

FINAL REPORT

Fan Relationships and National Football Associations in
Europe:
Better understanding for better management

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I. Introduction

The overall aim of this research project was to identify the types of relationship football fans want to establish with their National Football Associations in order to improve them through a marketing approach. Improved relationships should allow National Football Associations to better achieve their organisational goals and to satisfy and maintain football fans and their members loyal to them.

The objectives of the research project are fourfold and aim to:

- Define what kind of relationships fans with different levels of commitment and different cultures in Europe expect to have with their National Football Association and team.
- Identify for each category of fans the factors that can make a relationship be perceived as positive and successful.
- Identify and distinguish the relationship management practices which are desired by fans from those which create points of tension and resistance between different countries.
- Identify the most relevant factors and management practices in order to increase fans' loyalty and commitment towards the relationship.

Although the relationships between football fans and their clubs have received quite a lot of attention – see for example Harris and Ogbonna (2008) for a recent example, no previous study tried to achieve these objectives in the context of relationships between football fans and their national football teams and associations. Consequently, it appeared relevant to follow an inductive research approach based on qualitative research made of focus groups and interviews.

Because of the diversity of European contexts it appeared necessary to select several case studies and several variables were taken into consideration. The main selection criterion was economical as it was important to select countries from diverse economic stages as it can be estimated that relationship marketing approaches and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) techniques would be more applied in the most advanced economies. This factor is closely linked to the geographical dimension when considering a West-East spectrum. The size of the country and the importance of football as a sport were also factors to take into consideration as they would influence the size of the national association and the number of participants and members, which in turn would influence the NA's economic situation and position towards marketing. As the strength of the national football league could be a factor influencing the nature of the relationship between national associations and their fans, the importance of the local league was also taken into account. Finally pragmatic and practical considerations regarding the data collection process were also taken into account to select countries. A

consideration of all these factors made us choose three countries: Armenia, England and Lithuania. It was decided to conduct focus groups with Armenian and Lithuanian fans whereas individual interviews were chosen for English fans on the basis of the importance of the relationship between English fans and their clubs.

This report is structured upon three main parts. The second part presents the theoretical foundations of this study. The third part presents the methodological aspects of the study. The fourth part presents the findings of the study and comprises four sections. The sections 1 to 3 present the findings of Lithuania, Armenia and England respectively and the last section analyses the findings between the three case studies. Last, a conclusion is drawn reflecting on the research objectives and identifying future research perspectives.

II. Theoretical background

Many practitioners and researchers now recognise the importance of fans' loyalty for sport organisations due to the numerous benefits it provides, such as insuring steady financial revenues, creating positive word-of-mouth, and reducing price elasticity and sensitivity to competitors' offers (Bodet, 2012; Harris and Goode, 2004; Harris and Ogbonna, 2008). The acknowledgment of the importance of loyalty has progressively encouraged managers and practitioners to move from a conception of the organisation-individual exchanges focused on short-term transactions to long-term relationships (Hetzl, 2004). For Grönroos (2000, p.3), "a relationship has developed when a customer perceives that a mutual way of thinking exists between customer and supplier or service provider". It is therefore crucial that managers consider the relationship from the customers' perspective and understand what they seek in it (Christopher *et al.*, 1991). A relational perspective is now even considered by numerous practitioners and theorist as orthodoxy (Harris and Ogbonna, 2008). The management and the development of this relationship is the purpose of relationship marketing. According to Grönroos (1994, p. 9), relationship marketing aims to "identify and establish, maintain and enhance and, where necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all the parties involved are met".

However, Ferrand & McCarthy (2009) reminded us that this type of marketing was also relevant for not-for-profit organisations which represent a large proportion of sport organisations. Furthermore, this is particularly relevant for sport organisations because sport supporters exhibit genuine relational characteristics (Farrelly and Quester, 2003, Redden and Steiner, 2000). Specifically, these marketing approaches and techniques aim to encourage consumers to climb the loyalty ladder, which is made of the following stages (Christopher *et al.*, 2004; Ferrand & McCarthy, 2009):

- Prospect – people belonging to the target group.
- Customer – people with who single transactions were carried out.
- Client – people with whom the organisation carries out regular commercial transactions.
- Supporter - people with whom the organisation established an emotional link and who support it in a non-active way.
- Advocate - people with whom the organisation has established an emotional link and who support it in an active way.
- Partner – people who actively collaborate with you by committing resources.

One of the main tools used to manage these relationships is named Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and aims to understand, anticipate and manage the needs of the final consumers in order satisfy them and encourage long-term loyalty. However, Hetzel (2004) noted that even if this tool appears theoretically highly relevant, its application is often too centred on the organisation's needs and objectives and too disconnected from the needs of the customers. This situation can certainly be observed in the football industry and Adamson *et al.* (2006, p.159) summarise the position as “one of ‘talking the talk’ of relationships, but ‘walking the walk’ of transaction marketing”, which mainly focuses on short-term benefits. Therefore, the successful management of relationships between sport organisations and their fans first requires a true will to focus on mutual long-terms benefits but also to understand the various expectations of the different prospects. This is particularly the case in sport as fans diverse in terms of expectations, team identification, attachment and loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2009; Tapp, 2004; Tapp & Clowes, 2002).

Moreover, as there are very important differences between football and conventional businesses, these techniques cannot simply be applied to all football organisations especially the National Football Associations. For this reason, Adamson *et al.* (2006) praised the development of what they called ‘Fan Relationship Management’ (FRM) strategies to replace the too unspecific and not adapted CRM strategies. However, despite this call, no studies have yet tried to identify and define the relationship needs and expectations of the various football fans. This identification is particularly important not only because it deals with the efficiency of marketing management practices, and bottom line with the allocation of resources within football organisations, but also because a mismanagement of the relationship can create dissatisfaction and sometimes resistance which can be expressed in many different forms (e.g., petitions, protests, campaigns, boycotts) and which can lead to disaffection and non-attendance on a long-term perspective. This was also the analysis made by Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick (1998) and O’Malley and Tynan (1999) who found that the rhetoric of relationship marketing does not always match the reality of consumer marketing contexts in which such initiatives often fail to

create any real trust or commitment and are often perceived as intrusive by consumers. Harris and Ogbonna (2008) also noted that it would be inaccurate to believe that all fans are interested in long-term mutual relationships and that some of them would just want discrete transactions and contacts.

From the few who have been interested in this topic from a spectator/fan perspective, it was found that the proposed entry of market rhetoric, illustrated by the use of terms such as 'customer' and 'branding' and the market-centred differentiation (i.e., supporters versus fans), was seen as controversial and some fans fear losing a part of their identity and culture (Duke, 2002; Giulianotti, 2005; King, 1997; Oppenheim & van Zoonen, 2006). Although most of these studies were conducted in the context of professional football clubs, it can be assumed that these issues are fully applicable and potentially amplified in the context of National Football Associations due to the importance of national identity. Finally, due to the cultural and economic differences, in addition to the sporting results, it is strongly expected that differences will be identified between European countries, which would reinforce the contextual dimension of the definition of the relationships sought by fans. In this idea, it could be hypothesised that fans from countries with advanced economies would show some scepticism regarding relationship marketing and its intrusiveness whereas fans from emerging countries would be in demand for more relationship and more management from the organisation. However, despite assuming differences between fans in Europe, the current literature is not rich and advanced enough to establish specific hypotheses regarding these differences.

III. Methodology

Considering that no study has been conducted on the topic from a fan's point of view in relation to football in general and National Football Associations in particular, the amount of specific knowledge in the literature is relatively scarce. Consequently, this study's methodology followed an inductive research approach based on focus groups and individual interviews and aiming to identify theoretical issues and potential hypotheses from a relatively unexplored context. The use of qualitative research was previously advocated by Harris and Ogbonna (2008) who analysed the relationship between English fans and their clubs.

Because of the diversity of European contexts it appeared necessary to select several case studies and several variables were taken into consideration. The main selection criterion was economical as it was important to select countries from diverse economic stages as it can be estimated that relationship marketing approaches and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) techniques would be more applied in the most advanced economies. This factor is closely linked to the geographical dimension when considering a West-East spectrum. The size of the country and the importance of football as a

sport were also factors to take into consideration as it would influence the size of the national association and the number of participants and members, which in turn would influence the NA's economic situation. As the strength of the national football league could be a factor influencing the nature of the relationship between national associations and their fans, the importance of the local league was also taken into account. Finally pragmatic and practical considerations regarding the data collection process were also taken into account to select countries. The systematic inclusion of each variable in the research design would have required the selection of at least two cases (high vs. low or strong vs. weak) per variable which would have created a too big sample size. As a maximum of three case studies was manageable, we selected the cases of Lithuania, Armenia and England. As the main objective was to obtain as broad and diverse information as possible, the choice of focus groups appeared justified as they are widely used for exploratory research in marketing (Morgan, 2008). However, considering that the English football club context is significantly different than the other contexts due to the importance of the Premier League, we decided to conduct individual interviews with English fans as they allow to obtain more details about specific issues for each interviewee (Morgan, 2008). The same approach was previously adopted by Harris and Ogbonna (2008).

Following Grover and Vrier's (2006) recommendations, each focus group should comprise between 6 and 10 individuals. Based on the work of Tapp and Clowes (2002) who identified several types of fans in English football based on their level of attachment and loyalty, we decided to conduct two focus groups for Armenia and Lithuania with one focus groups gathering die-hard fans (or fanatics) and one focus group gathering regular supporters and casual (committed and carefree) fans. The distinction between die-hard fans and casual fans was based on Tapp and Clowes' (2002) definition and used the number of games attended per year as main criterion. The same distinction was used for selecting English fans.

A. Instrument

This interview guide comprised four main sections (see section VII Appendix for the details of the interview guide) and served as basis for the focus groups in Lithuania and Armenia and the individual interviews in England. In the first section, questions were designed to characterise and understand the nature of the relationships between the fans and their national teams. Examples of questions are: how often are you in contact with your national teams? Do you say your contacts with the national teams and their players are regular? The second section of the guide was designed to understand the nature of the relationships between the fans and their National Associations. Examples of questions are: do

you make a distinction between the national teams and the National Football Association? Do you know what are the activities run by the National Football Association? Do you think your National Football Association is visible enough? The third section of the guide focused on the role of marketing and Customer Relationship Management practices on the relationship. Examples of questions are: do you know what the NFA is doing in terms of marketing? Do you feel connected with the other fans of the national teams? The fourth and final section aims to compare the practices of National Football Associations and Professional Clubs from a fan perspective. Examples of questions are: If you also follow professional clubs, how would you compare the relationship you have with your national team and the professional club you like or support? If different, do you understand why? Which one is better? Generally speaking, what do you think about the marketing of the professional club you support?

B. Data collection

One research partner from the National Football Associations from the countries of Lithuania and Armenia has been identified and a research meeting was organised with the two of them. During these meetings, the purpose and specific objectives of the research project were presented and discussed. The selection of participants and the conduct of the focus groups were also discussed as the Lithuanian and Armenian partners were responsible for these tasks. From these meetings, the initial version of the interview guide was slightly amended to fit with the countries' particularities. For instance, as club football is not very developed in Armenia, it was decided to try to compare the Armenian Football Federation's marketing practices with other major national associations. The individual interviews with English fans were conducted by a research assistant.

In Lithuania, the two focus groups composed of die-hard fans on one hand and regular and casual fans on the other hand comprised 11 participants each. The tables below provide the characteristics of the focus groups' participants.

LITHUANIAN CASUAL FANS				
Gender	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Male	28	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Male	33	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Female	18	Primary	Kaunas region	High school student
Male	19	High school	Kaunas city	University student
Male	27	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Female	20	High school	Kaunas city	University student
Female	27	University	London	University student / employed
Male	29	University	Vilnius city	Employed

Male	18	Primary	Šiauliai region	High school student / employed
Male	23	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Male	19	High school	Vilnius city	Employed

LITHUANIAN DIE-HARD FANS				
Sex	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Female	27	University	Vilnius region	Employed
Male	22	University	Copenhagen	University student / employed
Male	28	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Male	29	High school	Vilnius city	University student / employed
Male	29	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Male	20	High school	Vilnius/Alytus city	University student / employed
Male	27	University	Vilnius city	Employed
Female	19	High school	Kaunas region	University student / employed
Male	21	High school	Vilnius city	University student / employed
Male	23	High school	Vilnius city	University student / employed

In Armenia, 8 participants composed the focus group made of casual fans, and 8 participants composed the focus group made of die-hard fans.

ARMENIAN CASUAL FANS				
Gender	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Female	22	University	Yerevan	Employed (designer)
Male	22	University	Yerevan	Employed (diplomacy)
Male	23	University	Yerevan	Unemployed
Female	25	University	Yerevan	Employed (economist)
Female	25	University	Yerevan	Employed (psychologist)
Male	26	University	Yerevan	Employed (international affairs)
Male	23	University	Yerevan	Employed (political science)
Male	23	University	Yerevan	Employed (public policy)

ARMENIAN DIE-HARD FANS				
Gender	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Male	24	University	Yerevan	Employed (engineer)
Male	24	University	Yerevan	Unemployed
Male	24	University	Yerevan	Employed (journalist)
Male	21	University	Yerevan	Employed (shop assistant)
Male	17	Secondary	Yerevan	Unemployed
Male	30	Secondary	Yerevan	Employed (taxi driver)
Male	26	University	Yerevan	Employed (oriental studies)
Male		University	Yerevan	Unemployed

In total, 10 English fans were interviewed, comprising 6 casual fans and 4 die-hard fans.

CASUAL ENGLISH FANS				
Gender	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Male	27	University	Silverstone, Northamptonshire	Employed
Male	24	University	Rustington, West Sussex	Employed
Male	25	University	Leeds, West Yorkshire	Employed
Male	25	University	Chattenden, Kent	Employed
Male	26	University	Brackley, Northamptonshire	Employed
Male	24	University	Luton, Bedfordshire	University student

DIE-HARD ENGLISH FANS				
Gender	Age	Education	Place of residence	Current occupation
Male	25	University	London	Employed
Female	25	University	Bradford	Employed
Male	26	University	Luton, Bedfordshire	Self-employed
Male	23	University	Loughborough, Leicestershire	University student

IV. Analysis

The analysis of the data followed a two stage process. The first stage deals with the within-case analysis looking specifically at each individual country. For each country, a descriptive analysis is conducted for each focus group and is followed by an overall discussion and analysis for the country, identifying their specificities and linking the findings to the literature. The within-case analysis concentrates on the Lithuanian, Armenian and the English cases respectively. The second stage deals with the between-case analysis and attempts to put the different cases in perspective and to identify similarities and differences as well as theoretical issues.

A. Stage one: the within-case analysis

Before presenting and discussing the results it is important to note two important points. The first point to note is that the analysis deals with fans' perceptions and that these perceptions are subjective. There is no right or wrong answer; this is simply how fans perceive things. It is therefore possible to notice gaps in terms of perceptions among fans but also between fans and national associations' managers and decision makers. This leads to the second point which is about representativity. The results are not

representative from a statistical point of view. They are probably representative in the sense that they represent the broadness and the richness of opinions among fans but it does not mean that they can be extrapolated in the same proportions to the whole population of fans. Further quantitative research would be needed to confirm the distribution of opinions.

1. The case study of Lithuania

The descriptive analysis deals first with the casual fans and is followed by the die-hard fans. An overall discussion then follows about the whole Lithuanian case study.

a) *The Lithuanian casual fans*

(1) Interest in the national teams

All participants are before all interested in the senior men football National Team (NT): there are interested in the team as a unit and in the players who compose it, following their performance in clubs. Only one interviewee said that he was not interested in the players and focused only on the team. However, for only four of them, this interest is exclusive which does not mean that it is definitive. As one interviewee expressed:

“I have no interest in the other teams because there is a lack of information about them and the spread of the information is not wide enough”.

This issue about information will be further analysed later, but it already provides a good indication that things are not set in stone and can positively evolve. The majority of the interviewees are also interested in the youth men teams particularly U21 and U18. Finally three interviewees demonstrated an interest in all national teams regardless the age and gender of the players. Therefore the majority of them did not show any interest in women’s football. One interviewee even stated that women football was “non-existent”, of a poor level, but still hoped that the new National Football Academy could improve de situation.

In terms of attendance, most of them (7 out of 11) attend about 25% of the home games of the senior men national team, three attend about half of them and only one do not attend any. However, when they do not attend, they regularly follow the games through the media, television and the Internet, with seven of them watching from about 75% to 100%. Three of them watch about 50% of the games and only one interviewee watches 25% of them.

Finally, one interviewee demonstrated a significant interest in the German national team and one in the Lithuanian national basketball team.

(2) Distinction between the National Team (NT) and the National Association (NA)

Overall about six interviewees, so about half, made a distinction between the NT and the National Association, but only three of them made a clear distinction. The later know the decision-makers, their role and position, and the way the NA functions. Overall most of them recognise however that they are connected and that the NT mirrors the NA; one saying that the national teams are the “toys” of the NA. Nevertheless, this relationship is not perceived in the same manner as for one interviewee, it is related to the success of the NT:

“When the national team wins or at least plays well I give credit to personalities inside the team (coaches, players) but when the results turn bad then the federation is to blame.”

For those who distinguish both entities, they consider that the NA is visible enough. On the contrary, for those who do not distinguish them, they can only provide some names of decision-makers and believe there is a lack of awareness which is due to a lack of communication. In terms of activities, the level of awareness seems better. They mentioned “various matters of the national teams, promotion of football in general, promotion and organisation of grassroots football activities, the running of the National Football Academy, the organisation of the FA cup and the League, stadium and infrastructure developments, the promotion of interaction between the NT and the fans, organisation of the best player awards, marketing and licencing, the promotion of disable football”. However, despite this quite good level of awareness, several interviewees stated that these activities and projects were not well known and that more should be done to communicate about them; one interviewee even talked about “mystical” projects.

Accordingly, those who did not make a clear distinction between the NT and the NA did not believe that the NA was visible enough or only visible to the people interested in and involved in football. One interviewee stated:

“If not for one related person I know personally, I would not even know what the federation is”.

One interviewee explained that the NA was “overshadowed by basketball in the public eye” and that basketball was getting most of the attention.

(3) Identity and image

Whether the interviewees estimate the NA to be visible enough or not, all except one agreed on the fact

that the NA had a non-attractive or negative image. One interviewee even said that “you could get nauseous” because of its image. Most of them did not make any distinctions between the NA’s identity (i.e. who they are) and image (i.e. how they are perceived by the general public). However, few interviewees seemed to make a distinction between them. One said that the NA should better promote its values to change its negative image which indicates that this person believes the NA has a good identity. The comment relates to one interviewee’s view saying that “more clarity and visibility would help people to understand the work of the federation”. However, another interviewee commented that this identity was only known by the people who are actually interested in it. Another one said that the negative image was actually not created by the federation but by “people who are interested in it in various ways (not always positive interest e.g. negative political agenda and etc.)”. This latest statement seems to express a positive vision of the NA’s identity but tends to underline that the NA is maybe not active enough to build its image which is “hijacked” by external groups or individuals. Consequently, they did not feel related to this image they often judged unacceptable. If nothing changes (e.g. the president of the federation), one interviewee said that he could not see how he could relate himself to its image in the future. One interviewee went as far as saying that the federation was not a “clean organisation”. Finally, one interviewee said that he did not feel he could influence in any way the NA’s image, and another one said that because he was not directly involved in any activities, he could not relate himself to the NA’s image.

(4) Relationship and contact

In accordance with the previous comments about identity and image, the perceived closeness of the relationship offers diverse answers skewed towards the lack of regular and deep contact. Few interviewees estimated that the relationship was close but the focus of the relationship is never the same and the close relationship is either perceived with the NT, the youth national teams or the Federation. This is illustrated by the following quotations from interviewees:

“I think that the national team sustains quite good relations with the fans and the public through advertisements, invitations to games. The Fan meeting with the national team players like the one before the Slovakia qualifier only strengthens the bond.”

And,

“I feel a relationship with the various men’s and women’s youth teams. The boys and the girls are quite friendly and usually not afraid to joke around or interact in other ways.”

And,

“I really enjoy the relationship I have with the federation. The people I know from there are quite friendly and helpful.”

However, two observations can be made. The first one relates to the latest quote which indicates that the perceived relationship is strongly influenced by the people the fan know from the federation. Consequently, we can wonder if the perception would remain the same without knowing these specific persons, as it is the case for the majority of casual fans. The same comment can apply to the second quote regarding the relationship with the youth teams. The second observation concerns the relationship which can be perceived as close but without necessarily involving reciprocity particularly when interviewees justify this closeness because of their love for the national team, without characterising a mutual relationship.

The second group of interviewees display sporadic contacts, which involves often special circumstances such as working in the media for one interviewee or being a volunteer for another interviewee. In any case, this relationship does not appear long-lasting and regularly active. It seems to only become active around national games or specific projects. One interviewee said that even when there is a contact with the NT, it does not seem to be the indication of a true relationship because no clear will or intention is perceived from the NT side. He said:

“I get opportunities to work with the national team as a volunteer during various games and competitions. But even then, when the interaction is live and close they usually view me just as another staff.”

For the majority of the interviewees, there is no contact with the NT and/or the NA. However, this is not always perceived as negative. In this case, their attitude seems neutral and to accept the current status which is perceived as “normal”. This is illustrated by the following quote:

“I would describe my relationship as a normal fan’s. I always take interest in what the federation is doing, follow the news and actively discuss them with my friends. I watch, take interest but I don’t think I have a direct relationship.”

Two of them do not expect to have a close relationship with the NT although they appreciate to have a close and personal relationship with the club they support. They do not compare these relationships and believe them to be distinct. This is supported by the following interviewee’s say:

“The relationship with the club was on a personal level and that does not happen with the national team. But I don’t think that it’s a bad thing because the scope is bigger and a NT player can’t personally meet every fan...”

This result can appear first positive because it acknowledges the difference between club teams and the NT by demonstrating different levels of expectations from a relationship perspective. However, it also signifies that, in their opinion, a relationship with the NT could never replace a club relationship and could not be seen as personal, which will represent a limitation to the development of a deep commitment.

The majority of the interviewees do not perceive any active relationship, at best sporadic contacts, but no real relationship. They talk about “cold”, “non-existent” or “inactive” relationship. They expect more interaction with the NT and the NA via communication and events. They want more information but also want to be more consulted. As one said:

“The federation could take more interest in the opinions of people interested in football; especially by doing various surveys. With the feedback they should respect it and after evaluation should apply solutions to solve issues.”

Some interviewees attribute the current absence of relationship to a lack of communication, but estimate that the NA genuinely wants to improve the situation and that the NA is trying but that it is not enough. This position is illustrated by the following quote:

“I don’t feel strong contacts but I think the national teams do try to improve the connection. I am sure they want to keep in contact with the fans to strengthen the love for the teams and their country.”

However, for the majority of the interviewees, there is no clear motivation or enthusiasm from the NA and few interviewees believe that there is even some reluctance from the NA to create strong relationships with its fans. One interviewee put forward the example of national games which have empty stands because of expensive tickets considering that the NA is happy about the situation and does not do enough to change it. Several interviewees believe that many fans are in demand for more contact and relationship but that the NA is not responding. However, if the NA was proactive, many would positively respond to the NA’s call. Only one interviewee said he would not get further involved even if solicited because of the current president.

(5) Promotion/word-of-mouth

Many of the interviewees share information and experiences with other people who have the same interests but they do not seem to promote them beyond the circle of already-interested people. One interviewee said he mainly communicates about positive things, things he can be proud of. Three of them said they invite friends to football games and get involved in football in general. This sharing is

illustrated by the following quote:

“When I have a chance I always gather a group of friends and go to support our national team in the stadium. I always spread football information among friends as it’s a good way to grow the football community. “

However, consistent with their opinions about the relationships they have with the NA, they do not try to share it with others. Only one interviewee stated that he actively tried to share and promote this relationship. The other interviewees promote only the relationship and the link with the NT.

(6) Information

In terms of information, three interviewees said that they were getting their information via traditional channels such as Television news, often alongside Internet and social media. A majority of them seems active followers of the NA via its Internet website and its Facebook page. Other online media such as journal and news websites seem to be consulted. Finally, three interviewees said that they were getting information from friends and people they know. The relative important use of Internet and friends and relatives as sources of information may represent an issue for the NA due to the lack of content control on these channels.

Overall, this issue, and particularly the lack of information, were regularly addressed during the focus group. Only one interviewee estimated that he had enough information but he was specifically referring to the NT. For all the other interviewees, there is a lack of information which seems detrimental to the relationship they have or want to establish with the national teams and the NA. Starting with the senior men national team, many interviewees express an appetite for more information. For instance one said:

“Usually there is a lack of even basic information like information on club careers of the national team candidates, articles about them and interviews with them. There is an increase of information before national team games but that only proves that the connection and communication from the NT’s is sporadic.”

Many of them emphasise that this lack of information creates a rather superficial relationship with the senior men national team. As previously indicated, the NT seems to be perceived to have some responsibility in this situation but two interviewees also pointed out the role of the media without making clear whether or not they have to be held responsible or not for the scarce information they put forward. This issue does not only concern the senior men national team but all national teams. One interviewee said he is only interested in the male senior national team, only because he cannot get further

information about the other national teams. Furthermore, the activities of the NA seem to also suffer from a lack of publicity. The level of awareness regarding the activities does not seem to be sufficient. Because they are not aware of the NA's activities, they are not able to assess and appreciate them and may tend to believe that very few or hardly anything is done. One interviewee said:

“Maybe I am not aware of such activities but I think that the national team should give more attention to children, especially the ones playing football.”

Because of this lack of awareness, one interviewee seemed to believe that the NA focused mainly and too much on the NT in comparison with other areas. He went on saying:

“The federation could be more informative about their activities and not focus only on matters of the national team.”

(7) Marketing

Overall the interviewees recognised a lack of marketing from the NA. However, it is difficult to know if they are fully aware of what it is being done. In this case, it would be a lack of communication and would indicate a lack of efficiency of the marketing campaigns. This communication issue was often identified as a weakness as illustrated by the following statement:

“I think that the federation should invest much more into advertising and spread of information to spread it much wider than just their official web page.”

Many interviewees expect more promotion, advertising and publicity. One interviewee said that more partnership with media could be established to increase the visibility of the NT and the NA. One interviewee said that even through the currently used media such as the website, more could be done to involve the fans. He said:

“The information channels, even the official federation ones could be much more informative and interactive. There could be more quizzes, contests and various other interactive games.”

This indicates a real will to get actively involved, even with information. This may echo the high use of Internet media which are generally seen as more interactive. In this regards, almost all interviewees would welcome a regular newsletter from the NA. Many of them praised for an electronic format. One interviewee went further saying that he would welcome a customised newsletter emphasising the topics he is interested in. This clearly highlights the need for more personalisation in the relationship. From a broader level, electronic communication using the NA's website as a door of entry seemed to be for

many interviewees the natural way of communicating without an existing personal relationship with someone working within the NA. Nevertheless, they did not seem exactly to know to whom they would address it.

In terms of services, several interviewees said they were expecting more, more events, more activities and more contact to create a stronger link with the NT and the NA. Overall, they want more contact with the players as illustrated by the following statement regarding the NT:

“I think that fans should be given greater attention. I think that at least few events per year should be organized where football fans can not only take photographs with the national team players but also interact with them in other ways like hearing their opinions on various football related matters. Events in a form of a press conference where fans and players hold a question and answer session could be perfect the perfect format. The fans do value opinions of the players.”

And the NA:

“Also there is a lack of events that involve communities and the public into football – like family football tournaments and other similar events.”

It seems that several interviewees estimate that because there are too few activities, they cannot be well communicated and “will not create a big buzz or interest in the team”. Some interviewees would want to see more things during games as well, such as contents and attractions.

Finally, two interviewees mentioned the price dimension considering that game tickets were too expensive and one interviewee mentioned the place and distribution issue saying that if he wanted to buy a replica jersey of the national team he would not know where to buy it.

Although almost all interviewees appreciate the positive impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), six of them did not know if the NA was conducting any. For the others, they were able to mention “promoting grassroots football through building new pitches in cities and towns, infrastructures in regions, helping children from orphanage homes, promoting physical activity in kindergartens via their grassroots projects”. Although they had various awareness levels of these activities, seven interviewees would be keen on contributing to these activities. Few of them would however want more information before making such a commitment but showed some enthusiasm. Only one interviewee said he would not take part because of a lack of time and two interviewees responded negatively because they did not believe the NA to be trustworthy enough.

(8) Sense of community

Several interviewees felt they were part of the same community, either the Lithuanian football community or the football fan community: some feel to be part of the same community because they play football and the NA is an important stakeholder; some feel to be part of the same community as football fans and fans of the NT, “the whole kitchen of Lithuanian football” with the federation and its members. However, the connections between the members of these communities do not seem very strong and rather passive. As one interviewee said:

“I do feel part of the football community but more in a passive way.”

Four interviewees did not feel or express any connection with the NA’s members. On the contrary, it does not seem to be any significant distinction between the NA’s and the NT’s community as the same who did or did not feel to be part of the NA’s community did or did not feel part of the NT’s fans community to the exception of one interviewee who only felt a link with the NA’s community. Surprisingly, one interviewee felt connected to the fans of England and Portugal because of “the way and style those teams play”.

(9) Comparison between the NA and local clubs

For those who support a local club, it seems that the link they have with them is closer than with the NT mainly because of the high frequency of contacts (e.g. longer season) they have with their clubs. The proximity and sometimes the friendship with the local players seem also to be an important factor. The fact that local players are less known makes them more friendly and approachable. One interviewee talked about his club as a “proper family”. The tight link can even be beneficial to the national teams when certain players, with who local fans have a strong connection, join the national team. This was the sense of one interviewee’s comment:

“I follow the Žalgiris players who play for the national team. There is quite a few of them there. That’s the main connecting point between the two.”

The link between information and the strength of the relationship seems also apparent as one interviewee said that he was more interested in the national team because he gets more interesting information about its players. In the same vein, but in favour of a closer relationship with his local club, one interviewee said about:

“I get regular information before every club match which gives me initiative to attend and get involved.”

The direct link fans have with their local clubs due to their small numbers seems to be a significant factor as well. One interviewee added that clubs appear to provide more attention to their fans than the NA. Also, this directness of the relationship could possibly link to trustworthiness which is perceived by one interviewee as one major asset of local clubs in comparison with the NA. Finally, the link between the fans appears different due to the small number of clubs' fans in comparison with the NT. This is illustrated by the following statement:

“The relationships are different because overall most Lithuanian football clubs don't have many fans so it's much easier to connect and interact with them while the national team unites a much broader spectrum of fans. Both relationships are equally good even though quite different.”

Last, for a majority of interviewees, the relationships between the NT and the local clubs seem to be at different levels but are not necessarily competing against each other; they are “non-comparable”. They correspond to different identity and self-expression levels. More relationships and partnerships with clubs could therefore be seen as beneficial for both entities.

b) The Lithuanian die-hard fans

(1) Interest in the national teams

In terms of attendance and following, a large majority of the interviewees (8 out of 10) go to 75 to 100% of the home games whereas only two interviewees attend about 50% of them. The same proportion of individuals watch between 75% to 100% of the games, principally away games, on television and/or on the Internet. Only two interviewees watch about 25% of the games on television. About a third of them are interested in all national teams, another third of them are mainly interested in men national teams and finally a third of them are only interested in the senior men national team. One interviewee said that he only followed the senior men national team because following his club was taking a big part from his “football time”. For the other interviewees, the main issues seem to be their interest and the football quality and level. Finally, two interviewees said that they were only following the senior men national team because of a lack of information about the other teams and one of them added that the poor attendance levels (“it is much less fun to sit with 100 people than it is with 6,000”) and a lack of marketing activities could explain that he is not interested in other national teams.

(2) Distinction between the National Team (NT) and the National Association (NA)

Seven interviewees claimed they could not make a distinction between the NTs and the NA because they are closely interconnected. One interviewee made a clear distinction and the last two interviewees made a distinction but focused on an image level. One said that he made a distinction because he still follows the NT despite perceiving a poor image from the NA although the other one recognised that, even if distinct, the “national teams’ public image depends a lot on the federation”. For the majority of these die-hard fans, they can only recall some basic roles and functions and decision-makers’ names and the president’s recent nickname (probably given by the media) for one interviewee. However, this knowledge remains vague and unspecific. Surprisingly, one fan that did make a distinction between the NTs and the NA did not seem to be interested in this difference:

“I never really cared but I think that *I know*¹ the president and the general director. But as far as I know, the federation also has different departments (like financial, marketing and etc.) who handle their own objectives and tasks.”

On the opposite, one fan who did not make this distinction seemed to show a very good knowledge. To the question about whether or not he had some knowledge of the NA’s decision-makers, he responded:

“Yes I do. For example the national team manager is decided by the federation’s executive committee which gets candidate propositions through the national team department director. Projects are handled by the project department. Sponsorship is handled by the commercial department.”

(3) Identity and image

In terms of identity and image, only one interviewee made a clear distinction between those two. For this interviewee, the NA does not have a distinctive identity and does not hold a positive image. This interviewee expresses himself in these terms:

“I’m not sure about the identity but I think they don’t have one; while the situation is the complete opposite with their image but not in a good way. That image is very strong and I’m not sure how much time will have to pass to shake that image off or at least improve it.”

For the rest of the interviewees, identity and image are similar. It is therefore difficult if they see a difference between them or not. For a majority of them, there is either no identity and image or negative

¹ Added by the author.

ones. For those who do not see any identity or image, the NA is not visible enough. Five interviewees estimated that it was not visible enough and/or only visible to the people already interested in football. Three of them considered that the NA's image was not positive and one interviewee made a reference to a recent incident involving the president. On the opposite, three fans estimated that the NA was visible enough and holding a positive image, "an image of a solid and serious organisation". However, one of them considered that there could be more visibility and clarity particularly in terms of finance. This issue will be addressed later in the section when dealing with the information issue. Accordingly, these die-hard fans relate themselves to this image. Another die-hard fan would only relate his self to the "children and youth football" component but would not do it for the whole organisation. Three of them could not say if they would relate themselves to the NA's image, whereas only two interviewees could not because they perceive it negatively.

(4) Relationship and contact

In terms of contact and relationship, two interviewees estimated they had close contacts with the NT via the players they know or are in contact with. One of them said:

"Yes I feel close to the national team. I have talked to some of them personally and most of them seemed warm, sincere people despite being very known players who get a lot of attention. But these contacts are not regular."

However, as illustrated by the last sentence from the above quotation, close contacts do not necessarily imply regular contacts. One interviewee commented that "the connection gets a little stronger before each of the national teams' qualifying games". For the majority of the fans, there is a connection but which is not regular and which cannot really be seen as close. However, two of them added that they did not seek for a closer relationship. For most of them, the NT is showing goodwill and is trying to get closer to the fans. For them, this is illustrated by the organisation of meetings with the manager and players, interaction with fans during games, the increasing amount of events related with the national teams' public relations and their better reporting in the media, the official WEB TV and its non-formal videos, the Facebook page, the appearance in "various non-commercial videos for good causes" and the increasing amount of advertisement for the NT's games. The overall feeling is quite positive but there is still a need and space for more interactions as illustrated by the following quotation:

"As a football fan (and there are not that many of us in Lithuania) I appreciate any attempts to create a stronger link between the national team and the public. I wish that fans could have more information about the players representing the national team."

Only one interviewee was negative about the NT's efforts to increase the contacts. He said:

“Hard to say but I think the players of NT's themselves are definitely not doing it. Also I doubt that other official representatives of the NT's are doing anything about it too; at least not enthusiastically enough.”

Two other interviewees estimated that the players' contribution was not satisfactory enough; as one said: “efforts of individual players are not seen”.

Despite the increasing number of contacts and an overall perceived will from the NT and the NA to improve things, most of the interviewees do not perceive to have a relationship with the national teams. When asked, they characterise the relationship as non-existent, indirect and minimal. Only the two interviewees who have personal and friendly relationships with some players hold a different view. In general, there is a demand for a relationship:

“Currently there is no relationship but I would like one to exist in the future.”

However, one interviewee questioned the possibility of having a relationship with the NT because of the irregular nature of the gatherings and games.

“First these relationships need to be created. At the moment it's hard even to imagine that so called relationship with the national team. It would be interesting to find out.”

On the opposite, two other interviewees did not express a desire to have strong relationships; one said “I like relationships that don't tie me down”.

(5) Promotion/word-of-mouth

Many interviewees said they invite their friends to go games, or when they cannot, to watch games on TV or via the Internet. This is illustrated by the following statement:

“Yes, when I have a chance to go to NT games I always invite friends. If I can't go to a live game I always invite friends to watch the game on TV or on the web. Also, I try to share the latest information related with the Lithuanian national team and Lithuanian football in general with them.”

In the latter case, information is also shared and promoted among the groups of friends for a majority of these die-hard fans. It seems that for many of these interviewees, this promotion and sharing is mainly targeting people who are already interested in football or fans of the NT, what someone called the

football community. However, it seems that some of them also try to promote the NT outside the circle of die-hards fans and try to involve a broader community. One interviewee said he was promoting the NT online via photos and comments about his support. This is the sense of this quotation:

“Most of my friends are football fans so I get to be happy or sad about the results. While with colleagues or other people I try to advocate for the national team and support its cause.”

The term advocates is interesting because it illustrates a very strong level of commitment, as shown by the same interviewee saying that he tries to advocate and defend the NT's causes. It seems to correspond to the penultimate loyalty level identified by Christopher *et al.* (2004).

Only one interviewee said that he did not like promoting the relationship he has with the NT and its players but he did not explain why. Last, one interviewee, specifically referred to the games, saying that he was trying to get the maximum of people active in the stands during the game. He said:

“I invite people to matches and attend the games in the most active fans-ultras stand where I vocally support my team. I try to get people to this stand and join the active support”.

(6) Information

In terms of sources of information, only two interviewees said they used the traditional media to get some information about the NT or the NA and for one of them in conjunction with social media. This very low use of traditional media could be explained by a disinterest and in some cases by defiance towards them as illustrated by the following quotation:

“The media really like to show any decision the NFA make in a bad way.”

For the majority of these die-hard fans, social media and the Internet and friends and relatives represent the main sources of information. For the social media, several of them cited the official federation webpage and its web TV, the NA's Facebook page, and other news websites. Few of these fans are eager to get information and search every day on the Internet for information about the NT. Friends also constitute an important source of information. This is illustrated by the following statement:

“I sometimes hear about various activities and projects but that they are done by the federation I only know from friends.”

Some of these friends seem to be working for the federation. One interviewee gets information via his “working relationship with the federation” whereas another one said he gets information “through live

communications with the federation representatives”. In some cases, friends and social media are interconnected when friends pass on links to various online media and contents.

Overall the level of information received seems relatively satisfactory for the majority of them. Nevertheless, as a characteristic of their involvement, they would welcome more information, For instance one interviewee said he would want more information and statistics about Lithuanian members of the NT playing abroad. Consequently, most of them would appreciate a newsletter. One interviewee said:

“Yes, I would like a newsletter. Currently all the information is received from the official web page which is not a good thing.”

However, they would prefer a newsletter they can personalize or customise according to their interests. This is illustrated by the following comment:

“I would like such a service but only if I could customize the news flow according to my needs e.g. only grassroots events in my region, only national team games, only merchandising and etc.”

Only two interviewees appeared reluctant. One said:

“And e-mail is not a bad thing but I think there are better ways of finding your target audience.”

However, it is not clear which are these better ways of communicating. The other interviewee was more assertive and said that newsletters were “old, outdated and unappealing”. This person gets all the information he wants online. Therefore, we can speculate that he has no interest in a newsletter because he may prefer immediate and frequent information and because he might believe that the information in newsletter is too much controlled by the institution which provides it.

Last, one interviewee asked however for more visibility and clarity which strongly relate with governance issues. He said:

“Yearly financial and activity reports could be available on the official webpage. Also information on the page about who are the people in the most important positions, what their responsibilities are and information about their past achievements and activities”.

Finally, the official website seems to be the main interface between fans and the NA, and many of them would use it if they had to make a request or complaint.

(7) Marketing

In regards with the marketing issue, several interviewees said that more could be done and that there was not enough promotion of the games. For instance one said that there was not enough “buzz” before the games. Another one said that marketing actions were implemented but that it could be more innovative. He said:

“*It is*² a bit stagnating. It has been a long time since anything new and innovative was introduced in terms of marketing.

They seem to want more “publicity” and more interactive activities as illustrated by the comments about social media and online contents:

“I like that it (*i.e. the official social media page*)³ features information and photos that are posted very quickly after events. I think that more competitions and promotions should be done there at least with some little prizes.”

And:

“It could be even better – would be great to have LIVE Lithuanian commentary on line for every game, team line ups with photos, also to have more inside information to why one or another player is not in the squad.”

The interactivity seems to be an important factor as another interviewee asked for more direct and “accessible channels” for players and fans to interact.

In terms of services and activities, they mentioned the development of grassroots football, organisation of various NTs, appointment and firing of national team managers, running of the leagues, development of football infrastructure, “solving problems and mediating clubs and players when there is a need, providing schools and other institutions with artificial pitches, increasing the popularity of football in Lithuania, training and preparation of coaches and referees, development of youth talent programs. Several interviewees said that things were improving but at the same time one interviewee estimated that things lacked “effectiveness”. This can be illustrated by this interviewee who said:

² Added by the author.

³ Added by the author.

“I think that at the moment the presentation of the Lithuanian national team to the general public as gotten much better. On the other hand a typical spectator does not see any positive changes in the A League.”

However, he added that the NA was not entirely responsible for the latter situation and that clubs were responsible as well.

In terms of CSR and community activities, several of them identify activities like grassroots (e.g. the Grassroots Day) and fan events, non-commercial videos for good causes, football tournaments for children from various ages, building pitches, organising free tournaments and championships for school pupils, supporting small-town clubs. From these answers, it can be observed that they do not seem to make a clear distinction between the services offered by the NA and the CSR-specific activities. Despite a diverse level of awareness, the interviewees praised such activities and all seem positive about them. Only three interviewees did not seem to know and be able to comment on them. Except one interviewee who seemed strongly involved in such activities, all of them expressed a willingness to participate to these kinds of schemes. Their only constraints seemed to be the lack of awareness and information about these specific activities.

(8) Sense of community

Several interviewees feel to be part of the same community mainly through their participation to football and/or their membership to a club or a league as illustrated by the following statement:

“The connection is through club matches every week and participation in amateur and student competitions.”

Despite feeling part of the same community, two interviewees expressed the need for more. One interviewee said he wanted more “personal attention” in the connection he has with the NA through its various activities and the other one seemed to blame people from the NA. He said:

“Sometimes I participate in conferences and meetings and try to offer suggestions. But sometimes the attitudes of federation’s members are strange. Often it feels like they are sure that they will sit in their posts for at least a hundred years. A lot of changes are needed.”

Surprisingly, one fans said he felt part of the football community but also that he was not active because he did not play football, which seems to be a restrictive definition of the community which

would be only defined by football participation. He went on saying:

“Connection happens through grassroots events but I don’t feel an active member of the football community because I don’t play football myself and am only an organizer and a fan.”

This statement can appear a bit curious because even if he is an active organiser and an active fan, he does not feel to be part of the football community. We can wonder whether or not it is a shared opinion and whether or not it is an impression given consciously or unconsciously by the sport participants and/or the NA.

Regarding the sport fan community, the opinions seem mixed. For two of the interviewees, there is no connection or special connection with the other fans of the NT. For three interviewees, there are connections but it does not seem that a particular link exist between fans besides personal relationships and friendships. These interviewees said that their common object of support, and their care and love for the NTs were the reasons why they were connected but it did not seem to go beyond this. This is the sense of the following quotation:

“The only connection is through supporting the same team. There is no other connection because the status of being a Lithuanian national football team fan is not very promoted in Lithuania. The same relationship is with fans of other Lithuanian national teams. Football and love for the country unites us all.”

For the remaining interviewees, they are more than just connected because of friendly and personal relationships which can be materialised through football fan tournaments, organising travel tickets, purchasing group tickets and organising visual and vocal support.

(9) Comparison between the NA and local clubs

In terms of club support, 8 out of 10 interviewees said they support a Lithuanian football club. Among the two interviewees who did not support a club, one of them said that his relationship with the NT was consequently more important whereas the other one said he had no relationship with either of them. Only two respondents supporting a club said these relationships were similar. Consequently, for the majority of them, the club relationship is better than the NT relationship. The relationship with the club is seen as closer, more frequent and personal; one said that clubs’ activities happen every day although NT’s activities happen only during “holidays”. The club players are seen as more approachable except for one interviewee, and the clubs are seen as more dynamic and doing more activities. More information is available about the club with more regular interaction. This is illustrated by the following

statement:

“Relationship with the club is closer than with the national team. This is because the league season lasts almost the whole year with games every week so you have to follow news and other information almost daily. With the national team the news are less concentrated with the bulk of it coming during weeks just before national team matches.”

Few interviewees supporting a club said the relationships were different but without being able to hierarchy them. For another interviewee, there is a distinction between importance and performance with the NT's relationship being seen as more important for him but with the club's relationships being seen as better managed. This is the sense of the following quotation:

“Overall maybe the national team relationship is a bit more important but the relationship with the club is better.”

Also, one interviewee said that the probability to see clubs achieving things is higher than for the NT which for this person “creates more hope and drama” for the club's fans. For the same individual, it is also easier to relate oneself to the clubs' identity: “the NT represents the country and the club the city in which you live in. Maybe because these relationships concern different identity levels and periods during the year, several interviewees estimated they could be complimentary. One said:

“On the other hand a good connection with a local club can improve a person's relationship with the national team.”

While another interviewee said that the NA could leverage and build on clubs' relationships with their fan to improve fans' commitment to the NT. He went on saying:

“I think the best way to create a fan identity for national team fans is to fuse it with their support for their club – love for the club plus national pride for the NT's. I think that this is the fan identity model that the federation should be striving for.”

Clubs' marketing seem to be praised by many fans but the fact that most of them support Žalgiris represents a bias in the comparison as this club seems to be at the forefront from sporting and marketing perspectives and therefore is not representative of the other Lithuanian clubs. Consequently, when comparing the NA's marketing activities with this specific club, the clubs' marketing is better rated but if all clubs are considered it seems that NA's marketing is perceived better.

c) Overall discussion of the Lithuanian case study

When comparing the findings from each focus group, the first impression is that the differences in terms of perceptions and attitudes are probably bigger within-groups than between-groups which mean that attendance patterns differentiating casual from die-hard fans do not seem surprisingly the most relevant or explanatory variable for Lithuanian fans when dealing with their relationship with the NT and the NA. In terms of interest for instance, it seems that fans decreasingly focus on the men senior NT, the men youth NT and the women NT. However, for both casual and die-hard fans, it seems that this unequal interest is not definitive because many casual and die-hards fans said it was mainly due to a lack of information; their interest would grow accordingly with the amount of information they receive or can access.

In terms of distinction between the NT and the NA, similarities can be found between casual and die-hard fans. For instance, very few of them clearly make a distinction between both whereas for the majority of them they are so much interconnected and their level of awareness is so low that they do not make a distinction between them. Again, the information and communication issue seems important to improve the situation but these results also show that there is a risk that the underperformance or management of the senior men NT influences too strongly the fans' perceptions of the NA and its work.

Regarding identity and image, some differences can be found and it seems that casual fans hold a much more negative image of the NA than the die-hard fans. Several causes can be put forward: casual fans can be more sensitive to negative media coverage and incidents than die-hard fans; this perceived negative image could be the reason why they remain casual and do not become die-hard fans. In the first case, fan's commitment would represent a barrier to negative publicity although in the second case, fan's commitment could reduce because of this negative publicity. Very few interviewees believe that the NA has a clearly negative or positive identity whereas for the majority of them the NA's identity is not clear and promoted enough. The clarity issue, whether it is related to the NA's values or its actions, strongly relates to governance issues, as transparency is often seen as a component of good governance. Garcia (2010) noted that a lack of transparency can create a lack of perceived legitimacy from the stakeholders which has sometimes been the case in football with national FAs. The NA's image does not seem very good among the general public but seems much better among people interested in football. However, it seems that, according to several interviewees, this image is strongly influenced by external factors (e.g. media, political) which tend to indicate that having a good identity and clear and positive values do not immunize from external influences and that more proactivity in the promotion of this identity and values should be shown.

In terms of contacts and relationships, it seems that a general consensus about the existence of irregular contacts, often related to the men senior NT's games, but no clear relationships. The majority of the fans appear in demand for more contacts and interaction, which implies a two-way process. However, it has to be noted that not all of the fans are in demand for more relationship. Similarly, some fans said they had close contact but it did not create a strong relationship. The frequency of the contacts seem here more important than their intensity to create a sense of relationship. It can be observed that fans expect the NT's players to play an active and significant role in these contacts. A difference can however be noticed between casual and die-hard fans regarding their perceptions of the NA's intentions: although most of casual fans do not notice any real will from the NA to improve the number of contacts and the relationship, most of die-hard fans perceive the opposite. In this case, the frequency of contacts and their awareness may influence the perception of a genuine (un)willingness from the NA.

Regarding promotion and word-of-mouth, the fans' behaviours are strongly related to the image they hold about the NA and NT. Among the casual fans, only few fans promote the relationship they have with the NT and mainly in a close circle of people they know. More die-hard fans try to invite and bring more people to games but essentially people who are already interested in football. Some of them also try to engage more people actively especially during games. Only one die-hard fan showed a very strong commitment towards the team by advocating and defending it. This corresponds to the penultimate stage of the loyalty ladder as defined by Christopher *et al.* (2004) and Ferrand & McCarthy (2009). The majority of the fans could be identified as "supporters" and "clients" according to the same framework.

Regarding sources of information, two main sources were identified and are the Internet and social media on one hand and friends and acquaintances on the other hand. Traditional media were identified but seemed to play a minor role. As for Internet, we can distinguish the official sources such as the NA's official website and the Facebook page from the unofficial sources represented by media websites, blogs and other social media. Friends and acquaintances as a source of information are extremely diverse, for instance some fans know people working for the Federation although others are simple NT's fans. For both unofficial Internet sources and friends and acquaintances, the level of control on the nature of the information and the messages put forward is very limited not to say inexistent. This can represent a serious issue for the NA and would be consistent with its image and the fact that it is strongly influenced by external factors. Three possible responses can be identified. The first one consists in increasing the level and the frequency of contacts with the fans to feed their need for information rather than letting them look for uncontrolled information which may be negative to NA.

This would also increase the perception of a relationship as evoked previously. The second option would consider increasing the level of control in the communication channels particularly with traditional media in increasing the Public Relations aspect. The third response could be to increase internal communication to make sure that the information and the image produced by employees and collaborators are consistent with its identity and wanted image. In this case, it would be important to ensure that employees and volunteers behave as advocates as well.

These responses would also increase the amount of information for both types of fans as for the majority of them the lack of information about the NT and the NA was identified as an important concern. However, many die-hard fans did notice improvements particularly with the WEB TV and some players-fans meetings (specific demands and recommendations were identified within the two previous sections). For the reasons mentioned above, a newsletter would be welcome by the majority of the casual and die-hards fans. However, few of them seemed to expect a level of personalisation or customisation as they are not interested in every issue. A customised newsletter may increase the satisfaction of various fans but would also require more management and work, and would also compartment the various members of the football community (e.g. fans only wanting NT's news, and participants only wanting football leagues and tournaments' news, etc.). In order to increase the sense of community among the various members, a single newsletter may be more relevant but would take the risk of deterring some fans to read it.

As for the marketing activities, most of the comments dealt with the promotion issue where most of the interviewees wanted more communication and publicity about the NT and the NA's activities as their average level of awareness was quite limited. In terms of services offered, many casual fans wanted more but their limited level of awareness could explain such attitude. The die-hard fans showed a better level of awareness and overall seem satisfied by them. It is interesting to see that for many die-hard fans the distinction between the NA's services and its corporate social responsibility activities was not always obvious in the fans' mind. It could mean that for many of them there is a tight link between them as the services are aimed at the football community. As CSR activities seem welcome by almost all interviewees, it may be relevant for the NA to better communicate on its services and activities using a CSR angle and language. It can be also noticed that with more publicity, various fans would be inclined to take part in these activities. In terms of price, only two interviewees mentioned the price issue in relation to the NT's games saying that the tickets were too expensive, and only one mentioned the distribution issue regarding merchandising. The development of online purchasing might explain this. Interaction and interactivity seem to be the master word for marketing activities and communication.

In terms of community belonging, the findings appear different between casual and die-hard fans. For casual fans, the definition of the community seems looser, more inclusive than for die-hard fans, and talked alternatively about the football or fan community. However for them, the link seems stronger between each member and the NT and the NA than between members. As for die-hard fans, many of them felt connected to the NT and/or the NA but the links could be tighter which is consistent with the findings regarding the level of contact and relationship. Many die-hard fans feel however strongly connected with the members of the fan community, sharing interests, friendliness and activities. One interviewee seemed to dissociate the football community from the fan community and for him, being only a fan and an organiser was not enough to feel part of the football community.

Last, the comparison between the NA and clubs drew some interesting conclusions. Although for several fans, the relationship with the club they support is better because it is closer, more regular and more dynamic from a marketing point of view, for other fans the relationships seem complementary and a good relationship with a club could help fans becoming more interested and committed to the NT. This position is justified by the fact that clubs and NTs concerns different periods of the years and different level of identities. In this case, it would mean that a closer collaboration with clubs and club fans could help the NA to extend the scope and the loyalty of its fan base.

2. The case study of Armenia

The focus groups with casual fans are first analysed and followed by the die-hard fans and the overall discussion of the Armenian case.

a) *The Armenian casual fans*

(1) Interest in the national teams

In terms of home game attendance, the profiles are quite diverse. Few of them define themselves as active because they regularly go the games or mainly because they watch all the games on TV. However, they do not consider themselves as very active but do not consider themselves as passive fans. Consequently, about 5 of them can be considered as *regular supporters* or *committed casuals* according to Tapp and Clowes' (2002) classification, whereas the 2 other interviewees can be considered as *casuals*. The regular supporter or committed casual profiles are illustrated by the following statements:

“I do not miss any match of our NT on TV, and if I have enough time I do my best to watch the matches at the stadium. I consider myself as an active supporter, but not a very active one.”

And

“I go to the stadium or watch the matches on TV if it is not possible to go to the stadium. (...) However I cannot say I am an active fan, I think I am in the middle”.

In terms of interests, two interviewees said they were only interested in the senior male NT whereas the other interviewees all expressed an interest in youth NTs. One interviewee said that he did not see any difference between the senior male NT and the U21 NT because both are “utmost important”. Two interviewees however said that they were mainly interested in the U21 NT because of the potential players who could rapidly join the senior male NT. They added that they did not follow the U21 NT with the same interest and enthusiasm as the senior male NT. Last, the senior women NT was only mentioned by one female interviewee who recalled attending one of its games.

(2) Distinction between the National Team (NT) and the National Association (NA)

Overall, the interviewees made a clear distinction between the NT and the NA; one interviewee even said they could not be compared. They indicated that they differ in terms of roles and functions, but also in terms of importance, attachment and ownership. This is the sense of the following quotation:

“For me the NT is ours, we support it. The NT is very close to our hearts, while we do not

go to the stadium for the NFA”.

This statement is quite interesting because even if they recognise that on one hand the NT exists because of the NA, on the other hand it means that it is own by the people, as part of their identity. This is the meaning of the following quotation:

“The NT is a national value, while the federation is just an organisation”

One interviewee said that only the names of the players remain in people’s memory but not the name of NA’s staff which could explain why only one interviewee seem to be familiar with the Executive committee whereas the other ones only knew the president.

This attachment and sense of ownership is so strong that one interviewee even regrets that the NA is not a state body the people could indirectly control thought the government.

Such unequivocal responses could potentially be explained by the fact that many interviewees were regular supporters and committed casuals and that very few of them were carefree casuals (Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

In terms of NA’s activities, the interviewees talked about the coordination of football activities from children’s football to the NT and the national championship, the development of football via the construction of stadiums, pitches and schools, and football infrastructure. In regards with the activities, one interviewee said she did not think the NA was satisfactorily fulfilling its functions but did not specify which ones.

(3) Identity and image

Surprisingly, although the respondents almost unanimously said that the NA and the NT were clearly different entities, few of them commented about the image and the identity of the NA. In terms of identity, only three interviewees responded and rapidly associated the identity of the NA to the identity of its president. One interviewee said:

“I think the Armenian Football Federation is one of those few organisations in our country that has a rather clear identity; this identity is directly connected with the name of its president”.

One interviewee said that he saw that this president had done a lot to develop football, to make it stronger. As only three respondents commented this issue, it is not possible to say whether this president or this personification of the NA is perceived positively or negatively.

In terms of visibility, only three interviewees made a comment. One respondent said that the NA was

quite visible and that increasingly more information has been communicated about its activities. One respondent said that she could not say whether or not the NA was visible enough and that she did not care about it. The third respondent said that people and the NT's fans were not interested in the NA's activities and that:

“Those minimal things that can be of people's interest are rather visible and have always been transparent and clear”.

As for the identify question, it is not possible to determine whether or not this opinion is shared among the interviewees.

(4) Relationship and contact

Regarding the senior male national team, the majority of the respondents did not express any particular needs or demands. Their interest seems mainly focused on the sporting results and performances, and therefore these interviewees do not express the will to get closer, meet or see them more regularly. This is illustrated by this interviewee who said:

“I do not even seek to have any kind of contacts with our team of players. I like football, I like to watch games, but I have never considered any player as an idol”.

This opinion is nevertheless not unanimous and few interviewees would positively respond to more informative programs about the players. The interviewees went on comparing football and chess players who are very popular and said that football players could become good brands with successful results. They also added that the relationship and attention to football players could be more regular in comparison with chess players whose fame is strongly connected to occasional tournaments. The idea of “daily attention” for football players seem to be perceived as one potential asset for the development of the sport.

More media programs seem to be developed about the NT and players but the focus of attention seems also to be moving towards the successful Armenian players based abroad which could create some distance with the NT. One interviewee said:

“The media is now more concentrated on international football and at least on our players playing in foreign clubs. Thus in general there is less attention paid on the NTs. In the previous years, if our NT was having a game, there were different programs about the trainings; there were interviews with the player from the pitch. At that time I could feel myself close to the players.”

The development of Internet was however seen as a good thing which could increase the contact with the NTs by watching their games. This decentralised way of communicating is therefore useful but for people who are already interested in the NTs.

Regarding the willingness issue, several interviewees believe that if it was a players' decision, "they would not want to have contact with the fans" and that the federation should make sure they do have different contacts with fans. One interviewee estimated that the level of contact and interaction in Armenia between fans and the NT's is below standards when comparing with other European countries for instance. Particularly, the use of new technologies seem low in comparison with what is done elsewhere which is a pity because they represent alternative ways to keep the contact with players in comparison with direct meetings. Nevertheless, two interviewees did not express any interest in increasing the contacts with the players.

When asked about their relationship with the NA, only two interviewees commented and focused on the NT and its players regretting a lack of contact and meetings. They did not expand on this relationship which could make believe that such a relationship does really exist with the NA. However, one said:

"I cannot say I am interested in having any kind of relationship with the NS. What I am interested in is our NT and players. I would like more reliable information regarding the NT and players."

Considering the absence of strong relationship between fans and both NT and NA, its promotion does not appear relevant and concerned only few interviewees on personal levels. One said that she promoted her personal ties with a player of the NT whereas another one said that he only shared information with friends and the people he knew would be interested in it.

(5) Information

In terms of information, one regular supporter said that the NT was for him an everyday subject of discussion and that he was actively seeking information about twice or three times a week in a regular week and more frequently during an international game week. This interviewee regretted that so few TV programs existed about Armenian football which forced him to use direct and indirect channels to obtain information. Another interviewee said he was seeking information through different websites and his own personal connections of people standing close to the NT. Last, one interviewee said that she was not active in seeking for information, except results, but if she came across some information she would read or listen to it. This behaviour seems typical of carefree casuals.

In terms of way of communicating, one interviewee said she would use the official website for find a contact to write an email whereas another one said that she would try to find "someone who knows

anyone at the NA” to send a message.

Two interviewees would welcome a newsletter from the NA but at different frequency: one every week by email and one every month. Surprisingly, the interviewee who would want one every month did not believe that the NA was doing enough activities that could be reported in the newspapers.

(6) Marketing

Overall, several interviewees acknowledged that things were being done but that it was not sufficient.

“In terms of such (*i.e. football*) marketing, the FFA can do many things, which is not done”.

For instance, one interviewee said that following the recent contract with Adidas, more T-shirts, scarves and accessories are being sold on the way to the stadium, which is good, but several interviewees would want to see more merchandised products. One noted:

“There are very few attributes symbolising our football and our NT, while there could be many different things, such as cups, pens, towels, balls, etc.”

Another interviewee added that he would be very happy to use them as gifts when he goes abroad, which could certainly increase people’s awareness of Armenian football. Besides this product element, several comments related to the place issue. One interviewee said he would want to see official stores where these merchandised products could be purchased and another one complained about the fact that no on-line purchasing was possible although many fans from the Armenian diaspora would be willing to purchase such products. In terms of price, one interviewee said that the ticket prices were “really high”. From some comments, there is also the feeling that the marketing should be more national and cover all the Armenian regions. Finally another interviewee talked about “many massive tournaments throughout the country” which could be implemented by the NA.

In terms of CSR, one interviewee said she was involved in a program which had been recently supported by the NA which renovated and refurbished a gym. Few interviewees were aware of this event they praised but believed that this kind of event and CSR activities were not mediated enough and that only the people interested in football and who go to the NA’s website are aware of this initiative. Few agreed that more proactive communication should be done via PR supports and media:

“There should be many press releases in different newspapers and news websites.”

And

“In order to get people involved in knowing such information the FFA should invite different popular media for sharing such information”.

When asked what the NA was doing for the local community, one interviewee said that artificial pitches had been constructed in his community. However, another interviewee said he had not noticed them indicating a clear lack of communication. Moreover, this interviewee questioned the reasons behind the installation of these pitches and asked for more equality and transparency. He expressed himself in the following terms:

“I haven’t noticed such pitches in our community. I don’t know what the reason is, how they decide where to build such pitches, but there should be some kind of equality while deciding where to have a new pitch. Why should one community have 5 pitches, while the other one does not even have one?”

Another interviewee expressed her surprise because she did not know these artificial pitches were funded by the NA although she had lived near several of them.

(7) Sense of community

No real sense of community was expressed in relation with the NA. Interviewees did not feel connected with the members of the NA and did not seem to express an interest in being connected with them. One said that he only felt connected to the NA via the Facebook NA’s official webpage but added that it was mainly to obtain more information. About this community, one said that:

“The only think I want to know about this community is regarding its presidential elections”.

Very few things are actually said about the interviewees’ relationship with the NA and how it could be improved. The few interviewees who made a comment said that they were familiar enough with the NA’s activities to make a judgement. This is illustrated by the two following quotations:

“I am not so much connected with the NA to think about what can be improved in these relations”

Or

“For people with low-interested in the activities of the NA, everything is on a satisfactory level; I do not see anything that must be improved in such relations”.

This lack of responses and comments can be due to a lack of interest in the NA but it could also be thought that some interviewees were not comfortable criticising the relationship they have with the NA. No particular cues would make us believe more in the latter than the former, but the latter cannot be excluded.

However, two interviewees said that when people support the NT or are more or less interested in the NT, they are part of a wider Armenian football community. This is illustrated by this comment about the games:

“When 15-20.000 people go to the stadium to support the NT they are all connected, they become one big family and in this way everybody is connected.”

One interviewee said he was part of a “mini fan club of 20 people” that would go to games together but would also be joined by others in the stadium. This sense of belonging goes beyond the games and these people seem to stay in contact with each other and gather apart from the games to talk about football. On the opposite, one interviewee did not express any particular interest in talking about football or fans.

(8) Comparison between the NA, local clubs and other federations

The level of club football is so low that it does not “compete” or interfere with the relationship with the NT, on the contrary. As one interviewee said:

“In these times of bad club football existing in Armenia, I think the NT is the positive light that always unites our football.”

Also, several interviewees seemed to praise the level of professionalism (linked to the number of paid staff) and management of the NA, and its will to develop marketing in comparison with other NAs. For instance, one interviewee said that sometimes other NAs do not even have a website and that overall they are not well managed. One interviewee said that other sports such as tennis have tried to attract more people but it did not last. Football is widely spread in the whole country. The only sport that could compete with football is the Chess team because it has very good results.

In terms of marketing, one interviewee said that the tennis and the chess federations have organised many tournaments to increase participation where people could play against famous people or champions. That was the case of chess, when people could play against the world number 2 player. This interviewee went on saying that he would appreciate the same kind of thing in football. Nevertheless, according to many interviewees, the football NA should be seen as a model as a whole in terms of marketing for the other national associations.

b) The Armenian die-hard fans

(1) Interest in the national teams

All these die-hard fans define themselves as active and sometimes “super active fans”. They have been supporting the NT for many years and attend almost all games when they can. Two interviewees said that during their military service they were not able to physically attend games but watched them on TV. For instance, one interviewee said that since 2001 he has missed only 2 or 3 games. One of them is a member of a fan club (First Armenian Front) and attend all games and open trainings as well. One of them also said he went to an away game. Several interviewees said they also follow the performances of the NT’s players in their clubs.

They are primarily interested in the senior male NT and only two interviewees made a comment about the other NTs. One said that he actively follows and go to almost all the games of the U21 and tries to go as much as possible to other youth teams’ games. This interviewee tried once to go to a women NT game but left at half time. The other interviewee belongs to an organised group of fans who tries to support all Armenian sportsmen and teams playing international competitions in Armenia. He recalled supporting women basketball and men ice-hockey but he is primarily interested in football.

(2) Distinction between the National Team (NT) and the National Association (NA)

A distinction seems to be clearly made between the NA and the NT. The distinction is evident with the following statement:

“FFA manages not only different issues of the NT, but also issues connected with Armenian football, in general, the clubs, etc. In our case, we support the NT, not the federation. We just follow the work of the FFA so that they do everything professionally, have professional management for the NT”.

With this comment, it seems that this fan perceives his role, and the role of other fans as he uses “we”, as a watchdog role to make sure everything is done for the best of the NT. In the same idea, several fans perceive themselves as stakeholders and talk about ‘cooperation’ and ‘collaboration’ with the NA. According to them, the relationship they currently have with the NA is positively perceived, and illustrated by the fact that the NA financed some fans to go to away games. In terms of decision-making, they mentioned the president and only one interviewee mentioned the Executive Committee.

Among the activities implemented by the NA, the interviewees mentioned: managing the NT, organising the National Championship, the National Cup, cooperating with the UEFA regarding the club

competitions (club licencing), coordinating the development of football in the country, children's football, women's football, developing small pitches with artificial turf in blocks' yards. One interviewee also mentioned the initiative of having football as a learning subject in public schools which was recently done.

Overall the interviewees seem to perceive that the NA is going in the right direction even if football participation among the younger generations and throughout the whole country remain difficult challenges

Interestingly, one interviewee said that there was a misperception of what the NA was doing among the general public and that more should be done to make people aware about these activities. He said:

“Actually the fans and the society in general have different views about the federation. They think that the FFA works from one game of the NT to the other, and does not do anything else, besides organizing the matches. (...) At the same time the FFA should be more reachable to the society, so that they have more accurate and precise understanding about the FFA.”

(3) Identity and image

Regarding the identity and image, not a lot was said. One interviewee said that having good sponsors was important to raise the image of the NA while another one said that the NA should pay more attention to the national championship because it would help to foster a better image as well. Another interviewee said:

“Compared to other organizations, The FFA has rather clear identity among the population. In my opinion this image is connected with the National Team on the one hand and with the name of the FFA President on the other hand.”

According to this quotation, no clear distinction is made between identity and image, and the NA's image seems to be closely linked to the personality of its president, without saying whether it was a good or a bad thing.

When asked about the visibility of the NA, two interviewees made a comment about transparency. One said that the NA could be more “reachable and transparent if it had everyday updates” while the other said that more important news should be communicated to the fans through press releases. One final interviewee estimated that because of UEFA requirements, European NAs had to be more or less transparent and that the Armenian NA was complying to the same rule which was a good thing.

(4) Relationship and contact

In terms of contact with the NT and the players, two interviewees said that they were not very close to the players but that things were going to change and that meeting with players would be organised very soon. Fan groups are however perceived to be the closest after relatives and the members and employees of the NA, which seems to satisfy some of them. This privileged position seems to allow them to get information.

In terms of willingness to maintain contacts and create a relationship, the conversation focused on the recent deletion of their Facebook account by NT's players. The fact that these two players created these pages in the first instance demonstrated their willingness to establish a communication with the fans but the interruption indicated that "the links between the players and the fans have been a little frozen". Most of the interviewees would want to see more players' official Facebook page active. The interviewees went on speculating about the reasons of such interruption and advanced that it could be because of the recent players' successes, because they want to "be more concentrated on their games", but more likely because "fans really are bothering them with different stupid things and questions". One interviewee said that he did not understand why Cristiano Ronaldo, who has 50 million followers on Facebook, was able to maintain his page active and not Armenian players. He further said that it would be better if the players were more proactive and feed forward the fans rather than feed them back; it is because fans do not receive enough information that they ask for it. Two interviewees suggested they should hire someone to maintain their pages.

Few of them have had personal conversations with NT's players. One had short communications with players when taking pictures and sending them back to the players while another interviewee had one online discussion with one player when he was injured. He was surprised he answered all the questions this die-hard fan asked. He had online conversations with other players and appreciated it as indicated by this quotation:

"I have had live communication with other players as well, and I can say that I have got only positive impressions from them. I like that they are very kind and just in such communications."

Another interviewee said he had various conversations with the players from the male senior NT and youth teams and he is fully positive about it:

"I have had many conversations with our both NT and young players. I think that they are always happy to talk with the fans. They are very simple and kind people and never see any problem, when you go and talk to them."

These comments can appear quite in contradiction with the initial discussions regarding the Facebook pages. Last, one interviewee discussed about live communication and meetings they had with players when staying in the same hotel as them for away games. They have nice stories and anecdotes about these moments and the shared emotions after a victory and are very proud to tell about these special moments and days with them.

Finally, only one fan understood and accepted this distance between players and fans saying that the nature of the relationship should be based on good support from the fans and good football performance, greetings and cheers to fans present in the stadium from the players, without asking for more personal things or free time.

In terms of relationship, the fans organised in groups want to be close from the NT and the NA, but want to remain separate. One interviewee said that its fan club refused to join the NA. Even if they are in good terms, they do not want to depend on the NA. However, the relationship they have or want to have with the NA is closely related to the sporting results which dictate their behaviour. This is summarised by the following quotation:

“There is an unwritten rule- if it is a victory, than the players have won the match, if it is a loss, than the FFA is blamed for the loss. Everything is built on this.”

In terms of communication, the fans’ groups seem to privilege a direct communication with the president of the NA reinforcing this idea of personification. For instance, when asked how the fans could communicate with the NA or complain, the fans belonging to a fan group mentioned in-game manifestations via banners and songs but primarily direct meetings with NA’s representatives and the president. This is also the sense of the following sentence:

“The meetings with the FFA president are enough to solve our problems, if there are such.”

The meetings with the president seem to be something organised fans are proud of as illustrated with the following quotation:

“As we have many meetings with the FFA representatives and in particular with the president, we like to tell about our meetings to our friends, to those interested.”

Internet was also mentioned with the creation of pages, groups and events on Facebook and/or on other social networks. Open letters seem to be a practice as well.

(5) Information

In terms of information, several interviewees said that there was a lack of information coming from traditional media such as TV, newspaper and radio, even basic information such as the squad list and injured players, and also a lack of sources of information. This is illustrated by the following comment:

“There was only one newspaper once in a week called “Football +” and only via this newspaper we could find any kind of information. However, we couldn’t know whether trust this information or not.”

This lack of sources of information and their potential lack of trustworthiness may explain why almost of interviewees use Internet as a source of information. Particularly, several of them follow a popular forum of discussion (www.forum.armfootball.com) which provides first-hand information because numerous contributors are based abroad and often in the same countries where Armenian players are based. One interviewee said that this source was so reliable that news websites use this forum as a source of information and that traditional media use news websites as a source of information. One interviewee regretted that not all Armenian clubs have a website to provide information and interviews for instance. Last, one interviewee said he would get some information thanks to special ties and relationships with players.

All of them look for information every day and several times a day. Looking for information is sometimes the first thing they do when they open their computer.

Overall, these die-hard fans want more information and believe that both players and the NT are not doing enough. This is illustrated by the following statement:

“Besides, if our NT tries to be on the same level as different European Teams, they must learn the ‘art of communication’ with the supporters. The communication should be more intensive both via internet and live.”

Live communication refers here to official meetings with players and fans as it is done in European football clubs. However, these meeting or Q&A sessions could be done as well online.

Not surprisingly many fans would prefer Internet and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to get regular information and use the NA’s official website as the main official source. Interestingly, several interviewees said they would want more information from this official channel because it would be more trustful. This is illustrated by the following statement:

“No, information is not enough and not trustful. There is different news in various websites that turn out to be false. That’s why we would trust any news from the official website more.”

This dimension of first-hand information seems quite important and the fans would welcome any communication channels (e.g. TV, websites) which would provide this kind of information. This is the sense of the following quotation:

“We would be very happy, if there was a TV channel only about football, or at least there were football programs in internet, so that we could watch something different from the standard information and standard interviews that we read every day. In such cases we would get the information right from the player and not from different yellow pages.”

However this element does not seem to be an issue for the fans organized in groups because they seem to get first-hand information from direct communication and meeting with the president.

Regarding the question of the newsletter, no real desire was expressed by the interviewees. One recognized that a newsletter once a week could be a good option for people in regions but if the official website was regularly updated, a newsletter was not needed.

(6) Marketing

In terms of marketing, the place issue was discussed with the desire of some interviewees to have a fan store where they could purchase merchandised products and also the possibility to buy online these products but also game tickets. One interviewee seemed to ask for more stable and reasonable prices to attract more spectators while another interviewee said ticket prices were too expensive compared to the prices of international games in neighbour countries. He said:

“When Georgia was hosting World Champion Spain, their tickets were much lower than our tickets, when we were hosting Italy, who was second in the last World Cup. And if we compare the living standards in two countries, they are better in Georgia than in Armenia.”

However for many fans, it seems that the sporting results drive the marketing policy and if they manage to get better results they will for instance attract more sponsors and fans. This is the sense of these quotations:

“Our NT should reach the level of successive European teams in order to get benefits from the marketing policy.”

And

“However, success always brings important changes. Our NT has become an interesting and demanded brand in Armenia, thus everything connected to the NT can be organized via our players. The longer we have good and stable results, the better marketing policies, advertisement offers we will have.”

The same kind of comment is made regarding the national championship whose marketing is inexistent but consistent with the quality of this league. One interviewee also said that he had the impression that the marketing was improving and that the new TV broadcast deal obtained by the NA was a good example.

In terms of CSR activities, one interviewee discussed about the construction of small pitches with artificial turf which were good activities to increase the image of the NA, whereas another one talked about the construction of pitches, stadiums and academies in regions. The organisation of various events and championships such as the Coca-Cola championship and school championships were also mentioned.

(7) Sense of community

When asked if they felt connected with the NA's members and if they felt part of the same community, only two interviewees responded and mainly focused their answers upon the information dimension as if it was the most important thing or advantage of being part of a community, almost like an utilitarian purpose, and this then closely linked to the special link they have with the president. This is illustrated by the following comment:

“I think that our Fan Club always gets first-hand information firstly because of the regular meetings with the FFA president. We can ask questions directly to the President and get true information. I think this is the best way of communication.”

As indicated with this quotation, it seems to be more about communication than about community.

When asked if they felt part of the same community as the other fans of the NT, only two interviewees from official fan clubs responded and said that they felt part of the same community, “the Armenian football family”. The main difference is that fans organised in groups stay in touch with each other when there is no game, are structured and better prepared when they for instance create banners and learn songs.

(8) Comparison between the NFA, local clubs and other federations

It seems that the strong support the interviewees express for the NT is due to the absence of high-level club football. They seem to only support clubs when they play European competitions. In terms of marketing, clubs should learn things from the NA. In terms of federations, only the chess federation could be compared to the Armenian NA because of its very good results but also because the President of the Chess Federation is also the President of the country which, according to one interviewee, provides “more power and seriousness”.

c) Overall discussion of the Armenian case study

Before looking at the results’ details, it is important to note two elements regarding the focus groups. The first element concerns the average age of the respondents which is quite young, between 20 and 30 years old. This characteristic does not represent in itself a major problem because the profiles of fans and die-hard fans in particular often falls within this range but it may significantly influence the managerial implications especially in terms of marketing as the younger generations do not use the same media channels and do not have necessarily the same consumption patterns. The second element to be noted is the level of attachment which is overall quite high. It is normal for the die-hard fans’ group but the casual fans’ group include regular supporters, committed casuals and carefree casuals. Although it is quite interesting from a research perspective to have such a variety of fans, the small number of carefree casuals might reduce the scope of information for this particular sub-group in terms of marketing.

In terms of interests, casual and die-hard fans are essentially interested in the senior male NT and the U21 players, because they are seen as the next NT’s players. On average, they are quite active and few die-hard fans belong to official fan groups which have some implications for the rest of the analysis as we will see later. Some of these organised fans also physically support other Armenian athletes and fans when competing in international tournaments.

Regarding the distinction between the NA and the NT the majority of die-hard and casual fans clearly distinguish them but the level of interest and/or knowledge about the NA does not seem very high. The NA seems mainly epitomized by the president of the federation and when talking about the NA, the fans often refer to the president. This quite high degree of personification could hide the overall actions and initiatives taken by the NA and therefore limit people’s awareness and perceived image. It also represents a double-edge sword as the NA’s image will be dependent on the president image which can be either positive or negative. In this case, it was not possible to determine whether it was

perceived as negative or positive. Having a clear and distinctive image for an organisation seems more sustainable and cost-efficient and the organisation's identity and image can remain after a change of president, without having to start from scratch. Particularly, the NA seems to be perceived as professional by many fans and this could be an angle of communication to affirm its image. The attention of die-hard and casual fans seems primarily focused on the NT and its players which may explain why in their mind the NA is primarily identified by its president. These findings are confirmed by the responses dealing with image and identity. Several respondents said that the NA has a clear identity and image but did not provide any associations or attributes (i.e. "professional" seems to be the only clear attribute identified).

In terms of contact and relationship, the findings are consistent with the previous contents and fans' interests. Fans mainly focus on the contacts and relationships they have with the NT and its players. A distinction seems to be noticeable between die-hard fans and casual fans regarding this issue: although most of die-hard fans look for more personal, regular and closer contacts with the players, many casual fans do not seem interested and mainly focus their attention on the sporting and performance side. In the same idea, die-hard fans would want more direct contact with the fans although casual fans would want more information and reliable information in media. This corroborates the findings of O'Malley et al. (1997) who noted that relationships between organisations and customers should be personal, friendly and intimate. Die-hard fans demand more social media presence from the players and contacts with them. It seems that their expectations are high, almost like for club players in Western European countries. This situation could possibly be explained by the absence of strong club football in Armenia. However, these initiatives are individual and clubs and national teams are not responsible for this presence. There is potentially a gap here between fans' expectations and NT and NA's responsibilities. Nevertheless, they also want physical contacts with the players, which is manageable by the NA and the NT. These demands are particularly high coming from fans in organised groups who were particularly happy about one experience they had with players in the context of an away game. The organised fan groups seem to demand and have a specific relationship with the president of the NA. They appear like real stakeholders but we can wonder if dealing directly with the president is an appropriate way of communicating. It tends to give a lot of importance to these fans who seem to follow a development and a structuration of "ultras" and could be negatively perceived by other fans.

Consistent with the previous findings, it seems that casual fans look for more information in traditional media although die-hard fans would want more regular information via the website or the social media pages of the NA. Die-hard fans seek for information every day and several times a day and satisfy their needs with online media and forums of discussion. Considering the high frequency of information they

need, it seems difficult from the NA perspective to satisfy them. However they also expressed a need for more “controlled” or “official” information. The NA could however use this in their favour. This is particularly surprising to see fans wanting more controlled information because they tend to increasingly consider official information as too neutral and corporate, particularly in comparison with online information. Consequently, die-hard fans do not seek for newsletter, probably because information is out-of-date for them when it arrives. For them, a regularly updated website should play this role. However, it could be more interesting for casual fans who are not that proactive regarding information and “who read it when it arrives to them”.

In terms of marketing, not a lot was discussed as the communication dimension seems to be the most important. Some interviewees expressed a need for more merchandised products, for a fan store and online purchasing while few fans complained about the price of the game tickets. The lack of discussion of the marketing issues can be explained by the fact that many fans seem to believe that marketing can only really happen if the NT is successful, which is incorrect and could be an issue if this perception is shared among the NA’s employees and managers. Many cases of sportingly unsuccessful or not so successful teams implementing innovative and successful marketing strategies exist (e.g. Bodet, 2009), and it is especially possible for national associations to focus their communication on corporate social responsibilities and community development activities.

In terms of CSR, the fans seem to be aware of certain activities and were positive about them but did not express a strong willingness to take part in it. As it will be discussed in the next paragraph, their main interest lies in the NT and the players and less in the development of football. The fans’ level of awareness of these initiatives could be improved and the NA’s PR activities could be developed in this regard as the role of traditional media was often raised. Transparency could also be an issue as several fans were not aware about certain schemes and would want more explanation.

Considering their sense of belonging to the same community, very few interviewees expressed a sense of belonging to what they call the Armenian football community. We can wonder is this finding could not be explained by a lack of interests for the NA and Armenian football in general and a strong focus on the NT and its players.

Finally, the Armenian context did not allow a comparison with football clubs’ marketing because of the lack of development. When compared with other sporting federations, the NA appears in a clear positive light. This dominant position could possibly explain why so few critics were overall expressed.

3. The case study of England

a) *The English casual fans*

(1) Interest in the England Team

Of the six *casual* interview respondents only two have experienced a live England home game: one respondent attended two matches during Euro '96 and the other has only ever attended one game. While all of the respondents would generally watch many of the games on TV, the extent of their interest varies depending on the type of game the NT is involved in. Whether it is a friendly, a tournament qualifier or a tournament game (i.e. World Cup or European Championship) will determine the extent to which respondents experience matches and demonstrate their support, with the lesser friendlies sometimes being ignored. For example:

“I pretty much watch every game I can with England. In fact, actually I don't tend to watch the friendlies. I watch, like, internationals and stuff like that, but not really friendlies as much”.

Five of the six interview respondents can be classified as *committed casuals* according to Tapp and Clowes' (2002) classification, with the sixth being classed as *carefree casual*. The focus of all the respondents support was the men's senior England team. Not one of the respondents was interested in watching games or seeking information out regarding the women's team. Half of the respondents expressed an interest in the U21 team, although their enthusiasm in terms of watching games and seeking out information was much less than that of the men's senior team. For two respondents, their interest in the U21 was linked to players of their club team featuring in the squad and for the other it was because of personally knowing one of the players.

(2) Distinction between England football team and the Football Association

All of the respondents regard the FA and the England team as two separate entities, although one respondent described the relationship between them as “symbiotic”. The majority of respondents could describe, basically, the different roles and activities undertaken by the FA. For example:

“I think I might know what some of their roles are in terms of governance and things (...). I think the FA are responsible for grassroots football. So, right through the stages of football development ...all the way to the top. Erm... I suppose they are involved in officiating the game, and the coaching side of the game. And then I suppose they are involved in the running of the football leagues we have in England from, erm, the Premier League all the way right down”.

Not one of the respondents feels any strong sense of attachment with the FA, with a typical view being: "I'm not... in need of anything the FA provides at the moment, apart from... the entertainment that the Premier League or any other football leagues provide, and... the national team". In spite of the lacking sense of attachment respondents feel towards the FA, half of the respondents believe them to be doing a reasonably good job in their various undertaken roles and activities, even if the respondent is not exactly sure what these are – "I think it's a tough job, they seem to be doing quite well, and they seem very committed to it". On the other hand, the other half of the respondents believes that the opposite is true, that the FA is not doing a very job, and is generally more able to elaborate why:

"I reckon they probably don't do the greatest job... I'm just... I don't think grassroots sport in general in this country is well for certain sports. It isn't particularly great. Football, for example, I don't think that football is that well-run".

In terms of the decision makers at the FA and England, all of the respondents knew that England manager is Roy Hodgson and saw him as the chief decision maker within the England team. As for the FA board of directors, two of the respondents could name the current chairman, David Bernstein, and another cited Sir Trevor Brooking, the FA's Director of Football Development, as a decision-maker within the organisation.

(3) Identity and image

Although all of the respondents regard the FA and the England team as two separate entities, four of the respondents did not see the FA as having a clear image or identity:

"I'm sure it likes to think of itself as having its own identity and ethos [...] But what that is, I not sure".

Only one respondent could describe what he thought the image or identity of the FA looked like. This respondent considered the FA to be *reactive*, *strict* and *firm* in the sense that the FA tends to be more visible when there is a football-related problem to address, e.g. disciplinary action or settling a feud. Although the sixth respondent did consider the FA as having a clear image and identity when asked to describe what they thought that was, their description was limited to knowing what FA stood for:

"I think everybody knows who the FA are, don't they? So if you said to most people "Who are the FA?" I think they may be able to tell you that it's the Football Association".

In terms of visibility, five of the respondents did not think the FA was visible enough in the sense that they were often unaware of its image or identity. One respondent compared it to the Premier League stating that:

“I think the Premier League has its own identity and set of values and... styles of play and things. But I think the FA, as the governing body that oversees the Premier League, doesn't particularly have its own clear set of values”.

However, there was one respondent, however, who believed that the FA was visible enough and had no reason to be more visible, stating that:

“A good national governing body goes about its business in the background and everything else runs smoothly on top of it. The decision-making of the national governing body shouldn't... impose across the sport in a negative way nor... be seen to”.

(4) Relationship and contact

In terms of direct contact with the England team, one respondent is a subscribed member of the official England supporters' club (englandfans) and receives regular information about the team from the FA via email. Another respondent is a follower of the FATV channel on YouTube.com which publishes regular videos about England, the FA Cup and grassroots football, including player and manager interviews, match highlights and 'behind the scenes footage'. Aside from that, direct contact with the England team, as a whole, is generally limited to around the times of games; that is, respondents are more likely to be in contact with the team, either watching games or seeking out information about the team, during “the cycle of international football fixtures and tournaments”, and less so during the regular domestic season. As one respondent stated:

“My contact with the national team fluctuates. So when... when it's the middle of the club season, erm, I'm not going to be as interested in the England setup. (...) I think when the club season's over and the England team is in the middle of a tournament, I think my interest [...and] my contact with the team goes up”.

Games are often watched on television, although this is sometimes dependent on whether the game is being shown on terrestrial or satellite television. As previously stated, the importance of the game usually determines whether, and the way in which it is experienced. For example, friendlies (when they are watched) are more likely to be experienced at home, sometimes alone, and sometimes with whoever happens to be in the home at the time of the game (partners, family members or a small

number of friends). On the other hand, major tournament games are more likely to be experienced in a more social setting, most commonly at a pub or bar, with a larger group of people.

During the domestic season the general view among respondents is that any major news items concerning the England team will usually be contained in a headline story in their preferred media sources; mainly websites (BBC Sport and SKY Sports) and television (Football Focus, Match of Day and SKY Sports News) and less so through newspapers (namely the Guardian, Independent and Daily Mail) and the radio (TalkSport and BBC FiveLive). With that in mind, respondents consequently take in major England news item through their everyday media consumption rather than purposefully seeking out information about the England team. This is very much the case concerning individual players too. Given that many of the England players play in the English Premier League there is often regular contact with those players in a club context, and not from an England point-of-view.

Whereas the majority of respondents feel some level of connection and closeness with the England team, or identify with them on some level, however slight that may be, the same cannot be said for England's players. Quite simply, for most of the respondents, there are no feelings of closeness to the players. One respondent even states that:

"There's a lot of players who... I just really don't like. (...) it tends to be players (...) who play for big teams (...) which I dislike as well. So, maybe Chelsea, and [John] Terry or [Ashley] Cole. Or [Wayne] Rooney and United".

It is interesting to note, however, this respondent has not always felt this way about England's players:

"I remember (...) Euro '96 very well. (...) I really liked [that] England team, they had a lot of players I really liked: [David] Seaman, [Darren] Anderton, [Steven] McManaman. All players that I really liked".

For two of the respondents, the lack of connection or identification with England's players relates to the amount of money that footballers in England generally earn.

"I think the players are removed. Their lifestyle and their (...) position in society is so far removed from what I do and from who I am that I suppose I wouldn't identify with the players".

And,

"[England's footballers] don't live my sort of life do they? (...) they get paid fortunes [...and] I don't feel like they would know what it feels like to live like a normal person".

Much like those respondents who expressed an interest in the U21 team, where there was a minor connection felt with individuals from the England team, this was linked to these players being from their club team. For example:

“Like, for example, Liverpool, Steven Gerrard, I definitely feel... don't know, erm..., I don't, I wouldn't say close, but I definitely have more... more interest seeing him play in the team”.

(5) Information

In terms of information concerning the England team, there are, as discussed, electronic newsletters (such as those direct from the FA and englandfans), news websites (BBC Sport and SKY Sports), social network websites (Twitter and the FATV channel on YouTube.com) television programmes (Football Focus, Match of Day and SKY Sports News) newspapers (Guardian, Independent and Daily Mail) and radio stations (TalkSport and BBC FiveLive) that respondents use to gather information about football and sport in general. Checking these sources of information is an everyday occurrence for all of the respondents, who mostly like to keep informed with football and sport in general. Since, as stated, major England news items are generally included within the main headlines of these media sources, respondents are kept up-to-date with the England team indirectly, rather than purposefully seeking out information about the England team. For example:

“I keep up to date on the internet if any stories come out on BBC [website], and I watch SKY Sports News a hell of a lot. So... any England news that does come out, such as the Rio Ferdinand stuff today, I generally find out about it. I don't tend to actively seek it. [It] more just comes through when I'm looking at other sports knowledge”.

The respondents are generally happy with the level of information available about the England team, and prefer ascertaining information through their own methods and at their own convenience. For example, when questioned about newsletters, both respondents who were already signed up for one and those who weren't, replies included:

“I feel [communications from the FA are] fairly faceless and impersonal. [...] When I get continuous e-mails [...] it does grind on me a little bit”.

Or,

“I don't think a regular newsletter or e-mail would interest me. It might be something that just goes straight into the spam [folder]”.

Or,

“I'm more someone that wants to go and actively seek things rather than something passively sent to me. And it's not a judgement on the FA. It's simply a judge of my character, I suppose. I... I generally don't like, or don't have time or... well, I probably say I don't have time but I just don't want to read things that come as a spam type message”.

Additionally, one respondent describes a dedicated FA section in the match day programme they purchase when attending club games, stating: “the FA would have a page about something, but I never read it”.

With the general consensus among the respondents (all but one) being that the FA fails to provide fans with enough information concerning its general activities (for example knowledge of work in the local community and CSR programmes was largely lacking), there are only a couple of suggestions from respondents of ways in which they think this aspect could be improved. In response to communications from the FA being ‘faceless and impersonal’, one respondent suggests that e-mail personalisation in newsletters would go some way toward encouraging the reading of them. Another respondent suggests that through their employment as a primary school teacher the FA could do more to contact and promote their work in schools:

“You know make themselves more available and more accessible to teachers... and children within a school environment. I think that would be a really good way of (...) boosting its reputation and its relationship in that (...) industry, in that sector so to speak”.

(6) Marketing

Overall, respondents could identify only certain aspects of marketing from England and the FA; aspects which related mainly to sponsors. For example:

“The only [marketing] I'm aware of is that their training ground sponsor is Vauxhall. I just know that Vauxhall is the sponsor of the FA”.

And,

“I know that Umbro have generally supported the shirts for year on year. [And] there are long-standing sponsors of the England setup, such as Nationwide and a couple of other major brands”.

The general feeling among the respondents is that they do, in some way, feel targeted by the marketing strategies undertaken by the FA and England, but not necessarily attracted by it. For example:

“I'm not really attracted by it. (...) I'm not really going to say, 'Joe Hart's wearing an England shirt, and he's wearing those gloves, and playing with that football, I should buy that.' [...] none of that is going to work on me”.

In terms of Corporate Social Responsibility, not one respondent was aware of any CSR schemes that the FA are involved in. Interestingly enough, when posed with the question “what do you think the FA's about Corporate Social Responsibility activities?”, one respondent highlighted the conflict between the health-promoting ambitions of football participation and the nature of sponsors such as Coca-Cola and McDonalds, whose products are “inherently unhealthy”: “it seems (...) counterintuitive. (...) It seems quite un-corporate [social] responsibility”. The respondent did however concede that this was not an issue located solely in English football given that the Olympics and a multitude of other sports organisations are also sponsored by these two companies.

Only two of the six respondents were aware of any work the FA is undertaking in their local communities, both of whom are employed at schools and one being a community coach.

(7) Sense of community

Respondents experienced a sense of community more so in terms of the England team – around the time of tournaments – than in terms of the FA. Even the respondent considered to be a *carefree casual* supporter according to Tapp and Clowes' (2002) classification, admitted 'getting caught up' in the wave of excitement and expectation around tournament times. Typical responses include:

“I feel that I'm joining a common interest really. (...) When it comes to supporting England (...), we want the same thing which is a nice... a nice feeling... in my opinion.”

Or,

“If you go to the pub and watch (...) Real Madrid against Manchester United (...) some people would want United to win and some people would want (...) Madrid to win. But (...) when you watch England, everyone wants England to win. That unites you straight away doesn't it? You all want them to win”.

Or,

“I feel like a football family comes together when England play. And I think everyone is [...] part of [that football] family”.

However, no overwhelming sense of community was expressed in relation to the FA. Respondents, generally, did not feel connected with the members of the FA and did not seem to express an interest in being connected with them. Of the exceptions to this viewpoint, one respondent described how they felt “loosely connected”, but “not that strong of a bond” with other FA members in the sense that playing amateur football provides contact with what could be considered other FA members (other amateur players, referees, etc.). Another respondent felt the sense of community they experienced, aside from in relation to the England team, was more the result of Premier League-related activities than those conducted by the FA:

“There's not many pubs you can go into without a football game on and... in that sense it does... you do feel connected to other individuals. (...) Half the time you'll walk into somewhere, a game of football will be on, someone turns to you [who] you've never met before in your life and asks you to score, asks what's going on or who you support. And you've obviously got an instant point of interest or a commonality”.

The other exception was a brief reply from one respondent who stated that:

“Friends of mine (...) enjoy being FA members and... do coaching, and obviously it's beneficial for them and the people they coach”.

It is interesting to note though, that the community coach respondent in this study did not feel part of an FA ‘football family’ in England.

(8) Comparison between club and national support

Given the level, quality and importance of club football in England, it is hardly surprising that for half of the respondents they prefer their club teams over the national team. Of the remaining respondents, two prefer supporting England over their club team, and the other supports both club and country equally, not wanting either “one to win at the expense of the other”. For the respondents who prefer their club team over the national team, this does not, as one might expect, relate to the geographical distance between their home and club. For example, one respondent located in Leeds (West Yorkshire) supports Arsenal (London); a distance of approximately 200 miles (or close to four hours driving time). Another from Rustington (West Sussex) supports Blackburn Rovers (Lancashire); a distance of approximately 280 miles (or approximately five hours driving time). The former describes his preference for supporting club over country as so:

“I prefer the Arsenal. (...) Just because my involvement with the Arsenal team is more active and so I share more (...) experiences and (...) more emotions with that cohort of fans who all have that high-level of active support. I think because of my fluctuating support and (...) passive association with England, and with the other fans of England, (...) I don't share the same level of (...) interaction.

In the next two quotes, the Blackburn supporter described above, the *carefree casual* supporter according to Tapp and Clowes' (2002) classification, first describes his reasons for preferring club over country and then offers a suggestion as to why, from the view of him and his friends, club teams might be preferred over the national team:

“I just loyally stick with Blackburn, just because I've always supported them. (...) I don't have that with England. A lot of people say, “It doesn't matter, you should support England, you're English, you should stick with your team.” But (...) I haven't got that connection for whatever reason. Whereas as I do stick with Blackburn. Even though we're not successful and we play rubbish football, I'll still support them. I can't really put a finger on why they still support them (...) Whereas I don't know why specifically, why I've stopped supporting England”.

And,

“Some of my friends back home will be disillusioned enough with England to be of similar nature [to me]. ... They'll be like, ‘We just don't care anymore. We've watched them for the last 15 years and they've failed every single time we get our hopes up to watch them’”.

Of the two respondents that prefer supporting England over their club, one of these does cite geography as being the main reason for that preference:

“I didn't grow up next to a ground supporting [a] club team. So the only connection I feel to any team is the England national team (...) I think if I grew up in a town where everyone supported the same team, I may well have done as well. [...] I think I would have supported England as well”.

For the other respondent that prefers supporting England over a club, he is unaware as to their reasons for this preference, although the fact that this respondent supports two club teams – therefore making them a *repertoire* fan (see Tapp and Clowes', 2002) – may have somewhat of an influence on this preference:

“[I prefer] England, but it doesn’t make much sense to me why. I think I should feel more passionate about my local team [Luton] or Liverpool, who I’ve supported since I was a boy but I don’t know why I don’t”.

b) The English die-hard fans

(1) Interest in the England Team

Of the four die-hard respondents interviewed, all would consider themselves active fans of the England national team. In terms of experiencing matches, all four of the participants have attended live England matches in the past, although one of those has attended only one U21 game. Of the other three respondents, one attends live England games at home “at least three or four times a year”, and the other two respondents have attended one and two home games, respectively, in the past two years. Two of respondents express an interest in attending a live away fixture in the near future, but both would prefer that it was during a major tournament rather than for a friendly game. When respondents are unable to attend live games, they will usually watch all of matches on TV, except for one respondent who states:

“If it’s a big tournament game like a... Euros or World Cup, I’d definitely watch every single game. Without a doubt. Erm, if it’s a friendly, it’ll be at my convenience”.

The focus of all the respondents support was the men’s senior England team. However, two respondents (one of whom was the only female respondent in the English sample) expressed an active interest in the women’s team, in terms of seeking out information about them and with both respondents having attended women’s games in the past. In terms of the U21 team, two respondents express a passive interest, in terms of watching games and seeking out information. However, the respondent described above who attends “at least three or four [senior home games] a year” describes their interest in the U21 as more active. For this respondent, a number of England U21 games take place at their club’s home ground (Carrow Road, Norwich) and he recognises that he probably has more access to the team than the average fan in terms of proximity to the team and a local press that is more inclined to report on the U21 matches. In either the case of the women’s team or the U21, enthusiasm in terms of watching games and seeking out information, while plainly evident, was much less than that of the men’s senior team although for the female respondent this was put down to access to games and information regarding the women’s team

(2) Distinction between England football team and the Football Association

All four respondents draw a clear distinction between the national team and the FA. This distinction is evident in the following statements:

I feel the [England] team itself is simply the players and the manager (...) I think of them as a team (...) separate from the FA. (...) I look at the FA obviously as the governing body for the sport in this country, and the team.

And,

I do sort of see them as two separate entities. I know they're supposed to be [considered] as one (...) but... I do see them as two separate things. I see the FA as (...) governing everything over the top, and the England team as (...) the pinnacle of the club teams.

The majority of respondents could describe, basically, the different roles and activities undertaken by the FA, with a typical description being:

"To govern football in England. (...) They work with the Premier League, (...) and the Football League after that. (...) the FA Cup. (...) I know they oversee the England team. (...) I think they're responsible for football going into the community. So there's the grassroots level stuff: the coaching. (...) I think they work with the PFA [Professional Footballers' Association], they're obviously not in charge of that [though]. (...) representing English football abroad, I would say, as well".

In terms of feelings towards the FA, two respondents view the FA in a generally positive light, although both concede there is room for improvement. One respondent has some quite negative feelings towards the FA, and the remaining respondent is relatively impartial in how they feel. Of the respondents with generally positive feelings towards the FA, one of those also criticises the FA as being "behind the times" in terms of coaching and development of the grassroots game compared to other countries. This is also the main reason for the respondent who holds some quite negative feelings towards FA:

"I feel quite negative about the FA if I'm honest. (...) I feel like they've only recently tried to change the infrastructure (...) of coaching in the country really. I feel like other countries, in Europe especially, have got these superb [set ups] and are generating these great players and teams, and we are being left behind a bit, and I blame the FA for it".

In terms of the decision makers at the FA and England, all of the respondents knew that England manager is Roy Hodgson and saw him as the chief decision maker within the England team. As for the FA board of directors, only one of the respondents could name the current chairman, David Bernstein. A typical reply in regard to the FA decision makers from the other three respondents would be: "I don't know [...] as much about the FA as I do about the England team".

(3) Identity and image

The majority of respondents (three) see the FA as having an identity or image, although whether they consider this to be clear or not varies between respondents. While one respondent describes the FA as "a traditional Football Association rather than a modern one", they do not believe this identity to be a clear one, "for the reason that people [general] don't know what they're doing now". Another respondent believes that with the FA's recent 150th anniversary, this has provided them an opportunity to better communicate an image and identity which has already seen improvements over the last ten years, an identity and image that is rooted in football tradition and history. The third respondent also has a fairly clear, but relatively negative, idea of what they believe to be FA's identity or image, criticising them of trying to "portray themselves in a certain image which is completely and utterly politically correct [and] impartial. (...) I think they (...) almost positively discriminate at times (...) where they're trying so hard to come across as this politically correct body". This respondent also thought the FA to be "too visible if anything. Especially when it comes to the England team". With regard to the visibility of the FA, of the other three respondents in the sample, one believed that they were visible enough already, while the other two respondents believed that the FA wasn't visible enough. In one case this related to the access to the women's national team.

(4) Relationship and contact

Contact with, and feelings of closeness and connectivity to the England, varies from respondent to respondent. For two of the respondents, the relationship they have with the national team can be described as 'sporadic', despite considering themselves active supporters. In this context, contact with the team is not regular and takes place, more so, around the times of tournament and qualifiers. But at those times, contact would be daily. On the other hand, another respondent considers his contact with the team to be a weekly occurrence, regardless of whether there is a fixture scheduled or not. The fourth respondent, who is a follower of the team and various players on Twitter, describes his contact with England as a "pretty much" daily occurrence. This, again, is regardless of whether there is a fixture scheduled.

In terms of the players, the majority of respondents reported feeling some connection to individuals within the England team, and one respondent feeling no connection with them at all. For one respondent this connection was generally limited to those players from the club team he supports:

“When you spend (...) most of the season hoping the likes of like Rooney [and] Gerrard, etc lose, and then all of a sudden you need to like support them during England matches, it’s a bit more difficult. But the likes of Ashley Cole, Lampard, to those lot yeah, I’d prefer them to score than Gerrard, Rooney and the likes”.

For another respondent the connection comes more from relating to the player’s qualities, style of play and mental attitude:

“Especially when he was younger, probably three or four years ago or more (...) I was always a massive fan of Gerrard. (...) I just really like the way he played, and his attitude”.

It is worth noting, however, this respondent also accepts that contemporarily:

“I feel that a lot of the players are (...) a little bit socially removed from the common man in this country. (...) And because of that, that sort of weakens the link between myself [and England], and probably [for] a lot of other fans too. So a lot of people probably feel slightly alienated from a lot of the players. Not all of the players, but a lot of the players. (...) I think the root of it is that they earn such a large amount of money compared to the working man... the average man.

The respondent who can be considered to feel closest to the England players and is the only official member of the *englandfans* supporters group of the four respondents, while generally regarding the players as “a pretty decent bunch of people” did discuss some negative experiences of his relationship with the players in the past:

“In the 2010 World Cup when Rooney stormed off and complained about the fans... I wasn't too happy about that, because, you know, as an England player you should be giving your all, and we can see that day that they probably weren't. (...) To turn around and complain about the fans (...) especially if you've gone to South Africa, I thought that was a little bit harsh”.

Very much like with the *casual* respondents, games, when not attended, are nearly always watched on television. Although for two of the respondents, this is sometimes dependent on the importance of the game. Similar again to the *casual* respondents, friendlies (when they are watched) are more likely to be experienced at home, sometimes alone, and sometimes with whoever happens to be in the home at the time of the game (partners, family members or a small number of friends). On the other hand, major

tournament games are more likely to be experienced in a more social setting, most commonly at a pub or bar, with a larger group of people. It is worth noting however that for the female respondent the preference is to watch games at home (when not attending a live game) regardless of the importance of the game.

Finally, in terms of the relationship respondents feel they have with the FA, none of the respondents believed they had any form of relationship with the FA aside from contact with the England team. As one respondent states:

“There's no passion towards it, I guess. That's a massive difference, there's passion towards England team, but not towards the FA at all”.

(5) Information

Very much like with the *casual* respondents, in terms of seeking out information, electronic newsletters (such as those direct from the FA and englandfans), news websites (BBC Sport and SKY Sports), social network websites (Twitter and Facebook), dedicated England sections of online club forums (Chelsea FC, Millwall FC, Norwich FC), television programmes (Football Focus, Match of Day and SKY Sports News) newspapers (national and local) and radio stations (TalkSport and BBC FiveLive) all play a role in the information-gathering processes of the respondents; in terms of England, and football and sport in general. Checking these sources of information is often an everyday regular occurrence. One respondent makes a negative reference to the tabloid media in England, specifically based around what he considers to be the unrealistic expectations they hold of the England team:

“There are certain things that I would take away, (...) the media hype around (...) qualifying, getting to the World Cup, and then [the media saying] ‘Ooo we are going to win it’. I remember (...) the headline when we got drawn against Algeria and America (...) in The Sun (...) “Easy”. (...) Algeria, Slovenia and USA [in the 2012 World Cup]. Easy. Well, like, no it's not”.

Generally, respondents are satisfied with the level of information available about the England team:

“I would say the FA tries to actively promote the England senior team as much as they possibly can, in as much a positive light as they possibly can through the media”.

Of the improvements that could be made to the level of information available about the England team, half the respondents would like to see improved access to, and more information regarding the

women's and youth teams. Of these two respondents, one respondent also expresses the wish for the FA to be more transparent in the context of decisions around the England team:

"I'd quite like to see a bit more (...) transparency in terms of how (...) people come together to pick the teams, for the England (...). (...) We assume it's Roy Hodgson and Stuart Pearce who come together. But maybe there's something more to it. I'd like to see that".

Although the majority of respondents generally believe the FA is providing enough information to fans about the England team, there was a feeling among them that the organisation is failing to provide enough information about its general activities. For example:

"[They need to try to] get [more of] the stories [to do with their general work] out there somehow, Sky Sports News or Football Focus, those kind of programmes, because a lot of people don't know that they have changed. (...) I think they'd get a better reputation if they do. (...) I think they should be more visible in areas like that".

For one respondent, information was lacking with regard to refereeing courses and potential progression into the professional game. For others, the FA does not communicate its grassroots programmes and CSR strategies effectively, meaning that people are often unaware or misinformed about such work. For example:

"There'll be certain initiatives that [people] don't know [about]. A lot of people say the "grassroots programme", but a lot of people won't be able to say what that is and what they're doing".

(6) Marketing

In terms of marketing, half of the respondents demonstrate some awareness of the types of marketing that the FA undertake (although this was mainly based around ticketing and sponsorship), one respondent is completely unaware of any of marketing that they undertake, and the other is aware that marketing exists, but was unable to elaborate of the any specific elements:

"I must admit, when I do think off the top of my head they do seem to have (...) quite a presence: a media presence. So I would say that they are certainly present enough. So their marketing must be (...) worth something to a degree I suppose".

For the two respondents that demonstrate some awareness of the FA's marketing, this was mainly to do with tickets:

“I mean, around, kind of, marketing for tickets and that, obviously they do [a good job], because they need to get out and be in people's faces”.

And,

“I've got a lot of e-mails. Erm... I always get e-mails before the games. (...) To do with ticketing.

These respondents were also aware of marketing in the context of sponsorship:

“I know sponsorship-wise, when you see them at press conferences you see, erm, Vauxhall down as the sponsors on there. Erm... and obviously when you see them training its plastered all around on advertising boards, etc.”

And,

“You've got the FA cup where they use a lot of sponsoring. Erm... obviously they're using Budweiser... their own brand, because it's their cup. So everybody knows it as the biggest club competition in the world so... everybody knows about that and they use that to their advantage I guess.”

Aside from ticketing and sponsorship, and in terms of the FA marketing themselves, one respondent describes how “the first thing you see [nowadays] when you get to Wembley is a plaque welcoming you to Wembley”. This is an interesting point, as the respondent sees this more as a recent development (the FA marketing themselves) when comparing the present day to his youth:

“I think they're making an effort [nowadays]. I think (...) they've made [the FA] more personable over the last, sort of, 10 years. I don't really remember as a kid (...) knowing about the FA really. Erm... especially as I went to a lot of Euro 96 games. That was my first memory of (...) seeing England. It was just literally England, that's it. You know, this is the national team... there's nothing else. I don't really remember anything else. But within the last 10 years... it's more... (...) You see when you get to Wembley, “The FA welcomes you to Wembley.” That kind of thing, you are seeing more about them so the image has definitely improved over, you know, the time that I'd been following England”.

In terms of Corporate Social Responsibility, not one respondent was aware of any CSR schemes that the FA undertake. Of the little that was actually said about CSR, one respondent misunderstood the concept completely, believing that CSR refers to corporate hospitality:

“I know that they've got for England games there's a lot of corporate tickets sold in advance of England international games. Erm... I know that's annoyed certain people, including myself, because there are a lot of empty seats. Which I think is terrible, to be honest”.

In terms of work being performed in the community by the FA, the majority of respondents demonstrated, at least, some generic awareness of the community football schemes. For example:

“I know they do coaching badges, erm... I know there are other activities (...) but I wouldn't be able to tell you what they are”.

One respondent is involved in football coaching, after school coaching and holidays clubs, and is therefore obviously aware of, and able to describe the type of work undertaken in his local community, seeing as he's part of it.

(7) Sense of community

Similar again to casual England fans, respondents expressed a feeling of connection to an English football community, more so in terms of their support for the national team than in terms of the FA. In fact, only one respondent felt that, when ignoring the England football team, they were part of a wider football community within the country. This was, however, related more to the fact the respondent was a coach in the local community:

“I do feel part of the FA's coaching community, bearing in mind that everyone who coaches need to be qualified by the FA at least for one of their coaching badges”.

In terms of the England team, however, all four respondents felt that when supporting the national team they were part of an English football family:

“I do (feel a sense of football community in England) but I don't feel that's through the FA. I feel that's through... going to [England] football matches, attending local football matches, trying to do the 92 club. I feel it's more through that than what the FA do. (...) It's more to do with getting out there and experiencing it as a fan, rather than... you know... someone who's, sort of, interested in the game. Erm, so in that respect, no”.

(8) Comparison between club and national support

What is interesting here is that despite the fact that all four respondents can be considered to be die-hard fans of the national team – for example, “[I'm] passionate about the England team. Purely because I'm quite a patriotic person”– all four would consider themselves more passionate about their club teams than the England team. For example:

“I would say that I have more of a relationship to my home [club], to Millwall, than I have with England. However I am still very passionate about the England team. Maybe about 70% as passionate [about England] as I am about to Millwall team”.

For all of the respondents, their relationship with the club is seen as closer, more frequent and more personal than with the national team. This is true for both supporters of Premier League clubs (two respondents – Chelsea and Norwich), and those who support clubs in the Football League (two respondents – Millwall and Bradford). For example:

“I’m more passionate about Norwich than England. (...) I think that’s because you see them week in week out (...) playing 40 odd games [a year] at least. (...) To me... Norwich is bigger than England. But when it comes to World Cup here or... a European [Championships] year... the passion that I have for Norwich transfers in the summer (...) [to] England . (...) Like I say, you see Norwich every week. And so you get more into it, you’re closer to the players.”

With that in mind, for both sets of fans (Premier League and Football League) there is more information available about their club and more regular interaction. For the supporters of the lower league clubs especially, players are also seen as more approachable.

Supporters of clubs that are located in the Premier League were generally positive about their club’s marketing, whereas the same could not be said for respondents who support Football League clubs. Consequently, when comparing the FA’s marketing activities with that of specific clubs, clubs’ marketing is better rated if the club is a Premier League club, whereas the opposite is true for those who support lower league clubs. Lower league supporters, however, feel that this may be down to the amount of money that their clubs have available for marketing activities.

c) Overall discussion of the English case study

When comparing the findings from each set of fans, despite the differences in attending games (i.e. die-hard fans attending, on average, more NT games than casual fans), there were no differences between the two sets of fans in terms of the reasons for not attending live games. Time and money are generally cited, by both sets of fans, as being the main reasons for not attending games, both for those who have already attended England games (and would like to go to more) and those who have not (and would consider going to their first one). Respondents from both set of fans also suggest that, together with time and money, the quality of the opposition and the importance of game can also play a factor in

deciding whether or not to attend games. Also, qualifiers and particularly tournament matches represent the most important games to both sets of fans, with the die-hard fans taking more of an interest in the so-called lesser friendlies than casual fans do.

In terms of interest, it seems that both sets of fans focus more on the men's senior team, followed by the youth NT and finally the women's NT, with interest corresponding with the amount of information respondents have access to. However, the main differences between the two sets of fans when considering interest in the NTs, aside from attendance, relates to interest in the women's NT. For the casual fans, not one respondent expressed an interest in the women's team, whereas half of the respondents in the die-hard fans expressed a relatively active interest in both seeking out information about, and watching women's games. It is worth noting here though that one of these die-hard respondents is female and an active amateur footballer. Consequently, and given the size of the die-hard sample, for both casual and die-hard fans, this unequal interest in the women's team cannot be described as definitive.

Concerning the distinction between the NT and the NA, there are very few differences that can be found here between casual and die-hard fans. For example, in both sets of fans all of the respondents draw a clear distinction between the England football team and the English Football Association, seeing them as two distinct, but related entities. Also, the majority of respondents in each set could describe, basically, some of the different roles and activities undertaken by the FA, even if they were initially unsure when asked directly.

In terms of image and identity, half of the die-hard fans could describe what they thought to be the FA's image or identity, whereas only one respondent from the casual fans could describe what they thought the image or identity of the FA looked like. According to several respondents, the perceptions of the FA are strongly influenced by external factors (e.g. media, political). What is not surprising then is the majority of casual fans – five out of six – do not think the FA are visible enough. For the die-hard fans only one respondent holds a negative perception of the FA's image and identity with the rest of that set of fans holding a positive or neutral view. For casual fans, half of the respondents hold a negative view of the FA, despite the majority not knowing what the image or identity of the organisation looks like. In the case of the die-hard fan with the negative views of the FA, it appears that this fan's commitment to the NT comes in spite of this negatively-held view, whereas for the casual fans with negatively held perceptions of the FA, increasing their commitment to England is, very possibly, impeded by their perceptions.

In terms of contacts and relationships, for respondents from the casual fans, contact is not constant and they are more likely to be in contact with the NT around the times of international fixtures and less so during the regular domestic club season. The same can also be said for half of the diehard fans. For the other half of die-hard fans though, contact with the NT is constant regardless of scheduled fixtures. The majority of die-hard respondents also reported feeling some sort of connection to individual players in the NT, whereas for the casual fans, they felt absolutely no connection to the players whatsoever. Often this was due to the wages and lifestyles of the NT players and them being so-far removed from the general population. The majority of the fans did not appear to be in demand for more contact and interaction with either the men's England senior team or the players. As opposed to the Lithuanian sets of fans, it appears here that the intensity of the contact, rather than the frequency, is more important in creating a feeling of closeness to the NT. In this sense the NT acts as a conduit for fans to celebrate one team as an "England family" rather than dealing with the rivalries associated with the more regular club season. Consequently, a good England performance in a tournament is more likely to improve the closeness supporters feel for the team rather than more regular contact from the FA.

Information regarding the NT is sought through a variety of traditional and modern media channels. The most popular by far is the internet with the BBC News and Sky Sports News websites being frequently cited by respondents as their preferred information sources. Whereas for die-hard fans, information about the NT would be purposefully sought out, for the casual fans, NT-related news would often be taken in indirectly, with major NT-related news items generally being included within the main headlines of their regular media consumption and everyday conversations held with friends and family. For a small number of the respondents from both sets of fans, social media is playing an increasing role in both the amount of information available to them, and their feelings of closeness to the NT. That direct contact is now available with players and organisations, together with the very real possibility that they may reply to any direct contact is seen as an advantage to these participants, who not surprisingly probably felt the closest to the NT.

There was widespread agreement among fans that while the FA provides enough information regarding the NT, the same cannot be said for the information they provide about their general activities. It is quite clear from the data that given the lacking sense of attachment that fans feel for the FA, both casuals and diehards, more frequent and positive stories about the organisation will likely increase awareness and improve the way they are perceived publicly. However, a newsletter (electronic or otherwise) would probably not be the best way to deliver such stories. The majority of respondents do not receive, or have never signed for a regular NT or FA newsletter, and have no interest in doing so in the future. Of

those that have, either through as the result of an automated process when buying tickets or through purposefully signing up for a regular NT or FA newsletter, the majority of respondents admit to never reading such communications. Suggestions from participants then about how the FA could disseminate information regarding their general activities were mainly based around direct contact. For example, two of the casual respondents, both teachers, felt that the FA could have more of a presence in schools around the country, advising students and staff on developments in the English game and their own organisational roles and goals. The general feeling was that if children had a better opinion and more awareness of the FA from an early age, they would grow up with these more favourable perceptions. Others felt that the FA could have more of a presence at club football level, for example, FA presentations at club games, FA sections in clubs' match-day programmes, and dedicated sections and links on club websites. This would result in a closer collaboration between the FA and club fans, and could go some way to helping the FA extend the scope and loyalty of its fan base.

As for the marketing activities, most of the comments were linked to the promotion issue discussed above, where most of the interviewees wanted more communication and publicity about the FA's activities as their average level of awareness was quite limited. It is hardly surprising that the die-hard fans had a better understanding of the FA's marketing schemes given that attending more live games would result in increased contact with them. For example, these fans were more aware of the marketing around tickets given that they purchase a lot more than the casual fans do. The die-hard fans were also more aware of the FA's sponsors since, again, they would have more contact with them at live matches. For example, on advertising boards, and the products on offer at Wembley (food, drinks, merchandise, etc.). Knowledge of CSR schemes in all of the respondents was pretty limited with only one respondent from the two groups able to discuss specific elements. In terms of the FA's work in the community, awareness of this did not seem to be determined by fan classification, but more so by those who actually engage in football related community work.

In terms of the sense of community respondents feel, there was widespread agreement that respondents experience a real sense of community more so in terms of the England team – and around the time of tournaments – than in terms of other FA members and activities. During the times of tournaments respondents feel strongly connected with the members of the national fan community, sharing interests, friendliness and activities.

Finally, the comparisons between the NT and club football bring up some interesting discussion points. What is surprising is that, whereas half of the casual fans would consider the relationship they have

with the national team to be stronger than that of their club teams, all of the die-hard fans would consider the relationship they have with their club teams to be stronger than that of the England team. This is surprising in the sense that one might have expected the opposite to be true, in fact. Of those fans that prefer club over country, there were a number of comments that related to a growing sense of disillusionment associated with the NT, and they related it very much to the unrealistic and over-hyped expectations of the certain elements of media in England. This point supports the earlier view, then, that a good England performance in a tournament (e.g. reaching a semi-final of the Euros or World Cup) is more likely to increase the closeness that supporters feel for the team, rather than contact with the NT through the media sources which are often responsible for the negative perceptions that people hold of team.

B. Second stage: the between-case analysis

Despite the particularities identified for each case study, several common theoretical and managerial features can be noted. First of all, it appears that not all fans look for personal, regular and long-term relationships with their NT or with their NA. In this sense, these findings support the analysis made by Harris and Ogbonna (2008). Several uncontrollable factors can explain this situation such as the existence of strong relationships with football clubs, personal characteristics such as time, or little appetite for committed relationships. However, several variables can represent managerial levers to make fans climb the loyalty ladder. The first variable concerns information and people's level of awareness. In many cases, it seems that a lack of communication and information represents an obstacle for creating more loyalty among fans. These levels awareness can concern diverse foci such as players, the NT, the NA's representative, the NA's activities or the NA's community and CSR activities. The ways of communicating information seem to differ significantly between die-hard and casual fans as die-hard fans want for frequent, up-to-date, interactive and personal information. They are proactive regarding information and want to find the relevant interface (e.g. websites, social media, players' personal social media pages) to satisfy their needs. On the contract, casual fans seem more passive and information should reach them either via traditional media, emphasising the importance of NA's PR, or via direct and less regular communication such as newsletters and other Customer/Fan Relationship Management techniques. Strongly connected to the awareness issue are NA's identity and image which can attract fans' attention and support when they are positively defined. In this sense, these results are consistent with the marketing literature dealing with branding and perceived-brand equity which states that consumers are attracted by brands which are perceived as positive, unique and stable (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Fans' loyalty seems also strongly influenced by fans' identification

which requires an *a priori* definition of the NA's identity. Consistent with the work of Bodet (2012) and Iwasaki and Havitz (2004), information and identification are thought to influence fans' commitment, which in turn influences fans' loyalty. All marketing actions seeking to increase information levels and enhance identity should be positive on the long-term for the NAs. Levels of commitment seem to be also influenced by emotional ties and bonds fans can establish with the NT, NT's players and fans. Experiential marketing as illustrated by Bodet (2009) could represent a possibility to increase these emotional links. This is consistent with the work of Harris and Ogbonna (2008) and the seminal work of Morgan and Hunt (1994). According to the same authors, commitment is strongly connected to trust which was often discussed in the focus groups. Being trustworthy and transparent was found to be important factors to create a mutual and positive relationship. It directly relates to the concept of governance and good governance and represents an interesting theoretical finding from the interviews. Obviously, not all fans care about governance issues – for instance Armenian fans hardly mentioned this issue, but it is certain that some fans care about them and it appears particularly the case when fans do not solely focus on the NT and are also involved in community football. We can also wonder if this issue is not predominantly relevant in western European countries reflecting general public's concerns. It would be interesting to see in a further study is what is defined as the pillars of good governance – transparency, accountability and democracy, influences fans' commitment and loyalty and in which specific contexts. The cultural dimension could possibly explain differences in terms of results.

Overall, these results appeal for more marketing from the NAs. Particularly, in Armenia and Lithuania, the basic marketing issues such as products and place seem relevant as fans are in demand for more merchandised products, physical points of sales and online purchasing possibilities. The price issue is topical for all contexts and will probably remain very important in the current economic climate. For the Armenian and Lithuanian associations, the context is very favourable as there is not a strong competition from football clubs and even from other sports. With a well-managed marketing, they could potentially take a lead and/or reinforce a leading position. However, it is important that the NAs do not feel restricted in their marketing by their sporting performances and results thinking that they cannot do anything without good results. On the contrary, the weakest the sporting performances are and the most marketing is needed. Particularly, they could emphasise on the community and CSR activities which almost unanimously praised by die-hard and casual fans.

V. Conclusion

The objectives of this research project aimed to define what kind of relationships fans with different levels of commitment and different cultures in Europe expect to have with their National Football Association and teams, to identify for each category of fans the factors that can make a relationship be perceived as positive and successful, to identify and distinguish the relationship management practices which are desired by fans from those which create points of tension and resistance between different countries, and to identify the most relevant factors and management practices in order to increase fans' loyalty and commitment towards the relationship. The findings of each case study provided specific and relevant knowledge about the nature and the intensity of the relationships fans have with their national teams and associations based on their level of loyalty. In some cases, the level of loyalty did explain major differences whereas in other cases and contexts it did not which indicates that other variables should be taken into consideration when looking at the differences of relationships and that multiple fan profiles exist in this regard. This variety of fan profiles will certainly require a variety of marketing actions and grasping the complexity of situations and cases will certainly represent a challenge for NA's marketers and managers. If marketing approaches appear more and more justified considering the increasing competitions between sport organisations for fans, their implementation will require adaptation and customisation to cultural contexts and individual characteristics.

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VII. Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

<p style="text-align: center;">Relationship between fans and National teams</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Intended outcomes/answers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often are you in contact with your National Teams (e.g. going to games, watching on Television) • How often do you seek information with your NTs (e.g. amount of reading, watching, listening to the radio, debates...). • For you, it is mainly about the Male Senior NTs, or do you go to games and seek information for Female and youth teams? • Do you feel your NTs to be close to you? Why? Do you feel close to the players? • Do you say your contacts are regular with the NTs and their players? • Would you say that NTs try to get in contact with their fans, with the population at large? Why? • How would you qualify the relationship you have with the Male National team? How would you qualify the relationships you have with the other NTs (e.g. female, youth, Paralympic)? • What do you like about these relationships? Are you happy about them? What could be improved? • Do you share/promote these relationships with others? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are fans active or passive? – Are they originators or followers? – Are fans mainly positive or negative in their reactions? – How often they interact with the NT? – With which products, services? – Why do they interact with the NT? – What are their Preferred Media packages? – Do they share their attitudes and opinions? With who? – Are they advocates?
<p style="text-align: center;">Relationship between fans and National Football Associations</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Intended outcomes/answers</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you make a distinction between the NT(s) and the NFA? • Do you know who their decision-makers are? • Do you know what are the activities run by the NFA? What do you think about them? • Do you think your NFA is visible enough? Do you feel it has a clear identity and image? • Do you relate to this identity or this image? • Are you in contact with the NFA beside the National team(s)? (e.g. players, referees...). What do you think about these services? • How would you qualify the relationship you have with your NFA? What do you like about it? What could be improved? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are fans active or passive? – Are they originators or followers? – Are fans mainly positive or negative in their reactions? – How often they interact with the NFA? – With which products, services? – Why do they interact with the NFA? – What are their Preferred Media packages? – Do they share their attitudes and opinions? With who? Are they

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you share/promote this relationship with others? 	advocates?
Relationship with marketing and CRM practices	Intended outcomes/answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know what the NFA is doing in terms of marketing? (e.g. ticketing, shirts, sponsorship...). Do you feel targeted and attracted by it? Do you like them? Do you think they do enough or not? If there is any, are you registered to a newsletter? How do you get information about NFA's activities? Would you like being contacted by emails? If you want to make some suggestions/complaints? Do you know how to do it? Do you know what your NFA is doing for your local community? What do you think about Corporate Social Responsibility activities? Would you like to be part of it? Do you feel connected with the NFA's members? Do you feel part of the same community? If yes via which channels? Do you feel connected with the other fans of the national teams? Why? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How often they interact with the NFA? With which products, services? Why do they interact with the NFA? What are their Preferred Media packages? Do they appreciate these contacts Do they lack contacts? Are they part of a group or wider community? Or are they just interacting from an individual level?
Comparison National Football Associations and Professional clubs	Intended outcomes/answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you also follow professional clubs, how would you compare the relationship you have with your national team and the professional club you like or support? If different, do you understand why? Which one is better? Generally speaking, what do you think about the marketing of the professional club you support? Would you like the NFA to do the same things (e.g. regular contact through email addresses, forums of discussion, promotional activities, offering game packages for home and away games...)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do they want NFA to copy professional clubs? Do they want them to use the same marketing tools? Which marketing tools do they like? Which marketing tool do they dislike?