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Growing the international fan base through brand awareness and engagement

NHL organizations in Europe

International Business

Master's thesis

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Marketing and branding in sports continuously have a more vital role when sports teams and athletes pursue more significant incomes. Marketing and branding strategy plays a significant role in this game as it includes different actions to make the brand recognizable and strengthen the image. The main goal is to attract potential new "customers" (fans) and create deeper engagement among fans who have already shown their interest and ambition toward the sports team or brand.

Interest in sports brand internationalization has increased lately among academic literature and sports marketing professionals. However, existing literature also recognizes an increasing interest in sports brand internationalization as the fan bases have globalized. It is highlighted that not many studies focus on fans living abroad and how different branding strategies influence those fans. In addition, the literature has focused on fan motivations to attend sporting events and how fans express their attachment through physical presence. However, the consumption of sports brands cannot be limited only to live events as the fan base is heavily globalized. Therefore, literature has acknowledged that the brand equity framework is more than suitable when exploring the connection between the brand and international fans.

This research examines how NHL teams may grow their European fan base by enhancing brand awareness and engagement. The study proposes that this may be accomplished by deconstructing the brand development process and establishing obvious links between each phase of the brand development process and the fandom development process. The purpose of this research is to provide an understanding how the branding process could be united with the fandom development process to create awareness which creates a foundation for fandom development and to create attraction and engagement to develop that fandom and ultimately retain the fandom.

The empirical research was conducted through expert interviews. Semi-structured interviews based on the theoretical framework were used to collect data. The interviewees were chosen after careful exploration, and the main selection criteria were extended knowledge and experience from the field of sports business and sports marketing.

The empirical research mostly validated the prior conclusions while also providing new insights. It was concluded that the most crucial thing in international sports brand management is understanding the brand's core and building a brand message around identity and personality that communicates authenticity. After that, the methods to enhance brand awareness were widely confirmed. The study identified the most critical methods in that phase. In addition, the same results were achieved in the brand engagement phase, as the study confirmed the findings from the literature. However, the study also underlined that the process seems simple in theory. However, in practice, it requires a lot of effort and resources. Following that, the objective of this study was accomplished by validating the theoretical framework based on the results of the empirical study.

Key words: international brand management, sports brand, brand awareness, brand engagement, satellite fans, fandom

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Urheilumarkkinoinnilla ja brändäyksellä on jatkuvasti tärkeämpi rooli, kun urheilujoukkueet ja urheilijat tavoittelevat suurempia tuloja. Markkinointi- ja brändistrategialla on tässä merkittävä asema, sillä se sisältää erilaisia tukevia toimia brändin tunnistamiseksi ja imagon vahvistamiseksi. Päätavoitteena on houkutella potentiaalisia uusia "asiakkaita" (faneja) ja luoda syvempää sitoutumista fanien keskuudessa, ketkä ovat jo osoittaneet kiinnostuksensa urheilujoukkuetta tai brändiä kohtaan.

Kiinnostus urheilubrändien kansainvälistymistä kohtaan on viime aikoina lisääntynyt niin akateemisen kirjallisuuden kuin urheilumarkkinoinnin ammattilaistenkin keskuudessa. Olemassa oleva kirjallisuus on myös havainnut kasvavan kiinnostuksen fanikunnan globalisoitumista kohtaan. Kirjallisuudessa on korostettu, että ulkomailla asuville faneille kohdennettujen brändisstrategioiden vaikutuksia ei ole tutkittu paljoa. Lisäksi kirjallisuudessa on keskitytty motivaatiotekijöihin, jotka saavat fanit osallistumaan urheilutapahtumiin ja siihen, miten fanit ilmaisevat sitoutumistaan fyysisellä läsnäololla. Urheilubrändien kulutusta ei kuitenkaan voida rajoittaa vain live-tapahtumiin, sillä fanikunta on voimakkaasti globalisoitunut. Kirjallisuus on tunnistanut brändipääoman viitekehyksen olevan sopiva tutkittaessa brändin ja kansainvälisten fanien välistä yhteyttä.

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, kuinka NHL-organisaatiot voivat kasvattaa fanikuntaansa Euroopassa lisäämällä bränditietoisuutta ja brändiin sitoutumista. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että tämä voidaan saavuttaa purkamalla brändin kehitysprosessi osiin ja luomalla ilmeisiä yhteyksiä brändin kehitysprosessin osien ja faniuden kehitysprosessin kunkin vaiheen välille. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli luoda malli, joka osoittaa, kuinka brändäysprosessi voidaan yhdistää faniuden kehitysprosessiin. Ensin tulee luoda bränditietoisuutta, joka toimii perustana faniuden alkamiselle. Toisessa vaiheessa tulee tukea brändin vetovoimaa ja brändiin sitoutumista faniuden kehittämiseksi ja lopulta myös fanien säilyttämiseksi.

Empiirinen tutkimus toteutettiin asiantuntijahaastatteluin ja aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla teoreettisen viitekehyksen pohjalta. Haastateltavat valittiin huolellisen selvityksen jälkeen ja päävalintakriteerinä oli laaja-alainen tieto ja kokemus urheiluliiketoiminnan ja urheilumarkkinoinnin alalta.

Empiirinen tutkimus vahvisti aikaisemmat johtopäätökset ja tarjosi samalla myös uusia näkökulmia. Tutkimuksessa todettiin, että kansainvälisessä urheilubrändin hallinnassa tärkeintä on ymmärtää brändin ydin ja rakentaa brändiviestiä identiteetin ja persoonallisuuden ympärille, aitoutta viestien. Tutkimus vahvisti menetelmät bränditietoisuuden lisäämiseksi ja tutkimuksessa pystyttiin myös tunnistamaan menetelmät, jotka ovat kyseisessä prosessin vaiheessa tärkeimmät. Brändin sitouttamisen osalta saavutettiin samat tulokset, sillä tutkimus pystyi vahvistamaan kirjallisuuden havainnot. Tutkimus kuitenkin korostaa, että prosessi näyttää teoriassa yksinkertaiselta, mutta vaatii käytännössä paljon vaivaa ja resursseja. Lopuksi tämän tutkimuksen päätavoite saavutettiin validoimalla teoreettinen viitekehys empiiristen tulosten perusteella.

Avainsanat: kansainvälinen brändijohtaminen, urheilubrändi, bränditietoisuus, brändin sitoutuminen, satelliittifanit, fanius

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

The size of global sports industry is nowadays remarkable, and it is growing even more now, and in the future (thebusinessresearchcompany.com). Marketing and branding in sports continuously have a more vital role when sports teams and athletes pursue more significant incomes. Marketing and branding strategy plays a significant role in this game as it includes different actions to make the brand recognizable and strengthen the image. The main goal is to attract potential new "customers" (fans) and create deeper engagement among fans who have already shown their interest and ambition toward the sports team or brand (Richelieu 2016; Richelieu & Desbordes 2009). With the domination of three professional leagues (National Football League, National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball) and university athletics, the expansion of professional sports may have reached saturation in United States (businessinsider.com). As a result, other leagues, like National Hockey League, have substantial problems in increasing their fan bases and businesses (Mastromartino, Qian, Wang, and Zhang, 2020). In today's dynamic and competitive environment, differentiating from competitors is vital, from the point of view of sports teams, if pursuing success sportingly and especially financially. This distinction is made possible by a solid and valuable brand in both the product or service category and sports (Brunello, 2018).

Nevertheless, what is sports marketing generally, and how does it differ from "normal" marketing? Schwarz and Hunter (2018, 4) define sports marketing as a *"process of engaging potential consumers through sport-related products and services that meet their needs and wants"*. It does not sound very complex, but sports have multiple nuances that affect strategic decisions and approaches. Sports products or services are usually demand-based, while most usual products and services are based on need. The sports business itself is mainly experiential and intangible. Most services are produced to support the main product and create additional value for the consumer, leading to increased satisfaction (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018). While pursuing development, it is essential to understand the role of media covering the teams, for example. Creating positive publicity, making solid relationships with customers, and messaging exciting and meaningful content about sports are in the middle of everything (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2005). Understanding this process and its importance for

sports creates the foundation for a sports team to enhance its marketing activities and brand. Furthermore, understanding that and applying it faces increasing importance in the future (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019).

Sports fan bases have globalized significantly through possibilities offered by technological development and advanced internationalization strategies for sports brands (Hill & Vincent, 2006). Those international fans could also be described as "satellite fans", meaning individuals who have created an emotional bond with the team or organization despite living abroad. Even though those fans do not share a geographical identity, they still focus on maintaining relationships with the object of fandom (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Interest in sports brand internationalization has increased lately among academic literature (e.g., Richelieu 2005, 2008, 2012) and sports marketing professionals. However, an increasing interest in sports brand internationalization has been recognized as the fan bases have globalized. It is highlighted that not many studies focus on fans living abroad and how different branding strategies influence those fans (Bodet, Geng, Chanavat, and Wang, 2020). In addition, the literature has focused on fan motivations to attend sporting events and how fans express their attachment through physical presence. However, because the fan base is very globalized, consumption of sports brands cannot be restricted to live events alone (Bodet et al., 2020).

The brand equity framework is acknowledged to be more than suitable when the connection between the brand and international fans is explored (Chanavat & Bodet, 2010; Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Furthermore, that same approach is used by other authors, which creates a solid foundation for this thesis to use the same approach (Bodet et al., 2020; Hinson, Osabutey, Kosiba & Asiedu, 2020). In addition, Hinson et al. (2020) also found out in the study that brand equity relates to brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty, which guides the brand management discussion of this thesis. Finally, it has been identified that brand equity development over time has not been researched in the context of a sports brand (Wetzel, Hattula, Hammerschmidt & van Heerde, 2018), underlining the suitability of that approach for this thesis.

Based on the literature review and familiarization with the topic, it is justified to say that there is a lack of existing literature on brand development and how that could be used as a tool to grow an international fan base. This research adds general theory about branding, brand internationalization, sports marketing, and sports team brand development for

fandom literature. Key concepts of the study are brand awareness, which means customers capability to recognize the brand to make purchase decision (Aaker, 2002), and brand engagement which means customer's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive attachment and bond to brand's interactions (Hollebeek, 2001). These concepts are united with the concepts of fandom creation and development. Fandom refers to *"collective behaviour of individuals that is reflected in a group situation"* (Ennis 2020, 76), where fandom creation refers to actions that an organization can take to support individuals to create such behaviour, and fandom development refers to actions that an organization can take to support the retention of fandom. The goal is to provide new valuable information for NHL (National Hockey League) and its organizations and help to identify current possibilities and presence to solve the problem or challenge.

The study combines sports brand building and development (e.g., Desborders & Richelieu 2012) and one fundamental model of fandom, PCM, by Funk and James (2001). Bodet et al. (2020) used the Funk and James (2001) Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) as a foundation for their research, where they explored which factors are creating attraction among international fans. The model is also suitable for exploring the psychological factors affecting fandom development. In addition to Bodet et al.'s (2020) research, existing literature has acknowledged the PCM model as relevant in fandom research. For that reason, the same model is also used in this research. In addition, there is relatively remarkable literature to support the study; for example, Gladden's (2014) study gathered a list of characteristics of sports team brands that give a framework to use when reviewed from the NHL organization's perspective. Kerr and Gladden (2008) explored the fans that did not share the same geographical area with the team and created an understanding of how brand equity affects those fans. In their study, Hinson et al. (2020) found that brand equity has a significant role in brand internationalization. General literature about sports business, management, and marketing creates a strong foundation throughout the study (e.g., Schwarz & Hunter 2018; Shank & Lyberger 2014; Ennis 2020). These studies and observations guided the study's direction, and the study's focus and position (Figure 1) generated through them.

Figure 1 Position of study

1.2 Purpose of the study & research questions

The study's primary question is *how NHL organizations can enhance their international brand awareness and engagement to grow their European fan base through satellite fans*. The answer to the question is built by exploring key characteristics of sports team brands and internationalization strategies for sports team brands and how those characteristics and methods could be used to enhance engagement, resulting in fandom. The research will be conducted through three sub-questions:

1) *How to manage an international sports brand to build brand awareness?*

2) *How can an organization support fandom creation and development?*

3) *How to enhance brand engagement among international satellite fans?*

The first sub-question aims to collect information and understand what methods and strategies could be used to build and enhance brand awareness internationally as a part of international brand management. The second sub-question aim to explore the world of fandom and what means sports organizations could take to support the creation and development of fandom to expand their fan base internationally. The third and final sub-question focuses on the strategies and tactics that could turn awareness and attraction into engagement and loyalty. Through these sub-questions, the research can answer the main

research question and create new, theoretically valuable information that could be implemented in practice and respond to academic scholars' needs.

The research outcome could be beneficial to every NHL organization, as North America has excellent other teams in different sports. As a result, there simply are not enough supporters for everyone. A considerable amount of work must be done to realize new potential growth areas and use existing suitable premises. A good example is Los Angeles, which has two basketball teams, two baseball teams, two American football teams, and in addition to that, two hockey teams and two football teams. These organizations need to be able to expand their reach beyond. Today's digital tools offer an unprecedented opportunity when the strategic focus is on point. From the academic perspective, this thesis will fill a gap in sports marketing literature by combining traditional brand and brand internationalization literature with sports marketing and sports team brand literature and, more importantly, fandom literature. The thesis creates new information and expands the theoretical framework based on literature review and expert interviews to create a deeper understanding of how sports organizations could execute branding in emerging markets when their home market is saturated and when they have recognized a new potential market with potential fans.

This thesis is made up of six chapters. The structure of this thesis is as follows: The introduction contains motivation, the research problem, sub-questions, and the purpose of the study. In addition, the background information about the context of this thesis in discussed next as a part of the introduction. After the introduction, the literature review is divided into two main chapters. The first part is international brand management in sports, where special characteristics of sports brands are discussed alongside brand awareness creation and brand internationalization strategies. The second part focuses on satellite fans and fandom through literature exploration. Lastly, a synthesis is formed to capture the key learning and findings together, which creates a theoretical framework that guides the empirical research of this thesis.

The research methodology follows the literature review, including the research approach, data collection, analysis, evaluation, and ethics. To complement the theoretical discussion, chapter four of the thesis will focus on the research itself and introduce the expert interviews' key results by following the structure of the theoretical framework introduced in chapter three. In chapter five, the thesis has a conclusion where the

theoretical discussion and the findings from the interviews are pulled together. In addition, that chapter discusses theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. Lastly, chapter six contains a summary.

1.3 NHL and NHL organizations

In this research, the theoretical background and framework are employed in studying NHL (National Hockey League) organizations in Europe. NHL and NHL organizations will create the empirical context. The study context is introduced at a general level to understand the perspective. NHL is the world's biggest ice hockey league before the Russian Kontinental Hockey League. National Hockey League is an association that gets its revenue from teams, sponsorships, and merchandise. NHLs total revenue in 2019/20 was 4.37 billion U.S. dollars.

NHL could be seen as an administrative and marketing organization shared by individual organizations. NHL is governed by The Board of Governors, which includes a Governor, usually the club owner, from every member. NHL includes 32 different organizations located in 31 different cities, as Figure 2 shows. Seven teams are from Canada, while 25 teams are from the USA. (NHL: *Teams*). NHL organizations are franchises owned by individuals or institutions, and every organization is a member of the NHL. The annual profit made by NHL is divided among the members, which allows the organizations to develop their operations internally. NHL organizations are businesses rather than communities, seeking to grow value and create revenue for owners. Although NHL has centralized functions, such as marketing or public relations, every NHL organization still has its in-house functions to engage with fans and develop operations that are not strictly involved in the game itself. (see Richelieu, 2012.)

Figure 2 NHL organizations in North America (Sport League Maps, 2022)

NHL has planned expansion to Europe for a long time. NHL's deputy commissioner Bill Daly started the discussion in 2008, and after that, the topic has been active. Over the years, NHL has recognized that physical expansion to Europe is unrealistic. Therefore, NHL must strengthen its presence in the European market. Every NHL organization must contribute independently to grow its European fan base. In September 2021, deputy commissioner Bill Daly brought the importance of that mission to the table when he stated that NHL is prioritizing international growth in the future (NHL, 2021). NHL has solid potential for Europe. According to QuantHockey, 302 players out of a total of 1033 are from Europe – approximately 29 percent (QuantHockey, 2022). European players create a great premise to enhance interest, awareness, and engagement toward organizations and league among potential fans.

Most, if not all, North American leagues are heavily centralized, limiting organizations' autonomy to launch their marketing initiatives and slowing their internationalization. In contrast, European leagues are often extremely decentralized, allowing dynamic teams to launch strong marketing campaigns domestically and internationally. However, there are significant disparities between the best teams and the chasing pack. Nevertheless, the league, not the teams, goes worldwide in North America. As a result, teams frequently play a supporting role in the league's internationalization, such as NBA exhibition games in France or the start of the NHL season in Sweden, Finland, or the Czech Republic.

Notably, clubs can launch marketing campaigns only within a 150-kilometer radius of their home market in the NHL. Aside from that, the NHL selects what and where it is marketed based on its priorities. As a result, team brands in North America are leveled only at the bottom to support the League brand, which operates a highly regulated and supervised system. (Richelieu, 2012.)

Comparing NHL to three other major leagues in the North America, it is fair to say that NHL is relatively small in many indicators. For example, NHL's total revenue is 4.37 billion U.S. dollars. At the same time, similar numbers for other leagues are 7.62 billion (NBA) and 12.2 billion (NFL). Only MLB has smaller total revenue, with 3.66 billion U.S. Dollars. However, in 2021, total interest in NHL was the smallest of these four leagues. (Statista, 2021.) In addition, no single NHL organization exists in the Top 50 of the world's most valuable sports teams in 2021. Meanwhile, the list includes 26 NFL (football) teams, nine (9) NBA (basketball) teams, and six (6) MLB (baseball) teams, with nine (9) soccer teams (forbes.com). Therefore, it is alarming when the NHL is still considered to be one of the major leagues, but none of the teams are not very major.

NHL organizations have ultimately great potential to reach new fan segments from Europe through active branding and fan engagement. Still, there are no clear steps to do it – the golden thread is missing. Branding and marketing have an increased role in sports, including many activities, from creating brand identity and awareness to enhancing brand engagement. NHL and its organizations must look outside North America to grow the fan base and create revenue to grow the value of franchises and the league. The league's popularity in North America is not at the same level as its main competitors (Statista, 2021), which forces them to create alternative ways to grow the business.

2 International sports brand management among satellite fans

This chapter focuses first on international brand management and topics that are related to that. The chapter structure will follow Desbordes and Richelieu's (2012) model, which also works as a leading framework for brand management discussion. Exploring international brand management, especially from the perspective of sports team brands, gives a solid foundation and fundamental knowledge which can be used. After that section, the focus is on fandom and especially satellite fans. The aim is to explore fandom creation and development and the basic principles of that. Fandom is mainly discussed through Funk's (2001) PCM model, which has been recognized as one of the most used models in fandom literature.

2.1 International brand management in sports

"A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or feature that identifies one sport product or services as being different from another" (Schwarz & Hunter 2018, 172). One of the critical features of a brand is that it can define and identify a product or service. Companies are trying to affect consumers' thoughts about the brand through branding activities. In addition, a brand could be used as a defining tool for other functions of a sports organization. The primary purpose of branding is to create awareness and interact with the consumer while positioning the brand compared to other brands (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018).

2.1.1 Special characteristics of sports team brand

It is essential to understand how a sports team brand differs from traditional brands, the special characteristics of a sports team brand, and the key elements that build a sports team brand. Sports brands' most significant challenges are saturated markets, demanding and aware consumers, media fragmentation, the disappearance of traditional media, short-term orientation, and new possibilities in marketing and communications enabled by new, innovative technologies (Keller, Aperia, & Georgson, 2011).

Gladden (2014) has created a list of different elements with descriptions (Table 1). A sports brand has special characteristics that are not generally associated with brands. That also creates a fundamental difference between a sports brand and a regular product or

service brand. Those characteristics are, for example, competitiveness, head coach and star players, and home stadium.

Table 1 Sports team brands characteristics (adapted from Gladden 2014)

Attribute	Description
Success	How successful is the property? Won/loss record is not the only proxy for success. Championships are important as well. This attribute also captures the notion of perceived quality.
Head coach	Particularly relevant when coaches become iconic either due to performance or persona. Relates to both success and personality of the coach.
Players/star players	Can refer to star players or a collection of players
Team characteristics	Does the team have a unique style of play or distinct personality?
Rivalry	Does property have notable rivals or compete in a notoriously difficult or notable conference/division?
Management/ personnel	Management and oversight of the property and its operations. Can also relate to whether or not fans think that the team cares about its fans.
Logo/mark	The property's nickname, logo, marks, and colors.
Stadium/arena/ venue	Defining characteristics of the facility in which the team plays or event occurs. Whether the stadium has distinctive features and/or is effective at creating community.
Team history/traditions	Notable traditions of the property, both performance- and nonperoformance-based.
Fans	The existing fan base in the stadium and any characteristics of those fans and the way in which they interact with game/event.

The most remarkable difference between a corporate brand, a sports teams' brand in this case, and a product brand is that a corporate brand requires attention from the whole organization. Instead of focusing on just external opportunities, corporate management needs internal competencies and integration of internal activities to ensure a holistic brand image from the inside out (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Furthermore, while technology is continuously evolving, every competitor has access to the latest innovations and methods. That decreases the organic competitive advantage, so teams must focus on differentiation at the emotional level. Therefore, pursuing competitive advantage has faced increased interest broadly (de Chernatony, Harris & Riley, 2000).

When branding a sports team, it is essential to acknowledge stakeholders other than fans when, for example, investors, sponsors, players, media, coaches, and other officials have a significant role in teams and organizations. Success is built on many factors, and each component must have a solid foundation. The team's brand is also directly affecting how the team is experienced. Without investors and partners, teams might suffer financial problems, and players are needed to play the game itself. Without media, the visibility and awareness of the team are weak. One of the main objectives of a brand is to

communicate the values and norms so that stakeholders can feel connected to the team and brand (Roeck, Maon & Lejeune, 2013). The great challenge in brand development is to define how many different brand elements are used. If marketers use too many elements, it might lead to confusion and loss of brand identity. The brand is a tool to gain revenue through partners and increase awareness and attraction. For that reason, sports markets must work to develop brand structure and architecture. That aims to communicate the value and benefits of the brand (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018).

Bodet et al. (2020) recognized brand attraction points for a sports team. The attraction points are very similar to the characteristics listed by Gladden (2014), which confirms that literature has widely acknowledged these characteristics and understood that they are unique features of the brand. Those attraction points are club history, style of play, kit colors, club managers, perceived fit with fans' background, presence of a star player(s), personality fit with club's members, sporting success, team's kit, peer influence, familial influence, club identity, broadcasting, international tours, international players, fit with the foreign fan's local club, personal connection, sponsors, previous game attendance, and local brand partnership (Bodet et al., 2020). As we can see, there are multiple similarities to Gladden's (2014) categorization. However, Bodet et al. (2020) have also introduced some socialization agents to be attraction points for sports clubs. In the case of satellite fans, this is encouraging as it corresponds with the observations from fandom literature.

Ross (2006) suggested a theoretical framework and categorized the attraction points into three categories: organization-induced brand attraction points, market- and environment-induced brand attraction points, and experience-induced attraction points. *Organization-induced brand attraction points* mean elements created and manageable by the organization (Ross, 2006). This category includes, for example, players, coaches, team, and organization officials (Robinson & Trail, 2003). Studies have acknowledged the role of all previously mentioned groups when attracting satellite fans. In addition, for players and teams, on-the-field success, playing style, and game quality are crucial elements (Bodet et al., 2020). The latter factors depend highly on player choices and coaching (Ross, 2006). So, there is a rationale for seeing players and coaching as essential aspects of an organization's controllable attraction points. When discussing fan attraction and special characteristics of sports brands, the discussion is often directed and identified with specific individuals and individuals who act as part of the organization and are identifiable

among fans. Batchelor and Formentin (2008) have identified that leveraging individuals' reputation is a significant attraction factor and strengthens an organization's brand equity.

The market- and environment-induced brand attraction points category includes factors that are not controllable or manageable by the organization but that fans and consumers use to gather information about the brand and the organization (Ross, 2006). For example, socializing agents, mass media, and sports subcultures are identified to enhance awareness and attraction when the content is positive and encourages the fans. In addition, the literature supports that family relationships and peer influence from friends, for example, have an impactful influence (Bodet et al., 2020).

Social media, alongside the overall communication element, which includes the internet and TV, are among the prominent influencers and sources of growing fan interest. The same type of observation is made about the web-based strategies of organizations where that use meta-active communication strategies (Bodet et al., 2020). The content could be generated by the organization or by the fans in the fan community. It is generally recognized that participating in high-profile sports events will directly influence the interest of an organization. Regarding satellite fans, access to these broadcasts and the content have not been steady (Bodet et al., 2020). However, the fan community could play a remarkable role. The importance of fan community increases among satellite fans when they feel they are part of the community and fan base even though they live in another country (Trail, Robinson, Gillentine & Dick, 2003). Chanavat and Bodet (2009) acknowledged this factor when they found out that French fans faced attachment to Liverpool F.C. as they felt that their community had similarities with the fan community.

Experience-induced attraction points are related to the service and the overall experience that will create commitment (Ross, 2006). For example, international games, such as NHLs Premiere tour in Europe, have been recognized as one of the most vital factors in international sports team brands' success (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009). Furthermore, family and friends play a significant role in this category, as the literature states that experiences through family and friends face increasing meaning in the future (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). In addition, the interaction among fans, especially with the fans of a sports team, could grow the fan base even more (Bodet et al., 2020).

To summarize, sports team brands have multiple elements that create the foundation for brand building. As Ross (2006) stated, attraction points could be categorized. From the

perspective of satellite fans, it is crucial to identify factors that could be highlighted and enhanced despite the lack of geographical unity. Organization- and market-induced brand attraction points might be most relevant for satellite fans. The sports organization should underline those factors as they do not require physical presence. However, as introduced, experience-induced attraction points are essential, but as those opportunities are not so common, it would be beneficial to focus on the two previously mentioned categories.

2.1.2 Building a sports brand

Building and developing a brand in sports is based on the traditional brand-building process. Branding activities for sports teams are pursuing to affect consumers' behavior and increase ticket buyers, which increases revenues. However, a few steps of the branding process must be accomplished before these objectives can be achieved (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). The branding process (Figure 3) includes four steps: *1) creating brand awareness, 2) brand image, 3) brand equity*, and *4) brand loyalty* (Shank & Lyberger, 2014).

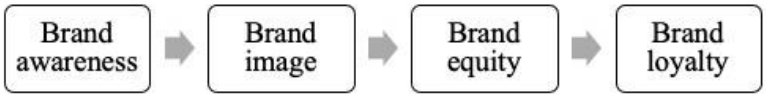

Figure 3 Branding process (adapted from Shank & Lyberger, 2014)

Brand awareness creates a foundation for later steps. Brand awareness is a term which measures the level of brand recognition by customer in order to interact with the brand (Rossiter & Percy, 1987). The second step is building and managing a brand image. Brand image is things that customers are associating to the brand and creating attitude based on those associations (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). With good brand image there is opportunity to create and develop strong brand equity, which means the over value created by the brand (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). Lastly, robust brand equity leads to increased brand loyalty. Bodet and Chanavat (2010) stated that this process would follow every step in practice, but the third step, brand equity, is forming from three other steps. So, brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty are subfactors that are supporting to create strong brand equity.

Branding is a distinct notion and concept that allows sports organizations to reach the attention of sports customers. As a vast sum of various characteristics, a sports brand represents a unique and unmistakable emblem of a sports organization that distinguishes it from its competitors. The equity of the sports brand is heavily leveraged to increase the income of the sports organization. The brand influences customer or consumer loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Brand management ensures that the value of an organization develops, both at the marketing level and the level of the entire organization, including the financial aspect. Brand management also ensures continuity and the future of the brand and the organization (Richelieu, 2012). This chapter will follow the strategic brand-building model in sports (Figure 4) (Desbordes and Richelieu's 2012; Couvelaere and Richelieu 2005), and the different steps of it will be introduced.

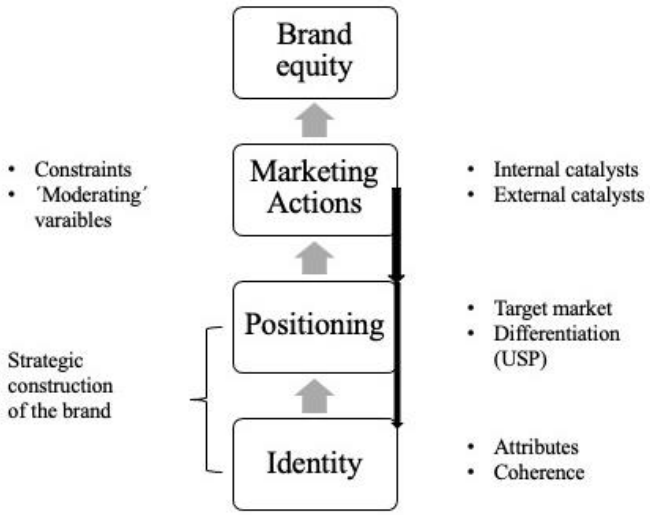

Figure 4 Strategic brand building in sports (adapted from Desbordes & Richelieu, 2012; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005)

The development of brand equity in competitive sports is made possible by three factors: defining the identity of a sports team, positioning the team in the market, and holistic marketing activities (Desbordes and Richelieu's 2012; Couvelaere and Richelieu 2005). The first step is to define and introduce the brand identity and personality from the sports brand perspective. The second step is to position the brand in the market. However, this thesis does not include a great discussion about positioning as there is a primary consumption that the target market is Europe. The third step is marketing actions which enable the development of brand equity. Marketing actions are discussed through the "heart of sports marketing" and internationalization, vital elements when creating

awareness and attracting satellite fans. Lastly, brand equity is introduced and discussed on how international strategies could enhance it in the satellite fan context.

That theory is supported by Keller et al.'s (2011) strategic brand management process, including the same elements as the model presented above. Four essential steps of brand management are 1*) brand positioning and brand value recognizing, 2) brand marketing campaigns planning and implementation, 3) measuring brand performance*, and *4) developing brand equity and maintenance*. The process leads to brand equity development, which is also the final focus of Desbordes and Richelieu's (2012) model. Hence, Desbordes and Richelieu's (2012) model was chosen as the primary model in this thesis and brand management exploration. Its focus is on sports brand management and the professional sports industry.

2.1.3 Brand identity

The first step of Desborders and Richelieu's model (2012) is to build a brand identity that includes different attributes and coherence. *"Brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members."* (Aaker 2002, 68). The research and processing of brands have been changed from brand image to brand identity, which is also the focus of sports teams. The identity focuses merely on how executives, employees, and players make the brand unique (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Communicating the desired brand identity is crucial when taking external stakeholders into account. To manage the differences between identity and image, teams must manage the brand holistically in every organization function and guide members to act toward common objectives (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Brand identity and positioning represent the strategic building blocks of a brand, i.e., they are, in practice, the basics of a brand strategy. Brand identity consists of the things and qualities a team perceives to be and wants to communicate to its stakeholders. For example, non-sporting factors, such as logo and tradition, strongly influence consumer attitudes and are, therefore, a good starting point for differentiation and brand strategy creation (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler, 2008). Brand identity is palpable and sensory-appealing. It is something to see, touch, feel, hear, and watch. Brand identity promotes awareness, increases distinction, and makes large ideas and meaning more

approachable. Great companies are like friends: meeting many of them every day, but it is possible only to remember the ones to care about (Wheeler, 2018). As stated previously, the brand is one of the most critical assets of a sports organization. Officials and executives in sports organizations will receive a certain kind of direction and purpose through brand identity (Richelieu, 2012).

An organization's identity forms from its strategic decisions and implementing and communicating them. Strategic decisions include, for example, mission, vision, values, culture, and creating a strategy (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). At the core of identity is how executives and employees make a brand unique (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Communicating these choices appropriately is essential; thus, the team's identity is also affected by the team's and brand's visual appearance, brand personality, brand promise, and brand communication (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012).

To become powerful, the brand must have a clear brand identity. Brand identity must raise emotions among consumers, differentiate the brand from competitors and represent the organization's present and future activities (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Brand identity combines brand elements that make it recognizable and creates associations among consumers. Those elements for sports teams are name, symbol, colors, shapes, number and quality, staff behavior, products, services, facilities, and advertising. Through these elements, the organization and team communicate about itself and its personality (Egan, 2007). Brand identity is a unique collection of brand associations marketers want to create and enhance (Aaker, 2002).

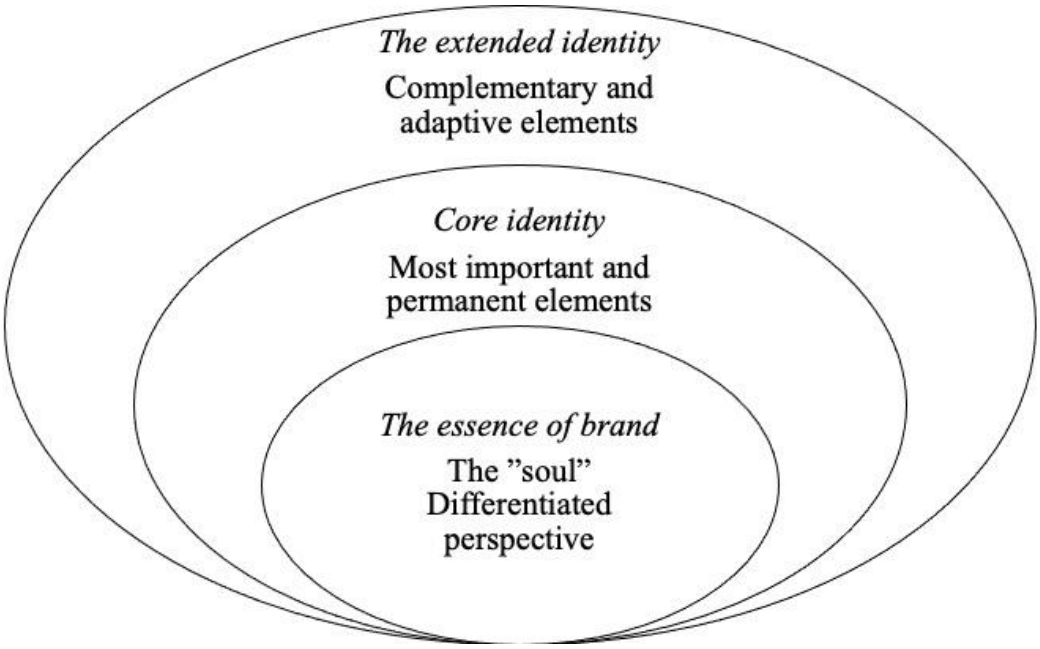

Figure 5 Levels of brand identity (adapted from Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000; Kapferer 2008)

To understand more precisely how brand identity is built, it could be analyzed through three levels which have been identified, and literature is mainly united with these observations. Those levels are the *essence of a brand*, *core identity,* and extended *identity* (Figure 5). *The essence of a brand* means uniting descriptions about the brand, which creates the soul of the brand. It is not essential but mostly efficient. Good essence is not focusing on summarizing all the different elements of the brand in one sentence. Although, it offers a differentiated perspective that captures the most memorable part of what the brand represents (Kapferer, 2008). For sports brands or NHL organizations, the "soul" could be created around playing style, nickname, star player, or legend. *Core identity* includes the most essential and permanent brand elements that are not changing even in the long term. Core identity must-have elements that make it unique and valuable and should strengthen the brand's purpose to succeed. As a result, the core identity should frequently contribute to the value proposition and the brand's credibility foundation (Aaker, 2002; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). For sports brands or NHL organizations, these elements could be tradition and history, community, and arena, for example. *The expanded identity* includes elements that bring more variety and wholeness to the brand. It fills the identity by bringing in details to refine the current state of the brand. Core identity is often not enough to describe all the elements and parts of a brand, and it is the role of the extended identity to bring out these aspects. An extended identity allows one to examine the marketing and communication tools that fit the identity. Compared to the

core identity, a critical consideration is that the expanded identity is expected to change and adapt to the market and situation over time (Aaker, 2002; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

To supplement those three levels, Aaker (2002) has also introduced a model that divides brand identity into four categories: *brand as a product, brand as an organization, brand as a person, and brand as a symbol.* Each one of these categories is distinct. It is part of a larger brand identity planning model, which also includes the previously introduced levels of brand identity. The brand builder may use the model to ensure the brand has depth and texture, add value proposition and credibility, and strengthen the brand-customer connection. However, Aaker (2002) adds that not every brand identity must encompass all four categories; the brand builder should choose the proper perspective that explains what the brand should stand for in the customer's mind.

For sports brands, this means that several attributes or values determine the brand identity, and it answers how organizations want to be recognized. Options include the special characteristics of the presented sports brand, which serve as supporting pillars for building identity. As stated, identity gives a direction for the organizations, which is also the starting point for long-term brand strategy. For example, suppose the organization and the team can exploit their emotional connection to the fans. In that case, it will result in a stronger brand. After the brand's values and identity are identified and accepted by the officials, the organization must unite those values and identity with the perceived image of the fans. Then, officials and executives must observe the environment continuously and make changes to reflect the brand identity. An important note is that the brand identity must not change in the short term but must follow the organization's long-term trend. It is impossible to be a champion forever, but how long can such an identity be maintained? However, a solid brand identity is a foundation for successful marketing activities. That is because brand identity might increase the emotional connection between fans and the team, which bolsters loyalty toward the brand. As a result, these fans are more responsive to marketing activities (Richelieu, 2012).

2.1.4 Sports team brand personality

Brand personality and brand identity are well connected; for example, Richelieu (2012) uses them as a synonym in some cases. According to Aaker (1997, 347), brand personality is a "*collection of human-like qualities associated with a brand*" and an essential part of

brand image (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) that creates brand equity (Keller, 2008). Brand personality may help marketers differentiate their brands and develop brand preferences regarding functionality and symbolic significance to customers (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2008). Furthermore, brand personality allows customers to express their true selves or some aspects of themselves and their ideal selves (Belk, 1988).

Tsiotsou (2012) established a scale for gauging the personality of sports teams based on brand image research. The tool examines the numerous dimensions and characteristics consumers associate with the sports team they cheer for. In addition, the sports team's brand personality scale (SCBPS) was established by Schade, Piehler, and Burmann (2014) with a particular focus on the brand image of a sports club. (see Liu & Schwarz, 2020.)

Because sports and related services are intangible, customer-complex, and emotive, sports brand perceptions must be understood in order to regulate brand design (Tsiotsou, 2012). As a result, Tsiotsou (2012) developed SPORTEAPE (SPORt TEAm PErsonality). This multi-stage method analyses a sports club's image in terms of administration, personnel, player, and coach, on and off the field of play, spectator image, and consumer-worker relations. (see Liu & Schwarz, 2020.) The approach considers five factors: *1) authenticity, 2) competitiveness, 3) credibility, 4) morality, and 5) prestige*. In addition, sports brand managers may use the scale for benchmarking and assessing how sports consumers regard their sports teams/brands across the five aspects described in this study (Tsiotsou, 2012).

The SCBPS was created with the goal of including dimensions of personality scales for professional sports clubs as well as other previously neglected qualities that are specific to sports clubs. Furthermore, rather than a larger variety of factors, the model concentrates primarily on personality traits. Finally, the new brand personality scale was divided into four dimensions (see Liu & Schwarz, 2020) (Figure 6): *1) extraversion, 2) rebellious, 3) open-mindedness, and 4) conscientiousness* (Schade et al., 2014).

Extraversion	Rebellious	Open-mindedness	Conscientiousness
• Traditional • Faithful • Sociable • Family-oriented • Humorous • Cheerful	• Rebellious • Bold • Alternative	• Open-minded • Tolerant • Spohisticated • Social responsible	• Hard-working • Fighting spirit • Diligent • Tough

Figure 6 Dimensions of brand personality for professional sport clubs (adapted from Schade et al., 2014)

A prerequisite for the effectiveness of a brand personality is to resonate with customers and differentiate the brand from its competitors (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Fan identification is essentially related to the brand's personality, and identification refers to the personal commitment and emotional attachment that a fan has to an organization. In this respect, sport is unique compared to other business models. There is a sense of belonging and identification with the team in sports. (Sutton, McDonald & Milne, 1997.) In addition, this identity and personality should represent the organization's abilities and intentions for the future. With the help of strategic brand analysis, it is possible to discover the image of its customers, competitors, and the brand itself (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Understanding that a sports team's brand personality could be developed from various factors is essential. There are multiple sources for that. Unfortunately, literature has not come together with one acknowledged method. Much research has used Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale but failed to create coherent results (Tsiotsou, 2012). For example, Theodorakis, Kaplanidou, Alexandris, and Papadimitriou (2019) criticized Tsiotsou's and Schade's models. Nevertheless, they found that the psychometric qualities of the brand personality scale were partially validated. Furthermore, it was proposed that the concept of brand personality positively affects fans' attitudinal loyalty and gaming attraction.

According to Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Salmi (2016), brand personality promotes the growth of fans' identification with their favorite sports team, influencing attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Therefore, it justifies and confirms the critical role of brand personality alongside brand identity when sports organizations are trying to develop their brand equity and create engagement with fans. Hence, to better understand how identity

and personality traits are connected to sports team brands, the next chapter focuses on the special characteristics of sports team brands.

2.1.5 Brand awareness through sports marketing mix

Following the model of Desbordes and Richelieu (2012), after defining identity and personality, the focus moves on to positioning. As mentioned, positioning is assumed in this dissertation, and thus this topic is not further explored. However, this phase will move towards marketing measures that will, among other things, increase brand awareness in Europe. In this case, the internationalization of the brand and the strategies used in that process must also be considered. For example, Hinson et al. (2020) found that brand awareness supports building a global sports brand. That was enabled by globalized promotional and marketing activities. To back this up, Wetzel et al. (2018) identified that increasing brand awareness through publicity is critical in brand building. This topic will be explored in more detail later in this chapter, focusing on marketing activities and increasing brand awareness.

In this case, it is crucial to attract new consumers and fans and guide them to make purchases to develop business and increase revenues and sales in multiple areas of sports team organization. Therefore, potential fans should be aware of the sports team and its brand before the attraction. Rossiter and Percy (1987) defined brand awareness as the consumers' capacity to recognize the brand sufficiently to make a purchase. Keller (2008) added that brand awareness could also refer to whether consumers know about a brand. Brand awareness includes multiple levels, from the perception that a brand has never been recognized to the point where the brand is "the one and only" for consumers (Aaker, 1991). Aaker (1991) has developed the brand awareness pyramid, which acknowledges the development of brand awareness among consumers. Figure 7 presents those levels: unaware of a brand, brand recognition, brand recall, and top of mind.

Figure 7 The Awareness Pyramid (adapted from Aaker, 1991)

At the bottom of the pyramid is the unawareness of the brand. Consumers will lack knowledge on meeting their wants if they are unaware of a brand. As a result, it is possible to infer that brand awareness is a critical factor for businesses, as they would not be able to create profit without it (Dodds & Swayne, 2011). The second-lowest level of the pyramid is brand recognition. In this case, brand recognition is based on assisted awareness. The next level is brand recall, meaning consumers can recognize and identify a brand without assistance. To clarify, at the level of brand recognition, the consumer can recognize the brand of Toronto Maple Leafs when it is among other ice hockey or NHL brands. However, at the level of brand recall, consumers can recognize and identify the same brand, although presented alone, without context. Lastly, the highest level of brand awareness is top of mind. That means the brand is the first to be mentioned in some given context and is at the top of the customer's mind (Aaker, 1991).

Aaker (1991) extended his study by recognizing the fundamental factors that enable brand awareness building. For example, suppose a company or a sports team wants to pursue and ultimately achieve brand awareness. In that case, it should first create the brand identity and connect that identity to products or services. Desbordes and Richelieu's (2012) model has also acknowledged that observation by Aaker. Brand strategy and marketing measures are influenced by internal and external catalysts and limiting and shaping factors. Catalysts are factors that support and create leverage for brand

development. Internal catalysts are owned and controlled by the team, such as the community of supporters, physical facilities, and various marketing activities such as campaigns, partnerships, product sales, and jerseys. External catalysts, in turn, are environmental characteristics or factors that are not under the direct control of the team, such as market size, industry changes, and technological developments. Therefore, marketing measures will only improve brand equity if the brand identity is clearly defined, and the brand is firmly positioned. (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005.)

According to Aaker (1991), some factors create the foundation for building brand awareness: differentiation, slogan, symbol exposure, publicity, event sponsorship, brand extensions, cues, repetition, and recall bonus. These factors can be approached through the marketing mix of marketing activities and sports. In the context of satellite fans, the differentiation in creating brand awareness is mainly conducted by marketing communications activities as the potential fans live abroad. When a slogan is connected to those activities, the brand may become memorable among potential fans. In addition, every team has its symbol, a logo, which completes the foundation package. According to Aaker (1991), creating and maintaining recall is far more complicated than developing recognition. For that reason, repetition and consistency are the keys to earning the brand recall and recall bonus.

Advertising, sponsorships, public relations, and personal selling are popular promotional activities in sports marketing. Despite this, sports marketers are also involved in product and service plans, price choices, and distribution concerns. These activities are referred to as the sports marketing mix, which is described as the coordinated set of elements used by sports organizations to fulfill their marketing objectives and satisfy the demands of their customers. (Shank & Lyberger, 2014.)

Exploring the sports marketing mix further is essential to understand how brand awareness could be enhanced with marketing activities. Figure 8 presents the heart of sports marketing, the sports marketing mix, that is processed from the 4 Ps (product, price, place, and promotion), and the foundation for it has been created through the 4 Cs of marketing analysis: the consumer, the company itself, the competition, and the climate. The need for an expanded sports marketing mix has been converted from the globalization of the sports business and the remarkable role of services in the sports industry. Therefore,

in addition to the traditional 4Ps, Ross (2006) expanded the mix with publicity, people, physical evidence, and processes to create the 7Ps for sports brand marketing.

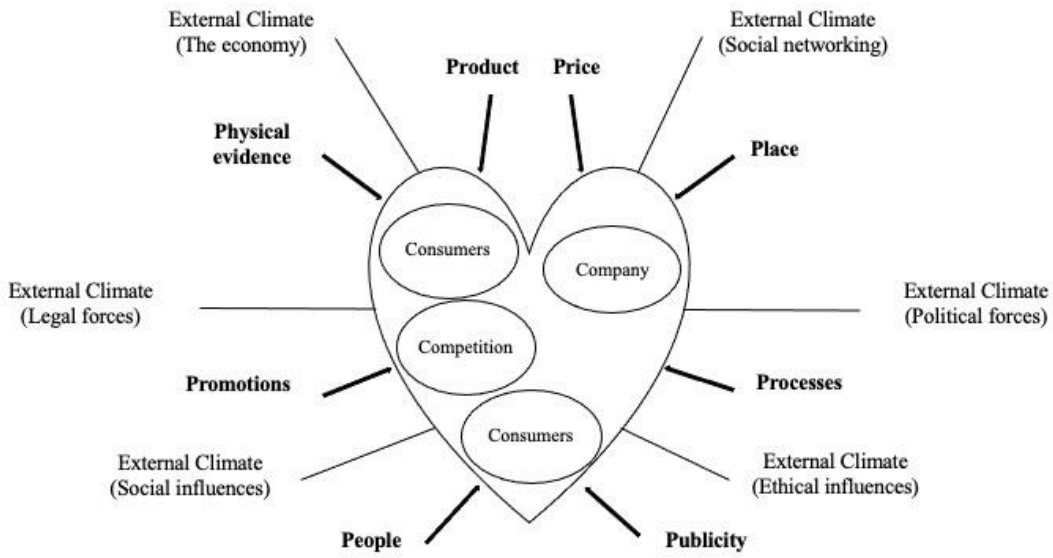

Figure 8 The heart of sports marketing: the sports marketing mix (adapted from Schwarz & Hunter, 2018)

As internal processes and operations create the foundation for the overall process, external factors heavily influence it. Consequently, the external climate encompasses external elements directly impacting sports marketing initiatives. The critical external climatological elements impacting sports enterprises today are economics, information technology, legal and political pressures, and social and ethical impacts. (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018.)

It is essential to unite elements together to have positive outcomes from marketing. The situation demands strategic choices and decisions. A strategy must include all the elements and factors in the sports marketing process, as strategic sports marketing includes a holistic and integrated process focused on long-term foresight. A unified mission, evaluation of internal operations, identification of external threats, setting goals, building an organizational structure, and an action plan to implement the entire process is formed as part of strategic marketing and its operations. (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018.)

The focus will turn to promotional activities and aspects to better understand how this strategic approach of sports marketing mix could be implemented to create brand awareness. Promotions are part of communications and communications management.

Communication management involves planning, implementing, supervising, evaluating, and modifying a sports organization's various internal and external communication methods (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018).

The main objectives of promotions are to provide information about the team and its products and services. Promotional activities in sports include elements and methods such as advertising, sponsorship, public relations, licensing, personal contact, incentives, and atmospherics (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018). Creating product and service plans is a fundamental sports marketing activity. While developing product strategy, decisions about licensing, merchandising, branding, and packaging are addressed (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). Furthermore, sports marketing managers are in charge of new product creation, maintaining existing items, and eliminating defective products. Understanding the nature of services marketing is crucial for the sports marketing manager because sports marketing is centered on services rather than commodities (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018). Pricing services, controlling service demand, and assessing service quality are aspects of service planning. Whereas advertising is a promotion component, it is far from the sole one. Aside from advertising, promotional aspects include engaging with diverse sports audiences through sponsorships, public relations, personal selling, or sales promotions. The promotion mix refers to the combination of these promotional factors. Sports marketers must consider combining their promotions and utilizing all marketing mix components when developing promotional plans. (Shank & Lyberger, 2014.)

A sports team pursuing enhanced brand awareness among potential satellite fans must recognize the most appropriate promotional activities to reach the objectives. In this case, advertising, public relations, licensing, and personal contact with their sub-activities could be most beneficial for the sports team (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018). Overall, the strategic marketing process includes different elements, and it is important to acknowledge each element's suitability when considering the current situation and objectives. This process begins with raising awareness and progresses via a succession of integrations (image, functional, coordinated, consumer-based, stakeholder-based, and relationship management) to the overall strategic promotional execution (Schwarz & Hunter, 2018).

After a sports team has created a strong identity and personality and communicates it with a holistic marketing strategy that features the principles of the sports marketing mix, they

could face increased brand equity. In the next chapter, brand equity is discussed further. Understanding how identity and promotions affect brand equity is crucial, as substantial brand equity is key when sports teams try to engage fans even more with their brand and team.

2.1.6 Sports team brand equity

Aaker (1991) has conceptualized brand equity, and the model includes four elements of brand assets: *1) brand loyalty, 2) brand awareness, 3) perceived quality,* and *4) brand association.* Aaker (1991, 15) defined brand equity as "*a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers".* According to this viewpoint, branding or brand management may comprehend and organize the portfolio of good and bad characteristics associated with an outsider's perception of the brand (Gladden, 2014). In a sports context, "*brand equity is the value proposition a sport organization generates from its products and services in terms of recognition, quality, reliability, or in terms of sport events and activities... a memorable experience"* (Schwarz and Hunter 2018, 174–175). The concept of brand equity is often used to analyze how a brand creates value (Bauer et al., 2008). A strong brand often means high and robust brand equity (Bauer et al. 2005, Ross 2006, Berry 2000). According to Kotler and Keller (2016), brand equity originates from disparities in consumer reactions caused by differences in customers' brand understanding. While a company's marketing operations have a significant influence, brand value is what buyers remember. According to Bauer et al. (2008), brand equity is the effects or results when a product is marketed through its brand compared to marketing the same product without branding and its benefits.

A few critical elements for sports team brands act as a foundation for the brand. Kerr and Gladden (2008) have divided elements that enable the building of brand equity into three different segments: *1) team, 2) organization*, and *3) market-related factors.* Team-related factors are success, a star player(s), and a head coach. Organization-related factors include conference and league, stadium, sponsor alignment, reputation, and tradition. Finally, market-related factors are geographic location, competitive forces, existing brand community, and international media arrangements. However, it has been recognized that head coach, reputation and tradition, and international media arrangements are not playing a significant role when considering satellite fans. (Kerr & Gladden, 2008.)

Furthermore, the listed antecedents have been connected to Aaker's (1991) four dimensions introduced earlier in this chapter (Figure 9).

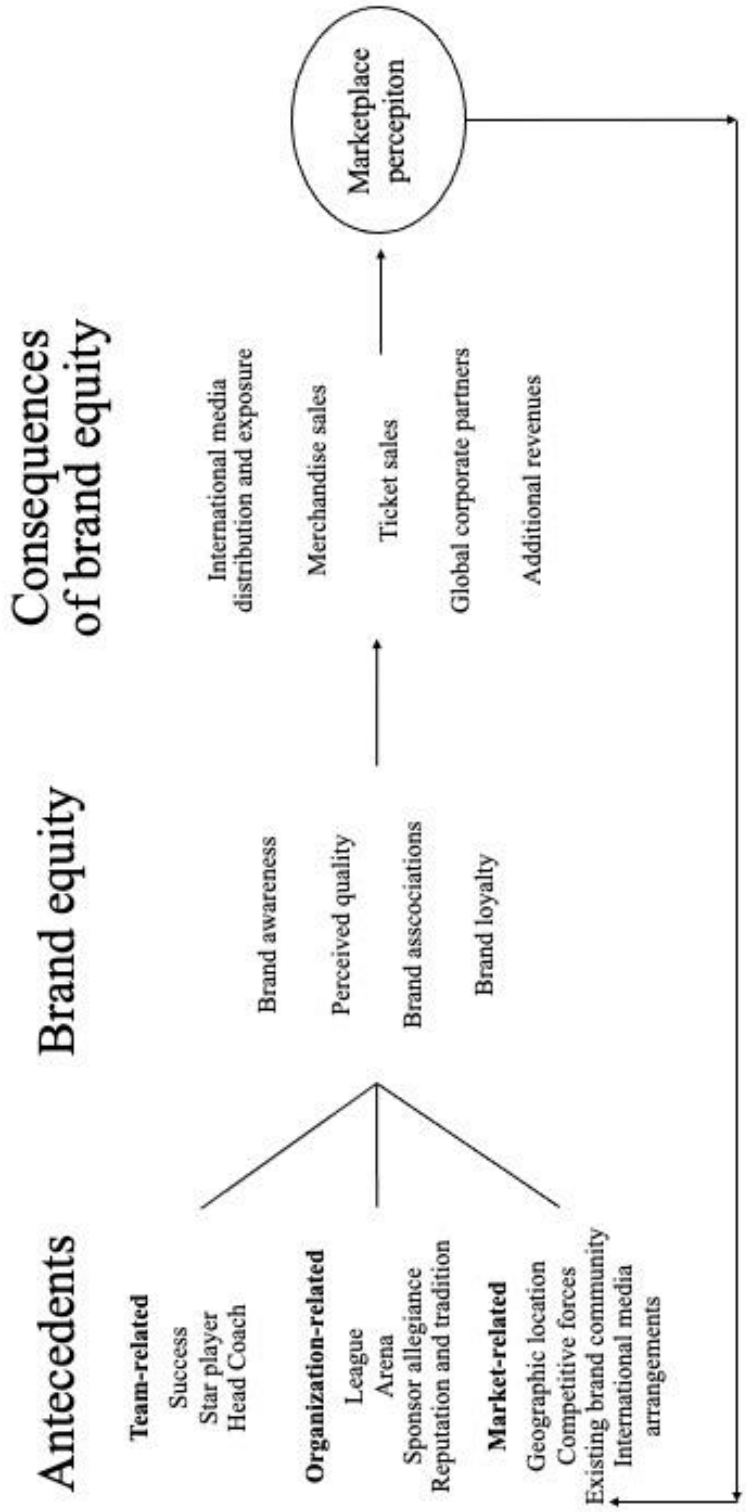

Figure 9 Building brand equity in a sports organization among satellite fans (adapted from Kerr & Gladden, 2008)

Antecedents lead to brand equity, and following those actions has consequences in the market. The model also includes a feedback factor that will enable adjusting activities to develop brand equity. Kerr and Gladden (2008) have explored how different antecedents affect brand equity dimensions (Table 2). Each antecedent discussed here has a distinct influence on brand equity development. Specifically, each antecedent may affect Aaker's (1991) four primary dimensions. As a result, Table 2 depicts some hypothesized relationships between the antecedents in this model and their distinct influence (or lack thereof) on the creation of brand equity, as described by Aaker (1991). Table 2 shows that some antecedents, such as success, can influence many aspects of brand equity, as Aaker (1991) outlined. Success undoubtedly contributes to brand exposure, an impression of quality, and, eventually, a fan base (loyalty). Likewise, the presence of a brand community implies that the product around which the community has formed is of high quality. (Kerr & Gladden, 2008.)

Table 2 Links between antecedents of brand equity and Aaker's (1991) brand equity dimensions (adapted from Kerr & Gladden, 2008)

	Brand awareness	*Perceived quality*	*Brand associations*	*Brand loyalty*
Team-related antecedents				
Success	■	■	■	■
Star player	■	■	■	
Head coach	■	■	■	
Organization-related antecedents				
League	■	■	■	
Arena			■	
Sponsor alignment	■	■		
Reputation and tradition	■	■	■	■
Market-related antecedents				
Geographic location	■			■
Competitive forces	■			
Brand community			■	■
International media arrangements	■			

Furthermore, the very presence of a community implies that there is already a devoted following that provides one-of-a-kind relationships. While some of the other hypothesized antecedents can only affect one or two of the Aaker (1991) dimensions, this does not imply they are not essential. International media agreements, for example, are critical for the team's brand exposure among satellite fans. It is hard to build brand equity without awareness. (Kerr & Gladden, 2008.) As a result, international media partnerships

may be critical in particular circumstances. Similarly, while competitive factors affect awareness, competition can be so fierce that even a high-quality brand cannot establish awareness among fans in overseas marketplaces (Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

Consequences like international media distribution and exposure, increased merchandise sales and ticket sales, global corporate partners, and additional revenues follow substantial brand equity. The media is interested in solid and successful sports team brands, and brand equity could be evaluated through the visibility gained by the team (Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

Organizations and teams with substantial brand equity can sell more merchandise and could strengthen their financial success. The merchandise also plays a significant role in creating awareness as fans act as team ambassadors. The most significant financial support from satellite fans for organizations comes from merchandise sales because satellite fans do not tend to watch games on the premises. Local fans provide revenues from ticket sales, which usually correlates with team success (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Of course, there are exceptions as currently, for example, seats in Florida are not filled despite the tremendous success of the Florida Panthers. Increased spectators and a strong brand could also increase the in-game amenity events, which raise the atmosphere in games. The good atmosphere and success allow supporters to return again and again to watch games on the premises. All this will increase the potential of the organization to be an efficient partner for companies (Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

In addition, Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) presented practical ways to increase the brand equity of a sports brand and develop the brand depending on the brand size of the team. Sports brands could be divided into three groups based on their size and plans: local, regional, and national. The third group is national brands that aim to internationalize and at least strengthen their position in national markets, for example, by forming strategic partnerships with other teams or international companies or organizing tours or matches abroad (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). As the focus is on the third group, this thesis explores next the internationalization of sports team brands and what strategies and opportunities organizations might have.

2.1.7 Internationalization of sports teams' brand

Marketing strategies' internationalization is based on special characteristics and brand equity's strength (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). According to Wetzel et al. (2018), internationalization among professional sports clubs also faces increasing interest. It is also an outcome of globalization in general and sports, while some professional sports clubs have evolved into global corporations (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; Wentzel et al., 2018). That has led to a situation where sports organizations have started to operate like MNCs, which put global branding at a standstill as part of the company's development. Hill and Vincent (2006) stated that Manchester United was the first sports organization that understood the possibilities and opportunities of internationalization and international branding.

Furthermore, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) have strongly highlighted internationalization strategies and strategies for building brand equity in sports. The most relevant statement is that on-field success is the most crucial factor when enhancing a brand and reputation. From the perspective of internationalization, success in international competitions is also relevant for a sports club. On-ice success could be bolstered by acquiring talented players who could become club legends and icons. Another strategy is to acquire international players. As stated in the introduction, NHL already has multiple European-based players. It has also been recognized that teams with European players are more popular than teams without European players. Therefore, international players could be used as brand ambassadors and the face of marketing. This strategy has been very successful for football and Asian players (Desbordes, 2007). In addition, marketing communication activities have a significant role when organizations try to engage with satellite fans. Internet sites, blogs, and content with localized language are the main channel for satellite fans to inform themselves about sports brands (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). When these activities are connected to international tours in relevant markets with localized merchandise and partnerships, it is possible to reach new customer segments, which might turn into fans (Hill & Vincent, 2006).

Richelieu (2012) explored the internationalization of brands in general and sports teams' brands. As already stated, the brand is one of a sports club's most significant resources and assets (Bauer et al. 2005). It is at the core of every action and is a foundation for the whole sports club community. The sports team brand has two sides: intangible benefits,

for example, experience, emotions, and atmosphere, and tangible benefits, like results, merchandise, and overall success (Boatwright, Cagan, Kapur & Saltiel, 2009). Intangible benefits have played a much more vital role among customers and fans than in other industries (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). By uniting processes and strategies and connecting them with literature, Richelieu (2012) generated a process for sports team brand internationalization (Figure 10).

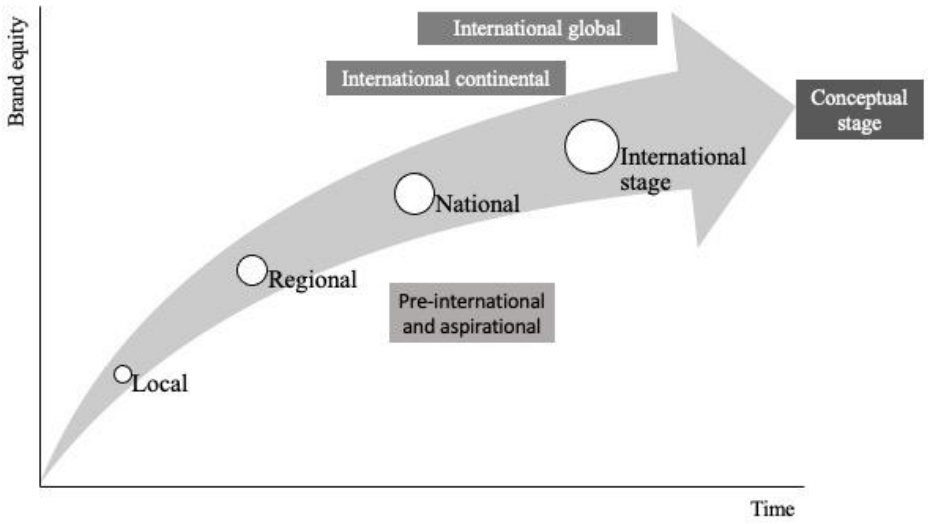

Figure 10 The internationalization process of a sports team brand (adapted from Desborders & Richelieu 2012; Couvelaere & Richelieu 2005)

A sports team's brand often takes a step-by-step strategy. However, it could also use other strategies or approaches, such as co-branding or international tours, where it can familiarize its brand alongside recognizable brands or bring it into the spotlight. Characteristics of opportunities, cultural distance, and financial aspects affect the decision to consider internationalization. A strong foundation is needed, and it is crucial to understand that this does not happen in one night. To develop the brand and pursue internationalization, sports organizations must follow the "brand equity pipeline", which includes four different strategies (Figure 11). Those strategies are not mutually exclusive and could be united to find the most perfect and suitable fit for one (Richelieu, 2012).

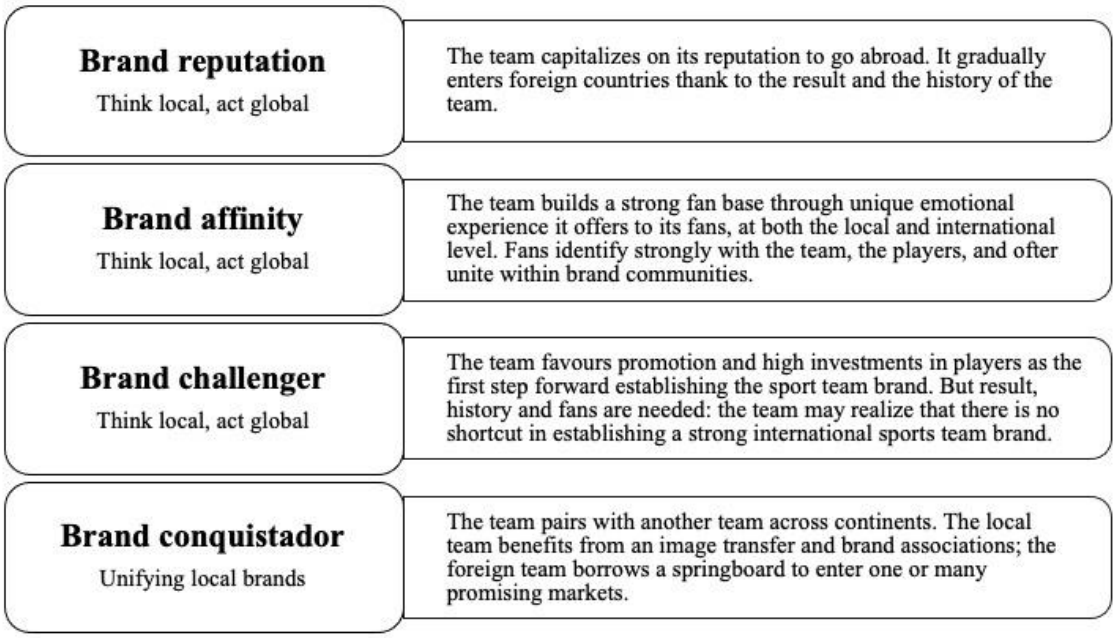

Figure 11 Four strategies to globalize sports team brand (adopted from Richelieu, 2012)

Internationalization is not as easy as it feels. For example, in sports, three elements can affect the success of the sports team's brand internationalization (Richelieu, 2012):

1. *The nature of the sports involved.* Every sport is not born global and does not have equal chances to become one.
2. *The management of the league.* The organization of the league plays a massive role in what individual organizations can do. In North America, leagues have centralized administration, and the franchises operate in their market area. In contrast, leagues in Europe are decentralized, giving teams a better opportunity to develop their operations and brand independently.
3. *The experience of the game.* It is acknowledged that in North America, the focus is on entertainment and fun. In contrast, in Europe, the focus is on the game itself, which acts as a uniting component among the community. North American sports organizations are franchises aiming to achieve the highest possible operating profit. The game itself is also quite different. The leagues in North America are "closed", which means that teams cannot relegate to lower levels. Some teams could be bad for years but still last in the league. However, sometimes bad teams could face relocation of the franchise if it needs a new start and market area. Another important notice is that the organization must create alternative ways to lure spectators when the team is athletically weak. In North America, the answer is entertainment and the overall experience of the game event. From the perspective of internationalization, entertainment could make the brand more attractive to international fans (Kerr, 2009).

To summarize, Richelieu (2012) created a holistic table about objectives and means that a sports team could use to leverage its potential as a sports brand and go through different internationalization steps. National brands looking for internationalization must set objectives like exporting and globalizing the brand and increasing brand recognition and presence worldwide (Richelieu, 2012; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Suitable means to achieve those objectives could be international strategic partnerships, tours, or tournaments abroad, hiring of international stars, creating website/application tailored for different countries and languages, and opening merchandise stores abroad (Richelieu, 2012; Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).

Richelieu (2016) has made the latest fresh conceptualization by developing the 'Integrated Marketing Strategy on the Internationalization of Sport (IMSIS)'. This concept endorsed five new strategies to globalize sports brands: *1) glocalization, 2) storytelling, 3) sportainment, 4) co-branding,* and *5) involvement of fan-actors.* Sports organizations must integrate their internal processes, objectives, resources, and external networks and technologies when they want to reach global customer segments.

Furthermore, this holistic branding process must create trust between the organization and stakeholders, especially fans (Richelieu, 2016). Executives and officials might feel that their brand has become a saturation point because of a lack of history and traditions, scarce resources, limiting league management, or the nature of the sport where the team is. If this is the case, long-term development work must focus on achieving a situation where the brand becomes a reference for others. Without patient work, the brand may dampen to a mediocre level, as has happened to the Edmonton Oilers, one of the most successful teams in recent years. (Richelieu, 2012.)

2.2 Satellite fans and fandom

2.2.1 Introduction to satellite fans and fandom

A sports fan is someone who is interested in and follows a certain sport, team, or athlete. A similar notion is sports spectator, which refers to someone who actively sees a sporting event in person or through media (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001). According to Ennis (2020, 76), "*fandom refers to the collective behaviour of individuals that is reflected in a group situation*". Not all fans respond similarly or show the same degrees

of interest, support, or loyalty. One-size-fits-all thinking is no longer acceptable. When describing and categorizing fans, it is critical to recognize that motivations and behaviors exist on a spectrum. At one extreme, we have docile, apathetic fans. On the other hand, we have passionate fans that display excessive activity. Different sorts of fan behavior are connected to issues such as identity and loyalty (Ennis, 2020).

According to Kerr and Gladden (2008), the importance of foreign fans for teams has risen even more in the recent decade due to developments in communication technology, notably the proliferation of social and digital media and mobile technologies. These improvements have provided unprecedented access to clubs and players regardless of geographical location, leading in the growing and increasing significance of "satellite supporters" (see Liu & Schwarz, 2020). As a result, global sports businesses must better grasp how to profit from branding possibilities beyond geographical boundaries. To clarify, "satellite fans" could be described as individuals who have created an emotional bond with the team or organization despite living abroad. Even though those fans do not share a geographical identity, they still focus on maintaining relationships with the object of fandom. A few motives for that have been identified: Firstly, those fans could be foreigners that have grown up following the team where it is located and have decided to continue supporting the team abroad. Secondly, individuals in another country might follow the team despite geographical distance. Brand development among fans connected with the brand in person before moving to other countries has probably been developed in more traditional ways. (Kerr & Gladden, 2008.)

The background to the concept of the satellite fan is dated to the 1980s when the importance of such fans began to be recognized. Later in the 21st century, Wann et al. (2001) launched the concept of "displaced fans". More specifically, the term means fans who have previously been in contact with the team in the same city but have later moved the team outside the market area. Such fans have also played a significant role in the development of television and the media in sports, making the team "reachable" even if they live in a different country or locality. Reifurth, Bernthal, Ballouli, and Collins (2019) explored nonlocal fandom and the effects of geographic distance and identity, and local competition on team identification. The foundation for research was that there are two types of nonlocal fans: displaced and nondisplaced. The concept follows Wann et al.'s (2001) conceptualization. However, many professional sports organizations have discovered that followers from other countries exceed those from their own in an

increasingly globalized industry. The presence of expatriate supporters, people who have moved abroad but still support their previous team, cannot correctly explain the size of this fan community (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Furthermore, according to Liu and Schwarz's (2020) research, there appears to be a distinction between local and international supporters of professional sports due to historical and cultural differences, as well as the method by which foreign fans may connect with a sport or club due to geographical location.

Schwarz and Hunter (2018) introduced the levels of sports consumption and fans through the escalator concept: *1) Aware non-consumers, 2) Indirect consumers/Media consumers, 3) Light users, 4) Medium users,* and *5) Heavy users.* Other classifications are also made, but as they do not acknowledge satellites very well, they are not included in this thesis. MacIntosh, Abeza, and Lee (2017) highlight two consumer segments among sports fans previously recognized in the literature: enthusiastic consumers and ardent devotees. In both segments, sports fans are motivated and have ambition for sports-related behavior. In addition, they have some level of attachment to the sports team. Existing literature acknowledges that foreign fans differ from traditional local fans. Fandom literature focuses on the motivation to participate in sports events and recognizes psychological factors. However, as sports teams have many international fans, sports brands' consumption cannot be limited to physical presence (Bodet et al., 2020). Media, friends, and team success are critical factors influencing the shape of sports fandom. Despite the intensity of attachment, fans usually try to fulfill personal needs (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Funk & James, 2001). The main reasons for consuming sports are entertainment, self-esteem, eustress, family, aesthetic qualities, group affiliation, escape, and economics. Those reasons could be divided into three main categories, which help us understand the nature of sports consumption by the individual (Figure 12) (Wann, Grieve, Zapalac & Pease, 2008).

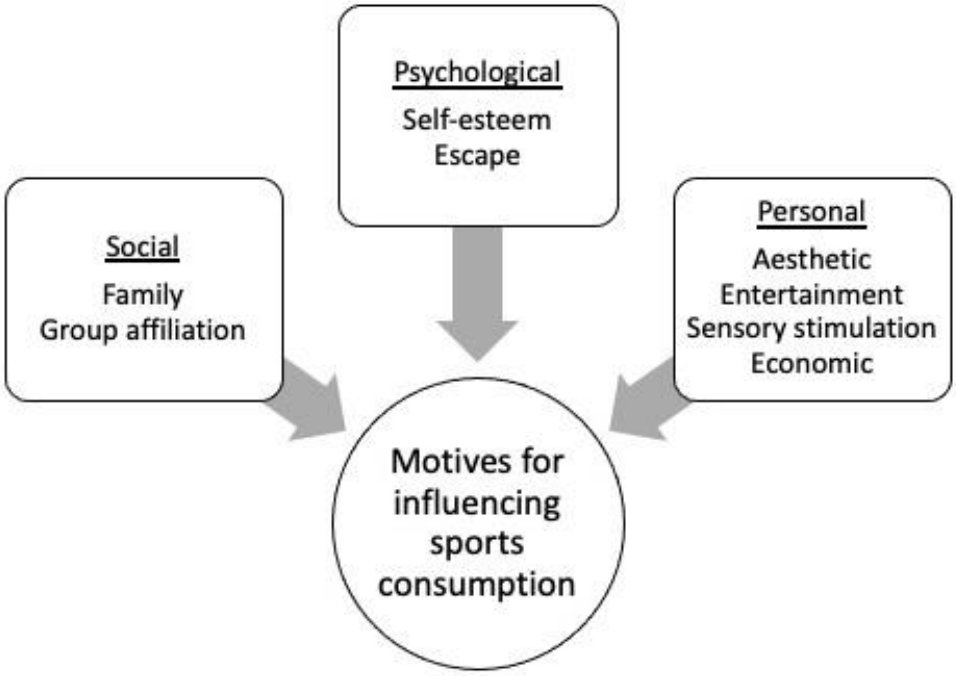

Figure 12 Motives for Influencing Sports Consumption (adapted from Wann et al. 2008; Wann et al. 2001)

One theory in fandom literature is the social identity that is modified into a fan identity. Tajfel (1978, 63) described social identity as *"an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge or his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership"*. Belonging to a community is one of the critical elements of fandom. Its importance is just about to grow as many potential fans are geographically distant from the organization's home city or market area. Fans establish a "fan nation" based on their level of devotion and the various reasons, attitudes, and behavior of sports consumption. The members of the fan nation do not need to share the exact location. However, even more importantly, it is a community that shares the same object of interest (Foster & Hyatt, 2008). Alongside Foster and Hyatt (2008), Anderson (2006) states that among satellite fans, the "imagined cohesiveness" with other anonymous members is strong as those fans might not have an opportunity to meet in person. Kalman-Lamb (2021) explored imagined fandom communities and confirmed that imagined community is one of the crucial uniting factors behind satellite fans. One of Foster and Hyatt's (2008) findings was that when individuals join the fan nation and turn into regular members, they will give much effort to keep their membership if it

positively reflects their own identity. Individuals who are part of the fan nation might segment their social world as they identify with a specific team and its fan community. Hinston et al. (2020) study confirm that identity-based attachment is an essential factor driving brand loyalty. For NHL organizations, focusing on brand engagement and building strong fan communities online could be justified to attract individuals seeking social community and attachment.

Sidani, Hyatt, and Kerwin (2021) referred to existing literature and highlighted that the fandom's behavioral, sociological, and psychological outcomes had been focused on motivations for becoming a fan. Furthermore, many sports consumer behaviorists have noted that because most fandom is team-centered, researchers and sports organizations should try to understand why fans choose one team before another and become fans of that team. Therefore, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001) gives a suitable foundation to explore fandom more precisely.

Fandom development will be discussed more deeply through Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) framework developed initially by Funk and James (2001). The PCM framework includes four steps that describe the brand building and development process from a fandom development perspective: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. It presents a comprehensive picture of sports spectator and fan participation and basic guidelines for mediating the interaction between a person and a sport or team (Funk & James, 2001.) The PCM provides a framework for accounting for an individual's progression from first awareness to eventual devotion to a sport or team. The concept posits that the complexity and strengthening of sport-related mental associations influence the psychological connections between an individual and a sport or team (Funk & James, 2001). An alternative theory for PCM is Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton's (2007) frequency escalator, a behavior-oriented model of sports consumption. The model suggests that as a fan becomes more interested in and devoted to a team, they will follow it more regularly, either through the media or by attending live games (see Hyatt & Foster, 2015). However, after exploring the literature, PCM (Figure 13) is the most common and used model in the existing literature. Therefore, it creates a suitable foundation for this thesis also.

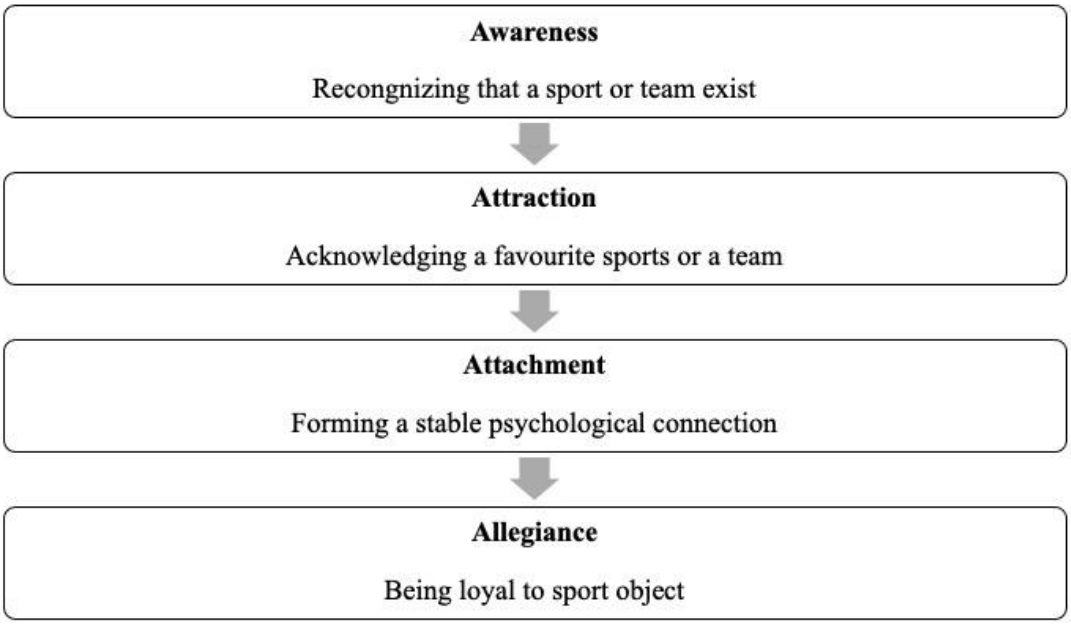

Figure 13 PCM model for fandom development (modified from Bodet et al. 2020, originally from Funk and James, 2001)

The first steps of the PCM model by Funk and James (2001) are awareness and attraction. Awareness describes when a person discovers that teams exist but do not have a favorite. Attraction denotes when a person admits to having a favorite team for various social-psychological and demographic reasons. After awareness and attraction, attachment and allegiance begin. These steps are further discussed in the following chapter, where we focus on fandom creation and development from the perspective of individuals and sports organizations. Suppose a team or organization wants to take the correct actions to create and enhance fandom. In that case, it is crucial also to understand how fandom starts and evolves from the perspective of individuals.

2.2.2 Fandom creation

Awareness is the first step in developing a psychological commitment to a sport or team. The realization that various sports and teams exist is a person's first interaction with a sports object. Awareness is at the bottom of the vertical continuum; recalling a specific team (e.g., the New York Rangers) when cued by a phrase (e.g., NHL, ice hockey) shows going upward within the awareness level (Funk & James, 2001). According to researchers, for example Gladden and Funk (2001), team–fan connections can be made up of bonds that fans have with numerous team-related points of attachment or brand associations, such as the team's players, venue, emblem, the sport played, or the city

represented (Wann, 2006; see Hyatt & Foster, 2015). Here the methods for creating brand awareness and the sports marketing mix have a crucial role. From the perspective of satellite fans, sports organizations must unite their actions to their internationalization strategy to support fandom creation and create an environment where a potential fan could interact with the team-related points of attachment or brand associations.

Awareness is the first exposure to sports and teams; it can happen at any age. There has been a significant amount of study conducted on the elements that contribute to a person's bond to a team. For example, Wann et al. (1996) discovered also that top five causes respondents in their survey began cheering for their preferred team were family influences, an attraction to specific players, geography, friend and peer group influences, and team success (see Sidani et al., 2021). Other consumer behavior researchers, as well as many others, have found evidence for these five. Knowing that sports and teams exist but having no interest in them suggests that a person has developed awareness but not desire. As a person learns to identify between different sports and teams, learns the rules of play, knows the names of various teams, and comprehends the many levels of a sport, they will be able to discern between them (e.g., high school, college, and professional football), and he or she gains awareness and advances toward attraction. (Funk & James, 2001.) Attraction is assumed to be caused by psychological aspects of the social context and hedonic reasons. However, the decision to follow a certain sport or team may be influenced by performance. Furthermore, various methods of advertising that highlight certain aspects and benefits of the sports product (e.g., entertainment, an opportunity to escape) may influence an individual's choice of a favorite sport or team. (Funk & James, 2001.)

An individual has made a conscious decision to support a specific sport or team based on *1) Hedonic motives (desire for pleasurable experiences), 2) Psychological features of a social situation, 3) Physical features, and 4) Situational factors*. People who are interested in sports may watch them on television, attend games, and even dress in team uniforms. However, motivation depends on temporary situational or hedonic factors at this level. Attraction is a low-level attachment to a sport or team that is not necessarily long-lasting or consistent. An individual's interest may fluctuate when circumstances change or alternative entertainment options become available. For example, when a team's performance is good, a person loves following it. However, when the team begins to lose, the individual no longer supports the team. (Funk & James, 2001.)

Developing a high fan identification is critical to a professional sports team's long-term commercial growth. No one, however, is born a fan (Funk & James, 2001). Previous studies suggested that socialization is one of team identification's most fundamental environmental drivers. "Socialization agents" are factors that contribute to one's socialization. Mastromartino et al. (2020) explored the fandom and socialization behind that. They recognized that literature had acknowledged two types of socialization agents in sports: fan-initiated and team-initiated. Fan-initiated socialization agents arise from the fan's environment and are typically outside the team's control (Wann & James, 2019). Crucial for sports organizations are team-initiated socialization agents that originate directly from the sports team. Past research has identified several ways sports organizations promote fan socialization. Factors in this category include stadium and game experience, personalized relationships with individuals, team success, school programs, and unique promotions. Through these factors, the socialization process could be supported. Mastromartino et al. (2020) also stated that team-initiated socialization agents have a more significant role than fan-initiated socialization agents.

To conclude this from the perspective of satellite fans, the first steps are straightforward as social media and technology have created multiple opportunities to engage with sports teams and become aware of them. Organizations could do a lot in this phase through marketing and internationalization initiatives. After engaging with teams, for example, through social media, news, or TV broadcasts, the level of awareness is rising. From that point, more effort is indeed asked by the sports organization to develop awareness into attraction. In the case of satellite fans, the team-initiated socialization agents rise to a significant role. With team-initiated socialization agents, the organization can highlight the elements of its brand, such as identity and personality, to attract potential fans. The attraction level is achieved when the psychological connection between the team and the fan develops, and the potential fans recognize that she or he prefers one team over another. When the team has reached the level of attraction, it must continue fandom development, as attraction is based on hedonic factors. Attachment is defined as low-level, which might lead to a situation where some other team or brand captures the attraction of the potential fan.

According to the PCM model, after awareness and attraction, attachment and allegiance begin. So next, the purpose is to explore what happens after the potential future fan is attracted by exploring the next steps of the PCM model.

2.2.3 Fandom development

While thoughts, emotions, and habits are separate concepts, theorists have observed that highly identified sports fans have both solid favorable perceptions and elevated levels of behavior directed toward their favorite team when contrasted to randomly consuming viewers and supporters of sports (Funk & James, 2001; see Hyatt & Foster, 2015). This concept of a highly known fan is congruent with the concept of a highly loyal consumer found in marketing literature on brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is defined as a strong and favorable attitude toward a brand's products or services, as well as repeated purchases (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). Sports consumer behavior experts have created prescriptions for how practitioners might deepen team–fan ties to establish more extensive and devoted fan bases, based in part on several empirical fan research (e.g. Foster & Hyatt, 2008;). Giulianotti (2002) also highlights the attachment between a fan and the team as a most important relationship.

Increasing fan disconnection is one of the most common challenges for managers in sports organizations (Adamson, Jones & Tapp, 2006), while fans are also struggling to be loyal fans as it has become quite costly (Tsiotsou, 2013). For example, Hyatt and Foster (2015) explored the reasons for fandom de-escalation in the context of NHL teams. They recognized that there are seven crucial factors for de-escalation. The problem is that those factors are the same factors that create engagement. Those factors are sport in general, ice hockey, the league, the team, individual players, media, and life. While doing the research, they also explored ways to maintain and develop fandom based on the PCM model. They created a model (Figure 14) that sports organizations could follow to strengthen and develop fandom.

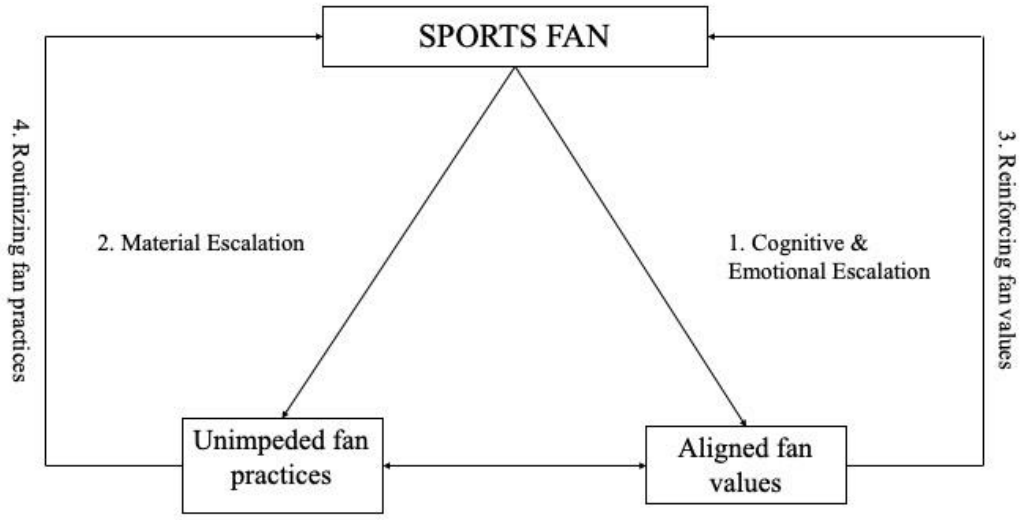

Figure 14 Maintaining fandom (modified from Hyatt & Foster, 2015)

When a sports fan cheers on their favorite team, the process typically begins. In this case, the fan is preserving their identity. Two factors ensure that the sports fan's identity is maintained and that the fan keeps supporting their team (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). The first is cognitive and emotional escalation (1), which happens when the sports fan and the team have emotional and cognitive links. The psychological and emotional connection with the team fosters a link that manifests as incongruence between the fan's personal preferences and the ideals the team symbolizes. Fan values align when a fan is cognitively and emotionally linked to the sports item (Hyatt & Foster, 2015.) The aligned fan values are needed to create an identity-based connection between the team and the fan. The fan must reinforce fan values (3) to maintain the connection (Hyatt & Foster, 2015).

According to Funk and James (2001), an individual becomes attached when a team establishes a psychological connection. They state that attachment is based on internal processes rather than external processes. Attachment is created when physical and psychological attributes take psychological meaning for the individual. As a part of the PCM model, Funk and James (2001) also listed a six-step pattern, how stable psychological connection forms between an individual and a team: 1) Sport object takes on intrinsic importance for an individual 2) Individual's attitude towards a sports object continues to develop 3) Marked by the increased complexity of an individual's associative network surrounding the sport object 4) Formed associations within the cognitive network

begin to strengthen 5) Extrinsic influence of situational factors reduced but situational factors continue to serve as primers for activation of nodes and associative links 6) Higher scores related to sign, centrality and risk facets of the Involvement construct.

The second component of fandom development and maintenance is material escalation (2) (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). A variety of material techniques can identify a fan. When supporters act as fans of a sporting item, they have unimpeded access to fan practices. However, free access to fandom's material activities does not guarantee the continued existence of the sports fan identity. For fans to represent their identities, fandom activities must be regularly referenced. To do so, fans routinize the unconstrained material behaviors of a sports fan identity (4) (Hyatt & Foster, 2015).

To conclude, "*when the cognitive/affective values are reinforced and the practical/material behaviors are routinized, sports fans are maintaining their identity*" (Hyatt & Foster 2015, 11). Based on this, it could be stated that sports organizations must understand how fans connect their identity to the sports brands' identity. Without a clear understanding, sports organizations cannot target communication and activities to support the fans to be fans also in the future. From the perspective of satellite fans, both escalation streams are possible as neither one requires physical presence. Through extended, specified communications, the cognitive and emotional escalation could be supported, while the material escalation could be supported by offering access to the team statistics, merchandise, and the opportunity to see the team playing live.

To follow the PCM model, after attachment comes allegiance. In this context, allegiance is a synonym for loyalty, a more common term in fandom literature. However, allegiance means loyalty toward a group is essential as the PCM model's primary focus is on an individual's loyalty to a team (Funk & James, 2001). Previous marketing literature has focused on brand loyalty and acknowledged that brand loyalty significantly affects purchasing behavior. Like any other organization, fan loyalty is also necessary for sports organizations to survive and develop their organization and operations (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009).

After exploring existing literature, Funk and James (2001) divided loyalty into attitudinal and behavioral segments. Attitudinal support and loyalty did not directly affect the spectators in the game, which showed that it could be a key factor determining fandom and allegiance. Based on previous literature, Funk and James (2001) formed

characteristics that are related to strengthening loyalty: *1) Persistence, 2) Resistance to change, 3) Biases in cognitive processing, and 4) Guides to behavior.* Furthermore, Funk and James (2001) contend that commitment to a sports team demonstrates an attitude (judgment of that relationship) that persists over time, rejects counter-attitudinal information, biases cognitive processing, and guides action. This team-oriented attitude is also internally consistent with other fundamental attitudes, beliefs, self-concepts, information processing, and action. According to them, loyalty represents the degree to which an attitude is enduring and resistant and impacts cognition and behavior. These four attitude-related strengths are causative indications of a strong, stable, and ongoing relationship with an athletic team and are viewed as loyalty drivers. (Funk & James, 2001.) Behavioral support includes purchasing tickets or merchandise and behavior that occurs in some specific period, for example, watching the team play every time.

Sports brand managers have multiple ways to influence team identification. Sutton et al. (1997) divide those ways into team, organization, community, and action principles. Community bonds are based on an individual's need to belong to a group (Sutton et al., 1997), which supports psychological and emotional connections. Furthermore, an organization, especially a team, can provide and fulfill hedonistic needs. From the perspective of satellite fans, Sutton et al. (1997) highlight four suitable strategies that could be used to enhance team identification to develop fan engagement: *1) Facilitating public access to the team and its players, 2) Adding team community activities, 3) Strengthening the history and traditions of the team,* and *4) By creating opportunities for group connections and participation.* These four strategies will get the team closer to the fan, supporting the fandom development. These must be implemented in the internationalization strategies and must be seen as a priority. Passikoff (1997) also found drivers that create loyalty for sports teams. Those drives are entirely in line with Sutton et al.'s strategies which underline the relevance of those: *1) Entertainment value, 2) Authenticity, 3) Close relationship between fans and team/organization,* and *4) Team's or league's history and tradition.* Figure 15 presents the combination of those strategies and drivers.

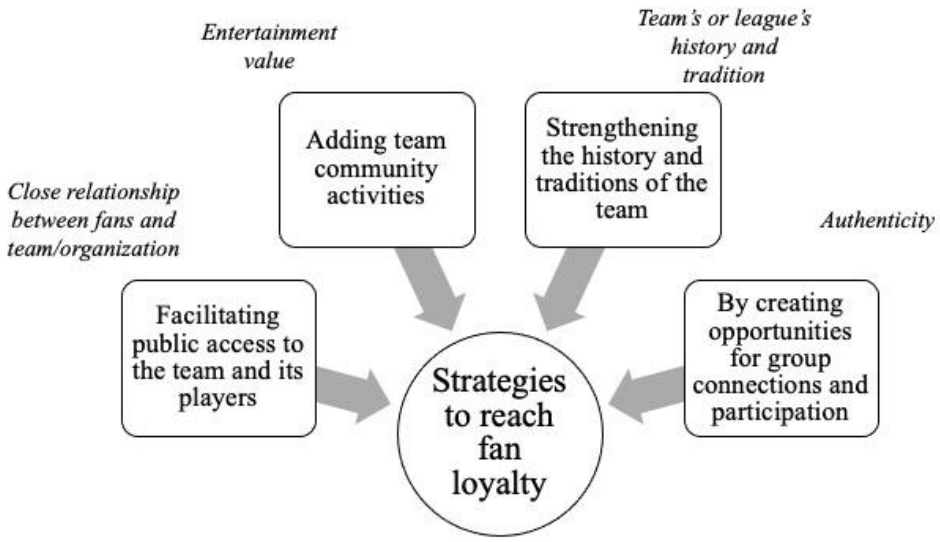

Figure 15 Strategies to reach fan loyalty (inspired by Sutton et al. 1997 & Passikoff 1997)

There is still the fact that sports team fan loyalty is more robust when compared to other brands. Furthermore, this might create challenges as taking fan loyalty for granted might weaken or diminish the fan base (Adamson et al., 2006). Comprehensively learned while exploring literature and confirmed by MacIntosh et al. (2017), multiple sports marketing scholars highlight that marketing activities and branding are vital strategies while developing fans' commitment and interpersonal bonds. With this in mind, it is crucial to enhance the fan base. Therefore, using branding elements might be a valuable and clever method. However, to enhance the fan base through brand development, it is essential to understand the sports fan and the psychology behind the factors. Without a clear understanding, moving from awareness to attraction and loyalty is impossible.

To conclude, from the perspective of satellite fans, reaching the level of attachment from the level of attraction might be difficult as the social identification process is not straightforward because of the lack of physical connection. Attachment requires a quite strong psychological and attitudinal connection between team and individual. However, there are no mentionable obstacles to creating that kind of connection, as the psychological development of fandom does not require a physical connection. Connecting the identity of the individual and the identity of the sports team is more crucial to fulfilling the perceived psychological needs. Material needs are much easier to fulfill as e-commerce, and digital platforms offer an easy possibility to consume the sports team

brand. This study's potential contribution is to discover how the brand could be enhanced to bolster attachment. When the level of attachment is reached, the same principal themes are still underlying when teams try to enhance the fandom from attachment to loyalty. As stated, loyalty could be attitudinal or behavioral. Both could be accomplished in the case of satellite fans, and that could be done through team-initiated strategies.

2.3 Brand awareness and engagement development to enhance fandom

A professional sports club may increase its brand equity by leveraging its emotional bond with its followers (McGraw, 1998). Likewise, Van Gelder (2004) recognized and clarified that a global brand must find a method to give meaningful meaning and experiences to individuals in different markets. These underlining observations will guide this thesis's theoretical framework, as represented in Figure 15.

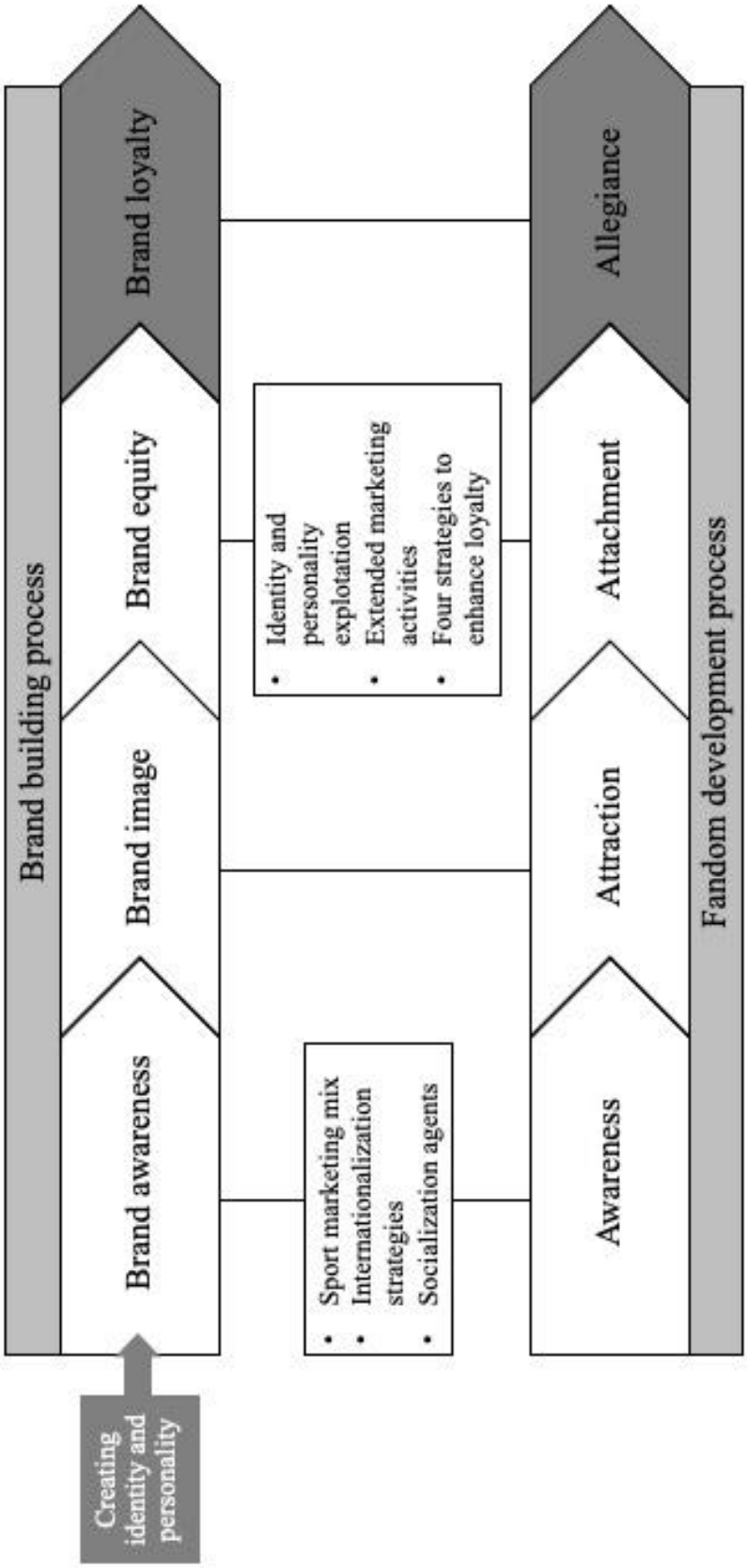

Figure 16 Theoretical framework: Brand development process to create and enhance fandom development

A foundation for the theoretical framework is based on two-level thinking that combines the brand building and development process (Shank & Lyberger, 2014) on the top row with Funk and James' (2001) PCM framework about fandom development on the bottom line. Richelieu's (2012) sports brand building model supports the brand development process, which creates a framework to explore brand building and development through different brand elements. Based on the literature view and Richelieu's (2012) model, identity and personality creation plays a remarkable role in sports brand building when the objective is to attract new fans and ultimately engage them with the team and brand. Exploration provides suggestions for enhancing brand awareness and engagement that are introduced below the brand building model. Those suggestions unite traditional methods and marketing activities while mirroring the literature about fandom and fandom development. The fan/consumer development models and the escalator model introduced by Schwarz and Hunter (2018) support the PCM framework. By uniting the PCM framework and escalator model, it is possible to see the connection between brand development, psychological continuum, and the level of fandom.

The theoretical framework is built on a holistic exploration of existing literature with topic cross-categorization. Strict connection points have been identified in branding, sports marketing, and fandom literature. The first step of brand building is creating a brand identity and personality. Fandom literature has widely acknowledged social identity theory which states that an individual is looking for a connection point between his or her identity and team identity. Through a sports team and its identity, an individual is fulfilling and enriching his or her identity to fulfill some psychological needs. In addition, fandom literature has identified that awareness is not even a point zero for fandom development. However, instead, it is a fundamental requirement for fandom. For the brand development process, creating brand awareness through marketing activities and brand internationalization is the first step after creating a desirable identity and personality. The second step of the PCM framework and fandom development is attraction. Suppose potential fans are aware of some sports team and find the brand image positive based on its identity, personality, and marketing activities. In that case, it will probably become an attraction. As learned, brand equity builds from previously mentioned factors. Literature has acknowledged, and this study already highlighted that brand engagement is possible if sports teams have substantial brand equity. Based on that

and the observations about brand development, it is justified to suggest that substantial brand equity leads to deeper fan engagement.

The research focuses on verifying the new theoretical framework created based on the theory and concretizing more clearly the methods used to improve brand awareness and engagement. In addition, the research focuses more precisely on satellite fans in Europe, which is already a well-established but poorly utilized market area for NHL and its organizations. Furthermore, given the centralized management and functions of the NHL, this study seeks to integrate general practices in the sports world to enable NHL organizations to embark on long-term work to build their brand in Europe. Finally, to better understand how the study is conducted and the methods used for the empirical study, the focus is on the methodology in the next chapter.

3 Methodology

This chapter examines the empirical study, methods employed, and the decisions made in the research's execution. Because the study topic is centered on understanding and creating the components that simultaneously create the brand of NHL organizations and the fan base in Europe, the research was done using qualitative approaches. After the research methodology, data collection technique used in the study, data analysis and assessment, and research ethics are described.

3.1 Research approach

The qualitative approach was chosen to be the research method for this study even though there are several possibilities for both a research methodology and applied research methodologies to solve the identified issues. This study views reality as socially produced (constructivist viewpoint) which is typical for qualitative research. This study has a multidimensional topic so qualitative approach is suitable when a "*complex, deep grasp of the topic*" is required (Creswell 2007, 40).

In this study the purpose is to relate the study to real-world situations and give a more thorough knowledge of the issues under consideration, going further than the "what" by striving to comprehend the "why" and "how" questions that drive action, which also creates a suitable foundation for qualitative study (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Hirsjärvi, Remes, & Sajavaara 2012; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch 2004; Silverman 2005). In addition, because of the studied phenomenon has multiple dimensions, and its core is process oriented, this study employed a qualitative technique. A qualitative research strategy is used when quantitative approaches fail to disclose a complicated circumstance or occurrence (Creswell, 2007). Lastly, in this study, the research design and problem were updated several times in this study as the theoretical backdrop expanded and the empirical study technique grew more defined which is also typical for qualitative research (Hirsjärvi et al., 2012).

3.2 Data collection

In this study only primary data was used and humans are favored as the primary data-collecting instrument, with researchers treating the topic from their perspective (Hirsjärvi et al. 2012; Miles & Huberman 1994). Observation, interviews, focus groups, surveys,

and documentation are some of the qualitative data-gathering methods accessible (Hirsjärvi et al. 2012; Ghauri & Gronhaug 2002; Smith 1991). In this study the data was collected through guided semi-structured interviews, allowing for a wide range of responses using open-ended questions, and allowing people' viewpoints and "voices" to arise. The goal was to find their unique perspective of the circumstance and how it informs their conduct (Hirsjärvi et al. 2012; Miles & Huberman 1994). Furthermore, because semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions, the replies can be broad. Therefore, they may cover numerous areas of research interest. For that reason, the interviews were recorded to enable complete analytical procedure as advised (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, the transcribed tape allows others to evaluate the interview discourse (Wright, 2013).

Interviews are a common data-gathering method in qualitative research (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). In contrast to structured and standardized interviews, a semi-structured interview contains a preset list of subjects and themes to be explored, like was done in this study. Nonetheless, the interviewer has some leeway in terms of question phrasing and order. Semi-structured interviews have the benefit of acquiring information in a more systematic and planned manner than open talks, making data analysis easier while maintaining the spirit of the interview casual (Daniels & Cannice 2004; Kovalainen & Eriksson 2003; Metsämuuronen 2006). Because interviews were chosen as one of the data-collection strategies, the interview process is extensively detailed in this section because interview data collection is an important part of the qualitative research project (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014).

The information obtained is often richer since informants may provide information in a larger context and with greater precision than in regular, text-based surveys. Furthermore, interviews were a flexible data collecting technique since the researcher was able to adjust the study questions, for example, during the interview based on specific factors, intuition, and the interviewee's traits. It also allowed the interviewer to monitor the interviewee's behavior (Kvale, 1996; Daniels & Cannice, 2004; Hirsjärvi et al., 2012; Metsämuuronen, 2006). However, as a preferred data-collecting strategy, interviews have several limitations. A researcher is required to explain the reasoning behind the study's technique selections and grasp the constraints of the methodology utilized (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). For starters, interviews need time and resources. Second, the interviewer's know-how and abilities play an important role since the interview's course is determined by the

interviewer's understanding of the issue covered, how effectively the interview is organized, and how well the interviewer can control the interview's direction. Third, the informant's responses to individual questions may be influenced by the context and prevailing circumstances. Finally, the interviewees may also supply specific answers to satisfy the interviewer or develop a favorable representation of oneself (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2002; Hirsjärvi et al. 2012).

Significant efforts have been taken to operationalize the research question properly in order to ensure that all essential subjects are addressed throughout the interview. The interview guide (Appendix 1) was subsequently created using the operationalization table (Table 3). Interview themes were determined based on the literature review and theoretical framework, and they were as follows: 1) Sports brands 2) International brand awareness and engagement in sports 3) International brand engagement in sports 4) International fandom in sports and 5) Brand's role in international fan engagement. These themes were discussed in general as well as in the context of the NHL.

Table 3 Operationalization chart

Research question	Sub-questions	Theory	Interview theme
How NHL organizations can enhance their international brand awareness and engagement to grow their European fan base through satellite fans?	How to manage an international sports brand to build brand awareness?	Sport's team brand Brand awareness Brand internationalization	1, 2
	How can an organization support fandom creation and development?	Fandom development International fandom	3, 4
	How to enhance brand engagement among international satellite fans?	International brand engagement International fandom	3, 4, 5

The themes and subjects in the interview guide go from general to more detailed to assist informants in becoming acquainted with the issue under discussion. Furthermore, further specific investigative questions were placed under each primary question. As a result, the interview guide acted as a supportive and structural document which helped the interviewer to keep the discussion around the initially determined topics. The interview

questions and their sequence were updated based on the history of the individual being questioned, recognizing that each informant has a unique perspective on each interview's primary issues (Daniels & Cannice 2004; Kvale 1996). As the interviews were conversational, additional questions were also posed throughout the interview, allowing for exploring themes and ideas from a specific subject that arose during the discussion. The researcher intentionally avoided asking leading questions, as Yin advised (2003). Because operationalization seeks to unite theory with real-world, the research problem was operationalized to guarantee that the research is based on suitable theoretical framework (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

In this study, the research participants were chosen carefully by the study's aims rather than a random sample (Hirsjävi et al. 2012; Jankowicz 1995). This study's interviewees were selected in two stages: In the first step, a detailed investigation based on Internet sources was carried out, in which Finnish sports marketing professionals were mapped. The interviewees were identified in the second phase after preliminary talks that the researcher had with the persons identified in the first phase. Some of the people indicated in the first step became interviewees, while, in contrast, others recommended more appropriate people to be questioned by the researcher. As a result, four experts (Table 4) were chosen to be interviewed.

Table 4 Conducted interviews

Interviewee	Profession	Date of interview	Duration
Interviewee A	Development Manager	13.9.2022	93 min
Interviewee B	Consultant & Senior Advisor	29.3.2022	117 min
Interviewee C	VP, Sales and Services	01.06.2022	80 min
Interviewee D	Consultant	10.10.2022	64 min

This key informant approach varies significantly from other interviews in which informants are picked randomly and the purpose is to gather a larger sample which enables broader discussion about the topics and issues. The key informant strategy is a type of purposive sampling in which the researcher selects which perspectives are important to the researched subject and the researcher's theoretical stance in conjunction with possible collaborators (Jankowicz 1995; Silverman 2005).

After identifying appropriate interview participants, an introduction email regarding the study topic was sent, along with an offer to participate in the research project. It has been suggested that the level of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee influences the interview result (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). This trust was built by first defining the reason for the interview in the email. Every interviewee was allowed to meet with the interviewer ahead of time to have a general conversation about the topic and an interview. Before the interview, the researcher and the interviewee could get known and share ideas during the initial discussions. That resulted in a more comfortable and conversational interview setting, reflected in the interviewers' easygoing demeanor.

A permission form was issued to the participants before the interview. Four expert interviews were done over eight months, ranging from one hour to two hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the native language of the participants and the interviewer. However, one interview was conducted in English as the expert interviewee

was a native English speaker. All interviews were conducted online, using Zoom or a comparable service. All participants agreed that the interview would be recorded. The use of a recorder helped to focus on the topic and the atmosphere without distractions. It enabled the researcher to access the content in its original form as many times as necessary.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis aims to offer clarity to the gathered data and, consequently, to generate new information about the research topic. Before performing the analysis, the researcher thoroughly familiarized himself with the material as recommended (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). As a result, the acquired study data was examined several times before analysis. As this study included a massive amount of acquired data, the first thing that was done was to identify the material pertinent to the study subject (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

Suppose no pre-existing theoretical framework exists. In that case, there is a risk that the results will be discussed without contextualization (Meyer, 2001). This study applied an alternative technique to organize the gathered material utilizing an already established theoretical framework and operationalization table. The selected technique implies that the researcher is familiar with the concepts before completing the inquiry (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014). When empirical data was analyzed, an inductive analysis was used, which means that rather than just verifying existing ideas and preconceived assumptions, the researcher attempts to study and observe the acquired data in a deep and varied manner, uncovering the underlying, less obvious patterns (Hirsjärvi et al. 2012; Miles & Huberman 1994). Existing theory serves as the theoretical underpinning in this investigation. As a result, it might be classified as deductive research. However, the goal is not just to evaluate the framework's validity, but also to use the new, acquired information and knowledge to improve the framework to create adaptable model for conclusions.

The interviews yielded a total of 88 pages of transcribed material. Analysis and quotes created based on that transcribed material were accepted by the interviewees. The gathered research material was organized by using the technique described above to ease research material analysis to comprehend the relationship between the interviewees' responses and the study topics, as, throughout the analysis stage, the gathered results and data must be merged and transformed into a clear and comprehensible form without losing

their informative value (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). The primary goal was to analyze the data to identify design or process elements in the transcribed literature, which refers to the fandom development process and brand development process in this study, before beginning cross-analysis, as Eriksson and Koistinen recommend (2014).

In this context, the cross-analysis means that first, the topics related to the study were identified per interviewee. After that, as provided in the theoretical framework, the information in this study was organized by separating it into categories comprising brand building and development process and fandom development. This framework was instrumental in arranging the data. An already established framework makes the study easier to follow and read (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). Eriksson and Koistinen (2014) offer a similar argument, claiming that data may be structured using grounded theory or a pre-existing framework. Furthermore, the researcher was able to invest minimal effort in acquiring fundamental information about the investigated phenomena, such as process information, thanks to the pre-existing framework and theoretical knowledge (Gummesson 1988, according to Meyer 2001). Lastly, the themes related to brand and fandom development were united to create a holistic understanding and analysis. After identifying the pattern, the material was compared to the theoretical framework established (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014; Creswell 2007).

Organizing the data in this study according to subjects such as phases in the brand building process assisted in the investigation of ideas such as fandom development. Quotations from transcripts were transcribed beneath each topic, and in some cases, the phrases were recreated in the researcher's own words to not to lose the context, as detailed by Eskola and Suoranta (1998). While rearranging is a robust approach, particularly with ideas arising from theoretical frameworks, it requires some subjectivity because pre-existing themes class the material. To address this issue, a different theme for effective content that failed to mesh into pre-planned topics was created, as suggested by Creswell (2007).

3.4 Evaluation of the study

The trustworthiness of this study is assessed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for determining qualitative research trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmatory. Shenton (2004, 64) defined credibility as follows: *"to ensure that their study measures or tests what is actually intended"*. The credibility of

this study was strengthened by employing similar research procedures to those used in previous comparable investigations and by ensuring that all the respondents were willing participants (Shenton, 2004). In addition, it can be claimed that they held extensive information over the course of the research because of their positions in their organizations which increases the credibility of the study as the data represents the researched topic (see Meyer, 2001).

Data was collected from multiple different sources to avoid skewed image and to strengthen the credibility (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, Yin 2003). In addition, all the interviewees represented sports industry which is improving the credibility even further (Meyer, 2001). Eventually, data analysis indicated that a specific degree of saturation had been attained, as the comparable topics and replies to questions arise from several interviewees (Meyer, 2001) meaning that the research data acquired seemed sufficient (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

The interviews were mainly done in Finnish; hence the interviewee's native language was used in most of the interviews. Furthermore, the analysis procedure was thorough due to the use of a recorder, which allowed for several word-by-word reviews of the data acquired. Furthermore, participant check was employed to increase trust since the findings were communicated to each respondent individually so that they could confirm the veracity of the study. Finally, the operationalization table acted as the foundation for constructing the interview guide, ensuring a relationship between the study topic, theoretical framework, and data collecting. As a result, the theoretical framework provided a generic structure for data analysis.

The capacity to adapt the findings to other events or populations is referred to as transferability (Shenton, 2004). However, due to the study's limited scope and scale, the results' transferability to other settings is highly limited, maybe only possible for contexts with similar backgrounds and sizes. Still, to offer transferability, throughout Chapter 3, the research process, techniques, and critical criteria for interviewee selection were introduced. Furthermore, the theoretical framework and literature review are introduced and discussed, offering a more comprehensive grasp of the study setting as Shenton (2004) stated that in qualitative case studies, the goal of transferability should be to offer extensive explanations of how the research was performed so that readers may judge how transferable the study findings are in different contexts rather than to examine how

effectively the transferability can be achieved. Transferability was also strengthened by offering clear information about interviewed individuals, interview time and questions, and characteristics of the data collection and analysis method as recommended (Shenton 2004; Eskola & Suoranta 1998). However, the context of the issue was one-of-a-kind in many aspects, which may limit transferability even more.

In this study, dependability was increased by the research technique, interview questions, and data analysis. As a result, it is possible to argue that sufficient information has been supplied for other researchers to reproduce the study. However, because the researcher created the theoretical framework before commencing the interviews, the researcher's prior knowledge and personal interests may have influenced the interview's course and how the discussion went. Furthermore, given this was the researcher's first study, inexperience may have impacted the quality of the interview data and the depth of the information obtained. Furthermore, as critical realism suggests, perfect replication of research is unlikely (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Confirmability is often referred to as objectivity. The study's goal is to provide results that truly describe the condition under investigation and are not reliant on the researcher's subjective opinions. As a result, confirmability may be linked to the previously mentioned reliability and dependability. Triangulation, outlining a practical research plan, and admitting the researcher's past assumptions can all help to improve confirmability and these issues were addressed during this study (Shenton, 2004). The rationale of information, data acquisition, and analysis was provided so the reader could judge the research’s impartiality, as subjectivity cannot be avoided in qualitative research (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

Meyer (2001) claimed that intentionally erasing past preconceptions and biases while making research, as done in this study, is one technique for lowering subjectivity. One option to allow the reader to make conformability auditing by providing sufficient amount of information such as an audit trail in the form of a structure of themes, definitions, and relationships identified during the analysis process, as well as any information about the data collection techniques used in the study (Halpern, 1983). The study's credibility was increased by presenting an explanation of the research methods and procedures used, as well as exposing the interview guide. Finally, while semi-structured discussions produce extensive data compared to completely structured interviews, they also enable

greater discretion in terms of question order and questions asked in the interview environment. As a result, creating an identical replica, whether by an outsider or the researcher, is almost impossible.

3.5 Research ethics

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with moral questions. Research ethics is the study of moral behavior in research contexts. Ethical frameworks provide a foundation for thinking about ethical quandaries (or moral behavior). They suggest certain criteria for researchers to utilize in determining what is right or wrong in the face of an ethical problem. (Wiles, 2013.)

All studies have ethical considerations (Bryman & Bell, 2007), and participants' anonymity, privacy, and secrecy are highlighted in this study. This study follows ethical guidelines, which include informed consent, capacity, the duty of confidentiality, anonymity, and risk (Wiles, 2013). The capacity of each interviewee is verified prior to conducting the interviews. Each participant has signed an informed consent form in advance. An informed consent form states the study's purpose, the participant's role in the study, and the data processing principles. The volunteering of each participant was verified orally at the beginning of the interviews, and they were also told separately how their data and interview material would be used and processed in the study. In addition, each interviewee has the right to withdraw from the study afterward, in which case their statements will not be included.

The exact identities of each interviewee have not been disclosed. Statements made during the interview that has been asked to be excluded from the study have not been used as part of the study, which fulfills the criteria for the duty of confidentiality. Private matters of the interviewees related to their background have also been excluded from the study. In order to minimize potential disadvantages, no information irrelevant to the study was collected, and non-research issues, such as the situation of the current employer or one's own company, were not addressed during the interviews. In support of the duty of confidentiality, each interviewee is anonymized so they cannot be directly linked to the study.

Finally, ensuring the safety and well-being of those involved in research is integral to ethical research practice. In this case, the research may pose minimal risks to the

participants. The subject matter is not sensitive or does not address personal issues or problems. The risk assessment has also considered the risk to the researcher and sought to minimize these risks by following ethical guidelines.

EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU 679/2016) is acknowledged. The researcher has made a data management plan, supported by a detailed privacy statement as the register containing personal information made during the research process. All information collected during the study will be destroyed immediately upon completion. Before that, the information collected will be accurately stored so that only the researcher will have access to that information.

Ethical issues are also associated with the analysis and reporting of research results, which are sought to address as comprehensively as possible. Special attention has been paid to the open and honest reporting of research results. In addition, the researcher has sought to pay attention to how objectively he or she views the topic, i.e., how impartially and independently he or she views the interviewees and their experiences. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) state that in traditional qualitative research, the informant's report inevitably filters through the researcher's framework, as the researcher is the creator and interpreter of the research setting. What the researcher hears and observes is influenced by, for example, the researcher's gender, age, religion, position, or other similar factors (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

4 Findings

This section presents the study's results that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The results are presented mainly in the main sections according to the main themes. The themes are the same as those discussed during the interviews, and these themes are linked to the research questions. A comparison of the results and a mirroring of the theory and previous global research data is provided in the next chapter.

4.1 Sports team brand

In the brand of sports teams, the stories and the images created around them came to light in interviews on a large scale. Stories can include, among other things, brand positioning and a motto that is easy for fans and audiences to understand. Understanding the core of the brand is essential, and after that, it is crucial to understand the new market deeply. Sports brands generally have a different dimension and are much more complex than regular consumer goods brands.

> "It's not about what you can develop, it's about trying to take advantage of the opportunities that already exist. Organizations should be able to find unique factors that set them apart. A position should be built around these unique factors, as well as a story to bring those factors to bear. up." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "If there were unlimited resources, the first would be to research the supporters and find out how we are seen and what values rise from it. [...] If you want to lead a brand systematically you need to know how it develops and what different attributes are attached to the brand ... to measure again whether the images are moving in the direction we want to take them." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

Every sports team might also have a different way of positioning its brand, but there still might be certain things that are important for every sports brand. Sports teams and their brands are built initially around communities, so the basic principles are heavily related to the community and the role of the brand in that community.

> "Basic pillars are for example communality, because in the end, the sports team is trying to bring people together. […] Responsibility is also one of those pillars, because why those people are starting to support some team or brand? Responsibility towards community, what are your values and what you bring to community. […] Of course, competitiveness belongs into this discussion, because the team is trying to bring the championship home. It is the goal." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

From the perspective of internationalization, those already mentioned unique factors and brand attributes must be apparent for the organization. As mentioned, sports brands are built around communities. However, brands are seeking to expand even though there are new challenges. The brand is not the same for everyone, but an organization must understand what the brand is and what it stands for. An organization must identify the brand's core before seeking to expand the brand.

> “So, you have to be aware that you can't just drop your brand in the new location and expect it to mean the same things to the same people, right. So, the, I think the key things you have to do is to firstly really understand what your brand is and what it stands for, right? What are the key pillars of that brand? And then when you move to a new location, understand which of those you can move on in which you can't move on.” (Interviewee D; Consultant)

> “What does their brand actually mean? So, you've got to understand from your side before you go anywhere which elements of our brand are non-negotiable. What do we have to keep regardless of where we go and what can we move on? […] If they (Green Bay Packers) export their brand to London they probably don't need to take the community club element with them because the community club only really makes sense in Green Bay. But everything else their brand stands for has to, you know, has to travel because otherwise it's not Packers brand anymore.” (Interviewee D; Consultant)

Interviewees also highlighted that brands must be consistent when expanding to global markets. If there is too much differentiation, the brand in the home market could be jeopardized. It is deeply related to the understanding of the brand's core attributes.

> “So, if your Mercedes and you wanna change your logo and say we'll go Pride colored flag and then you don't do it the following week in the Gulf because you think it'll upset people. That actually shines badly on the parent brand, and it starts to poison backwards.” (Interviewee D; Consultant)

As a most important sports brands characteristics team traditions and history was mentioned first by every interviewee. Then, players and star players, as well as fans and the community, were mentioned by every interviewee, which underlines the importance of those attributes for the sports brand. However, different attributes were discussed broadly, and interviewees pondered this from different perspectives.

> "I would first highlight the traditions and history of the club and all stakeholders such as fans, members and sponsors. […] History and traditions are absolutely the most important but also the success must be there. […] Lastly I will put the players and star players on the list." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

> "So, I'm gonna set team history and traditions. […] I think star players, because look, at the end of the day people want to be connected to the players. They are the stars now. […] So, I'm gonna say fans as well, because when someone becomes a fan, they see themselves as a fan and they don't distinguish between the fans in the ground and the ones at home." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

It could be said that some of the interviewees had slightly different perspectives, in which case there were also differences in the answers. As mentioned, traditions, history, and stakeholders, like fans, were strongly highlighted in the responses. In addition, identity and the visual look associated with it play an essential role among international fans. Success was also highlighted, but with a small reservation, as success is not eternal, and building a brand entirely on it is dangerous. However, interviewees mentioned that success is essential when acquiring new fans as it tends to be successful teams because people want to attach their self-worth to someone who will succeed. Without success, it is difficult to arouse widespread interest, especially abroad.

The importance of the entire story that characterizes the team and organization was mentioned multiple times. From an international perspective, interviewees highlighted the stadium and cited FC Barcelona's legendary Camp Nou as an example. However, it is clear that not everyone has such a legendary symbol; if there is, it should be used effectively. Fans also play a crucial role in rituals. The problem with these is that the club either has these or not. In addition, interviewees highlighted competitors and confrontations that build a brand and story around the club. Furthermore, interviewees mentioned identity and values multiple times in different contexts, so they will have a crucial role when creating a foundation for a sports brand.

> "A good example is St. Pauli, which has a very strong identity with its fans. As example of confrontation, I highlight Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, which again are always attracting international interest and that event has a strong history." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

Every interviewee mentioned players, especially star players, as remarkable factors for sports brands. Interviewees described that if there is an international star player on the team, it is downright a stroke of luck. However, the role of players and star players also faced critical reflection. The star players might be suitable for brand awareness enhancement but building a brand around those star players might be dangerous.

> "It might be a risk if you think that some sports team in America is seeking to expand their brand internationally and engage with new fans it is pretty

> risky. I would not build on that because it is not very controllable." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> "That's difficult because obviously players can move and come and go. So, then you have to, you have to define what the club stands for and what it means." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

Besides star players, managers also play a significant role, especially in football. A coach can significantly impact a brand without being an iconic character. Furthermore, the coach often communicates outside the team and organization and is a vital storyteller for fans and other stakeholders. However, given the context of this study, interviewees did not value the importance of the coach as part of the sports team's brand.

> "After all, the most important factors are those you can influence yourself. If you have any opportunities, grab them. The best way to make a difference is to find a story that speaks to your desired target group." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

One emerging theme was change and how a brand should be developed in the changing world, where current and potential fans might see the brand and its purpose differently. The focus was intensely on the importance of sports brand development and how these attributes should be reviewed over time. A brand could have some characteristics now, but over time they might change. The sports teams' brand must always align with the current team and its playing style and internal identity.

> "Of course, it matters how you bring up the brand and what kind of team we have. If we have competitive, tough, and unyielding team we must bring up those characteristics, but if we have a team, like Carolina Hurricanes that plays fun and happy hockey, and the team is filled with skilled players we cannot bring up those previously mentioned characteristics even though in the front office we feel that those characteristics are the ones that are traditional and original." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Authenticity is the key to success, and it should not be forgotten. When refreshing the brand and moving on from the original and traditional characteristics to attract new fans the problem might be that the brand lost its authenticity, the core of the brand mentioned in the beginning. Breaking away from own identity could be dangerous and costly. Understanding what is essential for the fans and using strengths is the key.

> "You must keep the core values with you all the time. Our current fan base felt that the authenticity disappeared. But you must adjust for the current situation and where the world is going but if you lose the authenticity your brand is significantly weakened." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

The world is changing, and the brand must also recur with it. Without changes, it is not possible to attract new fans. New brand attributes might not resonate with everyone, but finding the balance between old and new is crucial.

> "That is the reason why we created Gritty (mascot), to create new fan base. Of course, our goal was to make every citizen to be our fan. […] I think we went little bit too far with the recurring and in that point, we eliminated our old, current fans that have been involved like ten years." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

To summarize this from the perspective of NHL and NHL organizations, all the main characteristics of a brand should be able to be combined into one personal story that communicates the identity of the organization and thus appeals to potential fans. It basically means that the organization must identify its own strengths locally and create an understanding what makes it unique. The organization must identify and understand those characteristics before expanding the brand from the home to global markets.

Even though the change is evident and much needed over time, it is essential to remember the history and traditions as they are seen as one of the most important aspects of a sports brand. For that reason, traditional NHL organizations can create their brand core and story around those elements also among satellite fans. Younger NHL organizations might focus on different element that were mentioned such as star players, show, and, for example, new socioeconomic values that they create among their own community.

The core elements must carry along and should be emphasized while developing the brand to secure its authenticity. Opportunities must be able to be identified and exploited as effectively as possible. Resources should not be used to build the impossible but to seek to approach challenges through opportunities.

4.2 International sports brand awareness

When starting to improve brand awareness, it is crucial to identify ways to get in touch with potential fans. Success occurs when an organization can be more visible than its success may have made possible. Therefore, active marketing and communication activities play an essential role. The work does not provide further results without getting touchpoints and messages through.

> "In the beginning the focus must be on how the get touchpoints." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "If you think the basic of sales and marketing, you must find the touch points." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Interviewees highlighted several different ways and channels to improve brand awareness internationally. In addition, interviewees combined this perspective with fandom development. An interesting point raised by one of the interviewees is that it would not be about how to increase the fan base abroad but how an individual sports organization can increase its sphere of influence outside its market area. In this context, the interviewee mentioned that the "window of attention" is vital for sports clubs.

> "A window of attention is an epic event, like an international match or a championship match, that gets a lot of attention. They raise the profile internationally dizzy and such events easily get people's attention." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "Internationally the journey could be same (as locally) but you must use different channels. […] At the moment improving awareness it is easy if you use digital channels and television correctly." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Organizations can create such events by organizing international exhibition games, for example, if opportunities do not arise naturally. Taking the team to play abroad for the season opener and bringing the whole circus around creates a new "buzz" around the team in the country where the games are played. It is recognized as a very effective way to enhance brand awareness internationally, and NHL has also done it.

> "It is great way to attract new fans ang engage with them as people get the opportunity to see the game and the team on live. It engages on very different level. […] Even though small group of people gets the chance to watch the game, but you can still see the advertisement in the streets." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

The more local players, for example, in the team, the greater the attention in the target country. All kinds of physical presence and various raptures built around the team can effectively spread team and brand awareness. A principal messenger in these contexts is the media, which enthusiastically reports on the preconceived notions of domestic players. The foreign players seem to be ambassadors for the clubs that are strongly involved in the internationalization of the sports team's brand and the development of its profitability.

> "One good way is to use players… People are more tend to follow player from their home country." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> "Undoubtedly you want to use the star quality of players to build your brand." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

Over the years, digitalization and social media have significantly changed the internationalization of sports team brands, and the possibilities today are almost limitless. For example, the visibility created by EA Sports in video games is an entirely insane advertisement, especially if the team gets a significant role in the game, such as the player on the cover of the CD case. In addition, during a pandemic, various streaming services such as Twitch have gained tremendous importance as they have been able to interact with teams, for example, through online games.

> "Engagement through digital is a new kind of thing that has come up. It can be a viral thing, a video game, an application or, for example, a Fantasy league where you can manage real clubs and players virtually." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "Of course, using digital channels is important and every team has a lot of data. You are able to get the data from the NHL about your international fans if you want." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Of the most traditional means, broadcasting was perceived as necessary for every interviewee. Broadcasting is the easiest way to get in touch with international fans. It is also possible to calculate an exact value for it, which makes it possible to reach new sponsors. Surprisingly, it was also strongly underlined that without broadcasting in the target area, there is no point in going to market.

> "Investing in sending a delegation to tour among international broadcasters and showcasing team play as well as statistics to make the channel show up for team matches is an effective way to increase your own visibility in the world." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "So, if there's no NHL broadcast deal in Finland, to me, there would be no point trying to sell NHL in Finland because it is waste of time. You got to have broadcast deal and it is on national TV." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

Alongside traditional broadcasting and television, the new streaming services, like Netflix, HBO, and Viaplay, are giving a fantastic opportunity to sports leagues and teams to enhance brand awareness worldwide rapidly. Nowadays, those streaming services include multiple documents and series' where different teams, players, or leagues are introduced even further. That is also something that creates increasing interest and attraction.

> “If you see what Formula One did when they started to bring their brand to the United Stated, they created a Netflix series which tell a story about the Formula One in general, but they also introduced the drivers and what happens behind the scenes. After that they launched new races here and they have created big audience in short period.” (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> “NFL has made the Hard Knocks series which tells about NFL teams, and the same producers created a series when we played Winter Classic. It created awareness and we potentially got some new fans.” (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Among sports teams, sponsors can also play a crucial role in raising the profile of a team and its brand. For example, cooperation with a large shirt manufacturer, such as Nike, Puma, or Adidas, enables comprehensive international visibility when a shirt manufacturer wants to promote its products, utilizing the sports team's brand. In addition to the niche market, a particular sponsor may allow for high national popularity, as the example of Manchester City in Cambodia has shown.

> "The value that sponsors bring in raising visibility and developing fanaticism is really great. […] Nike, for example, was a huge supporter of the internationalization of the FC Barcelona brand as jerseys were on sale around the world. No other channels needed to be developed at that time." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

However, there are also strategic choices at the heart of improving brand awareness, as well as growing the fan base. Therefore, the market must choose carefully and, on this basis, the channels to be used and the activities to be implemented. The interviews revealed that each time a new target market is considered, it should be identified which market has the maximum potential compared to strategic goals. When choosing a target market, one must also consider the country's cultural factors and consider, for example, the language in which the target market is approached. The use of different marketing agencies could also consider improving local brand awareness.

To summarize this from the perspective of NHL and NHL organizations in relation to satellite fans, the creation of touch points is crucial. Success will follow if organization is able to create more visibility among potential fans than it might deserve, or its success may have made possible. Seeking potential target groups and identifying suitable channels and activities to create touch point should be under consideration continuously. “Window of attention” is something to pursue and when that moment is available there must be capabilities to capture the opportunity.

Concrete means to create the window of attention and enhance brand awareness internationally which are suitable for NHL organizations are, for example, international exhibition games. Taking the team to play abroad to the country where the population is having a great potential to become fans would be beneficial. Here the European players are having a crucial role as international fans and followers are more tend to follow local players. For example, if some NHL organization is having one or two good Swiss players it would be beneficial to focus on that target market. While enabling physical presence abroad is essential the media should also be activated to support the initiative. Uniting physical presence, local players, and media is a combo that has been identified as an effective technique in other sports.

In addition, awareness could be created and enhanced through opportunities enabled by digitalization and digital platforms. Applications, live streaming on Twitch or behind the scenes type of series via Netflix or similar are proven to be an effective and valuable way to tell the story and spread the knowledge. There is still lack of these kinds of activities by NHL organizations. Social media is enabling new ways to interact with the potential fans, and it is possible to tell the brand story through different channels continuously. Alongside with these "new" opportunities broadcasting is still having a major role. Without broadcasting rights there is no reason to target some market area. Broadcasting is still one of the most important channels to create awareness about the sports and the organizations. To conclude, NHL organizations must identify which channels are relevant for international fans and which target markets are most suitable for physical presence.

4.3 International fandom

During the interviews, fascinating aspects emerged regarding fandom, its birth, and its development. During the interviews, the interviewees raised, among other things, the definitions of different fandom levels and the factors that influence fandom's onset. An exciting and partly also a central aspect that emerged from the interviews was the note that it is often thought that it would be possible to make fans. However, interviewees pointed out that fans are not made but that clubs can develop and enable an environment in which fandom can begin and evolve.

> "It is a mistake to think that those fans are being made. I don't think they're made, but you're developing the conditions where that fandom can grow, but you can't make fans yourself." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> “"If we compare that a person like you who already has a solid relationship with us and this sport, it's really much easier to even get to watch a match sometimes. The opposite is some random person to whom we try to convince that our matches are good and worth coming to look at." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

As for fandom, it has several levels that define, for example, the marketing activities that are useful to target fans. One categorization were presented which included four different fan segments.

> “The smallest group was the so-called hardcore group, which is the loudest. They provide feedback on all channels and live through the club and team. The second group generates by far the most revenue. They are so-called basic supporters. They don’t terribly express opinions, but they faithfully go to watch matches. The third group is the glory hunters who appear when team is playing for a championship, for example. The fourth segment is very small, with individuals following the sport, but who don’t care which team is playing, but they are interested in the sport in general.” (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

> “I think the segments are very similar everywhere. Here we also segment the fans based on their consumption habits. The goal is to attract them to the next level and engage with them more and more.” (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

It was strongly highlighted that it is also crucial to understand why someone starts to follow sports and why they want to become a fan and belong to some kind of community. In most cases, the factors are hedonistic, and sports are one way to escape from normal everyday life.

> “We recognized that excitement and escapisms from the everyday life were motivators behind the fandom. In addition, the social side of sports was clear factor. When you got to the team or watch the game you focus on that, and you get your thoughts away.” (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

The interviewees highlighted that fandom starts by experiencing the sport either live or on television, for example. In addition, modern digital sources provide an excellent platform for exploring the sport. There is no difference between local and international fans and how they become fans, but the opportunities are different. However, interviewees also highlighted many other ways in which fandom can begin. Through players is a prevalent way, but it is not the only way. In the interviews, family and friends and their influence came to the fore. It has also often been observed that fandom seems to be passed down from generation to generation and remains part of the family.

> “The journey for fandom is quite similar locally and internationally. Internationally there is not many changes to engage with the team and brand and that is currently the biggest difference.” (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> “I have friends who are really passionate supporters of a particular team and when I ask them why they support that particular team then the answers are often related to childhood and family influences. For example, games of that particular team have often been watched on television and the father has supported that team. At the same time, it can be said that television has a really big impact on building fandom. " (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

Growing up a fan base is the easiest thing among children. It has been recognized that children attach to the club much more quickly than adults who have already grown up. One of the interviewees told the story of his fanaticism and how it started as a child during a trip abroad. Another effective way is to take advantage of friends and peer pressure. Often a group of friends who support a particular team will direct other friends to support the same team. Interviewees stressed on several occasions that the impact of family and friends could not be underestimated.

Other possible contact points where the fandom can originate include international and significant events, which the interviewee calls a "window of attention." In addition to these, the live experience is essential among international fans. For example, tourists may visit a team's stadium or watch a match as part of a local cultural experience. In addition, so-called engagement through digital has been recognized today as a widespread way to become a fan of a particular team. Such platforms can include video games, various applications, and sports team management games that feature real players and teams.

A significant factor has also been identified as various influencers who either lift the team to their feet or even, in some situations, may publicly support the team. It is also no longer impossible for public figures to buy sports clubs. Established Followers of these influencers may also take an interest in the team and begin to follow the team's performance on various channels.

From the perspective of the satellite fans, one massive problem for the organizations is that there are so many options for fans, so in a global environment, the organizations are required to do more than in their local market area. Once the first contact with a potential fan is made, it becomes crucial to build a second experience. With another experience,

starting a continuum in which, a potential fan moves to the next level of fanaticism is possible.

> "... what is that second experience after the first experience? The first experience can happen in many different ways, but the question, and challenge is how the second experience happens. [...] For example, if someone watches the final and sees the team play, but then never experiences the next experience, the interest will not develop, and the potential fan will not be able to follow the news or other communication related to the team. That's when you lost a fan, and nothing happens. " (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

One of the interviewees introduced a three-step concept to developing fandom: capture, retain, and monetize. Every activity carried out by an organization should settle into some part of this three-step model. If there is no place for the activity, it is worth considering whether the right things are being done. The model also includes subsequent experiences after the first experience, and it is these experiences that should be able to be placed in the model.

Lastly, interviewees highlighted that while it is possible to develop fandom, it is essential to understand that it also changes during an individual's life for many different reasons.

> "... when they were younger, some have been hardcore supporters, now they are fifty-year-old family fathers who are among the sponsors, or they are so-called basic supporters ..." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

It is crucial to recognize that at what level of fanaticism each individual is moving, it is perfectly normal for such movement to occur. In this way, the sports organization will also be able to make the right decisions to retain fans and develop fanaticism among these fans in the long term. As in this case, the brand characteristics of a sports team need to be able to aim for more than the team might deserve.

To summarize this from the perspective of NHL and NHL organizations in relation to satellite fans, the birth of international fandom is quite a similar process than domestically. The fandom is still moving on from generation to other or spreading through friends or other social communities. The big difference is that international fans, satellite fans, are not having the same opportunities than domestic fans. Key learning is that NHL organizations are not able to make fans but rather to create an environment where individuals can become a fan. Interviews highlighted the fact that fandom starts from experiencing the sports either live or on television, but nowadays the digital

platforms are also providing that same opportunity and that is something that should be on focus when attracting satellite fans. In addition, capturing the "window of attention" or using relevant influencers might be one way to enhance the suitable environment for fandom creation and development.

Like domestically, fandom is also having a different levels internationally. For NHL organizations it would be beneficial to understand the different maturity levels of target markets to target correct marketing activities. After that the focus could be turned on individual levels as fans are requiring different content and activities based on what level they are on the fandom. In most cases the reasons behind fandom are hedonistic are related to the individual's personal social needs. There the community and communal activities play a major role and NHL organizations should create an environment where international fans are also able to sense the feel of belonging and surrounding community. This understanding is already in the NHL organizations, but they should create the capabilities and environment to duplicate this to the international stage.

4.4 The strategic importance of fans to the sports team

In general, fans' importance to sports teams can be very complex. Therefore, before any activities are planned or implemented at the tactical level, making meaningful strategic choices and decisions is crucial.

> "[...] yes, it would be important to start with the question of what the goal is here […]" (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

There can be many different purposes for growing a fan base, such as growing a so-called ego. The idea behind this is that the Sports Club wants to be as prominent and well-known as possible based on the size of the fan base. Another goal in growing the fan base may be that the club wants to increase the value of the enterprise. The more fans the club has, the more valuable the brand and property are. However, this alone cannot be a critical intrinsic value in the sports business. The third major goal may be broadcasting value. The more spectators a team has, the greater the chance the club will have good sponsors and partnerships. That also affects revenue from broadcasting contracts.

> "[...] the more fans there are and the more contact areas and spheres of influence the better the income distribution and sponsor income can of course be, this is of course direct monetization for the club [...] " (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

Thus, during the interview, an aspect that was constantly emphasized: increasing the fan base should always have a clear strategic purpose. As shown, the goal may be to monetize digital or physical products or services, for example, or to increase the value and appreciation of the club through a broad fan base. After defining the strategic goals, it is possible to start thinking about tactical choices and activities that are useful to increase the brand awareness of a sports club, for example. There are different mechanisms behind it, depending on the underlying strategic choices.

For NHL organizations this means that there should be clear strategic need for fan base expansion internationally. They should acknowledge the needs and objectives behind those decisions. However, during the interviews it emerged that in future the NHL might not be so centralized anymore and individual NHL organizations might have better opportunities to execute activities internationally. When the change is happening there should be clear strategic vision how to benefit from that.

4.5 Brand engagement among international fans

In terms of brand engagement, the emphasis is on the position of the fans concerning the team and the brand and the activities that should be used to approach fans in that position.

> "If you think about everything you do, be it physically or digitally, you should always understand and recognize what the purpose and goal of these activities is. They should also be able to integrate with the previous three-step model and the process should go clearly from left to right." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> “If in the first stage it is important to get a potential fan to watch the game, then in the second and third stages there should already be other elements. It is important to ensure that there are elements that ensure permanence and, on the other hand, promote return and development." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

Brand engagement is often also driven by a strong identification with the team and its brand. It has also been recognized that a strong team brand, personality, and identity make fans remain fans. It could be achieved by adding something to the life of an individual fan to create meaning. Stories play a significant role in bringing out identity and personality. The stories complement and illustrate the brand, making it easy to attach and identify.

> “[…] and that can be so for some brands because it’s about wearing the shirt or the hat or whatever, not about attending a game. It’s about being able to

> use digital channels to continue to be part of that conversation, so that person can feel part of the club even though they can't ever go to stadium." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

> "Derby, for example, you can name a match and tell someone a story related to the match, why it's important, some reason why you should come and see that match. In social media, stories spread and that's where it starts." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

For satellite fans, stories play an even more critical role. Instead of selling a new ticket to a satellite fan who has once been watching, he or she should be told stories and other content, allowing the following and subsequent experiences with the brand and team to be possible. Only a few satellite fans can watch their team in the stadium. Digital communication and storytelling via digital channels are crucial when trying to create brand engagement with satellite fans. However, in communications, it is also vital to understand different customer and fan segments and target correct messages to each target group.

> "So how do you keep them? Part of my experience, so that's the glue that holds it together, is the digital communication that allows them to be part of that team. So, it's about the values, the star quality, the players and then success often, and then you use the glue to hold (it together)." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

> "If a team is playing really well in your home country and scoring great goals and so on, then you might be interested in following that team more. The process starts here, and you should, for example, be constantly getting content related to that team. As this happens continuously, you become more committed to the team and the brand and start downloading apps, other content and that's the way it goes." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

Digitalization and globalization have also created new opportunities for organizations to spread their brand internationally. While digital communications have been recognized as vital, other options exist to enhance brand engagement with fans. For example, some years ago, teams had the same opportunity to play an exhibition game abroad. However, after that, the "buzz" disappears. Now the story could be continued in a multi-channel manner, and there are a lot of good examples.

> "Merchandise sales internationally is very easy at the moment. […] Every organization has the opportunity to build a package for international fans where is few products, some special content (in digital format) that is accessible only if you belong to some international fan community. That is great way to enhance engagement among satellite fans." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> "[…] Now they can drop in off the plane and then they build on their Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and you can keep talking to the people or that you can do special interviews with players, you can push it out to the site, you've signed up, you've got special access, you can bring them into the family, to the community without having to have them in the ground." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

Interviewees highlighted different series and documents about the game, league, and team that could work in creating brand awareness. However, they are also robust tools when enhancing engagement.

> "How can you support that there is touch point outside the games… for example documents as a part of storytelling." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

> "From the fans perspective the opportunity to see what is behind the scenes is really interesting. Of course, players are playing three of four times in a week but if you are able to see what is happening in the back room, that is what creates engagement. […] In the office you cannot control if the teams win or loses but the way you can create engagement is by offering something special to them." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

Being a loyal customer and fan has a long way to go. There is also a lot to happen and whether, for example, the matches a potential fan watches are entertaining. At its best, a match leaves an individual with a wonderful emotional experience and memory imprint. From the perspective of satellite fans, exhibition games, global series games, and other events, where it is possible to see the game and the team, play a vital role in fandom development and brand engagement.

> "They are becoming much more engaged fans when they notice how intensive the game is. The game is much easier to follow on live than through television because ice hockey is not planned to be broadcasted." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> "An organization needs to be ready when that contact comes in a bit like a surprise. There must be a process and elements in place to take the fanatic and commitment forward. In this way, the second and third experiences can be made possible over time. The continuum from the window of attention should be clear, but the road ahead is long, and you need to do a lot of little stuff right. […] Circumstances that allow commitment to develop can be influenced and can even be helped, for example, through communication and marketing." (Interviewee B; Consultant, Senior Advisor)

Less surprisingly, the players and their physical presence are still critical. Fans idolize the star players, and if there is a possibility to meet with them, the fans will remember that forever. Satellite fans face this same thing as they might follow some player closely even

though he is playing abroad. Alongside players, the coach and general manager also have a vital role in storytelling, especially among fans looking for more and something unique. Based on the interviews, it could be justified to say that, even though there is a risk in building a brand around players and other staff, they are still valuable "tools" to create brand awareness and enhance brand engagement.

> "Of course, what we discussed about star players, it is totally reasonable that you attach to some player and through that you only attach to the team and organization." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

> "If you have fans there you can bring player to meet them or you can take the fans to meet your GM face-to-face and he or she could tell little bit more than to media." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

It is justified to say that brand engagement and storytelling are closely in contact with each other. Storytelling helps especially among satellite fans, where various contact points must be developed continuously outside of match events, whether the match event has been experienced live or on television. All kinds of documentaries, stories, raptures, competitions, events, and various other physical or interactive activities are essential. Fans must receive something special; in the case of satellite fans, every interviewee mentioned that there should be some special content or communal activities through digital channels or platforms. However, the interviews emphasized that engaging with a sports brand is very complex and challenging, and there are no simple solutions. Enhancing brand engagement requires a lot of activities, resources, and a clear understanding of the targeted fan segment.

For NHL organizations these findings means that when their activities are moving on from the awareness phase to engagement phase there should be clear vision what they are trying to achieve. Creating engagement is difficult as different individuals might require and need different actions and content to retain as fans. Findings underlined that brand engagement is driven by a strong identification with the team and its brand. Behind that identification is brand identity and personality and what those factors could offer to individual in personal level.

From the perspective of NHL organizations this comes back to storytelling and communicating the brand's core elements in a meaningful way to the fans. Interviews brought even strongly to the light that storytelling is the most crucial way to enhance engagement among satellite fans. NHL organizations are not trying to sell tickets to these

fans, but they are rather trying the sell the brand, community, and other social means that the brand is offering to individuals. The concrete ways to do these are via digital channels and platforms that enable the wide distribution of content and touchpoints. With the usage of digital channels, the fans also offer from data about itself to the NHL organization which could benefit that information by providing personalized content, offers or fan packages to the individuals.

Lastly, like in the awareness phase, similarly in engagement phase the physical presence is instrumental. Offering exclusive opportunities to meet players or team staff are really important when enhancing the engagement and turning that individual fan to lifelong loyal fan.

4.6 Brand's role in growing the fan base internationally

The brand is an integral part of the sports team but also very multi-dimensional, as it binds together everything that the club itself is and what is around it, like the home city. Brands and fans are widely recognized to have a connection and go hand in hand, at least to some degree. There is no follow-up if there is no brand. The importance of the brand to the fan base and its development, in general, is extreme as it also attracts people who want to represent the community under it. For sports organizations, the brand is something that could be controlled. There might be a good or bad season or a good or bad game. However, it is controllable and the only thing sports organizations are trying to sell in the long term.

> "Basically, it is everything. The reason why some is interested about you." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

> "Essential. I think it's the most important thing because it's the one thing you can control. […] You've got control over how the brand looks on the shirts, on the merchandise, over your social channels, over digital, over the content you create and push out to people, you control all elements and most elements of the brand." (Interviewee D; Consultant)

The brand can also be thought of in a simplified way, for example, as a logo and motto, which, however, creates pillars around which a more profound meaning can be built. The brand is used to build images and identity, on which society begins to build. For a sports club, the motto is often the one thing that fans remember or recognize first; therefore, it is essential.

Using a brand in fandom development internationally requires that the brand is deconstructed. Interviewees underlined that it is possible to develop the brand, and it is imperative to do that if there are ambitions to develop fandom. However, developing a brand does not strictly mean that the fans will follow. Therefore, organizations must pull the brand apart and tell fans what it means and why it is important to them to bring them along that journey. It is all about telling the story to ensure a continuum and humanize the brand for the fans.

> "So, if you just develop a brand, you can have a brilliant brand that can be getting better, a lot of metrics, but the fans might not know what you mean to them. So, to me, you have to deconstruct it (the brand), and tell people "This is way your life will be better with us in it." That's effectively what you're trying to do, right?" (Interviewee D; Consultant)

> "It could be difficult to get the continuum. It starts from the brand and everything you do with it, how you bring it forward, and what you really can bring to the fans, internationally as well." (Interviewee C; VP, Sales and Services)

A brand and identity are at the core of building the continuum and giving something special to an individual fan. It can be built on a wide range of elements. However, often-used elements include success, tradition, locality, and hometown. However, a locality is not fully functional in an international context, so the brand must build an international identity on top of other things like entertainment, a stunning and successful history, or even a great and trendy visual look and entertaining show.

> "If you have a 100-year-old club, then you have to ride with tradition and nostalgia." (Interviewee A; Development Manager)

To emphasize the brand's essence, the interviewees stressed that the brand is the important thing a sports club can have, as everything crystallizes in it. Without the underlying stakeholders, fans and community, there is no club, and the brand is everything. Lastly, the interviewees discussed the connection between fandom development from the psychological perspective and brand development. The brand must communicate its identity and what it gives to an individual. It creates engagement in the long term when the fan creates psychological connection points with the brand and its elements. For NHL organizations this confirms all the previous learnings and summarizes the importance of the brand. As the interviews highlighted, in the end, the brand is the only thing that the NHL organizations are trying to sell to the satellite fans and thus is the most important tool in growing the international fan base.

4.7 Summary of findings

Fandom development is becoming even more critical for sports organizations as the supply for potential fans is continuously growing. The organizations are trying to keep their operations profitable and remain remarkable in sports. The main goal for sports organizations is to attract new fans and create a more profound relationship with existing ones (Richelieu 2016; Richelieu & Desbordes 2009). This study shows that that could be done by focusing on brand development and connecting brand development to fandom development to create a new and larger fan base internationally. There is great potential to benefit globalization and digitalization to bring the brand and team closer to international fans even though the brand and team might be based in another country.

There were many similarities between the four interviews conducted for this report, but new perspectives and ideas emerged. One theme was different from the themes of the interview body. This theme is brought up because of its relevance to the topic at a general level and its value in future in the context of the NHL organizations. Different themes were discussed with every interviewee and based on their general knowledge of the sports industry and marketing the analysis from the perspective of the NHL organizations in relation to the satellites fans were made.

The key takeaways are that NHL organizations must first identify the core of their brand before starting brand expansion internationally to secure their own story and authenticity through that. Those elements are needed especially in the engagement phase where the "soft" values are having remarkable role. During the awareness phase the NHL organizations' focus should be on creating touch points and pursuing a window of attention which could be then captured. Understanding that among satellite fans the brand is the one and only thing to sell is essential as the fan base is clearly different compared to the domestic fan base and for that reason the strategic objectives are also different.

Next, the findings are mirrored with the previously introduced theoretical framework and existing literature to create theoretical contribution for academic world and practical implications for NHL organizations and managers. The chapter includes revised theoretical framework which is updated based on the key findings of this study. Clear pattern was identified which also creates value in future as the NHL might change its operating model from centralized administration into more organization focused model.

5 Conclusions

This chapter deals with the empirical results and compares them with previous research results and theory, which were the foundation for the earlier established theoretical framework. Furthermore, answers to the research questions presented in the first chapter are provided based on the findings. In addition, the managerial significance of the results is opened, and a few suggestions for further research are presented.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

Existing literature acknowledges that there is a lack of understanding about how different branding strategies influence fans living abroad, satellite fans (Bodet et al., 2020). This study focuses on finding a solid pattern where branding and fandom development could unite. In addition, literature has focused on the fan motivations to participate in live events and how the fans express their attachment through physical presence. However, in the globalized world and with globalized fan bases, consumption and attachment cannot be limited to live events (Bodet et al., 2020). As a part of the pattern, this study examines how psychological attachment/engagement is developing, which are the ways that the engagement could be expressed remotely, and how the organization could support that among satellite fans.

This thesis has explored how sports organizations, especially NHL organizations, could grow their fan base internationally through brand development. The objective was to gather general information about fandom development and brand development, how those processes could be united, and what would be the most critical practical methods to do so. The research focus was created by combining branding and sports marketing, fandom development, and international perspective. Based on the literature review new theoretical framework was created, bringing together the three sub-questions and answering those. The empirical research aimed to confirm that framework but also to add some new relevant elements when taking the underlying context of the study into account, if there is any. The study confirmed the initial framework and added some more profound knowledge which are introduced below. The observations made based on the literature review were widely confirmed and recognized also in the study, including methods to enhance brand awareness and engagement to fulfill the objective set for the study.

Most importantly, the study confirmed a connection between brand and fandom development. However, the process should be divided into phases. As a result, a confirmed framework (Figure 16) was created to include the findings from the empirical research and to clarify the framework with experiences from real life. Themes that faced deeper, additional information are bolded as they could be seen as the most critical factors in the process. In awareness creation phase the sports marketing mix and different marketing activities united to the overall internationalization strategy is seen as very crucial and was highlighted in the findings as digitalization is offering the most powerful tools for enhancing the awareness among satellites fans. In addition, the identity and personality exploitation with Sutton et al.'s (1997) and Passikoff's (1997) four strategies to enhance engagement and loyalty were seen as most important and crucial means during the engagement enhancement phase. Furthermore, the brand identity and personality are seen as a crucial foundation for the whole overall process, and not just as a starting point for brand building and development, as they are affecting heavily to the brand development and fandom development per findings. Next, the revised framework is discussed through three sub-questions.

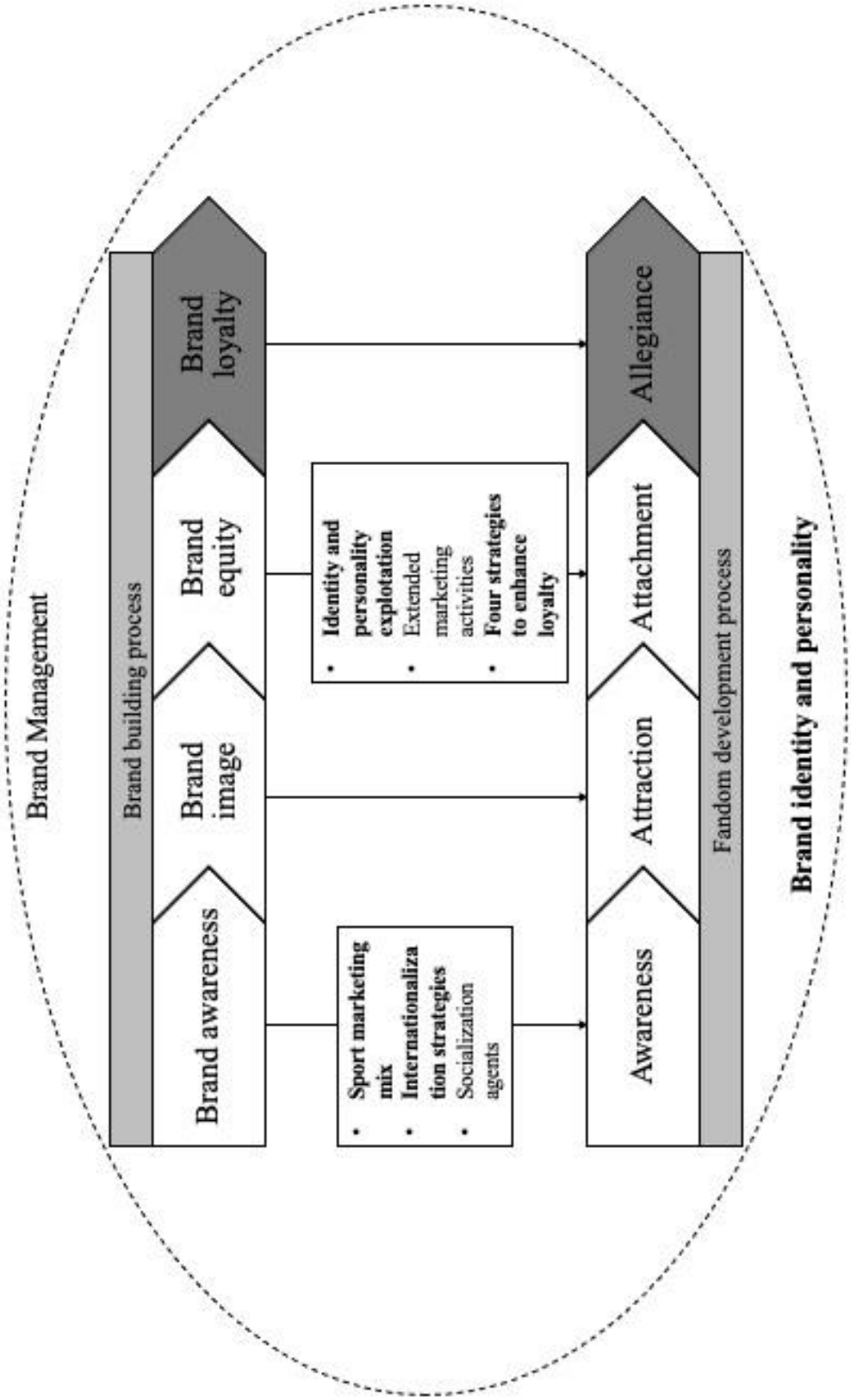

Figure 17 Revised framework

International sports brand management is built around the same principles as managing any other company's brand. However, sports brands have different special characteristics that make them more complex. Answering the first sub-question, this study shows that managing an international sports brand means managing the most crucial assets now, but, most notably, focusing on long-term factors with the brand continuously. Existing literature noticed that there is a lack of understanding of how branding affects satellite fans (Bodet et al., 2020). This study shows and creates a new understanding that it is not what can be developed for sports brands. However, it is about trying to take advantage of the opportunities and capabilities that are already existing. For the overall picture, sports organizations must identify their special characteristics, what the brand stands for, and the core of the brand, and try to build identity and personality around those factors to create a stable and understandable long-term brand identity. Understanding this is important because that identity could be communicated through various activities during the brand development or building process. Without a clear starting point and building blocks, creating anything that resonates with the (potential) fans and adds some real value to their life is hard.

In addition, this study acknowledges that to make the brand efficient tool in international fandom development, it should be deconstructed so the organization can understand which part of the brand building process and which factors genuinely affect fandom development. In every phase, a fan should understand what the brand offers to him or her and feel a connection to the brand. That cannot be achieved by building and developing the brand without clearly connecting it to different phases of fandom development. For that purpose, every organization needs accurate information about their fans to create a clear vision of how to proceed and communicate with the fans to develop the fandom.

When the overall understanding of the sports brand's core and its identity and personality is created, it is possible to start the brand internationalization process. As the existing literature acknowledged, creating new fans is crucial for sports organizations (Richelieu 2016; Richelieu & Desbordes 2009), but that could not be achieved without proper awareness. Building brand awareness relies on prevalent and practical methods highlighted in the existing literature and emphasized in the study. In this study, some "new" things were raised as the most important ways to build and enhance brand awareness internationally. The sports marketing mix, internationalization strategies, and socialization agents play vital roles in brand awareness enhancement. However, under

those methods, more precise channels and strategies working, especially for NHL organizations, were brought forward in the study. As a part of the sports marketing mix, digitalization and digital channels create unlimited chances for sports organizations to communicate and create awareness. That is something that was strongly emphasized in the study. Multiple successful examples were highlighted, but none of them were related to the NHL, which underlines that there is still room for improvement in digital channels. That is crucial to understand and is valuable observation because, with the sports marketing mix, it is possible to build a foundation for brand awareness.

As this study confirmed the observations from existing literature to be essential and correct means to create brand awareness, it also brought forward one new perspective, the "window of attention", which is vital for sports brand internationalization and awareness enhancement. This kind of "window of attention" could be a part of the internationalization strategy where the organization is looking forward to expanding its brand in some markets. They create an event that gives them the wanted attention from the fans. Internationalization strategy and marketing mix should create touchpoints between the sports brand and the (potential) fans. These touchpoints will create awareness but also helps the fans to create a better understanding of the brand, which could develop awareness into attraction if potential fan feels that the brand and its identity is offering something special for the individual. The team-initiated socialization agents were introduced in the literature, and some concrete examples of that were also highlighted in the study. For satellite fans, using local players and building awareness through them is a very effective method. At the same time, the players could also be used in other initiatives categorized as team-initiated socialization agents. Understanding the importance of the "window of attention" is crucial because if the organization cannot utilize the moment built through brand awareness activities and touchpoints, the potential fan might be lost. It is no longer possible, or at least it is much harder to support the fan to move forward from the awareness phase to the attraction phase.

Answering the second sub-question, the study confirmed and showed that sports brands and organizations have the opportunity and tools to promote fan creation and development, even though the study also emphasized that sports organizations cannot make fans. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how that process could be supported along the way. The brand equity framework is recognized to be a suitable tool to explore the relationship and connection between brand and fandom (Chanavat & Bodet, 2010;

Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Hinson et al., 2020) as brand equity relates to brand awareness, brand image, brand engagement, and brand loyalty, which are the supporting elements for fandom creation and development that the organization could control. To enhance the suitability of brand equity, the PCM model shows that fandom development has the same phases as the brand building process and that to create and develop psychological attachment, it needs the same factors needed to create a strong brand. To be straightforward, being a fan means attachment to the brand and its psychological offering.

This study confirmed that the brand is the only thing the organization can control, which is also the most important supportive tool. Based on that observation, this study explored ways to enhance brand awareness and attraction that lead to fandom creation. In addition, this study explored the strategies and methods to strengthen brand engagement, ultimately leading to fandom development. This study confirmed the observation based on the PCM model (Funk & James, 2001) that a brand must enhance its soft values and embrace its identity to deepen the emotional and psychological connection among the already existing fans. Underlining the role of the brand in fandom development support, this study made it clear that everything an organization can do to enhance engagement is somehow related to the brand and to the activities that are only controlled by the team. There is no shortcut or tricks for that. However, if the organization wants to achieve something among the fans, its tool is the brand. Therefore, they must implement various methods that are introduced in this study, such as engagement enhancing strategies, to underline the importance of the brand in the individual's life.

Thirdly, to answer the third sub-question, the focus moves on different engagement enhancement strategies that previous studies highlighted (e.g., Hyatt & Foster, 2015; Sutton et al., 1997; Passikoff, 1997) and that are also included in the theoretical framework. For example, this study supported and confirmed the possibility of meeting the team personnel and players face to face, team community activities, strengthening the existing capabilities such as traditions and history, and creating opportunities for group connections such as exclusive international fan community as the practical ways to allow the fan to learn more about the organization and brand and to have unlimited touchpoints so the fan can be in continuous connection with the brand in a way that creates additional individual value. In addition, the study highlighted the importance of special treatment for satellite fans as the organization cannot offer live experiences and regular activities to

those fans. Finally, material escalation, highlighted by the literature (Hyatt & Foster, 2015), was confirmed to be an efficient way to reward loyal fans.

This study highlighted and added that all the activities related to enhancing engagement should be done based on the position of the fan and his or her desires. Storytelling is an efficient way to bring forward content that the fan is willing to see. Therefore, digital communication through multiple digital channels is essential. Organizations must continuously create additional unique content for the fan to keep him interested and engaged with the brand and its story.

Finally, to confirm the relevance of the established framework and logic, this study shows that the brand's role in growing the international fan base is essential; without a brand, there is nothing. Furthermore, without a brand, there is no follow-up, which underlines that a brand is an essential tool for sports organizations to grow their fan base. The brand is the only thing the sports organizations can sell to fans because the performance on the ice could vary, and the players keep coming and going. Therefore, marketing activities, internationalization strategies, and engagement strategies should be created around the core of the brand and its identity and soft values that are the ones that make an individual fan if possible. To sum up, this study confirmed the initial theoretical framework through three sub-questions and created a theoretical contribution to the existing gaps identified in the existing literature.

5.2 Practical implications

Based on theory and empirical findings, the framework for fandom building through brand development (Figure 16) was designed and introduced in the preceding chapter. The findings are further studied in this chapter to offer implications on how managers may improve the brand, particularly awareness and engagement, to develop the fan base abroad, and what elements should be recognized about the process.

Turning this model into a real-life context and implementing it in practice requires strategic focus from the NHL organizations and general change in how the NHL and its organizations operate. Currently, there are limitations to use this model as the NHL's international operations and activities are controlled by the centralized administration, which does not leave many options for individual organizations to operate. Before going through what are the key takeaways from this model in practice, it must be said that if the

NHL organization is looking for brand expansion internationally, it should execute so-called ground zero brand research where the organization does holistic research about the current market in Europe and sort out the most potential market areas in Europe for the organization. As mentioned in the literature review, current players give the platform for NHL organizations to seek other market areas. One clear example, for now, is Dallas Stars, which has five Finnish players in its active roster, or Colorado Avalanche, which has two high-level Finnish players in its active roster. Those players create a suitable environment to seek brand expansion through different internationalization and brand marketing activities. However, before starting any practical activities, strategic research must be done so that when the individual NHL organizations can steer their international brand expansion, there is already a comprehensive understanding and solid strategical and tactical plan to go forward.

The key takeaways of this study from the managerial perspective are related to the overall understanding of how to manage sports brands internationally. As introduced, the brand's core, identity, and personality should be identified and defined to build on a consistent message which supports internationalization. Depending on that, the organization could choose the proper internationalization strategy. In the context of NHL organizations, glocalization would be most suitable where the organization keeps its existing strengths and then expands those attributes to the desired market with market-related adjustments.

Related to brand awareness and engagement enhancement, it all comes down to the ground zero brand research, which gives the foundation for strategy and tactic. As observed in the study, the activities should be chosen based on customer understanding, as different segments need different activities. However, now, the general situation for many teams is that they must think that they have not established the brand in Europe yet among the vaster audience. On the other hand, among hockey fans, brands are probably well-known, and the focus is on creating attraction to enhance fandom development.

When building brand awareness in Europe, the first focus should be creating a solid foundation via digital channels. The local players are an excellent tool to bring the brand forward. There is still a first-mover advantage, so wide usage of different content types through various channels is available. The analogy of IMC (integrated marketing communications) should be applied, which means the same message should be delivered via multiple channels, and the brand marketing activities should be consistent across the

channels. The strategic decision creates a base for the tactical decisions, and all the activities should support the same objective. Suitable methods could be an exhibition match with a local team or with another NHL team, a documentary movie or series about the team which goes deeper and opens what happens behind the scenes, meet, and greet events during the international tour, active and tailored social media marketing that is targeted for the target market and usage of the local/European players to create specific content for potential fans. As this study acknowledges, the focus should be on creating the first "window of attention," which could be then supported by digital communication to continue the story, which enables brands to talk more about themselves and what they stand for. As there are multiple options for satellite fans, the organizations and teams should focus on going deeper in their storytelling to create an environment where the potential new fan might develop a psychological attachment towards the organization and its brand.

After the "window of attention" is sealed and potential fans move forward from awareness to attraction, engaging activities come into play. Interestingly, most activities that should be applied in the awareness phase are also suitable and vital in the engagement phase. However, the perspective is different. The activities in the engagement phase should focus more on the individual than the team and its brand. As the study acknowledges and confirms, engagement should give some additional value to the individual. Therefore, the content should be more tailored and offer something special that is inclusive and enhances psychological needs. Therefore, identity and personality exploitation are increasingly important. That could be achieved through extended marketing activities that include special content and packages for international fans, including supporting cognitive and emotional escalation and material escalation, which is much easier to execute in the globalized world as the distribution channels are already established. The previously introduced four strategies to enhance engagement and loyalty have the same activities as the awareness phase. However, the difference is that the organization should acknowledge the special fan group that has already created attachment and offer them platforms and opportunities that are not available for the potential fans to feel exclusiveness and specialty.

To sum up, this study creates the understanding that the first steps are not strictly related to the introduced framework as there is some preparatory work to do first. Creating the structures and strategies for internationalization is crucial now when there are no clear

opportunities to operate yet. When the NHL generally understands that the power of the organizations should be utilized internationally, the window opens, and the organizations should be ready to execute. After the environment is suitable for brand internationalization activities, the introduced framework becomes more applicable, and the learnings from this study become useful.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research was conducted through expert interviews. The interviewed experts were general experts in sports marketing and brand marketing in sports. This study focused on uniting existing sports marketing practices to the NHL context. Hence, the extraordinary characteristics of the NHL depend only on one interviewee who was working for the NHL organization at the time of the interview. Therefore, the practices proposed should be verified with more interviews, which include the marketing experts from the NHL organizations, to add their perspective to the picture.

This study was the first one that unites brand development and fandom development. It argues that they could be united into one model if the brand development model is deconstructed to respond more efficiently to the fandom development model. The suggested theories and methods to enhance brand awareness and engagement should be tested more precisely in practice to see their actual impact on fandom development to verify those methods. It would also be beneficial to research if any additional branding strategies might simultaneously affect fandom development.

In addition, the NHL is not widely discussed in the existing literature, which makes some of the theories and models questionable from the NHL's perspective. Therefore, many of the conclusions are based on the existing literature, as the objective of the empirical study was to confirm the new theoretical framework, which was created based on the existing literature. However, existing literature also acknowledges that sports marketing principles apply to multiple sports. Still, it is crucial to understand that the football clubs in Europe work differently than the privately owned NHL franchises in the United States or Canada. For that reason, the different phases of the model should be examined and tested further to verify the connection in practice in the context of NHL and satellite fans.

Lastly, the practical limitation is that the current operating model of the NHL does not allow individual NHL organizations to make international marketing activities

independently. Therefore, the model is not applicable as such now. Moreover, the study did not acknowledge the strategic importance of new fans very sincerely, so to create a stronger foundation and argument for brand extension and fan base growth, there should be a more clarified understanding of the strategic meaning of the increasing fan base. However, the study confirmed, and the interviewees verified, based on their experience, that the model is more than suitable in the future if the operating model of the NHL is changed, and the marketing activities especially internationally, are not centralized anymore.

6 Summary

This research examined how NHL teams may grow their European fan base by enhancing brand awareness and engagement. It was proposed that this may be accomplished by deconstructing the brand development process and establishing obvious links between each phase of the brand development process and the fandom development process. However, this study found that it is not as straightforward in practice as it is in principle and necessitates a change in the operational environment.

This research aimed to provide a framework that would show how the branding process could be united with the fandom development process to create awareness and a foundation for fandom development and create attraction and engagement to develop that fandom and ultimately retain the fandom. The sub-questions were to find out how to create brand awareness and manage the sports brand internationally, how an organization can support fandom creation and development, and how to enhance brand engagement among international satellite fans. This study began with the creation of an initial framework based on past research findings. A clear pattern was established between the development stages, and several elements contributing to the success of the processes were given as part of the framework.

Expert interviews were used to perform the empirical investigation. Semi-structured interviews based on the theoretical framework were used to collect data. The interviews were chosen following extensive research, with the major selection criterion being extensive expertise and experience in the fields of sports business and sports marketing. There were four interviewers from various organizations in all. All of the interviews were taped, allowing for subsequent extensive transcription. Finally, themes from the operationalization table and topics that developed from the findings were used to analyze the data.

The empirical research mostly validated the prior conclusions while also providing new insights. First, it was concluded that the most crucial thing in international sports brand management is understanding its core and building a brand message around identity and personality that communicates authenticity. After that, the methods to enhance brand awareness were widely confirmed. The study identified the most critical methods in that phase. In addition, the same results were achieved in the brand engagement phase, as the

study confirmed the findings from the literature. However, the study also underlined that the process seems simple in theory. However, in practice, it requires a lot of effort and resources.

Following that, the study's goal was met by confirming the theoretical framework based on the empirical data results. Furthermore, management implications were presented to assist NHL teams and sports marketing managers in understanding the process of supporting foreign fan base expansion, as well as aspects that should be addressed throughout the process.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview structure and questions

Master's thesis

Interview guide (v3)

Haapalainen Joona

Turku School of Economics, University of Turku

Growing the fan base abroad through brand awareness and engagement: NHL organizations in Europe

How NHL organizations can enhance their international brand awareness and engagement to grow their European fan base through satellite fans?

The research will be conducted through three sub-questions:

1) *How to manage an international sports brand to build brand awareness?*
2) *How can an organization support fandom creation and development?*
3) *How to enhance brand engagement among international satellite fans?*

Background

- Brief introduction + professional background and current position briefly.
- What is your relationship with sports marketing and sports brands?

Theme 1 – Sports brand

- What are the crucial factors that needs to be acknowledged when building international sports brand?
    - How about when developing it even further? Are there some other focus areas?
- What role sports brand identity and personality plays in this context?
    - What kind of identity or personality traits supports most fandom creation?

- What are the main characteristics of a sports team brand (that also influence on fandom development)?
    - Choose 3-4 most important factors from the table that resonates with satellite fans (Gladden 2014)
- What are the key elements in brand management that should be acknowledged?
- How about from the perspective of NHL organization?

Theme 2 – International brand awareness in sports

- Can you describe the usual methods to create international brand awareness in general?
    - What are the most important marketing channels to create international brand awareness?
- What are the biggest challenges for creating international brand awareness?
- How about from the perspective of NHL organization?

Theme 3 – International brand engagement in sports

- Can you describe the usual methods to create international brand engagement?
    - Could you give some concrete examples of enhancing brand engagement in general?
- What are the biggest challenges for creating international brand engagement?
- What are the main characteristics of a brand to create engagement internationally?
- How about from the perspective of NHL organization?

Theme 4 – International fandom in sports

- How would you describe international fandom (satellite fans)?
    - What kind of special characteristics there are compared to domestic fandom?
- What are the key characteristics of sports team fandom?
- How does fandom start, and how it evolves?
- How can organization support fandom creation and development?

Theme 5 – Brand's role in international fan engagement

- How do you see the brand's role in international fandom creation and development?
- How about from the perspective of NHL organization?