

# AALBORG PIRATES

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*CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT  
THROUGH A BRAND COMMUNITY:*

*A STUDY OF AALBORG PIRATES AND  
CUSTOMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP*



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## Abstract

The purpose of the thesis was to investigate how brand community effects customer engagement in the specific case of Aalborg Pirates and the customer-brand relationship. Hence, it examines the case of Aalborg Pirates and what factors are relevant to consider in relation to brand communities and customer engagement.

To do so, the analysis is based on the Brand Resonance Pyramid by Keller (2020), where the primary data and literature are compared and analyzed. The analysis uncovers several findings. First, there is a great criticism towards the consumer-run brand community. It was discovered that it does not fulfill its potential, damaging the sense of community among customers. Thereby, it is suggested that Aalborg Pirates create and manage a firm-initiated brand community to target all customers with an interest in Aalborg Pirates and potential customers. Secondly, such a firm-initiated brand community will help Aalborg Pirates to increase its customer engagement level across all customer engagement. Thus, it is concluded that Aalborg Pirates overall has achieved brand resonance among many of its customers – yet a firm-initiated brand community will help develop the customer-brand relationship even further as it can strengthen brand loyalty, customer-brand identification, social identity, and customer engagement.

# Table of Content

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.2 Case study of Aalborg Pirates .....	10
1.3 Construction of the Thesis.....	11
<b>2. Literature Review .....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Brand Identity.....	15
2.1.1 Brand Awareness.....	16
2.1.2 Brand strategy .....	18
2.2 Brand community.....	19
2.2.1 Customer-brand identification .....	21
2.2.2 Brand Loyalty .....	22
2.4 Sub-conclusion.....	24
<b>3. Philosophy of Science and Methodology .....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 Critical Realism.....	25
3.1.1 Ontology .....	25
3.1.2 Epistemology.....	26
3.2 Methodology approach: Research Strategy.....	27
3.2.1 Qualitative data collection.....	29
3.2.2 Quantitative data collection .....	31
3.3 Validity and Reliability.....	33
<b>4. Analysis.....</b>	<b>34</b>
4.1 Customer segment .....	34
4.2 Brand Resonance Pyramid.....	36
4.2.1 Brand Salience.....	36
4.2.2 Brand Performance .....	40
4.2.3 Brand Imagery .....	44
4.2.4 Brand Judgments .....	47
4.2.5 Brand Feelings.....	49
4.2.6 Brand Resonance .....	53
4.2.7 Sub-conclusion .....	64
<b>5. Discussion.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>68</b>
6.2 Study Implementation and Implications.....	69
6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions.....	70
<b>7. References.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>8. Appendix .....</b>	<b>77</b>
Appendix 1 - Aalborg Pirates Sports Performance Success.....	77

<i>Appendix 2 - Literature Review .....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix 3 - Interviewguides .....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix 4 - Interview Marketing Manager.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix 5 - Interview Operations Manager.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix 6 - Interview Player.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Appendix 7 - Customer Survey.....</i>	<i>78</i>

## 1. Introduction

*“Building strong brands requires designing the proper positioning and establishing the right associations and meaning in the hearts and minds of consumers”* (Keller, 2023, p. 1).

Research stresses the importance of building strong brands, as customers no longer are satisfied with just the perfect product. Instead, they buy the experience and feelings built around a brand (You-Ming, 2010). Strategically, building and managing a strong brand involves many different aspects for businesses to consider. Hence, brand positioning can impact consumers’ feelings, actions, and thoughts, affecting whether consumers resonate or feel connected with the brand. In return, there is evidence that brand resonance and loyal customer-brand relationship can create brand equity and value (Keller, 2020).

As customers expect more than just a product nowadays (You-Ming, 2010), brand experience has become significant to direct attention to achieve brand resonance. Brands must possess a deep knowledge and understanding of its customers, trends, culture, lifestyles, and such to design and create experiences that appeal to customers on an emotional basis (Batat, 2019). Designing a unique experience can provide a strong brand positioning and a competitive advantage, creating a higher value for a brand’s customers (Wiedmann, Labenz, Haase, & Hennigs, 2018).

Studies, mentioned in table 1 below, have examined within the past three years how brands in the service industry can build a stronger brand by developing brand communities, and how it effects among others brand loyalty, customer identification, and willingness to invest. The studies illustrated in table 1 are interesting because they are investigating the field of branding within the service industry. How does branding differ in the service industry? How is brand community and customer engagement different in that industry? Table 1 highlights the findings and research gaps that is recommended for further investigation. The table is made to create an overview of what the current literature is lacking regarding the field of branding and brand community:

Author	Title	Findings	Future research recommendations
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Mills, Oghazi, Hultman & Theotokis (2022)	<i>The impact of brand communities on public and private brand loyalty: A field study in professional sports</i>	<p>Brand identification can result in an increase in brand loyalty.</p> <p>Findings based on a survey of professional basketball team in USA</p>	<p>Develop a deeper understanding of the interplay between consumers' direct relationships with brands and their relationships with a brand community.</p> <p>Does brand identification in a different setting e.g., the Danish ice hockey industry also result in brand loyalty?</p>
Shtudiner, Thoar & Kantor, (2022)	<i>The effect of identification with a sports team and its performance on the willingness of fans to pay for them</i>	<p>The degree of brand identification and perceived performance of a sport's team affect the willingness to pay among customers.</p> <p>It is also indicated, that developing brand identification and the brand connection among potential fans are of a significant benefit for managers</p> <p>Findings based on a survey of football fans</p>	<p>Investigate the ability and methods for nurturing and encouraging brand identification among potential fans to create a base of loyal fans.</p> <p>Is the perceived sports performance in Denmark and in ice hockey also an influential factor of consumers' consumption behavior?</p>
Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou (2020)	<i>Brand community integration, participation, and commitment: A comparison between consumer-run and company-managed communities</i>	<p>Consumer-run communities contribute to a higher degree of brand integration, participation, and commitment than when communities are company-managed.</p> <p>Findings based on two surveys of the leading Italian motorcycle brand Moto Guzzi. Based on a consumer-run community: Moto Guzzi</p>	<p>Investigate the existing differences between consumer-run brand communities, and company-managed communities by a more qualitative approach with both perspectives of the brand and consumers</p>

		World Club, and a company-managed community: The Clan.	
<a href="#">Martin, Toledo &amp; Palos-Sanchez (2020)</a>	<i>How deep is your love? Brand love analysis applied to football teams</i>	<p>Brand love consists of five variables: passion, connection, intrinsic rewards, emotional attachment and thinking, and frequent use.</p> <p>When fans are feeling brand love towards a football team the results are increased loyalty, willingness to invest and word-of-mouth communication</p> <p>Findings based on a survey distributed to football fans</p>	<p>Conduct qualitative research of the emotional variables of brand love for a sport's team.</p> <p>Does brand love also result in the same factors in ice hockey?</p>
<a href="#">Shin, Back, Lee &amp; Lee (2020)</a>	<i>Enhancing customer-brand relationship by leveraging loyalty program experiences that foster customer-brand identification</i>	<p>Customer brand identification influences brand trust, commitment and switching resistance.</p> <p>Findings based on a survey of two luxury brand hotels in Korea</p>	<p>Explore customer-brand identification's impact on customers' actual behaviors (word-of-mouth, repeat purchase) or brand equity measures</p>

Table 1: Future research recommendations (Own illustration, 2023).

What all the studies' recommendations for future research have in common is to further study the customers' emotional connection with with a brand through engaging in brand communities, identifying oneself with a brand, and the feeling of brand love.

An interesting finding of recent research by Mills, Oghazi, Hultman & Theotokis (2022) is how customers' identification of a brand community can promote an increase in brand loyalty. Thus, the theorists also identify there is a research gap of expanding the research to a further understanding of the relations between customers' direct relationship with a given brand and the relationship with the same brand's community. Furthermore, they suggest investigating their findings in other industries, sports or geographical settings that are different from



professional basketball in the USA. Contributing, researchers Pedeliento, Andreini & Veloutsou (2023) differentiate between two types of brand communities: consumer-run and firm-initiated. Hereof, they highlight that more empirical research is needed towards the differences between the two types of brand communities, whereas the research should be done in another industry than motorcycle. Pedeliento et al. (2023) added new findings to the research of brand communities by examining the similarities and differences among brand community members' integration, participation and commitment in both consumer-run and firm-initiated communities. The findings indicate that consumer-run communities result in higher levels of integration, participation, and commitment than firm-initiated communities.

Moreover, Shin, Back, Lee & Lee (2020) examined how loyalty program experiences can have a significant positive impact on customers' brand identification which also contributes to an increase in brand trust, brand commitment and switching resistance, and can be used to develop a more sustainable customer-brand relationship. Thus, they highlight the research gap of how customers' brand identification can affect customers' behaviors such as word-of-mouth, willingness to pay and brand equity. In addition, Shtudiner, Thoar & Kantor (2022) suggest doing further research on how a loyal fan base should be created through brand identification among fans and potential fans. Through their research, they uncovered that customers' level of brand identification and perceived performance of a sports team can directly impact fans' willingness to pay, whereas managing and developing brand identification and brand connection for fans and potential fans' is a significant benefit for managers.

In a similar context of building a strong brand, Martin, Toledo & Palos-Sanches (2020) identified more qualitative research is needed upon the emotional variables of brand love towards a sport's team that is not football. When customers' brand identification, brand love and brand loyalty is strong, it increases the engagement among customers' and can lead to brand communities. Their findings showed that brand love for football teams led customers to engage more, become more loyal and increased the willingness to pay and invest as well as increased the word-of-mouth communication.

The studies highlighted in table 1 all have in common that they were conducted to examine how brands can create a stronger customer-brand relationship based on different elements such as customer engagement, brand loyalty, brand community, customer-brand identification, and brand love. Hence, the research gaps, identified in table 1, highlight the need for future studies

to extend the understanding and knowledge of how customers' engagement and brand communities can enhance the customer-brand relationship. Furthermore, the studies highlighted in table 1 are studies based on cases of businesses that operate within the service industry whereas three out of the five are related to the sports industry.

The focus on research within the sports industry is chosen because sports teams often require more customer engagement and brand community feeling from the customers (fans) to be successful as sports teams' product is the team and experience. Thus, how, and what criteria do customers choose to support a sports team based on? Why do customers become engaged in sports teams? For example, the English football club Manchester United has many fans and a lot of them are very dedicated fans. Firstly, some individuals become fans of the club due to it being a local team. Secondly, others do it because of the history and heritage of the club. Thirdly, the choice of supporting a club may also be more random based on experiences and factors that happen early in the youth which may also be affected by what team is the most popular one at a given moment, social circle, or others (Szymanski, 2012).

Based on these points, it is interesting to investigate and help understand how a sports team without a long history and heritage can engage its customers through brand community? How will it enhance the customer-brand relationship? For example, in Aalborg, Denmark an ice hockey club named AaB Ishockey was in 2012 shut down despite a long heritage, however, the club was bought based on reflections of how to do a turnaround and rebranding of the club. The result became a new brand: Aalborg Pirates. For 37 years there was little sports performance success for the AaB Ishockey brand, until the new brand Aalborg Pirates in 2018 won not only its first trophy in the brand's history but two within the same season (Kjøller, n.d.).

The building of Aalborg Pirates as a brand has resulted in one of the most successful ice hockey brands in Denmark, however, there is still efforts needed to be done to increase its customers' engagement in ice hockey (Kjøller, n.d.). As a result, this thesis aims to examine the following research question:

*How brand community effects customer engagement? A study of Aalborg Pirates and customer-brand relationship*

## 1.2 Case study of Aalborg Pirates

In this section, there will be a presentation of Aalborg Pirates, its past and present as a business and sports team. Hereof, Aalborg Pirates' value offerings, brand positioning, and brand experience will be presented.

As stated in section 1, Aalborg Pirates is a relatively new business that was established in 2012. American and Canadian ice hockey teams inspired the brand of Aalborg Pirates where Aalborg Pirates created a modern looking brand and logo. The name: Aalborg Pirates, was chosen based on the meaning of the name as well as opportunities and ability to associate the word Pirates with thematic, events, and songs from Pirates of the Caribbean. This meant it was easier to build a universe and experience around the brand. The responsible branding team wanted the name to refer to an outcast that did not play by the rules whereas the brand identity was formed (Kjøller, n.d.).

By rebranding the sports team to Aalborg Pirates and by developing a new pricing strategy, a new interest in ice hockey in Aalborg emerged among consumers. The pricing strategy was based on a new season ticket concept where the business lowered the price to 99 DKK, however if one did not show up to a home game it resulted in a fee of 50 DKK. Furthermore, the decision of giving away many sponsor tickets was made to create awareness and interest in Aalborg Pirates and ice hockey. The two concepts were successful in their purposes and as a result the average attendance was tripled (Kjøller, n.d.). In the years to follow, the pricing strategy was developed and tailored to an increased interest in Aalborg Pirates. Thus, the business has focused on maintaining a low price on its tickets, as the minimum price of a ticket is 40 DKK and includes one free drink (beer, soft drink, or coffee). For the season ticket, Aalborg Pirates has developed a new concept where it costs either 99 DKK (standing) or 139 DKK (sitting) pr. month incl. one drink per game, nevertheless there is a creation fee of 499 DKK on both versions of a season ticket (AalborgPirates, Billetpriser, n.d.).

Aalborg Pirates' brand experience is built around the home games. The team has its base in Gigantium, Aalborg, which is a multifunctional arena. Therefore, Aalborg Pirates has a foyer available that it uses before, during and after a game. Here, it sells merchandise, drinks, has a DJ, events etc. In addition, Aalborg Pirates offers a meal before every game for everyone interested at the amount of 85 DKK (AalborgPirates, Spisning, 2023). As a result of Aalborg

Pirates' game experience, it is ranked as the number one most successful ice hockey club in Denmark regarding average attendees at games and is ranked as number 64 in Europe. For the previous season 2021/2022, there was an average of 2,548 attendees per home game (MetalLigaen, 2022). This indicates that Aalborg Pirates has a very strong brand positioning in the Danish competitive market of ice hockey. Also, Aalborg Pirates has benefited from a successful sports performance in recent years. In season 2017/2018, the sports team won the double - two trophies in one season. In the seasons afterwards, Aalborg Pirates managed to stay in the top four. Again, in season 2021/2022, the team won the double (Appendix 1).

The experience of attending a sports game is highly dependent on the loyal fans. Hereof, Aalborg Pirates' fans created an independent fan club named Pirates Support in 2014. The vision and purpose of the support club is to create a positive and festive atmosphere at both home- and away games. Pirates Support want to develop a community of similar minded fans who want to contribute with a good atmosphere (PiratesSupport, n.d.-A).

There are no other brand communities around Aalborg Pirates. It highlights the interest of investigating how such brand communities can increase customer engagement, brand loyalty, and influence the customer-brand relationship. Yet, how can Aalborg Pirates take advantage of its strong brand position and physical experience advantages to achieve so? Is Pirates Support attracting and engaging customers? Is Aalborg Pirates satisfied with the overall customer engagement? Is the one consumer-run brand community enough? These interesting aspects will be examined throughout the thesis.

### 1.3 Construction of the Thesis

In this section, the structure of the thesis will be explained and elaborated. The thesis is structured based on four different parts which are meant to be read in a chronological order to ensure the full understanding of every part and the thesis as whole.

The first part consists of an **introduction** to the research area of building a strong brand and as well as future research recommendations in relation to the research area. The introduction then presents a research question based on a case study of Aalborg Pirates which the thesis will be based upon. Finally, part two includes the construction of the thesis and a literature review.

The second part contains **methodology and analysis**, constitutes a presentation of the chosen philosophy of science paradigm, methodology approach and the data collected. The analysis includes a presentation of Aalborg Pirates' customer segment. Furthermore, it consists of how brand communities effect customer engagement and customer-brand relationship which is analyzed based on the Brand Resonance Pyramid.

The third part holds the **findings** and contains a discussion of the analysis to provide new perspectives on the analysis and to constitute a conclusion of the thesis. Moreover, part three includes future research suggestions and limitations.

The fourth part present the **references** and carries the final part of the thesis and consists of the references and appendices used to conduct the thesis.

## **2. Literature Review**

In the following section, literature within the area of branding in terms of brand identity and brand community will be elaborated. The literature will consist of old literature by theorists who founded the way in the field of branding as well as new literature that have contributed with new findings. Prior to the work of this section, a literature review in excel has been conducted to create an overview of the literature in separate categories (Appendix 2). The literature will be divided into two main sections: Brand Identity and Brand Community, whereas there will be subsections of relevant theories and terms underneath each main section.

In 1993, theorist Keller investigated the field of Brand Equity, and discovered that to achieve Customer-Brand Equity, it is necessary that a customer has a favorable, strong, and unique brand association in the memory of a brand. Also, positive customer-brand equity occurs when customers have a positive reaction to an element within the brand's marketing mix compared to the same marketing mix element with another fictitious or unnamed brand's product or service (Keller, 1993). This thesis aims to examine how Aalborg Pirates can increase its customer engagement through brand communities, and thereby achieve the ultimate customer-brand relationship. Thus, what is the ultimate customer-brand relationship?

This was elaborated further by Keller (2020) by defining the ultimate customer-brand relationship as brand resonance which consists of an intense level of customer loyalty, attachment, community, and engagement. Keller (2020) conceptualized these findings of how to achieve brand equity by building intense relationships with customers into a model named: Brand Resonance Pyramid. The model is illustrated below:



Figure 1: Brand Resonance Pyramid of how to achieve brand equity (Keller, 2020).

The Brand Resonance Pyramid will act as a basis for the thesis' analysis.

To create an overview the below table highlights the keywords of this thesis. All the literature shown below are related to branding:

Author	Research Focus	Data collection method	Sample	Analysis Method
<a href="#">Keller (1993)</a>	Conceptualizing brand equity from a the perspective of the individual customer through a model	Qualitative research	Two case studies - L.L. Bean and DLA Piper	Comparison of case studies results
<a href="#">Keller (2020)</a>	How businesses can build, measure and manage brand equity	Literature Review (book)	Analysis of former research	Based on existing research
<a href="#">Aaker (1997)</a>	What dimensions brand personalities consist of	Research paper	Representation of the U.S. population	Quantitative approach

<a href="#">Pedeliento et al. (2020)</a>	The differences between the two types of brand communities and how they affect members' integration, participation and commitment	Qualitative research	Survey of 2167 consumers of a motorcycle brand	Hypothesis testing through a quantitative approach
<a href="#">Keller (2023)</a>	How a brand's narrative (past, present and future) alongside with storytelling can reinforces and complements a brand's positioning and value proposition	Literature Review	Analysis of recent research	Based on existing research and their future research recommendations

Table 2: Key works related to the thesis (Own illustration, 2023).

The keywords are elaborated further throughout the different sections to follow.

## 2.1 Brand Identity

A traditional approach to defining brand identity is how tools are used to differentiate a brand over another e.g., name, logo, colors, symbol, design, or others (Kotler, 1991). Brand identity can also be perceived as an underlying promise of what brands deliver to its customers (Ghodeswar, 2008). The purpose of designing, developing, and managing brand identity is to differentiate and create a competitive advantage, resonate with customers, and indicate the brand's purpose and vision (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). The literature within branding tends to define brand identity as a work of how the managers of a brand want the brand to be formed, perceived, and communicated as (Keller, 2020; Aaker et al. 2000).

Thus, there has been a shift in the literature of brand identity, as it has become more focused on customers' perception of the brand instead of how brands construct its own identity. It is argued that brand identity attributes reflect upon the emotions and feelings summoned by a brand, and brand identity refers to a more self-expressive and symbolic function from



customers perspective (Keller, 1993). Although, brand identity may be defined more precisely as: *“the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”* (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). It is argued that brand identity consists of different dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Customers perceive and decide these dimensions, although it is possible for brands to manipulate them. Furthermore, it is highlighted that the construct of a brand’s identity dimensions influences consumers, their preferences, associations of a brand, and overall decision making (Aaker, 1997).

Brand identity literature provides a broad toolkit for businesses to apply when designing and developing its brand identity. Thus, a brand’s identity is not determined by the brand but by the customers’ perception and emotional and symbolic associations with the brand. Brand identity also relates to the depth and breadth of brand awareness (Rossiter & Percy, 1987; Keller, 2020) as well as managing a strategically brand image and narrative (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2023) which can lead to brand attractiveness and finally brand equity (France, Merrilees & Miller, 2016; Keller, 2020; So, King, Hudson & Meng, 2017). Therefore, the two areas: brand awareness and brand strategy, will be elaborated further in the following sections.

### 2.1.1 Brand Awareness

In relation to building a strong brand and achieving brand equity, the term brand awareness has been addressed in literature works over the years (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2020; Dick & Basu, 1994).

Keller (1993) defines brand awareness as: *“the extent to which a brand is recognized by potential customers and is top-of-mind when they think of a particular category”* (p. 2). He also notes that brand awareness is an important antecedent to other brand-related constructs, such as brand recall, brand associations, brand recognition, and is an essential element in building and maintaining brand equity. Hereof, it is argued that brand awareness is one of two components of brand knowledge (Keller, 1993). Furthermore, brand awareness is split into two components: brand recall and brand recognition, as shown on the below figure:

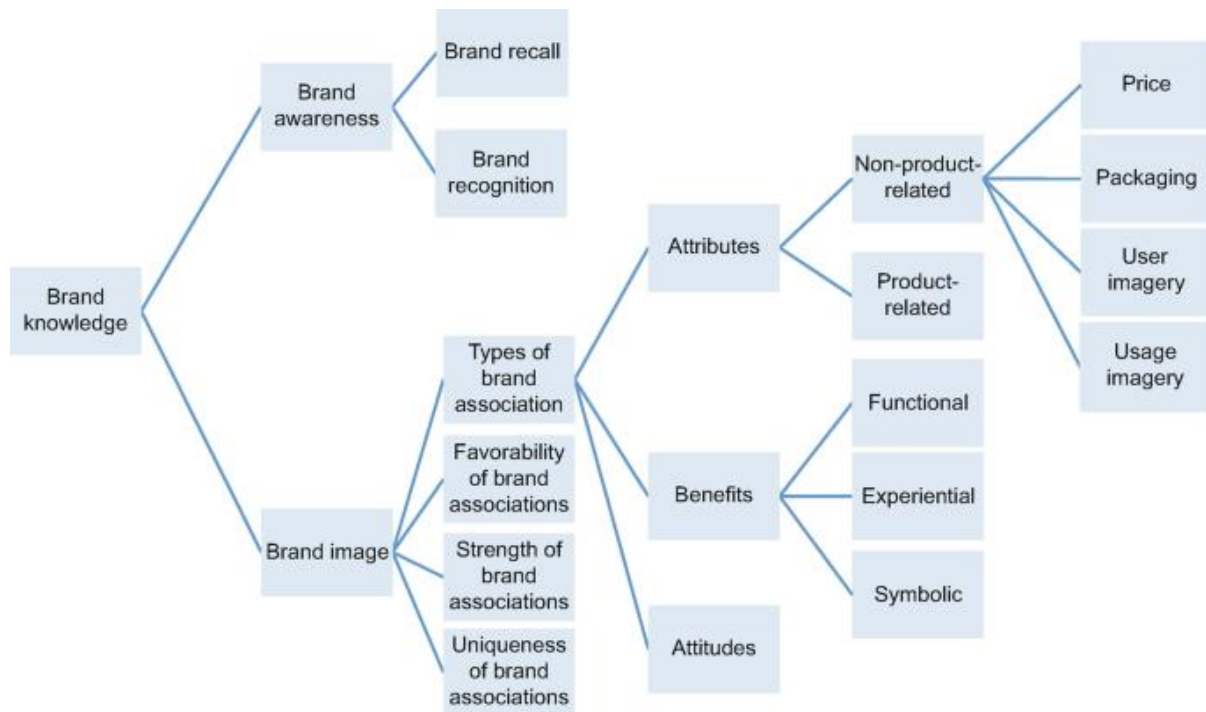


Figure 2: Dimensions of Brand Knowledge (Keller, 1993).

In a more recent work, Keller (2020) expands the definition of brand awareness as: *"the extent to which consumers are able to retrieve the brand from their memory when prompted with a product category, a sign, a symbol, or a company name"* (p. 69). This definition of brand awareness is more specific and relates to a brand's identity. Hence, in his Brand Resonance Pyramid (figure 1) brand awareness is illustrated in the bottom part as Salience which describes both the depth and breadth of brand awareness (Keller, 2020). In contribution, Dick and Basu (1994) examined the relationship between brand awareness and customer loyalty. They argue that brand awareness plays a crucial role in shaping customer loyalty by influencing the formation of positive brand attitudes and associations.

Furthermore, the importance of brand image is also illustrated by Keller (1993) in figure 2, where he conceptualized brand image to be composed of brand associations: the different types, favorability, strength, and uniqueness. Dick et al. (1994) contributed further to the literature of brand associations by investigating customers' brand attitude and describing it with antecedents. Customers' antecedents can be either cognitive (accessibility, confidence, centrality, and clarity), affective (emotion, feeling states/moods, primary effect, and satisfaction), and conative (switching cost, sunk cost, and expectation). These antecedents can be used to investigate how a brand's customers may perceive and associate the brand as well

as the specific attitude (Dick et al., 1994). Therefore, there may be a direct link between customers' brand associations and brand attitude.

In general, brand awareness is important because a deeper and broader level of brand awareness (brand recall, brand recognition) among customers can result in a higher brand and product knowledge which may influence the willingness to pay and the willingness to invest in a brand (Keller, 2020). Therefore, the literature of brand awareness highlights its importance as a foundational element in building a strong brand. Also, the literature emphasizes the role of brand awareness in shaping customer loyalty, which can ultimately contribute to long-term brand equity.

### 2.1.2 Brand strategy

Brand strategy plays a significant role in building a strong brand and shaping the perception and image of a brand in the minds of consumers. Therefore, it is important to understand the different aspects that can contribute to a successful brand strategy.

One important term is brand heritage, which refers to the historical background of a brand and its evolution over time. Brand heritage can provide a rich source of inspiration and help to create a strong brand identity and increase consumer loyalty (Keller, 2023). This idea is also supported by researchers Barwise and Meehan (2002), who argue that brand heritage can serve as a source of competitive advantage by creating a unique and memorable brand image.

Another important element is brand narrative, which refers to the relevance of a story that a brand uses to convey its message and connect with its target audience. A strong brand narrative can help differentiate a brand from its competitors, create a memorable and meaningful experience for consumers, and build brand loyalty (Keller, 2023). Hereof, brand narrative can be used to create a strong emotional connection with customers, and thereby plays a crucial role in building a strong brand (Oliveira & Ferreira, 2008).

The above points highlight the significance of including a brand's past, present and future when developing and communicating the brand narrative to gain a competitive advantage and a strong brand positioning. In his latest work, Keller (2023) conceptualized these points in the figure beneath:

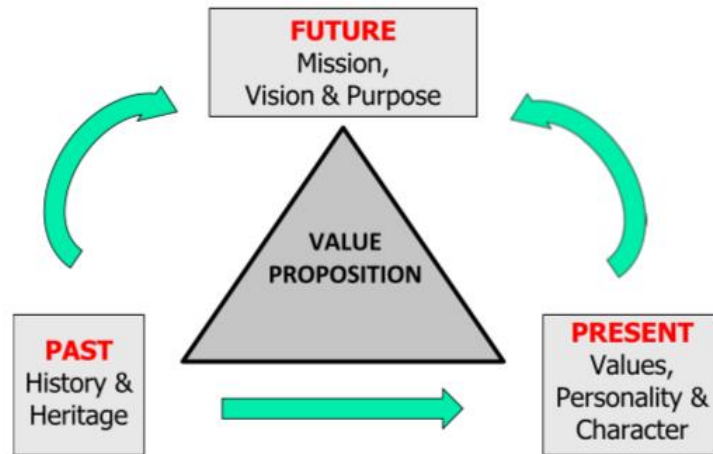


Figure 3: Managing a brand's past, present and future (Keller, 2023).

As illustrated on the figure above, it is also relevant for managers to include brand purpose as a symbol for the future when developing a brand strategy. The term brand purpose refers to the reason why a brand exists and what it stands for. It defines a brand's role in society and sets the direction for its future. A clear brand purpose can inspire employees and customers and contribute to create a sense of shared purpose and mission. Therefore, it can contribute to achieving brand resonance. Another tool to use in brand strategy is storytelling. It can be used to communicate a brand's message and connect with its target audience. By building compelling and engaging stories, brands can create an emotional connection with their audience and build a strong brand identity (Keller, 2023). Furthermore, storytelling plays a significant role in creating brand awareness and building brand loyalty (Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp, 2010).

In conclusion, brand narrative (past, future, present) and storytelling are key elements of a successful brand strategy. By incorporating these elements into its strategy, a brand can create a strong and differentiated brand, resonate with its target audience, and build brand loyalty.

## 2.2 Brand community

A brand community can be used as an important tool to achieve brand resonance, hence, the ultimate customer-brand relationship. A brand community is: *"a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand"* (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). The definition of brand community has been deepened further by Mills et al. (2022) to: *"groups of consumers who are emotionally*

*connected to and actively engaged with a brand through shared experiences, beliefs, and values."* (p. 1078). This definition focuses more on consumers' emotional connection to a brand, and how a brand community engages the consumers through shared experiences, beliefs, and values. Also, this elaborated definition increases the focus on the purpose of achieving the ultimate customer-brand relationship. Furthermore, other studies also state that brand communities can contribute to other benefits for businesses such as brand loyalty, customer engagement, purchase intention, willingness to pay and invest, and brand trust among others (Mills et al., 2022; Pedeliento et al., 2020; Wang & Ding, 2017; Marzocchi, Morandin, Bergami, 2013).

In recent literature on brand community, researchers have stressed the importance of dividing brand communities into two groups. Wang et al. (2017) group brand community into two types: firm-initiated, and consumer-run brand community. The first one is a community established by the organization itself on the brand's behalf. The organization manages it with the purpose to enhance and manage the relationship with current and potential customers (Pedeliento et al., 2020). When a business creates and manages a firm-initiated brand community, it needs to be aware of different factors such as the quality of information, communication, community interaction, and activity reward on community commitment because brand loyalty is often weaker for firm-initiated brand communities than consumer-run communities. Ergo, a firm-initiated brand community requires a greater strategy and efforts such as commitment across the whole organization, control of the community operations, processes, and conflicts to succeed and increase brand loyalty (Wang et al., 2017).

The consumer-run brand community is defined as a community created, managed, and controlled by the consumers themselves. The purpose is an interest in sharing knowledge, information and building relationships with others of the same interests, values, and beliefs as oneself. Generally, these consumer-run brand communities are often related to members' deep brand love and brand loyalty. However, they are not risk-free as the brand community members may share and exchange information about the brand that business does not want (Pedeliento et al., 2020). Another important element to highlight is that it is possible for a brand to have one of each brand community and for them to co-exist with success (Pedeliento et al., 2020).

Overall, the literature enhances the importance of brand communities, and how they can contribute to achieving a stronger brand through increased customer engagement, brand

loyalty, brand trust, and willingness to invest among others. Thus, literature also stress the difference between the two types of brand communities, and how both have benefits and risks.

### 2.2.1 Customer-brand identification

In the literature of brand communities, many studies research the impact brand communities have on customer-brand identification and vice versa. Customer-brand identification occurs when customers develop an identification with a brand: “*when the identity of the company: i) is similar to their own; ii) is distinctive from others; and iii) provides a level of prestige*” (Mills et al., 2020, p. 1078). It is indicated that customer-brand identification is enhanced through the social impact on consumers through social brand benefits, brand feelings and brand experiences (Mills et al., 2020).

This is highlighted further by the theory of social identification that occurs because consumers feel that they belong to a specific type of group either by actual belonging or symbolic. Literature emphasizes that it consists of three different components: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional. The cognitive part of social identification describes one’s awareness of being a member. The evaluative part refers to positive or negative associations towards the membership and community. Finally, the emotional part outlines the involvement and engagement in the community (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Marzocchi et al. (2013) propose that social identification is an increasingly significant factor when managing customer-brand relationships because the individual identification of customers influences the customers behavior towards the brand.

So et al. (2017) highlight that businesses should build a stronger customer-brand identification. Also, they contributed to the literature of customer-brand identification by emphasizing that brand prestige, brand distinctiveness and memorable brand experiences have a very important indirect impact on building customer-brand identification. Therefore, it is significant that businesses present and offer an attractive brand identity to its customers to gain customer-brand identification. This is also enhanced in the literature as it is proposed that customers do not only buy a product but buy a brand as the meaning the brand can add to a customer’s life (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, Marzocchi et al. (2013) contribute to the link between brand community and customer-brand identification by differentiating between community identification and company identification and how these affect brand loyalty in brand communities. When customers identify with a community, they have a shared identity, whereas

the customers' company identification can differ across customer segments, values, beliefs, lifestyles, and such. Also, identification with a brand community results in higher brand loyalty than when customers only have company identification (Marzocchi et al., 2013).

In relation to the points above, Shtudiner et al. (2022) investigated the link between customer-brand identification of sport teams fans, their favorite team, and the willingness to pay. They suggest that the degree of customer-brand identification in connection with the perceived sports performance directly impacts the willingness to pay and overall consumption behavior. The degree of customer-brand identification also weakens the link between the sports performance and willingness to pay. Hence, it is also highlighted how the development, control, and management of customer-brand identification and customer connection should be of high priority for managers. If it is done successfully, a brand can achieve higher customer satisfaction, profits through consumption behavior, and a stronger customer-brand connection (Shtudiner et al., 2022).

Additionally, Rees, Haslam, Coffee & Lavalley (2015) emphasizes how customer-brand identification is a powerful tool to build a strong brand in the sports industry. Hence, they stress that the social identity within a group is the fundamental part of sport groups behavior, formation, and development, whereas a higher degree of social identity with a sports group results in higher brand loyalty, brand support, word-of-mouth, and brand engagement.

In general, the literature of customer-brand identification enhances the impact it has on multiple factors such as brand engagement, willingness to pay, brand attractiveness, brand support, and brand loyalty within a brand community.

### 2.2.2 Brand Loyalty

When exploring the literature of brand community, the term brand loyalty is often mentioned and investigated. Brand loyalty can be defined as: *"a consumer's commitment to repurchase a preferred brand consistently over time, despite situational influences and marketing efforts."* (Mills et al., 2022, p. 1077). The definition bases the customer's loyalty on its consumption behavior of a brand.

Researchers Mills et al. (2022) propose that the concept of brand loyalty can be divided into two separate categories: private- and public loyalty. This concept is based on the original theory

of how consumers' individual behavior is altered and adapted when other individuals are seeing it in comparison to when it is a private act (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). Private brand loyalty refers to consumers' behavioral way towards a brand when it cannot be observed or seen by others, whereas public brand loyalty is a consumers' behavior towards a brand when it can be observed and seen by others. Hence, it is emphasized that customer-brand identification of a brand community can result in a significant increase in both public- and private brand loyalty (Mills et al., 2022). Also, it is proposed that the more customers are engaged in a brand community, the customers will feel more pressure to the group's expectations of behavior which will lead to affect the customers' loyalty to both the brand, community, and remaining of loyalty (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005; Ratner et al., 2002; Cheng, Huang, Chuang & Ju, 2015).

Furthermore, there is literature that investigates the link between brand loyalty and elements such as brand love, brand attachment, and social alliance towards sports teams and brand communities. When consumers perceive a brand as an extension of themselves and can relate to the brand's identity, values, beliefs or feel a connection towards a brand community, the result is a deeper love towards a brand, also called brand love. This contributes to a more emotional attachment aspect of the brand loyalty literature.

Brand love differs from other terms such as customer-brand identification and satisfaction by being: 1. brand love being affective and existing in the past, present, and future, 2. a result of long-term customer-brand relationship, 3. integrating the brand into the customers' own identity (Ahuvia, Batra & Bagozzi, 2009). Martin et al. (2020) contribute to the literature of brand love by adding five dimensions that brand love is made of: passion, connection, intrinsic rewards, emotional attachment and thinking, and frequent use. They also propose that brand love results in higher degree of brand loyalty, willingness to invest and word-of-mouth communication.

Overall, the literature suggests that creating strong brand communities can result in an increase in brand loyalty and customer engagement. Additionally, the literature divides brand loyalty into private and public loyalty, as well as considering brand love as an important term related to brand loyalty.



## 2.4 Sub-conclusion

In conclusion, the literature highlights the importance of building and managing a strong brand to gain a stronger brand position and brand equity. The literature review investigated literature linked to achieving the ultimate customer-brand relationship through key concepts of brand identity, brand awareness, brand strategy, brand community, customer-brand identification, and brand loyalty. These key concepts can all be linked to building brand communities whereas there are two different types of brand communities to differentiate between: consumer-run and firm-initiated.

The literature review provides a relevant insight into the important elements that relate to brand community, customer engagement, and brand loyalty. However, it is important to highlight that literature of experiential marketing has been left out. This is done because the thesis does not aim to investigate how Aalborg Pirates can create specific experiences to design and create a brand community and increase customer engagement. Hence, the focus is to investigate the link between brand community and customer engagement to achieve brand resonance.

### **3. Philosophy of Science and Methodology**

In the following sections, philosophy of science will be explained. It will be elaborated how the paradigm has contributed to the creation of the thesis. Additionally, the methodology approach, such as research strategy and data collection, used to conduct the thesis will be explained and how it has influenced the work, process, and result of the thesis. Finally, the validity and reliability of the thesis will be addressed.

#### **3.1 Critical Realism**

Critical realism is a philosophical approach that believes the underlying reality is not directly accessible but can be captured through the investigation of empirical phenomena. Critical realism seeks to understand the relationship between the objective structures and mechanisms of society and the subjective experiences of individuals (Danermark, Ekström & Karlsson, 2019). Therefore, it combines the objective reality and the individual subjective reality.

Critical realism preaches that reality is comprises both generative structures and the empirical events that they produce. Structures are not directly observable, but they can be inferred through their effects and regularities in empirical phenomena (Danermark et al., 2019). Furthermore, critical realism is particularly useful in the study of complex social processes and organizations. The use of critical realism entitles researchers to identify the underlying causal mechanisms that drive social outcomes, rather than simply describing the surface-level of reality (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2008). Critical realism allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between structure and reality and can help to reveal the power dynamics that influence social outcomes (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2014).

Overall, critical realism presents an approach for understanding the underlying structures and mechanisms that shape society and the experiences of individuals. It offers an approach of moving beyond surface-level reality and provides a means of investigating the underlying causes and causal relationships.

##### **3.1.1 Ontology**

Ontology refers to the study of reality and it is perceived. Critical realism proposes three layers of reality: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Arbnor et al., 2008).

The empirical layer refers to the observable data that individuals can directly perceive. The actual layer refers to the relationships between the empirical events that can be observed and the underlying causal mechanisms which produce these events. Finally, the real layer refers to the underlying causal mechanisms and structures that exist independently of human observation and interpretation (Arbnor et al., 2008). It is emphasized that the multiple layers of reality can be studied and understood through a combination of empirical observation and theoretical analysis. In this way, critical realism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of reality and how it is perceived by individuals (Buch-Hansen et al., 2014).

Therefore, both data of managers and customers and academic literature are collected in this thesis. All the data are relevant because it reflects the individuals' subjective interpretation and perceptions in combination with the actual events observed. The literature provides an insight in the underlying mechanisms effecting brand community and customer engagement.

In conclusion, ontology within critical realism acknowledges the three layers of reality. These layers can be studied and understood through a combination of empirical observation and theoretical analysis.

### 3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is used to describe how knowledge is created and processed in social science. Hence, critical realism holds the belief that knowledge is constructed through the interaction between objective reality and subjective interpretation. This interaction results in multiple layers of reality, which are both dependent on and independent of each other (Danermark et al., 2019).

The focus within epistemology is to uncover the mechanisms and processes that influence the construction of knowledge. This involves exploring the role that individual perspectives, biases, and power relations play in shaping our understanding of reality (Arbnor et al., 2008). Furthermore, it is important that researchers examine the subjective influences that shape knowledge. It is argued that it is not enough to simply study objective reality, as our understanding of it is always mediated by our experiences, values, and beliefs (Buch-Hansen et al., 2014).

In the thesis, the methodology section provides a guideline of how knowledge used to conduct this thesis is collected and processed. By following both a mixed-method approach (will be elaborated later), it allows the thesis to study both the subjective reality of individuals as well as the objective reality. However, by using the Brand Resonance Pyramid as a framework for the analysis, it contributes to ensuring the objectivity of processing the data collected. Thus, the data collected is created based on individual's own perceptions, reality, and biases.

In general, critical realism believes that knowledge is constructed through the interaction between objective reality and subjective interpretation. As a result, it is necessary to consider the three layers of reality and the subjective influences that shape our understanding of the world to gain a more complete and accurate understanding (Danermark et al., 2019; Arbnor et al., 2008; Buch-Hansen, 2014).

### 3.2 Methodology approach: Research Strategy

When conducting research, a strategy must be made. In the following sections, the strategy and choices made will be presented. Hereof, the method and data collection approaches will be explained as well as the reasons and effects of the chosen methods will be elaborated.

The reason behind a chosen research strategy is based on what a researcher aims to investigate, its purpose, the paradigm, and the research question. This thesis aims to examine the case study of how brand community effects customer engagement by studying Aalborg Pirates. Before this case study and research question were chosen, the thesis began with investigating the literature around branding and brand communities which lead to a more specific knowledge of literature within the sports industry. Then, by identifying the existing research gaps, the choice was made to base the research on the case of Aalborg Pirates. Hereof, the process of gathering basic data of Aalborg Pirates through its website began. Afterwards, the literature review was conducted to create a deeper objective knowledge of branding literature, terms and factors that impact brand community and customer engagement. After doing this, primary data consisting of Aalborg Pirates and its customers' perspectives were collected. Hereof, I went from theory to data. Thus, when conducting the analysis, I went back and forth between data, theory and vice versa.

By doing the above-mentioned, I chose to use a combination of the induction method (data to theory) and deduction (theory to data), which is named the abduction method (back and forth

between data and theory). An advantage of the abduction method is that it provides a flexibility in the research as it allows the research to move between the primary data collected and theory continuously throughout the thesis. Furthermore, the approach enhances a deeper and more insightful understanding of the existing literature and knowledge within the research area (Darmer, Jordansen, Madsen & Thomasen, 2010). Finally, by implementing this method, the research allows me to explore the phenomena of Aalborg Pirates' brand and how a brand community can effect the customer engagement and achieve brand resonance.

The thesis aimed to gather objective and subjective knowledge and perceptions within the case study as critical realism acknowledges the relevance of quantitative and qualitative methods in research. These two methods can differ in the two following ways: 1. collecting data, and/or 2. processing data (Arbnor & Bjerke, 2009). As a mixed-method approach, these two methods can also be related to each other. This mixed-method is based on the belief that it is possible to evaluate and explain all quantitative data qualitatively and vice versa, and all quantitative data is based on subjective and qualitative perceptions and judgments (Wheeldon & Åhlberg, 2012). In this thesis, data is collected quantitatively and qualitatively, however the data is only processed qualitatively. The use of triangulation that is implemented in the thesis is illustrated below:

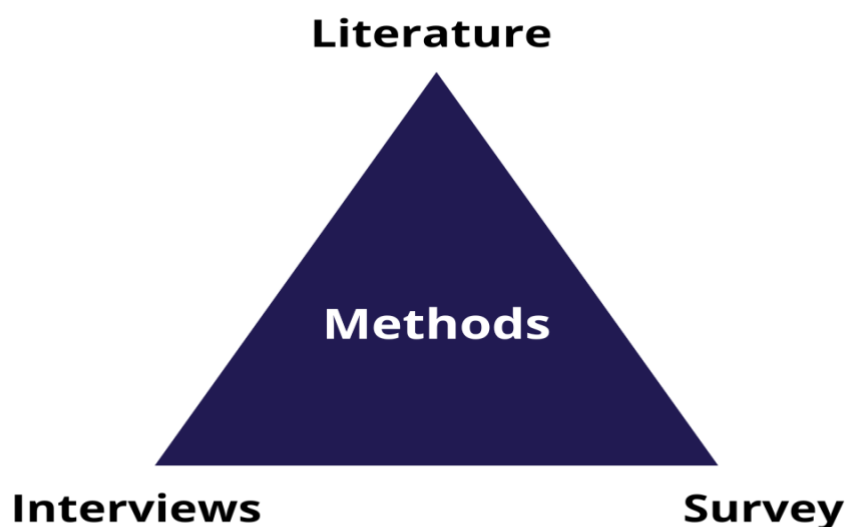


Figure 4: Triangulation of methods used in the thesis. Own illustration (2023).

The interviews can be described as the expert knowledge of Aalborg Pirates, the survey of the customers' can be described as the practitioners, and the literature is the knowledge within the research area. Therefore, the use of a mixed-method contributes to enhancing the quality of the thesis.

In the next sections, a more profound explanation of the chosen data collection methods will be presented: qualitative and quantitative.

### 3.2.1 Qualitative data collection

The qualitative data collection was done by collecting empirical data as three interviews were conducted. The purpose of the qualitative method is to collect each individual's subjective knowledge and perceptions of Aalborg Pirates.

Before setting up and conducting the interviews, the process started by looking into the organization of Aalborg Pirates and which individuals would be interesting to interview. Hereof, the Marketing Manager was chosen based on his main responsible area being marketing, which makes him relevant in terms of the research area of the study. Furthermore, the decision was made to interview the Operations Manager because of his work areas e.g., customer experience overlaps with branding. Lastly, the choice was made to include a player's experience to gain insight from another perspective outside the office of Aalborg Pirates. Therefore, the qualitative data collection consists of the two perspectives of the internal part of Aalborg Pirates' organization: Managers and Players.

To plan and structure the interviews the qualitative method of Kvale & Brinkmann (2014) was used. This method of conducting qualitative data consists of seven steps: Thematization, Interview design, Interview, Transcription, Analysis, Verification, and Reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

In the first phase, thematization, the wanted thematics for the research was chosen. These were based on empirical and academic knowledge from the literature review and basic knowledge of Aalborg Pirates as a business. Hereof, the chosen thematics were brand strategy, identity, value, community, engagement, and experience. These thematics aligned with the literature review and main theories used to research the problem in the thesis.

The second phase, interview design, consisted of preparing and designing an interviewguide that was altered to each of the three interviews. Some questions differ in each interview; thus, a lot of the questions are similar. This was done based on the explorative interviews, which are related to the mine-digger metaphor where the interviewer digs for information by exploring all answers and directions (Kvale & Brinkmann., 2014). The interviews were also designed based on a semi-structured method. The interviewguides consist of questions regarding the thematics that I was seeking answers to, however, depending on the answers the follow-up questions were adapted to uncover more. Therefore, the interviews were designed to be explorative and semi-structured and were made to discover the perceptions and opinions upon the individual person being interviewees (Appendix 3).

The third phase is conducting the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviews were conducted physically to engage in a more warm, deep, and personal contact with the interviewees. The interviews were done in the following order: Player, Marketing Manager, and Operations Manager. The choice was made to follow the above order because a player is more objective to the thematics. Also, the player experiences the customer engagement and brand communities first-hand. The Marketing Manager was the second interview because he is the person-in-charge (PIC) of the marketing- and branding efforts of Aalborg Pirates. The purpose was to establish Aalborg Pirates' efforts based on the perceptions and opinions of the PIC. The last interview was with the Operations Manager and PIC of the brand experience of Aalborg Pirates. He was the last to uncover whether he has the same perceptions and opinions of Aalborg Pirates' branding, customer engagement, and brand experiences etc. as the Marketing Manager.

Transcription is the fourth phase of the qualitative method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviewees all agreed to be recorded which made this phase easier. Each interview was transcribed based on a recording file. The recordings can be sent upon request from the supervisor or examiner, however, in the appendices the full transcription of each interview can be found (Appendix 4, Appendix 5 & Appendix 6).

The fifth phase is analyzing the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). One way this is done within this research is by coding the interviews into relevant thematics such as e.g., customer segment or brand identity. The coding process makes it easier to create an overview of what

each interviewee perceives of a certain theme of questions and implement into the thesis. Also, the thesis contains relevant quotes that are analyzed.

The sixth phase, verification, consists of validating the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Hereof, it is important to highlight that due to the interviews being semi-structured and explorative, the purpose was to uncover the individual person's perceptions and truth. The interviews can be validated as the questions are based on the literature and terms from the literature review. Also, the interviewguide works as a guideline for other researchers to recreate the interview to a certain extent. The data from the interviews are used in the triangulation method, so the interviews are not the only data collected and used throughout this thesis.

The seventh phase is reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This is done by analyzing each interviewees' perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs to uncover the research question and problems within.

### 3.2.2 Quantitative data collection

The third part of the triangulation is the quantitative data collection which in this thesis consist of a customer survey, cf. section 3.2.

The customer survey aimed to discover the perceptions and opinions of Aalborg Pirates' customers. It enhances a more objective data collection because it contains all three parts of the triangulation. The survey was sent out online into different facebook groups, with most being Aalborg Pirates support forums. It was also distributed on my facebook page to gather input from individuals who may not identify themselves as Aalborg Pirates fans. This was done to gather a more representative overview and resulted in a total of 354 respondents. The survey is mostly based on a questionnaire consisting of qualitative and quantitative answers. By gathering a broader and deeper knowledge of the customers, the survey also contributes to collecting quantitative data. Thus, the data will not be processed quantitatively but implemented as raw data throughout the thesis.

The representation of the survey will briefly be explained. The beneath figure shows the respondents gender in relation to age:



What is your age?  
Crossed with: What is your gender?

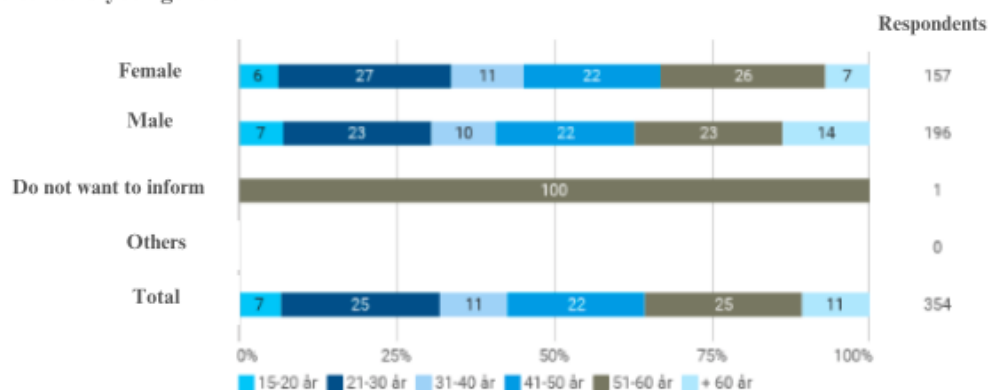


Figure 5: Own illustration of gender divided into age. Retrieved from SurveyXact (Appendix 7).

As illustrated, there are 196 males, 157 females, and 1 who do not want to inform. Hereof, the two largest age groups of the female respondents are 21-30 years (27%) and 51-60 years (26%). In the male group, there are three age groups that are close to each other: 21-30 years (23%), 51-60 years (23%), and 41-50 years (22%). Furthermore, the figure underneath illustrates the respondents' occupation divided into different education level:

What is your educational level?  
Crossed with: What is your occupation?

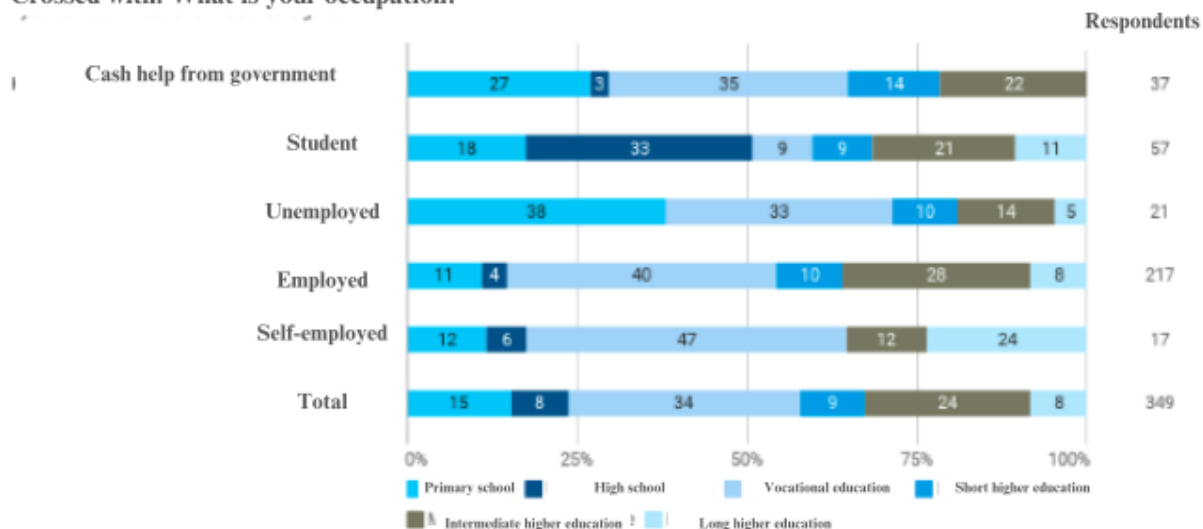


Figure 6: Aalborg Pirates' customers by occupation divided into educational levels. Retrieved from SurveyXact (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that most respondents are employed with 217 out of 349. Of the respondents who are employed, the majority (40%) have a vocational education. Overall, in each of the occupational groups, most of the respondents have a vocational education level, and it represents most of the respondents.

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability

A goal for the thesis was to ensure the validity and reliability of the research.

One thing that enhances the validity is the primary data collection. As the goal was to investigate customer-brand relationship in terms of how brand community effects customer engagement, the data collection was done based on collecting the three relevant perspectives: Managers, Customers, and a player. The choice was made to leave other stakeholders which limits the findings in the thesis, however, it was done because the focus was to investigate the customer-brand relationship. Even though some sponsors may also be customers, they benefit from promotion from its relationship with Aalborg Pirates whereas customers do not have any business or profitable benefits from their customer-brand relationship.

Thus, one thing that may affect the validity in this matter is the fact that the survey collecting customers' perspective was sent out in Aalborg Pirates fan forums and my personal Facebook page. This has influenced the representation of the respondents, as many of them may identify themselves as fans. Therefore, the findings of the thesis are an indication basis that representation. However, the primary data collection was used in a triangulation combination where the interviews and survey combined with academic literature. Hence, the findings are valid because they are based on the current situation in Aalborg Pirates as well as current literature.

Furthermore, the use of academic literature contributes to not only the validity but also the reliability of the thesis. It is ensured by a systematic approach to collecting data and conducting a literature review, cf. section 2. The literature review provides a guideline of different sections which are relevant to consider if other researchers were to investigate the same case. Thus, it is important to note that the research area of brand community and customer-brand relationship are two research areas that are constantly changing due to reality, surroundings, and dynamics of culture and society. Therefore, the literature is always developing and changing which may affect or make the findings of the thesis irrelevant over time. Thus, the focus has been on gathering recent literature to enhance the reliability.

## 4. Analysis

In the following sections, the primary data collected will be used for analysis. First, there will be an analysis of Aalborg Pirates' customer segments. Second, there will be an analysis of Aalborg Pirates and the customer-brand relationship with its customers to analyze how brand community effect customer engagement. To do so, the Brand Resonance Pyramid by Keller (2020) is used as a basis for the analysis.

### 4.1 Customer segment

In this section, there will be a short explanation of Aalborg Pirates' customer segments based on the interviewees' perceptions and the customer survey. This is done to create an overview of the segments to use throughout the analysis in relation to different preferences, values, and behavior.

The interviewees were asked to describe the primary customer in Aalborg Pirates. The responses from the Operations Manager and Marketing Manager are similar, yet they still differ in a way. In contrast, the Player has a very different perception of the primary customer. The three individuals' perceptions are shown below:

Marketing Manager	<i>"I would say that our typical customer is somewhere between 25 and 50 years old, primary male, and probably also primary with a vocational education background"</i>	Appendix 4, ll. 37-39
Operations Manager	<i>".. it is a man in his 40's who like to go out with his friends and drink beers"</i>	Appendix 5, ll. 31-32
Player	<i>"Hm, maybe it is the family mother who cares a lot about ice hockey"</i>	Appendix 6, l. 179

Table 3: Typical Customer of Aalborg Pirates. Own illustration (Appendix 4, 5, and 6).

The quotes above indicate that the two Managers experience the typical customer as male. In addition, the Marketing Manager deepens his understanding of a broader age group as well as educational background. Compared to the result from the conducted customer survey which is

described in section 3.2.3, this aligns in some way. Most of the respondents from the customer survey are male, 55% male and 44% female (Appendix 7). Therefore, a great part of the respondents is also female. The managers may be defining Aalborg Pirates' primary customer basis as their own perceptions instead of reliable data. This is also an issue highlighted by the Marketing Manager:

*“I miss more tangible data on the CUSTOMER. I can retrieve data of who follows us on social media and so on but they are not necessarily our customers .. The only thing I know of my customers is where they live postcode wise but in reality I do not know anything about them”* (Appendix 4, ll. 39-41; 50-52).

As Aalborg Pirates do not have any data on its customers, it becomes harder for the organization to adapt its brand and experience which induce a risk. Thus, the Managers seem to have an idea of the primary customer which also aligns with the result of the conducted customer survey. In contrast to this, the interviewed player has a different perception of the primary customer as illustrated in table 3. The Player describes it as a family mother who is much involved and engaged in ice hockey. Based on the customer survey, most of the female respondents are 21-30 years (27%) and 51-60 years (26%), as seen on figure 6, cf. section 3.2.3.

In comparison with the Player's perception the result of the survey seems to align. However, it is important to note that the player's definition of the typical customer is based on who the player perceives as the most involved and engaged customer, as he experiences that customer type as the segment that approaches the players the most (Appendix 6, ll. 184-189). Hence, the Player's response is based on who he sees and notices the most at before and after games.

On another note, the Operations Manager points out how he sometimes also segments the customers by the other categories: season ticket holders who attend 70-100% of the games, ticket buyers who generally like to attend sport events, and the segment where ice hockey is a relatively new experience (Appendix 5, ll. 38-40). The Operations Manager highlights how he works with moving these customer segments up the ladder from a first-time attend to ticket buyer to season ticket holder. He emphasizes that this work is somehow successful as the number of season ticket holders have increased in recent years. Whether this is due to a cheaper subscription solution for season ticket holders, or the sports performance of Aalborg Pirates is unknown (Appendix 5, ll. 41-47).

To sum up, the typical customer of Aalborg Pirates may be male in the age group 21-30 years, and within the age group 41-60 years, based on the survey and the two Managers' perceptions. Thus, one important element to highlight is how the Managers segment the customers based on age groups and genders instead of lifestyle, income, occupation, preferences, or others.

## 4.2 Brand Resonance Pyramid

Keller (2020) Brand Resonance Pyramid is a framework for businesses to achieve the ultimate customer-brand relationship as introduced in section 2. To summarize, the model consists of Brand Salience, Brand Performance, Brand Imagery, Brand Judgments, Brand Feelings, and Brand Resonance.

In the following sections the purpose is to analyze the customer-brand relationship in the case of Aalborg Pirates. The following sections will analyze the effects of brand communities in relation to customer engagement on game days and thereby enhance the customer-brand relationship.

### 4.2.1 Brand Salience

The first step of the pyramid is the identity of a business and is called Brand Salience. It is essential for businesses to create a brand identity that has both a broad and deep brand awareness, and fulfill its customers' needs in terms of product, brand, and experience. Brand Salience is the part of the pyramid where businesses design and create the identity of its brand (Keller, 2020).

First of all, Aalborg Pirates is a relatively new brand that was established in 2012, cf. section 1.2. However, the brand was bought from the old brand Aalborg Ishockey, and when the brand was established, there was already a perception of the new brand Aalborg Pirates, based on the former brand. Therefore, Aalborg Pirates had to detach from the former brand's brand identity and create a new one. Who were Aalborg Pirates and what should they be? Hereof, Marketing Manager highlights how the creation of Aalborg Pirates, and its brand was to create an identity where ice hockey is for everyone - the youth, families, and everyone else. Thus, this shift was and is still a bit difficult to manage as some customers still prefer the old brand and/or experience:

*“In some people's eyes you are still somewhat old, in a few you are still AaB, and some have been further back. But we are not, we are not AaB, we are a new club with our own independent identity, which we ourselves are involved in and can create. We want to be there and do what we call hockey with an edge (hockey med kant). We are not afraid to be different. We are not different just for the sake of being different, but we may dare to forget what we always have to and should do or what everyone else does. If it makes sense to us, we dare to do it, we dare to go to the limit. We are not just a sports team, but we must also be an experience with sport as a focal point.” (Appendix 4, ll. 180-187).*

The focus shifted towards creating an identity that did not only focus on the ice hockey game but also the experience around it. Hereof, the Marketing Manager describes the identity of Aalborg Pirates as Hockey With An Edge<sup>1</sup>. The focus is to have a brand identity where ice hockey is not simple and deliver an experience before, during, and after a game. This is further endorsed by the Operations Manager who highlights a quote from a former director of Aalborg Pirates:

*“We try to look at it off the pitch and how we can make it almost equally fun whether we have lost a match or not. Almost to quote our old director Thomas Bjuring "It shouldn't matter if we lose or win", although it does. We are a sports club, and everyone wants us to win, but it should be so that even if we lose, for example, Finale4 last Saturday, people should leave thinking "holy shit, that was awesome. It was sad that we lost, but it was great" (Appendix 5, ll. 121-126).*

The Operations Manager's statement indicates that Aalborg Pirates is a brand that aims to create and design its brand identity around the brand experience on game days. Also, the two Managers' perception of Aalborg Pirates' brand identity aligns relatively high. When comparing the Managers' perception of Aalborg Pirates' brand identity to the customers' reasons for attending games, the experiential element is also the main reason as illustrated below:

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<sup>1</sup> Dansk: Hockey Med Kant

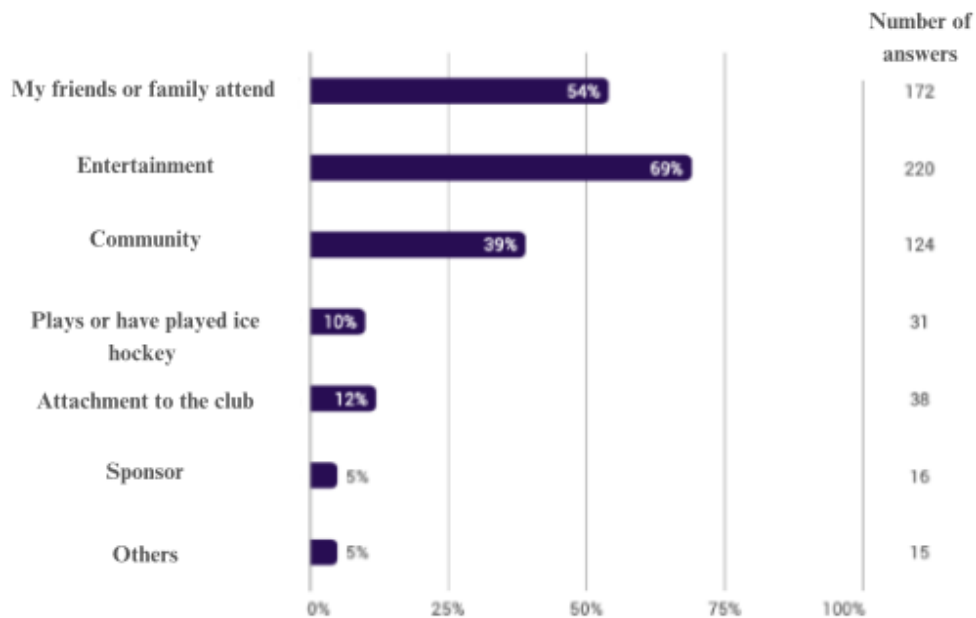


Figure 7: The reasons why customers attended Aalborg Pirates' games. Respondents could choose max. 2 answers (Appendix 7).

69% of respondents chose entertainment as the reason for attending the game which indicate that the customers also perceive entertainment on a game day as a major part of Aalborg Pirates' brand identity. In relation to Aaker's (1999) theory of Brand Identity Dimensions, it can be argued that Aalborg Pirates has a focus on designing and managing its brand identity as excitement, competence, and ruggedness. Thus, it is important to note that the brand identity dimension of Aalborg Pirates is created and managed by the business itself, however, it is the customers who perceive the brand identity and decide it. Yet the brand identity perception of Aalborg Pirates' Managers seems to align with the customers' perception which may mean that the customers' needs are relatively fulfilled. Although it is relevant to point out that Aalborg Pirates as a sports club will always be somehow depending on its sports performance to fulfill most customers' needs. This is further highlighted by a Player of Aalborg Pirates:

*“Yes, well, I would say that Aalborg Pirates' brand has become stronger and stronger over the years. It was also starting to get stronger just before I came up here, and just when I did.*

*But I would say that I also think it has helped that titles have come in. I think it has strengthened and contributed to make the club itself a stronger and more attractive brand.”*

*(Appendix 6, ll. 23-26).*

The statement indicates how the brand of Aalborg Pirates has benefited greatly from its sports performance success in recent years which has contributed to a stronger brand identity.

Second of all, it is important to consider the depth and broadness of Aalborg Pirates' brand awareness. In the data collected, brand awareness questions were limited to the geographical area of Northern Jutland. This was done to segment a smaller area, and due to the multiple sports teams in Northern Jutland that are competitors to Aalborg Pirates. The broad awareness of Aalborg Pirates' brand is relatively high as Aalborg Pirates has won multiple titles and has benefited from a great sports performance in recent years. However, the deepness of Aalborg Pirates' brand awareness may be questionable among the ordinary citizen in Northern Jutland, as highlighted by the Operations Manager:

*"I feel that there are many people who know who we are. But they don't know what it is, I think. They know that we've become champions or that we're playing at the top. But they don't really know what's happening out here. That's where I feel that there is an effort that can be made to get some people to come and say "go and see it" ... And that's where we also try to create something exciting, because we know that we are a niche sport."* (Appendix 5, ll. 215-221).

It indicates that Aalborg Pirates is a known sports brand with broad awareness in Northern Jutland whereas the deep awareness is low. The reason may be because ice hockey is a niche sport in Denmark, as pointed out by the Operations Manager. Hereof, Aalborg Pirates may consider communicating its brand and experience around the game more broadly and in depth to the ordinary citizens with no interest in ice hockey to attract them to attend the games. If Aalborg Pirates focus on creating a stronger brand community, it may result in maintaining new customers. Another interesting point made by the Marketing Manager is how he also believes that the broadness of Aalborg Pirates' brand is high. Thus, he highlights that it is only based on his beliefs and experiences as Aalborg Pirates has no relevant data of its brand awareness nor the broadness nor deepness of it (Appendix 4, ll. 372-375).

To sum up, it is important for Aalborg Pirates to remember to manipulate its own perception of its brand identity to potential customers, new customers, and existing customers. However, based on the perceptions and statements of the two managers, a player, and the customer survey, it is indicated that there is a relatively high alignment between Aalborg Pirates'



perception of its brand identity and customers perception of it. With the attributes of the brand identity: 1. it doesn't matter whether we lose or win, 2. Hockey With An Edge, and 3. focuses on delivering a great sports experience before, during and after a game.

#### 4.2.2 Brand Performance

The next step of the pyramid is Brand Performance. It refers to how well a brand's functionality of a product fulfills the customers' needs and expectations (Keller, 2020). When looking at Aalborg Pirates' Brand Performance, the focus will be within the brand's sports performance. This is because the sports performance is the main product of Aalborg Pirates' brand even though it offers an overall experience. Hereof, it is important to note that the Managers of Aalborg Pirates and other office employees only manage the brand's experience performance whereas they cannot control whether the team is winning or not.

As stated in all three of the interviews, Aalborg Pirates has had great success in its sports performance in recent years (Appendix 4, ll. 472-473; Appendix 5, ll. 269-270; Appendix 6, ll. 23-26). The success in sports performance has resulted in an increased number of attendees at games whereas 65% of the respondents have a season ticket. However, it is interesting to highlight that only 26% of those have had a season ticket for more than 5 years (Appendix 7). As Aalborg Pirates won its first championship in its brand's history in 2018 (Aalborg Pirates, n.d.-B), which is exactly 5 years ago, it indicates that many of the season ticket holders may have been attracted to attend games due to a better sports performance. However, 70% of the respondents do not believe that they are more likely to attend games if Aalborg Pirates experience sports success, as shown on the figure below:

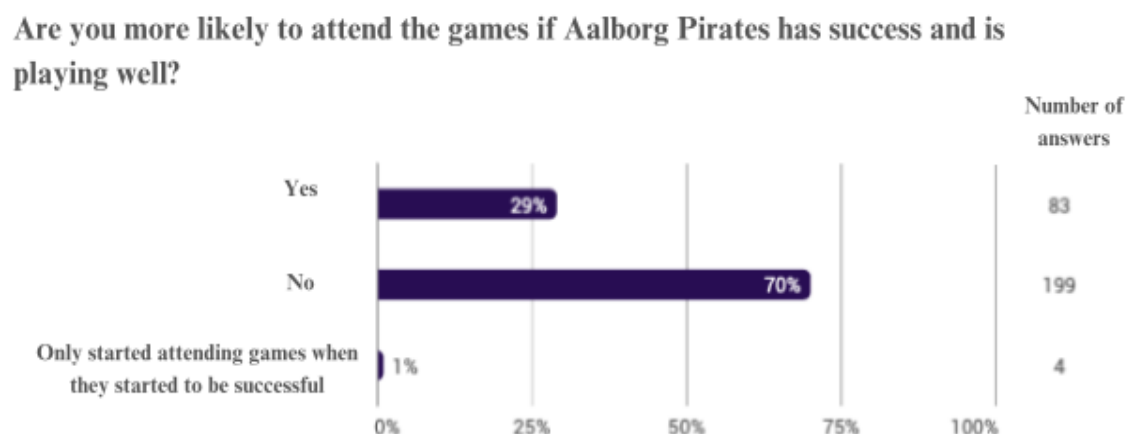


Figure 8: If customers are more likely to attend the games if Aalborg Pirates is playing great and having success (Appendix 7).

The figure above shows a contrast of when respondents started to buy season tickets, as Aalborg Pirates has only had great success within the last 5 years. Therefore, it may indicate that those respondents do not want to acknowledge that they are more likely to attend depending on sports performance. In relation to this, Shtudiner et al.'s (2022) findings state that sports success increases customers willingness to invest. In the case of Aalborg Pirates, this must be assumed to be true as most of the season ticket holders have occurred after the team's increased success. The literature also highlights that customer-brand identification can lead to willingness to pay (Shtudiner et al., 2022), which may also explain why 35% of the respondents do not want to invest in a season ticket because they are not identified with the brand or loyal fans.

Another interesting aspect to highlight is that even though Aalborg Pirates benefit from great sport success, the overall customer engagement at games is being criticized. The interviewees highlight the following:

Marketing Manager	<p><i>"Sometimes I would like it (the customer engagement) to be a little better. But I also think that there is some Jutlandic mentality in it."</i> (Appendix 4, ll. 494-495)</p> <p><i>"The ordinary customer, if you disregard the hardcore ones who stand down in the corner of the grandstand and sing their usual songs, well then there are not many Danes who dare to sit and sing along to a song."</i> (Appendix 4, ll. 502-504).</p>
Operations Manager	<p><i>"Here we are struggling to get people to clap and sing along. We've tried using clappers to get people to clap along and make some noise. We've even put out flyers with songs on them to be like "Here! Sing this song", or put flags all over the hall because that's how you're supposed to wave when we score, or come in, or whatever, or horns."</i> (Appendix 5, ll. 324-327).</p> <p><i>"We try to push them (Pirates Support) in the direction that we want to go and influence them to do that. I know that we</i></p>

	<p><i>have said that whatever they want to do in terms of atmosphere-creating initiatives, they have to tell us what they want to spend, because there is this bag of money for that. If it's something that makes them make flags, place some around the hall to create an atmosphere” (Appendix 5, ll. 375-378).</i></p> <p><i>“I hope, of course, that one day we will have such a good atmosphere that people will say "listen, this has never been seen before". A hypothetical example, that there is such a high decibel level inside the hall because the fans are just too wild.” (Appendix 5, ll. 576-578).</i></p>
Player	<p><i>“During the games, I actually think it is okay at times .. But during games, a little more drumming and a little more commitment - or there is commitment, how do I explain it... a little more ferocity, maybe.” (Appendix 6, ll. 127-129).</i></p>

Table 4: Interviewees statements of customer engagement during games (Appendix, 4, Appendix 5, Appendix 6).

As highlighted above, the tendency is lack of customer engagement. The mentality of the customers may result in them thinking it is embarrassing or uncommon to clap, sing, and engage themselves in games. Thus, it is mentioned that there is a corner in the arena with hardcore fans who create a great atmosphere and show engagement by cheering, singing, clapping, etc. In addition, the survey shows that only 27% of the respondents believe that they are fully engaged during games, whereas 21% would engage themselves if the atmosphere were better. Another interesting factor is that 18% of the respondents attending an Aalborg Pirates game do not want to engage by singing, clapping, or wearing merchandise. Moreover, 14% of the respondents want more initiatives to become activated (Appendix 7). The Operations Manager further highlights the low engagement and lack of atmosphere:

*“I would almost dare to say that among the top clubs in Danish ice hockey, we are the ones with the worst atmosphere. We are the ones with the most attendees, but there should not be more than 20 fans from Sønderjyske, then they make more noise than we do.” (Appendix 5, ll. 381-383).*

In another aspect, the player experiences that customer engagement depends on sports performance where the sound level can be low or moments of total silence during a game (Appendix 6, ll. 144-146). Also, the player points out that there is a clear difference in customer engagement depending on which opponent they face in a game (Appendix 6, ll. 125-129).

There lies an important task in managing and working to improve the customer engagement as the managers cannot control the sports performance. The Managers argue how the brand experience is a tool to do so. As the Operations Manager highlights in his statement, they have tried to engage customers by offering clappers and flyers with songs written on to increase the atmosphere. However, Aalborg Pirates previous and current efforts to increase customer engagement have not been successful. He also states that Aalborg Pirates offers resources to the independent fan club, Pirates Support, whereas the fan club can create initiatives to help increase the customer engagement in the arena. Thus, the fan community Pirates Support do not seem to take responsibility and actions into their hands, which is something that the Managers would like (Appendix 5, ll. 375-378).

According to literature, it is odd that a consumer-run brand community like Pirates Support has a low number of members and is not taking more action, as the literature indicates that members of these communities share the same love, interest, and passion of a brand (Pedeliento et al., 2020). Therefore, an idea may be for Aalborg Pirates to consider creating a firm-initiated brand community instead of focusing on the brand experience. A firm-initiated brand community will allow the organization to manage and control everything that is distributed and informed to the members. It will also allow Aalborg Pirates to influence the members to be more vocal and create a better atmosphere at games which can lead to influencing the regular customer to contribute and engage more to the atmosphere.

Overall, within Aalborg Pirates' Brand Performance there is a clear link between its sports performance and willingness to invest in terms of purchasing season tickets which is influenced by the customer-brand identification. However, the increased success in performance has not increased the customer engagement regarding atmosphere, singing, cheering, clapping etc. Thus, Aalborg Pirates' overall Brand Performance is high and ranked as one of the top brands in the Danish ice hockey league.

### 4.2.3 Brand Imagery

The third step is Brand Imagery which describes how brands seek to fulfill customers' psychological and social needs. It refers to how customers think and associate the brand more abstractly, and not specifically what the brand does. Brand Imagery is often put together by different intangibles directly based on customers' own experiences or indirectly by marketing or word of mouth (Keller, 2020).

First of all, the associations customers may have towards a brand can be related to a brand's personality and values. Businesses can try to form a brand strategy of how it wants to be perceived by customers in terms of defining its own personality and values, thus, it is up to the customers to make the associations of what the brand is. As stated in section 4.2.1, Aalborg Pirates focuses on creating, managing, and developing a brand identity where the focus is within the dimensions of excitement, competence, and ruggedness. Moreover, it is also clarified in section 4.2.1, that most of the customers' perception of Aalborg Pirates' brand personality aligns with Aalborg Pirates' own definition: ice hockey with an edge.

Another intangible relevant in terms of Brand Imagery is a brand's value. The Operations Manager describes Aalborg Pirates brand value as being divided into two-part. The first one is the sports performance which the managers cannot manage. The second one is creating a unique and great experience for customers despite winning or losing a game: *"We're trying to look at things off the ice and how we can make it almost equally fun whether we have lost a game or not."* (Appendix 5, ll. 121-122). In relation hereof, the Operations Manager states that it is sometimes a difficult to create a fun, entertaining, or innovative experience on a *"boring Tuesday night game where you play against the bottom team"* (Appendix 5, ll. 127-128).

An interesting part uncovered in the customer survey is how many of the respondents believe that the customer experience often targets that one customer segment who enjoys drinking beers and partying whereas other segments feel forgotten. Also, other critical points in focus are the lack of simple ice hockey, customer service, failing to target more than one customer segment when choosing artists to perform, events etc. Examples of the criticism hereof, is highlighted by multiple answers as shown below:

<i>"Not having a beer party before a game -</i>	Appendix 7, p. 11, ll.
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<i>preferably after”</i>	
<i>“But there is a lack of proximity. There is more old-fashioned "club spirit" especially in Odense and Vojens, and arguably in most other clubs as well, partly due to their size and their business format (more like associations), but some things could be prioritized, e.g. more frequent meetings between players/coaches and spectators.”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 13, ll. 8-11
<i>“Entertainment in the breaks”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 13, l. 16
<i>“Less alcohol! more community around SPORT”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 14, l. 7
<i>“More atmosphere. Sometimes it's more the away team's fan we can hear more”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 14, l. 9
<i>“More activation of fans and better organization of the atmosphere”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 14, l. 17

Table 5: Customers’ critical perception of Aalborg Pirates. Own illustration (Appendix 7).

Furthermore, one respondent highlights that the brand can be optimized through creating a bigger focus on the sports element: *“By focusing on the sporting side of things (meetings with players, presentations from coaches, etc.), rather than, for example, concerts with secondary artists such as Sash and Kato.”* (Appendix 7, p. 12, ll. 31-32). This point of view indicates a contrast with the Operations Manager who believes the brand’s value is creating a unique and great experience of the ice, instead customers request more focus on the sporting part of the experience. Thus, it is important to also note when asked “How can Aalborg Pirates optimize the customer experience” in the survey, many respondents noted that they believe Aalborg Pirates is the best club in the league and cannot see how Aalborg Pirates can do it any better.

Therefore, many customers are fulfilled with the current experience and brand’s value as they have a positive image of Aalborg Pirates’ brand. Yet many are also dissatisfied. Of course, when being a sports club business it may be difficult to satisfy all customer segments, however, the survey provides an insight into how Aalborg Pirates may optimize its Brand Imagery to become more positive overall by: 1. focusing on the sport element as a core value by creating events, e.g. where fans can meet players, 2. less alcohol and tailor events to other segments or more broadly, and 3. create a better atmosphere during games.

The first focal point, focus on the sport, is supported by the value mentioned as “One Team” by the Marketing Manager. He states that no stakeholder around the organization is more important than another, and the organization is depending on every single one (Appendix 4, ll. 119-125). In contrast to the customers’ criticism, the Marketing Manager highlights: *“Also, we are in Jutland. You should always be able to meet the players and people around the team.”* (Appendix 4, ll. 125-126). This statement indicates that the Marketing Manager is aware of the importance of the interaction between the players and fans, although there seems to be a lack of effort in creating a community that allows this. Furthermore, when the interviewed player was asked whether he believed that the players contribute enough to the community around the organization and to create an attachment between players and fans, the response was:

*“Both, I think more could be done. How could more be done? I think the people in the office need to think about that and how to plan it. But I definitely think that you can make some initiatives perhaps, which can give something more, but it must also make sense.”* (Appendix 6, ll. 92-94).

The player’s statement alongside with the criticism from the survey indicate that Aalborg Pirates needs to focus on creating a bigger attachment and connection between the organization, players, and fans. This can also lead to an increased sense of community. Also, focusing on creating a better atmosphere during games will require customers to be more engaged and involved, which may also lead to an increased feeling of belonging to a community.

Another element relevant to consider in Brand Imagery is a brand’s history, heritage, and experiences. As Aalborg Pirates is a relatively new brand, it does not hold a long history and heritage full of traditions, cf. section 1.2. However, when Aalborg Pirates try to manage and manipulate its Brand Imagery, it can focus on its brand’s history anyway. Keller (2023) highlights the importance of brands creating their own narrative by implementing its brand’s past, present and future in the storytelling of its brand. Even though Aalborg Pirates does not have a traditional past full of historical events, it can rely on its past where it was reborn into the brand as Aalborg Pirates with little finances. This made Aalborg Pirates a team focusing on developing its youth talents into elite players in the first years.

By implementing that Aalborg Pirates’ brand was created with little finances and with focus on developing talents into its brand’s narrative, it allows more management of its brand’s

imagery. Furthermore, Aalborg Pirates has won two championships, and two FINALE4 trophies in the past. In the present, Aalborg Pirates has recently won the 2023 championship (Aalborg Pirates, n.d.-B). Therefore, the brand has benefited from a mix of being a new brand placed in the bottom of the league to being in the top with several titles won in the past and present by developing its own local players.

The last important element is to focus on the brand's future (Keller, 2023), where Aalborg Pirates aim to be successful and continue in the top of the league. Currently, Aalborg Pirates is only focusing on its present and future, whereas the Operations Manager highlights: *"No, it's not the 'started from the bottom now we're here' scenario. But what we draw on is the present and that we want to be at the top in the future. We want to be the best both on and off the ice."* (Appendix 5, ll. 275-277). According to Keller (2023), it is essential that a brand's narrative contains the past, present, and future in its storytelling to create brand equity. Therefore, Aalborg Pirates should also implement its past as an important part of its brand imagery which may contribute to a higher customer-brand identification.

In general, the Brand Imagery of Aalborg Pirates is positive, however, the survey also uncovered a lot of criticism, where three main areas have been highlighted: 1. lack of sport focus, 2. less alcohol and party, and 3. bad atmosphere and lack of cheering at games. These three areas should be of high interest to Aalborg Pirates to evaluate to satisfy more customers and increase its positive Brand Imagery to more than a few segments. Furthermore, a tool to do so is by implementing its brand's story: past, present, and future. This may help increase the customer-brand identification and a positive brand imagery.

#### 4.2.4 Brand Judgments

The fourth step in the pyramid is Brand Judgments. This part describes customers' opinions of a brand which are made up from their brand performance and brand imagery associations and thoughts. Therefore, many of the arguments in this section will be based on points retrieved from sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3. Keller (2020) highlights four main judgments related to a brand: quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority.

It is described in section 4.2.2 that Aalborg Pirates has a high brand performance in terms of its sports success. Also, the customer experience is in high focus in Aalborg Pirates vision and value as it works towards creating a unique and high-quality experience due to the high



competition in the industry of experience and service in Northern Jutland. This indicates that the customers' Brand Judgments of Aalborg Pirates may be linked to high quality. This is further emphasized in the survey by multiple statements, whereas a few is highlighted below:

<i>"More than just ice hockey. It's entertainment while also doing great on the ice"</i>	Appendix 7, p. 35, l. 14
<i>"I see Aalborg Pirates as a brand and a company that is leading the way. They are constantly trying to optimize their brand and reach as many people as possible to create the best possible experience for us fans."</i>	Appendix 7, p. ll. 24-25
<i>"A top professional club that understands that they must also deliver off the ice."</i>	Appendix 7, p. 35, l. 20
<i>"It is a good, strong and popular brand that stands for innovation, unity, tradition and ambition."</i>	Appendix 7, p. 38, l. 28

Table 6: Customers' positive opinions of Aalborg Pirates. Own illustration (Appendix 7).

The above statements also indicate that the customers think of Aalborg Pirates as superior to other Danish hockey league brands. The superiority is also evident by how the customers think Aalborg Pirates is innovative and a strong brand with a focus on creating a bigger and more holistic customer experience. Thus, not all customers' judgments of Aalborg Pirates are as positive. The table underneath highlights a few of the more critical ones:

<i>"Too much focus on beer parties and too little on the sport and the players as individuals"</i>	Appendix 7, p. 33, l. 9
<i>"A structured club that can easily provide entertainment on ice, but lacks a lot in the stands/lobby..."</i>	Appendix 7, p. 33, l. 10
<i>"It's real great but at times it can get a little boring with all the same fan songs and the same songs, light, news"</i>	Appendix 7, p. 36, l. 12
<i>"It has become too much beer and fist pump"</i>	Appendix 7, p. 37, l. 27

Table 7: Customers' critical opinions of Aalborg Pirates. Own illustration (Appendix 7).

These statements highlight the complexity of being a sports club and a business. As Aalborg Pirates main product is the game on the ice, it can be very difficult to satisfy every customer segment regarding the experience of the ice. Its value “Hockey with an edge” is implemented in a way where it believes it will create and optimize the customer experience before, during and after a game and fulfill most of the customers’ needs. Thus, it is impossible to satisfy all customer segments, whereas Aalborg Pirates may need to work more by segmenting its customers by lifestyles to create an experience that fulfill more customers’ needs, cf. section 4.1. Hence, it can damage the judgment of Aalborg Pirates if it does not consider all customer segments in the customer experience.

Overall, many customers have positive opinions of Aalborg Pirates and its brand. Thus, being a sports club with a wide and broad range of customer segments makes it difficult for Aalborg Pirates to satisfy every segment. As a result, some customers have more critical opinions of the brand. A way for Aalborg Pirates to enhance more positive brand judgments is to rethink its customer experience to satisfy more than one customer segment. In addition, it is also essential that Aalborg Pirates revise its segmentation of customers.

#### 4.2.5 Brand Feelings

The fifth step in the pyramid is Brand Feelings. It consists of customers’ emotional feelings and responses to a brand which can be mild, intense, positive, negative, or neutral. The feelings can be specified into warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect (Keller, 2020).

In the survey, respondents were asked how they feel towards Aalborg Pirates’ brand, whereas the result is illustrated below:

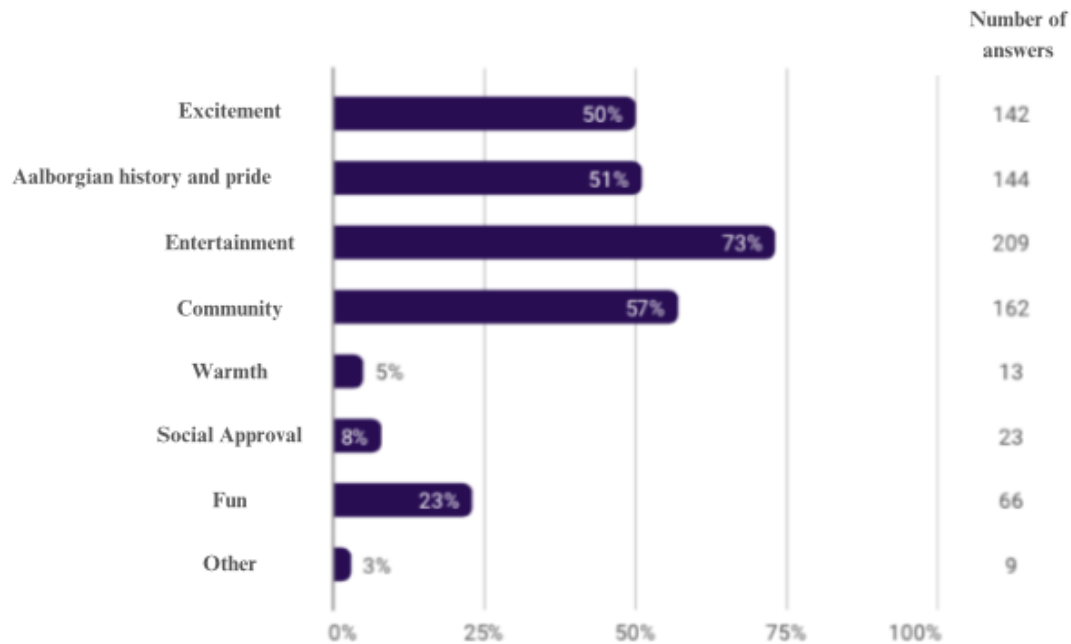


Figure 9: Customers' feelings towards Aalborg Pirates' brand when. Respondents could choose a maximum of 3 answers (Appendix 7).

The answers above are based on Keller's (2020) deviation of brand feelings as well as a few more altered to Aalborg Pirates' brand, however, it is important to mention that the answers are only based on positive brand feelings. The figure above shows that most respondents feel entertainment, community, and Aalborgian history and pride towards Aalborg Pirates' brand. The feeling of entertainment is the largest one with 73%. This aligns very well with the perception of the Marketing Manager: *"The feedback we get on it is really that they think it is good entertainment."* (Appendix 4, ll. 275-276). The Operations Manager further emphasizes it as the vision of the business: *"We all know that we are in the entertainment business. We may be a sports club, but we really see ourselves as entertainment. The ice entertains and we entertain when there's nobody on the ice."* (Appendix 5, ll. 592-594).

Overall, this brand feeling is very positive, however, as mentioned in previous sections, not all customers are fully satisfied with the entertainment. In section 4.2.2, it is highlighted how the lack of customer engagement during games influences the overall customer experience and entertainment. On the contrary, it is also highlighted in section 4.2.2, how Aalborg Pirates benefits from great sports success which generates higher entertainment for customers. Therefore, there may be a feeling of high entertainment towards Aalborg Pirates due to the

sports success and the vision of creating unique customer experience. Thus, it is not the case for all customer segments.

Another interesting aspect shown in the figure is how the feeling of community within Aalborg Pirates' brand is the second highest with 57%. Throughout the survey other questions were asked related to the feeling of community. As an example, only 39% of respondents attend the games because of the community (Appendix 7, p. 6). Also, when asked whether the respondent thinks there is a lacking community around the club, 55% answered no, 38% answered yes, and 7% answered neutral (Appendix 7, p. 21).

A few highlight the lack of atmosphere: *"There is a lack of atmosphere to that degree, I think you should consider removing a section with chairs to create more standing sections; that's where there is atmosphere and the atmosphere arises from ..."* (Appendix 7, p. 21, l. 16-17), and *"Yes, it looks like there is not much happening, but I would most likely not participate myself if something is organized"* (Appendix 7, p. 21, l. 10). The last statement particularly highlights an issue as some customers may not have a great feeling of brand community within Aalborg Pirates and they would most likely not want to engage in a brand community anyway.

This is further enhanced when respondents were asked what it would take for them to engage further in Aalborg Pirates as shown below:

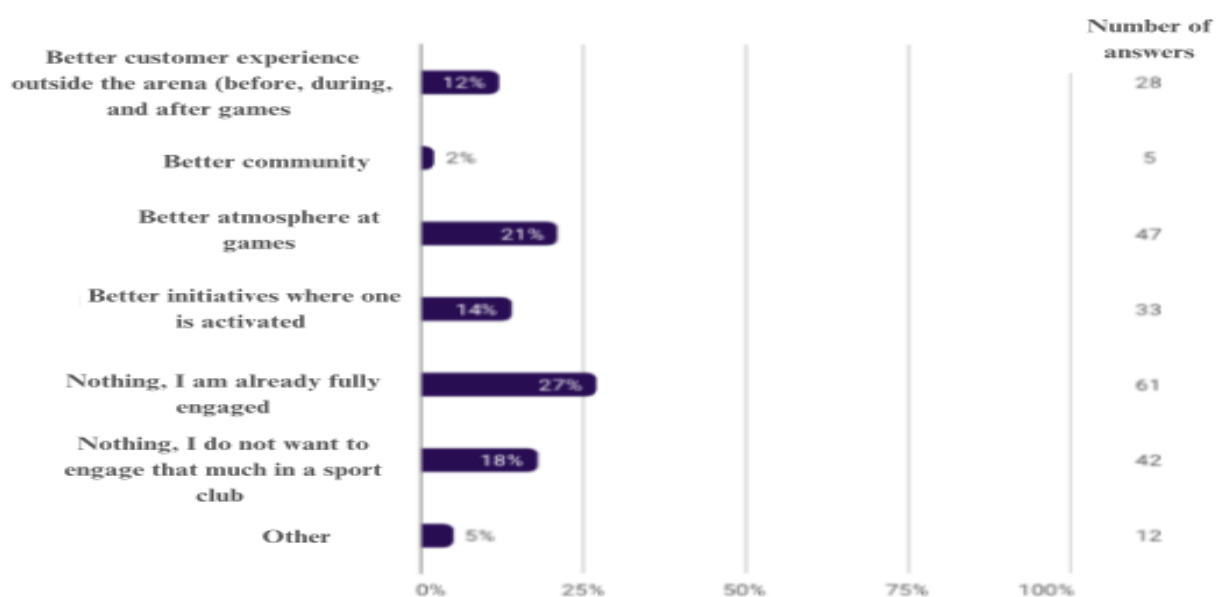


Figure 10: What it would take for customers to engage more in Aalborg Pirates (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that 27% of the respondents are fully engaged. However, 21% of the respondents would become more engaged if there was a better atmosphere at games. An interesting perspective to highlight is that for 18% of the respondents it would require nothing to make them engage because they do not want to engage that much in a sports club. These points highlight an important issue within Aalborg Pirates as the lack of atmosphere is making people engage less. In contrast, when asked how the following statement fits, the respondents answered:

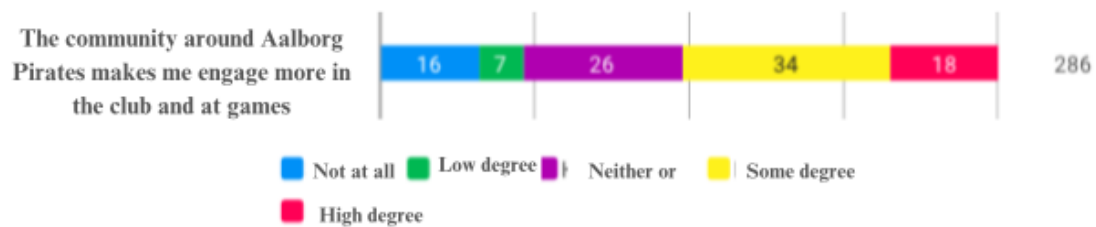


Figure 11: Level of engagement depending on community (Appendix 7).

It illustrates that the community around Aalborg Pirates make or will make more than half of the respondents engage more in Aalborg Pirates and at games. This further enhances the importance of building a brand community around Aalborg Pirates. In addition, only 20% of the respondents are members of the consumer-run brand community, Pirates Support, whereas 72% are non-members but have heard of it, and 8% have never heard of it (Appendix 7, p. 20). Hence, an interesting element uncovered in the survey is how 55% of the respondents do not believe there is a need for more community around the club (Appendix 7, p. 20), however, when asked whether they think that Aalborg Pirates should be in charge of creating a community around the club 55% answered yes (Appendix 7, p. 21). This indicates that more than half of the respondents believe that Aalborg Pirates' current community is enough, yet they want Aalborg Pirates to create and manage such a brand community instead of the current customer-run brand community Pirates Support.

These findings interfere with the literature of brand communities where consumer-run brand communities often result in a greater brand loyalty and brand love which result in a higher customer engagement (Pedeliento et al., 2020). Although, this is not the case with the Pirates Support community. If Aalborg Pirates ought to create its own brand community it can manage all information, communication, interaction, activity, and members more precisely. Thus, this type of brand community often results in weaker brand loyalty (Wang et al., 2017). This is

essential for Aalborg Pirates to be aware of, however, it may differentiate from the literature as it is a sports club where many of the customers are somehow loyal already due to the sport, as results from the survey also indicate:

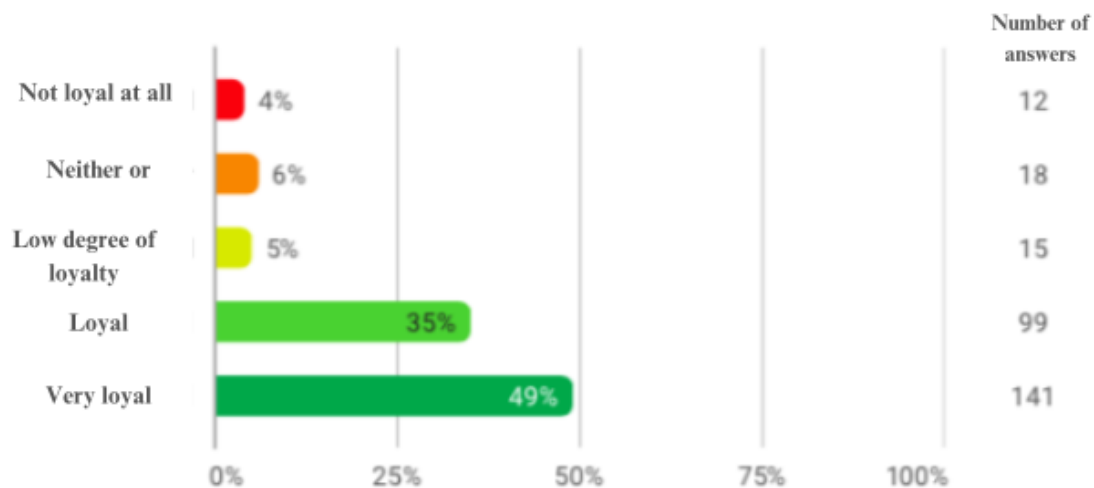


Figure 12: Customers' degree of loyalty (Appendix 7).

As shown 89% of the respondents identify themselves as loyal to some degree, ranking between low degree, loyal, and very loyal. This indicates that creating a firm-initiated brand community may be a solution for Aalborg Pirates to increase customer engagement, as the brand loyalty is relatively high already.

To sum up, customers' feelings towards Aalborg Pirates are generally positive; some are mild and others intense. Most feelings are related to the entertainment, community, Aalborgian pride and history, and excitement. However, there are also more negative feelings towards Aalborg Pirates' brand such as lack of atmosphere, low engagement, and too much beer drinking. A solution for Aalborg Pirates to control and manage these is by creating a firm-initiated brand community.

#### 4.2.6 Brand Resonance

The last step of the pyramid is Brand Resonance. This is the ultimate goal for all businesses in branding. It refers to when customers have a high customer-brand identification and feel linked to a brand. Ergo, Brand Resonance describes the relationship between customers and a brand. Additionally, customers' behavior can be divided into intensity or activity, which can be further grouped into four: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement (Keller, 2020).

#### 4.2.6.1 Behavioral Loyalty

Behavioral loyalty refers to customers' repeatedly purchasing a brand reflecting both on the amount and how often (Keller, 2020). In the survey conducted, respondents were asked whether they were season tickets holders whereas 65% were (Appendix 7, p. 3). In addition to this, the season ticket holders were also asked how long they have been season ticket holders:

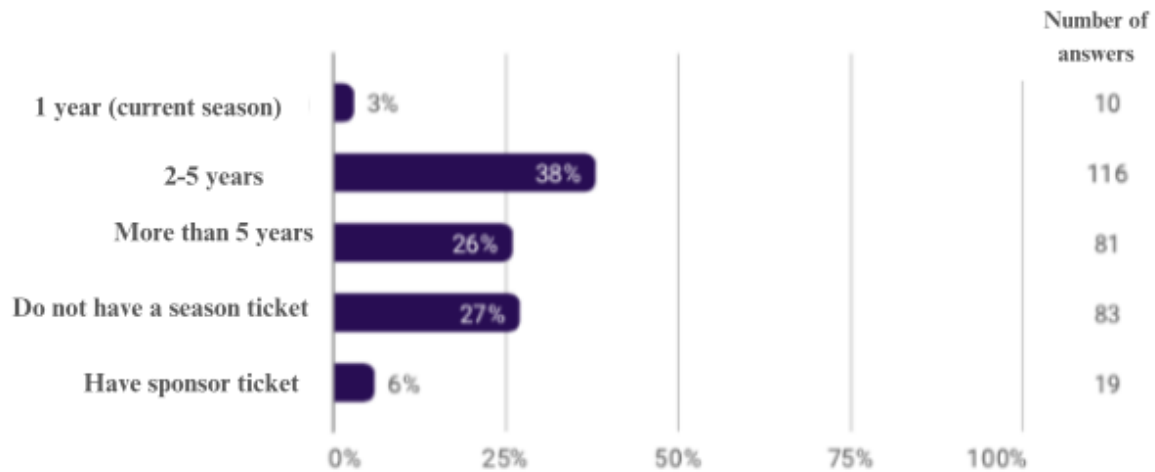


Figure 13: Length of season ticket holders (Appendix 7).

The results indicate that most season ticket holders have had their season ticket for less than 5 years being 41% of the respondents. Furthermore, 27% do not have a season ticket. This result is interesting as Aalborg Pirates did not benefit from sports success before 2018, which is five years ago, cf. section 1.2. Although most of the respondents have purchased season tickets after Aalborg Pirates has achieved championship titles. Therefore, the increased behavioral loyalty of Aalborg Pirates may be linked directly to its sports performance and perhaps is more important than the customer experience in terms of loyalty. This also enhances the literature of customer-brand identification further as findings argue that customer-brand identification and sports performance influence the willingness to invest and consumption behavior in general (Shtudiner et al., 2022).

Moreover, it was asked how often the respondents attend games as illustrated below:

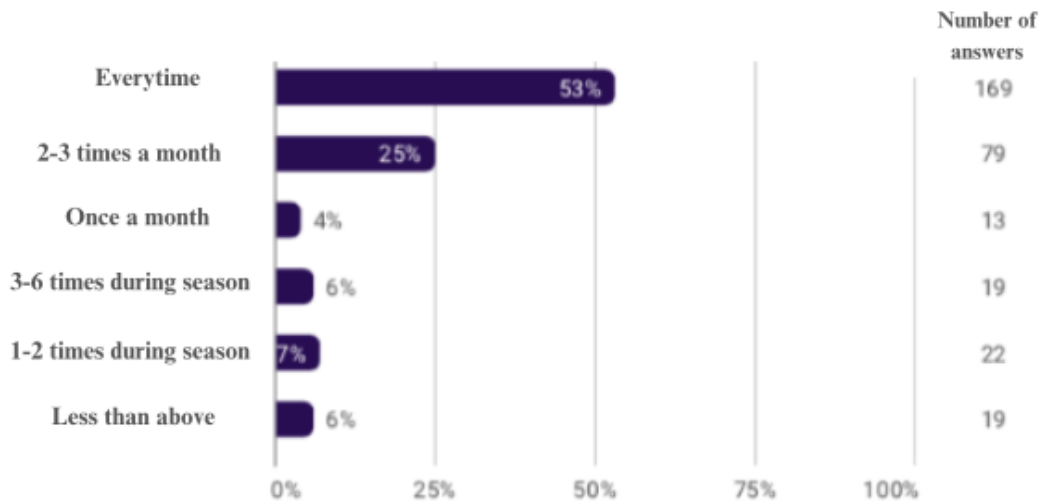


Figure 14: How often customers attend Aalborg Pirates' games (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that 53% of the respondents attend Aalborg Pirates' games every time, 25% attend 2-3 times a month, and 4% attend once a month. In total, 82% of all respondents attend an Aalborg Pirates game minimum once a month. Although, it is interesting how, as mentioned earlier, 65% of respondents are season ticket holders, yet only 53% attend every game. This indicates that many of the respondents are loyal to purchasing Aalborg Pirates' brand as they are season ticket holders, thus not all season ticket holders use it as frequently.

Regarding the consumption behavior on game days, the Operations Manager explains how Aalborg Pirates gather information and data of customers' consumption behavior in the food stands and analyzes consumption behavior related to which days and what the opponent team is (Appendix 5, ll. 650-652). Hence, Aalborg Pirates does not analyze data of how the consumption behavior is linked to the outcome of a game. Therefore, the business does not know whether the willingness to pay increases based on great sports performance which may be interesting to consider implementing in its data processing as literature argues that the willingness to pay is linked directly to sports performance (Shtudiner et al., 2022).

Overall, the behavioral loyalty seems to be relatively high based on the result of the survey. However, it is important to note that a sports club may be more likely to have a higher behavioral loyalty among its customers due to following reasons: 1. low competition of professional ice hockey clubs in the local area (cf. section 4.2.1), and 2. typical customers feel a bigger brand love towards sports clubs due to the social identity linked to it (Rees et al., 2015). Thus, it is still significant for Aalborg Pirates to consider increasing the behavioral



loyalty among customers who are not season ticket holders. This may be done by designing and creating a firm-initiated brand community to create a sense of community or focus on creating experiences tailored to different customer segments to increase a more frequent purchasing.

#### 4.2.6.2 Attitudinal Attachment

Another important element of Brand Resonance is Attitudinal Attachment which refers to customers personal attachment to a brand. A strong attachment to a brand may result in brand love. Also, it is important to note that customers' satisfaction with a brand is not enough, as attachment is required to achieve the best customer-brand relationship (Keller, 2020).

When discussing attachment, it is relevant to include the literature of brand love. Hereof, brand love can be divided into five dimensions: passion, connection, intrinsic rewards, emotional attachment and thinking, and frequent use (Martin et al., 2020). As illustrated in figure 14, there is a difference in the attendance of customers, however, many of the respondents attend games frequently - every month, and most more than once a month. Regarding the attachment and connection to Aalborg Pirates, respondents were asked how much they feel attached to Aalborg Pirates where the result is illustrated underneath:

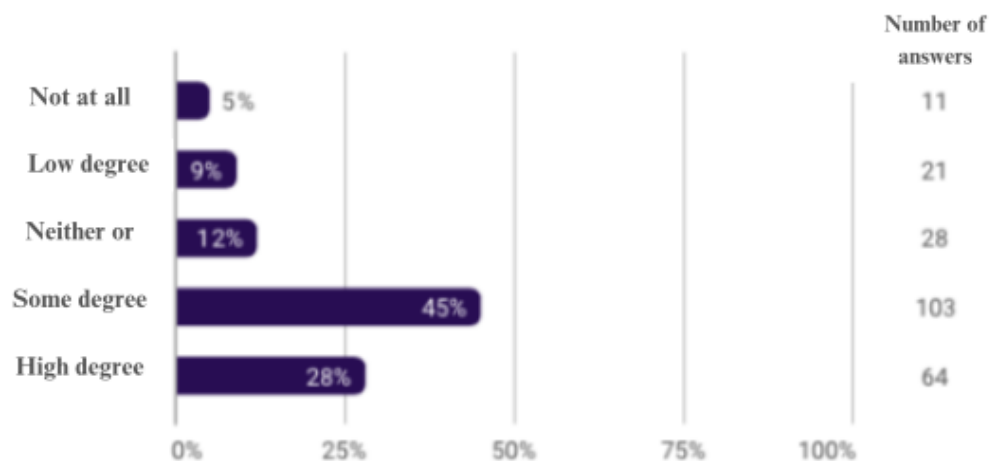


Figure 15: Customers' attachment to Aalborg Pirates (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that only 28% of the respondents feel attached to Aalborg Pirates at a high degree and 45% of the respondents do at some degree. It is interesting how most of the respondents feel attached to Aalborg Pirates but only at some degree. However, qualitative answers from the survey indicate that many respondents feel a great and high degree of

attachment, connection, and passion towards Aalborg Pirates. A few examples are illustrated in the table below:

<i>“We always follow AP through thick and thin”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 33, l. 17
<i>“Pirates forever. I have had the same seating spot in Gigantium since it opened”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 35, l. 3
<i>“I have been watching hockey since I was 4 years old (about 19 years) and I think that the club becoming Pirates is the best thing that has ever happened for Aalborg ice hockey”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 36, ll. 3-4
<i>“It is our club, our pirates, and our pride. I am always there, and sometimes even on the road [away games]”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 36, l. 41
<i>“The best club in the league. We are one team”</i>	Appendix 7, p. 39, ll. 12-13

Table 8: Brand love statements of Aalborg Pirates’ customers. Own illustration (Appendix 7).

The above statements indicate that the customers who feel a brand love for Aalborg Pirates feel it deeply and have a high customer-brand identification. In contrast to the figure that shows that most customers only feel attached to some degree. Therefore, based on the survey data, the customer-brand identification may only be medium. The goal for Aalborg Pirates would be to work towards enhancing customers’ attachment feeling. By building a firm-initiated brand community, it may be a beneficial way to contribute to increasing customers’ attachment.

The passion of Aalborg Pirates can differ a lot. The Operations Manager mentions a segment of passionate, hardcore fans who contribute to the atmosphere and are located in a specific section in the arena (Appendix 5, ll. 393-395). However, it is also pointed out how these passionate fans struggle with creating a cheerful atmosphere at every game because they do not know how to or lack coordination. Hereof, the consumer-run brand community Pirates Support is being criticized: *“I don't think they know what it [creating atmosphere] is about or what it requires.”* (Appendix 5, l. 388); *“.. there is our support group, but they do it as they usually do. It's been a sleeping pillow for them”* (Appendix 5, ll. 394-395). This segment, categorized as the most passionate fans, is struggling to show the wanted customer engagement, which is problematic. Even though these customers may have a high customer-brand identification and

feel a deep brand love, Aalborg Pirates needs to be in charge to increase the customer engagement which can be done through a firm-initiated brand community. In relation to this, the literature also states that brand love will result in a higher willingness to invest time and money which can affect the customer engagement. However, in the case of Aalborg Pirates' customers, a greater passion for the brand does not result in higher engagement.

The above points indicate a complexity within attachment and brand love of Aalborg Pirates. Most of the customers feel at least some degree of attachment and brand love towards Aalborg Pirates and a frequent attendance. However, it has also been highlighted there is a lack of customer engagement in relation to the atmosphere during games despite a deep brand love. It is essential for Aalborg Pirates to change this through brand community to increase customer engagement and thereby affect the overall customer experience.

#### 4.2.6.3 Sense of Community

The third element of Brand Resonance is community. Sense of community refers to whether customers identify with a brand's community with fellow customers, representatives of the brand, employees or others which can also lead to a social identity feeling (Keller, 2020). As mentioned earlier, brand community literature also differs between firm-initiated and consumer-run brand communities (Wang et al., 2017).

Aalborg Pirates does not have a firm-initiated brand community, however, there exists the consumer-run brand community, the fan club Pirates Support. Thus, throughout the analysis several points have been highlighted of Pirates Support failing to create a community where customers with the same interest for Aalborg Pirates can be associated with like minds and connect with their common love and passion, cf. section 4.2.2, 4.2.5, and 4.2.6.2. Literature states that consumer-run brand communities are more likely to result in a higher brand loyalty (Pedeliento et al., 2020), whereas this type of brand community should be in most interest of Aalborg Pirates. However, the Operations Manager highlights how the organization has offered resources to the consumer-run brand community multiple times, but Pirates Support lack initiative:

*“They get what they want from us. We try to push them in the direction that we want and influence them to do that. I know that we have said that whatever they want to do in terms of atmosphere-creating initiatives, they have to tell us what they want to spend, because there is*

*a bag of money for that [...] Because we have their back. That's why we thought with almost every position on the Pirates Support board being replaced, that this was the chance for us to make them boom.” (Appendix 5, ll. 375-381).*

The statement proves the issue of Pirates Support as it is offered resources but not using them to create a better engagement and deeper sense of community at games. Also, the statement highlights how Aalborg Pirates prefer the consumer-run brand community to work towards a certain direction whereas it wants to influence it, which is proven further by following quote: *“without knowing what it takes to be what we want it to be [Pirates Support] make our external brand stronger”* (Appendix 5, ll.400-401). Aalborg Pirates may be supportive and offer resources to the consumer-run brand community, however, it may result in lack of brand loyalty as this type of community should be managed and controlled only by the customers to create a greater value and credibility among the members.

The point above is another argument for Aalborg Pirates to create its own firm-initiated brand community as it will allow it to control and manage all operations, initiatives, and information itself. Hence, it is still important that the firm-initiated brand community does not replace the consumer-run brand community. Thus, the two communities can collaborate with different initiatives and events. Doing so may create a higher customer-brand identification and influence customer engagement, as Aalborg Pirates can create the initiatives it is missing from Pirates Support. This is very important because in the survey most of the customers express their loyalty for Aalborg Pirates more when they are with other like minds:

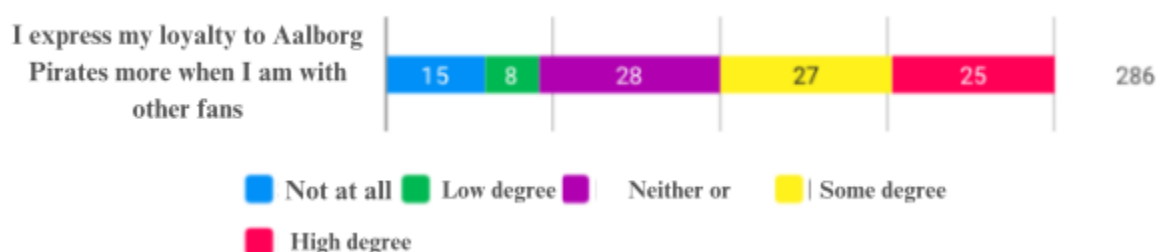


Figure 16: Expression of one’s loyalty to Aalborg Pirates (Appendix 7).

Thus, the figure also shows that 15% customers’ expression of their loyalty to Aalborg Pirates is not affected at all by being with like minds. Yet a firm-initiated brand community may increase customers who do not identify as very loyal to become more loyal. It will also allow Aalborg Pirates to manage the customer engagement during games if creating different initiatives. The survey further proves this as 55% of the respondents believe that Aalborg

Pirates should be in charge of a brand community whereas only 19% answered no (Appendix 7, p. 21). The respondents were asked what customer segments such a firm-initiated brand community created by Aalborg Pirates should be aimed at as shown below:

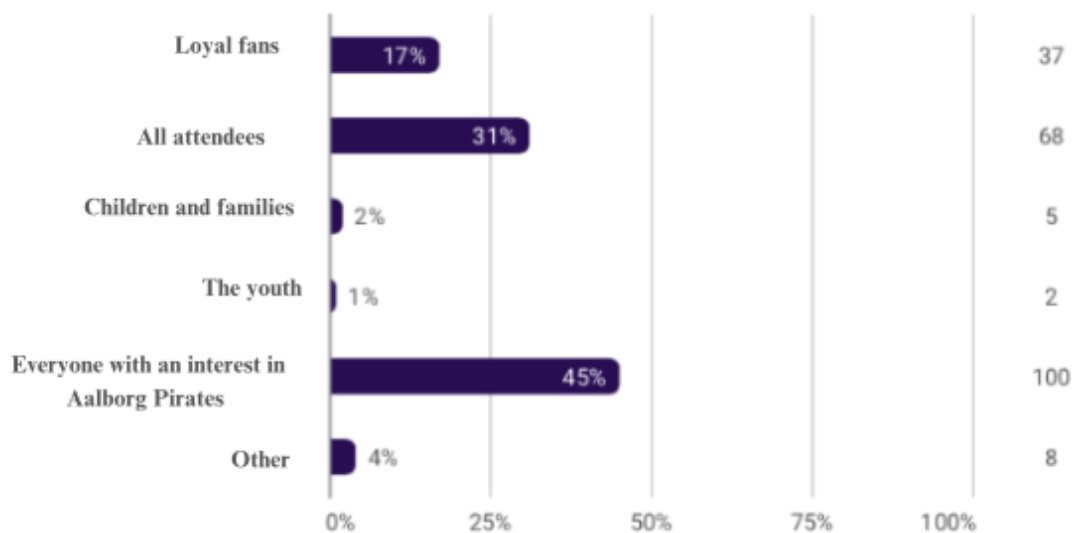


Figure 17: Who a firm-initiated brand community of Aalborg Pirates should attract (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that a firm-initiated brand community by Aalborg Pirates should not aim at a specific customer segment, however, be a community where everyone with an interest in Aalborg Pirates can relate and achieve a social identity no matter gender, age, work, lifestyle etc. Suppose Aalborg Pirates can succeed in creating such a community that leads to a social identity among members. In that case, it will result in a higher customer engagement, brand support and brand loyalty (Rees et al., 2015). Also, if Aalborg Pirates' customers engage in a firm-initiated brand community, they will be influenced by Aalborg Pirates and what it distributes. Additionally, they will also be influenced by other members of the community's opinions, behaviors, and expectations (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

In general, above arguments highlight the lack of brand community around Aalborg Pirates, and more particularly the failing consumer-run brand community: Pirates Support. It stresses the importance of Aalborg Pirates creating a firm-initiated brand community to control and manage all brand community initiatives by itself. Thus, it is still important for Aalborg Pirates to support the consumer-run brand community as both communities are significant to increase customer engagement according to literature. Furthermore, Aalborg Pirates ought to create a firm-initiated brand community attracting all customers with an interest in Aalborg Pirates according to the result of the survey.

#### 4.2.6.4 Active Engagement

The fourth element of Brand Resonance is Engagement. It refers to when customers feel strongly towards a brand which makes them engage their time, energy, money, or other resources in a brand (Keller, 2020).

As highlighted throughout the analysis, all study respondents criticize the customer engagement in terms of creating atmosphere and cheering during games. However, this may contrast with below result of the survey where the same respondents were asked whether they contribute to a good atmosphere by cheering:

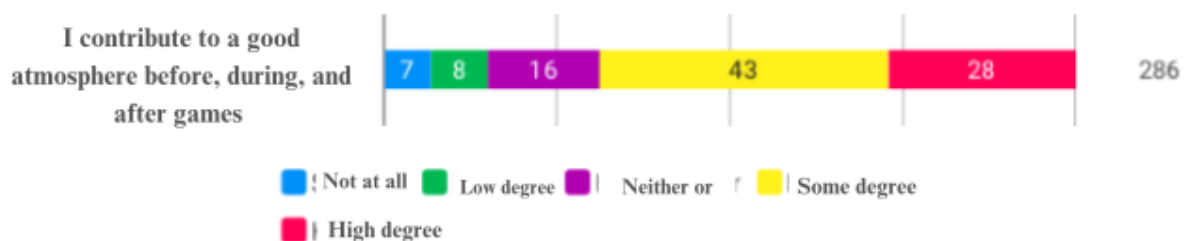


Figure 18: Expression of customers' engagement before, during, and after games (Appendix 7, p. 9).

The figure above indicates that 71% of the respondents believe they contribute to a better atmosphere before, during and after games by a minimum of at least some degree. Another important note is that 43% of the 71% only contribute by some degree - almost half of the respondents. This indicates along with the qualitative answers criticizing the atmosphere that many respondents believe they contribute to the atmosphere, however, they still believe there is a bad atmosphere. Yet they do not want to contribute and engage more. The lack of customer engagement during games is further enhanced by the Player when asked if there is a difference in customer engagement depending on days and opponents:

*“Yes, definitely. Especially Frederikshavn versus a Tuesday match against Rødovre, yes, there is a big difference. There you might wish that there was a more equal atmosphere regardless of the matches and days. Although, of course, there should also be a bigger atmosphere against Frederikshavn, as they are the archrivals.”* (Appendix 6, ll. 135-138).

It indicates that the level of customer engagement is very different depending on game day and opponent. It may also depend on sports performance as customers will engage more before,

during and after games when Aalborg Pirates may win a title or is playing against another top club.

In relation to customer engagement, it is interesting that the Marketing Manager believes the lack of engagement is because of customers' mentality in the local area, as stated in section 4.2.2. Thus, the Marketing Manager deepens his statement and believes that it is also a national Danish mentality: *"Well, there are not many Danes who dare to sit and sing along to a song. I would venture to say that this applies to all sports, because that is the Danish mentality."* (Appendix 4, ll. 502-505). However, suppose one compares the customer engagement in Aalborg Pirates to the Danish football club Brøndby. In that case, Brøndby has a much higher customer engagement from not only hardcore fans but also families, sponsors and other customer segments attending the games:

*"The culture we have in Denmark, or in Danish ice hockey, is not that sponsors agree to sit and sing, even if they sit right above the fans. I withdrew the part about Denmark because when I sit and think about watching football at Brøndby stadium, no matter who you are, it's your earnings, season ticket or main sponsor, then a whole long side stands and jumps."*

(Appendix 5, ll. 321-324).

The Operations Manager contradicts the Marketing Manager's hypothesis that customer engagement depends on the national mentality. On the other hand, the quote indicates that the lack of customer engagement may be due to the sport of ice hockey. This only enhances the significance of Aalborg Pirates working with increasing the overall customer engagement in terms of atmosphere across all customer segments.

Other than creating atmosphere, respondents were also asked questions upon other behavioral aspects:

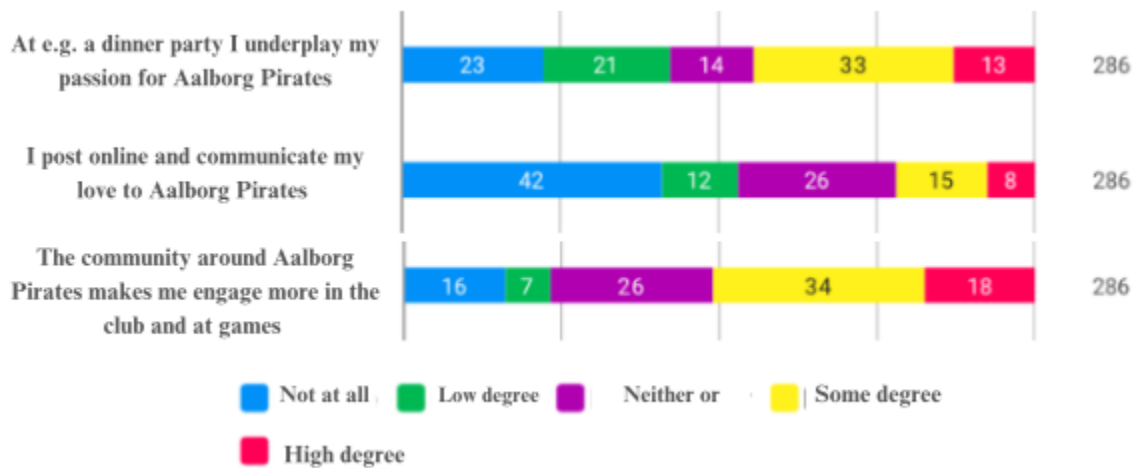


Figure 19: Customers' behavioral engagement (Appendix 7).

The figure shows that only few of the respondents publicly post and communicate their love for Aalborg Pirates online. Also, the first question shows that 46% of respondents underplay its passion for Aalborg Pirates at dinner parties which indicate that some respondents may be ashamed of being passionate about Aalborg Pirates. Furthermore, it indicate that the customers' private loyalty is higher than their public loyalty. Thus, it may depend on whether the customers are in company with other Aalborg Pirates fans or not. This enhances the importance of creating a firm-initiated brand community as literature states that customer-brand identification as a result of brand community will increase not only private loyalty but also public loyalty (Mills et al., 2022). The third question indicates the community around Aalborg Pirates make 59% of the respondents engage more in the club and during games. This further argues the significance of Aalborg Pirates creating a firm-initiated brand community and to support the existing consumer-run brand community to increase the overall customer engagement.

In general, the overall customer engagement is being criticized by all study respondents. There is a lack of customer engagement across all customer segments, however, the hardcore fans do have a higher level of engagement but still not enough. It is highlighted that the level of engagement across all segments depends on sports performance, day, and opponent. Overall, the customer engagement can be described as low to medium, nevertheless, it can be increased if Aalborg Pirates create a sense of community through a firm-initiated community and by supporting the existing consumer-run community.



#### 4.2.7 Sub-conclusion

Overall, Aalborg Pirates has a solid customer-brand relationship. Many of the respondents feel attached to the brand and identify themselves with the brand, leading to the customers being loyal to some degree. However, the customer-brand relationship still needs improvement. Two issues uncovered throughout the analysis are the lack of customer engagement and need for a better sense of community feeling. Hereof, the consumer-run community, Pirates Support, is being criticized. If Aalborg Pirates were to create a firm-initiated community it would allow it to manage and control everything and increase the customer engagement, as it would be able to implement atmosphere-creating initiatives and events. As a result, it may lead to a greater brand loyalty - both public and private - across all customer segments.

## 5. Discussion

In the following section the purpose is to discuss the findings of this thesis and compare them to findings in existing literature to uncover similarities or differences.

Through the analysis the purpose was to research the customer-brand relationship in relation to how brand community effects customer engagement in the case of Aalborg Pirates. Hereof, it was uncovered that there is a solid customer-brand relationship where customers' brand loyalty is somewhere between medium to relatively high - depending on the specific customer. The high customer-brand identification is a result of Aalborg Pirates offering a holistic brand experience under the value of creating hockey with an edge. It contributes to the literature as So et al. (2017) identified that memorable brand experiences indirectly affect customer-brand identification. However, an interesting finding was, despite the relatively high customer-brand identification and brand loyalty, the customer engagement during games is being criticized by all study respondents. This is particularly problematic as Aalborg Pirates is very successful in terms of its sports performance.

The findings in this thesis state that the customer engagement during games in a sports club is not affected directly by brand loyalty, customer-brand identification nor sports performance. However, the level of customer engagement is influenced by the social identity and sense of community feeling. Therefore, a brand community is necessary to create a high level of customer engagement. Moreover, this thesis stresses that consumer-run brand communities cannot stand alone if they are not successful and being managed correctly. Based on these findings a consumer-run brand community should never stand alone as there always should be a firm-initiated brand community to increase customer engagement across all segments.

One reason for the low engagement during Aalborg Pirates' games may be due to the Pirates Support's low control of its consumer-run brand community. During the interviews the Managers several times highlight how Pirates Support does not create enough initiatives to influence and inspire customers to engage. Also, the findings reveal that the customers wish for a firm-initiated brand community due to lack of success of the consumer-run brand community. These findings contrast with Pedeliento et al.'s findings who uncovered that consumer-run communities lead to a greater customer participation and commitment than firm-initiated brand communities (2020). Yet a firm-initiated brand community will lead to more

participation and engagement in the case of Aalborg Pirates because the organization will be able to act, create initiatives, a sense of community and engagement across all segments. The findings also stand in contrast to the findings by Wang et al. (2017) who stated that consumer-run communities lead to greater brand loyalty than firm-initiated brand communities. On the contrary, the findings of the thesis states that if Aalborg Pirates establishes a firm-initiated brand community it will effect the private- and public brand loyalty, customer engagement and sense of community feeling positively.

Another interesting finding is how most customers have very positive brand imagery and associations towards Aalborg Pirates and its brand experience in general. Yet many customers criticize parts of the brand experience which is one of Aalborg Pirates' main value offerings. They criticize that many of the experiential initiatives created to engage, involve, and satisfy customers are often only relevant for the same customer segment; young people who enjoy having a good time by drinking beer. This finding is significant for Aalborg Pirates to change to satisfy more than one customer segment. If this is not done, it will leave the other customer segments displeased which will likely result in decreased customer-brand identification, customer engagement, commitment, loyalty, or even bad brand feelings.

Therefore, it is essential that Aalborg Pirates aim to create a firm-initiated brand community that is targeting and relevant for all customers who either have a simple interest, huge passion, or great love for the brand. If this is not done a firm-initiated brand community can end up causing more damage than good because customers will be even more displeased that another initiative is only relevant for one or two customer segments. Therefore, it is essential that the firm-initiated brand community is created with the purpose of involving and engaging all customer segments and potential customers.

A third relevant finding is how the customers state they are loyal to the brand despite being relatively new customers. Most of the respondents have started attending Aalborg Pirates' games in recent years which is the same period where Aalborg Pirates has had great sports performance. However, when asked, most customers answered they are not more likely to attend the games when Aalborg Pirates is winning despite becoming customers in recent years. This may indicate an unwillingness to acknowledge the reason for attending the games or simply, they became loyal due to sports performance. Therefore, Aalborg Pirates' great sports performance have resulted in more season holders and loyal fans which has made the

willingness to invest increase. This also aligns with findings of Shtudiner et al. (2022) who uncovered that the perceived performance of a sport's team will affect customers' consumption behavior.

This finding also enhances the importance of creating a firm-initiated brand community that can create a social identity, customer-brand identification and increase brand loyalty. By doing so, it will allow Aalborg Pirates to be more resistant to losing customers in times of bad sports performance. This is significant because Aalborg Pirates cannot rely on sports success as it will face times with adversity in the future. Therefore, it is important that Aalborg Pirates have customers to support, engage, and contribute to a good experience in times when it cannot benefit from success.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of the thesis was to research Aalborg Pirates' relationship with its customers with the focus on brand community and how it effects customer engagement. The research was based upon examining the following research question:

*How Brand Community Effects Customer Engagement? A study of Aalborg Pirates and Customer-brand Relationship*

Recent studies show that brand communities in sports teams lead to higher brand loyalty, customer-brand identification, social identity, and customer engagement. Also, studies have been investigating the differences between a firm-initiated and consumer-run brand communities whereas findings show that consumer-run brand communities result in greater loyalty, willingness to invest, customer-brand identification, and customer engagement. These findings were the reason to study the case of Aalborg Pirates as there only exists a consumer-run brand community, yet it lacks initiative and is not successful. Therefore, the research was focused on investigating both types of brand communities and the effect on customer engagement.

To do so, the study was based on the critical realism paradigm that provides an approach of combining objectivity and subjectivity to uncover all causes and causal relationships. Therefore, methodology of the thesis was based upon triangulation where both primary and secondary data was collected. The primary data consisted of three sources where a survey and three interviews were conducted. This data provided a first-hand subjective perspective of Aalborg Pirates and its branding where the individuals' perceptions and opinions were important. The secondary data were based on collecting literature related to branding which were introduced in a literature review. By implementing former academic literature, it contributed to an objective approach to process the primary data. The primary and secondary data combined with the literature was analyzed based on the Brand Resonance Pyramid model.

The findings of the thesis show that Aalborg Pirates' customer engagement and existing consumer-run brand community are being criticized by all study respondents. The lack of customer engagement can be linked to the lack of community feeling among customers, and a badly managed consumer-run brand community. The low customer engagement highlights why

it is important that Aalborg Pirates create a firm-initiated brand community to control, manage and influence customers to engage more. Hereof, it is necessary that Aalborg Pirates create a brand community that can attract and engage all customer segments to increase customer-brand identification and achieve the ultimate customer-brand relationship across all customer segments. If Aalborg Pirates can successfully create a firm-initiated brand community it can lead to increase the public and private brand loyalty.

## 6.2 Study Implementation and Implications

If these findings are to be implemented in Aalborg Pirates, there are several factors to consider. As concluded, a firm-initiated brand community created by Aalborg Pirates ought to be a community where everyone with an interest in Aalborg Pirates can be a part of. In terms of its practical implementation, it is essential that the Managers design and create a brand community that welcomes all customer segments and is not too exclusive. Such a brand community does not need to be a membership club but may benefit more from being a more abstract community feeling across customer segments. However, it is important that the Marketing Manager and Operations Manager design and create different initiatives and events to engage and attract current and potential customers to create a sense of community. If this is done successfully, it will lead to an increase in customer engagement.

One suggestion is to hire someone to manage the customer engagement aspect of the business, a so-called Fan Coordinator. Another initiative could be to hire a Capo who stands in the fan section during games to control and organize the atmosphere and cheering. Also, another aspect highlighted in the thesis is customers' wish for more focus on the sport. Hereof, a solution is to create events that allow customers to meet and connect with the players and meet other customers to create a deeper community feeling. Furthermore, by creating events that only focus on the community feeling among customers such as away games presented on a big screen, can increase the community feeling and customer engagement.

However, there may be several implications if Aalborg Pirates choose to establish and create a firm-initiated brand community. First, it will require Aalborg Pirates to spend more resources regarding Managers' workforce. This may be problematic as Aalborg Pirates already is a very small organization. In addition, hiring another employee needs to be considered in relation to cost and benefit as it has limited finances. Second, since Aalborg Pirates only has experience

and knowledge of the failing consumer-run community, Pirates Support, it is not clear what specific brand community and initiatives will increase the feeling of community and customer engagement. Third, it is not validated if the customer engagement will increase among all customer segments as the conducted survey in the thesis is a representation of customers. It depends on the individual and may also be influenced by mood, day, time of the day, opponent playing, age, gender, mentality etc.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The thesis contains several limitations. It is based on the primary data collected of Aalborg Pirates and its brand. As the focus was customer-brand relationship the data was limited to regular customers as other stakeholders such as sponsors, or volunteers were not considered. Hence, it will be interesting to further deepen the research to examine the similarities and differences between e.g., the customer-brand relationship and the sponsor-brand relationship. How engaged are the sponsors? Are sponsors sponsoring the team because of brand love?

Another limitation of the thesis is the little comparison of the findings to other regions, national or international. The research is based upon an ice hockey club in Northern Jutland in Denmark whereas it is not sure whether the findings are generalizable. However, it will be interesting for other researchers to investigate whether the findings are applicable in other countries, other ice hockey clubs in Denmark, or other sports industries. In addition, it may also be interesting in future research to compare the findings of Aalborg Pirates to e.g., investigate whether it is the same case for its local competitor AaB or Aalborg Håndbold.

A third limitation is the fact that Aalborg Pirates is a small organization with only two Managers working with areas of marketing, and brand experience. This influences the resources that Aalborg Pirates has on its branding efforts. Hereof, it will be interesting to research the comparison of the findings to a larger sports organization.

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## 8. Appendix

### Appendix 1 - Aalborg Pirates Sports Performance Success

Aalborg Pirates													
2012-2013	Denmark	40	23	-	10	4	3	133	99	80	2.00	3	Quarterfinal loss ⓘ
2013-2014	Denmark	40	23	-	12	2	3	150	109	76	1.90	3	Bronze game loss ⓘ
2014-2015	Denmark	36	11	-	18	5	2	105	112	45	1.25	8	Quarterfinal loss
2015-2016	Denmark	45	14	-	24	3	4	129	174	52	1.16	8	Quarterfinal loss
2016-2017	Denmark	45	27	-	12	4	2	133	94	91	2.02	1	Quarterfinal loss
2017-2018	Denmark	50	28	-	15	4	3	156	111	95	1.90	2	Champion
2018-2019	Denmark	40	17	-	15	5	3	126	108	64	1.60	4	Bronze game loss
2019-2020	Denmark	48	34	-	14	5	7	186	121	104	2.17	1	Playoffs Cancelled ⓘ
2020-2021	Denmark	48	33	-	15	5	3	171	113	97	2.02	2	Final loss
2021-2022	Denmark	48	25	-	11	6	3	165	104	94	1.96	1	Champion
2022-2023	Denmark	37	21	-	8	4	4	131	80	75	2.03	1	-

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### Appendix 2 - Literature Review

### Appendix 3 - Interviewguides

### Appendix 4 - Interview Marketing Manager

### Appendix 5 - Interview Operations Manager

### Appendix 6 - Interview Player

## Appendix 7 - Customer Survey