

The strenght of local identity in a first division football team: the ACF Fiorentina

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Introduction

Football organizations like many other sport entities (no profit associations, clubs, professional teams, etc.) have been traditionally expression of particularistic local identities. Football has been historically linked to geographical locations and communities in which clubs were formed, symbolizing the pride of towns, cities or even neighbourhoods.

Contemporary football, due to its global diffusion and to an advanced 'mediatisation' process, is experiencing a massive internationalization trend which is primarily related to the presence of foreign athletes in the football market. Moreover, a new 'geography of ownership' is involving a growing number of teams. For instance in UK (e.g. the Manchester City FC has been bought by an Abu Dhabi investment company), in France (e.g. the PSG team is owned by a Qatari found of investments) and even in Italy (e.g. the Internazionale FC is owned by the Indonesian tycoon Eric Thohir and the AS Roma by the Northern American entrepreneur James Pallotta).

The main objective of this research is to understand how the ACF Fiorentina - the only professional football team of Florence, Italy - is leveraging its 'memories' (history, sport tradition, local network of relations, etc.) into the contemporary reality of its development strategy.

In the light of a progressively internationalized football environment, the Fiorentina is a 'rich' example where the strong local identity between the club, the city and a network of local actors is at the base of a value creation process that combines local dimensions and global imperatives.

Research methodology

A quali-quantitative methodology has been used to develop the case study of ACF Fiorentina. An in-depth case study was deemed appropriate for this singular club since it is a research methodology that focuses on analysing 'firm specific' elements (resources, capabilities, organizational structure, etc.) that have to be viewed from the inside (Yin, 2014) in order to understand the multiple dynamics present within the individual setting of the football team.

The knowledge of this case study has profited from several researches carried out by the authors from the year 2003 up to the 2015 (Zagnoli et al., 2004; Zagnoli, Radicchi, 2011; Zagnoli, Radicchi, 2015). The analysis of the club includes an examination of the Fiorentina's ticket season holders database. Furthermore, in-depth interviews and focus groups with fan clubs, local Institutions' representatives, managers of the football club (Stadium manager, Business Analyst, Responsible of the Internationalization project, etc.) have been undertaken. Additional information has been retrieved through a meta-analysis of sport magazines and national newspapers, and the searching of the ACF Fiorentina official web site, fan clubs blogs and forums.

Findings and Discussion

As a main result of our research it emerges that since its foundation in 1926, the Fiorentina has been intimately entwined

with a constellation of local stakeholders which have contributed to keep alive the 'memories' of the local context over the daily life of the club. The territorial bonds among the city, the team and its stakeholders (fans, local community, top management, media, sponsors, etc.) is in fact an intangible asset to the survival and growth of the club.

Local Institutions have had a meaningful role which aroused in 2002 in occasion of the failure of the club, playing as 'mediator' towards the sport judicial authorities to save the Fiorentina, 'heritage' of the local community. The role of Institutions has been strengthened in 2011 with the entrance of the Municipality within the governance of the club, and more recently it is confirmed with the institutional approval of the new Fiorentina stadium project.

For the citizens the team is a communal "property": even in adversity the participation, support and identification of the local community with the Fiorentina contribute to enhance the 'viola collective identity' (Zagnoli et al., 2004).

Fans, a 'tribe of people locally marked' (Zagnoli et al., 2004), 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 club and the other stakeholders (owner, coach, local institutions, etc.), being involved in its strategic choices.

However, local memories have been inexorably affected by the global sport competition, the crisis of the Tuscan economic model, and the new fiscal and financial rules introduced in football. The contemporary 'realities' has imposed to the ACF Fiorentina to contract foreign players and coaches, to negotiate with international sponsor, to manage new media, to develop an internationalization strategy in 'emerging' football countries like India and USA.

The challenge is therefore to maintain in the near future the 'place attachment' to Florence and its local ties as an essential component for the stability and growth of the club, to avoid the risk that in the name of globalization the unique set of resources (heritage, history, values) embedded in the local context is impoverished or even destroyed.

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