



On the Parallelism between Chess and Marketing Strategies

Ioanna Kalogeridou and Aikaterini Vassilikopoulou*

Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece

Abstract

The aim of the current paper is to investigate the parallelism between chess and marketing strategies. Chess is a strategic game that combines both strategic thinking and tactical moves. From its strategic aspect, it demands strategic decision-making, deliberate planning, foresight, and tactical adaptations. From its tactical aspect, it requires counting variations, creating traps, and making quick maneuvers. By focusing on both the strategic and tactical dimensions of chess, this paper seeks to connect specific characteristics and processes of the game to strategic marketing. More specifically, competitive behavior, signaling, innovation, and planning are some of the chess-related traits applied to marketing, offering ideas for fruitful reflection and the potential adoption of chess-inspired concepts in the marketing context. Through specific examples from chess gameplay, the present paper illustrates how marketers can better anticipate competition, assess risks, and plan long-term strategic moves.

Keywords: chess, strategic marketing, planning, competition

1. Introduction

Strategy emphasizes competitive tactical moves aimed at growing market share within a particular industry. It has long been regarded as a fundamental pillar of competitive advantage not only in the business field but also in various domains where planning, strategic thinking, and foresight are of the utmost importance (Nielsen, 2005). Chess is widely considered the hallmark of strategic thinking. A chess player must calculate moves, evaluate the position of the game, anticipate future scenarios, assess risks, identify opportunities and threats, and constantly adapt tactics based on evolving conditions, which are all underpinned by a long-term strategic plan (Vardhman, 2025). These features mirror the complexities of decision-making in real-world business environments.

The strategic nature of chess presents a formal, structured dynamic in which decision-making is not only reactive but also deeply proactive and intentional. Each chess player must develop, execute an opening strategy and also adjust in response to the opponent's moves, using signaling and positional sacrifices for long-term benefit. Competencies such as strategic

signaling, risk management, opportunity identification and capitalization, and conscious trade-offs align closely with modern strategic marketing practices (Coutu, 2005).

Marketers have often sought to analyze the strategic dimensions of marketing by drawing inspiration from seemingly unrelated fields or events involving strategic thinking. For instance, several studies have explored parallels between war strategies and marketing (e.g., Bozkurta & Ergen, 2016; Burns & Warren, 2008). Although chess is inherently strategic, few studies attempt to draw direct strategic parallels between chess and marketing strategies. Based on the authors' review, only one study has examined the connection between chess strategy and business strategy (Graber, 2007). However, that study adopts a broader perspective, focusing on general business characteristics also found in chess, such as flexibility, patience, ethics, and teamwork (Graber, 2007). The present study, therefore, probes deeper into the marketing domain, emphasizing the strategic aspects of chess that can be applied to strategic marketing, with the aim of identifying and analyzing specific parallels.

The study adopts a qualitative, bibliographic methodology. Academic books, journal articles, and conference proceedings on chess strategy and marketing strategy were reviewed. A comparative analytical approach was employed, identifying core principles of chess and drawing parallels with marketing practices. This method allows the development of conceptual analogies that link the logic of competitive play in chess with marketing strategies in dynamic business environments.

2. Parallelisms

2.1. Competitive behavior & Signaling

According to Varadarajan & Jayachandran (1999), competitive behaviour, which is defined as the actions or reactions of competitors, is a key consideration in marketing strategy design. Actions are steps taken by firms to gain or secure a competitive edge, ranging from simple measures (e.g., offering discounts) to more complex initiatives (e.g., launching a new product). When designing and implementing such actions, it is essential to anticipate potential competitive responses (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). As Porter (1980) notes, gaining a competitive advantage depends heavily on how competitors react to a company's moves. Chen (1996) further emphasizes that a firm's decision to act is shaped by the competitive landscape, as well as its own motivation and capabilities. Because competitors' moves can often be unpredictable, effective competitor analysis should go beyond surface-level observations of current strategies and resources. Nielsen (2005) argues that marketers must also examine competitors' long-term goals to better anticipate their behaviour.

In chess, there are numerous examples where gaining an advantage is inseparable from the opponent's response. For instance, in the Queen's Gambit opening (1.d4 d5 2.c4), White sacrifices a pawn early to control the center of the board, a move that can create a strong strategic edge. However, this advantage is not assured. If Black responds correctly with 2...e6 or 2...c6, followed by ...Nf6 and ...Be7, they avoid taking the pawn, develop solidly, and neutralize White's initiative. Conversely, if Black accepts the pawn (2...dxc4) without proper preparation, White can quickly develop with moves like a4, Nf3, and e3, regain the pawn, secure space, and achieve a lasting positional advantage (Silman, 2007).

In marketing terms, this illustrates how an aggressive initial move, such as a disruptive pricing strategy or bold product launch, may appear to offer an immediate advantage. However, if competitors respond strategically by strengthening customer loyalty, providing counteroffers, or enhancing brand messaging, the initial advantage can be neutralized or even

reversed. On the other hand, if the response is poor or overly passive, the first mover's advantage may evolve into long-term market dominance.

Lappo et al. (2023) show that cultural transmission biases shape chess players' decisions, including prestige bias (imitating top players), success bias (copying winning moves), and frequency-dependent bias (trying novel moves). In marketing, these translate to firms imitating industry leaders for credibility, benchmarking proven strategies, and pursuing unique approaches to stand out in saturated markets.

Porter's framework identifies four essential areas for assessing a competitor's intentions:

- (1) goals
- (2) assumptions
- (3) current strategy
- (4) capabilities

The first two reveal what motivates the competitor, while the latter two indicate what the competitor is currently doing or could potentially do. Porter also notes that a competitor's "history", including past strategies, can provide valuable insight into its goals and assumptions (Nielsen, 2005).

When evaluating an opponent's goals, it is important to recognize their long-term plans. For example, in chess, if a player begins maneuvering pieces toward the kingside early in the game, this may signal an intention to launch a direct kingside attack. Similarly, in marketing, a company expanding into new markets or product lines may be pursuing an aggressive growth strategy. Considering an opponent's past behavior is equally critical when forming assumptions about their likely responses. In chess, a player might assume, based on previous games, that an opponent plays passively, which could lead to overextension and miscalculation.

In the business world, a firm might assume a competitor lacks the resources to respond effectively, exploit what appears to be a market gap, and launch a new product, only to underestimate the competitor's adaptability. As Nielsen (2005) emphasizes, historical behavior is often a key indicator of a competitor's underlying beliefs and expectations. In terms of current strategies, chess players often begin with well-practiced opening systems such as the Sicilian Defense, Queen's Gambit, or Ruy Lopez. These openings shape the early position of the game and reveal the player's preferred strategic direction. Similarly, in marketing, a company's approach to pricing or product positioning can signal its broader strategic intentions.

Capabilities, both in chess and business, help identify not only visible strengths but also hidden potential. In chess, underdeveloped pieces or seemingly passive positions can suddenly generate a series of threats if activated in the right sequence, such as when a "quiet" bishop delivers a decisive attack after a tactical combination. Likewise, a company with powerful but underutilized R&D resources or an underdeveloped brand image may possess far greater potential than competitors anticipate. Porter (1980) emphasizes the importance of understanding these core dimensions, i.e. goals, assumptions, current strategy, and capabilities, so that no detail is overlooked. Misjudging even one of these aspects can lead to poor decisions and the loss of competitive advantage.

Companies often face the dilemma of whether to invest substantial resources in pursuit of competitive advantage. This notion of sacrificing resources with the expectation of future returns is mirrored in chess through the concept of the gambit, in which a player deliberately sacrifices material to obtain a superior strategic position (Graber, 2007). In both contexts, a short-term loss is accepted for the prospect of long-term gain. In marketing, this might take

the form of launching an expensive promotional campaign, investing in emerging technology, or entering a new market segment.

Such sacrifices vary in risk. In chess, a low-risk example is the Queen's Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.c4), where White sacrifices a pawn to accelerate central control and piece development, often regaining the pawn while maintaining the initiative. If Black accepts the pawn (2...dxc4) without adequate defense, White can dominate the center and dictate the course of the game. A high-risk example is the King's Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.f4), where the stakes are greater but so are the potential rewards. Similarly, in marketing, temporary setbacks, such as short-term revenue declines from heavy promotional spending, can pave the way for long-term benefits, including greater market penetration and stronger customer loyalty.

In the King's Gambit opening, a more aggressive sacrifice of a central pawn is made to open attacking lines. If the opponent is unprepared, this can lead to a quick victory. However, it also creates serious long-term vulnerabilities, particularly at the expense of the king's safety. In business terms, this resembles making risky investments, such as entering an extremely competitive, chaotic market with substantial upfront costs, which may result either in rapid brand establishment and increased market share or in lasting liabilities.

Whether in chess or marketing, a gambit requires careful calculation to ensure that the compensation, such as momentum, time, or market influence, is tangible, realistic, and sustainable. As Graber (2007) notes, both domains demand a clear understanding of what is being given up and the trade-offs involved. Although competitors' actions cannot always be predicted, firms can attempt to anticipate their rivals' moves and behavior. Varadarajan and Jayachandran (1999) highlight that companies should be able to view situations from their competitors' perspective, thinking through scenarios as their rivals would, under the assumption that all parties act rationally and intelligently.

In chess, every move, whether one's own or the opponent's, can create opportunities or threats, shifting the dynamics of the game. Similarly, in strategic marketing, firms must continuously monitor both internal decisions and external market responses, recognizing that each strategic move may generate new advantages or vulnerabilities. Like chess players, marketers must analyze the competitive landscape in real time and assess risks with the aim of improving their position. For example, in chess, advancing the e4 pawn, which is a seemingly harmless move, can provoke a sharp counterattack, as in the Latvian Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5), exposing weaknesses against a well-prepared opponent. In marketing, launching a new product or campaign without considering potential competitive reactions may lead to swift countermeasures, such as aggressive pricing, resulting in a loss of market ground.

Competitive signals are indicators of possible future actions, intended either to convey information to competitors or to gather insights from them (Heil & Robertson, 1991). As Varadarajan and Jayachandran (1999) point out, competitive behavior is often shaped by such signals. Shahid et al. (2024) examine and assess how signaling theory has been applied within international marketing, noting that its importance in this field is steadily increasing. However, signaling can place the sender at a disadvantage; revealing intentions in advance may allow competitors to respond strategically, undermining the sender's position.

In chess, intentional or unintentional signals can shape an opponent's perceptions and decisions. For example, hesitation, time pressure, or rushed moves can indicate uncertainty or lack of preparation, giving a skilled opponent the opportunity to seize control. Early inaccuracies, deviations from the opening system, or careless moves can encourage the opponent to adopt a more aggressive, high-risk tactical approach, altering both the psychological and strategic dynamics of the game and leading to an imbalanced position. In

marketing, firms must carefully manage the signals they send and accurately interpret incoming signals in order to make timely, well-informed strategic decisions.

How marketing managers perceive the market, firm characteristics, competitive history, and competitive signals is particularly important for strategy development. Varadarajan and Jayachandran (1999) identify several common errors in interpreting competitors' behavior:

1. **Insufficient attention to competitors:** A firm may focus too heavily on its internal goals while overlooking rivals' actions. For example, a brand might launch a new campaign without considering that a major competitor could release a similar initiative at the same time, leading to diluted market share and missed opportunities. In chess, this is parallel to ignoring the opponent's intentions and focusing solely on one's own plans.
2. **Excessive focus on rivals:** Overly concentrating on a competitor's every move can result in reactive and inconsistent strategies. For example, a company that keeps cutting prices to match a competitor's discounts can lose profits and stop growing. In the same way, in chess, a player who only responds to the opponent's moves without making their own plans often ends up stuck in a weak position.
3. **Misjudging competitors due to overconfidence and attribution biases:** Attribution bias can cause managers to underestimate rivals. For example, dismissing a competitor's entry into a new market as unsustainable may lead to inaction, causing missed opportunities. In chess, this is comparable to underestimating a lower-rated opponent, only to suffer an unexpected loss due to overconfidence.

2.2. Innovation

The body of research exploring the link between innovation strategies and business performance is substantial (Onufrey & Bergek, 2021). An innovative strategy is often regarded as an indirect yet powerful means for a firm to secure lasting competitive advantage. Innovations are rarely the product of mere luck; they require significant effort, careful preparation, and substantial risk-taking (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). Innovation also plays a crucial role in chess. Surprising, creative moves in the opening phase, which are known as novelties, are the result of thorough theoretical preparation designed to take opponents into unfamiliar territory. At the professional level, Garry Kasparov is considered one of the most innovative players. A notable example is his game against Viswanathan Anand at the 1995 Linares tournament, in which he revived the rare Evans Gambit, previously regarded as outdated, and secured victory. Despite the risks, such innovation can unsettle opponents and dictate the flow of the game.

Innovation in chess is also evident during the middlegame, where players may create material imbalances or reposition pieces in unconventional ways. Although these approaches carry significant risk, they can yield long-term positional advantages. An innovative player not only reaps immediate benefits but may also gain a reputation that pushes future opponents into a more passive, defensive style. The same applies in business: innovative companies often set industry standards and dominate their markets. In both chess and marketing, innovation demands preparation, insight, and calculated risk-taking, but when successful, it can secure lasting strategic superiority.

2.3. First-Mover

A first-mover is a company that is the first to launch a new product or enter a new market (Lieberman and Montgomery, 1988). The concept of first-mover advantage refers to the competitive control gained by entering the market early. Early entrants tend to capture larger market shares and shape industry standards (Varadarajan and Jayachandran, 1999).

In chess, the player with the white pieces always moves first, providing a slight but measurable advantage. Statistics show that White wins approximately 54-56% of games on average in elite tournaments. By moving first, White sets the pace and direction of the opening, often forcing Black into a defensive position. For example, in the aggressive Ruy Lopez opening (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5), White applies pressure on the center and initiates long-term positional plans, while Black must respond defensively.

Similarly, in marketing, early movers define industry standards, build customer loyalty, and establish brand recognition. However, this initial advantage is not guaranteed and can be costly if a move is premature. Thus, first movers in both chess and business must not only capitalize on their early initiatives but also adapt continuously throughout the process to maintain their advantage.

2.4. Implementation

As Bonoma (1984) states, strategies are successful and beneficial for a company only if they are implemented effectively. Strategy alone does not guarantee success; the outcome depends largely on how it is executed. A chess player may choose a well-established opening system, such as the Sicilian Defense, to secure a superior position, but if subsequent moves are inaccurate, rushed, misapplied under pressure, or miscalculated, the strategy quickly deteriorates. The key lies in fully embracing the position and deeply understanding the underlying strategic principles of the system.

In the business world, as Li (2023) notes, despite Nokia's dominance until the 2000s, it failed to adapt to the smartphone era, resulting in misaligned products and decline. Apple seized the opportunity with the 2007 iPhone, aligning hardware, software, distribution, and branding with customer needs. This case shows that strategy alone is insufficient. Effective implementation, like executing a chess plan move by move, sustains competitive advantage.

However, implementation errors can still arise due to lack of preparation, miscommunication, or faulty calculations. In business, these errors often stem from internal misalignment and inadequate resources. In chess, they may result from time pressure, psychological fatigue, or underestimating the opponent. Such mistakes can cause deviation from an otherwise winning plan.

2.5. Aggressive vs. Defensive Strategies

Success depends, among others, on the choice between aggressive and defensive strategies, considering available resources, the competitive environment, and long-term goals. In marketing, offensive strategies such as the frontal attack, flank attack, or bypass attack (Kotler & Singh, 1981) are employed when a firm aims to challenge a competitor directly, exploit an underutilized market segment, or enter territories to avoid immediate conflict.

Similarly, in chess, aggressive strategies involve early piece activity, unexpected and well-calculated sacrifices, and sustained pressure on the opponent. Examples include the King's Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.f4) and the Evans Gambit opening (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.b4), where White sacrifices material to seize the initiative, rapidly develop pieces, and force Black into a defensive position. Defensive strategies in marketing focus on preserving market share, building brand loyalty, and reinforcing existing strengths. In chess, this is reflected in openings like the Caro-Kann Defense (1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5) and Petrov's Defense (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6), where Black aims to establish a solid structure and prepare for long-term counterplay. The defensive stance allows absorption of pressure and the opportunity to strike back at the optimal moment.

McIlroy-Young et al. (2021) show that chess players can be identified by distinctive behavioral styles such as aggressive or defensive play. Translated into marketing, aggressive styles align with bold, trend-setting strategies, while defensive styles reflect risk-averse, retention-focused approaches. Recognizing these patterns helps firms adapt strategies to audiences whose playing style matches either dynamism or stability.

Each situation is unique, and no single strategy is inherently superior, thus balance is essential. An aggressive approach may fail if unsupported, while excessive caution can lead to missed opportunities and a passive position. Therefore, flexibility is key, requiring the ability to recognize and adopt the most appropriate strategy for each occasion.

3. Conclusion

This study has examined the strategic parallels between chess and marketing, demonstrating how principles from chess, such as signaling, risk management, innovation, and adaptability, can enhance the formulation and execution of marketing strategies. Just as a chess player must calculate threats, anticipate responses, and make trade-offs among evolving conditions, marketers operate in competitive environments that demand similar skills. Concepts like competitive behavior, first-mover advantage, strategic sacrifice, and the balance between aggressive and defensive approaches illustrate how chess strategy offers valuable insights into market dynamics. Crucially, strategy alone, whether in chess or business, is insufficient without effective implementation. Mistakes, wrong guesses about competitors, or not adjusting to changes can quickly destroy any advantage. By adopting a chess-inspired mindset, marketing professionals can improve their strategic thinking, planning, and decision-making in complex, competitive markets.

References

- Bonoma, T. V. (1984). Making your marketing strategies work. *Harvard Business Review*, *62*(2), 69–76.
- Bozkurt, F., & Ergen, A. (2016). Art of war and its implications on marketing strategies: Thinking like a warrior. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, *3*(3), 37–45. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v3i3.108>
- Burns, D. J., & Warren, H. B. (2008). Consumer warfare: Implications for marketing strategy. *Journal of Business Strategy*, *29*(6), 44–52. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02756660810917237>
- Chen, M. J. (1996). Competitor analysis and interfirm rivalry: Toward a theoretical integration. *Academy of Management Review*, *21*(1), 100–134. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258631>
- Coutu, D. (2005, April). Strategic intensity. *Harvard Business Review*, *83*(4), 20–22.
- Graber, R. S. (2007). Chess strategy and business strategy. In *Proceedings of the Allied Academies International Conference* (pp. 25–30). Academy for Economics and Economic Education.
- Heil, O., & Robertson, T. S. (1991). Toward a theory of competitive market signaling: A research agenda. *Strategic Management Journal*, *12*(6), 403–418. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250120602>
- Kotler, P., & Singh, R. (1981). Marketing warfare in the 1980s. *Journal of Business Strategy*, *2*(1), 19–29.

- Lappo, E., Rosenberg, N. A., & Feldman, M. W. (2023). Cultural transmission of move choice in chess. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, *290*(2008), 20231634. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2023.1634>
- Li, K. (2023). Comparative analysis of the technology strategy in the high-tech industry: A case study of Apple and Nokia. *BCP Business & Management*, *36*, 445–450. <https://doi.org/10.54691/bcpbm.v36i.3498>
- Lieberman, M. B., & Montgomery, D. B. (1988). First-mover advantages. *Strategic Management Journal*, *9*(S1), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250090706>
- McIlroy-Young, R., Wang, R., Sen, S., Kleinberg, J. M., & Anderson, A. (2021). Detecting individual decision-making style: Exploring behavioral stylometry in chess. In M. Ranzato, A. Beygelzimer, Y. Dauphin, P. S. Liang, & J. Wortman Vaughan (Eds.), *Advances in neural information processing systems*, *34* (pp. 21878–21891). Curran Associates, Inc. <https://proceedings.neurips.cc/paper/2021>
- Nielsen, C. (2005). The global chess game ... or is it Go? Market-entry strategies for emerging markets. *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *47*(4), 397–427. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.20060>
- Onufrey, K., & Bergek, A. (2021). Transformation in a mature industry: The role of business and innovation strategies. *Technovation*, *105*, 102190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.technovation.2020.102190>
- Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive strategy: Techniques for analyzing industries and competitors*. Free Press.
- Shahid, Z. A., Tariq, M. I., Paul, J., Naqvi, S. A. N., & Hallo, L. (2024). Signaling theory and its relevance in international marketing: A systematic review and future research agenda. *International Marketing Review*, *41*(2), 514–561. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-04-2022-0092>
- Silman, J. (2007). *How to reassess your chess: The complete chess-mastery course*. Siles Press.
- Varadarajan, P. R., & Jayachandran, S. (1999). Marketing strategy: An assessment of the state of the field and outlook. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *27*(2), 120–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070399272002>
- Vardhman, J. (2025). Applying chess strategies to real-life situations. *Premier Chess Academy*. Retrieved September 22, 2025, from <https://premierchessacademy.com/applying-chess-strategies-to-real-life-situations>