The Functions of Social Interaction in the Knowledge-Creative Economy: Between Co-Presence and ICT-Mediated Social Relations

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Published: May 8, 2019

Abstract

This article investigates the role and functions of interaction among knowledge-creative workers in Milan. While a large body of literature supports the relevance of co-presence for the building of social capital in creative scenes, a growing body of empirical and theoretical research shows in fact that, under certain circumstances, social relations mediated by digital tools are equally important. The extent to which professionals in these industries are embedded in "spaces" which are physical as well as digital, and how these have come to be so, remains nevertheless an under-explored research question. Building on findings from two distinct qualitative researches on knowledge-creative workers in Milan, undertaken in 2008 and 2011–2013, it is here argued that knowledge-creative professionals are embedded in a wider "space" of relations where exchanges mediated via ICTs productively intertwine with face-to-face interaction to determine new ways of searching for jobs and practicing work. The paper highlights what changes when proximity becomes physical and digital as a mixture of face-to-face and ICT-mediated interaction, and discusses contradictions and implications of their blending, showing the necessity to overcome the rigid distinction between face-to-face and digital interaction that still characterises the empirical study of knowledge-creative economies.

Keywords: social interactions; co-presence; ICT-mediated interactions; knowledge-creative workers; Milan.

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1 Introduction

This article investigates the role and functions of interaction among knowledge-creative workers in Milan. It does so, by looking at the role of face-to-face interaction and its relationship with ICT-mediated interaction in the professional context of a knowledge-based "creative city." A large body of literature supports the relevance of co-presence for the building of social capital in creative scenes; in parallel, a growing body of empirical and theoretical researches dealing with online interaction shows that, under certain circumstances, social relations mediated by digital tools are equally important. The literature, however, does not adequately engage with the question of how exactly offline and online relations combine for professional interaction and especially the functions that these respectively fulfill, which aims and purposes, which outcomes.[1]

This paper aims at filling such gap by presenting an account of this combination and integration. In line with recent research (Lindell, 2016), the article shows that offline and online interaction among knowledge-creative workers are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, using a unique combination of two qualitative researches that studied professional interactions among knowledge-creative workers in Milan, the article will demonstrate how these workers are essentially required to leverage on a combination of both offline and online interactions in the urban creative scene. This challenges the existing understanding of the functions of interaction in co-presence as well as in ICT-mediated contexts.

It is here argued that knowledge-creative urban professionals are embedded in a wider "space" of relations whereby exchanges mediated via ICTs productively intertwine with face-to-face interaction to determine new ways of searching for jobs and practicing work. The nature of these social relations will be here discussed with the purpose of enquiring the extent to which the functions of interaction and their activation across the offline-online dichotomy among urban knowledge-creative workers inform knowledge production and reproduction, the building of in-group reputation, socialization and the construction of trust. Our empirical analysis is based on findings from two distinct qualitative researches consisting of interviews to knowledge-creative workers undertaken in 2008 and 2011–2013 in Milan. The first one (2008) explored the needs and functions of face-to-face interaction in this context; the second one (2011–2013) aimed to assess, among other factors, the role of ICT-mediated interaction in the formation of social capital among freelance professional networks in this context. The combination of these observations offers a unique perspective on the development and evolution of the functions of social interaction in the context of the knowledge-creative economy in Milan at a moment in which digital technologies and particularly social media experienced an expansion in their relevance from spaces of leisure to professional networking tools broadly considered.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section presents the theoretical framework wherein this work locates, and highlights the gap in the literature it addresses. Subsequently, the combination of the two empirical researches is discussed from a methodological perspective; then, the findings that emerge from them are outlined. This will show how and to what extent localized networks of social relations among workers in the Milanese knowledge-creative economy unfold alongside the rise of digital-based networking; how the organization of work takes place within such hybrid networks, and how trust is built and managed across multiple domains. At the same time, it will illustrate that offline and online interactions are complementary aspects of a wider professional scene in which the urban context remains the most favorable setting for the professional development of workers and their increasingly freelance-based careers.

2 The Knowledge-Creative Economy, the City and Social Relations

Starting with Becker (1974; 1982), the study of creative production has exited the sole domain of aesthetic analysis to enter the sociological (Bourdieu, 1993) and managerial (Menger, 1999) scholarship, thus blending with existing research on knowledge work. Becker's contribution has helped disambiguating how creative, cultural, artistic, but also cognitive works are all product of processes of collaboration and

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1. The paper focuses on the functions of social interactions seen as the outcome of actors' relational work. In other words, networks are here taken figuratively as structures where interactions happen once the actors enter them. The paper therefore does not question the structure or properties of networks.

a complex, peculiar division of labour. The literature that flourished particularly at the turn of the century (Banks et al., 2000; Menger, 1999; Molotch, 2003; Pratt, 1999) has focused on the role of social capital, emphasizing how, notwithstanding the technological improvements in mobility and communication, people still primarily meet in person in order to engage in collaboration within this context. A partially different perspective has looked at the diffusion of knowledge as frequent exchanges and dense interaction take place in so-called "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1999), a term that is now widely used to describe situated social practices, characterized by learning and knowing that occurs both durably or for a short period of time, in a given place. As a whole, this literature clearly indicates that workers mainly gather around practices, and that interaction does not necessarily happen in a single defined place, nor is necessarily rooted locally; yet, it may use external linkages with other actors (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004) or build systematic links with other environments, shall be the risk of a stagnating milieu (Camagni & Capello, 2005). Professionals in this context, in other words, are released by co-location but, at the same time, forced to intensively move and meet with others frequently, most commonly in the context of an urban-based scene.

Nevertheless, this high mobility of knowledge-creative professionals (Favell, 2011) increasingly often occurs in a hybrid milieu made of both offline and online interaction. While often described as "flat" (Friedman, 2005), this economy is still dependent on firm-localization, in particular, for what concerns high-value activities which location in knowledge centres remains critical (McCann, 2008). Amin & Roberts, discussing the circulation of knowledge between and within firms, acknowledge that "relational proximity, as social-quality underpinning interaction between economic partners, [which] may or may not coincide with geographical proximity" (2008, p. 204). It may be hypothesized, however, that relational proximity, usually achieved through face-to-face interaction, may also be achieved now thanks to the use of ICTs and particularly social networking sites. Existing research acknowledges how the Internet allows to find new markets and potentially enable the growth of small-scale businesses (Roth, 2015), at the same time offering a new environment for supply and demand of work to meet (Pais & Gandini, 2015). In such a context, the building of one's "digital reputation" has been argued to be of paramount importance (Gandini, 2016a; 2016b; Hearn, 2010) as a means to objectify proxies for credibility and trust irrespective of geographic location.

Thus, it seems necessary to investigate whether digital-based interaction might not be simply alternative, but actually complementary to face-to-face interaction, particularly in a context such as the knowledge-creative economy where contacts historically matter for career success, and workers are "portfolio professionals" (Platman, 2004) commonly evaluated on the basis of their last job (Blair, 2001). As social media expanded in their relevance from spaces of leisure to professional networking tools broadly considered, it seems logical to question the extent to which professionals in the knowledge-creative economy are embedded into what appears to be an expanded environment that comprises co-presence *but also* ICT-mediated interaction, and reciprocally complement with each other for the pursuit of certain ends. The extent to which professionals in these industries are embedded in "spaces" which are physical *as well as* digital, remains an under-researched issue, despite a vast literature has questioned the role of digital technology in reinforcing or diminishing the importance of face-to-face communication.

This generates the following questions: to what extent are the social relations that knowledge-creative workers must nurture and cultivate, embedded in cities in a digitized economy? What is the link between physical co-presence and relational proximity? Which functions do face-to-face and ICT-mediated interaction respectively fulfill? How is the nature of social interaction changing in this context as digital-based social networking expands in importance? This paper suggests that the urban space still plays a crucial role, for many reasons — not necessarily, or not only, related to the cultivation of social relations.

3   The Functions of Co-Presence and ICT-Mediated Interaction

In order to answer these questions, the paper looks more closely at how the aspects just discussed interplay with the different functions of co-presence and ICT-mediated interaction. Boden & Molotch argued that face-to-face interaction, or co-presence, "is *thick* with information" (1994, p. 259) and allows people to exchange a very large set of information. Yet, co-presence is not only an efficient way of sharing

information; its functions actually range from cementing in-group membership up to the organization of work, developing trust among people to recognizing talent, and creating a common set of shared behaviour to feed creativity and knowledge transfer (Storper, 2013).

Similarly, ICT-mediated interaction enables a peculiar production of subjectivity and identity, pointed at the construction of a professional persona (Hearn, 2008). This occurs through the execution of productive communication acts across "networked" (Boyd, 2010) and "affective" publics (Papacharissi, 2014) where the mediation of metrics acts as a proxy for influence, credibility and trust (Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013). Here follows a discussion of the different functions of social interaction, to explore how and to what extent these are performed through co-present or ICT-mediated interaction.

3.1   Knowledge Transfer

The contemporary debate in sociology and geography around innovation and the knowledge economy has come to the central finding that knowledge transfer, innovation and creativity spread out thanks to networks and communications among different actors, such as firms, companies and institutions who own different kinds of knowledge and *meet* in order to solve various types of organizational, intellectual, commercial or creative problems. Dense networks of cooperative relations resulting from an innovative milieu produce a whole set of collective expertise, standards and rules that are shared among actors and institutions (Krätke, 2011, p. 94). Communities of practice are considered the medium through which knowledge is created and diffused (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Yet, the literature focusing on economies of agglomeration (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Bathelt & Henn, 2014; Boschma, 2005; Camagni & Capello, 2005; Ibert, Hautala, & Jauhiainen, 2015; Torre, 2008; Wolfe & Gertler, 2004; Balland, Boschma, & Frenken, 2015; Frenken & Boschma, 2015) explains firms clustering with the need to exchange tacit knowledge in both social and spatial significance[2]: firstly, because it concerns tacit skills as team working, and organizational or relational skills; secondly, because tacit knowledge, "being person-embodied and context dependent, is locationally *sticky*" (Morgan, 2004, p. 7).

The distinction between codified and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) has been largely used in the literature on interaction and knowledge transfer because the former can simply be exchanged through any kind of *media* (books, e-mails, etc.), while the latter needs co-presence and direct interaction. Generally, the more tacit the knowledge, the more co-presence is needed (Huber, 2012). Yet, through the concept of 'pipeline,' the classical conception of local cluster is challenged, as actors can maintain channels of knowledge exchange (pipelines) towards hot spots of knowledge (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004; Bathelt & Turi, 2011). Therefore, while in co-presence relations are conducive to tacit knowledge exchange, ICT-mediated relations channel codified knowledge and keep pipelines of knowledge exchange alive — or, put differently: "combinations of electronic and digital translocal communication with temporary face-to-face meetings provide efficient ways of linking different locations of production, research, and marketing with one another" (Bathelt & Henn, 2014, p. 1404).

3.2   The Building of Reputation

The nature of work in the knowledge-creative sector has changed significantly over the last decades, as this is performed mostly on the basis of short-term contract projects and freelance arrangements, thus inducing workers into undertaking different temporary jobs at the same time (Menger, 1999). Therefore, knowledge-creative workers have to constantly be on the lookout for new jobs or better contracts, and job opportunities generally originate from personal contacts and social capital (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012; Lee, 2011). In order to be successful in this constant search, recent research suggests that a key aspect for workers is to build and maintain a professional reputation (Gandini, 2016b). Very often a worker's skills are largely delinked from any formal education or the possession of a degree, which guarantees only partially for a worker's competence; secondly, their embeddedness in professional networks is what enables them to come into contact with job opportunities. Therefore, one's reputation becomes

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2.   This happens despite the fact that knowledge networks within clusters are "uneven and selective, not pervasive and collective" (Giuliani, 2007).

a key asset for their success in the labour market, to the aim of multiplying one's chances to obtain a job (Gandini, 2016b). Through a process of "getting into the loop" (Storper & Venables, 2004), offline networking is instrumental to access a certain network; here, individual qualities and skills are recognized as adequate to belong to the group, and the group defines its cultural capital. Thanks to frequent and extended interactions, the network guarantees the competence of its members as it produces the reputational capital for them, which results in a reduction of risk and information costs, enables more efficient partnering in joint projects and increases motivation in collaborative efforts (d'Ovidio, 2010).

All this is partially reproduced, amplified and accompanied by the Internet, where reputation may be seen as the carrier to bridge the offline and the online. The Internet is the milieu where a reputation can be managed and ultimately made visible to a broader audience — to also be used offline. Social media in this sense are the main territory where practices of reputation building and management are outlined. The publicness and visibility of reputation through a variety of proxies and metrics, such as the number of followers or the degree of engagement with others, measurable for instance in Twitter's retweets, combines with the curation of one's profile and content posted to make out a reputational capital, that is visible and to some extent measurable (Hearn, 2010; Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013; Gandini, 2016b).

3.3 Socialisation

Frequent face-to-face interaction is also essential in the creation of dense networks that tie knowledge-creative workers in community-like formations based on common sensibilities, aesthetic orientation and cultural values. Moreover, face-to-face interaction sets the timing and rhythm of daily work (Rodgers, 2014). Thus, it performs a socialisation function since, through interaction with other members, individuals learn the "codes" of the environment and acquire specific criteria of judgment which, in turn, signal to others that they belong to the same social world. In the literature on communities of practice this function is presented as "the *shared repertoire* of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time" (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). Socialisation across online social environments, on the other hand, may be understood in terms of what Wittel (2001) described as "network sociality," meaning a more ephemeral, non-communitarian modality of interaction based on publicity and rapid circulation of information. This, in Wittel's view, delinks from the idea of community as a result of the absence of shared meanings and values among individuals, who come to be tied in flows of information the nature of which is essentially affective.

3.4 Trust

Yet, knowledge-creative workers spend time, money and energy in face-to-face interaction because they have the necessity to build relationships that are conducive to trust, and to mutually renew and confirm that trust over time. Trustworthy relations are necessary because of the nature of the knowledge involved in their work, which entails an individual's ability, a sensibility, a certain lifestyle and taste that can be communicated, transferred and shared mainly through a personal relationship based on mutual trust. Banks et al. (2000) in the analysis of Mancunian cultural industries showed that cultural entrepreneurs are keen to develop active trust with mentors, clients and collaborators, in order to deal with the risk typical of a sector based on new ideas and knowledge. In their analysis, the spatiality of the social relations emerges clearly, as trust rises from dense networks of interpersonal relations rooted and reproduced in spatial contexts. However, relations of "active trust" are not necessarily dependent on a physical place, as a consequence of social disembedding, and they can be developed and sustained across stretches of space-time (Giddens, 1994; Möllering, 2005). As seen, the forms of interaction and socialisation over social network sites are being increasingly described as delinking from a communitarian form (Wittel, 2001) to embrace more loosely connected and ephemeral aggregations. In such a context, the notion of trust that comes to emerge is one that is based on reviews and feedbacks given by others, such as on eBay or Amazon, within a reputation-based logic that is deeply intertwined with the production of an online persona, and the metrics that calculate affective engagement among users (Gandini, 2016b).

To sum up, there seems to be a renewed necessity to question a number of important functions of interaction, including whether these (or some of them) can be acquired only by co-presence or rather

by interaction that is not a direct consequence of physical proximity. Although co-presence continues to put people "on the spot," and the density of the information exchanged in face-to-face interaction would be much bigger than in ICT-mediated exchanges, now workers in the knowledge-creative economy entertain digital-based exchanges with similar levels of confidence in the expectation of significant outcomes. The debate is essentially stretched between those who maintain a prominence of the agglomeration processes that characterize face-to-face interaction, and those who argue that ICT-mediated interaction is replacing some of the co-location patterns as a result of the chance of being connected with virtually anyone in the "network." The analysis of the practices of interaction in the knowledge-based creative economy in Milan shows the extent to which these domains are actually blurred, and how a difference between ICT-mediated and face-to-face interaction may eventually concern the outcomes of such interaction.

4   Research Methods

This article is the product of an ex-post reflection that builds upon two different empirical researches conducted separately and in different time frames by the authors. Although the use of secondary qualitative data is not a complete novelty in the field (Hracs, Jakob, & Hauge, 2013), the way the two researches have been interpreted in light of each other deserves further explanation.

The first research (R1) was conducted in 2008 as part of a larger project aimed at studying managers, entrepreneurs and professionals in the knowledge-creative industry in Milan. The empirical material is composed by 22 interviews to professionals operating in the business and management consultancy sectors in the media industry (motion picture, video, radio and television, electronic publishing), in computer games and in the fashion and design industry. They mostly worked as employees (although at highly successful levels) for established companies (17 out of 22 interviewees), and were mainly based in the city centre, with 6 interviewees' companies located outside the metropolitan area. None of them worked in a co-working space, but all worked in the company office.[3] Interviews were aimed at investigating the link between the working experience of professionals and the city of Milan, with a very strong focus on the role of the city in facilitating or hampering social interaction. Questions focused on the extent to which interactions with other professionals were useful for their work, and interviews touched upon many different professional contexts to the aim of understanding the functions of such interactions. The place where interactions occurred was also investigated, and the kind of people with whom they maintained such interactions was examined. The overarching research question was pointed at exploring the reasons behind the agglomeration of knowledge-creative activities in Milan, and one of the hypotheses was that such concentration was related, among other factors, to the need and fulfillment of face-to-face interactions by workers.

The second research (R2) was conducted in the period 2011–2013 with the primary aim of studying the role of reputation and trust across the professional networks of freelance knowledge-creative workers in Milan. The research consisted of 42 semi-structured interviews to professionals operating in the urban context, conducted adopting a snowball sampling rationale that sought to "follow" the social relations of these workers and understand their main features. Often in the paper these will be referred to as a "network"; however, this must not be intended in terms of their quantitative, structural properties but as a qualitative field of observation wherein social relations among the actors involved can be traced, observed and studied. While, as said, the main focus was posed on the interplay between reputation and trust and their role in the achievement of professional outcomes, among the different lines of inquiry there was an interest in assessing if and to what extent professional social interaction was changing in light of the diffusion of digital technologies and social networking sites in the professional domain, both for what concerns job search practices as well as for the accomplishment of certain tasks. Questions therefore were pointed at knowing as much as possible about workers' networking practices, their techniques of managing social relations across various means, and the differences between face-to-face and digital-based interaction, particularly with regards to the outcomes that workers expected to achieve by nurturing these different communication channels. Due to their freelance status, interviewees used to

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3.   The research was carried out prior to the larger diffusion of coworking spaces in Milan (Colleoni, & Arvidsson, 2015).

work in various contexts — a majority from their home or from the offices of their main client, and a few also from coworking spaces.

Notwithstanding the differences in data collection, these two research projects remarkably share similarities that make them comparable over time. The rationale of the research in both cases aimed at deeply exploring the nature of professional social interaction and social capital in the same context, and especially question the rising role of online interaction. In so doing, both studies produced knowledge about the different kind of interactions at stake within the Milanese knowledge-creative economy and their functions.

Secondly, both samples are made of interviewees who are very similar as for their professional career (industry and professional status), gender and age (both researches aimed at being gender-balanced, not to over represent a particular age group), and their social networks.

5   Comparing Findings: The Knowledge-Creative Economy in Milan and the Functions of Interaction

This section discusses the functions of interaction in the knowledge-creative economy in Milan across face-to-face and digital-based interaction, following the same logic used to outline the theoretical argument. First, the discussion will explore the importance and the geography of interactions; then, it will move on to present interactions (both face-to-face and ICT-mediated) as the loci of knowledge sharing and development of creativity, reputation, socialisation and trust.

5.1   The Importance and Geography of Interaction in the Knowledge-Creative Industry in Milan

Existing research on the Milanese knowledge-creative economy reveals that the local mix of peculiar geography and culture is at the basis of the relevance of networking practices by professionals in the city (Bonomi, 2012; Bovone, 2005; d'Ovidio, 2016; Mingione et al., 2010; Mazzoleni, 2016). This is quite common in many cities and is a core aspect in the development of the creative and cultural economy in urban contexts (Scott, 2000). However, while being an international context, Milan is also relatively small, especially if compared to other European cities; this allows even more interactions to take place among professionals in a co-present context. Yet, the space is even smaller if the symbolic environment of the city is observed, since the city centre, as in the medieval *borgo*, represents the space that one has to occupy in order to demonstrate one's importance (in economic, cultural or symbolic terms). Moreover, the city has a rather provincial attitude, where the "coolest" the event, the more central the place (territorially speaking) it is held is located; also, the recently gentrified neighbourhoods, where a large number of knowledge-creative activities concentrate, are not located far away from the city centre (Bruzzese, 2015; d'Ovidio & Ponzini, 2014).

Talking about interaction dynamics in this context, professionals tend to emphasise their social relationships and embeddedness, stressing the frequency by which they interact with others. Interviewees strive to develop dense webs of relations that are not only locally embedded, thanks to their numerous travels.

The network of social relations built around digitally-mediated interaction is equally important for this purpose. Social networking sites are used by knowledge-creative workers in Milan to keep in touch with people, to expand the number of contacts and also for promotional aims. When asked to specify the role these tools play in their networking activities, two respondents claimed that:

> Thanks to the Internet you can go everywhere, it is my communication means (Fashion designer – Research 1)

> Being a freelance professional is to "network," at the n-th power! (digital PR manager – Research 2)

Three kinds of networks are therefore overlapping here: a local one composed by frequent face-to-face interactions; an international one, fed by numerous travels abroad; and an Internet-based one,

which allows to manage social relations at a distance. They all fulfill the need to connect with other workers, and perform a number of functions, as presented below.

5.2   Knowledge Transfer among Knowledge-Creative Workers in Milan

As concerns the exchange of knowledge, a predominant role of face-to-face interaction seems to emerge. The knowledge exchanged among our interviewees is high within the walls of the film studios, fashion atelier, or design companies. All interviewees maintain that knowledge transfer is very intense among colleagues met in the actual place where production happens. However, besides that, there exists also an intense activity of knowledge transfer outside companies, and among different professionals.

Such knowledge exchange is varied and concerns both the exchange of practical information, as well as various other kinds of knowledge.

The most important information that is exchanged by knowledge-creative workers is what we may see as implicit signals that constitute the essence/cultural meaning of their own network. As said, the building of trust and the reciprocal recognition of talent are essential elements for these workers; the exchange of such signals among them is equally relevant for their recognition. To go out with a competitor and agree on potential collaboration, exchange information about third parties, share insider information or opinions in general are considered to be important 'signals' that mark the possibility for collaboration and networking as productive and meaningful. This is not always explicitly remarked by workers, but it clearly emerges when they are questioned about the importance of the urban context. An example is given below:

> In Milan I can go and have a drink with [...] who is also a competitor. We work in a highly competitive sector; therefore, one has to avoid crucial issues. But, at the same time, we share messages, as long as it is possible. I cannot figure out another place in Italy with the same social networking, as all head-hunting companies are here (Head-hunter – R1)

Most of the knowledge that is exchanged in many of these contexts, however, is tacit, and needs face-to-face interaction to be shared. Practical skills are more easily shared among field-related professionals directly in craftsmen laboratories, in shooting studios or in workshops.

Moreover, face-to-face interaction exposes professionals to information about new jobs, work opportunities and better contacts — which represent actual commodities that are shared and traded within the broad social network. Yet, some of this information can be considered codified, or at least, more codified than not, such as details about prizes or festivals, news and events. This information can be easily exchanged through emails, mailing lists or phone calls, and does not require face-to-face exchange. Thus, ICTs also allow knowledge-creative workers to develop those "pipelines" (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004) through which information "flows" from a place to another. For instance, in the film industry, the development of special channels of information between different professionals that are not working in the same city allows them to be constantly updated about prizes, festivals, rumours and essential information.

5.3   The Building of Reputation among Knowledge-Creative Workers in Milan

The kind of relations that characterizes the professional interaction of knowledge-creative workers in Milan requires them to be part of a complex ecosystem where they have to be constantly reachable and permanently available to meeting people who are part of the system, or are engaged in the same "loop" (Storper & Venables, 2004).

Interviewees often claim that there is a constant need to affirm one's status and to demonstrate to be the right person for a job. The "network" therefore works as a mirror, reflecting competences of the accepted members, as it emerges from this anecdote recounted by a PR professional who has been asked to detail how she obtained her current job:

> By the end of last month, I was called up by a freelancer who was director of an important PR agency here in Milan. She called me because she knew me, though I have never directly

worked with her before. It happened we met once, actually, when I called her up to do agency work while I was working PR for other people. I believe the reputation you have in the sector is very important nowadays (PR professional, R2)

The sole belonging to the "right" network guarantees about the reputation of each member. As a fashion designer claims: "You have to show up. Always." Although this is true for all sectors, it is particularly evident in those based on symbolic and emotional significance (as, in particular, fashion, design, art). Participating to "exclusive" parties and events means that one is accepted into the network and, consequently, that one possesses enough talent and skills. When asked to describe how he behave when he meet someone in an informal setting (such as a party), a web designed recounted:

The access code [to networks] is your competence: you are what you do [...], you are not the person, but your job. Therefore, for instance, you introduce yourself not with your name, but as the person who made that particular project or launched that particular brand (Web designer – R1)

In this context, digital technologies offer the complementary possibility of combining connectivity with the publicness of social media profiles and a managerial use of techniques of social media presence (Hearn, 2010).

An active presence on *Twitter*, the quality and quantity of connections and recommendations on *LinkedIn*, the quality of content production over websites or blogs, are all elements that often generate a positive reputational return, which in turn has consequences offline. This particularly applies to jobs that originate from the encounter between creative economies and the digital domain. When asked about the role of the content produced across social networking platforms, a social media consultant explained that:

[...] Producing interesting content on my blog, on social media, creates a reputation and a word-of-mouth. My blog for instance helped me in emancipating from my dependent job, as I got in touch with a lot of people, something I could not do if I kept working for the same company (Social media/marketing consultant – R2)

As relationships are constantly renewed in the network, this practice of "relationship management" often resembles a closed loop, where it is difficult to enter and where opportunities for collaboration arise as a result of a lengthy process of "reputation construction" via "getting known."

Accordingly, interviewees recognize the importance to be seen in the right spot. This is more relevant than any other aspect, including one's skills and education title, and is true offline but also online. When asked about the relevance of her education title for the digital skills required to undertake her job, a journalist/communication consultant claimed that:

Your education title doesn't mean anything, it says nothing about who you are, unless you are a surgeon. It matters what you are able to do, how you can come up with it, create your own reputation. Social media, if used well enough to create a diffused reputation, then they are useful (Journalist/communication consultant, R2)

This suggests that the place-based, face-to-face interaction that develops among knowledge-creative workers is complemented by an online dimension of interaction centred on practices of reputation construction that is instrumental to generate word-of-mouth. In this sense digital-based interaction does not substitute for, but actually reinforces co-presence dynamics. There seems to be a shared acknowledgement of reputation as the element to evaluate quality and talent among participants in this scene. In some respect, it may be argued that the kind of reputation face-to-face exchanges foster is a more qualitative, and less tangible one. Digital and social media activity, on the other hand, reverberates as a tangible and somewhat more quantitative logic based on the information publicly available online, something that Marwick (2013) describes as a form of recursive "status update" performed by workers to participate in the scene.

This outlines the existence of an expanded "scene" whereby digital and non-digital professional interaction reciprocally combine and incentivize, as tasks and jobs can be performed at a distance, often delinked from physical co-presence.

5.4 Socialisation among Knowledge Workers: Learning Behavioural Codes

In both sets of interviews, a system of interactions (both co-present and ICT-mediated ones) forming a wider professional network can be recognized. As explained in the methodological section, this paper refers to and analyses this 'network' from a broadly qualitative perspective. Hence, this is not understood as a social formation by which structural or quantitative features can be inferred, but as a broad social environment through which the codes, values and socially constructed practices that characterize interaction take place. In order to be recognized as part of this broad social formation, professionals have to learn some behavioural codes; this learning is maximized during face-to-face interactions. The following interview excerpt is extremely explicit in describing the making of this "network." It emerged when a web designer was asked to narrate what's happening during parties:

> It's like a "magma," in the sense that you can go to a closed party and you can have a chat with the art-director about your job, and s/he goes "what do you do? Give me your card and I will call you." Everything unfolds around this... Everything develops around word-of-mouth, around this loop. And then you discover that you know the same person and have common friends: there is a strong familiarity in the network! In Milan this happens in fashion, in PR, in communication, in design,... because everything works in the same way. So, if you are asking me where you can find these people, you have to find a closed party and get in. Once in, basically 80% of people from this world are there and get there to network (Web Designer – R1)

Parties, in particular exclusive ones, are gates to access this 'network' and important socialization opportunities where workers can learn the appropriate behavioural codes. Attending parties and events is a 'must' in particular for new and younger professionals in the scene, who have both to show up and to learn how to behave in a way that enables social recognition and triggers the reputational loop.

Professionals inserted in territorially embedded networks come to engage with these practices as subjects within a wider space made of both digital-based and place-based social interaction. Being active across both environments has come to be an essential aspect as the two sides of the scene combine towards the acquisition of a status within the broader professional network, which is ultimately instrumental to professional success. These specific dynamics of actions and interactions are necessary precisely because of the "publicness" of one's status given by the digital domain. Workers are, in other words, required to participate in such scenes and be active across them in analogous ways. Hence, we can see how offline and online interaction directly complement each other: the latter is peculiarly pointed at fostering those forms of sociality based on publicity which are instrumental to keep the word-of-mouth active for the profiles to be searchable and found, and sustain this 'loop' irrespective of co-presence.

5.5 Trust among Knowledge-Creative Workers in Milan

Finally, knowledge-creative workers in Milan spend time, money and energy in face-to-face interaction because they need to build relationships conducive to trust, and are required to mutually renew and confirm that trust over time.

Trustworthy relations are necessary both because of the job insecurity involved in these contexts, and because of the type of "soft skills" involved in their work, which entail not only talent and individual ability, but also elements of sensibility, taste and lifestyle.

Very often trust is generated within close networks, especially when this is ultimately perceived as a business dynamic, as this interviewee described when talking about his last project:

> [you always work with] the closer loop, because when you have to give money [...] you need trust (e-publisher, R1)

More generally, through personal relationships based on mutual trust, professional skills are communicated, transferred and mutually recognized. Similar to the case of Manchester (Banks et al., 2000), in Milan the territorial dimension of relations conducive to trust is very important, and translates into

parties, bars, venues where professionals usually gather: trustworthy relations among workers tend to be fuelled by the frequent face-to-face contacts and meetings they have in the city.

Online interaction therefore becomes here a complementary activity that is, nevertheless, central to establishing of a reputation that "works," as said, irrespective of co-presence. In a social space characterized by a dominant promotional culture based on self-branding as a form of labour (Hearn, 2008, 2010), reputation guarantees for the establishment of a bond of trust in a combination of co-presence and digital networking. See for instance how an experienced copywriter, when asked about his social media practices, describes his use of the social network site LinkedIn precisely for this purpose:

> LinkedIn to me is very important as you can show how much you are into a sector, for instance, someone who goes into my profile can see who I know. And there you can find names that can make you say "Oh, he's really into this sector." And then, second step, maybe I go to some of my contacts "… so you know about this guy? Have you worked with him?," or I can write a private message saying "I've seen you're friend with… What do you think about him?" It's all a big phonebook. If my contacts are qualified, you can see that (Copywriter – R2)

6   Conclusions

The article has shown how the study of the functions of interaction in the knowledge-creative professional scene in Milan unveils a dynamic of social networking whereby the 'physical' side of face-to-face exchanges is not diminished in importance by digital technologies, but actually complemented and to some extent enhanced by the rise of digital-based professional interaction as social networking expanded into a broader dimension of double layered embeddedness. Findings show a blending of the online and the offline realm in the professional urban scene, with these being equally important domains for the nurturing of social relations. Nonetheless, these fulfill different functions in a more peculiar way. This induces workers into entertaining activities that take place irrespective of co-presence or the sharing of a physical space. Participants in our researches seem to agree on the fact that the outcomes actors can achieve in the professional scene are consistently dependent on the way in which they are able to manage, and leverage upon, social relations in this milieu, with whatever means. It also emerges that, in the growth of digital-based professional networking, the "oil" that makes this "machinery" function is a shared acknowledgement of reputation as an informal system of evaluation for talent, quality and trustworthiness across multiple contexts of interaction. This, however, does not diminish the importance of urban-based networking, that remains instrumental for the participation in the "right" networks and the establishing of a career. Creative jobs, in other words, whatever the means through which are deployed, remain a "contact sport."

Digital technologies represent in other words an additional tool available to participants to engage in professional interaction, that enacts what Dellarocas (2003) describes as a "digitization of word of mouth." At the same time, the relevance of digital-based professional interaction also influences the way actors experience space (Lindell, 2016). Being physically in particular places allows the deployment of a set of relations crucial for the economic life of professionals.

Summarizing the main findings of our exploration, it may be said that online and offline interaction serve different scopes, both for what concerns functions and intensity. Knowledge-creative professionals seem to rely much more on offline interaction when knowledge exchange is implied, while online exchanges are essential to the building of a robust reputation. The reputational value of face-to-face interactions is, on the other hand, that of group belonging and being in *the loop*. Online and offline interactions are instead co-present in the field of trust-building and socialization and they differ mainly in intensity. Yet, in the building of trustworthy relations both offline and online exchanges are crucial, with the latter often reinforcing the bond built through the former. The socialization processes are channelled through both types of interaction, according to the context, either based on face-to-face or ICT mediated relations.

Ultimately, co-presence remains instrumental to access knowledge, information and job opportunities given the increasingly flexible and unstable nature of creative work that necessarily commits workers to undertaking different temporary jobs at any given time.

In line with other empirical analyses of the Milanese context (Bonomi, 2012; Bovone, 2005; Mazzoleni, 2016), this article evidences the existence of a cultural element that privileges the informal over the formal, with a primacy of word-of-mouth over formalized information flows in the context of the knowledge-creative economy in Milan. This, as a circle, strengthens the informal network formation as a common cultural trait that characterizes the insiders. As a consequence, the density of economic activities, the physical proximity of many professionals, and the cultural habits of interaction translate into a thick network of relations that plays a crucial role in the interviewees' experiences. Furthermore, the centripetal dynamics that characterise the city of Milan and the concentration of the economy in specific neighbourhoods allow the diffusion of face-to-face relations and the development of different sorts of interactions. The importance of interactions as here described appears to be the *signature style* of the Milanese knowledge-creative economy.

Our analysis reveals, moreover, that the networking practice and the entertainment of multiple means of interaction over various physical and digital realms provide workers with the reputation and the contacts needed to further their careers. Within this expanded professional network, trust is guaranteed by the "publicness" and presence in the scene over these multiple contexts, finding its own source in one's personal reputation, that makes easier the sharing of different cultural assets and skills necessary for collective projects. This is conducive to the building of trust, that is also important in the creation of rich professional networks whereby workers get together on the basis of common sensibilities, aesthetic orientation and cultural values. The "network" as here broadly conceived thus seemingly embodies a socialisation function, since through interaction with other peers, individuals learn the codes of their professional practice, thus acquiring specific criteria of judgment which, in turn, signal to others that they belong to the same social world.

The exploration also illustrates that both the ICT-mediated and the face-to-face interactions contribute to generate those cultural, social and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1979) that are vital for knowledge-creative workers. This article demonstrates that in order to investigate further the social embeddedness of economic activity in this context there is a necessity to take into adequate consideration both kinds of interactions and their functions. It also shows how, despite their blending, it may be useful to keep the two layers of interactions distinct depending on the aims and scopes of the research, as this might reveal how different functions unfold in different settings.

Nevertheless, many unanswered questions remain and new avenues for research are still open: how do these two kinds of interactions contribute to the creation of different types of network formations, this time intended from a more quantitative and structural perspective? How are the two systems of interactions structured? Which differences or similarities do exist in terms of networks features, accessibility, closeness? Despite a wide range of literature is available on social networks in entrepreneurial contexts (see for instance Leyden, Link, & Siegel, 2014; d'Ovidio 2015), still few studies engage with network dynamics in the context of creative work especially taking into consideration the role of ICTs in this context.

Digital technologies offer the "platformed affordances" for this mode of action to exist in the form of practices of reputation construction that ultimately and decisively contribute to a greater empowerment of the knowledge-creative worker as an entrepreneur (McRobbie, 2015). However, in an increasingly connected world, urban co-presence maintains a central position for economic activities to succeed, and technologies for communication and mobility become the structures that allow such networking to widen. Put differently, interactions do not happen by chance: they need the right mix of proximity, heterogeneity, density and culture to develop, all elements for which the urban environment remains the best equipped and most favorable setting. This has important implications in terms of urban regeneration policies, as physical encounters remain essential for the urban economy and for its vibrancy. The urban space should be imagined as able to allow any kind of possible interaction and to accommodate this *buzz*. The XIX century city with its squares, its cafés, its public spaces was vital for the development of the modern economy. Whether the contemporary city with its gentrified neighbourhoods, trendy bars, coworking spaces, social-media events and bloggers conferences will remain the best environment

for the development of today's knowledge-creative economy, remains to be seen. A lot depends probably on the capacity of the urban politics to integrate the two cities in a more open and fluid new one.

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