Football fan relationships with their national associations: A trans-European perspective

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Abstract

Following authors’ call for the development of Fan Relationship Management approaches which evolve from the traditional Customer Relationship Management ones to better fit with sport organisations’ contexts and specificities, the aim of this study was to identify the type of relationships fans want to establish with their national football associations to determine the type of management approaches and techniques these sport organisations can implement. A qualitative empirical study relying upon focus groups and individual interviews with casual and die-hard fans of the national teams in Lithuania, Armenia and England was undertaken. The findings emphasize differences between countries but also show similar perceptions and attitudes among fans from different countries but expressing comparable levels of attachment and identification to the national teams. Contrary to assumptions found in the literature, not all fans look for long-lasting and regular relationships. Awareness seems to be a foundational factor that emphasizes the importance of communication. However, the appropriate forms and channels of communication seem to vary according to the cultural contexts and football fans’ commitment. Also, associated with the communication issue, national football associations’ identity and image appear important factors to develop fans’ loyalty. To a certain extent, governance dimensions such as transparency and trustworthiness, appear relevant for certain fans, but seem more important for those who demonstrate a moderate identification to the team. Finally, basic marketing factors such as product access and prices appeared highly topical in Armenia and Lithuania, whereas Corporate Social Responsibilities seemed relatively important in the English context. Beyond the specific knowledge related to each context, this study provides interesting findings
regarding the complex nature of relationships between sport organisations and their publics.

Keywords: football, fans, relationships, marketing, national associations
INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing has been observed, analysed and/or recommended by many authors (e.g. Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne 1992, Grönroos 1994, Webster Jr 1992) since the nineties as the most relevant approach to respond to consumers’ needs and expectations, and to enhance firms’ and organisations sustainability. This supposedly new philosophy or strategic orientation, which represented a focus shift from transactions to relationships, relies on two main assumptions. The first assumption considers that it is less expensive to keep current consumers or members than attracting new ones as it reduces administration and marketing costs and encourages current consumers and members to purchase and interact more often or pay more. Besides these economic benefits, other benefits in terms of consumer behaviour and human resources management (e.g. positive word-of-mouth, advocacy, customer voluntary performance, social benefits for employees) are also postulated. This first assumption legitimates the use of such an approach from an organisational point of view. The second assumption, which legitimizes this approach from a consumer point of view, estimates that consumers prefer having an ongoing relationship than continually switching. This second assumption is more debatable and many researchers interested in postmodernity and postmodern societies would certainly challenge it as they consider contemporary consumers as switchers and zappers. This observation applies for both commercial and non-commercial contexts and concerns many types of organisations as exemplified by Bodet (2009a) and his work on sport participation organisations and their consumers. The sport spectacle context is particularly interesting in this regard as relationships can adopt many different kinds of forms designated by various terms such as supporters, fans, followers and flâneurs (Giulianotti 2002) for instance. Following the relationship trend discussed above, the
commodification of sport (Giulianotti 2005), the development of brandom (Guschwan 2012), and, consequently, the increasing reference to fans as consumers (Oppenhuizen & van Zoonen, 2006), sport organisations, whether they are for profit or not, increasingly try to actively manage the relationships they have with their publics and increasingly use Customer Relationship Management (CRM) techniques. However, these management approaches and techniques are often implemented without having a priori defined what kind of relationships various segments of their publics want to establish with them which conduct these organisations to design too organisation-focused systems (Adamson, Jones & Tapp 2006). This shortcoming is also reinforced by the fact that many traditional sport fans in general and football fans in particular do not see themselves as consumers and sometimes do not want to see themselves in such a light. Consequently, it appears crucial to first determine the type of relationships sport fans and spectators in general, and football fans and spectators, in particular want to establish with their sport organisations. Understanding the nature of these relationships should be a priority before implementing relationships management approaches and techniques. Nevertheless, very little is known about the types of relationships fans want and the marketing management tools used to manage these relationships, they tolerate, praise or criticize. Consequently, the overall aim of this study was to identify the types of relationship football fans want to establish with their national associations in the European context. The research objectives were fourfold and aimed (1) to define what kind of relationships fans, with different levels of commitment and different cultures in Europe, expect to have with their national football associations and team; (2) to identify, for each category of fans, the factors that can make a relationship be perceived as positive and successful; (3) to identify and distinguish the relationship management practices which are desired by fans from those which are criticised; and,
(4) to identify the most relevant factors and management practices to improve sport fans-organisations relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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 (Hetzel, 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 theorists 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 that 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 relevant, its application is often too centred on the organisation’s needs and objectives and therefore disconnected from the needs of the consumers. This situation can certainly be observed in the football industry and Adamson et al. (2006, p.159) summarised 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 and long-term benefits but also to understand the various prospects’ expectations. This is particularly the case in sport as fans are diverse in terms of expectations, team identification, attachment and loyalty (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2009; Tapp,
Furthermore, there are very important differences between football and conventional businesses and 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 ‘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 not only justified because it deals with the efficiency of marketing management practices, and thus with the allocation of resources within football organisations, but also because mismanaged relationships can generate dissatisfaction and resistance. This resistance can take various expressions and forms (e.g., petitions, protests, campaigns, boycotts), which can lead to disaffection and non-attendance on a long-term perspective. This analysis correspond to the one 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, which is in contradiction with one foundational assumption of the relationship marketing approach discussed in the introduction, and that some consumers seek discrete transactions and interactions.

From the few authors 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 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; Oppenhuisen & van Zoonen, 2006). Although most of these studies were conducted in the context of professional football clubs, these issues are certainly transversal and possibly amplified in the context of National Football Associations considering for instance the importance of national identity. Finally, due to the cultural and economic differences, in addition to the sporting results, and consistent with Askegaard & Linnet’s (2011) approach, 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 neither rich nor advanced enough to establish specific hypotheses regarding these differences.

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 NFAs 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 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, even if we should remain careful
with such generalisations. The size of the country and the importance of football as a
sport were also factors taken into consideration, since they would influence the size
of the national association and the number of participants and members, which
would in turn influence the NFA’s economic situation. As the strength of the national
football league could be a factor influencing the nature of the relationship between
NFAs and their fans, the importance of the local league was also considered. Finally,
pragmatic and practical considerations regarding the data collection process were
also taken into account to select countries. As a maximum of three case studies was
manageable, we selected the cases of Lithuania, Armenia and England and because
the main objective was to obtain broad and diverse information, the choice of focus
groups appeared justified as they are widely used for exploratory research in
marketing (Morgan, 2008). This research method is also consistent with the
approach supported by Askegaard & Linnet (2011). 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
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.

In order to ensure some kind of reliability between focus groups, an interview guide was used and comprised four main sections. In the first section, questions were designed to characterise and understand the nature of the relationships between the fans and their NAs. Example questions included: how often are you in contact with your national team? Would you say your contact with the national team 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 NFAs. Example questions included: do you make a distinction between the national team and the NFA? Do you know the activities run by the NFA? Do you think your NFA is visible enough? The third section of the guide focused on the role of marketing and CRM practices on the relationship. Example questions included: 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 NFA and Professional Clubs from a fan perspective. Example questions included: 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?

One research assistant from the NFAs Lithuania and Armenia were 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 research assistants were responsible for these tasks. From these meetings, the initial version of the interview guide was slightly amended to fit with the countries’ specificities. For instance, as club football is not very developed in Armenia, it was decided to compare the Armenian Football Federation’s marketing practices with other major national associations. A research assistant conducted the individual interviews with the English respondents. 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 group of casual fans comprised 8 male and 3 females, who were aged between 18 and 33 years old. The group of die-hard fans comprised 9 males and 3 females who were aged between 19 and 29 years old. In Armenia, 8 participants composed the focus group made of casual fans, and 8 participants composed the focus group made of die-hard fans. The group of casual fans comprised 5 males and 3 females aged between 22 and 26 years old whereas the group of die-hard fans was only made of males aged between 18 and 30 years old. In total, 10 English fans were interviewed, comprising 6 casual fans (6 males) and 4 die-hard fans (3 males and 1 female) aged between 23 and 27 years old.

The analysis of the data followed a two-stage process. The first stage dealt with the within-case analysis looking specifically at each individual country. For each country, a descriptive analysis was conducted for each focus group and followed with an overall discussion and analysis for the country, identifying their specificities and linking the findings to the literature. The second stage dealt with the between-case analysis and attempted to put the different cases in perspective and to identify similarities and differences as well as theoretical issues. Before presenting and
discussing the results, two important points should be discussed. The first point to note is that the analysis deals with fans’ perceptions and that these perceptions are subjective. It is therefore possible to notice gaps in terms of perceptions among fans but also between fans and NFAs’ managers and decision makers. This leads to the second point dealing with 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 is be needed to confirm the distribution of opinions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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 NFA. 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. Nevertheless, 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 awareness levels concern diverse foci such as players, the NT, the NFA’s representative, the NFA’s activities or the NFA’s community and corporate social responsibilities activities. The ways of communicating information seem to differ significantly between die-hard and casual fans as die-hard fans look
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 contrary, casual fans seem more passive and information should reach them either via traditional media, emphasising the importance of NFA’s public relations, or via direct and less regular communication such as newsletters and other C/FRM techniques. Strongly connected to the awareness issue are NFA’s identity and image that 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 seen 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 NFA’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 (2009b), 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 mutual and positive relationships. 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 do care about such issues and it appears to particularly be 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 the general public’s concerns. It would be interesting to see in a further study if, what is defined as the pillars of good governance – transparency, accountability and democracy (Garcia, 2010), this influences fans’ commitment and loyalty and, if so, in which specific contexts. The cultural dimension could possibly explain differences in terms of results.

Overall, these results appeal for more marketing from the NFAs. 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 NFAs, the context is very favourable since local football clubs (and even other sports clubs) provide little competition to their respective national football teams. With well-managed marketing, they could possibly take a lead and/or reinforce a leading position. However, it is important that the NFAs do not feel restricted in their marketing by their sporting performances and results, thinking that they cannot do anything without good results. Particularly, they could emphasise community and CSR activities, which were almost unanimously praised by die-hard and casual fans.

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 NFAs and NTs, 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 indicating 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 NFA’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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