

Exploring fan engagement and commercialisation in Swedish elite football

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Abstract

This dissertation builds on theory of customer and fan engagement and explores the nature of fan engagement in the Swedish elite football ecosystem. In light of the increasingly interconnected service ecosystem of elite football and the intensified commercialisation of the game, the aims of this thesis are to (1) examine and analyse the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement in Swedish elite football, focusing specifically on the influence of engagement with multiple actors and on different engagement platforms, and (2) analyse the consequences of elite football commercialisation on fans and their engagement.

To fulfil these aims, this dissertation builds on survey responses from 4331 fans of Swedish elite football and a systematic literature review focusing on the effects of elite sport commercialisation on fans.

Based on the results of three survey-based studies, this dissertation sheds light on the influence of engagement that occurs beyond the customer-firm dyad (fan-team), on the platforms where this engagement takes place, as well as on the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement. The results indicate that the engagement that occurs between fans, independent of involvement from the club, is extremely important for outcomes of engagement, such as value co-creation and brand loyalty. The survey results also indicate that engagement on virtual engagement platforms, such as social media, is positively related to team loyalty and value co-creation between actors. This finding indicates that virtual engagement platforms, which allow for ongoing and intense engagement between actors, are as important to fans and fan engagement as physical engagement platforms.

This thesis also highlights the scarcity of studies focusing on the effects of commercialisation on fans beyond the top European football leagues and finds that almost no studies have surveyed fans of women's elite football on this topic. As such, by surveying women's football fans, this dissertation shows that in contrast to the many critical studies on commercialisation, perceptions of increased commercialisation among women's football fans may, in fact, lead to more engagement and a more credible league.

The results of this thesis are important to the research on customer and fan engagement. For practitioners in this sector, this dissertation shows the importance of fostering fan-to-fan interactions and ensuring that virtual engagement platforms are facilitated accordingly.

Keywords: Fan Engagement, Commercialisation, Customer Engagement, Service Ecosystems, Swedish Elite Football.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The growth of a new world of football

In the early 1990s, European elite football started to change substantially (De Waele et al., 2018; Sund, 2014). Driven by, among other things, the launch of the English Premier League, the introduction of the UEFA Champions League, large broadcasting agreements from commercial TV channels (such as Sky Sports), and an increasing interest, and influence, from private investors (Rohde & Breuer, 2016), European elite football rapidly underwent a structural shift where success on the pitch became more contingent on financial and commercial investments off the pitch than before (Rohde & Breuer, 2017; Sund, 2014).

This process may be referred to as the commercialisation of European elite football and covers the increasing influence of financial revenues and the prioritisation of such revenues among actors in the elite football ecosystem, such as clubs, sponsors and media. Due to this intensified commercialisation, top European football teams (and their star players), such as Manchester United and Real Madrid, are no longer just football clubs; rather, they are global brands and, as such, have strong commercial value (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Uhrich et al., 2020). For instance, Forbes (2023) estimated the commercial value of Real Madrid to be 2 billion dollars, its brand value to be 1.014 billion dollars, and its total club value to be 6.07 billion dollars¹. Moreover, Manchester United was estimated to have a club value of 6 billion dollars (Forbes, 2023).

This development would not have been possible without the involvement and engagement of many football fans (Sund, 2014; De Waele et al., 2018). Football fans are usually considered individuals who have high levels of engagement, loyalty and willingness to cooperate with the clubs and to invite others to the fan community (McDonald et al., 2022). The strong relationship between fans and their teams may be manifested in how fans, despite losses, scandals and even degradation from divisions, remain committed to and engaged with their team (Fujak et al., 2018). As such, it is not surprising that European elite football has become an attractive industry for global brands (sponsors), broadcasters and currently even entire nation states (most recently Saudi Arabia investing in the World Cup 2030) to take part in (Ingle, 2023; Lundh, 2018). This rapid commercialisation has not been restricted to just men's elite football. Since the early 2000s, the commercialisation of women's football has steadily increased. As women's elite football does not yet have the same global fan community and global interest from sponsors as men's elite football, the commercialisation of the women's game has often

¹ The total club value includes the operating income and the club revenues during a year. Moreover, the brand value is the portion of a team's value not attributable to match day, broadcasting, commercial or player trading revenue (Forbes, 2023).

been seen as necessary for the sport to professionalize further and attract even more fans to the game (Culvin & Bowes, 2023; Radmann & Hedenborg, 2018).

Yet, as financial revenues and commercial ambitions have become more influential for the development of elite football, the criticism towards the commercialization of elite football has increased (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018; Panja & Smith, 2022). Commercial elements, such as ticket sales, sponsors, and betting, were indeed prevalent in elite football prior to the 1990s (Sund, 2014). However, both scholars and media have observed that the intensified commercialisation of men's elite football and the prioritisation of financial revenues among the clubs and other actors in this ecosystem may risk eroding the authenticity of the game (De Waele et al., 2018; Panja & Smith, 2022). This may lead to the creation of improper competitiveness where trophies are "bought" by superrich clubs and may increase ticket prices and reduce the perceived influence of fans on their clubs (Hognestad, 2015; Torchia, 2016). Within the most commercialised elite football leagues in Europe, such as the English Premier League and the UEFA Champions League, some scholars argue that this intensified commercialisation of men's elite football has transformed the formerly influential fans of elite sports into mere passive customers of their team (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018).

Fans, who may have engaged with a team for decades, may therefore feel excluded (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012; Woisetschläger et al., 2013). Their engagement may be reduced to only mattering for generating financial revenues for teams, broadcasters, and investors (Cockayne, 2019). As a consequence, the EU recently published an opposing statement where they argued that they "want a balance to be struck between professional sport's commercial interests and its social functions, by strengthening the links between grassroots and elite sport" and "promote the European model of sport and protect it from threats such as a Super League" (EU, 2024). Critical reports further argue that the increased importance of the commercial aspects of elite football has made it possible for elite football to become an industry in which investment groups, brands, and even governments can invest to improve their own reputations, which can be worsened by wrongdoing (Lundh, 2018). For instance, Ingle (2023) stated that a nation such as Saudi Arabia, which has poor human rights records (Amnesty International, 2023), has spent at least 1.5 billion dollars on "high-profile international sporting events" (Formula 1, golf, athletics, football) to benefit from the massive, global, engagement in elite sports.

However, when discussing the commercialisation of elite football, it must be recognised that perceptions of commercialisation and its influence on fans are largely subjective. Although some fans may feel that the increased influence of commercialisation has damaged the sport and eroded its authenticity, other fans may view this process in a positive light and embrace how it, for instance, improves the arenas, the possibilities to watch games from abroad, and the quality of the team through better signings (Abosag et al., 2012). The recent TV series following the Hollywood stars Ryan

Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, who purchased the Welsh football team Wrexham AFC, shows the ambiguity of how fans respond to aspects of commercialisation (Disney, 2023). For some fans, this purchase was embraced by the entire Wrexham community, who cheered for the American investors, as their investments improved the team's competitiveness (Catsam, 2023). However, at the same time, some Wrexham citizens felt that the investment by the Americans would erode the Welsh identity and atmosphere of the club (Catsam, 2023).

1.2 The “Swedish way”: association democracy

“While most of Europe’s leagues engage in a Sisyphean quest to source as much money as possible, Sweden has chosen a different model”, says Rory Smith from the New York Times in an article published in the Fall of 2023 (Smith, 2023).

During the 1980s and even the early 1990s, Swedish elite football teams (men's) were among the best teams in Europe, competing for European trophies (Sund, 2014). However, as global elite football incorporated much more of the abovementioned commercial logic and elements, Swedish elite football (both men's and women's) followed a somewhat different path and is now at another position on the commercialisation continuum (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016; Stenling & Fahlén, 2009).

For many decades, Swedish elite sports had a strong tradition of being associated with ideals of amateurism and volunteerism (Sund, 2014). For instance, in the 1950s, some of the nation's best football players were excluded from the national team, just for having been paid a minor salary (Bachner, 2023). Moreover, multiple actors within Swedish elite football have strongly advocated for regulations that restrict external investors from taking over the clubs, despite the traditional “fan-owned” structures implying lost competitiveness towards many other European top-tier divisions (Bachner, 2023; Sund, 2014). One such aspect is the “51 percent rule”, which is stipulated by the national sports federation in Sweden and upholds the “association democracy” in various sports organisations, such as Swedish elite football clubs (Almgren, 2021). This rule, which ensures that the clubs must be owned by their members, most often the fans, was established in 1999.

Due to Swedish elite football restricting private ownership, and therein becoming less competitive than other European leagues, an eventual abolition of the “rule” was brought up for discussion on multiple occasions (Lundh, 2018). However, Swedish football fans strongly advocated against the abolition of this rule and argued that such barriers to external and private ownership are needed to maintain the authenticity and uniqueness of Swedish elite football (Bachner, 2023; De Waele et al., 2018). Since the “51 percent rule” was established in 1999, attendance figures at Swedish elite football matches have steadily grown, despite the teams being far from the best in Europe (Föreningen Svensk Elitfotboll, 2023). In fact, the attendance of games in the top men’s division (Herrallsvenskan) has doubled in the last decade, thus showing that although Swedish elite football may lack international

quality with fewer teams playing in European competitions, it is undoubtedly continuing to engage its fans and attract them to follow their teams (Föreningen Svensk Elitfotboll, 2023).

1.3 Fan Engagement in an interconnected society

To engage with something, or someone, involves, in essence, taking interest in and being involved with an activity, for instance, sharing opinions with others and or taking part within a fan community (of a team or a music artist) (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). As society has become increasingly interconnected, engagement between multiple actors, such as customers and firms, is a key element of understanding life in the 21st century (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). Through the digitalisation and globalisation of society, engagement has further increased in importance, and elite football is no exception to this (McDonald et al., 2022).

When studying fans, this is referred to as fan engagement (McDonald et al., 2022). In essence, fan engagement can be described as the nonmonetary interactions that occur between fans and a focal fan object, most often the football team (McDonald et al., 2022). However, a fan object spans a wide variety of actors and elements and can also be a football league, an event, or an athlete. Moreover, fans can engage with their teams, leagues, or athletes in many ways, for instance, by taking part in discussions with other fans, interacting with staff at an event or game, or participating in organised events (Yoshida et al., 2023). Recent studies have shown that engagement within elite football is a cultural phenomenon in which fan engagement may be important to everything from team loyalty, attendance frequency, inviting others to the fan community, and an individual's overall satisfaction with life (Yoshida et al., 2023).

From a managerial perspective, it is often considered good to have a community of highly engaged fans. Studies have shown that high levels of fan engagement can have positive consequences, such as creating loyalty to a team (Yoshida et al., 2014), increasing perceived well-being (J. Kim et al., 2017; Wicker et al., 2023) and increasing value co-creation in fan communities (Jones et al., 2019; Stieler & Germelmann, 2018). In a society that includes an increasing number of possible brands, not only in sports, to engage with, and possible platforms to engage in, fan engagement can be described as the “interactional glue” that keeps the relationship between fans and teams of elite sports strong and intimate (Stieler et al., 2014).

However, despite the importance of fan engagement, several research avenues remain relatively unexplored, not the least of which is the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement behaviours (McDonald et al., 2022; Yoshida et al., 2023).

First, to better understand why fans choose to engage (and the antecedents to fan engagement), beyond just a customer and a focal firm, we need to understand the role of actors, other than the focal team, in engagement behaviours. In an increasingly interconnected society, customers engage with many different actors that may possess many different characteristics and goals. As such, studying

engagement beyond the customer-firm dyad (fan-team dyad) is important because it allows us to assess, for instance, the fundamentals of brand communities and how such engagement leads to loyalty and value co-creation (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). We need a more precise understanding of the consequences of fan engagement. To date, research has focused mostly on the antecedents to and consequences of one engagement type, that is, engagement between a fan and a sport entity, such as a team or a player. The recent decades of digitalisation, and the concomitant increased influence of social media, has undoubtedly enabled more engagement between fans within the sports ecosystem (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Nonetheless, knowledge of the antecedents to and consequences of such engagement, vis-a-vis the engagement with a team, remains scarce (Storbacka et al., 2016). Since elite football is an industry where there is engagement between fans and the collective consumption of elite sports is highly important, such engagement and the consequences of engagement warrant further investigation.

Second, to date, research has not fully assessed how the platforms where engagement occurs influence engagement and its consequences (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Blut et al., 2023). In the last decade, the number of digital, physical and hybrid platforms for engagement have increased (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020; Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Elite football is filled with engagement platforms, such as Facebook, online fan forums, sports arenas, pubs, and club-organised events, all of which play different roles in the life of football fans (Uhrich, 2014). As engagement platforms and their structures have a great influence on how fans and other actors in the sport ecosystem interact, studies are needed to investigate how engagement and its consequences are influenced by the type of engagement platform (Braidbach & Brodie, 2014). Thus, to fully grasp fan engagement, we must assess how these engagement platforms foster the consequences of engagement and answer questions such as where fans engage and what this brings to the fan engagement literature.

Finally, intensified commercialisation has altered the role of fans and their engagement in the last decade. Many scholars claim that the commercialisation of elite football has challenged long-standing ideals in sports and has made fans much more passive and customer-like (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). Some even argue that due to the increased influence of financial revenues, capital, and private actors (such as global sponsors, broadcasters, and nation states) in elite football, the role of fans and their engagement is being neglected (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019; Putra, 2019). However, not all settings are filled with such tensions between the increased commercialisation of elite football and the traditional ideals of the sport. Within some fan communities where commercial logic differs, commercial influence may instead be cheered by thousands of fans. What is evident, however, is that although the commercialisation of elite football has, in recent decades, globalised fan communities and challenged many traditional ideals of European elite football, there is little knowledge on how this impacts fans' willingness to engage or the consequences of it. To fully clarify fan engagement in contemporary elite football, such knowledge is needed.

1.4 Research Aims

Considering the importance of understanding fan engagement with multiple actors, on multiple platforms and in relation to an elite football ecosystem that is increasingly being commercialised, and by mainly focusing on the Swedish elite football context, the aims of this dissertation are as follows:

- 1. To examine and analyse the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement in Swedish elite football, focusing specifically on the influence of engagement with multiple actors and on different engagement platforms.*
- 2. To analyse the consequences of elite football commercialisation for fans and their engagement.*

1.5 Dissertation Outline

In pursuing the aim and objective of this dissertation, four different articles have been written, each of which are related to at least one of the two main objectives.

Papers II, III and IV examine fan engagement within Swedish elite football. Each paper addresses fan engagement in relation to actors other than the focal team (Paper II), fan engagement in relation to different engagement platforms (Paper III), fan engagement in relation to perceived commercialisation, and the perceived authenticity of Swedish elite football (Paper IV). The first paper is a review of the current literature on commercialisation and its consequences for fans. This paper frames the current research on the commercialisation of elite football and identifies the most important research avenues for future studies on the commercialisation of elite sports and its consequences for fans.

Table 1 shows a brief overview of the papers included in this dissertation.

Table 1. Studies included in the dissertation and their relation to the main purpose

| Paper in thesis | Paper I: “How are fans affected by the commercialization of elite sports? A review of the literature and a research agenda” | Paper II: “Exploring Antecedents and Outcomes of Customer Engagement Among Elite Football Fans” | Paper III: “Customer engagement behaviours on physical and virtual engagement platforms” | Paper IV: “The influence of Perceived Commercialization and Authenticity on Fan Engagement: Insights from Men’s and Women’s Elite Football Leagues in Sweden” |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Theoretical/Conceptual approach | Commercialisation of elite sports | Customer engagement; fan engagement; service ecosystems | | Customer engagement; fan engagement; authenticity; commercialisation |
| Methodological approach | Systematic review | | Survey | |
| Context | Global elite sports | Swedish men's elite football | | Swedish elite football (both men’s and women’s) |
| Exploration | Current understanding and critiques of the consequences of the commercialisation of elite sports on fans | Antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement with a team, vis-a-vis other fans | The consequences of fan engagement occurring on different engagement platforms | The consequences of perceived football commercialisation on fan engagement in both men's and women's elite football |

Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter of this dissertation provides an overview of the commercialisation of elite sports from the fan perspective. Third, a theoretical framework is established based on the customer and fan engagement literature. Fourth, the methods and research designs used in the studies are presented and discussed in relation to the aims of this thesis and the methodological positioning. In the fifth and last chapter, the results and contributions of this dissertation are discussed, both in regard to theoretical relevance but also in more practical terms. The four articles of this dissertation are included in the Appendix.

2. The commercialisation of elite football and the changing role of football fans

The competitive structures of men’s elite football were established more than a century ago, and consequently, the role of the spectator, supporter, or fan of the sport has changed alongside this development. The concept of a global game has emerged alongside an intensified commercialisation process that started as early as the 1800s and made elite football a billion-dollar industry (De Waele et al., 2018). Hence, parallel to the professionalization and commercialization of the game, football matches have transitioned from being events for the citizens of the local neighbourhood to nowadays

global occasions that engage billions of fans from across the world (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019; Sund, 2014). The following chapter, with a focus on the changing role of the fans of elite football, describes the commercialisation of European elite football and the role of the fan during the development of elite football. Special focus is given to fans of Swedish men's and women's elite football throughout the decades.

2.1 The establishment of elite football (1800–1920s)

Commercial elements in elite football are nothing new. In the 1880s, English clubs were already paying players (illegally) despite rules that prohibited players from becoming professional or even semiprofessional players (De Waele et al., 2018). Similarly, in Sweden, both the media and fans, regarded amateurism in elite sports as the role model for all football players (De Waele et al., 2018). Earning revenues from match-related activities was far from the focus of football teams, and the people who attended the matches were mostly local citizens (Goldblatt, 2007).

Gefle IF was the first football club, established in Sweden in 1882, followed by many others (Sund, 2014). For instance, Örgryte IS (1887), AIK (1891), Djurgårdens IF (1891) and GAIS (1894) were all established during the late 1800s (Goldblatt, 2007). The clubs that emerged during these years were driven by and promoted to the local working class, most often men (Radmann et al., 2023). Even if the concept of the football fan was not established in the media or in research, large crowds of working-class people were attending games and participating in the game of football outside of their everyday work (Radmann et al., 2023). For instance, Djurgårdens IF attracted approximately 7000 spectators to their games (Djurgårdens IF, n.d.), and the Swedish national team, which started to play international friendlies, had up to 20000 spectators during these early years (Svenska Fotbollförbundet, n.d.).

Women's elite football clubs, especially in Great Britain, were also established during these years, and in 1881, the first ever women's football game was played in Edinburgh (Lundberg, 2023). In Sweden, a few women's football clubs were also established in these early years; however, most games were seen as spectacle events rather than sport (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003). The first female football game in Sweden was played in 1918, and 500 spectators attended the game (De Waele et al., 2018). Most often, female football matches were organised for charity reasons, and ticket sales were allocated to other organisations. Some journalists criticised the games as weak and wrote that women should not play football (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003). Moreover, the Swedish FA did not allow "real" football matches or tournaments for female football players (De Waele et al., 2018).

During the establishment phase of men's elite football, events such as the modern Olympics were created and started to slowly engage increasingly larger crowds (Rahman & Lockwood, 2011). The notion of "fans" emerged when a clearer distinction was made between the athletes and the spectators (Krövel & Roksvold, 2012). Even if few fan crowds were organised, examples such as at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm showed that attendees started to engage in cheering for their favourite athlete

or team (Bachner, 2023). However, such chants were in many cases criticised by the media for being disruptive during matches (Bachner, 2023). One Danish newspaper made the following comment about the Swedish fans after the Olympics:

“Having been locked up for 90 minutes at the stadium and being forced to watch the infernal spectacle the Swedes are able to make, it is sure that no football audience is worse than the Swedish one”. (Bachner, 2023; p. 18).

Overall, during these early years of organised elite sports, it was evident that the phenomenon of engaged spectators was rare and almost insulting to the noble values of men’s football. Additionally, some commercial elements, such as players earning salary from playing, were seen as almost illegal.

However, that was going to change.

2.2 The popularisation of (men’s) elite football (1920s–1970s)

Starting in the 1920s, top-tier division leagues were established across the globe (Sund, 2014). In Swedish elite football, Allsvenskan (for men) was created in 1924, and just some years later, the most popular teams, such as AIK, attracted on average 17000 spectators to their matches (Bachner, 2023). It was evident that following a team and attending games became an appreciated activity among the working class. In Sweden, the active supporter cultures, and fan organisations (which has endured to this date) emerged from a working-class society (Radmann et al., 2023).

Like any other social movement group in Sweden during these years, elite football and fan communities became important forums for the male working class to socialize and find belonging (De Waele et al., 2018). As the clubs had close local connections to their specific neighbourhood and/or city (for instance, AIK in Solna, Hammarby in Södermalm, and Åtvidabergs FF in Åtvidaberg), the support for a team was very much related to the geographical area in which the fans lived (Radmann et al., 2023).

However, like other social movements in Sweden, the citizens did not hesitate to protest, and at several times, fans who belonged to the working class engaged in protests against elevated ticket prices and other more commercial advancements related to the club (Goldblatt, 2007; Bachner, 2023). Reports claim that among the working class, elite football was deemed something for the people and therefore should have low financial barriers to consumption (Sund, 2014).

Globally, during these decades, reports about “sports fans” started to emerge more frequently (Moore, 2015). In 1930, the term “sports fan” was mentioned for the first time in American lexicons and was referred to as someone with a broad interest in professional and high-level amateur athletic competitions (Moore, 2015). However, few studies analysed what makes fans engage with their team and what the consequences of such engagement are.

Furthermore, the establishment of the television changed the way the game was followed. For instance, the FIFA World Cup in 1958 was the first World Cup to be broadcast on TV, which allowed fans to cheer for their national team, despite not being at the physical stadium (Sund, 2014). Evidently, this growing interest in elite sports among the public and the possibility of broadcasting games also attracted more sponsors, the media, and investors seeking to make a profit on elite football (Andersson & Carlsson, 2011; Desbordes, 2012). With national broadcasts and sport events that started to attract more spectators, the focus on sports as an entertainment industry started to grow internationally and in Sweden (Norberg, 2009). Thus, although at a very slow pace, elite football started to move somewhat away from being just an event for the labour class, which preserved the ideals of amateurism, to becoming a more commercial event where some actors could make money off the growing football interest among Swedish citizens (De Waele et al., 2018).

For women's elite football, times were much tougher, and from the 1920s to the 1960s, women's football was mainly a peripheral activity, as seen by, for instance, the very few media reports on women's football (De Waele et al., 2018). However, especially in Sweden, during the late 1960s, a top-tier division was slowly starting to organize, and the games attracted a few hundred paying spectators (Stockholms Fotbollsförbund, 2017). Driven by enthusiasts at Swedish universities, women's football leagues were established in the late 1960s (De Waele et al., 2018).

2.3 The professionalisation of men's elite football and the growth of women's football (1970s–1990s)

In the 1970s, market-driven ideals started to become even more influential on elite football, affecting fans and fan communities across the globe (Dubal, 2010). During these decades, external investors, such as sponsors and broadcasters, started to pay attention to elite football (Desbordes, 2012). In elite football, this was perhaps best recognised in how, despite reluctance among many football associations, the interest among sponsors in investing in the clubs became more apparent (Hughson et al., 2018). In Germany in 1973, many football fans were surprised, as Eintracht Braunschweig became the first team to play with a brand name (Jägermeister) on their jerseys (Kelly, 2020). However, much more sponsors were to follow. As stadiums across the globe were filled with fans and world cups attracted high viewing figures, sponsors also started to appear not only on team jerseys, but also on boards at stadiums, commercials in TV, and taking over the names of leagues and stadiums (De Waele et al., 2018).

From a player perspective, through earning salaries and signing contracts with sponsors, professional and high-earning football players became a phenomenon (Lundh, 2018). Hence, the idolisation of stars among fans emerged as an important element of the sport (Sund, 2014). Furthermore, in Swedish elite football, rules regarding amateurism were abandoned, which further opened up the prospect of professionalisation in this setting. Organisations such as clubs became obliged to have certain financial structures, indicating that they needed to have a decent level of equity capital (Sund, 2014).

Reports and scholarly studies on fans also emerged alongside the commercialisation of the game (Sloan, 1989). Most studies during these years examined the external and internal drivers to becoming a fan and attending sport events. For instance, Sloan (1989) reported that fans are driven by the need to escape from work and the tedium of life as well as the desire for a stressful and arousing experience, and may also be attracted to games due to the violent and aggressive actions on the pitch.

In Swedish elite football, a new generation of fans emerged who took their main inspiration in terms of clothing, chants, and identity markers from the English supporter culture (Radmann et al., 2023). An explanation for this fan culture, which also created Swedish fans of English top teams, was that English football started to be broadcast on Swedish TV in the early 1970s (De Waele et al., 2018). Hence, the “satellite fan”, which is a sports fan that is mainly interested in a foreign team, was born (Behrens & Urich, 2019).

Drawing inspiration from the English football culture broadcasted on TV, hardcore supporters with a more rebellious spirit emerged (as was the case in England). As such, since the Swedish football teams were member-driven organisations, fans engaged more widely in club decisions through voting at annual meetings (Radmann et al., 2003). On a more negative note, exemplified by the Hillsborough disaster² and the Heysel disaster³, the late 1980s were characterised by hooliganism and insecure stadiums (Krövel & Roksvold, 2012). Within academic research on fans, much attention has been given to hooligan groups, seeking to understand the “symbolic hate” and the meaning of such communities to individuals (Krövel & Roksvold, 2012).

Among the Swedish football audience, amateur ideals were still very much present, and contrary to how it was in most other European leagues with professional players, the Swedish teams that played the European Cup finals during these decades (Malmö FF and IFK Göteborg) were still amateurs and had regular daytime jobs (Andersson, 2002).

In contrast to the amateur ideals and the rest of Scandinavia, many Swedish football teams were closely associated with industrial sites, for instance, Åtvidabergs FF and the Facit factory, in which firms signed players to both work for them and to play for their team (Radmann et al., 2023). Consequently, Swedish elite football teams were spread out in the smaller cities in which these corporations operated compared to, for instance, Danish elite football teams, which were mainly positioned in the Copenhagen area (Radmann et al., 2023). The industrial connection between the teams and the fans, in contrast to Danish and Norwegian elite football, involved large groups of

² The Hillsborough disaster refers to the fatal human crush in which 97 football fans died and 766 were injured during the FA Cup Semifinal between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest in 1989 (Steen, 2016).

³ The Heysel disaster refers to the tragic game between Juventus and Liverpool in 1985 in which fans engaged in fights at the arena, which led to 39 fatalities and 400 injured football fans (Steen, 2016).

passionate fans who more clearly identified with their clubs, as they represented the local area, and local factories, more explicitly (Radmann et al., 2023).

The professionalisation of women's elite football was still distant. However, especially in Sweden, the number of female football players increased steadily. In 1971, 4901 Swedish female players were registered, and almost 60 leagues were established (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003). Women's football became popularised, and in the 1980s, the number of registered women's football players increased to 26522 players (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003). As interest in women's football increased, among the players, not so much among the fans, a national team was established. In 1971, Sweden played a friendly game against Denmark in front of 6400 spectators (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003). In other countries, such as England, it was as late as 1989 that the media started to report on women's football (Petty & Pope, 2019). Clearly, while men's elite football was professionalised and attracted more spectators and revenue, women's football was fighting against the belief that football was a sport just for men. As such, it is not surprising that there were few media reports and scholarly studies on fans of women's elite football during these decades.

2.4 The global commercialisation of elite football (1990s – 2010s) and the growth of women's football

The commercialisation of elite football increased further in the 1990s as it attained a more global structure. During this time, some scholars started to argue that the commodification of the game was transforming football into a commodity that was primarily sold to its spectators (fans), rather than the value of the game being produced by its fans (Giulianotti, 2005). During these decades, other scholars highlighted that profit-driven actors, such as broadcasters, sponsors, and external investors, became an essential and integrated part of the elite football industry (Dubal, 2010; Fritz et al., 2017).

Some events that exemplify the increasing commercialisation of elite football in the 1990s were the establishment of the English Premier League (EPL) and the UEFA Champions League (UCL). The sales of broadcasting rights for these leagues drove an exponential rise in interest from a global audience and a global market of potential investors (Hughson et al., 2018). For instance, Sky bought five years of broadcasting rights of the EPL for £304 million in 1992 (Hughson et al., 2018). Previously, English football fans could see their favourite teams on free-to-air channels; however, due to the establishment of the EPL, subscription fees entered the lives of the fans. In Swedish elite football, it was not until 1997 that a major broadcaster (Canal +) bought the rights to the men's top division (Lundh, 2018); despite not being as lucrative as in England, this also changed the landscape of Swedish elite football, creating greater interest from sponsors to invest in the sport due to the fact that more fans than ever were watching the games from home (Andersson & Carlsson, 2011; Andersson & Hognestad, 2019).

Moreover, building on how fans started to idolize certain individual players in the 1970–1980s (for instance, the fan cultures surrounding Diego Armando Maradona and George Best), this was further accentuated in the 1990s due to the influence of commercial brands on star players (Goldblatt, 2007). For instance, David Beckham, with his affiliation with global sponsors such as Adidas, became a global superstar with his own personal fan community (Slack, 2014). In the late 2000s, the Swedish superstar Zlatan Ibrahimovic also attained a personal fan community whose focus was to cheer for Zlatan rather than engage with the different teams he played on (Lundh, 2018).

Other visible elements of this increasing commercialisation were the corporate naming of stadiums and arenas, which drove revenues to the teams and football clubs (Slack, 2014). Some of the critical voices against this commercialisation process claimed that the increased emphasis on financial revenue via elevated ticket prices, subscription fees and so forth, eroded the former connection between the sport, the athletes, and the local neighbourhood (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). These studies revealed that intensified commercialisation would undermine the role of fans and, as such, the formerly strong relationship between local fans and the team (Gammelsæter, 2020).

Ticket prices started to rise, in some cases making it too expensive for local citizens to attend matches (Merkel, 2007). Other negative examples during these decades included the loss of traditions and existing ideals and perceptions of eroded authenticity, as the clubs prioritised relationships with commercial actors and external investors (Giulianotti, 2005; Mason, 1999). Andersson & Carlsson (2011) criticised that through the commercial focus of the clubs, elite football became primarily produced to suit a market with upper class customers. The prioritisation of more wealthy football fans led to circumstances in which the local and formerly heavily engaged fans from the working class were subprioritised (Andersson & Carlsson, 2011).

However, not all scholarly and media reports had such a negative perspective on the consequences of commercialisation for fans.

Fans (and scholars), who, on another note, found positive impacts of this increasing commercialisation, argued that commercialisation yielded improvements in team quality, chances to win, and the convenience of consuming elite football from a fan perspective (Abosag et al., 2012). Additionally, it led to a global increase in fan engagement as millions of individuals beyond the local areas could engage, and even identify, with a distant team (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019).

In the Swedish elite football context, which witnessed the rapid globalisation and commercialisation of elite football, driven by, for instance, the creation of the English Premier League and the UEFA Champions League, discussions emerged as to whether it was time to abandon the 51 percent rule, which dictated that Swedish elite football clubs must be owned by their members (De Waele et al., 2018). These ideas emerged from Swedish Ice Hockey clubs, which were inspired by the North American NHL, in which teams were franchise-owned and had the possibility of paying much higher

salaries (De Waele et al., 2018). Voices advocating for the removal of the rule argued that Swedish elite football needed to keep up with the rest of the world and that it was important to be able to compete at the top European level for the development of Swedish elite football (Bachmer, 2023). However, the voices arguing for the importance of fan-governed clubs won, and the 51 percent rule was preserved (Radmann et al., 2023). Some claim that this created a paradox in Swedish elite football: despite Sweden being a wealthy country, its professional football clubs, with massive crowds, were among the poorest in Europe (De Waele et al., 2018).

Swedish elite football clubs had no chance of competing with the top European countries in terms of player signings or external investments, yet in relation to Scandinavian countries, the balanced competitiveness between the contenders of the top division has been somewhat consistent (Gammelster, 2009). In comparison to Danish elite football, where the national team has been the main interest, Swedish elite football has cultivated a strong tradition of engagement in club football. This means that despite losing their competitiveness with other teams in continental Europe, Swedish football teams continued to engage their fans. Some hardcore fans were inspired by the Mediterranean “Ultras” culture⁴ with its tifos⁵ and pyrotechnics (Radmann et al., 2023). Consequently, in contrast to Danish elite football, with less of a club football tradition, “modern football” protests also become an apparent phenomenon in Swedish elite football (Sund, 2014).

Early in this period, few commercial advances within elite football were associated with women’s elite football. For instance, the European championships in the early 1990s attracted almost no interest from mass media. Only 300 spectators saw the semifinal game between Sweden and England in Euro 1987, which further shows that there were few possibilities for sponsors and other actors to profit from the interest in women’s football (Playmakerstats, 1987). Moreover, many professional leagues were established during the 1990s and 2000s in women’s elite football but were disbanded just some years later due to financial struggles (Mumcu et al., 2016). Ambitions were there for women’s elite football to grow, yet interest from the media and sponsors was lacking and it was difficult to attract large crowds of fans.

However, some investments also started to flow into women’s football. These investments mainly came from the national football federations but also from sponsors and broadcasters. Driven by factors including the globalisation of the women’s game, in which, for instance, the USA and China arranged football tournaments that attracted large crowds, women’s games started to become more commercialised.

⁴ Football fans (often Mediterranean) that are renowned for their fanatical and organised support of a team.

⁵ Tifos (tifo) are the phenomenon whereby fans of a sports team create a choreographed display, sign, image, and/or banner in the stands to show a certain message of support.

2.5. The hypercommercialisation of elite football (2010s –)

Since the 2010s, the commercialisation of global elite football has continued to increase (Winell et al., 2023). Some have argued that we are now in a hypercommercialisation era in which football fans have become customers of teams, which are commercial brands with a global base of customers (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018; Hognestad, 2015).

Hypercommercialisation is largely a subjective and critical concept referring to an analysis of that football entities (most often a club) nowadays prioritises financial revenues above other ideals and values (Hognestad, 2015). Thus, these critical voices have argued that elite football, its teams, and players have become commodities for which the main concern is how to make profits (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). This critical perspective further argues that in many countries, there is a widening gap between local fans and global clubs. Instead, the most important relationships are those between external investors and teams (Tinson et al., 2021).

This implies that the modern football fan is not valued by its engagement with and around a club but by its potential to drive revenues through the purchase of tickets and TV subscriptions and by driving the team's brand value (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). Hognestad (2012) exemplified this criticism with the following quote on what commercialisation has implied for contemporary elite football:

“dislocated players and club officials from supporters, leaving the fan to experience their club and its traditions mostly through the purchase of replica tops and a variety of other club merchandise, alongside subscriptions to commercial TV channels...” (p. 381).

However, when discussing the “hypercommercialisation” era of elite sports, it is important to acknowledge that despite the critical reports in both the media and scholarly studies about fan reactions to this perceived “overcommercialisation”, top European teams and major sporting events still attract millions of fans. For instance, the final FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022 was viewed by 1.5 billion viewers (Sportspromedia, 2022), and teams in the English Premier League and UEFA Champions League still fill their stadiums and attract billions of TV viewers. Moreover, at the same time as perceived hypercommercialisation is depicted to erode the perceived “original” ideals of elite sports, it can also be seen as a welcomed process to, for instance, improve the convenience of attending a team's matches or improve the level of competitiveness (Abosag et al., 2012). For instance, in global fan communities, increased commercialisation has allowed for more broadcasts of matches, which are most often embraced by these satellite supporters (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019).

Conversely, during the last decade, a countermovement against the hypercommercialisation of elite sports, especially elite football, has also started to emerge. Fans across the world have protested against football clubs being bought by foreign investors, players signing contracts with Saudi Arabian clubs, and global competitions being conducted in nondemocratic nations. As Woisetschläger et al. (2013), Hill et al. (2018) and Tinson et al. (2021) showed, rising ticket prices, “globalised kick-off-

times”, and sponsors taking over arenas, stadiums and even the club’s identity explain why fans engage in protests toward the perceived overcommercialisation of elite sports.

This has also meant increased attention, not the least of which by the media, to leagues in which commercialisation is at lower levels.

In Swedish elite football, the values and ideals of the sport being “for the fans and driven by the fans” have remained important. Through rules and legislation against external ownership and a strong tradition of local club football, Swedish elite football can arguably be seen as less commercialised than what is often found in some of the top tiers in European elite football (Stenling & Fahlén, 2009). Even if the league is ranked among the worst in Europe, and Sweden is a rather small nation in terms of population, the atmosphere at games is often considered among the best in Europe (De Waele et al., 2018). Swedish elite football clubs may not have the same opportunities to attract external capital; instead, these clubs mostly rely on the engagement of their fans, for instance, through participation in annual meetings and vocal chants at games (Horgby & Ericsson, 2020).

As Swedish football clubs must be at least 51 percent collectively owned by their members (their fans) (Almgren, 2021), the final vote on how the club should develop is taken by the fan majority (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). This rule, which was established in 1999 in response to the increased number of commercial investments in sports, has allowed clubs to become limited companies, but not without removing the influence of their fans (Almgren, 2021). Consequently, as Swedish elite football has also shown increased commercialisation, with, for instance, new arenas and more lucrative broadcasting and sponsorship deals, the process has remained closely connected to its fans (De Waele et al., 2018). As an example, in the premier game of the Stockholm-based team AIK against Allsvenskan in 2024, their fans created a tifo that pictured Swedish elite football as the Gaelic village in the comic series of Asterix, in which Swedish elite football, instead of enduring the Roman Empire, has stood up against pressure from the hypercommercialisation of the football industry (Liedbergius, 2024). This illustrates that despite several commercial elements being present (such as expensive ticket prices, the influence of betting companies and major broadcasters, as well as the reliance on player transfers), the perception among the fans of Swedish elite football is unique and has resisted the global and hypercommercialisation of the football industry (Bachner, 2023). For instance, just as in any other commercial football setting, success on the pitch in Swedish elite football is very much related to the club’s financial performance. A club such as Malmö FF is by far the richest club in Swedish football and has also been the most successful in terms of the number of league titles won during the last decade.

Swedish elite football is arguably a context where local identities are preserved within the football clubs (Radmann et al., 2023). Engagement in Swedish football has been preserved and still plays a

substantial role not only in the relationships between the clubs and their fans but also in the local community at large (Radmann et al., 2023).

Men's elite football is not the only football league that has rapidly increased its commercialisation in the last decade. As global competitions in women's elite football have received increased attention from the media and fans, an increased influx of financial capital has also been observed in women's football (Tjønndal et al., 2024).

For instance, TV ratings for women's elite sports are at a much higher level than just a few decades ago (Meier & von Uechtriz, 2020). Among others, the women's FIFA World Cup in 2023 was viewed by approximately 1.12 billion individuals (Reuters, 2022), and the Euro 2022 final had more spectators than any previous Euro final (Tjønndal et al., 2024). From a commercialisation perspective, studies have shown that this increase in media coverage has led to a substantial increase in sponsors and interest from investors in women's elite football (Skogvang, 2023).

However, alongside the development of women's elite sports, including new and stable professional leagues, as well as global tournaments engaging fans worldwide, salaries for women's elite sports athletes are often much lower than those for men (Allison & Pope, 2022). Moreover, as many teams and tournaments have just recently started to attract wider audiences, the fan communities around players and teams are still in their early stages (Mumcu et al., 2016), and few studies have examined the fans of women's elite football. Contrary to the debates on the many negative consequences of the commercialisation of men's elite sports, the discussion of women's elite sports looks slightly different. More focus here is on the positive aspects of commercialisation, for instance, bringing more money to players and making women's elite sports more accessible to prospective fans (Allison & Pope, 2022). Moreover, women's football is often marketed as a "family friendly" product (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020). Pope (2011) further argued that some women's football fans are "new customers" of the sport and that women's elite football lacks the historical authenticity that men's football has built over a century.

Moreover, the recent decade has been characterised by intensified commercialisation that has influenced the way of being a fan. Social media and other types of online platforms have also emerged, allowing fans to both produce and consume team-related content (De Waele et al., 2018). In Swedish elite football, the online web forum "Svenska Fans" (Swedish Fans) has greatly influenced how fans engage in team-related conversations (De Waele et al., 2018). In contrast to previous decades, fans can now share their experiences and steer conversations regarding the team and the overall supporter culture.

2.6 Concluding reflections

This chapter provides an overview of how the role of fans and fan engagement has changed and developed alongside an increasingly commercialised elite football industry. Commercialisation has

changed the way of being a fan, and some even argue that contemporary football fans are mainly customers who purchase a brand rather than fans of a team (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018).

This chapter has shown how the Swedish level of commercialisation in both men’s and women’s football differs from that of not only England, Italy, and Spain but also that of its Scandinavian neighbours, such as the Danish and Norwegian top divisions of men’s football. Moreover, as has also been discussed, women’s elite football is at another level on the commercialisation continuum compared to men’s elite football. To conclude, Table 2 summarises the phases mentioned in this chapter, with a focus on the changing role of the fan.

Table 2 – The development of the Swedish elite football fan

| Phase | Definition | Major developments | The role/identity of the Swedish football fan |
|--|---|--|---|
| I. Establishment phase (1800s - 1920s) | <i>Elite football is established as an organised activity</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Official rules of and associations in elite football are established - Women’s football is seen as a spectacle rather than a sport - Chants are criticised at the 1912 Olympics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working class males dominates the stadiums - Football is a way of socializing for the fans - Close connection with the labour movement |
| II. The popularisation of men’s elite football (1920s - 1970s) | <i>Elite football reaches the masses and fan communities emerge</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The first World Cup in football occurs (1930), and the first World Cup is televised in 1958 - Ideals of amateurism dominate - Established women’s elite football competitions slowly emerge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The concept of a “sports fan” is established in the literature - Swedish fans start to organize in communities - Fans protest against commercial elements - Weakened class society makes football an activity for the middle and upper classes |
| III. The professionalisation of men’s elite football and the growth of women’s football (1970s - 1990s) | <i>Men’s elite football becomes professionalised and sponsors start to pay interest in the game</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The first sponsors are observed on team shirts in elite football (Jägermeister and Eintracht Frankfurt in 1973) - Massive crowds and insecure arenas - English football is broadcasted on TV in Sweden - Players are allowed to earn salaries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swedish football fans are inspired by English football culture in terms of their clothing, chants, and identifying markers - Issues with fan fights - English football is broadcasted in Sweden |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| | | - First ever international women's football tournaments | |
| IV. Commercialisation of elite football (1990s - 2010s) | <i>Elite football has a market-like structure and commercial actors gain substantial influence over the sport</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased influence from mass-media, sponsors and private investors grow, which some argue subprioritises the fans - Women's elite football starts to grow through international tournaments being broadcasted - Swedish elite football clubs are allowed to create limited companies, yet the 51 percent rule is established to prohibit full external ownership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Idolisation of star players such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic - Hardcore fans take inspiration from the Mediterranean "ultras culture" - Fans can now subscribe to see games in Allsvenskan |
| V. "Hypercommercialisation" of elite football (2010s -) | <i>Elite football and success on and off pitch becomes increasingly contingent on financial performance</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women's elite football becomes globalised and fully professional in many countries - Globalised fan communities - Star players establish personal fan bases - Increased foreign ownership of European top clubs (by China, Saudi Arabia, and the USA) - Swedish elite football gains attention for standing outside the "hypercommercialisation" of the football industry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protests towards "contemporary football" among hardcore fans - Strong support for retaining the 51 percent rule among Swedish football fans - Attendance figures rise despite a decrease in competitiveness among Swedish teams - Fan communities around some women's football teams (for instance, Hammarby) emerges |

3. Theoretical framework – Customer and Fan engagement

The second chapter outlined the journey of contemporary elite football, from amateurism to a commercial and global industry of professional players, with fans evolving from working-class spectators to, as argued by some, customers of elite football. In this chapter, the theoretical framework for this thesis is presented. The first sections of this chapter describe the foundations of customer

engagement research, its relevance to marketing research, and the current frontiers of engagement research. Thereafter, fan engagement is introduced as an adaptation of customer engagement to the elite sport context. This section discusses the peculiarities of fan engagement and its implications to theory on the role of both customers and fan engagement.

3.1 Engagement as a theoretical lens

An important element of our daily lives as humans are our interactions and engagement with the people, companies, and objects surrounding us. Engagement with a person, a brand, or an object means becoming involved or taking interest in someone or something (for instance, a movie, a brand, or a football team) (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). The people or the object that we engage with (i.e., the focal engagement object) are often friends, family, and companies, and as customers, we engage with these at various intensities (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Most often, customer engagement is deemed as a non-monetary interaction and can be considered a microfoundational concept that allows us to understand the co-creation of value and the formation of roles in contemporary society (Storbacka et al., 2016). Thus, by applying an engagement focus, we recognize the importance of such nonmonetary interactions in society and how such interactions may alter societal values and ideals (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Rather et al., 2022).

3.2 Theoretical foundation and frontiers of customer engagement research

In early marketing research, much focus was on how companies could work to create value for customers. Often, customers were depicted as passive, and value was considered to be created without any substantial influence from them (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). Yet, as service research developed within marketing research, more attention was given to the active role of the customer in value co-creation processes (Jaakkola et al., 2018). At its core, co-creation of value implies a more active customer, that do not just receive value from the company, but actively engage with the company to co-create value (Jaakkola et al., 2018). In other words, current research recognises that it is through the exchange of knowledge, skills, and resources between both customers and firms that value is co-created (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Hence much focus is on how a group of customers exchanges knowledge, skills, and abilities with other involved actors (for instance, other customers, friends, or employees of the company), which in turn drives value co-creation (Jaakkola et al., 2018; Yoshida et al., 2023). Based on this background, customer engagement has become an influential concept in marketing research and refers to the many nonmonetary exchanges and development of resources between customers and other actors in society (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Customer engagement has several benefits for both firms and individuals. For instance, from a firm perspective, engaged customers are more likely to be loyal, willing to participate in value co-creation, and tell others about a company and its related services and/or products (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). From an individual perspective, customers who are engaged are often involved in a certain community and may find meaning in a related activity, which implies that engagement can lead to personal well-

being and contribute to customer self-identity projects (Chang et al., 2021; Harrigan et al., 2018; Naumann et al., 2020).

Defining Customer Engagement

Customer engagement refers to the nonmonetary exchanges that individuals undertake as customers, with other actors of a service ecosystem, for instance, a company, other customers, the media, municipalities, among others (Hollebeek et al., 2022). When engaging, customers choose to invest knowledge, skills, emotions, equipment, time, and energy in interactions with another actor, most often a company and its employees (Hollebeek, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Through customer engagement, customer-brand relationships are cultivated (Chang et al., 2021; Vivek et al., 2012), and co-creation (or co-destruction) of value for all involved parties occurs (Behnam et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of customer engagement for both practitioners and scholars, there is no single definition of this concept or a uniform approach (Harmeling et al., 2017). Reviewing the engagement literature, customer engagement is either seen as a behavioural or a multidimensional concept (Hollebeek et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2022). The multidimensional perspective of customer engagement is often categorised into three dimensions that cover not only behavioural exchanges with a focal company but also cognitive processing and emotional states in relation to a brand, or as more recent studies have suggested, other actors as well (Dessart et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014). As such, it is argued that this approach to customer engagement lends a holistic understanding of customer engagement and how nontransactional behaviours, as well as emotional investment and attitudinal processes, lead to outcomes of engagement.

The second main approach to customer engagement is to focus on the behavioural manifestations of engagement. This means that customer engagement (behaviour) is defined as customers' voluntary behavioural manifestations towards a company resulting from motivational drivers and adding to value co-creation (Dessart et al., 2016; Doorn et al., 2010; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Cognitive and emotional dimensions of customer engagement are overlooked here (Hollebeek et al., 2019), and instead, the focus is on observing and measuring actual behaviours, such as collaborating with a company, providing feedback, and discussing new products/services on social media (Carlson et al., 2018). In the early stages of engagement research, engagement behaviours were defined as "a customer's behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchases, resulting from motivational drivers" (van Doorn et al., 2010; p.254). More recent studies on engagement behaviours have built upon this definition and highlighted that engagement behaviours also involve actors other than just the brand and the customer (Carlson et al., 2018). Engagement behaviours such as providing feedback, sharing knowledge, and discussing the company with others also involve other customers and other actors (Carlson et al., 2018).

Neither of these approaches to customer engagement is inherently wrong. This dissertation will mainly focus on the actual interactions, i.e., the engagement behaviours, that take place in the service ecosystem of Swedish elite football. This implies that, as seen in Chapter 4, most of the focus of this empirical work is to identify and measure engagement behaviours in relation to other actors and on different engagement platforms.

Engagement takes place within service ecosystems

Independent of which approach to customer engagement is chosen, scholars nowadays agree that customer engagement does not occur in isolation and without the influence of contextual characteristics or other actors involved (Hollebeek et al., 2022; Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022). Instead, structures and conditions for engagement are always affected by other actors, and engagement, in turn, is strongly influenced by the surrounding context (Tsiotsou, 2020). In studies on engagement, these contexts and overarching structures that influence customers and their engagement have been referred to as service ecosystems. Theoretically, service ecosystems are defined as “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p.11). Customers, as well as other actors, are embedded in these service ecosystems, and as such, engagement takes place in the overarching and institutional arrangements of the service ecosystems (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2020; Storbacka, 2019).

Service ecosystems are broader systems of intertwined actors that also include various touchpoints for interactions (Brozović & Tregua, 2022). These touchpoints can be referred to as engagement platforms (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022). As such, a physical store or a trade-fair may have certain structures that shape the nature and intensity of the engagement among customers (Sarmiento & Simões, 2019). However, virtual touch points such as social media, online forums and online marketplaces are also relevant platforms that may shape the intensity and richness of engagement differently than physical outlets (Blut et al., 2023). Each service ecosystem has its own structures, traditions, relational networks, roles, and platforms that shape the nature of engagement and its antecedents and consequences (Hollebeek et al., 2019). For instance, how customers engage with a company in a tech business may look very different from how football fans engage with a team in the service ecosystem of elite football (Buser et al., 2022).

As the service ecosystem focuses on networks of relationships between actors, it is a natural development towards a move beyond the customer-firm dyad in engagement research. Some scholars have advocated for a broadened concept of actor engagement, which amplifies how various actors (customers, firms, municipalities, media, etc.) all engage in service ecosystems and that they may have opposing goals or conflicts regarding the co-creation of value (Hollebeek et al., 2020). For instance, more engagement may also lead to protests, activism and what some actors may perceive as value co-destruction (Keeling et al., 2021). As such, when assessing the nature of engagement within market

exchanges, we may not only arrive at a better understanding of how strong brand communities are formed but also of how and why customers choose to engage in protests, resistance groups and other types of actions that may create value for some but also destroy value for a focal brand (Keeling et al., 2021).

In recent years, engagement studies have also incorporated the role of social media. Such platforms have led to customer-initiated and/or customer-driven collaborative engagement platforms (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022). Through the use of such platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or other online applications, customers are often the initiators of discussions about a product or service (Hollebeek et al., 2020). In some cases, this occurs even without direct contact with a company (Hollebeek et al., 2020). This further reinforces the notion that active customers are increasingly engaged with other customers. Previously, before social media and such collaborative platforms had emerged, the ways of engaging had a more dyadic nature (between just a customer and a firm); currently, customers can instantly engage with others (Blut et al., 2023; Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). Through engagement with other human actors (friends, other customers, etc.) on various platforms, relationships are established within a certain community that can make individuals feel as if they belong to a specific unit, in some cases a brand community (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). For many people as individuals, engagement with something or someone may lead to increased personal well-being and a sense of meaningfulness in their life and contribute to personal self-identity projects (Black et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2022).

3.3 Towards Fan Engagement

Recent studies on customer engagement and service ecosystems have shown that, just as service ecosystems have different actors involved and different institutional arrangements present, we must embrace context-specific characteristics when studying engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Since more actors seek to invest in the elite football ecosystem, a clear understanding of the nature of fan engagement is important because it allows us to better understand the economic, political, and social dynamics in football (Buser et al., 2022). In practice, recent years have also seen how fan engagement has resulted in the abolition of the European Super League (Panja & Smith, 2021) an urgency among clubs to create apps and platforms, such as Socios.com and “inside documentaries”, to ensure benefits of club-fan engagement (Laurell & Al., n.d.; Vale & Fernandes, 2018), and from a Swedish elite football perspective, how Swedish football fans have united in a strong resistance against e.g. VAR and, or the eventual abolishment of the 51 percent rule (Bachner, 2023; De Waele et al., 2018). All these are examples of the influence of fan engagement and thus indicate its importance to the service ecosystem of elite sports. However, despite the influence of fan engagement, scholars lack an in-depth understanding of this topic. McDonald et al. (2022) noted that “given that customer engagement is context dependent, and sport is known to have unique characteristics, the adaptability

of CE⁶ work to it has only been superficially examined” (p. 289). Consequently, to understand the nature of contemporary football fans and the engagement that is relevant in elite football, more studies are needed. This also implies that there is a need to further examine and explore the differences and similarities between customers and fans (McDonald et al., 2022).

Fan or customer of sports?

What, then, is the difference between customer and fan engagement? On an overarching level, it depends on whether fans are customers of sports.

On the one hand, it is possible to argue that fans are customers, just as in any other service ecosystem. By being engaged with the sport, they purchase tickets, subscriptions, and souvenirs and thus engage as customer-alike individuals, with the mere difference that rather than purchasing a product or service, they purchase the experience of following a team (Fujak et al., 2018). Giulianotti (2002) highlighted, in his categorisation of contemporary football spectators, that some fans do not have the same levels of loyalty or identification with a team, and as such, they may consume the game just as any other type of service. For instance, it may be the atmosphere at football games that is important rather than the actual teams that are playing (Giulianotti, 2002). From this perspective, scholars such as Fujak et al. (2018) have described that the differences between fans of elite football and customers in other markets may be overstated. In some way, both are customers and buy a product, service, or a football game due to personal motives.

However, on the other hand, fans can also be seen as something distinctively different. Fandom and being a fan are often regarded as based on identification and belonging, and an interest in a team is often inherited from parents or from friends (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Shank & Beasley, 1998; Tinson et al., 2017). Indeed, they engage in transactional behaviours such as purchasing tickets and souvenirs. However, a fan may also have a sense of ownership of the club, which is difficult to find in other service ecosystems. This also stipulates that compared to other markets, most often it is the identity of the fan community and their behaviours that governs a club’s identity (De Waele et al., 2018). Moreover, being a sports fan often has strong social implications. This means that, in comparison to other customers, engagement with an elite football team almost always involves the presence of other fans (Allison & Pope, 2022). In some cases, it may be other fans present within the specific stadium section; in other cases, it may be conversations with others on social media or with friends and family outside the specific game (Hyatt et al., 2018; Meng et al., 2015; Sloan, 1989).

In addition, being an elite football fan often implies unique (and maybe even irrational) levels of emotions, loyalty, and identification (McDonald et al., 2022). Many football fans will remain loyal and engaged with their team and/or a fan community independent of whether the team loses, is degraded, or is involved in scandals (Bauer et al., 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008; Yoshida et al., 2015). In some cases,

⁶ Authors note: Customer Engagement.

negative circumstances around a team may even elevate fans' engagement, particularly with others in the fan community (Atkinson, 2021). Moreover, as elite football teams may play a pivotal role for the fan and their self-identity, engagement in sports may be a form of public engagement. As such, the fan may have a distinct urge to engage in such a way that others see which team they identify with, which is highly beneficial for the team (McDonald et al., 2022). With so much engagement invested in a relationship with a team or a fan community, a change that is disliked (for instance, a new name for the stadium, new club owners, new sponsors, or elevated ticket prices) may therefore lead to, from a club perspective, negative fan engagement behaviours and value destruction (K. Kim et al., 2020; Naumann et al., 2020; Stieler et al., 2014).

The nature of Fan Engagement

Regarding 'engagement' and 'engagement behaviours', the choice of how to approach the fan as a fan or as a customer is of limited practical importance. Actual engagement behaviours are similar between the two scenarios and recent studies on fan engagement have sought to adapt measurements for customer engagement behaviours in the fan context (Yoshida et al., 2014; 2023).

In short, fan engagement may be seen as all sorts of nonmonetary exchanges that fans of elite sports have with other actors in the elite sport ecosystem, for instance, fellow and rival fans, clubs, and the media (Tsiotsou, 2016). Sports- and fan-specific characteristics that should be included in approaching fan engagement include ritualistic fan behaviours (Bradford & Sherry, 2015), the experiential benefits of being a fan (such as entertainment, escape, and socializing) (Bauer et al., 2008; Yoshida et al., 2023) and how being a football fan, for many, has an important role in their self-identity projects (Doyle et al., 2017; Yoshida et al., 2014).

Yoshida et al. (2014) were among the first to apply the customer engagement concept to elite sports. This initial definition of fan engagement was a three-dimensional concept that consisted of (1) management cooperation, (2) prosocial behaviour, and (3) performance tolerance (Yoshida et al., 2014). As such, this conceptualisation was believed to cover some distinct dimensions of fans' nontransactional behaviours, for instance, a strong willingness to support the club and assist others in the fan community, as well as how fans often remain engaged despite unsuccessful seasons (Yoshida et al., 2014). The recent publication by Yoshida et al. (2023) is another example of a definition of fan engagement behaviours. Here, fan engagement is explained as the "voluntary contribution to the success and welfare of a sports team through value-adding behaviours, going beyond the mere consumption of sport products such as ticket purchases and television viewing" (p.3). As such, this study builds on recent customer engagement studies that sought to integrate customer engagement into the service research (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Fan engagement behaviours are not restricted to one sole action and/or activity that a fan undertakes in relation to a focal team, other fans, or other actors of the elite football ecosystem. Instead, fans may

engage in different ways, which may lead to different outcomes depending on whom the focal actor is. As Table 3 shows, some fan engagement behaviours are more directed to other fans (for instance, referrals, fan-resource integration, and prosocial behaviours), while others are far more concentrated in interactions with the actual brand (for instance, management cooperation and team-to-fan interactions). In terms of value co-creation and/or value co-destruction, it is also important to note that some engagement behaviours, such as protests, may lead to value co-destruction from a club's perspective; this may also strengthen the fan community and contribute even further to individual fans' identification as fans (Hill et al., 2018; Stieler et al., 2014).

Table 3. Fan Engagement Behaviours

| Behaviour | Example | Studies |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Referrals | Inviting other peers to attend games and other team-related events | Lee et al. (2020); Yoshida et al. (2014) |
| Fan resource integration | Discussing team-related issues, such as past results, with peers on social media or at physical sites | Santos et al., (2019); Thompson et al. (2016); Yoshida et al. (2023) |
| Team-to-fan-interactions | Following and interacting with a focal team or athlete on social media or at a stadium | Cordina et al. (2019); Santos et al. (2019); Vale & Fernandes (2018) |
| Prosocial behaviours | Sharing information with other peers and/or helping others get to know the team and the community around it | Yoshida et al. (2014); Thompson et al. (2016) |
| Participation in member associations | Making an impact on team-related decisions through member and board meetings with the club (especially relevant in Swedish elite football) | Biscaia et al. (2016); Uhrich (2021) |
| Social gatherings with other fans | Tailgating events prior to games or supporter meetings at pubs and/or bars | Uhrich et al. (2014); Bradford & Sherry (2015) |
| Management cooperation | Assisting employees from the club and participating constructively with team representants at the stadium | Yoshida et al. (2014); Huettermann et al. (2019); Yoshida et al., (2023) |
| Rituals | Fans conducting formalised fan activities such as praying and singing in a certain sequence to co-create symbolic fan experiences | Bradford & Sherry, (2015) Liu & Berkowitz, (2016); Yoshida et al., (2023) |

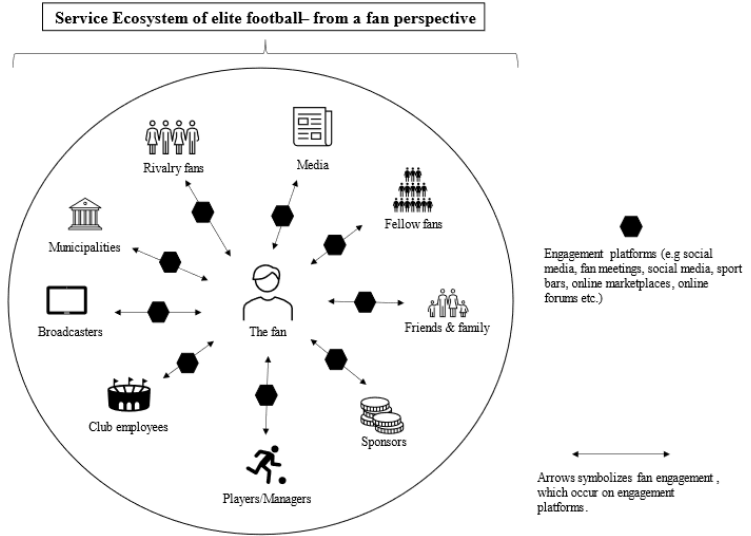
Fan Engagement and the Service Ecosystem of Elite Football

Compared to other service ecosystems, the service ecosystem of elite football has several distinct characteristics that shape the nature of fan engagement (Buser et al., 2022). One dimension of the elite football service ecosystem is the presence of many different actors and elements to engage with (McDonald et al., 2023). In contrast to other service ecosystems, where the relationship between a customer and a company makes up most of the engagement, fans often engage with multiple actors (rival fans, families, friends, teams, players, coaches, the media, etc.) across both digital and physical platforms (Buser et al., 2022). The social ingredients of fandom are an important aspect of the culture of being a football fan and the service ecosystem of elite football. Elite football, independent of whether it is seen on TV or if the fan is at the stadium, is often consumed in groups with strong social ties (Uhrich et al., 2023). In addition, the presence of rival fans and rival teams is also rather unique to the elite football service ecosystem. Some studies have shown that rivalry contributes to increased engagement levels, as it fosters concrete opposition that fans may engage in (Tyler et al., 2021).

Many actors (such as rival fans, the media, and municipalities) play a part in shaping all types of engagement in the service ecosystem of elite football. This is due not only to how they interact and engage with specific football fans but also to how they shape the institutional arrangements surrounding the engagement (Dessart, 2015; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). This illustrates that there is a myriad of actors (broadcasters, teams, news outlets, tech companies and so forth) that compete for fan engagement (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). In recent decades, the development and diffusion of new social media platforms and emerging technologies have further spurred this socialisation. As X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and other online fan forums have made it easier than ever to interact with other fans, watching a football game from home, alone on the sofa, may also be a social experience (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Figure 1 provides an illustration of potential fan engagement scenarios within the elite football ecosystem. Therein, a fan may engage with various actors who are interested in and participate in the overarching service ecosystem of elite football.

Figure 1 – The service ecosystem of elite football

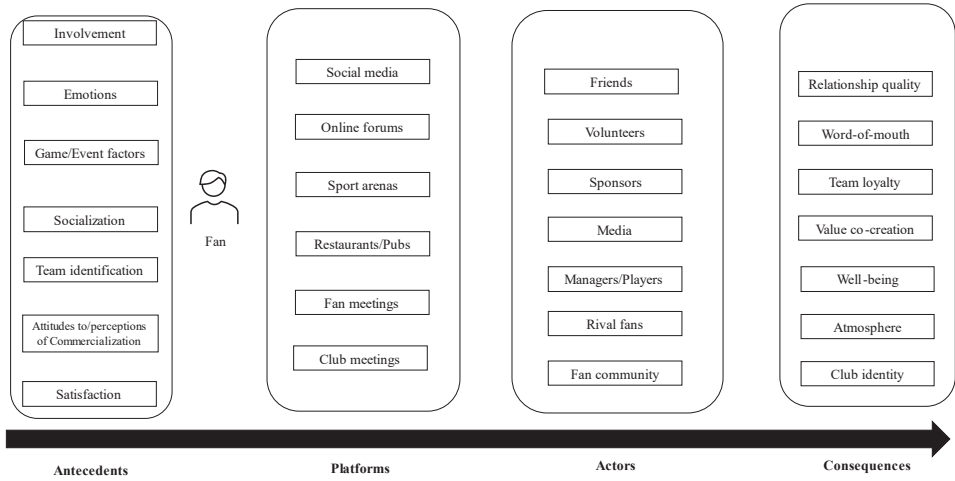


3.4 Conceptual Research Framework

This theoretical section focuses on the recent customer- and fan-engagement literature. In doing so, this section elaborates on the behavioural approach to the fan engagement concept, discussed the implications of a service-ecosystem-rooted perspective on fan engagement and argued for the importance of engagement through its many antecedents and consequences.

Figure 2 – “The Fan Engagement Journey” - provides a brief overview of the contemporary fan and how some key antecedents make the fan willing to engage, in turn leading to engagement on various platforms with various actors, which leads to various outcomes that are important to the individual, the team, and the entire elite football service ecosystem.

Figure 2 – Conceptual Research Framework



This framework shows that there are many factors that make football fans willing to engage with other involved actors. High levels of engagement are not only related to one specific antecedent; rather, engaged football fans are motivated by several factors simultaneously. The social dimension is one, as engagement is depicted as creating a stronger sense of belonging to a fan community. At the same time, for many fans, participating in an immersive match experience and/or becoming emotionally aroused through following a game also leads to engagement on different platforms and with different actors (McDonald et al., 2022). Figure 2 also shows how engagement in football benefits both the focal team and the individual fan. However, as recent papers have shown, in some cases, there may be backlash from the high levels of engagement in elite football, as protests, activism and other ways of fan engagement may lead to value co-destruction and a damaged relationship between the fan and the team (Stieler et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018).

To conclude, brands that succeed in engaging a large customer base and in understanding what drives engagement are often the most successful, as they have a dependable and, most importantly, cooperative fan base (Harrigan et al., 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2021). From a more theoretical perspective, assessing what drives engagement and its consequences are essential for understanding the contemporary customer, or as in this case, the contemporary football fan. An increased understanding of customer engagement also provides theoretical roots for understanding value-co-creation processes and the structures of wider service ecosystems.

4. Methodological framework

Research on customer and fan engagement has followed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches (Hollebeek et al., 2022). In terms of recent discussions of how to continue the theorisation on engagement, most calls for further studies have focused on which topics to delve further into rather than the methodological choices (Audy Martínek, 2021; McDonald et al., 2022). To generate representative and generalizable insights into the nature of engagement in society, this thesis aligns with the quantitative research tradition. Thus, principles of hypothesis testing regarding data collection and data analysis are applied. The remainder of this chapter will elaborate further on this research approach, the subsequent research process and the methodological choices that were undertaken to assess the reliability and validity of the studies.

4.1 Research approach

To fulfil the research aims of this thesis, and to be able to generate a generalizable and valid results a quantitative research approach is deemed as the most suitable. This quantitative research approach often builds upon the deductive and positivistic philosophy of Popper (1959), seeking to eliminate subjective interpretation. Quantitative research has several advantages that aligns with the aims of this thesis. For instance, one core element of quantitative research is that it strives to achieve as generalizable and neutral interpretations and analysis of the results as possible (Hair et al., 2014; Young, 1981). Through strict procedures and established requirements for statistical significance, focus in quantitative research is on ensuring the validity and reliability of the results (Hair et al., 2014).

As one of the objectives of this thesis was to build upon previous qualitative research in the areas of commercialization of elite sports, to provide a more generalizable picture, these quantitative procedures were well suited. Hence, in this thesis, hypotheses are formulated based on existing studies (both qualitative and quantitative) on the relevant topics. As such, hypotheses were developed in a deductive manner, where previous research on fan and customer engagement had a prominent role. This to be able to, in an as neutral way as possible, contribute to already existing theory on, for instance fan engagement.

Another core element of quantitative research is the minimisation of subjective interpretation and therein reducing eventual bias of the researcher (Cresswell, 2009). Through controlled and tested measurement scales, and therein as objective analysis as possible, the goal is to contribute to theory with neutral and replicable results around a certain phenomenon (Cook & Reichardt, 1979; Creswell, 2009). Since this thesis partly aimed to delve further into antecedents and consequences of fan engagement, in a, as neutral way as possible, these principles align well with the overarching perspective of the thesis.

Based in this research philosophy, with a focus on generalizability, statistical significance, and minimization of bias, the main data in this thesis was collected through two large scale surveys. For instance, an important objective was that the results should include several types of fans, in contrast to many critical studies on the influence of commercialisation on football fans, which most often include only the most engaged fans (Giulianotti, 2005, 2011; Hognestad, 2015) or only the local neighbourhood around the team (Putra, 2019). As such, this quantitative approach makes the results more representative to the population of football fans.

To summarize, Table 4 provides an overview of the data collected in the four different articles. As shown, the first article is the exception; it does not use a questionnaire as the primary way of collecting data. Instead, as the aim was to provide an overview and understanding of the existing research on the consequences of elite sport commercialisation for fans, a systematic literature review was undertaken (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Table 4 – Article overview

| Article | Data collection | Purpose | Data source | Key topics/concepts | Factors in survey | Data analysis |
|----------------|------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Rigorous literature search process | Develop a holistic understanding of the extant studies addressing the impact of commercialisation on fans of elite sports | 134 articles (prior to criteria filtering), 42 after exclusion | Commercialisation, elite sports, fans | N/A | Systematic literature review |
| 2 | Survey I | Explore drivers to and analyse the consequences of customer (fan) engagement with a firm (team), vis-à-vis customer (fan) engagement with other customers (fans) | 2031 survey responses | Customer engagement, service ecosystems, fans, elite football | Customer engagement with other customers, customer engagement with a firm, satisfaction, involvement, team identification; emotional attachment, attitudes towards commercialisation, team loyalty, word-of-mouth | Structural equation modelling (SEM) |

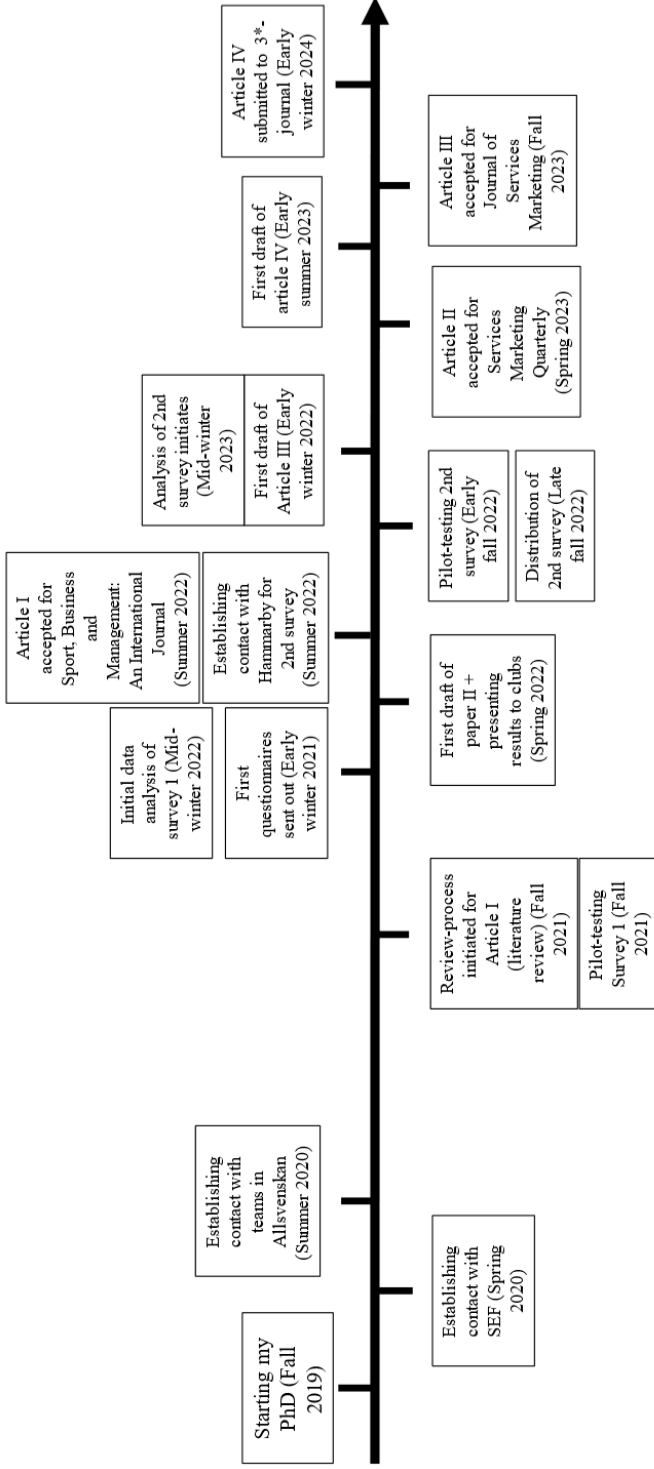
| | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|--|-----------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| 3 | Survey I | Examine and compare the influence of the disposition towards engagement behaviours on physical and virtual engagement platforms, as well as the influence of these engagement behaviours on brand loyalty, value-in-use, and word-of-mouth | 2031 survey responses | Customer engagement, engagement platforms, elite football, service ecosystems | Disposition to engage, value-in-use, team loyalty, engagement on physical platforms, engagement on virtual platforms | Structural equation modelling (SEM) |
| 4 | Survey II | Analyse and compare the consequences of perceived commercialisation on the perception of authenticity and fan engagement in women's and men's elite football | 1168 survey responses | Elite football, commercialisation, women's football, authenticity, fan engagement | Fan engagement, continuity, credibility/integrity, symbolism, perception of commercialisation | Moderated mediation |

4.2 Research Process

My PhD journey started in the fall of 2019, at a time where we did not know much about the forthcoming pandemic, which would have significant influence on society, and particularly, how fans followed their elite football team. Eventually, my work contacting the clubs, forming the questionnaires, and interpreting the results had to account for the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. For instance, in the first survey I distributed, the respondents were asked to think of the seasons before the pandemic, and in interpreting the results, I argued that there may be effects of restrictions on physical fan meetings and attendance of actual games.

Figure 3 provides a timeline of my PhD journey and shows some of the key milestones in the process.

Figure 3 - Timeline of the dissertation journey



4.3. Data collection

The emphasis of the data collection has been on two surveys (for articles II, III and IV). For the first article, which provides an overview the literature on the topic of elite sports commercialisation and its consequences for fans, the principles of systematic literature reviews were applied (Tranfield et al., 2003). In this section, some key reflections about the empirical work, including the review process and the surveys, are outlined, and discussed.

Collecting the literature

The aim of the first article written for this thesis was to provide an understanding of the extant literature on the topic of elite sports commercialisation and its consequences for fans. As such, the empirical data for this review were obtained from a database of retrieved and reviewed articles. To achieve a reliable and relevant base of articles for this review, Tranfield et al.'s (2003) principles for systematic literature reviews were used.

Tranfield et al. (2003) suggest that there should be strict and clear criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of studies in systematic literature reviews. Consequently, for article I, “commercialisation” and “fans” were defined as the main concepts, but to incorporate other articles relevant to the research aims, similar words such as “commodification”, “marketisation”, “supporter” and “sports spectator” were included. In total, 134 articles were retrieved from databases as well as from relevant sports-specific and non-sports-specific journals. The retrieved literature was thereafter narrowed down to 42 papers due to whether they touched upon the key topic of the article. The main benefits of following the systematic principles of Tranfield et al. (2003) is that a rigorous search process is applied, and the risk of missing relevant sources is minimised.

Surveys

The main emphasis in the data collection was on the two surveys, which were answered by a total of 4331 fans of Swedish elite football⁷. Through a deductive research approach and based on previous studies, working hypotheses were proposed and served as the basis for the structuring and item generation of the two different surveys.

In terms of engagement, the first survey (used for articles II and III) included items on fan engagement with a team, vis-à-vis other fans, and engagement behaviours on virtual and physical platforms. The aims of these two studies were to either examine antecedents and outcomes in relation to engagement with different actors (article II) or to examine antecedents and outcomes on physical and virtual engagement platforms (article III). For article IV, such separation of the engagement construct was not necessary to examine the relationships among engagement, perceived commercialisation, type of football league, and perceived authenticity. As such, engagement in this survey was treated as a uniform construct.

⁷A total of 2746 fans for the first survey, and 1585 for the second survey.

The surveys were designed in a process that involved pretesting, pilot surveys, and discussions with practitioners, in this case, representatives of the clubs and of the SEF (Svensk Elitfotboll). This was to ensure face validity. The adaptation of scales and items of fan engagement, as well as of perception/attitudes towards commercialisation, to the context of Swedish elite football was especially important. Most of the items used were based upon previous works, such as by Yoshida et al. (2014) on fan engagement. No previous studies have measured (1) perceptions of and attitudes towards commercialisation or (2) engagement behaviours on physical and virtual engagement platforms among fans.

In developing these scales, and testing them through rigorous principles of scale development (Hair et al., 2014; Kyriazios, 2018), the literature was first reviewed to control and find relevant and/or similar scales. To exemplify, for the measurements of attitudes towards commercialisation, some items were extracted from previous studies that focused on fans' attitudes towards other objects, for instance, a rival team and/or sponsors at a stadium (Fritz et al., 2017). Thereafter, and having discussed the pool of items with practitioners and colleagues, a final set of items to measure, for instance, attitudes towards commercialisation and the frequency of engagement on various platforms, was proposed. After the questionnaires were distributed, the new scales were validated through rigorous testing, and the samples were randomly split into three groups—one for the EFA, one for the CFA, and one for the final test—to ensure that the new scales were valid across a large sample (Kyriazos, 2018).

Pilot tests of the surveys, including all items, were conducted to ensure the consistency and relevance of the final survey. For the sampling of respondents, the clubs were asked to send out the online survey to randomised samples of individuals who had attended at least one game during the three most recent years. This approach allowed not only season ticket holders but also frequently visiting fans to be targeted. For both surveys, reminders were distributed approximately two weeks after the initial invitations were sent out, and by doing so, the response rates of both samples reached approximately 27%. Considering the large sample sizes and the rather long surveys, which included several pages and questions, this approach was considered acceptable. The data consisted of both numeric and string values, yet all the items were multiple choice and closed questions. This process ensured the recoding of the data for the following analyses.

All scales used five-point Likert scales (from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5)). This implied that the respondents were able to provide a neutral answer (3), which is preferable when respondents may not have a strong attitude or perception regarding a certain issue (Irwing et al., 2018). For some fans, this may be the reality regarding perceptions of and attitudes towards commercialisation, which was included as an item in both surveys. Table 5 provides an overview of the survey results.

Table 5 – Survey structure for the dissertation

| Survey | Study objects | Article | Questionnaires | Sampling method | Sampling criterion | Response rates ⁸ | Time of distribution | Focal constructs |
|--------|--|----------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 | Five Swedish elite football teams (Allsvenskan) | II & III | 2000 per club (10000 invitations in total) | Random | Had attended at least one game during the three last seasons | 20.3% | November – December 2021 | Fan engagement with a team; fan engagement with other fans; engagement behaviours on platforms; attitudes towards commercialisation; loyalty; value-in-use; word-of-mouth |
| 2 | Three Swedish elite football teams (men’s and women’s) | IV | 2000 per club (6000 invitations in total) | Random | Had attended at least one game during the three last seasons | 19.6% | January – February 2023 | Perceptions of commercialisation; fan engagement; authenticity ⁹ |

The first survey was sent out in the fall of 2021. The second survey, which article 4 is based upon, was sent out in the early spring of 2023. The answers to the surveys were fully anonymised, and no contact information was transferred as part of the data.

4.4 Population – Fans of Swedish elite football

The population in the empirical works of this thesis consists of fans of Swedish elite football (both men’s and women’s). Quantifying the total number of fans of Swedish elite football is almost impossible, yet statistics from the SEF show that a total of 3000000 game visits were recorded in the two top-tier divisions of Swedish men’s elite football in 2023 (in Herrallsvenskan, the average attendance figure was 10000 spectators/game) (Föreningen Svensk Elitfotboll, 2023). For the women’s

⁸ After excluding missing data.

⁹ Authenticity was separated into three different dimensions based on previous scales (Morhart et al., 2015): continuity, credibility/integrity, and symbolism.

top-division statistics, 197000 game visits were recorded in 2023, and the average attendance was 1086 spectators/game (OBOS Damallsvenskan, 2023).

These figures show (1) the quantity of Swedish elite football fans who attend matches and (2) that more than just the hardcore ultras attend the games. The ultras are an important part of Swedish elite football, yet the majority of those who attend Swedish football matches are people with an interest in a team but who engage differently than those who are the most vocal at the standing sections (SEF, 2023).

As such, in generating a reliable sample from this population, one important aspect of the survey distribution was to not only include the hardcore fans in the standing sections but also to apply a broader sampling frame to capture engagement among the more casual fans. Which was done through asking the clubs to randomly select a fixed number of attendees, including season-ticket holders but also those having attended just one game.

Sample characteristics

The two surveys resulted in two large samples of Swedish football fans. The first survey (for articles II and III) was distributed to only fans of Swedish men's elite football. Out of the 10000 invitations per mail, 2746 answered, leading to a response rate of approximately 27.5% (this response rate is common in online questionnaires (Stedman et al., (2019)). In total, 79.1% were men, and the average age was of the respondents was 58 years.

For the second survey, which was distributed to fans of both men's and women's elite football, 2000 invitations were sent to each team (a total of 6000 invitations), and out of these, 1586 responses were received (response rate: 27.6%). The average age of the respondents was between 53 and 54 years. The majority were still male (78% of those who answered the questionnaire about women's football fans were men, and 90% of those who answered the questionnaire about the men's elite football teams were also men).

The sample is undoubtedly skewed towards a male bias; however, that is also the truth in regard to those who attend the games in Sweden's top divisions. Recent studies show that, on average, 20% of those who attend Swedish elite football games are female, which is also representative of the data in this thesis (Radmann et al., 2022).

4.5 Data Analysis

Previous sections have elaborated on the research approach, the research process, the methods of collecting data, and the sample characteristics of the quantitative works of this dissertation. The following section discusses the core principles of the analytical work.

Systematic Literature Review

Structured literature reviews are applicable when seeking to understand an overarching phenomenon and/or issue (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). For article I, the aim of the systematic literature review was to

develop a holistic understanding of the extant studies addressing the impact of commercialisation on fans of elite sports. Having narrowed the relevant base of literature to 42 articles, the analysis process yielded several categorisations of methodological applications, studied contexts and the theoretical nature/theme of the articles.

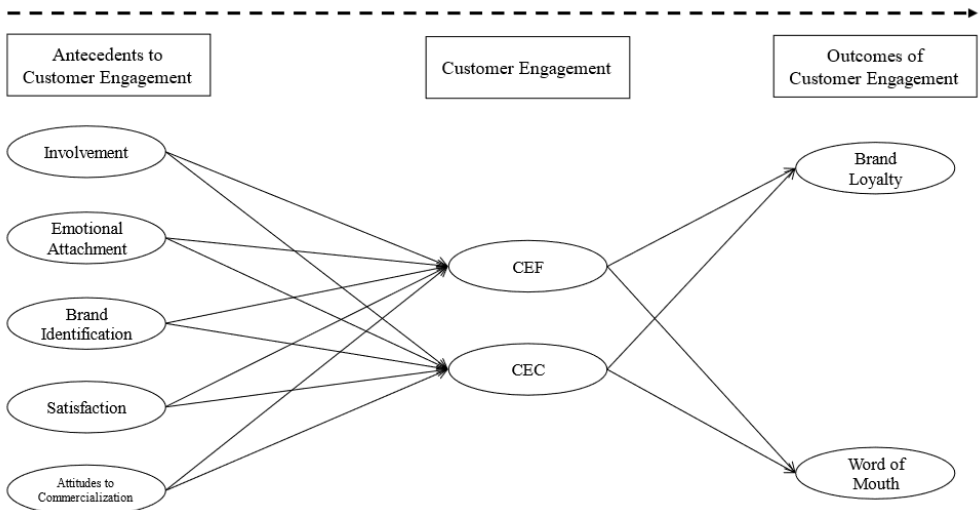
Such categorisation of the relevant articles allows an overview and an overarching understanding of the studied field (Tranfield et al., 2003). In this case, studies on the consequences of elite sports commercialisation for fans were categorised for both the actual article and to establish an understanding of the field that was used throughout the entire thesis.

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

SEM was used to investigate the causal relationships between multiple different variables, such as fan engagement, loyalty to a team, and the level of identification with a team (see article II) (Hair et al., 2014). As SEM examines structures and interrelationships between several variables, SEM is often used to test structural theory, as in this case with both antecedents to and consequences of engagement (Hair et al., 2014). Moreover, SEM is especially appropriate when multiple dependent and independent variables are present and there is a need to test for multiple relationships between constructs, as was the case in articles II and III.

For articles II and III, the focus was on analysing both the antecedents to and consequences of customer/fan engagement (either with a focal team vis-à-vis other fans or on virtual or physical engagement platforms). For example, Figure 4 shows the structural model developed for article II.

Figure 4 – Research model: Antecedents to and outcomes of customer engagement in Swedish elite football. (The figure is derived from paper II: Winell (2023).)



A regression model cannot capture such complexity in full (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, as the engagement constructs in articles II and III were separated into either engagement with different actors or engagement on different platforms, SEM, which tests for multiple regressions between various factors, is the most appropriate method (Hair et al., 2014). For instance, engagement with other fans and with a team is tested both in relation to multiple antecedents and in relation to multiple outcomes.

Having established the research models, the SEM analysis followed the principles of Hair et al. (2014) and included an overall measurement model that was tested for its validity, and thereafter a test and analysis of the validity of the structural model.

The hypotheses in relation to the SEM were established through previous literature, and after specifying and testing the structural model, conclusions were made through a rigorous process that focused on whether it was possible to reject the null hypothesis and, if so, whether the associated p values and beta-coefficients generated by SPSS AMOS were statistically significant.

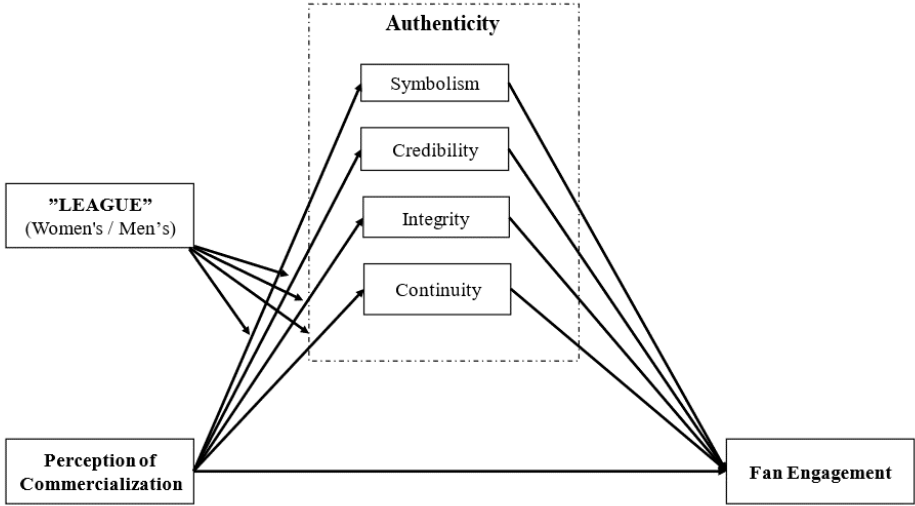
Moderated mediation

The principles of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013) were followed for paper IV, which analysed and compared the consequences of perceived commercialisation on brand authenticity and fan engagement in women's and men's elite football. Compared to the hypothesised structural models in articles II and III, the fourth paper included only four main constructs, and the main interest was whether perceived commercialisation had any direct or indirect (through authenticity) effect on fan engagement.

Moderated mediation analysis is useful when seeking to examine whether an indirect effect is dependent on the values of a moderating variable (Hayes, 2013). In the case of my dissertation, and as seen in article 4, a moderated mediation analysis was used to analyse whether levels of perceived commercialisation had different effects on brand authenticity and fan engagement in women's elite football and men's elite football.

The moderated mediation hypothesis was established based on previous literature; for instance, research has shown that an increase in commercialisation often erodes perceptions of authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2018). Figure 5 shows the moderated mediation model used in article IV.

Figure 5 – Moderated mediation research model of the perception of commercialisation on fan engagement. (The figure is reproduced from article IV: Winell et al. (2024).)



In this moderated mediation model, the four dimensions, namely, symbolism, credibility, integrity, and continuity, make up the mediating construct of authenticity. A mediating effect is when an independent variable, in this case, the perception of commercialisation, has a significant influence on the dependent variable (fan engagement) through a third variable, that is, the mediating variable (authenticity) (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Here, the focus was to test whether fans’ perceptions of commercialisation had an indirect effect on fan engagement through the four dimensions of authenticity. Moreover, there were differences based on whether the fans were engaged in a women’s elite football team or a men’s elite football team. For the hypothesis testing, the analyses and conclusions were made in a similar way to those for the SEM, i.e., depending on the p values and the beta-coefficients brought forwards in the statistical program.

4.5 Methodological considerations

For the systematic literature review, all the articles were analysed through the rigorous process suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003). These guidelines imply that a structured review strives to achieve validity and reliability in the process of planning, conducting, reporting, and analysing relevant articles (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). More specifically, they imply that a standardised way of, for instance, searching for articles, narrowing the scope of the topic, and analysing the empirical base of the articles, was applied. This approach ensured that bias and error were reduced to a minimum. Considering that the systematic literature review process was rather straightforward, this section therefore focuses on key methodological considerations for the quantitative research sections of this thesis, including how the validity and reliability of the empirical work was tested.

Reliability and validity

Reliability refers to the consistency and reproducibility of a study (Hair et al., 2014). This means that the reliability of a study is deemed high when the error terms are low and there is consistency in the scales that are used (Hair et al., 2014). As seen in the three empirical papers, prior to the SEM and the moderated mediation analysis, both exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) and confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) (using split samples) were conducted, with the goal of examining the chi-square statistics, standardised factor loadings, and error terms.

CFAs are needed prior to any structural models and assess the goodness of fit of the entire research model. They ensure that items and factors that are theoretically connected are statistically related in the dataset (Hair et al., 2014). Cho et al. (2020) reported that the construct and composite reliability of a measurement model is achieved when standardised factor loadings are above .6 (construct reliability), composite reliability is above .7, and the average variance extracted for each scale in the survey is above .5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Cho et al., 2020). Moreover, the reliability of a scale, for instance, the scale of engagement behaviours on physical engagement platforms, is most often tested through Cronbach's alpha (Hair et al., 2014). Cronbach's alpha tests the degree to which items of a latent construct measure the intended construct. In general, a Cronbach's alpha above .7 is deemed acceptable. In most cases, the constructs in this thesis were above .8, yet some, for instance, engagement with others (.76) and engagement with a team (.77), were slightly lower. Nevertheless, as Hair et al. (2014) suggested, such figures are acceptable and indicate that there are no severe issues with construct and composite reliability.

Second, validity is an important indicator of research quality because it refers to the degree to which what is intended to be measured in the survey is measured (Hair et al., 2014). In discussing validity, researchers often focus on convergent and discriminant validity.

Convergent validity refers to the extent to which the measures used in a study, which should be related, are related (Hair et al., 2014). Discriminant validity is rather the opposite, as it emphasises that the measures that are not related in the study are not actually related (Hair et al., 2014). Both validity indicators are related, and when (1) items are consistent with each other (scale reliability), (2) items reflect the independent latent variable (convergent validity) and (3) items are statistically distinct from other items on other latent variables (discriminant validity), construct validity is achieved (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler et al., 2015).

In this dissertation, the principles of Hair et al. (2014) and Henseler et al. (2015) were followed to ensure the convergent and discriminant validity of the studies. To assess convergent validity, Hair et al. (2014) noted that standardised factor loadings, for instance, from items of fan engagement with other fans to the construct of fan engagement with other fans, should be above .5, and ideally above .7. For almost all items, such levels were achieved with no correlation of error terms. However, for single

items, for instance, engagement with other fans, some error terms were correlated; however, this was justified based on the theoretical relevance, and the content validity of the items was ensured (Henseler et al., 2015).

Hair et al. (2014) argued that to ensure discriminant validity, the square root of each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) must exceed its intercorrelation. For instance, to test the discriminant validity of fan engagement, the square root of the AVE of fan engagement should not exceed the intercorrelations with other constructs, such as perceptions of commercialisation (Hair et al., 2014). To ensure discriminant validity in the studies, such tests were performed. Moreover, to further ensure discriminant validity, HTMT tests were performed (Hensler et al., 2015). Henseler et al. (2015) suggested that previously used methods to ensure discriminant validity have several flaws, and as the HTMT provides a more robust way of finding issues with discriminant validity, it is superior. Henseler et al. (2015) argued that the HTMT ratios of the constructs used should not exceed .85 when the sample size is above 500, which was the case in the studies used for this dissertation.

These procedures and the in-depth analyses of the included items are also important because they allow the exclusion of irrelevant items or the detection of issues with cross-loadings prior to the final analysis. Cross-loadings imply that an item loads on more than one of the factors, for instance, fan identification and fan engagement, which is a motive for exclusion because it seems irrelevant to the analysis (Hair et al., 2014).

Common method bias

Another important step is to control for common method bias (CMB) and common method variance (CMV). CMB is an issue in quantitative research and refers to whether there is a biased relationship between separate constructs (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986S). CMV, on the other hand, arises when the variance in the constructs is based on the measurement method instead of the actual measurements (Field, 2007).

To ensure that CMB is not present, it is important to formulate the items as clearly as possible. Most of the measurements used in this thesis were based on previously existing and validated scales, and for the scales that were developed, they underwent rigorous pilot testing and were established after discussions with practitioners in the field. In checking for CMB and CMV in the dataset, another important step is to ensure that no single factor in the data accounts for more than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). If it is above 50%, one could suppose that there is one factor in the dataset. As this was not the case in any of the surveys, there were no issues with CMB or CMV.

Missing data

One common issue and challenge related to quantitative research is the issue of missing data and incomplete questionnaires. To ensure that the response rates were as high as possible, reminders were

sent out to motivate the respondents to answer. In total, 2746 respondents (27.5%) completed the first questionnaire, and 1585 respondents (26.4%) completed the second questionnaire.

With the response rates mentioned above, an essential step prior to the data analysis was to examine for missing data and to determine whether missing data was missing completely at random (MCAR), missing at random (MAR) or not missing at random (NMAR). As researchers, we want to avoid an underlying systematic pattern of missing data as it erodes the representativeness of the sample (Hair et al., 2014). The principles of Hair et al. (2014) were followed for the analysis of missing values. To ensure that the data were either MCAR or MAR, separate variance t tests and Littles tests were performed. After concluding these tests and ensuring that there were no issues with NMAR, respondents with a less than 50% response rate on the items used for the analysis were excluded from the dataset. The remaining missing values were estimated through expectation maximisation in SPSS. This procedure is deemed the most appropriate because it allows for the specification of missing data other than normal, produces less bias than other methods and does not reduce the variance in the data, such as the mean or regression imputation (Hair et al., 2014). In total, the final sample sizes were 20.3% (2031 responses) for the first questionnaire and 19.6% (1168 responses) for the second questionnaire. The probable cause for missing data in this case was the length of the survey. Moreover, self-administered surveys often have certain levels of dropout compared to focus groups and/or face-to-face surveys (Stedman et al., 2019). However, in line with the discussion of Stedman et al. (2019) on response rates in online questionnaires, a response rate of approximately 20% is acceptable.

5. Results and discussion of the studies

The aims of this dissertation were to (1) *examine and analyse the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement in Swedish elite football, focusing specifically on fan engagement with multiple actors and on multiple engagement platforms*, and (2) *analyse the consequences of elite football commercialisation on fans and their engagement*.

Table 6 illustrates the main results and contributions of these four studies. The following chapter provides an analysis of the various results from the studies. First, the two main aims of this dissertation are discussed. Thereafter, the concluding section of this chapter provides a more general discussion of the major contributions to studies on fan engagement and beyond.

Table 6. Objectives, results, and contributions of the included articles (see the Appendix for the full papers)

| Article | I. "How are fans affected by the commercialization of elite sports? A review of the literature and a research agenda" | II. "Exploring antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement among elite football fans" | III. "Customer engagement behaviors on physical and virtual engagement platforms" | IV. "The influence of Perceived Commercialization and Authenticity on Fan Engagement: Insights from Men's and Women's Elite Football Leagues in Sweden" |
|--------------|---|---|--|--|
| Objective | To review and analyse the effects of the commercialisation of elite sports on fans. | To analyse the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement with both other fans and with a team in Swedish (men's) elite football. | To analyse and compare the influence of physical and virtual engagement platforms on outcomes of engagement with Swedish (men's) elite football. | To analyse the consequences of commercialisation and authenticity on fan engagement in both women's and men's elite football. |
| Result | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the research on this topic has applied a critical perspective, i.e., highlighting the negative influence on fans. • Almost no research exists beyond Anglo-Saxon contexts, and especially not in women's elite sports. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirms the importance of satisfaction, brand identification and emotional attachment as antecedents to engagement with a team and with other fans. • Engagement with other fans is more important to loyalty and word-of-mouth than engagement with a focal team. • Involvement is only positively related to engagement with other fans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The disposition to engage has a significant influence on engagement behaviours on both physical and virtual engagement platforms. • Engagement that occurs on virtual engagement platforms is more influential on outcomes such as brand loyalty and value-in-use than engagement on physical engagement platforms. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the Swedish elite football context (especially in the women's top-tier football clubs), perceived commercialisation is positively related to some core dimensions of brand authenticity. • Context-specific factors shape how commercialisation is perceived and whether its influence is positive, neutral, or negative. |
| Contribution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows that the influence of elite sports commercialisation on fans can be both positive and negative. • A thematization of the influences of elite sports commercialisation on fans. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goes beyond the customer-firm dyad and illustrates the differences in antecedents to and consequences of engagement with other fans vis-à-vis a focal team. • The most immersive engagement is that which occurs between fans. • No positive or negative relationship between attitudes towards commercialisation and fan engagement were identified. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The characteristics and peculiarities of engagement platforms play an important role in shaping the outcomes of engagement. • In elite football, the ongoing engagement via virtual engagement platforms is essential to the outcomes of engagement. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a context such as the Swedish elite football ecosystem, the effects of commercialisation on fan engagement seem to be much more neutral or even positive in comparison with studies on fans of English elite football. • In women's elite football, there is a positive relationship of commercialisation on both authenticity and engagement. |

5.1 Purpose I – To examine and analyse the antecedents to and consequences of fan engagement in (Swedish) elite football

In the elite football service ecosystem, fan engagement with rival fans, clubs, players, sponsors, and other actors on multiple platforms has a substantial influence on the co-creation of value (McDonald et al., 2022). However, as witnessed in recent years, for instance, with the engagement in protests towards the European Super League¹⁰ and/or the engagement against VAR in Swedish elite football¹¹, fan engagement may also lead to, from a club's perspective, value co-destruction as ideals of the game collides (Stieler et al., 2014). This shows the duality of fan engagement, and that elite football is a rather distinct service ecosystem consisting of multiple economic, political, social, and performance-related ideals. Learning about engagement from such a setting allows us to understand the fundamentals that fans have in the sport ecosystem and beyond. Consequently, this chapter discusses the main results of this thesis in three subsections: (1) *the antecedents to fan engagement*, (2) *the consequences of fan engagement*, and (3) *the influence of different engagement platforms*.

Antecedents to Fan Engagement in Swedish Elite Football

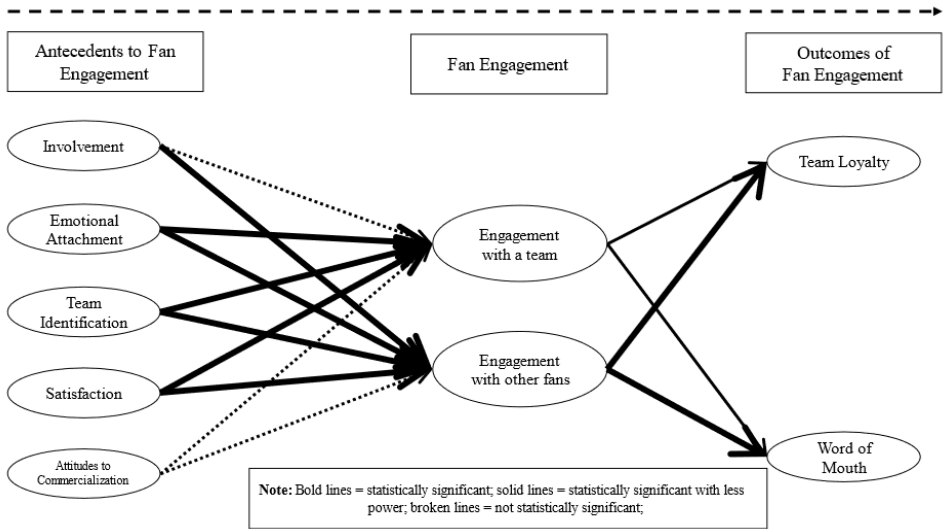
To understand fan engagement, one must account for the peculiar characteristics of the football ecosystem, for instance, the antecedents that are distinct for an elite football environment. Customer involvement and customer satisfaction are two examples of constructs that foster a willingness to engage among customers (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). If a customer is satisfied with a product or a service, it is more likely that they will be willing to continue to engage with the firm (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). The same antecedents are also relevant for studies on fan engagement, yet some additions and specifications are needed. As shown in Figure 6 (from Article II), in sports, the role of the level of team identification, emotional attachment to a team, and the eventual consequences of attitudes towards commercialisation are important to consider as antecedents to fan engagement.

¹⁰ The European Super League was a proposed international competition between the best, and richest, European clubs. As fans were concerned about elitism and the lack of competitiveness within this league, it met harsh protests from fans (Panja & Smith, 2021).

¹¹ Most of the Swedish elite football clubs that are run by their fans through voting have a affirmatory position towards the instalment of the Video Assistant Refereeing system in the Swedish top-divisions (Bachner, 2023).

Based on this and with the aim of examining engagement beyond the fan-team dyad, article II surveyed the role of these antecedents to engagement with the focal team and with other fans.

Figure 6. Final research model of the antecedents to and outcomes of customer engagement. Figure 6 is derived from article II: Winell, 2023.



The bold arrows in Figure 6 indicate the statistically significant relationships derived from the study. The results show that emotional attachment, level of identification with the team, and being satisfied with how the club treats the fans all are positively related to fan engagement behaviours with a team and with other fans. The influence of these independent variables on fan engagement indicates that for fans, just as with customers outside sports, being emotionally immersed in something (for instance, a game or a team) may also lead to an increase in engagement behaviours. The same is true for fans who strongly identify with their focal team and are satisfied with being fans of a specific club. This finding implies that, as previous studies have shown for the role of antecedents relevant to engagement with a team or a brand (Huettermann et al., 2022; Pansari & Kumar, 2017), the same antecedents are also relevant to engagement with other fans.

The results of article II also indicate that among Swedish elite football fans, the independent variable of involvement is a statistically significant predictor of fan engagement with others. However, involvement is not statistically significant regarding its influence on fan engagement with a focal team. This tells us that the high levels of involvement that many fans may have regarding a football team are likely to result in engagement within a fan community, not necessarily with the focal team as such. The social dimension of sports, i.e., that many fans invest considerable time and effort in interactions with other fans, serves as an important explanation (Yoshida et al., 2014). An example is “the hardcore ultras”, who involve and engage with other fans through chanting songs, choreographing

tifos, arranging fan meetings and so forth; this engagement with other “hardcore fans” is essential to such outcomes (Joern & Havelund, 2020). However, as these surveys also included more occasional fans, who are perhaps not the most vocal at stadiums, these results also show that involvement has a major influence on making fans engage in conversations about games/teams with family members or friends.

To conclude, as also shown in article II and Figure 6 and more thoroughly investigated in article IV, the influence of perceptions of and attitudes towards commercialisation as an independent variable on fan engagement is rather weak. The implications and contributions of these results are discussed below in the section where purpose 2 is discussed.

Consequences of Fan Engagement in Swedish elite football

Article II investigated and compared the (managerial) consequences of fan engagement with a team and with other fans. As shown in Figure 6, the results prove that engagement and interactions with other fans can have a major influence on brand loyalty and word-of-mouth. As the paths and coefficients for fan engagement with a team, vis-à-vis other fans, are weaker, it can be interpreted that engagement with other fans should be prioritised for club marketers seeking to foster team loyalty.

Yoshida et al. (2023) argue that fan engagement behaviours are important to team loyalty because they enable the social dimensions of being a fan and thereby lead to personal well-being, learning of rituals, cultural norms, and fan-related skills. As such, it may not be surprising that the results in article II indicate that interactions between fans have a positive relationship to loyalty to a team and to making fans willing to invite others to a fan community. Again, this reaffirms the theoretical discussions in both the customer and fan engagement literature that it is fruitful to go beyond the customer-firm dyad in seeking to understand the nature of engagement (Storbacka et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022).

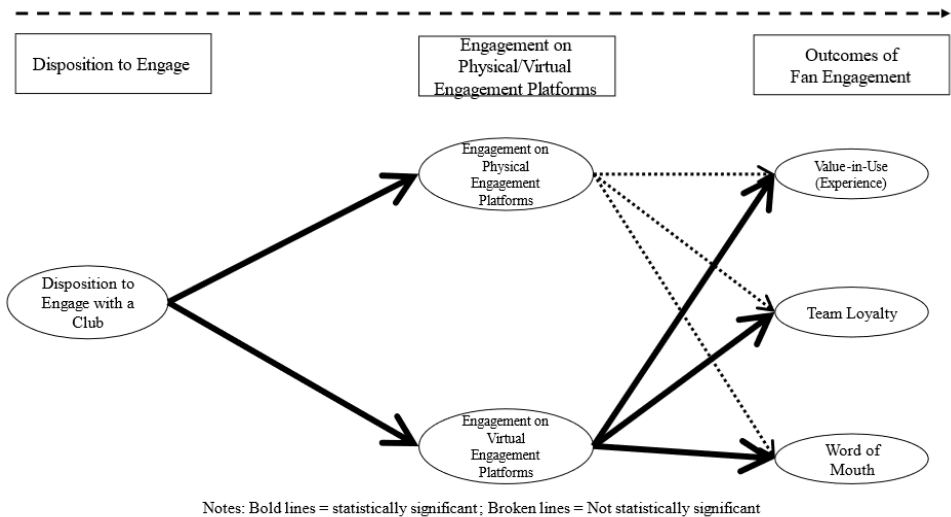
Engagement platforms and Fan Engagement

With the recent decade’s emergence of social media platforms, recent studies have started to examine the influence of these new engagement platforms in service ecosystems (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022). Such platforms play a major role in contemporary service ecosystems, as they (including both digital and physical engagement platforms) allow for continuous interactions, more collaboration, and closer relationships between customers, firms, and other actors (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022). This also means that engagement platforms enable and facilitate value co-creation (Buser et al., 2022), especially since, in many cases, customers/fans may initiate contact on such virtual engagement platforms (Hollebeek et al., 2020).

In elite football, the rise of social media during the last decade has had a significant influence on the nature of fan engagement and on the individual fan and the entire fan community (Buser et al., 2022; Yoshida et al., 2023). Therefore, article III explicitly focused on both virtual and physical engagement

platforms and examined the relevance of these platforms to engagement behaviours and to the outcomes of engagement. The results showed that engagement on virtual platforms, which allow for continuous interactions between actors, are positively related to the outcomes of engagement. In the empirical study, the influence of engagement on virtual engagement platforms was statistically significant for value-in-use, team loyalty, and word-of-mouth (Figure 7). At the same time, the influence of engagement on physical engagement platforms was not statistically significant for any of these dependent outcomes (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Final research model of engagement behaviours on physical and virtual engagement platforms. (The figure is derived from article III: Winell et al., (2023).)



First, these results tell us that there are multiple types of platforms (virtual and physical) that may facilitate customers’ willingness/disposition to engage (first part of the model). As shown in Figure 7, the disposition to engage with a club has a statistically significant influence on engagement on both physical and virtual engagement platforms. This is not a surprising result, yet few empirical studies have examined and compared the role of both virtual and physical platforms, and it indicates that platform structures must be accounted for in examinations of engagement (Tsitsou, 2020).

Building on this, the next part of the tested model shows that engagement on virtual engagement platforms, such as Facebook, X, and online forums, has become an essential arena for fostering value co-creation and other key outcomes of engagement. Thus, the convenience and frequency of engaging on virtual platforms, such as Instagram or an online fan forum, should not be underestimated. In contemporary society, such platforms may also be very much appreciated by newcomers to the fan community. Here, virtual engagement platforms may provide a sort of “try-out” route and low-effort way of connecting with other fans or with the team, and through such platforms, new fans may obtain

a better sense of the club's identity and the culture of the fan community. In turn, new fans become increasingly loyal.

Elite football is followed by billions of fans who remotely support their favourite teams without the possibility of attending many their favourite team's games (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019). As such, Yoshida et al. (2023) exemplified that this development has implied that teams can use many types of social media platforms and emerging technologies to create attractive fan experiences for "satellite fans". As shown in article III and Figure 7, engagement on virtual platforms, such as conversations on social media, may lead to value co-creation and loyalty. Moreover, this may be especially relevant for fans who do not attend every single game and/or who seek engagement beyond matchdays at the stadium.

5.2 Purpose II – To analyse the consequences of elite football commercialisation on fans and their engagement.

The second aim of this dissertation was to analyse how elite football commercialisation affects fans of Swedish elite football and their engagement. Three main results related to this aim are discussed in this section.

The limited understanding of the commercialisation process and its consequences on fans

This review paper (article I) aimed to analyse how previous literature has addressed the topic of the effects of elite sports commercialisation on fans. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that, to date, most papers on how elite sports commercialisation affects fans are critical to the increased commercialisation of the game. Most studies have emphasised the negative consequences of increasing commercialisation for fans, especially from the perspective of hardcore fans. This study showed that the main argument among this critical base of literature is that increased commercialisation has led to a prioritisation of external capital over the role of local fans (Kim & Byon, 2018; Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). More specifically, researchers have focused on examining the negative consequences of perceived commercialisation on constructs such as fan involvement, fan engagement, fan connection to a club and the perceived authenticity of the sport. There are exceptions, such as the study by Abosag et al. (2012), who identified that fans may embrace intensified commercialisation if it is shown how it contributes to a better team and/or an improved experience of following a team.

The review paper also shows that most critical studies on the commercialisation fan nexus are qualitative and have based their findings on either observations of hardcore (mainly English) football fans or conceptualisations based on media reports. Therein, they have shown how heavily engaged fans feel alienated and subprioritised by the clubs in favour of external investments, modernised arenas, better TV broadcasts, and new fans coming from abroad (Putra, 2019; Radmann et al., 2023).

However, that may not be the full story. As the literature was reviewed and analysed, several key themes emerged that require further study. Among others, two prominent key themes that emerged were (1) the absence of studies on the growing industry of women's elite sports and (2) the scarcity of studies addressing the effects of commercialisation on fans outside the top European football leagues. Therefore, based on these findings, the rationale to examine the consequences of commercialisation on fans of Swedish men's and women's elite football was justified.

Consequences of attitudes towards and perceptions of commercialisation on fan engagement

To explore the consequences of commercialisation on fan engagement, articles II and IV examined the possible consequences of attitudes towards and perceptions of commercialisation on fan engagement with various actors (article II) and on the relationship between authenticity and fan engagement (article IV).

Article II tested whether attitudes towards commercialisation among Swedish football fans had an influence on their levels of engagement. As shown in Figure 6, no such significant relationship was found in the survey of fans of Swedish men's elite football. Moreover, examining the standard deviations on the four different items for measuring attitudes towards commercialisation in survey I¹², (1.03; .99; .94; 1.12) it is evident that in a large base of fans, most are neutral towards this process. All four measures had mean values of 3.0, 3.36, 3.91 and 3.36, which further shows that there was neutral and, in some cases, even positive attitudes towards the commercialisation of Swedish elite football. Moreover, a comparison of attitudes towards commercialisation and involvement shows that being highly involved in the game (which may symbolize a "hardcore" fan) does not necessarily mean strong negative attitudes towards commercialisation. Instead, among those with the highest levels of involvement, attitudes towards commercialisation are around the mean values mentioned above. The same is true for fans with less involvement.

Article IV tested the possible consequences of perceptions of commercialisation on fan engagement. In this survey, responses from fans of both men's and women's elite football were included, and as Table 7 and Figure 8 show, the results indicate that there is a positive relationship between perceptions of commercialisation on fan engagement.

¹² Measured on a Likert-scale from 1-5, where 5 is very positive towards aspects of increasing commercialisation, and 1 is very negative.

Table 7 – Full moderated mediation model (Table 7 is derived from Winell et al. 2024).

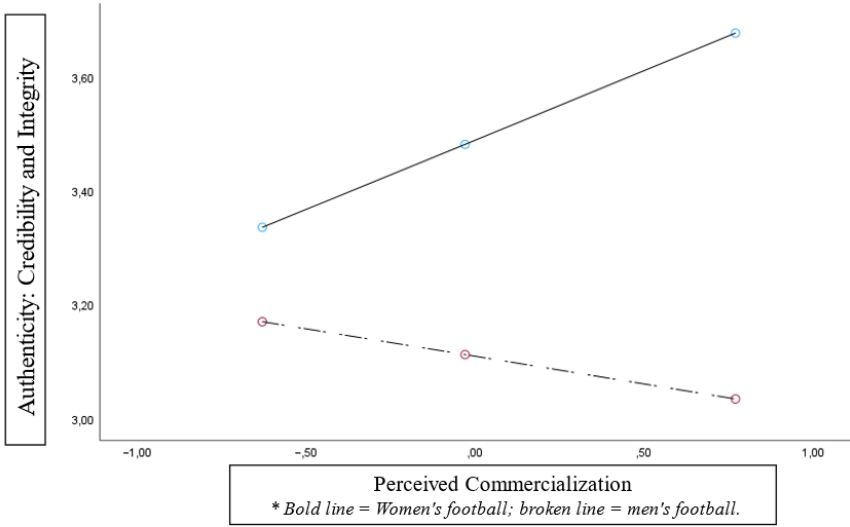
| | Mediating variable: Perceived authenticity of the league | | | | | | | | | Dependent variable | | |
|---|--|-------------|----------|---|-------------|----------|--|-------------|----------|--|-------------|----------|
| | Continuity | | | Symbolism | | | Credibility and integrity | | | Fan engagement | | |
| | <i>b</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>S.E.</i> | <i>p</i> |
| <i>Perceived commercialisation League</i> ¹³ | .194 | .037 | .000 | .168 | .037 | .000 | .033 | .035 | .358 | .177 | .041 | .000 |
| <i>League*</i> commercialisation | .899 | .056 | .000 | -.052 | .055 | .348 | -.357 | .052 | .000 | - | - | - |
| <i>Continuity</i> | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | .77 | .031 | .013 |
| <i>Symbolism</i> | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | -.166 | .041 | .000 |
| <i>Credibility and integrity</i> | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | .038 | .042 | .365 |
| <i>Age</i> | .007 | .002 | .000 | -.004 | .002 | .000 | .009 | .002 | .000 | -.017 | .002 | .000 |
| <i>Sex</i> ¹⁴ | -.075 | .071 | .29 | -.196 | .070 | .005 | -.177 | .067 | .008 | .025 | .078 | .750 |
| Model | R ² = .286; <i>F</i> = .679; <i>p</i> = .000 | | | R ² = .003; <i>F</i> = .672; <i>p</i> = .000 | | | R ² = .077; <i>F</i> = .606; <i>p</i> = .00 | | | R ² = .12; <i>F</i> = .828; <i>p</i> = .000 | | |

As shown in Table 7, there is a significant positive relationship between perceived commercialisation and (1) continuity, and between perceived commercialization and (2) symbolism (p-values below .05). Examining the influence of whether fans supported men’s or women’s football teams in regard to commercialisation effects, the results show that (1) perceptions of continuity in women’s football are generally lower but increase significantly as perceptions of commercialisation increase. This is further illustrated in figure 8 below that shows how an increase in perceived commercialization among fans of women’s football has a positive influence on perceptions of authenticity (solid line). However, among fans of men’s football that is the opposite, more commercialization leads to less authenticity (broken line). Table 7 also indicates that continuity and symbolism were both significantly positively related to fan engagement. That is, fans who perceive a higher level of commercialisation and a higher level of continuity and symbolism engage more with the team they support.

¹³ Coded 0 for fans of the men’s team and 1 for fans of the women’s team.

¹⁴ Coded 1 for male fans and 2 for female fans.

Figure 8. The moderating effect of fans of women's (Damallsvenskan) and men's (Herrallsvenskan) elite football teams on the relationship between perceived credibility and integrity and perceived commercialisation. Figure 8 is reproduced from article IV: Winell et al., 2024.



Moreover, and perhaps the most interesting finding of this study, is that in women's elite football, which for a long time has had to fight for its right to create revenues from the sport (Fink, 2015), perceptions of increased commercialisation seem to be positively related to the credibility and integrity of the league, as well as on levels of fan engagement. In comparison to the critical literature on fans of elite English football, this shows that commercialisation may, in another context, work in the opposite way regarding fan engagement and authenticity.

This shows that in women's football, which is at another point on the commercialisation continuum, increased influence from commercial actors may foster perceptions of more trustworthy and reliable ambitions regarding the development of the game, in turn, making women's football more attractive to engage in.

There are many underlying explanations as to why this relationship may be found in studies on fans of women's football. For instance, fans may perceive that the commercialisation of the women's game is necessary for the sport to attract more fans, for the clubs to be able to invest more in communication with the fans, and for the players to become fully professional (De Bosscher et al., 2009; Mansouri et al., 2022). As such, it is not surprising that perceptions of increased commercialisation among fans of women's elite football can, contrary to critical studies on hardcore English football fans, foster more engagement with the club and with other fans. As women's football clubs seek new ways of earning

profits, leading to more professional players and better fan experiences, the clubs are perceived as more credible and authentic.

Contextual differences such as the 51 percent rule, global appeal, club football tradition, external investments, and ambitions to compete in European top-level football have put Swedish, Danish, and English elite football at different levels of the commercialisation process (De Waele et al., 2018). This may also partially explain why fans of Swedish elite football seem to be less influenced by perceptions of or attitudes towards increased commercialisation. Swedish elite football has indeed been commercialised, as shown by the importance of revenues from broadcasts, player sales and season tickets, yet according to the fans, it has maintained its local connectedness (Radmann et al., 2023; De Waele et al., 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, Sweden has a strong club football tradition, yet it has predominantly been local, and even since the early 1950s, professional football players who moved abroad, to, among others, Italy, faced criticism (Sund, 2014). Such attitudes towards a globalised football industry are not thriving today, but have undoubtedly shaped Swedish elite football and its preservation of localness among its top clubs (De Waele et al., 2018).

Another important part of the explanation for why such a negative relationship between commercialisation and fan engagement does not seem apparent in these studies may be attributed to the fact that these studies included a large sample of fans. And that it was done in a setting where the critique towards “over-commercialization” are not that apparent. As shown in article I, most studies addressing the issues of commercialisation on fans are based on research that is primarily focused on one type of fan, most often in English elite football, and where these focal study objects are hardcore fans who have supported the team for a long time (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). As such, it is possible that when applying a quantitative perspective, and examining Swedish elite football, the negative consequences of commercialisation on fan engagement are not apparent.

5.3 Contributions and final discussion

A deepened understanding of fan engagement provides an improved understanding of the social and complex service ecosystem of elite football, which consists of a myriad of actors and engagement platforms (McDonald et al., 2022; Buser et al., 2022). To date, studies have shown the importance of fan engagement to fan communities (Huettermann et al., 2022; Yoshida et al., 2014), team loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2015; Yun et al., 2021) and value co-creation (and co-destruction) in sports (Jones et al., 2019; Stieler et al., 2014). Due to these outcomes of fan engagement and due to the intensified commercialisation of elite football, in which the fight for fan/customer attention is high, fan engagement strategies are highly prioritised among practitioners (Black et al., 2020; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Twilio, 2022). This also implies the importance of further research on fan engagement, especially in light of fan engagement beyond fan-team dyads, across multiple platforms and in light of the commercialisation of elite football. Consequently, based on a review of the literature on elite sports

commercialisation and two large surveys of more than 4000 Swedish football fans, the main contributions of this thesis are as follows:

- There is much more to know regarding the consequences of elite football commercialisation on fans. This thesis shows that current literature has overlooked many settings and has relied very much upon conceptual and/or qualitative research designs. Among others, this thesis shows the preponderance of critical approaches to this topic (for instance, Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018; Behrens & Uhrich, 2019; Kennedy, 2012), and the concentration of these studies on top European football leagues. Among others this thesis identifies that one peculiar context that is very much overlooked is the commercialisation of women's elite football and its eventual effects on fans. As women's sports, not only football, is in a rapid development phase, such studies are very much needed.
- Through three survey-based articles, a nuanced illustration of fans' perceptions of and attitudes towards commercialisation emerged in this thesis. By analysing responses from thousands of Swedish football fans, this thesis contributes to the above-mentioned understanding on commercialisation and its effects on fans by empirically showing a reality that is far more complex than the critical base of literature has suggested. In some cases, such as among fans of women's elite football, the effects of commercialisation on fans and fan engagement may even be positively related.
- This thesis has empirically shown that fan-to-fan engagement is an essential ingredient for football fans and for value co-creation in sport ecosystems (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Yoshida et al. 2023). As such, the results of this thesis contribute to current theoretical discussions of the importance of engagement beyond just customer-firm dyads (see Storbacka et al. (2016), Fehrer et al. (2018) and Hollebeek et al. (2022)). As engagement between fans is shown to be positively related to outcomes such as team loyalty and word-of-mouth, this thesis shows that we as scholars cannot concentrate on just one relationship within the service ecosystem of elite football, all types of engagement between actors are important.
- The increase in virtual engagement platforms, such as social media and club-driven apps, in the service ecosystem of elite football has changed the ways fans may engage. Current theoretical discussions on engagement, not only in the sports setting, have shown that the change in engagement driven by such platforms implies a demand for more studies on both virtual and physical engagement platforms (Read et al., 2021; Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016; Blut et al., 2023). Consequently, through responses from thousands of Swedish football fans, this thesis contributes to these discussions by showing that virtual engagement platforms, such as social media, facilitate ongoing and intense engagement behaviours. In some cases, such virtual engagement platforms may have an even greater role in facilitating outcomes of engagement, such as team loyalty and value co-creation, than physical engagement platforms.

Based on the above contributions, two key themes emerged for further discussion: (1) *togetherness: resistance and cooperation* and (2) *Swedish elite football – and is there a tipping point where commercialisation creates negative fan responses?* In this section, these two themes are discussed in light of existing knowledge on both customer and fan engagement.

Togetherness: Resistance and Cooperation

Recent engagement research has called for more studies that go beyond the customer-firm dyad and include the implications of the multiple engagement platforms currently available (Alexander et al., 2018; Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Fehrer et al., 2018). Simultaneously, we have witnessed several examples of how customers (or fans) together may engage in value co-creation and value co-destruction depending on whose perspective one is applying (Järvi et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). As shown in articles II and III, engagement beyond the customer-firm dyad and on virtual platforms that allow for more interactions has a substantial influence on the outcomes of engagement. This thesis has taken these discussions into the elite football ecosystem and shown that more engaged fans are also more likely to be more loyal to the team, to invite others to the fan community and to co-create value with other fans or with the club.

By creating positive atmospheres at a stadium, attending community-based events, and inviting others to games (word-of-mouth), fans are an essential part of value co-creation in sports. Consequently, with its focus on engagement with others, this thesis highlights how togetherness is a core dimension of fan engagement. Driven by interactions on social media, engagement that involves many fans may have a significant influence on clubs and entire fan communities.

Some recent examples that show the capabilities of such collective fan engagement, within and outside elite sports' customer and/or fan activism, include the coordination of massive stock purchases of GameStop in 2021 to disrupt the stock market and to protest against hedge funds (Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024) and the resistance and silent protests among German fans to the increased commercialisation and new sponsors taking over the names of stadiums (Merkel, 2012; Woisetschläger et al., 2014). In elite football, the influence of how fans together engage in certain issues has been further raised with recent stories of protests towards the European Super League (Honigstein, 2021; Panja & Smith, 2021) and, in Sweden, the resistance among fans to forfeit the 51 percent rule or to integrate the VAR system¹⁵ (Bachner, 2023).

Similarly, Tressoldi et al. (2023) stated in their study on LGBTQI+ communities and their influence on certain brands that new technologies have enabled new ways for customers to collectively engage and to have substantial influence on entire service ecosystems. All these recent examples, in line with the results that highlight the importance of engagement with fellow fans, show that, when organised

¹⁵ Video assistant refereeing (VAR) system.

collectively, fan engagement can play an important role for all actors embedded within a service ecosystem.

It is also important to acknowledge that the same engagement can lead to both positive and negative consequences, value creation and value destruction, depending on whose perspective is relevant. For instance, the engagement and resistance to retaining the 51 percent rule in Swedish elite football may have positive consequences for the fan community and lead to the co-creation of value for those involved. However, simultaneous engagement that results in fan activism may also have negative consequences for clubs seeking to attract more external investments to improve their financial situation. Based on the success of the examples of fan activism mentioned above, it would not be surprising to witness more collective engagement in the future, facilitated through social media platforms, which would have a significant influence on the decisions of sport clubs.

The togetherness of fan engagement is not limited to engagement between fans. As the articles of this dissertation have shown, the rise of digital engagement platforms in society has led to more collaboration between firms and customers, or in this case, between fans and teams (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2022). Through engagement on virtual engagement platforms, fans may have an instant influence on other fans and on their clubs. For example, protests towards the European Super League were facilitated through fans engaging with each other and with club representatives on Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms (Panja & Smith, 2021). This means that, from the eyes of the fan, the possibility of together engaging around a certain cause (in this case, stopping the European Super League) led to value for them.

There are also many positive examples, from a managerial perspective, of how social media may foster a sense of collectiveness between a club and its fans. For instance, the launch of apps such as Socios, which allows fans of European top teams to vote for the next season's jersey, man-of-the-match and so forth, shows that new engagement platforms create new opportunities for collaboration that is initiated by the clubs (Leipimää-Leskinen et al., 2022). In some cases, such apps can be interpreted as a way for clubs to respond to the increasing number of fan-driven initiatives and, therein, to ensure that this engagement leads to positive consequences for the club.

Overall, through the ongoing and frequent engagement occurring on virtual engagement platforms, the thresholds for interactions between a team and its fan community have decreased (Uhrich, 2014). Rather than having to attend or organize fan meetings, conversations about how a club should develop and how a fan community should be treated can instead occur instantly. As shown in article III, engagement on virtual platforms has gained a substantial role in shaping the outcomes of engagement, such as value co-creation. Thus, it may not be surprising that elite football, the collective way of engaging instantly and continuously on such platforms, may need to rapidly adapt and respond to changes in society.

Contemporary elite football: Is there a tipping point where commercialisation creates negative fan responses?

This thesis has shown that, in comparison to previous critical studies on, mainly, “hardcore” fans of English Premier League clubs, in the Swedish elite football setting, fans may be neutral, or in some cases even positive, towards an increase in commercial elements in football. The contextual differences may serve as one part of the explanation for these contrasting results. Moreover, through survey-based results, this thesis illustrates fans and fan engagement beyond the “hardcore” fans, who are perhaps the most vocal in their criticism of the “hypercommercialisation” of the game.

Football fans are not a homogenous group of only ultras or casual football customers (Giulianotti, 2004). Football is described by many scholars and the media as a game that can unite individuals from several social classes and across income levels and gender roles (De Waern et al., 2018). In the early days of football, as discussed in Chapter 2, most fans were men and came from the labour class. However, alongside a growing sport that has changed, it should not be surprising that not all fans are vocally critical of increased commercialisation and elements such as modernised arenas, global fan communities, more spectacularised events, and high-tech broadcasts. Among others, the intensified commercialisation of European elite football has allowed for a global fandom in which fans in, for instance, China and the USA, can also engage with their favourite team, despite being thousands of kilometres away from the home ground (Behrens & Uhrich, 2019).

For some fans, a change in ownership or sponsors may indeed lead to resistance and alienation (Woisetschläger et al., 2013). Some fans may even engage in value co-destruction, viewed from the club’s perspective, due to a sense of being neglected and isolated by the club (Kim et al., 2020; Merkel, 2012; Stieler et al., 2014). This is a situation in which the engagement among fans may erode the relationship between the club and its, most often local and most loyal, fans. However, others may instead embrace such commercial advances, as it implies that the clubs earn more profits and, in turn, are able to recruit better players and modernize the experience of following a team (Abosag et al., 2012). Similar circumstances can also be found in other contexts. For instance, as shown in the thesis of Dam (2024), focusing on nostalgic cyclists, the implication of a sense of alienation may lead to backwards movement in which past-themed elements of the game, or the way of cycling, are elevated and used as important tools to withstand a modernization, or a commercialization process.

In their discussion of contemporary football fans, Tinson et al. (2021) noted that there may be “tipping point” when positive aspects of increased commercialisation, such as modernised arenas, better players, and improved broadcasts, are outweighed by more negative elements, such as eroded authenticity, perceived alienation, and the loss of local presence. The concept of tipping points illustrates how the commercialisation of elite football may be seen as a continuum where clubs, leagues and even players are at different levels. For instance, there are major differences in levels of commercialisation when one compares the English Premier League with its clubs worth billions of

dollars to the Swedish top division of women's football (Damallsvenskan), in which many clubs struggle to remain financially viable. Thus, the commercialisation of elite football should not be seen as a dichotomous condition viewed only in one way by all fans, i.e., that a league is commercialised or not commercialised. Instead, due to different conditions, capabilities, and traditions, commercialisation may have different levels that lead to different perceptions and consequences for fans.

As football fans are not a homogenous group and as found in the survey samples, variations exist in how fans are influenced by perceptions of increased commercialisation and whether they perceive a tipping point of commercialisation. Some may mainly view their fandom and their way of following a team as entertainment. As such, increased commercialisation, with better players, more convenient arenas, and perhaps more commercial spectacles around the game, may be embraced and lead to fans engaging more with other peers or with the club on social media (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Lee, 2005). However, other fans, on the other side of the spectrum, who see the club as a core pillar of their own identity, may have completely opposite perceptions of increased commercialisation. For these types of fans, it may very well be that the commercialisation of global elite football structures has also changed the fundamentals of Swedish elite football and led to a situation in which a tipping point has been reached. In addition, fans' perceptions of commercialisation levels may also vary greatly. For some fans, new sponsors, elevated ticket prices and TV subscriptions may be perceived as an example of a sport ecosystem that is increasingly influenced by commercial elements. However, for others, such elements may only be noticed once but not influence their relationship with the club or their willingness to engage as fans.

Reviewing the critical studies on English "hardcore" fans of contemporary football clubs, such as Manchester United and Liverpool (Kerr & Emery, 2011; Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018; Torchia, 2016), this group of fans perceives that the commercialisation of elite football has passed its tipping point. According to existing studies, this passing can result in anger, boycotts, and protests towards the club's government (Tinson et al., 2021; Woisetschläger et al., 2013). More expensive ticket prices, TV subscriptions, player salaries, and lost connections to the local working class are, among many others, potential explanations for this criticism and the perception of the commercialisation of the club as having passed a tipping point (Numerato & Giulianotti, 2018). At the same time, in contrast to these critical studies, the "hypercommercialised" leagues and teams, such as the UEFA Champions League, constantly sell out their stadiums and see a continuing increase in their global fan community (De Waele et al., 2018). Clubs such as Real Madrid, Manchester United, FC Barcelona and Paris-Saint Germain are today global brands with hundreds of millions of followers on social media¹⁶ (Football Benchmark, 2023). To further exemplify this growth in the popularity of the "hypercommercialised"

¹⁶ Among others, Real Madrid increased their number of followers by 50.6 million in 2023 to its all-time high 415 million. The second most followed team on social media in 2023 is FC Barcelona, with 391.7 million followers across the major social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, X, YouTube and Weibo).

leagues, the UEFA Champions League 2022/2023 generated almost \$606.3 million in sponsorship revenues, stadiums were filled with spectators and the UEFA Champions League Final in 2023 was watched by an audience of 450 million people (Cardenas, 2024).

These figures tell us that as some fans perceive that a tipping point has decreased their willingness to engage, new fans (often from foreign countries) have started to engage with the team due to this commercialisation process. From the Swedish perspective, with a strong tradition of “satellite supporters” (Uhrich et al., 2020), the commercial activity of starting to broadcast English football matches in the 1970s undoubtedly explains why so many Swedish citizens, without a direct connection to an English city, are heavily engaged with teams such as Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United.

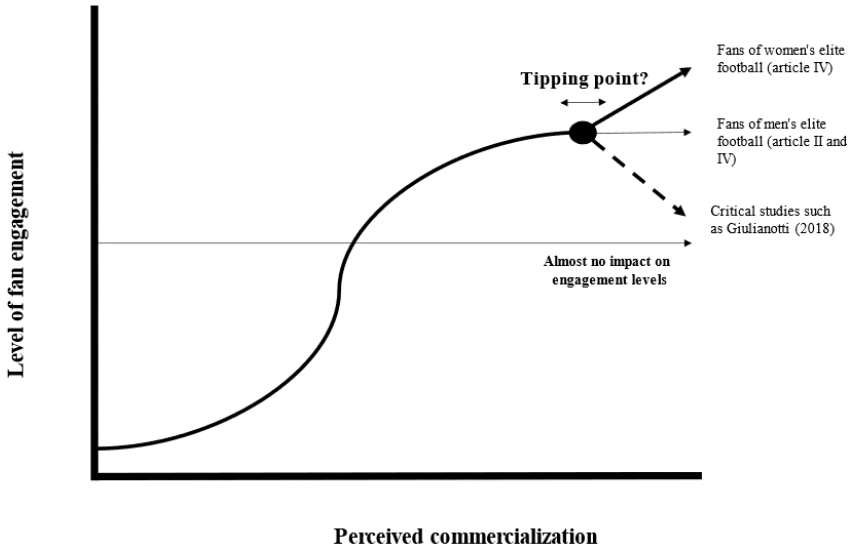
In men’s elite football, there are recent examples of phoenix teams, such as FC United of Manchester, where dissatisfied fans have created their own amateur club, as they perceived that their former favourite team (in this case, Manchester United) had been overcommercialised, i.e., went past its tipping point of commercialisation (Torchia, 2016). Moreover, in Denmark, a similar context to Sweden in terms of football traditions and culture but with a league that has allowed for external ownership rather than being fan owned, reports indicate that the rise of external ownership has eroded local connections and reduced fan engagement and attendance figures beyond the most successful teams, such as FC Copenhagen and FC Midtjylland (Tillberg, 2020). As the men’s top division in Swedish elite football has increased its attendance by 10% in the last ten years, the Danish top division has lost 25% of its spectators since external investors started to pay attention to the Danish top division (Tillberg, 2020). According to this thesis and studies on fans of Swedish men’s and women’s elite football, such negative consequences were not prominent. Instead, most Swedish football fans seemed rather neutral, or even positive, towards the extent to which they perceived increased commercialisation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the traditions of Swedish elite football have put it at another point on the football commercialisation continuum, a point at which external ownership is not allowed and the financial revenues that the clubs make are rather modest in comparison with clubs in the Danish, German, or English top divisions (De Waele et al., 2018). Consequently, based on the results of these studies, one may conclude that in terms of how Swedish elite football fans perceive commercialisation, a tipping point at which engagement is eroded has not been reached.

In women’s elite football, fans have traditionally not been accustomed to such high levels of commercialisation or fan engagement; instead, some may argue that women’s elite football has retained a close relationship between clubs, players, and fans (Hjelm & Olofsson, 2003; Olofsson, 1998). As such, women’s elite football faces an interesting future as more commercial elements enter, which may make fans perceive that it is losing its traditional and authentic core. The results of this thesis provide important nuance to the critical perspectives on the relationship between commercialisation and fan engagement. As illustrated in Figure 10 by the upwards arrow and

according to article IV, for fans of women's elite football, perceptions of increased commercialisation may lead to more engagement, as it is perceived as their club and/or league becoming more authentic. In other words, commercialisation manifests as a more credible ambition of becoming even more professional and as a way of attracting larger crowds to stadiums. As shown by the responses of the fans of the studied club (Hammarby IF), perceptions of increased commercialisation for the women's team have positive consequences for engagement.

Figure 10 provides an illustration that emphasises the heterogeneity among football fans and how the tipping point of perceived commercialisation may vary across fans. For some, as the midline ("almost no impact on engagement levels") illustrates, perceptions of commercialisation may have little or even no effect on how willing fans are to engage. As such, for some fans, the level of commercialisation may be totally irrelevant for why they engage or do not engage with the game. Also, that this may never have occurred as an issue to these fans. However, for others, there may be a tipping point that leads to less engagement. Critical studies, such as Numerato & Giulianotti (2018) are examples of such paths in which fans feel alienated due to a perceived "over-commercialization". In turn this leads to less engagement, or in some cases negative engagement and value-co-destruction. Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, fans may also be positive towards the commercialization of the game. In turn leading to more engagement. Examples of such fans are apparent in the studies on fans of women's elite football where increased commercialization was positively related to engagement behaviours. Possible due to how the commercialization of the women's game implied a more credible and professional structure. Also, as described in Chapter 2, despite the criticism towards the "hypercommercialization" of elite football, commercial advances have driven more fans to engage and attend stadiums. Therefore, although there may have been exceptions among individual fans, this is also an example of the increase in engagement that may be related to an increase in commercialization. The figure also shows that the eventual tipping point may, dependent on the individual fan's preferences, come earlier or later in the commercialization process. For some fans, very small increases of commercial elements may lead to a tipping point. While for others, an eventual tipping point may come much later in the commercialization process.

Figure 10. An illustration of the hypothesised tipping points of commercialisation.



To conclude, as indicated in Chapter 2, despite Sweden being one of the richest nations in Europe, its clubs, in both men’s and women’s elite football, are among the poorest in terms of their commercial structures (Radmann et al., 2023; SVT Sport, 2022). Currently, it seems that the clubs manage and have found a level of commercialisation that is sufficiently lucrative and that does not approach the tipping point of commercialisation where the process harms the levels of fan engagement. The eventual removal of the 51 percent rule has been discussed several times, driven by arguments that it would improve the Swedish clubs’ financial realities. However, because Swedish clubs have such a strong tradition and connection to their local fan communities, those proposals have been shut down rather quickly (Radiosporten, 2013; Radmann et al., 2023; Tillberg, 2020).

However, in the future, where the pressure to compete internationally increases and financial figures decrease, Swedish elite football will face key questions that will have a direct influence on how fans engage and relate to their favourite teams.

5.4 Managerial Implications

This thesis has made several contributions to the understanding of fan engagement and to the influence of the commercialisation process on fans and their willingness to engage with other fans, as well as with their favourite teams. As such, this section discusses two main implications for practitioners, such as marketers at elite football clubs and at other firms.

Prioritize engagement between fans (customers) on virtual engagement platforms

A main implication for marketers seeking to orchestrate value co-creation surrounding a club is to prioritize fan-to-fan engagement. The results of this thesis show that fan engagement with other fans is

often more important to word-of-mouth and team loyalty than engagement with a club or its representatives. From a managerial perspective, this implies that clubs need to invest resources in the structure of engagement platforms around the club. As article III showed, virtual engagement platforms have a vast influence on fan engagement outcomes and, considering their social- and fan-driven nature, this is where managers need to look at facilitating fan-to-fan engagement.

Investing in apps such as Socios or seeking to engage with new fans on Facebook and Instagram is not wrong. Such initiatives may have positive consequences for fan-club relationships, especially among newcomers to the fan community, but again, it is most important to create an environment in which fans are willing to engage with each other. Moreover, such commercial initiatives are not perceived as overcommercialised or as subprioritising the already existing fan base.

The crucial issue is how to facilitate such engagement. Fan-to-fan-engagement is often rather independent of the actual presence of the club, and as such, this task may seem difficult from a managerial perspective. However, having established the need for fan-to-fan-engagement, one relevant avenue could be to collaborate with social media companies or to create one's own platforms, which in turn can facilitate fan-to-fan interactions. For example, in Sweden, the fan-driven website Svenskafans.com has had a great influence on Swedish fan culture as well as on the Swedish football media landscape (Bachner, 2023). With a focus on fan-written articles around the clubs and with online forums where fans discuss recent performances and new player signings, Svenskafans.com has established an interactive fan culture in which fan-to-fan engagement can be described as yielding many positive consequences for the clubs.

Involve the fans in the commercialisation process

This thesis has also shown that in a context such as Swedish elite football, perceptions of increased commercialisation do not have such vast negative consequences on fans or their engagement levels. In the case of women's elite football, perceptions of increased commercialisation may lead to more engagement, as the club is perceived as more authentic and credible.

From a managerial perspective, these findings show the importance of understanding their fans and the club's level of commercialisation. For instance, for managers of women's elite football, seeking new ways of commercialising and involving more commercial actors may be a prerequisite for a more engaged fan base. As such, the commercialisation of women's elite football is important not only to the professionalisation of the game but also for the fans that engage in it. For managers, ways of finding new commercial partnerships such as new sponsors and new broadcasting agreements that imply more money for the game will benefit both the financial status of the club and the fans.

From the men's elite football perspective, it may be slightly more complicated, as the level of commercialisation is higher than in women's elite football. Despite Swedish elite football not being as commercialised as many other top European football leagues, fans seem more sensitive to commercial

changes. As men's elite football is often closer to the tipping point of commercialisation regarding fans' willingness to engage, new commercial advances have a greater risk of eroding the authenticity of the club than for women's elite football.

However, this does not imply that marketers in men's elite football should stop considering commercial developments if seeking to retain engagement of the existing fan base. As shown, Swedish elite football has also commercialised in the last decade. Among others, and just as in other leagues, ticket prices, souvenir prices, and prices for TV subscriptions have risen during the last decade. Moreover, just as in England or Denmark, the clubs that are the most profitable are also those that win the most trophies. However, these commercial advances have not come at the cost of influence from local fans. The 51 percent rule has been retained in Swedish elite football, and although the league is ranked among the least competitive in Europe, major crowds of both hardcore fans and more casual spectators attend the games and follow their teams. Thus, if they seek to commercialise in harmony with the ideals and desires of local fans, Swedish elite football could be set up as an inspirational example in that fans could be incorporated into commercial advances and decisions.

5.5 Limitations and further research

This dissertation has analysed fan engagement and elite football commercialisation from a quantitative approach. Thus, most of the findings are based on the results of questionnaires distributed to a large sample of Swedish football fans. As discussed, this study has made several contributions to the fan engagement literature.

However, many avenues remain.

First, in terms of methodological approaches, a qualitative study on a portion of this sample would be able to explain in greater depth why fans of Swedish elite football engage with one another and, among others, why commercialisation does not seem to have negative consequences on fan engagement as it does in settings such as the English Premier League. As shown in Article I, most of the critical studies on this relationship are qualitative and/or conceptual and are based on an Anglo-Saxon context. Thus, combined with the insights provided from this research, it would be interesting to go in-depth into Swedish elite football communities, including the ultras but also the more occasional spectators. Moreover, regarding the methodology applied, the measurements and operationalisation of fan engagement in this dissertation were mainly derived from the study of Yoshida et al. (2014), who focused on three core dimensions of fan engagement behaviour. However, as a recent paper by Yoshida et al. (2023) showed, there are other ways to measure the construct, and other dimensions may be appropriate. Thus, for future research, it would be interesting to see whether the results are the same or may provide other conclusions if they take inspiration from Yoshida et al. (2023) and incorporate dimensions of fan learning, fan resource integration, ritualistic fan behaviour, flow experience and fan knowledge feedback.

Second, as shown in articles I, II and IV, with their focus on the commercialisation process in elite sports, it is highlighted that commercialisation is not a binary condition; rather, it is a process that is contingent on contextual characteristics and the actors involved. As such, considering the evolving nature of the commercialisation process and that fans' perceptions of it may change over time, more longitudinal research is needed, both qualitative and quantitative. This would provide a more in-depth understanding of how commercialisation evolves; in relation to the billions of engaged fans worldwide, research needs to invest time and effort in following fans over time to determine how various elements of commercialisation may foster or reduce levels of fan engagement.

Third, as discussed in article IV, research on fans of women's elite sports is lacking. This includes research on fan engagement in this setting as well. Considering that women's elite sports, especially elite football, are steadily developing into a commercial industry that currently engages many fans across the globe, more research is needed that is specifically devoted to this growing industry. As shown in article IV, the nature of fan engagement and its relationship to commercialisation are not the same for fans of women's and men's elite football. Therefore, one cannot conclude that all that we know about fans and fan engagement in men's elite football is the same for fans of women's elite football (Tjønndal et al., 2024). For instance, studies such as those by Tjønndal et al. (2024) have shown that fans of women's elite football are more interested in topics such as inclusivity among spectators and equality for the sport than fans of men's elite football.

Fourth, as with the "Anglo-Saxon bias" in the literature on elite sports commercialisation, this dissertation has focused solely on fans of Swedish elite football. This means that the results of the importance of virtual engagement platforms to fan engagement are based on this specific setting. For future research, it is important to also examine fan engagement in other settings. As discussed, Swedish elite sports are rather unique in terms of the traditions and rules of the fans governing the clubs. Hence, the results of this dissertation may also be rather distinct from the results of a similar study in another elite sport and in another country. However, it is important to address fan engagement and its relationship to increased commercialisation in other elite sports settings. The same issues are commonly discussed in other cultural industries, such as food, festivities, and music (Dolan, 2010; Hamilton & Wagner, 2014; Jacobson, 1993; Mortelmans & Damen, 2001). All these are examples of settings in which many customers, for instance, foodies or music fans, engage a lot; however, if a restaurant or formerly independent music group is perceived as overprioritising commercial revenues, engagement may erode (Dolan, 2010; Miguel et al., 2022). Consequently, studying the relationship between engagement and commercialisation beyond elite sports would also further contribute to the overarching understanding of customers in contemporary society.

6. References

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