The impact of onboarding and nurturing fans

A qualitative research of Swedish ice hockey organizations strategies in their interaction with occasional and devoted fans

Author: Alexander Andlöw & Gustaf Carlgren
Supervisor: Hans Allmér
Examiner: Christine Tidåsen
University: Linnaeus University
Term: VT23
Subject: Business Administration III – Degree Project
Level: Degree of Bachelor
Abstract

With the constant challenge of successfully appealing to new customers and nurturing the relationships that sports organizations have created with their customers, well-thought-out and adapted strategies are required in communication. Since organizations from the sports industry are characterized by great competition from other organizations but also from other industries such as the entertainment industry, a clear and well-thought-out approach is needed for how customers are to be engaged and build loyalty. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to research how Swedish ice hockey organizations cultivate relationships with their devoted and occasional fans and which strategies they use to influence them as well as the impact the fan engagement has on their loyalty.

The empirical findings in this research derived from a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing semi-structured interviews. The focus of the research was on four ice hockey organizations from the top two tiers in Sweden, enabling a comprehensive examination of the subject matter. Then the results from the interviews that were carried out together with the presented literature review were discussed and analyzed to compare and distinguish similarities and differences.

The conclusion of the degree project drew attention to a clear differentiation between occasional and devoted fans, where it appeared that they were engaged by different factors, namely experience and sporting aspects. By leveraging this insight and following the modern trends and digitization, organizations can create opportunities to convert new fans into more loyal and engaged supporters and then nurture the relationship on a deeper level.

Key words

Relationships, Relationship marketing, Engagement, Loyalty, Devoted fans, Occasional fans, Ice hockey organizations, Sweden
Acknowledgments

We, the authors of this degree project, would like to express a big thank you to all those who contributed to this degree project. We would like to express high appreciation to the respondents who contributed information that was valuable for the outcome of the research and invested both time and energy to support this thesis. We extend our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Hans Allmér, for his valuable observation, guidance and keen understanding throughout the entirety of this degree project. In addition, we would like to express our earnest appreciation to examiner Christine Tidåsen for her significant feedback and for inspiring us in our research as well as all the opponent groups which have assisted with their insightful criticism that has raised the quality of the degree project.

Linnaeus University, School of Business and Economics
Kalmar, 24 May 2023

_________________  ___________________
Alexander Andlöw       Gustaf Carlgren
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 1  
   1.1. Background .................................................................................................................. 1  
   1.2. Problem discussion ....................................................................................................... 4  
   1.3. Purpose ......................................................................................................................... 6  
   1.4. Research questions ....................................................................................................... 7  
   1.5. Delimitations ................................................................................................................. 7  

2. **Literature review** .............................................................................................................. 8  
   2.1. Relationship marketing ................................................................................................. 8  
      2.1.1. Sport relationship marketing .................................................................................. 8  
   2.2. Customer engagement .................................................................................................. 10  
      2.2.1. Fan engagement ..................................................................................................... 10  
   2.3. Customer loyalty ........................................................................................................... 12  
      2.3.1. Fan loyalty .............................................................................................................. 13  
      2.3.2. Attitudinal and behavioral loyalty ......................................................................... 14  
   2.4. Devoted and occasional fans ......................................................................................... 15  
   2.5. Conceptual framework ................................................................................................. 17  

3. **Method** ............................................................................................................................ 20  
   3.1. Research approach ....................................................................................................... 20  
   3.2. Research strategy ......................................................................................................... 21  
   3.3. Research design ............................................................................................................ 22  
   3.4. Type of data .................................................................................................................. 23  
   3.5. Research method ......................................................................................................... 24  
      3.5.1. Semi-structured interviews .................................................................................... 24  
   3.6. Operationalization ....................................................................................................... 25  
      3.6.1. Operationalization guide ....................................................................................... 26  
   3.7. Selection of the cases ................................................................................................. 27  
   3.8. Data analysis ............................................................................................................... 30  
      3.8.1. Thematic analysis ................................................................................................... 30  
   3.9. Quality of research ....................................................................................................... 31  
   3.10. Ethical considerations ............................................................................................... 32  
   3.11. Sustainable considerations ....................................................................................... 33  

4. **Empirical findings** ............................................................................................................ 35  
   4.1. Cases ............................................................................................................................. 35  
      4.1.1. Timrå IK ................................................................................................................. 35  
      4.1.2. IK Oskarshamn ....................................................................................................... 36  
      4.1.3. BIK Karlskoga ....................................................................................................... 36  
      4.1.4. Östersunds IK ........................................................................................................ 36  
   4.2. Relationships ................................................................................................................ 37  
   4.3. Engagement .................................................................................................................. 41  
   4.4. Loyalty .......................................................................................................................... 45  

5. **Analysis** ........................................................................................................................... 47  
   5.1. Relationship marketing ............................................................................................... 47  
   5.2. Engagement .................................................................................................................. 49
List of tables

Table 1: Operationalization (Page 27)

Table 2: Details regarding the conducted interviews (Page 30)

Table 3: Clarification of cases (Page 35)

List of figures

Figure 1: The cycle of the conceptual framework (Page 19)

Figure 2: The updated cycle of the conceptual framework (Page 56)
1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter, the authors will first present the background and then move on to the problem discussion. Additionally, the chapter will cover the purpose of the thesis, the research questions and the delimitations that come with it.

1.1. Background

In the context of entertainment, few experiences can match the excitement of an event, as a sports event. Since it fosters a sense of collective spirit, regardless of one showing their support for a team or applauding accomplished athletes that have attained remarkable success (Will, 2017). What we today call modern sport, has undergone a long series of developments throughout history, from the focus in the beginning being on the entertainment from the game itself, to now being an industry that has great competitiveness in size and, above all, high influence. In recent times, sport has had a major impact on today's culture and has reflected shifts in social norms and attitudes (Pearson, nd). Sports have captivated people worldwide, drawing immense crowds of enthusiasts. In an era devoid of television and the internet, engaging in sports viewing emerged as one of the most favored recreational activities. For many individuals, immersing themselves in sports viewing serves as a means to get away from the stressful everyday life. Irrespective of the rationale behind it, there is an undeniable consensus that sports stand as one of the most highly regarded modes of amusement. Because there is a wide variety of sports, it gives people the opportunity to follow what they find entertaining based on their own interests (Franklin, 2022). The act of watching sports unites people and nurtures a feeling of inclusivity and connection. Moreover, sports have an overall positive effect on people as it enhances people's social skills and forms new acquaintances (Off the bench, 2022).

Social changes belong to a topic that sport has influenced for many years, and often in a positive way. Providing both good economic conditions to minimize the social gap to instead build a better bridge between them, sport plays an important role in the world regarding social changes and differences. In addition to this, sport also represents a large economic billion-dollar industry that has a great influence on the world economy, but other characteristics are also found, such as that it contributes to greater equality around the world (Singh, 2020). In 2014, the sports market in North America alone commanded an astounding value of $60.5 billion, underscoring its immense economic significance (Heitner, 2015). Sport is
based on social characteristics and it is therefore an important point of view to take into account. This means that sport stands for equal value and zero tolerance against exclusion and discrimination, but requires that everyone has the right to participate regardless of physical or mental obstacles and limitations. Politically, this has been noticed and in Agenda 2030, the UN has confirmed sport as a means of development towards a more sustainable world, as well as taking into account the stances and values of sport for society, guidance for individuals and the ability to build relationships with engagement (Movesports, 2021).

In 2022, the realm of sports provided an avenue for individuals to connect with their community in Sweden, boasting a staggering number of over 18,000 sports associations and a remarkable participation of approximately 3 million active members. These sports associations have evolved into vibrant gathering spots, attracting individuals who not only seek to engage in the physical activity but also desire to actively participate by joining supporter groups. Hence, sports serve as a platform where individuals can not only connect with like-minded individuals but also forge relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences (Lokaltidningen, 2022). The contribution of fans holds high value for sports teams and organizations in their search for success, which leads to sports organizations striving to create relationships and engage with their fan base. The existence of sports teams and sports leagues around the world heavily relies on the unwavering support of fans who are present in their teams games, purchase merchandise from them, and consistently demonstrate their backing. It is the fans who serve as the driving force behind the world of sports (Greenfly, 2023).

In terms of its ability to engage a substantial portion of the population and shape the collective mood of a nation, the sports industry holds a prominent position in society (Daniels et al., 2020). It is commonly held that fundamental theories in marketing have many similarities with brand research in sports marketing (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). However, some researchers, including Fathy, Elsharnouby, and AbouAish (2021), maintain that the consumption of sports elicits a greater degree of extreme behavior patterns compared to the consumption of other products. Among other things, Ruilley and Pate (2017) note that sports consumers are more inclined to develop intense emotions such as love for their team, athlete, or product.

Ice hockey is one of the most popular sports in Sweden, both in terms of participation and interest, with only football having a larger audience and
higher interest in the country (United sport, 2023). Furthermore, statistics demonstrate that interest in Sweden's top leagues is growing, with increasing numbers of people attending the matches (Shl, 2023). The Swedish ice hockey leagues are no exception to having committed and loyal fans. According to a report by Sveriges radio (2023), fans have been known to travel up to five hours on scooters to attend an ice hockey event in Sweden. Another illustration of the dedicated ice hockey supporters that permeate the sporting culture in Sweden is found in Hälla, outside the city of Leksand. Here, loyal supporters of the Leksands IF ice hockey team have taken charge of an old fire station building and use it to arrange meetings before and after matches, with players from the team and other fans coming together to form a fan community. These gatherings have also generated some money which they then use to sponsor the Leksands IF club with (Rönnkvist, 2019).

In sports clubs, it is common to assume financial risks to achieve both non-profit and operational goals. This also applies to ice hockey organizations in Sweden, where clubs often struggle to finance their operations while maintaining a competitive team. According to Wikström (2020), this situation has led many organizations to take on significant financial risks to obtain resources. In order to minimize such risks, the LA Kings organization of the NHL has shared its marketing strategy of increasing customer engagement and building a loyal customer base. By investing in fostering strong relationships with fans, teams can boost revenue from ticket sales, merchandise, and sponsorships. This approach has proven successful in the NHL, as the LA Kings have managed to create a loyal customer base that has helped establish a strong financial foundation (Smith, 2014). The Swedish ice hockey leagues are influenced by the NHL, and this influence can have a significant impact on the development of Swedish ice hockey. Being one of the largest and most influential ice hockey leagues in the world, the NHL has set an example for many ice hockey clubs globally, inspiring them to adopt its strategies (Carlsson, Backman, & Stark, 2022). A growing trend in the sports industry, including Swedish ice hockey, is the adoption of customer engagement and loyalty strategies similar to those used in the NHL (EY, 2022).

The formation and ongoing engagement of a passionate group of followers is crucial to the financial success of any sports organization (Godin, 2008; Tsiotsou, 2013). Several scientific studies have shown that for some people, sports and sports organizations hold such a significant meaning and impact on their lives that it can be compared to the role of religion. This suggests that sports can serve a similar function as religion by creating
a sense of community, belonging, commitment, and wholeness (Bain-Selbo, 2008; Taylor & Taylor, 1997). However, there is a diversity of fans with different reasons for watching sports, and not all fans equate sports with religion, indicating a range of perspectives among supporters (Amiot, Sansfaçon, & Louis, 2014). Additionally, within sports fan culture, there exists a phenomenon called "bandwagon," where fans only follow successful teams in a specific amount of time. This phenomenon is a form of selective engagement where fans only show interest in successful teams or athletes (Wang et al., 2021). These are just a few examples of the various reasons why people consume sports (Bouchet et al., 2011). Other reasons include excitement, inspiration, and the unique experience that sports events provide (Montgomery, 2018; Franklin, 2022).

1.2. Problem discussion

In today's sports society, fans play a big role for a sports team or organization. Creating good relations with supporters is a strong basic necessity for being able to conduct sporting activities. However, there are differences in how the sports industry's marketing strategies and the traditional retail industry's marketing strategies act. These differences can create difficulties for the organizations in their vision to engage and create devoted supporters if they don't adapt the best suitable strategies for the industry (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2020). A supporter does not only interact with his club during sporadic events or transactions, but rather as part of a longer and more complex relationship (Abeza et al., 2019a). Within the area of customer loyalty, there is an extensive amount of literature, but there is a lack of research within the sports industry as a whole on this topic. Some researchers argue that it requires an extensive methodology involving different sports and countries (Doyle, Kunkel & Funk, 2013).

Previous research has recognized a number of other factors that hold significance in establishing connections that may result in the development of devoted fans. Building trust in the organization is one such factor, which can assist fans in relating to the team. This approach enables organizations to establish substantial trust with their fans, thereby nurturing enduring relationships that culminate in loyalty (Wu, Tsai & Hung, 2012). In accordance with Shuv-Ami and Alon (2020) they believe that it is plausible for sports fans to have a dualistic identity orientation, which encompasses both social and personal identity. This theory centers on how individuals construct their identity by associating with particular groups or categories that may have social or personal characteristics. In the context of sports
fans, this implies that their identity may be influenced both by their membership in a specific social group of fans and by their personal dedication and emotional connections to the sports team or sporting event (Shuv-Ami & Alon, 2020).

Research has shown that it is crucial to look at the behavior of different groups of fans in developing strategies to increase devotion. According to Daniels et al. (2020) it is necessary to examine a wide range of fans, including both devoted supporters and occasional spectators, in order to form a more holistic understanding of customer loyalty (Daniels et al., 2020). For sports marketers and media providers, the extent to which an individual identifies as a sports fan could serve as a valuable variable for market segmentation purposes (Shuv-Ami & Alon, 2020).

Both sports and marketing managers need to have a good understanding of the differences between occasional fans and devoted fans, and adapt their marketing communications accordingly. It is particularly important to differentiate the messages to new fans from those who have a longer relationship with the team (Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Salmi, 2016). To ensure attraction and continued consumption from both new and existing fans, sports marketers need to target strategies relevant to both groups (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). Sports marketers face challenges when it comes to understanding the factors that drive brand loyalty among different fan segments, making it difficult to create effective marketing strategies (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008).

Retaining customer loyalty is crucial in industries such as sports that are marked by unpredictable performance outcomes (Kościólek, 2019). The sports industry faces a unique challenge because unlike other entertainment sectors such as theater, sports teams cannot promise a flawless experience or performance (Yoshida, Heere & Gordon, 2015). Consequently, sports organizations should prioritize satisfying their fans and keep a good communication with them as a strategic objective since it has been shown to increase the likelihood of loyalty and customers returning for repeat experiences (Kościólek, 2019). Consumers' internal motives are reflected in their behavior of attending an event. Therefore, attendance can be seen as an indicator of how much value the event's generate (Hanna et al., 2020). A marketing research conducted on hockey games discovered that organizations which were able to attract fans to the arena created a range of positive outcomes. This includes positive connections with their supporters, a higher frequency of winning,
acclaimed players, reasonable ticket prices, and meaningful engagement with their local community (Paul, Weinbach & Riccardi, 2019).

It is of importance for sports managers to adopt separate marketing strategies for each consumer group and gain insight into their different reasons for attending (Wilkins, 2012). To satisfy different groups of existing or prospective customers, sports marketers must develop distinct levels of brand engagement and consumption opportunities (Dwyer, LeCrom & Greenhalgh, 2018). It is crucial to acknowledge the media's influence in shaping identity salience, particularly as media platforms that have many users offer numerous opportunities for fans to consume media simultaneously, thereby enhancing their media satisfaction (Shuv-Ami & Alon, 2020).

Creating an understanding of what factors influence supporters to go from being occasional fans to becoming devoted fans to the organization is of great importance for a marketing manager, since a large part of the income comes from the fans. Loyal customers are devoted to their organization or club and are therefore seen as repeat customers, a challenge and problem for organizations is therefore to convert customers who are occasional to become more repeat and make them devoted to the organization (Fortunato, 2008). The study of highly devoted fans is crucial due to the significant investment they make in their fandom. Equally important is the examination of occasional fans and what strategies that can be applied to nurture the relationship and engage them to be more devoted (Mays, 2012).

1.3 Purpose

The aim of the present study is to analyze and explore the differences between two distinct groups of fans: occasional fans and devoted fans. By conducting an in-depth investigation, the study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of these fan behaviors and the factors that differentiate them. A central objective of the research is to acquire a more in-depth knowledge of how relationships are established and developed with these different types of supporters. By examining factors that influence the level of engagement of both occasional fans and devoted fans, the study can illustrate the factors that are crucial in creating strong and lasting bonds between supporters and their chosen hockey clubs. In addition, the research seeks to identify strategies and practices that hockey clubs can
use to capitalize on supporter engagement and thereby promote the creation of loyal consumers.

1.4 Research questions

How do Swedish ice hockey clubs establish relationships with devoted and occasional fans?
What impact does engagement have on the loyalty of fans of Swedish ice hockey clubs?

1.5 Delimitations

The research presented in this thesis will be conducted within a limited time frame of two months. This timeframe requires careful planning and prioritization on the depth and breadth of the study as there must be drawn delimitations on the research.

The researchers have chosen to focus their research within one industry, the sports industry. The thesis aims to investigate which marketing strategies ice hockey organizations within the two top tiers in Sweden use and how they are used. Since this thesis aims to examine these variables from an organizational perspective, the consumers' perspective will not be examined. Given that it is ice hockey organizations within the top two tiers in Sweden that are being investigated, the selection will therefore also be limited geographically to Sweden and there is a limitation of organizations selection as it is within the two top tiers.

Since it is a qualitative study, quantitative data from the organizations will not be stored for further analysis or results. Instead, it will focus on the strategies and methods that organizations apply and how they apply them to create relationships, engagement and loyalty with their supporters.
2. Literature review

In this section, the authors elucidate on the pertinent theories that will form the foundation of the research. They discuss theories pertaining to the creation of relationships, value generation, and their influence on engagement, and the subsequent impact on the different levels of loyalty within the organization-consumer relationship. Lastly, the authors present a conceptual framework.

2.1 Relationship marketing

The degree of commitment in a relationship is closely linked to shared values, and the value of the relationship increases as this commitment grows through greater cooperation. When the relationship holds greater value, partners are more inclined to collaborate effectively (Hessling, Åsberg & Roxenhall, 2018). The fundamental principle of Relationship Marketing (RM) involves cultivating mutually beneficial connections, which involves establishing, nurturing, and enhancing relationships, thereby generating value and improvement of these connections (Abeza et al., 2019b). An essential aspect of achieving success for organizations is placing priority on meeting the unique preferences of their customers, as this determines which organizations they select. In order to be successful, it is crucial for an organization to prioritize the perception and experience of its customers, thus becoming their preferred choice. An organization's success in retaining customers and maintaining their patronage depends significantly on their previous interactions with the organization. Meeting the needs of both the community and customers is equally important and critical for the prosperity of any organization (Kiani, 2021). Within fan communities, self-sufficiency is a prevalent trait. Having a relationship with the organization can enhance the group's legitimacy and foster a feeling of belonging among its members. Relationship marketing is a business strategy that entails utilizing marketing efforts to create, nurture, and uphold positive connections with customers or clients. Professional sports organizations aim to interact with their fan base in a way that fosters a sense of involvement and contribution among the fans towards the team (Price & Robinson, 2017).

2.1.1 Sport relationship marketing

Establishing enduring relationships with fans, employees, and other key stakeholders is imperative for the success of a sports organization in
today's fiercely competitive and saturated market. This is where Sports Relationship Marketing (SRM) plays a crucial role. In order to fully grasp the importance of relationships in value creation, it is essential to investigate the systematic function they serve in the process (Abeza, Finch, et al., 2019b).

Meeting consumer needs is a fundamental element of sports marketing. Consumer perceptions of the quality of athletic events or services offered can significantly impact the efficacy of a marketing campaign. In case consumers have a negative experience and perceive that their requirements are not being satisfactorily fulfilled, it is improbable that they will continue to interact with the brand. Hence, prioritizing the satisfaction of consumer expectations is crucial for sports marketing endeavors to establish favorable relationships and stimulate engagement (Ivanova, 2021). Sports teams can establish relationships effectively by implementing a marketing approach that encourages fan participation. When fans are made to feel like they are an integral part of the organization, they are inclined to identify more closely with the team, resulting in a more robust and enduring relationship. The reason behind this is the notion that the act of preserving, supporting, and enhancing the team instinctively comes from identification. Therefore, sports teams concentrate specifically on comprehending their fans' engagement, cognitive and emotional-related reactions (Pronschinske et al., 2012).

Numerous sports organizations utilize relationship marketing tactics to establish enduring connections with fans. These strategies align with the sports industry's objective of enhancing fan loyalty and reinforcing its brand (Theocharis et al., 2019). The incorporation of various new media platforms is a crucial component of sports marketing communications. Implementing this communication approach empowers organizations to connect with consumers effectively, establish brand recognition swiftly in novel markets, and generate fresh opportunities for content creation (Santomier, 2008). The sports industry is encountering the challenge of managing their social media presence proficiently, to capitalize on emerging technologies and enhance their relationship marketing strategies (Haugh & Watkins, 2016).

Managerial practice can benefit significantly from understanding the frequency and nature of fan engagement, as well as the factors that attract users to a sports organization's community (Naraine, Wear and Whitburn, 2019). Naraine et al. (2019) examined the behavioral traits of social media sports team communities in their research. According to the findings,
organizations must reconsider their social media strategy, particularly in terms of the timing, target audience, and frequency of their posts, as well as how they interact with their followers. In order to be more effective, managers in these organizations should contemplate creating a distinctive strategy for both game and nongame periods, instead of using a generalized approach that may not fit all situations (Naraine, Wear, & Whitburn, 2019).

2.2 Customer engagement

Customer engagement (CE) research has made considerable progress in the past few years. It refers to the way a customer invests their mental, emotional, behavioral, and social resources when engaging with a particular brand. This investment includes their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and even the tools they use (Behnam et al., 2021). According to the theory of customer engagement, a person's willingness to buy or promote something is influenced by how well it aligns with their values and beliefs. This increases the probability of them engaging in consumption-related activities (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017). This involves the dynamic relationship between individuals and organizations, based on their interactions with the organization itself as well as other customers (Santos et al., 2019). Recognizing the importance of these relationships is essential for brands, regardless of customers' purchasing tendencies, as people engage with a wide variety of products and activities (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012).

Engagement is a multifaceted concept that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements. In contrast, CE marketing refers to a company's intentional effort to encourage, facilitate, and evaluate a customer's voluntary involvement in the company's marketing efforts, going beyond just financial transactions (Pradhan, Malhotra & Moharana, 2020). Interactive and collaborative experiences are two aspects that are involved with CE, which can result in a stronger engagement and greater loyalty (Santos et al., 2019). Barari, Ross, Thaichon and Surachartkumtonkun (2021) found that experiences have a more significant effect on CE than functional measures. The emotional bond between a customer and a brand is more critical in determining their loyalty than their interactions with the brand.

2.2.1 Fan engagement
Research suggests that customer education and sharing of knowledge are essential factors in promoting customer engagement, especially in sports-related services. The results indicate that customer engagement has a beneficial impact on both customer co-creation and the quality of the relationship, with a stronger effect observed within the realm of sports-based services. The findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing service-related aspects of products to boost customer engagement and cultivate stronger relationships between customers and brands (Behnam et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has indicated a connection between the frequency of games attended and customer engagement, as well as a link between customer engagement and purchase intent. Additionally, engagement plays a role in the duration of customer-team relationships within the sports sector (Theocharis, Tsekouropoulos & Papaioanniu, 2019).

Theocharis et al. (2019) continues by explaining that while customer engagement (CE) has been widely researched, there has been a lack of studies conducted in the context of the sports industry. Within sports, the concept of customer engagement is commonly known as fan engagement (FE), which encompasses three key elements: collaborative management, prosocial behavior, and performance tolerance (Theocharis et al., 2019). Management cooperation is a significant component of fan engagement, which pertains to the measures adopted by fans to aid the management of their preferred sports team. Another aspect of fan engagement is represented by prosocial behavior, which refers to the actions undertaken by fans to provide support and assistance to their fellow supporters. The last component of fan engagement is performance tolerance, that measures the degree of support offered by fans to the sports team they favor, regardless of how the team has performed on the field, in other words different levels of loyalty (Huettermann, Uhrich & Koenigstorfer, 2019).

Despite the perception that sports operate differently from other industries, they often track similar consumer market trends as retailers (Fujak et al., 2018). Consumer engagement (CE) in sports is shaped by a number of distinctive characteristics inherent in the industry, including unpredictability of events, varying sources of interest, competition among brands, exposure to opponents, clear displays of loyalty, and the fact that many sports are seasonal. Professional sports organizations can leverage these factors to impact future consumption and relationships, resulting in increased engagement (McDonald et al., 2022). The research supports that there is a favorable correlation between a customer's identification with the members of the social network of a sports club, how they identify
themselves with the brand reflected by the club and the level of commitment there. By focusing on different aspects of customer engagement with their customers on different social media, they can increase the value for their customers and thus strengthen the relationship between the parties (Trkulja, Dlačić & Primorac, 2022). Naeem, Muhammad, Ghulam, and Tabssum (2021) conducted a study to investigate the efficacy of social media platforms for engaging fans. The research findings indicate that social media platforms are effective in increasing fan engagement with sports teams, and serve as a crucial marketing tool for attracting more people to games (Naeem et al., 2021).

2.3 Customer loyalty

In marketing, consumers are valuable assets that require ongoing attention and care to ensure their continued engagement with the products offered. One way to foster this commitment is by delivering exceptional and satisfying services, which can lead to the shaping of customer loyalty (Dimyatı & Subagıo, 2016). For organizations to prosper, they must be supported by two crucial elements: customer satisfaction and loyalty towards their services. The more satisfied customers are and the greater their loyalty towards the company's offerings, the higher the company's profits will be. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that customer satisfaction is heavily impacted by the attitudes and actions of the consumers themselves (Romdonny & Rosmadi, 2019). Developing and enhancing existing services with a clear objective can aid in retaining current customers and drawing in new ones. Satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal customers, thereby fostering a sense of customer loyalty (Gee, Coates & Nicholson, 2008). Maintaining existing customers' loyalty is equally important as the acquisition of new ones. Various factors, such as trust, satisfaction with the seller, and ethical conduct, influence customers' loyalty. In essence, customers wield significant power, and it is imperative to cater to their needs comprehensively. Hence, the task and prospect involve an accurate and discerning examination of strategies to acquire and sustain customer loyalty in the highly competitive industry (Mansouri, Boroujerdi & Husin, 2022).

In the field of marketing, emotional attachment to brands is a crucial concept that refers to the intensity of the connection between consumers and a brand. This connection, in turn, influences their actions and helps to promote the long-term profitability and customer loyalty of the business (So, Parsons & Yap, 2013). As the duration of the relationship progresses,
contented consumers not only develop a logical inclination, they also develop an emotional connection, resulting in the establishment of a powerful emotional bond with the brand. Such emotional attachments are so robust that they elicit intense passion from consumers, consider them indispensable, and undergo distress upon their removal (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012). With the development and increased intensity of a relationship, a consumer's fondness for a specific brand turns into love. As a result of a successful attitude towards a brand, brand love can be achieved, and at the same time, a connection that can be further developed in the future. Essentially, when a consumer loves a brand, they achieve the highest level of brand connection, which is loyalty, and become a dedicated customer (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2020).

According to the growing theory of brand attachment, an individual's attachment to a sports team is a crucial factor in developing loyalty towards the team, and it serves as a mediator in the relationship between cognitive constructs and team loyalty. For certain fans, their attachment to their sports clubs or teams is a crucial aspect of their self-identity. As a result, their sports-related consumption is solely directed towards their team, irrespective of their teams or clubs performance (Tsiotsou, 2013). Sports teams can be considered as brands, and studying the love for sports teams provides an excellent opportunity to examine the intensity of brand loyalty for a variety of reasons. Unlike products, team love can reach a much wider spectrum of intensity, with a range from strong passion to extreme obsession. Such loyalty becomes an essential part of a fan's life and can result in transcending from generations and lasting a lifetime (Daniels et al., 2020).

2.3.1 Fan loyalty

To cultivate brand loyalty in their customers, sports teams can build enduring relationships with them as a brand. According to Akoglu and Özbek (2021), genuine brand loyalty can be achieved when customers feel emotionally connected to the brand and also trust it. Typically, brands that offer satisfying brand experiences stand out from their competitors and are more preferred, leading to the establishment of brand loyalty and amplifying brand awareness (Akoglu & Özbek, 2021). Within the sports industry, the extent to which fans remain devoted is measured by factors such as the frequency and quantity of attendance at games, acquisition of team-related products, monitoring the club's progress in the media, and engaging in discussions regarding the team. The degree of loyalty exhibited is established by the level of team identification and the degree
of satisfaction fans derive from the team's performance. Furthermore, in industries such as sports, where performance outcomes are inherently unpredictable, the significance of retaining customer loyalty becomes particularly crucial (Kościółek, 2019). Loyalty that goes beyond reason is a widespread and seemingly obligatory phenomenon among many fan bases in the realm of sports. When connections between fans and sports brands get established, other aspects such as organization, athletes, teams and loyalty also become involved and influenced. Organizations and teams place great significance on the relationships they have with their fans since such connections can often be characterized with unwavering loyalty or by intense sentiments, even in situations that defy rational explanation. Amidst a multitude of challenges faced by sports organizations in today's landscape, such as cut-throat competition, worldwide accessibility to major sports teams and an ongoing battle for consumer attention, the demand for loyalty and devotion remains crucial (Ruhihley & Pate, 2017). When consumers develop strong emotional attachments to a brand, it can lead to increased brand loyalty. This means that consumers are more likely to repeatedly choose that brand over competitors. Additionally, these loyal customers can become advocates who make it their interest to promote the brand to others (Le, 2021).

In a study conducted by Cunningham and Kwon (2003), they investigated the reasons why customers choose to visit a hockey match by sending the participant questionnaires. The researcher's findings hold substantial practical value for sports marketers, underscoring how subjective norms influence aspects such as the social part of sporting events, which plays a pivotal role in attracting attendees. The study uncovered a correlation between favorable attitudes towards a team and the inclination to attend their games. To enhance the likelihood of people attending hockey games, the research proposed several ideas, including offering group ticket sale discounts, implementing customer loyalty programs and cultivating a more sociable ambiance at sporting events (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Pitts and Zhang, 2022).

2.3.2 Attitudinal and behavioral loyalty
The most elevated degree of consumer brand relationship is identified as brand loyalty. A blended approach that integrates attitudinal and behavioral loyalty is employed to assess it where attitudinal loyalty refers to the extent to which consumers choose to commit to a brand, whereas behavioral loyalty pertains to what extent that the consumer chooses to repeatedly buy from the same brand (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2020).
Furthermore, attitudinal loyalty refers to the deep emotional connection that fans have with their team. This type of loyalty helps differentiate between superficial and genuine fan loyalty, which is crucial information for sports marketers who need to attract and retain fans in a highly competitive sports market. By understanding attitudinal loyalty, sports marketers can gain valuable insights into their target audience and create effective strategies to engage and retain their fanbase (Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney, 2020). When an individual develops a favorable and unwavering attitude towards a sports team, regardless of the team's performance, it is likely that the person will develop a stronger identification towards the team. This is often observed in sports where a fan's loyalty towards a team remains steadfast despite the team's victories or losses. Moreover, research suggests that fans who have a strong identification with a sports team demonstrate greater commitment to the team and are willing to spend more money, often resulting in them becoming seasonal ticket holders. This indicates that a consumer's identification with their favorite sports team has a positive influence on their behavioral loyalty (Yoshida, Heere & Gordon, 2015).

Identifying different types of customer loyalty is not an easy task as there is no single methodology that can be used to classify buyers. Consequently, in order to systematically categorize types of customer loyalty, it is important to consider the combination of both behavioral and attitudinal aspects. This approach will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the different stages of customer loyalty that exist (Fedotova, Kryvoruchko & Shynkarenko, 2019).

2.3.3 Devoted and occasional fans

The concept of fans being devoted or occasional to the organization is often presented as a series of progressive phases. When observing the different types of loyalty displayed by consumers, two aspects are typically considered, both the behavioral and attitudinal traits (Fedotova et al., 2019). Numerous experts and scholars have advocated for enhanced comprehension and awareness concerning the procedure of establishing customer loyalty. Acquiring such knowledge could potentially result in improved methods of categorizing customers based on their stage in the process, as well as in implementing management tactics tailored to address the relationship-oriented necessities of diverse tiers of customer loyalty. Different customers are situated at separate stages of customer loyalty progress that may necessitate distinct strategies. Management may need to apply a dissimilar tactic for a long-standing, loyal customer in contrast to
a new customer (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). Furthermore, different levels of loyalty indicate that some customers are more devoted and others are more occasional fans. The variation in customer loyalty levels can be elucidated by pinpointing the various stages of customer loyalty. The process can be outlined as a series of separate stages. Customers become loyal to a business gradually, progressing through different stages of loyalty over time. The attitudes and behaviors of customers towards the organization differ as they move through each stage of the process. To quote Pilelienė (2009, pp.95) “Four stages of customer loyalty can be distinguished: (1) “Neutral customer”, (2) “Potentially loyal customer”, (3) “Unconsciously loyal customer”, and (4) “Genuinely loyal customer””. At each stage of the customer loyalty process, customers possess varying needs that must be identified and met by a business to gain a competitive edge in the market. Consequently, finding the loyalty stage of the organization's consumers is crucial (Pilelienė, 2009). Brand loyalty plays a crucial role in both driving and mediating the impact of love and attachment for a brand (Briliana, 2017).

Various methods exist to describe the different levels of loyalty that fans may exhibit. In contrast to Pilelienė's approach, Mahony, Madrigal, and Howard (2000) opted to present it in a different manner. The scale assessing the psychological attachment of fans to their team categorizes them into two groups based on their loyalty level: "latents" and "highly loyal". To start, latents exhibit devotion to the team and are unlikely to switch their support, however, they do not regularly attend games. Instead, they demonstrate their loyalty by buying team merchandise, wearing team clothing, and gathering to watch and talk about their team. In contrast, fans that are branded highly loyal attend a large number of games (Mahony et al., 2000). Daniels (2020) acknowledges five categories or stages of dedicated fans can be recognized, including temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional. First off, temporary fans are individuals who support a team for a brief period, primarily based on their recent performance. Local fans, on the other hand, are motivated by their geographic proximity, their hometown team. Devoted fans have a stronger emotional bond with their team and provide unwavering support through both good and bad times. Fanatical fans demonstrate an even greater level of dedication to their team. In contrast, dysfunctional fans are disruptive and violent, and not there for the love of the sport (Daniels et al., 2020).

McMullan and Gilmore (2008) categorized the customers into 3 different loyalty stages, high loyalty, medium loyalty and low loyalty. Clients who exhibit loyalty at a high level tend to react positively when acknowledged
by the company, as they believe in a mutually beneficial relationship reinforced by exclusive incentives. Clients who display loyalty in a medium level are also interested in establishing a connection, particularly when they sense a mutual approach that offers incentives for their faithfulness and within this category, pricing is a crucial factor. Clients with a low level of loyalty are the least inclined to cultivate a bond with the brand or team, but they show a keen interest in campaign deals (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). By contrasting the approaches under consideration, it can be inferred that the chosen types and stages of loyalty demonstrate varying degrees of correlation with one another. However, after looking at the different ways customer loyalty can be classified, there is no single agreed-upon way to determine the categories and criteria of it. The present techniques utilized for identifying types or stages of customer loyalty have no specific way in providing a definitive solution to the challenge of accurately distinguishing between them (Fedotova et al., 2019).

2.4 Conceptual framework

The purpose of a conceptual framework is to classify and clarify relevant concepts for a research study, and to elucidate their interrelationships. To discover these connections, qualitative researchers employ a blend of theoretical understanding and empirical investigation that assists them in structuring the conceptual framework (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). In (Figure 1) presented below, the conceptual framework is exemplified, highlighting the connections uncovered in the literature review. The researchers have identified and presented key concepts in their literature review that are relevant and significant to various initiatives aimed at creating value and building relationships with customers within Swedish ice hockey organizations. These initiatives are intended to foster improved customer engagement and shape loyalty amongst the customers towards the organization.

To begin with, relationship marketing is a strategy that focuses on building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers. By engaging customers through various channels, organizations can create a sense of trust and loyalty towards their customers (Abeza et al., 2019a). This leads to customer engagement, which is a critical aspect of relationship marketing as it increases the level of interaction between customers and the brand (Vivek et al., 2012). As customers become more engaged, they can develop a stronger emotional attachment to the brand, which can lead to both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.
Behavioral loyalty refers to the degree to which a consumer repeatedly engages with and purchases products or services of a brand or organization. Customers who have a positive attitude toward a brand and intend to continue shopping from the brand are more likely to exhibit repeat purchase behaviors. This behavior can also be reinforced by the customer’s cognitive loyalty, which is based on their beliefs and knowledge about the brand. Attitudinal loyalty relates to customers’ feelings and perception of the brand, but also to how accessible the brand is present in the customer’s mind. Customers who have a strong emotional attachment to a brand and a desire to continue to interact with and shop from the brand are more likely to have a positive attitude toward the brand (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2020).

Behavioral and attitudinal loyalty are important to consider because they can influence and affect customers who are devoted or occasional fans within the organization. By understanding the factors that influence each stage of loyalty, ice hockey organizations can develop strategies to strengthen customer loyalty and increase customer engagement and experiential value, as well as build stronger relationships (McDonald et al., 2022). The ice hockey organizations can strive to use different strategies for their relationship marketing to further engage their customers and strengthen their emotional attachment to the brand. This in turn can lead to increased behavioral and attitudinal loyalty in order to finally create a clearer idea and definition of which stage of loyalty the customer is in. This can facilitate the choice of marketing strategies with the customer for the organizations. Finally, to what extent fans are devoted or occasional affect different types of relationships, which further affect what kind of relationship the customer has with the organization and how committed and loyal the customer chooses to be, resulting in a cycle.
**Figure 1.** The cycle of the conceptual framework.
3. Method

The current chapter aims to provide readers with an overview of the methods employed by the authors to carry out the empirical research and to help them comprehend the research process in a better way. Various aspects related to the research such as research approach, research strategy, research design, type of data, research methods, operationalization, selection of the cases, data analysis, quality of research, ethical considerations, and sustainable considerations are elaborated upon and explained in detail.

3.1 Research approach

Research can be conducted using three distinct methodological approaches: deductive, inductive, and abductive research. In social science and other fields, the deductive method is frequently utilized to test hypotheses or theories. The deductive method involves researchers commencing with a hypothesis or theory and subsequently collecting data to assess it. Therefore, the researcher started with an existing theory or hypothesis and tested it by collecting data. While the inductive method employs empirical observations and data to produce new theories and concepts. The researchers begun by collecting and analyzing data and then employed their observations to develop theories. In this approach, the researcher started with observations and data to create new theories. The abductive research methodology is believed to merge elements from both deductive and inductive research. In abductive research, a hypothesis or theory is formulated based on prior experiences or observations. The researcher then performs empirical research to confirm or refute the hypothesis or theory (Patel & Davidson, 2019).

In the current investigation, a deductive approach has been employed, meaning that the studies are grounded in the existing theoretical framework and secondary data available. Utilizing a deductive method allows for the drawing of conclusions and the making of generalizations based on the established theoretical framework and available data (Jakobsson, 2023). The research primarily focused on the theoretical aspects of customer loyalty and its impact on marketing strategies within the sports industry. Considering these objectives, the deductive approach was deemed as the most appropriate methodology to undertake the investigation. It is generally accepted that the inductive method is suitable for qualitative research, whereas the deductive method is more suitable for quantitative research (Saunders, et al., 2019). Despite this Kumar (2018)
considers that the deductive approach can be acceptable in qualitative research where hypothesis is not necessary.

A deductive research approach is based on a theoretical foundation. This means that the researcher begun with an existing theory (Saunders, et al., 2019). To develop the conceptual framework that underpins the current deductive research, both primary and secondary sources were utilized. Peer-reviewed articles were gathered from databases like Onesearch, Google Scholar, and Emerald to support the development of the framework. Keywords such as "loyalty", "engagement" and "relationship marketing" were decisive in identifying relevant articles and establishing a basis for the conceptual framework.

3.2 Research strategy

In the domain of research, two predominant methodologies, namely the quantitave research method and the qualitative research method, are prevalent as research strategies. When considering the selection of a research approach, the researcher must commence with an assessment of the fundamental aspects of the research inquiries (Bryman & Bell 2017). Furthermore, several researchers strive to distinguish the two methodologies to facilitate their research aim, nevertheless, the distinctions between them are often indefinite. Used on eachother, or in combination, the qualitative and quantitative methodologies can also be employed together within research, a practice commonly referred to as mixed-methods research (Saunders, et al., 2019).

Saunders, et al. (2019) further explains that there are some differences between quantitative and qualitative methods. The fundamental distinction between them are that the research approaches lay in the nature of the data gathered, with the quantitative method gathering numeric data, and the qualitative method focusing more on words which may encompass written language as well as visual media instead of the quantity in numbers (Saunders, et al. 2019). Furthermore, Patel et al. (2019) suggest that there are additional differences between quantitative and qualitative research. quantitative research aims to a greater extent to construct a theoretical framework of comprehensive laws and regulations based on empirical evidence, where the researcher views the research subject from an analytical and logical perspective. In contrast, qualitative research seeks to identify new problems and opportunities, and researchers strive to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth description of the studied situation or phenomenon (Patel et al. 2019; Saunders et al. 2019). This implies that the
qualitative research method may be perceived as less systematic because it relies more on interpretations rather than precise numerical data. However, it also allows for more comprehensive and elaborate responses.

The degree project's motive is rooted in employing a flexible working method to explore, develop and clarify how Swedish ice hockey teams achieve high levels of fan loyalty. This, in turn, highlights the adoption of a qualitative research strategy in formulating research questions. By utilizing this approach, the survey yielded more comprehensive insights into how Swedish ice hockey organizations nurture fan loyalty and commitment by embracing dynamism and emphasizing the collective entirety (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2019). Through the utilization of a qualitative approach in this research, the authors have been afforded the opportunity to gather and analyze data that will hopefully yield a more profound comprehension of how Swedish ice hockey organizations employ various strategies to attract and retain customers. This, in turn, contributed to an enhanced understanding of the marketing challenges faced by the sports industry.

3.3 Research design

The collection and analysis of data in a systematic manner are referred to as research designs. These designs include the objective establishment of evaluation criteria for social science investigations and structured data collection that is tailored to the researcher's specific research questions and criteria (Bryman & Bell 2017). According to Saunders et al. (2019), research design is a crucial element as it provides a systematic framework for handling hypotheses and research questions (Saunders, et al., 2019). Moreover, there exists five distinct research designs that can be employed according to Bryman and Bell (2017), comparative designs, experimental, longitudinal, cross-sectional and case study.

In this thesis, the authors chose to use a comparative design as research design. Since a comparative design creates a more general picture in its comparisons and creates greater insight with several angles, it suited the research for a more comprehensive view (Bryman & Bell, 2017). It is emphasized by Bryman and Bell (2017) that comparative design requires at least two cases to be able to compare them with each other, but by including more cases the authors create a better opportunity to assess the research results in a more comprehensive way. In a qualitative interview study, the researchers can choose to interpret the language of the interview
respondents as well as descriptions of their knowledge and previous impressions in their analyzes. Therefore has the comparative design been delivered as an interview study of four organizations that will be presented and generalized in the empirical findings. Since the authors chose to apply a qualitative research strategy where a comparative design were applied, there was an increased insight between the organizations and an opportunity to more clearly portray the characteristics that were obtained. A central aim of this study is to examine the relationship between organizations and how to engage their fans to become more devoted and what marketing strategies organizations apply to succeed in doing so. This purpose is well in line with Bryman and Bell (2017) view that comparative design is a suitable research method for examining an overall picture and comparing relationships between variables.

3.4 Type of data

There are two main methods of data collection: primary data and secondary data. Primary data refers to completely new data collected by the researcher, while secondary data is already available from previous sources (Dahmström, 2011). Examples of these sources can include peer-reviewed articles, books, and popular science writings (Jakobsson, 2023). Jakobsson (2023) suggests that primary data is preferable to avoid bias as these are interpreted or can be presented in a reduced form. Examples of primary data are observations, interviews and surveys (Saunders et al. 2019).

In this research, the authors chose to use a qualitative interview study in order to obtain as comprehensive a data collection as possible. This interview study was conducted by applying semi-structured interviews. This choice of method enabled an open dialogue between the researcher and the respondent, which results in a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the subject in question. By using this method, the researchers gained access to unique insights from the respondents and thereby contribute to a more holistic understanding of the subject. Although interviews can be a valuable method of collecting data, there are also obstacles that must be overcome to achieve valid and reliable results. Dalen (2015) emphasizes the importance of carefully choosing suitable informants and presenting the basis in a correct way. This places a responsibility on the researcher to ensure that the interview is conducted in a professional manner and that the results are presented objectively. By being aware of these obstacles, the researchers have achieved awareness
and were able to implement measures to obtain primary data of the highest possible reliability.

In the current research, the selection of secondary data sources is mainly peer-reviewed articles retrieved from reputable databases such as OneSearch, Emerald and Google Scholar. This method was chosen to create a broad and deep foundation for the conceptual framework, which is of critical importance in developing a well-founded and anchored research approach. The researchers were able to ensure that they obtained high-quality and reliable data that had undergone rigorous scientific review and been approved for publication by using peer-reviewed articles as a source of secondary data. This method also enabled a critical review and synthesis of existing research in the subject area for the researchers as well as contributed to developing a deeper understanding of the research questions and its context. Overall, these peer-reviewed articles formed an important basis for the research and contributed to its theoretical underpinning.

3.5 Research method

The primary objective of qualitative research is to obtain a deeper understanding of phenomena that are relevant to individuals and their social context. The interview is a versatile tool in research, serving as a primary means of collecting information, or as a complementary method to augment other gathered data (Dalen, 2015). When conducting qualitative research interviews, there are two approaches to how to conduct them, unstructured and semi-structured interviews (Saunders, et al., 2019). Bryman & Bell (2017) outline the primary distinctions between unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews revolve around designated themes that are explored with the interviewee, whereas semi-structured interviews involve predetermined questions that serve as a framework for the discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The interviews can then be carried out using various methods, via in-person meetings, phone conversations, or digital platforms like google meet (Bryman & Bell, 2017; Saunders et.al, 2019). To treat the purposes and aim of this study, the research questions are best addressed through the use of semi-structured interviews.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews
The aim of the research was to investigate and understand what types of strategies Swedish ice hockey organizations use in their communication with their supporters and which segments are most important for them to prioritize in their choice of strategies. According to Saunders et al. (2019), semi-structured interviews can be more flexible and adapt the structure of the questions according to how the interview progresses. Since the topic the authors were researching has not been so researched in the past, semi-structured interviews fit well to gain a broader understanding where there was an initial interview guideline but the topic was openly discussed. Furthermore, this opened up the possibility of being able to ask more in-depth and focused questions to the respondent regarding the subject the researchers were investigating. (Saunders et al., 2019). In order for the interview to follow a common thread and a good structure, the researchers started the interview by talking about general topics and a thorough description of the research and asked questions that lightly touched on the topic to create a good basic understanding and a calm atmosphere. Then gradually changed to asking more in-depth questions to create a clearer and more in-depth picture, this allowed the researchers to store more information from the respondent and their knowledge to be able to investigate the research questions. (Ryen, 2004).

### 3.6 Operationalization

In order to obtain data for the research, interviews were conducted where opening questions were asked to the participants to get an initial idea of their level of trustworthiness. The continuation and purpose of the interview guide was to create insights into the respondents' knowledge. To achieve this, an interview guideline was designed with open questions that were based on the conceptual framework. The authors were careful to adapt the questions to the selected theories to ensure that the analysis would have sufficient support. By using a question guideline, the researchers were able to ensure that all respondents were asked similar questions, facilitating comparisons between their answers. This was particularly important to gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' knowledge. Since this research used a well-thought-out interview guideline, the authors were able to ensure that the data collection was structured and efficient, which enabled a strong basis for the analysis.

During the conduct of the interviews, the researchers had the opportunity to adjust the question guide by adding or removing questions, depending on the needs. This was done to avoid repetition of questions and to give respondents the opportunity to give more detailed answers. By paying
attention during the interviews and being able to adapt the questions according to needs, a basis was created to achieve saturation, that is, when there is no longer anything new to learn from the respondents (Jakobsson, 2023). As the interviews were flexible, they could be adapted to each respondent and get a more complete picture of their knowledge and opinions. This provided the opportunity to collect qualitative data in an efficient manner and ensure that the information collected was sufficient to achieve the purpose of the study. As the interviews were conducted digitally, it was particularly important for the respondents to be clear with their questions. To facilitate understanding, Swedish was used as the language because it was the mother tongue of all parties involved. This helped to avoid any language barriers and misunderstandings that might otherwise have arisen. By using a common language, respondents were able to express themselves in a clear and concise manner, which helped to ensure that the data collection was reliable.

3.6.1 Operationalization guide

Before the interviews began, the researchers offered the respondents the option to remain anonymous and if consent was given to record the interview. The aim of this approach was to facilitate the perception of details during the interview and to allow going back and paying attention to important parts when necessary. By offering anonymity, respondents were able to feel freer to express themselves and thereby contribute to capturing a more comprehensive picture of the topic under investigation. In addition, the possibility to record the interview could facilitate the subsequent transcription process and help to ensure the accuracy of the analysis of the data. By using this method, the researchers were able to ensure that they had access to detailed and reliable data that was of high quality and suitable for drawing reliable conclusions in their field of research. The interview guide was developed as an academic tool to cover various themes within the research area. The aim was to create a unified framework to simplify the conduct of interviews and collect relevant data. Below is one (Table 1) that describes the different themes covered by the interview guide's themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

26 (73)
The opening questions were used both to ease the respondents into the interview and to gather information about their background.

The questions related to the theme of relationships were administered to gain insight into the fans of the clubs and their methods of building connections.

Because engagement is viewed as a defining factor within sports fandom, it was deemed essential to inquire about it.

The investigation of the loyalty theme was deemed significant due to its central role in the research question.

The researchers posed the closing questions to avoid the possibility of missing any pertinent information and to afford respondents the chance to supplement their previous responses.

### Table 1. Operationalization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening and personal questions</th>
<th>1-4</th>
<th>The opening questions were used both to ease the respondents into the interview and to gather information about their background.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>The questions related to the theme of relationships were administered to gain insight into the fans of the clubs and their methods of building connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>Because engagement is viewed as a defining factor within sports fandom, it was deemed essential to inquire about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>13-16</td>
<td>The investigation of the loyalty theme was deemed significant due to its central role in the research question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing question</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>The researchers posed the closing questions to avoid the possibility of missing any pertinent information and to afford respondents the chance to supplement their previous responses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.7 Selection of the cases

In order to address the research questions, it is necessary to choose a sample. Two commonly discussed sampling methods are probability sampling and non-probability sampling. The selection of an appropriate method depends on the nature of the research being carried out, with probability sampling more commonly linked to quantitative research and non-probability sampling typically associated with qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). For this purpose, a non-probability sampling method has been opted for. The sample that has been selected relies on non-random selection, implying that some individuals are more probable to be chosen than others (Bryman & Bell, 2017). When conducting
qualitative interview research, the selection of respondents is a crucial matter for the result. It is essential to keep in mind that the number of respondents should not be excessively large since conducting and analyzing interviews is a time-intensive endeavor. Furthermore, the material obtained from interviews must be of high quality to serve as a satisfactory foundation for interpretation and analysis. Moreover, the authors had predetermined assessment criteria for the participants and a vested interest in them, as they were suitable for studying specific contexts. This assertion is supported by Dalen (2015) who acknowledges the potential of this approach to streamline the research process (Dalen, 2015).

3.7.1 Purposive sampling

Bryman and Bell (2017) state that in qualitative research, purposive sampling is the most commonly utilized technique for sample selection (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This sampling method is based on a non-probability approach, and involves the collection of a sample that is most suitable for addressing the research questions and objectives in a meaningful way (Saunders et al., 2019). According to Etikan et al. (2016) qualitative research often employs purposive sampling technique to efficiently allocate available resources towards identifying and selecting cases that are of valuable information. This process entails identifying and selecting individual participants or groups who possess a knowledge regarding the research under investigation. The underlying concept of purposive sampling is to focus on individuals who possess specific characteristics that are most likely to facilitate their valuable contributions to the research at hand (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

Moreover, this technique is appropriate for situations where researchers work with limited sample sizes and aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The selection of which sampling approach the authors deemed fit their investigation was motivated by the focus of the research, which was directed at the Swedish ice hockey industry and required a specific set of criteria to be employed in the selection of the cases. Furthermore, an additional justification for selecting a purposive sampling approach was to simplify the resolution of the research questions and by doing so achieve the objective of the thesis.

3.7.2 Criteria of organizations

The choice of organizations was based on a selection of criteria. It was based on the researchers’ own values that the criteria in these cases were
set and the extent to which these criteria could contribute to valuable information for the investigation.

**The criterias for the organizations:**
Swedish organizations.
Ice hockey organizations within the top two tiers of the Swedish ice hockey leagues, Swedish hockey league (SHL) and Allsvenskan.

**The criteria of the respondent within the chosen organization:**
Employed within the organization and be involved in their marketing.
Possess knowledge regarding the organization's marketing strategies.

The chosen entities for the interview process are all Swedish ice hockey teams that belong to the top two tiers of ice hockey leagues in Sweden. There are differences between the leagues in terms of capacity and work with fan loyalty which is something the authors were aware of and used as an opportunity to see if the strategies differ depending on different aspects. Moreover, the selected ice hockey organizations belong to the top two tier leagues within Sweden. Regarding the selected interviewees, they were employees within the organization with tasks related to marketing, salespeople and communicators. All of the respondents have experience with strategies and well-developed marketing skills. During the implementation of the sampling method, the author chose the selected based on their familiarity with organizations operating within the Swedish ice hockey sector. Moreover, an online search was carried out to identify which individuals to approach following the criterias described, and subsequently, the authors contacted them via an email that included a letter where the interview's objectives were outlined. Upon receiving a positive response from the contacted organization, a virtual meeting was arranged through Google Meet, taking into account the considerable distance between the parties and concerns for sustainability.

### 3.7.3 Table of cases

To facilitate the reading of the studies, the choices of cases have been clarified in (Table 2) below. The aim is to make it easier for the reader to understand which specific cases have been investigated in the studies.
3.8 Data analysis

In research, it is crucial to correctly process, compile and present the raw data to ensure that the conclusions drawn are reliable and representative of the subject under investigation (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2019). Patel and Davidson (2019) however, argue that clear procedures or routines for qualitative data management are often lacking, and instead each researcher relies on his or her own individual approach. Despite the current lack of standardized procedures in qualitative data management, there are certain guidelines that are essential to follow when analyzing data. Within qualitative research, textual analysis is preferred to make it easier for the researcher to reflect on the material and integrate their own thoughts into the analysis (Patel & Davidson, 2019). In the current study, the researchers conducted recordings of interviews and carefully listened to these recordings repeatedly and then transcribed the most important parts. The purpose was to identify patterns and similarities between the interviews and thereby create an understanding of the topics that were covered. By carefully listening to the recordings, the researchers were able to discover subtle nuances and relationships between what was said during the interviews. To then identify and analyze these patterns and similarities to create a deeper insight into the nature of the subjects and how they relate to each other.

3.8.1 Thematic analysis

Although there are no definitive guidelines for analyzing qualitative studies, there are various methods and techniques available for this purpose.
Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2017) clarifies that when the qualitative data that has been stored is to be analyzed, two approaches are recommended, thematic analysis and grounded theory. The thematic analysis is based on data that is already available and research on the topics that the researchers are already focusing on. Therefore, in this thesis, the researchers have used thematic analysis as a research method that was used to distinguish and categorize different patterns that are of importance in a data collection. This simplifies it for the researchers when they then have to interpret the different knowledge and definitions instead of concentrating on individual or special meanings among all the pieces of data. In the thematic analysis, the patterns that are of importance should be considered significant and essential to the questions being researched. Because thematic analysis has a flexibility that makes it adaptable, there is room to examine multiple aspects of phenomena and find open as well as hidden meanings. Therefore it proves beneficial across diverse research topics and inquiries (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

In this thesis, the researchers have used thematic analysis as a method to gain a broader insight of how Swedish ice hockey organizations work in their marketing to create relationships, build engagement and loyalty with customers. Since the researchers used a thematic analysis, they could uncover the underlying meanings and interpretations embedded in the data, ultimately providing a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study. Organizing the data into coherent themes enables the researchers to establish commonalities between the participants' experiences, providing in-depth insight into the topic under investigation.

3.9 Quality of research

In scientific circles, it is generally accepted that validity and reliability are central concepts for the assessment of research quality. These concepts are interdependent and are important indicators of how well a research study has been carried out. Validity is a measure of whether the research investigates what it is intended to investigate, while reliability measures whether the research can be repeated with similar results (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2019). Bryman and Bell (2017) however, questions the relevance of these two concepts in the context of qualitative research and argues that a different interpretation of the concepts should be used that is more applicable within qualitative research.
The researchers further claim that trustworthiness can be divided into four sub-criteria, reliability, transferability, dependability and confirmation. To ensure the reliability of their research, the researchers have followed the criteria for selection of 3-5 respondents in order to obtain several perspectives on social reality. It has also been important for the researchers to clearly understand the respondents' statements by clarifying the meaning of their answers during the interviews. The second criterion, transferability, means that the researchers must carefully understand the respondents' perspectives and transfer a detailed and complete account to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2017). To ensure the reliability of the study, the researchers have strictly followed the phases and criteria established for the research. It has been crucial that all steps have been followed carefully and this has also been reviewed by several seminars and tutors. In order to establish the confirmation of the research, it has been important for the researchers to ensure that the respondents' knowledge has not been affected. This has been achieved through the use of open-ended questions where respondents were allowed to express themselves freely about the topic.

The other important concept that is crucial for discussing the quality of a qualitative research is authenticity. This means that researchers should be aware of how their research affects the industry in question or society as a whole. This means that the researchers strive for their results to contribute to improving the situation and solving problems that are relevant to the industry (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In the current study, the researchers have been careful to ensure that the research contributes to informing the relevant industry, to enable development and change of the situation, this by checking that the respondents considered the topic to be important and relevant.

3.10 Ethical considerations

The researchers must remain attentive to ethical considerations and adjust accordingly during every step of the research and writing process involved in completing this final thesis (Saunders et al., 2019). The authors of the thesis have taken the ethical considerations outlined by Bryman and Bell (2017) into account when conducting their empirical research, ensuring that the data collection was conducted in an appropriate manner (Bryman & Bell, 2017). With the purpose of attaining optimal outcomes in this research, it is imperative to adhere to ethical considerations and maintain a clear and truthful approach for the benefit of all involved participants.
To begin with, the participants who participated were informed about the purpose of the study before they were interviewed, what the collected data was going to be used for and contribute to and how it would be collected. Next, the participants were also cultivated about informed consent to make it clear that the organizations and the interviewees participate voluntarily without pressure. It was also presented before the interview that they can choose to be anonymous and that the information shared would be treated with certainty for respect towards the organization, the respondent and the research. Moreover, the study's data and subsequent analysis were truthful and precise, indicating that there was no manipulation involved to generate and affect the outcome. Finally, the questions that the researchers designed were adapted to the respondent and their organization and were not angled to discriminate or offend any of the corresponding (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

According to Bryman and Bell (2017), it is essential to avoid plagiarism by refraining from copying verbatim from other writers' texts. The authors of this study were mindful of this aspect and took care to cite the original authors and not present someone else's work as their own. Simultaneously, they ensured that the information provided in the text was accurate and could be easily linked to the source to prevent any potential misunderstanding (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.11 Sustainable considerations

In order for the research to produce the best possible results, it is important to take sustainability into account. This is of great importance, partly so as not to contribute to negative consequences from an environmental aspect, but also so that future generations can live in a sustainable world (Scoones et al., 2020). Scoones et al. (2020) further explain that it is important to follow the trend towards a more sustainable world and in this survey the actions of the researchers towards the research reflected that (Scoones et al., 2020). The concept of sustainability is commonly divided into three fundamental components: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. In this study, the authors utilized these components as a basis for their research. It is crucial to adhere to these components to avoid any actions that may lead to unsustainable outcomes (Allen, 2022).

Viewed through a financial aspect, the researchers have not experienced any adverse effects as they have not utilized any physical material in their work. Instead, they have conducted their research, interviews and
transcriptions using computers, which has been a cost-effective approach. Additionally, they have been able to obtain free second-hand information for their research through the search engines provided by Linnaeus University, thus avoiding the expense of paying for reputable sources.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted digitally, which eliminated the need for the authors to incur travel expenses. In terms of social sustainability, the two authors have collaborated in a respectful manner. For starters, to facilitate their collaboration, they created a schedule, which they endeavor to follow as closely as possible to maintain a healthy work-life balance. As the work is conducted by two individuals, communication is crucial, and it is evenly distributed between the parties to ensure that each author contributed equally. They have also established a mutual understanding and agreement, which allows them to exchange opinions and ideas, even when they do not share the same perspectives. Lastly, we turn to the aspect of environmental sustainability. The research and interviews were conducted in close proximity to the researchers' homes, thus eliminating the need for extensive travel, which was also deemed significant in terms of environmental impact. Additionally, the use of software such as computers facilitated the completion of all aspects of the work without requiring any physical materials. Overall, it can be inferred that sustainability was a primary consideration throughout the investigation.
4. Empirical findings

The following chapter serves to introduce the various cases and interviewees involved in the research. The authors then present the empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews, which are organized according to the themes identified in the operationalization table with respect to the research questions. These findings are then summarized for easy comprehension.

4.1 Cases

The subsequent (table 3) has been designed to enhance the empirical reading experience by providing clarity regarding the respondents involved in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oscar Johansson</td>
<td>Timrå IK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gustav Backlund</td>
<td>IK Oskarshamn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Angle</td>
<td>BIK Karlskoga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Paulsson</td>
<td>Östersunds IK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Clarification of cases

4.1.1 Timrå IK

The ice hockey club Timrå IK, which has significant historical roots dating back to its founding in 1928, is located in the city of Timrå. Throughout the current millennium, the organization has spent 16 seasons in the highest league Swedish Hockey League (SHL), while the remaining seasons have been spent in Sweden's second-highest league, Hockeyallsvenskan.

In the context of this research, Oscar Johansson served as the representative for Timrå IK. His professional background is rooted in several years of active participation as an ice hockey player. Following the
conclusion of his playing career, Johansson commenced work as a sales and marketing coordinator for Timrå IK, beginning in 2016. In 2021, Johansson assumed the position of marketing and sales manager for the organization, having accrued considerable tenure within the organization.

4.1.2 IK Oskarshamn
IK Oskarshamn, the hockey club that was established in 1970, has its headquarters situated in the city of Oskarshamn. During the early 1990s, the club increased its efforts, and throughout the past millennium, it has been affiliated with one of the two major leagues, while being a participant in the top league since 2019.

Gustav Backlund served as the representative for IK Oskarshamn in the study. With a journalism degree to his credit, he has worked in the club's communication domain for the past five years. His principal duties involved working closely with the team and creating content centered around its activities.

4.1.3 BIK Karlskoga
Since the turn of the millennium, BIK Karlskoga, which was established in 1943 and is based in the city of Karlskoga, has competed in the country's second-highest league, the Allsvenskan. Notably, the club has a unique distinction of being the only team to have participated in every season of the Allsvenskan.

Marie Angle has extensive experience of working in the sports sector. She has been working full-time within BIK for the past two years and has also volunteered in the organization for three seasons, in addition to this she has built up and ran a sports blog. Marie Angle has also acquired relevant education through studies in communication and sports marketing. Her current role within BIK is as communications manager for the private market and CSR. In addition to her experience in the sports sector, Marie Angle has also worked with communications in traditional companies and has a background as a journalist.

4.1.4 Östersunds IK
Östersund IK is situated in the city of Östersund and, in contrast to the aforementioned clubs, does not boast an extensive history in the top-tier leagues. The club has only participated in the second highest league for a single season, and will make its second appearance in the upcoming season.

In the study, Maria Paulsson represented Östersunds IK, possessing academic credentials in marketing, graphic design, and communication. Following her education, she has accrued years of experience in the communications field, primarily with traditional companies, alongside her seven-year tenure managing communications operations for Östersunds IK.

4.2 Relationships

According to the opinions of the respondents, it is possible to find similarities between traditional companies and the sports industry. As Paulsson (2023) notes, there is a fundamental similarity between these two sectors, namely that both strive to facilitate the sale of products by building relationships.

“You have to work on the relationships all the time, but it's not always a given because there are so many different segments, supporters and different types of fans in different types of categories, everything from those who have been here since the 1970s to new young people” - Johansson (2023)

Johansson (2023) highlights a phenomenon that all respondents agree on, namely the importance of establishing different relationships with different categories of fans is of great importance. Backlund (2023) points out that there is a subtle boundary when it comes to communication with different consumer groups, because different categories of consumers expect different types of communication. According to the view, the importance of such expectations increases the higher up in the league system the organization is, which means a responsibility for the organization to manage these expectations when achieving higher sporting performances (Paulsson, 2023).

In the world of sports, the supporters are of fundamental importance, and Johansson (2023) emphasizes that they form the very core of the organization. He argues that it is crucial that there is a win-win relationship between the organization and the supporters, and that both
parties work together to find a way forward, as they are mutually dependent on each other. Angle (2023) emphasizes the importance of having mutual communication, where it is just as important to listen to supporters' opinions as to communicate with them. She uses a strategy where she always stays up-to-date by actively following various forums to be aware of supporters' opinions and thoughts. However, there are thoughts that this mutual communication primarily takes place with the most dedicated and committed supporters (Backlund, Johansson 2023). This is primarily aimed at creating a sense of community and belonging (Johansson; Backlund; Angle; Paulsson, 2023). The strategies to make the supporters feel seen and involved look different between the different organizations. According to Johansson (2023), this striving for community extends so far that the supporters are involved in decisions regarding renovations of the arena. An example he gives is that the supporters have had to repaint behind the standing section, which creates a sense of ownership and belonging. Other strategies mentioned by two of the organizations are that the most committed supporters are offered a direct communication channel with high-ranking people in the organization, for example through various meetings. The purpose of this form of communication is to create a sense of importance and security in these supporters (Backlund, Johansson 2023). According to Angle (2023) it is essential to establish transparency between the organization and the supporters. Although there may be negative events surrounding the organization, she believes that it is crucial to communicate and explain why it happens. Angle does not believe in being secretive, but advocates an open dialogue between the organization and the supporters, which can lead to problems being solved together. However, she points out that the phenomenon of transparency is also important for customers who are less loyal (Angle, 2023), this in turn, leads to greater consumer confidence (Paulsson, 2023).

Both Johansson (2023) and Angle (2023) believe that the hockey industry has been predominantly analog in the past, but that it is now increasingly digitized. One factor that may have contributed to this is the ongoing generational change, when many were previously inclined to stick to the old and some older supporters may have difficulties with digital technology (Johansson, 2023). Johansson (2023) believes that today's supporters have slightly different values and thoughts about what is important. Within the framework of digitization, an increasing use of social media is included and, according to the respondents, this testifies to the ability to reach different types of consumers on varying
channels and platforms (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Paulsson (2023) also points out that social media is a tool for reaching out to new consumers. All organizations testify that social media is an important tool in their communication to create relationships (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Angle (2023) believes that an adaptation of communication strategies and message format is necessary in accordance with the specific channel used. She exemplifies that even though the offer is identical, it requires the use of different wording when it is communicated through different channels (Angle, 2023). Backlund (2023) takes a complementary perspective by emphasizing the importance of varying messages and content in different channels. He strives for an ideal scenario where each channel would be unique in the content presented, with the aim of making it easier for consumers to locate the information and content they are looking for.

In general, respondents consider the social media Instagram to be their main channel, where most activities and interactions with consumers take place (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). According to Backlund (2023) and Paulsson (2023), Instagram functions as a platform where the supporters get a closer relationship with the team, with daily access to content related to the team and the organization. Paulsson (2023) illustrates examples where opportunities such as arranging question sessions with the players or conducting "takeovers" by players themselves can promote a more intimate contact with the players and create a deeper connection. There are opinions that indicate that Instagram as a platform has a slightly more pleasant atmosphere compared to other platforms, especially Twitter, where there are perceptions of a stronger tone and increased use of sarcasm (Angle; Paulsson, 2023). The reason for this seems to be that twitter is a platform used by the most dedicated fans (Paulsson, 2023), in that context the content is characterized by a certain nerdliness, with a focus on statistics and articles related to the matches (Backlund, 2023). LinkedIn is another platform that is primarily used to reach businesses, but surprisingly it also reaches out to private individuals. On LinkedIn, a slightly more serious tone is usually required and the content focuses on professional topics (Angle, 2023).

Paulsson (2023) describes two strategies for social media, where one aims to reach an older target group and the other focuses on reaching a younger target group, with the intention of also attracting their parents by extension. It is clear that the majority of respondents identify the
older target group on Facebook, where they value informative content (Angle; Backlund & Paulsson, 2023). However, Backlund (2023) adds that it can be challenging to have full control over Facebook, as it is a platform where there is a large amount of personal involvement, where supporters create their own fan groups. Johansson (2023) believes that it is a significant strategy to establish relationships with the young people, both to attract a larger audience and considering that the young people are the future of the clubs where a relationship can develop over a longer period of time (Angle; Johansson, 2023). Johansson (2023) adds that a special communication strategy is required for this specific target group, as they differ significantly from the most dedicated supporters. Angle (2023) and Paulsson (2023) emphasize that the optimal strategy to reach this target group is to exploit the growing platform TikTok, which leads to a constant search for the right approach among the organizations. Taking advantage of different platforms is a matter that depends on access to resources (Angle; Johansson, 2023). However, according to Angle (2023), she emphasizes that when resources are limited and there is no possibility to create the desired content, it becomes even more important to communicate in a more personal way. In summary, Johansson (2023) points out that the primary objective with social media is to achieve broad communication and reach as large a proportion of consumers as possible.

According to the respondents, it is widely accepted and important to maintain a close working relationship with the team and its players and to communicate this relationship to the fans. There is a belief that the players are a factor of interest for the fans and that their presence is crucial to achieve engagement among the supporters (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Paulsson (2023) emphasizes the importance of having a strong relationship with the players and that the players show a genuine desire to be engaged in this interaction. According to her, this aspect is even integrated into the association's team building strategy, where it is emphasized that one should be humble and genuine. By upholding such values and behaviors, players help promote cohesion within the association and create a sense of pride for all parties involved. This focus on being close to the players and encouraging their authenticity plays a central role in strengthening the association's identity and building strong bonds with the fans.

In order to establish and build relationships, it is crucial to be continuously updated and constantly prepared. This means being well
informed about current events and trends in relevant areas and being prepared to handle and adapt to potential changes (Angle; Backlund & Johansson, 2023). According to Backlund (2023), it appears that during the pre-season they carefully plan for the upcoming season to avoid being surprised by unfavorable conditions, such as bad results or unsatisfactory match times. Johansson (2023) further points out that modern society undergoes rapid changes and it is of the utmost importance to be well informed and follow current trends in order to be able to establish and maintain relationships with consumers.

4.3 Engagement

A recurring aspect according to the respondents is that the audience and supporters are important for the organization's survival, it is therefore important to engage your supporters (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Furthermore, Backlund (2023) talks about how much of the engagement that exists around organizations is reflected by the sporting achievements that are made (Backlund, 2023). Success breeds success, that is to say that sporting success also creates a path to success for communication with supporters (Paulsson, 2023). Angle (2023) also highlights the importance and significance of sporting success, and how it affects engagement, but from a different perspective. When success is achieved and the results are good, increased expectations are created on the part of the supporters and they can sometimes be difficult to fulfill (Angle, 2023). Paulsson (2023) draws attention to the challenge and emphasizes the importance of continuing to maintain the engagement after the successes, when the sporting may not go well (Paulsson, 2023). It cannot be assumed that things will go well on the sporting side, but it is more like a bonus when it does, because when the sporting side is going well, it is easier to grow as an organization, and to get people engaged (Backlund, 2023).

Both Backlund and Paulsson (2023) emphasize the importance of a robust hockey culture in a city. A strong hockey culture plays a crucial role in promoting increased engagement. However, Backlund (2023) points out that it is important to avoid becoming too comfortable with this engagement. It is necessary to maintain good communication to maintain interest. This is because the high engagement can create a simplified work environment, where it is easier to take for granted that the interest in hockey is constant. Paulsson (2023) adds that the culture can affect the atmosphere in the arena and the engagement that the supporters have. In a
city with less hockey culture, the interest is not as great and it requires more work and better communication from the organization (Backlund; Paulsson, 2023).

Working closely with supporters can have a significant effect on engagement. Backlund (2023) describes that in some matches they run a united march or in some other matches, have covered the travel costs for the supporters so that more fans can participate. Paulsson (2023) also says that they have made similar arrangements in the hope of engaging more supporters (Backlund; Paulsson, 2023). It is important to keep an open discussion with your fans to maintain a good collaboration (Paulsson; Angle 2023). Angle (2023) elaborates that communication between supporters is also important and that the organization needs to stay updated on what the fans write and think about them. This information is important to include in your further communication to the fans to show that their voice is being heard (Angle, 2023).

There are additional aspects that have been shown to have a major impact on supporter engagement, the interest generated and forming a community of supporters. Johansson (2023) says that before the season they brought home many big names and well-known players to the team, which has shown an increased interest and engagement to the team and the organization among the supporters. Johansson (2023) further develops this and says that the interest around players who come back engages and creates curiosity among people, which in turn draws more people to become interested (Johansson, 2023). Backlund (2023) is on the same track and has noticed an increased engagement among supporters in pre-season when new players are introduced to the team and that this creates interest because they want to know more about the new players (Backlund, 2023).

Continuing, Johansson (2023) says that even small things can be of great importance in the end in creating repeat customers. Pleasant staff is one such thing that can create a positive atmosphere among the supporters. Taking things like this into account also shows that the association cares and works for continuous development so that the best possible conditions will exist for the supporters (Johansson, 2023). In order for fans to feel included and part of a community, it is important to allow them to show emotion. One way that Angle (2023) worked to engage supporters is by writing chronicles about the organization, and believes that this can create feelings and community among the supporters. Keywords such as "together" are tactical to use in your communication with the supporters to
describe the community that the organization and the supporters want to create with each other. An important aspect is to let the supporters discuss about us because we want them to be engaged and let their emotions flow, so really any emotion is good, because it is a sign that they are engaged (Angle, 2023).

"Without emotions it's not sport, supporters must be able to be disappointed and pissed off at us sometimes otherwise they lose interest if they're not allowed to have emotions and then we lose them."
- Angle (2023)

Engaging all fans can be a challenge, not all supporters go there just for the sporting aspect, many are also there for the actual experience around the match (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Angle (2023) suggests that it can be a challenge to attract the proportion of customers who are not as frequent and are more interested in the experience itself. This is because there is a lot of competition for customers with other events and clubs, for the less committed customers it therefore requires a greater focus on creating an experience (Angle, 2023). Johansson (2023) talks about the importance of being able to build events around the matches, as it is a way to attract more customers who do not have the sport itself as their main interest (Johansson, 2023). There are several aspects that can contribute to a better experience (Angle 2023). Johansson (2023) is of the same opinion and believes that the supply of food and drink and that service and other things should go quickly and smoothly, such as queues, are variables that have an impact on a better experience for customers. These are points that influence new customers in their choice for repeat visits (Johansson, 2023). Going with friends and having a glass of wine and not putting as much importance on what happens around the match or the team on a daily basis, is something that Backlund (2023) explains as part of what appeals to some customers (Backlund, 2023).

To attract new audiences and create greater engagement, Paulsson (2023) mentions the importance of the entire event. To create special experiences for consumers around hockey, to then lead them into taking an interest in the game. There, factors such as atmosphere and community are important and supportive. They want to create this by involving the audience more during the matches because behaviors are contagious to others in the audience (Paulsson, 2023). A new event concept that has become increasingly common is to build events such as "after hockey", which means opening a type of nightclub after the game where supporters can attend and socialize to create community. This has also been taken a step
further and created opportunities for people who have not even been to hockey, to be able to visit these events (Angle, 2023). During these events, it is not the hockey itself that is the biggest priority, but more focus on creating a sense of togetherness between people and creating an increased interest (Johansson, 2023). Finding a good concept to attract new consumers can be challenging. Paulsson (2023) talks about an event that proved to be successful in increasing his customer group, in this case a girls' night out. This event made them actually open their eyes to hockey, which gave them a different view of the sport and contributed to creating a larger community around hockey (Paulsson, 2023). Furthermore, Angle (2023) adds that additional activities around hockey such as a good pub or a lounge that should be for female supporters are things that can drive engagement forward as these variables contribute to a better experience (Angle, 2023).

Within sporting organizations, young people play a large and important role because it will be carried on by them in the future. Paulsson (2023) emphasizes that young people are important and that through increased interest from them, better feelings are created among supporters in the association. At the same time, they work continuously to attract more young people, but they see a challenge with that (Paulsson, 2023). This is something that Angle (2023) says has been noticed and has contributed to a strategy they have used where they have given free entry to all young people up to the age of 19. This initiative has resulted in the arena becoming a gathering place for the youth of the city, even if not all of the youth are interested in ice hockey. Angle (2023) makes it clear that an increased interest and engaged young people is a positive investment for the future and therefore it is important to invest in them (Angle, 2023). Backlund (2023) is on the same track and states that with the great interest in ice hockey and the culture that exists in the city, it is possible to see an increase in interest among their young people. This increased interest in hockey has created a strong youth section within the organization which has grown and contributed to a major development in youth hockey, and an increased interest in hockey from girls (Backlund, 2023). Johansson (2023) gives examples of a strategy that has shown positive results, by creating more events around the hockey match it attracts more young people and increases their interest, which leads to even more young people choosing to get involved. This creates a small trend among the youth to go to hockey, which in turn contributes to them bringing their parents to the games. A café for the young people is another example Johansson describes of how they work to create an alternative environment for the younger ones to be in if they don't want to be in the stands. This initiative
has become like a hub in the arena for them to meet and spend time with each other (Johansson, 2023). Angle (2023) clarifies that it is important to follow the trends and be informed about what is happening in society, especially among young people. They are interested in the newest trends, so creating activities that are adapted to these trends increases engagement among the youth (Angle, 2023).

4.4 Loyalty

According to the respondents, there are different types of fans who show different levels of loyalty to the club and the association. It ranges from those who attend only a few matches to the most dedicated supporters who follow every match both home and away (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). However, loyalty to the club does not only extend to attending the most matches, but also includes, for example, the purchase of souvenirs and visits to restaurants and kiosks during match occasions (Johansson; Paulsson, 2023).

A significant percentage of respondents highlight the major problem of finding new consumers and subsequently increasing their loyalty (Angle; Johansson & Backlund, 2023). Instead, Paulsson (2023) argues that attracting a consumer to attend a single match does not represent the biggest challenge, since it does not require such financial effort on the part of consumers. Instead, she agrees that the real difficulty lies in getting them to come back and attend more games. In ice hockey, Angle (2023) and Johansson (2023) have identified an 80/20 rule that is relevant. According to this rule, about 20% of the fans are the most loyal and committed, who are strongly devoted to their club. Despite their constant presence at matches, however, it is noted that additional efforts are required to fill the stadiums with spectators. An important observation made by Johansson (2023) is that it is important to direct attention to the remaining 80% of supporters, who do not possess the same degree of loyalty. The respondent suggests that strategies and measures should be designed to engage and involve this group of less engaged supporters.

According to Angle (2023), gaining insight into consumer and visitor preferences and behavioral patterns is a crucial strategy. By actively getting to know their consumers and visitors, ice hockey organizations can create a deeper understanding of their needs, interests and expectations (Angle 2023). Today, ice hockey has undergone a digitization where customer data is used to a greater extent in its work to attract and retain
more loyal supporters. Among the customer data identified, it is the number of matches that consumers have attended that is considered particularly significant according to respondents. By leveraging customer data, ice hockey organizations can gain a better understanding of consumer behaviors, preferences and level of engagement. Furthermore, through identifying and analyzing the number of matches attended, you can create a more targeted marketing strategy and tailor offers and campaigns to increase participation and supporter loyalty. Although ice hockey has undergone digitization, it is still in a learning phase when it comes to fully exploiting this phenomenon. The ice hockey organization continues to actively work on acquiring knowledge and experience to take advantage of the opportunities that this type of digitization offers (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). While the number of matches is a key factor to consider, there are a number of other factors that are important to examine. Johansson (2023) highlights that other significant factors include the type of matches that attract different types of fans. For example, different categories of supporters may prefer weekend matches or derby matches which Backlund (2023) mentions is a factor that can draw supporters from different categories of loyalty as well as other similar behavior patterns.

Angle (2023) shares her past experiences of communicating "blindly," meaning she has relied more on intuition than actual data. With advances in digitization, she has been given the opportunity to direct her communication in a more strategic and safer way. According to Backlund (2023), there is now potential to influence when you discover negative patterns in sales. This means that if you observe a negative trend among a specific target group or in certain places, you have not been able to direct your communication towards this type of audience. According to the respondents, it is not that this type of communication is primarily carried out through the use of both SMS and e-mail (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023), but it is emphasized that SMS has proven to be the most successful channel to achieve the desired results (Johansson, 2023). However, there are divided opinions on how this should be handled. According to Johansson (2023), the importance of repeating the message and almost "nagging" it is emphasized, while Paulsson (2023) emphasizes that there is a subtle balance between being assertive and not being assertive. Despite this, the respondents agree that the message is important and should be adapted to the recipient (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023), Johansson (2023) and Angle (2023) add that it is important that the message is concise and clearly formulated. That the message should be tailored to the recipient is something that all
respondents emphasize. Paulsson (2023) describes this phenomenon as "onboarding" the new supporters and nurturing the relationship with the most loyal supporters.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, the authors will analyze the empirical data that has been found from the qualitative study that was carried out to connect and see the connection with the data from the literature review. The authors will place the greatest focus on comparisons of similarities and differences from the empirical work and the literature review. Finally, a new framework from the analyzed data will be implemented and illustrated.

5.1 Relationship marketing

To achieve success as a sports organization, it is imperative to establish sustainable relationships with fans, employees, and other key stakeholders (Abeza, Finch, et al., 2019b). This is well reasoned by the respondents, especially Johansson (2023), who emphasizes that the fans are the very core of the organization. The participants also emphasize the importance of involving the whole organization as the research clearly indicates that the relationship with the players is crucial to the marketing strategies towards the fans (Johansson; Backlund; Angle; Paulsson, 2023). By establishing strong and well-functioning relationships throughout the organization, including with the fans, you can create a unified and coordinated organization. This indicates that the organization can work towards common goals and thereby achieve positive results both financially and sportingly. Paulsson (2023) develops this argument to the point that it should be included in the law building strategy. Being able to build an organization and team early on that genuinely strives to help the club achieve its goals both on and off the pitch is seen as a significant advantage in creating stronger relationships with supporters.

According to Abeza et al. (2019b) the fundamental principle of relationship marketing is to cultivate mutually beneficial connections. It means establishing, nurturing and improving relationships in order to create value and improve those connections. This principle can be related to the respondents' statement that sports organizations use relationship marketing tactics to create lasting connections with fans and strengthen fan loyalty (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023). Professional
sports organizations strive to establish a rewarding interaction with their fan base in order to promote engagement and actively provide contributions from fans to the team (Prongschinske et al., 2012; Price & Robinson, 2017). This also constitutes a central work goal for the Swedish ice hockey clubs according to testimonies from the respondents, where they describe a variety of strategies used to integrate the fans with the association to establish a two-way communication (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023). It is worth noting that the strategies vary according to the degree of loyalty and engagement of fans towards the organization (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023). A more in-depth relationship seems to prove more meaningful to the most dedicated fans. This phenomenon can be understood by observing how the value of the relationship increases proportionally with increased commitment, which is promoted through increased cooperation (Hessling, Åsberg & Roxenhall, 2018). According to Backlund (2023), there is a clear demarcation between different categories of supporters, which results in their expectations of communication varying. This indicates that whether supporters are devoted supporters or occasional attendees at a few events, some form of relationship is required to satisfy their needs. As a communicator, it is important to carefully consider the strategies, as expectations differ depending on the level of supporter engagement. The connection between this idea and Ivanovas (2021) theory is clear, adapting communication based on the recipient's profile is fundamentally a strategy that contributes to the organization being able to satisfy consumers' needs.

A prominent observation among the respondents is the clear pattern within the hockey world where the transition from analogue work methods to digitization is clearly evident (Angle; Johansson; Paulsson & Backlund, 2023). This means that relationships are now established and maintained largely through the use of digital channels, while the importance of the fundamental characteristics still remains intact. Santomier (2008) believes that the introduction of different media platforms is a crucial component for sports communication. However, it is important to be aware that different channels are not universally suitable for all individuals, which in turn means that differentiated strategies are needed, depending on the specific target group with which one communicates. This idea can be supported by previous research, where Naraine, Wear and Whitburn (2019) have identified the importance of organizations rethinking their social media strategy. In particular, the research emphasizes the need to carefully consider aspects such as timing, target audience, frequency of posts and interaction patterns with followers. By analyzing the respondents' opinions, it becomes clear that the choice of the right
communication channel and adaptation of communication styles is important. Respondents’ views underscore the importance of communicators being well informed about community trends in order to engage and appeal to the newer supporters. On the other hand, the more engaged supporters tend to focus primarily on the team and related information. The respondents have different thoughts regarding which strategies work on the different social networks, with everything from a more serious tone on LinkedIn to a harsher climate on Twitter (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). This observation suggests the importance of adapting social media content based on the platform being used and identifying the appropriate atmosphere for each specific platform. This correlates with Trkulja et al. (2022) theory that different aspects of customer engagement can strengthen the relationship between the organization and the supporters on social media. According to Backlund (2023), an ideal situation would be that each channel offers unique content that is tailored to make it easier for consumers to find the specific information and content they are looking for.

5.2 Engagement

Organizations depend on relationships with supporters to keep them engaged. Therefore, Kiani (2021) states that it is important to be accommodating with your customers and take their wishes into account as these aspects can be decisive in their choice of organization, this finding is further corroborated by the insights shared by the respondents in the conducted research (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Theocharis et al. (2019) mention performance tolerance, collaborative management and prosocial behavior as three central aspects in sport that clarify the concept of customer engagement. Further, Backlund (2023) confirms that as sporting performances improve, there is a corresponding increase in customer engagement. Building on this, Paulsson (2023) elaborates on how sporting success leads to an upsurge in supporter engagement, while Angle (2023) underscores the subsequent rise in supporters’ expectations. Therefore, it becomes crucial for organizations to actively listen to and collaborate with their supporters, fostering a strong relationship and preserving the positive perception of the business to preserve recurrent consumers. This further corresponds with Da Silva et al. (2017) and Santos et al. (2019) claims that customer engagement is affected by how the organization’s relationship with the customer’s values is consistent and that this affects the customer’s choice of continued exchange. This suggests that supporters who have a higher degree of engagement feel a stronger connection to the organization and its values.
compared to what supporters with a lower degree of engagement feel. Sport is governed by emotions and this is something that Angle (2023) confirms as emotions create interest, and interest within a group leads to community, and the sense of belonging with other supporters and an organization shapes the engagement. This is congruent with Behnam et al. (2021) theory that a customer invests behavioral and emotional resources when they feel connected and engage with a brand.

The respondents mention that the supporters who do not feel the same engagement and interest in the sport and the organization are driven by other aspects, such as the experience itself (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Which can be linked to Barari et al. (2021) theory that experiences have a significant meaning on how engagement can be created and what effect experiences have on shaping repeat customers. This is also consistent with Behnam et al. (2021) explanation that it is important to promote service-related aspects to increase customer engagement and develop solid relationships between the organization and the supporters. The latter theories can be compared with Johansson and Paulsson's (2023) statements, Johansson (2023) emphasizes that there are events around the sporting that are not necessarily affected by the ice hockey match, it is easier to create the feeling of belonging which can lead to a wider interest and hence get repeat customers that way. Paulsson (2023) confirms this theory but elaborates that it is possible to create special experiences with the audience also by actively working to involve and engage them more during the match and thus get the best possible results from an engaged audience.

According to the respondents, engagement can be seen in terms of two clearly defined groups. The first group is characterized by their engagement to the game itself and the team, where their passion burns strongly for the team and its achievements. This group is deeply rooted in the core of the sport and has a strong identification with the team and its success. On the other hand, there is another group that has a more pronounced desire to experience something. For this group of supporters, the involvement is not only limited to the sport itself or the team's performance, but they seek a holistic experience around the events. These supporters may be more interested in the atmosphere, social interactions or other experiences that accompany the sporting events (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). These types of involvement can be related to Da Silva et al. (2017) reason that consumers' propensity to purchase a product correlates with their own values and beliefs. This means that it is important to be aware of these differences and recognize
that both types of supporters are important and needed to create a balanced and successful supporter base. Paulsson (2023) emphasizes the importance of focusing attention on the dedicated supporters' understanding and valuing the importance of including and engaging a wider diversity of supporters.

Both types of supporters contribute to the success of the organization and the team in different ways. The devoted supporters, who are passionate about the game and the team, can be strong ambassadors and loyal followers who create an atmosphere of passion and support. On the other hand, those supporters who seek an experience and other dimensions of the events, can contribute to a wider audience and a more inclusive atmosphere. This can be linked to Pradhan et al. (2020) theory of customer engagement importance of voluntary commitment to the organization. By recognizing and valuing both types of supporters, organizations can create an atmosphere of inclusion and diversity that attracts and retains a broader supporter base. This, in turn, can increase brand loyalty, support and financial success for the organization in the long term. Barari et al. (2021), however, point out that the emotional connection is more important in creating long-term loyalty than the actual interaction with the brand. In contrast, Paulsson (2023) believes that the experience can act as the first interaction to attract people to become more loyal consumers.

5.3 Loyalty

Loyalty and satisfaction from their customers are two important aspects that go hand in hand and have a great impact on organizations in order for them to achieve success and loyalty (Romdonny & Rosmadi, 2019). These aspects are something that all respondents emphasize as a fundamental necessity and that organizations actively need to continue working with knowledge around their customers in order to increase their satisfaction and develop (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). Furthermore, Angle (2023) describes that in the procedure for building loyalty with supporters, it is required that an open dialogue and good communication between the organization and supporters is there. At the same time, it is important to be open and maintain a good dialogue with all supporters, even those who are not seen as loyal, in order to create greater trust among the customers of the organization. This can be linked to Mansouri et al. (2022) theory that factors such as satisfaction and trust are important aspects that influence customer loyalty and that these variables
influence whether supporters choose to remain loyal to the organization or not.

Creating an understanding of how customers choose to interact with the organization and why they attend matches is necessary for survival and the formation of loyalty (Kościółek, 2019). Furthermore, Johansson (2023) emphasizes that there are several different behavioral patterns that can determine how loyal customers choose to be and what it is that determines why customers choose to go to and attend matches. Derby matches and weekend matches are mentioned as examples of what can motivate some customers to attend. These examples correlate with Ruihley et al. (2017) explanation that clarifies that there are additional aspects besides the actual interest in the team that influence the loyalty of supporters to the organization and the team. The supporters who choose to go to, for example, only derby matches or only weekend matches can do so for various reasons, as they are not as loyal or have the same interest as more dedicated supporters, this results in them not feeling the same need to support on other occasions. Organizations can achieve brand loyalty even with these customers, according to Akoglu et al. (2021), the important thing is to create an emotional connection between the customer and the organization in order to portray an interest and trust among the customers in the organization. According to Backlund (2023), an important aspect is to carefully plan for both expected and unexpected events. By planning and strategizing early for the upcoming season, organizations have a greater opportunity to influence situations that are considered unpredictable, such as non-derby or weekend fixtures.

5.3.1 Behavioral loyalty and Attitudinal loyalty

The concepts of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty refer to the degree of consumer engagement to a brand as well as their propensity to make repeated purchases of the brand (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2020). These concepts are highly relevant in the sports industry, where the respondents in the study describe a diversity of supporters with varying degrees of engagement, attended matches and purchase of souvenirs (Angle, Backlund, Johansson & Paulsson, 2023). Previous research also suggests that there is a relationship between the attitudes towards a team and the propensity to attend matches (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003; Pitts and Zhang, 2022). Additionally, attitudinal loyalty refers to the deep emotional connection that fans have with their team. This type of loyalty helps distinguish between superficial and genuine fan loyalty (Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney, 2020). According to Angle (2023), in the context
of sports, the importance of allowing supporters to express their feelings, whether positive or negative, is emphasized, giving the sport a strong emotional dimension. By having a deeper understanding of supporters' emotional lives, organizations can take advantage of those emotions to either amplify them or transform them into something charitable.

According to the theory, it appears that there are supporters who do not show an equally strong emotional attachment to an organization or club (Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney, 2020). Paulsson (2023) regards this as a challenge for the specific club, while Backlund (2023) argues that they have a wide range of supporters who display strong feelings and a positive attitude towards the organization and the club. Despite the benefits of establishing unconditional loyalty among fans, where performance and other factors play less role (Kościółek, 2019; Yoshida, Heere & Gordon, 2015), the degree of loyalty can vary between different organizations and requires tailored strategies based on the specific context. This means that different clubs can exhibit variations in the level of loyalty and the emotional connection of their supporters, which in turn requires different approaches to communication and interaction.

5.3.2 Devoted and Occasional fans
Based on previous research, varying levels of loyalty are observed that develop over time. The researchers argue that the consumer's perception and relationship to the organization changes depending on their position within the loyalty spectrum (Pilelienė, 2009). This opinion is also shared by the respondents, who point out that there are different degrees of loyalty among the supporters, where some are considered devoted fans who attend almost all matches, while others are considered as occasional fans who follow only a few of them. Given the significant differences in loyalty, varying strategies are required depending on which target group a communicator is targeting (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). To manage these differences, management may need to apply different strategies depending on whether they are communicating with a devoted and loyal customer versus an occasional or new customer (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). Paulsson (2023) describes this as a process of welcoming and integrating new supporters while nurturing and maintaining the relationship with the more engaged and loyal supporters. Based on the interpretation of the respondents' opinions, it appears that it is primarily important to pay attention to attracting new consumers, while at the same time it is necessary to take into account and satisfy the needs
of the loyal supporters. It is important to note that there are significant differences in the strategies required to manage these different groups. According to McMullan and Gilmore (2008), a positive reaction is observed from the more loyal consumers when they recognize and are recognized by the company, while less loyal consumers show a significant interest in promotions.

According to the research, the most dedicated fans are considered as those who feel a strong identification with their sports clubs and are most engaged with their teams, regardless of their performance (Tsiotsou, 2013). According to the respondents, the strategy to create the most loyal supporters involves establishing a deepened relationship and offering them a sense of participation (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). It is emphasized that two specific strategies to achieve this goal are to provide direct channels to higher positions within the organization and the opportunity to participate in renovation projects (Johansson, 2023). These strategies can be directly linked to the observation by McMullan and Gilmore (2008) that the more loyal consumers react positively when they recognize and are recognized by the company. A more detailed analysis of the importance of creating deepened relationships with the most loyal supporters is carried out in chapter (5.1), where a more detailed reasoning about the concept is presented, where the research indicates that the more devoted fans have a pronounced need for a more in-depth relationship with the organization or club.

Two of the respondents discuss an interesting concept called the "80/20 rule", where they claim that only 20 percent of fans are truly devoted while the remaining 80 percent are not as loyal and only attend a few games. Angle (2023) and Johansson (2023) argue that it is equally important, if not more important, to devote resources to the greater part of consumers. Here, however, arises the main challenge, namely attracting new consumers or those who are not as loyal. In the current survey, it appears that the respondents emphasize the importance of attracting new consumers and mention that there is a generational shift. It is thus emphasized that it is important to also attract young individuals in order to increase the number of new fans (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). According to Pilelienė (2009), different loyalty levels show different behavior patterns, which is of great importance for the organizations to understand. Today, research has shown that new tools have appeared that facilitate this work. Within the digitized development that the hockey industry is facing, organizations now have the opportunity to collect data to investigate consumer engagement and purchasing.
patterns. Respondents highlight various factors that can be measured using these new tools. Currently, however, the number of matches attended is considered a significant factor (Angle; Backlund; Johansson; & Paulsson, 2023). By collecting this information, organizations can create a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of their customers' engagement and preferences. This gives organizations the opportunity to shape a more successful strategy to meet customer needs and expectations. Therefore, establishing an initial interaction with customers is of significant importance. By capturing the fans' attention and engaging them in an initial interaction, the conditions are created to build a long-lasting and rewarding relationship. A positive first interaction can act as a fundamental building block to strengthen the trust and loyalty of customers and open the door for continued engagement and interaction with the organization. The existing techniques used to identify different types or stages of customer loyalty lack specific methods to provide a definitive solution to the challenge of accurately distinguishing them (Fedotova et al., 2019). But with today's digitization, there is a greater opportunity to differentiate between the different target groups and make it possible to create personal marketing.

5.4 Update of conceptual framework

In the completed literature review, a conceptual framework was constructed to systematize and explain relevant concepts and to clarify the connection between them. Despite the careful examination of the phenomenon in the current research, additional concepts and theories have emerged, emphasizing the need for an update of the conceptual framework, see below (Figure 2). One of the significant concepts studied is relationship marketing, which is about building and maintaining long-term relationships with supporters (Abeza et al., 2019a). During the research process, it has become clear that a relationship needs to permeate the entire organization in order to create and strengthen commitment among the supporters. An interesting observation is that today's relationships are established to a greater extent through the use of social media, which can be seen as a consequence of the increased digitization in ice hockey. Despite this, the organizations still use some analog approaches, that is, more traditional methods that do not involve social media, in their operations.

The relationships between supporters and clubs play a crucial role in creating customer engagement, which is a central aspect of relationship
marketing as it promotes mutual interaction between customers and the brand (Vivek et al., 2012). The research provides clear evidence that both the experience and the sporting aspect have a decisive impact on supporters' engagement. Both of these factors have significant implications for how fans connect and integrate with organizations and clubs. Furthermore, it is clear that different types of fans are engaged by different factors.

Engagement is strongly linked to loyalty, and today's digital tools enable the collection of data on supporters' attitudinal and behavioral towards the brand. It is possible to examine the extent to which supporters are loyal to the club. This is of great importance, as a deeper understanding of the factors that influence loyalty can help organizations strengthen fan engagement and loyalty (McDonald et al., 2022). By understanding different types of loyalty, strategies can be developed to create new and deeper relationships with both devoted and more occasional supporters. It is a continuous process that requires active work and commitment, and cannot be achieved through passivity. This gives rise to a dynamic cycle where the selected concepts and theories are used and further developed within the research.
6. Conclusions

In this chapter, the authors will present the conclusion for the research. First, the research questions will be answered and, accordingly, future research proposals and limitations will be presented.

6.1 Answering the research questions

6.1.1 How do Swedish ice hockey clubs establish relationships with devoted and occasional fans?
In this study, we have carefully analyzed and observed how fans of different degrees of loyalty differ, which has shown significant variations in the relationship between different types of fans. It is clear that the
dynamics that characterize the relationship between devoted fans and occasional fans are not identical. By examining this phenomenon more closely, the research has been able to establish that it is of crucial importance to create a form of interactive communication with the most dedicated fans. For these fans, it is of the utmost importance to feel involved in the activities of the club or team and almost experience themselves as an integral part of the team. However, this level of closeness and commitment was found to be less significant for less loyal fans, and it was difficult to determine exactly what defines their level of commitment. The research highlights that for less loyal fans, it is instead of greater importance that the communication is up-to-date and follows the latest trends. By staying up-to-date and adapting communication to current trends, you can open up an initial interaction with these fans. It has also become clear that the relationships between fans and their favorite team or club in today's society is increasingly done through social media. It is on these platforms that different types of fans can be integrated and interact with each other. These platforms offer a unique opportunity to create a well-grounded communication strategy, where it is of the utmost importance to carefully consider what types of communication should be targeted at different channels. It is valuable to note that each channel has its own particular characteristics and requirements, which means that the adaptation of communication methods must be differentiated to achieve the desired results. An interesting aspect is that some channels offer the opportunity to integrate and engage a wider audience, especially newer fans who may be less familiar with the team's history and context. At the same time, other channels enable a more in-depth and nuanced discussion about the team, which gives room for a deeper understanding and engagement among the more experienced fans.

6.1.2 What impact does engagement have on the loyalty of fans of Swedish ice hockey clubs?

The relationship created between fans and their favorite team or club is of central importance as it acts as a fostering factor in creating and sustaining commitment. In the present era, digital tools exist that enable the examination of fan engagement levels and loyalty. The results of the study have clearly shown that there are two distinct factors that engage fans: experiences and the sport itself. Clear evidence exists to suggest that the commitment to hockey and the profound affiliation with the team assume a pivotal role in fostering the loyalty of its most devoted fans. However, it is equally important that the most devoted fans comprehend the
significance of incorporating alternative modes of engagement. It's about getting them to realize that to achieve success, both financially and sportingly, a wider base of committed supporters is needed. Through the provision of an enriching experience, organizations can effectively capture and involve less loyal fans, thereby enhancing their loyalty and devotion over time. The experience plays a pivotal role in attracting and engaging fans, serving as a gateway to heighten the loyalty of less engaged individuals. By offering distinctive and memorable experiences, organizations can foster a deeper sense of connection between these fans and the team or club, consequently amplifying their dedication and engagement. It is essential to recognize that the experience encompasses not only the sporting event per se but also encompasses various forms of interactions and activities that foster a stronger bond between fans and the club.

6.2 Managerial perspective

From a managerial perspective, it is imperative to not only cultivate a devoted fan base but also to attract new supporters. According to research, this process necessitates substantial resources and strategic commitment that surpasses what is required to maintain relationships with established fans. Therefore, organizations need to establish a primary interaction with consumers that allows for data collection and facilitates the development of personalized offers for specific target groups. To achieve this, organizations need to be aware of and responsive to trends and societal developments, allowing them to create and communicate unique and memorable experiences surrounding their events. By seizing these opportunities, organizations can allocate resources efficiently and endeavor to convert new supporters into devoted fans.

For those fans who are already devoted, it is crucial for organizations to offer transparent communication that fosters inclusion and recognition. By involving fans in decision-making processes and fostering a sense of belonging, organizations can strengthen relationships and enhance the commitment of their most loyal supporters. It is essential for the organization, from players to fans, to collaborate towards common goals, both financially and in terms of sports performance. Through distinct collaboration and cooperation, the organization can foster stronger loyalty and increased engagement among fans.
6.3 Future research and limitations

There are opportunities to further develop the research even if the current study has been a thorough investigation of the phenomenon. The study mainly focuses on the perspective of the organizations, which means that there is potential to gain a deeper understanding by including additional perspectives. At the same time, challenges arose with recruiting respondents, which would have been more beneficial for the research to conduct more interviews to supplement the study's data base. Future research should therefore integrate the fans' perspective and consider the conclusions that have emerged in the current study. It is of interest to examine whether the organizations' perceptions are consistent with supporters' perceptions regarding the importance of factors such as two-way communication and trends in establishing relationships, promoting sporting engagement and creating meaningful experiences.

Further research is also needed on the phenomenon of increasing digitization within the fandom. It appears that organizations are in a learning phase when it comes to data collection, indicating the need for a more in-depth investigation of these tools and how they can positively impact loyalty. It is important to explore and analyze the different aspects of digitization within fandom to understand its potential effects on fan engagement and loyalty. Future research can help shed light on these areas and provide a deeper understanding of how digital tools and data collection can be used to strengthen relationships between organizations and fans and improve loyalty.

7. List of references

Books:


**Online resources:**


United sport, (2023) *Hockey: Sveriges mest populära sport*. Available at: https://www.unitedsport.se/hockey-sveriges-mest-populara-sport/ [accessed 06 Apr 2023].


**Academic articles:**


Appendix

Appendix A - Interview guide Swedish

Opening and personal questions:
1. Är det tillåtet att spela in intervjun?
2. Presentera dig själv och berätta om din bakgrund?
3. Berätta om er som förening, vilka är (laget), hur mycket gör ni själva vs byrå?
4. Har du alltid arbetat med marknadsföring inom idrott eller i andra branscher också?
-Om Ja, är det några skillnader på sport konsumenter och ”vanliga” konsumenter?
-Om nej, tror du att det är några skillnader?

**Relationship:**
5. Vad är era största utmaningar med kommunikationen?
6. Kommunicerar ni lika med alla fans, eller har ni olika strategier beroende på vilka ni vill nå ut till, till exempel beroende på hur lojala och engagerade eller ålder mm?
7. Vilka strategier använder ni för att omvandla dem till hängivna fans?
8. Vilka kanaler skulle du säga är de bästa för att nå ut till nya respektive hängivna fans och varför?
9. Vad är för och nackdelar med en trogen supportergroup?
10. Har ni nära relation med dem och på vilket sätt?

**Engagement:**
11. Vad skulle du säga är ett framgångsrecept för att få fans att engagera sig mer, både på och utanför sociala medier?
12. Finns det andra faktorer som du tror spelar roll för att folk ska komma på matchar förutom er kommunikation?

**Loyalty:**
13. Hur stor del av era besökare är återkommande besökare?
   -Till vilken grad är de återkommande?
14. Vilka strategier använder ni för att locka nya fans?
15. Ser ni tydliga skillnader på publiksiffrorna när det går bra för laget respektive dåligt? (Sittplats vs ståplats)
   -Om ja, hur arbetar ni för att höja dessa siffror när det går dåligt?
   -Om nej, vad tror du anledningen till detta är?
16. Finns det andra faktorer än resultat där ni ser att publiknittet ökar eller minskar?

**Closing question:**
17. Är det något annat som du vill tillägga?

---

**Appendix B - Interview guide English**

**Opening and personal questions:**
1. Is it allowed to record the interview?
2. Introduce yourself and tell us about your background?
3. Tell us about your association, who are (the team), how much do you do yourselves vs agency?
4. Have you always worked with marketing in sports or in other industries as well?
   - If yes, are there any differences between sports consumers and "ordinary" consumers?
   - If not, do you think there are any differences?
Relationship:
5. What are your biggest challenges with communication?
6. Do you communicate equally with all fans, or do you have different strategies depending on who you want to reach, for example depending on how loyal and engaged they are or age etc.?
7. What strategies do you use to convert them into devoted fans?
8. Which channels would you say are the best to reach your respective devoted fans and why?
9. What are the pros and cons of a loyal supporter group?
10. Do you have a close relationship with them and in what way?

Engagement:
11. What would you say is a recipe for success in getting fans more engaged, both on and off social media?
12. Are there other factors that you think play a role in people coming to matches apart from communication?

Loyalty:
13. What proportion of a visitor is a repeat visitor?
   - To what degree are they recurring?
14. What strategies do you use to attract new fans?
15. Do you see clear differences in the audience figures when things are going well for the team and when things are not going well? (Seat vs. Standing)
   - If yes, how do you work to raise these numbers when things are going badly?
   - If no, what do you think the reason for this is?
16. Are there factors other than results where you see the average audience increase or decrease?

Closing question:
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?