



# Conviviality behavior in entrepreneurial communities and business networks<sup>☆</sup>



Simone Guercini <sup>\*</sup>, Silvia Ranfagni

University of Florence, Department of Economics and Management, Via delle Pandette 9, 50127 Florence, Italy.

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## 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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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [simone.guercini@unifi.it](mailto:simone.guercini@unifi.it) (S. Guercini).

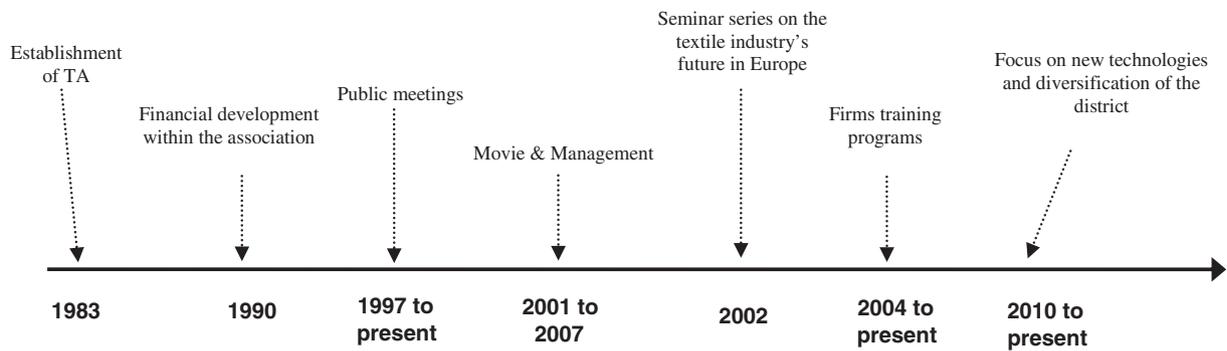


Fig. 1. The evolution of Textile Association (TA).

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

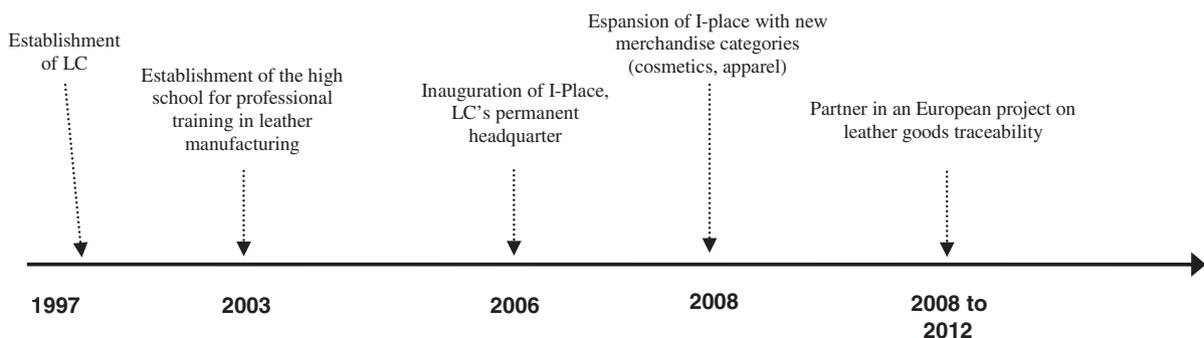


Fig. 2. The evolution of the Leather Consortium (LC).

in a certain area), but also linked by bonds that are maintained permanent, active and useful. Conviviality may represent an emerging tool for creating such bonds or carrying out specific functions in terms of rituality (Benedict, 1934).

### 3. Literature review: conviviality between social and business networks

The aim of our research is to study conviviality in entrepreneurial communities in order to shed light, on the one hand, on how more or less formalized and ritualized forms of sharing can foster interrelationships between a social and an entrepreneurial network and, on the other, on how such interrelationships not only constitute the means to preserve and strengthen a sense of belonging within a community, but also to achieve specific goals through the processes of linkage between organizations as well as the relations between such organizations in industrial markets.

The mechanisms of conviviality operate within existing communities through traditions and the reenactment of previously developed rituals, whereby it helps to create an “atmosphere” that may represent a vehicle for the spread of knowledge and a stimulus for undertaking initiatives. The concept of “atmosphere” has already been addressed in the business-related literature, though with different meanings. Within the context of industrial districts, “atmosphere” is generally viewed as a condition that develops within a district, wherein it plays an important role in learning as well as in the creation of a common market (Becattini, 1990; Dei Ottati, 1994). In the economics literature (Becattini, 1990; Marshall, 1920), industrial atmosphere is described as a condition arising in a geographically well-defined production context (industrial district). One further conception of “atmosphere”, linked to the concept of industry and advanced in some industrial marketing studies, views it as the setting for interaction processes to occur between suppliers and buyers where it is at the same time a product of the interaction process (Håkansson, 1982).

From the standpoint of the individual, conviviality is both nurtured by the establishment of social networks and at the same time favors their establishment and development. Social network denotes the sum of the relationships that link one person with other people (Cova & Dallı, 2009). At the same time, contacts within the network are non-redundant, that is, the link between various parts of a network may depend on a single network “node” that can influence the results achieved and any competition between its members (Burt, 1992; Burt, Jannotta, & Mahoney, 1998). Indeed, a community leaves room for competition, which conviviality does not eliminate, but creates a foundation on which to build new relationships, thereby increasing the density of the social network referable to the individual who is part of the community. In entrepreneurial communities, this accessibility of the relationships is made possible by the sharing inherent in conviviality and can bring about significant circumstances and occasions on both the individual and organizational levels (Carson, Cromie, McGowan, & Hill, 1995). Two factors – sharing within the community and the efficiency and competition in industrial markets – may operate according to different and apparently incompatible criteria (Guercini & Woodside, 2012; Ranfagni & Guercini, 2014). Nevertheless, the thesis that we advance in this paper is that conviviality, by creating the foundation for sharing and linkage within a community, has effects not only on the social network of the individuals, but also on the interactions and the business network(s) of the organizations to which they belong, or are in some way associated.

The relevant body of literature by members of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group describes business networks as a set of relationships that link one business enterprise to others (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Håkansson et al., 2009; Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). The IMP group’s approach is to examine the relationships between organizations in industrial markets, particularly the vertical interactions typical, for instance, of buyer–supplier relations, and focus on the interaction

processes that lead to processes of learning and teaching between the actors, which are accompanied by innovation and mutual adaptation (Ford et al., 2002). The very concept of market takes on the characteristics of a business network, in which exchanges form the basis for the creation of value, and the type of network in which such exchanges occur provides the settings for its production (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). In such a formulation the market is no longer viewed as an impersonal mechanism, but takes the form of interactions with specific clients or, in any event, specific organizational actors with whom to entertain relations (Easton & Håkansson, 1996).

In the IMP approach the structure of the business network is defined by a series of activity links, resource ties and actor bonds that furnish content to the characteristics taken on by the network. In this approach, however, the economic roots of the business network are more sociological in nature (Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola, & Snehota, 2014) and, in contrast to the community, conceptually the business network does not exhibit well-defined boundaries (Snehota, 2004). In comparison to the social network, analysis of the business network proceeds from the level of the individual to that of the organizations, offering a descriptive model of the relations between the firms and not the individuals. Thus, the level of analysis of business networks and that of social networks are different, distinct, above all because, while social networks describe the sum of relationships tying one person to other people, business networks are conceived of as a set of relationships connecting one firm to other firms (Håkansson et al., 2009). Each of the two levels (social and business) is able to offer a more effective model for appraising the specific effects of the two networks. However, this does not exclude social bonds as unimportant for organizational networks exhibiting embeddedness (Uzzi, 1997). In this sense, although social bonds may precede business bonds, in some aspects these latter encompass a broader scope, given the dimensions of the organizations with respect to individuals.

In addressing the issue of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities and business networks, herein we essentially attempt to provide some replies to the following five research questions: (RQ1) what mechanisms trigger or activate the tools of conviviality? (RQ2) What mechanisms and processes are employed to nurture and sustain convivial processes over time? (RQ3) How do the tools of conviviality relate to new emerging contexts and new communications technologies? (RQ4) What results can be achieved by employing the tools of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities? (RQ5) In the experience of specific entrepreneurial communities, what are the limitations of convivial tools and what results are beyond their scope?

### 4. Research method and case studies

The research reported here is exploratory in nature (Stake, 1994). The study examines two of the most significant and noteworthy entrepreneurial communities in the Italian fashion industry. The case studies have been carried out over a number of years according to a longitudinal research model (Leonard-Barton, 1990), using a number of different methods for the collection of empirical evidence and triangulation checks (Yin, 1981). The gathering of such data was facilitated by a process of easy communication between actors within the entrepreneurial groups and the researchers (Guercini, 2004; 2014) and has followed a substantially interpretative approach (Visconti, 2010), the main aim being to formulate new theoretical propositions regarding the subject of study (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The two communities studied express to two organizations, a cultural association and a consortium, both located in manufacturing districts in central Italy. The former, which we shall call Textile Association (TA), unites about forty entrepreneurs for the most part operating in the textile industry, while the latter, which we will refer to as Leather Consortium (LC), brings together over fifty actors primarily in the leather goods sector. In both cases the organizations’ members are not limited to these actors alone, nor do their members represent the entire

entrepreneurial community in their respective sectors. Both are particularly noteworthy and both are made up of enterprises operating for the most part in business-to-business dealings with clients including a number of multinationals in the fashion and luxury-items sectors. Historically, the two organizations correspond to two larger entrepreneurial populations, though they exhibit a perceptible dimension of community within these populations.

The research method of longitudinal case analysis was based on the data collected on the study subjects by the authors for 13 years (TA) and 8 years (LC) respectively. Such data collection included researching both online and offline documentation on the two organizations, performing interviews of the two groups' representatives (the association's director and consortium president) as well as of other members of the two communities, and participation in events and other convivial occasions arranged by the two organizations. In preparing for writing of this paper, a new, recent series of interviews has been carried out; some extracts of the results are reported verbatim herein. An outline of the topics addressed through the open-ended questions asked during this last series of interviews is shown in Table 1. Although both entrepreneurial groups have a mainly "horizontal" organizational structure, in the sense that they include members of enterprises in competition with each other, they do include some elements of a "vertical" organization, with a number of member entrepreneurs in buyer/seller relationships.

The following figures show the main stages in the evolution of the Textile Association (TA) and the Leather Consortium (LC). Since its establishment, the former has organized 1500 convivial events and has over time undergone some significant changes, as it has expanded its membership to new entrepreneurs, especially freelance professionals and actors in sectors other than textiles. The latter (LC) has succeeded in creating conditions favorable for small and middle enterprises to keep their manufacturing activities in Italy and nowadays accounts for about three thousand people employed in leather goods and allied industries.

## 5. Results emerging from the exploratory analysis of the two fashion communities

The case analysis of the two organizations highlights the two groups' frequent sharing of convivial occasions. In the case of TA, the group was originally made up of textile entrepreneurs chosen based on both their affinities and friendly relationships, who exchanged ideas mostly on issues of common interest. Instead, in the case of LC, the group's original composition seems to have been based on relations of friendship that also involved the families of local entrepreneurs operating in the same sector. These characteristics emerged quite clearly from the last cycle of interviews with TA's director and LC's president, who put the prime emphasis on the needs that the two groups attempt to satisfy through the community and the tools of conviviality:

Our consortium was established in response to the needs of the enterprises of the time, which was to go against the mainstream economic policies under development then ... which was to outsource production on an international level... we were convinced that we had to keep on working in Italy... [the initiative to set up the

consortium] came from a group of entrepreneurs who [at the time] had been personally acquainted for at least fifteen years... (LC)The occasions for conviviality have been many and diverse, because we have at different times thought of analyzing acutely felt problems ... for example, when it occurred to us to delve into ideas on the future of the textile and apparel industry in Europe... (TA)The phenomenon has been very important in the sector and was the determining factor in starting a very difficult undertaking, that is, the consortium [LC]... a countercurrent initiative, but strongly desired by this group of entrepreneurs. What comes to mind, amongst other things, are colleagues with whom we are still exchanging experiences [the names of the companions follow]... they are the ones in this area who we have worked with for about thirty years on so many projects ... (LC).

### 5.1. Triggering mechanisms (RQ1)

Conviviality is sometimes one of the main factors in creating a sense of community and fostering trust between the organizations' members. In this sense, it played an active role in the establishment of LC, but also in the development of the relationships not only between the people involved, but also between the enterprises:

During the years we are referring to our meetings were made easier by the simpler economic situation than the current one, but however it was really thanks to 15 years of meetings, partly for work and partly on convivial occasions, that made it possible to establish a consortium of a certain importance at the time when a need for it arose, [we had a relatively easy time going ahead with such initiative] because we could trust each other... (LC)[the problems shared by our partners] are addressed in various ways; there are seminars, training courses, some meetings, but the thing that distinguishes [our group] is the fact that we get together at least two every months in convivial meetings, held in the evening at dinner, with a speaker ... even without any specific matters that can be scrutinized by those taking part. (TA)

### 5.2. Support processes (RQ2)

The exchange process may take various, particular forms of engagement, in that each community builds up its own rituals and its own ways of doing things together. Thus, the expressions of conviviality take on special characteristics typical of each group, and these influence how its dynamics develop:

[...] we do our utmost to make direct interchanges possible, because when we think of conviviality, we think of it 'American style', with round table discussions: well, we didn't conceive of conviviality this way at first. We want a single table, even if it is long, so that everybody can look at each other face to face: we feel the need to state our ideas to the others' faces... it is a bit like the ideas of transparency and immediacy ... total sharing of both food and ideas... (TA)The conviviality that I remember is what led us to organize family dinners over the course of the year with, very numerous participants: we are talking about operations on the city... which offered occasions at least twice a year (Christmas time and before summer vacations) with about fifty entrepreneurs in the same sector, and their families. So, this became a real convivial *kermesse*, in which the topics were not the stock market or leather, but rather the desire to be together... (LC)There are shy people that have difficulty expressing their opinions... so, someone to facilitate dialogue between the participants is needed [...], but it also takes an open mind on the part of everyone, a willingness to interact with the others... (TA).[in some cases] thematic meetings on a specific topic were "residential", consisting of two days of full immersion into the problem, in which all the actors

**Table 1**  
Topics addressed in interviews of entrepreneurial community members.

Q1—concept of conviviality
Q2—evolution of the role of conviviality in business networks
Q3—occasions for conviviality and participants in the experience of their respective entrepreneurial communities
Q4—use of new social networking technologies
Q5—effects searched for/emerging from such occasions (the why of conviviality)
Q6—effects produced by such occasions, through accounts of relevant circumstances (accounts of the repercussions of social networks and business networks)
Q7—conviviality and its effects on the entrepreneurial community over time

involved in the production chain were invited to converse so as to address all the problems of timeframes and product development ... let's not forget that [textile-apparel] deals with a creative product... we are talking about fashion, you need to experiment and exchange ideas to make industrial level products ... creating a fashion product goes through a first stage in which experimentation is based on your skillset, but then to come up with an industrial-level product and then market it ... you have to develop a process that involves interaction between buyers and contracting firms... (TA)[conviviality] is very important because it allows you to tackle a problem, go into the details of the problem, that is, to talk to some people at a table about a fundamental subject... it makes you understand what the issues are and therefore enables you to expound your ideas... this is a very important experiment because it clears things up for you... it makes it simpler for you to make choices because it clarifies the fundamentals. (TA)

In some cases convivial processes come to resemble a learning process, or at least of way to approach new subjects. This can happen when a master–pupil relationship is established between two individuals within the community, though in the cases studied it appears more simply through interchange during times of sharing that are not strictly work-related:

[our trade associations] need to grow and bring young people into the professions that we represent. We need a new entrepreneurship. How do you attract new entrepreneurs to a market in a country like Italy which makes it so difficult to start up an activity nowadays? I believe that using conviviality as a tool for associative marketing is a must for an association... to make the young people we are trying to attract [understand], to convince them that a work opportunity can come from starting a new activity, as well as from their passion for a potential profession... [and this can be fostered by] sharing some career paths... (LC)[part of the activities carried out by the association aim] to prompt a certain entrepreneurial inclination that was very much alive in the 1950s and 60s also in this area, because credit was easy to come by for anyone ... over the years this has stopped somewhat due to greater barriers to entry, which discourage certain initiatives... (TA)People that have left the association later found themselves holding public office, they have become institutional figures, they have gained awareness of the issues, and have learned to place their trust in themselves, in their convictions, and then they became able to take on... public offices... (TA)

### 5.3. New communications technologies (RQ3)

The role taken on by the new technologies and Internet social networks is surely significant in favoring the establishment of links, but in the two communities studied they do not seem able to replace the role of the conviviality generated by the occasions to meet face-to-face:

The new communications technologies have made a great contribution to circulating partners' opinions in real time. Nowadays, at any moment is possible to acquire precise ideas from everybody, practically in real time. When partners are abroad marketing... we can talk to members of the board on the other side of the world, but then on matters that need further delving into, the element of meeting together is irreplaceable... (TA)In my opinion, [Internet technologies] are a tool. Just like there used to be envelopes or postage stamps, nowadays there are social networks that are faster, more immediate, with greater penetration, but on convivial matters they cannot take the place of [physical presence]. Human relations are the core of convivial situations... must be maintained completely through seeing each other, meeting each other, exchanging ideas... I think that technology can help a lot if, however, opportunities are created to see and meet each other ... (LC)I would say that the new technologies

lead to an acceleration of timeframes, to a greater ability to be on top of the news and a greater ability to share opinions on the press rather than on the media, but at the same time there is a need to reinforce the conviviality part to really become faster... the two parts are two work tracks, the one of new technologies must necessarily be supported by conviviality, or rather, anticipated by conviviality... (TA)

### 5.4. Results achieved through conviviality (RQ4)

What has convivial experience produced in the cases of the two entrepreneurial communities examined? To this type of question, the two communities provided responses pertaining to at least two levels: the concrete achievements of the community as actors; and the creation of possibilities and perspectives that could have led directly to other results at the level of single individuals and the relationships between them.

One characteristic [of TA] since its start was to keep on formulating ideas about the future, without taking on the concrete realization of these ideas. This [latter] was not the goal... since concrete realization has to take place outside, at other institutions... what have we produced over the years? ... many things that ended up no longer under our control ... (TA)[we have given rise] to these gatherings that have allowed us to do fun things like organize football tournaments and have a really good time. This has produced so many things; I believe this group of entrepreneurs and their frequent get-togethers were the reason the consortium [LC] was set up, as was a series of projects never before attempted in the area, such as the introduction of technology into leather goods production, training and research with and contacts at the university. We have set up a series of initiatives that have been the fruit of the frequent cordial get-togethers among ourselves... (LC)A group of our members has set up a finance company... it has promoted the creation of a museum of contemporary art... when the local bank was in crisis a few years ago. it proposed some solutions ... in some cases there have been attempts at intervention in bailing out failing enterprises, but there have also been a lot of things set up outside our group that cannot all be classified ... in any case, it's impossible to come to any accurate reckoning of "debits" and "credits"... (TA)

### 5.5. Limitations of and prospects for the tools of conviviality (RQ5)

Nowadays the situation has undergone some substantial changes that have had an impact on the very structure of the entrepreneurial communities involved.

What's the situation today? Certainly everything has changed, even the ways our enterprises relate to each other. We are part of an important territory recognized the world over as the luxury district. A disproportionate number of enterprises are located in this territory, we are talking about over two thousand leather goods firms ... sheer folly... and therefore, on the one hand, relational life should be more intense ... [instead] convivial life is still active, but in a completely different way... (LC)[among our associates] there are now many freelance professionals and entrepreneurs from other sectors [than textiles] with sectorial diversification in the area, we have also had other entrepreneurs with various different interests [from those of textile producers]... (TA)My thoughts are that what is happening today represents conviviality that is sectioned off and highly self-referential... we know about convivial relations within the group of suppliers of the great fashion houses, we know about the convivial relationships between the great houses as well, but we do not know about transverse conviviality... I believe that this a problem because, as I said, conviviality... is important due the fact of the transverse flow of thoughts and knowledge... if we go on witnessing the

sectioning off like that happening now, [conviviality] doesn't produce anything... (LC).

## 6. Conviviality in business-to-business fashion markets

The contents of the preceding section highlight how conviviality represents a constitutive factor in a sense of community, giving rise to processes of learning and contributing to the evolution of the entrepreneurial community. These first accounts presented in the foregoing have been selected for the most part from interviews of the organizations' heads and highlight mainly the positive aspects, though some limits to the role of conviviality within entrepreneurial community are also revealed. Other, both positive and negative, aspects can be better brought to light by following up along the lines of the research presented here. These concluding notes aim to define some aspects of both the role that the overall topic of conviviality may have on relationships within business markets, as well as the themes to pursue in continuing our research agenda.

The concept of conviviality must firstly be clearly distinguished from that of community: the former is an important, albeit not the sole, tool of a community and its mechanisms of operation. As a tool, conviviality also takes on "technical" importance and can hence be considered a crucial aspect of managerial practice. In this regard, the studied cases reveal the specific roles of "facilitator", carried out by some members of the group, in some cases, one of the organization's founders enjoying a central position in the social network, but in others, corresponding to managers, in the strictest sense, whose task is to encourage the group and promote the pursuit of more or less explicitly stated goals. Apart from the aforementioned facilitator of the community's internal relationships, others in the group represent 'structural' members, who act to promote sharing, and therefore the ability to create conviviality, by virtue of their special standing in the community, such as size, notoriety, age or ethnic background. Bearing these aspects in mind, with the aim of developing a theory on the role of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities and business networks, a number of research propositions follow.

**P1.** Conviviality represents a tool for developing entrepreneurial communities, whose effectiveness depends on, above and beyond the specific characteristics of the community, the contribution that a sense of community can make to both the motivation and commitment of participating individuals, as well as to the development of the business network.

Conviviality involves the crucial aspect of closeness, which can promote the transmitting of experience, for instance, through master–pupil relationships within the community. Naturally, this aspect has positive effects when the community is a repository of skills and competitive relations, but it may also be a factor limiting individuality and the drive to come up with a variety of solutions in times of crisis in the community's constituent enterprises, or when such enterprises have become less than competitive. Indeed, conviviality promotes the transfer of knowledge, skills and know-how within the community, and hence, as much as it is distinct from the community itself, the workings of conviviality reflect the advantages, but also suffer from the limitations, of the community in which it is implemented. Its function of promoting knowledge transfer may run dry in communities that exhibit self-referential behavior and close themselves off to the diversity present within their own ranks or to processes of 'contamination' by external realities.

Business-to-business relationships that the study reveals are not primarily those of buyer–supplier, or in any case, appear to go beyond such relationships, and hence furnish a way to elaborate on the possibilities for action on the part of those actors involved with respect to the market, viewed as a business network. Such considerations support P2.

**P2.** In business-to-business markets, conviviality furthers relationships between enterprises that could collaborate, by bringing people together, or at least enabling contact between them, and thereby open up a channel for communicating the potentialities. This holds for both horizontal as well as vertical relationships.

The tool of conviviality is an essential element in a process of sharing a context and creating a common vision of the issues. Thus, while conviviality is certainly a tool, it assumes strategic importance in that it can act to alter individual perspectives and thereby contribute to the formation of a convergent vision of the issues, or, in any event, even help to crystallize an individual perspective that may diverge from this shared vision, depending on the circumstances. This perspective informs P3.

**P3.** Conviviality leads to an exchange of deep-seated ideas and beliefs that can influence the market knowledge of the single individuals involved, thereby fostering a sense of community in which the individuals can however maintain their own independence and freedom.

It follows that social networks deriving from convivial relationships, which however enable individuals to maintain their autonomy, may, as a consequence of the new market knowledge acquired within the network, lead to the development of business networks that may extend beyond that of the original community.

## 7. Some final considerations

Conviviality is a source for the formation of new communities, but at the same time it is also the force holding an existing community together. It creates relational spaces in which all can act and express their own thoughts in complete liberty and autonomy. They represent spheres where individual identity is preserved, not distorted or undermined. This, also thanks to the tools of conviviality employed. In such spheres, each and every member becomes the custodian, as well as the potential bearer, of social capital, which conviviality can make shareable with others. This promotes greater collective knowledge, the development of trust, and, to the extent that there are also converging economic interests, can also favor the development of business relationships. The as yet unknown factors that lead to such integration between social network and business network is to be the main focus of the next stage of the current research, to be carried out through ethnographic immersion in the two communities studied.

The work reported on in this paper has attempted to define a concept of conviviality as it relates to the issues inherent in entrepreneurial communities and their associated social and business networks. The current lack of analyses, or even a widely-accepted definition of conviviality in the literature on management and entrepreneurship, makes it necessary to resort to researching sources from other disciplines (particularly sociology, anthropology and philosophy). In this regard, we hope this article and its contribution to such research may be deemed useful.

After a definition of the concept of conviviality as regards entrepreneurial communities, five research questions have been posed, generally regarding the factors that initially trigger and then maintain convivial processes and their role; how conviviality relates to the specific context and new technologies; the results it has enabled attaining and its limitations, or in any event, the prospects for its continued contribution. The research conducted on two entrepreneurial communities has provided the bases for discussion of these topics and led to the formulation of three theoretical propositions that would represent salient points for a future research agenda on the issue of conviviality in entrepreneurial communities, also in relation to the development of social and business networks.

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