UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA
Màster en Direcció d'Empreses de l'Esport
Facultat d'Economia i Empresa

Trabajo Final de Master
Curso 2024/25

Lauri Daniel Harakka
Pilar Aparicio & Meritxell Fontelles

Disc Golf in Finland: Enhancing the Sport's Credibility Through Fan Engagement

Lauri Daniel Harakka

6/2025

RESUMEN

Este proyecto explora el posicionamiento del disc golf en Finlandia, donde el deporte ha experimentado un rápido crecimiento desde la pandemia. A pesar de su popularidad, el disc golf sigue siendo percibido más como un pasatiempo divertido que como un deporte de élite. El estudio tiene como objetivo identificar estrategias a través de las cuales el disc golf pueda mejorar su credibilidad e imagen pública. Se analizan las relaciones entre aficionados y atletas, el compromiso de los aficionados, así como la exposición mediática y la marca personal de los jugadores profesionales.

Se utilizaron dos métodos de análisis. En primer lugar, una revisión de la literatura proporciona contexto sobre los temas y analiza investigaciones previas. En la parte práctica, una encuesta realizada entre la población finlandesa revela datos interesantes sobre percepciones y niveles de compromiso.

Los resultados muestran que, si bien el disc golf suele considerarse divertido y accesible, rara vez se lo percibe como profesional. El estudio sugiere que una mayor cobertura mediática profesional, un compromiso más estratégico con los aficionados y una mejor gestión de la marca personal de los atletas podrían ayudar a reposicionar el disc golf como un deporte de élite creíble en Finlandia.

Palabras clave: Disc golf; compromiso de los aficionados; marketing deportivo; Finlandia; credibilidad deportiva; relaciones aficionado-atleta; percepción pública.

SUMMARY

This project explores the positioning of disc golf in Finland, where the sport has experienced rapid growth since the pandemic. Despite the popularity, disc golf is still viewed more as a fun hobby rather than as an elite sport. The study aims to identify strategies through which disc golf can improve its credibility and public image. The study examines fan-athlete relationships and fan engagement as well as media exposure and personal branding of professional players.

Two analysis methods were used. First, a literature review gives some background on the topics and analyzes the previous research on the themes. In the practical section, a survey conducted among Finnish people provides insights on disc golf's public perception and engagement levels. The findings reveal that while disc golf is often seen as fun and accessible, it's rarely viewed as professional. The study suggests that professional media coverage, targeted fan engagement and better athlete branding could help to reposition disc golf as a credible elite sport in Finland.

Keywords: Disc golf, fan engagement, sports marketing, Finland, sports credibility, fan-athlete relationships, public perception.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction 5

2 Objectives 7

3 Methodology 9

4 Literature review 11

4.1 The Sport of Disc Golf 11

4.1.1 The Sport 11
4.1.2 Evolution 12
4.1.3 Current Landscape 14
4.1.4 Governing Bodies & Industry Stakeholders 15
4.1.5 Competitions 15
4.1.6 Previous Research on Disc Golf 16

4.2 Disc Golf in Finland 16

4.2.1 Evolution 16
4.2.2 Current landscape 19
4.2.3 Competitions 20
4.2.4 Players 21

4.3 Sports Credibility 21

4.3.1 Pillars of Public Perception 21
4.3.2 Disc Golf as an Elite Sport 22

4.4 Fan engagement 24

4.4.1 Fan Engagement in Sports Industry 24
4.4.2 Fan Engagement in Disc Golf 25
4.4.3 Enhancing Engagement in Disc Golf Through 360° Matrix 26
4.4.4 Athlete Branding 29

5 Analysis 31

5.1 Overview of the Data 31

5.1.1 Data collection 31
5.1.2 Summary of the responses 32
5.1.3 Disc golf engagement across demographics 35

5.2 Key Findings 37

5.2.1 Differences Among Disc Golfers and Non-Disc Golfers 37
5.2.2 Position of Disc Golf Among Other Sports 40

6 Conclusions 44

7 Implications 47

8 Limitations 48

9 Bibliography 49

1 INTRODUCTION

The sport of disc golf has experienced accelerating growth worldwide during the last few decades. In the 2020s, partly due to the pandemic, disc golf's popularity has skyrocketed (Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.)). Even with its growing popularity, there is still little previous research on disc golf, which makes it an interesting subject to explore further from an academic perspective.

In Finland, disc golf has become one of the most played sports, especially among young people. While it is primarily practiced at a recreational level, the professional side has also developed significantly. Finnish professional players have become increasingly competitive on the international stage, and the overall conditions for the sport have improved. (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.))

Despite this progress, disc golf continues to be overlooked as an elite sport (Pajala, 2024), and addressing this issue is the primary motivation behind this work. To tackle the challenge, the project's main objective is to identify strategies that enhance disc golf's credibility and improve its public perception. This involves exploring the key factors that contribute to a sport's credibility and examining how professional disc golfers can influence public perception through personal branding strategies.

I have multiple motivations to explore the sport of disc golf. To begin with, I play disc golf myself on an amateur level and follow the professionals closely. I consider disc golf an amazing sport and I have a lot of respect for the dedicated people who contribute to its growth in Finland. I'm also fed up with hearing people disrespect and question the professional status of the sport, and this project offers me an opportunity to actually do something concrete about it.

Professionally, working in the field of disc golf is something that I could imagine myself doing after finishing my studies. Also, next summer I will do my internship in a disc golf media company and participate in organizing the Professional Disc Golf World Championships, which will be for the first time ever played in Finland. This project can provide me with information and skills that I can exploit in my internship. Furthermore, combining the internship with my master's final project gives me a comprehensive perspective on the sport, which could be highly valuable in the future.

Finally, from an academic perspective, disc golf hasn't yet been widely researched, and I hope that this work can provide insights for disc golf policymakers and professional players to use their platforms more efficiently to better position the sport in the eyes of the public. All in all, I'm sure that I'll enjoy the process on the way and learn a lot of new interesting things about the sport that I love so much.

The structure of the project is the following. After the introduction, the research objectives will be presented. Then, the utilized methodology will be clarified and justified, and the research questions displayed.

The analysis begins with the theoretical section. A literature review is conducted, breaking down the current state of disc golf and defining all the concepts relevant for the project. This is followed by a practical section, where deeper insights are collected through a questionnaire among Finnish people.

The investigation will be wrapped up in the conclusion section. Based on the findings of both the theoretical and practical parts, the research questions will be answered and the key findings summarized. Then, the implications section presents concrete, actionable suggestions for disc golf policymakers and professional players. Finally, the limitations of the study will be acknowledged. The bibliography is presented at the end of the document.

2 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the project is to identify strategies that can enhance disc golf's credibility and, as a result, improve its public perception in Finland. This involves exploring the elements that contribute to a sport's credibility and whether disc golf is missing any of them. This also involves examining the nature of fan-athlete relationships in disc golf and investigating which personal branding strategies are most effective in enhancing the public image of a sport.

The main objective, as well as the secondary objectives, is listed below.

1. Identifying concrete means to enhance disc golf's credibility and public perception in Finland.
2. Discovering how disc golf is currently being perceived in Finland.
3. Discovering what factors affect an individual's attitude towards disc golf.
4. Discovering the differences between disc golfers' and non-disc golfers' perceptions on the sport of disc golf.
5. Discovering the characteristics and touchpoints of fan-athlete relationships in disc golf.

3 METHODOLOGY

The project is divided into two sections, the theoretical and the practical. Two different research approaches are used to create a comprehensive understanding of the examined topic. This chapter justifies the selected research methods and explains how they contribute to the study's objectives.

The theoretical section provides background on the topic, including an introduction to disc golf and a brief history of the sport. Since the focus is specifically on disc golf in Finland, its development and current state within the country are also explored.

As the main issue of the project is the public perception and status of disc golf, the theoretical section also looks into the factors that contribute to a sport's credibility, and analyzes whether disc golf meets the criteria. After this, two other relevant concepts are explained: fan engagement and athlete branding. Furthermore, fan engagement in the context of disc golf is reviewed exploiting the 360° Fan Engagement Matrix by Wilson and Fowler (2016).

The most important sources utilized in the theoretical section are academic articles and official websites of disc golf associations and organizations. To support the analysis, also other trustworthy websites are cited. The findings of the theoretical section serve as a foundation for formulating hypotheses and developing relevant research questions for the practical part.

The objective of the practical section is to gather and analyze data to gain deeper insights into the topic. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and reviewed. The primary source is a market study (questionnaire) among the Finnish population.

The survey aims to gain insights on Finnish people's attitudes and perceptions on disc golf. The questions focus on the sport's credibility and consumption, as well as on motivations and opinions.

The research questions that this study aims to answer, are based on the objectives, and they are the following:

1. What are the specific actions that can enhance disc golf's credibility and public perception?
2. How is the sport of disc golf currently being perceived in Finland?
3. What factors affect an individual's attitude towards disc golf?
4. How do the disc golfers' and the non-disc golfers' perceive the sport of disc golf differently?
5. What are the most important characteristics and touchpoints of fan-athlete relationships in disc golf?

The hypotheses of the work are drawn from an initial literature review, along with my personal insights and experiences in the sport. The most important hypotheses include:

1. The public opinion on disc golf varies widely among Finnish people and good and bad extremes exist.
2. The better an individual knows the sport of disc golf, the more likely they are to have a positive attitude towards it.
3. Mass media has an important role in shaping disc golf's public perception.
4. Disc golfers perceive the sport to be more professional than non-disc golfers.
5. Social media is the most important channel for interaction between fans and professional disc golfers.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this theoretical section, the sport of disc golf is explained and its current state analyzed. Then, the most important concepts of the study are presented, including sports credibility, fan engagement and athlete branding. All these concepts are also applied to the environment of disc golf to understand the present conditions, along with the opportunities and threats the sport can face.

4.1 THE SPORT OF DISC GOLF

In this subsection, the rules of disc golf are explained and the most important industry stakeholders presented. This subsection also covers the brief history and the current state of the sport.

4.1.1 The Sport

Disc golf reminds regular golf a lot: the aim of the game is to get an object, in this case a flying disc, inside another object, in this case an elevated basket with metal chains. As in golf, each "hole" is played from a tee area to a target (basket) with an objective of using the fewest number of throws as possible. Each throw is made from the position where the previous throw landed. A hole is completed once the disc lands in the basket (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.).

Disc golf course generally consists of 9 or 18 holes. The courses can be located in a variety of settings such as parks and forests. A nine-hole course is possible to establish on no more than five acres of land, while a professional 18-hole course can cover 30 to 40 acres. The distances of holes, on the other hand, vary generally between 60–150 meters, but can even exceed 300 meters. Possible course obstacles include natural elements like trees, shrubs, and land variations, as well as human-made barriers. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); World Flying Disc Federation, (n.d.))

The scoring system of disc golf is very similar to golf. All holes have a predetermined average score, which is referred to as "par". In ordinary disc golf courses, par varies between 3-5. Scoring one stroke under par is referred to as a "birdie", two strokes under par as an "eagle" and three throws under par as an "albatross". Scoring one stroke over the par is called a "bogey", two over par a "double bogey" and so on. Hitting the basket

straight from the tee in one throw is referred to as a "hole-in-one" or an "ace". (Henderson, (n.d.); Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.))

There are also course-specific rules that can affect the scoring such as "mandos", mandatory routes of play, and "out-of-bounds" areas. Missing a mando or throwing a disc out-of-bounds result in penalty strokes. (Henderson, (n.d.); World Flying Disc Federation, (n.d.))

For clarity, the flying discs or frisbees used in disc golf will further on be referred to as "discs". Different discs are intended for different types of shots. There are three most common types of discs, putters for approaching the basket, midranges with a longer glide and drivers with the most speed (Burns, 2022). Discs can be also divided based on their stability, they can be understable, stable or overstable depending on how the disc behaves in the air (Henderson, (n.d.)).

Disc golf is an affordable, low-barrier sport, and a vast majority of disc golf courses are free (Burns, 2022). It's easy to learn and designed for all people of all ages and abilities. The communal aspect of the sport is important and as golf, sportsmanship, honesty and integrity are important values of disc golf (World Flying Disc Federation, (n.d.)).

4.1.2 Evolution

The first official disc golf association, the Disc Golf Association was founded in 1976 by Ed Headrick, who is in the community considered as "the Father of Disc Golf". The game was already played prior to that in different variations by a group of enthusiasts, but it was Headrick who invented and patented the Frisbee and the Disc Golf Pole Hole, which is a basis for modern day disc golf baskets. Later in the same year of 1976 Headrick founded the Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA), which today is the umbrella organization of all professional disc golf. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Disc Golf History, (n.d.))

Led by Headrick, PDGA organized the first Disc Golf World Championship in Los Angeles in 1982. After that the sport and the association kept slowly growing for years. In 1998 PDGA player rating system was established to enable creation of fair, competitive divisions instead of a traditional handicap system. At around that time also began the explosive growth of PDGA memberships and events. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)). Figure 1 presents the growth of active PDGA members between 1999 and 2023, and Figure 2 the growth of the number of official PDGA events between 1999 and 2023.

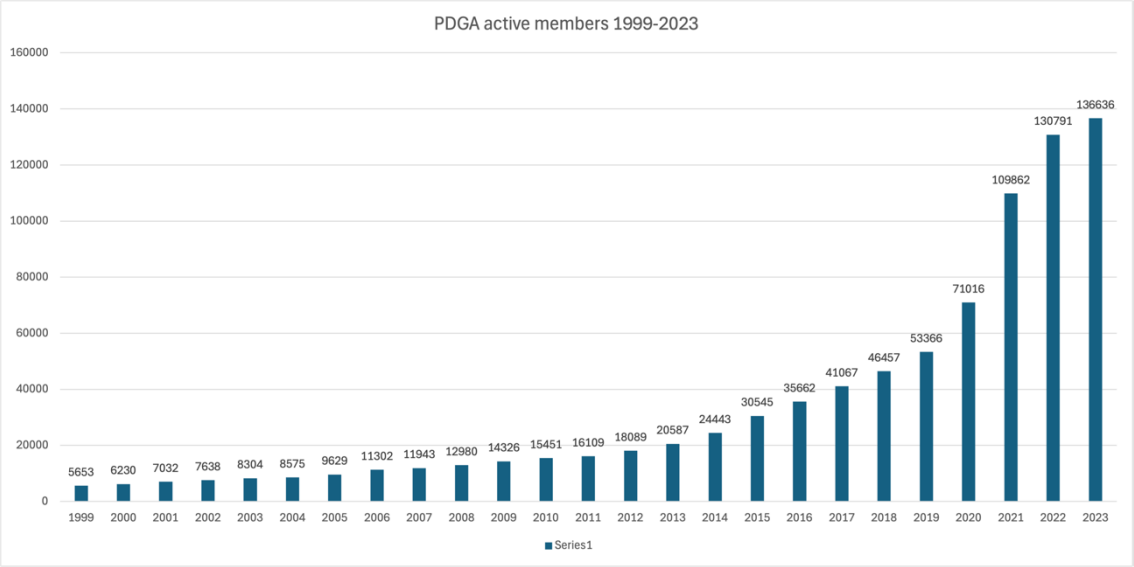


Figure 1. The active PDGA members 1999-2023. Source: https://www.pdga.com/

As the Figure 1 demonstrates, the growth of active PDGA members has been accelerating through the 21st century. The number of active members in the end of 2023 was around 2.5 times higher than in the end of 2019. An important factor behind this huge increase was Covid-19. As many recreational sports events and activities were put on hold, many outdoor activities such as disc golf saw major growth. For example, The Disc Golf Growth Report of UDisc, an app for disc golfers to keep their score and statistics, exhibited that 11.7 million rounds were scored through the app in 2020 – three times more than in 2019. (Payne, 2021; Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.))

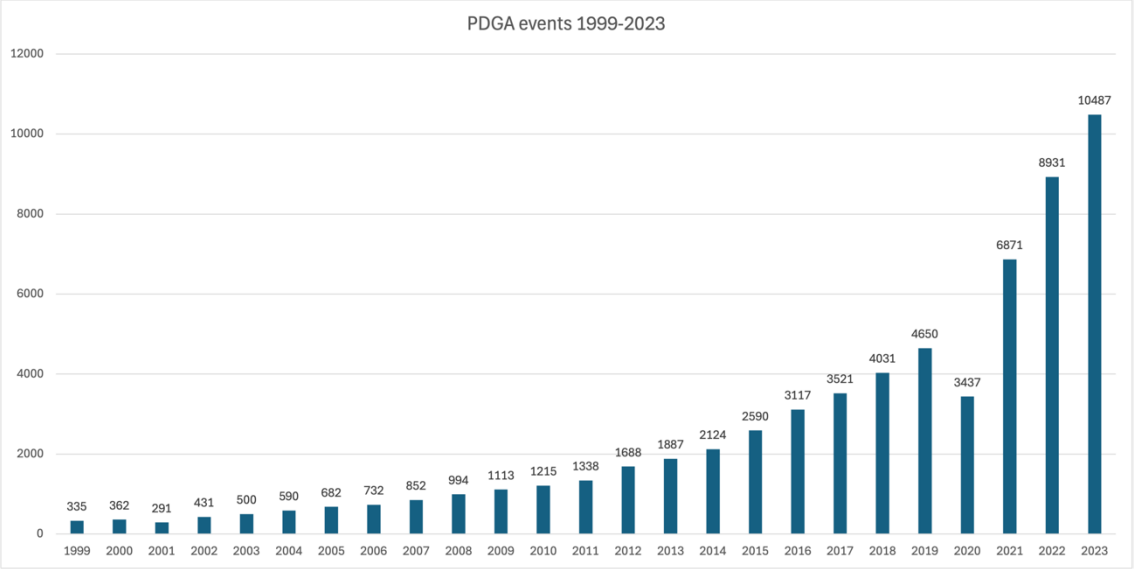


Figure 2. The number of PDGA events 1999-2023. Source: https://www.pdga.com/

From The Figure 2 can be seen that as the number of PDGA members have grown, so has the number of official PDGA events; in 2023 there was more than two times as many events as prior to Covid-19. The number courses worldwide have also increased drastically. The Disc Golf Growth Report 2025 indicates that by the end of 2024 there were 16 267 disc golf courses worldwide, with 3.2 new courses installed every single day (Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.)).

4.1.3 Current Landscape

In 2025, disc golf is played more than ever around the world. In the end of 2024, there were a total of 91 countries with disc golf courses: the most in USA (10 644), followed by Finland (1095), Canada (871), Sweden (758) and Norway (733). Out of the courses, 89 percent were free to play (Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.)).

As the course statistics demonstrate, USA is the leading country in disc golf with 106 660 PDGA members by the end of 2023. Sweden followed second with 5548 members, Canada third with 5486 members and Finland fourth with 4562 members. These numbers of official tournament eligible players, though, don't reflect the actual scale of the sport's global impact as disc golf is mostly played on a recreational level. It's been estimated by PDGA, that today there are at least 4 million people in the world playing disc golf regularly (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

The Disc Golf Growth Report of UDisc provides a lot of detailed statistics about the players, the sport and its impact on people's activity. The 1.26 million users of the app played more than 20 million disc golf rounds with UDisc in 2024, spent 33 million hours on the course and took 81 billion steps while playing (Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.)).

As disc golf has grown, the economic impact of it has also increased. In 2023, the global disc golf market was valued around 223 million US Dollars (TechSki Research, (n.d.). The prize purses of professional competitions have grown along, for example in PDGA Professional Disc Golf World Championships the prize purse in 2016 was 129 882 US Dollars, in 2021 it was 173 105 US Dollars and in 2024 it had jumped to 285 000 US Dollars. Furthermore, the highest paid athletes in the sport are making more than seven figures a year through sponsorship agreements alone. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Innova Disc Golf, 2022) In amateur level, according to the Disc Golf Growth Report, more than 70 percent of players spent as much or more money on equipment in 2024 comparing to 2023.

The viewership of professional disc golf competitions is also currently record-high. Disc Golf World Championship 2025 in Tampere, Finland, is expecting 25 000 spectators to Finland (PDGA Worlds, (n.d.)). Online, the Disc Golf Network (DGN) is the most important live streaming platform of disc golf, and while it hasn't released the latest subscriber statistics, in 2020 they had already reached 12 000 paid subscribers (Eisenhood, 2020). In Youtube, by the end of February 2025, the most popular disc golf coverage channels included "JomezPro" (470 000 followers), "Disc Golf Pro Tour" (194 000 followers), Go Throw Disc Golf (145 000 followers) and Central Coast Disc Golf (138 000 followers) (Youtube, (n.d.)).

4.1.4 Governing Bodies & Industry Stakeholders

The main global governing body in disc golf is the PDGA, which is responsible for rules, player rankings and major disc golf tournaments, and has more than 300 000 lifetime members (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)). Another important global entity is the World Flying Disc Federation (WFDF), an international federation representing flying disc sports, that is recognized by the International Olympic Committee. In the field of disc golf, the most important responsibilities of WFDF include supporting and promoting inclusive growth and development of the sport (World Flying Disc Federation, (n.d.)).

Below these two organizations operate the national associations of disc golf as well as one continental association, the European Disc Golf Federation (EDGF), which acts to promote disc golf, to encourage the play of the sport around Europe, and to provide a forum for discussion. Finally, at the grassroots level, local clubs play an important role in promoting disc golf within their respective regions. (European Disc Golf Federation, (n.d.))

The professional competitions, such as the Disc Golf Pro Tour, are also important stakeholders and will be discussed on the following section. Other important stakeholders in the industry include for example the disc and target manufacturers, the Disc Golf Network for live streaming events, post-event coverage providers such as JomezPro, UDisc for score keeping and major retailers such as Infinite Discs. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Disc Golf Network (n.d.))

4.1.5 Competitions

Regarding the professional competitions, the most important professional tour is the Disc Golf Pro Tour (DGPT), which works in collaboration with the PDGA. There, the top players in the world compete for tournament titles and for the tour championship. In

2025, DGPT consists of 20 tournaments out of which 15 are played in USA, 2 in Norway and 1 in Finland, Sweden and Czech Republic (Disc Golf Pro Tour, (n.d.).

The most prestigious events in professional disc golf are the PDGA Majors, that take place 4-5 times during one season, that typically begins around March and finishes in October. In 2025, three of these Majors will be held in the USA, one in Estonia, and one in Finland – the PDGA Pro World Championship – which will be for first time ever organized outside the USA. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Disc Golf Pro Tour, (n.d.))

There are also other high-level competitions such as national championships and regional tours. Below these events there are amateur and junior tournaments, and finally, at the grassroots level there are local and regional leagues and tournaments. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.))

4.1.6 Previous Research on Disc Golf

There doesn't exist a huge amount of research on disc golf as of today. In database Scopus, when looking for term "disc golf" in titles, abstracts or keywords, 47 results are shown. Web of Science, another database, provides 61 results with "disc golf" as a topic. In both of the databases only 22 of the documents are academic articles.

The topics of previous research on disc golf vary from injuries and throwing techniques to commercialization and social media. There exists very little research on the fan engagement in disc golf context, and the few articles that there are discuss engagement almost solely from the social media perspective.

4.2 DISC GOLF IN FINLAND

In this subsection, the development of disc golf in Finland is illustrated, and the most important competitions and players presented.

4.2.1 Evolution

Disc golf, in Finland referred to as "*frisbeegolf*", began to spread outside USA during the 1980s, and the first ever disc golf course in Finland was opened in 1982. The Finnish Disc Golf Association, "Suomen Frisbeegolfliitto", (SFL) was eventually founded in 1998. In the same year, the first Finnish Disc Golf Championship tournament was organized. Since then, the growth of disc golf in Finland has been

continuously accelerating. Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 are illustrating this growth. (Finnish Disc Golf Association (n.d.); Frisbeegolfin historia, 2023)



*Figure 3. The increase of disc golf courses in Finland. *Data from 2021 was not found. Sources: https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/ and https://udisc.com/disc-golf-growth-report.*

As the Figure 3 shows, the number of disc golf courses has increased drastically in Finland during the 21st century. Today, there are around 1100 courses in the country and that number is rising. The driving force behind the growth has been the increased demand and increased number of players, as the following graphs demonstrate.



Figure 4. The growth of Finnish PDGA members. Source: https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/.

The Figure 4 is illustrating the growth of Finnish PDGA members. The growth was moderate until 2013, then during the following three years the number of members tripled. Another significant leap was taken during Covid-19 in 2020 when more than one thousand new members were registered. The little decline during 2023 and 2024 is caused by a change in the licensing system (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).



Figure 5. The increase of SFL member clubs. Source: https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/.

The Figure 5 is showing the increase of SFL member clubs. SFL enabled clubs to join as members in 2004, and three clubs joined the association during the first year. Since then, the growth has been continuous and the threshold of 200 clubs was surpassed in 2022 (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

.



Figure 6. The increase of members in SFL member clubs. Source: https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/.

Finally, Figure 6 illustrates the increase of total members in SFL member clubs. The effect of Covid-19 is once again significant with the number of members increasing by more than 50 percent. As the popularity of the sport in the country has grown, PDGA has selected Finland to host some of the most important events in disc golf. One of the major professional tournaments, the European Open, has been organized in Finland every one or two years since 2006. In 2016, the Disc Golf European Championship was hosted in Finland and in 2025 Finland is hosting the Disc Golf World Championship. (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Frisbeegolfin historia, 2023)

4.2.2 Current landscape

Disc golf in Finland today is more popular than anywhere else in the world when comparing to the population. UDisc estimates that over 6 million rounds of disc golf were played in Finland in 2021, which is more than the 5.6 million people living in the country (Williamson, 2022).

In 2023, research conducted by the Finnish National Sports Council discovered that disc golf is the third most popular sport among 11–15-year-old-boys after football and cycling. Even more impressive numbers were provided by the Natural Resources Institute Finland, whose research conducted in 2022 claims that as much as 20 percent of the adult population and 42 percent of the 15–24-year-olds play disc golf in Finland (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

In the professional disc golf, top Finnish players are also doing better than ever. Eveliina Salonen became the first ever Finnish player to win the World Championship title in 2024 in FPO (Female Professional Open) category with Niklas Anttila finishing second in MPO (Mixed Pro Open) category. A big step forward for professional disc golf in Finland is hosting the Disc Golf World Championship in summer 2025 (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

Despite the popularity of the sport and the success of Finnish players, disc golf remains to be overlooked as an elite sport. Indeed, most of disc golf players in Finland are playing the game only for recreational purposes, which affects the public perception of the sport (Frisbeegolfnews, (n.d.)). The sport is facing similar issues in the neighboring country Estonia. Also there, disc golf has become one of the most popular sports of the country, but it keeps dividing opinions and some people don't consider it to be an elite sport at all (Pajala, 2024).

4.2.3 Competitions

The most important competitions of each calendar year in Finland are the Finnish National Championship tournaments. In addition to the MPO and FPO categories, the national champion is honored in multiple "masters" categories (over 40-year-olds), junior categories and amateur categories. There is also played a championship tournament for pairs in both MPO and FPO as well as for mixed pairs with one representative from both previously mentioned categories (Finnish Disc Golf Association (n.d.)).

The most important professional tour in Finland is the Prodigy Disc Pro Tour, which is organized by the SFL and Prodigy, one of the most significant disc and target manufacturers in the sport. The tour consists of five tournaments played in five different courses between May and September. Other national tours include the Masters Tour for over 40-year-olds and the Lady Tour for FPO. Finally, several regional tours for amateurs are organized yearly. (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Frisbeegolfmedia, (n.d.))

In addition to these competitions and tours organized by the Finnish Disc Golf Association, there are contests and leagues organized by local disc golf clubs. Many of these contests don't require an official competition license and it's often not mandatory to be a part of a club to participate. These contests are often organized weekly. They are low-barrier, less competitive and offer a great opportunity to learn and get advice (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

4.2.4 Players

Currently the best Finnish professional disc golfer in MPO category is Niklas Anttila, 23, who has won 3 Finnish Championships and 1 European Championship. Last year, he finished second in the Disc Golf World Championship tournament, and in a highly rated disc golf statistics page "Statmando" he is currently ranked as the 7th best disc golfer in the world.

Väinö Mäkelä is the second highest rated Finn in MPO, and his greatest career achievement is winning the Finnish Championship title in 2021. Mäkelä is the most followed disc golfer in Finland with more than 60 000 Youtube and 50 000 Instagram followers. Other important MPO players in Finland include for example Joona Heinänen, Lauri Lehtinen and Jesse Nieminen.

In FPO (women) category, the best Finnish player is Eveliina Salonen, who is a 5-time Finnish Champion and a 2-time PDGA Major winner. Her biggest achievement was winning the Disc Golf World Championship in 2024 as the first Finnish disc golfer ever. In Statmando she is ranked as the fifth best FPO player in the world. Other important FPO players from Finland include also a 5-time Finnish Champion Henna Blomroos, Silva Saarinen and Heidi Laine (Frisbeegolfmedia, (n.d.)).

4.3 SPORTS CREDIBILITY

This subsection discusses the factors affecting the credibility and the public perception of an elite sport. It also applies the concepts to the framework of disc golf and analyzes the current public image of the sport.

4.3.1 Pillars of Public Perception

The credibility and the public perception of a sport is dependent on multiple factors. To clarify the concepts, credibility in the Cambridge English Dictionary is described as "the fact that someone or something can be believed or trusted". Public perception, on the other hand, can be characterised as a shared understanding and organisation of information on a group level (Hallmann et al., 2020).

Elite sports are important actors in societies as they contribute to the formation of norms and values such as motivation and respect (Stewart et al., 2004). They can generate multiple social benefits such as feelings of national honour, pride and recognition. On a

personal level, individuals can get positive feelings and emotions through sporting success of others. (Wicker et al., 2012)

These perceived benefits have a significant impact on the public's perception and evaluation of elite sports. The more aware of these benefits the public is, the more likely they are to create positive associations with the sport. In addition to the perceived benefits, also the perceived costs can affect the public evaluation (Hallmann et al., 2020).

One of the most important aspects of the public perception of an elite sport is the notion of trust. Trust refers to the certainty that the other party, in this case an elite sport, has integrity and is reliable in the eyes of another party, here the public. Trust can improve the public perception of an elite sport (Hallmann et al., 2020), but at the same time distrust can harm confidence complicate restructuring (Bryson et al. 2006).

Another important aspect are role models, that can be defined as individuals who are considered admirable and interesting (Breuer and Wicker 2015). In many cases, elite athletes are regarded as role models. People who look up to athletes tend to have a more positive perception on elite sports that people who don't perceive athletes as role models. Thus, portraying athletes is important for a sport to gain credibility and improve the public perception (Hallmann et al., 2020).

These are all aspects that are more or less in the control of the industry policymakers and stakeholders. Yet, there exists also factors uncontrollable by the managers. Firstly, sports are unpredictable, and the aspect of performance is crucial. Public interest and evaluation of a specific sport increase when there's on-field success (Lee et al., 2020).

Secondly, mass media plays in important role on shaping the public opinion. It has the ability of agenda-setting, devoting to a certain topic and making it look important in the eyes of the public. It has also the ability of framing, presenting topics in a way that can shape the publics response. All this media bias can be accidental or intentional, but it certainly can cause public to look at an issue differently. Recently social media has affected the coverage of sports radically making it more rapid and interactive. One of the new aspects is the user-generated content, which can also influence public opinion. (Compete High, (n.d.))

4.3.2 Disc Golf as an Elite Sport

In US, where the disc golf originates from, the sport has been perceived to be kind of niche and alternative, something for "hippies" who smoke and drink beer during rounds.

A Finnish disc golf podcast "Heittolinjalla" discusses the issue in one of their episodes and notes that this image still is still hindering the public perception of the sport. (Youtube, (n.d.))

For the public, the social prestige and civil pride are important aspects of an elite sport (Hallmann et al., 2020), and the traditional brand image of disc golf isn't exactly lifting these emotions. In Finland, disc golf has done a lot of things to get rid of this stigma. The sport has been getting more and more professional; an example of the development is a high school program dedicated to disc golf in the high school of Ähtäri, which is designed for goal-oriented young disc golfers (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

Considering the perceived benefits of disc golf, it's clear that the sport offers a lot of health benefits. Disc Golf Growth Report of 2025 estimates that disc golfers took 81 billion steps on course in 2024. Also, fresh air is a nice side benefit to being active outside. Positive for disc golf, the perceived cost of the sport is also low and according to some comparisons, it's been even listed as the cheapest hobby for children in Finland (Finnish Disc Golf Association, (n.d.)).

The most popular disc golfers in Finland have tens of thousands of followers on different social media platforms and can be perceived as role models. This popularity is also starting to be noticed outside the disc golf circles as two disc golfers, Niklas Anttila and Eveliina Salonen, were nominated for the Best Athlete of the Year in the annual Finnish Sports Gala (Frisbeegolfmedia, (n.d.)). Despite neither of the two won, their recognition is positive for the public image of disc golf. Interestingly, as the public is getting more and more interested in the sport, there are entities that the sport still hasn't impressed.

In the neighbouring country Estonia, Kristin Tattar, the brightest star of women's disc golf who was the first player ever to win all 4 global major tournaments in 2023, was voted by the public as the best athlete of the year. Yet, the votes of media and official sport federations completely overturned the decision and she ended up not being awarded (Pajari, 2024), indicating that not everyone has completely approved disc golfs status as an elite sport.

In the mass media, the disc golf coverage remains to be limited. With a quick search, Helsingin Sanomat, the largest newspaper in Finland by circulation, has published 26 articles mentioning disc golf during the last 12 months; in comparison, there have been more articles about both ice-hockey and football during the last two weeks. More exposure would be important as it could make the public evaluate the social and

personal benefits higher leading to a better overall perception of disc golf (Hallmann et al., 2020).

4.4 FAN ENGAGEMENT

This subsection presents the concepts of fan engagement and athlete branding. It discusses fan engagement in the context of disc golf and utilizes the 360° Fan Engagement Matrix by Wilson and Fowler (2016) to look at the issue from different perspectives.

4.4.1 Fan Engagement in Sports Industry

4.4.1.1 Special Characteristics of the Industry

The sports industry is an interesting field of research due to its intriguing special characteristics. Firstly, sports fans identify with teams and players in ways that are rare in other industries. Customer relationships in the sports industry are highly loyal and engaged, and due to the enjoyment-oriented and self-expressive nature of sports, the sports fans' way of consuming can look even irrational from the outside (Karg et al., 2015; Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Secondly, the sports product is often produced and consumed at the same time, and thus the experience is only partly in the producer's hands (Yoshida et al., 2015). Along with live consumption comes the performance effects; the performance of teams and athletes is something that can't be controlled by sports managers and yet affect the fans' emotions and attitudes. In team sports, performance has been identified by Lee et al., (2019) as one of the strongest predictors of relationship quality.

Finally, in professional sports, fans are a crucial part of the product. Individual fans can't make a big difference alone, but the consumer communities can. In addition to benefiting a team or an athlete, fan communities can provide a basis for deep emotions, relationships and identities among their members (Guschwan, 2012).

4.4.1.2 Definition of Fan Engagement

In the mainstream marketing literature, customer engagement can be described in various ways. Huettermann & Kunkel (2022) define it as the resources that an

individual invests in interactions with an organization. In the sports marketing literature, the term "engage" has been used in describing the emotional connection between fans and their favourite teams or players (Yadav et al., 2023). In sports context, this connection is referred to as fan engagement.

Characteristic for the industry, the relationships between sports fans and their preferred teams or players are long-term and highly engaged. These relationships are increasingly built through relationship marketing, which Yadav et al. (2023) define as the process of cultivating, maintaining and boosting relationships with all associates to create benefits for all parties. Sports brands have multiple motives to enhance fan engagement. Highly engaged fans are more likely to create long-term associations with the brand as well as provide immediate financial benefits by purchasing merchandise and attending sporting events (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022; Yoshida et al., 2014).

Another integral part of fan engagement is fans' non-transactional behavior, which benefit sports brands indirectly. Through non-transactional exchanges the brand as well as the other fans can enjoy the benefits of fan engagement. In the sports context, non-transactional behavior includes consumer-to-consumer interaction such as word-of-mouth, play and rituals, fan-community-related behavior and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, it includes fans displaying sports fanaticism, basking in reflected glory and consuming content about their favourite team or player (Yadav et al., 2023; Yoshida et al., 2014).

4.4.2 Fan Engagement in Disc Golf

In disc golf, social media and internet are the most important channels for fans to interact with their favourite players. Unlike in a team sport such as football, where fans of the local team get to watch their favorites on-site every week, professional disc golf tournaments are usually organized in one location just once per year. Thus, seeing their favourite players live more than once a season requires a lot of commitment from disc golf fans.

Another interesting aspect of disc golf is that until the last couple of years, disc golf hasn't really been a live sport: the viewership of post-production coverages remains to be significantly higher than the live viewership. The popularity of live streaming, however, has increased lately, but due to the "slow" nature of the game, many fans prefer to watch the most compact round coverage the following day. (Frisbeegolfmedia, (n.d.))

Also, a vast majority of disc golf fans aren't primarily fans of a certain player, but rather general fans that want to see great disc golf. Thus, the on-site atmosphere in disc golf tournaments is communal and supportive towards all the players. The elements of fan engagement in disc golf tournaments include following and supporting the players from close as they play, meet-and-greets with players, activities organized by sponsors, opportunities to play a practice round in the same course where the players compete and more. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); PDGA Worlds, (n.d.))

Online, the engagement between fans and players happens through players' own platforms such as Youtube and Instagram pages, as well as through platforms of third parties. These platforms include for example sponsors' and manufacturers' platforms, streaming and post-production coverage platforms, media outlets and fan communities. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.); Disc Golf Growth Report, (n.d.))

4.4.3 Enhancing Engagement in Disc Golf Through 360° Matrix

4.4.3.1 The Matrix

One possible way of looking at fan engagement is through the 360° fan engagement matrix created by Wilson and Fowler (2016). The matrix divides the engagement into four clusters: on-site during matchdays, on-site during non-matchdays, off-site during matchdays and off-site during non-matchdays. The matrix can be seen below in Figure 7.

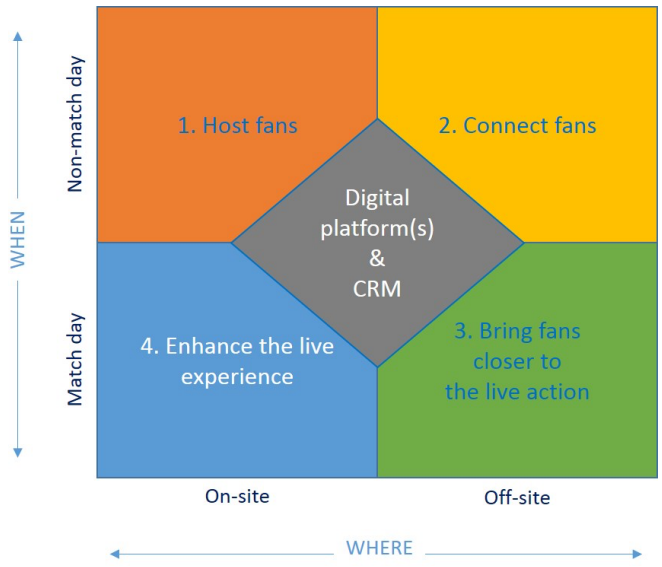


Figure 7. The fan engagement matrix by Wilson and Fowler (2016). Source: https://geoffwnjwilson.com/2016/08/25/254/

Explaining the matrix, Wilson and Fowler focus on sports clubs, but a lot of the concepts are also applicable to an individual sport such as disc golf. Next, the different clusters will be discussed from disc golfs perspective.

4.4.3.2 On-site during non-matchdays

Starting with the first cluster, on-site during non-matchdays, Wilson and Fowler highlight the importance of making fans feel as a part of the club. Suggested actions include stadium tours, museum tours and innovative uses of the venue such as hosting job fairs.

In disc golf, approaching this cluster is fairly difficult as, like previously mentioned, the professional disc golf events are typically held just once a season in a given location. The tournament venue is built some days in advance and taken down after the event. During the rest of the year, the course is generally available to play for everyone. Regardless, engaging fans on-site during non-matchdays could include for example communal events, training camps and regional tournaments. (Professional Disc Golf Association, (n.d.))

4.4.3.3 Off-site during non-matchdays

The most important channel for off-site engagement during non-matchdays according to Wilson and Fowler is the internet. The internet offers many possibilities such as virtual reality, content through multiple channels, chatbots and fantasy sports. In this digital context, engagement has been described as experiences that stem from interaction between consumers, communities and brands (Yadav et al., 2023).

Wilson and Fowler argue that fans want to feel connected to other fans as well as the club itself. These connections can form fan communities, which consequently can help individuals to increase their self-esteem and raise their aspirations (Yoshida et al., 2018). In addition to bringing fans together, the online environment is important for sports brands as it enables continuous engagement with fans between events and during off-season. The digital world and particularly social media have also become sports brands' primary channel for information sharing (Annamalai et al., 2021).

In disc golf, social media is the main channel for players and brands to engage with their fans. As well as the on-field performance, the off-field image of athletes has been identified as an important element in forming and maintaining a connection with fans. Thus, not only the disc golf companies but also the professionals disc golfers should pay

attention to their social media strategies. These strategies should also consider enhancing fan-fan-interaction, which in social media can happen through for example the comment sections, groups and discussion forums. (Zheng & Xu, 2024)

4.4.3.4 Off-site during matchdays

Third cluster talks about off-site engagement during matchdays. Wilson and Fowler note that live content rights can make this type of engagement difficult, which has led to creative ways of providing behind-the-scenes content.

In disc golf, where live consumption remains to be less popular, off-site engagement during matchdays is especially challenging. In addition to social media, live streaming and live scoring platforms are ways for disc golf brands to engage off-site fans during matchdays. To improve the possibilities for this type of engagement, professional disc golf would need higher live viewership numbers. (Frisbeegolfmedia, (n.d.))

4.4.3.5 On-site during matchdays

Finally, regarding the last cluster, on-site during matchdays, the matrix by Wilson and Fowler highlights the importance of a high-quality live experience. Maximizing the fans' experience and satisfaction is crucial as it can lead to considerable long-term benefits such as positive word-of-mouth and fan loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2015).

In sports in general the on-field performance of the supported team or an athlete plays a significant role in service quality (Lee et al., 2019). In disc golf, where a majority of viewers are general fans of the sport, individual players' performances don't affect the overall service quality that much. Thus, a manager of a disc golf event may have more control over the overall fan satisfaction than a manager of a football match including a local team.

Wilson and Fowler argue that the fan engagement starts with understanding the fan journey and addressing potential "pain points" such as weather forecasts and parking delays. Additional suggestions include live entertainment during breaks, fan zone areas, Wi-Fi at the venue and providing behind-the-scenes content.

The most important fans' touchpoints in a professional disc golf event typically include sponsors' activations, meet-and-greets with players and product exhibitions. To improve fans' satisfaction, high quality of these services is important as in addition to competing

with other sports and industries, watching the tournament from home is a cheaper alternative for fans (Balliauw et al., 2020).

4.4.4 Athlete Branding

Human brands can be classified as brands due to their potential for professional management and features similar to those of traditional brands. They are more unpredictable than product brands as they can lack stability and control. Also, balancing personal and professional lives can be challenging as human brands are continuously under public scrutiny. (Zheng & Xu, 2024)

In sports, athletes have considerable commercial and social value in their industries. Many professional athletes have reached a celebrity status among fans, and they are being perceived as social symbols (Zheng & Xu, 2024).

Brand image refers to the consumer's perception and understanding of a certain brand. It's different from brand identity, which is created by the source; it's what the brand insider communicates to the consumers (Linsner et al., 2020). For sports it's characteristic that the on-field performance of athletes plays a critical role in building a successful brand image. Athletic performance has a positive impact also on fan loyalty. Furthermore, a high level of loyalty increases fans' consumption of the sport and athlete, which consequently leads to higher profits. (Mahmoudian et al., 2020)

Despite its high importance, on-field success isn't enough to establish a sustainable brand: as for any other human brands, personal branding is important for athletes to stand out and enhance their brand image. Personal branding refers to the activities that are used to promote and distinguish people in areas of competition. Creating a human brand requires establishing a brand identity and communicating it to a target market. (Linsner et al., 2020)

In addition to the athlete's on-field performance, the elements of the athlete's personal brand include attractive appearance, positive off-field performance and marketable lifestyle. Successful off-field activities contribute to the public perception and drive emotional attachment between fans and athletes. Marketing lifestyle, on the other hand, refers to the off-field attributes of an athlete, illustrating their personalities and values. (Mahmoudian et al., 2020; Zheng & Xu, 2024)

Potential off-field and offline personal branding actions of athletes include for example philanthropic endeavors and meet-and-greets with fans (Pedersen, 2024). Lately, social media has allowed the creation of new touchpoints with fans to encourage continuous

engagement experiences. Social media has also brough consumers closer to the athlete's, reducing the perceived barriers in between (Zheng & Xu, 2024).

Social media has also provided athletes more power to define their brand through controlled and planned content (Pedersen, 2024). Interestingly, according to Mahmoudian, Mohammadi & Wang (2024), athletes tend to post more non-performance-related content than content related to the athletic performance itself. This way the athletes are adding new character traits and thus expanding their brand identity (Linsner et al., 2020).

To conclude, off-field activities of athlete's are as important as the athletic performance is building a successful human brand. The athletes should pay close attention to their decision-making when planning content for social media and other communication channels, customizing the content to meet the desired fan engagement goals (Mahmoudian, Mohammadi & Wang, 2024). This way the fans are more likely to create an emotional attachment to an athlete, which will lead to positive word-of-mouth and increase fans' purchase intentions (Zheng & Xu, 2024).

5 ANALYSIS

In this practical section, the results of a survey among Finnish population are analyzed. First, the data is described, and the demographics of the respondents are presented. Then, a comparison between disc golfers and non-disc golfers is conducted. Finally, the positioning of disc golf among other main sports in Finland is studied.

5.1 OVERVIEW OF THE DATA

In this subsection, the details of the data are presented.

5.1.1 Data collection

The data was collected via a survey conducted online through Google Forms. The survey consisted of four parts that were divided in the following manner:

Demographic information

In the first part, the age, gender, profession and education levels of respondents were asked.

Disc golf engagement and knowledge

In the second part, the respondents were required to answer questions about their disc golf playing activity, knowledge of the rules and professional players, and whether they follow disc golf related content or not. They were also asked about the channels through which they've got introduced to disc golf, and through which they follow disc golf content.

Binary questions

In this section, 10 opposite pairs of claims related to disc golf and sports were presented. The disc golf related questions were connected to the different perceptions that people have on the game. The general sports related questions addressed the attitudes on themes such as individual versus team sports and outdoor versus indoor sports.

Perception of disc golf among other popular sports in Finland

In the final section, the participants were presented a table with seven different characteristics; cheap, popular, fun, easy to learn, social, professional and requires good physical condition. Every characteristic had to be assigned to up to three of the following sports, football, ice hockey, Finnish baseball, basketball, skiing, athletics, floorball or disc golf. After this, the participants were asked which characteristics are the most important for them in their optimal sport.

The data was collected between May 28th and June 7th, 2025, and a total of 123 responses were received. The survey was conducted in Finnish, but the results are translated to English for this document.

5.1.2 Summary of the responses

5.1.2.1 Demographic overview

Out of the 123 responses, 66 were men and 57 women. The age of the respondents varied between 16 and 59. The age distribution is presented below in Figure 8.

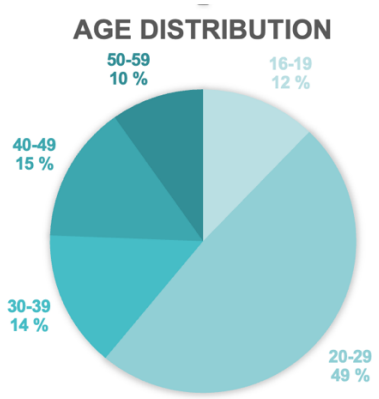


Figure 8. The age distribution of the respondents.

The highest attended education among all the respondents was either high school/vocational school, or university/university of applied sciences. For 45 respondents it was high school or vocational school, and for 78 of the respondents it was university or university of applied sciences.

Out of the respondents, 69 were currently working, 48 were students and 6 unemployed.

5.1.2.2 Disc golf engagement and knowledge

In the second part of the survey, the respondents were first enquired about their disc golf playing activity. 5 % of the respondents had never tried disc golf, 50 % had tried a couple of times, 35 % played disc golf occasionally and 10 % played actively.

Never tried	5 %
Tried a few times	50 %
Plays sometimes	35 %
Plays often	10 %

Figure 9. The disc golf playing activity of the respondents.

Based on this question, the respondents were divided in two groups, "doesn't play disc golf" and "plays disc golf". The latter one includes the 45 % that play disc golf at least occasionally and the remaining 55 % form the other group of non-players. These groups will be exploited in analysis later in the section.

Next, the respondents were asked about their knowledge of disc golf rules and terminology. The results are presented in Figure 10 below.

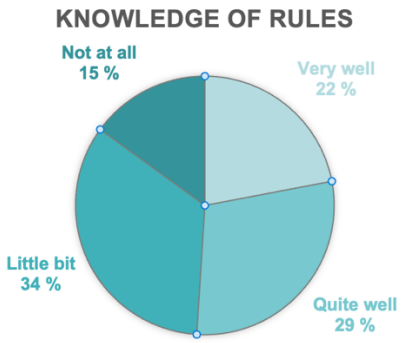


Figure 10. The knowledge of disc golf rules among respondents.

It appeared that around half of the respondents believed that they knew the rules and terminology of disc golf at least quite well. Yet, a significantly smaller number of respondents followed disc golf related news and content. As Figure 11 below demonstrates, 76 % don't follow disc golf related content at all.

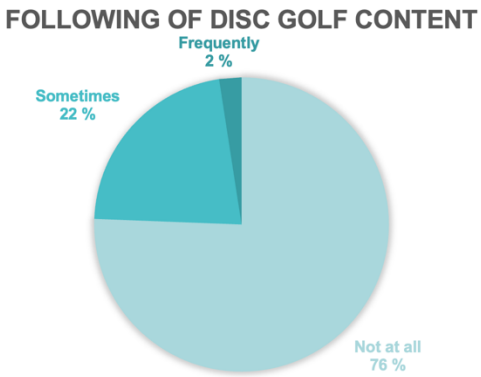


Figure 11. The following of disc golf content among respondents.

The people who do follow disc golf were then asked about the channels through which they consume content. TikTok, Youtube and traditional newspapers were three most important channels, meanwhile only 7 % of respondents consumed disc golf live or on the spot.

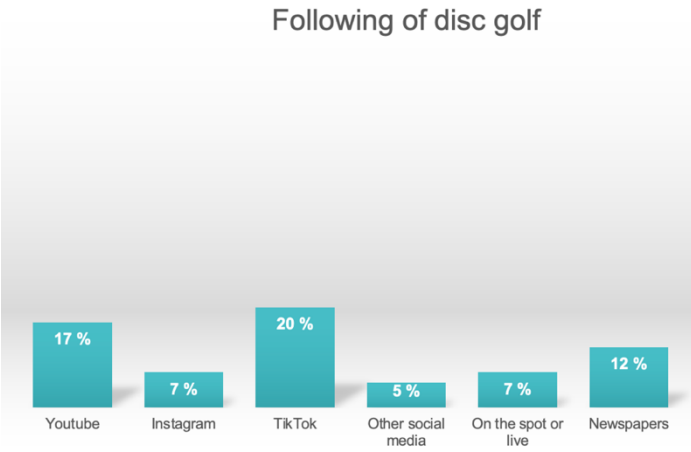


Figure 12. The most important channels for consuming disc golf content.

Despite majority of the respondents not following disc golf content, 63 % were able to name at least one Finnish professional disc golfer, indicating that the most popular disc golfers in Finland are somewhat little celebrities. The number of players that the respondents could name is demonstrated in Figure 13 below.

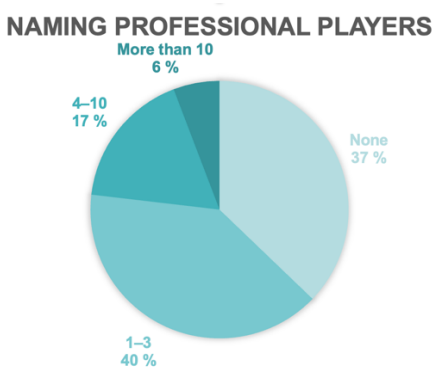


Figure 13. The ability to name Finnish professional disc golfers among respondents.

Furthermore, the respondents were inquired about the channels through which they had got introduced to disc golf. Figure 14 below illustrates the results.

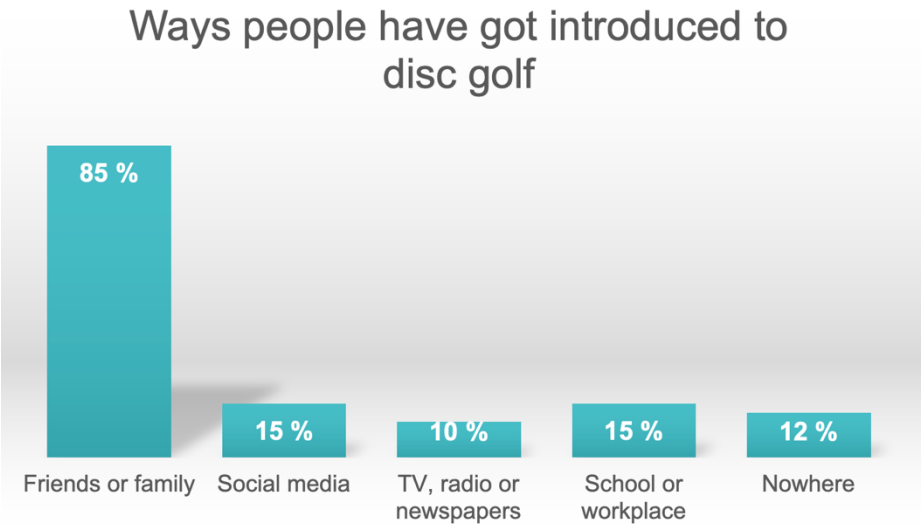


Figure 14. The most significant channels to get introduced to disc golf.

It was found that friends and family are by far the most important channel. 85 % of the respondents had heard about the sport from their friends or family. Social media, traditional media, school and workplace weren't significant channels with only up to 15 % share. This also highlights how disc golf rarely shows up in the news feed unless it's being purposefully searched for.

5.1.3 Disc golf engagement across demographics

There were significant differences among two genders and among different age groups in both disc golf playing activity and disc golf following activity. Male respondents were both playing and consuming disc golf a lot more than their female counterparts. Figure 15 below demonstrates these differences.

	Man	Woman
Never tried	0 %	10 %
Tried a few times	29 %	74 %
Plays sometimes	51 %	16 %
Plays often	20 %	0 %

Figure 15. The differences in disc golf playing activity among genders.

Out of the 66 male respondents, every single one had tried disc golf at least once during their lives and more than 70 % played disc golf at least occasionally. This is almost the complete opposite from the female respondents; none of them played disc golf often and only 16 % occasionally.

This is almost directly in line with the considered knowledge of disc golf rules. 77 % of men considered knowing the rules at least quite well comparing to 23 % of women. 32 % of women weren't familiar with disc golf rules or terminology at all. Considering the following of disc golf related content, 36 % of the men replied that they follow disc golf at least sometimes, meanwhile only 14 % of the women do the same.

The differences between different age groups are almost as significant considering the playing activity. Figure 16 below presents the differences in playing activity among different age categories.

	Doesn't play disc golf	Plays disc golf
Under 20	20 %	80 %
20-29	46 %	54 %
30-39	79 %	21 %
40-49	71 %	29 %
50-59	67 %	33 %

Figure 16. The disc golf playing activity among different ages.

Among the under 20-year-olds, 80 % played disc golf at least occasionally. Also among the 20-29-year-olds the majority played disc golf. This changes when moving on to the middle-aged and above. Interestingly, there's a significant drop in playing activity between the 20-29 and the 30-39-year-olds, after which the activity stays around the same.

One reason could be that students might have more freetime for leisure activities. Among the student-respondents, 56 % played disc golf, which is a lot more than the 35 % between the employed people. In line with these findings is also the result that among the respondents with the highest attended education being high school or vocational school, 58 % said they play disc golf, while among university level respondents only 38% replied the same.

In conclusion, it appears that disc golf is played more by students and young people than by people already in working life. Also, men seem to play disc golf significantly more than women. These results indicate that the most active disc golfers are young men and that despite the sport being available to play for everyone, among some groups it's not popular at all.

5.2 KEY FINDINGS

In this subsection, the key findings of the survey will be presented and analyzed. The subsection consists of two parts. The first part is studying the different perceptions that non-disc golfers and disc golfers have on the sport. The second part focuses on the positioning of disc golf in respondent's minds among other main sports in Finland.

5.2.1 Differences Among Disc Golfers and Non-Disc Golfers

This chapter aims to answer to RQ4, whether disc golfers perceive the sport differently than non-disc golfers. In this chapter the respondents are divided into two groups, "doesn't play disc golf" and "plays disc golf" as previously described.

First of all, as it could be assumed, disc golfers knew the rules and followed disc golf related content a lot more than non-disc golfers. They were also able to name professional disc golfers much better. Interestingly, only 6 % of the non-disc golfers followed disc golf related content. For main sports in Finland such as football or athletics, this number would probably be way larger due to the big amount of coverage that these sports receive in mass media. Disc golf related content rarely shows up in the news feed and thus has to be looked for, which could be one explaining factor behing this finding.

In the binary questions, there were also big differences between non-disc golfers and disc golfers. Figure 17 below presents the division of the answers on disc golf related binary questions.

	Doesn't play disc golf	Plays disc golf
Disc golf is a leisure sport	97 %	88 %
Disc golf is a professional sport	3 %	12 %
Disc golf is a communal sport	45 %	82 %
Disc golf is a solo sport	55 %	18 %
Disc golf is easy to approach	65 %	98 %
Disc golf is hard to approach	35 %	2 %

Figure 17. The different perceptions on disc golf among non-disc golfers and disc golfers.

As the figure shows, disc golf is perceived mainly as a leisure sport. Only a couple of non-disc golfers acknowledged the professional status of disc golf, while 12 % of disc golfers did so. This could be related to the lack of exposure that non-disc golfers have on the professional side of the sport. Like previously mentioned, non-disc golfers barely consume any disc golf related content, while disc golfers are more aware of the professional aspect of the sport.

The figure also shows that there's a huge difference in how non-disc golfers and disc golfers see the nature of the sport. More than half of non-disc golfers believe that disc golf is more of a solo sport. It's true that disc golf is usually played individually, but for disc golfers it's the communal aspect of the sport that matters the most. Actually, more than 80 % of disc golfers replied that the communal aspect in disc golf is more important the solo aspect. This is something that might go unseen for non-disc golfers and thus affect their attitude towards the sport.

Finally, the figure shows that most of the respondents perceive disc golf as a sport that's easy to approach. Nearly all disc golfers believe so, and so do 65 % of non-disc golfers. Yet, the remaining 35 % see disc golf as difficult to approach, which is quite worrying for the sport; this number should be reduced to improve the public perception of the sport and to attract new players and new audience. It's also contradictory with the responses to a question on whether "disc golf is accessible everyone regardless of their age or physical condition" versus "disc golf requires good physical condition". 99 % of all the respondents chose the first response, disc golf is accessible to everyone. Thus, there must be some other barriers that make disc golf difficult to approach for so many, and they will be discussed later.

The results of the remaining binary questions are presented in Figures 18 and 19.

	Doesn't play disc golf	Plays disc golf
Prefer team sports	55 %	68 %
Prefer solo sports	45 %	32 %
Prefer to do sports outside	97 %	93 %
Prefer to do sports inside	3 %	7 %
Prefer free sports	38 %	44 %
Doesn't mind paying for sports	62 %	56 %

Figure 18. Differences on attitudes between disc golfers and non-disc golfers, first part.

As we can see from the figure, there weren't as significant differences between non-disc golfers and disc golfers when it comes to themes such as cost, team versus solo sports and outdoor versus indoor sports. Curiously, disc golfers preferred team sports more strongly than non-disc golfers, despite disc golf being a solo sport in the end. This might be related to the communal aspect of disc golf that was just discovered. Outdoor sports were a lot more popular among respondents than indoor sports. Also, most of the respondents replied that they don't mind playing for sports, which is something that may not work to the benefit of disc golf, because it could indicate that more expensive sports are pulling potential players away.

	Doesn't play disc golf	Plays disc golf
Prefer the fun aspect of sports	87 %	84 %
Prefer the competitive aspect of sports	13 %	16 %
Follow more specific sports	60 %	78 %
Follow more specific athletes	40 %	22 %
Prefer live sports	85 %	85 %
Prefer highlights or replays	15 %	15 %

Figure 19. Differences on attitudes between disc golfers and non-disc golfers, second part.

There were almost no differences related to consuming sports between the two groups, a vast majority prefers live sports over highlights or replays. Also, the fun aspect of sports was more important than the competitive aspect. There was a slight difference between the responses on whether respondents followed more specific sports or athletes with disc golfers following more specific sports over athletes. This could be related to the fact that in disc golf there are more general fans than fans of specific players unlike in many other sports such as football or ice hockey.

In the fourth part of the survey, the respondents were asked to pick the sports that match the given characteristics best. Figure 20 presents the percentages of non-disc golfers and disc golfers that associated disc golf with a given characteristic.

	Doesn't play disc golf	Plays disc golf
Cheap	69 %	79 %
Easy to learn	42 %	73 %
Social	19 %	46 %
Professional	4 %	11 %

Figure 20. Differences in the different characteristics associated to disc golf among non-disc golfers and disc golfers.

Significant variations exist in all of the four categories. Almost 80 % of disc golfers picked disc golf as one of the cheapest sports among the most popular ones in Finland, while only 69 % of non-disc golfers did. This could be due to the lack of information that non-disc golfers have on the prices as they aren't familiar with the sport. Also, 11 % of the disc golfers associated disc golf with professional characteristics, while just 4 % of non-disc golfers did the same.

Yet, the differences are even greater when it comes to the social aspect and whether disc golf is easy to learn or not. 73 % of disc golfers considered disc golf to be one of the easiest sports to learn. Only 42 % of non-disc golfers thought so. Most of the respondents in "doesn't play disc golf" had tried disc golf a couple of times, but hadn't picked it up as a hobby. In just a few tries it's difficult to learn any sport, and this is why many non-disc golfers might consider the sport to be difficult to learn.

Considering the social aspect, the results here are in line with the earlier findings regarding the communal side of the game. Non-disc golfers can't be as familiar with the disc golf culture as the disc golfers are.

The results indicate that the sport may be experiencing a "disc golf bubble"; there is a strong growth in infrastructure and popularity, but public recognition is lagging behing. The people inside the bubble are passionate and think highly of their sport, but the people outside aren't really included, which could also be why they don't see the sport as easy to approach.

5.2.2 Position of Disc Golf Among Other Sports

In this chapter, the positioning of disc golf among other main sports in Finland is analyzed. The respondents were given seven characteristics, and they had to pair up each characteristic with up to three sports. Figure 21 below illustrates how respondents associated characteristics "cheap", "popular" and "fun".

	Cheap	Popular	Fun
Disc golf	**73 %**	17 %	**44 %**
Ice-hockey	2 %	**90 %**	**37 %**
Football	**39 %**	**80 %**	**73 %**
Floorball	17 %	10 %	15 %
Finnish baseball	24 %	22 %	32 %
Basketball	17 %	**24 %**	34 %
Athletics	**29 %**	10 %	17 %
Skiing	22 %	7 %	15 %

Figure 21. Perceptions of disc golf comparing to other main sports in Finland, first part.

Considering the price, the respondents perceived disc golf as by far the cheapest among the most popular sports in Finland. The big difference between disc golf and other sports is quite surprising, but on the other hand, disc golf is one of the only sports in the list that doesn't require joining a team. Also, the prices of the equipment such as discs are low.

Interestingly, disc golf wasn't perceived to be too popular among other main sports in Finland. Football and ice-hockey were dominant among the responses with basketball following in the third place. Once again one reason behind this answer can be the exposure, as disc golf isn't the most popular topic in mass media. Also, the more traditional sports were rated higher than disc golf in this category. The historical popularity of Finnish baseball and basketball might have affected the results. Still, the result is surprising considering that almost half of the respondents play disc golf themselves. This can also be the reason why disc golf was perceived to be the second most fun sport among the respondents.

	Easy to learn	Social	Physical	Professional
Disc golf	**56 %**	32 %	2 %	7 %
Ice-hockey	2 %	**66 %**	51 %	**73 %**
Football	**46 %**	**85 %**	**78 %**	**76 %**
Floorball	17 %	32 %	24 %	15 %
Finnish baseball	20 %	29 %	10 %	20 %
Basketball	20 %	**41 %**	39 %	**56 %**
Athletics	24 %	12 %	**59 %**	54 %
Skiing	**54 %**	5 %	**63 %**	46 %

Figure 22. Perceptions of disc golf comparing to other main sports in Finland, second part.

Figure 22 illustrates the results connected to the remaining four characteristics. Disc golf was perceived to be the most easy-to-learn sport among the eight. This could be due to the simple nature of the sport. Considering the social aspect, disc golf was positioned in the middle. It lost to the most popular team sports such as football and ice-hockey, but received a similar amount of share as floorball and Finnish baseball. This could be due to the strong social aspect inside the disc golf community that this survey has already revealed.

The sixth characteristic was in the survey "requires good physical condition". Only 2 % of the respondents selected disc golf, which aligns with the earlier result where almost every single respondent believed that disc golf is accessible to everyone regardless of age and physical condition. One reason for these results could be that disc golf doesn't for example require running.

Finally, only 7 % of the respondents associated disc golf with being "professional", which is by far the lowest among all the most popular sports in Finland. This indicates again, that disc golf is perceived to be more of a leisure sport, something that's played for fun with friends, with the communal aspect being more important than the competitive aspect.

The respondents were also asked about the characteristics, that they would want their "optimal" sport to have. The results can be seen in Figure 23 below.

Cheap	29 %
Popular	15 %
Fun	**93 %**
Easy to learn	34 %
Social	**71 %**
Physical	**44 %**
Professional	7 %

Figure 23. The most important characteristics in a sport.

The most important characteristics among the respondents were fun, social and physical aspect. The latter one is interesting as respondents thought that a sport must require physical condition over being cheap or easy to learn. For disc golf these results aren't optimal. The strengths of the sport are in the cheap and easy to learn categories, which

aren't highly valued by the respondents. The stigma of a "cheap" and "easy" sport may also be one reason why disc golf isn't perceived as professional by many.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this section, the research questions will be answered and the hypothesis reviewed and confirmed or rejected. Other relevant findings from the theoretical and the practical analysis will also be discussed.

To answer RQ1, several concrete actions were identified to enhance disc golf's credibility. First of all, the lack of disc golf media coverage was identified in the literature review. In the practical section, it appeared that the sports that were considered the most professional were the sports with the most mass media coverage. Thus, more visibility for a large audience could help to enhance credibility of the sport.

Secondly, in the literature review it was identified that social media and the internet are the most important channels through which disc golf is communicated to the fans. This is consistent with the 360° Fan Engagement Matrix; due to the nature of the sport, with a few yearly live events in one location, disc golf fans interact with athletes primarily through digital platforms. Improving this fan engagement would be important for disc golf's credibility as highly engaged fans tend to provide financial benefits and speak highly about the brand (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022; Yoshida et al., 2014).

RQ2 was about the public perception on disc golf in Finland. The survey revealed that disc golf is perceived as fun and easy to learn. Most importantly, it was perceived to be cheaper than other main sports in Finland. Low price can decrease the barrier to try disc golf, but it can also give it a stigma of a "cheap" and less professional sport. In the end, less than 10 % of the respondents perceived disc golf as professional, and in the eyes of the big public it seems to be more of a leisure sport. Disc golf was also perceived not to be physically demanding.

Moving on to RQ3, several factors were identified to influence an individual's perception on disc golf. The survey revealed that age and gender are both important indicators on a person's attitude towards the sport. Young people tend to play disc golf more actively, and thus have a more positive attitude towards it. Also, men play disc golf significantly more than women.

Yet, the most significant factor that influences the perception on especially the social and professional aspect of the sport was the familiarity and exposure on disc golf. The people who play disc golf considered the sport to be significantly more social, professional and easy to approach than non-disc golfers. This also answers RQ4.

Considering the RQ5, the most important touchpoints between professional disc golfers and their fans were identified in the literature review with the help of the 360° Fan Engagement Matrix by Wilson and Fowler (2016). Social media and the internet were identified as the number one channel not only for engagement, but also for information sharing (Annamalai et al., 2021). Other important touchpoints were meet-and-greets during tournaments and other disc golf events as well as behind-the-scenes content.

Revisiting the hypothesis, H1 was confirmed as the public opinion on disc golf indeed varies widely among Finnish people; some perceive it as professional and some as an alternative sport for "hippies". H2 was also confirmed as the disc golf knowledge and playing activity were significant indicators for having a more positive attitude towards the sport.

H3 was also partially confirmed. The important role of mass media in shaping the public opinion was acknowledged, but the mass media coverage of disc golf was found to be low comparing to other main sports in Finland. H4 on the other hand was indeed confirmed, with disc golfers viewing the sport as professional more often than non-disc golfers. Finally, H5 was confirmed as well as social media was identified to be the main channel for professional disc golfers and disc golf brands to engage with their fans.

Other interesting findings include the following. Firstly, the traits that disc golf is perceived to possess, such as being cheap and easy to learn, weren't highly valued by many when building an "ideal sport", which is worrying for disc golf. These attributes may be one reason why disc golf is being perceived more as a leisure sport rather than a professional sport.

The huge gender gap was also a significant finding. Women are clearly underrepresented in both participation and engagement. The gap between different ages was also notable. For a sport that wants to be easy to access for anyone, these differences aren't ideal.

Finally, an interesting finding was the huge importance of friends and family in introducing disc golf to new people. Once again, this could be due to the low media coverage of the sport, leaving the people around as the only channel where disc golf might be introduced incidentally.

To conclude, the most significant problem of disc golf's image is the lack of knowledge that people outside the "disc golf bubble" possess. The social and the professional aspect of the game are not visible to the grand public, which is why some may perceive

disc golf as an individual sport and some as a leisure game for hippies who drink and smoke during rounds.

It's important for disc golf to improve its mass media coverage to reach new audiences and to keep the game growing. This year is a great opportunity for disc golf in Finland as the Disc Golf World Championship is hosted by the country for the first time. It's a chance to communicate the professional and social aspects to the people as additional media coverage is guaranteed. Yet, one tournament isn't enough. To solidify its place among Finland's elite sports, disc golf has to turn its grassroots into a structured and recognized competitive scene.

7 IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the project offer several practical implications for disc golf stakeholders such as governing bodies, media companies and professional players.

Firstly, increasing disc golf's visibility in mass media is vital to improve the sport's public image. Most of the disc golf content is niche and focuses more on the "disc golf bubble". The presence should also be stronger in the most popular newspapers in Finland. To achieve a greater coverage, disc golf organizations, especially media companies, should actively look for opportunities to get their content into mass media outlets.

Next, disc golf should more actively target the groups that are unrepresented at the moment. It appeared that young men are the most engaged with the sport; this means that there are a lot of potential individuals among women and older age groups. Reaching these people would be vital to keep the sport growing. Targeted marketing campaigns and other public initiatives aimed at these groups could work out well.

Thirdly, professional disc golfers should exploit their platforms better to engage with fans and gain new audiences. Social media was found to be the primary channel through which fans interact with athletes, and thus, athletes' social media branding is important in improving the public perception of the sport. For better branding, disc golf organizations could offer athletes media training and support in content production.

Finally, there exists a great opportunity to reposition disc golf in the eyes of the public. Instead of being just a fun hobby, disc golf could be viewed as a credible, competitive sport. Athlete promotion and high-quality professional content can change the sport's image. If disc golf only relies on grassroot visibility, the growth of the sport can't continue forever. To break through the "disc golf bubble", disc golf has to gain respect and recognition as an elite sport.

8 LIMITATIONS

This project has several limitations that must be acknowledged when analyzing the results. Firstly, this research is a school project and it was conducted as a part of a master's degree program. Thus, there were limitations in terms of time and access, for example, some articles were behind a paywall. In both theoretical and practical parts, a lot of effort was made to ensure quality of the research, but in the end, it is still an academic project.

In the theoretical section, several sources were not peer-reviewed academic articles. There exists a limited amount of academic research on disc golf, especially on fan engagement. This is why some of the relevant data was drawn, for example, from disc golf websites and media outlets. These sources were valuable for the context and for the project, but they aren't as valid as peer-reviewed articles.

In the practical section, due to the limitations in time and resources, the survey received 123 respondents. The sample does provide excellent insights, but it is influenced by the specific demographics and backgrounds of the respondents. Thus, it is not big enough to represent the whole Finnish population.

Despite the limitations, the project provides valuable and useful insights on the issues. It can also work as a foundation for potential future research and discussion on disc golf's image, credibility and fan engagement.

9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Web pages:

Professional Disc Golf Association. (n.d.). PDGA. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://www.pdga.com/

Finnish Disc Golf Association. (n.d.). Frisbeegolfliitto. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/

European Disc Golf Federation. (n.d.). EDGF. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://discgolffederation.eu/

Frisbeegolfmedia. (n.d.) Frisbeegolfmedia. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://frisbeegolfmedia.fi/

Cambridge English Dictionary. (n.d.). Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/

Suomen frisbeehistoria (n.d.). Frisbeehistoria. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://www.frisbeehistoria.fi/

Disc Golf Network. (n.d.). Disc Golf Network. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from http://discgolfnetwork.com/

Disc Golf Pro Tour. (n.d.). DGPT. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://www.dgpt.com/

Disc Golf Growth Report (n.d.). UDisc. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://udisc.com/disc-golf-growth-report

World Flying Disc Federation. (n.d.). WFDF. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://wfdf.sport/

Finnish Disc Golf Association. (n.d.). Frisbeegolfliitto. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://frisbeegolfliitto.fi/

Disc Golf History. (n.d.). DGA Disc Golf. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://discgolf.com/disc-golf-education-development/disc-golf-history/

Frisbeegolfin historia. (2023, March. 28). Frisbeegolf Suomi. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://frisbeegolfsuomi.com/frisbeegolfin-historia/

Frisbeegolfnews. (n.d.). FGN. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://www.frisbeegolfnews.fi/

Compete High. (2024, August. 16). Compete High. Retrieved March 18, 2025.

https://competehigh.com/news-and-sports-coverage-shapes-public-opinion/

Innova Disc Golf. (2022, November. 23). Innova Discs. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://www.innovadiscs.com/

TechSci Research (n.d.). TechSci Research. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://www.techsciresearch.com/

PDGA Worlds. (n.d.). Disc Golf Worlds. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://discgolfworlds.com/

Youtube. (n.d.). Youtube. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://www.youtube.com/

Articles:

Annamalai, B., Yoshida, M., Varshney, S., Pathak, A. A., & Venugopal, P. (2021). Social Media Content Strategy for sport clubs to drive fan engagement. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *62*, 102648.

Balliauw, M., Verlinden, T., De Croocq, L., Fobe, A., & Van Den Spiegel, T. (2020). A strategic managerial approach to corporate sports hospitality: The case of Belgian football. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *35*(1), 61–75.

Burns, H. (2022, Aug. 18). Disc Golf Can Turn Your Walk Into a Workout. New York Times. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/well/move/disc-golf.html

Breuer, C. and Wicker, P., (2015). Arguments and evidence of bridging elite performance and mass participation sports from an economic perspective. In: R. Bailey and M. Talbot, eds. Elite sport and sport-for-all: bridging the two cultures? London: Routledge, 30–40.

Bryson, J.M., Crosby, B.C., and Stone, M.M., (2006.) The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: propositions from the literature. Public administration review, 66 (s1), 44–55.

Eisenhood, C. (2020, August 13). Disc Golf Network Success Is Changing the Media Landscape – And Fast. Ultiworld Disc Golf. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://discgolf.ultiworld.com/2020/08/13/disc-golf-network-success-is-changing-the-media-landscape-and-fast/

Guschwan, M. (2012). Fandom, brandom and the limits of participatory culture. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *12*(1), 19–40.

Hallmann, K., Rossi, L., Breuer, C., & Ilgner, M. (2020). Determinants of public perception of elite sport, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 12:3, 439-453.

Henderson, C. (n.d.). What is disc golf? What to know about emerging sport from courses to rules to Simon Lizotte. USA Sports Today. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/2023/04/14/disc-golf-scene-discs-rules-explainer/11659690002/

Huettermann, M., & Kunkel, T. (2022). The influence of non-transactional fan engagement on merchandise consumption. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *31*(1).

Karg, A., McDonald, H., & Schoenberg, G. (2015). The immediate impact of coach succession events on season ticket holder attitudes. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 24*(1).

Lee, M. A., Kunkel, T., Funk, D. C., Karg, A., & McDonald, H. (2019). Built to last: Relationship Quality Management for season ticket holders. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *20*(3), 364–384.

Linsner, A. et al. (2020) 'Developing an athlete brand identity scale using Rasch analysis', Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal, 10(4), pp. 431–449.

Mahmoudian, A. et al. (2020) 'Testing the impact of Athlete Brand Image Attributes on Fan Loyalty', Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 36(2), pp. 244–255.

Mahmoudian, A., Mohammadi, S. and Wang, W. (2024) 'Fan engagement management: Fan response to brand image attributes of professional athletes on Instagram', Journal of Global Sport Management, pp. 1–19.

Pajala, M. (2024, July. 18). "Tiedän, että sopimukseni puhuttavat"– Kristin Tattar tienaa satoja tuhansia euroja lajilla, jota monet eivät pidä minään. Helsingin Sanomat. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://www.hs.fi/urheilu/art-2000010570823.html

Payne, D. (2021, May. 12). No 9-irons needed: Disc golf participation soars during coronavirus pandemic. Cronkite News. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2021/05/12/no-9-irons-needed-disc-golf-participation-soars-during-coronavirus-pandemic/

Pedersen, Z.P. (2024) 'Communicating the athlete brand', Communication in Sport Management, pp. 86–94.

Stewart, B., et al., (2004). Australian sport: Better by design? London and New York: Routledge.

Vale, L., & Fernandes, T. (2017). Social Media and sports: Driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *26*(1), 37–55.

Wicker, P., et al. (2012). The value of Olympic success and the intangible effects of sport events – A contingent valuation approach in Germany. European sport management quarterly, 12 (4), 337–355.

Williamson, A. (2022, March. 29). Where Is Disc Golf Most Popular In The World? UDisc. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from

https://udisc.com/blog/post/where-is-disc-golf-most-popular-world?

Wilson, G & Fowler, D. (2016, August. 25). Fan engagement: from match day to every day. The Business of Sport. Retrieved March 8, 2025, from

https://geoffwnjwilson.com/2016/08/25/254/

Yadav, J., Yadav, R., Sahore, N., & Mendiratta, A. (2023). Digital social engagements and knowledge sharing among sports fans: Role of interaction, identification, and interface. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *195*, 122792.

Yoshida, M., Gordon, B., Nakazawa, M., & Biscaia, R. (2014). Conceptualization and measurement of fan engagement: Empirical evidence from a professional sport context. *Journal of Sport Management*, *28*(4), 399–417.

Yoshida, M., Gordon, B. S., Nakazawa, M., Shibuya, S., & Fujiwara, N. (2018). Bridging the gap between social media and Behavioral Brand Loyalty. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, *28*, 208–218.

Yoshida, M., Heere, B., & Gordon, B. (2015). Predicting behavioral loyalty through community: Why other fans are more important than our own intentions, our satisfaction, and the team itself. *Journal of Sport Management*, *29*(3), 318–333.

Zheng, L. and Xu, Y. (2024) 'Exploring the impact of athlete brand image on fans' behavioural outcomes: The role of emotional attachment and perceived price value', International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 25(4), pp. 839–861.