**London School of Economics and Political Science**

# Digitally mediated social ties and achieving recognition in the field of creative and cultural production
*Unravelling the online social networking mystery*

Cornelia Reyes Acosta

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Media and Communications of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

London, September 2016

## Abstract

Career paths in the field of cultural and creative production and the attainment of recognition have been associated with networking and point at the relevance of maintaining social relationships. Social capital has been discussed as one key element, given the fact that forming social relations with significant others potentially aids individuals striving for symbolic capital – the precursor to recognition. The emergence of online social networking platforms as a means to amplify opportunities to build social relationships raises questions in regards to its impact on building social capital. The key question that arises is: To what extent can digitally mediated social relationships support creative professionals in attaining recognition for their work by capitalising on digitally mediated social ties? To answer this, it was necessary to uncover the nature of digitally mediated social relatedness in order to understand how and why these relations may be eligible to produce social capital. Tracing this process through drawings of personal networks elicited a wealth of narratives around the influence of digitally mediated social interaction on symbolic capital. This thesis identified that accessing social capital resources via digitally mediated social interaction operates within the context of two prime factors: risk and trust. As such, digitally mediated social ties are useful for building social capital. However, this holds primarily in contexts where risk is relatively low and therefore the required level of trust is marginal. The relevance of digitally mediated social ties in building social capital is thus largely context driven, whereby the individual circumstances of creative professionals are crucial. My findings highlight the ambivalent nature of digitally mediated social ties in terms of their conceptualisation as a form of social relationship. Interestingly, while being highly volatile and fluctuating in nature, these *liquid ties*, as I have labelled them in my thesis, do afford access to resources such as trust that have hitherto been primarily associated with strong social ties. Essentially, this challenges the prime conceptualisation of social capital as an affordance of strong, established social relationships in the formation of symbolic capital. Therefore, I make a case for a more nuanced approach to (mediated) social capital, which conceptualises the relevance of the social tie in light of its affordance, rather than its formal quality.

# Declaration

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## *Chapter 1: Introduction*

## 1.1 Introduction

The initial idea to research the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in creative professions emerged several years ago during a conversation with my friend Anna in Vienna in September 2010. Anna, a graduate of theatre studies, was enthusiastically telling me about her plans to become a professional photographer specialising in portrait and wedding photography. Although I was somewhat startled at this new plan, given the fact that Anna had no formal education or training as a photographer, I was curious to find out more about her ideas – especially in terms of how she planned to establish herself in a field marked by a high degree of uncertainty and intense competition. Anna's response was both surprising and compelling to me: "I'm just gonna make it all happen on Facebook" (Anna, Interview 1, p. 1). Capitalising on the affordances of Facebook, which she trusted would help her spread the word about her work alongside publishing photos she had already taken, Anna was convinced that online social networking platforms would play a key role in her career. Confident of Anna's creative potential and talent, I shared only part of her excitement, as I was reluctant to appreciate the potential Anna saw in using online social networking platform to establish a career from scratch. I thought to myself, "It just can't be that easy." Ultimately though, a year and a few months later, Anna would convince me of the opposite.

By 2012, Anna had in fact managed to secure a firm client base with a number of contracts under her belt, which enabled her to actually make a living as a self-employed photographer. Affirming her enthusiasm for social networking, she reiterated the fact that online social networking platforms, especially Facebook, had played a fundamental role in launching her career. She referred to the growing number of online followers resulting from her engagement with social media, of which some had actually become clients, and who had approached her on the basis of her work featured on Facebook and Instagram. Anna was particularly fond of a number of resources she had acquired through her online connections: recommendations from friends of friends, collaborations with other relevant stakeholders in the field as well as networking with colleagues abroad, which often resulted in additional work contracts.

Impressed by Anna's achievement and the fact that online social networking did indeed seem to be opening up opportunities for her, I started to wonder what Anna had actually meant when she said she was going to make it all happen on Facebook. Questions started to arise as to what exactly Anna attributed to Facebook as a tool to leverage digitally mediated social ties and create visibility for her work by connecting with others. Exactly in what way did she use those platforms? Which strategies did she apply to create actual opportunities and what role did her apparent enthusiasm for networking play in terms of her online engagement? Did her specific niche of photography lend itself in any particular way to achieving recognition through Facebook? And to what extent was Anna's personal background, her particular skills or the already existing network of art-affiliated friends relevant in this context?

## 1.2 The field of cultural and creative production reconfigured – online social networking bypassing traditional routes to symbolic capital?

This anecdote about Anna highlights two important elements pertinent to the careers of many creative professionals and which characterise the core of this research: the importance of networking as a signature feature of creative careers and the potential relevance online social networking platforms assume in this regard. In the following sections of this chapter I present a number of theoretical notions that are relevant to trace the accumulation of symbolic capital for creative practitioners. The notion of social capital and its links to symbolic capital attainment are at the core of this project. Thereby, this thesis seeks to explore a range of theoretical ideas to develop a view on the role of online social networking platforms in the formation of social capital and eventually the attainment of recognition.

Previous research shows that networks are of particular value in creative professions as they provide access to employment alongside industry specific information (e.g. Neff, 2005; Pratt, 2004). Lee (2011) argues that in creative professions specifically, employees rely almost exclusively on networking as a practice to succeed in their profession by facilitating "access, which can ultimately translate to status and success" (p. 552). The significance of using online social networking platforms as a means to engage in wider networking opportunities seems convincing at first, as they are associated with simplifying access by connecting

individuals across geographical and social boundaries (e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Hanna et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Interestingly, Anna's example and the strong emphasis she placed on the relevance of using online social networking platforms in her 'success story' points to an interesting aspect: Traditionally, the attainment of status and success in the field of creative production has been portrayed as a limiting procedure, given the fact that access to networks and associated benefits have been described as exclusive in nature, favouring those with access to existing networks and associated benefits (e.g. Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Bourdieu, 1993). In contrast, the apparent ease of engaging with others via networking practices online conflicts with the notion of attaining recognition in that it is marked by competition and disadvantage. Rather it suggests the assumption that by using online social networking platforms, creative professionals can take control of their own success by facilitating networking opportunities that did not previously exist. As Anna's case implies, the use of online social networking platforms seems to positively impact networking opportunities, leading to status and success. However, one might ask, what is actually at the core of this assumption that suggests that social boundaries are being eradicated by the mere use of digital technology?

Tracing the relevance of networking from a conceptual standpoint, I decided to use Bourdieu's concept of field (1996, 1993) as a reference frame, given its emphasis on the significance of social relationships in the careers of creative professionals as imperative for attaining status and recognition. Bourdieu's notion of field is useful insofar that it portrays the individuals' struggle to attain specific positions and desirable resources as a process that is negotiated among individual stakeholders or 'players'. It is useful to conceptualise the field as a social space given its definition as "a network or configuration of objective relations between positions" (1993, p. 72). The notion of field highlights the significance of various forms of capital, according to which the pursuit to secure a position in the field is attributed to the availability of these forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993, 1984). The relational aspect of field is striking, as it "is also constituted by, or out of, the conflict which is involved when groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field and how that capital is to be distributed" (Webb et al., 2002, p. xi).

The way in which the value of capital is being negotiated and in further consequence (re-) distributed among stakeholders in the field explains why the

attainment of recognition is often experienced as constraining: In his original definition, Bourdieu (1993, 1984) heavily relies on the significance of social class affiliation in explaining individuals' agency to attain positions in the field. It is assumed that individuals affiliated with upper class social circles have more economic, cultural and social capital at hand, which aids navigating the field more efficiently, thus leading to better outcomes. Depending on predominating rules and social norms pertinent to the field of cultural production, affiliation with the ruling class equally enables individuals to utilise their existing capital more effectively, as knowledge on how to leverage particular forms of capital and converting them into other resources poses a competitive advantage (e.g. Lee, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013). Most importantly, the value of capital is always field-specific, which means that access to resources emerges in correlation to the specific norms that have been established in the field.

Obviously, circumstantial characteristics have changed since: Bourdieu's definition of *field* is anchored in a very specific social scenario – the French Bourgeoisie of the early 20th century that focussed on highbrow art and affiliated professions, which quite naturally introduces a certain bias. The way in which resources are assumed to acquire value is heavily linked to those particular conditions. For example, cultural capital, in the sense of obtaining a degree from a prestigious school and exhibiting a cultivated self by way of acquiring knowledge on opera and highbrow art, may be useful in this particular context. Thereby, conditions in the field favour "people with certain cultural dispositions and capacities, and with certain kinds of social networks [in order to] accumulate and acquire, for instance educational qualifications, information and skills" (Savage et al., 2014, p. 8). Nonetheless, contextualising the notion of field within an environment of creative production is crucial to understand how individuals in the field *practice* negotiating existing resources against perceived limitations implied by predominating external factors.

Bourdieu's notion of field is central to this research. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that the stringent focus of using structural positions of individuals rooted in class affiliation to explain what shapes their relationships has been criticised as too linear (e.g. Bottero & Crossley, 2011). One major challenge being that Bourdieu "fails to fully recognise the generative role [...] of interactions and bonds in the *constitution* of field relations" (Bottero & Crossley, 2011, p. 102, emphasis in original). This means that by putting overt emphasis on structural

framework conditions and the way in which they shape interaction, Bourdieu argument fails to look at the empirical detail of social relationships: How do individuals experience building relationships? In what way do they shape their practices? These are questions that are difficult to harmonise with Bourdieu's theory, but are nonetheless vital to this research project.

Addressing these shortcomings, I draw on Becker's (1982) notion of art worlds, which is often described as complementing Bourdieu's theory of field: "many authors [...] think that the concepts of field and worlds simply refer to two interchangeable approaches that are equally useful in the same research project, one emphasizing conflict, the other the complementarity of actors and actions" (Becker & Pessin, 2006, p. 275). Indeed, Becker's take on artistic production resonates with Bourdieu in his conviction that art is the product of a collective effort. He uses the notion of art worlds to "denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world of noted for" (1982, p. xxiv). Becker's concept of cultural production is to a large extent based on the significance of collective action, which he denotes as "joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence" (p. 35).

Relationships are central to Becker's argument. However, unlike Bourdieu, he offers a more empirical take on the significance of social relations in the process of producing art works. Instead of relying on social structure, he focuses on "real people who are trying to get things done, largely by getting other people to do things that will assist them in their project" (Becker, 1982, p. 280). Instead of portraying relations among stakeholders in the art world as "exclusively relations of domination, based in competition and conflict" (Becker & Pessin, 2006, p. 277), Becker focuses more on the "idea of a world of people who collaborate to produce this or that result [...] even if the more powerful people in their discipline don't approve or recognize what they do" (Becker & Pessin, 2006, p. 280).

My initial impression was that creative professionals do experience their professional environment as being heavily constrained and inaccessible. Nonetheless, I am keen to identify whether Becker's more inclusive take on art worlds perhaps resonates more with creative practitioners active in areas other than the traditional fine arts field.

I argue that two specific aspects need to be readdressed: First, there is evidence that particularly social capital assumes a striking relevance in creative professions, where it is often referred to as the creative economy (e.g. Lee, 2011). In creative professions specifically social relations significantly impact an individual's ability to attain recognition in the field, which then often leads to contracts and success. In a nutshell, this means that knowing the 'right people', as in the individuals occupying leading positions in the field, is key in becoming recognised as a legitimate player in the field. The importance of social capital in this context is justified in that it provides access to tacit knowledge via social relations (e.g. Grabher, 2004), for example, which is decisive in securing contracts and access to work opportunities. Second, there is reason to assume that the process of acquiring capital deviates from the established assumption that overemphasises the significance of social class affiliation in acquiring resources that are perceived to be valuable in the field. The recent notion of "emerging cultural capital" (Savage et al., 2015, p. 93) is worth considering here. At its core, this new form of cultural capital discusses the fading relevance of highbrow culture and with it, the significance of taste and values by way of hereditary transference (Prieur & Savage, 2013).

Furthermore, it has been argued that new competences associated with the digital age are to be addressed as cultural capital, whereby its acquisition may require particular skills (e.g. Savage, 2015) that are independent of – or at least complicate – the direct link to class affiliation in the Bourdieusian fashion. Given that forms of capital are convertible, this notion implies that the changing forms of legitimate cultural capital impact the way in which social capital is being acquired. Specifically, I assume that emerging forms of cultural capital are impacted by an individual's attributed skills in the use of digitally mediated forms of social connection (cf. Helsper, in press, van Dijk & van Deursen, 2014). This, in turn, led me to speculate that social capital attainment online is equally undergoing change.

My argument particularly focuses on the relevance of symbolic capital in the process of attaining recognition in the field. Initially, symbolic capital is defined as resources resulting in a certain degree of prestige or honour (Bourdieu, 1993, Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991), which is central for gaining recognition in the creative sector. The accumulation of symbolic capital is key when it comes to securing a significant position in the field; however, I assume that the attainment of symbolic capital is intrinsically linked to social capital, which essentially makes it a "social product" (Lawler, 2011, p. 1418). The relevance of social relationships and the

value inherent in these relationships are critical in order to appreciate symbolic capital not simply as a form of capital per se, but instead as capital that is perceived to be valuable, because of the meaning and legitimacy attached to the social relationships that created it. Bourdieu (1991) denoted symbolic capital as "*another name for distinction – is nothing other than capital of whatever kind, when it is perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception*" (p. 238). Thereby, symbolic capital is accrued when it is being recognised by others in the field, which creates a striking link to other forms of capital and particularly social capital. This assumption strongly emphasises the specific value of social relationships in the cultural and creative sectors. It suggests that symbolic capital is achieved not merely by forming social ties with virtually anyone in the field, but rather with particularly legitimate, recognised figures in the field. Tracing the value of digitally mediated social relations in view of attaining recognition leads us to the central question of this thesis: Are these social bonds eligible to sustain social relations *that count,* that is to say, legitimate social bonds, which create symbolic capital?

## 1.3 Social capital as the pivotal point for unravelling the significance of digitally mediated social ties

Conceptually linking the attainment of symbolic capital to social capital, I concluded that tracing the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in this process required going back to the very point where social capital originates: in the formation of social bonds (Bourdieu, 1984). My aim was to understand where social capital accrued through digitally mediated social ties emerges, by examining "the making of networks, with networking as a *practice*" (Wittel, 2001, p. 51). My aim was to understand what role online social networking platforms play in the careers of creative professionals, highlighting the process of forming social bonds with the help of digital technology. Online social networking as a practice seems uniquely eligible to complement creative professionals' engagement with other stakeholders in the field. The relevance of social media has been discussed as a pertinent feature of the creative industries (e.g. Flew, 2005), referencing its potential to facilitate collaboration among stakeholders and connecting actors to reach new audiences (e.g. Marwick, 2011; Shih, 2010). However, there is no empirical evidence that explains how online social networking platforms concretely affect social networking practices in creative professions, let alone enable professionals to create social

relations they see as meaningful in this context: What do individuals mean when they talk about networking online? How do they build relations using online social networking platforms and to what extent do those relations impact access to information and ultimately, success?

One of the first challenges was to identify a viable conceptual layout of social capital. In particular, it was important to identify a concept that would allow tackling the 'ingredients' of social capital as it were. To the effect that I would be able to address specific elements pertinent to social capital formation that served as leverage points for locating the impact of digitally mediated social ties in the process of building social capital. Unlike the growing amount of literature on social capital implies, I concluded that only a handful of recognised authors have dealt with the exact definition of social capital, in other words conceptualising what social capital in fact *is*. Accordingly, some researchers have claimed that due to its broad outlook, social capital runs the risk of becoming a "catch all term broadly used in reference to anything that is 'social'" (Lin et al., 2001, p. 57), which is mirrored in the lack of innovative conceptual contributions. The many approaches to tracing social capital in practice, which span a wide variety of indicators, including macro and micro aspects of social capital, make it a challenging concept to operationalise. This goes so far that even among the most acknowledged scholars in this field (e.g. Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988, Lin 2008, Portes, 1998, Putnam 1995, 2001) the only element that gathers consensus is that social capital is essentially "network-based" (Lin, 2008, p. 54).

Since I was interested in understanding the 'architecture' of social capital, so to speak, using Bourdieu's concept of the latter (1984) was one of the most important decisions I took at the very beginning of this research process. The specific definition of social capital as the aggregate of resources contingent on "a durable network of […] relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 51) seemed the most useful to me, as, unlike other definitions, it places a strong emphasis on the relational nature of social capital. Notably, Bourdieu's idea of social capital largely contrasts with the predominating discourse on the formation of social capital via digitally mediated social interaction. Specifically, I observed friction between Bourdieu's notion of social capital, which is marked by the restrictive impact of social class affiliation, and social capital attainment online, which is characterised by unbounded access in absence of social and geographical boundaries. For example, the emphasis Bourdieu places on the

relevance of mutually recognised relationships as being imperative to social capital formation raises questions regarding the eligibility of digitally mediated social ties in this respect: Precisely in what way are those ephemeral, transient social ties (e.g. Wittel, 2001) capable of sustaining social bonds that yield social capital? Consistent with this logic, digitally mediated social ties hardly seem suited to sustain a durable network of social relationships which, as the concept implies, is yet another requirement for social capital formation. Notably, characterising digitally mediated social ties as ephemeral and fleeting, I focus on newly established, emerging social ties and acknowledge that the digital realm often serves as a means to sustain already existing social ties (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). Associating these specific forms of digitally mediated social ties with social capital formation, drawing on Bourdieu's concept, created friction in terms of logically combining both theoretical realms. Nonetheless, instead of interpreting the existing conceptual tension as a reason to dismiss the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in building social capital, I was compelled to understand how individuals' interpretations of digitally mediated social ties and their use of online social networking platforms change the *process* of attaining social capital, which I assumed could lead to a more nuanced interpretation of social capital.

In a similar line of thought, I was interested in understanding how other forms of capital impacted the formation of digitally mediated social ties, or more precisely, to what extent cultural capital, for example, played a role in *making* digitally mediated social ties relevant. Bourdieu's work on the forms of capital (1984) highlights conceptual linkages between social capital and other forms of capital; it assumes that any form of capital can be converted into other forms of capital. For example, resources that qualify as cultural capital, such as particular knowledge or skills that manifest in an individual's attitude or status, have been described as decisive when it comes to forming relevant social bonds. In this regard, Bourdieu (1993) insisted on the relevance of inherited resources in building cultural capital, which become embodied *over time* by consistent exposure to relevant social and cultural cues. This assumption reiterates the significance of social class affiliation as it presupposes that to a significant degree, cultural capital acquisition is subject to the cultivation of one's self, often referred to as *habitus*, which stems from a predisposition that is a result of being raised in a cultivated home. This implies that cultural capital in its embodied state cannot simply be acquired; rather

it is the result of embodied social cues that become a part of one's socially observable self over time and are a result of continuous investment in cultivation.

The relevance of cultural capital as an important resource for accumulating social capital is obvious, following from the idea that in building social ties the perceived status of a person is decisive (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987; Lin & Dumin, 1986). According to the principle of homophily (e.g. Kadushin, 2012), it is assumed that individuals with a similar social status and a similar type of cultural capital, so to speak, are more likely to be associated socially. The question that arises here is whether or not this same principle holds true when it comes to forming social bonds online. Or in other words: To what extent is cultural capital, in its traditional sense, relevant for forming social ties online? What specific resources can be defined as legitimate cultural capital in terms of creating digitally mediated social bonds? I speculated that in this context, cultural capital needed reframing by shifting the prime focus away from inherited social markers and placing it instead on the particular *skill* and *practices* that assumed relevance in building digitally mediated social ties. Following this line of thought, I argue that in an online setting, those specific skills needed to form social bonds can be *acquired* instead of merely relying on one's social and cultural predispositions. Consequently, my research equally aims to identify individuals' strategies to create social relations online, by tracing how those effective skill sets are acquired and under which conditions they take effect.

## 1.4 Online social networking platforms and their affordance of facilitating meaningful social bonds

Aiming to identify whether and how digitally mediated social ties are eligible to build legitimate social capital, I decided to look at online social networking platforms and their affordances for facilitating the formation of social bonds. Specifically, I speculated that the features of online social networking platforms that facilitate social engagement, alongside individuals' attitudes and attributions toward their capacity to build social bonds, are both relevant. This brings us back to Anna's earlier claim that Facebook was going to "make it all happen" for her, which suggests the assumption that the tool and associated features per se would almost magically create sociality by itself. I was convinced that instead of attributing the influence of online social networking platforms to a logic of technological determinism, it would be more insightful to place the focus on individuals' own

interpretation of digitally mediated sociality and their particular motivations in using platforms. I was keen to identify in what way the particular skills needed for using platforms, paired with individuals' attitudes towards social media in general, played a role. This was precisely because I assumed that the key for creating effective social bonds online was to understand how individuals conceptualised opportunities in light of existing features facilitating social engagement.

Online social networking platforms have gained increasing popularity over the past decade, not only in the personal realm, but also for professional networking purposes, as is vital in creative professions. These platforms have become a fixed element of our daily lives, which is clearly evidenced by the 90% adoption rate that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have among young Britons aged 24 or less (Dutton & Blank, 2011). It is legitimate to assume that the use of online social networking platforms has had a lasting effect on the way people socialise and build social bonds. Rainie & Wellman (2012) even go so far as to claim that digitally mediated social interaction has created a new social operating system that "offers more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past because now they have more room to manoeuvre and more capacity to act on their own" (p. 9). Approaching online social networking practices from this perspective resonates with a discourse on social media specifically, and the Internet in general, that focuses primarily on the positive, enabling effects of online technology. Scholars often appreciate digital technology as an "indispensable means for the actual manifestation of many current processes of social change" (Castells, 2000, p. 694), which facilitates individual freedom, particularly in terms of creating a wealth of opportunities that positively impact collaboration among individuals on various levels (e.g. Benkler, 2006, 2011).

Research tracing the impact of using online social networking platforms echoes the perception of digital technology as a facilitator of sustaining personal growth capitalising on boundless networking opportunities (e.g. Resnick, 2005; Emens et al., 2004; Rheingold, 2003; Wellman et al., 2003). The significance of networking as a means to convey access to tacit knowledge resulting in competitive advantage (Grabher, 2004) highlights the central importance of *social capital*, particularly in creative professions. As the online networking logic implies, the opportunities that using online social networking platforms provide should significantly ease the process of gaining access to relevant resources (e.g. Hampton et al., 2011; Steinfeld et al., 2008). Therefore, it would seem that online social networking practices do not only amplify possibilities for personal growth by offering

users opportunities to engage more directly with their individual (social) surroundings on a deeper level; they also strengthen the feeling of being more connected to other individuals, which allows them to enjoy a number of benefits typically associated with social interaction.

Existing research (e.g. Gauntlett, 2013; Burke et al., 2011; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2007; Wellman et al., 2001) provided ample material to form an initial understanding of the formation of social capital online. However, I remained frustrated upon acknowledging the lack of conceptual input on social capital formation via digital means. The challenge I saw was to engage with this phenomenon at a much deeper conceptual level, insofar as the actual process of building social relationships online needs to be approached. Whereas previous research mainly deals with questions on whether digitally mediated social interaction increases or decreases the formation of social capital (e.g. Wellman et al., 2001), I speculate that the nature of social engagement online changes the whole process of social capital formation, given the fact that different types of social relations afford different outcomes. Consequently, I argue that in order to trace the attainment of social capital online, one must look at its very root, that is to say, tracing how digitally mediated social relations form and what is required for individuals to build meaningful ways of social engagement. In addition, drawing on the convertibility of different forms of capital I aimed to understand how cultural capital, in particular skills that enable individuals to capitalise on digitally mediated social ties could be reinterpreted.

To tackle the matter of an individual's skills in leveraging features of online social networking platforms to build social ties, I decided to look at the affordances of online social networking platforms as a means to trace "the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 44). This was informed by my expectation that if online social networking practices were to inform a more agentic narrative towards building social capital, I needed to identify how the particular features of a tool, namely its properties, served this purpose. While scholars have dealt with the affordances of online social networking platforms as a means to create forms of sociality (e.g. boyd, 2010; Donath & boyd, 2004), from a theoretical standpoint there is little evidence as to how individuals act in light of specific properties to *practice* online sociality. In other words, little is known about to which extent Facebook or Twitter are being perceived as useful in building social

ties, and which exact strategies individuals apply to bestow their online practice with meaning.

## 1.5 Tracing the emergence of social capital via digitally mediated social ties in the field – a journey from social network analysis to hand-drawn network maps

I concluded that in order to explore the affordances and individuals' response to these, I needed to tackle the very source of digitally mediated social relations by uncovering narratives of digitally mediated social relations in practice. I was keen to understand in which way online social networking platforms facilitated social relations *that count*, namely social relations that are experienced as legitimate for the accumulation of symbolic capital. I aimed for a methodological approach that was centred upon the nature of the social relationship. Precisely, this means that unlike most of the research in this area (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011; Lampe et al., 2011), which primarily traces usage patterns of online social, networking platforms, I wanted to go one step further and examine how individuals experience the process of connecting with others online. This resonated with Wittel's (2011) claim that differentiates network sociality, as he calls it, from other more traditional forms of social exchange. Unlike the predominant discourse on network sociality that is concerned with the macro-structure of global networks replacing more traditional forms of community, one aspect that is often overlooked is the "actual making of networks" as in uncovering new emerging "models of social relations" (p. 52). Obviously, tracing this micro-structure of networking requires starting at the very beginning, by collecting data based on the individuals' narrative accounts, including their experiences in building and maintaining social relations online, the particular strategies and tactics they use, as well as the specific skills required.

From the outset, it was clear to me that my empirical work would not merely aim to elicit data based on digitally mediated social relationships, but essentially data that unlocked the meaning of these particular social ties. Placing the emphasis on the nature of the social tie, I opted for a social network analysis approach. Initially, this seemed promising, as uncovering particular social relationships as pertinent to individuals' social networks plays a central role in the analysis of social networks (e.g. Wasserman & Faust, 2004). Most importantly, I was keen to use an interactive approach in the field, as I hoped to elicit data by way of stories, personal

accounts and anecdotes revealed in a dialogical setting. Consequently, I started out using a name generator approach (e.g. Carrasco et al., 2008; Hogan et al., 2007), aiming to enable individuals to speak about the social relationships that sustain their network. This was achieved by instructing respondents by a trigger question (cf. Burt, 1984), to list the names of those individuals who they thought played an important role in their creative practice. I speculated that enacting data on relevant actors would then prompt respondents to talk in more depth about the social relations online and how these became meaningful as part of their networks.

Contrary to my expectations, respondents struggled with the name generator technique when it came to enacting data on digitally mediated social ties. Specifically, this resulted from the fact that most of them were unable to remember the concrete names of people they were connected to on Facebook or Twitter, which meant that respondents either omitted these contacts altogether or provided vague bits of information, therefore failing to produce conclusive data. Nonetheless, using the name generator in two pilot studies provided an opportunity to collect feedback on the difficulties they encountered and where the lack of engagement originated. I learned that while recalling traditional social contacts is often logically connected to a person's name, this rationale is ineffective when it comes to digitally mediated social relations; rather than associating social proximity to particular individuals via their name, digitally mediated social bonds were better remembered in conjunction with concrete experiences, contexts and circumstances. Inspired by this observation, I felt compelled to address the implied constraint of instructing respondents to think around social relationships via a predefined trigger and decided to apply a more unstructured approach.

I then opted for an arts-based approach based on respondents' drawings of their social networks. Even though I initially doubted the effectiveness of such a completely unstructured approach, I quickly realised that the openness of this approach was key in motivating respondents to speak to me on a more intuitive level about digitally mediated social interaction. Whereas respondents struggled with traditional approaches, the absence of predefined indicators that characterised this method enabled them to elaborate on digitally mediated social ties by creatively providing information on the quality of these relationships, paired with information on whether or how they seem relevant, and in which context.

Looking at the way in which respondents spoke about their social ties on Facebook, Twitter, etc., some preferred to refer to online social ties through

placeholders. One such figure that was repeatedly cited was the "bubble", a sort of anonymous aggregation of several individuals at once. One interesting aspect was that these bubbles came to life through respondents' narratives on specific events and contexts, which was when some of those anonymous 'faces' then became tangible. This was astonishing, because quite unexpectedly, by letting respondents draw social ties in whatever shape or form they wanted, I had quite haphazardly discovered the key to unlocking the nature of digitally mediated social ties. Interestingly, my respondents' account of digitally mediated social ties as a sort of cloud of 'faceless', 'anonymous' individuals coincided with various theoretical accounts on the ephemeral and transient nature of social connections in the digital age (e.g. Chambers, 2013; Bauman, 2013, Bauman, 2007). So instead of continuing to work with abstract theoretical notions, it was at this point that I discovered *what* it was that made these ties seem so intangible.

Understanding that context and situation was key for discussing the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction in creative professions. I was then able to interpret the data, the narrative and specific anecdotal evidence that respondents provided, from a completely different angle. As such, I was able to observe that within these stories, narratives unfolded that described in detail when digitally mediated social interaction leads to the formation of social bonds *that count*.

The narratives I elicited around specific situations in which digitally mediated social ties were perceived to be relevant, helped me understand the role of these ties. I understood that these social ties are often portrayed to be useful in terms of connecting with individuals in key positions that were deemed attainable for specific reasons. Essentially, online social networking platforms were often seen as crucial to establish this initial contact, the spark of a social bond that promised to develop into something more. These social ties can sometimes fulfil the function of building a bridge towards symbolic capital holders that would be difficult to produce otherwise. Specifically, respondents referenced the capacity of online platforms to provide them with a means for this initial contact, which they perceived as very unlikely to be obtained via other routes, such as just sending them an email, because they feared this form of contact might not be enough of an incentive to facilitate a real connection.

I concluded that for digitally mediated social ties to be perceived as meaningful in that they give respondents an opportunity to create social

connections that count, context is highly relevant. Above all, I realised that the productivity of digitally mediated social ties in the field of creative and cultural production hinges on two factors: On one hand this revolves around the perceived risk involved and the associated level of trust required to compensate for the risk involved. On the other hand, I realised that the significance of digitally mediated social ties for building social capital is heavily impacted by the type of creative engagement. Therefore, in highly volatile sectors such as the fine arts sector, where symbolic 'attachment' largely defines which artwork is perceived to be of value, the significance of digitally mediated social interaction for building a reputation is negligible, given the fact that their ability to sustain the level of trust required in this sector is simply beyond their capacity. Thus, I have generally experienced the affordance of digitally mediated social ties to be most effective in a situation where there is a limited degree of risk involved, in the sense that the artwork produced involves a less complex process of authentication to be perceived of value.

## 1.6 Outline of this thesis

This thesis is structured as follows: The literature review (Chapter 2) places the thesis in the field of cultural and creative production. I begin with situating the thesis within the fields of cultural production and the creative industries, which are often used interchangeably, but characterise the production of art works in a different way, specifically in terms of portraying the way in which value is attained. I then discuss the relevance of symbolic capital as a means to attain recognition and prestige and I define the attainment of symbolic capital as a key component in the careers of creative professionals. I then move on to contextualise the notion of symbolic capital with social capital. I argue that framing cultural and creative production alongside Bourdieu's notion of field, the attainment of symbolic is best understood as a social process, which highlights the significance of social capital resources as vital to achieve recognition. Challenging the rigidity of Bourdieu's notion of social capital I then discuss the significance of the social tie, in which I focus on investigating the value of social relations in view of attaining social capital resources. This is followed by a discussion of network sociality and the notion of digitally mediated sociality, which discusses the impact of online social interaction on the formation of social engagement. Finally, I discuss affordance theory to tackle how individuals interpret properties of digital platforms in view of facilitating social

engagement online. The conclusion of Chapter 2 offers a break down of the main arguments I build my thesis on and offers an overview of the research questions.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of this thesis: I present a detailed overview of the sampling process, including different avenues I have taken to identify suitable respondents. I also provide a rationale for adopting case studies as a means to find answers to my research questions and portray five creative practitioners as cases. In the remainder of Chapter 3 I discuss the methods I have applied, including the name generator technique and hand-drawn network maps as a means to elicit verbal data. This is followed by a discussion of the analysis of my data, which includes narrative analysis and thematic analysis. At the end of this chapter, I discuss limitations of this thesis and provide a note on reflexivity.

In Chapter 4, 5 and 6 I discuss the findings of my research: Chapter 4 focuses on conceptualising digitally mediated social ties as a liquid ties – a new concept I developed in characterising the nature of digitally mediated social ties. This is achieved alongside discussing the visual cues of the hand drawn network maps as a means to grasp of the meaning of social ties that are facilitated online. I also discuss the notion of trust as a key affordance of digitally mediated social ties in the given context and provide conceptual implications of liquid ties on conceptualising social capital.

Chapter 5 builds on the notion of liquid ties and looks at affordances of Twitter to trace the way in which individuals use platform properties to create social engagement online. Drawing on the notion of 'effectivities' I discuss three key dynamics that I identified as key to understand respondents' readiness to leverage Twitter's properties successfully.

Chapter 6 then focuses in more depth on the attainment of symbolic capital. I draw on the notion of authentication as key in the process of bestowing recognition onto creative professionals and I discuss they way in which approval for creative work is being achieved online. This chapter also provides an analysis of key skills in activating digitally mediated social ties and contextualises digital literacy skills with cultural capital, providing input that advocates notions of emerging cultural capital.

In Chapter 7, I provide an overview of key findings, which I relate to the theories that have informed the conceptual framework. I outline contributions to the concept of social capital, portray the concept of liquid ties in context with trust as a key affordances of digitally mediated social interaction and discuss the relevance of

digitally mediated social capital in relation to other forms of capital. I also offer an overview of the methodological contributions, providing implications for researching digitally mediated social ties in social network analysis.


## 1.7 Conclusion

This introduction provided an understanding of the relevance of studying the impact of digitally mediated social ties as a means to create symbolic capital in creative professions. As previous research argued, networking in creative professions is vital for locating work contracts, creating visibility, and ultimately for establishing recognition. I have argued that gaining recognition, expressed in symbolic capital attainment, is linked to existing social capital, whereby creating social relations with recognised individuals in the field is essential. Traditionally, attainment of recognition, particularly in the cultural sector, has been portrayed as cumbersome, often favouring those with pre-existing social networks and resources that lead to competitive advantage. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of field suggests that social capital attainment stringently requires exploiting other forms of capital, notably cultural capital or economic capital. Further, the claim that capital attainment is most often linked to social class affiliation, whereby individuals associated with privileged social circles will leverage capital more effectively, explains why their resources are perceived as uniquely eligible to convert them into other forms of capital.

Online social networking platforms seemingly create opportunities to form social relationships in the absence of social or geographical constraints. Digitally mediated social ties resulting from the use of these platforms appear to facilitate an easier access to social capital. I speculated that the use of online social networking platforms might qualify to alleviate obvious constraints. Tracing the relevance of those ties, I decided to work with respondents from creative professions who were using social media platforms as part of their day-to-day practice. Particularly, through the use of hand-drawn network maps, I aimed to elicit data on the quality of digitally mediated social ties and on which strategies are used to facilitate access to social capital. Ultimately, I learned that the significance of digitally mediated social ties largely depends on the context and the particular field of occupation, whereby implied risk and uncertainty play a major role. Therefore, the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in a traditional fine arts context is marginal, whereas in other

areas, connecting with others online can often provide access to particular resources that are essential in becoming visible to potential clients and thus acquiring work contracts.

Ultimately this thesis seeks to explore a range of theoretical concepts to develop of a view of the role of online social networking platforms and digitally mediated social ties in the formation of social capital. Thereby the core argument of this thesis builds upon the following claims:

a.) Social capital is key to developing a career in the field of cultural and creative production, given the fact that it allows access to resources that enable creative practitioners to establish recognition (e.g. mentorship, expressions of approval, access to insider information, etc.)

b.) The field of cultural and creative production is one where both social and cultural capital are needed to progress.

c.) Social capital is linked to the notion of social networks as it is established through the social relations that sustain the network.

d.) Access to social capital is often perceived as cumbersome due to geographical and social barriers. The advent of online social networking platforms seems to help circumvent these boundaries and as such offer an alternative/additional route to accruing social capital.

e.) This led me to investigate whether creative practitioners' use of online social networking platforms can help them develop a career and aid their attainment of recognition.

f.) In order to investigate this, I argue that social capital attainment is best understood as a social process. This means that investigating the effect of digitally mediated social ties on social capital attainment requires to trace a micro-perspective of social networks, i.e. looking at social networking as a practice

g.) The case studies I used in this thesis enabled me to trace this micro perspective and unpack narrative data that allows illustrating the process of online social networking as a practice

h.) Social capital attained by means of digitally mediated social interaction requires looking at two key features: 1.) their affordance of establishing trust and 2.) their capacity to facilitate voiced approval/authentication by decision makers

i.) Building digitally mediated social ties that feature these capacities requires elements of performance, which are embodies an individuals' ability to leverage platform properties to build meaningful social engagement

j.) These elements of performance need to draw upon an individuals' cultural capital as they need to understand field-specific norms that are expressed in their perceived professionalism

k.) In addition, they need digital cultural capital to become proactive users of in utilising platforms effectively

l.) In cases of artists who do not use online social networking platforms to activate social capital and follow traditional routes I observed that their use of these platforms reflects rather than develops their social capital

Researching the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in view of attaining symbolic capital I identified the following key research questions. I present these here as specific themes in accordance with theoretical realms pertinent to my research agenda:

Theme A: Digitally mediated social ties and symbolic capital

RQ1: To what extent are digitally mediated social bonds meaningful in terms of creating symbolic capital?

RQ2: To what extent digitally mediated social interaction allow creative professionals to connect with those individuals that help them to become recognised?

RQ3: To what extent do digitally mediated social ties actually play a role in accumulating symbolic capital?

Theme B: Digitally mediated social ties and social capital

RQ4: To what extent do digitally mediated social relations facilitate the accumulation of social capital?

RQ5: Do online social networking platforms serve as a legitimate means to establish meaningful social connections?

RQ6: In what way can ephemeral, transient digitally mediated social ties sustain a sense of durable social relatedness?

Theme C: Social capital facilitated online and its relation to other forms of capital

RQ7: To what extent are other forms of capital, specifically cultural capital relevant to building digitally mediated social relations?

RQ8: How can the attainment of symbolic capital be linked to resources that emerge from digitally mediated social interaction, if at all?

RQ9: To what extent can individuals' skills in building digitally mediated social interaction be interpreted as a form of cultural capital?

Theme D: Relevance of affordances in facilitating digitally mediated social engagement

RQ10: How do individuals perceive opportunities of relationship building by interpreting platform immanent properties?

RQ11: How do individuals build and maintain social engagement through online social networking practices?

RQ12: What are particular emerging strategies and tactics that individuals apply in building online ties?

Justifying the significance of these research questions, clarifying how they emerge from gaps in the theory, I will present a closer analysis of my research questions in

# Chapter 2: The field of cultural and creative production and the relevance of symbolic capital as a resource of social capital

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a framework for understanding the dynamics that characterise the process of creative production which, in turn, influence the conditions that professionals working in the cultural and creative industries are confronted with. My research centres on the notion that sustaining a career as a creative professional is commonly perceived as challenging (e.g. Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Pratt, 2008), as in highly competitive environments such as those of the cultural and creative industries, professionals depend heavily on the approval of specific stakeholders in order to attain value for the work they create (cf. Banks et al., 2000; Caves, 2000; Bourdieu 1996, 1993). Thereby, it is often assumed that aside from factors such as talent or adequate subject-specific education, establishing a social network is vital in order to sustain a career. Forming social relationships with key stakeholders in the sector, such as gallery owners, mentors and other individuals holding a certain reputation, is of primary importance. Most of the creative professionals I have spoken with throughout my fieldwork have confirmed the importance of networks in their careers simply because "having connections" opens doors, it creates opportunities to showcase one's work in order to eventually get "your work under the nose of the right people" and establish a career.

The challenge faced by many professionals in the creative sector is setting up an adequate social network that includes decision makers, which often proves to be a cumbersome experience. The challenge is that many artists and creative professionals may indeed be very talented and produce excellent work, however, they often lack social acquaintance with decision makers. Theoretically, this constraint has been explained drawing on the implications of class affiliation and access to different forms of capital (e.g. McPherson et al., 2001; Savage & Egerton, 1997; Bourdieu, 1982, 1984, 1993). Simply put, connecting socially with individuals of a certain social standing has often been assumed a privilege enjoyed by those

with either financial resources, access to expensive education and by those who were born into an upper class, elite social circle.

The relevance of studying online social networking platforms in the context of creative production manifests precisely at this point: Digitally mediated forms of social interaction are credited with the capacity to make building social relationships easier. Particularly so, because connecting with others online seems to alleviate constraints associated with connecting to others socially, such as class affiliation, gender or economic status, for example (e.g. Brooks et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2010). It is assumed that digitally mediated social interaction facilitates social connections with virtually everybody with a minimal level of effort and independent of one's social status (e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Quan-Haase et al., 2002). But why is it that connecting online is perceived to be less challenging? And how exactly should this form of social interaction change anything for individuals in creative professions? After all, competition in the creative sector continues to be fierce, and those seeking to establish themselves in the field continue to face constraints in their efforts to develop a career. I assume that, by and large, the framework conditions in the field of creative production remain unchanged in spite of the growing use of online platforms particularly in this sector. However, I argue that in certain contexts, online social networking platforms enable professionals to deal more effectively with given constraints and, therefore, assume greater agency in using the affordances of digital technology to form social connections that hitherto were considered unlikely. In this thesis, my aim is to identify these 'windows of opportunity', as it were, and trace under which circumstances they appear and how individuals manage to leverage the opportunities offered by online social networking platforms.

Framing the field of cultural and creative production as an environment in which competition for scarce resources is predominant, I draw on Bourdieu's concept of *field* (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). This notion characterises individuals' agency by drawing on the importance of different forms of capital, which provides a reference frame for understanding the opportunities and constraints that individuals in the field are facing. I refer to the concept of social capital as a pivotal point in conceptualising the resources that are often perceived as necessary for attaining recognition in the field of the cultural and creative industries. In particular, I describe how accessing resources that are associated with social capital are contingent on social connectivity. Thereby, I further elaborate on the relevance of social

relationships in this context. I chose to use social network theory as a framework to approach the establishment and maintenance of social capital in a more structural manner. This is based on the assumption that the attainment of social capital stems from an individual's embeddedness in a social network (e.g. Kadushin, 2012; Kadushin, 2004; Lin, 2001; McPherson et al., 2001). Unravelling the complexities of a person's capacity to access resources affiliated with social capital provides insight into how exactly digitally mediated social relations become meaningful.

I discuss the implications of digitally mediated forms of social interaction via online social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, focussing on the impact of digital sociality on predominant concepts of social relatedness. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how individuals facilitate social connectedness by utilising such platforms and how this form of digitally mediated social connectedness ties in with traditional forms of primarily face-to-face social connectivity. I aim to achieve this by framing digitally mediated forms of social interaction in line with the affordances of various social media platforms.

Assuming that digitally mediated forms of social interaction potentially expand the predominant understanding of social networks, I aim to illustrate how digitally mediated forms of social connectedness integrate with more traditional forms of social connectivity. I refer to how they have been credited with a potential to facilitate social connectedness by referencing previous attempts, arguing that the affordances of online social networking platforms alleviate the constraints usually involved in building relationships with others. This provides an opportunity to discuss how and why digitally mediated social interactions may or may not be of relevance in view of attaining certain social capital resources which are seen as relevant for attaining recognition within the cultural and creative industries.

The aim of this thesis is to provide evidence to understand whether or not online social networking platforms actually facilitate establishing meaningful social connections. This has led me to draw together a string of theoretical considerations that address the intricacies of the process of attaining recognition as a creative professional. The theoretical framework attempts to harmonise existing concepts of field, social capital, social networks and digitally mediated social interaction, applied to the specific framework conditions of the cultural and creative industries.

## 2.2 Making a case for the cultural and creative industries – a prime example for researching symbolic value and the significance of social capital

Initially, directing the focus of my research towards the cultural and creative industries seemed a somewhat arbitrary choice. I had no previous exposure to the cultural sector; much less did I have any experience working in this particular field. Nonetheless, I have always had a keen interest in creative and cultural production, quite possibly due to the influence of the many friends and acquaintances I have made in Vienna (cf. example Anna introduced in Chapter 1). The various anecdotal reports that friends working as photographers and writers have shared with me, have drawn my attention to the striking significance that personal networks seem to play in order to strive professionally. Often to such a point that it seems attaining 'success' as a creative professional is the result of fortunate circumstances and coincidence in which 'knowing the right people' is frequently mentioned as a key requirement. The literature on cultural and creative production evidences this perception and confirms that socialising and networking play a crucial role in terms of actually getting work and becoming recognised as a creative (e.g. Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Flew, 2005; Caves, 2003). Even though this seems to be common knowledge, it is in fact the interplay of stakeholders that helps explain the intricate journey towards attaining recognition, which reiterates the stringent importance attached to social relations with and among key stakeholders.

Before delving deeper into this subject, I will first clarify how cultural and creative professions have been discussed so far in the literature. Conceptually, this is important, because often the specific purpose of creative production impacts the way in which recognition is being achieved. Used as an umbrella term for a number of creative professional paths, there are however a few distinctions to be made when speaking about creative and/or cultural forms of expression: The term *creative industries* refers to individuals such as poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, etc. who "engage in work whose function is to create meaningful new forms" (Florida, 2004, p. 38). This concept, in itself, applies to many different forms of creative engagement, however the term *industries* suggests that here creative activity is primarily meant to serve an economic purpose, which obviously is not always the main motivation for professionals to legitimise their creative efforts. Basically though, it stresses the fact that creative

professionals use their skills to generate value by way of *creating* something new. Even though this assumption is ambiguous, the literature on creative production does not always spell this out clearly, which leads to confusion as to whether and how the term *creative industries* is different from the *cultural industries* (Cunningham, 2002). This explains why both of these terms are often used interchangeably.

The main difference between creative and cultural fields of production seems to emerge from the specific purpose that creative work is meant to serve. The term *creative industries* typically "refers to an industry whose aim is the exploitation and/or generation of knowledge and information" (Hesmondhalgh 2007, p. 15) for an economic purpose. The work of a photographer to be published in a fashion magazine, for instance, would exemplify this well, as it stresses the fact that work in the creative industries commonly serves a for-profit purpose (Pratt, 2008). In contrast, the term cultural production seems to address those creative activities that are more concerned with producing a more symbolic value, particularly cultural or social wealth (e.g. Hartley, 2005; Cunningham, 2002). Cultural production, as opposed to creative production, refers to "the creation of products whose value rests primarily on their symbolic content and the ways in which it stimulates the experiential reactions of consumers" (Power & Scott, 2004, p. 3).

In practice, the distinction between the 'cultural' and the 'creative' fields is not as clear-cut as these definitions might imply (Pratt, 2008). In fact, expressions of creative production often aim to serve a number of purposes, which makes it difficult to locate the actual value of a painting, a photograph, a sculpture or any other form of creative expression as either purely produced for profit, or aiming to achieve symbolic value. The aspirations of professionals and their self-image often seem to operate at the intersection of both of these realms, that is, aiming to achieve, on the one hand, economic value for the work they produce, and on the other a symbolic value that represents a sort of innate value that may not be easily compensated by monetary gain. After speaking with many creative professionals, my experience is that they see their work as a form of cultural expression, which primarily resonates with their aim to express themselves artistically, while remaining conscious of the fact that at the same time their work should fulfil an economic purpose. In practice, this results in artists combining both ambitions and adapting their work practice to accommodate both these needs. Consequently, I have chosen to use the term *cultural and creative industries* for this thesis, as it unites both the

aforementioned traditions (Pratt, 2008) and resonates best with how professionals in this sector would see their work practice represented.

Given that I will be researching the careers of individual arts practitioners I acknowledge that it might be difficult to justify drawing conclusions about the field of the cultural and creative industry more broadly. This is because the specific type of creative activity that respondents represent (i.e. fine art, wedding photography, sculpting) and the specific framework conditions they find themselves in (i.e. the traditional field of cultural production vs. cultural/creative entrepreneurs) illustrate different aspects of cultural and creative production to varying degrees. This means that whereas for a traditional fine artist the implications of Bourdieu's notion of field and the structural determinants of objective relations resulting in power struggles might be expressed with greater urgency, for a wedding photographer creating a business on social media these power struggles might not be perceived equally limiting. Nonetheless, providing a general scope of the field of cultural and creative production, seemed vital to me to conceptually embed the relevance of social relationships as a form of capital, which assumes value due to the social forces pertinent to the field.

Talking about cultural and creative production inevitably calls to mind the notion of the culture industry, most prominently represented by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944). Referring to cultural production in this sense focussed on a critical response to the popularisation of cultural products, which led to the commercialisation of cultural goods. This aspect holds a partial value in the context of this research project, given its overlap with the existing commercial aspect related to marketing cultural goods. Nonetheless, my take on forms of cultural production runs into another domain: Contrasting the culture industry in the sense of mass products of cultural consumption, I am more interested in framing forms of cultural production in the sense of social entrepreneurship. This means that instead of focussing on the inherent value of cultural production and its social implications per se, I am more interested in the process of producing cultural products and how this is influenced by recent tendencies to utilise digital technology to create new forms of cultural engagement. Thus, I am less concerned with notions of the effect of cultural production on audiences, and more with the process of navigating the framework of cultural production in a digital age drawing on digitally mediated social interaction. Thereby, my take on forms of cultural production focuses on individual representatives of the creative industries and their individual attempts to produce

creative goods as a form of engaging with audiences in the broadest sense, via digitally mediated forms of social interaction.

This resonates with more recent claims in regards to social and cultural entrepreneurship (e.g. Martin & Witter, 2011; Klamer, 2011; Wry et al., 2011). I hold that approaching the cultural and creative industries from this perspective is more accurate in view of the aims of this research project as it draws the focus to the "shifting cultural norms" (Martin & Witter, 2011) that digital technology has induced, also but not exclusively in the creative and cultural industries. Particularly, my claim ties in more neatly with this theoretical strand, as digital forms of social interaction are one such example of shifting boundaries as they take a stake in re-engaging with prevalent norms in the field. The relevance of newly emerging fields of creative production equally flags up questions regarding Bourdieu's theory of fields of cultural production and the greater or lesser autonomy of these fields relative to the economic world. This essentially addresses the distinction between the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production (which I address in Chapter 6, p. 201 ff.). Conflicting framework conditions require a closer look at the definition of legitimate forms of capital, which Bourdieu himself addressed in one of his later works (i.e. "The field of cultural production, or: the economic world reversed, 1983). Thereby, shifting beliefs in regards to the notion of legitimacy may impact the way in which symbolic capital for example is being interpreted and attained (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.6, p. 225 ff.).

Returning to the significance of social relatedness in this sector my aim was then to find a conceptual framework that would help trace the relevance of social relations in view of attaining recognition. I find it most useful to look at the cultural and creative industries from a 'field' perspective. In particular, the notion of 'field' draws the attention to the fact that creative and cultural production is accomplished in an environment that is characterised by the social interaction between various stakeholders. Stressing the social aspect of this environment highlights the notion that value – both economic and symbolic – for cultural and creative processes is quite naturally a process of negotiation, in which many parties have a say. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept, the notion of field is rooted in the argument that creative professionals are exposed to a social space that is defined by institutions, norms and conventions that shape the actions of individuals in a specific field. Particularly, it is the very configuration of the field that defines individuals' position therein and ultimately shapes individuals' practice and agency

(Webb et al., 2002; Bourdieu, 1984, Bourdieu, 1993). As such, the negotiating process of value as a social process in the field, suggests that in order to attain value, creative professionals are forced to navigate this field, internalising norms and conventions in their efforts to thrive (Bourdieu, 1987).

I suggest that aside from creating value for their work, creative professionals always strive to gain recognition from others in the field. Being recognised in the sense of being *acknowledged* as a legitimate figure in the field is obviously based on the quality of the work produced and whether or not others value that artist's contribution. However, while quality of work is a crucial aspect, the notion of field suggests that attaining recognition is never exclusively an effort uniquely rooted in the professional's status and merit. Rather, it is a process that is negotiated among several stakeholders, notably the artist, as well as art critics, gallery owners and art consumers (Bourdieu, 1996). This assumption questions the exclusive relevance of the artistic genius of the 'creator' as the sole explanatory factor that determines who is to become recognised and who is not. In fact, it counteracts the assumption that artists and their capacity to produce valuable work are the key to success. Rather, Bourdieu suggests that instead of directing "the gaze towards the apparent producer" it is revealing to investigate "who has created this 'creator' and the magic power of transubstantiation with which the 'creator' is endowed" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 167). This suggests that in addition to an artists' creative potential, it requires the approval of established figures in the field – those who 'create' the creator – who act as a sort of gatekeeper and hold the power to decide who is to be endowed with recognition. Accordingly, it is often due to the judgement of power holders in the field to 'make or break' an artist, given the fact that their specific knowledge and the trust that comes with their position seems to justify their decisions in terms of attaching value to created artwork (cf. Banks et al., 2000; Bourdieu, 1985).

## 2.3 The attainment of symbolic capital as a social process – links to social capital

It is here that the relevance of symbolic capital comes into play, as those who command a relatively high degree of symbolic capital are the ones setting the rules and norms the field is subjected to. By this, I mean that those individuals in powerful positions are endowed with a power to decide on the course of the progress of the artist, determining whether or not they will prevail and become a

'recognised' player in the field. Bourdieu sees this sort of power epitomised in a "process of 'consecration', which implies a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition) and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from the operation." (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 75). Reiterating the point that 'consecration' is essentially a social process, the interaction of actors with those in charge of a high degree of symbolic capital largely determine the creation of value.

Symbolic capital refers to those particular resources that are available to an individual on the basis of honour, prestige or recognition, which then serves as a value one holds within a cultural environment (cf. Webb et al., 2002, Bourdieu 1993, Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). In the field of creative and cultural production, my understanding of symbolic capital embodies the recognition that creative professionals manage to achieve based on their social relations to power holders, which results in a specific standing within the field. Social capital is related to symbolic capital "since the latter can be seen as a possible effect of having the former as recognition by one's social network" (Driessens, 2013, p. 550).

The definition of symbolic capital is one of the most ambiguous terms in Bourdieu's theory of capital and even Bourdieu himself defined it in different ways: In *Social space and symbolic power* (1989), Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known or recognized, when it is known through the categories of perception that it imposes" (p. 21). This implies that by and large symbolic capital is achieved merely by a transubstantiation of existing forms of capital that an individual holds which others perceive as particularly legitimate. This definition of symbolic capital is echoed by other scholars (e.g. Lawler, 2011), arguing that symbolic capital is best understood as a "legitimated, recognized form of other capitals" (p. 1418). Thereby, symbolic capital is potentially inherent in other forms of capital – e.g. social and cultural capital – provided that they are "recognized as representing legitimate prestige" (Lawler, 2011, p. 1418). Symbolic capital – according to these definitions – is then a recognised form of a resource associated with capital that enables its formation. In the field of creative and cultural production, this could, for example, manifest in exhibiting specific credentials by obtaining a degree from a prestigious school (i.e., cultural capital) or being affiliated with prestigious social circles (i.e., social capital).

In more recent works, Bourdieu (1991) then distinguished symbolic capital from other forms of capital, characterising it as a separate form of capital, which can be accumulated by an individual:

*Symbolic capital – another name for distinction – is nothing other than capital of whatever kind, when it is perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the incorporation of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when it is known and recognized as self-evident.* (p. 238)

It is essentially its *recognisability* by significant stakeholders in the field that make symbolic capital a separate form of capital. This is chiefly a result of imposition of new value criteria (i.e. a different forms of value other than value attributed to economic or cultural capital for example) that result in a creative professionals' work being recognised by peers. Thereby, I suggest that symbolic capital is best understood as a legitimate form of recognition, or publically recognized authority (Swartz, 2013, p. 84). Consequently, I argue that the attainment of recognition is associated with the amount of symbolic capital a specific player in the field holds. This occurs on the basis of accruing other forms of capital, represented in economic achievements and commercial success or by being recognised as an authentic, well-regarded representative of a particular school or movement.

Related to the concept of symbolic capital is the notion of authentication. Authentication in the context of cultural and creative production refers to the process of approving art works as a legitimate, thus valuable product. Authenticating art works involves the voiced approval of decision makers, i.e. recognised figures in the field (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.2, p. 205 ff.). While Bourdieu relates symbolic capital to the notion of authentication (cf. p. 37), he did not provide a clear definition of it. In my view, authentication is most effectively described as an outcome of attaining symbolic capital: Only then when a creative professional is perceived worthy of being recognised as a legitimate player in the field, obtaining approval for their work, by way of recommendation for example, can we speak of someone's work being authenticated.

In practice, bestowing recognition upon someone refers to particular symbolic acts in which symbolic capital holders lend their capital to another person who is regarded to be worthy of recognition. Often referred to as "consecration" (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993), this particular process of bestowing symbolic capital upon

another person is in practice a very subtle procedure. It is exercised as a procedure of repeated articulation and demonstrated gestures that represent targeted endowment. As an observable practice, this can be realised in different forms, for example through the exchange of relevant information with a gallery owner over dinner or a drink, at a private viewing, or introducing an artist to a prestigious or potent audience. I identify two factors that characterise symbolic capital attainment in the cultural and creative sector:

1. Bestowing recognition on someone, as an exchange of symbolic capital, is always a social process that requires direct, face-to-face encounters or the previous establishment of a relationship or social connection.

2. The specific position that a symbolic capital owner occupies is crucial in this context. As such, individuals bestowing recognition on others are often persons who enjoy specific recognition, given their affiliation with elevated positions in society or the cultural field at large. These would include established gallery owners, art critics, professors at art colleges, other already established artists or individuals occupying leading roles in society.

Framing this process as inherently social also explains the importance of social capital within this context. Engaging socially and ultimately building a relationship with symbolic capital holders is the prerequisite for creative professionals to accumulate symbolic capital themselves. In this regard, attaining recognition in the creative and cultural sector is fundamentally different from other occupational fields, where presumably the importance of social relationships is less striking. Essentially, I assume that the main reason for this is that in the field of creative and cultural production, recognition is largely based on intangible, immaterial merit (cf. Banks et al., 2000, Bourdieu, 1985). While in other fields of occupation, recognition may be easier linked to the production of tangible value, in the arts sector value is primarily symbolic, which explains why the creation of value is inextricably linked with the opinion of symbolic capital holders.

Lastly, it is important to mention that even though Bourdieu's work takes an important role in my conceptual understanding of the creative and cultural industries, I am not aiming to provide a critical analysis of Bourdieu's concept of

field. Rather, I am using Bourdieu's concept, as I believe it offers a suitable analogy to illustrate the dynamics of creative production and especially to demonstrate the relevance of social relations. In particular, my aim is then to clarify and give substance to my assumption of social capital as being of fundamental importance in this sector. What this thesis further aims at is disentangling the aspects of social capital with the aim of portraying the impact that digitally mediated forms of social interaction can have on its conceptual layout. Having said this, I nonetheless anticipate that my portrayal of social capital in light of digital social connectedness will have an impact on the predominant understanding of dynamics in the field of cultural and creative production, particularly because it may give a fresh impetus to the understanding of how different forms of capital shape individuals' agency within the given field.

## 2.4 Social capital – Weapon of Choice: On the significance of social relatedness in the field of cultural and creative production

Characterising the field of cultural and creative production as inherently social serves to illustrate that accumulating legitimate social capital through socialising with recognised figures in the field is an important mechanism for attaining recognition. Developing social relationships with other 'players' in the field is critically important to this end, as they may provide access to resources – insider information, tacit knowledge on predominant rules and norms, support of other players – that may all be conducive to thriving professionally (Lee, 2011; McRobbie, 2010. It is those resources paired with the individual's ability to create these relations that emphasise the relevance of social capital in this context. Researching social capital has become a trending subject in social science research, particularly over the past few decades, in which social capital is often associated with lending wider opportunities and benefits to individuals (e.g., Kadushin, 2012, Field, 2008) – not exclusively in the cultural and creative sector. The emergence of digital technology, accompanied by growing opportunities for creating social relatedness, has fuelled discussions around social capital and put it high on the research agenda. That said, the now widespread popularity of online social networking practices, has drawn the attention to new forms of social capital alongside a presumably wider agency that individuals may assume in leveraging access to new resources.

As mentioned earlier, the ability to relate to others, getting to know the 'right' people and investing in 'networking' practices have often been defined as indispensable factors when it comes to launching a career in the creative sector (e.g. Lena & Lindemann, 2014; Wittel, 2001). The significance of social capital for creative individuals has been discussed extensively in the literature. For example, Accominotti (2009) argued that the career paths of 19th and 20th century conceptual artists are best understood as a collaborative effort that is built upon interaction among fellow artists, whereby being part of a particular artistic movement of that time has been highlighted. It is the collaboration among these artists and the support they have most likely provided each other – all typical social capital resources – that had a marked influence on the careers of artists of that time. Essentially, creative fame often seems to be impacted by affiliation with a specific artistic movement, thus pointing to the relevance of the specific artistic network that individual artists have been acquainted with. Similarly, Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2010) claim that sociability and networking activities are major elements to secure employment and land work contracts in the creative sector, given the fact that networking provides access to "tacit knowledge, fostering relationships within flexible working environments and building competitive advantage" (Grabher, 2004, p. 551).

Interestingly, the way in which social capital is discussed has changed markedly over the past decades. Albeit conceptualisations of social capital vary widely, those authors who are most frequently addressed in social capital research – first and foremost structuralist approaches by Bourdieu and Coleman – have portrayed social capital and access to resources in light of the significant constraints imposed by the repercussions of social class affiliation. For example, Coleman (1988) linked the scholastic performance of high school pupils to their social capital, whereby family background and the associated financial and social resources impacted a child's intellectual development. This suggests that family ties and the available resources that are rooted in the affiliation with privileged social circles create benefits that would otherwise have been difficult to attain, and which ultimately impact their formal achievements. Bourdieu (1984) takes a similar line in his conceptualisation of social capital. He argues that access to social capital resources is a result of contingent relationships that are based on kinship or formed as part of the interaction with individuals' at the workplace (p. 52). This explains why, in this context, social capital is often seen as an exclusionary mechanism that

favours a ruling social class whose members have access to certain resources, and whose boundaries are defined by constructing a network of social relations exclusively among respected members of that particular social class (cf. Bourdieu, 1987).

Bourdieu's interpretation of social capital stands in contrast with a more recent discourse that represents social capital in a predominantly positive light, highlighting access to social capital resources as enabling and liberating. Evidently, Internet technology and particularly online social networking opportunities are often mentioned in the same breath with building social capital. In a recent example, Rainie & Wellman (2011) conceptualise the emergence of 'networked individualism', which suggests that online social networking platforms provide opportunities to connect to virtually everyone via Facebook and Twitter, which reduces geographical and social boundaries between people and allows them to create "powerful social capital" (p. 125). In a similar fashion, plenty of relatively recent academic research has discussed online social networking and its implications on the accumulation of social capital, focussing primarily on its positive effects (e.g. Steinfield et al., 2008; Cummings & Higgins, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007; Lin, 2002; Williams, 2006). But how has online technology managed to create such a shift in the perception of social capital? And what role do social relationships play in this context?

In light of recent claims calling for a new concept of social capital (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2009) impacted by digitally mediated social interaction, I argue that there is one key aspect that should be examined more closely. Notably, this has to do with the requirements for forming a social relationship, that is to say, the conditions of social interaction that facilitate social exchange. I conclude that in order to identify why the concept of social capital and the perception of it has shifted, it is pivotal to study how digitally mediated social interaction impacts the way in which individuals relate to one another. To this end, it is necessary to revisit the conceptual layout of social capital with the aim to uncover how social relatedness has been portrayed in this context. However, where to even start? Given the various definitions and concepts of social capital that often vary significantly in terms of their approach, it is challenging to identify suitable concepts. In light of this particular research project that highlights the relevance of social relatedness as its most striking element, I have come to the conclusion that for this purpose, Bourdieu's concept offers the richest points of contact, given its theoretical

detailing and its emphasis on social relations as a vital element for facilitating social capital accumulation.

Arguably, Bourdieu's concept of social capital has been defined as the "most theoretically refined among those that introduced the term in contemporary sociological discourse" (Portes, 2000, p. 3). In particular, Bourdieu highlights the relational aspect as the essence of social capital, signalling that it is in fact the nature of the social relationship between individuals that determines its formation. Accordingly, social capital is defined as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 51). Theoretically speaking, this suggests that accessing resources requires an individual to establish long-lasting relationships that potentially manifest in frequent social interaction over a certain time period. As a result, each individual on their part recognises that this relationship does in fact exist by mutually agreeing and authenticating this social bond via continuous social exchange. Put simply, this notion of social capital suggests that social capital resources require a significant effort, as they depend upon investment in a relationship, making it a potentially exclusive affair.

Other concepts of social capital differ significantly from Bourdieu's approach insofar as they do not tackle the social process underlying social capital formation, but instead focus on a macro-perspective of social capital, targeting potential outcomes of social capital attainment. For example, Putnam (2001a) used the concept to explain the decline of civic participation and community life in the United States since the 1960's. Putnam (1995, 2001b) looks at social capital from a macro-perspective, that is to say, studying the impact that social capital has on the overall cohesion of communities by highlighting aggregate effects, such as a sense of social cohesion, community and well-being, which in Putnam's proposal originate in the relative presence or absence of social capital in a community. Here, the aspects that are related to social capital refer to political participation, volunteering or civic engagement. Consequently, Putnam frames social capital by thinking of it as an action-based tool, based on the idea that "networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value" (2001b, p. 41).

Even though Putnam's research had a critical impact on the study of social capital, which led to a revival in social capital research, I consider the author's use of social capital to be conceptually flawed. This is because he largely equates social

capital with the existence of social networks, which is ineffective in terms of operationalising social capital, since it fails to provide an analytical frame for coherent empirical analysis. Nonetheless, Putnam's account triggered a significant amount of further study and insight, in spite of major disagreement in regards to a clear conceptualisation of social capital and its affordances. Among the most acknowledged scholars in this field (e.g. Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988, Lin 1999, 2002, Portes, 2000, Putnam 1995, Putnam, 2000) there is common agreement that social capital is essentially network-based, however "various conceptual and operational analyses then diverge from this point of agreement" (Lin 2002, p. 63).

Elsewhere, Coleman (1988) – another main proponent of the social capital theory – looked at social capital from a slightly different perspective, pointing to the function that social capital fulfils in a society. He sees social capital as shaped by social structures (p. 98), which are mirrored in the relationships of and among actors that enable social capital to form. Consequently, social capital in Coleman's definition is closely related to theories of structuralism where an uneven distribution of social capital is associated with the unequal allocation of resources in societies, which in turn accounts "for different outcomes at the level of individual actors" (p. 101). In essence, following Coleman's account, social capital forms as a by-product of social interaction, which in his view is largely influenced by social norms and rules. While I agree that social capital formation and resource generation can also be seen as unintentional, I disagree with Coleman's argument that "social capital functions precisely because it arises mainly from activities intended for other purposes" (Schuller et al., 2000, p. 7).

I would like to stress that my focus on Bourdieu's claims in view of social capital has emerged purely out of his most articulate definition of social capital. The way in which Bourdieu conceptualised social capital was particularly helpful in operationalising it, given that he provides a clear set up of tangible units of analysis. This is not to say that I dismiss the analytical rigour and theoretical contributions of other – often quantitative – approaches to social capital, which assume relevance in the remainder of my work. Distinguishing between various channels and mechanisms whereby social capital has been found to influence individual outcomes is thereby vital to address in order to grasp the breadth of specific theoretical social capital contributions. For example, Granovetter (1973) discussed social capital highlighting the provision of information as a vital outcome. In The *Strength of Weak Ties*, he argued that weak ties in relation with diffusion processes can often be more

effective in providing access to resources than strong ties. This is because weak ties lend themselves to establish "relations *between* groups" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1360), which enables individuals to access novel information that may be difficult to obtain in a cohesive, small and well-defined network established by strong ties – an aspect which I will discuss in Chapter 4.7 (p. 158 ff.).

Other outcomes discussed in conjunction with social capital attainment are status, credit and prestige. Overlapping to a certain degree with Granovetter's work, Podolny & Baron (1997) argued that in organisational settings an "individual's mobility is enhanced by having a large, sparse network of informal ties for acquiring information and resources" (p. 673). Tracing the individual's performance they then discuss the relevance of the content of social relations in a network, primarily distinguishing between "resource-based and identity-based content" (Podolny & Baron, 1997, p. 675-676). This statement highlights the complexity of discerning outcomes of social relations purely on the basis of tie strength. Drawing on the example of understanding upwards mobility of employees, they argue that while a sparsely knit network may be important to establish competitive advantage through information benefits, "a dense redundant network of ties is often a precondition for [...] internalizing a clear and consistent set of expectations and values in order to be effective in one's role" (Podolny & Baron, 1997, p. 676). Thereby, contextualising social ties with the attainment of status within a company for example, the authors highlight the fact that rather than overemphasising tie-strength, the content that is actually being exchanged through social relations can be more effective.

Acknowledging these contributions in understanding the respective outcomes that different types of ties imply, using Bourdieu's concept is essential, because of the stringent necessity it places on uncovering the nature of social relatedness as the means that leads to the accumulation of social capital. The assumption that digitally mediated forms of social interaction alter our understanding of social relatedness – or at the very least individuals' perception of it – is the groundwork for the theoretical angle I am taking to facilitate the argument that social capital is now different, because the way in which we build and experience social relatedness has changed (cf. Willson, 2006). This then draws the attention to the actual affordances of the social bond that facilitate the accumulation of social capital. One such affordance of a mutually recognised social relationship, which Bourdieu does not discuss directly but which can be inferred from his argument, is the significance of trust in the production of social capital. To this

end, Bourdieu (1984) stresses the importance of affiliation with a particular social group or membership in a particular society, which facilitates the formation of durable social bonds. That said, it is implied that group membership is being kept a privilege, largely reserved for those individuals who are able to portray themselves as a trustworthy member of the group. Ultimately, this draws the attention to need to uncover the affordance of this specific social bond in facilitating trustworthiness.

After tracing the emergence of trust, it will then be necessary to examine the act of forming a relationship as a process of exchange of social cues. Bourdieu makes several claims regarding those cues in facilitating relations among individuals of a particular social group. For example, he mentions the significance of "the great name", signalling important family bonds used as a symbol from which the legitimacy of being a member of a particular social group is inferred. However, the exchange of information via social engagement can be extended to a much broader realm. In fact, Bourdieu's *habitus* illustrates how personal characteristics and visual cues embody information that are used to infer an individual's social status and group affiliation in a social setting (Bourdieu, 1987, 1980). Exploring the ways in which online social networking platforms set up a social environment in which social relations are formed will thus be a key focus of this thesis. Finally, I will portray social capital facilitated via digitally mediated social interaction as subject to the specificity of social interaction it produces and the affordance of online interaction as a means to support and facilitate interpersonal trust.

Lastly, Bourdieu's take on social capital is specific in the sense that it integrates various forms of capital. Conceiving the field as a social space in which actors struggle for recognition, it is in fact the interplay of several forms of capital that defines an individual's position in the field and ultimately the extent to which social capital is available. In The Forms of Capital (1984), Bourdieu focuses on economic, cultural and social capital framing the disposition of each individual actor in the field, whereby economic capital and cultural capital directly influence social capital accumulation. In this light, Bourdieu assumes that *"social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. This work, which implies expenditure of time and energy and so, directly or indirectly, economic capital, is not profitable or even conceivable unless one invests in it a specific competence (knowledge of genealogical relationships and real connections and skill at using them, etc.) and an acquired disposition to acquire and maintain this competence ..."*

(p. 52). In practice, this means that besides economic resources that help individuals, it is also about those particular skills that often define to what extent individuals see themselves in a position to engage with somebody socially. The relevance of cultural capital in the accumulation of social capital is important as they are inherently linked. Conceptually, Bourdieu (1984) described cultural capital as existing in several dimensions (the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalised state), of which I find the embodied state to be the most revealing in this particular context.

Cultural capital in its embodied state refers to the incorporation of knowledge, adopted either through education or by inheritance, which results in "what is called culture, cultivation, *Bildung*" (p. 48). Ultimately, the cultivation of one's self results in being observed and displayed as what is called habitus, in which the primarily intangible aspects that build cultural capital manifest in the observable "attitudes and dispositions" and "the way in which [...] individuals engage in practices" (Webb et al., 2002, p. xii). Seen from this perspective, cultural capital assumes great relevance in light of accumulating social capital. On the one hand, it is the particular knowledge in the form of *Bildung* that Bourdieu refers to, that may greatly influence the formation of social bonds. This is especially valid in the field of cultural and creative production, where on many occasions displaying a cultivated sense of self and the ability to lead an informed discussion on art and art practices, showcasing pertinent expertise on art and its many trajectories contributes to engaging socially with other relevant figures in the field. To this end, the cultural capital inherent in obtaining an academic degree (e.g. Webb et al., 2002; Bourdieu, 1984) potentially from a recognised institution is one way to help convert cultural capital, by way of demonstrated knowledge, into social capital. On the other hand, cultural capital equally takes a stake in terms of the actual skills that are necessary to foster social relatedness. Although Bourdieu hints at this aspect when he speaks of a particular "skill at using them [i.e. social relationships]" (1984, p. 52), it is not made entirely clear how cultural capital resources are useful in terms of fostering relationship building, or in other words, how cultural capital aids individuals' capacity to engage with others socially. Regarding this aspect of cultural capital, Lee's (2011) work on the relevance of networking in the creative sector reveals that it is largely about the communication skills that a person displays in order to thrive in a social context. For example, research respondents highlighted the importance of personal attributes and a particular set of social skills indicating the "centrality of

'getting on' with other people in the industry" (p. 557) in order to succeed in occupations in the creative sector. Essentially, it is those 'soft skills' that allow individuals to find "the 'right' tone" (Lee, 2011, p. 556) in social situations which emphasise the importance of communicative abilities. Seen from this perspective, the abilities needed to communicate effectively with other stakeholders in the field are a key feature of cultural capital that triggers the conversion of cultural capital into social capital.

Ultimately, the relevance of this ability to network (e.g. Wittel, 2001) seems to have become a signature skill required particularly in creative professions. Nonetheless, portraying these networking abilities as a pertinent element of cultural capital according to its original definition might prove challenging. Lee (2011) argues that the competence to succeed in the creative industry is associated with displaying skills connected to the cultural capital passed on through social class, upbringing and socio-economic background. However, I hold that particularly regarding this aspect, there is space for a more lenient interpretation. In fact, the use of online social networking platforms may require a skill set that is related to typical cultural capital resources such as knowledge and education. However, I argue that there may be space for a more ample allocation of sources from where the required communication skills can be extracted. Accordingly, newer interpretations of cultural capital (e.g. Savage, 2015) argue that the digital information age and the required abilities to navigate online spaces may have triggered the formation of a sort of 'emerging' cultural capital (p. 113). To this end, established forms of cultural capital that are heavily institutionalised may have become out-dated, giving way to a type of "'hip' cultural capital [...] which emphasise[s] the ability to be flexible and adaptable" (Savage, 2015, p. 113).

## 2.5 The significance of the social tie: The explanatory power of social network theory in view of investigating the value of the social tie for social capital

I have established that conceptually, the attainment of social capital is most adequately traced by looking at the quality of individuals' social relations and how these may afford access to specific resources. The access to social capital has often been discussed in association with social networks and social network theory, which is evident when we consider that social relations sustain social networks. In this line

of thought, Lin (2002) advocated a "network theory of social capital", which proposes that social capital and the attainment of resources is to be understood as an affordance of the structure of personal networks and consequently of the embedded social relationships. In practice however, the terms *social capital* and *social networks* are often used interchangeably. On the one hand, this stresses the compelling interdependence they are subject to; on the other hand however, the strong conceptual overlap invites premature conclusions, which often prompts researchers to use both terms interchangeably. For example, Putnam's (2001) claim that social networks have value per se, can be misleading in this regard, as it encourages the assumption that the mere existence of a social network equals the existence of social capital, which is not necessarily the case. Actually, it overlooks the relational process among individual stakeholders that creates the network in the first place, which ultimately defines whether access to social capital is possible.

Lin (2002, 1999) has partly responded to this conceptual flaw, proposing an integrated approach towards conceptualising social capital that aims to harmonise all pertaining elements into one coherent argument. This means that drawing on the structural embeddedness of social relations, social capital is measured by the sequential analysis of the "resources embedded in a social structure; accessibility to these social resources by individuals; and use or mobilization of them by individuals engaged in purposive action" (Lin, 2002, p. 58). This clarifies that social capital attainment is not simply a matter of an existing social network, but rather is contingent on the way in which individuals engage socially. Accordingly, the way in which individuals build social relations with others will provide much better leads for characterising access to social capital resources. Even though I generally agree with Lin's argument in terms of tracing social capital as an affordance of the network structure, the emergence of digitally mediated social relations complicates this effort. This has to do with the fact that from a theoretical standpoint, digitally mediated social ties have not yet been embedded in social network theory, and thus their structural position in a network is yet to be articulated. As such, I argue that digitally mediated social ties constitute a missing link in network theory, which is essential to examine before endeavouring to trace their relevance within a social network.

Social relations as social ties are a core element of social networks and therefore of social network theory. Even though a clear definition of digitally mediated social ties has not been argued, looking at the core ideas of social network

theory is a useful guideline to characterise the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in reference to existing notions of social ties. Often disregarded as an actual theory, social network theory is associated with social structures by conceptualising how individuals are related to other individuals in their network via defining the characteristics of their social ties. The classic literature on social network theory (e.g. Burt 2000, 2001 Wasserman & Faust, 1994, Kadushin, 2012) describes relationships among individuals that sustain the structure of their social network in the form of nodes and ties, whereby individuals in the network are referred to as nodes and the relationships among these actors are referred to as ties. Above all, the link between social capital and social network theory is evident, as conceptually they both rest upon social relatedness as their key feature. In this way, tracing individuals' access to social capital has often been done by way of drawing on characteristics of social networks. In specific, access to social capital has been described as being contingent on the direct and indirect social relationships that individuals maintain within their social network. Moreover, the position that an individual holds within their network has often been described as another indicator of access to social capital (Jansen, 2002). To that effect, social network theory states that the extent to which an individual has access to social capital resonates with the pertinent parameters of their social network. Consequently, social network theory sees social capital as inherent "in the structure of relations between persons and among persons" (Coleman, 1994, p. 302).

Interestingly, the whole structure of a social network hinges upon its framework of social relations, however although social ties are constitutive elements of social networks, their conceptual grounding reveals major weaknesses. Key literature in the field (e.g. Wasserman & Faust, 1994) is often primarily concerned with describing network characteristics and relatively little attention is actually given to the conceptual understanding of social ties, in spite of the striking relevance that is attached to them. To this end, Krackhardt (1992) delivered the most detailed analysis of social ties, building upon those elements that create social connectedness in practice. As such, a social tie can be described as a result of interaction, affection and time (p. 218/219), whereby the aggregate effect of mentioned parameters is crucial in defining the tie. In this line of thought, Granovetter (1973) defined the strength of a social tie as a "(probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361). As

such, the relative strength is a key parameter to characterise social ties, whereby social network theory mainly relies upon differentiating between strong social ties and weak ones. However, defining the actual strength of a social tie in practice seems to be fairly ambiguous. Strong social ties often refer to more durable relations such as family, friends and other types of kin that are of interest here, rather than any sorts of one-off, fleeting encounters (e.g. White, 2008; Krackhardt, 1992). However, from that point onwards, things grow significantly more complicated.

While there seems to be widespread agreement in terms of the definition of strong social bonds, other less established forms of social relatedness are much less clearly defined, particularly in terms of defining how they manifest in practice. Challenges start to arise when tackling the characteristics of weak ties by referring to them with reference to given characteristics, namely, time, affection and interaction. Thus, an important question to ask is "At what point is a tie to be considered weak?" (Krackhardt, 1992, p. 216). Is it safe to assume that weak ties, then, describe a social relation that is either characterised by less affection or has not existed over a long time period, resulting in less interaction? Granovetter (1973) for example, suggested that loose relationships, like those with a distant colleague at work or a brief encounter at a business meeting or conference, can indeed be perceived as relevant within a social network, especially since they often provide access to a wider variety of resources that strong social ties may be less suited for. Nonetheless, the boundaries defining what counts as a social tie, whether weak or strong, are controversial. To this end, I suggest that the existing theory on social ties is often conflicting with empirical observation and the individual, subjective observations as to whether a tie is relevant or not. This is illustrated by social network theory approaching forms of particularly loose relational engagement, such as "when a person strikes up a pleasant chat with a stranger at a bus stop (White & Godart, 2007, p. 4), which have been considered too insignificant to qualify as social ties.

If we draw the focus to digitally mediated forms of social interaction, then – strictly speaking – according to predominant social network theories, their characteristics would make them hardly suited to qualify as social ties. In fact, those "fleeting and transient" (Wittel, 2001, p. 51) forms of social interaction which often describe digitally mediated social relations, are far from corresponding to the traditional criteria that are seen as pertinent to forming any sort of social

engagement. And yet, in practice digitally mediated forms of sociality often represent a completely legitimate form of social interaction that is even considered vital in terms of their affordance to create a sense of belonging and identification with specific social groups. In any case, crediting the use of social networking platforms as a means to transform "many aspects of modern society and social interaction" (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 151) seems to be testament to the significant role that digitally mediated social ties play in individuals' social embedding. Ultimately, the point here is that it is important not to dismiss the relevance of social network theory in light of characterising social ties; on the contrary, I do believe that the previously defined characteristics that establish what makes a tie a tie are still valid and provide a very useful framework to identify how sociality is being built. Nonetheless, I argue that the way in which we approach sociality has changed markedly, given the fact that online social networking practices seem to have given way to a new form of sociality, where "social relations are not 'narrational' but informational" and are primarily based on the "exchange of data and on 'catching up'" instead of notions of "mutual experience and common history" (Wittel, 2001, p. 51).

Therefore, I argue that predefined values that explain the existence of social ties become relative variables, given the fact that our whole take on what sociality actually is, and how it is being understood, has changed.

## 2.6 Network sociality and its impact on conceptualising social ties

Digitally mediated forms of social interaction by way of using online social networking platforms has provided ample material for re-conceptualising existing notions of sociality. In this regard, Wittel's (2011) notion of *network sociality* stresses the fact that online, individuals seem to form social connections that are inconsistent with a traditional sense of building social relationships by way of continuous engagement. Rather this inconsistent manner in which social relations are being built invites the assumption that online social networking practices have established a new form of social relation. In terms of its nature, social interaction in the virtual space is often described as "supplementing or intersecting with real space communities" (Willson, 2006, p. 65). But what does this mean in terms of conceptualising the nature of those ties, specifically in reference to the strong

tie/weak tie dichotomy that exists. Can digitally mediated forms of social interaction be characterised as strong ties, and, if yes, under which conditions? Or are those primarily weak ties, given the fact that social exchange is marginal? Furthermore, is there actually a new form of social tie emerging that has not yet been conceptualised?

In fact, research on networked sociality has triggered a new theoretical notion of the social tie. The concept of the 'latent tie' (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011; Pearson, 2009; Haythornthwaite, 2002, 2005) has been articulated in this context to conceptually approach emerging forms of social relatedness. In the literature, latent ties are referred to as "bonds that are technically possible within existing network structures, but which have yet to be activated" (Pearson, 2009). Used as an umbrella term to subsume potential social interactions facilitated online, the concept of the 'latent tie' as a concept of social interaction primarily draws on its potentiality of socialising with an undefined audience. The description of latent ties resonates greatly with notions of the great potential they bear in terms of facilitating *actual* social bonds. However, what does this mean in terms of defining this specific type of tie? Is it safe to assume that, once activated, latent ties are then to turn into strong ties, for example, on the basis of reiterated acts of social interaction? Or if that is not the case, will latent ties then simply remain weak ties, in absence of a more concrete identification with given parameters? Rather, I argue that referring to digitally mediated social ties as latent ties remains a placeholder for a new emerging form of networked sociality that in absence of empirical evidence, has not yet been further conceptualised. It remains largely undefined what specific form of social relation digitally mediated social interaction facilitates and how users of online social networking practices *experience* this form of social interaction.

Considering the relevance that has been attached to digitally mediated social relatedness in recent years, it is remarkable how little evidence exists in terms of measuring digitally mediated social ties in practice. In the case of traditional social ties, this is significantly different. Particularly, when talking about strong social ties, one may immediately think of one's best friend or a family member and, quite possibly, images of how these relationships are formed and maintained, e.g. spending afternoons in the café chatting about life, might come to mind. Similarly, weaker forms of social ties may produce a scenario of meetings at conferences for example, where 'networking' events are common items on the agenda that facilitate the exchange of pertinent information over a drink for example; business cards may

be exchanged and kept until the moment comes when these social ties may be called upon. Clearly, these may be quite stereotypical scenarios framing the quite diverse set of experiences involved in building strong or weak ties in practice; In fact, it is striking that when it comes to digitally mediated social ties, comparable scenarios may be difficult to reproduce. Though one might question what the object of doing this might be, or how it plays out when looking at the different ways in which individuals utilise those ties, I argue that this points to a relevant discussion in terms of defining online social networking as a practice, and more precisely how people "build, maintain and alter these social ties" (Wittel, 2011, p. 52) that are often referred to as latent ties.

One key issue that is often discussed in this context is the way in which *intimacy* is actually formed online. As mentioned earlier, the "extended and disembodied sociality" (Willson, 2006, p, 49) that characterises digitally mediated forms of social interaction, has induced a significant change in social practices, primarily defined by today's online communication practices that are "abstracted from the face-to-face" (Willson, 2006, p. 49). Therefore, examining how intimacy is produced in an online environment is the best approach in order to understand the way in which individuals build relationships online and how they bring latent ties to life. To this end, Lambert (2013) argued that on Facebook for example, intimacy in social relations is described as an act of "performing connection" (p. 57). In practice, this means that individuals produce social connectivity by engaging with others using the platforms' tools in order to facilitate interaction. Social interaction online manifests by individuals creating profiles, producing status updates and leaving comments on each other's timelines to stay connected (p. 58). By doing this, individuals engage in dialogical action and "inject sociability into mediated communication, showing emotion, expressing closeness and availability" (Baym, 2010, p. 51).

Returning to my research focus, the matter that still requires closer examination is how digitally mediated social relations in latent ties can be understood in light of facilitating social capital. Drawing on new sources of sociability, it is interesting to see how these social ties have impacted the formation of social capital. Clearly, previous studies tackle digitally mediated social relatedness in the context of social capital, identifying social capital resources such as social support and facilitating social cohesion. For example, Ellison et al. (2007) found that Facebook allows individuals to benefit from social support that is facilitated by the

possibility to reconnect and stay connected with former friends and acquaintances. Similarly, the use of Facebook has also been researched in view of its effect on psychological well being (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2007), which equally points to its affordance of enabling users to benefit from existing social ties. Other studies elaborated on the use of Twitter as a means to sustain social cohesion by providing an opportunity to facilitate sociality among an initially dispersed group of individuals forming a particular community (e.g. Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010; Sugawara et al., 2012).

The problem I observe with these studies is that most of them tackle social capital facilitation online based on existing definitions of social relations. Thus, digitally mediated social ties are associated with strong ties resulting in the formation of 'bonding' social capital, which is primarily associated with expressive benefits such as social support (e.g. Putnam, 2001b, Putnam, 2002). Similarly, when connections are evaluated as weak, they seem to facilitate 'bridging' social capital associated with instrumental benefits such as access to novel information (Putnam, 2001b, Putnam, 2002). This means that the formation of social capital online, is researched by drawing on existing structural determinants of social relationships, thus using network characteristics such as the presence of strong and/or weak ties, the overall size of the network, as well as the relative density of openness of this network as indicators. However, if we are to assume that digitally mediated social relations facilitate new forms of social relations that do not neatly tie in with existing forms of social relations, it is legitimate to assume that the social capital inherent in these ties also deviates from existing descriptions. This is not to say that it is wrong to assume that digitally mediated ties facilitate bridging and bonding social capital; rather, I argue that characterising digitally mediated social ties as either weak or strong, might result in premature conclusions as to what social capital benefits they facilitate access to. Potentially, I speculate that whereas digitally mediated social ties may often seem to emulate the traits of traditional social ties, the associated outcomes may well depart from the existing social capital discourse.

In my findings, I draw on the notion of liquidity as introduced by Bauman (2013, 2007, 2003). I used the notion of liquidity as a metaphor as it resonates with the ephemeral yet consistent relevance of digitally mediated social ties. The notion of liquidity is pertinent to the notion of a networked sociality (Wittel, 2001) as it describes contemporary social relationships as impacted by shifting affordances

of social ties, which become highly relevant in one instance and lose significance in the next. Nonetheless, this is not to say that all social ties that are generated online are liquid. Rather, my aim in using this terminology is to offer a perspective to the reader to get a grasp of the changing conditions of sociality in the digital age providing a tangible metaphor that resonates with what I have observed. Thereby, the concept of liquid ties that I introduce in Chapter 4 is meant to illustrate a phenomenon that I observed in one particular case. Whereas the concept of liquid ties does thereby not (yet) hold profound descriptive power in approaching digitally mediated social ties in general, I argue that its strength lies in its capacity to challenge previous social tie concepts.

## 2.7 The affordance of digitally mediated social interaction to establish legitimate social relations

In light of the affordance of digitally mediated social ties to facilitate social capital, I am particularly interested in understanding how these ties are meaningful in terms of producing symbolic capital. Strong ties are often defined as particularly effective in building legitimate social capital, especially in a social context marked by insecurity and uncertainty, as is often the case for creative production (cf. Krackhardt, 1992). Digitally mediated social interaction via online social networking platforms is normally associated with producing weaker forms of social interaction, along with maintaining already existing social ties. Hence, the question that arises is how digitally mediated forms of social interaction are relevant to build social interactions that are perceived to be useful in forming relevant social ties, in the sense of building a legitimate source of social capital. At first glance, this appears to be a paradoxical assumption, as these loose forms of social interaction hardly seem productive in the sense of affording a tangible output. And yet, the prevalence of digitally mediated social interaction paired with anecdotal evidence that attests legitimacy to these social bonds contradicts this assumption. How then, is it possible to trace why and in which context digitally mediated social interaction leads to the formation of relevant social bonds?

Regarding the effectiveness of online social networking platforms to establish legitimate social capital, it is essential to look at how platform-immanent features lend themselves to facilitating social interaction. When framing online social networking platforms as a locus of social interaction, utilities such as messaging

tools, imagery and personal profiles are often referenced as key elements in identifying the affordance of technology to facilitate social bonding. However, this offhandedly implies, that those features are meant to be the prime focus of attention when it comes to tracing affordances. I hold that while looking at these features is crucial, individuals' skills and practices and what motivates these is an aspect that is equally relevant to study.

Affordance theory is useful to analyse online social networking platforms from the perspective of the specific properties that potentially enable individuals to facilitate social interaction with others. Gibson's (1977) theory of affordances defines these properties as "action possibilities" immanent in environments that exist independently of the individual's ability to be aware of them. Nonetheless, Gibson (1979) further argues that these affordances are to be seen in relation to the individual's capacity to recognise them. This implies that the person's ability to recognise existing affordances is crucial in understanding how they lead to anticipated outcomes. In the case of online social networking platforms, affordances refer to platform-immanent features and the way in which individuals choose to utilise them in order to facilitate social exchange. In this context, the notion of affordances is often used as a conceptual bridge between a technological deterministic view of applications and individuals' social practices in utilising them (e.g. Bakardjieva, 2005; Graves, 2007). In light of this aspect, Hutchby for example argues that

> [A]ffordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. (2001, p. 444)

The ability to build intimacy is critical to facilitate social bonding (e.g. Lambert, 2013). To this end, online profiles, typically based on personal data such as age, location, interests and a profile picture (cf. boyd & Ellison, 2013), are one major element, as they allow users to navigate through online social worlds (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2008). Equally, socialising with others is facilitated by disclosing personal information such as tastes, interests and personal views on particular subjects (Stutzman, 2006). This transmission of social cues online is

useful to emulate traditional socialising processes in which the exchange of social cues helps to evaluate a person's eligibility to form a social bond. Nonetheless, the way in which social cues are being transmitted and perceived by others is different in an online environment (cf. Baym, 2010; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Even though profiles on platforms facilitate the exchange of social cues, they are conveyed in a different manner, because online "interactants are unable to see, hear or feel one another, they cannot use the usual cues conveyed by appearance, nonverbal signals, and features of the physical context" (Baym, 2010, p. 54).

Given the fact that the interpretation of social cues in an offline context can sometimes disadvantage individuals when appearance and non-verbal signals do not correspond with predominant standards, it is evident that digitally mediated forms of social interaction can be seen as more liberating (cf. Yates, 2001). Albeit the liberating and equalising effects of social interaction online seem convincing, their impact on negotiating status and power is ambivalent. For example, Spears & Lee (1994) argue that whereas online social interaction does decrease the relevance of social cues in terms of social positioning, the "individual control over one's work domain or productivity, by virtue of technological forces, is conceptually distinct from the social power relations within which this is exercised." (p. 435). This means that while online social networking platforms may provide individuals with a greater scope of action due to the fact that online users remain largely anonymous, this does not defy existing social power relations. At best, online social networking platforms may provide individuals with greater agency in terms of managing existing power dynamics, which does not imply that existing notions of power paired with notions of inequality will be eradicated (e.g. Baym, 2010; Yee et al., 2007; Yates, 2001).

This is valid to some degree, as on the one hand greater anonymity online may imply that factors such as "gender, race, rank, physical appearance, and other features of public identity are not immediately evident" (Spears & Lee, 1994, p. 435). However, it requires particular skill to compensate for the lack of social cues so that interaction online does not remain deprived of its capacity to create intimacy, a point to which I will return later.

Another aspect worth mentioning here refers to the affordance of online social networking platforms as a means to foster a public display of social connections. Fostering a sense of public awareness of sociality, boyd (2010) explains how digitally mediated forms of social interaction create a social

environment referred to as 'networked publics', whose main feature lies in its ability to *showcase* a social connection amongst a wider audience. Specifically, the affordance of articulating the individual's social connections via a 'friends list', such as the one featured on Facebook, for instance (Donath & boyd, 2004), is striking in that social connections are publicised and become another feature of one's identity online. As such, comments or other forms of interpersonal communication in general "are not simply a dialogue between the two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience" (p. 45). This is particularly interesting from a social capital perspective, as affiliation with a specific social circle is often considered vital in terms of gaining access to resources. This affordance of making connections publicly visible and observable by others will assume significant relevance in the forthcoming empirical chapters. Approaching networked sociality as a "process of self-reflexive public identification" (Lambert, 2013, p. 57) suggests that individuals are encouraged to create their public appearance by associating themselves with others online. The public display of one's social connections serves a number of purposes that are relevant to an understanding of social capital formation online, because as Donath & boyd (2004) argue, it emulates a social dynamic that is present in the physical world.

> *Seeing someone within the context of their connections provides the viewer with information about them. Social status, political beliefs, musical taste, etc, may be inferred from the company one keeps. Furthermore, knowing that someone is connected to people one already knows and trusts is one of the most basic ways of establishing trust with a new relationship* (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 72).

Notably, the dynamics of social affiliation and group formation are markedly different from similar processes offline, given the fact that online connections often form alongside shared 'interests' and in absence of physical constraints may lead to the formation of "connections that might not otherwise form" (Baym, 2010, p. 102). Consequently, displaying social connections publicly via online social networking platforms may enable individuals to foster new social connections with individuals they did not know previously, potentially from other social circles and personal backgrounds.

Aside from the specific tools that enable social interaction, it is equally interesting to trace individuals' 'ability' to identify the opportunities that online social networking platforms create. This is based on the assumption that even though online social networking platforms do create opportunities to form meaningful social relations with others, not everyone seems to be able to leverage these existing opportunities to the same extent. Yates and Littleton (1999) have effectively discussed affordances in this light, looking at computer games in view of sustaining gaming cultures. In this respect, they have established a take on affordances that has its roots in psychological theories of perception (e.g. Gibson, 1977), which substantiates the appreciation of affordances by defining them as "the situated interaction among actors or between actors and objects" (Yates & Littleton, 2010, p. 570). To that effect, the use of a specific tool is understood as an interaction between an actor "with some other 'system'" and the specific "conditions that enable that interaction" based on the assumption that "properties of both the actor and the 'system'" are taken into account.

Taking a similar line, my appreciation of online social networking platforms lies at the intersection of the given features of specific platforms paired with the specific attitudes, characteristics and context on the part of the individual who is making a choice to use these features accordingly. I therefore argue that looking at affordances as an interplay of available properties and individuals' 'effectivities' portrays digital technology and online social networking platforms more effectively in light of the often perceived variation in terms of attained outcomes. Put simply, looking at affordances in that way, I aim to find a conclusive answer as to why some individuals seem to be able to use Twitter more effectively than others in spite of similar points of departure. Moreover, portraying digitally mediated forms of social interaction in that way addresses both questions of agency in the digital realm, as well as enabling the identification of why the use of online social networking platforms equips some, but not others, with the capacity to benefit from potential opportunities.

## 2.8 Trust as a key affordance of social ties

Tracing the significance of digitally mediated social ties in context with notions of access to resources and recognition goes hand in hand with trust and credibility. At the end of the day, whenever we talk about the exchange of

resources, being considered worthy of being entrusted with these resources, be the information or the endowment of recognition, is key. Arguably, the process of establishing trust is closely connected to the way in which we conceptualise social relations and access to social capital. The literature makes a clear statement in that regard: Trust has been discussed as a foundation of social relations (e.g. Rempel et al., 1985) shaping the extent to which individuals perceive them as meaningful.

Previous research (e.g. Krackhardt et al., 2003; Lorenzen, 2001; Baron, 2000) showed that strong, established social ties are possibly the most conducive means to establish trust between two parties. This makes intuitive sense, given that continuous moments of social interaction that form strong ties provide individuals with plenty of opportunities to infer information about others, which might eventually result as them being considered trustworthy. Embedding the notion of trust within the framework of my research there are two questions that need addressing: The first one is to what extent building trust is relevant in terms of attaining symbolic capital and thereby recognition as a creative professional. The second question that I tackle addresses the capacity of digitally mediated social ties in building and sustaining mutual trust between two parties.

The relevance of establishing trust between stakeholders in the field of cultural and creative production becomes apparent by looking at its framework conditions: Departing from the assumption that trust becomes most important in situations where perceived risk is prevalent, the field of cultural and creative production serves as a prime example to illustrate this claim. Creative production is a process that is marked by its "volatility, changeability and instability, which places risk so centrally within the biographies and practices of the cultural entrepreneur" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 458). On one hand this is to do with the intricacies of estimating the value of cultural products, given its intangible, symbolic nature. Whereas in other domains value is often connected to measureable skill, in the fine arts sector attaching value to a piece of work isn't quite as forthright. Karpik (2010) attributes this to the multidimensionality, uncertainty and incommensurability of artwork as products that he defined as "singularities". Art works are difficult to compare against one another and in Karpik's view attributing value to these hinges on specific regimes of economic coordination – among those, Karpik lists expert opinion and the common opinion as central to the value attribution process.

The significance of expert opinion and approval brings us to the second issue that I address in this thesis: The relevance of social relationships and the capacity of digitally mediated social ties in building trust. Given that creative professionals heavily rely on approval and voiced recognition of respected stakeholders in the field, it is plausible to assume that building social ties with these individuals ranks highly among the priorities of creative professionals. Lee (2011) highlighted that networks and social ties with key figures in the field are essential to gain access to valued resources and recognition. Arrow (1974) defined trust as an "important lubricant in social systems" (p. 23). Building on this notion I anticipate that sustaining close relations with decision makers requires a capacity to establish trust.

Given that trust is often seen as a social collateral of dense network comprised of strong social bonds (e.g. Karlan et al., 2009), I aim to establish to what extent digitally mediated social ties are capable to achieve similar outcomes. Do these brittle social bonds afford trust? And if so, how can trust be conceptualised in this context? Furthermore, what conclusions are by implied conceptualising digitally mediated social ties as trust-building agents when defining trust as a social capital resource?

## 2.9 Pulling the strings together – digitally mediated social relations in context with social capital and the attainment of recognition
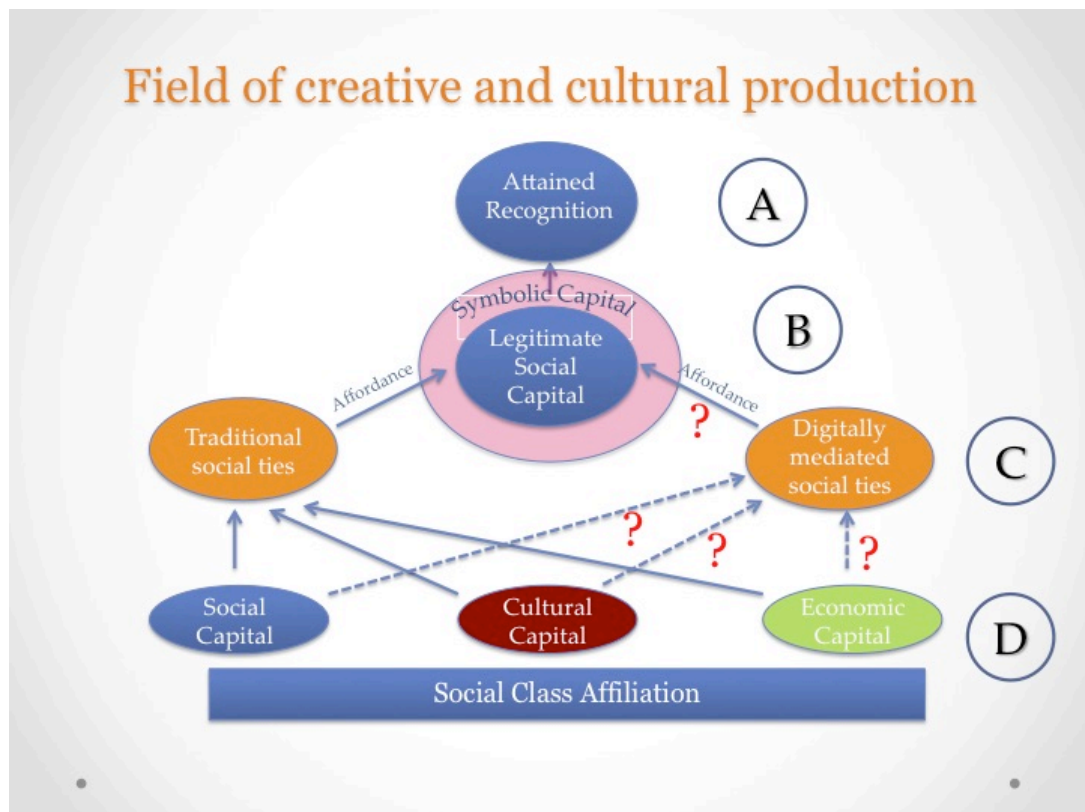
**Figure 1: The field of creative and cultural production and the significance of digitally mediated social interaction**

This figure represents the field of creative and cultural production and illustrates the interrelation of the theoretical strands I used as a basis for this thesis. The underlying assumption holds that to attain recognition as a creative professional (Part A), it is essential to accumulate symbolic capital insofar that significant figures in the field already holding a great amount of symbolic capital consecrate a specific artist by, for example, supporting them through their approval and goodwill. More precisely, the prestige and honour of those symbolic capital holders is bestowed upon eligible artists, providing them with specific resources that potentially enable them to become respected figures in the field themselves. As mentioned earlier, the main argument here is that achieved recognition is not necessarily a result of the talent and quality of the artwork produced, but rather the result of a consecration process in which symbolic capital holders are key. Traditionally, the accumulation of symbolic capital has been seen as contingent on the artists' opportunity to gain access to symbolic capital holders primarily by means of networking and socialising (cf. Bourdieu, 1993, 1996, 1987). Attaining symbolic capital is interpreted here by building legitimate social capital (Part B); therefore symbolic capital is immanent in

social capital via social relations that are seen as legitimate, namely, maintaining social relations with the 'right' individuals (cf. Lawler, 2011).

The attainment of social capital has been linked to establishing social relationships that facilitate access to specific resources (Bourdieu, 1984). In this context, social networks and social network theory have been used to understand the attainment of social capital structurally, by emphasising the framework conditions of an individual's social network, such as strength of social relationships, openness vs. closedness of the network or network position (e.g. Lin, 2008, 2002). Traditionally, these indicators are used to trace an individual's relative opportunities in accessing social capital resources (Part C). My research interest centres upon the argument that digitally mediated forms of social interaction have an impact on individuals' opportunities in terms of establishing social relationships, which consequently may enable them to gain access to social capital resources .The fundamental question here is: To what extent can digitally mediated social relations facilitate the accumulation of social capital? More precisely how does the use of online social networking platforms enable individuals to form social relations that are perceived significant in light of gaining access to resources that may help to achieve recognition?

This is also where the story departs: Traditionally, it has been assumed that social capital attainment requires forming strong, social ties in order to gain access to resources that are conducive to attaining recognition (Bourdieu, 1984). This holds particularly true for the field of cultural and creative production that is often described as a field where uncertainty and risk are particularly high (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Banks et al., 2000; Krackhardt, 1986). This assumption is evidenced by the fact that creative production is often appreciated as a highly volatile undertaking. Notably, the implied uncertainty in the field of creative and cultural production stems from the fact that "product value judgements are primarily aesthetic" and is subject to constantly shifting indicators such as "trends, styles and symbols" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 458). As such, the value of creative expression upon which recognition is based, is a result of highly subjective choices and expressions that manifest as "gambles on possible future markets" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 458). This also explains the central role that recognised individuals occupy within the field, given that their choices in bestowing value upon creative work are often perceived as more credible in terms of anticipating value in light of future expectations, and thus simulate the effect of reduced uncertainty.

The importance of strong social ties in this context stems from a similar rationale. Tracing the relevance of strong social ties, I draw on Krackhardt's (1986) argument that portrays these ties as a result of continuous social interaction and existing affection. Thereby, the strength of strong ties is reflected in the security and predictability achieved by long-standing social relations, which provide recognised individuals with more security in voicing their judgements. In this sense, it is legitimate to assume that creative professionals with strong ties to decision makers may appear as more trusted individuals upon which recognition is bestowed, as knowledge on their person, their previous work history and their suitability to produce creative work that assumes value over time may seem more accurate. Therefore, the value of strong social ties in view of attaining symbolic capital is obvious as the wealth of information that is provided by reiterated social exchanges over a significant amount of time, may strengthen the predictability of the artist and in this sense their trustworthiness in being eligible in terms of their predictability to attain value over time.

Equally, I refer to Granovetter (1973) as the main proponent of the concept of weak ties. It highlights the capacity of these ties to access social capital resources that are restricted in densely knit social networks. Weak ties are often the result of more informal forms of social interaction, such as business meetings and being introduced to friends of friends. The essence being that weak ties facilitate a bridge between previously unacquainted social actors (cf. Granovetter 1973/1982). This bridging affordance credits weaker forms of social interaction with the capacity to facilitate access to novel information, leading to the formation of bridging social capital (cf. Putnam, 2000). These social ties bear relevance for creative professionals in that they potentially facilitate access to stakeholders in the field. Nonetheless, they require the existence of gatekeepers, that is to say, existing social contacts with individuals who take on the role of introducing individuals, thereby triggering social interaction.

Digitally mediated social ties contrast the significance of existing concepts of social ties to attain recognition; I hypothesise that digitally mediated social ties equally play a role in terms of facilitating access to symbolic capital holders by relating to them in a non-traditional way. Essentially, this seems to be a barely plausible scenario, given that the volatile, ephemeral nature of digitally mediated social relation is a rather unsuitable tool in facilitating access to desirable resources. In particular, this fleeting way of social interaction as a means to convey a sense of

continuity and predictability is counter-intuitive at first. And yet, digitally mediated social relations are frequently portrayed as being a major constitutive agent in reaching out to other individuals and presumably accessing resources inherent in the social capital produced. I argue that digitally mediated social ties do play a role in creative professionals striving for recognition. Nonetheless, it is so far not clear how this may happen. Are there particular conditions under which digitally mediated social ties are specifically useful? If yes, what are these and how can these conditions be characterised?

Another element that comes into play here is the relative importance of other forms of capital (Part D), namely, economic and cultural capital in the formation of social capital and gaining access to decision makers. Traditionally, cultural capital resources as well as economic resources have been described as major elements in determining attainment of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), as embodied cultural capital is often seen as a factor that facilitates building social relationships, and most particularly, gaining access to representatives of prestigious social circles. In the case of digitally mediated social relations, the relevance of other forms of capital is much less clearly defined. The relevance of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital has been contrasted with more recent notions of cultural capital (e.g. Savage 2015, Prieur & Savage, 2013/2011). These so-called emerging forms of capital are relevant insofar as they question the relevance of skills and knowledge derived from individuals' social background. Instead of focussing only on the hereditary transference of skills, this new take on cultural capital takes into account new cultural domains that favour novelty and versatility as equally important factors in acquiring effective skills and habits. To what extent are resources associated with cultural capital a prerequisite to forming these social ties? And to what extent can financial resources, if at all, be seen to play a role in the formation of digitally mediated social ties?

In this thesis, I will reframe the existing logic on symbolic capital formation: Contrasting the Bourdieusian logic of symbolic capital attainment as primarily a result of class affiliation alongside relevant forms of capital, my take on symbolic capital attainment envisions a more agentic approach. Thus, by tracing the role of digitally mediated social ties as a means to attain symbolic capital, I depict the process of symbolic capital attainment as an affordance of these social ties. Obviously, the role of existing forms of capital cannot be neglected in this context. However, rather than framing the existence of social network ties as a result of

existing capital allocation, I evaluate to what extent digitally mediated social ties initiate the formation of social capital. In other words, instead of following a bottom-up approach drawing on existing capital allocation as the explanatory factor for symbolic capital attainment, I look at digitally mediated social ties as the very source of it. In light of these aspects I ask:

*"In what way is social capital sustained by digitally mediated social ties conducive to the accumulation of symbolic capital for those engaged in the field of cultural and creative production?"*

To cover all the aspects necessary to answer my research question, I have further subdivided it into the following thematic areas, each containing a sub-set of questions:

Theme A: Digitally mediated social ties and symbolic capital

This set of questions emerges from existing theories on symbolic capital as discussed in section 2.3 (cf. p. 36 ff.) and tackles the tension arising from implicitly emphasising the relevance of strong ties in attaining honour and prestige (i.e. symbolic capital outcomes) in the field of cultural and creative production (cf. p. 64-65). Ephemeral social bonds like those often facilitated through digitally mediated social interaction challenge existing notions of symbolic capital. Thereby, I aim to understand whether or not digitally mediated social ties play a role in this context and if so, how symbolic capital attained through these ties can be understood.

RQ1: To what extent are digitally mediated social bonds meaningful in terms of creating symbolic capital?

RQ2: To what extent digitally mediated social interaction allow creative professionals to connect with those individuals that help them to become recognised?

RQ3: To what extent do digitally mediated social ties actually play a role in accumulating symbolic capital?

<u>Theme B: Digitally mediated social ties and social capital</u>

This research theme ties in with the previous one, which illustrates the strong link between accessing social capital resources and the attainment of symbolic capital, which I have discussed in sections 1.3 (cf. p. 14) and 2.3 (cf. p. 31 ff.). Given that social capital as a means to symbolic capital has been associated with strong ties, how does the notion of digitally mediated social ties tie in with this discourse. Is there are need to re-conceptualise social capital attainment, given the impact of resources that may be accumulated by intermittent forms of social engagement?

RQ4: To what extent do digitally mediated social relations facilitate the accumulation of social capital?

RQ5: Do online social networking platforms serve as a legitimate means to establish meaningful social connections?

RQ6: In what way can ephemeral, transient digitally mediated social ties sustain a sense of durable social relatedness?

<u>Theme C: Social capital facilitated online and its relation to other forms of capital</u>

This research theme emerges from the idea of convertibility of different forms of capital, whereby it is suggested that possession of cultural capital for example may impact an individuals' ability to accrue social capital resources (cf. p. 13 ff.). Digitally mediated social interaction has been previously discussed around notions of skills and motivation. To what extent can these skills be understood in relation to other forms of capital, particularly cultural capital? Is there a need to re-address existing notions of cultural capital in light of these new developments (cf. p. 13)?

RQ7: To what extent are other forms of capital, specifically cultural capital relevant to building digitally mediated social relations?

RQ8: How can the attainment of symbolic capital be linked to resources that emerge from digitally mediated social interaction, if at all?

RQ9: To what extent can individuals' skills in building digitally mediated social interaction be interpreted as a form of cultural capital?

<u>Theme D: Relevance of affordances in facilitating digitally mediated social engagement</u>

This thematic area of research questions focuses on relevance of affordance theory in understanding how individuals interpret platform immanent properties of online social networking platforms as opportunities to build social engagement (cf. section 2.7, p. 46 ff.). Particularly, I am interested to tackle the interplay of individuals' interpretation of properties and person-specific effectivities to leverage these, which addresses questions of motivation, self-conception and the impact of the influence of their social embedding.

RQ10: How do individuals perceive opportunities of relationship building by interpreting platform immanent properties?

RQ11: How do individuals build and maintain social engagement through online social networking practices?

RQ12: What are particular emerging strategies and tactics that individuals apply in building online ties?

To this end, there are several layers of information that I aim to uncover: First, I aim to represent the nature of digitally mediated social ties drawing on individuals' experience in engaging socially through online social networking platforms. By examining individuals' perceptions of these ties, I will look at how these ties resonate with constitutive factors of social relationships, notably time, affection and interaction. Second, I will trace if and how digitally mediated social ties allow individuals to gain access to resources. Essentially, this relates to their personal estimate in terms of how meaningful digitally mediated social interaction to benefit from these interactions. And essentially, how do individuals use online social

networking platforms in order to produce a connection? Third and lastly, how can these resources, if at all, be interpreted in light of accumulating symbolic capital? Can the resources that digitally mediated social interaction provides access to – notably access to information, access to individuals who can offer support and encouragement, etc. – be interpreted as symbolic capital in the sense of helping these individuals to become recognised as legitimate professionals?

## 2.10 Conclusion

The aim of this theoretical chapter was to provide a coherent framework in which to theoretically embed my research interest. My aim with this thesis is to trace to what extent digitally mediated forms of social interaction can enable individuals to establish social relations that allow them access to resources associated with social capital. In particular, I am interested in understanding whether the resources that individuals can access via digitally mediated forms of social interaction are seen as relevant in terms of attaining symbolic capital, which I have defined as the attainment of recognition.

Overall, I have contextualised my research interest by looking at the work practice of individuals working in the creative and cultural industries. The advantage of locating my research interest within this specific realm was evident to me given that maintaining meaningful social relationships with people that matter has always been discussed as crucial in this context; creative professionals usually strive to access social capital resources by establishing a social network of meaningful social contacts in order to attain recognition. Most notably, I see the attainment of symbolic capital (i.e., resources that entail recognition) as essentially a relational process that has been framed as being equally influenced by other forms of capital, such as cultural and economic capital. In addition, by drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, I ascribe importance to the specific rules and norms that frame the process of establishing social relations in the field of the cultural and creative industries.

Essentially, what I aim to deliver with this thesis can be summarised as follows: First of all, I aim to establish a sound methodological approach that will allow researchers to trace the implications of digitally mediated social connections within the framework of social network research. I will explain in detail why tracing digitally mediated social relations using traditional approaches of social network analysis has been seen as problematic, which is why my thesis strongly advocates for a more

holistic approach towards social network research. Second, I aim to deliver a more refined definition of social capital and related resources. I argue that this is relevant given the fact that social capital resources have, by definition, often been associated as being contingent on traditional forms of established social relationships. Given that digitally mediated forms of social relationships do not tie in with existing social capital definitions, my aim is to respond to this conceptual gap by delivering a definition of how latent forms of social connections are pertinent to the social capital realm. Third and finally, I will deliver an understanding of whether social capital resources, particularly those fostered via digitally mediated social interactions, are perceived as productive in terms of achieving recognition for creative work. More precisely, if these relations are seen as meaningful in this context, I will clarify under which specific circumstances this is the case, as I assume that whether they are useful or not is essentially context-specific.

In the following chapter, I will explain how I will go about finding an answer for each of these three realms by introducing the specific research questions, and subsequently, I shall illustrate how I propose to answer them empirically.

## Chapter 3: Methodological section

## 3.1 Part 1: From theory to the field – Defining Research questions and choosing cases

Digitally mediated social relations afford new ways to engage with others by not only sustaining and reinforcing previously formed social relationships, but also providing the opportunity to interact with previously unknown individuals or sustain fleeting one-off encounters. These forms of loose engagement are interesting in terms of understanding how they afford access to resources that may otherwise be difficult to attain. Likewise, this assumption affects established definitions of social capital, given the fact that so far the accumulation of social capital has been strongly linked to traditional, strong social ties. Consequently, there are two important aspects that I am looking at as part of the empirical work of this thesis. First, I aim to look at how individuals actually experience digitally mediated social interaction as part of their day-to-day activities. This will allow me to understand in what way digitally mediated social ties are different from more established forms of social interaction, notably strong ties and weak ties. Secondly, my aim is to uncover to what extent individuals see digitally mediated social ties as providing access to resources that they perceive as meaningful and which are unique to online social interaction.

In the field of cultural and creative production, the ability to engage socially with others and to form a network of contacts is vital, because it creates possibilities to create visibility for work produced and to secure job opportunities. Therefore, accumulating social capital is essential for creative professionals, specifically in terms of liaising with key individuals in the field, such as art critics, gallery owners, prestigious clients, etc. as this may boost their careers and allow them to make a name for themselves. In this sense, building social capital will allow them to become recognised as legitimate "players in the field", which is contingent on the approval of mentioned key stakeholders in the field. This process is often described as 'consecration', which points to the importance of symbolic capital. I argue that accumulating symbolic capital, that is, gaining access to those resources contingent on the approval of key stakeholders in the field such as honour, prestige, being named worthy of recognition, is directly linked with social capital. Given the

fact that digitally mediated social ties seem to impact the way in which social capital is being accessed, it is thought-provoking to ask whether digitally mediated social ties do play a role in accumulating symbolic capital. Essentially, the question that follows is: To what extent can online social interaction allow creative professionals to connect with those individuals that will help them to become recognised?

In its essence, my research question addresses the need to understand the process of attaining symbolic capital in the field of the cultural and creative industries, by way of using resources accumulated through individuals' use of digitally mediated forms of social interaction. I focus my research on individuals in the creative sector, as in this type of industry, collaborative relationships occupy a central role. Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2010) also pointed to the significance of 'socialising and networking' (p. 13) as vital elements in the ability to sustain a career in the creative sector, which is plausible, given the fact that information on job opportunities, insider information from within the sector or professional support is often gained by way of building and sustaining meaningful social relationships.

Seen from this perspective, social capital can therefore be converted into economic capital for example. Bourdieu's concept of social capital has been widely applied in social science research, and increasingly within the context of online social networking platforms. However, what most of the studies fail to deliver is a portrayal of the implications of online social networking platforms within a context that enables tracing the process of producing an altered understanding of social capital based on the implications of digitally enabled networks. Choosing to work with individuals in the cultural and creative industries enables me to use Bourdieu's concept of the field in a meaningful way. And yet, illustrating how digitally enabled networks alter the meaning and relative significance of the field's constitutive elements reveals the significant shortcomings of Bourdieu's field concept. A main aim of this thesis is therefore to address these shortcomings and respond to these with an alternative or complementary definition of social capital and of symbolic capital.

### 3.1.1 On the practicalities of researching the field of the cultural and creative industries – Case studies as a window into the relevance of digitally mediated interaction

Defining the scope of my research and anchoring my research interest on the relevance of digitally mediated social ties within the field of cultural and creative production, was the first step of this thesis. Following the conceptualisation of my research, I then looked for possibilities regarding gaining access to the field of cultural and creative production myself, tackling a viable method to empirically trace the relevance of digitally mediated social ties and ultimately identifying creative professionals as suitable research respondents. Early on in my research, I recognised that my research interest would require an in-depth approach in terms of its methodology, given the fact that little empirical evidence existed regarding the nature of digitally mediated social interaction and how individuals in the creative sector in particular experienced their relevance as part of their day-to-day work practice. As such, I chose to work with case studies as they are a useful way for framing research endeavours in which the focus is on "contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables" (Yin, 2003, p. 1). This means that essentially, identifying creative professionals and approaching them as particular cases would help me to engage with them holistically, familiarising myself with their personal history, their career trajectory and tracing in what particular ways digitally mediated social interaction played a role in their individual journeys to establish themselves professionally. I aim to use these cases for a detailed comparative analysis, which will allow me to understand key features of the theories I used and develop these.

Looking at social capital and the relevance of digitally mediated social interactions is complex in nature. Many variables potentially have an effect on the way in which these social ties take on meaning within the specific circumstances of creative professionals: their educational background, career ambitions, the overall importance of social networks from their perspective, as well as engagement with online social networking platforms, their specific use of these platforms, and their individual assessment in terms of how using these platforms constitutes a meaningful facilitator for a creative professional's establishment in the field. In the literature, case studies are defined as

*"... analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods.*

*The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates."* (Thomas, 2011, p. 513)

This thesis is set up as a theory development project specifically focussing on redefining the concept of social capital through digitally mediated social ties and its impact on achieving recognition. For this purpose, I use detailed comparative case studies to understand key features of the theory and develop these.

Nonetheless, case studies per se do not constitute a method; rather they are a framework to structure an approach towards a chosen field of enquiry in terms of defining the overall perspective on a given subject. This means that whereas case studies provide a way into defining research respondents, ultimately they do not predefine a specific method of research enquiry. As such, case studies are often carried out in line with interviews or focus groups, but also more ethnographic approaches such as participant observation are common in this particular context (cf. Yin, 2003). Approaching this research drawing on a set of case studies also entails a number of restrictions and potential drawbacks: While case studies can provide detailed accounts of empirical phenomena, one of the main disadvantages is the extensive time commitment involved in terms of making cases robust and ensuring sufficient, continuous engagement with each of the cases. (cf. Baxter & Jack, 2008). This implies considerable effort to ensure a robust choice of cases, which entails significant preparatory work that is, getting to know the eligible representatives in the field prior to choosing cases to make an informed decision on whether or not they promise to deliver insightful data. Before elaborating further on my particular methodological approach, I will explain how I started approaching the field of creative and cultural production and what I did in order to identify suitable cases for my research.

### 3.1.2 'Networking' my way into the field of cultural and creative production – On sampling cases

Subsequent to my decision to carry out my research by observing professionals in the cultural and creative industries who used online social networking platforms as part of their practice, I then had to make a decision as to where exactly I would begin my research. Aside from my personal interest in the cultural sector, I had no prior affiliation with this sector. Therefore, I started out

identifying various potential avenues into the field. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was more challenging than I had initially anticipated, as soon enough I realised that having contacts and establishing a network was not only important for creative professionals themselves, but equally for me as a researcher in order to gain access and ultimately gain the trust of professionals in the field. Ultimately, there were three main routes I pursued to recruit research respondents: a) personal contacts, b) contacts via collaboration with art platform and c) established collaboration with the University of the Arts London (UAL).

### 3.1.3 Research respondents via personal network

Initially, I contacted two photographers to carry out a pilot study for my research in April 2013. For this pilot, I used a convenience sampling strategy, based on the fact that I had access to these two photographers via my own personal social network and I had been acquainted with both of them before the start of my research. One of these two photographers is an avid user of online social networking platforms and has claimed that in particular Facebook was fundamental in getting her business off the ground. After an initial interview with her, I decided to try the name generator approach with her, in the hope that based on her experience in using online social networking platforms her contribution would prove insightful. The network map she produced was instructive; early on in my empirical research, it pointed to the difficulties I would later experience with this technique. However, I decided not to include this particular network map in my final analysis, as I was unable to devote enough time to exploring the case of this particular photographer due to the geographical distance, on the one hand, and a limited availability on her side, as much of her work involved being abroad. Hence, many questions that had emerged from the initial interview and the network map remained unanswered. Nonetheless, the information I gained was useful in the sense that it provided material to reflect upon, specifically in terms of the need to alter my approach to the network maps.

The second interview was with another photographer I had known for many years, and as such, I was largely familiar with her work. Given that online social networking platforms played an insignificant role in her career, I decided not to pursue my work with her any further, as I assumed that the information she could provide would not be insightful, given the central role that digitally mediated social

ties played in the context of my research. Nonetheless, the way in which she talked about her work as a photographer reiterated the central importance of contacts and networking in the creative sector, which reaffirmed the significance of looking at the relevance of social ties in the framework of creative professions.

Apart from the information regarding methodology and work circumstances in the field of creative production, these initial interviews provided me with another contact from their network. As such, I was able to get in touch with Sienna, a wedding photographer in Birmingham, who I had interviewed as part of my actual fieldwork starting in January 2014. Sienna proved to be an excellent candidate for my project as not only online social networking platforms played a significant role in her work, but also, so it seemed, being acquainted with her work colleagues in Vienna, seemed to reinforce her motivation to work with me. Given that I have been referred to Sienna by my initial contact Anna, this case is best addressed as resulting from a snowball sample (e.g. Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). It is important to note that including Sienna in my research was driven by the opportunity, which resulted from contacts of my own network. This helped me identify cases that were comparative across key variables and therefore opened up opportunities for comparative analysis allowing for theoretical testing.

Another contact I pursued through my personal social network was an emerging fine artist based in London. Even though he was unable to participate fully in my research due to time constraints, he agreed to an informal interview in a café in central London in March 2014. During that interview, he talked to me about his own career path and the relevance of his education at the Royal College of Art, which he thought was marginal and that above anything it was important to get your work known through gallery exhibitions. However, he provided me with further contacts of seven colleagues, whom he had either attended university with or who have previously collaborated with him. After familiarising myself with the work of these artists, I contacted them by email, which however proved unsuccessful in most cases, even after sending several reminders reiterating my interest. However, eventually one artist was responsive to my email upon which we met for an initial interview in a café in central London. A few weeks later, we met again in her studio in East London where I had the chance to learn more about her work and her career path. The interview however, did not provide any clues in terms of the relevance of online social networking platforms as the artist was sceptical about the significance of these platforms in the first place and as such did not see herself in the position

to speak to me about it. In addition, my impression was that in general this artist was dismissive of the fact that networking played any role in her work at all, and claimed that her unsuccessful career path was mostly due to her lack of motivation to sustain a career that to her seemed to be a combination of luck and arbitrary decision making.

### 3.1.4 Contacts via collaboration with art platform

Starting my actual fieldwork period in January 2014, another access point into the creative sector was via a previous research project I had been working on, which involved collaboration with a London based public art enterprise that manages a portfolio of international artists. Having established a work relationship with the manager of the platform, I started searching the portfolio of artists affiliated with the platform via their website. Specifically, I searched for artists that were listed under the categories *Fine artist, Photographer* or *Digital Artist*. I then went through the results the search yielded and looked at each of their profiles, which often contained further information on the artist such as a biography and/or links to a website or social media profile. Browsing the information, I searched for hints which would reveal more information on the exact work practice of the artist and I was particularly looking out for those artists who either mentioned using social media or who had provided links to online platforms such as Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, etc.

As such, this initial strategy of recruiting research participants is best described as purposive sampling, given the fact that via this strategy the "researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996, p. 523)", which implies that the research sample is intentionally skewed, focussing on those individuals whose specific characteristics, experiences or expert knowledge promise to deliver the most interesting results. After I had come up with a list of potential research participants, I then started to contact these potential research participants via a personalised email in which I introduced myself as a PhD student at the LSE studying the experiences of people working in creative professions.

Eventually, I managed to contact five artists – photographers, visual artists as well as fine artists – based on two main criteria: their geographic location (based in or around London) and their preference of using online social networking

platforms as part of their work practice. Out of these five contacts, two agreed to an initial interview. One of those was Fiona, a photographer based in London who proved to be an excellent respondent and was happy to tell me about her use of online social networking platforms with which she had lots of experience. Another interview with a fine artist proved less successful, as she had relocated to the United States and abandoned most of her arts practice in London. Besides, her expertise in using social media was limited, contrary to my initial perception based on the information provided on the website.

In addition, to agreeing to participate in my research, Fiona also recommended working with another fine artist she was acquainted with – Vincent, who agreed to an initial meeting in June 2014. The personal reference from Fiona was decisive for recruiting Vincent as a research participant, as – according to his statement – it assured him of my genuine interest in his work practice and also secured an initial level of trust that he thought was pivotal. Although Vincent had been introduced to me as an 'authority' among artists on Facebook, evidenced by his impressive 'fan group' and the significant amount of people following him on Twitter, he was rather dismissive of the actual relevance of these platforms, something he communicated to me early on. Nonetheless, he was able to talk to me about the relevance of digitally mediated social contacts as opposed of the significance of traditional social ties, which he considered to be crucial for his career.

In addition, based on the pleasant collaboration with Vincent, he introduced me to another fellow artist during an informal dinner after attending his art stand at Moniker Art Fair in October 2015. During this dinner, I got to know more about the work of Jeff, a London-based fine artist and sculptor, who showed a keen interest in my research on social media. As such, we agreed to meet for an interview at his studio in East London, where we held two interviews and also produced a network drawing.

## 3.1.5 Cooperation with students at UAL

Another strategy that I pursued was to recruit research participants by contacting professors and course managers at art schools and arts affiliated colleges in London. This way, I managed to set up a meeting with a course leader of a Master's programme in photography at the University of the Arts London. After an initial meeting, in which I took the opportunity to explain in detail my research

interest and academic background, I was given the opportunity to establish contact with photography students face-to-face at the university while preparing for their end of year photo exhibition project. There, I was given the opportunity to mingle with students and talk to them informally about my research project. Even though several students showed an interest in participating in my research, only one student – Lilie studying for a degree in photography – agreed to meet me for an interview. Similar to Fiona, Lilie, as an emerging photographer, was excited to talk to me about the possibilities social media offered in terms of connecting with fellow artists and to make her work known among a wider audience. As such, the interviews and the network drawings I produced together with her provided a depth of information in that regard.

### 3.1.6 Limitations of the sampling process

In conclusion, I can say that personal referrals and recommendations from previously recruited participants, proved to be the most effective strategy in recruiting participants. Establishing a personal network of creative professionals and affiliates has definitely been one of the most important aspects in my fieldwork. The professionals I had recruited for my pilot study, as well as those I met via the art platform, subsequently referred me to other fine artists or photographers who then participated in my study. I conclude that in my case snowball sampling as in recruiting *"a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest"* (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141) was the most effective strategy. It was my impression that in many cases, potential respondents were reluctant to participate unless I had been recommended to them by a colleague, and they showed a significant personal interest in the research itself. I suspect that this is partly to do with the competitive nature of the field, which entails a certain level of caution in terms of who to share information with and who is perceived as trustworthy in terms of showing a genuine interest in their work. Therefore, the success of this sampling technique could be explained by the fact that *"[...] the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study"* (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141).

In fact, this might also explain why my efforts to recruit two other well-established creative professionals, remained unsuccessful: Initially, I aimed to also

interview creative professionals who seemed to owe their success to social media platforms, as I was curious to see how they evaluated their significance. I contacted the founder of one of the largest YouTube platforms in the UK, who was frequently quoted by the press as a "Social media star". An initial email proved unsuccessful, upon which I contacted him directly on Facebook and managed to speak to him briefly. Though he agreed to meet for a brief interview at his office, the appointment was later cancelled due to time limitations and any further attempts to reschedule the appointment were unsuccessful. In addition, during an interview with Vincent I was made aware of another photographer and digital media artist who has risen to significant fame through her Facebook and Instagram channels. Again, I tried to establish an initial contact by following her on Facebook and on Twitter and sending her several messages with the aim to arrange a Skype interview. In addition, I attempted to contact the artists' agent to arrange for a more formal interview, which however remained unanswered.

Since I intended to establish a long-term relationship with my research participants, I also made an active effort to get involved in the arts scene. I frequented art fairs, such as the Moniker Art Fair, the Other Art Fair as well as the Hampstead Arts Festival, as well as gallery openings in smaller art venues. In addition, I attended events that featured the work of my research participants. This was tremendously useful, as it provided me with first hand exposure to the field, where I could observe how art is practiced in real life, so to speak, and I have witnessed the importance of networking and socialising among fellow artists.

Essentially, by attending events and showing an interest in the work of my research participants, I managed to familiarise myself with their working conditions and to experience first hand what it means to be an emerging artist. In addition, socialising equally helped to establish trust and good disposition among research participants, as they realised I had a genuine interest in their work. Furthermore, though the context and the topics discussed in my study were not particularly sensitive in nature, it is my experience that, in general, professionals in the cultural and creative industries may often be reluctant to share 'insider' information, which is quite possibly related to the highly competitive nature of this field and incurs a certain suspicion on their part. As such, studies on sensitive issues have often required researchers to make use of their personal social networks and/or establish such networks in the first place, in order to be able to access information that will yield effective data for a subject matter that requires "hard-to-reach" or "sensitive

populations" (e.g. Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Eland-Goossensen et al., 1997; Sarantakos, 1998; Valentine, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c), something which is likely to add challenges to the sampling process (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997, p. 791).

Study participants often seemed reluctant to share "too much" information about the particularities of the sector and their own particular ways to "make it", given the fact that this knowledge may be perceived as precious and hard earned. In addition, the competitive nature of their occupation may then also require study participants to speak about disappointments and situations perceived as failures, often a natural consequence of working in competitive sectors. Some of the information the study participants shared with me throughout our work together can be considered sensitive and required an additional degree of sensitivity on my part.

### 3.1.7 All the same and all different: Introduction to five creative professionals as part of my case study

In this section, I will introduce the respondents I have worked with in the field and with whom I have produced the network maps. I aim to provide some background information regarding the specific type of creative work each of my respondents engage in, as well as some information about their background, specifically concerning their formation as a creative professional, career achievements and career goals, where applicable. These brief portraits are intended to give the reader an impression of who the artists behind the interview data and the network maps are, what they do, where they come from and what their specific goals and aspirations are. To ensure confidentiality, my aim is to provide enough detail to get a picture of the overall profile of the respondents, while omitting any sort of information that would make it possible to identify the actual person behind the data, such as, for instance, the specific names of schools or universities they have attended, or their nationality.

I included five creative professionals in my case studies. Even though this may seem a small number I considered it important to focus on a limited number of respondents to ensure an in-depth understanding of their creative practices. Working with these five individuals over a period of 14 months allowed me to establish a lasting connection with each single respondent, which helped integrating information their backgrounds, professionals hopes and aspirations alongside a good

understanding of their live worlds. In addition, I acknowledge the great diversity of participants ranging from what we might call more classical, established artists (Vincent) to more craftsmanship type professionals (Sienna) and emerging, not yet established artists (Lilie) as both a strength and weakness in terms of the conclusions I will be able to draw. I see the quality time spent with these respondents, getting to know them and their stories as a great strength as it allowed me to understand the complexities of the process of gaining recognition, whereby I discovered a rich set of indicators that influence this process. On the other hand, the limited number of cases limits the generalisability of my results. Nonetheless, given the novelty of my approach in understanding the nature of digitally mediated social ties, I am convinced that a more in-depth approach was the most adequate choice.

| Overview case selection | | Variables | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Level of perceived recognition | Economic capital | Cultural capital (e.g. Education) | Use of online social networking platforms |
| Cases | Fiona | Low | Low | Medium | High |
| | Lilie | Medium | Low | High | High |
| | Sienna | High | Medium | Medium | Medium |
| | Vincent | High | Medium | High | High |
| | Jeff | Medium | Low | Medium | Medium |

**Figure 2: Case selection Matrix**

### 3.1.8 Case 1: Fiona – photographer and self-proclaimed social media expert

| FACTSHEET - FIONA | Indicators |
|---|---|
| Low Perceived Recognition (Success) | • 1 sold piece of art (£500)<br>• Occasional participation in art fairs and exhibitions<br>• Perceived outsider to the art scene |
| Low Economic Capital | • Little to no income from art-related activities<br>• Information regarding precarious standard of living has been communicated informally |
| Medium Cultural Capital | • University degree (non-art related)<br>• Continuous efforts to effective use of online social networking platforms |
| High Use of digital platforms | • 882 Twitter followers<br>• 1,259 Facebook followers<br>• Daily posts on Facebook and Twitter<br>• No indication of face-to-face engagement as a follow-up |

**Figure 3: Factsheet – Fiona**

* Colour coding: Blue (low degree), Yellow (medium degree), Red (high degree)

Fiona was the first respondent I interviewed using the hand-drawn network map. Fiona is a self-taught photographer who originally obtained a degree in Computer Science at an overseas university. She has previously worked as a social media and marketing manager in the UK and abroad. Fiona's big passion, however, is photography, despite how challenging she claims it has been to establish a name for herself, and despite the fact that her dream of exhibiting in one of the larger galleries and establishing a sustainable career is yet to be accomplished. Nonetheless, Fiona has previously presented her work in several smaller exhibitions, primarily in London, and she has been featured as an emerging artist on Saatchi's digital screen. Aside from that, Fiona is presenting her work on her business

Facebook page and on the websites of several online galleries, where she has already been able to sell several of her works. Above all, Fiona is an avid fan of all sorts of social media and is a frequent, enthusiastic user of all sorts of online social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest, among others. In terms of her involvement with the arts scene, Fiona has often expressed disappointment with the predominant dynamics in this sector. Specifically, Fiona has told me that in her experience, many of the artists she has met over the years are self-centred and are only interested in their own careers and artwork. Consequently, Fiona does not particularly enjoy participating in the social events that are very common in this field and has claimed that she often finds the conversations with other artists too one- sided and as such, she does not maintain many social contacts with other artists and photographers in the field.

### 3.1.9 Case 2: Sienna – the wedding photographer

| FACTSHEET - SIENNA | Indicators |
|---|---|
| High Perceived Recognition (Success) | • Work continuously featured in top-rated UK wedding blog<br>• Photographs approx. 20 weddings per year<br>• Creative practice fully sustains lifestyle |
| Medium Economic Capital | • Regular, stable income from art-related activities<br>• Financial back-up established by former professional activity as film cutter |
| Medium Cultural Capital | • Previous professional experience in film editing and cutting and visual editing<br>• No art-related degree |
| Medium Use of digital platforms | • Professional website<br>• Maintains a blog (featuring monthly updates)<br>• 1,339 followers on Facebook |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • 667 Twitter followers<br>• 1,673 followers on Instagram<br>• 26 followers on Pinterest<br>• Interaction with targeted audiences is strictly online even though on several occasions Sienna's meets future clients at weddings |

**Figure 4: Factsheet – Sienna**

* Colour coding: Blue (low degree), Yellow (medium degree), Red (high degree)

Sienna is a UK-based wedding photographer to whom I was referred by a friend who also works in wedding photography. Sienna was originally trained as a film editor, working primarily for advertising companies. As such, creativity and expressing ideas visually have always played a big role in Sienna's professional life. After 14 years in film editing, Sienna was becoming increasingly unsatisfied with simply executing other peoples' ideas. She wanted to work in an area in which she could be more independent and decided to become a self-employed, self-trained wedding photographer. From the outset, her main goal was to be able to support herself and become self-sufficient through her work in photography. Therefore, Sienna decided to fix the prices for her work in the upper price range, meaning that her targeted customers would be those from a higher socio-economic circle who also appreciate her specific style in photography, as she only shoots photographs on film, something rather rare in wedding photography. From the beginning, Sienna has relied on various online social networking platforms, specifically Facebook for marketing purposes and one of the first things she did was to create her own website. After a period of trial and error exploring the field of wedding photography, Sienna's work was featured in a UK-based wedding blog. As she explained, she has learnt that such blogs have a tremendous impact on couples planning a wedding in their search for inspiration and for service providers, such as photographers. In Sienna's view, being featured in the blog kick-started her career and has been one of the decisive steps in sustaining her now very successful business. Sienna also mentioned that she enjoys connecting with other photographers in the field, either online via Google hangouts, where she can exchange experiences and good practices with other photographers from all over the world, or in face-to-face meetings with blog editors, photographers and the like over a gin and tonic at the local pub.

### 3.1.10 Case 3: Vincent – fine artist with a passion for drawing and social media darling

| FACTSHEET - VINCENT | Indicators |
|---|---|
| High Perceived Recognition (Success) | • Original pieces sell for approx. 2,000£<br>• Several (solo) exhibitions in the UK and internationally<br>• Active member of the local art scene (presence at art fairs, events, etc.) |
| Medium Economic Capital | • Regular, stable income from art-related activities<br>• Financial back-up established by former professional activity as a costume designer |
| High Cultural Capital | • Art degree from UK university<br>• Insider knowledge of the field<br>• Previous experience in a creative profession |
| High Use of digital platforms | • Professional Website<br>• 3,329 Twitter followers<br>• 395,548 Facebook followers<br>• 19,400 followers on Pinterest<br>• Weekly posts on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest<br>• No indication of face-to-face meetings with online contacts |

**Figure 5: Factsheet – Vincent**

\* Colour coding: Blue (low degree), Yellow (medium degree), Red (high degree)

Vincent is formally the most successful artist I interviewed in all my fieldwork. He is a fine artist, producing artwork experimenting with different materials and substances mainly focussing on portraits but also abstract art. I

became aware of his work through another respondent, who claimed that Vincent's work has been a tremendous source of inspiration and became a fan of his work. I first met Vincent at a gallery exhibition opening in London, which exclusively featured some of his recent works. Originally trained in graphic design at a UK art institute, he then began an apprenticeship at a London-based costume design company where he eventually became creative director. Visiting Vincent at his studio, he told me that he had always been fascinated with drawing and that at a very young age he was already producing sketches of all different sorts of motives. Throughout his time at the design company, his wish to become a full-time fine artist grew stronger and stronger, until after 15 years with the company he decided to resign and start to produce his own artwork. Initially, Vincent organised and curated themed exhibitions to present works of other artists, which in his view was important for him in order to get to know the art scene, which has doubled as a platform for him to get to know people and establish a network consisting of other artists, gallery owners and curators. Since establishing his own studio in 2010, Vincent has extensively shown his work in the UK and overseas and has managed to make a living from his art. From the outset, Vincent has been using social media, specifically by creating his own blog and by using Facebook and Twitter. He said that sharing his art and the process of producing it has always been important to him. As such, sharing his work with an audience via blogging has also helped him to deal with a certain isolation that is inherent to working as an artist. Nonetheless, the marketing opportunities offered by online social networking platforms have also been a an important motivation, as Vincent approached his work as an artist with a business mindset, given his former career in the private sector. Overall, Vincent is thriving as an artist and claims that both his father and grandfather who also pursued creative professions have been a great influence and support for him. Likewise, Vincent enjoys being part of the artists' community and counts many other fine artists and creative professionals among his friends. He also enjoys attending art fairs and exhibition openings, and pursuing other art-related activities.

### 3.1.11 Case 4: Lilie – the photography student with an interest in documentary journalism

| FACTSHEET - LILIE | Indicators |
|---|---|
| Medium Perceived Recognition | • Works as a freelance |

| (Success) | photographer alongside her studies<br>• Has worked with some celebrities for portrait photography<br>• Invited to participate in the YPS scheme of the Young Photographer's Alliance (10 selected per year) to work with established photographers |
|---|---|
| Low Economic Capital | • Commands limited financial resources given her student status<br>• Reported to come from a middle class family |
| High Cultural Capital | • Pursues an photography degree at a London university<br>• High involvement in peer-related activities (e.g. exhibitions at university, involvement in grassroot arts activities) |
| High Use of digital platforms | • Professional website<br>• Maintains a blog (featuring monthly updates)<br>• 1,048 Twitter followers<br>• 1,348 followers on Instagram<br>• Weekly posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram<br>• Indicated several instances of offline interaction initiated online |

**Figure 6: Factsheet – Lilie**

\* Colour coding: Blue (low degree), Yellow (medium degree), Red (high degree)

I was first introduced to Lilie during a workshop session at the University of the Arts London, where students were preparing for their end of term exhibition at the university. I took the opportunity to speak to some of the students while they were working on their individual projects. Lilie showed an immediate interest in my

PhD topic and on that day she already showed me some of her recent works as well as her website, telling me a bit about her experience using Twitter. From the outset, I was impressed by Lilie's approach to her work as a young photographer, as she seemed to have a very mature attitude towards working in this profession resulting in a very strategic approach towards her career. While still a student, Lilie has already produced commissioned work for a number of charity organisations as well as private clients. Aside from portrait photography, Lilie is particularly interested in the documentary vein, as she would like to use photography as an instrument to tell a story about people and draw attention to minorities and people or professions underrepresented in traditional media.

Lilie is also very fond of using social media, taking advantage of the whole spectrum of online social networking platforms and integrating them into her day-to-day work as a photography student and practising photographer. While she is using many of these platforms for business purposes, in particular Facebook and Twitter, she also makes use of other platforms for more private interests, such as Instagram or Tumblr, which she claimed to use as a sort of diary and visual sketchpad. Above all, Lilie seems to take pleasure in immersing herself in the arts sector, pointing out that many of her friends and acquaintances in London are either photography students as well or have an interest in it. Incidentally, Lilie's personal background is not related to any sort of artistic activity at all, nonetheless she claims that from an early age she has shown an interest in the visual realm, and has always received the support of her family and peers in her pursuit of an art-related activity.

### 3.1.12 Case 5: Jeff – artist and sculptor with an interest in 3D printmaking

| FACTSHEET - JEFF | Indicators |
|---|---|
| Medium Perceived Recognition (Success) | • Featured on Saatchi's young artists portal<br>• Participates regularly in art exhibitions and events in the UK<br>• Claimed himself that he creates art for arts sake not for financial success or prestige |
| Low Economic Capital | • Supports himself primarily |

|  | with work as a 3D designer |
|---|---|
| Medium Cultural Capital | • Experience in 3d printmaking and in design (which remains his main profession)<br>• Art degree from a UK university |
| Medium Use of digital platforms | • Professional website<br>• 1,218 followers on Behance<br>• Infrequent posts (monthly) on Facebook<br>• No indication of face-to-face meetings on the basis of online engagement |

**Figure 7: Factsheet – Jeff**

* Colour coding: Blue (low degree), Yellow (medium degree), Red (high degree)

I was introduced to Jeff by my other respondent Vincent during a private dinner after attending the Moniker Art Fair in London. There, Jeff and I had a long conversation about the significance of social media for artists, which was the reason why I decided to include him in my fieldwork. Jeff completed a classical arts education at an arts college in the UK, where he became fascinated with Cubism and Picasso in particular, who he claims is still one of his biggest influences. Also, computers and technology in general have over time become important influences for his work, as Jeff has become fascinated with the way computers can make an idea manifest itself very quickly. Together with his brother, Jeff is now focussing a big part of his artwork on producing sculptures and he has been able to exhibit his work at a number of art festivals and galleries across the UK and overseas. Nonetheless, Jeff still finds it challenging to make a full living out of, mostly because he finds it challenging to make good connections and find more opportunities to exhibit his work among a wider audience.

The cases I have chosen to include in my research are obviously quite different: Vincent as a fine artist for example represents professionals in the field of cultural production in the traditional sense, whereas the work of other respondents such as Sienna resonate better with characteristics of the creative industries. The different framework conditions that their work practice is embedded in makes it obviously difficult to draw comparisons across these cases. In addition, the variables I present in the case selection matrix (i.e. recognition, economic capital, cultural

capital and use of online social networking platforms) are meant for illustrative purposes so to help the reader get an idea of the respondents' personal circumstances aiding a better interpretation of their narratives. Given the explorative nature of this thesis, I utilise these cases to establish evidence that allow me to address gaps in the literature regarding the nature of digitally mediated sociality and inconsistencies in regards to the interpretation of concepts such as social capital that have emerged as a result of digitally mediated social interaction.

The most important indicator in selecting cases was their use of online social networking platforms. Thereby, the initial interviews I conducted with all respondents were meant to identify to what extent the use of these platforms seemed relevant to their creative practice. I would also like to note that even though the relevance of digital technology in creative professions has been addressed in the literature (e.g. McRobbie, 2002; Wittel, 2001) there is no reliable empirical evidence to what extent digitally mediated social ties assume actual relevance in the day-to-day practice of creative professionals. This means that I was unable to rely on existing case studies that would have provided a solid base suitable for comparison for example. Thereby, it was difficult to establish a general assessment of the significance of digitally mediated social relations for creative practitioners beyond the limited number of cases that I present here. As a result, one may ask how important the phenomenon of digitally mediated social interaction really is.

As mentioned in the introduction, I heavily relied on anecdotal evidence to establish a convincing framework for my investigation. Nonetheless, I took the fact that there was little to no reliable evidence of a convincing account of the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in the field of cultural and creative production as additional motivation to explore this phenomenon from scratch. Thereby, I acknowledge that the strength of my data lies in providing leverage points for further analysis. I strongly believe that even though at this stage my data does not hold the capacity of being quantified or compared across cases, my insight will build the foundation for future research that can achieve this.

### 3.1.13 Overview of the research process

Concluding the sampling procedure and presentation of cases, I present here an overview of the complete research process. This provides an overview of all

interviews and pilots I did for my research, including pre-screening interviews of cases that I eventually decided not to further pursue. This shall illustrate that even though I ultimately based my research on five case studies, identifying these cases requires a number of preceding steps that were vital to eventually establish a firm basis for my actual fieldwork. Thereby, this overview includes a description of all interviewees in chronological order, including comments on the information I obtained from interviewees and the conclusions I was able to draw at the time being.

| Interviewee | Interview specifics | Comments |
|---|---|---|
| Anna (Personal Contact) | Date: April 2013 Location: Her home/studio in Vienna Duration: 2,5 hours | • First pilot carried out using the name generator technique. Anna's feedback on this method highly influenced my adopting of an alternative technique • Anna's feedback was useful for contextualising information from further interviews • Unable to fully participate in the research due to geographical and time constraints |
| Photographer 1 (Personal contact) | Date: April 2013 Location: Her home in Vienna Duration: 2 hours | • Second pilot carried out using the name generator technique. • Unable to fully participate in the research due to geographical and time constraints |
| Fine Artist 1 (Personal Contact) | (Informal) Interview Date: December 2013 Location: Café in Central London Duration: 2 hours | • Provided me with background information on conditions in the fine arts sector • Provided me with 5 contacts to other fine artists, out of |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | • which one female artist (Fine Artist 2) agreed to an interview.<br>• Was unable to participate in the research due to time constraints |
| Fine Artist 2<br>(Referral from Artist 1) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Café in Central London<br>Duration: 1 hour<br><br>Interview 2<br>Date: February 2014<br>Location: Studio in East London | • Throughout the interviews it became apparent that this artist was not as promising to interview given her increasingly reluctant use of digital platforms<br>• Seemed to withdraw from the art world altogether to pursue a PhD, which negatively impacted her readiness to participate in the study |
| Fine artist 3<br>(artbelow.org) | (Informal) Interview 1:<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Café in Central London<br>Duration: 1 hour<br><br>Interview 2:<br>Date: February 2014<br>Location: Her home/studio in Central London<br>Duration: 2 hours | • I decided not to include this artist in my study as my initial observation of digital tools playing a role in her work proved inaccurate as the interviews progressed |
| Art Expert 1<br>(art-below.org) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Café in North London<br>Duration: 1 hour<br><br>(Informal) Interview 2<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Art Gallery in North London – joint visit of an exhibition<br>Duration: 2 hours<br><br>(Informal) Interview 3 | • I decided to interview this respondent due to his presence on art-below.org, however during the interview he revealed that he had actually abandoned his art practice<br>• The interview however was useful to get |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Date: July 2015<br>Location: Café in North London<br>Duration: 1 hour | background information on the UK art scene and he also referred me to another expert |
| Fiona<br>(artbelow.org) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Pub in East London<br>Duration: 2,5 hours<br><br>Interview 2:<br>Date: February 2014<br>Location: Her home in East London<br>Duration: 3 hours<br><br>Interview 3:<br>Date: April 2014<br>Location: Her home in East London<br>Duration: 2 hours<br><br>Interview 4:<br>Date: September 2014<br>Location: Her home in East London<br>Duration: 2 hours | CASE 1 |
| Art Expert 2<br>(Referral from Art Expert 1) | (Informal) Interview<br>Date: February 2014<br>Location: Café in Central London<br>Duration: 30 mins | • Working as an artist, producer and art critic I intended to interview this respondent aiming to gain a better understanding of the relevance of digital technology in arts practice<br>• Withdrew from the interview as she seemed reluctant to engage with the topic and claimed she was the wrong person to talk to |
| Fine artist 4<br>(art-below.org) | (Informal) Interview<br>Date: January 2014<br>Location: Hotel in Central London<br>Duration: 1 hour | • I identified this person as a suitable candidate due to use of digital technology. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | However this person was in the process of moving her creative practice to the US, which rendered a collaboration impossible |
| Sienna (Referral from Anna) | Interview 1<br>Date: April 2014<br>Location: Café in Birmingham<br>Duration: 2 hours<br><br>Interview 2<br>Date: May 2014<br>Location: Café in Birmingham<br>Duration: 2 hours<br><br>Interview 3<br>Date: July 2015<br>Location: Skype interview<br>Duration: 1 hour | CASE 2 |
| Vincent (Referral from Fiona) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: April 2014<br>Location: Art exhibition in East London<br>Duration: 1,5 hours<br><br>Interview 2<br>Date: May 2014<br>Location: His studio in East London<br>Duration: 2,5 hours<br><br>Interview 3<br>Date: September 2014<br>Location: Art gallery in Brighton<br>Duration: 1,5 hours<br><br>(Informal) Interview 4<br>Date: October 2014<br>Location: Moniker Art Fair London<br>Duration: 3 hours | CASE 3 |
| Lilie (Cooperation with UAL) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: May 2014<br>Location: UAL Campus<br>Duration: 30 mins | CASE 4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Interview 2<br>Date: July 2014<br>Location: Saatchi Gallery, SW London<br>Duration: 2,5 hours<br><br>Interview 3<br>Date: August 2014<br>Location: Café in Central London<br>Duration: 2 hours | |
| Bob Hendriks (YPA)<br>(Referral from Lilie) | Interview 1<br>Date: July 2014<br>Location: Skype Interview<br>Duration: 1 hour | • This interview was meant to get more information about framework conditions of photographers<br>• Particularly useful to contextualise Lilie's insight<br>• I included some of his insights in Chapter 6 |
| Jeff<br>(Referral from Vincent) | (Informal) Interview 1<br>Date: October 2014<br>Location: Moniker Art Fair<br>Duration: 3 hours<br><br>Interview 2<br>Date: November 2014<br>Location: His studio in East London<br>Duration: 3 hours | CASE 5 |
| Fine artist 5<br>(Referral from Vincent) | Interview<br>Date: September 2014<br>Location: Café in South London<br>Duration: 1 hour | • After the initial interview, which was promising due to this respondents' status as a fine artist and user of digital platforms, I aimed to include this person as case 6 in my study<br>• Reiterated unsuccessful efforts over a period of 6 months without being able to arrange a follow-up meeting for an interview led |

| | | me to discontinue my work with this artist. |
|---|---|---|

**Figure 8: Overview of interviews**

* Sections highlighted in orange are respondents that built the basis of my case studies.

## 3.2 Part 2: Tracing digitally mediated social ties in the field – A journey from social network analysis to hand-drawn network maps

Upon starting my empirical work, one of the obvious challenges I saw myself confronted with was choosing a suitable method. Obviously no approach is perfect, however essentially, I was looking for a method that would allow me to observe digitally mediated social relations. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, I established that tracing social interactions must be at the core of my empirical work in order to produce an understanding of how digitally mediated social interactions impact the established narrative on social capital. Hence, my first thought was to employ social network analysis as a method to use with participants in the field. This seemed suitable given that I was interested in understanding how the connections in individuals' personal networks played out in terms of benefitting from these relationships. Social relations are conceptualised as a prime empirical phenomenon in social network analysis and social networks are seen as the "finite set [...] of actors and the relation or relations defined on them" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 4). The conceptual link of my research interest and social network analysis was evident, in the sense that the literature on social network analysis emphasises its capacity to aid facilitating an understanding of "complex patterns of interaction" (Streeter & Gillespie, 1993, p. 201).

Understanding the relevance of personal networks and the social relationships that sustain these networks plays a pivotal role in many areas of the social sciences and beyond. The use of social network analysis (SNA) and a number of methodological tools that have emerged from the field of SNA have proven to be efficient tools in what concerns the structural analysis of these networks (e.g. Granovetter, 1973, Burt, 1982, Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). Social network analysis has been used extensively in research investigating social capital. For example, Coleman's (1988, 1990) research into the influence of family structures and the social capital inherent in those bonds is a prime example, showcasing the relevance of social network analysis in researching social capital resources. Equally, Milgram's (1967) seminal study commonly referred to as "small-world-phenomenon", draws on a similar rationale, by identifying how individuals make use of network ties in order to obtain information from a specific target person.

Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that social network analysis, albeit informed by social theoretical approaches, is not a theory per se. Instead, social network analysis is best understood as a "[...] particular set of methods" instead of "a specific body of formal or substantive social theory." (Scott, 2012, p. 37). Whereas this is not to discredit the empirical value of social network analysis, it is important to consider the fact that the theoretical underpinnings of social network analysis as a method may not always correspond with the particular research interest. My own experience with utilising social network analysis shall demonstrate that in fact the theoretical shortcomings of social network analysis pose a significant problem in terms of understanding the value of social relatedness in the field.

However, for the duration of a pilot study I carried out as part of the preparatory work for my actual fieldwork, I realised that in the specific context of my research, the use of the name generator method was problematic and eventually did not satisfy my research interest. Given my interest in understanding how social relationships are being formed via the use of online social networking platforms, I have discovered that using existing methods of social network analysis and bringing them to the field is unsatisfying. This is because digitally mediated forms of social relationships seem to go beyond the scope of social network analysis, considering that digitally mediated forms of social relationships do not always conform with the traditional understanding of social relatedness.

### 3.2.1 Opening Pandora's box – Using the name generator and lessons learnt in view of tracing digitally mediated social relations

Early on in my research, I decided to conduct a pilot study using social network analysis to test how well this approach would suit respondents in view of enabling them to speak to me about their engagement with online social networking platforms. I was interested in providing a tool that would allow them to detail their appreciation of digitally mediated social interaction and how it integrates with other forms of social engagement. I chose to work with a technique called the "name generator" (Lin, 2008; Hogan et al., 2007), which is a method that aims to depict a personal social network by accessing information on their network by identifying the names of those individuals who are considered part of that network. Essentially, this technique is characterised by its interactive engagement with respondents, as quite

commonly the elicitation of data is carried out together with the participant aided by a set of trigger questions. Ultimately, using the name generator in view of eliciting data on digitally mediated social ties was problematic as the specific properties of these specific ties could not be captured with this tool.

Particularly in the field of researching personal networks (i.e. ego networks), the name-generating technique has become a widely used approach for eliciting data on personal social networks. The mapping of personal networks via the name generator is a specifically useful fieldwork technique as it allows eliciting data together with the interviewee on the layout of a specific person's network (e.g. Burt, 1984, Lin, 1999). In practice, these 'nodes' and 'ties' are then placed into a diagram, which in social network analysis is usually called *sociogram*. The sociogram is a descriptive way of devising a personal network by "representing the formal properties of social configurations [...] with individuals represented by 'points' and their social relationships to one another by 'lines'" (Scott, 1988, p. 5). There are two ways to establish this sociogram: One way is to distribute a survey among the targeted population, where they are asked to answer an array of questions from which the sociogram is then established; the second option is to create it through a participant-aided network sociogram (cf. Hogan et al. 2007).

The name generator technique looks back on a relatively long tradition and has been used in many different contexts to trace the relevance of social ties. Wellman & Wortley (1990), for example, used the name generator to understand how members of a community in downtown Toronto maintain social relationships to each other and how these social ties are perceived as meaningful in terms of social support provided to these members. Similarly, Bott (1957), often credited as the founder of ego-centred social network analysis, has used this technique in eliciting data on family relationships and the roles family members take on in a kinship-related context. Conceptually rooted in Moreno's (1943) sociogram (i.e., the visual representation of social links that sustain a person's social network) the use of network maps has become a widely used diagrammatic tool, which aids achieving an analytic understanding of patterns of social interaction and has proven to be useful for understanding community structures (e.g. Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988, Barnes, 1954), historical networks (Padgett & Ansell, 1993) or social interaction in developing areas to aid epidemic research, for example (e.g. Christakis & Fowler, 2007, 2011).

Alongside its application in traditional thematic areas of the social sciences, social network analysis is increasingly used to research online social networking platforms and how their use impacts individuals' networks. Ellison et al. (2007), for example, have looked at college students' Facebook use to understand access to social capital within an established online social network by drawing on respondents' survey data. Elsewhere, Haythornthwaite (1996) has traced information exchange facilitated by online social networking platforms by means of social network analysis. In addition, network visualisations of online social networks using data mining strategies and associated software (e.g. Gruzd et al., 2011, Kumar et al., 2010) have become widely applied in the research of social relations sustained via online social networking platforms. Drawing on network analysis software, Smith et al. (2012) have studied patterns of social interaction using network data from Facebook.

The name generator technique is particularly useful for research where establishing the social network is contingent on information provided from the participants themselves. Thus, researchers do not previously know the actual members of the social network, unlike, for instance, in organisational networks research, where social ties are known in advance. Typically, the process of listing names of individuals in the social network members is prompted by a so-called trigger question facilitated by the researcher. An often-used trigger question reads, "List persons with whom you discuss important matters" (Burt, 1984). However, the trigger questions are usually appropriated to specific research interest and may thus be altered accordingly. Typically, the individuals that are named by the person are then placed onto a sheet of paper (Hogan et al., 2007). In addition, the sociogram is often based on the use of a template, namely, a sheet of paper that shows concentric circles that shall enable the participant to indicate degrees of closeness to and/or a degree of importance of a specific tie, etc. within this specific network, which is referred to as hierarchical mapping (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Antonucci, 1986; Ajrouch et al., 2001).

In my study I used the name generator with interviewees who are active in a creative profession, particularly in photography and fine arts. My aim was to identify individuals in the social network of that person that he or she perceived to be relevant in view of their professional work practice. I followed a slightly altered approach to the standard hierarchical mapping technique, labelling the concentric circles according to the perceived importance of the social ties indicated. Thus, the

concentric circle closest to the person in the middle indicated 'most important' social ties, whereas the outermost circle indicated 'less important' social ties. Labelling the concentric circles according to perceived importance instead of emotional closeness was a better option in view of my research question, because it prompted interviewees to think of their social ties in terms of their relevance for their careers instead of emotional closeness and thus it was sensible to deviate from the original design. Similarly, the trigger question I asked was also phrased in view of highlighting perceived importance of social ties:

*"Who are the people that you consider to be important, so that you can produce successful work as a creative professional?"*

Gearing the trigger question towards the perceived importance of social ties in terms of these creative professionals' work practice was in line with the intention of identifying the resources embedded in these social ties that seemed relevant for achieving recognition in the creative realm. I also asked Fiona to group the indicated social contacts into different groups, depending on her specific perception of their social affiliation. The grouping of resources into categories was intended to enable interviewees to speak more concretely about how and in what context they perceived specific social ties to be important for their creative work practice and to gain a systematic overview of the resources that were perceived as relevant here. Figure 3 shows a network map that I produced together with Fiona, a London based photographer, who specialises in contemporary photography. Besides being a talented artist, Fiona is also an adept user of online social networking platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, which she uses for work practice as an artist and which was also the reason I was specifically interested in recruiting her as a research participant for my study.

The work with Fiona on the name generator was instructive as it made me realise that this approach was limiting respondents too much in terms of eliciting data on digitally mediated social relations. This is also why Fiona, aside from a pilot conducted with Anna, remained the only respondents with whom I conducted a network map with the name generator approach.

**Figure 9: Fiona network map – name generator technique**

## 3.2.2 Mission unaccomplished – The intricacies of eliciting data on digitally mediated social ties via social network analysis

Figure 3 shows that eliciting data on traditional social contacts, essentially people Fiona has met face-to-face, such as through exhibiting work at galleries or arts events did indeed work very well. However, in regards to eliciting data on digitally mediated social ties, the use of this method has been less successful, which I suspect is owed to the fact that those social ties are difficult to reproduce drawing on the name of a specific individual. It seemed to me that Fiona was struggling to use this approach of naming social contacts in context with those individuals that she was primarily connected with via online social networking platforms. Initially, this came as a surprise as I had not anticipated what seemed to be like a conceptual break in terms of accessing data on social ties that are not sustained in a traditional

environment. I then decided that even though this approach did not help Fiona to talk to me about digitally mediated social ties, I wanted to use this opportunity to understand why this is actually the case.

It seems plausible here that in this case, Fiona does not perceive the network map as an appropriate trigger to enable her to speak about the quality and perceived meaning of these social connections. Therefore, the way in which Fiona responded to the task of naming individuals that she connects with on Facebook and Twitter, is revealing in terms of the way she perceives the nature of digitally mediated social ties. The following excerpt of our conversation in producing the network map is indicative of her struggle to identify digitally mediated social ties via the name generator:

*Cornelia Reyes (CR): So let's move on then to the contacts you have on Facebook and Twitter. You can start with whatever or whoever comes to your mind first. Could you also write them down on these sticky notes?*

*I have at the moment 719 followers on Twitter and the only thing I can do is put X, Y and Z to represent them all because, to be honest with you, I interact with those people but because they are not close in any way, shape or form, I don't even remember their names. So I have 719 strangers on Facebook … sorry, on Twitter who are supporting my art, send me some comments but I'm completely detached from them and [...] I really cannot tell you their names. [...] And it's quite... it may sound quite weird but they are important only in a way that they are not even faces. [...] I don't consider them individuals.*
Fiona (LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 2, p. 7)

It seems that in Fiona's perception, the quality of social connectedness via online social networking tools appears to be strikingly different as compared to a more traditional conception of social relationships as composed of individuals, illustrated by describing them as either 'not real' or 'not human'. Acknowledging the fact that Fiona speaks of social ties maintained via Facebook or Twitter as if she does not consider them as 'individuals' evoked concerns on my part as to whether asking interviewees to list specific social ties – specifically those online – and arrange them within a diagram to display an image of their personal social network was

indeed a suitable choice within the context of my research aim. Nonetheless, these relations, though perceived as 'unreal', seem to play an essential part in her evaluation as a useful tool in what concerns her artistic practice, in order to create a sort of cohesion between herself in her role as the arts practitioner, and other individuals involved in this process. However, she suggests that these relations apparently go beyond the scope of the conceptual layout of the network map as a tool for eliciting data on digitally mediated ties. In other words: Digitally mediated social ties just do not seem to fit into the box.

It is important to reiterate at this point that the challenges faced by my respondents are not to discredit the use of traditional methods of social network analysis. The name generator is a useful technique for tracing already established forms of social relationships. As in my case I placed such a strong focus on tracing digitally mediated social interaction, I needed to deviate from those existing methods as they were conceptually too confining. Obviously, this also means that important data on already existing traditional forms of relationships may have been neglected by using an alternative approach. Acknowledging this limitation, I decided that using an alternative approach was necessary, because I felt compelled to offer respondents a method to engage more deeply with their experience of digitally mediated social interaction. Deciding against a traditional approach, I consciously chose to give more importance to a method that allowed eliciting in-depth data on my research questions. For example, research questions 4 and 5, which look at how social capital is facilitated by digitally mediated social interaction, requires an understanding of the perception of these ties. Eliciting data on the perception of these ties is not possible to achieve with the name generator. Thereby, weighing in the disadvantage of losing structural data that would deliver a general picture of the respondents' social network, I decided that this was necessary to find a satisfying answer to my research question.

Further elaborating on the shortcomings of the name generator, Fiona's way of describing digitally mediated social ties as 'not real' points to a much more fundamental issue that is related with the actual nature of digitally mediated sociality. I came to the conclusion that what appears to be the case here is that instead of these social ties being 'unreal', they actually seem to be dealt with on a different level in terms of how those ties are being anchored in the memory of respondents.

### 3.2.3 Back to square one – Using hand-drawn network maps to elicit data on digitally mediated social ties

I have shown that using traditional techniques of social network analysis can prove to be an inefficient measure in terms of eliciting data on digitally mediated social ties. This can be attributed to the fact that individuals' recall of data relating to digitally mediated social ties may be negatively impacted by a rigid methodological framework such as the name generator. Mainly, this is because instructing respondents to recollect the names of concrete individual actors is counterproductive in the context of digitally mediated social relations. Rather, it seemed to me that remembering specific moments and circumstances during which digitally mediated social interaction assumed significance was more useful to elicit verbal data on the significance of these ties – an aspect, which I will discuss in detail in section 4.6 (cf. p. 146 ff.).

In general, online social networking platforms like Facebook have been perceived as an ostensibly useful tool to expand and maintain social ties. Despite the fact that SNA tools have been widely applied to investigate various aspects of social relatedness, I argue that digitally mediated social relations add a multiplicity of dimensions to our predominant conceptual understanding of the nature of social relatedness. Willson (2006) argued that online forms of social interaction require a new understanding of an "extended and disembodied sociality" (p. 49). Similarly, new forms of facilitating communication via these digital platforms impact the dynamics of relationship building resulting in a new bandwidth of perceived social connectedness (Baym, 2010; Haythornthwaite, 2002).

Consequently, Wittel (2001) claims that digitally mediated forms of interaction trigger a new narrative of sociality that is based on a network sociality that "consists of fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations" (p. 52). Nonetheless, effectively characterising how online sociality is lived in practice and to what extent digitally mediated social ties add to the bandwidth of traditional forms of social relations is yet to be discovered. Wittel (2001) therefore suggests "not to focus on networks themselves, but on the making of networks" to identify "what kind of sociality is at stake in the information age" (p. 52). This is exactly what I target to uncover when I ask how social capital is attained (RQ 5 & RQ 6) by eliciting data on how digitally mediated social relationships afford access and contextualising this knowledge with particular skills (RQ 11 & RQ 12) by which access is facilitated.

In light of the need to trace how digital sociality manifests in day-to-day interaction via online social networking platforms, there is a need to revisit existing SNA tools and their capacity to respond to this complexity and deliver accurate data on the nature of social connectedness in the digital age. For clearer insight, I propose to expand traditional techniques used to investigate the relationships within a social network by adopting an arts-based research technique, which I call free network drawing. This technique takes a completely unstructured approach towards eliciting data on social relationships on the part of the interviewee: Instead of providing a conceptual framework for data elicitation as would be used in name-generating approaches, the process of eliciting is data completely open given the absence of any constraint implied by the method. In light of the complexity that digitally mediated communication practices have introduced into individuals' practices in forming social relationships, the conceptual assumptions underlying the layout of traditional social network analysis tools bear the risk of constraining the interviewee too much in terms of enacting data on their digitally mediated social relationships. In other words, interviewees might be urged to report on their social relationships in reference to traditional ways of memorising relationships, that is, via the name and/or positions of a person, even though this sort of reference might not apply to digitally mediated ties. In this case using traditional tools of social network analysis, might then obfuscate more data than they actually reveal.

I observed that traditional social network analysis operates within a relatively rigid interpretation of social relations based on strong social ties and weak social ties; a dichotomy that is informed by traditional social network theory. White (2008), for example, often credited as one of the leading figures in the formation of modern social network analysis theory, often refers to more durable relations such as family, friends and other types of kin (i.e., strong social ties) that are of interest here, rather than any sort of one-off, fleeting encounters, such as "when a person strikes up a pleasant chat with a stranger at a bus stop [which] does not necessarily constitute a relation." (White & Godart, 2007, p. 4). Granovetter (1973) suggested that often loose relationships like those to a distant colleague at work or a brief encounter at a business meeting or conference (i.e., weak social ties) can play a crucial role in terms of access to resources bound in social relationships, especially when it comes to accessing novel information that may be relevant for job searches. Influenced by interaction via online social networking platforms, scholars introduced the notion of latent ties (e.g. Haythornthwaite, 2002, Genoni et al., 2005) to

include a new typology of social interaction. Latent ties refer to those social ties "that are technically possible within existing network structures, but which have yet to be activated" (Pearson, 2009).

Recent developments give reason to question whether categorising social relations as either strong, weak or latent accurately illustrates how social relationships in the digital age are being experienced by individuals. This resonates with Podolny's work (1997) in which he argued that tie strength may not be the most suitable unit of analysis to trace effectiveness of social ties. The question I am addressing here is to what extent traditional forms of social network analysis are effective in tracing how individuals are experiencing digital social connectivity. The cognitive process that individuals undergo while eliciting data on social ties via the use of network maps resonates with what in cognitive psychology is called 'anchoring' or 'focussing'; here it is used to evaluate how individual's reasoning and decision-making is affected in response to the provision of a cognitive anchor, a sort of aid that focuses decision-making or reasoning around a provided trigger (e.g. Tversky & Kahnemann, 1973). The name generator technique uses quite a similar approach in terms of the cognitive process that underlies this technique, namely by prompting the individual to think of a 'name' in order to elucidate information on social ties. Interviewees are prompted to focus on specific individuals via a cognitive focus that anchors individuals' memory around the 'name' of a specific person.

Given that cognitive anchors always prompt the occurrence of a bias in individuals' recalling information, it may be assumed that providing such an anchor in social network analysis may lead individuals to think of their social relationships in a way that intentionally instructs them to focus only on those relationships which they can relate to via the specific name of a person. My argument, then, is that focussing on the 'name' as a cognitive aid might be unsuitable when it comes to reproducing knowledge on social connections that are digitally mediated.

Having established that the advent of social networking platforms has stirred up the validity/applicability of the conceptual understanding of a relationship, my following question is: In what way do individuals see themselves in a relationship with other people when posting on Facebook or publishing tweets? What sort of relationship are we speaking of, and more importantly, how is this form of relationship perceived by individuals as meaningful in terms of the resources that these relations may grant access to? And last but not least, which method meets

the requirements in guiding interviewees to speak about their own interpretation of digitally mediated social connectedness?

I assumed that using a more open, creative approach might be more suitable to enable interviewees to enlighten my understanding of digital social connectedness via "communicating more holistically, and through metaphors, [...] enhance empathic understanding, capture the ineffable, and help us pay attention to reality in different ways" (Weber, 2008). The aim of such an approach was thus in line with my experience that the structural constraints embedded in traditional network visualisation techniques were too limiting to think outside of the box and counteracted a more holistic understanding of social connectedness.

### 3.2.4 Hand-drawn network maps – an investigation into the nature of digitally mediated social ties

The use of freestyle network visualisations have received relatively little attention (Coates, 1985) so far, even though there have been some recent attempts to incorporate such techniques into the realm of personal social network studies (e.g. Ryan et al., 2014; Domínguez & Hollstein, 2014). Unstructured visualisation techniques are meant to graphically elicit data which might be difficult to verbalise with a standardised interview technique (Crilly et al., 2006), simply because the subject at stake might be problematic to embrace from a cognitive aspect and/or perceived as relatively abstract. Given its capacity to enhance dialogue on abstract matters, such techniques have a long tradition in clinical psychology or developmental psychology (Bagnoli, 2009), where graphic data elicitation methods that involve drawing or some other sort of creative expression have been applied successfully to understand children's stages of cognitive development, for example, or to facilitate individuals' emotional needs in a therapeutic context (Silver & Ellison, 1995). Furthermore, such forms of methodological enquiry have also been perceived as empowering interviewees "to reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanisms and taken for granted" (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 7).

Drawing on so-called 'projective techniques', which are relatively unstructured in nature, thereby allows research participants to organise the presented data in a way that is meaningful to them in terms of expressing their personal view and understanding (cf. Allen, 1958). In network research, Emmel &

Clark (2009) used such a free network visualisation technique to engage interviewees in a dialogue around the social processes and social dynamics that build and sustain communities and neighbourhood networks. The key feature of this method is that unlike traditional forms of visualisation of network maps, here it is completely up to the participant to come up with ideas on how to structure the visualisation of their personal network, instead of bringing a template to the field (Molina et al., 2014). In this regard, I used this unstructured technique in a second interview round. It was my hope that the technique would facilitate a richer discourse between myself and the interviewee in terms of them being able to provide data on their perception of the digitally mediated social ties in their network.

On a practical level, I then asked respondents to produce a drawing of their personal network on a blank sheet of A3 paper. To initiate the drawing I instructed respondents to think about all those people they considered important for their success as a creative professional. My aim was to keep instructions to a minimum in order not to make respondents feel compelled to think about their social network in any particular way. Rather, it was my intention to enable respondents to bring to the table their own interpretation of how they perceived the relevance of other individuals as part of their creative work practice. Therefore, I did not manipulate the paper sheet in any way, as I had done with the network map based on the name generator approach, and left it blank intentionally.

By using drawings, I was interested in achieving an understanding of how respondents' would incorporate contacts they had made through online social networking platforms into the drawing. In fact, when referring to such digitally mediated social ties, respondents chose different ways to visually refer to these contacts. For example, some of the respondents drew several bubbles, one each for a specific social media platform they were using in their creative practice, and labelled them Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc. Some of them then continued to draw a large number of smaller bubbles around each of the 'social media bubbles' to symbolise the large number of other individuals they saw themselves connected with via these platforms.

Similar to the name generator approach, I asked Fiona a trigger question to facilitate the drawing of the network maps. Just as with the name generator technique, I asked

*"Who are the people that you consider to be important for your success as a creative professional?"*

The only difference here was that with this technique interviewees could start drawing straight away with whatever social relation, individual or social group came to mind first instead of enacting names of social ties first, listing them and then putting them on the prepared sheet of paper. In most cases, interviewees then started to draw themselves or a representation of themselves (e.g. via a synonym or the name of their brand). After that, they filled the sheet with whatever came to mind. Following this instruction, Fiona produced the network map below (Figure 4).
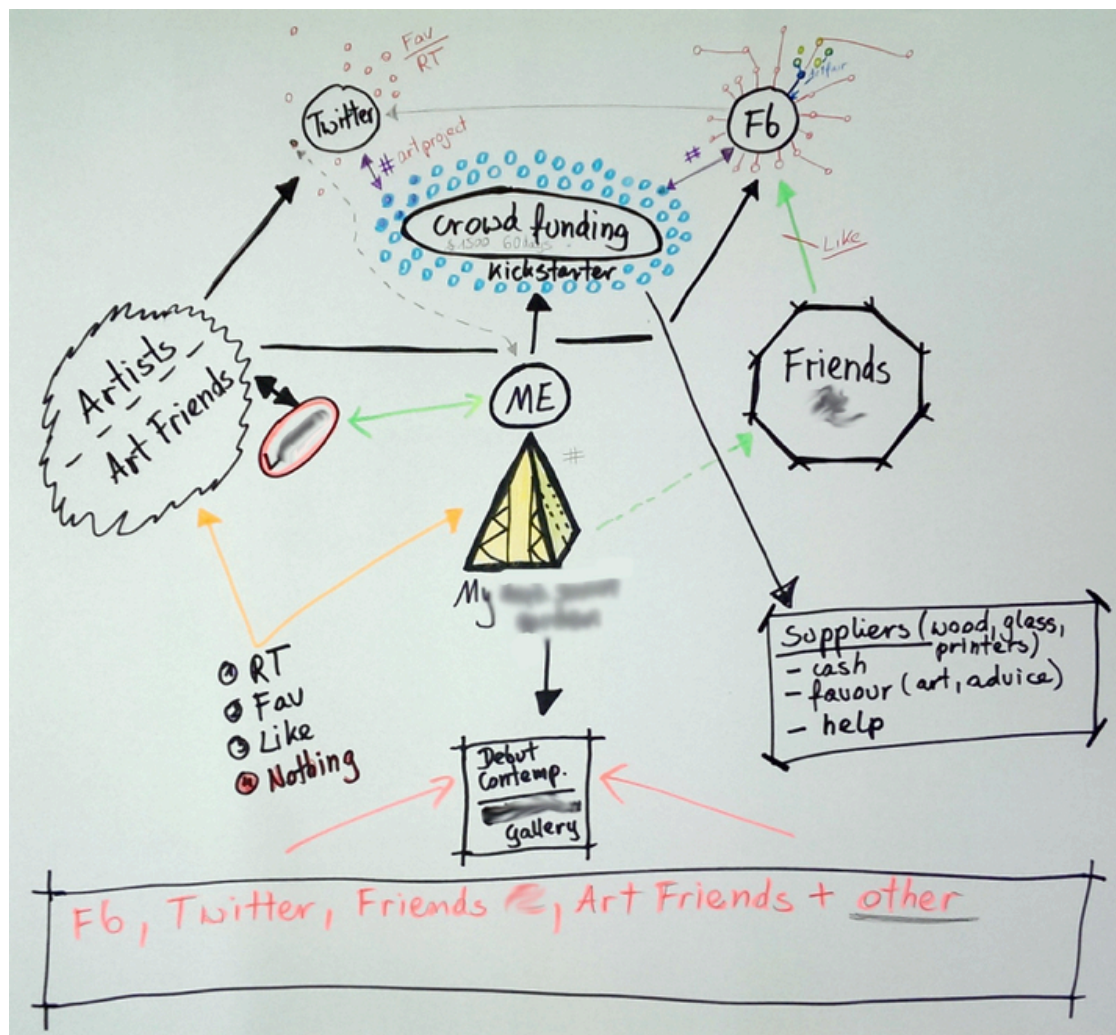


**Figure 10: Hand-drawn network map – Fiona**

One thing that was particularly striking throughout this part of the exercise was the fact that the drawing seemed to trigger respondents to recall a number of anecdotes related to their experience of using online social networking platforms. As

such, the drawing seemed to initiate a dynamic in which the respondents felt compelled to make sense of their own use of online social networking platforms in particular and social media in general, which then enabled them to verbalise their experiences of using these platforms. In essence it seems, the exercise of drawing allowed respondents to integrate socialising processes on Facebook, Twitter, etc. into a narrative form, which they shared with me as they came to their minds while working on the drawing. In this sense, using this methodology was useful as it facilitated an insight into online practices that are abstract and thus not easy to verbalise, with methodologies that are standardised and heavily framed in their layout.

The advantage of hand-drawn network maps is that they provide respondents with a certain freedom in terms of expressing their associations with digitally mediated social ties in whatever way they believe is useful. The example above is representative of as it shows that when given the right framework, digitally mediated social ties are in fact not 'not real', as Fiona has mentioned earlier, but instead that there is a wealth of information there, that is often informed by anecdotal evidence that is generated by the act of drawing. As such, drawing seems to be effective in terms of eliminating conceptual blocks that other techniques such as the name generator may create.

> [...] when you are drawing you are just saying what it is. So I guess its like an easier process for the mind. [...] It can be quite daunting to be asked a question when you are not like interacting with anything, but when you are drawing and thinking of people on Facebook for example, then I could just think quite easily and then it made me just ... I guess, just be able to answer it straight away. (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 9)

Acknowledging the limitations of this unstructured approach, I would like to highlight that working with creative professionals afforded me a significant advantage here. The task of drawing their social network from scratch requires a significant amount of imagination on the part of the respondent, along with an openness to create something under minimal guidance. While my respondents enjoyed this exercise and were happy to engage with an experimental technique, this may not be always the case. It is possible that this exercise might be perceived as daunting by some individuals and constrain their degree of engagement, which

would be counterproductive. Thereby, using an unstructured method should suit the background of targeted individuals. Instead of drawing on an empty sheet of paper, more conceptual aids, such as an example of how these drawings could look, or clearly defined relational concepts could be used with groups of respondents who seem hesitant to engage in an arts-based approach.

At this point, it might be relevant to mention that using this approach with interviewees who are either trained and/or active creative professionals worked exceptionally well, presumably because it is part of their daily activity to create something 'from scratch' without been given any particular orders or instructions. This was probably also the reason why all my interviewees approached the task of drawing their network with considerable ease and did not show any sign of discomfort with the task at hand. On the contrary many of them actually enjoyed the exercise and found it interesting to be prompted to think about their social relationships in a creative way.

### 3.2.5 Producing network maps in the field

Once I had chosen a method, I then had to decide how to best implement it in the field together with my participants. One of the major concerns was that whatever method I used had to be easily implemented and uncomplicated to reproduce. I was conscious of the fact that introducing any sort of 'social network' reference in conjunction with the method should be avoided. Given the fact, that the term 'social networking' has become a household term in recent years – especially among a younger audience for whom using online social networking sites has become an integrated part of everyday socialising activities – I was conscious of the effect that mentioning this term would have. To avoid interviewees from bringing their own interpretation of social networking to the table, I framed the process of producing the network maps within a narrative of specific 'individuals' that were considered as important regarding the work practice of each individual I spoke with.

I then had to make a choice between using a computer-assisted approach or a paper and pencil approach. There are a number of factors that have to be taken into account when making this decision: Most importantly, the chosen methodology should not introduce any constraints in terms of practical handling, so as to ensure an easy expiration of data collection. In addition, the chosen technique should also

give the participant time for reflection and offer the opportunity to correct statements and alter the shape or content of the network map, if needed. Taking these concerns into account, I then opted for a pencil-and-paper approach, as I assumed that for creative individuals who are accustomed to producing things with their hands and expressing ideas in a creative way, this would be an enjoyable exercise ensuring the best possible outcome for the network maps.

In preparation for the production of the network maps, I prepared a guideline with several questions that aimed to trigger responses from the interviewee. The initial trigger question I asked to initiate the process of producing the network maps was "Who are the people that you consider to be important for your success as a creative professional?" In the analysis, I decided to include only network ties that were considered relevant for work purposes, since drawing all network ties would have been too time-consuming.

In order to give the respondent a possibility to visually display their social contacts, I prepared two sheets of A3 paper, one with the heading 'Very important contacts' and another headed 'Important contacts'. I then asked the respondent to write all names of people that came to mind spontaneously onto post-it notes. I then provided the interviewee with post-it notes in three different colours: blue for only offline contacts (defined as 'People I know face-to-face'), pink for only online contacts (defined as 'People I am in touch with only via online platforms, such as Facebook, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.' and yellow for those contacts that respondents were in touch with 'both face-to-face and online'. After that I gave the interviewee some time to scan their memories and write all the names that came to into their minds on the different post-it notes, for which I allocated about 20 minutes. Some interviewees used the time to check their Facebook or Twitter accounts to double check names of people they might have forgotten or simply to refresh their memory.

Once the interviewee felt that no more names came to mind, I then asked them to group the names of people they had written onto the post it notes into two categories and label them as either 'very important' or 'important' contacts and they were then transferred onto the two A3 paper sheets I had prepared in advance. This gave the interviewee an opportunity to check one again whether the names of contacts were complete and to prepare them for the following exercise, which was to distribute the names on another sheet of paper onto which I had drawn three

concentric circles, with a smaller circle in the middle that read 'You' in reference to the respective interviewee.

I asked the interviewee to distribute the post-it notes along the concentric circles, whereby those contacts they felt were closer to them in terms of emotional proximity would be placed on the inner circles and those contacts they did not feel as close to would be distributed among the outer circle, or even entirely outside the concentric circles to indicate that there was any existing closeness whatsoever.

Once the respondent had finished distributing the contacts within the concentric circles, I gave them a moment to decide whether they were satisfied with their network diagram, which gave them an opportunity to identify any inconsistencies they would like to correct. In the last step I then asked the respondent to identify groups and relations between the named contacts. Essentially, this grouping of contacts into batches of social contacts was aimed at producing an understanding about why certain contacts where perceived as relevant. For example, some groups of social contacts where labelled as being relevant in terms of 'providing inspiration' for the work of the artists, or were 'giving feedback' or 'emotional support' throughout the process of producing work.

### 3.2.6 Data elicitation via hand-drawn network maps – Paving the way for obtaining verbal data

Evidently, the use of social network analysis and specifically my work with research participants on establishing hand-drawn network maps is a pivot point in my empirical work. It is essential to point out that using hand-drawn network maps is in fact a method that aims at triggering study participants to produce verbal data on their appreciation of digitally mediated social ties as a part of their personal social networks. I would like to point out that in my case I used the network maps primarily as a trigger to help respondents engage in a dialogue on digitally mediated social interaction. Therefore the network maps are to be seen as a precursor to the actual interview data that I was keen to obtain. As mentioned earlier, data elicitation by way of using visual data is often used to "access information that might be hard to obtain otherwise" (Frith et al., 2005, p. 189) due to the fact that respondents may find it too difficult to speak about topics that are abstract and hard to voice in a structurally coherent manner. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that in my case

the visual data represented by network maps primarily served the purpose of generating interview data. (cf. Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Producing the network maps was a key element to my empirical research and ultimately my work with respondents resembled a qualitative interview setting. To this end, my conversations with creative professionals sought to "obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon" (Kvale, 2008, p. 51). In terms of logistics, my approach to these interviews resembles a semi-structured interview setting (Gaskell, 2000), whereby I provided a loose structure in terms of guiding the respondent through the interview setting with questions covering a number of thematic areas that seemed important to address. Therefore, based on a combination of a critical reading of the appropriate literature, a reconnaissance of the field (which will include observations and/or preliminary conversations with relevant people), discussions with experienced colleagues, and creative thinking (cf. Gaskell, 2000), I prepared a set of questions around the following themes:

a) What is the overall importance of relationships and networks in creative professions?

b) What do these networks look like?

c) What relevance do online social networking platforms have?

d) Which experiences using online social networking platforms do individuals have?

e) How have digitally mediated social relationships been useful in view of their careers, if at all?

In conclusion, I would like to note that my approach to eliciting data on digitally mediated social relations via network maps is one way of approaching this subject. The fact that I focussed primarily on the interview data as a source of my analysis proved useful to establish material that could aid in finding answers to my research questions. Nonetheless, I do equally appreciate the value of the produced visual data, which I am certain bear a wealth of information that holds tremendous analytical potential. While still in its infancy, there is research on social networks that uses visual data to a much wider extent. To this end, interpretive approaches that focus exclusively on the image per se (e.g. Breckner, 2015), drawing on the symbolic narrative conveyed in images could be key to opening up a new discourse

on digitally mediated social relatedness in specific, and their embeddedness in social networks in general.

## 3.3 Part 3: Analysis of the data

In the previous chapter, I presented how I have elicited data in the field together with a number of professionals from a variety of sectors in the cultural and creative industries. I have illustrated how I have utilised hand-drawn social network maps to instruct study participants to elicit data on their social network and specifically on how social contacts both offline and online have been perceived as meaningful throughout their careers and their daily work practices. Drawing these network maps achieved a depth of verbal data that allowed me to gain in-depth insight into how social contacts are relevant for those creative professionals and moreover where to locate the specific relevance of digitally mediated social connectedness.

After transcribing the recorded interviews and familiarising myself with the content of each specific case, I soon realised that analysing the data will require different analytical strategies to effectively process the information gathered. On the one hand, I wanted to achieve an analytic understanding of the specificity of each case and the particular story each single artist told. Given the fact that digitally mediated social contacts assumed significance in different ways for each of the individual study participants, it was important to me to allow space for the uniqueness of how the relevance of digitally mediated social contacts played out in the context of each specific individual. On the other hand, my aim was also to understand how particular themes, such as for example the perceived nature of digitally mediated social connectedness, the associated resources and the relevance of these contacts re-emerged across different cases and how they can be informative of the relevant conceptual domains that I have established as pertaining to my research interest.

I decided to use two different strategies of data analysis, one that would allow me to understand each case holistically, and another that would allow me to compare themes across cases. Accordingly, I used a narrative analytic approach to look at each one of the cases holistically, and I applied thematic analysis to extract information regarding overall conceptual themes that are indicative in light of answering the research questions raised in the theoretical chapter. I will now proceed to describe how I have applied both analytical approaches and will illustrate how I went about extracting the data on a practical level.

### 3.3.1 Treating each case holistically – applied narrative analysis

Narrative analysis has been applied increasingly in the social sciences, paying tribute to narrative accounts of study participants from a holistic point of view (Griffin & May, 2012). As such, narrative analysis looks at scientific data as an entity, a narrative, a coherent account of an individual's personal perspective on a given subject. Narrative accounts are usually framed around a specific plot, where several narrative elements such as specific events and activities come together to form a causal sequence of events (Kjellberg & Andersson, 2003; Elliott, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1995). The key characteristic of narrative analysis lies in the fact that events that are told by the respondent are framed around a temporal structure with a clear beginning and an end, providing a frame in which interlinked events are embedded (e.g. Boje, 2001; Elliott, 2005). Essentially, narrative analysis enables the researcher to trace the emergence focal events from the data. In my research this focal event portrays the relevance and the specific context in which digitally mediated social ties have played a role throughout the careers of creative professionals I have interviewed.

In order to achieve this, narrative analysis requires the researcher to achieve a case description "by synthesizing various informants' narratives and perhaps other data sources, such as archives, in building an analytical pattern of how the process in general occurred" (Makkonen et al., 2012). The researcher structures the gathered data by extracting sequences of provided statements to produce a case description, whereby specific narrative sequences are arranged in such a way that a coherent sequence of events is formed. As such, narrative analysis requires the researcher to highlight specific sequences within the gathered data, to extract them and arrange them according to a purposive structure, which is typically based on the researcher's subjective research interest and informed by theoretical purposes (Elliott, 2005).

For my investigation, narrative analysis was particularly helpful to achieve an understanding of how, on the one hand, cases are different from one to another, but equally to see where similarities emerged. Essentially, my aim was to trace in what specific context digitally mediated social relations play a role in my respondents' careers. Setting out a framework around which I could organise the narrative accounts, I followed Labov & Waletzky's (1967) layout, where a narrative is formed along six structural key elements:

1. Abstract (a summary of the narrative's topic, what the story is about)
2. Orientation (time, place, situation, participants)
3. Complicating action (what actually happened)
4. Evaluation (the meaning and significance of the action, the 'so what')
5. Resolution (what finally happened) and
6. Coda (the ending and exit)

This was useful to focus on specific sequences of interview data and trace at what point and in which context digitally mediated social interaction seemed relevant. In reference to my research interests, I have also used these structural elements as a means to source the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction based on these questions: As such, I proceeded to analyse the transcribed interview data identifying information on:

a) Point of departure: Here, I identified information on the background of each of the creative professionals, including statements on their professional background, their professional training, qualifications they have obtained and statements they made in view of their career goals and aspirations.

b) Turning points: I then continued to locate those sequences where respondents spoke about crucial turning points in the careers, that is to say, actions and/or events, which they presented as trigger moments for establishing recognition for their professional work. In particular, I tried to locate – where present – the relevance of using online social networking platforms in this context. For this purpose, I observed those passages in the transcripts that featured anecdotes about their use of social media platforms as either facilitating the occurrence of certain events and/or opportunities that were opened up to them as a direct consequence of digitally mediated social interaction.

c) Evaluation of events: I then continued to locate supporting information in reference to respondents' particular use of those platforms. Here, I identified statements that detailed the specific course of action they took in using these platforms. These statements were meant to help understand individual strategies in using platforms to facilitate social interaction and information in view of respondents' attitudes towards online social networking platforms. As such, this step of analysis enabled me to contextualise the reported

events and to find an explanation on how certain actions on the part of the individuals may correlate with the trigger events they mentioned.

*d)* <u>Impact and consequences:</u> I then proceeded to identify how individuals have integrated using online social networking platforms in order to access resources that are relevant for their careers. What overall role does digitally mediated social interaction play in the overall context of their career achievements? What role do digitally mediated social relationships play in contrast to more traditional forms of social interaction?

*e)* <u>Establishing typologies:</u> I then proceeded to assign a typology to each of the cases that characterises the significance of online social networking platforms overall. By establishing this typology I aimed to extract the explanatory potential that the use of online social networking platforms bore in terms of career trajectories, in light of explaining the causality of events I have described under point b) My aim was to unravel why the use of social media played a crucial role in some cases, while in others it did not seem relevant at all. Consequently, I aimed to find explanatory potential of how the use of online social networking platforms played a role in achieving recognition by drawing on differences in the course of events as well as looking at the particular context of each case, namely, field of occupation, audiences and type of work that were presented across cases.

I decided to literally recreate the narrative plots of each individual by producing a collage of interview sequences on a sheet of paper. I therefore printed all interview data and highlighted specific sequences according to the abovementioned key elements. I then cut out the chosen sequences and pasted them on the paper with the aim of resembling a chronological order of events. This was useful as it allowed me to order the gathered interview data and create a storyline, which in the actual interview is often absent, as interviewees usually sequence their narrative in that way. While pasting the chosen sequences of text on paper, I also recorded my own notes that were meant to interpret the events in light of the significance of the given statements in view of digitally mediated social relationships. As such, I created a chart of events, which signposted how specific events in the respondents' careers unfolded and more precisely what role digitally mediated social interaction played in that context.

Narrative analysis tries to assist the researcher in establishing a sense of causality in the line of events that have been portrayed by the interviewee. How did specific events in the life of an individual lead up to a certain outcome? What role do life circumstances and context play in shaping a specific outcome? In applying narrative analysis, the researcher can thus establish *how* and *why* certain outcomes came about and help explaining these outcomes as reflected in the established causal sequence of actions and events. In particular, creating a narrative plot from presented data can help identify *significant triggers* that frame the formation of a specific event and can be determined as shaping the emergence of a process. Such triggers can be, for example, specific actions that an individual took or occurrences that have significantly impacted the succeeding course of events. As such particularly these triggering events can be helpful in establishing causality for emerging processes or progressing events.

I also used narrative analysis in order to categorise the data drawing on the plots that unfolded throughout the narrative. On one hand, this significantly helped to navigate the complexity of the given data by focussing the attention on one specific key issue – the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction. Depending on the specific events that shape the progression of events in the plot, I then labelled each case according to a specific motto (Boje, 2001), which in one sentence describes the overall relevance of digitally mediated social relations or online social networking platforms.
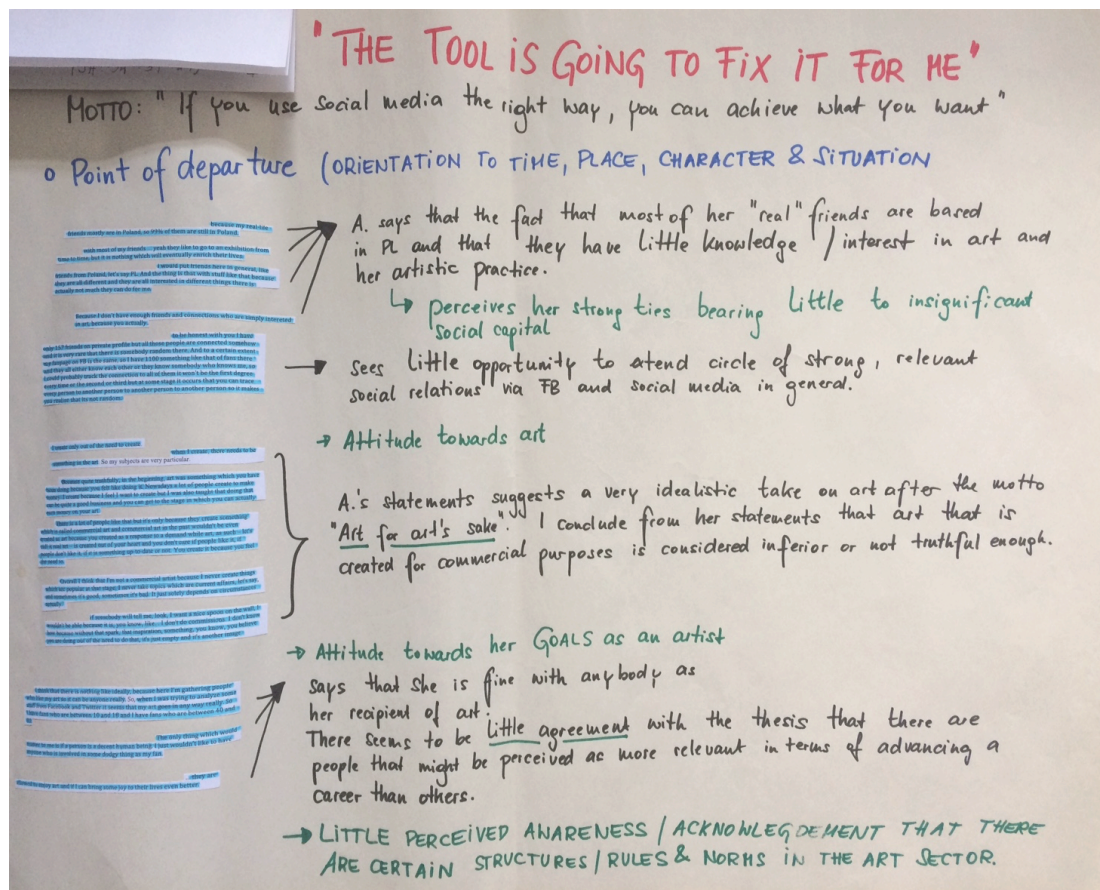
**Figure 11: Narrative Analysis – Case Fiona**

For example, I labelled one case according to the motto "The tool is going to fix it for me" (Figure 11), which indicated how this respondent approached the relevance of online social networking platforms in their career. As such, these mottos were useful to characterise in a nutshell what role digitally mediated social interaction played for each of the respondents. Labelling different cases by assigning a typology can thus be an important feature in terms of understanding *why* certain cases exhibit different plot lines, and ultimately "why the stories/perceptions differ" and "might warrant a theoretical examination of issues that explains why stories differ as they do." (Makkonen et al., 2012, p. 295).

### 3.3.2 Looking across cases - Thematic Analysis

After performing the narrative analysis, which provided a holistic understanding of each single case as a separate entity, I then used thematic analysis as a method to look for emerging themes *across cases*. Essentially, thematic analysis serves as an analytical tool to identify themes in texts, such as interview transcripts, that are vital for describing a phenomenon that is relevant in view of

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answering the research question (Daly, Kellehear & Gliksman, 1997). Identifying these themes I went through the interview transcripts to familiarise myself in depth with the data at hand, by way of "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). The aim of this reiterative reading was to recognise patterns emerging from the data and to group the data into meaningful categories (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

My thematic analysis of the data was characterised by two approaches: a first deductive a priori approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) and the data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998). In practice, the deductive approach I focussed on initially was based on predefined coding scheme that is based on a predefined set of codes that is typically based on knowledge drawn from the relevant literature. The data-driven inductive approach works without a pre-defined coding template, whereby themes and categories are established 'on-the-go' while analysing the given data. In my case, as with most cases in qualitative analysis, the analytical process is not an either-or approach, but instead uses a sort of hybrid approach, drawing on both inductive as well as deductive coding strategies. I used a set of a priori codes to categorise relevant parts of the text "while allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data using inductive coding" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4).

The coding process requires the researcher to go through the data and identify and highlight whenever an important passage appears in the text that captures an interesting element in view of the research question(s). Notably, the coding process is just a first step of the analysis, which happens prior to the actual interpretation of the coded information and serves to detect those elements in the text that represent a qualitative richness of the phenomenon in question (Boyatzis, 1998). After the encoding process, the gathered elements are then organised around specific themes, whereby themes are described as "a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 161).

I established two main categories at the beginning of the coding procedure – social capital and symbolic capital/recognition. These two main categories guided the first round of identifying and highlighting passages of text that provided relevant information regarding the phenomenon. My intention was to analyse the text by way of using a filtering technique, starting with the two main categories of interest: social capital and symbolic capital. Going through the data, I highlighted passages of text that contained information pertaining to either one of these two

categories and I then copied and pasted these text passages into two different documents. The data I collected is rich and often very detailed, containing information that corresponds with a variety of different aspects of the social capital or symbolic capital. Performing this first round of analysis, I made notes and comments for each of the collected data passages in regards to further emerging sub-categories. The specific approach to thematic analysis I chose is essentially a "step-by-step procedure, [and consequently] the research analysis was an iterative and reflexive process" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 4).

In a second round of analysis, I reviewed the previously identified passages of text and re-analysed the data, now specifying the information according to categories pertaining to social capital and symbolic capital. For the quotes in the 'social capital' category I worked again with a previously established set of categories drawing on the theoretical definition of social capital and I re-coded the text passages into three categories: a) social relationships, b) resources and c) social networks. This way, I ensured that I had analysed the given data covering all the elements that have been established as meaningful in the context of understanding the relevant elements that social capital is comprised of. In the third round of analysis I followed an inductive approach, working without a template of codes, but identifying further categories that emerged from the three main categories. Consequently, I established a set of categories that allowed a yet more refined analysis of the three categories. This allowed me to identify emerging sub-categories. Table 2 provides an overview of the categories and subcategories used and the themes I identified.

| Main Categories | Categories | | Subcategories | Emerging key aspects |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Symbolic Capital | Traditional networks vs. online networks | | Affordance | Remarks that describe aspects of symbolic capital in relation to existing traditional networks |
| | | | Significance | Evaluation of the meaning of traditional networks in this regard |
| | | | Manifestation | Which concrete aspects/events interpreted as symbolic capital are described? |
| | | | Challenges | Aspects that are seen as limiting in terms of building symbolic capital drawing on networks |
| | | | Social ties | Significance that is ascribed to social relations in view of attaining symbolic capital |
| | | | Context | Does symbolic capital come in different forms according to a specific niche of creative work? |
| | | | Success | Appreciation of symbolic capital regarding actual impact on a successful career path |
| | | | Capital | Appreciation of other forms of capital contributing to symbolic capital attainment |
| Social Capital formation via social relations | Digitally mediated sociality | Meaning | Definition | Respondents' interpretation of these ties: What words do they use to describe these ties? |
| | | | Discourse | Remarks and impressions regarding the experience of building social ties |
| | | | Context | Remarks regarding digitally mediated social ties in reference to traditional forms of social relations |
| | | | Attitude | Aspects referring to the general appraisal of digitally mediated social ties |
| | | | Opportunities | Remarks regarding the benefits of relating to others online |
| | | | Challenges | Beliefs/remarks regarding difficulties encountered while building social ties online |
| | | | Expectations | Interpretation of the role of digitally mediated social interaction regarding their arts practice |
| | | Practice | Role | What role do digitally mediated social relations play in their day-to-day practice |
| | | | Engagement | Extent of daily engagement online |
| | | | Strategies | Particular measures applied to facilitate social relations online |
| | | | Evaluation | Rationale towards effectivity of their practice online |
| | | | Perception | Remarks regarding their own awareness of social engagement online |
| | | | Peer influence | Extent to which colleagues and friends shape their online practice |
| | | | Skills | Perception of their own ability/competence of online engagement |
| | | ces | Definition | Beliefs/rationale regarding the capability of online social networking platforms to facilitate social bonds |
| | | | Discourse | Remarks/interpretation of social ties created by using online platforms |
| | | | Features | Appreciation of specific tools pertinent to platforms in light of supporting the formation of social bonds |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Social Capital formation via social relations** | **Traditional forms of social relations** | | Role | What role do traditional forms, particularly face-to-face interaction play? |
| | | | Engagement | How and in what context do respondents form social ties? |
| | | | Evaluation | Description regarding the importance of those ties regarding social capital |
| | | | Skills | Comments on particular skills required, what does 'being social' require? |
| | | | Attitude | Perception of social engagement; necessary evil, enjoyment, etc.? |
| | | | Affordance | Comments regarding the effectiveness of these ties in facilitating social capital |
| | | | Challenges | Which could be the hindrances of building traditional social ties? |
| | | | Advantages | Does face-to-face engagement make building social capital easier? |
| | | | Peer influence | Comments on the influence of colleagues on facilitating social ties |
| | | | Motivation | Opinions regarding their expectations of building social ties, what are they hoping for? |
| **Socio-cultural Background** | | | Education | Details regarding their professional formation |
| | | | Social context | Background of family and friends, potential existing affiliation with creative sector |
| | | | Importance | Comments regarding their own evaluation regarding the importance of pre-existing exposure |
| | | | Skills | Evaluation of previous experience and/or training that influenced their arts practice |
| | | | Autonomy | Comments regarding the importance of their independent achievements |
| **Perceived success** | | | Ambitions | Reflections on careers plans, hopes and future prospects |
| | | | Evaluation | Remarks about their achieved successes, aspects which they think facilitated achievements |
| | | | Challenges | Limitations regarding their own capability to be successful as an artist |
| | | | Environment | Remarks regarding the significance of framework conditions and impact on career |
| | | | Influence | Factors they think influenced previous achievements |

### 3.3.3 A note on reflexivity – Positioning myself as a res[...] the field of creative and cultural production

One strength of qualitative research results from the research[...] engagement with research, which is necessary in order to understar[...] matter in depth. Nonetheless, personal involvement and the relations[...] researcher and research participant also creates bias and preconcepti[...] 2008). In my case, counting a number of creative professionals – ph[...] writers and actors – among my circle of friends quite possibly had an e[...] attitude towards the field of creative and cultural production. Despite [...] artist myself, the stories friends have shared with me certainly influen[...] perspective on the field. In fact, one of my friend's 'success' in using Fa[...] platform to launch her career as a photographer in Vienna ignited m[...] focussing my research on digitally mediated social interaction in this pa[...] of occupation. As such, my motivation to carry out this researc[...] influenced by my friend's narrative on the significance of digital engager[...] own perception of its relevance in view of her own career trajectory.

Nonetheless, my existing interest in the arts in general and ph[...] specific, have also had positive effects: It was my impression that [...] interest in creative work and my enthusiasm motivated respondents to p[...] my study. I assume this has to do with the fact that they felt appreci[...] work they did and felt understood in the challenges implied by the [...] framework conditions of their field of work. This way, I effectively man[...] the respondents' trust, as they were reassured of my genuine interest i[...] Then again, given the significance of the personal network and being re[...] was vital in order to recruit participants. Consequently, the selection of [...] by way of snowball sampling may have limited the scope of research [...] and thus obfuscated the actual complexity of data. As such, given my [...] in photography and the recommendations from professionals I know p[...] visible in the sample. However, even though I benefitted fro[...] recommendations I made an active effort to pursue as many differe[...] possible, by establishing my own connections and pursuing alternative ro[...]

### 3.3.4 Limitations of the study

Researching the field of creative and cultural production has been by far more challenging than I had initially anticipated. A number of factors that I did not initially contemplate had in further consequence a considerable impact on this study, particularly regarding the fieldwork and gaining access to study participants. A major limitation is implied by the selection of research participants; initially, my research was triggered by my interest in understanding the impact of digitally mediated social interaction and furthermore, its capacity for forming social capital. My assumption that online social interaction plays a role in the emerging success of creative professionals was initially fuelled by a number of 'success stories' of professionals I knew personally or those being featured in popular culture. I was especially interested in tracing the impact of digitally mediated social interaction throughout their career paths. However, this turned out to be more difficult in practice than I had imagined it to be. Eventually, it was challenging to gain access to the individuals *behind* those success stories, either because it was impossible to gain access in absence of a personal connection, or because the geographical distance would have significantly delayed the progress of my work. Thus, this research lacks the input of respondents in whose careers digitally mediated social interaction has led to building reputation or to influencing 'success' in the broadest sense.

As a result, in terms of tracing the actual significance of digitally mediated social interaction, my research and the data I elicited may only scratch the surface of a phenomenon that receives much wider application in practice. Thereby, I acknowledge that the validity of the data and the cases I present here is limited and does not allow drawing general conclusions in terms of the role of digitally mediated social ties and their significance in terms of achieving recognition. Having said that, I am positive that the insight I have produced with my case studies provides sufficient evidence in providing a means to tackle this phenomenon empirically by providing data that helped define new concepts (cf. "liquid ties") and that challenge existing notions of social capital for example.

In addition, my work with creative professionals in the field was impacted by a number of limiting factors. The first hurdle was often allocating time for a meeting. Given the busy work schedules of participants this has often been challenging and required significant flexibility on my side. Frequently appointments were cancelled last minute and had to be rescheduled, which often delayed the progress of the

interviews. In addition, interviews were often carried out in public spaces, for example after attending an artists exhibition or workshop, which proved difficult in terms of facilitating a productive environment and sometimes interviews had to be paused and continued at a later stage. As such, participants were sometimes unable to dedicate their full attention to the interview, which may have impacted the quality and significance of the collected data. This applied especially to a situation where I was forced to record interviews in public spaces, which resulted in a poor quality of the recording and difficulties in transcribing the data accurately.

Another limitation resulted from the qualitative nature of this study, particularly in view of the specific method I used: Research on social capital formation in reference to online social networking platforms is primarily based on quantitative data. Little effort has been made to actually focus on the relevance of the nature of digitally mediated social ties per se, which resulted in the fact that no prior clues as to how to tackle those empirically existed. As such, the initial steps in terms of fine-tuning the method required a significant amount of experimenting and readjusting. As mentioned earlier, I had intended to use the name generator as a method to trace digitally mediated social ties, aiming to trigger responses in reference to the nature of those ties and specific practices of utilising those ties to accumulate social capital. However, as two pilot tests revealed, the name generator did not elicit enough insightful data, given the fact that respondents found it difficult to engage with the network map as a means to talk about their experience using online social networking platforms. Ultimately, the hand-drawn network maps seemed the best approach in terms of data elicitation. Nonetheless, I was hesitant about using a completely unstructured approach in the beginning, as I was uncertain about whether respondents would accept this challenge. To this end, the fact that I had chosen to work with creative professionals was certainly helpful as their openness and flexibility to engage with creative technique was already pertinent to their profession.

Another factor that needs addressing obviously relates to the sample size and the feasibility of defining cases: Early on, I had decided that using case studies would be the best approach, as I was keen to understand respondents' engagement with online social networking platforms as profoundly as possible. I was aiming to interview each respondent several times over a prolonged time period with the hand-drawn network maps as the core element. In addition, I also wanted to get to know them and their work in practice by way of attending their exhibitions with

them, thus obtaining a complete picture of their work as creative professionals. This was important to me, as I believe it enabled me to contextualise their responses and interpret them more accurately. In practice, my work with respondents differed significantly from case to case. While with three of my respondents – Fiona, Lilie and Sienna – I was able to engage in a long-term collaboration, meeting consistently over a period of one year, the other two respondents – Vincent and Jeff – showed significantly lower interest in such a time-intensive collaboration. Consequently, I was unable to carry out repeated interviews, whereby the depth of the interview data was also impacted by time constraints and lack of commitment.

## 3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the methods used in my thesis alongside sampling procedures and means of data analysis. I placed special emphasis on illustrating the limitations of traditional social network analytical approaches (i.e. the name generator), which then led me to utilise hand-drawn network maps in the field. I argued that the use of the name generator technique proved unsuccessful in researching digitally mediated social ties. The name generator requires respondents to specify social ties alongside identifying concrete actors, which in the case of digitally mediated social interaction, proved cumbersome. This was because of the sheer amount of followers and "friends" respondents maintained through various online social networking platforms, which made it difficult for them to identify these by name. In addition, the ephemeral nature of digitally mediated social ties made it challenging for respondents to recall concrete information on these ties.

Instead, I then opted for an unstructured approach by utilising the hand-drawn network maps. This provided respondents with greater freedom to verbalise their perception of digitally mediated social ties, without the constraint of formalised methods. As a result, the drawings helped respondents recall specific moments of in their creative practice during which digitally mediated social ties assumed relevance. This was essential to elicit anecdotes, which proved essential to elicit a wealth of narrative data that allowed me to trace essential conceptual information in regard to the nature of these ties.

In conclusion, the insight resulting from utilising an unstructured method in my research, led me to reflect on limitations that arise when utilising traditional network analytic approaches for tracing social relations in the digital realm: Social

network analysis operates alongside a conceptual understanding of social ties anchored within a dichotomy of strong and weak ties. This does not directly apply to the digital realm, as the way in which social relations are being perceived by respondents does not always resonate with existing tie concepts. In addition, my research showed that the focus on tracing structures in social networks, which underlies traditional SNA tools conflicts with the nature of social networks facilitated by digitally mediated social interaction. Characterising networks alongside existing notions assumes that we are looking at a fixed entity comprised of regular patterns of social interaction. I argue that due to the fluctuating, ephemeral nature of digitally mediated social ties the boundaries of social networks are constantly shifting and migrating, which renders traditional approaches cumbersome to apply in this context.

My main methodological contributions in view of utilising a social network analytical approach in conjunction with researching digitally mediated social interaction are two fold:

1. I argue that given the impact of digitally mediated social interaction, the perception of social networks and the way in which established social network analysis techniques tackle social ties requires rethinking. Researchers have to acknowledge changing circumstances in which social networks unfold. This resonates with a perceived shift away from a narrational sociality to an informational sociality. This implies that ephemeral social ties assume increasing relevance in individual's perception of meaningful social interaction. As a result, conceiving of networks as a fixed entity that grows structurally over time decreases in relevance. Thereby, social network researchers shall pay closer attention to understanding the factors that trigger the formation of networks, which counteracts the notion of linearity and fixity associated with networks.

2. On a practical level, applying social network analysis techniques in conjunction with researching digitally mediated social ties, researchers may consider shifting the focus away from studying relationships in conjunction with concrete social actors. Rather I suggest to frame research projects around

specific circumstances or moments of interaction to elicit data on digitally mediated social ties.

# *Chapter 4: Reconceptualising social capital in mediated social interaction – Liquid ties and the role of trust*

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I aim to reconceptualise social capital based on the impact that digitally mediated social ties create on forming social bonds. Drawing on two cases – Vincent and Lilie – I establish how social capital attainment via digitally mediated social ties unfolds, thereby tackling research theme B "Digitally mediated social ties and social capital" (cf. Chapter 1, p. 27-28). Social capital, based on Bourdieu's definition, is a core concept of this thesis. I argue that the importance of social capital in the field of creative and cultural production is uniquely aligned with creative professionals' ability to attain recognition. I thereby frame social capital as a prerequisite to the attainment of recognition, which I have conceptualised as an affordance of symbolic capital. As I argued in Chapter 2 (cf. 36 ff.), symbolic capital is best understood as a form of legitimised social capital, which draws attention to the importance of resources accrued as a consequence of established social relationships to power holders. These relationships are significant as they facilitate a process in which power holders are motivated to bestow their existing symbolic capital onto others (cf. Bourdieu, 1996).

Social capital research has recently assumed increasing research interest (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2009), as the impact of digitally mediated social interaction sheds new light on individuals' capacity to accumulate social capital. The assumption that online social networking platforms support individuals in building new social ties has fuelled an opportunity driven discourse on social capital. Whereas traditionally, social capital has been discussed alongside issues of constraint, given geographical and social boundaries, more recent takes on social capital seem to render these constraints irrelevant. But what is the actual source of this change in appreciation of social capital access? And does digitally mediated social interaction in fact eradicate perceived constraints?

Digitally mediated social interaction and the use of online social networking platforms are being discussed as a facilitator for building social capital (e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Ellison et al., 2007; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; Quan-Haase et al., 2002). The apparent ease of forming social bonds by socially engaging with

others on Facebook and Twitter is often associated with more opportunities in fostering access to social capital resources. This is because building social ties online provides seemingly unrestricted access, which is credited with the affordance of eradicating social boundaries in particular. This implies that social capital has become easier to attain, given free and ubiquitous possibilities to establish social exchange with others and build social relationships. While some aspects of this new take on social capital hold merit, I argue that on a conceptual level, social capital formation via online platforms remains largely untouched. In particular, I hold that this lack of conceptual engagement originates in an underdeveloped understanding of the nature of digitally mediated social relationships, which in turn obfuscates tracing their capacity to accrue social capital resources.

In the following, I identify the locus of an emerging change to social capital formation, based on the affordance of digitally mediated social ties in building trust. In my view, existing social capital concepts rely on the importance of strong, established social ties, particularly because of their capacity to build trust. It is important to note that tracing the notion of trust as a social capital resource ties in with a very specific outcome of social capital, which is not meant to discredit contribution made by Granovetter (1973) and the relevance of weak ties. The field of cultural and creative production is often associated with bearing high levels of risk and uncertainty, which is explained by the volatility of the art market and the prevalence of ambiguous judgement of value (cf. Banks et al., 2000). This explains why stakeholders in the cultural and creative sector often rely on strong social bonds and inherent trust as a means to mitigate uncertainty (cf. Krackhardt, 1986).

I found that under specific circumstances, digitally mediated social ties equally foster trust, albeit in a temporally bounded context. This implies that digitally mediated social ties, bearing in mind their capacity to build trust, are interpreted as a generator of social capital. The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether these social capital resources qualify as legitimised forms of social capital. Thereby the value of digitally mediated social ties in aiding the formation of recognition is questionable. Nonetheless, I hold that at the very least, digitally mediated social ties foster opportunities to build social ties with power holders, which highlights their capacity to circumvent socially constructed barriers.

Drawing on the statement provided by Vincent – a fine artist who established himself as a successful member of the field of cultural production – I first trace the

relevance of strong social ties as vital in facilitating recognition. Vincent's case resembles a number of aspects akin to Bourdieu's account of building recognition in the literary field (cf. Bourdieu, 1993), which highlights the role of power holders and gatekeepers. Equally, Vincent's scenario portrays an environment marked by fierce competition, in which stakeholders rely heavily on the advocacy of mentors in order to attain symbolic capital. Vincent describes this process of mentoring as vital, while at the same time pointing to additional sources of risk, such as mentors looking at a potential loss of reputation by advocating unsuitable artists or the implied financial risks which gallery owners face. Acknowledging prevalent moments of risk in the careers of a fine artist, the importance of trust inherent in strong social ties becomes evident. Furthermore, identifying the significance of trust in the face of risk and uncertainty pertinent to the field of cultural and creative production provides a platform from which to trace the relevance of digitally mediated social ties. To what extent are these ties useful in mitigating risk and can they form social bonds that aid the formation of legitimised forms of social capital?

I contrast Vincent's case with that of Lilie, a photography student at the University of London who holds that digitally mediated social interaction plays a significant role in her creative practice. She highlights the capacity of digitally mediated social ties to establish social connections with power holders. Lilie provided the example of using Twitter to establish a connection with a politician, which I have identified as one occurrence in which social capital can be attained. This example is significant, as it portrays digitally mediated social ties as a means to manage power imbalances – a key issue recurrent in social capital discourse. From this perspective, social capital accrued via digitally mediated social interaction challenges Bourdieu's scenario as it implies that loose, ephemeral social bonds created online replace the role of strong social ties. However, as I shall argue later, this claim is only valid in scenarios that aim at a one-off exchange of resources. I use the notion of liquid ties as an indication of social capital formation in the absence of strong social bonds and durable networks. This is not to say that Bourdieu's concept has become irrelevant – quite the contrary: As Vincent's case shows, social capital attainment in the field of cultural production still very much operates according to established standards. However, Lilie's case provides a compelling example, in which digitally mediated social interaction offers an additional, extended viewpoint into social capital formation.

Another component of this chapter is the characterisation of digitally mediated social ties. I have argued that the conceptual understanding of these social ties remains vague, which can be seen in previous research where these ties are discussed as latent ties (cf. Genoni et al., 2005; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Drawing on the network maps of two respondents – Lilie and Fiona – I trace how digitally mediated social ties have been interpreted in terms of assuming meaning in the formation of social capital. Based on their capacity to afford trust in one-off social capital exchange scenarios, I conceptualise digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties, whereby the notion of liquidity illustrates the capacity of digitally mediated social ties to resemble strong tie affordances to create trust in a temporally confined situation.

To demonstrate the significance of each of the cases (i.e. Vincent, Lilie and Fiona) I discuss in this chapter, the following case-comparison matrix presents an overview of the concepts addressed in each case. I present motives that emerged as relevant and address variations/tensions between each of the cases in context of this chapter (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994).

| Cases / Motives | Social capital and social ties | Significance of social ties for recognition | Trust and digitally mediated social relations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vincent | Strong ties are invaluable for accessing resources, specifically mentoring and provision of contacts. | Strong ties (i.e. friends from art school) are essential here, because their advocacy facilitates trust among gallery owners for example. | Digitally mediated social relations do not account for traditional social relations, because they are perceived as unreal, thus not relevant for facilitating trust with gallery owners for example. |
| Lilie | Strong ties and digitally mediated social ties are equally relevant but they facilitate different outcomes: Feedback from friends and colleagues (i.e. strong ties) vs. access to new, unacquainted individuals and new information (i.e. digitally mediated social ties) | Limited evidence for achieving recognition available in this case, given Lilie's status as a student. She seems aware of the "rules of the game" and advocates the necessity of contacts with decision makers and involvement with colleagues in the field. | Digitally mediated social ties are discussed in one instance, connecting Lilie to a decision maker. This serves as a basis to discuss the capacity of these ties to establish credibility on her side. |

| Fiona | Hardly any existing social ties with colleagues from the field, due to perceived constraints (i.e. perception of art friends as calculating and not genuinely interested). Thereby, Fiona almost exclusively relies on digital platforms to promote work and establish and maintain social engagement. | No evidence of achieved recognition elicited. Fiona is a struggling photographer who has sold the occasional piece in the past. Also, she does not seem to be recognised by major art galleries and among the field at large, due to lack of engagement and limited resources. | Mentions that trust is difficult to achieve in relations with other creative professionals, as they – in Fiona's perception – are not genuinely interested in her as a person and thus not relevant to her. No indication of establishing meaningful social relations through online platforms. |

**Figure 12: Case-Comparison Matrix: Chapter 4**

## 4.2 Social capital and the role of strong social ties in the field of cultural and creative production

Bourdieu's concept of social capital (e.g. 1984) holds that at its core social capital formation relies on two main pillars: a) mutually recognised social bonds as a result of a b) durable network of social interactions. This implies that for social capital to be attained, established relationships such as familial ties and strong friendship bonds are most effective in accessing resources, such as social support and mentorship. Insisting on the indispensability of these ties, this conceptual notion of social capital implies that social capital resources are exclusive, whereby individuals are cautious in granting others access to resources, which explains the focus on firmly established social networks. While this assumption makes sense intuitively and still holds merit in many social scenarios, it is important to unpack why these social bonds are credited with such importance in the field of cultural and creative production.

Framing the field of cultural production as a social environment in which uncertainty is prevalent, the central relevance that strong social bonds assume is most plausibly explained by their capacity to manage uncertainty and mitigate risk. I mentioned earlier that this notion of uncertainty is so central to the field of cultural production because actors operate in volatile markets marked by subjective decision-making (cf. Banks et al., 2000). Shifting values such as "trends, styles and symbols" are the main drivers of the appreciation of the value of artwork and predicting "possible future markets" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 458). This dynamic

"places risk so centrally within the biographies and practices of the cultural entrepreneur and makes their work so adaptable to, and indicative of, the 'risk society'" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 458). Involved stakeholders (emerging artists, gallery owners, art mentors) are confronted with this uncertainty as part of their day-to-day arts practice, whereby their aim is to keep risk at a minimum so as to avoid ill-investment and potential loss of reputation, for example. One way to alleviate the burden of uncertainty is to create an environment of trust, whereby stakeholders rely on trusted individuals in order to manage repercussions of unstable framework conditions and spread out the burden. Thereby individuals in the field of cultural production aim to achieve a status of trustworthiness to attain a status of reliability. Trustworthiness and credibility are key pillars for decision makers in the field, whereby they often rely on "trustworthy, knowledgeable individuals, experienced in the cultural sector, who could offer advice, contacts [and] market information" (Banks et al., 2000, p. 461) to help mitigate risk. The notion of mentorship thus takes on a key role in this context and emerging artists and decision makers alike rely on their input.

The notion of trust is closely associated with the concept of social capital. For example, Putnam (1993) defines social capital alongside "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action" (p. 167). Coleman (1988) focussed on the functional aspect of social capital conceptualising it as "a variety of entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors" (p. 98). This implies that social capital defined by its function enables cooperation among individuals, because they "enable us to trust each other by protecting our relationships from abuse" (Hardin, 2006, p. 76). Elsewhere, Newton (2001) argues that trust originates "in that broad, deep and dense network of voluntary associations and intermediary organizations that comprise civil society. Trust is a – probably *the* – main component of social capital" (p. 202, emphasis in original).

Having established that trust plays a major role, as an outcome but also as a requirement for social capital to form, brings us one step closer to understanding the relevance of strong social ties in creative professions. Bourdieu draws on a social scenario where framework conditions such as the prevalence of upper class social circles and access to elite networks forcefully imposes a setting in which those with established social bonds to elites and opinion leaders of society benefit most from

their social capital, as the resources those relationships grant access to are scarce and exclusive. Bourdieu's scenario resonates greatly with Vincent's story: Recounting the early stages of his career, he was decided to launch a career as an artist, but was struggling to gain access to an exclusive circle of opinion leaders in the art world, such as gallery owners. His main aim was to achieve a status of credibility in order to be granted the privilege to attain visibility for his work and acquire their trust in the value of his work. Aware of the fact that this ambition required the approval of recognised figures in the field, Vincent holds that established social bonds played a significant role in fostering access to decision makers in the field. One such occasion Vincent described, highlights the importance of the existing relationship with a fellow student from art school – William – who since his graduation has launched a solid career as a fine artist. Represented by major art galleries across the UK and exhibiting his art alongside UK art celebrities Tracy Emin and Peter Blake, William is considered a legitimate player in the cultural field having established solid recognition resulting in prestigious contracts and accumulation of significant monetary value in art sales featuring his work.

Accordingly, William played a critical role throughout the early stages of Vincent's career by acting as a mentor who provided him with contacts to gallery owners and insider advice. *"first I'd said to him [i.e. William] 'I'm giving the job up' and he was like 'Oh brilliant, it's great that you are giving it a go' and then he […] gave me a couple of introductions to a gallery in Brighton."* (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 7) This statement illustrates how Vincent in the face of the uncertainty to convince gallery owners of his artistic legitimacy, sought to claim mentorship advice from a reliable and trusted source – a close friend from college. Importantly, this dynamic resonates with the importance of long-standing social contacts I have described earlier. The relationship between Vincent and William reflects Bourdieu's focus on durable networks, whereby durability of this social tie formed as a result from shared time at art school. It also illustrates why this incident of social capital attainment and Vincent's ability to benefit from insider information is keenly linked to the existence of a mutually recognised type of relation, because it ensures an existing level of trust between Vincent and William. Why is trust important in this scenario? The mutual perception of trust is important for both actors: On one hand, William as a mentor faced the risk of losing his established reputation in case Vincent proved to misuse his information. Accordingly, Vincent values William's mentorship as *"quite a brave thing for him to do […] because*

*recommendations are always dangerous I think as you're kind of putting your reputation on the line by suggesting someone else."* (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 7). On the other hand, Vincent too was in a position of uncertainty, as he solicited William's advice while being at the beginning of his career, lacking established credentials and existing authenticated work.

By describing William's decision to recommend Vincent's work to a number of galleries as 'dangerous' he implies that the potential loss of one's reputation by recommending a person based on the wrong credentials poses a significant risk. In this case, William by recommending a novel artist bears a risk of losing his credibility and risking his position in the field. It is this perceived risk of impending damage to one's social standing in the field that explains why individuals in such settings typically rely more on established durable social relations as they bear the capacity to control risky situations and avert negative outcomes. The literature on affordances of social ties holds that strong ties seem to excel at their capacity to be useful to individuals who are in an insecure position (cf. Krackhardt, 1986). Drawing on Granovetter's (1982) conceptualisation of strong ties, which holds that "strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available" (p. 113), the relevance of strong ties in navigating risky situations results from the firm base of trust that often naturally forms while strong ties are being formed and maintained over a significant amount of time.

**Figure 13: Hand-drawn network map – Vincent**

A look at Vincent's network drawing (Figure 13) affirms his appreciation of strong social ties as the most important type of social relations in his career. The importance of William is also evidence in this drawing as Vincent chose to place his name at the very centre of the map (yellow circle, name anonymised). Vincent's appreciation of strong social ties in the context of his creative practice is a key theme in general: For example, family members such as Vincent's father, grandfather and wife assume an important role too, because of their continuous support and encouragement.

> *My parents are [...] the people who've given me all my confidence to do what I do. [...] I couldn't be doing it if I didn't have the confidence to do it [...]. My Granddad is the first person that I can remember when I was a child. So that's a kind of early, you know ... he is the reason I started drawing.* (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 1)

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Fellow artists and creative professionals equally played key role in the beginnings of his career *"So this is my, this is my artist friend, who when I decided to kind of leave my job, was kind of like, just little words of encouragement."* (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 2) These strong ties Vincent's refers to often form as a result of (social) proximity and tend to "bond similar people together" (Krackhardt, 1986, p. 216), providing assurance and support. In the case of William having spent time together at art school and the maintained friendship ever since established a profound basis of trust, highlighting the relevance of durability and consistency formed by reiterated acts of social engagement as the basis of strong tie formation. Based on the rationale that social and geographical proximity play a major role in the formation of strong ties, Lorenzen (2007) holds that "strong ties usually radiate from a particular place – such as school, university, club or other organisation that holds people together geographically over a period – or a physical artefact or facility [...] that *makes people meet and talk regularly*" (p. 807, emphasis is mine). I conclude that these continuous acts of social exchange as the basis of strong ties are also the foundation from which trust emerges.

Returning to the significance of strong ties in the formation of social capital, Vincent's case presents a compelling example affirming Bourdieu's concept. The attainment of being provided access to contacts, information and opportunities – all classic social capital resources – seem to have originated from Vincent's established relationship with William. Thus, Vincent's case validates the importance of mutually recognised relationships because of their capacity to mitigate implied risks and uncertainty by leveraging mutual trust in their established relationship. On one hand, William's trust in Vincent's ability as an artist quite possibly resulted from previous social engagement at Art College, which illustrates the relevance of strong social ties in this context. On the other hand, this example shows the close correlation between trust and bestowing recognition onto someone. It is because of William's trust in Vincent that motivated him to bestow his own reputation (symbolic capital) onto Vincent, which enabled him in turn to solicit the trust of other stakeholders, such as gallery owners and art critics. Thus in a way prevailing trust unlocked a resource in social capital, which I conceive of as the lending out of symbolic capital, borrowed recognition that serves as a kind of loan to enable one individual to build their own reputation.

Furthermore, Vincent's case also substantiates the notion of building recognition via social capital as an exclusive social process. This is, because of

required access to particular social circles and associated stakeholders that allow an individual to leverage resources. As the theory holds, access cannot simply be created, as it requires long-standing affiliation with members of eligible social circles, which typically evolve over time in confined social environments. This resonates with claims that credit such densely knit networks with the capacity to facilitate trust on the basis of inherent norms and sanctions (cf. Coleman, 1988). The fact that Vincent and William went to school together serves as a token to evidence belonging to this network and it relies on the institutionalised gatekeeper mechanisms that assure affiliation with a network is kept a privilege to eligible individuals. In this case, the formation of a network was regulated by access to attend Art College for example, which on the one hand requires economic capital and quite possibly cultural capital, as evidence to be seen eligible to become part of that circle.

On a related note, identifying creative professionals who used online social networking platforms as part of their practice, Vincent was introduced to me as a "social media star". This was due to the solid base of followers and fans on Facebook and Twitter he has built up over the past years. Initially, I speculated that his career trajectory would present an 'ideal' case, in which digitally mediated social ties were the primary source of building social capital. Quite ironically though, Vincent, the very person who has been highly commended as the 'go-to' artist when it comes to recognition-building online, was the strongest opponent of digitally mediated social interaction as relevant in the field of cultural production. Consequently, contrary to my initial assumption, Vincent demonstrated that instead of relying on online resources, it was the pre-existing social relations that allowed him to build recognition in the arts sector drawing on personal recommendations.

Elaborating on the minor role online social networking platforms played in the course of his career, Vincent states that in his view digitally mediated social ties represent *"nothing tangible. [...] It's nice kind of, yes, of course, the numbers encourage you, but it's, your relationship with them is like your relationship with a statistical graph"* (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 7). Taking into account the importance, Vincent attributes to "actual" friendships that form a basis of trust, it becomes evident that loose forms of social interaction over Facebook and Twitter seem largely irrelevant in his particular case. If this were where the story ended, I would conclude that in spite of numerous opportunities to engage in social bonding online, the formation of social capital remains virtually unchanged. However, as I

realised later, it seems that digitally mediated social ties are more effective when activated in a context that involves minor levels of risk – which applies to situations where access to resources are granted as a one-off exchange, which renders the duration of the 'trusted' relationship as confined to a limited duration. Making a case for a scenario in which online social networking platforms were effective to establish a relationship to power holders, Lilie's example is one such scenario:

## 4.3 Making a case for social capital formation online – digitally mediated social ties and building trust on Twitter

Acknowledging Vincent's case and the importance of trust as an affordance of social ties, I was compelled to see whether digitally mediated social ties could take on a similar role. My aim in this sequence is to trace the actual capacity of digitally mediated social ties in accessing social capital resources, alleviating constraints implied by social boundaries. Having established that trust serves as a key element in tracing the role of social ties, I use Lilie's example to unpack to what extent digitally mediated social ties are equipped to establish trust. The way in which respondents have conceptualised digitally mediated social ties is insightful as it allows tackling under which conditions digitally mediated social ties build social capital. Fiona and Lilie's statements are instructive in this context, as they provide verbal data that clarifies what digitally mediated social ties are and in what context they become a potential means of establishing trust with others. Assuming that digitally mediated social ties hold the potential to sustain trust, I also trace what role individuals' *use* of online social networking platforms plays to unlock this potential. To illustrate this process of activating digitally mediated social ties, I use Lilie's example to portray online engagement via Twitter as a means to build trust. Characterising this particular social interaction as *liquid ties*, I highlight their capacity to build trust by emulating affordances that are typically associated with strong social ties, while at the same time assuming the function of weak ties. This is achieved by the affordance of digitally mediated social ties to convey social cues that affirm individuals' credibility in light of the requirements of a given situation. At the same time however, I see liquid ties as replacing the role of gatekeepers in their capacity to build a bridging relationship between previously unacquainted individuals – an affordance that is traditionally associated with weak ties.

A photography student at the University of London, also working as a freelance documentary and portrait photographer, Lilie describes the use of online social networking platforms as an indispensable means in her day-to-day practice

> *[...] because there are so many competitions, there are so many news articles that are photography-related or artist-related. If you follow people who are people you are inspired by or even just people you know, curators or work at this gallery then that's how you find out a lot of your information. (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 6)*

In one particular instance, Lilie used Twitter as a stepping-stone to foster interaction with individuals who played an important role insofar as they provided access to insider information. While Vincent took a dismissive stance towards the value of digitally mediated social interaction in building legitimate social bonds, Lilie's case challenges this interpretation: As part of a photography series she produced while participating in a Trainee scheme of the Young Photographer's Alliance (YPA), Lilie found it challenging to acquire insider information from political representatives that were crucial however for the successful completion of the project. Consequently, a critical element for producing this series was to obtain information on the Scottish referendum. Lilie explained that over the course of this project, Twitter played an important role in connecting to these politicians, that is, members of social circles she was previously unacquainted with. *"I was trying to get in touch with politicians, and obviously none of them were going to email me back, I'm a student, they don't want to talk to me"* (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 7). It seems Lilie explained her unsuccessful attempt to establish a connection as a result of her being a student, which suggests the presence of a power imbalance between the two stakeholders due to her potentially inferior status as a student.

Acknowledging the lack of perceived credibility that comes with her student status, Lilie described how this lack of granted trustworthiness disrupted her attempt to gain access, particularly when using more traditional ways of communication (e.g. email): *"... before I was just emailing and saying 'Can I interview you?' And obviously they're like, 'I don't know who you are' [...] I think sometimes they get so many emails it's just not ... for them to look up maybe"* (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 8). Disappointed with these initial attempts, Lilie opted for another approach:

*How could you get in touch with them, for example, on their Twitter [i.e., the Twitter account of the specific politician Lilie was aiming to interview] they'll say what events they are doing, and then you can message them and you can pin down a location they'll be at. And then you can say 'I've seen that you're doing this on this date, can I meet you afterwards?'*
*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 7)*

Ultimately, this strategy proved successful and resulted in Lilie being able to meet face-to-face with the politician, followed by an informal interview which provided her access to the information on the referendum. Keeping things in perspective, one could argue that interpreting this example as a case of social capital formation might seem somewhat contrived. Granted, the fact that Lilie managed to arrange a meeting with the politician may have been sheer coincidence or at least serve as proof of a good disposition, whereby the politician granted access to the information out of courtesy. Nonetheless, I propose a more nuanced look at this scenario. Perhaps the value of online social networking platforms in building social ties is distinct from other means of social interaction as they allow to convey a preliminary sense of trust. Comparing Lilie's example to Vincent's case naturally sets them apart as the extent to which this relation impacts both individuals' social capital access differs widely. Whereas Vincent's case presents a convincing example showcasing traditional social ties affording the transfer of symbolic capital as an expression of social capital, interpreting Lilie's case might best be described as one occasion of access to one particular source on the basis of being considered trustworthy. In other words, Vincent's scenario describes an aim to establish a long-term relationship with key figures in the field, with the purpose of building upon endowed trust to establish himself as a legitimate artist in the field. In contrast, Lilie's relationship with the politician is aimed at a very specific, momentary goal, which renders this relationship as significant only in the context of this one-off, temporary exchange of a particular resource.

Nonetheless, the significance of social relationships as a means to build trust unites both Vincent's and Lilie's scenario; Vincent affirmed that due to the risk of damaging William's reputation, their long-standing relationship and existing trust helped mitigate this risk. Likewise, Lilie mentioned that the main obstacle she saw in building a relation with the politician was the challenge to establish trust: Lilie's

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initial attempt to contact the politician via email proved unsuccessful, which she attributed to a possible lack of willingness to engage with an unknown person. In addition, Lilie assumed that her lack of credibility implied by her student status might have served as a source of potential mistrust, causing suspicion on the part of the politician: *"I'm a student, they don't want to talk to me [...] they're like you're a student, what's the spin of this? [...] And people are protective of their information so whatever they give they want it to be with someone who's credible I guess, so that's the route they take"* (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 8/9). This ties in with the notion that facilitating access to social capital resources requires the presence of trust. Thereby, Lilie assumed that lacking credibility was the major obstacle to attaining access to the desired information.

Albeit the level of required trust significantly differed between Vincent's and Lilie's case, it is legitimate to argue that in both cases social capital was established on the basis of social relationships and their affordance to build this trust. At the same time, this assumption questions the conceptual validity of social capital: Holding that the existence of mutually recognised, durable relationships is paramount to any form of social capital formation given the capacity to build trust, Lilie's case puts the validity of this claim in perspective. However, at the core of this dilemma lies the assumption that digitally mediated social ties as a transient, fleeting form of social encounter ought not to form trust, given the absence of reiterated social engagement that is typically assumed as the basis of trust. Nonetheless, I argue that circumstances that temporally confine the necessity of trusting another person depict a scenario in which digitally mediated social ties can facilitate access to social capital. On the basis of this assumption, I will frame these as liquid ties by showcasing their capacity to build temporarily contained social interaction that resembles indicators akin to the concept of strong social ties. Furthermore, I trace the quality of produced trust, which these ties facilitate, equally reflecting on their relevance for re-conceptualising social capital.

## 4.4 Conceptualising digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties and its implications on social capital

Starting from the premise that digitally mediated social ties are capable of building trust, I will trace under which conditions they assume this capacity. Using Lilie's example, I hold that Twitter's affordance to carve an image of credibility

serves as evidence for its capacity to build trust. I argue that this is primarily achieved by utilising Twitter's properties to convey information regarding professional credentials and affiliation with other stakeholders, thus signalling credibility. Typically, the disclosure of such personal information is accomplished as an affordance of strong social ties, almost as a natural by-product of continuous, reiterated moments of social engagement. In the case of digitally mediated social ties, using platform features to actively cast a particular image of oneself, I argue, produces results that can be compared to similar affordances of offline social processes. Thereby, Lilie's social engagement online served exactly this purpose: carving an image of credibility by conveying trustworthiness around indicators of professionalism. Bearing in mind that in this instance we are talking about a situation of building credibility in view of achieving a specific purpose, that is, the one-off exchange of information, I hold that the quality of trust that Lilie's online interaction produces is fundamentally different from the sense of trust Vincent was required to achieve to meet his goals.

Assuming that trust operates on a bandwidth from thick trust to thin trust (e.g. Lewis & Weigert, 1985), I assume that digitally mediated social ties produce levels of trust that are somewhere in the middle of this continuum. This is also indicated by my conceptualisation of liquid ties as assuming both strong and weak tie affordances. Weighing in different dimensions conducive to producing trust, such as cognitive and emotional aspects (e.g. Lewicky et al., 1998), I frame the affordance of digitally mediated social interaction as facilitating a form of temporary trust. The temporary nature of this form of trust is implied by the fact that it is granted only in respect to the one-off exchange of resources. Thus, characterising this social engagement as liquid ties addresses this temporary nature of these ties as an effective trust-building source bound to one specific scenario. Thereby, I argue that liquid ties emulate qualities of strong social ties by conveying social cues that instil a preliminary sense of trust. Applied to Lilie's case this means that liquid ties produce credibility, which leads to a momentary situation of trust. This is different from Vincent's case who relies on an overall, encompassing sense of thick trust, which is required, because of the long term projection of his desired goal. Another aspect addressed the ephemerality of liquid ties as a facilitator of trust, which is expressed by the fluctuation in their effectivity to sustain trust throughout an extended time period. The notion of liquidity addressed this phenomenon as a central quality of digitally mediated social ties.

One aspect that I would like to address relates to digitally mediated social ties and the symmetry/asymmetry of online relationships. In Lilie's case the connection she formed with the politician can be referred to as an asymmetric relationship, given that the relationship was initiated from an individual who did not previously know the other person. The digital realm offers numerous opportunities to connect with others who we do not share any previous unacquainted with. Asymmetric relationships in the context of social networks have been discussed in relation with questions of status (e.g. Bonacich & Lloyd, 2001). This may equally apply to this scenario, where indeed the politician occupies a role of elevated status in the given network relation. Nonetheless, I was less interested in delving deeper into issues of status or fame, but rather to what extent properties of online social networking platforms allow individuals to turn these relation into symmetric relations, thereby managing social distance induced by another person's structural position in the network. In what follows, I illustrate how I have characterised digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties, drawing on the network maps and material from the interviews.

## 4.5 Uncovering the nature of digitally mediated social ties – Interpreting network visualisations

I have introduced the notion of *liquid ties* on the basis of conceptualising digitally mediated social ties as a means to build trust as an affordance of credibility. So far I have focussed on the concept of liquid ties on a theoretical level. In what follows, I demonstrate how the network maps combined with the material from the interviews prompted me to conceptualise digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties. Two aspects were striking in respondents' interpretation of digitally mediated social ties: On one hand this concerned their appreciation of digitally mediated social interaction assuming the potential of connectedness to a 'crowd' of individuals who are per se anonymous. I shall argue that this challenges both existing concepts of social ties as well as existing methodological approaches to social network analysis. On the other hand, my methodological approach highlighted the value of drawings in eliciting narrative data that helped define the nature of these ties, once activated. Thereby, respondents' focussed on recalling occasions in which digitally mediated social ties unlocked access to social capital resources. The way in which respondents

framed these occasions led me to conceptualise these ties alongside the notion of liquidity.

Prompting respondents to draw a representation of their networks triggered a visual expression of their interpretation of digitally mediated social ties. This resulted in a detailed narrative that uncovered the nature of these ties, specifying in which situations they played a role alongside their motivation to establish these ties. Two of the respondents – Lilie and Fiona – provided the richest insight into digitally mediated social ties drawing on their experience using online social networking platforms as part of their creative practice. Even though, all respondents spoke about digitally mediated social ties when referring to their social engagement, Lilie's and Fiona's visual representation of these ties provided the richest data. Both of them found especially creative ways to bring their perception of digitally mediated social ties onto paper. Precisely, it seemed that symbols such as 'bubbles', gave way to an understanding of a form of sociality that challenges existing typologies of social ties. Contrary to the traditional understanding of social ties, digitally mediated social relationships manifested in the absence of the conscious presence of a particular actor. The 'bubble' served as a placeholder to indicate the potentiality of technically existing social relations with others, which concretises only alongside particular situations. Drawing these bubbles prompted respondents to remember particular instances, for example the preparation of an art related event, such as exhibitions, which served as a framework to specify social contacts that proved significant in that context.

Referring to digitally mediated social ties as a potential form of social interaction resonates with the concept of latent ties – a theoretical approach to various strands of social connections fostered online. By definition, latent ties are social ties that are "technically possible […] but have yet to be activated" (Pearson, 2009). It is assumed that technology like online social networking platforms lend themselves to create opportunities to socialise with a per se unspecified number of individuals. Even though technically possible, not everyone capitalises on these opportunities to establish an actual connection or, better yet, not everyone has the means to do so. This highlights the importance of uncovering individual strategies users apply in activating these ties. As of yet, existing research on latent ties (e.g. Genoni, 2005; Haythornthwaite, 2002) offers a primarily theoretical account of those ties, whereby activation strategies are flagged up but lack concrete empirical evidence. I give examples of how digitally mediated social ties are being perceived,

paired with activation strategies that uncover how potential ties manifest in observable social interaction.

## 4.6 Leveraging visual cues in network maps to trace the meaning of digitally mediated social ties

As discussed in Chapter 3, respondents struggled to talk about their specific perception of digitally mediated social ties within a traditional social network analysis framework. This was due to the fact that traditional methods of network analysis prompted respondents to specify their relations based on the naming of particular actors. Since respondents in the case of digitally mediated social ties could not anchor their recollection of social relationships in accordance with that logic, they struggled to verbalise their experience of social engagement online. I thus decided to use an alternative method, based on hand-drawn network maps. Working with this approach alleviated methodological constraints and unlocked respondents' ability to articulate their understanding of digitally mediated social relations alongside a number of experiences that expressed what role they played in their day-to-day work practice as creative professionals. Characterising digitally mediated social ties in light of the information respondents provided facilitated a conceptual understanding of social ties that is informed by existing definitions, yet draws the attention to their volatile nature.

Starting with Fiona's network drawing, she highlighted two platforms – Facebook and Twitter – as the main platforms she used as part of her creative practice. She described herself as an avid user of online social networking platforms, whereby her main aim was to gain visibility for her work as a photographer and to stay in touch with other creative professionals. Her network map (Figure 7) depicts the framework of social contacts she evaluated as important in her work as a photographer. Fiona used a specific art project she was working on at the time of the interview as a reference frame.
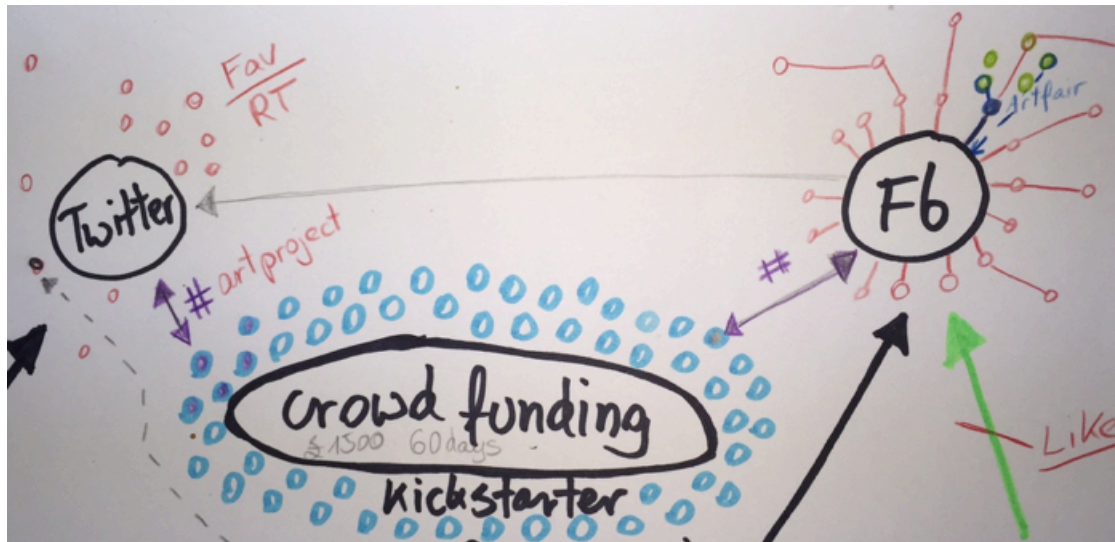
**Figure 14: Hand-drawn network Map Fiona – online social networking platforms section**

She drew ellipses/circles to indicate her activity on each of the mentioned platforms: a larger ellipse represented Kickstarter, a popular crowd funding platform, which Fiona used to source funding for an arts project; two smaller circles represented Facebook and Twitter. Around each of these three circles, Fiona added various smaller circles or 'dots', as she called them, to visually refer to various individuals that she connected to via these platforms. To be specific, when speaking of "being connected" Fiona refers to individuals who are either part of her "friends" on Facebook or who have followed her profile on Twitter, whereby at this stage the actual interaction with particular friends or followers remained unspecified.

The different shapes and colours of dots show that Fiona's perception of the meaning of these connections varies according to the type of platform. For example, the circle representing Twitter depicts randomly allocated dots around the circle, with the dots being detached from the circle. This demonstrates that Fiona thought of her followers on Twitter as random individuals that lack a sense of manifest connection.

> [...] because Twitter ... Twitter is an open world. Anyone interested in anything [...] can get the information. [...] it's just random it is not any order, it can happen you know ... I'm posting on Twitter and within that time people around the world are looking for something. [...] they will see my tweet, they will read it, look at the link, if they like what they see, they can favourite it, they can re-tweet it or they follow me, but this is very random ... you never know who, you never know how ..."
>
> (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 2/3)

Contrary to this notion, the dots surrounding the Facebook circle follow a different principle: these dots appear more structured and are connected to the circle, indicating a more manifest, closer connection.

> *[...] so on Facebook ... your public is connected to you and there is very little likelihood that somebody from outside, if they don't know you, if they don't have any of your contacts ... that they will like you. [...] Facebook works like that, so you can have somebody random here, but that random person is never random, it is more or less always somehow connected to you or let's say your friends ... it is working like that.*
> *(Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 3/4)*

Some of the dots that are at a further distance are connected to the circle via some of the closer dots, which refer to individuals that she befriended on Facebook following a face-to-face encounter

> *[...] let's say ... you meet somebody at the art fair [indicated by blue circle around Facebook circle] ... you meet that person and I am putting that person very close, because s/he will become your 'like' ... so they are connected to you, but that person has friends ... so what happens is that somebody close to that person sees 'Oh this person added a friend', ok so let's see what's gonna happen and you have other people who are starting to look at your profile.*
> *(Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 4/5)*

The unifying characteristic that applies to all of the dots irrespective of their specific quality is that at this level they remain unspecified. This means that even though I asked her to name all individuals who she considered important in terms of her creative practice, the dots that represent these individuals remained anonymous. One preliminary conclusion I drew is that these connections largely resemble latent tie characteristics. The dots representing followers on Twitter and friends on Facebook are *technically* there, however in absence of any concrete recollection of actual relational investment, these ties remain a potential source of social connection. While in theory Fiona could imagine scenarios in which these social ties would be activated, her statements assert that in practice these ties remain

devoid of actual relational meaning. Willson (2006) echoes this perception in her take on digitally mediated social interaction as a fragmented form of sociality, which "potentially disconnects or abstracts the individual from physical action and a sense of social and personal responsibility to others offline." (p. 63) I argue, that this lack of *action* on Fiona's part explains why digitally mediated social ties remain without specific meaning in this instance. In other words, Fiona lacked a means to capitalize on the potentiality of these connections, which renders them vague and anonymous. Thereby, I conclude that Fiona's network map serves as a good example to illustrate a conceptual understanding of *latent ties*. So how do latent ties evolve into liquid ties?

Lilie's interpretation of digitally mediated social ties contrasts Fiona's understanding of technology, by giving examples of activating digitally mediated social ties. Albeit using a similar terminology, Lilie's drawings represent a number of actual events, which showcase how she activates technically possible social ties. While Fiona chose to approach the drawing focussing on a specific art project, Lilie drew her personal network as a representation depicting the social contacts that were important in her overall day-to-day practice as a student and practicing photographer (Figure 15).
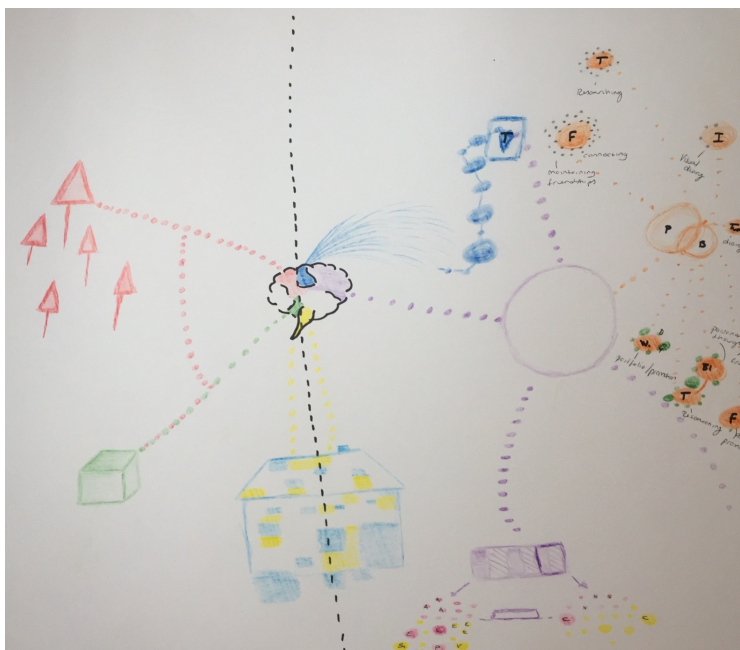


**Figure 15: Hand-drawn network map – Lilie**

Initially, Lilie's interpretation of digitally mediated social ties resonates with Fiona's take on online ties as a random allocation of loose contacts. This asserts

how their understanding of digitally mediated social interaction stands in contrast to the existing logic that portrays social relationships as contingent on the subjective awareness of a related actor. In practice this means that an individual's awareness of an existing social relationship follows the appreciation of a concrete actor. In methodological terms, the existence of a concrete individual, or more precisely the subjective awareness of it, was what anchored research on social relationships. This is mirrored in the strategic approach that social network analysis typically takes in eliciting data on social connectedness. For example, the name generator (e.g. Kadushin, 2004; Burt, 1984) draws on the individual as a concrete entity usually labelled as 'node' to draw inferences on the relationship to this concrete actor in a sequential step of analysis. Similarly, the position generator (e.g. Lin, 2008) draws on the individual and their attributed status in society to trace relationships that provide access to resources associated with individuals in particularly relevant positions.

In the case of eliciting data on digitally mediated social ties, a reversed logic seems to apply, whereby the recollection of concrete individual actors is of minor importance. Rather, it seemed that Lilie focussed on particular events she associated with their use of online social networking platforms. In particular, the recollection of specific circumstances in a specific context enabled her to elaborate on digitally mediated social relations. This is not to say, that the individual per se is irrelevant in terms of tracing social relations in this context; rather it seems that only when embedded in the recollection of a specific scenario concrete individuals were identified. Therefore, it is plausible that the dots in the drawings served merely as a reference point that helped respondents focus their attention on interaction in relation to a specific event and in that way convey a more tangible perception of those relations.
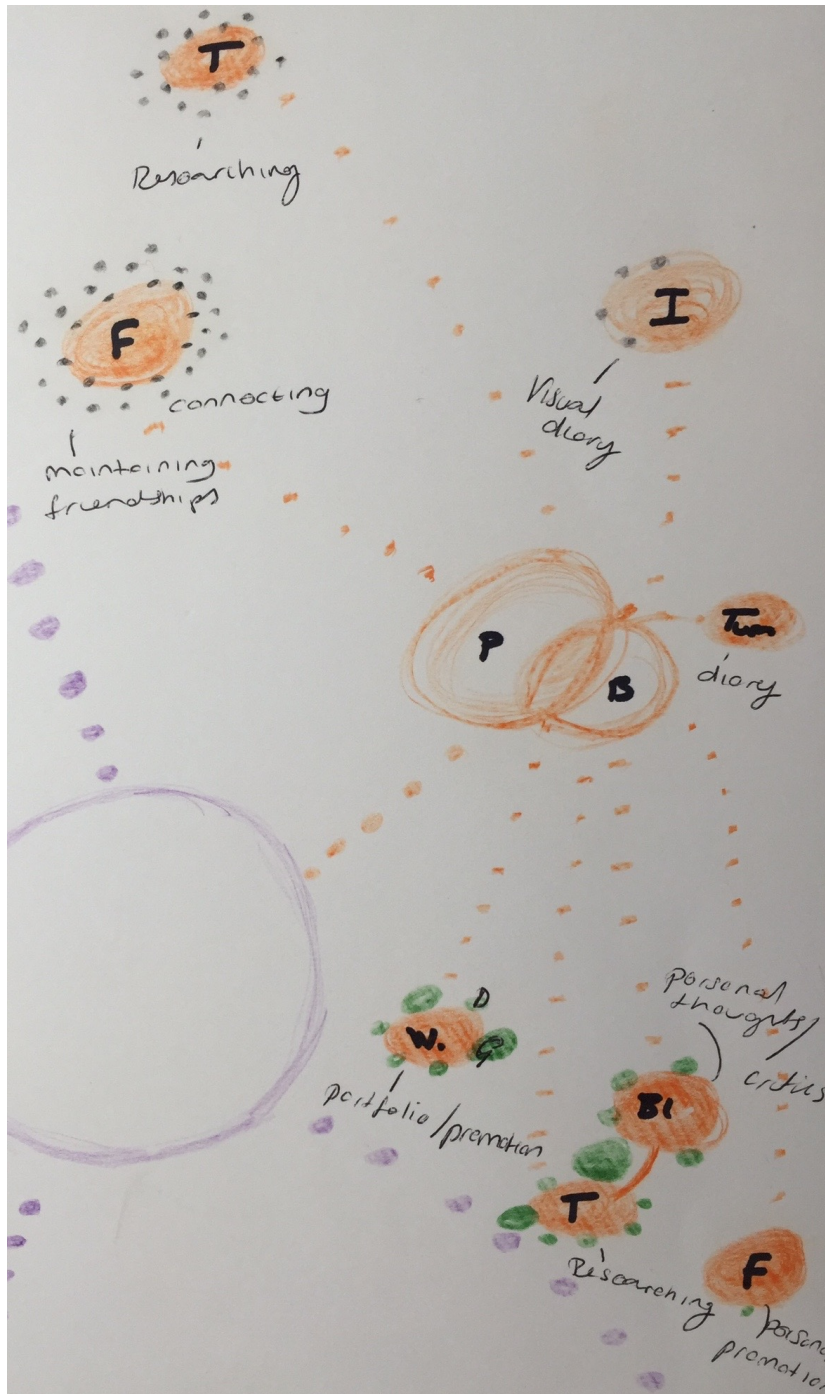
**Figure 16: Hand-drawn network map Lilie – online social networking platforms section**

One section in Lilie's network drawing specifies her interactions online (Figure 16). In the drawing, she started out by dividing her use of platforms according to two aspects: her private use of these platforms (orange circle in the drawing labelled 'P' for private) and use for business purposes (second orange circle labelled 'B' for business). Interestingly, Lilie drew the two circles overlapping each other, which possibly indicates that the two realms are divided in terms of Lilie's appreciation, while in practice they seem to overlap. From these two initial circles, Lilie included a

number of smaller circles, branching off from the two bigger ones. These include various smaller circles for Facebook (labelled 'F'), Twitter (labelled 'T'), Instagram (labelled 'I'), Tumblr (labelled 'Tum') and another circle, which represented her blogging activity (labelled 'Bl'). In general, I noticed that Lilie anchored digitally mediated social interactions around specific moments of interaction:

> *I think about interactions, but I don't really think of names. [...] I think of the experience that happened with them [...]. For example, the green ones* [see green dots in Figure 3b lower right quadrant] *are all the professional ones, the big green one is where I got a commission to work with a charity from Twitter, they found my work and then contacted me through there.*
> (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 26)

Thereby, the activation of digitally mediated social ties is contingent on the presence of a concrete interaction for it to become tangible and manifest.

This concrete example of social interaction on the basis of online engagement marks a striking difference between Fiona's and Lilie's interpretation of digitally mediated social ties. Albeit both drawings show similarities in their visual language, Lilie's narrative highlights actual interactions that followed from identifying opportunities online. This illustrates that in Lilie's case, ties have become activated, for example during face-to-face conversations that followed from interaction online or as a means to transfer online exchange into collaboration on an art project. Consequently, I interpret online engagement as a means to kick-start subsequent face-to-face interaction. Tracing the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in accessing social capital resources, this observation implies that however fleeting these social ties are in theory, it is these concrete moments in the creative practice of respondents that activate social ties.

## 4.7 The liquidity of digitally mediated social ties – framing the nature of social ties around context and degree of trust

Conceptualising these activated ties as liquid ties, I return to Lilie's interaction with the politician on Twitter. Primarily, I have chosen the notion of liquidity as it resonates with their ephemeral capacity to create trust. The term *liquid tie* is different from *latent tie*, as it explains when and why these ties are

activated. This points to the transitory effectiveness of latent ties, as they are activated in one situation and relapse to an inactivated, dormant state as part of the "anonymous crowd of faceless individuals" (Fiona) later on. This resonates with Bauman's notion of liquid modernity, which holds that globalisation and technisation have created a disintegrated, ruptured form of sociality, which is reflected in the nature of digitally mediated social relationships:

> *Perhaps this is why, rather than report their experience and prospects in terms of 'relating' and 'relationships', people speak ever more often (aided and abetted by the learned advisers) of connections, of 'connecting' and 'being connected'.* (Bauman, 2003, p. xii)

Both, Vincent's and Lilie's examples demonstrate the capacity of social ties to create trust, whereby the role of social ties mainly differs in the respective degree to which they build trust. I argue that the respective levels of risk or uncertainty at stake in both cases are a pivot point to clarify the effectiveness of strong ties vs. liquid ties: Whereas, Vincent describes a scenario in which he aims to establish a long-term work relationship, which explains the necessity of strong trust, Lilie's case is bound to a one-off exchange of information, which significantly lowers risk and thus requires lower levels of trust. Whereas I hold that in both cases accessing social capital resources requires trust, the degree of trust is shaped by temporality and implied risk.

Lilie's use of Twitter to establish a connection with a politician serves as a good example for a liquid tie. Tracing the way in which Lilie utilised this connection is useful to conceptualise liquid ties alongside strong tie and weak tie characteristics: On one hand, this liquid tie emulates strong tie affordances, because of its affordance to achieve credibility by conveying plenty of social cues. Lilie strategically provides these cues so as to carve an image of professionalism to establish credibility. I argue that traditionally, this capacity is more closely associated with social engagement in offline settings. On the other hand, liquid ties take on weak tie affordances by acting as a bridge between two previously unacquainted actors, thereby replacing the role of gatekeepers. Note that I have chosen to use the term 'connection' here, which indicates that liquid ties resonate with a weaker form of social engagement.

So do liquid ties emulate strong and weak tie components? In reference to the provision of social cues, Lilie mentioned that the creation of an "online persona" was important. Precisely, this notion holds that establishing a connection via Twitter bears the capacity to deliver information on the basis of particular cues.

> *[...] it gives you a face ... so maybe it's more personal. [...] So, in a way, the use of Twitter [...] it's not just like a computer emailing you and you can just ignore it and throw it away. It's, kind of, like, that's a person who has just contacted you. So I feel like although it doesn't always work, it's maybe harder to ignore than an email and they can go and check what information they are interested in.*
> *(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 2/3)*

In my interpretation, Lilie's experience highlights that Twitter instantly conveys an image of a person, whereby the information that this *online persona* holds may or may not serve the purpose of substantiating one's credibility. Referring to liquid ties' capacity to build trust, I argue that its main affordance is to enable individuals to establish credibility. Twitter enables users to provide information about the knowledge they hold up front. This ties in with Lilie's concern to come across as a "knowledgeable" person and as someone who made the impression to be on top of things.

> *I think that they must think that you know more than you do, so therefore that's why they give you an interview. [...] Even doing your research, it just makes them feel that you are more credible because you have done more research.*
> *(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 9)*

According to Lilie's statement it is this notion of having done "your research", which allowed the politician to form a preliminary judgement regarding her credibility. Lilie took two important steps to strengthen her image of being knowledgeable: On one hand, she decided to follow the politician and her activities on Twitter alongside other relevant Twitter accounts dealing with UK politics. This way, she showed that she knew about the politicians' work, expressed by correctly identifying her as the person to talk to. On the other hand, the presence of a

number of visual cues, such as her profile picture on Twitter served as an additional incentive. *"I guess, your photo [on Twitter] is maybe quite important. Because if it's something that maybe isn't so professional, [...] I might not have believed it with your account"*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 6)

So how is being knowledgeable relevant in building trust? Traditionally, trust is conceptualised as a means to reduce complexity in social situations, whereby often the emphasis lies on building a relationship with trusted individuals in order to anticipate their future actions, with the potential to rely on reciprocating actions (e.g. Kramer, 2006; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This is particularly relevant in work relationships where collaboration among a group of involved individuals is often bound to trustworthy behaviour (e.g. Chua et al., 2012). Furthermore, the theory on trust holds that often giving others "the benefit of the doubt" serves as an incentive to facilitate collaboration. In a social environment of complex information and multiplex social interactions granting others this benefit of the doubt is useful as "in the absence of personalized knowledge about others, or adequate grounds for conferring trust on them presumptively" (Chua et al., 2012, p. 582) it provides a rule of thumb to permit cooperation. Thereby, trust on the basis of good will decision-making is described as a social decision heuristic applied to other individuals "[...] when 'noise' or uncertainty regarding their trustworthiness is present" (Kramer, 1999, p. 583).

One aspect that deserved clarification here is to what extent the notions of trust and credibility are related. In Chapter 2 (Section 2.8, p. 60 ff.), I claimed that trust is vital in order to reduce perceived levels of uncertainty and risk in transactions between two or more individuals. The ability to establish trust is seen in close context with the quality of the social relations that those involved in the transaction maintain, whereby strong social ties are often seen as more effective in facilitating trust (e.g. Krackhardt et al., 2003; Lorenzen, 2001; Baron, 2000). While respondents often switched back between notions of trust and credibility when reflecting on their perception of affordances of digitally mediated social ties, there is an obvious difference between those terms. Effectively, credibility is best approached as a sub-category of trust and can be defined as "a feature attributed to individuals, institutions or their communicative products (written or oral texts, audio-visual presentations) by somebody (recipients) with regards to something (an event, matters of fact, etc.)" (Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2008, p. 49). Elsewhere,

Herbig & Milewicz (1995) hold that credibility is the "believability of an [individuals'] intentions at a particular moment in time" (p. 7).

This asserts that for an individual to be perceived as credible it requires the evaluation of their communicative acts by its receiver. In the realm of digitally mediated social interaction, the assessment of one's credibility is thus an evaluation of the believability of an individuals' communicative acts online. Does an individuals' post on Twitter accord with the persona they have established? Does what this person is saying resonate with their overall claims? It is then plausible to argue that trust is linked to credibility insofar as credibility is perceived as a necessary antecedent to building trust. Only when a receiver is convinced of the believability of an individuals' actions – online or offline – will they be motivated to bestow trust upon this individual.

This brings us to the relevance of risk in trust-based relationships, which will help explain why being knowledgeable was important in Lilie's case: Thereby, two factors ascertain the presence of uncertainty in this scenario: On one hand, there is the factor of Lilie's lack of trustworthiness due to her status as a young student, which poses uncertainty in terms of her professional credibility. On the other hand, Lilie's contact, the politician, anticipated the risk of providing a potentially untrustworthy person with sensitive information, which Lilie illustrates by saying that *"people are protective of their information, whatever they give they want it to be with someone who's credible"* (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 9). This situation leads to a power imbalance attributed to factors of questionable trustworthiness (in Lilie's case) and potential repercussions of making a wrong decision (in the politician's case). Facilitating trust between those two parties serves as a lubricant that neutralises uncertainty on both sides.

I argue that connecting with the politician on Twitter was an important step to reassure the politician of Lilie's credibility, while at the same time counterbalancing the perception of implied risk for the politician. So how can this process of neutralising implied risk be conceptualised alongside existing notions of trust? As mentioned before, the politician's decision to grant Lilie access to her information could have potentially been based on a pure decision of good will – relativising the risk of providing an unknown person with sensitive information by assuming that in general people are trustworthy. One argument that challenges the efficacy of good will in this context is that establishing a connection via email did not prove efficient. This implies that contacting someone by email denies individuals

the opportunity to infer credibility on the basis of 'being knowledgeable', potentially because of the lack of concrete information that allows individuals to form a coherent judgement regarding their credibility. But what do I mean by *concrete* information? The literature suggests that trust is built alongside cognitive, affective and behavioural information or content (e.g. Lewis & Weigert, 1989). Cognitive-based trust for example is based on evidence that provides "good reasons" (p. 970) for choosing to trust someone and is often formed on the basis of "cognitive familiarity with the object of trust" (Lewis & Weigert, 1989, p. 970). In addition to that, affective trust is formed on an emotional base; it is an inference that we draw based on our general sense of *liking* somebody, which is most effectively achieved by forming strong emotional bonds.

I argue that in spite of lacking a strong tie relationship to the politician, Lilie managed to establish cognitive-based trust by assuring the politician that she was knowledgeable. This is evidenced by Lilie's concern to know about the referendum and the general line of work the politician was operating at. Returning to the claim that levels of trust operate on a spectrum, this situation-specific level of trust resonates with the concept of "thin trust" (e.g. Lewis, 1999), whereby thin trust is conceptualised as the initial step to building firmer levels of trust. Trenholm & Jensen (2000) hold that this first stage of initiating trust in interpersonal relationships is built around "perceptions of similarity" which create attraction. I argue that in Lilie's case, Twitter and the online persona she created resembled this first stage of inferred similarity based on a demonstrated overlap in interests and resulting credibility. This further resonates with the importance of social ties as a means to judge individuals according to characteristics "such as familiarity, gender, emotion or temperament" (Cheng et al., 2001) as conducive to facilitating trust. Whereby these social cues are most effectively exchanged in face-to-face settings, Lilie emulates this process by portraying herself in a "professional manner" on Twitter. Interestingly, it seems that a connection via Twitter enables a person to obtain information about the person that is traditionally an affordance of exclusively strong tie settings. For example, the possibility to match a profile photo and the crowd of followers one person exhibits via their 'online persona' may be one way of inferring information about that person and match it with one's own 'professionality' standards for example. Interestingly, this act is often described as a common stage of creating intimate, trusting relationships by way of relying on "perceptions of similarity" that may "provide an initial attraction" (Radin, 2006, p. 594).

Although the level of trust Lilie managed to build is relatively weak, it proved efficient in this specific scenario. Why is that the case? Relating this scenario to Vincent's case, shows that in both cases they relied on social contacts to achieve their respective goals. Additionally, the main resemblance is that Vincent, just like Lilie, needed to find a way to increase trustworthiness. While Vincent relied on his friend William to prove his eligibility as a talented artist worth investing in, Lilie used Twitter to achieve a similar goal. Whereas both cases are similar in terms of the fact that trust was required, the actual quality of trust differs fundamentally. In Lilie's case, the situation presents itself in a different manner: Here, trustworthiness is estimated in view of a very specific, one-off occasion, that is to say, the exchange of information during an interview. Thus, the fact that future interaction seems negligible in this scenario means that the affordance of trust in this instance is limited to one occasion. Unlike in a prolonged collaborative setting, where "information of a personal and sensitive nature" is disclosed to other people "in the hope of eliciting comparable disclosures from them in return" (Kramer, 2006, p. 69), these expected reciprocated returns are absent here. Given the absence of expected returns, trust is established around one specific occasion, whereby Lilie's trustworthiness is assessed only in view of the specific matter at hand instead of a general estimation of her trustworthiness.

Ultimately, it is the affordance of liquid ties to deliver social cues in support of inferring trust on the basis of familiarity that led me conceptualise them alongside strong tie characteristics. Thereby, I argue that the capacity of these ties to convey information on the basis of which others are incentivised to infer familiarity emulate strong tie characteristics with the aim of building trust.

However, liquid ties also assume qualities typically associated with weak ties. As such, I assume that the function of Twitter is best described as delivering elements that helped initiate an offline social encounter. In that regard, connecting online was a preparatory step to establish a subsequent face-to-face meeting. I argue that Twitter plays an important role in setting the scene for this meeting, particularly so, because connecting via Twitter Lilie showed that 'she was in the know' (Lilie) about the specific subject that formed the basis for the interview. The notion of social ties as a facilitator to establish social engagement also resonates with weak tie concepts. Although, relevant literature lacks a firm conceptualisation of weak ties, it holds that weak ties are mostly accurately defined by its 'bridging' function. Thereby, "a weak tie constitutes a 'local bridge' to parts of the social

system that are otherwise disconnected, and therefore a weak tie is likely to provide new information from disparate parts of the system" (Krackhardt, 1986, p. 216).

Liquid ties can equally be conceptualised alongside weak tie characteristics: Liquid ties resonate with weak tie concepts on a formal level, due to a lack of continuous social engagement thereby implying that the connection is limited in its intensity. Nonetheless, the way in which liquid ties facilitate weak tie affordance (i.e., bridging two individual actors) deviates from existing weak tie concepts. Granovetter's (1973) concept of weak ties holds that their existence requires the presence of a "triad", which in social network theory describes a social setting in which three actors are related to one another. Weak ties hold a specific function in connecting triads, whereby it is assumed that one specific actor in this three-actor constellation assumes the function of a gatekeeper, thus facilitating a weak tie formation. "[…] a bridge between A and B provides the only route along which information or influence can flow from any contact of A to any contact of B, and, consequently, from anyone connected *indirectly* to A to anyone connected indirectly to B." (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1364, emphasis in original).

Importantly, this is not to say that Twitter is passive in the sense of simply overtaking the structural position of a human actor. Even though Twitter is clearly not an active human gatekeeper, one of the interesting things that I observed is that respondents seemed to perceive it as this neutral platform. It is clear that Twitter is not a neutral agent and affordances are interpreted by humans, which is not necessarily recognized as such by the respondents (see also Section 5.4, p. 185 ff. for example). This is because Twitter in itself does not have the power to bestow symbolic capital onto an individual; rather it is the platform's design that delivers the framework conditions for people to take action in that regard.

I argue that Lilie's connection to the politician via Twitter emulates a weak tie scenario. Since Lilie was not socially acquainted with the politician, she needed to build a *bridge* in order to facilitate interaction. Whereas according to social network theory, an additional actor would be required to facilitate this bridging function, in Lilie's case the use of Twitter replaced the function of this additional actor. Thereby, she facilitated a connection using Twitter as a medium to facilitate a bridge between herself and the politician. Rather than relying on a third party, Lilie's action to follow the politician on Twitter and identify an opportunity to meet with her offline is what facilitated social engagement. It is exactly this dynamic that explains why liquid ties differ from weak ties: On a formal level, liquid ties are similar to weak ties, in that

they lack intensity of social engagement. On the other hand, however, they deviate from this concept, because the way in which liquid ties afford weak tie outcomes render the presence of a gatekeeper irrelevant.

In conclusion, I base my concept of liquid ties on the following three conceptual pillars: a) Liquid ties emulate affordances of strong ties because of their capacity to convey social cues that are typically exchanged in offline scenarios. In Lilie's case, these cues aimed at establishing a sense of professionalism, whereby the main affordance was to facilitate credibility. b) Liquid ties equally emulate the affordances of weak ties in their capacity to replace the role of gatekeepers. In Lilie's case, the use of Twitter assumed the role of a gatekeeper, whereby it was her specific use of the platform that facilitated the formation of this tie. c) The final criteria that informed the liquid tie concept addressed its ephemeral quality. By this, I mean that even though liquid ties assume the affordances of strong and weak ties to varying extents, the effectiveness of these affordances is bound to a limited time and confined by the requirements of one specific scenario. Lilie's relationship with the politician resembled these criteria, because the situation of exchanging information on the referendum was effective only in terms of enabling Lilie to finish her work on the project. Presumably, the time of the social engagement with the politician was also only valid in this context, and the relationship was inactivated after this event.

What does this affordance of digitally mediated social ties in creating initial trust say about the nature of these ties? How can they be conceptualised on the basis of their affordance to create this form of trust? Lilie's connection to the politician may superficially reveal itself as a 'weak tie' connection, which is evidenced by the fact that little to no interaction takes place and that there is no narrative that sustains their relationship. However, the affordance of this specific social tie resembles a number of qualities typically associated with stronger forms of social bonds.

The theory holds that building intimacy in interpersonal relationships is the strongest facilitator in building trust, whereby "reciprocal self-disclosure promotes greater intimacy" (Radin, 2006, p. 594). A traditional face-to-face setting typically provides a good platform for self-disclosure assuming that over longer time periods and continuous instances of social interaction, individuals feel less hesitant to disclose information about themselves. Previous research suggests that online environments often promote acts of self-disclosure, because observable acts of

others' self-disclosure motivate individuals to emulate that behaviour (e.g. Radin, 2006).

As a consequence of that, social interaction in a digital environment fosters acts of self-disclosure by way of giving away personal information, which at the same time serves as a means to convey social cues. Strictly speaking, if we interpret Lilie's acts of self-disclosure as a means to foster greater intimacy, I argue that under this specific aspect digitally mediated social ties resemble the affordances of strong ties, albeit to a lesser degree. Conceptualising digitally mediated social ties according to this finding, demonstrates the dilemma that arises when conceptualising these ties on the basis of the existing strong tie/weak tie dichotomy.

This is not to say that online relationships are per se less powerful in fostering relationships that create trust. In fact, online social networking platforms under specific circumstances may be just as powerful as traditional, face-to-face relationships in creating actual impact. Whitty & Buchanan (2012) illustrated that individuals used dating sites and online social networking platforms to create relationships under the pretence of actual romantic interest. These scam profiles and the apparent trust that fraudsters established by conversing with targeted platform users resulted in significance financial loss abusing their trust. This demonstrates that online environments can be as suitable and under certain circumstances even more effective in establishing trust in spite of lacking face-to-face interaction.

Lilie's social interaction on Twitter resembles formal criteria of weak tie relationships, yet affords outcomes that are typically associated with strong ties: This specific form of social interaction is weak, judged by its short-term duration and the absence of continuous social engagement. However, judging by the levels of intimacy that the transmission of social cues on Twitter allows, this interaction mimics the qualities of strong ties. In this case, the social tie meanders between fulfilling the formal criteria of a weak tie but at the same time affording the provision of social cues that are typically facilitated by strong tie relations. At the same time, the relevance of conveyed social cues is estimated only in regard to one specific situation. Therefore, I argue that this tie should be classified as a liquid tie, as it shows that strong tie resemblance is confined to one situation at a given point in time. The liquidity in these social ties characterises this quality due to its short-lived effectivity.

Conceptualising digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties obviously applies to this specific scenario. Whereas this is not to say that digitally mediated social ties operate as liquid ties per se, I have chosen to use the term *liquid* to propose one typology that describes the nature of digitally mediated social ties in this specific scenario. Obviously, in many other situations, digitally mediated social ties can remain latent or evolve into a more regular type of weak tie. What this example shows, however, resonates with claims I have mentioned earlier that address the instability of traditional typologies of social ties. More precisely, it shows that depending on how we frame them, social ties are not always either weak or strong. And perhaps, applying formal criteria to specify the affordance of social ties is not the best approach in this case either.

Also, the phenomenon of social ties deviating from the traditional form of conceptualising them is not entirely new. In fact, Desmond (2012) coined the typology of "disposable ties" in his research on social support networks among the urban poor in North America. Observing how members of high poverty neighbourhoods formed social ties with non-kinship members to meet day-to-day needs, such as shelter and practical life support, takes a similar line as my argumentation for liquid ties. This is based on the observation that among members of this social group, loose and brittle connections are often effective in creating social support, even though this outcome is disproportionate with the actual strength of the relationship. In other words, disposable ties afforded obtaining resources that would normally require kinship relations, that is, strong familial bonds. Drawing on Granovetter's weak tie concept, Desmond distinguished disposable ties from strong/weak ties, illustrating their unique capacity to cater to the "increased demands placed on brand new acquaintances, demands disproportionate to the duration of the relationship" (p. 1328). Thereby, conceptualising social ties alongside Desmond's typology of disposable ties stresses the friction that arises when working with a weak/strong tie analogy, which resonates with similar conceptual concerns I raise in my argument.

## 4.8 Conceptual implications of liquid ties on social capital

I have demonstrated that liquid ties afford access to social capital resources because of their capacity to build trust. This finding implicates the traditional concept of social capital, as it challenges the necessity of strong ties and their

affordance to build thick trust. This is not to say that the latter is outdated; rather, I argue that framework conditions in fields of creative occupation differ. In Vincent's case, for example, framework conditions significantly overlap with Bourdieu's setting, highlighting the significance of long-standing social acquaintances in order to attain social capital and, ultimately, recognition. I have argued that the efficacy of strong ties in such a context is explained by their affordance to create trust and to mitigate substantial perceived uncertainty.

Lilie's case affirms the value of digitally mediated social ties – characterised as liquid ties – to access social capital resources. Whereas these social ties are seen as irrelevant in a Bourdieusian scenario, perhaps the rise of a new social environment in creative practice accounts for the leverage of digitally mediated social interaction. In reference to Wittel's concept of 'network sociality' (2010), McRobbie (2002) makes a case for a creative environment, which sees new creative workers as "highly reliant on informal networking" (p. 519) in the absence of institutional culture and narratives. In this environment, creative professionals act as cultural entrepreneurs that rely on "patterns of self employment and informal work" (p. 520). This means that emerging photographers like Lilie are exposed to an environment where due to the lack of organised labour and existing norms, they are disembedded from a traditional creative work narrative. Instead of following the rules of traditional career pathways, these creative entrepreneurs are almost forced to create their own career pathways, whereby "velocity of transaction, along with fluidity and mobility of individuals" (p. 522) are defining features that individuals are expected to perform to.

So to what extent can Vincent and Lilie's scenarios be compared? I argue that in both cases, social interaction afforded these creative professionals access to exclusive social circles. By exclusive I mean that in both cases constraints regarding access were implied: Vincent faced constraint in being granted access to the field of cultural production due to his status as an emerging artist, lacking recognition. I conclude that his relationship with William was key in alleviating these constraints. William's providing him with information on which gallery owners to contact and how to do this facilitated access to the field. Whereas Vincent said that this relationship was crucial in setting in motion a subsequent process of recognition building, William's role of mentoring remains crucial in terms of accessing power-holding individuals.

In Lilie's case the role of digitally mediated social interaction as part of her overall career remains yet to be seen. Albeit her example shows that digitally mediated social ties can be a means to overcome power imbalances due to a lack of credibility, it does not allow conclusions in terms of the effectiveness of these ties in the overall sense of building recognition. Therefore, these ties rather serve as a means to solve momentarily faced restrictions.

## 4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the implications of digitally mediated social interaction on the concept of social capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which suggests that strong social ties are a prerequisite to accessing social capital resources, I challenge this assumption based on the affordance of digitally mediated social ties. The conceptual friction that arose stems from a tension that is implied by the ephemeral, transitory nature of digitally mediated social ties: Whereas technically these ties ought not to afford accessing social capital, recent literature often portrays digitally mediated social interaction as a means to enhance access, specifically by alleviating constraints implied by social and geographical boundaries.

I have argued that tracing the role of trust in social interaction is key in understanding the actual role social ties play in facilitating access to exclusive resources. In that regard, I focussed on data from the network maps alongside narrative accounts of Vincent – a fine artist – and Lilie – a photography student. Vincent's scenario affirmed the relevance of strong social ties as a means to tap into social capital resources. This was illustrated by his established relationship with a successful artist who acted as a mentor throughout the early stages of his career, by providing him with insider information thus alleviating access to gallery owners and other established artists. The role of trust was key in Vincent's scenario, as all involved stakeholders faced risk and uncertainty. According to Vincent, the factors that implied risk were, on the one hand, associated with his friend facing the risk of jeopardising his reputation by recommending the work of a novel artist whose future potential was unknown. On the other hand, the gallery owners were also risking their reputation by providing Vincent with an opportunity to showcase his work at such an early stage in his career. Thereby, the presence of trust as an affordance of strong ties supported this dynamic: Vincent was able to access social capital resources in the form of insider information, which eventually enabled him to build his own recognition.

In contrast, Lilie relied on digitally mediated social ties to access social capital. Like Vincent, she too desired to build social interaction with an individual in a powerful social position – a politician – with the aim to obtain potentially sensitive insider information. Contacting this person on Twitter eventually enabled her to arrange an offline, face-to-face meeting, which led to an interview, during which Lilie obtained the desired information. This challenges the existing notion of social capital as this scenario implies that the transient, loose form of social interaction as a result of digitally mediated social interaction may eventually lead to similar outcomes. However, I have also argued that this is only true to some extent, reiterating the relevance of trust in contextualising both scenarios: Whereas Lilie was keen to establish an image of credibility via Twitter in order to facilitate trustworthiness, the value of trust in this instance is different from Vincent's case. Two factors illustrate the varying degrees to which trust plays a role in both scenarios. On one hand, Vincent's case exhibited a stronger presence of uncertainty, as significant monetary means and the loss of established reputation were at stake. On the other hand, Vincent's scenario also shows a social dynamic in which temporality played an important role, whereby trust was key, due to his aim of building a long-term collaboration among involved stakeholders, with the object of being granted recognition in the field of cultural and creative production.

In contrast, Lilie's case is best described as a one-off exchange of resources, whereby assuring her credibility was key to facilitate access to this resource. At the same time the implied risk in this instance is marginal, given the absence of any serious future implications for either one of the involved actors. However, I have also argued that while access to the required information may have been an act of pure good will, Lilie's strong emphasis on the relevance of conveying credibility challenges this assumption. Thereby I assume that achieving this credibility via the use of Twitter was key in this scenario of social capital formation, as it facilitated a preliminary sense of trust that mitigated the implied risk for a limited duration.

Tracing the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in the context of social capital formation also revealed an existing conceptual friction in terms of characterising social ties. In the literature, social ties are categorised as either strong ties or weak ties. I hold that this dichotomy is insufficient in addressing the complexities on social tie characteristics, both in terms of its formal specification as well as in view of social tie affordances. I conceptualised digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties which enabled me to go beyond existing definitions. Thereby, I

characterised liquid ties as emulating both strong tie and weak tie affordances, bearing in mind that the efficiency of liquid ties to access social capital resources for example is limited in duration. The term *liquid ties* addresses this specific quality as it resonates with their momentary importance, implying that if circumstances change, this type of social tie will return to its inactive status. This finding also marks a distinction between liquid ties and latent ties, a concept, which has assumed currency in reference to conceptualising digitally mediated social ties. While the latter can be latent ties, this concept lacks an understanding of how these ties are being activated and what their actual capacity is. Thus, I argue that approaching digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties in this particular instance offers a richer, empirically substantiated concept. However, drawing on Desmond's (2012) notion of *disposable ties,* I acknowledge that the conceptual novelty of liquid ties must be been seen in context with earlier attempts to address the existing friction of conceptualising social ties on the basis of the strong tie/weak tie dichotomy.

So do the conceptual implications of liquid ties legitimise a reconceptualisation of social capital? Answering this question requires a nuanced approach. Overall, I hold that the relevance of social capital in the field of cultural production as described by Vincent remains relatively stable. Empirical evidence has shown that in such settings trust is key, because of the various forms of uncertainty that are at stake. Uncertainties regarding future expected returns, namely, anticipating the success of an artist, imply a major sense of risk faced by several types of stakeholders. Thereby, I conclude that the relevance of strong ties remains most significant as a means to respond to these uncertainties and mitigate implied risk factors. This means that Vincent's case asserts the Bourdieusian notion of social capital by emphasising the value of a durable network of mutually recognised social relationships. However, this only holds true when social capital resources are anticipated to result in symbolic capital, that is to say, the goal of becoming a recognised player in the field of cultural production.

Lilie's case, however, serves as a compelling example in which the activation of latent ties results in accruing similar social capital resources. Thereby, I hold that liquid ties do challenge the stringent need for strong ties in order to access social capital. However, the efficiency of liquid ties is limited by their momentary capacity to create trust. It follows that liquid ties facilitate access to exclusive resources (i.e., insider information) only in reference to a clearly defined objective, which is

temporally and situationally confined. In addition, liquid ties bear the capacity to circumvent social barriers – a notion that is at the core of Bourdieu's social capital theory. Departing from the assumption that social class affiliation is one key factor that shapes access to social capital, the affordance of online social networking platforms in establishing liquid ties with individuals of these prestigious social circles must be acknowledged. Liquid ties enable individuals to bypass gatekeepers, by actively seeking to establish ties with power holders for example. Whereas traditionally, this capacity has been associated with weak ties, the strength of digitally mediated social interaction lies in providing individuals with the means to establish social interaction in absence of previous offline social engagement.

I conclude that it is the affordance of liquid ties to create a momentary sense of trust that justifies its capacity to attain social capital. This way of attaining social capital is characterised by liquid ties' affordance to convey particular social cues that aid a person's ability to convey a positive image in view of their professionalism. In addition, liquid ties' capacity to take greater agency in connecting with previously unacquainted individuals resembles weak tie characteristics, thus omitting the need to connect with gatekeepers. I conclude that the resources Lilie attained via building social capital online hardly sustain an accumulation of symbolic capital, because they serve a purely functional purpose, which do not add to her being recognised (i.e. authenticated) by decision makers.

In Chapter 5, I take a closer look at the process of building trust by using online social networking platforms. I will build on Lilie's example of using Twitter to establish trust, tracing the significance of Twitter's properties, identifying how they lend themselves to conveying social cues and creating social proximity. Juxtaposing Lilie's use of Twitter with Fiona's, I uncover how their motivation and appreciation of social norms online influences their abilities to create meaningful connections. This will deliver important clues to answer how this type of social capital is attained, drawing on affordances of online social networking platforms. In addition, I create a link between digital practices (i.e. skills and habits) and cultural capital.

# Chapter 5: Twitter's affordance of building trust – On the individual's 'effectivities' in activating the potential of digitally mediated social ties

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I delve deeper into the notion of liquid ties (introduced in Chapter 4) and look at the capacity of these ties to establish trust between two individual actors. I have portrayed the relevance of trust in Chapter 2 (Section 2.8, p. 60 ff.), where I explained that facilitating trust is crucial in sustaining access to resources and facilitate authentication, particularly in areas of cultural practice, where perceived risk is significant. I then look at the affordances of online social networking platforms, focussing on Twitter, tracing how respondents' identify and interpret platform immanent properties. Building on respondents' perception of properties, I contextualise this with respondents' motivations to make use of online social networking platforms, referring to their 'effectivities' (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.7, p. 56 ff.).

In the previous chapter, I established that digitally mediated social ties can function as a measure to convey significant levels of trust. In particular, I have highlighted that using Twitter was perceived as essential by Lilie in connecting with a power holder in order to access information that may have been difficult to attain otherwise. Primarily, I concluded that Lilie appreciated using Twitter for its relative ease to approach targeted individuals, whereby the amount of social cues that are being conveyed seemed beneficial in order to establish the required level of trust. Incidentally, Lilie highlighted Twitter as her medium of choice, because it helped manage the disadvantages of other media in terms of establishing connections. For example, Lilie stated that using email in this case did not prove successful, because she thought that sending an email did not provide a platform to engage the other person sufficiently.

> *I would just email them and say 'I've seen that you're doing this event, is it possible to arrange an interview with you straight afterwards?' [...] Even though you said what it is, I think sometimes they get so many emails [...] And obviously they're like, 'I don't know who you are, you're a student, what's the spin of this?'*

(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 8)

Ultimately, I conclude that the crucial factor that explains why Lilie's attempt to establish a connection via email remained unsuccessful resulted from the fact that insufficient information regarding Lilie's eligibility to be entrusted with sensitive information was being communicated. In part, this is explained by the fact that email as a medium of communication is often described as a lean information medium in contrast to rich media (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1986). Specifically, this means that email, unlike face-to-face communication, "is driven mainly by situational determinants (i.e., distance, expediency, structure, role expectations, or time pressures), often by content reasons (i.e., simple and routine messages) and rarely by symbolic reasons, indicating in this way that email, unlike face-to-face communication, does not have the ability to signal meaning beyond the explicit message that it carries." (Panteli, 2002, p. 76). However, relative information richness does not fully explain why connecting via Twitter resulted in a more favourable outcome. After all, online social networking platforms like Twitter have often been described as being limited in their capacity to convey information, such as distinctive social cues that are used to form an impression of a person (e.g. Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

If we assume that, by definition, the use of online social networking platforms is limited in its capacity to convey social cues, the challenge ahead lies in identifying how individuals' use of platforms like Twitter can establish trustworthiness. Thereby, this chapter looks at the affordances of particular online social networking platforms and how these are conducive to forming social bonds. Essentially, I claim that this is a matter of tracing *how* individuals approach using the platform and what factors shaped their particular actions. In Lilie's case the challenge that manifested resulted from the fact that she used Twitter, a medium that could be assumed to be limited in its capacity to convey social cues, to establish a connection with a power holder, namely, a specific individual who occupies a powerful position, either because of their societal status or because of specifically valuable resources they command. As Lilie mentioned, the difficulty that manifested in her attempt to overcome her status as a student was associated with a lack of trustworthiness. Thereby, she needed to establish a connection that was strong enough in its trust-building potential to convince the power holder of her eligibility to be provided with sensitive information. Digitally mediated forms of social interaction have often been characterised as being free of social burdens

because digitally mediated forms of social interaction, unlike face-to-face interaction, minimise the importance of visual and other status cues which might interfere with individuals' attempts to foster social interaction. However, my observation is that online social networking practices do not eradicate the existence of constraints. Rather, I have come to understand that online social networking practices can have an impact in terms of how certain constraints are being addressed and managed. By this I mean that connecting socially with power holders via the use of online social networking tools still emulates the social constraints that characterise traditional forms of social interaction, and using these platforms can provide individuals with opportunities to strategically address these challenges.

Specifically, by interacting with creative professionals using online social networking platforms at different stages and for different purposes in their careers, I establish that the use of online platforms assumes significance at very specific moments (e.g. in creating a sense of trust around their professionalism) where connecting with others via digitally mediated forms of interaction plays a role. While on the surface the rules that guide the dynamics of social interaction in this specific context remain largely the same, online social networking practices offer possibilities to face these challenges more effectively and evade some particular constraints.

To demonstrate the significance of each of the cases (i.e. Lilie and Fiona) I discuss in this chapter, the following case-comparison matrix presents an overview of the concepts addressed in each case. I present motives that emerged as relevant and address variations/tensions between each of the cases in context of this chapter (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). I would also like to mention here that it is not a coincidence that Lilie's case is perhaps over-represented throughout Chapters 4 and particularly in Chapter 5. This is because particularly relevant data emerged from Lilie's case that allowed me to portray the significance of digitally mediated social ties as liquid ties, building on their capacity to facilitate trust. Thereby, I consider Lilie's case a textbook case of using online social networking platforms efficiently and integrating digitally mediated social engagement into creative practice. Given this observation, I acknowledge that generalising the effects of digitally mediated social ties requires further case comparisons in future research.

| Cases / Motives | Digitally mediated ties and trust | Interpretation of platform properties | Motivations of use and 'effectivities' |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lilie | Indicates a scenario in which she created social engagement with a politician, using Twitter. She suggests that trust is essential in this case, given her (inferior) status as a student and the need to establish trust in order to exchange desired, sensitive information. | Shows a reflexive interpretation of properties, taking into account opportunities of using messages, photos, status updates etc. to craft an "online persona". Shows that she is keenly aware that whatever activity online will be keenly interpreted by the receiver. | Seems to adopt a "can-do" attitude, constantly experimenting with online platforms, identifying effective ways of fostering engagement. Actively seeks the advice of colleagues and peers to fine-tune online activity and seek out best practices. Keenly aware of the fact that online engagement goes hand in hand with traditional social activities and opportunities of online engagement are often followed up by real-life encounters. |
| Fiona | Stresses the importance of digitally mediated social interaction, but does not provide evidence for an actual case of building actual social engagement, let alone building trust. Represents a techno-deterministic view, which suggests that simply posting on Twitter will create engagement by itself. | Shows equally keen awareness of available properties, specifically on Twitter and Facebook. However, seems less concerned about how activities might be interpreted by others. Seems less strategic in terms of creating a consistent image of herself online. | Seems convinced of the effectiveness of digitally mediated social engagement. Seems to me though that in her case it serves as a means in itself, i.e. Fiona does not show an active effort to transfer online engagement into real-life social exchanges. Is in general suspicious of the art world as a social space, thereby avoiding exchanging best practices with peers and seldomly interacts with other arts practitioners. |

**Figure 17: Case-Comparison Matrix: Chapter 5**

## 5.2 Tracing the effective use of online social networking platforms via affordances

The Internet has been discussed as a space that provides ample opportunities to connect with others socially, particularly in light of its capacity to foster social interaction effortlessly and effectively (e.g. e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Hanna et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Especially, online social networking platforms have been discussed in light of this aspect, since they alleviate geographical and social boundaries between people, providing a platform to broaden individuals' personal network of social contacts, enabling them to benefit from social interaction in various ways. For example, Rainie and Wellman (2012) claim that online technologies foster wider opportunities for social interaction, making it easier for individuals to "move among relationships and milieus" (p. 15), essentially creating a "spirit of personal agency" (p. 19). Nonetheless, there is ongoing debate in regards to whether or not the use of online social networking platforms is equally beneficial to everyone (e.g. van Dijk, 2010; Hargittai, 2001). Recent research on the digital divide (e.g. van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; Helsper, 2008) addresses this notion, whereby benefits of using digital technologies have been associated with identifying particular skills that seem to enable individuals to use online tools effectively. Likewise, the importance of individuals' motivation and attitudes (e.g. Helsper, forthcoming) alongside psychosocial barriers (e.g. Stanley, 2003) provide important cues to understand digital exclusion.

Identifying the acquisition of digital skills, theories of affordances have been widely applied in view of tracing the effectiveness of using online social media platforms (e.g. Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010; Wellman et al., 2003). Consequently, looking at the affordances of these platforms has become a commonly used strategy in portraying individuals' use of platforms paired with the specific opportunities platforms offer. Affordance theory aims to help analyse specific tools, such as for example features pertinent to online social networking platforms, in light of the specific properties that potentially enable individuals to facilitate intimacy (e.g. Lambert, 2013). In the present case, I trace Lilie's engagement with Twitter, specifically focussing on those features that she identified as conducive to building trust. In addition, I emphasise Lilie's ability and efficiency in capitalising on available features, which I characterise as particular skills sets which I then contextualise within the cultural capital realm.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the significance of affordance theory in tracing the effective use of online social networking platforms. I have highlighted two important elements that using affordance theory offers, namely a) the role of the given properties of the tool – artefacts – to be utilised for specific purposes and b) the specific way in which individuals choose to use the properties of the tool. Several studies of social media have drawn on this concept, aiming to explain how the properties of different online social networking tools facilitate certain outcomes. For example, the use of online social networking platforms and their properties has been researched in view of their capacity to improve organisational processes (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), by potentially facilitating more effective communication practices among the members of a team. In a similar fashion, Majchrzak et al. (2013) investigated the potential of these platforms to mediate knowledge exchange in work environments, by looking at how individuals use these platforms to engage in conversations.

In this chapter I utilise affordance theory to trace how Twitter enabled one of my respondents to facilitate and sustain meaningful social interaction with a power holder. Given that establishing trust is the key element in facilitating meaningful social interaction, I look at Twitter's properties in light of their capacity to allow individuals to create a sense of trustworthiness. In this regard, I have highlighted Yates and Littleton's (1999) approach as particularly relevant, as they locate the outcomes of utilising tools such as online social networking platforms as part of the dynamic between the tool's properties and "the situated interaction among actors or between actors and objects" (p. 570). To that effect, the use of a given tool is understood as an interaction between an actor "with some other 'system'" and the specific "conditions that enable that interaction" based on the assumption that "properties of both the actor and the 'system'" (Yates & Littleton, 1999, p. 570) are taken into account. Whereby individuals' capacity to leverage platforms' properties has often been referenced as 'skills', this approach frames individuals' engagement with online platforms as 'practices' (p. 569).

The notion of 'practice' is useful as it implies that individuals' actions are informed by specific motives and intentions, which are shaped by their social surroundings (cf. Sweetman, 2009). Thus, my appreciation of online social networking platforms lies at the intersection of the given features of specific platforms paired with the specific attitudes, characteristics and context on the part of the individual, which inform their choices and actions in using these features. I

therefore argue that looking at affordances as an interplay of available properties and individuals' 'effectivities' portrays digital technology and online social networking platforms more effectively in light of the often perceived variation in terms of attained outcomes. Put simply, looking at affordances in that way, I aim to find a conclusive answer as to why some individuals seem to be able to use Twitter more effectively than others in spite of similar points of departure. Moreover, portraying digitally mediated forms of social interaction in that way addresses questions of agency in the digital realm, by identifying factors that help explain why some individuals yield better outcomes.

Lilie's story of using Twitter to establish a connection with a power holder is a particularly good example for tracing the effect of Twitter's properties in light of its capacity to establish trust. Juxtaposing Lilie's experience with Fiona's narrative, alongside Vincent's statement, illustrates why using Twitter was successful in Lilie's case, whereas it did not deliver comparable outcomes in Fiona's case, albeit their situation as emerging photographers has been fairly similar. In addition, comparing the different narratives, I provide an understanding as to why Lilie managed to use the platform more effectively than others, by locating the emergence of 'effectivities' in the minutiae of individuals' attitudes and highlighting the importance of offline social interaction being mirrored in their individual practices.

## 5.3 Twitter's properties in view of initiating social relations – conveying trust as the essential quality

Twitter, with its specific features as a micro-blogging website where opportunities for social interaction are limited to 140-character messages may not come across as the medium of choice when it comes to sustaining meaningful social interaction. Nonetheless, Twitter does provide an opportunity to create an online presence – or as Lilie has referred to it "an online persona". In this regard, boyd (2006) highlights that crafting a profile on online social networking platforms in itself already creates an opportunity for individuals to "present themselves to those who may view their self-representation or those who they may wish might" (p. 4). As such, Twitter presents itself as a social space where individuals use their profile as a first base to convey information about themselves, thus creating a "locus for interaction" (boyd, 2006, p. 4). Accordingly, Lilie discloses information about her professional status, her location and affiliation with art societies/clubs on her

Twitter profile. Likewise, a glance at her profile page provides information about her Twitter activity (number of Tweets and 'likes') as well as an estimation regarding the size of her network, that is, number of followers and people/accounts being followed. I speculate that Twitter's profile featuring personal information can be interpreted as a means to engage in 'reciprocal self-disclosure' allowing for "perceptions of similarity" that may eventually "allow people to find out more about each other" (Radin, 2006, p. 594). These acts of providing personal information may facilitate "initial attraction" (Radin, 2006, p. 594); nonetheless, these acts of reciprocal engagement are common to scenarios of face-to-face interaction, characterised as a first step in building intimacy in trusting relationships (Trenholm & Jensen, 2000).

Twitter provides a public space where potentially a connection with anybody else represented on the platform can be established, irrespective of his or her social standing or professional credentials. On Twitter, with its currently 304 million active users (www.statista.com) including celebrities, politicians and other figures of public interest, "one does not need to be on a first-name basis or even 'know' the user to follow them" (Murthy, 2013, p. 6). As such, anyone creating a profile on the platform can potentially address users of all kinds, including celebrities, politicians and other most visible Twitter participants. This resonates with claims that social media can serve as a means to connect individuals outside of one's social group or personal affiliation (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Fiona, a freelance photographer based in London, recognised this potential, describing Twitter as "an open world" where "anyone interested in anything can get in touch" (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 3). Attempting to engage with power holders, Twitter seems to provide a very particular social environment, supporting interaction with someone who is not close enough to be part of one's social network, but where a connection might nonetheless be initiated. This roots in the fact that Twitter is characterised as a platform where a sense of connectivity can be established by "inviting them [i.e., other Twitter participants] to engage without directly addressing them" (boyd et al., 2010, p. 1).

Lilie highlights this specific feature as essential in her attempt to establish a social interaction with a power holder. Therefore, she has described Twitter's potential to foster social interaction as favourable compared to other possibly more traditional means of communication. This was precisely because of the fact that online social engagement fosters interaction without coercing others into immediate

engagement: As such, she mentioned that sending an email to a previously unacquainted person would be too insignificant to foster engagement, whereas directly contacting them by phone ...

> ... would be too intense, [...], because if you ring, they would be, like, so who are you and why are you contacting me? [...] it's not aggressive, but it's quite an intense way, if you've never spoken to someone and you don't have, like, any recognition.
>
> (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 7)

This resonates with claims pertinent to social presence theory (Walther, 1992) in which the absence of social context cues has been described as conducive to reach out to "higher-status participants" (p. 56). However, despite the fact that being able to connect with individuals across all social classes and locales is technically possible, the mere possibility to connect does not necessarily entail a trusted relationship. Thereby, the craft of creating trust does not rest in the property itself, but instead relies on the individual's skill to effectively address the challenge of conveying social cues in a typically information poor environment. Media richness theory (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) addresses this notion, pointing to the lack of nonverbal cues as the main difference between digitally mediated and face-to-face social encounters. This implies that users of online platforms are required to make up for this lack of reduced social and emotional cues to establish a richer form interaction.

Profile pictures on Twitter serve as one such feature, which enables individuals to craft an image of oneself, thereby conveying a set of nonverbal cues. The importance of choosing a profile picture that represents a favourable image of yourself to the outside world, explains why "issues of fashion and style play a central role in participants' approach to their profiles" (boyd, 2006, p. 4). But more than a merely aesthetic contribution to one's public image, a profile picture gives a sense of who we are and how others might perceive us. Lilie's statement supports this claim and indicates that the choice of an adequate photo of yourself can be crucial in sustaining an initial form of contact:

> I guess, your photo, as well, is maybe quite important [...] because I feel like it would... Say, like, a certain picture might not relay that professionalism, or

*might not make someone reply, or they might think it's a spam account. Because people are guarded, so maybe that would happen. But I would hope that having it and showing that you use your account as well, would show, then, that you are a real person.*
*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 6/7)*

Accordingly, Lilie substantiates her awareness of the fact that individuals use images as an initial trigger to form opinions regarding the professionalism of a person. Images are vital in terms of forming a connection with others, by leveraging conveyed visual cues. For example, Spolsky (n.d.) frames the affordances of images as a powerful element in triggering responses on the part of the receiver, simply because they allow others to focus on "aspects of the environment which offer various kinds of accommodation." (p. 355). On Twitter, visual cues inherent in profile pictures almost inevitably evoke an emotional response in the receiver, because "in addition to the person's identity, we determine such things as age, sex, ethnicity, emotional state and attractiveness [whereby] our interactions with that person are modified accordingly" (Allison et al., 2000, p. 268). In this sense, the social cues such images convey can be interpreted as being conducive to establishing intimacy, by providing a platform to express attraction and sympathy, one decisive element in building intense social relationships (e.g. Krackhardt, 1986).

Obviously, profile pictures are not exclusive to Twitter, as they are a common feature in any online social networking platform, and posting an image of oneself on any other social media platform probably fulfils a similar function. In this context, however, seeing a picture of a specific person on Twitter allows the receiver to form an initial judgement of a person's identity and decide whether the visual cues inherent in the picture seem consistent with other information. For example, Tanis & Postmes (2003) argued that profile pictures alongside biographical information "is thought to reduce the ambiguity" (p. 677) which often leads to the formation of "more positive impressions" regarding a person. Thereby, conveying social cues through images can be seen as an important element to facilitate further social exchange.

Aside from conveying information via images, Twitter holds certain properties to facilitate social interaction through conversations. For example, Twitter's news feed has been described as supporting "public or semi-public interaction between participants" where users can "gather around shared interests"

(boyd, 2006, p. 6). Unlike other online social networking platforms, where conversations often circle around seemingly mundane conversations, Twitter is often seen as a tool that is predominantly, but not exclusively, used for "knowledge saving, coherent statements and discourse" (Ebner & Schiefner, 2008 quoted in Murthy, 2013, p. 9). Clearly, sharing information on a specific topic does not necessarily create social interaction, albeit participants are enabled to comment or broadcast messages of others (e.g. boyd et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, the fashion in which one decides to communicate information can impact the way one is being perceived by others. I have observed that in order to catch the attention of a specific user, particularly a power holder, it can be crucial to effectively use this public space as a means to convey a sense of professionalism, conducive to establish trust. Lilie's comment highlights her awareness of the importance of crafting your words carefully on Twitter, by reflecting on how she has observed Twitter being used by politicians:

*I think [on Twitter] it's carefully considered what is said. [...] Like, if you look at, maybe the Twitters of really famous people, they build their persona. [...] So ... you know, the things they Tweet about are part of that persona or as a politician. So, I think it's carefully considered what is said.*
*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 3/4)*

Therefore, the specific way in which information is being presented on Twitter qualifies as an effective property in light of crafting an image of professionalism that is conducive to facilitating trust in a digitally mediated form of social interaction.

The role of Twitter's properties nonetheless is only one part to the story, that is, they help explain why a specific action is being made possible. Therefore, looking at the affordance of profile pictures and Twitter messages is fundamental in producing an understanding about why the use of Twitter can facilitate certain outcomes, e.g. facilitating a social connection that conveys a certain degree of trust. Even so, understanding what outcomes specific properties are potentially capable of producing does not necessarily warrant the actual attainment of these outcomes. As such, it is essential to take the analysis further, tracing the factors that motivate and enable the individual user to appreciate a potential affordance and effectuate it in practice.

## 5.4 Where the narratives diverge – tracing the impact of 'effectivities' on individuals' using Twitter

I have identified that Twitter's profile as the primary locus of social interaction can be used to convey important social cues via profile images and associated information. Another side to the story is tracing individuals' capacity in using the available properties effectively – an issue that Yates & Littleton (2010) have referenced as the 'effectivities'. By and large, these 'effectivities' are rooted in each single individual's "specific abilities [...] that allow them to make use of the available affordances" (Shaw et al., 1982; Greene, 1994 quoted in Yates & Littleton, 2010). Consequently, the accurate estimation of an individual's ability to capitalise on existing properties, is influenced by the individual's social and personal traits. More precisely, the use of platforms like Twitter "resides in the combination of person-in-situation, not 'in the mind' alone." (Snow, 1994). I thus argue that it is key to look at a person's cultural and social embedding to trace a "person's reading of technology" to craft a convincing image of their social media use in light of its outcomes.

Drawing on Fiona's, Lilie's and Vincent's accounts of using Twitter illustrates how their specific perception and appreciation of Twitter's properties impacts their respective ability in using the tool to sustain social interaction effectively. I have identified three elements that are indicative of shaping individuals' 'effectivities' when using Twitter as a resource to establish connections with power holders: 1) appreciating online social networking platforms as a tool that mirrors dynamics pertinent to offline social scenarios, 2) fostering an awareness of power imbalances inherent to the field of cultural production and respecting these as equally existent in online forms of social interaction and 3) capitalising on offline social network bonds to manage one's efficacy in using online social networking platforms to sustain social connectivity online.

In spite of interviewees being at a similar stage in their careers, the outcomes of their use of online social networking platforms were strikingly different. Whereas Lilie enthusiastically spoke to me about several incidents in which using Twitter has made a difference for her, Fiona – although an eager user of social media – seemed rather disappointed with the impact that using Twitter had had in terms of reaching out to potentially important individuals. While Fiona continues to enjoy using Twitter, she could not tell me a single incident in which her use of online social

networking platforms had actually yielded any tangible results. Vincent on the other hand, did not find the use of online social networking platforms meaningful at all, which I suggest comes down to two reasons: his existing network of social contacts enabled him to draw on existing resources inherent in established strong ties, and he perceived digitally mediated social contacts as a sort of social interaction that was not capable of achieving his intended goal.

Looking at Lilie's and Fiona's case, their framework conditions seem to be particularly similar: both of them are at a similar age and both have already produced work, exhibited at galleries and have made initial steps towards establishing themselves in the creative and cultural field. Most importantly, both of them are avid users of online social networking platforms and equally seem to appreciate the potential of using Twitter for the purpose of advancing their careers. Even though all of these factors are comparable enough, the outcomes are strikingly different. Whereas Lilie has had plenty of anecdotes to share in which her use of Twitter has produced tangible outcomes, Fiona's side of the story appears different. Whereas Fiona tells me that over the past year, she has managed to establish a remarkable group of followers on her Twitter account, it seems that none of her activities on Twitter have actually helped her significantly in achieving a particular goal. Why is that the case? How is it that given very similar framework conditions and context of activity, the stories each one of them told me are worlds apart?

Looking beyond the obvious reasons of the effective use of online technology, such as availability of the Internet and access to computers, Stanley (2010) identified barriers to accessing the Internet that reach far deeper. Thus, other factors that shape individuals' effective use of technology are more complex to identify. Stanley's (2010) work on the psychosocial barriers to gaining access to computer and the internet, identified that individuals' self concept as well as a certain fear of making technology a part of their lives, heavily impacted whether or not those individuals decided to make use of computers in the first place. Essentially, she concludes that "the vision one holds about who and what one may become" (2010, p. 412) heavily influences one's opportunities in terms of accessing and using available technology, resulting in the fact that a specific self concept "shapes one's preference structure and constrains one's choices" (p. 413).

Consequently, it is plausible that even though Lilie's and Fiona's objective conditions regarding access and availability are comparable, the actual outcome on the individual level differs widely. In fact, Stanley's argument assumes relevance in

this particular context as it resonates with my observation that self-conceptual issues paired with the individuals' appreciation of the technology (i.e., how individuals subjectively frame affordances of technology) play a major role in explaining the observed differing outcomes. For example, the way in which individuals frame their appreciation of online platforms seems to impact their ability to utilise the available tools more effectively. Similarly to Stanley's (2010) finding that "seeing oneself as the 'type' of person who uses a computer correlates with the acquisition of computer skills" (p. 412), I conclude that individuals' framing of technology influences whether or not they manage to successfully acquire the skill needed to navigate online social spaces effectively by building meaningful social relationships.

## 5.5 Expanding on the three key elements to understand online social network dynamics and affordances

In what follows I expand on three elements I discovered in the context of my interviewee's answers and network representations. These are meant to inform an understanding of individuals' ability to effectively use Twitter as a platform to establish social interaction with others.

### 5.5.1 Appreciation of online social networking platforms as a social space

Digital forms of social interaction and the use of online social networking platforms as a means to it, have been discussed from different angles. Essentially though, in the literature a dichotomy persists between appreciating technology as a medium that in itself "gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs" (Rainie & Wellman, 2014, p. 9) and building relationships, however there are concerns as to "whether conducting a relationship through technological means has altered the nature or form of that relationship" (Willson, 2012, p. 55). As such, it is essential to trace whether and how the appreciation of technology as a means in itself versus appreciating it as merely an extended form of existing social locales, plays out in terms of actual social practices and observable goals and outcomes in sustaining social connectivity.

Fiona's and Lilie's comments about their use of online social networking platforms brought to the surface how this very issue plays out on a practical level. One thing that struck me from the very beginning was how differently they both positioned themselves towards social media, which in consequence manifested a fundamentally different appreciation of themselves as users in context with the tool. Talking to Fiona about using Twitter, it seemed to me that she in particular demonstrated a very 'tool - centred' view of social media. To be precise, Fiona described her use of Twitter as something that was external to her, almost as if she as the user and Twitter as the tool were two discrete entities that operated independently of one another. In one particular sequence of the interview, Fiona elaborated on her activity on social media as a sort of activity that had to be "managed":

*My strategy is just to get people interested in the idea and direct them to the platform so they can decide for themselves [...] I don't necessarily need to give anyone anything, because it's enough that I'm gonna post interesting content and I'm gonna hashtag it properly and I have 10, 15, 20 followers afterwards, because people are looking for content.*
*(Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 2/3)*

In contrast, when asked to show her stance towards online social networking platforms, Lilie drew a picture of herself as the user in an interplay between tool-specific attributes and the existing social framework in which the use of the tool was represented. A look at the network drawings produced by both Lilie (Figure 7) and Fiona (Figure 4) substantiates this interpretation. Whereas Lilie also referred to online social networking platforms as a gathering point for anonymous individuals, unlike Fiona, she used these unspecified others ('bubbles' in the drawing) as placeholders which helped her to connect them to specific events involving a concrete person when using the platform.

*I think that different people come up. [...] Because I think, like, it's not necessarily, like, the people who I would say, like, in life you are genuinely really close to. But it's more like what's happening, coming up in the next few weeks that makes me think what's going on.*
*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 7/8)*

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Lilie, in contrast with Fiona, managed to bring these unspecific 'bubbles' to life by recreating a narrative around them. This did not resonate with Fiona's experience, where 'bubbles' remained as unspecified events, devoid of a concrete underlying narrative signalling social interaction. Accordingly, Fiona's network map speaks a different story: Her activity on social media is depicted as an array of seemingly related 'items': Facebook and Twitter are represented in connection to Kickstarter by lines or arrows, where these lines represent activities like 'hashtagging', one of the strategies Fiona uses to activate these connections.

Overall, Fiona's drawing resembles a dynamic that calls to mind the purely functional property of a construction plan. Incidentally, the drawing does not feature a single individual person, which prompts the assumption that when drawing this part of her network, Fiona did not necessarily picture any individuals in it. That is to say, her version of social media seems fairly tool-centred; this represents a take on digital sociality, which favours technical affordances over its conception as a social space, taking into account that there are actual people behind each of these tools and affordances.

Having demonstrated how respondents' framing of online social networking platforms quite significantly diverges, I argue that conceiving online environments as a social space is favourable in terms of intended outcomes. In this way, individuals are prompted to appreciate these online environments as a social space like any other, which operates along similar dynamics to offline social encounters. This resonates with claims that portray online social interaction just as subjected to social norms as offline encounters (e.g. Martey & Stromer-Galley, 2007; Bendor & Swistak, 2001). Following a 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' imperative, I argue that unless one *sees* online technology as quintessentially social, turning one's actions into tangible 'social' outcomes, such as building a social relationship, is unlikely – if not impossible. As a result, I argue that an appreciation of online environments as a social space motivates users to acknowledge social norms, which ultimately leads to a more effective use of online social networking platforms. In what follows I will elaborate on how this informs users' appreciation of social norms in online environments.

## 5.5.2 Appreciating power imbalances inherent in the field of cultural production mirrored in online space

To regard online social networking platforms as virtual communities is often associated with depicting them "as being free of physical, spatial, or temporal constraints faced by real space communities" (Willson, 2012, p. 59). Looking at technology in such a way prompts the assumption that socialising in online spaces is characterised by an absence of social norms and etiquettes that would typically occur. Consequently, this implies that digital forms of social interaction are subject to different 'rules of the game', if not even devoid of any sort of rules altogether.

Although virtual online social spaces have been described as "inherently liberating and equalizing" (Willson, 2012, p. 59), looking at the use of these platforms in practice reveals that digital forms of social interaction, just as traditional offline forms of socialising, are equally guided by rules that steer the dynamics of the socialising process it gives way to.

*I guess people think, just because it's online they can do whatever they want, but ... like I think that's actually not the case. You still have to be on your toes, because ... well I guess people still care how you behave and what you say.*
(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 6)

I interpreted this statement as an indication of Lilie's awareness of the existence of social norms in online environments. Likewise, previous research suggests that social interaction in online environments is likewise guided by specific rules that guide individuals' behaviour (e.g. Baym, 1998, Jeffrey & Mark, 2003). In particular, the formation of intimacy in online social spaces has been discussed as being strongly characterised by the effective way of transmitting social cues (Walther, Loh & Granka, 2005). So how does the presence of social norms in digitally mediated environments affect individuals' experience online? And further, how does individuals' appreciation of these rules manifest in their interaction online?

Evaluating the conversations with interviewees, my conclusion is that their acknowledgement of social rules as a determining factor of their online experience varies significantly. Consequently, their specific appreciations of the online space as

being guided by rules has shaped their awareness of which social rules are at stake when attempting to establish a social connection with a power holder.

Comparing Lilie's and Fiona's use of Twitter illustrates how their individual approaches framed their use of the platform. One thing that was particularly striking was that whereas Lilie's account of using Twitter demonstrated her being aware of the power dynamics that were at stake when she attempted to establish a social connection, Fiona seemed reluctant to attribute any significance to them, rather appreciating online social networking platforms as a space "where everything is possible". This is illustrated by Lilie's concern regarding the power imbalance existing between herself as a student and the politician as the power holder, which influenced the way she used Twitter in order to establish a relation. In fact, Lilie seemed to quite consciously incorporate her concerns about the power imbalance into her use of Twitter, by leveraging those properties of Twitter that would empower her to create a sense of trustworthiness via her specific crafting of her online persona. Accordingly, Lilie mentioned that she was keenly aware of making a good impression online by being consistent and "organised" in the way she used certain platforms, because she assumed that "updating" her online presence frequently *"shows that you're actively good at that, which I guess makes people put trust in you as well" (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 25).*

Being aware of the "trust deficit" in the potential relationship between herself and the politician, Lilie's use of Twitter exhibits specific strategies that make her use of the platform effective. For example, Lilie commented on the role of profile photos as a means to establish instant rapport with other Twitter users.

*So, I guess, your photo is maybe quite important [...] Because if it's something that maybe isn't so professional, and, like, that if you were talking to me and you didn't have, maybe, a professional picture [it] might not relay that professionalism, or might not make someone reply, or they might think it's a spam account. Because people are guarded, so maybe that would happen.*
*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 6/7)*

In fact, Lilie's concern about the relevance of conveying professionalism in her choice of profile picture reflects her awareness of individuals' associating certain attributes of images with professionalism. Fiona, in contrast, did seem reluctant to

factor in any concerns of this sort. Following her way of talking about using Twitter, it seems that she either did not appreciate the fact that communication online is characterised by social cues that are exchanged throughout the social interaction (e.g. Bendor & Swistak, 2001) or that she perceived them as negligible. *"So, basically, my strategy is just to get people interested and direct them to the platform so they decide for themselves"* (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 2). I interpreted this statement as showcasing a lacking acknowledgement of Fiona's responsibility as a user to ensure in which way her presence online was being perceived and interpreted. Stating that she left it up to the perceiver "to decide for themselves" suggests that Fiona was reluctant to strategically plan in which way an impression of herself would be formed on the basis of her online presence. In fact, Fiona seemed to be reluctant to acknowledge that achieving recognition for her work was contingent on other's approval in the first place. This is illustrated by her approach to socialising via Twitter as well. When I asked Fiona, whether or not it was important to her who she was establishing a connection with on social media, she responded, it can be "anyone really" (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 3). This illustrates that Fiona, unlike Lilie, does not seem to strategically plan her activity on social media, to an extent that she would specifically seek to establish a connection with those who could potentially benefit her career in whatever way.

Having said that, it seems to me that Fiona's use of social media is equally constrained by a certain social distance she sees between herself and other users of social media, particularly those in the creative industries. As such, she said that those people she meets as part of her activity in the arts sector "are friends for art and that's it" (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 11). However, while she appreciates that social interaction with others in the art sector can benefit your work in many ways, she is reluctant to form a stronger social bond with them, given her seemingly negative attitude towards this specific social circle. "[...] they are curious as hell to see what you are doing, why you are there, how you can benefit them or how much they need to fear you, because we are in a competition" (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 11).

While Fiona appreciates Twitter's potential to connect with others, she is at the same time reluctant to use it as a means to establish social contacts or intensify existing contacts with others who could be important for her work. Throughout our conversations, Fiona frequently mentioned one specific artist whom she described as "inspiring" and whom she found interesting to talk to about art and the art world in

general. Even though a connection already existed between herself and this artist, she was reluctant to use social media to potentially intensify this connection. However, unlike Lilie, Fiona dismisses online social networking platforms' ability to initiate or intensify social contact with potentially important others. Even though she mentions that she keeps in touch with this person via Facebook and Twitter primarily, she states that

> *[...] to be honest with you, to actually make a connection through Twitter is difficult. [...] so for me, meeting strangers through social media is a little bit weird. [...] It's not like actually making a human connection. It's like just having one more number on the account and those numbers matter but they matter only in big amounts.*
> (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 2, p. 8)

Interpreting this statement, I conclude that Fiona perceives online social spaces and traditional offline social spaces as opposed to each other, unlike Lilie, who appreciates that social contacts that are initiated online may at times trigger further social interaction face-to-face, where these initial contacts might develop into a manifested, stronger social relationship. The awareness that online social interaction is guided by specific rules, just as offline forms of social interactions are, is vitally important in order to navigate this space effectively. As such, it seems plausible that approaching the Internet and online social networking platforms in particular as a space that operates according to similar rules that would usually guide social interaction is critical to efficiently harness its affordances. I argue that approaching the Internet as a space that is formed by and with people rather than a mere technical tool in order to frame one's actions effectively.

Having previously established how Lilie's appreciation of the ontology of online social networking spaces is different from Fiona's, I will now look at how this attitude manifested in framing their strategies for establishing social relations via Twitter. When Lilie gave me this distinctive example of her attempt to connect with the politician, there were two points in her statement that seemed noteworthy: First, she mentioned that she was looking to connect with a specific politician whom she had identified as important in terms of her goal of obtaining the required information. As such, I have learnt that Lilie makes a conscious decision as to who could be a suitable contact for each specific case. In light of this decision, Lilie

targeted her search for a particular person, before she took any action towards contacting them. Second, she also spoke of her concern to establish a connection that would help to fulfil her goal of being perceived as trustworthy. I conclude that Lilie was aware of the power imbalance that was at stake in this specific case, which led her to assume that she needed to use Twitter in such a way as to convince the other person of her trustworthiness.

### 5.5.3 The impact of offline social networks/offline social interaction in shaping individuals' 'effectivities'

Thus far, I have described that users' appreciation of social networking platforms as a space that is governed by rules, influences individuals' effective use of these platforms. In addition, I have identified one other factor that seems to play a role in terms of shaping users' ability to use technology effectively: the influence of peers and established social network contacts on individuals' strategies in using technology and the specific way in which they communicate with others via online social networking platforms. It seems that discussing experiences and 'best practices' with others has an impact on individuals' specific use of platforms and to what extent they become aware of strategies and opportunities.

The effect of social capital as an inherent resource for established social ties has been discussed in great detail. In particular, the impact of social capital resources on other forms of capital, such as cultural capital for example, has been long established. For example, Coleman (1988) argued that social capital has an effect on children's performance in school and their overall well-being, given its effect on scholastic performance and the manifestation of skills and knowledge that are often perceived as indicative of cultural capital. Likewise, in the context of digital literacy, the question has been raised as to whether and how social capital resources impact individuals' ability to use available tools effectively. To that effect, Wittel (2010) asks how different forms of capital play out in terms of building and maintaining digitally mediated social ties, particularly cultural and social forms of capital.

In Lilie's case the interaction with her peers, specifically fellow students at university, friends and flatmates, who according to her statement are all involved in some sort of creative profession, was a formative influence in her use of social media. Lilie's example illustrates that talking with colleagues about their use of

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online social networking platforms facilitates an exchange of best practices, which impacted her own approach to using Twitter. More precisely, Lilie indicated that she quite frequently exchanges experiences with her friends and colleagues on establishing social contacts online, which has inspired her own socialising practice on Twitter. "I spoke to my friend about how she got in, like, I was, like, 'how did you get in contact with those guys?'. And then she told me the whole thing, and I was, like, wow, that's pretty impressive" (Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 13).

Further elaborating on her experience of interchanging best practices Lilie remarked that it was interesting for her to observe how one specific friend at university strategically used Twitter in light of conveying an image of professionalism. In this instance, Lilie describes a conversation with a friend from university:

*I mean, you can choose before you Tweet someone whatever you put out there. So you could choose to, I don't know, if you're planning to Tweet them and you wanted to be, like, strategic about it, you could choose, three days before, to Tweet a lot things you know they'd be interested in, and then to Tweet them. So then they might think; well, they're in the know about this subject.*
(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 3, p. 12)

In this regard, Lilie's conversations with friends on their particular use of social media platforms, gives her an opportunity to learn from these experiences and evaluate whether or not and to what extent she would consider integrating these suggestions into her own practice. As such, it seems plausible that individuals' capacities in using platforms can indeed be seen as influenced by existing social relationships, hence characterising them as an effect of social capital on digital networking skills. Drawing on Lilie's case, I conclude that social capital inherent in offline forms of social relationships, for example with friends at university, do have an impact on individuals' 'effectivities' in using the affordances of platforms like Twitter in a targeted, effective way.

**Figure 18: Hand-drawn network map Lilie – online social networking platforms section**

A look at Lilie's network drawing (Figure 18) emphasizes the importance she attaches to the exchange of opinions among her friends and colleagues, which is mirrored in the drawing where friends and colleagues play a major role and these relations appear as a permanent feature in her network. Elaborating on one particular section in her network map, Lilie speaks about the importance of face-to-face, established contacts, that is to say, strong bonds with people in London she attributes value to:

*[...] these are interactions that I've had at university ... what influences me mainly while I'm here, or what helps me grow. [...] And then these are interactions that I have with people [...] lecturers or different people or friends. Probably because I was there two years [i.e., at university] I met a lot of people, like my current flatmate now is someone who I was on a course with before, they influence you when you come to them for advice. I think*

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*it's really important in London to have that, or anywhere, as an artist to have*

*people who are doing the same thing or are at the same place.*

*(Lilie, MR; LE; HC; HS, Interview 1, p. 14/15)*

I conclude that Lilie values the importance of offline, established relationships particularly in view of gaining access to opinions and advice, a key resource associated with social capital. In addition though, I argue that these same contacts equally influence Lilie's activities online, shaping her 'effectivities' in using online social networking platforms, a dynamic that is absent when looking at Fiona's story.

Observing how Fiona speaks about her involvement with other individuals might offer part of the explanation as to why her use of Twitter did not yield comparable results. Fiona's network drawing (Figure 19) reveals that her social involvement with fellow artists is minimal. While she mentions one fine artist as central to her professional network, her overall involvement with colleagues in the art sector is minimal. A reason for why Fiona's does not interact socially with fellow artists might relate to her overall negative attitude towards the art scene and people in this circle. Explaining the part in her network drawing that depicts "art friends" she says:

*This is [i.e., the circle 'art friends'] just you know it can be anything, anywhere with anyone and it is not stable enough to build a relationship on that, it is not stable enough to actually ... for me at least, to waste lots of time on that. So most of the time I noticed unfortunately that at least artists can be very self-centred, they would [talk] to you only about things they are interested in, if they don't like something you know ... they would just ... move on. And most of the time, it's very one-sided [...] because they make art the essence of themselves. That's why those people very rarely are interesting enough for me to get in touch with on a regular basis.*
*(Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 1, p. 12)*
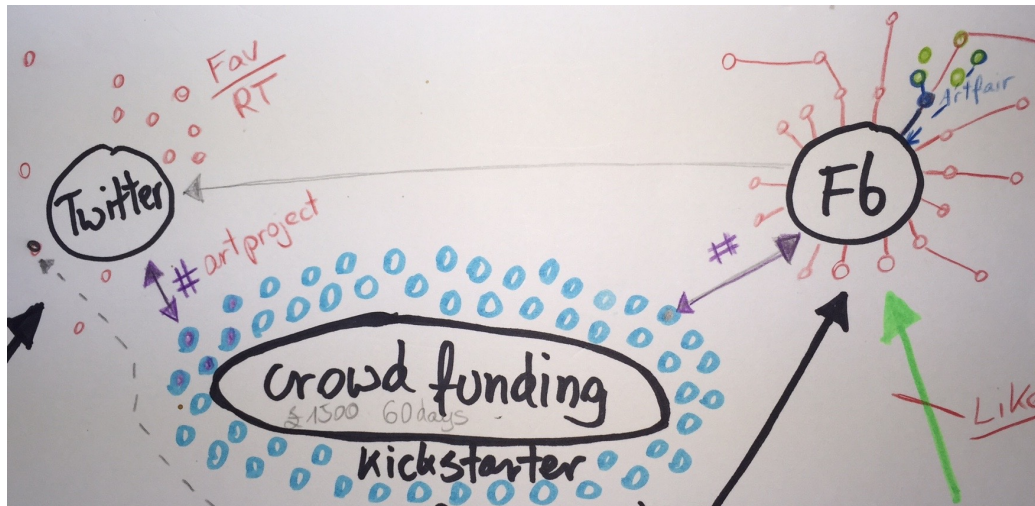
**Figure 19: Hand-drawn network map Fiona - online social networking platforms section**

Given Fiona's somewhat less enthusiastic attitude towards the art scene per se and her limited engagement with fellow artists, it is plausible to assume that she misses out on gaining access to essential resources that Lilie has highlighted, not limited to, but particularly relevant to, the use of social media. So instead of seeing online social networking as an activity that requires constant updating and improvements, Fiona approaches tweeting more as a static activity that does not require any specific sort of learning. "*It's a tool which you are using, people are involved but not necessarily you have any emotional connection to those people*" (Fiona, LR; LE; MC; HS, Interview 2, p. 18).

## 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I focussed on Lilie's use of Twitter as a means to gain access to insider information by connecting to a power holder. The significance of establishing a connection with this person was striking insofar that, typically, a significant amount of trust is perceived necessary in order to obtain the required information. In the absence of existing social bonds with power holders or affiliation with other members of this social group, I assume that Lilie's use of Twitter yielded results that are traditionally associated with stronger social ties. Elaborating on the affordance of digitally mediated social ties in this context, I conclude that through her specific use of Twitter, Lilie managed to convey a particular sense of trustworthiness that exceeds levels of thin trust. This result is compelling insofar as trust via digitally mediated social ties exceeds levels of thin trust, which are typically

associated with weak ties. While at the surface, the social tie Lilie created does not qualify to be labelled strong, given the absence of continuous social interaction over time, at the same time it affords a significant level of trust, which deviates from the commonly established logic.

In addition, I have argued that Lilie's social interaction emulates affordances of weak ties insofar as they take on a bridging function. While the capacity of creating a social bridge between previously unacquainted individuals is commonly associated with weak ties, digitally mediated social ties afford similar outcomes in absence of so-called gatekeepers. This means that connecting with power holders by using Twitter for example alleviates the burden of relying of individuals who facilitate social exchange (i.e. gatekeepers), which bestows greater agency upon those seeking to facilitate a connection. I called these social ties liquid ties to express a) that their capacity to create trust is a result of emulating strong and weak tie affordances and b) their ephemeral effectiveness to sustain trust, as this affordance is confined to a temporally confined access to resources.

I argue that this result, on the one hand, has to do with the fact that using features on Twitter can mimic the creation of trust in accordance with one specific event, while at the same time the social tie does not produce long-lasting effects of trust. On the other hand, Lilie's understanding of power imbalances greatly influenced her use of Twitter. Being aware of the perceived lack of trustworthiness she was subjected to regarding her professional identity motivated Lilie to strategically shape her use of Twitter in that regard. This is illustrated by her keen effort to convey a sense of professionalism on her Twitter profile, but also aligning her activity on Twitter – for example the messages she posted – with assumed expectations of power holders. As such, Lilie paid significant attention to the content of posted messages, the social affiliation with other individuals on Twitter she exposed and also a sense of authenticity, which helped her achieve the desired result.

The significance of this social tie in light of fostering recognition is striking: I conclude that Lilie's use of Twitter afforded the formation of legitimate social capital, in spite of a seemingly fleeting, ephemeral social connection. Whereas the formation of social capital via weak ties has been previously discussed, I argue that in this case the affordance of digitally mediated social ties is atypical, given the fact that a significant amount of trust was necessary to produce legitimate social capital. This offers important clues towards a redefinition of social capital, as it questions

the validity of strong social ties in fostering legitimate social capital. Although Lilie's social connection lacks a more fundamental level of trust, which would require a deeper, more continuous sense of social interaction, she managed to obtain desired results in spite of lacking an existing affiliation with power holders.

In Chapter 6, I provide an example of Facebook as a means to aid authenticating creative work. Drawing on Sienna's experience, I show how her activity on Facebook allowed her to gain visibility of her work as a wedding photographer among a greater audience. This was interesting to me, as at first it seemed that publishing images on Facebook and fostering the approval of creative work online emulated a traditional process of authentication. However, I learned that this process was intertwined with pre-existing forms of symbolic capital, which I interpreted as a requirement to assume recognition. Observing respondents' skills and habits in leveraging affordances of Facebook, I will elaborate further on the attainment of social capital drawing on affordances of Facebook. In addition, I will show how particular skills are linked to other, pre-existing forms of cultural capital. Finally, Sienna's example proved useful in establishing to what extent the use of Facebook allowed her to gain recognition among an elite circle of individuals, which enabled me to engage more reflexively with the importance of this type of social capital and the way in which it can be described in view of accumulating symbolic capital, i.e. helping individuals to gain recognition.

## Chapter 6: Authentication: The capabilities of Facebook to translate mediated symbolic capital into social, cultural and economic capital

## 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6 I discuss the process of authentication as a relevant mechanism to secure recognition, which I have discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 38). There I have characterised the notion of authentication as a social process, which requires that decision makers such as art critics, gallery owners and/or already established artists is crucial for the individual arts practitioner to establish a reputation, which then influences the perceived value of their work. In this chapter I juxtapose Sienna's case with that of Jeff and look at the ways in which they have described authentication processes, particularly looking at which stakeholders they perceive crucial to be authenticated. Sienna – working as a wedding photographer – relies heavily on Facebook to publicise her work among targeted audiences (i.e. previous clients and their friends network on Facebook). I look at specific affordances of Facebook (cf. Chapter 2, p. 56 ff.) to facilitate approval among targeted audiences by for example generating positive, voice approval of posted image by commenting on these posts in a favourable way. Characterising this process I refer to the notion of e-word of mouth in this chapter to show how digitally mediated social ties can facilitate authentication of work distributed online. Jeff's take on authentication differs from Sienna's experience, dismissing the relevance of online platforms. Jeff – a sculptor – explains this by referring to the rigid rules of achieving authentication in the traditional field of cultural production, where one must seek out the approval of established figures in the field, which renders digitally mediated social ties irrelevant to achieve this. Thereby, I was able to establish that digitally mediated social ties as a means to authenticate art works chiefly depends on the circumstances and ultimately which practices to achieve this are being seen as accepted.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Lilie's case of using Twitter to build a connection with a power holder with the goal of gaining access to sensitive information. I focussed on Twitter's affordance of facilitating this connection, leveraging Twitter's features to convey an image of credibility. I argued that Lilie's reflexive way of using Twitter, informed by her awareness of existing power

dynamics in the field, yielded more favourable outcomes as compared to Fiona, for example, who exhibited a very technology-deterministic view of online social networking platforms. In this chapter the focus is on Sienna's use of Facebook in her work practice as a wedding photographer, pursuing the aim to gain visibility for her photography among a prestigious social group. Sienna frequently posts a selection of images from recently photographed weddings on Facebook, whereby the 'tagging' feature played a significant role regarding accessing this particular target group. I argue that Sienna's use of Facebook played a significant role in managing the constraints she faced when targeting clients from a prestigious social class in the absence of existing social connections to these specific individuals in her personal network. Consequently, I portray Sienna's use of Facebook as one other example in which digitally mediated social ties played a role in alleviating perceived constraints in establishing recognition.

At a conceptual level, the notion of authentication is at the core of this chapter. Drawing on Bourdieu's work (e.g. 1996, 1993), authentication in the field of cultural production describes a process of voiced recognition of artwork, which serves its aesthetic legitimisation. It holds that work is authenticated by "the creators of the creator" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 127), which signals that those who create require the approval of individuals perceived as experts in their field to establish recognition (i.e., symbolic capital). Bourdieu's take on authentication is grounded in the restricted field of cultural production, in which the struggle to attain recognition (or symbolic capital) and follows the autonomous principle of hierarchisation (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 40), in which producers of art seek the approval of other producers. In contrast to this principle stands the heteronomous principle of hierarchisation, associated with popular culture and large-scale production, which aims at the approval of a broadest possible audience to secure economic capital (cf. Elafros, 2013).

Both of these processes are relevant in this chapter, however I argue that in the cases of my respondents, both principles apply as securing economic capital requires pre-existing attainment of symbolic capital. However, the distinction is useful to understand *who* respondents primarily target in seeking approval. In Sienna's case, audiences (i.e., clients) double as those authorities that legitimise aesthetic value. However, as I will show throughout this chapter, the attainment of recognition by gatekeepers is equally important. Contrasting Sienna's case, I introduce Jeff, a London-based sculptor, who described his struggle to attain

recognition as mainly contingent on key figures in the field of cultural production (i.e., gallery owners, art critics and other, established artists).

Both respondents see the attainment of recognition as a social process, which relies on established social ties with those who are in a position to authenticate their work. Accordingly, respondents frequently mentioned that in order to thrive, "you need to get your work under the nose of the right people". To achieve this, being socially acquainted with those who are in a position to approve is imperative. But why is this the case? At the time of our interviews, Jeff was at a critical stage in his career, describing himself as not yet having reached the stage of a fully accomplished professional artist, but "getting there" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 3). His take on authentication as a social process portrays the existence of a tangible social connection with the authenticator as imperative: *"it's knowing the right person that will get me in front of the right curator that will give me the right show"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 15).

By knowing the right person, Jeff said that a real connection based on direct face-to-face contact with this person is important to facilitate authentication, because it creates a "deeper, longer-lasting connection with people" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 16), which proves most effective to facilitate authentication as it creates a "more memorable" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 17). experience with the other person. Jeff's statement resonates with claims that characterise strong ties as most effective in facilitating access to social capital resources that facilitate recognition, as they allow the authenticator to infer vital information about the artist, thereby creating trust in the artists' ability to create artwork that is perceived to be worthy of approval. A substantial social connection where *"you get yourself out in front of that person, have a drink with them, sit down have a chat, make it a real thing rather than a virtual thing"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 17) is, according to Jeff, the most effective way to achieve that. However, can digitally mediated social ties play a role in this process of authentication? Or in other words, can they facilitate a scenario in which they enable creative professionals to gain access to the right people?

Sienna's case represents one example in which digitally mediated social interaction on Facebook facilitated authentication of her work as a wedding photographer. Facebook proved effective in this instance, because authentication in wedding photography relies on publicly voiced approval of clients, commonly known as word-of-mouth referral practice. Initially, it seemed that Facebook played the

main role in facilitating authentication and legitimising the aesthetic value of her work. Nonetheless, as it manifested later, Sienna's pre-existing attainment of symbolic capital and being recognised by gatekeepers in her own field, was key to trigger this authentication process on Facebook at a later stage. Facebook's affordance of allowing Sienna to create visibility and approval among a prestigious social group is thus closely intertwined with pre-existing authentication. Nonetheless, the notion that in wedding photography consumers of creative work simultaneously act as authenticators, challenges Bourdieu's overt emphasis on art creators as the decision-making authority.

Sienna's clients embody the experts that hold the power of recognising and determining the value of produced work, assuming the power of decision-making and the approval of value. The way in which Facebook facilitates this digitally mediated process of authentication alongside Sienna's ability to activate this process is a key part of this chapter. Looking at the affordance of online social networking platforms to facilitate authentication, I contrast Sienna's efficacy in leveraging the properties of Facebook with Jeff's appraisal of the effectiveness of Facebook and other platforms in this regard. Appreciating differences in the accounts of both respondents, I conclude that – different context of creative practice aside – respondents' motivation influenced by legitimised practices in their respective field of creative practice in utilising affordances of platforms is mirrored in their individual outcomes.

To demonstrate the significance of each of the cases (i.e. Sienna and Jeff) I discuss in this chapter, the following case-comparison matrix presents an overview of the concepts addressed in each case. I present motives that emerged as relevant and address variations/tensions between each of the cases in context of this chapter (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994).

| Cases      Motives | Authentication: Relevant stakeholders | Perceived significance of social relations for authentication | Perspective of using online platforms effectively |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sienna | Most strikingly here, actual clients double as authenticators (i.e. it is not relevant what experts think about Sienna's photographs, but what clients think). | Social relations are key to establish a good reputation among targeted clients. Voiced approval of previous clients is essential. Thereby, it is | Highlights the importance of being able to stimulate actual social engagement on the platforms. Mentions that sharing content that evokes a |

| | This impacts the way in which authentication is achieved: Appraisal from clients and publicly voiced approval are key here. | assumed that this will spread through their social relations with friends and acquaintances. Digitally mediated social interaction is described as effective to enhance this effect, by making work known among unacquainted individuals. | positive reaction and creating engagement by posting questions for example proves highly effective. Issues of taste are mentioned implicitly; leads to assume that emulating taste preferences of targeted audiences in online activity creates more effective results. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jeff | This case provides a different take on the way in which authentication is achieved: Decision makers are vital and inevitable to facilitate authentication. Mentions that meeting the right people is key in order get oneself known. Portrays the field of cultural production as extremely rigid, whereby rules of authentication have to be followed and only specific individuals will be accepted to do so. | Advocates the necessity of fostering social relations with decision makers. Thinks that meeting with these decision makers in more informal settings (over a drink, at an exhibition) will enhance the efficiency of them approving art works. Thinks that existing affiliation with respective art circles and having the right credentials (i.e. degree from a prestigious school) eases this process. | Seems indifferent towards adopting strategies of using online platforms. Claims however that they are crucial in terms of fostering a positive image online. Mentions that probably more could be done to improve his online presence, but seems reluctant to try and invest time. Speculates that unless you know the right people, being known online won't make a difference. |

**Figure 20: Case-comparison matrix: Chapter 6**

## 6.2 The relevance of the gatekeeper – the role of word-of-mouth in voicing approval in wedding photography

Early on in our conversations, Sienna mentioned that one of the biggest challenges in establishing recognition among her targeted client base was associated with lacking previous exposure to this particular social circle. The professional identity she created, targeted a very specific audience, whereby issues of taste as well as monetary means played an equally important role: *"From the beginning I kind of fixed my prices on a relatively high level, because my goal with this was always that I don't have to do my other job anymore"* (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 1).

Sourcing clients with a significant amount of economic capital at hand and the willingness to book Sienna was one challenge she faced early on in her career. Closely linked to the required economic capital of her targeted clients is Sienna's aim to reach those clients who identify with her aesthetic vision. In particular, it was important to her to offer clients a *"memory of how the wedding felt" (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 2, p. 7),* which resonates with her ambition to capture the positive emotion that surrounded the event. Notably, Sienna portrayed her approach to documenting weddings in pictures as distinct from other more conventional approaches to wedding photography: Her photography distinguishes itself from other possibly old-fashioned approaches in that instead of merely documenting sequences of the event, Sienna aimed to create a narrative around the actual event by conveying an emotional colouring, whereby a sense of sophistication mirrored in style and fashion played an equally important role. This way, she hoped to enable clients to better identify with her aesthetic given the fact that she thought a more modern approach to photography would be appreciated among this target group. Consequently, Sienna's aim to be recognised for her particular aesthetic is paired with the hope that her particular take on photography would serve as an incentive for clients to pay an above-average price.

My impression is that individuals' taste and Sienna's ability to cater to specific expectations mirrored in clients' expression of taste were two key elements in achieving approval, thereby securing recognition. According to Sienna's statement, gaining access to the *right* people, posed a major challenge specifically at the beginning of her career (cf. p. 206). This resonates with similar constraints that are faced by creative professionals in their strive to attain recognition, that is, establishing access to those individuals who are in a position to authenticate. Lilie's case (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.5.2) showed that her struggle to become recognised implied the need to establish trustworthiness by gaining credibility to facilitate the approval of a person in power. The main difference in Sienna's case is that here, recognition is apparently being attained in absence of those external authorities, and is established as a result of existing or previous clients' voiced approval of produced work. The leverage point in Sienna's process of authentication is that authenticators double as consumers of creative work, which implies that the voices of approval of external experts are less relevant in producing value.

This process of building recognition as a wedding photographer is markedly different from other creative sectors: Particularly in the fine arts sector, it has been

argued (e.g. Bourdieu, 1996, 1993) that an artists' recognition is established via an authentication process that is external from the actual consumption of art and typically involves 'gatekeepers', such as for example gallery owners or art critics, whose expert knowledge or reputation entitles them to authenticate art works. It is implied that the authentication process *precedes* the accumulation of value of produced artwork. It follows that authentication is a process from which consumers are excluded, because only once the value of the work has been created, consumers such as art buyers will be able to appreciate it.

This is not to say that authentication processes are absent in wedding photography, rather the main difference with other art sectors revolves around the question of *who* is perceived as eligible to authenticate work. Particularly in Sienna's case, but in wedding photography in general, it is the consumers or the actual clients who act as the authority to judge the quality of produced work. Rather than relying on experts' opinions or gatekeeper referrals, it is the consumers themselves who, presumably quite intuitively, judge the quality of the work. Consequently, work is being authenticated on the basis of clients' subjective estimation of the value of produced work, along the lines of "Do I like what I see or not", which renders the approval of experts (i.e., gatekeepers) negligent. In relation to this, sourcing clients in wedding photography is largely based on being referred by previous clients on the basis of their voiced appraisal. In an interview with Bob Hendriks (Skype Interview, July 2014) president of the Young Photographers Alliance, he confirmed this assessment, stating that in this specific niche of photography "personal relationships are most crucial to build a career", specifically because of the fact that personal referrals make up "at least 50% of a professional's client base [and] and it might even go up to 80%" (Skype Interview, July 2014, Transcript, p. 3). It has been argued that such referrals predominantly depend on previous clients spreading the word about the prestige of a particular photographer, which is commonly referred to as word-of-mouth behaviour (e.g. Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007).

It is precisely at this moment that the relevance of social networks and social ties comes into play: As Jeff highlighted, building "real connections" (i.e. strong ties) with authenticators is crucial in triggering the process of authentication. Presumably, strong ties and their capacity to establish trust in an artist and their abilities serves as the main affordance here. In Sienna's case, the relevance of social ties is similar, albeit targeting consumers of artwork instead of external gatekeepers. Relevant literature in the field provides evidence for the relevance of strong social

relationships in this context, too, highlighting their key role in word-of-mouth behaviour. For example, Brown and Reingen (1987) concluded that strong social ties "play a more significant role" (p. 353) in facilitating personal recommendations due to the fact that unlike weak ties, strong social relations provide enough trust to support "information seeking, perceived influence [...] and overlap in personal sources of information". As such, it can be argued that an existing network of strong personal relationships positively impacts achieving recognition in this case.
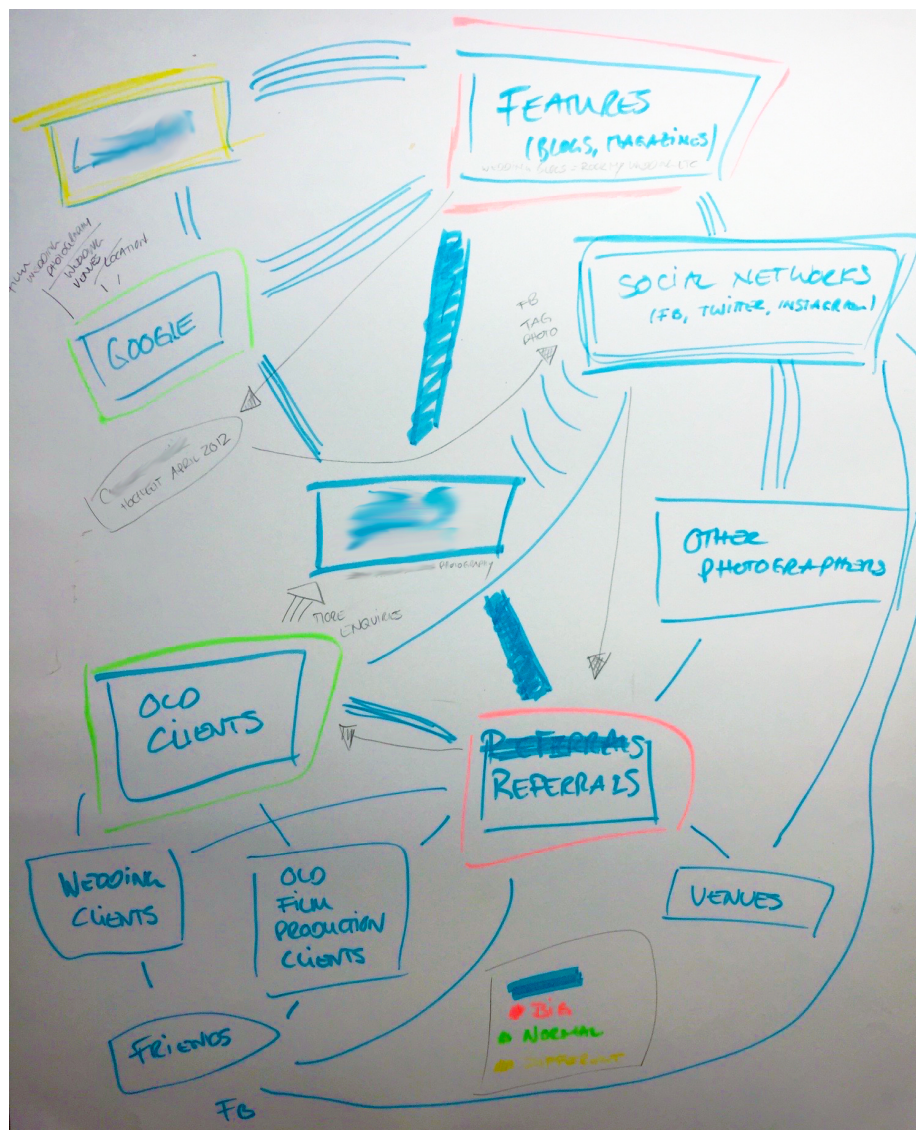


**Figure 21: Hand-drawn network map – Sienna**

Sienna's story however, adds an interesting dimension to the described scenario: As can be seen in the network map that Sienna produced (Figure 21), she clearly indicated "referrals" (area circled in pink, bottom right quadrant) as one core element in her career. Among other elements such as "Old clients" (area circled in

green, bottom left quadrant) and "Wedding clients" (blue box, bottom left quadrant), she also added Facebook (denoted as "FB", bottom left in the map) as being key in this context. She stressed the importance of Facebook in facilitating approval for her work and above all in making comments of approval visible among a specific target group. Drawing on the assumption that digitally mediated social ties are often perceived as weak social ties, Sienna's declared importance of Facebook in facilitating approval for her work seems peculiar. More specifically, it seemed that Sienna utilised features on Facebook to emulate social dynamics in which the expression of personal tastes and interests are important insofar as approval is being shared among friends and followers. She stated that posting images on Facebook triggered a dynamic in which individuals' approval of her work was aligned with existing aesthetic preferences, whereby I interpreted this dynamic as emulating word-of-mouth behaviour offline.

Another element in the network map merits attention here: At its centre, Sienna placed the name of one key person in her career – Hannah (name anonymised in map). In spite of the central importance Sienna attached to the role of other clients and their referrals, Hannah played a key role at the very beginning of her career:

> *I had photographed five or six weddings in the first year [...] and that was when I exhibited for the first and only time at a wedding fair. [...] I exhibited there and I didn't even get one wedding booked through this wedding fair. But, I had one girl who approached me [...] she wanted to do a style shoot ... a photo shooting which is self-organised with models and a theme ... to get published with a wedding blog, [...] which is I think the second biggest blog in England concerning weddings.*
> *(Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 2)*

The contact Sienna established with Hannah was a key moment in her early career stages, as the collaboration with her provided her with an opportunity to gain exposure among a wide audience of eligible clients. Even though, visibility on Facebook became increasingly important, I interpret Hannah's capacity in choosing Sienna as a photographer and publishing her work on the blog served as an initial instance of authentication. I consider Sienna's achievement in establishing herself as a successful wedding photographer to be a result of this initial instance of

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authentication, paired with her ability to expand this process online. On the surface, Facebook seemed to play a major role in attaining recognition. However, in my view, Sienna's achievement was a consequence of the preliminary authentication (interpreted as an attainment of symbolic capital here) through exposure on a major wedding blog. This was enhanced by her ability to capitalise on this existing symbolic capital by leveraging Facebook's affordances to facilitate re-affirmation of legitimised value. So what precise role did Facebook then play in this process and more importantly what is the role of digitally mediated social ties in there?

## 6.3 The role of digitally mediated social ties vs. strong social ties' as a means to facilitate approval online

Online social networking platforms such as Facebook play a role in facilitating authentication, because of their capacity to showcase voices of approval. Drawing on the relevance of personal referrals via word-of-mouth, Facebook as a platform of performed social interaction lends itself to emulate offline social processes. So what is the significance of social ties in word-of-mouth processes? It has been argued that strong ties play a key role in facilitating word-of-mouth dynamics, because individuals often rely on the positive experience of trusted individuals in order to form an opinion about a specific product or service (e.g. Brown & Reingen 1987, Buttle, 2011). The relevance of drawing on a network of closely associated individuals is plausible, because existing trust in peer judgements helps to minimise a potential risk of being disappointed with the end result and knowing their money has been ill-invested. There is common agreement on the relevance of friends and acquaintances in facilitating trust, especially because the intensity of these social bonds produce "greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available" (Granovetter, 1982, p. 113), especially when it comes to making choices on arguably important matters (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.8). In Sienna's case it would only seem logical that potential clients would trust the recommendation of close friends and acquaintances prior to making a decision on which photographer to book for their wedding.

During the first phase of my fieldwork in April 2013, I ran a pilot test with an acquainted wedding photographer – Anna – who attracted my attention, because of her professional use of online social networking platforms (see Chapter 1, Section 1.1). Whereas Anna's professional profile made her a uniquely suitable respondent,

geographical distance and time constraints rendered further empirical work cumbersome. However, interviewing Anna for my pilot study revealed useful data substantiating the relevance of referrals and established social relationships in establishing a reputation as a wedding photographer. Based in Vienna, Ann's account of her days as an emerging photographer illustrated how referrals markedly influenced the success of her work. Like Sienna, she targeted clients from a specifically affluent part of society, as she too had decided to market herself at the upper price segment. Coming from an affluent background herself, Anna mentioned that in fact the very beginnings of her professional career as a wedding photographer were the result of shooting friends' weddings and subsequent referrals.

> *In the beginning [...] somebody called me once and asked me "Do you also do weddings?" and I said to myself 'Ok, why not, I also do weddings.' And then after this first couple, more and more approached me regarding wedding. [...] that was exclusively word of mouth. I didn't have a website, I didn't have anything online. That was really only "Ah you know, I know somehow who does photography ask her, or I knew there was someone doing the pictures at this wedding".*
> (Anna, Interview 1, p. 2)

I interpreted the apparent ease with which Anna managed to establish herself professionally as a result of this existing social network of potential clients. Anna clearly benefitted from the fact that her own friends and acquaintances doubled as a suitable client base, mostly but not exclusively due to the fact that they had sufficient financial means to afford Anna's work. Contrary to Anna's experience, Sienna's early career stages proved more cumbersome, because she lacked an established social network of eligible clients.

> *I had several enquiries from friends or friends of friends but this never really happened, mostly because of the price, because people simply say, "Ah, we cannot afford that" ... so this is also a little bit to do with ... so I could also not afford myself.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 2, p. 7)

I concluded that one major challenge Sienna was confronted with was to establish a network of personal relationships from a particularly affluent target group, which, unlike Anna, she did not have access to, given her own social background. And it is at that precise moment that online social networking platforms became a decisive element for Sienna to achieve exactly that – gaining access to a network of individuals that she was, by default, excluded from. Sienna evidenced the significance of Facebook in sourcing economically potent clients, in reference to one specific wedding she photographed at the very beginning of her career.

*So for example the first wedding in my second year [...] they are both from affluent London families. [...] they got married in a massive church, both lawyers and they had like 120 people there, all their friends all of a similar age, most of them unmarried and because of this wedding I had I think five more weddings in the coming years.*
*(Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 11)*

This statement reveals that Sienna, from the very beginning of her career, had a very specific picture of targeted clients' individuals attributes in mind: In a nutshell, she aimed to establish herself as the photographer of choice among an elite social group, comprised of individuals occupying prestigious professional positions, affluent social backgrounds who were keen to see their sophisticated aesthetic taste reflected in the images taken at the wedding. The relevance of taste and aesthetic preferences is evidenced by Sienna's closer description of the event: *[...] the pictures were amazing, a great sunny spring day, with fresh blossoms on the trees then this crazy church and everything just looked great, she had like a Vera Wang dress, so everything really top"* (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 11). As I will argue later in this chapter, the significance of elite taste along with Sienna's ability to express sophistication in her photography influenced her ability to utilise Facebook in showcasing her abilities. But what is the actual role that online engagement plays in creating visibility and facilitating approval and in further consequence authentication of her work?

In terms of building a reputation among this client base, Sienna's presence at the event (i.e. the actual wedding ceremony) and the resulting exposure among potential new clients undeniably played a crucial role. Background information on

how Sienna gained access to this particular client reveals that in fact existing authentication, interpreted as previously accrued symbolic capital, played a crucial role here. As mentioned earlier, Sienna's acquaintance with Hannah, editor of one of the largest wedding blogs in the UK at a wedding fair, allowed her to gain visibility among a large pool of eligible clients. Getting published on that blog had a significant impact, providing Sienna with exposure, which resulted in *"[...] three inquiries. And the week after another ten enquiries and I then had the following three weddings booked, because of this feature through this blog"* (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 2/3). The abovementioned couple was one of those clients. I interpret this incident as an expression of authentication; the editor's decision to work with Sienna on this style shoot and publish her work online allowed her work to be *approved* by decision-makers in this field. Given the impact this wedding blog has among a key audience in wedding photography, this is an instance of legitimising the aesthetic value of Sienna's work, recognising her as eligible to represent the aesthetic vision of the blog's target audience.

Sienna clearly benefitted from the authentication by being featured on one of the most popular wedding blogs in the UK and the significance of the social relationship she established with its editor, who took on an authoritative role in judging Sienna's eligibility to be featured on the blog. The role of Facebook in capitalising on pre-existing authentication and actively expanding its reverberations comes in at this point:

> *[...] with Facebook for example ... one thing that I actually always do, whenever I have a wedding ready I upload this onto my blog then I also put one photo on Facebook with the link to the blog post ... and if the couple – so the wedding couple – is friends with me on Facebook then I tag them in the picture so that their friends who don't know me see this in their newsfeed and also click on my page, because this is something that so far has always worked best.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 5)

This implies that Sienna uses Facebook as a trigger to connect to a wider audience from a similar social circle, using posted images as a visual cue to facilitate social engagement. The 'tagging' feature is particularly important here, as it enabled Sienna to reach out to this particular network, in absence of pre-existing personal

acquaintance. The act of tagging facilitates a dynamic that can be compared to offline word-of-mouth scenarios as it provides an incentive to share reactions to the image. Unlike in offline scenarios where word-of-mouth happens as a by-product of social engagement, on Facebook, the exchange of this information is in the focus. Granting audiences a glimpse into her work motivates 'tagged' individuals to infer information regarding Sienna's ability as a professional based on the visual aesthetic presented in the image.

Facebook enabled Sienna to immediately draw attention to her work, gain the attention of her targeted audience and most importantly publicise previous clients' approval of her work.

> *If these people [i.e., a particular wedding couple] have lots of friends on Facebook [...] and when I tag them in their own picture then I get the five-fold in terms of hits [...] so then really all of their friends click on this and say 'Cool picture, looks great!', which is especially great when my client sees that their friends really like the picture, which is then again good for me, because it's praise for me.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 5)

In the same vein, Jeff appreciated online social networking platforms for their capacity to create visibility among audiences. Albeit expressing reservations regarding the relevance of these virtual connections aiding an actual process of authentication, he holds that *"Facebook is a good place to collect people [...] you know, to make friends, make new connections. They could be potentially gallerists, interested buyers, new friends"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 8). While this statement shows that Jeff appreciates Facebook as a general platform to reach out to a potential, yet undefined audience, Sienna takes it one step further: Jeff's definition of whose visibility he is aiming to attract remains rather vague *"[...] anyone on Facebook that's relevant I suppose [...] It could be anyone really. [...] just in case someone, you know, pays attention"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 7/9), *whereas* Sienna's approach proves more assertive by *targeting* a very specific client base through Facebook; this is paired with her efforts to facilitate endorsements by previous clients and encourage voiced appreciation of her work on Facebook. This dynamic can also be inferred from Sienna's network map, as she

marked old clients (Figure 14) and other elements as being interrelated with her use of Facebook.

Incentivising engagement with published content is a mechanism that facilitates social interaction, thereby *activating* these social ties. Whereas 'tagging' is effective in targeting a specific audience, it is Sienna's ability to create actual interaction by encouraging people's comments on her posted images.

*So, what's great is, if the people who are in the pictures themselves comment [...] because then most of the time they say "We had such a great time with you and whatever and we still look at the pictures every day" [...] and if it is on Facebook of course even better, because more people see it. (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 10)*

The couple positively commenting on her work potentially encourages their friends and friends of friends to form a positive opinion about Sienna's work. Thereby, commenting on Facebook emulates one particular aspect of word-of-mouth behaviour that is often referred to as approval utility (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Approval utility proposes that, by and large, consumer behaviour is often incentivised by consumer's satisfaction, whereby in this case one crucial aspect results from the fact that the wedding couple "publicly praises one's contributions" (Hennig-Thurau, 2004, p. 43). Therefore, not only the fact that previous clients are content with Sienna's work, but also their public voicing of approval is crucial. Facebook's affordance of publicising opinions among an existing group of friends or followers works to Sienna's advantage. In that regard, the "public display of connection" (boyd & Ellison, 2008) as a common feature of online social networking platforms is important. Especially, because particularly Facebook's affordance to use published, shared content, such as for example an image of a wedding, helps individual users to "connect based on shared interests [...] or activities." (p. 210).

Whereas for Sienna, the voiced and publicly visible approval of her work proved effective in expanding recognition of her work, Jeff challenges its effectiveness in facilitating actual opportunities for building recognition in his career. He holds that although visibility on Facebook bears potential in getting yourself noticed, it does not replace actual engagement with decision makers.

*If it wasn't for Facebook it would be me sitting in a pub talking to people, telling them I'm an artist, or having postcards and giving them to everyone I meet [...]. I'd still have to go through a process of connecting. [...] it's [Facebook] a platform, but really it's meeting the right people and turning up in front of them.*
*(Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 15)*

This brings us back to the relevance of social ties in building recognition: While Jeff agrees that virtual environments can create connections and opportunities, he questions the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in this respect: *"I don't think [these connections] are as strong as engaging with curators, etc. and having something come out of it"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 16). Acknowledging Jeff's and Sienna's divergent takes on online social networking platforms I was keen to trace the actual source of their differing views. Are they perhaps talking about two entirely different perceptions on what authentication means? If so, then what is the affordance of social ties in each of their accounts and what is their explanatory value regarding affordances of digitally mediated social ties in fostering approval and authentication?

## 6.4 The relevance of social group affiliation in authenticating creative work – affordances of digitally mediated social ties vs. strong ties

A growing amount of literature attributes specific significance to online social networking platforms in context with word-of-mouth behaviour (e.g. Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013; Steffes & Burgee, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Existing claims around the relevance of creating online dynamics of word-of-mouth approval often revolve around issues of communities being built around voiced claims in approval of a particular consumer experience. Facebook has received particular attention in this regard, whereby its affordance to create brand communities "based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001, p. 412) is most typically highlighted. Even though, this aspect is important in this context, my interest in investigating the relevance of Facebook in Sienna's case aims at a more fundamental level. I argue that not only was Facebook important to create relationships affording approval of Sienna's

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'brand'; more importantly, I claim that Sienna's ability to speak to these audiences required her appreciation of specific cues that signalled preferred forms of taste and aesthetic preferences pertinent to the social group her targeted clients were affiliated with.

Tracing the significance of strong social bonds in this context becomes particularly relevant because social affiliation is often expressed through similar attitudes towards taste and personal preferences among others. There is ample literature on the significance of taste and aesthetic preferences as one indicator of social class affiliation (e.g. Savage et al., 2013; Bourdieu, 1984). In Distinction (1982) Bourdieu argued that expressions of aesthetic preference manifest in individuals' choices, such as exhibiting a preference for classical music vs. popular music, highbrow art vs. lowbrow art, etc. It is plausible to assume that class affiliation and bonding over personal preferences is one scenario that is continuously practiced in offline social settings. There is a social component to identifying similarities in taste and aesthetic preferences; Goffman (1959/1978) for example, saw social affiliation processes as a form of "theatrical performance" (p. xi), whereby the notion of performance describes "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 8). In reference to social affiliation, the activity of social actors designed to influence others' perception of them by manifesting – either consciously or subconsciously – expressions of taste, is key.

Social settings such as cocktail parties serve as a popular platform in which taste and style preferences are communicated and thus serve to *practice* affiliation with other individuals. I argue that conceiving social affiliation processes as performance holds value in explaining the process of authentication as it too is subject to individuals' perception and evaluation of others' actions in reference to their own actions. However, offline social settings hold a different capacity as compared to online platforms in terms of their affordance in exchanging specific cues signalling taste and aesthetic expressions. I argue that offline environments as a platform of exchange of social cues lend themselves to a wider, possibly more holistic presentation of self as compared to online environments. This in turn impacts the affordance of offline vs. online social scenarios in aiding authentication processes. Drawing on Jeff's and Sienna's scenarios, the indicators on which authentication is based on differ widely, which explains why their evaluation of online social networking platforms in that regard diverge significantly.

Recently, online social settings have been compared to offline social affiliation dynamics. For example, Liu et al. (2009) argued that "online social networks reflect – with a great degree of insight – the social and cultural order of offline society in general." (p. 19). This implies that social affiliation processes via expressions of personal taste and style common to offline networking scenarios are equally prevalent in the online space. In particular, I argue that the expression of taste is a strikingly visible element in online social networking platforms such as Facebook as "they simply reveal the superficial structure of social connectedness" insofar as "social network profiles themselves imply deeper patterns of culture and taste" (Liu et al., 2009, p. 18). Social class affiliation in online social settings is signalled via the information individuals give away on their profiles, such as information on preferred music, leisure activities, but also through the content they post and, more importantly, the content they approve of by hitting the 'like' button or engaging with published content. Lewis et al. (2008) substantiate this notion, pointing to the capacity of online social networking platforms in tracing expressions of taste as a relational affordance: "Facebook profiles contain open-ended spaces for respondents to enter their favourite music, movies, and books. [...] the availability of these data creates a number of new research opportunities – including clarifying the nature of tastes as a cause or consequence of social interaction" (p. 5).

Acknowledging the significance of using Facebook in Sienna's case, I conclude that she uses online environments to affiliate herself with this specific social circle by signalling similar taste preferences through the images she posts. It follows that affiliation with this social group is exclusively built on the basis of aesthetic preferences and its mutual approval, which creates a one-dimensional affiliation given that inclusion in this social circle is exclusively built on the basis of this particular feature. Comparing this scenario of social affiliation to traditional offline settings highlights the very limited capacity of online social settings in facilitating authentication. Goffman's "cocktail party" (1959/1978, p. 66) serves as a useful example here, as it draws attention to the fact that individuals typically choose social settings as a backdrop for the exchange of social cues that allow exchanging symbols of one's (class) status. Goffman (1951) argues that in order to achieve cohesion among a particular social group, status symbols or *sign vehicles* are exchanged and approved or disapproved of. These cues are exchanged by communicative acts and are typically inferred by observing how individuals *act* in

front of the group. "They are the cues which select for a person the status that is to be imputed to him and the way in which others are to treat him" (p. 294).

Jeff's network drawing (Figure 22) alludes to this scenario: Putting his interpretation of the significance of relationships in his professional career onto paper, Jeff used the drawing as a platform to illustrate instances and processes pertinent to the field of cultural and creative production. Highlighting the importance of social gatherings such as exhibitions, he says:

*[...] it's a social event, isn't it? It's an opportunity to show your work to your friends, but also to people that you may feel that would be interested in going. It's an opportunity to network while having free drinks and seeing the art, you know, it's a combination of things.*
*(Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 5)*

This act of networking among a defined audience is one important instance of facilitating authentication as it sets the scene for the exchange of social cues that enable gatekeepers to infer whether the way in which a person acts coincides with the expectations of the group. Jeff highlighted the fact that social gatherings in the art sector lend themselves to the observation of a "combination of things", which points to the significance of a holistic interpretation of one's self in front of the group, which is markedly different from its online equivalent.

Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" is significant here; it refers to those "deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that we possess" (1984, p. 67) which convey a number of cues that gatekeepers in the cultural field use to make a decision on whether a person is trustworthy – on the basis of congruence with the habitus of other groups members – to being bestowed with recognition. The point here is that in Jeff's case a holistic evaluation of one's suitability to fit the criteria of inclusion into a predefined social circle is key for achieving authentication.
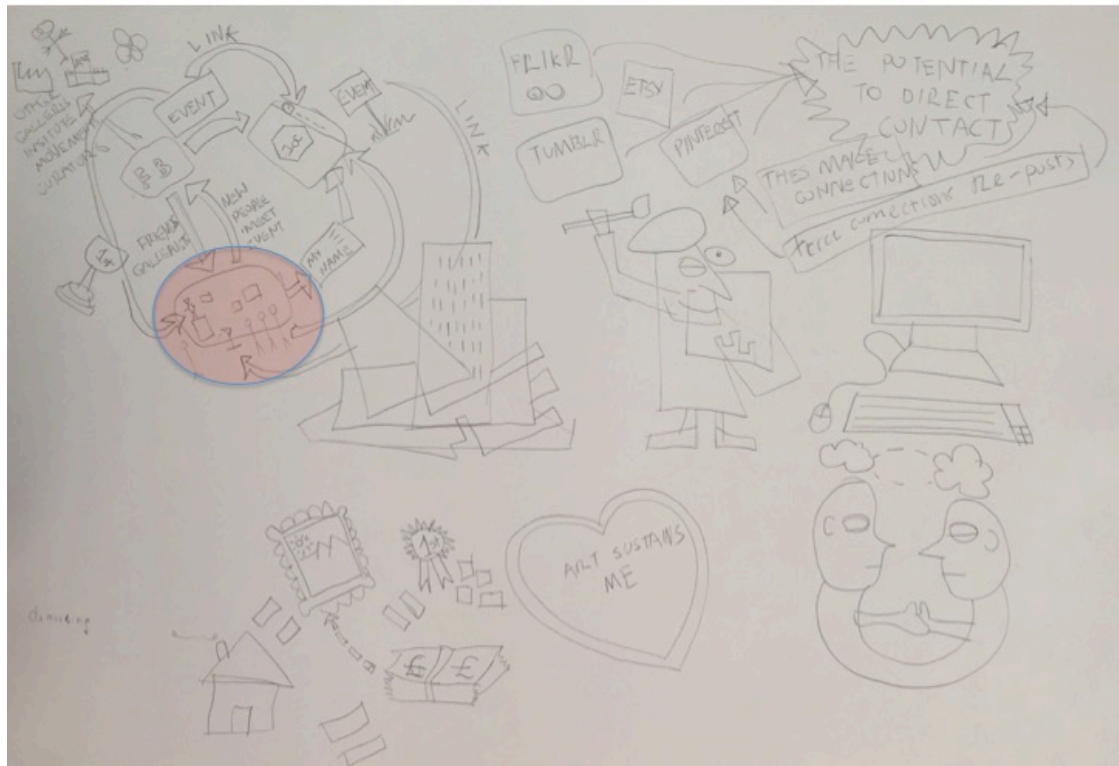
**Figure 22: Hand-drawn network map – Jeff**

Returning to Sienna's case, she too aimed at being recognised within a particular social circle, which required an assessment of indicators that allowed inferring congruence with existing expectations. Nonetheless, the purpose of this evaluation is strikingly different. Whereas in Jeff's case, taste and personal preferences are evaluated alongside other social indicators, I argue that online, expressions of taste can become a uniquely relevant identification factor. This means that whereas offline, expressions of taste are commonly perceived in context with a spectrum of other indicators of social class (e.g. language, affiliation with other members at the party, etc.), online these factors seem to fade from the spotlight. I see this phenomenon as crucial in terms of Sienna's initial challenge to gain approval among a particular social class. While her 'given' social class affiliation would not have allowed her to be associated with this particular target group, the conscious choice of affiliating herself via her specific aesthetic preferences signalled on Facebook, enabled her to form an association solely on the basis of style and taste. I claim that Sienna's case of being granted the approval of this particular social circle on Facebook served a purely functional purpose. This implies that the evaluation of her professional credibility was a result of fulfilling the requirements of one specific work contract.

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Further elaborating on this claim, I refer to the significance of "social space" (Bourdieu, 1989) in context with the relational formation of social class. In his argument, Bourdieu claims that the specificity of social space is key to allow individuals of various positions to affiliate themselves with one another, insofar as "Agents and sets of agents are assigned a position, a location or a precise class of neighbouring positions, i.e., a particular area within that space; they are thus defined by their relative position in terms of a multi-dimensional system of coordinates whose values correspond to the values of the different pertinent variables." (p. 14). Unsurprisingly, the allocation of different forms of capital is key to assume particular positions, whereby legitimate forms of capital achieve closeness among a particular group. In general, "agents in the same class are as similar as possible in the greatest possible number of respects" (p. 15), whereby my interpretation of "similarity" is that whatever constitutes a legitimate form of capital is based on a more or less clear definition of what capital represents. To draw on one of Bourdieu's examples, legitimate cultural capital in the context of upper class social circles may be expressed by knowledge of literature, opera and in general the consumption of high brow art. Consequently, individuals 'liking' Sienna's images published on Facebook signals congruence with existing expressions of taste, which serves to showcase similarity and justified affiliation with particular social circles on this specific occasion.

I have previously mentioned that in Sienna's case, expressions of style and aesthetic preferences seem to play a role, too. However, further drawing on Bourdieu's logic, legitimate forms of capital are traditionally assessed holistically, which implies that it requires a compound of legitimate cultural, economic and social capital together to produce affiliation with a particular social group. Consequently, I assume that the main difference in the formation of social class and the formation of brand communities, if you like, revolves around one particular specificity of legitimised cultural capital. In Sienna's case this means that community and identification with the group is asserted on the basis of coinciding preferences of style represented in her photography. Albeit similarity in this particular aspect does not automatically produce social class affiliation, it seems to produce enough similarity for Sienna to become approved and associated with this particular social class for the purposes of engaging in a business related activity. This one-dimensional production of similarity with social groups is also the main reason why digitally mediated social ties are efficient to facilitate cohesion in this particular

scenario. In other words, Sienna becomes part of this social group momentarily on the basis of her expressed style and in the particular timely context of a wedding. Whereas a more profound and lasting affiliation with the group is not guaranteed it is also not necessary to achieve recognition.

I conclude that Facebook's features of creating visibility by posting images for example and targeting specific audiences by tagging them in the post creates a platform where individuals seem to bond contingent on the content being displayed. In addition, showing approval of content by hitting the 'like' button and commenting on published content is one key feature in sharing affirmation and publicly voicing it, which is important for expressing claims of approval and making those visible among a particular audience. Similar to my claim in Lilie's case (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.4), tool-specific features are only one relevant element in tracing how online social networking platforms enable access to building social relationships. Unlike claims that trigger the assumption that Facebook's features build social interaction by itself, I argue that also in Sienna's case, there are indicators that provide evidence for the relevance of person-specific technical skills alongside existing professional skills that unlock the potential of developing digitally mediated social ties into meaningful forms of social interaction.

## 6.5 Affordances of digitally mediated social ties in facilitating expressions of approval

In Sienna's case, the use of online social networking platforms played a significant role in amplifying the effect of pre-existing authentication: Sienna's collaboration with the editor at one of the UK's largest wedding blogs, which resulted in the publication of images from a style shot, portrayed an instance of authentication. The recognition gained from this exposure motivated targeted clients to approach her for future work, which resulted in a number of work contracts such as the earlier mentioned wedding. Precisely, being featured on the blog earned her professional credibility, whereby the published images served as an incentive to assure clients of Sienna's professionalism. In addition, the images served as a means for clients to be reassured that their expectations of Sienna's aesthetic would meet their own expectations. Sienna sees the benefit of blog features in their immediacy claiming that the effect is almost instantaneous: *"so if I*

*post something at 9 in the morning I receive feedback on it in the coming four hours" (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 6).*

Acknowledging that pre-existing recognition played a vital role for Sienna in the early stages of her career, the use of Facebook becomes important as a means to capitalise on already achieved credibility and attract additional attention. Put simply, Facebook serves as a facilitator to promote existing credibility among a wider audience, which leads us to the next step of specifying what role digitally mediated social ties actually have in perpetuating the effects of existing authentication. I argue that the connections Sienna established by 'tagging' a previously unknown group of individuals affords outcomes that are typically associated with strong social ties, at least to a certain extent. As mentioned earlier, it has been argued that word-of-mouth dynamics are best supported in strong social relationships. Arguably, this is related to issues of trust that are pivotal in word-of-mouth dynamics. Specifically, for reasons of homophily, the importance strong ties assume in facilitating information seeking behaviour by word-of-mouth, is evident given the fact that "consumers in strong tie relationships are likely to have an understanding of how likely a product offering would be to satisfy the other strong tie person's needs given the level of intimacy of the strong tie relationship" (Steffes & Burgee, 2008, p. 47). Sienna's action of tagging a couple's friends and friends of friends on Facebook grants her access to a network of presumably already existing strong ties. However, what can the connection that Sienna established via tagging this circle of friends be labelled? While it would be unsuitable to simply call this connection a strong tie, given Sienna's loose acquaintance with those specific individuals, they nevertheless afford outcomes that are typically associated with strong ties.

Defining the quality of digitally mediated social ties in Sienna's context poses similar challenges as observed in Lilie's case. In Chapter 5 (Section 5.3), I argued that Lilie's connection to a power holder created via Twitter mimicked the affordances of a strong tie relationship in view of its capacity to create trust. Nonetheless, traditional indicators of strong social ties, specifically time and continued interaction, did not exist. Therefore, I argued that Lilie's use of Twitter features enabled her to *create* trust by conveying indicators of professional credibility. In Sienna's case facilitating trust plays an equally important role, albeit in a different context. I argue that by 'tagging' wedding couples in Facebook posts, Sienna creates connections with other individuals who are already associated with

this specific couple, whereby the formation of these connections are incentivised by displayed cues of style and taste. This means that the published image depicting the wedded couple alongside a number of emotional cues (e.g. bride in the wedding gown, displaying a sense of cheerfulness and content, indicators of aesthetic preferences such as choice of location, outfit and style) served as an incentive for affiliated friends to approve this scenario and display their affirmation by 'liking' the post or commenting on it.

Strictly speaking, these connections facilitated via 'tagging' surely do not qualify as a means to establish an actual relationship. What counts however, is that these connections elicit the display of voiced approval for Sienna's work. Even though virtually no relationship exists between Sienna and the couples' friends on Facebook, the fact that voiced approval of Sienna's aesthetic, anchored in the posted image, creates a sense of community building around this specific 'event'. Sienna evaluates this dynamic as significant, because it fosters interaction among this particular group of individuals.

> *A comment [n.b. instead of a "like"] is better in any case simply because the people interact and that they would like to say something to that [...] so if these are people that say 'Wow these pictures look totally great' then ... if a potential client sees this, then it is also a confirmation that it is good.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 10)

Specifically, in this aspect the significance of digitally mediated social ties overlaps with Lilie's scenario: social connections are being built and become meaningful around 'one specific event'. This means that any sense resulting from the connection is only valid at that specific moment and regarding one specific event. Thus, whereas digitally mediated social ties do not sustain a sense of generalised trust, corresponding with strong ties, creating trust is specified around one specific feature. In Lilie's case, I speculated that credibility was established on the basis of indicators of professionalism, which she managed to convey by giving away the 'right' cues on her Twitter profile. In a similar fashion, Sienna built credibility by publishing images that, drawing on Facebook's features, could be 'liked' or (positively) commented on, which provided a platform for this network of ties to identify with, particularly around cues that indicated personal aesthetic preferences. Essentially, the affordance of digitally mediated social ties in both

cases resonates with enabling the individual user to give away the 'right' cues to individual potential clients and/or stakeholders.

## 6.6 Activating digitally mediated social ties by fostering social engagement

I have established that Facebook's properties of publicising content such as images, for example, paired with the possibility to comment on published content, supports Sienna's aim to gain the approval of clients from a particular segment of society. The connection she created via Facebook facilitated a process of positive affirmation that is contingent on the approval of previous clients. Whereas platform immanent affordances were key in fostering approval, I argue that Sienna's ability to leverage platform properties to address aesthetic preferences of her target group significantly contributed to her success online. Online social networking platforms like Facebook heavily rely on visual forms of communication, primarily through images and videos, and lend themselves supremely to positive affirmation of content. Relevant literature on word-of-mouth online suggests that Facebook in specific is perceived as an eligible source of information when it comes to "sharing better-than-expected outcomes" (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013, p. 1476). This implies that positively connoted content is being favoured, when it comes to sharing experiences, whereby it can be assumed that how content is being portrayed plays a major role in facilitating engagement. Whereas focussing on positive content to secure approval is key, I argue that Sienna's skill in targeting her desired audience by publishing content that is not only positive, but meets the exact aesthetic preferences of this group, is what made all the difference.

Considering the fact that positive content is more likely to gain attention among audiences on Facebook, I assume that Sienna's acknowledgment of this dynamic influenced the beneficial outcome she managed to achieve. Several parts of Sienna's statement support this assumption: For example, speaking about *how* she chooses content she posts on Facebook, illustrates that she is aware of the fact that she herself needs to create an incentive to allow individuals to engage with it. *"If it is, for example pure self-promotion, then people are not interested in that. If it's incredibly great pictures then they are already significantly more interested"* (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 6). Sienna asserts that whatever she posts is never based on random decision-making; rather, she appreciates that using an

aesthetically-driven medium such as Facebook requires her skill in selecting content that ensure people's engagement. I interpret Sienna's use of Facebook as being informed by a strategic decision, whereby her goal is to increase the likelihood of individuals' engagement and approval by selecting those images that are most likely to yield a reaction, such as a comment.

> At a wedding you photograph, I don't know, between 800 and 1500 photos [and] when I process the photos from a wedding, I see two or three photos where I think 'Those are already my favourites' [...] and these are mostly the ones where the emotions are great [...] where people say 'Wow this is really great!' so those that evoke a positive reaction.
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 6)

Sienna's perceived importance of actively selecting content that facilitates a reaction is crucial in terms of triggering a process of social interaction that produces actions of approval. Sienna is aware of the fact, that it is particularly her expertise of selecting appropriate visual content to incentivise individuals' engagement. Sienna's skill in correctly reading the preferred tastes of her audience alongside her professional skill to reflect these aesthetic cues in her work is crucial. Notably, Sienna says that it is precisely her ability to detect aspects in an image that are likely to evoke an emotional response from people looking at the image, which at the same time promises further engagement with the proposed material.

> [...] so at one wedding they had for example a dog that was wearing a bow-tie and a mini-tail coat or something like that and that of course makes for a good photo, because everyone will be like 'Ahhh great dog, so sweet' or a small child blowing soap bubbles, so something that's funny or an especially breath-taking background because it was in a great location [...].
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 2, p. 10/11)

Sienna was keenly aware of the importance of signalling sophistication in the images she published; not only did her imagery (i.e., photographing on film, showcasing sophisticated designer outfits, exclusive locations, etc.) deliver visual cues that echoed clients' taste; Sienna actively sought to integrate concrete cues that communicated exclusivity and sophistication: Sienna made it a habit to label her

work with specific tags, such as for example "Wedding, Savoy Hotel, London" (Sienna HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 3). This ensures that on Facebook, as well as for work featured on her blog, individuals searching for suitable photographers are provided with an incentive to associate Sienna's work with sophistication; cues that portray Sienna's work as being linked to exclusive locations such as the Savoy Hotel in London, ensure that potential clients are assured that Sienna's work corresponds with their likely expectation to make sophistication an integral part of their wedding and ensure that this is visually communicated in Sienna's photography. Hence, Sienna's awareness to ensure that her published work is associated with sophistication, serves as evidence of her ability to utilise properties to strategically influence individuals' response to her content and thus increase the likelihood of engagement.

Relevant literature in the field proposes that images in particular play a key role in triggering social interaction as they provide a platform to share and identify with experiences among a wider social circle. Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) argued that Facebook is a space in which photographs are key in representing life events using visual artefacts to "help build and sustain social groups by communicating shared values and stories" (p. 254). Therefore, posting images on Facebook adopts a key role in sustaining existing social relationships in the sense of providing triggers for social engagement. Particularly, positively connoted life events such as weddings lend themselves uniquely to promote social engagement (cf. Slater, 1995) and to reiterate identification with a particular social group. In reference to Sienna's work, I interpret the action of posting images on Facebook as important in terms of two particular aspects: First, the visual representation of the recently wedded couple serves as a means to re-identify with a given social group, which is relevant in terms of Sienna's aim to affirm recognition for her work among this particular group of individuals. Second, the published image serves as a trigger for interaction among this particular group of individuals, which gives space for additional affirmation of Sienna's work, which is important in terms of substantiating the recognition she has achieved for her work. Contextualising this claim alongside the relevance that social interaction assumes in terms of affirming individuals' opinions on Sienna's work, it has been argued that particularly "positive conversations" trigger dynamics of spreading the word quickly, which in the context of word-of-mouth behaviour can lead to "growing brand recognition" (Longart, 2010, p. 146).

Sienna recognises the impact of social interaction as a means to boost recognition and explains how she consciously takes steps to facilitate this dynamic.

> *It's important that you get a reaction from people. [...] So for example I post a picture of the bride's shoes ... and if you post a question together with that like 'How many shoes do people buy?' or 'Isn't it crazy how much people spend on that?' or whatever. So if its some sort of interactive question then you get even more feedback.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 6)

It seems that Sienna's action of using Facebook as a platform to facilitate and actively steer the conversation in a positive direction by way of choosing images that provoke a reaction, serves her purpose of actively fostering affirmation for her work. I conclude that Sienna capitalises on Facebook's affordance of fostering interaction via shared content, which in her case doubles as a means to create awareness for her work among a particular target group, in addition to reaffirming her status as a recognised photographer.

In addition to that, Sienna is conscious of the fact that in social environments – online and offline alike – targeting opinion leaders is key for recognition building. Referring to the wedding couple she initially mentioned, she commented that their appreciation of her work and them voicing their positive opinion about her work was beneficial to establishing herself as a photographer in the upper price segment.

> *That was such at thing where I thought, some recommendations are worth more than recommendations from other people depending from whom they come. [...] its mostly people who have a certain profession or who come from a specific social class ... so I think people take them more seriously or because their opinion is often quite substantiated.*
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 10/11)

I conclude that Sienna's use of Facebook was influenced by her awareness of the relevance of opinion leadership even in the online context. Consequently, in aiming to establish a reputation in an online environment, one's awareness of offline power dynamics being reiterated online seems to boost individual outcomes.

Evaluating the significance of online social networking platforms in both Sienna's and Jeff's cases, I conclude that whereas Sienna utilised Facebook to capitalise on existing authentication and facilitate approval among a targeted audience, digitally mediated social interaction proved less powerful in Jeff's case. Assuming that a traditional process of authentication does not easily lend itself to a virtual environment, because of its contingency on 'real' connections, I am inclined to argue that digitally mediated social ties are simply not relevant to Jeff. Appreciating Jeff's ambiguous reflection on the relevance of digitally mediated social ties however suggests that other factors equally influenced Jeff's dismissive stance towards online social networking platforms. I argue that aside from the disparate requirements of facilitating authentication in Jeff's and Sienna's cases, both respondents' motivation and the factors that influenced it, equally played a role in understanding their different stances towards the effectiveness of digitally mediated social ties in facilitating their goals.

Throughout the conversations with Jeff, I got the impression that his dissatisfaction with the overall progress of his career partly originated in a feeling of being at a disadvantage compared to other more successful colleagues. When I asked why he experienced getting to know the right people as so challenging, he mentioned that at that very moment he felt "not savvy enough to infiltrate the art market the way I wish to" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 15). Encouraging Jeff to elaborate further on why this was the case, he went on to say

> *[...] because it's really a who knows who kind of society, unfortunately. I mean, it seems that people that do a Masters at the Royal College, or another college that's got a name for itself, are able to facilitate themselves as professional artists much easier than people who are outside of that network of people. For example, lecturers will be fully aware of who works in the galleries and stuff, so they'd be able to connect an artist better to a gallery, etc.*
> (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 15)

This sense of exclusion from the tightly knit network of individuals who make the decisions that Jeff describes resonates directly with the picture of intentionally constructed barriers of access that both Bourdieu (1984) and Goffman (1951) describe in their work on status. Jeff's acknowledgement of his position as an

outsider to the field, who lacks access to the 'in crowd' due to having the wrong credentials, seems to justify his being at a disadvantage. How does this attitude reflect on Jeff's appreciation of the relevance of digitally mediated social engagement? I assume that Jeff's dismissive approach towards online engagement was not purely a result of its perceived irrelevance in aiding authentication in the field of cultural production, but was also influenced by his self perception as an artist who would not be eligible to easily gain access in the first place. It is plausible to assume that a general sense of being at a disadvantage may have negatively influenced appreciating the value of online social networking platforms and to use these as a window of opportunity, a stepping stone, so to speak, on the way to building recognition.

Recent literature on digital exclusion highlights the importance of subjective levels of disadvantage regarding an individuals' perception of their digital skills and resources when compared to those of others (Helsper, in press). This offers a more integrated approach to understanding to which extent individuals see themselves able to benefit from digital engagement as it takes into account that when comparing themselves to others, some individuals may see themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to estimating their ability to leverage affordances of digital technology. It is thus plausible that a comparison of one's ability to use online platforms may result in a perception of disadvantage, which may impact their motivation to capitalise on the technology's affordances.

Upon comparing Jeff's and Lilie's cases, I observed that their relative difference in attitude and use of online social networking platforms resonated with the abovementioned claim: Like Jeff, Lilie was struggling to gain access to individuals affiliated with an exclusive social circle (i.e., a politician holding access to information), which shows that in both cases respondents were dealing with a lack of access, which can be attributed to their credibility. Whereas I acknowledge differences in the relative implications of access, I argue that their differing interpretations of the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction in facilitating access are important.

In Chapter 5 (Section 5.5), I argued that Lilie's use of Twitter in facilitating access was one window of opportunity she used to *create* access as a response to acknowledging failure of other more traditional means of doing this. Interpreting the relevance Jeff attributes to online social networking platforms, I conclude that he too is aware of their affordance as a facilitator. *"They [i.e., platforms such as*

Facebook] are all really important, they're all opportunities. [...] networking always involves every way of connecting so you can't put precedence over one or the other" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 6). In spite of appreciating their potential, Jeff seems to lack motivation to actually *activate* these opportunities. Why is this the case? I see two important factors here that help plausibly trace respondents' different actions in the face of equally existing opportunities: On one hand, Jeff acknowledges that his engagement online is limited:

> *I'm trying to be, I mean it's having the time to do all of these things [...]*
> *there's so many things I have to do. Flickr is somewhere I need to be*
> *present, and I'm not really too present there.*
> (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 9/10)

Jeff also seems to attribute the relevance of social media to factors of luck and coincidence, by portraying his online activity as a sort of unpredictable gamble. Unlike, Sienna and Lilie who made a keen effort to target very specific individuals; Jeff argues that he primarily posts images of his work online *"just in case someone [...] pays attention"* (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 9). Aside from these motivational aspects that impact activation strategies online, I argue that peer dynamics resulting from network affiliation equally play a role. By this, I mean that the use of Facebook in establishing social ties to build recognition may also be affected by the relative extent to which online engagement is perceived as a legitimised practice in reference to their peer group.

In both Lilie's and Sienna's cases, the use of online social networking platforms as a means to expand visibility and create connections represent a firmly established practice approved by other members of their social networks. This is supported by Lilie's statement in which she describes the exchange of "best practices" in using online social networking platforms among her network of fellow photography students as a fixed element of peer support (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.5.3).

Sienna takes this one step further by describing social networking online as a core element and one of the founding pillars of her professional niche: In contrast, the relevance of social engagement online is perceived negligent in Jeff's social network, where the traditional route to achieving recognition is seen as an irrevocable principle of success. In this social environment, the need to be approved

by elite figures and undergo a process of authentication is portrayed as the norm that forms a central part of one's definition of artistic credibility. This finding resonates with Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and the way in which habitus influences practice, which aligns with the proposition that habitus "generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 170). This implies that practices that manifest in observable behaviour are associated with individuals' habitus, that is to say, incorporated, legitimised ways of acts of behaviour in front of other members associated with the field. Simply put, Jeff's reluctance to use online social networking platforms is interpreted as a result of perceiving digital tools as an illegitimate means to facilitate approval. Being part of a peer group of other fine artists and sculptors, it is plausible to assume that among this particular group of creative professionals, relying on Facebook or Twitter is perceived as an illegitimate practice that might be disregarded and even frowned upon. In contrast, in Sienna's and Lilie's case the use of social media forms an integral, commonly accepted part of individuals' creative practice. Drawing on their statements, I interpret their perception of digital tools as an accepted, clever way to make their careers work, whereby best practices and instances of 'online success' are celebrated and shared among peers.

## 6.7 Contextualising digital literacy skills – links to cultural capital

Previously, I have argued that awareness of social rules as persistently shaping online social interaction is a plausible factor in tracing individuals' efficiency in using online social networking platforms. Similar to Lilie's case, the fact that Sienna is aware of the online environment as a social space (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.5.2) in which power dynamics expressed by individuals' expressions of taste are present, seems to have benefitted her use of Facebook as a means to establish recognition among a particular social group. The fact, that the validity of individuals' opinions is often being assessed in line with their social status, seems to have motivated Sienna to specifically target individuals' of a specific social standing. Granted, it may have been the case that Sienna's particular use of Facebook has been motivated largely by intuition and learning by doing. Nonetheless, I speculate that her awareness of fostering recognition among her particular audience ties in with her previous professional experience.

Specifically, Sienna's skill in leveraging Facebook's strong focus on visual elements as a means to engage audiences, I speculate that her previous work experience as a film cutter comes into effect here. Speaking about her professional life experiences, before she decided to become a full time photographer, she claims that one of the acquired key skills was the ability to create a narrative with her photographic work.

> [...] my goal is actually always to tell a story from the wedding day. And this is also the primary objective of a cutter, so you kind of put the story together to tell it, so it makes sense. [...] I think I saw a lot of good images, I have also developed a certain eye for that.
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 13)

Sienna's previous work experience and the skill she developed in being able to identify good images, paired with a keen eye in reading the messages conveyed, played a key role in her career. After all, she claims that one of the key skills she developed was that *"you can evaluate your own work, that you are able to say what is good and what is bad" (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 13)*. This particular skill of being able to judge your own work and to be selective about particular images suitable for publishing is equally relevant in terms of creating an identity online via visual content. Moreover, I argue that not only being able to judge the quality of work, but also to select images that convey the right cues was key in Sienna's successful use of Facebook: not only did she target the 'right' individuals on Facebook, but she also understood how to communicate indicators that signalled sophistication and elite taste, which I argue is to a certain extent a result of previous work experience.

Approaching Facebook as a space where group identification is displayed to the outside world, particularly via visual content, is important in this context, too. It has been argued that in online social space, expressing taste and interests, is key to the specific identify through which one would like to be identified by the outside world (e.g. Liu et al., 2008). Consequently, on Facebook friends' networks and social affiliations become manifest through sharing particular content. In Sienna's case, I argue that aside from her skill as a photographer, one element that has been important is asserting her target group's preferences in taste, thus affirming their existing identification with a particular aesthetic.

By doing so, she not only caters to existing communicated taste preferences, but also signals that her own aesthetic corresponds with preferences of her target group.

> I photograph on film [...] which is rather rare in what concerns weddings. [...] So I have that quite often that people who like to photograph themselves or it happened twice that the father of the bride was a photographer and they said 'My dad always photographed on film and that's why I want to have someone who does that, too.'
> (Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 2, p. 9)

As this statement implies, Sienna's clients often come from a pool of individuals' who identify with her sophisticated style to such an extent that aesthetic preferences become the unique source of trust in her work. This resonates with claims in which the formation of networks is often associated with expressed "social status, political beliefs, musical tastes, etc." which "may be inferred from the company one keeps" (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 72). Likewise, on Facebook the expression of taste signalled by approving of Sienna's work seems to serve a similar purpose, that is, identification with a particular social group on the basis of preferences in taste.

I conclude that Sienna's capability in leveraging the affordances of Facebook is also a result of existing cultural capital. Cultural capital interpreted as the "habits, skills, and attitudes" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 17) derived from one's background lend themselves to enable individuals to infer "knowledge and know-how [and] tastes" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 17.). Sienna's skill in fostering approval for her work via Facebook by catering to the aesthetic preferences of her target group, is thus to be interpreted as an ability to capitalise on pre-existing cultural capital and apply skills and know-how to foster social engagement, creating access to social capital resources. The fact that Facebook uniquely lends itself to publicise and share these expressions of taste reaffirms existing social affiliations, which in its consequence marked an important element for Sienna in her efforts to be recognised for her specific style, thus motivating these particular clients to choose her as their photographer.

Putting things into perspective, Sienna's use of online social networking platforms, Facebook in particular, was key in her development as a wedding photographer. According to her estimates, she believes that reaching a wider

audience via publishing work on Facebook continues to play an important role and overall she assumes that her online activity amounts to about 40% of her clients. However, looking holistically at Sienna's story puts the relevance of online social networking platforms into perspective. When asked about key events at the beginning of her career, Sienna spoke about one specific person – Hannah – who was fundamental in building a reputation as a wedding photographer. The significance of the relationship to Hannah is also visible in the network map (Figure 14), as she portrays her as a central figure in context with building her reputation as a wedding photographer.

> *After I had shot five or six weddings in the first year [...] I exhibited for the first and only time at a wedding fair. [...] I had one girl who came with her mother ... and it seems that her mother said to her "If you get married you have to book this wedding photographer". It seems she found my photos really great [...].*
> *(Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 2)*

Incidentally, Sienna later mentioned that this person went on to become editor-in-chief of a major wedding blog, where the work of wedding photographers is showcased, reaching an audience of several hundred thousand people every day. Sienna calls it a "lucky coincidence" that while her exhibition at the wedding fair did not get her any new clients, she managed to capture the attention of this specific person, which in hindsight provided her with extensive exposure among a significant audience.

> *[...] we organised a photo shooting, which was really great [...] because she found exactly the right people that pulled everything off ... and that was then published [on the wedding blog]. [...] and exactly on that day I already received three enquiries. And the week after, another ten, because of this feature through the blog.*
> *(Sienna, HR; ME; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 2)*

Interpreting Sienna's experience in view of the importance of social contacts in establishing recognition, I argue that her case corresponds with existing claims that attribute prime significance to gatekeepers. More precisely, to a significant

extent it reaffirms claims that highlight the importance of the "creator" of the artist (cf. Bourdieu 1996) in explaining whether one is endowed with recognition among a specific circle of creative professionals. Therefore, I assume that Hannah assumed a key role in 'authenticating' Sienna's work in her capacity as chief editor of the blog, according to which she assumed an expert role in judging the eligibility of photographers' work. Essentially, this also resonated with Vincent's earlier claim that in order to succeed as an artist, one needs to make an active effort to "get your work under the nose of the right people". Admittedly, Sienna's encounter with Hannah at the wedding fair may be interpreted as coincidence. Nonetheless, I argue that her decision to showcase her work at this particular wedding fair is proof of her identification with a particular niche of photography, which was essential for getting her work known among the right people.

However, one has to bear in mind that ultimately Sienna's and Jeff's case differ significantly in terms of what constitutes authentication, how it is being achieved and the role social relations assume: Jeff's case resonates clearly with the logic of Bourdieu's field of cultural production, where online connections are not that important, as what counts is actually the endorsement of peers. In Sienna's case, online relations are important, as they are essentially word-of-mouth relations with clients, and in her world of creative practice the economic logic of having a market is what counts. In Chapter 2 (Section 2.3, p. 36 ff.) I discussed that creative professions and the way in which recognition or symbolic capital is being attained differs widely across specific areas of creative production. One could thus argue whether or not Sienna's use online social networking platforms and the approval she facilitated online can be interpreted as a case of symbolic capital attainment. On one hand, I argue that this instance can be interpreted as symbolic capital attainment, given that it achieves the desired outcome of recognition as a legitimate producer of artwork. On the other hand however, the way in which this is achieved differs significantly from the social process of symbolic capital attainment that Bourdieu described, most importantly because Sienna's case challenges the significance of power holders (e.g. art critics) in the field. Thereby I conclude that even though Sienna achieved recognition, the way in which it was achieved and the stakeholders that were relevant in this process seems to deviate from the logic Bourdieu applied.

## 6.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I focussed on the notion of authentication as a means to attain recognition in the field of cultural and creative production. Drawing on Bourdieu's work, I conceptualised authentication as a social process in which social relationships to decision makers in the field are key to attaining recognition. Drawing on Sienna's case, I traced the relevance of online social networking platforms as a means to facilitate authentication. Facebook provided a suitable platform for Sienna to create visibility for her work and leverage its utility to foster social engagement as a means to facilitate approval among an elite social circle. The key affordance of Facebook in this case was that it enabled Sienna to access individuals of this social group, which posed a major challenge in the beginnings of her career.

Acknowledging the importance of personal referrals to source clients, word-of-mouth behaviour is important in terms of fostering approval for creative work and to establish recognition. As Anna's example showed, strong social ties pertaining to a closely-knit network of friends are considered most effective in facilitating approval via word-of-mouth, given the fact that a high level of trust and familiarity with personal interests and preferences is provided. Drawing on Sienna's example using images on Facebook as a key incentive to foster engagement among a targeted group of individuals, I argue that this online dynamic emulated traditional offline scenarios in which personal opinion formation is being achieved. Specifically, I have argued that Sienna managed to engage audiences by strategically selecting images that incentivised social interaction online, which I have interpreted as a key skill in fostering approval for her work.

Aside from Sienna's ability to utilise the properties of Facebook to encourage social engagement as an incentive for individuals to publicly voice approval, I highlighted her skill in reflecting the aesthetic preferences of her target group in her imagery. I argued that Sienna's ability to accurately interpret indicators of taste and mirror these aesthetic choices in her work allowed her to *activate* social ties on Facebook, fostering approval and positive engagement. I interpreted Sienna's ability to utilise imagery as a conveyor of visual cues that convey social status as closely related to pre-existing cultural capital. Previous work experience as a film cutter provided her with the know-how to accurately interpret visual cues, which resulted in the ability to actively steer the narratives present in her work. Thereby, I see her ability to strategically select images on the basis of visual cues signalling status as

crucially important: while Sienna seemed to intuitively publish the "best" images on Facebook, I see this ability to make an accurate choice as a result of pre-existing skills and know-how, paired with a keen understanding of platform utilities.

The relevance of digitally mediated social interaction on Facebook as a means to emulate authentication requires a nuanced appreciation nonetheless. Whereas initially, Sienna's attained recognition as a wedding photographer seemed to be an exclusive affordance of her online engagement, this assumption proved to be too simplistic. Indeed, Sienna's work being selected and published by an editor of one of the leading wedding blogs in England served as an initial means to authentication. Precisely, Sienna later argued that most of early work was directly impacted by this instance of achieved authentication and recognition among her targeted client base. Online social networking platforms did play a key role in facilitating continuous approval among targeted clients, expanding the impact of Sienna's work. I conclude that Sienna's use of Facebook is better understood as a means to capitalise on pre-existing recognition. Thereby I see the actual affordance of online social networking platforms as a catalyst of pre-existing recognition. This means however, that using Facebook enabled Sienna to actively steer this impact of existing authentication and to ensure continuous leverage and approval.

Contrasting Sienna's and Jeff's cases also revealed that their mixed views on the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction were also influenced by different takes on authentication. Jeff's description of being authenticated as a sculptor resonated to a great extent with Bourdieu's account of authentication in the fine arts sector. Jeff highlighted the relevance of existing social ties with decision makers in the field, such as gallery owners and art critics as they play a key role in authenticating work. This alludes to the importance Bourdieu projected onto the "creators of the creator" and implies that only a prestigious group of individuals are in a position to actuate authentication. Compared to Sienna's case, the main difference in authentication rests on the eligibility of clients to build recognition. Here, clients as the consumers of the produced work are seen as legitimate authenticators themselves, as their voiced approval is interpreted as recognition.

Jeff and Sienna held different views on the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction as a means to build recognition, which is influenced by earlier mentioned differences in authentication processes. However, I see their motivation to rely on digitally mediated social ties as equally influenced by accepted forms of creative practice in their respective field of creative engagement: Sienna's case

showed that the use of online social networking platforms is a widely accepted practice among wedding photographers, where best practices and achievements in securing recognition online are celebrated. Jeff's creative engagement was marked by a more traditional view on building recognition, whereby the need to be authenticated by critics, is indispensable and any attempts to circumvent implied barriers are seen as illegitimate. This is anchored in the different framework conditions of their relative fields of creative practice. Whereas wedding photography as a form of creative entrepreneurship advocates new routes to address audiences, Jeff's self-image as a creative professional is anchored in more traditional view of what makes an artist an artist.

## *Chapter 7: Conclusions*

## 7.1 Introduction

This thesis explored the relevance of online social networking platforms as a means to attain recognition in the field of cultural and creative production, drawing on social capital resources. I was compelled to trace whether and how digitally mediated social interaction facilitated access to social capital resources, which I have identified as conducive to attaining symbolic capital. My research interest was triggered by anecdotal evidence that portrayed the use of Facebook as a powerful medium to attain recognition. Thereby, an acquaintance from Vienna – Anna – who established as a photographer in spite of lacking formal qualifications and prior exposure to the field of photography was convinced that Facebook played a major role to thrive in her profession. She claimed that using Facebook allowed her to gain visibility for her work and initiate a dynamic in which publicly voiced approval of her work enabled her to attain recognition.

Keen to understand the underlying dynamics of attaining recognition as a creative professional, I soon realised that the attainment of social capital was key in facilitating this process. Precisely, it was specific resources that are commonly associated with social capital such as access to insider information, mentoring and access to and approval of key stakeholders in the field that made social capital so significant in this context. I identified friction between existing concepts of social capital and the way in which social capital was being framed as a result of digitally mediated social interaction: Whereas traditionally, social capital attainment was portrayed in context with constraints implied by social boundaries, the impact of digital technology shifted that discourse to an opportunity-driven notion of social capital. At first sight, this seemed legitimate, as digital platforms such as online social networking platforms foster an unprecedented amount of opportunities for building social relationships with others, seemingly regardless of their social or geographical origin. Research theme B "Digitally mediated social ties and social capital" (pp. 27 - 28) addresses this need for a fresh look at social capital in light of the changes that digitally mediated social interaction facilitates.

Tackling social capital from a conceptual perspective, I chose to use Bourdieu's social capital theory (1984). This was a key decision at the very

beginning of my research and in spite of the many existing theoretical approaches to social capital I was convinced that Bourdieu's take on social capital was arguably the most theoretically robust (e.g. Portes, 2000). This is supported by Bourdieu's relational approach to social capital: In conceptualising the attainment of social capital, Bourdieu highlights the importance of an existing durable network of established, mutually recognised social relationships. This was in line with my assumption that social relationships take on a key role in creative professionals' ability to attain recognition. Furthermore, Bourdieu's take on social capital represented a coherent conceptual bridge to locating creative professionals' practice within the field of creative and cultural production.

The notion of struggle and competition for limited opportunities to become a recognised player in the field is at the core of many creative professionals' biographies; Bourdieu's notion of *field* (e.g. 1993) delivered a convincing theoretical account, whereby it focuses on the struggle for resources and allocating different forms of capital as the source of this struggle. Over the course of my research, I have spoken with a great number of creative professionals – fine artists, photographers, sculptors and art experts – whereby every single one of them unequivocally claimed that the key to recognition in the field of creative and cultural production was "to get your work under the nose of the right people". This resonates with Bourdieu's claim that the assumption that an artist could make it on their own solely relying on their talent is a fallacy. Rather, he suggested that the focus should be on the "creators of the creator" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 167), individuals with the power to bestow recognition onto an artist, thereby achieving value for their work.

This theoretical framework informed my main research question: *"In what way is social capital sustained by digitally mediated social ties conducive to the accumulation of symbolic capital for those engaged in the field of cultural and creative production?"* Drawing on the assumption that the affordance of social relations was key to attain recognition, my aim was to uncover which role – if any – digitally mediated social ties played in this process. More precisely, I was compelled to understand how these ties enabled creative professionals to facilitate a relationship with decision makers in the field so as to enable them to attain recognition. I acknowledge that there is strikingly little evidence on the actual nature of digitally mediated social ties, which I identified as essential to uncover the actual role of social ties in this context. Whereas preliminary efforts have been made to

identify the characteristics of these ties, the conceptual output in that regard was not convincing. Drawing on the existing notion of latent ties (Genoni, et al., 2005; Haythornthwaite, 2002), which has gained currency in previous research, I hold that this notion is inefficient in tracing affordances of digitally mediated social ties. This is because referring to digitally mediated social ties as latent ties fails to deliver insight into how these social ties are being activated. Therefore, I developed a novel concept, which I call *liquid ties* (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.4, p. 148 ff.), that characterises digitally mediated social ties alongside existing social tie definitions, taking into account individuals' use of online social networking platforms that facilitate these social relations.

Uncovering these traits of digitally mediated social ties proved more difficult in practice than initially anticipated. The major challenge that presented itself early on in my fieldwork was to identify a suitable method to enable respondents to provide information on how they perceived digitally mediated social ties (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2, p. 77 ff.). This was essential to understand how these ties assume meaning in terms of establishing relationships with others. Initially, I used a traditional social network analysis approach in the form of a name generator technique (e.g. Hogan et al., 2007), whereby I hoped that an interactive means to establish network maps would be useful in tracing digitally mediated social ties. This traditional approach proved ineffective since the structured framing of social relationships inherent in social network analysis interfered with individuals' recall of digitally mediated social ties.

Acknowledging the constraints of tools rooted in formal social network analysis, I opted for an unstructured method of social network analysis, which I called free network drawing. Based on hand-drawn network maps (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2.4, p. 93 ff.), this method provided respondents with more freedom in terms of voicing their experience of establishing digitally mediated social ties. These drawings revealed that digitally mediated social ties are often perceived as intangible forms of social relationships that assume relevance only under specific circumstances, in a particular context and for a specific time period. Thereby, aspects of contextuality and temporality proved highly relevant in view of an accurate perception of digitally mediated social ties as a meaningful element of personal social networks. I conclude that these liquid ties – as I have named them – challenge traditional concepts of social ties. Following this insight, I conceptualised liquid ties at the intersection of strong ties and weak ties. I chose the term *liquid*

*ties* because it conveys the idea that digitally mediated social ties assume the affordance of creating trustworthiness, which is commonly associated with strong ties. However, they also take on the function of bridging previously unacquainted actors – an affordance associated with weak ties. Moreover, I experienced the effectiveness of liquid ties as confined by a limited period of time, allowing a one-off exchange of resources. Thus, I consider the notion of liquidity useful as it expressed the ephemeral, situational effectiveness of liquid ties. Nonetheless, further research and more data on activated digitally mediated social ties is needed to verify the robustness of this concept

In particular, respondent Lilie highlighted the relevance of liquid ties in view of accumulating social capital, by providing them access to resources that proved challenging to achieve (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.4, p. 185 ff.). This was due to an observed power imbalance between two individuals, which complicated access to social capital because of social barriers. The specific context in which liquid ties actually granted access to particular resources that were seen as serving professionals' attainment of recognition implies a very specific conceptualisation of social capital. Albeit established social relations are normally seen as the most reliable route to attaining social capital, my research findings suggest that liquid ties can be equally relevant, provided that contextual measures of risk and uncertainty are being accounted for. This is particularly relevant for professionals who strive to attain recognition in the field of creative production, given that uncertainty in this environment is prevalent and the value of the work produced is often highly subjective and contextual.

Moreover, the findings suggest that individuals' ability to establish trust is critical in terms of attaining social capital through digitally mediated social interaction. As a result, I hold that establishing interpersonal trust is key to social capital attainment. Facilitating trust by way of using online social networking platforms also implicates the way in which trust is conceptualised, given the fact that trust is established in absence of a traditional exchange of social cues. Instead, facilitating trust online is based on perceptions of an individual's attitudes and behaviour, which is aided by certain affordances of the technology.

## 7.2 Key Findings and their implications for future research

My main research question addressed the significance of digitally mediated social interaction in view of attaining recognition in the field of creative and cultural production, which I have conceptualised as symbolic capital. I have argued that social relations to decision makers and the resources these relations permit access to are a pre-requisite for accruing symbolic capital. This explains the central importance I have attached to the conceptual value of social capital. I argued that tracing the impact of digitally mediated social interaction on the formation of social ties with these decision makers would serve as a means to reconceptualise social capital. Here, the main argument was that digitally mediated social ties as a fleeting, transient form of social interaction challenged traditional social capital concepts, given the stringent importance that has been attached to strong, established ties in this context. At the core of my analysis was the aim to deliver an empirically evidenced characterisation of digitally mediated social ties. This was important as I assumed that understanding how these ties facilitate social engagement was a necessary step to grasp whether and how they produce access to resources. As a result, I used narrative data from my case studies to contrast traditional scenarios of social capital attainment with other alternative accounts in which digitally mediated social ties allowed creative professionals access to social capital. The question I aimed to answer is whether these forms of social capital attainment are valid to be interpreted as a means to accrue symbolic capital.

In my theoretical chapter, I highlighted how the impact of digitally mediated social interaction created a conceptual tension between traditional conceptual takes on social capital and new alternative explanations. In what follows, I address these tensions and outline how implications of digitally mediated social interaction tie in with existing concepts. The findings in relation to the nature of digitally mediated social ties and how individuals attach meaning to these in the framework of their careers, has highlighted three areas in particular: a) conceptualising social capital in light of online social interaction; b) researching and conceptualising personal social networks; c) the significance of trust facilitated online.

### 7.2.1 Results for research theme A "Digitally mediated social ties and symbolic capital"

The notion of liquid ties suggests that a new take on social capital in the field of cultural and creative production may be required; however, this does not necessarily mean that this type of social capital lends itself easily to attain symbolic capital. Under research theme A, I traced to what extent digitally mediated social ties could assume value in creative individuals' careers gaining symbolic capital, reflected in the following set of research questions:

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Research theme A: Digitally mediated social ties and symbolic capital

RQ1: To what extent are digitally mediated social bonds meaningful in terms of creating symbolic capital?

RQ2: To what extent does digitally mediated social interaction allow creative professionals to connect with those individuals that help them to become recognised?

RQ3: To what extent do digitally mediated social ties actually play a role in accumulating symbolic capital?

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In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that the impact of digitally mediated social ties advocates an alternative interpretation of social capital. However, this is only a preliminary conclusion as it yet remains to be seen whether this new form of social capital is a means to produce symbolic capital, thereby allowing creative professionals to attain recognition. Seen from this perspective, I argue that the value of social capital resources attained via digitally mediated social interaction plays a marginal role as a means to accrue symbolic capital, especially for those professionals active in traditional fields of cultural production such as fine arts. This is because the framework conditions in this field seem particularly rigid (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.4, p. 216 ff.) and alternative means – such as via digital platforms – to promote work are not accepted, when it comes to seeking approval from key stakeholders.

Bourdieu described symbolic capital "as being known and recognized and is more or less synonymous with: standing, good name, honour, fame, prestige and reputation." (1993, p. 37). This points to the function symbolic capital takes on in the process of building recognition in the field. It is assumed that any form of capital, such as for example social capital, is conducive to entitling individuals to be endowed with honour and prestige. Thereby, symbolic capital is attained when "any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social" prompts social actors to endow it "with categories of perception, which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 47).

This implies that symbolic capital takes on a functional property in view of "mediating power through prestige" (Fuller & Tian, 2006, p. 290). In Vincent's case, the social capital he possessed resulted in symbolic capital, because other stakeholders recognised its value (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.2, p. 138 ff.). Being mentored by a famous fine artist endowed Vincent with the power of recognition, which resulted in a process of validation of his work. In that instance, Vincent's social capital was converted into symbolic capital and as a result afforded him the prestige to accumulate recognition.

The notion of social capital that I described drawing on liquid ties hardly compares to this scenario. Whereas, liquid ties facilitate access to exclusive resources, it is this element of validation that is missing in this process. This means that whereas social capital through liquid ties grants access to resources, it lacks the quality of bestowing prestige and honour onto an individual. Thereby it lacks this element of prestige that grants the individual the power to be recognised. This is also to due to the fact that this one-off exchange of a resource that Lilie (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.3, p. 145 ff.) described does not hold the capacity to be interpreted by others as a valid form of capital. Thus, I argue that its capacity to accrue symbolic capital is unaccomplished.

At the same time, I see a close relation between the process of authentication and symbolic capital: The theory holds that artists' recognition as legitimate players in the field of creative and cultural production is contingent on being authenticated by legitimate figures in the field. Bourdieu (1993) argued that authentication is achieved by the voiced approval of decision makers, thereby bestowing value on an artists' work. Even though the literature does not explicitly articulate a relation between symbolic capital and authentication, it is implied by the prestige and honour that symbolic capital entails. Assuming that symbolic capital

bestows prestige on an artist, I argue that authenticators infer an artists' value on the basis of this accrued prestige. Vincent's case substantiates this claim: The prestige he obtained from being mentored by an already successful, established artist may have motivated decision makers to use this expression of symbolic capital as a motivation to bestow value on his work, thus granting him recognition.

This take on symbolic capital as a facilitator of authentication also relativizes the significance of liquid ties in this context. Lilie's scenario shows that whereas liquid ties grant access to social capital, their capacity to trigger authentication is absent. Even though, this instance of social capital attainment is valid, it has not been framed in a context of assuming recognition. Whereas the social engagement with the politician might build a stepping-stone towards authentication for Lilie (perhaps because finalising this project may build a fundamental element in her future career), it remains to be seen whether or not this instance of social capital attainment bears any relevance in terms of Lilie's overall career as a photographer. Thereby, I conclude that the effectiveness of online mediated social capital in building recognition is marginal. At best, it can aid the formation of future social interaction with key stakeholders. However, to empirically validate such a scenario would require tracing the significance of online mediated social capital over a longer time period. Taking Lilie's case for example, it will be interesting to see how – once she establishes as a photographer – she will reflect on the significance of liquid ties in the overall process of her career.

In summary, drawing on my insights towards symbolic capital I provide the following answers for research questions highlighted under theme A.

RQ1: To what extent are digitally mediated social bonds meaningful in terms of creating symbolic capital?

The most important piece of insight here suggests that the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in view of attaining recognition seems to be heavily influenced by the specific field of creative and cultural production. To illustrate this, the narrative accounts of respondents Vincent and Jeff have been instructive: Vincent – in spite of being an avid user of online social networking platforms – stated that in terms of his overall career and particularly in the beginning being mentored by another established artist was crucial alongside being introduced and recommended to gallery owners (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.2, p. 138 ff.). As a result,

digitally mediated social interaction played a marginally relevant role here, which Vincent described as nothing more than a "relationship with a statistical graph" (Vincent, HR; ME; HC; HS, Interview 2, p. 7). This perception is echoed by Jeff, who was convinced that becoming a recognised artist required to "get yourself out in front of that person [i.e. decision makers], have a drink with them, sit down have a chat, make it a real thing rather than a virtual thing" (Jeff, MR; LE; MC; MS, Interview 1, p. 17).

Contrary to Vincent's and Jeff's experience, digitally mediated social ties were described as particularly relevant in Sienna's case when it comes to accruing symbolic capital. Making her work visible on Facebook and facilitating a process of approval by incentivising positive comments from targeted audiences played a key role in her career (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.2, p. 205 ff.). Nonetheless, I identified that Sienna's previously accrued symbolic capital by means of authentication by a prestigious wedding blog editor played a key role. Thereby, her activity on Facebook may be interpreted as a means to capitalise on existing recognition. Ultimately, I conclude that in spite of some evidence that advocates the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction in terms of creating symbolic capital, further research shall be undertaken in terms of tracing the long-term impact of digitally mediated social ties throughout the careers of creative professionals. Particularly, I suggest distinguishing between traditional fields of cultural production and newly emerging fields pertaining to the creative industries, which I speculate may provide a clearer picture here. This resonates with issues concerning the Bourdieu's theory of fields of cultural production and the greater or lesser autonomy of these fields relative to the economic world (cf. Chapter 2, p. 35).

RQ2: To what extent does digitally mediated social interaction allow creative professionals to connect with those individuals that help them to become recognised?

Answering this research questions requires again distinguishing between traditional fields of cultural production and other, newly emerging fields of creative practice. In the latter case, Sienna's example shows that digitally mediated social engagement was effective to seek approval from targeted audiences. However, this was effective only, because in her case decision makers (i.e. those authenticating the value of her work) doubled as actual clients (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.5, p. 222

ff.). I conclude that in this case engagement on Facebook was crucial as it allowed Sienna to connect with existing and future clients, who were key in facilitating approval, thereby sustaining her status as a recognised wedding photographer.

Lilie's example illustrated the relevance of Twitter in creating a connection with a previously unacquainted power holder (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.3, p. 145 ff.). This instance proved essential in terms of understanding the relevance of online social networking platforms in creating social connections with individuals outside of one's personal social network, who are difficult to reach given power imbalances and other (socially and geographically induced) barriers. Nonetheless, the example does not provide sufficient evidence to ascertain that online social networking platforms can actually sustain social engagement with decision makers involved in the process of gaining recognition. Similar to my suggestion for future research indicated under RQ 1, I suggest to look at the relevance of digitally mediated social ties over the life course of establishing as a creative professional, perhaps comparing early career professionals with those already established.

### RQ3: To what extent do digitally mediated social ties actually play a role in accumulating symbolic capital?

As implied by the answers to RQ1 and RQ2 understanding the role that digitally mediated social ties play in the accumulation of symbolic capital depends on the actual field of creative practice. Drawing on my insight, I hold that Sienna's case most convincingly supports the argument that digitally mediated social ties play a role in terms of her career development. This is because I interpreted the way in which she facilitated publicly voiced approval of her work (i.e. authentication) online as an indication of her attaining symbolic capital (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.5, p. 222 ff.). Even though the data supports such an interpretation there are two uncertainties remaining: First, it is not entirely clear what role pre-existing symbolic capital through Sienna's work being featured on a prestigious wedding blog (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.3, p. 210 ff.) played. Sienna claimed that her collaboration with the editor-in-chief of this blog was crucial in the beginnings of her career and gained her a number of prestigious work contracts (cf. p. 210). Thereby, it is unclear whether or not her online engagement would have had the same effect, if Sienna would not have been able to capitalise on the effects of high-profile clients she

sourced due to her being featured on the blog. As a result, I assume that her success on Facebook was more of a spin-off effect of pre-existing recognition.

Second, it is unclear whether or not Bourdieu's interpretation of symbolic capital and its significance in attaining recognition is the most suitable in this context. This is because in Sienna's case the profile of stakeholders who are in a position to authenticate work is fundamentally different from Bourdieu's thesis, which I have described in Chapter 6 (Section 6.3, p. 210 ff.). This means that Bourdieu's field concept and the role that different forms of capital assume in the process of attaining recognition might differ in newly emerging fields of creative production that heavily rely on online word of mouth (cf. Chapter 2, p. 35 ff.). Clarifying this aspect thus deserves further analysis in future research.

## 7.2.2 Results for research theme B "Digitally mediated social ties and social capital"

Interpreting liquid ties as a means to facilitate access to social capital provided important clues to answer research questions pertaining to research theme B. RQ 4 – RQ 6 targeted the effectiveness of online social networking platforms to facilitate meaningful connections and in what way digitally mediated social relations can be interpreted as a means to build social capital:

RQ4: To what extent do digitally mediated social relations facilitate the accumulation of social capital?

RQ5: Do online social networking platforms serve as a legitimate means to establish meaningful social connections?

RQ6: In what way can ephemeral, transient digitally mediated social ties sustain a sense of durable social relatedness?

Departing from Bourdieu's notion of social capital that emphasises the importance of a durable network of strong, established social ties, I aimed to trace elements that legitimised this take on social capital. Thereby, I understood that the notion of risk pertinent to the field of creative and cultural production, alongside the relevance of trust, were key in tackling the actual meaning of social capital. In

Chapter 4, I used Vincent's case to illustrate this dynamic. Vincent presented the attainment of recognition as a social process in which mitigating risk was key. The perceived level of risk was evidenced by the many factors of uncertainty that the involved stakeholders must face. For example, William, by mentoring Vincent, faced the risk of losing his reputation by recommending an unknown, emerging artist. Likewise, gallery owners anticipate uncertainty in the process of investing in a new artist, which among others implies a potential monetary loss. The insight Vincent presented was key in understanding why social capital is perceived as cumbersome to attain, thus substantiating Bourdieu's conceptual take. Furthermore, it explained why strong, social ties were so important to facilitate social capital attainment and accessing resources of the involved stakeholders: The affordance of strong ties to diminish uncertainty is primarily based on their capacity to facilitate trust among different parties. Thus, Vincent, as an emerging artist, utilised strong ties as they proved most efficient in evading those constraints. For example, the strong social relationship between Vincent and William as a result of having spent time together at university facilitated a level of trust between them that incentivised William's role as mentor. In turn, it is plausible to assume that William's established position in the cultural field allowed gallery owners to bestow Vincent with similar trust, as William's position in the field legitimised his choice of sponsoring Vincent.

In addition, this substantiates the close relation I have attached to social capital and symbolic capital: Vincent's access to established figures in the field facilitated the process of claiming recognition. Thereby, the social relationship with William allowed Vincent to access one particular social capital resource, i.e. information on which galleries to contact and how to do this, that in itself is an expression of symbolic capital. Precisely, it is the prestige that comes with the exclusivity of this resource that legitimises this form of social capital. In consequence, access to this information facilitated a process of recognition: Vincent's access to the information enabled him to show his work in the gallery, which led to further accumulation of symbolic capital. Being recognised for his work by the gallery owner allowed Vincent to assume a position as a legitimised artist himself, which then facilitated access to the field of cultural production. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this take on assuming recognition applies to the fine arts sector, implicated by the rules and norms of this specific field.

Lilie's case offers an alternative take: Drawing on the affordance of liquid ties in this instance I argued that they facilitate the attainment of social capital. I found

that provided that individuals effectively use online social networking platforms by targeting power holders, liquid ties facilitate access to specific resources, such as insider information. However, my findings suggest that social capital facilitated by liquid ties is a very relative concept. By this, I mean that albeit liquid ties facilitate social interaction enabling access to resources, the perceived levels of risk and uncertainty may limit the efficiency of these ties. Hence, understanding liquid ties' capacity to produce trust is crucial. In that regard, Lilie's statement implies that the main affordance of digital social engagement was to ascertain her credibility as a professional photographer. Whereas the literature interprets credibility as a means to facilitate trust (cf. Kim et al., 2015; Einsiedel & Geransar, 2009), I hold that the extent to which trust is granted is limited to a one-off exchange of resources.

In light of the factors that mediate social capital attainment via liquid ties, I conclude that the following three factors are crucial in this context: 1) the situational specificity that portrays the attainment of a desired resource, 2) the degree of trust the attainment of resources requires and 3) the efficiency of liquid ties in facilitating trust in light of their temporal nature. In this sense, I argue that the process of online social capital attainment is best understood by taking into account factors of situational context, trust and the role that digitally mediated ties play in the process of attaining resources.

As a result, I argue that liquid ties grant access to social capital in spite of their limited capacity to build trust. Rather, the ability to convey credibility is what facilitates social engagement as the basis of social capital attainment. Contrasting this notion of social capital with Bourdieu's concept, substantiates my assumption that digitally mediated social ties form the basis of a reconceptualised version. It follows that the traditional concept of social capital is contrasted by an alternative take on social capital: The traditional concept of social capital relies on strong social ties as a means to facilitate access to exclusive resources on the basis of thick trust. In contrast, my take on social capital sees the attainment of similar resources as facilitated by liquid ties. The main difference between these two concepts comes down to trust: Social capital as a result of strong, established relationships facilitate a sense of thick, all-encompassing trust, whereas liquid ties enable individuals to be seen as trustworthy on the basis of conveying credibility.

Drawing on my insights I provide the following answers for the research questions highlighted under theme B.

<u>RQ4: To what extent do digitally mediated social relations facilitate the accumulation of social capital?</u>

Digitally mediated social ties provide access to several social capital resources, particularly access to new information. Aside from these resources, I was particularly interested to see whether digitally mediated social ties would allow accumulate social capital resources that are traditionally associated with strong ties, such as access to insider information, seeking mentoring and approval from decision makers. Vincent's account (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.2, p. 138 ff.) questions the relevance of digitally mediated social ties in regard, stating that established social ties were inevitable in terms of mentoring and approval. Lilie's case however, provides a compelling example of utilising digitally mediated social ties to build ties with power holders and obtain access to insider information (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.3, p. 145 ff.). I conclude that digitally mediated social ties do facilitate the accumulation of social capital and thereby access to critical resources. However, the specific context of creative practice is crucial here, whereby the effectiveness of digitally mediated social ties seems less relevant in the traditional fine arts field, as compared to emerging forms of creative practice. Also, the overall impact of resources accrued via digitally mediated social engagement on practitioners' efforts to establish recognition is yet to be seen.

<u>RQ5: Do online social networking platforms serve as a legitimate means to establish meaningful social connections?</u>

To a certain extent online social networking platforms can facilitate meaningful social connections. However, this depends heavily on how individuals' interpret these ties as being meaningful. In Vincent's and Jeff's case digitally mediated social ties are seen as less meaningful, because they attributed marginal value to resources that digitally mediated social engagement provides access to. Particularly in Lilie's and Sienna's case the contrary seemed to be the case. Here, digitally mediated social ties were perceived as highly meaningful, as they provided short-term access to important information (cf. Lilie, Chapter 5) and enabled to trigger a process of approval (cf. Sienna, Chapter 6). The significance of digitally mediated social ties in these particular cases resonates with Wittel's argument that stresses the importance of ephemeral social relations and the notion of catching up

pertinent to the notion of the network sociality. This seems particularly relevant in the field of the cultural industry as Wittel claims, where traditional forms of narrational sociality seem less relevant (cf. Wittel, 2001), which I have discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.3, p. 14 ff.). Thereby, I suggest further research that looks more deeply into the overall changes of sociality impacted by digitally mediated social interaction and how these forms of social engagement seem to become perceived more meaningful for creative practice and beyond.

<u>RQ6: In what way can ephemeral, transient digitally mediated social ties sustain a sense of durable social relatedness?</u>

Following the insight I produced, it seems that digitally mediated social ties do not necessarily produce a sense of durable social relatedness such as strong ties do for example. This is evidenced by the way in which Fiona characterised digitally mediated social ties, portraying her social engagement on Twitter as being connected to an anonymous crowd of faceless individuals (Section 4.7, p. 161) for example. However, I observed that a durable sense of social relatedness may not even be expected or necessary in order for these ties to be perceived meaningful. Rather, it seems that respondents appreciate the possibility of engaging with distant others, fostering temporary engagement with an audience that meets a discrete purpose: In the case of Sienna this was facilitating approval for her published photographs on Facebook to enhance the effect of word of mouth referrals (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.2, p. 205 ff.). As a result, I suggest that particularly for newly emerging creative professions, which may be characterised as a form of cultural entrepreneurship, durable social bonds may not always be vital to achieve anticipated outcomes. Thereby, I suggest to research the relevance of digitally mediated social ties and the significance of informational social engagement (cf. Wittel, 2001) in more depth to better be able to portray new forms of creative and cultural engagement that hinge on the effects of a network sociality.

### 7.2.3 Results for research theme C "Social capital facilitated online and its relation to other forms of capital"

Tracing individuals' attainment of social capital, I was also keen to understand to what extent other forms of capital influenced this process, which I addressed in research theme C "Social capital facilitated online and its relation to

other forms of capital". RQ 7 – RQ 9 targeted the relation between social capital formation and the way in which other forms of capital, particularly cultural capital were relevant in this process.

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RQ7: To what extent are other forms of capital, specifically cultural capital relevant to building digitally mediated social relations?

RQ8: How can the attainment of symbolic capital be linked to resources that emerge from digitally mediated social interaction, if at all?

RQ9: To what extent can individuals' skills in building digitally mediated social interaction be interpreted as a form of cultural capital?

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Traditionally, the notion of social capital implies that its attainment is inherently linked to the possession of other forms of capital. For example, Bourdieu (1984) argued that the attainment of social capital is influenced by cultural capital. Thereby, it is suggested that expressions of cultural capital such as acquired tastes or knowledge are conducive to attaining social capital. This is relevant in the field of creative and cultural production as establishing social bonds with gatekeepers (i.e. social capital) is often described as contingent on individuals' credentials (e.g. a degree from a respected art college). These so-called embodied forms of cultural capital are represented by knowledge and tastes that an art degree provides, which was shown in Vincent's case. Cultural capital assumes relevance in the given context insofar as exhibiting cultural preferences and taste in social situations (Savage, 2015), may signal affiliation with the a creative circle. Even though I observed that the significance of embodied forms of cultural capital remains unchanged (e.g. Jeff's and Vincent's cases), the attainment of social capital through digitally mediated social interaction limits the relevance of traditional concepts of cultural capital.

Drawing on the capacity of liquid ties as a means to attain social capital, I see cultural capital as relevant regarding two aspects:

1. As a means to facilitate a process of socialising in which exhibiting personal tastes and preferences impacts how individuals are being perceived by others

2. On a practical level, referring to skills and habits that shape individuals' use of online social networking platforms as a means to establish social interaction

Addressing the relevance of conveying social cues as an expression of cultural capital resonates with Sienna's scenario (Chapter 6). In there I argued that digitally mediated social interaction enabled her to facilitate approval for her work among an exclusive social circle. Elite tastes and a preference for sophistication were a major element in this instance, whereby Sienna argued that a key requirement for her work to be valued was to appeal to this sense of sophistication in her images. Thereby, representing symbols of elite taste, such as exclusive wedding locations, designer clothes, etc. in her photography was one crucial element to address sophistication needs of her clients. Here, the significance of cultural capital as a means to achieve recognition among her clients is primarily based on Sienna's skill in accurately interpreting this sense of sophistication and integrating relevant elements of taste and style in her photography. I interpreted this ability to interpret symbols of sophistication and the capacity to represent these in her images as indicators of cultural capital.

Tracing the origins of this skill, I consider the knowledge Sienna gained in her original career as a film cutter to be conducive to shaping this skill. The literature suggests that cultural capital provides individuals with "the communicative and cognitive skills to succeed" in a particular environment, which "encompasses such seemingly 'natural' things as taste, style and confidence" (Lee, 2011, p. 556). Drawing on traditional concepts, cultural capital refers to resources that we use in order to align ourselves with others, by exhibiting our tastes and preferences (e.g. Goffman, 1951). Thereby, cultural capital generates the prospect of gaining social advantage, for example by alleviating access to particular social circles or individuals of a certain social standing. Thus, cultural capital in the sense of being able to exhibit the 'right' style and taste is assumed to grant individuals access to elite social circles, thereby accruing social capital.

In Lilie's case, the relevance of cultural capital presents itself in another form: I demonstrated how Lilie used Twitter to form a connection with a power holder. I argued that facilitating a relation with this person via digitally mediated social interaction, has granted access to specific resources generating advantage, given its exclusive nature. I have concluded that digitally mediated social interaction

enabled accessing this resource, albeit confined by specific circumstances. Addressing the relevance of cultural capital in Lilie's case, drawing on more recent concepts of cultural capital seemed most effective: Tracing a shift in cultural capital, Prieur & Savage (2013) identified a new kind of cultural capital – which they called 'emerging' cultural capital – which is "associated with younger people" and emphasises "the ability to be flexible and adaptable" (p. 113), which is presumed to be embodied in a specific attitude that enables individuals to capitalise. Thereby, Prieur & Savage (2011) advocate a more relative approach to cultural capital that is essentially field-specific. By this, they point to the fact that what exactly constitutes cultural capital are those skills and habits that have "'market value' in the struggle for privilege" (Patron, 2012, p. 89), which depends on the specific context and conditions of a social field, requiring the actors in the field to adapt to constantly changing conditions.

I conclude that exhibiting any sort of highbrow cultural tastes that are traditionally being coined as valuable cultural capital assets associated with being largely inherited and acquired through upbringing in a cultivated home, are not of prior importance in this context. Apart from the fact that conveying complex social cues such as personal tastes that could imply social standing is limited when using online social networking platforms. Rather, it seems that using digital technology to connect with others may convey a message of being 'hip', on the pulse of time and arguably unorthodox, which in itself may lead to being perceived favourably by others. As such, when relating socially online, it may be less important to exhibit specific knowledge; instead, the fact that digital technology is used in this context may be more important. Particularly in the context of creative production, exhibiting a hip, unorthodox attitude, may be more useful in terms of accumulating advantage, which renders 'highbrow' cultural taste and old school knowledge irrelevant if not unproductive.

The other aspect I wish to address refers to digital literacy skills as an interpretation of cultural capital. Cultural capital is relevant here insofar as it addresses individuals' capacity to utilise digital technology, thereby attaining competitive advantage. The apparent ease of using online social networking platforms to facilitate social capital is contrasted by the diverging outcomes respondents achieved in this regard. While at first sight it may seem that the only thing one needs to know is how to create a profile, compose messages and upload images, it requires a much more strategic approach to leverage platform

affordances. This requires a significant amount of planning and reflexivity on the part of the user. Several of my respondents have pointed to this by concluding that using online social networking platforms effectively is a result of trial and error. As such, successful users seem to invest a significant amount of time in calibrating the impact of their activity online. Therefore, this requires constant monitoring of one's activity and synchronising one's desired results with actual achievements.

As mentioned earlier, in order to create trust online, users need to know how to craft their presence in a particular way so as to achieve credibility. As such, choosing the right tone of voice, the use of irony and humour, as well as representing aspects of style and taste in images are relevant to achieve this. I used Lilie's case to demonstrate that these skills are often difficult to just *learn*. Whereas, calibrating the efficiency of use might be a result of trial and error, I hold that the tacit knowledge individuals assume is crucial. Thereby, this form of knowledge helped Lilie, for example, to have an accurate sense of which specific cues convey professionalism. Essentially, it is exposure to the field and the exchange of best practices that enable individuals to incorporate this tacit form of knowledge. Knowledge of what creates an image of professionalism is influenced by prevailing norms pertinent to the field. Likewise, knowledge of these norms impacts individuals' ability to represent these in their online practice. As a result, tacit knowledge is often interpreted as a form of cultural capital (Lee, 2011) because it impacts individuals' ability to strategically use digital technology to create access to resources.

As Prieur & Savage (2013) have concluded framing cultural capital as relative to the field-specific conditions requires engagement of the individual with the field in order to attain field-specific capital. This finding emphasises that the legitimacy of cultural capital seems to be a result of public engagement. In this context, Prieur & Savage (2013) argue that cultural activities that involve public engagement often perceived as more legitimate than those cultural products which are consumed privately, due to the fact that being culturally engaged can often add to individuals' "cultural confidence and assertiveness" (p. 106). Similarly, I argue that engaging actively with activities pertaining to the field, such as attending relevant exhibitions or engaging in dialogue with others, exchanging views and best practices, can lead to a greater assertiveness also in using digital technology. As such, I argue that knowledge of the cultural values in the field will equally lead to better outcomes in using online social networking platforms, because users who

command this particular cultural knowledge are also more assertive and confident in using the technology, insisting that their use will eventually lead to the desired outcome.

Whereas the links between social capital and cultural have been most striking, the significance of economic capital cannot be neglected in this context. In Sienna's case for example, digitally mediated social interaction quite obviously resulted in accruing economic capital, as she was able to secure further work contracts as a result of addressing new audiences on Facebook. I observed that in this case social capital was quite immediately converted into economic capital. Nonetheless, in some cases economic capital played a more indirect role in view of attaining social capital online. Sienna for example asserted that online engagement is often a result of trial and error, whereby finding the right strategy in addressing audiences adequately needs time. To a certain extent, being able to invest time in experimenting with online social networking platforms to accrue social capital can also be interpreted in relation to economic capital. By this I mean that financial independence can give individuals the necessary freedom to experiment with strategically using online social networking platforms, a luxury that Fiona for example could not enjoy given financial constraints. Thus I assume that the time investment that seems necessary to being able to leverage benefits of online engagement can be seen in relation to existing economic capital.

Drawing on my insights I provide the following answers for the research questions highlighted under theme C.

### RQ7: To what extent are other forms of capital, specifically cultural capital relevant to building digitally mediated social relations?

The relation between social capital and cultural capital is relevant insofar as specific skills and knowledge inherent in cultural capital are assumed to be relevant to accrue social capital, which I discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.4 (p. 40 ff.). Building digitally mediated social ties and activating those ties requires a certain amount of strategic thinking and an ability to correctly identify opportunities for creating meaningful social engagement capitalising on a platform's properties.

I have portrayed this ability as a form of cultural capital in Chapter 5 where I highlight the relevance of Lilie's ability to form social engagement on Twitter as a result of her cunning awareness to use platform properties to convey a sense of

credibility and professionalism (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.3, p. 180 ff.). I also argued that to a significant extent her knowledge of the rules of the field of creative production and how these are mirrored in the online social space were key to her being able to leverage platform immanent properties (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.4, p. 185 ff.). Equally, I addressed the relevance of cultural capital in Sienna's case: I identified Sienna's pre-existing cultural capital, which she acquired throughout her earlier career as a film cutter, as crucial in facilitating approval for her work online (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.6, p. 225 ff.). Her ability to identify and address aesthetic preferences of her targeted audiences was crucial to facilitate approval for her work by knowing which content would resonate with these individuals' expectations. Thereby, I conclude that the relevance of cultural capital is crucially relevant to build meaningful bonds online, as it allows individuals' to effectively use platform immanent properties. Nonetheless, digitally mediated social engagement may require establishing a new interpretation of cultural capital, which includes additional resources such as creativity, openness and tacit knowledge emerging from socialisation processes with peers.

<u>RQ8: How can the attainment of symbolic capital be linked to resources that emerge from digitally mediated social interaction, if at all?</u>

In RQ 1 – RQ 3, I highlighted the relevance of Lilie's and Sienna's case as the most relevant in illustrating the relevance of digitally mediated social interaction in attaining symbolic capital. Regarding concrete resources that have emerged from digitally mediated social interaction I conclude that in Lilie's case access to potentially sensitive insider information obtained through interaction with a politician was the most relevant resource. Even though, accessing this information was essential for Lilie to be able to finalise a photography documentary project she was working on at the time, I concluded that this instance is difficult to portray as an instance of symbolic capital attainment (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.5, p. 187 ff.). Nonetheless, further research reflecting on the relevance of this instance throughout Lilie's overall career at a later stage might provide more accurate results here.

Sienna's case revealed that digitally mediated social interaction was essential to facilitate a process, which I have referred to as e-word of mouth (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.6, p. 225 ff.). Here, the essential resource that triggered authentication

of Sienna's work was publicly visible voices of approval, which were triggered by Sienna's posts of photographs on Facebook. This instance is perhaps the most convincing instance of symbolic capital attainment through digitally mediated social interaction. However, I identified that pre-existing authentication and already accrued symbolic capital might have been significant here as well (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.2, p. 205 ff.).

<u>RQ9: To what extent can individuals' skills in building digitally mediated social interaction be interpreted as a form of cultural capital?</u>

The notion of cultural capital is clearly relevant when tracing the emergence and effectiveness of individuals' skills in building digitally mediated social bonds. However, Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital and an overt focus on embodied forms of cultural capital (i.e. defined strictly in terms of class-related practices and dispositions) in view of attaining social capital (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.3, p. 36 ff.) proves insufficient to capture the complete picture here. Thereby, I referred to the notion of emerging cultural capital, which addresses new competences associated with the digital age as a form of cultural capital, whereby its acquisition may require particular skills (e.g. Savage, 2015) that are independent of – or at least complicate – the direct link between cultural capital and class affiliation in a Bourdieusian fashion. The relevance of this aspect has been particularly striking in Lilie's case, since her successful use of online social networking platform seemed independent of classical cultural capital markers. In spite of still being in its infancy, the notion of emerging cultural capital is crucial and resources such as a disposition to creatively engage in online practices, an openness to alternative routes of social engagement and taking unconventional approaches are all relevant factors that help explain Lilie's use of digital technology and yet are not easily captured under the umbrella term of cultural capital.

Another relevant aspect that emerged is the relevance of socialisation processes as an expression of cultural capital (cf. Kingston, 2001). Lilie's case quite unexpectedly showed that typical cultural capital markers, such as subject-specific knowledge, and academic degrees, are not necessarily indicated by interviewees as directly relevant to their successful use of digital technology. Rather, it seems that them being part of a specific social group that allows access to tacit knowledge through informal chats and moments of catching-up was perceived as strikingly

relevant here. Even though this type of knowledge may serve as an expression of cultural capital, it may not be necessarily recognised and verbalised as such by respondents. Thereby, I suggest looking more closely at the relevance of socialisation theory (e.g. Maccoby, 2007) and socialisation processes and the way in which these result in the adoption of cultural capital.

## 7.2.4 Results for research theme D "Relevance of affordances in facilitating digitally mediated social engagement"

The notion of trust and the capability of establishing trust via digitally mediated social ties has been one of the key themes of this thesis. This was because trust is perceived a key antecedent to accessing social capital resources and is crucial for creative professionals striving for recognition. I conclude that while trust as a means to social capital has been convincingly described as a 'lubricant' (e.g. Arrow, 1974) to facilitate social interaction, it is in fact the process of building trust that transforms interaction into a productive scenario. Nonetheless, the formation of trust online at first seems to be a paradoxical effort: Trust has been described as an increasingly fragile concept and given the perceived anonymity online, using online technology to establish trust does not seem to be the best starting point.

Accordingly, trust facilitated in online environments has often been compared to Putnam's (2001b) concept of 'thin trust', which describes trust in more distant social ties, which "extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally" (p. 136). So what is it that we are actually trusting in an online environment and how can 'thin trust' be conceptualised in this particular context? Essentially, trust, both in online and offline environments, is situated between two actors, who are aiming to facilitate interaction, where a particular person is seen as trustworthy (the trustee) and another person (the trustor) who is willing to trust the other person. Therefore, online trust embraces a similar concept to offline trust, given the fact that the desired outcomes are virtually the same.

Ultimately, the main difference in conceptualising interpersonal trust online and offline revolves around the question of how trust is being established. Interpersonal trust built offline relies on face-to-face social interaction and thickness of information that is exchanged in favour of establishing trust. Online, building trust merely relies on the images on a screen and words in exchanged messages.

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Therefore, understanding online trust requires looking at how information concerning individuals' identity and personal characteristics is being conveyed and, ultimately, how actors in this particular field can successfully fulfil these requirements given the absence of social cues.

Most notably, the concept of 'situational normality' is crucial in tracing the establishment of trust online. This means that actors striving to establish trust with a particular person aim to create a situation that very closely resemble this process in an offline scenario. Looking at the role of digital technology in this scenario highlights the fact that technologies such as online social networking platforms do exactly that, namely, creating a mediated experience that seems very much as if it were not mediated (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). The results of my research point to a similar direction, given the fact that respondents seem to often intuitively strive to achieve a scenario that emulates offline social interaction in order to convey trustworthiness. Essentially, trust building behaviour using digital technology is best understood by looking at how the individual user achieves this with what they do and what they say. Following this thought, Boyd (2003) argued that building trust online is primarily a rhetorical effort that requires a nuanced understanding of trust-inducing factors and the ability to effectively use technology to support this effort.

The specific relevance of trust in digitally mediated social ties raised questions in regards to how online social networking platforms afford building trust. Research theme D looked at the relevance of affordances of online social networking platforms when it comes to establishing meaningful social bonds online. Thereby, RQ 10 – RQ 12 looked at how individuals perceive opportunities to build relationships online with the aim to identify particular strategies to do this effectively.

RQ10: How do individuals perceive opportunities of relationship building by interpreting platform immanent properties?

RQ11: How do individuals build and maintain social engagement through online social networking practices?

RQ12: What are particular emerging strategies and tactics that individuals apply in building online ties?

I addressed the significance of affordances of online social networking platforms to understand *how* they facilitate social capital formation. Specifically, I looked at individuals *practice* in leveraging digitally mediated forms of social interaction to attain social capital. Thereby, I identified that the individuals' ability to use networking platforms effectively is heavily influenced by their existing affiliation with networks. This is because existing interaction with other creative professionals facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices that influence individuals' capacities to utilise platforms effectively. This was convincingly illustrated by Lilie's statement, in which she claimed that discussing her online networking practices with colleagues benefitted her strategic use of Twitter for example.

In addition, I concluded that the appreciation of rules and norms in the field of creative and cultural production have an impact on individuals' use of online social networking platforms. Taking into account that communicative practices online are influenced by norms of behaviour, which guide individuals' perception of others, the individuals' ability to acknowledge these rules positively influence outcomes. In Lilie's case her acknowledgement of power imbalances impacted her use of Twitter, whereby she made an effort to counterbalance lack of trust by conveying a professional image online. This was contrasted by Fiona's perception of online environments as a free space, in which everything is possible. Thereby I conclude that the individuals' ability to leverage affordance of online social networking platforms, is influenced by their readiness to convey social cues online in such a way that they adhere to field specific rules of perception.

One other element I addressed dealt with individuals' motivation to use online social networking platforms. On one hand, I observed that an individuals' estimate of whether or not digitally mediated social interaction qualify as a legitimate means of connecting with power holders is informed by framework conditions of their specific type of creative practice: Whereas in the fine art's sector (cf. Jeff's and Vincent's case), the use of online social networking platforms seemed less regarded as a legitimate form of connecting with decision makers, in Lilie's and Sienna's cases using Facebook and Twitter seemed a commonly accepted practice. This draws attention to the significance of accepted practices in different areas of creative practice and how these influence individuals' motivation to incorporate digitally mediated technology in their practices. On the other hand, motivations also seemed to be influenced by individuals' subjective interpretation of their capacity to benefit from digitally mediated social interaction. Perceiving of one's situation as

disadvantaged in comparison to others was mirrored in a lack motivation to make use of online social networking platforms: Jeff, who perceived himself as lacking adequate credentials as an artist, negatively influenced his belief that using online platforms could make any difference. It was my impression that such existing perceptions of disadvantage influence an individuals' motivation to integrate digitally mediated means of interaction in their strive for recognition.

Looking at how building trust is facilitated by the particular use of online social networking platforms calls for revisiting existing conceptualisations of affordances. Thus, the discussion on the particular affordance of creating trust begins by tackling those specific properties of online social networking platforms that are perceived to be suitable for facilitating that particular outcome. Interestingly, properties that are associated with this particular outcome are not necessarily self-evident or suggest themselves to any particular sort of action straight away.

Therefore, online social networking platforms can lend themselves to a number of previously unforeseen purposes. For example, Twitter per se has been designed to enable the user to post short messages or updates and to organise these around hashtags. This per se doesn't necessarily imply that Twitter can be a viable tool in order to create trust. Nonetheless, users have identified that a number of tangible aims using Twitter can help facilitate trust though they may not be evident at first sight. As such, one aspect that heavily impacts conceptualising affordances of platforms like Twitter is the individual's ability to evaluate the viability of given properties in light of establishing trust. In my view, the ability to perceive and evaluate properties anticipating particular outcomes is a skill that is key in tracing affordances in the digital context. In the first instance, this validates the assumption that "the perceiving of an affordance [...] is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object" (Gibson, 1979, p. 140) and consciously weighing potential actions by leveraging tool-specific properties.

Many studies around the affordances of social media in general and particularly online social networking platforms have looked at what using platforms affords in view of various outcomes. For example, scholars have researched how the use of social media enhances/impacts virtual learning spaces (e.g. Tess, 2013) and the emergence of collective intelligence (e.g. Jenkins, 2002). I argue that even though there is value in researching the affordances of digital platforms in view of specific outcomes, there is nonetheless one essential element missing that is

frequently overlooked – or rather ignored – by researchers, potentially because they further complicate subject matters. As such, another component that it is necessary to pay attention to when researching affordances is identifying what triggers their personal evaluation in regards to the affordances of a given tool.

There are two important implications tackled in previous affordance literature that in their combination are key to understand affordances of online social networking platforms. First, Gibson's notion of affordances stresses the fact that the properties of tools are primarily rooted in their individual specific perception. Therefore, the essential question to ask is "not whether they exist and are real but whether information is available in ambient light for perceiving them." (Gibson, 1979, p. 60). This points to the fact that a number of actions are potentially supported by given properties and essentially the ability to perceive them as skills in themselves. In further reference to this, Yates & Littleton (2010) have researched how gaming culture emerges as contingent on the life worlds of the respective user. Drawing on Snow's argument (1994), they give particular importance to the user framed as a "person-in-situation", which implies that a "person's reading of the technology [is] in relation to both the interpersonal and the cultural context" (p. 571).

I argue that it is essentially a combination of these two aspects – the ability of the individual user to perceive potential affordances, paired with the cultural embedding that informs their perception – that most effectively conceptualises affordances in the realm of digital technology. As such, the key to affordances in a digital context is combining an understanding of what individuals perceive, with locating the emergence of their perception in their respective cultural embedding. As I argued earlier, the perception of individuals' is heavily driven by their motivation to use online tools, which in turn are impacted by expectations and accepted practices in the particular area of creative practice. In addition, network effects equally come into play when tracing individuals' perception. Thereby, best practices, as a form of exchange of tacit knowledge is one of the most strikingly relevant factors. Ultimately, I suggest that looking at affordances in this way is key to address questions in regards to the varying outcomes of individuals in their use of technology, which is relevant in terms of explaining digital literacy and digital divides.

In light of this, I suggest that perceiving the properties of online social networking platforms in view of sustaining social relatedness, poses a useful example that illustrates the specific factors that inform concepts of affordances.

I thus argue that the following four elements are crucial in order to achieve the establishment of trust via online social networking platforms:

1.  Portraying the specific properties of the platform
2.  Tackling those factors that influence a user's ability to perceive the possibilities of using given properties in a specific context
3.  Understanding the 'effectivities' of the individual user in light of their cultural embedding and situational context, which ultimately informs their ability to perceive potential actions
4.  Describing particular skills that effectuate observed potential outcomes by applying particular skills

Drawing on my insights on affordances and the way in which they impact the formation of digitally mediated social ties, I provide the following answers for the research questions highlighted under theme D.

RQ10: How do individuals perceive opportunities of relationship building by interpreting platform immanent properties?

The most striking difference in terms of perception of platform immanent properties was that adopting a techno-deterministic view of online social networking platforms like in Fiona's case (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.4, p. 185 ff.) seemed to negatively impact individuals' ability to leverage opportunities for social engagement online. This means that perceiving online social networking platforms as a separate, neutral social space is less beneficial in terms of desired outcomes (i.e. building meaningful social bonds that foster access to particular resources). Fiona's appreciation of the online environment as a neutral social space was contrasted by Lilie's and Sienna's readiness and ability to address social norms and expectations as present in digitally mediated social spaces.

In Chapter 5 (Section 5.4, p. 185 ff.) I highlighted that the ability to address power imbalances for example by making an effort to craft a credible online persona targeting appropriate audiences was essential to leverage opportunities to build social ties and access to desired resources. As a result, I conclude that the way in

which individuals perceive the online space shows a significant impact when evaluating the efficiency of online engagement. Equally, individuals motivation and their self-assessment seemed to play a role in terms of their perception of whether or not digitally mediated social interaction presented itself as an opportunity – an aspect which I discussed in Chapter 6 (Section 6.6, p. 238 ff.).

### RQ11: How do individuals build and maintain social engagement through online social networking practices?

Theories of affordances and particularly the interplay of platform immanent properties and individuals' effectivities to identify and interpret ways to build digitally mediated social engagement were essential here (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.8, p. 60 ff.). Thereby, the way in which individuals perceive of properties was crucial in order to understand how and why they managed to foster social engagement online. Lilie's case provided a good example to illustrate this: She leveraged Twitter's properties to connect with a politician using their publicly accessible status updates to foster an opportunity for an actual face-to-face meeting. Thereby, not only the way in which she was reading Twitter's status updates, but also her ability to identify a means of intervention on the basis of the cues that were given away in tweets was essential (cf. Chapter 5, Section 5.2, p. 178 ff.). Equally, I identified that one key aspect was to establish a sense of trustworthiness by crafting a credible and professional image online. This was reflected in the images respondents chose to represent themselves online and the particular content they chose to share in their tweets and status updates. This ties in with my answer to RQ 10, where I mentioned that appreciating social norms and responding to expectations of professionalism and credibility was the most relevant aspect to distinguish between successful and less successful online practices.

### RQ12: What are particular emerging strategies and tactics that individuals apply in building online ties?

I have come to the conclusion that referring to emerging practices that individuals adopt in building online ties as strategies and tactics is perhaps not the most accurate approach here: The way in which respondents portrayed their online engagement does not necessarily resemble notion of strategies and tactics, which

perhaps too overtly implies that digitally mediated social engagement happens in accordance with a predetermined instrumental goal. Whereas on the surface this might be the case, respondents did not perceive their online practices as strictly goal driven. Rather it seemed to me that respondents genuinely enjoyed building and sustaining social ties while at the same time this engagement resulted in specific benefits.

In general I conclude that respondents' perception of the online space as a social space like any other was the most important strategic element. Those respondents whose online activities were driven by a genuine interest in connecting with others instead of a mere utilising a tool seemed to have achieved the most effective outcomes. This was particularly true in Sienna's and Lilie's case as I have outlined above.

Nonetheless, instead of calling their online activities strategic, I conclude that their reflexivity in using digital technology seemed to have created a lasting impact. In Lilie's case this was evidenced by her ability to create a credible online persona as she called it (cf. p. 160), by presenting herself online in a professional manner. However, it was my impression that Lilie's choice to make an effort here was driven by her creativity and genuine interest to being able to successfully establish rapport with others. Equally, Sienna seemed to demonstrate this stance: Even though, she carefully selected images that seemed to promise the most effective feedback on Facebook (cf. p. 225 ff.) she too seemed to genuinely enjoy the prospect of earning the approval of others, simply as a token of her creative ability and as reassurance of having creating a lasting memory of a couple's wedding day.

This also reflects on the validity of Bourdieu's at times too overt focus on economic capital (e.g. Kingston, 2001): Placing strong emphasis on the convertibility of other forms of capital implies that the attainment of social capital for example targets individuals' expectation that social contacts will pay off at some point in the future. Whereas this may be relevant and even desired by many of my respondents, it seemed to me that their efforts to establish connections with others online was not primarily driven by future expectations. Rather it seemed to have been a mix of several motivations, whereby genuine interest in collaborating with others to create a meaningful outcome was equally relevant as the idea that this would impact their reputation as creative professionals in the long run.

## 7.2.5 Reflections on social capital, liquid ties and their implications on individuals' agency in a networked society

Individuals' agency in forming and sustaining social relationships perceived as meaningful in view of their desired benefits has often been seen to be impacted by predominating social structures (cf. McPherson et al., 2001; Bourdieu, 1984). This is because social norms and behaviours dominated by social cues heavily influence individuals' agency in terms of forming social bonds. In creative professions in particular, the relevance of social capital is pertinent, due to the fact that individuals rely heavily on others' approval in order to attain recognition, which I have defined in my thesis as an expression of symbolic capital. The use of online social networking platforms has been credited with a potential to eradicate social boundaries, thus enabling individuals to establish social bonds with virtually anyone (cf. Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This notion implies that online technology paves the way for unbounded voluntarism that frames individuals' action, drawing a picture of the free agent, capable of virtually achieving anything given access to resources free of constraints. According to my findings, I respond to individuals' agency in the network society on two levels:

1. Liquid ties positively impact individuals' agency in view of attaining resources that require limited trust
2. Attaining agency is contingent on knowledge of existing structures prevalent in the field of creative production and incorporating them into actions

On one hand, attaining access to social capital resources can be facilitated by online social networking platforms. As I explained earlier, liquid ties can be effective in this regard given that the desired resource requires a low level of trust. Broadly speaking, this is contingent on the estimated risk entailed by providing access to a resource and the trust required to compensate for anticipated risk factors. Typically, trust is established via interpersonal interaction, as it provides an opportunity to get a sense of one's trustworthiness, which is often inferred by various social cues such as an individuals' behaviour and other visual cues such as language and gestures that are being interpreted in a certain way.

Agency manifests exactly at this point: Liquid ties provide the individual user with more freedom in terms of facilitating trust in social relationships. More

precisely, I argue that digitally mediated social interaction provides individuals with more control over how they present themselves online and in further consequence it creates an opportunity to convey social cues to their favour. This means that, to a certain extent, individuals can claim agency by actively impacting the way in which their messages are going to be framed. Unlike in offline social situations, where information in regards to someone's trustworthiness is often inferred from social cues conveyed in gestures, visual and verbal expression, online social interaction allows individuals to have more control over the way in which information is being conveyed. This is not to say that social cues are absent from digitally mediated social interaction. However, using online social networking platforms provides individuals with greater authority to emphasise certain personal characteristics. As such, having control over framing a social situation in this way can be interpreted as bestowing agency on the individual user.

Ultimately though, claiming the freedom to present oneself online in the best possible, most trust-instilling light, implies knowing which specific actions and which specific characteristics instil trust in a given situation and in a particular environment. In this regard, I have mentioned that establishing trust and knowing what steps are required to effectively use online tools requires knowledge of the 'rules of the game' (e.g. Bourdieu, 1989) that govern the field. Lilie's example shows this quite effectively: Not only does she mention that a "professional photo" would be required in order to be perceived as trustworthy, she also pointed to the fact that providing relevant, professional information on one's Twitter account can aid facilitating trust. Hence, the question that arises is: How does Lilie know what makes a professional image? Which style, layout, which facial expression creates a professional image? And what makes information relevant, that is to say, which topics have to be chosen and what is the right tone of voice?

I argue that creating trust in a digitally mediated social environment among a targeted audience requires being knowledgeable about predominant social codes and ethics that are expressed both verbally and visually. Therefore, I assume that Lilie's extensive exposure to activities pertaining to the creative field, such as her education at art college, socialising and debating with colleagues, attending exhibitions and networking events, naturally sharpen her knowledge and her sense of what, in this particular case, are the elements that convey professionalism and will thus instil trustworthiness. In fact, knowing about the structures, which represent the predominant rules and norms in the respective field, is essential in order to

capitalise on the liberating properties of online social networking platforms in the first place. As such, this process creates a double bind: whereas the use of online social networking platforms does entail agency by providing tools to 'free' them from structural constraints on the one hand, it is conditional on the individuals' knowing and incorporating these very same structures. Therefore, paradoxically, these rules and norms may in fact *facilitate rather than constrain* explicit action.

In this sense, framing agency in the context of digitally mediated social interaction resonates with and reiterates Durkheim's notion, who framed the structure-agency debate as agency *given* structure, rather than agency *versus* structure. As such, "[...] agency in this sense is not a matter of 'pure will' or absolute freedom; instead, it is the individual and collective autonomy made possible by a solid grounding in the constraining and enabling features of social structure." (Durkheim, 1964, p. 64/65). I conclude, that whereas digitally mediated social interaction provides individuals with more control over how to present themselves online, which is frequently interpreted as bestowing agency upon individuals' action, given the attainment of a specific goal – in this case establishing trust. However, individuals are required to respond to existing norms in verbal and non-verbal forms of communication in order to capitalize on this freedom.

## 7.3 Researching liquid ties in social network research – implications on the use of social networks analysis

Researching individuals' perception of digitally mediated social ties allowed me to adopt a creative technique based on hand-drawn network maps. The unforeseen challenges in tracing respondents' social ties enabled me to reflect on the validity of existing methods. While methodological aspects were not directly covered in my research questions, I nonetheless think that my experience utilising hand-drawn network maps delivered significant insight. In this section, I summarise the main findings and reflect on how these impact the validity of traditional techniques in social network research.

Tracing the nature of digitally mediated social ties was at the very core of my research. Even though I did not consider methodological concerns directly in my research questions, I consider the insight resulting from my (failed) attempts to utilise traditional forms of social network analysis as beneficial to future studies of digitally mediated social ties. The use of an alternative approach to social network

analysis proved essential, because of the conceptual tension that digitally mediated social interaction created when compared to traditional social tie concepts. Thereby, I acknowledged that the focus of my empirical work ought to be placed on uncovering the characteristics of digitally mediated social ties, which informed my concept of liquid ties. Liquid ties are challenging to trace when using traditional methods of social network analysis. This is because their ephemeral nature makes it challenging for respondents to recall information on these ties, which resulted in a fragmented narrative that obfuscated the desired data. Notably, addressing digitally mediated social ties as ephemeral social relations, I focussed on emerging social relationships with previously unacquainted individuals rather than those social relations that are an extension of already existing (offline) social relations. This is important to acknowledge as online social networking platforms often serve as a means to maintain already existing friendships for example (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011).

In Chapter 2, I argued that the use of established social network analysis tools such as the name generator proved unsuccessful in researching digitally mediated social ties. The methodological challenges I experienced not only complicated tracing digitally mediated social ties, but also pointed to an underlying tension in the existing approach to researching social ties. The literature on social network analysis has pointed to an existing discussion in view of the theoretical rigour of social network analysis. Accordingly, Scott (2011) argued: "[…] theoretical work has long been underdeveloped in social network analysis. While the methods themselves do not require or imply any particular sociological theory, they do require theoretical contextualisation in wider debates" (p. 24). The difficulty I experienced in tracing digitally mediated social ties highlighted the missing theoretical underpinnings of what concerns the nature of social ties. While social ties are a core part of social network analysis (e.g. Wasserman & Faust, 1994), its practical application reveals inconsistency in defining its fundamental aspects, as to for example "what empirical phenomena constitute a tie" (Erikson, 2013, p. 220).

Social network analysis operates alongside a conceptual understanding of social ties that is anchored within a dichotomy of strong tie and weak tie definitions. This implies that whatever form of social tie we are to observe, it ought to be labelled either a strong tie *or* a weak tie. In general, tie strength has been measured as a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Krackhardt (1986) demonstrated that this approach

is indeed speculative, as there is "considerable ambiguity as to what constitutes a strong tie and what constitutes a weak tie" (p. 216). The volatile nature of digitally mediated social ties resonates with this claim. My notion of liquid ties conceptualised social ties on the basis of an affordance perspective, whereby I illustrated how these ties emulate both strong and weak tie characteristics when looking at their affordance to build trust. Nonetheless, this does not resolve the dilemma of accurately conceptualising social ties and is instead yet another expression of it.

This raises important questions regarding the perception of social networks and the way in which social network analysis tackles social ties. Formal social network analysis is perceived as a tool that focusses on the structural analysis of social networks, whereby networks are defined as "composed entities" (Knoke and Yang, 2008, p. 8). This implies a notion of networks as comprised of a set of actors (nodes) and the relations that connect these actors (ties) as in "regular patterns of relations" (Knoke & Yang, 2008, p. 4). Characterising networks in this fashion evokes an understanding of networks as a fixed entity, in which social relations are structured in a linear way. I argue that liquid ties challenge this concept, as these ties add a non-linear dimension to networks. This is owed to their fluctuating, ephemeral nature, which sees social relations as constantly shifting and migrating. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) analogy to rhisomatic structures resonates with the liquid tie concept, by conceiving social ties as part of "an entity whose rules are constantly in motion because new elements are always included." (p. 34).

Drawing on this notion, I argue that given the configuration of liquid ties, researchers have to move away from associating social networks with fixity and linearity. This is not to say that networks may not grow and evolve over time, however the pivotal point is that there has been a change in terms of *how* networks grow and transform. I assume that social networks impacted by digitally mediated social interaction transform into a non-linear, inconsistent fashion. Similarly, Bauman (2013) denotes *liquidity* as one major theme that characterises contemporary social life insofar as social phenomena – such as relationships – "neither fix space nor bind time" (p. 2) which entails discontinuity in terms of its (spatial) dimensions.

On a practical level, this has key implications for utilising social network analysis in empirical research. My research has shown that digitally mediated social ties often only assume relevance within a specific context. These relations are often perceived to be relevant in reference to a specific time period, whereby they take on major importance in one moment and disappear in the next. Using a qualitative

approach, such as hand-drawn network maps, gives respondents a wider framework in terms of expressing potentially disruptive information regarding the relationships they perceive to be meaningful. In this regard, as I have explained in Chapter 3, respondents feel less constrained in voicing responses, because of the unstructured approach, which does not coerce them into thinking of their network as a fixed set of actors and associated relationships. Instead respondents could represent their network focussing on whatever aspect, actor and relationship they found significant at a given moment in time.

In this regard, I argue that considering the shift in the configuration of social relationships, the actual unit of analysis in researching social networks needs to be rethought. By this I mean that researching the relationships in social networks requires shifting the focus in terms of how the configuration of social networks is being accessed. Traditionally, social network analysis relies on a network concept that focussed on "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of [actors]" (Mitchell, 1969, p. 2). Whereas this definition includes relationships among actors as are a core component of social networks, this notion suggests that these relationships are epiphenomenal, so to speak, to identifying actors that ground this network.

This phenomenon adds to an existing discussion around the atheoretical nature of social network analysis (e.g. Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Burt, 1984, Mitchell, 1969), which highlights complications regarding the theoretical grounding of empirical phenomena that are being researched using social network analysis. My research findings reinforce existing concerns regarding the conceptual approach to social relations as they illustrate how social network analysis makes it virtually impossible to evoke a holistic picture of the heterogeneity of social relatedness, where various forms of social ties coexist within a social network as an entity. What are the implications for future research in social network analysis?

Understanding the relevance of liquid ties for social capital attainment specifically required a shift of focus in reference to what these social ties actually constitute. Using a name generator approach in this context would mean that collaborating with respondents in the field would require shifting the focus from an actor-based approach to a situational approach. Therefore, I suggest adapting corresponding trigger questions to capture social ties around specific activities and contexts, instead of connecting trigger questions to actor-specific attributes such as name or position. Obviously, this will result in a snap shot picture of the

respondents' social network, however it will enable the researcher to understand the relevance of both traditional and liquid ties within a given context in more depth. In addition, tracing the relevance of liquid ties over time will be interesting to observe. Thereby, producing several network maps over a given time period may deliver insights into how liquid ties develop and whether they establish into more traditional forms of social ties or under which circumstances they disappear/reappear.

## 7.4 Conclusion

In summary, my findings advocate a more nuanced approach to social capital, leading to a reconceptualisation of its conceptual rigour. Contrasting Bourdieu's conceptual take on social capital, I presented the impact of liquid ties as an alternative route to social capital attainment. This new take on social capital results from the capacity of liquid ties to attain exclusive resources, such as access to insider information on the basis of trust. Whereas traditionally, the attainment of such resources highlighted the need for strong ties, my research showed that ephemeral, fleeting ties (i.e. liquid ties) yield similar outcomes. Furthermore, I argued that this notion of social capital has to be seen in context with their capacity to facilitate the accumulation of symbolic capital, which was the main aim of this thesis. I argued that whereas liquid ties facilitate the attainment of social capital, their effect in terms of symbolic capital accumulation is negligible. This is because liquid ties do not facilitate a process of authentication to which symbolic capital is key. Liquid ties fail to tie in with symbolic capital accumulation, because I was unable to trace their effect on producing prestige and honour. As a conclusion, I argue that liquid ties are relevant in facilitating a one-off, temporally bound exchange of resources, rather than facilitating a process of authentication and assuming symbolic capital.

To some extent, my findings affirm the rigour of Bourdieu's exclusive take on social capital, particularly in light of its conversion into symbolic capital. Vincent's case strikingly confirmed the effectiveness of social relations to power holders in building a reputation as an artist. Nonetheless, Lilie's scenario, for example, highlighted the potential that digitally mediated social ties hold in navigating social barriers. While this case confirms the existence of social restrictions in establishing a connection with key stakeholders, it also shows that digitally mediated social interaction can have an impact on accessing restricted social circles. Thereby, the exclusive focus Bourdieu puts on social class affiliation is relative insofar as it

displays a rather "mechanistic picture" (Crossley, 2001) of class affiliation in shaping individuals' actions. I experienced respondents' as being highly conscious of social rules and implied boundaries that are so prevalent in the field of creative and cultural production. As a result, they seemed to consciously seek out possibilities to alleviate perceived constraints and shape their actions in a more effective way. Utilising digital technology might be one such example of taking a *conscious choice* by incorporating alternative means of creating social bonds into their practice. While "incorporated habits dispose the agent to continue with particular forms of practice" (Crossley, 2001, p. 83) it will be interesting to see how agents generate new practices. I suggest that future research shall address questions in regards to individuals' motivation to deviate from existing habits, by identifying dispositions and circumstances that shape the formation of new habits.

I also contextualised the attainment of social capital via liquid ties to other forms of capital. According to Bourdieu's theory, the attainment of social capital is intertwined with the possession of other forms of capital. Specifically, I focussed on parallels between online social capital attainment and existing forms of cultural capital. I highlighted that individuals' skill in activating digitally mediated social ties required particular skills and knowledge to produce meaningful outcomes. I argue that skills in utilising online social networking platforms to activate social ties emerge as a result of previously accumulated cultural capital. These forms of cultural capital take on the shape of knowledge in conveying social cues in accordance with existing norms prevalent in the field of creative and cultural production. In addition, transferable skills resulting from previous professional engagement proved efficient in this context, allowing respondents to accurately interpret visual cues displayed as a part of digital social engagement and integrate these into their own use of these platforms.

I highlighted new forms of cultural capital emerging as part of the relevance that digitally mediated social engagement has taken on in recent years. Thereby, displaying skill in utilising online social networking platforms to foster social interaction can be seen as an expression of cultural capital in itself. Recent research has addressed the ability to be flexible and adaptable as being associated with emerging forms of cultural capital (Savage, 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2011). Whereas this notion blends in well with individuals' readiness to develop online social networking skills, linkages to previously existing skills and habits remain largely unclear. Highlighting Sienna's case, my research showed a very clear link between

previously acquired professional skills and the effect they had when utilising online social networking platforms. In this particular case, the ability to engage with visual narratives impacted Sienna's practice in addressing expressions of taste on Facebook. I suggest further research shall focus on identifying skills and habits that enable individuals to engage flexibly with online social networking practices, for example, instead of relying on 'embodied habits' as an expression of cultural capital.

My research also highlighted methodological challenges in utilising social network analysis tools as a means to investigate digitally mediated social interaction. Alongside existing claims that pointed to a lack of theoretical rigour in social network analysis, I argue that the relative conceptual weakness in defining social ties is mirrored in the challenges that tracing the nature of digitally mediated social ties evoked. While the notion of social ties is at the heart of social network analysis, its conceptual underpinnings are based on a dichotomous definition of social ties as either weak or strong. This proves inefficient in researching social ties as part of digitally mediated social engagement, which as a result obfuscates research on social capital, for example. I thereby advocate a more nuanced approach to social network analysis, which instead of focussing on formal aspects of social ties, looks at these ties from an affordance perspective. My qualitative approach to social network analysis utilising hand-drawn network maps is one example of achieving this.

I acknowledge that qualitative approaches to social network research may not always be suitable. However, I recommend that researchers, specifically in the field of digitally mediated social interaction, be cautious about relying solely on traditional SNA methods. In practice, qualitative approaches could be integrated with standardised approaches. Livingstone & Sefton-Green (2016) provide a compelling example of how this might be achieved in practice. By harmonising arts-based and structural depictions of school children's social networks, they trace the meaning of their social interactions utilising drawings alongside showcasing their structural embeddedness in the classroom as a social environment using traditional network maps. The insight gained from this approach shows that structural determinants such as position in a social network do not always coincide with how those individuals experience their social engagement with others. Exploring digitally mediated social interaction could equally benefit from such an approach, because it would highlight individuals' experience of being socially connected, instead of relying solely on formal indicators of their social networks. This might produce a more

nuanced understanding of common social network characteristics, such as network centrality and graph theory in general (cf. Freeman, 1978; Barnes, 1969).

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