The role of sport fan community in value co-creation[1]

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Introduction

The new complexity of the sport sector has a strong impact on the implementation of sport products that nowadays are an expression of manifold subjects. Planning, production, distribution and communication of sport contents involve numerous actors who participate in the implementation of sport with diversified roles and importance: sport organizations, athletes, institutions and local administrations, sponsors, media, etc. Fans and supporters are of course of central importance to sport service production. The passion, excitement, involvement expressed by the audience has a crucial role for event implementation and value creation. Due to the importance of fans as "co-producers" of the sport service, the hypothesis of this research is that a fan community is a salient stakeholder in the value co-creation process.

This *research focuses* on a fan community of a specific professional football case, the *ACF Fiorentina - the Florence, Italy football club* - a "rich" example for identifying and analyzing the manifold influences and interactions that fans can engage in with their team, the local context and the network of actors as a whole. The knowledge of this case study has profited from several investigations, research and theses carried out within the Master's Degree in Sport Management at the University of Florence. We started to monitor the football club and the relations with the local stakeholders since the year 2003 - after the club's failure and its "rebirth" when the team went to an owner that for the first time ever was "non Florentine" - up to the last 2009/2010 football season.

To develop this case study a quali-quantitative methodology was used. The analysis of the fan community starts with an examination of the Fiorentina's ticket season holders database that highlights their socio-economic features.[2] One-to-one interviews and focus groups with fan clubs representatives, the local Chief of Police, sport institutions, members of the football club (coach, managers, etc.) were also organised. [3] Further information was retrieved through the monitoring of sport magazines and national newspapers, and the site searching of the ACF *Fiorentina* official web site, blogs and fan club web sites, in order to better explain data collected from interviews, focus groups and the database.

The complex context where fans move was studied by analyzing different subjects with a specific interest in the football club. The mapping of actors who more or less are linked to the existence of the Fiorentina was guided by the *stakeholder theory*. Nonetheless, this analytical tool does not seem to thoroughly explain all the relations developed within the sport sector. This approach is somewhat "corporate-centred" and considers mainly the relationships activated by the "focal organization" with its stakeholders.[4] It further aims to understand how a firm can create value through transactions and relations established with each stakeholder.

The present research takes a different focus. It analyses the relations within the sport network by focusing on a specific stakeholder that in economic terms constitutes the demand for which the product or service is destined, in respect to the focal organization. The local fan community, the Fiorentina's "user", interacts with manifold actors such as the players and coach, owners, local citizens, institutions, media, sponsors and suppliers. By drawing on the theoretical tools of the *network analysis* it is possible to map the relations between the football club and its fans, as well as between fans and other stakeholders.[5] More particularly, it is possible to emphasize the special network of the Fiorentina both in terms of internal dynamics as well as in regard to its connections with the external competitive football environment.

Even though the theoretical framework offered by stakeholder theory and the network analysis give us the analytical lens for exploring the system of relationships developed around the football club, these approaches have not offered specific analytical categories able to "read" the peculiarities of a sport community until now. By not exhaustively highlighting the role of the fan community in the value creation process, these theories leave space for a *typological articulation* related both to the fans' behaviour in regard to the match, and to strategic behaviour adopted by the various subgroups of fans in the football sector.

Mapping stakeholders of a professional football club

The theoretical framework we decided to use to explore football fan communities is referred to as the Service-Dominant *(S-D)* Logic approach.[6] One of the fundamental premises of this research recognizes a *central role of networks and interactions in value creation*. Many of the actors in sport, with their different roles and capabilities, *co-participate* in the sport service and create a *"constellation" of relations*[7] that produce value by implementing the sport product.

Stakeholder theory [8] enables us to map the actors involved within the sport system. From the stakeholder's perspective, a firm or more generally a "focal organization" (company, corporation, etc.) is at the centre of a network of stakeholders. [9] According to the definition proposed by Freeman, that is *'groups and individuals who can affect, or are affected by the strategic outcomes of a firm'*.[10] Actors who are vital to the continued growth and survival of the organization can be grouped as *primary stakeholders* (e.g. customers, employees, manager, owners, suppliers, sponsors, local communities) while other groups that can affect or be affected by the focal organization, are called *secondary stakeholders* (e.g. competitors, media, government, consumer advocate groups, special interest groups). [11]

A case such as the *ACF Fiorentina* football club, gives us some interpretative insight into the system of stakeholders in regard to a professional football club. In recent years the *Fiorentina* has undergone relevant changes in terms of ownership that for the first time ever is "not Florentine". This event has triggered a relationship process among the actors involved within the local system (fans, institutions, media, coach, top management, etc.) that enriches the empirical framework as shown in figure 1.

The *Fiorentina*, the only one professional football club of Florence, is at the centre of a network of relationships with fans, spectators, players, coach, top management, media, sponsor, facilities managers, etc. who interact to implement the match end-product (see fig.1). The football club is the actor around which many subjects and interests rotate. The team is the entity that satisfies the emotional need of fans. These fans are citizens and therefore the local and governmental institutions are involved in managing sport facilities, logistics, road conditions, and liveable spaces that enable the team to carry out matches, for their direct and mediated enjoyment. In the following paragraphs we propose an interpretative and dynamic mapping of the main primary *stakeholders* that in different ways interact with the football club in Florence. The fulcrum of our analysis is therefore the fan community that we will analyse both in socio-demographic and organisational terms.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Customers: the "Viola" fans

The *"viola"*[12] are fans, spectators, supporters of the Fiorentina. These individuals can be considered as *customers* of the football team's product, whose emotional involvement is derived by attending the match. Subscribers and spectators of the *Fiorentina* are a crucial support in producing the game and make it possible to deliver the sport event. They play a meaningful role in value creation since fans are the "demand" and are able to drag friends, colleagues, family, etc. Fans are real activators of the potential demand. Fans, as direct consumers of the service offered by the sport club (match), assume an important economic value since their satisfaction depends

largely on football club revenues (tickets, merchandising, TV rights, etc.). In the case of the *Fiorentina,* single and season ticket sales are an important source of income and of continuous growth[13], being 10% of the total football club revenue. This datum is further reinforced by the average percentage of stadium[14] occupation which in the season 2008/2009 amounted to 68%[15] in comparison to a national average of 59% of the total capacity. The ample live participation of fans is therefore one of the strengths of the Fiorentina. This means the football club must offer services and apply technical policies (purchase and transfer of players, type of game, etc.) able to satisfy the fans' expectations and especially those of the season ticket holders who have the highest level of identification with the team.

Socio-demographic features of the "viola" fans

The *Fiorentina* fans can be considered a "tribe" of people who share the same passion for the Florence football team. The concept of community used in this research is that of "tribe" in the *anthropological* sense, rather than sociological or marketing sense.[16] The territorial bonds among city, fans and team in this case are particularly important. One anthropological definition of a tribe is a 'group of individuals united by a family bond and by the sharing of a territory'.[17] According to a sociological approach, Maffesoli (1988) uses the metaphor of the 'post-modern tribe' to point out 'micro-groups of people that share an affective drive'.[18] In the case of the *Fiorentina*, this is a tribe of people who are passionate about a football team. Thus, while some historical football teams' fans such as for Milan, Inter, or Barcelona, are pluri-localized, *viola fans* are arguably a *"group of people geographically marked"*.

The research on the Fiorentina's season ticket holder's database indicates a *strong "viola" collective identity* that underlines the relevant territorial origin of membership ticket holder fans.[19] Of these, 50% live in the city of Florence with a further 37% in the Florentine metropolitan area. Thus, this overall 87% of membership-subscribers confirms the very strong territorial tie existing between the fans and the team (see fig. 2). This also implies that the stadium can easily be reached by many supporters using bicycles, scooters or even on foot, making it handy and immediate. The strong identification between Florence and its football team is confirmed by the high number of subscriptions purchased every year by Florentines. In the 2008-2009 season, there were 24,389 subscribers to ACF Fiorentina, a value pretty much confirmed as a trend for the last seasons, making the Fiorentina one of the top 5 teams for maximum number of subscriptions sold.[20]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The bond between Florence and its football team has always been very strong. Even when the team downgraded to Division C2 following its bankruptcy in the 2001-2002 season, the number of supporters and membership season ticket holders remained that of when it was in the First Division with about 17,000 subscribers. The collective viola identity emerges even in the current "turbulent" football environment. Notwithstanding sporadic episodes of violence, increases in average ticket prices, alternative viewing choices for enjoying sports events (digital TV, Internet, etc.) and the continuous change in the schedule of games, the "active" participation of fans remains stable and relevant.

Fans are predominantly male, aged between 25 and 44, who have supported the "Viola" for a long time, and can be divided into three socio-demographic profiles: the core fans, young people and seniors. Most of the *core group* (25-44 years) are males, live in Florence or in the metropolitan area and belong to the middle-class. They have a high-school diploma and are white collar workers. Many of these supporters choose a particular sector of the stadium (the Curva Fiesole). [21] This means not only "watching" the match but engaging in the role of supporters who really incite their team. *Young people* (6-24 years) (students, apprentices, etc.) have a presence "en masse" in the Curva Fiesole, the sector of the stadium with the liveliest fans who have a desire to join in and share the team's fortunes, emulate and admire the "more expert" and

better known supporters, and be part of the historical groups of the "Curva" sector. *Seniors* (over 44 years), due to their mature age, tend to watch the game itself carefully rather than seek an active participation in supporting activities. They are more interested in comfort and safety, hence they are likely to occupy "quiet" seats of the stadium like Maratona and Tribuna.

The *socio-cultural level* of fans is predominantly *middle class*[22] thus confirming that football is a mass sport. Nevertheless, the viola fans social status seems to reflect the city's socially productive sector: workers, students, entrepreneurs, merchants, etc. who have an active role towards the Fiorentina, considered by everyone as common "property".

The structure of the fan community on the whole appears *varied*, encompassing those with very great or lesser degrees of "fanaticism", those who enjoy going to bars[23] or a recreational facility, and who are affiliated with a fan club.

The dimensions and attributes of the Viola fan community make it a remarkable phenomenon in the local context. On occasion of every match the team can count on about 45,000 spectators between real and mass-media audience. The most relevant segment is the *membership subscribers* (more than 24,000 in the season 2008/2009) who express their loyalty to the team through live participation in all home games and many of those out of town. There are about 9,000 *live spectators* at home matches[24]. There are about 9,000 *media spectators* who watch the matches on Sky television, the pay satellite TV which broadcasts every game of the *Fiorentina*[25] as well. Since 2007 the games are even broadcasted by the digital terrestrial TV[26] at half the price of Sky, and the estimated audience is around 8,000 spectators. There are also many enthusiastic fans who do not go frequently to the stadium or watch the games on television, but who have an interest to the team's fortunes by reading newspapers and "posters", and these numerically might involve a great part of the local population. Even if they are not interested in football, they feel represented by the team and involved in its successes and failures. The fan's community is further amplified if we consider the grassroots football schools and young sectors connected to the team that constitute a sort of local "breeding ground" not only for the next champions but also for growing fans. The *Fiorentina* team in Florence seems to be therefore the only "event" able to mobilize, more or less simultaneously, the interest of tens of thousands of people since fans share their passion with families, friends, colleagues, etc. making the team a meaningful expression of the city.

Fans organisational structure: the Viola clubs

Analyzing the *manifold components* that constitute the viola fan community, an ample group of "organised" fans or members of the so-called "Viola Club" emerges. As a whole the structure of the supporters community appears as a *variegated and composite network of micro-groups*, a sort of 'tribal constellation'[27] (see fig. 3). Although there are some national and international fan clubs (i.e. Scandinavia, Malta, etc.), *most of the population of Viola Clubs is rooted in the Florence metropolitan area*, confirming the identity between the city and the fans.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Some Viola Clubs act autonomously. There are historical groups that for a long time have done their activities (single tickets and season tickets selling, web sites, house organ dedicated to the supporters, etc.) without having a higher co-ordination, such as the "Settebello" founded in 1965. The *autonomous Viola Clubs* segment is quite small. The attitude of Fiorentina fans is therefore that of collaboration, or "playing together" to achieve success and the continuity of the city team.

Many fan clubs of the Fiorentina are affiliated with associations that have an active supportive role in the football club policies. The most important associations of Viola clubs are the Centro Coordinamento Viola Club (ACCVC) which includes around 220 clubs, the Associazione Tifosi Fiorentini (ATF) with 30 fan clubs

and the Collettivo Autonomo Viola (CAV) that includes about 10 clubs specifically located on the Curva Fiesole. The size of Viola Clubs can vary from 20-30 people up to more than 500. If we hypothesize that the average number of fans enrolled within a single fan club is around 180-200 supporters, these create a community of fans affiliated to a Viola Club that accounts for about 50,000 people. Of these, a remarkable share are membership subscribers as well (23,000). The others are fans of the Fiorentina who may not have a season ticket because they are not living in Tuscany, but they express their own attachment to the team through membership in a fan club, where they can share with others their enthusiasm for the Viola.

The *Fiorentina* is aware of the importance of having good collaborative relationships with fan clubs. The representatives of the three main associations are often guests at official meetings, congresses, press conferences, operational groups for security (GOS[28]), to express point of view regarding decisions that concern the football club not only on technical terms, but also strategic and managerial (i.e. facilities management, training fields, out-of-town game management, etc.). Figure 3 shows the affiliation of each Viola Club to a higher organization, hence the connections among these actors are illustrated. The Viola Club associations have many activities for single fan clubs that can be grouped as follows:

- support of home game tickets and membership subscription selling;
- support of out-of-town game ticket selling and the organization of packages (ticket+journey) for members who want to go to the match venue or even stay abroad for longer;
- organization and management of the typical supporters activities in the stadium, like banners, chants, drums, choreographies, etc;
- support of new Viola Club start-up and growing implementation;
- management of the information and communication process towards the fans through the use both of new technologies (mobile phones[29], web sites) and traditional tools (i.e. magazines of the association of Viola Club);
- production and commercialization of "non official" merchandising. Even though a good percentage of supporters buy material of the Fiorentina, only 30% of those fans purchase the official merchandise. The fans feel "closer" to the gadgets (i.e. scarves, hats, hanging keys, etc.) offered by the Viola Club[30];
- carrying out of convivial and "social" activities in the area, such as the organization of parties, billiards and bowling tournaments, besides the management of five football fields and the athletic activities for children, with evident commitment to the local community.

Besides their coordination of a Viola Club, fan club associations play a crucial role in the support of the team in addition to the mere sport itself, as happened for example on occasion of the failure of the football club. The rebirth of the *Fiorentina* occurred thanks to the strong stimulus of local citizens[31] started by a small group of fans and supporters belonging to the main Viola Clubs, who became directly involved with the local institutions in the negotiations for the football club[32], and pressured the appropriate institutions. [33] Despite the importance of the organizations of Viola fans, the *number of supporters* who are *not members of a Viola Club is high*. These participate in the team's activities by going to the stadium, following matches on TV, or staying informed about the sport results through the press.

The social network of ACF Fiorentina

Network analysis can be used to place the fan community within a network of relations where it operates using different strategies and adopting different policies. [34] The structure of the ACF Fiorentina's network is characterised by a multidirectional set of relations (*polyadic network*). [35] In fact, one may observe the presence of a multiplicity of stakeholders (*nodes*) interacting with each other, such as the team, the fans, the institutions, the media, the owners etc (see fig. 4), to contribute to providing the sports service. [36] Overall the network appears to be relatively *"dense"* [37] since each stakeholder sets up interactions with all the other

members of the community. Provision of the sports service implies the co-participation of multiple actors engaged in various ways in the organisation of the sports event which in the case of football takes place frequently.

Despite each team, and *Fiorentina* in the case in point, being the actor *positioned ab origine at the core of the system* (see fig. 4), the relational "centrality"[38] of a stakeholder may be measured in terms of power, management of relations, specific importance within the network, etc.[39]

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Using the concept of "closeness", that is the extent to which one stakeholder is able to "independently" activate connections with the other members of the network, we can define the fan community of Fiorentina as a central stakeholder.[40] As regards events keeping up the interest of fans in the club, such as the dynamics of player transfers, the introduction of the fan card, building of a new stadium etc, Fiorentina fans play an active role in the network, relating directly to the football club owners and local institutions and expressing their opinion both "officially" (press releases, open letters etc.), and "diffusely" (intervening in the many local sports transmissions, blogs, online articles published on the net, etc).

As regards interaction within the network, the fan community is particularly "opinionated", putting pressure not only on the other stakeholders, such as local community institutions, but even in some cases considerably influencing the football club's strategic choices. But then the *fan community strongly identifies with the team* and in the effort to maintain this identification is open to dialogue and to collaboration, constantly pressing the owners to improve the team's technical-competitive qualities. The ownership[41] and the management are thereby forced to assume a position in which it involves the fans and negotiates with them, asserting their role as protagonists of the city and therefore of its football, which in Florence is based on the strong ties between the football club, team of players, fans and institutions. A *virtuous circle* is thus created wherein thanks to the collaboration of the various stakeholders, in part induced by relations of power, the entire local context pivots on the value created.

The case studied enables us to identify, as well as the variables used in literature to delineate a network (density, centrality, etc), further dimensions which seem to influence the structure of the specific ACF Fiorentina system and the relations between the stakeholders who compose it. One variable which is decisive in structural terms is the *territory*, with the cultural aspects, values and principles which have, over time, instilled themselves in the people inhabiting a specific local context. The high level of interpenetration between the local environment, specific features of the territory and of civil society affects people's behaviour delineating a largely atypical network structure compared to other networks of actors in the sports sector. For example, in terms of fans' behaviour, social exclusion and juvenile unease seem to be relatively limited phenomena at a regional level (Istat, 2008), so that the absence of forms of "social deviation" throughout the territory may explain the almost total absence of violence among Fiorentina fans. The fans' tendency to continuously challenge the football club and Institutions so as to "fight" for something which they feel is theirs derives from the "Florentine outlook" which ..."*enjoys a verbal scuffle and manifest dissent, which is diffident, suspicious, ever inclined to believe that someone wants to rip them off*"[42] and therefore ready to "shout" its opinion at anyone attempting to lay their hands on its heritage, whether the city itself, a monument, or football club.

On the sports side, a close connection emerges between Florence's social and economic features and the structure of the local football system. The situation of Fiorentina must be interpreted in the light of the *Tuscan social-economic context*, a region characterised by a dense network of medium-sized cities and which compared to other Italian regions has undergone a process of "light industrialisation" placing it in a "peripheral" economic position.[43] Top class clubs like Milan, Inter FC, Juventus, etc. are able to create top-performing teams not just because of the considerable financial resources provided by selling TV rights but also because large industrial groups are backing them which can afford to buy champion players and ensure

organised and efficient technical management. In the case of Fiorentina, despite the owners being a business group at the higher end of the leather goods market, they are still a family firm, the expression of the economy of the *"third Italy"* characterised by the predominance of a system of small to medium-sized enterprises far from the process of economic development typical of historically industrialised regions such as Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto. [44]

On one hand, the strictly "local" nature of the supporters is a strong point, especially in moments of difficulty when they are able to mobilise the entire city, however on the other, this nature also reduces its "appeal" to television networks. The game's local popularity make Fiorentina a "minor" team in terms of audience: preventing it from negotiating consistent fees for broadcasting matches and denying it the significant resources needed to purchase top coached and players[45]. There is therefore a discrepancy between the perceived position of the club at a national and international level and its locally desired "status". Indeed the city would like to see its team among the top teams but comes up against a competitive, external environment dominated by the big teams with relative skills and resources. The continual gap between top level competitive goals on one hand and strategic and economic restraints on the other affects the structure and relations within the network via the constant dialogue between fans, institutions, media and the football club which keeps the network of relations alive at a local level.

The dominant driving force in the Fiorentina network is the will to win. External competition triggers *co-operative interaction of the various actors* evident in the competitive commitment of the coach and players, economic investments by the owners, support of the team by fans, commitment of the Institutions to ensuring the correct use of local facilities and logistic resources. In the last few years subsequent to going bankrupt in 2002, an unusual situation has arisen in which the stakeholders have behaved according to a network logic, aimed at ensuring the success and continuity of the team. Despite the absence of star players, the co-operative boost of the coach, owners, sports director and management has led to important results being achieved. Each stakeholder therefore acts as part of a network with a strong local and sports identity in which each plays their role. The competitive strategy of Fiorentina over recent years has been to pursue ambitious goals (such as achieving classification in Champions League) of an intermediate level in relation to the financial and economic resources available, valorising to the utmost the resources of each individual stakeholder. This strategy has been adapted to external circumstances, shaping the football club's abilities to the competitive environment. Thus the *distinctive capability* of Fiorentina has been its ability to create a single project in which the owners, players, coach, fans and institutions collaborate.

The viola fan community sees the team as part of its cultural, historic and artistic heritage. Not only does it respect the team but it plays a role as central stakeholder helping to create value through commitment and social participation which seem, given the results achieved, to compensate the performance technical discontinuity and scarcity of economic and financial resources.

Towards a typology of sports fans' roles and behaviour

In the light of the empirical evidence gathered we propose a first typology of fans' roles and strategies to add to current analysis classifying fans' behaviour with reference only to the sports event itself.[46] This paper analyses the fan community not only to show the roles assumed by fans at the stadium, but above all to underline the variety of ways in which fans behave as stakeholders of their own team.

To represent fans' roles and behaviour we built a simple matrix (see exhibit 5) where on the ordinate axis we put the variable *"fans' level of identification with the team"*, while on the abscissa the *"type of participation in the event"*. According to Sutton *et al.*, fans' identification is defined as *"the personal commitment and emotional involvement people have with a sports organization"* and can be highly varied in degree: from low levels of participation (*low*) when the fan does not feel "part" of the club but is more

interested in satisfying a need for *entertainment*, to an intense (*high*) level in which *soccer identity* subtends a *common social identity* that expresses the fan's affiliation to a sports club and/or to a specific local context.[47]

Fan participation in the event can be direct or indirect. Real or *live spectators* are those who directly watch in the match, while *indirect spectators* enjoy the game through free-view television, digital, satellite and terrestrial television, radio, Internet and mobile phones. Sometimes the choice between direct or mediated participation seems correlated to numerous variable factors that are *organisational* (change in schedule of games), *social* (friends and family's influence), *economic* (increase in average ticket prices), *distributive* (ever-increasing "virtual" choices for enjoying sports events), *technical-sportive* (match location, team combination, refereeing), *safety* and *security* (episodes of violence occurring inside and outside stadiums) in nature. Such factors can influence fans' choices to attend sports events. Moreover fans themselves in turn modifies their participation by adopting broadly diversified behaviour depending on the intensity of identification and the "importance" of the match, apart from the various participation options compatibly with the timing of games, sport facilities and other commitments (work, family, etc.) (see figure 5).

In terms of direct participation, *live occasional spectators* "consume" sport as with any other type of *entertainment* such as movies, music concerts, etc. In this group we can also include those people who go to the stadium sporadically to capture the *"aesthetic"* dimension of the event, the atmosphere and the *"neat play"* on the field.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

For the *live fan,* participation in the event is not continuous, but motivated by the importance and the "drama" of each match. Live fans do not buy a season ticket. Their choice is guided each time in part depending on the "social" dimension: going to the stadium is a moment of aggregation with other people, friends, family, a way of having a good time together. The *supporter* is not just a spectator, but "participates" in the event continuously, by purchasing his season ticket to the home games. Despite following each match with excitement the supporter is not an active member of the fan club, even though he/she feels highly motivated and part of the team.

The *"twelfth man"*, as the term suggests is an *essential support* to the game and the success of the team as much as the players and coach are. The actions performed by fans during the game (ritual chants, songs, banner waving, etc.) motivate the team and "intimidate" the other side and thus to an extent, fans' emotions, passions and moods can influence the result of the match. The "twelfth man" seems to actively and passionately follow every match, both home and away, in national championships and international tournaments. Fans truly believe they must "participate" in the game to "help the team win". [48] What strengthens and distinguishes the role of the twelfth man compared to that of the supporters is the importance he gives to rituals (which he spends a great deal of his time in) and in planning the celebratory routines, the wording to put on the banners, the songs to be chanted, and the co-ordination of the fan clubs. During pre-match days, fans meet up to discuss their "scenographic" strategies and keep themselves up-to-date with the line-ups of their own team and the opponents', as well as downloading online statistics on players' performance.

In terms of indirect participation, the growing use of new technologies is largely responsible for the reduction of live spectators. Opportunities offered by the new media have modified fans' behaviour in relation to how they enjoy a game which for years characterised the sports culture rooted in our country.

Occasional TV spectators are those who watch the most important matches both at national and international level (Champions League finals, European and World football championships, etc.) on television. In this case the level of identification with a single team is quite low. What influences the type of participation is the passion for sport. Even when they do not have a "favourite team", the competitive spirit of football makes them "take sides". Spectators' motivation to be a fan of a club can be influenced by multiple

intangible factors such as the popularity of a football player, the fame of a club or the passion for a specific jersey or other tangible aspects such as the country of origin of the teams competing on the pitch, the participation of star players and the refereeing.

Within the segment *random individual and mobile attendance* we have classified sports fans that "sporadically" follow football, mainly but not exclusively through web sites and mobile phones. Having a general interest for sport, they do not limit themselves to attending matches of a single team, but for example download onto their laptops and/or phones the most thrilling highlights. Fans included in this category often combine viewing the match with "live betting" services, where betting on the event is streamed on web sites or mobile phones. With the new media, traditional "passive" participation in a football match is enriched by additional contents which can be enjoyed wherever the spectator is, by maximizing his level of entertainment as being a football (content) and new media (tools) expert.

Constant multimedia fans create virtual communities of people with whom to share their passion for the same team. These fans usually attend matches on pay-tv or through web sites that offer live football services. Through multimedia match attendance, fans are not only able to follow their own team, but can even have real time exchanges of information with other fans, strengthening their own "ties" with the team. Despite there being no direct participation, the use of new media can increase the fans' voice and the flow of information and comments, increasing the level of attention paid to the team.

The *indoor social media attendance* segment includes fans who *usually* meet up in small groups in public places like cafes, fans' clubs, etc. or in friends' and families' houses *for championship and Champions League matches* and very often recreate a sort of "stadium atmosphere". Although they express a *high sense of identification with the team*, this group of fans prefers to attend the match by buying a seasonal membership card to a digital or satellite television network, mainly on account of the increasing cost of live matches, the continuous schedule changes, the "distance" from the venue, etc.

The typology of roles proposed does not set out to be exhaustive, but provides some interpretative indications of the multiple combinations of fans' behaviour in the light of empirical evidence. The representation of roles is not static. The positions (fans' role classification) assumed by fans are closely related to the strategies of the football club both in technical and managerial terms, the role played by the owners, the competitive position of the team, the calendar of events, the media channels on which the sport content is provided (matches, interviews with players and coaches, dedicated channels, etc.), and to social and personal relationships (family, social class, income, etc.). Since *success* is what drives *the popularity of a football club,* a winning team can generally guarantee greater attendance in terms of fans and spectators. *Fan loyalty* is in fact a variable "depending" first and foremost, on the success of a team.

Being included in important championships, achieving victories on the field, together with popularity, history, legend and the international flavour acquired over time by a team, are the prime factors influencing fans' involvement. Nevertheless, the construction of a continuous club- supporters relationship aimed at preserving a certain level of fan loyalty and avoiding lower levels of identification and participation, is developed though the ability of each individual football club to undertake new sports-technical challenges and to set up initiatives able to involve the fans. These initiatives might include tangibles such as the modern management of football venues, an exciting team performance, appealing merchandising, the organization of collateral events, and the offer of additional services (call centre, services online for the fans such as games and chat, info services on mobile phones, etc.).

Strategic postures of fans as a stakeholder

In concluding this paper the need emerged to explore and offer a possible classification of strategies adopted by fans as stakeholders of a football club. Figure 6 was built by counter posing the fans' *inclination to cooperate"* with their *"inclination to be a threat"* to the football club and for the network as a whole. The

analytical framework used here is drawn from the theoretical tools proposed by Freeman *et al.* (2007) to outline the strategic behaviour of a firm's stakeholders.[49] The variables in Freeman's model - "relative cooperative potential" and "relative competitive threat" - can be applied to the fan community to delineate a *first typology of fans' "strategic postures"* and outline the different ways in which the latter are able to influence the decisions of the football club. The graphic representation of figure 6 highlights a *continuum of strategic behaviour*: from maximum cooperation (*partner*) to dysfunctional behaviour.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

Partners have *very high cooperative potential*, but at the same time may have great control over the football club's decisions and can therefore shape its strategic outcomes. Partner fans can be defined as "rule setters" and may be particularly opinionated and able to voice their concerns towards the football club. This can be done not only through open letters to the football club Chairman and owners, press releases, speeches on local radio and TV (traditional media), blogs and web sites (new media), or sit-ins involving the entire local community, but also through direct contact with the football club's top management, coach, and local institutions. Partners are generally an inner circle of fans who do not "speak" as individuals, but rather it *is the fan club which interacts with the other stakeholders* (football club, media, local government etc.). Apart from their official duties of co-ordinating fans, supporting the team and assisting the football club in managing ticket sales, *fan clubs* have over the years moved away from being almost "piloted" by the owners - since it was the club itself which elected the official representatives and Chairmen of the fan clubs[50] - to assuming an independent *role* not only towards the football club, but also towards other stakeholders such as the municipal government and related institutions. Partners' strategic behaviour is therefore distinguished by a *high level of freedom of opinion and action* toward the football club, but also by their inclination to be "propositively open". At the same time, the football club acts towards the partners in a spirit of dialogue and negotiation, involving them in its strategic choices. For example it usually invites them to official meetings and local and national conferences where other stakeholders (e.g. local government, local police, etc.) take part.

The group defined *collaborator* is characterised by a *high level of co-operation* and a relatively *low threat potential*. As with partners, the activities performed by this segment of fans assume a "collective" dimension; it is not the single fan who acts, but rather the association coordinating the fan clubs. The strategic behaviour of the collaborators aims to find "friendship and dialogue with the football club, thinking of football merely as an exciting sports event".[51] Their aim is to keep in contact with, and coordinate each fan club's activities, to maintain direct relationships with football clubs and local institutions and restore the human side to the match–event for example by seeking moments of encounter with the opponents' supporters through the organization of convivial meetings, twin fan clubs, exchanges of team flags and jerseys, etc. Collaborators are an active but moderate part of the fan community. They play an important role in the success of the event in terms of safety and security. The friendly attitude of the fans towards their opponents' supporters[52] can help football clubs, local government and the institutions responsible for public order to manage public safety, welcoming away fans and controlling the areas around the stadium.

In stark contrast, our model poses c*ontrarians* as a *strong threat to the football club*, while having *very limited collaboration potential*. The contrarians' strategic behaviour enables fans to continually influence the football club's choices responding specifically to an action or a decision of the latter, by spreading counter arguments, refusals, criticisms, etc. This is a rather dangerous strategy for the football club, since this segment of fans does not seem willing to negotiate and collaborate. At the same time, the football club cannot "ignore them" since they may have a strong influence on achieving competitive goals. If the contrarians do not approve of the football club's decisions, they are openly "critical" and tend not to activate relationships with other stakeholders, but rather express their own opinions through the new media such as blogs, social

networks and fans' web sites. The threat deriving from this kind of behaviour is amplified by use of the new media: digital technologies contribute to *virally spreading*[53] a general complaint due to the tendency of the fan community to share their emotions and experiences with friends, relatives, colleagues, etc. online, which in some cases may even influence the social and sports atmosphere.

The *audience* are fans who are characterised by *having contextually low cooperation and threat levels*. This group does not specifically express its position, whether supportive or critical towards the football club; the audience does not make its point through the media or the fan clubs, as happens with partners and collaborators. Nevertheless, their strategy is not "neutral" since this stakeholder is an important asset for a football club: by not going to the stadium or not purchasing a pay-tv subscription, they can considerably influence the football club's revenues both in terms of single ticket and season tickets sales, and in terms of the audience on television networks. The variation in number of "indirect" consumers can influence the value of a match's broadcasting rights thus decreasing this segment of revenues. Fans included within the audience react in an indirect way to the choices of the football club, for example as regards the team line up and its technical level, the purchase and/or transfer of players, increases in the average prices of tickets and season tickets, etc. Nevertheless, the audience's behaviour is able to negatively influence the number of spectators of the team.

The *dysfunctional*[54] group appear to have very *high threat level* and *non-existent attitude to collaboration*. For these people, the football event is merely an occasion to *yell out their anger, frustration, and personal dissatisfaction* through oral and physical abuse of power, destructive fury and violence towards things and people. Their aggressive behaviour and their violent gestures are scarcely related to the results of the match. Violence is mainly the result of a long process starting in the mind of the individual before the event. It is usually an expression of the social unease of the individual.[55] In fact, aggressive behaviour occurs outside the sports context (the stadium) as well, for example near train stations, bus stops, subways, and takes the form of out and out criminal actions (devastation of cars, trains, buses and damage to shops etc.). The aggressiveness is not only a threat to the football club, but also disrupts the value created by generating negative feedback affecting the entire network of stakeholders (fans, Institutions, media, local citizens, etc.).

Conclusions

A number of articles have been written about the football fan phenomenon both in the popular press and in academic papers, but not much systematic research has been found related to the role of a football fan community as regards to the way it behaves as stakeholder of its own team. This paper aimed to increase our understanding of the concept of value co-creation in the football sector. Therefore our main research question was: *how can a football fan community participate in value co-creation?*

To answer to this question we referred to the empirical case of the ACF Fiorentina, by studying the interaction among all the actors involved within the local social network and trying to enlighten the central role of the fan community. Although we are aware of the limits of single case study research, the case of Fiorentina can nevertheless be considered a kind of active and dynamic "laboratory" from where we tried to draw a *first classification* of *fans' roles* and *strategic behaviours*.

The typological articulation of roles and strategic postures proposed here is not exhaustive and therefore does not exclude the exploration of additional fans behaviors through further research. However, the empirical evidence of the Fiorentina illustrate the *viola fans' specificity as stakeholder of their team*. In a global football environment where "productive resources" like players and coaches come from different countries and not within their team's local context, and where the football ownerships are often expression of foreign investors, fans frequently develop "emotional relations" with top international teams (e.g. Manchester United, Inter, Barcelona, etc.). Indeed, the media broadcasting of football matches and the process of global branding pursued by several clubs have favored the growth of worldwide supporters' communities.

Against these currents, the Fiorentina football club is an example where the *strong local identity* between

the fans and the club is still persistent, irrespective of the fact that other stakeholders like players, the coach and the owner are "non Florentine". The *territorial identity* between the team and the fan community is an *intangible asset* that is crucial to the continued growth and survival of the club. Indeed the Fiorentina's fans are repositories of the history and the "Viola" cultural continuity. They play a role that goes beyond that of the "twelfth man": fans do not only support the team by following every match, but through the fan clubs they can speak their voice, they interact with the football club and other stakeholders (owner, coach, local institutions, etc.), and they are involved in its strategic choices. The viola fans play a *leading role* within the social network of the Fiorentina by helping to create value through commitment, collaboration and social participation which seem to compensate the continuous evolutions and changes of the technical results, the players, the owners, and the coach. The very strong territorial tie existing between the fans and the local context, the attachment to the "viola jersey" in itself, and the high level of identification with the city and the team make the *viola supporters* a *key determinant stakeholder* for the value creation process within the Fiorentina's social network.

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Figure 1. A stakeholder map for the Fiorentina football club
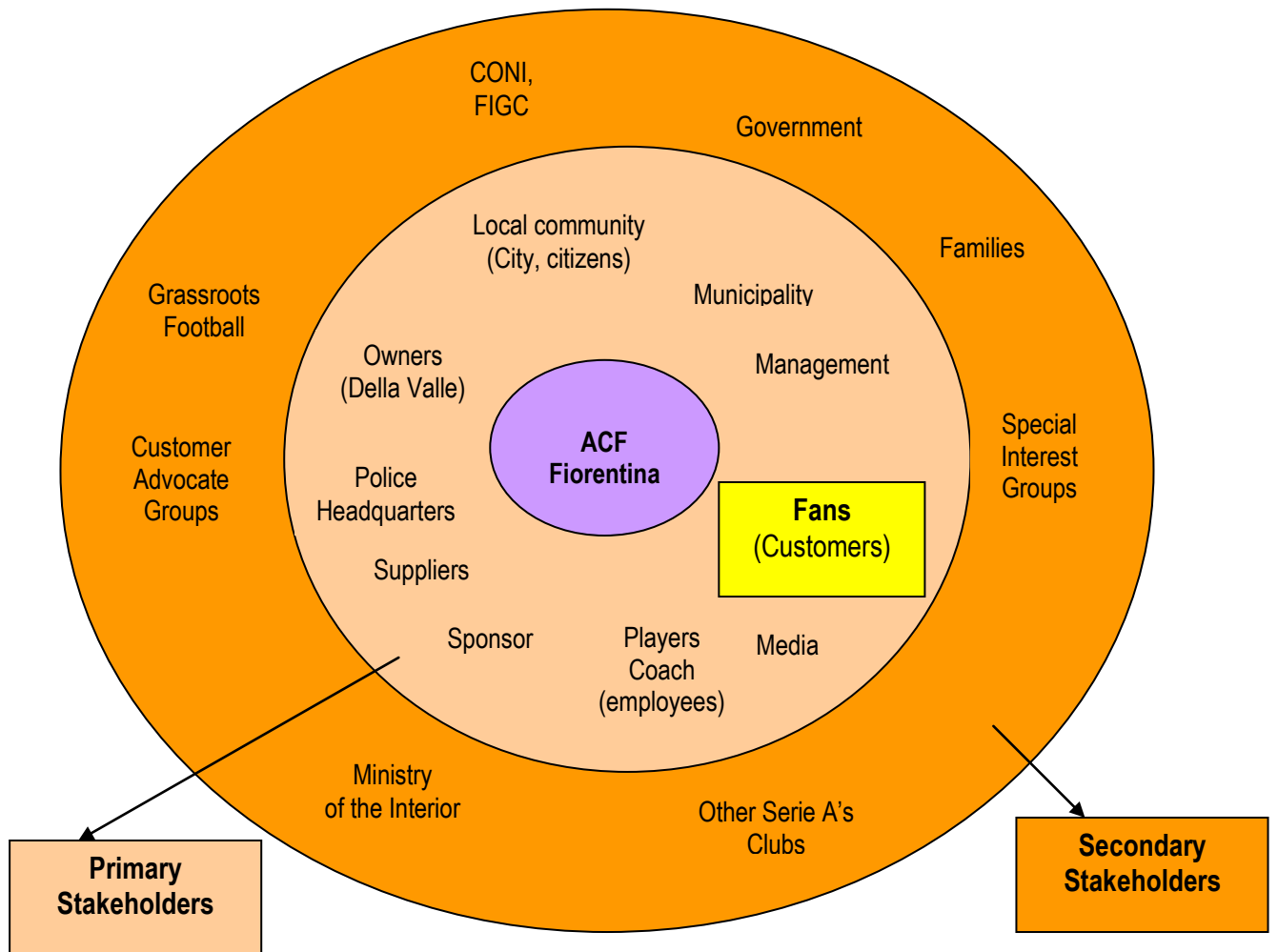
Source: Adapted from Freeman *et al.*, 2007

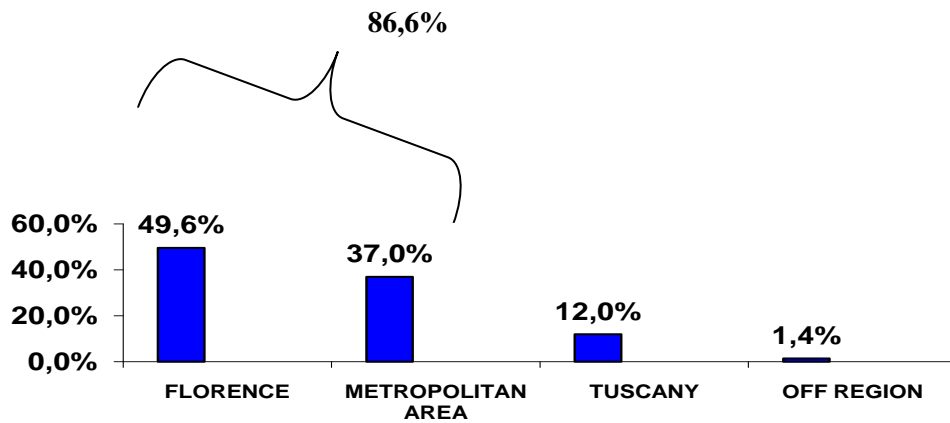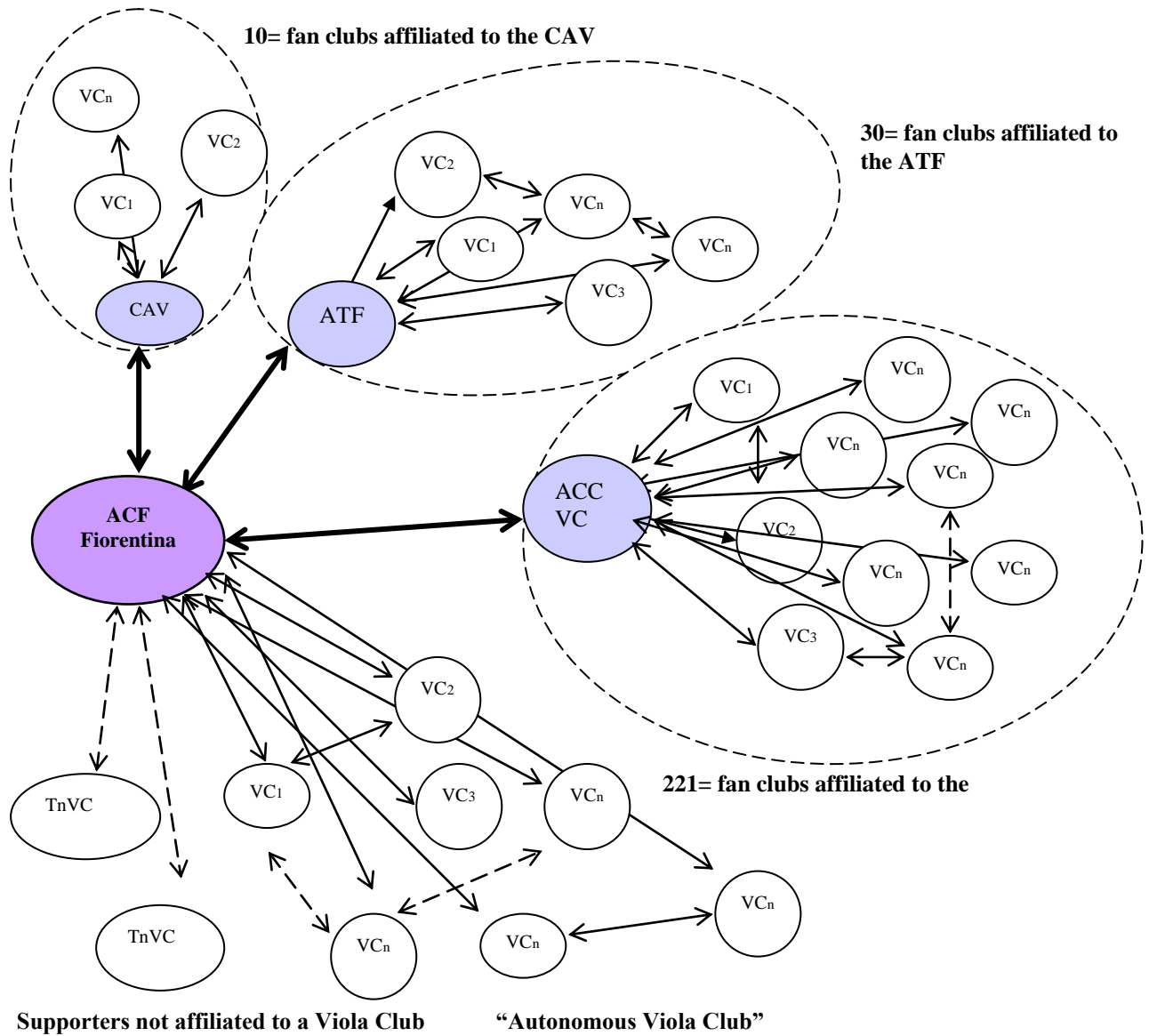Figure 2. The strong collective "viola" identity

Figure 3. The ACF Fiorentina fan community organisational structure

10= fan clubs affiliated to the CAV

30= fan clubs affiliated to the ATF

221= fan clubs affiliated to the

Supporters not affiliated to a Viola Club   **"Autonomous Viola Club"**

CAV= Collettivo Autonomo Viola;
ATF= Associazione Tifosi Fiorentini;
ACCVC= Associazione Centro Coordinamento Viola Club

Figure 4. The social network of ACF Fiorentina
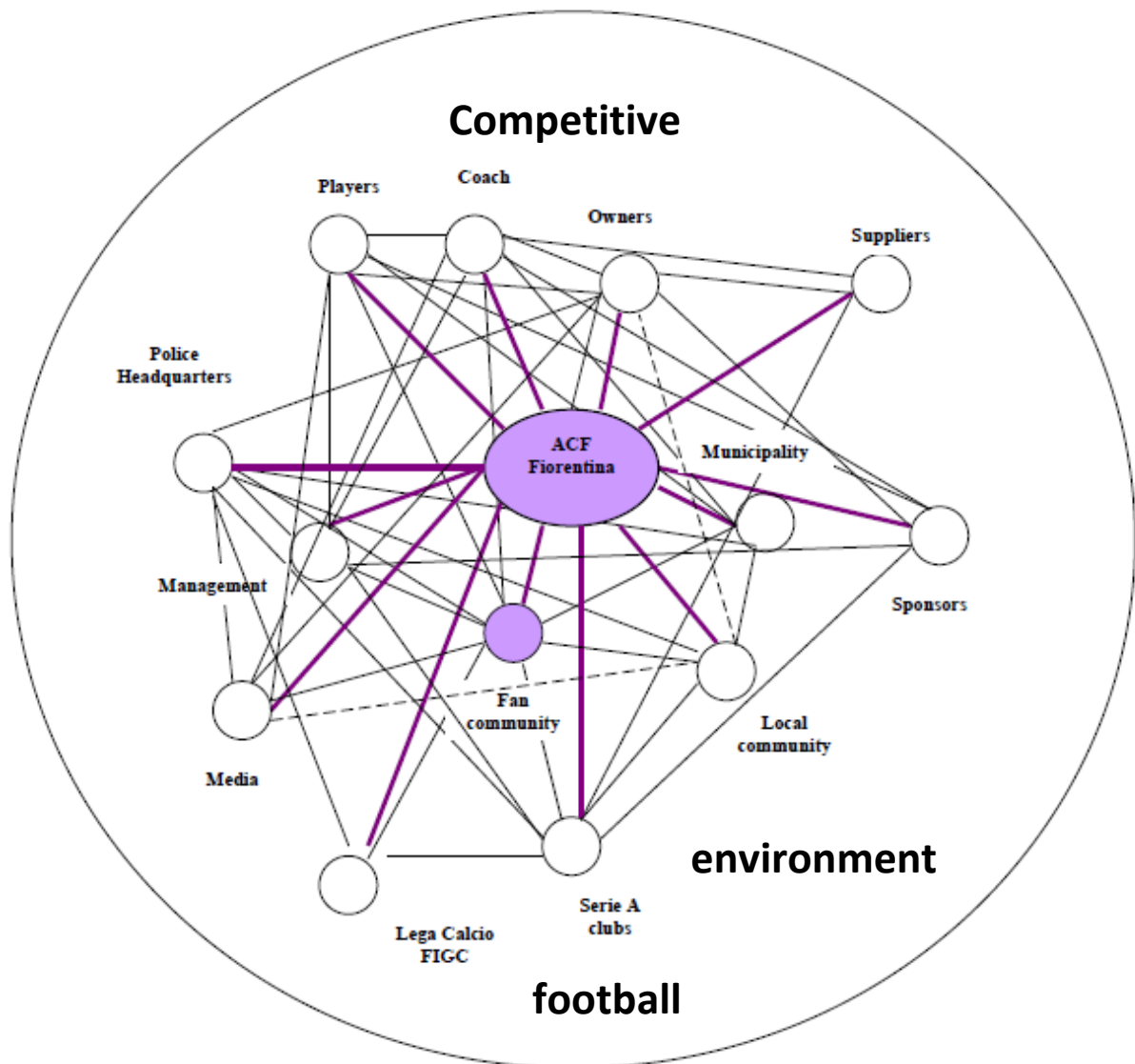
The continuous lines connecting the various stakeholders involved in the network show the existence of a collaborative relationship between the same. When the line is "thicker" this means a stronger collaboration between two stakeholders.

The dotted lines show a lack of collaboration between the actors of the network.
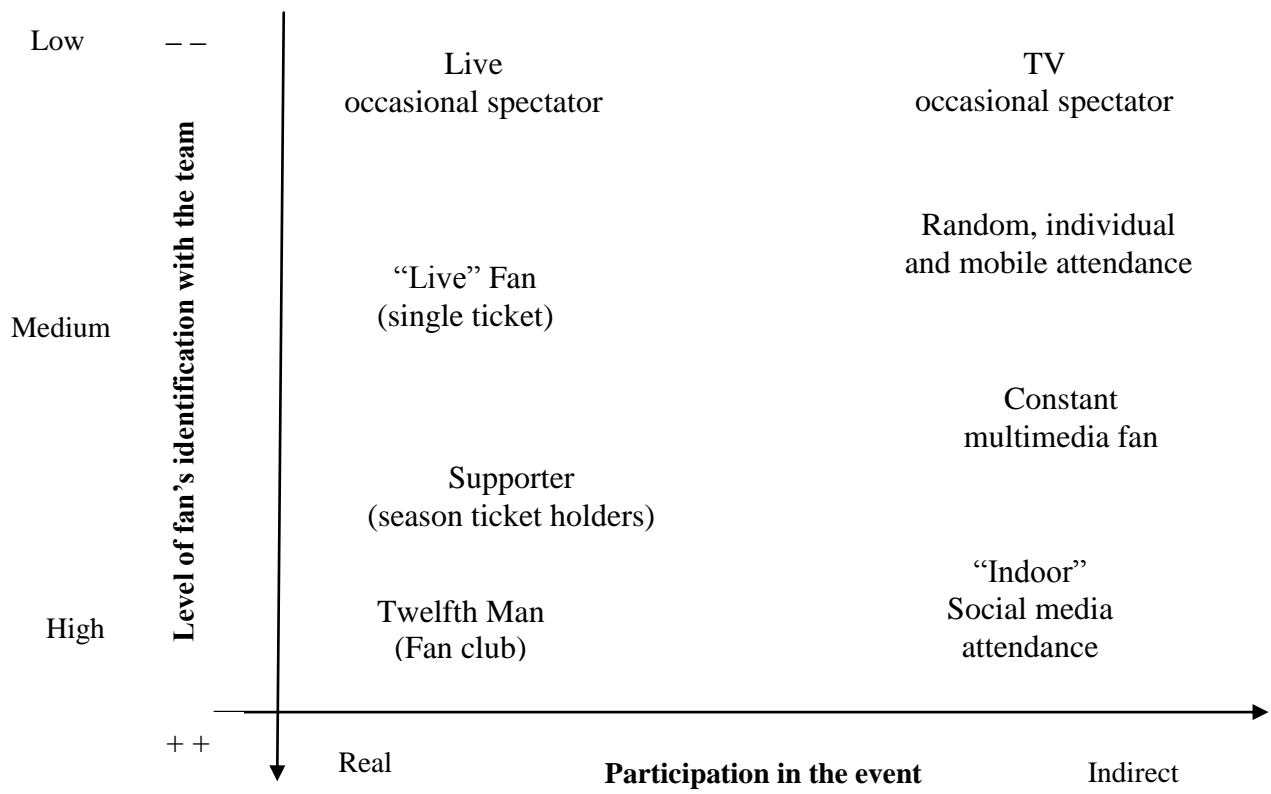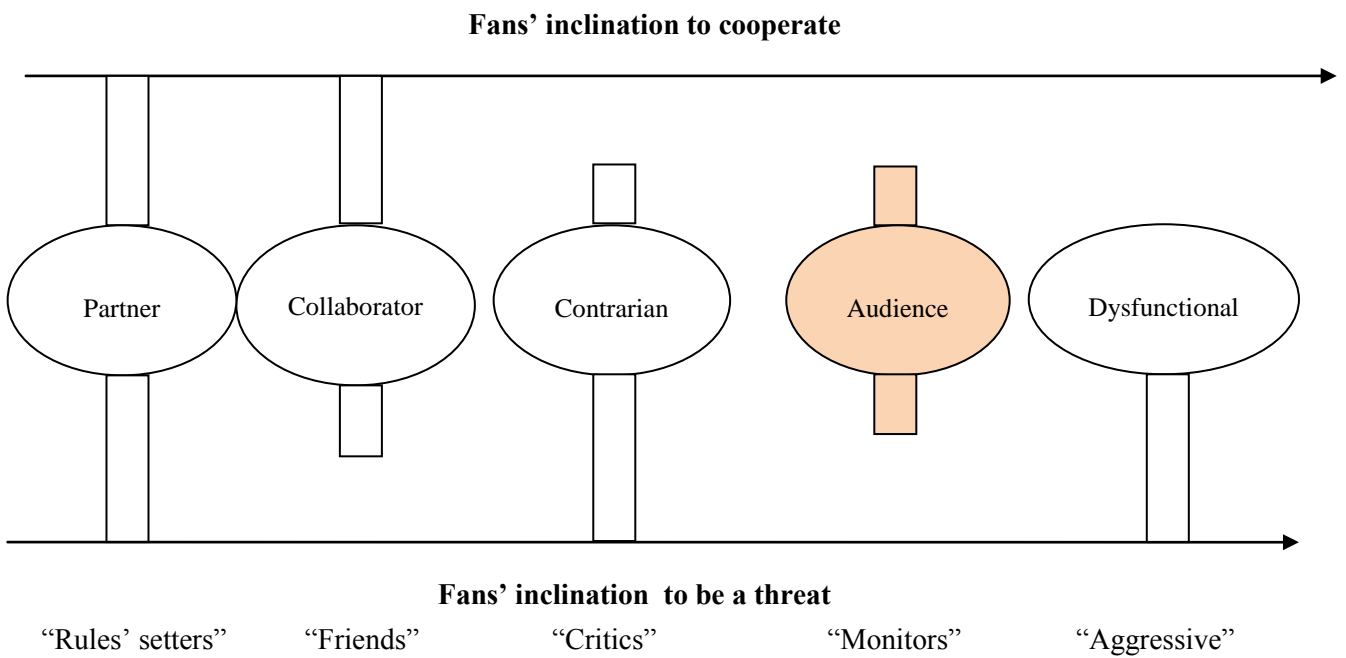
Figure 5. Fans' roles

Figure 6. Strategic postures of fans as a stakeholder

Fans' inclination to cooperate

| Partner | Collaborator | Contrarian | Audience | Dysfunctional |

Fans' inclination to be a threat

| "Rules' setters" | "Friends" | "Critics" | "Monitors" | "Aggressive" |

Source: Adapted from Freeman, 2007

Notes

[1] Although the authors have shared their research work, Patrizia Zagnoli has written: Introduction; Mapping stakeholders of a professional club; Towards a typology of sports fans' roles and behaviors. Elena Radicchi has written: Customers: the 'Viola' fans; Socio-demographic features of the 'viola' fans; Fans organisational structure: the Viola Clubs; The social network of ACF Fiorentina; Strategic postures of fans as a stakeholder; Conclusions.

[2] See Zagnoli, P., Fanti, D., Radicchi, E., Lamanna, E., '*L'identità collettiva viola. Analisi socio-economica degli abbonati della ACF Fiorentina (2003-2004)'*.

[3] Associazione Centro Coordinamento Viola Club, Associazione Tifosi Fiorentina, Collettivo Autonomo Viola.

[4] Freeman, Harrison and Wicks, '*Managing for stakeholders: Survival, reputation and success'*; Harrison, Bosse and Phillips, '*Managing for stakeholders, stakeholder utility functions and competitive advantage'*. Rowley, *'Moving beyond dyadic ties'*.

[5] For network analysis compare Burt, 'Range'; Freeman *et al.*, *Research methods in social network analysis*; Håkansson, Snehota, 'Analysing business relationships'; Gummesson, *Marketing relazionale*; Mitchell *et al.*, 'Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience'; Rowley, 'Moving beyond dyadic ties'; Salvini, *Analisi delle reti sociali: teorie, metodi, applicazioni*; Scott, *Social network analysis: A handbook*; Wasserman, Faust, *Social network analysis: Methods and applications*.

[6] Lusch and Vargo, 'Service-dominant logic'; Lusch and Vargo, The *service-dominant logic of marketing*.

[7] Normann and Ramirez, *Le strategie interattive di impresa*.

[8] Freeman, *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*; Harrison *et al.*, *Managing for stakeholders*.

[9] Harrison *et al.*, *Managing for stakeholders*.

[10] Freeman, *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*, p.25

[11] Freeman, *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*; Harrison *et al.*, *Managing for stakeholders*.

[12] The term "viola" means "violet" i.e. a bluish-purple colour, and this is the colour of "la Fiorentina's" jerseys, hence the fans team formal name *viola*.

[13] The season tickets sales for the ACF Fiorentina raised from more than 6 million euro in 2007/2008 to 8 million euro in 2008/2009. *Source*: Poesio E. (2009),'Poveri, ma belli', *Corriere della Sera*, Venerdì 3 Luglio, 10-11.

[14] The stadium where the Fiorentina plays its home games is named "Artemio Franchi".

[15] See Lega Calcio (2009), *Analisi del trend degli spettatori allo stadio e degli ascolti televisivi della Serie A TIM e della Serie B TIM*, Maggio.

[16] Muniz and O'Guinn, 'Brand Community'.

[17] Sitz and Amine, *Consommation at groups de consommateurs, de la tribu postmoderne aux communautés de marque: Pour une clarification des concepts*, p. 3.

[18] Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus, le decline de l'individualisme dans les sociétérs postmodernes*, p. 18.

[19] Zagnoli, Fanti, Radicchi, Lamanna, *'L'identità collettiva viola'*.

[20] See note 15.

[21] Curva Fiesole is the place to be for chants, songs, drums, and non-stop team support; thus it is the area in the stadium where most young people are found.

[22] The number of subscribers that hold a University degree is lower than that with a high school diploma and of a middle-school certificate.

[23] The place where traditionally young and senior Fiorentina's supporters meet up to discuss matches results, technical aspects of the team, players performance, etc. is the "Bar Marisa" which is located near by the stadium Artemio Franchi.

[24] Average number of live spending spectators for each match. *Source*: Lega Calcio, 2009.

[25] Average number of Sky spectators for each match. *Source*: Lega Calcio, 2009.

[26] Mediaset Premium broadcasts Champions League matches, while Dahlia TV offers a full package with all the Fiorentina home and away games.

[27] Cova, 'Community and consumption'.

[28] The Operational Group for Security (GOS) includes representatives of the Police Headquarters, local Municipality, Fire Department, Health Service, besides representatives of the guest team and local fan clubs.

[29] For example, the ACCVC, one of the most well organised supporters associations, has implemented an SMS service to communicate in real time with all the Viola Club Chairmen. This service enables each Club to be up-to-date on changes of instructions, new services and general meetings of the Association.

[30] Some fan clubs have registered a trademark - the *Indiano* - expression of the Curva Fiesole clubs, to be placed on their merchandise. In this case the Viola Club seem to provide for the football club deficit, by offering products and gadgets that satisfy the particular needs of fans, first and foremost, with regard to the price.

[31] During the months before the football club's failure, through the local press and other media, fans succeeded in informing the whole city about the financial crash Fiorentina was heading for. They also organised initiatives aimed at increasing the level of protest, such as the famous torchlight procession of April 2001 in the streets of the city centre which involved over 30,000 fans, or the boycotting of season tickets subscription, and so on.

[32] After bankruptcy hit the former owner Cecchi Gori, in 2002 August 1st, AC Fiorentina also failed. The same day, in the light of several initiatives, demonstrations, and sit-ins by the supporters and local citizens during the previous weeks, the Mayor and the Sport Councillor of Florence, following the FIGC resolution allowing "expression" of a team representing the city, founded a new football club: Fiorentina 1926-Florentia Srl, with the Mayor as President. In the following days the football club was transferred to a new owner, the business man Diego Della Valle.

[33] *Lawsuits* contemplated by some representatives of Viola Clubs have been central in expressing their disagreement with the decisions made by the Florentine Court, the FIGC and the Lega Calcio. Those acts were aimed at speaking out against a "sick" football system widespread among many professional teams which were not penalized as Fiorentina was.

[34] Håkansson, Snehota, 'Analysing business relationships'; Gummesson, *Marketing relazionale*; Mitchell *et al.*, 'Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience'; Scott, *Social network analysis: A handbook*; Wasserman, Faust, *Social network analysis: Methods and applications*.

[35] Freeman *et al.*, *Research methods in social network analysis.*

[36] The graphic representation of the network is the result of qualitative analysis without the use of specific statistical software. The connections between focal organisations and stakeholders were developed by interpreting the results of interviews and discussion groups.

[37] Network density *is* the *extent to which all actors in the network are connected*. It describes the general level of linkage among members and measures the ratio of the number of ties that exists in the network to the number of possible ties, if each network member were tied to every other member (Scott, 2000).

[38] Network centrality refers to an individual actor's position in the network relative to others. Centrality measures the extent to which communication within a network passes through an actor. Network centrality refers to power obtained through the network's structure (Rowley, 1997).

[39] Burt, 'Range'.

[40] On concept of "closeness", see Rowley, 'Moving beyond dyadic ties'.

[41] Following the failure of the football club and its rebirth in 2002, the team went to the well known Italian entrepreneur Della Valle, for the first time ever a "non Florentine" owner. Although not Florentine, the new owner won support for his operational, technical and business choices. He started a process of creating collaborative relationships in the city, among supporters, institutions and the football team.

[42] Taken from the blog of a Fiorentina fan. See http://blog.libero.it/archiaraviola/5735501.html.

[43] Becattini, *Lo sviluppo economico della Toscana, con particolare riguardo all'industrializzazione leggera*.

[44] Bagnasco, *Tre Italie. La problematica territoriale dello sviluppo italiano*.

[45] By way of comparison, the signing budget of a team such as Inter FC, considered among the top international and national clubs is about 150 million euro a year and the coach Mourinho's salary is about 8 million euro net per season. In the case of Fiorentina, the annual signing budget is about 35 million euro and the coach Prandelli earns a net salary of slightly under 2 million euro. See http://www.legacalcio.it.

[46] Harada *et al.*, 'Segmentation of sports fans using the experiential value scale'; Hunt *et al.*, 'A conceptual approach to classifying sport fans; Kozanli and Samiei, 'Segmenting the football audience'; Tapp and Clowes, 'From carefree casuals to professional wanderers'.

[47] Sutton, McDonald, and Milne, 'Creating and fostering fan identification in professional sports', p. 15; Finn and Giulianotti, 'Scottish fans, not English hooligans'.

[48] As an example consider some banners written by the Fiorentina fans for the Champions League match "Fiorentina-Liverpool", 29/10/2009: *"Our faith is your strength"…..."Fedelissimi"……"A unique city, a never ending love".*

[49] Freeman *et al.*, *Managing for stakeholders.*

[50] In Italy, the control of the fan club by the football club was justified by the relevant economic support given to the former, which very often in return entailed the possibility for the owners to name the majority of fan clubs' representatives and Chairmen. See Papa, Panico (1993).

[51] See Sancassani M., *La voce dei tifosi*, June 2009, Italian Federation of Football Club supporters.

[52] For example for the Champions League match Fiorentina-Liverpool (29/09/2009), some fans from the Collettivo Autonomo Viola (CAV) launched a twin fan club initiative with the English supporters, called the "Reds" after the colour of the team's jerseys, welcoming them before the match outside the stadium, exchanging flags and jerseys and expressing their friendship through chants and banners such as "Reds, your name is a legend".

[53] Wilson, 'The six simple principles of viral marketing'.

[54] Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw, 'A conceptual approach to classifying sport fans'.

[55] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for excitement*.