



Proposal for an original approach of professional football clubs stakeholders' identification and classification

Julien Bousquet¹, Nicolas Cicut²

¹ Full professor, Laboratory of research on New Forms of Consumption (LaboNFC), University of Quebec at Chicoutimi, Canada

²Lecturer, Marseille school of sports (Mediaschool)

Abstract

This paper proposes a dynamic and iterative approach to the identification and classification process of the stakeholders of professional football clubs. To do so a theory used in project management was mobilized. We used a qualitative empirical methodology and focused on a longitudinal case study, a professional French football club. Two data collections were done to capture the stakeholders' temporal dimension: one before the club's buyout in 2016 and one after this major event in the club's life so as to meet the objectives of the study. The first results highlight the role played by each stakeholder but foremost their active and evolutionary nature which should be considered in a managerial point of view. Moreover, and even if it may appear as a cumbersome method as all stakeholders identification and classification processes, the approach we have chosen is fairly easy to implement to assist a professional football club's manager.

Keywords: Football Clubs, Stakeholders, Sport Management, Case Study, Soccer

1. Introduction

According to Freemam (1884), the managers of an organization must not only take the stockholders expectations into consideration, but more broadly those of a whole set of stakeholders. These stakeholders are groups or individuals who may influence or be influenced by the achievement of the organization's objectives and therefore contribute to the determination of its overall performance. Because some actors are likely to be impacted by the goals, actions and results of an organization, they exert their influence to defend their own interests or to assert their vision, values, etc. The growing interest and importance of stakeholder management for sport organization is now established. In 2011, *European Sport Management Quarterly* published a special issue on the topic² and covered a number of industries related to sport. Since then, the number of publications has increased. Studies of professional football clubs stakeholders have mainly focused on two themes: stakeholder identification and stakeholder management. The first consists in identifying and prioritizing the clubs stakeholders in an effort to highlight the most important ones for managers to take into consideration (Senaux, 2004, 2008). Studies about stakeholder management often comprise the first stage which consists in identifying them. Research on the subject has focused on questions such as stakeholder governance and management (Michie & Oughton, 2005; Senaux, 2011), the analysis of some specific categories of stakeholders (Healy & McDonagh, 2013) on themes such as social responsibility (Walters & Tacon, 2010), the construction of a stadium (Walters, 2011), value creation (Paché & N'Goala, 2011), the clubs market value volatility (Sarıkaya, Yılmaz & Temizel, 2012) or information (Morrow, 2013). It is interesting to note that most studies are limited to English clubs (Healy & McDonagh, 2013; Michie & Oughton, 2005; Morrow, 2013; Walters, 2011; Walters & Chadwick, 2009; Walters & Tacon, 2010). However a few authors have focused on French clubs (Senaux, 2004, 2008, 2011), European clubs (Anagnostopoulos, 2011; Paché & N'Goala, 2011), Turkish clubs (Sarıkaya et al., 2012), and more recently Brazilian clubs (De Siqueira, Pajanian & Telles, 2015). On the whole, studies are often too intuitive, conceptual and are somewhat inspired by and limited to the works of Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997).

The objective of our study is to propose a different approach for the identification and classification of internal and external stakeholders compared to the theories commonly used in research in the football field. Taken from project management, this approach mobilizes the concept of "centrality". Contrarily to the factors mobilized by Mitchell et al. (1997) which we will see later in the article, centrality is the result of the interest, power, positioning and implication of each of the stakeholders and offers a more systematic framework and insists on the dynamic

aspect of the process. The empirical research strategy we chose is that of a longitudinal case study. The longitudinal methodology brings an interactive and temporal approach to the study of complex phenomena and therefore renders the dynamic nature of these phenomena (Patton, 2015). According to Yin's definition (2013), the case method is a qualitative approach to an empirical enquiry that allows its users to study in depth a complex social phenomenon, an event, a group or a collection of individuals, non-randomly selected, to eventually describe this phenomenon with precision and to interpret it according to its context. Besides, as our study targets a dynamic phenomenon strongly linked to its context and to the results it generates, we chose a procedural and longitudinal perspective. Our aim is to study the evolution of stakeholders over time. We chose to study the case of Olympique de Marseille (OM) - a French Ligue 1 professional club – and focused on two specific periods : before and after the club's takeover in September 2016. Two of the three researchers have a close relationship with the club as they have both had important functions within the club (player and board member). This "intimacy" with the environment made the chosen method more efficient with a more adequate data collection thus meeting the objectives of the study. The first observations after data analysis let us foresee very interesting results. First the proposed stakeholder identification and classification methodology makes the understanding of the various actors simple and efficient. Indeed the "central" stakeholders of the OM project are classified rapidly and "objectively" in two main categories: higher-priority stakeholders (with a centrality score above average) and lower-priority stakeholders (with a centrality score below average). Admittedly this may seem a little less precise than the typology developed by Mitchell et al. (1997) but, in fact, centrality offers a promising perspective. In line with Xue and Mason's works (2011) we can notice that stakeholders evolve over time, thus showing the urgency of taking the time factor into consideration in all research mobilizing such concept in a managerial perspective. Until now this has barely been done. Once iterativity and the weighting process of the four criteria that make up "centrality" are mastered, the challenge consists in making the procedure more automatic to facilitate the manager's work.

This article is structured according to the following plan. After an introduction that will anchor the subject in the field of football, the literature review will present the main contributions to the study of stakeholders in professional football clubs. The following part will describe the original methodology used to meet the objectives set beforehand and we will then present the results we obtained. In the conclusion, besides the potential limits of the study, possible directions for future research will be highlighted. In the next section of the article we will present a review of the existing literature on stakeholders in general and more especially in professional football clubs.

2. Literature review

The stakeholder theory originates in Freeman's work (1984) and rests on the idea that managers must not only take into account the shareholders expectations, but more generally, those of a number of the firm's stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined as « any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives ». They must be considered because they are known to contribute to the determination of the overall performance. Freeman links the necessity of a new managerial paradigm to the changes – internal and external – the firm must face. The stakeholder approach has been used to study various types of organizations including professional football clubs. Works on the subject have focused on the two points mentioned previously: stakeholder identification and prioritization on the one hand and stakeholder management on the other hand.

2.1 Stakeholder identification and prioritization in professional football organizations

Senaux's works (2004, 2008) appear as the most thorough as they are focused on stakeholder management. The author has identified a number of French professional football clubs stakeholders (as well as their expectations) and has established a hierarchy based on the power, legitimacy and urgency criteria defined by Mitchell et al. (1997). His study is limited to seven categories of stakeholders: shareholders, players, support association¹, professional league/federation, local authorities, spectators/supporters and TV channels/sponsors. The others – media, players' agents, the European Commission and the State – are simply mentioned and left aside for they are either considered as secondary and not so important, or considered as being considered more likely by the federation, the league or professional groups/associations. The result of this study is that, among the examined stakeholders, the most important ones – considered as unambiguously « definitive » –, towards which attention should be directed, are the shareholders and the players. Supporters are also *a priori* definitive stakeholders but can in some situations only be dominant or dangerous. The support association, the league and the federation are considered as dormant, dominant or definitive stakeholders depending on cases. Local authorities are classified as discretionary stakeholders, TV channels and sponsors as dormant or definitive². The author specifies that these are preliminary results based on the interviews of different stakeholders – including clubs managers – for two Ligue 1 and one Ligue 2 clubs.

¹ The support association represents the club's historical entity. It holds the FFF affiliation number, enters the club's teams in national competitions and owns the club's logo, color code and slogan.

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In the same way, many studies seem to be limited to only a few stakeholders. Boon (2000) presents a non-prioritized cartography of English clubs stakeholders. These are the Premier Football League, the Football Association, FIFA - Fédération Internationale de Football Association -, UEFA - *Union of European Football Associations* -, European clubs, employees, players and agents, other clubs, fans/consumers, community, commercial partners, media, TV channels, the public, the government and supervisory bodies. Basing his analysis on this cartography he underlines the main issue of English football which can sum up to a planning question: do the main stakeholders collectively want to support the international ambitions of the bigger clubs or do they want to focus on domestic issues? Meyssonier and Mincheneau (2013) draw a distinction between primary stakeholders (shareholders, players, spectators) and secondary stakeholders (UEFA, the French Football Federation (FFF), the Ligue de Football Professionnel (LFP), local authorities, the support association, the world of amateur football) without using an empirical methodology to prioritize them. Indeed the authors only indicate that the primary stakeholders' participation in the club's life is necessary to its success.

Most of the works targeted on professional football clubs are seen under a managerial point of view. Some studies emphasize club governance in general while some others focus on a specific stakeholder or on a specific question. Mitchie and Oughton's work (2005) illustrate the first point of view and studies the governance of English clubs. Their analysis reveals that despite significant improvements, many clubs would benefit from adjusting and improving their practices, especially in terms of information disclosure, the appointment of directors, board composition, induction and training of directors, risk management and consultation with stakeholders. As for any firm, good governance requires that clubs communicate not only with their shareholders, but also with other stakeholders such as their employees, their clients, and local community representatives. The relationship with the supporters in particular is important and differs from the usual relationship between a firm and its clients. The study specifies that clubs use mechanisms that favor stakeholders involvement based on communication with supporters groups, supporters' trusts, supporter-elected directors on the board or fan forums. In 2011 Senaux analyses the implications of the emergence of a commercial logic in French professional football on club governance and management. Initially, clubs were non-profit associations with sports objectives. They are now commercial firms for which football has become merchandise. It appears that this new logic has not replaced but co-exists with the previous one. Clubs, are therefore confronted to an institutional pluralism (Gammelsaeter, 2010), or, in other words, to different institutional logics or « rules ». This contributed to make their governance and management more complicated, hence the necessity to manage their stakeholders. For the authors, this means an improved consideration of the stakeholders' expectations and a restructuring of the organizational identity in a context of radical institutional change.

More recently Brazilian researchers (De Siqueira et al., 2015) have developed a more quantitative or "numerical" approach to assess stakeholders. Using the three criteria – power, legitimacy, urgency – from Mitchell et al.'s (1997) model, they suggest giving a score to each of them by interviewing football clubs managers. The results are interesting and make it possible to numerically prioritize stakeholders according to the seven categories – dormant, discretionary, demanding, dominant, dangerous, dependent and definitive - defined by the authors. This empirical research defines a more objective framework for stakeholder assessment and varies from the more conceptual models developed until now.

2.2 Stakeholder management

As we explained earlier, some researchers have focused on a single stakeholder. It is the case with Healy and McDonagh (2013) who studied Liverpool FC virtual fan community. More especially, the authors analyze the determining factors and the patterns of the fans consumption. A consumer typology is defined and comprises seven categories, four of which are directly inspired by the works of Hirschman (1970) and Cova and Cova (2000) – exit, voice, loyalty, twist - and the three other are a new addition – entry, re-entry, non-entry. Each category corresponds to a degree of importance in the role they play in the co-creation club culture and brand value. Managers can encourage fans involvement by facilitating dialog and collaboration in an effort to understand their expectations and to meet objectives. Contacts can be made with the most influential members of the community to use their knowledge as "qualified consumers".

Most studies focus on a specific question linked to stakeholders. Some researchers have concentrated on social responsibility. Breitbarth and Harris (2008) propose a conceptual model describing the creation of cultural, social, human, financial and societal values for the stakeholders of various types of sport organizations such as professional football clubs, professional football leagues and federations in England, Germany, Japan and the United States. Therefore social responsibility must be seen as an opportunity and not as a problem. Walters and Chadwick (2009) insist on the strategic advantages a football club can gain from implementing community programs through a model of stakeholder involvement based on the creation of a community trust. The work relies on the study of English clubs that have organized charity events which is a way for them to get involved in socially responsible activities. Six strategic levers seem to emerge: the removal of community and commercial tensions, reputation management, brand strengthening, the setting up of partnerships with local authorities, the creation of business cooperation and the discovery of young players.

In 2010 Walters and Tacon study the way UK sport organizations implement social responsibility through stakeholder management strategies. They are interested in the clubs' and the stakeholders' actions and responses. The study is based on several interviews of the manager of a top professional football club, the CEO of a medium sized professional football club, the vice-chairman of a small professional football club, a supporter-elected director, five representatives from national supporter organizations, two board members at two large supporter associations, two representatives from the Football League, one representative from the Independent Football Commission, and a prominent sports journalist. Walters (2011) analyzes the integration of stakeholders in the building of English club Arsenal FC's new stadium. The analysis is based on the engagement and participation principles defined by Low and Cowton (2004), the objective being to incorporate the stakeholders' expectations and interests in the project so that the stadium contributes positively to the area in which it is being built and maximizes the advantages for a number of stakeholders. The project was carried out with a residents' consultation, a communication strategy, the creation of a Stadium Liaison Committee, the elaboration of a Stadium Management Plan, and a supporters' consultation. The study of the stadium construction did reveal stakeholder engagement but few participation and involvement opportunities were observed. In the same year, Paché and N'Goala (2011) examine the value creating strategies developed by the clubs' managers, players and supporters in European clubs. It emerges that value creation is based on the development of brand equity, player capital and customer equity, notably via marketing policies aiming at valorizing the link between them. However, the authors underline the current weaknesses of these strategies for the supporters and other stakeholders as the appropriation of the consequently created value is not equal for all of the main actors. On the contrary, new marketing practices encourage the co-creation of value between the various stakeholders for the benefit of all.

Sarikaya et al. (2012) address a different issue. Basing their study on four Turkish clubs, they suggest that stakeholder and reputation management should be used as a tool to control the market value volatility of sport firms. They insist on the fact that reputation is closely linked to stakeholder management and rely on Davis, Chun, Da Silva and Roper's (2003) works who define reputation as a feeling of proximity resulting from the firm's ability to satisfy stakeholders' expectations. The study also stresses that these two points are of utmost importance for the clubs' success, financial performance and control of their market value volatility.

Recently, Morrow (2013) stresses the importance of information - more especially financial information - in British football clubs. The stakeholders he considers are the investors, the lenders, the employees (players, staff...), the supporters and the regulatory bodies of football (League, UEFA). This study is part of the overall debate on the concept of financial fair play implemented by UEFA. The author highlights the inadequacy between financial fair play and the stakeholders - including shareholders - objectives and expectations. Therefore information must be more extensive than just economic and financial, notably on the clubs' social dimension. Because of the nature of football clubs, various elements of performance should be considered thus broadening the clubs' responsibility beyond the mere economic and financial accounts. In a more general perspective such as this, other stakeholders could contribute to the clubs' information.

Overall, the existing literature offers a few interesting analyses. At the start, most studies were centered on British clubs. In recent years, this tends to change (Anagnostopoulos, 2011; De Siqueira et al., 2015; Sarikaya et al., 2012; Senaux, 2008, 2011). Studies on stakeholder identification and analysis have stuck to the model proposed by Mitchell et al. (1997) without attempting to improve or develop it apart lately from de Siqueira et al.'s (2015) work. Moreover research has been limited to the very wide issue of stakeholder governance and management (Mitchie & Oughton, 2005; Senaux, 2011) and/or to the analysis of specific stakeholders on very specific themes (Healy & McDonagh, 2013). Finally, and even if several researchers are discussing the subject, very few have tackled the dynamic and evolving aspect of stakeholders in football. Xue and Mason (2011) have compared two distinctive periods in the history of the Shanghai Formula One Grand Prix in order to study the evolution of the various stakeholders involved. These observations have incited us to aim for two specific objectives for this paper. The first objective is to use a different empirical method than the one developed by Mitchell et al. (1997), even if it has become almost standard in the study of professional football. The second objective is to integrate the dynamic aspect which seems crucial for a better understanding of stakeholder identification and classification. To reach this objective we will rely on the model proposed by Bousquet, Leyrie and Diallo (2013) in the field of project management.

3. Proposed methodology

3.1 The authors' methodological position

The research strategy we used to meet the objectives of the study is a longitudinal case study. The longitudinal methodology brings an interactive and temporal approach to the study of complex phenomena and therefore renders the dynamic nature of these phenomena (Patton, 2015). This approach presents the necessary flexibility to identify the complex processes involved in the specific organizational context of professional football organizations. The case method is a qualitative approach to an empirical enquiry that allows its users to study in depth a complex social phenomenon, an event, a group or a collection of individuals, non-randomly selected, to eventually describe this phenomenon with precision and to interpret it according to its context (Yin, 2013). Besides, as our study targets a

dynamic phenomenon strongly linked to its context and to the results it generates, we chose a procedural and longitudinal perspective. Our aim is to understand how OM’s stakeholders evolve over time.

3.2 Field of study

The field we chose to meet the research objectives is OM or, more precisely, OM project as defined by the new owner since the club buyout in September 2016. This was a natural choice for several reasons. First, and as mentioned previously, two of the authors have a close relationship with the professional club. One was a professional player at the club and another had an important managerial position. Closeness and easy access to the field of study were an undeniable advantage in the research process and therefore to identify and assess the OM project’s main stakeholders.

Why OM ? Because it is an important French Ligue 1 club with a significant history and tradition. In addition the club’s takeover in September 2016 allow us to precisely compare two periods of the club’s history – before and after buyout – assuming its stakeholders have evolved in the wake of this important event.

3.3 Stakeholder identification

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the context, we carried out a census of the various stakeholders of the OM project. In the first place the authors did an individual press review from newspaper articles (local newspaper “La Provence” for instance) but also used their intimate knowledge of the club. In the second place, they determined the main expectations for each stakeholder as suggested by Senaux (2008). Once the census was completed, the researchers confronted their results in order to refine and select stakeholders. One should note that the odd number of researchers (three) made the arbitration process easier when needed. The results translated into a list that would serve as a base for the following stakeholder classification and prioritization (quantitative analysis). At this stage it is important to specify that two periods of identification took place: the first before buyout from December 2015 to January 2016 and the second after buyout from November 2016 to December 2016.

3.4 Stakeholder classification

For stakeholder classification we used the notion of centrality as developed by Bousquet et al. (2013). Centrality is determined by analyzing the level of interest, power, positioning and implication of each stakeholder. Interest corresponds to the real or perceived, positive or negative stakes the OM project represents for the stakeholders. The existence of these stakes is what makes a simple actor become a stakeholder. Power represents the capability of the stakeholders to act on or influence, positively or negatively, on the project. The stakeholders positioning towards the project and its achievement is described by the position independently from the actions taken or not taken. These actions are taken into consideration in the implication criterion. This last notion indeed describes the intensity of the actions implemented by the stakeholders in relation with the project and its achievement. Finally stakeholder centrality – a compound criteria based on these four notions – is defined as the central and crucial nature of a stakeholder at one given stage of the life of a project. The table below (table 1) summarizes the different criteria for each stakeholder and presents the scale used to assess them.

Taken from socio metry, this measurement aims at characterizing the position of actors within a network and more particularly to identify the most important ones. Several types of centrality can be found in the existing literature such as degree centrality (number of direct links) or intermediacy centrality (number of intermediate positions in the links between the network’s actors) for Freeman, Roeder and Mulholland (1979), or local (proximity with other actors of the network) or global centrality (overall network centrality) for Huault and Leca (2009). All of these “centralities” have in common that they highlight the relative importance of some actors compared to other actors in terms of efficiency (Baret, Huault, & Picq., 2006), authority ((Hussler & Hamza-Sfaxi, 2012) and, above all, power ((Huault & Leca, 2009), thus making these actors essential (Burt, 1995). The concept of centrality we are using in the present paper is different because of its compound nature. It is derived from the most commonly used criteria in stakeholder analysis and project management literature.

Interest	The real or perceived, positive or negative stakes the project represents for the stakeholders: very low (1), low (2), average (3), high (4) or very high (5).
Power	The stakeholders capacity to act on or influence the project positively or negatively: very low (1), low (2), average (3), high (4) or very high (5).
Positioning	The stakeholders positioning towards the project and its accomplishment: strong opposition (-2), opposition (-1), neutrality (0), support (1), strong support (2).
Implication	The intensity of the stakeholders actions relative to the project and its accomplishment: very low (1), low (2), average (3), high (4) or very high (5).
Centrality	Central or crucial nature of a stakeholder: sum of the scores attributed for the level of interest, power, implication (absolute value) and positioning.

Table 1. Criteria selected for the calculation of stakeholder centrality

Concretely and as in the previous stage, each researcher starts by assessing each criterion according to his analysis of the press review and to his knowledge on the subject. Once assessments and centrality scores have been calculated individually, the researchers confront their results in order to attain consensus. The odd number of researchers and therefore of points of view here again helps reduce the subjectivity bias as much as possible. The most important stakeholders for the given period are then determined by identifying those with a score above average. This third step is described in a table that integrates centrality (see table 2 and 3 in the “results and discussion” section of the paper) and presents the stakeholders we have identified and their centrality scores for each period.

4. Results and discussion

Before we can start the analysis of the results, it is important to specify that this analysis will cover both internal and external stakeholders.

4.1 Internal stakeholder identification and classification

Data analysis (table 2) gave some very interesting results. First, not all stakeholders are central in the OM project in both of the periods studied.

In the pre-buyout period the mean score is 12.3 out of 17 which highlights four central stakeholders: owners, directors, coaches/football managers and players. These actors are essential in the internal running of a professional club.

In the post-buyout period, mean centrality increases a little (13.4 out of 17) which shows a progression for some of them. Two new central stakeholders are added to the four previously identified: the support association and the youth academy which appear as important in the new OM project.

Stakeholders	Main expectations	PERIODS	
		Before buyout	After buyout
Owners	Sport-related, economic, financial, social, media et political	17	17
Directors	Sport-related, economic, financial, social, media et political	16	16
Coaches/football managers	Sport-related, financial and media	14	16
Players	Sport-related, financial and media	14	14
Technical and medical staff	Sport-related	12	12
Sport collaborators	Sport-related	11	11
Administrative staff	Financial and social	10	11
Support association	Sport-related, societal and values	11	15
Academy	Sport-related and economic	12	16
Volunteers	Recognition	6	6
Mean score		12.3	13.4

□ Cells highlighted in grey represent a higher centrality than average

Table 2. Internal stakeholder centrality

Some stakeholders have evolved between the two periods (before and after buyout). The support association (from 11 to 15 out of 17) and the youth academy (from 12 to 16 out of 17) have become more important because of the strategic decisions of the new directors. These two actors were already present in the club’s strategy but have become more important over time, in the space of little less than a year. This can be explained by an internal stakeholder management and mobilization different to that of the previous directors. The academy, through the development of young talented players, has become a new element of sport and financial strategy. The follow-up of academy players and the development of the links between the amateur teams and the professional team are one of the club’s new priorities. The support association and the SASP (Société Anonyme Sportive Professionnelle) OM now have more efficient relationships and active communication. The SASP (Société Anonyme Sportive Professionnelle) OM has shown an increased interest in the support association and they now have more efficient relationships and active communication.

4.2 External stakeholder identification and classification

For external stakeholders (table 3) the analysis is more challenging because of the number of external stakeholders (26 in total for any given period). For the pre-buyout period, mean centrality is 6.08 out of 17 and eight stakeholders have a higher score: the LFP (Professional football league), the municipality (Ville de Marseille), players’ agents, spectators, supporters groups, the media, suppliers and clients. For the post-buyout period the number of stakeholders is unchanged with a mean centrality of 7.04 out of 17 which means some have become more important for the club. Stakeholders with a score higher than the mean score are the LFP, the municipality, other local authorities, spectators, supporters’ groups, the media, suppliers and clients.

Stakeholders	Main expectations	PERIODS	
		Before buyout	After buyout
FIFA	Football development and regulatory	3	3
UEFA	Football development and regulatory	4	4
FFF	Football development and legal	5	5
LFP	Football development, regulatory and economic	8	8
DNCG	Regulatory	6	6
EU	Legal and regulatory	3	3
Ministry of Sports	Football development, legal and regulatory	3	3
Ministry of Economy and Finance/Labour ministry	Legal and financial	4	4
Home office	Regulatory	6	6
Municipality	Sport-related, political, image and territorial development	12	14
Other local authorities	Political, image and territorial development	6	8
Players agents	Sport-related and financial	8	6
Directors union	Professional clubs development	4	4
Coaches union	Respect, promotion and advocacy of the profession	4	4
Players union	Respect, promotion and advocacy of the profession	5	5
Referees union	Respect, promotion and advocacy of the profession	4	4
Agents union	Legitimacy and recognition	4	4
Spectators	Sport-related and entertainment	9	12
Supporters groups	Sport-related, entertainment, social and identity	10	17
Media	Audience/visibility, sport-related, entertainment, economic and financial	10	17
Suppliers	Visibility/image, economic, financial and social	11	14
Clients	Visibility/image, economic and financial	13	16
Competitors	Sport-related and entertainment	5	5
Eco-friendly, local residents and territorial associations and committees	Compliance to laws and regulations and defense of the represented interests	4	4
Social association	Defense and promotion of the corporate object of the association	4	4
Financial community	Funding in compliance with the regulations promulgated by the supervisory bodies	3	3
Mean score		6.08	7.04

Cells highlighted in grey represent a higher centrality than average

Table 3. External stakeholder centrality

It is interesting to note that some stakeholders have become less central between the two periods while other ones have become more central. Before the buyout agents (8 out of 17) had a more central position in the club's activities. With the new directors' deliberate and more transparent strategy, their importance has decreased (6 out of 17). In the same line of thought other local authorities who were not central in the pre-buyout period (6 out of 17) have gained a more central position after buyout (8 out of 17). OM's commercial activity stretches well beyond the limits of the city of Marseille and covers the whole region around it. A powerful OM is greatly beneficial to the concerned local authorities.

Other stakeholders have seen their centrality significantly increase between the two periods. It is the case for clients (from 13 to 16 out of 17), suppliers (from 11 to 14), the media (from 10 to 17), supporters' groups (from 10 to 17), the municipality (from 12 to 14) and spectators (from 9 to 12). This evolution is strongly related to the new stakeholder management policy implemented by the new owner and the new directors. The novelty effect, accessibility, transparency and a set of targeted marketing actions have inspired more favorable behaviors from the actors towards the club.

5. Conclusion on the stakeholder identification and classification process presented

Our identification and classification approach, with its strengths and limits, is different to the one commonly used in the field of sport management and developed by Mitchell et al. (1997). As for its strengths, our approach makes it possible to quantify the process empirically and not conceptually and to make it more systematic. It also uses the concept of "centrality" and therefore adds one criterion for the classification of stakeholders. The main limit is that, for the moment, it doesn't offer a typology as developed as Mitchell et al.'s (1997). In the same time, the discrimination of stakeholders in two categories (central or less central) offers a much simpler reading of the subject.

This study clearly and empirically stresses the dynamic aspect of stakeholders which is according to us vastly neglected by the majority of studies in the field of professional football and even of sport organizations in general. Too few studies have empirically studied several distinct periods (Xue & Mason, 2011). Stakeholders can rapidly evolve in the context of a professional club under the influence of controllable or uncontrollable events.

However there is still a lot of work to do to make this tool usable on a daily basis by football and sport organizations manager. Indeed, while the stakeholder identification process is not especially difficult, stakeholder classification is a much more complex process. According to us, future research on stakeholder identification and classification should focus on two points. First it would be interesting to determine the right moment to undertake the heavy identification process, especially when facing elements that are not controllable by the managers as a striking event can impact the stakeholders.

Secondly both Mitchell et al.'s (1997) approach and ours remain extremely complex and cumbersome for a manager to use. It would be useful to work on the automation of stakeholder identification and classification and ideally to propose an almost real-time dashboard. Our approach, with a centrality score made of four weight able criteria, tends towards this possibility and could be used as a starting point for future developments.

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