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# MEMBERSHIP MODEL AS PART OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON THE EXAMPLE OF FOOTBALL CLUB

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Preliminary communication

UDK: 339.138:796.332:796.073

JEL classification: M31, M37, M39, Z21

<https://doi.org/10.17818/DIEM/2026/1.9>

Paper received: March 18, 2025

Paper accepted: February 9, 2026

## Abstract

*Under increasing competitive pressure in the global market, companies are increasingly implementing relationship marketing strategies to establish long-term and profitable customer relationships. At the same time, the sports industry is experiencing rapid growth, while sports marketing is emerging as a distinct and specialized discipline within the broader field of marketing. Like other market-oriented organizations, sports associations and clubs apply membership models as a key relationship marketing tool to foster long-term, profitable relationships with customers and supporters. This study examines the factors influencing member satisfaction, differences in attitudes and behavior between members and non-members, and the factors affecting members' identification with the organization. The research was conducted among fans of the Croatian football club Hajduk, including both members and non-members. Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed online and in person. The results indicate that member satisfaction is influenced more strongly by members' involvement in the club's operations than by the first team's on-field performance. Furthermore, members are significantly larger consumers of club products than non-members and demonstrate a higher likelihood of long-term purchasing behavior. The findings also reveal a positive direct relationship between member identification and organizational satisfaction, organizational reputation, frequency of contact with the organization, and satisfaction with the benefits provided to members.*

**Keywords:** *relationship marketing in sports, member identification and satisfaction, football club Hajduk Split*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, relationship marketing emerged as a distinct and specialized marketing concept. The term relationship marketing was first introduced by Leonard Berry, who defined it as the process of attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships (Berry, 1983). According to Bühler and Nufer (2010), effective relationship marketing enables interactive and continuous communication with consumers. The development of relationship marketing can be viewed as a response to intensified market competition and organizations' growing need to retain customers



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and establish long-term, profitable relationships. One of the key strategies organizations use to retain customers within the framework of relationship marketing is the development of membership programs. Membership can be defined as “a sense of belonging or a shared sense of personal connection” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Many for-profit organizations have introduced membership programs to both retain existing customers and attract new ones. However, membership relationships differ from other marketing channels, as they involve managing relationships with a large number of users rather than focusing on one or a few key customers. Consequently, managers responsible for membership programs are primarily concerned with overall membership retention rates rather than individual transactions (Gruen, Summers & Acito, 2000). The concept of membership has also been widely applied in the non-profit sector. Nevertheless, significant differences exist between the application of membership in for-profit and non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations allow individuals to identify with the organization’s mission and values, and unlike corporate customers, members in non-profit organizations pay to be part of the organization rather than to receive a specific product or service (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995). From this perspective, the football club Hajduk represents a unique organizational case. On the one hand, Hajduk has operated as a sports joint-stock company since its organizational transformation in 2008 and adheres to market-oriented business principles. On the other hand, it represents an organization of strong social significance, characterized by a large and highly committed fan base with a strong level of emotional identification. The mass protests in 2012, when the club faced the threat of bankruptcy, clearly illustrate the importance of Hajduk to the local community of the city of Split and its wider region<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, Hajduk cannot be viewed exclusively through the lens of profit maximization or financial performance, nor can it be strictly classified as a traditional for-profit organization.

Nowadays, professional sports are increasingly turning into a pure business. Estimates show that the global sports market generated over 403 billion dollars in revenue in 2022, and it is estimated that total revenues will reach 680 billion dollars in 2028.<sup>2</sup> Football, as the most popular sport in the world, occupies the largest share of the global sports market. The value of the European football market in 2024 reached just under 40 billion euros, and the largest share in total revenues was held by the 'Big five' European leagues with revenues of over 20 billion euros<sup>3</sup>. In 2022/23, the total revenue of the UEFA Champions League amounted to over 3.2 billion euros, representing a slight increase on the previous season<sup>4</sup>. Looking at these figures, it is clear that professional football has turned from a sport into a very profitable economic activity. However, the difference between small and large clubs from the so-called "Big five" European leagues are getting bigger and bigger. The biggest part of the cake from big competitions and TV rights is taken by big clubs. For clubs from small countries, such as Hajduk, which exist on a small market in countries with a weak economy and low marketing potential, membership fees can represent an extremely valuable item in the total income and can be a guarantor of club stability.

In parallel with the development of sport as an economic sector, marketing in sport has also evolved. Sport marketing can be defined as the tailored application of marketing principles to all types of sport products, as well as to non-sport products that are related to sport in any form (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). According to Bühler and Nufer (2010), sport membership represents a specific form of consumer association within sport organizations. They emphasize that fans are less likely to become members if membership does not grant access to privileged information or other tangible or intangible rewards. Members are particularly valuable to sport organizations due to their higher

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/sport/hajduk/clanak/id/182341/banovina-u-obrucu-torcide-dok-kerum-ne-potpise-jamstvo-ispred-poglavarstva-se-skupilo-oko-2000-navijaca-bijelih> [05.02.2025.]

<sup>2</sup>The Statistics Portal: *Global sports market - total revenue from 2022 to 2028*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/370560/worldwide-sports-market-revenue/> [01.03.2025.]

<sup>3</sup>Deloitte Sports Business Group (2015): *Annual review of football finance*. Available at: <https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/services/financial-advisory/research/annual-review-of-football-finance-europe.html> [01.03.2025.]

<sup>4</sup> The Statistics Portal: *UEFA Champions League total revenue from 2005/06 season to 2014/15 season*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/279067/uefa-champions-league-revenue/> [01.03.2025.]

overall consumption compared to “ordinary” consumers and their greater tendency toward long-term consumption. Furthermore, research indicates that member satisfaction is influenced more strongly by members’ involvement in the club’s activities than by the team’s on-field performance, which often has little impact on satisfaction levels (McDonald & Shaw, 2005). Organizational identification plays a crucial role in understanding member behavior. When individuals identify with an organization, they experience a sense of connection and define part of their self-concept through their relationship with the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). A deeper understanding of member identification can therefore represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Members also use the organization’s image – namely, their perception of how others view the organization – as a reference point for how they believe others perceive them (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Consequently, the concepts of club image and club identification are of critical importance for the future management of professional sports clubs (Altın, Bezgin-Diş, Tüfekçi, & Altın, 2020). Research on social identification suggests that satisfaction with the organization, organizational reputation, frequency of contact, and the level of affiliation all influence the strength of member identification (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In assessing the success of membership relationships, Gruen et al. (2000) identify three key member behaviors: retention, participation, and co-production. Member retention is a central indicator of the effectiveness of a membership model and is defined as the percentage of members who renew their membership from one year to the next. One of the primary objectives of relationship marketing is to improve membership quality, with member participation serving as its first indicator. Participation refers to the extent to which members consume and engage with the organization’s services. Co-production, in turn, can be defined as the delivery of services through ongoing, long-term relationships between professional service providers and service users across various sectors.

The main research questions address the extent to which sports associations adequately manage membership, the degree to which the principles of sports marketing and relationship marketing are applied in football club, and the level of awareness within organizations regarding the value that members represent. As the sports association with the largest number of members in the country, HNK Hajduk serves – at least formally – as the first organization of this scale in Croatia to position its members as the foundation of its operations. This positioning provides the club’s management with an opportunity to establish a long-term and financially sustainable relationship with its members through effective membership management, supported by knowledge and application of sports relationship marketing principles. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine the behavior of club members, identify the factors that are important to them and contribute to their satisfaction, analyze the level of member identification with the club, and explore members’ purchasing behavior.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Sport as an Industry and Marketing in Sport**

The sports industry is a highly diversified sector encompassing a wide range of segments, including professional sport, health and fitness, recreational sport, and sports facility management (Hums, Barr & Gullion, 1999). A fundamental distinction between sports organizations and their products and services, compared to organizations in other industries, lies in the unique emotional connection and strong identification that fans develop with their clubs as users and consumers (Zimbalist, 2006). Football is the most popular sport globally and is played in virtually every country worldwide. Owing to its widespread popularity, football generates the highest revenues within the sports industry. While the popularity of football continues to grow in regions such as Asia, Australia, and North America, European football remains dominant in terms of attractiveness, historical significance, and commercial appeal (Reilly & Williams, 2003).

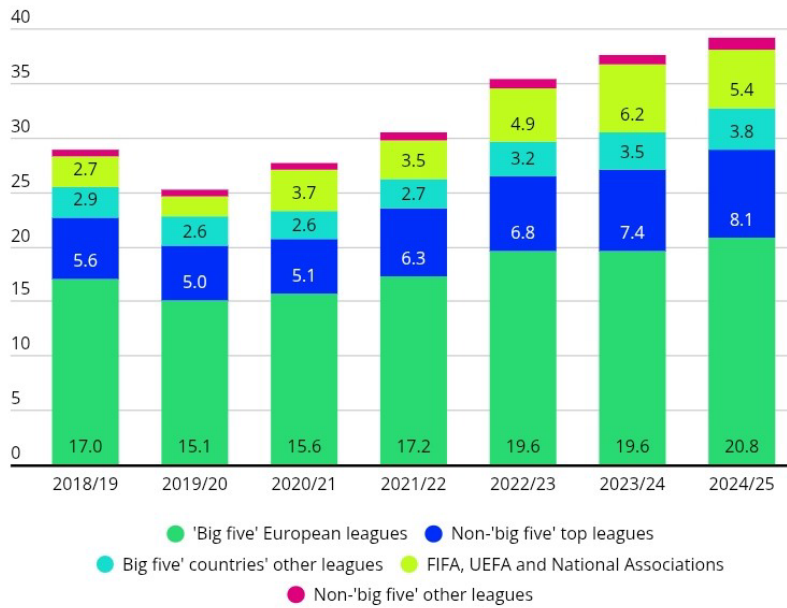


Figure 1 European football market size – 2018/19 to 2024/25 (€ billion)

Source: Deloitte.com; available on: <https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/services/financial-advisory/research/annual-review-of-football-finance-europe.html> [03.03.2025]

Table 1 The 10 most valuable football clubs in the world in 2024

RANK ^	TEAM	COUNTRY	CURRENT VALUE
1	Real Madrid	Spain	\$6.6 B
2	Manchester United	England	\$6.55 B
3	Barcelona	Spain	\$5.6 B
4	Liverpool	England	\$5.37 B
5	Manchester City	England	\$5.1 B
6	Bayern Munich	Germany	\$5 B
7	Paris Saint-Germain	France	\$4.4 B
8	Tottenham Hotspur	England	\$3.2 B
9	Chelsea	England	\$3.13 B
10	Arsenal	England	\$2.6 B

Source: Forbes.com; available on <https://www.forbes.com/lists/soccer-valuations/> [02.03.2025.]

The rapid growth of the sports industry has led to increased interest in sports marketing as a specialized field. Sports marketing encompasses all activities designed to satisfy the needs and desires of sports consumers through exchange processes (Desbordes & Richelieu, 2012). Within this field, two primary directions of development can be identified: the marketing of sports products and services directly to sports consumers, and the marketing of non-sport consumer and industrial products and services through sports-related promotional activities (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2007).

Shared values between sports organizations and their consumers play a significant role in the development of customer loyalty. As loyalty to a sports organization increases, consumers are more likely to engage in repeated ticket purchases, attend matches regularly, and increase their consumption of sports-related products (Bee & Kahle, 2006). A distinctive characteristic of sports marketing is its frequent promotion of products and services that are not directly related to sport, using sport as a communication and engagement platform (Smith & Stewart, 2015). Sports organizations operate in a highly complex environment in which they often compete and cooperate simultaneously to achieve long-term objectives. Consumer demand in sport can fluctuate significantly, while the sports product itself is subjective, experiential, inconsistent, and inherently unpredictable. Additionally, sports consumers tend to actively comment on sporting events and often perceive themselves as knowledgeable or expert participants in the sport experience (Masteralexis, Barr & Hums, 2014). To explain the progression of consumers from low to high levels of involvement in sport, sports marketing literature frequently employs the concept of the “escalator.” This model describes the movement of consumers from non-users, through occasional users, to highly involved individuals who strongly identify with the sports culture of an organization (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). A well-documented example of successful sports marketing is the use of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games to promote the NBA on a global scale. By sending the basketball “Dream Team” to the Olympics, the United States effectively positioned the NBA as a global brand. The success of this strategy is evidenced by the fact that, by 1997, NBA merchandise sales outside the United States had reached a total value of USD 500 million (Mullin et al., 2007). In recent years, scholarly literature has emphasized that modern sports marketing must encompass not only traditional marketing activities but also digital strategies and the design of experiences that strengthen fan identification and loyalty. For example, a study conducted in the professional Thai football league demonstrated that experiential marketing has a significant positive impact on spectator satisfaction and fan loyalty, including indirect effects mediated through increased satisfaction levels among spectators (Sakdanuwatwong, 2023). Recent research also points to the importance of sustainable social engagement – specifically Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) activities – as a factor that increases fan trust and loyalty, indicating that sports organizations increasingly need to incorporate socially responsible strategies into their marketing practices in order to enhance emotional connections with consumers (Kim & Jeong, 2025).

## **2.2. Member Satisfaction, Identification, and Relationship Marketing in Sport**

Under the pressures of globalization and increasing market competition, customer satisfaction has become one of the primary objectives of modern organizations. Customer satisfaction represents a measure of how well an organization’s overall offering meets customer expectations (Hill & Alexander, 2006). In the context of sport, customer satisfaction is a subjective assessment of sports product quality and represents an important input for the design and delivery of sports products and services. Continuous improvements in customer satisfaction in sport positively influence customer loyalty, willingness to pay a premium price, and the organization’s ability to attract and target new market segments (Blakey, 2011). Research conducted among nearly 8,000 members of football clubs in Australia found that member satisfaction is shaped by a combination of tangible service attributes and an intangible sense of involvement and emotional connection with the organization (McDonald & Shaw, 2005). Moreover, customer satisfaction is closely linked to customer identification. Wakefield (2007) defines fan identification as a psychological state in which individuals react to events affecting a team or player as if those events had happened to them personally. Similarly, Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) describe team identification as the degree to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a particular team or athlete. Previous studies have also shown that identification with a sports team may vary according to individual characteristics such as gender and age (Allison & Knoester, 2021). Fan identification generates several important benefits for sports organizations. Highly identified fans tend to exhibit lower price sensitivity and are less influenced by fluctuations in team performance and sporting results. Milne

and McDonald (1999) distinguish three levels of fan identification: low identification, medium identification, and high identification. High identification represents the strongest possible connection between a fan and a club and is characterized by significant emotional attachment and financial commitment. Additionally, strengthening organizational prestige and enabling opportunities for social interaction among members can further enhance identification with the organization (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Sports organizations increasingly emphasize long-term customer retention and, to achieve this, adopt various customer database management techniques to maintain and deepen relationships with fans. According to Schwartz, Hunter, and LaFleur (2013), the primary objectives of sports customer relationship marketing (SCRM) include identifying and targeting the most valuable consumers, managing marketing campaigns with clearly defined objectives, increasing sales, improving customer account and sales management through optimized information use, and enabling the development of individualized relationships with customers by providing higher levels of service to the most profitable segments. Membership represents one of the most effective tools for establishing and maintaining strong relationships with fans. While membership programs have traditionally focused on adult supporters, sports organizations have increasingly recognized the importance of developing long-term relationships with younger fans as well (Bühler & Nufer, 2010). Digital technologies and social media are increasingly transforming the ways in which fans connect with clubs. Research shows that digital interaction, identification, and the communication interface play a key role in driving fan engagement and knowledge sharing, thereby further strengthening their connection with the organization and the fan community (Yadav et al., 2023). Moreover, analyses of engagement through social media reveal that content specifically tailored to audience expectations can significantly increase fan interaction, which is important for building long-term loyalty and active participation (Deep Prakash & Majumdar, 2023). Moreover, concepts such as fan identification in the metaverse and virtual communities are becoming increasingly relevant, as digital platforms enable fans to access exclusive experiences that further strengthen their connection with the club and the broader fan community (Chohan & Schmidt-Devlin, 2024). Most European football clubs offer several categories of membership fees that vary according to price and number of benefits. Today, HNK Hajduk has 94,217 members and the number is growing every day<sup>5</sup>.

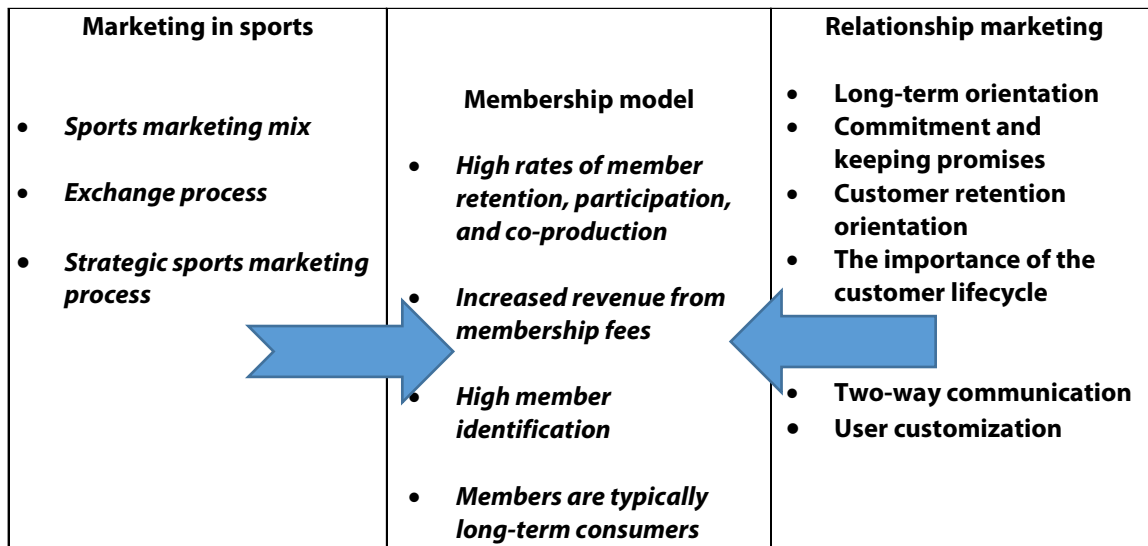
### 3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

#### 3.1. Research Model

The research model (Figure 1) illustrates the influence of the application of sports marketing tools and processes, as well as relationship marketing, on the membership model implemented by the organization. The middle column presents the positive outcomes of the effective application of the membership model, reflected in high levels of member retention, participation, and co-production (Gruen et al., 2000), strong member identification with the organization (Bhattacharya et al., 1995), and long-term member spending alongside revenue generated from membership fees (McDonald & Shaw, 2005). However, for these positive outcomes to materialize, it is essential that sports marketing and relationship marketing tools and processes are consistently and effectively applied. The left column of the model outlines the key sports marketing processes (Shank & Lyberger, 2014), while the right column presents relationship marketing processes (Little & Marandi, 2003). The application of both sets of processes represents a prerequisite for the successful implementation and functioning of the membership model.

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<sup>5</sup><https://hajduk.hr/klub/clanstvo> [15.03.2025.]



Picture 1 Conceptual model of the impact of tools and processes of marketing in sports and relationship marketing on the success of applying the membership model

Source: Created by the authors

### 3.2. Results of empirical research

In preparation for the empirical part of the research, an exploratory study was conducted using in-depth interviews with experts in the fields of relationship marketing and sports marketing. Additionally, an in-depth interview was carried out with a high-ranking representative of one of the Hajduk Friends Associations in Dalmatia. These qualitative insights served as a foundation for the development of the empirical research framework. The empirical part of the study involved both secondary data analysis and the collection of primary data using the survey method. The survey was conducted on a sample of 207 respondents. When designing the questionnaire, special attention was paid to the specificity of the research topic and the characteristics of the target population. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by an expert in relationship marketing and sports marketing. Furthermore, a pre-test was conducted with approximately 20 respondents to assess the validity and clarity of the questionnaire, after which minor revisions were made based on respondents' feedback. In addition to items developed by the authors, the questionnaire incorporated established measurement scales from previous research. Member identification with the organization was measured using scales developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Bhattacharya et al. (1995), the latter employing a six-item scale originally used to assess identification among museum members. Organizational reputation over the past five years was measured using items adapted from Pavičić et al. (2007) and Alfirević et al. (2011). A total of 207 respondents participated in the study, selected using purposive (convenience) sampling. Of these, 146 respondents were male and 61 were female. The largest proportion of respondents (138) belonged to the 18–24 age group, followed by respondents aged 25–30 (14.5%) and 31–35 (8.2%). Among all respondents, 202 identified themselves as fans of HNK Hajduk and were therefore included in further data analysis. Within this subsample, 126 respondents reported being members of HNK Hajduk. Regarding non-members, the most frequently cited reason for not joining the club was the perceived lack of sufficient benefits associated with membership, followed by disagreement with the way the club operates. Of the 202 Hajduk fans included in the analysis, 78 respondents were season ticket holders, while 124 were not. In terms of employment status, the majority of respondents were students who did not work alongside their studies (44.4%), followed by employed respondents (27.1%).

The main research objectives and the corresponding findings are summarized below.

*Research Objective 1:* To examine whether involvement in the activities and operations of the club has a greater impact on the satisfaction of Hajduk members than the performance of the first team (e.g., match results and league standing). To address this objective, members were asked to assign a percentage to two factors – Factor 1 (involvement in the club’s activities) and Factor 2 (team performance, including match results and league standing) – indicating the relative influence of each factor on their satisfaction. The total percentage assigned across both factors was required to sum to 100%. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was first applied to assess the normality of the data distribution, revealing that neither Factor 1 nor Factor 2 followed a normal distribution. Consequently, the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to evaluate the hypothesis.

Table 2 Kolmogorov-Smirnovljevi test 1

	Involvement in the work of a football club	The result of the first team and the position in the ranking
N	126	126
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	1,664	1,664
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,008	0,008

Source: Author's research

The Wilcoxon test indicated that involvement in the activities and operations of the club (Factor 1) has a significantly greater impact on the satisfaction of Hajduk members than the performance of the first team (Factor 2). This difference is statistically significant at the 1% level ( $p = 0.003$ ).

Table 3 Wilcoxonov test

	Rezultat prve ekipe i pozicija na ljestvici - Uključenost u rad kluba
Z	-2,933(a)
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,003

Source: Author's research

Based on the results obtained, it is concluded that involvement in the activities and operations of the club has a greater impact on the satisfaction of Hajduk members than the performance of the first team (e.g., match results and league standing).

*Research Objective 2:* To examine whether Hajduk members tend to be long-term consumers and have higher overall spending than non-member fans and supporters of the club. The initial aim was to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between members and non-members regarding their willingness to provide financial support to the club, even if they do not support the club’s management. To test this, a chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test of independence was conducted. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between members and non-members in their attitudes toward financial support for the club, regardless of support for club management, with the empirical significance level effectively equal to zero ( $p \approx 0$ ).

Table 4  $\chi^2$  test of independence

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	88,208(a)	2	0,000
Likelihood Ratio	93,048	2	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	72,084	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	207		

Source: Author's research

Further analysis using the Mann-Whitney U test revealed that club members spend significantly more on tickets and subscriptions than non-members ( $p \approx 0$ ). Similarly, members were found to spend significantly more annually on official club merchandise than non-members ( $p \approx 0$ ). Finally, the Mann-Whitney U test also indicated that members have a statistically significantly higher likelihood of making long-term purchases of tickets, subscriptions, and other official HNK Hajduk products compared to non-members ( $p \approx 0$ ). These results collectively highlights the importance of membership as a tool for fostering long-term loyalty and sustained revenue, demonstrating that members exhibit stronger attachment and investment in the club compared to non-member supporters.

Table 5 Mann-Whitney test 3

	What is the possibility that you will personally buy tickets and subscriptions and official club products of HNK Hajduk in the long term?
Mann-Whitney U	676,000
Wilcoxon W	3997,000
Z	-11,344
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,000

Source: Author's research

*Research Objective 3:* To examine whether the identification of Hajduk members is influenced by satisfaction with the organization, the reputation of the organization, frequency of contacts, and satisfaction with the benefits provided to members. Members' identification with the club was measured using the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1989), adapted to the context of a football club. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.735, indicating satisfactory reliability. Consequently, the arithmetic mean of the six items was used for further statistical analysis. To assess the relationship between members' identification and their satisfaction with the organization, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated. The results indicated a statistically significant, positive, albeit weak, correlation between member identification and satisfaction with the functioning of the club at the 1% significance level ( $p = 0.25$ ;  $p = 0.005$ ). This suggests that higher satisfaction with the club is associated with stronger identification among members, supporting the role of organizational satisfaction as a factor in fostering member loyalty and engagement.

Table 6 Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

	Identifikacija	Identifikacija	I am generally satisfied with the functioning of the club.
Spearman's rho	Identifikacija	Correlation Coefficient	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,250(**)
		N	125
Općenito sam zadovoljan funkcioniranjem kluba.	Općenito sam zadovoljan funkcioniranjem kluba.	Correlation Coefficient	,250(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1,000
		N	,005
		N	124

Source: Author's research

To assess the relationship between member identification and the organization's reputation over the past five years, a 12-item scale was used. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.898, indicating very good reliability. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the variables "Identification" and "Satisfaction with the organization's reputation" followed a normal distribution, allowing the use of the Pearson correlation coefficient. The Pearson correlation revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship at

the 5% significance level ( $r = 0.178$ ;  $p = 0.048$ ), indicating that members who perceive a better organizational reputation tend to identify more strongly with the club).

Furthermore, the frequency of the club's contacts with its members was measured using a scale consisting of 4 statements. The Chronbach alpha coefficient for the above scale was 0.629, which represents an acceptable level of consistency in members' opinions about the frequency of contacts with the club. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test on one sample determined that the variables "Identification" and "Frequency of contacts" follow a normal distribution, which means that the relationship between the two variables can be tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The Pearson correlation coefficient showed that at a significance level of 1%, there is a statistically significant weak, positive relationship between members' identification with the organization and the frequency of members' contacts with the organization ( $p=0.002$ ;  $r=0.281$ ).

Finally, satisfaction with the benefits provided to members was measured using a scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.795, indicating solid reliability. Spearman's rank correlation showed a weak, positive, statistically significant relationship at the 5% level between identification and satisfaction with benefits ( $\rho = 0.199$ ;  $p = 0.027$ ). Based on these results, it is concluded that the identification with the club is positively associated with satisfaction with the organization, the organization's reputation, frequency of contacts, and satisfaction with the benefits provided.

Furthermore, a statistical analysis determined that members believe that the overall reputation of the organization has been stable over the past 5 years, given that they rated the organization's reputation with an average of 3.05, and a score of 3 in the survey questionnaire corresponded to the answer "It was stable". The overall reputation of the organization was broken down into: reputation among fans of other clubs, reputation among other clubs, reputation in the media, and reputation with the wider community. Each of the 4 items was measured using 3 of the same, equally important factors: the management model under which the club operates, the results of the first team, and the ability of the club's management. The results showed that, with slight deviations, members believe that the reputation has been stable over the past 5 years according to all 4 items.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics indicators for each of the 4 organizational reputation items

		P1_ average.	P2_ average.	P3_ average.	P4_ average.
N	Valid	124	122	120	121
	Missing	2	4	6	5
Mean		3,3011	2,9672	2,6569	3,2837
Median		3,3333	3,0000	2,6667	3,3333
Std. Deviation		,79112	,95962	1,03268	,72987
Minimum		1,00	1,00	1,00	1,33
Maximum		5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00

Source: Author's research

The study also examined whether members' purchasing behavior differed depending on whether they were born or residing in Split and its surroundings versus outside the region or abroad. The Mann-Whitney test revealed no statistically significant differences in ticket/subscription purchases, official club product spending, or long-term purchase likelihood between these groups ( $p = 0.057$ ;  $p = 0.786$ ;  $p = 0.102$ ), suggesting that geographic location does not significantly affect member consumption patterns.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Like other organizations in competitive markets, sports associations around the world use the membership model to deepen the connection with fans/customers, secure direct income through membership fees, and stimulate additional spending on club products and services. This model has

become increasingly important as clubs strive for financial self-sustainability amid reduced public subsidies and growing competition for fan engagement. This study set out to explore key elements of relationship marketing as applied within the sports industry, using HNK Hajduk Split as an empirical case. The club's membership base has grown significantly in recent years, with Hajduk surpassing 100,000 members for multiple consecutive years – placing the club among the largest membership-based football clubs globally. This unique positioning – operating as a sports joint-stock company with deep community ties and fan ownership traditions – gives Hajduk both commercial and social significance beyond what is typical for a for-profit organization. The research examined how member involvement, consumer behaviour, and organizational factors influence satisfaction, identification, and loyalty among club supporters. The findings provide significant insights into both academic theory and practical sports marketing management. First, the results clearly demonstrate that involvement in club activities has a stronger impact on member satisfaction than the performance of the first team. Members consistently attributed a greater share of their satisfaction to participatory engagement rather than competitive outcomes. This suggests that sports organizations seeking to build long-term loyalty must prioritize meaningful opportunities for supporter involvement beyond match results. Second, analysis of consumer behaviour revealed that members exhibit higher levels of financial engagement and loyalty than non-members. Members are more likely to provide financial support – even when critical of the club's management – spend more on tickets, subscriptions, and official merchandise, and show a higher likelihood of long-term purchase behaviour. These findings echo central tenets of relationship marketing, which emphasize that satisfied and engaged members become more valuable and loyal consumers over time. Third, factors such as satisfaction with the organization, perceived reputation, frequency of contacts, and satisfaction with member benefits were all found to be positively correlated with members' identification with the club. While the strength of these correlations was modest, they collectively support the idea that identification is a multi-dimensional construct shaped by both relational and perceptual elements. This reinforces the role of tailored relationship marketing strategies in enhancing psychological attachment and, ultimately, long-term loyalty. From a practical perspective, these findings highlight several actionable insights for sports organizations: prioritizing engagement initiatives that deepen member involvement can yield greater satisfaction than reliance on team performance alone; membership programs should be designed to foster long-term financial commitment, as members demonstrate stronger spending behaviour and loyalty; communication strategies and benefits structures that strengthen organizational reputation and enhance perceived value can further enhance member identification and retention. HNK Hajduk Split exemplifies the potential for a membership model to thrive even within smaller national markets. This result shows that Hajduk members do not differ in purchasing behaviour with respect to geographical affiliation, and the club could better utilize the consumer potential of members living outside Split and its surroundings. From a descriptive analysis, many non-members stated that their main reason for not joining is a perception that they do not receive sufficient value from membership. This insight points to concrete opportunities for enhancing membership appeal. For example: organize social engagement events for non-members to increase awareness of the club's mission, activities, and membership benefits; enhance digital and social media communication to highlight exclusive member benefits, storytelling, and behind-the-scenes content; introduce new member benefits, such as exclusive training video content, special interviews with players or coaching staff, or members-only features within the club's official online platform; utilize mobile communication channels, such as SMS alerts for match reminders, birthday greetings, or holiday messages, to strengthen ongoing personal engagement. These strategies align with the overarching goals of relationship marketing by fostering continuous, personalized interactions that build emotional connection and loyalty over time. Overall, this research underscores the importance of relational and identity-based approaches in sports marketing. It contributes to the academic literature by empirically validating key relationships among involvement, satisfaction, identification, and consumer loyalty in a real-world setting.

For future research, longitudinal designs could further illuminate causal pathways among these constructs, and comparative studies across different sports and cultural contexts would enhance the generalizability of findings; comparative club studies (collect and analyse membership and consumer behaviour data from other football clubs in Croatia and abroad to identify general principles or club-specific differences in the application of the membership model); gender-focused insights, given the rising presence of women at matches and in fan communities.

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