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**Sponsor relationship development in Finnish sport clubs**

Master's thesis 2020

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## ABSTRACT

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Sports interest and move enormous amounts of people, and the interest garnered by sports manifests in sponsors' interest as well. Sports has been the most popular sponsoring target for many years, but particularly in the last years, more discussion has focused on the challenges what sponsoring has faced. Sports have become a business operation and sponsors play a large role in this operation. However, the companies reflect more thoroughly on their investments and acquiring sponsoring revenues is increasingly harder.

The aim of this study is to study the development of the sponsoring relationship in Finnish sport organizations. The goal is to increase awareness on sponsoring relationship development, and to especially identify aspects that affect relationship development. Hopefully, the study will help Finnish sport organizations better understand their opportunities for affecting the sponsoring relationship development.

The study was conducted as a qualitative study for a purposive sample consisting of sport clubs and companies that had long-term sponsoring experiences. The interviewees had been involved in sponsoring for a long time and could state their opinions based on years of experience. The data from individual interviews was compared to literature on the topic. The theoretical base for the study consisted of sponsoring, sponsoring process, and customer relationship development. The study results indicate that Finnish sport organizations recognize the need for sponsoring relationship development, but that concrete operations are still only beginning. The development is mainly realized through new products and services.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

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Urheilu kiinnostaa ja liikuttaa valtavaa joukkue ihmisiä ja urheilun herättämä kiinnostus näkyy myös sponsoreiden kiinnostuksena. Urheilu on ollut jo pitkään suosituin sponsoroinnin kohde, mutta varsinkin viime vuosina on puhuttu haasteista, joita sponsorointi on kohdannut. Urheilu on muuttunut liiketoiminnaksi, jossa sponsoreilla on iso rooli. Mutta yrityksen miettivät panostuksiaan entistä tarkemmin ja sponsorointituloja on haastavaa saada.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia suomalaisten urheiluorganisaatioiden sponsorointisuhteen kehittämistä. Tavoite on nostaa tietoisuutta sponsorointisuhteen kehittämisestä ja erityisesti tuoda esiin keinoja, jotka vaikuttavat suhteen kehittämiseen. Tutkimuksen toivotaan auttavan suomalaisia urheiluseuroja ymmärtämään paremmin omat mahdollisuutensa vaikuttaa sponsorointisuhteen kehittämiseen.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena valitulle tutkimusjoukolla, joka koostui urheiluseuroista sekä yrityksistä, jotka ovat tehneet pitkään sponsorointia. Haastateltavat henkilöt ovat olleet pitkään mukana sponsoroinnissa ja pystyvät kertomaan vahvan kokemuksen perusteella näkemyksiään. Yksilöhaastatteluista saatuja tuloksia verrattiin aiheeseen liittyvään kirjallisuuteen. Teoreettinen pohja muodostui sponsoroinnista, sponsorointi prosessista sekä asiakassuhteen kehittämisestä. Tutkimuksen tuloksista voidaan huomata, että suomalaiset seurat ymmärtävät sponsorointisuhteen kehityksen tarpeellisuuden, mutta käytännön toteutus on vielä alkuvaiheessa. Toteutuksen suhteen kehittyminen on tapahtunut pääsääntöisesti uusien myytävien tuotteiden sekä palveluiden kautta.

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This is it. The end and the new beginning at the same time. This thesis project brings this journey in Lappeenranta to the last stop. And what a journey it was. I could not have imagined this when I first time went to the university five years ago. Last five years have been the greatest time of my life. And the main reason for this is people who I have met during the journey. I have got awesome friends who have made this journey unforgettable. I want to thank you all.

Of course, this journey gave me a lot of different skills that I will be able to utilize in my future working life. Now I dare to step the future with confidence. This thesis project gave the final seal to my studies and during this process I noticed how many new doctrines I have got along the way. I really want to thank all six interviewees. I know your schedules are full, but you took the time for interviews. Thank you for that!

Last but definitely not least I want to thank my family. You gave me huge support during the whole journey. I got always help when I needed. Especially I want to thank Heidi, who gave me support all the time. You are full of gold and we made this journey together.

Now begins a new journey, but I am more than ready for it!

Tampere, 1.5.2020

Tero Rantalainen

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This master's thesis focuses on researching the development of the sponsoring relationship in Finnish sports clubs with special focus on long-term development.

The goal of the study is understanding how Finnish sports clubs develop their relationships with their current sponsors.

The paper is divided into seven main chapters, which are described in detail at the end of this chapter. The following subchapters describe the background for this study, the research questions, and the goals of the study. Furthermore, the subchapters describe previous research and the theoretical framework for this study. The most relevant concepts for the study are also discussed.

## 1.1 Research background

Sports evoke emotions and affect enormous amounts of people. Finland is a true sports country, and different sports garner extensive attention in Finland. Many different sports are popular in Finland. In 2017, 46% of Finnish people above the age of 10 attended a live sports event. Team sports are especially popular in Finland. (Ruuskanen, 2019)

Because sports engage people, they provide an excellent opportunity for visibility. Large sums are used for sport sponsoring and sponsoring investments in international sports have risen steadily. In 2018, the global sport sponsoring market was valued at 65,8 billion dollars, which is a growth of 10 billion euros compared to four years prior. The market has continuously grown and in recent years the growth has been approximately 3 billion euros a year. (Guttman, 2019) The same trend can be seen in Finland as well. In 2019, 162 million euros were used for sport sponsoring in Finland. The share of sports in Finnish sponsoring market is 62 percent which means that sport sponsoring is clearly the largest sector in sponsoring. The investments in sport sponsoring have steadily risen in Finland as well. For example, last year, the sponsoring investments for sports rose 4,5 percent compared to the year before. (Sponsor Insight, 2020)

Sponsoring revenues play a large role in sports. An increasing amount of clubs' revenues come from sponsors, which makes the clubs very dependent on their sponsors. For example, more than half of the revenue for Finnish major league hockey teams, the most popular sport in Finland, comes from sponsors. This shows that sponsors have a shockingly large role in enabling sports. (EY, 2019)

It is still challenging for sports clubs to gather adequate sponsoring revenues, despite the growing sponsoring markets. Finances have been challenging for both team – and individual sports during the 2010s. The situation was especially challenging at the beginning of the decade, because the economic downturn forced companies to tighten their financial “belt” and this has often led to decrease in the clubs' sponsoring revenues. (Auvinen & Kuuluvainen, 2017, pp. 13-14) At the same time, clubs have become more dependent of their sponsors during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sponsoring revenues have been increasingly focused on certain sports and clubs, which has caused problems for many clubs, and some clubs have even declared bankruptcy. (Hakola, 2014)

It is easy to see the same trend continuing in the future. Spectatorship in different sports has decreased for several years, (Ainoa Mittari, 2019) which has led to problems caused by the decreased ticket sale revenues. When spectatorship decreases, the clubs miss out on grocery sales in addition to ticket sales. Therefore, the relative share of sponsoring in revenues increases even more. (Sponsor Insight, 2020) The coronavirus pandemic also poses a large threat for the clubs' finances. The virus has halted all sports and it's impossible to predict the future. One idea has been to continue sports without live audiences. The spectators can be reached through television, so the visibility offered to sponsors would not decrease. Without a live audience, the clubs' revenues rely almost solely on sponsors, which makes sponsoring relationships extremely valuable. (Ylä-Anttila, 2020; Vainikka, 2020; Ahola & Vesterinen, 2020)

When attaining sponsorship revenues becomes more challenging and focuses on certain sports, the role of current sponsors increases, and the development of individual sponsoring relationships becomes more important. The clubs' must be able to create long-term relationships with their sponsors and this relationship must be

developed throughout the following years. In many cases, developing the relationship is the only way to increase sponsorship revenues. It is possible that the clubs have not sufficiently focused on this aspect. The coronavirus has also shaken up things, and in the future, the clubs must prepare more efficiently for possible problems. Intense sponsoring relationships are a great safety net for situations like these.

Sponsoring has been studied to some extent globally and in Finland (e.g. Meenaghan, 1991; Cornwell & Kwon, 2019; Valanko, 2009). The studies have mainly focused on benefits of sponsoring and the sponsoring company's perspective (e.g. Valanko, 2009; Meenaghan, 2001; Davis & Hilbert, 2013). Hardly any focus has been given to developing the sponsoring relationship, especially from the club's perspective, which makes this study relevant and important.

## **1.2 Research goals and questions**

As previously stated, the role of sponsors in Finnish sport is significant and the clubs get most of their revenues from companies. Therefore, the goal of this study is to determine how Finnish sports organizations develop the relationship with their sponsors. The study examines whether the clubs make a conscious effort for developing more long-term and financial relationships with their sponsors.

The main research question is:

*“How Finnish sports organizations develop their relationship with their sponsors?”*

The following three sub-questions support the main research question:

*“Why are sponsors involved in sport sponsoring?”*

*“How do clubs discover the sponsor's goals for sponsorship outcomes?”*

*“How the sponsoring process works?”*

In order to investigate how the relationship is developed, motives for sponsoring need to be discovered. The first sub-question examines the sponsors perspective

for choosing the sponsored party and what are the goals for sponsoring. For example, why are the sponsors involved in sport sponsoring rather than other sponsoring sectors?

The second sub-question is important for development, because the basis for developing the relationship are the partner's goals. (Farrelly, Quester & Burton, 2006) The clubs need to understand these goals and discover the partner company's goals for sponsoring.

The third sub-question examines sponsor process in Finnish sport clubs. Development takes place through a process, therefore it is important to understand what the process is like. The sub-questions help with answering the main research question.

### **1.3 Delimitations**

The study was narrowed down using four aspects. The first aspect is geographical. The sports market varies greatly between countries and regions. For example, the Finnish sports market is smaller than in the United States or Central Europe. (Statista, 2019; Meenaghan, 2013; Sponsor Insight, 2020) That is why the study focuses on the state of Finnish clubs and the study is limited to Finnish clubs.

Secondly, the study examines professional sports organizations, although most sports organizations are not professional. Non-professional clubs have been bypassed in the study, because they do not strive for financial profit, so their operations differ from professional organizations. (Hossain, Suortti & Kallio, 2013, p. 32)

Thirdly, the study focuses on team sports, because sufficiently large professional organizations for individual athletes do not yet exist in Finland (Kössö, 2016).

Fourthly, in order to study relationship development, the study focuses on companies that have been involved in sponsoring for an extensive period of time.

## 1.4 Theoretical framework and key concepts

International scientific studies and articles are used for constructing the theoretical framework for this study. The sources also include international and national publications dealing with sponsoring, sports finances, and customer relationships. The theoretical framework for this study has been described in figure 1. below.

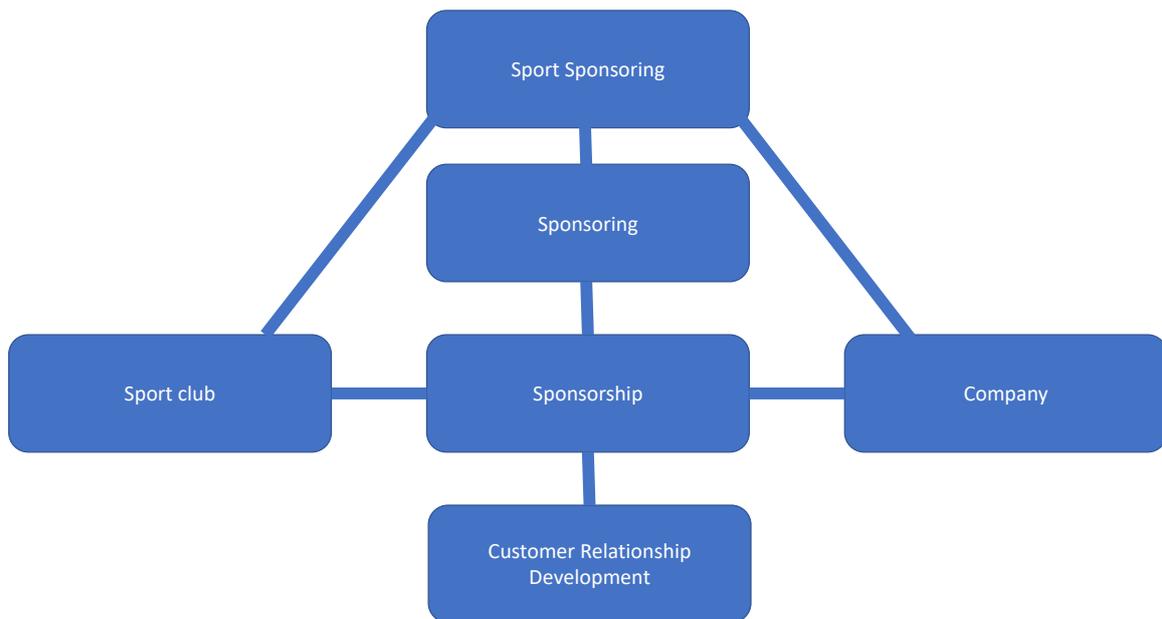


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

### **Sponsoring**

Sponsoring is defined as the cooperation between two parties; the sponsor and the sponsored. A sponsoring relationship, where the sponsor party pays for the sponsored party, has been created between these two parties. A key aspect of sponsoring is marketing communications, which expresses the relationship between parties and thus realizes the sponsoring goals. (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Demir & Hilbert, 2015; Valanko, 2009, p. 51)

### **Sport sponsoring**

Sport sponsoring is one the sponsoring subsections. In sport sponsoring, the sponsoring operations are focused on a sports operator. The sports operator can be, for example, an event, a team, an individual athlete, or a sports venue. (Davis & Hilbert, 2013, p. 337; Meenahgan, McLoughlin & McCormack, 2013)

## **Marketing communications**

The company attempts to communicate about themselves, their products, or their services through marketing communications. The goal is to affect the company's demand in the eyes of external stakeholders. Marketing communications do not equal advertising. Rather, advertising is just one aspect of marketing communications. Sponsoring, for example, is an aspect of marketing communications. (Kotler, 1997, p. 93; Tuori, 1995, p. 8)

## **Customer relationship development**

Customer relationship development attempts to maximize the profits of an existing customer relationship. The development can, for example, be done through new products or services. Customer relationship development leads to increased value for both parties. (Mäntyneva, 2003, pp. 9-11; Kotler, 1997, pp. 162-163; Grönroos, 2009, pp. 319-320)

### **1.5 Previous research**

As stated previously, sport sponsoring has been studied to some extent in Finland and abroad. The roots of sponsorship-related research date back to the 1980s, when sponsorship began to be separated into its own field. The first studies came from the United States and the biggest European countries. (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998) They focused on the nature of sponsorship as well as the corporate perspective. (e.g. Meenaghan, 1983; Gross, Traylor & Shuman, 1987, Gilbert, 1988)

In the 1990s research expanded and began to focus more on the United States. There the sport sponsoring market grew strongly and attracted more interest. The studies focused on different cases. (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998) In addition to the nature of sponsorship and the company's perspective more research was done on sponsoring strategies and measuring. (e.g. Meenaghan, 1991; Kuzma, Shanklin & McCally, 1993; Cuneen & Hannan, 1993)

During the new millennium, sport sponsoring research has continued to evolve. In the early 2000s the sport sponsoring market developed rapidly outside the United States as well. Research expanded especially to Europe. The number of studies

has also increased. (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019) There are three major perspectives: sponsorship trends, sponsorship process and effectiveness (e.g. Walraven, Bijmolt & Koning., 2014; O'Keefe, Titlebaum & Hill., 2009; Meenaghan, 2013).

Plenty of sponsoring research comes from the United States, where the topic has a long and extensive base. Sports markets have grown significantly, and the topic has garnered a lot of interest among researchers. (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019) However, most of the research is focused on the sponsoring content or the sponsor's perspective (e.g. Cornwell, Roy & Steinard, 2001; Alexander, 2009; Wang, 2017). Relationship development has not been widely studied (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019).

In Finland, sport sponsoring research has been scarce, although the activity has increased during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first studies in Finland are from early 2000s. (Olkkonen, 2001; Alaja, 2001) The perspectives in Finland vary, but generally follow the global trends. (e.g. Valanko, 2009; Aronen, 2015; Vottonen, 2012) Most studies in Finland focus on specific sports. This is justifiable, because the differences between sports are large in Finland. (Olkkonen, 2001) Sports business has received its first university courses in Finland, which means that the interest towards the topic will most likely increase in the future (Sivukari, 2013).

## **1.6 Research structure**

This study consists of seven main chapters displayed in figure 2. The first chapter describes the background and purpose of the study. It also details the research goals and questions, the theoretical framework, and the scope of the study. The study's theory is discussed in chapters two, three and four. The chapters describe sport sponsoring, the sponsoring process and customer relationships.

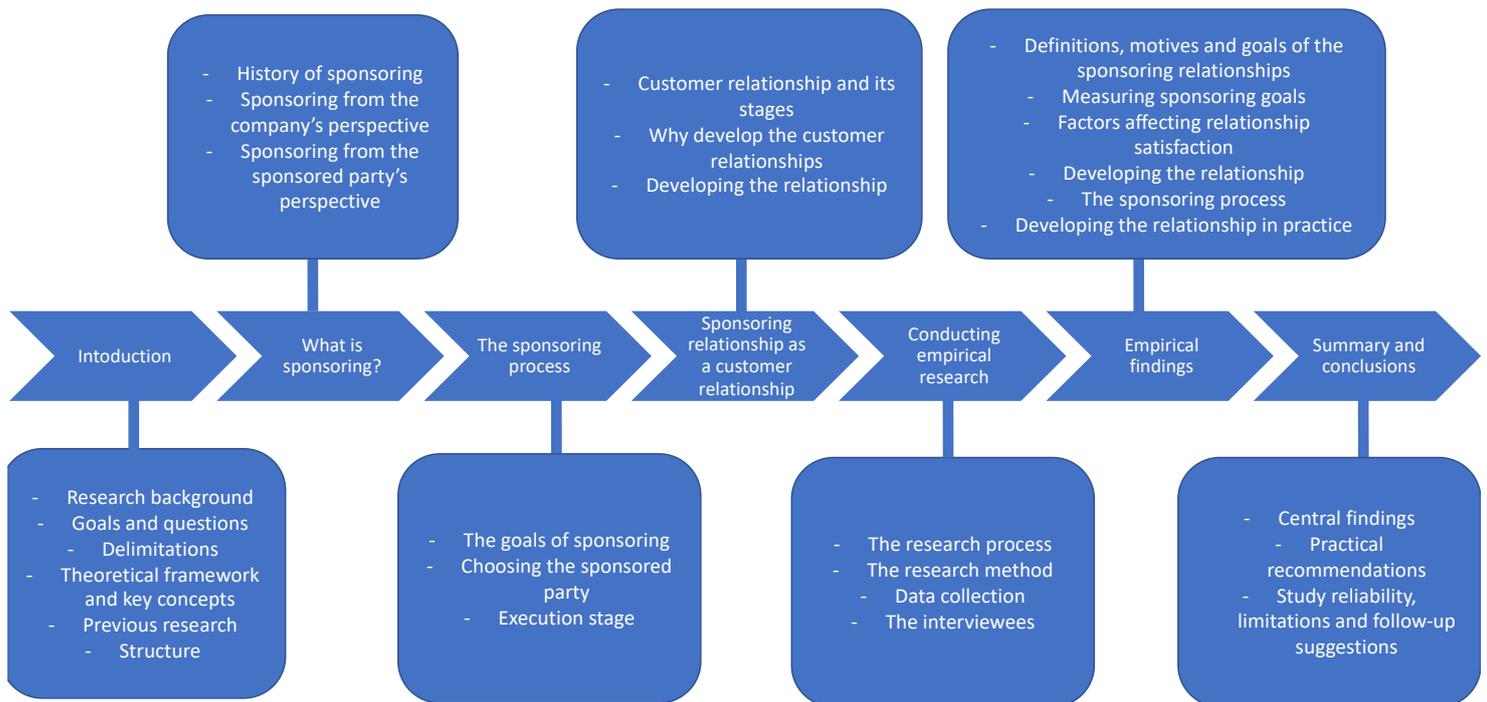


Figure 2. The structure of the thesis

Chapter five describes the empirical portion of the study. The chapter describes research methods and – strategy, as well as data collection, processing, and analysing. Chapter six describes the central findings of the study. This chapter has been divided into several subchapters for clarity. The findings are further discussed in the last conclusions chapter, which also answers the research questions from the introduction. Furthermore, the chapter gives practical recommendations based on the study. The last chapter also addresses the reliability and validity of the data, as well as the limitations and deficiencies of this paper. In the end, possible future research based on the study is discussed.

## 2. WHAT IS SPONSORING?

There are several different definitions for sponsoring. One of the best-known definitions is Meenaghan's definition from 1983. According to Meenaghan sponsoring can be defined as "the provision of assistance either financial or in kind to an activity by a commercial organization for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives". (Meenaghan, 1983) There are always commercial objectives behind sponsoring, and therefore it must be distinguished from charity (Walliser, 2003; Valanko, 2009, p. 49). However, benevolence has been, and still is, a fundamental part of sponsoring. This clearly distinguishes sponsoring from, for example, direct commercial marketing. (Meenaghan, 2001) Especially in Finland, the history of benevolence has left a strong stigma around the term sponsoring. Due to this stigma, sponsoring is often pictured as donations or one-way support instead of a commercial operation. (Valanko, 2009, p. 15) However, the term is out-dated, and a more suitable modern term would be cooperation partnership (Valanko, 2009, p. 24). Nevertheless, the term sponsoring is used in this study due to its renown and specific meaning.

Sponsoring is always a strategic solution for the company and a part of their marketing (Valanko, 2009, pp. 118-119). Marketing can be defined as management of productive customer relations, which entails new customer acquisition by promising supreme value and existing customer retention and growth by keeping the customers satisfied (Amstrong, Kotler & Harker, 2012, p. 8). However, sponsoring is not an unattached process related to marketing. Instead, it touches on numerous boundary surfaces through the communications plan (Jeffries, 2010). Therefore, sponsoring is a diverse tool for the company, and it has the grand benefit of securing exclusive rights to a certain marketing device – the sponsored party.

Sponsoring should be distinguished from advertising. The aim of advertising is to directly pursue customers, whereas sponsoring can modify people's existing images of the company. (Kelly, Ireland & Mangan, 2016) The value gained from sponsoring usually manifests later than the value gained directly from advertising. Furthermore, advertising is mostly controlled by the company, whereas in sponsoring, the company has limited control. In advertising, the company can pre-

determine the type of message they want to send, but in sponsoring the message is harder to control, and in fact, can't be completely controlled. Sponsoring is often experienced, and this makes the experience different for everyone. (Cornwell, et al., 2005) Furthermore, sponsoring utilizes the brands of the sponsor and the sponsored party very much.

According to Fullerton and Mertz, in sponsoring, the sponsor aims to benefit from his official relationship to the sponsored party using different methods (Fullerton & Merz, 2008). Sponsoring is a largely utilized marketing tool. When done correctly, sponsoring can be utilized, for example, in communications and in engaging the desired stakeholders, even outside the B2C sector. For example, business customers, partners, and the company's employees can be influenced by sponsoring. (Meenahgan, et al., 2013) Sponsoring has been the fastest growing marketing tool in the world for a long time and many companies have chosen sponsoring as their main marketing method (Fahy, Farrelly & Quester, 2004; IEG, 2017a).

The effectiveness of sponsoring is based on the good relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored party. According to Nufer and Bühler (2011), the tight relationship creates a hard to find competitive advantage, which is hardly available using any other marketing methods than sponsoring. (Nufer & Buhler, 2011) Therefore, sponsoring is often based on a relationship that lasts for years. This enables development of the relationship and the operation. Sponsoring is a great way to reach different target audiences and break cultural boundaries in global markets. (Fahy, et al., 2004)

In sport sponsoring, the company invests their marketing procedure into a sports operator, which can be a club, a player, or an event (Davis & Hilbert, 2013, p. 337). The commercialization of sport has led to sponsoring becoming a form of trade between the sponsor and the sponsored operator. In this trade, both parties aim to reach their own strategic goals. In the ideal situation, sponsoring cooperation functions like any other business cooperation so that both parties reach their pre-defined and equal goals. Sport sponsoring has moved from charity towards productive business activity. (Farrelly, et al., 2006) Sponsoring is seen as a

strategic resource for both parties, and these strategies are realized through sponsoring (Demir & Söderman, 2015).

The underlying aim of an investment in sport sponsoring is often to convince the fans and followers of the sports operator of a positive relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored operator. From a strategic perspective, the positive values and traits of the sponsored sports operator create a so-called halo around the sponsor's actions and therefore support the sponsor's brand – and reputation goals. (Davis & Hilbert, 2013, p. 337) Thus, the aim of sponsoring is to positively influence the image that potential customers have of the company's brand. For the sponsored party, financial benefits direct them to act in a way desired by the sponsor.

The positive side of sports in sponsoring is its emotional aspect. Sport evokes feelings ranging from shock to ecstasy and it is very engaging. The rousing of emotions and engagement produced by sports are the basis for the effectiveness of sport sponsoring. Sports are a great way for companies to reach desired target groups. (Mida & Zaiem, 2015)

## **2.1 History of sponsoring**

The history of sponsoring goes far, especially in sports. Figure 3. displays how sponsoring have evolved over the years. In ancient Rome the local dignitaries and politicians supported athletes, especially gladiators, and different construction projects in order to grow their influence. This type of sponsoring based on benevolence and support continued for a long time and increased during the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, the church, and later the nobility and royalty had a large role in funding and supporting art. (Masterman, 2007, pp. 11-13)

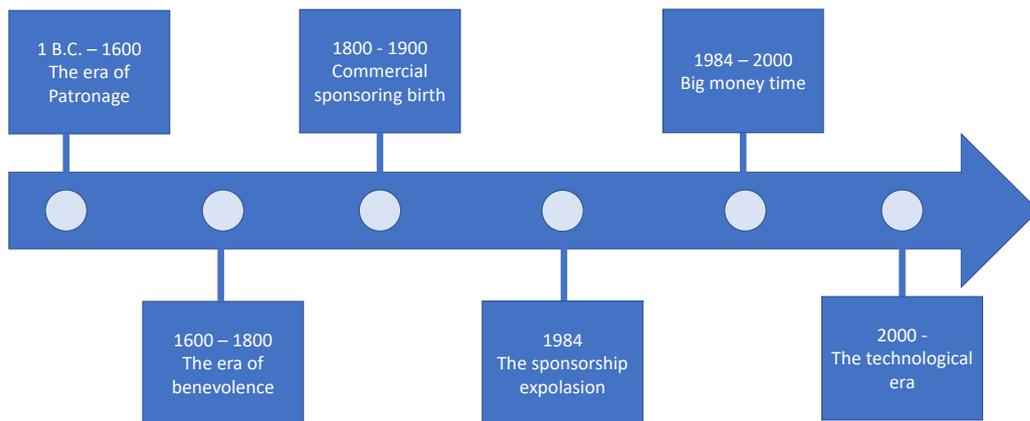


Figure 3. History of sponsoring. (adapted from (Masterman, 2007, pp. 11-13; Horne, 2006, pp. 73-76; Sage, 2016, p.104)

Although historically sponsoring has been seen as benevolence and support, these actions were rarely completely one-sided. Already in Rome, the dignitaries gained respect for their support. Thus, it can be said that throughout history, sponsors have sought profit for their investment. The beginning of modern commercial sponsoring can be seen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the birth of consumer culture and when advertising became more common. During this time, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popularity and viewership of sports began to increase, and the development of sports as a product began. This created a perfect starting ground for developing sport sponsoring. (Horne, 2006, pp. 73-76) From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization and urbanization shaped sports towards a more commercial form. (Sage, 2016, p. 104; Berrett & Slack, 1999)

With the generalization of television, a whole new way of reaching larger and larger audiences emerged for advertisers and sponsoring moved to the next level. The growing popularity of sports and sport events directed the focus of advertisers and sponsors towards sports. Advertising before, after, and during the commercial breaks of televised sports events gained popularity. Furthermore, through sponsoring televised sports events, companies could gain coverage without the increasingly costly advertising costs. (Masterman, 2007, pp. 14-15)

The most important development for international sport sponsoring happened in 1984 with the Los Angeles Olympics. These Olympics were the first in history that were organized with private money. Major part of funding for the games was secured from companies through sponsoring. (Shannon, 1999) The 1984 Olympics secured 123 million dollars in sponsorship revenue. This amount was significantly larger than ever before (Olympic committee, 2019). For the next major international event after the Olympics, the 1986 football World Cup, a ferocious bidding competition for sponsor spots ensued. (Shannon, 1999)

The roots of sport sponsoring in Finland are in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when physical education was philanthropically supported in order to prevent social problems. These support funds were provided by cities, which used the profits gained by selling liquor for sponsorship. After the success in the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, financial support was directed to competitive sports in addition to general physical education as well. It wasn't long, before competitive sports consumed most of the money instead of physical education. (Ilmanen, 1998)

More wide-spread development towards commercial sponsoring in Finland happened during the 1980s, especially in the latter part. During 1990s, know-how related to sponsoring significantly increased in Finland and first sponsoring professionals appeared. During this time, the income generated by sponsoring increased as well, although the economic depression of the 1990s halted the increase slightly. The depression directed companies towards a more thoroughly planned investments, which led to increasingly methodical and organized sponsoring. (Alaja, 2000)

On the whole, it can be said that the nature of sponsoring has shifted from charity to being a part of the sponsor company's marketing. Simultaneously, the investments in sponsoring have been directed more towards competitive sports instead of physical education. The demands and systematic nature of sponsoring have also increased. (Meenaghan, 1983). From sponsoring perspective, sponsoring has moved from short-sighted and passive logo visibility towards a more goal-directed and measurable long-term sponsoring. Because of these developments,

sponsoring is more and more seen as a part of the company's marketing message and clear quality standards have been set for sponsoring. (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998)

On the other hand, due to recent developments, the marketing focused thinking has shifted slightly towards the philanthropic side because of social responsibility. According to Cornwell, the consumer-focused thinking has been diversified and new goals and opportunities have appeared for sponsoring. However, understanding these opportunities and the sponsoring network is still insufficient. (Cornwell, 2014)

## **2.2 Sponsoring from the company's perspective**

As stated previously, from the sponsor company's perspective, sponsoring is seen as a resource used for achieving business goals. Sponsoring should be a part of marketing communication strategy and the integrated marketing communication of the company, so that maximum efficiency can be gained from sponsoring. (Demir & Söderman, 2015) The diverse opportunities provided by sponsoring create a large repertoire of possible applications for the company. According to Valanko (2009, p.63), the following sections of marketing communication can be executed through sponsoring: (Valanko, 2009, p. 63)

- Storytelling
- Concrete display of values
- The possibility for showcasing creativity
- Creating meaningful content
- Combining different communication tools
- Creating positive atmosphere
- Reach target group during their free time both individually and communally
- Provide stimulus for all senses

When done correctly, the sponsoring company can diversely communicate with their stakeholders. Simultaneously, the sponsor can communicate with and engage multiple desired stakeholders outside B2C operation as well. Sponsoring can

reach business customers, partners, and regulatory organs in addition to customers. (Meenahgan, et al., 2013)

However, sponsoring rarely functions independently. Rather, it's a part of a multi-channel communications plan. A more extensive communications plan can provide value for the company and diversify their image. Sponsoring is a very useful tool for doing this. (Jeffries, 2010) Furthermore, sponsoring is a great way for the sponsor company to reach their marketing goals, such as brand recognition and influencing the customer purchase intent (Nickell, et al., 2011). Thus, companies should always see sponsoring as an opportunity to enhance the company's competitive advantage.

Compared to advertising, sponsoring enables diverse marketing communication in different sectors. On the other hand, advertising is more controlled than sponsoring and enables more focused marketing communication. (Walliser, 2003) Sponsoring is seen as more humane and caring than advertising. Consumers are more favourable towards sponsoring than advertising (Meenaghan, 2001) and sponsoring has been called "soft advertising". (Suchard & Scott, 1992) Thus, consumers don't regard sponsoring as invasive or obtruding as is often the case with advertising (Walliser, 2003). Furthermore, in sponsoring, the company pays for the right to use the sponsored party in their marketing communications. In advertising, the company pays for an advertising spot in a pre-defined media. (Karjaluo, 2010, p. 55)

Sport sponsoring is a creative communications method and it provides the company with a possibility of getting their message through the mess of mass media messages. (Roy, 2005, p. 158) The company can influence the desired target group in a surprising and creative way. In sport sponsoring, the possibilities are numerous. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 63-65) The target groups reached by sports have expanded due to technological development and for example the Olympics and football World Cup gather viewers from all around the world. In addition, local sports operators can nowadays reach a larger target group, and this provides companies with a great opportunity. The same marketing communications tool can

be used to communicate with a large geographical audience. (Roy, 2005, pp. 147-149)

Creativity is manifested in the development of goals and tools of sponsoring. Thirty years ago, the aim of sponsoring was almost solely visibility. Nowadays, other goals, such as the active activation of customers, are also seen as important. However, the role of visibility is still significant. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 115-117). According to research conducted by IEG, social media is the most popular channel for utilizing sponsorship marketing. Figure 4. demonstrates how sponsors actively use multiple channels for sponsoring. (IEG, 2017b)

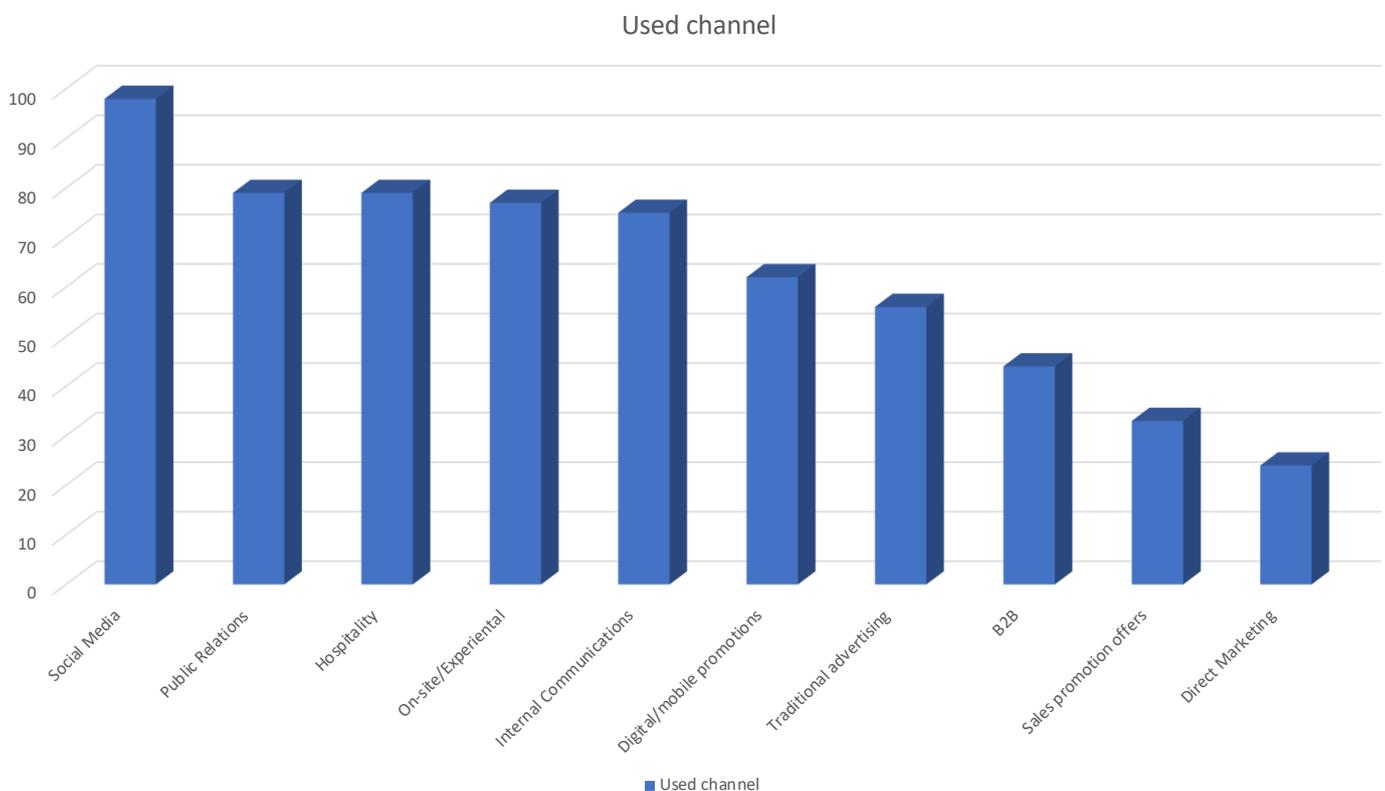


Figure 4. Most popular channels for utilizing sponsorship marketing. (Based on IEG, 2017b)

A large factor that draws companies into sport sponsoring is the loyalty of sports fans. Fans are often blindly loyal to their own favourite and the company's wish is that this loyalty would be at least partly transferred to the company's products or services through sponsoring. (Schlesinger, 2013) By utilizing visible and admired people and teams, the positive image that the consumers have of the sponsored

party can be transferred to the sponsor's product or service. This is done by linking the sponsor and sponsored party together via sponsoring operations. (Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014; Stone, et al., 2003)

Sports are an exceptionally good enabler for companies. Sponsoring enables reaching many goals, such as brand awareness and – visibility, engaging the target audience, increasing sales, and developing the brand image. (Papadimitriou, et al., 2016) This is especially enabled by the flexibility of sports as a marketing opportunity. Sports have a special meaning for people around the world. Although popularity of different sports varies, the language of sports is universal, and it can create universal stories. (Amis & Cornwell, 2005, p. 148)

According to Grohs, Wagner and Vsetecka (2004, p. 133) the positive image of the sponsored party is transferred to the sponsor more effectively, when the marketing investments of the sponsoring increase (Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka., 2004).

Sponsoring investments should be used for extensive communications. Nowadays dialog with different stakeholders is very important for companies (Luoma-aho, 2015) and the company must be diversely visible in different channels, especially in social media. The same rule applies to sponsoring as well. The amount of information has significantly increased and getting one's message through is challenging. (Luoma-aho, 2015) In sponsoring, it is important for the sponsor to recognize the content that is significant for the desired target group. This is the only way to spread the message to the desired consumer. (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013)

Sponsoring can also be viewed as a strong communication method, because it enables the transferability of the company's or the organization's identity. It can be used to influence the sponsor's reputation, guide the perceptions different stakeholders have of the sponsor, and authenticate the promises of the sponsor's brand. (Alexander, 2009) The most important tangible resources in sponsoring are financial resources – money. Other tangible resources include stadiums and event venues. However, intangible resources are more important than tangible resources. The most important tangible resource is brand capital. Increasing brand capital is the goal of sponsoring. (Fahy, et al., 2004)

### **2.2.1 Sport sponsoring as a brand tool**

Brand is the comprehensive sum of the associations that the consumers attach to the name, mark, or symbol of the product or service. Brand guides the consumer to choose a certain product or service and encourages buying and paying more for it than for a nameless and meaningless product or service. (Kourovskaja & Meenaghan, 2013) Brand recognition denotes the ability of a potential customer to recognize the brand and to link the brand with a specific product- or service category. Brand recognition can range from a completely unknown brand to a brand which the customer sees as the only representative of its category. (Aaker, 1991, pp. 61-62) Brand recognition is often an underrated competitive edge, but recognition has been shown to affect perception and even the sense of taste. People prefer the familiar and link positive emotions to products and services that are familiar to them. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 17)

Sport sponsoring can easily increase brand awareness among people, because sports enable the presentation of the company's desired image to a large audience. Based on research, spreading brand awareness works, and the increase of brand recognition is a natural consequence of sport sponsoring. (Cornwell, et al., 2001) Sponsoring provides companies with a new way of communication, and it enables a better and quicker change in the brand image compared to traditional advertising. The role of sponsoring in brand building is unique, and according to Valanko (2009, p. 29;63), it can be viewed as a cornerstone for brand building, because it enables increase in visibility, distinctiveness, and the creation of meaning through content. (Valanko, 2009, p. 29;63) Sponsoring can also bring the brand closer to the target group if there are strong emotions associated with the brand, and they can be spread through the sponsored party (Tribou, 2011). The compatibility of the sponsor and the sponsored party has been shown to positively affect the sponsor's brand loyalty (Wang, 2017).

Brands increasingly pursue long lasting customer relationships that are profitable in the long-term. Therefore, engagement with the brand has become a significant factor in theoretical and practical marketing. This new direction has created new descriptions, such as "passionate" and "committed" and the customers can be described as "fans" of the brands in their own mind. This has led brands to look for

new methods for creating and increasing brand engagement. These methods include experience-based marketing, cooperative marketing, and sponsoring. One of the most significant changes in the development arch of sponsoring has therefore been the shift from fabric patches to brand and meaning building. Brand engagement can be measured initially even before the purchase decision has been made, but it is most relevant after the purchase decision, when the long-term effects of brand engagement are realized in the form of long-term revenues. (Meenahgan, et al., 2013)

Building associations related to the brand and communication are powerful ways of creating brand identity and distinguishing oneself from competition. Through standing out, brand associations create positive feelings towards the brand in the brand's target group and therefore these associations provide a reason for consuming the brand's products and services. Brand association also has a so-called strength, which consists of repeated and different brand exposures. Thus, associations related to the brand are increased through increased exposure. (Aaker, 1991, pp. 109-112). Sport sponsoring provides exceptional possibilities for this, because through sports, brand associations can be positively influenced by using diverse communication (Henseler, et al., 2007). However, a jointly defined sponsoring process and guidelines are required, so that the message is consistent and can therefore influence brand associations (Valanko, 2009, p. 129).

Sport sponsoring provides smaller brands with a great opportunity for growing their recognition and creating brand associations. Through sports, different images that the consumers attach to the brand can be created. These images are formed through the sports brand, which is already familiar to people, and the association is mainly positive. It can be said that the brand of the sponsored party is transferred to the sponsor's brand thus strengthening it. (Gwinner, 2005) Research has constantly shown that the brand associations of the sponsored party are transferred to the sponsor through sponsoring. The sponsor's initial brand recognition had no effect and the transfer seems to take place in every instance. (Walliser, 2003; Smith, 2004) Therefore, sponsoring affects the sponsor's brand image regardless of the company's size or recognition.

### **2.2.2 The benefits of sport sponsoring for the sponsor**

The previous chapter discussed the effects of sponsoring on the company's, product's, or service's brand. A variety of other benefits can be realized through sport sponsoring depending on the goals set for sponsoring. One of the benefits compared to other marketing methods is the locality of sport sponsoring. (Davis & Hilbert, 2013, p. 342) Especially sports teams are very strong locally. It is good to sponsor local sports teams if the company wants to strengthen their brand locally. Likewise, teams in other municipalities or abroad provide the company with an opportunity to grow the company's geographical influence. (Ginesta, 2013) Locality is strong in Finland, especially in smaller municipalities, where the local sports team plays a large role in people's lives.

As mentioned previously, sports fans are very loyal, and this is reflected on the sponsor. It has been shown that sports fans recognize and remember sponsors much better than "regular" sports spectators. Fans also have more positive attitude towards the sponsor of their team or player. (Olson, 2018) Sport evokes feelings and this has a positive effect on brands, because they also evoke feelings. Through sport sponsoring, the company can evoke feelings together with the sponsored party and thus increase the interest towards their own brand. (Mida & Zaiem, 2015) Sponsors should recognize this and use it when planning sponsoring.

Sponsoring also creates a practical opportunity for developing the company's business. For example, business meetings in sports events are a good way of building relationships between two companies. Sports events provide opportunities for creating new contacts and deepening relationships with existing business partners. Negotiations based around sports events are different from traditional business meetings because the emotions transmitted through sports bring their energy to the negotiations as well. Often, the teams save the best spectator seats for the sponsors to make the experience as successful as possible. (Burton, et al., 2011) The company's staff can be engaged and encouraged through sport sponsoring as well. Successful sponsoring actions can manifest in the staff through increased work morale, company pride, team spirit, and through a more developed image of the employer. (Meenahgan, et al., 2013)

Companies pay more and more attention to the so-called social responsibility, which means that the company helps society in some way. Social responsibility is a large entity which entails extensive options. The execution of social responsibility can be directly related to the company's business or it can be completely independent of the business. (Carroll, 2015) Sport sponsoring is a great way of telling new and potential clients that the company takes care of their responsibilities within their own community. Mere sponsoring of a local athlete or team indicates responsibility and participation in community development. (Kase, et al., 2010) During the coronavirus epidemic more social responsibility operations have been seen in sports. The teams with their sponsors have, for example, helped the elderly or the sick. (e.g. Åssät, 2020; Aamulehti, 2020; Happee, 2020)

Sponsoring provides certain companies with a marketing channel, because marketing through other channels is not possible. For example, advertising alcohol or tobacco is prohibited or heavily restricted in many countries, but sports provide creative marketing channels for this industry as well. (Cornwell, 2008) The link between sports and alcohol was not questioned for a long time, but during 2010s the subject has been discussed extensively. For example, should the presence of breweries as main sponsors for sports teams be restricted (Ruonala, 2012). For example, in Finland, alcohol marketing has been severely limited, but it can still be used in sponsoring (Valvira, 2018). A good example of this type of marketing is the long-standing partnership between the Finnish National Hockey League team HIFK and the Sinerbychoff-brewery, which has enabled the extensive marketing of Sinerbychoff's Koff beer through sport sponsoring (Elo & Niipola, 2015).

In Finland, sponsoring can be almost free marketing, because the sponsoring done by companies is tax deductible. However, sponsoring must be a two-way cooperation for it to be counted as a marketing cost. Therefore, the company must receive visibility or other profits through the sponsored party. If this two-way relationship does not exist, sponsoring is seen as charity and is not tax deductible. (Pulli, 2017)

Visibility is of course the main benefit of sponsoring (Itkonen, et al., 2007, pp. 41-47). Through sponsoring, the company can easily focus their marketing message to large masses or small niche-segments when needed. This targeting can be

done by choosing the sponsored parties that can reach the desired customer segments. (Thwaites & Carruthers, 1998) Sports have a positive image that supports sport sponsoring. (Itkonen, et al., 2007, pp. 41-47) Compared to advertising, sports reach their target audience effectively through the commotion that is advertising (Nickell, et al., 2011).

### **2.2.3 The possible disadvantages of sport sponsoring for the sponsor**

Although many positive aspects are associated with sport sponsoring, every coin has two sides. There are also some possible disadvantages that sport sponsoring can have for the sponsor. Good stories and positive images are associated with sports, but this is not always the case. Just like in business, cheating, malpractices, and abusing people happen in sports. (Itkonen, et al., 2007, p. 9) Special threats related to sports are doping, violence, cheating, and bribery. Sport sponsoring is often a relatively expensive investment as well. (Itkonen, et al., 2007, pp. 41-47)

Unpredictability is also a factor closely related to sports. It is never certain how a certain player, team, or event will succeed. (Amis, et al., 1999) The sponsor can't completely control the actions of the sponsored party, and the possibility for contract breaches that cause damage to the company's reputation do exist. It is also impossible to predict the spectators' affections. An action that has been thought as positive can be viewed as negative by the spectators. (Itkonen, et al., 2007, pp. 41-47)

The negative images that the opponents of the sponsored party have of the company are concrete negative effect for the sponsor. According to Olson's (2018) research, fans have a negative attitude towards the sponsors of their worst rivals. These negative emotions or experiences can be called hate. According to this research, the feelings of hate increase with the increase of the sponsor's brand's association with the sport in question. Sponsors should be aware of this negative effect among the sponsored sport operator's rivals and try to evaluate whether the advantages of sponsoring outweigh its disadvantages (Olson, 2018; Thomas, 2014)

## **2.3 Sponsoring from the sponsored party's perspective**

Sponsored party, the sports team in this paper, is the other partner in the sponsoring partnership. The sponsored party is practically a marketing tool that strives to advance the sponsor's goal with their actions and thus create operational resources for themselves. Usually these resources are financial. (Fahy, et al., 2004) The sponsored party decides on what it wants to provide for the sponsor. The sponsored party can be, for example, a stadium, event, individual, group, or sports organization. (Cornwell & Kwon, 2019)

From the perspective of sports, the sponsoring revenues from the business world are essential. The continuous development of top-level competitive sports and the continuously decreasing resources have made sports operators increasingly dependent on their sponsors. The competition between sports has also increased and this can especially be seen in Finland. (Koski & Heikkala, 1998) In Finland, the sponsoring support is focused on the most popular sports, and even in those sports the largest operators take most of the money. (Itkonen, et al., 2007, p. 15) The main revenues for the teams in the national ice hockey league, Finland's most popular sport, come from sponsors. Therefore, sponsors have a large impact on the sport. (EY, 2019)

Sponsoring provides the sponsored party with operational opportunities and the sponsored party often gets other benefits as well. For example, sponsoring can be used to polish the sponsored party's image. However, sponsoring also creates challenges for the sponsored party, especially if the sponsor assumes a large role in prerequisites for operation. (Fahy, et al., 2004)

### **2.3.1 The benefits of sponsoring for the sponsored party**

As mentioned previously, the greatest benefit of sponsoring for the sponsored party is the financial support that enables sports operations. (Fahy, et al., 2004) However, the sponsored party gains other benefits as well. Sponsoring can be viewed as a part of the team's marketing from the sponsored party's perspective as well. Due to the marketing communications carried out by the sponsor and the team, the awareness of the team's processes usually increases. The team's brand

and related associations can also be changed through sponsoring. (Dietl & Schweizer, 2014) Visibility is not only limited for the sponsor, and the sponsored party can benefit from the increased visibility as well.

With the help of quality marketing communications, the sponsored party can also stand out. Well-executed marketing creates competitive advantage for the team and distinguishes it from the competition. Sport sponsoring is an opportunity for the team to develop the relationship with their fans and other sports consumers. (Demir & Söderman, 2015) Through sponsorship cooperation, the team can reach new target groups and appear in a different light for familiar target groups.

For sports teams, sponsoring is also business, and just like in all business, the sports teams look for positive customer experiences. Through these positive customer experiences and customer satisfaction, the interest towards the sponsored party can increase in other companies as well. (Dietl & Schweizer, 2014) According to research, the sponsored party can affect the sponsor's target choices by affecting customer experience and customer satisfaction. By providing quality work, the sponsor projects an outward image of an interesting operator that most people want to work with. (Walliser, 2003)

### **2.3.2 The possible threats of sports sponsoring for the sponsored party**

The main threat for the team is overdependency on the sponsoring revenues. When the teams increasingly operate on sponsorship revenues, other revenue streams are unnecessarily thrust aside. If the sponsor's business becomes endangered and their financial situation is driven into a crisis, it reflects on sponsoring as well. This can prove fatal for the team if their income is too dependent on sponsorship revenues. (Gomez, et al., 2010) A concrete example of this has been seen this passing spring when the corona epidemic has caused great financial difficulties for sports teams. Because of a foreseeable drop of sponsorship revenues in the future due to the pandemic, many teams in Finland's top-level ice hockey league have had to re-evaluate their operations. (e.g. Lukko, 2020; Åssät, 2020b; Pelicans, 2020)

Increased dependency on sponsors can also create expenses for clubs. The growing standards imposed by businesses has forced the clubs to grow their operations towards a model that resembles large businesses, although most clubs are still relatively small. Clubs have hired new employees, whose skills do not necessarily match the job description, because the club's financial resources do not enable hiring of "tougher" professionals. Sports organizations have, for example, also built new facilities for entertaining partners. However, the use of these facilities is deficient, and their expenses are large compared to the clubs' financial situation. (Cousens & Slack, 2005) Hiring new people and new facilities are not necessarily challenges, but when they surpass financial capacity, they become a burden.

One big threat for clubs is gathering too many sponsors. It might be tempting for a club to gather as many sponsors as they can, but this is harmful. Excessive number of sponsors and the spectators' exposure to too many sponsors decreases the effectiveness of sponsoring. According to research, the spectators' ability to observe and remember the team's sponsors decreases with the number of sponsors visible. Therefore, excessive quantities of individual sponsors negatively impact the success of the sponsoring strategy and thus decrease sponsor satisfaction. (Cornwell, et al., 2000)

### **3. THE SPONSORING PROCESS**

Sponsoring partnership is based and developed on a sponsoring process. The process creates a partnership and enables its development. From the club's perspective, it's important to understand the different stages and results of the process, because this enables the development of the sponsor partnership. The sponsoring process should be carefully planned and constructed, so that the spread message is consistent and reaches the desired target group in the desired way. (Valanko, 2009, p. 129; Meenaghan, 2013; O'Keefe, et al., 2009)

The third main chapter explains this process more thoroughly and helps the clubs understand the critical sections at each phase of the sponsor partnership. The chapter has been divided into three subchapters, the goals of sponsoring, choosing the sponsored party, and execution. Together, these three sections create a successful process and create a basis for developing the relationship. (Jeffries, 2010)

#### **3.1 The goals of sponsoring**

Before starting a sponsoring partnership, the sponsoring party must create sponsoring goals. Clearly defined goals guide the sponsoring operations. (Meenaghan, 2013) Goals are derived from the company's business goals, so they can't be completely independent (Jeffries, 2010). Sponsoring enables communication and engagement with single or multiple target groups, but the relevant fact is, that the operational goals have been pre-defined. If there are multiple target groups, the goals should be set individually for each target group. (Meenaghan, 2013) A goal directs the operations and enables verification of results from completed operations.

According to O'Keefe (2009), the company must clearly recognize their goals for sponsoring and sponsoring partnership before initiating the sponsoring process. If the company can't recognize and express their goals, they can't be executed and measured through the sponsoring partnership. (O'Keefe, et al., 2009). The team can support goals and awaken ideas, but in the end the goals must be set by the sponsoring company (Jeffries, 2010).

As mentioned previously, sponsoring is no longer charity. Rather it is a business, and therefore the companies seek some profit for their sponsoring investments. These profits can be financial or non-tangible depending on the company's goals. (Meenaghan, 2013; Rope & Pyykkö, 2003, p. 287) The company's goals for sponsoring can thus greatly differ according to different needs. According to research carried out by IEG, the five most important goals sponsors have set for sponsoring were: (IEG, 2017b)

1. Increasing consumer's awareness of the company
2. Increasing customer loyalty
3. Expressing the company's social responsibility
4. Changing or maintaining company image
5. Entertaining existing and potential clients

In addition, sponsoring is used to reach platforms that enable brand building through experience. Developing marketing communications content through sponsoring was also seen as important. (IEG, 2017b) In Finland, sponsors still mostly strive for visibility through sponsoring. The goals that are widespread worldwide are still just arriving in Finland. (Itkonen, et al., 2016)

It can be stated, that the goals set by companies can be divided into three subcategories: Brand building, stakeholder goals, and social responsibility. These subcategories are discussed in the following subchapters.

### **3.1.1 Brand building**

Brand building through sponsoring is diverse, because the brand is seen as a diverse entity. Brand denotes a name, symbol, or characteristic that sets the product or service apart from those offered by other providers. The brand can be a company, a product, a family of products, or a service. (American Marketing Association, 2020) Brand capital is built mainly in people's minds and it's influenced by everything that people see, or experience related to the company, product, or service. Brand building through sponsoring happens, for example, through visibility. (Cornwell, et al., 2001)

Brand building is often seen as the most important and only goal of sponsoring, and this used to be the case. Companies mainly sought visibility for themselves, their product, or their service through sponsoring. Brand building and its attached elements are clearly visible outwards and are thus the most obvious expression of the sponsoring partnership. Sponsoring is an effective tool for strengthening and developing company image and brand. Through sponsoring, brand building can be done in internal and external communications. (Meenaghan, 1991; Valanko, 2009, p. 129) Therefore, the most important goals have always been attached to the company's brand building.

Sports sponsoring has many opportunities for achieving its brand building goals. (Farrelly, et al., 2006) Sponsoring can be used for creating images and building the brand at both the company and the product level (Alexander, 2009). And especially in consumer-focused sponsoring, sports work well in reaching the target groups. Sponsors gain visibility and can reach the desired target groups and increase their willingness to buy products and consume services. (Cornwell, et al., 2005)

Sport sponsoring can be used in many ways for brand building because of its flexibility and diversity. Sports evoke emotions and create stories, and many people can connect to them. With creativity, the sponsor's goals for brand building can be realized in a multitude of ways. (Cliffe & Motion, 2005) According to research, different kinds of stories effectively impact the brand, because they are interesting and stay in people's minds. Sport is an exceptional storyteller, so it builds an excellent base for brand building. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 64-66)

The versatility of sport and its strong base provide an excellent starting point for brand building. Extensive possibilities enable different brand building goals, and therefore the most popular goals related to sport sponsoring have to do with brand building. (Alexander, 2009; IEG, 2017b) Sport provides a lot of diverse visibility, and therefore messages that benefit the company image can be spread using a multitude of methods (IEG, 2017b).

### 3.1.2 Stakeholder goals

In addition to brand building goals, sport can reach different stakeholder groups. If brand building attempts to influence people's images, stakeholder goals aim to influence the sponsor's stakeholders and partners. These stakeholders can be company external or internal. Sponsoring can help with motivating the company's employees, as well as in developing the company's customer -, supplier -, and partner relationships. (Oesch, 2002, p. 6) Stakeholders can also include local communities, business associates, stockholders, and members of the board. (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004)

For stakeholders, sponsoring can create additional value and surprises. This can be done, for example, by offering exclusive services or by securing exclusive purchasing rights for certain events. (Cunningham, et al., 2003, p. 412) Through sponsoring operations, organizations can build and strengthen their own identity through internal communications and marketing, and thus increase their desirability in the eyes of external stakeholders (Cunningham, et al., 2009).

A concrete stakeholder goal for the company could be improving the company's reputation as an employer. Thus, the desired stakeholder group would be potential employers. Nowadays, the competition for competent labour force is increasingly tough and sponsoring can be used for standing out when recruiting. (Valanko, 2009, p. 137) On the other hand, the goal can be engaging the existing staff, which can also be positively influenced by sponsoring. Through sponsoring, the company can provide its employees with exclusive benefits and thus stand out from the competition. (Alexander, 2009) Therefore, the goals can be viewed as developing the company culture and improving the company image in the eyes of the employees (Meenaghan, 2013).

The stakeholder segment is often given too little attention when creating sponsoring goals. Sponsoring is not seen as way to influence current employers or potential recruits. However, with diverse operations, these groups can be influenced as well. Messages about the sponsored party should be communicated to employees, and the employees should actively be given the chance of thinking and developing their own ideas. (Amis, Slack & Berrett, 1999) Sponsoring can be used in a

multitude of ways and taking care of stakeholders through sponsoring gives the company yet another competitive advantage.

### **3.1.3 Social responsibility**

The third main goal for sponsoring is social responsibility, which means helping the society in some way. Social responsibility can often be independent of the company's business operations, and its aim is to spread an image of responsibility. (Carroll, 2015) Social responsibility has become an increasingly important sponsoring goal, and nowadays it is seen as the third most common goal for businesses (IEG, 2017b). Social responsibility has become more common throughout society and nowadays the companies are expected to do their part. (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010)

Possible goals realized through social responsibility include positive customer attitudes towards the company, developing the relationship between stakeholders and the company, and improving the company's image (Du, et al., 2010). Social responsibility operations have increased as a part of the sport related marketing communications, because companies see sport sponsoring as a useful channel for spreading awareness of their social responsibility actions. (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer & Groeppel-Klein, 2014)

According to research, the social responsibility work by companies through the sponsored parties positively influences the consumer's attitudes. The social responsibility operations were seen as especially effective in those cases where the similarity between the sponsor and the sponsored party was otherwise low. (Uhrich, et al., 2014) Thus, people positively receive social responsibility work, even though the sponsor partnership would otherwise be slightly odd. On the other hand, fulfilling the social responsibility has been seen increasing the realization of commercial sponsoring goals as well. (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010). Therefore, social responsibility actions, and its related goals also produce commercial results.

Often the problem with social responsibility is publishing. People don't necessarily react in the best possible way if the company promotes its social responsibility using its own channels. This is seen as glued on, or reputation polishing. However,

companies have the need to communicate their social responsibility work, because it creates positive images in consumer's minds. Therefore, sports are an exceptional tool for advancing social responsibility goals. (Du, et al., 2010) Great examples of this have been seen during the coronavirus epidemic, as companies have worked together with sports teams in supporting local people during this challenging time. For example, the ice hockey team Porin Ässät and their partners have delivered medication to people at risk in the Pori region. (Ässät, 2020a)

### **3.2 Choosing the sponsored party**

After goals have been set, the sponsoring process takes its next step which is choosing the sponsored party. Several studies show the importance of choosing the suitable sponsored party for the sponsoring process. (Jeffries, 2010; Bush, et al., 2004; Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014; Meenaghan, 1991; Rope & Pyykkö, 2003, p. 292; Valanko, 2009, p. 63; Vuokko, 2002, p. 302) Choosing the sponsored party carefully improves the possibilities for a successful sponsoring process. Through the sponsored party, the company can realize its sponsoring goals and reach the desired target group. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013) However, choosing the sponsored party is not easy, because the range of possible parties is extensive (Renard & Sitz, 2011). Therefore, the sponsor company must create clear criteria for choosing the sponsored party in order to reach the set goals. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014; Jeffries, 2010; Valanko, 2009, pp. 23-24; Renard & Sitz, 2011)

The criteria for choosing the sponsored party should be connected to company's marketing – and business strategies (Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014; Jeffries, 2010). The researchers suggest that the companies should use pre-defined filtering criteria so that the criteria match the company's larger strategy. It has been shown that decision makers make more rationalized and faster decisions when they have pre-existing criteria to base their decision on. It is impossible to make a comprehensive list of all the criteria, because the criteria are almost completely dependent on the sponsor's needs and goals. Therefore, the sponsor must make the decision on the exact criteria themselves. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014)

Johnston and Paulsen conducted a research on the demands of international sponsorship manager and created a list of the most common filtering criteria. The most important criteria were the compatibility of the sponsored party with the sponsor's brand goals, and the quality and length of the sponsoring relationship. According to the researchers the sponsoring executives look for high compatibility with the sponsor's brand goals, great or exceptional sponsoring relationship, and extensive duration. Important factors for the sponsoring relationship are trust, mutual satisfaction, commitment, coordinated cooperation, and clear two-way communication. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014)

According to research, the geographical aspect is relatively important for sponsorship managers, but it is nowhere near as important as the compatibility, length, and quality aspects. Sponsoring executives prefer regional sponsor partnerships to local, global, and international partnerships. National and local partners are close to the popularity of regional partners, but the interest towards international partners is surprisingly low. This might be due to the large number of resources required for international partnerships compared to regional and local ones. Local communities are also often more homogeneous and therefore generate more profits. Local sponsored parties are often related to local culture, which provides the sponsors with a better opportunity for approaching and creating relationships with the consumers. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014)

Exclusivity, how the sponsor partnership is paid, and how it is shown in the media are nowhere near as important for sponsorship managers than the criteria mentioned above. According to the researchers, main sponsor, and exclusive sponsor for certain category are the most desired titles, because they guarantee visibility regardless of higher expenses. The most popular method of payment is a combination between cash and products/services (for example, an ice-hockey product supplier providing the team with their products). Money donations and cash payments are some of the least preferred payment methods. The most desired marketing platform for sponsoring cooperation is the traditional printed media. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014) According to research, sponsorship managers are surprisingly reluctant in marketing the sponsoring cooperation via the internet, although cooperation through internet has been shown to have more positive results

compared to cooperation where internet is not used as a marketing tool (Weeks, et al., 2008).

Evaluating sponsoring applications in accordance to the filtering criteria is important, because it promotes objective and rational decision making. The evaluation can be done by assigning each criteria a value and by thus comparing the criteria and sponsoring applicants with each other. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014). However, Cunningham, Cornwell, and Coote note that despite all the sponsoring policies, filtering criteria, and evaluation methods, the sponsored party is sometimes chosen from outside the scope of these factors. This is because choosing the sponsored party is often a heuristic process and decision making is dependent on individuals. (Cunningham, et al., 2009) However, understanding the criteria for choosing sponsored parties has an increased relevance for both the company and the sponsored party. (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013) The teams looking for sponsors should especially try to find out the criteria for choosing sponsored parties as accurately as possible.

Sponsors usually publish the sponsoring policies in order to explain the motivation behind sponsoring and in order to receive more targeted applications. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014) The teams should look at the company's sponsoring policies for information. Teams looking for sponsors should also limit the potential partners by, for example, going through the company's former and current partners, looking for companies with a natural connection to the target, and companies whose image and values are in line with the target's image, as well as companies that are generally favourable to sports. Furthermore, the search can be focused based on standing out from the competition, utilizing current relationships, by listening to experts, or by following economic trends and capitalizing on companies' business partnerships. (Alaja, 2001, p. 62) Even though companies would not directly communicate their willingness for sponsoring, clubs can look for angles and possibilities through their own active operations.

### 3.3 Execution stage

After the initial goal setting and choosing of the sponsored party, sponsoring moves to the execution stage, where the sponsoring cooperation is concretely realized. The execution phase ultimately determines the results and future of the sponsoring relationship. The execution phase is based on a contract between the sponsoring partners. Clear boundaries, goals, and expectations should be laid out in the contract, so that both parties know what to expect from the sponsoring cooperation. (O'Keefe, et al., 2009) The contract is usually written, so that it can guarantee the rights of both parties. This imbues both parties with a sense of certainty and creates the conditions for fruitful cooperation. The contract attempts to pre-define the aspects of the sponsoring cooperation as accurately as possible.

(Valanko, 2009, p. 173)

The length of the contract must be decided on a case-to-case basis, but according to Meenaghan, McLoughlin and McCormack (2013) parties should mainly avoid lengthy, unyielding contracts. Goals set in multiyear contracts should be regularly evaluated. This can be done, for example, on a yearly basis, because the ever-changing operational environment may demand adaptations and reactions from both the sponsor and the sponsored party for maintaining and developing the mutual operating efficiency. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013) Long-term commitment has been shown to be more beneficial for both parties when the cooperation has been regularly evaluated. In order to evaluate the relationship, measures for evaluating whether goals have been reached need to be devised. (Zdravkovic & Till, 2012).

It is important that the sponsored party, the team in this case, understands the company's perspective for sponsoring. By understanding the sponsor's perspective, the sponsored party can significantly facilitate the sponsoring cooperation and their own operations. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 187-190) When both parties have the same view on the sponsoring cooperation, the initiation of the execution stage is easy (O'Keefe, et al., 2009). In this stage, the communication between parties is crucial for avoiding unclear situations.

The success of the execution stage can be thus divided into three main categories: communication, measurements, and management. The next three subchapters deal with these topics.

### **3.3.1 Communication**

Effective communication is extremely important for executing the sponsoring cooperation. The communication must be clear from the beginning, and the parties must find a common language between two totally different operators. Although the common goal can be completely clear for both parties, they can still have their own opinions on sponsoring and its practical arrangements. (Jeffries, 2010; Valanko, 2009, p. 187-190) Communication must exist throughout the sponsoring process, so that the process will remain active and beneficial throughout the contract period. Two-way communication also supports adaptations to changing marketing communication needs and fulfilling marketing communication goals. (Meenaghan, 2013)

The communication of both parties has a large impact on the success of the sponsoring process. According to research conducted by Jeffries (2010), the profits of the sponsoring process can be multiplied by effective two-way communication. Ways of utilizing existing channels and reaching the target groups with the desired messages can be developed by effective two-way communication between parties. The message in the execution phase must be clear and in accordance with the nature and values of the sponsored party. This means that the communication between the sponsor and the sponsored party must be in order. (Jeffries, 2010) On the other hand, the shared values between the sponsor and the sponsored party, as well as the sponsored party's communication channels should have already been taken into account during the planning stage. (Renard & Sitz, 2011)

However, spreading the message to the target group of the sponsoring process should not solely be the sponsored party's responsibility (Jeffries, 2010; O'Keefe, et al., 2009). The sponsoring company should know how to express clear expectations to the sponsored party, and if necessary, instruct the sponsored party on how and what kind of message to spread (O'Keefe, et al., 2009). The company's goals and needs may change during the sponsoring period, and in this case the

company's communication to the sponsored party is paramount for realizing the changing sponsoring goals. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013)

Nevertheless, the communication in the sponsoring process must be careful. Human aspects, such as personality, experiences, know-how, desire, and activity play an important role when dealing with humans. Misunderstandings, delays, incorrect actions and executions, underperformance, and not being able to follow the schedule are common in sponsoring environments. Therefore, honest, open, and instant communication and reaction are almost crucial for risk management and sustaining the sponsoring cooperation. If a crisis happens, Valanko (2009, p.170-171) suggests that all parties involved immediately and openly share their insights without holding anything back and without unnecessary explanations. Furthermore, it's imperative to ensure that the message has been received and it has been correctly understood. The parties must also understand their own share, and if necessary, sincerely apologize. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 170-171)

Comprehensively, open and active communication is crucial for successful sponsoring. It is important that the sponsored party asks and agrees if there are any unclarities related to sponsoring. They must encourage the sponsor to communicate and make sure that two-way communication exists. Effective communication is also a key for developing the relationship.

### **3.3.2 Measuring**

In order to measure the results of sponsoring, the sponsoring must be measured and evaluated. As stated before, the sponsoring should provide additional value for the company's business. Therefore, its effectiveness and functionality should be measured just like the other aspects of the company's business. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 25-27) Although research has shown that sponsoring is popular among companies, they rarely know of the effects and effectiveness of their sponsoring. The quality of measuring the sponsoring process is low in quantity, nature, and execution. According to Meenaghan (2011), this can be true for companies that are engaged in extensive sponsoring operations as well. The budget for measurement reports is often non-existent, even though the companies recognize the

importance and necessity of measuring the effectiveness of the sponsoring process (Meenaghan, 2011).

Following, measuring, and researching the sponsoring give the company information about the effectiveness and functionality of sponsoring in regard to the set goals. In other words, clear pre-defined goals are required for sponsoring measurements. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 25-27) However, sponsoring evaluation and measurements should not be limited to following the pre-defined goals, because the effects of sponsoring can often be unexpected and multi-faceted. Complex causal relations must be taken into account when evaluating the effects as well, because many background factors can individually or jointly affect the end result. (Jeffries, 2010)

Measuring sponsoring results at the end of the sponsoring period also provides relevant information for extending the sponsoring contract. Thus, it is possible to avoid continuing inefficient sponsoring relationships based on impressions alone. In multi-year sponsoring contracts, the realization of goals should be regularly evaluated, and if necessary, the measuring tools should be modified to fit the changing sponsoring goals, so that the correct things can be measured. The measurements and measuring tools must thus change in accordance with the company's changing goals and needs. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013) The choice of measuring tools differs greatly from one researcher to another. With the evolution of sponsoring, the effects of sponsoring on the different stakeholder groups should be calculated as well. (Meenaghan, 2013; O'Keefe, et al., 2009)

Sponsoring effectiveness can be measured in many ways. Budget – and cost-effectiveness reports, return on investment (ROI) calculations and different comparisons, as well as sales – and marketing share reports and comparisons are tools that offer the most concrete numbers for measuring sponsoring effectiveness. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 174-175) Roughly speaking, it is at least important to examine how large of an audience, or how large portion of the target audience noticed the sponsoring, and whether the desired message was effectively communicated through sponsoring. In other words, did the audience successfully interpret the sponsor's desired message. (Masterman, 2007, pp. 224-226)

Nowadays, social media has assumed an increasingly large role. Emotion based analysis, which focused on the attitudes and opinions in the online community become essential metrics when analysing the role of social media. In sponsoring context, the subject can be studied by examining which brands are seen positively and which negatively in desired brand building environments. This is a way to measure sponsoring effectiveness in different social media environments. In social media, engagement can be easily used as a metric as well, for example, by measuring the number of “likes” or “followers”. However, the insights provided by these metrics are limited. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013)

However, the effect of sponsoring operations on increased sales is hard to unambiguously prove. In other words, it is hard to draw a direct link between sponsoring and sales number, or other financial metrics. It's hard to isolate the effect of sponsoring on sales numbers or other numerical values. (Meenaghan, et al., 2013) Furthermore, measuring sponsoring results is even more challenging because it's hard to isolate sponsoring results from the effects of other marketing procedures. In addition, it is hard to measure how people's previous knowledge about the subject matter, company, or product affect the results and effectiveness of sponsoring. (Cornwell, et al., 2005)

In the end, the most reliable comprehensive picture of sponsoring success is achieved by measuring and evaluating sponsoring goals using a multitude of ways. (Valanko, 2009, pp. 176-177) Decisions on the continuation of sponsoring contracts can also be based on this information. All in all, the sponsor and the sponsored party should agree on clear metrics and conclude how to perform the measurements.

### **3.3.3 Management**

Developing and managing the sponsoring relationship is a key for effective sponsoring cooperation. Everything is based on the length of the relationship. Long-term and productive cooperation is often required for realizing optimal sponsoring benefits (Farrelly, et al., 2006). Short sponsoring contracts ranging from 1 to 3 years have been far more popular than longer contracts ranging from 5 to 10 years. However, according to research, longer and more intense sponsoring

relationship creates better results. (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014) In the last few decades, sponsoring co-operations have shifted from short-term charities to long-standing partnerships. This means that sponsoring cooperation is a long-term investment that requires time and effort from both parties in order to create the positive link between the sponsor and the sponsored party in customer's minds. (Walraven, et al., 2014)

Sponsoring has become very competitive market sector, and nowadays it's harder to gain competitive advantage through sponsoring. Therefore, sponsoring investments must be managed purposefully and in an organized manner for the results to be realized. In order to succeed, sponsoring requires the support of other marketing tools, and often the lack of this support is what causes sponsoring campaigns to fail (Fahy, et al., 2004). Different abilities outside of sponsoring are also required from both parties for a successful sponsoring campaign. The sponsor and the sponsored party must find talented sponsoring representatives, as well as other qualified and motivated staff. Sponsoring agreements and their benefits can be seen as a combination of the parties' resources, but it's the responsibility of each party to use these resources in a way that provides additional value. (Papadimitriou, et al., 2016)

Instead of feeling the pressure to conform to the sponsor's will, sports operators should examine their own operations from the brand's perspective and figure out how the sponsoring cooperation could benefit their own brand as well. Each party should enter the sponsoring relationship with an understanding of their own and their partner's economic and marketing goals. Both parties should understand the bigger picture of sponsoring, instead of thinking about the sponsoring investment as a logo somewhere on the field. Without comprehensive understanding of sponsoring possibilities, it is easy to miss out on the full sponsoring potential. In order to get most out of sponsoring, both parties should have enough marketing knowledge to realize this potential. According to research, especially sports operators lack this knowledge. The most successful sponsoring co-operations are those, where the sports operator understands the need for cooperation between the sponsor and the sponsored party. (Farrelly, et al., 2006)

The sponsoring relationship develops and creates new value with effective management. At the same time, sponsoring can create new resources for the company and the sponsored party. (Fahy, et al., 2004) The key is that both parties understand their partner's goals and perspective. When sponsoring is seen as a strategic investment, clear goals are defined and followed. Through standards and utilization of resources, the relationship develops as long as there is communication. In this way, the relationship creates new resources and functions effectively. (Kang & Stotlar, 2011) The sports team can also assume the role of the leader in the relationship and through their own action enable the development and mutual benefit of the relationship. (Farrelly, et al., 2006) Understanding the sponsoring process must be the first step for assuming an active leadership position in the relationship.

## **4. SPONSORING RELATIONSHIP AS A CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP**

The previous chapter described sponsoring and sponsored relationships. Sponsoring relationship was defined as a relationship between two operators. These operators, the sponsor company and the sponsored team trade, for example, in visibility and different services. In practice, the sponsoring relationship is a customer relationship between the company and the sports club, where the club acts as the vendor. (Athanasapoulou & Sarli, 2015) Therefore, sponsoring relationship development is really customer relationship development. Because the topic of this study is sponsoring relationship development, it is imperative to understand customer relationship development. Therefore, the second theoretical base for this study deals with companies' B2B customer relationships.

In order to develop customer relationships, the concept of customer relationship and its stages need to be understood. The first subchapters describe the customer relationship and its stages. After these concepts have been examined, the following subchapters will introduce the benefits of developing the customer relationship. The last subchapter discusses how to develop the relationship in practice.

### **4.1 Customer relationship and its stages**

Companies don't operate in a vacuum, and almost all companies have connections to other companies. These connections can be very superficial or very intense depending on the situation. (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008) One way of realizing these connections is a customer relationship, which signifies trade between the two companies, for example, in goods or services (Grönroos, 2009, p. 319).

The purchase made by the customer is seen as the starting point for a customer relationship. In reality, the relationship can begin before the purchase. It can be said, that the customer relationship consists of several stages. Recognizing these phases is a key for developing a healthy relationship. (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2010, p. 139) By understanding the different stages, the vendor can act in a correct manner

and increase the customer's satisfaction. Both parties hope for a functional, long-term customer relationship, because a strong customer relationship is very hard to undermine, and it produces desired results. Maintaining a good customer relationship is also easy and economical for both parties. (Mandjak, Szalkai & Neumann-Bodi, 2015)

Four separate stages can be identified in customer relationships. As figure 5. displays, the relationship grows stronger or weaker in different stages. In the beginning, the relationship is weak, and it begins with the customer's awareness of the company. In the awareness stage, the customer does not yet consider a purchase, but the company is at least somewhat familiar. The customer's awareness of the company is seen as the starting point for the customer relationship. (Ala-Mutka & Talvela, 2004, pp. 60-62) For sports clubs this is easily achieved, because at least major league teams are widely recognized (Koski & Mäenpää, 2018).

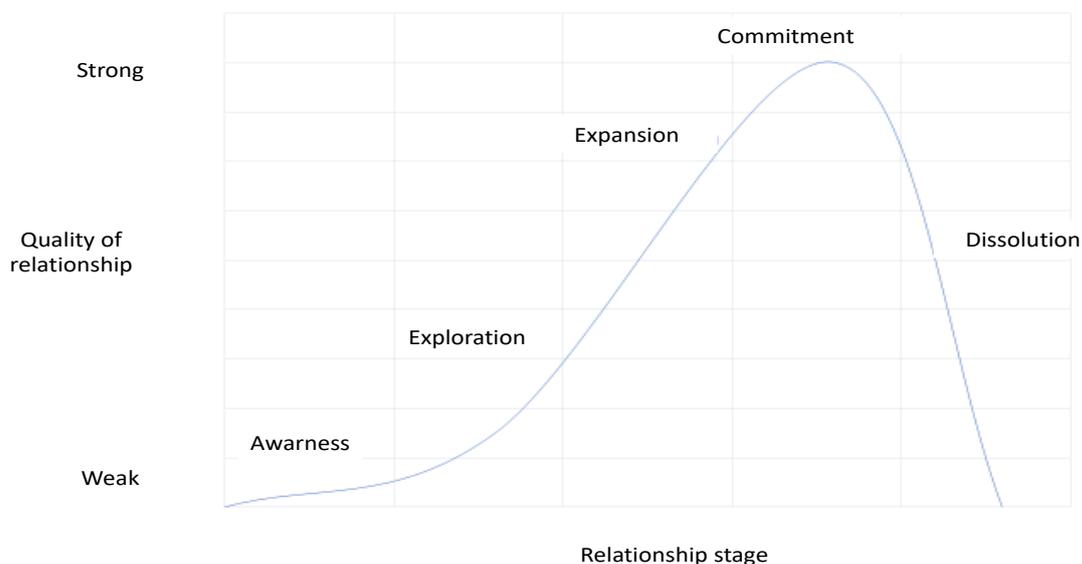


Figure 5. Relationship stages (Based on Ala-Mutka & Talvela, 2004, pp. 60-62)

The next stage after awareness is exploration, when the relationship takes its first official steps. The customer gathers more information about the company and its product or service. The customer might have a need they need to fill, and they are exploring their options. In sponsoring sales this stage can be performed by the club when they approach the company themselves. Expansion stage follows the

exploration stage. The purchase is made in the expansion stage. In the sponsoring relationship, the first sponsoring purchase is made in the expansion stage. The relationship develops the most during this stage. (Ala-Mutka & Talvela, 2004, pp. 60-62)

The fourth stage is the commitment stage, where the customer centralizes all their purchases and operations to the company. A regular customer relationship has been formed between the company and the customer. The customer relationship has been refined and strengthened. During this stage, the company must focus on maintaining and possibly refining the customer relationship, for example, by reforming their product or service (Grönroos, 2009, pp. 320-321). This stage is critical for the sponsoring relationship, because the stable relationship needs to be developed. The sport club must strive for new developments and innovations in order to expand the relationship. Through development, the club can gain additional benefits for itself. (Cousens, Bablak & Bradish, 2006)

The fifth and final stage is dissolution. During this stage the customer detaches themselves from the company, for example, in order to purchase from a rival company. The customer relationship wanes, and without action from the company, will cease to exist. During this stage, the company must reflect why the relationship has waned and, in the end, completely dissolved. The company must strive to improve their operations to renew their relationship with the customer and to avoid similar cases in the future. (Ala-Mutka & Talvela, 2004, pp. 60-62) During this stage, the sponsoring relationship wanes and the company has, for some reason, decided to terminate the sponsoring process. The club should figure out why the relationship has been terminated and seek to mend these grievances. (Mandjak, et al., 2015) However, continuing the relationship is not always possible.

When the purchase is made by a company, the process can be described as professional and complex. Tailored solutions are typical for this process. The significance of customer relationship is typically large, which highlights the impact of personal sales work for the purchase decision. (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2010, p. 26) Although several descriptions of companies' purchasing processes have been made, they are all basically rather similar. The purchasing process itself does not change from consumer purchases to production purchases. The people involved are the

most significant difference in the business purchase process. Depending on the size of the company, the purchase group might be large and consist of several people, or alternatively it can be compact, and consist of a single person acting in a multitude of roles. (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015) Therefore, finding the right decision makers is exceptionally important for creating and maintaining a B2B customer relationship (Hellman, 2005)

## **4.2 Why develop the customer relationship**

There are many motivating factors for developing the customer relationship. Many of the factors are related to positive financial impacts. Research has constantly shown that long-term, loyal customers are profitable for a company, and the company should hold on to these customers. Maintaining and developing existing customer relationships saves money, whereas acquiring new customers is expensive and laborious. (Puusa, Reijonen & Juuti, 2015, pp. 193-194) Loyal long-term customers purchase more and are usually more willing to implement new ideas. Existing customers are also not as sensitive to price. Therefore, price is not a very significant factor in the decision making. (Puusa, et al., 2015, p. 195) Concretely this can be manifested in sponsoring relationship as, for example, an increased contract value.

By developing the relationship, the company can create new value for themselves and their customer, which in turn leads to increased revenue for the company. Customer satisfaction also increases. This enables a so-called circle, where the company can continuously create increased value for themselves and their customer. (Buttle, 2009) As the result of development actions, the customer may recommend the company to others, and the company gains more customers (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2010, p. 126). This is extremely significant in sponsoring cooperation, because almost all sponsorship escapades are visible to everyone. When the club and the sponsor can create new operating models, these operating models attract interest from other companies as well.

The relationship between parties also develops in a long-term, developing relationship. The vendor and customer learn to know each other, and pitching ideas

becomes easier. (Puusa, et al., 2015, p. 195) With intensive cooperation the company's representatives come to know the club and its policies even better. This creates emotional bonds between the club and the company's decision makers, which in turn intensifies the relationship. The parties learn to better understand each other's needs and can even help in developing each other's business. (FitzPatrick, et al., 2015) As stated previously, emotions play a large role in sports, and if the emotions towards the sponsoring company can be magnified, the relationship intensifies.

Comprehensively, customer relationship development can diversely affect the development of the company's business. The development almost inevitably creates new value for the company, which in turn increases interest towards the company. With interest, the company can grow their business and acquire new customers to develop their relationship with. Development enables operational development and the positive impacts can be realized on many fronts, financially as well. (Payne, 2015)

In the best-case scenario, the customer relationship development creates a co-dependency between the parties. In this scenario, the relationship is based on mutual trust, and both parties want to nurture the relationship. Dissolution of this kind of relationship is extremely difficult and unlikely, because so many members of the companies interact with each other. Because of the dependency, the customer does not want to explore rival options, because the cooperation with the existing partner is easy. (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2010, pp. 141-142) The results of a sponsoring relationship increase in these types of relationships, and in the best case, the brands of the club and the company are so interconnected that people perceive them as homogenous in their own minds (Alexander, 2009).

### **4.3 Developing the relationship**

Customer relationship development is based on understanding the customer relationship. It is often said that the customer merely purchases services or products, but this is not what the customer really looks for. In reality, the customer seeks the benefits provided by the services or products. Customers do not look for services or products as is. Instead they look for solutions that serve their value creation

processes. (Grönroos, 2009, pp. 25-26) Therefore, in a customer relationship, the customer seeks additional value for themselves. Creating this additional value is the key for the development process. This can be done using a multitude of methods. If the acquired benefits are valuable enough and worth pursuing, the relationship deepens and expands. (Puusa, et al., 2015, pp. 191-192) Therefore, clubs in a sponsoring relationship must understand the company's underlying motives for sponsoring and utilize this understanding by creating new opportunities.

The parties must understand themselves and each other when developing a customer relationship. Both parties must know where they are currently at and what is their company's strategy. The vendor and customer must also understand where the relationship is at currently. When both parties are on the same page, a base for developing the relationship exists. (Puusa, et al., 2015, pp. 191-192) The mutual experiences in the customer relationship form an entity that defines the strength of the relationship (Grönroos, 2009, p. 30). The following four factors have been viewed as especially influential for the customer experience; mutual trust, honesty, co-dependency, and communication (FitzPatrick, et al., 2015).

Trust between people is key for sales, and this often determines whether the sales are profitable or not. Building trust between a customer and a new vendor is a long process, even if the vendor's company is a familiar operator in the market. It may take one or two years before the vendor has created their own contact network within the customer organization and ensured the partner of their operation's trustworthiness. The new vendor has the responsibility of providing positive and profitable results for the customer and their own organization. The interactive relationship between the customer and the vendor is diverse and always developing. The degree of trust and commitment between the vendor and the customer increases when the vendor expresses problem solving capabilities. (Joki-Korpela & Roune, 2008, pp. 125-126) Although there is a lot of talk about complex decision making between business partners, the decisions are made by people in the end. Therefore, interaction between people is the key. (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015)

Sales to existing customers are strongly based on mutual trust and the vendor's strong knowledge about the customer's existing and changing needs. Regular

contact with the client and the vendor's knowledge about current changes and plans in the company are key for maintaining existing customer relationships. The customers value the vendor's proactive activity, where the vendor suggests new products and services for the customer and recognizes the customer's underlying needs. An effective operating model with existing customers is planning the cooperation development like a yearly clock: regular meetings and other procedures related to cooperation are coordinated with the client. The vendor must be aware of the customer's rivals and their shares in the product's market in order to evaluate future sales potential. (Hänti, et al., 2016) The vendor can make themselves indispensable by selling new ideas and with active communication. Thus, a co-dependency is formed between the companies, and the customer can't survive without the vendor. (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2010, pp. 141-142)

This is a great opportunity for sports clubs, because the clubs can make themselves indispensable to the company with active and honest communication. The clubs also have extensive opportunities for developing their products and they can meet versatile needs. Thus, clubs can find vendible products for different customers and customer relationships.

Even though developing all customer relationships is important for the vendor, in reality, this is almost impossible because of limited resources. It is important that companies segment their customers and determine which relationships are critical. (Hänti, et al., 2016, p. 122) By developing these critical relationships, the company gains maximum benefit. On the other hand, the functionality of relationships must also be determined, and if necessary, the company must be willing to terminate a relationship that causes problems or is no longer productive. This is especially important for sports clubs, because as previously stated, the visibility decreases if there are too many sponsors. Sports clubs usually have limited resources as well, so they should be focused on the so-called key customers. (Mitrega & Pfaijar, 2015)

Satisfaction is at the heart of development. Both parties need to be satisfied with the partnership for a lengthy and developing cooperation. Personal contacts, implementing agreed plans, and activity are keys for guaranteeing satisfaction. The

vendor specially must be active and interested about their client for the relationship to prosper and develop. (Farrelly, et al., 2006) In a sponsoring relationship, the sports club is the vendor who must ensure the functionality of these operations.

## 5. CONDUCTING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This chapter describes the stages of the study and the related policies. The research process, how the study proceeded, is described first, followed by description of the research methods and strategy. After this, data collection, processing, and analyzation are described.

### 5.1 The research process

The research process for this thesis can be divided into four stages; planning the research, building the theoretical framework, collecting the research data, and data analyzation.

The planning process began with the choice of topic. Choosing the topic has usually been viewed a long process including several stages. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2015, pp. 66-70) For this study, the topic was chosen at an early stage. However, the critical phase of narrowing down the topic was required a lot of thought. The topic can't be too broad, and it needs to be thoroughly discussed. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 83-85) Narrowing down the topic was challenging, because sponsoring is a very extensive topic. Many things are closely interconnected, and therefore the narrowing down needed to be very accurate. However, developing the sponsoring relationship has not been largely studied, so it was a justifiable research topic.

In the second phase, theoretical framework is created. When creating theoretical framework, special attention was given to previous scientific research and articles on the topic. Sponsoring became the one of the main themes for the study, because the topic is developing the sponsoring relationship. The other main theme is developing the B2B customer relationship, because the sponsoring relationship is a customer relationship for the sponsored party. Development of sponsoring and customer relationships mainly follow the same formula. However, the theory on client relationship has been mostly narrowed down to issues related to the development phase.

The third phase of the research process is data collection, which in this was done by conducting interviews. The interview questions were developed with the help of the theoretical framework. During this phase, interviews were conducted, and the data was transcribed. In the fourth and final phase, the data from the interviews was analysed and findings were drawn based on the analysis. The study is finished with summary and conclusions. The research process is illustrated in figure 6.

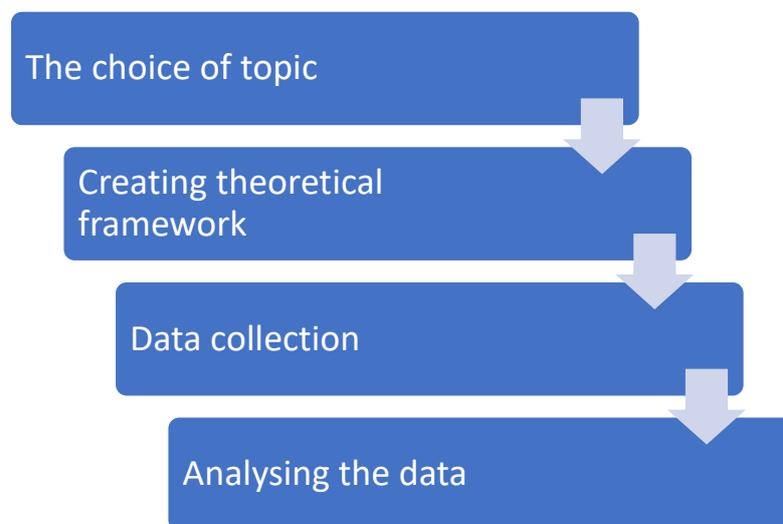


Figure 6. The research process

## 5.2 The research method

This study was conducted as qualitative research. The aim of qualitative research is to discover facts by studying the subject as comprehensively as possible. Qualitative methods are used when the goal of the study is studying a phenomenon, describing an event, or understanding specific behaviour or action. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 85) The gathered, concrete data is the focus and basis for qualitative research. During the study, tangible observations are made from the data. The findings of the study are based on these observations. (Lähdesmäki, Hurme & Koskimaa, 2015) Unlike in quantitative studies, the findings are not numerically expressed. Rather, the findings are examined through the interviewee's views and

experiences. Therefore, the goal of qualitative research is to profoundly investigate the phenomenon in question, rather than producing generalizable knowledge. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018)

Inductive processes are typical for qualitative research. Therefore, the research questions can shift during the research (Alasuutari, Koskinen & Peltonen 2005, p. 32). This study utilized inductive research and the research questions were perfected along with the interview frame. A purposive research sample is typical for qualitative research, because the research aims to discover facts instead of proving something that has already been researched. The data set is regarded as one of a kind. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, p. 164) Because the sample is purposive, the study is also a case study. Understanding the research topic as diversely as possible is typical for case studies. (Metsämuuronen, 2006, pp. 90-91)

### **5.3 Data collection**

The data was collected with individual themed interviews. Themed interview is a convenient research method, when the researcher doesn't know what types of answers they will get, or when the answers are based on the interviewee's own experiences (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 204-206). A semi-structured interview, which is a combination of structured and open interviews, was used for this study. In themed interviews, the interview follows pre-defined themes and pre-defined questions are helped to move the interview forward. The questions can be open, or semi-structured, their form doesn't matter, and they can be asked in the desired order. The aim is to discover answers that are meaningful for the research topic. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 75)

In themed interviews, the interview situation should be as casual as possible. This increases the thorough analysis of the research topic. However, ensuring that the pre-defined themes are adhered to is important, so that the discussion does not go off-topic. Nevertheless, the interviews may differ, because semi-structured themed interviews allow open discussion as well. (Alasuutari, et al., 2005, p. 105)

This method enables a reliable perspective that expresses the interviewee's opinions as well as possible. Semi-structured themed interviews also allow additional

questions to be asked when searching for information, but they should be carefully constructed so that the interviewer doesn't steer the answers. The interviewer must aim to minimize their own effect on the findings. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, p. 205)

#### **5.4 The interviewees**

The interviewee sample can be either random or purposive. Qualitative research aims for deep understanding of the topic. Therefore, the interviewees must be chosen carefully. The goal is that the interviewees have extensive knowledge or previous experience on the topic. Different criteria can be used when choosing the interviewees. These include their knowledge and skills on the topic, their life experiences, and their ability to express things and thoughts. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 88-89) The interviewees were very carefully chosen for this study and the aim was to find people who had lengthy sponsoring relationship experiences as the sponsor or the sponsored party.

Three sponsoring representatives from different Finnish sports organizations and three sponsoring executives from Finnish companies that have a long sponsoring history were chosen for the interviews. The chosen companies had sponsored the chosen organizations, so that the study could benefit from two perspectives of the same sponsoring relationship. The interviews attempted to uncover the actual level of sponsoring relationship development in Finnish sports organizations.

The participating clubs were from different sports and different regions of Finland. All three sports are among the most popular in Finland. Two of the teams are joint-stock companies and one is a registered association. However, the turnover of each team is near a million and their operating models are very business-like. All the participating companies had nationwide influence and operations abroad. The companies represented different business sectors: travel, provisions, and clean-tech. The companies were large with a turnover around 100 million euros. All the companies operated in consumer/client markets, although they all had B2B stakeholders as well.

The interviewees were directly contacted by e-mail. The e-mail briefly described the research idea and provided guidelines for the interview. The interviewees are in high positions in the companies and the clubs and regularly work with sponsoring. To ensure truthful and reliable answers, the interviewees' names and personal identifiers are not discussed in this study. Furthermore, company and club names have been anonymized as well. The interviewees use the following pseudonyms in the interviews: Interviewee X1, X2, X3, Y1, Y2, and Y3. The X-group represents the clubs and the Y-group represents the companies. Team names are Blue, Red, and Green and company names are, Brewk, Chroom, and Cleap. Table 1. below displays the sponsorship experience. Table 2. displays the clubs' and companies' background information.

Table 1. Interviewees' background

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Sponsoring experience (years)</b>	<b>Years in the company/team</b>
X1	15	22
X2	4	22
X3	30	30
Y1	13	4
Y2	5	30
Y3	25	25

Table 2. Clubs' and companies' background

<b>Team / Company</b>	<b>Number of sponsors or sponsored clubs (approximately)</b>	<b>Longest sponsoring relationship in years (approximately)</b>
Blue	800	32
Red	180	55
Green	150	10
Brewk	50	32
Chroom	1	30
Cleap	15	7

Four of the interviews were conducted on the companies' or clubs' premises and two interviews were conducted over phone. The interviews were conducted

between February 14<sup>th</sup> and March 15<sup>th</sup>. The interviews were conducted with interruptions or interference and their length ranged from 40 minutes to 57 minutes. The average length of an interview was 49 minutes. Before the interview, research themes and goals were briefly discussed. Anonymity was also discussed with all interviewees.

The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission, so that the data could be more thoroughly analysed. The recordings were interpreted quickly after the interviews. Similarities between the interviewees common themes were identified from the interpreted data. The method is called thematic analysis and its goal is to categorize the data around specific topics, which called themes. In themed interviews this is quite clear and even easy, because the interviews were conducted with the help of specific themes. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 93) The main theme for the study is developing the sponsoring relationship and the content of the sponsoring relationship, communication between parties, and sponsoring motives became the subthemes for the research. Table 3. below displays the themes and key words often associated with these themes during the interviews.

Table 3. Themes and key words

The main theme	The subthemes	Key words
Developing the sponsoring relationship	The content of the sponsoring relationship	Innovativeness, richness, surprise, cooperation, new things, activity
	Communication between parties	Personal connection, open, honest, direct, close
	Sponsoring motives	Brand building, stakeholder influence, social responsibility, visibility, money, well-being at work

Analysing the data and conclusions are critical for the study, because they answer the research questions. Mere analysis is not enough for presenting the findings. Main issues and answers to the research questions should be constructed based on the findings. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 229-230) The purpose of the thematic analysis was to find qualitative answers for the research questions from chapter 1.

The aim was to answer the questions by utilizing the theoretical framework. With the help of thematic analysis, the answers were easy to find, as many key words and themes were repeated during the interviews. The following chapters detail the research findings.

## 6. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter describes the main findings of this master's thesis. The chapter has been divided into subchapters for clarity. It is important to note that the interviewees came from different organizations and had different roles in the sponsoring relationship. However, all the interviewees had many years of work experience in sponsoring.

### 6.1 Definitions, motives, and goals of the sponsoring relationships

As stated previously, there are several complementary definitions for a sponsoring relationship. However, it has been extensively stated that sponsoring relationship is a relationship between two parties that seeks to fulfil commercial goals.

(Meenaghan, 1983; Walliser, 2003; Valanko, 2009, p. 49) In sponsoring, the sponsor attempts to take advantage of their official relationship with the sponsored party. (Fullerton & Merz, 2008) Therefore, sponsoring is based on different goals and motives. When we want to understand development, we must first find out the motives. This chapter describes how the interviewees view the sponsoring relationship and what are their underlying motives for sponsoring.

Sponsoring has been generally seen as one-way charity, especially in Finland (Valanko, 2009, p. 15). According to the representative from Green company, the image is still strong, but it is not reflected on the amount of invested money.

*"In Finland, sport sponsoring is still seen as support and charity. On the other hand, in Finland, this support is far smaller than in Sweden or Central-Europe, where the support by companies helps run entire clubs." (X3, Green)*

However, the charity perspective is outdated, and sports sponsoring has increasingly become a joint business activity (Valanko, 2009, p. 24). This is clearly interviewed when the club representatives and sponsors comment on business operations.

*“Sponsoring is no longer giving someone an x-amount of money and then that’s it. Nowadays people look for mutually profitable cooperation, which is also a business activity” (Y2, Chroom)*

*“The trend is that the contracts are made and thought of more carefully. It is also a good thing for the clubs. They have to think, as clubs and as a sport, where to go and how to improve” (X2, Red)*

Although business activity as a base for sponsoring has increased, there is still room for charitable support. This relates especially to the emotions awakened by sports.

*“Feeling-based marketing still does happen and it’s great. The identity of sponsoring is tied to the emotions awakened by sports, and hopefully it stays that way.” (X2, Red)*

*“Charity in our sponsoring still exists as well. Sometimes we don’t even advertise and just support for the sheer joy of it.” (Y1, Brewk)*

According to past research, there are several different motives for sponsoring. In this study, these motives were divided into brand building, stakeholder goals, and social responsibility according to their respective goals. The interviewees provided great examples for all the listed sponsoring motivations.

*“In the past, brand building and advertising were the only motives, but nowadays we do a lot of social responsibility work. We also look for new tools for increasing well-being at work.” (Y3, Cleap)*

Sponsoring was previously seen as just brand building through visibility, but now the focus has shifted to other aspects as well. There has even been talk of advertising inflation in sponsoring. For example, the decrease in value of jersey – and board advertising has been speculated. (Meenaghan, 2013) This perspective arises in the interviews as well, but visibility is still seen as an integral part of sponsoring.

*"We are a large operator, and we don't really need to build recognition. Currently, we are trying to figure out how to offer better experiences for our customers. I think this has been the biggest change from my perspective." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"Other services besides visibility need to be included in the contract nowadays. However, board- and jersey advertisements still play a significant role. It can't be underestimated, especially as the vendor. But other things are required as well." (X2, Red)*

*"Our logo in the jersey creates visibility, but it is not such a significant factor as it was before. Visibility can be seen as extra, but other services are required as well." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"We think that visibility is a part of a good partnership. Although some people don't want or need it, we want it to be a part of the relationship. It proves that the company is committed to our family, and the fans can see that the company is on board." (X1, Blue)*

Most company representatives also address motives related to well-being at work. Utilizing the sponsoring cooperation for well-being at work has been a positive experience. The sponsoring cooperation has manifested, for example, as internal events or as distribution of the club's tickets.

*"Well-being at work is very important to us, and the club provided us with new ideas. Tickets enable our staff to attend games and they feel like they are part of the cooperation. That positively affected well-being at work in our company." (Y3, Cleap)*

*"We've had an internal sports club at our company since the beginning, and through that club we got involved in sport sponsoring as well. Now, through sponsoring, we have been able to introduce new things to our staff as well." (Y1, Brewk)*

In the past years, the companies' social responsibility has assumed a larger role, and the impact of sponsoring on this field has increased. Social responsibility has more increasingly been viewed as a motivation for sponsoring. (IEG, 2017b) The interviewees also mentioned social responsibility numerous occasions and admitted that sports are a good platform for social responsibility. The Cleap company made a change of strategy some years ago and shifted from top-level sport sponsoring to the more socially responsible junior sponsoring. Thus, social responsibility became the company's main goal.

*"Sports are a good platform for performing social responsibility. Sports are a diverse platform, that engages people, and it provides diverse opportunities for carrying out social responsibility. We have made a shift towards social responsibility in our sponsoring and invested especially on junior sports." (Y3, Cleap)*

It is imperative that clubs understand the sponsor's motives for sponsoring, so that they can provide the right services and the relationship can be developed. The goals of the relationship are based on the motives, and the functionality of the relationship is measured through these goals. (O'Keefe, et al., 2009) Too often these motives, and thus goals, are hidden, and no effort is made to discover them (Meenaghan, 2013) The interviewed clubs admit that this is a problem, but they have recognized it and attempt to remedy the situation.

*"We do try to figure out the motives, but unfortunately it is given too little attention. We don't have the resources to discuss with all of our partners. That's clearly a weak point. We discuss the goals with about 20 percent, the main partners." (X3, Green)*

*"We try to create goals, and figure out the companies' motives, but we have so many sponsors that it's hard to go through so much with everyone." (X1, Blue)*

*"Goals are more and more determined, and motives discussed. Especially with the bigger partners, because for them it's clearly a business activity and there are goals included. The goals also facilitate the operations, because by following the goals, we see how well the relationship works." (X2, Red)*

Clubs are not the only ones who are unsure about the goals. Because of the charitable background of sponsoring, companies have only begun to create sponsoring goals in recent years. (Meenaghan, 2013) For example, Cleap, who terminated their cooperation with Green a few years ago, admits that goals have only recently become a factor in their sponsoring.

*"I can't say that we had sponsoring goals few years ago. We did it based on feeling and certainly didn't look at any numbers. Now the company has transformed, and we would probably require more pre-defined goals that we would monitor."*  
(Y3, Cleap)

The fact that companies have increasingly been acquired by foreign parties has also transformed the sponsoring field, because there is no emotional relationship between the company's owner and the club. A foreign owner will look at the numbers more closely, because it is harder to measure the general vibe. This has been seen in both the clubs and the companies.

*"Our foreign owner has clear monetary indicators that are used to monitor the cooperation. Otherwise we can independently agree on the contracts' content, but the owner wants to clearly know how profitable the cooperation is."* (Y2, Chroom)

*"The world has changed, and more decisions are made abroad. Goals are set at an early stage and they are increasingly followed. Numbers are important, because a personal relationship can't be created."* (X1, Blue)

## **6.2 Measuring sponsoring goals**

The previous chapter described sponsoring motives and goals, but measurements are needed for evaluating the success of a sponsoring relationship. Different measurements are dependent on the sponsoring goals set by the sponsor, but it is evident that sponsoring has become increasingly measured. (Meenaghan, 2011) Companies have begun to insist on measurements, although the clubs assert that this development has been relatively slow.

*"It is surprising how rarely the companies ask for statistics. I know that some partners measure visibility on their own, but it is still surprisingly rare." (X3, Green)*

*"We can provide pretty good statistics on our different packages, but some parties don't see the measurements as important. However, we want to discuss measurements with them all." (X1, Blue)*

There are several different metrics, but the increase in the role of social media is visible in how the metrics are utilized. Social media easily provides access to different metrics without large investments. Other metrics include customer satisfaction, associations between brands, advertisement viewership, accessibility, and sales numbers. However, it is hard to directly link some of them to sponsoring impact.

*"Financial results are often viewed too much from the perspective of direct profit created by the club. I think that people look at sales numbers too much, because they are impossible to measure accurately. You can't accurately tell what portion of sales can be directly attributed to sponsoring." (X3, Green)*

*"The end goal of sponsoring is growing the business, so in the end it's euros that count. But it's hard to measure monetary value directly, and other ways need to be used as well." (Y2, Chroom)*

The clubs increasingly compile statistics of their own activities, and even present these statistics without demand. Blue, for example, uses multiple metrics that they utilize. Measurements are already an automatic operation policy in the club, and the companies do not need to demand them. All the interviewed clubs explain that they use at least some form of measurement. The results are also communicated to the sponsor.

*"There are different metrics that we have ready. If the sponsoring is focused on social media, it's very easy to measure. It makes our job a lot easier and benefits the client greatly." (X1, Blue)*

*"Measuring is done diversely, and we communicate them to the company. For example, we measure social and printed media visibility. We also encourage companies to think of different metrics." (X2, Red)*

*"I run the numbers with our partners in joint meetings. But we don't directly deliver any values. Making measurements is also challenging, because of our scarce resources. " (X3, Green)*

According to Blue's experience, extensive measurements have also been beneficial to the club's activities, because different measurements facilitate understanding the value of specific products and services. Thus, it is easier to set a price tag for products and services, and this price can be justified as well. This is often challenging in sponsoring, because no listed prices exist, and because products and services are usually unique. (Meenahgan, et al., 2013)

Not all of the interviewed companies require measurements by the club. Rather they conduct the measurements themselves. Therefore, the results are immediately available, and the company can choose what metrics to use. Both Chroom and Brewk conduct measurements on their own. For Chroom, their own measurements are enough for evaluating sponsoring results, whereas Brewk wants to expand the club's measurements by conducting their own.

*"We don't necessarily need finished results from the club. Instead we can measure and determine the sponsoring value ourselves." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"We usually measure things from our own perspective, and this supports the club's measurements. We don't measure everything ourselves, but when necessary we conduct our own measurements. However, we expect statistics from the clubs as well." (Y1, Brewk)*

### **6.3 Factors affecting relationship satisfaction**

Both parties need to be satisfied in the customer relationship for it to develop (FlitzPatrick, et al., 2015). The same is true for sponsoring relationships as well. The first part of the empirical chapter described the motives, goals, and measurements in the sponsoring relationship. This chapter discusses the factors that build satisfaction in the parties, and thus determine the continuation of the relationship.

Based on the interviews, both the sponsoring companies and the sponsored clubs identify three clear factors for satisfaction. These factors are communication, innovation, and profitability. Satisfaction consists of these three factors, and satisfaction is the key for a profitable, long-term sponsoring relationship. The following subchapters discuss these factors in more detail.

#### **6.3.1 Communication**

As stated previously, a sponsoring relationship is a customer relationship, and a customer relationship between two parties is built through communication. Although sponsoring is a B2B relationship, humans are central to the process. (Athanasapoulou & Sarli, 2015) Thus, communication is crucial for developing the relationship. Interpersonal relationships are seen as very important in the interviewed clubs and companies as well.

*"A personal connection is really important. If the contact persons are not at the same wavelength, the partnership is very difficult to fulfill" (Y3, Cleap)*

*"The role of personal relationships is very big, because we deal with people." (X1, Blue)*

A customer relationship has been viewed as most effective, when the interaction between parties is active, and unofficial discussions are plenty. New ideas arise through active communication, and they can be mutually refined and lead to new business opportunities. (Jeffries, 2010) All the interviewees had noticed this as well. All the parties revealed that they meet their partners officially at least twice a

year, and unofficial communications happen approximately once a month. Active interaction has brought many new aspects to the sponsoring relationships.

*"During active discussion we share a lot of small information with each other. Someone can mention something that the other party notices, and something new is discovered." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"We communicate weekly and ideas arise from every organizational level." (X2, Red)*

*"We always go through the new things together and think how we can help each other. We also think how to involve the other party in our stuff, and I think that it's very important." (Y2, Chroom)*

All the interviewees also mention honesty and directness in communication. Usually these attributes are manifested in longer relationships but developing them right from the start is very important. (Grönroos, 2009, pp. 25-26) Open relationships have created additional value for both parties and thus the sponsoring cooperation has progressed forwards.

*"Communication should be open and honest. Then we can conduct business according to good manners and we can be proud of our partners." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"Honest and direct relationship accounts for much. I can clearly see that we have done a lot more with others because of this close relationship." (Y3, Cleap)*

In the best-case scenario the relationship between parties can be so close, that the partner can be asked for help. A good example provided by the interviewees was including the sponsor as a part of brand building for the company's product. The product in question was to sponsor the club, so the club was involved in thinking how a strong brand could be built right from the start. The risk involved is, that the club representative would assume an exceedingly large role in the brand development.

Threat factors are also attached to communication. If a close connection has been made to a specific person, and he leaves the company, the cooperation may be in jeopardy. Company sponsoring can rely too much on a single individual, and the company might not feel that the sponsoring is essential. The clubs understand this very well.

*"Staff changes are a large threat. I think that the impact that the change of contact person has is too large. This tells me that sports partnerships are directed with too much emotion." (X3, Green)*

*"Sometimes the relationship has been lost after a new person who didn't like sports has been hired. Then you need to highlight the history together and prove the benefits through numbers, but sometimes you just need to let go. These things happen." (X1, Blue)*

Blue also has different experiences, where the close and personal relationship has created new partnerships, even though the contact person has changed jobs.

*"Often we've been able to involve the sponsor even though the contact person has changed jobs. In some cases, this contact person has involved the new company in our sponsoring as well, which means that through good relationships we have acquired new partners easily." (X1, Blue)*

The representative of Brewk also attaches problems to the excessive personification of the relationship. The company has tried to combat this by involving more people in the process. For example, when Brewk conducts sponsoring negotiations, up to 30 people can be in attendance.

*"Resting the relationship on just one person is really dangerous. If I built all the relationship so that I would be solely responsible for them, and then decided to leave the company, the company would have no connection to the club. I don't think I would have done right by the company at that point. I would only have done what's good for me with the company's money, and that's not right. More than one contact person is required. I think that it's the only responsible way." (Y1, Brewk)*

It was previously stated that the decision maker should always be included in the discussion, so that a personal relationship with them can be created. (Ivanova-Gongne, 2015) Nowadays, this is impossible, because the decisions are increasingly focused into units and the clubs can't directly negotiate with the company's management. For example, local decisions can be made in the management which is based abroad. This creates communication problems as well.

*"It has changed. Even CEOs that we know tell us that they don't want to overrule the marketing team. In the past sport clubs could directly negotiate with the management, but now the idea needs to be sold to the marketing manager or – team, which then takes the matter forward. Simultaneously the decision makers have moved to larger regions or even abroad."* (X2, Red)

The interviews note that a personal relationship is needed, but it can't rely on one or two individuals. Good, open, and honest communication ensures the relationship's profitability for all parties, which drives the relationship forwards. Therefore, communication is very significant for creating a sustainable and developing cooperation.

### **6.3.2 Innovativeness**

Another important aspect affecting the relationship is the parties' innovativeness. Innovativeness denotes creating new things and it can be utilized in multiple ways during the relationship. Innovativeness can be used for developing or deepening the relationship, or for surprising the other party. (Fahy, et al., 2004) All the interviewees mentioned innovativeness in their interviews, and it was seen as an important factor for sponsoring relationship satisfaction.

*"Richness of ideas is a big factor for satisfaction. There were some wild ideas that we could jump on board with. It was certainly a factor that kept us engaged for so long."* (Y3, Cleap)

Through innovation and new ideas, the club can surprise their sponsors and thus increase satisfaction. A concrete example was provided by Green, who introduced

social responsibility aspects to their operations already at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the time, social responsibility was a new concept and Finnish companies were not aware of it. However, the reception was positive, and through responsible action, Green was able to entice new partners.

*“At the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, social responsibility became one our club’s values. We started participating in other things than just sports, and for example participated in rearing children outside sports as well. It was a wise decision which strengthened our brand in the long term and garnered interest from people. At the beginning, companies were maybe a bit surprised, but in a positive sense. However, it was well received.” (X3, Green)*

Lack of ideas has been seen as a problem in sponsoring, and especially the clubs have been blamed for weak innovativeness. (Fahy, et al., 2004) However, according to the interviews, the clubs were active in ideation, and some clubs felt that ideation stemmed mostly from the club.

*“Most of the ideas came from the club. We received a lot of new ideas from them, all the time. Of course, we produced new ideas as well, but the club had more. Of course, they are mutually advanced.” (Y3, Cleap)*

*“Sometimes the companies have ideas, but it’s pretty rare.” (X3, Green)*

*“We probably have more ideas, but on the other hand, the sponsor has had concrete ideas that have been easy to implement. For example, providing sports lessons for the sponsor’s clients was the company’s idea. Employees from both organizations also have some ideas.” (X2, Red)*

One perspective is to look at the size of the company’s marketing department. This provides basis for ideation. In many companies, the marketing department can be focused completely on creating new ideas, and sponsoring is a valuable addition to their toolkit.

*"Naturally we have a relatively large marketing organization that enables ideation. This is why we have mainly suggested how more effectively utilize the cooperation." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"And advertising agency is often involved in the discussions as well, and they come with their own ideas. I would say that all three parties, we, the sponsor, and the agency, produce new ideas. The sponsor organization also provides a good opportunity for sparring and polishing our own ideas." (X1, Blue)*

*"A few individuals are responsible for our marketing, and they have been involved in ideation and planning. They've had their own good visions." (Y3, Cleap)*

According to the interviews, ideas can be conceived in numerous ways. The basis could be the sponsor's benefit, or completely athletic, which includes different elements from the sponsor. The interviewees note that ideation must be active, and some mad ideas should be entertained as well. The representative from Brewk also brings up an idea that has received too little attention in Finland.

*"Many of our projects have began with sports as the main focus, but they have provided the possibility for creating new sponsoring aspects later on. In practice, the innovations created for the club have provided new opportunities for our partners as well. So, we haven't just thought of additional ideas. Rather we have thought of sports comprehensively, and how to involve our partners in that." (X3, Green)*

*"I think ideation is done in Finland, but one overlooked perspective is taking more advantage of the partners. Partners should be brought to sit at the same table, and together with many sponsors something new could be created. Different industries could have a lot of good discussion and ideas. I would like to see more cooperation between industries." (Y1, Brewk)*

The representative from Green reminds that new things should not be created for creation's sake. Moderation should be used.

*"There are a lot of different industries and demands. I think it's an illusion that a functioning cooperation should be changed. Often people try to force new innovations. They take up energy unnecessarily and cause problems. Sometimes the constant innovations have actually pushed us backwards. But of course, we always think of new things that we can bring to every partnership."* (X3, Green)

The previous chapter discussed the importance of communication. Communication comes up in innovation discussions as well, because the interviewees feel that good communication and intense relationships assist in effectively creating new things. A good relationship also lowers the bar for proposing one's own ideas.

*"We no longer necessarily discuss that much. Rather the club's representative approaches us directly with the idea and says that they have a part they would like us to play in implementing the idea. I can also call the club's representative and tell them that we thought this is something you could take care of."* (Y2, Chroom)

*"When the relationship becomes tighter, it also becomes much more spontaneous. Ideas are pitched from both sides. It also lowered the bar for saying yes to different ideas and we were prepared to spend some of our budget for those ideas."* (Y3, Cleap)

All things considered, innovation increases satisfaction, because new ideas can produce something new for the relationship. Concretely this can be manifested as increasing customer satisfaction for the sponsor.

*"Our customers have received the new sponsoring activities well. New ideas have become really popular and for example different sponsoring activities draw people in. On the other hand, it increases the interest towards the club too, so the club wins as well."*

### **6.3.3 Profitability**

The first chapter of the empirical portion already discussed measurements and different measurement tools. The interviewees brought up profitability as a component of satisfaction. However, as previously discussed, the cooperating parties

might not have concrete goals, or if they do, they might not be measured. How can these activities be perceived as profitable and thus increase satisfaction?

*“Although we didn’t concretely measure sponsoring, we could create associations between the clubs and the company. We received positive and good visibility, especially locally. That was a sufficient and good result for us. I would say that we didn’t measure the relationship financially. Rather we measured it based on feeling.” (Y3, Cleap)*

Therefore, profitability has been viewed through experiences. Satisfaction consists of experiences, and thus the relationship is continued. (Grönroos, 2009, pp. 320-321) Many interviewees felt that complying sponsoring statistics was difficult, especially initially. Hence, the profitability was based on experience.

*“It’s hard to measure sponsoring cooperation here and now. We still base a lot on vibe and on how we feel.” (X3, Green)*

*“We are not good at concrete measurements. We have relied more on I feel like - measurements and how we feel about the cooperation.” (Y3, Cleap)*

On the other hand, Cleap also points out that they don’t know how to demand numbers, because they have been provided with so few.

*“I haven’t really ever seen statistics from the clubs. It’s been more dependent on who’s the responsible party. For example, in one sponsoring relationship, we received accurate visibility numbers, and after that the interest towards the numbers maybe rose regarding other sponsored parties as well.” (Y3, Cleap)*

As previously stated, the amount of statistics has grown along with the interest. Based on the interviews, complying statistics will become very common in sponsoring.

*"Nowadays, it's increasingly important to think how we receive profit for our investment. Every time that we give out money, we should also think what we'll get in return." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"For example, last year we conducted a larger project with one our sponsored clubs. We wanted accurate numbers for that project, because it was large additional investment for us. In that case, we involved the numbers in thinking whether the project was profitable enough." (Y1, Brewk)*

A customer relationship always does well when it's profitable. This is most easily evident through statistics. (Payne, 2015, pp. 22-23) If there are no statistics, and everything is based on feeling, the risk of a severed relationship exists, because the relationship is not seen as indispensable. If the club can prove that the relationship is profitable by producing results, maintaining a strong relationship is easy.

*"If we can measure euros and display revenues, we have a strong seat at the negotiation table. I'd say that money is number one and everything else follows." (X2, Red)*

*"We conducted a good research on how people reacted to our advertisement. That advertisement didn't mention the sponsor, but it had our company logo and the advertisement text. The results showed that a third of the respondents thought it was our sponsor's advertisement. Practically, they get direct advertisement through our club with investing a cent. The campaign has also increased their sales. Continuing the relationship after this was pretty easy." (X1, Blue)*

#### **6.4 The sponsoring process**

The basis for development is always the sponsoring process. As the theoretical part stated, the process begins with the goals. After the goals have been set, the sponsored party is chosen, and the process moves to the execution stage. The goals and motives of the interviewees were discussed in the first subchapter, but what are the factors that affect choosing the sponsoring target?

The companies have similar thoughts regarding choosing the sponsoring target. Values are brought up often, and they are one of the central factors for modern companies that look for partners. Values denote a desired way of operating; what is right or wrong for each party or individual. During 2010s, values have become increasingly important for companies. (Davis & Hilbert, 2013) The values are also brought up during the interviews, although the companies don't necessarily talk about them.

*"We don't really discuss values, but the company and the club need to have matching values." (Y3, Cleap)*

*"Values are the primary decider for initiating a partnership." (Y1, Brewk)*

Implementing the values is as important as talking about them. The companies' websites often describe values in detail, but they are not implemented in the real world. (Davis & Hilbert, 2013) This perspective is mentioned in the interviews as well.

*"I'd consider practical policies more important than values. What are the club's real values on an operational level? Nowadays all the clubs and companies have the same phrases, but it's their actions that express their values. This line might get blurry sometimes." (X3, Green)*

In addition to values, the companies diversely bring up brand compatibility, personal relationships, and the club's personnel. However, it is an entirety, which is addressed throughout the relationship.

*"We value the sponsored party's quality operations and good image. They need to have clear links with our company, and it's evaluated throughout the relationship." (Y3, Cleap)*

There has been a lot of discussion on whether the sponsored party needs to be successful to attract company interest. The interviewees have different opinions on this.

*"Success is the number one thing. It's easy to cooperate with successful sports clubs. Success is measured by sporting success." (X2, Red)*

*"The target doesn't necessarily need to be successful. Being on board only during success is pretty awful. A partnership consists of support even during the periods when success is not found." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"I don't believe that success determines who to sponsor. Success helps in creating a brand, and therefore it can help with acquiring partners, but I don't think it's the most important thing." (X3, Green)*

After the target has been chosen, the process moves to the execution stage. The policies between clubs and companies differ greatly. Some parties like to agree on everything early on, and everything is written down in a contract. For some, the contract provides guidelines that are specified during the contract period. However, all parties highlight the importance of cooperation.

*"Nowadays we can make a contract that's pretty open, and that contract is then developed together. We jointly think what's good for both parties, and what would satisfy both parties' customers. Of course, we have a lot of customers that are the same, so there is no conflict. Five years ago, everything was written in the contract and that was it." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"We define the contents and agree on billing very accurately before signing the contract. Of course, some things are added along the way, for example some event that can't be known a year or two in advance. But predominantly everything is agreed on." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"We usually have long-term contracts, but they are sometimes refined. They are modified along the way, and it pretty much works as a base." (Y3, Clead)*

Finding suitable operating models is important for the clubs. They are the only way for creating an effective process.

*"Our operations are based on individuals. We have people that are responsible for negotiating with the companies. They all have different procedures, and they must fit the company's procedures." (X1, Blue)*

*"We often propose a framework for the company, and the company creates the content inside those frames. Thus, the company can decide on content that fits their needs and we have enough resources." (X3, Green)*

Planning before execution plays a large role and both the clubs and the companies recognize this.

*"We always have a presentation ready, and we are looking at the big picture. The actual planning is done in a larger group and a year clock is made for the next year. We pretty much follow that clock then. The negotiations can consist of up to 30 people." (X1, Blue)*

*"It has changed a lot in five years. There is more planning and it's more accurate." (Y1, Brewk)*

The planning phase also provides a great opportunity for thinking about different escapades and their scheduling. The interviews provide a good example.

*"Last year, when we were planning our big event, we were thinking about scheduling a lot. First of all, we asked the company which games interest the audience least. We knew that sometimes attendances were low. Secondly, we also thought of how to get maximum attention. For example, nothing special should be done on Valentine's day because everyone is doing Valentine's day stuff. It makes standing out hard. It can be done, but it requires something exceptional and large investments." (Y1, Brewk)*

Many factors affect the sponsoring process, but smart planning and execution produces good results. This increases company satisfaction and creates new development possibilities for the relationship. The next chapter discusses relationship development.

## 6.5 Developing the relationship

As stated at the very beginning of this study, the sponsoring market has developed over the years, but the clubs still find it increasingly difficult to secure more partners. According to the interviews the clubs have also recognized this problem, but in reality the number of partners has increased in the recent years. Table 4. below demonstrates the number of sponsors declared by the interviewed clubs. The number was more than a hundred for all clubs, and slight increase has taken place over the years. However, it is anticipated that the growth will reach its zenith and relationship development will become more crucial.

Table 4. The number of sponsors

<b>Team</b>	<b>The number of sponsors</b>
Blue	800
Red	180
Green	150

*"The numbers have risen constantly, but the peak growth has already been realized in the recent years. Lately, the increase in the number of sponsors has halted." (X3, Green)*

*"The number of sponsors has increased. Although we sometimes think that we've reached the limit, we've always found new targets and been able to squeeze more. But the greatest increases have come through development, when we have discovered something new to sell, for example through social media. We are lucky that we have enough partners and they have the interest to grow the relationship." (X1, Blue)*

The theoretical part of this study described customer relationship development and its requirements. A lengthy relationship, where both parties are willing to develop, is often required. This was recognized in all the interviews, by both the clubs and the companies. Therefore, both the clubs and companies have the same starting point. Both parties understand that relationship development is based on persistence and quick profits should not be expected.

*"This is a long-term process where results can't be expected right away. The results come in the future if they come at all." (X3, Green)*

*"Sponsoring is a long-term process where results are built persistently. Some people have sometimes difficulty remembering that this is not a business for short term profits." (Y1, Brewk)*

Long-term relationship is seen as key for relationship development (Grönroos, 2009, p. 30). According to the representative from Brew, a long-term relationship is an excellent base for creating new things and developing.

*"All relationships are equally important for us, but I have to admit that most relationships are a bit difficult. With a long-term relationship, the relationship itself becomes significant. The base has been built together for a long time. It's easier to build on that base. On the other hand, everything has to start from somewhere." (Y1, Brewk)*

All the interviewed clubs and companies had worked together for a long time. The clubs have a lot of different relationships, and therefore relationship length differs. The clubs are also in a different situation, because Blue and Red are traditional clubs that already participated in major league sports when Green was founded. However, all the clubs have acquired long term partnerships.

*"We have quite a few long-term partnerships, some exceeding 20 years. We have a few 15 – 20-year partnerships, and a lot of partnerships that are over ten years old." (X1, Blue)*

*"We come from a small region and are a big operator locally. Therefore, companies attach to our club, which creates long term-relationships. Let's say that our longest relationships have started in the 1960s. There are quite a few." (X2, Red)*

*"Looking at the big picture, we have too many year-long partnerships, but the most significant ones have been there for 2 -4 years. We have partnerships that are longer than this too. For example, almost a 10-year partnership with one company." (X3, Green)*

Of the sponsors, Brewk is involved in extensive sponsoring in different sports and Cleap focuses on few targets, and currently especially on junior sports. Chroom only has a few sponsored parties, but the relationships are very close. However, all the companies share to goal of achieving long-term relationships.

*"We've been involved in all kinds of sponsoring throughout the years. The sports and targets have shifted, but we've always been active. It works for us, and sports are a good way of reaching our customers." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"Per se, we haven't had many sponsored parties. Sometimes we've given a few hundred locally and the favour has often been returned. But the relationship we've focused on, they've been close. And they have also worked." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"We have a lot less sponsoring partners than we used to, because we changed our strategy. Nowadays our sponsoring is focused on a smaller scale, and locally we support especially junior sports. We were happy with the old model as well. The new management wanted to change and direct the marketing investments elsewhere." (Y3, Cleap)*

We have discussed the parties' basis for sponsoring relationships. The next chapters describe what factors enable this development.

## 6.6 Developing the relationship in practice

In a customer relationship, the customer seeks additional value for themselves. In order to develop the relationship, the vendor must provide this additional value (Grönroos, 2009, p. 25-26; Puusa, et al., 2015, p. 191-192). The theory stated that the sponsor and the company must know each other and each other's situation, so that the relationship can be developed (Puusa, et al., 2015, pp. 191-192). According to the interviews, both the clubs and the companies understand this.

*"The development must benefit both parties. Both parties need to gain something if the relationship is developed. We think of the sponsored party as well, not just our own perspective. It's mutual cooperation." (Y2, Chroom)*

Customer segmentation should be a key factor in relationship development. It is nearly impossible to develop a relationship with everyone, and the critical relationships that provide the maximum benefits should be chosen. (Hänti, et al., 2016, p. 122) According to the interviews, the clubs strive for segmentation, but the segmentation is not always well thought out.

*"We have attempted to model how to develop all relationships. In reality, relationship with everyone can't be developed as much as we would like. We work most with our main partners and try to deepen that relationship and create something new." (X1, Blue)*

*"Large partnerships naturally provide development opportunities. We have a relationship with around 10 partners that we are able to develop and thus acquire more revenue for the club." (X2, Red)*

*"In the past 5 – 10 years the significance of the main partners has increased and we can try to develop the relationship with those partners." (X3, Green)*

Therefore, main partners are most important for clubs, and the clubs seek relationship development with those partners. But what factors enable relationship development?

*“We try to revise our services. For example, in the last 10 years, social media has appeared from nowhere and opened up completely new opportunities for growing the contracts. We also try to enable as many things as we can for our sponsors. For example, certain companies can do certain kinds of advertising through sponsors only according to the law. We want to utilize that. A big thing is that we pitch all sorts of things. We try to be as innovative as we can and think of a model. We also want to have a discussion on what the company wants. There we can find the room for development.” (X1, Blue)*

*“We’ve been able to look for growth and development through new products. For example, the role of well-being at work has increased and we’ve been more involved in that. Companies care about their employees’ well-being and our games can provide an opportunity for tearing away from everyday life. That’s why we’ve tried to develop new things for the games.” (X2, Red)*

*“We are lucky, because we’ve been able to develop our own operations constantly, because we are a new operator. Simultaneously we’ve been able to develop new things for the sponsor and through that develop the relationship. This has happened through product and service development.” (X3, Green)*

The sponsoring companies think that development has progressed in the right direction. Sponsoring has been developed and the companies have gained new benefits.

*“Nowadays money is not given out for the joy of giving. We really think what we can gain for that money. It has worked well, and we’ve gained those benefits that we’ve sought. We also have gained some benefits that we didn’t even ask for.” (Y2, Chroom)*

*“For example, we received new tools for well-being at work through relationship development. We didn’t really ask for these tools and they happened through development work. It wasn’t something that we had not known to ask for.” (Y3, Clead)*

Companies also think that development has happened as a result of the companies' elevated standards. The standards towards the partner have not really increased. Rather it is the company's internal standards have been raised, which has reflected on sponsoring as well.

*"The level of standard has changed. In the last five years we have started thinking more about the things we receive." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"The level of standard has really changed. We ask for a lot more. Not from the partners, but from ourselves. We need to much more effectively find the profits and we need to be able to communicate that." (Y1, Brewk)*

As stated previously, the decisions makers in the companies are increasingly focused to the head office, and the office can be abroad. Thus, decisions for relationship development are made in places that have no connection with the club. Therefore, the development idea must be sold with strong reasoning.

*"You need to rationalize the relationship first in Finland, then they explain it to Europe, and from Europe to, for example, China. One of our ideas with our partner travelled from Finland to Stockholm, from Stockholm to Amsterdam, and from Amsterdam to China. In the end, we got the nod from China a month later." (X1, Blue)*

The further the decision makers are, the more the significance of personal relationships decreases. Therefore, the other party's satisfaction must be increased even more. In the best-case scenario the club can make themselves indispensable, and the company will closely commit to the relationship.

*"The club needs to become so important and interesting that the company can't leave." (X3, Green)*

*"We've been able to create such a close relationship with the company, that several studies have shown that people confuse our brands. There have been instances where our fans have switched restaurants if they haven't served our*

*sponsor's products. That's of course extreme and rare, but this is a situation where it's really difficult for the company to leave." (X1, Blue)*

*"We have sponsoring relationships that are so strongly associated with the club that even though we wouldn't do anything for three years, the people would still think that we work together. Of course, there's no point in stopping when this is the case." (Y1, Brewk)*

Sometimes the clubs have had to make sacrifices for relationship development. One good example is changing the jersey colours to match the company's or the currently very common naming of the stadium according to the company.

*"The club has done some big things with us. For example, when they decided on their operating languages, they asked our opinion. They wanted to hear that the decision they were thinking was okay for us." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"We thought of changing our club's colours back at the of 1990s and we involved our partners in the process. That's how we adopted our partner's colours. It is evident in all of our activities, because our jersey and field match our sponsor's colours. I see it as a strong sign of commitment." (X2, Red)*

However, development does not happen, if the parties do not want to work for it. Continuous raising of standards and active operations are required. It is very easy to stay still and not progress. Both the companies and the clubs recognize this.

*"No-one has told us that we need to develop our sponsoring or sponsoring relationship. We have elevated our standard ourselves. But we've seen that we always need to be able to raise our standards. The clubs have understood it too, and I've never come across a club that would say no to development." (Y1, Brewk)*

*"We have to make sure that we are constantly progressing. The contracts include a lot of stuff and some of these benefits are not realized. We should remember to activate the companies and get them to engage. Therefore, they can participate in*

*this community and develop. We also look for something extra in every contract.”*  
(X1, Blue)

*”We look for growth. We always negotiate for new sales opportunities. That’s clearly goal number one. The second goal is to discover those strategic partnerships that enable growth. Thus, we can elevate our standards and development follows automatically.”* (X2, Red)

*”I hope that the cooperation will deepen more in the future. Of course, we have to think of how we can support each other even better and thus gain new benefits. It can’t work in a way where we just deposit money every now and then and stay satisfied. Development must be continuous. and it needs to happen together.”* (Y2, Chroom)

*”I believe that in the future we’ll more carefully think about how to gain even more from sponsoring. We need to think about that continuously and standards need to be set. That’s the way for development in both the clubs and the companies.”* (Y3, Cleap)

*”I think sports as an entity direct towards thinking about development. Live sport causes us challenges, as does our own fragmentation. In the future, it might be that just the top brands and large events remain. For example, long regular seasons might cause problems. Development is needed to address that issue.”* (X3, Green)

There was a lot of discussion on development with all the interviewees, but they found it more difficult to predict the future. However, all of them had their own view on how sport sponsoring would progress in the future.

*”I fear that only strong club – and event brands will remain in sports. The sponsoring investments will focus more on those elites, so there’s a need for development. Sports clubs also need to take a step away from the sport business and find profitable industries elsewhere in order to continue in top-level sport. Extensive development work is required, and sponsors can be utilized in it as well.* (X3, Green)

*"I think that sport sponsoring will progress towards a more responsible direction. The partnerships will deepen, and the standards will be raised." (Y3, Cleap)*

*"I think that communication will become even more significant. The communication must be open and active. Good manners and values are required from business. At least we demand that we can be proud of our partners." (Y2, Chroom)*

*"Diverse sponsoring contracts are required in the future. Simultaneously you need to express where you come from and be proud of your roots. By integrating into one's own locale, the club can work persistently and look for new partnerships." (X2, Red)*

*"I think that the role of social media will increase and progress to the next level. I still think that it needs to somehow stand out. Digitalization and new technologies enable opportunities for venues. But I think that the most important thing is a good relationship with the partner and displaying that it's beneficial to work with us." (X1, Blue)*

*"I hope that the clubs will involve more companies in planning across industry lines. It's pointless to compete against each other, because no-one wins. I think that long-term relationships will increase. This is already a global trend. At the same time, advertisement visibility is already in the past. The clubs need to be bold enough to try new things instead of thinking that if some company leaves, we lose all their revenue." (Y1, Brewk)*

The interviewees understand the development of the sponsoring relationship. The development also is sought. The level of requirements and understanding of sponsoring has also risen in Finland. Table 5. displays the empirical results in relation to the research questions in the study.

Table 5. Empirical answers to research questions.

RQ1: "Why are sponsors involved in sport sponsoring?"

- Sports sponsoring provides diverse opportunities for build the brand.
- Sports sponsoring is a good platform to affect different targets and stakeholders.
- Sports evokes emotions.
- Sports sponsoring provides wide opportunities to develop something new.

RQ2: "How do clubs discover the sponsor's goals for sponsorship outcomes?"

- Through discussions.
- By keeping personal connection with the sponsor.
- By sharing statistics.
- By creating goals for sponsoring.

RQ3: "How the sponsoring process works?"

- Choosing the right partners is the key to success.
- Together clubs and companies think the goals and ways to do sponsoring.
- Communication and innovativeness drive the process forward.
- Planning and results measuring have grown to a major role in the process.
- It is a long-term process which requires constant work.

Main RQ: "How Finnish sports organizations develop their relationship with their sponsors?"

- Sport clubs lead the development.
- New ideas mainly develop the relationship.
- Development can also arise through new opportunities such as new technologies.
- Without new innovations or new opportunities, development is very difficult.
- Close relationship with the sponsor helps the development.

## **7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter discusses the conclusions for this study and summarizes the central findings. Research findings are discussed in relation to past literature and the findings are used to answer the research questions from chapter 1. Furthermore, some concrete recommendations are provided based on the study. The limitations and reliability of the study are also discussed. Finally, some possible suggestions for following research are given.

### **7.1 Central findings**

This study looked at how Finnish sports organizations attempt to develop the relationship with their sponsors. Sponsorship development, and sponsoring in Finland has been scarcely researched, and it is interesting to see if Finnish sports organizations consciously develop the sponsoring relationship. The study focused on Finnish team sport clubs and companies that had long-term sponsoring experience. Sponsoring plays a large part in the operation of clubs and companies. The first chapters answer the study's sub research questions, followed by the main research question.

#### **7.1.1 The sponsor's motives**

The first research question discussed the sponsor's motives for sport sponsoring. It is important to discover the sponsor's motives, so that the development work can progress in the right direction and the results desired by the company can be achieved. (Meenaghan, 2013) The companies extensively described their motives for sport sponsoring in the study. The theory clarified that sponsoring is a business operation, not charity (Meenaghan, 2011). This was communicated by the companies as well. Although charity is still included in sponsoring, the motives have shifted towards the business aspects. This is reflected on goals among other things, as the interviewed companies commented on how they increasingly set sponsoring goals.

The companies also brought up goals that were similar to one's in the study's theory chapter. The companies look to improve brand building, stakeholder influence,

and social responsibility through sponsoring. Based on the answers, the companies have understood the diverse sponsoring opportunities provided by sponsoring. The companies are involved in sports sponsoring for emotional and recognition reasons. The clubs were seen as well-known operators that provide visibility. On the other hand, the emotions awakened by sports also aroused interest.

The study also found that companies have begun to create their own motives. Five years ago, the companies were involved in sponsoring because of traditions, but now every company communicated underlying motives for sponsoring. The clubs do not necessary quite grasp these motives, but the companies do not seem to notice this. The companies praise the clubs on understanding their needs and the new services and products they provide.

### **7.1.2 Discovering goals**

The second sub question studied the clubs' understanding of the companies' goals. This is important, because understanding their own and their partners situation is central for development work. If this understand is lacking, development is nearly impossible. (Puusa, et al., 2015, pp. 190-192) The clubs recognize this as well. The interviewed clubs regretted their ignorance of the companies' goals. The goals of the sponsoring relationships are too often hidden. On the other hand, the clubs assumed that goals were strongly related to business aspects. The clubs talked about the companies' monetary incentives. However, the companies did not discuss these aspects much.

The fact that clubs must assume the company's goals stems from the fact that the goals have not been set together. This might be due to the sport sponsoring's history as charity. Profits were not sought from sponsoring. Rather it was viewed as charity (Meenaghan, 2013). This was evident from the interviews.

Based on the interviews, the clubs are increasingly interested in the companies' goals. The clubs feel that the goals facilitate development. The goals can also be monitored. Monitoring and measuring goals also help clubs determine the value of their services. Goals were also seen as useful tools for negotiations and ideation.

All in all, this was seen as one the areas that requires most development in the future.

### **7.1.3 The sponsoring process**

The third research question examined the clubs' sponsoring process. The theoretical part of the study discussed sponsoring and sponsoring related processes. The sponsoring relationship was defined as a relationship between parties, which aims at realizing financial goals. (Meenaghan, 1983; Walliser, 2003; Valanko, 2009, p. 49) In sponsoring, the sponsor attempts to utilize their official relationship with the sponsored party using a multitude of methods. (Fullerton & Merz, 2008) The sponsoring process was also defined. The sponsoring process consists of the goals, choosing of the sponsored party, and the execution stage. Sponsoring can be viewed as a suitable method for realizing a multitude of goals. In this study these goals were divided into brand building, stakeholder goals, and social responsibility. Many sponsoring operations are governed by these topics.

In this study, the clubs were most focused on brand building elements. Although brand building products were viewed as somewhat outdated, the clubs highlighted their importance. Advertising and visibility are still central to sponsoring, and they are the most visible sponsoring method. All the interviewed companies brought up visibility and advertising in some way. For example, visibility was viewed as integral to sponsoring, and it is offered even though the company would not demand it. The role of visibility was encouraged and downplaying its significance was not supported.

The clubs focused on other aspects besides brand building as well. Especially social responsibility has been viewed as increasingly important in sponsoring and also for the clubs. One of the clubs was actually a forerunner of social responsibility and introduced social responsibility in their operations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Stakeholders were viewed as enablers of innovativeness. However, this was more evident from the companies' perspective. Stakeholders and employees were mentioned often when the clubs talked about planning the future. All in all, the clubs feel that they are more innovative in the relationship and that they try to create new content for the relationship. The companies have viewed this as

positive. This is important, because company satisfaction enables relationship development (Johnston & Paulsen, 2014)

Choosing the sponsored party proceeds from the goals in the sponsoring process. Choosing the sponsored party is usually very significant for a successful relationship (Jeffries, 2010; Bush, et al., 2004). The clubs have also understood this. The clubs use a variety of methods for making themselves more enticing. Mentioned methods included utilizing social media and richness of ideas. The clubs feel that choosing the sponsored party will be more challenging in the future, because the decision makers are further away. The clubs might not be able to create personal relationships with the decision makers, which directs the relationship towards more measurable results.

Choosing the sponsored party is followed by the execution phase, which was divided into three major parts in the theory: communication, measuring, and management. Communication was viewed as central by both the clubs and the companies. All the interviewees had similar views and all six interviewees were satisfied with the other party. The clubs feel that effective and open communication enables a long-term, developing relationship. The clubs' opinions on measurability differed. Some clubs conducted extensive measurements, while another used statistics and measurements scarcely. However, all clubs felt that the role of measurability will increase, especially because decisions are no longer made locally. Measurable results were seen as a key factor for increasing sponsor satisfaction as well.

Regarding management, the clubs strive to always think about development. The interviewed clubs had an air of determination and organization, which is crucial for managing a relationship (Fahy, et al., 2004). The clubs have a slightly imperfect understanding of the sponsor's motives and goals, which complicates relationship development and management. The clubs explained that this was due to limited resources. However, the company representatives rarely brought up this point, which means that they do not focus on it.

All in all, the clubs have understood the sponsoring process and its different features. The clubs also understand the factors that affect each stage of the

sponsoring process and act accordingly. However, regarding some aspects, for example measurability, the companies do less than they talk. This is likely due to the limited resources, which do not enable the desired level. Nevertheless, the clubs recognize this, so improvements in the future are possible.

#### 7.1.4 Developing the sponsoring relationship in Finnish sports organizations

Now we have gotten the answers to three research questions. Table 6. below sums up the answers to the research questions.

Table 6. Answers to the sub questions.

Research question	Answer
<i>Why are sponsors involved in sport sponsoring?</i>	Sport sponsoring provides a diverse platform that attracts interest from a wide range of people. There are strong emotions associated with sports. Sponsors try to incorporate these feelings into themselves through sport sponsoring. Sport sponsoring is also seen as a unique marketing channel.
<i>How do clubs discover the sponsor's goals for sponsorship outcomes?</i>	Clubs seek to discover their sponsor's goals primarily through discussions. Many times this is difficult because the companies do not discuss these aspect much. Clubs are also small and they do not have enough resources to figure out sponsor's goals. Sport sponsoring's history is based on charity and that is why companies do not give exact goals for sponsoring. On the other hand the clubs are increasingly interested in the goals and they saw that the goals are important for the development.
<i>How the sponsoring process works?</i>	The sponsoring process is a long-term operation which aims at realizing financial goals. The process consist of the goals, choosing of the sponsored party, and the execution stage. The success of the process determines the success of the entire sponsoring relationship. It is important to identify the different stages of the process and understand how the relationship can be developed at different stages. The process is always similar but the different stages may vary depending how long or old the relationship is.

Finally, the main research question can be answered. How do Finnish sport organizations develop the relationship with their sponsors? Based on the research, it can be stated that Finnish sports organizations try to develop their relationship with their sponsors. The development progresses mainly through new products and services. Growth is sought with additional sales.

The study's aim was to discover how the sponsoring relationship development. Relationship work and utilizing innovativeness are the most important methods. Through relationships, the clubs attempt to gather clues on the companies' needs.

Close relationships enable direct discussion on how to gain additional benefit for both parties. Innovativeness is largely based on this cooperation as well.

In the best-case scenario, the development work progresses to a point where people begin to confuse the club's and the company's brands (Alexander, 2009). The clubs are aware of this, but they do not comment on the possible negative aspects. The clubs seldom think about the appearance of their partner, but the sponsors do. This is usually due to the relative difficulty of acquiring sponsors. Clubs want to maintain their sponsors and are not willing to terminate the relationship themselves.

Based on the study, both the clubs and the companies felt that relationship development is important. They also see long-term sponsoring relationships as rational. Both parties want to do development work, but it's not completely clear which party is in charge. Development usually leads to new opportunities for both, which can manifest, for example, as money. A close relationship between the club and company facilitates development work, and development can happen unnoticed.

Based on the study, the sponsoring companies are satisfied with the development. The companies feel that the clubs act coherently and maintain active communications. Possible grievances arising from, for example, discovering the company's goals and motives, do not cause problems in the relationship. According to companies, the clubs have understood the elevated standard and companies see this as an important resource for the future.

All in all, it can be stated that Finnish clubs work on sponsoring relationship development, but it is challenging to determine how well planned and managed this development is. The clubs are very current and knowledgeable of trends. This builds trust and enables long-term, developing relationships. However, there is still room for improvement with sufficient resources.

## 7.2 Practical recommendations

Based on this study, it can be stated that sponsoring relationship development is beneficial and desired. The companies expect development in some way, although they are not able to directly communicate it. It is possible for the clubs to become forerunners in this field, and help companies develop their sponsoring. Because the number of sponsors will not radically change, the greatest growth can be achieved through relationship development. Therefore, it's beneficial for clubs to invest in relationship development.

The clubs should find out the company's motives and goals for sponsoring. By doing this the club can stand out and facilitate their own actions. When motives and goals have been discovered, additional planning becomes a lot easier. The companies also value clubs that are interested and think about the company. Through understanding, the club can also provide exactly the right products and services to fit the company's needs.

After motives and goals have been discovered, the central factors are communication, innovativeness, and measurements. The club can create a deep connection with the company by using active, open, and honest communication. Communication also provides the key for the company's needs. The company can also pitch new ideas through active communication, which facilitates the club's innovation work. Communication also increases company satisfaction, which is a big factor for continuing and developing the relationship.

The club should and needs to be innovative as well. Partners should be involved individually and together in development work, but the club must provide different ideas for their partners. The ideas do not need to be radical, but they need to serve the company's needs. Based on communication, the clubs get to know the company's needs. Looking at the company's websites can also help a lot. Visibility elements need to be taken into account along with innovativeness, but visibility is no longer the only aspect. The clubs must use creativity and develop new opportunities.

Although measurements in sponsoring are rare in Finland, a great need for measurement exists. Measurements can provide the club with valuable information on whether the sponsoring matches the company's goals. Measurements also facilitate evaluating the club's own work and its functionality. The clubs require more and more results to base their decisions on, and if the club can provide the company with measured results, the decision-making process is accelerated. Concrete results also make it harder for the company to terminate the sponsoring cooperation.

The club should focus their resources accurately. The clubs must work with all of their partners, but it is impossible to develop the relationship with everyone. Choosing the critical partnerships and developing them is important. This is effective use of the club's resources. The clubs should segment the companies and think of different operating models for different segments. Thus, they can provide suitable services for everyone.

### **7.3 Study reliability, limitations, and follow-up suggestions**

Reliability and validity mistakes are always possible in research. Reliability is determined by examining if the same study could be repeated. The study's qualifications are determined by its validity. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233) However, these metrics are closely related to quantitative studies, and are not completely fit for evaluating qualitative studies. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 136-137) Nevertheless, they are used as help for evaluating this study.

The study has a high reliability if its results are repeatable, for example, by another researcher studying the same subject. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233) The reliability of this study is affected by the fact that it is a qualitative study with a purposive sample. The interviews were conducted as themed interviews, so the interviewees did not necessarily talk about the same exact things or perspectives. In addition, the results were not guided in any way, and the participants could express their own opinions on different themes. All the interviews attempted to examine the same things, but because the interviews progressed uniquely, the responses did not exactly match each other.

Therefore, discussing the same themes with a different sample might not guarantee similar results. The same is true for a different researcher, because they might direct the interview in a different way. Therefore, the study might not be repeatable using a different sample or researcher. In this study, the researcher had no connection to the interviewed organizations, and the interviews were carried out independent of any organizations. Thus, the researcher could not affect the study findings, which naturally increases the study's reliability. Reliability also increases, because the interviews were conducted in peaceful environments, without additional distractions. The interviews were conducted in conference rooms or over the phone.

The study's validity denotes its ability to measure exactly what it should measure. (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233) Qualitative case study is a suitable method for this study, because the goal of a case study is to increase the understanding of a topic, rather than to generalize the results (Metsämuuronen, 2006, pp. 90-91) The research questions were also set successfully, although they changed a little during the study. The theoretical framework of the study corresponded with the research questions and supported the search for answers. However, the theoretical framework could have focused more on relationship development aspects.

The sample for this study was very small, so the results are not generalizable. They are also not generalizable, because this is a case study. The sample was not drawn from a single organization, so the results can't be generalized even to a single organization or industry. On the other, as stated, the generalization is not the goal of a qualitative study. Rather, qualitative studies study the individual views on a topic. The aim is to discover similar responses from the data, and this study was suitable for achieving that goal.

This study could be developed by focusing on specific sponsoring relationships. The study could prove valuable to a specific organization that could utilize the results in developing their sponsoring sales. On the other hand, the stages of the sponsoring process could be studied more. This would create more perspectives for examining relationship development. In addition, the study could be conducted on a different sample, for example representatives from individual sports or junior organizations.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Interview questions

### Background

- Introduce yourself shortly (name, how long you have been in company/club, position in the firm)
- Describe shortly your working experience
- How long you have been working on sponsoring
- How many sponsors/sponsored clubs your team/company has
- Has the number of sponsors/sponsored clubs changed in recent years

### Sponsoring relationship

- How long the average sponsoring relationship last
- Is there more investing in certain sponsoring relationships
- How relationships are segmented

### Motivation behind the sponsoring

- What is sought with sponsoring
- What are the goals behind the sponsoring
- Where do those goals come from
- Have the goals changed in recent years

### Measuring

- How these goals are measured
- Which party makes the measurement

### Developing the relationship

- When next year plans are made
- How often you communicate with a partner
- Where do new ideas come from
- What are the key factors behind relationship development
- How the relationship can grow
- What is the direction of the future