

# TURNING CULTURE INTO BUSINESS: RESOURCE COMBINATION IN CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURIAL VENTURES

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Work in Progress Paper

## ABSTRACT

Scholars interested in understanding economic development and growth have recently turned their attention to cultural sectors as viable contexts for new business formation and development. Thus far existing research has been fragmented and the main processes are under-explained. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this emerging field of research through an empirical and conceptual exploration of the evolving process of resource combination within cultural entrepreneurial initiatives. To this end, the paper i) adopts the IMP approach and the ARA model as the guiding conceptual frameworks to investigate the development process of cultural entrepreneurial start-up firms; ii) examines and discusses a single longitudinal case study of a novel venture - Rockin'1000, better known as 'The Greatest Rock-Band On Earth' - in the field of live events for music. At the resources layer, the case clearly shows that Rockin'1000 new business formation is a matter of resources combining through various more or less established networks and relationships. In particular, passion emerges as the key resource able to mobilize, modify, activate, using, other resources - both tangible and intangible - as well as to interact with the surrounding network of activities and resources.

Key-words: Start-up, Cultural sector, Business relationships, Resources

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars interested in understanding economic development and growth have recently turned their attention to cultural sectors as viable contexts for new business formation and development. Thus far existing research has highlighted the presence of a group of endemic 'unconventional' features affecting new business formation and development in cultural contexts and sectors, that have until recently been documented in a fragmented way and under-explained (Pratt, 2011): mix of financial/economic and art/culture-related goals (Eikhof and Haunshild, 2006); competences in the artistic/creative field (Klamer, 2011) combined with personal flexibility (Ellmeier, 2003) and "do-it-yourself" attitude (Scott, 2012), limited financial and organizational resources (Ellmeier, 2003), dense social networks (Scott, 2012). Therefore the unusual organisational forms of cultural businesses and institutions, the project-based nature of activities and the fast-changing and agile nature of contextual networks are all variables influencing the way culture-based businesses form and develop (Flew and Cunningham, 2010; Hartley et al., 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this emerging field of research through an in-depth empirical and conceptual exploration of the evolving process of resource combination within cultural entrepreneurial initiatives. In particular, we aim to examine more in-depth the formation process of the new entrepreneurial venture, placing emphasis on resource access and development activities implemented within and outside the original community/entrepreneurial team, thus involving a broader network of business and institutional actors. Therefore the research question to be addressed is the following: how are resources accessed, combined and developed in the evolution of cultural entrepreneurial ventures?

To this end, the paper adopts the IMP approach (Håkansson et al., 2009; Håkansson and Snehota, 2017) as the guiding conceptual framework to investigate the development process of cultural entrepreneurial start-up firms. The IMP approach is considered a useful tool in the light of its emphasis on resource access, combination and development and on relationships and networks, which are relevant in the new venture creation process (Snehota, 2011; Ciabuschi et al., 2012; Aaboen et al., 2017; Baraldi et al., 2018), whose research is called upon in the entrepreneurship field (Shepherd, 2015).

In order to pursue this goal this paper examines and discusses a single longitudinal case study of a novel venture - Rockin'1000, better known as 'The Greatest Rock-Band On Earth' - in the field of live events for music, which has been established at first mainly as a cultural event with the aim of being self-consumed, and then progressively is transformed in a more complex entrepreneurial initiative with a stronger business orientation, various types of resources, different role and kind of involvement of the related community.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

### CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The cultural industry has been increasingly under observation in both the economics and management disciplines (Caves, 2000; Peltoniemi, 2015). Cultural goods "are experiential, meaning that they are judged on their ability to offer fun, enjoyment and pleasure, and, prior to consumption, consumers cannot know whether the goods will succeed in delivering these" (Peltoniemi, 2015: 42). The realization of cultural activities, product and services are perceived as strongly based on creative effort, which characterizes the features of "cultural" workers (Florida, 2002) and the organization and management of cultural projects (Peltoniemi, 2015).

The emerging literature on cultural entrepreneurship highlights many specific features of the entrepreneurial figure, which show relevant differences when compared to traditional views of entrepreneurship developed in the economics and management fields. The first aspect is related to the entrepreneurial motivation. Various contributions highlight that cultural entrepreneurs are shaped by a complex - and often at odds (Eikhof and Haunshild, 2006) - the mix of economic and

culture-related goals, where the balance is often oriented towards the latter. Cultural entrepreneurs "are geared to toward the realization of cultural values" (Klamer, 2011: 154), and therefore the market is a tool to achieve that goal. Other authors place emphasis on the double identity of the cultural entrepreneur, linked to the artistic and economic dimensions: "their identity as an artist, which provides them with work motivation and creative impetus, and their identity as a 'small firm' ... which enables them to make a living out of an artist" (Eikhof and Haunshild, 2006: 234). In this line of reasoning some authors emphasize the type of competences held by the cultural entrepreneur. According to Van Der Ploeg he/she is able to develop on the one hand "knowledge and sensitivity towards the arts and creative processes", on the other hand "knowledge and comprehension of the potential public and marketing techniques" (Klamer, 2011: 146). Klamer (2011:154) states that the main capacity is represented by the ability of persuasion, which is directed toward partners and collaborators - to convince them to join or support the entrepreneurial project - and towards potential "consumers": "the arts require conversation, informal exchanges in order to be shared. Transactions in the marketplace are important but subordinate to the informal interaction in the social sphere". Another relevant feature is the articulated and flexible personality. According to Ellmeier (2003: 26) cultural entrepreneurs are "on average ... multi-skilled, flexible person, psychologically resilient, independent, single ... who jumps to whatever opportunity there is to be had in the field of art, music or the media". Cultural entrepreneurs often have multiple jobs, combining traditional jobs - which guarantee a stable income (Eikhof and Haunshild, 2006) - with cultural work and projects.

Cultural entrepreneurship is often characterized by limited financial and organizational resources (Ellmeier, 2003). Cultural entrepreneurs - as said above - have a strong "independent" and "do-it-yourself" attitude (Scott, 2012) while organizing their activities leading to the realization of a cultural output. Resources are mobilized in a different way when compared to the typical market exchange. Cultural entrepreneurs activate their dense social networks of artists, technicians, designers placing emphasis on friendship, common values and interest and building an exchange system of "favors", where each individual is a "subject of value" and provides over time the resource basis for undertaking temporary projects and initiatives (Scott, 2012). Often the involvement in projects leads to the development of "semi-permanent groups", which guarantee to artists "a source of competitive advantage and collaboration opportunities" (Peltoniemi, 2015). Art-related communities might be shaped by specific obligations, principles and values, which might decrease the opportunities of personal benefits - and might varying degrees of opening and closure to new members. Alternative sources of resources might be represented by family linkages, personal savings (Scott, 2012) or by established relationships with government institutions (Klamer, 2011).

#### START-UP AND RESOURCES IN THE IMP PERSPECTIVE

The IMP approach points out the relevance of interaction in market exchanges (Ford and Håkansson, 2006; Håkansson et al., 2009). A central component of the IMP approach is the actors-activities-resources (ARA) model, which allows for exploring the main elements of interaction processes among firms within business networks. All companies undertake activities which are embedded in relationships connecting with other actors - firms, institutions - which might control valuable resources for business purposes. Resources are heterogeneous and mutually dependent (Håkansson, 1987) and they change and develop their characteristics over time, leading to possible frictions with other connected resources embedded within a company, in interaction with other actors, in a larger resource constellation across the business network (Håkansson et al., 2009).

The IMP stream of studies has been over time increasingly concerned with entrepreneurship and small business development (Snehota, 2011; Ciabuschi et al., 2012; La Rocca et al., 2013; Aaboen et al., 2017). These contributions adopt a processual perspective to examine the creation and further development of new firms. The role of networks and relationships and resource access and combination emerge as crucial research topics.

In particular, Ciabuschi (et al., 2012) focus on the "assembly" of resources within new businesses. Start-up companies might detain a limited amount of required resources and thus have a strong propensity to activate new and old business relationships to gain access to them. However, this effort could be very complex and difficult and thus follow a non-linear process (La Rocca et al., 2013). Initial relationships could provide key resources to consolidate both the business idea and the emerging organisational configuration of the new venture. Therefore "this perspective makes the formation of the new business appear as a collective rather than an individual act" (Ciabuschi et al., 2012: 228).

Within the IMP stream only a few studies have attempted to investigate the cultural sector. Leek and Canning (2011) study the passion-based network around a Music Festival and highlight the role of personal networking activities in facilitating resource access through "in-kind exchange" rather than financial exchange.

Thus we argue that the IMP approach and specifically the ARA model is useful to shed new light on the process of resource access and combination within cultural entrepreneurial ventures, constantly facing lack of resources (Scott, 2012) and thus dealing with an intense networking process attempting to overcome it (Klamer, 2011) within and outside the community of passionate peers. The ARA model allows for pointing out the variety of actors involved, the combination of activities within the entrepreneurial process and the nature of key resources.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper builds on a qualitative research method and uses a longitudinal case study (Easton, 2010) to explore the development process of a new entrepreneurial venture in cultural and creative sectors. The case study method is advocated for capturing the nature of the context embedding entrepreneur's initial actions and relationships (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), while the longitudinal study enables the exploration of the process through which these initial relationships have turned into a complex set of business relationships. The case study analysis concerns Rockin'1000, which is a venture based in Italy and concerned with the organisation of music live events which have generated much interest and attention among the major media of the world. Rockin'1000 has officially become a start-up in 2015 after the diffusion of a video from the first live event, which became viral on 'YouTube' and registered 42 millions of contacts in a few weeks.

The reason for selecting Rockin'1000 as the case study has been based on the following criteria: i) the great success of its music events; ii) the transformation of a "passion-related" idea into a business venture; ii) the interesting mix of social/community and business networks activated for accessing valuable resources.

With regard to data collection we combined primary and secondary data. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 of the 6 members of the Rockin'1000's board: Fabio (General manager), Claudia (Executive Producer), Anita (Artistic Director Special Events), Martina (Communication Manager), and Maria Grazia (Head of Public Relation and Press Office). Only 'Cisko' - the Sound Department Manager - has not been directly interviewed. All conversations have been recorded, transcribed, and analysed through the lens of the IMP ARA model for network analysis (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). This framework helped in guiding the investigators in the coding process, based on a continuous comparison between data and concepts (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We have also built on a large selection of online articles, video interviews, and special reports concerning the case (Borghini et al., 2010).

## ROCKIN'1000 CASE

This section analyzes the conception, launch, and evolution of Rockin'1000 - The Biggest Rock Band on Earth - a popular music live event taking place annually in Italy. Rockin'1000 consists of a band of a thousand musicians performing together masterpieces of rock music. The first live event was launched in Cesena - a small city in the Emilia Romagna region in Italy - in July 2015, while

the last edition has been held in July 2017 in Val Veny (Courmayeur) in the Italian Alps. In the following subsections the evolution of Rockin'1000, and its related processes of formation and resource development will be described in detail.

#### FROM THE FIRST IDEA TO THE LAUNCH OF THE START-UP

Fabio is an experienced marine biologist and data analyst working for the Italian National Research Council (CNR) in Bologna. In his private life, Fabio is a music lover and an avid concert-goer. Because of his passion, in 2014 Fabio starts dreaming about the idea of inviting The Foo Fighters to play in Cesena, the small town where he lives. However, 'Foo Fighters' is one of the most popular rock bands in the world; this means that organising a 'Foo Fighters' concert consists of an incredibly expensive and complex initiative, that goes well beyond Fabio's means and competences. Furthermore, Cesena is a small town situated in the middle of central Italy and is a place not equipped at all to host such a type of big event. While dealing with these obstacles, Fabio makes up his mind that to achieve his goal he has to create an extraordinary 'call for' the band: *"something never seen before in music community, something ambitious and original, just like my idea was"* (Fabio). So, he thought of putting together one thousand musicians playing "Learn to Fly" and then inviting the band to come to Cesena and give a show - "I believe that one thousand voices can be certainly heard louder and stronger than only one" (Fabio). He plans to release a video of the performance on 'YouTube' and deliver the message directly to Foo Fighters.

In a matter of weeks, the idea takes shape and Rockin'1000 can start officially as a project in Summer 2014. At first, Fabio starts contacting his network of friends in order to find technical and knowledge support to make a preliminary assessment of the feasibility of his idea. Fabio is thus joined by Claudia, an old school friend and an experienced project manager in the field of live show events working for companies in Milan (Italy), and 'Cisko' a professional sound technician and entrepreneur with long-lasting experience in the field of live music business. Both Claudia and Cisko join the project and accept to collaborate on a voluntary basis with Fabio. Given their positive response, Fabio decides to go ahead with his plan. The first move is to enlarge the leading team through seeking passionate and committed friends who can contribute to the project. The entire team-building process takes almost 5 months, with the involvement of Anita (art-director and video-maker), Mariagrazia (head of public relations and press office), Martina (communication manager) and Marta (sponsorships manager).

In this period, three critical paths of resources development arise clearly. Firstly, fundraising activities develop to secure the financial resources needed to put in place the necessary technical structure to produce the live event. A crowdfunding campaign is launched in Summer 2014 on 'Idea-Ginger' - a crowdfunding platform specialised in developing local projects; also a number of agreements with sponsors and media partners are stipulated to complement the social campaign. Concurrently, a more integrated approach to project communication is implemented to support the fundraising activities and promote the project and the event. This effort leads to the development a unified and original brand design, a series of video spots, interviews, and social profiles on Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and Twitter.

These developments are relevant as the social media activities of Rockin'1000 are also crucial to recruit the 'thousand' musicians. The second line of development, in fact, relates to activities concerned with selecting and recruiting 'the thousand' musicians. In this process, the group of music 'gurus' is of particular importance. The 'gurus' are experienced music teachers, or professionals, designated to scrutinize, select, coordinate, and control the musicians. The "thousands" are divided into different groups by instrument and skills. Each candidate applies by submitting an introductory video showing its musical skills. The gurus select musicians according to their skill level. This procedure allows the team, and the music gurus, to better coordinate and organise the thousand, and control the quality of the musical performance which depends on the skill level of the single musician.

The third line of resource development involves essential organisational, logistical, and managerial aspects concerning the functioning of such a complex live event: bringing together one thousand musicians, coordinating them by making them practicing the song together, making them playing in time, in tune, and with a good tone, running the live performance, and recording it, is a great technical, organisational, as well as managerial challenge in live music events history. However, all these aspects have notably been covered through the work of passionate volunteers - both professionals and amateur enthusiasts - all mobilised from the network of personal contacts of the team. Each team member has been involved in recruiting personally new collaborators according to the needed competencies and the specific project area to develop: technicians, sound engineers, photographers and video-makers have all been mobilised on a voluntary base.

The Rockin'1000 event is finally launched in Cesena in July 2015. The official video is diffused in the web collecting millions of visualizations: the entire number of single contacts is about 43 million to date. Most importantly Foo Fighters responds to the Rockin'1000's 'call for concert', and in November 2015 they held a memorable show in Cesena.

This success is as enormous as unexpected. Many requests, offers, novel opportunities, and projects are proposed from potential partners around the world. The nature of the initiative start to change as the team realizes that the project is transforming itself into something else of potential commercial value. Furthermore, the implementation of the project has encouraged the formation of a close community of passionate musicians and collaborators excited by the event. Musicians contribute to the project accepting sharing personal resources and efforts, even financing the crowdfunding campaign to get the project done. Similarly, many professionals, freelancers, and small suppliers provide resources and services sustaining or reducing costs. All these actors link to Rockin'1000 through building direct and close relationships with the team or other close collaborators, connecting with groups in specific project areas, and taking an active part to the creation of an overall sense of community. For these reasons, Rockin'1000 relies today on a community of enthusiast musicians, fans, and passionate collaborators, whose supportive action is crucial for developing new related initiatives.

Therefore, Claudia, Martina, Maria Grazia, Anita, Cisco, and Fabio - the 'hard-core' group of the organisation - pushed by both the enthusiasm of musicians and collaborators, which are emerging into a close and supportive community, and the successful mobilisation of such a complex set of resources, decide to turn Rockin'1000 into a registered company. Thus, in 2016 the Rockin'1000 company is officially established by the initial group of 6 friends which has been involved from the beginning and has spent more resources and passion in the first initiative.

#### ROCKIN'1000: 'THAT'S LIVE' AND 'SUMMER CAMP'

The goal of the new venture is to develop the Rockin'1000 project further starting expanding the role of the community while maintaining the freedom to explore, innovate and take on the new opportunities: "we wanted to evolve from last year's video and prove [to] everybody that Rockin'1000 hasn't just been a call to the Foo Fighters" (Fabio).

In this phase, the content of the project is rethought and designed differently as novel ideas emerge according to this changed scenario. Thus, in the attempt to qualify Rockin'1000 more as a 'true' rock band than just as a viral phenomenon on a social media, the team realizes that it is the time to challenge the 'Thousand' to perform a real live concert, in front of a real public. The main intention is to transport the magic of the 2015 video to a live audience: "we realised many people could see that video online, but just a bunch could see the musicians performing live, so we decided to focus on this concept of a live show" (Fabio).

The team calls the show "That's live" and plans to realize it in July 2016. The team re-activates a significant part of previous relationships managing in a more dynamic as well as structured manner the surrounding community. Thanks to its precedent experience, the team has developed a strong ability to involve, mobilise, and coordinate the community; also the team starts working in a more

structured manner in terms of roles and assignments, and increases the level of personal involvement as the venture begins to turn into a more business-oriented project.

On the 24th of July 2016, Rockin'1000 performs a complete concert with songs throughout the history of rock in the stadium of Cesena in front of thousands of people: "There was a team of something like 200 volunteers to take care of all these guys and try to help them with their needs. It's been massive work; it involved something like 500 people. Thirty of them worked intensively throughout one entire year." (Fabio). Furthermore, an album of the concert is published for Sony music.

The live music show seems to be the suitable format to develop further the Rockin'1000 project at this early stage. One year after, in fact, in 28th and 29th of July 2017, the third Rockin'1000 event is launched: a live show called "Summer Camp" in Val Veny (Courmayeur, Italian Alps). The event consists of a group of more or less 1200 musicians, some of which coming from all over the world, performing together in the open air at the foot of 'Monte Bianco' for over 3000 people. What is distinctive in the "Summer Camp" event is the concert location. The challenge is to create an extraordinary event, within an extraordinary place. The 'Val Veny' location has been selected in order to add a sense of uniqueness to the Rockin'1000 experience, making the occasion even more memorable for all people taking part to the event. In the future Rockin'1000 team is thinking of developing a popular form of musical entertainment by offering a successful 'traveling format' to be reproduced all around the world. The aim is to generate a large following of passionate musicians from any place and engage them into an interactive and close Rockin'1000 community world.

## PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINAL REMARKS

This paper analyses the longitudinal case study of a cultural entrepreneurial venture - Rockin'1000 - from the perspective of its social and business network early formation and development and the related resource combination processes, using as conceptual lenses the ARA framework. We argue that the IMP approach provides useful insights to better understand cultural entrepreneurship processes, and also that new cultural ventures - and their unconventional features - help in further expanding the reach of the IMP approach and in developing its key concepts.

With regard to the usefulness of the IMP approach for understanding cultural entrepreneurship, the ARA model allows for gaining a more structured view taking into account the complexity of this phenomenon.

Taking the actor layer, the case shows how both at the individual level and at the "community" level the initiative took off thanks to a complex process of actors' interaction. Starting from Fabio and his direct contact with two key friends the actor network very soon enlarged up to six members, currently forming the entrepreneurial team/owners (Klamer, 2011). Around the entrepreneurial team and its network of relationships the group of music 'gurus' has been built and after that a larger collaborators and supporters group has been formed. Finally, the thousand musicians, that probably never met each other before the performances, represent the whole community around the "seminal" community.

Taking the activities perspective Rockin'1000 shed light over the importance of activities interaction in a processual perspective. The activities that were simpler at the beginning due to the clearer objective of the first initiative (the video production), become more complex and interdependent in the following phases of the entrepreneurial venture. After the launch of the video it became clear that a different organization to manage increasing complex activities is needed and the Rockin'1000 start-up has been founded. Crowdfunding activities, sponsorship, sound service outsourcing, logistics, started to be managed in a more structured way with clearer responsibilities within the entrepreneurial team and with a greater organizational effort within the collaborators/supporters group even in a flexible manner (Ellmeier, 2003).

Finally, at the resources layer, the case clearly shows that Rockin'1000 new business formation is a matter of resources combining through various more or less established networks and relationships. In particular, passion emerges as the key resource to mobilize, modify, activate, use other resources

(both tangible and intangible), as well as to interact with the surrounding network of activities and resources (Scott, 2012). The case demonstrates how passion can be actually addressed in different and interrelated manners in the Rockin'1000 venture development: passion for music first, but also passion for achievement, passion for challenges, entrepreneurial passion. Musicians take actively part to the crowdfunding activities; passionate music gurus take part also to the selection activities of the thousand as well as in the communication activities; Fabio and the team are progressively involved in "typical" business activities that are very distant from those they are used to carry on, even in cultural/event-related jobs of some of them (Eikhof and Haunshild, 2006). Thus passion emerges as a key resource that permeates the successful path of Rockin'1000 business development (Leek and Canning, 2011).

With regard to the relevance of cultural entrepreneurship for the IMP framework, the paper provides a twofold contribution to the IMP perspective.

Firstly, it enhances the understanding of the phenomenon of new ventures and start-up development, that is receiving increasing attention in the IMP (Aaboen et al., 2017; Baraldi et al., 2018), by exploring the case of cultural entrepreneurship (Scott, 2012). The cultural field can provide new insights about the many ways new ideas, resources, and processes comes to be mobilised to form a novel and successful start-up. In particular, we argue this entrepreneurial area provides opportunities to explore the starting up of a new business in the particular context of community-based networks and relationships, whose unusual nature and dynamics have been scarcely investigated to date. Generally, we aim gain a better understanding of the 'unconventional' functioning and features (Cova and Guercini, 2016) of this initial type of relationships and on the relevant differences they show when compared to the traditional contexts of entrepreneurship that have been investigated thus far, even in IMP-based research with a few exceptions (Leek and Canning, 2011).

Secondly, the paper contributes to shed a new light on the resource layer - that is a central issue in the IMP thought (Baraldi et al., 2012) - by taking into account passion as a "key resource". Passion is useful here to understand the nature and extent of networks and relationships intervening in the early process of development of a new venture in cultural sectors. Passion could be conceived as a "relational resource" impacting relationships not only emphasising trust and commitment among actors, but also providing shared motivations and a sense of community within personal and business networks. Passion encourages individuals to get involved in projects that can have a positive impact on their life and the community as a whole. In this way, actors display a strong propensity to share resources and efforts in the name of a communal feeling (their passion for something) which turns into the will to contribute mainly on a voluntary basis.

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