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More Than a Game

A Case Study of Digital Value Co-Creation and Fan Engagement in
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ABSTRACT:

With the rise of digital transformation, sports fandom has evolved from passive viewing into an experience defined by emotional commitment and community. In this accelerating shift, fans are no longer just an audience but active participants who create content, engage in dialogue, and co-create experiences with sports organizations on digital platforms. This changing role of the fan presents both an opportunity and a challenge for sports organizations striving to maintain their relevance and financial viability in the competition for people's leisure time. The aim of this study is to investigate how a sports organization utilizes digital platforms and social media through this transformation, with the goal of deepening fan relationships and co-creating value with fans.

The use of social media in sports marketing has often been studied from the perspective of organizational and communication strategies, leaving the practical processes of co-creation with less attention. To complement the existing research, this thesis delves into the mechanisms of value co-creation in a digital environment. The study examines this phenomenon from the perspective of a Finnish professional sports organization, where a passionate fan culture plays a significant role. The findings are based on a mixed-methods dataset collected through triangulation, consisting of interviews with the club's marketing representatives, a fan survey (n=671), and a content analysis of all Instagram posts (n=1370) from the 2024–2025 season.

The findings demonstrate that successful digital interaction is built upon the club's local identity, the emotional drama of game events, and player brands. Fans evolve from passive followers to active value creators through a process of reciprocity, where the club rewards participation with visibility and a sense of appreciation. The central contribution of this study is the 'Digital Fan Value Co-Creation' framework, which shows value co-creation as a dynamic process. The framework also accounts for the challenges of this process, such as the gap between resources and aspirations and the risks of value co-destruction. It offers sports organizations a more realistic model for understanding and managing their digital fan communities by balancing the promotion of engagement with the management of its associated risks.

KEYWORDS: Value Co-Creation, Customer Engagement, Social Media, Digital Transformation, Sport Marketing

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Urheilun seuraaminen on kehittynyt digitaalisen murroksen myötä passiivisesta katsomisesta kohti emotionaalista sitoutumista ja yhteisöllisyyttä. Kiihtyvän murroksen myötä fanit eivät ole enää vain yleisöä vaan aktiivisia osallistujia, jotka luovat sisältöä, keskustelevat ja rakentavat kokemuksia yhdessä urheiluorganisaation kanssa digitaalisilla alustoilla. Fanien roolien muuttuminen on mahdollisuus ja samalla haaste urheiluorganisaatioissa, jotka pyrkivät säilyttämään merkityksellisyytensä ja taloudellisen elinvoimansa kilpailussa ihmisten vapaa-ajasta. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, miten urheiluorganisaatio hyödyntää digitaalisia alustoja ja sosiaalista mediaa murroksen keskellä, kun tavoitteena on syventää fanisuhteita ja luoda arvoa yhdessä fanien kanssa.

Sosiaalisen median käyttöä on tutkittu urheilumarkkinoinnissa usein vain organisaatioiden ja viestintästrategioiden näkökulmasta, jättäen käytännön prosessit vähemmälle huomiolle. Täydentääkseen nykyistä tutkimustarjontaa tämä tutkielma pureutuu syvälle arvon yhteisluomisen mekanismeihin digitaalisessa ympäristössä. Tutkimus tarkastelee ilmiötä urheilumarkkinoinnin ja suomalaisen ammattilaisuusurheiluorganisaation näkökulmasta, jossa intohimoisella fanikulttuurilla on merkittävä rooli. Tulokset pohjautuvat monimenetelmälliseen aineistoon, joka on kerätty triangulaatiomenetelmällä seuran markkinoinnista vastaavien haastatteluista, fanikyselystä (n=671) sekä koko sarjakauden (2024–2025) kattavasta Instagram-julkaisujen (n=1370) sisältöanalyysistä.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että onnistunut digitaalinen vuorovaikutus rakentuu seuran paikallisen identiteetin, ottelutapahtumien emotionaalisen draaman ja pelaajabrändien ympärille. Fanit kehittyvät passiivisista seuraajista aktiivisiksi arvonluojiksi vastavuoroisuuden kautta, jossa seura palkitsee osallistumisen näkyvyydellä ja arvostuksen tunteella. Tutkimuksen keskeinen tulos on "Digital Fan Value Co-Creation" -viitekehys, joka kuvaa arvon yhteisluomista dynaamisena prosessina. Kehys huomioi myös prosessin haasteet, kuten resurssien ja tavoitteiden välisen kuilun sekä arvon yhteistuhoutumisen riskit. Viitekehys tarjoaa urheiluorganisaatioille realistisemmän tavan ymmärtää ja johtaa digitaalisia faniyhteisöjään, tasapainotellen sitoutumisen edistämisen ja siihen liittyvien riskien hallinnan välillä.

KEYWORDS: Value Co-Creation, Customer Engagement, Social Media, Digital Transformation, Sport Marketing

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, fan experience in sports is more about emotional attachment and commitment to a sports organization than just watching the game itself (Dolles & Söderman, 2011). Many people choose to spend their free time at sporting events, often accompanied by friends or family. These events become especially meaningful when fans can actively participate in the atmosphere and support their favourite teams or athletes (Westerbeek & Smith, 2003). As digitalization reshapes the sports industry, fans are increasingly involved not only on-site but also through digital platforms, where they interact, create content and co-create experiences with sports organizations. This shift from passive consumption to active engagement aligns with the broader transition from goods-dominant to service-dominant logic in marketing, where value is created collaboratively between customers and organizations (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

1.1 Motivation for the Study

Ice hockey is Finland's most popular sport (Statista, 2025). Reflecting this popularity, the Finnish National Ice Hockey League (Liiga) maintains strong attendance figures. During the 2023–2024 season, games attracted an average of 4,569 spectators, with an average arena capacity of 70% (EY, 2024). The report suggests that teams can still attract audiences in today's hyperconnected and platform-driven environment, which is a critical achievement given the rising costs of organizing sporting events (EY, 2024). Successfully attracting spectators and effectively commercializing sports as a product are crucial objectives that sports organizations must focus on (Yoshida, 2017). This is particularly significant in Liiga, where approximately 25% of a club's revenue comes from ticket sales and on-site services (EY, 2019; EY, 2024). Engaging fans and providing memorable experiences at live events can enhance these revenue streams while fostering a loyal fan base.

Modern sports fans operate in a digital environment where participation extends beyond the stadium. Through mobile apps, social media, and other digital platforms, fans can vote, comment, share, and engage with clubs in real-time. These touchpoints become platforms for value co-creation, where both the organization and the fan contribute resources such as data, feedback, emotions, and attention to shape the experience (Stegmann et al., 2021). Value is no longer embedded only in the product or game itself but emerges through dynamic interactions. For example, mobile voting for “player of the game,” occurs at the intersection of the customer sphere and provider sphere (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Furthermore, customer engagement, involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment, lies at the heart of the evolution from passive fan to active value creator. Ultimately, customer engagement enables longer-lasting relationships between fans and sport organizations. (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2011)

1.2 Research Gap

Social media has become central to academic research in sports marketing. Foundational reviews, such as Filo et al. (2015), identified relationship marketing and information distribution as main themes. However, a key critique they raised remains highly relevant as much of the literature has treated social media as a tool for managed communication rather than as an interactive environment for value co-creation. Later studies have advanced the understanding of digital fan engagement in two main ways. Research on content strategy examines which types of posts generate engagement and shows, for example, that socially oriented content generally performs well, while the effect of media format depends on the context (Annamalai et al., 2021). Also, studies on fan motivation explain why fans interact, highlighting drivers such as passion, hope, and solidarity (Stavros et al., 2014) and linking these motivations to different levels of engagement (Vale & Fernandes, 2017).

Despite this progress, important gaps remain. While underlying factors, such as fan motivations, and outcomes, such as likes, comments and shares, are increasingly well

documented, the dynamic, reciprocal processes through which fans and organizations co-create value on specific platforms are still less understood. Stegmann et al. (2021) highlight that existing research has only begun to explore engagement platforms and service ecosystems in sports marketing. Moving beyond assessments of “what works” requires empirical analyses of the micro-level interaction mechanisms through which brand narratives are shaped collaboratively by clubs and fans in everyday practice.

Methodologically, much empirical work relies on single-method designs, typically using either quantitative surveys (e.g., Vale & Fernandes, 2017; Piątkowska & Bańbuła, 2025) or qualitative content analyses (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014). Mixed-methods studies do exist. For example, Annamalai et al. (2021) combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of content strategies. However, their focus differs from the present study. While their work provides a detailed analysis of which content types are most effective in a specific sports league, it does not use triangulation to examine the underlying interaction processes between fans and clubs, nor does it explore how and why value is co-created in that service ecosystem.

Related research in sports marketing also examines value co-creation beyond the fan–organization partnership. Uhrich (2014) investigates customer-to-customer value co-creation using a qualitative multi-method design and develops a typology of physical and virtual platforms and practices through which fans create value with each other. At the same time, the study highlights the need for quantitative measurement and attention to value co-destruction. This perspective broadens understanding of the wider ecosystem but differs from the present study, which focuses specifically on fan–club interactions within a single, platform-specific environment. In addition, Jalonen (2017) provides a particularly relevant conceptual foundation grounded in Service-Dominant Logic by framing social media as a space where fans, organizations, and sponsors integrate operant resources such as social identity, community, and participatory culture to co-create value. However, Jalonen’s model remains largely conceptual and does not empirically examine platform-specific, micro-level interaction processes. It also does not

employ a mixed-methods design that triangulates organizational strategy, fan perceptions, and public-facing content within the same empirical setting.

Addressing these gaps, this thesis conducts a mixed-methods single-case study. By integrating interviews with organizational actors, a fan survey, and an Instagram content analysis, the study investigates not only which content drives engagement but, more importantly, how and why value is co-created through ongoing, micro-level fan–organization interactions within a distinct digital service ecosystem. The next section will provide a more in-depth presentation of the research questions and theoretical contributions.

1.3 Research Problem and Theoretical Contribution

The central research question of the study is: **How can a professional sports organization instrument its social media to move from transaction to co-creation, building deeper, interactive relationships with fans?**

This main question is explored through the following three sub-questions:

- How can sports organizations utilize their Instagram platform to prompt and integrate user-generated content as a form of brand narrative co-creation?
- What are the key motivators and perceived benefits that drive fans' participation in sports organizations digital co-creation initiatives?
- What are the primary strategic challenges and operational limitations sports organizations face when attempting to manage and scale value co-creation activities?

To understand how digital transformation and social media enable value co-creation in real-world contexts, this thesis employs a single-case study that examines the topic from multiple perspectives. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the roles of sports organizations, fans, and social media in the process, and to provide an empirical

foundation for the theoretical framework. A central element of the methodology is the mixed-methods strategy, which triangulates three distinct data sources: semi-structured interviews with the case organization, a quantitative fan survey, and a content analysis of the organization's Instagram presence. The interviews provide insights into real-life activities and internal processes, the fan survey captures fans' perceptions and satisfaction with current practices, and the social media analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches based on posts from the 2024–2025 season.

This study's primary theoretical contribution is the 'Digital Fan Value Co-Creation' framework, an empirically grounded model that explains digital value co-creation in sports. Moving beyond static models of content effectiveness, the framework presents co-creation as a dynamic, reciprocal process. It identifies a core mechanism, an "Engagement Engine," driven by the interplay between strategic club inputs and fan motivations for recognition, and demonstrates how this process is shaped by the club's unique identity and operational constraints. Ultimately, the framework provides a multi-layered explanation of how and why micro-level interactions build and sustain an active digital fan community.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The study consists of five main chapters. After the introduction, the second chapter lays out the theoretical foundation for the research. It explores the core concepts of value co-creation, customer engagement, social exchange theory, digital transformation, and the role of social media, as well as their connection in sports marketing. The chapter concludes with the presentation of the study's initial conceptual framework, which guides the empirical investigation. The third chapter provides a detailed account of the research methodology, while the fourth chapter presents the empirical findings. The fifth chapter is the discussion, which concludes the study, evaluates its theoretical and managerial implications, acknowledges its limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2 Theoretical Background

The study's theoretical background integrates the theoretical foundation with the context of sport marketing. The first section discusses the concepts of value co-creation, customer engagement, social exchange theory, and digital transformation to build understanding of the broader phenomena. The latter section focuses on the specific context of sport marketing and how the broader concepts apply within it. To conclude the theoretical background, a conceptual framework will be presented as the foundation for the study's empirical section.

2.1 Foundations

This section outlines the core concepts of value co-creation, customer engagement, social exchange theory, and digital transformation. By examining foundational theories and frameworks, this section builds the basis for analysing how customer roles and organizational strategies have evolved in the digital era and sets the foundation for applying the concepts in the context of sport marketing.

2.1.1 Value Co-Creation

Value co-creation has emerged as a central theme in marketing research following the development of service-dominant logic (Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Service-dominant logic contrasts with the traditional goods-dominant logic, in which organizations are viewed as value providers, and the customer's role remains that of a passive consumer who receives the delivered value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Moreover, goods-dominant logic is based on the premise that value is created entirely during the production of the product and transferred to the customer, usually at the point of purchase (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

However, according to service-dominant logic, value creation occurs not during production or purchase but only in the usage situation. Therefore, the customer is the central actor in the value creation process, where the organization's role is to provide a value proposition, and the actual value perceived by the customer is defined by them (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Ultimately, all participants are assumed to be resource integrators, and value is created through communication and experiences (Payne et al., 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Figure 1 illustrates the differences between goods-dominant logic and service-dominant logic.

	GOODS-DOMINANT LOGIC	SERVICE-DOMINANT LOGIC
EXCHANGE FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EXCHANGE OF TANGIBLE GOODS (OPERAND RECOURCES) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EXCHANGE OF SERVICES AND COMPETENCES (OPERANT RECOURCES)
ROLE OF GOODS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • END PRODUCT: VALUE EMBEDDED IN THE GOOD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CARRIERS OF KNOWLEDGE: TOOLS FOR VALUE CREATION
ROLE OF CUSTOMER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASSIVE RECIPIENT OF THE GOODS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACTIVE CO-PRODUCER: INVOLVED IN VALUE CREATION
VALUE DETERMINATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEFINED BY PRODUCER: BASED ON EXCHANGE VALUE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PERCEIVED BY CUSTOMER: BASED ON VALUE-IN-USE

Figure 1. Differences between goods-dominant logic and service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Value co-creation has various definitions and has been applied to multiple frameworks. Universally, it is defined as a process in which value is created through the interplay between actors within the service ecosystem (Hein et al., 2019; Peñaloza & Mish, 2011; Ranjan & Read, 2016). According to Sugathan et al. (2017), customers are involved in various stages of the process and contribute their knowledge and skills. In contrast, Galvagno and Dalli (2014) argue that value co-creation is a joint process where new value is created collaboratively, both materially and symbolically. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) were the first to introduce a framework where the customer is seen as an active participant in the value creation process. Their DART model identifies four key aspects

of co-creation: Dialogue, Access, Risk assessment, and Transparency which guide organizations in building platforms for co-creation communication. Alongside the DART model, Payne et al. (2008) developed a framework for co-creating brand relationships, and Boyle (2007) introduced a five-stage model for brand collaboration. Although the definitions and frameworks vary, they all view co-creation as an interactive and dynamic process in which different actors combine resources to achieve shared goals.

In practice, the value co-creation process can be divided into three spheres: provider, customer, and joint. Co-creation occurs in the joint sphere, where both the provider and the customer mutually influence one another (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The organization's mission is to build collaborative platforms that, in the joint sphere, helps to understand how customers perceive value. These platforms can be technological, organizational, or cultural structures that enable participation, learning, and co-development (Grönroos, 2011). For example, interviews of this study revealed that the Finnish National Ice Hockey League has developed mobile app for the clubs where fans can vote for the "player of the game" based on players' performance during the game. In this case, attending and watching the game, as well as voting through the app, fall within the customer sphere, while organizing the game and enabling mobile voting to represent the provider sphere. The point where these spheres meet, namely the mobile application, allows customers to influence their value perception and enables the organization to take action based on the results. Therefore, the game generates deeper engagement for both the fan and the team, as the team supports the voting by awarding a product prize to one of the voters. Figure 2 illustrates the three spheres of value co-creation.

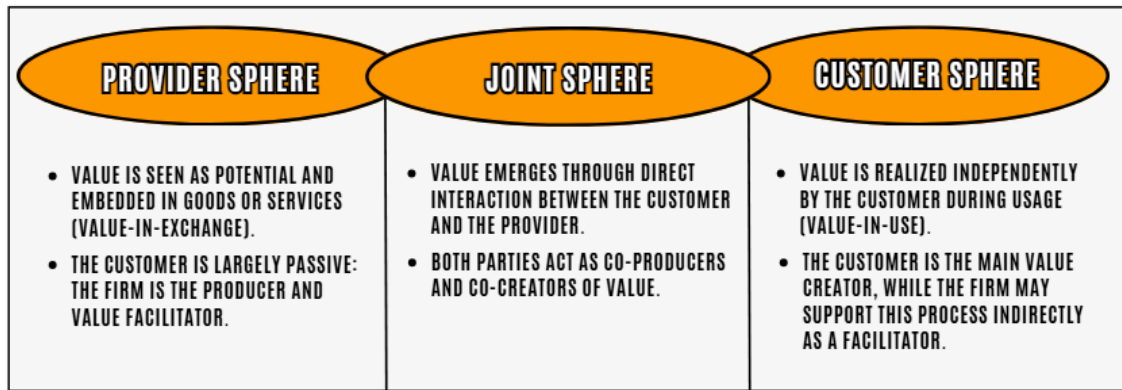


Figure 2. Three spheres of value co-creation (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Above all, the joint sphere of value co-creation should facilitate the integration of resources between the organization and the customer. The customer contributes time, knowledge (operant resources), and physical or digital tools (operand resources) to support the organization's development efforts (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Romero & Molina, 2011). If the joint sphere is underdeveloped or mismanaged, value co-creation may not occur effectively, and value remains merely a proposition subject to the customer's evaluation (Grönroos, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, high-quality and relevant interaction with the customer is key to successful co-creation.

Furthermore, service-dominant logic does not accept the assumption that the customer and the provider are always co-creators of value, nor does it support the idea that companies can influence the customer's value creation simply by allowing them to participate in their processes (Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014). Therefore, value co-creation may be more of a context-specific phenomenon that depends on the relationship between a particular company and its customers.

Despite differing perspectives, the benefits of value co-creation have been widely acknowledged from both the customer's and the organization's points of view. For customers, it provides an opportunity to influence the products and services they use, which in turn enhances satisfaction, experiential value, and loyalty (Delpechitre et al., 2018; Hein et al., 2019). For organizations, co-creation offers insights and innovative

resources from customers, enabling the development of more personalized, higher-quality, and relevant solutions (Saha et al., 2021). Additionally, it can lead to cost savings, improved customer insight, and longer-term customer relationships.

In conclusion, value co-creation is a multilevel phenomenon that challenges the traditional idea that value is created solely by the organization. At its core lies customer participation, resource integration, and the meaning of experience. Value cannot be created without the active involvement of participants and an appropriate context. Therefore, customer engagement is deeply rooted in value co-creation, as the customer plays an active role. The following subsection provides a more detailed examination of customer engagement.

2.1.2 Customer Engagement in Co-Creation Process

Customer engagement represents the psychological and behavioural investment a customer makes in their relationship with a brand, extending beyond simple transactions (Hollebeek, 2011; Brodie et al., 2011). While engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, it is the behavioural aspect that directly drives the value co-creation process.

It is crucial to distinguish between the psychological state of engagement and the specific "customer engagement behaviours" that contribute to value co-creation. These behaviours can include providing feedback, helping other customers, or generating online content. From this perspective, value is not co-created by the feeling of engagement alone, but through the tangible actions that fans undertake. Therefore, a fan's participation becomes a critical resource that the organization can integrate into its service system, making engagement a direct antecedent to value co-creation. (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014)

Customer engagement is defined as the intensity of individuals' participation and connection toward an organization's offerings, where the nature of this participation and connection can be either customer-oriented or organization-oriented (Vivek et al., 2012). Customers' behaviour may include, for example, word-of-mouth promotion, recommendations, and online conversations, which reflect the value customers place on the provided product or service. However, it is noteworthy that from the organization's point of view, customer engagement behaviour may be either positive or negative (van Doorn et al., 2010). Thus, customer engagement is deeply linked to the shared value creation process.

Moreover, customer engagement is expected to have a positive impact on organizational performance and competitive advantage, ultimately increasing sales and profitability (Hollebeek, 2011). The goal is to have participating customers who share their knowledge and experiences for product or service development (O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2010). For example, a group of friends may share an Instagram story content from a sport event and promote the atmosphere, which may lead to new paying spectators.

However, customer engagement is not achieved straight away. Organizations can monitor their relationships with their customers at three different levels that are represented in Figure 3 (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The first level is the transaction level, where the customer is not yet emotionally attached or engaged with the organization's products or services but is still behaviourally active. At this level, the customer relationship is tracked by when the customer last made a purchase (recency), how often the customer buys (frequency), and how much money the customer spends (monetary value). From the transaction level, the customer relationship evolves to the relationship level, where the customer demonstrates trust and commitment. This progression is driven by the principles of social exchange, as a history of positive, rewarding interactions builds the trust necessary for a deeper commitment. Finally, engagement is the third level, where the customer is emotionally invested in the brand and actively participates in product development by providing feedback and even defending the

brand during crises. Customers' direct contributions to the organization can be observed in their purchasing behaviour, while their indirect contributions include promotion, feedback, and social influence (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

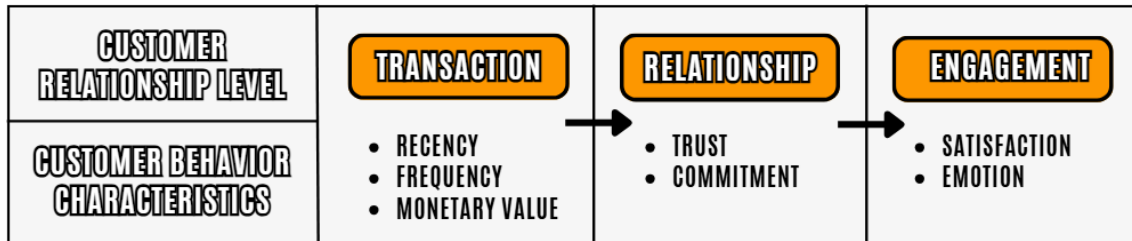


Figure 3. Customers' relationship progress to the stage of engagement (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

In summary, customer engagement plays a crucial role in linking value co-creation to long-term business success. It enables companies to shift from transactional relationships toward meaningful partnerships, where customers actively shape and influence the organization's operations. Integrating customer engagement into value co-creation allows for the development of adaptive, customer-centric strategies in a rapidly changing digital environment and complex markets (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Brodie et al., 2011; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The following subsection will introduce the motivational theory that underpins this entire dynamic.

2.1.3 The Motivational Foundation: Social Exchange Theory

While value co-creation explains the process of interaction and engagement describes the customer's psychological and behavioural state, they do not fully explain the underlying relational drivers. Social Exchange Theory provides this essential motivational foundation, answering the fundamental question: why do fans choose to engage and participate in co-creation in the first place?

Originating in the works of sociologists such as Homans (1958) and Blau (1986), Social Exchange Theory posits that social behaviour results from an exchange process. Individuals and groups engage in relationships based on a subjective cost–benefit analysis, seeking to maximize rewards while minimizing costs (Emerson, 1976). A relationship is maintained and strengthened when participants perceive the exchange as fair and the rewards outweigh the costs.

Conversely, engagement also involves costs. These include tangible costs like time and data usage, but more importantly, intangible costs such as cognitive effort (learning platforms, creating content) and emotional investment. This emotional cost carries the risk of negative outcomes like frustration with the team's performance or exposure to toxic comments and conflict within the fan community (Cook & Rice, 2003). Thus, Social Exchange Theory provides the theoretical lens to understand not just why fans engage, but also when and why they disengage or actively participate in the destruction of value.

The balance of costs and benefits described by Social Exchange Theory becomes particularly dynamic in the digital age. Technology and digital platforms not only provide new arenas for this exchange but also actively reshape the nature of its potential rewards and costs. It is therefore essential to analyse the digital transformation that creates the very architecture for modern fan engagement and value co-creation.

2.1.4 Digital Transformation and Social Media as a Part of Co-Creation

Digital transformation represents a central process in which analog functionalities and resources are digitalized and integrated into digital tools and technologies (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). Fitzgerald et al. (2013) defines digital transformation as the use of new digital technologies to enable major business improvements. Hess et al. (2016) stated, digital transformation is concerned with the changes digital technologies can bring about in a company's business model, which may result in changed products or organizational structures or the automation of processes. Furthermore, digital transformation is more

than just a technological change, as it transforms business models and structural as well as cultural foundations, enabling operational efficiency, cost savings, improved stakeholder relationships, and enhanced value creation (Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Vial, 2019; Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023; Plekhanov et al., 2023). For example, in this process, non-digital resources, such as attending a sports event, and digital resources, such as a sports club's mobile application, combine to create new forms of communication.

In addition, digital transformation has been shown to enhance value co-creation by enabling new services, improving customer understanding, and promoting more personalized and efficient processes especially in social media (Vial, 2019; Alamäki & Korpela, 2021). By integrating resources between the organization and customers, organizations may predict future trends and adjust their offerings to respond to these trends (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Therefore, digital transformation supports collaboration and transparency but requires careful management of both digital and analogical platforms to prevent potential frictions. Frictions may arise when new ways of working encounter old ones, and at worst, this may lead to the destruction of value. This is especially true in traditional industries, where products and processes are valued for their analogical features (North et al., 2020; Tekic & Koroteev, 2019; Baraldi et al., 2012)

For example, traditionally, customers could purchase tickets at the arena's ticket booth using cash at a sports event. However, nowadays, the buying process increasingly takes place in digital environments, as ticket shops are online and physical payments are handled with payment cards. If the new buying process is not fluent, fans could become frustrated and even decide not to attend the game. Especially older customers who do not use the internet may find the situation challenging, which could ultimately lead to lost customers, decreased revenue, and weakened relationships between the organization and its customers.

Furthermore, social media, as part of digital transformation, plays a central role in how organizations communicate with their customers and how digital transformation is

linked to value co-creation nowadays. Social media supports value co-creation by providing platforms for resource integration. The consumer's role is to bring their knowledge, passion and needs to the conversation inside the platforms. With active consumers and their feedback, organizations can modify the value proposition in the desired direction (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). For example, consumers could actively give feedback by commenting on an organization's social media posts or share stories from the organizations event. Conversation with customers not only enhances the organization's competitiveness but also deepens the relationship with them (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Particularly, social media marketing activities act as enablers for customer engagement in value co-creation.

The development of social media dates to the late 1970s, with the emergence of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). In the 1980s, development continued with the emergence of Usenet. In the 1990s, it reached a significant milestone with the emergence of the World Wide Web, which led to the creation of early forms of user-generated content. However, real interaction platforms, where users could communicate and create content, emerged only with the release of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Nowadays, social media enables creating content, sharing knowledge, and building communities within social media applications, including blogs, content communities, social networking sites, and forums, which also enable organizations to select the most suitable platforms for value co-creation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Internationally recognized platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, have long dominated the social media landscape (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). In recent years, TikTok has rapidly emerged as a major player, experiencing significant growth in both user numbers and overall popularity (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). This rise has notably influenced consumer behavior and the strategies adopted by businesses worldwide.

Nevertheless, this study will examine Instagram, as the case organization has the most followers and activity on that platform. Instagram has emerged as the most prominent

user-generated content (UGC) channel. The platform allows individuals to act as both content creators and curators, deciding what content is posted, commented on, and shared. This form of customer participation also enhances value co-creation by integrating emotional and experiential (Casaló et al., 2020). Despite its everyday nature, UGC has been described as a novel phenomenon in branding strategies, offering expanded opportunities for customer outreach while challenging traditional marketing practices (Dennhardt, 2014). Through UGC, users effectively become marketers of the content they produce, thereby supporting brand visibility and engagement (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

However, digital transformation and social media are not entirely positive. From the organization's point of view, it is essential to manage the platform and strategically upload relevant content. Contradictory expectations, poor responsiveness, or poorly designed digital experiences can lead to value destruction, customer dissatisfaction, or loss of trust (Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023; Sahebi & Formosa, 2022). Moreover, poorly designed content and posts, as well as negatively perceived actions taken by the company and communicated through social media, can lead to a surge of negative feedback in comment sections and messages. This may steer the conversation, customer engagement, and value creation in an undesirable direction.

In conclusion, digital transformation and social media are deeply intertwined with customer engagement and the co-creation of value. Digital tools provide the infrastructure, and social media offers an interactive platform for communication and participation. Together, they reshape the customer relationship into a more dynamic and collaborative process. To ensure long-term success, organizations must understand their audiences, develop a coherent social voice, and maintain consistent and transparent communication (Stegmann et al., 2021). However, while value co-creation, customer engagement, and digital transformation have been widely studied across various industries, their application in the field of sports marketing presents unique characteristics and challenges. The following section applies the previously discussed

theoretical concepts to the sports marketing context, where fans, organizations, and digital platforms interact in ways that reshape value creation and customer relationships.

2.2 Application in Sport Marketing

This section examines how the previously discussed theoretical concepts are applied in sports marketing. This view helps us better understand the opportunities and challenges that sports organizations face when trying to engage fans and create value in digital settings.

2.2.1 Characteristics of Sport Marketing

Traditionally, sport management has been approached with goods-dominant logic, as sport was seen to be something that was “produced”. For example, sport customer needs were fulfilled with sport products and services (O’Reilly et al., 2013), where nowadays they are filled with social interaction and engagement. Moreover, the sports industry has been viewed as a production process complemented by additional services. Li et al. (2001) described this process through the Sport Activity Model which is illustrated in Figure 4. In the model, sport producing sector (teams, athletes, fitness clubs, trainers and event producers) are the creators of the sport event and various supplementary sectors, such as media, supports the core creation. Although the model is somewhat dated, it still captures a key insight relevant today: no single company or organization can create a sports event on its own.

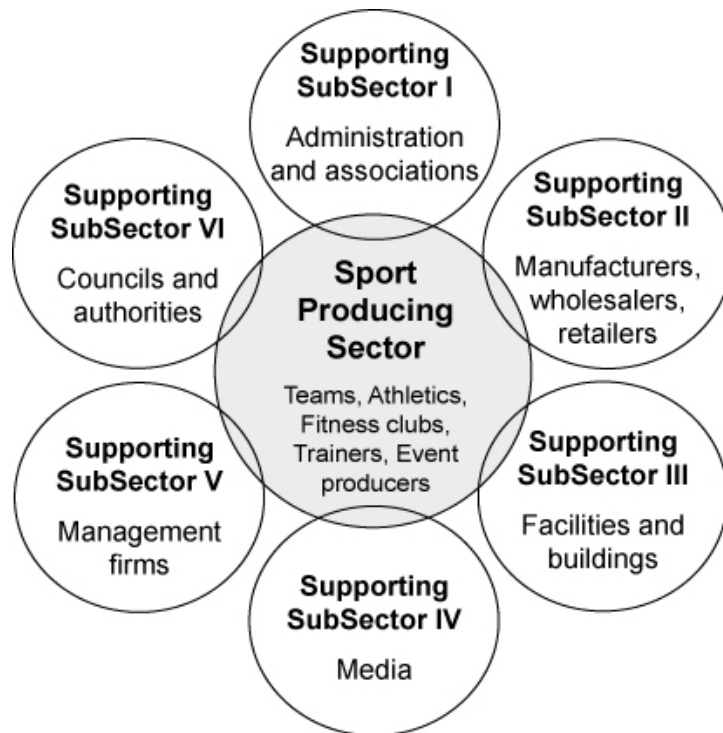


Figure 4. Sport activity model (adapted from Li et al., 2001).

Sports marketing has unique characteristics within the field of marketing. Characteristics like changing experiences, intense emotions and unpredictability separates it from regular consumer goods and services (Smith & Stewart, 2010). The primary goal of sports marketing is not only to promote teams or events but also to foster emotional bonds, loyalty, and a sense of community among fans (Yoshida, 2017). Therefore, fans often form deep connections with teams, athletes, or sporting identities. These connections can last a long time, even if the team performs poorly. In addition, traditions and shared history strengthen these feelings and contribute to a sense of belonging (Bee & Havitz, 2010).

In conclusion, this kind of emotional commitment leads to loyal behaviour, which is evident in activities such as attending games regularly, purchasing merchandise, and engaging online (Bee & Havitz, 2010). From the perspective of social exchange theory, this loyalty can be understood as the outcome of a relational exchange where the profound psychological and social rewards, such as a sense of belonging and identity

reinforcement, consistently outweigh the costs, such as the price of tickets or the disappointment of a loss (Wann & Branscombe, 1970). In addition to these identity-related benefits, fans also receive hedonic rewards such as enjoyment and excitement, informational benefits like exclusive news, and symbolic recognition from the club, all of which contribute to the perceived value of the relationship.

As said, teams, leagues, and athletes often carry symbolic value that goes beyond performance and influences broader societal discussions around gender, race, politics, and national identity. For example, attending games, wearing fan merchandise, and taking part in fan events creates a sense of community and belonging which also support's fans self-expression and social identity (Funk & James, 2001). Furthermore, social identity and a sense of community are valuable resources for sports organizations and key operant resources that support value co-creation. (Jalonen, 2017) As a result, consuming sport is often a shared and social activity, and this sense of togetherness is shaped by the whole context around sport, not just the game itself. This context includes pre-game events, post-game discussions, and conversations in both traditional media and social media platforms (Guo et al., 2024). In particular, social media can be seen as a service platform that facilitates identity formation, emotional expression, and peer interaction among fans (Jalonen, 2017).

Therefore, fans now take on many roles, not just as observers but also as content creators and brand supporters. This shift from passive to active participation has also influenced sports marketing strategies. Instead of one-way communication, sports organizations now operate in interactive ecosystems where value can be co-created with customers (Stegmann et al., 2021). Furthermore, the emotional nature of sports consumption offers a fertile ground for studying customer engagement and value co-creation. The interaction between fans and teams often extends far beyond a simple financial transaction, such as purchasing a ticket. Fans may participate in contests, feedback channels, and even decision-making processes (Kolyperas et al., 2019), such as the previously mentioned "player of the match" voting.

In summary, sports marketing has unique characteristics, such as emotional appeal, experiential richness, participatory culture, and symbolic significance. In addition, the shift from transactional consumer relationships to relational and co-creative marketing aligns naturally with the dynamics of sports fandom, providing a compelling context for in-depth exploration of value co-creation and customer engagement processes which are discussed in the next subsection.

2.2.2 Value Co-Creation and Customer Engagement in Sport Marketing

The application of value co-creation and customer engagement in sports marketing reflects a broader shift from goods-dominant logic to service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Woratschek et al., 2014). In traditional sports marketing models, value was seen as something included in a product, such as a game ticket, which the customer bought and used. However modern frameworks emphasize the role of the customer as an active participant who combines their resources with those of the sports organization within a service ecosystem, thereby creating value using the service or product (Jalonen, 2017).

Sport Value Framework (SVF) introduces the special features of value co-creation in the sport context and extends service-dominant logic to fit the field of sports (Woratschek et al., 2014). The SVF includes five connected levels through which value is co-created. The first level, the nature of the exchange, separates traditional transaction-based thinking from interaction-based value creation. The intra-level examines how individual actors, such as fans and team representatives, combine their resources to participate in creating value. The micro-level focuses on dynamic interactions, such as those between fans in social media. The meso-level encompasses networks of actors working on engagement platforms, which can be physical, such as stadiums, or digital, like online forums. The macro-level refers to the full-service ecosystem, where value is created as physical and digital environments connect. SVF is illustrated in Figure 5.

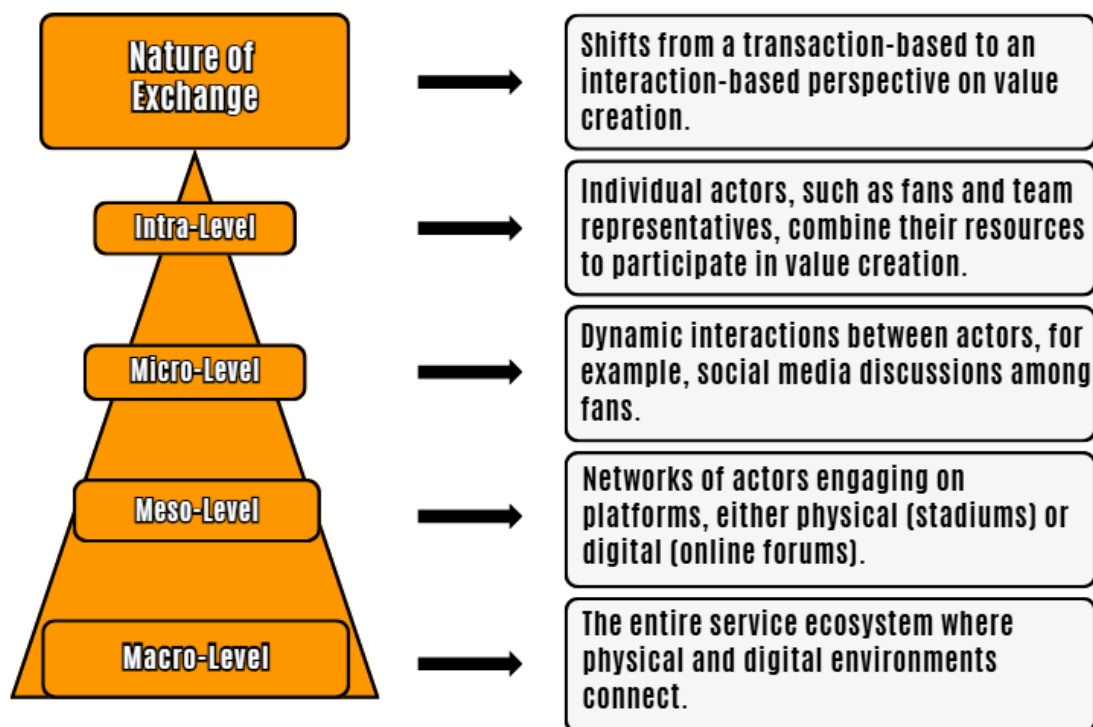


Figure 5. Sport Value Framework (Woratschek et al., 2014).

The SVF places the fan as a co-creator of value whose emotional, symbolic, and functional contributions are essential to the sports experience (Stegmann et al., 2021). In essence, the framework describes the multi-layered structure where social exchange occurs. Fans do not just consume entertainment but also help create it through their behaviour, identity expression, and shared rituals. Symbolic value is created, for example, when fans identify with a team through clothing or social media. Hedonic value stems from the joy and excitement participants feel when engaging, while functional value emerges when they appreciate the smooth organization or access to game-related content. These forms of value are interconnected and collectively shape the complete sports experience (Guo et al., 2024).

Jalonen (2017), presents a complementary framework which is illustrated in Figure 6. The framework emphasizes the role of social media as a platform for value co-creation among fans, sports organizations, and sponsoring companies. Based on service-dominant logic, the model highlights three key operant resources that social media

enables: social identity and a sense of community, congruence between the brand and the sports organization, and participatory culture with fan activation. Fans use social media to create stories, have conversations, and reinforce brand messaging in addition to consuming content. Social media is a dynamic platform for co-creation and collaboration because of its real-time interaction and symbolic expression. While sponsors profit from the alignment of their brand identity with fans' emotions, fans create communities based on shared values and emotional investment. Fans become active participants in the sports marketing process in this participatory setting, which blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer.

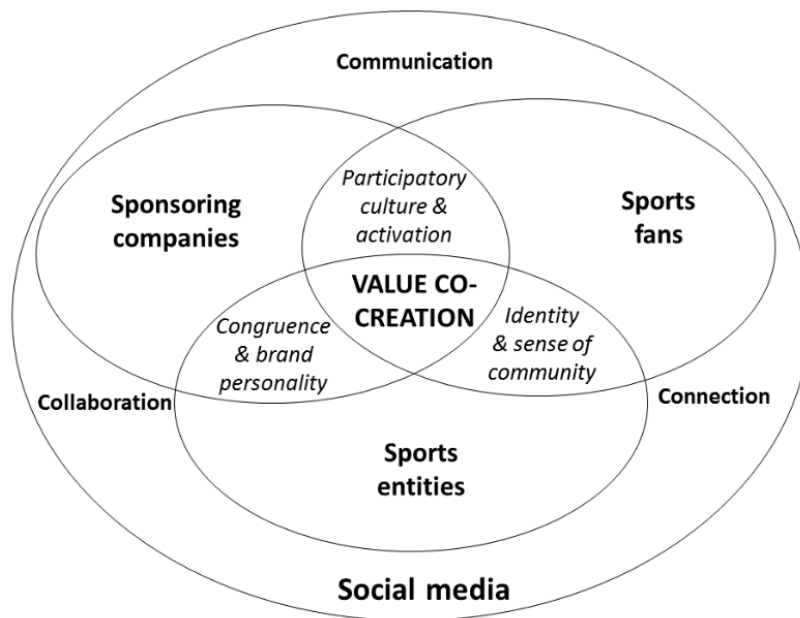


Figure 6. Value Co-creation through social media in sports ecosystem (adapted from Jalonen, 2017).

These developments indicate that sports organizations must transition from managing individual interactions to building service ecosystems where value is created through relationships and shared experiences (Woratschek et al., 2014; Jalonen, 2017). Organizations are no longer the only ones creating value. Instead, they support co-creation by giving fans chances to express themselves, connect with others, and take part in building the brand. Fans give back by sharing their ideas, feelings, and networks,

which lets them have an impact on outcomes. Co-creation frameworks highlight mutual exchange, participation, and shared agency (Jalonen, 2017)

Although existing frameworks, such as the Sport Value Framework and Jalonen's model, offer a strong theoretical foundation, there is still limited empirical research on how these dynamics operate in practice (Jalonen, 2017; Stegmann et al., 2021). Jalonen himself highlights the need for practical studies that explore how social media enables co-creation between clubs and fans. Jalonen's idea of practical research is continued in this study by expanding the theoretical framework with perspectives from social exchange theory and user-generated content. These concepts help explain the two-way nature of value creation and the reasons why fans choose to participate. However, as social media and digital transformation were raised as important actors for co-creation in sport marketing earlier in this chapter, the next subsection will explore more closely the role of these actors in sport marketing.

2.2.3 Digital Transformation in Sport Marketing

Covid-19 pandemic fostered the incorporation of digital platforms into the fan experience. Sports organizations had to implement new digital strategies to stay in touch with their fans as live event participation was curtailed or suspended. Therefore, social media, streaming services, and mobile applications have emerged as more important tools for communication opening new avenues for collaborative work (Cornwell, 2020). This change made digital spaces a key component of how people watch sports and highlighted the significance of creating value off the field. According to research, fans are expecting more interactive formats, short-form videos, and personalized content, so marketers need to reconsider their conventional strategies and adjust to a fragmented, demand-driven consumption landscape (IBM, 2025).

In addition, one major change has been the digitalization of everyday operations, especially in areas like ticket sales, membership management, and mobile apps. Sports

clubs now use digital tools increasingly to make transactions easier and to offer personalized content based on fan behaviour and preferences. Data from these tools, such as click paths, purchase history, and app usage, is used to improve services and target communication more accurately (Mondello & Kamke, 2014). When data from different platforms is combined, sports marketing becomes a data-rich environment where clubs can do detailed segmentation, analyse behaviour, and make predictions (Wedel & Kannan 2016).

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have played a central role in the digitalization process, as they facilitate easy interaction between fans and enable public engagement with sports clubs. User-generated content such as memes, photos, comments and stories serves as a tool for fans to build their identity (Jalonen, 2017). Some fans even turn their social media into a commercial space centered around their fandom. A broader example can be seen in major sports events, such as the Olympics or the Super Bowl, which generate large volumes of online discussion reflecting a wide range of emotions, narratives, and loyalties. During these high-profile events, social media channels are filled with fans' real-time comments, reactions, and hashtags, which increase the cultural impact and emotional weight of the event (Yan et al., 2019).

As highlighted before, Instagram has become a key user-generated content (UGC) platform because it enables fans to easily engage with sports culture through stories, posts, and reels that connect personal experiences to broader team narratives. This type of content contributes to the co-creation of brand meaning and identity while also providing valuable insights into fan emotions and behaviour. The real-time and emotional nature of this content makes it a vibrant source for understanding the symbolic value of sports experiences and the connections fans have with teams beyond the physical arena (Chang, 2018). Through Instagram, value creation deepens, for example, when fans can reshare stories originally posted by the sports organization. This also works the other way around, as sports organizations often share content created by fans on their channels.

Despite the benefits, digital platforms also bring specific challenges. Another key issue is privacy and data security. Social media channels collect large amounts of data about fan behaviour, preferences, and identity, which raises questions about consent, data storage, and ethical use. Fans may not be aware of how their data is collected or used, especially when interaction happens subtly through apps, Wi-Fi analytics, or social media. Potential data breaches or misuse can reduce trust and harm the reputation of sports clubs (Lee, 2025).

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of sports marketing, pushing clubs to adopt new tools for engaging fans remotely. This shift emphasized that value in sports is increasingly co-created off the field and through emotional, digital, and participatory experiences. Through digital platforms, fans are no longer passive consumers but contributors to the club's identity and narrative. Social media channels like Instagram enable fans to co-create brand meaning via stories, memes, comments, and personal posts (Jalonen, 2017; Chang, 2018). When fans share content or react emotionally online, they become part of a dynamic dialogue that shapes the club's image and community culture.

2.3 Conceptual Framework: Co-Creation and Engagement in Digital Sport Ecosystems

The previous sections have established the theoretical foundations. This section synthesizes these concepts into a cohesive conceptual framework that will guide the empirical investigation of this study. The framework, visualized in Figure 7, explains how fan engagement evolves, how it is mediated by digital platforms, and how these interactions culminate in value co-creation within a sports context.

At the core of the framework is the understanding that fan engagement is not a static state but a developmental process. Drawing on the model by Pansari and Kumar (2017), this study posits that the fan relationship progresses through distinct stages. It begins at

a transactional level, involving simple interactions like purchasing a ticket. Through consistent positive experiences, this can evolve into a relational level, characterized by trust and commitment. The ultimate stage is engagement, where fans are emotionally and behaviourally invested in the organization. This framework argues that once engaged, the customer is activated to take action and commit, making them more willing to participate in meaningful co-creation.

Digital platforms, particularly social media, function as the primary enablers and mediators of this process. They constitute the "joint sphere" (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) where the sports organization and its fans can interact directly. These platforms provide the infrastructure for user-generated content (UGC), comments, and sharing, which are the tangible manifestations of fan participation. The organization utilizes these platforms to offer value propositions, while fans use them to contribute their own operant resources, such as knowledge, passion, and creativity.

The "engine" driving a fan's progression through the engagement stages is explained by Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1986). Fans are motivated to invest their time and effort when they perceive the benefits of participation to outweigh the costs. In this context, benefits are often intangible, including a sense of community, emotional connection, recognition from the club, and the feeling of belonging. When a sports organization successfully facilitates these benefits, it encourages a reciprocal response from fans.

This reciprocity creates a powerful feedback loop, shown by the returning arrow in the framework. When engaged fans participate in co-creation and feel that their contributions are seen and valued, their commitment and emotional investment are reinforced. This, in turn, deepens their engagement, encouraging continued participation and loyalty in a repeating cycle. Value co-creation is the emergent outcome of this dynamic interplay. It is a context-specific process where the organization and its engaged fans, interacting through digital platforms, collaboratively shape the brand

narrative, the fan experience, and shared symbolic value. This framework moves beyond the model of Jalonen (2017) by focusing on the micro-level motivations and behaviours of individual fans. It provides a lens to investigate how a sports organization can strategically use its digital channels to guide fans from simple transactions toward becoming active partners in a living, interactive brand ecosystem.

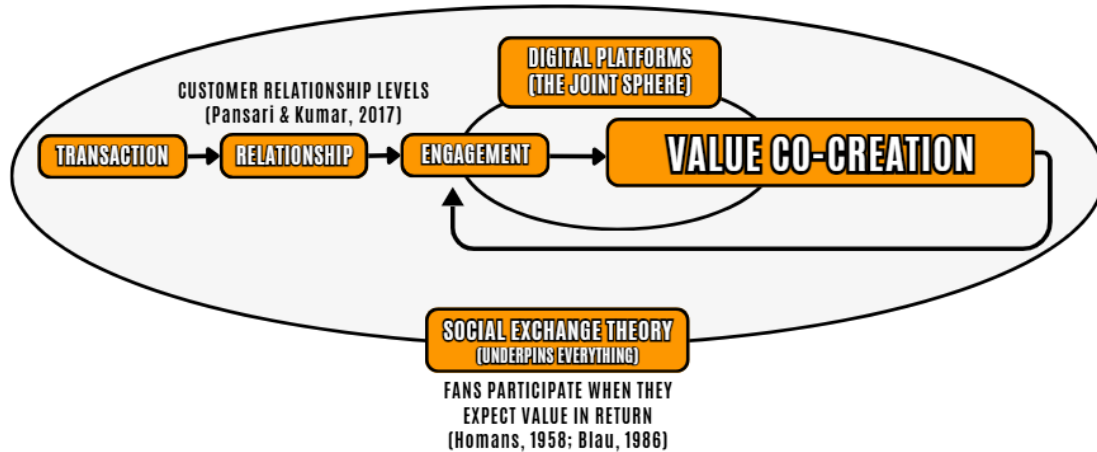


Figure 7. Conceptual framework of the study.

3 Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework introduced earlier, this chapter outlines the methodological choices made in the study. The aim is to describe the approach taken to answer the central research question: How can a professional sports organization instrument its social media to move from transaction to co-creation, building deeper, interactive relationships with fans? This chapter begins by clarifying the philosophical foundation and overall research strategy, then explains the case selection rationale, and finally outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis. In addition, Artificial Intelligence tools were employed in various stages of the thesis preparation process, in accordance with university guidelines. A more detailed declaration of the tools used, and their purposes is presented in Appendix 7. These elements, together with the theoretical background, form the foundation for interpreting the findings presented later.

3.1 Research Strategy and Method

Choosing the research strategy was a key step in shaping the study's overall direction, from how data would be collected to how findings would be analysed and presented. Given the multifaceted and context-sensitive nature of digital fan engagement and value co-creation, a flexible but structured approach was necessary.

The study applies a pragmatist research philosophy. Pragmatism is especially relevant for this study since it focuses on the practical usefulness of the knowledge produced and the research problem and does not commit to any single view of knowledge, like positivism or interpretivism (Morgan, 2014). In addition, pragmatism supports the objectives of this study to understand real-world phenomena from different perspectives and generate useful insights. Moreover, a pragmatic approach offers a solid reason to use a mixed-methods research design, where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed within the same study. This combination helps build a more complete and detailed understanding than either approach could provide on its

own (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Hollebeek & Belk, 2021). Qualitative insights answer the “why” and “how”, and quantitative insights the “how many” and “how much”, and by bringing these answers together, the study is able to create a richer and more rounded view of the topic.

The research is structured as a single-case study. The case study method is an empirical approach that allows for a deep dive into a real-world situation, making it ideal for exploring how value is co-created between the case organization and its fans (Yin, 2018). A single-case study made it possible to go into more detail and really understand the interactions at play, where a multiple-case study would have lacked, since the objective isn't to make broad generalizations but rather to offer meaningful insights and practical takeaways from this specific context.

More specifically, this study uses a Convergent Parallel Design which is well-known mixed-methods strategy, where different data sources are collected simultaneously, analysed separately and then integrated in the final interpretation phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this thesis, this means that the qualitative data from interview and content analysis were collected during the same period as the quantitative data from the fan survey. Collecting the data at the same time allow for dynamic interplay between different data types during the analysis and discussion stages.

The cornerstone of this research design is triangulation. Originally a term from navigation, triangulation in social sciences refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to study a single phenomenon, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Jick, 1979; Yin, 2018). This study employs two distinct forms of triangulation. First, methodological triangulation is achieved by combining three different research methods: semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and a quantitative survey. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and by combining them, the limitations of one method are offset by the strengths of another. Second, data source triangulation is achieved by gathering data from three distinct

perspectives: the club's internal strategy (from interviews), its public communication actions (from content analysis), and the fans' external perceptions (from the survey).

In conclusion, this study uses triangulation not just to find agreement between different data sources, but also to explore where they might differ or add to each other (Jick, 1979; Mathison, 1988). Differences or contradictions between sources are not seen as problems, but as valuable findings that can highlight gaps between strategy, execution and perception. Complementarity means that one source can help explain or add context to what another one shows. By recognizing all three outcomes: agreement, difference and complementarity, this study aims to create a strong, multi-layered understanding of value co-creation in the digital sports world.

3.2 Case Selection

After careful consideration, the selected case is a Finnish professional sports organization competing in the country's highest-level ice hockey league. The selection was not random but based on specific strategic criteria aligned with the goals of this study. In mutual agreement with the organization, it will be referred to as the case organization throughout this thesis.

The first criterion was the organization's active presence on social media and digital platforms, especially Instagram. Given the research questions, it was essential to choose a case that actively engages with fans through digital channels in order to examine the role of user-generated content in value co-creation. The case organization's Instagram account is regularly updated and diverse in content, offering rich material for content analysis. Posts range from official announcements to interactive content, enabling a practical analysis of the club's communication strategy. Without this digital activity, the content analysis would not have been feasible, and the study would have lacked a realistic context for examining modern fan relationships.

The second criterion was the relevance of the case in the context of Finnish sports marketing. Ice hockey is the most popular sport in Finland, and Liiga is its top professional league, attracting significant media attention and a passionate fan base (Statista, 2025). Therefore, the findings from this case are not tied to an outlier or unusual example but instead reflect a nationally significant setting. This increases the transferability of the insights to other similar contexts. While the results of a single-case study are not statistically generalizable, their value lies in generating a deep understanding that can inform both theory and practice. In addition, for smaller clubs or across different sports, the findings of this research may offer meaningful and practical insights.

The third, and arguably most important, criterion was the accessibility of the organization. A key strength of this research lies in the triangulation of methods and data sources and namely in the combination of interviews, a survey, and content analysis. This would not have been possible without the organization's collaboration. The case organization expressed willingness to participate in the study, provided access to key marketing personnel for semi-structured interviews, and agreed to co-create the fan survey and share it through its official social media channels. This access was methodologically essential. The interviews provided an "insider" perspective on strategic goals and perceived challenges, while the fan survey which was supported by the club, enabled the collection of broad "outsider" views. Without this collaboration, the study would have been limited to public data such as social media content, lacking the strategic and experiential dimensions. The case organization's accessibility thus enabled a truly multi-dimensional, triangulated, and robust case study, making it an ideal choice for this research.

3.3 Data Collection

To implement the triangulation strategy described earlier, data was collected from three distinct sources. This section provides a transparent and detailed account of each data collection method to ensure the process is both replicable and coherent.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

To explore the organization's internal marketing and communication strategy, a semi-structured interview was conducted with individuals directly responsible for marketing and social media. The interview participants were the organization's Marketing Manager and Office Manager. Interview Data Table can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview data: interviewees' roles and interview durations.

Interviewee	Role	Interview length
1	Marketing Manager	66 minutes
2	Office Manager	42 minutes

A semi-structured format was intentionally chosen to ensure consistency while also allowing for flexibility enabling spontaneous follow-up questions, deeper clarifications, and the emergence of new themes (Yin, 2018). The original interview framework was developed in Finnish, and the English translation is presented in Appendix 1. It was constructed from two primary themes, supplemented by questions regarding the use of artificial intelligence. The first theme, Digital Platforms and Ecosystem, was designed to establish the current state and future vision of the case organization's digital strategy. The questions aimed to identify key digital channels, performance metrics, and the organization's overall approach to building and maintaining long-term fan relationships.

Following this, the framework delved deeper into the core topic of this thesis with the second theme, Value Co-creation and social media. These questions explored the practical methods used for fostering interaction and community, the role of fans in content creation, and the organization's perspective on what motivates fans to participate. Finally, a set of bonus questions investigated the organization's current or potential use of artificial intelligence and analytics in its fan communication and marketing efforts.

3.3.2 Fan Survey

To examine the perspectives of fans, a quantitative survey was designed and distributed digitally in collaboration with the organization. The survey was published in the case organizations website, and the survey was made with websites tool (Wise Network). The survey included demographic questions such as age and game attendance frequency, as well as statements designed to measure key theoretical constructs, including perceived engagement, value co-creation, and content preferences. The questions were designed in collaboration with the case organization, taking into account both their specific needs and the needs relevant to the study. The original survey was conducted in Finnish, and the English translations of the survey questions are provided in Appendix 2.

The core of the survey was based on a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree). The scale intentionally excluded a neutral option to encourage respondents to take either a positive or negative stance, thereby reducing ambiguity and increasing the clarity of the results (Garland, 1991).

The survey was distributed and promoted via the organization's official social media channels using a non-probability, convenience sampling method. Responses were collected from individuals who happened to see the survey and chose to participate. While this method does not provide a statistically representative sample and the results cannot be generalized to the entire fanbase, it fits the exploratory nature of this study, which seeks to map out phenomena rather than produce generalizable findings. This approach also allowed for a rapid collection of responses from active fans, who are especially relevant for the research. Total of 671 answers were collected during the collection time. Data table of the fan survey can be seen below in the Table 2.

Table 2. Fan survey data: platform, distribution, collection time, and responses.

The survey platform	Distribution channel	Collection time	Amount of Responses
Tool integrated in case organizations website (Wise Network)	Case organizations Social Media	10 days 1.7.2025 – 11.7.2025	671

3.3.3 Social Media Content Analysis

To explore the organization's public communication, a systematic content analysis was conducted on posts from the organization's official Instagram account. The dataset included all posts published during the 2024–2025 regular Liiga season. This period was chosen to capture the full communication cycle of the game season. Due to Instagram's restrictive API and terms of service, which limit automated data collection, the data was gathered manually. Each post was documented systematically, including the caption text, link to post, publication date, hashtags as well as the number of likes and comments at the time of collection.

Additionally, all of the posts were categorised into four different categories. a) media type: (single picture, picture carousel or reel/video), b) Call to Action: (question voting, comment, no call to action, go and buy ticket or lead to web page) c) Context of the post: (Related to game event, not related to game event, player story, fan related story, game add or partnership post), d) Post is related to: (Superstar 1, superstar 2, end result or other). Posts were categorized by End Result, Superstar 1, Superstar 2 to determine if their engagement rates differed from other content. 'Superstar 1' and 'Superstar 2' are two of the organization's most well-known players. The unit of analysis was a single post, which is a well-established practice in this type of research (Krippendorff, 2019). This thorough method ensured a comprehensive and accurate dataset of the club's public communication strategy in action. Table 3 illustrates the data table of the Instagram Quantitative Analysis.

Table 3. Instagram quantitative analysis: content, volume, and timeframe.

Analysis	Content	Amount of Posts Gathered	Season	Post-Publication Dates
Quantitative	All posts from first regular season game to final game of the playoffs	1370	Season 2024-2025	10/09/2024 - 02/04/2025

To enable qualitative analysis, a purposive sample of 13 posts was selected based on engagement levels and thematic relevance. The selection included the overall top three posts with the highest number of comments, as well as the most-commented post within each major content category such as game-related events, player stories, partnerships, advertisements, and fan-related stories. The purpose of this selection was to examine what kind of content fans published in the comment sections and how these comments related to other forms of data collected in the study. Appendix 3 presents the selected posts together with the selection criteria, as well as their content category and media type.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data was conducted in three distinct stages, corresponding to the three data sources. Each dataset was first analysed using methods appropriate to its nature. The findings from these separate analyses were then synthesized and integrated to present in the Discussion chapter and to construct a holistic interpretation. This section details the specific analytical procedures applied to each dataset.

3.4.1 Interview Data: Thematic Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. An inductive, 'bottom-up' approach was applied to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' own perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded systematically, starting

with data preparation and familiarization. The interviews, which were conducted via Microsoft Teams, were initially transcribed using the platform's automated tool. This initial transcript was then manually corrected line-by-line in Google Docs while listening to the audio recordings to ensure complete accuracy. The finalized transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the dataset.

Next, an initial, open coding of the data was performed in Google Sheets. This involved assigning descriptive labels to segments of text that captured their semantic meaning. To remain close to the data, these initial codes were often based on the participants' own language, resulting in labels such as "bilingualism," "appealing to emotion," "resource limitations," and "highlighting UGC" (user-generated content). The codes were systematically sorted and collated into potential themes. In this phase, related codes were clustered into broader, more interpretive categories. For example, codes like "social media as a fan channel" and "highlighting UGC" were grouped under a potential theme of "digital platforms as tools for engagement." These potential themes were then recursively reviewed and refined by comparing them against both the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and accurately represented the data in relation to the research questions.

Finally, this process resulted in the four final themes presented in the Findings chapter: "Identity and the Digital Ecosystem," "The Core of Engagement," "The Evolving Role of the Fan," and "The Gap Between Aspirations and Reality." To enhance the transparency of this analytical process, a table illustrating the coding hierarchy with concrete examples is provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of the Thematic Analysis Coding Process.

Interview Quote	Initial Code	Category / Sub-Theme	Final Main Theme
"We want to create a feeling for the content creator that they are clearly part of this shared thing, and above all, we want to encourage people to share material from the games."	Creating a sense of belonging	Encouraging UGC and participation	The Evolving Role of the Fan
"The goal is that the customer experience isn't dependent on the game result; we want to offer something more than that."	Emotion over result	Emotion-based engagement	Core of the Engagement

3.4.2 Survey Data: Statistical Analysis

The quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS. Because the data were collected on a four-point Likert scale and are ordinal, non-parametric tests were used for inferential analysis, as these do not assume a normal distribution (Allen & Seaman, 2007). The analysis began by examining the respondents' demographic profiles and visualizing frequencies for each group. A detailed breakdown of the respondents' demographics is provided in Appendix 4.

The analysis then summarized overall response patterns by calculating frequencies, percentages, and the mode and median for each question, providing insight into the central tendency of responses. A full breakdown of the descriptive statistics is available in Appendix 5. Inferential statistics were subsequently applied to explore relationships between variables and compare key fan segments. To ensure data integrity, only complete responses were included in each analysis; for example, a respondent who did not answer the question on content preferences was excluded from that specific calculation. For group comparison tests, variables with multiple response options such as age, game attendance frequency, and social media activity were recoded into three-level ordinal categories (0 = low, 1 = medium, 2 = high), creating distinct groups while preserving the hierarchical nature of the data.

Furthermore, the specific tests were chosen based on the nature of the variables being examined. The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to compare the responses of two independent groups, such as season ticket holders versus other fans, to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in attitudes regarding the levels of emotional attachment. For comparisons across three or more independent groups, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test was employed to analyse how recoded categorical variables, such as age group or social media activity level, influenced fan perceptions and behaviours. For example, it tested whether higher social media activity correlated with a greater propensity to purchase merchandise, a stronger feeling of being appreciated, or higher expectations for interaction with the club. Moreover, Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation (ρ) was applied to measure the strength and direction of relationships between two ordinal variables, allowing exploration of key dynamics within the fan experience, such as the association between game attendance frequency and emotional attachment or the link between a fan's perceived sense of community on social media and their emotional attachment to the club. A summary table of the key inferential statistical tests conducted is provided in Appendix 6 to enhance the transparency of the analysis.

3.4.3 Instagram Data: Mixed-Methods Content Analysis

To analyse the Instagram data, a mixed-methods content analysis was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both a broad overview and deeper insights into the club's digital strategy.

In the quantitative analysis, after systematically collecting and coding the collection data as explained in section 3.3.3, the dataset was processed in Google Sheets, where pivot tables and charts were generated to capture key dimensions such as the frequency of media types, posting activity across months, and the distribution of content categories. To assess effectiveness, engagement rate was calculated as the primary metric by dividing the total number of likes, comments, and shares by the number of followers,

which normalizes for audience size and allows standardized comparison across content types (Phua et al., 2017). Comparisons of average and median likes and comments across categories were also conducted to provide complementary perspectives. By cross-referencing content categories with their corresponding engagement rates, the analysis aimed to identify multiple strategic elements driving engagement, including featuring a star player, highlighting game events, or using specific media types, rather than focusing on a single factor.

The qualitative analysis began by collecting all comments for each selected post, after which a sample of eight comments per post was examined in detail. Each comment was coded into one of five categories, brand-supportive, communal, emotional, analytical, or other/negative, with detailed justifications recorded for each coding decision. In addition, the analysis distinguished between superficial engagement, such as emojis or one-word replies, and substantive dialogue in which fans actively interacted with the club or with each other (Stavros et al., 2014). This stage highlighted the meanings, attitudes, and emotional tones behind fan interactions that raw engagement numbers could not capture. The results of the coding were then synthesized by identifying the most prevalent themes within each post type, which were triangulated with insights from the interview and survey data. For example, the strong presence of emotional themes in comments was compared with both the club's interview-stated emphasis on emotional storytelling and survey findings on fans' affective attachment. This integrative strategy strengthened the validity of the findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of how digital fan engagement and value co-creation are enacted on Instagram.

3.4.4 Triangulation

The triangulation of the three distinct data sources was a foundational part of the analysis process. To practically implement this, a master spreadsheet was created in Google Sheets to serve as the central analytical workspace. Within this spreadsheet, key

findings from each data source were systematically arranged side-by-side under emerging thematic categories. For example, to build the main theme of "The Evolving Role of the Fan," one column included interview insights describing the club's strategy of systematically re-sharing fan content to foster a sense of belonging and appreciation. Another column displayed quantitative survey results showing a statistically significant link between a fan's social media activity and their feeling of being appreciated when their content was shared ($H = 57.962, p < .001$). A third column contained observations from the Instagram analysis, noting defensive and brand-enriching comments made by fans on posts featuring user-generated content

This visual mapping allowed direct comparison, showing how the club's stated strategy was validated by fans' emotional responses and observed public behaviour. It facilitated the identification of convergences, where different sources supported the same conclusion, complementarities, where one source added depth to another, and discrepancies, where findings initially seemed to differ, prompting deeper analysis. This comparative approach ensured that the final themes presented in the Findings chapter were robustly supported and cross-validated across the datasets.

4 Findings

This chapter dives into the analysis findings through the lenses of the fan, case organizations thoughts, and posted content. Four themes were identified within the triangulation analysis, identity and the digital ecosystem, the core of engagement, the evolving role of the fan, and the gap between aspirations and reality. These themes will guide the findings and finally help synthesize them into the revised framework, the 'Digital Fan Value Co-Creation' framework.

4.1 Case Analysis

This section presents findings from the fan survey, the case organization's interview, and the organization's social media analysis, organized under four main themes.

4.1.1 Theme 1: Identity and the Digital Ecosystem

The first theme of the analysis examines how organization's unique identity serves as the foundation for its digital ecosystem and how the success of this ecosystem can be measured. The analysis shows that the club has successfully built its strategy upon a local, bilingual identity, and that this strategy has yielded concrete, measurable results. The interview emphasized that the core of the club's brand is the goal of being a team for the entire province, which requires a strategic decision to actively serve both of the region's language groups.

"To truly be the entire province's team, we must serve both languages. We have left the choice to the consumer as to which language they choose." (Interviewee 1)

This strategic choice is strongly supported by the fan community. In the survey data, the statement "I believe it is important that the club communicates in both national languages" received very high support (median and mode 4/4, n=671). Particularly

significant is the finding from a Mann-Whitney U test that season ticket holders consider bilingualism to be statistically significantly more important ($p = 0.036$, $U=38492.5$, $n=671$) than other fans. This indicates that the identity strategy resonates most powerfully with the most committed core audience.

To reach this broad, bilingual audience, the club strategically utilizes different digital channels for different segments, noting that Instagram serves a younger demographic. The survey data validates the effectiveness of this segmentation. A Kruskal-Wallis test showed that age has a highly statistically significant effect on how actively fans interact with social media content ($H = 26.295$, $p < 0.001$, $n=671$), with the youngest age groups being the most active. According to the interview, the club's primary digital metric is "reach," a goal supported by the fan co-creation strategy.

"If there are 100 fans at a game sharing the value they experienced with their own followers, you can reach a much larger mass of people." (Interviewee 1)

This strategic focus on digital reach and engagement appears to have yielded concrete results. During the 2024–2025 season, the club's Instagram following grew by 18% (3,879 followers) and the average game attendance grew by 12.27% (Internal club data, restricted availability; Liiga.fi, 2025) compared to the previous season. While direct causation cannot be proven, the strong parallel development of these figures suggests a link between the successful digital strategy and increased real-world interest.

While digital growth correlates with overall interest, the survey data shows that the role of social media as a direct sales channel is nuanced. On a general level, fans' responses to statements about social media driving purchases were neutral (median 3/4, $n=671$). However, the situation changes when focusing on the most active fans. A Kruskal-Wallis test reveals that the most active social media users have a statistically higher propensity to buy a ticket or fan merchandise ($H = 26.927$, $p < 0.001$, $n=671$). The distribution of responses across different types of social media activity is illustrated in Figure 8 below.

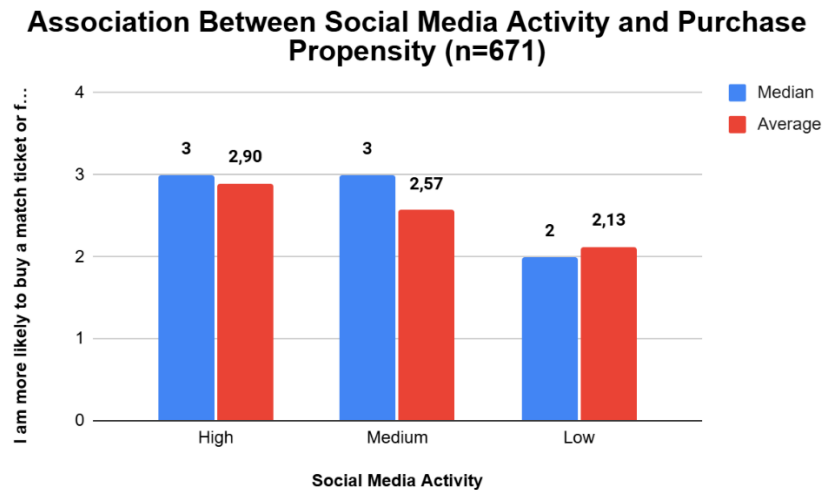


Figure 8. Association Between Social Media Activity and Purchase Propensity.

This is not a contradiction but an illustration of a process: social media's primary function is not to act as a direct advertising channel for everyone, but rather to build deep engagement with an active core group. It is through this deep engagement that a higher purchase intent is born. The relationship precedes the transaction.

4.1.2 Theme 2: The Core of Engagement

The foundation for this analysis is the club's successful strategic renewal of its digital presence, a change that has been clearly recognized by fans. According to the survey data, an overwhelming majority of respondents (a combined 95%, n=671) either "slightly agree" or "strongly agree" that the social media content has improved compared to previous seasons. This positive reception indicates a fertile ground for deeper engagement. In interviews, the organization's decision-makers emphasized that the primary strategic goal is to build a fan experience that is independent of the result of any single game. The focus is on creating broader emotional and social value.

"The goal is that the customer experience isn't dependent on the game result; we want to offer something more than that." (Interviewee 1)

"Everything starts with the fan enjoying themselves at the game and in the best-case scenario, they enjoy it so much that they tell someone else about their experience." (Interviewee 1)

This perspective, where value is derived from the holistic experience rather than just the core "product," is directly in line with the principles of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The strategy's core is to evoke emotion. However, while the strategic aspiration is to detach from game outcomes, the empirical data paints a more complex picture. Both the club's actions and the fans' reactions demonstrate that the most powerful engagement is still generated around the drama of the game and individual player performances. An interviewee acknowledged this tension:

"Ice Hockey is difficult to predict, but we can clearly see a higher volume of content when the game is tight, or we win" (Interviewee 1)

"We also aim to engage people with the players and their personal brands so that people would know and want to follow and support a specific player" (Interviewee 1)

This is directly reflected in the Instagram data. The quantitative Instagram analysis proves that posts related to the end result and superstar players achieve the highest engagement rates across all metrics. For example, the average engagement rate for "Superstar 1" posts was 5.66% (n=1370), more than double that of "other" content 2.03% (n=1370) (Figure 9.). In addition, average amount of comments per post was highest in the content related to end result (Figure 10.).

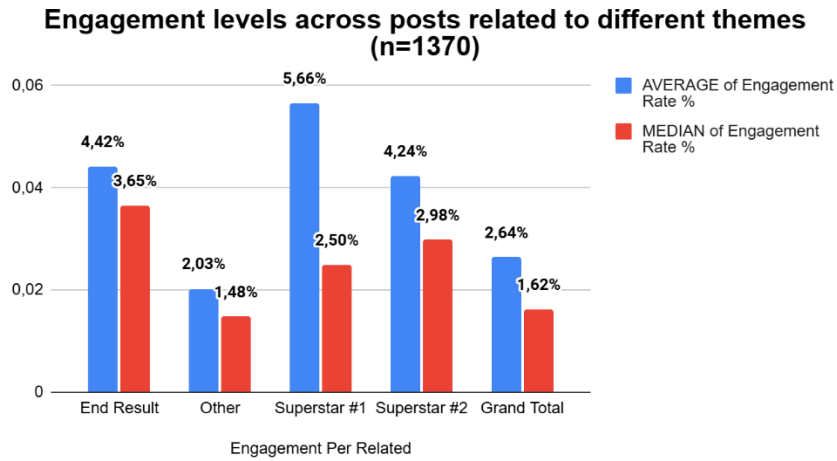


Figure 9. Engagement levels across posts related to different themes.

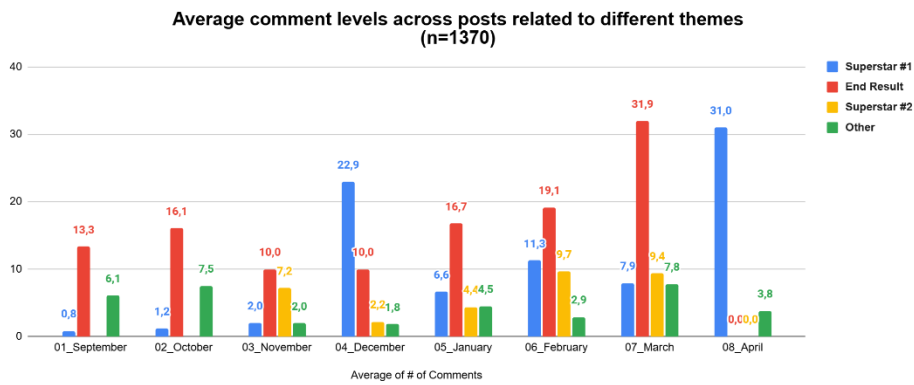


Figure 10. Average comment levels across posts related to different themes.

The qualitative Instagram analysis explains this phenomenon. Fans actively co-create hero narratives and use result-focused posts as "digital arenas" to express emotion, engage in analysis, and participate in rivalries. For example, qualitative Instagram analysis shows comments from fans that does not praise the game itself, but rather the experience of "being there" (P8). The overall atmosphere and feeling, which goes beyond just the hockey itself. In this sense the overall atmosphere has made the fans create content and create value.

The survey data reinforces the importance of player narratives and confirms that fans are interested in more player- and human-centered content on social media. Specifically,

57.97% (n=670) of respondents expressed a desire for content featuring coaches and other behind-the-scenes staff, while 50.97% (n=670) indicated interest in player interviews. (Figure 11.)

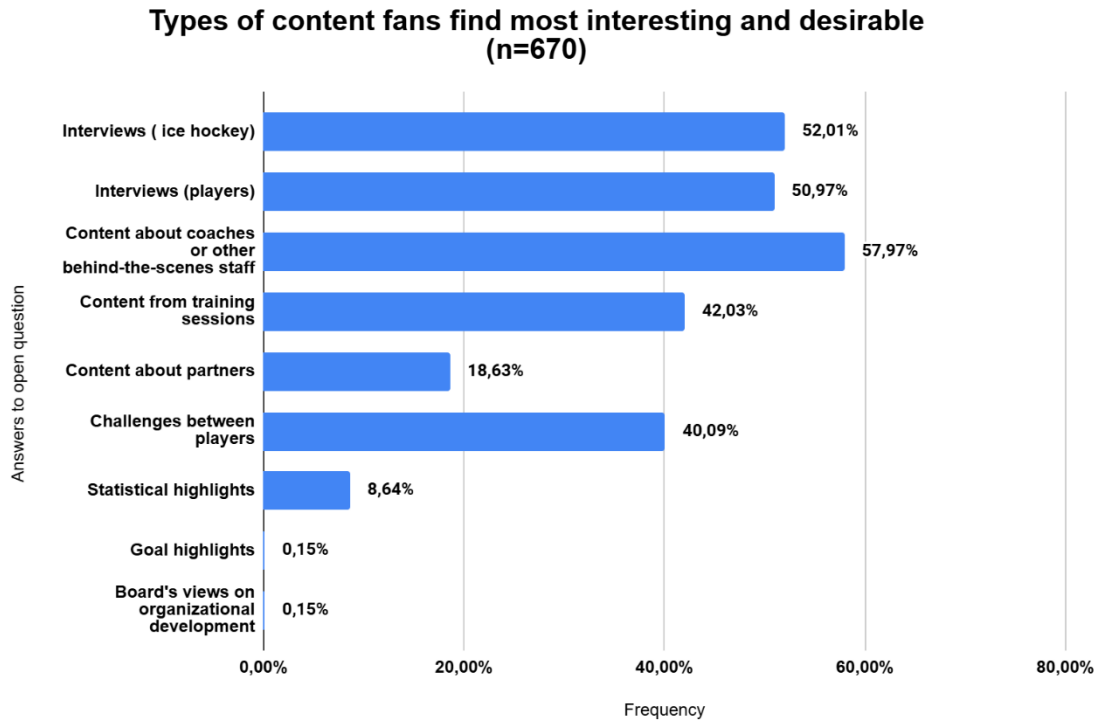


Figure 11. Types of content fans find most interesting and desirable.

In addition, the survey data confirms this focus on emotion. A strong majority of fans report a powerful emotional attachment to the club (median 3/4, mode 4/4, n=671). A Mann-Whitney U test reveals that this emotional bond is statistically significantly stronger among season ticket holders ($p < 0.001$, $U = 40977.5$, $n=671$) than among other fans, highlighting that the deepest commitment is profoundly emotional, not just financial. Furthermore, Spearman's correlation analysis reveals how the physical and digital worlds are intertwined. First, a statistically positive correlation exists between game attendance frequency and emotional attachment ($\rho = 0.214$, $p < 0.001$, $n=671$). Second, fans who attend games more often also interact more frequently with the club's social media content ($\rho = 0.124$, $p = 0.001$, $n=671$). This suggests a cyclical relationship:

the live game event fuels the emotional bond, which is then expressed and reinforced through digital interaction.

Finally, the data clarifies the primary role of social media in this ecosystem. It is not a direct sales channel. In the survey, fans' response to the statement "I am more likely to buy a match ticket or fan merchandise when the club has been active on social media" was neutral (median 3/4, n=671). However, this does not suggest that social media is ineffective, but it indicates that its most important role is relational, not transactional. The strongest evidence for this is a positive correlation between the perceived sense of community on social media and the emotional attachment to the club ($\rho = 0.343$, $p < .001$, n=671). In conclusion, social media functions as the space where the emotion and community forged at the live event can persist and grow. It builds and maintains the emotional capital that is a necessary precondition for any commercial activity. In short, good social media does not necessarily lead to immediate sales, yet without it, the conditions for sales may never materialize.

4.1.3 Theme 3: The Evolving Role of the Fan

Once the emotional foundation of engagement is established, the next step is to transform a passive audience into active value co-creators. The analysis shows that the strategy to achieve this is not based on direct calls-to-action, but on a model of reciprocity, where fan participation is rewarded with visibility and appreciation. This creates a positive cycle that serves as the engine for the digital community. In the interview, the club's representatives made it clear that they view fans as active partners whose own activity is the most effective form of marketing. The core of their strategy is the systematic use of user-generated content (UGC) to foster a sense of belonging and participation.

"We want to create a feeling for the content creator that they are clearly part of this shared thing, and above all, we want to encourage people to share material from the games." (Interviewee 1)

"We want to feature all fan-created content in our own Instagram story after light moderation." (Interviewee 1)

Underpinning this strategy is a belief in reciprocity: when the club gives fans attention, the fans give the club visibility and authenticity.

"The sense of appreciation that a fan gets when the club has taken a small moment of its time to share that same story is enormous." (Interviewee 1)

This strategy extends beyond words into concrete actions. Although precise quantitative or qualitative data is unavailable, the interviewee estimated that the club re-shares approximately 20-50 fan-created stories on its own Instagram Stories channel during each home game. This systematic activity is a tangible act through which the club integrates the fan experience into its official brand narrative. The qualitative Instagram analysis confirms this: fans not only share content, but their comments also defend, analyse, and enrich the club's brand in ways the organization itself could not. (P1; P4; P8; P9).

The survey data proves that this reciprocity-based strategy works and creates a self-reinforcing positive cycle. While only a core group of fans (16.5%, n=671) report sharing their own content regularly, the experiences of this active segment are revealing. First, the feeling of appreciation is directly linked to activity level. A Kruskal-Wallis test shows that the more actively a fan uses social media, the more strongly they feel appreciated when the club shares their content ($H = 57.962$, $p < .001$, $n=671$). As illustrated in Figure 12, the median and average appreciation scores are highest among the most active social media users and decrease with activity, providing clear visual evidence for this connection.

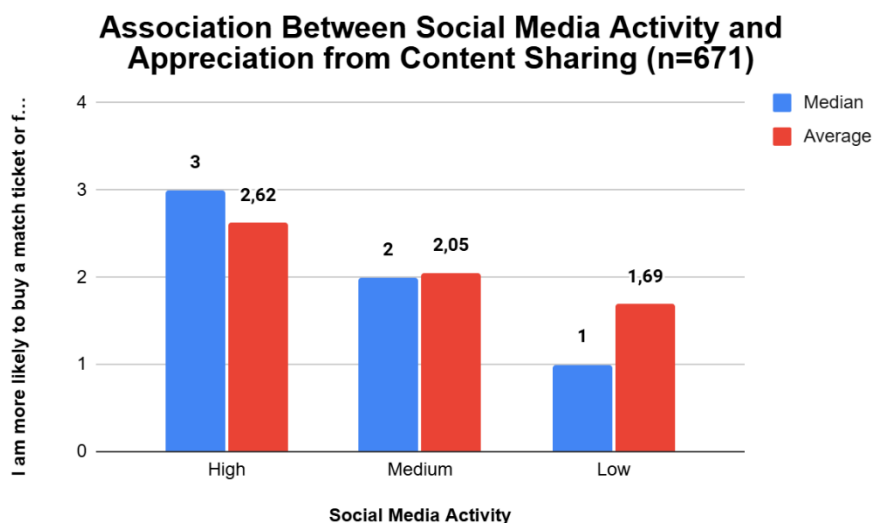


Figure 12. Association Between Social Media Activity and Perceived Appreciation from Content Sharing.

Second, this feeling of appreciation is directly linked to the willingness to participate in the future. A Spearman's correlation analysis reveals a statistically positive relationship between sharing one's own content and the feeling of being appreciated ($p = 0.243$, $p < .001$, $n=671$). This "engagement loop" is fuelled by emotion. The analysis also reveals a strong positive correlation between emotional attachment and sharing one's own content ($p = 0.268$, $p < .001$, $n=671$). Active content creation is, therefore, an expression of deeper commitment.

This process culminates not only in increased visibility but also in a sense of empowerment for the fans. The data shows that the more actively a fan participates digitally and attends games, the more strongly they feel they can influence the club. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirms that the most active social media users feel a statistically stronger ability to make a difference through their support ($H = 32.607$, $p < 0.001$, $n=671$). In addition, majority of the fans agree that case organization engages its fans on social media platforms (Figure 13.).

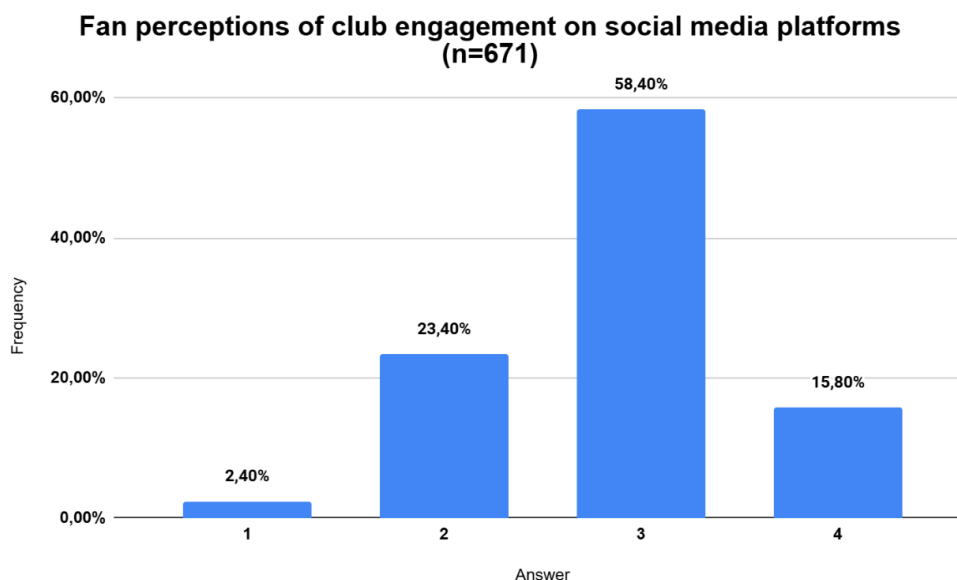


Figure 13. Fan perceptions of club engagement on social media platforms.

In conclusion, the case organization transforms its fans from an audience into co-creators through a strategy founded on reciprocity. The club provides the platform and appreciation, the fans bring emotion and content, and this process collectively builds a deeper relationship, ultimately providing the most active fans with a sense of genuine belonging and influence. While the reciprocity model has strengthened engagement among active fans, the analysis also reveals strategic and operational limitations that may hinder the scaling of this co-creation model.

4.1.4 Theme 4: The Gap Between Aspirations and Reality

While organization's digital strategy has successfully deepened fan engagement, the analysis also reveals a clear gap between the club's ambitious goals and its operational reality. In the interview, the club's representatives painted a picture of a future driven by data and artificial intelligence to improve customer understanding and personalize the fan experience. The vision is that customer behaviour could be known so well that the customer experience would be more individualized and better. However, the primary

obstacle to realizing this vision is a lack of resources. This is evident in the management of fan interaction on social media:

"The social media inboxes are not the best feedback channel, nor the most active for us, because the resources are limited." (Interviewee 1)

This resource gap is directly reflected in how fans perceive their interaction with the club. While the survey data shows fans are satisfied with the content, they desire more direct engagement. The median response to the statement "I would like the club to react more actively to fan comments and messages" was 3 out of 4 (n=671), indicating a desire for improvement. In addition, particularly significant is the finding from a Kruskal-Wallis test that the most active social media followers have statistically higher expectations for a reaction from the club ($H = 30.301$, $p < 0.001$, $n=671$). This means the resource gap creates the greatest risk of dissatisfaction among the most engaged and important fan segment.

A second, more visible symptom of the club's limited resources appears in the Instagram comment sections. The qualitative analysis showed several cases where the club's intended positive message was overshadowed by disputes between fans or by inappropriate remarks. Because the organization lacks resources for active moderation, it sometimes loses control of the narrative (P9). This challenge is further complicated by a strategic paradox. The club acknowledges the risks of inappropriate behaviour but at the same time the interview revealed a belief that any form of emotion and discussion, even negative, might ultimately benefit the brand:

"When people are talking, they are also buying." (Interviewee 1)

This creates a strategic dilemma: is it better to let passions run free to maximize raw engagement metrics, or should limited resources be used to create a safer community space? In conclusion, the greatest challenge in managing value co-creation is the gap

between its ambitious, data-driven vision and its operational realities. This gap manifests to fans a lack of direct interaction and is seen publicly as a loss of narrative control.

In addition, the gap between the club's long-term vision and its current capabilities is also reflected in its adoption of emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI). The interview data suggests that the limited use of AI is not unique to the case organization, but rather indicative of a broader trend within the Finnish sports marketing industry. The interview paints a picture that AI is not yet widely utilized in the field, positioning it as a future opportunity rather than a mature, standard tool. Consequently, the club's current application of AI is in line with this industry state, being confined to operational efficiencies, such as video editing, rather than the ambitious, strategic goals of hyper-personalization. The challenge, therefore, is less about the organization failing to keep pace and more about an entire industry sector being in an early phase of AI adoption.

4.2 Synthesis and the Digital Fan Value Co-Creation Framework

The previous themes showed how the case organization uses its digital ecosystem to build emotional connections, support fan co-creation, and manage operational challenges. To reflect this, a Digital Fan Value Co-Creation framework is presented, based directly on the empirical data. Shown in Figure 14, the framework illustrates a dynamic cycle of Digital Fan Value Co-creation, a system of value co-creation with five interconnected elements. It extends models like Jalonen's (2017) by adding evidence-based mechanisms, such as the "Engagement Engine," and including operational constraints as a key factor.

At the foundation of the framework is the Contextual Foundation, which in this case is the club's unique local and bilingual identity. As demonstrated in Theme 1, this identity was not merely a background detail but a strategic asset. The strategy was strongly supported by the fan community (median and mode 4/4, n=671) and resonated most powerfully with the most committed core audience, as season ticket holders rated

bilingualism as statistically significantly more important than other fans ($p = 0.036$, $n=671$). This finding empirically grounds identity as a measurable strategic driver within the co-creation ecosystem, directly informing the nature of the club's strategic inputs.

The process begins with the organization's Strategic Inputs, which are the concrete actions the club takes to encourage engagement, as highlighted in Themes 2 and 3. Examples include focusing on emotional, player-centered stories, which the Instagram analysis showed generated more than double the engagement rate for superstar-related content (5.66%) compared to "other" segment posts (2.03%), and systematically promoting user-generated content, reflecting the club's practice of sharing almost every Instagram Story related to game event. This provides empirical detail to Jalonen's general idea of "interaction enablers" by showing specific, effective tactics.

These strategic inputs are channelled through what is termed the Engagement Engine. This reciprocal loop drives the entire co-creation process. Theme 3 empirically demonstrates this mechanism: when the club shares fan content, it triggers a feeling of appreciation, which in turn positively correlates with a fan's willingness to participate again ($p = 0.243$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 671$). This mechanism was also outlined in the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, and the current findings serve to empirically validate it. This concept represents a novel contribution by isolating and confirming reciprocity as a distinct operational driver of sustained engagement.

This engine is effective because it taps directly into core Fan Motivations. The findings consistently indicate that fans are motivated more by intangible, emotional rewards and recognition than by direct transactional benefits. Theme 3 highlighted a strong desire to be appreciated, with the most active social media users reporting a significantly greater sense of recognition when the club shared their content ($H = 57.962$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 671$). This refines existing conceptual models by clearly identifying recognition as a measurable psychological driver of fan participation.

Finally, this process produces both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes, evidenced across Themes 1–3, include stronger emotional bonds and a greater sense of community ($p = 0.343$ between community sense and attachment, $p < 0.001$, $n = 671$), as well as increased purchase intent among the most active fans ($H = 26.927$, $p < 0.001$, $n = 671$). Negative outcomes, detailed in Theme 4, include the risk of losing narrative control in unmoderated spaces and unmet fan expectations, which can lead to value co-destruction (Plé & Cáceres, 2010). Highlighting these operational constraints extends Jalonon’s model by showing that an organization’s internal capacity directly affects the sustainability of its value co-creation efforts. This entire process is cyclical; the positive and negative outcomes create a feedback loop that informs the club’s future Strategic Inputs, ensuring the co-creation system remains dynamic and adaptive.

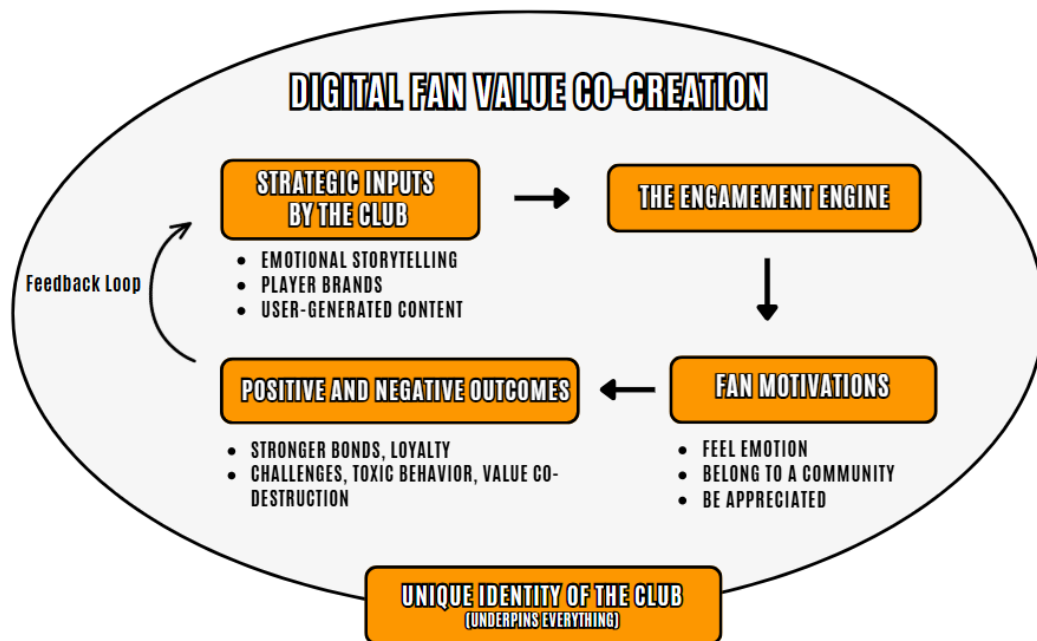


Figure 14. The Digital Fan Value Co-Creation Framework.

5 Discussion

This chapter presents the study's findings, discusses their theoretical and managerial implications, evaluates the research's trustworthiness and limitations, and outlines directions for future research. The primary aim is to synthesize the results from the mixed-methods analysis into a cohesive answer to the central research question: How can a professional sports organization instrument its social media to move from transaction to co-creation, building deeper, interactive relationships with fans? The discussion begins with a summary of key findings, then explicitly addresses the research questions, connects the results to existing theoretical frameworks, provides practical reflections, and finally suggests future research directions.

5.1 Summary of the key findings

The empirical findings of this study reveal a complex and multi-layered process of digital fan engagement and value co-creation. The triangulation of interviews, survey data, and Instagram analysis identified three interlinked core components that together answer the study's research questions.

The first component, the construction of a digital platform for engagement, directly addresses the sub-question of how sports organizations can utilize their platforms to integrate user-generated content into their brand narrative. The findings show that this platform is not merely technological, but a carefully developed space rooted in the club's unique identity. The organization's strategic focus on emotional, player-centered content proved to be a critical factor in creating a resonant environment. The analysis demonstrated that the club systematically uses this platform to re-share fan-created content, thereby transforming individual fan experiences into a shared, co-created brand narrative that reinforces emotional connection.

The second component, the reciprocal process of co-creation, answers the sub-question concerning the key motivators and benefits that drive fan participation. The analysis revealed that this process is powered by a reciprocal cycle, or an "engagement engine." Survey data showed that fans are primarily motivated by non-monetary rewards such as emotional attachment and the experience of being acknowledged by the club. When the club highlights or shares fan-generated content, it fulfils this need for recognition, which in turn fosters a willingness to contribute further. Through this engine of reciprocity, fans evolve from passive observers into active co-creators who enrich the club's digital ecosystem.

The third component, the paradox of scaling engagement, addresses the final sub-question about the strategic and operational challenges organizations face. While the co-creation model successfully leads to enhanced emotional bonds and deeper identification, the findings highlight a clear paradox: the same passion that fuels engagement also creates significant challenges. These include the strain on limited organizational resources to manage community interaction, the rising expectations of the most committed fans, and the difficulty in moderating toxic behaviour. This reveals that as co-creation scales, organizations face a strategic dilemma between maximizing raw engagement and maintaining a healthy, sustainable community

In summary, these three components together form the foundation of the study's main contribution, the Digital Fan Value Co-Creation framework, and collectively answer the central research question. The club's digital platform, the reciprocal co-creation process, and the challenges of scaling engagement show how a professional sports organization can move from simple transactions to active co-creation, building stronger emotional connections and deeper fan participation.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study was designed to address the research gap concerning the specific processes of value co-creation in digital sports marketing (Jalonen, 2017; Filo et al., 2015; Stegmann et al., 2021). The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the 'Digital Fan Value Co-Creation' framework, which synthesizes insights triangulated from organizational interviews, fan surveys, and content analysis. It presents a more nuanced, cyclical, and critically aware model of digital fan engagement that integrates strategic actions, fan motivations, a reciprocal engagement engine, and both the constructive and destructive outcomes of the process. Building on this primary theoretical contribution, the study further advances the theoretical discussion as follows.

Firstly, by empirically demonstrating how value emerges through shared fan experiences, the findings provide strong support for the core tenets of Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The study illustrates that value is not embedded in the "product" (the game) but is realized contextually through interaction. Furthermore, the study operationalizes the "joint sphere" concept proposed by Grönroos and Voima (2013), showing how a club-managed Instagram platform functions as the concrete space where the provider's value propositions and the fan's lived experience meet and merge.

Secondly, the study lends empirical weight to the explanatory power of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1986) within digital communities. The research moves beyond simply stating that reciprocity matters, it validates the theory's central claim by showing a statistically significant correlation between the intangible reward of "feeling appreciated" and the tangible behaviour of content creation. This demonstrates a clear mechanism where non-monetary benefits provided by the organization directly motivate resource contribution (time, creativity, and passion) from fans.

Thirdly, the findings challenge the implicitly linear progression by revealing a deeply cyclical and iterative process. The "engagement engine" of reciprocity, where organizational recognition fuels further fan participation, suggests that engagement is

both a prerequisite for and a product of co-creation. This perspective enriches the network-level ecosystem models proposed by authors like Woratschek et al. (2014) and, crucially, extends the triadic framework of Jalonen (2017). While Jalonen masterfully outlines the macro-level interplay between the club, fans, and sponsors, this study empirically specifies the micro-foundations by detailing the individual motivations and reciprocal micro-interactions that power that larger ecosystem. In essence, this research uncovers the "engine room" of Jalonen's model.

Finally, the study makes perhaps its most important contribution by challenging the often overly positive view of value co-creation in the literature. By identifying and analysing the "engagement paradox" and the real risks of value co-destruction, such as toxic comments or loss of narrative control, the findings complicate the assumption that all engagement is inherently beneficial (Plé & Cáceres, 2010). This calls for a more critical examination of participatory platforms, recognizing them as spaces where conflict and community coexist. This insight advances the theoretical discussion toward a more realistic understanding of the complexities and managerial challenges in open, digital co-creation systems.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The results of this study provide clear and practical insights for sports organizations looking to strengthen their relationships with fans through digital channels. A key recommendation is to focus on emotional storytelling, player-driven narratives, and the natural drama of sport, as these elements were found to be the most effective in generating engagement and building lasting emotional bonds. In addition, organizations should consistently recognize and highlight fan participation. Instead of sharing user-generated content only occasionally, clubs can establish regular practices and formats that embed reciprocity into their communication, rewarding fans while maintaining the engagement cycle over time.

The findings also highlight the importance of preparing for the loss of narrative control that co-creation inevitably brings. Rather than resisting this, organizations should manage it proactively by establishing clear community guidelines, allocating staff resources for interaction, and moderating discussions, especially since the most active and loyal fans often have the highest expectations for dialogue and responsiveness. The study further emphasizes the strategic value of leveraging local and cultural identity. The case organization's bilingual communication strategy proved both operationally effective and emotionally engaging, showing that clubs should identify their unique characteristics, whether geographical, cultural, or historical, and incorporate them into their engagement strategies as distinguishing assets.

5.4 Limitations

While the triangulated research design provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations do not invalidate the core findings of the study, but they should be taken into account when considering their precision and transferability to other settings.

The study focused on a single case, and while this enabled in-depth analysis, it also limits the generalizability of the findings. To further broaden the perspective within this case, interviews could have been conducted also with personnel from outside the marketing department, such as representatives from sports operations or management. Their insights might have revealed internal challenges and opportunities not captured by the current dataset.

The data collection methods also present limitations. The survey relied on voluntary participation through the club's digital channels, which likely overrepresents digitally active fans and may skew perceptions toward more positive evaluations of the organization's engagement efforts. Additionally, while the analysis of Instagram was carried out systematically, all data were collected manually, which increases the risk of

human error. Moreover, due to the nature of the platform, it was not possible to access archived Stories or to retrieve data on fan-generated content within them.

The survey also covered a wide range of topics, including both research-related themes (engagement, co-creation) and practical service questions (e.g., ticket pricing, game-day activities). While this range provided a broader picture of fans' experiences, it also reduced the focus on Instagram-driven engagement. As the practical service questions did not play a role in the findings, they were excluded from the analysis.

Furthermore, the survey utilized a four-point Likert scale without a neutral middle option. While this approach encourages clearer responses by prompting respondents to take a stance, it must be acknowledged as a limitation, as some participants may have felt forced to choose an opinion they did not fully hold.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's own position. The author has prior professional experience in sports marketing and ice hockey. While this insider perspective provided valuable context and a nuanced understanding of industry dynamics, it also introduces the potential for unintentional bias. Efforts were made to maintain objectivity throughout the research process, but this background should be considered when interpreting the results.

5.5 Suggestions for future research

The findings open several valuable avenues for future research. The first suggestion concerns the management of value co-destruction. Further research could investigate how different moderation strategies, community guidelines, or platform choices affect the health and tone of online fan communities. The concept of the engagement paradox, where high visibility and interaction can result from negative behaviour, warrants deeper examination.

Another particularly fruitful suggestion would be a longitudinal study that systematically focuses on Instagram Story content. Such a study could be conducted by manually collecting data from every user-generated content shared by the club during, for example, all home games of a season. This design would enable a deep analysis not only of the quality and quantity of the Story content but also of the fundamental nature of fan reactions and the content they create, tracking its evolution over time and relations to result or star players.

The third suggestion presents possibility to extend the study through comparative research across different organizations, leagues, or sports. Such studies would help identify which aspects of digital fan engagement are universal and which are context dependent. A multiple-case design could offer insight into how organizational size, resources, or cultural positioning affect the success of co-creation strategies.

Finally, while artificial intelligence (AI) was not an explicit theme of this study, its significance and potential emerged as a future opportunity in the interview. Therefore, an important direction for future research is to examine the role of AI in fan engagement and value co-creation specifically in Sport context. A longitudinal study could track how organizations implement AI tools for personalization, behavioural prediction, and content delivery. Such research could deeply analyse how these technologies reshape the fan experience and the dynamics of interaction on digital platforms.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-Structured Interview Questions Translated in English

Digital Platforms and Ecosystem

1. Which digital platforms are most important for your interactions with fans? (e.g., social media, event technologies, ticketing services)
2. What are your key social media channels?
3. What are the most important metrics on social media and digital platforms that guide your activities?
4. How would you describe the role of the club's digital channels in building fan relationships?
5. How do you develop fan engagement, and what are your goals for engaging fans through digital channels?
6. In your view, what is the most important factor in long-term fan commitment?
7. How do you see digital fan relationships evolving in the future?
8. How do you envision the transition from one-time interactions to long-term fan relationships?
9. Is there something you wish you could do better in digital interaction with fans?

Value Co-creation and Social Media

10. How is social media used to foster interaction and community building?
For example:
 - How does the club respond to fans' comments, messages, or suggestions?
 - What kind of role do fans have in content creation?
 - How do you measure fan participation?
11. What types of fans do you think are most likely to engage in content creation and value co-creation?
 - For example, can first-time visitors also share content on their own social media and become more deeply engaged?

12. Do you have any practices or campaigns where fan contributions are particularly visible?
13. Have there been any situations where fans have tangibly created value for the club?
14. How do you recognize or respond to fans' ideas or initiatives?
15. Do you believe that value creation through digital platforms helps attract new customers or fans?
16. What do you think fans expect in return for their participation?

Artificial Intelligence and Analytics

17. Do you utilize artificial intelligence or analytics in your fan communication or marketing?
18. If yes, for what purposes? (e.g., personalization, automation, performance tracking)
19. What kind of benefits or challenges have you encountered in using AI or analytics?

Appendix 2. Fan Survey Translated in English

Background

- **Gender:** Male, Female, Other
- **Mother tongue:** Finnish, Swedish, Other
- **Age:** Under 18, 19–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, Over 65
- **How often do you attend the club's games?:** Season ticket holder, 1–2 games per season, 3–5 games per season, 5–10 games per season, 10–20 games per season, 21–30 games per season, I only follow via MTV Katsomo, I only follow via social media, None of the above
- **How actively do you follow content on the club's social media channels?:** Several times a day, Once a day, A few times a week, Once a week, A few times a month, Once a month, Less frequently
- **Which of the club's social media channels do you mainly follow?:** Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X / Twitter, Threads, YouTube, club's website

Organization and Social Media

Please rate the following statements based on your opinion and experience.

Scale:

1 = Strongly disagree,

2 = Somewhat disagree,

3 = Somewhat agree,

4 = Strongly agree

1. I think club's social media content has improved compared to previous seasons:
2. I am more interested in club thanks to its current social media content
3. I am more likely to buy a match ticket or fan product when the club is active on social media
4. Match advertisements make me want to buy a match ticket
5. I regularly interact with content (like, comment, share)

6. I feel that the club listens to and responds to fan feedback
7. I feel that the club involves fans through its social media platforms (polls, questions etc.)
8. The presence of other fans on social media strengthens my own engagement

Bilingual Communication

9. I believe it's important that the club communicates in both national languages
10. I feel the club social media is now of good bilingual quality
11. I think there should be more bilingual content (e.g., interviews)

Community and Sense of Value

12. Active digital communication makes me feel important as a supporter
13. I have shared my own content related to the club (photos, videos, stories, shares)
14. I feel appreciated when the club shares my content (e.g., IG story)
15. Content shared on social media gives me a sense of community
16. I believe fans' activity on social media strengthens the club's overall sense of community
17. It is important to me that the club values the fans' contribution
18. I feel emotionally connected to the organization
19. I feel that through being a fan, I can have an impact
20. Events like the Gala are a great way to enhance the sense of community

Expectations and Reciprocity

21. I expect the club to respond or acknowledge when I participate
22. I would like the club to respond more actively to comments and messages
23. I'm more likely to engage when I feel appreciated

Games and Other Events

24. I find the club's match events currently entertaining

25. I think there should be more activities for the audience at games (app games, artists, etc.)
26. A performing artist at the afterparty positively influences my decision to buy a ticket
27. I feel that additional activities during games add value to my ticket
28. I find the club's ticket prices reasonable
29. Public events organized by the club (e.g., music events) positively affect my purchase decision

Checkbox and Open Field Questions

30. **What type of content do you find interesting or would like to see more of?:**
Interviews related to ice hockey, Interviews that show players as people, Statistics highlights, Content about coaches or background staff, Content about partners, Content from training sessions, Player challenges or competitions, Bilingual content
31. **Which of the following increase or would increase your enjoyment at the game?:**
App games (e.g., Player of the Match, photo contests), Artist performing at afterparty, Mascots (especially at family games), Intermission competitions, Pre-game event, Combining U20 games with main events
32. **How would you improve club's game day experience?:** (Open field)
33. **What new products would you like to see in the club's restaurant services?:**
(Open field)

Appendix 3. Instagram Qualitative Analysis: Selection Criteria, Categories and Media Types

Post	Reason to Analyse	Category	Media Type
P1	Highest number of comments among all posts	Related to Game Event	Reel/Video
P2	Second highest number of comments among all posts	Not related to Game event	Single Picture
P3	Third highest number of comments among all posts	Player Story	Single Picture
P4	Highest number of comments in the category	Related to Game Event	Single Picture
P5	Highest number of comments in the category	Player Story	Single Picture
P6	Highest number of comments in the category	Partnership Post	Reel/Video
P7	Highest number of comments in the category	Not related to Game event	Single Picture
P8	Highest number of comments in the category	Game Add	Reel/Video
P9	Highest number of comments in the category	Fan related story	Reel/Video
P10	Highest number of comments related to winning a game	Related to Game Event	Single Picture
P11	Highest number of comments related to losing a game	Related to Game Event	Single Picture
P12	Highest number of comments related to Superstar 1	Player Story	Single Picture
P13	Highest number of comments related to Superstar 2	Related to Game Event	Single Picture

Appendix 4. Demographic Profile of the Fan Survey Respondents

Gender	N	%
Man	558	83,2
Women	113	16,8
	671	100
Native language	N	%
Finnish	454	67.7
Swedish	214	31.9
Other	3	0.4
	671	100
Age	N	%
19-25 yo	73	10.9
26-35 yo	102	15.2
36-45 yo	148	22.1
46-55 yo	157	23.4
56-65 yo	122	18.2
Under 18 yo	25	3.7
Over 65 yo	44	6.6
	671	100
How often do you go watch homegames?	N	%
1-2 games per season	60	8.9
3-5 games per season	100	14.9
5-10 games per season	125	18.6
10-20 games per season	119	17.7
21-30 games per season	116	17.3
Season ticket	127	18.9
I follow only through MTV Katsomo	13	1.9
Only follow in Social media	5	0.7
None of the above	6	0.9
	671	100
How often do you follow content created in social media?	N	%
Several times a day	173	25.8
Once a day	207	30.8
A few times a week	202	30.1
Once a week	47	7.0
A few times a month	26	3.9
Once a month	7	1.0
Less frequently	9	1.3
	671	100

Appendix 5. Descriptive Statistics for the Survey Questions

Question	Valid Answers	Missing	Answer Median	Answer Mode
I think club's social media content has improved compared to previous seasons	671	0	3.00	4
I am more interested in club thanks to its current social media content	671	0	3.00	3
I am more likely to buy a match ticket or fan product when the club is active on social media	671	0	3.00	3
Match advertisements make me want to buy a match ticket	671	0	3.00	3
I regularly interact with content (like, comment, share)	671	0	2.00	3
I feel that the club involves fans through its social media platforms (polls, questions etc.)	671	0	3.00	3
I feel that the club engages its fans on social media platforms (e.g., through questions, polls, etc.).	671	0	3.00	3
The presence of other fans on social media strengthens my own engagement	662	9	3.00	3
I believe it's important that the club communicates in both national languages	671	0	4.00	4
I feel the club social media is now of good bilingual quality	671	0	3.00	3
I think there should be more bilingual content (e.g., interviews)	671	0	2.00	2
Active digital communication makes me feel important as a supporter	671	0	3.00	3
I have shared my own content related to the club (photos, videos, stories, shares)	671	0	2.00	1
I feel appreciated when the club shares my content (e.g., IG story)	671	0	2.00	3
Content shared on social media gives me a sense of community	671	0	3.00	3
I believe fans' activity on social media strengthens the club's overall sense of community	671	0	3.00	3
It is important to me that the club values the fans' contribution	671	0	4.00	4
I feel emotionally connected to the organization	671	0	3.00	4
I feel that through being a fan, I can have an impact	671	0	3.00	3
I expect the club to respond or acknowledge when I participate	671	0	3.00	3
I would like the club to respond more actively to comments and messages	671	0	3.00	3
I'm more likely to engage when I feel appreciated	671	0	3.00	3

Appendix 6. Summary of Inferential Statistical Tests

Variable comparison / relationship	Test	Test statistic	p-value	Additional Information	N
Bilingualism importance: season ticket holders vs. others	Mann–Whitney U	U = 38492.5	0.036	Season ticket holders consider bilingual content more important	671
Emotional attachment: season ticket holders vs. others	Mann–Whitney U	U = 40977.5	< 0.001	Season ticket holders have stronger emotional attachment	671
Social media activity by age group	Kruskal–Wallis H	H = 26.295	< 0.001	Younger fans are more active on social media	671
Purchase propensity by social media activity level	Kruskal–Wallis H	H = 26.927	< 0.001	More active have higher purchase propensity	671
Feeling appreciated (club shares content) by social media activity level	Kruskal–Wallis H	H = 57.962	< 0.001	More active feel more appreciated	671
Perceived influence on club by social media activity level	Kruskal–Wallis H	H = 32.607	< 0.001	Emotional attachment grows with activity	671
Expectation for interaction from club by social media activity level	Kruskal–Wallis H	H = 30.301	< 0.001	More active expect more feedback	671
Game attendance frequency ↔ Emotional attachment	Spearman's ρ	$\rho = 0.214$	< 0.001	Positive Correlation	671
Game attendance frequency ↔ Social media interaction frequency	Spearman's ρ	$\rho = 0.124$	0.001	Positive Correlation	671
Sharing own content ↔ Feeling appreciated	Spearman's ρ	$\rho = 0.243$	< 0.001	Positive Correlation	671
Emotional attachment ↔ Sharing own content	Spearman's ρ	$\rho = 0.268$	< 0.001	Positive Correlation	671
Perceived sense of community on social media ↔ Emotional attachment	Spearman's ρ	$\rho = 0.343$	< 0.001	Positive Correlation	671

Appendix 7. Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Study

The University of Vaasa encourages students and teachers to utilize artificial intelligence. According to the university's policy, a student must transparently declare if artificial intelligence has been utilized in the preparation of their thesis. This declaration must specify which AI tools and language models were used, and for what purposes (University of Vaasa, 2023).

Various artificial intelligence tools have been used for different purposes at various stages of this research process:

- Gemini 2.5 Pro has been used for general brainstorming and the exchange of ideas. For instance, Gemini was consulted on the coherence between chapters and was assigned the role of a critical reviewer of the text. Gemini also assisted in the analysis of the extensive dataset and provided clear recommendations on how to approach each data entry.
- ChatGPT's GPT-4o model was used for language revision and for compiling the reference list to ensure citations were formatted correctly and efficiently. It was also used for brainstorming suitable keywords for literature searches. For language revision, the AI features of Grammarly Pro were also utilized. In these tasks, the AI was assigned the specific role of correcting grammatical errors without altering the style or register of the text.
- Furthermore, the Consensus and Perplexity AI tools were used to assist in the literature search process.

This study has adhered to the university's guidelines and regulations regarding the use of artificial intelligence as a tool.