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# The creation of fan engagement through social media

A study of Norwegian elite football clubs

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# Abstract

Social media puts football clubs in an ideal position to reach fans, and to establish and foster interactive, long-term relationships with them. Also, the large number of followers indicates that fans appreciate sport organizations presence on social media in general. As online fan engagement is shown to create several types of value for the fan, research has yet to examine how football clubs can create engagement. The purpose of this thesis was therefore to examine how Norwegian elite football clubs create fan engagement through social media.

By combining the theoretical framework of relationship marketing, value co-creation, customer engagement, and networks and engagement platforms, four research propositions were made. The research propositions were used to discuss the findings.

A case study approach was applied, for which three clubs were selected. First, a quantitative netnographic method was used to collect data from the football clubs' social media platforms. Second, a qualitative interview method was used to get a detailed explanation of how the managers engage with their fans through social media.

The findings show that football clubs in Eliteserien strive for fan engagement and relationship creation through their social media platforms. This is mainly achieved by using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The content published to improve fan engagement and relationships are mainly videos, match-related information, and content with a sense of humor. As new social media channels develop constantly, further research should investigate how football clubs follow up new trends and how the clubs establish social media platforms to reach out to their online target groups.

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# 1. Introduction

Social media plays a significant role throughout all aspects of life in todays' society. Web 2.0 connects networks of people in addition to networks of information. User-generated content has become the new norm, and individuals can now interact, generate and share multimedia content easily (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 8). Obviously, also sport organizations, and particular football clubs, are present on social media channels today. In fact, with all the benefits provided it is not a choice anymore, but rather a mandatory question about how well they do it. Social media is shown to put football clubs in an ideal position in order to reach fans, and to establish and foster an interactive, long-term relationship with them (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015, p. 63; Wallace et al., 2011, p. 439; Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 435).

Eliteseriebarometeret, an annual report about the development of professional football in Norway, shows that football clubs in Eliteserien experience a decreasing trend of spectators in the stadium (Deolitte, 2019, p. 8). While this trend affects football clubs' income due to decreasing ticket sales, the clubs also risk losing an important platform to engage with their fans. In this regard, social media can fulfill various important functions. It provides an alternative platform for the clubs to stay in touch with their fans and foster fan relationships. This opportunity has shown to be particularly valuable during the Covid-19 lockdown, when physical contacts between the clubs and their fans were impossible. However, by strengthening the relationships with their fans through social media, the clubs may ultimately succeed in turning the trend around and increase the number of spectators in the stands again.

As social media is shown to be an ideal platform to establish and foster long-time relationships, one of the main opportunities to do so, is by having an ongoing dialogue with fans and create fan engagement (Abeza et al., 2013, p. 134). Previous literature suggests that online fan engagement is proven to create several types of value for the fans (Marbach et al., 2016, p. 513), but research has yet to investigate how football clubs create engagement. This thesis will contribute to the current body of literature by providing a better understanding of football clubs' approach to creating online fan engagement and investigating the types of engagement that can be created through social media channels.

Based on these considerations, the following research question has been developed in order to make a contribution to the existing literature. An open formulation of the research question was chosen to include findings that were not thought of prior to the study.

How do Norwegian elite football clubs create fan engagement through social media?

By addressing this research question, the thesis aims to provide an understanding of how fan engagement is created by the Norwegian football clubs' communication managers. Using a qualitative research method, interviews with the managers are done to understand not only what, but also why they choose to publish particular content with regards to the creation of fan engagement.

In chapter 2 the conceptual framework of the thesis is presented to give an understanding of the complexity of social media and communication through social media channels. Further in chapter 2 the theory is presented, before the literature review highlights previous literature in the field. Chapter 2 ends with four research propositions derived from the conceptual framework. In chapter 3 the context of the thesis is explained, and the research methodology of choice is presented in chapter 4. The research method is a triangular mixed method including netnography and interviews. Netnography was chosen to collect information that is publicly available in online forums and interviews were chosen to collect detailed information from the managers. The findings from the empirical studies are presented in chapter 5. In chapter 6, the findings are discussed and compared with the research propositions. Chapter 7 consists of a conclusion, limitations of the thesis, and suggestions for future research.

# 2.    Conceptual framework

In this chapter, the theoretical approach to study the research question is presented and explained. The chapter starts with an explanation of social media and engagement platforms, and the opportunities of communication and collaboration through these channels. This was found necessary for the research question because social media is a complex environment, and an explanation of some main elements was considered essential to provide understanding. Next, the theory highlights the relationship marketing approach, value co-creation, customer engagement and networks in engagement platforms. Further, the literature review clarifies why these approaches are important in the study of professional football clubs and fan engagement. In the final part of the chapter, research propositions derived from the presented conceptual framework are suggested, and later used to discuss the findings.

## *2.1    Social media and social media platforms*

Social media can be defined as 'the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility" (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 4). This is a complex definition because the social media exist within a complex and rapidly evolving environment, and within the social media channels there are many options to engage with the followers. For this thesis, social media is considered an important place for marketing managers to communicate and collaborate with their actors as they seek to create engagement among fans through the social media channels.

Facebook & Twitter were the social media channels chosen as the starting point for this thesis. They were considered the most prominent social-networking channels and are well established with a large number of online fans. The channels also provide different features and opportunities to communicate and interact with the followers. Facebook was considered as a channel to interact with the clubs' followers, while Twitter was perceived to be a channel where short information can be shared quickly to a large number of followers (Hopkins, 2013, p. 112). For this thesis, I want to include both

channels to examine communalities and differences, in addition to how managers use several social media channels to engage with their fans. Besides, the most recent critical review of social media research in the area of sport management suggests that Facebook and Twitter have received considerable attention from scholars (Abeza et al., 2015, p. 607).

To differentiate how content is communicated through the social media channels, Tuten and Solomon (2018) use the four zones of social media: zone 1 Social Community, zone 2 Social Publishing, zone 3 Social Entertainment, and zone 4 Social Commerce. The four zones framework is not set in stone as various uses of social media can lead to overlaps between two or even more zones. Social media are networked around relationships, technologically enabled, and based on the principles of shared participation (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 13).

Zone 1 is the social communities, in this zone creating and maintaining relationships through the common interest of the community are in the focus. This zone features multi-way communication, conversation, collaboration, and the sharing experience of resources. Zone 2 is social publishing. This zone aids in the dissemination of content to an audience by hosting content while also enabling audience participation and sharing. Zone 3 is social entertainment. The social entertainment zone is the place where activities are designed to provide the audience with pleasure and enjoyment. Zone 4 is social commerce. Social commerce encompasses social tools that enable shared participation in a buying decision. This might also include marketing. The four zones framework is a useful way to cut through the clutter and get an overview of social media content. The zones of social media are shown in figure 1 (Tuten & Solomon, 2018).

*Figure 1: The four zones of Social Media (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 12).*

## 2.2   Communication and collaboration

From the definition of social media, communication and collaboration were considered important terms to examine when answering the research question. Social media have developed from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, and consumers have also developed in the way of using social media channels. As Whitburn et al. (2020, p. 418) claim, "… consumers do not only receive marketing messages passively, but also actively seek information when needed, through search engines, social media communities, video sharing platforms, and brand websites". This development of digital and social media channels has forced organizations to adapt in communicating information in terms of credibility and effectiveness. In the Web 2.0 this is affected by social influence on consumers, word of mouth, and how advocacy has increased in importance for marketers (Whitburn et al., 2020, p. 419).

This new type of media provides two-way communication to interact with customers (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 435). However, as social media facilitates fan interaction, content about the club and experiences with other fans, it provides an excellent opportunity for fans to cocreate value with the brand. In line with the sport value framework, social media channels provide platforms where different actors co-create value in a network (Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13). This suggests that social media can be

used to facilitate for communication and collaboration in a network of actors, to create fan engagement.

The team is a natural actor in the network, but the sponsors should also be incorporated. Including sponsors in this network to create commercial social media posts gives an additional platform for sponsors to promote their products to a lot of online fans. But, even though sponsors account for a great deal of income for football clubs, the managers should be careful when including them, as too much direct promotional massages communicated through social media can discourage or even irritate fans (McCarthy et al., 2014, p. 186).

## 2.3 Theory

The theories chosen to explain and discuss the research findings are presented in this section. First, relationship marketing is presented as the overall framework that explains the benefits of developing long-term fan relationships for both the fans and the club. Second, value co-creation is introduced because it is useful to explain how value is created through interaction of different actors on social media. Based on this, third, customer engagement is explained as a specific concept within value co-creation and it is, fourth, shown how social media networks can be used to serve as platforms to facilitate customer engagement.

### 2.3.1 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing is a useful tool to illustrate the current consumer dominated perspective of marketing, and has been developed into a widely accepted marketing paradigm (Grönroos, 2004, p. 99). Relationship marketing appears different from conventional marketing in terms of ethics and values. The relationship requires a long-term view, mutual respect, a win-win strategy, and the acceptance of the customer as a partner and coproducer of value and not just a passive recipient of a supplier's product (Gummesson, 1998, p. 243). Grönroos (2004, p. 100) identifies mainly three components to successfully implement a relationship marketing strategy: (1) a planned communication process supporting the development and enhancement of relationships, (2) an interaction process as the core of relationship marketing, and (3) a value process

as the outcome of relationship marketing. With these three components in mind, relationship marketing should lead to a customer perceived value of the service or product (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 327; Grönroos, 2004, p. 103). It is important to understand the relationship marketing approach as a consumption of a service or a product that is based on a long-time relationship process (Grönroos, 2004, p. 99). Gummesson (1998, p. 244) made a definition of relationship marketing that is as simple as it is genius: "Relationship marketing is marketing seen as relationships, networks and interactions".

In relationship marketing, the marketing exchange is seen as a process consumption rather than the transaction marketing's outcome consumption (Grönroos, 2004, p. 100). Since the central aim of relationship marketing is to be a total service offering, the management of an interaction process is the core of relationship marketing, in the same way that product exchange is the core of transaction marketing (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 327). Because the relationship marketing is understood as a process, the marketing managers' work contains of managing all the actions of the process. This can be from identifying potential customers, to establishing a relationship with them, and then to maintaining the relationship that has been established and to enhance it so that more business as well as good references and favorable word of mouth are generated. Finally, sometimes relationships are terminated either by the supplier or by the customer (or by any other party in the network of relationships), or they just seem to fade away. Such situations must also be managed carefully by the supplier or service provider (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 327; Grönroos, 2004, p. 101).

This understanding of marketing as relations has developed since the 1980s and led to thinking of marketing in terms of *service-for-service* exchange rather than exchange in terms of goods-for-goods or goods-for-money. This new thinking outlined a framework from Vargo and Lusch (2017, p. 47), that has become known as Service-Dominant logic. Vargo and Lusch (2017, p. 47) ideas consist, first, of the marketing activity, that is the activities emanating from specialized knowledge and abilities that people do for themselves and others, and the activities they want done for them, not the goods. These activities are only occasionally used in the transmission of the service and represent the source of value and thus the purpose of exchange. Second, value is cocreated, rather than created by one actor and passively received by the consumer (Vargo & Lusch,

2017, p. 47). Vargo and Lusch (2017) have contributed the importance of value co-creation to the marketing literature. The authors claim that customers are always co-creators of value, and that the firm cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions.

### 2.3.2 Value co-creation

To make sense of value co-creation, Grönroos and Voima (2012, p. 12) argue that value creation is best defined as the customer's creation of value-in-use. Grönroos and Voima (2012, p. 12) investigate co-creation of value in the perspective of service logic, and their analysis indicates that the firm's and customer's processes and activities can be divided into a provider sphere, and a customer sphere. The provider sphere is where the firms' production of resources and processes is only value facilitation, since only potential value is formed. There is no direct contact with the customer and therefore the sphere is closed for the customer. In the customer sphere the customer creates value independently from the firm, as individual persons, customers create value in different ways and appreciates different processes and activities. The customer sphere is closed for the firm, because no direct interaction exists, where the provider could take part in the customer's experience of value-in-use and influence it (Grönroos & Voima, 2012, p. 12).

The provider sphere and the customer sphere meet in the joint sphere, where there is direct interaction between the customer and the firm. In the joint sphere, the customers' role is twofold, the customer is a co-producer of resources and processes with the provider. Although the customer opens up a joint value creation sphere for the firm, the customer, is however, always the value creator. Therefore, if direct interactions occur the provider may only get an opportunity to engage in the customer's value creation process and take on the role of a value co-creator with the customer (Grönroos & Voima, 2012, p. 12).

In the context of sports, the customers, which in this context are coined to as fans, 'perceived value' must be understood as value-in-context (Horbel et al., 2016, p. 524). The fans consume club related content in different ways, for example a league match can be watched from the stadium, in a pub or at home. This creates a fan's perceived value dependent on its' consumption context, that is where the fan watches the league

match. Club related consumption are for many fans, part of their self-identity, and as the internet continues to grow, fans, as customers, exhibit social and cultural attachment to the club on a global scale (McCarthy et al., 2014, p. 185). For the club to create fan perceived value they must consider in which context the fans consume the clubs' content. Different social media content is necessary to produce and deliver fan perceived value for the stadium spectator, the pub-lover or the family man at home.

### 2.3.3  Customer engagement

Customer engagement is seen as a customer-to-firm relationship that goes beyond the core purchase or service offering, resulting from motivational drivers – such as writing reviews or providing word-of-mouth recommendations (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254). This view focuses on behavioral manifestations of engagement, and does not take other relational concepts, as loyalty, involvement trust, in consideration. By building on this approach and drawing on both the Service-Dominant logic and the expanded domain of relationship marketing, (Brodie et al., 2011) contribute a broader and more rigorous theoretical analysis of the customer engagement concept in order to provide a general definition:

> "Customer engagement (CE) is a *psychological state* that occurs by virtue of *interactive, co-creative customer experience* with a *focal agent/object* (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships. It occurs under a specific set of context-dependent conditions generating differing CE levels; and exists as a *dynamic, iterative process* within service relationships that *cocreate value*. CE plays a *central role* in a nomological network governing service relationship in which other relational concepts (e.g., involvement, loyalty) are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative CE processes. It is a *multidimensional concept* subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions" (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 261).

This general definition was the first to define customer engagement that is suitable across a range of situations, by portraying the relevant dimensions generically, rather than more narrowly or context specific. The broad theoretical perspective is used to differentiate customer engagement from other relational concepts within a nomological network that characterize specific service relationships One must also have in mind that

the essential to the definition are the customers' interactive and co-created experiences, that play a central role in focal service relationships (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 262).

Online customer engagement builds on Brodie et al. (2011, p. 264) work (Marbach et al., 2016, p. 503). Customers' engagement behavior in online communities is mainly affected by two concepts: personality traits and customer-perceived value. Several personality traits were found to be related to online customer engagement, namely: introversion/extroversion, (dis)agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, need for activity, need for learning and altruism. On the other hand customers engaging in Facebook brand communities perceive six different forms of customer value: social value, play, efficiency, excellence, aesthetic and altruistic value (Marbach et al., 2016, p. 518). As this thesis investigates from the managers' point of view, we cannot examine the personality traits, but customer-perceived value can be an important element to the analysis in how brands communicate content through their online, social media platforms.

Marbach et al. (2016, p. 503) claim that the term customer engagement was preferred in their online customer engagement study because their participants were actual customers of the brands they engage with on Facebook. Hence, Brodie et al. (2019, p. 177) argue that engagement occurs among different types of versatile actors, not just customers and consumers, and the term actor engagement is therefore a more suitable term.

### 2.3.4 Networks and engagement platforms

Engagement platforms are described as physical or virtual touch points designed to provide structural support for the integration of resources, and thereby co-creation of value between actors in a service ecosystem (Breidbach et al., 2014, p. 596). They are embedded within service ecosystems and enable and support continuous interaction between actors. As engagement platforms enable interaction and collaboration of actors and facilitate resource integration, understanding engagement platforms are crucial when managing co-creation processes (Buser et al., 2020, p. 5).

The term of engagement platform has been considered as superior in the marketing literature, because the platforms are facilitating interaction, value co-creation, and

engagement among multiple actors (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017, p. 765). Because the complexity of social media provides the football clubs with an opportunity to not only interact and engage with their fans, engagement platforms are chosen for this thesis to understand how the clubs collaborate with other actors to create fan engagement.

## 2.4   Literature review

The literature review aims to give the reader an overview of relevant literature on the topic of fan engagement through social media in sports. To do so, the section includes literature in the field of social media and communication, fan relationships, social media channels and fan engagement. The section finally highlights several gaps in the current literature and the suggested contributions of the thesis to the sport management literature.

To begin, the research on social media in the field of sport management started slowly in the start of the 21$^{st}$ century, but an increasingly number of articles occurred in the years to come. According to Abeza et al. (2015, p. 605), until 2014 six areas within social media have got attention in the sport management literature: I. the nature of social media; II. defining constructs; III. how social media has been used as marketing and communication tool; IV. legal and ethical considerations; V. industry applications, VI. social media's impact in marketing and journalism practice (Abeza et al., 2015, p. 605). In this period most of the research has focused on Twitter (41,7%) and Facebook (12,5%) (Abeza et al., 2015, p. 607). After the sport management scholars increased the research on social media, several researchers shows that the evolution of communication through Web 2.0 has been effective to gain attention and popularity for both international sport organizations, athlete super stars, and professional sport teams (Hopkins, 2013, p. 112; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015, p. 63; Su et al., 2020, p. 438; Wang, 2020, p. 2; Winand et al., 2019, p. 225). For sport organizations, communication through social media is not only beneficial to maintain and increase their fan base, but also to positively impact the brand-image of the organization and increase fan loyalty (Filo et al., 2015, p. 175; Kunkel et al., 2016, p. 128). As indicated by the large number of followers, fans appreciate sport organizations presence on social media in general (Parganas et al., 2015, p. 564).

The development of social media has provided a great opportunity for sports organizations to establish relationships with their fans (Wang & Zhou, 2015, p. 143), and is an effective tool in meeting relationship marketing goals (Abeza, Finch, et al., 2019, p. 344; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015, p. 247; Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 435). Ongoing dialogue was considered the prime benefit of social media as a relationship marketing tool (Abeza et al., 2013, p. 138). Through ongoing dialogue, teams are able to understand their fans' constantly changing needs and to arrange for co-created value that facilitates the building, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationship with the fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, et al., 2019, p. 102). To enhance the relationship between professional sport teams and their fans, social media channels provide a stage to humanize their brand. By communicating social media content using a friendly tone, employing humor, and participating in real-time personalized conversation with their fans, teams are improving their fan relationships (Abeza, O'Reilly, et al., 2019, p. 102).

Further, building relationship with fans through social media communication tools, has been given some attention in the literature. Hopkins (2013, p. 117) shows that increasing the quality of the communication with a sport organization through social media, will increase fan popularity, both on the platforms as well as the fans' overall experience with the club. Hopkins (2013, p. 117) further demonstrates that discovering and using the strengths of the different platforms is effective to improve fan popularity. Facebook and Twitter were found to create a deeper relationship between the club and its fans, interacting with and engaging them in new ways (Hopkins, 2013, p. 117). Twitter is effective to strengthen the fans' relationship to sport organizations and sport organizations use the platform to disseminate information. Thereby, the platform can have a "megaphone effect" (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 351; Wang, 2020, p. 9). Facebook is capable of giving fans a more active role, and therefore fosters the links between fans and the club (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015, p. 71).

The role of Facebook and Twitter as prominent communication channels is also confirmed by the findings of Maderer et al. (2018, p. 13). For Europe's most valuable football clubs, Facebook and Twitter are important channels to communicate a variety of product-related attributes, in addition to non-product-related attributes. The channels have the potential to increase the quality of communication between supporters and

their club, as sport clubs exploit this opportunity to create engagement with their fans (Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13).

Professional football clubs publish mostly product-related brand attributes relating to the team, it's players, and the manager (Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13), through their Twitter, Facebook and Instagram account (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018, p. 432; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015, p. 71; Parganas et al., 2015, p. 564). However, several non-product-related attributes were part of the clubs' content as well, including tradition and value, importance of the stadium, the teams' history, and sponsors. Because fans experience social media content in real time, the clubs are capable of giving the fans a more active role and have the opportunity to engage with fans by sharing fans' posts, greeting fans, or dealing with fans' comments. These findings also suggest that through social media, sport clubs offer content that provides information about and deeper knowledge of the club as a relationship-marketing activity (Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13).

Even though several of the studies presented have found social media a suitable place to stimulate fan engagement, research on how sport clubs can encourage fan engagement through social media is so far lacking. Marbach et al. (2016, p. 513) propose that engagement is linked to a value perception by customers, which explains the difference between successful and failing online communities. By using the perspective of service-dominant logic, creating engagement platforms through social media is considered useful to create business customer engagement, and play a supportive role by reinforcing, promoting or reporting on the activity undertaken on other platforms (Hollebeek, 2019, p. 95). This thesis aims to fill the research gap, by investigating how professional football teams engage with their fans through online engagement platforms. As highlighted in the literature review, communicating through social media is undoubtedly beneficial for professional sport teams, but to understand how engagement is created with the clubs' fans is an undiscovered theme. As the Covid-19 pandemic stroke us and shut down the society this topic got even more important, as the clubs cannot invite the fans to the stadium and hence, miss the physical touchpoints with them. Therefore, they must engage with them on digital platforms. In addition, Su et al. (2020, p. 443) found in their study of TikTok use during the Covid-19 lockdown that 15 second TikTok videos of sport superstars are easily consumed and engage fans.

By using the logic of relationship marketing on the case of Norwegian elite football clubs, the thesis will contribute to existing literature in the field of sport management by increasing the understanding of the creation of fan engagement through social media.

## *2.5    Research propositions*

Figure 2 shows an overview of the theoretical framework presented in this chapter. Social media channels and where the football clubs decide to establish engagement platforms are the baseline for the thesis. Collaboration and communication through several social media platforms are suggested to create benefits for the football club as well as the fans. As the literature review highlights, communication through social media can create fan engagement and value co-creation with fans, and engagement through social media is suggested to be positive for fan relationships. This thesis aims to further investigate how communication through social media collaboration with other actors herein can create fan engagement and facilitate value co-creation. As this chapter suggests, effective creation of fan engagement and value co-creation through online engagement platforms will improve the relationship between the football club and their fans.

*Figure 2: Overview of the conceptual framework for the thesis.*

Based on figure 2, four research propositions are suggested for the thesis. It's important to note that the research propositions are the researchers' tentative understanding of the theory, and the declarative sentences cannot be tested directly, but will be discussed in light of the findings in chapter 6.

1. Football clubs are present on social media and have established engagement platforms on various social media.
2. The clubs use different types of communication to effectively engage their fans.
3. The clubs collaborate with other actors, such as the team, the fans, and the sponsors, in their social media activity to effectively increase fan engagement.
4. Fan engagement and value co-creation through online engagement platforms improve the relationship between the football club and its fans.
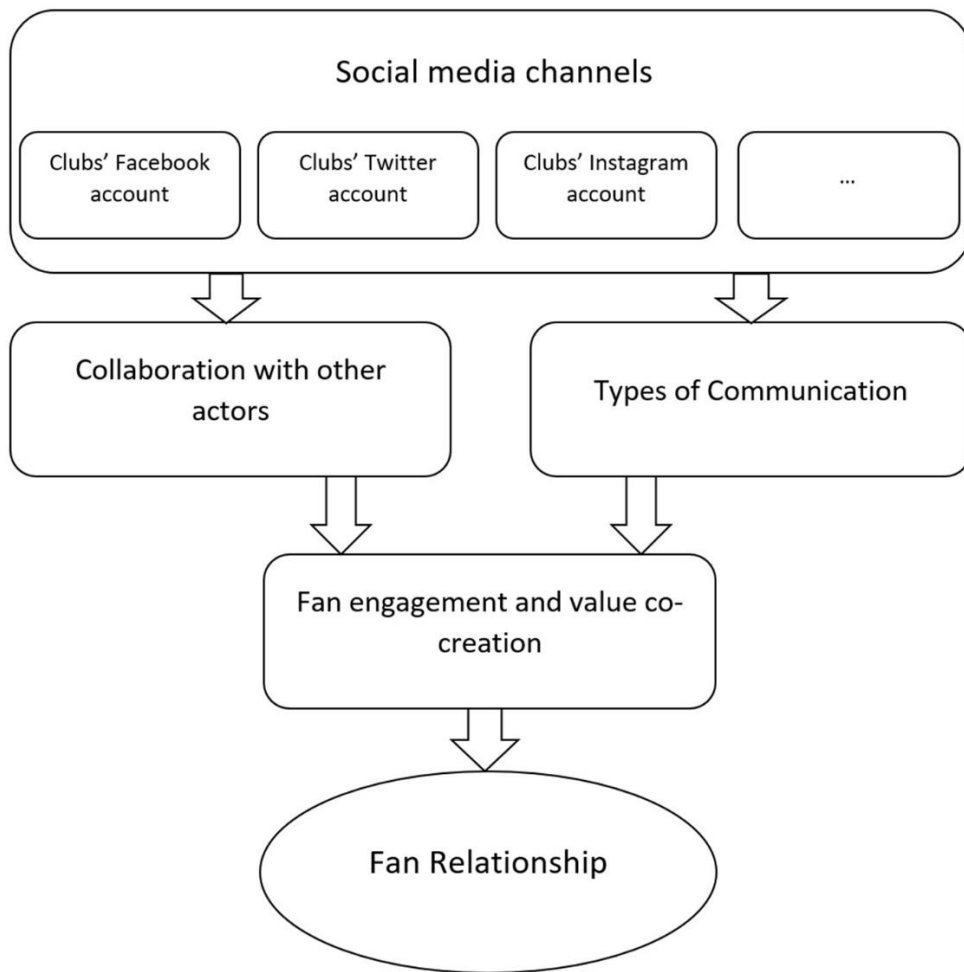
# 3.   Context

Eliteserien was chosen as the context for this thesis for several reasons. First, the author has a deeper understanding and interest of Norwegian football. Second, Eliteserien was also the most practical, considering the language, availability, and circumstances. Third, Eliteserien is the top Norwegian football league and fully professional, which means that the clubs consist of full-time paid players and staff. In 2018, the total revenue in Eliteserien was €146M and had the 19th highest revenue income of European leagues (UEFA, 2020, p. 58). Even though the league is one of the smaller leagues in Europe, 13 of the current 16 clubs have staff with the main responsibility of communication, and 8 of them are specified for social media.

Eliteserien consists of 16 clubs in total, that compete in a round-robin structure where each of the 16 clubs plays all the other 15 clubs twice – once at home and once away. Those who finish 15th and 16th by the end of the tournament relegate to the second-tier league, and the 14th team enters the promotion/relegation play-off. The champions of the tournament enter the qualifying rounds of UEFA Champions League, which is the top European cup. The 2nd and 3rd place enter the UEFA Europa League qualifying rounds, which is the second best European cup. In Eliteserien, most of the matches are played during the weekends, with 66% of the matches played on Sunday in 2019 (Ermakov, 2020, p. 15).

One of the main incomes for the clubs comes from selling tickets to spectators. This makes the fans an important actor for the football clubs. Fans of a football club are not similar to usual customers to organizations. Their fandom is about expressing their identity and attitude to life, knowing everything about the club, sharing intimate details with it, standing by it, especially in bad times, and experiencing intense emotions. Indeed, loyal fans often remain behaviorally loyal to their club throughout their life, and fans and their clubs are strongly bound to each other (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010, p. 664). In addition, as brand associations through social media are suggested to increase fan loyalty (Kunkel et al., 2016, p. 129), the clubs' social media activity might attract the fans to the stadium.

# 4.    Research method

This study examines how football clubs in the Norwegian first league, Eliteserien, create engagement with their fans through social media. In this chapter, the methodological approach to study the research question is presented and explained. As this is an exploratory case study, the social constructivist worldview was considered as the baseline for this thesis and is first described. Then, the research design of the study based on the research question is outlined before the data collection and data analysis are explained. The chapter ends with an assessment of the thesis' reliability, validity, and ethical concerns.

## 4.1    Philosophical approach

The philosophical worldview of choice was social constructivism. The philosophical ideas influence the practice of research, and this information will help explain why the qualitative approach was chosen for this thesis (Creswell, 2009, p. 6). I have chosen to support Creswell in using the term 'worldview' as meaning "a basic set of beliefs that guide action". The term worldview is a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds (Creswell, 2009, p. 5), which I find suitable for my thesis. Others have used the term 'paradigm' (Thagaard, 2018, p. 37), which maybe is a more common term, but the meaning of the words are basically the same.

Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects of things (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The social constructivists aim to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. Broad and open-ended questions are usually asked to get the participants' subjective meanings, because these meanings are formed through interaction with others, and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). The key idea that is fundamental to my research is that people construct their own meaning of their surroundings. The possibilities to create engagement through social media are complex, someone

experiences certain ways to create engagement, whereas others experience different ways to create engagement, and both procedures could be effective in their own way.

## 4.2    Research design

With the view of a social constructivist and an intention to investigate how football clubs engage with their fans, an exploratory case study design was chosen. Case study was chosen because the design aim to study a lot of information about a small number of units or cases (Thagaard, 2018, p. 56; Yin, 2014, p. 17). This thesis about how engagement is created by football clubs in Eliteserien on social media, fits in the category of collective case studies where a number of cases are studied in order to investigate a general phenomenon (Silverman, 2013, p. 143; Thagaard, 2018, p. 56). The aim of using a case study for this thesis is to examine a small number of cases, but secure saturation of information collected within this community.

In light of my research question a triangular mixed method was chosen to fully understand how the clubs' communication managers engage with their fans. In the beginning I chose semi-structural interviews as the methodology design, but as the thesis developed, I wanted to supplement with netnographic data in social media to get a better understanding of how fans are engaged in social media. Triangulation of netnographic data with data collected using other methods, such as interviews, may be useful if the researcher seeks to generalize to other groups than the population studied (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65).

## 4.3    Data collection

To examine how Norwegian football clubs create engagement with their fans through social media, the data collection was done in two steps. The netnographic method was applied to determine whether the clubs owned official Facebook and Twitter accounts, and to assess the activity on these platforms. Later, semi-structural interviews were applied to get a detailed explanation of how the managers engage with their fans through social media.

### 4.3.1  Sample

Three Norwegian football clubs are strategically chosen as the sample to answer my research question. After the netnographic data collection, the clubs were chosen strategically with three requirements; that their Facebook and Twitter accounts are active, that they had a satisfying number of followers, and that there was significant number of likes, comments, and shares in their Facebook content. When the clubs were chosen, contact with their communication or social media managers was done through e-mail. The e-mail contained information about the project and the informed consent (Appendix A), which the participants agreed to before the interviews and signed later on. To one of the cases the e-mail was sent to the wrong person, but he responded with contact information about the more appropriate participant which joined in the following week.

One person from each of the three clubs was recruited to the study. After the interviews were done, the participants got a number from their time the interview was done. The first interviewee become participant 1 from case 1, the second interviewee got participant 2 from case 2, and lastly the third interviewee got participant 3 from case 3.

### 4.3.2  Netnography

Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities, and is an online marketing technique for providing consumer insight (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). Netnography is chosen because it is a research technique that uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influencers of relevant online consumer groups. In addition, compared with focus groups and interviews, netnography is far less obtrusive and can provide information in a manner that is less costly and more timely (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). To get an overview of the Norwegian football clubs' social media use, the netnographic technique was used to examine all the clubs' engagement platforms on Facebook and Twitter. The reason for applying the netnographic technique was two-fold; to secure a strategic sample that have active Facebook and Twitter accounts, and to compare their Facebook and Twitter use with the results from the interviews.

The first step was to determine if the clubs had been marked as a verified account by Facebook and Twitter. All three clubs that were included have verified accounts that are

marked with a blue verification dot in their nickname, both on Facebook and Twitter. In addition, all clubs have open Facebook and Twitter accounts, and the posts and tweets are available for everyone. For the Facebook posts, data collection happened by dividing the different posts in the four zones of social media (figure 1) with a small description of each post. For the tweets, they were more similar with each other and therefore merged into suitable categories. For the Facebook posts, engagement was measured by each posts' number of likes, comments, and shares, this was not considered essential for the tweets.

The netnographic research period included three different weeks throughout the 2020 season, week 23, 31 and 43. The 2020 season was special compared to earlier years, because of the corona virus the season started mid-June and carried out non-stop until mid-December, with a maximum of 600 spectators in the stands. In a normal year, Eliteserien is played in two parts, with the first part reaching from March to June, a season break in July, and the second part from August to November, with thousands of fans in the stadiums. For my thesis, this influenced the weeks chosen, but more importantly it might influence the way the football clubs engage with their fans through social media channels. Since the fans are not able to come to the stadium, the clubs cannot engage with their fans directly under matches, but social media may offer suitable channels to compensate for the lost fan engagement. Before the data collection, match-related attributes were considered as the main reason for clubs' establishment of engagement platforms in social media. Three weeks were picked strategically to strive for representativity in form of different football activity throughout the year. Week 43 was considered the most normal week because almost every club in Eliteserien had one match this week, and it was on Sunday. This gave a lot of opportunities to the communication managers, because the match-related content was not needed before the end of the week and they had time to publish non-match-related, fan engaging content if wanted. Week 31 was chosen for the opposite reason, in this week almost every club in Eliteserien had two matches, one on Wednesday and the other on Sunday. This gave a lot of match-related content and almost no room for non-match related content. If the predictions were successful, this should be the most fan engaging week. Week 23 was chosen because this was pre-season a couple of weeks before the season started. The clubs had non-official matches this week and it emphasizes how the communication

managers provide fan engaging content outside of the season. As the Twitter feed did not go back that far, week 23 is not included in the netnographic analysis of Twitter.

To sum it up, the netnographic data collection consists of one week without matches, one week with one match, and one week with two matches. This secures a week with no match-related attributes, a week with some, and a week with a lot of match-related attributes.

### 4.3.3  Interviews

Interviews were chosen to collect detailed information of how communication managers engage with their fans through the clubs' social media platforms. Interviews in case study research are usually guided conversations rather than structured queries. This means that even though a consistent line of inquiry is pursued, the actual stream of questions in a case study interview is likely to be fluid rather than rigid (Yin, 2014, p. 110). The interview approach is based on the fluid steam of questions and can be characterized as a semi-structural approach.

The semi-structural interview approach has a flexible structure where the main themes are written as questions in the interview protocol, but new ones may occur as the interview is carried out. Because the interview process has a flexible structure, the interviewer can adjust the questions based on the interviewee's behavior. By doing so, the interviewer can catch up new, relevant themes that appears during the interview. This can add valuable information to the research question, which the researcher has not thought about prior the interviews (Thagaard, 2018, p. 91).

The interview protocol (Appendix B) was based on previous literature and theory. The main themes in the interview protocol were social media in general, social media content, engagement through social media, target groups, collaborators/sponsors, and Covid-19. The themes that got the most attention were social media content and engagement through social media. In addition, the following components were included in the interview process: instructions for the interviewer to follow so that standard procedures are used from one interview to another; the questions (typically an ice-breaker question at the beginning); probes for the questions; space between the questions to record responses; a final thank-you statement to acknowledge the time the

interview spent during the interview (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). Recording of interviews was done with consent by the participants and in line with the regulations to NSD (Appendix C).

## 4.4   Data analysis

Case studies have not much of fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the analysis of data, instead much depends on the researcher's own style of rigorous empirical thinking, along with sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations (Yin, 2014, p. 133).

Analysis of the netnographic data involved both data analysis and data interpretation (Kozinets, 2002, p. 67). Putting the content in the different zones of social media (figure 1), gave the possibility to observe commonalities and differences among all clubs in Eliteserien. As the research question aims to examine how the clubs create fan engagement, this was carefully considered in the data analysis. The three clubs chosen, were the ones that stand out in an engaging way, regarding likes, comments and shares, number of posts, type of content, or other engaging elements.

Data analysis of the interviews was done with a process that involves making sense out of text. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). With guidance of Creswell's (2009) data analysis in qualitative research, the process was done in several steps.

The first step was to write the interviews into a document to transform the raw data into transcripts. The transcripts were written word by word from the recording of the interviews. Hesitation from the participants was written with a comma and easily noted when reading through the transcripts later. Utterances, such as 'hm' and 'eh', was written in the first transcript but deleted in the next step as data was organized and prepared for analysis. The next step also included to read through all the data, to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning. General ideas of

the information from each interview were written down, but no codes were made before step number three. In step number three, coding was done to organize the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). Codes were shaped by how the data made sense. Some codes were easily discovered and became the major topics, other codes were considered unique topis, and the codes that were challenging to place often ended up as the leftovers. The list of topics was taken back to the data and reformulated as codes that were appropriate with segments of the text. The data material belonging to each category was assembled in one place and a preliminary analysis was performed. When data was assembled, the next step was to analyze each individual case and across different cases. Further, a description of the codes was represented in the qualitative narrative. The final step in the interview analysis was to make an interpretation of the data and to examine how it answers the research question.

## 4.5   Validity, reliability, and ethics

In this section the validity, reliability and ethics relating to the thesis are given attention. Within case study research, three types of validity deserve explicit attention: construct validity, internal validity; and external validity (Yin, 2014, p. 45). As internal validity is not considered relevant for exploratory studies, only construct- and external validity are discussed in this thesis. Further the reliability is discussed regarding the methodological ability to be repeated. Lastly, ethical concerns of the thesis are highlighted.

Content validity deals with the concerns about identifying the correct data collection methods (Yin, 2014, p. 46). Both, the netnographic and interview approach are well-known methods for investigating football clubs' social media activity (Abeza et al., 2013; Su et al., 2020). In addition, method triangulation strengthens the thesis content validity as the two research methods can be compared with each other. Also, content validity is strengthened by choosing the specific concept of fan engagement through social media, and identify operational measures that match the concept, such as likes, comments, and shares on Facebook.

External validity deals with the problem of knowing whether a study's findings are generalizable beyond the immediate study. For case studies the issues of striving for generalization are challenging, but as Yin (2014, p. 40) highlights, analytic generalization is seen as another way of generalizing the results from theory and theoretical propositions. No matter, striving for generalization from a case study is difficult, but by highlighting the theoretical approach which create the baseline for data analysis and interpretation, it is possible to suggest an understanding of how the interpretation led to conclusions. The research propositions made for this thesis strengthen the external validity as they are derived from previous research. To discuss the findings with the research propositions provides a basis for generalization if the findings support the research propositions. In addition, a strategically chosen sample increases the external validity as it provides considerable data.

The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study (Yin, 2014, p.49). Since the study has never been done before, striving for making as many of the steps operational as possible is done. Precise and structural description of the different steps in the procedure have been given. In addition, conduct research as if someone was looking over my shoulder to strive for reliability of the thesis. Also, precise explanations of the data analysis are provided.

Ethical concerns of the thesis have been given consideration. Approval from NSD is given and signed consent was delivered by all participants. Also, particular in the presentation of the data, but also throughout the thesis, considerations of neutral terminology, regarding sexuality, race, gender, and stereotypes, are given a thought. This is done to avoid offending a random reader of the thesis in the future. As the thesis does not investigate any sensitive, personal information, other approvals than the one from NSD were not needed.

# 5.     Findings

In this chapter the findings of the empirical study are presented. This thesis aims to understand how professional Norwegian football clubs effectively create fan engagement through social media. The findings from the quantitative netnographic analysis are presented first. Afterwards, the findings from the semi-structural interviews are presented. These include an overview of the football clubs' social media channels and types of communication used in these channels. Furthermore, it will be shown how they collaborate with other actors in their social media activities, and how they try to develop fan relationships using social media.

## 5.1    Netnography

The findings from the netnographic study show how the clubs have used Facebook and Twitter in the selected weeks (week 44, 31 and 23). The clubs' use of Facebook to communicate with their followers is presented in table 1 and the clubs' Twitter use is presented in table 2. Furthermore, the number of the clubs' followers on both Facebook and Twitter is included (pr. 20. August 2020). For each club and each of the selected weeks, table 1 displays the total number of the clubs' Facebook posts first and afterwards the posts are categorized by the four zones of social media (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 12). Social community includes the posts that facilitate the clubs' community and shares from the webpage. Social publishing includes the posts that facilitate fan engagement directly, for example by raising questions. Social commerce includes the clubs' posts of marketing or sponsors, for example the clubs' fan-store. Social entertainment includes the posts that create entertainment for the consumers, such as videos or online competitions. Table 2 shows the categorizations that suits for the clubs' Twitter use.

The number of likes, comments and shares are presented in parenthesis as average of the representative posts. According to these measures, most fan engagement on Facebook was created in week 31. The netnographic findings further show that most content published includes product-related attributes, mainly match-related attributes, but also non-product-related attributes where posted.

For club nr. 1 the match-related attributes created the most fan engagement in form of likes, comments, and shares on Facebook. Content about the match score, highlights after the match and that the team returns to the city after a match were the most fan engaging posts. In addition, the signing of a player stuck out and created significant likes, comments, and shares. The tweets for club nr. 1 include different type of content, including some videos and a considerable number of retweets from other actors. For club nr. 2 the match-related attributes, particular the results from the victories, did create the most fan engagement. Also, a video of the celebration from the wardrobe got a lot of fan engagement in form of likes, comments, and shares. The tweets for club nr. 2 were mostly live notifications, but also some videos. For club nr. 3, the post that got the most likes, comments and shares was a post in the social publishing category, asking: "What did you think of todays' game?" with a shared article from the webpage including a match summary. Also, the goals from a match in week 31 got the second most fan engagement. The Twitter content for club nr. 3 was mostly live notifications from the matches.

*Table 1: Netnographic analysis of the clubs' Facebook use in the weeks 44, 31 and 23.*

| Facebook: | Club 1<br>72 618 followers | Club 2<br>32 665 followers | Club 3<br>27 388 followers |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 44**: | **13 posts (383, 31, 8)** | **9 posts (115, 15, 2)** | **20 posts (90,4, 1)** |
| Social community | 7 posts (550, 30, 11) | 4 posts (104, 8, 2) | 11 posts (126, 4, 2) |
| Social publishing | 2 posts (204, 48, 8) | 2 posts (113, 33, 1) | 4 posts (41, 9, 0) |
| Social commerce | 1 post (75, 73, 2) | 1 post (159, 8, 1) | 3 posts (33, 1, 2) |
| Social entertainment | 3 posts (216, 6, 3) | 2 posts (120, 6, 3) | 2 posts (69, 1, 1) |
| **Week 31**: | **9 posts (855, 45, 20)** | **9 posts (635, 52, 11)** | **7 posts (304, 31, 2)** |
| Social community | 5 posts (638, 54, 15) | 4 posts (1022, 62, 11) | 2 posts (200, 9, 1) |
| Social publishing | - | 3 posts (164, 28, 1) | 3 posts (388, 60, 3) |
| Social commerce | - | - | - |
| Social entertainment | 4 posts (1000, 34, 27) | 2 posts (570, 59, 26) | 2 posts (283, 9, 1) |
| **Week 23** | **12 posts (214, 19, 27)** | **6 posts (131, 4, 6)** | **5 posts (98, 10, 1)** |
| Social community | 8 posts (254, 24, 6) | 4 posts (124, 8, 6) | 2 posts (58, 1, 2) |
| Social publishing | 2 posts (82, 0, 2) | - | 1 post (40,42, 0) |
| Social commerce | - | 1 post (30, 0, 2) | - |
| Social entertainment | 2 posts (184, 18, 2) | 1 post (262, 2, 10) | 2 posts (167, 3, 1) |

*Table 2: Netnographic analysis of the clubs' Twitter use in the weeks 44 and 31.*

| Twitter: | Club 1<br>16,2k followers | Club 2<br>12k followers | Club 3<br>8601 followers |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Week 44**: | 24 tweets – 6 retweets, 8 tweets social community, 9 from the web, 1 video | 45 tweets – 25 live notifications from 1 match, 8 videos, 8 tweets social community, 2 retweets, 2 from the web | 7 tweets – 1 diversity, 3 memory lane, 3 live notifications |
| **Week 31:** | 34 tweets – 12 retweets, 14 from the web, 3 videos, 5 social community | - | 28 tweets of live notifications from 2 matches |

## 5.2    Social media channels and clubs' engagement platforms

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the social media channels where all clubs are present on a daily basis. Participants from club 2 and 3 are also present on the platform TikTok. Club 3 have an ongoing YouTube channel, and the participant from club 1 are developing a series to publish on YouTube. TikTok and YouTube were considered platforms where the club reach out to the youngest fans, often under the age of 18. None of the participants are using snapchat, two of the participants explained snapchat as an option they abandoned:

> *«We have chosen to give less priority to Snapchat, quite simply because we feel It's a platform that is very similar Instagram, and Instagram Stories in particular. So, we have chosen to go in for communication through one of those platforms, and we have chosen Instagram as the one we want to priorities the most"* (participant 3).

Facebook was considered the platform that reached the most fans, but it was not consensus that this was the platform that created the most engagement. The participant from case 1 expressed that Facebook is the platform that have the most followers, but the fan engagement might be higher through Instagram, in particular the feature of Instagram Story. In addition, the participant from case 3 thought Facebook was the platform that the club had reached the most people in the recent decade, but this might

be changing in the last couple of years. The participant from case 2 did not want to choose the most engaging platform, and said:

> *«I feel that they are all important in their respective way. It is that, cause they are not similar, so I feel that all of them are useful, if not, I wouldn't be there. So, all of them are useful in their respective way, and it's important to be present because there are different people on the different platforms as well, so if you want to reach everyone you must be there"* (participant 2).

However, the fast development of social media platforms also brings along challenges. One participant call attention to the challenge of keeping up to track with the engagement through all the different engagement platforms. There can be direct messages, comments, retweets etc., that fans send to the clubs' engagement platforms. Even though all participants highlighted the importance of responding to all the fans, preferably directly to each of the inquiries, this was considered a time-consuming challenge because there is a lot of messages coming into the different platforms.

## 5.3   Types of communication, content, and fan engagement

When talking about fan engagement through social media it was impossible to not mention communication. Fan engagement is a result of how the club communicate through their social media engagement platforms. The participants, which everyone have the responsibility of clubs' social media accounts use several types of communication to engage with their fans through social media. In the end of the subchapter the different kind of communication and the engagement it aims to provide are summarized in table 2.

Firstly, all participants acknowledge that one-way communication with no facilitation of engagement was something they did, and sometimes this was unavoidable in a practical matter. Social media is after all platforms that offer high-speed sharing of information, and a place where the fans can look up information. This is the type of communication that facilitates fan engagement the least, but also the easiest content to publish. The

participant from case 3 highlight that he wants to publish informative content to get the media interested:

> *"Every week we post, on Mondays, publish our training schedule on the web-page, which is shared to Facebook, and to Twitter, cause it's important to reach out to the journalists and get their attention when we have training session, to do interviews, to write about us, and make news about us"* (participant 3).

The quote shows an important aspect of engagement. Even though the content does not facilitate for fan engagement, it provides useful information for other actors that contribute to spread the clubs' brand.

Secondly, the participants pointed at some methods they use to facilitate for fan engagement by reformulate the information content. The participant from case 1 used a question mark in the end of the sentence, and maybe add an easy question, for instance:

> *"Today is 43 days until season kick off, are you excited?"* (participant 1).

Another example is to evoke sassy quotes from important people in the club, like the star players, the coach, the chairman or the manager. Using a sassy quote or a smart comment in the communication will reach out to fans in a humoristic way and create engagement in forms of likes and comments, or even contribute to the fans' word of mouth. In addition, communicate through social media by articulate with the local accent in the community create pathos to the fans and a belonging in the community. This kind of communication is considered not hard to publish and are some methods the participants use to easily create a little bit engagement with their not-engaging, informative content.

Thirdly, the most efficient fan engagement through social media came from three types of content; videos, entertainment with a sense of humor, and give unique content. Video content has consensus among all participants to be fan engaging. No matter the form or length, video content is said to create a lot of likes and comments. Mainly highlights from matches, interviews with players or coach, try out trends/dancing with a sense of

humor, or go back in the archive and post a video from an earlier win, is the most used video forms. One participant explained it:

> *"Video – It could be from trainings, interviews, one day at the stadium, live from the practice, it's really just the imagination that set limits"* (participant 1).

Entertaining content with a sense of humor are also highlighted as fan engaging in form of likes and comments. Social media offer valuable platforms for the clubs to make entertainment outside of the pitch, not only on the pitch. Including humor in the content can be difficult, but if it is managed with humor that appeals to the fans, they will feel more attached to the club. In addition, messing around with other clubs, preferably the rival, are content the fans appreciate and are pointed out as engaging by the participants.

To serve content that no one else can give was the last thing that was pointed out as effective to create fan engagement. The participant from case 2 put it this way:

> «*Try to find content that the newspaper doesn't ask about all the time, cause the reporters are around all the time … attempt to give something that no one else are able to give. Because I have 24 players, I can use you know, and of course I can find content that no one else can, about the club"* (participant 2).

Thirdly, the ultimate stage of fan engagement is considered when the fans act like ambassadors and share the clubs' content through social media or word of mouth. The participant from case 3 highlighted the importance of the fans:

> *"The benefits are, as I touched, they (the fans) are ambassadors of the club. Everyone who follow us in social media, every time they tag our club, every time they share our content with their respective followers, they contribute to spread our news, posts, our brand and kind of our family, which is important. 'Word of mouth', of course is important, we want our club to be a hot topic in the lunch breaks, in the classrooms, in the workspaces, and all of this starts with us in the club, but everyone has an important role in this. There are not a few people in the communication division, everyone must contribute"* (participant 3).

The participant from case 2 highlights that he wants to make the fans understand that they are together about this, the club, the team and the fans. Therefore, it's important to have an easy dialogue and a close connection between the fans, the club, and the players. One challenge that was brought up to this was the boundaries in social media, for both fans and players. To express personal opinions in an online forum which is available for the whole world can be a scary thought and increase the boundaries of flaunting oneself. To sustain the fan engagement, it is important to provide a safe and easy communication platform through social media.

In the end, all of the participants considered the fans' feedback as decisive to get fan satisfaction and effectively create engagement. The participants had a feeling they got enough feedback from their fans but acknowledged that they can be better collecting feedback in order to get more constructive, and higher numbers, of feedback. This was considered an area where one can never be satisfied with the numbers, but always reach for higher, better and more constructive.

Figure 3 show the participants approach to what type of communication creates engagement among the fans. As fan engagement is not always the aim of every type of communication, the participants point at different types of communication that creates different type of fan engagement. For example, communication in form of information creates engagement in form of likes and ultimately word of mouth, and communication as competitions create engagement in form of participation and comments. The white arrows indicate the types of communication and the engagement it aims to create. The black arrows indicate, to effectively create engagement, communication and value for the particular fans should be provided.
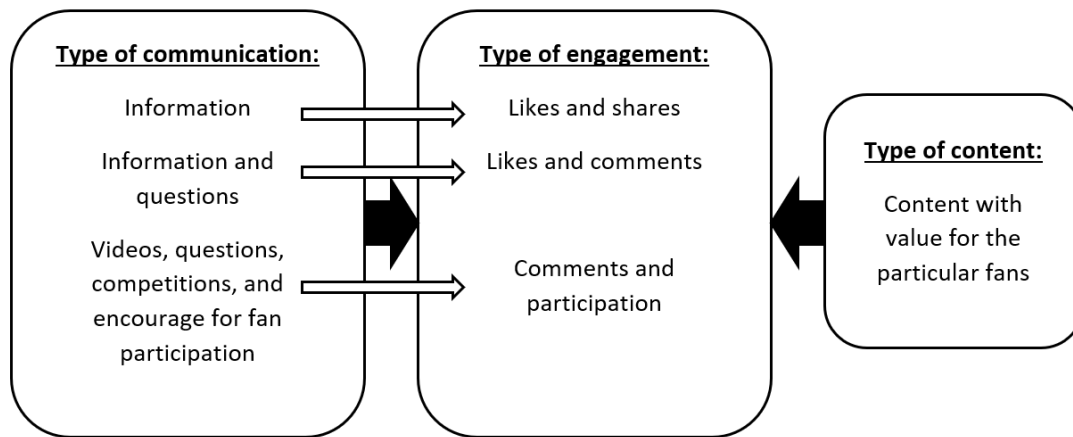
*Figure 3: Overview of the interviews' analysis of the types of communication and the engagement it aims for.*

It is important to clarify that the types of communication also can get less or more engagement depending on the content. For example, to post the weekly training schedule as information might engage fans or media to watch training sessions and talk about it afterwards. This will not only create likes, but with a little help from the snowball effect, create publicity and word of mouth. All participants brought up the importance of striving for fan engagement through communication in social media and believed that there must be a balance between the different types of communication, frequency and type of content that is published. Fan engagement in forms of discussion in the comment section, word-of-mouth, and feedback on social media content as direct message or in the comment section, was highlighted as advantages with engagement through social media.

Even though all participants acknowledged the importance of fan engagement, their strategies to achieve it was vague. Two of the participants acknowledged a lack of consistency but was improving content consistency by planning main themes that made a guide for the day-to-day content. In addition, participant 1 followed three guidelines when publishing content: make the fans come to the stadium, create characters of the players and coach, and to provide information. However, the day-to-day strategy have an ad-hoc approach for communication through social media, but this was not considered as a poor approach.

## 5.4    Collaborators

Collaborators were clearly an important aspect of creating fan engagement through social media. The fans are an important actor within themselves, but the participants also pointed out the team and the sponsors as important actors for creating fan engagement. In this section I will present how the participants use the clubs' professional team and their sponsors to effectively create fan engagement and create value for the team and the sponsors.

The findings show that all the participants had help when publishing through social media. The participants had the main responsibility but used other people to help them if they were wavering or not present at a certain match that should be communicated about in social media. Participant 1 revealed that he consults well-established people from the fanclub to get advice about the text and use wording that fits the local accent, but also, to avoid publishing content that could annoy the fans. Participant 2 stated that he consults people within the club, such as the managing director, whereas participant 3 mentioned that the club had hired a person that works with content production to secure good quality in the content published.

### 5.4.1  The team

The team, including players, coaches, and managers, are seen as the most important actor as it more or less is the reason for the popularity among fans. All participants highlighted the importance of including the team in social media, but with different approaches. The participant from case 3 has a direct dialogue with the players where he prepared them to appear in media and sees them as the most important ambassador for the club. He had a general intention that this is not only beneficial for the club, but also the player:

> "*We want them to understand that we are together about this, this is not only something the communication department of the club does, you can make a considerably effort to get in position to increase your own market value. In addition, it's a great help and contribution to the club*" (participant 3).

Further, he compares football players with other social media influencers in the society and point out that football players have the great potential of being influencers outside

of the pitch. For them to understand the scale of fans they can reach, it would be a huge value for the players and the club, but also the general interest of football.

The participant from case 2 intends to build players as role models and show their personalities outside of the pitch. To present the players in a way that the fans do not see on television and not present them as robots than only practice or play football, but as human beings and positive role models.

Lastly, the participant from case 1 thought doing different kind of interviews with the players would create a slightly relationship from the players to the fans. Changing between doing structural and strict interviews till humoristic interviews or interviews done right after practice was a useful approach the participant used to create the relationship. By creating this relationship, the fans get a bigger eager of see their players on the pitch, which also could increase spectators in the stands.

One example that stuck out from the netnographic analysis, was a player that renewed his contract till 2024 with club 1. A video was published with a 1.45min interview with the player and the text formulation was a quote from the interview. This post got over 1000 likes, 64 comments and 25 shares. The comment section was full of hearts and fan gratulations to both the player and the club.

### 5.4.2   The sponsors

Including sponsors in social media content was not primarily seen as a way to create engagement, but it was nevertheless considered an important actor. Obviously, economics play a role when we are talking about sponsors, and it is important for the club to make the sponsors satisfied, also through social media. From an engaging perspective, mostly negative comments came from including the sponsors in social media. This can be confirmed by the netnographic analysis where all the content regarding directly with the sponsors are placed in the 'social commerce' column. None of the posts from this column got a lot of engagement in form of likes, comments, or shares. The participants assumed in the interviews, that content including the sponsors was perceived as advertisement by the fans, and therefore discontented and none engaging. However, when sponsors where included in social media, it was done by

using the clubs' colors and lay out, to make them less 'advertising'. This is one example of how it is done by participant from case 1:

> *"For this sponsor for example, I made two competitions for them in social media which increased their followers significantly. Even though it's clear that this is a commercial and something we (the club) get paid for, I do it with, what should I call it, a twist or a glimse from the eye. In addition, we use our profiles that make it cool and suitable also for our target group"* (participant 1).

The participant from case 1 also had an example from a less successful cooperation with the sponsor:

> *"I think it was too obvious that the sponsor was creator of the content, because I was the one producing, but they edited their own colors and touch in the video. So, I believe if you get, even though we used our biggest profiles in the videos I got the impression of little engagement, because the sponsor was the creator in a kind of way"* (participant 1).

Even though the participants started with a negative attitude towards the sponsors, opportunities were mentioned as well. The participants brought up that involving their star players with the sponsors had the opportunity to create humoristic content and give fan satisfaction. Involving the sponsors could also benefit directly by giving them a feeling of getting positive attention in social media and appreciate the sponsorship more. This makes the club more attractive by other sponsors, and maybe get more profitable contracts.

## 5.5   Fan relationships

It is clear from all participants that social media provide platforms where they can create unique relationships with the fans. Engagement platforms through social media offer other ways to create relationships than the traditional engagement platforms, for instance the stadium. To achieve these relationships, the participants had several strategies to create fan engagement and strengthen their relationship with the fans.

First, the participant from case 3 stated that it was important to trigger the fans' feelings:

> *"We believe that football is feelings, therefore we try to trigger the supporters' feelings. This is why there is a mix between memory lane, and presence and todays' situation in a way"* (participant 3).

To reach out to the fans' football feelings he had good experience with content that he called 'memory lane'. This content could be either a video of highlights from a victory the team made 10 years ago, preferably against the up-coming opponent, or it could be a retrospect of 'this day' 10 years ago. This type of content would fit for the older supporters which can relate to the big happenings 10 years ago, but maybe provoke positive feelings both for the older supporter and the new supporter for seeing an historical achievement. The participant from case 2 pointed at the same feelings among the fans, with an example that engagement might not always be positive:

> *"… if we win the match in a way, then all the time spam the feed with content from the match we've won, with pictures and goals and highlights and all those things … that engages a lot! … but if you publish, I'm careful with content from losses we have, because then I don't reach out. It's just, you get 70 negative comments on Facebook when I publish the summary from a loss"* (participant 2).

However, the participant from case 3 mentioned that engagement in forms of negative comments and negative feedback was unavoidable for a football club, and that the club should appreciate all the engagement it gets. In addition, this is a good indicator that the fans' do care about the teams' performance and if they win or not.

Secondly, the frequency and volume of the content published are considered an important factor of creating fan engagement. Specially, to have a strategy where you repeat the social media content are highlighted as important to influence the fans' habits and create predictability. The strategy includes both the time of publishing and to not only publish something once. The participant from case 3 pointed at the time of publishing is important to reach the fans when they are online. In the afternoon and evenings were considered most effective to reach the fans, but as participant 3

highlights he wants to influence the fans' habits by publish content till predictable times and get the fans' online to consume club content:

> *"It's something about the frequency, we have an assumption that repeated content. So, to create more engagement, one of the things we can do is to make sure that the content is repeated ... this will make a predictability for the fans, and it will influence the habits of the reader and the viewer, or the listener."* (participant 3)

Further, the participant from case 2 said that if you want to reach the fans with a message you need to publish the message repeatedly, or it is forgotten. For instance, he had made a video that aims for increasing the season tickets sold and had a strategy of publish the video a series of times to constantly get fan recognition.

However, to accomplish repeatedly content and fan prediction is demanding for the communication managers. It takes time and commitment to publish content repeatedly, that does not break with the fans' expectations. For instance, if the fans are used to, and have an expectation, of watching the team celebration after a win through social media, it must be published to avoid breaking fan expectation. As the participant from case 2 explained it:

> *"... if it's been a mistake after an away game, that someone hasn't been able to record the celebration, and it's not published. Then of course you will get a lesson learned from the fans, like where is the celebration, we have won and what the f... is going on."* (participant 2).

Thirdly, social media is a great platform to make the fans feel part of the team. By posting information of things that matter to the team and the club make the fans feel included in the matters. It could be matters that range from when trainings are scheduled to internal difficulties in the club. When important matters are given from the club, legitimacy are increased, and the club make a more trustful relationship with the fans. The participant from case 3 says:

*"And then there is the issues of current relevance, the issues that interest people right now. What matter to people quite simple, create engagement out there, then the people are enthusiastic"* (participant 3).

# 6.    Discussion

In this chapter, the findings will be discussed in light of the presented theoretical framework. The discussion starts with comparing the cases' use of social media, with a focus on how they create engagement with their fans, and then the findings are discussed in light of the research propositions. The chapter ends with implications from the findings.

The findings show that all participants find it useful to engage with their fans through social media. The football clubs' in Eliteserien see the potential of online fan engagement, as all the teams have established engagement platforms through social media. In addition, all three cases have employed staff in the administration with the specific task of communication through social media channels. However, the three participants also have different day-to-day tasks without the social media activity, which implies that an efficient way of communicating through social media serve them well. This shows that the topics' relevance for scrutinizing is present, in addition is it a useful contribution to make the football clubs' social media strategies more effective.

The findings show that fan engagement is said to be important for the participants' social media strategies, but how engagement is implemented in their strategies remains rather vague. As participants 2 and 3 acknowledge a lack of strategy, they wanted to improve this by focusing on consistency of the content. By planning central themes over a period of time, this could be used to guide the content published in the period and the content would be more repetitive and predictable. Participants 2 and 3 suggest that including this type of repetitive content can provide the clubs with more brand awareness and frequently provide relevant information for the fans. In addition, it creates fan expectations, as they know what type of content is normally published. The participant from club 1 had a different approach and wanted to use three guidelines when publishing content: make the fans come to the stadium, create characters of the players and coach, and provide information. Even though both strategies are a bit vague, the findings also show that fan engagement occurs on the clubs' engagement platforms. Either way, football clubs should consider applying a social media strategy, but more research is needed to support this.

## 6.1 Considerations regarding the research propositions

This part will follow the structure of the four research propositions.

### 6.1.1 Social media channels and engagement platforms

The first research proposition says that the football clubs have established engagement platforms on different social media channels. As the findings show, all the clubs have established engagement platforms on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Facebook and Twitter are well known social media channels, that were considered prominent in the start of the project, but the findings show that Instagram can be considered just as prominent. In fact, Instagram was suggested as the most engaging platform by one of the participants. The feature of Instagram stories can be considered as an easy and low-threshold feature to create engagement between the club and the fans, because the interaction happens in the private box of direct messages. However, more research is needed on this certain channel to make any recommendations of most engaging social media channel.

Further, two of the clubs have established engagement platforms on TikTok. One club are present on YouTube and one club are establishing the engagement platform on YouTube. For YouTube, no particular type of engagement was mentioned during the interviews. However, no follow-up questions about this were asked during the interviews, because YouTube was not in the focus for this study. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that YouTube facilitates primarily consuming content rather than engaging content. As Su et.al. (2020 p. 443) suggests, TikTok is a platform that facilitate for short, humoristic content that is easily consumed. Videos of sport superstars created significant attention and fan engagement through TikTok videos (Su et.al. 2020, p. 443). These findings suggest that sport organizations, such as football clubs, also can create attention and effectively create fan engagement through TikTok, but as the channel is quite new, and the findings are vague, this topic need more research. However, as the findings by Su et.al. (2020, p. 443) show, TikTok content is cross-posted on Instagram and Twitter, and engages fans through well-established engagement platforms. To keep up with the rapid development of social media it is advisable for professional sport organizations to follow new channels arriving and integrate them in their social media mix, especially when they are primarily used by important target groups.

The findings show that one of the challenges with new social media channels is to respond to the engagement that is created through the different platforms. All the participants had established engagement platforms through Snapchat, but these where inactive in the period of the interviews. Interaction and engagement with fans can be a time-consuming task, and therefore it is necessary to consider the establishment of each individual engagement platform carefully, taking into account the cost, resources and potential benefit. To evaluate what kind of engagement platforms effectively create fan engagement can be suggested in order to keep up with the fan engagement between the different platforms.

In line with Abeza et al. (2013, p. 138) all cases choose to establish engagement platforms on several social media channels to interact with their fans. The findings suggest that the club should establish engagement platforms on all the channels their fans are present. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were considered platforms where they reach various types of target groups, and TikTok and YouTube were considered the platforms where they reach out to the youngest fans. The findings imply that football clubs should segment their engagement platforms to reach specific target groups, but more research are needed on this topic.

The goals of using several engagement platforms are to retain customers by establishing, maintaining, and enhancing long-term relationships. The findings are therefore in accordance with Grönroos (2004, p. 102), as organizations need to communicate and engage in dialogue with their customers. The opportunities provided by social media to meet relationship marketing goals are supported by the findings of this thesis. Through a two-way continuous dialogue, sport teams can listen to and understand the fans' needs, respond accordingly, and are able to create additional value for consumers (Abeza, O'Reilly, et al., 2019, p. 100). However, the findings of this thesis show that social media has the potential to go beyond two-way communication, because it provides a network that enables interaction between several actors. For example, social media facilitates word-of-mouth and sharing club content from fan to fan, or interaction between players and fans. Relationship marketing through social media is much more than a two-way dialogue, it is relationships, networks and interactions between several actors connected with the club (Gummesson, 1998, p. 244). The findings confirms Gummesson (1998, p. 244) suggestions, by showing that

relationship marketing is accomplished by creating networks through engagement platforms where fans can engage with each other, the communication manager, the players, as well as other actors, such as the sponsors, the board, or the coach. This kind of engagement create benefits in the relationship such as mutual respect and a win-win strategy for both the football club and the fans (Gummesson, 1998, p. 243).

## 6.1.2  Communication through engagement platforms

The second research proposition suggests that the clubs use different types of communication to effectively create fan engagement. As the findings suggests, one-way communication is a natural part of the football clubs' daily content. However, according to Maderer et al. (2018, p. 13), the social media channels provide the opportunity to increase the quality of communication between supporters and their club, as sport clubs exploit this opportunity to create fan engagement. In other words, social media managers should engage with their fans to provide the type of communication and information that the fans would appreciate through social media. As figure 3 suggests, different types of communication create different types of engagement. For example, communication in form of information create engagement in form of likes and ultimately word of mouth, and communication as competitions create engagement in form of participation and comments. However, the type of communication is not the only factor influencing fan engagement. It is further important to provide the type of content that has value for the fan. Because value for the fans is individual and context-dependent this finding demonstrate that 'the clubs cannot deliver value, but only offer value propositions' (Vargo & Lusch, 2017, p. 47).

All participants point at videos as fan engaging content. However, what type of fan engagement it creates is not expressed clearly. The netnographic analysis shows that match-related videos, such as the players' celebration after a win, creates a lot of engagement in form of likes, comments, and shares. In line with previous research, the findings show that the emphasis of content communicated by football clubs is product-related attributes, but also non-product-related attributes are part of the content communicated (Abeza, O'Reilly, et al., 2019, p. 105; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018, p. 425; Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13; Parganas et al., 2015, p. 561). In addition, all participants point at videos as fan engaging content. The netnographic analysis confirms this, but also reveals that match-related videos, such as a video of the players

celebration after a win, create a lot of engagement in forms of likes, comments, and shares. Especially positive comments as congratulations and hearts are made after the team victories. Also, as the participants express, a video from the match creates more fan engagement on Facebook compared with a summary in text from the match. Week 31, that includes two league matches, was the most overall fan engaging week for all three cases. In line with the findings by Maderer et al. (2018, p. 13) the product-related attributes are more fan engaging than non-product-related attributes. This thesis contributes with additional findings which suggest that match-related content in form of videos, is the most fan engaging.

Even though the managers want to provide information and create engagement through social media channels, the findings by Abeza et.al. (2019, p.105), show that fans are expecting to consume behind-the-scenes look at teams and facilities. Teams are not only expected to provide updates and highlights and to communicate match-related content, but also content such as live streams of teams at a training field, and players off-the-field activities (Abeza, O'Reilly, et al., 2019, p. 105). The finding suggest that it is not enough for football clubs to include match-related content and highlights in their social media activity. As fans expect content from 'behind-the-scene', this should be included in the social media mix to meet the fans' expectations.

### 6.1.3  Collaboration with other actors

The third research proposition says that the clubs collaborate with other actors, such as the team, the fans and the sponsors, in their social media activity to effectively increase fan engagement. The findings highlight that the team is the most important actor, as the team is the main reason for the clubs' popularity among fans. Including the players in social media content is shown to create fan engagement with a lot of likes, as well as hearts in the comment section, and shares. As the team is more or less the primary reason for the fans to participate in the clubs' engagement platforms, this can be suggested to be the squishy nature of football clubs' social media activity. These findings supports previous literature as one of the most important actors in the social media activity are the team (Kunkel et al., 2016, p. 129; Maderer et al., 2018, p. 13).

Including the sponsors in the clubs' social media activity was one thing the participants assumed as negative, because the content often was perceived as advertisement and

therefore discontented and none engaging. This is in line with one of the social media strategy issues suggested by McCarthy et al. (2014, p. 187). However, as the findings assume, and McCarthy et al. (2014, p. 194) suggests, there is pressure to use social media as a commercial space if the clubs are to allocate resource, but fans may consider social media as their space. By including the sponsors in the communication strategies mentioned in part 6.2.2, such as content with product-related attributes (player-related or match-related content), fan satisfaction can be made by creating humoristic content. As participant 2 says, this gives more sponsor visibility in social media and possibly make the sponsors appreciate the sponsorship more. Further, this makes the club more attractive to other sponsors and may attract more profitable sponsor contracts. This finding implies that there is an undiscovered potential by including the sponsors in the football clubs' social media activity. For the football club the potential lays in improving their position as target for the sponsor, making the sponsors compete about the football club where the highest bidder gets the most attention through the clubs' engagement platforms. For the sponsors, it provides a prominent place to create more attention and publicity for their brand. However, it is important to have in mind the findings by McCarthy et al. (2014, p. 186) which suggest that too much direct promotional massages communicated through social media can discourage or even irritate fans. Again, by referring to the communication strategies in part 6.2.2 this depends on the content with value for the particular fans. It seems decisive for the managers to balance the act of promoting the sponsor, but not too much as the fans get discouraged. However, this is an undiscovered topic that need more research.

Participant 1 highlights that fans with significant "authority", such as leaders of the fanclub, are used to control the content. As they have been a fan in a long time, origin from the local city, and know the 'temperature' among the fan group, it is effective to use them as consultants. This is in line with the suggestions by Abeza, O'Reilly, et al. (2019, p. 99), to use influential social media users with significant "authority" as a third party, but this topic needs further investigation. The findings by Abeza, O'Reilly, et al. (2019, p. 99) suggest that influential social media users are considered to be more "real", because they are external to the team and not bound by a "marketing" label. As these types of fans can sway opinions in a positive or negative way, the managers should also repost/retweet the fans' content in their social media activity.

None of the participants point towards the opportunity of sharing the fans' content, even though it is highlighted in the previous literature as an important aspect of fan engagement through social media (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 351). Especially Twitter is considered a channel where fans' use the clubs' hashtag and then the tweets are retweeted on the clubs' Twitter platform. This feature is highlighted as one of the most engaging features on Twitter, but none of the participants brought up the feature as an engaging tool. However, from the retweets in the netnography this is done once by club 1. No matter, it is consensus among the participants that Twitter is mostly used to provide information, usually with media as the target, which is in line with some previous literature (Hopkins, 2013, p. 112), but in contrast with those that suggest Twitter as an engagement channel (Abeza et al., 2017, p. 351; Parganas et al., 2015, p. 564). The reason for this could be the context of Eliteserien, as the Norwegian Twitter use is not as comprehensive as the Americans use of Twitter.

### 6.1.4  Fan relationship

Research proposition four states that fan engagement and value co-creation through online engagement platforms enhance the relationship between the football club and their fans. The findings show that engagement platforms through social media offer other ways to create relationships than the traditional engagement platforms, as the stadium. The clubs improve fan relationship by providing the fans with communication, interaction, and value, as Grönroos (2004, p. 102) relationship marketing approach suggests. This supports previous literature with the understanding that social media is an effective tool in meeting relationship marketing goals (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015, p. 247; Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 435).

Furthermore, three cases had different approaches to improving their fan relationships. The participant from case 1 had no distinct approach to improve fan engagement. Were the participants from case 2 and 3 have clearly pointed at factors which improves fan relationships from an engagement perspective, such as trigger the fans' feelings and strategically evaluate frequency and volume of content published. One of the findings show that the football clubs experience fan engagement in forms of negative comments and negative feedback as well. The participants don't express the negative comments as a minus for the fan relationship, but rather an indicator for the fans' caring of the club. Previous literature has discovered similar findings and suggests it is one of the

opportunities with social media channels. The findings to Abeza, O'Reilly, et al. (2019, p. 104) suggests that if the negative opinions are performance related, the managers "let it happen", but when the content posted is found to be inappropriate, the managers delete it. When the participants talk about negative feedback in the setting of engagement it is related to the teams' performance, as the findings show.

As participant from club 1 did not have a clear approach to improve fan relationship, there might be an intention of improving fan relationships within the clubs' social media strategy. The social media strategy for participant 1 is not considered planned, but the content is published with an ad-hoc approach and guided with three central aims: make the fans come to the stadium; create characters of the players and coach; and to provide information. If the central aims are compared with Grönroos' (2004) relationship marketing approach it shows that communication is fulfilled as information provided, interaction with the fans to make them come to the stadium, and value for the fans is aimed for with the characteristics presented through social media. With all these areas considered, it can imply that participant from club 1 have a social media strategy that improves fan relationships, considered from a relationship marketing approach.

## 6.2   Implications

Practical implications for communication managers were derived from the findings of this thesis. The findings show that football clubs in Eliteserien mainly use Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to create fan engagement. These are considered the most well-established channels, but other channels as YouTube and TikTok are used as well. The findings imply that fan engagement and improved relationships can be created through the well-established channels. Additionally, content from other platforms can be cross-published and effectively create fan engagement. However, as each channel demands a great deal of attention, using additional channels besides the well-established ones should be evaluated regularly and carefully. For communication managers it is useful to keep up with the development of new channels arriving in social media, but the findings suggest to strategically choose the channels where their target groups are present.

Regarding the content published, this thesis suggests that match-related content is the most engaging. Videos including match-related attributes are suggested to improve fan engagement and relationship. However, the clubs may also consider including content that gives the fans something more than information about the result, for example, competitions before a game, videos of the goal during a game or video of the team celebration after a win.

Reposting content from the fans, particular from fans with great "authority", should be given higher priority. This is shown to give fans satisfaction, create fan engagement, and has been shown to "influence" and "control" fans in a positive way. As previous research suggests it as an engaging feature, this should be given considerable thoughts by communication managers to create fan engagement.

As the social media strategies are found to be vague, this should be taken into consideration for communication managers. The findings suggest that having a strategy to publish content in a way that fans' get some expectations of what to get. For example, publishing an interview with the coach before every match, or a video of the celebration after every win, creates expectations among the fans. In addition, this is suggested to influence the fans' consuming habits. If they know that an interview with the coach is published before each game, they might visit the clubs' engagement platforms before every game to get the latest news from the coach.

In addition, such a social media strategy should contain a strategically choice of engagement platforms where specific target groups are segmented in the different platforms. The social media channels that reach out to the youngest fans was considered TikTok and YouTube. These channels should therefore be considered to interact and engage with the next generation of fans.

# 7.   Conclusion

This thesis aims to examine how online fan engagement is created by Norwegian football clubs using social media. By combining the theoretical frameworks of relationship marketing, value co-creation, and networks and engagement platforms, four research propositions were formulated to guide the empirical study. A case study approach was applied, for which three clubs in Eliteserien were selected. Data was collected through both a netnography of the clubs' Facebook and Twitter accounts and interviews with the clubs' communication managers.

## 7.1   Summary of the main findings

The first research proposition examines the clubs' establishment of engagement platforms. The findings show that all participants have established engagement platforms through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The reason for establishing several engagement platforms is to reach out to, and engage with, different target groups. The clubs also try out other social media channels, such as TikTok and YouTube, to keep up with the development of new channels. Implications are suggested to give a shot to new social media channels, but as it is time-consuming work, communication managers should pick the channels where they reach out to as many target groups as possible.

The second research proposition suggests that football clubs use different types of communication to create fan engagement. Even though communication is an important tool for creating fan engagement, the findings show that the content communicated must have value for the particular fan to create fan engagement. For example, information about a player who extends the contract, creates likes and comments, such as congratulations, and a competition that asks for 'man of the match' creates comments and engagement in form of fans' participation.

The third research proposition says that football clubs collaborate with other actors in their social media activity to increase fan engagement. The findings show that the team, such as the players and coach, are the most important collaborators in the clubs' social media activity. In addition, sponsors are suggested as collaborators, but must be used

with care, as content including sponsors is often perceived as commercial. Nevertheless, the potential for the clubs to collaborate with sponsors is seen as valuable in terms of income.

The fourth research proposition highlights that fan engagement and value co-creation through online engagement platforms improves the relationships between the football club and their fans. The findings support previous literature stating that a relationship marketing approach is appropriate for sport organizations' social media use.

As the research propositions have provided important contribution to answer the research question, some findings where more general. The clubs' communication managers highlight Instagram as the most engaging platform. The argument for Instagram is that the channel has a feature where fans can respond to the content directly to the clubs' private inbox. This suggests that a low threshold for interaction should be strived for to create engagement with the fans. Furthermore, content regarding the matches was found as the most engaging. Particularly after a team win, the engagement was high. This can be explained with football fans' identification with their team, which is one of the main reasons why fans who support a football club, experience joy, when their team wins a match. In addition, it was shown that simple posts using text only are not sufficient to create fan engagement. Particularly, videos were brought up as fan engaging, independent from the social media channel.

To answer the research question, the findings show that football clubs in Eliteserien strive for fan engagement and relationship creation through their engagement platforms. This is mainly achieved by using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but other channels, such as TikTok and YouTube, are also used to some degree. The content published to improve fan engagement and relationships are mainly videos, relevant information about the club, and content with a sense of humor. Despite having the feeling of creating sufficient fan engagement, the participants point at some improvements. A social media strategy should be used to create advantages, such as regular and repetitive publishing of content, and provide the consumer with expectations and predictability.

## 7.2 Limitations and future research

As in every other research project, this thesis is not without limitations. This is a master thesis, and as a student doing a research project for the first time, many research activities can prove to be challenging, such as the interview situation or analyzing the data. As a case study design was chosen, generalization of the findings is limited. Furthermore, this is a master thesis bounded by time, and perhaps the project should have examined more cases or given a more thorough examination of one case, but with the time limit in count, three cases were chosen. Three clubs in the context of Norwegian elite football, can hardly strive for generalization, but comparison with similar leagues can be done in the future. Also, three weeks of the netnographic analysis was limited by time. Three weeks from a whole year are too narrow to make suggestions of the clubs' social media activity, but longer periods of netnographic analysis could be done by future research.

Furthermore, future research should investigate online fan engagement and relationship creation for several reasons. First, as new social media channels develop constantly, a case study should investigate thoroughly how football clubs implement a new engagement platform in the club's social media mix. It should be investigated under which conditions upcoming channels should be integrated, how new channels should be selected to reach out to the clubs' target groups and how different channels can be connected, for example through cross-posting content.

Second, as this thesis take the perspective of the football clubs, future research should investigate the fans' perspective of online engagement. They are the consumers of content and the fans' thoughts of what type of content, and when they consume the content are relevant in the topic of fan engagement. This type of study will contribute with information that football clubs should implement in their social media strategy.

Finally, a study of a football club's desire to share the fans' content through the club's engagement platform is needed. The study should aim to provide information about the fans with "authority" and how their content could be used by the club to influence the whole fan group and further engage with their fans. For football clubs, to share their fans' content are shown useful to create fan engagement, but as the findings do not support previous literature, more research on the topic is needed.

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# Tables

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# Appendix

## Appendix A: Informed content

## Informasjonsskriv og samtykkeskjema

**Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet**

*"Hvordan skaper Norske fotballklubber engasjement i sosiale media?"*?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke hvordan norske fotballklubber skaper engasjement i sosiale media. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

**Formål**

Dette er en masteroppgave som skal undersøke hvordan norske fotballklubber bruker sosiale media, med et spesielt fokus på å skape engasjement til fansen. Sosiale media har vokst i store mengder de siste tiårene både når det gjelder aktiviteter, plattformer, teknologi og enheter, og er stadig i utvikling med nye plattformer som kommer og går. Dette har skapt en plass hvor man kan dele informasjon til et globalt publikum i en hastighet som ingen andre medier kan måle seg med, men kanskje enda viktigere gir det mulighet til å skape interaksjon med følgere. Ved å skape interaksjon til følgerne, øker man fansens motivasjon til å engasjere seg i innleggene i sosiale media, skrive positive omtaler og ha generell positiv '*word of mouth*'. Det er vist at interaksjon og engasjement blant fansen som følger klubben i sosiale media gir større tilfredsstillelse av innholdet og det knytter sterkere bånd mellom fans og klubb.

Norske fotballklubber er åpenbart populære i sosiale media med sine mange tusen følgere. På bakgrunn av dette ønsker jeg å undersøke hvordan klubbene bruker sosiale media og kontinuerlig følger den raske utviklingen. Dette er forhåpentligvis informasjon som kan være nyttig for fotballklubber i Eliteserien, men også for Toppserien og fotballklubber i lavere divisjoner.

**Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?**

Jeg, Kennet Dvergedal - masterstudent ved Norges Idrettshøgskole er ansvarlig for prosjektet. Under veiledning av førsteamanuensis Chris Horbel.

## Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du får spørsmål om å delta på grunn av din stilling i klubben. Jeg ønsker å intervjue 3-5 personer i fotballklubber fra Eliteserien som jobber med sosiale media, og har valgt et strategisk utvalg ut ifra de klubbene jeg tror vil gi gode svar til oppgaven min.

## Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det et intervju på ca. 60 minutter. Intervjuet vil bli gjennomført digitalt for å ta hensyn til eventuelle koronarestriksjoner, og det vil bli tatt lydopptak av samtalen.

## Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

## Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Det er kun jeg som masterstudent og veileder som vil ha tilgang til opplysningene. Lydopptakene vil bli lagret på passordbeskyttet sky og transkribert. Når oppgaven er ferdig og skal leveres vil alle opplysninger bli slettet.

Som deltaker, vil du bli omtalt som sosiale media ansvarlig, uten å bruke navn på hverken deg eller klubb. Det er mulig du kan gjenkjennes gjennom din stilling i klubben og særtrekk i sosiale media.

**Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes/oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er i slutten av juni 2021. Som sagt, blir all informasjon slettet ved prosjektslutt.

**Dine rettigheter**

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

**Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?**

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Norges Idrettshøgskole har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

**Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?**

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

Kennet Dvergedal – Masterstudent

Tlf: 40636964

Epost: kennetdv@hotmail.com

Chris Horbel – Førsteamanuensis

Tlf: 23622440

Epost: chrish@nih.no

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost ([personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no)) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Kennet Dvergedal

*Prosjektansvarlig*                                    *Eventuelt student*

(Forsker/veileder)

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Samtykkeerklæring**

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *"Hvordan skaper Norske fotballklubber engasjement i sosiale media?"* og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐   å delta i intervju
☐   *at mine personopplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet*

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

**Appendix B: Interview protocol**

**Intervjuguide**

Gi informasjon om formålet til oppgaven og at deltakeren kan trekke seg når som helst gjennom prosjektet.

Innledende spørsmål:

Hva er din rolle i klubben?

- Hva er dine hovedoppgaver?

Hvilken arbeidserfaring og utdanning har du?

- Tidligere, annen arbeidserfaring i forhold til dagens rolle?

Kan du gi en kort oppsummering av dine tanker om lagets prestasjon denne sesongen?

Generelt angående sosiale media

Hva er målet/intensjonen deres med å bruke sosiale media?

- Har du ulike målsetninger til ulike plattformer? – hvorfor/hvorfor ikke?

Hvilke sosiale media plattformer har/bruker klubben?

- Har du vurdert andre plattformer og hvorfor valgte du å ikke bruke de?
- Hvilken plattform føler du er mest nyttig?

Hvor ofte blir disse brukt?

- regelmessig, hver dag, uke, måned?

Hvilke brukes mest og minst?

- Hvilke plattformer publiseres det mest/minst innhold på?
- Hvorfor?

Hvor mange har tilgang/bruker plattformene?

- Hvem har ansvar

Hvilke fordeler og ulemper opplever du med sosiale media?

- Hvilke fordeler og ulemper har ulike plattformer?
- Hvilke forskjeller er det mellom plattformene?

Hvor viktig er det at fansen følger dere på sosiale media?

- For å motta informasjon, styrke relasjonen f-eks-

Hvor nyttig opplever du det er å kommunisere så «fort og enkelt» med så mange fans gjennom sosiale media?

Hvordan legger opp til/skaper du dialog med fansen via sosiale media?

Innhold:

Kan du forklare din strategi for bruk av sosiale media

- Hvordan planlegger du for innholdet?
- Hyppighet, mengde, tidspunkt
- Hvordan formulerer du tekst, bilder, video, intervju?
- *Er dette strategisk eller tilfeldig?*
- Forskjell i plattformene?

Kan du fortelle hvilke innlegg du publiserer?

- Typisk på Facebook
- Typisk på Twitter
- Typisk Instagram
- Følge opp spørsmål 2, 3, 4, om det trengs

Hvilke typer innlegg publiserer dere mest?

- Seriekamp, spillere, trenere, fans, historie, samarbeidspartnere, Merchandise f.eks.
- Konkurranser, spørreundersøkelser??

Hvilke typer innlegg har stor respons/ er populære (treffer stort publikum/fans)?

- Noen type innlegg du har dårlig erfaring med/unngår?
- Forskjell i plattformer?

I hvilken grad inkluderer du fotballaget i innlegg?

- Kan du komme med eksempler?
- Du skriver om trener, spillere, støtteapparat, f.eks.
- Takeovers der spiller eller trener tar over plattformen og publiserer innlegg, f.eks.
- Du deler innlegg videre, som en spiller/trener/støtteapparat allerede har lagt ut i sin private konto, f.eks.


Engasjement:

Kan du beskrive hvordan du skaper interaksjon med fansen via sosiale media?

- Hvor viktig er dette i din sosiale media strategi?

Hvordan måler og/eller analyserer du responsen på innlegg?

Er du oppmerksom på antall likes, kommentarer, delinger?

- Hvorfor/hvorfor ikke?

Hvordan formulerer du innleggene for å oppnå likes, kommentarer, delinger?

- Forskjell i plattformer? Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
- Legger opp til engasjement?
- Legger opp til humor?

Dersom det kommer spørsmål, diskusjoner i kommentarfeltet, hvordan responderer dere?

- Hvorfor ikke?

Dersom fans/følgere foreslår innhold til sosiale media hvordan tar du hensyn til det?

- Hvorfor/hvorfor ikke?
- Hvordan legger dere opp til innholdsforslag fra fansen i sosiale media?

Hvilke fordeler opplever du med at fansen engasjerer seg i sosiale media?

- Opplever du utfordringer?


Målgrupper:

Hvilke typer grupper tror du dere treffer med sosiale media?

- Menn 50+, ungdommer, alle?
- Forskjell i plattformer?

Hvem ønsker dere å nå ut til?

- Hvordan legger dere opp til å treffe disse?
    o Ulikt opplegg i forskjellige plattformer?

Hva kunne dere gjort annerledes for å treffe målgruppene som dere vil?

- Hva opplever du funker bra?
- Hvordan jobber du for å kontinuerlig forbedre innholdet?
- Hvilke utfordringer møter du?
- Hvordan jobber du med utfordringene?


Samarbeidspartnere/sponsorer:

I hvor stor grad inkluderer du samarbeidspartnere i sosiale media innlegg?

- Dersom samarbeidspartnere foreslår innhold til sosiale media tar du hensyn til det?
- Kan du nevne et konkret eksempel på samarbeid med partnere angående sosiale media?
- Kunne samarbeidet blitt gjort på andre måter?

På hvilke måter blir sosiale media inkludert i kontrakten med samarbeidspartnere?

Hvordan opplever du innlegg som inkluderer samarbeidspartnere, blir mottatt blant fansen?

- Skaper dette interaksjon/engasjement?

Er du bevisst på hvor mye/lite samarbeidspartnere bør prege innholdet i sosiale media?

- Har du erfaring, eksempler (negativt, positivt)
- F.eks: Målbart i reduserte likes, kommentarer, delinger; mindre engasjement fra fansen i kommentarfeltet, word of mouth etc…


Korona-situasjonen:

Hvordan har korona-situasjonen påvirket klubbens bruk av sosiale media?

Hvordan har korona-situasjonen påvirket fansens respons/interaksjon?


<u>Avsluttende spørsmål</u>:

Hvilke muligheter ser du med sosiale media?

Hvilke utfordringer ser du med sosiale media?

Hvor mye av potensiale til sosiale media tror du dere når?

- Bruker dere alle funksjonene, mer å gå på?


Er det noe du mener jeg burde spurt som jeg ikke har spurt angående sosiale media?

Noe du vil legge til?


Takk for tiden, lykke til med sesongen.


**Appendix C: NSD approval**

NSD sin vurdering

Prosjekttittel:

Hvordan bruker fotballklubber i Eliteserien sosiale media?

Referansenummer:

640805

Registrert:

02.02.2021 av Kennet Dvergedal - kennetd@student.nih.no

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon:

Norges idrettshøgskole / Institutt for idrett og samfunnsvitenskap

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat):

Chris Horbel , chrish@nih.no, tlf: +4723262440

Type prosjekt:

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student:

Kennet Dvergedal, kennetdv@hotmail.com, tlf: 40636964

Prosjektperiode:

25.01.2021 - 31.05.2021

Status:

09.02.2021 - Vurdert

Vurdering (1):

09.02.2021 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet den 09.02.2021 med vedlegg. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 31.05.2021.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen

- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål

- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet

- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

## DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

## FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Dropbox og program for digitalt intervju er databehandlere i prosjektet. NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

## OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold

Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)