

The causal effect of interactive social media marketing tactics on the attendance at Ilves-Hockey Oy home games

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Ammattirheiluorganisaatiot alkavat vähitellen vankistamaan asemaansa sosiaalisen median pelikentällä, ja pyrkivät siten parhaansa mukaan sitouttamaan asiakaskuntaansa. Keskeisenä ongelmana lienee sosiaalisen median markkinoinnin tehokkuuden mitattavuus koskien vuosittaisia taloudellisia tulostavoitteita. Merkittävä osa liikevaihdosta ammattirheiluorganisaatioissa koostuu kotipeilien lipputuloista, joten urheilujohtajat luonnollisesti asettavat huomionsa siihen, miten parhaiten houkutella yleisöä kotipeleihin tavoitteiden mukaisesti.

Tutkielma käsittelee interaktiivisen sosiaalisen median vaikutusta yleisömääriin Ilves-Hockey kotipeleissä. Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan myös faniuden ja ottelutapahtumaan osallistumisen suhdetta, sekä minkälainen vaikutus sosiaalisella medialla on edellä mainittuun. Tämän tutkielman kontekstissa interaktiivisella sosiaalisella medialla tarkoitetaan suunnitelmallista viestintää, jonka päämäärä on osallistaa faneja sekä herättää vuorovaikutusta yhteisön sisällä.

Teoreettisen viitekehyksen avulla muodostettiin kyselytutkimus, jonka kohdeyrymänä toimi Ilves-Hockeyn fanit. Tutkimuskysely oli päämäärin kvantitatiivinen, lukuun ottamatta muutamaa kvalitatiivista jatko-kysymystä. Kyselyn vastaukset analysoitiin ja esiteltiin graafisesti, sekä oleelliset tulokset ristiintaulukoiitiin. Vastauksista selvisi, että mitä sitoutuneempi fani koki olevansa, sitä enemmän hän koki sosiaalisen median vaikuttavan positiivisesti päätökseensä osallistua ottelutapahtumaan. Positiivinen vaikutus huomattiin myös sosiaalisen median roolissa vastaajien koettuun faniuteen, joka osaltaan vaikuttaa päätökseen osallistua ottelutapahtumaan.

Tulokset viittaavat siihen, että vaikka sosiaalisen median markkinoinnin vaikutusta myytyihin kotiottelulippuihin on vaikea täsmällisesti tutkia, voidaan kuitenkin päätellä, että sosiaalisella medialla on vaikutusta fanin uskollisuuteen, mikä välillisesti tuottaa eksponentiaalista kasvua osallistumisessa ottelutapahtumaan. Tämän edellä mainitun pohjalta ammattirheiluorganisaatioiden tulisi priorisoida sosiaalisen median markkinointia saavuttaakseen ajan tasalla olevan ja sitoutuneen fanikunnan.

Asiasanat: urheilufani, fanius, fanimotivaatio, sosiaalisen median markkinointi, ottelutapahtuma

ABSTRACT

Tampere University of Applied Sciences
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Professional sports organizations throughout are gradually beginning to solidify their presence within the social media arena, yet measurability of effectiveness of social media marketing in sports with regards to driving annual fiscal targets remains problematic. A significant portion of revenue for sports organizations amounts from home game ticket sales, so the attention of sports executives naturally lies in how to best attract budgeted attendance.

This study investigates the impact of interactive social media tactics on attendance at home games of the case company, Ilves-Hockey. Moreover, the relationship between sports fandom and attendance is highlighted, and how social media presence in turn may affect that relationship. In the context of this study, interactive social media is defined as the premeditated manner in which one interacts on social media with intention to spark engagement and reactions amongst users with the community.

Theoretical framework regarding key concepts aided in the formulation of an online questionnaire directed at fans of Ilves-Hockey. As the main research method, the questionnaire was primarily quantitative in nature with qualitative follow-up response fields where necessary. Responses were analyzed and presented into graphs to depict findings, and cross tabulations made to highlight relevant insight. The results show that in terms of attendance, social media's effect gradually increases the more committed a fan perceives themselves to be. Social media also seemed to be significant in boosting levels of fandom that in turn affects attendance.

These results suggest that while it remains problematic to accurately quantify how well social media marketing in professional sports converts into sold home game tickets, the peripheral effect social media has on fan loyalty produces exponential growth in attendance as a byproduct of rising levels in fandom. On this basis, social media marketing should be prioritized highly as a tool for professional sports teams to keep their fans consistently engaged and informed.

Key words: sports fan, fandom, fan motivation, social media marketing, attendance

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the realm of professional sports, one of the primary benchmarks for current brand prestige is home game attendance. Sport marketers face the recurring challenge of optimizing marketing schemes that aim to increase revenue, which is largely driven by ticket sales. The birth of social media opened brand new avenues within the marketplace for sports marketers to thus reach desirable consumer segments. The rapid evolution of social media platforms within Web 2.0 over the past two decades has forced sports organizations to adapt with the times, and find new ways to constantly fine-tune best practices within the dynamic social media arena. Yet, the interactive nature of social media simultaneously provides opportunities and challenges that differ from traditional one-way marketing channels. In the arena of social media, no longer are consumers passive recipients of information, but rather active players that are key in the co-creation of content consumed by the public.

The basis of this study relies on the findings of previous studies on relevant key topics on sports fandom, fan motivation, and social media marketing, both traditionally and in the context of professional sports. The goal is to delve into the main factors that may influence attendance figures in sports so that the validity of any final conclusions remain as objective as possible. Much emphasis is placed on understanding the phenomenon of sports fandom and the multifaceted roles that fans embrace within its context. Also, understanding underlying motivations that drive the consumption of social media content is investigated. The insight gained from the literary reviews helped form the questionnaire targeted towards fans of Ilves Hockey. The questionnaire, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, gives insight on how the respondents perceive themselves as fans and what influence the team's social media activity has on their perceived levels of fandom and attendance decisions.

Although social media activity of sports teams may be deemed generally entertaining without need for scientific validation, the question remains how effective really are interactive social media tactics in boosting attendance for sports teams such as Ilves Hockey?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 History of case company, Ilves-Hockey Oy

Ilves-Hockey Oy is a professional ice hockey organization based in Tampere, Finland. It is part of the multisport brand Ilves Ry, which was established in 1931. The vision of Ilves Ry was to form a brand new sports club for a group of enthusiastic youth lacking the means of an organized entity. At the time of establishment in 1931, teams were formed for two primary sports, ice hockey and football. Over the years, Ilves Ry has sported teams in numerous other sports such as ringette, floorball, futsal, bandy, basketball and handball. With the professionalization of ice hockey in Finland Ilves' ice hockey team separated from the parent company Ilves Ry into its own business entity, Liiga-Ilves Ry. Twenty years onwards, in June 2000, the currently standing Ilves-Hockey Oy took over the governing and financial responsibilities upon establishment of the stock company.

In terms of sporting success, Ilves is the second most successful franchise in Finnish ice hockey history, holding a total 16 national titles. Ilves falls short by only one championship in the all-time leaderboard, to bittersweet Tampere-riivals Tappara (TBK-affiliate organization included). Ilves' most recent medal dates back to the 2000-2001 season, when they secured their bronze medals by defeating Kärpät 2-0 (Wikiwand).



PICTURE 1. Ilves logo (Ilves Ry website)

2.2 Sports fan

The birth of the so called 'modern sports fan era' may be dated to latter end of the nineteenth century, when popular sports saw regulations imposed on number of participants for instance (Crawford 2004). Preceding that era, Crawford (2004) pinpoints that sports events were largely unregulated also in terms of playing surface boundaries, which made it difficult to classify one as either solely a player or spectator. The reason why it is necessary to emphasize the 'modern' complexion of sports fans is due to the argument that one may make appealing that ancient civilizations held sporting events hosting spectators long ago. For instance, in Ancient Rome gladiatorial sports drew crowds well into the thousands, part of republic-led agenda to portray ideological heroism to the masses (Golden 2004). A key influencer in the evolution of sports consumption spanning from the Roman coliseums to modern day was the culturally significant evolution of mass media communications (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998). The arrival of mass media, as Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) describe, broadened the consumption of sports from highly exclusive and localized live spectacles, to more casual and accessible ways of consumption easily undertaken in the privacy of one's home. The digital era further accelerated secondary consumption modalities from local newspapers, to teletext, finally to modern day social media (Geey 2019). Fandom though cannot be declared as an entirely passive or external phenomenon; fan participation or non-participation has an integral effect on the atmosphere and arguably outcome at live games (Crawford 2004; Lovelock 1997; Rinehart 1998).

The terms *fan*, *follower*, *supporter* and *spectator* are often interlinked and challenging to define separately. Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw (1999) concisely define a fan as "an enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object". The difficulty in accurately defining a sports fan lies in the multi-faceted roles that a fan may embrace during their life, partly due to the natural ebb and flow that a fan may experience across these roles (Crawford 2004). Crawford (2004) though believes that common behavioral factors exist that validates a stereotypical sports fan: any form of consumption, whether it be attending live games, watching or following through alternative media, or purchasing merchandise related to the object of fandom. Hills (2002) adds that the intensity, sometimes

obsessional nature, in which an individual interacts with the object of interest distinguishes a fan from the mass. Crawford (2004) though argues that the interpretation of who is deemed a fan is highly subjective depending on whose perspective is taken; behavior that may seem fanatical to one person, may well be undermined by another who embraces more dedicated patterns of support.

2.2.1 Fan evolution & archetypes

Crawford (2004) uses the term *general public* to represent the typical starting point in one's fan evolution. At this general public-stage a person displays minimal interest towards a subject, but will likely have some elementary knowledge of the subject gained from exposure usually through media (Crawford 2004). The induction process into fandom typically begins in childhood, the central factors influencing the object of fandom being: amount of exposure to a team or sport, person's own athletic capabilities, preferences of people in social circle, and local popularity of sport or team including media attention (Crawford 2004; Hunt *et al* 1999). Other noteworthy variables in the process include "nationality, social class, religion, and ethnicity" (Wann *et al.* 2001). Locality for long also remained a cornerstone determinant influencing fan induction, but the effect has been diminished due to globalization and respectively mass media reach (Taylor 1995). From within these contexts stated, an individual semi-consciously gathers information on which they base their decision on whether they eventually become a fan or not (Hunt *et al.* 1999). Whether the cumulative impressions from these associations invoke positive or negative feelings will ultimately have greatest effect on that decision (Hunt 1995; Hunt & Bashaw 1999). In his study of football hooliganism in Britain, Marsh (1978) delves into the dynamics of tribe-like hooligan communities that appeal to pre-adolescent boys seeking a sense of belonging. Marsh (1978) noticed that within the hierarchical community each individual assumes a role, but also has the potential to climb the ranks to more prestigious duties over time. Jones (2000) states that conventional sports fans too may follow a similar process of induction and fan evolution albeit without aggressive tendencies.

Many researchers classify fans with similar behavioral characteristics into segments of fans to combat an unnecessarily black-and-white outlook on fandom

(Crawford 2004; Giulianotti 2002; Hunt *et al.* 1999; Wann *et al.* 2001). Socialization amongst fans has been introduced as a significant component of fan induction (Holt 1995). It is typically through observation and enquiry how novice fans form mental framework on the behavior and process of being a fan (Crawford 2004). Crawford (2004) classifies this stage as *interested*, where individuals display early curiosity of the subject and most often do not yet personify themselves as fans. From the perspective of novice fans, veteran fans within the community portray a position of authority and are usually those from which know-how is drawn (Holt 1995). The stronghold mass media has in today's society, especially social media, has shifted the way fans socialize and therefore provided an additional platform for learning (Crawford 2004). Hunt *et al.* (1999) theorize that in fan evolution a "halo process" takes place, begun by individual information processing and the formation of memories via sensory inputs.

Hunt *et al.* (1999) clarify that although being a sports fan is often associated with a team, there are those whose primary object of fandom may be the sport, league or player[s] for instance. Hunt *et al.* (1999) elaborate that according to their halo effect theory, one may predominantly start by following their favorite player, subsequently becoming far more probable to also develop into a fan of the idolized player's team. The halo parameters then likely extend to the league and sport in question, even to corporate sponsors, which is discussed further in 2.2.3 (Fisher & Wakefield 1998; Hunt *et al.* 1999). Fisher & Wakefield (1998) add that once an individual identifies themselves with a team, the likeliness of them partaking in revenue-producing actions such as attending games or purchasing team merchandise increases noticeably.

Once an individual is sufficiently exposed to the subject [of fandom], he or she may progress to deeper levels of attachment. Researchers use differing terminology to classify fans progressing to these levels of fandom, but what they all commonly agree on is that an individual's fandom is hereby closely tied to self-concept (Crawford 2004, Hunt *et al.* 1999, Real & Mechikoff 1992). Progressing through different stages in fan evolution is not seen as strictly linear, but researchers do find common ground in terminology used when fandom evolves to become a core part of one's identity: *the devoted fan* (Crawford 2004; Hunt *et al.* 1999). At this stage, a significant emotional investment is made on part of

the fan to actively follow their object of interest (Hunt *et al.* 1999). Crawford (2004) depicts the devoted fan as one who typically feels they possess expert knowledge of the subject, which is most likely the case due to the time they invest in being a fan. As the terms entails, the devoted fan also remains a fan regardless of sporting success or not (Hunt *et al.* 1999).

According to Hunt *et al.* (1999), a few exceptions exist nevertheless: the *temporary fan* and *local fan*. A temporary fan may temporarily become a fan of a team due to a range of circumstances, such as the seasonal nature of an event, i.e. favorite player changes teams or globally popular event such as a Champions League Final (Hunt *et al.* 1999). Popular culture produced the term *gloryhunter* to refer to someone who only associates with a team or player when success occurs, another example of the temporary fan (Hunt *et al.* 1999). A local fan however is a fan primarily due to geographical location of the team or player, and if their location were to change for one reason or another, the local fan's enthusiasm would simultaneously alter (Hunt *et al.* 1999).

The remaining categories include fans to whom fandom is a pivotal component, if not the most important aspect in their lives and core identity (Crawford 2004; Hunt *et al.* 1999). Hunt *et al.* (1999) describe one fan segment, *the fanatical fan*, as similar to the devoted fan in many ways, but the intensity in which fandom is expressed externally is notably more flamboyant. Hunt *et al.* (1999) emphasize that the fanatical fan although heavily invested in fandom, still has at least one core aspect of life that surpasses fandom in importance, e.g. family or work. *The dysfunctional fan* segment refers to those whose fandom is the single-most meaningful part of their lives and core identity (Hunt *et al.* 1999). The term dysfunctional illustrates the manner in which their fandom interferes with other functions in daily life and even the sports consumption experience of other fans (Hunt *et al.* 1999). Prime examples of dysfunctional fans are football *ultras* or *hooligans* whose radical and fundamentalist style of support is often felt as overtly aggressive by other fans (Hunt *et al.* 1999). Crawford (2004) states that although fans may be segmented by common practices, the experience of fandom is exactly that, a fluctuating experience and one of subjective nature.

2.2.2 Fan motivation

The consumers, in this case sports fans, are undeniably the engine of all revenue streams in professional sports; thus understanding their needs and subsequently offering “superior value” should be the core organizational mission (Neale & Funk 2006). Teevan & Smith (1967) define motivation as the drives or motives that either provoke behavior directly or assist towards action. In the case of sports fanatics, what specific drives and motives play a role in the decision-making process regarding consumption?

The study of sports consumer involvement and its periphery aspects have produced varying definitions amongst scholars (Funk, Ridinger & Moorman 2004). Four generally recognized motivators of sport fan involvement amongst scholars are: “stress and stimulation seeking, entertainment, achievement seeking and social interaction” (Sloan, 1989). McIntyre & Pigram (1992) further specify three aspects that define involvement: attraction, self-expression and centrality. Attraction is the emotional expectation of the event, in other words the perceived value that the event possesses for an individual or group (Funk *et al.* 2004). Funk *et al.* (2004) add that a part of the attraction construct is pleasure, which signifies the resulting subjective emotional reward gained from attending a live event for instance. Self-expression refers to the actualization fandom offers for fans to project their identity through sports (Funk *et al.* 2004). Centrality, Funk *et al.* (2004) defines as the vital need for socialization that is nourished and fulfilled by active participation as a fan. Neale & Funk (2006) emphasize that fans of the home team are motivated to attend games by the opportunity to mingle with other fans. Neale & Funk (2006) further insist that it is the responsibility of the host organization to facilitate the appropriate setting for fans to interact both prior and after games. Fans have also been seen to rank excitement as a central motivator; therefore unique ways in creating an entertaining atmosphere should be prioritized according to Neale & Funk (2006).

The matrix of factors that impact the decision-making process of sports consumption is vast with both tangible and intangible factors alike. Listed in the previous paragraph were mainly internal and intangible needs that positively incite sports fan consumption. Paradoxically, Douvis (2008) in his review of de-

clining attendance rates in the Greek Professional Basketball League makes a valid point that while much emphasis is generally placed on understanding motives that advocate for attendance, the reasons behind non-attendance remain largely uninspected.

| Rank | Factor | Percent |
|------|---------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Price of ticket | 85% |
| 2 | Game live on TV | 52% |
| 3 | Child facilities | 28% |
| 4 | Ease of access to stadium | 27% |
| 5 | Parking available | 24% |
| 6 | Food and drink available | 24% |
| 7 | Other games on TV | 24% |
| 8 | General atmosphere | 18% |
| 9 | Stadium design | 16% |
| 10 | Actual seat available | 13% |
| 11 | Fans behavior | 10% |
| 12 | Clean Stadium | 9% |
| 13 | Good weather | 7% |
| 14 | Public transportation | 4% |
| 15 | Evening game | 4% |
| 16 | Weekend game | 3% |
| 17 | Cheerleaders | 3% |
| 18 | Off field entertainment | 3% |
| 19 | Pre match entertainment | 2% |

TABLE 1. Percentage of fans answering *YES* to the question: Which of the following factors could **prevent** you from attending a game? (Tomlinson, Buttle & Moores 1995)

As Table 1 confirms, ticket pricing is one of the most predominant factors for fans in their decision whether or not to attend lives games. For instance the average ticket price for a National Hockey League in 2015 was 62 dollars (TMR 2016). Fans are naturally enticed to compare and contrast admission pricing with that of other entertainment industry substitutes, thus better estimating the ticket's subjective value (Neale & Funk 2006). As with all potential factors, it is important to remember that the relative significance of price is also dependent

on the level of fandom a fan identifies with as discussed in 2.2.1 (Crawford 2004; Hunt *et al.* 1999).

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>Socio-demographic</i> | Age, gender, education, social class, income, distance to venue |
| <i>Economic</i> | Ticket price, entertainment substitutes, live TV / streaming coverage |
| <i>Sporting</i> | Opponent, match prestige / special promotional game, star players, style of play, home team record |
| <i>Perceptual</i> | Weekday, weather forecast, expected attendance, hospitality/safety/entertainment at venue |

TABLE 2. Pitts & Stotlar (2002) effectively classified general factors influencing attendance at sporting events.

Sports marketers face an elusive challenge considering their limited sphere of influence on sporting performance factors in particular (Neale & Funk 2006). To specify, performance-based variables that may forecast attendance figures for upcoming games include: recent form, rivalry games, history of fixture and probability of victory (Goff, Wilson, Martin & Spurlock 2015; Price & Sen 2003). Although the factors listed in both *Table 1* & *2* are generally applicable across sports and teams respectively, the key ultimately lies in finding new angles on better understanding fans and providing them premium value where feasible (Neale & Funk 2006).

Male and female fans possess differences in attitudes towards sports and team-specific fandom according to James & Ridinger study (2002); many female fans that strongly associate themselves with a team, do not regard themselves equally interested in the sport itself or sports in general, whereas male fans of the team were also found strongly associated with sports in general. James & Ridinger (2002) also concluded that where sports fandom feeds deep into the

social identity of male fans, female fans were less likely to feel overwhelming disappointment after loss or overly interested in the technical aspects of the sport. However, Ware & Kowalski (2012) in their study of college sports fans deemed that when considering highly motivated fans, gender did not seem to be a relevant factor regarding levels of emotional impact after a win or loss. The so called gender gap in sports fandom has also been seen to have diminished over time as more female fans display fandom openly, thus making their behavior perceived as more socially acceptable amongst peers (McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan 2003; Wann & James 2018).

Age as a variable has yet to provide viable consensus towards one conclusion or another (Wann & James 2018). Nevertheless, fans of younger age were found to express greater levels of disappointment for instance after a crucial loss (Rainey, Larsen & Yost 2009). Older fans on the other hand more often appreciate traditional values in sports such as integrity, humility, sportsmanship, and team-first mentality (Aiken, Campbell & Sukhdial 2010; Wann & James 2018).

In a longitudinal study observing major league baseball attendance spanning across a century, Ahn & Lee (2014) discovered that motivational factors regarding attendance have not been stagnant over time. Whereas nowadays a diverse array of factors such as outcome uncertainty, venue hospitality and home team offensive prowess (i.e. batting in baseball) positively affect attendance, the only seemingly influential factors used to be winning & losing (Ahn & Lee 2014).

2.2.3 Fan & brand loyalty

A loyal fan is the most ideal type of fan, if the question is directed towards sports executives (Neale & Funk 2006). Oliver (1999) defines loyalty in consumerism as “deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future. Loyal fans persevere through difficult times and are much more likely to extend loyalty to affiliated sponsors and acquire team-branded merchandise (Martin 2013; Neale & Funk 2006). In contrast to traditional service industry, where perceived service quality is significant in terms of producing brand loyalty and overall customer satisfaction, principles that define sports fan loyalty are not as straightforward (Brown, Fisk & Bitner 1994).

As opposed to service industries, [on-field] performance is not necessarily in direct correlation with [fan] loyalty levels (Oliver, 1999). To clarify, a losing record will most likely not sway a loyal fan to switch their fan affiliation to another team (Neale & Funk 2006). It is not to say that a winning record does not help drive fan loyalty, but deeming it unanimously influential would be naïve and false (Passikoff 2000). Passikoff (2000) coined four catalysts for fan loyalty as seen from TABLE 3 with relative importance ranking from top to bottom:

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Pure Entertainment Value</i> | Excitement, dramatic performance, victory |
| <i>Authenticity</i> | Sense that players are passionate and proud |
| <i>Fan Bonding</i> | Driven by recognizable & admired players |
| <i>History & Tradition</i> | Having heritage and tradition with defining moments in team’s history |

TABLE 3. Passikoff (2000) drivers for fan loyalty in sports fans.

Passikoff (2000) greatly emphasizes that victory is but one aspect of *Pure Entertainment Value*, suggesting that losing teams that spur crowd excitement or embody a favorable style of play can also positively influence fan loyalty. Tapp (2004) however takes an entirely opposite stand, declaring that excluding very few exceptions, losing teams rarely boost fan loyalty. The claim is mainly based through longitudinal investigation of English football teams' standings in the league table in relation to their attendance figures, which have shown direct correlation (Tapp 2004). Interestingly, the major league baseball team Chicago Cubs is proof of one such exception; Bristow & Sebastian (2001) found that fans embraced the team's prolonged status as underdogs and so fan loyalty actually increased while sporting glory remained lackluster throughout the years.

Neale & Funk (2006) find common ground with Passikoff (2000) that utilizing star players in marketing is only profitable in creating loyalty to the extent if they are significant, contributing members of the team. The use of star players in a promotional manner has been seen to increase identification with the team, thus leading to increased loyalty (Neale & Funk 2006). While the drivers of fan loyalty mentioned by Passikoff (2000) are mostly outside of sports marketers' reach, social media marketing tactics have potential to enhance fan loyalty, further discussed in 2.4.

The differences in philosophies regarding fan loyalty and its dynamics can be somewhat explained by examining attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (Tapp 2004). Attitudinal loyalty, the precursor for behavioral loyalty, is rooted in psychological commitment and resistance to change (Bee & Havitz 2010). Behavioral loyalty, as the name states, refers to the tangible actions that may manifest from loyalty, those often desirable to sports organizations: repeat consumption (i.e. attendance), consistency of consumption and frequency of consumption (Dick & Basu 1994; Bee & Havitz 2010). Dick & Basu (1994) add that the behavioral loyalty is sometimes seen as the indicator of the actual relationship potency between attitude and behavior: whether someone who "talks the talk" also "walks the walk". The discernment of loyalty aids sports organizations

to assess a more objective profile of fans, which have tendency to boast their loyalty beyond objectivity (Tapp 2004).

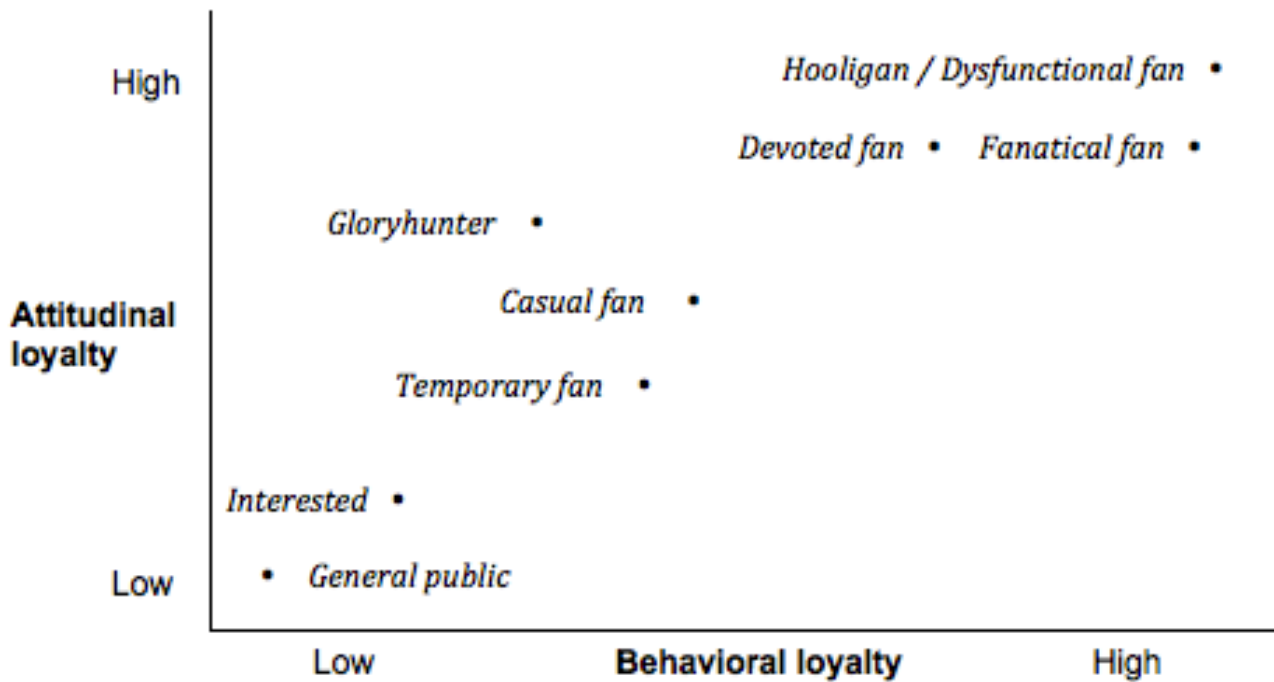


TABLE 4. Inspired by Tapp (2004) version of Dick & Basu (1994) framework, fan archetypes mentioned in 2.2.1 have been roughly placed in terms of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Fan loyalty has significance in more than one area for sports organizations. For one, securing loyal fans is seen to be financially more profitable than gaining new fans for instance (Passikoff 2000). Martin (2013) complies that the behavior and attitude of loyal fans is also far more predictable and sustainable in terms of revenue-producing actions. Adding to the challenge that sports marketers' face is that the core product, the game, in itself is highly unpredictable (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton 2000). Martin (2013) also validly points that the most loyal and committed fans also act as "opinion leaders" to a wider segment of fans, thus securing positive associations in their minds is seen to be vital. Gladden & Funk (2002) refer to brand equity or brand associations as the value, ideas, and perceptions of a sports team from a fan's perspective. Securing favorable brand associations is both crucial and demanding for sports marketers; as opposed to generic consumer branding, teams provide an "experiential service" rather than a tangible product (Gladden, Irwin & Sutton 2001). Only adding to the challeng-

ing dynamic is the wide spectrum of elusive consumer needs to be pinpointed and met effectively (Ross 2007). Ross (2007) adds that the incentive of identifying brand associations is consequently having the ability to emphasize the favorable associations and becoming aware of lesser favorable associations. Ensuring strong brand equity thus requires marketers to gain as much consumer information as possible and dissect the relevant information from masses of data (Gladden & Funk 2002).

2.3 Social media marketing

The impact that social media has had on corporate marketing in the past 15 years has been unprecedented (Miller 2013). As of July 2020, an estimated 3.96 billion people use social media actively, just over 50% of the world's population (DataReportal 2020). A 2017 study also discovered that 90% of U.S. *Inc. 500* companies had a Facebook page, and 79% had a brand profile on Twitter (UMass Dartmouth 2018). In 2018, *Inc. 500* companies were surveyed on the effectiveness of social media with 92% responding that it was effective in building relationships with consumers (Statista 2019). These statistics help support the apparent fact that social media platforms have potential to create mass marketplaces where brands and consumers can interact effectively (Singh, Lehnert & Bostick 2012).

Social media marketing entails online promotion and communication with the customer base, most commonly using Web 2.0 tools such as websites, applications, and widgets (Albarran 2013). Easily accessible web platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram represent the pinnacle of the virtual marketplace where social media marketing is most often utilized (Neal 2012).

The impact of social media marketing on sales has produced differing results amongst studies (Popp *et al.* 2017). For instance, studies that advocate the positive impact generally focus on the supplementary incentives surrounding the actual sales occurrence such as "sales leads" (Campos *et al.* 2013; Agnihotri *et al.* 2012; Rothschild 2011), follow-up marketing (Hudson & Thal 2013) and reinforcing product reliability especially to more motivated target groups (Agnihotri *et al.* 2012, Marshall *et al.* 2012). Paradoxically, other studies state

social media antics actually have little impact on sales numbers (Rodriguez *et al.* 2012) and that email marketing was forty-fold more efficient in enhancing sales (Mullin *et al.* 2014).

Making social media marketing an enticing option for any business is its cost-effectiveness, especially for companies with limited financial resources (Bandyopadhyay 2016). Although executing social media marketing bare its costs, it is thought to be a substantially lesser investment than what traditional media campaigns require (Miller 2013). Other fundamental advantages of social media marketing include the possibility to cultivate relationships with consumers, the measurability of reach and engagement, and a rapid feedback loop (Miller 2013). With large masses however, competition is naturally strong and gaining leverage within the online marketplace requires innovation and adaptability (Singh, Lehnert & Bostick 2012). Shorter attention spans of modern day social media consumers only adds to the fierce competition, forcing carefully thought out strategy (Geey 2019).

The onset of social media birthed a brand new paradigm in marketing far more dynamic than age-old one-way marketing (Serazio & Duffy 2017). Not only did the manner of product communication alter, so did the intangible position that brands hold within the contexts of the marketplace; rather than trying to aggressively force products to consumers' attention, brands attempt to recognize trends, secure favorable positioning and communicate interactively within the social media marketplace (Serazio 2013). Serazio & Duffy (2017) highlight *earned media* as one of the three flagship utilities of social media marketing. Earned media is organically gained publicity fueled by the community itself, without direct influence of the brand (Serazio & Duffy 2017). For instance, fanzines or fan forums represent prime platforms for earned media to flourish. Zarrella (2010) concludes, "the best social media marketing is always going to be done by your fans". Another facet of social media marketing is *owned media*, which falls within the direct sphere of a brand's influence and involves all deliberate online publications produced with intent to spark engagement (Serazio & Duffy 2017). Completing the triad of the social media marketing mix is *paid media* (Serazio & Duffy 2017). Paid media is most similar to traditional marketing out of the three as its function is to pay in order to gain audience, as means to

seek strategic positioning utilizing tailor-made targeting (Serazio & Duffy 2017). Paid media strategies have seen rise in popularity within recent years with social media platforms offering customizable options to reach the social media feeds of target segments.

2.4 Social media marketing in professional sports organizations

Blending social media marketing into the realm of professional sports requires teams to provide fans with “an enriching experience, in an innovative way” (Anonymous 2012). Relationship marketing is a central component of social media marketing in sports. Reese (2011) defines relationship marketing as building and maintaining positive, mutually beneficial, and lasting relationships with stakeholders (i.e. fans) in order to induce loyalty and repeat purchase behavior. Grönroos (2004) believes interaction is the core fabric of successful relationship marketing. Additionally, the thorough understanding of fan motivation variables (chapter 2.2.2) is vital in methodical relationship marketing (Beverland, Farrelly, Quester 2010). Four distinctive motivators for fan interaction on social media were also theorized by Stavros, Meng, Westberg & Farrelly (2014): passion, hope, esteem, and camaraderie. Stavros *et al.* (2014) discovered that cultivating relationships with fans through social media leads to a more engaged fan. Seen as organizationally favorable, the more engaged fan has been proven to be more prone to frequent purchase behavior including attendance at games (Kim 2008; Williams & Chinn 2010). Williams & Chinn (2010) add that the interactive nature of social media is appealing to fans because fan produced content may also be used in the promotion mix thus strengthening the relationship between team and fan; sports consumers are no longer characterized as solely passive recipients of entertainment, but rather interactive “prosumers”. Social media thus provides a more elusive platform than traditional one-way communication and one in which fans are key components in influencing brand image via “electronic word-of-mouth” or earned media as discussed in 2.3 (Chu & Kim 2011; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Popp, McEvoy & Watanabe 2017). Some other social media objectives sports organizations focus on are creating brand and product awareness, boosting engagement and following, and generating sales leads (Newman, Peck, Harris & Wilhide 2013). For example, teams might an-

nounce the latest player signings, ticket promotions, and merchandise sales through their social media channels (Stavros *et al.* 2014).

Communication with the team's fan base is considered a crucial part of social media activity through as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook (Siguencia, Herman, Marzano & Rodak 2016). Williams *et al.* (2014) in their study of the value of Twitter for sports fans state that Twitter for instance is an optimal platform for interaction between the team and fans prior, during and after the event of a game. From the fan perspective, social media communication and content is also perceived as more personal compared to more traditional media outlets (Hutchins 2011). Social media marketing can also help professional sports teams build and maintain a positive brand image, especially amongst a younger segment of fans that are generally best reached through multiple social media channels (Siguencia *et al.* 2016).

While social media is utilized reasonably in terms of sales, its potential in meeting strategic marketing goals with regards to attendance and ticket revenue is generally not realized by sports organizations (Popp *et al.* 2017). Those organizations who had a clearly defined social media strategy in place, were much more likely to experience boosts in revenue to those who did not (Rothschild 2011). Popp *et al.* (2017) suggests "newness to best practices" as one reason to which why social media marketing does not automatically translate to increased ticket sales. Popp *et al.* (2017) conclude that social media marketing for sports organizations may also simply be more useful in meeting alternative marketing goals such as relationship marketing, branding, and gathering information on consumer behavior.

The rapid pace of today's social media consumption is a noteworthy aspect that sports teams look to utilize in their marketing efforts (Williams *et al.* 2014). In terms of increasing sales, NCAA Division I teams found short-lifespan exclusive game promotion produce favorable results (Popp *et al.* 2017). Popp *et al.* (2017) nevertheless noted that it is difficult to distinguish whether there is an increase in net ticket sales or revenue as a result, and whether or not the impact is sustainable.

Sports marketers are challenged by the measurability of social media effectiveness; lacking entirely feasible proof of return on investment (Popp *et al.* 2017; Dwyer & Drayer 2010; Jensen *et al.* 2014). This consequently makes justifying organizational resource allocation for social media challenging. Studies have been able to draw positive correlations with being a fan/follower of a company's social media page and positive purchase behavior (Dholakia & Durham 2010; Rishika *et al.* 2013). Naturally, the measurement found to be most fruitful is so called "audience growth rate" (Agnihotri *et al.* 2012). Other indicators of social media impact such as engagement may be utilized to better understand the relationship between a team's social media content, the fans and the subsequent impact it may have on consumption (Chu & Kim 2011; Williams & Chinn 2010). Williams & Chinn (2010) concur that cultivating interactive relationships between the fans and the team through social media should consequently result in recurring purchase behavior.

Factors outside the sports marketer's sphere of influence may also impact social media following. As previously listed as a crucial factor in fan motivation, team performance has also been linked to an increase in the number of followers as determined in a study done on professional Spanish football teams (Pérez 2013). Watanabe *et al.* (2015) in their study pinpoint that while team strength is seen to be significant in relation to following; the ability of team's to produce attractive content also was a noteworthy component in the regard.

Often overlooked by sports organizations is the dissection and identification of sub-segments within the current fan base (Ross 2007). Ross (2007) adds that organizations may inadvertently be missing potential value through lack of targeted content, while excessively focusing on macro-level marketing.

Based on the theoretical framework, the research questions and methods used for this study could be formed. The research methods will be more thoroughly presented and justified in the following section.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to review the relevance of the literary review in terms of selecting methodology, examine the research questions, and discuss the data collection methods and how well these methods served to answer the research questions.

Through the introduction and dissection of key concepts, the research questions could be established. The aim of the literary review was to best form a comprehensive and objective outlook, so that the research questions were in line with the thesis statement.

The process of finalizing the selected research questions entailed the evaluating of correlation that the central denominator, interactive social media, had on the two primary variables, attendance at home games and perceived fandom.

3.1 Research questions

1. How does the implementation of interactive social media marketing tactics influence attendance at Ilves-Hockey home games?
2. What is the cumulative effect of interactive social media tactics on perceived fandom of Ilves-Hockey fans?

3.2 Fan questionnaire

The principal method for data collection was a 19-question survey with Ilves Hockey fans as the focus group. Primarily, the questionnaire consisted of quantitative questions, yet the respondents were given the option to qualitatively elaborate on a few selected questions. The platform used for the online questionnaire was the user-friendly Google Forms, which provides a wide array of options for customization.

The questionnaire was distributed primarily on the Facebook fanpage *Ilves Tampere*, consisting of just over 10,000 members. The group has a fairly strict

policy for access, thus ensuring that it is exclusive to fans of Ilves, including ice hockey and football. The link to the questionnaire was also tweeted on my personal Twitter page, after which it was retweeted by the official Twitter account of Ilves Hockey (@ilveshockey which has 17,3 thousand followers as of October 2020). These distribution methods were selected to ensure that the questionnaire would reach a motivated segment of potential respondents in a fairly short amount of time. The online questionnaire was open to responses for the duration of one week (week 17 April 2020), after which the form was closed from public access. The overall sample size ended up being 414. The raw data that was produced from the questionnaire results was effectively exported from Google Forms, into a spreadsheet, where relevant analysis could be formulated into visual and numerical data seen in section 4.

3.2.1 Demographics

Two basic demographic questions were presented, gender and age. Gender response options were “male”, “female”, and “Other/ choose not to respond”. The age response category was divided into six segments: under 18, 18 to 25, 26 to 35, 36 to 45, 46 to 60, and over 60. The general reasoning behind the chosen segment frequencies is related to generic socioeconomic statuses associated with the segment. For instance, the majority of 18 to 25 year olds are generally assumed to be post-secondary level students, whereas 26 to 35 year olds are commonly at a stage where they are establishing footing in their career of choice and starting families of their own. The next two segments, generalize the phase where families most often have young kids (36 to 45) and later those kids transition into adulthood (46 to 60). Over 60 year olds consequently are generally considered to be in retirement, thus justifying the use of the wide non-fixed segment.

3.2.2 Attendance

Two questions regarding home game attendance of fans during the 2019-2020 season were presented. The first enquired about the total number of Ilves home games attended. Four segments were provided for responders to choose from: under 2 games, 2 to 5 games, 5 to 10 games, and over 10 games. Through this

division, an approximate conclusion could be formed on levels of fan loyalty. The second question simply asked respondents to clarify whether or not they were Ilves season ticket holders during the 2019-2020 season. This question was aimed to further emphasize the inspection into fan loyalty.

3.2.3 Fandom

The next three questions were aimed to target how fans themselves perceive their fandom. Firstly, respondents were asked to specify on the primary reason of their induction into becoming a fan of Ilves. The standard response options for this question were based on results from previous research done on the topic, further discussed in the theoretical framework. Also based on results from desktop research were the response options for the second question regarding how fans perceived their current level of fandom. Finally, respondents were asked to state their perception on the evolution of fandom over time. For those who responded that they had experienced any fluctuation in their levels of fandom, an additional open-response field was added for them to elaborate on the possible reasons.

3.2.4 Social media

The remainder and largest portion of the questionnaire was focused on the relationship fans have with the social media presence of Ilves, in addition to what impact Ilves' social media activity had on home game attendance and fandom.

Firstly, respondents were asked to check off each Ilves social media account that they follow, if any. This gave basic data on the distribution of social media following. Respondents were then asked to state the primary source from which they generally consumed information regarding Ilves home game specifics. To follow up, all possible channels from which information on home games had been gained was enquired upon. The questions were intended to produce data on what channels were most fruitful specifically in communicating information on upcoming home games to respondents. A complementary question regarding alternatives methods of consuming live games if not physically in attendance was also added.

One of the most central questions of the questionnaire was whether or not Ilves' social media activity had any impact on the decision regarding attendance or non-attendance of home games. This question directly targets the research question presented in 3.1. Respondents were also asked of their preferred mode of social media content and what content they would opt to have more of. These questions helped to identify more specifically what content was found most engaging.

The other predominantly significant question regarded whether respondents felt that Ilves' social media activity had any impact on their level of fandom. This question also directly targets the second research question presented in 3.1. Respondents were asked in remaining questions to elaborate in more detail what characteristics of social media persona were seen as most important and what was seen as least important. Respondents were then made to choose in what practical way Ilves' social media enhanced their fan experience. An open-field question finalized the questionnaire, where respondents could give unfiltered feedback on their perception of Ilves' social media outlook.

4 RESULTS

A total of 414 responses were received through the online questionnaire directed to Ilves fans. All tables presented below hold the mentioned sample size.

4.1 Demographics

Gender of respondents

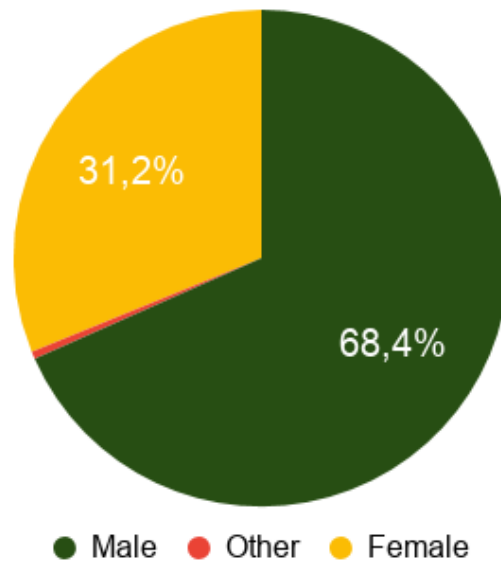


TABLE 5 – Gender of respondents

TABLE 5 shows the gender distribution of questionnaire respondents. The majority of respondents were male making up roughly two-thirds of respondents (68,4%). Nevertheless, almost one third of respondents being female suggests that the gender gap in sports fandom is not as significant as may have been before (McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan 2003; Wann & James 2018).

The age distribution of respondents was fairly scattered. The segment of 26 to 35 year olds represented the majority with 27,1%. 90,8% were between the ages of 18 and 60 years old with minors (under 18) and elderly (over 60) accounting to only 9,2% of respondents. 18 to 25 years olds accounted for 22,7%, 36 to 45 year olds 22%, and 46 to 60 year olds 19,1%.

4.2 Attendance

Home game attendance 2019-20 season

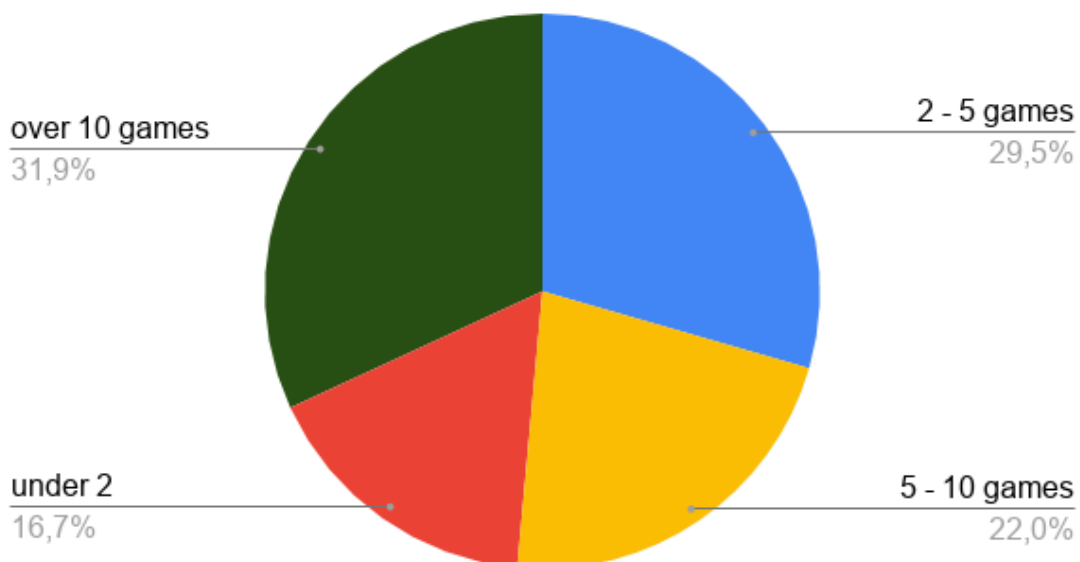


TABLE 6 – Home game attendance 2019-20

TABLE 6 displays the amount of home games respondents' attended during the 2019-2020 season. The majority (31,9%) attended more than 10 home games during the past season.

Season ticket holders 2019-20 season

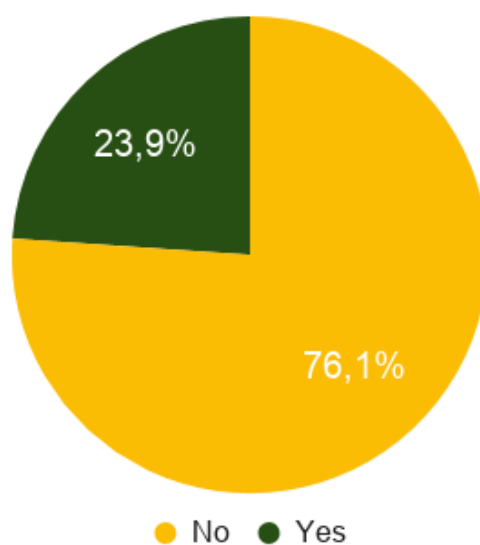


TABLE 7 – Season ticket holders 2019-20

TABLE 7 shows the proportion of season ticket holders among respondents. 23,9% owned or had access to a season ticket during the 2019-2020 season.

Primary way to follow games if not in attendance

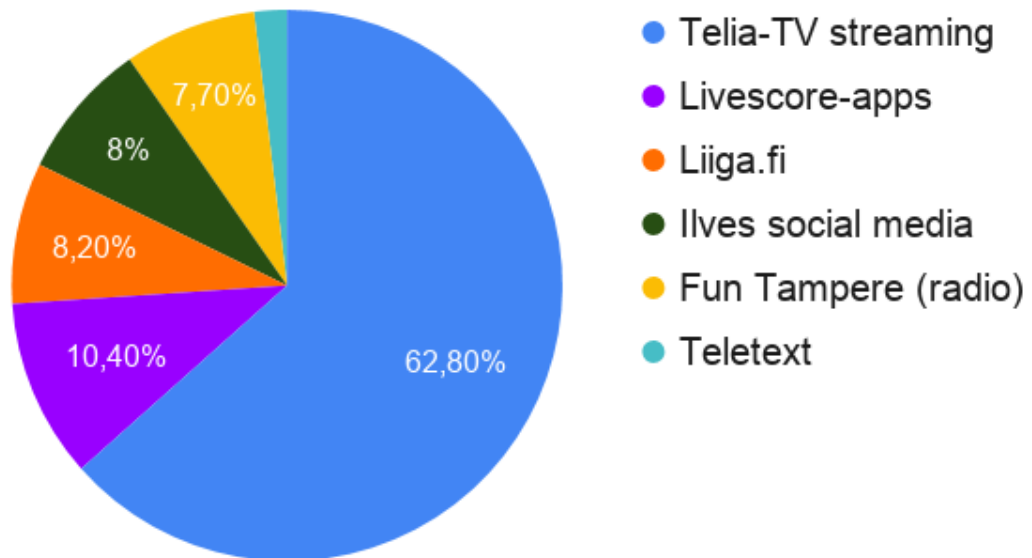


TABLE 8 – Primary way to follow games, if not in attendance

TABLE 8 shows the primary method to follow games if not in attendance live. The majority 62,8% responded to primarily use *Telia-TV* live streaming services to follow games. As Pitts & Stolar (2002) stated, many factors such as the live coverage of games may have significant impact on the decision to attend live games or not.

4.3 Fandom

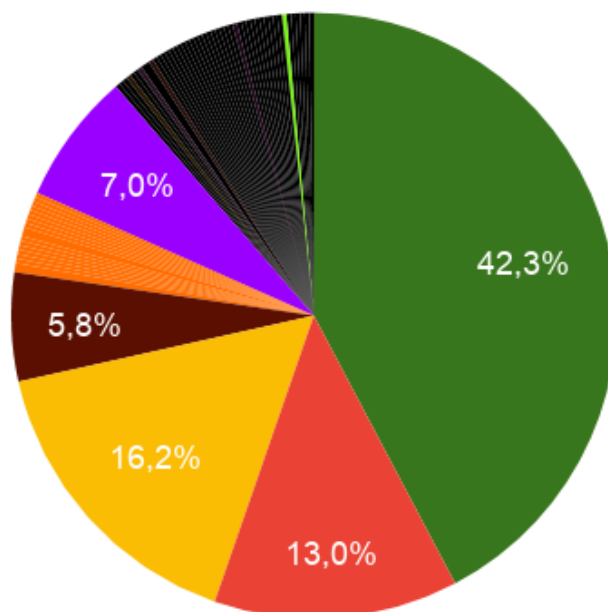


TABLE 9 – Method of initiation into fandom

TABLE 9 shows the responses regarding the initiation process of how respondents came to become fans of Ilves. Confirming Crawford (2004) & Hunt *et al.* (1999) findings regarding induction into fandom during childhood, over half of questionnaire respondents described their fandom to be in some way hereditary, as 42,3% (green) responded that their social circle had the biggest impact and additionally 10,1% (black) used the open response field to explain that their fandom was either a family trait or something acquired from their “mother’s milk” as the Finnish metaphor illustrates. Red (13%) represents those who responded that locality was their most significant aspect. Yellow (16,2%) represents those who responded that their own athletic history in Ilves was the reason for fandom. 7% (purple) felt that they first became interested in ice hockey as a sport and then Ilves. 5,8% (brown) responded that their fandom was initiated through following a certain player Ilves player they idolized. The smallest portion (5,6%) in orange represents miscellaneous answers from the open response-field.

Level of fandom

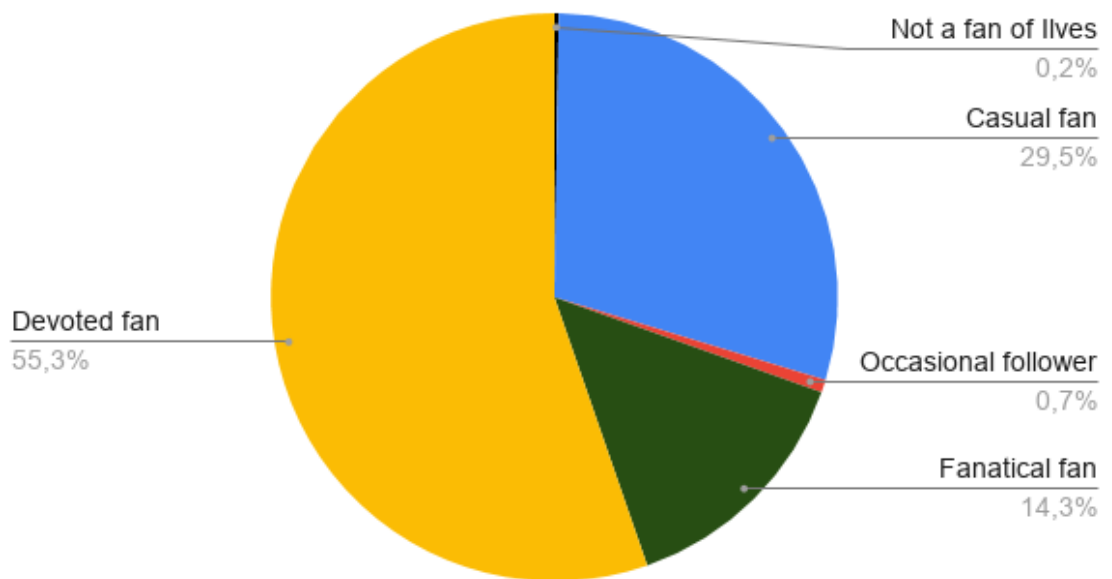


TABLE 10 – Level of fandom

TABLE 10 illustrates how respondents would rate themselves from predetermined levels of fandom. More than half, 55,3% of respondents rated themselves as *devoted fans* and 14,3% as *fanatical fans*. Brief parameters of each classification were provided for clarity to ease the respondents' response decision.

Evolution of fandom

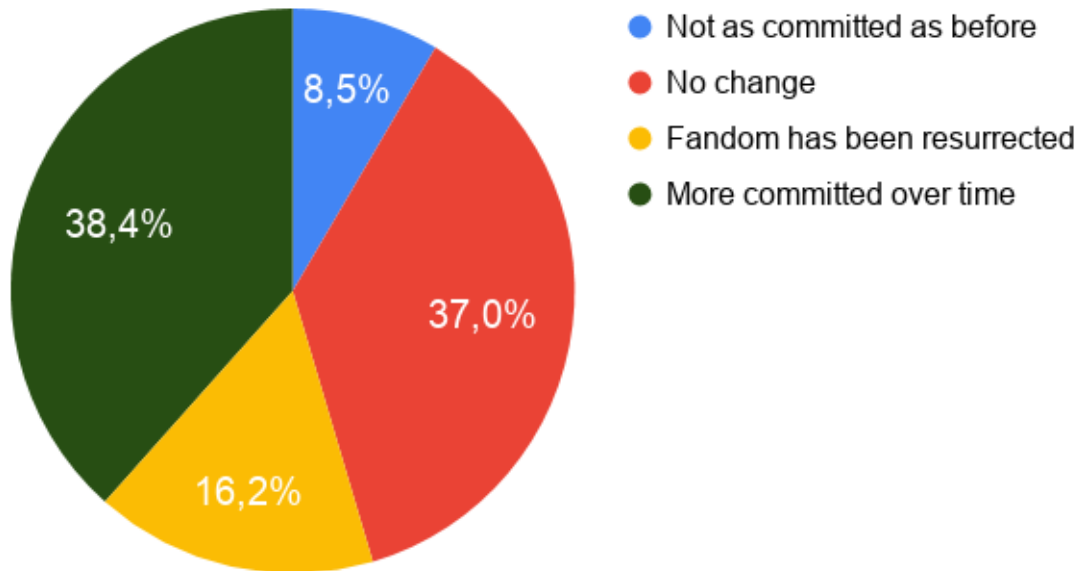


TABLE 11 – Evolution of fandom

TABLE 11 is a depiction of whether respondents had experienced changes in their own perception of fandom over time. 63% of respondents felt that their commitment levels regarding fandom had fluctuated. The large majority of that 63%, had experienced positive changes whilst 8,5% of total respondents felt they were not as committed as they used to be.

4.3.1 Qualitative results: changes in fandom

An optional open-entry field following up the previous question was provided for those who responded that their level of commitment in fandom had changed. The follow-up provided fans to further elaborate on the possible reasons for change occurring.

Among those who responded that their commitment level had decreased over time, age along with its peripheral effects proved to be the most influential factor. To clarify, age and its underlying significance varied somewhat amongst respondents as to what practical challenges aging produced. A few respondents (both whom rated themselves casual fans) elaborated their change in fandom due to increased objectivity towards the game:

“Age. I no longer have as much time to attend games. My understanding of the sport has improved, therefore I focus on the game rather than “being a fan”.”

“Due to current life circumstances, I attend live games less than in my youth. Although I support Ilves, I try to follow games as objectively as possible. I feel as though fans on social media get carried away following wins or losses. Every loss is followed by the blaming of our own players or the referee, even though most often the opposing team was simply better.”

Other respondents have had to reprioritize fandom within their hierarchy of values due to family obligations, work, geographical location, and alternative interests in their lives'. The recurring theme in many instances appeared to be a perceived lack of time leading to a lessened commitment to fandom. One response interestingly blames *Liiga* for their decreased fandom raising speculation whether Hunt *et al.* (1999) halo effect theory may be applicable in reverse manner:

“Many other interests in adulthood. Additionally, my interest towards ice hockey and the domestic league has lessened. Liiga as a brand feels flimsy. Also, the dominant position ice hockey holds as a sport in Finland and the way it is exploited at the cost of other sports has decreased my interest towards the sport, thus also Ilves.”

Those respondents who felt that they had become more committed over time produced a variety of explanations: team success, geographical location, more time, financial freedom, kids becoming involved, inclusive social media content, regained trust in the organization, increased interest towards the sport, and strengthening of the bond to team/community. Ageing along with increase of expertise was paradoxically also seen to bear positive implications to commitment levels for some fans. One respondent referred to Ilves as their “second family” and a common theme seemed to be the emphasis that the importance of Ilves had grown on a personal and emotional level so much so that levels of commitment followed:

“Fan group activity has developed in such a way, thus giving opportunity for the feeling of involvement to develop. [The primary fan group] called Osasto41 has had the biggest impact on becoming more committed.”

“I somehow feel that the Ilves community has grown closer together and I feel it is an important aspect [to increased commitment] in addition to [team] success.”

“It [Ilves] has become a part of my identity as a person and native of Tampere as someone who has migrated elsewhere.”

“As the years fly by the significance of the shared journey grows.”

The importance of social media antics in the rise of commitment to fandom was highlighted by a fair segment of respondents. Stavros *et al.* (2014) mentioned camaraderie and passion as elements that encourage fan interaction on social media. Questionnaire responses complement these findings both in terms of increased emotional bond and importance of social media as a platform for cultivating camaraderie and passion:

“Ilves’ proactive presence on social media has rekindled old memories, thus sparking my interest.”

“Internet. As someone living in the greater Helsinki area it is easier to stay up-to-date regarding Ilves, as well as interacting online (fan forums, social media, etc.”

“Interest in the product [Ilves] has grown, partly due to social media [presence].”

A significant portion of those responding that their fandom had been resurrected, accounted it to regaining lost trust in the organization. Respondents who had previously had negative brand associations most likely experienced positive ones influenced by changes in ownership, something that Gladden & Funk (2002) theorized regarding the importance of associations on brand equity:

“I lost faith in Ilves’ success under previous ownership. I also grew tired of the lack of accountability from executives. After the 2017 change in ownership I gave Ilves a second chance which I have not regretted.”

Sporting success was naturally among the significant factors positively enhancing fandom, whether boosting fandom over time or fandom being resurrected:

“Winning has been important, and great players who to follow.”

“Recent success and the good vibe around the team have had a big impact.”

“For many years [team] performance were terrible, so I was not interested in seeing us get beat up. I hope in the future we can contend for top-6 standings [in the league] so I will surely go to more games.”

The transitions between phases in life of an individual have shown to influence levels of fandom positively as well. Many testified to have new-found time and responsibility lifted from previous family or social obligations that were also mentioned earlier by those who had experienced a decrease in commitment. Hunt *et al.* (1999) works may provide theoretical backing to these findings, as they mention that fan evolution is not necessarily a strictly linear process:

“Due to family and work-related time constraints I did not follow Ilves so closely. Now I have returned [to Ilves]”.

“Life takes you in many directions, studies, work, family, etc. I did not have the emotional capacity to fulfill all aspects [of life], although I do admit that delving into a good game sometimes rivals meditation. The last ten years Ilves has been an important part of my life and will continue to be.”

“During life’s hectic years fandom was lost. Now the club’s positive outlook and the change in team performance from frustration to more promising avenues have lured me back in. Going to games and being apart of the fan section’s elation is an empowering experience. I also enjoy the [Ilves] social media shenanigans.

4.4 Social media

Social media accounts followed

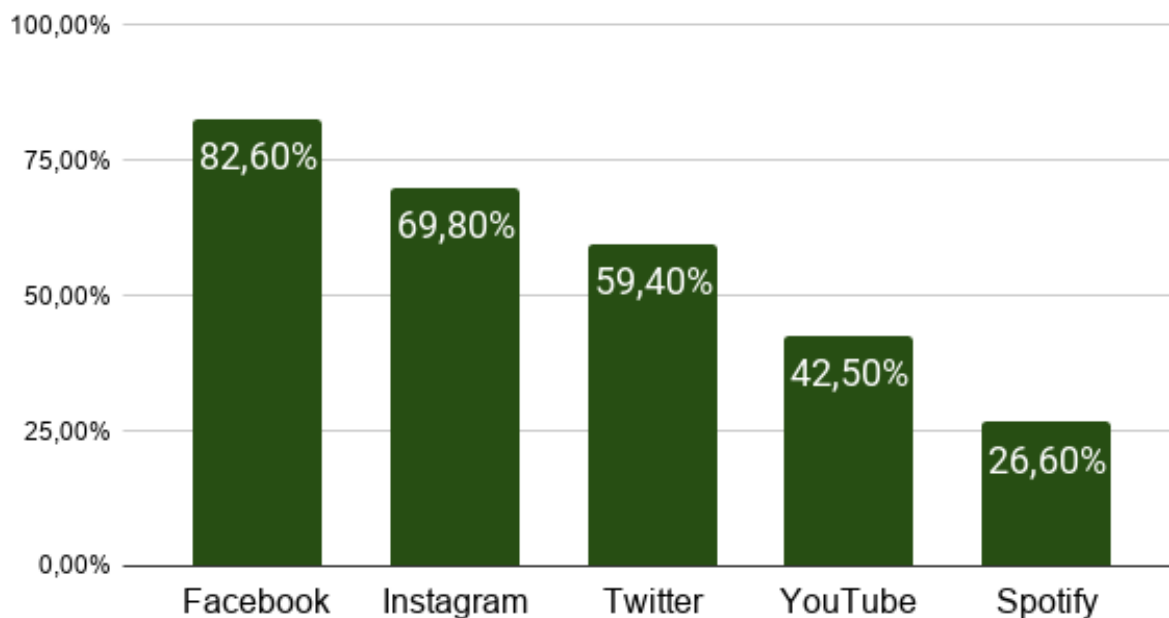


TABLE 12 – Social media accounts followed

TABLE 12 shows which lives social media accounts were followed amongst respondents. The largest majority of respondents followed lives on Facebook (82,6%). The graph does not display the 1% who were not on social media and 0,7% that did not follow any lives social media account.

Primary source for information on upcoming home games

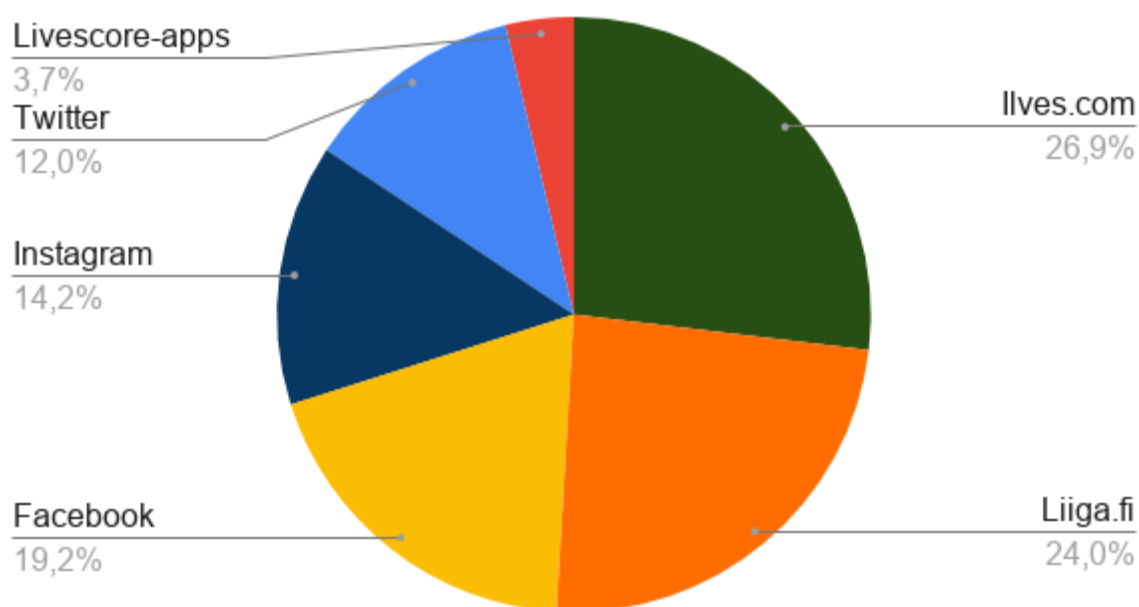


TABLE 13 – Primary source for information on upcoming home games

TABLE 13 shows the distribution regarding where respondents primarily consumed information regarding upcoming home games of Ilves. The team's official website (*Ilves.com*) and the national league's official website (*Liiga.fi*) totaled over half (50,9%) of the responses, with *Ilves.com* being the slight majority (26,9%) among the two. Social media channels combined 45,4% as primary sources of information, Facebook being the most popular (19,2%) among the three main platforms. Various Livescore-applications accounted for the majority of "Other"-answers (3,7%). Other minority responses were fan forums, the local newspaper, teletext, imported calendars, and *Liigavahti*, the league's smartphone application with media coverage and highlights.

Respondents were also asked to check all the channels from which they may personally obtain information regarding home games. 75,6% of respondents checked Facebook, 71,5% checked *Liiga.fi*, and 71,3% checked *Ilves.com*. Instagram followed with 62,3% and Twitter with 50,5%. The local newspaper *Aamulehti* was selected by 33,3%. "Other"-responses contained largely similar responses to the previous section.

4.4.1 Effect on attendance

Social media effect on attendance

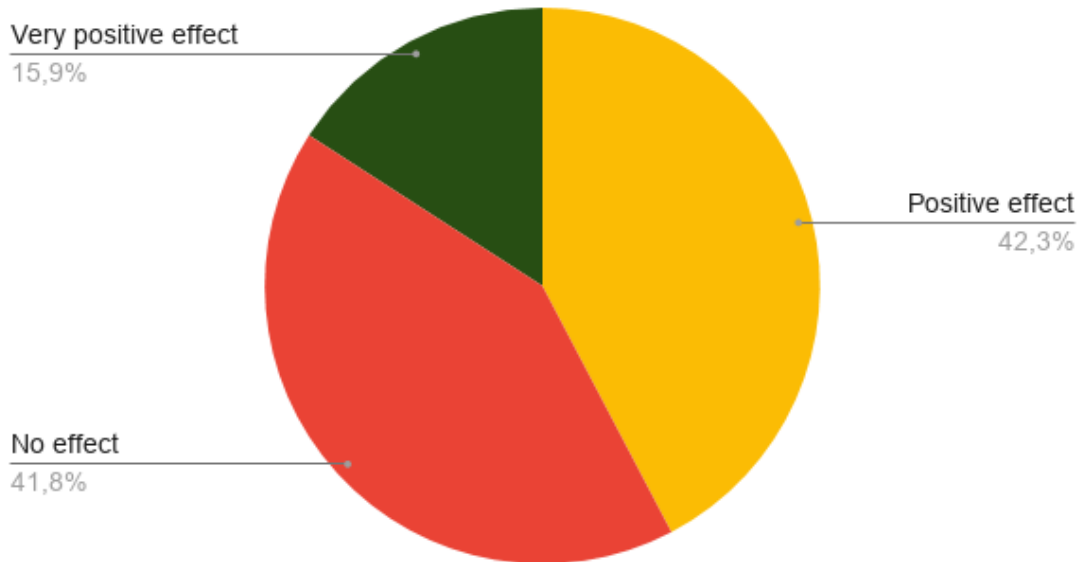


TABLE 14 – Social media effect on attendance

TABLE 14 displays what proportion of respondents perceived that Ilves' social media activity had a positive, negative or neutral effect on attending home games. 58,2% combined felt social media presence positively affected their decision to attend home games, with 15,9% attesting that the effect was very positive. None of the respondents felt it had negative effect, while 41,8% felt the effect was neutral. A few elaborate responses were made through the "Other"-option that were designated to appropriate generic categories:

"Practically no effect, because I am a season ticket holder and attend games nevertheless, but I do like that there are many game day posts [on social media]."

"Yes [it has effect]. If the game is hyped properly, and Ilves [social media] posts about expected high attendance for instance then I will more surely prioritize my day to attend the game..."

Preferred social media content

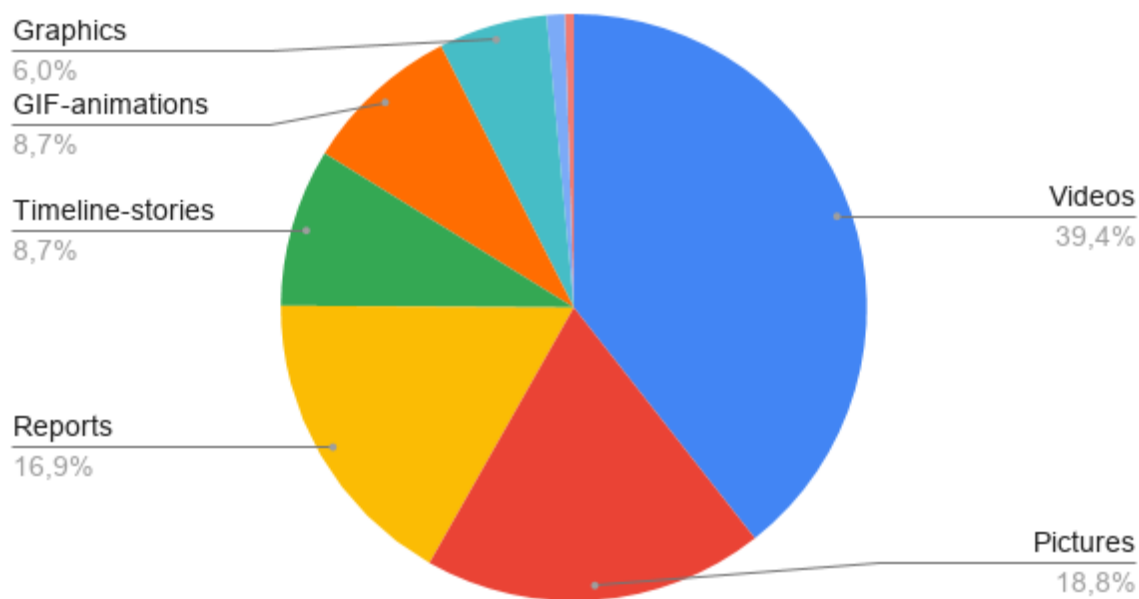


TABLE 15 – Preferred social media content

TABLE 15 shows what form of content respondents preferred the most. Video content was the most popular response (39,4%) followed by pictures (18,8%) and text-based reports (16,9%).

A follow-up question was presented with multiple possible responses regarding what type of special content would respondents prefer to see more of. The most prevalent response checked was *Unique perspectives on the daily life of team* to which 70,5% desired more of. The three next most checked alternatives were *Interviews / Player bios* (54,3%), *Atmosphere from games* (51%), and *Mini-documentary –series* (49,3%). The remaining options produced response prevalence ranging from 20% to just over 30%: *Nostalgia* (31,9%), *Sponsor affiliations with team involved* (28,5%), *Fun content* (26,1%), and *Fan-produced content* (20,5%).

4.4.2 Effect on fandom

How social media effects fandom

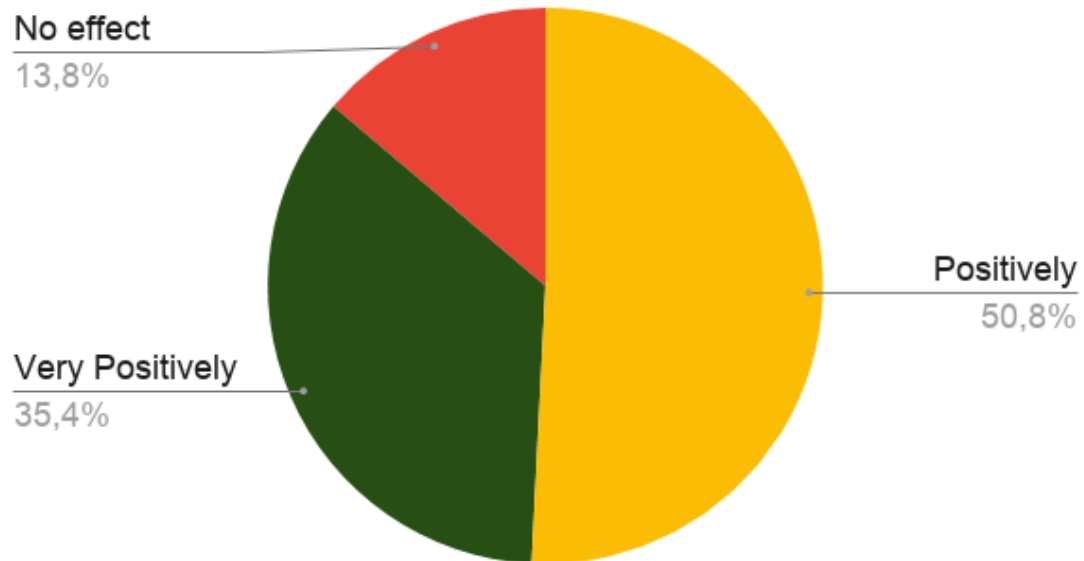


TABLE 16 – Social media effect on fandom

TABLE 16 depicts the respondents' ratings on how lives' social media had an effect on their perception of fandom. A combined 86,2% of respondents either felt social media antics had a positive (50,8%) or very positive (35,4%) effect on their fandom.

Respondents were also asked to rate five predetermined feature lives' of social media in terms of importance, 1 being the most important and 5 being the least important feature for them. The predetermined features were: *informative*, *trendy*, *relatable*, *traditional*, and *light*. The question itself was somewhat open to interpretation on what each term signified for each respondent. The feature that received most primary (1) responses was *informative*, with 163 (39,4%). *Light* received the second-most primary (1) responses, 77 (18,5%), but also the most responses for least important (5), 133 (32,1%). *Trendy* received the most responses for secondly important (2), 113 (27,3%). *Relatable* received the most responses for thirdly important (3), 122 (29,5%).

What elements does Ilves' social media add to fandom

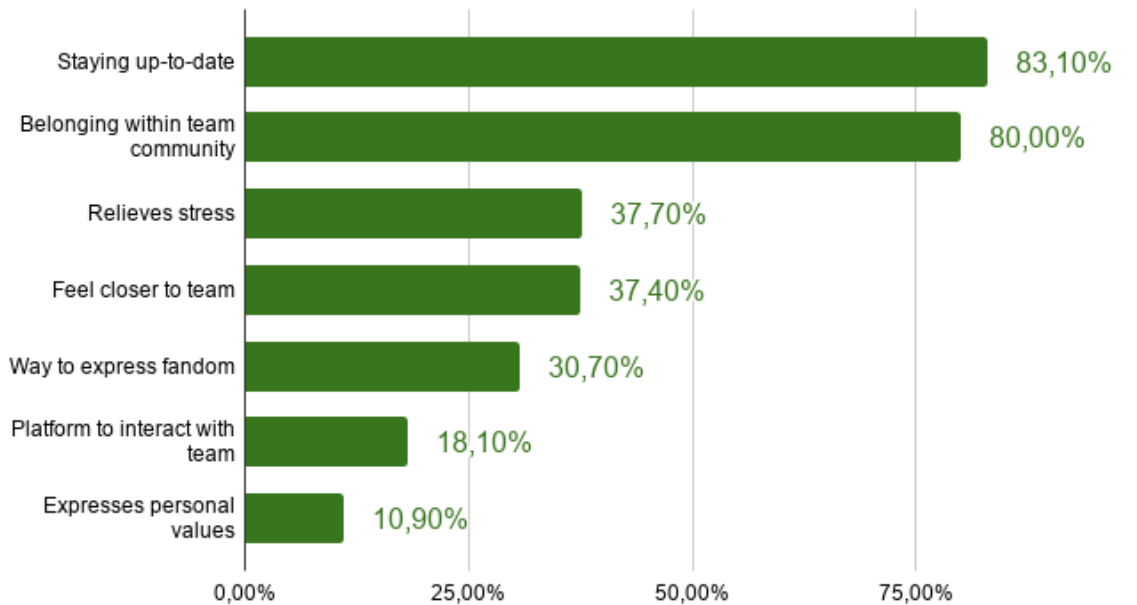


TABLE 17 – In what way social media boosts levels of fandom

TABLE 17 shows what percentage of respondents felt whether a respective element added to their fan experience or not. Multiple answers were accepted and most commonly responded were *Staying up-to-date* (83,1%) and *Belonging with the team community* (80%).

Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts on Ilves' social media presence through open-field response. The open-response field produced 180 responses, the majority of responses being positive and praising, and a small minority of responses being either neutral or offering critique.

Many fans pinpointed that progress has specifically been made in a positive direction within the span of a couple years or so:

“The development in a positive sense has been tremendous over the past few years”

“Has improved noticeably within the last couple years. Visual and player-related content is very good.”

“Not sure how long current [social media] staff have operated, but I’m guessing around two years ago our social media took a light-year worthy leap, and now it is the best in the league. By far.”

“Social media presence has gradually become more professional. Most of the content is targeted towards younger fan segments, which is understandable. “

Many respondents ranked Ilves’ social media presence as the best on a domestic level compared to rival teams and those of other professional sports teams:

“Best social media in the league.”

“Best [social media] in all of domestic sports. A good mix of memes, witty humor, and practical information.”

“The [social media] team has done a great job in unifying the presence [and image] of all channels of communication. A frontrunner in the domestic league. Great job!”

“Tremendous. The best in Finland. Has received praise within groups, forums, and social media from opposing fans, regarding both content creation and [social media] image. Graphic design is amazing! You won’t find better in Finland!”

Respondents were also keen to state the characteristics present in Ilves’ social media that pleased them the most:

“Overall very well balanced, being informative enough, yet providing nostalgia and humor, without forgetting to pay respect to heritage and tradition.”

“Fresh. Attuned to the times. Trendy. Professional.”

“Modern. Funny, yet practical as well. Active.”

4.5 Cross tabulations

Fandom x Attendance

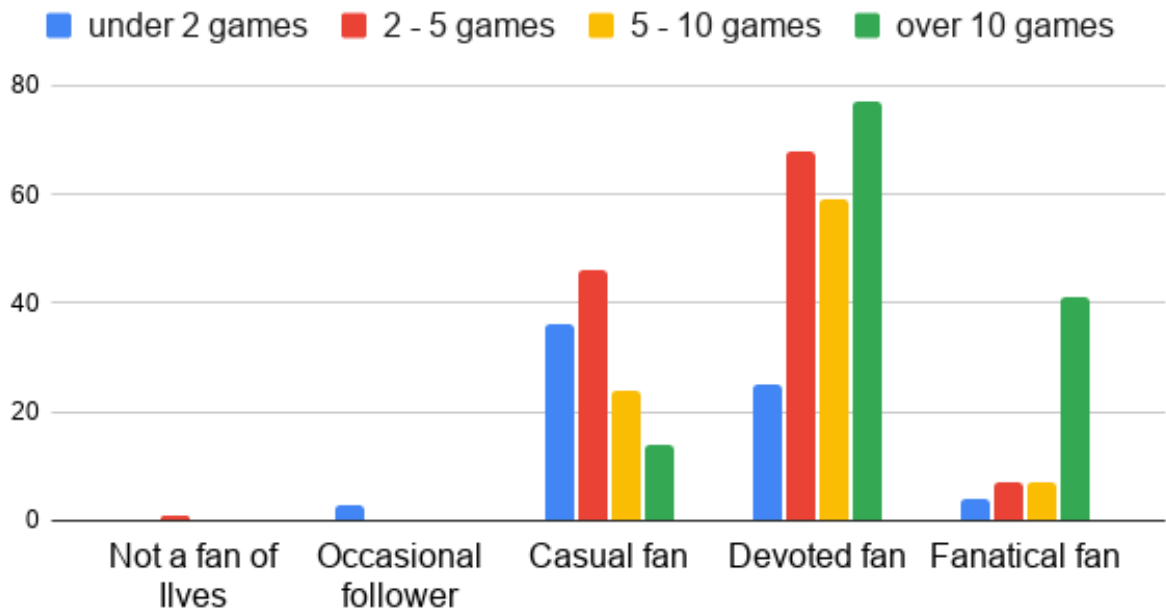


TABLE 18 – Relationship between perceived fandom and attendance

Table 18 shows the correlation between each classification of fandom and the amount of games that were attended by each archetype classification. The casual fan typically attends games, as the fan archetype states, casually. Nevertheless, even casual fans have already formed attachment and identify themselves with the team, and as Fisher & Wakefield (1998) confirm, this leads to higher likelihood to revenue-producing behavior such as purchase of game tickets. As evident, once the attachment level is grows, so does the likelihood to attend more games. Those who classified themselves as devoted fans were significantly more likely to attend at least 2 home games with *over 10 games* gaining the most responses slightly. The distribution amongst fanatical fans was fairly unanimous. The majority of fanatical fans attended over 10 home games during the course of the season.

Fandom x social media effect on attendance

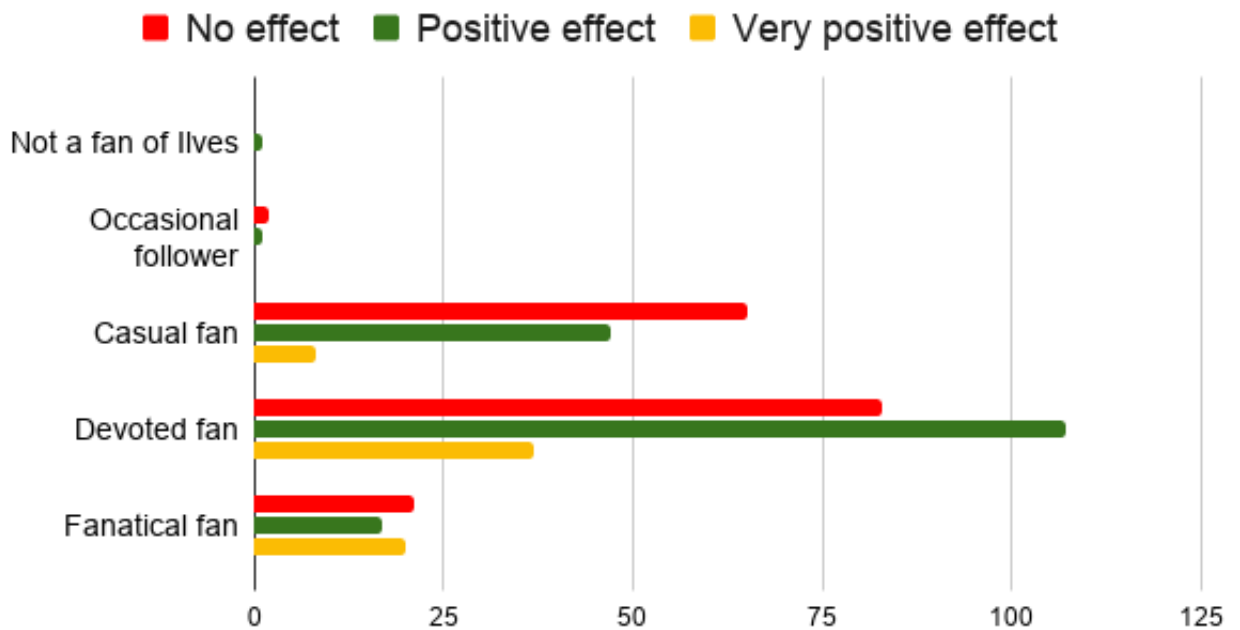


TABLE 19 – Relationship between fan archetype and influence social media has on attendance at Ilves home games

Table 19 displays the correlation between fan type and how much of an influence social media presence of Ilves had on their decision to attend home games. A single respondent in the questionnaire did not choose the option of *Negatively*. However, a clear trend similar to Table 18 is evident, where higher levels of fan attachment increased the ratio in favor of positive effect overall. 16% of *Devoted fans* felt social media had a *Very positive effect*, whereas 34% of fanatical fans answered the same. 54% of *Casual fans* responded that social media had *No effect* on their decision to attend games, 39% responded with *Positive effect*, and only around 7% chose *Very positive effect*.

Tables 20 through 22 on the following page, help illustrate the exponential jump from how *Casual fans* differ from *Devoted fans* and *Fanatical fans* in their perception how social media affects their attendance at home games.

Casual fan

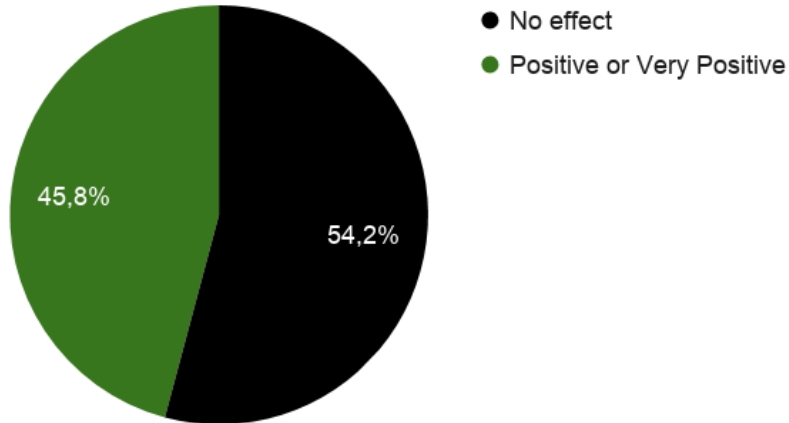


TABLE 20 – % of Casual fans perception of social media's effect on attendance

Devoted fan

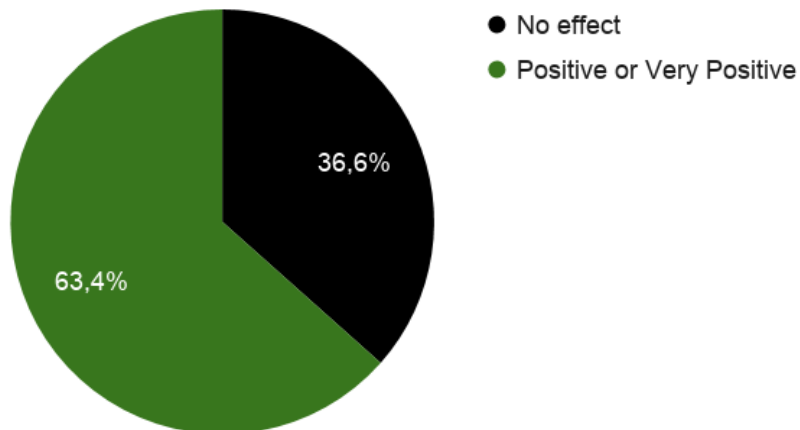


TABLE 21 – % of Devoted fans perception of social media's effect on attendance

Fanatical fan

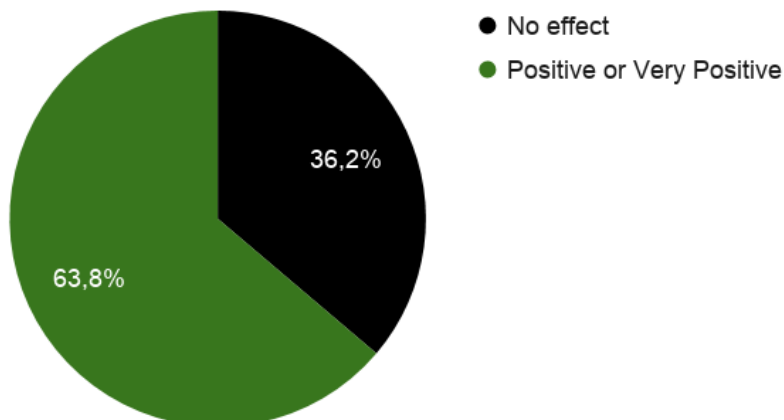


TABLE 22 - % of Fanatical fans perception of social media's effect on attendance

Season ticket (Yes/No) x Fandom

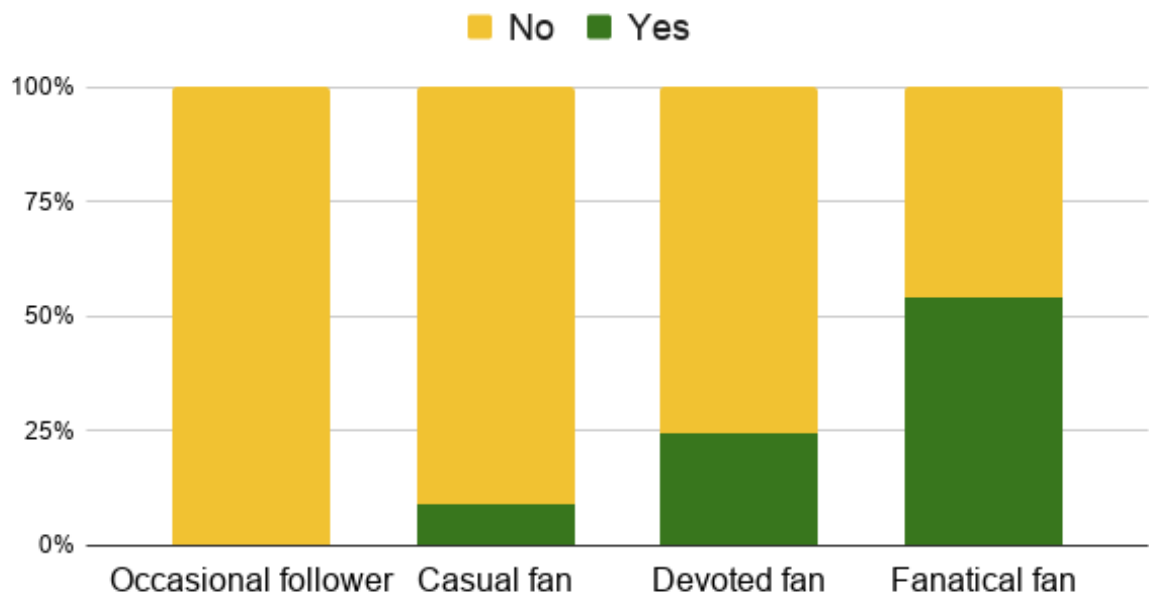


TABLE 23 – Ratio of season ticket holders within each fan archetype

Table 23 displays the ratio of season ticketholders within each fan archetype classification. The correlation is somewhat expected, as the higher the level of fandom, the larger portion are season ticket holders, thus also confirming the data from Table 18; that fans who rate themselves as more committed are more likely season ticket holders and more likely to attend home games regularly. As seen in Table 4 (page 18), the behavioral loyalty of respondents in regards to their fan archetype followed a predictably ascending trend (Tapp 2004); the greater extent that fans identified with the team, the greater proportion of behavioral loyalty in the form of season ticket acquisitions.

Season ticket (Yes/No) x Age

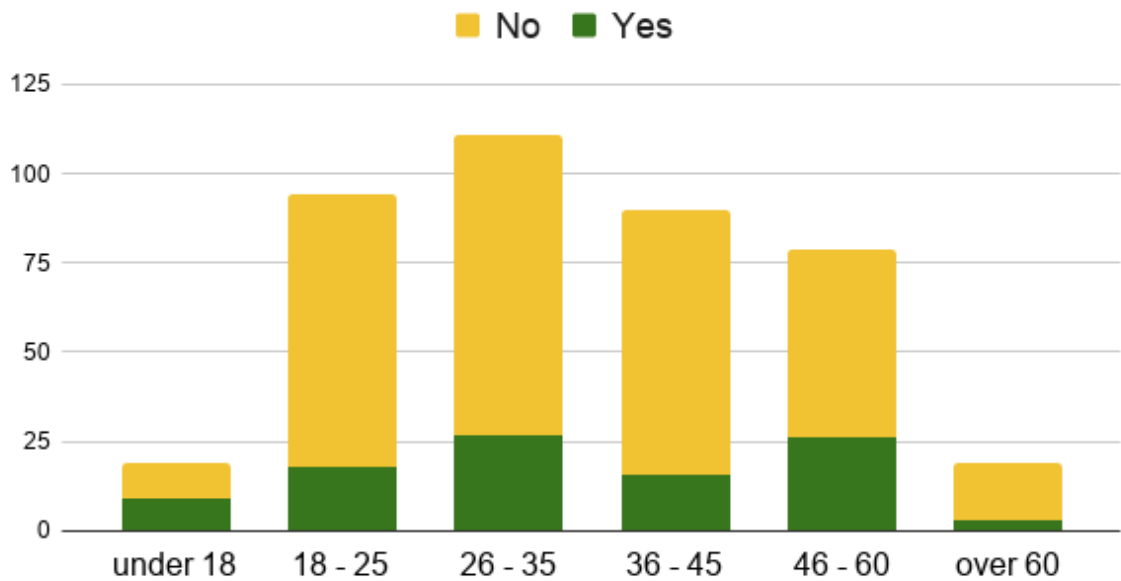


TABLE 24 – The relationship between season ticket holders and age.

Table 24 displays the distribution of season ticket holders in regards to age and the ratio of season ticket holders amongst each age category. The differences in total responses across age categories must be taken into account when comparing percentual ratios. 47% of under 18 year old respondents were season ticket holders, 19% of 18-25 year olds, 24% of 26-35 years olds, 18% of 36-45 year olds, 33% of 46-60 year olds, and 16% of over 60 year olds. The large ratio of under 18 year old season ticket holders can be partly explained by the smaller total of responses from the age group, yet is notable. The highest ratio from the four most-responded age groups was 46 to 60 year olds with one third being season ticket holders.

5 DISCUSSION

The discussion section aims to primarily speculate how well the study answers the research questions. The significance of the findings, also in relation to the theoretical framework is also interpreted simultaneously where relevant. Lastly, the validity of the study is inspected critically and the need for further academic research is weighed upon.

Research questions: review

1. *How does the implementation of interactive social media marketing tactics influence attendance at Ilves-Hockey home games?*
2. *What is the cumulative effect of interactive social media tactics on perceived fandom of Ilves-Hockey fans?*

The first key finding that the study shed light on was the relationship between the two research questions and in fact how intertwined the two are in the residual outcomes of one another. In other words, the effect fandom has on attendance and vice versa shifted from the intended binary scope (regarding research questions) into more of a trinity dynamic, where changes in one variable inevitably had a ripple effect the others. The direct conclusions of each both research questions are nevertheless discussed, yet somewhat concurrently throughout.

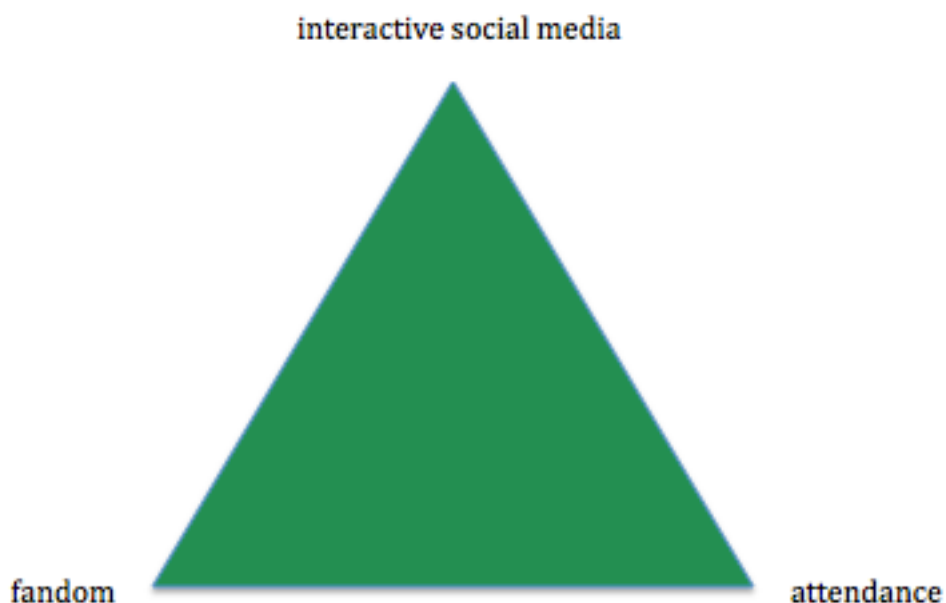


TABLE 25 – the three variables of study (interactive social media, fandom, attendance)

Well over half of the questionnaire respondents attested Ilves' social media presence to have positively affected their tendency to attend home games. Although this statistic indicates a stronger disposition to attend games on behalf of the majority, the real impact on whether social media is the deciding factor in attending remains highly problematic to prove. Nevertheless, the more social media buzz was created preceding an upcoming game, the more prone fans were seen to be to attend the hyped home game live. Much like traditional advertising, solidifying space in the memory of the target group is key and especially crucial to do so in a manner that evokes some form of emotional response. The following paragraphs reason why securing positive emotional responses is especially important in the long-term and how ultimately it should indirectly lead to positive growth in ticket sales.

The way in which interactive social media activity influences fandom however was found to be exponentially more impactful. In their study on how well college sports teams converted social media growth in attendance, Popp *et al.* (2017) argued that while proving the effectiveness of converting social media marketing into ticket sales is rather problematic, the way in which tactful social media presence promotes a more engaged fan, which in turn increases revenue-producing behavior such as ticket sales is relevant when mirroring to the conclusions of this study. Roughly half of questionnaire respondents declared that their levels of fandom had in some way been boosted over time, due to a variety of reasons. For one, the phenomenon can generally be supported by Gladden & Funk (2002) theory regarding positive brand associations. Although positive associations entail a wide spectrum of factors, many external from a social media-marketing standpoint (e.g. team success or change in ownership), through social media Ilves is able to endorse favorable associations that consequently secure and feed sustainable growth in fandom. Much in the way which neural pathways in our brains are strengthened through repetition and consistency, conscious social media efforts can similarly work in nurturing those favorable associations in the attention of fans. Deliberately creating positive associations can be seen as a skillful method to enhance relationship marketing, which

Reese (2011) confirmed to strengthen the bond between brand and consumer and encourage revenue-producing actions and consumer loyalty.

As mentioned, mathematically proving return on investment in terms of how well social media converts into ticket sales requires complex theory not yet available. Nevertheless, the results confirmed what has been justified by earlier theory, that securing sustainable attitudinal loyalty leads to more behavioral loyalty. A viable limitation to the study however is that the sample group was in principal biased towards predominantly possessing stronger levels of identification and fandom. The bulk of questionnaire responses were reaped through the *Ilves Tampere*-Facebook group, where the assumption is that fandom levels of members had reached a level that motivated them to join an *Ilves*-specific fan group to begin with. In addition, mainly fans with notable identification with the team may assumedly follow *Ilves* on Twitter, which was the secondary distribution channel. Consequently, the study lacks feasible data on the impact for lesser-invested fans such as *the temporary fan* and *gloryhunter*, or those individuals in the induction phase yet to identify as fans, labeled as *general public* or *interested* (see Table 4, page 18). The impact of this research limitation is that while nurturing fans' attitudinal loyalty can be proved to be fruitful towards attendance specifically for those that possess existing attachment as fans, the question remains unanswered how social media marketing affects attendance for those who are minimally invested in terms of fandom. On a practical level, the lack of personal incentive or reward for questionnaire respondents may be examined. On one hand, some potential respondents may have been discouraged and dismissed the questionnaire as a waste of time, yet those who did take the time to answer may be seen as more sincere without interest for personal gain. In addition to the *Ilves Tampere*-Facebook group, the questionnaire was also only distributed on one official *Ilves Hockey* social media account, that being Twitter. Out of the three most popular social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), *Ilves* has the least amount of total followers on Twitter (17,4 thousand as per Oct 2020). *Ilves'* official Facebook page has a total of 42,7 thousand likes (Oct 2020) and their Instagram has 30,3 thousand followers (Oct 2020). Therefore, inevitably certain potential respondents were missed out on simply because the questionnaire never reached them, for instance if they only

follow Ilves Hockey on Instagram or only like their Facebook page yet are not members of the Ilves Tampere-fanpage.

The recommendation for further study concerns a more in-depth analysis of social media post-specific data and its reach, further cross tabulations of relevant data, and a look into how fan attitudinal loyalty may be influenced during the induction phase. Firstly, by inspecting post-specific data, such as demographics, impact of time of day, impact of content type, and reach for instance, the numerical data may provide interesting insight that differs from questionnaire-based results. Further comparing and contrasting those results between numerical data and questionnaire results would be beneficial in order to justify or challenge validity of previous findings. The options for cross tabulations were immense even for this study, yet only a few relevant ones were chosen for presentation. For a greater overall understanding, future research would benefit from perhaps a higher-level all-encompassing academic study that speculates on all potential connections in data. A final thought that was mentioned in the earlier paragraph concerns the lack of valid study on how social media affects the segments of sports consumers who do not yet identify as fans per se. The benefit of studying this specifically would greater shed light on the progression into becoming an engaged, loyal and more predictable fan that sports organizations yearn to secure.

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APPENDICES

Tutkimuskysely: Ilves- Hockey fanien näkemys sosiaalisen median vaikutuksesta faniuteen

*Pakollinen

1.

Sukupuoli *

Merkitse vain yksi soikio.

Mies

Nainen

Muu / en halua vastata

2.

Ikä *

Merkitse vain yksi soikio.

alle 18

18 - 25

26 - 35

36 - 45

46 - 60

yli 60

3.

Kuinka monessa Ilveksen kotipelissä kävit paikan

päällä kaudella 2019-20? **Merkitse vain yksi soikio.*

alle 2

2 - 5 peliä

5 - 10 peliä

yli 10 peliä

4.

Oliko sinulla Ilveksen kausikortti käytössäsi kaudella 2019-20? *

Merkitse vain yksi soikio.

Kyllä

Ei

5.

Mikä seuraavista parhaiten kuvaa sinun

polkuasi Ilveksen faniksi? * *Merkitse vain yksi*

soikio.

En kannata Ilvestä

Lähipiirissäni on Ilveksen kannattajia

Harrastin itse jotain urheilulajia Ilveksessä

Kiinnostuin ensin jääkiekosta lajina

Pelaaja jota fanitin pelaa/pelasi Ilveksessä

Paikallisuus, tuntui luonnolliselta kannattaa paikallista seuraa

Muu:

6.

Miten itse kuvailisit faniutesi tasoa

seuraavista vaihtoehdoista? * *Merkitse vain*

yksi soikio.

En kannata Ilvestä

Satunnainen seuraaja

Perusfani, elämässäni on muitakin merkittäviä intressejä

Uskollinen fani, Ilves on suuressa osassa elämääni

Tosifani / Kannattaja-aktiivi, Ilvesläisyys on yksi tärkeimmistä ellei tärkein osa identiteettiäni

7.

Onko faniutesi muuttunut ajan myötä? *

Merkitse vain yksi soikio.

En ole yhtä sitoutunut kuin ennen olin

Faniuteni ei ole muuttunut

Olen ajan myötä tullut sitoutuneemmaksi

Faniuteni on herännyt uudelleen eloon

Faniuteni on hiipunut täysin

8.

Jos vastasit että faniutesi on muuttunut ajan myötä suuntaan tai toiseen, osaatko vastata miksi?

9.

Mitä Ilveksen sosiaalisen median tilejä seuraat? *

Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot.

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

YouTube

Spotify

En seuraa mitään Ilveksen tilejä

En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa

10. Mistä saat ensisijaisesti tiedon Ilveksen tulevista kotiotteluista? * *Merkitse vain yksi soikio.*

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Aamulehti

Ilves.com

Liiga.fi

En saa tietoa Ilveksen tulevista kotiotteluista

Muu:

11. Valitse kaikki kanavat joista itse saat tiedon Ilveksen tulevista kotiotteluista? *

Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot.

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Aamulehti

Ilves.com

Liiga.fi

En saa tietoa Ilveksen tulevista kotiotteluista

Muu:

12. Millä tavoin ensisijaisesti seuraat Ilveksen otteluita, jos et ole paikan päällä? * *Merkitse vain yksi soikio.*

Ilveksen sosiaalisen median kanavat

Telia TV- suoratoisto
Fun Tampere (radio)
Liiga.fi
LiveTulokset- sovellus tai -verkkosivu
Teksti- TV
Muu:

13.

Vaikuttaako Ilveksen sosiaalisen median sisältö päätökseesi käydä kotiotteluissa? *

Merkitse vain yksi soikio.

Erittäin positiivisesti
Vaikuttaa positiivisesti
Ei vaikutusta
Vaikuttaa negatiivisesti
Erittäin negatiivisesti
En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa
Muu:

14.

Minkä muotoisesta sisällöstä pidät eniten Ilveksen sosiaalista mediaa koskien? * *Merkitse vain yksi soikio.*

Kuvat
Videot
Storyt (esim. Instagram- aikajana)
Grafiikat
GIF- animaatiot
Raportit / teksti
Ääniraita
En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa

15.

Minkälaista sisältöä kaipaisit enemmän Ilveksen sosiaalisessa mediassa? (useampi vastaus ok) *

Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot.

Ainutlaatuisia näkökulmia joukkueen arjesta/harjoittelusta

Minidokumentti-sarjoja

Nostalgiaa

Haastatteluita/ Henkilökuvia

Erilaisia yhteistyötempauksia jossa joukkue/pelaajat osana

Arvontoja

Hauskaa sisältöä esim. meemejä

Fanikiitosta / fanien tuottamaa sisältöä

Tunnelmia peleistä

En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa

Muu:

16.

Miten Ilveksen sosiaalisen median sisältö

vaikuttaa sinun faniuteesi? * *Merkitse vain yksi*

soikio.

Erittäin positiivisesti

Positiivisesti

Ei vaikutusta

Negatiivisesti

Erittäin negatiivisesti

En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa

17.

Listaa seuraavat ominaisuudet tärkeysjärjestykseen Ilveksen sosiaalisen median tiimoilta. (1 - tärkein , 5 - vähiten tärkeä)

Merkitse vain yksi soikio riviä kohden.

1 2 3 4 5

Informatiivisuus

Trendikkyys / vaihtelevuus

Samaistuttavuus / henkilökohtaisuus

Perinteikkyys

Kevytmielisyys

18.

Mitä seuraavista elementeistä Ilveksen sosiaalisen median seuraaminen tuo sinun fanikokemukseesi? (useampi vastaus ok) *

Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot.

Yhteenkuuluvuuden tunne seurayhteisössä

Ajankohtaisen tiedon saaminen

Väylä osoittaa faniuttaan esim. kommentoimalla / jakamalla julkaisuja Mahdollisuus vuorovai-
kutukseen joukkueen ja pelaajien kanssa

Oppii tuntemaan pelaajia, siten tuntee olevan lähempänä heitä

Ilmaisee omia henkilökohtaisia arvojani osuvasti

Helpottaa unohtamaan muita stressitekijöitä elämässä

En ole sosiaalisessa mediassa

Muu:

19.

Kuvaile halutessasi vapaasti Ilveksen sosiaalisen median ilmettä.