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Social Media and Community Engagement in Sports Clubs

Case Pickala Golf

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis examines how social media can support community and engagement in a sports club environment, using Pickala Golf in Finland as a case study. Although social media has become an established element of professional sports marketing, less is known about how member-based or grassroots sports clubs use digital platforms to foster belonging and interaction among their members.

To address this gap, the study combines theoretical perspectives on social media in sports marketing with research on community and engagement in sports clubs. The research has three objectives: to analyse how social media functions as a marketing and communication tool in a sports club and how Pickala Golf applies these practices. The empirical material consists of two semi-structured interviews with active members of Pickala Golf. The findings indicate that Pickala Golf has a uniquely strong sense of community that extends beyond the sport itself. Members described the club as a social environment where relationships, shared routines, and a welcoming atmosphere play a central role. Social media supports this by showcasing everyday interactions, highlighting members, and reinforcing shared identity.

However, challenges arise from the club's broad audience, including different age groups and attitudes toward tradition and modern digital communication. The study concludes that social media can strengthen community most effectively when it reflects authentic club culture and focuses on people rather than performance.

KEYWORDS: social media, sports marketing, community, engagement, marketing, golf

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1 Introduction

The development of social media has transformed how organizations communicate, build relationships, and engage stakeholders. In the context of sport, the movement has been from one-way announcements to continuous, two-way dialogue, where clubs and members create meaning and value. Recent sport communication reviews demonstrate that social media is now the infrastructure for everyday relationship management, not just a promotional enhancement (Abeza, 2023).

For sports clubs, the development offers opportunities beyond just being seen. Social media can be a means of providing belonging, identity, and member-to-member engagement. These aspects are all fundamental to a healthy club community. Research shows that the "how" of social media (i.e., interactivity, member voices, and participatory cues) is just as important as the "how often" (Abeza, 2023). Not surprisingly, evidence from related contexts shows that social and traditional media intersections can influence participation in niche sports and growth potential, emphasizing the strategic relevance of digital approaches for community development (Woods, 2021).

Golf offers a unique perspective on this discussion. It is the only sport where tradition is central to guidance over policies, expectations, and culture. Organizational club culture has a belief framework established over time, as the club relies on playing conditions and volunteering, club life and social culture most often take form after many years. Recent research within clubs illustrates how volunteers provide leadership, help implement programs, and "togetherness," along with a focus, explaining the richness and complexity of clubs socially (Mills, Mackintosh & Bloor, 2022). While this traditional foundation is viewed as a strength, it raises questions about how to add, mix, or blend more digital, online modes that stimulate conversations equally respectfully and effectively.

Another important factor is the diversity of Pickala Golf's members. The membership at Pickala Golf combines younger generations who value digital communication and older members who emphasize tradition. Different generations often use and prefer social media in distinct ways, which can influence how they engage with a sports club's

communication. Therefore, the design and tone of communication play a key role in ensuring inclusivity (Barden & Phillips, 2024). For this thesis, the focus is limited to members who follow the club's social media; wider user categories fall outside the scope of this study.

From an academic perspective, much of the social media in sport literature focuses on elite teams and leagues; community aspects at the club level are explored less frequently. This gap is where the thesis contributes to existing literature. Previous studies on private clubs and their use of social media (Kim & Cichy, 2017) as well as on the social organization of golf clubs (Mills et al., 2022) provide valuable insights. However, there is still room to connect these perspectives more closely and examine how a club that actively uses social media can improve everyday engagement and community among its members. Drawing on two summers of work at Pickala Golf, the study combines practical insight with academic analysis. My goal is to produce theoretically meaningful and practically useful findings for a club like Pickala, while contributing to a deeper understanding of community and engagement in sports.

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how social media can function as a tool for supporting community and engagement in a sports club environment, focusing on Pickala Golf in Finland. While professional sports organizations increasingly recognize the strategic value of social media in sports marketing and communication, considerably less research has examined how member-based or grassroots clubs use digital platforms to strengthen their communal life. This thesis addresses that gap by combining theories of social media in sports marketing with research on community and engagement in sports clubs, and by applying these perspectives to the contextual realities of a case study.

In the context of sports clubs, social media has the potential to extend the sense of community beyond physical spaces, complementing traditional practices and offering new

ways for members to connect, participate, and feel a sense of belonging. At the same time, sports clubs often serve diverse groups with different expectations, traditions, and levels of digital engagement. Understanding how social media operates within this environment is essential for identifying both its opportunities and limitations.

The objectives of the study are threefold:

1. To examine how social media functions as a marketing and communication tool in a sports club environment, and how Pickala Golf applies these practices in its own digital communication.
2. To explore how social media can strengthen community and engagement in a sports club context by complementing traditional, in-person communal practices.
3. To understand how members experience social media in relation to belonging, participation, and emotional connection with the club.

Together, these objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media can support community-building in a sports club and how digital and physical forms of interaction intersect in this setting. As a practical study, it can provide context-specific information useful for Pickala Golf and other sports clubs dealing with the balance between tradition and digital transformation.

1.2 Structure and delimitations

This thesis is divided into five main chapters. After the introduction, Chapter 2 focuses on social media in sports marketing. This chapter outlines the overall role of social media in marketing and communication, before looking at its role in the sports industry and then specifically at how sports clubs use it. Chapter 3 focuses on community and engagement. It begins by defining community, continues with looking at community engagement theory, studies the intersection of engagement and social media in sports, and

finishes by discussing community and engagement together, which serves as a theoretical basis for the empirical analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the case of Pickala Golf. Section 4.1 describes the club and context, describing why this is a relevant case for the study. Section 4.2 describes the research design and data collection through semi-structured interviews with Pickala members and how the club's social media practices were developed. Section 4.3 presents the study's findings and discusses the theoretical basis of those results from Chapters 2 and 3. The last and final Chapter 5 summarizes the research, discusses practical implications for sports clubs, points out limitations, and then suggests future study possibilities.

The boundaries of this thesis are considered mainly through three forms of limitations. First, it is a single case study of Pickala Golf. While the understanding from this one case study could be helpful in several overarching groups of studies with sports clubs, the findings cannot be drawn too broadly. Second, the study emphasizes members who engage with social media in connection with the club. Members who do not use social media are part of the wider community, but including their perspectives would expand the scope of this research beyond what is conducive to a bachelor's thesis. Therefore, their opinions are not considered within the scope of this study. Lastly, conceptual boundaries are narrowed to social media, community, and engagement. All other digital experience, such as artificial intelligence and virtuality, is excluded. These limitations provided the study with academic rigor and a manageable scope for this bachelor's study.

To explain the theoretical background of this research clearer, four research streams are depicted in Picture 1. later in the thesis which help explain how communities work in sports clubs: sociological foundations, community structure, sport-specific community, and marketing and digital communities. These different perspectives are from different academic traditions, but they still make a holistic understanding of how belonging, identity, and shared experiences arise within clubs.

Besides that, Picture 2. shows the main idea that is the basis of this thesis: meaningful digital communication and strong social bonds are not two separate forces that are in conflict but rather two forces that complement each other. Together, they can empower the authenticity and the resilience of a club community. Referring to these frameworks at the beginning makes it clear that the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 are directly linked to the Pickala Golf empirical case study.

1.3 Key concepts

This thesis is structured around three central concepts: social media, community, and engagement. These concepts are closely connected: social media provides the channels and tools for communication; engagement represents the members' active involvement and emotional connection; and community means the shared feeling of togetherness that emerges in online and offline interactions.

Social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content in real time (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the context of sports, social media has significantly evolved over the past decade, reshaping how organizations communicate and engage with their audiences through more dynamic, interactive, and visually driven platforms (Abeza, 2023). For sports clubs, these platforms are a way to promote events and inform, and are a place where members can connect.

Community refers to a sense of belonging and connection that unites individuals through shared interests and experiences. In sports, community develops through physical presence—being together at events, traditions, and shared routines—and digital spaces extending those connections beyond the clubhouse or course. Affective research into sports fan communities shows that emotional bonds drive loyalty, helping the connection last long after direct participation ends (Mastromartino et al., 2020).

Engagement represents an individual's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural depth. Engagement with an organization (Brodie et al., 2011). In sports marketing, engagement is not confined to participation in activities—it refers to online acts such as liking, sharing, and/or commenting on club content. Digital engagement has become an important measure of how well sports clubs can maintain relationships. Together, these three concepts make a balanced and dynamic cycle.

2 Social Media in Sports Marketing

This chapter describes the theoretical foundation for reviewing how digitalization and social media have transformed marketing communication. It explores the new ways of interaction between organizations and their audience through social media, moving from traditional one-way communication to more interactive and relationship-based communication. The chapter introduces the concept of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to explain how digital channels, especially social media, function as strategic tools for building relationships and creating value across different audiences. These perspectives provide the conceptual framework for examining the role of social media in the sports industry, which will be discussed in the following sections.

2.1 The role of Social Media in Marketing and Communication

Marketing communication has changed radically over the past decades. When communication started, the traditional use of the mass media was the basis - newspapers, TV, and radio, where the organizations were the senders of the messages and the consumers were the receivers passively—this one-way model limited interaction and feedback. However, with the rise of digital technologies, marketing communication has shifted toward a more dialogical, relationship-oriented process. Digital media allows two-way communication, where audiences actively engage and influence brand narratives (Nesterenko et al., 2023).

The movement from traditional to digital media in marketing has changed the producer-consumer relationship. Concepts of co-creation and participatory culture highlight how users are no longer mere audiences but active participants in shaping communication (Jenkins et al., 2013). Therefore, this interactivity has caused organizations to encourage a more customer-centric approach and to use a continuous relationship rather than isolated campaigns.

Within this transformation, the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) framework has become particularly relevant. This framework forms the strategic function of the whole range of marketing and communication tools — from advertising and public relations to digital media — to deliver a unified and consistent message across all platforms (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015). IMC changes the focus from treating media channels separately to creating synergy, ensuring a consistent tone and unified brand message across all communication.

IMC highlights the growing need for consistency and emotional connection. In today's digital environment, audiences encounter brand messages through multiple channels, from websites to social media. Maintaining a unified tone and identity across these platforms is essential for building trust and brand recognition (Roy et al., 2020). At the same time, digital media allows organizations to add a more personal touch to their messages – without losing alignment with their core brand values. This combination of coherence with authenticity enables brands to establish stronger emotional connections with their audience, creating relationships that feel both familiar and genuine.

Digitalization has also brought up the ethical and cultural dimensions of marketing communication. The consumers are looking for transparency, meaning, and authenticity. Therefore, organizations are expected to engage with audiences genuinely, building trust rather than relying solely on persuasion (Yang & Battocchio, 2020).

In the context of this thesis, the shift from one-way to interactive and from transactional to relational communication highlights the growing importance of dialogue. This transformation also emphasizes the evolving role of social media as a platform that enables participation, visibility, and ongoing interaction between organizations and their audiences.

2.2 Social Media in the Sports Industry

Social media has become one of the most powerful communication tools in the sports industry, redefining how organizations, athletes, and fans interact. Unlike traditional broadcasting, social media enables real-time dialogue and relationship building between sports organizations and their audiences (Abeza, 2023). In addition, the sports environment provides a welcoming space where personal identity, emotions, and a sense of community come together to foster genuine connections. It becomes more than just a game; it's a place where people feel they belong and can share meaningful experiences.

In his review of social media and sport studies, Abeza (2023) observes that the focus of the field has evolved. Instead of simply using social media as a promotional tool, organizations now see it as a vital way to foster relationships and build communities. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become more than just channels—they are now central to how sports organizations communicate. These platforms enable clubs to connect with fans and members in a more personal way, encouraging active participation through comments, sharing, and other interactive features. This change highlights the social rather than the commercial dimension of communication. Instead of talking to their audience, sports clubs now speak with them, creating an ongoing dialogue that builds trust and authenticity (Barden & Phillips, 2024).

The use of social media in sports has expanded engagement and visibility for more minor or non-normative sports. Woods (2021) shows that digital media can act as an engine for growth for sports that traditionally receive limited mainstream coverage by offering new spaces for identity and community formation. Social media helps create equal opportunities by enabling even small, grassroots clubs to reach broader audiences without needing large marketing budgets. This process has provided increased visibility for clubs and produced an atmosphere of inclusivity and representation amongst sporting communities.

However, this evolution requires strategic management and adjustment. Mills, Mackintosh, and Bloor (2022) show that in sports such as golf, clubs' voluntary and traditional structures provide both possibilities and issues around social media integration. While social media can modernize communication and strengthen engagement, it must be used to respect the cultural values and traditions that define the sport. Finding the right balance between innovation and heritage is significant in sports where community and membership are long-term.

Research on private sports clubs supports this view. Kim and Cichy (2017) found that members notice social media as a valuable tool for information and connection, but expect communication to remain aligned with the club's culture and values. Members prefer social media that strengthens their sense of belonging rather than commercializes the club's identity. Therefore, sports organizations must design social media strategies for visibility and community continuity.

Social media in the sports industry is a multi-dimensional space for representation, engagement, and community building. It enables clubs to combine communication efficiency with emotional connection, allowing members to participate in the club's story. The following section highlights how this strategic potential becomes most visible at the club level, where everyday activities are built around relationships and interaction.

2.3 Social Media strategies in Sports Clubs

Today, social media is more than just a way for sports clubs to communicate. It shapes who they are and how they connect with people. While big professional teams might use these platforms mainly to boost their brand, member-based clubs focus on building relationships, sharing moments, and keeping that sense of community alive. A good social media approach helps clubs reach different groups and stay true to what makes them special.

Abeza (2023) points out that social media in sports is now less about promotion and more about building relationships. For clubs, this means having an organized communication plan that still leaves room for members to get involved and feel seen. Sharing everyday moments, celebrating members, or showing what happens behind the scenes look all help to make the club feel authentic and relatable. These genuine touches are what foster loyalty and keep members engaged over time.

Barden and Phillips (2024) say that a good social media plan needs consistency and creativity. Clubs should maintain a steady tone, look across their posts, try new ideas, and show genuine feelings. This means planning content that fits the club's values but also paying attention to what's popular on each platform and what members care about. Posting often, sharing stories people can relate to, and using visuals all help build a stronger community and get people talking.

Kim and Cichy (2017) think that clubs need to know what their members want from social media. This is not just about posting news, but also about starting conversations and inviting members to share their thoughts. When clubs listen and respond, it builds trust and makes everyone feel more connected.

Mills et al. (2022) note that older or volunteer-run sports clubs sometimes find it hard to adopt new digital tools. Some are careful about changing what has always worked. But if digital changes respect the club's traditions, they can help attract younger people and keep long-time members interested. Finding the right mix of new ideas and old values is key to a club's growth.

Woods (2021) highlights that being genuine and consistent is key to truly connecting with people. Clubs that take the time to respond to messages, share stories from their members, and encourage interaction help their social media stand out and reach a wider audience. When these efforts are thoughtfully put into practice, social media turns into a lively showcase of the club's unique personality and culture.

In short, sports clubs must balance structure with spontaneity and tradition with innovation in their social media approaches. While planning ensures messaging stays consistent, genuine interactions keep communications engaging and authentic. This balance sets the stage for the following case study, which examines how social media and community efforts play out in an actual club environment.

2.4 Summary

Chapter 2 explored how social media has changed the way sports organizations connect with their fans and members. It emphasized how digital platforms have shifted from simple one-way messages to engaging, relationship-building interactions that make social media a key part of strengthening bonds, shaping identities, and fostering community. While professional sports often use social media to boost visibility and branding, local clubs rely on it to support regular communication, a sense of belonging, and shared experiences.

Across the sports world, social media offers new chances for conversation, involvement, and representation, especially for grassroots clubs that might not have access to traditional media. Successful communication depends on balancing consistency with genuine authenticity and blending innovation with respect for tradition—something especially important in sports like golf, where cultural norms matter. The chapter highlighted that effective social media strategies come from understanding what members value, encouraging interaction, and showcasing the club’s daily life and values. These ideas set the stage for the case study, where social media is looked at both as a marketing tool and a way to strengthen community and engagement within a sports club. Next, we'll look beyond just the strategies and dive into how good communication and genuine engagement create real emotional bonds, loyalty, and a shared identity among supporters.

3 Community and Engagement in Sports Clubs

This chapter takes a closer look at two important social aspects of sports clubs: community and engagement. While sports organizations often focus on providing services, they also function as social communities where shared identity, a sense of belonging, and active participation are key. We'll explore how these communities form within sports clubs and how engagement grows from these shared experiences. First, we'll define what community means, then look at engagement theory and how it applies to sports. Finally, we'll connect these ideas to set the stage for the case study in Chapter 4.

3.1 Defining community

The idea of community shows up in many different fields, but its meaning can change depending on the context. In sociology, it might mean a neighbourhood or a group of people connected by personal relationships. Ferdinand Tönnies, a well-known sociologist, talked about two types of communities: Gemeinschaft—which are small, close-knit groups built on trust and emotional bonds—and Gesellschaft, which are larger, more formal, and often more impersonal social structures. As societies evolved, our everyday interactions shifted from those tight personal bonds to more institutional and practical relationships. Despite these changes, scholars point out that Gemeinschaft bonding—like shared identity, values, and mutual support—remains important. It contrasts the more individual-focused and transactional nature of modern life. In essence, community is about those deep social connections that create a sense of belonging, setting it apart from broader social systems.

From a social-psychological point of view, the idea of 'sense of community' helps us understand what makes us feel connected and part of something bigger. McMillan and Chavis (1986) described a sense of community as that warm feeling of belonging — knowing that you matter to others. They matter to you, and you believe that your needs will be met because you're committed to being part of a group. It is not just about being

in the same place; it's about feeling like you are genuinely part of it, with shared connections and commitments.

They identified four key parts of this feeling: membership (believing you belong and have a right to), influence (feeling your actions matter to the group and vice versa), shared needs (the group helping to meet your needs), and emotional bonds (the memories and experiences that create strong feelings of connection). When all these are present, people experience community through belonging, trust, giving and receiving support, and emotional ties.

A strong sense of community is widely understood to be a contributor to greater well-being and stronger involvement, with lowered feelings of social isolation. In practice, how connected people feel within a community tends to reflect how welcoming and supportive that environment is. This perspective brings out the idea that communities are not just organizational structures but also lived and emotional experiences through which people come together and sustain meaningful connections.

In marketing and consumer research, the idea of community helps us understand how people form meaningful connections around brands and shared interests. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) introduced the term 'brand community'—a group of individuals who feel a genuine bond through their relationship with a brand. These communities often create a sense of belonging, shared traditions, and mutual support, much like a family. Even when their ties are based on commercial or symbolic reasons, the core elements of community—shared identity, practices, and care—remain deeply impactful.

Researchers have also looked into modern forms of community, such as online forums, user groups, and what Maffesoli (1996) called "neo-tribes." These are informal, flexible groups built around shared lifestyles or interests rather than location or family ties. They show how people seek emotional and social connection through community, even in temporary or digital spaces. Ultimately, the feeling of belonging is key to building loyalty

and engagement, demonstrating that the human need for connection is just as vital in marketing as it is in everyday life.

Sport is more than just a physical activity; it's a powerful social connector—like a glue that holds people together. Think about local clubs, fan communities, or outreach programs, where folks come together not just to play or watch, but to build relationships and feel a sense of belonging. Sometimes, people use the word 'community' in sports without really explaining what it means, which can be confusing. Sport can help create social capital by strengthening trust, friendships, and supportive relationships within a community.

Community researchers highlight that genuine communities are built through shared emotional connections, a feeling of belonging, and mutual commitment among members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This aligns closely with sports club environments, where identity, loyalty, and being part of something larger than oneself play a central role in members' experiences. Ultimately, the most meaningful community in sport emerges where everyone feels included, where authentic relationships are formed, and where people truly feel connected — far beyond simply being part of a crowd.

3.2 Community in Sports Clubs

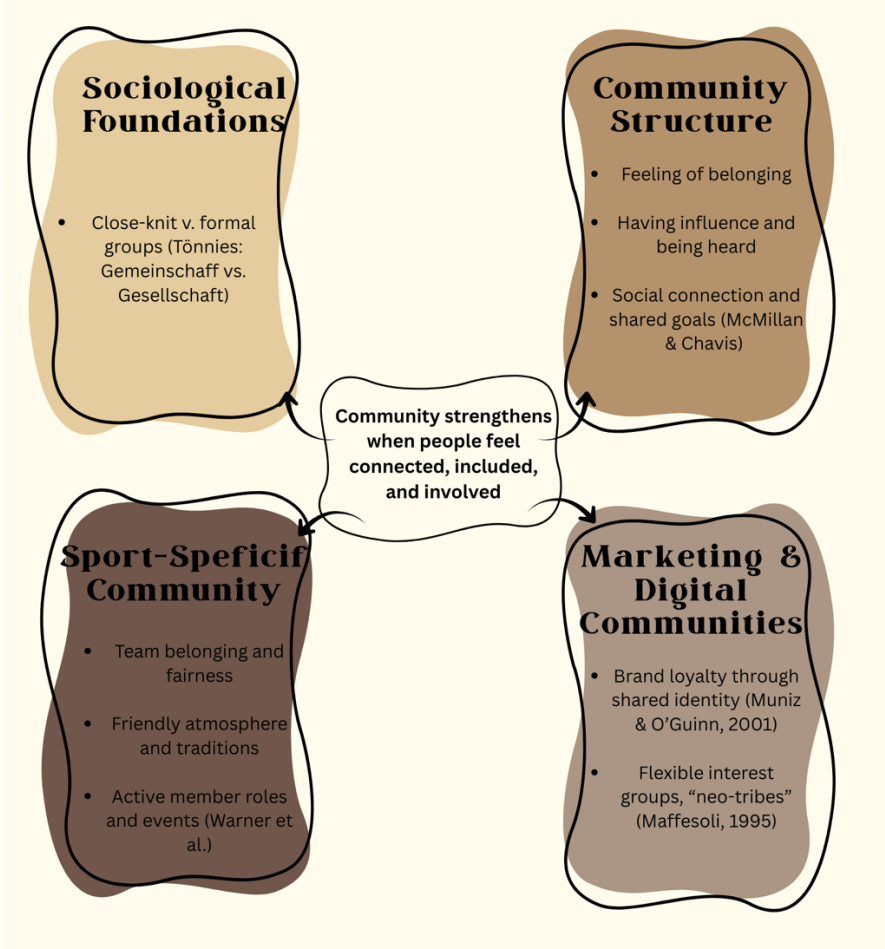
Community sports clubs, especially those run by volunteers, are more than just places to play—they're vibrant hubs of community life. These clubs bring people together, not just through the game, but by creating social spaces where friendships blossom and grow beyond the field. A recent study in the UK revealed that 97% of young people involved in grassroots clubs felt a deep emotional connection, often calling their club a "second home" (University of Bath, 2024). This sense of belonging helps boost confidence, social skills, and even reduce feelings of loneliness.

Unlike professional sports teams, grassroots clubs thrive on volunteers and active participation from members. Everyone pitches in—whether playing, organizing, or supporting—fostering a true sense of ownership and collective effort. This shared involvement builds trust and mutual support among members.

Expert Warner and colleagues (2012) introduced the idea of Sport-Specific Sense of Community (SCS), highlighting key ingredients like shared passion, transparent leadership, member involvement, and social spaces that foster bonding. Events such as post-match get-togethers and open lines of communication help strengthen these connections, encouraging ongoing engagement.

Many clubs feel like family, especially for those who rely on social support. Around the world, voluntary sports clubs are recognized as vital tools for promoting inclusion and social cohesion. In Europe and the UK, for example, these clubs often work hand-in-hand with public organizations to help people feel connected and supported (Waardenburg, 2016; University of Bath, 2024).

Whether it’s a local football club or a cricket team in another country, these organizations act as social anchors—spaces where people feel they belong, where traditions are kept alive, and where different generations come together. Shared rituals like meals, songs, or volunteer activities deepen these bonds. Because participation is voluntary, members are usually driven by a sense of solidarity and joy, which helps sustain a strong, lasting community spirit.



Picture 1. Theories behind community in sports clubs

3.3 Engagement theory

Engagement in marketing is all about how involved and connected someone feels with an organization. Instead of just making a one-time purchase or attending an event, true engagement is a deeper, ongoing relationship that touches on what they think, feel, and do. For example, a club member who's truly engaged isn't just interested—they actively talk about the club, support it, or participate in activities and online discussions. This shows they've woven the club into their identity and lifestyle, often feeling the team's wins and losses as their own. In sports, this emotional bond is especially strong; even fans of unsuccessful teams stay loyal because their connection goes far beyond just winning or losing — it's about passion and belonging.

Understanding customer engagement (CE) builds on the principles of relationship marketing and co-creation, where value is created through interaction rather than one-way transaction (Brodie et al., 2011). Think of engagement as a way to turn customers—or club members—into active partners rather than just passive buyers. Instead of simply selling a product, organizations and their communities work together to create value and memorable experiences through ongoing interaction. This approach aligns perfectly with the idea that service is a co-created effort, where everyone plays a role.

For sports clubs, this concept transforms into what we call “fan engagement.” It’s about fans becoming collaborators—they’re not just watching or buying tickets; they’re actively shaping the club's culture and activities. Fans support their clubs socially, volunteer their time, and advocate passionately, which makes their involvement especially meaningful because sports fans often find personal significance in their interactions. This emotional connection helps build loyalty, so engaged fans are more likely to stick around for the long haul (Yoshida et al., 2015).

Nurturing engagement can lead to meaningful benefits such as increased trust, stronger commitment, and greater loyalty. This relationship is cyclical: clubs aim to engage members to build loyalty, and loyal members tend to engage even more. Highly engaged customers or fans often contribute positively to an organisation’s overall atmosphere and activity, which can be seen in consistent participation, interest in club merchandise, and the willingness to share positive experiences—even during more challenging periods.

Engagement is often described as a dynamic, multi-dimensional process involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components that reinforce one another (Brodie et al., 2011). Fans pay attention to content, feel emotionally connected to the club, and participate in activities such as attending events or sharing material online (Hollebeek, 2011). When these dimensions of engagement are supported, club communities tend to strengthen and become more resilient (Yoshida et al., 2015).

3.4 Engagement and Social Media in Sports

Social media's rise has truly transformed how sports fans and clubs connect. Now, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok let fans and clubs chat directly with each other, breaking down the old barriers between organizations and their supporters (Abeza et al., 2023). These days, social media isn't just about sharing news; it's about creating a two-way street where fans feel they are part of the conversation. When a golf club posts something online, fans might respond by sharing their own stories or asking questions, sparking fundamental, lively interactions. Simple actions like liking a post, sharing a score, or commenting on a teammate's photo show that fans are emotionally invested and genuinely engaged. Every like or comment isn't just a digital gesture—it's a sign that fans care deeply about their club and want to be part of its story.

Did you know that what happens on social media can influence real-life behaviours? When clubs keep members engaged and excited online, it often encourages them to participate more in on-the-ground activities. For example, a recent study of a local sports club showed that a well-thought-out social media plan got members more involved online and led to more people attending events and feeling connected as a community (Abeza et al., 2023). Members shared that having engaged, relevant content on social media made them feel more connected to their club and motivated them to attend events and chat with other members face-to-face (Yoshida et al., 2015).

This shows that digital engagement is not just a separate world—it is a way to strengthen the sense of belonging and encourage active participation in tournaments or volunteering. Social media acts like a virtual clubhouse in sports clubs where members can continue interacting between physical meetings. Through group chats, comment threads, and sharing club news or memories, members build relationships online that supplement their in-person experiences.

Social media can help members feel more emotionally connected to a club, especially when used thoughtfully. Being part of an online community often makes members feel

proud and more engaged, supporting the idea that identification with a sport community strengthens emotional involvement (Yoshida et al., 2015). But the key is authenticity—members want the tone and content to genuinely reflect the club's true values and culture. Instead of just advertising services, the most effective posts celebrate members, highlight traditions, and showcase community spirit. When social media feels real—like welcoming new members or thanking volunteers—it builds trust and creates lasting connections. In this way, social media can expand the club's real-world community into a lively, everyday digital space.

3.5 Linking Community and Engagement

Being part of a sports club is all about community and engagement—they naturally go hand in hand. When members feel a true sense of belonging, with shared identity and mutual support, it creates a space where people want to get involved. At the same time, the more engaged members are, the more they help grow and strengthen the community through their active participation. Think of community as the foundation that ignites your motivation to stay involved, while your engagement is how you show that sense of belonging. When people feel like they genuinely belong, it often improves how they feel about themselves—boosting pride, confidence, and connectedness. Research by Mastromartino and Zhang (2020) highlights that these emotional benefits come from the bonds fans form with each other, making them more likely to participate in club events, discussions, or just cheer for the team. For example, if you feel appreciated and connected within the club, you might volunteer at events, join conversations, or promote the club among your friends. Past studies, like Yoshida et al. (2015), found that fans who strongly identify with their sport community tend to go above and beyond—participating more actively and spreading positive word-of-mouth. In practical terms, this could mean members coaching younger players, organizing meetups, or simply talking up the club to others—all motivated by a genuine attachment and sense of community.

Engagement is the heartbeat of any community. When members take part—whether by chatting, sharing ideas, or helping—they are weaving the fabric that makes the group feel like family. Think of it like social capital: every time someone volunteers, offers help, or just interacts, they're investing in the community. For the club, these acts bring energy and fresh ideas, making it a better place. For everyone, engaging offers personal joy and stronger connections. People who are involved in the community often feel happier and more fulfilled. Take volunteers in a club—research by Mills et al. (2022) shows they bring leadership and a sense of togetherness, enriching the club's social life. In the end, all these acts of engagement create a true community where members feel like family, knowing their participation matters and strengthens the bonds between everyone.

Community and engagement often go hand in hand, creating a positive cycle that benefits everyone. When members take part in events, chat with each other, or share on social media, they start to feel more connected to the club and to each other. These bonds—friendships, recognition, and shared experiences—make people want to stay involved. When a sports club increases its activity on social media, members often feel more included and connected, which can naturally strengthen their loyalty and ties to the community (Abeza et al., 2023).

Relational marketing theory supports this idea, too: when clubs interact genuinely and consistently, trust and a sense of belonging grow, making people more eager to participate (Brodie et al., 2011). In simple terms, people join in because they feel part of something, and they feel part of something because they're involved.

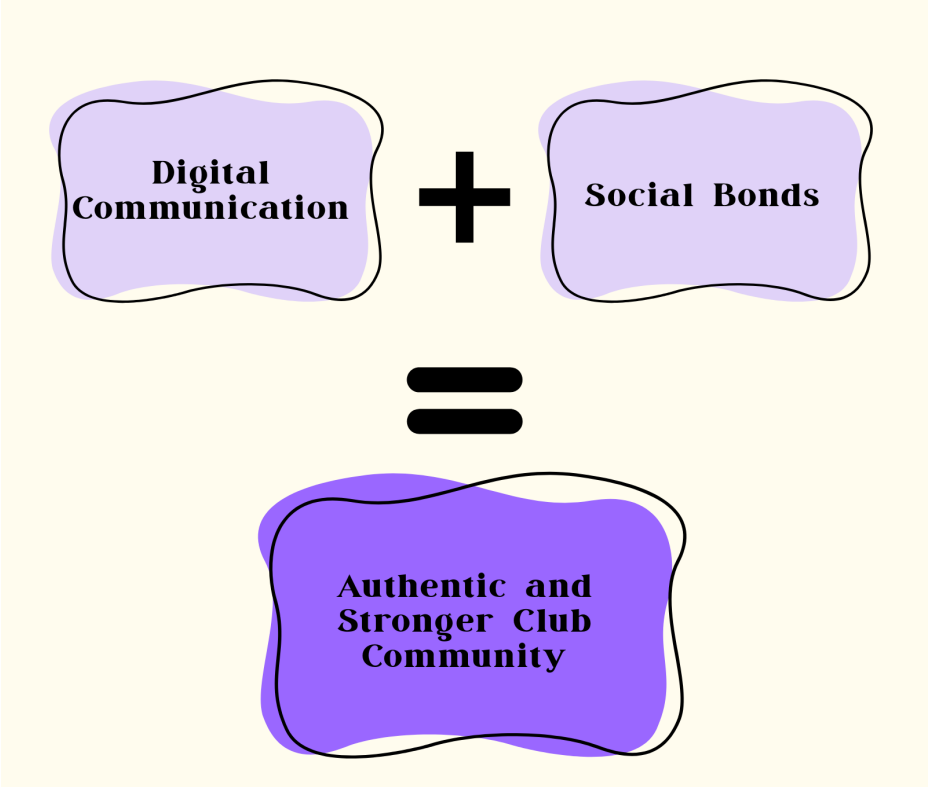
To succeed, sports clubs should focus on nurturing both community and engagement. This can mean offering members chances to share stories, organize casual get-togethers, or just feel truly welcomed. When members see that the club values everyone's input and shared purpose, they are more likely to stay active. Every small action—whether it's a social media post or volunteering—helps build a lively, loyal community built on mutual support and pride.

3.6 Summary

Chapter 3 examined community and engagement within sports clubs, focusing on how social relationships, shared identities, and member participation contribute to a strong and meaningful club culture. The chapter showed how sports communities develop through emotional bonds and shared values, and a feeling of belonging which comes from both official systems and regular social interactions. The sense of community model and social capital research demonstrate that these elements form the basis for how people find support and build connections. They also discover fulfillment in club environments.

The chapter examined member engagement through active participation and involvement, and interaction within the club. The level of member participation activities, together with their emotional bonds and identification with the community, determines community engagement. Research on sports club communities demonstrates that member engagement intensifies through recognition and inclusion, and when club events both in person and online align with their personal identities and interests. The different viewpoints demonstrate that emotional connections and shared understanding, and continuous involvement maintain enduring sports club communities.

These theoretical insights provide a crucial foundation for understanding the case of Pickala Golf, where community, identity, and everyday interactions play a central role. The next chapter applies these concepts to the empirical material, examining how members describe the club's atmosphere, relationships, and the role of social media in shaping and supporting these communal experiences.



Picture 2. Foundations of Club Community

4 Case Study: Pickala Golf

This chapter presents the case study of Pickala Golf, one of Finland's most well-known golf communities. I will explore how the club helps members feel connected and engaged through their daily activities and communication. The chapter is divided into three parts: first, an introduction to the club and its background; second, an explanation of the research methods used; and third, a discussion of the findings in relation to the ideas introduced earlier. The goal is to bridge real-world experiences with academic concepts of community in sports.

4.1 Case description and context

Pickala Golf is one of the largest and well-known golf club in Finland, located in Siuntio in the Uusimaa region. Founded in 1987, Pickala has become more than just a golf course — it's a vibrant community where members enjoy high-quality facilities and a warm sense of belonging. The club operates with core values like joy, responsibility, ambition, and togetherness, which inspire everything from daily activities to long-term plans. These values are especially highlighted in the club's latest strategic plan, Pickala Strategy 2024–2030, which is all about continuing to grow as a friendly, inclusive golf community.

The club's membership is diverse, including players, shareholders, volunteers, and professionals. More than just a golf course, Pickala is a vibrant social environment, where members connect not only through sports but also at events, volunteering activities, and everyday interactions. The club values shared experiences and the "Spirit of Pickala," fostering a strong sense of belonging and community. Additionally, Pickala actively uses communication channels like social media and invests in infrastructure to keep members engaged and strengthen the community bond.

This case study is informed not only by publicly available information but also by my close observation of everyday operations and member interactions at Pickala Golf.

Through being present in the club environment, I have accrued a broader view of how communication unfolds in practice, how relationships among members are formed, and how efforts to build engagement and community take shape. These insights provide valuable contextual understanding and contribute to why Pickala Golf was selected as the focus of this study.

4.2 Research design and data collection

This research takes a close look at how social media helps build and strengthen the community at Pickala Golf. Using a case study approach allows for a deeper exploration within its real-life setting, especially since the boundaries between the club, its members, and its social media practices are closely intertwined in everyday operations. This approach fits well because social media habits and members' experiences are deeply intertwined with the club's daily culture and operations.

In sports and social media research, qualitative methods are popular because they allow us to really understand personal experiences, perceptions, and meanings (Abeza, 2023; Barden & Phillips, 2024). This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with two active members of Pickala Golf. Both of the interviews style strikes a good balance—it's structured enough to compare responses, yet flexible enough to explore new ideas as they come up, which is vital when studying how people connect and engage within a community (Kallio et al., 2016).

Participants were chosen purposefully because they were familiar with the club's social media and actively involved in the Pickala community. This way, they could provide meaningful insights into how the club communicates and what the member culture is like. Both had been members of Pickala Golf for several years and regularly followed the club's social channels. One of them was a young adult member, while the other was a middle-aged member. Having these two perspectives helped give a more complete

picture of different generational views, which are discussed in sports communication research (Barden & Phillips, 2024).

The interviews took place in October 2025 and were conducted online to make it easier and more convenient for the participants. The interview questions were designed around four central concepts drawn from the theoretical framework: sense of community, sport-specific community, social media use, and engagement-related interactions between members. Participants were assured that their information would remain confidential, emphasizing that participation was voluntary and their privacy would be protected throughout the study.

This approach helps us explore how social media impacts member engagement and strengthens the sense of community within the club. By combining an established case study method with firsthand stories from members, the research paints a clear picture of shared values and digital interactions in a member-based golf club setting.

4.3 Findings and discussion

The interviews reveal that Pickala Golf's community culture is truly the heart of what makes the club special for its members. Both participants emphasized that the club is more than just a place to play golf — it feels like a second home. Many members have spent years there, forging lifelong friendships and forming daily routines that give their experience a sense of warmth and belonging. This feeling of being part of something larger resonates with community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which suggests that emotional bonds and shared experiences create a strong, close-knit community.

One interviewee mentioned that they've been part of Pickala for nearly twenty years, taking on various roles from playing to working there. They see Pickala as more than just a sports club—it's a community where people gather to socialize and exchange greetings, often with acquaintances they may not know well. The second interviewee agreed,

observing that "there are always people at Pickala, and they enjoy being there." These insights are consistent with Warner et al.'s (2012) concept of a sport-specific sense of community, where social spaces and informal interactions foster closeness and a shared identity among members.

The community at Pickala feels special compared to other Finnish golf clubs — it's like a small town where members not only enjoy playing golf together but also live nearby. Many drive their own golf carts to the clubhouse and afterward gather to socialize, dine, and soak in the beautiful surroundings. This everyday lifestyle creates a warm, welcoming atmosphere, something you don't often see in Finnish golf culture. As Rich et al. (2021) point out, sport settings often create small, close-knit worlds where routines and shared experiences help shape our identities. Pickala truly embodies this idea, making it more than just a golf club — it's a community.

Both interviewees actively follow Pickala's social media channels and have expressed positive feelings about the friendly and welcoming tone of the content. One participant shared that they read "every message that comes from Pickala" and especially enjoy updates about member successes and club events. This reflects research indicating that sports social media helps build emotional bonds by celebrating shared achievements and strengthening group pride (Barden & Phillips, 2024).

This feedback suggests opportunities to further highlight Pickala's welcoming and lively character. One interviewee suggested showcasing more active community members and sharing behind-the-scenes content, like videos of members having fun or practicing. Another recommended approach is to focus on broader groups rather than just top performers. Overall, these ideas support the notion that when everyone gets involved and is visible, it creates a sense of inclusion and a stronger feeling of community.

These views align with the understanding that Pickala's unique community culture can be communicated even more effectively online. The relaxed golf-cart-driven lifestyle,

spontaneous gatherings at the clubhouse, and genuine friendships are at the heart of Pickala's identity—they set the club apart from other Finnish clubs. By highlighting these everyday moments more consistently, the club can build stronger connections online and attract new members who value not just golf, but a sense of belonging. This idea resonates Abeza (2023), who notes that social media in sports has shifted from just promoting events to telling the stories of the community. For us, that means sharing more about what its members do every day—beyond just scores and announcements.

Participants acknowledged the difficulty in communicating with Pickala's diverse audience. As one interviewee shared, members range from juniors to seniors, each with different expectations. Some prefer traditional and formal approaches, while younger members enjoy modern, more relaxed content. I've personally noticed this tension—golf has deep-rooted traditions and etiquette, yet casual content sometimes faces resistance from those who value tradition. Research supports this, showing that different generations have distinct digital habits in sports communities (Barden & Phillips, 2024). Private clubs, therefore, need to find a way to honor their traditions while also embracing new ways for members to participate (Kim & Cichy, 2017). For Pickala, creating content that resonates with both longtime members and younger generations is essential to keeping the community connected and encouraging growth.

In summary, the case of Pickala Golf shows us how social media is more than just a way to share information; it acts as a reflection of the community's values and culture. The interviews highlight that what makes Pickala special is the sense of friendship and the unique lifestyle that surrounds the club every day. When social media genuinely and inclusively captures these qualities, it can build stronger connections, create a sense of belonging, and make Pickala stand out from other golf clubs. At the same time, carefully managing communication with different member groups and honoring long-standing traditions requires a considerate and balanced approach. These insights lay the groundwork for the final chapter, where we'll explore practical takeaways, limitations, and ideas for future growth.

5 Conclusions

Looking back on the study, it is clear that my research is deeply rooted in personal experience. As someone who is both a member and an employee of Pickala Golf, I've always felt that our club is more than just a place to play—it's like a small town built around fairways and friendships. This thesis has given me the opportunity to explore that feeling through academic theory and qualitative research. The key takeaway is that social media at Pickala is more than just a marketing tool; it acts as an extension of our community. It captures and shares the warmth and everyday friendship I see at the clubhouse, allowing members to connect and share stories no matter where they are.

My interviews really confirmed what I have always felt — a genuine sense of belonging at Pickala is in those everyday moments: members playing rounds together, sharing a drink after a round, or sharing a laugh at the driving range. These simple traditions create a feeling of belonging that makes our club special. When social media works well, it can even boost this vibe. Research shows that digital platforms have changed sport viewing from a solo activity to a communal, community-building experience. I see this everywhere — in comments from members or when they share a clip of friends. Platforms like Instagram let fans connect with the club and with each other, creating a kind of digital "fan family". When we share posts that show real life at Pickala — like a barbecue on the terrace or a player making a hole in one — we're not just sharing news; we're inviting others into our story.

Managing Pickala's social media has shown me how complex it can be to connect with different generations. Our followers range from junior golfers who love memes, to parents who prefer more detailed updates, and retirees who appreciate formal announcements. While many members value golf traditions and etiquette, others enjoy a more relaxed, casual tone. This creates a delicate balancing act: honoring our club's rich heritage without turning away younger members. Modern platforms allow teams and athletes to speak directly to fans, which makes controlling the message more challenging. I've experienced this firsthand—receiving criticism when a playful video is seen as

unprofessional, or when a traditional newsletter feels too stiff for younger audiences. These moments have taught me that good communication isn't about sticking to one style. It's about blending different approaches into a story that feels genuine and inclusive.

Reflecting on the research, I've learned some important lessons. First, being genuine matters more than sounding perfect. Members really appreciate when they see themselves and their friends in our posts. Sharing real people and everyday moments helps create a feeling of pride and connection—something no fancy marketing can quite achieve. Second, telling stories about our community should include everyone. Whether it's a top player or the restaurant staff, showing different voices reminds us that everyone is part of Pickala's culture. Third, making it interactive matters. Using polls, Q&As, and content from members encourages conversations and shows that the club belongs to all of us. Finally, respecting tradition while trying new ideas is not possible. Mixing formal updates with fun reels can reach different groups without changing who we are.

This study has some limitations worth reflecting on. Since I only conducted two interviews and relied on my own observations, the findings should be seen as suggestive rather than conclusive. There are likely perspectives I missed, especially from junior members or occasional players. I also acknowledge that my personal involvement might have influenced my interpretations; it was sometimes difficult to separate my thoughts for the club from my role as a researcher. Additionally, this project didn't include quantitative data or compare our social media engagement with that of other clubs. Future studies could include a larger and more diverse group of members, combine interviews, surveys, and analytics, and compare Pickala's digital practices with other sports organizations.

Ultimately, working on this thesis reminded me why so many golfers choose Pickala from the very beginning. The clubhouse feels like a second home—a place filled with laughter, support, and a shared passion for golf that creates lasting bonds. When used

thoughtfully, social media can help strengthen these connections and invite others to experience what makes Pickala so special. As the digital landscape continues to change, I hope Pickala keeps innovating while remaining rooted in what truly matters: the people, the spirit, and the community that can't be found anywhere else.

This research has profoundly shaped my understanding of meaningful communication. It's clear to me that digital tools are most powerful when they enhance genuine human warmth, rather than replacing it. Looking ahead, I am inspired to continue exploring how community-driven storytelling and member-focused content can support sports clubs like Pickala, and maybe even influence wider practices within the Finnish golf community. Suppose my work can ignite new ideas or help others see the value of authentic, community-centered communication. In that case, it has achieved more than just an academic milestone — it's a way of giving back to a community that has already given me so much.

Throughout the different stages of this thesis, I used OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.1 as a supportive tool. I relied on the model for brainstorming, structuring ideas, and organizing relevant literature. ChatGPT also assisted in clarifying English-language concepts and sources, as well as translating interview material from Finnish to English. In addition, it was used for drafting, refining, and reviewing the linguistic clarity of the text. All interpretations, analytical decisions, and substantive content are entirely my own, and I remain fully responsible for the academic and ethical quality of this thesis.

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