



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Business Research

Conviviality behavior in entrepreneurial communities and business networks<sup>☆</sup>Simone Guercini<sup>\*</sup>, Silvia Ranfagni

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 1 June 2015

Received in revised form 1 July 2015

Accepted 1 July 2015

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Conviviality

Communities

Business marketing

Entrepreneurship

Networks

Fashion industry

## ABSTRACT

This article takes a step toward building of conviviality behavior in entrepreneurial communities and business networks. The actual experience of entrepreneurs suggests the importance of convivial events in entrepreneurial communities, especially to foster social and business networks in industrial markets. Yet little research effort has been devoted to elucidating the factors at play in achieving such effects. With the aim of contributing to closing this gap in the business literature, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to investigating and elaborating on the concept of conviviality as this behavior influences business networks. Two cases of entrepreneurial communities in the Italian fashion industry are examined with the aim of gaining insight on the role played by conviviality in the development of the producers' ability to conduct business in their respective industrial markets. The main results of the paper include three research propositions for a research agenda regarding the role of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities.

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## 1. Introduction

“Conviviality” is the propensity for sharing and a phenomenon that is created, sought after, or in any case emerges from the community and contributes to strengthening the bonds within a group, without compromising individual freedom, but that gives rise to new possibilities deriving from the perceived closeness and greater sense of community (Caire, Alcalde, & Sombatheera, 2011; Germov, William, & Freij, 2010). The present study offers a nascent theory of conviviality behavior in entrepreneurial communities and its implications for business marketing. The topic of conviviality is a rather new one in industrial marketing and management. Arriving at a definition of the concept of conviviality as it relates to the study of business markets can profit from referring to the contributions of other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and philosophy. To date, little attention has been devoted to the business issues related to conviviality, a lack we believe is deserving of rectification. In fact, while the management literature contains little on such issues, the actual experience of entrepreneurs suggests the importance of convivial events due to their frequency within the entrepreneurial community (i.e., social networks) and the relationships they foster with other actors and organizations in industrial markets (i.e., business networks). More specifically, despite the wide body of marketing literature on entrepreneurial and business networks,

analyses seem to be lacking of the role of conviviality in the development of business-to-business markets in entrepreneurial communities. The seriousness of such lack is revealed by the important role that conviviality is deemed to carry out by members of actual entrepreneurial communities. (See Figs. 1 and 2.)

This article addresses the issue of defining conviviality as it affects entrepreneurial communities and their operation in business-to-business markets. To this end, two cases of entrepreneurial communities in the Italian fashion industry are examined with the aim of gaining insight, from their direct experience, on the role played by conviviality in their enterprises' ability to conduct business in their respective industrial markets. The main results are then framed in terms of some propositions regarding the possible roles of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities, with particular reference to business-to-business marketing in fashion enterprises.

## 2. The concept of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities

The term “conviviality” derives from the Latin *convivialitas* and, in turn, the Greek *koinonia*. Although it denotes a sense of community and sharing, it is in fact distinct from the concept of community, in that it represents a means or tool to build and nurture a sense of belonging and reap the benefits that such belonging to a community can offer. Since ancient times, a community has been conceived of as way of being together, freely and willingly, and hence it is within the community that individuality is expressed and finds full realization. In this sense, individuals can be interpreted as expressions of the community which has influenced them and within which they can realize themselves. At the

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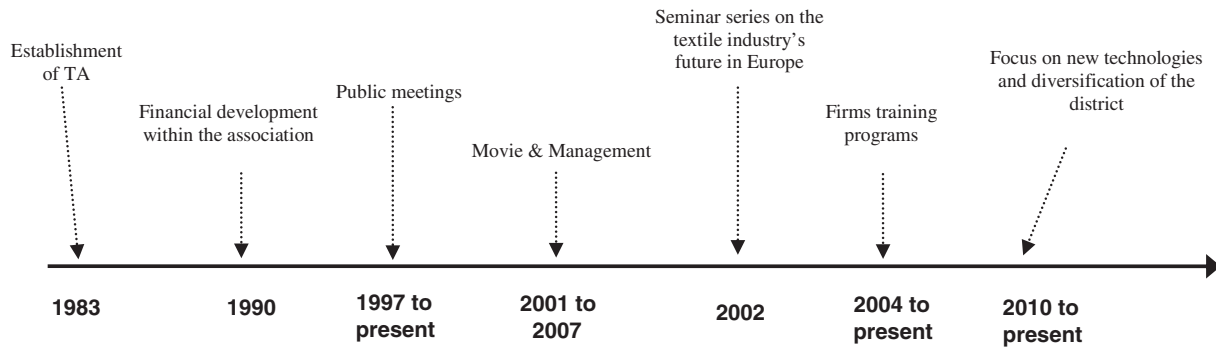


Fig. 1. The evolution of Textile Association (TA).

same time, the community needs individuals in order to nurture a sense of belonging. The concept of community is distinct from that of society, in that, while in the latter individuals remain essentially separate despite the factors that unite them, in a community human beings remain essentially united, despite the factors that separate them (Tönnies, 1887).

A framework for studying conviviality must necessarily begin with conceptualizing contributions from philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists (Gandhi & Hoek, 2012; Illich, 1973; Maitland, 2008; Williams & Stroud, 2013). One important contribution comes from Illich, who considers “conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value” (Illich, 1973, p. 29). A convivial society is thus a society that grants individuals the opportunity to exercise the most autonomous and creative activities, with the aid of instruments uncontrolled by others. Illich contrasts the concept of conviviality with that of productivity, which is instead viewed as a dominant element in contemporary society. In Illich's view, productivity is expressed in terms of having, while conviviality in terms of being. Thus, each and every individual is defined in relationships with others and with the environment by the interactive tools employed. These tools can be ordered along a continuum, with on one extreme productive tools and on the other, opposite one, convivial tools: the transition from productivity to conviviality represents the transition from the search-for profitability to the spontaneity of gift-giving and the convivial, always new, relationship; it is the work of people who participate in the creation of social life. Illich maintains, “the progressive homogenization of personalities and personal relationships cannot be stemmed without a retooling of society. Research on the social character traits that make retooling difficult or doubtful is complementary to what I propose. But I am not postulating the creation of a new man as a condition for a new society, nor am I pretending to know how either social character or cultures will change. A pluralism of limited tools and of convivial commonweals would of necessity encourage a diversity of life styles” (Illich, 1973, p. 35).

In this approach, while capitalist productivity does nothing but enforce controlled uniformization, dependence, subjugation and impotence, the austere choice of the convivial tool ensures the free expansion of autonomy and human creativity. Conviviality therefore represents a “tool” that leaves the broadest possible room and power to modify the world according to one's own intentions. The convivial tool is such only as far as it is accessible, and each and everyone can use it without difficulty when and as much as is desired for the aims determined by the individual. In such a view, the use that anyone can make of it does not encroach on other people's freedom to do the same. Conviviality thus appears as a bridge between the individual and the world, contributing to the individualization of purpose and objectives and to the intentionality of the actors. Above and beyond the aims of Illich's study, this view of conviviality as a tool or an instrument presents a number of interesting aspects for assessing it with regard to other disciplines.

Conviviality is a tool for nurturing and stimulating a sense of community (Lloyd, 2002). It represents a way to promote free sharing as a form of emancipation that is universal in nature, and thereby contrasts not only individualism of the most egocentric sort, but also communitarism. Conviviality is a reservoir of community that nowadays is viewed ever more frequently as an outdated corrective measure to our present setting, characterized by the ways and means of neoliberal, capitalist production, to which it, in many aspects, represents an alternative.

A community refers merely to a number of individuals who share the same place and give rise to a recognizable group (Cova, 1997), but also becomes productive to the extent that it provides the individual with the possibility to access social capital (Bourdieu, 1980, 1985; Coleman, 1988), defined it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 2). Social capital emerges from belonging to a group, in the sense of a set of actors, not only endowed with common property (for example belonging to a single ethnic group settled

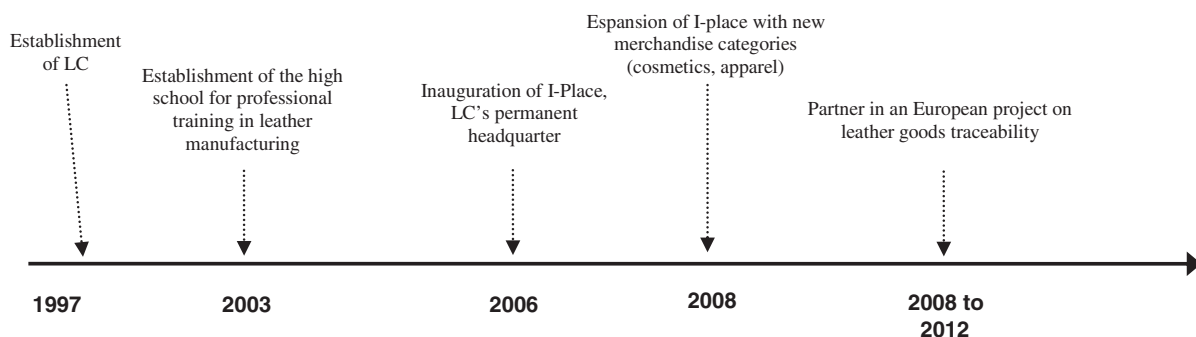


Fig. 2. The evolution of the Leather Consortium (LC).

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