Animating business relationships through community social capital: an insight into conviviality

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Abstract

Purpose – As conviviality can nurture community social capital, this paper aims to investigate how such capital can give rise to economic behaviour in terms of developing business relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical analysis was based on case studies of Italian businesses recognised as active communities that periodically organise convivial activities to fuel reciprocal collaboration. The case studies were constructed by combining a collection of secondary data, in-depth interviews and participant observations.

Findings – This paper shows how: community social capital in convivium emerges from self-narrative stimulated by ritual practices; social trust mobilising a convivial social capital is fuelled by knowledge generated through sharing and empathic relationships; community-based social relations embed business relations and if mediated, community-based business relations can also embed a community business.

Originality/value – The originality of the paper is twofold as it contributes: to understanding how conviviality can be used as a strategic tool for entrepreneurs to develop business relationships from convivial relations; and to finding intersection points between studies on business relationships from social capital and studies on entrepreneurship from community social capital.

Keywords Community, Business relationships, Conviviality, Social relations, Embeddedness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Conviviality is often associated with the values of friendship, union and hospitality. It is an articulated concept, which can be explored from different angles; the main contributions to its understanding come from the fields of anthropology philosophy and sociology. They conceive conviviality as "cum-vivere" around positive experiences, as "cum-vivere" despite diversities and as "cum-vivere" in an authentic way. In this paper we analyse conviviality according to these angles, contextualising it with management issues. Recently, conviviality has made its entry into management studies as a collective approach that can fuel both the sharing (Bradley, 2018) and the generation of innovation (Lizarralde and Tyl, 2018). Guercini and Ranfagni (2016) have shown that convivial relationships can also foster business relationships. In this paper, we would like to go beyond that study. As conviviality can nurture community social capital, we intend to investigate how such capital gives rise to economic behaviour in terms of developing business relationships. Studies show that community social capital has an impact on entrepreneurship when it emerges from social

trust between the parties (Kwon *et al.*, 2013). Said social trust, is the same force that according to the International Industrial Marketing Purchasing Group (IMP Group), fuels business relationships from social capital. Our goal is, therefore, to investigate how conviviality fosters community social capital and how it fuels business relationships through social trust, as well as to understand what kind of business relationships can emerge. Our paper is organised as follows: firstly, we examine the concept of conviviality and its interdisciplinary origins; then we investigate conviviality in managerial studies and starting from the assumption that conviviality can animate business relations from the community social capital it fuels, we have explored the links that exist between community social capital and business relationships. Finally, after illustrating the research methodology adopted, we present and discuss the results of the research on conviviality carried out in Italian business communities. Following are the managerial implications and conclusions.

Conviviality: an interdisciplinary concept
The term conviviality derives from the Latin word, "cum-vivere", which means to live together. Historically, it was used as a synonym of friendship, union and hospitality. An interdisciplinary analysis of conviviality allows for shedding light on the different facets of convivial "cum-vivere".

Conviviality is "cum-vivere" in contexts where experiences are shared. Williams *et al.* (2015), on analysing the Slow Food Movement in Australia, show how sitting together around a good meal defines a convivial space. According to Lewis (1997), food festivals are convivial spaces where people get together to share typical food, understood as an expression of local traditions. Instances of *convivium,* that is, of contexts in which food creates social cohesion are the Roman banquets (Dunbabin, 2003). Now as then, people interact around good food and chat together acting as tellers of personal stories (Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010). Their self-narrative can be punctuated by ritual practices. Ritual, understood as an "action frequently repeated... [thanks to which] everyone present knows what should happen" (Visser, 1993, p. 18), guides the convivial moments and contributes to creating integration amongst the participants. As Neal and Walters (2008) demonstrate, these develop a sense of belonging to the *convivium* due to the perception of "being in common" that convivial sharing from self-narrative can nurture (Wessendorf, 2014). Observing that "church services and dinners were prominent features of benevolent activities through which social relations were enacted" (p. 26), Lloyd (2002) considers *convivium* as a means "to represent social relationships and create authority" (p. 26). Maitland (2008) instead, explores visitors' experiences in London and realises that for them, "getting to know the city was a convivial experience" (p. 21) consisting of stop-offs in local places to drink or go shopping. It follows that *convivium* is also a means of accessing places and cultures.

Conviviality is also "cum-vivere" in contexts in which diversities coexist. Wise and Velayutham (2014) investigate how societies can be convivial spaces where cultural diversities live together. This is possible through:

- spatial ordering capable of structuring social interactions;
- job-connecting and bridging of multicultural people; and
- an intercultural habit of interacting with individuals belonging to different cultures.

Habits, as Noble (2013) shows, are convivial practices describing forms of interaction with others and with objects that turn out to be useful for living together in cosmopolitan societies. Even though they consist of repetitive actions, they are endowed with plasticity

and are open to exploration, adjustment and initiation. By exploring communities having ethnic diversities, Heil (2014) shows how living together is possible when based on "negotiation" and "translation". Negotiation is the identification of common living practices while translation is the use of multilingual repertoires facilitating linguistic adaptation. Blommaert (2014) considers the adaptation of language a practice that contributes to "the perpetual shaping and reshaping of an infrastructure for super-diversity" (p. 431). Williams and Stroud (2013) consider linguistic practices as powerful mediators of social life and find in "linguistic citizenship" the foundation of a politics of conviviality capable of triggering a process of cohabitation and social interaction also in multiculturalism environments.

Besides, conviviality is "cum-vivere" by sharing contexts in an authentic way. This perspective takes shape in philosophy studies. Amongst them, one of the most important contributions to conviviality is the work of Ivan Illich. Investigating conviviality as a social and historical phenomenon, in his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), he describes the convivial society as a "free space" of collective interactions where individuals exercise their right to autonomous action and, more generally, their freedom without being controlled. According to Illich, the convivial society is the opposite of the capitalist society. While the convivial society practices free expression, individual autonomy and human creativity, the capitalist society is based on productivity and generates dependence, submission and impotence amongst people. The capitalist production is based on having and pursuing results; instead, convivial freedom is based on being and gives rise to authentic relationships in which individuals express themselves in accordance with their true self, that is, with their inner thoughts and feelings (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). They reveal themselves as they really are, acknowledging the consequences of their self-behaviour, be it positive or negative (Bishop, 2013). De Waal (2009) shows that living together based on free self-expression favours the conditions for generating an empathic attitude in individuals. Another effect that it produces is the development of contexts comparable to Aristotle's *koinonia*, in other words, to a community where individuals maintain self-authenticating relationships to pursue collective well-being.

Managerial studies: the emerging perspective of conviviality as a bridge between social and business relationships

The theme of conviviality has also made its way into management studies. The works of Bradley (2018) and Lizarralde and Tyl (2018) are significant. Both are inspired by Illich's concept of a convivial society and develop a convivial approach to innovation. Bradley (2018) demonstrates how by experiencing convivial spaces, consumers learn more about product innovation and share information that can be useful for tinkering with and modifying low-tech tools. The bikers who attend the online "bike kitchen" community explored by the author, in addition to sharing opinions and feelings, can gain useful information for understanding what to do to maintain, repair and self-build bicycles. Convivial spaces are consequently spaces where users can claim autonomy and creativity, democratise technology and retain non-capitalist relations. The convivial spaces under Bradley's investigation are digital spaces. These, as McKenna (2020) highlights, are environments that allow social movements to exist, undertake their activities and give rise to collective actions. Lizarralde and Tyl (2018) demonstrate that conviviality can be used as the basis of a new framework for explaining sustainable design processes. After analysing emblematic company cases, they point out that the convivial community of Illich can foster a design approach where new products or services are elements of a socio-technical system: their development implies the engagement of stakeholders including designers and engineers. This convivially based approach can contribute to overcoming threats emerging

in the design processes, which include biological degradation of the ecosystem, radical monopoly, over-programming, economic polarisation and product obsolescence. These are all the same threats that undermine Illich's convivial society and limit the development of sustainable innovations.

Amongst recent studies on conviviality, the work of Guercini and Ranfagni (2016) is also significant. They explore convivial communities of entrepreneurs not as spaces to trigger, manage or share innovation, but rather, as spaces where, contrary to Illich's view, authentic social relations (based on being) can animate business relationships (based on having). The authors arrive at these conclusions starting from the assumption that social relations can nurture business relationships. Social relations are understood as stable bonds between individuals (Coleman, 1988) and are bearers of resources. As Bourdieu (2000) points out because of social relations, it is possible to access information and financial resources. In addition to information, social resources can also facilitate access to power and collaboration (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Generated by relationships based on mutual acquaintance and recognition, they give rise to social capital, that is, to "the aggregate of actual or potential resources" accruing individuals through the "possession of a durable network of relationships" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). This capital can be converted into economic capital, as, according to the concept of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), "All human behaviours (including economic ones) are embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (p. 487). IMP researchers point out how, just as economic behaviours are embedded in social relations, business relationships are embedded in social relations too. A business relationship is "a confrontation process that occurs between companies and which changes and transforms aspects of the resources and activities of the involved companies and of the companies themselves" (Ford *et al.*, 2008, p. 3). However, underlying this are individuals who, by interacting amongst themselves, weave and maintain a web of personal relationships. As Håkansson and Snehota (1995) highlight, "Business relationships are generally built up very much as a social exchange process in which the individuals that take part become committed beyond strictly task content" (p. 10). They take shape in social relations that appear to be a condition for the development of inter-organisational ties between any two companies (Håkansson, 1982): because of the resources they are bearers of, they foster interactions with or in business relationships (Raskovic, 2015; Mandják and Szántó, 2010). These resources may derive from "social bonds developed in the workplace, social and sporting clubs, religious organisations and the like" (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 15), and therefore in friendly and authentic environments. Björkman and Kock (1995) demonstrate how social relations are a means to gain information and trust that are essential for successful business relationships on international markets. Mattsson and Salmi (2013) stress that both trust and the exchange of information from social relationships can contribute to resolving inter-organisational issues of a technical, organisational and economic nature. According to Halinen and Salmi (2001), in addition to the exchange of information, social relations also perform two other functions in business relationships, namely: assessment and negotiation and adaptation.

On the trail of conviviality as a basis of community social capital embedding business relationships

In the light of the above, it is intriguing to investigate how convivial relations generate resources that foster business relationships, considering that in addition to being authentic, they can also nurture community social capital. To our knowledge, no studies have explored how community social capital interacts with business relationships.

Community social capital and entrepreneurship
A community social capital is not a private asset: it is not an individual resource whereby people benefit from their affiliation to certain social networks (Burt, 1992). Instead, it is a public asset; it includes resources that belong to a community (Dana *et al.*, 2019) and as Coleman (1990) observes, it is an "attribute of the social structure in which a person is embedded" (p. 315). It springs from living together in the same geographical territory, from sharing common experiences, expectations and interests. By generating a group identity, over time contributes to preserving shared values and concerns, together with a sense of place. In this way, community social capital is both a means and an end of collective practices (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). Even though community-rooted, it can open up entrepreneurial opportunities and encourage collaborations based on reciprocity, reducing opportunism and corruption (Isham, 1999). Putnam (1992, 2001) points to social networks as a source of community social capital that facilitates access to resources for fostering entrepreneurship, understood as self-employment in commercial businesses or entrepreneurs. Other studies (McKeever *et al.*, 2014; Dana *et al.*, 2019) identify the source of a useful community social capital in the local context where individuals are situated. Entrepreneurial activities are consequently considered easier to start up when undertaken by individuals rooted in local communities. As Sampson (1988) in fact demonstrates, the length of residence enhances local friendships, attachment to community and participation in local social activities influencing the members' ability to mobilise resources at the community level. When their initiatives are rooted in the local context, community members can provide access to social capital, thus facilitating the opportunity for discovery and exploitation (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Roxas and Azmat (2014) and Kwon *et al.* (2013) add that what favours community social capital fuelling entrepreneurship is actually, the social trust in social relations. Social trust extends beyond existing social interactions, also involving people who have never developed social ties. It assumes the connotations of "moral trust" (Uslaner, 2002) and "altruistic trust" (Mansbridge, 1999) emerging "when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create regular expectations of regular and honest behaviours" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 153). It routinely animates social obligations that Coleman (1988) describes in the following terms: "If A does something for B and trusts B to reciprocate in the future, an expectation is established in A and an obligation occurred on the part of B" (p. 102). The self-employment that social trust nurtures, according to Kwon *et al.* (2013), derives from the fact that it:

- facilitates the free flow of information between social groups; and
- helps small entrepreneurs to overcome a lack of recognisability and well-defined reputation, thus creating a bridge in terms of business collaborations with customers, suppliers and investors.

Social trust, resources and embeddedness
As pointed out above, social trust can mobilise a community social capital that encourages entrepreneurship: through social trust, community-based social relations embed economic behaviour. The benefits of social trust in terms of information transfer are greater in voluntary organisations (Lee, 2012) due to their community settings that facilitate socialisation amongst people belonging to different social circles. In doing so, according to Putnam (1993), they contribute to building social trust at the same time. Exploring the embeddedness of business relationships, it emerges that the social trust that links community social capital to entrepreneurship is the same trust that according to IMP researchers, mobilises resources in social relations which can be economically convertible

through business relationships (Figure 1). The trust mobilizing these resources is in fact, experienced as a non-calculative heuristic, that is, without detailed calculations or calculation practices (Finch *et al.*, 2010). As McEvily *et al.* (2003) explain, it fuels generalised reciprocity given that it implies "the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations about another's intentions or behaviours" (2003, p. 92) and as such it "includes an element of calculated expectation. . . [and] a non-calculative component, recognising the bounded rationality and uncertainty of organisational life" (2003, p. 93). Nevertheless, despite social trust, social relations do not necessarily foster business relationships, just as community social capital does not necessarily foster entrepreneurship. On investigating the indigenous communities of North America, Light and Dana (2013) show how the community social capital their social trust generates does not succeed in animating the development of local entrepreneurship. The barrier to such development lies in a cultural capital that is opposed to an entrepreneurial mindset. It is a permanent liability that cannot be circumvented through external resources: having no ties to the powerful, indigenous subjects are locked out of resource swapping networks that can provide foreign entrepreneurship incentives to invest locally. The entrepreneurship that social capital from social trust animates can be partial. As Dana (2007) demonstrates, it characterises the Amish, a religious group the entrepreneurial community of which pursues the maintaining of their cultural values such as asceticism, labour and humility, rather than prestige or profit. However, resources from a social trust-based-social relationship cannot be economically convertible either. According to IMP researchers, this can happen when these resources are not produced, maintained and developed with the aim of pursuing an economic goal. Value for the counterparts must emerge through a business relationship (Håkansson, 1982). In other words, social capital is converted into economic capital through business relationships if the relative resources can be used as an input of business activities in business relationships, contributing to the outcomes pursued. These outcomes are the effect of how business relationships are managed on the basis of an individual network picture (Ford *et al.*, 2002). As a network is understood as connected business relationships (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), a network picture is the perception actors have of "what is happening around them and of their actions and reactions in the network" (Ford *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). This is the result of the sensemaking process (enactment, selection and retention) via which they seek to find a logic for their encompassing working scenario (Weick, 1979). The network picture that emerges from making sense of business relationships is a mental
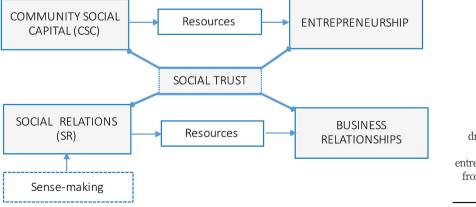

Figure 1.
Social trust as a
driver of resources
from CSC to
entrepreneurship and
from SR to business
relationships

representation where connected business relationships are goal-oriented and linked to the desired outcome; this representation implies making sense of components forming part of a business network (Ford *et al.*, 2008), and therefore also of the resources deriving from social relations (Figure 1).

Research aims and methodology

As we intend to investigate how a community social capital from convivial relations fosters business relations, we wonder in the first place how conviviality feeds a community social capital *(RQ1)*. Likewise, given that through social trust, community-based social relations embed economic behaviours just as business relationships are embedded in social relations, we investigate how community-based social relations embed business relations by exploring how social trust mobilises a convivial social capital impacting business relationships *(RQ2)* and which business relationships are established *(RQ3)*.

To answer these research questions, we adopted the case study method (Yin, 2003). In addition to focussing on understanding the dynamics at play in a single setting (Tsang, 2013), it is considered valuable for the purpose of holistically analysing a previously unexplored phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). The phenomenon in question is conviviality, which we have examined through the Alfa Association, Beta Consortium and Gamma Group cases. The insider point of view, namely, the view of those who actually experienced conviviality, constituted the foundation for the analysis and interpretation of our study. For confidentiality reasons in the research, the names of the three communities explored are fantasy names. The first two are in Italy, while the third is in China. Alfa Association was founded in 1983 and includes about 40 members, all entrepreneurs and managers operating in the textile and clothing industry and professional services. Beta Consortium was set up in 1997 and consists of more than 50 leather entrepreneurs engaged in business-to-business dealings with multinational fashion and luxury goods companies. Gamma Group was incorporated in 2005 under the aegis of the Italian Chamber of Commerce and includes 60 members, entrepreneurs and managers working in businesses belonging to different industries and having as target customers both local and international companies. All these business communities are recognised as active communities that periodically organise convivial activities to encourage reciprocal collaboration. To garner the insider points of view by exploring the cases-study, we combined a collection of secondary data, in-depth interviews and participant observations (Hannah and Eisenhardt, 2018).

The research process started in September 2016 and ended in June 2020. During the first two years, we studied the convivial activity of the Alfa Association and Beta Consortium through the analysis of periodic reports on the events organised and in-depth interviews (6 in total) with the President of Alfa Association and the Beta Consortium Director (3 interviews each) according to a protocol aimed at investigating:

- the convivial activities of the community (types, tools and management);
- the benefits of conviviality for community members; c) the way in which the benefits originate; and
- the prospects and roles that conviviality can assume over time for community members.

Each interview lasted about 90 min. As they were recorded, the interviews were transcribed and then discussed. In compliance with the research guidelines adopted in entrepreneurial studies (Dana and Dana, 2005), the interviews were integrated with observations deriving from our participation in *convivium* events organised by Alfa Association and Beta

Consortium during the research. The aim was to shed light on the daily activity processes (Mulhall, 2003) during the *convivium* events. The ensuing results were deepened by examining the convivial activity of the Gamma Group, engaging the research group in the three-year period 2018–2020. This analysis combined the perspective of the organiser of convivial events with that of the entrepreneur who experiences convivial events. In fact, it was based on in-depth interviews (a total of 15) with the Group coordinator (3) and with nine members of the community (one or more interviews each) who are owners of Italian companies. Apart from Alexis which provides training, consulting and communications, the other companies (Nomix, Erastos, Kyros, Petro, Soter and Zenas) belong to the textile and clothing industry. Labelled with fantasy names for reasons of confidentiality, they use around 30 people, have developed local partnerships and sell on international markets. The interviews were conducted by adopting the same basic interview protocol used in the previous research step, adjusted as required to fit the specific interview. Each interview lasted about 60 min; once recorded and transcribed, it was discussed with the others. The resulting data were integrated with notes from our participation in two *convivium* events organised in China by Gamma Group involving the interviewed entrepreneurs. We took part in the events as ethnographers (Dana and Dana, 2005), observing the members and listening to their conversations where the topic discussed was the entry of foreign companies on the Asian markets. While observing, we focussed on the daily activities during the *convivium* and also on the dialogue amongst the participants (Mulhall, 2003) transcribing the topics and exactly what was said about them.

To achieve the rigor of the analysis (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010) in both phases of the research we were specifically guided by conceptual relations emerging from the theoretical review amongst business relationships embeddedness, conviviality, community social capital and entrepreneurship. In particular, we carefully read the transcriptions to determine verbatim quotations that might express possible conceptual thematic areas connecting conviviality, community social capital, social trust and business relationships. In dealing with the analysis, we first proceeded to explore the verbatim quotations of each interview separately and then confront them to increase the reliability of the research. Hence, we analysed selected verbatim speech. We only considered the resulting common areas as an expression of agreement amongst them to assure the reliability of the analysis (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). The next section will present and discuss significant conceptual thematic areas and verbatim quotations as the main results of the empirical analysis. The results were supplemented by also considering the notes and transcriptions originating from the participant observations after being shared, as explanatory of convivial mechanisms creating connections between community social capital, social trust and business relationship (Drucker-Godard, 2001).

The main results from case studies

The entrepreneurial communities investigated include members who are managers or entrepreneurs and who, under the direction of their coordinators, take part in periodical meetings usually in the form of *convivium*: people interact and talk around good food and discuss different topics. In doing so, they reveal aspects of their personal and professional lives. The empirical research results illustrated below originated from the combined research methods.

Conviviality, ritual practices and community spirit

Members of the explored communities experience convivial events that take place with a certain periodicity. "We see Gamma Group as an important point of reference and together

with other entrepreneurs, I look forward to the meetings held once every fortnight" (Nomix). "These are informative and also educational meetings because they increase our knowledge, generating new energies in us" (Kyros). They are held around ritual practices. As one member of Gamma Group explains:

> Each convivial event is usually organised at the Group's headquarter where we first register, then participate in the event during which we address issues useful for our professional life over dinner talking openly and exchanging our views (Petro).

The same rituality also characterises the *convivium* of the Alfa and Beta communities. The community members actively participate in the event together with guests, namely:

> Professional outsiders who introduce the theme that inspires the discussion during dinner and by making their competences available provide information that leads to reflection and broadens certain entrepreneurial horizons (President of Alfa Association).

The rituality can foresee the presence of an animator who may be useful to "Make sure that all those at the table express their ideas... there are shy members who have difficulty in expressing their opinions and they must be stimulated" (Soter). In addition to emerging directly, by means of the intervention of business experts, the themes around which the *convivium* develops, can also emerge indirectly. For example, through the viewing of films, "We once watched 'The Devil wears Prada' and then discussed themes of the fashion industry" (President of Alfa Association). Or through artistic experiences, "Recently, art experts such as famous gallery owners have been invited to talk about exhibitions and their organisation and from there, we have developed ideas on how to create new exhibition spaces for our clients" (Zenas). Ultimately, "Even discussions that start from topics unrelated to our professional life can be useful" (Nomix). What follows, as the owner of Erastos adds, is that "We feel a sense of belonging to the convivial community" which also reveals itself to be an environment in which differences coexist:

> At the *convivium* you can find entrepreneurs or managers of important companies, both large and small, which have been more or less successful [...], together with experts in different fields with whom, given their fame, you could not otherwise have interacted (Director of Beta Consortium).

Emergence of a community social capital through professional and personal storytelling
At the *convivium*, members interact through speaking. As one member of the Gamma Group explains, "Everything is stimulating when you find people at the table who are not in love with their ideas, not mentally caged, but open" (Zenas). Like the dialogue, members tend to filter the topics discussed through their personal experiences. Speaking about access to Asian markets, some entrepreneurs of the Gamma Group express themselves in these terms, "Internationalisation in Asia is difficult, we have been able to reach this market because of our clients in China" (Zenas):

> "It is through local institutions that we have been able to invest in the Chinese educational market" (Petro), "We came to China to do creative work in the apparel sector in the wake of what other Italian companies have done" (Kyros).

Thus, by participating in the *convivium*, the members of Gamma and those of the other communities may reveal certain characteristics as entrepreneurs. They also go so far as to provide details about their business activity. In fact, the following emerges from the narrations, "Being amongst the best textile machine manufacturers, we have managed to create a large market in Asia" (Alexis), "We rely on innovation because if you want to sell in Asia you have to offer specialisation" (Erastos), "Despite our efforts, we have given up on

growing in China, so our main market remains South Korea" (Nomix). Some of the details provided may relate to the actors involved in the business activities. Indeed, while talking, as some of the members of the Gamma Group point out, "We interface with certified suppliers in China" (Alexis), "Today from China we are developing commercial relations with partners in neighbouring countries where the tax burden is lower" (Nomix), "Since we are looking to sell more in Asia, we are trying to create a local commercial network" (Zanos). Ultimately, the effect generated by narrations can be that of fostering the perception of a *convivium* social capital in the participants. As the President of Alfa Association explains, "Listening to others and their stories intercepts resources that the members are carriers of and which could be interesting to activate". To quote the owner of Soter: "You might think of associating these resources with certain gaps that your company needs to bridge to grow in the business", but as the Gamma Group coordinator adamantly claims, "You don't have to draw on them because you know that you are here not to exchange visiting cards but for the pleasure of being together with others". By virtue of this, members also feel free to tell anecdotes about their personal lives as antecedents of their entrepreneurial experiences. There are those who state, "My experience began many years ago in the fashion industry when I began to work with my parents" (Kyros):

> I wanted to spend this period of my life here in China [. . .]. it is challenging because you live in contact with a different culture that needs to be understood to be experienced properly (Nomix).

Therefore, it follows that the entrepreneurs and managers, participants in the *convivium*, can also discover themselves as individuals.

The basis of social trust in convivium
As the Director of Beta Consortium points out, "Continuing to narrate during the convivium, the participants realise that they are not so different". They all share *problems*. By observing Gamma Group members, we can see that they exchange thoughts like "We have many problems to solve; one is that of finding a stable local labour force in our company" (Alexis). "This is a problem for us as well, which leads us to consider whether to maintain headquarters in China" (Nomix). "Added to which there is the organisation of the turnover of our Italian managers and it is not easy to find people willing to move here" (Zanos). The shared problems may concern issues that are not so much professional as personal. Some participants assert the following, "Even if we work well in China, we are not able to communicate with the local population" (Zanos). "This low social integration becomes a problem for our children who are unable to have a viable social fabric" (Erastos). In addition to problems, as the President of the Alfa Association specifies, the members show they also have *common opinions*. Emblematic are some exchanges of jokes during the *convivium* between members of Gamma Group such as, "According to me, here [in China] we can't reach levels of productive excellence" (Erastos), "I agree. . .. high quality escapes because you can wind up finding suppliers that subcontract to another factory" (Kyros). Even common opinions can concern personal and not only professional issues. In this regard, the owner of Alexis says, "I think that the local population discounts a certain cultural rigidity that limits our social integration". As the owner of Petro adds, "In the face of such rigidity we could try to integrate by opening our convivial community to the local population". Moreover, during the *convivium*, it cannot be excluded that participants show that they also share *certain perspectives*. With reference to their future as entrepreneurs on the Chinese market, some members of the Gamma community make considerations on their social integration, e.g. "In my opinion, we must reinvent our careers in another country [. . .] the local government wants many foreign enterprises to disappear" (Petro). "I am convinced

that we should return to producing in our own country at competitive prices" (Alexis). It follows, as the President of Alpha pointed out in the interviews, that sharing broadens mutual knowledge, strengthens the community spirit and leads to putting oneself in the other's shoes to find solutions to other people's problems. With reference to the issue of supplier mobility, the owner of Alexis, for example, proposes "looking for new suppliers in other Asian countries that meet higher quality standards". The entrepreneur of Erastos instead, suggests "I would look for Italian suppliers in China who, like us, provide quality guarantees". With reference to the problem of social integration, the coordinator of the Gamma community points out, "If I needed to integrate, I would try to create a local social fabric through Chinese employees" and the owner of Soter adds, "I would do this without involving them in our convivial moments because from what I know the Chinese see such occasions as an invitation to do business". Providing suggestions by putting oneself in the other's shoes, that is, by expressing an empathic attitude, in addition to further expanding mutual knowledge, also fosters relationships based on social trust. As Beta Consortium's director says:

> What happens is that participants internalise social relations, identifying with other people and their problems [. . .], so they also get to know each other better and trust builds up between them.

Community social capital from convivium as a private asset

Social trust intensifies the exchange of ideas. "At the *convivium* because of the climate that is generated, we transfer ideas and mature new ones", says the owner of Alexis, adding "in doing so I have grown, I have evolved in my way of thinking". The effect of certain ideas produced has spread to the territory where the convivial community is located. As the President of Alfa states, "Thanks to our meetings, many things were born outside our Association as initiatives of contemporary art and the development of a new museum". However, in addition to nurturing ideas, social trust facilitates the mobilisation of information, in some cases represented by resources that serve in personal life. In this regard, the owner of Erastos says, "I didn't know which kindergarten in China to enrol my children in and a manager with whom I bonded during convivial meetings like this oriented me in the choice". Along the same lines, the owner of Petro explains how "I was wondering where to find some particular Italian products and I found an answer to my question at meetings like this". Other information that social trust mobilises is in the form of resources that are needed in professional life. One member recalls, "I was looking for a fair services supplier with a certain urgency and an exchange of information with other managers in the community enabled me to find an organiser" (Nomix). The convivial relationships, therefore, facilitate access to new partners with whom to develop business relationships. This implies that the members of the *convivium* play a bridging role between community and external actors by activating an information exchange mechanism. In this regard, one entrepreneur explains:

> After having created new commercial spaces in the company, I passed on the contact details of the suppliers I had employed to Alexis which needed to build new offices. In exchange, the owner of Alexis gave me information on access to local financing together with a series of details on financial assistance for specific local investments (Nomix).

Exchanges of information may continue even after the *convivium* has ended. As the director of Beta Consortium states, "We use our mailing list to continue spreading information and fostering collective participation, nurturing reciprocal confidence at the same time" (President of Alfa Association). Specifically, as the Gamma Group coordinator explains:

If someone needs an attendant or a local supplier, after the *convivium* we send a collective e-mail or a WhatsApp message and ask whether anyone has someone to propose in response to the request (Kyros).

The technology keeps the circulation of useful information alive amongst the members, but as the director of Beta Consortium points out:

Technology cannot replace the true conviviality in which we are together in the same place, listening to each other and thinking together because if on the one hand technology does not stop contact between us, on the other it empties relationships of human and creative content.

Even though convivial relationships can generate resources that pave the way for professional collaborations outside the community, as the owner of Soter explains, "They could lead to understanding how certain skills that members have could be integrated with those of other members to improve their business".

Community social capital from convivium as a collective asset
Social trust in convivial relationships mobilises a community social capital which, despite the intentions that the participants declare, is used as an individual asset: it fuels business relationships between community members and external actors. It is not used to develop a community business involving one or more members. In fact, as the owner of Alexis points out, "We are aware of having complementary resources and we trust each other, but we have not yet worked together". The Gamma Group's coordinator is of the idea that "Here people confront each other, some of them have been participating in our meetings for years, but they do not go beyond certain promises to each other". The justification for this behaviour, as the owner of Soter explains, maybe because "we do not have much time to develop business amongst us". Then, as he specifies, "Even if we did, I would be hesitant to work together because we know each other so well that I would be afraid of not being able to live up to" or, as the owner of Zanos says, "Because we know how the other thinks, we classify him as a person and then we fear that certain ways of being may affect doing business together". Social trust does not act as an engine of community resources nurturing business relationships within the community as it is weakened in its effects by a high level of mutual knowledge. The President of the Alfa Association observes how some people see in the external management of a community business a way to finalise a social capital from *convivium* to the development of business relationships involving the holders of such capital. In this regard, the Gamma Group's coordinator explains the following:

Entrepreneurs can exploit their reciprocal trust to foster business together, but they need someone to help make it possible [. . .] we have thought about collective business, namely, non-competitive business for exploiting our competences and abilities.

As the owner of Nomix adds, "This actor should act as a mediator, cancelling our mutual acquaintance, managing the business by dictating the tasks that each of us must perform". Nevertheless, the director of Beta Consortium states, "We as a Consortium were born on the wave of a collective spirit [. . .] but ultimately we share a joint promotion project rather than a business". Even though the community social capital from *convivium* is not successful in feeding a community business, the community membership is seen as a collective asset, which is useful for overcoming barriers to the development of business relationships outside the community. In this regard, members of the Gamma Group point out, "Until now we've been able to form a community that is able to put pressure on institutions such as local governments" (Kyros) and "All together we carry weight and some of our operational requests (i.e. building permits) that are useful for improving our local businesses may be
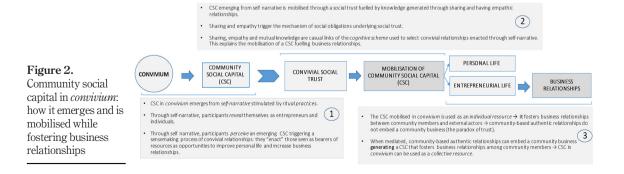
more easily accepted" (Petro). Along the same lines, as the Director of Beta Consortium claims:

> The membership made us more authoritative when we found ourselves interacting with regional and national institutions in an attempt to obtain legal authorisations which were bureaucratic barriers for setting up our Consortium.

As a result, convivial relations facilitate a collective negotiating power seen as a condition for improving one's own business.

Discussion
Figure 2 summarises the main issues emerging from our research as answers to our questions and discussed in this section.

Conviviality and the unfolding of community social capital
Our analysis highlights how convivial relationships feed a community;'s social capital through two main tools: ritual practices and self-narrative *(RQ1)*. The ritual practices (recording, experts' talks, dinner time) create a spiritual community and give rhythm to the convivial discussion by favouring self-narrative. The narration is triggered by the interventions of professional guests and can be stimulated by animators and by exploiting participation and engagement techniques. While taking part in the *convivium*, the participants talk about themselves as entrepreneurs and as individuals through their professional and personal stories. In doing so, they give a glimpse of the resources of which they can directly or indirectly become bearers. The sum of these resources forms a potential social capital. Our research shows how it derives from a *convivium* formula that is not only "cum-vivere" by sharing collective experiences (Williams *et al.*, 2015; Lewis, 1997) but also "cum-vivere" despite the differences (Wise and Velayutham, 2014): at the *convivium* they can meet people who have different roles and recognised relevance in society. Then, it is also a "cum-vivere" in an authentic manner (Illich, 1973): individuals participate in the *convivium* to renew themselves and discover something innovative by revealing themselves as they are. Through the self-narrative that develops around ritual practices, participants form the perception of social capital emerging from the convivial community. Even if they take part in the *convivium* without pursuing the goal of exploiting this capital, due to being entrepreneurs, "what they see in the world are those aspects that influence their projects" (Weick, 1995 p. 45). Almost unconsciously they are induced to make sense of convivial relationships based on their own entrepreneurial planning. Listening to the narrations of

Figure 2.
Community social capital in *convivium*: how it emerges and is mobilised while fostering business relationships

others, they build a representation of reality, "enacting" (Weick, 1979) certain portions of the *convivium* constituted by those convivial relationships that they recognise as bearers of resources useful not only for their personal but also their professional lives. With reference to the latter, social capital from *convivium* can serve to improve their entrepreneurial skills and identify opportunities to strengthen their business. This strengthening is guided by an interpretation of convivial relationships as resources that pass through the network picture (Ford *et al.*, 2002), that is, the personal mental map representing business activities also in terms of business relationships in which their own company is involved.

Mobilisation of community social capital: the convivial trust
Our research shows that community social capital emerging from self-narrative is mobilised through a social trust that is nurtured by the mutual knowledge generated by sharing and having empathic relationships (Figure 2). Both are the effect of active participation in the *convivium*. Sharing (problems, opinions and perspectives) allows individuals to discover what they have in common, and therefore what makes them similar. Having empathic relationships (De Waal, 2009) implies putting oneself in the shoes of others which becomes a means to make oneself better known and reveal one's personal identity. While Putnam (1993) points out how socialisation produces social trust in voluntary organisations, our study identifies the antecedents to mutual knowledge in sharing and empathy nurturing social trust as the effects of socialisation in a voluntary-based context such as the convivial one. They help trigger the mechanism of spontaneous social obligations (Coleman, 1988) underlying social trust. In other words, participants in the *convivium* find themselves exchanging resources without having planned them, i.e. without ever thinking of achieving them by temporarily having pleasant experiences together. The fact that convivial social trust mobilises resources from convivial relationships means that discovering that you have something similar by sharing and getting to know each other better through empathic relations leads to identifying relationships that are bearers of useful and accessible resources. From an "a posteriori" analysis of convivial relations, it emerges that mutual knowledge based on sharing and empathy is the foundation of the cognitive scheme used to make a *selection* of the environments (Weick, 1979), that is, of the convivial relationships previously enacted by participating in the self-narrative. Therefore, causal linkages between sharing, empathy and mutual knowledge describe patterns to be retained to explain the mobilisation *in convivium* of resources that foster economic behaviours. In fact, just as social trust (Uslaner, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999) mobilises a community social capital generating entrepreneurship (Roxas and Azmat, 2014; Kwon *et al.*, 2013), the convivial social trust mobilises a community social capital which, in addition to contributing to personal life (social integration, everyday life issues), also influences business activities by facilitating the development of business relationships *(RQ2)*. Therefore, just as economic behaviours are embedded in community-based social relations, business relationships can also be embedded in the same social relations if mediated by a social trust having the characteristics of convivial trust. In the cases investigated, the community social capital interfacing with business relationships consists of information regarding new suppliers as potential business partners. The information represents the same resource of the community social capital which social trust mobilises and that fuels entrepreneurship (Kwon *et al.*, 2013). Another resource from convivial social capital interfacing with business relationships is membership. This can be used to overcome institutional barriers that act as a brake to the progress of business relationships.

Business relationships and convivial relations

As Guercini and Ranfagni (2016) explain, convivial relationships are authentic relations that can embed business relationships. It follows that authenticity and business can both coexist in *convivium* and contrary to what Illich (1973) argues, the expressive freedom of convivial communities can exist together with the productive logic of capitalist communities. However, community social capital mobilised by social trust in the authentic relationships of *convivium* is not used as a collective asset but instead, as a private asset: both the information exchanged and membership services to develop business relationships not so much amongst members of the convivial community as between the latter and external actors *(RQ3)*. This individual use of community social capital is ascribable to a paradox brought to light by our research, namely, the social trust paradox: the more we know each other as we are, the more we trust each other and the less we do business together. This is a structural paradox related to authentic relationships as community-based relations that develop in convivial contexts. Authenticity produces the same effect which, according to Dana (2007), cultural capital rooted in certain communities generates on the development of community entrepreneurship: just as this limits such development, authenticity in community-based social relationships hinders the use of community social capital in creating a collective business. Unlike a community cultural capital, however, authentic relationships do not restrict the use of community social capital as a private asset. Because of social trust, the social capital from *convivium* does not remain immobile but can act as a bridge between the community and the market in developing business relationships. On the other hand, our research shows that authentic relationships as community-based relations could also embed economic behaviour within the community *(RQ3)*. Competences, skills and social relationships of the convivial community's members could be used to create business relationships amongst community actors. This requires the overcoming of the social trust paradox through the involvement of an external actor capable of exploiting the mutual knowledge, and therefore, the social trust aimed at organising a community business. He could act as a mediator of authentic *convivium* relationships, emptying these relationships of their cognitive content and mediating them to fit the activities that each actor is called on to carry out depending on the community business. When mediated, convivial relationships foster community business relationships. In our opinion, in such mediation lies the compromise between community-based authentic relations and collective businesses destined to develop outside the community (Figure 2).

Managerial implications and conclusions

Investigating conviviality can give rise to new theoretical and practical perspectives for understanding and supporting entrepreneurship more effectively.

Participating in a *convivium* means to experience a moment of escape for entrepreneurs, in which members also encounter unfamiliar people, talk to them, develop ideas and strengthen their entrepreneurial sensitivity. By exploiting the possibility of telling each other about themselves, they help produce a community social capital and develop a reciprocal perception of this capital. In their role as entrepreneurs, members almost unconsciously interpret convivial relationships according to their entrepreneurial planning, in this way taking into account their representation of the business network, in other words, goal-oriented connected business relationships. They animate self-narrative which remains the protagonist of the *convivium*. The effect produces in terms of a community capital embedding business relationships depends on how the ritual practices succeed in giving it rhythm while at the same time creating a spiritual community. In fact, what takes place because of a rich self-narrative is the sharing of issues together with the development of

empathic relationships. Both act as the basis for generating convivial social trust, thereby creating the conditions for mobilising resources. Creating convivial trust through mutual knowledge resulting from sharing and empathy can be interpreted as a convivial heuristic rule for accessing resources that have an impact on both social and professional life.

By participating in the *convivium*, the main advantage that entrepreneurs can obtain is to draw on resources outside the community in an almost unexpected way. In particular, they can access information for finding new partners with whom to develop business relationships and use membership as a force to exert negotiating power. However, they cannot achieve anything else. The authentic relationships generated by convivial contexts limit the possibility of giving life to a community business by involving members of the *convivium* unless these relationships are mediated by a third party. The benefits that the *convivium* can produce in terms of accessing resources, however, require as a basic assumption, active participation: participants must be motivated, have an attitude oriented towards discovery and be able to immerse themselves in socialising activities. The passive attitude of merely listening does not provide any rewards in terms of achieving benefits. We wonder whether these would be greater if the convivial relationships were less authentic, and therefore not as rich in terms of individual knowledge content. Greater benefits could be achieved by reducing the strength of ritual practices in terms of individual engagement. In reality, this solution would not be effective given the authentic nature of convivial relationships and if it were, there would be the risk of not mobilizing resources due to a reduction in mutual knowledge fuelling social convivial trust. We believe that instead of pursuing intermediation of convivial relationships, another valid alternative could be to make authentic knowledge not so much a limit as an opportunity for creating collective businesses by taking advantage of the main resource that conviviality can generate, namely, dialogue. As Yankelovich (2001) explains, if well managed and nurtured over time, dialogue can produce "results [that] can be extraordinary: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mutual understanding achieved, vision shaped and grounded in shared purpose" (p. 16). Digital tools can offer virtual social spaces thanks to which it is possible to continue the dialogue also in a post-*convivium* phase.

It is inevitable, however, those business relationships – whether internal or external to the community – originating from resources generated by convivial relations, give rise to business networking, i.e. to attempts to change the process of interaction or the structure of relationships in which their related company is directly or indirectly involved (Ford and Mouzas, 2013). The substance of a relationship is expressed in terms of activities, resources and actors involved in the relationship. New business relationships characterised by activity interdependence, resource heterogeneity and actor jointness, can interfere with existing relationships (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). A major impact of conviviality is that of giving rise to changes in the relationship processes by contributing to modifying the morphology of the business network in which the company is involved. It is as if its ecosystem changes, also with the possibility of evolving.

Finally, we would like to point out that our study shows how, in theoretical terms, studies on business relationships embeddedness, community social capital and entrepreneurship can find intersecting elements in conviviality. The intersection lies in the social trust due to the fact that:

- just as the social trust from community social capital fuels entrepreneurship, likewise convivial social trust fuels business relationships from community social capital;
- just as there are barriers that limit the use of a community social capital for entrepreneurial activities despite the social trust, there are also barriers that can restrict the use of a community social capital, not so much as private resources (to

foster business relationships) as collective resources (to foster business relationships outside the community) despite the convivial trust.

We are aware that this study has its limitations. One is that of having concentrated on very few case studies even if emblematic. Moreover, we have examined conviviality experienced around a traditional dinner party; our understanding of conviviality could certainly benefit from broadening the study to other convivial events and other social practices. Our main aims are two-fold, that is, to study other cases of conviviality in business communities and to explore the functioning of other social practices in fostering embeddedness. Our upcoming research is planned along these rough lines as we are convinced that the topic of conviviality will become important in the future. It has recently been taking on new forms: the contingent situation of the Covid-19 virus has given rise to living a virtual conviviality more than a real one. It would be interesting to understand how such conviviality animates a community's social capital, what its connectedness is and how it impacts economic behaviours. Its understanding as a managerial tool could help find answers to the many aspects of the crisis in terms of loss of identity and unifying values, which are afflicting companies now more than in the past (Flint and Robinson, 2008). To do so, however, it is necessary to understand how conviviality can effectively become a strategic resource for those business communities which, by supporting it, act as its main promoters. This study is currently an interesting challenge for many academic researchers engaged in entrepreneurship studies.

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