

The Janus-faced relationship value of professional sports clubs

A study of Molde Football Club, Norway

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Abstract

Professional sport clubs can be analyzed according to the extent their offers affect the community and the individual. The “use value” takes into account the individual benefits of watching a sporting competition, whereas the “non-use” reflects the externalities of a sports club and its sports events towards people not particular interested in the sport in question. Both values are commonly investigated within the local context, however in an explorative study of the Norwegian football club Molde FK, a sample of 29 young people that had taken up residence in a different part of the country from where they grew up was analyzed in order to find out what “relationship” value a sports club from their home town still has in their lives. Despite the fact that the sample turned out to contain very few passionate football fans, it also revealed that Molde FK still is present in the lives of non-football fans. We conclude that the football club functions as a frequent reminder of the hometown for people that have migrated, and thus, the non-use value might extend beyond the individual’s (lack of) interest for football. Further, the football club and its activities serve at the same time as a foundation for conversations that might support migrators to extend and to build up social capital at their new location.

Key words: sports clubs, football, impact studies, use value, non-use value, existence value, option value, bequest value, sport events, fans

Introduction

The reasons why football teams win or lose are perhaps the central questions in football management research, but sport clubs are also cultural community institutions that might have a wider impact beyond that of the outcome of the matches themselves. In recent years, the world of football has increasingly been referred to as an industry in its own right (Söderman, Dolles & Dum, 2010). Its characteristics are likened to those of the entertainment industries, as people worldwide may choose whether to go to the cinema, an amusement park, or to the stadium to watch a match (Dolles & Söderman, 2013). The distribution of matches via TV and online media has propelled the growth of an industry that now may represent a significantly larger percentage of a nation's gross domestic product (Jones, 2014). This can be explained by the fact that a club and the repeating football events during a season also drive a considerable number of other sectors such as media, facility management, and various other services like catering or transportation. Thus the participation of a football club in the national top-tier league and international competitions might generate economic benefits for the host city and its region.

Besides “hard benefits”, meaning the monetary flow into the home region of a football club due to the club's business activities and spectator spending (cf. Preuss, Könecke & Schütte, 2010, 2012), it is also claimed that “soft benefits” accumulate (cf. Elliott, 2011; Hamm, 1999; Pagel & Peters, 2010). Obviously, increased popularity and attraction for the home region of a successful club are to be expected as soft benefits, but we know little about how this translates into people's lives, i.e. influencing their identity, images and actions in terms of living, visiting or even moving to a particular city. In this article, we explore the experiences of and impacts on a sample of young people that have left a hometown hosting a football club in the top national division. How, and to what extent, do the football club and the matches (events) still affect the lives of these people in terms of soft effects? Does the football club create any kind of value for them?

The case study: Molde Football Club and its home region

Molde is a small city with 27,000 people in the western part of Norway. It was the second smallest city hosting a team in the Norwegian top division in football during the 2013 and 2014 seasons and is among the smallest cities hosting a team qualified for European competitions. The Aker stadium in Molde has been ranked by journalists among the top three in Europe because of its location at the Romsdalsfjord and the stunning nature as background scenery (Niva, 2013). The panoramic view of the 222 mountain summits hovering over the fjord, its archipelago and the stadium by the city center is perhaps the most lasting impression for visitors to Molde. The surrounding scenery inspires people in the region and visitors to engage in outdoor sports and mountain hiking, but at the same time, Molde has increasingly established itself as a football city.

Since qualifying for the top league in Norwegian football in 1974, MFK has played all but five seasons in that league (Tippeligaen). During the era in Norwegian football when Rosenborg won the title 13 times in a row, MFK was runner-up five times. This gave the club an image as the permanent runner-up. However, at the end of the 2014 season, MFK could look back at four golden years in the club's history, starting in November 2010 when MFK announced the Manchester United legend, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, as their new team manager (or head coach). The club's 100-year anniversary in 2011 was celebrated with winning the league for the first time. The team succeeded in winning the following season and qualified for the group stage in the Europa League after losing to FC Basel in the last qualifier for Champions League. The expectations for 2013 were high, but after a poor start of the season, the team managed to turn a negative trend and finished sixth place in the league. A mediocre season was however saved when MFK beat their biggest rival, Rosenborg in the Norwegian cup final in November 2013 (note that unlike many European leagues, the football season in Norway lasts from the end of March to November, when the cup final ends the season). Solskjær left MFK at the end of 2013 to manage Welsh Cardiff City FC. Tor Ole Skullerud, previously the head coach of Norway's U21 national team, replaced him. Expectations were uncertain, but at the end of the 2014 season the club won "the Double" for the first time. MFK finished the league with a record-breaking 71 points and won the Norwegian cup again.

Theoretical foundations

Despite increasing globalization and the migration of international players (and coaches) across the globe, the linkages between a popular sports club and its community might intensify (Jakobsen, Gammelsæter & Fløysand, 2009). Traditionally in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia, clubs were formed by the local community and often bore its name, symbolizing the strong association between club development and social principles such as fellowship, engagement, equality and solidarity. Because sports clubs were primarily organized within their local communities, they depended on, and still do, parents and other volunteers running activities such as coaching, refereeing, serving as board members, baking cakes for lotteries, providing transport to practice sessions and matches, and team jersey laundering. Consequently, club development has an important role in civil society through fostering democratic participation and organizational skill building (Andersson & Carlson, 2009; Gammelsæter & Jakobsen, 2008; Hasselgård & Straume, 2014).

Sport clubs in many countries often stand out as different from most other organizations in their representation of the place in which they are located (cf. Morrow, 2003). Increasingly, they are the only popular institutions that bear the name of a neighborhood, the city or even the region, and in that sense, represent the place (cf. Crolley & Hand, 2002; Ophüls-Kashima, 2003; Dolles & Söderman, 2011). Moreover, they regularly play teams from other places and tend to evoke feelings of rivalry and reinforce place identification among citizens more than other civic organizations do. Popular sports clubs, to a large part mediated by the press, thus contribute to strengthen, perpetuate and construct local identities (Crolley & Hand, 2002). It is obvious that the popularity of sports clubs is closely connected to the sport event and to people's access to the spectacle and the contest between teams. It follows that value of sport events can be analyzed from the point of consumption by the club, its fans and other stakeholders ahead, during and after the event or a whole season (see for example the studies by Preuss, Könecke & Schütte, 2010, 2012; Solenes et al., 2014). Nevertheless, value might also be constructed in a broader sense to understand what an institution in sports might provide to the hosting town or region in the form of "soft benefits" or social capital.

While being a somewhat opaque and perhaps an overused concept, social capital is generally defined as the ability to secure benefits through

membership networks, trust-based relationships and other social structures (Portes, 1998). It is usually seen as productive in the sense that there are certain aspects of social structure that enable social actions, provide financial and/or knowledge resources and achievements that would not be possible in its absence (Coleman, 1988; Mykletun, 2009). One source of social capital is what Portes (1998) terms “bounded solidarity”, the powerful motivational force that emerges from identification with one’s own group or community. Sports clubs can achieve network-mediated benefits when being embedded in such social structures and networks, and conversely, communities may benefit from hosting sports clubs and events that increase the identification with place. Sport events are frequently seen to “...provide places with both tangible and intangible benefits...” (Rein and Shields, 2007, p. 74) and the club, through community networks has access to the resources of organizations, groups and individuals that identify with the place and thus facilitate place gravitation. As pointed out by Cavaye (2004), social capital or networks can thus lead to improved municipal infrastructure, employment and an increased range of services.

In their review of the literature of values resulting from events, Andersson, Armbrrecht and Lundberg (2012) address Garrod and Willis (2001) by differentiating between “direct use value” and “indirect use value”. Unique experiences that arise during a football match at the stadium generate direct use value as they represent values and excitement in real time, like the roar of the crowd, shared emotions, palpable energy sent from fans to their favorite team on the pitch, etc. Indirect use value refers to experiences ahead of the game, during breaks and after the match, and on or off the venue. This includes traveling to and from the arena, experiences on the stands and hallways, talks or digital chatting, etc. Notably, because of modern technology and media, direct and indirect value can be detached from the physical place of the team. Sporting events can be consumed at a distance and without spending money directly towards the event organizer, at the stadium or in the city. If a sports event is broadcast live, live streamed or live on air, we still consider this consumption – whether it happens at home, on a smart phone somewhere else or with colleagues or friends in a sports pub – as direct use value. This is based upon consumption in real time while the uncertainty of outcome still prevails. Obviously, experiences will be different depending on where and with whom the viewing takes place. Listening, viewing or reading match summaries or match news however, has to be catego-

alized as indirect use value of the event, given the fact that the information is already summarized and packaged.

Besides relating value to direct or indirect use, Andersson et al. (2012) point out that values might also arise from non-use of events. In our case the idea of impact from non-use is of particular interest because our study is based on a “self-selected” sample of people living away from the venue of the events, which, as it turns out, do not follow football very closely (with a few exceptions). Andersson et al. (2012) point out that people might attach positive non-use values to events as a cultural asset they identify with (existence value), and to the future possibilities that exist to visit an event (option value). Furthermore, values might be attached to stewardship, i.e. the value that an event might represent for future generations (bequest value). We suggest that these non-use types of value are related to the concept of social capital, or “bounded solidarity” (Portes, 1998). They represent resources that emerge from identification with the community that supports the club and its sporting event possibly because, as relational social theory suggests, “...all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making” (Somers, 1994, p. 606). For many people this means inscribing themselves into a grand narrative comprising several attractions or desirable attributes of a place, oftentimes the place of birth or permanent residence. These values are extending beyond the individual. In our case, it is of interest to see how far these use and non-use values reach.

Methodology

The case study approach chosen for the study allows for inquiries towards values associated with a particular football club, but also helped us to construct a more holistic understanding of the value MFK provides to its hometown. The empirical data analyzed in this article was gathered through semi-structured interviews with persons that had migrated from the Molde region. We assumed that this group of individuals gains much more non-use values than (direct) use value from the club, as their chances to visit the football matches physically are limited. Thus, we intended to evaluate the interviewees’ sense of belonging to the region in general and to MFK in particular. The interviewees were not told that the study

was about MFK until late in the interview. At this point, they were given the chance to withdraw, but none found the new information reason to abstain from the interview.

The interviews were conducted by one of the authors between March and May 2013. In total, 29 people were interviewed, of which 15 were women and 14 were men. 17 of the interviewees grew up in Molde, while 12 were from other municipalities in the region. At the time of the interviews, all of the informants lived outside the region, and 26 of the 29 lived in cities larger than Molde. Also of note, 11 of the interviewees were full-time students, and the remaining 18 were in industry positions. The youngest interviewee was 21 and the oldest was 39. Most of the interviewees were in their twenties, and the mean age was 27.

Interviewees were recruited in two steps. During Christmas 2012, two of the authors approached participants in the City Hall at the annual “Christmas job fair” where local businesses promote themselves to possible returnees in an effort to compensate for the brain drain from the region. During this event, 25 people indicated interest to participate in our study, and of those, 17 responded positively when they were contacted at a later stage. As the interviewees were selected at a particular event aiming at bringing people home to regional business, we considered that the sample might be biased towards a positive attitude to the home region. Consequently, in an effort to expand the sample we asked our informants to introduce us to friends that also had migrated from Molde. Following this, we succeeded to recruit another 12 interviewees. All interviews were conducted by telephone. Some interview questions were open ended, while others had fixed alternatives. The interviews lasted from 10 to 15 minutes and all participants gave their consent to record the interviews. Responses were fed into separate Questback forms and reports were generated from the program.

As a limitation it is important to note that the sample is not supposed to be statistically representative of young migrators from the region. However, in our view, the nature of the contribution of the study is the foundation it provides for logical and not statistical inference (cf. Mitchell, 1983). We think the sample and the way it was selected will suffice for this intention.

Empirical findings

The first part of the interview contained general questions concerning the interviewees and their relationship to Molde and the region. All interviewees expressed a strong sense of belonging to the region, illustrated by the fact that 24 out of 29 answered that they see themselves moving back to the region at some point in the future. When asked about the most important arguments for moving back were job opportunities as well as family, friends and generally safe environment for children to be raised. At the same time, missing job opportunities were equally identified as the most important argument for not moving back within the next few years.

In the study, 21 of the interviewees stated that nature is the most important brand asset for Molde and the region. The question was open-ended with an opportunity to provide more than one answer, and job opportunities (by 10 interviewees) and MFK (10) followed as the joint second most frequent reply. Following this, when asked how they introduce the town and region to others (open-ended with multiple-answers), 28 of the 29 interviewees identified nature and the opportunities for recreation and outdoor activities as the most important. Further, the interviewees pointed out as important features of the city and the region that it is a quiet small town (4 respondents), safe environment (4), and has an exciting business environment (4). Only one of the interviewees mentioned MFK as a general brand asset for Molde.

To address the question of place value from a different angle we asked the interviewees what regional attractions were important to them in their personal life. Out of a list of eight attractions – four annual cultural events, two cultural institutions and two others (nature and childhood environment) – the interviewees were asked to specify each attraction's relevance using a 5-point Likert-scale. "Nature" came out as very important or important to all of them, followed by "childhood environment" and the annual Molde Jazz festival (83% each) and MFK (66%). Five interviewees (17%) explicitly stated that MFK was of little or no importance to them. However, 18 of the 29 interviewees (62%) articulated that they attended an MFK game whenever there was a chance. Among those, only two (7%) indicated to be passionate enough about MFK to plan their return trips to Molde based on the home match days. Still, most of the respondents expressed that their relation to the region was not affected by whether or not MFK plays in the Norwegian top league.

In an effort to explore the value placed on MFK further, we asked the interviewees to provide three positive and/or three negative values he/she would associate with the football club. Among the positive values associated with MFK, the term most frequently mentioned was “Solskjær” (the head coach), followed by “community”, “solidarity” and “engagement”. For analytical purposes, all answers were clustered into seven different categories. The interviewees associated the club with engagement, pride and community spirit (39%), success (18%), and “the attractiveness of the club’s management philosophy” (14%), but some also mentioned local players (9%), entertainment (9%), place marketing (7%) and business value (6%). Taken together, the majority of answers revolved around positive effects that the club has on the community. When it comes to negative values 12 out of 29 (41%) interviewees did not mention any negative values associated with MFK at all. This indicates that MFK is not generally associated with negative values. The few responses received have been clustered afterwards into five different categories: players’ elitist behavior (41%), MFK dominance – overshadowing other local activities (17%), supporter behavior (14%), unstable football performances (14%), and lack of self-containment, hence the club’s dependence of support from investors (14%).

While starting out with the assumption that our sample was not particularly interested in MFK and football, gradually the interviewees revealed direct use value. Twenty of them (69%) claimed they watch MFK play every now and then, although they have not been asked to specify whether this was in the stadium, by means of live broadcasting in TV or live-streaming. None of the interviewees signed up for pay-TV channels with the purpose to watch MFK playing. 14 interviewees (48%) attended home matches when they were in Molde, while 11 (38%) watched MFK playing away matches if played close to where they currently reside. All interviewees mentioned to follow MFK in the media (indirect use value), however only one interviewee subscribed to the regular news-updates from the club. 14 (48%) respondents confirmed owning fan merchandise that they had bought themselves.

TABLE I *MFK's importance in the social environment of the interviewees. Actual numbers (N=29).*

	Agree		Neither nor		Disagree	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
I do not care about MFK	2	3	1	3	12	8
I am very proud when MFK wins	9	9	4	5	2	0
I tease football fans in my environment (friends and close colleagues) if their favourite team has lost and MFK has won	9	7	2	2	4	5
I am often confronted by friends and close colleagues with MFK results	8	9	6	1	1	4

Table I summarizes the interviewees' responses to four assertions presented to them. Five (17%) respondents replied that they are indifferent to MFK, whereas the majority of 20 (69%) do care. 18 (62%) admit to feeling very proud when MFK wins matches and 16 (55%) confessed that they tease friends and colleagues if MFK wins and their favorite teams have lost. 17 (58%) reply that friends and colleagues often take up MFK's results in informal conversations.

Discussion and reflection

We started our research with the question of how, and to what extent, does a hometown football club and its matches (sports events) affect the lives of people that have left their hometown. Does the football club still create any kind of value for them? To answer the question we conducted an explorative study and interviewed 29 people, all of which live away from their home region – Molde – in Norway. The majority of the interviewees state during the interviews that nature and opportunities for recreation and outdoor activities are the most important brand assets for Molde and the region. Only one of the interviewee named the football club in Molde in his reply. If we assume that people attribute qualities to what makes them proud or to how they prefer to live their lives, we think this distribution of answers indicates that we are not generally dealing

with migrators that are typical football fans or have a passion for Molde Football Club (MFK) *per se*.

However, about 50% of the interviewees told us they own MFK fan merchandize. Further, close to 70% of the respondents claimed they watch MFK matches, nearly 50% attended home matches when they visit Molde, and about 40% watched MFK playing away matches. We might therefore conclude that there is a substantial relationship with the club among the majority of our sample, although this does not ascend into passionate fanship.

Even given our limited sample size, this research shows that popular sport clubs' representing a city have an impact on the lives of migrants from the city, even when they are not passionate fans of the club. As for our observations, a football club may function as a frequent reminder of the hometown for people that have migrated, thus the concept of bounded solidarity extents in time and geographic space. This phenomenon can also be conceptualized as non-use value exactly because it tends to keep the relationship between the individual and the community alive even when people have physically moved out of the community. In our sample, MFK is associated with "engagement, pride and community spirit" ahead of "sporting success" and the "club's management philosophy", thus supporting the concept of existence value of the football club and extending it across regional boundaries. It is the existence value that transcends into the daily life of our interviewees, as 62% state of being proud when MFK wins matches, 55% admit that they actively tease friends and colleagues if MFK wins matches and 58% reply that friends and colleagues take up MFK's match results in colloquial conversation.

The possibility to watch an MFK match live in Aker stadium, live at away matches, or live on TV or by digital media, constitutes an individual option value for most of the interviewees. The study revealed that 62% of the respondents made use of this option by telling us that they watch MFK matches whenever there is a chance, thus converting option value into direct use value. Two of our interviewees even told us that they return to Molde based on MFK playing in Aker Stadium. All interviewees read about MFK in the press – conceptualized as indirect use value – but only one subscribed to receive updates and news from the club. This is in line with the study by Solenes et al. (2014) on MFK revealing that fans who watch the club play also consume packaged services from various sources, like pre- and post-match information on the club's website, in the regional newspaper, etc. Bequest value, conceptualized as value that

the club might represent for future generations can only be indirectly supported in our research, when assuming that continuing support by fans, even after having moved away, will enable the club to keep competing in the future.

With reference to how likely migrators are to return to their home town we do not know the strength of the non-use value, but it is reasonable to speculate that by keeping the bonds alive, the football events and the impact of the repeating reminders through football conversation might increase the likelihood that migrators will return in the future. Likewise, it is likely that this non-use value, because it shows that moving away does not imply full detachment from the community, will increase the probability of individuals being reintegrated into the community. It helps to maintain place solidarity. This means that the relationship maintained through the football club helps people to retain part of their original social capital. Being inscribed in the grand narrative of the place, the relationship to the sports club is functional and meaningful. At the same time, the conversations triggered by football may help migrators to extend their relationships and build social capital at their present location. Following a popular team from ones hometown means employing a Janus-faced relationship value that is usable in terms of capitalizing on the past, while at the same time building social capital for the future and at several locations.

It is obvious that the present study has its limitations. First, we do not know how representative our sample is in statistical terms. Second, the present study is a case study and is therefore contextual. It is contoured by a successful club in a small city in the Nordic region where sports clubs are rooted in voluntarism, democratic principles and a sense of belonging in local communities (cf. Goksøyr, Andersen & Asdal, 1996). Thus, a relevant question is if there are particular contextual conditions that increase or decrease the employment of the relationship value. If the phenomenon observed here is ubiquitous, it might oscillate depending on club success, city size, whether or not there are several clubs in the city, the management of the club, the traditional bonds between the club and the history of the city, etc. Only further research can inform us about these issues. A third limitation is of course related to a single period of investigation. To better understand the impact of the club on people's relationships, longitudinal research designs are needed. Ideally, the study should be repeated with the same sample in a couple of years. A fourth limitation and challenge for further research is in assessing the

impact of the relationship value relative to issues such as job possibilities, childhood environment and safety, nature and outdoor life, and other assets. What sets the football club apart from many other assets is the frequency by which the migrant is reminded about the relationship, exactly because football matches are repeating events and spread over most parts of the year. In this sense, the impact of the team might extend beyond the individual's (lack of) interest for football or going to the matches. To understand this impact in larger depth further qualitative studies should be employed.

Acknowledgement

This article comes out of a larger research project on exploring the contribution of football clubs to their home region (see Solenes et al. 2014). We would like to thank Molde Football Club for collaborating with us in this research. In its development the article has benefited greatly from discussions with Tommy Andersson and John Armbrecht (Centre for Tourism, University of Gothenburg, Sweden) on how to apply the concepts of use and non-use value within our real world case setting.

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