work for a satisfied fan and how do you get them back?
5. Have you noticed a variation in the number of fans if the team is doing worse / better?
6. What are the basic elements of your brand and can you describe your brand?
7. What does the brand mean to you?
8. How would you like your brand to be received / what does it reflect to others?
9. What sponsorship strategies do you currently have and how do you attract new sponsors?
10. Are you actively trying to increase sales of your fan products? If so, how?
- What about selling other services and products?
11. Does your team have its own website and do you have an online marketing strategy?
12. What are the goals of your website?
- In terms of information?

- For fans?

13. Do you have a strategy for social media?

- If yes, what sites / applications do you use?

14. What kind of visibility do you seek through social media?

- In terms of providing information?

- For fans?

15. Do you work actively on social media to engage fans and get them more involved?

16. How actively do you take fans into account during the games?

17. Are you currently doing any online events?

18. Is it important for you to get fans involved and engaged? Benefits?

19. Are there other factors you are working on to improve your relationship with your fans?