To the Next Level

Influence of Social Media on Sport Organisations' Brand and Relationship Management during Global Pandemic

Giancarlo Mancuso & Richard Amankwah Addo

June 2021

Abstract

Aim: The aim of the study is to investigate the influence of social media in building brand and relationship for sport organisations during a global pandemic.

Methodology: The methodology in this study is built on a qualitative method based on a inductive approach. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews when interviewing the sports organisations and fans. Furthermore, a content analysis was employed as it served the aim of the study best.

Findings & Conclusion: With regards to building the brand through the use of social media, findings showed that transparency, the history of the club and their image play a vital role in building a distinctive brand. With regards to building their relationship through the use of social media, findings showed that although efforts were made by the hockey clubs to interact and engage fans with various strategies, there was a lack of consistency in order to build their relationship with their fans. Thus, the findings of the study revealed that sport organisations have been able to build their brand as well as maintain their relationship with their fans during the global pandemic through the use of social media.

Contribution of the Study: The study has both theoretical contributions and practical contributions. With regards to the theoretical contribution, the study introduces a framework that focuses on what factors influences the effectiveness of social media (SM) use for sports organizations to build their brand and relationship with their fans. Also, to the practical contribution, consistency in interacting and engaging with customers on SM should be a top priority for sport organisations' relationship managers to build their relationship with fans on SM.

Reflections on the Study and Suggestions for Future Research: As the study has been limited to three hockey clubs from Swedish Hockey League, the scope of the study could be broadened in future research. Also, conducting a quantitative method is recommended for future research to determine the link between interaction and engagement.

Key Words: Relationship Building, Brand Building, Interaction, Engagement, Social Media, Sports Organisations

Acknowledgements

Table of Content

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

SM - Social Media

CRM - Customer Relationship Management

RM - Relationship Marketing

SCRM - Social Customer Relationship Management

SNS - Social Media Sites

Q & A – Questions and Answers

SHL – Swedish Hockey League

This page is intentionally left blank

1. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction, a background to the study is provided, followed by how sports is related to business. Also, the importance of this study is provided, clearly showing the aim of the study which will be achieved by answering two research questions. Finally, the disposition provides in brief how the remainder of this paper is presented.

1.1 Background

On Wednesday 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged the coronavirus outbreak was a pandemic even though it had already spread in Wuhan, China where it emerged. Subsequently, WHO identified it as COVID-19, which is caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Min, Zhang & Li, 2020). Even though this was not the first time the world has been hit by a pandemic, it is obviously the first time for almost everyone living in this generation. During the preliminary spread of the pandemic across the globe national governments and the international community effected a Lockdown to contain and control the spread of the virus (Giulianotti & Collison, 2020). This first step had an unexpected bearing on world sport, which caused almost a complete shutdown of sports clubs, events, tournaments and businesses, as well as the halting of all activities of the global sporting industry valued at over US$500 billion (Business Research Company, 2021). As of 18 February 2021, WHO confirmed that at least seven different vaccines across three platforms had been rolled out in countries, with priority given to Vulnerable populations in all countries for vaccination (WHO, 2021). Nevertheless, there are still restrictions where fans are not allowed to visit the stadium. Moreover, as sports in general have long been thought of as a valuable tool for fostering communication and building bridges between communities, the sport ecosystem has to find new and innovative solutions to engage with their fans (United Nations, 2020).

1.2 Social Media and Its Usage

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define SM as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Ever since its presence in the early 2000's, it has had a great control on people's lives including how they use the internet (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010). SM has from its origination been known to play a large part in the daily routine of its

users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and also a preferred means for online communication. The interactive nature of SM considering its ability to begin conversations among individuals and firms and also involve customers in content generation and value creation has thrilled practitioners with its potential to better serve customers and satisfy their needs (Sashi, 2012). Despite this, most firms and businesses esteem the use of SM, particularly social networking platforms, as immaterial to their business (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011). Nevertheless, SM platforms are collaborative, where users, including organizations "share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011, p. 241). Successful companies such as Microsoft have shown how SM can be exploited to promote brand presence and sporting organizations. That being said, sports organizations are beginning to know the benefits in engaging, and possibly developing, their fan base through innovative use of SM (Larkin & McKelvey, 2015).

Even though vaccines are being rolled out, there are still restrictions on social gathering which affects sports activities in terms of revenue generation and fans engagement. SM platforms and applications have become widely held across all industries, for different drives (Malik, Heyman-Schrum & Johri, 2019). This has assisted most sports clubs to use SM platforms for advertising, communication and brand building as well. Furthermore, as online engagement tends to display an active relationship with the brand (Santos, Correria, Biscaia & Pegoraro, 2019), sports organisations have used SM to improve their brand, promote sales, facilitate social networking and improve their fans' online experiences (Achen, 2019). Hockey clubs as part of the sports fraternity have also been affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic, where fans are unable to attend games. Fans have somehow adapted to this new development as hockey clubs try to engage their fans on SM when it comes to sharing live scores or even streaming live matches and providing updates concerning the club.

1.3 Sport and Business

With the sport industry being a highly complex industry, some may consider sport too much of a game to be a business and too much of a business to be a game (Hums, Barr & Gullion, 1999). However, the sport industry has over the past few decades experienced an astonishing growth (Morgan, Adair, Taylor & Hermens, 2014) and has never been as methodically commercialised as it is today (Liu, Zhang & Desbordes, 2017). As global

sport events like the Olympic games or the World Cup of soccer are capturing worldwide viewers, the sport industry has become a valuable platform for sport organisations and businesses to extend their reach for capturing new customers (Zhang, Kim, Mastromartino, Qian & Nauright, 2018). According to Liu *et al* (2018), the Gross Value Added (GVA) for the European Union is 1.76 percent on average in sport-related activities. Furthermore, the sport industry accounts for 1 percent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Laurell & Soderman, 2018). The revolutionary change of the sport industry throughout the past decades, has turned a game into a serious multi-billion dollar global business and into an established and sought after industry (Lui *et al., 2017*). Therefore, as the economic aspects are increasingly influencing decision making ((Ibid), the creation of customer relationship management activities are of great importance for sport organisation strategies (Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt, 2005). Against this background, it is no secret that the COVID-19 global pandemic has become a challenge to overcome for the sport industry. The revenues in the sport industry worldwide have nearly been reduced to half between the years 2019 and 2020 as a result of suspended seasons and cancelled sport events (Statista, 2021). It is therefore imperative for sport organisations to adapt to technological solutions to meet customer demands (Machado, Martins, Ferreira, Silva & Duarte, 2019).

1.4 Sport Brand and Relationship

With the importance fans place on the name, symbol, and context of their favourite sports organizations, practitioners and academics have paid close attention to sport brand management (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Brands are one of a company's most valuable intangible assets, serving a variety of purposes and act as identifiers for a company's products and services (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). With the concept of managing a team as a brand having become a prevalent model in the sport marketplace, many studies have built scales to calculate brand equity in a variety of sport settings over the last decade (Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado & Marôco, 2016). Additionally, sport organizations are utilizing SM channels to raise their brand values by assessing the interest of fans, players, sponsors, and other stakeholders all over the world (Kunkel & Biscaia 2020).

Digital, interactive, and social technology advancements are influencing not only the nature of customer-firm relationships, but also the firm's relationships with all of its stakeholders. As a result, conversations about the company, its brand, product and service

offerings, and customer service experience performance are now immediately open to a much greater number of stakeholders, whose relationship could be critical to the company's future success (Payne & Frow, 2017). Furthermore, SM platforms can help sport organizations develop their brands as part of a long-term relationship marketing strategy and as customer relationships grow, so does their loyalty, resulting in repeat business, increased profit and lower marketing costs (Thompson, Martin, Gee & Geurin, 2018).

1.5 Problematization

McGowan (2015) asserts that across all major SM platforms, there is a high level of interest in sports. With sports events having not been traditionally considered as "brands" within their own right, Bouchet, Doellman, Troilo and Walkup (2015) argues that sports events are now widely considered and managed as global "brands". Considering the interactive nature of SM, sport organizations seek to develop specific strategies to improve fan loyalty, develop strong consumer-brand relationships and ultimately build brand equity (Thompson *et al*, 2018). With Pronschinske, Groza and Walker (2012) highlighting the importance of communication, it was noted that interacting with fans and engaging in ongoing discussion on SM can positively impact customer relationships as well as brand equity. Unfortunately, there is a disparity between the level of engagement fans are looking for and what the clubs are providing on SM (McCarthy, Rowley, Jane Ashworth & Pioch, 2014). Especially when most of the research within the area of sports represents only one perspective, thus either the sports clubs or fans without taking into consideration the perspective of both sports clubs and their fans. Doubts as to whether the level of engagement between sports organization and fans has aided in building and maintaining their relationship during the COVID-19 global pandemic is unknown. Hence, a greater understanding of the motivations of sport organizations and fans for SM engagement in building brand and relationship is required (Stavros, Meng, Westberg & Farrelly, 2014).

Research into sport organizations' use of SM has revealed that it is often an underutilized brand management tool, with little evidence of its use to create or maintain a relationship dialogue with fans as well as brand building (Abeza and O'Reilly, 2014; Walden and Waters, 2015). In fact, even though research examining issues on engagement of sport consumers' extents nearly 30 years, Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa and Biscaia (2014) asserts that most studies have been developed offline and which are based on transactional

5

behaviours, while the few developed online does not consider a full set of behaviours and inspirations connected with SM engagement, which lacks theoretical depth (Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015). Filo et al. (2015) further argues that in the field of sports and SM, most research is based on gratification theories whilst a vibrant understanding of the engagement process enabled via SM is missing (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić, 2011; Filo et al., 2015).

With SM being an effective tool for sport organizations to engage and interact with fans (Meng, Stavros & Westberg, 2015), there is still a lack of evidence as to how SM affects its users through engagement. As emphasized by Yoshida et al. (2014), there is the need for contemporary research to delve into areas which seek to investigate whether the engagement process between SM and its users has aided in building brands or relationships especially during the COVID-19 global pandemic. This is because there is limited or no research to be found on relationship marketing and engagement by sports clubs on SM hence the need for this study to fill such a gap.

1.6 Aim

The aim of the study is to investigate the influence of social media in building brand and relationship with fans for sport organizations during a global pandemic. To address the aim of the study, the following research questions are formulated.

RQ1: How have sports organisations been able to use social media to build or develop their brand during the global pandemic?

RQ2: How has sports organisations been able to use social media to build and maintain their relationship with fans during the global pandemic?

1.7 Delimitation

The scope of the study is focused on how sports organizations build their relationship and brand through the use of SM. Even though the study considers sports organizations, the scope is only limited to three hockey clubs and their fans located in Sweden. To this end the study did not include other sports such as football in the study. Furthermore, since the study is grounded on theory of customer engagement researchers did not take into consideration other functions enabled by SM such as advertising. Moreover, due to COVID-19 restrictions, more hockey clubs and fans could not be selected as samples for the study.

1.8 Disposition

The study consists of six main chapters. Chapter 1 talks about the introduction of the subject area as well as justification for pursuing the study. It is followed by the theoretical discussion of the main theories used in the study in Chapter 2. The theoretical discussions end with a framework design based on the theories used. Chapter 3 provides detailed justification of why certain methods and techniques were used in the study. Also, validity and reliability of the study is discussed in this chapter as well as ethical issues considered prior to data collection. The empirical data collected for the study is presented in chapter 4 followed by the analysis of the data which is present in chapter 5. Conclusion of the study is presented in chapter 6, where answers to the research questions are provided as well as a general reflection of the study and suggestions for future research. Lastly, a reference list is provided together with other appendices.

2. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The main theory discussed in this chapter is customer engagement. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of customer relationship management and brand equity, followed by social media engagement and social media marketing, then relationship marketing. Moreover, there is a discussion of customer engagement cycle by Sashi (2012). Finally, a conceptual framework is developed from the theoretical discussion.

2.1 Customer Relationship Management

Payne & Frow (2009, p.11) defines CRM as "a cross-functional strategic approach concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate relationships with key customers and customer segments". Originally, the concept of CRM has its foundation from the theory of RM and is grounded from the assumption that building relationships with customers is the best way to retain them (Nyadzayo & Khajehazadeh, 2016). With RM and CRM often being categorised to be the same, it is necessary to understand the difference between the two concepts.

RM is a strategic approach that focuses on managing the relationships with all relevant stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers and other stakeholders, whereas CRM is a strategic approach that focuses solely on managing the relationships with customers by using appropriate technologies (Payne and Frow, 2017). Reinartz, Krafft and Hoyer (2004) empirically found that the implementation of CRM especially at the commencement and maintenance stage, will result in a better relationship maintenance as well as the initiation of relationship. Simply put, CRM is the approach of managing the whole relationship between an organisation and their customers, which includes all types of contact, interactive activities and communicational aspects with a purpose of building and maintaining successful long-term customer relationships (Nyadzayo & Khajehazadeh, 2016).

From a traditional point of view, the concept of CRM was mainly focused on gathering data about customers to promote sales and to use that information for the benefit of the organisation (Elena, 2016). However, since the arrival of social media technologies, earlier literature has not considered the importance of such innovations in CRM which ultimately has opened a new concept in a form of social customer relationship management. The focus of SCRM rests on customer engagement in a two-way interactive

relationship where customers are encouraged to participate in the co-creation process (Choudhury and Harrigan, 2014). Furthermore, since the introduction of SM, organisations are no longer considered to be in control of the relationship with their customers and instead, customers with their highly influential virtual networks are now driving the relationship (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Lastly, SM in the concept of SCRM gives organisations the possibility to communicate with various groups all around the world and to share and exchange information in an interactive approach and ultimately provides a prospect to engage with customers (Elena, 2016).

2.2 Brand Equity and Brand Association

The theory of brand equity first appeared in the 1980s and has since grown in importance as a strategic driver for assessing an organisation's long-term success (Yousaf, Gupta & Mishra, 2017). According to Budac and Baltador (2013), brand equity is considered to be a set of assets and liabilities which are categorised into brand loyalty, name recognition, perceived quality, brand association and relationships within the distribution channels. It is therefore essential for organisations to build a strong brand equity as brands are considered to be one of the most valuable assets (Yousaf et al. 2017). Furthermore, it is important to note that establishing brand equity depends highly on the customer's image of the brand (Koll & Von Wallpach, 2009). Thus, not only can the organization's practices influence brand association but rather both past and present external stimuli affects the customers association to a brand (Ibid). Eventually, the success of brand equity is often determined by how close customers' association themselves to a particular brand and how efficiently the brand identity is communicated to customers (Armstrong, Adam, Denize & Kotler, 2014).

For professional sports organisations, success on the field plays a vital role for the development of the brand and it is therefore crucial to establish a strong brand equity by creating a strong identity (Richeliue and Pons, 2006). Consequently, sports organisations have centred their marketing strategies around their brand with a purpose of establishing competitive advantages (Yousaf et al. 2017). A competitive advantage in the form of a strong brand equity depends on how well people identify themselves with a particular brand. An example of a strong brand association can be logos, marks, mascots, owners, players, coaches, stadiums and entertainment packages surrounding the game (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2014).

Furthermore, brand associations are differentiated by their distinctiveness, favourability and strength and should be present for brand equity to be high (Bauer et al. 2005). As Underwood, Bond and Baer (2001) asserts, the building of a sports brand is about promoting a distinctive sports brand, which involves brand associations leading to perceptions where the quality of the brand is greater and the levels of loyalty towards the brand are increased. The idea of a brand association is built on the concept of brand awareness where brand awareness is described by Aaker (1996) as an indication of the strength of a brand in the minds of consumers. Moreover, the strength of brand awareness is conveyed by the consumers´ capacity to recognise a brand under different circumstances and situations. The concept of a brand association is an important part of branding strategies of sport clubs since it can enhance brand equity in areas such as perceived quality and brand loyalty (Beech and Chadwick, 2007). Furthermore, the strength of association to a brand can be reached by providing fans with unceasing and relevant information flow through different media channels (Ibid).

2.3 Social Media Engagement

With the growth of SM having a new dynamic in marketing, SM platforms allow its users to engage in all-embracing brand-related activities (Hollebeek & Brodie, 2016). This ensures a dynamic, ever-present and often real-time communication between brands and consumers, as well as large-scale consumer-to-consumer interactions (Gensler, Völckner, Lui-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). Tsai & Men (2013) considers engagement to be relevant within communities on social networking sites, such as Facebook, through which many organizations allow consumers to engage with the brand and at the same time being able to share their doings within their social group.

In the field of sports marketing, fans are considered as widely varied groups, found in every socio-economic class and education level (Sandvoss, 2005). Moreover, the relational dimensions of the relationship between fans and their favourite club can be assessed by the rationality to pleasure, desires and self-identity with the club (Ibid). SM has offered fans a new landscape to engage with their favourite teams and clubs, while at the same time allows sport organizations to build up their fan relationships (Stavros et al., 2014). Williams and Chinn (2010), posits that within SM, customers become co-owners and co-creators of brands which includes club brands, empowering the building of brand reputation and image. Nevertheless, most clubs still scuffle with the problem of wanting

to have dominance over their brand, while at the same time building an engaging presence with their fan base (Filo *et al*., 2015). Furthermore, even though some views communicated by some fans on SM may not always be what sport managers want to hear, McCarthy et al. (2014) argues that clubs who fail to engage with their fans may be potentially limiting the opportunity for enhancing relationship bonds with their fan base.

2.4 Social Media Marketing

The development of SM technologies as well as the increase of SM usage, has caused a growing debate among scholars within the field of marketing (McCarthy *et al.,* 2014). As the influence of SM is rising, it is considered to have a distinct position from conventional media and communication methods (Filo *et al*., 2015). With the importance of SM being highlighted, social networking tools are offering a way for brands to engage with customers, build relationships and encourage brand initiatives. This in turn has directed companies to allocate a large amount of time and resource to drive engagement and develop relationships online (Ibid). However, to build relationships through the usage of SM, brands should engage with their customers in the co-creation process (Filo *et al*., 2015).

According to McCarty *et al.* (2014), sport organisations are well-positioned to benefit from SM as an engagement platform, given their current fan base and their level of sports enthusiasm. Additionally, fans participation in SM is considered to influence positively on brand equity and brand relationships (Achen, 2019), providing an important opportunity for organisations to increase the engagement with their fans (Santos *et al*., 2019). By applying SM marketing into their operation, sports organisations have a bigger opportunity to establish a connection with customers and fans online. This is supported by both Sashi (2012) and Filo *et al.* (2015), stating that the influence of SM is growing and has helped sports clubs to connect with their fans and other customers. As the end goal of SM marketing is to build and improve customer relationships, adopting a humanistic approach on SM could lead to a stronger customer brand relationship. Specifically, stronger brand relationships lead to financial efficiency, lower costs, higher retention rates, lower price sensitivity and increased brand loyalty (Achen, 2019).

2.5 Relationship Marketing

The theory of relationship marketing has initially been developed within the field of industrial marketing (Payne & Frow, 2017), as it was thought to be more useful and relevant in a Business-to-Business environment by practitioners and scholars (Wang, Head & Archer, 2000). Furthermore, since the retail sector has a large number of customers, the partnership between companies and individual customers has been deemed too expensive and time consuming for businesses. However, the importance of interacting and satisfying customers' needs has not gone unnoticed (Wang *et al.*, 2000), causing the concept of relationship marketing to grow in a rapid pace (Steinhoff *et al.*, 2018). The central idea in relationship marketing has been characterized as an approach that aims on building, developing and maintaining relationships between customers and organisations (Wang *et al.*, 2000; Achen, 2019) and is considered to be the pillar of many successful businesses (Payne & Frow, 2017).

Since 1990, online relationship marketing has expanded from basic e-commerce to include SM and online communities. In Addition, it was estimated that by the end of 2020, 85 percent of customers will manage their relationships without any physical contact and customers will instead seek a connection and a relationship with their company online. Consequently, organisations are working on building and maintaining online relationships with their customers (Steinhoff, Arli, Weaven & Kozlenkova, 2018).

While sports organisations find themselves in a service environment, it is considered advantageous for sport organisations to focus on building relationships with their customers rather than depend on conventional transaction-based marketing. Furthermore, Thompson *et al.* (2018) suggests that SM platforms empower sports organisations in building their brand as part of a long-term relationship marketing strategy. This is also supported by (Achen, 2019), stating that an essential aspect for sports organisations in building relationships is by engaging customers on SM platforms.

2.6 Customer Engagement

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2021), customer engagement is more of a strategy which involves the establishment of experiences that allow companies to build deeper and sustainable interactions between its customers or external stakeholders. Sashi (2012) suggests that the emphasis of customer engagement is on satisfying customers by providing greater value than rivals to build trust and commitment in long-term relationships. As Alhathal, Sharma and Kingshott (2019) posits, relationship marketing shows how important developing customer relationships is to improve brand awareness and long-term profitability. Considering the interactive nature of SM, the exchange of information between sports organizations and their fans permits the building of emotional bonds in relational exchange with them (Sashi, 2012). Whereas within the sports industry, the benefits of SM appear well appropriate to brand and relationship building with fans (Wallace, Wilson & Miloch, 2011). With customer engagement requiring the development of trust and commitment in a relationship especially between a buyer and seller (Ibid), Gladden and Funk (2002) affirms that fans (consumers) obtain and develop brand association through experience as a result of long term commitment.

Through the development of brand associations as a result of continuous engagement, fans build brand knowledge permitting them to willingly recognize a specific brand, which leads to a higher level of brand loyalty (Kaynak, Salman & Tatoglu, 2007; Ross, 2007). With many scholars recognizing the importance of relationships in the building of brands, Williams and Chinn (2010) indicates that as relationships with fans develop, so does their loyalty, which leads to repeat business, lower marketing costs and, eventually, increased profit. These various perspectives not only reflect what customer engagement is about, but also proposes that customer engagement as a process develops over the course of a relationship. This is based also on Brodie et al. (2011), finding that there is a positive impact of social media engagement in creating an affirmative mental outcome towards brands.

2.7 Customer Engagement Cycle

Sashi (2012) states that the process of building customer engagement consists of a customer engagement cycle to refer to awareness, consideration, inquiry, and retention stages. The concept of a customer engagement cycle depicts how organisations, and their customers interact with each other using SM. SM with its ability to assist relationships may help understand the potential of both the marketing concept and relationship marketing by providing the needed tools to better satisfy customers and build customer engagement (Sashi, 2012). The various stages of the customer engagement cycle propounded by Sashi (2012) are connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement as portrayed in Fig. 1 below.
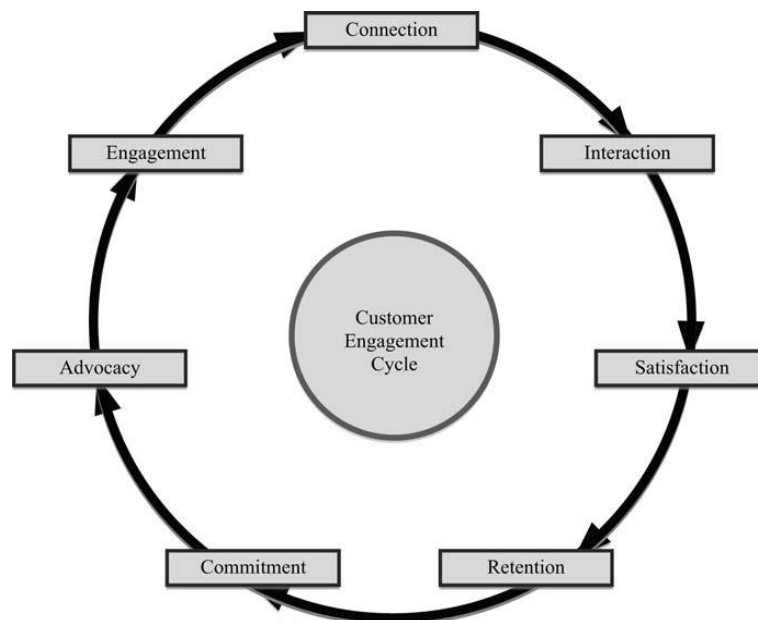
Figure 1 Customer Engagement Cycle by Sashi (2012, p.261)

2.7.1 Connection

With connection being a prerequisite for establishing relational exchange with emotional bonds (Sashi, 2012), SM has helped in establishing connection with sports clubs and their fans (Customers). These connections can either be initiated by fans or the sports club (Brodie et al., 2011) however, it is considered that on SM platforms the establishment of connection is initiated by the fans. The connection to a particular brand does not only add value to the brand but also leads to stronger performance and loyalty to the brand (Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009). The brand attachment of customers is highly associated with

14

brand personality because it is what customers often get attached to (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011). Most sports fans connect to their favourite sports club by following them on all SM platforms with the aim of getting updated with news concerning the activities of the club.

These connections show a deep association to the club and its brand. The strong existence of these associations in the events' posts is vital since brand-building benefits related to strategic exposure of positive brand associations include building a positive fan perception and development of loyalty in brand preference (Ross, Russell & Bang, 2008). These are vital in order to increase brand loyalty and develop long-term relationships with fans (Gladden, 2014). Given the short-lived nature of sports events, it will be of relative importance if brands continue to use content containing brand associations during this time period to ensure fans and followers develop and build their brand knowledge outside of the event period (Thompson *et al*., 2018). Wallace et al. (2011) noted that strategies centred on agenda-setting of particular brand connection were evident in SM content, contributing unique opportunities to manage a favourable public opinion which might ultimately influence fan satisfaction with the brand. Research suggests that marketing also leads to a strengthened brand connection, which ultimately aids in brand-building endeavours (Thompson *et al*., 2018). As a connection has been established through the usage of SM, sports organisations have the possibility to interact with their customers and fans which can make it possible for sports organisations to improve their brand. This is supported by both Thompson *et al.* (2018) and Achen (2019) stating that the usage of SM platforms empowers sports organisations in their brand growth as part of a long-term customer relationship marketing strategy.

2.7.2 Interaction

First when a customer has been connected to a brand then can interaction take place and the internet has made it possible for customers to interact in real time with their brand. The interaction between a sports club and their fans can enhance the understanding of customers' needs and how to satisfy their needs in a better way (Sashi, 2012). The environment of SM has transformed consumer-brand interactions (Machado *et al.,* 2020) which makes it possible for sport clubs to promote sales, enhance the fans' online experiences, improve the brand and boost social interactions (Achen, 2019). The interaction part plays a vital role in contributing to successful customer relations (Alhathal

et al., 2019) and has been defined by scholars as a core element of the relationship marketing process (Stavros *et al.,* 2014). According to Santos *et al.* (2019), the interaction experience of a customer in virtual environments such as SM platforms, is considered to be as important as a customer's offline experience with a brand. Furthermore, by continuously interacting with their customers and in conjunction with customers, brands have the possibility to connect to a wider audience and thereby stimulate cross-selling opportunities (Machado *et al.,* 2020). Consequently, by interacting with customers and fans through SM platforms is considered to be an important aspect for brands and building relationships (Thompson *et al.,* 2018).

2.7.3 Satisfaction

Sashi (2012) asserts that customers will stay with a particular brand only if the interaction between them is satisfactory. Sashi (2012) further posits that one of the factors associated with loyalty is satisfaction with the interaction whereas displeasure has an influence to disrupt the process of purchasing and customers give up with the firms. Mittal and Kamakura (2001), perceives satisfaction as not an end in itself as the use of customer satisfaction surveys and ratings sometimes suggests a transitional step in strategies to achieve the ultimate goals of an organization. Although it has been argued that the aim of marketing is not satisfaction but rather customer empowerment, satisfaction is seen as a necessary condition for customer engagement but not sufficient for customer engagement (Firat and Dholakia, 2006). Thompson *et al.* (2018) affirms that for sport organizations to develop their relationship with their fans, there is the need to find avenues to understand them and their needs. Nevertheless, the use of SM and understanding the scope thereof facilitates the possibility to expand an integrated marketing and management style that can help build a relationship with fans through satisfaction of their needs (Thompson et al., 2018).

2.7.4 Retention

According to Sashi (2012), customer retention can result from overall satisfaction over time as a result of repurchases which implies a long-term relationship between seller and customer. Sashi (2012) further argues that it is quite unclear whether commitment leads to retention, instead it is possible retention gives rise to commitment. In a study of the effects of customer satisfaction and commitment on customer retention, it was evident that customer satisfaction had a positive effect on retention, whilst commitment did not

16

have an effect on retention (Gustafsson, Johnson & Roos, 2005). With Relationship building considered a vital part of brand management (Gladden, 2014), Thompson *et al*. (2018) concluded in their study that as a result of long term commitment, sports organizations appear to be using SM to initiate and maintain relationships with consumers. This being said, it is quite unclear whether these long term commitments by fans to sports clubs have been affected as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic leading to social gathering restrictions. With relationship quality found to improve under conditions of high-uncertainty (Cannon, Doney, Mullen & Petersen, 2010), the emergence of a global pandemic begs the question "Have organizations been able to retain their customers or not as a result of the pandemic".

2.7.5 Commitment

According to Sashi (2012), commitment plays a vital role for establishing long-term relationships with customers and there are considered to be two types of commitment, affective commitment and calculative commitment. The latter one of the two commitments occurs when there is a lack of other choices, and the commitment is considered to be rational. Affective commitment is the consequence of trust in a relationship and is based more on emotions of a customer (Ibid). As fans tend to be lifetime supporters of a brand and are unlikely to change brands, sport fans are considered to have an affective commitment towards a club due to the emotional involvement (Machado *et al.,* 2020). Additionally, with sports fans and supporters having a high level of commitment, sports brands are in an advantaged position to build strong and lasting relationships with individuals (Ibid). However, even though commitment is being associated with sports fan attitudes and behaviours (McCarthy *et al.,* 2014), brands are still in need to maintain and nurture the relationship with their fans in order to ensure customer loyalty and commitment (Alhathal *et al.,* 2019).

2.7.6 Advocacy

Advocacy constitutes the degree to which consumers communicate positive information about a product, brand or company to others and is considered to be a special case of word of mouth (Sashi, Brynildsen & Bilgihan, 2019). However, customers are only becoming advocates for a brand, product or company if they have developed emotional bonds and are considered to be loyal customers in a long-term relationship (Sashi, 2012). With SM opening up a new world of opportunities in engaging with customers and building

relationships, brand advocacy refers to a consumer's willingness to talk about the brand and promote it to others (Pourazad, Stocchi & Pare, 2019). As brand advocates are typically highly involved with the brand (Ibid), they tend to be less sensitive to bad performances, more loyal to the sports brand and considered as an important asset for innovation (Machado *et al.,* 2020). Furthermore, as much as advocates are willing to promote the company, brand or product to new customers, they are also as much inclined to defend the company from other critiques (Sashi *et al.,* 2019). Thus, brand advocates are considered to play a vital role for a brand, product or company as the future of the brand is important to them (Machado *et al.,* 2020).

2.7.7 Engagement

With the importance of establishing an interaction between customers and an organisation, customer engagement has gotten an increased amount of attention by scholars in the management literature (Santos *et al.,* 2019). According to Sashi (2012), engaged customers become partners who collaborate in the value adding process and occur when buyers have a strong emotional bond with a brand or an organisation. With social networking sites (SNSs) playing a central role in branding activities and in customer engagement (Machado *et al.,* 2020; Santos *et al.,* 2019), sport organisations are considered to be in a perfect position to benefit from SM as an engagement platform (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Due to the possibilities of SM, sport fans have changed the way in which they engage with sport teams, athletes and other fans, directing sport clubs to invest considerable amounts of time and resources into online engagement (Ibid). As sport clubs are establishing their presence on SM and by engaging more frequently with their fans contributes to an increased consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, by continuously interacting and engaging with customers through SM gives sport organisations the ability to build upon their existing relationship and moreover has an impact on the consumption habits of sports fans (Thompson *et al.,* 2018).

2.8 Theoretical Framework

In summary, it has become clear throughout the theoretical discussion that the usage of SM can provide sports organisations an avenue to positively influence their brand and their relationships with fans. Nevertheless, prior research has indicated that sports organisations in general are not exploiting the full potential of SM as a brand and relationship management tool (Abeza and O'Reilly, 2014; Waters, 2015).

Based on the concepts of customer engagement outlined in the literature and theories above, it can be noted that relationships and brands can be built using social networking sites. This being said, Filo *et al*. (2015), perceives engagement as a process hence categorizes engagement under three dimensions; thus, minimum, mid and highest level of engagement. The minimum level of engagement is associated with the viewing of brand-related posts, reading reviews of post without actively participating with the brand (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2016), whiles the mid-level of engagement covers interactions with others or the brand in the form of liking content, sharing or commenting and to a large extent, making consumers brand endorsers (Ibid). Lastly, the highest level of engagement constitutes producing and publishing brand-related content with consumers which includes posting reviews, uploading photos and using hashtags (Ibid). The content generated by consumers may be a motivation for further consumption or contribution by peers (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). It is based on these three dimensions of engagement that shows whether relationship and brand are built and maintained (Filo *et al*., 2015).

It is on this concept that researchers were able to develop their theoretical framework. In Fig. 2 below, three main concepts are present in the framework which represent relationship marketing, relationship building and customer relationship management. Firstly, under the concept of relationship marketing, SM marketing is adopted since it falls with the scope of the study. Secondly, under the concept of relationship building, theoretical discussion shows that to successfully build relationships there has to be enough interaction and engagement which will lead to commitment. The level of engagement needed for relationship building is mid-level engagement (Filo *et al*., 2015). Hence once enough commitment is shown by the customer, the relationship is easily maintained as a result of customer retention. Lastly, even though the factors that lead to relationship building helps in brand building as well (Thompson *et al*., 2018), there has to be enough satisfaction and advocacy from consumers which will eventually lead to

19

brand association. Furthermore, the highest level of engagement can lead to successful brand building (Filo *et al*., 2015).

In general, Fig.2 below shows how SM can be used to build and maintain relationships as well as brands. Moreover, different variables that affect the tendency to build a brand or relationship on SM are also presented in Fig.2. This also depicts how customers are involved in the process of brand and relationship building. Also, building relationships and brand on SM requires a good level of customer relationship management to ensure that relationships built are strongly maintained. Concluding, the concept behind the conceptual framework is to assist and improve the understanding of the processes involved in building a brand and relationship in an online environment.

Figure 2 Framework of links between relationship marketing to brand and relationship building and maintenance
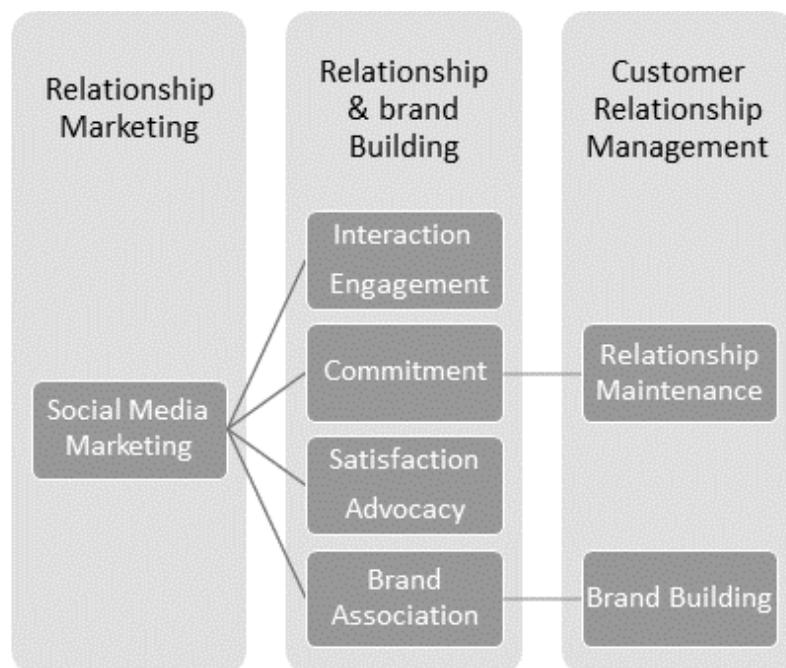
Source: Own Construct

3. METHODOLOGY

The overall aim of this chapter is to present readers how the study has been carried out as well as the basis for choosing methods. In general, this chapter presents detailed information on how empirical data has been collected and analysed as well as various research techniques implemented during the research to enhance validity and reliability.

3.1 Philosophical Stance

With both Ontology and Epistemology making the central debate among philosophers, Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe and Valizade (2018) considers ontology as the nature of reality and existence whilst epistemology talks about the theory of knowledge which helps researchers to recognize best ways of exploring a phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, different ontological and epistemological assumptions are drawn to develop the methodologies employed, in order to increase the quality of the study (Ibid).

3.1.1 Ontology

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), there are four ontological positions namely realism, internal realism, relativism and normalism with the main debate between realism and relativism. In realism, philosophers assume that the physical and social world exist independently of any observation made about them by researchers (Ibid), while relative philosophers also assume that a phenomena depends on the perspectives from which researchers observe them (Ibid). For the purpose of the subject being studied, the researchers assume the relative ontological viewpoint since our study seeks to investigate the influence of SM in building brand and relationship. The researcher assumed the relative ontological position because the subject matter being studied is well-known to be of a subjective nature. This assumption is based on Moalusi (2020) claim that researchers can base their study on an ontological view if the subject matter under study is of objective nature or subjective nature. Practically, this study is said to be subjective in nature especially when empirical data from the sports clubs are somehow measured by empirical data from their fans. To this effect since the impact of SM in business strategies has been identified by researchers (e.g., Boyd, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005) to be relative especially its usage and expected outcome depending on human cognition. The study sought from the research participants how they use SM and how well it has been of help to them.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Taking into consideration the various philosophical assumptions as to what constitutes knowledge, Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), categorize these assumptions under either positivism or social constructionism and as such both having a methodological implication. With these assumptions suggesting how researchers produce, obtain, and transfer knowledge in the course of their study, the epistemological stance of this study seeks philosophical backing which validates information that is considered to be valid and reliable. (Sumner and Tribe, 2004). With Positivism seeking to ask questions that can be quantified taking into consideration large numbers (Berryman, 2019), social constructionism aims to increase the general understanding of a situation taking into consideration small numbers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, taking into consideration the methodological implications of epistemology, the study assumes the position of the social constructionist epistemology. The study seeks to occupy participants of the interview in a frame of reference so as to understand their level of subjectivity to the subject area. Also taking into consideration the population of study, thus sports clubs and their fans, the social constructionism viewpoint makes empirical data collected from sports fans more relevant for the study. Moreover, the social constructionism viewpoint supports the research method being employed in the study thus qualitative (Ibid). As such, social constructionist epistemology provided the required level of credibility to validate and justify answers to the research questions especially when two viewpoints are being represented in the study.

3.2 Research Approach

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), there are three different research approaches that can be adopted by the researchers to achieve the purpose of a study and these research approaches are deductive, inductive and abductive. The deductive research approach refers to the process of rationally developing a specific case using general premises or previously existing knowledge (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2010). Furthermore, the deductive research approach is a theory testing method that begins with a known theory or generalisation and seeks to see if the theory holds true in specific situations (Spens & Kovács, 2005). The inductive research approach involves working solely on the basis of the participants' experiences, which ultimately leads the analysis (Azungah, 2018). Moreover, the inductive analysis refers to approaches that develop concepts and themes primarily from thorough readings of raw data (Thomas, 2006).

Lastly, the abductive research approach can be considered to be a combination of the deductive and inductive approaches (Saunders et al. 2012). By adopting an abductive research approach, the researchers are drawn to imaginative theories about interesting findings and subsequently return to the field to test the assumptions (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Taking into consideration the three main research approaches thus deductive, inductive and abductive, and with Spens and Kovacs (2005) arguing that both inductive and deductive approaches are used to obtain knowledge in modern research, the study employs an inductive research approach. As the inductive research approach is considered to deal mainly with qualitative data, the collection of data allows for multiple perspectives on occurrences (Saunders et al. 2012). Also, the inductive research approach is used to develop new theories or revise existing ones (Ibid). Furthermore, the discoveries arise directly from the analysis of the raw data and not from a priori beliefs or models, even though the results are influenced by the questions outlined by the researchers (Thomas, 2006). Thus, with careful consideration of the aim of the study, an inductive research approach is considered suitable since the study seeks to extend the knowledge of customer engagement on brands and relationships.

3.3 Research Method

The three main research methods commonly used by researchers are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2014, p.32) "Quantitative research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analysed using statistical procedures". Qualitative research is also defined by Creswell (2014, p.32) as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem", whilst a mixed method is "an approach to an inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks". A mixed method on the other hand can be seen as a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

To answer the research questions and thus achieving the aim of this study, the researchers employed a qualitative research approach. The choice to adopt a qualitative approach is inspired by Creswell (2014), who contends that a qualitative research approach helps

researchers obtain detailed views from participants. By employing a qualitative method, researchers were very much expected to ascertain a detailed description of the thoughts and experiences of the participants involved in the study (Denzin, 1989). Moreover, using a qualitative method helped the researchers get closer to the subject studied, giving us a narrative in order to have a detailed insight (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Researchers conducted a qualitative interview so as to analyse how fans understand and perceive the clubs' relationship with them on SM during the pandemic whilst interviewing three sports organisations from the SHL to find out the general strategies and communication measures put in place during the pandemic on SM. This was in line with Saunders *et al.* (2012) assertion that from a pragmatic perspective, there is no single point of view. In general, using a qualitative method enhanced both validity and reliability of the study since the collection of data was from both the perspective of the sport organizations and their fans.

3.4 Operationalization

Most of the interview questions were derived from the theory and literature used in the theoretical framework with only a few questions asked to get a general overview. Both interview questions to the fans as well as the club were based on the theories used which covered all aspects of the study. In table 1 and table 2 below is the operationalization table linking with themes and theories and follow up questions that were used during the interviews can be found in the appendix 3.

Table 1 - **Operationalization of Interview Questions Link with Themes and Theories (Hockey Clubs)**

Q.N	Questions	Theoretical Reference	Themes	Link to R.Q
3	Do you consider that the pandemic has affected the relationship with fans since they cannot attend the games?	Wang et al. (2000)	Relationship Marketing	R.Q 2
4	How important is SM in building your brand and relationship with fans and other customers during the global pandemic?	Hollebeek & Brodies (2016)	Social Media Marketing	RQ 1 RQ 2
5	How do you build and maintain relationship with fans through SM?	Wang et al. (2000); Achen (2019)	Relationship Building	RQ 2
6	How do you use SM to attract new fans and customers?	Sashi (2012)	Connection	RQ 1 RQ 2
7	Do you seek the opinions of fans on SM?	Dolan et al. (2016)	Level of Engagement; CRM	RQ 1 RQ 2
8	Do you encourage fans to contribute their own content during events and games and share it on SM?	Tsai & Men (2013)	Level of Engagement	RQ 2
9	Do you have a clear marketing strategy to enhance your brand on SM?	Underwood et al. (2001)	Brand Association	RQ 1
10	What content that you post on SM is considered as strengthening the brand and what content is considered to strengthen the relationship with fans?	Wang et al. (2000); Achen (2019)	Brand & Relationship Building	RQ 1 RQ 2
11	Has your content on SM changed during the global pandemic?	Kumar (2010)	CRM	RQ 1 RQ 2

Source: Own construct

Table 2 - **Operationalization of Interview Questions Link with Themes and Theories (Hockey Fans)**

Q.N	Question	Theoretical Reference	Themes	Link to R.Q
2	How long have you followed your favourite hockey club on SM?	Machado et al. (2020); Sashi (2012)	Retention	RQ 2
3	Who encouraged you to follow your favourite hockey club on SM?	Sashi (2012); Thompson et al. (2018)	Connection, Advocacy	RQ 1 RQ 2
4	What is the reason for visiting your favourite hockey clubs SM?	Machado et al. (2020)	Commitment	RQ 2
5	How do you perceive the relationship between the fans and your favourite hockey club on SM during the pandemic?	Mittal & Kamakura (2001)	Satisfaction	RQ 1
6	Have you ever posted anything on SM of your favourite hockey club to make the platform usage more enjoyable?	Dolan et al. (2016)	Interaction	RQ 2
7	Do you interact with your favourite hockey club on SM?	Alhathal et al. (2019)	Interaction	RQ 2
8	What do you think of the content posted by your favourite hockey club on SM?	Thompson et al. (2018)	Satisfaction	RQ1
9	Under what circumstance would you unfollow your favourite hockey club on SM?	Cannon et al (2010)	Commitment	RQ 2
10	Do you perceive your favourite hockey club as a brand?	Mullin et al. (2014)	Brand Association	RQ 1
11	How would you describe your commitment towards your favourite hockey club?	Machado et al. (2020)	Commitment	RQ 2
12	Have you ever shared news about your favourite hockey club on SM?	Pourazad et al. (2019); Dolan et al. (2016)	Advocacy, Mid-level Engagement	RQ 1 RQ 2
13	Do you encourage others to follow your favourite hockey club on SM?	Sashi et al. (2012)	Advocacy	RQ 1
15	Has the club taken measures to engage fans in the club's issues through encouraging feedback and opinions from fans on SM and have those measures changed during the global pandemic?	Dolan et al (2016)	Highest Level of Engagement	RQ 2

Source: Own Construct

3.5 Selection of Sports Organisations

According to McCarthy et al (2014) SM is commonly used as a marketing tool by the majority of organisations who want to grow and appear more attractive to their target market. An extended literature review revealed that the use of SM by sports organisations as a tool for marketing and customer engagement is mostly centred on football. Therefore, there is a need to extend research on to other sports and in this particular study researchers investigated Swedish hockey organisations. Among the 14 clubs that compete in the highest hockey league in Sweden, referred to as Swedish Hockey League, the authors contacted 10 clubs with the highest followers on SM. Out of the 10 hockey clubs that were contacted, three replied positively to our inquiry and decided to participate in our investigation. These three hockey clubs are Frölunda HC, Djurgårdens IF and Luleå HF.

Frölunda HC have the most followers on SM out of all the teams playing in the SHL, followed closely by Djurgårdens IF (http://www.hockeybladet.nu), who also are the most successful team in Sweden by winning the Swedish hockey league a total of 16 times (https://www.swehockey.se). Lastly, Luleå HF has the most followers on SM out of all the hockey teams from the northern part of Sweden. As a country, Sweden is a very long vertical country and the clubs participating in this study are located in three different areas within Sweden. As mentioned above, Luleå HF is located in the north of Sweden, also known as "Norrland ", in Sweden. Djurgårdens IF are centred in Stockholm which is called for "Svealand" in Sweden and lastly Frölunda HC are located near Gothenburg which is referred as "Götaland" in Sweden. Ultimately, the clubs that are being investigated in this study have the most followers on SM based on their location in Sweden. Taking these aspects into careful consideration, Frölunda HC, Djurgårdens IF and Luleå HF are suitable choices for this study with this scope.

3.6 Qualitative Research Technique

Having encountered several challenges in trying to get access to the interviewees, Fjellström and Guttormsen, (2016, p. 118), argues that "There is no "correct" number for an "appropriate number of interviewees" as far as a qualitative work is concerned". However, according to Saunder et al (2012), a minimum of 5 -25 interviews are recommended to meet the requirements for a qualitative study. Therefore, the researchers of this study interviewed a minimum of five individuals, employees and fans, from each of the three clubs. That said, a good number of people from both fans and the hockey clubs agreed to grant us an interview. This is in accordance with Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) assertion that, in a qualitative research approach, interviews provide a good amount of data with the interviewer's interest put at Centre stage. Furthermore, each of the interviews were conducted in the Swedish language to increase the comfort of the interviewees and to allow them to express themselves in the best possible manner. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, each one of the interviews were firstly recorded, secondly transcribed and lastly translated into English.

By recording all the interviews, the researchers of this study had the possibility to view and listen to all the interviews multiple times in order to ensure that nothing is 'lost in translation' from Swedish to English. Furthermore, the translation from Swedish to English was kept as literal as possible, apart from minor adjustments, to preserve the context of the interview. To ensure transparency of our translation, an example of the original and translated material is to be found in the appendix 4. By providing an example of the original and translated material, the acceptability of the translations is being kept (Nikander, 2008).

To increase the reliability of the interviews with the sports organisations, the researchers firstly transcribed the recorded session and thereafter sent it back to the interviewees of each of the clubs for approval and validation. However, this process has not been applied with the fans as the idea and for the benefit of this research was to capture their first impression of the fans general perception and opinions on how the club uses SM. The selection of participants for the interview was based on the research questions we sought to answer. Firstly, we interviewed three hockey clubs to know the various strategies carried out on SM to help them build their brand and relationship during the pandemic and also interviewed fans of these hockey clubs who follow them on SM to find out whether these strategies stated by the clubs actually served its purpose. This indicates that

the questions asked were derived basically from the theory with all questions being linked to the aim of the study as suggested by (Mosley, 2013). In general, we seek the views of both the club and their fans to help properly answer the research questions for our aim to be achieved. To this end two sets of interview questions were developed, with one set for the fans and the other set for the hockey club. A total of 22 questions were asked which covered key aspects of the study with questions asked based on the theory of customer engagement. In developing the interview questions, our supervisor reviewed the questions to give feedback on questions that needed to be rephrased.

3.7 Sampling Technique and Interview Schedule

As part of the qualitative approach, authors employed a non-probability sampling technique; using both snowball and convenience sampling methods to attract fans for the interview. Participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to take part in the interview. The authors of this research posted an inquiry in three closed Facebook groups that are solely represented by fans from each hockey club that has been interviewed. The name of the Facebook groups are 'FrölundaTjötet' which is one of the biggest fan group page on Facebook with over 9 000 members, 'Djurgården Hockeysnack' which has over 3 000 members and lastly an inquiry was posted on 'Luleå Hockey i våra hjärtan' which has approximately 1 700 members to date. In order to enhance the possibility of fans participating in an interview, the researchers added emoticons in the posted inquiry to give a warm, friendly and social impression (Li, Chan & Kim, 2019), together with a short description of the purpose of the study. An example of the inquiry can be seen in the appendix 5.

The reason for posting an inquiry on these various Facebook groups was specifically to reach out to as many Frölunda HC, Djurgårdens IF and Luleå HF fans as possible and to get the best possible input to answer the research question. Furthermore, the participants are considered to be suitable in terms of collecting relevant and reliable responses to achieve the aim of the study. Due to time limitations, some fans were recruited by asking prior participants if they had any acquaintances who would be willing to participate in the study. A total of 12 fans were interviewed, with four supporters from each club, participating in the interview from the 15th of April until the 21st of April 2021. Half of the participants were recruited through the various Facebook fan group pages mentioned

above and half of participants were recruited through acquaintances from the participants.

Moreover, with regards to the qualitative approach an online interview was conducted with both fans and clubs through the use of Zoom. Using Zoom as an interview tool gave the authors the possibility to interview the participants without the need to travel to various locations in Sweden. Furthermore, due to Covid-19 and the recommended restrictions, the use of Zoom was considered the safest way to collect the required input from both fans and clubs. The interviews with the participants were conducted on separate occasions and more in-depth information of the interviews are provided in table 3 and table 4 further below.

3.7.1 Interview with Sports Organisations

Table 3 below shows the list of participants who took part in the interview from each of the three Hockey clubs. Furthermore, the table shows which club the participants work at, their work title at the club, how long they have been working at the club, when the interview was conducted and the duration of the interview with each participant. The respondents are being presented as C.R as in Club Representative.

Table 3 **Interview with Sports Organisations**

Club Respondent	Club	Employee Position	No. of Years in the Club	Date of Interview	Duration of Interview
C.R 1	Djurgårdens IF	Marketing & Growth Manager	30 Years	26.04.2021	19 min
C.R 2	Frölunda HC	Video & Media Editor	4 Years	20.04.2021	45 min
C.R 3	Frölunda HC	Brand Manager	11 Years	26.04.2021	18 min
C.R 4	Luleå HF	Communication & Media Manager	16 Years	15.04.2021	32 min
C.R 5	Luleå HF	Marketing & Sales Manager	10 Years	21.04.2021	15 min
					Average Duration 26 min

Source: Own Construct

3.7.2 Interview with Fans

Table 4 below shows the list of fans, both men and women, who participated in the interview. In total 10 men and two women participated and were interviewed. The table shows which club the participants support, how long they have been following their club on SM, when the interview was conducted and the duration of the interview with each participant. Furthermore, the participants are presented with an F as in "Fan", followed by a number.

Table 4 **Interviews with Fans**

Name	Club	Age	No. of Years following the club on SM	Date of Interview	Duration of Interview
F.1	Djurgårdens IF	34 years	Approximately 5 Years	16.04.2021	17 min
F.2	Djurgårdens IF	49 Years	Approximately 10 Years	19.04.2021	18 min
F.3	Djurgårdens IF	50 Years	Approximately 16 Years	16.04.2021	15 min
F.4	Djurgårdens IF	28 Years	Approximately 12 Years	20.04.2021	20 min
F.5	Frölunda HC	31 Years	Approximately 16 Years	15.04.2021	12 min
F.6	Frölunda HC	22 Years	Approximately 9 Years	18.04.2021	22 min
F.7	Frölunda HC	35 Years	Approximately 5 Years	18.04.2021	19 min
F.8	Frölunda HC	27 Years	Approximately 5 Years	21.04.2021	14 min
F.9	Luleå HF	60 Years	Approximately 16 Years	16.04.2021	32 min
F.10	Luleå HF	41 Years	Approximately 7 Years	18.04.2021	11 min
F.11	Luleå HF	32 Years	Approximately 11 Years	19.04.2021	15 min
F.12	Luleå HF	42 Years	Approximately 5 Years	20.04.2021	20 min
					Average Duration 18 min

Source: Own Construct

3.8 Data Processing and Analysis

With the processing and analysis of the data collected, an improper analysis can affect the validity of the study, therefore it is important to pay critical attention when analysing and processing data. Doing so will ensure the results are clear and presented in a logical manner. The data analysis procedure and method is explained in the following paragraphs.

Based on the philosophical stance taken prior to the study, a content analysis was employed. Easterby-Smith et al. (2018, p. 239) defines content analysis as "an approach that aims to draw systematic inferences from qualitative data that have been structured by a set of ideas or concepts". The first step taken in the analysis of the data was selecting relevant materials based on the research questions determined by the theory used for the study. The responses from the interview have been presented in a summary with some direct quotations from the respondents to represent the general views of the interviewees, as it is presented per topic that has been covered. Because the interview was semi structured, some areas were covered in different ways during the course of the interview, hence answers given in response to some questions had a follow up question. Data from the interview has been analysed with focus placed on factual answers given by the interviewee which fell in line with the themes set out by the researchers. These answers were analysed in their framework and afterwards related to the theory, in which connections and variations were found. Moreover, the response from the interview aided in answering the research questions so that the aim of the study could be achieved. The main themes for which the analysis was based on the theory of customer engagement which is presented in figure 2 below. Since the interviews were intended to get the various perspectives from both fans and clubs, having a theme helped us analyse the various responses received.

In Fig 2 below, we show how the various themes build up to help build brand as well as relationship and ultimately maintain the relationship. Firstly, researchers intended to know whether a connection between the clubs and their fans has been established. Secondly, whether the responses given by both the clubs and their fans showed the presence of interaction and engagement which could lead to commitment and advocacy by the fans as well as show whether there is a deep brand association. Moreover, themes such as brand building, and relationship building were set out to know whether the hockey clubs have been able to maintain their relationship with their fans during the global pandemic or not.

Figure 3: Themes for Analysis

Source: Own construct

3.8.1 Unit of Analysis

According to Kumar (2010), a unit of analysis can be individuals, a group of individuals, organizations, countries, or objects depending on the study aim. Taking into consideration the data collected from both hockey clubs and their fans as well as the aim of the study, the unit of analysis considered for the study is hockey clubs and their fans. This is because the knowledge and information provided by the hockey clubs as well as their fans during data collection meets conditions to help fulfil the aim of the study. Moreover, based on the social

constructionism epistemological viewpoint taken prior to the study, empirical data from the sports fans will serve as a standard of measure for data from the hockey clubs.

It is important to note that the aim of the analysis is not to draw a comparative analysis between the responses from the various hockey clubs and their fans but to form a general conclusion with the hockey clubs on one side and fans on another side. This way it becomes straightforward to know whether these sports organizations have been able to build and maintain their relationship with their fans during the pandemic. To this end, setting out themes was relevant since it easily helped identify variations within and between these factors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, in table 4, the readers are provided with a disposition of how the various themes will be discussed during the analysis.

Table 5 **Disposition of Themes for the Analysis**

Themes	Headings
Relationship Marketing, Social Media Marketing & Satisfaction	Relationship Marketing through Social Media
Connection	Establishing Connection on Social Media
Relationship Building, Interaction & Engagement	Relationship Building through Social Media
Brand Association & Advocacy	Brand Building through Social Media
Level of Engagement, Interaction, Commitment & Engagement	Level of Engagement on Social Media
Customer Relationship Management, Satisfaction, Interaction & Engagement	Customer Relationship Management on Social Media

Source: Own Construct

3.9 Generalizability, Reliability and Validity of the Study

As emphasized by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), a good research should have some link to theory especially in the case of a master dissertation, the researcher has to make use of a theory. With the study not deviating from the said concept, it gives it a practical approach, as well as safeguarding quality of data collected which forms a basis for trustworthiness (Ibid). Connelly, (2016) refers to trustworthiness as the amount of confidence in an empirical data, its interpretation, as well the methods used to safeguard its quality. With the main concepts and findings derived from the study having

relevance on sports and SM especially during a global pandemic, there is enough grounds for the generalization of the study. This also perfectly falls in line with the strong constructionist perspective that to generalize a study, concepts and constructs derived from the study should have relevance in other settings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Cooper and Schindler (2014) state that the reliability of a study refers to the accuracy during the procedure of measurement while validity refers to the extent a measure represents a concept. In any research, validity and reliability plays a considerable role since they are the most important elements in producing and evaluating the quality of the research study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Reliability and validity are indicators that show the internal consistency of a measurement (Zikmund et al., 2010). Through triangulation, the authors enhanced the validity of the research using several literatures and numerous sources of information. Golafshani (2015), describes triangulation as a way to improve the validity and reliability in qualitative research since it involves the use of several sources of data and literature. To further improve the validity of the study, empirical data was ascertained from both the clubs perspective and the fans perspective. More precisely, responses from the fans also served as the check or confirmation to the responses from the hockey clubs which ensured validity of both responses. This is in line with the constructionist perspective that to improve validity, there has to be a sufficient number of perspectives included in a study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Also, the research questions were carefully defined prior to the actual study in order to enhance validity as suggested by Yin (2019). The research questions were formulated through extensive review of academic articles as well as a critical review from both teachers and students, which adds to the validity of the study. Furthermore, the internal validity is maintained by linking both the interview questions of fans and the hockey club to the various theories used.

Moreover, with consistency ensured throughout the process of the study, stability was achieved as Bryman and Bell (2015) suggests that to achieve reliability, data must be stable. Also as stated earlier, the purpose for an independent review of the interview questions was to ensure questions asked were clear and easy to understand and to a large extent achieve reliability. Furthermore, taking into consideration the data collection approach employed during the study, the measure of these data corresponds closely to reality as suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), which is also an indication of transparency in the data collection method and interpretation. To further improve the

reliability of the study, data collected during the interviews after transcribing were sent back to each of the club respondents to confirm whether it represents their responses. Lastly, and as it was mentioned before, the translation from Swedish to English was kept as literal as possible throughout the whole process to ensure the context of the interview was preserved. This was made possible due to one of the researchers being knowledgeable in both the Swedish and English language. Furthermore, the readers are provided with the original and translated material in appendix 4 in order to be as transparent as possible.

3.10 Ethical Consideration

Taking into consideration the various aspects of ethical behaviour, ethical consideration was kept at a satisfactory level regardless of the data collection technique. Ethical consideration of the study is motivated by Babbie's (2010) four main principles of research ethics thus, Voluntary Participation, No Harm to the Participants, Anonymity and Confidentiality, as well as Deception, to ensure the implementation of the basic ethical guidelines. Bearing in mind anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, researchers decided not to provide the real names of fans interviewed except for the club representatives interviewed, who showed consent for their real names to be shown. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity was stated clearly in the introductory letter sent to the hockey clubs. On the issue of voluntary participation, an introductory letter was sent to the hockey clubs of which participants were asked to indicate their exact date and time for their interviews.

Fans of these hockey clubs who were contacted were informed prior to the interview that it is optional, and no one is forced to participate. Bryman and Bell (2015) explained deception as an instance when the researcher deliberately shows his/her study different from what it truly is, researchers provided a brief overview of the study to all respondents at the commencement of each interview and asked if they will need a copy of the completed study. Finally, regarding "No Harm to the Participants", care was taken not to reveal any information that would psychologically harm and humiliate participants or even jeopardize their professional life especially those whose real names have been indicated in the empirical data presented. Moreover, after the transcription of the interview, a copy was sent to respondents to confirm if the transcribed document is a true reflection of what they said.

3. 11 Limitation of the Methodology

Taking into consideration the research method employed for the study thus qualitative research, researchers did not consider a large sample size for the study as the sample size involved three hockey clubs and twelve fans. Furthermore, even though the research is conducted in English, data collection through interviews was conducted in Swedish and translated back to English. During the process of translation, some relevant information from certain interviewees might have been lost.

4. EMPIRICAL DATA

This chapter provides information obtained from interviews with three hockey clubs in Sweden and their fans. Data from the interview is presented according to the main and sub themes, which form the basis for analysis.

4.1 Empirical Findings from the Sports Organisations

4.1.1 Relationship Marketing of Hockey Clubs

With relationship marketing being an important part of business sustainability, the hockey clubs were asked whether the global pandemic has affected the relationship with fans since they cannot attend games. The responses from the three sports organisations were of the same opinion and confirmed that the pandemic has had a negative impact on the relationship with their fans.

As C.R 3 points out: *"Yes, absolutely, it has. The fans feel a great lack of closeness to the team"*.

Besides having fans come to the arena to watch the hockey team play which is considered to be a vital aspect for sports organisations,

As C.R 5 adds: "*It is the atmosphere in the arena that is a big part of the product"*.

It was confirmed that other types of events were cancelled due to the global pandemic and thereby limited the sports organisations to execute their relationship marketing.

As C.R 2 specifies: "*The pandemic has also affected all of our city events and ultimately the pandemic has affected our overall approach with the audience"*.

Furthermore, it became noticeable for the hockey clubs that the interest for their matches has dropped due to the pandemic as fans are being restricted from attending their live matches.

As C.R 4 points out: *"We have noticed that during the season, fans who aren't diehard fans and as committed as them, choose to do something else now instead of coming to our matches"*.

Ultimately, as the relationship has noticeably been affected, it became clear for the sports organisations to reconsider their approach to stay connected with their fan base.

As C.R 1 specifies: *"The question for us has then become on how we should communicate with them and how we can create services and products that attract them"*.

4.1.2 Social Media Marketing of Hockey Clubs

With the development of SM technologies and an increase of SM usage, the interviewees were asked how important SM is for them in terms of building their brand and relationship with fans during the global pandemic. Once Again, the respondents were of the same opinion, and it was apparent that SM was considered to be a very important tool for them in regard to building their relationship with their fans and also to build their brand.

As C.R 4 confirms: "*It is extremely important to us because through social media we can express ourselves as a sports organisation in the way we want and also highlight certain aspects we believe are important to us in a cost and resource efficient way*".

It was further noticed by all of the interviewees that through the usage of SM, sports organisations were able to reach out to a greater audience which was prior to SM mainly available through their on-going events.

As C.R 1 points out: "*An advantage of the digital channels is the value of being able to communicate and at the same time reach an enormously much greater audience than just through our matches*".

There is also a greater understanding among the sports organisations that there is a relation between the usage of SM and fans attending their matches.

As C.R 2 specifies: "*We believe that there is a connection between being active on social media and having new fans coming to the arena. The use of social media is for us a way to bring in new fans and also to maintain the ones we have by providing content that suits them.*"

Besides using SM to attract new customers to attend their live matches, sports organisations use SM to be able to communicate with the fans and also to sort out any kind of misunderstandings that might have appeared.

As C.R 4 points out: "*We can capture views and thoughts that are among the fans in an earlier stage and answer them in time before it might blossom into a bigger problem*".

It is clear that among all the interviewees, SM is considered to be very important as it gives them the possibility to communicate in a fast, cost and resource efficient way.

As C.R 3 specifies: "*Through social media, we can very quickly and directly keep our audience updated with what is happening*".

4.1.3 Connection through Social Media

When the clubs were asked how they use SM to attract new fans and customers, it was evident in the findings that all three clubs have the same view. Diversity in their content is considered to generate a greater interest for the club. Furthermore, all three sports organisations have a different approach in how they use SM to attract new customers. One of the sports organisations' approaches was focused more on attracting the younger generation with a more direct and exciting style of communication.

As C.R 1 points out: "*When you talk about the younger generation, it is often referred to as the six-minute generation which means that anything over six minutes is too long. This means that we have to find a way to communicate in a significantly shorter manner compared to a match*".

Another club's approach was focused more on being creative with the content of their post on SM to attract new customers. One of their strategies was by creating content that is more relatable and enjoyable for anyone to watch.

As C.R 2 specifies: "*We also have a production called 'Mic'd up' where we put a microphone on a player and record the sound during training sessions and produce it in a more exciting way*".

Lastly, another approach by one of the sports organisations was by focusing on strengthening their image by showing a different side of the sport organisation beside the sport itself.

As C.R 4 points out: "*We can show what we work with and what kind of responsibilities we take towards the younger generation and towards the society and that we are more than just a sports organisation*".

4.1.4 Level of Engagement on Social Media

To determine the level of engagement the clubs have with their fans, a question was asked during the interview whether the clubs seek the opinions of their fans on SM. All responses confirmed that they seek the opinions of the fans on issues such as change of logo or jersey. The main rationale behind seeking their opinions was to retain their fans since they perceived them to be their customers.

As C.R 1 confirms: "*Yes, we do. It is super important to do that because in the end they are the consumer*".

Furthermore, Luleå HF did emphasize that in certain cases, fans are even allowed to vote on decisive issues related to the club.

As C.R 4 adds: *"We do ask the fans questions through social media about which player we should make a jersey on next, when we played in the Champions Hockey League fans were able to participate and vote on what type of design the jersey should be"*.

Moreover, the clubs were subsequently asked whether fans were permitted to contribute their own content during events and games on SM. All the clubs did state that fans were allowed to contribute their content on SM during events and games to create a form of interaction and involvement since fans no longer visit the stadium due to the global pandemic. Also, the rationale for allowing fans to contribute their content on SM as stated by the clubs is to draw attention to people during games.

As C.R 4 points out: *"We definitely encourage fans to share their own content on social media which in turn has a positive effect for us if these posts come from someone's friend or family member"*.

4.1.5 Brand Building through the Use of Social media

During the interview, the hockey club´s representatives were asked if they have a clear marketing strategy in place to enhance their brand through the use of social media. The general understanding from the answers given was that the hockey club´s do not have a clear marketing strategy on SM to enhance their brand. However, the hockey clubs do consider several factors that play a vital role for enhancing their brand. To start with, the hockey clubs have a clear understanding of the direction they are aiming towards as there is a fluent collaboration between different departments of the sports organisation.

As C.R 4 points out: "*We do not have a written marketing strategy, however, we still have a clear idea and vision of which direction we are striving to go. We do talk a lot with each other within the club*".

Furthermore, the hockey club´s understanding of enhancing their brand is not only linked with the use of SM, but by creating a brand presence that flows through the whole sport organisation which are connected with each other.

As C.R 3 specifies: "*We do not have a separate strategy that focuses solely on social media, but everything must be connected with each other. I do not think that brand building can only be done through social media platforms, but it should be more like a way to reach out wider with what our brand stands for.*".

In Addition to that, the hockey clubs consider honesty and transparency to be a key factor to enhance and strengthen the perception of their brand.

As C.R 5 adds: "*To strengthen the brand, it is probably more about us being a little more transparent and not having any secrets*".

4.1.6 Relationship Building through the Use of Social Media

The interviewees were asked how they use SM to maintain and build their relationship with their fans to get an understanding of the hockey club's approach in this aspect. The general opinion given from the interviewees was that by being active on SM would ultimately lead to both maintaining and developing the relationship with their fans. The general idea behind being active is to have a constant flow of content on SM.

As C.R 4 states: "*We have a strategy to communicate through our social media continuously where we try to publish something new every two hours during the waking hours of the day*".

As C.R 1 supports: "*On the one hand, it is about having a continuous flow of communication and news while at the same time broadening our content*".

However, one hockey club's approach on SM was to be both active with posting content and by being active with their presence.

As C.R 2 specifies: "*We try to respond to as many messages and comments as we can, we try to show that we see our fans and that those who make comments get some form of confirmation that it has arrived*".

Furthermore, the same hockey club with the two sets of activities in their SM approach were actively trying to engage the fans by creating interaction and participation.

As C.R 2 adds: "*On Facebook, we try to engage the fans by inviting the fans to comment and tell us about a memory that may be connected to the arena or that they should guess the match results. We try to build an interaction with the fans that at the same time creates participation.*

4.1.7 Content on Social Media that leads to Brand and Relationship Building

The hockey clubs were then further asked during the interview which content they consider strengthening the relationship with their fans and what content they consider strengthening their brand. The general opinion by the hockey clubs is that the brand and the relationship with the fans are considered to be the same.

As C.R 4 points out: "*In terms of sports and the passions that are associated with it, relationships with fans and brands are considered to be one thing*".

Although the hockey clubs were sharing similar views that the relationships with fans and brands are considered to be the same, it became clear through their answers given that there is a differentiation made between the content posted by the hockey clubs. Content that can be directly linked to the clubs well-being is considered to strengthen the brand whereas content that creates some form of emotion is considered to strengthen the relationship with fans.

Content linked to developing the brand

As C.R 5 supports: "*It can be information about the club and that it is managed in a financially good way. If we can release information about something in our own channels before the press does, it is always to our advantage and considered important for strengthening our brand*".

Content linked to strengthening the relationship with fans

As C.R 1 adds: "*It is about different types of activations that leads them to act or react*".

As C.R 2 supports: "P*osts where we offer a little extra are considered to strengthen the relationship with our fans, such as 'Inside Indians' and 'Mic'd up' are two examples that we believe strengthens the relationship with our fans. We try to invent new things all the time so that it feels fresh for our followers. Because it can be a contributing factor to stopping following something because the same things always come up*".

4.1.8 Customer Relationship Management due to the Global Pandemic

The interviewees were asked if their content on SM has changed during the global pandemic and all of the participants acknowledged that a change has occurred on their content posted on SM due to the pandemic. As hockey clubs have lost the possibility to host fans in the arena during an on-going event, the biggest changes are considered on content regarding match tickets sales.

As C.R 4 points out: "*Yes, the content has changed as we are now pushing less on selling match tickets on social media*".

However, content regarding match tickets have instead been replaced by selling so-called 'support tickets'.

As C.R 2 specifies: "*The content has turned a lot towards supporting the club financially*".

Furthermore, because of the implemented restrictions made by the government and due to financial restraints, less pictures from on-going training sessions have been posted from the hockey clubs.

As C.R 2 adds: "*The pandemic has contributed to us having to reduce working hours due to the fact that the organisation has not had the same financial conditions as before and this has contributed to us making fewer posts on social media*".

As C.R 4 points out: "*We may not be as close to the fans as we were before the pandemic with our posts because we do not want to provoke anyone with our posts based on the current restrictions*".

As the global pandemic has brought forth several forced changes for the sports organisations, it has become even more important to them to both create content that evokes emotions and to communicate in a more effective way.

As C.R 1 points out: "*Content that is shown in our digital channels is very much about creating a feeling that you cannot get to experience in the arena*".

As C.R 5 adds: "*The communication has become even more important because you cannot deliver it in any other way*".

4.2 Summary of the Findings from the Hockey Clubs

Table 6 **Overview of the Sport Organisations' (Hockey Clubs) response**

Themes	Findings
Relationship Marketing	100% of the interviewees confirmed that the global pandemic has had a negative impact on the relationship with the fans.
Social Media Marketing	100% of the interviewees were of the same opinion that SM as a marketing tool was considered to be very important, especially during the global pandemic.
Connection	In terms of attracting new customers and fans, all three clubs were of the same opinion that diversity in their content is key to attracting new customers on SM.
Level of Engagement (Opinion seeking)	100% of the interviewees confirmed that they do seek the opinions of the fans. However, they also admitted that they do not seek the opinions of fans on SM to a great extent.
Level of Engagement (Content sharing)	100% of the interviewees confirmed that they do encourage fans to share their own content on SM. However, only one club uses this approach with a purpose to draw more attention towards the club whilst two hockey clubs only do it to some extent.
Brand Building	Two out of three clubs answered that they do not have a marketing strategy that is solely focused through SM. One club replied that they do have a marketing strategy for the use of SM.
Brand Building (Content)	Information regarding the hockey clubs' values and information about the hockey being managed financially in a right manner are associated with brand building according to the interviewees.
Relationship Building	The key factor by all participants was by being active on SM. However, only one club was being more specific in their approach of building and maintaining the relationship with the fans. Emphasis was on creating an engagement, creating an interaction and creativity/diversity in the content provided.
Relationship Building (Content)	one club expressed that content that is considered to be unique and exclusive is strengthening the relationship. Another club mentioned content that creates a reaction or action is considered to build the relationship. Lastly, one club considered brand building and relationship building with the fans to be the same, however, content that create a feeling and passion is considered to build the relationship with the fans. Ultimately, any content that make fans act, react or creates a positive feeling is considered to build the relationship with the fans.
Customer Relationship Management	100% of the participants declared that the content on SM had changed due to the global pandemic.

Source: Own Construct

4.3 Empirical Findings from the Fans

4.3.1 Connection to the Hockey Club through Social Media

With fans being asked who encouraged them to follow the clubs on SM, most of the responses received showed that they followed their favourite hockey club on SM on their own accord due to their love for the club. Also, it is established from the responses that connection was initiated by the fans themselves and not the hockey clubs.

As F4 declares: *"I would say that it was by my own choice. I am very interested in the club that I started to follow by my own choice"*.

Moreover, few of the fans were encouraged by family members to follow the club on SM.

As F8 adds: *"I would guess that it was my family since I grew up supporting Frölunda HC. So, my guess is that it was encouraged through my family"*.

4.3.2 Interaction with the Hockey Club on Social Media

When asked the fans if there is an ongoing interaction between themselves and the club or between the fans and the club on SM the general perception of the interviewees is that there are sometimes some kind of ongoing interaction on SM. Quotes like "sometimes", "It has happened on a few occasions" and "I don't really know" often occurred during the course of the interview. Moreover, the interaction is perceived to be one-sided in a form of the club posting content on SM.

As F10 comments: *"Yes, in a form of one-way communication to a large extent"*.

An interaction between the fans and the club is often perceived to occur when fans ask service related questions or when they demand information to be posted on SM. Even though interactions do happen between the fans and the club, it is not frequent to be noticed to a larger extent. Also, to most of the fans, interacting with their favourite hockey club on SM means the club allows them to comment on all their SM posts and in some cases the club tends to like these comments.

However, an interesting observation made by a fan is that the CEO of the club has commented and answered questions from fans on Twitter.

As F11 points out: "Y*es, it happens on Twitter sometimes. I know that the CEO has been there and commenting and answering fans' questions on social media".*

Furthermore, it was noted that fans do only interact with the club when the process is initiated by the club since the fans have no intention of initiating an interaction process with the club. During the interview, a question was asked if the fans have ever posted anything on their club's SM to make the platform usage more enjoyable. Almost all participants indicated that they have not posted any content because they either are already satisfied with the club's use of SM or because they do not think that they can add any value to it.

As F4 adds: *"No, I have not done that. I kind of feel like people who do that have it more as their profession. There is such a large supporter culture within Djurgårdens IF that I would not know what I could add to it".*

4.3.3 Fans Satisfaction with the Hockey Club's Social Media Activities

Fans during the interview were asked how they perceive the relationship to be between them and the club on SM during the global pandemic and what they make of the content that is being provided by the club.

Relationship: In regard to the perceived relationship between the club and the fans on SM the general perception is that the relationship is good during the global pandemic. Since fans are unable to attend games, some fans indicated that the club now spends more on SM

As F1 expresses: *"I think the relationship is good. I think it is clear that they post more often now during the pandemic. Instagram has grown and they are very active there and try to keep the fans interested since you cannot go and watch their games live".*

This is in line with other fans' perception that the club has realised the importance of SM and therefore spend more time there during the pandemic.

As F11 supports: *"I think Luleå is taking good care of their social media which is much appreciated. Especially since Stefan Enbom (CEO) has joined the club and his way of being towards the supporters, reflects Luleå as a club and how they act on social media".*

Content: In regard to what the fans make of the content that is being provided by the clubs, the fans are in general satisfied with the content the club posts on SM. Quotes like "I think it is good", "I think it is very good" and even "I think it is great" are used by the majority of the participants to describe the content that is being provided by the clubs on SM. These words were used to describe the level of satisfaction fans showed towards the content the club posts on SM.

As F1 adds: "*I think it is good, it is informative, it is professional and above all very inspiring. You can really notice that they are trying to build an interest in different ways*".

4.3.4 Level of Engagement between the Hockey Clubs and Fans on Social Media

With three main levels of engagement identified earlier, thus minimum level, mid-level and highest level of engagement, participants were asked three different questions which indicated the level of engagement they have with their club. When participants were asked if they have shared content on SM provided by their favourite hockey club almost all of the participants answered that they do it on a regular basis or that they do it on certain occasions, such as prior to an upcoming match in order to create awareness. Furthermore, on SM platforms like Twitter and Facebook, by liking the content provided by the club will automatically appear on other people's newsfeed within their social network. This shows the presence of a minimal to mid-level of engagement between the fans and the club on SM.

Minimal level of engagement, as F10 expresses : "*No, I have not. However, I have liked certain posts made by Luleå HF which then is getting spread within my network on social media. By me liking something in their post on social media means that others in my network are getting it in their news feed on social media*".

Mid level of engagement, as F12 states: "*Yes, I have. It has been information about an upcoming match to get more spectators to the match. To help spread the word about it so more people would come to watch women's hockey*".

In terms of the highest level of engagement, the interviewees were asked if the clubs have taken measures to engage them in matters related to the club by encouraging them to provide feedback and opinions on SM. According to the fans, this has happened on very

few occasions. However, some fans did indicate that their opinions were sought for on a particular occasion when the club intended to change its logo. This also shows the highest level of engagement between the club and fans.

Highest level of engagement, as F7 points out: "*Yes, they have. What comes to mind the most is the discussion about Frölundas logo that is to be changed from the Indian. Many fans were actually very annoyed that it is going to be changed, so I think it is good that the club engages fans in these issues*".

When the fans were asked if the clubs have taken measures to engage fans in the club´s issues by encouraging feedback and opinions from fans on SM and if those measures have changed due to the pandemic, the general view is that the club do it on very few occasions and that there is room for improvements to be made by the hockey clubs in this matter.

As F8 replies: "*No to my knowledge. There is definitely room to do it more*".

As F3 supports: "*It has happened maybe once or twice a year where they ask for fans' opinions and feedback, but not more than that. Also, they do not really take our questions and thoughts into consideration*".

4.3.5 Fans Commitment towards the Hockey Club

As stated earlier, there are two types of commitment namely, affective and calculative commitment. In an attempt to establish the type of commitment the Fans have towards the hockey teams; fans were asked three sets of questions. The first question was asked to find out the reasons for visiting their favourite hockey club on SM, next fans were asked under what circumstances they would unfollow the club on SM and lastly the participants were asked to describe their commitment towards the club.

In regard to the reason for visiting their favourite hockey club on SM, all the participants voiced the same reasons. It was to stay updated and to acquire information about the club among other things.

As F4 specifies: "*I have a very big interest in how the sports organisation is developing, which players are coming in, interviews with players, analysis of matches. This kind of information gives me more value as a supporter which I would not be able to gain by watching their games live or on television*".

When fans were asked under what circumstance they would unfollow the club on SM, participants were having a hard time answering it. A shared opinion from all the interviewees was that they would never unfollow the club, although a few mentioned that if the club would post inappropriate content or change their value, they might consider unfollowing them on SM.

As F10 states: "*I cannot see that happening. That is if the club would post things that are not relevant at all or are against my own values or by expressing themselves in an inappropriate way. But the possibility of that happening is very slim*".

Lastly, the participants were asked to describe their commitment towards their favourite hockey club. The general view of all the interviewees was that they consider themselves to have a strong commitment towards their favourite hockey club.

As F11 comments: "*I would say that my commitment is very big. I watch the majority of the matches. When I lived in Umeå, which is 280 km away from Luleå, I travelled up to Luleå for each of the play-off games and also to some away games. Luleå HF means a lot to me*".

4.3.6 Brand Association from the Fans Point of View

During the course of the interview, the participants were asked if they associate their club as a brand. All of the interviewees were of the same opinion and considered their club as a brand. A fan was of the view that the club was more than a brand as he was of the opinion that the club stands for much more than what a brand could ever stand for.

As F3 adds: "*Well, it is because I believe that Djurgården as an organisation stands for so much more than what a brand can. It is the emblem of Djurgården that brings people together and not the brand. In my opinion it gets often misinterpreted by both the media and the club what the emblem is in comparison to what a brand is. To me, the emblem of the club is the most important identification of a club*".

Furthermore, the general view by the participants was that the hockey clubs are perceived to be a brand on its own since players come and go but the brand remains.

As F7 replies: "*Yes, absolutely. The brand is almost what you are supporting. The players come and go, but it is the club as a brand that you are supporting*".

4.3.7 Advocacy of the Fans towards their favourite Hockey Club on Social Media

To establish if the participants are advocates of their club, they were asked in the interview if they encourage others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM. The answers given by the participants in this particular question were diversified. Some answered that they do not encourage others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM, whereas others are actively encouraging others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM. Generally, the participants are less keen to encourage others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM.

As F10 comments: "*I do not do that overall; I am not active in that way*".

As F6 adds: "*Yes. Of course, I do. The more people who follow and become a fan of Frölunda, the better it will be*".

4.3.8 The Impact of the Global Pandemic on Hockey Club´s use of Social Media

The participants were asked during the interview if they noticed any changes made by their club on SM due to the global pandemic. The general view by the participants was that the clubs are more active on SM than before the global pandemic by providing content more frequently.

As F1 specifies: "*It feels like they are posting more frequently now, they post more updates and overall, are more active on social media. They understand that people cannot come to the matches and therefore they try to engage fans a little more before a match and show the supporters that they are visible on digital forums instead*".

Moreover, the general view of the participants was that the increased activity on SM from the club was based on content with the purpose of selling so-called 'support tickets'. Due to the global pandemic, Hockey clubs have started to sell 'support tickets' which are match tickets that fans can purchase without attending the match. By purchasing 'support tickets', anyone has the possibility to help the clubs financially.

As F11 points out: "*Yes, there are more posts around the support tickets that fans can purchase. But no significant changes apart from that. There are in general more posts, but the content itself has not changed*".

Lastly, the interviewees were asked if they are satisfied with the content provided by the club or if they lack anything from their favourite hockey club on SM. The overall impression by the fans is that they wanted the club to maintain the level of content posted whilst simultaneously making suggestions for improvements.

As F7 adds: "*I would like them to continue with some of their fun features they have had this year even after the pandemic. Like diverse competitions where you can win to train with the team for one day and such. But overall, I think they manage their social media very well*".

4.4 Summary of the Findings from the Fans of hockey clubs

Table 7 **Overview of the Fans Opinions**

Topic	Findings
Connection	Out of the 12 participants, 83% stated that they took the initiative by themselves to follow their favourite hockey club on social media whilst the remaining 17% stated that they were encouraged by a family member.
Interaction	75% admitted that there is sometimes an interaction happening between the fans and the club on social media. However, the interaction was not all too noticeable for them to say that it happens regularly. One participant even mentioned that there is more of an interaction between the fans rather than the fans and the club. The remaining 25% were of the opinion that there is a regular ongoing interaction between the fans and the club.
Satisfaction (Relationship)	59% were of the opinion that the relationship was good, 33% were of the opinion that it is equivalent prior to the pandemic and 8% perceived the relationship to be bad on social media during the global pandemic.
Satisfaction (Content)	84% were of the opinion that the content is either good or even great. 8% thought it was decent whilst 8% perceived it to be bad.
Engagement	83% of the fans have admitted to either liking or sharing news about their favourite hockey club on social media which is an indication of a minimal to mid-level engagement. The remaining 17% have not shared content from their favourite hockey club.
Commitment (Reason)	92% stated that they want to stay updated and find information about various matters concerning the club. 8% stated they visit their favourite hockey club as they perceived it as fun and exciting to do.
Commitment (Unfollow)	67% stated that it will never happen, 8% stated in case the club merges with their closest rivals, 17% in case it becomes too commercialised and 8% if the club would become immoral.
Commitment (Description)	83% described their commitment as strong. 17% described their commitment as ordinary.
Brand Association	92% answered that they do. 8% answered that they perceive the club to be more than what a brand could ever stand for.
Advocacy	75% stated that they do not encourage other to follow their favourite hockey club on social media whereas 25% would.
The Impact of the Global Pandemic (Changes)	58% were of the opinion that their favourite hockey club are using social media more frequently whereas 42% have not noticed any difference.
The Impact of the Global Pandemic (Improvements)	50% thought there could be improvements made by the club, 17% were not satisfied and 33% were satisfied the way social media was used by their favourite hockey club.

Source: Own Construct

5. ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an analysis of the empirical findings and further compared and integrated with information from the theoretical discussion. The analysis is based on topics framed from the various themes used to present empirical findings.

5.1 Relationship Marketing through Social Media

With relationship marketing being characterized as an approach that aims on building, developing and maintaining relationships between customers and organisations (Wang *et al*., 2000; Achen, 2019), it is very imperative to know how sports organizations have been able to use SM to build and develop their brand and relationship with customers during the global pandemic. All sports organisations acknowledged that the global pandemic has had a negative impact on the relationship with the fans as the fans have been restricted from attending games at the stadium which has led to the loss of interest in live games. However, it was evident in the findings that relationship marketing was still possible for the hockey clubs through the use of SM which is an indication that building and maintaining ties with fans through mutual exchanges did take place. According to Stavro et al (2014), communication has been identified as the core element of relationship marketing and although fans were unable to come into physical contact with the club due to the global pandemic, the sports organisations confirmed that communication was still possible through SM. Findings from the study very well illustrated that relationship marketing is at the heart of the hockey clubs since most of their activities on SM were directed towards building and maintaining their relationship with fans.

Moreover, SM was seen to be extremely important to the hockey clubs since it helps them express themselves as a sports organisation in the way they want and also highlight certain aspects they believe is important to them in a cost efficient way. Furthermore, it was evident in the study that through SM, interaction and engagement between sports clubs and their fans was possible and at the same time there was a sense of belonging among the fans towards their favourite hockey club even on SM. This demonstrates the strategic role that SM provides in building relationships with customers. With SM platforms allowing users to engage with each other, Gensler et al. (2013) upholds that, this ensures a dynamic, ever-present and often real-time communication between brands and consumers, as well as large-scale consumer-to-consumer interactions. Besides, taking into consideration the level of satisfaction expressed by the hockey clubs in using SM to

build and develop their brand and relationship, findings also showed that the fans of these hockey clubs were highly satisfied with the club's activities on SM since they are trying to build an interest for their fans in different ways. This clearly affirms Thompson *et al.* (2018) proposition that SM platforms empower sports organisations in building and developing their brand as part of a long-term relationship marketing strategy. Taking into consideration that sport organisations find themselves in a service environment, the relationship marketing approach should have focused more on building the relationship with the fans. This would have aligned with Achen (2019) assertion that due to sport organisations finding themselves in a service environment, it is considered more profitable to focus on building relationships with their fans rather than depend on conventional transaction-based marketing. Ultimately, relationship marketing through SM was evident in the club's activities with the main attention given to transaction-based marketing.

5.2 Establishing Connection on Social Media

Relationship marketing through SM cannot be implemented if there is no connection established between fans and the hockey clubs. Within the confines of SM, it is only possible to interact and engage with a user only when you follow the SM "handler" of the user. The findings from the fans show that they followed their favourite hockey club on SM on their own accord as they want to stay updated and find information about various matters concerning the club. This is because fans connect to their favourite sports clubs by following them on all SM platforms with the aim of getting updated with news concerning the activities of the club. Interestingly, considering the fans' high level of commitment towards their favourite hockey club, only a small number of fans stated that they encourage others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM. According to Sashi (2012), customers become advocates for a brand, product or company if they have developed emotional bonds and are considered to be loyal customers in a long-term relationship. Although fans consider themselves to have an emotional bond and to be in a long-term relationship with their favourite hockey club, their willingness to encourage others is low.

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the sports organisations do have a strategy for attracting new customers onto their SM platforms. While some clubs are creative with their content by producing their own series on YouTube, others communicate information

in a shorter way as a strategy to attract younger fans on SM. This is based on the idea that any content over six minutes posted on SM is considered too long for users to pay attention to, therefore the need to communicate to users in a very short manner as possible without compromising the quality and authenticity of information being communicated. Ultimately, diversity in their content is considered to be an important aspect by the sports organisation in order to attract new customers on SM. Although their approach varies, findings proved that these strategies have been very effective for the clubs especially when the rationale behind these strategies is to add value to the club as a brand. This perfectly falls in line with Park et al. (2009) assertion that connection to a particular brand does not only add value to the brand but also lead to stronger performance and loyalty to the brand. Furthermore, creating different types of content containing brand associations is considered to be developing customers' brand knowledge even outside of the event period (Thompson et al. 2018). Even though fans have chosen themselves to connect with their favourite hockey club on SM, it is clear that all of the sports organisations have a strategy to attract new customers on SM platforms.

5.3 Level of Engagement on Social Media

With engagement being an important aspect of brand and relationship building, McCarthy et al. (2014) laments that clubs who fail to engage with their fans may be potentially limiting the opportunity for enhancing relationship bonds with their fan base. With findings showing that the opinions of fans are taken into consideration with regards to issues such as the change of team logo or team jersey as well as sharing of their own content on SM to foster engagement between the clubs, there is a clear indication of the presence of engagement between the hockey clubs and their fans. This type of engagement brings to light how fans get involved in the decision making process, especially the building of the clubs brand and also perfectly falls in line with Filo *et al*. (2015) assertion that, to build relationships through the usage of SM, brands should engage with their customers in the co-creation process.

Furthermore, with Filo *et al*. (2015), perceiving engagement as a process and categorizing it under three dimensions; thus, minimum, mid and highest level of engagement, the study did identify all three dimensions to be present in the engagement activities between the clubs and their fans on SM. However, findings from both the clubs and the fans did show that the level of engagement from the clubs is considered to be inconsistent. While a high

level of engagement is present in the findings, it is not consistent enough which is due to sport organisations neglecting the importance of interacting and engaging with their fans on a regular basis. Furthermore, considering that both the minimum and mid-level of engagement are important to relationship building, a higher level of engagement creates a more vibrant avenue for relationship and brand building as well as gives a competitive advantage over rivals. This is based on Brodie et al. (2011), findings that there is a positive impact of social media engagement in creating an affirmative mental outcome towards brands. Moreover, a higher level of engagement shows that the hockey clubs are keen in building a solid brand and relationship with the fans.

Consequently, with the highest level of engagement evident between the hockey clubs and their fans on SM, a strong level of commitment was shown by the fans towards the club which affirms Sashi (2012) argument that, the emphasis of customer engagement is on satisfying customers by providing greater value than rivals to build trust and commitment in long-term relationships. More importantly, findings did show an "affective commitment" by the fans which is a result of trust in their relationship with their clubs. As findings did show, information posted on SM by the hockey clubs such as the signing of new players, interviews and analysis of matches gave the fans a sense of value as a supporter of the club. This however did contribute a lot in enhancing the commitment level of fans and more precisely as Sashi (2012) asserts, engaged customers become partners who collaborate in the value adding process and occur when buyers have a strong emotional bond with a brand or an organisation.

5.4 Brand Building through Social Media

As stated by Underwood et al. (2001), the building of a sports brand is about promoting a distinctive sports brand, which involves brand associations leading to perceptions where the quality of the brand is greater and the levels of loyalty towards the brand are increased. Even though findings did show that the hockey clubs did not have a clear laid down plan on how to develop their brand on SM, there was a clear understanding of the direction they intend to go in developing and building their brand. Emphasis was made on the fact that there is no separate strategy that focuses solely on social media, but rather everything must be connected with each other. This is an indication that brand building by the hockey clubs is not done solely on SM platforms but also on other media to be able to reach out to a wider group.

Findings did show that an approach often used by the hockey clubs to strengthen their brand is to be as transparent as possible to the fans by releasing information concerning the club on their SM platforms before the press does. This perfectly affirms Filo et al. (2015) contention that establishing authenticity in a form of communicating through the official team page can confidently influence the number of fans, which speaks volume to the importance of brand trust within social media. Moreover, taking into consideration the fact that the strength of association to a brand can only be reached by providing fans with unceasing and relevant information flow through different media channels (Beech and Chadwick, 2007). Transparency in information sharing by the hockey clubs is considered to help strengthen brand association of the fans especially when the idea of a brand association is built on the concept of brand awareness.

Nevertheless, the question as to whether these brand building approaches by the clubs has been effective was seen when responses from the fans did show a close brand association with most fans perceiving the club as a brand. Even though no element of brand association was evident in the study, the extent of brand association was only limited to the general perception that every sports club is indeed a brand based on the number of fans they have. Having noted that establishing brand equity depends highly on the customer's image of the brand (Koll & Von Wallpach, 2009), it is important to provide truthful and timely information which will create a good brand image in the minds of the fans. As Armstrong et al. (2014) also argues, the success of brand equity is often determined by how close customers' associates themselves to a particular brand and how efficiently the brand identity is communicated to customers. This perfectly shows the relevance of communication in creating a brand image since brand building is a crucial part of customer relationship management. Hence the association of fans towards the club's brand serves as the premise for some of the fans' advocacy towards the club by encouraging others to follow the clubs on SM. This is because customers only become advocates for a brand, product or company if they have developed emotional bonds and are considered to be loyal customers in a long-term relationship (Sashi, 2012). Also, the demonstration of brand association and advocacy by the fans is a clear indication that the clubs efforts in building their brand through SM has been very effective.

5.5 Relationship Building through Social Media

As detailed by Thompson et al. (2018), for sport organisations to develop their relationship with their fans, there is the need to find avenues to understand them and their needs. In the process of finding avenues to understand them and their needs, interacting with them provides such avenues to understand them. Considering that a fan has followed their favourite hockey club for an average of approximately 10 years, the findings showed that an interaction between the club and fans occurs only on very few occasions. Furthermore, the interaction was also perceived to mainly be one-sided in the form of the hockey clubs having a constant flow of content posted on SM. Although the interaction is considered to be limited, fans did recognize some form of interaction and these interactions mostly took the form of a question and answer with the aim of providing fans with needed information concerning the club.

However, as asserted by Thompson et al. (2018), continuous interaction and engagement with customers through SM gives sport organisations the ability to build upon their existing relationship and is considered to affect the consumption habits of sport fans. Based on this assertion, it can be concluded that the sports organizations were not able to build upon their existing relationship since a continuous interaction and engagement was not evident in the clubs activities on SM. More especially, this led to their inability to connect to a wider audience which could stimulate cross-selling opportunities as also mentioned by (Machado et al., 2020). Furthermore, interaction with customers on SM platforms is considered to be highly important for brand and relationship building (Sashi, 2012). Thus, by continuously interacting and engaging with customers through SM gives sport organisations the ability to build upon their existing relationship and is considered to affect the consumption habits of sport fans (Thompson et al. 2018). With the findings showing that the global pandemic has had a negative impact on the relationship, it is important for sports organisations to note that the interaction experience of customers in virtual environments are considered to be just as important as the offline experience (Santos et al. 2019).

Another important aspect for sports organisations in building relationships is by engaging customers on SM platforms (Achen, 2019). With findings showing that the hockey clubs only sought the opinions of fans to a small extent, the fans were generally satisfied with the content posted by their favourite hockey club on SM. The general view from the fans is that their favourite hockey club does not take enough measures to engage fans on

SM platforms. With McCarthy et al. (2014) having mentioned that there is a disparity between the level of engagement fans are seeking for and what the clubs are providing on SM, sports organisations are considered to be in a perfect position to benefit from SM as an engagement platform (Vale & Fernandes, 2018), especially when the level of engagement fans are looking for is now known. Furthermore, as SM has opened up a new world of opportunities in engaging and building relationships with customers, fans are more inclined to become advocates of the brand (Pourazad et al. 2019). As the findings show, solely a small number of fans act as advocates of the brand by encouraging others to follow their favourite hockey club on SM. Ultimately, by interacting and engaging with fans in ongoing discussion on SM can lead to a positive impact on customers' relationships as well as brand equity (Pronschinske et al. 2012).

Lastly, with both fans and clubs stating that the content on SM has been directed more towards the transactional aspects, such as the frequent posts of 'support tickets', sports organisations should consider adopting a more humanistic approach on SM as it could lead to a stronger customer brand relationship. Specifically, stronger brand relationships lead to financial efficiency, lower costs, higher retention rates, lower price sensitivity and increased brand loyalty (Achen, 2019). Evidently, the findings from the fans and clubs show that the use of SM in terms of interacting and engaging fans through SM to build relationships is being underutilized by the sports organisations.

5. 6 Customer Relationship Management through Social Media

With the global pandemic restricting fans from attending live matches, it has been necessary for sport organisations to adapt to technological solutions to meet customers' demands. As CRM is considered to be a strategic approach by using suitable technologies (Payne & Frow, 2017), it has been confirmed by the sports organisations that they had to change their content on SM due to the pandemic. As fans have been restricted from visiting the stadium on match days, the main changes have been on selling so-called 'support tickets' where fans have the possibility to assist the club financially. This has been confirmed by the fans as they also noticed that the clubs have changed their approach on SM by pushing more on selling 'support tickets'.

Another interesting observation made by the fans is that they perceived their hockey clubs to be more active on SM by providing content more frequently during the global pandemic. This can be due to sports organisations considering the use of SM platforms

being even more important during the global pandemic as they are not able to communicate and deliver information in any other way. Hence communicating through SM by the hockey clubs is considered to influence the relationship and brand positively (Pronschinske et al., 2012). This strongly affirms Beech and Chadwich (2007) claim that keeping a continuous flow with relevant information on various media channels is a way for sports organisations to strengthen their brand association. Additionally, by being more active on SM falls perfectly in line with Alhathal et al. (2019) who asserts that brands are still in need to maintain and nurture the relationship with their fans in order to ensure customer loyalty and commitment. Furthermore, findings show that the fans seem to be generally satisfied with the content posted by their favourite hockey club on SM. Thus, the majority of the fans want the clubs to maintain the same level of content provided by the clubs even after the global pandemic.

5.7 Summary on Brands and Relationship Building through Social Media

From the data analysed, as well as the different perspectives shared by both the clubs and their fans, there is no doubt brand and relationship building is a vital part of relationship marketing. Also, there is a clear indication that in the process of brand and relationship building, fans are very well needed especially during interactions and engagement. This is to say that sports organizations cannot build or develop their relationship and brand solely through SM without the involvement or assistance of their fans. Especially in the co-creation process, interaction plays a vital role in contributing to successful customer relations (Alhathal *et al.,* 2019). Since findings proved that to build relationships with fans through SM there has to be a continuous level of interaction and engagement, the most important part of it is for sports organizations to post creative contents on SM that is enticing enough to get fans to interact and engage with.

To conclude, a framework which perfectly depict the role both hockey clubs as well as fans play in the process of building or developing relationship and brand through SM is developed based on the analysis of the empirical findings. This is to demonstrate the role both the hockey clubs and fans play in building brand and relationship. To a larger extent, the fans are very well in a better position to determine whether a strategy or content used by the clubs on SM is effective or not depending on the level of satisfaction and commitment shown.

## 5.8 Framework based on the Study Findings and Analysis

Based on the empirical findings and analysis of the data, figure 4 has been developed to depict how sports organizations can actually build their brand and relationship through SM during a global pandemic. Even though we are in a global pandemic, it was evident in the result that relationship marketing through the use of SM platforms was possible for sport organisations. It is therefore important to note that the establishment of a connection with fans through SM platforms is initiated by the sport clubs. According to the empirical findings and in terms of establishing a connection to a wider audience through SM, a new variable has been discovered throughout the study. A well-used strategy employed by all hockey clubs to attract new customers is by providing diversity in their posted content on SM, which has also been confirmed by the fans. Whereas other frameworks point to the importance of SM to be able to interact and engage with customers, this research has provided both the researchers and readers with concrete evidence on strategies used by the sport organisations to attract new customers. Thus, with sport organisations having the possibility of conducting relationship marketing, connecting to fans and customers has been possible which as a result leads to fans having a minimal level of engagement.

For sport organisations to increase the level of engagement with the fans, there are certain requirements that need to be fulfilled. With interaction and engagement being features linked to increase the engagement level by previous researchers, the empirical findings of this study show that sport organisations have certain strategies in place to increase the level of engagement with their fans. These new variables are timely information with news about the hockey club before the press does, by being transparent with their content to strengthen the trust and brand with their fans and by interacting and engaging with fans in the form of Q&A. Furthermore, as clubs provide timely information and are transparent with their communication, the findings prove that fans are satisfied with these strategies since they keep coming back to visiting sport organisations SM platforms. Also, by interacting and engaging fans in form of question and answer and in conjunction with timely provided information is set to create a mid-level of engagement with sport fans. However, to successfully reach the highest level of engagement, there needs to be a continuous interaction and engagement which ultimately will lead to building the relationship with fans and customers through the usage of SM platforms.

According to the findings, fans have not perceived the sport organisation to have taken measures during the pandemic to engage fans through SM. Therefore, to reach the highest

level of engagement, sport organisations need to continuously interact and engage fans through SM. Ultimately, it is important to note that the level of engagement can shift forth and back as sport organisations are controlling the level of engagement with the fans through the use of SM. Concluding, the activities of the sports organisations on SM is set to influence the fans attitude towards the club as depicted in figure 4 below. But ultimately, at a certain point in the relationship marketing process, efforts from both the sports clubs and their fans will ensure a continuous level of interaction and engagement between them and ultimately lead to the building of relationships and brands.

Figure 4: Framework for Sport Organisations for Building Brand and Relationship during a Global Pandemic
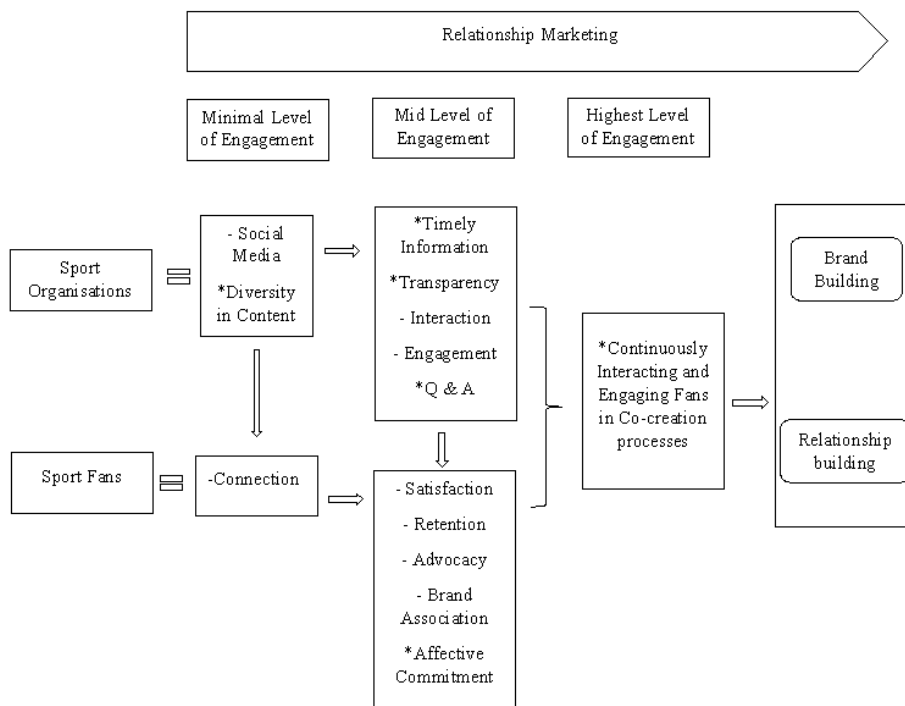
Source: Own Construct

*New Variables Identified

- Variable in existing theories

⟹Influence of variables

Variables needed to enter the next level of engagement

6. Conclusion

This chapter presents the answers to the research questions as well as a response to the aim of the study. Theoretical, practical as well as reflection and recommendation for future studies is also discussed in this chapter.

6.1 Answer to Research Question 1

How have sports organisations been able to use social media to build or develop their brand during a pandemic?

The building or development of a brand using SM is more about promoting a distinctive brand which involves brand association. The association of a customer to a brand is mostly dependent on the perception of brand awareness which is mostly conveyed by the consumers' capacity to recognize a brand under different circumstances and situations. Many sports organizations use SM for different purposes which is mostly based on the clubs' willingness to let fans get close to them. With the global pandemic having adversely affected many businesses and lives, SM has become part of the main platforms where daily businesses are conducted. Even though sporting activities do take place, it has been in the absence of fans who are unable to attend live games due to social gathering restrictions. Due to this, many sports including hockey have resorted to SM as a means to build and develop their brands.

Findings from the study did show that sports organizations indeed did use SM to either build or develop their brand during the global pandemic. It was evident that, in the process of developing their brand on SM, sports organizations are as transparent as possible to the fans by releasing information concerning the club on their SM platforms before the press does. Moreover, the clubs did interact with their fans mostly through a question and answer sections on SM. It is important to note that the whole idea of brand building using SM is to be as transparent with fans as possible in order to gain their trust. Moreover, in the building of a distinctive brand, the history and image of the club is very important since it also counts as a reason why some fans associated themselves with the club. Also, a minimum to mid-level of engagement was seen between the hockey clubs and their fans which necessarily counts for the building or development of the brand through SM as a result of the global pandemic.

The efforts of the hockey clubs to build and develop their brands on SM can be seen as very successful especially when the fans had trust in the club in all its activities. This can be seen as the premise for a strong brand association by the fans as a result of the various brand awareness strategies used by the hockey clubs. With brand association being an important part of brand building, a conscious association of fans to the clubs' brand shows that efforts to build or develop a brand on SM has been very effective. Again, findings did show that the extent of advocacy shown by some fans was as a result of a strong brand association to the clubs' brand which also counts as reason why these hockey clubs have been able to develop their brand through SM during the global pandemic.

6.2 Answer to Research Question 2

How have sports organisations been able to use social media to build and maintain their relationship with fans during the pandemic?

The building of relationships with customers mostly develops around relationship marketing. Even though there are restrictions regarding social gatherings, relationship marketing is still possible due to SM. Relationship marketing through SM begins with establishing a connection with customers on SM. Through connection, interaction and engagement becomes possible on SM, forming the premise for sports organizations to build and maintain their relationship with their fans. Moreover, the building or development of a relationship as well as maintaining it requires satisfaction from fans which will eventually lead to affective commitment as well as customer retention. Even though both interaction and engagement are very much needed in building or developing relationships with fans, for sports organizations to succeed in building their relationship with fans using SM during a global pandemic, a continuous level of interaction and engagement with fans is needed.

Findings from the study did show that even though the hockey clubs had relationship marketing strategies such Q&A sections and to a large extent asked their fans to sometimes contribute their content on SM, this was not enough to build upon their relationship with their fans during the global pandemic since these strategies did not continue for a longer period. Nevertheless, the fans did express their satisfaction with these interaction and engagement approaches initiated by the hockey clubs. This is to say that even though fans are satisfied and committed to a brand, they can easily be retained

but to build upon a relationship, a continuous level of interaction and a higher level of engagement is required.

Furthermore, with findings showing that the hockey clubs were more active on SM by providing more content frequently during the global pandemic, a minimum to mid-level of engagement was identified between the hockey clubs and their fans. This meant that during the global pandemic, the hockey clubs have only been able to maintain their relationship with their fans but have not been able to build upon their relationship. Concluding, even though the hockey clubs have been very successful in maintaining their relationship with their fans, they have not been effective enough in building upon their relationship with their fans on SM.

6.3 The influence of Social Media in Building Brand and Relationship with Fans

The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of social media in building brand and relationship with fans for sport organizations during a global pandemic. This was based on the premise of the lack of literature on relationship marketing and engagement process enabled via SM since most literature on SM is based on gratification theories. To this effect, the study sought to find answers on how sports organizations have been able to build their brand and also their relationship with their fans through SM during the global pandemic. Finding did show that through SM, sports clubs have been able to build upon their brand as well as maintain their relationship with their fans. This is to say that through SM sports organizations have been able to carry on with relationship marketing even though due to the global pandemic, there are restrictions on social gathering. Furthermore, having found answers to the research question, the aim of the study has been duly addressed as findings do show that indeed SM has a positive impact in building brand and relationship with fans during a global pandemic. Also, SM was seen to be extremely important to the hockey clubs since it helped them express themselves as a sports organisation in the way they want and also highlight certain aspects they believe is important to them in a cost efficient way.

Although sports organisations do not have a marketing strategy for building their brand centred around the use of SM, it is evident in the findings that their marketing strategies are based on the whole concept of the organisation. Thus, the strategies they do have are easier implemented on SM. In regard to relationship building, sports organisations are in

contact with their fans outside of the SM platforms. However, as fans have been restricted from visiting live matches due to the global pandemic, these interactions have been interrupted and not been replaced well enough through the use of SM.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions

Firstly, the study contributes to literature on customer engagement which a review of literature by Filo et al. (2015) have indicated to be limited especially within the area of SM and its usage. Specifically, since the study makes use of empirical data from both sports organizations and their fans, the disparity between the level of engagement fans are looking for and what the clubs are providing on SM as mentioned by McCarthy et al. (2014), was bridged and identified. Hence the study clearly outlines the level of engagement the fans are looking for and what is expected from the sports organizations by incorporating them in a framework. Another contribution to current literature is that the study extends the present knowledge of customer engagement by providing solid findings in terms of fans satisfaction and the three different levels of engagement. As prior research has not considered the various levels of engagement, this study has presented new knowledge by revealing that a high level of satisfaction from the fans perspective can be reached already at a mid-level engagement. Furthermore, with many literatures on sports and SM focusing mainly on football as already emphasized, the study contributes to the limited literature on hockey clubs use of SM and more importantly, gives a detailed insight into how sports organizations can use SM to build their brand and relationship with their fans.

Moreover, the study identifies new variables relating to the engagement theory thus timely information, content diversity, Q&A and continuous level of engagement. These new variables were identified to help sports organizations to build their relationship with their fans on SM. Researchers do believe that these new variables identified, modifies and corrects what previous research has identified to help sports organizations build relationships with their fans on SM especially when data used in this study was derived from both sports clubs and their fans. In general, these new variables which have been incorporated into the theory of customer engagement provides a more detailed and practical approach on how sports organizations can build a solid relationship with their fans on SM while developing their brand in the process.

Lastly, with much research on SM and its usage mainly based on gratification theories as pointed out by (Filo et al., 2015), the study contributes to the research on the relationship marketing and engagement process enabled via SM by showing how brands and relationships can be built through customer engagement and interaction. To a larger extent, the study will stimulate further research into the engagement process enabled via SM in relationship marketing by taking into consideration the perspective of both business and their customers.

6.5 Practical Contribution

The study aimed to ascertain how sports organizations use SM to build their relationship and brand. To this, the study offers recommendations to sports organizations on how they can use SM to build and develop their brand as well as relationship with their fans. For example, the study did show that for customer relationships to be built or developed, a continuous level of interaction and engagement is required. This enlightens sport organizations on how to plan their activities on SM. Also, the study is timely especially during this period of a global pandemic where many businesses have been affected badly. The study brings to light how sports organizations, especially hockey clubs have been able to cope during this global pandemic considering their relationship with their fans. This makes issues discussed in the study more relevant and credible. Moreover, the study provides an understanding of how sports organizations have been able to manage their relationship on SM during the global pandemic as a result of fans ' inability to visit the stadium.

This will help sports managers across the globe know the demands and expectations of sports fans, so they know how to satisfy them. Likewise, the study presents a framework which provides a practical insight into how sports organizations can build and develop their brand on SM especially when fan involvement has been identified to play a vital role in such a process. In summary, researchers do believe that for sports organizations to build or develop their relationship with their fans on SM, interacting and engaging with them consistently should be the top priority. This is because findings do show that having an engagement and interaction strategy is not enough to build or develop relationships but rather the consistency in how the said strategy is being implemented.

6.6 Reflection on the Study and Recommendation for Future Study

To fill the research gap and thus achieve the aim of the study, the researchers employed a qualitative approach by collecting empirical data from both hockey fans and professional hockey clubs in Sweden. The findings from the study were then analysed from the perspective of the clubs and the fans to investigate if the strategies used by the clubs were effective or not in building their brand and relationship with fans. However, a limitation to take into consideration is that the fans who were interviewed could have been biased in their perception of their clubs social media usage. As the literature and the study verifies, sports fans are considered to have an affective commitment towards their club on their own accord.

Considering the nature of the study, the research was conducted during the Swedish Hockey league play-offs, which might have played a part in only three clubs responding. Thus, the study can be enhanced when its scope is broadened by including other hockey clubs or even other sports. Furthermore, due to an externality which is directly connected to the global pandemic, fans have been restricted from visiting live matches which have made the process of acquiring fans who were willing to participate in the study a challenge. Therefore, by broadening the scope with more fans and clubs would assist in obtaining views from different perspectives regarding the concept of relationship building on SM. Moreover, a quantitative method can be used in future studies to determine the relationship between interaction and engagement and more importantly, whether there exists a relationship between the different levels of engagement. This will help strengthen the overall position on the concept of interaction and engagement. Concluding, future research can be done by involving different hockey clubs to make a comparative analysis of the different engagement and interaction strategies used by these clubs. This could help identify areas where these clubs fall short in terms of strategies and also develop appropriate recommendations.

Reference list

Aaker, D.A. (1996). Measuring brand equity across products and markets. *California management review*, *38*(3).

Abeza, G. & O'Reilly, N. (2014). Social media platforms' use in building stakeholder relationships: The case of national sport organizations. *Journal of Applied Sport Management*, *6*(3), p.10.

Achen, R.M. (2019). Re-examining a model for measuring Facebook interaction and relationship quality. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 9(3), pp.255–272.

Alhathal, F.T., Sharma, P. & Kingshott, R.P.J. (2019). Moderating effects of service separation on customer relationships with service firms. *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, 29(1), pp.71–92.

Armstrong, G., Adam, S., Denize, S., & Kotler, P. (2014). *Principles of marketing*. Pearson Australia.

Azungah, T. (2018). Qualitative research: deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, [online] 18(4), pp.383–400. Available at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/QRJ-D-18-00035/full/html.

Babbie, E. (2010). Research design. *The practice of social research*, 85-88.

Bauer, H.H., Sauer, N.E. & Schmitt, P. (2005). Customer-based brand equity in the team sport industry. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(5/6), pp.496–513.

Beech, J. & Chadwick, S. (2007). Introduction: the marketing of sport. *The marketing of sport. Essex: Pearson Education Limited*.

Berryman, D. R. (2019). Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods: Information for Librarian Researchers, Medical Reference Services Quarterly, Vol.38(3), Pp.271-279.

Biscaia, R., Ross, S., Yoshida, M., Correia, A., Rosado, A. & Marôco, J. (2016). Investigating the role of fan club membership on perceptions of team brand equity in football. *Sport Management Review*, 19(2), pp.157–170.

Bouchet, A., Doellman, T.W., Troilo, M. & Walkup, B.R. (2015). The impact of international football matches on primary sponsors and shareholder wealth. *Journal of Sport Management*, *29*(2), pp.200-210.

Boyd, D. (2007). The significance of social software. In Burg, T. N., Schmidt, J. (Eds.), BlogTalks reloaded: Social software research and cases (pp. 15–30). Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand.

Boyd, D.M. & Ellison, N.B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, [online] 13(1), pp.210–230.

Brodie, R.J., Hollebeek, L.D., Jurić, B. & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research. *Journal of Service Research*, 14(3), pp.252–271.

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business research methods*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Budac, C. & Baltador, L. (2013). The Value of Brand Equity. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 6, pp.444–448.

Cannon, J.P., Doney, P.M., Mullen, M.R. & Petersen, K.J. (2010). Building long-term orientation in buyer–supplier relationships: The moderating role of culture. *Journal of Operations Management*, [online] 28(6), pp.506–521. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272696310000173 [Accessed 31 Dec. 2020].

Choudhury, M.M. & Harrigan, P. (2014). CRM to social CRM: the integration of new technologies into customer relationship management. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 22(2), pp.149–176.

CNN, T.M. (2015). *Google: Getting in front of 3.5 billion football fans*. [online] CNN. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/27/football/roma-juventus-google-football/index.html [Accessed 6 Apr. 2021].

Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Medsurg Nursing*, *25*(6), 435.

Cooper, D. R. & Schindler, P. S. (2014). *Business Research Methods.* 12th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). Interpretive interactionism. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publication.

Donaldson, B. & O'Toole, T. (2007). Strategic Market Relationships: From Strategy to Implementation. *John Wiley & Sons.*

Dolan, R., Conduit, J., Fahy, J., & Goodman, S. (2016). Social media engagement behaviour: A uses and gratifications perspective. Journal of Strategic Marketing, 24, pp. 261–277. doi:10.1080/0965254X.2015.1095222.

Easterby-Smith, M., Jaspersen, L.J., Thorpe, R. & Valizade, D. (2018). *Management and business research*. Sage.

Elena, C.A. (2016). Social Media – A Strategy in Developing Customer Relationship Management. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 39, pp.785–790.

Fırat, A. F., & Dholakia, N. (2006). Theoretical and philosophical implications of postmodern debates: some challenges to modern marketing. *Marketing theory*, *6*(2), 123-162.

Filo, K., Lock, D. & Karg, A. (2015). Sport and social media research: A review. *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), pp.166–181.

Fjellström, D. & Guttormsen, D.S. (2016). A critical exploration of 'access' in qualitative International Business field research: towards a concept of socio-cultural and multidimensional research practice. Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management, Vol.11(2), Pp.110-126.

Frow, P. E. & Payne, A. F. (2009). Customer Relationship Management: A Strategic Perspective. *Journal of business market management*, 3(1), pp.7–27.

Gensler, S., Völckner, F., Liu-Thompkins, Y. & Wiertz, C. (2013). Managing brands in the social media environment. *Journal of interactive marketing*, *27*(4), pp.242-256.

Giulianotti, R. & Collison, H. (2020). Sport and the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Structuralist Analysis of Key Themes in the UK Mass Media. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 2.

Gladden, J.M. (2014). "Brand equity: management and measurement in sport", in Pritchard, M. and Stinson, J.L. (Eds), Leveraging Brands in Sport Business, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 3-20.

Gladden, J.M. & Funk, D.C. (2002). Developing an Understanding of Brand Associations in Team Sport: Empirical Evidence from Consumers of Professional Sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, 16(1), pp.54–81.

Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The qualitative report*, *8*(4), 597-607.

Gustafsson, A., Johnson, M.D. & Roos, I. (2005). The Effects of Customer Satisfaction, Relationship Commitment Dimensions, and Triggers on Customer Retention. *Journal of Marketing*, 69(4), pp.210–218.

Heller Baird, C. & Parasnis, G. (2011). From social media to social customer relationship management. *Strategy & Leadership*, 39(5), pp.30–37.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Malthouse, E.C., Friege, C., Gensler, S., Lobschat, L., Rangaswamy, A. & Skiera, B. (2010). The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships. *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3), pp.311–330.

Henric Wauge (2020), LISTA: De är störst på sociala medier. Retrieved from https://hockeybladet.nu/ligor/shl/lista-de-ar-storst-pa-sociala-medier/

Hollebeek, L.D. & Brodie, R.J. (2016). Non-monetary social and network value: Understanding the effects of non-paying customers in new media.

Hums, M.A., Barr, C.A. & Gullion, L. (1999). The Ethical Issues Confronting Managers in the Sport Industry. *Journal of Business Ethics*, [online] 20(1), pp.51–66. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25074118 [Accessed 6 Apr. 2021].

Kaplan, A.M. & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, [online] 53(1), pp.59–68.

Kaynak, E., Salman, G.G. & Tatoglu, E. (2007). An integrative framework linking brand associations and brand loyalty in professional sports. *Journal of Brand Management*, 15(5), pp.336–357.

Keller, K.L. & Lehmann, D.R. (2006). Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities. *Marketing Science*, [online] 25(6), pp.740–759. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40057218 [Accessed 6 Apr. 2021].

Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P. & Silvestre, B.S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, [online] 54(3), pp.241–251. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005.

Koll, O. & von Wallpach, S., (2009). One brand perception? Or many? The heterogeneity of intra-brand knowledge. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

Kumar, V. (2010). Customer relationship management. *Wiley international encyclopedia of marketing*.

Kunkel, T. & Biscaia, R. (2020). Sport Brands: Brand Relationships and Consumer Behavior. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 29(1), pp.3–17.

Larkin, B. & McKelvey, S. (2015). Of Smart Phones and Facebook: Social Media's Changing Legal Landscape Provides Cautionary Tales of "Pinterest" for Sport Organizations. *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport*, 25(2), pp.123–153.

Laurell, C. & Soderman, S. (2018). Sport in business studies: a state-of-the-art literature review. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 8(5), pp.529–546.

Li, X. (Shirley), Chan, K.W. & Kim, S. (2019). Service with Emoticons: How Customers Interpret Employee Use of Emoticons in Online Service Encounters. *Journal of Consumer Research*, [online] 45(5), pp.973–987.

Liu, D., Zhang, J.J. & Desbordes, M. (2017). Sport business in China: current state and prospect. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 18(1), pp.2–10.

Machado, J.C., Martins, C.C., Ferreira, F.C., Silva, S.C. e & Duarte, P.A. (2020). Motives to engage with sports brands on Facebook and Instagram–The case of a Portuguese football club. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 21(2), pp.325–349.

Malik, A., Heyman-Schrum, C. & Johri, A. (2019). Use of Twitter across educational settings: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *16*(1), pp.1-22.

Malär, L., Krohmer, H., Hoyer, W.D. & Nyffenegger, B. (2011). Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Personality: The Relative Importance of the Actual and the Ideal Self. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(4), pp.35–52.

McCarthy, J., Rowley, J., Jane Ashworth, C. & Pioch, E. (2014). Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs. *Internet Research*, 24(2), pp.181–204.

McGowan, K.B. (2015). Social expectation improves speech perception in noise. *Language and Speech*, *58*(4), pp.502-521.

Meng, M.D., Stavros, C. & Westberg, K. (2015). Engaging fans through social media: implications for team identification. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 5(3), pp.199–217.

Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N.T. & Christodoulides, G. (2011). Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands. *Industrial Marketing Management*, [online] 40(7), pp.1153–1159. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0019850111001374.

Min, S., Zhang, X. & Li, G. (2020). A snapshot of the food supply chain in Wuhan under the COVID-19 pandemic. *China Agricultural Economic Review*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print).

Mittal, V. & Kamakura, W.A. (2001). Satisfaction, Repurchase Intent, and Repurchase Behavior: Investigating the Moderating Effect of Customer Characteristics. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 38(1), pp.131–142.

Moalusi, K. (2020). Numbers conceal the intricacies in categorising qualitative research in organisational studies: What lies beneath the surface? SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, Vol.46, Pp.1-12.

Morgan, A., Adair, D., Taylor, T. & Hermens, A. (2014). Sport sponsorship alliances: relationship management for shared value. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 4(4), pp.270–283.

Mosley, L. (2013). *Interview Research in Political Science.* 1st ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Mullin, B.J., Hardy, S. & Sutton, W. (2014). *Sport marketing 4th edition*. Human Kinetics.

Muntinga, D.G., Moorman, M. & Smit, E.G. (2011). Introducing COBRAs: Exploring motivations for brand-related social media use. *International Journal of advertising*, *30*(1), pp.13-46.

Nikander, P. (2008). Working with Transcripts and Translated Data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 5(3), pp.225–231.

Nyadzayo, M.W. & Khajehzadeh, S. (2016). The antecedents of customer loyalty: A moderated mediation model of customer relationship management quality and brand image. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 30, pp.262–270.

O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is Web 2.0.Design patterns and business models for the next generation. Retrieved from http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html Google Scholar

Park, N., Kee, K. & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in a social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. CyberPsychol Behav 12: 729–733.

Payne, A. & Frow, P. (2017). Relationship marketing: looking backwards towards the future. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 31(1), pp.11–15.

Pourazad, N., Stocchi, L. & Pare, V. (2019). The power of brand passion in sports apparel brands. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print).

Pronschinske, M., Groza, M. D., & Walker, M. (2012). Attracting Facebook 'Fans': The importance of authenticity and engagement as a social networking strategy for professional sport teams. *Sport marketing quarterly*, *21*(4), 221.

Reinartz, W., Krafft, M. & Hoyer, W.D. (2004). The Customer Relationship Management Process: Its Measurement and Impact on Performance. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 41(3), pp.293–305.

Richelieu, A. & Pons, F. (2006). Toronto Maple Leafs vs Football Club Barcelona: how two legendary sports teams built their brand equity. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 7(3), pp.79–98.

Ross, S.D., Russell, K.C. & Bang, H. (2008). An Empirical Assessment of Spectator-Based Brand Equity. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22(3), pp.322–337.

Ross, S.D. (2007). "Segmenting sport fans using brand associations: a cluster analysis", Sport Marketing Quarterly, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 15-24.

Sandvoss, C. (2005). Fans: The mirror of consumption. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Santos, T.O., Correia, A., Biscaia, R. and Pegoraro, A. (2019). Examining fan engagement through social networking sites. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 20(1), pp.163–183.

Sashi, C.M. (2012). Customer engagement, buyer-seller relationships, and social media. *Management Decision*, [online] 50(2), pp.253–272. Available at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/00251741211203551/full/html.

Sashi, C.M., Brynildsen, G. & Bilgihan, A. (2019). Social media, customer engagement and advocacy. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(3), pp.1247–1272.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2012). *Research methods for business students.* 6th ed. Harlow: Pearson.

Stavros, C., Meng, M.D., Westberg, K. & Farrelly, F. (2014). Understanding fan motivation for interacting on social media. *Sport management review*, *17*(4), pp.455-469.

Spens, K.M. & Kovács, G. (2006). A content analysis of research approaches in logistics research. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, 36(5), pp.374–390.

Statista. (2015). *Sports merchandising revenue worldwide 2006-2015 | Statista*. [online] Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/269797/worldwide-revenue-from-sports-merchandising/.

Stavros, C., Meng, M.D., Westberg, K. & Farrelly, F. (2014). Understanding fan motivation for interacting on social media. *Sport Management Review*, 17(4), pp.455–469.

Steinhoff, L., Arli, D., Weaven, S. & Kozlenkova, I.V. (2018). Online relationship marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, [online] 47(3), pp.369–393. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11747-018-0621-6.

Sumner, A. & Tribe, M. (2004). The nature of epistemology and methodology in development studies: what do we mean by 'rigour'. In Development Studies Association Annual Conference. Pp.1-27.

Svenska Ishockeyförbundet (2020), Antal SM-guld sedan 1922. Retrieved from https://www.swehockey.se/Hockeyboken/Herrar/svenskamastareshl/AntalSMGuldsedan 1922/.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2007). *Beyond loyalty Meeting the challenge of customer engagement*. [online] Available at: http://graphics.eiu.com/files/ad_pdfs/eiu_AdobeEngagementPt_I_wp.pdf.

Thomas, D.R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, [online] 27(2), pp.237–246.

Thompson, A.-J., Martin, A.J., Gee, S. & Geurin, A.N. (2018). Building brand and fan relationships through social media. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 8(3), pp.235–256.

Timmermans, S. & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), pp.167–186.

Tsai, W.H.S. & Men, L.R. (2013). Motivations and antecedents of consumer engagement with brand pages on social networking sites. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, *13*(2), pp.76-87.

Underwood, R., Bond, E. & Baer, R. (2001). Building Service Brands via Social Identity: Lessons from the Sports Marketplace. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 9(1), pp.1–13.

United Nations (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on sport, physical activity and well-being and its effects on social development*. [online] United Nations. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2020/05/covid-19-sport/.

Vale, L. & Fernandes, T. (2017). Social media and sports: driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 26(1), pp.37–55.

Wallace, L., Wilson, J. & Miloch, K. (2011). Sporting Facebook: A Content Analysis of NCAA Organizational Sport Pages and Big 12 Conference Athletic Department Pages. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4(4), pp.422–444.

Waters, R.D. (2015). Charting fandom through social media communication: A multi-league analysis of professional sports teams' Facebook content Justin Walden, State University of New York College at Brockport &. *PRism*, *12*, pp.1-18.

Wang, F., Head, M. & Archer, N. (2000). A relationship-building model for the Web retail marketplace. *Internet Research*, 10(5), pp.374–384.

Williams, J. & Chinn, S.J. (2010). Meeting Relationship-Marketing Goals Through Social Media: A Conceptual Model for Sport Marketers. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3(4), pp.422–437.

www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com. (2019). *Our Market Research Reports | The Business Research Company*. [online] Available at: https://www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com/report-preview1.aspx?Rid=sports%20market [Accessed 6 Apr. 2021].

Yin, R.K. (2004). CaseStudy Research: Designs and Methods. *Harvard Educational Review*, *74*(1), pp.107-109.

Yoshida, M., Gordon, B., Nakazawa, M. & Biscaia, R. (2014). Conceptualization and Measurement of Fan Engagement: Empirical Evidence From a Professional Sport Context. *Journal of Sport Management*, 28(4), pp.399–417

Yousaf, A., Gupta, A. & Mishra, A. (2017). Sport team brand-equity index: a new measurement. *Journal of Indian Business Research*, 9(2), pp.169–188.

Zhang, J.J., Kim, E., Mastromartino, B., Qian, T.Y. & Nauright, J. (2018). The sport industry in growing economies: critical issues and challenges. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 19(2), pp.110–126.

Zikmund, W. G., Babin, B. J., Carr, J. C. & Griffin, M. (2010). *Business Research Methods*. 8th ed. Mason: South-Western Cengage Learning.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Questions for the Fans

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you followed your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
3. Who encouraged you to follow your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
4. What is the reason for visiting your hockey club's (*the name of the Hockey Club*) social media platforms?
5. How do you perceive the relationship with your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media during the pandemic?
6. Have you ever posted anything on social media of your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) to make the platform usage more enjoyable?
7. Do you interact with your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
8. What do you think of the content posted by your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
9. Under what circumstance would you unfollow your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
10. Do you perceive your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) as a brand?
11. How would you describe your commitment towards your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*)?
12. Have you ever shared news about your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
13. Do you encourage others to follow your favourite hockey club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) on social media?
14. Have you noticed any changes on social media in terms of how the club (*the name of the Hockey Club*) is using it during the pandemic?
15. Has the club (the name of the Hockey Club) taken measures to engage fans in the club's issues through encouraging feedback and opinions from fans on social media and have those measures changed during the pandemic?
16. Is there anything you would like to add about your favourite hockey clubs (*the name of the Hockey Club*) social media? It can be both positive or negative, suggestions for improvement or something that is already very good?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for the Hockey Clubs

1. Could you please tell us a bit about your job description?
2. How long have you worked at the club?
3. Do you consider that the pandemic has affected the relationship with fans since they cannot attend the games?
4. How important is social media in building your brand and relationship with fans and other customers during the pandemic?
5. How do you build and maintain relationships with fans through social media?
6. How do you use social media to attract new fans and customers?
7. Do you seek the opinions of fans on social media? (why/why not)
8. Do you ask fans to contribute their own content during events and games and share it on social media? (Why/why not)
9. Do you have a clear marketing strategy to enhance your brand on social media?
10. What content that you post on social media is considered as strengthening the brand and what content is considered to strengthen the relationship with fans?
11. Has your content posting in social media changed during the pandemic? If so, how?
12. Is there anything you would like to add and is relevant to the topic discussed?

Appendix 3

Follow up questions used during the interviews

- *Can you please explain more about your thoughts on how you are more than just a sports organisation?*
- *Why and what is the reason that you share news about your favourite hockey club on social media?*
- *Why do you encourage others to follow your favourite hockey club on social media?*
- *Did maybe a family member, friend or the club encourage you to follow your favourite hockey club on social media?*
- *Can you explain more on how your favourite hockey club is a brand?*
- *Why do you not encourage others to follow your favourite hockey club on social media?*
- *When you did not live in the same town as your favourite hockey club, did you then encourage others to follow them on social media?*
- *You mentioned earlier their YouTube channel, is that something new that they have started with?*
- *Can you give an example on how your favourite hockey club is taking measures to engage fans in the club´s issues?*
- *Is there an ongoing interaction between the fans and club on social media?*
- *Why and what is the purpose of sharing news on social media about your favourite hockey club?*
- *Is there anything special you look for when visiting your favourite hockey clubs social media?*
- *Why do you perceive the relationship between the fans and the club on social media that way?*
- *Has the club answered your views on social media?*
- *Have not noticed any difference in the usage of social media before and during the global pandemic?*
- *Can you elaborate on that?*
- *Do you believe that in case Djurgårdens IF is being successful over a longer period of time and by constantly sharing news about that success would bring the organisation more followers on social media?*
- *One could say that the younger generation is connected to social media, how do you reach the older generation?*
- *Have you brought in extra staff members during the ongoing pandemic to meet the fans' expectations on social media?*
- *When you say you can become better at certain things, has it come up in connection with the pandemic?*
- *Have you gained more followers by playing hockey in Europe?*
- *Do you do anything else besides Inside Indians and Mic'd up?*
- *In which way has it affected the relationship?*
- *In what way have you succeeded / failed?*
- *You also mentioned earlier that you called to season card holders, how many phone calls was that in total?*
- *You have the most followers of all SHL organisations, why do you think that is so?*

- *Can you elaborate more on the comment part you mentioned, is it the fans or the club´s comments you are referring to?*
- *What do you consider to be good?*
- *Do you think this is due to the pandemic?*
- *If the majority of the fans were against a change of the logo, do you think Frölunda HC would listen to the fans?*
- *What about if they would get relegated from the SHL and then also from the Allsvenskan, would you then stop following them on social media?*
- *In which way do you think they have changed their approach on social media?*
- *What is missing according to you?*

Appendix 4

Example of Transcribed Interview with one of the Sports Organisations (Original)

1. **Kan du berätta lite om vad som ingår i ditt jobb (vad är ditt ansvar och vad är det du gör)?**

Kommunikationsansvarig i Luleå Hockey vilket innebär att jag har ansvar för vår hemsida, våra sociala medier, jag hjälper marknadsavdelningen med annonser, allt säljmaterial, skickar ut nyhetsbrev, har kontakten med media där jag förse dem information. Extern kommunikation framför allt.

2. **Hur länge har du jobbat på klubben?**

Jag har jobbat på klubben sedan 2005 och har världens bästa jobb.

3. **Anser du att pandemin har påverkat förhållandet med fansen med tanke på att de inte kan komma till arenan för att titta på matcherna live?**

Det har det definitivt gjort eftersom engagemanget hos fansen gentemot klubben är stor. Våra Diehard fans följer oss fullt ut i alla fall men framför allt så har det märkts under säsongen att de fansen som inte är Diehard fans väljer att göra någonting annat nu i stället för att komma på våra matcher. De är kanske inte heller lika angelägen som tidigare att hålla koll på när vi har match vilket kan bero på att man inte blir lika mycket påmind som tidigare av sina kollegor på jobbet eller i skolan som har varit på matchen och berättat om det för sin omgivning.

4. **Hur viktig är sociala medier för att bygga ert varumärke och en relation med fansen och andra potentiella kunder under den pågående pandemin?**

Det är oerhört viktigt för oss, eftersom vi kan uttrycka oss som förening som vi vill och lyfta fram det vi vill lyfta fram. Vidare kan vi ha en direktkontakt med våra fans som kan ställa frågor direkt via sociala medier och vi kan besvara dem. Vi kan fånga upp de funderingar som finns bland fansen och besvara dem i tid innan det kanske blir ett problem. Så sociala medier är ett viktigt verktyg och ger oss en jättemöjlighet att höra, bemöta, redan ut eventuella missförstånd och för att nå ut med information om vår förening på ett kostnads och resurseffektivt sätt. Det gäller för både vårt varumärke och för relationen med fansen eftersom det går hand i hand med varandra. Vi kan därför kommunicera ganska allmänt och brett och samtidigt nå ut till allmänheten vad gäller varumärke och fans.

5. **Hur gör ni för att behålla och även bygga vidare relationen ni har med fansen via sociala medier?**

Vi har en plan att kommunicera löpande, dvs. vi försöker att publicera något nytt varannan timme under de vakna timmarna på dygnet. Men på grund av pandemin så kommer vi kanske inte riktigt upp till de nivåerna som det är tänkt eftersom det inte blir lika mycket fokus på försäljning av matchbiljetterna som det har varit tidigare. Så lite mindre har det blivit men vi försöker ändå att fortsätta med att publicera inlägg på våra sociala medier eftersom intresset hos fansen är stor och har inte blivit mindre på grund av pandemin.

6. **Hur använder ni sociala medier för att locka in nya fans och kunder?**

Att locka in nya fans via sociala medier har vi nog inte tänkt på så jättemycket utan det är genom vår sportsliga verksamhet som helhet som lockar in nya fans. Sen kan vi stärka bilden av vår förening via sociala medier genom att visa en annan sida av vår förening utöver det idrottsliga. Vi visar vad vi jobbar med och vilka ansvar vi tar gentemot ungdomar och samhället och att vi är mer än en idrottsförening.

Följdfråga på det: Kan du berätta mer om hur ni är mer än en idrottsförening?

Till en början är vi en av de största företeelserna i hela Norrbotten och de som man pratar med utanför Norrbotten och det de känner till om Luleå är just Luleå HC, i alla fall topp tre i den bemärkelsen. Oavsett om man följer Hockey eller inte så vet folk utanför Norrbotten om att Luleå HC finns.

7. **Efterfrågar ni fansens åsikter om diverse saker på sociala medier? (varför/varför inte)** *Gör det redan?*

Det gör vi, men kanske inte lika mycket via sociala medier utan gör det framför allt i direkt kontakt med styrelsen för Luleå fansen, vi har en VD som har löpande kontakt med ståplats publiken för att ha en bra relation med dem. Det är därför bättre att sköta den kontakten personligt istället för att posta inlägg via sociala medier.

Men vi ställer frågor via sociala medier om vilken spelare vi ska göra en tröja på härnäst, i Champions Hockey League har fansen fått vara med och rösta på vilken typ av design det ska vara på tröjan. Detsamma gjorde vi när vi skulle byta vår logo. Vi försöker att lyssna och engagera våra fans så mycket som möjligt.

8. **Uppmuntrar ni fansen att dela egna innehåll på era sociala medier under ett evenemang eller match?**

Det gör vi. Till exempel när man köper stöd biljetter så får man en unik biljett med sitt namn på och det vill vi att man ska dela med sig på sociala medier. Syftet är att vi vill kunna uppmärksamma folk runt omkring om våra matcher och för att få fansen att hjälpa till att inspirera andra att också skaffa sig stödbiljetterna. Under slutspelet pågår det en operation "Röda Luleå" som fansen har startat där man ska hänga upp en flagga eller en matchtröja vid fönstret och att man ska ta en bild på det och lägga ut det på sociala medier för att inspirera andra. Så vi uppmuntra fansen definitivt att dela egna innehåll på sociala medier. För vår del blir det bara positivt om inläggen kommer från någons vän eller familjemedlem.

9. **Har ni en tydlig marknadsföringsstrategi på sociala medier för att stärka ert varumärke?**

Ingen skriftlig marknadsföringsstrategi så utan vi har det ganska klart för oss ändå åt vilket håll vi strävar efter att gå. Vi pratar mycket med varandra inom klubben om att engagera fansen och försöker att vara ödmjuka i vårt tillvägagångssätt där vi lyfter fram både företag och individer på sociala medier.

10. **Vad för typ av innehåll som ni publicerar på sociala medier betraktas som stärkande av varumärke och vad för typ av innehåll anses stärka relationen med fansen?**

Jag skulle säga att relationen med fansen och varumärke är i stort sett samma sak för oss. Det handlar mest om att man ska känna någonting för föreningen och att man ska brinna för föreningen lika mycket som vi själva gör i klubben eller till och med mer än vad vi gör. Engagemang hos fansen gentemot en klubb är enorm om man jämför med ett vanligt företag. Där hade det nog blivit annorlunda i hur man bygger ett varumärke och en relation med kunder. Men kring en idrott och den passion som finns för idrotten så är relation och varumärke ett.

11. **Har ert innehåll, era inlägg på sociala medier, förändrats under pandemin? Om så är fallet, hur har den förändrats?**

Framför allt har vi pushat mindre på att köpa matchbiljetter. Vi har kanske inte heller varit lika nära fansen som tidigare med våra inlägg eftersom vi inte vill provocera någon med våra inlägg utifrån de rådande restriktioner. Vi kan därför inte lägga ut lika mycket bilder på våra träningar och andra saker eftersom spelarna kanske står för nära varandra. Vi känner att man måste ta hänsyn till det och även fast vi bedriver en smitt säker verksamhet så kan det på en enskild bild se tveksamt ut och därför har vi då valt att inte lägga ut bilder lika mycket som tidigare.

12. **Finns det något du skulle vilja tillägga och som är relevant för ämnet?**

Vi funderar mycket på den yngre målgruppen och andra plattformar som Tiktok. Facebook är det största för oss, Twitter har vi mest aktivitet på, Instagram växer väldigt mycket och LinkedIn är ett måste och så finns vi på Youtube. Så frågan blir då för oss om vilka fler kanaler ska vi finnas på, ska vi vara med på Tiktok, Snapchat eller Clubhouse, eller finns det något annat som man ska både synas och höras på? Samt måste man betänka också hur mycket det ger tillbaka med tanke på de resurser man har och krävs.

Example of Transcribed Interview with one of the Sports Organisations (Translation)

1. Could you please tell us a bit about your job description?
I am communication and media manager at the club Luleå Hockey which means that I am responsible for our website, our social media, I help the marketing department with ads, send out newsletters, and I have contact with the media where I provide them with information. My responsibilities are all types of external communication.

2. How long have you worked at the club?
I have worked at the club since 2005 and have the best job in the world.

3. Do you consider that the pandemic has affected the relationship with fans since they cannot attend the games?
It has definitely affected the relationship with the fans as our fans are very committed towards the club. Our Die-hard fans are still very invested in our club and are following us no matter what, however, we have noticed that during the season, fans who aren't Die-hard fans and as committed as them, choose to do something else now instead of coming to our matches. They may not either be as interested as before the pandemic to keep track of when we have a game. This could be due to them not getting reminded as often anymore by colleagues at work or at school who have been to the game and then talk about it the next day with their surroundings.

4. How important is social media in building your brand and relationship with fans and other customers during the pandemic?
It is extremely important to us because through social media we can express ourselves as a sports organisation in the way we want and also highlight certain aspects we believe is important to us. Furthermore, social media gives us an avenue to have direct contact with our fans who can ask questions directly through social media and we have the possibility to answer them right away. We can capture views and thoughts that are among the fans in an earlier stage and answer them in time before it might blossom into a bigger problem. So once again, social media is an important tool and gives us a huge opportunity to hear, respond, clear out any misunderstandings and it gives us a possibility to reach out with information about the sport organisation in a cost and resource efficient way. This applies to both our brand and the relationship with the fans because brand and relationship goes hand in hand with one another. The usage of social media gives us the possibility to communicate in a quite general and broad way and at the same time reach out to the public in terms of brand and fans.

5. How do you build and maintain relationships with fans through social media?
We have a strategy to communicate through our social media continuously where we try to publish something new every two hours during the waking hours of the day. However, due to the pandemic, we may not really reach the set up levels as we are no longer focused on sales of match tickets as we have done before. We still try to continue to publish posts on social media because the interest for our club from the fans is very high and has not declined due to the pandemic.

6. How do you use social media to attract new fans and customers?
We have not really put any thoughts into how to attract new fans and customers through social media, however, we believe that we attract new fans and customers through our event and sporting activities in general. What we can do on social media is strengthen the image of the sport club by showing fans and customers a different side of us in addition

to sports. We can show what we work with and what kind of responsibilities we take towards the younger generation and towards the society and that we are more than just a sports organisation.

Follow-up Question: *Please tell us more about your thoughts on how you are more than just a sports club?*

To begin with, we are one of the biggest phenomena in the whole of Norrbotten and those you talk to outside Norrbotten know about Luleå HC. Regardless of whether you follow Hockey or not, people outside of Norrbotten are aware that Luleå HC exists.

7. Do you seek the opinions of fans on social media? (why/why not)

Yes, we do seek the opinions of our fans, perhaps not as much through social media, but we do it by having direct contact with the board of the Luleå fans. Our CEO has an ongoing contact with the stand audience with the goal of creating a good relationship with them. We believe it to be more efficient to handle the contact personally instead of posting through social media. However, we do ask the fans questions through social media about which player we should make a jersey on next, when we played in the Champions Hockey League fans were able to participate and vote on what type of design the jersey should be. We used the same approach when we changed our logo. We try to listen and engage our fans as much as we possibly can.

8. Do you encourage fans to contribute their own content during events and games and share it on social media? (Why/why not)

Yes, we do that. For example, when you buy a support ticket, you get a unique ticket with your name on it, and we want the fans to share it on social media. The purpose is that we want to be able to draw attention to people around our games and to get fans to help inspire others to also buy the support tickets. During the playoffs, we fans have started a so-called "Red Luleå" operation which means that fans hang out a flag or a match shirt by the window and then take a picture of it and post it on social media to inspire others. So yes, we definitely encourage fans to share their own content on social media which in turn has a positive effect for us if these posts come from someone's friend or family member.

9. Do you have a clear marketing strategy to enhance your brand on social media?

We do not have a written marketing strategy; however, we still have a clear idea and vision of which direction we are striving to go. We do talk a lot with each other within the club about engaging the fans and try to be as humble as we can in approach when we highlight both business partners and fans on social media.

10. What content that you post on social media is considered as strengthening the brand and what content is considered to strengthen the relationship with fans?

I would say that relationships with fans and brands are pretty much the same thing for us. It is mainly about creating a feeling and passion for the sports club as we do ourselves here at the club or even more than ourselves. The commitment of the fans towards the club is enormous compared to a regular company. There they would probably have different views on how to build a brand and how to build a relationship with customers. However, in terms of sports and the passions that are associated with it, relationships with fans and brands are considered to be one thing.

11. Has your content posting in social media changed during the pandemic? If so, how?

Yes, the content has changed as we are now pushing less on selling match tickets on social media. We may not be as close to the fans as we were before the pandemic with our posts because we do not want to provoke anyone with our posts based on the current restrictions. We can for example not post as many pictures of our training and other things around it because the players may be too close to each other and people might get offended by it. We are of the opinion that we need to respect that point of view from people even though we do apply all the necessary adjustments to run an infection-proof business. However, it can look questionable on an individual picture and because of that we have decided not to post as many pictures anymore as we did before the pandemic.

12. Is there anything you would like to add and is relevant to the topic discussed?

We think a lot about the younger target group and also if we should include other types of platforms like for example Tiktok. Facebook is the biggest platform for us where we have the most followers, we have the most activities on Twitter, Instagram is growing a lot and LinkedIn is a must have and we are also visible on YouTube. So, the question then becomes for us what more and other channels should we be on, is it Tiktok, Snapchat or Clubhouse, or is there something else where we should be seen and heard on? And we would also need to consider how much it would give us to enter a new platform and if we have the resources and requirements to enter a new platform.

Appendix 5

Hejsan till alla "Name of the team" Fans 💪,

Jag skriver just nu min D-uppsats på Högskolan i Gävle där jag undersöker hur Hockeyföreningar använder sociala medier för att skapa en relation till sina fans under den pågående pandemin! Därför söker jag fyra frivilliga för en intervju. 👊

Jag har redan intervjuat klubben och söker nu därför fansen synpunkter på det hela för att göra mitt arbete komplett.

Intervjun kommer att ta ca. 15–20 min och jag hoppas innerligt att det finns fyra "Name of the team" Fans som kan hjälpa mig med det. 🙏

Om någonting känns oklart så är det bara att fråga så ska jag besvara er så gott jag kan.

Tillägg: Ni kan skicka ett PM till mig så kommer jag att svara er så fort jag bara kan!

Tack så jättemycket! 👍🙏

Med vänlig hälsning / Giancarlo