



# Utilizing influencers in marketing for Finnish Hockey League organizations

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### **Abstract**

Sports organizations in Finland need to find fresh marketing methods to attract people to consume sport. At the same time, digitalization and social media have revolutionized marketing methods and changed the nature of marketing. One fast developing and efficient way to market is influencer marketing.

The commissioner company of this study was JYP Jyväskylä Ltd, one of the fifteen Finnish Hockey League organizations (Liiga). The research problem was to find out how influencers can be utilized in marketing to promote the commissioner company's business. Another aim was to understand more deeply the use of influencer marketing as part of a company's marketing strategy.

The research method was qualitative. It was conducted through semi-structured interviews by using Microsoft Teams. The selected interviewees represented three different Finnish Hockey League organizations. These organizations were selected because they had already used influencers to promote their businesses. Remote interviews were conducted in September 2023. The transcribed interview data was further analyzed by dividing it into different headings representing different themes. The themes were extracted from the theoretical framework.

The findings show that influencer marketing is an efficient, modern form of marketing. It provides the commissioner company with opportunities to reach such new target groups as young people. For instance, a meet and greet event activation creates added value to the event by engaging and persuading the audience. Utilizing influencers in the planning phase and setting out cooperation objectives is vital. When selecting influencers, it is important to ensure that they are connected to ice hockey scene, they are sport-oriented, or they at least have some connection to the city concerned. Creating an influencer event is the easiest way to measure the benefits of influencer marketing. It is essential to budget for influencer marketing as part of the company's marketing to get full benefit from it.

In future research, the study could be continued and extended to include all the Finnish Hockey League organizations. This would provide a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. It would also be relevant to repeat this study in a few years time to see whether the organizations that participated in it have continued to use influencers in their marketing and what new perspectives have emerged.

### **Keywords/tags (subjects)**

Sport business, marketing, influencer marketing, influencer, social media, Finnish Hockey League

### **Miscellaneous (Confidential information)**

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# 1 Introduction

Marketing has been around for centuries. At first, marketing was primarily focused on promoting the product itself. The simple goal was to market the product so people would buy it as much as possible. It was characteristic that the target group was often not considered primarily. The world has changed, and so has the marketing. Nowadays, it is essential to consider what marketing interests the target group. Marketing is vital to plan and organize from the customer's perspective. (Hurmerinta 2015.)

Digitalization and social media have revolutionized marketing methods and changed the nature of marketing (Ye et al., 2021). It requires courage to throw yourself into a new world, a new way of thinking, a new way of creating ideas and a new way of serving customers. Today, people do not just want to see the ads; they want to influence what ads they see and where. They want to be part of a community, feel valued and cared for, and feel like they can influence. (Hurmerinta 2015.) Digitalization and social media have revolutionized marketing methods and changed the nature of marketing (Ye et al., 2021).

Traditional marketing, such as TV, print, radio, and email, is considered less effective today. However, digital marketing and related digital services and channels are growing strongly. (Kananen 2018, 14.) One fast-developing and effective way to market is called influencer marketing. This modern phenomenon creates a new frontier for the marketer. Influencer marketing is a new but effective solution for marketers ready to think outside the box while building relationships with their target market. (Kádeková & Holienčinová 2018.)

The development of marketing can also be seen in the field of sport business. The nature of sport business and the pace of change demonstrate the developing, flexible, and adaptive role that sport marketers need to understand to achieve strategic success (Zhang & Crabtree 2022). Sport business today is even more challenging because competing against people's leisure time is tighter, and the level of consumer demand for sport events has increased. Many generations have lost interest in attending sports events because they want better participation and new experiences and ways to watch sport and follow their teams (Soluntech 2022). This phenomenon is also seen in the sport business in Finland. It is challenging to attract people weekly during the season to watch the game or event live. Many people can watch games and events from their

homes via television without forgetting other cultural events and entertainment and streaming services like Netflix, the most prominent opponent of sporting events. Technology development makes it effortless to follow a sporting event directly from home (Sports Management Degree Guide n.d.).

The general perception is that the average age of spectators is higher and more young people need to participate in sport events. It is essential to find and reach younger target groups, but this is challenging because sport business today faces challenges in finding different ways to attract millennials to events (Sports Management Degree Guide n.d.). These challenges have driven the commissioner company of this study, JYP Jyväskylä Ltd, to the situation that it is necessary to create new ways of marketing to attract people to consume ice hockey. When discussing the sport business, it is essential to study trends and predict which phenomena will be widespread (Sports Management Degree Guide n.d.).

## 1.1 Background and key concepts

This thesis paper was commissioned and conducted in collaboration with JYP Jyväskylä Ltd (later JYP Jyväskylä), which is a limited liability company operating in Central Finland in the city of Jyväskylä. It is owned by the investment company Evellsport Ltd, which has a 100 percent holding. JYP Jyväskylä Ltd is responsible for the sport and business of the JYP Jyväskylä men's team and the team of under-20-year-old juniors. The men's team is one of the fifteen Finnish Hockey League organizations, and all of these organizations play in the professional ice hockey league called Liiga. JYP Jyväskylä is central Finland's largest weekly event organizer and the most recognizable sport brand. In short, this company is an entertainment and event organizer in the field of sport business. (JYP marketing material 2019.)

Changing situations in sport business forces organizations like JYP Jyväskylä to find new ways to reach the different and wanted target groups. When discussing strategic sports marketing, it is essential to identify the needs and desires of customers and try to satisfy them by changing and developing products, services, and methods of operation (Zhang & Crabtree 2022). Traditional marketing needs a new type of marketing alongside it, such as influencer marketing.

Influencer marketing has become an essential part of companies' marketing strategies. Nowadays, it is one of the strategies companies use to improve their brands, conversions, and reach. According to a study conducted in 2020, 93% of marketers practice influencer marketing, and 69,8% plan to increase their influencer marketing budget. (Peker 2020.) In Finland, influencer marketing is part of a marketing mix for many companies, but influencer marketing is still a minor factor when looking at the entire marketing field. However, the trend in Finland is the same as abroad: influencer marketing is proliferating, and it is constantly taking on an even more significant role in the everyday life of marketers. (Rajamäki 2022.)

This research focuses on utilizing influencers in marketing for Finnish Hockey League organizations to promote their business. Few Finnish Hockey League organizations have already cooperated with the influencers. Based on this fact, this research tries to clarify how these Finnish Hockey League organizations have used influencers to develop their marketing and promote the business, why they chose specific influencers, what they wanted to achieve with this cooperation, and what the result was. Ultimately, the goal is to understand more deeply how influencer marketing can be utilized in professional hockey organizations such as JYP Jyväskylä Ltd and other Finnish Hockey League organizations.

The selected and interviewed persons in the study are from three different Finnish Hockey League organizations. These organizations were selected because they have used influencers to promote their business. All interviewed persons were involved in planning and organizing the use of these influencers. All interviewees are responsible for the organization's marketing and events.

## 1.2 Purpose of the study and research questions

The research problem of this study is to find out how influencers can be utilized in marketing to promote the business for the commissioner company, JYP Jyväskylä Ltd. The findings can also help other Finnish Hockey League organizations improve their marketing and business. Furthermore, this study aims to understand more deeply the use of influencer marketing as a part of a company's marketing strategy. Some Finnish Hockey League organizations have already used influencers, so this study will explore the reasons and motives behind using influencers in their business.

Consumer needs, expectations and motives against sporting events have changed, leading to the situation that sport event organizers need to understand better how consumers behave and which factors affect their purchasing decisions. Marketing is one of the primary operations related to sporting events. The simple goal of marketing is to get people interested in the products or services of a company (Emeritus 2022). This study offers practical information and knowledge about influencer marketing and what kind of new possibilities it can bring alongside traditional marketing. The study will help the commissioner company to understand the opportunities of influencer marketing, and at the same, it will give different options on how to use influencers. In the best case, it might provide extra tools for the commissioner company to improve their business in the future. A better knowledge of influencer marketing will enable a more effective marketing strategy for the commissioner company.

The main research question is: *What is the purpose of influencer marketing in professional Finnish ice hockey organizations?* The supplementary research questions of this study are:

1. Why do professional Finnish ice hockey organizations use influencers in their marketing?
2. How have professional Finnish ice hockey organizations used influencers in their marketing?
3. How have professional Finnish ice hockey organizations measured influencers' benefits and effectiveness in marketing?

The first supplementary research question collects valid information for JYP Jyväskylä Ltd about why interviewed organizations have used influencers in their marketing and what they wanted to achieve by using influencers in their marketing. The second supplementary research question tries to clarify how these organizations used influencers in their marketing and how influencer marketing suits the sport business. The third supplementary research question provides background on how interviewed organizations have measured the benefits and effectiveness of using influencers in their marketing. This study attempts to provide JYP Jyväskylä Ltd with more information and insights on using influencers in their marketing. The gathered data is collected from the interviews of JYP Jyväskylä Ltd's colleague organizations from the Finnish Hockey League (Liiga).



### 1.3 Structure of the study process

The structure of this study process consists of five different parts. The introduction leads the reader to the study's topic and opens the study's background and purpose. At the same time, it introduces the commissioner company of the research and gives familiarization with the sport business and its challenges. This enables the formation of the research problem that guides the whole study. The introduction is followed by the theoretical framework, which begins with a literature review concerning the studied phenomenon. The main focus of this theoretical framework is on influencer marketing, its purpose and usability. Influencer marketing is still a new way of marketing which is multiplying, and it is constantly taking on an even more significant role in the everyday life of marketers. Some of the conducted research related to this topic can be found in industries other than sport business. After the theoretical framework, the research implementation, data collection, and data analysis are explained by a decent methodological research approach. This empirical part of the study is based on interviews with representatives of three Finnish Hockey League organizations. Based on their thoughts, observations are made about different ways to utilize influencers in the marketing of Finnish Hockey League organizations. These findings summarize and conclude the collected data and create, together with a theoretical framework, a qualitative approach for this study. In the end, the result of this study gives perspective for the discussion, conclusion, and future research.

## 2 Influencer marketing

Many people consider the history of influencer marketing to begin in the early 2010s when the popularity of social media exploded. This information needs to be corrected because influencer marketing has been done long before, but its forms, ways, and channels have been entirely different from today. For example, in the 1930s, the Coca-Cola company was a trendsetter in influencer marketing. They created an advertisement campaign around Santa Claus, who was known worldwide. Coca-Cola needed this famous figure to tell people that their beverage was delicious. It was an intelligent move because Santa Claus was a spokesperson whom people trusted. This advertising campaign was successful influencer marketing because it proved that if people love the person promoting the product, they will love the product and brand, too. Coca-Cola was a trendsetter that showed the way and opened the doors for brands to use different figures to promote their brands through influencer marketing. (Schwartz n.d.) Even then, it was realized that using influential and well-known people in advertisements can positively affect the consumer's purchasing decision. This is what influencer marketing is about.

One definition says that influencer marketing allows a company to promote its brand through advertisements or recommendations from influencers and content creators on the Internet (Roberts et al., 2023). Influencer marketing can mean different things to different people. Some people think that influencer marketing is like spreading rumors, while others believe it is just content marketing or storytelling. All of these thoughts are true. Influencer marketing is a form of advertising where an influential person acts as a brand representative instead of a company. This significant person can be called an influencer. At the same time, this influencer earns the trust of the desired target group. (Kananen 2019, 63.)

Influencer marketing effectively reaches critical target groups for a company or organization and influences their attitudes, knowledge or purchasing behavior (Kananen 2019, 65). Companies are taking advantage of this relatively new marketing communication tool as it allows them to reach large audiences (Ye et al., 2021). Many studies have shown that influencer marketing is an effective form of marketing that achieves good results and is used often (Kananen 2019, 65). Many sources indicate that influencer marketing is one of the most effective forms today (Lahtinen et al., 2023, 125). Influencer marketing aims to find suitable influencers regarding the company's values and target groups. Through and with the help of these influencers, exciting and authentic

stories are told to desired target groups. Influencer marketing can be used to communicate both social and commercial themes. (Ping 2022.)

World of Mouth Marketing Association has defined influencer marketing as identifying, searching for, and interacting with influencers (Halonen 2019, 36). According to Geysler (2023), influencer marketing is a tool that helps brands improve recognition and promote sales. Practically, it means that a brand collaborates with an influencer to market one of its products or services (Geysler 2023). Some simple definitions say that influencer marketing is storytelling through influencers (Halonen 2019, 36). Influencer marketing is a mainstream form of online marketing that combines the new and old ways of marketing (Geysler 2023). According to Halonen (2019, 37), the following actions can be identified as influencer marketing:

- Content published on an influencer's channel where the influencer talks about the company's product or service and receives payment for it.
- Hiring an influencer as a company's brand ambassador or representative.
- The influencer produces content in real time directly to the company's social media channels.
- It is involving the influencer in the company's product development for payment.

Influencer marketing uses influential people with credibility, followers, and motivation to share a positive message through their channels to influence people's consumption decisions (Ye et al., 2021). In a simplified way, influencer marketing means cooperating with different companies to influence people's opinions, behavior, and attitudes. At the same time, these people try to promote that company's strategic goal. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 281.) When influencer marketing correctly uses social media channels, it primarily reaches young people (Lindblom 2023, 24). Almost half of the young people feel that specifically, the content produced by social media influencers has influenced their behavior not only in everyday choices but also in social issues related to, for example, climate change, studies, career choice and elections (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 109). After all, successful influencer marketing is based on the values shared by the

influencer and the company and their desire to discuss the same topic (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 281).

## 2.1 Influencers

There have been influencers as long as people have existed. Since the beginning of humankind, some individuals have had the ability and power to influence other people's thinking, opinions, and decisions. The social media era has revolutionized influencing and improved the possibilities of becoming an influencer. Almost anyone has the opportunity to become an influencer. Almost everyone has access to a wide range of mass media and channels, making it possible to reach thousands of people regardless of time or geographical restrictions. Social media has allowed influencers to access even bigger arenas and expand their circle of influence to people they would never have met in person. (Halonen 2019, 14.) Influencers have become a powerful marketing tool for companies and brands (Rundin & Colliander 2021).

Nowadays, the concept of an influencer is much broader than before. Influencer marketing is not a new phenomenon. For decades, many companies have used celebrities such as athletes, singers, actors, and models to promote their reputation and market their products or services. Because of digitalization and the growth of social media, the operating environment has changed, and influencers have emerged in a new way. Today's celebrities have not necessarily earned popularity based on traditional achievements such as sports performance or acting skills. They have become celebrities through the social media. These ordinary people are called influencers. (Halonen 2019, 15–16.)

Influencers are individuals or groups of individuals who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers. Social media influencers create and disseminate content through blogging, vlogging, or generating short-form content for example on Instagram or TikTok. These influencers create content that portrays their everyday lives, opinions, and experiences. Followers self-select to follow influencers whose identity resonates with them. (Leung et al., 2022.) Rundin & Colliander (2021) point out that to many people, social media influencers are synonymous with the celebrities.

An influencer can be defined as someone with an above-average reach or influence through different communication channels. An influencer has a greater chance than usual to influence other people's opinions and behavior. They can be trendsetters or have strong views on specific topics. An influencer's credibility determines their value as an influencer. Influencers always have an audience whose trust and popularity they have earned. This target audience is typically interested in the same things as the influencer. Influencers act like the media because they interpret and convey the contents of their field to others. These shared and filtered information are often the latest and the most exciting phenomena in a particular area. (Halonen 2019, 14–15.) Influencers adopt new products and services that interest them before other users and integrate these products and services into their lifestyle, promoting them to their target audience (Tafesse & Wood 2021).

Influencers include bloggers, TikTokers, YouTubers, Snapchatters, Instagrammers, e-athletes, artists, athletes or politicians. A person who can influence other people's thoughts, behavior and attitudes can be called an influencer. Anyone can be an influencer, regardless of the number of followers. This person must have an audience on social media and the desire to create and share professionally produced and high-quality content. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 282.) Ultimately, people follow these influencers via social media (Komulainen 2018, 229).

## 2.2 The purpose of influencer marketing

Regarding influencer marketing, it cannot just be a separate part of the company's marketing. It is an essential part of the company's marketing strategy to support its business goals. Influencer marketing requires strict planning, and to be successful, it must be based on clear guidelines, goals, and metrics. (Halonen 2019, 83.) Influencer marketing is a very effective way to reach a company's target group and influence their attitudes, knowledge or purchasing behavior. This is only possible if it is implemented correctly. In influencer marketing, finding the right influencers who fit the company's brand image and share the same values is essential. (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021.) At the same time, the cooperation with the right influencer can help brands to grow (Roberts et al., 2023). Influencers must have followers and target groups similar to the company's (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021).

When a company does marketing, it always has a purpose. Recognizing the vast potential of social networks, companies are tapping into influencer marketing by hiring independent influencers to promote their products on social media platforms (Mallipeddi et al., 2022). In influencer marketing, influential people cooperate with different companies to promote a specific company's strategic goal. This goal can mean increasing the company's awareness among a particular group of people or just increasing direct sales. The success of influencer marketing requires setting goals and selecting the right metrics before starting the cooperation. The business, marketing, or campaign goals often determine plans. For example, opening discussion, increasing brand awareness, or driving traffic to the company's online store are good examples of setting goals. (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021.)

Influencer marketing is about leveraging the trust and connection that influencers have built with their followers. In this way, influencers help extend brands' reach and impact on social media. (Tafesse & Wood 2021.) From the influencer's point of view, the influencer must know the goal of the cooperation and what needs to be considered. Influencers often envision the approach or methods to excite the target audience. This is why engaging the influencer already in the planning phase is crucial and giving them relatively free hands to act. (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021.)

Through influencer marketing, a company can significantly increase awareness of its brand and its offerings in a particular place (Lahtinen et al., 2023, 125). In other word, influencer marketing opens a new channel for target marketing. The content of social media influencers affects the consumer's purchase decision, whether the content is sponsored or not. These contents and messages strengthen the company's marketing message and strategy. If an influencer shares a picture of a specific product on social media and praises it, the followers often get excited about this product and may want to buy it. (Komulainen 2018, 227–231.) Influencer marketing aims to present and honor the effect of social media channels to promote awareness and sales. Maximizing the number of followers interested in and willing to buy the product is essential. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 281.)

### 2.3 Platforms for influencer marketing

The internet has brought new opportunities for marketing, such as social media (Leung et al., 2022). From a business perspective, social media has become more relevant nowadays

(Komulainen 2018, 227). The era of social media has changed the buying behavior of consumers. Companies have noticed that the customer's path to purchase is more complex than it used to be. For a long time, the company's website was the most important and often the only source of information that influenced the consumer's purchasing decision. Before the final purchasing decision, the consumer explores many different sources of information, such as reviews, blogs, and forums. From the company's point of view, it is even more important to be present in the channels where the people and potential customers spend their time. These channels are on social media and especially on influencer channels. (Halonen 2019, 47–48.)

The era of social media has significantly increased the number of available platforms (Kananen 2018, 14–15). This phenomenon has also increased the number of platforms used in influencer marketing (Tuominen 2022). A company needs to understand which platforms consumers spend time on and which are worth investing in because those platforms that were popular a decade ago are no longer in use or do not play a significant role as before (Paunonen 2022). Social media has many different platforms that work differently (Virtanen 2020, 15). These platforms can be used in many ways to promote a company's brand visibility and to improve its effectiveness (Komulainen 2018, 231). Blogs and websites are no longer the only platform for influencer marketing. Numerous social media platforms have been developed, such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook. (Paunonen 2022.) New social media platforms are constantly being created, and old ones are dying simultaneously (Virtanen 2020, 15).

Today, influencer marketing should be more comprehensive than just social media platforms (Halonen 2019, 29). It is usual for the influencers of the digital world to be strongly present in traditional media such as television. This makes them better known to a broader audience. (Lahtinen et al., 2023, 126.) Using traditional marketing channels in influencer marketing is reasonable, as influencers can be more than just social media stars. In this case, advertising can work on social media and traditional channels such as newspapers, radio, and TV. (Hypement 2017.) Platforms used for influencer marketing are also constantly developing and renewing, opening new marketing opportunities. Influencers and consumers use numerous platforms, highlighting the importance of multi-channel marketing. Consumers expect to be served in the channels where they spend most of their time. (Paunonen 2022.) This is why influencer marketing

has spread to social media, newspapers and magazines, outdoor advertising, and events (Ruotsalainen 2019).

When choosing platforms, it is relevant to consider which media reach the desired target group best. It is also vital to recognize which platforms produce the best results and offer natural and practical ways to advertise products or services. (Tuominen 2022.) The characteristics of social media platforms determine what kind of content works best on a particular platform (Leung et al., 2022). The choice of platform is also significantly influenced by the customer's purchasing path. Different platforms are suitable for different stages of the customer's purchasing path. In today's Internet world, the problem can be that there are still people who are not actively using the Internet or social media. Therefore, using many different platforms increases the possibilities to reach large groups of people. Using various platforms can also support each other. (Ropponen 2021.) The budget also significantly affects the choice of platforms (Reiman 2022).

## 2.4 The different forms of influencer marketing

### 2.4.1 Commercial cooperation

Cooperation between an influencer and a company is called commercial cooperation. In commercial cooperation, the influencer presents the company's products or services on a channel for compensation. This channel can be an influencer's personal or company's social media account or other media platform such as a newspaper, magazine, blog, or podcast. The influencer always receives a reward for cooperation. This reward can be money, services or other benefits such as gift cards, products or trips abroad. (Kiuru 2022.) Commercial cooperation between companies and influencers has become significantly more common recently (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 282). Commercial cooperation is the most common type of influencer marketing collaboration (Barker 2023).

Commercial cooperation is a form of influencer marketing where the company and the influencer work together to promote the sale of a particular product or service. At the same time, the goal is to raise the company's brand profile. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority 2019.) Influencers create and publish brand-related content on their social media accounts (Barker 2023). The creation of general commercial cooperation might be a video, audio, or photographic



presentation or blog entry published by the influencer that deals with the company or its products. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority 2019.) Commercial cooperation is practical when the company chooses an influencer with a suitable profile as a partner and the influencer decides to cooperate with a company that shares the same values. Successful commercial cooperation can be a valuable marketing action for both parties. (Bazar Helsinki 2020.) Commercial cooperation works best when an influencer and a company find each other with a common content strategy (Halonen 2019, 43).

#### 2.4.2 Content marketing

When a company, organization or influencer produces targeted content for consumers and citizens in their channels, it is about content marketing (Juholin 2017, 204). Content marketing combines content and marketing by creating and distributing online content in a way that develops consumer awareness of the brand (Leibtag 2014, 18). It aims to bring the company or desired thing closer to potential stakeholders and individuals by producing content that interests or entertains them (Juholin 2017, 204). Content marketing aims to help the customer by making the purchase decision easier. It is successful if the content is so high quality that it arouses the target's interest, and the target does not need to be convinced in other ways. Content marketing suits companies that sell more services and knowledge than tangible goods. Since the target cannot hold the product, they must be convinced of the quality of the purchase with the help of text, pictures, or videos. Content marketing is not a quick campaign; it is a long-term activity. It is a method of operation that may be as essential for a company as product development or staff education and training. Content marketing can also be considered as an indirect form of marketing. (Kortesuo 2018, 171–172.)

The core of content marketing is to create marketing activities that make it possible to provide exciting and valuable content to the company's target group. It is an integral part of the company's marketing tools, primarily when it aims for expertise or opinion leadership in its field. The definition of content marketing is influencing a specific customer with carefully considered content in precisely the proper channels. The background of content marketing is always related to content strategy. It is like a vision of how strategic goals are implemented with content and what actions and plans can be used to achieve the desired goals. (Halonen 2019, 42.)

When planning content marketing, companies often focus on how they can produce content for their channels that interests potential customers by themselves or with the help of an advertising agency. One effective way to deliver content is to cooperate with influencers. In this case, sharing the content on the influencer's channels and simultaneously on the company's own channels is possible. The advantage of using influencers is that they can plan content that interests their audience, which will probably work well for this target group. It is easy because influencers know their followers and the latest trends in their field. They can also take advantage of the interaction with their followers and ask what content they want to see, hear, or consume next. In this way, the company does not necessarily have to plan content and campaigns because part of the planning process can be outsourced to influencers and their audience. (Halonen 2019, 42–43.)

### 2.4.3 Influencer PR

Influencer PR (also known as influencer relations) can be defined as a form of communication in which a company uses social media influencers in an intentional way to address them so that they perform activities that are strategically relevant to the company's objectives (Smith et al., 2023). In other words, it is continuously building and maintaining a personal relationship between a brand and an influencer. Influencer PR can be talked about when an organization tries to get its product or service visible in the influencer's channels without paying the influencers. The most significant difference between influencer marketing and influencer PR is that influencer marketing is paid advertising, and influencer PR is earned advertising. Influencer PR is based entirely on earned visibility. The company aims to get free visibility by utilizing influencer channels and trying to make influencers advocates of its brand. Influencer PR is entirely voluntary, and influencers have no duty to promote company products or services on their channels if they do not want to. (Halonen 2019, 155–156.)

On the other hand, paid and earned visibility are not wholly separate phenomena, as they can be related to each other. A paid cooperation with an influencer can also generate earned free visibility in the long term because the influencer gets to know the brand, its products, and the people representing it. In the best case, the influencer can become a loyal user and advocate of the brand. At the same time, the opportunity for free and earned visibility on the influencer's channels increases. (Halonen 2019, 155–156.)

From a company's point of view, influencer PR may involve a lot of risks. The reason is that companies cannot directly affect what kind of content the influencer publishes about the received product or service. The influencer may not always post anything, and this is ultimately allowed. Influencers can publish whatever they want about the received product or service. They can directly express if they do not like the product or service, which can give negative visibility to the company. (Halonen 2019, 155–156.) The following actions can be related to influencer PR:

- Invitations or public events are organized for the influencers.
- Newsletters and free product samples are sent to influencers without commitments such as advertising, etc.
- Building and maintaining personal relationships with influencers. (Halonen 2019, 38.)

#### 2.4.4 Brand ambassador

Brand ambassadors are used to promote and advocate a specific company's products or services in return for compensation (Barry 2015, 215–216). In other words, companies use brand ambassadors to promote their products and services. As the customer's age increases, brand ambassadors become more trusted sources of information. For this reason, many companies ask brand ambassadors to promote a positive customer experience in stores, websites, and events. (Horwitz n.d.)

A brand ambassador is a person who represents companies or products in a positive light and uses their personality to highlight the company's brand, values, and culture. Brand ambassadors usually have an excellent sense of human relations and strong communication skills. These extroverted individuals are enthusiastic about the brand they represent. The task of the brand ambassador is to arouse interest in the brand and build relationships with potential and current customers. Many companies use brand ambassadors to increase brand visibility and promote customer loyalty. Brand ambassadors can be utilized online or in real life and employed by the company or recruited as volunteers. (Nieminen 2022.)

Companies often sign a long-term and strategic cooperation agreement with the brand ambassador. This means that the brand ambassador is committed to the company's brand and

highlights the company's values regularly. (Indieplace 2023.) From the follower's point of view, long-term cooperation often seems more reliable than irregular and occasional publications, especially when the influencer and the brand are a genuine match (Halonen 2019, 116). Usually, brand ambassadors produce content related to the company on their social media channels, but brand ambassadors can also be utilized more widely in the company's marketing (Indieplace 2023). The contract between the brand ambassador and the company often includes a certain amount of content, publications, and event participation during the year, and the company is allowed to use the influencer's name and face extensively in its marketing and communication (Halonen 2019, 116).

Brand ambassadors can be roughly divided into two groups: those who get paid and the company's loyal customers. The company's employees can also act as brand ambassadors and are extremely useful in creating a positive employer image. (Indieplace 2023.)

A paid brand ambassador is an influencer with whom a cooperation agreement has been signed and receives a fee for this cooperation. A paid brand ambassador can be a well-known celebrity or, for example, a social media influencer who reaches a specific target group and shares the same values as the brand. These prominent influencers promote the brand to their engaged followers and connect the brand and the audience. This allows them to get feedback from their audience about the brand that might have been missed. (Indieplace 2023.)

Loyal customers have independently discovered and genuinely engaged with a brand or product. They like the brand so much that they want to recommend it to others, for example, by writing positive product reviews on the website or recommending the service to their friends. Brand ambassadors are not only influencers or celebrities; anyone passionate about a brand can be a brand ambassador. (Indieplace 2023.)

#### 2.4.5 Affiliate marketing

Affiliate marketing is online performance-based marketing (Folcan n.d.). It is a rapidly growing and one of the most cost-effective forms of digital marketing, where a company only pays for results (Yrityksenperustaminen.net n.d.). This low-cost form of marketing can yield good profits when done correctly (Hawkins 2019, 3).

Affiliates (also known as publishers) are websites, blogs, or other channel owners who share a company's ad to their website and direct visitors to the desired destination (Huttunen 2020). During this marketing process, the affiliate can earn a commission by marketing another person's or company's products. The simple idea is that the affiliate finds a product they like, promotes it, and earns a commission from each sale they make. Sales are made via affiliate links from one website to another, making it easier to follow sales results. Affiliate marketing is an effective way to increase sales and develop significant online revenue. It is a new way of marketing that is exceptionally reasonable to both brands and affiliate marketers. (Bigcommerce n.d.) This benefits everyone involved in the network, as affiliate marketing allows the collaborating parties to earn revenue without creating their products or services. Indeed, affiliate marketing is often an excellent way to add another source of income to websites that already have much traffic. Online stores are good examples where affiliate marketing is used. (Folcan n.d.)

The affiliate will be rewarded for the following results:

- CPS (Cost Per Sale). The affiliate receives a specific payment for each transaction through a link the affiliate shares.
- CPA (Cost Per Action). The affiliate gets paid when a planned action is implemented in an online store. These actions can be, for example, a contact request or a subscription to an email list.
- CPC (Cost Per Click). The affiliate receives payment when a customer clicks on an advertisement on the affiliate's page. In other words, each visitor brings a commission to the affiliate. (Folcan n.d.)

#### 2.4.6 Event activations

Event activation is a form of marketing that allows brands to create immersive experiences that enable them to connect directly with their customers (Neville 2023). It is about creating plans and strategies to create a memorable audience experience, and that is why it is also called experiential marketing. It can be anything from interactive installations and engaging social media content to on-site activities and live performances. Event activation adds value to an event and engages and persuades the audience. As a result, people talk about their experiences with each other and spread the word on social media channels, which is suitable for event organizers. (Turcanu n.d.) The idea of event activations is to enrich meetings, gatherings, campaigns, etc. One effective

way to do event activation is to work with influencers. This means cooperating with influencers who can increase brand awareness and build lasting relationships. When chosen correctly, the influencers make the event more credible, which increases sales afterwards. (Mara 2022.)

Events produced with influencers generate interest and mobilize the public. Social media influencers are the superstars of the 2010s and relevant live performers that people want to see and experience live. In this way, the familiar persona of the influencer is refined into a physical and tangible entity for the influencer's audience. An influencer's involvement makes the event's marketing communication more effective. The very presence of the influencer increases the media value of the event, as influencers behave like the media through their social media channels. Effective event activation with the influencer always starts with the customer's needs. The use of influencers in events has increased as the number of influencers has grown. From a company's perspective, it requires expertise in finding the right influencers for different occasions. (Haatainen 2023.) The advantage of live events is that they bring together influencers and followers in one place (Kanava. 2023).

Working with an influencer allows the event organizer to utilize the influencer's networks and reach new audiences. The idea is that these influencers will promote the event on social media and create a buzz around it, which will encourage public participation and engagement. (Turcanu n.d.) Influencers often run competitions on their channels, which is one way of promoting the event itself (Kanava. 2023). Influencers' recommendations for events are more than just recommendations; they are an extended version of personal advice that reaches a broader audience. Using influencers as referees enriches the brand and the event. It is vital to choose the right influencers, as influencers need to fit the event and the industry to have a relevant audience, or they will open a new target audience for the company. (Turcanu n.d.)

## 2.5 Laws, rules, and ethics in influencer marketing

### 2.5.1 Laws and rules

The Consumer Protection Act covers the recognizability of advertising. Consumers always have the right to know when they are being commercially influenced. This is why hidden advertising is prohibited. In practice, it means that advertisements and commercial collaborations must be

recognized as advertisements at first glance. The ban on hidden advertising applies to all advertising. Commercial partnerships on the influencer's channels must also be identified as advertisements at first glance. In social media, the ad must be marked with an advertising identifier. Every commercial content needs to be clearly labelled. It is the duty of both the company and the influencer to ensure that influencer marketing is legal and that no hidden advertising is practiced. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority 2019.)

The company is responsible for ensuring that the content published by influencers is lawful, even if the influencer is given free hands to disseminate and implement the content. This responsibility includes instructing the influencer, for example, that surreptitious advertising is not allowed. Secondly, the company should provide some advice on how to mark the ads in each channel properly and what they should be. Finally, it is essential to check that commercial content, such as marketing, is legal. (Somelaw n.d.)

Influencers themselves are also responsible for ensuring that marketing is legal as they significantly influence marketing, create the content, and decide what is published. Responsibility can also apply to an agency between the company and the influencer, such as a management or advertising agency. (Somelaw n.d.)

### 2.5.2 Ethics

Influencing happens everywhere all the time. It is difficult for consumers to say or recognize what is responsible for influencing and what is manipulation or otherwise ethically questionable influencing. (Lindblom 2023, 123.)

The difference between influencing and manipulation can be very subtle. Situations in which people are not necessarily aware that they are being influenced can arise in different ways in everyday life. It can be challenging to distinguish between influencer marketing and pure entertainment without commercial purposes. Even now, many social media platforms are essentially non-stop entertainment environments built for commercial purposes. The consumers who use them need to realize how extensive and, at the same time, well-targeted influence they are likely to be exposed to when spending time in these digital environments. (Lindblom 2023, 27, 123.)

At the same time, Lindblom (2023, 27) emphasizes that many consumers are aware and capable of interpreting the messages they receive and making independent decisions. Social media followers are mindful of advertising content (Elo 2018, 50–51). However, this does not mean that consumers cannot be influenced by, for example, misleading information or on an unconscious level. The situation may become particularly problematic if the means of influence are aimed at minors. (Lindblom 2023, 27.)

In the coming years, as digitalization accelerates and new types of business environments, social media channels, and applications become more common, the ethical questions related to influencing will become even more complex and, at the same time, more challenging to solve. (Lindblom, 2023, 123.)

## 2.6 Measuring and evaluating the success of influencer marketing

### 2.6.1 Measuring and evaluating

Measuring influencer marketing is a vital part of the marketing strategy to get the full impact of influencer marketing (Boulet 2023). Measuring the actual effectiveness of communication and marketing has always been difficult. The era of social media has made it even more challenging, even as data has multiplied and become more accessible. More data is available online than ever before, which could be expected to make it easier to measure. The problem is that this enormous amount of information is scattered because the number of producers has grown exponentially. In 2021, there were 3.8 billion social media users worldwide. Each generated more information, engaging in conversations while influencing other people's opinions. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 309–310.)

Measuring it is essential for a company to get the most out of influencer marketing (Boulet 2023). Effective influencer marketing always requires carefully set objectives, a clearly defined target audience, and a clear core message. When starting a cooperation, it is essential to agree on key performance indicators, such as how the partnership's value and return of investment will be calculated. At least as important as defining objectives and indicators is communicating them to all parties involved in the cooperation. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 311.)



The influencer must know whether the goal is to generate conversation, raise awareness, gather new ideas, increase sales, or drive online sales. To achieve the desired result, it is vital to discuss with the influencer what is expected of the cooperation and what it aims to achieve. In general, the influencers themselves know best what kind of approach will warm their audience, so it is vital to engage them in designing the right creative concept. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 311.)

Influencer marketing must include clear objectives and indicators. Influencer marketing objectives can be roughly divided into four categories, which are measured differently. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 312.)

When the aim is to increase reach and awareness, the indicators can include:

- The overall reach of the campaign
- Engagement, CPE (Cost per engagement)
- Number and quality of reactions and comments.
- Number of impressions and number of reads or listens.
- Earned media and media coverage, EMV (Estimated Media Value)
- Increase in the number of followers of own channels or newsletter subscribers.
- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Relevant and appropriate content and audience reached through advertising. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 312.)

When the aim is to change images and increase impact, the indicators can include:

- Engagement, number and quality of reactions, CPE (Cost Per Engagement)
- Number and tone of conversations
- Influencers' interest in the brand
- Polls on social media channels, number and quality of responses
- Draws, competitions, number of participants. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 312-313.)

When the aim is to measure the produced content, the indicators can include:

- Content in line with the brand and its amount
- The quality and usability of the content
- Time spent on content and its exploration
- Access rights and diversity of content
- Long-term usability of content and qualitative metrics. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 313.)

When the aim is to increase online sales and traffic, the indicators can include:

- Clicks or traffic, CPC (Cost Per Click), UTM link (Urchin Tracking Module)
- Affiliate links, use of promotional codes
- Euros/unit and customer retention
- Newsletter subscribers
- Growth in social media followers
- Received feedback, applications. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 313.)

The most important thing is that the indicators chosen by the company are linked to the business objectives. Some purposes may relate to the business's long-term success, while others may relate to short-term productivity. Companies operating in the digital markets typically set different types of objectives, such as sales objectives (sales in euros), brand objectives (brand awareness and brand image), and customer loyalty objectives (customer relationship management). It is vital to define the role of influencer marketing in achieving the company's business objectives and what kind of impact it is intended to have. It is essential to focus on quality rather than quantity when setting indicators. (Halonen 2019, 178.) The purpose is not to measure for the sake of measuring or reporting, but data is collected from marketing because it is needed and used tangibly. (Halonen 2019, 176).

Once the measurement is done and the results are known, they are analyzed to see how the objectives were met. At the same time, feedback is collected from all those involved in influencer marketing, and suggestions for improvement are considered for the future. The data and results need to be analyzed so that the analysis can be used to adapt and improve the business. (Halonen 2019, 176.)

### 2.6.2 The challenges of measurement and evaluation

The correct measurement defines the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Boulet 2023). The challenge in measuring influencer marketing is determining the impact of a single action on sales or results when a company is likely to be doing many different things and actions simultaneously. It is often impossible to fully isolate and measure the impact of a single marketing activity. Startups whose marketing consists solely of influencer cooperation may be exceptions. Potential customers have never heard of these companies or have not formed a strong image of them. (Halonen 2019, 195–196.)

Following the purchase path can often be challenging. The impact of influencer marketing can be slow, and customers may come across the company several times in different contexts and form an image of the company before making a final purchase decision. Purchases can be made online, in-store, directly from the company, or through a retailer, so it is often impossible to form a clear picture of the reasons behind each customer's purchase decision. This is the reason why the overall impact of influencer marketing related to sales can often be just an educated guess. With unique discount codes, it is possible to identify those who have made a purchase decision immediately. It is more difficult to find out, for example, how many people were convinced by a product but only bought it later after the discount code campaign had already ended. (Halonen 2019, 196.)

Some channels are more difficult to measure than others; sometimes, deciding what to measure in the first place can take time and effort. It may also be possible that the influencers themselves know the reach of their posts, but advertisers need help finding out. Although the influencer reports numbers to the advertiser as agreed, it can sometimes take time for the advertiser to estimate the achieved organic visibility through the influencers' channels. Context and relevance

also play an essential role. The content of the cooperation must be seen by the right people, in other words, potential customers. (Halonen 2019, 197–198.)

### 3 Research methodology and implementation

Research methods are like specific activities that are used to produce information. These specific activities can be, for example, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observation. Research methods make it possible to understand the research better and ensure that it comes from a valid source and that the data has been collected and analyzed correctly. (Greener 2008.) In this master's thesis, a qualitative research method has been used. Qualitative research methods usually have clear rules and can be used to study things that cannot be expressed by numbers (Greener 2008).

#### 3.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is appropriate when trying to understand and describe a new phenomenon. The purpose of this method is to find out what the phenomenon under study is all about. (Kananen 2014, 16.) It is like describing a phenomenon, understanding an act, or a theoretical interpretation between these two (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 85). Qualitative research comes into question when very little is known about a phenomenon or when there is insufficient information, theories, or research about it (Kananen 2010, 41). Qualitative research aims to gain an understanding of a phenomenon; in other words, it tries to answer the question, "What is this all about?" Qualitative research does not seek to generalize things as quantitative research does. (Kananen 2017, 32.) This research method allows a wide range of data to be collected from research subjects, individuals, groups, places, events, or organizations (Veal & Darcy 2014, 39).

A qualitative approach seeks to understand and provide a comprehensive and rich account of a few individuals' behavior, attitudes, or situations (Veal & Darcy 2014, 39). Qualitative research is used when there is no data, theories, models, or support for a phenomenon. In this case, qualitative research methods must first be used to determine the phenomenon, what factors make up the phenomenon, and the relationships between the factors. This is essential because the researcher wants to understand the phenomenon. Qualitative research provides an opportunity to get deep insight into a phenomenon. The purpose of the research results is to determine the depth of insight. Qualitative research focuses on a few observation units, which can be studied thoroughly using qualitative research methods. However, it does not allow for generalization. The results are only valid for the object of the study. Qualitative research always

provides the basis for new models and theories. It is a research method to develop valid theories and models in the real world. (Kananen 2017, 33.)

The importance of theory in qualitative research is obvious and, therefore, essential. When conducting research, the theory is also needed to understand methods, research ethics, and reliability and to create a context for the research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 23.) Qualitative research aims to obtain an overall picture or understanding of a phenomenon, after which a theory of the phenomenon can be developed, and its validity can be tested. A researcher may try to apply an existing theory to a new phenomenon and seek to extend the scope of the theory or generalization. (Kananen 2010, 41.)

The nature and pace of change in the sport business require organizations to understand the bigger picture to achieve strategic success (Zhang & Crabtree 2022). Sports organizations face challenges in finding different ways to attract millennials to events. This phenomenon has led to a situation in which it is essential to study trends and predict which phenomena will be widespread. (Sports Management Degree Guide n.d.) Influencer marketing is a modern way of marketing that offers new and effective solutions for marketers who are ready to think outside the box while building relationships with their target market (Kádeková & Holienčinová 2018). Some professional Finnish Hockey League organizations have already utilized influencers in their marketing, so this study aims to deepen the understanding of influencer marketing by an inductive qualitative research method. A qualitative research method was chosen because it often studies a phenomenon (Gupta & Awasthy 2015). At the same time, the qualitative research method provides more profound information on the researched phenomenon and expands the understanding of the utilization of influencers in the studied business context.

The qualitative method requires but also allows a flexible approach to the overall design and conduct of the study. It is a characteristic of qualitative research that it often has a recursive approach and a flexible relationship between the research elements. This means that the hypothesis is formed and developed as the research progresses, the data analysis and collection co-occur, and the theoretical framework evolves continuously as the process progresses. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 254.) In practice, these different elements of research are combined and evolve gradually as the research progresses. Qualitative research is a process in which the different stages

of the research process cannot necessarily be structured in advance into clear steps but emerge gradually as the research progresses. One explanation for the openness of this research approach is that the researcher's aim is usually to reach the subjects' perception of the phenomenon under study or to understand human behavior in a particular environment. With this approach, the researcher must be prepared to develop awareness as the research progresses and be ready for research redirection. (Valli 2018.) The research process of this thesis is described, and the flexibility of the process is illustrated in Figure 1. The theoretical framework of this study was supplemented after the interviews and during the analysis process.

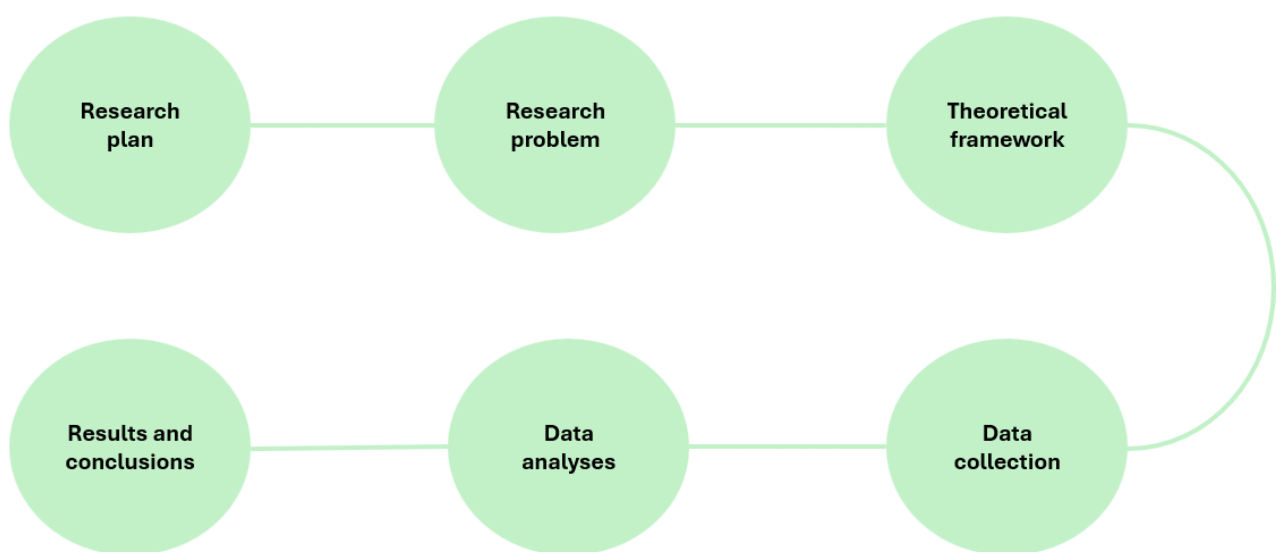


Figure 1. The research process.

### 3.2 Data collection

For academic research, data must be collected fairly and systematically (Greener 2008). Interviews are the most used data collection method in qualitative research. Many types of interviews can be classified as individual or group, depending on the number of participants. (Kananen 2017, 88.) Interview as a data collection method was chosen because this research aimed to understand more deeply the use of influencer marketing as part of the marketing strategy of Finnish professional ice hockey organizations. Information on the subject of the study can be collected through various types of interviews (Kananen 2017, 73). The data from studied professional Finnish ice hockey organizations in this research was collected using semi-structured interviews to study reasons and motives behind utilizing influencers in marketing.

An interview is an interaction between two people in which the interviewee gives the researcher a personal perception of the phenomenon under study. The researcher's skills determine what can be revealed about the interviewee. The researcher must build an atmosphere of trust from the beginning of the interview with a respectful, appreciative, and interested attitude. (Kananen 2017, 72.) This study built an atmosphere of trust from the start, as the researcher and the interviewees worked in the same business and knew each other beforehand. At the contact stage, all the interviewees were immediately interested in the presented research topic and were open for the interviews. At the same time, the study's objective, the method used, and the estimated interview duration were also communicated to the participants. The personal chemistry between the researcher and the interviewee starts to work from the first contact. The researcher has some idea of the subject, but through the interviews, the researcher confirms, changes, and expands this picture. (Kananen 2017, 73.)

In an interview situation, the researcher and the interviewee interact verbally. Interviews cannot be conducted by e-mail with questions, but the Internet offers technical solutions for face-to-face interviews. (Kananen 2017, 73.) As the interviewees lived in different parts of Finland, the interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams to save time and effort. Microsoft Teams enabled video and audio recording, which also influenced the choice of technical solution for the interview.

Before starting the interviews, this study included a decent planning and preparation phase. In the first stage, it was essential to familiarize myself with the literature related to the subject, which helped to form a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon under study. A comprehensive literature review provided a basis for a pre-understanding of the phenomenon and established themes for the interviews. The day before the scheduled interview, the researcher sent the questions by email to the interviewees so they could familiarize themselves with them in advance. The interview questions were intentionally sent only a day in advance so that the respondents would refrain from formulating answers and a genuine discussion could occur in the upcoming interview. This email also reminded the interviewees of the main objectives of this study again. All these actions strengthened the validity of the research's data collection phase.



A semi-structured interview is a conversation between two people on one topic at a time. The researcher plans the topics or themes to discuss with the interviewee. These themes are often very general and are formed by preconceptions of the phenomenon under study. (Kananen 2017, 88.) This research divided, the semi-structured interview into main themes: reasons, goals, role, actions, selection of influencers and cooperation, and measurement and budgeting. The theoretical framework of this research guided the themes, questions, and structure of the semi-structured interview. Respondents' insights and experiences of utilizing influencers in their marketing further influenced the semi-structured interview template.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher seeks to understand and share an understanding of the phenomenon under study, which always involves people and their actions. In the interview, the researcher tries to open up the phenomenon by asking thematic questions to gain more information from the interviewee. The interviewee's answers help the researcher understand the phenomenon better and provide opportunities to develop new questions on the subject. The researcher builds a comprehensive picture and understanding of the research subject through the responses during the analysis phase. (Kananen 2017, 90.)

Using interviews as a research method requires a common language between the researcher and the interviewee (Kananen 2017, 88). The interviews in this research were conducted in Finnish so that all participants could understand and answer the interview questions in their own language. In a semi-structured interview, the questions are the same for each interviewee, and the answers are not pre-determined, but the interviewees can answer in their own words (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2004, 47). In qualitative research, it is not possible to ask detailed questions when collecting data (Kananen 2017, 33).

It is relevant that participants related to the research are selected because of their expertise or experience with the phenomenon being studied (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 84-85). The study's selected and interviewed persons were from three professional Finnish hockey league organizations. A total of three people, one from each organization, took part in the interviews. All these selected organizations have used influencers in their marketing, and all these interviewed persons were part of the planning and organizing these influencers' use. All these interviewees represented the organization's perspective in the interview situations. As the researcher worked

in the same field, finding and choosing the right organizations to interview was easy. For academic research, it is essential to consider the target groups from which data will be collected (Greener 2018).

Remote interviews were scheduled by phone in September 2023, and all interviewees participated in the interview phase within a week of being contacted. These remote interviews were conducted during the same week via Microsoft Teams with video and audio recording. The interview duration was one hour to ensure enough time for open conversations and questions. The actual duration of the interviews varied from 25 minutes to 80 minutes. One interview was forced to split into two days due to the interviewee's will. There was so much discussion during that interview that the one-hour time limit needed to be increased. For scheduling reasons, this interview was continued the next day.

Before all the interviews began, interviewees were told that the interviews and analysis would be conducted anonymously and that it would not be possible to identify the organizations or interviewees from the collected and analyzed data. Interviewees were informed that the interviewer's current position in the commissioner company would not affect the study results and that all relevant discussions would be handled confidentially and only in the context of this study. At the same time, interviewees were told that they would have the right to see the study results once the master's thesis was completed.

It is crucial for academic research always to have a clear objective purpose (Greener 2008). The interviews started with a review of the research topic and objectives. After this, the interviewer hoped that respondents would answer the questions they were asked as honestly and extensively as possible. At the same time, the interviewer also highlighted that the research results could be utilized in the business and marketing of the respondent's company, if necessary. Furthermore, respondents were also emphasized that the recorded interviews would be destroyed after the research was published.

When designing questions, the researcher needs to consider how easily respondents will understand the questions (Greener 2008). These semi-structured interviews included seven main questions and two sub-questions. For academic research, the questions must be valid and fair and

relate to information needs (Greener 2008). In the big picture, the questions were designed to explore the purpose of influencer marketing in marketing the studied organizations. To build up this overall picture, it was essential to ask about the reasons and objectives for using influencer marketing, the role of influencer marketing, what actions have been taken, and why. For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, it was also essential to ask questions about selecting influencers' forms of cooperation and measuring and budgeting influencer marketing concerning other marketing.

### 3.3 Data analysis

For academic research, data must be analyzed systematically. The accuracy and quality of the analysis strongly influence whether or not the research results are valid. (Greener 2008.)

Qualitative data analysis aims to simplify and clarify the existing data and generate new information on the subject under study. The analysis summarizes the data so that clear and meaningful information emerges from the fragmented data. In other words, the information value of the data increases. For this purpose, different data analysis methods have been developed to handle different data types. (Taanila 2007.)

Many analysis methods can be used simultaneously in the same study, but not all can or should be combined. When talking about a novice researcher, the most important thing is to find and understand at least one way of analyzing the data that will lead to a finished study. Therefore, the researcher will always have to make choices and actively analyze and interpret the data. Some choices must be taken before the data are collected, but some choices become concrete when the researcher chooses how to analyze the collected data. (Valli 2018.) Analysis methods are used to extract the solution to the research problem or the answers to the research questions from the research data (Kananen 2017).

Analysis methods are linked to data collection methods and research approaches (Kananen 2017). In this research, the data was collected with semi-structured interviews, one of the most common methods used in qualitative research. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method, usually applied to texts such as interviews or transcripts. Through thematic analysis, the researcher carefully examines the data to find common themes such as topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly (Caulfield 2019). Thematic analysis is about finding themes in

the data that are relevant to the research problem. Thematic analysis is one of the methods used in qualitative research and can be considered a form of content analysis. (Tietoarkisto n.d.)

Before the actual analysis of the data can begin, the data must be prepared in a form that allows for analysis (Metsämuuronen 2006). In other words, the analysis of the data starts with the transcription of the data. The collected data is transcribed and decoded from the tapes onto a computer. There are several different types of transcription, and the choice between them depends on the analysis the researcher wants to do (Valli 2018). In this research, the interviews were audio and video recorded using Microsoft Teams. Three recorded interviews were transcribed word by word using the Microsoft Word program. After this, the researcher went through the transcribed interview materials very carefully several times, focusing only on reading. Then, the researcher removed extra words from the text, such as filler words and repetition of words that repeated precisely the same thing and had no effect on the answers. This way, the researcher could summarize the interview material into a more compact and explicit whole. The purpose was to reduce the data, which aims to summarize and chop the collected data into smaller parts so that the content irrelevant to the research is removed from the data (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018).

Thematic analysis involves chopping and grouping the data according to different themes. It is then possible to compare the presence of specific themes in the data. In its simplicity, the data are searched for perceptions that reflect a particular theme. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018.) When dealing with qualitative data, analysis always requires reading, so the researcher rereads the data to understand the content better (Kananen 2015). The researcher then chopped up and organized the interview material according to different themes. The data was divided into different headings based on the responses, representing different themes. This allowed for a more efficient analysis of the data collected. The interview was structured around predefined themes, which further simplified this phase. Some of these themes in the analysis phase were built on the research questions, but one new theme emerged directly from the data. Semi-structured thematic interviews are conducted on a thematic basis, but new themes may often emerge from the data (Tietoarkisto n.d.). In the thematic analysis process, the points or summaries of the interviews that connect to the theme are grouped under each theme (Kananen 2008). Under each theme, the researcher collected the parts corresponding to the research question. The researcher then

unpacked the data by highlighting related expressions and themes from the data under the themes. In the thematic analysis process, the research report often includes genuine textual citations from respondents (Kananen 2008). The researcher illustrated the themes with direct citations by grouping them under different themes in this study. At the same time, these emerging citations answered the research questions.

The themes aim to increase the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Kananen 2014). The aim is to find an answer to the research problem and the research question derived from it (Kananen 2015). Interpretations are used to reach conclusions. In this way, the researcher may end up in a situation where emerging themes are waiting for a comprehensive solution (Kananen 2014). Later, the observed data was used as research findings, which will be analyzed in more detail.

### 3.4 Validity and reliability of the research

The quality and trustworthiness of the research depend on the methods used and the care that has been adopted (Veal & Darcy 2014, 49). At this stage, two different dimensions emerge in this context: validity and reliability. Research must be able to be examined and assessed throughout the process. Good research is always valid and reliable and can withstand objections. (Salkind 2016, 99–100.)

**The validity** of a research means its ability to measure what it was intended to measure. Validity measures and evaluates whether the data presented in research correspond to the phenomena the researcher claims it represents. Validity is often divided into external and internal validity. Internal validity describes how well the data content reflects the phenomenon under research from the chosen perspective. From the qualitative research perspective, the amount of data per participant is essential for internal validity. It is called external validity when determining the generalizability or representativeness of research. It clarifies to what extent the results can be generalized to a population wider than the particular sample used in the research. The result always depends on external factors, such as selecting the sample members. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 49.)

Empirical research focuses mainly on people's behavior and attitudes, and the researcher depends on people's reports in the form of responses to questionnaire-based interviews and other forms of interviews. Sports research often faces challenges in this area because the instruments used often need to be completed, meaning that the validity of sports data cannot be as confident as in the natural sciences. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 49–50.)

**Reliability** is when the results are the same, even when the research is repeated later or with a different sample. In simple terms, reliability traditionally refers to the repeatability of a measurement. This model follows natural sciences. If experimental conditions are adequately controlled, a repetition of an experiment should include identical results wherever and whenever it is conducted. Similar questions will likely lead to different results in different places, even in the same country or region. The social and physical environment varies, so the sports researcher must be careful when making general theoretical statements based on empirical research. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 50.)

When generalizability is assessed using different measures, it can be noted that research results can often be very subjective, as responses are influenced by different factors such as time and place of interview, etc. (Veal & Darcy 2014, 50.) From a research point of view, it makes sense to consider that participants do not speak consistently in all situations; for example, language use and speech patterns are context-specific. When assessing reliability, it is essential to consider how the nature of the research and the subject may have influenced how respondents responded to the research. (Tietoarkisto n.d.)

However, it is essential to remember that the aim of qualitative research is not quantitative measurement but to understand and explain the phenomenon under research. From the point of view of reliability, the most crucial test of qualitative research is, therefore, its quality, and in fact, the concept of reliability is irrelevant in qualitative research. From the point of view of the reliability of qualitative research, a careful description of the whole research process and design is essential. This makes it possible to assess whether the researcher has followed the methods described in the research design. (Karihanse 2012.)

## 4 Findings

This part of the study outlines the findings from the interviews. To correctly answer the main research questions, what is the purpose of influencer marketing in professional Finnish ice hockey organizations? It was relevant to approach the topic through supplementary research questions divided into different sections. To answer the first supplementary research question, why do professional Finnish ice hockey organizations use influencers in their marketing, and the reasons, goals, and role of influencer marketing were explored. To answer the second supplementary research question, how professional Finnish ice hockey organizations have used influencers in their marketing, the respondents were asked about activities related to influencer marketing, the selection of influencers, and forms of cooperation. The third supplementary research questions aimed to determine how professional Finnish ice hockey organizations have measured the benefits and effectiveness of using influencers in their marketing, so it was essential to ask respondents how influencer marketing has been measured and budgeted. The answers were translated word for word from Finnish into English, and citations were utilized to enrich the answers. The interviewees in this research are named respondent 1 (R1), respondent 2 (R2), and respondent 3 (R3).

### 4.1 Reasons, goals, and role

#### 4.1.1 Reasons

The findings showed several reasons why professional Finnish ice hockey organizations use influencers in their marketing. The most significant finding, repeated in the interviewees' responses, was that using influencers is a modern and effective marketing method.

R1: *"It is kind of a new way of marketing that is effective simultaneously."*

R2: *"Modern influencer marketing can also be very effective."*

R3: *"Our organization uses influencers in marketing because, from our point of view, it is one of the most effective modern marketing tools."*

All the respondents said that influencer marketing is often expensive, but two emphasized it can also be done without significant financial investment, for example, through relationships. In these organizations, relationships have been vital in leveraging influencer marketing.

*R3: "We have done it because influencer marketing does not always require a huge financial investment. In this case, of course, it requires relationships. We have good relations with certain influencers, so using them has been natural."*

*R2: "Influencer marketing can also be very cost-effective if done correctly. We were lucky because we knew a local influencer who helped us to contact other influencers. Without this influencer's connections and input, the price tag of our event would have been too high, an obstacle to the whole event, so this link was vital."*

According to the findings, one respondent pointed out that influencer marketing is a trendy way to market, which is why it is used. Other companies' successful examples of influencer marketing in different contexts have inspired this organization to use influencers. Another respondent felt that influencer marketing is a phenomenon, and phenomena are often interesting, and people want to follow them, so it is worth using. The third respondent underlined that influencer marketing is still an underused form of marketing in the sport business environment, which is why their organization does it.

Only one respondent had personal experience with influencer marketing from a previous job, which was also mentioned as one of the reasons why their organization now uses this form of marketing. The use was supported by earlier experiences with influencer marketing, which were positive, and the respondent already had existing methods on how to use influencers in marketing. For one organization, the visibility through influencers was an essential factor. This organization strongly connected influencers to social media. One organization wanted to do charity work and used influencers in their marketing. Respondent felt that charity was essential for attracting influencers to cooperate with the organization. Another organization aimed to develop its brand image through influencer marketing. They even felt that they had succeeded in this goal.



#### 4.1.2 Goals

All the interviewed organizations saw the possibility of reaching new target groups as an essential goal for using influencer marketing. In this context, they wanted to reach and attract new customers to consume their main product, ice hockey. At the same time, all respondents highlighted young people as a new target group they wanted to reach through influencer marketing. According to the respondents, getting young people to attend games and get them excited about sports and sport events is essential. One respondent also mentioned that they tried to reach the families through influencers.

*R1: "We reached out to new target groups, especially young people, so they would come to the game to meet these influencers and then get excited to come to our games in the future."*

*R2: "We aim to use influencer marketing to reach new and young people and families. The aim is to familiarize these target groups with the arena and lower their threshold for returning to games and events."*

*R3: "We need to get young people interested in our product, get new people interested in the sport and events, and get our brand message forward to them."*

One respondent emphasized that influencer marketing aimed to improve the organization's marketing in general. This is strongly linked to the use of social media. From the perspective of two respondents, they used influencer marketing to reach people who do not usually attend ice hockey matches. One of these respondents added that they have also used influencer marketing to reach people not interested in ice hockey.

*R2: "Through influencer marketing, we can get those people into the arena who do not normally attend hockey games."*

*R3: "Influencer marketing was used to reach new people who do not attend our events or are not interested in hockey. We want certain people to come to our events through these influencers, so they bring other new people with them."*

### 4.1.3 Role

When exploring the role of influencer marketing in the marketing strategy of professional Finnish ice hockey organizations, very similar perceptions emerged from the interviews. All respondents highlighted the importance and effectiveness of influencer marketing but stated that more needs to be done. They even admitted that influencer marketing is still in its early stages or has yet to be done relatively rarely. All respondents agreed that its use should be better exploited and increased in their daily activities.

R1: *"Too little influencer marketing has been done and used in our organization, but luckily, we have finally become interested in it. I feel that we are perhaps even a little bit behind in its use compared to other organizations. We want to try and test it more and more in the future."*

R2: *"We are in the early stages of influencer marketing, but we are constantly thinking about how to utilize it better. This has been discussed in our organization, and we should use influencers much more in our marketing."*

R3: *"It is still quite small, but the role of influencer marketing in our marketing is growing constantly. We feel a huge potential exists, so we want to invest more. We also have good experience, so we want to continue, deepen, and increase it."*

According to the findings, one respondent even underlined the importance of influencer marketing, as they want to shape their brand image more youthfully through influencer marketing.

## 4.2 Activities, selection, and cooperation

### 4.2.1 Activities

The findings showed many ways to use influencers in marketing activities. The most significant finding, repeated in the interviewees' responses, was that these organizations have used influencers to enrich their traditional and daily marketing to attract the attention of different target groups. In these cases, influencers have appeared in different content on the organization's social media channels and websites. All the organizations were also united because they had

organized a meet and greet events with influencers but in different contexts. All the respondents agreed that meet and greet events have been popular and served their purpose.

Two organizations have invited influencers to match events to attract new people to the arena and increase content to the event itself. One of these organizations has systematically used influencers in pregame shows and during intermissions. One organization has organized a unique influencer event for ice hockey and charity. This event also aimed to attract new target groups to follow ice hockey and attend their matches in the future. Two organizations mentioned that by managing their cooperation well, they have even got visibility on the influencers' channels related to these events. One organization also mentioned that they required certain publications to be published on the influencers' channels.

All respondents mentioned that if their arena or city has hosted, for example, concerts, they have provided their team's jerseys to the performing artists in the hope that they will mention the clubs on their channels. One of the organizations said that if they are involved in organizing these concerts, they even ask the artists to promote the club. Only one respondent underlined that they have used influencers to promote sales, such as marketing the season tickets. One organization revealed that they have tried to activate their target audience through influencer marketing by organizing competitions on social media channels, where one lucky person gets to drop the opening puck in a match with an influencer.

Respondents highlighted players' use in marketing, as they are perceived as influencers in their field. All of them have used players in organizations' channels for general marketing as well as marketing their game days and fan merchandise. However, they all recognized that influencer marketing should be able to be utilized in such a way that players would share the content produced by the organization on their channels. The organizations can only require it if influencer marketing is defined in the players' contracts. One organization tries to activate players by providing them with pictures after each match so that they can share them on their channels and promote the organization. All respondents see massive potential in using players for influencer marketing, so they are trying to find ways to do this in the future.

#### 4.2.2 Selection

Different factors influenced the selection of influencers, but many similarities emerged in the responses. The first factor that all the respondents highlighted was that relationships influenced their influencer selection. All respondents had contacted influencers because someone in their organization had a link to that particular influencer. Another factor that all respondents considered important was that the influencer must have some connection to ice hockey. The responses showed that the ice hockey connection also makes cooperation more natural.

R1: *“One of our influencer marketing campaigns was born purely through relationships. Without these relationships, the campaign would not have been made, or the cooperation with the influencer in question would not have been possible. This influencer regularly followed ice hockey, making working together easier. We think it is vital that the influencer has a connection to ice hockey.”*

R2: *“This influencer was selected through relationships. When an influencer is interested in ice hockey, the cooperation can be quite organic and natural.”*

R3: *“Of course, some of it has been purely based on relationships when you know some influencer. It is always a big plus if one has some connection to ice hockey.”*

Two respondents considered localism an essential factor in choosing an influencer, while two underlined that the influencer must be sports-oriented. Two respondents felt that the influencer should have some connection or an interest in the city or the club. Two organizations do not see any value in using an influencer with no link to the club or the city. Two respondents mentioned a software (Boksi) allowing influencers to contact sports clubs. One organization has used this software to target specific audiences for their events. Another was planning to implement this software in the future. From the perspective of the two organizations, they needed to know that the content produced by influencers was not questionable or damaging to their brand. All three organizations have mostly chosen to work with social media influencers, but all have experience working with music influencers.

One respondent pointed out that they also used an influencer who was very popular and made many public appearances at that time. They felt that timing has an impact on the selection of influencers. For one organization, the choice of an influencer depends on the target group whose interest they want to arouse. In this case, the influencers suitable for the target group have been asked to cooperate. Only one respondent mentioned that the influencers' and the organization's values must align to make cooperation possible.

#### 4.2.3 Cooperation

When asked about the form and extent of cooperation, all respondents mentioned that the collaboration was of a campaign type and no written contracts had been made. The contracts have been agreed by discussing the nature and content of the cooperation with the influencers. One respondent continued their plans for long-term influencer cooperation, which requires written contracts. The responses showed that no organization had spent much money on collaboration. Two respondents pointed out they offered financial benefits to influencers at events in exchange for cooperation. Both mentioned hospitality services, catering, and fan merchandise as benefits. One organization said that they paid travel expenses to influencers for collaboration. According to one reply, they plan to use new software (Boksi) to leverage influencers in the future, which will cost them money.

All organizations had in common that they involved influencers in planning the cooperation from the beginning. This allowed them to plan the influencer's content and role in the event while expressing their wishes for what the influencer could do. At this planning stage, all organizations also asked the influencer if they could use the influencer's name in their marketing. Two responses mentioned that they did not require the influencer to promote the event, but in both cases, the influencers voluntarily promoted the events themselves through their channels. Another said that a price is involved if they demand something from an influencer. The same respondent believes that cooperation is more cost-effective and at least as beneficial when it is not defined and imposed. Only one organization defined the minimum amount influencers should publish on their channels. As it was a charity event, the organization could demand influencers to promote the common good. Two respondents highlighted that they only invited influencers to the event, believing this would also give them visibility in influencer channels. One respondent mentioned that the influencers were sports or hockey-oriented and wanted to cooperate without financial

compensation. Another respondent felt that without the charity angle, they would have had to hire the influencers they used at their event.

### 4.3 Measurement and budgeting

#### 4.3.1 Measurement

Two of the interviewed organizations admitted that their influencer marketing measurement needs to be completed or improved. Both respondents said that the impact of influencer marketing has only been measured on a gut feeling. Estimates have been made by comparing the number of spectators before and after influencer marketing. According to them, their events attracted more new target groups than usual. Both highlighted that this was only an estimation without facts. At the same time, both revealed they plan to measure influencer marketing in the future.

*R1: "In the future, it will be easier to get data and measure influencer marketing if we do a single social media campaign with an influencer whose task is to guide the customer to shop on our channels through a specific link."*

*R3: "The idea is that we can make this form of marketing much more measurable. We already have plans now. We will do influencer marketing by utilizing campaign codes in the future. This will guide us in the right direction and allow us to get the data."*

Only one organization said that they have been able to measure the results of influencer marketing at their event successfully. The respondent's opinion was that this was possible because they organized a completely separate influencer event. According to the respondent, the best measurement was that the event was sold out. They sold tickets for this influencer event using the same ticket system as their ice hockey matches. This gave them accurate data on all visitors and allowed them to compare the data with, for example, match attendance. According to the respondent, their organization used the data to identify its primary target audience successfully. Using the data, they could identify new customers who had yet to purchase tickets to the organization's events. From the respondent's point of view, it was also the advantage that they could use the same data to market their ice hockey matches. As a suggestion for improvement,

respondents pointed out that they could not measure how many of the spectators from this influencer event also started attending ice hockey matches in the future.

One organization has measured the impact of influencer marketing in terms of increased social media followers, number of likes on publications, and identification of social media followers' profiles. According to the respondent, this is explained by the fact that as soon as their brand appeared on the influencer's channels, there was an apparent increase in traffic, such as increased followers and likes on their posts. This organization stated that through influencer marketing, the interest in the club has increased in social media. Respondents underlined that they could not prove how much influencer marketing has increased attendance at ice hockey matches or increased fan merchandise sales. One organization has measured the impact of influencer marketing through a customer survey. In this survey, influencer marketing was only one aspect of the study.

#### 4.3.2 Budgeting

When asked about the influencer marketing budget, all respondents agreed that it is not currently budgeted separately in their organizations. One respondent said they have a so-called event budget that can be used for influencer marketing, for example. Another underlined that influencer marketing has been part of the marketing budget. Two respondents commonly stated that if influencer marketing wanted to be done systematically and effectively in the future, then a separate budget for influencer marketing would have to be earmarked for the marketing budget. According to one reply, digital marketing and the associated budget should be constantly increased, and that influencer marketing falls into this category. In another reply, the respondent revealed that the lack of a separate budget for influencer marketing has forced them to innovate and develop ways to do it as cost-effectively as possible.

## 5 Conclusions

This part of the study aims to analyze the research problem by examining the research questions using the theoretical framework used in this study. The research problem of this study was to find out how influencers can be utilized in marketing to promote the business for the commissioner company, JYP Jyväskylä Ltd. At the same time, this study aims to understand more deeply the use of influencer marketing as a part of a company's marketing strategy. The simple purpose of this part of the study is to find answers to the research questions. The findings of this study attempted to make it possible to answer the main research question: What is the purpose of influencer marketing in professional Finnish ice hockey organizations? To answer the main research question as well as possible, it was relevant to approach the topic through supplementary research questions, which were divided as follows:

1. Why do professional Finnish ice hockey organizations use influencers in their marketing?
2. How have professional Finnish ice hockey organizations used influencers in their marketing?
3. How have professional Finnish ice hockey organizations measured influencers' benefits and effectiveness in marketing?

### Reasons, goals, and role

The reasons, goals, and role of influencer marketing will be discussed to answer the first supplementary research question. According to various studies and surveys, influencer marketing is one of the most effective forms of marketing, growing exponentially (Lahtinen et al., 2023, 125). All the respondents agreed that influencer marketing is an effective and modern way to market nowadays, which is why it is used. Kananen (2019, 65) also points out that many studies have shown that influencer marketing is an effective form of marketing that achieves good results, which is why it is used often. Today, influencers have become a powerful marketing tool for companies and brands (Rundin & Colliander 2021).

All the interviewed organizations tried to reach new target groups by utilizing influencer marketing. According to Jaatinen and Kivinen (2021), influencer marketing is a very effective way



to reach a company's target group and influence their attitudes, knowledge, or purchasing behavior. Especially young people were identified as a new and vital target group that all the organizations wanted to reach. They recognized that young people follow many different influencers, so it makes sense to use influencers in marketing. Lindblom (2023, 24) mentioned that when influencer marketing correctly utilizes social media channels, it primarily reaches young people.

All the organizations involved in this study admitted that influencer marketing is an excellent addition to traditional marketing, allowing them to reach target groups that are only sometimes reached by traditional marketing. Many companies use influencer marketing because it is a relatively new marketing communication tool that allows them to reach large audiences (Ye et al., 2021). Influencer marketing offers a new channel for target marketing (Komulainen 2018, 227).

All the respondents also recognized the popularity of influencers in marketing and the business opportunity they offer. Influencers have become more common in marketing in various sectors, so their use is also justified in sports marketing. According to Geysler (2023), influencer marketing is a tool that helps brands improve recognition and promote sales.

### **Activities, selection, and cooperation**

To answer the second supplementary research question, the activities related to influencer marketing, the selection of influencers, and forms of cooperation will be concluded. According to Geysler (2023), influencer marketing is a mainstream form of online marketing that combines the new and old ways of marketing. All three organizations involved in this study have utilized influencers in different content on the organization's social media channels and websites. They have aimed to enrich their traditional and daily marketing by trying to attract the attention of different target groups. Kádeková & Holienčinová (2018) highlight that influencer marketing is an effective solution for marketers who are willing to think outside the box while building relationships with their target market. Influencer marketing provides different and eye-catching content compared to traditional marketing.

All the organizations have organized meet and greet events in different contexts by utilizing influencers. They agreed that these meet and greet events have been popular and very successful. This form of influencer marketing is called event activation, which aims to add value to an event and engage and persuade the audience (Turcanu n.d.). Two organizations have invited influencers to match events to attract new people to the arena and increase content to the event itself. When chosen correctly, the influencers make the event more credible, which increases sales afterwards (Mara 2022). The idea of event activations is to enrich meetings, gatherings, and campaigns by utilizing influencers (Turcanu n.d.). Two organizations mentioned that by managing their cooperation well, they have even got visibility on the influencers' channels related to these events. This is so-called influencer PR, where the company aims to get free visibility by utilizing influencer channels and trying to make influencers advocates of its brand. Influencer PR is based entirely on earned, not paid visibility. (Halonen 2019, 155–156.)

All the organizations mentioned that if their arena or city has hosted, for example, concerts, they have provided their team's jerseys to the performing artists in the hope that they will mention the clubs on their channels or appear in their jerseys. In this way, these organizations tried to turn influencers into brand ambassadors or rather a company's loyal customer. A brand ambassador is a person who represents companies or products in a positive light and uses their personality to highlight the company's brand, values, and culture (Nieminen 2022). As mentioned, the brand ambassadors can be divided into two groups: those who get paid and the company's loyal customers. Loyal customers like the brand so much that they are ready to recommend it to others, for example, by writing positive product reviews on the website or recommending the service to their friends. (Indieplace 2023.)

As Jaatinen and Kivinen (2021) determine, when a company does marketing, it always has a purpose. In influencer marketing, influential people cooperate with different companies to promote a specific company's strategic goal. Influencers must always know the goal of the cooperation and what things need to be considered. For that reason, it is vital for a company to engage the influencer already in the planning phase and to give them relatively free hands to act. (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021.) All the organizations involved influencers from the very beginning in the planning of the cooperation. In this way, they could plan together the content and the role of the influencer in the event while simultaneously expressing their wishes for what the influencer could

do. The success of influencer marketing requires setting goals and selecting the right metrics before starting the cooperation (Jaatinen & Kivinen 2021). Organizations also asked the influencers if they could use the influencer's name in their marketing.

Influencer marketing is an investment because the influencer always receives a reward for cooperation. This reward can be money, services, or other benefits such as gift cards, products, or trips abroad. (Kiuru 2022.) In this study, the organizations had yet to spend much money on cooperation, but they offered financial benefits to influencers in exchange for their cooperation. Hospitality services during the events, catering, fan merchandise, and travel expenses were mentioned as rewards. The nature of the sport business provides an opportunity to do influencer marketing cost-effectively.

All the organizations mentioned players as influencers, so they have used players in their overall marketing. Influencers can be bloggers, TikToks, YouTubers, Snapchatters, Instagrammers, e-athletes, artists, athletes, or politicians. Anyone can be an influencer, regardless of the number of followers. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 282.) They see huge potential in using players for influencer marketing, so they are trying to find ways to improve this in the future.

The selection of influencers plays a crucial role in getting the desired results from influencer marketing. It also defines the content of cooperation. Brands should pay attention to the influencer selection process and assess the suitability of each influencer for the planned marketing activity (Singh 2020). All organizations involved in this study used their existing relationships when selecting influencers. From their perspective, contacting and engaging influencers was easy because someone in their organization had a link to that particular influencer. According to Jaatinen and Kivinen (2021), finding the right influencer who fits the company's brand image and shares the same values is essential. Influencers must have followers and target groups similar to those of the company. The cooperation with the right influencer can help brands to grow (Roberts et al., 2023).

All respondents considered it important that the influencer must have some connection to ice hockey because it makes this cooperation more natural and effective. Localism, sports orientation, and connection in the city or the club were also identified as essential factors in the selection

process. They even felt cooperation is not helpful if an influencer has no link to the sport, club, or city. Successful influencer marketing is based on the values and thoughts shared by the influencer and the company and their interest in discussing the same topic (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 281).

Respondents also considered it crucial that the content produced by influencers is not questionable or does not damage the organizations' brand. When cooperating with the influencer, it is essential that this person has their audience on social media and desire to create and share professionally produced and high-quality content (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 282). In the end, followers self-select to follow influencers whose identity resonates with them (Leung et al., 2022).

All organizations have in common that they use primarily social media influencers and artists in their marketing. Digitalization and the growth of social media have changed the operating environment, and influencers have emerged in a new way. Nowadays, a person who can influence other people's thoughts, behavior, and attitudes can be called an influencer. (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 282.)

### **Measurement and budgeting**

To answer the third supplementary research question, the measurement and budgeting of influencer marketing will be concluded. It is often impossible to fully isolate and measure the impact of a single marketing activity (Halonen 2019, 195). Only one organization has successfully measured the benefits of influencer marketing by utilizing the gathered data. According to the respondent, the best measurement was that this separate influencer event sold out. Their advantage was that they could use the same ticket system for this event as for their ice hockey matches. This gave them accurate data on all visitors and allowed them to compare the data with, for example, match attendance. This data could be used to successfully identify their target audience and find new customers who had yet to purchase tickets to the organization's events. The same data also allowed the organization to use it in target marketing for their ice hockey matches. Proper measurement is crucial to the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Boulet 2023).

Learning to measure influencer marketing is essential if a company wants to get the full potential out of influencer marketing (Boulet 2023). Two organizations have based their impact measurements only on a gut feeling or an estimation without facts. They admitted that they have yet to find a way to measure these marketing efforts where influencers have been used. One organization has estimated the impact of influencer marketing in terms of increased social media followers, number of likes on publications, and identification of social media followers' profiles. This organization argued without a clear fact that as their brand appeared on the influencer's channels, the interest in the club increased in social media. According to Halonen (2019, 195), the challenge in measuring influencer marketing is determining the impact of a single action on sales or results when a company is likely to be doing many different things and actions simultaneously.

According to the respondents, influencer marketing measurement needs to be improved. As Boulet (2023) mentioned, measuring influencer marketing is a vital part of the marketing strategy to get the full impact of marketing efforts. Two organizations have planned their future influencer marketing campaigns to be measurable. Measurement is possible when influencers and their channels are correctly leveraged through campaign codes. With the help of codes, it is possible to get relevant data that can be used to measure the benefits of influencer marketing. When the aim is to increase online sales and traffic, the indicators can include, for example, affiliate links or the use of promotional codes (Lahti & Meretniemi 2022, 313).

Another area for future development highlighted by respondents was influencer marketing budgeting as a specific part of the marketing budget. All respondents agreed that influencer marketing is not currently budgeted separately in their organizations. Marketing plays a vital role in every business, but with a budget, it is easier to do marketing and measure its results. If marketing aims to achieve the desired results and increase turnover, marketers must have a sufficient budget. In the worst case, lacking a well-constructed budget causes significant marketing failures. (BusinessChat 2023.) Two organizations highlighted that if influencer marketing wanted to be done systematically and effectively in the future, then a separate budget for influencer marketing would have to be earmarked for the marketing budget. With a well-defined marketing budget, it is possible to set goals to drive the company and its business forward (BusinessChat 2023).

## Utilizing influencers in marketing

As this study shows, influencer marketing is an effective and modern method. It is a form of marketing that provides commissioner company JYP Jyväskylä with opportunities to reach new target groups such as young people. These target groups are not necessarily reached by traditional marketing. Marketing aims to attract the attention of different target groups. By utilizing influencers in marketing through different channels, commissioner company JYP Jyväskylä can enrich their traditional and daily marketing and attract the attention of different and wanted target groups. The event activations create added value to an event and engage and persuade the audience (Turcanu, n.d.). For example, utilizing influencers at meet and greet events in games or outside games is an effective way to attract and engage a new audience. Engaging influencers in the planning phase and setting out the cooperation objectives is vital when cooperating with influencers. By managing the cooperation well, getting free visibility on the influencers' channels is possible.

The selection of influencers plays a crucial role in getting the desired results from influencer marketing, so it is vital to pay attention to the influencer selection process. When selecting the influencer, they must connect to ice hockey, be local, sport-oriented, or at least have some connection to the city. The content produced by influencers cannot be questionable or does not damage the organization's brand. The most reliable and cost-effective way is to use relationships when selecting the influencer. Social media influencers and artists are natural influencers in this context. Using the organization's players in influencer marketing is helpful, but it needs to be used to its full potential. The desired situation is that influencer marketing can be used so that players share the organization's content on their channels. This is so-called influencer PR, where the organization aims to get free visibility by utilizing players' channels and trying to make players advocates of its brand (Halonen 2019, 156).

Measuring the benefits of influencer marketing is a vital part of the marketing strategy to get the full impact of marketing efforts (Boulet 2023). Creating a separate influencer event is the easiest way to measure the benefits of influencer marketing. If this is impossible, measurement can be done through campaign codes by utilizing influencers and their channels. This provides relevant data that can be used to measure the benefits of a single influencer marketing campaign. Although

influencer marketing does not always require a large amount of money, it is essential to budget for it as part of a company's marketing budget. When the marketing budget for influencer marketing is well-defined, it is possible to set goals to drive the commissioner company's business forward (BusinessChat 2023).

## 5.1 Discussion

This study explored how influencers can effectively be leveraged in marketing efforts to promote the commissioner company JYP Jyväskylä Ltd while providing valuable insights for other Finnish Hockey League organizations. Through qualitative research, the author sought to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and shed light on a topic overlooked in the Finnish sports field. The use of influencers in the marketing for Finnish professional ice hockey organizations has not been further researched in the Finnish sports context. This study aimed to offer relevant academic information and new insights for Finnish professional ice hockey organizations related to influencer marketing. The author sees that the data collection was successful, and the research results meet the research questions. The study's commissioner company can use this research to develop its operation. They can benefit from the results in multiple ways in their marketing.

The research process was started in April 2023 with a discussion with the commissioner company about their marketing development needs. The debate aimed to figure out the most exciting research topic regarding the marketing development of the sports business. After these discussions, the research topic was selected together with JYP Jyväskylä Ltd, who was able to agree on justified and relevant research content. The commissioner company was satisfied with the study proposal. The decision-making process was accelerated and facilitated by the fact that the researcher himself was working in the commissioner's company. The researcher's position as a development manager at JYP Jyväskylä Ltd may have affected the subjective view of the study. On the other hand, researcher's interest in the research subject and long sports marketing experience has helped to focus on a relevant research problem.

The theoretical framework for the study was formulated during the summer of 2023, and the interview frame was completed in the autumn of 2023 based on the theoretical framework. All three interviews were conducted one week at the end of September. The data collection phase was efficient because all three interviewees were interested in the presented research topic and

had experience with the phenomenon being studied. They also felt that the research would allow them to develop their own business and marketing in the future, making the interviews easier. As Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 84-85) mentioned, it is relevant that participants related to research are selected because of their expertise or experience of the studied phenomenon. As the researcher worked in the same field as the interviewees, finding and choosing the right people to interview was natural.

This study's theoretical framework used both international and national academic sources. National academic sources were in Finnish, the researcher's native language, and, therefore, were easier to understand and use in this context. The references in this research were from different types of reliable online scientific articles, international academic publications, and e-books from the JAMK online library called Janet Finna. Also, different websites and online newspaper articles were used in this study.

The research took longer than estimated, as the author worked simultaneously throughout the research process. The research implementation required careful planning to ensure that the study proceeded coherently. It was essential to divide the research process into different parts. Three interviews were the minimum number to ensure the reliability of the study, but also reasonable in terms of time. More selected interviewees could have enriched the findings and given more insights on this topic. However, the chosen interviewees created credibility for the findings as all the professional Finnish hockey league organizations they represented had used influencers in their marketing.

The conducted research indicated that influencer marketing is seen as a modern and effective way of marketing, and it offers many new dimensions for sports marketing. Influencer marketing in professional Finnish ice hockey organizations aims to enrich marketing to reach new target groups, especially young people. Influencer marketing can be used more effectively in the future when there is relevant information on the reasons and motives for its use and what kind of activations make sense to put into practice. It is also essential that results can be measured, and that influencer marketing is part of organizations' marketing budgets in the future. Players' use in influencer marketing still needs to be explored in terms of its potential. Finding and selecting the



right influencers is critical to getting the desired results from influencer marketing. An organization must define cooperation objectives and engage the influencer already in the planning phase.

## 5.2 Research ethics and reliability

Ethical behavior must always be considered in research, as in other areas of human activity. It is essential to consider ethical considerations in research, such as plagiarism and integrity in reporting results. When research impacts the physical environment, ethical issues increasingly arise. The principles of research ethics are universal because they are about honesty and respect for the rights of individuals and animals and the integrity of ecosystems (Veal & Darcy 2014, 105).

Research ethics is about ensuring the reliability of information and also about respecting the work of others. Basic ethical questions are about right and wrong, what principles should be followed, and what regulations should be observed. The code of ethics aims to protect the values the community holds as essential and promote the well-being and safety of the individual and the community. The result of the research is a public document that the reader and other parties must be able to trust. (Bister 2019, 62-63.)

Scientific research can only be ethically acceptable and reliable and its results credible if conducted according to good scientific practice (Kananen 2015, 125). This thesis has been written according to the ethical principles of the Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences. As Veal and Darcy (2014, 108) mention, ethical principles must be part of the research process, including design, data collection, data storage and handling, analysis and interpretation, and publication.

To ensure the reliability of the research, this study has tried to describe the whole research process as precisely as possible. This research process is structured according to qualitative research guidelines to understand better the phenomenon being studied. The research is designed and written logically to make the reading experience as fluent as possible. References to theoretical frameworks were made clearly and comprehensively, and the use of direct citations in the findings section is intended to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the study.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, form the findings, and answer the presented research questions as well as possible. The data collected from interviews

was first transcribed, and after this, it was chopped and divided into different headings based on the responses, representing different themes. This helped to ensure the credibility of the data collection phase. The collected research data have been stored and managed correctly during the whole research process to ensure the anonymity of the interviewed persons. The guidelines for qualitative research have presented the findings, which have been analyzed impartially. To achieve the study's objective, conclusions have been drawn by combining the theoretical framework and the study's findings.

At the contact stage, the research topic, the study's objective, the method to be used, the study's commissioner's company, and the estimated interview duration were presented to the participants. All these points were repeated at the beginning of the interviews. The day before the scheduled interview, the questions were emailed to the interviewees so they could familiarize themselves with the questions in advance. By doing this, it increased the credibility of this research. Interviews were successfully conducted remotely by using Microsoft Teams. Notably, a few interview questions were formulated too broadly, as all the respondents had to open up the questions in more detail with sub-questions to get richer answers.

Privacy and confidentiality were considered by selecting participants fairly and providing them with all necessary details related to the research process. Participation in this study was voluntary, and all participants were informed of it during the contact stage. Participants could withdraw from the study without causing any negative impacts. At the same time, they had full right not to answer proposed questions or to ask for the answer given to be deleted. Participants were also told that the study was completely anonymous. Connecting them to their true identities was impossible, and their data would be collected, analyzed, and reported correctly and anonymously. If respondents had any additional comments or questions about the research after the interviews, they could contact the study's author by email or phone.

The interviews in this study were selected based on proper research ethics. At the beginning of the interviews, the respondents were informed that the interviewer's position in the commissioner's company did not affect the results of this study. The data analysis, interpretation, and reporting required the interviewer to be honest and neutral during the research process to obtain trustworthy and relevant results. At the end of the interviews, the interviewees were told that this

study was planned to be published in spring 2024, and the author promised to send the published research to the participants. This can strengthen the trustworthiness of this study.

### 5.3 Proposal for future research

In future research, this study can be utilized as a guideline for a better understanding of using influencer marketing in a sport business context. Exploring and expanding this topic further would be relevant by interviewing all the Finnish professional ice hockey organizations. This would provide a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. It would be interesting to repeat this study in a few years to see whether the organizations that participated in the study have continued to use influencers in their marketing and what new perspectives have emerged. This conducted research can also be applied to various sports leagues. Another possible research angle would be to study this topic from the perspective of the influencers. It would be interesting to find out what kind of market influencers see in the sport business and what opportunities it offers them. As this study proved, influencer marketing is a modern way of marketing, and it offers tools to reach new target groups. In addition, influencer marketing has enormous potential if it is done correctly. Using the data and knowledge from this study, commissioner company JYP Jyvaskyla Ltd and other professional Finnish ice hockey organizations may develop and enrich their marketing in the future.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview

#### Syyt, tavoitteet ja rooli

1. Miksi organisaationne on käyttänyt vaikuttajia markkinoinnissa ja mitä sillä on tavoiteltu?
2. Mikä on vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin rooli ja tarkoitus organisaationne markkinointistrategiassa?

#### Toimenpiteet, vaikuttajien valinta ja yhteistyön muoto

3. Kuvaille millaisia markkinoinnin toimenpiteitä teillä on ollut, joissa vaikuttajia on käytetty?
  - Mitä kanavia on käytetty ja miksi juuri nämä tietyt kanavat?
4. Millä tavoin olette valinneet vaikuttajat ja miksi juuri nämä tietyt vaikuttajat?
  - Mikä pelaajien rooli on vaikuttajamarkkinoinnissa?
5. Minkälaisia sopimuksia vaikuttajien kanssa on tehty ja mitä yhteistyö on pitänyt sisällään?

#### Mittaaminen ja budjetointi

6. Millä tavoin vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin hyötyjä ja vaikutusta on arvioitu ja tuloksia mitattu?
7. Miten vaikuttajamarkkinointia on budjetoitu suhteessa muuhun markkinointiin tai miten sitä pitäisi budjetoida?