



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# The Formula to Success

A characterization of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans  
and high-profile sports teams

by

Julia Möller

Kajsa Knutsson

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Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya

Examiner: Annette Cerne

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## Abstract

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**Authors:** Julia Möller & Kajsa Knutsson

**Supervisor:** Veronika Tarnovskaya

**Keywords:** Formula 1; High-profile sports teams, Sports Fans; Brands; Brand community; Consumer-Brand Relationship.

**Research question:** How does the consumer-brand relationship evolve between fans and high-profile sport teams?

**Purpose:** The aim of this thesis is to understand how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams, more specifically, Formula 1 teams. It will explore the triadic relationship that exists with other consumers in addition to the dyadic relationship between a brand and a consumer. The high-profile sports teams will be viewed as complex brands and the thesis will be through a consumer perspective.

**Methodology:** The research has been conducted with an inductive approach using qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews. The empirical data was collected through 18 interviews with respondents who consider themselves fans of Formula 1.

**Theoretical perspective:** The research applies a theoretical framework of the consumer-brand relationship in combination with literature of brand communities.

**Findings/ Conclusion:** Three emerging themes were identified in the findings which were, fascination of the brand, social interaction, and engagement. All of these stages are characterized by different aspects that move the relationship in a trajectory forwards through positive brand experiences, both in a dyadic and triadic way. In addition, negative brand experiences were also considered to show the dynamic aspects of the consumer-brand relationship.

**Contributions:** This research is providing insight to how the relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams can evolve through different factors that can lead to a higher loyalty towards the brand.

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**Julia Möller**



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**Kajsa Knutsson**

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## 1.0 Introduction

*In the first chapter, the context of the research topic will be clarified in the background section. The first section of the background will provide an explanation for brands and sports fans before introducing Formula 1, the high-profile sport selected for this research. Additionally, the problem discussion will be addressed along with the purpose and research question for this thesis. Lastly, the delimitations and intended contribution will be specified and presented.*

## 1.1 Background

Imagine the chills that go through the body when the words “lights out and away we go” are said. It is likely that not everyone is aware of this saying, but the people who know these words are definitely fans of Formula 1. The relationship that fans have with sports teams are obviously advantageous to the teams and the sport as a whole. Because if there were no fans, sports would most probably not be as exciting as it is today. In line with this, Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (2013) mentioned that it was not long ago since the marketing world thought that the theory and practice of relationship marketing was just another fashion that soon would be forsaken. However, it is now widely accepted that a major purpose of a business surrounds the creation and sustainment of mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2013).

The relationship between a brand and a consumer and the potential enhancing of brand value can be explained through the consumer-brand relationship (CBR) (Abd Ghani & Tuhin, 2016). Keller (2013) explains that the benefits consumers get from brands does not have to be purely functional. Meaning that consumers do not only desire tangible brand attributes such as cost or quality. Instead, brands do also carry intangible attributes, hence they serve as symbolic devices that allow consumers to project their self-image. This means that brands permit consumers to communicate to others, or to themselves, what type of person they are or would like to be. Consumers will have more opportunities to form a close bond with brands that have a desirable personality.

A shift to the relationship establishment from the transaction-based exchanges was accepted and established after brands realized the significance of emotional bonding with consumers (Khatoun & Rehman, 2021). Further, the authors mention that a relationship between brands and consumers is created by implementing and associating brands with e.g., meanings, personalities, images, or associations. A development in this area was established by Fournier (1998) in her research of “Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research”. In this article, it is not only argued for the validity of the consumer-brand relationship, but also for how brands can serve as a relationship partner, similar to how humans create relationships with each other. However, for a relationship to be considered as real between a consumer and a brand, there must be a mutual connection between the partners. This means both brand behaviors and consumer behaviors affect the structure of the relationship. The ability to think of a brand as a participating and active member of a relationship dyad rather than only a passive object of marketing transactions is something that has been noteworthy, not only by Fournier (1998), but especially by Aaker (1997). In her research on the dimensions of brand personality, the author recognizes that humans create relationships with brands through the human characteristics associated with it. Drawing on the “big five” personality traits, Aaker (1997) develops a theoretical framework of brand personality dimensions of e.g., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Due to a brand's personality, consumers have the opportunity to express their authentic selves, aspirational selves, or specific features of themselves. The author also highlights how the symbolic attributes; hence the self-expression functions can easily be recognized by consumers as historical figures or celebrities that can be related to oneself. This in addition to the functional attributes of a brand, which often serve as more practical functions for consumers (Aaker, 1997).

For centuries, millions of people, if not billions, have invested their time, money and not at least energy in cheering for their favorite team as a fan. Sports fans devote themselves to a team and plan their lives around the team's or the sport's schedule. A sports organization's brand is one of their most important assets. Having a strong brand can enhance the trust of the invisible purchase for a consumer (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020).

Brands that undoubtedly have gotten recent attention are the different teams within the sport of motorsport, Formula 1. Since the Netflix show *Drive to survive* was launched in 2019, the global popularity of the sport has been magnified. Suddenly, people from all corners of the globe were drawn into this captivating world (Driscoll, n.d.).

It is important to create a basis for understanding the high-profile sports teams in context for this thesis. Therefore, as a starting point, Formula 1 is a sport that for many years, was seen as an unusual sport with fanatical enthusiasts, similar to sailing or hunting. After different documentaries, more social media exposure and the Netflix show *Drive to survive* that was launched in 2019, it is now one of the most watched and popular sports in the world (Hope, 2022). With the popularity of the sport, the media exposure of it has also increased significantly. A quote from one driver that explains to which extent the sports teams work with their marketing and branding is from Daniel Ricciardo who said *“Being an F1 driver is a crazy job but not what everyone expects. My year consists of 20% driving and 80% media, marketing and travel”*.

Currently, there are 10 different Formula 1 teams, with 20 drivers in total. The teams competing in the 2023 season are (Formula 1, n.d.).

- Alfa Romeo
- Alpine
- AlphaTauri
- Aston Martin
- Ferrari
- Haas F1 Team
- McLaren
- Mercedes
- Red Bull racing
- Williams

From a marketing and branding perspective, the upswing the high-profile sport received after its launch is particularly interesting. Not only because high-profile sports teams receive a lot of attention, both from media and people (Cambridge, 2023). But most importantly because the



sport teams and the fans that take part take the sport of Formula 1 highlights both the dyadic and the triadic relationship that can occur between consumer and brands.

This triadic relationship is a term that has been much found in the concept of a brand community Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). In this influential work on brand communities, the authors state that individuals who belong to a brand community commit and identify with this group because of the shared brand experiences. Hence, the consumer-brand relationship is influenced by both brand characteristics and community characteristics. This means that a group of individuals that share a passion or a common interest for a special brand may be included or involved in a brand community. It is a unique, non-geographically bound society built on a formalized network of social connections between enthusiasts of brands. In addition, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describes how a brand community can serve as an important asset for the brand since it is a part of the brand's social construct. However, the important thing to note with a brand community is that it moves the relationship with a brand from dyadic to a more complex triadic relationship where consumers do not only interact with the brand but more importantly with other consumers.

Another research that brings up the triadic relationship that consumers can have with brands is Ponsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011), who through research tries to understand value co-creation in a brand community which surrounds the premier league Liverpool Football club. The results showed that fans act as brand agents. Hence co-creating value by having different relationships with both the brand as well as other fans. Different dynamic roles of e.g., providers and beneficiaries allow entry points to more experienced as well as less experienced football fans. Important foundations for this process are the interactions and information sharing activities between fans.

Furthermore, the personality of high-profile sports teams as brands can also be connected Aaker (1997) who mentions that the perception of brand personalities may be influenced by any indirect or direct contact that the consumers have with the brand. For example, the brand's user imagery, which is the human traits associated with a typical user, endorser, CEO, or employee of a brand, implies that the personality traits of a brand can be directly tied to people associated with a brand. On the other hand, the perception of brand personalities can also be influenced

indirectly by product-related attributes such as brand name, symbol, advertising style, price, or product category associations.

The fact that the personality of a high-profile sports team consists of both symbolic and functional attributes is further mentioned by Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) research about how brand personality drives loyalty in sports. In this research, it is mentioned how a mixture of the team's management, employees, players, coaches as well as fans can be defined as a direct part of a sports team's brand personality. Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) further states that when trying to understand loyalty in connection to sports, the focus should lie on consumers' beliefs, sense of belonging to a community and self-image. The authors also mentions that behavioral loyalty in a context of sports marketing is connected to actual behaviors pointed towards sports events. This can range from taking part in sports events, attending games and watching it on television to repurchasing behaviors of e.g., the brand's product. In addition, Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) also says that compared to other brands, sports teams may be even more strongly connected to their brand personalities. This is since they are described as emotionally charged, hedonic and experiential and the core of sports brands are described as even more intangible and unstable. Furthermore, the relationship that is developed between a consumer and a sports team is a dynamic one that has its roots in societal importance and personal identity.

Lastly, an important mentioning about the consumer-brand relationship in high-profile sports is the multifaceted definition of "consumption" made by Crawford (2004). Hence consumption does not solely have to refer to the physical consumption, but also the "person-person" relationship that occurs on e.g., sport events. Fan activity does to a large extent consist in the minds and thoughts of fans through conversations, thoughts and memories that are exchanged. However, Crawford (2004) also says that these interactions often are connected to some type of consumption.

## 1.2 Problem discussion

The analogy of human relationships has for a long time influenced research on marketing relationships, recently more prominent in regard to the consumer-brand relationship (Breivik & Thorbjornsen, 2008). Especially noteworthy in this area is the ability to think of a brand as an active and participating member of a relationship's dyad. Something that both Fournier (1998) and Aaker (1997) focuses on by highlighting in which ways consumers create relationships with brands.

While much research on the consumer-brand relationship has focused on the dyadic relationship, the complexity that the triadic relationship brings to a brand is something that is worthy of more attention. This since Pongsakornrungrasit and Schroeder (2017) not only mentions how we are living in an era that relies on interpretation and meaning of core brand values. But maybe more importantly because consumers have the possibility to act as creative agents for brands, hence performing, sharing, and curating brand stories in authentic ways. This through their own subjective perceptions and motivations. As stated in the introduction section, an interesting example of complex brands lies within sports. Not only because fans of sports teams often interact with each other in different brand communities, but also because much of what makes a fan is located in thoughts, social interactions, and personal identity. The complexity that the triadic interaction brings to the construct of brands may be due to the fact that fans not only can create a relationship with a brand, but also with other fans.

Another reason for why sports teams can be viewed as complex brands lies within Aaker (1997) argumentation of how the perception of a brand personality is affected by direct and indirect factors. Apart from product-related attributes such as price, symbols, or product category associations, people associated with a brand can also influence the relationship that consumers create with brands. This since, compared to other brands, sport teams are strongly connected to their brand personalities. Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) argues that sport teams are complex brands, both with intangible and unstable core products that are experiential, hedonic, and emotionally charged. Since we know that the brand personality serves as a foundation to relationships between brands and consumers, it is worth mentioning that the personality of a sports team does not only evolve around a product or service, but rather a combination of the

image of both coaches, players, fans, as well as personnel and administration. In addition to functional attributes as performance, this may make sport teams as brands dynamic and complex in nature.

Focusing on high-profile sport teams is especially important due to the marketing and branding opportunities it can bring. This since high-profile sport teams tend to receive a lot of attention, both from people and media (Cambridge, 2023). Developing the understanding of the consumer behaviors that goes into the consumer-brand relationship can be synonymous to taking advantage of possible outcomes of consumers relationships with brands, such as driving consumer loyalty, relationship quality and long-term stability and durability. Through massive investments, Formula 1 has been able to develop a posh image and draw an elite audience. Hope (2022) says that the documentary series *Drive to Survive*, social media and betting promotions all can be reasons for why the sport now has become one of the most watched and most popular sports in the world.

Taking a consumer perspective and drawing on the consumer-brand relationship in a context of fans and high-profile sports teams can add to literature in several ways. Firstly, it can cover both positive and negative consumer emotions. Here, Khatoon and Rehman (2021) mentions that negative emotions towards brands are limited. This even though there is over 20 years of research on the consumer-brand relationship. Secondly, drawing on Fournier (1998) work on the dyadic consumer-brand relationships allows for a development of the triadic and dynamic aspects of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Hence not only focusing on how consumers interact with the brand, but also with other consumers.

### 1.3 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this research is to understand how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Hence, this thesis draws on the consumer-brand relationship by Fournier (1998) by trying to develop and further emphasize the consumer behaviors that goes into not only the dyadic relationship between brands and consumers, but also the triadic relationship with other consumers. This means that the thesis takes a consumer perspective on the brand-consumer relationship by highlighting both the triadic relationship as well as the dynamic aspects of a relationship with a brand. In addition, the thesis will focus on high-profile sports teams as complex brands. This means that it moves from Fournier (1998) previous focus on traditional brands of FMCG. Instead, it regards sports teams as brands that according to Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) are even more dynamic and unstable due to its tangible and intangible attributes.

Therefore, the research question is

*How does the consumer-brand relationship evolve between fans and high-profile sport teams?*

### 1.4 Delimitation

In this research, constraints have been set to limit the scope of the research. This thesis will solely focus on the high-profile sport teams of Formula 1. The sport has undergone an increase in popularity and attention, both offline and online in recent years. Another reason for this delimitation is because Formula 1 has many various components, including different teams and drivers.

Since the thesis focuses on the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams, it has been further delimited to a sample consisting of individuals that consider themselves as fans of Formula 1. To participate in the qualitative semi-structured interviews, it was necessary to only focus on fans who follow the sport and are knowledgeable about the teams that are currently in Formula 1. However, there was no requirement of age, nationality or for how long the sample had been fans. This since possible variations in experience and insights in

relation to Formula 1 can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the research phenomena.

Lastly, the thesis will take a consumer perspective in terms of looking at fans and how their relationship with teams as brands evolves. Taking a consumer perspective on the consumer-brand relationship between fans and Formula 1 means that the thesis will focus on how consumers interact and create relationships, both with the brands, but also with other consumers.

### 1.5 Intended contributions

Through empirical observations as well as drawing on the consumer-brand relationship theory by Fournier (1998), the thesis will cover consumer behaviors in a setting of high-profile sports teams. This will be developed upon a valid consumer-brand relationship proposition. Taking a consumer perspective on how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams brings the opportunity for several contributions. These can be both theoretical and managerial.

Due to the view of high-profile sports teams, which in this case is teams of Formula 1, the focused brands will be regarded as complex. In addition to the fact that they have several indirect and direct aspects that consumers can link to brand personalities, they also regard a triadic interaction. This is different from Fournier (1998) who only regards the dyadic interaction between a brand and a consumer. Therefore, using the consumer brand relationship theory in a different setting than traditional brand of products such as FMCG can bring theoretical contributions of how consumers' relationship with complex brands evolve. Looking at the interactions between fans can allow a further understanding of the triadic interaction, something that often is considered in studies about specific brand communities. Moreover, acknowledging both positive and negative emotions and how that influences the consumer-brand relationship can bring further understanding of the role of negative brand experiences. Something that Khatoon and Rehman (2021) mentions as limited in the research of consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, regarding the triadic interaction between fans and high-profile sports teams may also be managerially beneficial. The triadic interaction can create complexity for brands since the

relationship now relies on more than linear brand techniques and strategies to be maintained. Therefore, understanding what consumer behaviors that affect the trajectory of the relationship between consumers may be important. This is because consumers' actions and behaviors often may be out of managerial control. Also, understanding what types of internal or external stresses that can affect how the consumer-brand relationship evolves is particularly important. Since a relationship is said to be dynamic, it is therefore important to consider aspects that both can influence the trajectory forward and backwards. In addition, an illustration of the multiple aspects of high-profile sports teams that consumers can use as a perceived brand personality may also be managerially beneficial. This since the portrayals of this are often within managerial control. Hence managers have the possibility to influence the consumer-brand relationship if they know how consumers respond to marketing and branding activities.

## 2.0 Frame of reference

*This chapter offers a thorough overview of current research that is pertinent to the thesis. It starts with explaining the theory of consumer-brand relationship will be defined and further move on to the brand personality, brand co-creation and brand communities. Furthermore, it will explain the concept of sport fans as well as sport teams as brands. This chapter will end with the key concepts from the literature review. This to make readers understand how and why certain aspects from the frame of reference will be used to interpret and draw conclusions from the collected data.*

### 2.1 Consumer-Brand Relationship

In the influential work of consumer behavior and branding, Fournier (1998) does not only argue for how consumers can and do form relationships with brands based on different dimensions of e.g., self-connection, interdependence, or commitment. The author also argues that brands serve as a partner in relationships that can be similar to how humans form relationships between each other. However, for a relationship to be considered as real between a consumer and a brand, there must be a mutual connection between the partners. Therefore, Fournier (1998) acknowledges that consumer behavior affects the structure and dynamics of relationships. The ability to think of the brand as an active, participating member of the relationship dyad, rather than only a passive object of marketing transactions is something that has been noteworthy. Fournier (1998) states that one way of defining a brand as a partner is to focus on ways in which the brand is humanized or personalized. This can be achieved by conceptualizing the brands as having human characters or by adopting the brand's perspective to construct a relational view. It is important to highlight that for the brand to act as a legitimate partner in a relationship, the brand must behave as a contributing member of the dyad with consumers.

Further, Fournier (1998), mentions that relationships can be defined as the ties that make parties join together. These ties can be either emotionally based or substantively grounded. The emotional based ties can vary in terms of intensity ranging from friendly attachment, passionate love, or compulsive fixation. Sociocultural, relational, and psychological factors are the three



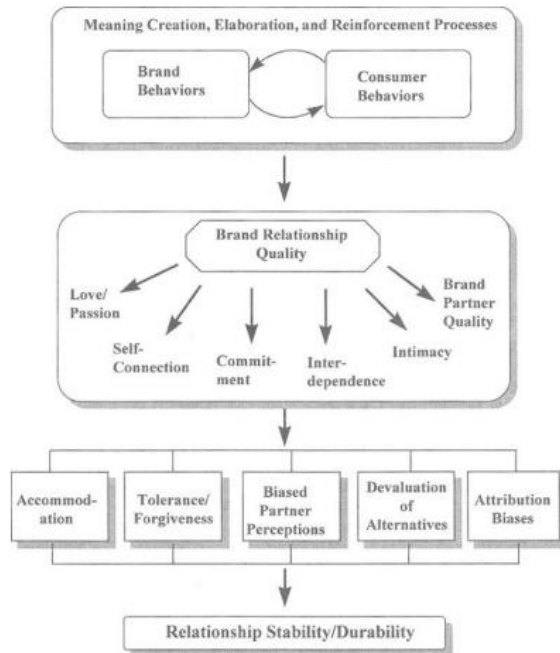
main variables that determine what a relationship means. This since relationships are affected by and affect the context in which they are rooted in (Fournier, 1998).

Moreover, Fournier (1998) created a model for the brand relationship quality between consumers and brands. This was done through an idiographic analysis of three consumer's life worlds with different brands. This model, which can be seen in *Figure 1* presents a framework on how to get a better understanding of the relationships that consumers create with brands they know and use. Through this, Fournier (1998) provides arguments for how brands actually can serve as viable relationship partners through consumers' lived experience with brands. Hence consumer's do not only buy brands because they work well but because they add something more to the life of a consumer. Whether that is connected to more functional or symbolic attributes.

Fournier (1998) describes how fifteen different relationships emerge, where each relationship type provides different benefits to consumers. In addition, each relationship type requires a different level of involvement. As an example, relationship forms defined as "casual friendship" and "dependencies" will most certainly provide different benefits to consumers as well as requiring different types of involvement. Still, both are consumer-brand relationships that add meaning to consumer life. However, both environmental, partner-oriented and dyadic/relational stresses can affect the continuing trajectory of the relationship between consumers and brands. Examples of such could be changes in personal location, changes in needs or managerial decision to alter a brand. This means that the relationship types are dynamic and fluid and do not have to consist of a linear development that reaches a particular destination in a consumer's life. In addition, Fournier (1998) mentions that researchers generally decompose the continuous process of a relationship into different growth segments. Many adopt a five-phased model of initiation, growth, maintenance, deterioration, and dissolution.

Lastly, Fournier (1998) describes an indicator of the overall relationship quality between a consumer and a brand. This is a six-faceted brand-relationship quality construct (BRQ). In turn, the brand relationship quality influences consumers relationship stability or durability, both with brands in and outside of their own life. This means that the BRQ by Fournier (1998) creates a holistic perspective of the consumer-brand relationship that can be used to understand the

relationships that consumers form with brands. In addition, it is also stated that consumer-brand relationships can be framed in many different ways that are both theoretically and managerially advantageous. Not only to understand the different dimension of the relationship that consumers can have with brands, but also to identify strategies that may be used to create long-term relationships between consumers and brands.



**Figure 1.** A preliminary model of brand relationship quality and its effect on relationship stability (Fournier, 1998).

The relationship ties between consumers and brands are further argued for in the research made by Ramaseshan and Stein (2014). Here, it is mentioned how brand personality not only can provide differentiation and increased preference for a certain brand. It has also shown to increase loyalty. The brand experience can act as a link to brand personality, hence a positive experience with a brand is likely to make consumers more loyal to the brand. In addition, a positive consumer experience can increase the likelihood of an emotional bond between consumers and brands. This since a re-immersion or repeated purchase is likely to occur due to the positive experience. Moreover, the opportunity for a brand to establish a relationship with a consumer

will be greater if the consumer believes that using this brand will bring them a greater value and advantages (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014).

However, Khatoon and Rehman (2021) mentions that even though there has been over 20 years of research on consumer-brand relationship (CBR), the understanding of negative emotions towards brands is still limited. Avoidance, negative word of mouth as well as vengeance can be a result of negative emotions towards a brand. Since research on consumer-brand relationship mainly has focused on positive emotions, Khatoon and Rehman (2021) focused on illustrating the growth of negative emotions in connection to Fournier (1998) work on consumers and their brands. Hence, the results describe that the most prominent negative emotions in connection to consumer-brand relationships are anxiety, guilt, fear, distress, and anger. In turn, these negative emotions can have fewer desirable consequences for consumers' relationship with brands such as brand hate, consumer fear or consumer guilt.

## 2.2 Brand personality

As mentioned above, Fournier (1998) states that ways of defining a brand as a partner is to focus on how the brand is humanized or personalized. This is developed from Aaker (1997) who recognizes that humans create relationships with brands through the human characteristics associated with it. Based on the “big five” personality traits from psychology, Aaker (1997) develops a theoretical framework of brand personality dimensions of e.g., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The framework can act as a way for marketers to understand how to differentiate and create value for consumers by associating different human traits to brands.

Aaker (1997) mentioned how brand personality refers to the human traits associated with a brand. Due to a brand's personality, consumers have the opportunity to express their authentic selves, aspirational selves, or specific features of themselves. The author mentions how the symbolic attributes; hence the self-expression functions can easily be recognized by consumers as historical figures or celebrities that can be related to oneself. This in addition to the functional

attributes of a brand, which often serve as more practical functions for consumers. The reasons for why consumers can associate the symbolic attributes of a brand, hence the human personality traits that are imbued, is often connected to the different branding techniques that advertisers use. Aaker (1997) continues by stating that techniques of associating personality traits to brands through anthropomorphizing, creating user imagery or personification can make a brand distinct and enduring.

However, important to note is that even though brand personality or human traits can share a common conceptualization, they can also differ in how they are viewed by consumers. This means that the human perception of personality traits can differ, and it may be influenced by different factors of individuals. Examples of this can be attitudes and beliefs, physical characteristics, behaviors, and demographics. Moreover, the author mentions how the perception of brand personalities may be influenced by any indirect or direct contact that the consumers have with the brand. For example, the brand's user imagery, which is the human traits associated with a typical user, endorser, CEO, or employee of a brand, implies that the personality traits of a brand can be directly tied to people associated with a brand. On the other hand, the perception of brand personalities can also be influenced indirectly by product-related attributes such as brand name, symbol, advertising style, price, or product category associations (Aaker, 1997).

Furthermore, Donahay and Rosenberger III's (2007) discussed that having a strong brand personality that consumers can identify with can enhance the image of the brand, boost the intention to engage with the brand, or increase the willingness to pay higher prices for the brand and its products. In Donahay and Rosenberger III's (2007) research about brand personality and the effectiveness of image transferring on Formula 1, sponsorships are mentioned as a useful way of communicating the symbolic brand associations. This is a way of gradually building or developing the brand's personality.

Donahay and Rosenberger's III (2007) argumentation of the positive factors of having a strong brand personality that consumers can identify with leads into the research of Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) that states that brand personality drives loyalty in sports. It is mentioned how a mixture of the team's management, employees, players, coaches as well as fans

can be defined as a direct part of a sports team's brand personality. Karjaluoto, Munnkka and Salmi (2016) further states that when trying to understand loyalty in connection to sports, the focus should lie on consumers' beliefs, sense of belonging to a community and self-image. The authors also mentions that behavioral loyalty in a context of sports marketing is connected to actual behaviors pointed towards sports events. This can range from taking part in sports events, attending games and watching it on television to repurchasing behaviors of the brand's product.

Moreover, the fans of a sports team commonly have little difficulty expressing the team's characteristics and they are able to do it just as effortlessly as they would describe the personality of someone they personally know. Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) further mentions that many individuals aspire to have an ideal self-image and therefore, they are interested in consuming brands that can increase their self-confidence. Strong associations between a brand and a consumer's self-image increase the possibility that the consumer adopts a favorable viewpoint of the brand and in turn, forms an emotional bond with it. In addition, brands that procure a strong personality or that are seen as unique can lead to consumers being more prone to identify with it. In addition, Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) also states that compared to other brands, sports teams may be even more strongly connected to their brand personalities. This since they are described as emotionally charged, hedonic and experiential. The core of sports brands is described as even more intangible and unstable. Furthermore, the relationship that is developed between a consumer and a sports team is a dynamic one that has its roots in societal importance and personal identity. Fans who feel a strong connection between their self-identification and the identity of the team are more devoted to that team than fans who feel less of a connection (Karjaluoto, Munnukka & Salmi, 2016).

### 2.3 Brand co-creation

Even though Fournier (1998) highlights the validity of how brands can serve as partners in a relationship, the author acknowledges that consumer behaviors affect the structure and dynamics of the relationships with brands. An interesting aspect in connection to the relationship dyad between brands and consumers is Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2017) research on

consumers and brands. The authors are in their research about brands and consumers mentioning how consumers have to be increasingly considered with regards to branding strategies. This is because we are living in an era that relies on interpretation and meaning of core brand values. It may also be connected to the fact that consumers have the possibility to act as creative agents for brands, hence performing, sharing, and curating brand stories in authentic ways. The co-creation between brands and consumers is something that Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) mentions as a sort of relationship tie. This means that brands can act both as servants, hence working for the consumer or as partners, hence working with the consumer. An example of co-creation between consumers and producers, also called “brand actors' ", that is brought up by Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) is within the tourism sector. Here, brands increasingly rely on consumers for e.g., reviews, comments, and discussions, hence meaning and value. As consumers’ experiences turn into rankings for tourist attractions, they are part of key aspects of value creation and brand awareness both for other consumers as well as brands.

Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) further mentions that consumers interact with brands in many ways. This includes consumer tribes, subcultures, and brand communities. Moreover, there are a variety of ways which underlines consumers' relationships with brands such as value-creation in co-consuming groups, “working” consumers or brand volunteering.

Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) refers to their study of brand co-creation in a brand community surrounding the premier league Liverpool Football Club. The study that was published in 2011 explores consumers' role in brand co-creation. However, important to note with a brand community is that it moves the relationship with a brand from dyadic to a more complex triadic relationship. Here, consumers do not only interact with the brand but more importantly with other consumers. In the study of the brand community of Liverpool Football Club made by Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011), results showed that fans act as brand agents. Hence co-creating value by having different relationships with both the brand as well as other fans. Different dynamic roles of providers and beneficiaries allow entry points to more experienced as well as less experienced football fans. Important foundations for this process are the interactions and information sharing activities between fans (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011).

Further on, Crawford (2004) highlights that consumption patterns of sport fans do not have to imply the consumption of material goods such as merchandise or team jerseys. Instead, the author argues that consumption can involve more than physical goods. As a matter of fact, “person-person” relationships, such as fans that observe or consume the performance and actions of others also can be considered as a type of consumption. Moreover, fan activities do not necessarily have to involve any type of consumption at all. Crawford (2004) suggests that much of what makes a fan is located in thoughts, social interactions, exchange of memories and personal identity and not primarily in actual behaviors. However, this can also be connected to acts of consumption, such as attending events, games, or television shows.

## 2.4 Brand communities

One way of how the triadic relationship between fans and brands can be shown is through brand communities. In Ponsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011) research about the co-creation between consumers and brand in a brand community, results showed that social interaction between fans is significantly tied to the value creation process. To understand the role that a brand community can play in the relationship between consumers and fans, it is necessary to elaborate on the characteristics of a brand community.

According to Muniz Jr and O'Guinn (2001), individuals who belong to a brand community commit and identify with this group because of the shared brand experiences. Hence, the consumer-brand relationship is influenced by both brand characteristics and community characteristics. This means that a group of individuals that share a passion or a common interest for a special brand may be included or involved in a brand community. It is a unique, non-geographically bound society built on a formalized network of social connections between enthusiasts of brands. The reason it is unique is since it is centered towards a branded service or good. A brand community is important for the brand's legacy since it is a part of the brand's social construction. There are shared traditions, rituals, and consciousness throughout the members of the community (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001).

Further, Mills et al (2022) says that individuals that belong to a brand community experience a sense of connection with the members of the community. These connections result from shared views and attitudes which are perceived to be different from members outside of the community. The sense of belongingness to a group can be shown in front of the public through rituals and traditions. This is related to the members' sense of community and acknowledgement that they are a part of a wider group who admire the same brand. It is also worth mentioning that Mills et al (2022) argues that consumers have higher integration into the brand community than what has been suggested originally. In fact, a brand community can provide more than one "touch point" for a consumer. Hence, consumers can encounter the brand through its goods, marketers, consumer interactions, and the brand itself. (Mills et al, 2022).

Muniz Jr and O'guinn (2001) brings up subcultures in their research. A subculture is similar to a brand community in the way that they usually share the same ethos, patterns and hierarchies, but there are also distinctive differences. In the paper by De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007) states that the paper made by Muniz Jr and O'guinn (2001) laid the foundation for the term of subcultural communities and subcultures of consumption which has led to the term of brand communities. In relation to brand communities, it is mentioned how certain communities exist solely because shared interest for a brand or commodity. Hence, the members of a brand community can find unity in a collective appreciation for a brand. Important to note in relation to brand communities is the term "consciousness of kind". This term does not only mean that members feel a connection to a brand, but more importantly, they feel a connection to other members of the community. In other words, the connection between members may be more important than the actual brand. In addition, the members may feel that the brand belongs as much to them as to the actual manufacturer of the brand. In the end of the paper by De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007) it is specified that the subculture can exist outside of the boundaries of a brand while a brand community needs a brand for its focus.

## 2.5 Sport fans

Many individuals have the propensity to be very engaged in and full of admiration for numerous activities. An individual that supports and admires a person, brand, sport, or a team can be



classified as a fan. These individuals feel a strong, positive emotional connection to a famous person or object (Duffett, 2013).

Further, a fandom can be defined as a subculture that consists of individuals who have a shared interest in or admiration for a specific topic, like a book, TV show, movie, video game, or a sports team. Jenkins (1992) argues that a fandom has at least five different levels of involvement. As a result of the different levels, fandoms in his opinion are complex and diverse communities that make up a subculture. In an article made by Jacobson (1979) discusses the many benefits there are with having a fan identity since it can provide a sense of belonging. People from various societies, both young and elderly, can be fans as well as belonging to fandoms. It is argued by Jacobson (1979) that being part of a sports fandom can give a personal growth among individuals in terms of managing emotions and feelings, both in terms of joy and disappointment. Moreover, an individual's involvement in sport may be supported, reinforced, influenced, hindered, or suppressed by a sense of the collective. A fan feels a connection with the team and has a connection to it, sharing the teams' triumphs and sorrows (Jacobson, 1979). This fan identification is supported by Donahay and Rosenberger III (2007) where the success and failures of a team is experienced as their own. This through the emotional connection, personal devotion, and perceived closeness that the sports fans have with the sport and the team.

The authors Branscombe and Wann (1991) states in their article that watching sports gives individuals a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than themselves. The individuals do not need to have a particular knowledge or skills to be part of the viewing of the sport. It will also enable the individual to temporarily escape the "real world". The authors contend that it is essential to differentiate between sports involvement and identification with a particular team. Even though an individual is a devoted sports fan, some people might not have a favorite team. The equivalent is applicable to individuals who support their college team but have little interest in a specific sport or even athletics in general (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Crawford (2004) suggests that it is within memories, thoughts, social interactions, and the personal identity that defines what being a sport fan is. Examples of this could be games that have been seen, or sport events that have been attended. Moreover, Crawford (2004) mentions

the changing nature of sports within the late-capitalism society, where sport that constitutes a major part of contemporary society has gone through a substantial change. Here “hyper-commodification” is a term that is used to describe the growth of consumerism and commerce within sport. Interrelated to the commodification of sport is the role of mass media as well as the globalization process. As a consequence, major sport competitions can now be consumed and viewed by audiences and fans all over the world. Much due to the technologies of mass media such as Internet and TV as well the opportunities that the popularity of sport brings to corporate investors and organizations. Important to note is also that the relationship between fans and mass spectator sports has been impacted by the changes that the later-capitalist society has brought to the audience of sport. Crawford (2004) explains how consumption in terms of the performance and spectacle that athletes bring no longer is restricted to mass events or “live experiences”. Instead, it is spread into everyday life. It can be a source of socialization, community building and entertainment. Examples of this could be casual conversations or social media engagement between sports teams, athletes, and fans.

## 2.6 Sports teams as brands

Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) mentions in their research of brand co-creation in a brand community of a football club that the triadic relationship that occurs within a brand community of a sports team can create complexity. This can be due to the fact that consumers do not only interact with the brand, but also with other consumers. In addition, Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Salmi (2016) states that compared to other brands, sport teams are strongly connected to their brand personalities. It is described how sport teams are complex brands, both with intangible and unstable core products that are experiential, hedonic, and emotionally charged. Further, the interaction between teams and consumers is described as a dynamic process that arises from individual identity and societal meaning. Moreover, Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) mentions that the personality of a brand can serve as a bridge to consumer identification. In sports teams, the personality does not only evolve around a product or service, but rather a combination of the image of both coaches, players, fans, as well as personnel and

administration. In addition to functional attributes as performance, this may make sport teams as brands dynamic and complex in nature.

However, when talking about sports teams it is important to note the role of sports stars and their ability to influence consumer behavior. This since they may play a critical role in the component of a sports team that consists of coaches, teams, players, and fans. Zhou et al (2020) continues on the research of sports marketing by highlighting the role of the actual sport stars. This is an area that becomes especially important in today's age where globalization and digitalization of sports have a great influence on the media reach of athletes. New medias' pervasiveness and cultural impact have the ability to transcend national boundaries and in turn, athletes can become known globally. This makes the athletes an important marker both for building sport brands, such as sport teams or sport enterprises (Zhou et al, 2020).

Zhou et al (2020) also says that due to sport star's special expertise, charisma, and wide recognition, they are increasingly serving as spokespeople for sports brand enterprises. As a consequence, globally recognized sport stars are becoming growingly important to build a sports brand's image for an international market. This is not only due to their capability of reaching international fans but also because many sports brands rely on digital media to communicate with fans. In addition, brands that can shape the identity of consumers have a high ability of getting a strong emotional response from them (Zhou et al, 2020).

## 2.7 Key concept from the literature

The aim of the thesis is to understand how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the consumer-brand relationship model (CBR) by Fournier (1998). This will be a basis for understanding how consumers create relationships with brands. Important to note here is that Fournier (1998) argues that brands can serve as partners in a relationship, similar to how humans create relationships with each other. One way of defining a brand as a partner is to draw attention to how the brand is personalized or humanized. This since there must be a mutual connection between the partners for the relationship to be considered as real.

Although Fournier (1998) will be used as a basis for understanding how consumers can create relationships with brands, it is important to note that the author only focuses on the dyadic interaction between consumers and brands. However, we view sports teams as complex brands that allows for a triadic interaction between fans. In addition, there are multiple indirect and direct aspects of sports teams that consumers can link to their brand personalities. Therefore, the thesis will include further concepts of Aaker (1997) and Muniz Jr and O'Guinn (2001). This to draw attention to concepts of both brand personalities as well as brand communities. Something that might be necessary when trying to understand how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams.

Lastly, it is particularly important to further explain the word evolve. Not only because it is a part of the research question but also to understand how we view the construct of relationships between consumers and brands. As an example, Fournier (1998) highlights the fact that both partner-oriented, dyadic/relational and environmental stresses can affect the trajectory of relationship between brands and consumers. This implies that relationships are dynamic and fluid, hence meaning that the consumer-brand does not have to consist of a linear growth that reaches a particular destination in a consumer's life. On the other hand, it is also mentioned that researchers typically decompose the continuous process of a relationship into different growth segments. According to Fournier (1998), many researchers adopt a five-phased model of initiation, growth, maintenance, deterioration, and dissolution.

In this case, we use the term evolve to describe the continuous relationship that fans have with sports teams. By starting with an understanding of how the interview respondents became fans in the first place, we will proceed to look at factors that contributed to a progression of the relationship. Since it is assumed that the relationship is dynamic, hence moves “forwards” and “backwards”, it will be important to take note of factors that not only moves the relationship forwards, but also backwards. Hence not only focusing on what makes the relationship e.g., stronger in terms of loyalty but also potential relational stressors that can affect the trajectory of the relationship.

## 3.0 Methodology & Method

*To get an understanding of the methodological reasoning behind this research, the first section will start with defining the research philosophy. Furthermore, the research approach will be explained to end the section with the research design of this thesis. After the methodology chapter is discussed the methods for collecting the empirical data will be explained. There will be arguments for the choices that were made as well as explanations of the question design, sampling, and data analysis. The ethical considerations that were made when conducting this thesis will be discussed at the end of the entire chapter. In this part the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability are presented.*

### 3.1 Methodology

#### 3.1.1 Research philosophy

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the consumer-brand relationships evolve between fans and high-profile sports teams, more specifically within the sport Formula 1. Since the goal of this research is to get a thorough knowledge of the complex phenomenon of relationships between fans and sports teams as brands, it lies closer to an interpretivist paradigm compared to a positivist paradigm. Interpretivism relies on the idea that reality is subjective, socially constructed, and multiple. In this paradigm the reality is determined by people instead of external factors and objectives. This is to get a broader understanding of how individuals are making meaning of their experiences and the social context in which they live (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Looking at how people are making meaning of their experiences makes it possible to get a thorough understanding of the mechanisms and underlying motives behind an individual's relationships with high-profile sports teams within the sport of Formula 1. Instead of only exploring why fans support a certain high-profile sports team, the aim will be to get a deep understanding of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves. This through exploring underlying motives, experiences, and emotions.

Individual experiences are different from each other due to the fact that they are formed from their own social and historical perspectives (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The researchers will engage with the phenomenon during the data collection process while keeping in mind that there are several realities and that individuals' experiences, and opinions may be subjective.

### 3.1.2 Research approach

The process of conducting research that includes the steps from general hypotheses to specific techniques for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data is known as the research approach. The approach combines a worldview or set of beliefs about research with a particular design and research techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

According to Collis and Hussey (2014), there are two distinct approaches to research: the deductive approach and the inductive approach. Moving from the general to the particular is a term used to describe the deductive approach. The deductive approach is more closely related to positivism, which is predicated on the idea that social reality is distinct and objective. Based on the interpretivist paradigm that this research has been following, it takes an inductive research approach. By following the inductive research approach, the aim will be to move from the specific to general. This means that looking at individual observations to gain an understanding of more general patterns. (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

This thesis takes a more inductive research approach than deductive since the objective is to identify and characterize patterns from the empirical data. Fournier's (1998) theoretical framework on consumer-brand relationship will work as a guidance for discovering new relationship themes and to get a broader understanding of the relationship phenomena. Data will be evaluated once it has been collected to look for patterns among the numerous respondents that could answer the research question. Similar responses to the interview questions in regard to the consumer-brand relationship are patterns that can be examined. The data will be collected from semi-structured interviews with individuals who consider themselves as fans of Formula 1.

### 3.1.3 Research design

According to Collis and Hussey (2014) the specific strategy for carrying out a research study is called the research design. The conduct of the research should be outlined in the research design where it should be coherent with the research question and meet the objectives of the research. This research, which adheres to the interpretivist paradigm, uses qualitative research methods to examine how the consumer-brand relationships evolve between fans and high-profile sports teams. In this case, the context of study lies within the sport of Formula 1.

## 3.2 Method

### 3.2.1 Interviews

To answer the research question of how the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sport teams evolve, qualitative semi-structured interviews were held. In total 18 interviews were audio-recorded, and each interview lasted from approximately 30-60 minutes. There was a mix of both in person and remote interviews due to long physical distance to some interview respondents. In addition, the interviews were held in both English and Swedish since the researchers wanted to make sure that all participants could express themselves in the language respondents felt most comfortable in. All interviews that were held were semi-structured with a majority of open questions. This to gather comprehensive details and insights from the participants that would have been harder to capture with only closed-ended questions.

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), semi-structured interviews are a valuable way of creating opportunities for capturing the meaning and interpretation of the research phenomena. In addition, the semi-structured allowed for flexibility in terms of changes of questions, structure as well as additional follow up questions. Since the aim of the study is to get a deeper understanding of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams, it is important to dive into the world of the respondents. Therefore, open-ended questions were asked as a way of receiving more detailed as well as richer answers from the respondents. An example of open-ended questions that were asked during the interviews was “how is your relationship with your favorite Formula 1 team comparable to your

relationship with other brands in your life?”. Formulating the questions in a more open way can allow qualitative data collection to be more efficient. Not only in terms of receiving richer and more detailed information from the respondents. It may also encourage the respondent to engage in the interview since the question allows experiences and answers that are more detailed than “yes” or “no”. Moreover, using open-ended questions allows for unexpected insights that may not have been thought of before. This in comparison to only asking closed-ended questions such as “are you a fan of Formula 1”. Even though a small amount of closed-ended questions were asked, it was kept to a limited amount. This since the formulation of this question can limit the respondent’s ability to provide detailed and thoughtful answers.

Moreover, an aspect of a semi-structured interview that is mentioned by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) regards the step-by-step logic in an interview. In the case of the relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams, the consumer-brand relationship may not follow a linear process. There is a high probability that fans create relationships with teams in many different ways. Therefore, since the step-by-step logic of the research phenomena may not be as clear, a semi-structured interview approach was particularly suitable. In this case, follow up questions, change of structure or laddering techniques were used to receive richer or different insights from the respondents. Both laddering up in terms of asking “why” as well as laddering down in terms of asking respondents to exemplify events were used. Moreover, all interviews were transcribed after a revision of the notes were conducted.

Before the interviews started, all the respondents were through email assigned a consent form to read through in order to understand the conditions for the interview. Even though Formula 1 might not be considered as a particularly sensitive topic, it is important to make the respondents aware of the foundation for their participation. Examples of areas that were brought up in the consent form concerned how insights will be transferred into the thesis, potential withdrawals as well as data collection.



<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Date of interview</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Place</i>
A	17/4	2001	52:14:00	Zoom
B	17/4	1998	27:18:00	Physical
C	17/4	1998	27:25:00	Physical
D	17/4	1997	41:57:00	Zoom
E	17/4	1993	32:51:00	Zoom
F	17/4	1994	34:09:00	Zoom
G	18/4	2000	33:50:00	Zoom
H	18/4	2001	33:54:00	Zoom
I	18/4	1999	42:15:00	Zoom
J	18/4	2001	32:57:00	Zoom
K	18/4	2001	43:52:00	Zoom
L	18/4	1994	45:02:00	Zoom
M	18/4	1997	25:44:00	Physical
N	19/4	1997	32:45:00	Zoom
O	19/4	1987	1:13:00	Zoom
P	19/4	2001	25:08:00	Zoom
Q	19/4	1962	44:13:00	Zoom
R	19/4	1994	44:25:00	Phone

**Table 1.** Information about the interviews

### 3.2.2 Question design

As seen in the appendix 8.1, the questions were divided into different areas with regards to the thesis topic. This to make the respondents understand what area of the research phenomena that was about to be discussed. Also, the division of questions aimed at making the interpretation of the data more convenient in later stages of the data analysis. The interview started off with some general questions about e.g., for how long they had been fans. As the discussion continued, questions that required more thought were asked. An example of such a question could be how the respondents would describe the characteristics of their favorite team. One reason for this question construction is to make the respondents comfortable with the setting and the topic.

As stated before, mostly open-ended questions were asked. Even though the question design was followed similarly throughout all the interviews, the questions deviated quite a bit from each participant. Since every participant brought up different memories, insights and experiences, the following leading up questions and laddering techniques were used differently. As an example, not all respondents had seen an actual race live nor had all respondents the same favorite team.

The variation of answers led to different discussions. A particular differentiator for the discussion depended on how long the respondents had been fans. This means that their experience and view of Formula 1 differed. However, what united all respondents was that they considered themselves fans of Formula 1.

### 3.2.3 Sampling

To explore the relationship between fans and Formula 1 teams, the selected sampling process is purposive sampling as well as convenience sampling. This is mentioned as part of a non-probability sample design by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015).

By having a clear idea of what sample unit that needed to be explored, fans of Formula 1 were purposely contacted by social media forums. In addition, by making people in the surroundings, both offline and online, aware of the search for fans of Formula 1, contact with fans was also made through referrals. In this case, the only requirement for participating in the study was that potential respondents identified themselves as fans of Formula 1. Even though there was no requirement for how long the participants must have identified themselves as fans, it was valuable to attain respondents that had been fans both for a long and a short period of time. This since it could potentially bring another perspective to the interpretation and analysis of the research phenomena, hence how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams.

Further, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) mentions that both purposive sampling and convenience sampling is part of the non-probability sample design. In this case, it means that it will not be possible to fully state that the probability of the relationship between fans and Formula 1 teams looks the same throughout all fans of the sport. This means that the fans in this research may create relationships with Formula 1 teams differently if compared to other fans of the sport.

### 3.2.4 Data analysis

To conduct a systematic analysis of the collected data, we have been following the general analytical procedure described in Collis and Hussey (2014). The widely used approach is useful because it does not necessarily have to be tied to a certain data collection method. It is also useful because it helps to conduct the analysis in a systematic way. Further Collis and Hussey (2014) describes how an analysis of qualitative data involves three concurring activities, which includes:

- Reducing the data
- Displaying the data
- Drawing conclusions and verifying the validity of the conclusions

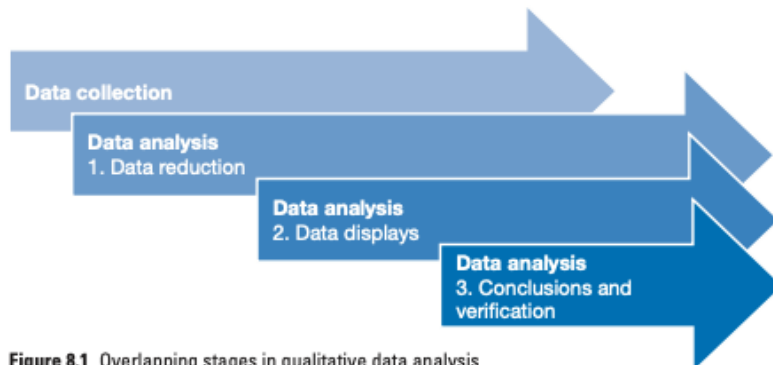


Figure 8.1 Overlapping stages in qualitative data analysis

**Figure 2.** Overlapping stages in qualitative data (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

After the interviews were transcribed and before any reduction of data took place, we tried to get familiar with the data by reflecting and discussing both the notes that were taken during the interviews as well as the actual transcriptions. This by having the theoretical framework, the research question and previous literature in mind.

By following the general analytical procedure, the analysis of the collected data started by reducing the data. This since a large amount of qualitative data has been collected, where all of it is not relevant for the purpose of the study. Collis and Hussey (2014) describe the data reduction process as a way of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that

appears in transcriptions. Here, a continuous data reduction was done by discarding irrelevant data and collating data that were interesting in relation to the theoretical framework, hence the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams.

Further, coding the data, which Collis and Hussey (2014) describes as a common feature in the process of analyzing qualitative data was necessary. This means that assigning words or meaning to each respondent's interview question allowed for an efficient way of reorganizing and making sense of the raw data. The coding was done in excel where codes were put into a table for each question and each participant. The first respondent was assigned as respondent #A, the second #B etc.

The theoretical framework of the consumer-brand relationship by Fournier (1998) has been used as a guideline in how consumers create relationships with brands. Through creating codes and categories, a display of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and Formula 1 teams could more easily be created. In this stage of the interpretation process, patterns among the codes and categories could be used to find themes that answered the research question. Further, *table 2* that was created in this thesis allowed for a valid conclusion to be drawn on how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and Formula 1 teams. In addition, quotes of the transcriptions are inserted into the findings and discussion section of the thesis. This is not only done to show a detailed and rich description of the research phenomena, but also used as a way of supporting claims and interpretations that are made.

### 3.3 Ethics

#### 3.3.1 Credibility

Firstly, to increase the credibility of the study, the research includes prolonged engagement in the subject of the thesis as well as extensive data collection and information search. These are areas that Collis and Hussey (2014) describes as ways of creating a more correct description of the subject. The researchers were familiar with the research topic of Formula 1 from before. Hence, had both an interest as well as a foundation of knowledge on how the Formula 1 teams and its drivers place themselves on different forums. Something that might be valuable in consideration to the time length of the thesis period. Moreover, by collecting empirical data from 18 different respondents with varying ages, nationalities and experiences may increase both the extensiveness and the range of information that is presented.

#### 3.3.2 Transferability

According to Collis and Hussey (2014), transferability connects to the findings ability to be applicable to adequate contexts where general conclusions can be drawn from identified patterns. To ensure that interests of the thesis understand in which situations the relationship between fans and teams of Formula 1 can be applicable, a rigorous documentation of the research process and context has been made. This to make sure that anyone who reads understands where the phenomena derive from, and under which preconditions the consumer-brand relationship evolves. In addition, limitations describe factors that decrease the ability to draw general conclusions to a larger or different setting. However, as in line with Kvale (1994), the subjectivity of the qualitative interview respondents' realities does not aim towards full generalization. Instead, the contextualization and the deep insights that are gained from the respondents' answers can be a way of explaining how the results of the study are transferable in similar settings.

### 3.3.3 Dependability

Through a rigorous literature review by relevant keywords as well as a general analytical procedure, the researchers aimed at increasing the dependability of the study. This, in line with Collis and Hussey (2014) description of dependability as a rigorous, well documented, and systematic approach. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded both individually and collectively to ensure a reduction of potential biases towards the research phenomena. Since we have a previous interest in Formula 1, it was particularly important to make sure that potential biases were reduced throughout the research process. Hence, acknowledging reflexivity while making sure that themes derive from the collected data and not from the minds of the researchers. With regards to the potential power balance between the respondents and the researchers, laddering techniques were used to get insights into the world of Formula 1 fans. This in addition to being aware that collecting data from qualitative interviews may require a more comprehensive approach than just simply asking a question. Moreover, the process of data collection is thoroughly described in the method section where the contextualization of the study can be understood.

### 3.3.4 Confirmability

In order to show how the findings, derive from the collected data and not from the minds of the researchers, rich quotations have been inserted in the findings. This is a way of supporting the claiming themes on how the relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams, more specifically with Formula 1 teams. An illustration of the themes has also been inserted in *table 2* as a way of clearly showing readers the results. This is in line with Korstjens and Moser (2018) examples of how to increase confirmability. In addition, the same authors mention that audit trails are examples of ways to increase the confirmability of the study. In connection to this, the researchers have transparently displayed the process of the research in the method section.

## 4.0 Findings

*In this chapter, the empirical findings of how the research respondents perceive their feelings and relationship with a team in Formula 1. The findings have been analyzed and are presented through three emerging themes which are: fascination of the brand, social interaction and engagement. A brief summary of the research participants opens the chapter to get a better understanding of the familiarity of the respondents and their level of knowledge.*

### 4.1 Analysis of respondents

A comprehensive background description of the 18 respondents has been created in order to provide an overview of the fans that participated in the interviews. Among the 18 interview respondents, 12 were male born between 2001 to 1962. The remaining 6 participants were females born between 2001 to 1997. All of the respondents considered themselves to be fans of Formula 1. However, the respondents had been fans of the sport for a different amount of time. To be exact, the years of being a fan ranged from 1 year up to 29 years. Amongst the 18 respondents, the majority were from Sweden, more exactly 13 of them. While 2 from the Netherlands, 1 from Sri Lanka, 1 from Germany and 1 from Palestine.

### 4.2 Description of the table

Through the general analytical procedure described by Collins and Hussey (2014) categories and themes have been identified. In the table shown below three overarching themes have been identified along with the codes that they are based on. Table 2 has been done to illustrate how the consumer-brand relationship evolve between fans and high-profile sports teams. The empirical findings of this thesis shows that the relationship evolves through three particular stages consisting of; fascination of the brand, social interaction, and engagement. The sample of codes are parts of what characterizes these three stages. Something that will be further developed in the upcoming findings. However, what also will be shown in the findings is the dynamic aspects of the consumer-brand relationship. This means that different factors not only influence a forward's progression of the consumer-brand relationship, but also a possible backwards progression. In

other words, something that impacts the relationship in a more negative way. This in comparison to a forward's progression that in this case often is characterized by positive connotations, such as increased brand loyalty.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Technology	Invisible brand	Fascination of the brand
Strategies		
Money		
Sponsorships		
Fans		
Race weeks		
Family & Friends	Interaction with other fans	Social interaction
Conversations		
Social media		
Media involvement		
Brand communities		
Exploring personalities/ Values of brand	Commitment	Engagement
Drivers & Teams		
Shifting industry		
Emotions		

**Table 2:** Overarching themes derived from empirical data



## 4.3 Fascination of the brand

### 4.3.1 The way of becoming a fan

Since the research question focuses on the evolving relationship between fans and high-profile sport teams, it is important to start the findings section with a demonstration of how the respondents became fans in the first place. This was especially done through initial questions of what made them watch the sport as well as what made them become a fan. The respondents had mixed answers with regards to how they became fans. It varied from having a motor interest to having friends and family watching it beforehand. Respondent #A explained that Formula 1 was the one of the motorsports that could be seen on TV. Given the respondent's deep interest in motorsport, this was a convenient way to watch it.

*“Probably my interest in cars in general, I think, and it was one of the few things that was popular that I could watch on TV as well as in the same category.” - #A*

Another way that the respondents started to watch the sport was through friends and family. It was not necessarily a specific interest that made them start watching on their own but instead as a more social thing. Respondent #G mentioned that it was the path for the current interests there is for the sport.

*“It was because of my friends who started watching it and in that way I became interested and then I started watching it myself.” - #G*

Going from watching the sport to becoming an actual fan was a process that was similar for the respondents. Many of the respondents believed that it was very fascinating and exciting to watch and to get to know more about all the different aspects of the sport and teams. Respondent #G, started watching the sport because of friends as a social thing. After a while the respondent believed that there was more to the sport than just cars going in a circle.

*“The more you kind of started watching it and became aware and realized the competition of everything, that was probably what made me a fan of it and then actually realize how big it is.” -*

#G

Other respondents made a similar transition, going from viewers to fans. Some believed that it was the social aspects of watching the races together with other fans that was the enjoyable part of being a fan. Apart from the social aspects, such as watching the races together with others, some respondents enjoyed a more prolonged engagement. This means that they took the time to not only watch the races on Sundays, but also to watch practices, interviews and qualifying. The respondents believe that devoting their time to this was very important for them. It was not time consuming since this was something that they wanted to devote their time to. Many respondents said that the sport took a lot of thought activity. Not only did they think of the sport, but also their preferred teams and drivers. It was mostly during race weeks but also weeks where there were not any races or other events. Furthermore, when asking the respondents if it took much time thinking about the sport the answers were mixed. Respondent #I argued that when you are a fan, you make time for the sport

*“No, then if you think it's fun, then it doesn't take that much time, you make time for it.” - #I*

On the other hand, participant #K said it took much time to be a dedicated fan

*“Yes, especially when it's like the week before the race, then I'd probably say that. Partly because you try to plan out so that you can check all the practices and then everything before and then during the weekend, I would say. But it's not the first thing I think about when I wake up every day.” - #K*

The respondents shared the experience of going from watching the races for the first time, to developing a passion for it, and continuing to do so. Some of them said that they got hooked directly when they got to know more about the teams and the sport in general. According to respondent #C, it took some convincing from friends and family to watch the sport for the first time.

*“I got recommendations from many people, both family and friends and I have dragged me away from watching it, but then one day I was like, yeah I could just watch it and I got hooked.” - #C*

#### 4.3.2 Everything around the brand

The respondents were asked what they believed was intriguing with the sport as well as why they started watching it. Even though many respondents answered differently, all the answers ended up being similar in regard to how complex the sport is. What all of the respondents thought were intriguing was how much that happened behind a race. The teams, media, money, politics and technical aspects of the sport were all part of the fascination.

About half of the respondents discussed the sport's technical elements. A frequent subject was how Formula 1 influenced developments in the auto industry, coupled with aerodynamics and the sport's engineering art. Respondent #H went into detail about how the various stages necessary to be able to participate in the sport are complex and fascinating.

*“I think like, just like the very built of the car is very cool, how everything works and how much there is behind like one car and one driver. There are so many steps and it is so f\*\*\*\*\*g complicated. It's not just that they put a person in a car and that person drives like 50 laps, but it's like, there is a lot that is in the back of the mind.” - #H*

Another aspect that was brought up in regard to what they believed was fascinating with the sport was to see the strategies behind the teams. Examples of this can be how many things that need to be thought about when constructing a team as well as the rivalry between the teams. Some of the respondents also mentioned that it is fascinating to see how the teams are runned as companies. The answers given by the respondents revealed that they were well aware about the teams and sport while also being able to describe the teams in great detail. As respondent #A notes, it is obvious that there is a great deal of knowledge behind the statement, and that understanding extends beyond simply following the race to include learning about the work that went into it.

*“It is partly the engineering art and then it is incredibly much more strategic than if you might spontaneously think it is. It's not just throwing out 2 cars and doing your best, but there is a lot involved in that as well and really every stable is run more or less like a complex business. Everything from the creation of the cars at home in the factories to those who are in place at the races so it's also quite interesting, I can think when it comes to how many parts there are within just one stable.” - #A*

Connected to the question of what they believed was intriguing with the sport, the money involved in the sport and in the teams was something that was discussed among the respondents. Some of the respondents believed it was very interesting how different sponsors as well as drivers needed to have money to be able to enter the sport itself. A discussion that was similar among the many respondents was that the sport is very luxurious. This was both in terms of how expensive it is to attend the races physically and to be able to even start with it. This shows that the respondents are aware of the fact that money is required to be able to participate in this sport. Respondent #Q mentions this with an example of a team that has a driver whose dad owns the team.

*“..there is a lot of fuss going on when the stables hires its drivers and it's about a lot of money and I mean Lance Stroll, for example in Aston Martin would never have had that control unless his father was a billionaire so that it's like that, it's a lot of money doped today.” - #Q*

## 4.4 Social interaction

### 4.4.1 Family and friends

Many of the respondents believed that watching the races on Sundays was important for them. When asking if they usually watched the races by themselves or with others, the answers were quite mixed. Even though the respondents watched the races both by themselves and with others, different circumstances could come into play. Some always watched by themselves, some watched with friends or family members while others watched both by themselves and with others, depending on where in the world they were situated. In addition, all of the respondents knew other fans and they enjoyed talking about Formula 1 with them. Respondent #P usually watched the races alone but texted with others during the races. In addition, making friends through Formula 1 was an enjoyable part of being a fan. Trying to convince other people to start to watch the sport was something that the respondent did to have more people to talk about it with. By getting more people to watch the sport is a way for the respondent to engage more in the sport and also to interact with more fans. When asking the same respondent #P if talking with other fans was important, the answer was

*“I'm very hyper fixated on it. So I have a lot of information about it and I really like sharing it with my friends because it's something that I really like. So I've made them start watching it and update them on the races when they can't watch it.” - #P*

Connected to the question of if the respondents knew or interacted with other fans of Formula 1, respondent #D said that the topic of Formula 1 was a sort of social interaction. It could happen that the race was watched both alone and with others. However, the topic of Formula 1 could unfold within different social activities. With having more people being engaged in the sport it was a way to get more discussions, both calm and more heated. By having more people interested in the sport they could create different activities around the sport and the teams, such as quizzes together. Respondent #D elaborates on this by saying

*“Yes, the whole Hockey team is involved in Formula 1 so we discuss and everybody has..if we put it like this, many souls in the sport of Hockey have strong wills and opinions. So of course we*

*have some heated debates every now and then. We also have quizzes on the bus to matches and there are many easily entertained questions about it there, absolutely. It becomes a conversation topic and people commit to reading up upon it while trying to be more knowledgeable than others.” - #D*

In addition, respondent #E also describes how the topic of Formula 1 and the teams acts as a social interaction, in this case at the workplace. Where being interested in the sport could make more people feel included in fun work activities. The respondent #E says that making these activities makes it more fun to be a fan where you also can show how knowledgeable you are in the sport.

*“At work we have started a Formula 1 competition. So every Friday before race weekends a colleague sends out a form that you are supposed to fill in. For example, it can be who will be the fastest in the qualifying and in the race. After the race we get different points. There is no money involved or anything, it is just for fun.” - #E*

#### 4.4.2 Social media

As the quotes above implies social interaction both offline and online, are a fun and valuable part of the devotion towards the sport for many of the respondents. However, one respondent #N did not believe that other fans were too important. Still, the respondent #N relied on the creation of online content as a sort of social interaction. Something that has been made possible due to the work of other fans. Hence respondent #N states

*“It is a lot between the races, it is content between the races, that is fun I would really say. It opens a personal side of the driver and if you follow the drivers you can see how they live and meet, you get a deeper picture of them.” - #N*

Similarly, respondent #K mentions the online interaction as a way of creating relationships with the drivers and the teams. When asking the respondent #K about the need for social interaction with other fans in Formula 1, the respondent said that following the sport alone was not a

problem. This since it was how the respondent started watching the sport alone. However, the respondent continued to say that the creation of content online by other fans can be a way of filling the lack of offline interactions

*“Yes, but mostly because that’s what I already did in my hometown. There are not many people who are following it there in the same way and therefore I have been watching it by myself. I have felt that I don’t necessarily have to discuss it with anyone. In terms of discussions I think you get an outlet for it through social media, especially Twitter I would say. You can also end up on the Formula 1 site on Youtube and get good discussions in the comment section or under videos. So in that way I need it.” - #K*

#### 4.4.3 Brand communities

In connection to the social interactions that occur between fans and sport teams, it is important to highlight respondents' thoughts about brand communities within Formula 1. Even though many respondents stated that they did not actively contribute to a certain community, other than some online groups, the characteristics of a brand community was distinct in the answer to some interview questions. An answer from respondent #B illustrates this by saying how other fans are a big part of creating a community feeling around a certain team:

*“Yeah, yeah, sure. For sure. It's nice to have a community feeling in this sport. It's also nice to have some arguments with people that don't support the same drivers.” - #B*

Similarly, respondent #I implies that there is a certain connection between fans. The answer from this respondent shows that the importance of having other fans around can be important for the engagement and involvement of the relationship the fan can have with a team.

*“Certain community, you get contact with other fans on a deeper level, especially if you meet hardcore fans, you create strong friendships. From the first day we could be friends.” - #I*

Further, respondent #L, who is a Mercedes fan, describes the social interaction around the races as a sort of brand community. Here different fans seem to have different jargons depending on the team they support. The rivalry among the teams is enjoyable according to respondent #L

*“I always watch with my friends, that’s always fun. Uhhh right back in Colombo. Like we have quite a big Formula 1 fan community that always like rivalry. So it is always good fun to have a drink and the fan just shouting at each other. You know, Ferrari fans just heating us on and stuff. That if fun.” - #L*

#### 4.4.4. Media involvement

When asking the respondents if they had watched the series *Drive to survive* all of them had seen it. Some had watched all the seasons of the series, although others had only seen a few episodes. The response that was given by the majority of people was that it had been fascinating to learn more about what goes on behind the scenes and that the series had featured more of the drivers and teams. Some respondents felt that the series presented a favorable view of the sport, enabling viewers to get to know the drivers better personally, and gave viewers a better sense of their personalities. Fans can develop more intimate connections and relationships with the sport and the teams by being able to obtain this media coverage of a previously very closed-off sport. Respondent #H elaborates on how you can observe more of the drivers' private lives while learning more about their personalities.

*“I think there are a lot of people who are really interested in the life of the drivers, which is very fun. Because they are becoming like personalities and everything, so yes a bit more like that” - #H*

Another respondent #N believed that the series *Drive to Survive* was a good way for new people to come into the sport. By being able to watch a series about the sport the people got a way to learn more about the different teams as well as all the different regulations and politics included that might be hard to learn about without the media showing it.



*“It was very informative and educational and you learnt a lot from it. And it was also the politics and rules. It was a very good gateway to the sport.” - #N*

It was apparent through the answers given by respondents that the media did not always present the teams and drivers in a manner that was favored by the fans. Regarding the series *Drive to Survive*, not all the respondents saw the series as favorably as others. The show helped the sport expand and gain popularity, but some of the respondents felt that it painted a negative picture of the teams. Respondent #A stated that

*“....so maybe I don't think that it reflected reality very well and that it was very much exaggerated and is triggering incredibly much. I was perhaps not a huge fan of that and partly also that it perhaps in a way puts a bad image on many of the drivers or other protagonists within F1 who perhaps were not really. It was not really cool like not completely grounded in anything. So maybe not really impressed with the content, but well done for how it pulled people.*

“ - #A

Additionally, many respondents stated that the Formula 1 community had transformed as a result of increased commercialization and the influx of new fans. All of the respondents believed that there was a difference between the sport's early fans and those who joined after the series. According to several of the respondents, fans who became involved in the sport following *Drive to Survive* were more interested in the drama surrounding it all than in the sport and the teams themselves. The respondents that had been fans for several years believed that it can be comparable to the community of football fans. These respondents believed it was more love for the sports and that it was shown when talking to the older fans that it was not as much hate towards anything specific like teams or drivers. Respondent #Q that had been a fan for 29 years said it was more noticeable that the love for the sport itself had decreased since the influx of new fans.

*“The people as old as me, we're not antagonists, we like each other because we have a love for the sport, whereas now it's become "aa verstappen buhuu or Hamilton and that, like, it's become a bit more football while in the beginning it was more of a love for the sport or the sport or what*

*to call it so that I think it has become a little more the same feeling that football has today has infiltrated F1, which I did not like at all because that I, I'm just as happy for everyone who drives formula one” -#Q*

Similarly respondent #R who had been a fan of the sport since being a child said that the jargon of the fans had been changed to something worse and that now it's lacking respect towards the teams as well as the drivers. This might be due to the increased media attention given to the sport in recent years and the fact that more individuals now have different methods to keep involved in it.

*“Yes they are looking for this big drama. It becomes almost conspiratorial in the end. Everything becomes a much bigger deal these days, even if it's not really such a big deal and you get extremely upset and then I think the tone has gotten worse. The jargon goes can be, I'm in groups on facebook and so and there sometimes I think it's almost lacking a little respect and I think that has been added with many new fans and I wouldn't say it's directly connected maybe to the TV series , but that's where most of the new fans come from.” - #R*

As a result of the dramatical aspects and the commercialization of the series, many respondents believed that the climate on social media had been more hateful. Both towards the different teams and the drivers. In addition, experiences of how the fan base seems more segregated now compared to before was also mentioned. Respondent #D states

*“But then it's also the fan base, like in the past, it was probably more that everyone watches the race to watch the race and cheer for someone, but now it's really like this, you might cheer for a team or a driver and then you hate the others. It has become very segregated.” - #D*

Along with the commercialization of the sport, many of the respondents agreed that the sport has gotten an upswing in recent years and that the fanbase has become bigger than before. It was also brought up that it is more of a hype now than it has been before due to more publicity and the series *Drive to survive*. Respondent #H states that it is can be fun that many more people are watching the sport while also questioning how authentic the media coverage actually is.

*“There is absolutely a lot of hype, a lot more hype around it now than it was then. But it's also because of the Netflix series that came out and that's just fun. All the drivers say it's also like that it's fun that there are so many people watching, that there are many people who kind of care and that there is so much social media hype as well. Then I don't know how authentic it is towards what they are actually doing you know, the coverage is like interesting coverage and it gets like this that I don't know, they get more sponsors and just more money. There is an awful lot of money involved, so it only benefits them in that way.” - #H*

## 4.5 Engagement

### 4.5.1 Exploring personalities and values of the brands

Regarding the personalities and values of the teams there were many different answers towards this. Nearly all of the respondents could identify certain team characteristics as well as how they differed from other teams. Some of them discussed the team's nationality and how it could be shown in the team. While some could draw similarities to other brands. One respondent #I describe the favorite team comparable to Apple in the way the decisions are made more behind closed doors as well as how the image of the brand must be kept more professional. The respondent kept on describing how the team has a particular prestige within the motorsport. This shows that the respondents are knowledgeable about how the different teams within Formula 1 works with their image of the brand and that it shows an importance for them.

*“Yes, I guess I would describe the team itself in kind of like in the way that Apple works. It's very, very like behind closed doors. Everything must be kept professional. It's also a bit of Ferrari work that you should not say something negative about the team and you have to think a lot about the team's image and you have to perform because of the history of the brand and always like, win. It is like what Ferrari is, you have this particular prestige in motorsport.” - #I*

Instead, the respondent #F describes the favorite team Red Bull as a cooler brand that has built a brand outside of the sport. The history within motorsport is not as important for the respondent

but it was more how the brand operates outside the sport. That Red Bull chose to go for a braver approach in their marketing that is perceived as a cooler brand.

*“Yes, but there is a lot that is connected to the Red Bull brand. They always had more for the extreme sports branch, it feels like that. The whole brand, I think is cool, so you can say that in and of itself to the question earlier about its history, it was more and the brand itself that I think is a cool brand. - #F*

Respondent #B compared the teams' different nationalities as a way to differentiate their way of working as a team. The teams may be distinguished as being more structured based on the respondents' perceptions of the various nationalities stated, whilst Ferrari was seen as being more chaotic.

*“I think Red Bull sees themselves quite similar to Ferrari or to Mercedes. And Ferrari has more character and it's more like chaotic in my opinion, and I think Red Bull also sees that. But Red Bull and Mercedes are both German and you can kind of see that in their way of working.” - #B*

In connection to how the respondents said that they got a better picture of the drivers through social media, it was obvious that the fans had clear perceptions of the personality of the teams and the drivers. Especially in relation to its competitors. When asking how the personality of the teams compared to each other, the answers were well elaborated on and the respondents had a clear idea of how their favorite team compared to its competitors. This can be illustrated by quotes of respondent #D, who states that:

*“It feels like the team has taken things from their origin country. Like how do the e.g. Italian behave? According to me, it feels like they have some problems with their strategies. Maybe because they have not been fully straight to each other. While e.g. The Brits and Redbull, well they seem more straight to each other. Maybe because they have a clearer communication. So that is one difference..” - #D*

Further, the same respondent #D talked about the differences between the drivers' personalities by comparing two drivers. How they are perceived from the fan bases and how they might differ in popularity in the sport.

*“If comparing the drivers, such as Hamilton, then he seems very down to earth and he is plant based and that kind of person. That probably draws a lot of people to him. Then we have Verstappen who is like a 16 year old and he is not afraid of driving into someone if you put it like that. He wants to win at every price , which he has succeeded with. But he does not get as much from outside of his fan base. So of course there are alot of differences between them” - #D*

In addition, respondent #L implied that the fact that each team has different personalities added value to the sport. Each team has its own drivers and in addition to their unique characteristics, the respondent stated that it was especially exciting to follow the new drivers that shows that there is more to the sport than just getting from point A to B.

*“No, I mean that is kind of the best part I guess. Because everyone is super different. All kinds of drivers have a bunch of different personalities and that’s what makes them unique. I really like the young drivers because they have proven that there is more to driving than you know to get from point A to point B fast. They have added a little bit of what you say, I guess glamor. It's interesting to see the new guys wake up and it’s super interesting to watch the different personalities.” - #L*

The different teams in Formula 1 consist of a mix of different people such as driver and management. As shown above, interactions with the teams on social media can be a way of creating an understanding of the personality of the teams. Furthermore, most of the respondents followed a variety of the team and the drivers on Instagram. However, other ways of both getting and understanding of the personality of the teams as well as keeping updated on news and updates about them was through e.g., the Formula 1 app, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok.

#### 4.5.2 Drivers and Teams

The respondents were asked if they had a favorite team and a favorite driver. This in addition to the question of why it was their preferred one. This question had different answers. Most of the respondents had a favorite team while others had a favorite driver. It was also some respondents who had more than one team as their favorite. In addition, the teams that were most talked about in relation to this question were Aston Martin, Ferrari, McLaren, Mercedes, and Red Bull.

Many respondents highlighted the teams' histories as well as what they had inherited from friends and family as the primary reasons for why they supported a specific team. Respondent #P talked about having Ferrari as a favorite team that was inherited from an uncle that had been a fan for a long time of that team.

*“Yes, my favorite team is Ferrari and that is for heartbreak sake. No. But. My uncle actually has been a diehard Ferrari fan for a very, very long time. So when I started watching, that was the only team I could pick, and it was very easy to pick it as well because the drivers really seem to love their team. They're very loyal to it and yeah” - #P*

Regarding favorite drivers, the answers were similar to the reason behind having a favorite team. All respondents were able to list one or more favorite drivers. The respondents indicated that they preferred drivers from previous seasons as well as those who are currently driving. Some respondents had a favorite driver whose personality they disliked completely, while others had a favorite driver whose personality they liked because they had favorable characteristics. The personality traits seemed to be an important aspect of why many of the respondents chose to support a driver or a team. It shows that the respondents put time into getting to know the drivers on a more personal level. From this they create a deeper relationship with a driver. Respondent #P argues that the favorite driver is a good person outside of the sport because of the different activism project he is involved in.

*“I mean not just as a racer. He is a great individual. Privately, he's very into activism and he's just a really, like, he really highlights like women in motorsport, which a lot of people don't really do.” - #P*

Respondent #B had a favorite driver whose personality was not preferred but still had this driver as a favorite because the personality of the driver seemed to be good for the sport.

*“I hate his personality, but I think it's good for the sport.” - #B*

#### 4.5.3 Shifting industry

When asking the respondents about their loyalty towards their favorite team, the answers were quite different. Some of the respondents said that they could never switch their favorite team. It was more of a matter of principle that you stick to the team in both good and bad times. However, some people were able to switch to another team if they believed that they committed a wrong or contentious act that violated their morals and ideals. Some were able to switch teams but not drivers and vice versa. Respondent #B felt that the loyalty was more towards the driver than the team. This shows the importance of developing a relationship more with a person and a character than with supporting the team.

*For me, it's just the driver. That really is why I'm really into the team. I think if he would switch to, for example, Ferrari that would switch teams immediately. - #B*

While another respondent #A stated that if you have a team that you have chosen to support it is important to stay loyal to this team. It had been the same team from the start of watching the sport.

*No, always had the same one and could not imagine actually changing. - #A*

The respondent #A and respondent #H had the same type of loyalty towards the team. Respondent #H was arguing that when you spend time and energy on something you automatically become more loyal.

*No, no, I think you will be very like the more time you spend on something or somebody the more you start to feel for that team or loyalty you have towards it. - #H*

When asking the respondents to compare their loyalty towards their favorite team to other brands in their life, the answers varied. Some claimed they were more committed to the brand of their phone and could not transfer brands as easily as they could change teams. However, several people believed that switching teams was just as challenging as switching other of their preferred brands. A reflection that was brought up in the interviews was that supporting teams are connected to immaterial attributes compared to functional attributes that other brands can give them. Respondent #L describes that it is a more emotional part of supporting a team and the sport.

*“No, I think loyalty, the level of loyalty is fairly higher than like anything like a phone or like a product that you use consumer durable, I think it's definitely high because it's much more, there is much more emotional kind of attachment to the sport and also the brand.” - #L*

Respondent #D also talks about the differences between having loyalty to a product and having loyalty to a team. It is discussed that you have a certain loyalty to other brands that are used but after some time it is required to switch the product, but the loyalty might stay within the brand. But supporting a team is different since it provides more of an emotional touch to it. As the respondent says below

*“...But right now I would say that yes, there are certain things that you have loyalty to and brands, companies or products. But for some reasons you might have to change, but otherwise I would not have done it so I would say that there are certain brands. But that's because they provide such benefits. Red Bull does not do it in that way. No, but redbull is more about that you have found something that you think suits you and it is the heart that does it, so they could lose a whole season and then I wouldn't switch anyway. But if my iPhone would stop and break down and become worse, then I would have changed immediately. So it became a little more that you have your heart in something.” -#D*



#### 4.5.4 Positive and negative emotions

All of the respondents were found to be emotionally invested in the teams and the sport. It was both positive and negative emotions that were brought up. Some mentioned that both before and during the race, the pulse was increasing and sometimes it was nerve wracking. This was something that respondent #I talked about how you have this type of nervousity before and during a race. This respondent #I also describe that there are two different emotions that can occur, such as being annoyed if the team screws up.

*“You get a little roused, so it's special. So if you kind of know that the team might have a good chance to win, and if they then make a mistake or screw up their own strategies, of course you then kind of get annoyed when it's like this. This is something you can teach a kindergarten child to do better than they do. Of course, you get upset sometimes but then you also get very happy when they win.” - #I*

During the interviews, it was not exactly clear whether the respondents had strong positive emotions towards certain teams. Often it was more obvious regarding the negative emotions. It was demonstrated that they felt more strongly about a driver or team they were not as fond of. This could be connected to the negative emotions a fan can feel towards a team or driver. Many of the respondents mentioned particularly negative emotions towards their favorite's team or driver's competitor. A respondent #Q talked more about the love for the sport rather than liking a special team or driver. Even though it was not about who liked who, the respondent felt negative emotions towards one driver.

*“I don't follow Hamilton because I think he's such a f\*\*\*\*\*g scapegoat, so I can't stand it.” - #Q*

Respondent #C argued that the team's team principal may have been the source of the negative emotions rather than the team itself.

*“Red Bull, and it is a bit like I described before, yes, I don't know. I think or I usually say that Christian Horner seems based on the Netflix show to be a bit like a Jack Russell that just barks.”*

- #C

Moreover, respondent #C highlights aspects with emotions towards the teams. The respondent described how they did not necessarily have a favorite team. However, the respondent was very clear on which team that was disliked. When asking about the respondent favorite team, the answer was

*“Maybe Mercedes, but I would more say that I am Anti Red Bull than a fan of any team.” - #C*

When asking the reason for the negative emotions towards Red Bull, the same respondent #C continued to say that it could be due to how they have been portrayed in the series *Drive to survive*

*“I definitely think that I am influenced by how Netflix has portrayed Red Bull. There they are seen as the villain, and they have a bit of a bully attitude being number one. But of course, I have Netflix portrayals of them in mind.” - #C*

## 5.0 Discussion

*The main findings of the research are discussed in detail in this chapter. The findings found in the previous chapter will be reflected critically in relation to the literature presented earlier in the research. In this chapter the new insights to literature will be discussed to complement the existing theory.*

### 5.1 Fascination of the brand

The empirical data presented in the chapter above shed light on how the respondents went from watching the sport to becoming fans of the high-profile sports teams and what factors contributed to their current passion for the sport. The answers to the questions about what made them fans and why they started to watch the sport revealed a diverse range of experiences and motivations. It could range from having a passion for cars to having family and friends watching. This means that it was the external factors that influenced their journey of becoming a fan.

Many of the respondents believed that the enjoyable aspect of watching the races was to do it with fellow fans. The social bonding and the companionship that came with being a fan was highlighted among the respondents. Moreover, some of the respondents discussed how the fascination with the teams contributed to an extended engagement with the sport. This in terms of watching all the practices, the race interviews as well as the qualifying sessions. This shows a deeper dedication to their chosen teams and drivers by underlining that a dedicated fan invests time outside of simply the main race events. Important to note is that when the respondents are watching more than just the main races, they may also take the opportunity to explore more of the team's different aspects. This can be seen from the Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) article about brand personalities where the authors highlight the unique characteristics of sports teams as brands by describing how they are both intangible and emotionally charged. The emotional bond and experiential nature of supporting a sports team adds further to the brand's complexity and fascination. Along with the respondents' answers and the argument from Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) the context of the brand personality of sports teams is

not only about the team but an inclusion of the image of the team as a whole which includes drivers, team members, the team principals, and other fans.

Although the respondents' answers to what they believed was particularly fascinating with the teams and the sport, there was a common thread among the respondents. This was connected to the complexity of the sport. Hence a fascination for all the different aspects of the sport such as the money, politics, technical parts, media, strategies, and the teams. Therefore, everything around the sport and all the things that happen behind the scenes are all things that can make the respondents believe that the sports teams of formula 1 are complex, multifaceted, and fascinating brands. The strategies within the different teams were especially brought up by some respondents as a fascinating part of the brands. They believed that it was more than just cars going in a circle on a track which was appealing with the sport. Instead, they focused on how global brands such as Ferrari, Red Bull and Mercedes have various components who work together to create an experience.

This supports the idea of Aaker (1997) and how consumers can identify with both direct and indirect aspects of a brand to create a perception of a brand's personality. Something that serves as a foundation for the creation of a relationship between a consumer and a brand. This does not only point to the aspects of fascination as a starting stage of a consumer-brand relationship, but it also highlights possible managerial opportunities and threats that come with multiple sources of a perceived brand personality. In other words, factors such as strategies and technical aspects may be more within managerial control compared to media portrayals and the behaviors of fans. Since all of these aspects are sources that consumers can link to a sports team's brand personality, it further shows the complexity that may come with managing the brand personality of a high-profile sports team. Something that is part of how the consumer-brand relationship may evolve. Overall, the first stage of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams is characterized by aspects that made the respondents become a fan. A major reason for this is due to a fascination with the brand. Much of the fascination of the brand can be seen as dyadic, meaning that fans became interested with sports teams as brands. Examples of this is how the respondents got interested in the unique characteristics of the teams and its surrounding aspects of money, politics, technical aspects, and strategies. Therefore, a

fascination for the brand may be seen as an obvious foundation for a forward trajectory of the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams.

## 5.2 Social interaction

Through the empirical data, it was shown that the social interactions, both offline and online, could be a way of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Important to note within this area is that it connects to the perception of high-profile sports teams as complex brands. This may be because the relationship no longer is simply dyadic, hence only between consumer and brands. Instead, the relationship is triadic, meaning that consumers also interact with other consumers. This may create complexity from a managerial perspective since the relationship now relies on more than linear brand strategies and techniques to be rectified. Still, as mentioned by Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2017), the triadic relationship can be particularly important for brands in today's age that relies on meaning and interpretation of core brand values. This since consumers can act as creative agents for the brands by sharing and performing brand meaning and stories in perhaps more authentic ways. Hence out of their own subjective experiences, motivations, or perceptions. Something that brands alone may not have been able to do in the same way.

Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2017) argumentation of the co-creation between brands and consumers, where the consumers work as brand agents to create e.g., value and awareness for other consumers was visible in the empirical findings. Even though many respondents said that other fans were not necessarily important for the relationship to a certain team nor the sport, answers to other questions could imply a different perspective. As an example, many fans said that they watched a lot of content on social media between the races. It was not only a way of following and keeping updated about the teams and drivers, but also a simple enjoyment. Something that the respondent benefited from.

Moreover, some respondents said that the need for social interaction around the sport was not particularly important. A few respondents had started to watch the sport alone, hence could

continue to do so. In addition, a lack of fans nearby made it more difficult to engage in offline interactions. The fact that an external aspect affects further involvement of the consumer-brand relationship could be seen as a situationally imposed stressor, which Fournier (1998) mentions as a disturbance in the relationship due to a change in physical location. Such an environmental stress is by the author said to be highly likely to affect the trajectory of a continuous relationship. Still, the fan consumption of sports may not be exactly comparable to other brands since much of the consumption occurs online. However, one respondent admitted that the lack of offline interactions was filled with discussion online. Both on social media such as twitter as well as in the comment section on YouTube. This was described as a way of how the respondent could vent its need for discussion that otherwise would have occurred with e.g., family or friends offline. This may imply that there are ways of dissolving different stressors that otherwise could have affected the trajectory of the consumer-brand relationship. Therefore, the need for interaction with other fans was necessary, but in another way than possibly imagined.

The need for interaction with other fans can also be connected to Ponsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2017) research of brand co-creation in a brand community. Not only does the author highlight how the relationship between consumers and fans moves from dyadic to triadic, but more specifically they conclude that fans can act as brand agents. Having a different relationship, both with the brand as well as with other consumers points to the dynamic roles that fans can take on. Something that can make the consumer-brand relationship evolve. This since Ponsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2011) argues that the different roles of e.g., providers and beneficiaries that consumers can take provide several entry points to other fans. Important to note with the dynamic roles that fans can take to allow entry points for more and less experienced fans is the interactions and information sharing activities that can occur online. The need for providers was clearly stated by many respondents. This since watching content between races was needed by many. Partly because it was a way of seeing a more personal side of the drivers, such as how they live as well as who they meet in their everyday lives. Being able to interact with the brand may therefore be a major aspect of how consumers perceive the brand personality of high-profile sports teams. This mutual connection between consumers and brands is something that Fournier (1998) mentioned as a foundation for a relationship to be considered as real. Hence, for the relationship to evolve, it must firstly be considered as real.

Through the brand co-creation, it can be assumed that some fans act as beneficiaries of the information and interaction sharing activities while other fans provide it. However, even though it may be assumed that the providers are more experienced in the field, it can be harder to state. This since information and interactions can come in many forms of e.g., questions, thoughts, experiences, or opinions. Something that does not have to imply that neither a provider or beneficiary is either less or more experienced. As a consequence of the providers work on social media, fans might get a better perception of their team's brand personality. As Fournier (1998) mentioned, one way of defining a brand as a partner is to focus on how the brand is personalized or humanized. Also, for the brand to act as a legitimate relationship partner, the brand shall behave as a provider of the dyadic interaction with consumers. However, since fans already contribute as a triadic partner in this case, the brand itself may not have to contribute as much. This since fans can vent their need for a relationship partner through other fans. In turn, the information sharing activities on social media can act as a gateway for how the consumer-brand relationship evolves. This even though not all fans may be aware of how important the co-creation of other fans might be for their relationship with sports teams.

Furthermore, the creation of brand related content online, in addition to offline interaction between fans does not only favor the beneficiaries. It can also benefit the providers. Through the brand personality, providers will have the possibility to express themselves through information sharing activities and interactions. This can be connected to Aaker (1997) who mentioned that due to a brand's personality, consumers will have the opportunity to express different versions of themselves. Examples of this can be their authentic or aspirational selves as well as specific features of themselves. Further, giving consumers the chance to identify themselves with a brand personality can have several implications for how the consumer-brand relationship will evolve. Examples of this could be how consumers can get a favorable viewpoint of the brand, thus an emotional bond with it, as stated by Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016). Also, the fact that the same authors say that sport teams may be even more strongly connected to their brand personalities may make the consumer-brand relationship more prone to be connected to an emotional bond.

The enjoyment or need of providing brand related information is further elaborated on by one respondent who felt hyper fixated on Formula 1. The respondent had a lot of information about the different teams and their drivers, something that felt needed to be shared with friends. The respondent even made friends watch the sport just so that they would understand the information that would be shared. The positive aspects of sharing brand related information with friends and family is something that permeated the respondents' answers. Many respondents stated that the conversations they had with their family and friends were an enjoyable part of being a fan. These discussions were either capable due to the fact that their friends and family's interest in Formula 1 initiated an initial interest or because of how the respondents themselves made people in their surroundings start following the sport. This could possibly be described as a natural part of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Crawford (2004) describes how much of the fan activity consists in the minds and thoughts of fans. This through conversations, thoughts and memories that are exchanged. The social interactions may therefore be important for positive brand experiences, something that can drive the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams forward.

Further, the study of brand communities within sports by Ponsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder (2017) leads the discussion into the role that brand communities can play in how the consumer-brand relationship evolves. Interesting to note in this area is that few respondents said that they actively contributed to any brand community. Still many respondents mentioned how supporting a certain team can create an enjoyable community feeling. It was also said how it is easy to get a deeper contact with other fans of Formula 1, something that can lead to an instant friendship. Moreover, the different jargons and arguments that surround the different teams added value to the respondents in terms of pleasure and joy. A sense of belonging to a community is something that may make the consumer-brand relationship evolve between fans and high-profile sports teams.

For instance, Mills et al (2022) argues that brand communities can create several touchpoints for an interaction with the brand. Not only through its goods or marketers but also through consumer interactions. Therefore, interaction with other fans creates the possibility for a continuous or a frequent interaction with sports teams. Further, Mills et al (2022) also argues that consumers



have a higher integration into the brand community than originally suggested. This means the ability of other fans to serve themselves and others frequent touchpoints with the brand can act as an example of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves. Further, Fournier (1998) states that the consumer-brand relationship is not linear. This means that the engagement with a brand can be lower or higher at different times. Still, the possibility of being able to interact with the brand through numerous touch points may be important towards how the relationship evolves through a long-term perspective. The enjoyment of being part of a community was shown by many respondents. One respondent especially stated that it was easy to get a deep contact with other fans, especially hardcore ones. From the first day they met, they could become friends.

Additionally, the collective feeling that brand communities can provide is another example of a social interaction that the respondents enjoyed. This may be partly in connection to the additional benefits that consumers can receive from symbolic and functional attributes of a brand. It can also be because of the unity that can be found in a collective appreciation for a brand. Important to note here is De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007) argumentation for the term “consciousness of kind”. This means that members of a community not only feel a connection towards the brand itself, but also to other members of the community. This is something that can imply that the connection between fans may be more important than the connection to the actual brand. Especially if the brand fails to give fans the opportunity to express themselves through brand strategies of personalization or animation. However, since Aaker (1997) states that humans create relationships with brands through human characteristics associated with it, both indirect and direct contact with the brand can contribute to the consumer-brand relationship. This means traits of a typical user or product-related attributes can influence the relationship. In the case of Formula 1 teams, examples such attributes could be drivers, management, car brand or advertising style. The clear jargon of certain sports teams in Formula 1 is mentioned by one Mercedes fan who usually watched the races with friends at the bar back home. It was described how the fan community of Ferrari heated up with Mercedes by shouting at each other. This was described positively since having a drink and being part of the rivalry was said to be very fun.

As stated in the introduction section, the different high-profile sport teams got a particular increase in viewers and fans after the series Drive to survive was launched. Since the series

launched in 2019, it is now one of the most watched sports in the world meaning that the global popularity of the sport has boosted. Further it may be interesting to know that many fans believed that the series was interesting because they got a chance to learn more about the different teams and the management behind them. However, something that may be more relevant to elaborate on further in the discussion is how media, which the series is an example of, can affect the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams. This is because many respondents pointed towards the critical aspects of the media. This in terms of how it contributed to a perceived increased commercialization of the sport. Media was said to be a reason for creating unnecessary drama and a bad image of certain teams and drivers. This in turn was mentioned as a reason for why there had been an increased negative climate in the community of Formula 1. In connection to this, one respondent especially mentioned how the climate on social media nowadays seemed to lack respect. Something that other respondents said may be due to the influx of new fans that are influenced by media's portrayals of the teams. In addition, it seemed like fans tried to over exaggerate actions of certain drivers and teams to create more drama. Even though the respondent could not be exactly sure of if it was directly connected to media portrayals, it was certainly assumed since that's where many new fans come from.

Further, an area that was brought up by respondents was how the fan base seemed more segregated now than before. Something that was mentioned in connection to the attention and publicity that the teams of Formula 1 received from the media. It was stated that the fanbase seems more segregated now than compared to before. People that were fans before the perceived commercialization was seen as more genuine towards the sport as a whole. This in comparison to new fans that either hated or loved a specific team. In particular, this was something that older fans perceived as a less enjoyable part of their continued relationship with the sports teams. In connection to the consumer-brand relationship by Fournier (1998), the perceived commercialization of the sport, hence a stressor, may have implications for how the relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams evolve. As described by Fournier (1998), there are different stresses that can affect the trajectory of the consumer-brand relationship. These can be both environmental, partner-oriented, and dyadic/relational. This means that both external and internal factors can influence how the relationship between consumers and brands will evolve.

With regards to different stressors, an interesting note in the case of a perceived commercialization of Formula 1 is how the consumer-brand relationship in this case regards a triadic interaction with other fans. This in comparison to Fournier (1998) who only takes the dyadic interaction between consumers and brands into consideration when regarding different stressors that can affect the trajectory of the relationship. From the perspective of the triadic interaction between fans, respondents' experiences of how segregated the fans of formula 1 have become may not still be a perceived neglect on part of a dyadic relationship partner. In other words, fans may not be disappointed towards the teams, hence the brand itself. Instead, it points more towards disappointment towards other fans. Still, since the triadic interaction is valuable for the relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams, even non-managerially imposed stressor may affect how the relationship evolves. This implication can bring further complexity to the high-profile sports teams as brands. This is because aspects that may be out of managerial control, hence the behaviors of other fans and media portrayals, can be reasons for why the consumer-brand relationship evolves in directions with more negative connotations. Instead of an increased brand loyalty due to positive brand experiences, the segregations of fans as well as the perceived commercialization of Formula 1 teams may bring negative emotions towards the sports teams. This in terms of e.g., brand hate, consumer fear or consumer guilt. In other words, media may have a substantial impact on how the relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams evolve, something that can be hard for the brand themselves to control or impact. On the other hand, some respondents were aware of the fact that the teams could benefit from media due to the money that comes with commercialization, hence getting a bigger audience and more sponsorships. This may point to an understanding, hence a positive view, of how the publicity benefits sports teams to make certain choices.

In summary, the second stage of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams is characterized by social interactions, both offline and online. This stage brings the triadic interaction between fans into the discussion, something that is important because the community feeling that other fans bring is what brings further positive brand experiences. Moreover, the information sharing activities that occur both offline and online can

be a way of benefitting both providers and beneficiaries to explore further brand personalities and self-expression functions.

However, important to note is that different stressors of e.g., media and the behaviors of other fans can affect the trajectory of the relationship. This means that even non-managerial, hence aspects outside of the brands control can bring negative emotions towards the brand itself. This points to the dynamic aspects of the consumer-brand relationship since it is not a linear process that only moves forwards as time goes on. Instead, the relationship can move backwards due to more negative connotations that consumers experience with a brand. On the other hand, this does not have to imply that the consumer-brand relationship no longer exists. Instead, different aspects can dissolve the stressors which may bring further positive brand experiences.

### 5.3 Engagement

From the empirical data it was shown that the respondents could easily talk about the different characteristics the teams had. This both with regards to their preferred teams as well as the ones they were not so fond of. Some of the respondents were able to draw comparisons between teams and other brands outside of the sport such as Apple. Respondents that are able to draw human-like traits to the brands as well as differentiate them from other brands goes in line with the brand personality concept by Aaker (1997). An example from the findings was a respondent that made a statement about Ferrari being similar to Apple in the way they work. The respondent then perceives their brand personality as more professional, exclusive, and focused. In addition, one respondent thought that Red Bull's brand was braver and really emphasized how cool the brand was in comparison to Mercedes, who seemed to be more formal and closed in their way. The respondent believed that the extreme sport brand that Red Bull is from the beginning was shown in the way they are operating the brand image of the team. Further it was mentioned that Red Bull did more activities and campaigns with the drivers that may differ from brands like Mercedes that goes for a more classic way of marketing. In other words, respondents were able to compare the brands and to see the traits and personalities of each.

Further, some respondents brought up the nationality of the brands as a way to differentiate them. They stated that the nationality of the team could be shown in the way they are operating as well how they are making decisions. As an example, Mercedes represented a more German way of working since they seemed to be more structured. This while Ferrari seemed to be a bit more chaotic in their decisions because it was perceived to be the Italian way of working. In addition, respondents were able to easily demonstrate the drivers' different personalities, traits, and characteristics. It was considered that teams' variety of drivers and their personalities contributed to the sport. Fans admired the drivers' originality and distinctiveness, which enhanced the excitement and intrigue of the racing experience. New drivers' emergence also gave the sport a different and fresh perspective which in turn sparked further engagement. These perceptions further demonstrate how consumers ascribe various personality attributes to each team, something that is influencing their preferences and emotional attachments towards the brands, which in turn makes the consumer-brand relationship evolve. It is also in line with Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) who says that fans of sports teams commonly have little difficulty expressing the teams' characteristics just as effortlessly as they would describe someone they know personally.

Another area that is connected to further engagement with the brand covers the changing industry of sports. In other words, high-profile sports teams are not only complex, but different from the industry that other brands operate in. This may be because high-profile sports teams are not founded in traditional markets of consumer products and services such as FMCG. After all, high-profile sports teams' reason for existence may not solely be to serve as brands. Instead, the ultimate reason may be to compete and achieve success and greatness in the context of sports. In connection to this, many respondents believed that you do not just switch your favorite team because they perform badly. Similar to other sports, you have your favorite team and no matter if they win or lose, you stay loyal to them. The fact that you stay loyal to your team in both good and bad times is described by many respondents as a "matter of principle" in sports. Therefore, when trying to understand the consumer-brand relationship in terms of fans loyalty towards the teams, it is necessary to elaborate further on the respondents' thoughts about the changing industry that sports teams as brands operate in. This is because factors such as brand personality may not be the sole reasons for how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and

sports teams. Instead, it may also be connected to other aspects that would not influence the consumer-brand relationship in an industry with traditional products as brands. This is an area that has to be regarded when viewing sports teams as brands. Something that may implicate that the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams is not directly applicable to how the relationship with consumers and brands in other industries evolve.

In line with this, viewing sports teams as brands may implicate that the personality per se might not be the only way a sports team can contribute to the relationship with fans. Instead, the sense of belonging to a collective or something bigger can be a reason for why fans choose to stick with a certain team. It can also be due to fans feeling a connection to a team and its fanbase and thus share both its triumphs and sorrows. In addition, Donahay and Rosenberger III (2007) argues that success and failures of a team can be experienced as a fans own. Meaning that there is an emotional connection and personal devotion towards the team. This in comparison to a brand that consumers feel is more easily exchangeable.

Karjaluoto, Munnkka and Salmi (2016) also states that when regarding loyalty in connection to sports, the attention should be pointed towards consumer beliefs, collective feelings as well as self-image. This is something that further points towards how other factors than brand personality matters in how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. One respondent highlights the immaterial attributes of supporting a favorite team by stating that the loyalty you have towards a team is fairly higher than to any other consumer durable. The respondent continues to explain that there is much more of an emotional attachment to supporting a sports team. This further shows that it can be hard to compare the teams to other brands that are consumed, meaning that it is important to underline how sports teams as brands can be different to other brands through the concept of fandom as well as the context in which these brands operate. On the other hand, some respondents still stated that they could imagine changing their favorite team. Reasons for this could be e.g., continuous bad performance or controversial happenings from the team. A respondent said that if the team does something that goes against the respondents' own values it would be easy to switch to another team. This may implicate that just as with other brands, continuous negative brand experiences can affect the brand loyalty towards sports teams.

Further, what could be seen from the interviews was that all the respondents were emotionally invested with the teams and the sport. The respondents expressed both positive and negative emotions, towards the teams and the drivers. These emotions could vary in intensity towards a team and a driver they either disliked or liked. Another thing that they also showed different emotions to is how the sport, teams and drivers are portrayed in the media. The respondents mixed emotions consists of a combination of different factors that goes into the construct of the teams and the sport. As an example, one respondent stated that before a race there are a mix of emotions such as an increase of pulse, feeling excitement and nervousness. This could be seen as a high level of emotional engagement that the fans have towards a team as well as the sport itself. In connection to this, Fournier (1998) says that a mutual connection between the partners is required for a relationship to be regarded as authentic. Therefore, these positive emotions can play a crucial role in establishing and upholding these connections. A higher level of consumer loyalty can be attained by emotions connected to positive brand experiences.

Even though it is stated that a positive brand experience can increase the likelihood of loyalty towards the brand, another perspective of emotions was seen through the answers of the respondents. Examples of this could be that some respondents did not necessarily have a favorite team. However, they knew who they disliked. As stated previously, Fournier (1998) has focused on positive emotions with regards to the consumer-brand relationship. However, the fact that respondents had relatively strong opinions about which team they disliked points towards the mentioning of negative emotions by Khatoon and Rehman (2021). Here it is stated that negative emotions can have fewer desirable consequences for brands, such as brand hate. On the other hand, the result from our empirical findings may show that negative emotions towards one sports team may be stronger than the positive feeling towards a sports team. This means that not only positive consumer experiences can lead to brand loyalty. Instead, negative brand experiences may play a role in why fans are loyal towards a sports team. On the other hand, the natural rivalry of sports can also contribute to how negative emotions play a role in the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams.

An external factor that was affecting the respondents' emotions towards the teams was the media portrayals. Many of the respondents talked about how the series *Drive to Survive* painted a rather

distorted view of the entire team. As respondent mentioned the series might have influenced why Red Bull was not a team that was preferred. It seemed like the series portrayed the team as more aggressive than other teams. From the empirical data it can show how the media narratives can be able to influence how a fan feels about the teams and drivers. The media has the ability to amplify unfavorable feelings, feed rivalries, and reinforce preexisting biases. As Zhou et al (2020) argues, the digitalization and globalization of sports is having a great influence on the athletes in terms of media reach. The personal brand of an athlete can be influenced by the media and the reach it has to make an athlete more globally known. For a sports team marketing is crucial for both building the brand as well as for the fans. As the participants believed that the series *Drive to Survive* gave a disrupted picture of the team, it can lead to affecting the brand in a negative way. Zhou et al (2020) also argues that the athletes and team is serving as the spokesperson for the brand. One respondent who thought that the Red Bull team principal is unlikable may have affected how the respondents viewed the entire sports team, hence brand. This can be due to the media portrayal. However, the teams are relying on their media exposure as a way to gain new fans while also entertaining the current fans. Through media exposure, a brand's identity may be shaped, but doing so can elicit a powerful emotional response from consumers.

In conclusion, the third step of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams is characterized by a continued engagement with the brand, both through dyadic and triadic interaction. The engagement involves both further engagement with the teams as well as other fans. Through further exploration of the brand personality, fans' relationship with the brands can be strengthened since for a relationship to be valid, mutual exchange has to occur. Further, an understanding of the industry can be a way for fans to retain loyalty, both through good and bad brand performances. It can also be seen that both negative and positive emotions can drive the likelihood of a continued loyalty towards the brand. This since negative emotions towards one sports team often were expressed as impactful towards the choice of being loyal towards another sports team.

However, important to note is that the context of high-profile sports teams lies within a changing industry. The strong rivalry, fandom and emotions that can occur within sports may therefore



make the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams less applicable to other industries.

#### 5.4 Implications for discussion

Discussing how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams may require a highlight of a few implications that influenced the discussion. First of all, it is through Aaker (1997) known that the brand personality serves as a foundation for relationships between brands and consumers. Further, Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) states that the personality of a sports team does not only evolve around a sole product or service, but rather a combination of the image of both coaches, players, fans, as well as personnel and administration. Moreover, the triadic interaction with other fans might be a factor that makes sports teams different from other brands. This since an additional part is considered when consumers interact with a brand. Something that is different from Fournier's (1998) view of the dyadic consumer-brand interaction. In addition to functional attributes of e.g., performance or rankings, sport teams as brands can further be perceived as dynamic and complex. This in connection to the fact that high-profile sports teams as brands are not founded in traditional markets of consumer products or services. In other words, viewing sports teams as brands makes the discussion evolve from a different angle compared to Fournier (1998) who uses traditional products of e.g., FMCG in the discussion of the dyadic relationship between consumers and brands.

Another area that has to be taken into account in the discussion is how Aaker (1997) is mentioning how different factors influence the perceived brand personality, hence the consumer-brand relationship. As a starting point, all the respondents that were interviewed already considered themselves as fans of Formula 1. This may imply that the relationship between the consumer and the brand in this case already has evolved to some extent. At least if comparing the relationship to consumers that interact with a brand for the first time. As Duffett (2013) states, being a fan is synonymous to having a strong, positive emotional connection to e.g., an object or famous person. However, as in line with Aaker (1997), even though a brand personality can share a similar conceptualization, it can differ in how it is perceived by consumers. In this case, it

means that respondents may have different perceptions of brand personalities even though brand strategies and techniques are consistent. This is an important implication for how the consumer-brand relationship evolves since it points to the individual differences in perceptions. Especially since the respondents in this thesis have both different ages and nationalities, in addition with a difference in for how long they have been fans.

## 6.0 Conclusion

*This last chapter will wrap up our research and look into whether the objectives were achieved, and the research questions were addressed. The limitations, managerial contributions and future research will also be presented.*

### 6.1 Research findings

The purpose of this thesis has been to gain further understanding of how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams. Hence, the thesis has focused on teams in Formula 1 as the chosen high-profile sports teams. Further, to fulfill the purpose, semi-structured interviews with fans of Formula 1 teams have been conducted. This to gain an understanding of how their relationships with Formula 1 teams evolve. By taking part in individual experiences of the consumer-brand relationship with regards to Formula 1 teams, the thesis aims at using specific instances to create a further understanding of how consumers' relationships with high-profile sports teams evolve. The findings could therefore, under similar circumstances and implications, be valid for a broader context. In addition, drawing upon Fournier (1998) research of the relational phenomena in consumer product domain allows for the empirical findings to be partly grounded upon a valid relationship proposition in the consumer brand context.

With this in mind, three stages that characterize how the consumer-brand relationship evolves between fans and high-profile sports teams have been found. These consist of a fascination with the brand, social interaction as well as engagement. All of these stages are characterized by different aspects that move the relationship in a trajectory forwards through positive brand experiences, both in a dyadic but mainly in a triadic way. Still, different stresses such as media and the behaviors of other fans can impact the relationship in a more negative way. This may bring further complexity to sports teams as a brand since it may be out of brand managerial control. Such implications point to the dynamic aspects of the consumer-brand relationship in a context of fans and high-profile sports teams. In addition, it has been noted that sports teams as brands may not be directly applicable to other industries due to their specific features and

changing nature. Something that is in line with Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Salmi (2016) who mentioned how sports teams are complex brands, both with intangible and unstable core products that are experiential, hedonic, and emotionally charged. This points towards how the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams may evolve differently compared to consumers and other brands.

## 6.2 Contributions

The conclusions of this thesis provide both theoretical and managerial contributions in the field of study. Firstly, using the relationship theory by Fournier (1998) as a foundation for how consumers create relationships with brands allows for a valid foundation for a development in terms of how a triadic interaction can influence the consumer-brand relationship. This means that not only the dyadic interaction with brands have been explored, but also the triadic interaction between fans and how that influences the relationship trajectory in a context of high-profile sports teams. Moreover, focusing on high-profile sports teams and using Formula 1 as an example brings further contributions to how both indirect and direct aspects can influence the perceived brand personality. In addition, taking a consumer perspective and allowing both positive and negative emotions and brand experiences be shared provides a thorough understanding of the dynamic aspects of a relationship. Hence showing factors that makes the consumer-brand relationship evolve both forwards and backwards. Negative emotions is especially something that calls for more attention since Khatoun and Rehman (2021) mentioned that the understanding of negative emotions towards brands is still limited.

Moreover, taking a consumer perspective and showing three distinctive stages that can impact the trajectory of the consumer-brand relationship gives further contributions that could benefit high-profile sports teams from a managerial perspective. This since it could act as insight on what type of branding strategies or techniques that brand managers could answer with or initiate to give further positive brand experiences. This is something that is important for a continued loyalty to the focused brand. Especially if regarding the industry of sports where the emotional and experiential nature plays a big role in the complexity and fascination that draws consumers attention.

Also viewing sports teams as complex brands with a triadic interaction can also give further managerial contributions. This is in line with Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder (2017) who mentions how we are living in an era that relies on authentic interpretation of core brand values. Therefore, giving insights into how consumers can act as creative agents for brands as well as how their work moves the relationship trajectory forwards can give ideas on how to take advantage of the opportunities it brings. In addition, providing examples of factors that impact the relationship in a more negative way can act as a reminder of how things out of managerial control can impact the consumer-brand relationship. Since an authentic interpretation of core brand values becomes more important for the relationship between consumer and brands, it is valuable to understand what type of complexities that comes as a consequence. Also having an understanding for how media attention and portrayals can affect the community of fans within high-profile sports teams may be even more important since globalization and digitalization drives the great media reach of sports.

### 6.3 Limitations and future research

One of the limitations that has been identified is that the thesis solely concentrates on the consumer-brand relationship between fans and teams within the sport Formula 1. This implies that it may not be fully generalized to other high-profile sport teams. This is because it might not accurately reflect the specifics and dynamics of different sports teams or businesses. It is important to know that the consumer-brand relationship of the high-profile sports teams is influenced by different factors such as the cultural, economic, and social within different countries or regions. Like many other sports, the fan base of Formula 1 is diverse with people from all over the world, with each fan group having their own unique cultural characteristics. All of the 18 respondents—who were of various nationalities—were interviewed in Sweden. With having the interviews in Sweden, it is important to be aware that the respondents might still have influences from the Swedish cultural characteristics. Since the consumer-brand relationship might vary depending on things like cultural values, regional rivalries, and traditions among fans, applying this research to other cultural contexts may not be applicable. Therefore, an interesting future research suggestion is to continue on the consumer perspective but using another sport

when regarding high-profile sports teams. This to be able to view possible similarities and differences within fans of different high-profile sports teams. In addition, using a different sample could further contribute to the exploration of factors that influence the consumer-brand relationship.

Further, using Fournier (1998) consumer-brand relationship theory could further provide a characterization of what type of brand relationship quality that fans have with high-profile sports teams. This to understand what brand and consumer behaviors that can lead to possible stability and durability between consumers and brands. In addition, it would be interesting to continue on how sports teams as complex brands with a triadic interaction affects the consumer-brand relationship quality. A future research suggestion like this could also include both positive and negative emotions, something that is in line with Khatoon and Rehman (2021) who calls for further research on negative emotions towards brands.

Another limitation that is worth attention is how the thesis only regards the consumer perspective of the consumer-brand relationship. This means that we have not looked at how possible branding strategies can impact how the trajectory of the relationship moves forwards or backwards, hence creating positive or negative brand experiences. Therefore, we suggest that this phenomenon can be further explored from a managerial perspective. Examples of this are what implications these stages of the relationship trajectory has for the brand itself or what branding techniques that could be used to both initiate and maintain the consumer-brand relationship between fans and high-profile sports teams. How to manage different external and internal stresses that come from e.g., media and the triadic interaction of a high-profile sports brand might be more important than ever. Not only since the stresses may be out of managerial control but also because today's globalization and digitalization of sports have a great influence on the media reach of sports. Further, new medias' pervasiveness and cultural impact have the ability to transcend national boundaries. This is something that management around sports teams have to take in consideration to maintain a desirable relationship with their fans.

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## 8.0 Appendices

### 8.1 Interview questions

#### **General questions**

1. Which year are you born?
2. Where are you from?

#### **Fandom - Sport fans**

3. Would you consider yourself a fan of formula 1?
4. For how long have you been following the sport of Formula 1/been a fan?
5. What made you start watching the sport?
6. What made you become a fan?
7. Could you recall a specific formula 1 moment that was special to you?
8. Have you ever been to a Formula 1 race? If so, which one(s)?
9. Do you follow any other motorsports besides Formula 1? If so, which ones?
10. What do you believe is intriguing with following F1?
11. Are there any specific aspects of the sport that you particularly enjoy or find fascinating?

#### **Sports fan**

1. How do you watch the races? On TV, on streaming platforms or at a specific place?
2. Which race is your favorite on the Formula 1 calendar?
3. What do you think of the current state of Formula 1 racing?

#### **Sport teams**

1. Do you have a favorite F1 team?
  - a. Why? Functional/symbolic attributes?
2. Do you have a favorite driver?
  - a. If so, what qualities or characteristics do you admire most about them?
3. For how long has this been your favorite team/driver?
4. How do you think your favorite driver/team compares to their competitors?
5. Do you follow any other drivers/teams besides your favorite?

- a. If so, who and why?
6. Have you ever met or interacted with your favorite driver/team in any way?
7. How important is a team's history and legacy when it comes to choosing which team to support?
8. How much weight do you give to factors like driver skill, car performance, and team strategy when determining which team to support?
9. Do you have any personal connections to a particular team or driver, such as nationality, hometown, or family ties?
10. How do you think your favorite F1 team's brand image and messaging differs from their competitors, and what impact does that have on your decision to support them?
11. Do you think your favorite team's performance on the track impacts your decision to support them as a brand, or do other factors play a bigger role in your decision-making process?

### **Consumer brand relationship**

1. Do you usually watch the race yourself or with other people?
2. Do you know other fans, and do you often talk with other people about F1?
  - a. how/why?
3. Have you watched "Drive to Survive"?
  - a. Do you believe that there is a difference between the fans who started watching the sport after the series and those who watched the sport before the show came out?
4. What are your emotions towards the sport? For example, do you get sad when your favorite team loses or get extremely happy when they win?
  - a. Does it take up much of your time thinking about formula 1?
5. Do you think it signals status to watch formula 1?

### **Brand personality**

6. How would you describe the personality or values of your chosen F1 team? What sets them apart from other teams in the sport?
7. Do you have a formula 1 team that you dislike and if so, why?

8. Have you ever felt that the driver or the team fits you as a person?

**Co-creation: Consumer tribes, subcultures and brand communities**

9. What is your favorite thing about being a formula 1 fan?
10. Have you bought any merchandise from the team or the driver? In that case, what does that mean to you?
11. Would you still follow Formula 1 if you had no one to talk to about it?
12. Are the other fans a big part of your love for the sport?
13. How do you stay connected with news or updates about F1? Ex social media etc
14. Are you following the team or the driver you are supporting on social media?
  - a. Are you following any other team or driver that you do not support?
15. Do you partake in games that formula 1 has?
16. Do you contribute to the formula 1 brand community? if so, how?

**Brand loyalty**

1. Would you ever switch your favorite team? If so, why? (Or have you ever switched?)
2. Have you had negative experiences or disappointment with your chosen F1 team?
  - a. How did this impact your loyalty to the team?
3. How does your relationship with your team compare with your relationship with other brands?