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MORE THAN JUST A FOOTBALL SHIRT: Football and sense of belonging in Rome, Italy

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“MORE THAN JUST A FOOTBALL SHIRT”

Football and sense of belonging in Rome, Italy



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1. **Abstract:**

The world of football is constantly changing and is now a global industry with employers, employees, investors, and consumers, and the football shirt can be seen as the commodity par excellence of this industry. However, both in professional and amateur football, the football shirt and other elements of football material culture, acquire meanings and value that exceed the consumeristic and capitalistic dynamics. Through Photo and Video Elicitation Interviews and Oral and Life History Interviews, the participants of this research project, who are six members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club based in Rome, Italy, demonstrate how the club's shirt is more than just a football shirt as it is something that reinforces their sense of belonging towards each other and towards the team, how this shirt becomes a lens through which it is possible to think about broader issues and questions such as migration flows and the movement of people, how elements of football material culture become the glue that connects the world of amateur football to the one of professional football, and how amateurs' perspectives and opinions become interesting prompts for further discussions and reflections about the recent economic and financial changes in this sport and about a possible switch towards a non-Eurocentric football.

2. **Introduction:**

a. **Research problem:**

The world of football is constantly changing. The game played in England more than two centuries ago is a faraway relative of its contemporary version. In fact, for example, there are continuous changes on the rules of the game, on how football matches and leagues are organized, and on how this sport is made available for consumption for the many football enthusiasts around the world. In addition, football is now a global industry with employers, employees, investors, and consumers. However, even though more studies need to be conducted on how these changes affect the passion of the people for this sport, it is fascinating to see how this passion is still very strong in many different pockets of society around the globe. For example, one place where this passion is very deep and firmly rooted is the world of amateur football, which, by definition, is composed of people who basically love what they are doing (Eitzen, 1989). Finally, it is possible to say that the professional side of football functions as a vector for the expansion of this sport all around the world, and that the changes occurring in it somehow influence other aspects of football, such as that of amateurism. In addition, many factors of professional football can also be found in amateur football, such as histories of migration related to footballers, and elements of material culture. In this sense, this research project addresses amateur football in Rome, Italy, as it was conducted on a very precise case study, the Liberi Nantes amateur football club, one of the few Italian football teams to welcome refugees and asylum seekers as members of the club. By taking an ethnographic approach, I investigate how the members of this club attach meanings and values to the team's football shirt and other elements of material culture, as well as what are their opinions and perspectives on the state of contemporary football, both professional and amateur.

b. Theory grounding:

This research project is built around three main theoretical pillars. The first one is “football”, or “the beautiful game” (Kendall & Osbaldiston, 2010; Butler & Butler, 2021; Buchowski et al., 2016; Dubal, 2010; Hughson, 2019). Unpacking the various implications that this sport has with respect to social, political, cultural, historical, and economic issues will be scope of the following theory section. However, in many public and academic debates about the sport of “football”, the attention is mainly paid to its professional aspect, and this makes amateur football highly underrepresented. That is why, the second theoretical pillar of this project is “amateurism” (Eitzen, 1989; Crabb, 2017; Wheeler, 2004; Osborne & Wagg, 2017), as this research focuses on a group of amateur footballers, their personal and migratory histories, and their perspectives on the state of contemporary football. As previously mentioned, one way through which these two aspects of the same sport connect to each other is the “material culture” (Yates, 2022; Buchli, 2020), which is the third theoretical pillar. In fact, within this research, I examine different components of material culture, their meanings, and their importance for a group of six members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club. Among the artifacts, there are the team’s football shirt, a pair of football boots, a hat, a sweater, other football shirts, various photographs, and a small notebook. While the other elements of material culture which are taken into consideration are the team’s football training equipment, football pitch, and changing room.

c. Presenting the argument and the main research question:

This research project starts from an ethnographic engagement with a particular football shirt, that of the Liberi Nantes, an amateur football club based in Rome, Italy. More specifically, the focus is on the men’s first football team which is composed of many different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, as the organization welcomes Italians as well as many refugees and asylum seekers. During the fieldwork experience, I had the chance to conduct collaborative research with some of the members of this team to understand:

What does the Liberi Nantes football shirt mean for the members of this amateur football club in Rome, Italy?

In line with the idea of the “*cultural sociology of the football shirt*” (Kendall & Osbaldiston, 2010), this project proposes that a clothing item such as a football shirt might have different meanings and acquire a particular value for a precise group of people, given the importance that football has in their social life. In this sense, the Liberi Nantes shirt is more than just a football shirt as it connects to ideas of expression of the self, solidarity, freedom, migration, perception of the “other”, and family. The members of this amateur football team, regardless of their country of origin, perceive it as something that reinforces their sense of belonging towards each other and towards the team itself. Therefore, this shirt becomes a lens through which it is possible to think about broader issues and questions. For example, migration flows and the movement of people, as all the participants share a past characterized by the movement from a geographic area to another.

Or, the “*social life of things*” (Appadurai, 1988), as football shirts and other material objects can acquire meanings and values that exceed the consumeristic and capitalistic practices usually associated to such commodities. Furthermore, it emerged in this project that these material objects become the glue that connects the world of amateur football to the one of professional football in two main ways. Firstly, the members of this amateur football club can be defined as both consumers and practitioners of football related material culture, as they make use of professional football shirts, scarves, and sweaters to make sense of their life and their passion for football. Secondly, these material objects can evoke life histories related to migration, which is a common trait of both aspects of football. Finally, the participants’ perspectives and opinions become interesting prompts for further discussions and reflections about the recent economic and financial changes in this sport, the possible switch towards a non-Eurocentric football, and how elements of amateur football material culture, such as the pitch, the training equipment, and the changing room, resemble or differ from their equivalents in professional football.

3. The Research Context:

a. The Liberi Nantes Organization:¹

The Liberi Nantes amateur football club is just one of the various branches of the Liberi Nantes organization, a non-governmental organization operating in Rome, Italy, since 2007. The name already says something about the organization’s vision. In fact, the word “liberi” means “free” in Italian, while the word “nantes” derives from the epic poem of the Aeneid, where Virgil uses it to refer to the few swimmers or sailors who manage to save themselves from a shipwreck. Therefore, “Liberi Nantes” becomes “the swimmers who are free to navigate in the Mediterranean Sea and to save themselves as they escape from wars, oppression, and dramatic humanitarian situations”.²

This research focuses on the men’s first team of the Liberi Nantes football club, which is composed of people with different origins and cultural background. In fact, even though there are several Italians, most of the members are migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers coming from various regions of the world. More specifically, two of the six members who took part in this project are Italians, one comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and three come from Cameroon. However, since the team trains and plays in Rome, the two Italians are also migrants, as one is originally from the island of Sardinia and the other one is from the region of Molise.

After a first informal interaction in December 2021, the organization was approached again in the autumn of 2022 to propose the research idea to the president. The response was positive, so in January 2023, I traveled to Rome to conduct the two and half months of fieldwork, ended in March 2023. During this period, I

¹ Main source for this section: <https://www.liberinantes.org>; By navigating through this website, it is possible to learn more about the history, the team, and the different activities that are being done by the organization.

² Source, <https://www.liberinantes.org/chi-siamo/#lanostratoria>

actively took part in the team's training sessions as well as following the team in eight different league matches.³

b. The “XXV Aprile” Football Pitch:

This association organizes different activities and offers numerous services to the people of the neighborhood of Pietralata, in the eastern quadrant of the Italian capital city.⁴ This area of the city has a long history. Between 1935 and 1940, it welcomed thousands of citizens who were evicted from their houses because of renovations works being carried out in the city center during the Fascist Regime. It was denominated as one of the “borgate”, areas of the city of Rome mainly characterized by social housing projects for working-class people. During the Italian neo-realism, in the aftermath of the Second World War, this neighborhood and its citizens, together with many other areas of the country where the population was living in conditions of extreme poverty, devastation, and abandonment, became a great source of inspiration for various Italian poets, authors, and directors, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini.

More specifically, the Liberi Nantes men's football team trains and plays its home games at the “XXV Aprile” football pitch, in via Marica, 80. The name refers to the 25th of April, the date in which, in 1945, Italy was officially liberated from the Nazi and Fascist occupation. Before being officially assigned to the Liberi Nantes organization in 2010, this football pitch was abandoned for many years, even though it was very important for the local community. In fact, opened in the 1960s, it was the home of the “Albarossa”, a football team directly linked to the Italian Communist Party's section operating in the neighborhood.⁵ In the context of this research, this place is where I spent most of the fieldwork and where the relationships with the participants were built and constantly strengthened. Furthermore, it is a place of encounter for different culture, a characteristic that was proved in first person by having the chance to step on it during the many training sessions. Finally, its structural traits such as the soil made pitch, the rustic stands, the changing rooms, and the buildings surrounding it, make it a perfect example of amateur football facilities and give it a sense of a place where time seems to have stopped, in contrast to the ever-changing world of football. In conclusion, this organization, and this specific team, fit very well as the case study of a research that addresses the topics of football, amateurism, material culture, and migration, and that focuses on how elements of the material culture acquire specific meanings and values related to personal histories of migration and the passion for football.

³ The Liberi Nantes football club currently participates in the Italian Second Category, one of the many amateur football leagues organized in the Italian territory.

⁴ In the appendix, it is possible to consult a map that shows where this organization is located.

⁵ Source: <https://www.liberinantes.org/chi-siamo/#lanostrastoria>

4. Theory Section:⁶

a. Football:

In public as well as academic discussions, the term “football” is commonly, and sometimes exclusively, associated with the professional side of this sport, to an extent to which it is legitimate to ask oneself if this is the only aspect of football that needs to be, or must be, discussed and studied. But why is that? For example, one reason could be the various repercussions that this aspect of football has with different societal issues and processes of identity making, as demonstrated by the interest of the anthropology of football when it comes to football fandom (Knapton et al, 2018; King, 2000; Sandvoss, 2004; Ben Porat, 2010; Szogs, 2017; Williams, 2006; Međedović & Kovačević, 2020). Another reason could be found in the professional football’s implications with respect to the debates on the topics of ethnicity, racism, “*color blindness*” (Lentin, 2004:431) and neo-colonialism (Burdsey, 2012; King, 2012; Gardiner & Welch, 2012). Furthermore, another possible explanation for this particular attention paid to professional football is that this sport has a great ability to transcend local, regional, national, and continental boundaries, to a level at which football can be considered “*a complex transnational phenomenon*” (Buchowski et al., 2016:1). The “*transnational optic*” (Levitt, 2012:3) is acquiring more and more importance among the possible approaches to the study of migration (Khagram & Levitt, 2008; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Basch et al., 2008; Portes et al., 2008; Kearney, 1995), a phenomenon that has a close link to football. In fact, the relationship between migration flows and football can be demonstrated by taking an historical perspective to look at the movement of professional footballers as “*football migration ... has a long and complicated history ... [and] ... it should not be isolated from general migratory trends and patterns*” (Taylor, 2006:8). However, a closer look at these flows of professional players brings to the surface the consequent unequal power relations between the different actors involved in this movement. In this sense, there is an ongoing debate on the level of eurocentrism in professional football, and on how political and economic decisions taken by its European governing bodies have had, and continue to have, serious impacts elsewhere, to an extent to which it is possible to talk about “*the football empire*” (Dietschy, 2013:279), “*forms of sporting imperialism*” (Dietschy, 2013:281), and about how football “*has functioned as a vehicle for both Western-driven cultural imperialism and as a locus for resistance to imperial pressures*” (Darby, 2002:2). Furthermore, in recent years, this sport “*evolved into a truly global phenomenon*” (Sandvoss, 2004:67), showing tight connections with economic and financial capitalism. In fact, football governing bodies and professional football clubs “*have formed so-called ‘strategic partnerships’ with transnational corporations (TNCs)*” (Sandvoss, 2004:69) and multinationals, resulting into a complete transformation of the world of football. In addition, the recent technological developments soon became a tool through which it has been possible to push the global expansion of the sport of football (Sandvoss, 2004), and, once these innovations collided with the profit-driven strategies carried out by the capitalist actors that constantly invest in this sector, the outcome is a

⁶ This theory section includes parts of the work done for the writing up of this project’s research proposal. However, the idea was to engage again with the proposal, as well as expanding it with new and diverse flows of reasoning. This integration process was also obliged by some differences between what was originally planned and expected before entering the fieldwork, and what emerged during and after the two and half months spent in Rome.

condition where “*the rationalization and McDonaldization of football constitute the economic ground upon which its current cultural order rests*” (Sandvoss, 2004:121). This sport is now permeated by forces of “Americanization” (Williams & Hopkins, 2011), extreme spectacularization, and “commercialization” (Dubal, 2010). These considerations on the state of contemporary professional football show that, firstly, football is something that is practiced almost everywhere in the world and that has a strong connection with migration and the movement of people. Secondly, as it happens in other spheres of society, there are economic forces at play that continuously influence the way this sport is practiced, organized, and consumed. Finally, there is a need for further studies on how these changes in professional football impact amateur football, and how they are perceived by football enthusiasts and amateurs, whose total population outnumbers that of professionals.

b. Amateurism:

The case study on which this research is built on, forces an analysis of what “amateurism” is, what does it mean, and how it connects to professional football, migration, and material culture. Etymologically, this term has a long history, even though it is usually linked to North American collegial sport culture and the Olympic Games (Crabb, 2017; Wheeler, 2004). In fact, “*it derives from the Latin ‘amator’, which means ‘lover’*”, and “*the amateur is one who participate in sport because of love for the sport*” (Eitzen, 1989:95). “Amateurism” also refers to what Eitzen calls the “*mythic qualities*” (Ibid.) of an amateur, which include the idea that “*the amateur sacrifices everything, most especially financial gain, to achieve athletic excellence*” (Ibid.), he/she “*devotes long hours of training to hone skills to maximize athletic performance*” (Ibid.), and that he/she “*competes for the love of sport, and is therefore above venality*” (Ibid.). But how and when “amateurism” and sport came together? According to Kelly C. Crabb, “*the modern tradition of amateurism in sports began in England’s class-conscious society of the early 1800s*” (Crabb, 2017:184), where the members of the upper-class had both the money and the free time to participate in sports and other leisure activities, while the working-class people were initially excluded (Wheeler, 2004). Therefore, participation in sport was in itself an indicator of class (Crabb, 2017). This class-based difference at the core of sport participation created an “*ideology*” and “*a set of principles*” (Osborne & Wagg, 2017:121), which added fuel to the fire of class discrimination. However, there is still an ongoing debate on whether it is still possible to talk about “amateurism” in contemporary’s sport culture and what does it entail. In fact, if the sport of football is taken into consideration, there is this idea according to which “*in parallel with the process of commercialization of football, the concept ‘amateurship’ seems to wither away*” (Zelyurt & Ataçoçu, 2016:1149), especially because of a growing tendency for which players, coaches, and club managers get some sort of income from the sport practice (Zelyurt & Ataçoçu, 2016). This shows how the changes in professional football can also affect the world of amateur football, as in this case the profit-driven mentality seems to be the only thing that matters as well as being the only “correct” mentality in order to survive, even though it heavily contrasts with what “amateurism” should be. This fight for survival highlights the condition of money and financial capability, or in-capability, in the world of amateur football, a topic on which studies have been conducted

(Defau et al., 2022). Furthermore, other than this economic link, amateur football also connects to professional football via the topics of migration and of material culture. In fact, the ethnic composition of amateur teams and leagues, whether football facilitates the process of integration, and the amateur players' relationship to particular "spaces", are all new topics of interest in the anthropology of football (van Haaften, 2019[a]; van Haaften, 2019[b]; Haß & Schütze, 2022[a]; Haß & Schütze, 2022[b]). Finally, amateur football and footballers, given their supposed affinity with migration and ideas of sportsmanship, passion, love, and so on, seem to be valid subjects of study to understand how values and meanings that exceed the economic and capitalistic realm are attached to different elements of material culture, and how these same elements can evoke personal and migratory histories.

c. **Material Culture:**

The concept of "material culture" is a complex one. Its intricacy derives from what it means and what can be acknowledged as being part of it. The Britannica Encyclopedia defines "material culture" as "tools, weapons, utensils, machines, ornaments, art, buildings, monuments, written records, religious images, clothing, and any other ponderable objects produced or used by humans".⁷ This means that "material culture" includes, for example, objects and things as well as architectural elements. However, it does not only include tangible objects. In fact, by engaging with an etymological analysis of the word "material", Julian Yates presents a complex "*paradox*", according to which, on one hand, "*the word refers to that most basic of substances, the physicality and malleability of things and to our ability to transform matter into a whole host of objects that then make up a built world*" (Yates, 2022:28). On the other hand, the word also refers to the idea that "*all that exists does so by virtue (force) of some shaping design, idea, or form, which in and of itself is immaterial*" (Ibid.). Therefore, the paradox is that "material culture" somehow connects both to the idea of "materiality", the artifacts for example, but also to the idea of "immateriality", for example, the meaning, the value, or the rituals associated to the artifacts. In the context of social and cultural anthropology, the concept of "material culture" has been used since the 19th century, for instance, as a lens through which it was possible to understand non-Western societies and investigate their level of "civilization" and "progress" (Buchli, 2020).⁸ Therefore, "*material culture as we understand it is a direct consequence of the collecting traditions of the nineteenth century, liberal Enlightenment era notions of universality, colonial expansion, industrialization, and the birth of consumerism*" (Buchli, 2020:12). Finally, "*Marxist theory [...] also made material culture and systems of production central to theory, in particular in relation to understanding long-term social processes*" (Morphy, 2010:454). In this sense, by focusing on the "material culture" related to the football subculture, this approach is used in this research to contribute to the study of migration and the movement of people, and to understand how material objects, such as football shirts, and architectural and

⁷ The encyclopedia was consulted online at the link: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/material-culture>, on 18th June 2023.

⁸ "Material culture" soon became linked with early colonial and imperialistic practices, such as the development of "*cabinets of curiosities*" (Buchli, 2020:4) and private as well as museum collections.

urbanistic elements, such as football pitches, acquire different meanings and values which are able to exceed the economic and capitalistic ones.

Considering football as an “industry” where different actors with different purposes coexist and compete against each other, puts the premises for an investigation of how its consumers relate with the commodities and material objects produced by the industry itself. According to Karl Marx, a “commodity” is a central element for the maintenance, development, and survival of capitalism. In fact, it is “*a product intended principally for exchange, and that such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism*” (Appadurai, 1988:6). The point here is that “commodities” are considered as impersonal and strictly related to money and capital (Appadurai, 1988), especially, for example, by the capitalist actors of the football world previously mentioned in the section about “football”. However, other actors, such as football enthusiasts and fans, might look at the same “commodities” from a different perspective and these objects can acquire other meanings. But how is this possible? Through which processes does this happen? For example, Arjun Appadurai proposes the idea that the context in which commodities are exchanged plays a great role in the process through which individuals attach a possible meaning or value to such objects (Appadurai, 1988). Similarly, Igor Kopytoff adds to this that “*commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing*” (Kopytoff, 1988:64), and, whether an object is considered a commodity or not, differs from individual to individual. Another possible way is by particular rituals, such as the exchanging of gifts. Marcell Mauss, for example, argues about “*the extent to which giving, receiving, and reciprocating gifts dominates social intercourse*” (Rubin, 1975:171), and that the parts involved in the exchange are conferred “*a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid*” (Rubin, 1975:172). In this article’s section dedicated to “findings and analysis”, it is possible to understand how, through the processes mentioned above, the participants of this research attached different meanings from those related to the economic and capitalistic realm to the various elements of the football material culture. At the same time, it is possible to understand how amateur football elements acquired a specific value which made them differ from their equivalents in professional football.

There is a growing number of studies dedicated to material objects related to the world of football. For example, Claudio Benzecry proposes the various ways in which a football shirt, in this case that of the Argentinian professional football club Boca Juniors, “*achieves value*” (Benzecry, 2008:50), and his work, “*towards a cultural sociology of the football shirt*” (Kendall & Osbaldiston, 2010), inspired Gavin Kendall and Nick Osbaldiston in their own examination of “*the football shirt as a totem [...] inserted into circuits of the sacred and the profane, and the authentic and the inauthentic*” (Kendall & Osbaldiston, 2010:1). Similarly, Viola Hofmann emphasizes how “*the football shirt is not just an economic epiphenomenon which envelops the fan’s body, but becomes an inscribable element which enables genuine self-presentation and self-definition*” (Hofmann, 2016:188). In addition, David Butler and Robert Butler discuss how traditional

colors of the club's jerseys “have proved remarkably resilient to the changing football environment and commercialization of the sport” (Butler & Butler, 2021:832). Finally, Christian Derbaix and Alain Decrop, by focusing on “paraphernalia” (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011), including scarves and shirts, investigate football fans' behavior with respect to the consumption of these objects. To conclude, what this research adds to this growing debate is the amateur football perspective, as the participants discussed what does the Liberi Nantes football shirt mean for them.

5. Research Methods and Techniques:

a. Ethnographic approach and participant observation:

As previously stated, this project is the result of an ethnographic engagement with the Liberi Nantes football shirt. “*Ethnography matters*” (Fassin, 2013) because it allows for further reflections and discussions about broader questions regarding both “*spaces saturated by consensual meanings*” (Fassin, 2013:642), such as that of professional football, and “*the understudied regions of society*” (Ibid.), such as that of amateur football. Furthermore, ethnography is needed in the field of anthropology because “*it keeps us open to the world and provides the insights we return to the world*” (Miller, 2017:30). In fact, without an ethnographic approach, it would have been harder, if not impossible, to “collect” such deep findings, and to “collect” them directly from the people involved. Finally, the ethnographic approach has been used already in the field of the anthropology of football (Schwell et al., 2016) with respect to different aspects of this sport. In this section, the methods and techniques used throughout this project are listed and discussed.

Between January 2023 and March 2023, I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. During this period, I made consistent use of what is known as “participant observation”. This process consists in the researcher immersing him/herself in the field, and in the population of interest, for an extended period of time. In fact, I did “*more than just observe*” (Bryman, 2016:423), as I actively took part in the practice carried out by the participants as well as conducting a series of activities for the collection of data and fieldnotes, such as drawing, sketching, photographing, filmmaking, and audio-recording. More specifically, I took part in the Liberi Nantes' training sessions twice a week.⁹ The only exceptions happened when I decided to be on the stands and acquire the needed multimodal material for the output of this project. My active participation in these sessions is probably the main change from what I had assumed in the research proposal. However, it allowed me to have a closer look at the internal dynamics of the team, and to experience what it means to be part of this amateur football team. For example, I could notice some behaviors which are typical of amateur football, such as the fact that the team members' participation in the weekly sessions strongly depends on their job as well as family related commitments. In fact, on many occasions, the coach could not count on the entirety of the first team members, and preparing the weekend's match would be highly difficult. In addition, many members expressed difficulties with respecting time schedules, for instance by arriving at the pitch very late both for the training sessions and the league's games. Sharing the changing room, playing football

⁹ The training sessions were scheduled every Tuesday and every Thursday, from 6pm to 9pm.

together, working hard, and giving my best in every session, definitely played a role in how I initiated and carried out the relationships with the participants. In fact, my presence at the pitch during the week and my attendance during weekend's games, allowed me to conduct small-talk conversations which led me to the establishment of relationships as well as gaining the participants' trust and respect necessary to conduct the interviews.

b. Photo and video elicitation interviews:¹⁰

These two techniques were used to co-create the knowledge about, on one hand, how the participants make sense of the recent economic and financial changes in professional football, and on the other hand, how amateur football connects to professional football via the comparison of some elements of the football material culture, such as the Liberi Nantes football pitch with the professional football stadiums, the Liberi Nantes training equipment management with the professional football procedures, and the Liberi Nantes changing room with the professional football changing rooms. This process of co-creation of knowledge was built in a way that the researcher was the one to start the discussion as well as giving initial prompts using audio-visual materials.

The Photo Elicitation technique "*is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview*" (Harper, 2002:13) in order to elicit a deeper or "*a different kind of information*" (Ibid.) about the topic of interest. For example, to discuss the recent economic and financial changes in professional football, I had prepared, a series of images downloaded from the internet. The first one depicted Cristiano Ronaldo's move to Saudi's team Al-Nassr, and the second one was the logo of the FIFA 2022 Qatar World Cup. These images were chosen to be used as "*prompts for discussion*" (Bryman, 2016:454) around the recent developments and changes in professional football. In addition, to discuss how elements of amateur football material culture resemble and differ from their equivalents in professional football, I had prepared other images, taken from the internet, which depicted the Camp Nou and Old Trafford stadiums¹¹, as well as the visitor's changing room of the Santiago Bernabeu stadium¹². Since "*the discussions may be based on photographs taken by the ethnographer*" (Ibid.), during the first days of fieldwork, I also took some photographs of the Liberi Nantes' football equipment, football pitch, and changing room, and then I used them together with the other images taken from the internet. Before starting this project, I had assumed the participants would only criticize certain aspects of contemporary football, but, instead, this method allowed me to find out more about their opinions and to discover that, in some cases, my assumptions were challenged, if not proved wrong. This is a strong point in favor of this method as it creates a situation where

¹⁰ The images and the screenshot of the video used for the interviews can be consulted in the Appendix.

¹¹ The Camp Nou is the official stadium of F.C. Barcelona, and the Old Trafford is the stadium of Manchester United F.C., two of the richest and most famous professional football clubs in the world. Their stadiums are very famous for their very aesthetically pleasing pitches and for the atmosphere that is possible to experience only in these places.

¹² The Santiago Bernabeu is the stadium of Real Madrid C.F., the most famous and one of the most awarded professional football clubs in the world. The visitors' changing room is one of the stops of the tourists' tour that take place in the stadium, which, due to the enormous quantity of trophies and the history of the club, is also a museum and a popular tourist attraction of the city of Madrid.

the “*ethnographer and informant would discuss their different understandings of images, thus collaborating to determine each other’s views*” (Pink, 2021:109). Finally, these principles also apply for Video Elicitation Interviews, where videos can also be used as “*research tools*” (Henry & Fetters, 2012:118). For the interviews, I took an extract of a video which shows the process and the people involved in the preparation of football equipment in professional football¹³. To conclude, I conducted four individual interviews and one “double” interview, during which the two members of the Liberi Nantes team also had the chance to confront with each other rather than only with the researcher. One of the individual interviews had to be conducted twice due to technical issues.

c. Oral and life history interviews:

These two techniques were used to co-create knowledge on the other elements of football material culture that were of interest for this research, to demonstrate, firstly, how they function as a glue between professional and amateur football and, secondly, how they can be linked to the idea of “the social life of things” (Appadurai, 1988) as well as which are the processes through which they acquire different meanings from those usually associated to “commodities”. Finally, to demonstrate how these elements link to personal life histories related to migration and the passion for football. In this case, the participants were the center of the process of co-creation of knowledge as they led the conversations and, in some cases, they used a series of objects to stimulate further and deeper reflections.

Oral and Life History Interviews are “*special forms of interview associated with qualitative research*” (Bryman, 2016:485), and are usually employed in historical research (Perks & Thomson, 2015), and in relation with migration, which, more specifically, “*emerges as one of the most important themes of oral history*” (Thomson, 1999:24). However, this approach has also been used already in relation to football (Buarque de Hollanda & Ribeiro, 2020). Life History Interviews and Oral History Interviews are two distinct techniques. The first one “*is a kind of unstructured interview covering the totality of an individual’s life*” (Bryman, 2016:485-486), while the latter “*is usually somewhat more specific in that the subject is asked to reflect upon specific events or periods in the past*” (Bryman, 2016:487-488). However, they share some common traits which made them suitable methodologies for this research project. In fact, on one hand, they both allow the researcher to put the participants’ voices and opinions at the center. And, on the other hand, they both allow for the inclusion of spoken testimonies among the valid sources of anthropological research. Furthermore, these two techniques can be both employed with the use of material objects such as documents, diaries, photographs, and other objects. More specifically, these techniques were chosen because of the composition of the Liberi Nantes men’s football team. Before entering fieldwork, I had assumed I would be interacting with migrants and refugees from Africa or the Middle East. However, as from the very first day, I understood how heterogenous the team is, and I found myself sharing the changing room and the pitch with people coming from different continents, such as Africa and Asia, but also with Europeans and, more

¹³ More specifically, the video was about the routine of Genoa C.F.C., an Italian professional football club.

particularly, many Italians. Therefore, once deep into the fieldwork, I chose to still conduct these types of interviews but with a focus on how the presence and, in some cases, the absence of material objects could say more about the participants' past and their passion for football. In fact, in two of the six interviews conducted, two members did not bring any object with them, but this "absence" still says something about their stories¹⁴. Interestingly, the topic of migration emerged naturally in every interview, even though it happened with respect to different migratory patterns. This spontaneous emergence of personal histories and lived experiences connected to migration flows and the movement of people was possible thanks to the employment of these specific methodologies, which, at the end, allowed to overcome the issue related to the study of migration that Heath Cabot calls "*crisis chasing*" (Cabot, 2019).

d. Major ethical considerations:

The main issue in this research project is represented by the research population, which included numerous migrants, some of whom were refugees and asylum seekers. This implied, other than considerations on the use of Italian as the language of interaction with the participants of this project, a constant reflection around some of the principles of the AAA Code of Ethics.¹⁵ The first principle, "Do No Harm", has been seriously and continuously taken into consideration because of the possible vulnerability of some of the members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club, given their status as refugees or asylum seekers, and their migratory past. Some of the employed methodologies, such as the Oral and Life History Interviews, dealt with the participants' past which, in some cases, revived memories related to violence, war, poverty, and death. However, the participants were completely free to choose what to say and their willingness to share it with me has always been double checked. This was also possible because of the great attention paid to the second principle, "Be Open and Honest about Your Work". In fact, as from the first day, I continuously stressed what my intentions were, what I was doing there, and why. Furthermore, in line with the third principle, "Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions", the consent was negotiated on a daily basis, both with respect to the acquisition of audio-visual materials and to the participation in the interviews. In this sense, consent forms have been handed out to the participants which then signed them. In relation to this, for example, one of the members of the club with whom I had built a great relationship, decided not to take part in the project and therefore no interviews were conducted with this person and no audio-visual materials were acquired. With respect to the sixth principle, "Protect and Preserve your Records", all the data, files, multimodal works and materials, are carefully stored in a dedicated hard disk, and the modalities in which they will be stored in the future were discussed with the participants. Finally, about the seventh principle "Maintain Respectful and Ethical Professional Relationships", a lot of attention has been paid on the researcher positionality and on the resulting power relations. By taking part in the activity of interest in first person, I forced myself to be on the same level, to be a member of the team. This also means that, as teammates usually do, I had the chance to spend some extra-research time with some of the participants,

¹⁴ In the multimodal output of this research project, this aspect is better unpacked and explored.

¹⁵ Source: <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/>

which allowed to construct positive relationships which will be eventually carried on in the future as well. To conclude, this project was possible thanks to a collaborative process between the researcher and the participants, and also thanks to the help provided by some of the members of the Liberi Nantes organization itself.

e. **The multimodal output:**

To present the findings of the research project, this written article is accompanied by an “interactive album-zine”, which takes the form of a mock-Panini sticker album.¹⁶ To begin with, given the importance of the concept of “materiality” in this project, the idea was to realize a tangible output. Something that could be touched with the hands, and something that would be capable of evoking memories by playing with it. In this sense, the “zine” becomes a valid and coherent output as it is directly linked to the concept of “materiality” (Piepmeier, 2008). Even though it challenges the traditional zine-making norms (Chu, 1997) because professionals were approached for the printing phase, this “zine” is entirely self-designed, in accordance with the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture (Poletti, 2005). Furthermore, the interactivity of this output lies in the fact that, by leafing through it, the audience can find a series of QRcodes which are linked to short videos about the stories of the six members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club who participated in this project.

At this point, it is time to address what “mock-Panini sticker album” stands for. The idea was to create an “amateur” version of the famous Panini sticker albums, which are a traditional element of football culture all around the world but are also usually restricted to professional football and footballers. Rather, by focusing on amateur football, this album wants to reproduce a typical characteristic of the zine-making culture, therefore, “*to erode the predominance of mainstream and commercial interests in particular cultural activities*” (Poletti, 2005:184). Since zine-making is also closely related to activism and it can be considered as a form of activism itself (Poletti, 2005), this “interactive album-zine” takes a stand with respect to the issue of migration and the movement of people in Italy, both when it comes to internal migration patterns and to the movement of people from Central Africa to Europe. Finally, by mocking a typical commodity of the football industry, this “interactive album-zine” also reflects a critical stance towards the state of contemporary professional football.

6. **Findings and Analysis:**

a. **More Than Just a Football Shirt:**

In this section, the answer to the research question is provided, as the various opinions of some of the members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club are presented as well as analyzed. According to the coach of the team, the Liberi Nantes football shirt is connected to the idea of “opportunity”. The “opportunity” is related to having the chance to express himself, which seems to happen on two levels. Firstly, in terms of being able to express his character, as he states that “*The Liberi Nantes shirt remembers*

¹⁶ In the appendix, it is possible to consult an example of these sticker albums.

me of an opportunity [...]to show my values, my personality” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). But also, in terms of being able to express his ideas and his knowledge about football, as the Liberi Nantes club allows him to put them into practice by having him as the coach. This idea of “opportunity” is also connected with “help” and the ability of “helping others”. In this sense, on one hand, the “helping” is towards people in need, people who are in difficult situations because of their migratory histories, which is something he can relate to because of his own lived experiences, even though he acknowledges that his life has changed a lot, as he comments that *“today I have the opportunity to help someone, rather, in my past, I was the one who needed help”* (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). On the other hand, the “help” is mainly concerning football as this shirt remembers him *“of the opportunity they give me to help my compatriot, or other boys who need help into the world of football”* (Interview with J., 7th February 2023).

According to the team captain A., this shirt is connected to three broad concepts. In fact, this shirt connects to “migration”, as he states that *“every time I wear this shirt ... it makes me remember of when I arrived here and ... when I enter the football pitch, I always give my 100% for this team”* (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). During one of the interviews, A. told his extremely dramatic and painful migratory history which started, among other reasons, because of his strong desire to make it in the football world, and ideally ended when he arrived in Italy. Even though he is not a professional player as he had wished, this football shirt gives him the chance to play football. Similarly, this shirt connects to “welcoming the other”, because *“it is a team that welcomes everyone, it does not matter where you come from, you can come from everywhere and they will welcome you”* (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). Even in this case, there seems to be a constant cycle in this team, as, with time, its members pass from needing help to providing help, for example by accepting everyone without distinctions. Finally, it connects to “freedom”, which according to A. is intrinsic in the Liberi Nantes name, *“as it says in the logo ... it is really a team that makes you feel “free” to be part of it, and “free” to leave when you want”* (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). “Freedom”, here, is linked to the possibility to choose whether to stay or to leave, therefore to the idea of the movement of people. In this way, an interesting contrast is created between what does the movement of people entail “before and after” wearing the Liberi Nantes shirt.

According to I., the Liberi Nantes football shirt also connects to a sense of “responsibility”, which can only be felt by the members of this team. In fact, *“I will say it is a burden, because when I think about this shirt, it is not like other teams because Liberi Nantes is a team that helps refugees, and other things like this [...] every match we play, there are a lot of people, a lot of eyes that are watching over us, over our behavior in the pitch, how we play, all these things”* (Interview with I., 10th March 2023). Even in this case, “migration” stands out. But this time, the focus is on how it is perceived by the other people and not by the members of the team themselves. In fact, this “burden”, and the respective sense of “responsibility”, is an exclusive characteristic of this team due to its own very composition. The context where the perpetual examination of

their actions and behaviors happens, does not help in easing this “burden”. In fact, it seems to be directly proportional to the negative perception that other people might have with respect to them.

Finally, according to K., another member of the Liberi Nantes team, this shirt connects to the idea of “family”. In fact, he states that *“When I wear this shirt, for me, I am playing for my family [...] because [it] gives you, again, the second chance to live your life, to meet new people. It gives you the opportunity to live the life you used to live in your home country”* (Interview with K., 2nd March 2023). However, it is a new “family”. It is group of individuals that becomes a family because they share something in common, namely, a past marked by migration histories. In so doing, they give each other the chance to constantly connect also to the positive aspects of their past, such as their lives before joining the team or, eventually, before arriving in Italy. In fact, the word “second” implies a before and an after, which are separated by different experiences of migration.

Therefore, this football shirt acquires various meanings that exceed those related to consumeristic and capitalistic practices that are usually attached to this kind of commodity. In fact, the Liberi Nantes football shirt can be seen as a material object through which the expression of the self and the idea of solidarity between people with different cultural backgrounds connect to the world of football. It is also a material object that is capable of evoking apparently simple conceptualizations of freedom as well as life histories related to migrations flows and the movement of people. This material object also becomes an indicator of the level of sportsmanship, intolerance, and respect towards the “other” of a specific section of the Italian society, that of amateur football. Finally, and more importantly, it is a material object that, by connecting to the basic idea of “family”, creates a strong sense of belonging between the members of the team, which is constantly strengthen by sharing similar lived and new experiences.

b. Material objects connect to the oral and life histories of the members of an amateur football club:¹⁷

In the process of understanding how different elements of the football material culture function as a glue that connects amateur to professional football, and how material objects can acquire meanings and values that exceed the consumeristic and capitalistic practices usually associated to such commodities, two main patterns emerged from the Oral and Life History interviews conducted. The first one is the “presence” of material objects. In fact, four members of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club brought different material objects to the interviews and used them to stimulate the discussion about their past.

For example, G., an Italian school teacher, brought along different objects to the interview, such as a sweater of his favorite professional football team A.C. Milan. This “commodity” was gifted to him by his girlfriend

¹⁷ In the multimodal output of this project there are six short videos which explain and expand more about the relationship between the participants and the objects that they did or did not bring with them during the interviews. However, here, only a few examples will be discussed.

and, even though it is *“the element that brings away some time from our day as a couple”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023), it acquired a strong value through the process of “gift exchanging” described by Mauss (Rubin, 1975). Furthermore, even though it is a purchasable object in the football market, this sweater connects his past to his present, as *“phases of my life are characterized by A.C. Milan”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). Therefore, this object not only shows how football is capable to connect one’s past to the present by this passion that remains untouched throughout the years, but it also evokes memories related to childhood, family relationships, and job, as *“A.C. Milan becomes a key of interpretation to get to know my students better”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). Another object that he brought with him was a scarf of the football team of the city he comes from, Campobasso. This apparently simple object evokes memories related to family, as for example this was the team *“where my uncle played”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). It also connects to broader issues of football fandom, the importance of football in local communities, and the connection between football and the economy, as he states that *“football is important ... also for a community”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023) in terms of economic development and vivacity. Finally, it is something that evokes memories related to migration and migratory histories as, even though this is the team of the city where he was born and from where he moved away, this object is important because it keeps him connected to his roots, which is something important for him *“because then one also has to be linked to his roots”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023).

With K., a young boy from the Democratic Republic of Congo, we discussed the story of a pair of football boots. These football boots were a gift, therefore Mauss’ argumentation on “gift exchanging” applies also in this case. The value that these boots acquired through this process is mostly related to the other individual involved in the exchange, Yaya Toure, one of K.’s favorite professional football player and one of the most famous and successful African athletes. K.’s attachment to these football boots is so strong that he can confirm that *“this makes me very happy and gives me the strength to keep playing football”* (Interview with K., 2nd March 2023). During the interview, this “commodity” evoked a discussion on football fandom, on how young African non-professional footballers idolize African professional footballers, on the differences between African and European football, and on how football is able to give the opportunity to live great experiences, as K. states *“all of that is thanks to football ... because without football I do not know if there is the possibility to do something with such a great person”* (Interview with K., 2nd March 2023).

During the interview with S., the Italian sporting director of the club, we discussed, firstly, about three different Liberi Nantes’ shirts which, according to him, they represent *“my second football life”* (Interview with S., 21st February 2023), the one that started after he left Sardinia to go to Rome. However, most of the conversation revolved around two other objects, a wool hat and a retro Juventus F.C. football shirt. The first one was a gift from the wife of one of his teammates when he was playing football in Sardinia, the other one was a gift from his brother. Other than just reflecting about the importance of these objects as gifts, it also emerged how they both evoked stories related to the passion for football, to family, to football fandom and to

how big Italian professional football teams have a lot of fans in small cities, because the local team plays in the lower leagues of Italian football. Finally, these objects were also able to connect S. to his past and to specific periods of his life, something that makes them very special as he states that *“I am more attached to the period than to the single item”* (Interview with S., 21st February 2023).

The second pattern that emerged from the interviews conducted was the “absence” of material objects. On one hand, the “absence” is only related to the context of the interview. In fact, even though he did not bring any object to the interview, I. discussed his life history and how he managed to go from a person who *“did not even know how to keep a ball between my feet”* to becoming *“one of the best guys in my neighborhood”* (Interview with I., 3rd March 2023). In this case, while reflecting on some elements of the football material culture, such as footballs and other tools of football training equipment and their constant use for an extended period of time, I. connected them to childhood memories as well as sacrifices and hard training. Furthermore, these objects were somehow able to elicit a discussion on football in Cameroon, on sport as an alternative for youths in peripheral and abandoned areas, on idolizing African professional football players and their impact on the local football culture, on football as a way to express yourself and to encounter the “other”, and, finally, on football as something that unites. On the other hand, the “absence” is related to a life history in general. In fact, A. not only did not bring any object to the interview, but the personal story that he told was strictly connected to the “absence” of *“valid identity documents [...] money [...] and medical assistance”* (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023), and on how this “absence” forced him to embark into a life-changing trip to Europe, during which he went through extremely violent events and great suffer. However, as it is possible to understand more about this by engaging with the multimodal output of this research, his passion for football remained constant and accompanied him from Cameroon to Niger, to Nigeria, to Algeria, to Morocco, to Libya, and, finally, to Italy.

To conclude, all the material objects discussed in the interviews appeared to function as a glue connecting amateur football to professional football. And this happened in two main ways. On one hand, the members of this amateur football club can be defined as both consumers and practitioners of material culture, as they make use of diverse objects related to professional football and to their childhood dream to become professional footballers, to make sense of their life and their passion for football. On the other hand, all the participants were able to connect material objects to their life histories of migration. The interview with the coach of the team, J., exemplifies this. In fact, he brought with him two photographs. One depicted him together with the last team he played for in Cameroon before moving to Italy, and the other one was a portrait of him alone, taken when he was playing semi-professional football in the south of Italy. These material objects were able to connect J.’s past to his present, and evoked memories related to migration flows and the movement of people as well as to the differences between professional, semi-professional, and amateur football in Africa and in Italy. Finally, when it comes to the topic of migration, this emerged, on one hand, with respect to the Mediterranean Sea route and the movement of people from Africa to Europe thanks,

for example, to A.'s and I.'s oral and life histories, J.'s photographs, and K.'s football boots. On the other hand, with respect to Italian internal migration flows and the movement of people from the islands to the peninsula, and from the small cities to the big cities, thanks to S.'s hat and football shirt, and to G.'s scarf.

c. Amateur football material culture in the eyes of the members of this amateur football club:

As previously mentioned in the Theory section dedicated to “material culture”, this concept also includes architectural elements, such as buildings and constructions. In the context of this research, the Photo and Video Elicitation interviews partially served to understand how elements of amateur football material culture, such as the pitch, the training equipment, and the changing room, resemble or differ from their equivalents in professional football.

i. The football equipment:

From the very first day of fieldwork, my attention was captured by a particular practice carried out at Liberi Nantes. The coach and other volunteers dedicate part of their time to wash and to prepare a variety of different items of football clothing apparel, which are then put at the disposal of the members of the team. This practice is similar to what happens in the context of professional football, where the athletes are given at their disposal everything they need for the training sessions as well as for the official games. This was confirmed by S., who said that “*since the moment I have been appointed as sporting director ... I strongly wanted to trace what was the professional model of football teams' warehouses*” (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). This shows how some practices of professional football can also be visible in amateur football and how the latter takes the first as an example to be followed in many different aspects. However, because of various reasons, these practices take a different form. In fact, coach J., who is one of the people involved in this, admits that “*I could not do exactly as they do it in Genoa [...] but slowly, I started to do something. [...] now you arrive, and you find all these clothes carefully folded [...] you have the impression that they are similar to how they are here [indicates the laptop with the video]*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). In the eyes of the people involved, this practice serves to teach how to give dignity and respect to the equipment as well as to enhance the participation of the footballers by making them feel as they are professionals. In fact, the moment this practice was implemented at Liberi Nantes was a turning point for its members, as team captain A. says, “*those who came and didn't even have the shoes to kick the ball with [...] and then they would find everything ready for them, and they would be happy, and they would come more regularly*” (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). Finally, the main difference with professional football lies exactly in the form of this practice and in its aesthetic, as G. explains “*in Genoa the thing is more 'industrialized', here is more 'dirty' [...] when something is more dirty [...] it is more 'rich' in my opinion*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023).

ii. The football pitch:

The Liberi Nantes football club has its training sessions and home games at the “XXV Aprile” football pitch, a soil-made pitch. The “soil element” contrasts a lot with “*televised football [where] the pitches are perfect*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). However, this does not change the attitude of the participants towards their pitch, rather, it reinforces it because “*when we win a match here, on this pitch, we are happy [...] it is our pitch*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). In addition, “*when there is the training session under the rain [...] it is stimulating, it is more beautiful, more interesting, because you feel alive*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). Therefore, the only difference is on the aesthetic level, once again, because “*there [in professional pitches] you can kick a ball like you can kick it on the other one [...] it is not the pitch that makes the player, but it is the player who makes the pitch*” (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). To conclude, according to the participants, this football pitch is special because it is their football pitch, and even though it differs so much on an aesthetic level from professional football, it is still the place where they can practice this sport that they are so passionate about. In this sense, it is also an element of material culture that connects to their past, but it is not indispensable for the development and maintenance of the passion for football, as I. states “*we used to play in the streets, in pitches that were worse than this [...] when there is the love for football there isn't a choice of where to play, wherever there is a ball you can play*” (Interview with I., 3rd March 2023).

iii. The changing room:

The changing room is a “sacred” place for a team, a place where access is usually restricted and one that carries an aura of secrecy and mystery regarding what happens inside of it. One aspect of this element of amateur football material culture that is in common with professional football, is the “smell”, as S. explains “*the changing rooms, in my opinion, also in Serie A, they always have the same smell [...] the smell of camphorated oil, the smell of the skin, of the people's sweat, and of football bags*” (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). The changing room acquires its sacrality because it “*is fundamental ... it is the energy, no? it is like when you dream of something [...] in the changing room one imagines things, imagines what will happen in the pitch*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). In addition to this, “*it is exactly there that the group spirit is formed [...] the changing room is in some way the soul of the team*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). Therefore, it is a place where winning or losing emotions, life experiences, values, and goals are shared and discussed by the members of the team. However, there are two main differences between the Liberi Nantes' changing room and one of a professional football club. Firstly, it is again the aesthetic to be different, “*because in that one, they are professional and some of them have their names on their seats as well*” (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). Secondly, the level of “access” is different, but this is mainly related to the special characteristic of the Liberi Nantes team, which is one that welcomes everyone, as G. says, “*the changing room is fundamental because it is the place where no one has to enter ... even though, by us, a lot of people enter*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023), and as A. reinforces by saying that “*here, everyone comes and goes, it is not like the professionals*” (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023).

d. The perspectives of the members of an amateur football club on the recent changes and developments in professional football:

Football is changing, as many other aspects of society are changing, as S. explains “*we cannot think that football is always the same thing and unfortunately it won't be like this, as it has not been like that for the worlds of labor, of living, of studying ... for everything*” (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). But what guides this change? Apparently, it is money and economic flows, as nowadays “*there are millions [of euros] moving around in football, there are also marketing and advertising things which create revenues*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). In this sense, specific events such as the Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer to the Saudi team Al-Nassr and the World Cup in Qatar were discussed with the participants and served as a lens to reflect on other general issues of today's world.

For example, in the discussion on the Cristiano Ronaldo's choice to join the Saudi professional football league, it emerged that the Italians focused more on the economic aspect of this event, on its negative consequences for football, and on issues exceeding the football world. In fact, when debating about the enormous amount of money that this player is going to earn, G. states that “*Cristiano Ronaldo is now a real business company*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023) and S. adds that “*this player was held hostage by his personality and by him being a corporate-man*”¹⁸ (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). Therefore, this choice, according to G., demonstrates that “*there is no love for football in this, there is the analysis of a business company which protects its interests and makes its turnovers*” (Interview with G., 1st March 2023) and that “*we are not talking about football anymore*” (Ibid.). This specific event evoked reflections on issues which are not apparently related to football but, thanks to football, they become of general interest, such as the human rights violations in particular countries, as S. confirms by stating that “*going to play in a country where civil and social rights [...] are continuously trampled on a daily basis hurts me, and it has nothing to do with what football is about*” (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). On the other hand, however, the non-Italians focused more on the ideas that huge amounts of money are justified by great sacrifices, and that the player in question wanted to try something different. In fact, J. states that “*the number of 200 million*”¹⁹ “*should not worry anyone, because the player who has been playing for his entire life has made an enormous sacrifice*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023) to be where he is now, and A. adds that “*he wanted to try [...] a different level of football [...] he doesn't play only for the money, he plays for the passion*” (Interview with A., 3rd March 2023). Furthermore, this event stimulated a debate on the development of professional football in countries outside of Europe, as J. explains “*I will say that in 10 years, those countries like China, Saudi Arabia, with this mentality, they will have highly competitive football leagues if compared to, also, European leagues*” (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). These different opinions might be the product of different lived experiences and different cultural and social backgrounds among the participants.

¹⁸ “Corporate-man” here refers to the idea of the fusion between a business corporation and an individual, as Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the most famous athletes in the world and owns various brands in different economic sectors.

¹⁹ The reported yearly salary of Cristiano Ronaldo at Al-Nassr.

With respect to the 2022 FIFA World Cup tournament in Qatar, from a footballing point of view, the participants agreed both on the quality of football displayed and on the success of the innovations put in place. On one hand, this tournament saw an unexpected but inspiring performance from the Morocco national team, which made history by finishing fourth and attracted many praises, like that of J., who says that *“many of its players play football in advanced European [...] leagues, therefore they have the right qualities to compete with the European teams”* (Interview with J., 7th February 2023), and he believes that the way they prepared for this tournament should be an example for other non-European countries, such as “his” Cameroon. On the other hand, the “winter tournament”²⁰ innovation worked out well, as S. explains *“it was a good World Cup ... so, the winter World Cup formula works, because you have the players who don’t arrive so fatigued to it”* (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). However, the participants provided different answers with respect to extra-football issues. Considering the numerous complaints and protests about Qatar hosting the World Cup, this event becomes an interesting starting point for broader considerations about geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural issues. For example, while discussing about the preparing phase of the World Cup, G. says that *“we also saw the corruption case with the European Parliament”* (Interview with G., 1st March 2023). Furthermore, the controversies related to the conditions of the workers employed for the construction of the stadiums in Qatar, which soon became a hot topic in the western media, are a spy for the conditions of many workers around the world, as J. reminds *“unfortunately, in the world, the construction of many buildings, not only related to football, are done in order to lose a lot of lives”* (Interview with J., 7th February 2023). In addition, he believes that talking and discussing about these issues creates awareness in migrant workers and this is important because *“until the day there is poverty, the people will always look for a job, and who is looking for a job is always exploited in some way”* (Ibid.).

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar can also be considered as one of the steps towards a non-Eurocentric football, an issue on which the participants had different opinions. According to I., *“everything begins with the publicity and advertising of their football culture [...] not only in Qatar but in the Arab countries”* (Interview with I., 3rd March 2023), therefore football becomes an instrument of soft power through which non-Western countries are trying to shape their international reputation. Furthermore, *“what they showed us in this World Cup is that football is not only limited to Europe [...] and we hope that after this, we will have other countries outside of Europe which will be able to organize the World Cup, I hope a country from Africa”* (Ibid). This event, then, also represents the desire of many football enthusiasts around the world to see their home countries hosting such an important football manifestation as the World Cup. But, on which premises and foundations is this potential turn towards non-European football based? According to S., *“that type of football [as he indicates the photograph with the Qatar World Cup logo] [...] only works with large amounts of money. And the economic flows are telling us that the money is now found in these autocracies, petrol monarchies”* (Interview with S., 21st February 2023). The rise of non-Western countries in the football

²⁰ For the first time in the history of the World Cup, the tournament was organized during the winter. This decision was the center of many discussions on every level of football, from institutions to fans, about, for example, how this could have impacted the football season and what it meant in terms of environmental consequences.

world seems to be linked with strategies based on great economic possibilities which contrast with the situation in the Old Continent, and therefore the “*World Cup in Qatar is the spy of an economic situation [...] of great difficulty that European football is experiencing*” (Ibid.).

7. Conclusion:

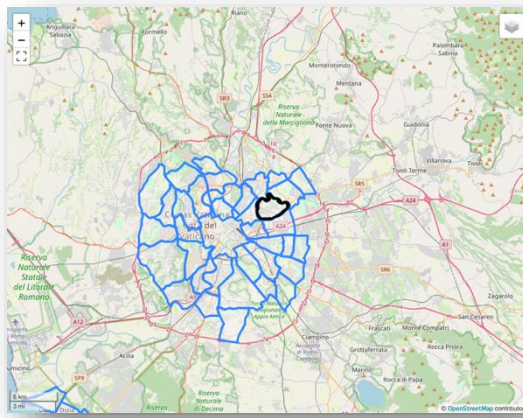
The amateur perspective taken in this project by focusing on the case study of the Liberi Nantes amateur football club, challenges the underrepresentation of amateur football in public and academic debates. Furthermore, on one hand, it allowed for an extensive analysis of how various elements of football material culture connect to broader issues and questions. In fact, first of all, the club’s shirt becomes something through which its members reinforce their sense of belonging towards each other and towards the team itself. Secondly, the elements of the football material culture acquire meanings and value through various processes. Thirdly, these elements are able to connect to personal histories of migration. On the other hand, the opinions of the members of an amateur football club on the changes and developments of football, show how closely interconnected the amateur and professional aspects of this sport are, and how this sport paves the way for reflections and discussions about different issues of the contemporary society.

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Appendix:

- Map of the city of Rome. In black, the Pietralata neighborhood, where the Liberi Nantes organization is located.



- The images, the photographs, and the screenshot of the video used in the Photo and Video Elicitation Interviews.
 - o Question 1:
 - Cristiano Ronaldo's move to Saudi team Al-Nassr.



- o Question 2:
 - The logo of the 2022 FIFA World Cup Winter Tournament.



○ Question 3:

- The football equipment management in amateur football vs. professional football.



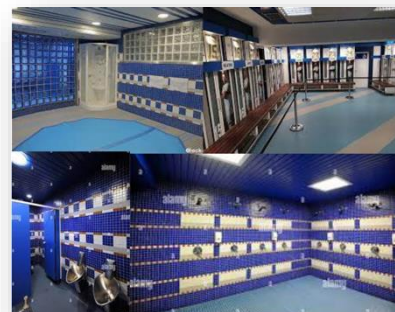
○ Question 4:

- The Liberi Nantes football pitch vs. Professional football stadiums.



○ Question 5:

- The Liberi Nantes changing room vs. professional football changing room.



- An example of the Panini Sticker Albums which were taken as inspiration for the realization of the multimodal component of this research output.



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