Fandom, brandom and the limits of participatory culture

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Abstract
This article approaches sports team supporters from two lenses: (1) that of branding, which defines supporters as loyal customers and potential commodities; (2) that of fandom, which understands supporters as agentive meaning-producers who use fandom for their own uses. This juxtaposition reveals how fans’ sense of symbolic ownership is both impelled and disavowed. I use the term ‘brandom’ to refer to brand-controlled ‘fan’ communities that lack real autonomy. The case study of the Lazio Irriducibili ‘ultràs’ fan club in Rome Italy, demonstrates the potential of organized fans to create and promote branded commodities and, furthermore, it shows the potential of organized fans to threaten the symbolic and financial legitimacy of sports team/brand ownership, and the typical relationship that exists between fans (consumers) and teams (brands).

Keywords
branding, fan culture, football, Italy

In the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the north end of Rome’s Olympic stadium was home to one of soccer’s most exuberant and notorious group of supporters. Devotees of Rome’s S.S. Lazio gathered at their end of the stadium to cheer, socialize, raise banners, sing choruses, insult opposing players, orchestrate magnificent displays and occasionally disrupt the soccer match (Guschwan, 2007). They were active participants in the soccer spectacle. Lazio fans were led by the Irriducibili (the hard core or indomitables), an organized ultrà group composed primarily of ardent young men who supported the team and socialized inside and away from the stadium. In 2005, the Irriducibili initiated protests against the owner of the team, Claudio Lotito. They organized a campaign against him including protest marches and a fan ‘strike’. They railed against Lotito in newsletters, videos

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and on the radio. The Irriducibili envisioned an identity for themselves as resistance fighters pitted against the powerful and corrupt, Lotito. From an academic perspective of fandom, the Irriducibili were a model of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 1992). Through their activity and organization, they threatened the power of Lazio’s owner. The Irriducibili were, however, far from anti-capitalist revolution- ary Marxists. They implicated themselves within the lucrative business of top-level soccer. Their attempted revolt exposed fissures in the conduct of sports teams as businesses that rely on emotionally invested fans. To understand sport teams as businesses that capitalize on deeply felt identities, I describe pro-sports teams as brands. Drawing from Holt’s concept of iconic brands (2004), I describe the characteristics that make sports teams particularly powerful brands. The sports team brand is the construct used to negotiate, and potentially conceal, the contemporaneous incongruities of soccer as (private) big business and soccer as (public) cultural phenomenon.

While there may be nothing new in suggesting that commodity producers appropriate the labor of trendsetting consumers, new social media has changed the speed and level of interaction between producers and consumers. Social media has enabled fans/consumers to easily congregate online, but it has also created an opportunity for marketers to exploit the labor of these fans/consumers and the communities that they have constructed. Through ‘pass along’ and ‘viral marketing’, campaigns, marketers encourage their customers to act as co-marketers and salespeople. Muniz and O’Guinn describe ‘brand communities’ (2001) as spaces where brand loyalists can celebrate, critique and share their passion for particular consumer goods. Though ‘brand communities’ may serve the interests of their members, they have also been identified as ‘prosperous and beneficial’ (Smack, 2011), sites of actual and potential unpaid branding labor. This articles distinguishes between fandom, which offers agency and autonomy from a corporately controlled aggregation of people that I call brandom. In the case of the soccer fans described below, I attempt to explain their radical actions in terms of the tensions that exist between conceptions of branding and conceptions of fandom.

History of ultràs

Ultràs are organized soccer fan groups known for passionate, well-organized and occasionally militant support of their team. At the stadium, they defend their ‘turf’ against ultràs of the opposing team. They create much of the atmosphere at soccer games through their constant singing and shouting and through massive coordinated displays that may cover an entire end of the stadium. Ultràs travel to the most remote away matches as a sign of their devotion. For the ultrà, one of the goals of going on these trips has been to represent and defend the honor of their team.

Many of these early ultràs groups received direct support from the team, but, as Bromberger notes, ultràs’ relationship to the team is marked by both the ambiguous ‘assertion of autonomy and the thirst for recognition’ (Bromberger, 1999: 185).
Away from the stadium, ultras groups meet during the week to socialize, raise money, arrange travel to away games, and plan the aforementioned demonstrations and songs (Testa, 2009). The term, ultras, first used by soccer fans in Italy in the 1960s (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998), was borrowed from radical leftist political groups of late 1960s, though as Podaliri and Balestri state, ultras groups have been recruiting grounds for the entire spectrum of political movements. Tensions between left-wing ultras and right-wing ultras and waves of politicization and de-politicization (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998: 95; Roversi, 2008) have become recurring themes of ultras culture.

Ultras have become infamous in Italy and abroad for episodes of violence. In the 1970s, violent clashes between opposing ultras groups were quite common. In the 1980s and into the first decade of the 2000s, clashes between opposing groups in the immediate vicinity of the stadium became less frequent as specially aimed laws and police crackdowns secured a tenuous peace. Instead, ultras would organize clashes away from the stadium or impromptu violent encounters would occur on the tollways leading to and from the stadium. In recent times, ultras have united, to a degree, in opposition to their common enemies: the police and any other form official authority (Guschwan, 2007; Testa, 2009).

The police presence inside and outside Italian soccer stadiums is highly visible and intimidating. At some matches, hundreds of police in riot-gear helmets, shields and body armor wield batons and line the streets while dozens of armored police vehicles surround the stadium. New laws require individuals to provide official identification when they purchase a ticket and ‘fan’ identification cards were planned to be implemented in 2010 (Osservatorio, 2012). Such measures are designed to help secure the stadium, but these measures also discourage people from attending the game, and according to ultras groups, impinge upon their civil rights.

**Sports teams as brands**

While ultras see the stadium as a refuge from outside life (Testa and Armstrong, 2010), sport is always embedded in social, commercial and legal aspects of industrialized societies as an ‘intrusive and influential cultural practice’ (Andrews, 2001: 132), or ‘an ideological and cultural force’ (Miller et al., 2001: 43). Correspondingly, brands are pervasive in life under modern capitalism (Klein, 2000). Pro-sports teams meld these powerful social forces. Crawford applies the term ‘theming’ to the ways that sport venues sell ‘an image and experience’ (2004: 87) to their consumers; I prefer branding as a broader concept that fuses the entire identity of a team. Though pro-sports teams are commonly understood to be brands (Deloitte, 2010; Ozanian and Schwartz, 2007), this article specifies the characteristics that make sports teams unique and potentially powerful brands. Furthermore, understanding the team as brand gives insight into how teams cultivate and manage the strong feelings of attachment that many consumers have.
Branding creates an identity for a product and differentiates the product from competitors. Branding used to be understood as primarily a top-down process initiated by marketers who use mass-mediated advertising to persuade consumers to believe in a product’s (superior) quality, value, desirability, etc. More recent brand campaigns extend branding into the realm of lifestyle or culture. For example, Nike is well known for creating an aura of ‘hipness’ and ‘fitness’ (Goldman and Papson, 1998) through celebrity endorsements (e.g. Michael Jordan), and catchy slogans (e.g. ‘Just do it’). Douglas Holt calls brands such as Nike that successfully enter into the lexicon of culture, iconic brands (Holt, 2004). Iconic brands ‘help [consumers] express who they want to be’ (2004: 4).

Sports team brands have extraordinary power to infiltrate culture, particularly in the media-saturated economy of the 21st century. The primary consumer ‘products’ of a sports team are live, ticketed performances (matches), television/media content, and licensed merchandise. These products constitute complementary modes of consumption that spark demand for the other products in what Lury describes as ‘the loop’ (Lury, 2004: 8). The match is, in this sense, an endorsement for the media products and for the licensed merchandise, while the media products promote merchandise and ticket sales, and so on. In the words of one NFL executive, televised games are a ‘Three hour infomercial’4 and stadiums function as ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (Belk et al., 1989: 10) where the consumer can, after having paid for admission, conspicuously consume before, after and during the game. The ‘loyal consumer’5 is impelled to flaunt officially licensed merchandise in the stadium with the chance of being portrayed on the stadium jumbo screen (Crawford, 2004: 86) or on the TV broadcast. Team-licensed products from coffee mugs to coffins (Associated Press, 2006) are widely available in and out of the stadium. Additionally, outside sponsors pay handsomely to become the ‘official’ clothier, broadcast partner, beer, airline, toenail-clipper or superfluous-widget of the team. The best pro-sports team brands are so powerful that each branded product becomes both self-marketing and a space to sell advertising to a third party.

For many professional teams, media content rights are a vital source of income in addition to their brand-building value (Deloitte, 2010). National and international broadcasting allows sports team brands to reach immense global audiences with intriguing two to three hour-long infomercial/matches supplemented by pre-game, post-game, and highlight/news shows that showcase the brand. The marriage between sport and television, aka the sport-media complex (Rowe, 2004), is mutually beneficial in that sports brands benefit from the exposure, while the television stations gain content that has broad mass appeal as well as strong niche appeal for the coveted 18- to 34-year-old male demographic (Andrews, 2001: 137). Sport is integral to television’s business strategy as exemplified by Rupert Murdoch’s investment in NFL television rights in the USA, and soccer rights in Britain that brought viewers to his Newscorp media empire (Andrews, 2001; Horne, 2006). The alliance between television and sport has reached a new era of integration as teams operate their own branded television networks.
While media enables a global reach, notions of the local are central to most, if not all, sports team brands. Local sports teams are often associated with the character of the local community (Crawford, 2004; Dunning, 1999; King, 1998; Kraszewski, 2008). As Michael Serazio remarks, ‘Sports teams seek to show that they play a function in terms of civic unity and popular memory’ (Serazio, 2010: 169). Though Serazio questions the power of teams to solve real problems, sports team brands unrepentantly promote symbolic connection to local communities. For example, the English soccer team, Manchester City created an ‘Our City’ campaign employing slogans such as ‘Pure Manchester’ and ‘100% Manchester’ to brand themselves as more Manchester than ‘city’ rivals, and global brand par excellence, Manchester United, who play their matches in the borough of Trafford (Edensor and Millington, 2008). In addition to campaigns that highlight localness, many sports team brands enjoy geographical monopolies. In the USA, professional leagues are exclusive cartels that preclude local competition. In European soccer, top-tier teams enjoy lucrative television income that grant enormous competitive advantages and virtually guarantee local dominance.6

Sports team brands use individual stars to boost the team brand. Likewise, certain sports teams offer the platform from which players may become stars. As Ellis Cashmore remarks, even David Beckham could not have become a global star at Preston North End (Cashmore, 2004: 16), the modest British soccer team that Beckham made five appearances for early in his career. Global marketing mammoth Manchester United provided the platform for Beckham the superstar. When Beckham was later sold to the giant Spanish club, Real Madrid, Cashmore relays speculation that the move was orchestrated to boost merchandise sales rather than to help the team win matches (Cashmore, 2004: 81). Real Madrid annually competes with Manchester United not only for players and trophies, but to be the foremost sport team brand in the world (Ozanian and Schwartz, 2007).

The value of any brand includes history, though in sport, history and tradition take on exaggerated roles. Loyal followers immortalize past heroes that endow the team brand with the nebulous notion of ‘tradition’ that translates into increased brand value. Continuity is an essential to many loyal sports team consumers who maintain monogamous lifelong commitments to their team regardless of current performance. The sports team brand ‘coordinates multiple temporalities’ (Lury, 2004: 13), tying the mythic past together with the (exciting or dull) present. Sports team brands cultivate historical continuity by constructing shrines and displaying banners at stadiums and through in-house media representations. Sports team brands also benefit from outside media such as Ken Burns’s 10-part documentary, Baseball: A Film by Ken Burns (Burns, 2010[1994]) an independent series that mythicizes brand-Yankees and Major League Baseball. Unlike most entertainment products, sports teams are virtually infinitely regenerative. While individual star performers get injured and retire, there is no foreseeable shortage of new players to fill the rosters in major sports. Barring war, disaster or labor disputes, professional teams play full schedules every year. Despite the inevitable turnover of players,
teams are able to ‘secure the recognition of the brand as a constantly shifting series of (variously related) products’ (Lury, 2004: 11).

The ability to generate myth is perhaps the most powerful asset of the sports team brand. Holt argues that, ‘Iconic brands garner cultural power from their role in expressing identity myths: ongoing revisions of national (and occasionally global) myths that provide collective salves for major contradictions in society’ (Holt, 2006: 372). While iconic brands exploit identity myths, he finds that brands themselves almost never create the actual identity mythology. In other words, most successful brands are ‘ideological parasites’ (Holt, 2006: 374) of culture and its myths, and thus, rely upon the output of ‘Mass media outside the firm’s direct control’ to provide the essential identity myths (Holt, 2006: 372). Holt cites sport, along with film, television, music and journalism, as the ‘primary agents promulgating identity myths’. Sports brands have the rare power to both create and exploit identity myths – myths that carry iconic brands into the collective consciousness of a culture. Furthermore, sports team brands invest relatively little into the infrastructure of sport journalism that is dedicated to disseminating sport myths. Every day, newspapers, magazines and television create, exalt and dethrone sport heroes and villains. Free advertising for sport brands is built into the daily sport section.

Brand → fan communities

As Holt and astute brand managers know, the impact of a brand is only partly determined by marketing campaigns or by the product itself. Recent efforts at understanding brands focus on the social circulation of brands from consumer to consumer in addition to the traditional flow of information from producer to consumer. According to Arvidsson, the value of a brand, ‘builds only in part on the qualities of products. To a great extent it is also based on values, commitments and forms of communities sustained by consumers’ (Arvidsson, 2005: 236). ‘Brand communities’ (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) are groups of avid consumers that assemble, of their own accord, to discuss, critique and celebrate particular brands. With the advent of online social networking, the activities of burgeoning online brand communities have piqued the interest of modern brand managers who are keenly interested in measuring and monetizing the brand-building ‘labour’ (Arvidsson, 2005: 237) of these communities. The active consumer, or prosumer (Ritzer and Jergenson, 2010), who produces brand-related content and meaning is the point at which marketing and brand studies converge with academic fan studies.

In sport, ‘brand communities’ are better known as ‘fans.’ Fan culture studies represents a divergent approach to understanding the relationship between ‘loyal consumers’ and the object of their affection. Traditionally, the discourse of branding understood marketers as the instigators of brand-building and consumers as targets/subjects who must be impelled to engage with and loyally buy the brand. Conversely, the academic discourse of fandom led by Henry Jenkins centers the
consumers’/fans’ uses, needs and desires, while dealing warily with the intrinsic economic and power inequalities of the marketplace.

The original impulse of fan studies was to redeem the reputation of media ‘consumers’ who were conceived of as passive dupes of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006[1972]), or, as, ‘emotionally unstable, socially mal-adjusted and dangerously out of sync with reality’ (Jenkins, 1992: 13). Fan studies has re-cast the fan as an active participant who co-constructs meaning and produces ancillary texts. Sandvoss traces the history of fan studies (Sandvoss, 2005: 13) from its origins in the discourse of structure and agency, power and resistance. Early fan studies framed the fans as disempowered or disenfranchised consumers who could, at best, ‘make do’ (De Certeau, 1984) within the narrow confines of mass consumer culture. Fiske focused attention on various forms of fan productivity (Fiske, 1991) while Jenkins locates fans’ ‘tactical resistance’ (Sandvoss, 2005: 23) in fan-created texts. In the footsteps of Jenkins and Fiske, scholars have argued for the agency of media fans by showing how they are actively engaged in constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing texts. In these formulations, fans have a degree of agency in the construction of meaning, but, to quote Marx, ‘not in circumstances of their own choosing’. By celebrating the elements of agency and potential resistance of the consumer/fan, the discourse of fandom runs the risk of minimizing economic relations. Sandvoss reminds us that fans make their fandom through a ‘series of acts of consumption’ (Sandvoss, 2003: 17), inevitably structured by market forces.

While brand managers seek to capitalize on the enormous potential labor pool of active consumers, relying on these consumers to promote the brand is risky. Banet-Weiser and Lapsansky (2008) analyze a public competition in which contestants were prompted to extol the virtues of a particular Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV). To the chagrin of the marketers, several participants chose to link SUVs to environmental devastation and poor driving habits. Approaching the subject of consumer behavior from a legal perspective, Rosemary Coombe states, ‘Owners’ of mass-media signifiers may well permit the social production of significance when it mints meanings with potential market value, but they may also prohibit the material circulation of connotations that contest the valences they have propagated’ (Coombe, 1999: 264). In the case of video game ‘modders’ (fans who modify the content of videogames), Postiga (2008) reports that valuable labor from modders is often annexed or stifled by producers wielding intellectual property law.

Fundamentally, brands reside in the conscious and subconscious minds of actual and potential consumers. Who, then, owns the brand? Fans/consumers may feel a sense of ownership in the ‘text/team’ to which they give their loyalty, but do not often have legal rights of ownership. Lury points out that, ‘while the associations that are protected in trademark are held in law to be made in the minds of consumers, the consumption activities in which such associations might reasonably be assumed to be produced – at least in part – are not generally held to be objectifying’ (Lury, 2004: 14). In other words, legal precedent does not fully
recognize the rights of consumers when their labor goes into producing the meaning of the brand. Lury finds this situation to be asymmetrical and unequal, especially since brands, as Sandvoss argues, have influence beyond the point of purchase. ‘The way we wear our jeans or engage with the symbolic resources of popular culture does, however, have a profound impact on our social and cultural environment and interpersonal relations’ (Sandvoss, 2005: 15). According to Holt, the ‘postmodern branding paradigm’ offers brands as ‘cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses’ (Holt, 2002: 83). Brands reside in overlapping spaces of private intellectual property as products and in public culture as raw materials (Crawford, 2004: 160) for constructing identities.

**Brandom**

Brand managers have recognized the usefulness of fans and are seeking to exploit fan labor. The discourse of brand management is developing guidelines to optimize the relationship between the brand and brand-centered consumer communities. In their book on brand management Heding et al. offer a ‘Do’ and ‘Don’t’ list (2009: 200) for dealing with brand communities. They advise brand managers to acknowledge ‘the power of the consumer in the creation of meaning and equity’, though they warn not to ‘involve your customers too much as it can result in resentment’. They suggest that brand managers, ‘purposely select, initiate, manage and control the interaction among consumers’. Their advice for brand managers reflects a different quality of consumer agency than that rooted in the Jenkinsian notion of participatory culture. Academics must distinguish between participatory fandom and brand-created forms of community. As Jenkins asks, ‘Where does grassroots culture end and commercial culture begin?’ (2007: 364). In an effort to differentiate between these two visions of community, I offer the term *brandom* to describe the pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises. As discussed above, participatory fan culture is based, at least in part, on consumption, therefore fan culture may never completely escape the marketplace, and so a pure distinction between fandom and brandom may be impossible to sustain. However, participatory fan culture in the Jenkins tradition offers freedom of expression and a measure of independence from the producer and the hegemony of the market that brandom lacks. Fandom is ‘subversive by design’ (Sandvoss, 2005: 13). Ironically, Heding et al. (2009) suggest using brand communities for ‘grass-roots innovation’, presumably as long as the innovation is a ‘gift’ from the loyal fan/consumer to the producer. In the example below, the organized fans of the Italian soccer team, S.S. Lazio, take symbolic participation to a logical extreme through an attempted mutiny. This example highlights some of the tensions between the discourses of branding and the discourse of participatory fan culture.
The Irriducibili

Ultràs have responded to the modernization and militarization of Italian soccer in different ways. For example, one pan-ultràs movement has assembled under the name, ‘No al calcio moderno’ (No to modern soccer; see No al calcio moderno, 2008) to protest against higher ticket prices, the influence of television and other ‘modern’ commercial aspects of the game. In his analysis of English soccer fans, Anthony King (1998) suggests that the behavior of fans and other subcultural groups’ tends to waiver between resistance and compliance. He describes how the ‘lads’ of Manchester United disavowed certain types of consumption, such as the official team jersey, while continuing to emotionally and financially support the team through the purchase of match tickets. The Irriducibili took a radical path in relation to resistance and compliance by transforming into a commercialized fan group. Founded in 1987, the Irriducibili were composed primarily of young men between the ages of 16 and 30, though some of the original members are now over 40. The founder of the group, Fabrizio Toffolo, remains the leader. The group had a clubhouse where younger members carried out mundane chores such as cleaning, painting banners for display at the stadium and registering fans for chartered bus trips to away games. Unlike Lazio’s archrival, A.S. Roma, which is supported by several ultrà groups that clash over politics and style, the Irriducibili became the singular dominant Lazio ultràs group in the early 2000s. The Irriducibili’s solidarity gave them tremendous power to control the behavior of fans in the stadium and to gain the attention of the team’s management.

The Irriducibili drew negative attention for xenophobic and far right political displays. They sang anti-semitic lyrics and chanted ‘Il Duce’ in homage to Benito Mussolini. During a game in 2000, they raised a banner in honor of the slain Serbian war criminal, Arkan. In 2006, their cheers for Paolo Di Canio and his fascist salute gave both Di Canio and the Irriducibili widespread media attention. The Irriducibili became prime targets for journalists and TV pundits who have criticized their ‘mindless heckling of black players’ and neo-fascist displays.

From ultrà to ultra-brand

Police crackdowns at the stadiums and public criticism in mainstream media put tremendous pressure on the ultràs in general and the Irriducibili in particular, to change. Toffolo conceded that the days of battles among ultràs were near an end, and that ultràs must adapt. He said, ‘The ultrà must use his brain [and be] much more aware of communication, much more aware of the problems that ruin the image of soccer.’ The Irriducibi changed into an organization with impressive media capabilities and business interests. Through these means, and through strategic alliances, the Irridicibili accrued enough real power to threaten the Lazio owners. In doing so, they became ‘professional’ fans and disrupted the typical relationship between fans and owners/producers.
In addition to the banners, flags, songs and choruses used inside the stadium, the Irriducibili sold a game-day newsletter, maintained a professionally designed website, controlled a radio program, and produced various books and films. La Voce Della Nord (The voice of the north), the game-day newsletter/fanzine that the Irriducibili sold outside the stadium, for 1 or 2 euros, on game days since 1995 became a primary tool in the group’s campaign against the Lazio owner. The newsletter’s title refers to the Curva Nord (North Curve) of the stadium, the section controlled by the Irriducibili. In 2005–06, La Voce Della Nord was a 16-page, color newsletter that combined relevant information about the team with full color pictures and fan-authored articles. The graphic design and layout of the newsletter are impressive for a newsletter with limited distribution. As one might expect of a soccer fan publication, La Voce Della Nord contains many pictures of prominent players in action during games and articles praising Lazio and ridiculing rivals, A.S. Roma.

Beyond the predictable content that hails the soccer team, La Voce Della Nord devotes a considerable amount of space and imagery to the self-reflexive representation of the Irriducibili themselves. The newsletter documents banners that the Irriducibili display at the stadium and their most inventive demonstrations (Figure 1). On the centerfold of the 15 April 2006 issue of La Voce Della Nord (Figure 2) where one might expect the picture of the team or an individual player, there is, instead, the picture of the fans that traveled in great numbers to support Lazio at the match in Florence the previous week. The number of bodies as well as their flags, banners and scarves are quantitative indicators of the pride and dedication that the Irriducibili have for their team. This centerfold photo literally and symbolically places the fans at the center of ‘Lazio’ rather than the players or owners of the team. It proclaims, ‘We’ are Lazio. This auto-documentation is an example of fan produced media used to construct a meaningful sense of identity.
Figure 2. Centerfold image of fans supporting Lazio at Siena. *La Voce Della Nord* (2006b). Banners read: ‘Sempre al tuo fianco’ (Always at your side), ‘Chi ci odia ci teme’ (Who hates us fears us).

Figure 3. Photo of Paolo Di Canio, ‘Blood and Sweat’ (*La Voce Della Nord*, 2006a: cover).
The images portray the Irriducibili doing fandom and becoming ultras; These images create a template for appropriate modes of fandom.

La Voce Della Nord is also a vehicle for right-wing political commentary. An article entitled, ‘Conflitto di Civiltà: Un Inganno Pericoloso’ (Conflict of civilizations: A dangerous deception) recaps the controversy surrounding the publication of anti-Islamic cartoons in Denmark and the ensuing scandal involving Italian Senator Roberto Calderoli who proudly wore a t-shirt depicting one of the controversial cartoons. Calderoli eventually resigned from the Senate after pressure from both inside and outside his party. From this episode, the article concludes that Italy’s current stance on multiculturalism is not working: ‘The most ferocious intolerance today is connected to those who would “give” the multicultural society to everyone.’ For the Irriducibili, Lazio and right-wing politics are fundamental elements of their identity, and this combination of soccer and political commentary is indicative of the multiple points of identification that the Irriducibili constitutes.
For the Irriducibili, nobody embodies the amalgam of soccer performance and right-wing politics better than the player Paolo Di Canio, a figure who seems to appear on every other page of La Voce della Nord. He is depicted playing soccer, celebrating goals, and even standing still in moments of apparent contemplation. The 26 February 2006 edition of the La Voce Della Nord (2006a), sold on the night of the Lazio–Roma rivalry game (Figure 3), depicts Di Canio on the cover in uniform, with clenched fist, clenched teeth, shaved head, tattoos and an apparent cut on his right arm underscored by the words, ‘Sangue e Sudore’ (Blood and sweat). The Irriducibili looked to Di Canio to be a leader on the field and to exemplify their attitude. Quoting from an article about Di Canio in La Voce Della Nord: ‘[In Di Canio] I have someone who says on TV what I would say, who bites, on the field, as I would bite, who exults as I would exult ... salutes ... as I would salute.’ The ‘salute’ refers to the aforementioned occasions when Di Canio gave the fascist salute to his fans in the Curva Nord. In the pages of La Voce Della Nord, Di Canio represents the defiance and the right-wing militancy that the Irriducibili idolize.

La Voce Della Nord became an important tool in the Irriducibili’s campaign to overthrow team owner, Claudio Lotito. Lotito bought the team from its bankrupt owners in 2004 and initially, he was welcomed as a savior by the fans. After a short time, the Irriducibili turned against him. They accused him of not spending enough money on the team and using Lazio only to make himself rich. The Irriducibili used all of their resources to protest against Lotito. Inside the stadium La Voce Della Nord became a key tool to distribute anti-Lotito songs such as the following:

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<tr>
<th>Forza Lazio</th>
<th>Let’s go Lazio</th>
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<tr>
<td>Forza Lazio</td>
<td>Let’s go Lazio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sempre insiem’ a te</td>
<td>Always with you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forza Lazio</td>
<td>Let’s go Lazio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forza Lazio</td>
<td>Let’s go Lazio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotito vattene!</td>
<td>Lotito go away!</td>
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La Voce Della Nord carried pictures of protest banners that read ‘Lotito Vattene’ (2006c). The newsletter claims that the Irriducibili are the ‘Only defenders of this more than century old tradition’ and that Lotito, on the other hand, does not even celebrate Paolo Di Canio’s goals.

**The book**

While La Voce Della Nord covers the day-to-day Irriducibili updates, their book, entitled, Irriducibili: Noi Siamo gli ultràs della Lazio (Indestructables: We are the ultràs of Lazio) (2006d) recounts their origins and history. The preface of the
book was written by Toffolo and his fellow Irriducibili leaders, Yuri and Diabolik. The book is filled with pictures of the fans throughout the years highlighting the magnificent in stadium displays such as an eagle that covered the entire Curva Nord and one in which fans wearing white t-shirts spelled out, ‘Roma Merda’ ([A.S.] Roma is shit). The book also documents their militancy featuring photos of protest marches and clashes with police, and recalls the history of their symbol, Mr Enrich, who was based on an English comic book hero and who symbolized a ‘new style’ (La Voce Della Nord, 2006d: 51) The book closes with a hand-written letter written by Paolo Di Canio who writes: ‘It is an honor to be hated.’ The Irriducibili book is another artifact that declares and consolidates their way of thinking.

The DVD

The Irriducibili-branded documentary DVD, L’amor per te mi fa teppista (My love for you makes me a hooligan; Zappulla and Camolino, 2005) 20 (Figure 4) depicts Irriducibili founder, Fabrizio Toffolo, making business visits with various Irriducibili directors and associates. Toffolo is briefly shown guiding the Irriducibili at the stadium but most of the film portrays Toffolo as a businessman. With his closely cropped hair, unshaven face and aviator glasses, Toffolo defines the gruff ‘look’ that defines the Irriducibili.

The film, like all of the other Irriducibili media, defends the right-wing perspective of the Irriducibili, which, they feel, is misrepresented in biased, left-wing mainstream media. Toffolo states that although violence is unpleasant, ‘We live in a society of violence’, and the Irriducibili do not look to start problems, but, true to their name (Indomitables), they will not back down either. Irriducibili leader, Diabolik, deflects blame onto the authorities by citing an incident where the police did not have the keys to unlock a gate during a match, a mistake, he argues, that could have led to tragedy.

The DVD highlights the Irriducibili’s impressive media presence as Toffolo makes an appearance on the radio program La Voce Della Nord, which shares the name of the Irriducibili newsletter. In the video, Toffolo wears headphones and responds to various callers. For the Irriducibili and for Toffolo, radio is another tool used to disseminate opinions, recruit members, solidify opinion and demonstrate legitimacy. As Albertro Testa notes, the Irriducibili also use their media presence to promote social causes. Testa quotes Irriducibili leader Giorgio, who says: ‘Just to have one of us on the radio speaking about the initiative is helpful’ (Testa, 2010: 17).

The extras section of the DVD presents documentation of their protest campaign against team owner Claudio Lotito. One of these extras is a five-minute documentary-montage of protests titled, ‘Sit In’. Led by Toffolo, the Irriducibili are shown marching, waving flags and shouting slogans outside of the Italian parliament. None of this footage is narrated or otherwise explained. One scene depicts Toffolo exchanging heated words with Lotito himself, though the video
offers no context for this exchange. The entire montage is introduced by the words: ‘Our battles . . . we fight them alone.’ The Irriducibili are framed as heroes fighting against the ‘villainous’ Lotito.

**Original Fans**

Beyond the Irriducibili’s impressive repertoire of fan-created media, their most impressive and controversial accomplishment is their establishment of a chain of retail stores named, Original Fans. In 2005, there were a dozen Original Fans stores operating in Rome, selling Lazio tickets and officially licensed Lazio merchandise. More significantly, they sold Irriducibili-branded t-shirts, scarves (see Figure 5), flags, DVDs and anything else that might appeal to their members.
or admirers. The Irriducibili merchandise uses the light blue and dark blue color scheme of Lazio and featured designs such as Mr Enrich (Figure 6), a cartoon character who wears a bowler hat. The Irriducibili use the La Voce Della Nord as a promotional tool for the Original Fans stores. Prominent Lazio players such as Di Canio, Tommaso Rocchi and Valon Behrami have modeled Irriducibili shirts in full-page ads in the newsletter.

Original Fans signifies a decisive departure from the traditional role of ultràs by being a medium-scale, for-profit enterprise. The Irriducibili have faced criticism from other soccer fans that view them as traitors to an implied code that demands that ultràs be loyal supporters free from commercial concerns. Rival fans mockingly call them, Irriducibili Inc.23 The notion that fans should not seek anything more than participation in a symbolic sense is reinforced by powerful soccer figures such as former Italian national team coach Roberto Donadoni. After commending ‘good fans’ he said, ‘There is another [element of fans] that is in it to profit from soccer to gain wealth and make it a business. I believe that it is one of the maladies of our soccer, to marginalize and combat: it is an insidious practice without the intention to really support their club’.24 Donadoni did not cite as a malady of soccer the players, coaches or owners who are lavishly rewarded from the expenditures of fans. From the fans’ perspective, why should they be excluded from the economic benefits of the game when they add so much to the ambience of the stadium, and to the cultural cachet of the brand?

The Irriducibili turned their fan culture into a brand of its own. After their founding in 1987, the Irriducibili sculpted a subcultural identity consisting of dedication to Lazio, to right-wing politics, and of the aggressive support of their team. They developed a style including short-cropped hair, black t-shirts, and aviator-style sunglasses. Their identity grew from and, in key aspects apart from, Lazio and other Lazio supporters. Their brand challenges the usual relationship between fans and owners/producers. The Irriducibili wanted to be considered partners in the enterprise, and to be treated as equals. Instead, they were treated as criminals.

While the Irriducibili were protesting against Lotito in organized marches, fan ‘strikes’ and media campaigns, they began supporting former Lazio star Giorgio Chinaglia in his bid to get control of the team. Chinaglia claimed to have the financial backing of a Hungarian pharmaceutical consortium (BBC News, 2006b). Meanwhile, according to police reports, Toffolo and other members of the Irriducibili made threatening phone calls to Lotito, urging him to sell the team. Toffolo and other Irriducibili leaders were arrested and charged with extortion, while the financial authorities began investigating Chinaglia’s supposed financial backing (Hawkey, 2006). Police investigators allege that Chinaglia’s bid to buy Lazio was secretly backed by the mafia. Chinaglia was indicted, though as of writing, he has not returned to Italy from the USA to face charges. Investigators theorize that Lotito had demanded a portion of the Original Fans’ profits, and that Chinaglia had made a pact with the Irriducibili, promising not to interfere with Original Fans if they would support him in his bid to take over Lazio. In 2007, Fabrizio Toffolo, while serving part of his sentence under house arrest, was shot in
the leg at the entrance to his apartment (Repubblica, 2007). Some speculate that this shooting was a message sent by the mafia urging him to remain quiet. These events precipitated the demise of the Irriducibili as rulers of the Curva Nord with their leaders in jail and several other members banned from the stadium. The Original Fans retail stores began to falter as well.

The Irriducibili’s cultural and financial power posed a serious threat to the Lazio brand and to its owner, Claudio Lotito. The Irriducibili, and ultràs throughout Italy, add value to the team/brand that they support through consumption, but also through productive labor. They add to the soccer stadium experience through dedicated support in the form of cheering and elaborate displays. Through their subcultural identities, they add to the cultural cachet of the team that they support. While many fan groups believe they deserve more credit and respect from the team owners and from the media for their activities, the Irriducibili were unique in their ability to organize thousands of followers, a substantial segment of ticket holders. They also developed impressive media capabilities, and economic power through the Original Fans retail outlets. While the tactics of the Irriducibili were, at the very least, questionable, they put into action the desire of many fans to gain a real stake in the team that they dedicate their passion and identities to. They took participatory culture to one logical extreme.

Conclusion

This article has juxtaposed the language of fandom with the language of brands. On one hand, fan culture can be a vibrant form of leisure that forms the basis for deeply felt emotions, relationships and identities. On the other, fan culture is rooted in a consumer culture that constantly quantifies, monetizes and leverages human impulses under legal regimes that do not recognize any value in fan sentiment. While the law may not adequately recognize value in human sentiment, brand managers most certainly do. Douglas Holt’s work on brands is just one example of the enormous literature (not to mention the almost unfathomably large industry) devoted to cultivating positive consumer sentiment (or branding). Fans and marketers share the understanding that the vital identity-producing ‘stuff’ of fandom cannot be reduced to a set of consumer goods (Horne, 2006; King, 1998). Both groups understand that consumer goods are raw materials upon which identities are built, whether we call these identities brands or fandom.

Holt’s insights into iconic brands highlight the strategies of successful brands, but the focus on how brands impel consumers does not adequately characterize fans/consumers as actual constituents of the brand. Fans of any sports team are an asset of the brand – they add an essential element to the experience of the product. My personal interest in soccer was spurred by the fan orchestrations at Rome’s Olympic Stadium more than the performance of the players on the field. Beyond the direct stadium experience, the subcultural identity of fan groups such as the Irriducibili can add cachet to the brand and attract more followers and season-ticket holders. The Irriducibili recognized their role in the Lazio brand – they
recognized themselves in the brand that Lazio was trying to sell. In response, they tried to leverage that power to get a stake in the team.

Another reading of the situation might conclude that the Irriducibili narcissistically and foolishly exaggerated their role. Certainly, official authority was on Lotito’s side, as there is no legal mechanism in Italy (or elsewhere as far as I know) for fans to assert claims of ownership in privately owned teams. The Irriducibili appear to have aligned themselves with the ‘unofficial and unauthorized’ power of organized crime as a desperate option. In other contexts, fans have reacted to the perceived deficiencies of their team’s management in other ways. Some fans simply opt out, while in England, after the owners of Wimbledon FC moved the club, the fans formed their own club, AFC Wimbledon. Fans of Manchester United have staged long-term protests against the team’s American owners (Gibson, 2010). Spain’s biggest clubs, Real Madrid and Barcelona, are actually owned by the fans who vote for the team’s executives. With limited options, the Irriducibili created their own voice and their own movement.

The Irriducibili’s rebellion was enabled, in part, by modern communication technologies that enabled them to not only to coordinate their fans, but also to establish a business that outsourced the production of scarves, flags, hats and other Irriducibili-branded products. This example demonstrates that the power to make a brand is in the hands of consumers. Simultaneously, the power of fandom is within reach of brand managers who seek to harness the labor of fans under the terms of brandom. This struggle between fans/consumers/producers and power-wielding institutional producers will continue under different names and in different places. While one could imagine harmonious, cooperative alliances between fans and ownership, in Rome, there was an ugly struggle for power. The decline and fall of the Irriducibili marks one notable battle in what will be a long war.

Notes
1. See, for example, Wuyts (2010).
2. See, for instance, Smack (www.smackinc.com) for an example of a company dedicated to building brand communities.
3. In Italy, ultras is not necessarily the plural form of ultrà, though for the sake of this article, I will use ultras to denote the plural. Some Italian members call themselves ultrà while others prefer ultras (no accent). According to the Progetto Ultrà, ultras is more common among northern and newer groups, though this is not definitive. Testa and Armstrong (2010: 2) use UltraS.
4. Macky Weaver, an executive of the Jacksonville Jaguars, an American football team, said ‘Having the games on TV is important to developing your fan base . . . I like to describe it as it’s a 3 hour infomercial that promotes our product. And with that not on, it definitely hurts the ability to build the brand’ (Graf, 2010). The team had seven of eight home games blacked out in 2009 due to the National Football League’s broadcasting restrictions.
5. I use the term ‘loyal consumer’ here instead of ‘loyal fan’ because many fan cultures, including some mentioned in this article, overtly resist forms aspects of consumption associated with football such as officially sponsored jerseys. See King (1998); Crawford (2004: Ch. 8).

6. The schemes vary in Europe. The English Premier League (EPL) collectively negotiates media rights and distributes revenues but the vast gap in income between the EPL and the next tier gives the EPL teams a substantial advantage. Spanish teams negotiate individual contracts, while the Italian league appears to be moving toward collective media rights.

7. Toffolo led the Irriducibili, but, as will become clear, the status of the Irriducibili, and Toffolo himself, has changed.

8. Arkan was the nickname of Željko Ražnatović, a Serbian paramilitary leader who was accused of crimes against humanity committed during the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Arkan was murdered in January 2000 before his court hearing.

9. The story of Di Canio’s fascist salute can be found at ESPNsoccernet (2006).


13. As of December 2007, the site is no longer online.


17. The social significance of the Irridicubili’s right-wing politics and their connection to contemporary Italian politics deserves more attention than I can give to it in this article, though I intend to pick up the subject in subsequent work. For more information on the relationship between radical politics and Italian soccer fans see Testa (2009, 2010) and Testa and Armstrong (2008, 2010). My concern in this article is how right-wing politics informs the self-described identity and the Irriducibili as a branded identity.

18. The image appears to have been altered to enhance the blood on the arm.

19. Translation of: ‘Ho qualcuno che in TV dice quello che direi io, che in campo morde come morderei io... saluta... come saluterei io’ (La Voce Della Nord (2006a).

20. Also known simply as Lazio Irriducibili DVD; however, the outside of the DVD case has the name L’amor per te mi fa teppista on the side (Zappulla and Camolino, 2005).

21. Translation of: ‘Nostre battaglie... combattiamo da sola.’

22. Original Fans is the name of the shop; it is not a translation.

23. The nickname, Irridicubili, S.p.A., is the equivalent of Irriducibili Inc. or Incorporated. This insult appears, for example, on a fan site of rival Fiorentina fans in an article entitled ‘Irriducibili S.p.A. la vergogna dei gruppi ultra’ (Irriducibili Inc., the shame of ultrás groups) (Magnifico, 2010).

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