

Building Sports Brand and Fan Relationships Through Social Media During Covid-19 Pandemic and Post Pandemic Era

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the measures taken by professional hockey clubs in Sweden for building brand and relationship with fans through social media (SM) during the global pandemic Covid-19. The study followed an inductive approach and qualitative method. Data were collected from officials and fans of three well-known Swedish Hockey league (SHL) teams through semi-structured interviews. A content analysis was undertaken to analyze the collected responses from the club officials and fans. The findings provide insight on the actions taken by the clubs to build their brand and fan relationships through SM. The study provides a framework signifying the important factors that sports organizations need to focus on while building their brand and fan relationships during a global pandemic and in the post pandemic era.

Keywords: brand loyalty, fans relationship, social media, hockey clubs interaction, engagement.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Firms and organizations across the globe in all industries use social media (SM) platforms to reach their target audiences (Malik et al., 2019; Abeza et al., 2020). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define SM as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” The interactive nature in communication through SM allows firms to build up interactive relationships with their targeted audience, understand the views of their audience and engage them through motivating contents (Sashi, 2012; Abeza et al., 2020). SM platforms can be used as an inter-active engagement and communication platform by clubs and franchises in sports industry to build their brand and fan relationships (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Larkin & McKelvey, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018). During the last decade, it has been observed that the sports industry has become a multi-billion-dollar global industry (Liu et al., 2017; Laurell & Soderman, 2018) various sports clubs and sports organizations within this global industry are using SM effectively to communicate with their fans nationally, regionally, and globally to convey their brand meaning and build fan relationships (Santos et al., 2019; Achen, 2019; Kim et al., 2022).

1.2 Problem Discussion

Against this background, the Covid-19 global pandemic posed a challenge for many industries (Tian et al., 2020), including sports. This is particularly true during the preliminary stages of the pandemic, when it had enormous bearing on world sports (Gentile et al., 2021), leading to an almost complete shutdown of sporting events. Hockey clubs were no exception, with activities on hold, a halt valued at over 500 billion USD (The Business Research Company, 2019). As the matches were called off and there were no ways the fans could meet their idols or visit the club grounds and facilities, hockey clubs identified SM channels to be the only way to communicate with their fans interactively to maintain relationship, induce brand loyalty and promote the club merchandise (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). During the period of the global Covid 19 pandemic, the interest of the fans intensified to visit the social platforms of their favourite clubs (Eddy et al., 2021). The question is whether the clubs were using their SM platform as per the expectations of their fans to build relationship with new fans, maintaining relationship with loyal fans and managing the brand as all physical activities and engagements were on hold due to the pandemic. In the post pandemic era the interaction behaviour of the fans has altered from pre pandemic era due to the influence of the frequency of visiting the clubs' social platforms during the pandemic. So, it is important to

explore the factors that can influence sports clubs to build their brand as well as build and maintain club-fan relationships through SM in response to the behavioural change of their fans in the post pandemic era.

1.3 Research Gap & Aim of the Study

Previous research focusing on the use of SM by sports organizations specified that SM was not used effectively to build fan relationship and branding (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Walden & Waters, 2015). Previous research studies have pointed out SM as an effective tool for interaction with fans (Meng et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015). But only a few studies have focused on how SM can be used by a sports club to build and maintain relationships with their fans and build their brand. Moreover, how SM is used by a sports club to build and maintain relationships with fans and building brands during a global pandemic like Covid-19 and in the post pandemic era is not discussed in any studies. Therefore, there exists a knowledge gap and research gap related to how sports clubs can build their brand and fan relationship through SM during the global pandemic and in the post pandemic era. To fulfil this research gap and knowledge gap, this study aims to explore the actions taken by sports clubs during the Covid-19 global pandemic to build and maintain relationship with their fans as well as build their brand through SM. Furthermore, this study will also focus on identifying measures that can allow sports clubs to continue building their brand and fan relationship through SM in the post pandemic era. This study is unique as it focuses on hockey clubs of Swedish Hockey League (SHL) in Sweden which is the world's second most popular Ice hockey league in the world after National Hockey League (NHL) of USA and Canada. Moreover, the study provides outlook from both hockey clubs' perspective and fan's perspective to understand what measures were taken or should be taken by sports clubs to build their brand and fan relationship through SM to satisfy fans' expectation .

2. Theoretical Discussion

2.1 Relationship Marketing and Customer Relationship Management

Relationship marketing (RM) and customer relationship management (CRM) is often used interchangeably, yet it is necessary to understand the difference (Payne & Frow, 2017). RM is an approach that aims at forming and preserving relationships between firms and their clients (Achen, 2019; Wang et al., 2000). On the other hand, CRM is only focused on firms taking actions to maintain established relationships with its customers (Payne and Frow, 2017). CRM allows firms not only retain their customers but also develop relationships with them and allow the customers to engage in sharing their thoughts related to building the brand (Migdadi, 2021). CRM has the capacity to unite the potency of the RM approach and SM strategies to reach and understand the target customers in a better way (Migdadi, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). CRM is often viewed by firms as a cross-functional, process-oriented strategic outlook that enables the firms to create a strong bond with their customers (Migdadi, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important for sports clubs to give value to RM to establish relationships with their fans and practice CRM to maintain relationships with their fans (Achen, 2019).

2.2 Brand Equity and Brand Association

Brand equity refers to a set of emotions that allows people to recognize a brand name, have perception regarding the brand name, show positive attitude towards the brand name, and take initiatives to make the brand part of their life by being loyal as well as by promoting the brand to their reference group (Budac & Baltador, 2013; Yousaf et al., 2017). Creating brand equity is not the same for a sports club and a business firm as fans as clients are very emotional and they often give priority to performance, success of the sports club to influence their feeling, attitude, and attachment as a fan (Richelieu & Pons, 2006). In the case of professional sports clubs, the club's logo, the players, the coaching staffs, the club's mascot, the club's stadium, facilities, the history of the club's performance, the owners and their background are all included in the brand association of the fan (Underwood et al., 2001; Mullin et al., 2014) and this association can be deepened through interactive communication between the club and the fans (Eddy et al., 2021) which can be more effectively accomplished by SM (Kim et al., 2022).

2.3 SM Marketing and Engagement

The interactive nature of SM allows marketers to communicate to its target audience and engage them in content co-creation and brand development (Filo et al., 2015; Hollebeek & Brodie, 2016; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Engagement through SM can influence sport organizations or clubs to build an effective relationship with their fans (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Eddy et al., 2021) that can lead to fans' loyalty towards the sports clubs (Achen, 2019). Loyalty of fans positively influence their engagement mentality and action towards building the brand and brand equity of the club (Achen, 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021). Loyalty often allows fans to spontaneously take up the role of being the opinion leader and brand ambassador of the club (Machado et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). So, it is important for sports clubs to use SM as an effective communication tool for building fan relationship and brand equity (Sashi, 2012; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021; Kim

et al., 2022).

2.4 Connection and Interaction

Emotional bond with fans is the basic requirement for sports clubs to achieve brand equity (Achen, 2019). SM platforms provide sports clubs the capacity to connect and interact with their fans and allows them to receive feedback from their fans (Alhathal et al., 2019; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021) to establish an interactive and strong relationship (Sashi, 2012; Santos et al., 2019). Interactive relationship allows clubs to understand better the needs and wants of the fans which leads to creation of effective and motivational SM contents that ensures stronger bond between fans and the club (Stamm & Boatwright, 2021; Kim et al., 2022) and enhanced Fan engagement (Eddy et al., 2021). Moreover, SM interaction can promote sales and enhance fans' online experience that results in superior brand loyalty (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Achen, 2019; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021).

2.5 Satisfaction and Retention

According to Sashi (2012), customers will only remain with a certain brand if the interaction between customer and the firm is satisfactory. Consequently, by realizing the opportunities that a sports club can have by using SM as an integrated marketing communication tool, sports clubs can understand the pulse of their fans better, create interactive and effective relationship with their fans, and make their fans satisfied (Thompson et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2022). Satisfied fans mean loyal fans Santos et al. (2019) as customer satisfaction have a positive impact on customer retention and customer loyalty (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Therefore, satisfying customer needs over time can lead to customer retention, implying a long-term relationship between an organization and its customers (Sashi, 2012).

2.6 Commitment

As sports club fans have deep emotional attachment with the club, they often play an important role of being the opinion leader or brand ambassador for the club (Stavros et al., 2014; Machado et al., 2020). Fans often take up spontaneous actions to promote the clubs' brand to portray their loyalty and commitment towards the brand of the club (Stavros et al., 2014; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021). Effective interactive SM communication can influence the commitment level of the fans to act as brand opinion leaders (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Yoshida et al., 2014; Alhathal et al., 2019).

2.7 Advocacy and Engagement

Advocacy refers to positive word of mouth (WOM) communication of clients (Sashi et al., 2019). Advocacy often is the result of positive brand relationship and effective customer engagement (Yoshida et al., 2014; Sashi et al., 2019; Eddy et al., 2021). Vale and Fernandes (2017) categorize customer engagement into three dimensions namely minimum level, mid-level, and high level of engagement. Vale and Fernandes (2017) further specify that minimum engagement is associated with connecting to a brand, mid-level engagement refers to frequent brand-customer interactions, and the highest level of engagement is where customers actively participate in the co-creation process. Sports club can use the interactive SM platforms as an engagement platform for their fans to provoke advocacy of their brand (Yoshida et al., 2014; Santos et al., 2019; Pourazad et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020) and achieve highest level of engagement as specified by Vale and Fernandes (2017).

2.8 Theoretical Framework

The literature review discussed in the preceding sections has provided us the understanding to create a theoretical framework that portrays the overview of how different variables are linked to each other to build the brand and fan relationship of a sports club through SM. The review of the relevant literature has made it clear that if RM approach is effectively blended in the SM communication of sports clubs, effective fan interaction, fan engagement, fan commitment, fan satisfaction, fan-club brand association, and fan advocacy can be achieved that can eventually lead to brand and fan relationship building for the sports clubs as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, creating connection with fans on SM permits the clubs to boost interaction and engagement with their fans resulting in brand association and commitment. It is observed that increased opportunity of fan-club engagement turns fans into opinion leaders and brand ambassadors of the club.

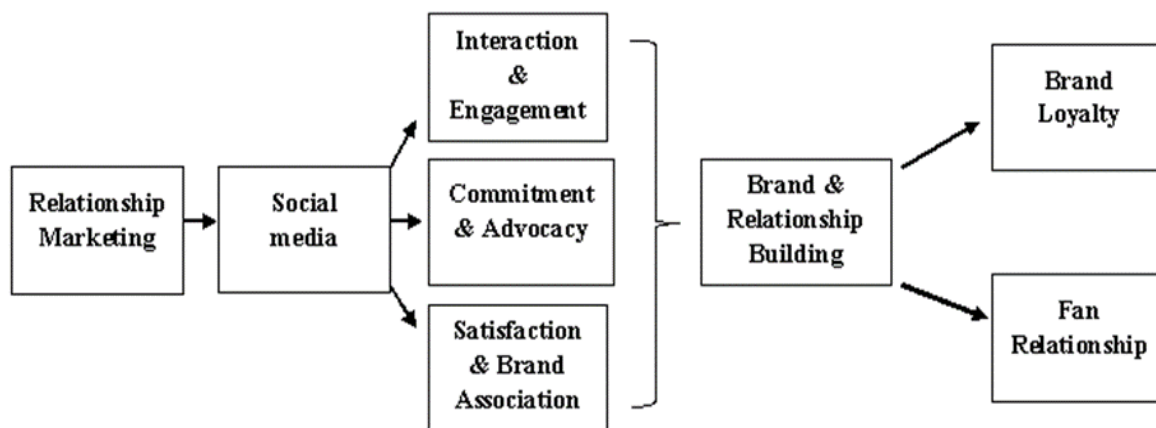


Figure 1. Framework for Building Fan Relationships and Brand Loyalty for Sports Organizations through SM

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach & Data Collection

Qualitative research approach was used to address the aim of this study as to fulfil the aim of the study, a detailed understanding of the thoughts, attitudes, motivations, and experiences of the respondents needed to be obtained (Denzin, 1989; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As per Yin (2009), qualitative research method provides more in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon rather than quantitative research method. As our aim was to explore and understand the actions taken by the sports clubs through SM channels to build their brand and fan relationships, it was required to obtain practical insights through discussions with the marketing policy makers in the selected sports clubs and this could only be possible through qualitative approach (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). Similarly, as per the aim of the study we wanted to understand the real feelings of the fans of the selected clubs and have their opinion related to fan relationship and brand building initiatives of the sports clubs through SM. So the required insight from the fans can only be possible through interaction and discussion with the fans that is why qualitative approach was selected (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018; Craig et al., 2024). Inductive approach was followed for this study as it permits the development of new theories as well as revision of existing ones (Saunders et al., 2012) based on the real scenario explained by the respondents. Out of the fourteen Swedish Hockey League (SHL) clubs, ten clubs were contacted that have the highest number of SM followers. Out of the ten clubs that were contacted, three clubs responded positively to take part in the study. The three clubs were: Frölunda HC, Djurgårdens IF and Luleå HF. To reach potential fan participants, an inquiry was posted to three closed Facebook groups exclusively for fans of each of the three hockey clubs interviewed. Snowball and convenience sampling methods were applied for the selection of the fan respondents (Acharya et al., 2013). Whereas, judgemental sampling method was applied for selecting the club respondents (Acharya et al., 2013). Digital communication platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams was used for the interviews based on the convenience of the respondents (Craig et al., 2024). To obtain the required information, semi-structured digital interviews were conducted with open-ended questions for the respondents to provide their perspectives freely (Creswell, 2014). Each interview was recorded as per the permission of the respondents (Craig et al., 2024). Each interview was transcribed following a realistic approach that included facial expressions as well as variations in the respondent's voice while answering the interview questions (Oliver et al., 2005). The authenticity and trustworthiness of this study was ensured by selecting the right respondents that can participate in the study, receiving in-depth knowledge through extended interview sessions with respondents, and persistent scrutiny of the relevance of the collected information (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A list of the participants from each of three hockey clubs and their fans who took part in the interview is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of participants and interviews

Name	Club	Employee position/ Age of fan	Years employed with club/Years following club on SM as a fan	Date of interview	Duration of interview
C.R 1	Djurgården IF	Marketing & Growth Manager	30 years	26.04.2021	19 min
F.1	Djurgården IF	34 years	5 years	16.04.2021	17 min
F.2	Djurgården IF	49 years	10 years	19.04.2021	18 min
F.3	Djurgården IF	50 years	16 years	16.04.2021	15 min
F.4	Djurgården IF	28 years	12 years	20.04.2020	20 min
C.R 2	Frölunda HC	Video & Media Editor	4 years	20.04.2021	45 min
C.R 3	Frölunda HC	Brand Manager	11 years	26.04.2021	18 min
F.5	Frölunda HC	31 years	16 years	15.04.2021	12 min
F.6	Frölunda HC	22 years	9 years	18.04.2021	22 min
F.7	Frölunda HC	35 years	5 years	18.04.2021	19 min
F.8	Frölunda HC	27 years	5 years	21.04.2021	14 min
C.R 4	Luleå HF	Communication & Media Manager	16 years	15.04.2021	32 min
C.R 5	Luleå HF	Marketing & Sales Manager		21.04.2021	15min
F.9	Luleå HF	60 years	16 years	16.04.2021	32 min
F.10	Luleå HF	41 years	7 years	18.04.2021	11 min
F.11	Luleå HF	32 years	11 years	19.04.2021	15min
F.12	Luleå HF	42 years	5 years	20.04.2021	20 min

Note. C.R- Club representative; F.-Fan.

3.2 Data Analysis

The study employed a constant comparative approach of joint coding and analysis (O'Reilly et al., 2012). The analysis process began with going through the transcribed interviews based on the recorded meetings and selecting the important issues discussed by the respondents and coding those important issues. Then memos were developed based on the codes. In the next step codes were compared with memos and focus was given on frequency of occurrence, connections, similarities and differences to conceptualize the transcribed information and develop themes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Through this analysis process, five themes were identified: *relationship marketing*, *customer relationship management*, *brand building*, *relationship building*, and *level of engagement* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Table 2 illustrates the analysis process and links between concepts, codes, memos, and themes that helped the content analysis.

Table 2. Overview of codes and themes

Concepts Behind Theme	Codes	Memos	Themes
Relationship marketing focuses on building and retaining relationship between marketer and its clients (Wang et al., 2000; Achen, 2019).	Focusing on what the hockey clubs use their SM for.	Determining whether the club-fans relationship was affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic was crucial, especially considering RM is possible through SM.	Relationship Marketing
While the traditional idea behind CRM was mainly to promote sales (Alhathal et al., 2019), SM platforms allowed marketers to interact with target audience to build and interactive customer centric engagement focused relationship (Dolan et al., 2016).	Prioritizing of the fans' interest on SM.	The aim was to find out whether the hockey clubs relied on CRM solely to promote sales or allow their fans to engage and build interactive relationship.	Customer Relationship Management
Building a sports brand focuses on creating emotional attachment with fans that leads positive attitude and brand loyalty of fans (Underwood et al., 2001).	Emphasis on promoting a distinctive brand on SM.	Brand building requires a hockey club's fans to show an association towards the club brand while the club leverages this association as an equity.	Brand Building
Vale and Fernandes (2017) categorize engagement into 3 dimensions (i.e. minimum-, mid- and high level of engagement), based on which the brand relationship can be determined.	Emphasis on content that motivates fans' engagement and interaction.	Fans showing commitment and advocacy towards the hockey clubs forms the premise to determine the level of engagement.	Relationship Building
Continuous interaction through SM platforms allows sport clubs to enhance their relationship with their fans that results in fans' positive brand engagement (Thompson et al., 2018).		Continuous engagement with fans can only be possible when fans are committed to high level engagement.	SM Engagement and Interaction

4. Findings

4.1 Relationship Marketing

The global pandemic influenced the Swedish hockey league games to be suspended which meant that physical relationships of the clubs with their fans were negatively affected that influenced the hockey clubs to think of other measures to keep the relationship with their fans alive without the possibility of the fans to be able to come to watch their favourite club perform in home or away games.

As C.R 1 put it: *"The question has become how we need to communicate with our fans and how we can create services and products that attract them"*.

As per the fans, due to absence of not being able to support their favourite clubs in home and away games, took initiative to follow the clubs in SM platforms. On the other hand, the hockey club representatives focused on SM strategies to attract fans to their SM platforms. The findings show that the hockey clubs shared the view that it was necessary to post assorted content on SM. However, to do this each club took a different approach. One club focused on brief communications to attract the younger generation, another focused on creating new, creative content to attract a more diverse crowd and, lastly, the other club concentrated on strengthening its image by showing the social responsiveness of the club. The hockey clubs unitedly expressed that SM was considered a vital brand and relationship building tool. SM allowed the clubs to reach their target fan audience in an interactive manner.

As C.R 3 pointed out: *"With the use of SM, we are able to quickly and directly keep our audience up to date on what is happening"*.

4.2 Customer Relationship Management

Understanding the need for change, the hockey club respondents confirmed and acknowledged that the SM contents had been changed for managing their relations with their fans during the pandemic.

As C.R. 5 explains: *"SM communication is important because of its reach"*.

Regarding SM content posted by the hockey clubs, the fans were seemingly very satisfied.

As F.10 adds: *“For me personally, it is good, as they publish content that I want to read about”*.

Moreover, the fans took notice of the change in their favourite hockey clubs' SM content creation and frequency, and the overall perception was that clubs SM activeness was more than pre-pandemic era.

As F.1 remarked: *“The feeling is that they are providing content more frequently now”*. They however noticed that majority of posts focused on selling “support tickets” with the purpose of supporting the club financially.

4.3 Brand Equity and Brand Association (Brand Building)

Based on the interviews with the club respondents it was evident that the clubs did not have a marketing strategy in place that focused solely on enhancing their brand through SM. They did, however, have a clear aim and intention of promoting their brand on SM. Another interesting remark made by one the hockey club representatives was that honesty and transparency are key factors for strengthening and improving brand awareness.

As C.R 5 expressed: *“Strengthening of the brand depends on our transparency to our fans”*.

All the fans interviewed shared the view that they all considered their favourite hockey club as a brand; *“Yes, of course. The club as a brand is what you support since players come and go”* (F.7)

On the other hand, most of the clubs were using SM platforms to build fans' brand relationships whereas, only one club was using SM platforms to retain fans' brand relationships. *“We try to engage the fans by inviting them to comment and tell us about a possible memory connected to the arena or encourage them to guess the game results. We try to build an interaction with the fans that, at the same time, creates participation”*. (C.R 2)

Lastly, the clubs believed that any content that provoked some kind of action, reaction or positive feeling from fans can be considered as relationship building SM strategy.

In relation to content linked to strengthening the brand, C.R 5 pointed out that: *“If we can release information about anything via our channels before the press, it is considered to be to our advantage and an important aspect for strengthening our brand”*.

4.4 Commitment and Advocacy Towards the Hockey Clubs

Fans in order to get up-to-date news and views of the club frequently visited the SM platforms of their favourite hockey clubs for new contents.

F.4 stated, *“I am very interested in what is happening around the club”*.

In general, the fans believed that they would never unfollow their favourite hockey club on SM; *“I don't see that ever happening”*. (F.10)

The fans thought that all fans will spontaneously follow the SM platforms of their favourite club because of the emotional attachment with the club. *“No, I don't encourage others as I believe that if someone is interested in the club, it'll become natural to follow them on SM”*. (F.11)

4.5 SM Engagement and Interaction

SM importance was confirmed by the respondents and the hockey clubs' respondents admitted that the extent of their interaction with the fans was limited and could have been increased.

For example, C.R 1 added that: *“Yes, we do, as they are our customers and important to us. However, it's something we need to get much better at”*.

The responses from fans, on the other hand, indicated that there was interaction on SM. The relationship interaction appears mainly to be one-sided and initiated by the club, where the club posts content on SM: *“The interaction occurs mostly in the form of a one-way communication”*. (F.10)

To establish the level of their engagement, 83% of the respondents stated that they either “liked” or shared news about their favourite hockey club but nothing more.

As F.12 explained: *“Yes, I've done that many times to attract more spectators to the games”* while another respondent said, *“I've liked certain posts, which then get spread within my social network”*. (F.10)

However, the overall view was that the clubs had not taken measures or developed their SM strategies to engage fans. The general perception of the fans was that their club's SM engagement with fans was weak.

As F.3 put it: *“On a few occasions, it's happened that they ask for opinions and feedback, but not more than that”*.

Table 3 shows the summary of the findings in the following.

Table 3. Summary of the findings

	According to hockey clubs	According to fans
Relationship Marketing	A clear strategy was in practice to attract new customers on SM which was done through posting a range of contents on SM.	Most fans started to follow their favorite hockey club on SM of their own initiative
Customer Relationship Management	The contents of the hockey clubs in their SM platforms were mostly influenced by transaction-based marketing philosophy.	Hockey clubs were more active in SM platforms compared to pre-pandemic time. However, the increase of content on SM focused primarily on selling "support tickets".
Brand Equity & Brand Association	A clear strategy to strengthen the brand was adopted by being transparent and releasing information about the club before the press does.	Responses from the fans showed a strong brand association as the hockey clubs are perceived as a brand.
Commitment, Interaction & Engagement	The hockey clubs could not use their SM platforms to trigger fans interactive engagements in an effective way.	Fans have a very strong commitment to the club. However, fans consider the interaction to be mainly one-sided and the engagement from the clubs to be low.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Relationship marketing is known to be an approach that allows marketers to build and maintain relationships with their clients or customers (Wang et al., 2000; Achen, 2019). The findings specified that during the Covid-19 pandemic, two hockey clubs tried to use their contents in SM platforms to build fan relationships and the other hockey club used the SM platforms to maintain their relationships with their fans. As the hockey clubs operate in a service environment, they should focus more on relationship building through SM (Achen, 2019) which was evident in our findings. However, in our study it was seen that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs were making contents in the SM platforms following a transaction-based marketing approach which should not have been the approach while building SM contents (Achen, 2019).

Relationship marketing should be conducted by the marketer by using the method that reaches the target clients and builds relationship (Payne & Frow, 2017), during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs used the SM platforms to reach and build relationship with their fans in a cost-efficient manner. Despite hockey clubs having a strategy in place to attract new fans to their SM platforms, the findings clearly show that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the fans followed the clubs on SM as they wanted to be updated with the news and views of their favourite club during the global pandemic (Mountifield & Sharpe, 2020). According to Thompson et al. (2018), customers' brand knowledge can be developed by creating different types of brand association-containing content. Furthermore, fans perceived the clubs to be more active on SM during the Covid-19 pandemic compared pre-pandemic era (Mountifield & Sharpe, 2020). The reason for the hockey clubs' increased activity on SM was the otherwise limited opportunities to communicate and deliver information during the pandemic. The hockey clubs moreover confirmed of utilizing frequent SM content update during the pandemic, which, as noted, by the fans as being contents related to selling "support tickets".

Sports club branding involves fan-brand attachment that leads to positive fan attitude and club brand loyalty (Underwood et al., 2001). Our findings reveal that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs were using the SM platforms as a club brand strengthening tool by creating contents to provide latest news and views regarding the players and the clubs which affirms the claims of Filo et al. (2015) and Beech and Chadwick (2007) that sports clubs can ensure trust of fans and brand association through continuous, effective, and transparent communication. Nevertheless, the question of whether the clubs' brand-building approaches had been effective was seen in the fans' responses as means of positive brand association with the clubs' brands that affected their spontaneous brand opinion leadership in SM (Kim et al., 2022).

Sports clubs require to understand the pulse of the fans for effective interaction and building relationship (Thompson et al., 2018). Our study specifies that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the SM interaction between the club and fans was limited and mostly one-sided only from the clubs creating SM contents. It was surprising considering that the average fans had followed their favourite hockey club for about 10 years. This scenario provides that understanding that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs failed to use SM to enforce fan interaction to build and retain their clubs' brands as Thomson et al. (2018) prioritized on continuous interaction and engagement through SM to build and retain fan relationships.

Furthermore, the findings pointed out the Covid-19 pandemic had negative impact on club-fans (Gentile et al., 2021). Under the circumstances the hockey clubs needed to use their SM platforms to induce fans interaction and engagement to build and maintain club-fans relationships (Santos et al., 2019; Achen, 2019). In our study, fans

expressed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs did not take enough measures to engage them through contents on the clubs’ SM platforms. This engagement gap between sports clubs and their fans can influence the fans-club relationship (McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2017)

Lastly, our study revealed that the use of SM to interact and engage with fans to build relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mountifield & Sharpe, 2020), has been under-utilized by the hockey clubs. As most of the SM platform contents of the hockey clubs were directed towards transactional aspects, such as “support tickets” which was a mistake committed by the hockey clubs as they had the opportunity to create contents to induce effective fan engagement to ensure strong bonding with their fans leading to fans’ loyalty towards the brand of the clubs (Achen, 2019). The study also portrays that while high levels of engagement were stated as occurring in the hockey clubs during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were not consistent enough due to the clubs’ negligence to interact and engage with their fans on a regular basis. This affected the brand and fan relationship as Brodie et al. (2011) specifies that SM engagement positively impacts the creation of an affirmative mental outcome in relation to a brand.

5.1 Study Output Framework

Based on the findings of the study and the analysis of the findings it is evident that the hockey clubs have somewhat utilized the SM platforms to communicate with their fans through content creation which ensured connection between the hockey clubs and their fans during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was also evident that the hockey clubs failed to create effective interactive contents in their SM platforms to induce fan-engagement. Interaction between fans and the sport club is an influencing factor for the engagement level of the fans (Vale & Fernandes, 2017; Eddy et al., 2021). As per our findings, the hockey clubs were successful in providing up-to-date news to their fans related to the club and the players through their contents in their SM platforms. This news sharing with fans are seen by fans as an important factor towards transparency of the hockey clubs and creation of positive perception among fans about the club and its brand and ensured fan loyalty. The study also reveals that the fans think that to achieve the highest level of engagement during a global pandemic, the hockey clubs need to be more interactive in their SM platforms and clubs should encourage fans towards content co-creation to ensure effective club-fan relationship. Mountifield and Sharpe (2020) also pointed in the same direction. As an outcome of this study, Figure 2 provides a framework for brand building and Fan Relationship building through SM for a sports club during a global pandemic. The framework focuses on the variables that have been identified previous research as well as new variables that has been identified in this study to ensure clubs’ brand building and building relationship with fans. The framework follows the three dimensions of engagement identified by Vale and Fernandes (2017). This framework shows how SM can be used to build the band of the club as well as fam relationship during global pandemic and how that knowledge can even be utilized in the post pandemic era where fans are more frequent in SM channels than pre pandemic era.

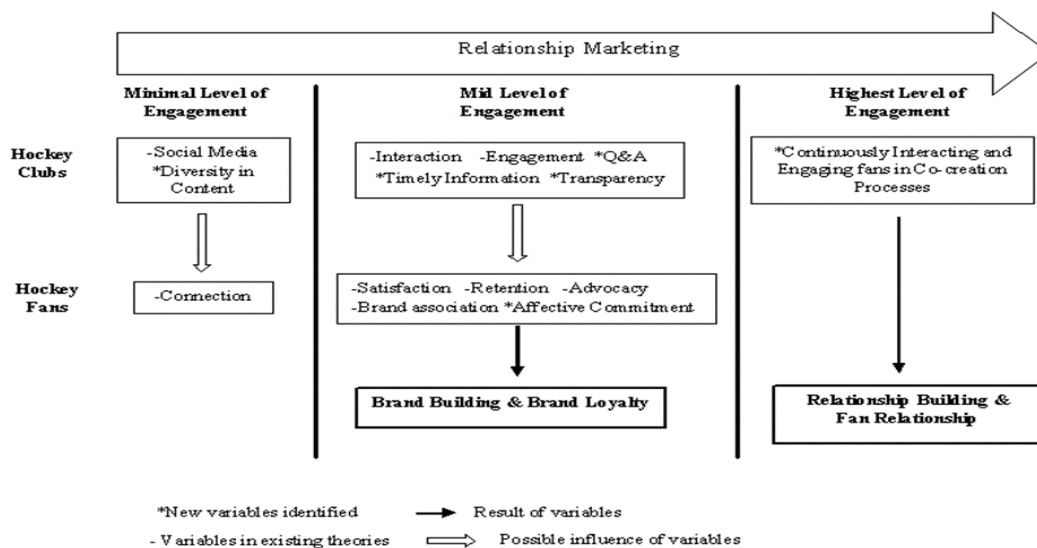


Figure 2. Framework for Brand and Fan Relationship building through SM for a sports club during Global Pandemic and Post Pandemic era

6. Conclusion

Building a sports club brand and building relationship with fans through SM platforms depends on understanding the fans' emotional bond with the club and how the club engages their fans to deepen their relationship with the club and its brand (Sashi, 2012; Santos et al., 2019; Achen, 2019; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021). Our study has outlined that during Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs have taken measures to use their SM platforms to build their clubs' brand and club-fan relationship (Mountifield & Sharpe, 2020). It is also evident from our study that the sharing of news and views about the clubs on SM by the hockey clubs during Covid-19 pandemic allowed the fans satisfaction and also enhanced their trust on the clubs' brand (Thompson et al., 2018; Kim et al. 2022). The hockey clubs during the Covid-19 pandemic were able to win the trust of their fans with their contents in their SM platforms but it was evident from the study that they were unable to encourage their fans through interactive content creation (Alhathal et al., 2019; Stamm & Boatwright, 2021). The lack of interactive character in SM platform contents of the hockey clubs during Covid-19 pandemic influenced lack of engagement for their fans (Vale & Fernandes 2017), which resulted in less fan brand advocacy (Santos et al., 2019; Pourazad et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020, Eddy et al., 2021). It can be said that during Covid-19 pandemic, the hockey clubs were more active and frequent in their SM platforms compared to the pre-pandemic era with an outlook to build their brands as well as the club-fan relationship. But despite their efforts, the hockey clubs were unable to engage their fans to content co-creation in their SM platforms to reach the maximum level of engagement as mentioned by Vale and Fernandes (2017) due to their transactional approach during Covid-19 pandemic. So, it is required for the hockey clubs to remain active in content creation in the SM channels to build their brand and fan relationships in the post pandemic era as well. In the post pandemic era, more initiatives should be taken by the hockey clubs to create contents in their SM platforms that allows their fans to be more engaged to attain the maximum level of engagement as mentioned by Vale and Fernandes (2017) and effectively build clubs' brand and fan relationship.

6.1 Contributions

The study has several theoretical contributions. Firstly, the study adds to the literature on customer engagement, filling a need cited in Filo et al.'s (2015) review, especially when it comes to the area of SM and its usage by sport clubs to induce fan engagement during a global pandemic and in the post pandemic era. The study further provides empirical findings on the claim of McCarthy et al. (2014) that there is a gap in the expectation of fans and the SM content creation of sports organizations when it comes to fan engagement and content co-creation. The study also provides new knowledge on the level of engagement of fans as categorized by Vale and Fernandes (2017) with the brand of the sports organization stimulated by SM contents of the sports organizations during a global pandemic through an empirical study conducted with reflections from both fans and sports organizations.

The study further provides managerial knowledge related to new variables like timely information, content diversity, and continuous level that influences the framework that this study brings out based on the findings that sports organizations can follow to build their brand and fan relationship through SM in post pandemic era.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Study

This study provides new knowledge related to brand building and fan-club relationship building through SM during a global pandemic for hockey clubs of Swedish Hockey League. This new knowledge specially the framework for brand and fan relationship building through SM for a sports club during a global pandemic and post pandemic can be tested in future studies focusing on other sports organizations in other sports in the post-pandemic era. Furthermore, future studies can use a mixed method where qualitative methods like interview and focus group discussion can be used to receive responses from sports organization respondents, and club members and quantitative methods like survey can be used to receive feedback from fans to cover a larger population and have result that can be more generalizable.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury and Dr. Daniella Fjellström were responsible for study design and revising. Mr. Giancarlo Mancuso and Mr. Richard Amankwah Addo was responsible for data collection. Mr. Giancarlo Mancuso, Mr. Richard Amankwah Addo and Dr. Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury drafted the manuscript and Dr. Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury and Dr. Daniella Fjellström revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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