



# **A comparative study of CSR utilization in Swedish and Finnish professional football sponsorships**

**Value beyond exposure**

Henrik Johansson

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**Johansson, Henrik**

### **A comparative study of CSR utilization in Swedish and Finnish professional football sponsorships: Value beyond exposure**

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#### **Abstract**

The actions connected to sports sponsorships have largely remained idle for an extended time despite the consistent upward trajectory of investment amounts in sponsorships throughout the last two decades. Sponsorship is considered an act of philanthropy rather than a mutually beneficial relationship that allows both businesses to develop their company and clubs to get funding for operational management. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves as a common ground for sports clubs and corporations, enabling them to achieve their commercial objectives while gaining visibility, without relying merely on conventional kit sponsorship.

The theoretical framework comprises sports sponsorship, CSR, Corporate Sustainability (CS), and creating shared value (CSV). This study draws especially on the framework by Porter and Kramer (2011) in which corporate social and environmental investments should be guided by creating shared value rather than reputation-driven CSR and the "win-win-win" -paradigm presented by Breitbarth, Hovemann, & Walzel (2011). Using thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews with football clubs and their sponsors the aim was to deepen the understanding of sustainability issues involved in sponsorships and identify similarities and differences between Finnish and Swedish football clubs in CSR-linked sponsorships.

The results showed a strong connection between the football clubs' CSR initiatives and companies' willingness to invest in the clubs. Based on the analysis, it can be determined that Swedish clubs have successfully incorporated corporate social responsibility as an integral component of their regular operations, but Finnish clubs are for now in a situation where CSR activities remain distinct and separate from the core functioning of the club. The strategic use of CSR in sponsorship not only attracts more investments but also promotes the alignment of business objectives with societal and environmental concerns. It can be identified that establishing brand recognition and separation requires extensive and sustained cooperation. In addition, clubs must differentiate themselves from competitors and provide a suitable match for every prospective sponsor. Shared values function both as a base for identifying the right partners and as a fundamental element in building long-lasting partnerships. The optimal approach for sponsorship is the implementation of CSR initiatives that provide mutually beneficial outcomes for many stakeholders, hence creating shared value. This research is significant for the academic field as it demonstrates the current application of CSR to sports sponsorships in Nordic conditions. The insights provided in this research are additionally beneficial for both sponsorship managers and club management.

#### **Keywords/tags (subjects)**

CSR, corporate social responsibility, corporate sustainability, sport sponsorship

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# 1 Introduction

The sporting community's view on sponsorship is traditionally extremely transactional: give money and receive logo visibility. As a result, many sponsorship arrangements lack a genuine feeling of partnership. Sponsorship has meant a gratuitous act where companies support sports without receiving actual value in return, but companies are, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, more careful concerning their investments. Moreover, companies are seeking valuable meaning and wish to emphasize their social and societal scope (Jalonen et al., 2017). Many companies practice Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), although it is no longer merely a method for charity or a means to accomplish legal obligations; it is strategic and more about providing additional value for the company and society (Duffy, 2016 as cited in Moyo et al., 2021). This generates more pressure on sports organizations to create various ways of offering added value for their sponsors. In the contemporary landscape, securing sponsorships has become more challenging, particularly for top sports organizations that have difficulties amassing sufficient funds to cover escalating expenses. Consequently, it is crucial to comprehend how corporations might derive additional advantages from sponsorships. We are in a situation where sports organizations do what they have always done and companies choose whether to support them or not, without specific goals (Jalonen et al., 2017). This creates a particular dilemma in obtaining sponsors. Companies settle for VIP seats, stadium exposure, and a brand logo on game wear, instead of striving to achieve greater value for their investments. Son and Williams (2023) argue that sponsorship motives that are regarded as supportive of the sponsored teams are likely to generate more favorable evaluations of the sponsors, in contrast to cases where the motives are perceived as solely commercial. By creating successful concepts through CSR, sports organizations can argue a broader value proposition in seeking sponsorship support. Management of sports organizations and sponsor relationships are traditionally considered shortsighted (Jalonen et al., 2017). Rather than engaging in isolated marketing campaigns or individual advertising agreements, the collaboration between sports groups and corporations has the potential to evolve into enduring and advantageous long-term relationships.

Finland falls behind other European nations in several aspects. The societal issues that motivated the major English clubs to initiate corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives as early as the 1980s have also been seen in Sweden, our neighboring country in the Western region, during the early 2000s. The objective of this study is to examine the various social responsibility efforts in

Sweden and Finland throughout the 2020s. By comparing these elements and establishing interrelation the research provides a comprehensive assessment of whether firms are inclined to endorse this kind of endeavor as opposed to conventional sponsorship focused solely on visibility.

Sport is widely considered a mediator for sponsor-stakeholder relationships. Football, as the most popular sport around the world, affects the community both economically and socially. Hence, football has received a larger meaning as a societal actor. Andersson and Carlsson (2009) believe that Scandinavian football will inevitably incorporate more monetary values. Notwithstanding, the long legacy of idealism will continue to boost the game's moral, social, and political possibilities. In this regard, the Scandinavian environment and its future growth will become even more intriguing for evaluating and measuring the result of the fusion of economic and social cohesiveness. Due to its strategic value, CSR has recently attracted the attention of businesses (Sudolska & Lapinska, 2020). CSR is often present in partnerships, but only as a side note without specific actions. Nevertheless, CSR is a fundamental part of all sports organizations due to the nature of sports as an integral part of social health and well-being, thus offering dead-on-target marketing opportunities for companies. CSR may be much more than just a financial burden, a physical restriction, or a good deed. Smith and Westerbeek (2007) claim that sport makes for an ideal vehicle for deploying CSR. When approached strategically, it creates business opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage—while resolving urgent social issues (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Studies on the wider societal implications of sports have examined the potential contributions of sports in several domains, such as peacebuilding, development, crime reduction, education and training, health promotion, women empowerment, community building, and support for those with disabilities (Giulianotti, 2022). Although the subject is popular among scholars, limited research has been conducted concerning the social influence, efficiency, or values of sports in society and measuring consequences from sport-based social initiatives (Lee, 2012; Rhodes, 2020; Walzel et al., 2023). Breitbarth et al. (2011) declare that additional research is necessary to comprehend the adaptation, integration, and potential of CSR in the field of sports. Lee (2012) suggests that the lack of research on the specific subject may be due to the intangible or indistinguishable qualities of the effects of social projects based on sport, which are challenging to evaluate. The rather small number of studies that have examined CSR through sports have largely relied on information revealed by firms in their official published records, without verifying that this data corresponds to reality. Breitbarth et al. (2015) argue that future research might examine CSR practices that incorporate sport in greater detail and juxtapose the data with statements made by the

companies. Walraven et al. (2016) suggest that future studies could examine the synergies in sponsorship projects, and sponsorship's effectiveness should be looked at on a strategy level instead of a project level. Jäger (2023) states that it may be beneficial to include the perspectives of decision-makers from leagues, federations, sponsors, and fans to get a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' attitudes toward the CSR activities of clubs. An inquiry of this kind might provide valuable insights for the clubs themselves, given they are the primary stakeholders they want to engage with (Jäger, 2023). Walzel et al. (2023) added that there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the economic, ecological, and social aspects of sustainable sport sponsorships. This research aims to address a part of this by pointing out how the relationship between the sports property and their sponsors can be improved through CSR, thus gaining more notable effects and added value for both parties.

This study aims to examine the relationship between sports organizations and their sponsors regarding the utilization of CSR. The research problem is identified as follows: The potential of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in partnerships between professional sports teams and their sponsors. The research process is driven by the following research questions:

RQ1: How can companies benefit from sponsorship using sports clubs' CSR actions?

RQ2: What type of mutual goals can be achieved through collaboration?

RQ3: In what way can CSR cooperation create shared value efficiently in modern-day sponsorships?

Three phases of investor participation in football have been discovered by Rohde and Breuer (2017): professionalization, commercialization, and internationalization. The professionalization of sports in Sweden meant a gradual transition from an amateurish and people-democratic way of thinking to a salary- and market-based way of thinking. A decision was taken in 1999 in Sweden to permit the corporatization of sports clubs. However, the association retains the most votes, namely at least 51%. Consequently, the limited company had the potential to hold the license, albeit the association had the majority of votes inside the limited company.

In Sweden, there are clear differences between the legal systems and rules that apply to sports joint-stock companies and those that apply to non-profit groups. Organizations that don't make money can get free police protection during games, but sports joint-stock companies have to pay for it themselves. A non-profit organization distinguishes itself from a for-profit entity by

abstaining from activities aimed at generating financial profit. Instead, a for-profit group does things to make money and pays for the costs of doing so. There are also differences when it comes to tax and value-added tax (VAT). One example of this is that organizations that generate profit have to pay a profit tax, but organizations that do not make money are not obliged to. So, if a non-profit organization makes money, it can put all of it back into the business. A for-profit organization, on the other hand, must pay taxes on its income.

According to Chapter 1 § 2 of the Finnish Associations Act (26.5.1989/503), the purpose of a non-profit association is not to obtain a profit or other form of financial benefit for the association or its members. The financial operations of Finnish sports clubs have seen substantial growth in the last two decades due to the increasing commercialization of sports. As a consequence, the clubs have undergone a transition from their conventional organizational structure to a limited company model. The process of incorporation enables a sports club to enhance its focus on optimizing financial performance, hence increasing the likelihood of attaining sports achievements. Consequently, transitioning a sports club from a non-profit organization to a limited corporation becomes a logical decision when the organization's scale surpasses the capacity of the association.

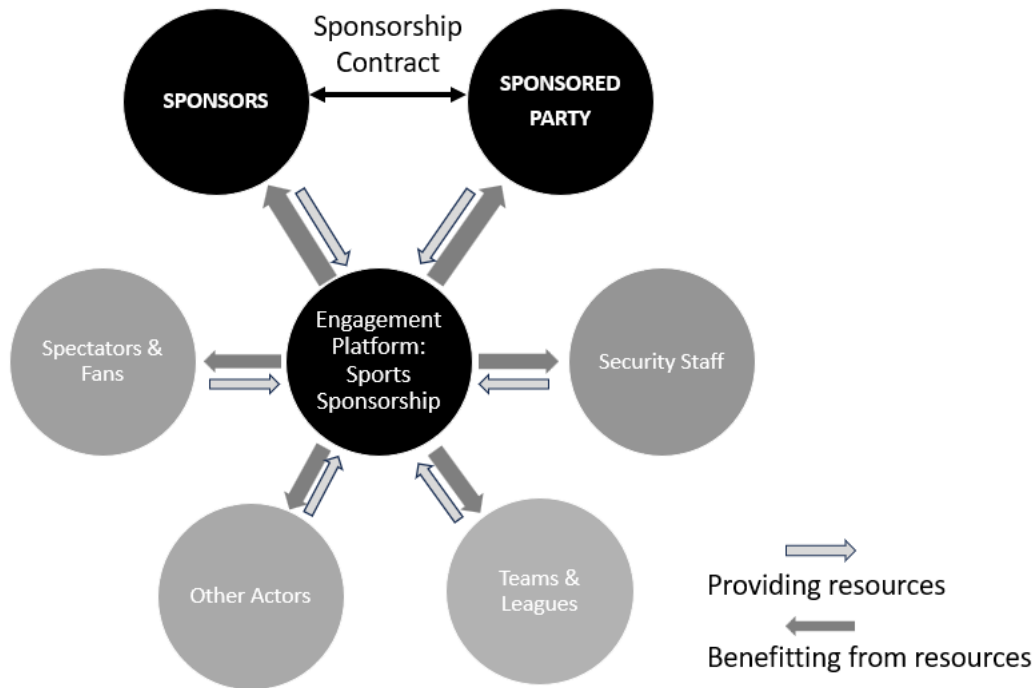
## **2 Literature Review**

Sports marketing is “the specific application of marketing principles and processes to sports products and to the marketing of non-sports products through association with sport” (Shank & Lyberger, 2015; Chadwick, 2016; Lagae, 2005). Successful sports marketing connects the fundamental principles of marketing in sports contexts with the sports industry. The sports industry comprises three elements: consumers of sports, the sports products they consume, and the suppliers of the sports products.

The AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action) concept, which explains how personal selling works, originally developed by American businessman Elias St. Elmo Lewis already in 1898 (Doyle, 2011), is highly relevant even today (Hassan et al., 2014) and its cognitive, affective, and behavioral stages are still broadly in use. The stages represent the cornerstones of marketing communication, focusing on the purchase stage of the sales process (Doyle, 2011). The AIDA model has been largely implemented in both advertising and sponsorship evaluation (Hoek, 1999). However, the model essentially states that the selling must be immediate, and the beliefs have changed from sales objectives to communication objectives. Marketing communications instead should



cause trials, introduce the brand to the consumer, work through people's attitudes, and establish a relationship with the consumer (Amoako et al., 2012). Lusch and Vargo (2006) assert that the original conception of the service-dominant logic (SDL) of marketing was heavily service-based, narrowed attention to the seller's performance, and concentrated only on the tangible elements of purchasing, selling, storage, and transportation. The authors of "The Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate and Directions" (2004) note in their book that SDL has gained strength and that they now firmly believe that consumers are valued equally to the company and are recognized as co-creators of value. The transition from goods-dominant logic (GDL) to service-dominant logic meant that service providers began to view the exchange of commodities and services for money as something more, such as the transfer of knowledge and skills. The concepts proposed by SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2006) may prove to be beneficial in this context. The concept of "value co-creation" is a fundamental principle within the framework of SDL. It pertains to the collaborative process of creating value for enterprises, organizations, and customers. The consumer must connect the provider's product with services from other suppliers, public infrastructure, and their knowledge and abilities to provide value. Therefore, the calculated value is significantly influenced by the consumer's resource integration procedures (Horbel et al, 2016). The identification and delineation of key stakeholders is widely recognized as a crucial component in the formulation of strategic plans (Oeckl & Morrow, 2022). Buser, Woratschek, and Ströbel (n.d.) use the sports value framework illustrated in Figure 1 to illustrate the collaboration of assets among sponsors, sponsored parties/rights holders, and other relevant players inside the sports sponsorship engagement platform. It is vital to acknowledge that the provision of value cannot be attributed entirely to any social actor.



**Figure 1.** Framework for Sport Sponsorship as an Engagement Platform (adapted from Buser et al., n.d.)

The commonality of sponsorship as a marketing strategy has been widely observed; however, the absence of reliable methodology for measuring, assessing, and comparing the results of sponsorship activities has been recognized as a significant concern within the industry (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 2013; Fahy et al., 2004). Sponsorship effect measurement generally relies on exposure data, which only reveals the chance to view a sponsorship connection, but not the consumer impact. Since spectators' focus is often on the actual games, there is little evidence to suggest that they absorb the sponsorship information they are exposed to. Therefore, it seems that there are substantial difficulties associated with using an exposure-based technique that focuses on estimating the time of visibility, which might lead to inaccurate evaluations of sponsorship efficacy (Breuer & Rumpf, 2012). Sponsorship may measure numerous objectives, while consumer impact only measures one, like awareness. Currently, it is not typical in the corporate sector to engage in benchmarking activities to assess the comparative effectiveness of sponsorships. After all, consumers possess enormous power in sports consumption. The COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the significant role of supporters in the realm of sports. The role of fans as consumers has the potential to influence the processes of creation, spread, and consumption within the world of sports (Cornwell, 2023). It does not take a scientist to recognize and identify the power of the consumer, as evidenced by the following quote from a correspondent attending a football game:

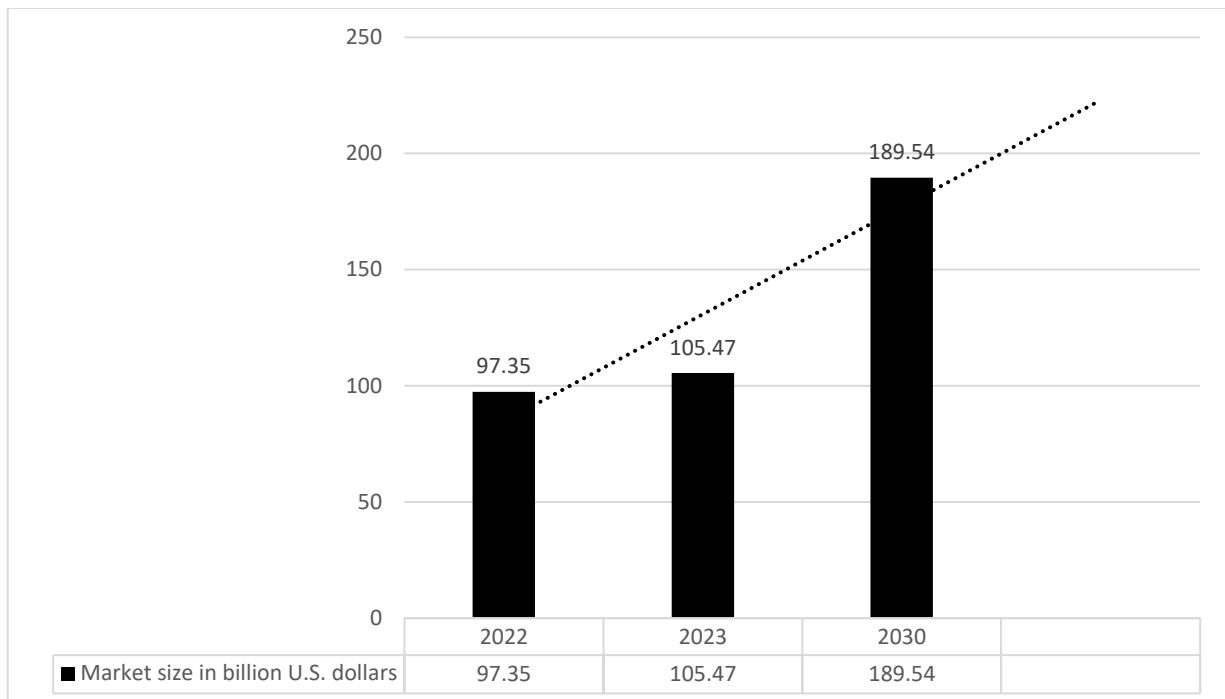
*"Would the fan's viewing experience be improved by sideline advertising or, for example, the offered seat cushion?"*

- Tero Hakola, Helsingin Sanomat (January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016)

Sports is characterized by the uncertainty of outcome. The uncertainty-of-outcome hypothesis (UOH), first proposed by Rottenberg (1956 as cited in Eckard, 2015), contends that sports fans choose competitive matches with unknown outcomes. According to Breitbarth et al. (2015), UOH is the most fundamental reason behind the high demand and consumption of spectator sports. Furthermore, sport is uncommon in its nature of cooperative competition. Sport always includes at least two players or teams competing against each other for the win, while also cooperating at a certain level together with the governing bodies (rules, regulations, locations, schedules). Sport creates feelings and emotions that advertisers can only dream of, which makes marketing communication through sport highly lucrative (Lagae, 2005). These factors make sports unique and, therefore, an excellent target for sponsorship.

Sponsorship is often seen and characterized as a strategic instrument for marketing and communication, particularly as a means of promotion. Companies of various scales typically allocate a portion of their marketing budget towards sponsorship initiatives. Fahy et al. (2004) provide an abstract that shifts the emphasis from advertising to sponsorship, seeing it as a strategic activity capable of creating a sustained competitive advantage inside the business environment. Global spending on sports sponsorship has steadily increased during the last two decades. Nearly one-third of global sports revenue is generated in North America, mostly due to the influence of prominent international entities such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL). Sporting clothing brands, including Nike and Adidas, occupy the first and second positions, respectively, in terms of being the largest corporations in sports sponsorship. Identifying a single business that exclusively dominates sports sponsorship, apart from sports apparel with its tailored fit, seems to be an arduous task. However, other prominent sectors actively engage in sponsorship endeavors, including technology, alcoholic beverages, gambling, financial services, and the automotive industry.

**Figure 2.** Size of sports sponsorship market worldwide in 2022, with a forecast for 2023 and 2030, (Statista, 2023).



The sports sponsorship sector has shown a consistent upward trend throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Venturoli (2019) states that the industry's continued development rate each year expresses the industry's robust health and the effectiveness of the sports marketing instrument. In 2022, the sports sponsorship industry was valued at around \$97.35 billion U.S. dollars. It was forecast that the sector would see a cumulative annual growth rate of 8.68 percent until 2030, resulting in a value of about \$190 billion U.S. dollars (Gough, 2023) as can be witnessed in Figure 2.

Anastasio (2018) argues that both the sponsor and the beneficiary possess narrow and biased understandings of the advantages associated with sponsorship. According to the researcher, the assertion has validity not just in conventional sponsorships but is much more evident in the emerging 'partnership' paradigm. Three primary incentives prompt organizations to provide support for sports: brand sponsorship, purpose-driven marketing, and revenue-driven sponsorship. Walraven et al. (2016) looked at the success of football funding in the Netherlands and found that the average level of sponsorship efficiency was almost 0.3. This means that the average project would have gotten the same results for 30% less money if it had done as well as its standard. Also, the data showed that only 12.5% of the partnerships that were looked at were fully successful.

The impact of football on individuals' well-being is indisputable based on empirical studies. Sport improves health regardless of age, gender, or race. The enhancement of individuals' mental and physical well-being, the development of learning capacity, and the strengthening of social well-being are seen. Nevertheless, the efficacy of exercise has mostly been shown via anecdotal accounts or instances of achievement since its monetary impact has been difficult to quantify. The recent result of the UEFA SROI (Social Return on Investment) modeling, however, is stunning. The yearly economic impact of football on the Finnish economy is estimated to be roughly €522 million euros. Furthermore, it is important to note that the estimated value of the social benefits is not less than €1.09 billion, while the potential savings in healthcare expenses are around €344 million (Suomen Palloliitto, 2022). Japanese research examined the social business activities of a professional soccer club from the perspective of the triple bottom line, providing more evidence in favor of a favorable correlation. The results indicate that professional soccer clubs that participate in social business activities have a return on investment of \$1.31 for each dollar invested (Oshimi et al., 2023).

## 2.1 Sponsorship

“Sponsorship: A cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically sports, entertainment, non-profit event or organization) in return for access to exploitable commercial potential associated with that property.” (IEG, 1982 as cited in IEG 2017)

Smith and Stewart (2015) define sports sponsorship as follows: A separate person or company supporting a sports property. A sports property can include various types of sports organizations and individuals: clubs and teams, leagues, events, stadiums, and other sports-related venues, federations, special causes, and athletes. Sponsorship is sometimes misconstrued as charity. The primary motivation for sponsored collaboration is reciprocal compensation. In contrast, the philanthropist does not anticipate any financial gain from their generosity (Alaja & Forssell, 2004). Corporate partnerships are crucial for the financial sustainability of sports clubs and organizations. In 2014 Swedish sports amassed €530 million in sponsor investments, while Finnish sports had to settle for €128 million (Helsingin Sanomat, 2016). Even though Finnish companies are slowly getting back on their feet again post-COVID-19 pandemic and the sponsoring amounts are continuing to rise, the Finnish sports market is still far behind the other Nordic countries with €167 million in sponsorships last year. According to Sponsor Insight's (2022) sponsorship barometer, 74% of companies planned to increase or maintain their sponsorship investment in 2023. Clubs in the Swedish

football league, Allsvenskan, had a sponsoring income of approximately €45 million euros in 2022 (Price, 2023), let alone entire Swedish sports. In the summer of 2018, the public gambling monopoly in Sweden was abolished. The neighboring Western country implemented a licensing system for gambling activities. This included the Swedish gambling authority issuing new licenses for interested parties to apply for. Licensed operators are required to pay for their license, and a portion equivalent to 18 percent of the enterprises' gaming margin is allocated to the state as a gambling tax. In return for obtaining the license, game firms are granted permission to promote and distribute their goods within the borders of Sweden. This decision enabled, among other things, Unibet's giant investment in Swedish football. The contractual agreement, spanning 12 years commenced in 2020, entails a substantial monetary value of €170 million euros. The agreement ensures that Swedish top-tier football will get a minimum yearly sum of €14 million. In comparison, the public gambling monopoly in Finland, Veikkaus, has foundations so deep in the cultural fabric and national economy that it does not easily falter, but in case it did, it could potentially mean whole new revenue streams even in Finland.

Sponsorship emerged as the fastest-growing marketing type over the last two decades, passing media and sales promotion (IEG, 2017). Economic and demographic shifts have contributed to the increase in sponsorships, along with the dissolution of media. The rise of OTT platforms has made it easy for consumers to fast-forward or avoid commercial messages altogether. Sponsorship enables the utilization of fixed advertising while messages are integrated into the action. Several factors encourage corporate sponsorship. Companies employ sponsorships to grow awareness in a target market, enhance brand image (Musante et al., 1999; Smith & Stewart, 2015), and seek a specific return on investment (Patterson, n.d.) while the main objective for sports properties is commonly financial support (Smith & Stewart, 2015). In 2022, signage accounted for the majority of sports sponsorship globally, with a share of 47.5%. Digital activation accounted for 25.3%, while club and venue activation accounted for 17.9%. The remaining 9% was attributed to various forms of sponsorship (Statista, 2023).

Sponsorship is seen positively as a kind of marketing that provides reciprocal advantages to both the marketer and another party. It suggests a level of sincerity and generosity that is not present in conventional forms of marketing. The sports properties receive cash, goods, services, or expert advice, and the sponsors receive promotional rights and marketing advantages. Although contemporary sponsorship may have philanthropic origins, it has developed into a phenomenon that is driven by consumer demand (Lee, 2012). Consumers make decisions based on whether they have

an association with a brand. Sports can improve brand recognition by increasing conventional reach to new consumers and separating from rivals. Additionally, it may function as a platform for articulating the principles and values that a brand embodies. O'Reilly et al. (2018) state that sports sponsorships provide the perfect venues for interaction, allowing sponsors and properties to work together to interact with (possible) customers. For companies to succeed with sponsorship, it is imperative that they clearly define their goals (Lee and Ross, 2012 as cited in Sá & Almeida, 2016) and surround sports sponsorship with other promotion tools (Lagae, 2005).

Sponsorship relations are transforming a partnership model, whereby sponsors and organizations engage in collaborative interactions throughout the planning and execution stages, driven by mutual interests. Many researchers have studied congruity because of its importance in sponsorship. Chadwick et al. (2016) state that in the field of sports marketing, the notion of congruence often emerges as a significant idea, with the ability to elicit more robust and favorable effects on customer responses compared to incongruent associations. A celebrity's skill or beauty may make them seem congruent even if their appearance doesn't match the brand. Therefore, the fit needs to follow a certain logic, although it may not always seem logical to the consumer. Furthermore, modern marketing relies on brand aesthetics, like brand colors; thus, academics have studied color congruity. Research showed that utilizing the same brand colors helped companies attain visual congruity, which led to favorable attitudes about the sponsor (Son & Williams, 2023). When choosing sponsorship targets, companies need to carefully consider congruence or the proper fit, whether the sports property shares the same values as the company, and whether the values translate into daily action or not. Furthermore, companies must evaluate which commercial or marketing-related benefits they receive in return for their investments. While sponsorship's potential advantages might be substantial, they are highly challenging to prove empirically and always include risks (Amoako et al., 2012). Relegations and promotions within the leagues are a common occurrence for many sports clubs. In many cases, this may include calculating an adjusted sponsorship cost to account for promotion or relegation. Sports continue to encounter numerous obstacles in realizing its full capacity. Frequently witnessed instances of intolerance, racism, animosity, and aggression occur during athletic events. When talking about sports, and team sports in particular, the scenario of either winning or losing is constantly eminent, not to mention feelings. Emotions among spectators are generally positive but can sometimes take a negative turn. Take, for example, the hostile encounters between supporters of two rival teams in Naples (Wood, 2023), the publicity surrounding the teams can hurt the brand image of the sponsors as well as the

organization. Football, being the most widely followed sport globally and involving substantial financial resources, is especially vulnerable to corruption, including activities such as match-fixing, bribery, and embezzlement. In addition, athletes are frequently tempted to boost their performance through doping, and many sponsors have withdrawn from partnerships as a consequence. The scandal surrounding the allegations of human rights violations at the FIFA World Cup of Football in Qatar in 2022 forced multiple sponsors to pull out (Menon, 2022). It is safe to say, sponsorships are not merely linked to common values and generating ROI (or ROSI – Return On Sponsorship Investment), companies shall also evaluate the possible risks related to sponsorships. Because of the possible conflicts and increased complexity of sponsorship arrangements, marketers are more conscious of the necessity of a strong strategic reason for their partner selection (Fahy et al., 2004).

Farrelly & Quester (2014) claim that the success of notable brand-driven sponsorships, such as the collaboration between Nike and Michael Jordan, led to a change in attention from the strategic role of sponsorship in the media mix to its potential for enhancing organizational performance in the market. The traditional and most visible type of sponsoring is restricted to logo visibility on shirts, in-venue exposure, interview backdrops, or billboards. Kit sponsorship has further expanded into additional sectors of athletic clothing. Before the advent of mobile billboards and LED lighting, advertising boards were static. The progression includes virtual advertising, the ability of rights holders to vend identical advertising space inside an LED timeline to several regional marketers, which is already a reality to great effect in many sports. This evolution enables sponsors to target particular regions, opens new revenue streams, and lowers barriers to entry for businesses wishing to target a certain region of the world. Nevertheless, similar to any kind of sponsorship, it is imperative that it provides a positive and beneficial experience for all parties involved, including the fans, the brand, and the sponsor. The positioning of a logo in an intuitive way may not provide a good return on investment (ROI) in the context of sponsorship. Corporations pursuing sports sponsorship must consider the full picture to attract fans and not rely on just one component concerning assets. Chadwick and Thwaites (2006) declare that the traditional ways of advertising are a result of both the sponsor's ignorance and the club's influence, while many businesses frequently accept contracts with provisions that are skewed in favor of clubs, whether they are being lured or intimidated. Junghagen (2018) argues that the impact of exposure effects is not as powerful as the impact of the relationship effects that sponsors obtain from their sponsorship. As noted by Lagae (2005), the act of purchasing media space is seen as much less challenging and time-consuming



when compared to the coordination and strategic planning involved in sports marketing communication.

The investigation of implicit memory effects is not frequently undertaken in academic research. However, certain authors have suggested that sponsorship may have an impact below the level of conscious awareness. Specifically, the formation of an affect and the selection of products may occur solely as a result of exposure to the trademark (Walraven, 2013). Brand visibility is a number that most marketers consider when it comes to both in-venue and on-kit sponsorship. Continuous visibility is one factor that has a key impact on the memorability of the cooperation (Sponsor Insight, 2019). Despite being apparent, it can only be assessed subjectively. This doesn't diminish the value of any method for enhancing a brand, but it strengthens the case for the need for a multifaceted strategy. Chadwick et al. (2006), claim that the amount of visual information that sports viewers are exposed to has reached a limit that exceeds their processing capacity. For example, a jersey holding more than five sponsor logos should be avoided because the impact of exposure on visual attention will be marginal. According to Cornwell et al. (2000), the choice of restricting the number of sponsors is clearly the best alternative to creating long-term commitment. Adequate visibility with minimum competition stands out as the most efficient way for sponsors to gain recognition (Cornwell et al., 2000) since the presence of visual clutter has the potential to diminish the viewer's level of attention (Breuer & Rumpf, 2012). Accordingly, Chadwick and colleagues' line that sponsorship clutter will limit the attention of the audience, making it more difficult for consumers to identify a sponsor, suggesting that the primary issue for sponsorship management should be to increase audience attention levels rather than viewer exposure levels (Chadwick et al., 2016). Sponsorship information is therefore even regarded as a threat to companies' communication objectives. While it may seem appealing for an organization to get several sponsors, it is worth considering the potential viability of the sponsorship arrangement from the sponsor's standpoint.

The field of sports is experiencing a process of fragmentation regarding its many forms, diverse audiences, multiple media platforms, and extensive reach. Consequently, the commercialization of sponsorship is expected to see a further increase in the foreseeable future. As a result of this fragmentation, companies are now able to effectively target their desired audience in a manner that was previously unprecedented. The adoption of a tailored approach by rightsholders in accommodating advertisers has expanded the realm of sports sponsorship beyond the reach of only major businesses with substantial financial resources.

Although there has been an increase in the measurability of brand awareness in recent years, it continues to not correlate with revenue (Stengel et al., 2023). In contrast, brands are strategically using sports as a promotional instrument, effectively assessing the influence of sponsorship on their financial performance. This revenue-driven objective may be achieved via the implementation of various strategies, such as conducting contests, providing special deals, or integrating sales data with the broadcasting of certain athletic events.

Companies acknowledge the need for two-way communication, and purpose-driven sponsorships are ideal in that sense. Sponsorships are generally considered a pleasant way of marketing since it does not intrude on people's privacy. Furthermore, it is perceived as positive due to its selfless character, which benefits someone else rather than solely the marketer. Brands can provide a more precise metric in addition to more instinctive techniques like in-venue advertising or kit branding through digital sponsorship. With the help of digital sponsorship, marketing may become a cooperative revenue stream that helps firms build their brands and consumer bases while also strengthening ties between them (Business First, 2022). Goodwill, as a sponsorship of social causes in community-based organizations, creates opportunities for companies to effectively promote their brand through sports sponsorship (Smith & Stewart, 2015). Brands utilize their purpose to take a public stance on social concerns while also raising their brand. When it comes to corporate social responsibility (CSR), or strategic philanthropy, purpose marketing has become an increasing emphasis for firms in recent years. The significance of the value-centered approach to communication is escalating due to consumers' heightened reliance on businesses that align with their values.

## **2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility**

The principle of responsibility is to act in a way that avoids harm (Blumrodt et al., 2013). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is defined by the European Commission (2011) as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society and outlines what an enterprise should do to meet that responsibility". The concept of CSR is based on three fundamental pillars: environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Walzel et al., 2023). The use of sports as a component of corporate social responsibility (CSR) may be characterized using many terminologies. Sport-based CSR is when a company uses sport as a tool to promote its CSR initiatives. CSR through sport is when a company uses sport as a platform to achieve its CSR goals. Sport as a facilitator for CSR is when a company uses sport to help facilitate the implementation of its CSR initiatives. Sport as a tool for implementing CSR is when a company uses sport as a tool to achieve its CSR goals. The vast

majority of corporate operations are confronted with both social and financial challenges. The theory behind corporate social responsibility is that society and business are not separate entities but actually intimately linked. Consequently, society has certain suppositions about suitable conduct and results from businesses. Organizations endeavor to establish a brand identity that aligns with their desired image, and for companies aiming to bring about beneficial social transformation (such as public health programs) or include sport-based projects in their CSR portfolio, sport in general and football in particular serves both as a platform and an agent (Blumrodt et al., 2013). While corporate social responsibility is ideally a sincere endeavor to return the advantages of a successful firm back to the society from which it arose, sponsorship is a company investment via the use of a marketing-mix instrument (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). Today, social responsibility, such as addressing environmental concerns, has become a valuable asset in both the business and the sports sector, providing a competitive edge. Exercising authority over a company's corporate social responsibility initiatives helps mitigate the likelihood of controversies related to unregulated emissions and corruption, which can result in negative media attention. Furthermore, the utilization of more accountable items can significantly enhance a company's reputation and branding (Siltaoja 2006 as cited by Ditlev-Simonsen, 2017). Involving sponsors in sustainability programs presents a compelling economic opportunity. Studies show that employees value socially conscious firms, while investors are increasingly prioritizing the amount of responsibility shown by companies they consider investing in (Ditlev-Simonsen, 2017). According to IEG (2017), 80% of respondents in a poll conducted in Britain said that sponsorships "make a positive contribution to society" and the 2013 Cone Cause Evolution survey found that 89% of U.S. people expressed a willingness to change brands to support a product that is connected to a cause they are passionate about. Additionally, the survey revealed that 93% of individuals develop a more favorable perception of a product or organization when it aligns with a cause that they care about. A study by Keenan, Wilson, and John (2022) found that consumers tend to observe and exhibit a preference for brands that allocate a higher proportion of their earnings in relative terms, as opposed to absolute amounts. Inoue and Kent (2012) state that when supporters absorb the environmental ideals of their favorite teams, they are more likely to support the team's effort and engage in pro-environmental actions in their everyday lives. The attitudes are further underlined by Graeber and Scheinbaum (2022) where the use of CSR-linked interpretation approaches showed superior performance compared to standard interpretation methods without a pro-social component in enhancing individuals' attitudes towards schema and functional-based sponsors. In their jersey sponsorship study, the researchers discovered that charity sponsors had a significantly higher

favorable CSR view of the team than corporate sponsors. Notable data suggesting that utilizing charity sponsors leads to a more favorable CSR opinion of the sponsor compared to using corporate sponsors is an important insight for supporting the necessity of pro-social advertising in this expanding medium and the platform's potential. The function of the game jersey as a medium of expression for players, properties, and brands, will only grow in significance in the upcoming years, and future studies may investigate the influence of social messaging on player jerseys on sports marketing and integrated brand promotion (Graeber & Scheinbaum, 2022).

According to Slack (2014), an increased number of organizations and corporations have a social responsibility to their community and companies nowadays are active regarding corporate social responsibility. Neither the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the global coronavirus epidemic, nor the prevailing energy crisis has diminished the dedication of Finnish firms towards upholding corporate social responsibility, but rather the opposite (Finnish Business & Society, 2023). The value base for CSR programs is often humane in nature, and themes such as human rights, equality, and sustainability occur regularly. Kemppinen et al. (2020) state that several of these initiatives aim to integrate young individuals into society, reducing their sense of isolation by providing them with role models, contacts, or sponsors to facilitate their employment. According to the European Commission (2011), businesses should have a framework in place to work with their stakeholders to incorporate the issues above into their core business strategy and actions. The purpose is to create shared value, which means to create returns on investment for the company's shareholders while benefitting the company's other stakeholders. In accordance with the Commission, the sponsorship authority, IEG (2017), points out that the demands of society and the interests of business overlap. There is no separation between sports organizations and corporations regarding CSR; both can equally generate social benefits (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007).

Persson and Normark (2009) argue that all CSR initiatives create attention, and successful ones generate more interest that potentially converts into more capital. When it comes to business, assets typically serve as the main focus. Sales of goods and services are profitable, whereas the contrary results in loss and closure. The same goes for CSR, its costs, its origin, and foremost, the return on investment. The concept of corporate social responsibility in the realm of sports is mostly linked to neoliberal ideologies, especially those endorsed by multinational firms. These ideologies often adopt a voluntarist perspective that emphasizes individual philanthropy (Giulianotti, 2015). Sport has a great commercial and social impact on the community. CSR can increase an organization's image, its financial status, and the commitment its members show toward the organization

(Slack, 2014). Babiak and Wolfe (2007) assert that sports organizations' CSR programs provide benefits that businesses in other sectors do not. The reputation of famous athletes, as well as media coverage of the competitions, leagues, teams, and athletes themselves, are a few examples. Furthermore, sports organizations can inspire people more than other businesses do, in areas like children's education and health care, fitness and health, environmental awareness, and social and cultural development. Therefore, corporate, and nonprofit organizations seeking to boost their CSR effect and be seen as good corporate citizens by stakeholders, find partnering with sports groups in CSR programs to be particularly attractive (Babiak & Wolfe, 2007). Flöter et al. (2014) state that for companies to achieve favorable brand outcomes, relevant customers and stakeholders must be informed about the company's sponsorship activities that are connected to CSR. The corporation can spread knowledge regarding these operations via various channels under its control or take advantage of third-party sources. Slack (2014) has pointed out that CSR is one of a few core themes of research that are crucial and bring massive potential to the sport management field, while there are still unexplored areas such as the lack of research on smaller organizations that represent the foundation of the sport delivery system.

In their study, Walker and Parent (2010) analyzed the online platforms of more than 100 sports teams, leagues, and organizations. The purpose of their research was to illustrate the many strategies used by the industry as a whole to foster social participation. In conclusion, the authors have identified eleven subject categories that are relevant to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and serve as a supporting framework for the study conducted by Djaballah, Hautbois, and Desbordes (2016) on CSR initiatives in the sports industry (S-CSR). Djaballah et al. (2017) conducted a thorough analysis of the justifications for sponsors' social corporate responsibility (S-CSR) activities in France. The content areas as shown in Table 1 exhibit universality and applicability in the Nordic setting as well.

**Table 1.** Typology of S-CSR actions (Djaballah et al., 2017)

Content areas	Operational definitions
<b>Social integration</b>	Beneficial actions for socially disadvantaged people.
<b>Cultural diversity</b>	Efforts in support of racial and cultural minorities.
<b>Youth</b>	Efforts aimed at supporting children, such as initiatives in education and the promotion of animated content.
<b>Disability</b>	Measures taken to help people with disabilities.
<b>Gender equality</b>	Initiatives taken to combat prejudice based on gender.
<b>Health</b>	The implementation of initiatives centered on the use of sports as a means of ensuring and improving individual well-being.
<b>Responsible economy</b>	Responsible acquisition or buying in support of local or struggling economic players.
<b>The environment</b>	Actions to minimize environmental effects (for example, recycling initiatives).
<b>International solidarity</b>	Aid to developing nations or people impacted by humanitarian emergencies.
<b>Other charitable causes</b>	Actions in support of issues not covered by the preceding categories (for example, contributions to different organizations).
<b>Sporting ethics</b>	Efforts regarding the inherent problems in sports (such as doping, corruption, and hooliganism).

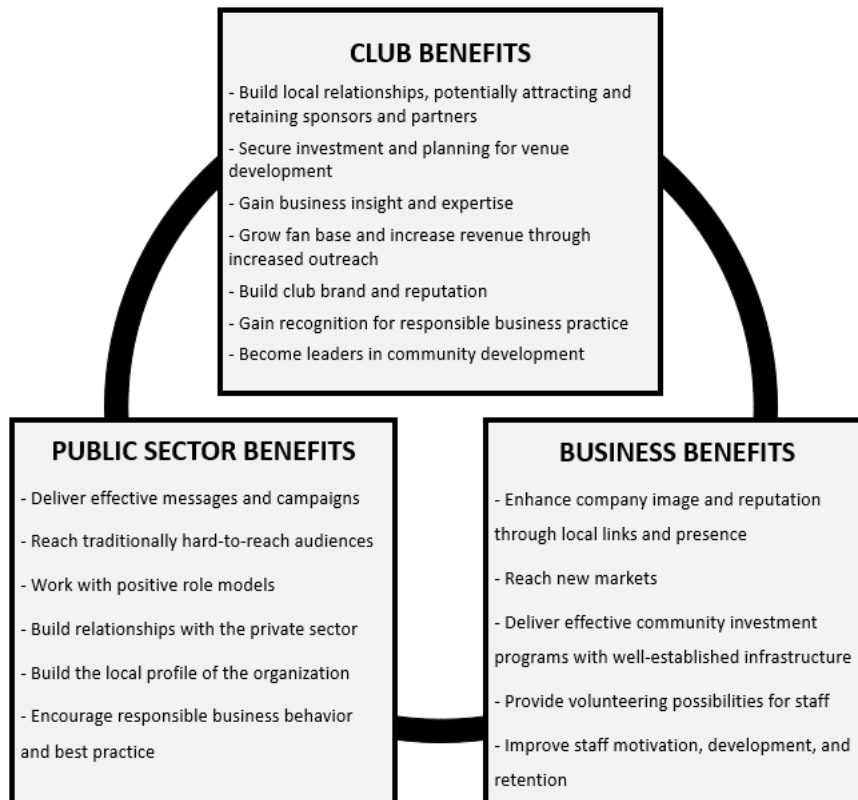
Smith and Westerbeek (2007) present the unique features of S-CSR that already attract many partnerships between companies and sports organizations:

- Mass media distribution and communication power
- Youth appeal
- Positive health impacts
- Social interaction
- Sustainability awareness
- Cultural understanding and integration
- Immediate gratification benefits

Cornwell (2023) states that there exist three prevalent configurations of CSR within the realm where sports marketing and corporate social responsibilities intersect. The first involves sports initiating a CSR program, which sponsors may or may not align themselves with. The second configuration views sports as an independent CSR initiative for sponsors. Lastly, sponsors may develop a CSR program that has been seamlessly woven into their sport sponsorship. When a company

practices CSR through sport and combines its message with a sports organization's CSR initiatives, it creates added value, and two value systems coalesce (Jalonen et al., 2015). If the alignment is absent or illogical, it is probable that the campaign will face criticism. Consequently, both the sponsor and the sponsored party will experience a loss of credibility and reputational harm. To maintain a competitive edge, brands must formulate a well-defined strategy that aligns with their marketing goals and effectively resonates with their intended demographic. In addition to being committed to fostering favorable effects on the environment, diversity, and inclusion, brands that show cultural competency are prone to build strong bonds with their target audience (Infront, 2022). It is crucial to make sure that such contracts are designed to benefit both parties long-term, which is a process far more strategic than just selecting a communication channel. Following prior scholarly investigations, Walraven et al. (2016) argue that the presence of excessive sponsorship advertisements has a negative impact on the effectiveness of sponsorships, whereas the length of sponsorship duration has both a positive impact on sponsorships and a favorable correlation with the level of sponsorship awareness. Sponsorship agreements often last three to five years and are sometimes expected to be extended several times to provide sponsors the chance to reap the rewards of a long-term engagement that may work with the messaging of their brand (Fahy et al., 2004).

A conceptualization of the function of CSR in professional football (Figure 3) has been laid out by Breitbarth and Harris (2008) supported by empirical data. They conclude that, in terms of commercial and strategic management, sports managers have not yet given the CSR notion sufficient consideration. Co-operating with government bodies ensures integration to society, access to legitimacy, and support, while corporate partnerships provide major financial prospects. To use these resources effectively, the management of clubs, leagues, and associations must outline their CSR targets as an element of the organization's broader strategy and evaluate their effectiveness (Breitbarth et al., 2011). Club-specific resources are most effectively used in CSR activities when the clubs' participation in CSR is closely intertwined and connected to their core operations (Jäger, 2023). Trail and McCullough (2020) suggest that opinions regarding sustainability campaigns are influenced by needs, values, and attachment points. Sports managers and marketers should therefore possess a comprehensive comprehension of their counterparts' views towards sustainability to effectively craft a targeted message that promotes participation by aligning with their needs and values.

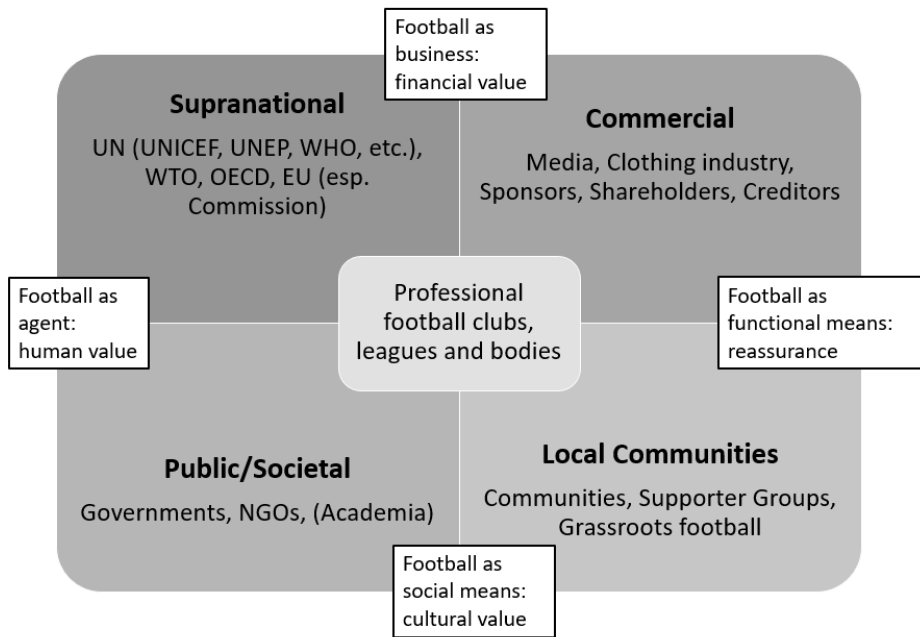


**Figure 3.** Win-win-win”-paradigm underlying joint Corporate Citizenship activities in the area of sports (adapted from *Business in the Community*, 2008 as cited in Breitbarth et al., 2011)

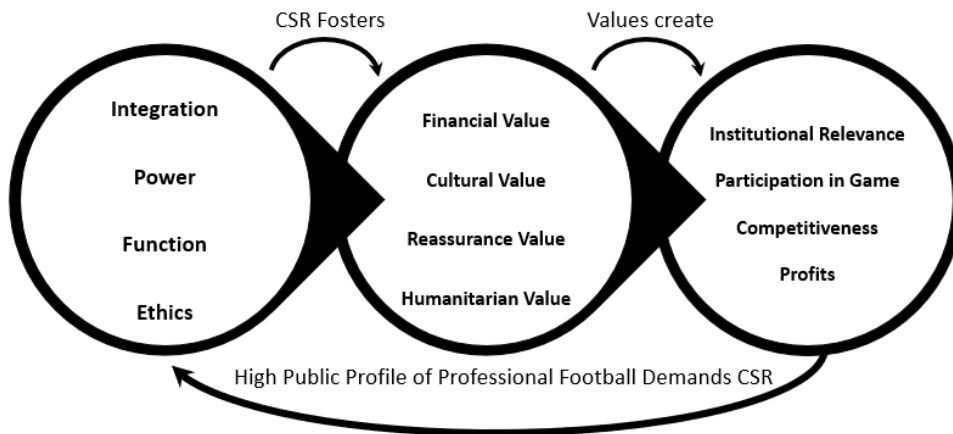
Football can produce value for its external stakeholders and position itself as a highly important and influential social, economic, and political agency by adopting sustainable business models and incorporating CSR into its long-term strategy (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008). Moreover, football clubs have evolved into organizations that can pursue several social objectives to enhance the quality of life in local communities as well as promote particular ideals (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). The conceptual model of the role of CSR in professional football developed by Breitbarth and Harris (2008) integrating English, German, Japanese, and US football contexts with key results from case studies (Figures 4 and 5), is supported by the idea that resources influence how well value-creating activities function and turn out. The model allocates areas in which professional football clubs can succeed in value creation through their specific purpose for society.

The researchers identified four independent areas of value creation illustrated in Figure 4. Football's ability to act as an agent to create human value (1), as a business agent to create economic benefit for different industries (2), as a social agent for promoting cultural value (3), and—most importantly—as a vehicle to connect business or representatives of politics with people (4).





**Figure 4.** Value creation through CSR in professional football (adapted from Breitbarth & Harris, 2008)

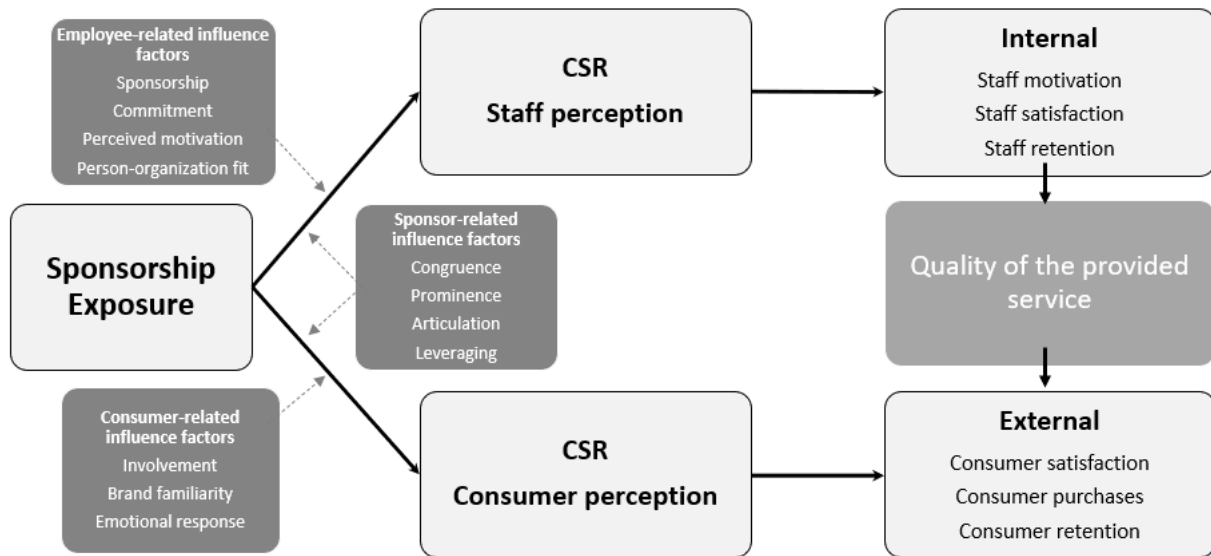


**Figure 5.** Model of the Role of CSR in Professional Football (adapted from Breitbarth & Harris, 2008)

According to Breitbarth et al. (2011), the implementation of CSR will boost institutional importance, game participation, football business earnings, and competition with other sports and entertainment genres. Football creates social benefits – both directly and indirectly. The important thing is to make it visible, comprehensible, and place it in the context (Kemppinen et al., 2020).

The conceptual framework proposed by Plewa and Quester (2011) in Figure 6 raises the question if sponsors view CSR as a measure of sports sponsorship effectiveness, and how do they seek to

achieve it. The framework successfully integrates both the internal (employee) and external (consumer) perspective supporting a holistic business approach on sponsorships.



**Figure 6.** A conceptual framework of CSR-mediated sponsorship effectiveness (adapted from Plewa & Quester, 2011)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an old phenomenon, dating back to the 1950s, and the values of improving society can be dated even further (Carroll, 2016). The Pyramid of CSR, developed by Carroll in 1991, is, according to Visser (2006) the most popular four-part framework of corporate social responsibility. Carroll's CSR model was the pioneering framework that underscored the significance of corporations extending their commitment to social responsibility beyond just profit maximization. The framework portrays components as building blocks, starting from the economic responsibility that upholds the others, stating that being profitable is the fundamental part. A company can simply not stay in business without being profitable. The second layer consists of legal responsibilities. Since laws regulate what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior in society, businesses are obliged to respect the law. Legal responsibilities refer to the company's nationwide, regional, and local-level responsibilities (Carroll, 2016). The third layer is ethical responsibility. Ethical responsibilities go beyond legal responsibilities and refer to the duty to act morally righteously while minimizing or avoiding harm to stakeholders. Carroll (2016) points out that the goal of these expectations is for companies to be conscious of all norms, standards, values, principles, and expectations that consumers, employees, owners, and society have of them. Philanthropy is situated at the apex of the pyramid, encompassing the most limited area allocation. Business enterprises have often faced criticism for their contribution to carbon emissions, pollution, the depletion of natural resources, and other related concerns. To mitigate these

drawbacks, they need to engage in community-oriented initiatives that contribute to the welfare of the society from which they get resources. Despite being the pinnacle of CSR, it is imperative to acknowledge that this facet should not be underestimated, as a considerable number of individuals are inclined to engage in commercial transactions with firms that actively contribute to the development of society. Philanthropic responsibility encompasses more than mere commitment to ethical principles; it is a commitment rooted in a company's core beliefs to contribute positively to society.

According to Carroll's pyramid, a responsible company is characterized by its adherence to all levels of obligations prior to engaging in philanthropic activities. To maintain long-term viability, a firm must satisfy all of its associated duties. To meet these criteria, companies engage in goodwill activities like donations and voluntary work. Concerning sports organizations, these can be seen as voluntary initiatives that go beyond their economic, legal, and ethical duties (Carroll, 2016).

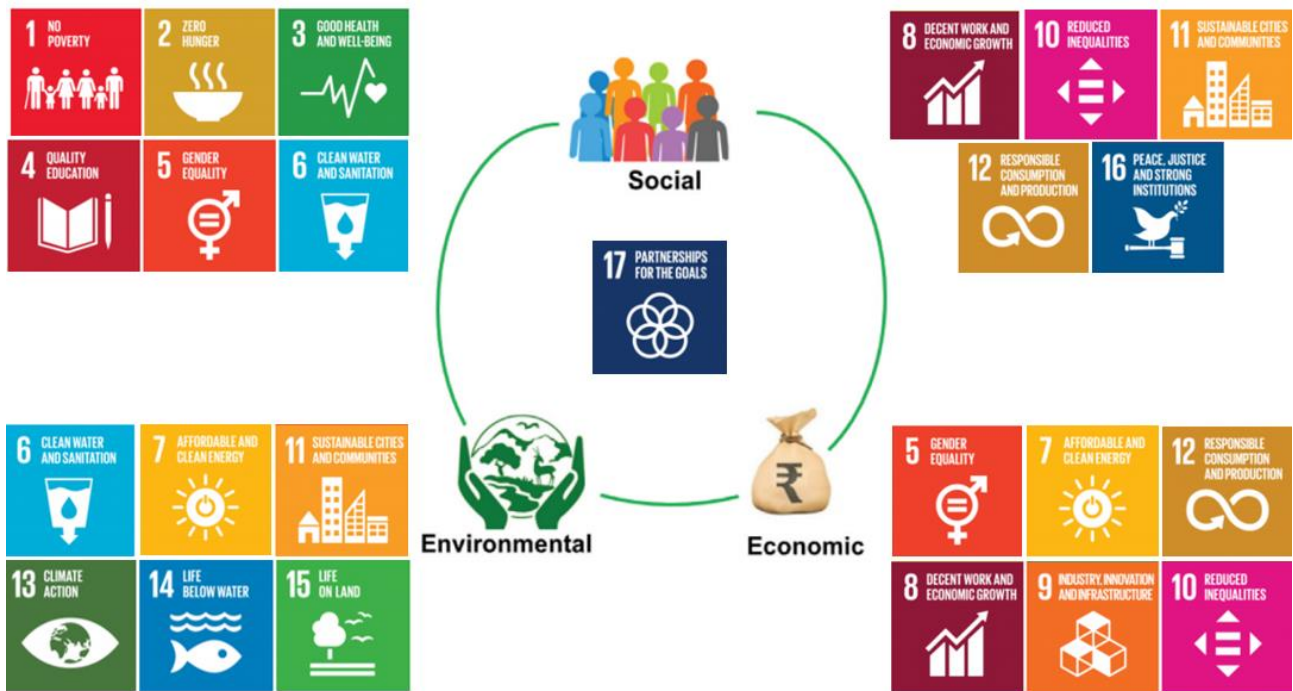
Most companies have turned to CSR to improve performance through initiatives like public relations campaigns or fundraising events that have little to do with company strategy (Sitaloppi, Rajala & Hietala, 2021). Porter and Kramer (2011) state that there is no natural conflict between making the business environment better and genuinely wanting to make the world a better place.

### **2.2.1 Corporate Sustainability**

CSR is tightly connected to several terminologies and ideas that have developed throughout time, including corporate sustainability, corporate citizenship, corporate responsibility, corporate social performance, corporate reputation, business ethics, and corporate philanthropy (Fallah Shayan et al., 2022). Both corporate responsibility and sustainability address the interplay between business and society. Nevertheless, the two areas of study have merged to the point that they are intricately intertwined and indistinct, resulting in scholars from both traditions addressing the same business threats and possibilities (Bansal & Song, 2016). Furthermore, within the public sector, the terms sustainability and sustainable development are used, contributing to further perplexity (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021). Even though social and environmental challenges are everywhere, some managers may still be confused about social responsibility or sustainability. Montiel (2018) submits that unclear definitions and structures can hinder managers in establishing the goals of CSR and Corporate Sustainability (CS) and says the difficulty is even tougher for researchers. To obtain repeatable findings, CSR and CS researchers need well-defined, precisely constrained, and commonly agreed-upon structures. While CSR and CS share several similarities, CS specifically refers to

the implementation of sustainable development at the corporate level, with a focus on short-term economic and environmental concerns, as well as the long-term social performance of the company (Steurer et al., 2005 as cited in Rébula de Oliveira et al, 2023).

The United Nations has previously issued a statement emphasizing that sustainability is a complex concept that has an impact on the economy, society, and the environment (Cornwell & Koenigstorfer, 2018). A wide range of humans worldwide experience poverty, hunger, discrimination, inequality, unemployment, and severe illnesses. In addition, they may encounter catastrophic events resulting from the escalation of sea levels, climate change, desertification, and the depletion of biodiversity, among other factors. Addressing natural, economic, and societal concerns poses significant challenges. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a meticulously designed and all-encompassing policy agenda to foster the creation of a more improved world. The UN approved the SDGs in September 2015 to address the environmental, social, and economic concerns that would arise over the next 15 years. These goals were formulated with a focus on both present and future requirements. The proposal revolves around the 5Ps, namely people, planet, peace, partnering, and prosperity (Fallah Shayan et al., 2022). The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes sport, including football, as a significant and cost-effective facilitator of sustainable development. The Declaration acknowledges the increasing role of sports in achieving development and peace by promoting tolerance and respect, empowering women and young people, individuals and communities, and contributing to health, education, social inclusion, and social development goals (Al-Thani & Picco, 2020). Bigger frameworks like the SDGs, introduce an additional depth of significance to the traditional CSR obligations that are extensively spread through marketing communications but lack measurable and comparable data to substantiate results. The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented in Figure 7 are synergistic frameworks that both aim to advance sustainable development. The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) highlights the significance of economic, environmental, and social aspects, while the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a strategic plan for attaining sustainable development.



**Figure 7.** TBL-SDGs framework (adapted from Fonseca & Carvalho, 2019 by Singh & Rahman, 2021).

In today's world, there is a higher level of interconnectivity than ever before. The worldwide popularity of sports can bring together influential networks of varied partners and stakeholders who are all dedicated to sustainable growth (Lemke, 2016). Fallah Shayan et al. (2022) state that CSR and SDGs are currently being implemented as distinct initiatives within the corporate sector and recommend that corporate CSR initiatives actively support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, Malmö FF and the City of Malmö have successfully incorporated the Agenda 2030 SDGs into their sustainability efforts (Malmö FF Hållbarhetsarbete, 2022). Through the incorporation of a sustainability element into their alliance, the National Football League (NFL) has successfully cultivated a more intimate and collaborative association with Verizon. This collaboration has resulted in the expansion of ongoing initiatives, the establishment of fresh endeavors, and the generation of a beneficial influence on the cities that host NFL events and their neighboring communities (Gruffudd, 2019). Singh and Rahman (2021) conclude that creating connections between the three pillars of the TBL idea and the 17 SDGs might be useful for companies. Implementing a TBL-SDG framework may motivate companies to actively engage and make meaningful contributions towards achieving the SDGs. Implementing sustainable initiatives can be a difficult task due to limited resources, insufficient expertise, and conflicting priorities (Cury et al., 2022). Nevertheless, research has shown that when capacities are sufficient, and attention is paid to sustainability issues it becomes more likely that organizations will implement sustainable practices.

## 2.3 Creating Shared Value (CSV)

The beneficial relationship between Corporate Social Performance (CSP) and Corporate Financial Performance (CFP) has been the subject of several studies (Robles-Elorza et al., 2023; Tonello 2011). There is a growing awareness and concern among society about social issues, leading to an increased expectation for businesses to have a bigger role in promoting sustainable development. The task of defining this emerging position is a significant obstacle for organizations, as they must devise strategies to include both CSP and CFP within it. The study on the relationship between CSP and CFP had a substantial increase starting around 2005. This coincided with a notable surge in the focus on sustainability-related issues (Robles-Elorza et al., 2023). A favorable correlation has been shown between CSR and corporate financial success, particularly when corporations allocate resources to CSR initiatives in accordance with the interests of their stakeholders (Zaharia & Zaharia, 2013). In addition to clientele, investors are progressively conscious of societal issues and often make decisions about organizations based on their demonstrated efforts toward enhancing social responsibility. According to Tonello (2011), previous research shows that CSR activities will not only benefit a business's competitive advantage, brand loyalty, reputation, and customer relationships but also help pursue mutually beneficial results by generating synergistic value. In addition, CSR initiatives are effective tools for attracting financial investments and building a strong employer brand (Sudolska & Lapinska, 2020).

According to the outdated, condensed conception of capitalism, companies benefit society by turning a profit, thereby supporting things like employment, wages, purchases, investments, and taxes (Porter & Kramer, 2011) considering it a sufficient social benefit. According to Porter and Kramer (2011), most businesses are still locked in a social responsibility paradigm that places societal challenges on the outside, rather than at the center of what they do. Corporate social and environmental investment should be guided by creating shared value rather than reputation-driven CSR since it is a strategy essential to a company's competitive position (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Through sponsorships, businesses can demonstrate their social responsibility visibly. Porter and Kramer (2011) claim that the notion of shared value, which entails generating economic gain while concurrently generating value for society by addressing its needs and issues, holds the key to finding a way forward. The concept of shared value acknowledges that communal needs, not just conventional financial ones, shape markets. Social harms or weaknesses often create internal costs for firms, while addressing societal harms and constraints does not necessarily raise costs for firms (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

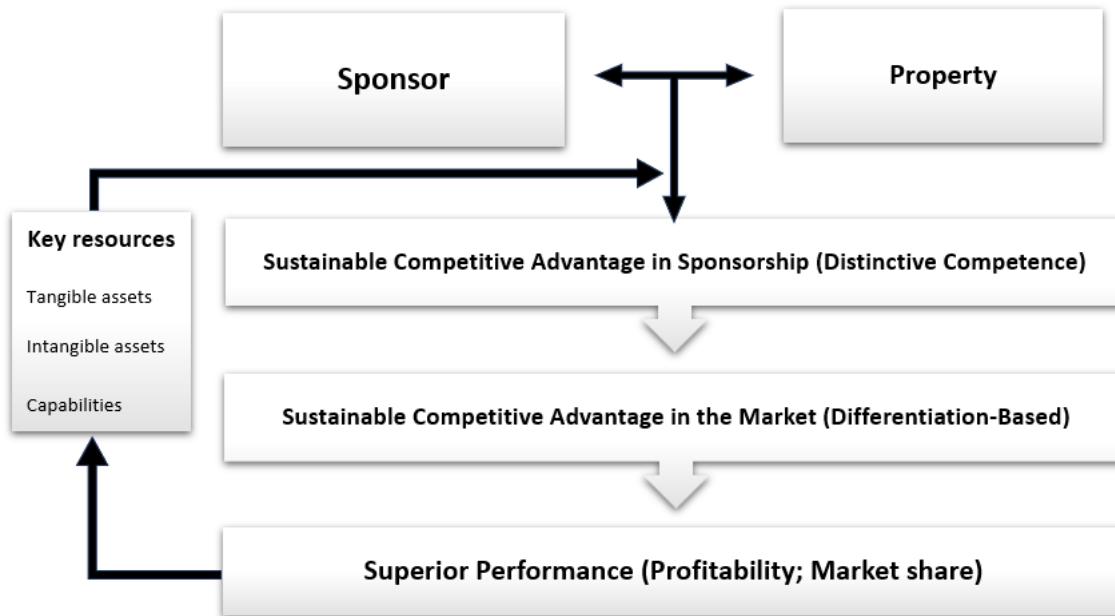
Porter and Kramer (2011) assert that context-focused philanthropy is complicated and not a precise science since one approach will not work for all cases. Companies vary in their comfort and timescales for philanthropic work; thus, they will execute differently. Philanthropy depends on human judgment and faith to accomplish long-term goals, making it subjective and speculative.

Essentially, Corporate Shared Value (CSV) is a methodology employed to identify and capitalize on socially responsible business opportunities, which entails transforming risks into opportunities. According to Anastasio (2018), CSV offers a shareholder perspective that aligns with sponsorship stakeholders, considers outcomes on both sides of the partnership, and evaluates external outcomes, including philanthropy and CSR perspectives.

Menghwar and Daood (2021) have, through a systematic literature review, defined creating shared value as a strategic method through which businesses might address a social issue that is related to their value chain and generate financial gain. The researchers made an additional finding that terms such as CSR, social innovation, sustainability, and CSV were often used interchangeably in scholarly investigations. Several scholars have conducted investigations on the incorporation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues into the routine operational activities of firms. Tonello (2011) describes that the integration of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into mainstream business practices may be attributed to one of three underlying justifications:

- The social values-led paradigm refers to the adoption of CSR activities by firms for non-economic motives, focusing on specific concerns.
- The business-case model is a framework that evaluates CSR efforts mainly from an economic perspective and is used when there is a direct correlation to the financial success of the company.
- The syncretic stewardship model is a hybrid approach that integrates both the social values-led and the business-case models.

Consideration must be given to two separate degrees of competitive advantage (in sponsorship and market) as seen in Figure 8, when examining the strategic significance of sponsorship (Fahy et al., 2004). For a sponsorship to achieve success, it is necessary to provide significant resources towards marketing communications. This assertion has been supported by Lagae (2005), who highlighted the need of supplementing sponsorships with other promotional strategies.



**Figure 8.** A model of sponsorship-based competitive advantage (adapted from Fahy et al., 2004)

Actors develop value proposals for future value creation independently, but value-in-context is co-created via resource integration among actors since no one party can generate or deliver value on its own. In the research “The Creation of Shared Value in the Major Sport Event Ecosystem” conducted by Cook et al. (2021), the researchers found that it is critical that major sports events (MSEs) and sponsors pursue ever-more innovative ideas, and this is possible through long sponsorship deals that are boosted by symbiotic relationships. The dyadic relationships between sponsors and MSEs, as well as the network of linked actors, provide novel and distinct networks in which value may be generated and exchanged. Porter and Kramer (2006) advise that each corporation must decide which of society’s challenges relate to its line of business. Creating shared value in response to social concerns will result in independent solutions that are unrestrained by financial support from the private or public sectors. Mullin et al. (2014) assert that by establishing a connection with an activity or event, a firm may convey its trustworthiness and goals, while effectively communicating with a customer who is likely to be more open and responsive. “Adding passion layers to marketing approaches creates messages that breakthrough at a higher frequency and resonate more with the target audience,” said J.D. Lubenetski in an interview: *Trends in sport sponsorship evaluation and measurement: insights from the industry* (Jensen & White, 2018). Stories are the foundation upon which our shared understandings of the world rest. Hence, football narratives are an essential tool for understanding and communicating reality (Kemppinen et al., 2020).



## 2.4 The Future of Sports Industry Partnerships

The question of whether advancements in sponsorship management have kept up with the significant rise in its financial worth was raised by Chadwick and Thwaites (2006) more than a decade ago. The sports industry is yet again in the midst of a change. As technology and connectivity continue to advance, changes in the way people work, travel, interact, consume, and socialize are influencing and defining the sports sponsorship industry. The value of sponsorship will be modified by new sponsorship entrants, fresh platforms, and evolving fan needs. Enabling development for the global sports marketing business requires identifying and monitoring these specific key drivers.

According to a study conducted by O'Reilly et al. (2018), researchers highlight the significant potential for growth in sponsorship revenue within the sales profession of the four major North American sports leagues. The study reveals that social media and mobile platforms are expected to play a crucial role in this growth, as indicated by 82.2 percent of the surveyed sales professionals who anticipate a substantial increase in sponsorship revenues within these sectors. In addition, access to unique material is said to help boost sponsorship earnings, with 50.5 percent of respondents projecting a significant increase in this area while respondents believe traditional media, like television, print, and radio, is expected to remain consistent (O'Reilly et al., 2018). The authors further point out that declining spectator numbers, the uncertainty of sports clubs' performance, and increasing competition in the sponsorship marketplace are among the markable threats to sponsorship sales (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

The presence of numerous objectives throughout sponsorship poses complications when attempting to compare results. Jensen and Whites (2018) interview with Michael Goldstein, the Vice President and Senior Business Leader of Mastercard's Global Sponsorships revealed that besides ROI (Return on Investment), ROO - Return on Objectives - plays a role as well, and different businesses have varied objectives when it comes to marketing, including sponsorships. Campelli (2021) argues that the phrase "win-win-win" will soon no longer be a weary cliché but rather a fact of the sports business. In recent times, there has been a notable surge in scholarly attention towards the wider societal implications of sports. Draves (2020) stresses the good impact that sporting events may exert on a community, particularly in terms of building a more sustainable future. According to Nielsen Sport's (2021), "The Changing Value of Sponsorship", businesses are increasingly searching for rights holders who can give them a platform to advance their values, such as sustainability. Rights holders with a sustainability plan can expect 11% larger revenue in the ensuing three to five

years in comparison to competitors without the same focus. For rights holders, a sponsorship that is concerned with sustainability offers room for expansion, as highlighted by Samantha Lamberti, the Managing Director of Nielsen Sports, in an interview with *The Sustainability Report*: “Sustainability and social causes is definitely one of the top priorities that brands have when thinking about a new sponsorship activation or activating an existing one,” (Campelli, 2021). Socially desired sponsorship is not a part of marketing and communications strategies, but rather a core component of the entire plan, as suggested by Porter and Kramer (2011).

Companies that tend to sponsor sports clubs are generally large, marketing-oriented, profitable corporations, while the clubs often fail to make a profit, and many lack commercial managerial competence (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2006). Sponsors must use the inverse leverage of their status to alter the dynamics of the relationship. Chadwick and Thwaites (2006) propose the following guidelines for sponsorship decision-making:

- Engage in proactive management.
- Understand what and how the sponsorship property can do for the company.
- Sponsorship properties need sponsors as much as sponsors need them.
- Be clear about what the deal will add to the bottom line.
- Sponsorship decision-making is a corporate phenomenon.
- Know why the company has engaged and how the organizations can work together.
- Seek beneficial long-term deals through strategic, network-related, close association.
- Be aware of the power balance in the relationship.
- Be creative, and innovative in developing new value-adding activities.

Sponsorship agreements offer a chance for exclusivity that other forms of communication rarely offer. Exclusiveness has a dual effect, binding the sponsor to the sponsored property exactly as closely as it binds the organization to the sponsor (Fahy et al., 2004). The research findings of Stegmann et al. (2023) indicate that the post-growth sports industry faces various challenges in terms of financing, such as the decline in sports sponsorship and public funding and the creation of a circular economy in the sporting goods industry. It is a commonly acknowledged fact that sports clubs engage in well-being in their day-to-day practice. What is often overlooked is the sports clubs’ beneficial impact in promoting a sustainable future. Collaboration can encourage action and help achieve goals related to the environment, health, education, and social inclusion (Draves, 2020). During the mid-1990s, John Elkington attempted to quantify sustainability by including a

new framework for measuring performance in corporate America. The triple bottom line (TBL) accounting methodology extended beyond standard profit, return on investment, and shareholder value indicators to add environmental and social elements, comprising the three P's; profit, people, and the planet (Slapher & Hall, 2011). Environmental elements are the environmental gains brought about by fans' more sustainable everyday activities and consumption habits (e.g., recycling, taking public transit) that benefit the environment. Since sustainability measures are optional and not yet considered standard practice, companies that implement them may reap immediate and indirect economic benefits, such as lower utility costs connected with more efficient stadium systems and more favorable public attitudes (Cayolla et al., 2023). The TBL's other addition, the social component, covers both tangible and intangible behaviors centered on the relationship between the company and its stakeholders (and among stakeholders). Financial benefits allude to both the club's and the companies' potential income increase as a result of supporters' good response to the club's actions (Cayolla et al., 2023).

Beko, Barcelona, the FCB Foundation, and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) launched "Eat Like a Pro" in 2018 to encourage kids to eat like their heroes, Barcelona players. Consumers were asked to raise €1M towards UNICEF's child feeding programs. The campaign started with a video featuring renowned footballers Messi, Piqué, Suárez, Ter Stegen, Rakitić, and Samuel, who were shown with a family in a kitchen setting. The players serve as a source of motivation for the youngster to maintain a healthy diet. The video's call to action was simple: promote the campaign on social media and the business will pay one euro to UNICEF's food education programs for every #EatLikeAPro hashtag used on Twitter and Instagram. Beko donations to UNICEF had assisted almost 600,000 children by October 2018. The Beko logo on Barcelona's sleeve was changed to #EatLikeAPro during the El Clásico versus Real Madrid on May 6, 2018, to additionally promote the program. Beko achieved a massive increase in brand recognition, engagement, and return on investment during the campaign, which aired in 167 countries and 406 cities and reached an estimated 741 million people.

As shown in the above example, enterprises and their associated brands have a substantial opportunity to actively participate in solving significant social concerns. Moreover, such endeavors have the capacity to not only enhance financial performance but also provide substantial social advantages (Cornwell, 2023). After all, sport possesses many opportunities, like mitigating mobility issues, a significant impact on leading a purposeful life, the substitution of working hours with

voluntary engagements, the promotion of resource efficiency through sharing, and the integration of technology in sports, such as digital consumption (Stegmann et al., 2023).

### **3 Research Method and Implementation**

This research is a phenomenological study of corporate social responsibility in sports sponsorships. The following chapter provides a brief summary of the background, a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology, an in-depth description of the data gathering and analysis process, an examination of the reliability of the findings, and a look at the main ethical issues concerning the study.

#### **3.1 Research Method**

Research is usually based on either quantitative or qualitative data. Quantitative methods are needed when quantifying numerical data and are best suited for the generalization of results. Qualitative data gives the reader an insight into someone else's experiences transformed into written text (Patton, 2002) and is used to describe a certain phenomenon. Social researchers can opt to utilize various methods in their research, and the choice of research strategy does not automatically mean one has to commit to any single one (Descombes, 2010). Nevertheless, in this explanatory research, a qualitative research method was implemented since the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of CSR in the context of sports sponsorships. The aspiration was to examine and compare the partnerships between top-tier football clubs in Finland and Sweden and their sponsors. It is an option to pair the comparative design with a qualitative research strategy, transforming it into a multiple-case study (Bryman, 2016). Descombes (2010) states that qualitative interviews are best suited for this purpose. Qualitative interviews offer an effective way of collecting valuable data from both parties. According to Veal and Darcy (2014), the research methodology involves conducting individual interviews with a very limited number of participants, which are conducted in-depth and may occur on many occasions. The interviews are often guided by a checklist of topics rather than a structured questionnaire. Interviews allow the researcher to explore areas that otherwise would be unreachable, such as people's subjective experiences and attitudes (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Moreover, there are no clear values to measure and compare the utilization of CSR for sponsorships in professional team sports. Thus, the content focused on describing and comparing the methods for attracting sponsors and recovering a detailed view of how companies experience clubs' CSR activities.

The purpose of interviews is to find out things we cannot observe (Patton, 2002). Interviews are of a one-to-one variety since they are easy to arrange, transcribe, and conduct (Descombes, 2010) and allow for more personal thoughts by the informant. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to control the discussion, without giving ready-made answers. When questions are open-ended, the emphasis is on the interviewee elaborating points of interest (Descombes, 2010). The primary objective of this approach is to get comprehensive knowledge of the topic and the viewpoint of each respondent, rather than ensuring exact replication across interviews. Consequently, modifying the collection of questions between interviews is seen as quite acceptable.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

To get a more profound understanding of the phenomena, preliminary interviews, and discussions with seasoned specialists in the field of athletics were utilized. These interactions focused on the subject of the study and served to test the research questions in advance. The preliminary interviews were done using a guided and semi-structured approach to closely resemble the real interviews. The purpose was to get a better understanding of the research topic and to assess the effectiveness of the questions. The interviews were carefully recorded manually to subsequently adapt the actual interview questions to align with the specific subject matter being targeted.

The actual data was collected through documentation and semi-structured interviews with employees of football clubs in the top national leagues in both Finland and Sweden to study the implementation of CSR in their work while obtaining and maintaining sponsors. Interviews with the respective clubs' sponsors concerning their motivations and objectives for supporting sports clubs and the role of CSR activities as sports sponsorship mediates from a business point of view framed the study.

Descombes (2010) declares that purposive sampling offers a method of obtaining the most accurate and important information by carefully choosing individuals who are most likely to possess the necessary knowledge and competence to provide high-quality insights into the study issue. Because the informants needed to possess specific attributes related to corporate social responsibility, a non-probability purposive sampling method was used to pick out the informants. Purposive sampling is based on the idea that the most valuable information can be obtained by intentionally selecting a limited number of cases that possess certain known characteristics (Descombes, 2010). Sharma (2017) states that purposive, or selective sampling methods, count on the judgment of the

researcher. Inclusion criteria refer to the specific features that individuals must possess to be suitable for participation in the research project (Nikolopoulou, 2023). The study used specific inclusion criteria that required sports clubs to demonstrate a certain level of CSR in their activities and actively promote their engagement with the community from a responsible standpoint. The practical considerations for exclusion were the contrary. In addition, the results are also more easily comparable when sports clubs have similar attitudes towards the topic. Since the study would otherwise need to rely on secondary information, the sports organizations then themselves revealed sponsors that meet the desired criteria.

The study used a wide range of secondary data sources to find clubs that actively participate in community engagement and are interested in improving their organization via the application of corporate social responsibility (CSR) inside their operation. The individuals who participated in the interviews were managers or executives who were chosen based on their close association with the sponsorship engagement and their comprehensive understanding of the issue and context. The conducted interviews began with four clubs that are actively involved in CSR initiatives. The objective was to ascertain their motivations for integrating such activities and to determine if they see them as valuable enhancements during sponsorship negotiations. Subsequently, a series of interviews were conducted with firms that sponsor these four sports clubs. The objective was to find out if the CSR initiatives undertaken by these clubs had influenced their selection of marketing targets and to explore the underlying reasons for any such influence. In addition, the primary research inquiry is on the enhanced value derived from CSR and the investigation of the advantages that firms may get by engaging in CSR projects inside clubs. Following the guidelines of research literature, a discussion guide was designed before conducting the interviews. A discussion guide demands a great deal of pre-work, such as alignment with research goals, result definitions, proper introductions, and a clear guideline for relevant and specific questions.

Sampling usually continues until the researcher has gathered enough information on a certain topic and thus reached data saturation. Braun and Clarke (2019) urge researchers studying sport to embrace ambiguity and acknowledge that meaning is produced by interpretation rather than extraction from data. Thus, decisions about the number of data items to collect and when to cease collecting data are both natural and subjective. Initially, the number of interviews was fixed, with the possibility to add more if necessary. In total, four sports organizations were selected in advance. In order to compare the groups, specifically two clubs from larger urban areas were chosen. Additionally, to have a more comprehensive understanding, two smaller clubs that actively

participate in corporate social responsibility were selected to complete the study. Both Swedish clubs are members of the European Football for Development Network (EFDN), which is a collective of professional football teams, leagues, and FAs that are dedicated to their communities and social obligations. They possess the enthusiasm to collaborate and participate on a European scale. Football is the second-most popular sport in Finland. Yet, Finland has no elite clubs in this coalition - only one fostering club to date. The network's objective is to enhance the influence of football as a means for societal advancement and assist network members in their endeavors to utilize football to engage with different demographic segments inside their communities. This fosters a cooperative atmosphere for the exchange of information to cultivate a wide range of instructional approaches that will directly enhance the well-being of communities across Europe.

The clubs proposed the sponsors, selecting those who actively engage in CSR, albeit not necessarily directly via the club. Each of the four sports organizations chose one or two sponsors for the interviews. These sponsors were approached and asked if they were open to participating, with the goal of obtaining one sponsor from each sports club. Thus, the total amount of interviews was set to eight. The stakeholder group, date, length, and form of interview are presented in Table 2. Participants were approached via electronic mail, telephone, or the professional networking platform LinkedIn to ask for participation in the research through in-depth interviews. Three interviews were performed in person, an approach that enables the researcher to concentrate on the interviewee's responses while closely observing emotions and body language. With the advancement of technology, in-depth interviews are often conducted over the telephone, video calling, or other digital communication methods (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Coincidentally, four interviews were carried out online using Microsoft Teams, and one was completed by email because of company policy. The benefit of using technology in this study was limiting the costs of traveling and time-saving issues because of various geographical locations. Participants were situated in either their chosen work environment or a separate meeting room, free of any additional people. The individual interviews were carried out from June 15th to November 30th, 2023. The face-to-face interviews were recorded using a mobile phone application, and the video interviews were recorded in Teams, after which all were transcribed into written form. Before the interview, the interviewees were requested permission to record and transcribe the conversation. The interviews were performed in Finnish, Swedish, and English.

**Table 2.** Interview participants

RESPONDENT	ROLE OF INTERVIEWEE	FIELD	DURATION	DATE	TYPE OF INTERVIEW
R1	Sustainability Manager	Club	55min	15/6/2023	Face-to-face
R2	Sustainability Manager	Club	70min	29/6/2023	Video
R3	Marketing Manager	Club	45min	22/8/2023	Face-to-face
R4	CCO-Marketing Manager	Club	30min	28/8/2023	Video
R5	Marketing Communications Expert	Financial Services	40min	29/11/2023	Face-to-face
R6	Sponsorship Manager	Warehousing	40min	28/8/2023	Video
R7	Marketing Manager	Sports Retail	48min	17/11/2023	Video
R8	Community Manager	Food & Beverages	-	30/11/2023	E-mail

The research was conducted using a content analysis methodology, including coding and thematization techniques. Upon categorizing and organizing the gathered data, the information has been analyzed, and significant concerns relating to the research topic have been identified. The study compares differences between the Finnish and Swedish markets since the sporting culture is highly similar, with the exception that Swedish companies spend greater amounts on sponsorship and Swedish clubs seemingly implement a more open attitude towards CSR.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews allows a more profound comprehension of the impact of CSR initiatives on the process of attracting sponsorships, as well as if and the reasons why firms value these efforts. The methodology applied in the data analysis was mainly thematic, a common method when clarifying themes collected through interviews. Clarke and Braun (2016) define thematic analysis “as a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data”. Thematic analysis provides insight into the complexity of people’s views, knowledge, and experiences from a set of qualitative data (Caulfield, 2022). The method is a very



subjective technique that relies on the researcher's judgment, utilized for analyzing both small and large datasets. What separates thematic analysis from most other qualitative methods is its flexibility, which makes it inviting for researchers in positive psychology (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Given the exploratory nature of theme analysis, it is common for research topics to evolve or undergo modifications throughout the analysis.

When choosing thematic analysis, researchers need to define certain characteristics of their study. The analysis approach can either be inductive or deductive (Caulfield, 2022). The preconceived themes generated from the theoretical framework and research questions provided indications of what to anticipate. Therefore, when themes such as CSR activities and value co-creation arose in an early stage of the research, the analysis approach is considered the latter, a deductive approach. The study was, however, inductively affected as new codes emerged during the process.

Furthermore, a semantic approach that focuses on interviewees' stated opinions is preferable, compared to a latent approach. The semantic approach was chosen due to the nature of the study and the strong knowledge of the interviewees. The process of the manual data analysis method was divided into six steps: (1) Familiarization; (2) Coding; (3) Theme Generation; (4) Theme Review - reviewing the codes and revising or combining them into themes; (5) Theme Defining and (6) Writing up - presenting connected themes according to the theory of Clarke and Braun (2016). This research included both category aggregation and direct interpretation methodologies. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word on a personal computer. After gathering all the replies, each one was cross-referenced with the audio recording to analyze and correct the transcription, which was seldom without errors. The transcriptions were further categorized by color via the use of open coding and thereafter exported to Microsoft Excel. The replies were subsequently divided into club responses (R1-R4) and sponsor responses (R5-R8) on separate spreadsheets. The technique of category aggregation was used when common patterns emerged throughout the analysis of the interviews. The interview transcriptions were methodically examined to identify and establish connections between certain recurring themes, known as thematic analysis coding. Ultimately, the information was consolidated into a single spreadsheet to discover parallels and recurring topics for both examined entities.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

There are certain problems with the use of interviews. Foremost, asking the essential questions that allow the researcher to reach the research goal is elemental. Secondly, the interviewer must

be free from bias to achieve neutral answers. Of course, a researcher is always influenced by different factors, like epistemology and ontology. Epistemology is essentially the theory of knowledge, and ontology is the psychological study of existence, or the way of looking at the world (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Additionally, values and practical considerations have arisen as newer factors in research. The expectation is that researchers should be free of value to be objective. Social scientists nowadays recognize the fact that this does not hold water; it is simply not reasonable since it is not viable to suppress researchers' values while they can interfere in the whole process of social research (Bryman, 2016).

Reliability and validity are ordinary factors when conducting research interviews. The researcher needs to consider sampling sizes, interview surroundings, behavior, and consistency. Reliability, as far as data collection goes, refers to the degree to which other researchers performing similar observations would make the same assumptions and conclusions (Franklin et al., 2010). Various questions regarding the same subject are useful tools for avoiding misinterpretation during the interviews. The primary objective is not to gather similar responses, but instead to concentrate on establishing a standard procedure for collecting and interpreting data. In order to guarantee the reliability of this qualitative research, a standardized set of open-ended questions was established to guarantee that relevant answers were obtained.

Validity and objectivity are considered two key factors concerning the evaluation of research. Validity is, according to Bryman (2016), one of the most important quality criteria. Validity can be further divided into several subcategories: measurement validity, inferential validity, ecological validity, internal validity, and external validity (Bryman, 2016). Regarding qualitative studies, internal and external validity are the main elements in critical evaluation. Veal and Darcy (2014) assert that in case study research, a limited number of instances are analyzed, and the goal is not to generate conclusions that are generally or broadly applicable. Qualitative researchers have argued that the results they produce should be evaluated according to different criteria than the ones presented here. Social scientists' definitions, offered by non-qualitative researchers, are seldom applicable to qualitative researchers' approaches (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed trustworthiness as a criterion of validity (as cited in Elo et al., 2014). According to Elo et al. (2014), trustworthiness of qualitative material is mainly shown via the use of concepts such as *credibility*, *dependability*, *conformability*, *transferability*, and *authenticity*.

Internal validity mostly refers to causality and credibility, the relationship between cause and effect. It ultimately identifies the research methods and research design. An external validity study is concerned with the generalizability of its results outside the circumstances of its research to measure whether the findings apply to other contexts (Bryman, 2016). Typically, survey results tend to be increasingly trustworthy and precise as the sample size increases (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Validity was established by ensuring that the interviews in the case study accurately captured and depicted the real-life experiences and thoughts of sponsorship managers and club representatives. In order to verify content validity, the list of interview questions underwent several reviews and tests. Follow-up inquiries ensured the accurate understanding and clarification of the provided responses and experiences.

Interviews are generally criticized due to their small sample sizes. However, researchers claim that this analogy is incorrect regarding case studies. Statistical generalization is used in survey research, while analytical generalization occurs in case studies (Rodon & Sesa, 2008). The research is interpretive by nature, derived from social action theory that acknowledges the activity and complexity of people, as well as their motivation and different meanings for acting.

### **3.5 Research Ethics**

The Ethical Principles for JAMK University of Applied Sciences (2018) were used to ensure the absence of research misconduct or negligence towards responsible behavior throughout the research process. However, research always includes ethical issues, and some major principles need to be accounted for. Informants have the right to anonymity and should one of the sponsors decide to claim anonymity, the rest shall be held anonymous as well. Personal, identifying information ought to be kept secret. Participants need to be given an overview of the study before deciding on participating and the researchers need permission to interview and publish the results. Every interviewee is entitled to decline participation; therefore, all informants were asked for their consent and participated voluntarily without pay. Moreover, every informant has the right to withdraw from the study at any given point. All participants in this study willingly agreed to participate after receiving a comprehensive description of the research in advance.

While interviewing, it is difficult to remember and transcribe everything. Therefore, a recording, either with a recorder or on video, is necessary. All interviews were transcribed during the interview with Microsoft Word and audio recorded on a mobile phone to allow for backup and information checking and online interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams. Informants were

informed of the recordings, and should they wish to pause the recording at any time during the interview, they were free to do so. It is also the researcher's obligation to keep delicate information confidential.

## 4 Results

Swedish clubs see CSR as an inherent component of their routine day-to-day operations and have seamlessly incorporated CSR into their principles and strategies. Down from the management to the staff, the strategies and activities of the organization exhibit a profound level of integration and establishment. R4 stated that the club's first chairman and his commitment to being part of a city and a community is something that they have carried with them for many years, and it has always characterized the business. It is noteworthy that both Swedish clubs and the Swedish Professional Football League are part of the European Football Development Network (EFDN, n.d.) and implement UN's Agenda 2030 framework for social development goals (SDGs). R4 has chosen four objectives, each with corresponding sub-objectives, to guide their efforts in sustainability. The four goals, each representing a sub-goal, encompass three strategic focus areas; social sustainability, ecological durability, and corporate sustainability that align with Goal 4: Quality Education, Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 12: Sustainable Consumption and Production, and Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals. R2 is dedicated to creating innovative and environmentally friendly methods for organizing and collaborating in its operations and surrounding community. Secondly, R3 promotes integration as a football club. For eight years, Drive In-Football has provided sports rooms for spontaneous football in the suburbs, meeting a need for meaningful activities. Third, the club launched an initiative to contribute to the creation of positive match-day experiences for all individuals by emphasizing crowd safety and security.

*"I am so incredibly concerned and careful that it should not be perceived as a project, instead as core business. After all, we have developed our strategical framework in transition." (R2)*

*"The city has always had bigger challenges in different ways. Socially, like not least now, but I also mean in the nineties and eighties when they put down the local dockyard, which led to high unemployment and so forth. So, it's always been there as part of the association. It is not that we have stuck on classic corporate social responsibility on our brand, but that part has always existed as a natural part of the club." (R4)*

R4 has implemented quantifiable targets, known as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), for all its sustainability objectives. These goals can be measured and monitored over time to ensure that the sustainability efforts are progressing in the desired direction.

*“Right from the start [of the partnership], we wanted to make visible the difference everyone can make in their own climate impact” (R8)*

Meanwhile, Finnish football clubs have shown a growing tendency towards embracing societal shifts in recent times, gradually recognizing the significance and worth of participating in endeavors outside the realm of sport. Leveraging the shift to their advantage to the greatest extent possible. Finnish respondents R1 and R3 have shown a delayed adoption of CSR acts in comparison to their Swedish counterparts but demonstrate a desire to establish enduring dedication to these programs.

*“Companies that have woken up still want to see where their so-called social responsibility money is going. I'm not even talking about sponsor money anymore, but partnership money. In a way, it's like their contribution to the fact that their social responsibility funds will be put to good use.” (R3)*

*“We live in times that need reacting. I believe that if we can affect children and youth today, it will have long-lasting consequences for the future.” (R1)*

The companies in both countries have a positive view of the clubs that actively engage in their communities and tend to favor clubs that communicate the initiatives and intertwine with company objectives. R7 says they restrict the number of initiatives they take part in, simply because they involve a lot of time and effort. R6 said they would be more than happy to support smaller one-time campaigns since they realize that they are more effective and cheaper to organize compared to traditional marketing campaigns, but further stated that it would crave interest and activity from the club itself. R8 saw the club's involvement in the community as beneficial. R5 claimed that the one thing concerning the club that the company was convinced about, was their active involvement in CSR.

*“We are very careful that if we recommend someone or tell our stakeholders about our partners, we also want them to act in the same way as we do - act responsibly and reliably.” (R6)*

*“We collaborate with specific initiatives within the organizations. Each year, we undertake a limited number of CSR initiatives, often one or two, sometimes three, but just enough to ensure our ability to execute them effectively. We are actively engaged in developing the club.” (R7)*

R2 said that corporate social responsibility has become a customary practice in Sweden. Nevertheless, the participant stressed that for the club to expand, the community must also expand. Given their need for more funding, they must undertake further efforts and explore novel methods to recruit sponsors of a higher caliber.

Corporate Social Responsibility is a fundamental component of sports organizations, however, there are discrepancies in the communication and implementation of CSR inside the club on a day-to-day basis. The CSR initiatives undertaken by clubs are crucial for decision makers in the supporting corporations. It serves as a source of motivation for corporations and aids them in achieving their own CSR objectives at the company level. In general, the complete package must be handled as a whole, rather than focusing on specific parts, like CSR, in order to determine the optimal combination of many components for the best mutually benefitting solution.

#### **4.1 Health and Well-being**

Promoting health and well-being is an inherent aspect of all clubs and supporting youth sports is a highly significant incentive for sponsor involvement as well. Consensus among informants is therefore universal about the essential importance of children's health and physical activity in football organizations. R2 said they think it is really important to reach more people who would not otherwise be physically active. The whole of public health is highly relevant right now, especially after the pandemic. Consequently, they have around 8,000 participants in their school activities alongside the 2,000 football members in the club. A growing level of physical inactivity among children is a general concern for all respondents. R4 emphasizes learning combined with sports with the help of 18 school academies helping youth in school while growing as football players. The program offers upper secondary school students the opportunity to combine their sports with school. With the help of the academies, they strive to use football as a motivator for the local youth in upper secondary schools to receive better grades and reach college. R1 emphasized the primary objective of generating low-threshold motion in schools and around the city, whereas R3 stated that they engage a significant number of young individuals in activity. They are active in the local preschools, provide the club facilities for the schools, and organize testing for athletes in other surrounding clubs. Both Finnish clubs prioritize the importance of contributing to workplace well-being by providing activities that increase job capacity for companies. R5 and R7 specifically said that the clubs they support, organize activities for very many children, and they are the main target group for the company investments. R7 further stated that in the absence of it, they would refrain from allocating funds to a senior team.

*“The primary reason for our involvement is the significant influence wielded by the younger generation, which accounts for almost 90% of this power. Subsequently, the CSR component assumes significance as it establishes a connection, making it very crucial.” (R7)*

Two company respondents have invested more in the respective organization's top-tier team but share the basic idea of promoting an organization that contributes to well-being. R8 has the objective to facilitate individuals in adopting a healthier lifestyle by consuming nutritious food while minimizing the strain on the Earth's resources. More specifically, they wish through the partnership to advocate for a predominantly plant-based diet among sports groups. R6 wants to be a part of the local sporting community and uses the partnership venues more for exposure than the actual ideal since the facilities the club owns, are versatile and bring together a lot of different athletes from different sports like athletics, track and field, floorball, basketball, and football thus targeting a larger whole.

Health and well-being are fundamental to the survival of sports organizations, since they play a significant role in promoting physical activity and engaging young people, making the third sector the biggest activator in Scandinavian communities. This is then linked to the junior section in the clubs and the non-profit part of the organizations. For corporations, this entails a more robust society via the mitigation of healthcare expenses, allocation of resources towards the development of the future workforce, and finally culminating in an overall healthier society.

## 4.2 Community

*"Sponsorship and marketing in general go well hand in hand. Very few sponsors do things without getting anything in return. It's a bit like that with us too. However, we want to be part of the community. All of this is actually connected to marketing in the background. We desire to actively engage with the genuine community, encompassing both the local community and the sports community." (R6)*

All respondents agree unanimously on the significance of the community. The clubs inherently endeavor to integrate into the community through various innovative methods and attract more players, while the sponsors seek to participate in a partnership to bolster their marketing endeavors and promote their brand.

*"We aim to be a part of the city and the region that surrounds it. Of course, we are an elite club, but we are also very committed to the city in which we live for the reason to be able to work with others to grow the city, and I believe many partners share this sentiment." (R4)*

*"The league follows club messages about socially responsible social issues and most teams have an average of around one percent. We have it at 15%. In my opinion, it is the only right way - if the club wants to grow, the community has to grow, and it has to be made stronger in the community." (R1)*

All clubs agree that for the future it is essential to create lower thresholds for people to participate in sporting activities. Some projects are not even necessarily all about football or sports, but more about learning how to work in a group, having fun, basic manners, apologizing, and paying attention to others. Five respondents (R1, R3, R4, R5, and R7) consider assisting the less privileged to be of utmost importance in the context of the youth movement, particularly in an era characterized by escalating expenses. As previously mentioned, both R1 and R3 also guarantee the promotion of occupational well-being for commercial organizations, which has a dual relevance.

*“The most essential target group is children and young people, supporting their hobby activities, and I believe it is significant if we can help a low-income family remain in sports despite all rising costs.” (R5)*

*“We've been moving individuals for over 40 years. We want to make sure that businesses are doing well, so if it comes along cleverly and they also want to promote football and children, practically every time the negotiation table is made up of all these blocks.” (R3)*

*“Well, there are always those VIP tickets and such. Without underestimating any of its value, it is a community gathering place. Our match event, after all, is still one of our most significant marketing revenues. I hope that partners would want to give value to the community.” (R1)*

Swedish football clubs exhibit a stronger connection with their local community and actively collaborate with the municipality, the companies, and the city to foster a more prosperous future for all. As an example, R4 mentioned their cooperation with the schools in the city, where the children participate in a tournament and carry out a theme day around equal value and dignity. The Convention on the Rights of the Child serves as a framework for the work on basic values. In contrast, Finnish clubs shoulder a significant burden and are responsible for a substantial amount of work on their own. The sponsors of the Swedish clubs have a close relationship with the local community and share a common goal of promoting the society around them. R4 aims to create job opportunities by connecting local companies with unemployed individuals, building connections among individuals, and engaging in regular collaborations with sponsoring clubs.

*“We have the Career Academy, which is an activity that we do together with our partner companies where we work to get the people who are very far out into the labor market to get work. If we have a partner who needs workers or employment, we involve them in that and we have employed somewhere around 450 people in recent years.” (R4)*

All club respondents (R1-R4) have extended their reach to nearby schools to actively engage a wider audience and include more young individuals in the club. R4 operates a dedicated primary school academy that aims to encourage kids to study via an e-sports or football-based or incentive system. R1 and R2 also have their own academies, but these are focused on nurturing young



talent who are on their path to joining the first team. These academies provide external help for the pupils in the form of student counseling, special education, coaches, nutritionists, and psychologists. R3 says that they have initiated programs for addressing bullying and abuse. By establishing a more robust local network, the teams may engage in more favorable negotiations for contracts with sponsors.

*“We implement social responsibility as a company and the club is a part of what we have been doing for many years. The ‘Stop Bullying’ -project was conceived as the last addition. Sponsors were asked to participate in that project, and we move more than 1,000 children within the project every year. The work against bullying and inappropriate behavior also wants to raise discussion and awareness outside of sports. We will spread the anti-bullying message outside the stadium as well, on a school tour in the area. The goal of the campaign is to ensure that all events are bullying-free. The club and the main sponsors also challenge the members of the club and all stakeholders to act as examples in hobbies, schools, and workplaces.” (R3)*

*“Through our school visits, we try to inspire the pupils to an active lifestyle, and then sometimes it can result in them joining clubs. In my opinion, that's probably the most significant thing. Well, maybe not the most significant, the next one will be, our child protection support team, where we provide football for youth in open maintenance.” (R1)*

*“We now work in 30 schools in the region with full-time staff. Our school athletics encompasses approximately 8,000 participants.” (R2)*

*“This partnership is about giving back to the city and the region. This city is after all where it all started for us and with a production site, global headquarters, and a Research & Innovation center, we have become a fairly large employer in the region.” (R8)*

*“What we do falls under a specific section of our sustainability plan, and it is apparent that all associations we support, provide activities for many youngsters. There will then be a good impact on society. I mean, the more children you get to play sports and stay away from other things, the better. Then the economy becomes great, and other things, such as the violent part and crime, decrease dramatically.” (R7)*

Companies recognize the importance of demonstrating their involvement in local communities and providing assistance to local sports groups. The influence wielded by urban populations is crucial to the strategic visibility and marketing endeavors of firms. In order for the clubs to expand, resources must be directed to the areas with the highest demand. These examples include schools, immigration facilities, job agencies, and childcare organizations. The activities also highlight the significance of engaging with those who are often overlooked and enhancing the brand for all parties involved, including both clubs and sponsors.

### 4.3 Values

CSR is a crucial component of organizations, as they actively endorse causes and select partners that closely correspond with the company's core values and overall strategy, rather than merely fulfilling requirements. Every respondent identified certain mutual values that either initiated the sponsorship discussions or deepened the relationship.

*“They pursue an array of CSR issues in the form of gender equality, and they pursue the type of topics that we can use in our channels, in our sustainability report, in what we are doing, so we can see whether we are in sync.” (R7)*

Regarding sponsorship values, a factor that popped out was equality, R5, R6, and R7 all specifically pointed out that they aspire to be equal in their sponsorships in their local communities. This can be linked to the ownership model or company ideals.

*“The management team has made a decision that we will not sponsor directly so there will be no such unjust connections in any direction. A lot is also because our owner is a foundation that collects money for people in the state dune, so it's like a pension pot for people in the state dune. There are teachers, policemen, firemen, plumbers, and people in this type of professions, and then they do the same through Evergreen, which is an investment foundation, and we are in their investment pot.” (R6)*

*“When we wish to remain impartial, we have the desire to help big clubs equally, and we also cooperate across sports boundaries. We want to be perceived as adaptable; hence we have considerably smaller clubs and ambitions in smaller sports as well.” (R5)*

From a club standpoint, the shared principles involve doing thorough background checks and ensuring the companies are financially stable and accountable, to ensure alignment with the club's beliefs. R1 stated that they try to find sponsors with similar values, that strive to do good. R2 added that there are those they do not bring in because the club needs to have a certain credibility.

*“It is super important that partners have the same values as we do. We always do a background check, always the same check on everyone. Do they follow the rules and pay their taxes and VAT, are the legal things in place? How are they perceived by the outside world? After all, we have our 4 values and it is very important to us that we feel that there are brands with which we have a common image, and it happens that we refuse. If we don't think we match well.” (R4)*

*“We are trying to find sponsors with similar values, that strive to do good. ... Same things and common values unite us.” (R1)*

*“What strikes me personally is the club's CSR operations; it embodies many of the same ideals that we do at the company.” (R5)*

*“Of course, on a philosophical level, we would like to support a socially responsible organization. That hasn't been the deciding factor in our involvement in this case, but on an intellectual level, we prefer to deal with performers who are truly responsible.” (R6)*

*“We share the aim to be the greatest on home field, as well as the drive to achieve greatness globally. We are constantly careful when selecting partners to guarantee that it is a fair business. Of course, everything the club does on a societal level is fantastic.” (R8)*

*“We cooperate with the world's oldest non-governmental organization in the field of mental health, with the basic mission of promoting mental health and preventing problems. They share exactly the same values with us, and we have a lot in common.” (R1)*

The potential negative impact on brand reputation was mentioned by respondents R2, R4 and R5. The clubs mitigate potential risks beforehand in the prospecting phase, however, for sponsors, it was believed to be harder to foresee such incidents, especially concerning fan behavior, coaches, and players. It might cause harm for both parties if situations are handled incorrectly or bypassed unmitigatedly.

*“If an individual behaves improperly for any reason on the playing grounds, or in other club-related activities, it will harm our reputation. The most concerning aspect is that if we neglect to address this issue and receive feedback from our customers or other sources stating that we are associated with a certain problematic situation, it will undermine our credibility and our role as a guarantor. Consequently, we must approach this matter with utmost seriousness and critically evaluate our actions and intentions. We need to engage in a thorough discussion about our cooperative partnership, ensuring that our actions align with our core values, as this is of paramount importance.” (R5)*

Opportunities arise when individuals have the same ideals, as two participants have shown on a practical level. They possess the capacity to initiate the establishment of foundations aimed at assisting the underprivileged, providing them with an opportunity to participate and become members of the club. This is achieved by collecting funds and redistributing them to those in need.

Shared values and responsible organizations are fundamental prerequisites for successful partnerships. Without a foundation of common ground, it becomes very difficult to establish mutually advantageous connections, particularly with the aid CSR. Clubs find themselves in a predicament where they cannot exclude entirely everyone but strive to align with their principles and choose whom to collaborate with.

#### **4.4 Exposure, Communication, and Congruence**

There seems to be a significant disparity in the sale of sponsorships between the elite team(s) and the overall club. The issue of youth development and children's well-being emerged in several

instances and serves as a major motivation for firms to engage. Not only are the companies endorsing adult visibility, but they are also endorsing their principles and beliefs to promote a more promising future. The sponsors prioritize the connection between them and the conversation with their respective end customers above exposure.

*“If someone sells me a board ad, a spot in their periodical, and a parking lot advertisement and we get that logo on display, it doesn't matter to me at that point” (R5)*

All participants believe that conventional exposure remains relevant, but it is not essential for the sponsorship agreement. R7 has relocated the company logo on the jersey for the purpose of achieving congruity and in response to the club's desire to monetize the specific placement to another party. The respondent asserts that while visibility is not essential, they utilize it to establish a link between the organization and the sponsorship. R5 shares a comparable strategy and expresses their desire to be associated with the positive actions undertaken by the club. This allows their present and potential customers to perceive that the company is endorsing a noble cause, and R5 may use this collaboration in their communication efforts. In conclusion, it is not only to be seen but seen in the right context.

*“The exposure is not vital for the deal's financial significance, but rather serves to establish a sense of connection and unity, fostering a shared team spirit. I believe it is very important.” (R7)*

*“I really believe that a certain static visibility still has its place. ... There are only a few individuals who buy visibility. But the fact that green values and social responsibility and all this saving the world, those are the things that attract partners today.” (R3)*

*“The traditional sponsorship, for example shirt exposure and business networks, will always be there, and they are very important and good. But if we want to move up a level, we have to find completely new ways to be relevant.” (R2)*

*“That's the kind of visibility I want. For local people, our owner-customers or future customer to see that the company is involved in good things” (R5)*

The presence of color congruity in shirt exposure allows fans to perceive the sponsorship as less commercially motivated and more supportive. This effect is particularly pronounced among fans who possess a strong emotional connection to the team colors, as they are more adept at comprehending and interpreting this signal. The Swedish clubs have taken this into account on a more extensive basis than their Finnish counterparts, although a similar trend shift can be noticed in Finland as well.

*“We still try to work on the belonging and the right of association more than the number of signs and how to work with the brands in symbiosis more than constantly shouting out the logo. And that’s also why all the logos on our clothes and in our communication are shown in congruent colors. We’ve concluded that this is the way to go, and they’ve also researched that this might actually even give greater output. You shouldn’t stick under the chair with that. After all, there are people who don’t want lots of brands shouting at them. This can be a way to integrate the brand a little more, a little more stylishly than now someone wants to sell me something.” (R4)*

Communication plays a crucial role in this study, including both the interaction between the sponsored party and the sponsor, as well as the communication directed towards customers and other stakeholders. All informants indicate that they are very engaged with the external world and the media, R1 and R2 displaying even a sense of arrogance in their communication. This has prompted other clubs to emulate their actions and see the benefits of expressing their principles outside their organization. The association of sponsors with the positive reputation of clubs, and their ability to use this association in their communication with their target audiences, has emerged as a crucial strategic factor.

*“We had a visit from the English West Ham Foundation, and they were jealous that we got to work with the club shield because no one cares about their foundation because people only care about West Ham’s football team. There’s something in that, we must find a way to the person. It’s the common thread here that both are needed and that the interest comes a lot from football and the games and that part. But that the greatest benefit may have to come elsewhere.” (R2)*

Three out of four partnerships demonstrated explicit and consistent ideals and activities that connected the sponsor to the organization. R1 and R5 share certain attributes, such as promoting diversity and providing assistance to the underprivileged within the local community. R2 and R7 share common visions and missions to promote physical activity among youngsters. Additionally, R7 emphasizes the value of partnership in terms of sales. R4 and R8 have identified instances of congruent behaviors, wherein the sponsor can include the partnership in their own communication and promote their products at the stadium.

*“The ideal partnership is when you activate the brand in your other communications. Where you see that partnership, or sponsorship as it is classically called, is something where the brand makes something more out of its relationship with the club. When you constantly try to be a part of it without always having to sell something, where you take a stand or where you communicate in other contexts. One sponsor did it, for example, when we were very far ahead last spring, and had won like 9 out of 9 rounds. They made an ad for it with a pie chart. It said since we became a partner of the club, we have won all the games.” (R4)*

R2 and R4 specifically stated that association rights, the ability to use the club brand and endeavors in company communication, can help the companies grow both brand reputation and awareness. R8 has used this approach earlier in Germany by launching a pilot study and has managed to use the communication effectively in Sweden as well. R5 believes that creative storytelling is the only thing lacking from their current partnership. R6 brought up the ineffective use of social media, which is partly due to the persons in charge, but a valuable tool, yet to be discovered properly.

The sponsors realize the importance of using different channels of communication both for creating a connection between the company and the sports club, but additionally as a means to boost their performance. Such channels include social media, member letters, and websites.

*“The production of content is crucial as it serves as the distinguishing factor. Without cohesive material, our collaborative efforts will go unnoticed, apart from the mere presentation of the company logo.” (R5)*

*“Primarily, our presence on social media has been highlighted during some football matches. However, I must admit that I have sometimes failed to utilize the partnership, particularly with the member's letter side and my overall usage of social media. Nevertheless, if there is a designated contact person available, I would want to communicate with them about the possibility of collaborating with us in some capacity. However, I have been rather negligent in attending to these matters as the partnership spins under its own force.” (R6)*

The clubs did not explore the concept of exclusivity, while two out of four sponsors (R5&R7) mentioned it as a significant component of the cooperation. Their goal is to establish themselves as the exclusive partner in a certain category and acquire a competitive advantage in the communications mix via the relationship.

*It's important to note, though, that these things are delicate, and if we put a lot of sponsoring money into them, then we need to get the most attention.” (R5)*

Despite its perceived antiquity, exposure still retains its relevance and use. However, exposure may also be employed in contemporary and harmonious ways. The concept of using collaboration in communication between both parties has emerged, with the development of new social media platforms and collective projects aimed at improving society. Storytelling as a form of marketing evokes emotional reactions that make the brands more memorable. There are several methods of emphasizing the relationship between sponsors and clubs that cater to the desired demographic. Effective communication methods, on the other hand, require a significant investment of time in collaborative efforts to craft narratives that deeply connect with the audience. Time, being a valuable resource, is crucial for establishing a fruitful collaboration.

## 4.5 Creating Shared Value

*“Many clubs have similar actions ... The club needs to differentiate somehow, which I believe we have done, and I am convinced this is the future. It is something we need to convert to a good offer for the sponsors.” (R2)*

Active engagement in sponsorship sales allows sports clubs to use their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts to attract larger investments. Sponsors may capitalize on their association privileges to reach their specific target audiences. Therefore, firms might be seen favorably while not being entirely accountable for the corporate social responsibility initiatives in the community.

*“Many people say that they desire to engage in societal discussions. Frankly speaking, while many individuals claim otherwise, self-interest frequently plays a decisive role in making judgments. We must collaborate not only with sponsors who are committed to societal betterment but also with sponsors who are inclined to make financial investments in the club. I believe this is a common trend that has a lot of benefits. A lot needs to be done. This way, sponsors can check the box that they've taken responsibility and helped, but at the same time, they make money or grow their business.” (R2)*

The concept of creating shared value was widely discussed and prominently included in the thoughts of both sides. All informants provided a multitude of existing strengths and suggestions for enhancing the collaboration in the future. R1 said that CSR initiatives generate interest among potential sponsors and are used as an essential component in partnership proposals. They have gotten positive feedback over the last two years after transitioning towards addressing societal concerns. R8 highlighted their victory by obtaining permission to vend their products at the football stadium and promote their cause while taking gradual steps towards their company CSR goals. R7 highly values the junior organization and their parents as current customers, and the ability to retail club products in their stores.

*“Creating shared value, our entire school sport is built on that theory. It's about identifying one social need; physical activity in children. Then, what is our expertise? Yes, we know sports and we know organization. Lastly, what is our business approach? The more supporters, the more sponsors, the greater relevance - that everyone wins by collaborating. Then it will be fine. And that's the thing, we need to create a model and that is what we do, where everyone who invests, wins. The schools, the children, the club, the companies, and the municipality.” (R2)*

*“We deviate from the conventional path and have been exploring a partnership model that embodies the distinctive essence of us. That prompted us to consider the concept of partnering with the club. This partnership embodies our fundamental idea of promoting little, gradual advancements that finally provide significant effects. We believe that significant achievements begin with incremental actions, such as our endeavor to revolutionize the food system to benefit human well-being and the environment. We want to obtain this approach in our cooperation, and we mean this in a literal sense.” (R8)*

There is still a role for networking in sponsorships. Businesses want to establish connections via these collaborations to meet other key decision-makers and eventually generate revenue. R6 believes that weekly company movements foster both interpersonal connections and generate fresh business prospects. R7 recognizes the importance of having the ability to invite customers to the games and enhance their relationship with other clients through this gesture.

*“Additionally, we possess the aspect of hospitality. With VIP season tickets, we have the privilege of inviting other customers to the games and engaging in commercial activities. There have been instances when several associations were brought in and provided with a tour of the facilities of the elite club. Consequently, the smaller clubs inquired about strategies for addressing certain challenges, which undoubtedly proved beneficial. Although maybe not the primary factor, it is evident that these many components together have significance for us.” (R7)*

*“If you think about this network of ours, I believe that it is also a certain kind of value that partners bump into each other. Often those responsible for partnerships are in a higher position. We hold a lot of events like this, in a way they are partner networks. Yes, it's really a good thing and it's always cool for us to see that neither of them would necessarily know each other otherwise.” (R3)*

*“Our primary objective is to maintain a safe and healthy operating environment, which will in turn allow our owner-customers to reap the financial benefits of our efforts to the fullest extent possible.” (R5)*

All club participants firmly believed that the network they offer is highly valuable. The sponsors raised the issue in two out of four instances. R2 has expressed their intention to explore the feasibility of establishing an alumni network for individuals with a past affiliation with the club. A model that is prevalent in American high schools to assist former players but is not commonly seen in Europe. The network of sponsors serves as a means for businesses to establish connections and ultimately generate B2B sales with the assistance of the club.

*“Of course, if you think about our network, we believe that it has a particular worth that some partnerships meet.” (R3)*

*“Then there's the professional network. In fact, we've developed some excellent contacts. There are corporate executives from various disciplines, and other things have grown as a result.” (R6)*

*“We are also investigating the feasibility of establishing an alumni network. They're good at it in the United States; if you've attended a school, you are part of an alumni network, and we'd like to do something similar so that everyone who goes through the system has a connection to the association in various ways. Because there are a lot of big business leaders or decision-makers who cheer us on but with whom we have no relationship. It's a tremendous waste.” (R2)*



The level of collaboration in the partnerships in Sweden is far more advanced compared to Finland. The Finnish clubs do not actively measure the success of a partnership, while the Swedish clubs have KPIs, strategies, and measuring techniques to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the collaboration. R1 and R3 state that they do not use any metrics for sponsorship success or satisfaction, but instead rely on their relationship with the decision-makers. The Finnish sponsors also stipulate that they trust their personal contacts, although they periodically monitor the performance of certain joint activities. R2 and R4 on the other hand use various types of surveys, empirical investigations, customer satisfaction indexes, and brand exposure metrics. R7 mentioned that they engage in reconciliation approximately every three months with the club, during which they address various issues with youth sports, the event department, or other relevant parties.

*“There is not a singular metric. Furthermore, we abstain from doing routine satisfaction surveys, hence I am certain that we are already acquainted with our partners. Indeed, the assessment is conducted based on predetermined criteria, but often it revolves around overall contentment.” (R3)*

*“For example, if you take the business network, we measure the customer satisfaction index and it measures how satisfied they are with the club, how much business they do between each other and there we usually get good ratings. When it comes to the traditional rights, we are very good. We have very satisfied partners.” (R2)*

The clubs want to expand their services to draw in more capital, but they are unable to sustain each new project due to a shortage of funding and people. R1 asserts that there is a significant amount of work to be done, but the available resources are inadequate. R5 believes that managing sponsorships successfully would require a dedicated and time-consuming occupation. R3 stated that the cooperation between clubs is rather non-existent, even though it could provide favorable in multiple aspects.

*“Sponsorships require open interaction from both sides. That we go towards common goals through the strengths of both parties. Together figure out how could we achieve benefits for both by cooperating.” (R1)*

*“There is no contradiction between making money, winning, and doing good. That's what our school athletics have demonstrated.” (R2)*

Companies get additional advantages by collaborating with clubs to organize activities and events. The aforementioned activities included contests and sports occasions, specifically designed for either young children or complete families, where youngsters are invited together with their parents and siblings to participate in a family club day. The use of game day activation has shown to be advantageous in terms of ticket sales and community activation. Companies may obtain exclusive

discounts or vouchers that they can then give to their customers or use to speed up ticket sales via their network. Occasionally, the matchdays were augmented with entertaining events including mascots, other sports clubs, and actors, resulting in exceptional club days that included athletic activities before and during the actual game.

Creating Shared Value (CSV) and value co-creation (VCC) are the most crucial aspects of sponsorship partnerships. CSV, where corporations strive to generate economic value while also generating value for society via their sponsorship function as a building block and as motivation for companies to engage in sponsorship. Sponsoring organizations may get several additional advantages from mutually advantageous collaborations and co-create value for both parties, provided they are committed to enhancing the connection and facilitating its expansion to new heights with regular contact over an extended amount of time.

## **5 Concluding Discussion**

### **5.1 Main Results and Conclusions**

The research questions presented in the Introduction were the following:

RQ1: How can companies benefit from sponsorship using sports clubs' CSR actions?

RQ2: What type of mutual goals can be achieved through collaboration?

RQ3: In what way can CSR cooperation create shared value efficiently in modern-day sponsorships?

All participants in the study possess a profound comprehension of the significance of sustainability. The top management of their companies emphasizes the significance of sustainability. Nevertheless, there are variations in their inclination and capacity to engage in action, as well as in their motivations for resolving these issues. Clubs with a designated sustainability manager aim to address societal problems as an integral part of their routine responsibilities. Whereas a marketing manager is constantly trying to market the team, but more seldom has time to concentrate on matters that concern a larger whole. Different club structures, like nonprofits and for-profit businesses, help in understanding the similarities and differences between the results. Certain organizations collaborate with sponsors using a "league lens" -approach, which focuses only on the elite team. In this arrangement, the junior organization has its own distinct sponsors and support. An organization that is driven by profit and combines the youth teams as integral parts of the total

entity is more likely to attract more participation and appeal to potential sponsors. The masses with all their parents and stakeholders in any club bring more attention than merely a top-tier team and its local reach. The main objective of the sponsors was on the CSR element associated with grassroots properties. According to Graeber and Scheinbaum (2022), the use of CSR-linked interpretation techniques demonstrated better performance compared to normal interpretation methods that lack a pro-social component. All participating clubs are largely owned by the respective sports organization. The elite teams, and in one instance, the event business, are incorporated due to a significant number of clients being VAT-registered. Essentially, this case study refers to nonprofit organizations that have a restricted number of corporations under their ownership. The research revealed a clear incentive between using the entire club, including junior development, as a strategy in CSR-linked sponsorship for gaining benefits, both for the for-profit top-tier team and the non-profit organization via higher investments, and companies by achieving CSR goals and objectives while improving brand reputation. Collaboration between nonprofits, or VSOs (volunteer sport organizations), and the for-profits is crucial for the companies to invest in future workforce, a sustainable future while promoting a healthy society.

As Breitbarth et al. (2011) pointed out, management should outline their CSR targets as an element of the overall club strategy. The statement is further supported by Jäger (2023) who specified that effective participation in CSR works best when tied to the organization's core business. Besides the Swedish clubs' long history in sustainable development and the seamless integration of CSR in their core business, they demonstrate an advantage by benefiting from their larger organizations and substantial investments. Football is the greatest sport in Sweden, with the most players, biggest audiences, and highest income among all Swedish sports, while football in Finland falls behind ice hockey in everything but the most players.

The clubs want to augment their offerings to attract more investments, but some face a scarcity of resources and a lack of available manpower to support each new undertaking. Therefore, clubs should explore other sources of support, such as reaching out to the Ministry of Education and Culture, or the local cities, both of which have been examined. It is important to note that there is a lack of ability to collaborate at the club level in many regions and thereby collectively create something of greater significance to attract more visibility. By using alternate sources, clubs may enhance their CSR efforts, so complementing their existing daily labor and reaping future benefits. It is crucial to bear in mind that this should pertain to the domains of health, youth, and sports, specifically linked to the fundamental goal of sports organizations within the communities.

According to the sponsors, football organizations do not need to devise numerous novel initiatives, primarily focusing on targeted measures that address contemporary societal issues that are linked to sports. Moreover, it is important that the CSR projects have a local influence and are connected to current societal challenges such as immigration, immobility, job satisfaction, health, or environmental sustainability.

Sponsorship expenditures are less expensive than other marketing efforts, but they have the potential to provide amplified returns. Thus, organizations have the potential to get a greater return on investment (ROI) via sponsorship compared to conventional marketing methods.

According to Boeuf et al. (2018), congruence arises when a rational cognitive connection is established between a sponsor and the sponsored party, either as a result of shared functional characteristics or owing to a resemblance in their respective images. When selecting sponsorship targets, firms must engage in a comprehensive evaluation of congruence, which pertains to the appropriate alignment between the company and the sports property. This evaluation should include an assessment of shared values between the two entities, as well as an examination of whether these values are effectively translated into daily tangible actions. Further supported by Chadwick et al. (2016); congruence is a key concept in sports marketing that has the power to generate stronger and more positive effects on customer responses compared to incongruent associations. The significance of shared values in establishing a common starting point is evident. Both parties must identify their intended targets and demonstrate a certain level of alignment in doing so. Clubs can enhance their involvement in their respective communities by initiating specific projects and identifying the most suitable sponsor(s) for each endeavor. The results show that the power of youth development is a starting point, while all participants agreed that we have a developing problem in youth immobility. Regular physical exercise is essential for children's overall well-being, as it not only strengthens their motor skills, physical coordination, and fitness but also fosters self-awareness and social skills through engagement in recreational activities.

The shared value framework proposed by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) that creates economic value while simultaneously addressing societal needs can be witnessed in all interviews. This fosters a beneficial cycle of success for both the company and the community, ultimately reestablishing the connection between the private and public sectors. The co-creation of value may be achieved via several approaches, depending on the preferences of the sponsors. Every source mentioned the network as a significant component of the cooperation. Networking allows

sponsors to connect with other firms and their key decision-makers, enabling them to enhance their business network via the club and potentially increase their B2B sales. Cook et al. (2023) support the networking idea by stating that links between sponsors and major sporting events, as well as the network of connected individuals, create unique networks where value may be created and traded. Hospitality falls under the same category of business practice, whereby company management or employees can invite clients to the club's football games. According to O'Reilly et al. (2018), sponsorships in sports provide ideal platforms for communication, enabling sponsors and properties to collaborate to engage with potential customers. Clubs naturally get financial assistance, but they may also gain advantages from networking, event management or ticket sales.

As Chadwick and Thwaites (2006) predicted, new innovative ideas such as child welfare, building workforce, or school projects are examples of creating successful CSR concepts through which sports organizations can argue a broader value proposition in seeking sponsorships. All of which have been successfully incorporated by one or more club respondents. These cases exemplify the "win-win-win" framework by Breitbarth et al. (2008), whereby the initiatives provide advantages for the club, the businesses involved, and the public sector. Regarding CSR initiatives made by the club either individually or with the help of a partner, companies can boost their brand in multiple ways and increase market edge. Clubs refer to association rights, which the companies in turn can use in their own communication, towards their current and future customers. The use of association rights by corporations in a sponsorship arrangement is contingent upon the specific content of the agreement, which may impose various restrictions and guidelines. However, a knowledgeable sponsorship manager considers these factors when making decisions. Maintaining a broader view, Smith and Stewart (2015) suggest corporations may effectively promote their brand and improve reputation by financing social concerns via community-based organizations using sports sponsorship as a form of goodwill.

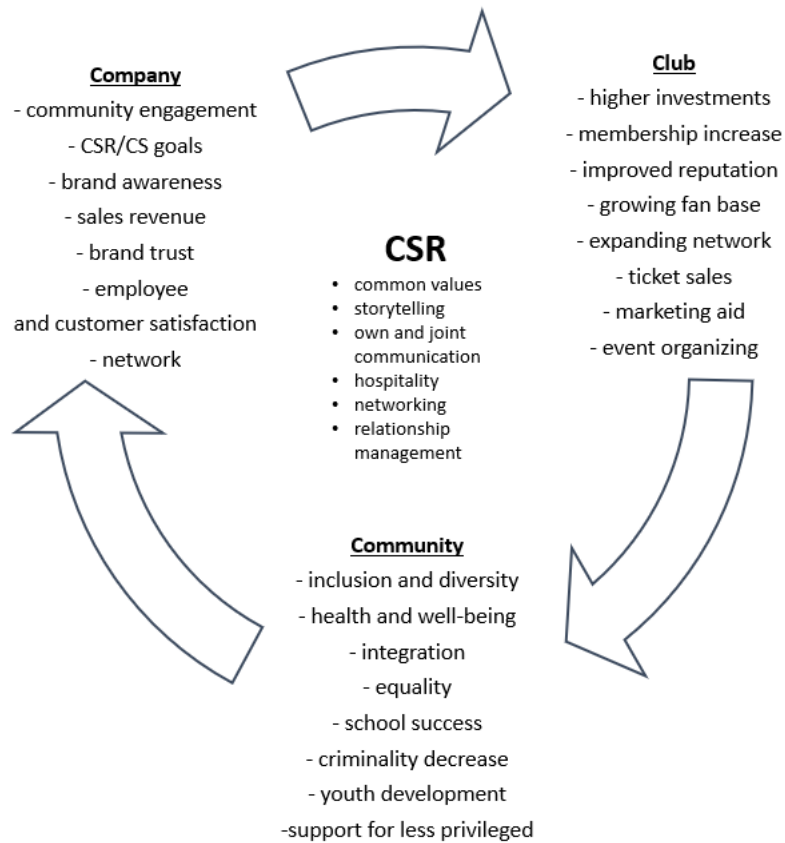
Productive collaborations require significant time, enduring connections, and effective implementation. When both parties possess sufficient resources, actively engage, and dedicate time to developing partnerships, they can generate significant contributions to the community. The significance of the call-to-action (CTA) in effectively managing the relationship was widely recognized.

Every participant agrees unanimously on the communication aspect. Exposure is rarely essential for the business; rather, it is crucial to be perceived in the appropriate context. Moreover, the companies desire to establish a connection to the club. It goes beyond just marketing exposure. It

is about establishing an association with the club and their active engagement in society. Sponsors may capitalize on consumers' passion and excitement by associating their brand with teams or players, creating a powerful emotional connection. This interrelation may result in heightened brand awareness, enhanced consumer loyalty, and ultimately, a favorable effect on financial performance. Additional contemporary methods for effectively communicating their collaborative endeavors include the company's website and various social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook). The interviewees expressed a desire to employ storytelling techniques. The clubs aim to increase visibility and raise awareness to attract more players. The companies seek to generate revenue by demonstrating goodwill towards their existing and potential customers. Another aspect that falls under the category of communicating joint efforts is color congruity. As the study results of Son and Williams (2023) indicate, the presence of color congruity, a team-colored sponsor logo serves as a notable indicator of the sponsor's endorsement of the team, which is already evident in the Swedish market.

According to Oeckl and Morrow (2022), there is limited study on the assessment and the usage of particular key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure individual CSR activities of sports groups. The Social Development Goals (SDGs) and KPIs derived from them could be the way forward. By using a common framework, used in the business world, it is possible to get more clubs working towards a more sustainable future according to the same goals. The SDGs help identify the issues and label them in a similar fashion in both the corporate and the sporting world.

It can be identified that establishing brand recognition and separation requires extensive and sustained cooperation, relationship-building, strategic planning, and active engagement. When corporations and sports clubs establish a balanced partnership characterized by frequent two-way communication and shared interests, both sides converge in a mutually beneficial paradigm. In this case study, the mutually beneficial interaction between the stakeholders of both sides leads to a scenario where all parties involved may reap the advantages. Companies and sports clubs may attain shared objectives by strategizing their partnership, establishing goals, and monitoring their progress. Companies shown a pronounced inclination to engage in health and youth development at the organizational level, hence facilitating the sports clubs' objective of growth via increased financial expenditures.



**Figure 9.** How value is co-created through CSR in the team sports context.

Creating shared value through CSR proved to be highly beneficial for all parties, the company, the sponsor, and the community, as presented in Figure 9. When sports organizations actively include CSR in their work, it creates a platform for the sponsors to engage in more modern ways than traditional exposure, while simultaneously addressing current environmental issues and societal challenges.

The study showed that Swedish clubs had a lengthier track record of addressing sustainability problems, with CSR efforts being integrated into the clubs' fundamental operations, strategy, and everyday practices. Moreover, Swedish clubs have access to a larger pool of resources, and they actively engage in cross-cultural collaboration to identify common objectives and address the shared value notion. The current research demonstrates the advantages of integrating social, environmental, and economic factors that align with an organization's values into the strategic plans of sports clubs. Businesses may enhance their brand image and contribute to society by implementing CSR initiatives and engaging in philanthropic activities. Although it may seem evident to some individuals, there remain clubs that neglect to effectively convey their main societal purpose during sponsorship talks. Instead, they focus on promoting visibility and exposure rather than

emphasizing the potential for creating customized shared value. This notion benefits both current sponsorship managers and sports clubs with their sales teams. Both parties involved in a sponsorship agreement may enhance their brand by strongly highlighting their collaborative corporate social responsibility efforts via social media and other channels. Companies may enhance their sponsorship arrangements by diligently monitoring and pursuing the mutually agreed-upon objectives. When sponsorship cooperation is based on business goals and integrated with other marketing activities, it is no longer about buying visibility, but aiming for impact. A good partnership tells a common story and even changes the world in the desired direction.

Sports marketing and corporate social responsibility have three CSR configurations, according to Cornwell (2023). Firstly, sponsors may join the clubs' CSR program. Secondly, clubs are sponsors' independent CSR initiative. Thirdly, sports sponsors might involve CSR into their sponsorship. Based on this study, it is possible to recognize all three of these aspects, but when corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerns are integrated with the club, it becomes more of an inherent reality rather than something distinct from the partnership, even if the reasons for involvement may vary. Companies get numerous benefits from sponsorship, particularly when it is associated with a specific CSR initiative inside the club. The holistic approach can improve their brand awareness and reputation, contribute to positive public relations, align with their own CSR objectives, drive sales, generate content, grow their networks, entertain prospects and customers, motivate employees, help society, and ultimately contribute to a brighter and healthier future for children.

This research offers useful insights into the present condition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerning sports sponsorships, which is valuable to the academic discipline. Moreover, these results have significance for both sports organizations and prospective sponsors to optimize their cooperation and fully use the expertise and potential of all parties involved.

## **5.2 Ethicality, Validity, and Limitations**

The methodology of the research is described in chapter three, including the used methods as well as the procedures for data collection and analysis. In this research, merely 14.29% of the top-tier clubs participating in the Finnish Veikkausliiga and the Swedish Allsvenskan were examined. Since the research targeted a small portion of the clubs in both countries and only one sponsor per club, the research scope of eight is relatively small. This raises the question of external validity. Validity is the integrity and application of the methodology and the accuracy with which the conclusions represent the data. The standardized set of open-ended questions guaranteed that, while each



session may have deviated depending on the participants' experiences, there was a consistent set of subjects pertaining to CSR, partnership, and values that every participant discussed. The content quality of the interview questions was ensured through evaluation and testing. Preliminary interviews assisted in assessing the appropriateness of interview questions in gathering comprehensive data that address the research inquiries at hand. Semi-disguised duplication of questions during the interview and follow-up questions afterward were asked to guarantee a precise comprehension and explanation of the provided comments. Since the informants were open to participating in the research and informative concerning the sports properties and their features, the results can help identify similarities to other sports clubs with similar characteristics, which can prove beneficial for other organizations in regard to transferability. The adoption of a non-probability purposive sample approach when choosing participants may introduce selection bias. However, this method was chosen because it allows for the inclusion of informants who are actively engaged in sports CSR and may provide insights into the impact of such initiatives on their sponsors and the local community and can therefore be considered successful with well-defined criteria and a logical justification for including certain individuals. The sponsors were suggested by the participating clubs, and their selection may have been impacted by bias as they were not directly chosen, despite the researcher being given several options to choose from.

The outcome could have been influenced by epistemology, not necessarily in a subjective manner, but rather through the researcher's employer's knowledge. Within an extensive sports network, 25% of the respondents have had prior personal interaction with the researcher. Thus, a deliberately chosen neutral position was adopted towards the subject, and careful emphasis was placed on the questioning process to ensure that informants could provide the most accurate and reliable information.

The research data was collected in the individuals' native languages, Finnish or Swedish, and then translated into English. During the process of switching between languages, a manual translation was performed to secure that the intended meaning of the interviewee is accurately conveyed without any loss or distortion. For the literature review a diverse range of sources, including websites, books, e-books, academic journal articles, and scholarly publications was exploited, all of which are presented in the reference list. The process of information retrieval was a continuous process, involving examination and clarification utilizing a variety of information resources, retrieval techniques, and library services, while also critically evaluating the information acquired.

Additionally, an assessment of numerous theoretical frameworks that examine comparable themes has been conducted.

Ethicality was considered throughout the course of the research. While it is essential to meticulously and securely preserve the data, every file was password protected on a personal computer. To optimize the potential of data, efficient administration, extensive documentation, and frequent backups were ensured by naming the files and folders accordingly and using an external hard drive. Furthermore, Master students are required to retain the data used in their master's theses for a duration of two years after their graduation which will be done by using private account cloud storage services with encrypted files. Every scientific study involving human subjects must possess a distinct justification and participants were provided with comprehensive and unbiased information regarding the study. Prior to participating in the study, all club informants were informed about the need of incorporating a commercial sponsor. All informants were requested permission to record, transcribe, and use the collected data anonymously for the purpose of the study. The anonymity of respondents was guaranteed by employing pseudonyms and implementing coding techniques. Their consent to participate was voluntary and uninfluenced, without any form of persuasion.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

The current research is defined by certain limitations, therefore offering exciting prospects for future research endeavors. Increasing the number of sponsor participants would be advantageous to ascertain the representativeness of the findings for all sponsors associated with the individual clubs. Additional participants would also be advantageous in determining which types of firms have similar goals in terms of sponsorship and anticipate equivalent returns on investment. Furthermore, conducting interviews with clubs on a broader scope is highly recommendable to ensure that the findings may be applied to both compared leagues on a larger scale.

Integrating the expertise of sales teams in clubs has the potential to provide valuable insights into the alignment between sales offers and the objectives of sustainability management. It can also shed light on whether salespersons base their value propositions on a sustainable perspective in their sales pitches. Furthermore, expanding the meso-level study to a macro-level analysis would enhance its depth and trustworthiness. By conducting community-wide quantitative research, it can be determined whether CSR communication is as advantageous as perceived by clubs and sponsors. This might be accomplished by conducting a survey of firm customers and club fan

communities to see if association rights are an effective means of expressing shared values and CSR efforts. The studies might simultaneously investigate the effectiveness of various channels in communicating partnerships linked to CSR.

The present study indicates the terminology and factors employed vary greatly and this makes it difficult to collect information and effectively compare previous research. It is evident that even the sports organizations use different terminologies in their efforts, ranging from sustainability and responsibility to ESG (environmental, social, and governance) and CSR. Hence, it is important to address this aspect when doing research in order to identify applicable prior studies and ensure that all parties involved are discussing the same issues and ideas, although under different terminology.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview guide for clubs

1. Describe your role in the organization.
2. How many members does the club have?
3. Could you describe your process of attaining sponsors?
4. What kind of benefits can the sponsor get by entering into agreements with the club?
5. What do you wish to achieve through sponsorships?
6. Describe the importance of CSR for the club.
7. Why do you invest in corporate social responsibility?
8. What kind of CSR activities are you involved in?
9. How do you co-operate with the sponsors?
  - a. As a whole?
  - b. In CSR-related subjects?
10. How do you maintain the partnerships?
11. Which kind of CSR activities are you lacking, and do you have plans for suitable partners for them?
12. How do you measure the success of a sponsorship?
13. What is your idea of an ideal partnership?

## **Appendix 2. Interview guide for sponsors**

1. Describe your role in the organization.
2. Which field is the company active in?
3. What is your number of employees?
4. What is your market area?
5. Why do you sponsor?
6. Why have you chosen the specific club for your investment?
7. What do you wish to receive from the partnership?
8. How do you co-operate with the club today?
9. How could the relationship be improved?
10. What kind of CSR-related goals does the company have?
11. How did the sports organizations' CSR engagement affect your willingness to invest?
12. Which kind of non-monetary benefits have you acquired through this particular partnership?
13. How do you measure the success of the sponsorship?
14. What would you need from the partnership to invest more?
15. What would your ideal partnership look like?