The network of value captures in professional football management: Analysing the development of the Japanese professional football league

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Aim of paper and research questions

The 1993 set up of the J-League, Japan's professional football league, fits into the global spread of football during the last two decades. It is "an exceptional case of creating a whole new market out of the blue" (Hirose, 2004: 38). Light and Yasaki (2003: 40) highlight the J-League as an outstanding success, "attracting crowds that could not previously have been dreamt of for soccer in Japan." By taking the implementation as well as the immediate and sustainable success of the J-League during their first decade as a neglected research example, we apply a "network of value captures" (Dolles & Söderman, 2008) to analyse the J-League. Our understanding of value captures is based on Barney's (1991) conceptualization of sustained competitive advantage. A football club's resources can only be a source of competitive advantage when they are valuable. Resources are considered to be value captures when they enable a football club to conceive of or implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness. A football club enjoys a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value-creating strategy combining bundles of valuable club resources. Those strategies require a club-specific particular mix between the different products a club might offer and the customer groups. Knowing how those value captures are interlinked in Japan is of significant practical relevance and offers insights for international comparative research.

Literature review

The incorporation of the J-League changed the entire sporting culture in Japan. Foreign ideas about the various ways football should be governed, structured, played and consumed were gradually institutionalised in Japanese sports during this process and the first decade of playing seasons. McDonald et al. (2001: 43) state that the J-League was adapted to Japan "based on unique Japanese cultural and social patterns." The development of professional football in Japan thereby provides a area for research, which has not been very well covered. Some of the existing literature on the J-League has been provided by journalists (e.g. Moffett, 2002; Ōsumi, 1998). There are a few case surveys available (Harada & Ogasawara, 2008; Schütte & Ciarlante, 1998; Probert & Schütte, 1997) whereas most of the academic research in the field is taking a sociological approach (e.g. Close & Askew, 2004; Horne 2002; 2000; 1996; Horne & Bleakley, 2002; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2002; Manzenreiter, 2004; 2002; Manzenreiter & Horne 2007; 2004).

The existing work on the J-League's business system and impact can be categorised as descriptive and explorative. From the literature review, three main limitations were identified: First, the findings of those research streams have neither been systematically consolidated into a framework nor validated by means of a broader empirical survey. Second, given its

economic impact the business perspective in the development of football in Japan still needs to be addressed in further research, thus challenging existing "westernised" assumptions. Third, Japanese football is increasingly becoming part of the global network of interdependency chains in the football business and therefore adds further dimensions to the research on football as a global business.

Research design and data analysis

The chosen methodology reflects the need to create a framework for comparative analysis. We searched the websites of top European football clubs and football governing institutions in regards to management issues and stories of success or failure of professional football clubs. Next we applied a qualitative content analysis in order to identify possible value captures in professional football management based on the method suggested by Mayring (2000a; 2000b; 1994). An academic literature review followed in order to provide scientifically-based evidence available to support the preliminary composition of value captures. In cases where strong scientifically-based research did not exist, we decided to produce syntheses of research summarising the evidence taken from practice. To evaluate our observations and findings we surveyed the JFA website and conducted about twenty narrative interviews with the J-League management, the JFA, and football clubs in Japan, Germany and Sweden.

Results

The "network of value captures" structures the differences found by applying the dimensions: (1) product and its features, (2) various customer groups, and (3) vision of the future of the club central to different levels of strategy aggregation.

Discussion and conclusion

Among the many differences in value captures combinations discovered in our research we like to mention one example in this abstract: Football is marketed in Japan as a "new, improved product, now on sale", following a Japanese marketing principle (Horne & Bleakley, 2002; Watts, 1998). Compared to European practices it differs as regards associated product marketing and merchandising which is centralised in the J-League. This strategy reflects the fundamental principle of the founders of the J-League, that all teams should have an "equal chance of exposure" and an "equal share of the merchandising revenue". In the same direction the J-League practices a method of distributing media revenues from broadcasting rights equally to all J-League teams irrespective of performance, challenging prevailing European practices in professional football so far. This conclusion should have managerial implications for western football league organisers.

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