PUT THE FAN ON THE TOP OF THE PYRAMID. A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF AN ONLINE BASKETBALL FAN COMMUNITY

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Aim of the paper and analytical framework

In the light of the new global context, sport organizations need to reconfigure roles and relationships among a network of actors - partners, suppliers, fans, media, institutions, etc. - in order to create value. Activate this *constellation of relationships* (Norman, Ramirez, 1995) should be one of the main goal for a sport organization.

Nevertheless, many sport clubs still have a pyramidal structure: on the top of the pyramid there are owners and Presidents, below the management, often poorly qualified, and the fan base is on the lowest level. The prevailing managerial logic is "top-down". Nevertheless, considering the importance of the fan base for a sport club, it should be necessary an *overturning of the pyramid*: identifying new ways to make fans central in the life of their "favorite team", implementing initiatives based on the knowledge of supporters and their needs, in order to generate higher revenues, to develop and to enhance the business of a sport organization.

This paper is aimed at *identifying complementary tools of knowledge about fans* and a better management of relationships with customers/fans.

According to Mullin, Hardy, Sutton (2007), the key moments to achieve an integrated view of supporters are the so called "touch points" between the fans and the club (buying tickets and merchandising, watching games, visiting team website, etc.). If on one hand many clubs are still not well prepared to exploit traditional touch points with their fans, on the other hand it is necessary to go further. *Web 2.0 and social media* provide great opportunities to create new touch points, in order to involve supporters and to gather additional information (life style, behaviors, attitudes, etc.) through online activities (Greenberg, 2009). The use of social media can favor the involvement and engagement of fans. Moreover, sport organizations should *exploit social networks* in order to *learn about the relationships* and interactions between the *club* and the *fans* and among fans themselves. The main goal is to "listen" to the online communities of supporters so that it would be possible to offer products and services that meet fans' needs and to enhance their brand loyalty.

Methodology

This study is an attempt to apply a *netnographic methodology* to an online basketball fan community. Netnography (Kozinets, 1998; 2002) is a qualitative and exploratory research approach to analyze the consumers dialogue in online communities in order to gain their insights. For this specific research, an online communication between the *members of a group of supporters* of a First Division *basketball club in Italy* has been studied. According to the netnographic procedures (Kozinets, 1998), the following steps have been provided:

• *Entrée*:
- formulation of research questions:

RQ1) do virtual spaces like an online forum drive opinions of real fans and other stakeholders related to a sport club?

RQ2) which is the perception of online fans as regard to the club?

- identification of an appropriate online channel to be studied. We chose the *unofficial forum* of the basketball club Scavolini Pesaro *managed by the fans*. This channel has been created ten years ago and in 2012 it registered 1755 members. It is important to underline that the group of fans we are investigating are not organized as official fans clubs.

• *Data collection*: direct copy from the online forum of the observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings. We are monitoring (from December 2012-ongoing) a close group of conversations (about 10) among the most active supporters online from where we have extrapolated about 150 post.

• *Analysis and interpretation*: classification, qualitative analysis and contextualization of communicative acts.

Results and Discussion

Although data is still being collected and further analyses and conclusions will be elaborated and presented, the empathic and non-obtrusive online observation and listening should allow to enlighten needs, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings of fans about the sport club. Regarding the RQ1, findings suggest that opinions expressed by fans online are able to drive opinions of

people in the local context. For example, local media are used to extrapolate conversations from the forum and to publish it on the local press. Regarding the RQ2, the main feelings expressed by fans towards the sport club are:

-the *strong local identity between* the *supporters* and the *team*;

-the feeling of the *club* seen *as a sort of "common good"* of fans and citizens;

-the *desire of renovation* regarding the top management of the club.

The insights deriving from some opinion leaders would provide important information to the club in order to drive its marketing strategies. According to our first results, we should suggest to the club a proposal marketing strategy based mainly upon:

- organizing more formal occasions of involvement of fans in the life of the club;
- involving fans and supporters within the organization of events, promotional campaigns, etc.;
- listening the fans' critiques in order to improve the club's service.

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