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**Competitor interactions**

A qualitative study on how Swedish football clubs engage in multiple  
boundary work

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# **Competitor Interactions**

## **A qualitative study on how Swedish football clubs engage in multiple boundary work**

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### **Abstract**

Historically, rivals have interacted to achieve common goals, whereas previous research shows examples of several types of competitor interactions. However, in the modern corporate world, the perception of fierce competition has been more normalized, and interactions between rivals pose a sensitivity to them. Thus, this paper examines how rival organizations interact with each other and how different relationships can unfold in the process, with the purpose of creating further understanding and knowledge on competitive relations between organizations. The research uses boundary work as a theoretical framework to investigate the phenomenon and applies the case of the Swedish football league, Allsvenskan. The empirical data is based on both primary and secondary data connected to the Swedish football league, Allsvenskan, gathered through interviews and documentary analysis. The most common interactions between the football clubs were informal collaboration and collaboration through a third-party organization. Competition-oriented interactions were also found when the different football clubs actively tried to frame their identity and highlight the differences between one another. Purely collaborative interactions aligned with the framework were the rarest, with only two matching findings: collaboration during crises. These results have two main contributions. Firstly, it shows the possibility for organizations to simultaneously exercise multiple types of boundary work, which has not been discussed previously. Secondly, it proves that boundary work is adequate as an analytic lens of interactions since it explains how different interactions lead to different relationships.

**Keywords:** Interactions, competitor relations, rivalries, Boundary Work, collaboration, competition, football, organizations

## Introduction

Cambridge Dictionary defines competitors as a company, person, or team challenging each other for the same limited end result: customers, a piece of land, or a trophy (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). As discussed by Feenay (2017), interactions within competitor relationships have been documented throughout history. For example, going back to the early competitors of Rome and Carthage, the two empires coexisted and interacted with each other through shared roads and several other interactions, even though competing within the same geographical area. However, the same competitor relationship has also seen the other spectra of competitor interactions in trying to eliminate each other due to competition over land. Consequently, the relationship dynamics went from cooperating to competing and ultimately one eliminating the other, thereby exemplifying the extent of the phenomenon of interactions between competitors and competitor relations.

In more recent history, many of the competitive relationship dynamics of the past could instead be applied to horizontal company relations. The interactions between company competitors could range from the collaboration of Nokia, Samsung, and Sony Ericsson. They actively interacted to develop a more competitive operative system (Bengtsson, Eriksson and Wincent, 2010), to Coca-Cola and Pepsi more passively interacting due to specific circumstances, with the example of possible criminal activity amongst co-workers (Elsevier, 2007). Furthermore, there are competitive relationships such as situations between Google and Microsoft where the tech companies debate over stolen search results, ending up in online conflicts and court settlements (Brodkin, 2011), and lastly, relationships where competitors actively try to sabotage one another, in order to strengthen their position by weakening their competitors (Cornish, 2000).

In the sense of interactions between actors, the world could be argued to be divided into two. According to O'Cass and Weerawardena (2010), a corporate world is often centered around competitors and customers. Various models are used to determine the status of a company's competitors and how to outperform them to gain the customers' preference. Such analyses of competitors are argued to provide important information about a firm's competitive environment and arguably connect that information to the possible success of a firm, creating a clear boundary between a company and its competitors. In contrast, a societal world argues for collaboration and social connections between actors, both at the national and society level. The 17 Global Goals of the United Nations are one example where the organization provides information on how countries and people should act in order to help create a better situation for the less fortunate, but in the long run, create a beneficial situation for all living (The Global Goals, 2022). Ultimately tearing down the societal boundaries in the world.

Adding the collaborative values of the United Nations Goals and the societal world to the corporate world is not always functioning. Although it could have beneficial outcomes to work through the boundaries and collaborate with competing companies, it imposes sensitivity (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.). According to Brandenburg and Nalebuff (1996), there is a belief amongst companies that collaborating with competitors could

indicate weakness and allow a competing company to have insight into your business, increasing risk due to the lack of trust for each other. On the other hand, the construction of boundaries could have the opposite effect, increasing power by distancing from competitors. Furthermore, the sensitivity of rivalries and competition between companies within the same industry could be further enhanced by historical events and actions that have accumulated to the relationship today, making it difficult to set aside differences (Havard, 2018).

Regardless of the sensitivity surrounding competitor interactions, there are examples of industries where collaboration with competitors is a known fact. The airline industry displays a situation where competitors collaborate through alliances where multiple airline companies share information, coding, flight routes, and overall operating costs in order to benefit all companies involved in the alliance (Garette, Castañer, and Dussauge, 2009). For example, the 26 airlines creating Star Alliance argue that their alliance enables multi-domestic connections and therefore access to more destinations than would have been possible through the individual companies, indicating that collaboration within the industry is beneficial for the involved companies (Star Alliance, 2021).

To further develop the knowledge and understanding of how competitors interact with each other through different types of boundary work, this study will be conducted by analyzing the case of Sweden's highest football division, Allsvenskan. The football industry provides a valid case due to the mixture of the corporate and societal world, where performance is the crucial element. However, actions are always met with reactions from many parts of society, thereby creating an interesting setting for analyzing the phenomenon of competitor interactions. A further explanation of the dynamics in football is that the individual clubs compete every week through their professional teams to outperform each other and do better than their competitors (UEFA, 2022). However, the same clubs that compete week in and week out are also enrolled within the same league, a league whose overall performance affects all teams participating (UEFA, 2022).

The first official competitive football league was brought up by a collaboration between its 12 member clubs in the late 19th century. Thereby creating the very foundation of the professional football of the 21st century through the nature of interactions between the 12 competitive football clubs (EFL, n.d.). Furthermore, the interactions have continued since the foundation of football leagues, mainly through regular games against each other, but more interestingly also at organizational levels. In 2004, the German football club Borussia Dortmund faced economic difficulties and thereby risked going into bankruptcy (Taylor, 2013). Instead of letting that happen, another German club, Bayern Munich, saw the historical and competitive value in having Borussia Dortmund as an existing and performing organization in German football. Therefore Bayern Munich loaned Borussia Dortmund money so they could restructure. By interacting, Bayern Munich strengthened their long-term rivals in order to benefit German football as a whole. Moreover, a similar situation appeared in England in 2020. The 135-year-old football organization Bury FC went into liquidation and feared for its existence (Conn, 2020). However, instead of interacting, the competitors chose not to, resulting in Bury FC not being able to stay active. Therefore exemplifying that

there historically have been different approaches to whether to interact with competitors or not, also in a football setting.

Limited attention has been aimed at understanding the boundary dynamics of such a complex industry as football. Therefore, by examining the interactions between competitors, this study will provide valid arguments for different possibilities regarding interacting with one's competitors. Furthermore, applying the case of such a complex industry will show interactions when it is the most difficult, making the information also applicable to less complex industries. Thereby enabling knowledge and understanding throughout the area of competitor interactions, possibly influencing companies to think differently and, regardless of the type of boundary work, help companies develop.

The purpose of this research is to create further understanding and knowledge of competitive relations between organizations and their usage of boundary work. The study thereby aims to answer the following research question: *How do rival organizations use boundary-spanning activities in competitor relationships?*

To narrow down the scope of the research, the study limits itself to examining the boundary spanning activities between companies within the same industry. It does not account for vertical relations due to the distinction and definition of competitors. Thereby, the research becomes more concise and will be able to provide a more precise analysis and result. Concerning the specific case to examine the phenomenon of competitor interactions, it limits itself to the geographical area of Sweden, namely also the highest division of Swedish football, since it exemplifies a complex business setting. Lastly, the study does not take supporter perspectives into account since it wants to focus on the professional organization of Allsvenskan.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Previous research**

As stated in the introduction, traditionally, relationships between competitors in the industrial market have been based on competition (O'Cass & Weerawardena, 2010). However, Easton et al. (1993) argue that it is not that simple since relationships between competitors can differ depending on aspects such as the companies' motives for action and how intensely competitors interact with each other. In addition, the distance between competitors is significant for the relationship's characteristics that emerge. Easton et al. (1993) are thus introducing the notion that firms can have interactions and relationships that are not only competitive. One such relationship can potentially be co-opetition, a well-referenced term that brings relations between competitors to new light with a particular focus on collaboration between competitors. Additionally, according to Brandenburg and Nalebuff (1996), who first coined the term co-opetition, industries not considering the option of collaboration will not be as successful as they have the potential to be. Thus, Brandenburg and Nalebuff (1996) found that relationships between competitors, as described by Easton et al. (1993), may not be as simplistic and straightforward as previously believed. Discussing game theory and the usage

of mathematics to solve co-opetition-related problems, they add to the notion that there could exist more between firms than just competition and that interaction such as collaboration could benefit all parties involved.

Another influential contribution to research is Bengtsson & Kock (1999), who elaborated on the work of Brandenburg and Nalebuff (1996) and Easton et al. (1993), making a more extensive research by reusing and putting the term co-opetition in relation to other possible firm relationships. This was done by conducting a case study between two companies within the lining industry and the rack and pine industry, aiming to achieve a more multi-faceted description of relationships between competitors.

Bengtsson and Kock's (1999) study was conducted by finding valid secondary data and interviewing several different managers. Based on this, it was possible to deduce that firms are usually involved in various relationships with other horizontal firms. Firstly, there is coexistence, which is described as firms having no economic exchanges and no bonds with each other (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). Secondly, there is cooperation which entails frequent interaction, not only economically but also socially, providing each other with a lot of information (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). However, the firms are still competitors and may have high distrust for one another. Thirdly, there is competition, consisting of multiple mirroring strategies and no collaborative interaction (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). If one of the firms is launching a new product, then all the other corporations will follow. Fourthly and lastly, there is co-opetition, involving both collaboration and competition and firms coexisting in harmony. Furthermore, this fourth horizontal relationship entails shared goals and joint ventures but, at the same time, competition in other areas (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999; Brandenburg & Nalebuff, 1996).

As described, there are multiple different relationships and possible interactions. In order to deal with such a complex situation, the CEOs must act strategically and use interactions that sustains effective relationship management since all relationships affect different areas of a firm (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). Furthermore, the four types of relationships identified provide companies with advantages in different ways, meaning that the CEO, together with the other managers, needs to tailor made different interactions for each horizontal relationship (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). Additionally, when managing relationships, the fact that they will continually change over time must be taken into account. For example, at a certain point in time, the relationship in question could be coexistence, at another time, cooperation, and so forth (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). With all of these aspects in mind, it is essential to understand that firms are not solely competitors or collaborators but embedded in a web of different relationships and that there can exist multiple multi-face relationships simultaneously (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999; Brandenburg & Nalebuff, 1996; Easton et al., 1993). Moreover, due to this complexity and the limited research around the subject, Bengtsson & Kock (1999) stress the importance of further research and explain that more empirical work is needed to describe the interactions and relationships between competitors.

## **Literature review**

The previous research indicated that there could exist multiple different relationships between corporations. However, it does not explain how different interactions are made in order to create these various relationships. Thus, the theory of boundary work is believed to be a suitable concept in order to investigate this further due to it not only being similar to aspects in previous research but also since it has the ability to visualize how different interactions lead to different circumstances between actors. Moreover, the choice of theory is additionally made due to a statement from a group of prominent boundary work researchers. *"We believe that the notion of boundary work has even richer possibilities that have not so far been exploited because many organizational phenomena have simply not been considered explicitly using this lens, although they easily could be"* - Langley et al. (2019).

To conduct research with this concept and to review the theoretical field, the term boundary work must first be defined. Although there are a lot of different definitions, the following example provided by Langley, A et al. (2019) is used *"purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material and temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations, and organizations."* In other words, boundary work is activities done to shape, create or destroy boundaries between actors to either reinforce collaboration or competition. However, there are situations where boundary work is enforcing both elements simultaneously. Within this literature review, three different perspectives from influential authors will be highlighted and reviewed in order for the reader to get a better understanding of the theoretical field. However, the review also facilitated the creation of the theoretical framework since the authors had to investigate several articles of boundary work to get a sufficient understanding of themselves. In terms of selecting appropriate literature, much inspiration is gathered from Langley, A et al. (2019), who have made an extensive review of the whole theoretical field.

Though initially slow to develop, in the last decade, the concept of boundary-work has grown rapidly (Langley, A et al.,2019). However, it was initially coined by Gieryn (1983). He believed that there was a problem within science in terms of demarcation since scientific work seemed to be distinguished as something different from non-scientific intellectual activities. Thus, Gieryn (1983) believed that the scientific institutions were actively working towards separating themselves from all others. Therefore the focus of the report was to investigate these efforts, which eventually led to the development of the theory of boundary-work.

The findings of Gieryn (1983) indicated that his hypotheses were correct; the ideologies of science were actively defending different boundaries between science and non-science. Furthermore, the report found different areas where science ideologists especially utilized boundary work. Some examples are: excluding individuals within the ideology of science who are endangering the established boundaries, creating emphasis on the differences of certain science ideologies and worshipping your own in order to create a clear superiority over others, and taking little responsibility for consequences and instead blame outsiders for faults within the science ideology. As mentioned, Gieryn (1983) is the original research where boundary work emerged as a theoretical concept. However, these examples of boundary-work

provided are not limited to the demarcations of science alone. Gieryn (1983) explains that the concept of boundary work can be seen and used in other ideologies as well. Since his original article, there have been many different definitions and publications within various fields of research. Although Gieryn (1983) is a well-referenced article, it has some shortcomings. It mainly focuses on how organizations defend boundaries and does not consider the possibilities of utilizing boundary work with the ambition to create or contest boundaries. Moreover, his research did not mention the concept of using boundary work for more collaborative purposes either and due to present research, it makes Gieryn's (1983) perspective relatively narrow.

The next significant contribution to the field of boundary work is Strauss (1978), who researched negotiation order theory. According to Strauss (1978), negotiations are vital and are present in multiple situations in everyday life of humans, and it is through negotiating that we transform, construct and define the world around us. Humans are presumed to act pragmatically, and all types of problems and differences can ultimately be overcome through interaction and communication (Strauss, 1978). This article opens up the possibilities of using negotiations within boundary work, which broadens the view so far discussed. As with Gieryn (1983), the works of Strauss (1978) are well referenced and have laid a foundation for future research on more collaborative boundary work. Although, there are some aspects that Strauss (1978) fails to mention. The possibilities of using this collaborative perception of boundary work in order to not only negotiate boundaries but also embody and downplay them. Additionally, it does not consider the idea of negotiating through boundaries to reach collaboration, only at them, which could be considered a shortcoming due to the amount of research that exists today.

A third major contribution to the theoretical field of boundary work is Guston (2001). His research is more or less a combination between Strauss (1978) and Gieryn (1983) since he introduces the concept of boundary organizations which is described as a unit between two different social worlds, such as two competitors. Thus, individuals from both sides of competition can utilize the boundary organization for specific purposes without losing their rival identity (Guston, 2001). For example, a corporation with superior knowledge can be shared with another rival business if it is likely to increase value for both parties. This perspective is of value since it takes both collaboration and competition into account. However, it neglects approaches that arrange or coalesce boundaries, which are present in more modern publications.

### **Three types of boundary work**

Having reviewed the different historical roots of the theoretical field, it is noticeable that three different types of boundary work can be initiated: Competitive, Collaborative, and Configurational. These categories are taken from Langley et al. (2019) since they made a similar and more extensive review on the subject.

#### ***Competitive boundary work***



The first category originates from Gieryn (1983) and is called competitive boundary work. It focuses on the interactions of people who work for boundaries to separate themselves from others within the exclusive territory that has some kind of advantage. The label competitive is in reference to the self-oriented nature of this kind of boundary work, which construes boundaries or distinctions as mechanisms for acquiring resources or reproducing power, social position, and status for those who engage in it (Langley et al., 2019). After studying various articles related to competitive boundary work, it is clear that the concept has evolved from its origins. An example of more modern competitive boundary work can be seen in Lefsrud and Meyer (2012). They investigate identity works and framing tactics within the climate change science community. More specifically, they research the scientists' efforts to legitimize themselves as the champions of truth. Ultimately, they found that boundary work in terms of framing always has the same ingredients regardless of the ideology. In their case, some believed that climate change was a hoax, and some thought it was the harbinger of extinction. However, within this type of competitive boundary work, there is always the claim that the contrary opinions are based on biased research (Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012). Another example is from Santos and Eisenhardt (2009), who conducted a study to understand how entrepreneurs shape markets by constructing boundaries. They found that entrepreneurs mainly depended on three tactics when creating boundaries: claiming, demarcating, and controlling the market. The first tactic, claiming the market, was exercised by creating identity-based boundaries in order to make their own market category, thus separating themselves from everyone else. The second tactic, demarcating, included building alliances and turning powerful actors. The third and last tactic, controlling the market, was achieved by hostile takeovers that eliminated competition and prevented the entry of other actors into the market. According to Santos and Eisenhardt (2009), the entrepreneurs who used these three tactics effectively created powerful boundaries and, therefore, gained the ability to lead the invented share of the market.

### ***Collaborative Boundary work***

The second category originates from Strauss (1978) and is labeled "collaborative boundary work." It considers how people work at boundaries in interaction with others to collaborate or get the day-to-day activities done. This category recognizes that boundaries can be worked at in order to contribute to facilitating coordination while concurrently requiring people to engage in practices to connect or productively unite and set aside their differences (Langley et al., 2019). Strauss (1978) explains how negotiating boundaries can be displayed. However, it is not the most recent of academic publications, and a more modern example of collaborative boundary work is the works of Meier (2015). She argued that boundaries were downplayed to enforce employee collaboration within emergency wards due to pressing life and death situations. The article explains that the need to downplay boundaries and instead focus on collaboration was especially prominent in the emergency ward due to the stressful work environment. The doctors, nurses, and surgeons within the emergency ward deemed it more important to ignore certain boundaries, such as jurisdiction. Instead, they worked as a team in order to solve the patient's wound or illness. Another example of collaborative boundary work is the works of Azambuja and Islam (2019), who investigated the everyday work of middle managers. They make the point that boundary work is usually connected to

these managers' activities. According to the authors, this is because middle managers have to balance the demands of a corporation's strategic unit with the needs of an operational unit simultaneously. The efforts to coordinate the demands of these two units is where the boundary work is mainly done, and Azambuja and Islam (2019) argue that middle managers essentially become the boundaries.

### ***Configurational Boundary work***

The third and final category, inspired by Guston (2001), shifts the focus of agency to a higher level. Configurational boundary work considers how people work outside existing boundaries to influence others' behavior. This category focuses on how patterns of differentiation and integration among sets of people within or around organizations may be reconfigured to ensure that certain activities are brought together within bounded spaces to produce particular collective action (Langley et al., 2019). There are several examples of different types of configurational boundary work apart from the example provided by Guston (2001) in the literature review regarding boundary organizations. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010), who made the field study called "the war of the woods," explains how forest companies became involved in boundary work in order to react to environmental concerns posed by activists and members of local communities. According to Zietsma and Lawrence (2010), one of the companies secretly invites rival actors to pitch and try new logging methods in an attempt to put an end to the costly conflict between the two sides. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) coined the term "experimental spaces" in order to describe these temporary projects of secret negotiation and tests of activities. These experimental spaces were valuable since they shielded both sides from inner criticism since the boundaries between the companies and the environmentalists were still in place.

### **Summary of framework**

There are three different types of boundary work that organizations can perform, and there are certain situations when each variant is mainly utilized. Competitive boundary work is mainly found when organizations oppose each other and are made by excluding and highlighting differences to gain or maintain resources and power. In contrast, collaborative boundary work is used when organizations attempt to reach an agreement or collaboration and is characterized by efforts to ignore differences and tear down boundaries. Finally, configurational boundary work can be explained as a combination of collaboration and competition and is used in situations when organizations want to discreetly collaborate while still officially being competitors.

## **Methodology**

### **Approach of the Study**

The study was structured through a qualitative method, where the primary information was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Thereby giving the respondents the possibility to ask questions of their own and depart from the setup structure of the interview without compromising the quality (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, enabling a relaxed conversation in a comfortable setting. Furthermore, the thesis investigates competitor interactions by getting

the respondents' perspectives of the climate. Therefore a qualitative method was deemed the most suitable, being in line with the thoughts of Patel and Davidson (2019). Lastly, the thesis follows an abductive approach based on an incomplete set of observations and existing theories, as well as a noticed gap in the competitor interaction literature. Therefore, an abductive approach was the most suitable since the research question was aimed to be answered through theory and empirical findings (Patel & Davidson, 2019).

### **Organizations**

When adopting the case around Swedish professional football, the sample size limited itself to the 32 clubs enrolled in the membership governed organization, Svensk Elitfotboll. To create an interesting case and enhance the aspect of rivalries, the study focused on the highest Swedish football division, Allsvenskan. To not compromise and risk getting an unfair evaluation of the situation, the study focused on all the 16 clubs that make up Allsvenskan and were thereby able to get multiple perspectives from within the same league, nuancing the discussion. However, not all 16 clubs were involved due to not everyone wanting to participate. Instead, the study aimed for representatives of the different layers within Allsvenskan to make sure the league still got represented fairly. They were ranging from representatives with perspectives from the top and the bottom of the competitive and economic pyramid. The representative clubs chosen were those that best exemplified their layer based on competitive and economic performance. Due to the distinctions between competitive and economic performance, the study enhanced the complexity of the relationship due to the increased tensions and possible rivalries it enabled.

Since the study focused on Allsvenskan as a league organization and the possible interactions the different actors had, it was valuable to complement the information received from the different clubs with the perspective of the responsible member organization, Svensk Elitfotboll. Through their information, the study was able to get an overarching perspective of the interactions between its members, which added valuable insights to discuss together with the information provided by the clubs.

### **Respondents**

The respondents within the organizations that participated in the study were chosen based on their general knowledge and information about the organization's boundary-spanning activities and interactions with competitors. Sufficient insight and information about the club's activities involving another party were vital to receive the answers enabling the research. People considered to have the information needed were Club Directors, CEOs, Vice CEOs, and people responsible for specific events. These people were deemed to have the information needed since they were people with an organization-wide knowledge of various areas (Club Director, CEO & Vice CEO) or people with extensive knowledge of external relationships (Specific Events). Other roles were not considered. However there was an openness to the possibility of the organizations recommending another role for the interview, in that case, there could have been other roles than the previously mentioned that were of interest.

Concerning the respondents of the membership association, Svensk Elitfotboll, the people with interest were the ones responsible for the clubs enrolled in Allsvenskan since the people responsible for that specific league would have information regarding possible interactions. The association's general secretary was the one deemed to have the most relevant and developed information when it came to answering the questions.

### **Primary Data**

The primary data was gathered through interviews, which is considered preferable when conducting qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The flexible way the study was structured aims to provide the respondents with an opportunity to interpret the questions asked in their own individual sense, however, with clear boundaries limiting the answers to the relevant topic and context. The total interview time added up to 400 minutes (approximately seven hours), all directly connected to Allsvenskan through several people at a number of clubs, as well as the overarching organization. The amount of time was believed to be sufficient for the purpose of the study when combined with the secondary data.

Initial contact with the organizations and respondents was made through e-mail, either directly to the relevant respondents. If the correct address could be found, otherwise a reduced e-mail was sent to the organization's official e-mail address, and the authors were later directed to the respondents from there. The e-mail directed to the organization's address introduced the authors and asked for a relevant person with insight in the topic discussed, whereas the mail directly to the respondents further explained the context of the research and what value the organization's participation in the research generates. The companies and respondents who agreed to participate in the study were contacted further to schedule a time and place for an interview. The respondents were given the opportunity to choose between a digital or personal interview.

Having scheduled a time and place for an interview, the interviewees were provided with an interview guide, enabling the respondents to prepare and address the topic in advance. The guide was built on the structure of Bryman and Bell (2015) and sent out to increase the dependability of the study.

When performing the interview digitally, the respondent connected to Zoom. After a few minutes of introduction, small talk, and formal aspects, the interview continued in the agenda structure. Firstly, the authors introduced themselves and the topic of the study, secondly, the respondent had the chance to introduce themselves and their roles. After the respondents' introduction, the interview continued with the question manuscript, with an openness to follow-up questions. Lastly, the respondents were given a chance to add to the information provided when all questions had been asked. When having a physical interview, all steps unfolded in a similar fashion, except that the authors instead traveled to the office of the respective respondents to conduct the interview.

### **Secondary Data**

This report gathered secondary data to complement and validate the knowledge gained from the interviews and the collected primary data. The secondary data were gathered from three different communication channels representing different aspects of the interactions between competitors. Firstly, the information on long-term commitments and possible boundary-spanning activities were gathered from official documents on the respective organizations' websites. The documents' role was to provide information on well thought after and developed interactions between competitors. A total number of 25 official documents were analyzed. Secondly, secondary data were also gathered from press releases and notifications on the respective organizations' websites, thought to provide insight into the more ongoing interactions between the different organizations. A total of 80 press releases and relevant articles were analyzed on their websites. Lastly, to grasp the everyday interactions as well as more spontaneous interactions, the study accounted for around 900 communications analyzed on the official Twitter accounts of the respective clubs. The specific platform of Twitter was chosen due to its activity and easily accessible form of communication. The extent of secondary data was deemed to be sufficient by itself but provided a further certification when combined with the primary data from the interviews.

### **Processing of Empirical Data**

The empirical data was recorded during the interview and transcribed and re-listened to directly afterward to ensure the perceptions stayed up to date. Notes were made to make sure initial thoughts were considered when making the further analysis. The process of analyzing the empirical data started at once after the transcription to enable the best possible analysis, as stated by Patel and Davidson (2019). If both authors could not attend the interview, assurances were made that both had a similar perception of the information presented by listening to the recording or thoroughly reading the transcription. When having made sure that the authors had the same idea of the empirical data, the process continued with a thorough coding of the data received from the interviews as well as the secondary data. After having a finalized text of all the information gathered, it was divided into primary and secondary data in accordance with the way the data had been gathered. Furthermore, the data were divided into the categories of the Empirical Section, being Formal Collaboration, Informal Collaboration, and Rivalry. The divisions were made through color-coding the type of information with the right category from the empirical section to make the presentation of the data sufficient. Lastly, the presentation of the empirical data was paired with the theoretical framework to analyze how the clubs engage in boundary work, matching the categories of the empirical data with the different types of boundary work. The way of processing enabled a structural and systematic approach to the discussion due to the empirical data being easily navigated within.

### **Literature Evaluation**

The theoretical framework used in the thesis is based on articles and books, where the School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg's library and the University search engine "Supersök" were the two primary providers of sources. To filter out the reliable from the unreliable sources, articles and books marked as "peer-reviewed" were the only ones chosen. Furthermore, the number of citations of an article or book was also of interest when

evaluating the quality of the literature. Therefore, the sources used for the theoretical framework were deemed to be reliable and of academic quality.

### **Critical Method Discussion**

To assess the quality of the data in this research, a framework of trustworthiness and authenticity was used. This way of evaluating the quality was deemed a better option than the reliability and validity framework since the chosen framework was better applicable to qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Trustworthiness was evaluated through four determinants, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In comparison, authenticity was evaluated through fairness and ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity.

#### *Credibility*

The collection of the primary data was made through good practice by thoroughly preparing for the interview in advance by reading up on the interviewees and their roles, as well as understanding interview techniques to perform the best possible interview. To enable the interviewee to be prepared, an interview guide was sent out in advance, containing the structure of the upcoming interview. Furthermore, to ensure that the authors had similar perceptions as the respondents, an ongoing contact was established, where the authors were able to ask questions to clarify and verify. Furthermore, before publishing, the thesis was sent out to the respective interviewees to confirm that their information had been perceived correctly.

#### *Transferability*

The transferability of the data collected was gathered through multiple interviews with people at similar positions within Allsvenskan and its members. By having the most knowledgeable people within the section of competitor interactions, and the extent of the depth, in terms of the number of interviews and minutes, the conclusions made by the thesis would be transferable to other complex industries. Especially industries with a similar business orientation combined with an emotional aspect. When performing qualitative research, a small group is often intensely studied, therefore risking a low transferability to other groups (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, by having studied one larger organization in Allsvenskan, the study accounts for the required depth, whereas having the perspective of several people with similar positions enables a larger transferability.

#### *Dependability*

Throughout the thesis process, the authors have kept a parallel auditing role as presented by Guba and Lincoln (Bryman & Bell, 2015), meaning that records have been kept during the process. Initially, a document was created to spawn ideas and different takes on the subject. Then, a further document containing a log of different searches made on the internet was created in order to be able to go back and see what had previously been researched, thereby enabling the authors to trace the process as it unfolds. Furthermore, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to go back and be re-listen to for the best possible understanding. Lastly, coding was done of the empirical data to categorize it into relevant

categories for the upcoming discussion, thereby facilitating the remainder of the thesis by going through the empirical data in its different categories systematically.

### *Confirmability*

Regarding confirmability, complete objectivity was challenging to achieve due to the background and previous knowledge of the authors. However, the interviews were performed objectively without alterations depending on the interviewee. Thereby the authors were able to not apply personal biases and values to the interviews. Every interview was done with an open mind and objectivity to where the interview would end up.

### *Fairness*

The primary data collected in this study mainly represents the senior executive perspective of competitor interactions. However, concerning the subject in question, their perspective was considered the most relevant, and other perspectives would not have been as valuable since the matter researched is not relevant for all positions within the organizations. When combining the primary data with the secondary, the total data collection was deemed to be a fair representation of the entire organization.

### *Ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical*

Through analyzing competitor interactions, the research has provided a further understanding of possible ways to engage with competitors. The complex industry of football has shown that collaboration is possible even in industries surrounded by extensive emotions and competition. Thereby, the research has provided information that might push companies to reevaluate how they interact with competitors, both organizations participating in the research as well as other companies and organizations. The research might also increase the general understanding within the football community of why and how different clubs interact with each other.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting the interviews for this qualitative study, it was important to be considerate and humble to the respondents lending their time and trust, therefore treating the information with the greatest care and respect to provide a fair picture of the situation. This was done by always asking for permission to record the interviews and deleting the recordings when having transcribed the interview.

Concerning the subject of football, the interviews contained sensitive information about possible interactions between rival clubs, information that could be interpreted in different ways and therefore needed to be displayed correctly. Consequently, the respondents were asked whether they preferred to be public or anonymous when displaying the data. Due to the different answers, the authors decided for it to be anonymous. However, due to his consent and to enable the best possible structure of the report, the General Secretary of Svensk Elitfotboll remained public.

## **Empirical Data**

### **The Setting**

Allsvenskan is Sweden's highest football division when it comes to Men's football, and ever since 1924, the league has determined what team is the best in Sweden every year. The league is made up of 16 teams that, through a series of 30 games each, compete with each other with the aim of collecting as many points as possible. The team with the most points when the 30 games have passed wins the league, and the two teams with the fewest points are relegated to the second division, Superettan. Consequently, the two teams with the most points in Superettan are promoted to Allsvenskan. Furthermore, the club that finishes third to the bottom in Allsvenskan plays against the club that finishes third in Superettan to determine who gets the last spot in Allsvenskan in the upcoming season. (Allsvenskan, 2022)

Besides determining the winner and relegated teams, the position in the league also determines whether a club is permitted to play in the top European competitions; Champions League, Europa League, and Conference League (Svenska Fotbollsförbundet, 2022). The performances of Swedish teams in the European competitions also affect the European ranking of the league, and the better ranking of the league, the more European Cup spots are handed out to the league. Consequently, the performance of one Swedish football club in Europe affects the entire league situation in Allsvenskan, both concerning reputation and economy. (UEFA, 2022)

To lead the development of Swedish club football, the 32 clubs enrolled in the two highest football divisions in Sweden, Allsvenskan and Superettan, together make up the member association Svensk Elitfotboll (SEF). The association's role is to develop Swedish professional club football's performance, economy, administration, and commercialization, and through its engagements, create the best possible foundation for Swedish clubs to perform internationally. (Svensk Elitfotboll, 2022)

### **Secondary Data**

#### ***Formal collaborations***

SEF is the central organization for all clubs in Allsvenskan and functions as a collaboration platform. The collaborative activities and duties of SEF can be divided into six different categories according to its official policy: Football, economics and law, marketing and facilities, society, member club services, and development and image. The football category revolves around work directly associated with football, this can be training aspects for players and leaders, such as the 2020 Unicoach and talent development, or international competition issues, such as UEFA games and rules for international transfers. Furthermore, it also entails collaboration for the planning of Allsvenskan and Superettan, for example, scheduling, rules, security issues, and match delegation. The economics and law category is expressed through financial and legal activities, such as financial and legal advice and insurance issues. Additionally, it also includes representation with external partners. The marketing and facilities category includes activities regarding events and their needed facilities and organization, such as project planning and sales. Furthermore, the Society category is focused



on efforts towards communities and includes following and participating in relevant societal topics that can impact Swedish football. Moreover, it also includes the maintenance of SEF's role as an opinion leader on aspects regarding elite football in Sweden. The member club service category is efforts made in order to facilitate specific elements for and between the different member clubs. This is explained as the provision of office functions, information, communication, PR, and joint meetings. Finally, the development and image category concerns innovation and public opinion, containing activities such as IT, digital investments, further processing of player data, club development, CSR, brand development, and Integrity issues (Svensk Elitfotboll, 2021).

Furthermore, SEF uses a standardized certification structure to evaluate all elite clubs' youth activities, where the clubs' youth academies are given a rating between one and five stars annually. The long-term initiative has existed for more than ten years, and the overall goal of the project is to create future elite players within Swedish football. The certification is used to ensure the quality of the participating clubs' work with player education between ages 8-19, as well as identify the clubs' own areas of development. Furthermore, SEF is also providing support in terms of dialogue to contribute to the clubs' own development plan and create a stimulating manual for the participating clubs. Additionally, the certification and SEF are supposed to create clarity for the board, sponsors, players, parents, other clubs, and the municipality to make it easier for the club to identify its role in Swedish football (Svensk Elitfotboll, 2021).

### ***Rivalry***

Rivalry is present between teams in close proximity. For example, the two clubs, GIF Sundsvall and Östersund, increase marketing and publicity when they want to increase tension for the Northern Swedish Derby. The clubs perform interviews and campaigns to increase the general interest and create a further sense of belonging amongst the club's supporters (Svensk Elitfotboll, 2016). Similarly, BK Häcken and IFK Göteborg, two teams playing in the city of Gothenburg, also highlight their upcoming matches in order to raise interest, calling it the "Göteborgs derby" (BK Häcken, 2022). The same goes for Malmö FF and Helsingborgs IF, both located in the south of Sweden within the Region Skåne. Similar to the above, the two southern clubs also label and base the publicity on the team's geographical location (Malmö FF, 2020). More specifically, Hammarby and AIK, two clubs located in Stockholm, created a campaign named "show heart." This initiative was founded by the two football clubs, Hammarby and AIK, and its purpose is to collect money to support organizations researching cardiovascular diseases. The fundraising was aimed toward both clubs' supporters respectively during their derby. Afterward, a result was shown which of the two clubs collected the most money, creating a sense of competition also outside the field (AIK, 2017). Moreover, a slightly different example of rivalry that ignores proximity is the "classic match," a match played between IFK Göteborg and Djurgården. These two teams have origins in Gothenburg respectively Stockholm, has been highlighting their matches in particular for the last 113 years. Therefore instead aiming the focus of rivalry on historical aspects rather than the geographical (IFK Göteborg, 2022).

Building an identity around the team is an activity that all the clubs in Allsvenskan are doing, by having their own songs, their own colors, and their own symbols, as well as having a mascot in some cases. Highlighting current and historical successes is frequently displayed through different communication platforms. When winning over geographical or historical rivals, the communication is likely to connect to that specific rivalry, noticeable on multiple platforms of several teams in Allsvenskan (Malmö FF, 2022; Djurgården, 2022; Hammarby, 2022; AIK, 2022; Kalmar, 2022; Mjällby, 2022; Elfsborg, 2022).

Moreover, AIK made a video named "We are not you." The video consisted of clips visualizing the community of AIK and the supporters, as well as several highlights from football games. In addition, there was a man speaking to inform all viewers that AIK is the center of attention in Allsvenskan and that all other teams are their rivals. The speaker in the video states that every match they are playing is a derby since passion and compromises are not concepts functioning together. The video discloses there is one team competing against everyone else and that they are not them, they are AIK (Youtube, 2014).

## **Primary Data**

### ***Formal collaborations***

Many of the efforts are driven by the member association SEF regarding formal collaboration. The General Secretary discloses that the association has several member meetings each year, where Club Directors get the opportunity to meet and discuss relevant topics, enhancing possibilities of collaboration. The General Secretary argues that the clubs still use the knowledge shared in the meetings to create the best circumstances for their own club. However, sharing their knowledge enables a better situation for Allsvenskan as a whole.

Club#4 argues that there can be different types of collaborations. Although they believe that most of these collaborations are done through SEF and its member associations, they still argue that specific collaborations with individual clubs also occur, such as matchday coordination. Additionally, Club#2 also highlights that Swedish football is characterized by collaboration and cooperation, especially through their umbrella organization, SEF. Similar to Club#4, Club#2 also engages in formal collaborations disconnected from SEF. Such examples could be initiatives to increase local interest and awareness of the clubs and their partners, thereby collaborating with regional competitors. An opportunity for team-to-team collaboration also arises on match days, with Club#2 providing an example where they and a competitor decided to support pride, during the annual pride week, by coloring team accessories, such as captains armbands and numbers, in pride colors. The two teams also provided lectures about the subject to further show their support to increase people's awareness. Moreover, Club#1 views collaboration as a positive aspect of Swedish football, and that Allsvenskan provides several examples of collaboration and its benefits. While mostly being driven through SEF, Club#1 argues that it is all involved elite clubs that run the projects, and as also mentioned by Club#4, Club#1 indicates that several other projects engage in formal collaboration, often connected to geographically close clubs. Furthermore, Club#3 explains that they also see collaboration as a positive aspect of Swedish football. They disclose that the different Club Directors have several meetings each year via SEF and

that these occasions usually result in a lot of valuable knowledge exchanges. They also state that SEF is doing a lot of work promoting collaboration between clubs through their various efforts. Finally, all six clubs interviewed agree that the SEF-led meetings, where Club Directors meet to discuss current issues, are an important base for the discussion and engagement in formal collaboration. All clubs also account for SEF's role in actual projects enhancing formal collaboration. Amongst them are joint television agreements, sponsor agreements, and a fairly large IT platform that is run together between the 32 clubs and SEF.

*"I think we have very good collaboration in Swedish football, we have joint tv agreements and sponsorship deals. But we also have a fairly large IT platform that we run together."*

*Club Director Club#1*

The general secretary discloses that football supporters are essential for the association SEF. Thus they argue that they are working to create an environment that is enjoyable and safe for the supporters by having tight collaborations with authorities and police. Additionally, he says that in times of crisis, the different clubs of Allsvenskan and Superettan are usually looking towards SEF for help and guidelines. For example, during the pandemic, there were multiple aspects that SEF needed to oversee, such as standard protocols and regulations as well as general security measures. The general secretary means that during such crises as the pandemic, the clubs and SEF are working closely and are continuously searching for improvements and possible collaborations to improve the situation for everyone. Moreover, the general secretary argues that the Ukraine crisis has also enhanced communication and collaboration within Swedish football. In order to help those in need, SEF is organizing fundraising for UNHCR and other communications at all elite football games within Sweden. When asked the same question, Club#6 and Club#3 argue that, though the pandemic and war in Ukraine have changed the focus of the general collaborative efforts, it has not changed the way of working together. Similarly, Club#1 believes that it is business as usual, but other questions are being discussed. However, Club#5 believes that the nature of the crisis intensified the collaborative efforts of the SEF-member clubs since meetings occurred weekly instead of monthly during the period of the pandemic. Although having different perceptions, all clubs agree that the problem-solving culture within Allsvenskan is key to dealing with unexpected situations.

*"Everyone working within Allsvenskan and the sport industry are incredibly oriented towards problem-solving, it is in our everyday work. There is no idea to get frustrated and angry with each other because everyone is working towards the same goal."*

*Club Director Club#3*

Collaboration through youth football is also an aspect that Club #1 believes is important. The Swedish clubs in Allsvenskan work together, with help from SEF, when it comes to youth football through common principles as well as the certification system. Club#1 also states that there are regional collaborations when it comes to promoting youth football, as well as

principles of how youth players can move between clubs in order to reduce possible tensions. Club#3 and Club#6 do also engage in collaboration concerning their youth sections, however, not with other clubs in Allsvenskan. The clubs argue that the reason is their geographical location, due to them being the only club in Allsvenskan in their region. Security and match-fixing are also areas of joint effort, and there are standard regulations that everyone respects. Club#1 believes match-fixing, gambling addiction, and security connected to matches are problems best solved together through sharing information and continuously having a dialogue. Regarding security and the relationship with the police, several clubs and SEF believe that it is important to be united within Allsvenskan to show that the will of the clubs are aligned. Working together with other clubs regarding police errands is something that Club#4 believes is important to reach the best solutions. Furthermore, Club#2 argues that most clubs within Allsvenskan cooperate when it comes to security and event issues, some more and some less, but that the reason for the level of cooperation is knowledge rather than rivalry. The cooperation unfolds by sharing information and using the common knowledge and facilities to be beneficial for the specific clubs enrolled in that event, whereas the security issues are often connected to the events, such as matchdays.

*"There is no reason for me to look down on rival clubs' event managers. Me looking down on them does not promote the best interest of my club or Allsvenskan as a whole... I believe we have become more professional, and everyone is willing to do their part to create the best conditions for an event"*

*Event Manager Club#2*

The Swedish TV agreement, which is controlled by SEF and distributed on past and previous performance, is important according to Club#2 since this system provides solidarity, which is needed to be the best league in the Nordic region. Furthermore, club #2 explains that Swedish clubs must ensure that they have a good environment that can be prosperous for everyone. Club#3 further explains that there are clubs that probably would have generated a lot more money if the TV agreement had been distributed on club popularity or more extensively on performance, a thought shared by most of the clubs interviewed. However, all clubs are believed to be satisfied with the current distributions since it is the best for the league as a whole, as explained by Club#2.

*"The Swedish TV agreement is the most solitary in Europe... It is important in order to be the best league in the Nordic region, to create a prosperous environment for all to develop."*

*Club Director Club#2*

Mostly highlighted by Clubs #2 and #3, the distribution of the TV agreement money enables smaller clubs to develop as organizations, thereby increasing the general level of Allsvenskan, making the league more competitive internationally. Additionally, Club#1 shares their interest in developing Swedish football to the same standard as international

football and believes aspects such as the TV agreement are important to make Swedish football more competitive.

### ***Informal collaborations***

Personal relationships and networks are important in order to create successful professional collaborations. Club#1 explains that it is essential to have connections and that Club Directors should build up a professional network of contacts. The club means that it can be helpful and will facilitate the creation of successful cooperations. Club#1 argues that different clubs and people have different competencies and qualities. They believe that through sustained personal relations with the responsible people at the different clubs, their team and the league could benefit from sharing information with each other. The trust built up through their relationship is vital to enable this kind of information sharing. Club#1 gives an example where one Club Director called to ask how they had gone about developing their Professional Women's Team since Club#1 had more experience regarding this subject. In such a situation, Club#1 are fully transparent with sharing their knowledge, however, they expect to receive the same transparency when the question goes in the opposite direction. Club#5 further elaborates that there is a lot of information sharing within Allsvenskan through phone calls or catch-ups. The Club Director believes the transparency between the clubs is good, with some clubs being better than others. The Club Director argues that the main aspects determining the level of information sharing and whom they share their information with are the individual's relationships and the topic of the question since it is more relevant to talk to some clubs about supporter issues than others. The rivalry between the clubs in question is not deemed as important in the information sharing, since most interviewees believed the information only helped the league as a whole, while it is still up to the individual clubs to act on that information. Furthermore, Club#2 explains that almost all organizational and administrative information is shared within Allsvenskan if asked for. The Club Director provides an example where they have shared information regarding their ticket system to other clubs when asked. The motivation is that the outcome will be more interest in Allsvenskan, therefore beneficial for all. A similar situation is explained by Club#3 since they received help and information from other clubs when wanting to develop their training facilities.

There is a general perception, from all the clubs, that personal relationships with the relevant people within the other clubs are key to developing and sustaining the level of information shared today. Also, it being the aspect that to the largest extent influences whether one club shares information with another or not. However, the majority stresses that it has to be a two-way street, where information goes both ways, otherwise it would be unsustainable. Club#2 further explains that by sharing information through informal phone calls or meetings, it increases the trust and understanding of one another, thereby creating a basis for further cooperation.

*"I do not think there is anyone who would say no to cooperation, but you should have something that binds the clubs together. Some kind of topic that makes it interesting for both parties. "*

#### *Club Director Club#4*

When further developing on informal collaboration, Club#4 thinks that a lot of the collaboration unfolding within Allsvenskan happens behind closed doors and is not displayed to the public, such as smaller projects or continuous dialogues. One possible reason for the discretion, according to Club#4, is to not upset fans, a thought shared by Club#5. They argue that information can be interpreted in different ways, and seeing your club collaborating with a rival might increase unnecessary tensions, making something bigger than it is supposed to be. The discretion of some collaborative initiatives is further discussed by Club#2, who discloses that there is no need to communicate externally every time some kind of agreement is struck. The club explains that it is no secret that the clubs talk to each other, but they do not always need to share everything they talk about, at least not during the negotiation processes. Additionally, Club#3 further indicates that a large amount of collaboration and cooperation unfolds without the knowledge of the public and motivates it with the disruption that media could cause the process through misinterpreting areas of the collaboration.

*"So there is a lot of stuff like this that never comes out in the media and we do not want that to happen either. It's a lot more collaboration than anyone thinks."*

#### *Club Director Club#3*

The informal types of collaboration through personal relationships and communication can lead to more formal collaborations. Club#1 provides an example where they were contacted by a large car manufacturer for a sponsorship deal, however, the car manufacturer ideally wanted all clubs within that region included in the sponsorship deal. Regardless of the rivalries, Club#1 contacted the relevant clubs in the region to present the deal. Through communication and good relationships based on informal collaboration, the situation resulted in the three clubs in question receiving identical contracts of a magnitude that would not have been possible without informal communication, ending up in formal collaboration and a favorable contract for all involved parties. The Club Director of Club#1 believes that more deals of this nature could be developed if the clubs in Allsvenskan have a continuous and open dialogue, something that will benefit the entire league in the long run. Moreover, Club#3 explains a similar situation where their good relationship through informal communication facilitated a formal collaboration with another Allsvenskan club. The situation involved a player that needed to change environment due to professional and personal reasons. Therefore, the two clubs struck an agreement for the player to move to Club#3. However, the other club still paid the player's salary, which would have been impossible without the already established informal relationship between the two clubs. Lastly, Club#2 fills in that, although rivalries and competition are a vital aspect surrounding the teams, the rest of the organization shall highlight collaboration.

#### ***Rivalry***

The General Secretary of SEF believes that there is a lot of rivalry in Allsvenskan. However, today the word is charged with positive values, compared to a couple of years ago when there was much negativity connected to it. The General Secretary argues that it may be related to the efforts done by SEF, incentivizing good relationships between the clubs. Today, SEF has the role of actively promoting collaboration, whereas rivalry applies when teams meet on the pitch. The General Secretary argues that as far as rivalry goes, it is fixed on the team and team performance. Concerning other sections of the organization, the clubs do not act as rivals.

*"When the teams meet on the field, then they are rivals, when signing players, they are rivals, but in almost everything else, the clubs are not rivals ."*

*The General Secretary of Svensk Elitfotboll.*

Club#3 believes it is clear that there is an intense rivalry when playing matches. It is all about winning on the field. Furthermore, they believe that the amount of prestige and rivalry is at its highest when two teams are close to each other geographically since it adds to the competition of the region and usually involves a long history of fixtures. Additionally, they disclose that the club does not actively work towards increasing the rivalries between its competitors in Allsvenskan. However, their marketing department uses different rivalries to increase the suspense between supporters before important matches to raise interest.

According to Club#2, there are probably multiple levels of rivalry. The rivalry connected to the actual performance of the football teams is an absolute prerequisite for the clubs to be measured in the table. However, the Club Director believes that rivalry is mainly present on the field and rarely somewhere else in the organization. Although, similarly to Club#3, they believe that the marketing and communication surrounding matches could increase or sustain the rivalry between clubs by communicating the number of titles won and other aspects personifying their club. Club#2 also share the thought that intense rivalries are often based on historical and geographical circumstances and the actual performance and position in the league table.

Club #4 explains that the whole purpose of football is that clubs have multiple antagonists that you want to win against in order to reach success with your team, and without that aspect, football and sports would not be the same. However, that does not mean that clubs do not respect each other, but rivalry must be present if there is to be a positive development, according to the club. It indicates that clubs need to put in the effort and encourage each other by wanting to be the best. They need to compete in order to survive, the best teams get the best deals and the most money and usually also a lot of supporters.

*"The entire purpose of football is to win the matches your team plays, and on the field, there are rivalries and tensions, often highlighted by supporters."*

*Club Director Club#4*

Lastly, Club #1 explains there is an importance in having a powerful sense of rivalry, however, it is most useful within the same geographical area. Although the Club Director does not believe there is any need for them to increase the rivalry in terms of marketing and communication since there is a trust that supporters and media will do it enough. Club#5 provides a different viewpoint than its colleagues since the interviewees explain that the club does not engage in activities that enhance the rivalry between them and other clubs. This is because they have a history of negative publicity concerning rivalries and supporters, and the Club Director argues that they do not want to encourage any more of that behavior by enhancing rivalry through focused marketing. Thereby they never put emphasis on the tension between them and other teams.

## **Discussion**

### **Competitive boundary work**

Due to the nature of Swedish football and its history of rivalry between clubs, it is expected that there are a lot of interactions displaying signs of competitive boundary work. First of all, when the players meet on the pitch, there is an intense competition since they are trying to win against each other. However, the actions surrounding the games, such as publication of highlights through their media platforms, are more in line with the definitions of competitive boundary work, since the clubs often communicate their superiority in order to separate themselves from other clubs. These aspects are in accordance with the remarks of Langley et al. (2019) about focusing on interactions that separate themselves from others within an advantageous exclusive territory. Moreover, there are several Club Directors who are disclosing that they are actively working towards creating a powerful sense of rivalry around the matches in the league and especially Club Director #4, who means that the whole purpose of football is to have antagonists, otherwise there is no actual entertainment. Additionally, it is noticeable that the geographical location adds to the rivalry and prestige between clubs within the same region, as seen with the different Derbys. Consequently, the competitive boundary work described surrounding these events is more intense since there are more publications and marketing efforts involved.

Actively intensifying the historical boundaries of rivalry between the clubs is common and is specifically done by marketing efforts from the different clubs. This is in line with what Gieryn (1983) discussed about the efforts scientists made to distinguish their work from others they deemed unworthy of. Another example of strengthening boundaries is the campaign made by the football club AIK, called "We are not you," since it is making statements that indicate intense rivalry. It argues for the reality that AIK is the center of attention of Allsvenskan, and it is every other team competing against AIK rather than all teams competing against each other. Although it could be argued that all Football clubs are using framing tactics, as seen in Lefsrud and Meyer (2012), in order to visualize their club as the most superior, AIK is probably the club framing the most since the name "We are not you" alone suggests a high belief of superiority. However, AIK's other campaign, "show heart" which essentially was a fundraising competition between AIK and Hammarby of who



would raise the most money, is slightly different. It also clearly shows signs of competitive boundary work from both clubs since it creates a we against them situation while simultaneously gaining money and prestige. Although, the difference with this particular interaction is that the money collected was donated to charities after the winner was announced from both clubs. Therefore, in practice, the two clubs were collaborating for a common cause by using competitive boundary work rather than utilizing it for themselves alone. The "show heart" campaign is classified as competitive boundary work due to it being in accordance with both Gieryn (1983) and Langley et al. (2019) regarding the creation of separation, however, it is rather unique since it also has aspects of collaboration.

After processing the empirical data, it was clear that none of the organizations were trying to create boundaries as in accordance with Santos and Eisenhardt (2009). It is apparent that the clubs are instead actively interacting to intensify existing boundaries. As seen with the two campaigns AIK made and the showcasing of highlights etc., there is more focus on framing oneself as superior while at the same time framing others as inferior. There are no hostile takeovers, the building of alliances, or the creation of an own market niche, except AIK who are communicating it is them against everyone. However, that is more framing superiority than the creation of a market niche. Thus it is clear that the aspects provided by Lefsrud and Meyer (2012) are more prominent in Allsvenskan than the concepts of Santos and Eisenhardt (2009).

### **Configurational boundary work**

The nature of competitive football incentivizes rivalries, and thus it is not difficult to imagine competitive boundary work being done in order to enforce differences and preserve historical boundaries. However, the data indicated that even though the rivalry is important, collaboration is at least, or if not more significant. The findings showed that clubs are doing collaborative activities while simultaneously remaining behind their continuously established boundaries. According to Guston (2001) such collaborations may take the form of boundary organization, which essentially is a neutral third party organization where rivals can interact. Arguably the best example of this phenomenon is the activities and collaborations within Svensk Elitfotboll, which is a boundary organization within Allsvenskan since it is controlled by all the clubs together. It can frequently be used by the clubs and serve the purpose of being a neutral ground where rivals can meet and discuss matters which may benefit both parties. However, it does at the same time function as an experimental space (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), since Club Directors can meet and discuss collaborations more secretly without risking compromising their official rival image. SEF hosts multiple meetings every year that all Club Directors are invited to. These meetings, as mentioned, mainly consist of information exchange between Club Directors to improve the governing of their respective club.

SEF provides the different clubs with multiple opportunities to collaborate due to it functioning as a boundary organization (Guston, 2001). Not only in terms of information exchange but also in areas such as security, finances, law, and youth football. This is displayed more specifically through the TV agreement, whose purpose is to divide the money equally among the clubs in Allsvenskan. This is, as multiple other aspects, a result of a

functioning boundary organization. Due to the existence of SEF, the clubs are able to facilitate each other financially, which in turn develops the league as a whole. The TV agreement is improving the prospects for the smaller clubs and is making it possible for them to improve, thereby increasing their competitiveness. Through increased competitiveness the league attracts more interest and supporters, thereby facilitating a beneficial situation for the entire league. Based on this, it is apparent that the clubs are using SEF in order to work through boundaries from the outside and influence activities not only as mentioned by Guston (2001) but also as informed by Langley et al (2019).

The interviewees agreed that SEF were their most significant formal collaboration and that a lot of matters have been significantly improved as a result. However, there are other situations where collaboration through boundaries is present. Informal phone calls between Club Directors are normalized and often used to gain information from each other. The content of these phone calls varies, although their purpose is usually to gain help in areas where the Club Directors have less experience, as displayed by the example of the development of ticket systems and training facilities. These phone calls are not official, and the Club Directors are therefore collaborating behind the scenes. It is evident that the personal relationship between the Club Directors is a major factor when it comes to the level and extent of informal collaboration since the informal collaborations tend to ignore possible rivalries and instead prosper on the Club Director's Relationship. Furthermore, the geographical location does add to the rival tension between clubs, however, the interviewees also account for the geographical location as a reason for more collaboration through business events and security issues. The interactions over the phone can thus be interpreted as an active experimental space in accordance with the works of Zietsma and Lawrence (2010). They had similar findings in their article War of the Woods study where experimental spaces were created and utilized by rivals behind the scenes.

### **Collaborative boundary work**

There are two examples of pure collaborative boundary work found: the Ukraine crisis and the covid-19 pandemic. These findings are in accordance with the works of Meier (2015) about downplaying boundaries faster in emergencies since clubs, in a matter of days, ignored all boundaries and implemented encouragement for financial aid to Ukraine on all official Allsvenskan matches. However, it is complex since it is possible to argue that more or less all collaborations can be interpreted as collaborative boundary work. The clubs are trying to reach collaboration; however, for the most part, they are not trying to work at or tear down any boundaries, rather, they are hiding behind the boundaries and are influencing matters through them. Therefore, almost all collaborations landed in the configurational boundary work section since it is, by definition, more accurate.

### **Multiple boundary work**

To further elaborate on the discussion of the different boundary works displayed in the competitive context of football, the following section will act as a base for discussing the types and commitments of boundary work against each other instead of focusing solely on the literature. As discussed, the clubs engage in activities strengthening the boundaries through

marketing campaigns and activities to increase the suspension. This was in line with Gieryn's (1983) findings on competitive boundary work, and these boundary-spanning activities were the most intense when the clubs were in geographical proximity. However, as presented, the clubs also collaborate through both formal and informal channels. The majority of people interviewed argue that collaboration is an important factor in the continuous development of Allsvenskan. Thereby increasing the relevance of sustaining and creating good personal relations between the Club Directors since these relations are argued to be a vital aspect of the clubs level of collaboration. Therefore, the collaborative efforts could be considered to be favored over the competitive interactions. Although, based on the empirical evidence, rivalry and the competitiveness surrounding it are still present in the core of the industry and are one of the major determinants concerning clubs' willingness to develop and perform. Therefore, the empirical data suggests that the interactions with boundaries in the complex industry of football are more similar to the concept of configurational boundary work as presented by Guston (2001) than strict competitive or collaborative boundary work. Although it is clear that the different clubs in Allsvenskan engage more in collaborative interactions than competitive, there are few signs of tearing down boundaries as presented in the collaborative boundary work research. This means that the clubs collaborate to a large extent but do not actively engage in increasing the collaboration further or tear down existing boundaries between each other. In opposite, the clubs engage in activities instead of strengthening boundaries, as displayed previously, through communication surrounding the events. The clearest factors arguing for collaborative boundary work through tearing down existing boundaries are in crisis situations such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. One can argue that the efforts of SEF are aiming to tear down boundaries between its member clubs through collaboration. However since it is through a neutral third party, it is classified as configurational boundary work instead.

The different types of boundary work are seen in different parts of the organizations, with some aspects overlapping. The competitive boundary work is mostly displayed through the formal marketing and communication campaigns and not engaged in the informal settings between Club Directors. Their focus is on collaboration through the upheld boundaries, therefore categorized as configurational boundary work. However, there are no signs of the informal settings actively trying to tear down the existing boundaries, displayed by most informal collaboration not being communicated to the public. Therefore, one can argue that the clubs want to keep the historical differences by upholding boundaries to the public but collaborating in the background, to develop the organization and enable beneficial business opportunities. Indicating that the clubs want to develop and move forward, but at the same time keep the formal relationship dynamics in their historical, rivalistic roots.

Having analyzed the empirical data, the complex industry of football shows various signs of engaging in multiple types of boundary work at the same time. This is rare since the presence of making multiple boundary work at the same time has not previously been encountered. For example, Langley et al. (2019) reviewed 72 articles about different types of boundary work. Not once in their review was the contribution of a paper the presence of multiple types of boundary work simultaneously. Thus, one of the main findings of this research is to show

how organizations do more than one type of boundary work at the same time. This is visible in our study since all three types of boundary work were represented in this analysis. Although, as seen, the majority were competitive and configurational, almost none were collaborative. Even though the aspect of making multiple boundary work is a significant finding within the theory of boundary work, it is not unexplored within previous research on competitor relationships and interactions. For example, Easton et al. (1993) meant that there could be more than one type of relationship between competitors. Moreover, the categories and notions of Bengtsson & Kock (1999) indicate that organizations can have various complex interactions and relationships simultaneously. However, the difference between their and this research is the utilization of the theory boundary work. Analyzing competitors' interactions through the lens of boundary work made it possible to identify what interactions lead to what relationship and understand how these interactions are made. When a football club, for example, made competitive boundary work with another club, previous research would most likely deem it as the relationship competition due to the similar existing interaction such as creating separation for resources and power. However, in this article, due to the research on boundary work, it was possible to gain an understanding of how these competitor interactions were made. Enabling questions that had previously not been possible to ask due to the limitation of the theoretical framework: Did the football clubs defend present boundaries by intensifying them, or did they create entirely new boundaries in order to gain certain advantages? This is proven by the concept of configurational boundary work, which makes it possible to understand how organizations can compete and cooperate at the same time. Previously, co-opetition has been defined by interactions of both collaboration and competition and analyzed with game theory to understand why collaboration between competitors can be helpful. Although, as mentioned, it has not been established how interactions are made in order to create these types of relationships. Through the lens of configurational boundary work, it was clear that the interactions occur through previously established boundaries in co-opetition type relationships, especially with the aid of a boundary organization, such as our case with Svensk Elitfotboll.

## **Conclusion**

There are multiple cases of competitive boundary work found in the study focusing on framing tactics and the preservation of historical boundaries in order to gain resources and power, especially within geographical proximity. This means that organizations are intensifying their competition when they are more near each other. In contrast, there are few signs of the category collaborative boundary work, except during crises such as Ukraine and the covid-19 pandemic, where boundaries are downplayed. This is due to the fact that most of the collaborations are more in line with definitions of configurational boundary work since the organizations are interacting through boundaries rather than tearing them down. Consequently, the type of boundary spanning activities being the most common is configurational boundary work, made through boundary organizations and experimental spaces. Indicating the organizations want to collaborate, however, they prefer to do it discreetly with all the historical boundaries in place.

The research question: *How do rival organizations use boundary-spanning activities in competitor relationships?* Can be answered by stating that rival organizations are working simultaneously with multiple types of boundary work. This is a finding previously not found in boundary work research, showing that rival organizations can uphold and empower boundaries between each other to maintain prestige and identity. Meanwhile, the rival organizations are simultaneously collaborating through informal conversations and a neutral third-party organization. Thereby, the finding exemplifies its setting by not being able to address industries of this complexity with just one type of boundary work, instead it enhances the opportunity to engage in multiple boundary work simultaneously. Indicating that there is more to rival relations than meets the eye since a lot of interactions are happening without the knowledge of the public, thereby adding another perspective on the fierce rivalries displayed through communication channels and media. Additionally, another major finding is made through the "show heart" campaign. Its empirical data indicates that it can be a new type of competitive boundary work previously not seen, defined as using fierce competition to reach collaboration. The campaign preserves boundaries and gives the winner identity and prestige, although, at the same time, it also gives both organizations what they want, which is to donate as much money to the charity as possible. This finding increases the knowledge of boundary work and introduces the notion that collaboration can be reached when there is competition without using the more discreet configurational boundary work.

Furthermore, it is found that boundary work and its theoretical concepts are an adequate lens to analyze competitor interactions since it makes it possible to understand how different competitor relationships unfold, something overlooked by research. Previously, it has only been possible to determine which general interactions lead to what relationship. One prominent example of this notion is Brandenburg and Nalebuff's (1996) Co-opetition relationship, which is defined as collaborative and competitive interactions simultaneously between organizations. It does not show how the different interactions are made, which its boundary-spanning counterpart configurational boundary work does. It explains what type of interactions need to be present for a certain relationship to exist and how they are executed, such as through boundary organizations or experimental spaces. Thus, the theoretical framework boundary work could arguably be used in future research on other organizations to understand which interactions are made in competitor relationships and how they are made.

The study has shown how largely complex industries engage in boundary work through the case of the Swedish football league, Allsvenskan. To further develop competency and information about the phenomenon of competitive interactions, it would be interesting to add an international aspect to it. Firstly, by studying how companies in complex industries interact with international competitors in the same industry. Thereby, it would be possible to compare the national setting of this study with the international, to see whether companies engage more or less with their national or international competitors and why. Secondly, future research could benefit from applying a similar study on the same industry in another country. Several of the people interviewed believe that the collaborative way of working in Allsvenskan is a Swedish way of engaging in competitor relations. Therefore, applying the

study to a culturally similar country such as, for example, Denmark, one would be able to notice interesting dynamics of the Swedish company environment, thereby providing further insight into complex business environments.

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