
Co-opetition as an organising concept in football – a study of Swedish Football

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Synopsis:

The paper deals with co-opetition as an organising concept in Swedish Football. The aim is to study how the tension between collaboration and competition can be used to organise league football strategically.

Abstract:

AIM OF PAPER - RESEARCH QUESTION

At a first glance, one could assume that any observer would claim that the main driver of association football is competition. This is manifested in explicit rivalry between clubs and the fans of these clubs. However, the football industry has during the last decades transformed from being dominated by amateur sports ideals to being a commercial industry. An industry where contemporary clubs are organised more professionally and fans and sponsors are seen as customers of a commercial operation. It could therefore be assumed that a discrete organisation perspective would be the best approach to study the football industry. A setting where the pursuit for financial results would be as competitive as the pursuit for results in sports. There are, however, several indications that what is good for the industry as a whole is also good for the individual club. This implies that an embedded organisation perspective could be applied on the football industry where collaborative mechanisms are more important than competitive. To apply the one perspective before the other would limit the view of the football industry; instead will this tension between the perspectives be viewed as a paradox to be resolved. The balance between collaboration and competition has been labelled co-opetition, as proposed by Nalebuff & Brandenburger (1997). This concept will be central to this paper, as co-opetition is the representation of an ambition to achieve non zero-sum rather than zero-sum games. The focus of this paper will be on the Swedish top tier league – Allsvenskan. The question to be answered in this paper is: In what way can co-opetition be used as an organising concept in the development of Swedish football?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Nalebuff & Brandenburger (1997) introduced the concept of cooptation using game theory to show that pure competitive zero-sum games do not necessarily maximise the result for 'players in the game'. The introduction of collaborative components, transforming the competitors to complementors, does in fact increase the individual results and hence creates a win-win game. Bengtsson & Kock (1999) suggest four strategic modes for relationships: coexistence, cooperation, competition and cooptation, where cooptation is defined as the simultaneous cooperation in some areas, while competing in other areas. In traditional industries, a number of studies have shown that a proper balance between competition and collaboration ranges from a higher degree of collaboration early in the value chain and competition later in the value chain (e.g. Walley, 2007) This traditional view on cooptation does not apply directly to football clubs, given the fact that the creation of the common product – football – is related to the organised sports activity, which foundation is competition. If the clubs in a league would cooperate in developing the teams and the talent pool – product development – to the extent that teams would compete on a seemingly even basis, the only advantage a team would have, would be the home pitch advantage. This in turn would lower the interest of spectators and lead to lower attendance at matches (Forrest & Simmons, 2002). Assuming that cooperation is not primarily to be sought after when reaching success in sports, the room for cooptation is instead assumed to open later in the value chain in the more commercial aspects of the football industry. A study of French football clubs (Le Roy, Marques & Robert, 2007) examined the cooptative strategies of the clubs in relation to cooperation and competition. The study shows benefits in cooptation, not in terms of success in sports, but in relation to other objectives of the club, including financial objectives.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is based on a mixed methods approach with a combination of qualitative expert interviews, with representatives from clubs; sponsors; and the league association, and information from publically available secondary data sources. The empirical findings are supplemented with a conceptual theoretical discussion on cooptation, identifying areas where cooptation can be used as an organising concept for the development of Swedish football.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

There is certainly room for improvement by means of cooperation when it comes to the marketing of football as a commercial product. The win-win game builds on the logic that the collaborative strengthening of football as a commercial product will create higher revenues for the individual clubs, in turn providing a stronger financial platform for success in sports, which intensifies competition, which then increases the attractiveness of the game. Data collection is still in progress, full results and implications will be accounted for in full paper submission and potential conference presentation.

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