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# DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW CUSTOMER SEGMENT FOR KOUVOLAN PALLONLYÖJÄT

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## ABSTRACT

Finnish baseball is presently gaining popularity and has seen a rise in international interest during the last few years, mainly through social media. Therefore, the thesis aimed to study the possibility of sports tourism through the perspective of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. Moreover, the research objectives were to evaluate if there is a potential for the organisation to attract foreign visitors to home games of the first team, to measure the current interest level of Finnish baseball for foreign spectators are, and to determine who belongs to the foreign spectator customer segment.

The research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative research, resulting in mixed-method research. An online survey was sent to students of Xamk Kouvola campus, and 20 applicable responses were received. In addition to the survey, a form interview was held with Mika Toivola, the executive director of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, to showcase the need for the new customer segment. Using mixed-method research allowed for a better understanding of the research topic.

The results of the study showed that there was some untapped potential in attracting foreign visitors to Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät home games. The lack of previous marketing efforts, and the absence of prior research on the topic made it difficult to evaluate the true potential that foreign visitors have for Finnish baseball organisations. Proposals were made to Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät on how they can further attract the potential customer segment to their home games.

**Keywords:** sports tourism, international Finnish baseball, team sports entertainment, social media marketing

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Finnish baseball, also known as pesäpallo, has been coined as the national sport of Finland. Developed by Lauri "Tahko" Pihkala in the 1920's through a combination of various traditional ball-batting team games and American baseball, the foundation of the game is similar to other ball-batting games. One team tries to score by hitting the ball and running through the bases, and the other team tries to defend by catching the ball and putting the runners out. The key, and the most critical difference between Finnish baseball and most other popular bat-and-ball games is the vertical pitching of Finnish baseball. (Pesis, n.d.)

Hitting the ball, as well as controlling the power and direction of the hit, is much easier, giving the offensive game much more variety, speed, and tactical dimensions than in baseball. In contrast, the fielding team is forced to counter the batter's choices with defensive schemes and anticipation, and the game becomes a mental challenge. Its success as a spectator sport is based on the unique combination of skills, smarts, athleticism, and teamwork required in the modern game. In the summer of 2022, Finnish baseball officially celebrated its 100th anniversary. (Pesis, n.d.)

### **1.1 Background and commissioner**

Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät is a Finnish baseball team located in Kouvola, Finland. Founded in 1931 (Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät n.d.), they are one of the most successful teams in the history of the sport, with 5 championships in the top Finnish league, with the latest dating back to 1976. Currently, "Kopla," or "KPL," is one of the biggest teams in the highest league of Finnish baseball, Superpesis. The team has been constantly one of the most successful teams in terms of competitive success, popularity, revenue, and youth player development in recent years.

Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät has appeared in the finals of the league playoffs three times since 2018, only missing a long-awaited championship by small margins.

With an average attendance of 1871 spectators at their home games during the regular season in 2023, the team is also one of the most popular teams in the league, with the home game average attendance being the 3<sup>rd</sup> best overall out of 13 teams in the league during the 2023 regular season (Pesistulokset, n.d.). Their current stadium, KSS Energia Areena, is the biggest in the league, at best capable of holding approximately 5000 spectators (Superpesis, n.d.).

I had the opportunity to do my advanced training for the organisation, and while working there during the summer of 2023, I had the chance to learn about the current business environment of the organisation and the challenges the organisation faces. Because of the nature of sports business, teams are constantly trying to find new ways to create new opportunities to elevate their operations to a new level, with Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät being no exception. New research could drive the organisation to compete better with competitor teams and financially help the team to win the long-desired championship after almost 50 years.

One of the most important factors to look for new revenue sources also relates to the current financial state of the Kouvola region. When the municipalities of Elimäki, Jaala, Valkeala, Anjalankoski, Kouvola, and Kuusankoski merged to become the new city of Kouvola in 2009 (VisitKouvola, n.d.), the new city has in practice struggled with hefty economic problems since the beginning due to a multitude of reasons. For example, in 2022, Kouvola had a €20 million deficit in their financial statement of the year (PK & Ankkuri 2023). Because of the financial struggles, there have been a number of ways the city has tried to cut costs to turn the tide of the economic situation. This also reaches to the funding provided for local sports teams.

For 2024, Kouvola is planning to drop their marketing sponsorship for sports teams and athletes. The total amount of funds allocated for sports sponsorships drop from the previous 177 000 euros to only 71 000 euros in 2024, which is only around forty per cent from the previous amount. This also affects Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, which alone received 36 000 euros in 2023, which would be over

half of all the funds allocated for 2024. (Tieaho 2024.) Currently, there seems to be no official study done on the international spectator potential of Finnish baseball, and conducting research on foreign visitors could lead to a new customer segment and revenue source for the organization, which could also indirectly create positive financial effects for the city of Kouvola.

A prominent example of the potential that sports tourism has for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät and Kouvola is Itä-Länsi (English: East-West), the all-star event of Finnish baseball. The event is held annually in different cities throughout Finland and attracts Finnish baseball fans domestically to the event city for a whole weekend. Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät and the city of Kouvola are planning to apply for hosting the event in 2025. Based on studies of the two previous Itä-Länsi -events held in Tampere and Sotkamo in 2022 and 2023 respectively, the event is expected to attract over 10 000 visitors, which would generate a revenue of 1-1,5 million euros for the local economy. (Puhakka 2024.) Based on the revenue that domestic visitors generate during Itä-Länsi, it is safe to say that international visitors could also generate extra revenue for Kouvola and Kouvola.

## **1.2 Development settings**

The aim of the research is to develop a potential new customer segment for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät to ultimately increase the revenue and average attendance of the organisation. Not only is it the aim of Kouvola to have their own long-term strategy, but also the aim of the Finnish baseball Association and Superperis Oy, the governing bodies of professional Finnish baseball. In 2023, it was revealed by the two organisations that there is a goal to increase the revenues and attendance figures of all Finnish baseball organisations by a total of fifty per cent by 2026 (Superperis 2023).

There are also multiple objectives to achieve the aim of the research. The first objective is to study the possibility of sports tourism and the use of social media through the perspective of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. The second objective is to hold a survey for international students of XAMK Kouvola campus, who are the survey sample group of the research. The third objective is to identify the whole

customer segment outside the chosen survey sample group through an interview with the executive director of Kopla, Mika Toivola. The final objective is to analyse the results of the survey and combine the analysis with the identification of the whole customer segment to determine and evaluate whether there is enough potential that the customer segment is significant enough to be a part of the strategy of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät in the future.

The purpose of the thesis is to study the possibility of sports tourism through the perspective of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. The current position of Finnish baseball as a spectator sport is very marginal in an international aspect. Based on this research problem, the research questions are to: (1) evaluate if there is potential for Kopla to attract foreign visitors to home games of the first team, (2) measure the current potential level of interest in Finnish baseball for foreign spectators are, and (3) determine who belongs to the foreign spectator customer segment.

Based on the results, the goal of the thesis is to develop and analyse the possibilities of the new customer segment and suggest realistic measures to attract foreign spectators to the home games of Kopla in the future. Another goal of the thesis is to work as a precedent case for future research, due to the lack of current research on the subject.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The research was conducted as mixed-method research. Mixed-method research uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods combined, to draw from the strengths of each. The approach allows to obtain multiple perspectives, build comprehensive understanding of the topic, and explain statistical results in more depth. (Harvard Catalyst n.d.) The thesis uses an anonymous survey for international students of Xamk Kouvola campus to obtain quantitative data, and an interview with the executive director of Kopla to obtain qualitative data. The survey is preferred to other quantitative methods as it can be distributed to a high number of people and the data can be gathered and processed easily. The interview is favoured as it gives current in-depth information about the relationship between Kopla and the potential of foreigner spectators.

The survey sample group of international students is used to measure the sample group's current level of awareness and interest in Kopla and sports overall. The research sample is chosen due to several factors. As the survey is directed to international students at Xamk, the research sample is already known to be more interested towards Finland, Kouvola, and Finnish culture due to their chosen location for university education, and therefore is a part of the customer segment for the Kouvola region. The use of Xamk students also excludes the need of third-party organisations, which would most likely be needed to analyse the whole international customer segment. The survey specifically tells us about the potential that a portion of the current English-speaking population of Kouvola might have to visit the home games of Kopla.

#### **1.4 Framework and limitations of the study**

Sports tourism can be differentiated between active or passive sports tourism. Active sport tourism participants are defined as those who actively engage in professional sports or recreational activities during trips, and passive sports tourism is related to spectatorship, such as travelling to watch sports. Passive sport participants include those who follow mega events, (e.g., Olympic Games), major events (e.g., World Athletics Championship), or local events (e.g., a football match of their favourite team or city marathons). (Morfoulaki et al. 2023, 2.)

The potential of Kouvola for sports tourism through both active and passive sports tourism has been researched by Airo and Puonti (2014), with a focus on the comparison of the Kouvola sports facilities and their competitiveness to other regions in Finland through benchmarking. Differently from the study of Airo & Puonti, this thesis focuses on only passive sports tourism through one specific sport and one specific team. In terms of other Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät research, examples of research include Salo (2017), who researched the brand of the team through Finnish visitors, and Hovi (2019), who researched the incorporation of the background organisation. These topics are not discussed in this study.



The current level of international visitors at Kopla's home games is very low and marginal, which means there is currently no existing customer segment for which to conduct a survey. This also means that the geographical or demographic background from which visitors would come from is not clear. Thus, the scope of the thesis is to research the potential of only the survey sample group, although the rest of the possible customer segment is identified according to one of the objectives of the thesis. The thesis only focuses on sports tourism through the perspective of a spectator, and not from the perspective of participating in the sport itself. Figure 1 illustrates the relations between the concepts discussed in the theoretical framework.

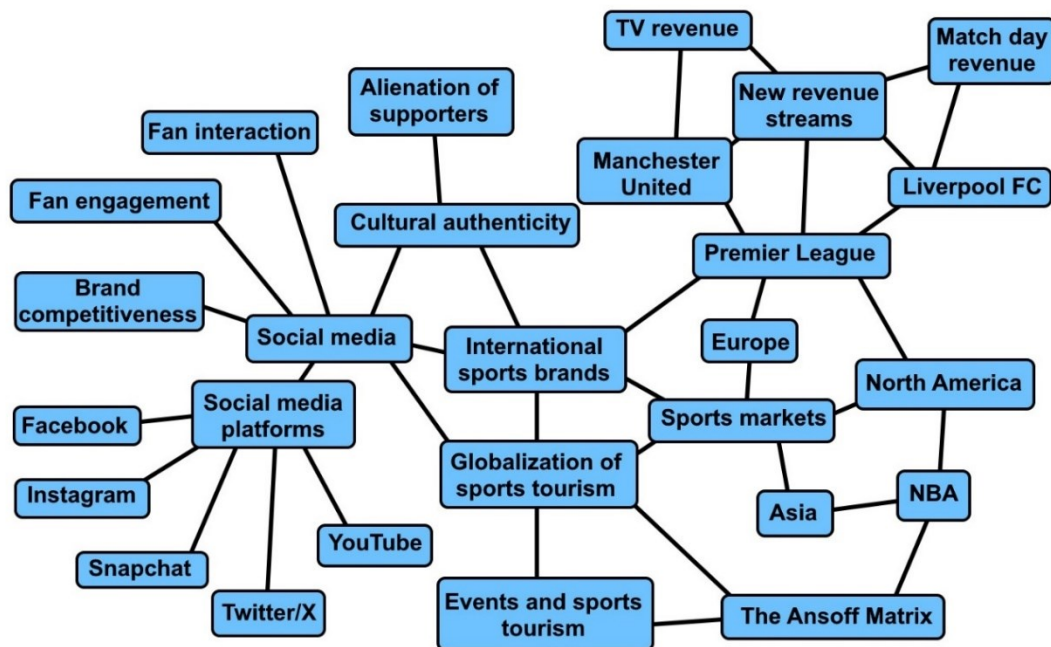


Figure 1: Relationship between the concepts of the theoretical framework

It should be noted that the commissioner, Kouvola Pallonlyöjät ry, is still a registered association and not incorporated. This means that the financial possibilities of the organisation are not the most comprehensive due to the current scale of operations for all teams throughout professional Finnish baseball. Because of this, the thesis does not focus on the financial investments that promotive actions might require, or how much Kopla should invest in the promotive actions for the newly identified customer segment.

## 2 SPORTS TOURISM AND MARKETING

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the thesis is discussed. The chapter discusses how sports can be seen as a sector of the tourism industry, how the internationalisation and the rise of tourism in sports have affected the marketing efforts of sports teams, and how the use of social media creates fan engagement in the sports industry. The chapter also includes an introduction to the Ansoff Matrix, which plays a prominent role in the marketing changes of different organisations.

### 2.1 Tourism and sports

Events figure prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations, but as late as the 1960's and 1970's the events sector was not yet recognised as an area of separate study within leisure, tourism or recreation. Event tourism is nowadays generally recognised as being inclusive of all planned events in an integrated approach to development and marketing. Surprisingly though, many planned events are still produced with little, or no thought given to their tourism appeal or potential. Sometimes this is due to the organisers' specific aims, and sometimes there is simply no previous relationship established between events and tourism. (Getz 2008, 403-409.)

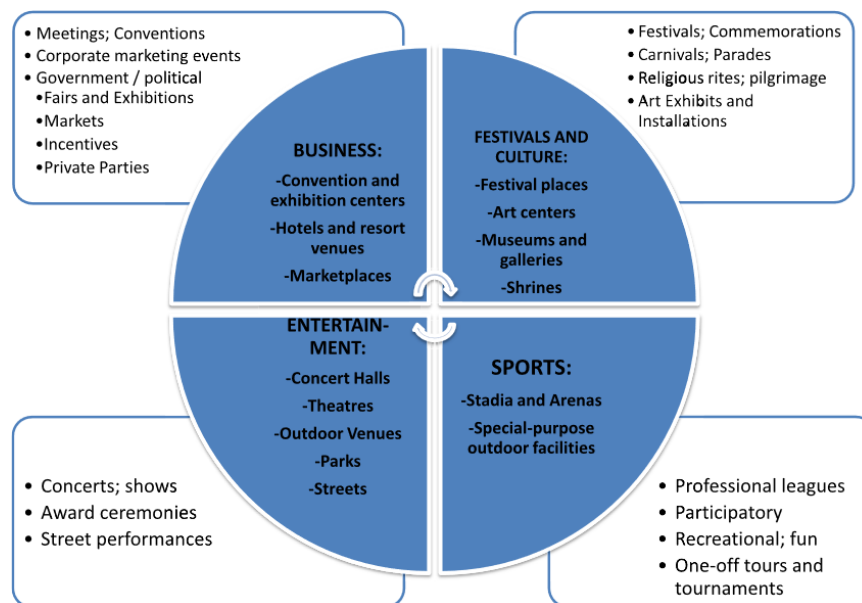


Figure 2: Typology of planned events and venues: An event-tourism perspective (Getz & Page 2016)

Along with various types of event tourism, such as business, entertainment, and festivals/culture tourism, sports tourism is a prominent sector of event tourism, as shown in Figure 2 (Getz & Page 2016, 594). Across North America, almost every city now has a sport tourism initiative, often with dedicated personnel and agencies, and global competition to bid on different events and attract the sport event tourist is fierce (Getz 2008, 411). This is understandable, as more and more tourists are interested in sport activities during their trips whether sports are the main objective of travel or not (UNWTO n.d.).

Internationalisation of the global economy has meant that sports teams marketers nowadays look to the global market instead of one local region in their marketing efforts, such as their home country market. The substantial increase in middle class households in China and India together with their large population have attracted more professional sport teams, such as teams from the National Basketball League to these countries. In addition, the declining birth rate and ageing population of countries in Northern Europe and the United States has spurred professional sports leagues to focus on the new regions. Sports teams are also expanding to foreign markets to capitalise on the rapid economic development of these countries, with globally millions of dollars generated in ticket sales and merchandise, with much of it coming through the brand of sports teams. (Ratten & Ratten 2011, 614-618.)

One of the most popular passive sports tourism activities and international phenomena is attending football matches, such as matches of the English Premier League, an example of a truly internationally established league. The 2018/2019 season of the Premier League was broadcast in 188 countries, to an estimated cumulative television audience of 3.2 billion people (Tobar & Ramshaw 2022, 3). The 2021/22 season saw the average revenue of a club in the league rise to an all-time high of 5.5 billion pounds (Deloitte 2023). In the summer of 2023, the league held its' first pre-season tournament in the USA, with six clubs playing nine matches in five major cities (Premier League n.d.).

Due to the popularity of the Premier League worldwide, clubs have started to target tourists as a new customer segment. Clubs have established museums and stadium tours at their home grounds, making them some of the most visited tourist attractions in the UK's largest cities, such as Liverpool FC attracting a tour/museum attendance of 340 000 in 2017. Apart from the tourist attractions at the stadiums, a major contributor to the increased revenue by tourists is the match-day revenue, particularly from hospitality suites offered for tourists. For example, at the end of the 2019 season, Manchester United reported revenues of 110,8 million pounds from corporate boxes and indicated them as a main driver of match-day revenues. (Tobar & Ramshaw 2022, 437.)

Because of the profitability of tourists for Premier League clubs, local supporters have been however experiencing negative aspects from the increased number of tourists at Premier League games. Examples of negative impacts for local supporters include increased cost to attend matches, reduction of tickets dedicated to local supporters, feelings of place-displacement and alienation by local supporters, inappropriate behaviour by tourists, and limitations to produce and follow traditions, such as singing songs. It is argued that if the current direction to promote tourism continues, and local supporters keep being marginalised, that the match-day attractiveness could be compromised, resulting in non-sustainable football tourism. (Tobar & Ramshaw 2022, 440-442.)

The problems with local sporting events with too much focus on tourism can be seen elsewhere as well. As explained by Donald Getz (2008, 407), local and regional events are problematic from a tourism perspective. Some of them do in fact have tourism potential that can be developed, requiring investment, but some are simply not interested in tourism. If local events are primarily community or culturally oriented, it is argued to not exploit them, as the issue of preserving cultural authenticity and local control emerges whenever tourism goals are attached to local and regional events. (Getz 2008, 407.)

## 2.2 Social media and sports

According to Heggde and Shainesh (2018, 4) social media is used actively by seventy-two per cent of internet users, and regardless of age, people spend huge amounts of time on social media sharing and browsing information. Social media offers an invaluable opportunity to build sustainable bonds with consumers and to create and facilitate brand advocacy by encouraging positive conversations about the brand among consumers (Heggde & Shainesh 2018, 20). Social media offers a huge array of different social media platforms for marketing. For example, 94 percent of business-to-consumer marketers use Facebook for customer acquisition (Heggde & Shainesh 2018, 5).

Apart from, Facebook, other popular platforms include WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube (Heggde & Shainesh 2018, 5). Platforms have different strengths and weaknesses based on the organisation's type, for example, companies like to use Instagram to convey company culture and an employer brand through pictures and videos with fewer posts, while Twitter (now called X) requires higher volumes of content and greater frequency of posts (Jenkins 2022, 22-25). The social media environment has also allowed the creation and recognition of niche groups, facilitated by the fragmentation and specialisation of both consumers and brands (Plume et al. 2017).

The sports industry is also heavily affected by social media, which plays a key role in the branding and engagement of fans for sports teams globally. The goal to form and broaden consumer engagement for a brand is due to the increase of loyalty for the brand, which in turn increases the revenues and competitiveness of a brand (Annamalai et al. 2021, 1). In their study, Annamalai et al. (2021) researched the social media fan engagement of the Indian Premier League, the top global league of cricket. Based on over 4000 Facebook posts generated between 2015 and 2017 by different teams of the league, the study argues that the level of fan engagement depends on various factors, which are content vividness, content type, seasonality, and team performance. (Annamalai et al. 2021, 2-4.)

For content vividness, text is the least vivid, and video is the most vivid content. Content types include information, remuneration, social, or entertainment content. The scale of seasonality is between peak season and off-season, and the scale of team performance is between a well-performing team and a poor-performing team. All the aforementioned factors contribute to fan engagement, where it was argued that more engagement produces more likes, comments, and shares, and an overall net positivity of the team, whereas vice versa, less engagement means less likes, comments, shares, and net negativity. Figure 3 is formulated to explain the relationship between the different factors. (Annamalai et al. 2021, 2-6.)

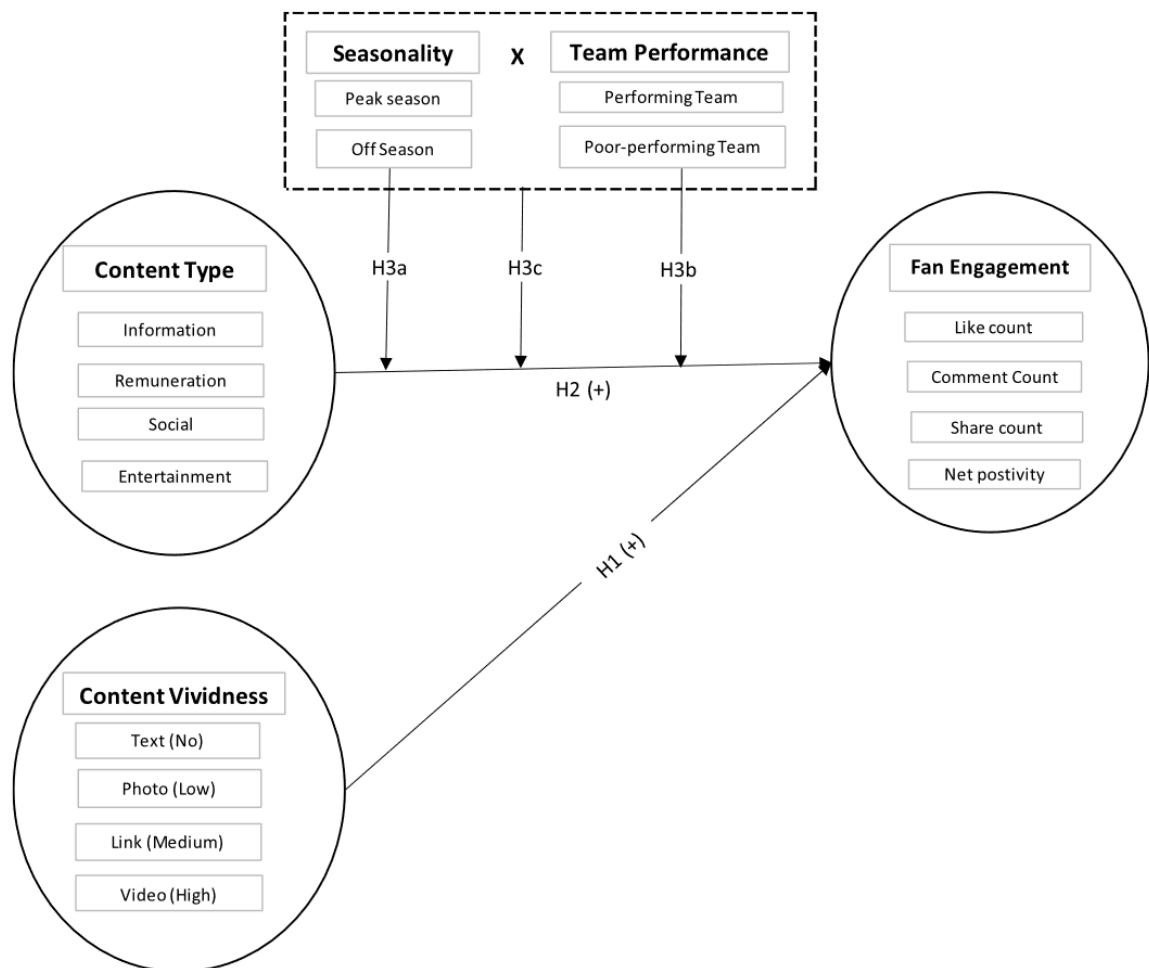


Figure 3: Research model with operationalisation of variables (Annamalai et al. 2021)

Based on the analysis of the Indian Premier League, all of the hypotheses of the study were fully or partially supported. It was argued that the content vividness level of a post has a positive association with fan engagement, such that the content with high vividness results in enhanced fan engagement. Surprisingly, it

was analysed that for likes, comments, and net positivity scores, fans are more likely to engage with low vividness content than with high vividness content. In contrast, high vividness gained the maximum number of shares. Thus, it was determined that it is the strategic decision of a club to determine which way is better. (Annamalai et al. 2021, 2-8.)

It was argued that in a sport context, the content type of a post influences fan engagement in a way, where social content type results in maximum fan engagement among all content types presented in the study, which was also proven by the analysis. Other proven arguments made in the study were that seasonality moderates the influence of the content type on fan engagement, where the impact of content type on fan engagement is stronger in the peak season than in the off-season. In addition, the current success and performance level of the team moderates the relationship between content type and fan engagement, in that a better team performance strengthens the relationship between content type and fan engagement. Together, seasonality and team performance have an interactive effect on the relationship between content type and fan engagement. (Annamalai et al. 2021, 2-8.)

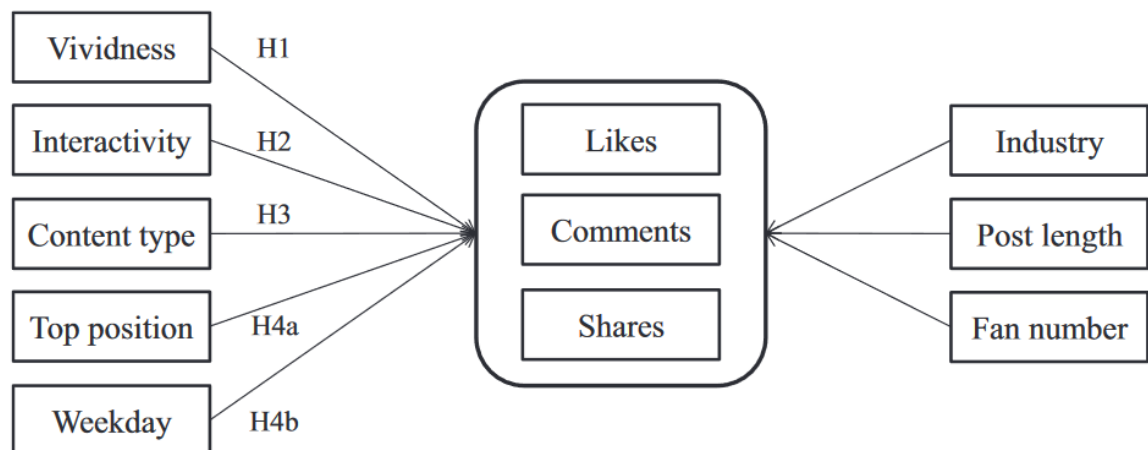


Figure 4: Conceptual framework (Schultz 2017)

Schultz (2017) comes to many of the same conclusions, for example, that the degree of post vividness has a positive effect on post interaction. Different from the study of Annamalai et al. (2021), where the focus is solely on the sports industry, the research of Schultz involves an all-around view of brand engagement in several different industries. Due to this difference, Schultz'

research introduces three more factors alongside content vividness and content type that leads to brand engagement. These are interactivity, top position (on a social media page), and weekday. Figure 3 has been formed from these slightly different set of factors. (Schultz 2017, 27.)

Alongside content vividness and content type, interactivity of a post refers to the level of which a post animates a response from a user. Examples of interactive posts include links to different websites, polls, and different contests and quizzes. The top position means that the longer a post is at the top of the (social media) page, the higher the number of post interactions it receives. The final factor of social media engagement is weekday, although Schultz argues that in the future as accessibility of social media increases, posts published on weekdays lead to neither more nor less post interactions than post published on weekends. (Schultz 2017, 25-27.)

### 2.3 The Ansoff Matrix

Developed by H. Igor Ansoff, the Ansoff Matrix (Figure 4) is a marketing strategy tool to help organisations achieve growth for the products and services it sells.

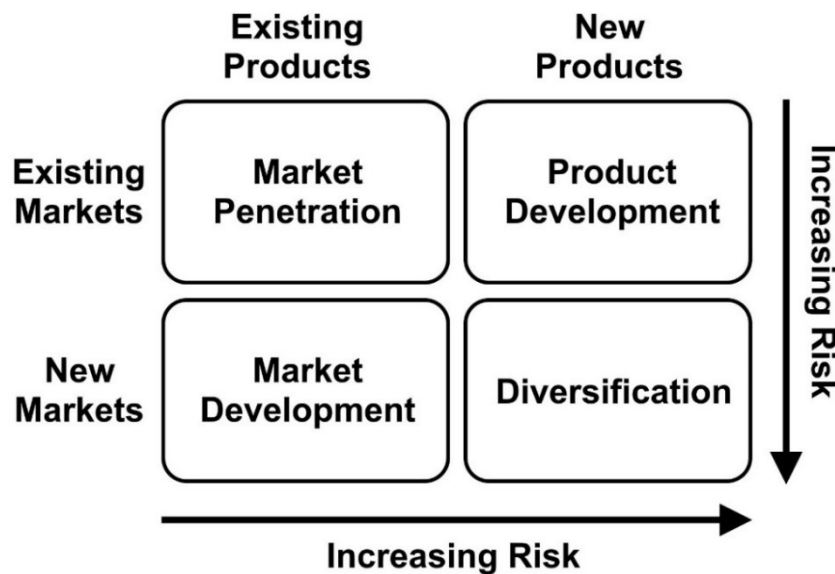


Figure 5: The Ansoff Matrix (Ansoff 1957)



The Ansoff Matrix consists of four unique concepts to develop a marketing strategy, with each market strategy showcased being riskier than the previous. **Market penetration** consists of increasing sales without departing from the original product-market strategy. Sales are increased by either increasing the volume of sales to current customers, or by finding new customers for present products. **Market development** consists of adapting the current product line to new markets and customers. In opposite, **product development** maintains the existing market and customers, but offers new products with new and distinctive characteristics from the previous products offered. Finally, **diversification** consists of simultaneous departure from the present product line and present market and customers. (Ansoff 1957.)

In the study, it is stated however that in most actual situations a business would follow several of the different strategies at the same time. It is argued that market penetration, market development, and product development is usually a sign of a progressive, well-run business and may be essential to survival in the face of economic competition. The diversification strategy is deemed to be the riskiest strategy. This is due to the new skills, new techniques, and new facilities needed, which are not as mandatory in the other three strategies, representing a distinct break with past business experiences. (Ansoff 1957.)

### **3 THE STATE OF INTERNATIONAL FINNISH BASEBALL**

As stated, there seems to be no prior study done for any team, or Finnish baseball as a whole on the potential of international spectators. However, even without a prior study done yet on the international spectator potential of Finnish baseball, there have already been multiple official efforts to grow the knowledge of the game internationally. In this chapter, the previous and current efforts to grow the knowledge of the game outside of Finland are discussed. The chapter also applies the theory discussed in the previous chapter to Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät and Finnish baseball and highlights examples from other sports on the potential of foreigner spectators.

There has been a growth of international interest for the game of Finnish baseball, especially during the last few years. Several foreign news outlets have run stories about the game, including the New York Times (Mather 2016) and CNN, where it was described that it is difficult to know where to look because of all the action (Mackintosh & Kiernan 2019). In India, the game has even seen a rise in popularity through YouTube videos (Arffman 2016). In the top league of Finnish baseball, Superpesis, some matches have been played in foreign countries as a promotional effort for the sport. For instance, the opening match of the league has been played in Fuengirola, Spain for five years between 2017-2023, and the sixth being played in the spring of 2024 (Fugepesis, n.d.). During the same year as the first game in Fuengirola was played, Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät was also a part of an international match, where the team played the opening match of the 2017 season against Joensuu Maila in Stockholm, Sweden at Zinkensdamm IP (Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät 2017).

The use of social media has absolutely been critical in the increase of international interest for Finnish baseball. For instance, video clips from games have been shared numerous times on social media sites, which have gathered views in countries outside of Finland. In 2022, a video clip of Teemu Nurmio's play, which saw the player diving dangerously to a river trying to catch the ball, was shared on various American Twitter accounts with millions of followers (Ikola 2022). Similarly, various video clips from the TalviSuper games, a winter pre-season series, have seen thousands or even millions of views on TikTok. Seven video clips have gathered over 100 000 views, and the top watched video clip has seen 4,2 million views. Because of the exposure, many people from foreign countries have been asking about the game and its' rules in English. (Niemistö 2024.) Going forward, the role of social media will continue to be a key element in marketing the game for foreigner spectators.

In addition to the professional teams having taken some advantage from the rise of international popularity, the amateur-level Pesäpallo World Cup has been played a total of 11 times, since the tournament was first held in 1992. In 2023, the tournament was played in Hyvinkää, Finland, to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup>

anniversary of the foundation of Finnish baseball, although the tournament has regularly been played in other countries as well. Participants of the 2023 edition of the tournament included countries such as Australia, Estonia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and for the first time, Canada. The fastest-growing area of Finnish baseball is Asia, but financial challenges limit the growth of the game, and the limit participation of teams for the World Cup from Asia, such as Bangladesh and India. (Pesis 2023.) Even though the Finnish Superpesis can be currently classified as the only professional league of Finnish baseball in the world, the World Cup shows that there are nowadays amateur games and players in foreign countries too.

By using the Ansoff Matrix to analyse the current main marketing strategy of Finnish baseball and Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, it can be determined that the current strategy used is the Market Penetration Strategy, in which the existing product is sold to existing customers. By shifting focus to foreigner visitors by developing the new foreigner customer spectator segment, the strategy of Finnish baseball and Kopla would move towards the riskier Market Development Strategy. In this strategy, the existing product is taken to new markets, in the case of Finnish baseball through new demographic or geographical markets. The key changes would be to consider new channels and routes to market, and campaigning to the new target segment (Oxford College of Marketing 2023).

Similarly to Finnish baseball teams, a great recent example of a Finnish team already shifting focus to attract foreigner visitors to home games is HIFK Helsinki, a professional team playing in Liiga, the highest league of ice hockey in Finland. For HIFK Helsinki, the same words can be said about moving to the Market Development Strategy. A few years ago, the HIFK organisation shifted some of their marketing strategies, which included marketing to new and different customer segments and marketing in new geographical locations, inside and outside of the Helsinki metropolitan area. Included in the new marketing strategies was a decision to create advertising for different language groups as well. (Pajala 2023.)

The organisation has been promoting the team, “at least in Finnish, Swedish, English, German, Spanish, Estonian, Persian and Vietnamese,” as described by the Marketing and Sustainability Director of HIFK Helsinki, Raakel Koittola. As a result of the expanded marketing strategy and advertising for new language groups, the average attendance at HIFK home games grew from about 7000 spectators to almost 8000 spectators in a single season. It is also important to note that the financial resources of marketing were not expanded significantly, but the growth can be seen as a successful shift in the marketing strategy of the organisation and an interesting team on the ice. (Pajala 2023.)

As shown by the example of Premier League (Tobar & Ramshaw 2022), the National Basketball League (Ratten & Ratten 2011) and HIFK Helsinki (Pajala 2023), a similar shift of marketing described in the Ansoff Matrix to a new customer segment for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät could boost the financial state of the team. However, as also shown by the examples, such as the problems the Premier League has faced (Tobar & Ramshaw 2022), it is also very important to discuss about the problems that have risen due to sports tourism elsewhere with Kopla. The current potential of Finnish baseball matches as an international sports tourism destination is very uncertain, but it cannot be underestimated that this could also have negative impacts from the perspective of local supporters, and how to minimise the problems that could rise. However, at this stage of identifying and developing the customer segment, these factors should not be a considerable obstacle for Kopla due to the overall smaller scale of Finnish baseball operations compared to the other sports.

#### **4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research methods are defined as the tools and techniques used to collect and analyse data (Dawson 2019, 2). In this chapter, the research methodology used in the study are explained in detail. The research was conducted using mixed-method research. The implementation of mixed-method research involves collecting, analysing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a single project or study. Mixed-method research results in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that is researched because of the integration

of both quantitative and qualitative data. (Leavy 2022, 9.) Mixed-method research is generally appropriate when the purpose is to describe, explain or evaluate a phenomenon, and is used routinely in applied social science research (Leavy 2022, 9-10), such as business research. The method of mixing different research approaches to study the same phenomenon can also be called triangulation (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022).

**Quantitative research** is characterised by deductive approaches to the research process aimed at proving, disproving, or lending credence to existing theories (Leavy 2022, 9). At the core of quantitative research is studying and measuring how variables change (Martin 2012, 4). This type of research involves measuring variables and testing relationships between variables in order to reveal patterns, correlations, or causal relationships. (Leavy 2022, 9.) Quantitative research primarily intends to make causal inferences concerning two or more variables of interest (Laher et al. 2019, 19). Research may employ linear methods of data collection and analysis that result in statistical data. The values underlying quantitative research include neutrality, objectivity, and the acquisition of a sizeable scope of knowledge, such as a statistical overview from a large sample. (Leavy 2022, 9.)

**Survey** research is the most widely used quantitative research design in the social sciences. Common uses of survey research include the census, polling on political issues or public opinions, and market research. Surveys rely on asking people standardised questions that can be analysed statistically and allow researchers to collect a wide array of data from large samples and generalise to the larger population from which the sample was drawn. Surveys are typically used in, for example, to find individuals' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or their reporting of their experiences. (Leavy 2022, 113-114.)

Online questionnaires are questionnaires that are administered over the internet to gather data about behaviour, experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values, and are used as a research method in survey research. Online questionnaires are used in wide variety of disciplines and fields of study, including business and

marketing. The advantages of using an online questionnaire include customisation, individualisation, filtering, and downloading of the questionnaire swiftly and easily. (Dawson 2019, 288-290.)

**Qualitative research** is characterised by inductive approaches to knowledge building aimed at generating meaning. Qualitative research is used to explore and learn about social phenomenon, to decode the meanings people have for different activities, situations, and events, or to build a depth of understanding about some dimension of social life. The values underlying qualitative research include the importance of people's subjective experiences and acquiring a depth of understanding, such as detailed information from a small sample. (Leavy 2022, 9.) There is no clear theory or paradigm in qualitative research, but rather different interpretation conventions (Seppola 2023).

**Interview** is a commonly used research genre across disciplines. In general, interview methods use conversation as a learning tool. Different methods of interview impose various levels of structure, which range from unstructured to semi structured to highly structured, based on the layout of the questions asked. (Leavy 2022, 152.) Interviews can be used to approach work from an objectivist standpoint, where the questions are grouped into pre-determined categories to help answer the research question and confirm or disconfirm the research hypothesis. The assumption is that the respondent has experiential knowledge that can be transmitted to the interviewer. (Dawson 2019, 268-269.)

There are various ways to categorise different interview methods, which can also carry several names even for the same interview method. Ultimately, most methods differ from each other in the level of structure in the questions, meaning the way in which the questions are formed and the way the interviewee marshals the interview situation. Figure 6 shows an example of the level of conditioning structure in different interview methods. As shown in the figure, a form interview is the most structured interview method, as there is a set of pre-determined questions, in which the respondent or the interviewee cannot elaborate further on

the questions. In contrast, an unstructured interview resembles a conversation the most from the other interview methods. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022.)

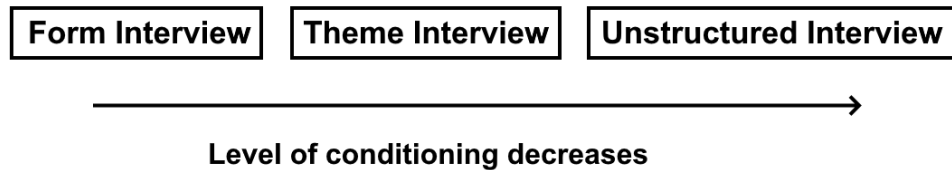


Figure 6: Level of conditioning in interview structures (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022)

#### 4.1 Data collection

For **survey data collection**, an anonymous survey (see Appendix 2) was commissioned for international students of Xamk Kouvola campus to obtain quantitative data. Students that took part in the survey came from the Bachelor of Business Administration degree, Master of Business Administration degree, and Bachelor of Culture and Arts degree. The survey was distributed through a survey link sent on Outlook email to the students and was open for 10 days.

The survey sample group of international students was used to measure the sample group's current level of awareness and interest of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät and sports overall. As the survey is directed to international students at Xamk, the research sample is already known to be more interested towards Finland, Kouvola, and Finnish culture due to their chosen location for university education, and therefore is a part of the customer segment for the Kouvola region. The use of Xamk students also excludes the need of third-party organisations, which would most likely be needed to analyse the whole international customer segment. The survey specifically tells us about the potential that a portion of the current English-speaking population of Kouvola might have to visit the home games of Koplá.

For **interview data collection**, an interview was conducted with the current executive director of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, Mika Toivola, who manages the day-to-day financial and marketing operations of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. The interview with Toivola was held live at the offices of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät on 17 May 2024,

and was translated to English after the interview. The interview was held as a form interview, as the questions were fairly simple and easy to answer.

## 4.2 Data analysis

**Quantitative data analysis.** The use of a sample (international students) is used to try to forecast a phenomenon in the bigger population (international visitors) by using statistical deduction (Seppola 2023). In quantitative research, the interaction among variables after discovery allows the measurement of study outcomes. Essential statistical methods used to assess scores of variables include central tendency, variability, and the characteristics of the normal distribution. (Martin 2012, 3.)

Variables can be assigned scales of measurement, with two general classifications of scales of measurement, each having two subcategories. Discrete scales are nominal and ordinal, and continuous scales are interval and ratio. (Martin 2012, 5.) Measures of central tendency are values that represent typical scores in a distribution or set of scores. Examples of these are **mode**, which is the score that occurs most often in a set of scores, **median**, which is a value in the set of which 50 percent of cases fall below and 50 percent above, and **mean**, which is the sum of individual scores in a data set divided by the number of scores (N). (Martin 2012, 7-8.)

The quantitative data of the survey was analysed using the SPSS software, by describing the relationship between different variables using statistical deduction. Using SPSS, the mode, the median, the mean, or the standard deviation of results are displayed when applicable. In addition, further visualisation of data is provided with bar charts or pie charts. Occasionally, there are open-ended questions, which are formed in a way that requires a narrative response. Open-ended questions are usually needed when possible responses are too varied or complex to be conveniently listed on a questionnaire. (Treiman 2009, 1-3.)

**Qualitative data analysis.** Form interview is the most heavily used interview method. In a form interview, the design of questions and claims, and the order in



which they are asked are completely predetermined. A form interview is suits the best when the research deals with formal hypotheses, and the data is easily quantified. A form interview is also the best option when research wants to gather factual information, and the research might have an implication of what kind of information the interviewee could give. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022.)

Thematic analysis in qualitative analysis involves searching across a data set, such as an interview, to identify recurring or significant patterns of meaning in the qualitative data. The researcher takes an interpretative approach, and the coding reflects their subjective engagement with the data. The search for thematic patterns and meaning across the dataset helps to understand, categorise, interpret, and develop new ideas about the data. (Lyons 2022, 49-50.)

## **5 RESULTS**

### **5.1 Survey results**

Out of the 456 students from XAMK Kouvola campus that the survey was sent to, 26 students answered the survey. However, 6 students stated to be Finnish, which were not the target audience of the survey, and thus these 6 answers have been excluded from the analysis. In total, 20 answers were applicable for data analysis. Because the rate of response was only around five per cent, no advanced calculations can be made, and only basic information can be gathered from the survey results.

**Demographic of respondents.** The first questions of the survey gathered demographic and background information of the respondents. The youngest respondent was 19 years old, and the oldest respondent was 42 years old. The mode of respondents was 21, the mean of respondents was around 25 years old, and the standard deviation of responses was just over 6.

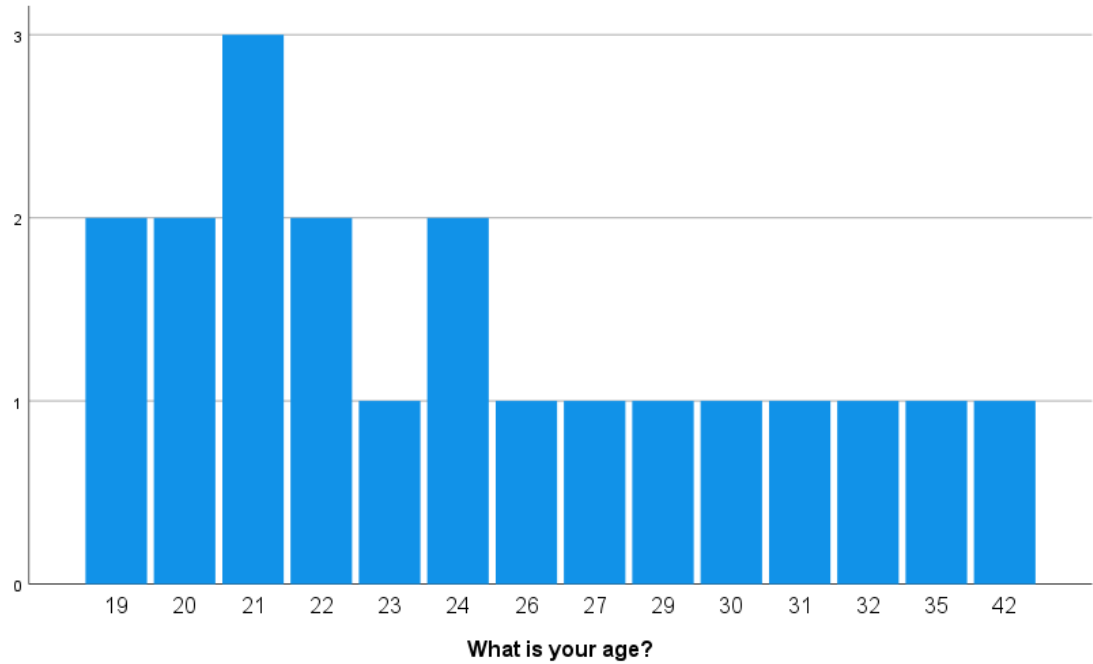


Figure 7: Bar chart of the respondents' ages

Figure 7 shows a bar chart of all respondents' ages. In Figure 8, the gender distribution of respondents can be seen. Fifty per cent of respondents were female, and forty-five per cent were male. Five per cent of respondents did not want to state their gender.

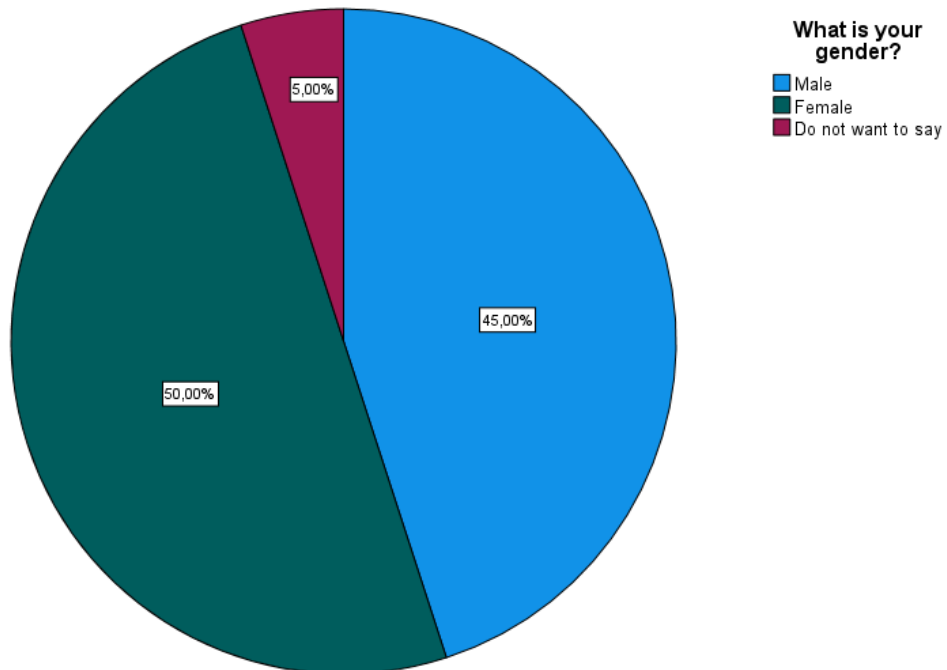


Figure 8: Respondents' gender distribution

In Figure 9, the nationalities of respondents can be seen. The chart shows a diverse range from which students study in Kouvola, with backgrounds from all over the world and multiple continents. The most answers came from Russian students, who amount to twenty-five per cent of all responses.

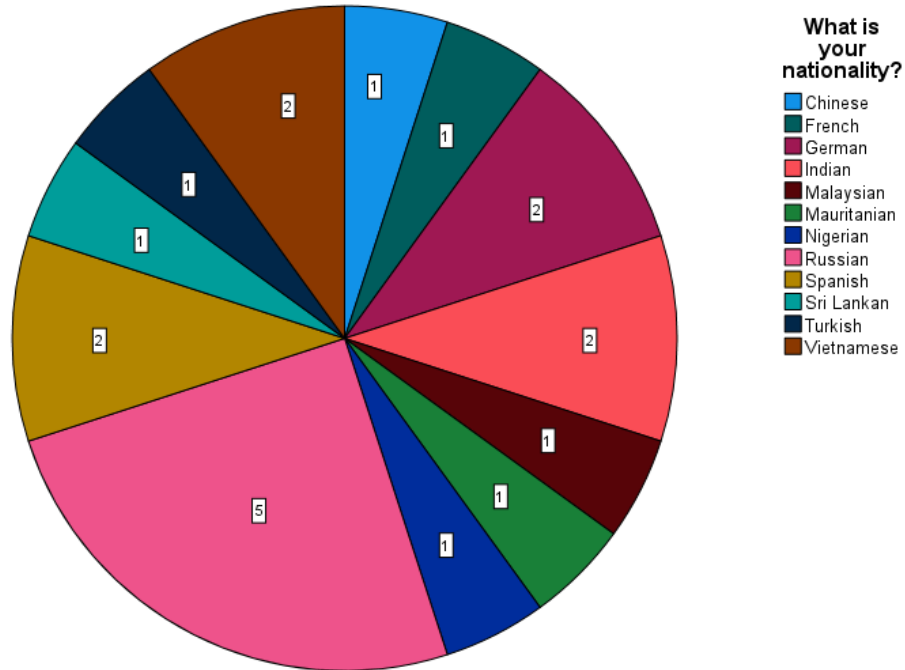


Figure 9: Nationalities of respondents

The next set of questions asked the background that respondents have with playing sports competitively themselves. 6 respondents stated that they have played sports competitively, shown in Figure 10. The wide array of sports that the respondents had played competitively included handball, volleyball, football, basketball, bowling, tennis, rugby, beach soccer, historical fighting, and swimming.

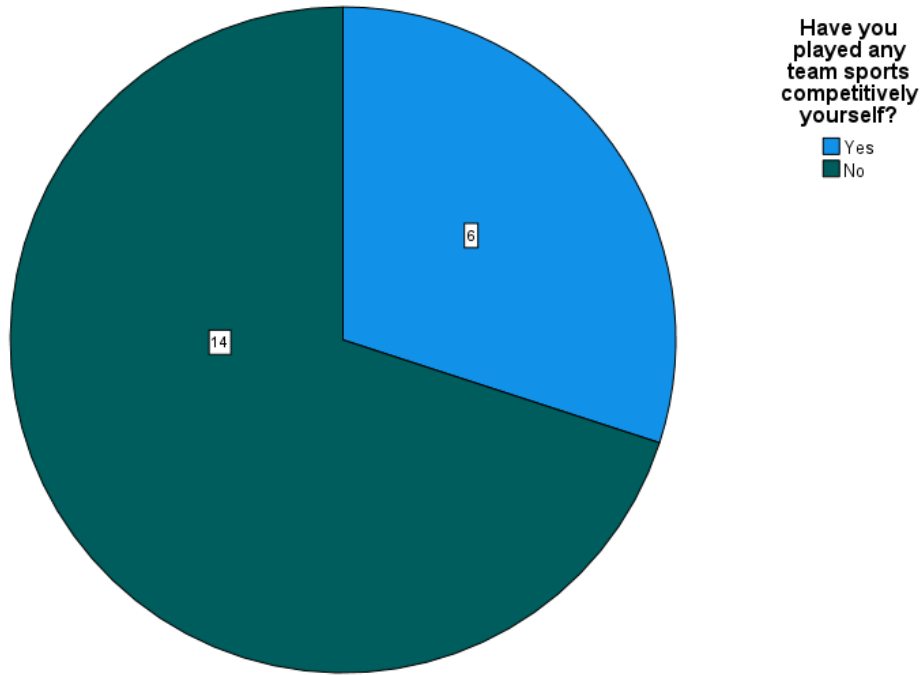


Figure 10: Sports background of respondents

**Interest in following sports entertainment.** The respondents were asked to rate how regularly they follow sports entertainment on a scale from 1 to 5, where approximately 1 corresponded to rarely or never, and 5 corresponded to constantly. In Figure 11, the percentage table of every chosen value is displayed. Sixty-five per cent of respondents had rated their sports entertainment following as either 1 or 2. This approximately means that only thirty-five per cent of all

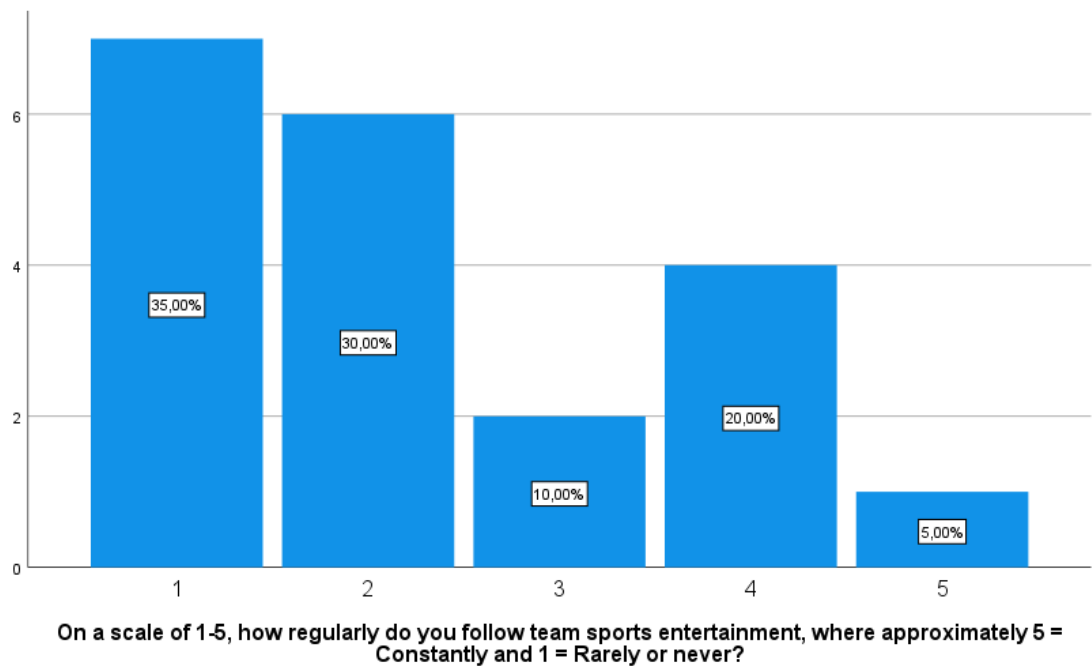


Figure 11: Respondents' rate of sports entertainment following

respondents, who rated their sports entertainment following between 3 and 5, are those who follow sports entertainment either constantly or somewhat regularly. Only five per cent percent of respondents stated that they follow sports entertainment constantly.

**Followed team sports.** The respondents were asked to choose which team sports they follow regularly from a predetermined set of some of the most followed sports worldwide. Table 1 shows the number a different team sport was chosen. Over half of all respondents stated that they follow association football, which makes it the most followed sport among the respondents. The answer which received the second most answers was that the respondent does not follow team sports, reflecting the previous question. One respondent stated Other as their answer. They stated that they follow floorball, as well as other sports, such as Olympic or World Championship level sports.

Table 1: Chosen team sports that respondents follow

Sport	Answers
Association football / Soccer	11
Basketball	3
Ice hockey	2
Cricket	2
Baseball	1
Rugby union	1
Volleyball	1
Other	1
Field hockey	0
American football	0
I do not follow team sports	7

After choosing the team sports that respondents follow, they were asked to rank their chosen sports according to how much they follow the sport, where the most followed sport was asked to rank as 1. Table 2 shows the mean of every sport, in which the lower the number of mean, the more interested the respondents are of the sport. It can be seen that association football is no longer the most popular sport, but rather rugby union.

Table 2: Interest in the team sports for respondents

Sport	Mean
Rugby union	2,00
Baseball	3,00
Basketball	3,67
Association football / Soccer	4,45
Volleyball	5,00
Ice hockey	5,50
Cricket	5,50
Other	10,00
Field hockey	-
American football	-

**Interest in attending sports events live.** The respondents were asked whether they like to attend live team sports events. Figure 12 highlights the percentage for enthusiasm of attending team sports events. Fifty-five per cent of respondents stated that they like to attend team sports events live, and forty-five per cent did not like attending team sports events live. The respondent could also elaborate on why they like attending team sports events, or why they dislike attending team sports events based on their choice.

When asked why the respondents liked to attend team sports event, they said that, for example, “because of feeling closer to the team,” “because of the cheerful atmosphere,” and “I am a big fan of my football team”. One respondent simply stated “Manchester” as their reason, most likely referring to their fondness for either Manchester United or Manchester City, the two Manchester-based Premier League teams. One respondent said the following: “When the game is important, there is a great ambient in the games. I also like the experience of seeing new sports live.”

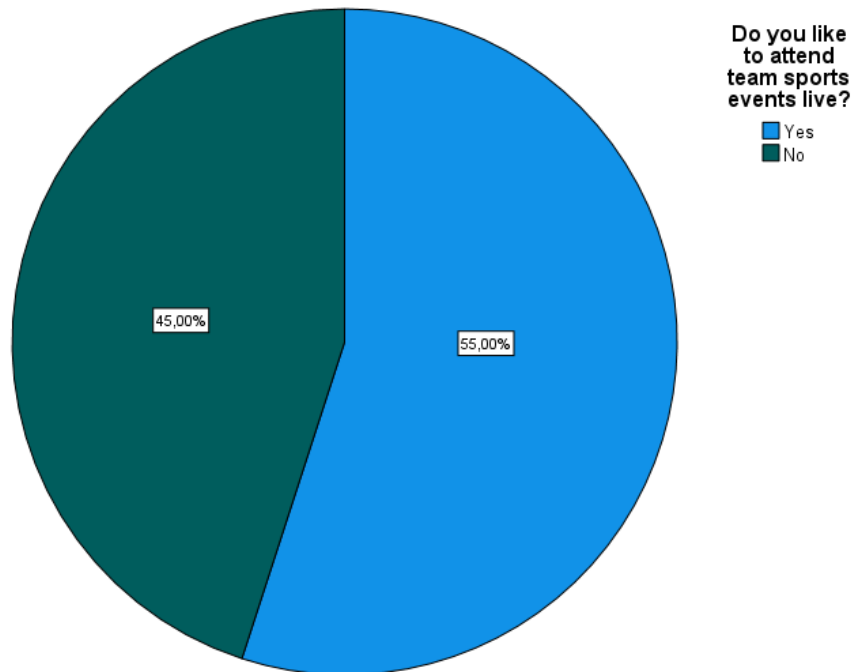


Figure 12: Enthusiasm of respondents to attend team sports events

When asked for reasons why the respondents do not prefer to attend team sports events, they said that, for example, “I am just not the biggest sports fan”, “I never had a habit for it, and it is usually crowded and really loud”, or that, “generally I have no interest, unless its hanging out with friends for the sake of entertainment”. One respondent stated that, “I prefer playing sports myself rather than watching others playing. Also, I am not interested in any sports currently.” The loudness of sporting events was stated multiple times, and the general lack of interest in sports as well.

**Live sports event factors.** The respondents were asked to select factors which were important for them to attend a sports event live of an ordinal scale from 1 to 5, ranking the most important factor as 5 and the least important factor as 1. Figure 13 shows the importance of ticket prices for the respondents. Seventy-five per cent of respondents stated that ticket prices were the most important factor, or the second most important factor in attending sports events.

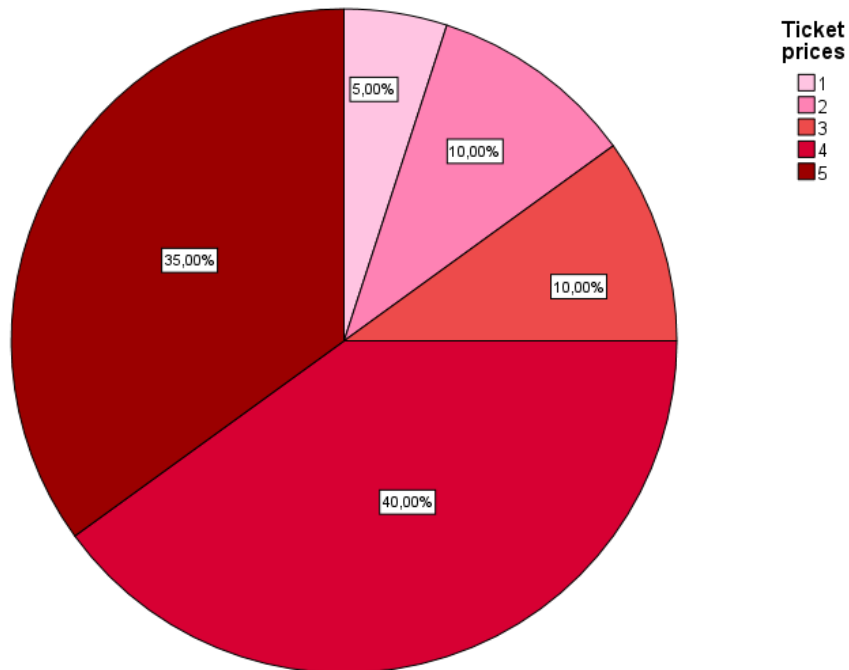


Figure 13: Importance of ticket prices for the respondents

Figure 14 shows the importance of the atmosphere of the game. Eighty per cent of respondents stated that the atmosphere of the game is either the most important factor, or the second most important factor to attend a team sports event, and no respondent stated it to be the least or second least important factor.

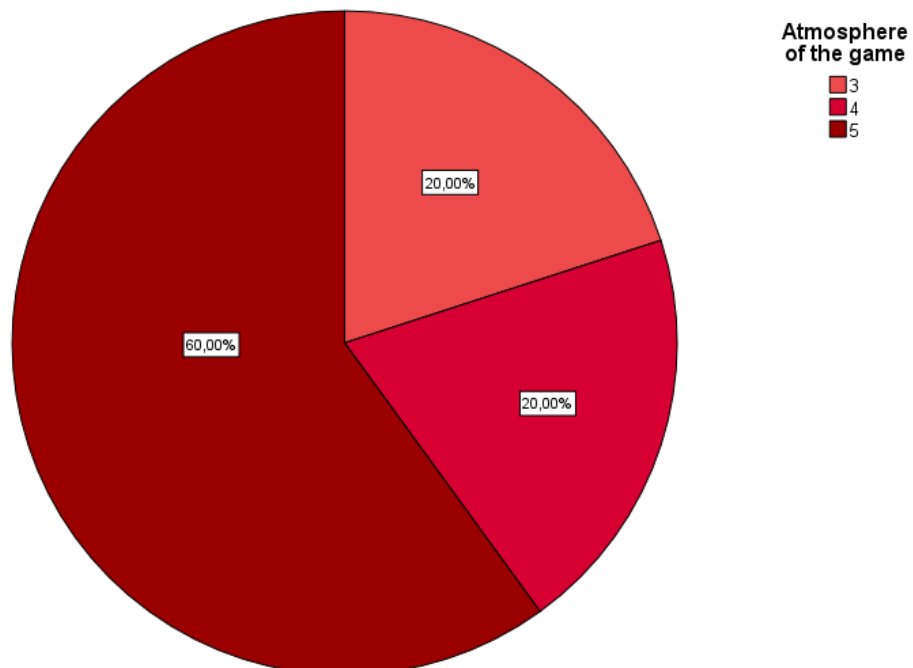


Figure 14: Importance of the atmosphere of a game to the respondents



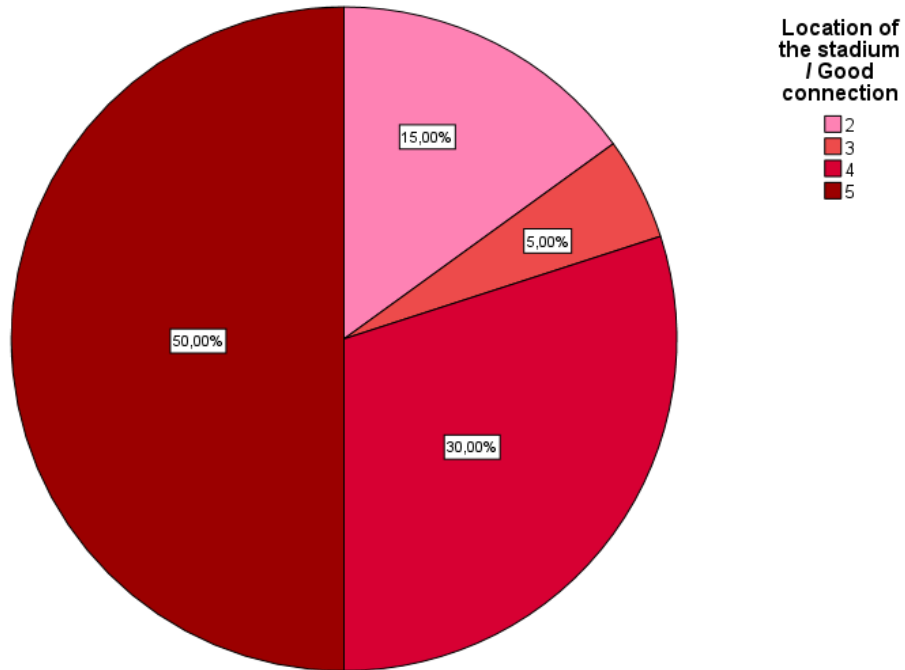


Figure 15: Importance of the stadium location or good connectivity for the respondents

Figure 15 shows the importance of the location of the stadium, or good connectivity to the stadium. Eighty per cent of respondents stated that the stadium location is either the most important factor, or the second most important factor in attending team sports events. No respondent stated it as the least important factor.

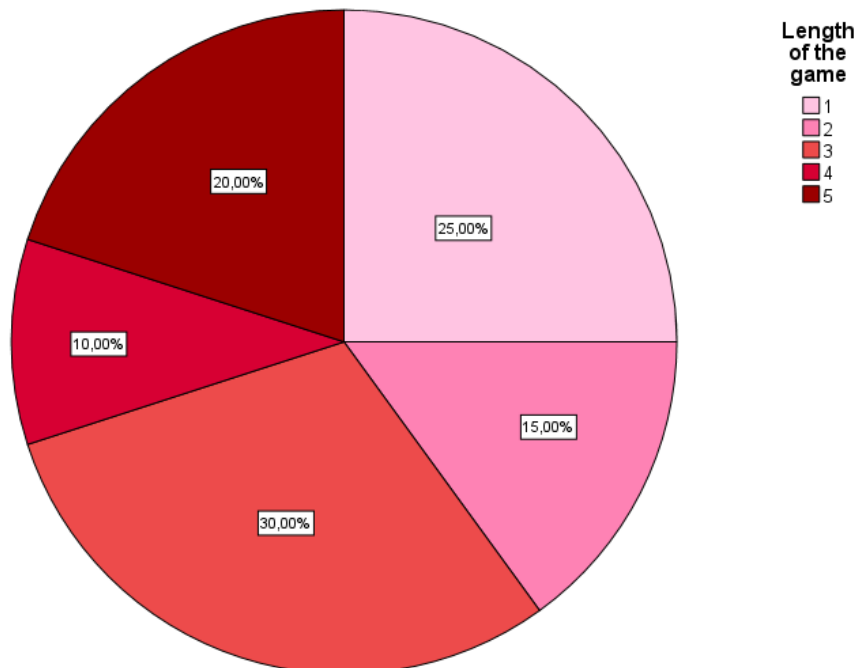


Figure 16: Importance of the length of the game for respondents

Figure 16 shows the importance of the length of the game. Forty per cent of respondents stated it to be the least important factor, or the second least important factor for attending team sports events. Thirty per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor, or the second most important factor. Thirty per cent of respondents viewed it as neutral to their attendance decision.

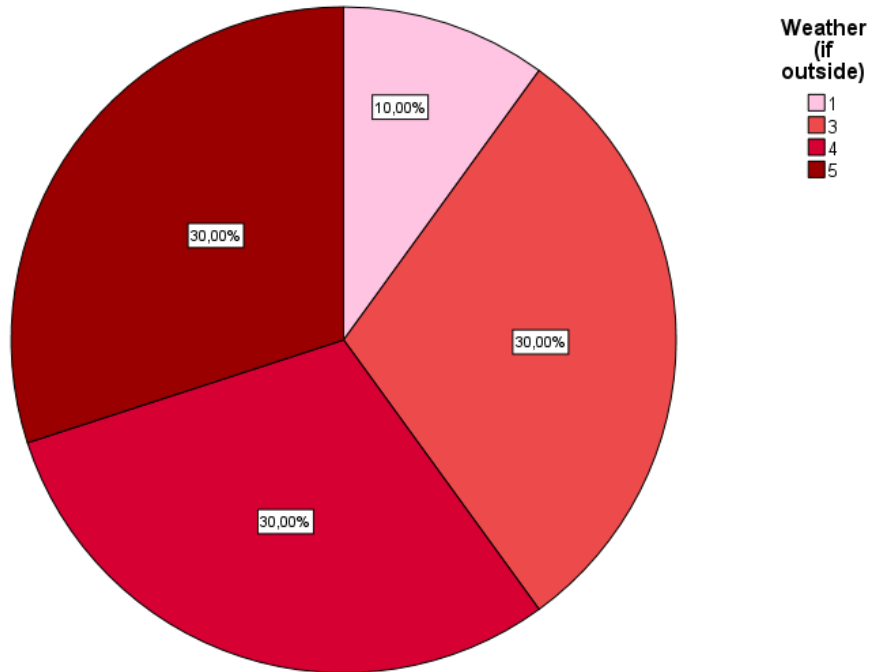


Figure 17: Importance of the weather for the respondents

Figure 17 shows the importance of weather. Sixty per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor, or the second most important factor in attending team sports events. Only ten per cent of respondents stated it to be the least important factor.

Figure 18 shows the importance of the weekday and time for the game. Fifty per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor in attending team sports events. Only twenty per cent of respondents stated it to be the least important factor, or second least important factor.

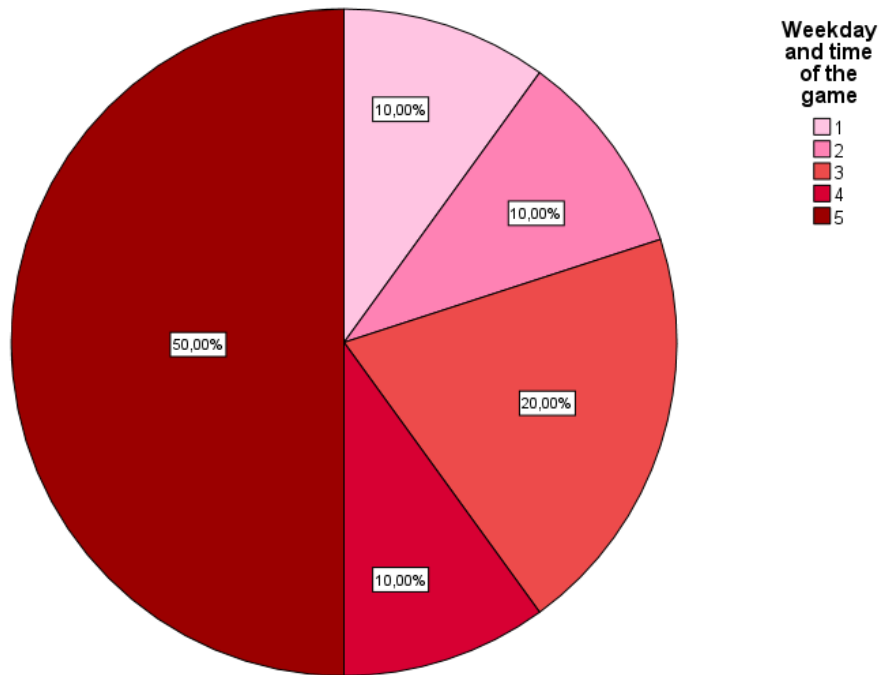


Figure 18: Importance of the weekday and time of the game for respondents

Figure 19 shows the importance of prior knowledge of the team. Forty-five per cent of respondents stated that prior knowledge of the team that they are going to see is the least important factor, or the second least important factor in attending team sports events. In contrast, forty per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor, or the second most important factor.

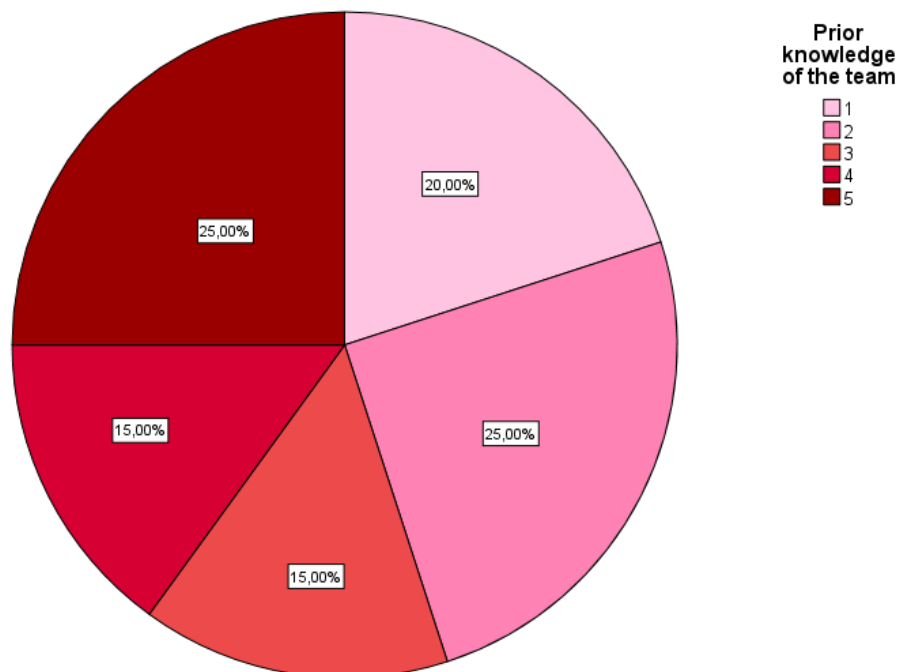


Figure 19: Importance of prior knowledge of the team for respondents

Figure 20 shows the importance of the accompanying people in sports events. Seventy per cent of respondents stated good company as the most important factor in attending team sports events. No respondent stated it to be the least important factor.

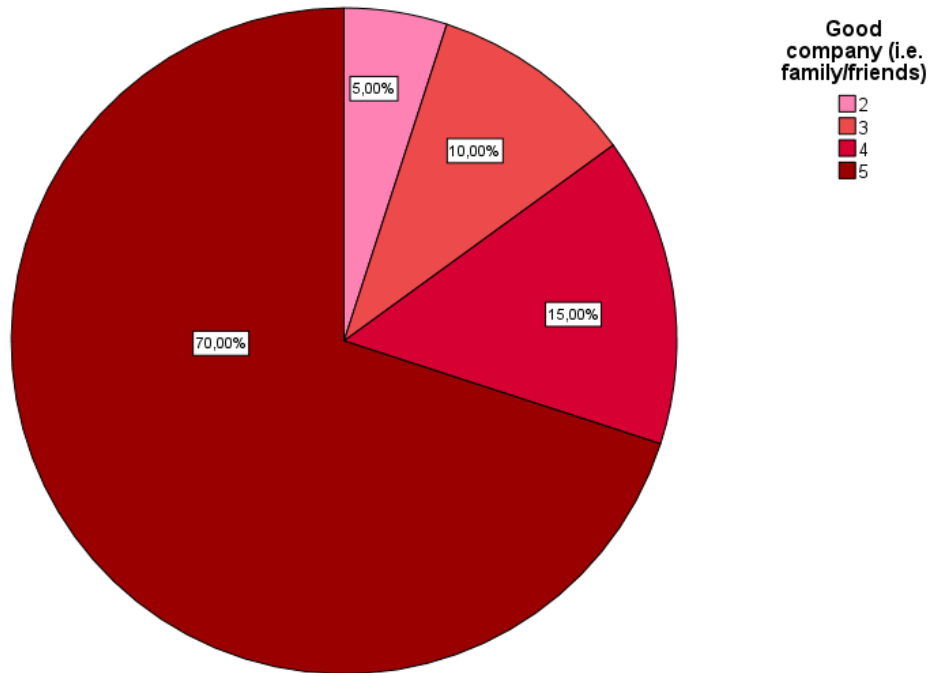


Figure 20: Importance of accompanying people for respondents

Figure 21 shows the importance of food and drink options. Fifty-five per cent of respondents stated it to be the least important factor, or the second least important factor in attending team sports events. Only twenty per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor.

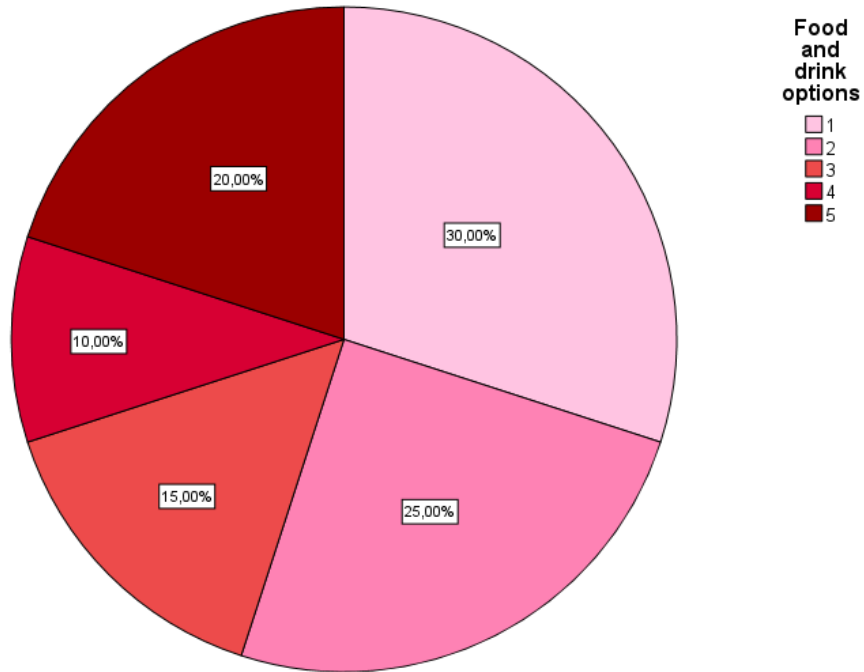


Figure 21: Importance of food and drink options for respondents

Figure 22 shows the importance of VIP suites. Ninety-five per cent of respondents stated it to be the least important factor, or second least important factor in attending a team sports event. Only five per cent of respondents stated it to be the most important factor in attending a team sports event.

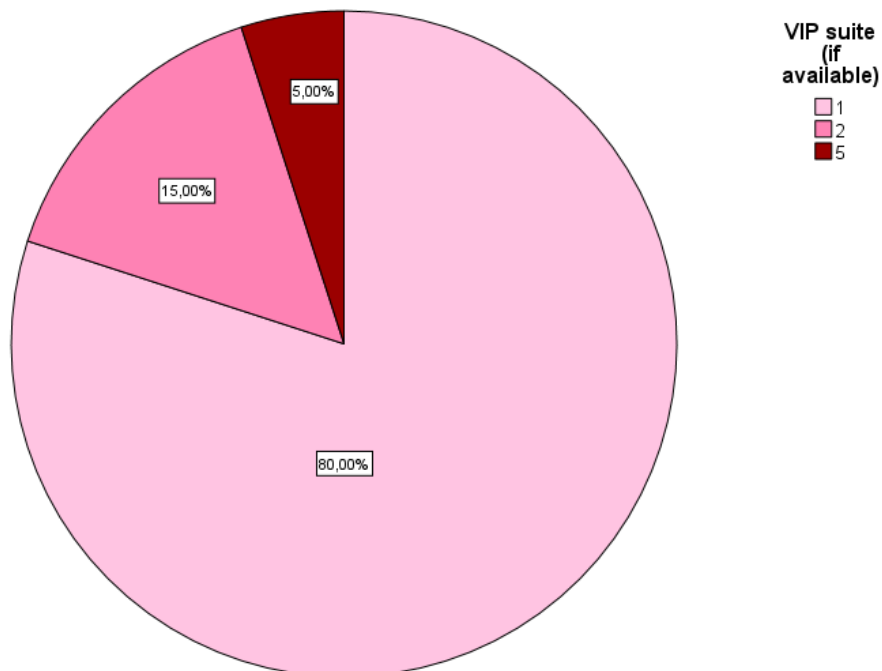


Figure 22: Importance of VIP suites for respondents

Table 3 shows the prioritising of different factors through the mean and standard deviation of the values chosen for different factor. The higher the mean, the higher the respondents prioritise the factor. The standard deviation tells how much the respondents agree with each other, with a lower standard deviation meaning a better consensus of importance among the respondents. The most important factor for the respondents were the accompanying people to the game, and the second most important factor was the atmosphere of the sports event. The least important factor was VIP suite availability. These three factors also had the lowest standard deviation.

Table 3: The mean and standard deviation of the factors of attending a sports event for respondents

Factor	Mean	Std. deviation
Good company (friends/family)	4,50	0,889
Atmosphere of the game/ good connectivity	4,40	0,821
Location of the stadium	4,15	1,089
Ticket prices	3,90	1,165
Weekday and time of the game	3,80	1,436
Weather (if outside)	3,70	1,218
Prior knowledge of the team	3,00	1,522
Length of the game	2,85	1,461
Food and drink options	2,65	1,531
VIP suites (if available)	1,35	0,933

**Prior knowledge of Finnish baseball and Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät.** The respondents were asked questions about their previous experiences with Finnish baseball and Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. Figure 23 showcases whether the respondents had heard about pesäpallo or Finnish baseball before. Fifty-five per cent stated that they had not heard of the sport prior to the survey, and forty-five per cent had heard of the sport prior to the survey. When asked about whether the respondents had been to a Finnish baseball game before, **all 20 respondents stated that they had not previously been to a Finnish baseball game prior to the survey.**

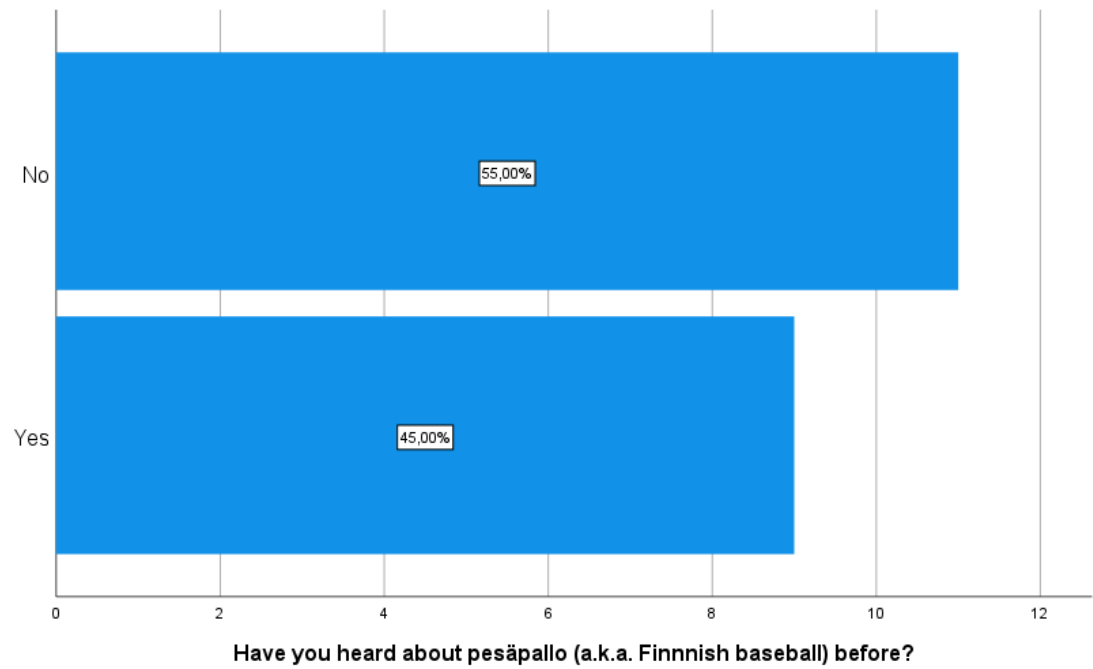


Figure 23: Respondents' prior knowledge of Finnish baseball before the survey

Figure 24 shows the prior knowledge of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät before the survey. Eighty per cent of respondents stated that they had not heard about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät prior to the survey, and only twenty per cent had heard about the team before.

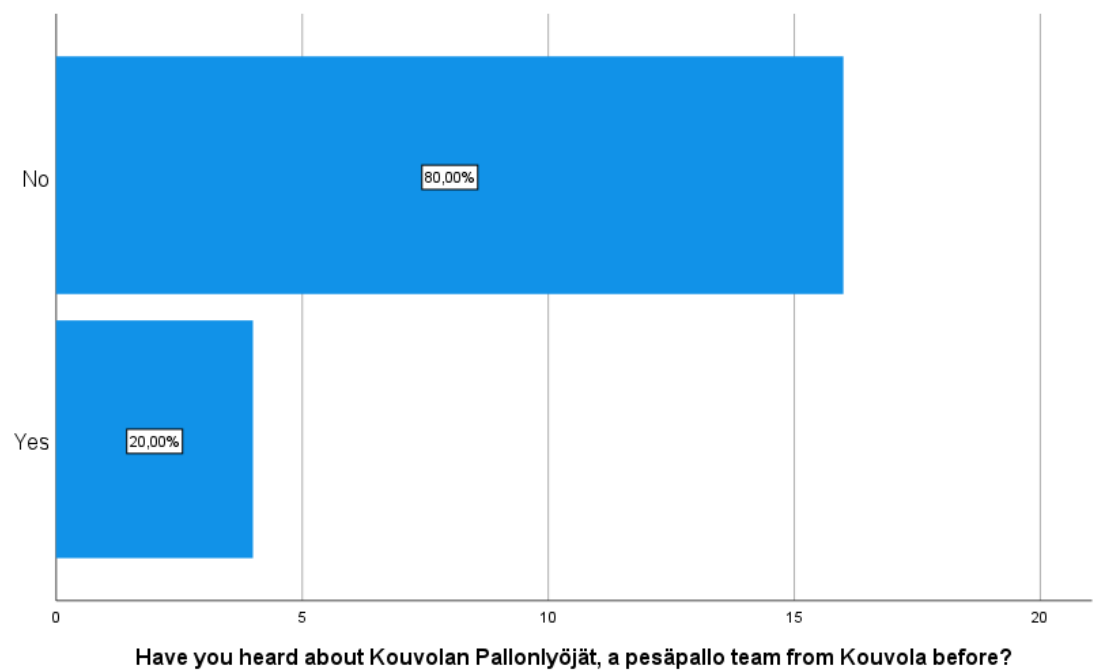


Figure 24: Respondents' prior knowledge of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät before the survey

**Interest in Kouvola sports teams.** The respondents were asked to select Kouvola sports teams that they would most likely want to see live. The number of responses each team has received is depicted in Table 4. The most popular team chosen was KooKoo, an ice hockey team, with 10 selections. The second most popular answer was to not choose any of the teams available with 7 selections. the third most popular option was Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät with 6 selections.

Table 4: Chosen Kouvola teams that respondents are most likely to see live

Sports team	Answers
KooKoo (Ice hockey)	10
Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät (Finnish baseball)	6
KJP (Association football)	4
KoLe -57 (Volleyball)	4
MyPa -47 (Association football)	2
Kouvot/Kouvottaret (Basketball)	2
Kouvola Indians (American football)	2
None of these teams	7

After choosing the different teams that the respondents would be most interested to see live, it was asked to rank their chosen teams, and to rank the most interesting team as 1. Table 5 shows the mean of every team, where the lower the number of mean, the more interested the respondents are to see the team live.

Table 5: Interest of chosen Kouvola teams for respondents

Sports team	Mean
KJP (Association football)	2,67
KooKoo (Ice hockey)	2,75
KoLe -57 (Volleyball)	3,67
Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät (Pesäpallo)	4,00
Kouvot/Kouvottaret (Basketball)	4,00
Kouvola Indians (American football)	4,00
MyPa -47 (Association football)	5,00

This time, KJP, an association football team was ranked as the most interesting team to see live with 3 respondents, and KooKoo was the second most



interesting team with 8 respondents. This is explained due to the fact that KJP was chosen as the most interesting team for 2 respondents out of 3 respondents, lowering the mean unnecessarily due to the low number of answers. It is also hard to tell whether Kouvola Pallonlyöjät is as interesting to Kouvot/Kouvottaret and Kouvola Indians, as Kouvola Pallonlyöjät received rankings from 4 respondents, whereas Kouvola Indians only received 2 rankings and Kouvot/Kouvottaret only 1 ranking, although the three teams means were identical.

**Activities of Kouvola Pallonlyöjät.** The last set of questions was regarding the activities of Kouvola Pallonlyöjät. The respondents were asked to state in which language they would prefer to receive information about Kouvola Pallonlyöjät.

**All of the 20 respondents stated that they would like to receive information in English.** 6 respondents also stated that they would like to receive information in Finnish in addition to English.

Figure 25 shows the different ways that respondents would like to receive information about Kouvola Pallonlyöjät. The most popular option for respondents was to receive information on social media, with 18 respondents choosing the option. The second most popular option was to receive information in Word of mouth -style, for example, from friends or family, chosen by 17 respondents. The third most popular option was to receive information from the Kouvola Pallonlyöjät web site, with 12 respondents choosing the option. The least favourite option was to receive information by an email newsletter. One respondent had chosen the Other option and stated that they would like to receive information via Telegram.

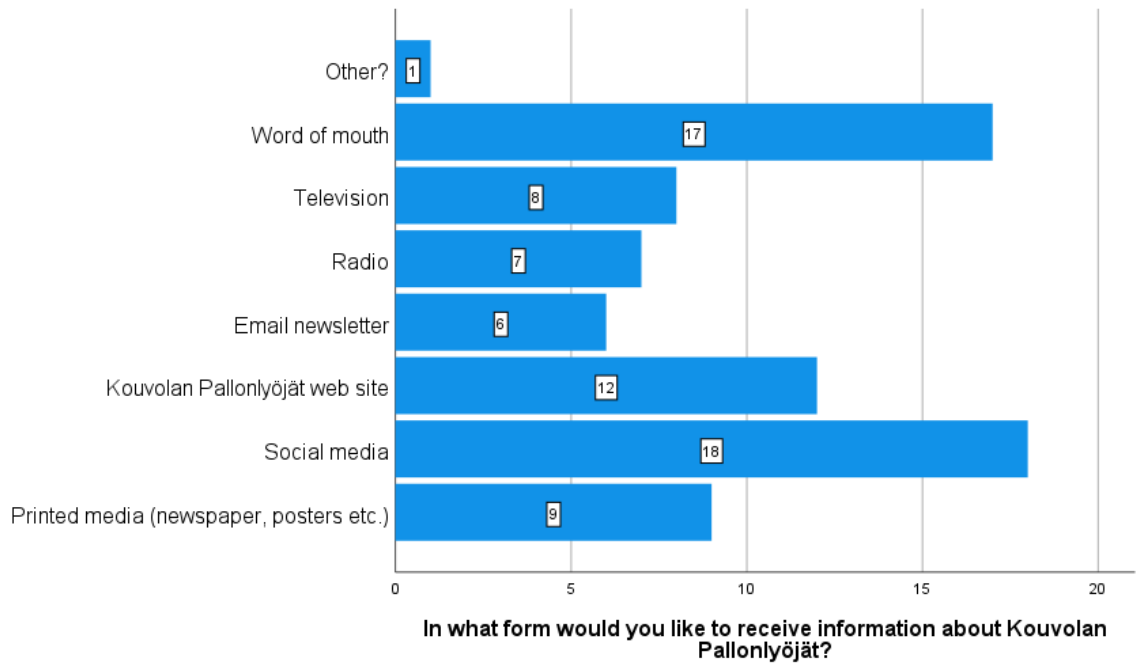


Figure 25: Forms in which the respondents would like to receive information about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät

Figure 26 shows which social media platforms the respondents who chose social media as their preferred information channel would most like to receive information about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. The most popular social media platform was Instagram, which was chosen by 15 of the 18 respondents. Other more popular platforms were YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, with 8, 7, and 6

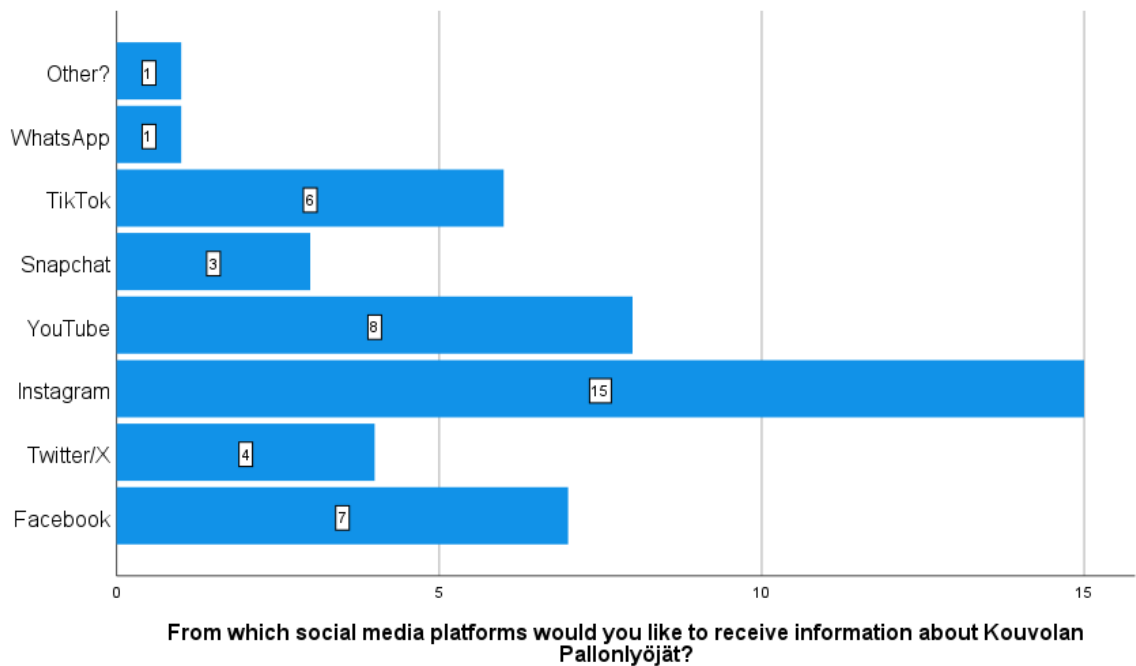


Figure 26: Respondents' chosen social media platforms

responses, respectively. The least popular social media platform was WhatsApp. There was also one Other platform answered, and this was again Telegram.

The last question asked from the respondents was to state reasons why they would like to attend, or not like to attend a home game of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. One respondent stated that they would like to attend a game, “if a friend invited me.” One respondent stated that, “I probably will not attend a game in Kouvola because I am not fan of watching sports, I live very far from Kouvola, and I study part-time. That reduces the possibility even more.” One respondent also said the following: “I honestly do not know about the team, the game and the matches' schedule. It would be a good idea to first talk about the game - what it is and why it is so enjoyable etc. More like category creation and then bring in the team.” Other responses further elaborated on the lack of knowledge of the game and its' rules as a reason to not attend a game.

## **5.2 Interview results**

The interview held with Mika Toivola, the current executive director of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, was held to reaffirm the current needs of the organisation, and to discuss the potential of the new customer segment. The interview questions and a transcript of the interview can be found in Appendix 1. When asked about the strengths and weaknesses in comparison to other Superperesis organisations, Toivola notes as a strength that Kouvola is a major sports city, and Koplala has a firm and supportive fan base. Koplala has a lot of spectators when the team is playing well, reflecting that the attendance levels are one of the best in the league. The current weakness of Koplala is the Kouvola economic zone, as it is not at the same level of Tampere, where another Superperesis team Manse PP plays, but it is still bigger than many of Koplala's competitors. (Toivola 2024.)

A sector that the new customer segment would help to grow in the organisation's operations would be the match day revenue. The importance of match day revenue for Koplala cannot be underestimated, as without the sales gathered from home games, and funding received from partners, there would be no Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät. This speaks volumes of the importance that revenue generated from

games has for many Superperesis organisations, and the sponsorship received from local businesses and towns. The current customer segments of Kopla are most prominently adults and senior citizens, who most likely also come from mainly the Kouvola region. One of the challenges that Kopla faces is to attract younger people to home games. (Toivola 2024.)

Toivola has not been an executive director of Kopla for very long and has only started working as the executive director of Kopla since the end of 2023. Because of this, when asked if he had seen any recent signs of internationalisation in Finnish baseball, Toivola said that he had not yet seen significant signs, although he saw big potential in internationalisation of Finnish baseball. Continuing on the international aspect, Toivola sees that as a lot of people currently move to Finland from abroad, there is potential to attract these people to Kopla home games as well. It is already a challenge of Kopla to try to raise their attendance levels. (Toivola 2024).

### **5.3 Analysis of results**

It can be said that the knowledge of Finnish baseball in international spectators is still very low compared to other sports, as well as some Kouvola sports clubs, which is reflected in the research sample group. It is important to note that none of the respondents had visited a Finnish baseball game. Although there have been efforts to grow the game internationally, more strategic work is needed to attract international visitors to games.

The interest of respondents towards the different Kouvola sports teams showed that Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät is more interesting to the respondents than the football teams of Kouvola, even though football was far more popular as a sport among the respondents. This is very critical when discussing the potential of attracting viewers, as Finnish baseball and football have long battled to be summer's number one spectator sport in Finland. There could be multiple reasons why association football is ranked much lower in interest. It might be because some respondents only casually follow football, whereas they are more interested in following other sports, such as rugby union or baseball, which both had better

interest among the respondents. However, both rugby union and baseball only received one response from the chosen sports overall, whereas association football still received five number one spots from the respondents, meaning it is difficult to tell which is relatively more interesting to the respondents.

The respondents of the survey like to enjoy team sports entertainment more casually, and engaging international people to the more obscure sport of Finnish baseball could be hard. The casualness of following sports is also reflected in the factors that respondents saw as important in attending team sports events. The most important factors were about the accompanying people that people take to games, and the atmosphere and location of the stadiums, and in contrast, knowledge of the tactics of the game did not seem as critical to enjoy the event. This can also be turned into a strength of Finnish baseball with the right marketing tactics, although engaging and turning people into long-time fans is also very critical.

As the current audience of Kouvola includes adults and senior citizens, a few international possibilities to attract more from these customer segments can be already found in the Kouvola region. For example, the recent Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United States (DCA), signed after Finland joined NATO (Ministry of Defence, n.d.a.), can be beneficial to the region of Kouvola. One of the agreed facilities and areas of the agreement includes the Vekaranjärvi Garrison and Pahkajärvi Training Area, located north of Kouvola city centre (Ministry of Defence, n.d.b., 37) A recent example of the economical consequence that NATO military exercises have on the Finnish regions was Nordic Response 24 exercise, which brought approximately 10,6 million euros in Northern Finland, in Enontekiö (The Finnish Defence Forces 2024). It is possible that some foreign people attending these military exercises could also in addition have time to attend Finnish baseball games in Kouvola in the future.

The revenue from match day is very important for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, as it is critical to the livelihood of the whole organisation. Foreign visitors could boost the revenue stream and ensure that Finnish baseball is played in Kouvola in the

future as well, and that they sports stays as the number one summer spectator sport in the city. It could also ensure that Kopla can keep competing with Superpesis teams from bigger economic markets. Attracting international people, such as students, could also help in the challenge of attracting younger people to home games.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

The first research question of the thesis set to evaluate if Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät has potential to attract foreign visitors to home games of the first team. Based on the research, there are factors that contribute to the fact that there is some potential that Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät can attract international visitors to their home. Facts that support this claim can be seen in the interest of Kopla in comparison to the football teams of Kouvola, as well as from the needs that respondents have to visit sports events live. For example, the location of the stadium is conveniently placed in the city centre of Kouvola, which makes it easily accessible by people and tourists outside the city as well. The needs of Kopla described by Toivola also reinforces the fact that people from new areas need to be attracted to Kopla home games.

The second research question was to measure the current potential level of interest in Finnish baseball for foreign spectators. Based on the literature review and survey results, it can be said that there is rising interest in foreign spectators, but the game of Finnish baseball is currently not well known enough internationally, evident from the fact that none of the respondents of the survey had actually visited a Finnish baseball game. Reasons that there has not yet been many foreign visitors could be attributed to the fact that no marketing has been done to the foreign customer segment. A shift in marketing tactics described in the Ansoff Matrix could definitely change this, and further marketing and research could be conducted to find more information about the interest that foreigners have in Finnish baseball.. Overall, there is definite potential for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät to have foreign spectators as a strategic new customer segment in their future operations.

The third research question was to determine who belong to the whole customer segment. Based on the research, a portion of the customer segment was determined, which includes those who come to work or study temporarily or permanently to Kouvola. However, further research would still be necessary to determine the whole customer segment.

## **6.1 Managerial implications**

The most important task for Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät to attract international visitors is to highlight the sport and team better on their various social media channels, such as the number one selected social media platform Instagram, and locally to international people to achieve interest in the game, which could result in Word-of-Mouth marketing. Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät should try to create content in English to cater to the new customer segment. This could be achieved by either creating content on social media alongside their Finnish content, or by creating exclusive channels on social media platforms that solely have content in English. An English subpage on their web site could help foreign visitors to easily find the necessary information on how to visit the home games in Kouvola.

To attract international visitors to Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät home games, it would be wise to offer some way to cater to the needs that the respondents have shown in their survey results. For example, to achieve the need for the most important factor of accompanying people, Kouvola could offer cheaper tickets to international visitors, such as a two-in-one package, to attract spectators to come to home games with a friend or a family member, and to cater to students with lower economic possibilities.

As shown by the example of the projected revenue of the Itä-Länsi-games, another way to further drive more tourists to the Kouvola area would be to collaborate with other stakeholders in the Kouvola area. This could also in return boost other operators in the Kouvola economic area, such as restaurants, hotels, and other stakeholders. Kouvola could also market the Itä-Länsi event to foreign visitors, such as the ones coming to the Helsinki capital area, with English language content, together with Kouvola stakeholders, or through a trainee.

Kopla could also use digital marketing tools, such as targeted advertising on social media platforms, for this purpose. Data could also be shared between the stakeholders to better determine the customer segment and who belong to it. An example of another stakeholder in the Kouvola area would be VisitKouvola.

## **6.2 Reliability discussion and further development**

The reliability of a study means that an experiment results in the same outcome every time it is performed. Validity in turn means, that the measuring method used in the experiment measures exactly the researched phenomenon's feature, which is supposed to be measured. (Heikkinen & Kaukko 2023.) According to Taylor (2013, 3) validation in research also involves close scrutiny of logical arguments and empirical evidence to determine whether they support theoretical claims. Researchers try to mitigate possible threats to the validity of their claims while they gather evidence to support their theories. (Taylor 2013, 3.)

To support the reliability and validity of the thesis, a comprehensive literature review was instigated, and concrete examples of the current internationalisation efforts in Finnish baseball were showcased to back the literature review. Based on the literature review and the examples, the survey questionnaire was designed to reinforce these examples, and to further elaborate on the validity of the thesis. The reliability of the thesis could be questioned due to the low number of respondents, but it could also be argued that the exclusion of the answers outside of the intended survey audience also helped to validate the research better. In addition, the expert interview helped to reinforce the need for the research.

Although the lack of prior studies on the subject could also be seen as questionable on the reliability of the thesis, it was also one of the goals of the thesis to function as a precedent case for future research on the subject. This means that it would be more than welcome to try to replicate the results in another study, to either debunk or reaffirm the outcome of this study. Future research could be implemented on other Finnish baseball teams, or on other possible parts of the customer segment that were excluded from this study.



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## **Interview with Mika Toivola**

### **Name?**

Mika Toivola.

### **What is your role in the operations of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät?**

I am the executive director of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät.

### **What are the strengths and weaknesses of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät in comparison to other Superpesis organisations?**

I see Kouvola as a major sports city, and Kopta has a firm and supportive fan base. There is a lot of spectators in our home games when the team is playing well. The economic zone of the Kouvola region is not at the same level of, for example, Tampere, but still bigger than many of our competitors.

### **How significant part does match day revenue play in the activities of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät?**

It is a very significant part for our organisation. Without the sales gathered from home games, and funding received from our partners, there would be no Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät.

### **Who belong to the current customer segments of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät?**

The most prominent customer segments are adults and senior citizens. Our current challenges include attracting younger people to our home games.

### **Have you recently seen signs of internationalisation in Finnish baseball?**

I have not yet seen significant signs, although I do see big potential in the internationalisation of Finnish baseball.

### **Do you think attracting international spectators is potential in the future activities of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät?**

Yes. There is a lot of people currently moving to Finland from foreign countries and I see potential in this for us too. We have to anyway try to raise our attendance levels in our home games.

## Survey questionnaire

### Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät thesis survey

Mandatory questions are marked with a star (\*)

**This survey collects information for my thesis. The commissioner of the thesis is Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, which commissioned the thesis to develop their marketing strategies and to reach international audiences. The survey measures the respondents' current experiences with team sports entertainment, such as attending different sporting events live, or by following and supporting different sports teams.**

**The survey is anonymous. Thank you for responding and helping me with my thesis work!**

- Saku Myller

**What is your age? \***

---

**What is your gender? \***

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Do not want to say

**What is your nationality? \***

---

**Have you played any team sports competitively yourself? \***

- Yes
- No



Which sport/sports have you played? \*

---

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On a scale of 1-5, how regularly do you follow team sports entertainment, where approximately 5 = Constantly and 1 = Rarely or never? \*



In your experience, which of the following team sports do you follow? You can choose multiple options. \*

- Association football / Soccer
- Cricket
- Basketball
- Baseball
- Rugby union
- Field hockey
- Volleyball
- Ice hockey
- American football
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- I do not follow team sports

**Rank your chosen team sports according to how much you follow them, where 1 = Most followed \***

	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
	<input type="radio"/> 3
	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
Association football / Soccer	<input type="radio"/> 6
	<input type="radio"/> 7
	<input type="radio"/> 8
	<input type="radio"/> 9
	<input type="radio"/> 10

**Do you like to attend team sports events live? \***

- Yes
- No

**Why do you like to attend team sports events live?**

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---

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**Why do you not like to attend team sports events live?**

---

---

---

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**Which factors would be important for you to attend a sporting event live, where 1 = least important and 5 = most important? \***

	1	2	3	4	5
Ticket prices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Atmosphere of the game	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Location of the stadium/good connection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Length of the game	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Weather (if outside)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Weekday and time of the game	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prior knowledge of the team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Good company (i.e. family/friends)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Food and drink options	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
VIP suite (if available)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Have you heard about pesäpallo (a.k.a. Finnish baseball) before? \***

- Yes  
 No

**Have you previously been to a pesäpallo game? \***

- Yes  
 No

**Have you heard about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, a pesäpallo team from Kouvola before? \***

- Yes  
 No

**There are multiple sports clubs in Kouvola that have representative adult teams that play either in the championship level of Finland or lower divisions of Finland. Which of the following (selection of) teams would you most like to see live? \***

- KJP (Association football / Soccer)
- MyPa -47 (Association football / Soccer)
- Kouvol/Kouvottaret (Basketball)
- Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät (Pesäpallo)
- KoLe -57 (Volleyball)
- KooKoo (Ice hockey)
- Kouvola Indians (American football)
- None of these teams

**Rank your chosen Kouvola sports clubs according to which one you would most like to see live, where 1 = Most likely to see live.**

\*

	<input type="radio"/> 1
	<input type="radio"/> 2
	<input type="radio"/> 3
<b>KJP (Association football / Soccer)</b>	<input type="radio"/> 4
	<input type="radio"/> 5
	<input type="radio"/> 6
	<input type="radio"/> 7

**If you were to attend a home game of Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät, in what languages would you like to receive information about the activities of the team (home game timetables, team news, social media presence etc.)? \***

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**In you wanted, in what form would you like to receive information about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät? \***

	Yes	No
Printed media (newspaper, posters etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät web site	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email newsletter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Radio	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Television	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Word of mouth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**In what other way would you like to receive information about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät? \***

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**Which social media platforms would you like to receive information about Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät? \***

- Facebook
- Twitter/X
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Snapchat
- TikTok
- WhatsApp
- Other, what?

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**Do you have other possible reasons to attend or not to attend a home game of  
Kouvolan Pallonlyöjät?**

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