EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN SMALL FIRMS:
A CULTURAL TOOLKIT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Exploring the use of social media in small firms: a cultural toolkit perspective

Social media platforms have proliferated rapidly, altering societal norms of communication. Whilst a number of studies (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, 2014; Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013) have shed light on the implications of social media use for firms, there remains a limited understanding of how firms interpret and implement social media. This thesis seeks to address the gap by exploring the psycho-sociological processes underpinning social media use in small firms. Data was collected during a qualitative study of social media use in 31 organizations in the United Kingdom (UK) and interpreted using concepts from Swidlers (1986) cultural toolkit framework**.**

This thesis contributes insights about the wide variety of resources required to "participate in the networked society" (Harris, Rae & Misner, 2012) using social media platforms. Previous studies have suggested that interpretations play an important role in social media use (i.e. Treem & Leonardi's affordances, 2012) but have failed to explicate how interpretations of social media are formed. This study found that respondents drew on a wide variety of 'cultural tools' (Swidler, 1986) in order to interpret and operate their social media accounts. These included their embodied skills, habits and styles as well as resources that were available through their social networks. The study found that the respondents' interpretation of social media as a low risk and highly uncertain endeavour prompted their experimentation with various combinations of cultural tools as attempts were made to overcome the common challenges of social media use (i.e. finding time for social media, knowing what to post on social media). One such challenge related to the marked difference between social media interactions and face-to-face

encounters. The findings are used to extend Goffman's notion of situation-like encounters (1979). It is contended that social media provide a rich example of a situation-like context.

Keywords - social media, small firms, cultural toolkits, Ann Swidler, Erving Goffman

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"...the "digital divide" between the "haves" and the "have nots" (in the developed world at least) is now less about access to the web than it is about understanding how to actively participate in the networked society" (Harris, Rae and Misner, 2012)

In an era of rapid technological development and ubiquitous digital technologies (Vodanovich *et al,* 2010) arguably the most pervasive form of participation in the networked society (Harris, Rae & Misner, 2012) has been the use of social media (Kiron *et al.* 2012). Social media are defined herein as web-based platforms that enable an unlimited number of users to perform a variety of communicational tasks across space and time (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). The term social media is used to refer to a family of platforms that take a wide variety of forms. For example, the term is used to refer to social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn), microblogs (Twitter), video sharing platforms (Youtube, Vimeo), photo sharing sites (Flickr, Pinterest), virtual worlds (SecondLife, World of Warcraft) social bookmarking sites (Digg, Delicious) and many other manifestations. Platforms are generally considered to be part of the social media landscape if they "build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and … allow the creation and exchange of 'User Generated Content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Not only have staggering numbers of personal users taken up social media accounts (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kane *et al.* 2014), it is also estimated that around 75% of firms now communicate via social media (Kiron *et al.,* 2012; KPMG, 2011). The extent of the impact of these technologies has been reflected in the language used in social media studies, which describe the platforms as being adopted by an "overwhelming majority (Li & Shiu, 2012) creating a "major shift" in communications practices (Clark & Roberts, 2010) with "dramatic implications" (Bernoff & Li, 2008).

Despite great interest in the social media phenomenon from scholars in a variety of disciplines (Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, 2013) it has been challenging for the academe to keep pace with social media practice (Treem & Leonardi,

2012; Raeth *et al.,* 2009). Social media have been described as a "moving target" (Aral Dellarocas & Godes, 2013; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010) characterised by continuous rapid development (Kane *et al.,* 2014).Some studies (Kurzweil, 2005, Sorenson & Landau, 2014) suggest that the platforms form part of an era of rapid development that at its zenith will outpace anyone's ability to make sense of it (Sorenson & Landau, 2014). One implication of this for social media scholars is that the growing body of literature which focuses on defining the platforms and their implications for users is in an inherently precarious position. For the social media we recognise and use today is unlikely to be the social media used tomorrow (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). An additional implication for individuals using social media is that they are required to understand and negotiate a complex and constantly shifting social media landscape. If Harris *et al.*'s (2012) opening statement is to be taken seriously, then the question of how they accomplish this can have profound consequences. If the issue of "understanding how" (ibid) to use social media has the potential to engendour a digital divide and to create "haves and have nots" (ibid) then unpacking how these understandings are formed is integral to understanding social media use and its implications. Furthermore, a more detailed understanding of how users interpret and use social media also promises to contribute to the human-centred narrative about dealing with rapid technological change (Kurzweil, 2005). Yet the literature is relatively silent on this subject to date. While Treem & Leonardi (2012) acknowledge the importance of user interpretations in guiding subsequent use and shaping implications for organisations, they do not go so far as to explore how these interpretations are formed (the reasons for this omission are explored in the next section). This thesis addresses the gap by focusing on the issue of "how" from a psychological and social perspective.

1.1 – Small firms as a research setting

A growing stream of research has provided a number of insights in to the implications of social media use for firms (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Koch,

Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013; Leonardi, Huysman & Steinfield, 2013; Leonardi, 2014; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). In many instances these studies focus on the use of internal social media platforms (Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013) by large firms with globally distributed teams (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013; Leonardi, Huysman & Steinfield, 2013). In these settings social media has been shown to afford a number of communicational outcomes that were previously difficult or impossible to achieve (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In particular, social media use is thought to enhance knowledge sharing (Leonardi, 2014) and communication between geographically dispersed firm members (Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013).

However, the almost exclusive focus on large organisations has led to an implicit selection bias that has become prevalent in the social media literature. One ramification of this is that scholars are prone to building theory (Leonardi, 2014; Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013; Koch Gonzalez & Leidner, 2012) based on the erroneous assumption that people will interpret and use social media in similar ways based on the relatively fixed features of the platforms (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This assumption does not account for the rapidly changing state of the technology (Kurzweil, 2005) mentioned earlier, or the heterogeneity of users and firms contexts. A small handful of studies underscore the problem with this assumption by presenting instances where social media use in firms is not experienced as straightforward or unanimous. For example, number of industries have struggled to see the relevance of social media platforms (Michelidou *et al.* 2011). In some settings social media platforms have been considered dramatically different to established communications practices and have been viewed as a threat (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). The tendency to focus on large firms and their internal use of social media has underemphasised the diversity of social media experiences. Such studies implicitly assume that high levels of competence and resource exist within firms and enable social media use. Yet evidence suggests that there can be significant gaps in the skills and resources required to use social media (Michelidou *et al.* 2011; Koch Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013) making the task of understanding how to use social media more difficult. By challenging the dominant assumption that

users will interpret social media in the same way, these alternative depictions render an understanding of the processes underpinning social media use in heterogeneous settings even more significant.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how firms incorporate social media use in to their communications practices. Small firms have been selected as the research setting as their size makes it easier to access everyone involved in the social media use, creating a more complete picture of the social processes at work. This study draws its findings from 31 small firms who are members of a business support organisation offering (among other things) social media support. The group were all attempting to make use of the three most common, freely available social media sites of the day; Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Their involvement with the support organisation suggested that they were still attempting to make sense of and understand social media. Thus they represented a purposive sample (Easterby-Smith, 2002) able to directly address the research question. They had limited financial and human resources to devote to social media use and thus had to find creative ways to work around their restrictions.

1.2 – Cultural toolkit as a theoretical framework

This study did not adopt an a priori theory, but was guided by the patterns emerging in the data as it was gathered. The narratives collected suggest that social media was a markedly different way of communicating that was unfamiliar to the participants as a business activity. They looked to their social networks to understand how to use the platforms. By drawing upon socially shared understandings the participants were able to form interpretations of social media that informed their practice. Sociologist Ann Swidler's cultural toolkit framework (Swidler, 1986) was used as a way of interpreting and analysing the data. Swidler's (1986) framework explains how individual's respond to contextual changes by assessing the cultural (or socially shared) resources at their disposal for dealing with the new situation. In this study, the widespread societal adoption of social media represented the contextual shift that the participants were responding to. One benefit of employing Swidler's (1986) approach to culture is that it acknowledges individual and contextual

heterogeneity and places the individuals in agentic control of the materials they can use to inform their understanding and practice (Swidler, 1986). IT was therefore considered to represent an alternative view of social media use than currently existed in the literature, where heterogeneity is under-acknowledged.

The resulting analysis offers a more complete picture of how the social media users incorporate the platforms into their communications practices, taking both psychological and social factors in to account. The findings compliment and extend existing social media studies that identify the importance of user interpretations (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Koch Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013) by explicating how social media interpretations are formed. This process is articulated using Swidler's (1986) framework which provides a less technologically determinist view of social media use that is currently lacking from the extant literature. The multiplex role of uncertainty is considered, a characteristic previously overlooked in a literature that presupposes competence and the availability of resources. This study finds that uncertainty's role is significant, triggering framing processes and encouraging experimentation with alternative ways of understanding and using social media.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 – Introduction

"Interpretive flexibility is an attribute of the relationship between humans and technology and hence it is influenced by characteristics of the material artefact, … characteristics of the human agents, … and characteristics of the context." (Orlikowski, 1992: 409)

If social media can be understood as being interpretively flexible, then an exploration of the use of social media in small firms must elaborate upon how interpretations of social media are formed. For, such interpretations will ultimately shape and influence social media use and its consequences. The literature reviewed in this chapter is shaped by Orlikowski's (1992) suggestion that interpretations of social media are informed by artefact, actor and context. In addressing the artefact, section 2.1, **Social media defined**, demonstrates the pronounced difficulty associated with trying to define what social media is (Leonardi & Treem, 2012; Kane *et al.*, 2014). Definitions offered to date have either focused exclusively on either the particular features of social media that ultimately become out-dated (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kane *et al.*, 2014) or on the dynamic factors involved in social media use (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014), those involved in the interpretation and use of social media. The definition adopted in this thesis seeks to include reference to both the material features of social media and the dynamic interpretations of users, which influence and shape both the platforms and their use.

Interestingly, although the academy has grappled with defining social media, limited attention has been given to how organisations define and interpret social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In section 2.2, attention is turned to the actors and the literature on **Social media use in organisational contexts** is reviewed. The majority of these studies have focused on the implications of social media use for organisations (Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013, Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Germonprez & Horvorka, 2013) particularly

for large organisations and globally distributed teams (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2012). Social media are acknowledged as being of important consequence to organisations because they enable communication and interaction to take place in ways that were previously difficult or impossible (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Where adopted (KPMG, 2011; Kiron *et al.* 2012; Michelidou *et al.*, 2011), social media technologies can represent a major shift in the communications practices of organisations (Koch, Leidner, Gonzalez, 2013; Kane *et al.* 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

In order to better understand how small firms respond to the contextual changes affected by social media, the second focus of the chapter is a review of a perspective offered by sociologist, Ann Swidler (1986). Swidler (1986) extends a framework for understanding how individuals and groups respond to disruptive, societal changes. She suggests that established skills, habits and styles, both collective and individual, are mobilised in response to such events. She refers to these resources as cultural tools and suggests that people tend to predominantly make use of their most familiar tools, by drawing them together in to alternative combinations that constitute their response to new challenges. This approach (Swidler, 1986) recognises the complexity involved in interpreting and responding to new situations, which require access to a wide variety of different cultural tools. The framework has been used in a number of recent studies of organisational problem solving (Ravishankar, 2015; Leonardi, 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Fine & Hallett, 2014). Section 2.3, **The field of organisational culture***,* contextualises Swidler's framework amongst other approaches to studying organisational culture (Schein, 1990; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Martin, 2002). In particular, this section underscores the marked difference between Swidler's (1986) approach to the concept of culture as a resource and the dominant values driven approach in which culture is used as a causal variable. Section 2.4, **Social media and IT culture conflict***,* discusses the limitations of the values driven approach to culture in relation to social media studies (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). In contrast, Swidler's framework (1986) is then elaborated upon in section 2.5, **The cultural toolkit approach***,* and its relevance to this study is established.

2.1 - Social media defined

2.1.1 - The origins of the term social media

The first recorded use of the term social media is thought to have come from the AOL executive Ted Leonis, who in 1997 was recorded as stating that consumers needed to be provided with "social media, places where they can be entertained, communicate, and participate in a social environment" (Bercovici, 2010). In the same year the first social networking site, 6Degrees, was launched (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). From thence the term social media became increasingly mainstream, initially as an individual recreational pursuit and eventually as a major organisational concern (Leonardi & Treem, 2012). Estimates suggest that between 65% (Bughin & Chui, 2010) and 70% (KPMG, 2011) of organisations currently use some form of social media and that with experience they are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their social media use (Kane *et al.* 2014).

Although social media is now commonly used both in organisations and in wider society, specifying precisely what the term means is not a straightforward task. Social media have been described as a "moving target" (Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, 2013; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010), difficult to define due to their continuous, rapid development (Kane et al, 2013). Popular sites such as Facebook (a social networking website), Twitter (a micro-blogging platform), YouTube (a video-sharing platform), Wikipedia (a wiki-encyclopedia) and Second Life (a virtual world) have all been described as social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In addition, it is becoming increasingly common for organisations to develop and implement bespoke social media platforms for internal use (Leonardi & Treem, 2012; Leonardi 2014; Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013). Table one gives some examples of the social media definitions offered by an emergent stream of research focusing on social media. The definitions share a number of common features, such as the networking of individuals (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kane *et al.* 2014), the importance of user generated content (Kim *et al.* 2010; Martini,

Massa & Testa, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014) and the fundamental role of the internet (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). As studies of social media in organisations have gradually focused less on description and more on the theoretical and practical implications of social media for organisations (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), so the approach to defining social media has evolved.

Author(s)	Definition/description
Boyd & Ellison, 2007	We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.
Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010	A group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'
Kim et al, 2010	We define social web sites as those web sites that make it possible for people to form online communities, and share user-created contents (UCCs).
Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010	We emphasize the social affordances of social media. In this framework, social media afford two-way interaction with an audience, beyond any specific recipient.
Martini, Massa & Testa, 2013	Also referred to as Web 2.0, these tools rely on active content creation by users or members as a central distinguishing feature
Vaast & Walsham, 2013	(use the phrase Electronically mediated social contexts or EMSCs) EMSCs – defined here as social settings in which participants interact mostly or only through electronically mediated means
Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013.	We use the term social media to refer to a group of Internet-based technologies that allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate and/or link to content or to other creators of content
Kane , Alavi, Labianca & Borgatti, 2014	Our updated definition of social media networks possesses four essential features, such that users (1) have a unique *user profile* that is constructed by the user, by members of their network, and by the platform; (2) *access digital content* through, and *protect* it from, various *search* mechanisms provided by the platform; (3) can *articulate* a list of other users with whom they share a *relational connection*; and (4) *view and traverse* their connections and those made by others on the platform.
Scott & Orlikowski, 2014	Social media websites are characterized by the active engagement and online contributions of large numbers

	of people across time and space (Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Surowiecki 2004)... Such websites depend predominantly on what is known as user-generated content, provided through members ongoing and often informal contributions.

Table 1: Definitions and descriptions of social media

2.1.2 – Early definitions and the referential approach

The seminal definition of social media was offered by Boyd & Ellison (2007) who were specifically interested in social networking websites (see table 1). Their study was concerned with how social media use influenced the dynamics of communication between individuals (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It corresponded with a massive increase in public awareness and use of social networking sites, particularly Facebook (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kiron *et al.* 2011). Many studies of social networks at the time adopted the definition (e.g. Dimiccio *et al.* 2008; Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Debatin *et al.* 2009; Beer, 2008). However, it was not appropriate in all instances given the heterogeneity of sites referred to using the umbrella term social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

In light of these challenges, it became common for early studies to forego offering an explicit definition and instead to make reference to a popular platform that readers might commonly identify as social media (e.g. Culnan *et al.* 2010; Marwick, 2011; Lerman & Gosh, 2010 all reference Twitter). However, this practice resulted in descriptive studies that failed to contribute significant theoretical insights (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). As new social media platforms were introduced and as new groups of users started adopting social media and using it in different ways (e.g. use within organisations) Boyd & Ellison's (2007) definition, and studies adopting the referential approach were quickly becoming out-dated (Kane *et al.*, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

An alternative early definition that was widely adopted came from Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) (see table 1). They emphasised the utility of the internet for social media activity, and in particular Web 2.0,

"a term that was first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end users started to utilise the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion." (2010:61).

In their definition, Web 2.0 constituted the undergirding ideological and technical foundation for social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), whilst all activity that occurred on the platforms was described as "user generated content". Other definitions that followed (Kim et al. 2010; Vodanovich et al, 2010; Martini et al. 2013; Majchrzak et al. 2013) built upon the two defining characteristics introduced by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), or simply used their original definition (Yuan et al, 2013; Huang Baptista & Galliers, 2013).

Treem & Leonardi (2012) note that a significant flaw of both of these early definitions is that they "do not develop theory about the consequences of social media use for organising" (2012: 145). They (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) observed that Boyd & Ellison's (2007) definition was too narrow to be generalisable, whilst Kaplan & Haenleis's (2010) definition was too broad to offer an insight in to the ways social media might influence behaviour. In order to remedy these difficulties, they proposed that an alternative approach was for scholars to define social media not according to particular technological features, but rather in relation to the types of behaviour typically afforded across various organisations (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Accordingly, they offer the affordances approach (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, 2014).

2.1.3 – Affordances and the interpretation of social media

Unlike its descriptive predecessors, the affordance approach recognises the role of interpretation (Orlikowski, 1992) in technology use and has proven useful in understanding why people use the same piece of technology differently (Gaver, 1991; Norman 1990; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001; Zammutto

et al. 2007; Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Leonardi, 2011). Treem & Leonardi (2012) borrow the notion of affordances from perceptual psychologist James Gibson (1986). Gibson (1986) argued that although objects such as rocks had relatively fixed physical features, distinct animals would naturally identify different uses for the rock and therefore use it in a variety of ways. These perceptions of an object's usefulness and the resulting actions taken constitute "affordances". Gibson (1986) also suggested that although the tangible features of an object are separate from the physical existence of the users, those features are imbued with a variety of meanings "relative to the posture and behaviour of the animal being considered" (1986:127-128). According to this approach, while the physical features of social media may remain the same in every encounter, its affordances do not. For example, for some organisations social media afford the opportunity to screen potential new employees (Clarke & Roberts, 2010) whilst for others the same kinds of sites afford the opportunity for knowledge sharing and networking (Leonardi, 2014). Studies adopting the affordances approach emphasise the relationship between the people and the things with which they come in to contact (Hutchby, 2001; Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Markus & Silver, 2008; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). In other words, affordances are not exclusively properties of users or technological artefacts; they are constituted in the relationship between people and things.

Treem & Leonardi (2012) suggest that an advantage of this approach is that it avoids defining social media according to particular features that can quickly become obsolete. Instead the focus is on the communicative outcomes that "occur within and constitute organisations" (Treem & Leonardi, 2012:144). They define social media according to a list of four relatively stable, generalisable affordances, namely:

1. *Visibility*: "the ability to make ones behaviours, knowledge, preferences and communication network connections that were once invisible, visible to others";

2. *Persistence*: "the communications remain accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished with his or her presentation";
3. *Editability*: "individuals can spend a good deal of time and effort crafting and re-crafting a communicative act before it is viewed by others";
4. *Association*: "established connections [are made] between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation" (Leonardi & Treem, 2012)

As these affordances implicitly and explicitly serve as the basis for many studies of social media (e.g. Majchrzak *et al.* 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Granados & Gupta, 2013: Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013) they will be considered in more detail in the next section (2.2 - *Social media use in organisational contexts*).

Whilst the affordance approach reduces the tendency to merely describe social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) it is not helpful to completely overlook material features. The result is a somewhat lopsided view in which the implications of social media use can be described, but the platforms cannot. Whilst the affordance approach (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) thus far offers the only view of social media that acknowledges the import of user interpretation, it is still somewhat incomplete in relation to the artefact, actor, context triumvirate described in the introduction to the chapter (Orlikowski, 1992). This gap in the developing social media literature is significant as the lack of an inclusive definition can inhibit the ability of researchers to clearly identify social media platforms as objects of importance to be studied.

Accordingly, this study seeks to develop a definition built upon prior iterations that acknowledges the characteristics of the platforms (as artefact), the social media users (as actors) and the task of organisational communication (as context). Therefore, social media shall be defined within the rest of this document as *web-based platforms that enable an unlimited number of users to perform a variety of communicative tasks across space and time.* This definition clearly identifies social media as tools for communication, but in the

spirit of the affordances approach (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), it should be acknowledged that within organisations the way social media are used to communicate is likely to vary widely (Leonardi, 2011; Orlikoswki, 1992). Thus, the following sections explore the extant literature on social media use within organisational contexts.

2.2 - Social media use in organisational contexts

2.2.1 – The domain of social media research

It has been challenging for empirical studies to keep pace with the rapid proliferation of social media technologies at all levels of society (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Raeth *et al.* 2009). The "far reaching consequences of social media" (Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, 2013:3) have stimulated interdisciplinary interest, although some scholars suggest that information systems (Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, 2013) or communication studies (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) are the most suited to playing a central role in social media research. Nevertheless, studies of social media can be found in most disciplines related to organisations and organising.

For example, given the extensive adoption of social media as a marketing tool (Kiron *et al,* 2012; KPMG, 2011; Kane *et al.* 2014) the marketing literature predominantly poses research questions relating to consumers. Studies in this domain have interrogated the impact of social media on consumer behaviour (Campbell, Ferrerro & Sands, 2014; Goel & Goldstein, 2014) and the ability of individuals to rate products (Kumar *et al.* 2013), comment on brands (Colliander & Wien, 2014; Miller & Mobarak, 2014, Toubia & Stephen, 2013) and influence each other (Aherns *et al.* 2013; Kerr *et al.,* 2012; Kumar *et al.,* 2013; Miller & Mobarak, 2014). Similarly, the human resources (here after HR) industry has been particularly affected by social media. Accordingly, HR studies have focused on how social media has transformed traditional processes such as employee selection (Roth *et al.* 2016; Van Iddekinge *et al.* 2013) and job search behaviour (Fuels *et al.* 2014; Janta & Ladkin, 2013; Thomson, 2013). The use of social media has also prompted many ethical questions related to personal communication among workers (Mainiero &

Jones, 2013 (a) (b); van Laer, 2013) and the external communication of an organisation's CSR initiatives (Castello, Morsing & Schultz, 2013; Clarke & Roberts, 2010; Fiesler & Fleck, 2013; Lee, Oh & Kim, 2013; Lyon & Montgomery, 2013;Wheelan, Moon & Grant, 2013).

In light of the burgeoning, inter-disciplinary nature of interest in social-media a small number of research frameworks and agendas have been proposed (Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, 2013; Kane *et al.* 2014; Vodanovich *et al.* 2010). Aral, Dellarocas and Godes (2013) present a broad agenda representative of a variety of different levels of analysis and activity. They offer four thematic concepts that are applicable to three specific but interrelated units of analysis, as summarised in Table 2.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="6">Activities</th></tr>
<tr><th></th><th></th><th>Designs & features</th><th>Strategies & tactics</th><th>Management & Organisation</th><th>Measurement & value</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Level of Analysis</td><td>Users & society</td><td>How do users interact with social media features? How does feature design affect their use, interaction with one another, satisfaction, and ability to derive value from social media?</td><td>How can users optimize their use of social media? Which objectives do users pursue in using social media? How can they create relationships, curate information, broaden their reach, and maximize their influence?</td><td>How do users organize within communities and social media? How does community organisation emerge? What are the effects of community organisation And management on user contribution, participation, satisfaction, etc.</td><td>What are the benefits and costs of social media? How can we measure consumer surplus generated by social media? What is the non monetary value that social media create (e.g. equality, health, violence, civic engagement)?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Platforms & intermediaries</td><td>How do platforms and intermediaries design social media features? How do specific features and designs help</td><td>How can platforms maximize their influence and revenue? What are the product development, pricing,</td><td>How should platform operators organize internally? How should platforms create, manage, and instil culture within their</td><td>What is the value added by platforms? What are sensible valuations for platforms? How can we measure the value of platform ecosystem</td></tr>
</table>

	platforms attract users, create engagement, enable and constrain user behaviour, and increase revenue?	partnership, marketing, and acquisition strategies that achieve the best results? Should platforms be open or closed, standardized or ad hoc?	ecosystems? Which skills, talent, or human resources should platform operators develop? How should platforms create incentives to guide social media activities?	partners and ecosystems? How can value be allocated across the ecosystem to optimize incentives?
Firms & Industries	How should firms interact with specific platform features to maximize their benefit? What features should firms design into their home-grown social media initiatives?	What types of social media initiatives work best for what firms? How should firms interact with public social media? What combinations of home-grown and public social media initiatives should firms pursue? How should firms respond to social media crises?	How should companies organise, govern, fund, and evolve their social media capabilities? What skill and culture changes are needed to best adapt to a social world? Which skills, talent, or human resources should firms develop? How should firms create incentives to guide social media activities?	How do we measure the short- and long-term bottom line and intermediate outcomes of social media for firms? How do social media add value to firms? What industry-wide efficiencies have been (can be) attained via social media?

Table 2: An organising framework for social media research, from Aral, Dellarocas & Godes, (2013: 5)

The table highlights how the interplay of different areas of focus and units of analysis prompt different research questions. Whilst the framework serves as a useful heuristic for guiding research conversation, it should also be acknowledged that the boundaries traditionally drawn between units of analysis have been blurred by social media. For example, evidence suggests that individual social media users have the potential to trigger consequences at an organisational level (Clark & Roberts, 2010; Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). Thus it might also be useful to treat the units of analysis as a continuum. Treated in this way the framework shows that social

media platforms sit between individual users and organisations creating a boundary that is more dynamic and fluid than it may have been previously (Harris, Rae & Misner, 2012; Harrison & Corley, 2011). Thus, in addition to focusing on a particular unit of analysis, it might also be beneficial to consider how units at different levels affect each other (Fine & Hallett, 2014).

In relation to the framework in table 2, this study is concerned with small firms managing and organising their social media use. Aral, Dellarocas and Godes (2013) suggest that this should prompt questions about the resources, skills and culture that may be required to implement social media use. However, the majority of studies to date have focused on description rather than explanation, highlighting what the platforms are used for as opposed to how social media use is accomplished. As many such studies explicitly or implicitly relate to one of Treem and Leonardi's (2012) social media affordances, the remainder of this section will elaborate on the affordances of visibility, persistence, editability and association.

2.2.2 – Visibility

Visibility refers to the way that social media enable individuals and groups "to make their behaviours, knowledge, preferences, and … network connections that were once invisible (or at least very hard to see) visible to others in the organisation." (Treem & Leonardi, 2012: 150). Through a combination of status updates, comments, posts, votes, pictures, friending, bookmarking and other forms of contribution, behaviours and information are visible to other social media users (Dimicco *et al.,* 2009; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Although other forms of communication render information visible (i.e. email or instant messaging) visibility on social media extends across complex networks of connections (Leonardi, 2014). The combination of visible behaviours and information creates unique consequences for organisations. For example, not only can social media enhance knowledge sharing and collaboration between geographically dispersed teams (Leonardi, 2014; Subramaniam *et al.* 2013), it can also create a meta knowledge about the type of people within an organisation and the sources of particular forms of expertise, knowledge and

connection (Leonardi, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Such visibility can foster knowledge sharing across organisations (Majchrzak *et al.* 2013; Subramaniam *et al.* 2013) and between organisations and renders the exchange of knowledge continuous rather than discreet (Majchrzak *et al.* 2013). Of course these advances rely on the openness of organisations and individual users in opting to make information about themselves visible and searchable. Many social media studies accept the 'ideology of openness' (Eisenburg & Witten, 1987; Chen, 2013; Gibbs *et al.* 2013; Leonardi, 2014; Yuan *et al.* 2013), which assumes that "effective communication is characterized by openness" (Gibbs *et al.* 2013: 103). Leonardi (2014) for example, offers the grounded theory of communication visibility, suggesting that there are numerous strategic advantages to communicating openly via social media platforms.

Interestingly, it is not just what social media makes visible, but what it conceals that is of great value to users and organisations. A handful of studies explore circumstances in which users make strategic decisions to conceal, rather than reveal, information about themselves via social media (Gibbs *et al.* 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). Gibbs et al. (2013) explored the tensions inherent in employees' use of social media to signal that they were present, making the team accessible to one another. However, this meant that they experienced constant interruptions and questions, which impacted their work. Their strategic response was to alter their status on social media in order to "go invisible", allowing them to monitor conversations whilst avoiding interruption, and to leave the office when they wished. In another example, Scott and Orlikowski (2014) explore how social media allows organisations to perform anonymity by comparing an online travel evaluation site, TripAdvisor, and the long established UK-based Automobile Association (see also, Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). Each organisation offers evaluations of hotels for the benefit of travellers and each review is carried out anonymously. On one hand this had created a thriving online community of travellers sharing their real-life experiences and user recommendations, but anonymity also enabled abuse of the system and fake reviews had received attention from the global media. Granados and Gupta (2013) extend this line of enquiry by suggesting

that in light of social media, organisations have the flexibility to conceal or disclose information and therefore need to develop a 'transparency strategy' (Granados & Gupta, 2013). Currently, many organisations respond to the affordance of visibility by developing policies to restrict or limit the behaviour of their employees on social media (Vaast & Kaganer, 2013) although some studies suggest this may not always be the most effective course of action (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2012).

2.2.3 - Persistence

Social media is referred to as persistent (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) because it is not bound in time, thus the content posted by a user remains in the same format after the user logs out. This is different to other types of organisational communication, such as video conferencing or telephone conversations, which only remain in the memories of those who participated after the communication is completed (Goffman, 1974). Persistence enables a variety of new practices that were not previously possible. For example, a number of studies show how organisational wikis enable geographically dispersed teams to contribute to the development of projects over a (sometimes long) period of time (Holtzblatt *et al.*, 2010; Kane & Fichman, 2009; White & Lutters, 2007; Majchrzak *et al.* 2007). Infact, these "flexible knowledge reposito[ries]" (Lutter & White, 2007:2) allowed content to be re-used and refined over time. Mejova *et al.* (2011) showed that workers were more likely to reuse content that had been posted by someone they had 'friended' using a social media tool. The reuse of content was also shown to facilitate the formation of tighter relationships across organisations (Mejova *et al.* 2011). Similarly, studies at IBM concluded that the social tags used as part of the company's social bookmarking system corresponded with the development of communities of practice (Muller, 2007a; 2007b). As users continue to add content to the nearly unlimited space offered by social media, the knowledge available to users grows over time and can become indexed and searchable (Riemer & Richter, 2010). However, studies have also shown that these ever increasing knowledge banks can be cumbersome and difficult to maintain (Ding *et al.*

2007) and for this reason they may be abandoned as quickly as they were adopted (Grudin & Poole, 2010).

The persistence and visibility of information on social media enables organisations to collect and measure it, creating an extremely valuable form of competitive advantage (Davenport, Barth & Bean, 2012). There is an increasing interest in 'mining big data' (Argwal & Dhar, 2014) to gain a number of strategic insights. While studies have focused on the advantages of persistence to organisations, little attention has been paid to the potentially negative consequences that might occur due to the persistence of social media posts. Persistence seems to undermine the important role of forgetting for both individuals and organisations (Mayer-Schoneberger, 2011). For example, it has become common practice for managers to screen job applicants using social media, a practice which allows them to view not only the historical curriculum vitae of each candidate but also details and images from their private lives (Roth *et al.,* 2016; Van Iddekinge, *et al*., 2013; Clark & Roberts, 2010). In recognition of the potential harm of these practices, California passed a law, which became effective in 2015, enabling minors to permanently erase social media data and make a fresh start (Berkman, 2013). Developers are also responding by creating apps that protect privacy by making content disappear after a defined period, meaning that social media communication becomes more ephemeral (Schein, 2013). The opportunity to forget is also important at an organisational level. The concept of organisational unlearning describes the process whereby organisational knowledge is intentionally or unintentionally removed (Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1991; Tsang & Shaker, 2008). It is not currently clear whether social media impede the ability of organisations or individuals to forget.

2.2.4 - Editability

Industry reports suggest that it has become common practice for organisations to use social media to present a favourable impression of their operations to external audiences (Kane *et al.,* 2014; Kiron *et al.,* 2012; KPMG, 2011). Social media posts are the main vehicles of communication, affording

the opportunity for messages to be constructed in isolation and communicated asynchronously (Walther, 2007; Leonardi & Treem, 2012). Communicating in this way enables the social media user to consider and edit the contents of each post in a way that is not possible in live, face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1959). In some instances it is also possible to edit the contents of a post after it has been sent and even the posts made by a third party to the account of an organisation can be deleted (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). There are a number of positive behavioural outcomes associated with the ability to edit posts. Social media users have the time to carefully consider the recipients of their posts and to target content accordingly (Grudin & Poole, 2010; Huh *et al.*, 2007). They can also make strategic choices about the information they want to reveal in order to build a particular impression of their organisation (Goffman, 1959; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Farzan *et al.* 2008).

Despite the opportunity to edit posts before they become public, mistakes still occur on social media whereby contextually inappropriate content is posted to an organisation's social media account (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). There have been several illustrative examples in recent times, which have highlighted the potential of inappropriate posts to lose business, damage relationships and cause public humiliation and embarrassment (Barak, 2014; Fearne, 2014; Warren, 2011). Richey, Ravishankar and Coupland (forthcoming) explore why inappropriate posts occur, even when social media users have the opportunity to carefully edit and craft their communications. Their study suggests that a series of situational triggers converge during social media use that make inappropriate posts more likely to occur. Thus the affordance of editability is not a guarantee that fewer mistakes will occur.

2.2.5 - Association

On social media platforms connections are established between individuals, others in their social networks and content with which they are affiliated. Associations between individuals in a social network are widely referred to in the literature as social ties (Kane & Alavi, 2008; Kane & Borgatti, 2011; Kane

et al. 2014; Kivran-Swaine *et al.* 2011; Ransbotham *et al.* 2012; Wattal *et al.* 2010). Boyd and Ellison (2007) point out that social media are unique in their ability not only to foster social ties, "but [also in] that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (p. 211). There are a number of behavioural outcomes associated with this affordance. As people are able to view and traverse each other's social connections, new associations are facilitated (Zhang *et al.* 2010), potentially increasing the social capital of users (Steinfield *et al.* 2009; Ferron *et al.* 2010). Individuals are also able to become explicitly associated with pieces of information, through bookmarking, blogging and tagging (Ding *et al.* 2007; Thom-Santelli *et al.* 2010;). Because these associations are made visible, others are able to make selective judgment about the quality and relevance of information, which may improve content use in organisations (Thom-Santelli *et al.* 2010)

Conversely there are occasions when associations are a valuable asset that individuals would rather conceal. Leidner et al. (2013) give the example of a group of IT designers who agreed that social media could be useful, but chose not to share their expertise on social media platforms because they valued security and wanted to maintain competitive secrets. This dilemma relates to the 'ideology of openness' (Eisenburg & Witten, 1987; Chen, 2013; Gibbs *et al.*2013; Leonardi, 2014) mentioned earlier. Leidner et al.'s (2013) example demonstrates that on some occasions it is a strategic *disadvantage* to reveal associations openly on social media. Similarly, Scott & Orlikowski's (2014) study of the popular website Trip Advisor showed that organisations are not always in control of the comments and ratings they become associated with on social media. Association with damaging content posted by others can cause great problems an organisation as consumers increasingly make purchase decisions based on ratings and comments posted by other anonymous social media users (Kumar *et al.* 2013; Colliander & Wien, 2014; Miller & Mobarak, 2014, Toubia & Stephen, 2013).

2.2.6 – Critiquing the affordances approach

As highlighted by the discussions above, there is still much to be understood about the affordances of social media, particularly as far as the potential downsides are concerned (Turel & Surenko, 2013). Affordances have thus far been considered in a positive light, and the potential for them to be misused or abused is an area where more research is needed. The affordances approach to studying social media has enabled researchers to begin to understand some of the implications of social media use in organisations. However, the approach also has a number of limitations.

For example, Treem and Leonardi (2012) make the argument that people can translate affordances in the same way across contexts because the material features of the technologies constrain certain interpretations whilst enabling others. However this view does not capture the inventive use of social media, or its misuse and abuse (Turel & Surenko, 2013; Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). The assertion that everyone will interpret social media in similar ways also assumes a standard level of competence in operating and understanding the platforms, whilst studies show that competence and confidence can vary widely among team members and between different industries (Michelidou *et al.* 2011). Additionally, the approach also assumes that user interpretations are influenced predominantly by the material features of social media. Whilst material features may enable or constrain interpretation, social and psychological forces and organisational contexts (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) also have a role to play the interpretation of social media (Orlikowski, 1992). For example, those implementing social media use in their organisations will have to take in to account their own technical capabilities and not all will be experienced, proficient or comfortable (Michelidou *et al.,* 2011). Interpretations will also likely include a consideration of how social media is being used by others (Kiron *et al.* 2012). In addition, perceiving social media to be useful does not necessarily mean that it will be used, as the affordance literature originally suggested (Gibson, 1986). Thus, whilst the affordances approach offers a useful starting point in understanding that social media use is guided by interpretation, additional work is needed in

order to understand how organisations interpretations of social media are formed.

If interpretations of technology are influenced by the artefacts, actors and contexts associated with them (Orlikowski, 1992), the review above suggests that the contexts influencing social media interpretations have thus far been paid little attention in the social media literature. The contexts influencing social media use in small firms include internal factors (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez 2013; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) and the influence of societal norms and structures external to the firm (Martin & Frost, 2006; Bastien, 1992; Louis, 1985). Perhaps this gap in the literature can be attributed to selection bias across the existing studies of social media use in organisations. In most cases researches have explored social media use in large organisations (Leonardi, 2014; Koch Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013; Mount & Martinez, 2014), where communication has flowed internally between members. Thus the affordances approach to social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) is built upon the premise that individuals will interpret social media's relatively stable features in similar ways (ibid). Studies of large organisations also tend to implicitly assume high levels of competence and resource as constituting the context for social media interpretation and use (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). Such assumptions overlook the significant gaps in skills and resources that are typical in many firm settings, particularly small ones. As a result they underplay the significant work required in many instances to bring firms up to speed with the prevailing use of social media technologies in society (Michelidou *et al.,* 2011). This study seeks to redress this gap by acknowledging the heterogeneity of firms attempting to use social media to communicate. Such variety will naturally lead to varying interpretations and consequences. An acknowledgment that interpretations of social media can vary and are not necessarily the same across firms (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) refocuses attention on the processes that underpin the formation of social media interpretation, a focus that has been lacking in the literature even in studies that acknowledge the importance of user interpretation (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, 2014; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014).

Studies suggest that social media have created a major shift in communication practices, both within organisations (Leonardi, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez 2013) and across societies (Hogan, 2010; Kane *et al.* 2014). In that case, how do significant changes in context impact small firms and their interpretations? Sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) provides a framework for understanding how individuals and groups respond to disruptive, societal changes. She suggests that established skills, habits and styles, both collective and individual, are mobilised in response to such events. She refers to these resources as cultural tools and suggests that people tend to predominantly make use of their most familiar tools, by drawing them together to form responses to new challenges. This approach (Swidler, 1986) recognises the complexity involved in interpreting and responding to new situations, which require access to a wide variety of different cultural tools. The framework has been used in a number of recent studies of organisational problem solving (Ravishankar, 2015; Leonardi, 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Fine & Hallett, 2014). The following sections explore the utility of this approach for understanding social media interpretation and use.

The next section, 2.3 *the field of organisational culture,* provides a context for the cultural toolkit approach (Swidler, 1986) by reviewing the development of organisational culture literature (Schein, 1990; Alvesson, 1992; Martin, 2002). In particular, the review emphasises the consequences associated with different perspectives on the concept of culture, whether it is treated as a causal variable (Ouchi, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982), an organising metaphor (Smirchich, 1983; Alvesson, 1993) or a resource (Swidler, 1986). In section 2.4, *social media and IT culture conflict,* the significance of the different understandings of culture is demonstrated using a recent social media study, in which the use of the culture as a variable is shown to have limited explanatory power. In contrast, Swidler's framework (1986) is then elaborated upon in section 2.5, *the cultural toolkit approach,* and its potential for elucidating small firm interpretations of social media is established.

2.3 - The field of organisational culture

Swidler's (1986) ideas about how groups and individuals respond to significant disruptions to their way of life grew out of a long tradition of organisational culture research. The idea that peoples' interpretations and actions are influenced by meanings, ideas and beliefs that are socially shared was introduced by anthropologists and sociologists. Many now famous cultural studies (Geertz, 1973; Mead, 1928; Sahlin, 1985) presented ethnographic portraits which were built around the loosely defined conceptualisation that culture constituted of a complete way of life among a group. It was from these traditions that organisational scholars drew their first ideas about cultures that could be applied to organisations (Hofstede, 1980; Ouchi, 1981).

Although the concept of culture had entered mainstream organisational thinking only a decade earlier (Ouchi, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982) and had generated much attention among organisational researchers (Jelenik, Smircich & Hirsch, 1983) ontological rifts turned the organisational culture territory in to a 'battlefield', the setting for what Joanne Martin describes as 'the culture wars' (Martin, 2002). Yet, the concept of organisational culture continues to generate rich streams of empirical and theoretical enquiry (Weber & Dacin, 2011). Studies of organisational culture can be seen as belonging to two distinct 'waves' of research (Jalenik, Smircich & Hirsch, 1983; Weber & Dacin, 2011). During the first wave, two dominant schools of thought emerged (Martin, 2002), providing alternative explanations of how culture influenced behaviour in organisations. In an attempt to clearly establish the differences between the two approaches, Smircich (1983) elaborates that in the first, culture is treated as a variable, or a thing that an organisation has (Kilman *et al.*, 1985; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) while in the second culture is used as a metaphor for understanding organisations (Alvesson, 1998; Martin, 2002). The choice between these two treatments of culture can have a profound impact on the way the concept is operationalized in research (Smircich, 1983).

At the heart of the debate between proponents of these different schools of thought are questions about the definition of organisational culture. What is it? Where is it found? The deep philosophical divides among scholars meant that answers to these questions have been contested and somewhat elusive (Martin & Frost, 2006). In addition to these tensions, organisational culture, as a grand concept (Alvesson, 1998), refers to multiple processes at different levels of analysis. The complexity and scope of culture has led to the common criticism that culture can mean everything and therefore nothing (Alvesson, 1998). In some cases the term culture is avoided altogether and alternative terminology is used for describing essentially the same phenomena (e.g. Institiutional logics).

Despite disagreements, researchers of organisational culture draw on a common anthropological heritage which is concerned with the impact of living together in society on group and individual behaviours and understandings. For cooperation and intelligible communication to occur in any group setting there must first be some level of shared understanding (Goffman, 1981). Without the availability of commonly understood referents, interaction would be rendered unintelligible. Goffman (1981) suggests that groups begin to establish communal understandings from their earliest moments. Communal points of reference accumulate over time, and have a 'referential afterlife' (Goffman, 1981), such that they can be used as "an interpretive framework through which individuals make sense of their own behaviours as well as the behaviour of others in society" (Scott & Lane, 2000).

These common reference points constitute the content of culture. They are the "symbolic vehicles of meaning" (Alvesson, 1998) that influence interpretation and behaviour. There is a rich literature exploring the different forms that such cultural 'material' can take, including a variety of cognitive and material cultural manifestations (Martin, 2002). In organisations, cultural materials include that which is subjectively described, such as common stories (Brown, Gabriel & Gherardi, 2009; Beech, MacPhil & Coupland, 2009; Driver, 2009), rituals (Islam, 2012; Rippin, 2011), ceremonies (Dacin, Munir & Tracey, 2010) or humour (Ashforth *et al.* 2007; Robert & Wilbanks, 2012;

Romero & Pescosolido, 2008), as well as that which can be objectively described, such as architectural layout, logos, letterheads, artwork and dress code (Schein, 1991). Culture, then, might be understood as being scattered in bits throughout the organisation (Swidler, 1986). Cultural researchers are not only concerned with the outward manifestations of culture, but the associated psychological understandings and interpretations (Kitayama, 2002). Whilst the cultural contexts influencing social media use have received some attention in the literature (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013; Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2012) this has not included a consideration of how interpretations of social media are formed. Swidlers (1986) suggestion that new interpretations and ways of doing things are formed in response to major societal shifts is consistent with the view that social media constitutes a radical shift in the way that organisations communicate (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, 2014). Thus Swidler's (1986) cultural toolkit framework promises an alternative way of understanding how small firms interpret and use social media. The merits of the cultural toolkit approach (Swidler, 1986) can be better understood in relation to alternative views about culture's influence on interpretation and action.

Whilst scholars broadly agree on what constitutes the content of culture, the extent to which culture is shared between members of an organisation and the impact of cultural meanings on organisational behaviour have caused disagreements among scholars for decades (Frost & Martin, 2006; Jalinek, Smircich & Hirsch, 1983; Smircich & Hirsch, 1983; Weber & Dacin, 2011).

2.3.1 –The positivist tradition

Early interest in the impact of culture on organisations was fuelled by the success of firms based in Japan (Ouchi, 1981) and the United States of America (Peters & Waterman, 1982). It was hypothesised that the effective performance of an organisation could be attributed to its culture (Ouchi, 1981; Kilman *et al.,* 1985). Studies adopting this approach treated culture as something measurable and identifiable that organisations 'had'. The prospect

that culture could be controlled caught the attention of managers and MBA students (Martin et al 2006) and a slew of articles followed (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Denison, 1980, 1990; Denison & Mishra, 1995; Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ouchi, 1981; Sorenson, 2002; Sackman, 2010; Kotrba *et al.*2012) in which the aim was to quantify and reproduce successful cultures.

In this approach, labelled the integrationist approach (Martin, 2002) culture was seen as a constraining force, in which the shared values of the organisations directed and shaped the behaviour of people within organisations. Kilman *et al.* (1985) suggested that "a culture has a positive impact on an organisation when it points behaviour in the right direction – alternatively a culture has a negative impact when it points behaviour in the wrong direction." (1985:4). The view that culture could be used as a means of managerial control was translated into many management articles, which advised on how to build a 'strong' – meaning unitary – culture (Nohiria & Beer, 2000; Sull, 1999). In this view it is possible and desirable to create "strong" and "cohesive" organisational cultures, meaning organisations in which there is a high degree of cultural consensus among organisational members (Martin, 1992; Martin & Frost, 2006) where the " collective programming of the mind … distinguishes the members of one organisation from another" (Hofstede, 1991: 262).

This tradition examined how to use cultural materials to manipulate the workforce; for example, Casey (1999) explored how the symbolic terminology associated with family and family life was used to engender positive feelings of loyalty and commitment in employees. This tradition tended to reduce culture to simplistic descriptions of what constituted 'good cultures' or 'bad cultures' (Baker, 1980). Here good cultures were characterised by norms and values that supported corporate goals. Values were considered to be the primary drivers of behaviour, supplying organisational members with the desired ends to which behaviour was directed (Swidler, 1986). The majority of research from the integrationist school presented prescriptive techniques for engineering value by manipulating workers into 'value consensus' (Martin,

2006; Hochschild, 1983; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). Alongside the strong emphasis on organisational values, other shared manifestations of culture were also of interest in this approach. Edgar Schein's (1991) description of culture has been widely used among organisational theorists in the integrationist school of thought. Schein (1991) describes culture as existing at different levels of human experience. External manifestations of culture are observable all around us, and can include architecture, room layouts, mannerisms, language and anything else that is shared externally in a social space (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011). These external manifestations are shaped by the inner values common to a cultural group, such as 'openness' or 'competitiveness' (Schein, 1991). At a deeper level, these shared values are underpinned by deeply held assumptions about the world, which individuals themselves may not even be fully conscious of holding (Schein, 1991). This suggests that culture is simultaneously "a cognitive, representational abstraction [and also] a perceptual-embodied experience" (Flores-Pereira *et al.* 2008).

Integrationist studies were characterised by their emphasis on the uniform aspects of cultures, and suggested that cultures were characterised by a lack of ambiguity (Schein 1991). Although this approach was strongly criticised as a "very simple and banal conception of culture and one depriving it of the richness that is normally seen as its strength" (Alvesson, 1998) the interest in utilising culture as a variable to predict and measure performance endures (Sackman, 2010; Kotrba, 2012). Some argue that although individual variations exist in the extent to which people accept and enact culture, the study of organisational culture is primarily concerned with that which is shared. In this view, that which is not shared is not cultural (Schein, 1991).

The impact of shared cultural values on action and interpretation has been explored in the social media literature (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). In their (2013) study of social media adoption in a global organisation, Koch, Leidner and Gonzalez suggest that shared cultural values enable or constrain the adoption of social media technologies.

2.3.2. - Social media and IT culture conflict

Whilst organisations have adopted social media technologies (Kiron *et al.* 2012; Kane *et al.* 2014) many have faced difficulties in implementing social media use across their organisations (Michelidou *et al.* 2011; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). Koch, Leidner and Gonzalez (2013) suggest that these difficulties can be attributed to an organisation's cultural values. They argue that social media is non-neutral (Orlikowski, 1992; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) and organisational members perceive particular values to be associated with social media artefacts. These perceptions are related to their interpretation of social media, for example, a group might understand social media as platforms for social interaction (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2012). When these perceived values are at odds with an organisation's values, IT culture conflict arises (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) hampering social media adoption and use. They present a case study of a global security firm, which serves as an example of such a conflict (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013).

In this case study (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013), the organisation was characterised as having a "need to know" culture, driven by high levels of security and the tendency of employees to try and protect their own jobs. The management introduced an internal social media system to encourage knowledge sharing, reduce interdepartmental inefficiencies and to appeal to the new millennial hires. However, the established workforce did not respond well to the new system, perceiving it as a waste of time and a threat. Thus in the early stages of implementation the system was not widely used and failed to achieve management objectives. In response, a series of interventions were implemented designed realigned the values of the organisation with the social media use and in the long run the system was widely adopted and very successful. Thus Koch, Leidner and Gonzalez (2013) suggest that the successful adoption of social media relies on the alignment of organisation values and user perceptions of social media.

The limitation of this view is that it suggests that conflicting values constitute the main cause of difficulty in social media implementation. Whilst conflict may be experienced when social media is imposed upon teams, there are many instances in which teams actively choose to implement social media use. When teams voluntarily adopt social media the theory of IT culture conflict (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) has limited explanatory power. Indeed it seems counterintuitive to assume that teams proactively working to implement social media do not value the platforms. On the contrary, many organisations expend significant effort on their social media use (Kiron *et al.* 2012) because they understand social media to be associated with activities that they value (i.e. marketing, managing employees etc.)*.* In addition, it is simplistic to assume that organisations with values that align with social media will experience no difficulties. Such an assumption underestimates the impact of the context of the organisation, both internally and externally (Orlikowski, 1992).

The theory of IT culture conflict (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006) is underpinned by a positivist philosophical position, which claims that shared cultural values play a causal role in determining action. The assertion that cultural values are shared by all members of an organisation and that values direct behaviour has been a major point of departure for alternative treatments of culture including the cultural toolkit approach (Swidler, 1986; Martin, 1992; Van Maanen, 1991; Martin & Frost, 2006).

2.3.3 – Culture as a metaphor

An alternative perspective of culture was presented in the special issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Jelinek, Smircich & Hirsch, 1983), widely regarded as an important statement on the first wave of cultural studies in organisations (Weber & Dacin, 2011). Here the idea that culture could be used as a 'root metaphor' (Jalinek, Smircich & Hirsch, 1983: 331) for understanding organisational life was presented. For many researchers the acknowledgement that organisations were more than rational, functional machines was "as a breath of fresh air" (Salzer-Morsling, 2003). Positivist

traditions, with a tendency to reduce complex phenomena to measurable variables (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Denison, 1980, 1990; Denison & Mishra, 1995; Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Ouchi, 1981; Sorenson, 2002; Sackman, 2010; Kotrba *et al.*2012) had dominated studies of organisations. These studies were primarily concerned with organisational efficiency and tended to ignore or factor out human agency and interaction. While cultural norms and values exert a powerful influence on thoughts and behaviours, individuals are also able to alter these institutions through their day-to-day interactions (Rindova *et al.* 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011). Hence, the second school hoped that culture might be a framework that could "tolerate alternative assumptions" (Smircich & Hirsch, 1983: 331) and present a more diverse, holistic and realistic view of life in organisations (Frost *et al.* 1985).

Studies in this tradition were more concerned with the lived experiences of people and culture offered a paradigm that connected these individual experiences back to the organisation as a whole (Fine & Hallett, 2014). From this perspective cultures and selves exert a mutual influence on one another that is "dynamically recursive" (Markus and Kitayama, 2010). There was room in this approach to acknowledge that organisations and the people in them did not always behave entirely rationally. Neither need organisations consist of a single, unifying set of cultural values but of a dynamic interplay of multiple subcultures which could be differential, fragmented and contested (Martin, 2002). Furthermore, the language of culture, drawn from anthropology, seemed to "counter the dry and overly rational form of traditional theorising about organisations" (Smircich & Calais, 1987: 229). Thus "organisational life suddenly acquired mythical qualities, such that a Christmas party could be described as a ceremony, the budget process as a ritual, the manager as a hero, the induction programme as a rite, and so on." (Salzer-Morling, 2003).

This second school provided the basis for different understandings of the extent to which culture influenced the interpretations of organisational members. The first of these perspectives, labelled the differentialist approach by some (Martin, 2002; Martin & Meyerson, 1988; Young, 1985) proposed

that it was not possible to achieve an organisation wide level of cultural consensus. There is no unified interpretation of a cultural manifestation, instead consensus and clarity might only be found within sub-cultural boundaries. Proponents of this approach required sufficient depth of enquiry to penetrate the efforts at impression management that most organisational members present to strangers (Goffman, 1959; Schein, 1985; Myers & Newman, 2007). These studies often revealed inconsistencies between managerial ideals and organisational life in practice (for example, Van Maanen's (1991) study of ride operators at Disneyland). Such accounts were sensitive to inconsistencies between stated values and actual behaviour, between formal and informal practices and in the interpretations of different sub-cultural groups (Van-Maanen & Barley, 1986; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Bartunek & Moch, 1991). These early studies introduced the idea that organisational culture is best viewed as nested groups "that co-exist in harmony, conflict, or independence from each other" (Martin & Frost, 2006. See also, Bastien, 1992; Louis, 1985)

This allowed for cultural differences to exist between the subgroups of an organisation. However, the idea that every individual within a group would share identical sets of values and ideas was also challenged (Feldman, 1989; Meyerson, 1991). For decades, studies had explored the role that native cultures have upon individuals as they enter an organisation (Whyte & Williams, 1963; Haire *et al.,* 1966; England *et al.,*1977; Scarborough, 1998). The domestic cultures of individuals have great influence on the perceptions (Chatterjee & Pearson, 2000; Neelankavil *et al.,* 2000), values (England *et al.,* 1974; Hampden-Turner & Trompenars, 1993) and beliefs (Smith & Thomas, 1972) they bring with them in to organisations. Consequently, these domestic and national cultures might be expected to have an influence on behaviour and culture within an organisation (Hofstede, 1980; Nelson, 2003).

Thus in a third approach, the fragmentation view, scholars proposed that even within groups consensus was complex and included elements of confusion and contradiction (Martin & Frost, 2006). Any level of consensus, whether organisation wide, or at a subculture or group level is temporary and tied to

specific issues (Feldman, 1989; Kreiner & Schultz, 1993). According to the fragmentation view any attempts to offer clarity by using the cultural concept were attempts to create an illusion of clarity where none exists (Levitt & Nass, 1989; Martin & Frost, 2006). Fragmentation studies offer no direction to those who would manage culture. Instead, irrationality (Brunsson, 1985) and ambiguity (Cohen & March, 1974; March & Olsen, 1976) take centre stage.

Fragmentation studies highlight situations in which meanings are unclear. For example, Meyerson (1991) offered an insight in to the organisational experiences of social workers for whom objectives and goals were uncertain and the notion of what a successful intervention might be remained unspecified. He analysed the use of irony and humour by the workers and concluded that any account of this organisation that excluded ambiguity would have been false and incomplete. Many other accounts offer pictures of fragmentation and confusion within organisational boundaries in which workers either adapt to the ambiguity inherent in modern dynamic, fluid organisations (Robertson & Swan, 2003) or live with the apparent meaninglessness of their tasks (Feldman, 1989). The confusion and uncertainty was not always harmless; Weick's (1991) study of an airport in Tenerife shows how the struggles of different workers to be understood across different statuses, languages and tasks led to the collision of two jumbo jets in the fog.

There has been strong criticism and some rejection of the fragmentation approach to understanding organisational culture. As previously mentioned, Schein (1991) rejects the idea that ambiguity can be cultural. Alvesson (1998) acknowledges the dynamism and contradiction that are part of organisations but cautions against the over emphasis of ambiguity, given that "the process of organizing hinges on the simultaneous presence and absence of shared meanings (Saltzer-Morling, 2003 ; see also Gray, Bangon & Donnellon, 1985). In her comprehensive writings about the battles between those taking different sides in the "culture wars" Martin (2002) suggests that organisations can simultaneously exhibit the characteristics described in the integrationist, differentiation and fragmentation approaches.

In the long struggle to come to a consensus about a superior definition of culture, it has also been acknowledged that the use of the term culture may not be the cause of the problems (Saltzer-Morling, 2003). It is when culture is combined with the epithet "organisational" that problems begin to occur, because the reference to an organisation suggests boundaries and uniformity. If culture is a differentiator as much as it is an integrator, then cultural and organisational boundaries are unlikely to strictly align. Rather than regarding organisations as absolute cultural entities, an alternative approach would be to ask how organising is accomplished in light of culture (Smircish, 1983; 1985) and how culture might enable or constrain any sense of organising? (Salzer-Morling, 2003). This line of enquiry has rejuvenated studies of organisational culture in the past decade, in what has been described as "the second wave of cultural analysis" in organisations (Weber & Dacin, 2011). This wave of research takes an alternative approach to explaining culture's influence on action (Swidler, 1986; Weber & Dacin, 2011).

2.3.4 - A second wave of cultural studies

If earlier studies of culture were concerned with meanings and symbols at a collective organisational level of analysis, the second wave has focused more on the dynamic and recursive relationship between individuals, groups and organisations (Martin & Frost, 2006; Weber & Dacin, 2011). There has been an acknowledgement that culture can still be a constraint when it subconsciously drives behaviour, but it can also be used by individuals in a much more pragmatic and conscious manner (Swidler, 2008; Vaisey, 2008). Weber and Dacin's (2011) description of a second wave of studies includes those that treat culture primarily as constituting a wide range of social processes. Such studies tend to make reference not only to the internal culture of a group or organisation, but to how that culture is performed publically, to an external audience (Weber & Dacin, 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011). Interest in public performances goes back at least to Goffman (1959) and his examination of 'front-stage' performances and impression management. This shift in emphasis from the consideration of a closed group,

to the inclusion of their external audiences creates a more permeable view of organisations and an "open-system" (Harrison & Corley, 2011; Weber & Dacin, 2011) perspective of cultures. These changes seem to reflect the increasing public access to information, including information exchanged on social media (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014).

An additional conceptual shift has been the emphasis in recent cultural research on the agency of individuals. Rather than being constrained by their cultural values, individuals are considered to be "cultural entrepreneurs" (Loundsbury & Glynn, 2001) who make use of culture in a pragmatic way. This approach is based on the work of Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) whose criticism of earlier cultural studies, lead her to reconceptualise culture as a toolkit of resources.

2.4 - Culture as a toolkit

In her seminal article *Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,* Ann Swidler (1986) challenged the dominant use of the value-oriented approach to explaining culture. For decades, researchers using culture to explain behaviour had assumed that culture influenced action by providing the ends (in the form of values) to which action is oriented. This assumption was widely held at the time, across all approaches to studying culture, although most notably in integrationist studies where values were engineered and filtered down through an organisation (Kilman, *et al.,* 1985; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). Swidler (1986) problematized this approach, reiterating that 'real cultures' contained diverse, often contradictory cultural material, and could not be oversimplified as being unified systems.

She (1986; 2001; 2008) proposed that rather than viewing culture as an interconnected web of shared meanings, culture should be treated as separate bits of meaning, existing at a societal level as a broad register of available cultural tools, and brought together at an individual level in a repertoire or 'toolbox' of various usable skills, habits and styles. These cultural

tools (Swidler, 1986), or as she later describes them, cultured capacities (Swidler, 2001; 2008) take various shapes and forms, but are roughly analogous to the 'vehicles of meaning' described in other studies (Alvesson, 1998; Schein, 1991).

Each individual has access to a broad range of cultural tools at a societal or group level, but varies in their proficiency at using them. As Swidler describes:

> *"We do best to think of culture as a repertoire, like that of an actor, a musician, or a dancer. This image suggests that culture cultivates skills and habits in its users . . . and that such cultured capacities may exist both as discreet skills, habits and orientations and in larger assemblages, like the pieces a musician has mastered or plays an actor has performed. It is in this sense that people have an array of cultural resources upon which they can draw" (2001: 24)*

Just as performers show various levels of mastery in their chosen craft, so individuals show different levels of ability in relation to their available cultural tools (Harrison & Corley, 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). Some tools are well used and well-rehearsed while others are less familiar and are thus rarely used or left entirely dormant. Swidler (1986) suggests that culture can be difficult to detect until there is a disruptive event that compels the individual or group to reconsider the way they do things. She asserts that cultural toolkits are mobilised in response to these "initiating jolts" (Swidler, 1986:) as individuals attempt to formulate new "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986) from their available cultural tools. Here the term strategy does not denote any kind of formal plan, rather "a general way of organising action that might allow one to reach several different life goals" (1986: 277). Strategies of action are formed as different cultural tools are combined in response to a new problem.

2.4.1 - Selection of cultural tools

Individuals and groups have a wide variety of cultural tools at their disposal which they use in different combinations in response to problems. Since it is

not necessary to use every available tool at any one time, a number of internal and external factors influence which tools will be selected and which will be left dormant (Swidler; 2008; Kellogg, 2011). For example, although an individual might want to adopt social media to promote their organisation, the platforms may not be deemed an appropriate method of communicating in a particularly formal industry (Michelidou *et al.* 2011). In this sense the social norms of the industry constitute part of the opportunity structure in which groups are nested (Kellogg, 2011). The values of the industry or group do not directly drive the action, but they act as moderators, determining the extent to which a tool might be used. The influential role played by internal schemata have also been highlighted in recent studies describing how people draw 'frames' (Goffman, 1974) around selected combinations of resources while ignoring others at their disposal (Ravishankar, 2015; Leonardi, 2011).

Frames are related to sense-making efforts and reflect the interpretation of a situation (Ravishankar, 2015; Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011; Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). Frames can be understood as cognitive meta-tools, themselves culturally informed, which are used to form an understanding of a new situation. Individuals use frames to help them to determine which tools are most appropriate to use in response to new challenges (Ravishankar, 2015; Leonardi; 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Rhagurham, 2014, Kaplan, 2011; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011). As cultural tools in their own right, a variety of different frames may be available within the same cultural repertoire. For example, Leonardi (2011) describes how the development of a new technology at a U.S automobile manufacturer became fraught with difficulty when teams from different departments were unable to agree on the problem they were solving because they were all framing the problem differently.

The relationship between frames and other cultural tools is not clear-cut or predictable. Although Swidler (1986) suggests that people tend to favour particular, well-practiced world views or tools, Howard-Grenville *et al.* (2011) point out that cultural tools are more than passive containers that carry meaning around; "symbols are rich and multi-vocal, connoting potentially

different meaning for different people" (Howard-Grenville *et al.* 2011). The multiplicity of potential meanings attached to cultural symbols means the selection of appropriate cultural tools is not straightforward or easy to predict. Individuals and groups have to navigate their use of cultural tools carefully in order for their selected strategy of action to be acceptable to others (Wry, Loundsbury & Glynn, 2011; McPherson & Sauder, 2013) and to avoid misunderstanding or offense (Leonardi, 2011; Ravishankar, 2015). McPherson and Sauder's (2013) study of the proceedings of a panel drawn from different organisations to form a drug court shows that while each individual represented a different perspective on the appropriate course of action for offenders (rehabilitation, punishment, etc) they also routinely mobilised alternative frames during discussion in order to maintain the image that they were objective contributors and also to garner a sense of cooperation that might later serve their long term objectives. Similarly, Ghaziani and Baldassarri (2011) describe how frames might be used as 'anchors' holding together otherwise very different groups. Their study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) marches describes how a small selection of ideas were used as the basis for organising by providing a 'thinly coherent foundation' that supported internal differences. Understanding how cultural tools are used to enable (or constrain) organising is a central theme of these studies, which focus on how tools are used "in *local* communities, shaping civic life and tied to the recognition of shared pasts and prospective futures (Fine & Hallett, 2014:1775, emphasis in original). This meso and micro focus on the context of interpretation and action relating to social media has thus far not been explored. It holds particular promise for connecting the streams of enquiry that have focused exclusively on individual social media users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Michelidou *et al.,* 2011; Hogan, 2010) or organisations as a whole (Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Leonardi, 2014).

2.4.2 - Cultural tools and groups

Although in Swidler's conceptualisation (1986; 2001), culture is understood as something that individuals carry around in their heads, "cultural meanings

are brought to bear at the collective and social, not the individual, level" (2008: 617). Fine and Hallett (2014) argue that if "culture is a form of practice" then local, group level settings are where the action is. These 'meso-realms' are at the nexus between individuals and the wider institutions and structures that exist in organisations and society. "The local scene is an instance of the larger culture with its style, rules and beliefs shaping how social relations are organised" (Fine & Hallett, 2014: 1777). Although they argue that groups represent "outposts" of wider society, they also acknowledge the diversity and complexity of groups, which simultaneously draw on the background cultures of participants, the instrumental goals of individuals and the collective group, group status and the acceptable moral standards of action (Fine, 1979; Fine & Hallett, 2014). Over time, groups collect shared experience and communal memory, which serve as the basis of ongoing interaction (Fine, 1979). Although groups are socially positioned to provide insights into the everyday use of social media, there is growing acknowledgement that in-group dynamics are not the only influence on organisational interpretation (Weber & Dacin, 2011).

2.4.3 - The influence of external audiences

Earlier research assumed that members interacting in the same group would understand the same cultural points of reference but more recent research engages with the analytic device of an external audience that is separate from but influential to the focal group (Harrison & Corley, 2011; Wry, Loundsbury & Glynn, 2011; Maurer *et al.* 2011; Rindova *et al.* 2011; Weber & Dacin, 2011). Goffman's early work on external audiences (Goffman, 1959) divided social interactions into those that take place in public (front-stage) and private (back-stage) spheres. Contemporary studies that engage with the notion of an audience vary in the degree to which the audience is engaged in interaction with the focal organisation or group (Rindova *et al.* 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014).

Harrison & Corley (2011) describe the relationship between a company designing and manufacturing climbing and skiing equipment and the

community of outdoor enthusiasts that made up its customer base. The authors adopt an open systems perspective to describe the relationship between the organisation and the wider community, showing the boundaries of the organisation to be permeable, allowing cultural ideas and materials to pass from the organisation to the community and back again, as each recursively shaped the culture and practices of the other. Rindova et al. (2011) also show the influence of external audiences and cultural resources, but where the links between organisation and its public are more removed and intermittent. They present a historical case study of Italian manufacturer Alessi, showing how over decades the organisation strategically tap into the external cultural register to enhance their own cultural repertoire, enabling them to innovate and change in unconventional and advantageous ways. In contrast to Harrison and Corley's (2011) portrayal of an organisation deeply embedded into an external culture, Alessi's experience of importing new cultural materials and ideas was far more effortful, although in the long term, fruitful (Rindova *et al.* 2011).

Wry, Loundsbury and Glynn (2011) show that the strategic use of cultural tools can be more precarious and at the same time of vital importance when a group is less well defined and in the early stages of establishing itself. They draw on a number of empirical studies to explore how the stories told by nascent groups help to establish a legitimate group identity. In their examples, groups use 'growth stories' in order to gain the attention and affiliation of new members. These efforts can be thwarted if the stories told are not consistent, or if they unintentionally draw in the wrong kind of new member, thereby diluting the legitimacy of the group (Wry, Lounsbury & Glynn, 2011). It is not always the actors from inside the organisation that play the most active role in the relationship between organisation and public. Mauerer et al. (2011) point out that audiences can also be organised, and can have an impact by actively bringing their interests and concerns to the organisation, as in the case of social movements or activist groups.

Whilst the studies discussed above depict actors actively drawing in tools from broader cultural registers, Kellogg (2011) by contrast, examines why

some actors do not use their available toolkits to affect change. In her study of changes made to hospital procedures she argues that the opportunity structures of organisations and their environments have an influence on whether actors are afforded the opportunity to make use of their cultural tools. It is also the case that individuals may also not feel comfortable or competent to use particular cultural tools (Swidler, 1986). In such cases, Swidler suggests, rather than assuming that individuals do not value the ends towards which they might direct their actions, we might also question whether they feel suitably equipped to pursue said course of action (Swidler, 1986).

2.7.4 - Acquiring and using new tools

Although cultural toolkits contain more tools than individuals need to use (Swidler, 1986), they are not limitless. Individuals can find themselves facing a problem for which they do not possess suitable cultural tools (Swidler, 1986; Molinsky, 2013). For example, a manager may wish to implement social media use in their firm but lack the required understanding or ability (Michelidou *et al.* 2011). While individuals are able to acquire new cultural tools and capacities from the broader cultural register, Swidler argues that the cost of 're-tooling' is too high in terms of time and effort to be an appealing option for most people. In general, she says, people are more likely to stick to skills, habits and styles with which they are familiar and well practiced (Swidler, 1986). Thus, individuals "are more likely to shape their goals or ends around the cultured capacities they have than to shape their capacities around their ends" (Swidler, 2008:615).

However, some studies (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011) suggest that change can take place in the absence of initiating jolts through the use of liminal experiences, which encourage and enable participants to 'think about how they think' and provide them with a space to experiment creatively with alternatives. Such experiences require individuals who are able to take a meta-view of their organisations, having both an understanding of the prevailing dynamics and their cultural background as well as a determination to champion change (Howard-Grenville *et al.,* 2011). Howard-Grenville *et al.*

(2011) provide a case study of individuals championing sustainability practices within their organisations and show that re-tooling need not necessarily be costly or require initiating jolts but can be achieved iteratively over time.

Molinsky (2013) discusses the psychological micro processes that impact the individual when drastic re-tooling is necessary. Drawing on a study of international MBA students who had to adapt in order to take part in the education system in the United States of America, Molinsky (2013) elaborates on the struggles of the students and suggests that some were able to 'craft' a sense of authenticity as they adapted culturally. He presents series of stages through which people move as they adapt, although he highlights that adaptation and retooling is not a linear process, and people's experiences are highly heterogeneous. There is still a limited understanding of how, when and (Molinsky, 2013; Rindova *et al.* 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011).

2.8 – Summary

This chapter opened with the assertion that social media technologies are interpretively flexible (Orlikowski, 1992; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and that social media interpretations are informed by characteristics of the platforms (i.e. artefact), the users (i.e. actors) and the small firm setting (i.e. context). In the preceding literature review many of the studies focused exclusively on either the actors or the artefact, implicitly assuming that social media would be interpreted in a similar way in different firm contexts (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). As a result there is a noticeable lack of focus on the influence of context on the interpretation of social media platforms, a gap that this study seeks to address.

The second section of the literature review introduced the concept of culture as a framework for understanding contextually shared meanings and their influence on interpretations and actions. However, the different approaches to mobilising culture as a theoretical lens over the past few decades show that the concept should be applied conscientiously. Where the concept has previously been used to explain social media use (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner,

2013) the results have produced limited explanatory power (i.e. when the values driven approach to culture was applied). As suggested earlier in the literature review (p. 29) this may be due to selection bias across social media studies. When researchers focus predominantly on large firms and assume that interpretations and contextual features will be experienced similarly by everyone, then there is little attention given to the heterogeneity or agency of individuals. One benefit of employing Swidler's (1986) approach to culture is that it acknowledges such heterogeneity and places the individuals in agentic control of the materials they can use to form interpretations. In addition, it does not restrict the researchers consideration of the factors influencing interpretation (Orlikowski, 1993) but facilitates a consideration of the material features of the technology, the actor and the context. Therefore, this study proposes to use Swidler's cultural toolkit framework (1986) as a way of addressing the current gap in the literature concerning the formation of social media interpretations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 – Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological design of this study, which is underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy (Prasad, 2005). Guided by the assumptions associated with this view (Guba & Lincoln, 1984; Cohen *et al.,* 2007) and the current limits of research on social media use in organisations (described in chapter 2) this study followed a qualitative approach with a view to gathering rich and descriptive data. The objective was to move beyond the prevailing focus on the implications of social media use in organisations and to explore *how* small firms formed their interpretations and subsequent use of social media. In order to achieve this, accounts were gathered from 31 small firms that were members of two support agencies offering (among other things) social media training. The firms were all trying to use social media as a new way of communicating with external stakeholders and the individuals interviewed were involved in implementing this activity. The following sections describe the development of the interviews, and provide details about how the data was collected, coded and analysed. The respondents provided detailed accounts of the psychological and social processes influencing their social media use. This chapter provides an overview of their experiences as a foundation for the full narrative analysis presented in chapters 4 and 5.

3.1 – Research philosophy

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy (Cohen & Ravishankar, 2012), which can be understood to be located within a paradigm focused on *understanding* (e.g. constructivist, phenomenological and ethonographic approaches) as opposed to *explaining and predicting* (e.g. positivist and neo-positivist approaches) *emancipating* (e.g. critical, feminist/gendered studies, action research) or *deconstructing* (e.g. post-colonial, discourse analysis, post-modernism). Although a number of philosophical approaches development are covered by the loose term interpretivism (Mayasandra *et al.* 2006), it has been suggested that they are unified by the view that human interpretation is the basis for the development

of knowledge (Prasad, 2005). Ontologically, this study takes a relativist stance, which considers reality to be subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this view, realities are mediated by our senses: they emerge as consciousness engages with objects and events in the world to produce meaning (Crotty, 1998).

In an epistemological sense, from this perspective meaning (knowledge) is not discovered, it is constructed subjectively in interaction between consciousness and the world. This does not mean that knowledge is constructed in isolation or that there is no prospect of a consensus over the meaning of events or objects. While individuals may construct meanings in different ways they also influence each other's interpretations. In this way co-constructors negotiate and come to agree upon a 'truth', which culturally and historically situates the knowledge they develop (Cohen & Ravishankar, 2012). Therefore the social world can only be understood from the viewpoint of participating individuals (Cohen et al. 2007)

Informed by this perspective, the study follows a broad research aim as opposed to articulating a specific set of research questions. The aim of the study is:

> *To explore how firms incorporate social media use in to their communication practices*

Whilst the literature review acted as a sensitising device providing information on current practices in social media use (e.g. that some organisations use it for communicating with external stakeholders) no *a priori* theory was imposed on the development of the interview questions. Instead it was assumed that the respondents' self-reported understanding of their experiences represented the reality constructed by those participating in social media use for their organisations.

3.1.1 – Research methods

For the purposes of this study, the experiences and viewpoints of the individuals representing their organisations on social media was primarily accessed via semi-structured interview. As recommended by Alvesson and Ashcroft (2012) in order to "conceive of good technique" consideration was given to how the philosophical position guiding the research informed the view of what the interview was and what it could do.

The dominant metaphor for the interview used in many interpretivist approaches is that it constitutes a human encounter (Alvesson, 2003), in which rapport, trust and commitment are established between the interviewer and respondent, encouraging the latter to openly express their views, opinions and experiences (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012). This position on the interview, labelled *romanticism* by some (Dingwall, 1997; Alvesson, 2003, Alvesson &Ashcraft 2012) assumes that the closer we come to the respondent the closer we are to comprehending their reality. Although there are risks that interview conversations might be guided by social desirability (Goffman, 1959; Myers & Newman, 2007), it is also a generally presumed that building close relationships with participants can reduce this issue.

Critical theorists advise caution against the over reliance on interview transcripts as representing a 'truth'. They suggest that there is a tendency to over-estimate a participant's willingness to aide science by answering questions honestly and an under-estimation of our own tendencies as researchers to be influenced by bias (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012). Thomas Kuhn (1970) neatly described the dilemma of creating pure and authentic observations as social scientists: 'They are shaped by our concepts – we see what we have ideas about and can't see what we don't have words and ideas for' (in Becker, 1998: 18). As Alvesson and Ashcraft (2012) suggest it is "vital not to over-simplify and idealise the interview setting" (pg. 245). There are a number of ways in which researchers unwittingly (or purposefully) do this. These include using a philosophically-guided, narrow metaphor of what the interview is; taking an over-simplified view of answers given during the data analysis stage; and taking for granted that researchers are able to act as objective, neutral instruments of analysis.

These issues can be offset to an extent by exercising a reflexive pragmatism (Alvesson, 2003, Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012) in which the researcher is cognisant of their own cultural construction and its impact on the interview and subsequent analysis (Jordan, 2006). Taking a "reflexive pause" (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012) to consider the interview setting by using alternative metaphors and questions goes some way to preventing the researcher from losing analytic distance by simply presuming an authentic exchange has occurred. The pause allows the researcher to recognise that the interview setting is a complex social situation in its own right (Goffman, 1959; Myers & Newman, 2007), rather than a kind of meta-situation used by researchers to shed light on 'normal', 'everyday' social encounters.

In light of the idiosyncratic nature of the interview setting and the subjectivity of the researcher, it is worth considering what can be claimed about data gathered via interviews. In the philosophical context of this research, the data and subsequent analysis are not considered to constitute an omnipotent report. Instead, it is recognised that in the interview process my own subjectivity as interviewer becomes entangled in the interpretations of my participants. As such, we become co-producers of a set of "emerging practical theories" (Cunliffe, 2003). Given that this approach rejects the possibility of human objectivity, the next methodological issue concerns the claim this kind of study can make to the advancement of knowledge in a broader sense. In other words, given the inherent subjectivity of the study, can claim still be made to generalisability and validity?

3.1.2 - Generalisability and validity in qualitative research

Silverman (2008) advises that although "everybody knows that qualitative research can work fruitfully with very small bodies of data that have not been randomly assembled . . . [the researcher must] explain how [she] can still generalise from [the] data" (2008: 377). Generalisability has been traditionally understood to mean the ability to apply research conducted among a sample group to the broader population (Keat and Urry, 1982). The concept is often invoked as a legitimising discourse for social research, with the implication

being that research that is more generalizable is of more significance to collective knowledge formation. Achieving statistical generalisability is problematic for interpretive researchers, whose data often include personal observations and measurements that "would not necessarily be replicated by another independent researcher" (Babbie, 1995). Qualitative research is also generally conducted among smaller numbers of participants, raising questions as to whether the findings are representative of the larger population. The fundamental methodological issue though, is whether the search for a unifying truth or reality is appropriate to an interpretive, qualitative study.

Despite the fundamental differences between qualitative and quantitative traditions, some qualitative researchers have sought to increase confidence in their work by adding quantitative criterion (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1994, Silverman, 2001), such as more rigorous sampling procedures, controls and tools of analysis. Indeed, some writers have advised researchers aspiring to publish their work in major north American journals that their papers "should not diverge from a conventional, [nomothetic] design more than is absolutely called for" (Bengtsson et al. 1997: 488) Research conducted in this way is more reflective of a mixed methods approach, which can then legitimately mobilise the discourse of generalisability used to create authority in positivist research. Other researchers have criticised the pursuit of scientific generalisability in qualitative research. Howard Becker (1990) calls the positivist pursuit of generalisability "one of the great scams of our society: the notion that things called by the same name are the same in other respects"(Becker, 1990, 238).

Becker (1990) and Prus (1994) as well as others (e.g. Sandberg, 2005) assert that it is epistemologically incoherent to apply quantitative principles to a qualitative study. Instead, they propose an alternative, qualitative model of generalisability. Their model abandons any claims to generalisability among population, and instead focuses on the ways in which qualitative research can be useful in generalising about social processes. For example, instead of studying a sample of social media managers, the focus would be on the social processes that go on in their work.

One of the aims of this approach is to enable the researcher to observe social processes as they play out in diverse settings. Prus describes them as 'generic social processes' (Prus, 1994: 394) in the sense that they transcend the specific setting in which they are observed. This does not imply that context becomes less important, only that the processes "occur in multiple contexts wherein social actors face similar or analogous problems" (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 421). This was particularly useful to this study because the interviews were conducted among members of two support agencies who represented a wide variety of industries, as described in more detail in section 3.2.

In addition to generalisability, validity is considered an important measure of the quality of a research project. Like generalisability this concept is not straightforward in light of the differing philosophical stances adopting the term. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) elaborate on the ways that researchers from the different traditions understand the concept of validity differently. For example, whilst those with a positivist perspective might use the concept of validity to ask "do the measures correspond closely to reality?" an interpretive scholar might instead consider validity as addressing the question "have sufficient number of perspectives been included?" (Easterby-Smith, 2002: 53). This is because from an interpretive perspective facts are relative to the individuals experiencing them, and so a sufficient representation of a variety of viewpoints is preferable. The approach taken in this thesis is detailed in the research setting section (3.2). In addition, Curran and Blackburn (2001) assert that in order to ensure the validity of a project it is important to distinguish between the viewpoints of the participant and the researcher's interpretation of the data collected. To this end, Chapters 4 and 5 focus principally on the narratives given by the participants, while the discussion in chapter 6 provides my interpretation and analysis of the data collected.

Haynes (2012) suggests that in addition to a consideration of the ontological and methodological issues related to the research, the qualitative researcher

must also give further consideration to their own cultural, emotional and subjective nature and its influence on the project.

3.1.3 - Personal Reflexivity

Cunliffe's (2003) description of 'radical reflexivity' advocates that researchers examine how they themselves "make truth claims and construct meaning" (2003: 985). Recognition of my own pre-understandings as opposed to understanding developed during the course of the research reveals more clearly the process whereby prior knowledge and new knowledge interact (Gummeson, 1991; Haynes, 2012). Thus in the remainder of this section I reflect on the potential impact of my own background on the interview process and study as a whole.

I brought a measure of previous personal experience in to the project, which contributed to the initial motivation for the research. I had previously worked in an organisation advising small businesses on growth related issues, and during my time there social media had become a growing concern for the small business managers we advised. In addition, the small organisation I was a part of was trying to understand how to use social media with limited time and resources. As the person responsible for social media in my own organisation, I empathised with the frustration expressed by the managers I interacted with, who felt social media was necessary yet found it confusing and difficult to justify. The practitioner sources from which I developed my own understanding of social media at the time conceivably influenced my views and treatment of social media as a phenomenon i.e. that it was a communications tool; that it was suitable for businesses. My own level of knowledge influenced the way I expressed the research aim at the beginning of the project as well as the way I treated social media in the development of the pilot interview guide. The project developed iteratively as the respondents shared their own complex accounts.

During the course of the research I was in some senses both subject and object – a PhD student exploring social media use in small organisations and

a former representative of a small organisation for whom social media had proven complex and problematic. It was impossible for me not to compare my own lived experiences with the accounts given in interview. Their experiences simultaneously contributed to the academic theories being developed as interviews took place and my own sense-making of my previous work experiences. The influence my own experience had upon the development of the research question and pilot interviews was balanced by the use of semi-structured interviews in which participants were allowed to guide the direction of the conversation to include their own salient issues.

My prior professional connections also influenced the participants' ideas about me. Many of them were aware of, or had been involved with, my previous employer, which gave me a different status than 'PhD student'. I used this status as a way of gaining access. Many saw me as a professional advisor, a conception that was strengthened by my offer of consultancy advice in return for an interview. For this reason, there were many times during the interview when participants would ask me for advice and questions, which I would promise to try and address once the interview was finished. I wanted to help them and understood that they felt it was important that they got something in return for their time. I felt somewhat guilty that I couldn't offer the more comprehensive assistance that I might have done in my previous position, but time and means prevented it.

I noted that the answers they gave during the interviews were, at first, coloured by their perception of me. This was more pronounced when the participants were technically more advanced. They did not want to appear uninformed or naive and would gloss over problems or give what sounded like rehearsed answers that demonstrated their knowledge. They appeared to be conscious of impression management at points during the interview (Goffman, 1959; Myers and Newman, 2006) and did not want me to get a bad impression of their organisation. Usually, as the interview progressed and they relaxed, they would drop their guard to share their uncertainties or mistakes, but this did not seem easy for them to do. Often, as my recorder was turned off, they would share a story or ask a question that seemed

relevant or important, and I would ask if they would mind me putting the recorder back on, as their social media anecdotes were all relevant. My hope was that they see me as a collaborator, searching for answers on their behalf, so that they might feel more confident in sharing their genuine experiences and thoughts with me. In order to contextualise the narratives given by the participants, I will now describe the study context and the organisations that took part in the study.

3.2 – Research Setting

The extant literature on social media use in organisations predominantly focuses on large organisational settings where the technology is used to facilitate communication and collaboration between dispersed team members (Leonardi, 2014; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). However, for the purposes of this study, small firms offered a more compelling setting for the study of social processes. The first advantage was that everyone involved in social media use could easily be accounted for and contacted, whereas in a large organisation accessing everyone involved in these activities could be difficult. In addition, other characteristics commonly associated with small firms promised a varied and interesting data set. For example, as small organisations typically have fewer resources to draw on than their large contemporaries, the potential for exploring diverse and creative behaviour was higher.

Despite the advantages of collecting data in small firms, there were also some challenges, particularly in identifying and selecting a coherent and appropriate sample. Small firms are a heterogeneous group, and classifying them by size alone was not sufficient. The objective was to access a group of small firms that were using social media and experiencing varying degrees of success. However, this factor alone did not comprise a meaningful sample. Reflecting again on the case made for focusing on social processes (Prus, 1990; Becker, 1994), it seemed appropriate that the firms should be part of a comparable social setting, where they would have access to similar opportunities and resources. Two UK based, Government affiliated support agencies fulfilled

these requirements, in that they provided support to an extensive membership, which had included social media seminars. The membership of these support agencies represented a purposive sample (Padgett, 1998). Purposive sampling enables the researcher to identify an appropriate sample to precisely address the research questions (Easterby-Smith *et al*., 2002). I assumed that these small organisations would be experiencing varying degrees of success on social media, and would have been exposed to similar opportunities and resources by virtue of their membership.

The first organisation, *emda*, was one of nine regional development agencies set up in England between 1998 and 2000, with the aim of promoting regional economic development, levels of employment and the promotion of business efficiency, investment and competitiveness. The agency held a database of businesses and organisations operating in the region to whom they provided a number of support programmes. The agency operated within the Midlands region but formed part of a national Government initiative. The second agency, *the Federation of Small Businesses,* was formed in 1974, as a non-partisan campaign pressure group representing the interests of small businesses and the self-employed. The agency has over 200,000 members and 194 branches. They offer support, training and a variety of professional services to members at a local branch level.

I contacted the local offices of both agencies, offering consultancy services in exchange for participation in the study. A formal notice detailing the offer was circulated by email among local members of both organisations. I was concerned with gathering a theoretical sample of those most likely to be displaying the behaviours being studied. I asked for participants who operated in firms employing between two and ten people and stipulated that they must already be using social media. I had sixty-nine responses by email, which I called to verify their eligibility to take part. Fourty-eight of the firms were eligible and eventually fifteen participated in the pilot interviews and thirty-one different firms took part in the formal interviews.

The firms that took part in the interviews were representative of the variety of industries that made up the wider membership of the support agencies. The firms operated in one of two circumstances; from offices rented on an industrial estate or science park; or as virtual teams operating out of their homes. While some of the interviews were conducted in 'meeting rooms' that made up part of the office complex, others were of necessity conducted in cafés, lunchrooms or restaurants. Two of the interviews were conducted at an respondent's home. These circumstances were a feature of everyday life for the individuals involved. The circumstances of each interview were helpful in creating a picture of the real conditions under which social media posts might be made.

The respondents were all using the four most popular, free, publically available social media platforms; Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. In a broader sense, the respondents used social media to communicate about their firms with external groups.

3.2.1 - Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was through semi-structured interview. The interview content was developed via an initial sensitising literature scan, although at this early stage, there was no *a priori* theory. The suitability of the interview questions was tested during a pilot phase in order to establish the relevance of the questions to the research setting. Fifteen firms took part in these initial interviews (See table 1). The interviews were recorded, with permission, and I made a detailed summary of each interview in order to identify recurring themes.

The main themes that arose out of the pilot interviews are summarised in table 2. At this point the interview guide was revised to reflect the salient themes from the pilot phase.

Pilot Organisation Identifier	Industry Sector	Number of Employees	Number of respondents	Platforms Used
Pilot 1	Corporate communications	5	1	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn
Pilot 2	High Tech start up (Mobile Events App)	10	1	Twitter, Facebook
Pilot 3	Telecomms	7	1	Twitter, LinkedIn
Pilot 4	Cloud Computing	5	1	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
Pilot 5	Translation Services	10	1	LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook, Twitter,
Pilot 6	Communications Agency	6	1	Twitter, Blog
Pilot 7	Online Dating Website	10	1	Facebook, Twitter, Google+
Pilot 8	Childrens' Nurseries	10+	1	Facebook
Pilot 9	Stationary supplies	10+	1	Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn
Pilot 10	Computer programming	10	1	Blog, LinkedIn
Pilot 11	e-commerce website	2	1	Facebook, Twitter
Pilot 12	Art sales	4	1	Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube
Pilot 13	CCTV and security	9	1	Blog and LinkedIn
Pilot 14	Lingerie design and manufacturers	7	1	Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube
Pilot 15	Estates management	10+	1	Blog, LinkedIn

Table 1: *Organisations involved in the pilot interviews*

The revised interview guide is available in full in the appendix (Appendix A). The revised questions focused on exploring any previous experiences respondents had with social media, their impressions of social media use and its impact on their firm, what their motivations were for using social media and their experiences of overcoming difficulties, if there were any, with using social media.

Theme	Description
Informal learning	Almost all of the interviewees were self-taught or had been taught informally by a friend how to use social media platforms.
Blurred boundaries	The issue of boundaries between work life and personal life manifested itself in a few ways. Many interviewees treated social media differently to other forms of communication, and frequently checked their social media business accounts out of working hours, whereas they wouldn't take phone calls for example. There were also concerns raised about not letting personal social media accounts and business social media accounts mix.
Uncertainty	The respondents expressed uncertainty about why they should be using social media, although most of them said they intended to devote more resource to developing their social media use.

Table 2: *Significant themes that arose out of the Pilot interviews*

The formal interviews were conducted among thirty-one small firms summarised in table 3. The research sample size was established during the interview process when it was determined that theoretical saturation had been reached (Bryman, 2008). The main group of participants were the owner-managers, but other staff involved in social media implementation were also interviewed where available. Using an individual level of analysis to account for a phenomenon that has an organisational level impact is consistent with the view that organisational realities are socially constructed. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted over an eight week

period. When multiple participants took part, they were interviewed on the same day. The conversations were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the respondents. In addition, when respondents made reference to specific instances in their social media use, I made an attempt to access the incident on their social media account, in order to verify the accuracy of the account given. In some cases negative incidents had been deleted, particularly those that had occurred in the more distant past. Those that were more recent however were collected as 'screen-shots' (pictures of the images and text that appeared on the screen) and saved for analysis.

Organisational Identifier	Industry Sector	Number of Employees	Number of Interviewees	Gender of interviewees
Org 1	Charity	10	1	F
Org 2	Charity	10	1	M
Org 3	Fashion	3	2	1F, 1M
Org 4	Fashion	2	1	F
Org 5	Food and Drink	10	1	M
Org 6	Food and Drink	3	1	F
Org 7	Commodity e-Retailer	3	1	M
Org 8	Design Consultancy	3	2	2M
Org 9	Internet Security	10	1	M
Org 10	Media Production	9	1	M
Org 11	Public Relations	2	1	M
Org 12	Arts and Crafts	5	2	F
Org 13	Corporate Finance	3	1	M
Org 14	Charity (1)	6	3	3F
Org 15	Chemical Engineering	3	1	M
Org 16	Domestic Installations	3	1	M
Org 17	Electrical Engineering	4	2	1F, 1M
Org 18	Engineering	2	2	2M
Org 19	Engineering	3	1	M
Org 20	Engineering	8	1	M
Org 21	Film Production	5	2	1M, 1F
Org 22	Food and Drink	9	1	1M
Org 23	Food and Drink	5	2	2M
Org 24	Health and Beauty	10	1	M
Org 25	Health and Fitness	7	1	M
Org 26	Accountancy	9	2	2F
Org 27	Performing Arts	2	2	2M
Org 28	Property Management	7	1	M
Org 29	Research and Development	3	2	2M

| Org 30 | Telecomms | 10 | 1 | M |
| Org 31 | Telecomms | 8 | 2 | 1M, 1F |

Table 3: *Descriptive data about the 31 participating organisations*

3.2.2. - Ethical considerations of gathering data online

Although the trend for publically articulating various forms of communication on social media offers researchers access to new and intriguing data, it also raises new ethical questions (Vaast & Walsham, 2013). The boundary between public and private life have become more blurred in online settings. It can be difficult to distinguish whether some online spaces are considered private by participants even though they're publically available. Following the recommendations of Vaast and Walsham (2013) I endeavoured to ensure the anonymity of all the individuals and organisations involved in the online discussions I gathered. I was able to get the permission of the respondents to use the data from their social media accounts, although the data gathered was intended for consumption by an external audience.

The vast, sprawling nature of the data available on social media also requires that careful attention is given to the purpose of gathering data. Gathering conversations without knowing who is 'speaking' could lead to the creation of fantasy data (Vaast & Walsham, 2013). In order to avoid ambiguity, I limited the data collected to the profile information presented by each company on their social media account profiles and any incidents explicitly referred to during interviews, as described above.

3.3 – Data Analysis

3.3.1 – The coding process

The coding process began 'in the rough' during data collection as interviews were completed and transcribed. Each transcript was reviewed and summarised in order to keep track of patterns emerging across the interviews. During this process a broad set of early codes were developed. These were used to highlight passages that related to salient topics that had arisen during the literature review and any issues that seemed particularly important to the

participants. This included codes such as: learning; lack of time; lack of expertise; communication; business value and problem solving. By summarising the interviews it became apparent that the participants were predominantly referring to two overarching activities in relation to social media: their efforts to try and understand and make sense of social media and their practical efforts to use the platforms. Whilst the same method of coding and analysis was subsequently used for the entire data set, they codes and categories naturally fell under one of these two meta-themes, represented in tables four and five, respectively.

Building upon these summaries and early codes, a second round of coding was undertaken, in which each interview was carefully re-read and interpretive codes assigned to each sentence or semantic unit. These codes represented my interpretation of the meaning of each sentence informed by my accumulated understanding built up iteratively during the on-going literature review and interviews. This process was undertaken manually and generated a large number of interpretive codes not included in the initial broad code list. The set of codes was refined as different codes with the same meaning were combined (i.e. asking others, gauging performance and feedback were combined under the interpretive code SOCIAL FEEDBACK). The coding stage was considered complete once the code set could not be refined any further and a stable set of interpretive codes had been produced.

Once the entire data set was coded I conducted a traditional thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which I begun by manually mapping out the codes and relating them to each other conceptually. This technique enabled me to identify how different codes could be brought together to constitute an overarching theme. In order to gauge the suitability of each potential theme I considered its recurrence within discreet interviews and across the data set as a whole. I also considered the different emphasis and meaning that different participants gave the same theme (for example risk, which some participants treated very lightly and others described as a serious concern). This indicated that particular themes had the potential to highlight the heterogeneity of experiences across the sample. In order to refine the themes in to a set of

abstract categories, the data related to each code was reviewed for its fit with the emergent themes. As a result, some themes were disregarded as being less representative or less salient. The final themes are summarised as abstract categories in tables four and five.

Representative quotes	Interpretive codes	Abstract categories
I'm not sure how to transfer the success I see other businesses having to the things we're doing on our social media. (Org 12)	**UNCLEAR TRANSLATION**	**UNCERTAINTY**
I feel like I'm missing a trick. (Org 24)	**SELF-DOUBT**	
You have to get used to the new world of social media and you have to try and understand it. That has taken a while. (Org 30)	**UNFAMILIAR NORMS**	
I want to take a bob or two from it. How I do that, I do not know (Org 22)	**BUSINESS VALUE**	**OBJECTIVES**
I have noticed that some of my customers follow me, which is obviously a good thing. But not … all of them. That would make it seem like a useful thing. (Org 9)	**SOCIAL METRICS**	
It would be nice to be seen to have this lovely community of customers, so anybody looking from the outside would go "oh! There's some people on there that are like me" (Org 7)	**RELATIONAL BENEFITS**	
It's not high risk as long as you're not posting things that you shouldn't be. (Org 17)	**INAPPROPRIATE POSTS**	**RISKS**
The risk is that it's just a giant waste of time.(Org 10)	**WASTE OF TIME**	
I just block those people or kick them out so I feel like I have the ultimate control.(Org 22)	**CONTROLLING OTHERS**	**SOLUTIONS**
Nothings really gone wrong, but only because we've not got many followers yet, so we've just skirted around the edges, trying a few things out. (Org 16)	**STAYING SMALL**	

Table 4: Codes relating to the respondents' understanding of social media

Each abstract category label was selected to serve as a parent category for the more detailed children codes (Guest *et al.,* 2006) and was chosen to reflect the experiences of the participants as closely as possible. This is depicted in table four, which maps out the codes and abstract categories related to understanding social media and table five, which details how the participants described practically using social media. When describing how they developed their understanding of social media many of the respondents made reference to the difficulty they had with translating the advice and examples they accessed from their wider networks in to their own practices (UNCLEAR TRANSLATION). It was also common for them to express doubt in their own abilities to adequately comprehend and use social media (SELF-DOUBT). This was in part due to the many unfamiliar norms they observed and experienced when using social media (UNFAMILIAR NORMS). The abstract category UNCERTAINTY was chosen to reflect the epistemological uncertainty created by their on-going experiences. In other words, the label uncertainty was used to denote a psychological state that had an impact on their understanding and use of social media.

Their uncertainty meant that they found it difficult to clearly articulate their reason for using social media (as depicted by the second row of table four). They spoke about the potential for realising business related outcomes as a result of their social media use (BUSINESS BENEFITS). They also made reference to their efforts to gain new followers, likes and shares on social media (SOCIAL METRICS). Whilst these gave them some numerical indication of the efficacy of their social media posts, they also talked about their goal to build relationships that were more meaningful than "clicks" (RELATIONAL BENEFITS). Their ideas about what they wanted to achieve through their social media use were assigned the abstract category OBJECTIVES. The label was chosen to represent the interpretive codes as they all related to a broader intended outcome of social media activity.

In light of the sense of uncertainty that pervaded the interviews, the conversations also naturally turned to whether or not the participants perceived any risk inherent in social media use (depicted by the third row of table four). The majority identified two risks related to their businesses communicating via social media. The first was that their efforts would not produce any real results and would therefore prove to be a waste of time (WASTE OF TIME). This was a particularly notable concern for the participants who experienced vary busy days whilst running their small firms. The second risk they talked about was the risk that the posts made to their social media accounts would cause upset or offense and damage their reputations or relationships (INAPPROPRIATE POSTS). Some had already experienced this first hand, while others had been alerted to this potential risk by the experiences of a friend or a report in the media. These codes were assigned the abstract category RISKS again to denote an epistemological sense of risk rather than the ontological state of the social media space.

Interestingly, the participants felt that they were able to control these risks and therefore they could consider the risks minimal (as depicted in the fourth row of table four). The first strategy for achieving this was to control what people posted to the social media account (CONTROLLING OTHERS). This could entail blocking or deleting comments that were damaging, preventing staff members or others from making posts to the account, providing detailed staff instructions about what was appropriate to post and policing staff members' personal social media accounts. The second strategy was to embrace the small number of followers to a social media account as a way of practicing without being widely noticed (STAYING SMALL). In this way, any inappropriate posts would not be noticed by many people and could be discreetly removed. These codes were assigned the abstract category SOLUTIONS to reflect the attitude of the participants who felt confident that their strategies cancelled out any risk associated with social media. This enabled them to practice social media use without being stultified by risk aversion. Table five represents the codes relating to their social media practice.

Representative quotes	Interpretive codes	Abstract categories
	Communicating	
I feel frustrated about it because I feel that in a group where there are a load of like-minded people communicating together, we should be able to have a decent conversation. (Org 9)	• Speaking	
"I struggle to understand sometimes how you can just listen." (Org 8)	• Listening	
"You're asking yourself all the time, who am I aiming this at? It's difficult to understand that on social media." (Org 19)	• Seeing	
"It seems to me that it's very difficult to have a genuine interaction on there." (Org 29)	• Relationships	**CHALLENGES**
	Scarce resources	
"It's just a matter of time and energy really when there's only a small number of people . . . social media is something that we want to do, but it's not urgent." (Org 27)	• Time	
"It would be great if we could just quickly improve our social media, but we don't have the wherewithal to do it because we just don't have that injection of money." (Org 1)	• Money	
	• Staff	
"I wanted to hand it on to one of the staff really, but they all have other demands to deal with" (Org 22)		
"Social media is an online game" (Org 30)	**Sense-making tools** • Metaphors	
"It's not that serious, you get on there and play with your friends" (Org 26)	• Ideas and beliefs	
"That's where my knowledge from my side-business comes in. I know how to do search engine optimisation so that people will find your social media account more easily" (Org 7)	**Practical tools** • Knowledge and skills	**ADDRESSING CHALLENGES**
"I'd spent a lot of time with these skaters and extreme sports fans, so I knew how to talk to them and what would appeal" (Org 5)	• Styles and habits	
"We've got connections with larger partners who use Twitter and Facebook, so I've always watched them to see how they use it." (Org 2)	**Socio-structural tools** • Observation and imitation	
"When we first set up we were given funding by a larger organisation, who provide us with a lot of back office support [with social media]." (Org 1)	• Large organisations	

"There have been conversations with friends from the business network about social media." (Org 15)	• Social feedback

Table 5: Codes relating to the accounts of practical engagement with social media

A particular feature of their accounts was the difficulty they had in interacting with their followers (COMMUNICATING). As they described their difficulties they often related these back to their typical face-to-face modes of communication. They were frustrated that making a post on social media did not enable them to strike up a conversation in the same way that verbalising speech might (SPEAKING). Similarly, their ability to 'listen' to the comments made by others was inhibited by the great volume of posts constantly being added to social media sites (LISTENING). When they couldn't see whom they were communicating with they found it difficult to know how to interact (SEEING). These features of social media use made it particularly challenging to initiate interactions with new connections as they were out of each other's physical presence and couldn't easily gauge how to interact appropriately (RELATIONSHIPS). In addition to these social challenges, they experienced pronounced practical challenges with implementing social media related to the limited resources at their disposal (SCARCE RESOURCES). They were time stretched and found it difficult to allocate time to a task that they were not sure would reap results (TIME). Many of them felt that if they could allocate some money to buy in expertise then they would be able to improve their performance, however, they did not have excess financial resources to devote to social media (MONEY). Their own staff either had limited capabilities or were similarly time stretched and therefore could offer little help with social media use (STAFF). These codes were assigned the abstract category of CHALLENGES, because each contributed to the difficulty the participants experienced in using social media platforms.

In response to these challenges, the participants mobilised a variety of different resources to enable them to keep trying and keep using social media. They used a number of cognitive sense-making tools to understand social media and to describe their understanding to others (SENSE-MAKING

TOOLS). These included METAPHORS that likened their abstract ideas about social media to something more concrete and recognisable and IDEAS AND BELIEFS drawn predominantly from conversations with other people. In addition to discursive tools to talk about social media they had to employ practical KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS developed in other professional settings in order to use social media. They also drew on less formal STYLES AND HABITS developed during their personal lives. Outside of their firms there were also a number of resources that could assist them in using social media. They were particularly keen to imitate the social media use of other firms (OBSERVATION AND IMITATION), particularly those they deemed to be successful or direct competitors. They also tried to draw on their associations with larger organisations to enhance their capabilities and reputations on social media (LARGE ORGANISATIONS). Finally, they turned to their social connections in order to get feedback on how their social media efforts were being received (SOCIAL FEEDBACK). These codes were assigned the abstract category of ADDRESSING CHALLENGES as they were used in various combinations to respond to the challenges of social media use.

As the data was organised into the narrative analysis presented in chapters four and five it became apparent that the participants had varying levels of competency with the tools they were attempting to use. Therefore a final round of recoding was undertaken, as presented in Appendix B (p. 215). The aim of this round of coding was to establish the participants' level of competence with each tool they were describing. In order to do this, consideration was given to their own references to using the same tool on a previous occasion, whether they mentioned using the tool in a professional capacity, how recently they had been introduced to the tool and other inferences captured in the recorded interviews (for example, did they seem comfortable or uncomfortable with the tool). During this process, each tool identified was assigned one of three additional codes. Established tools (EST) were those that the participants were familiar with, having used them in a professional capacity, or over an extended period of time. Moderately familiar tools (MOD) were those that the participants had only used once or twice, indicating that they were not necessarily well-practiced with this particular

skill, habit or style. New tools (NEW) were those only recently introduced to the participants, which were being tried for the first time. These labels added additional nuance to the picture of the participants social media practice and were used in the development of the model in the discussion section (p. 174).

3.3.2 – Theoretical frameworks

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical explanation of social interactions provided a framework for assessing the kinds of interactions taking place between their respondents and their social media followers. They found that social media interactions reflected some of the familiar aspects of social encounters, described at length by Goffman (1959), yet there were also significant differences. Goffman touches lightly on the idea that technologically mediated interactions are attenuated and 'situation-like'. By comparing the experiences of the respondents to Goffman's (1959) framework, the data added some insight in to what a 'situation-like' encounter might involve. These ideas are developed through a narrative analysis in chapter 4 and the theoretical discussion in chapter 6. Their situation-like encounters were complicated by complex social and material factors that made it more difficult for them to interpret social situations on social media. In this sense the idea of situation-like encounters is also related to the concept of socio-materiality (Orlikowski, 2010; Leonardi, 2013; Mutch, 2013) a concept which is also included in the discussion in chapter 6.

In addition, Ann Swidler's (1986) cultural toolkit paradigm highlighted the way the respondents responded to the practical problems of using social media. This approach suggests that individuals use the skills, habits and styles supplied by culture in an agentic way to solve problems. Swidler's (1986) vocabulary showed the respondents making use of embodied and structural cultural tools in different combinations as they dealt with the ongoing challenges of social media use. Using Swidler's (1986) framework, social media can be understood as representing a drastically different, new way of communicating that jolted the cultural toolkits of the respondents into action.

3.4 – Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explain the methodology guiding the design of this thesis, including the articulation of the research aim, the selection of a research setting and the collection and coding of empirical data. In the spirit of the interpretivist philosophy underpinning this work, it is acknowledged that the findings chapters that follow represent my understanding of the respondents' accounts and that their own accounts were constructed for the particular purpose of the interview setting. However, the approach taken during this project assumes that only their first-hand accounts of social media use enable an understanding of how they interpret and use social media. Thus the following chapters comprise a narrative analysis, in which their own words add detail to the summaries given in the tables above. Taken together, their accounts speak to the high levels of uncertainty they experienced in relation to social media use and the experimental approach they took to overcoming challenges in order to incorporate this new way of communicating in to their organisational repertoires.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of social media

4.0 – Introduction

This chapter explores the respondents' perceptions about social media, its potential uses and the associated risks and rewards. Social media technologies presented new challenges for all of the respondents. Descriptions of an underlying sense of uncertainty permeated their accounts. The majority of the group had committed to taking part in the study in order to access a "social media expert" who could help to resolve their uncertainty. The first section of this chapter, **Uncertainty about social media**, considers the objects of their uncertainty, which included uncertainty about social media in general; what their objectives for social media use should be; what social media success would look like; whether their customers and clients could be reached through social media and how to assess the results of their efforts.

The second section of this chapter, **Playing with objectives for social media use**, draws attention to the way that the respondents played with a variety of different potential objectives for using social media as a way of making sense of the mixed results of their efforts. The three main objectives they mentioned were the potential for improving their financial performance using social media, the opportunity to enhance their reputations by accruing likes and shares and the possibility that they might improve their relationships with their followers using social media. Due to their deep seated uncertainty, none of the respondents stuck exclusively to one objective. Instead, they dipped in and out and sometimes used ideas interchangeably.

Although their accounts were somewhat characterised by uncertainty, they did not appear to equate uncertainty with risk. The third section, **Understanding the risks of social media** focuses on how the respondents made sense of the threats they associated with social media use. Although they could identify things that might go wrong they did not consider them to be serious, as they felt able to protect themselves. Faced with a high level of uncertainty and a

perception that the risks were minimal, the respondents played around with alternative ways of using social media. Their willingness to experiment was underpinned by uncertainty and low risk, as their accounts in this chapter will now show.

4.1 – Uncertainty about social media

The respondents' uncertainty about different aspects of social media use was a major feature of their accounts. Interestingly, technical proficiency did not correspond with increased levels of certainty. Even those who advised clients about social media use expressed uncertainty related to their own experiences. Many of the respondents found the basic requirements challenging, reporting that it was difficult to know which platforms to join. The owner of an online clothing retailer recalled the difficulty she had experienced in deciding which platform was best suited to her organisation.

> *I think to start with you were thinking "Which one is going to come out top?" You know, "Should we be on Facebook? Is Twitter better? What about Linkedin?" and there were several others at that point. So you worry initially you're going to back the wrong donkey. (Org 3)*

She had little personal experience on social media and faced the prospect of spending a lot of time learning how to use the platforms. Although the platforms she was interested in were free to join, she didn't want to waste valuable time on setting up an account that would not be popular with her customers. Although she turned to her social networks for advice she was unable to eliminate her uncertainty. Likewise, many of the respondents were uncertain about which platform to invest effort in to. The manager of a research and development lab observed that popular opinion could change very quickly and today's favourite could quickly fall out of favour.

> *You never know how things are going. But everybody used to be on Friends Reunited and MSN; a lot of it is fad, what's the latest fad? You have to take note of it, but something else will come along. They are so*

new and things that have been new in the past haven't lasted so it's difficult to know which is the one that will last? Which one will be worth putting the effort into? (Org 19)

His uncertainty related to what he recognised as the faddish nature of people's interest in new technologies like social media. He felt reticent to put effort in to building a social media presence on a platform that had the potential to quickly become out-dated. Yet he felt unsure about his own ability to correctly judge whether social media was a temporary fad or something to invest in.

He was not the only one who doubted his own judgement in relation to social media. Although all of the respondents had created and used their social media account to some extent, many still expressed doubts about what social media use in their organisation could achieve. One respondent who was the owner-manager of an engineering firm had previously introduced new communications technologies to his global team, yet he still struggled to understand the benefits of social media use;

I'm not sure I can see how useful the platforms are. I have no idea what it can do for us; I can imagine to some extent what it might do. I don't feel I know enough about it. (Org 20)

He explained that the main difference between social media and the other technology he had adopted was that he was used to working with clear user guidelines and a support helpline. Conversely, he felt that there were no formal resources that would enable him to figure out how to use social media and thus he was left to some extent to rely on his own imagination and the imaginations of his colleagues. This was the case for the majority of the respondents who were using social media but still expressed great uncertainty about why they were using it and what they should use it for.

4.1.1 – Following the lead of others

Many of the respondents accounted for their decision to join social media by making reference to the many others who were joining social media. Many commented that if it was being used by big corporations and their competitors, then it must be good for something. The owner-manager of an arts and crafts company had previously worked for a business that had used social media to establish a large number of active followers and increase their sales. She also followed a number of her competitors and had noticed that their social media accounts were very active. She wanted to achieve the same kind of success but was not sure how to replicate it in her own business.

> *I'm not sure how to transfer the success I see other businesses having to the things we're doing on our social media. (Org 12)*

She also related her uncertainty to a lack of information about how she could duplicate the success of others. She particularly admired organisations that interacted directly with individual followers via social media. She could see these types of interactions occurring on other accounts but could not understand how organisations made this happen. In the absence of clear guidelines she relied upon her own ideas and suggestions gleaned from her social network.

Similarly, the founder-owners of a design agency observed social media accounts of other businesses on social media, but found it difficult to understand how to use social media in a way that was appropriate for their business.

> *What can we use it to do? Other businesses put offers out there to large followings of people. The kind of offer that we have may not be appropriate for social media. So what do we use it for, that's the point? What's left for us? (Org 8)*

They said they had imagined themselves imitating the types of posts made by other businesses and had concluded that the style used by others was not suitable for them. Although they struggled with their own social media account they worked in an industry where they were expected to advise clients on social media use. They worked with partners to fulfil these obligations as the need arose and admitted that despite having a social media presence, their own understanding of the platforms was limited.

> *We've only scratched the surface of understanding it and we wouldn't claim to be social media geeks in any shape or form. Because of our industry, we're clinging on. (Org 8)*

Many of the respondents felt that their own levels of understanding limited their social media use. They sensed that social media had the potential to add some kind of value, although they struggled to understand exactly what that might mean for their firms.

4.1.2 – Doubting their own capabilities

It appeared to be difficult for the respondents to dismiss social media despite the uncertainty they felt. Although many expressed doubts about the suitability of the platforms for their firms, they were also apprehensive about how well they had interpreted and understood social media. One manager who ran a health and beauty business hoped to establish a social media account that would attract a lot of followers. He had failed to achieve this and had followed many other businesses to see if they were managing to get followers for their accounts.

> *I've got a friend who runs a business and he's got thousands of likes for his social media page. How does he do that? I mean that shows me it can be done. So how do I do that? I feel like I'm missing a trick. (Org 24)*

He felt that he had not yet achieved his goals because of his own lack of understanding. Like many of the other respondents he was able to see the interactions taking place on other accounts, but had no idea about how they were achieving what he considered to be 'success'.

Most of the respondents expressed doubt about their own capabilities and uncertainty about how to improve. For example, the manager of a corporate finance company who was trying to enhance the image of his organisation on social media was uncertain about whether he could attribute any new business to his social media use. Reflecting on his experiences led him to scrutinise his own ability rather than questioning the suitability of social media for his firm.

Could we do it more? Could we do it differently? I'm limited in what I know, so given our limited knowledge I think we do alright. (Org 13)

He felt more satisfied than some of the other respondents about his level of knowledge concluding that although his understanding was limited, he knew "enough". Knowing enough enabled him to participate on social media, whilst uncertainty prevented him from abandoning the platforms despite his difficulty in measuring clear results.

Many of the respondents expressed the view that their own aptitude was limiting their success on social media rather criticising the platforms. This meant that the respondents could not definitely rule social media out. Thus all of the respondents claimed that they intended to continue and in some cases increase the resources they were devoting to social media use, even in the absence of clear objectives and benefits. They tried to explain this contradictory behaviour in different ways. Many made sense of this paradox by making reference to others in a similar situation. One founder-manager of an online clothing retailer was very optimistic about the opportunities presented by social media. She had realised that a large proportion of her customers were using social media and that it could enable her to communicate with those people and potentially improve her sales.

Nevertheless, she was unfamiliar with the platforms and uncertain how to begin using them;

> *I think this is what's happened to a lot of people. A lot of people are scratching their heads, "Oh, we know we've got to do this, but we're not sure where to begin". (Org 3)*

She felt more comfortable with her uncertainty because she perceived that many other firms were in the same position. If others were continuing to use social media despite their limited understanding, she felt she should too. The respondents were reluctant to abandon their social media use when so many other firms continued to maintain a social media presence. Thus even in the face of complex uncertainty many suggested that social media was an inevitable part of contemporary life. The owner-manager of a telecoms company who had employed a social media manager reflected that;

> *The hive mind is that you should have a social media account (Org 31)*

The imagery of the hive mind typified the behaviour of many of the respondents who collectively followed a pattern of behaviour without being able to clearly identify a leader. Many said that there was a general acceptance that it was important to have a social media account nowadays, even if they didn't understand why. In addition to the socially informed sense that social media was the "done thing" (Org 30), the respondents also talked about their own instincts in relation to social media. The owner-manager of a property company relied on instinct to offset the uncertainty that he felt.

> *I get the gut feeling it can help me with the goals for my business but I don't know where that comes from because I've never seen the evidence to back that gut feeling up. (Org 28)*

This manager spoke about the extreme difficulty he had with making time to learn how to use social media "properly". The idea that his own intuition could be a sufficient guide for his actions seemed to relieve him from spending time

searching for quantifiable evidence of social media's efficacy. However it did not resolve his uncertainty, which created both frustration and an intention to persist in social media use so that he didn't "miss out on something". Similar tension existed in many of the respondents' accounts; they referenced "engaging [their] instincts" (Org 15) or "following a hunch" (Org 9) particularly where concrete understanding and evidence could not be gathered. The respondents drew upon the idea that their intuitions could somehow guide their decisions in the face of considerable uncertainty about social media.

4.1.3 – The new world of social media

In addition to hunches, the group made use of a variety of heuristic devices in order to discern how they should respond to social media. For example, they played with a number of metaphors as a way of describing their understanding of what social media was. The owner manager of a health and fitness organisation described social media as "a machine that constantly needs fixing" (Org 25) while the owner of a public relations firm described social media as a "form of verbal diarrhoea" (Org 11). One telecoms manager who was managing his social media activities on top of his other everyday tasks drew on a metaphor that seemed to capture the complications the respondents were experiencing as they tried to make sense of social media;

> *You have to get used to the new world of social media and you have to try and understand it. That has taken a while. (Org 30)*

By comparing social media to a new world, this manager captured the complexity of the task of learning to use social media that many of the managers faced. It involved having a presence in a new type of environment and opening an account was the easy part. He said that he sensed there were new social norms and customs with which he was not familiar. By using the new world metaphor he could begin to make sense of his confusing experience which had previously seemed "too big to get [his] head around".

Learning what could be done on social media and how one should interact were on-going challenges for all of the respondents.

The new world metaphor resonated with the experiences of the other respondents who sensed that social media was connected to their everyday experiences but also separate. In the social media "world" there were enough recognisable social features to make communication possible, but at the same time familiar social structures and norms were altered. Many found that social media use altered their normal working patterns and social conventions. The founder of an engineering organisation expressed his uncertainty about how to continue with his *modus operandi* when using social media:

> *We don't really know how to get on with our normal way of doing things (Org 18)*

He described that he would normally persuade people to do business with him in person where he was able to carefully read their responses and adjust his delivery accordingly. In contrast, on social media he felt that he couldn't build the same types of relationships because the volume of on-going conversations meant that he was easily ignored. Many respondents sensed that in order to be noticed on social media they would need to change their established ways of working, although they were not sure exactly what the change would entail. For those who professed to have limited capacity to understand social media some of these changes were particularly challenging.

Some of the respondents struggled to learn entirely new ways of doing things. One manager of a food and drink organisation experienced pronounced difficulty understanding how to interact with such a large network, where he perceived there to be new customs and practices. He lamented;

> *I can do bits of it. I can't go in to its inner sanctum and do what the whizz kids do (Org 22)*

This manager described that his way of coping with this new world was to learn enough to "get by". He felt he could not use social media to its full potential as he didn't fully understand what that was. However he could do enough to have a presence on social media and to give "the appearance of life and activity". This was important, he explained, because if you did not participate on social media, then even in the real world you risked being seen as "obsolete".

Many of the respondents expressed the sense that although their physical organisations did not rely on social media an intangible link between the real world and the world of social media could not be ignored. For example, the manager of a lettings agency had been told at a business networking seminar that;

> *If you don't have a social media account you don't have a business. I mean I don't think that literally means your business would cease to exist of course, but people might wonder why not and who the hell you are. (Org28)*

This manager's comment was reflective of the idea that social media represented a "new world". He felt that existence in this new world relied on some sort of active participation, yet he was not clear what form this participation should take. Many of the respondents expressed a concern that they would be excluded on some level if they did not participate. They used language like "being left out of the conversation" (Org 11), "the world would go on without me" (Org 21) and "I would feel like I'm missing out on something" (Org 26). These sentiments suggest that a perceived social pressure in part motivated the respondents to join social media, in many cases before they made sense of why they were doing so.

The sense of uncertainty did not disappear once the respondents had established a social media account. The manager of a charity felt that it was

difficult to establish objectives once their social media account had 'gone live'. He regretted that clearer objectives had not been identified earlier;

> *The objectives weren't really clear in the beginning, I wish they had. I don't think they're clear now. (Org 2)*

This manager had used social media personally for many years and had observed many other charities in his sector establishing social media accounts. He said he had not identified a clear set of objectives, but had instead opted to "suck it and see". Many of the respondents admitted that they were using social media without establishing a clear set of objectives. The owner of an electrical engineering firm had grown cynical about the utility of social media for his organisation. He had also followed the direction of others in his industry by setting up a social media account. He described that he was adding pictures and posts to his account without really knowing why;

> *What it does for the business God knows, but it's got a load of pictures. (Org 17)*

Interestingly, he continued to make posts despite a lack of response from his followers and without knowing what else he could expect from social media. Likewise, the manager of another charity had started a social media account with the help of her volunteers, hoping that they could establish some objectives. She described being mildly disappointed with their social media performance so far, although she hadn't really known what to expect in the first place.

> *I don't know how we measure success really; I don't know exactly how we should be monitoring it. What should we be expecting? (Org 14)*

Even as she accumulated experience with social media use her uncertainty remained. In this dynamic context, where the platforms could quickly come in and out of fashion and where it was difficult to make use of some of their normal ways of conducting business, the respondents played with three main

objectives for social media use. The respondents hoped that establishing clear objectives for their social media use would help them to overcome their uncertainty. Their ideas are described below separately for the sake of clarity, but in conversation the respondents would use draw on these objectives interchangeably to justify their continued involvement with social media in the face of great uncertainty. They did not necessarily separate the three objectives or experience them chronologically.

4.2 - Playing with objectives for social media use

The respondents' underlying sense of uncertainty was reflected in their efforts to explain why they used social media. They were vague about their objectives and played with three main ideas, which they alternated between during their interviews. These were the idea that social media use could generate business value, the idea that likes and shares had some intrinsic value worth pursuing and the idea that social media could enhance their relationships with their followers.

4.2.1 - Generating business value

A common starting point was to consider whether social media could be used to enhance a firm's performance in relation to its core objectives. The respondents used a variety of different language to describe the kind of outcomes they hoped for (i.e. commercial, charitable, educational etc). For example, the owner manager of an e-commerce site used the vocabulary of business to describe how he hoped social media would augment his usual activities;

> *It would be great to find new customers. Ultimately, I'm a business; I need sales. (Org 7)*

Like this manager, many of the respondents associated social media activity with the need to drive profitability. The owners of an underperforming

confectionary brand hoped that social media would help to boost their usual level of trade at key strategic times;

> *The main thing is driving more business - which sounds like a very obvious thing. We want to use it for direct marketing and targeting companies and outside retailers, so when Christmas comes - our bumper time of year - we've got more than just relying on the shop and what comes through the door. (Org 23)*

However, most of the group did not understand how to achieve a financial impact using social media. The manager of a hospitality business identified that he wanted to use social media to attract more visitors to his establishments. He felt certain that getting customers "in" would ultimately lead to increased profitability, but he was uncertain about how to use social media to accomplish his aim;

> *I want to take a bob or two from it. How I do that, I do not know (Org 22)*

Most of the respondents struggled to know how to use social media to successfully generate a new lead, a sale or any other indication that there was an improvement in their financial performance. The manager of a telecoms company had delegated social media responsibilities to a number of his staff and was frustrated that he could not yet see the fruits of their combined labours;

> *The whole point of it is to get business out of it and we've failed miserably so far. If we don't see anything out of it in the next three months I think we'll sack it off. (Org 31)*

Likewise, the manager of a corporate finance company claimed that it was essential to see improvement if he was going to continue to put time and effort in to social media activities.

> *I'm only on it for more business. If I didn't get more business out of it, I'd sack it off. (Org 13)*

Interestingly, although he had no concrete evidence that social media was helping him to achieve his objectives this manager continued to use his account, to the frustration of his partner;

> *My partner will always say to me - "have you ever directly got a piece of business off Twitter that's earned us money?" and I'll say "no" and he'll say "have you done it on LinkedIn?" and I'll say "no". But what you can't quantify is who's watching and who's thinking of us. Was it a Tweet that I sent that got us a deal? Well probably, it may well have done, but you're never going to be able to quantify it. (Org 13)*

The majority of the respondents could not link their social media use to an improved financial performance, yet they continued. Their common rationale for this behaviour was that it was not easy for anyone to link social media use and financial metrics. For most, its financial impact was somewhat impalpable and difficult to trace. Those whose transactions occurred online were the exception because much of the activity leading to a sale was captured on their websites making it was easier for them to measure, as the manager of an online fashion brand described;

> *Social media has definitely had an impact. We've measured where people are finding us from and it's gone from 0% to 9% in eighteen months. When I say nine percent that's more than the whole of our marketing efforts. So anything we did before, the exhibitions and the other methods and the advertising is at 8% and social media has come straight in at 9%. We've measured people who have bought from us, so it's actual sales. (Org 3)*

In other cases, the ability to measure activity on their websites convinced them that social media wasn't having a financial impact, making them more

cynical. One consultant working for an engineering organisation, who had used social media previously on his own business, explained this;

> *Social media works for some business; I don't think it works for all of them. It's all about getting new clients and new business. I didn't get any clients or new business, from how I managed to measure that. Didn't really drive huge amounts of traffic to my website. So it didn't work for me. (Org 18)*

The majority of respondents failed to equate social media with an improved financial performance. Many remained unclear about why this was so. When they compared their own experiences with other people managing social media accounts it only added to their confusion. One telecoms manager had attended a workshop provided by the business support agency he was a part of, where the social media expert had given advice about increasing sales via social media;

> *Manager: Well the main objective is sales. Increasing sales. A local social media expert said we could.*
> *Interviewer: Have you seen that happen?*
> *Manager: Be serious!! (laughs) For years we didn't but it's helped in giving us a more lively image. And I'd like to say we've managed to sign up one reseller purely via Twitter, but he hasn't actually signed yet. Our Canadian sister company say it is driving their business quite a lot, they are very big on it. We haven't seen that kind of success yet. (Org 30)*

His own cynicism that it was possible to make sales via social media did not prevent him from trying. A social media expert and others in his organisation had told him that is was possible, so he persisted. In the meantime, he could recognise that at least social media gave them a "more lively image". Many of the respondents had consulted others in their networks about the potential to improve their financial performance on social media. The advice available via their support agencies was not always clear. Sometimes they were given

conflicting advice by different people, as in the case of the property manager who had approached his business support agency and other friends for guidance;

> *I want more clients. We could use social media to find more clients. The opinion at the support agency was they were very hot on Facebook ads, but I spoke to another guy who said it was a waste of time. (Org 28)*

The less experienced respondents became increasingly confused and cynical in the face of differing opinions. The more tech-savvy managers, such as the manager of a media production company, acknowledged the differing opinions that constituted the on-going debate about the use of social media for business generation.

> *Manager: Whether or not you do generate leads from it is open for debate sometimes.*
> *Interviewer: Have you found that you have?*
> *Manager: There have been people who have found us through social media, but generally speaking it's all through search engines. Though you could deem that the content that is uploaded to YouTube, that is then ranked highly by Google, then generates us business through traffic from that. That might not be what you deem as social media, but it's a knock on impact of it. (Org 10)*

A few respondents were able to make indirect and lose connections between social media and improved financial performance. In his efforts to make this kind of connection, the manager of a drinks brand explained the rationale behind using social metrics as a substitute for business metrics;

> *My targets are purely based on likes because ultimately they are then potential customers. Say if I get to 100,000 people liking the page for SKON (his side line business), they're potential customers and ultimately all my sales come through social networking. So the more*

> *likes and the more people engaging with my pages, the more potential*
> *customers I've got. That's ultimately what I gauge my success on, so I*
> *need more followers. (Org5)*

Although many asserted their intention to "sack off" (Org 31) social media if it failed to produce tangible business benefits, none of them actually did. In the absence of explicit business objectives many of the respondents explored alternative measures of success related to the social metrics they were able to achieve.

4.1.2 - Using social metrics

The social metrics integral to each platform appealed to the respondents as an alternative quantitative measure of success. Although they were unable to draw concrete links between social media activity and increased profitability, "likes", "shares" and "followers" were expressed as numbers, which could easily be measured as rising or falling. The manager of a chemistry lab considered himself a "social media luddite" but found these simple metrics were easy, even for him, to follow:

> *Success is an increased number of followers and people liking your*
> *page. Even I've noticed this on LinkedIn at times. (Org 28)*

The general consensus was that the higher the number of likes or followers, the more successful a firms was at using social media. The confectionary marketing manager anticipated that the people liking and following them on social media would have a high level of engagement with their social media account;

> *Success looks like, every hour gaining new "likes" because someone*
> *else has heard about us from somewhere. We want people to join our*
> *page and wait for us to say things. We want them to engage with it,*
> *and like and share posts. So we're learning how to word the posts;*
> *what makes people actually want to go with it. (Org 23)*

Another drinks brand manager agreed that social metrics were an indication of the popularity of a brand. He expected that once his social media account gathered momentum, it should be possible to quickly increase the number of people following his account;

> *I base success on likes. So I want to get my side business to 5,000 likes as quick as I can; I want to get my drinks business to 10,000… and I'm being realistic. These are realistic numbers as far as I'm concerned. I wanted to get the side business to 2,000. That was my target and I got there really quick actually. So I'm quite happy with that, I've not lost any followers so they're obviously engaging with what I'm doing. (Org 5)*

Again, he expresses an assumption that the numbers indicate that people are watching and engaged with what he is posting. Although most of the social media sites allowed followers to make comments about the manager's posts, these qualitative interactions were rarely mentioned. The quantifiable number of likes and shares appeared to be much easier for the respondents to account for.

The respondents who had achieved high numbers of followers or likes tended to use these metrics to report their success. The manager of a children's fashion brand reported a successful campaign in relation to social metrics rather than sales volumes:

> *We put a picture up of a gift basket for Mother's Day and our page got twenty eight and a half thousand views within five days. Our likes went up by 500 in that space of time. (Org 4)*

A charity manager had achieved a similar quick result when members of his team filmed and posted some novel creative content to YouTube.

There was one where my colleagues in York did an event in a day and put it on YouTube and it went massive. Went viral really. Had 10,000 blog hits and 6000 views on YouTube. It's been replicated in loads of other places around the country as a result. (Org 2)

To be copied by others in this way was also seen as evidence of success. It was common practice for respondents to compare their accounts to others, and to be copied by another indicated that there was a consensus that what you were doing was working. As well as copying the style of posts being made by others, they compared the number of followers they had to similar firms. The drinks brand manager used social metrics to compare his performance to that of another local business

I've actually got a barometer really because a friend of mine started another company at pretty much the same time that I started my side business. He had an advantage over me because he's got a lot of money and he's got about six staff working for him on this particular project. But I'm absolutely wiping the floor with him as far as likes are concerned and followers and actual sales. I meet with him regularly and he's honest with me and I get to see what he's doing and he gets to see what I'm doing and I'm wiping the floor with him. (Org 5)

His sense that he was more successful than his friend related more directly to social metrics than to other measures of success. Successfully accruing followers or contacts was also seen as a way of competing with much larger organisations. The corporate finance manager competed in an industry of well-established, international organisations, and felt that the ability to articulate his intangible social connections on LinkedIn had a strong influence on the impressions potential clients formed about him;

There's hardly anybody I know who has as many recommendations as me on LinkedIn. It definitely adds real value for us. Because we do big deals but we are a small team. So this way I can compete with some

big guys. LinkedIn in gives me some sort of proof that I am well connected. I get more value on LinkedIn. (Org 13)

Others were more cautious about the amount of weight given to social metrics alone. The manager of an arts and crafts organisation felt that chasing likes and followers for their own sakes was misguided.

Companies put a lot of weight in how many likes they have on Facebook, and that's not relevant to how well you do as a business. If we put a picture up on Facebook of something we've made, I'd prefer to get 3 comments that are good feedback than 10 comments that don't really mean anything. That's more empowering than just getting a high number of people commenting or liking it. I've seen some companies put pictures of cute animals on their accounts trying to get people to click. It's not really relevant to how you are doing as a business. It may get someone to like the photo but it doesn't say anything about you as a business. I've seen a lot of companies do that. (Org 12)

When the more critical managers carefully considered social media, they felt that social media should be viewed as a means to an end rather than the end itself. In that respect many felt that social media metrics could be deceptive, because they did not indicate any real achievement. The manager of a PR agency had also been frustrated to witness what he felt was naïve behaviour from other companies who were trying to increase their followers to the exclusion of all else.

I don't really care if it's a popularity contest. I'd rather have 1000 followers 80% of them engaging with me, than 10,000 follows and 8 engaging. Whatever the maths you do – it's not about the numbers, it's about the interactions. Because numbers make no difference. It's about interactions and people actually doing something from following you. So if they've followed you because you put a risqué joke on there, and then they forgot to un-follow you, they're not going to go to your

website to find out more about your business, or to download a free trial, or contact you or organise a coffee with you then there's not really any point to them being there. They're just hanging around. You can buy Twitter followers and it's utterly pointless other than it makes you feel a bit better. People think it has more gravitas. People should measure gravitas by how many interactions are there, not just how many followers there are. (Org 11)

Whether the respondents intended to engage their followers in conversation, or simply to encourage them to click 'like', achieving social metrics was not always straightforward. The human interaction involved meant that likes and shares were difficult measures to predict and reliably achieve. The manager of an internet security company had a firm grasp of other technical aspects of social media use, but felt vague as far as achieving social metrics was concerned;

I'm a little bit foggy. I have noticed that some of my customers follow me and I occasionally get some interaction with them, which is obviously a good thing. But not enough. Not all of them. That would make it seem like a useful thing. (Org 9)

He said he felt at ease with the technical aspects of social media use but recognised that the social conventions were more difficult to master. Even those that had performed well in terms of social metrics could recognise that the human behaviour involved in the acquisition of "followers" and "likes" made it hard work. The drinks brand manager who had high numbers of followers had consulted with a number of social media 'experts' to try and find a trick to make it easier, but to no avail;

I'd love someone to give me a top-secret manual and "do this on this day at this time. Do this and this is going to guarantee you this many more followers." If that existed you'd probably be a rich person. I don't think it is quantifiable. I think it's hit and miss a lot of the time and I think you've just got to keep with it. (Org 5)

The experience of trying to achieve social metrics proved just as complex in practice as trying to apply business measures. Therefore, the participants looked for other softer, less quantifiable indicators that social media could be useful.

4.1.3 - Relational benefits

Although some respondents had not experienced any increased profitability or success in boosting their social metrics, they continued to use social media. In justifying their actions they drew upon language describing the relational benefits they hoped to achieve. For example, the owners of a design agency confessed that they were uneasy with the rate at which social media had permeated everyday life and felt unable to keep up. One way of coping was to conceptualise social media as a conversation used to build a relationship;

> *At the end of the day I think that's what you're seeking to do, you're seeking to build up some kind of kudos. We have got something relevant to say –in some ways what you're trying to do is strike a chord with people. (Org 8)*

Their success at striking a chord and building kudos could not be measured quantitatively. The use of the conversation metaphor allowed them to learn and develop what they saw more as a "craft". A number of respondents expressed the aim of making a connection with the real people behind "likes" and "follows". This approach helped them to resolve their failure to attract a large group of followers as well as connecting them to a higher organisational motive of caring more about building a rapport with people than hitting numerical targets. Accordingly, those who adopted this approach used the idea of developing a community. These communities were described as being more than just "sites" or "followers", as the manager of the online clothing brand describes;

I don't think of our business as a website anymore, I think of it as a community. We needed our followers to understand that when they came to that place we were really interested in their lives we understood the issues that they were going through and we were generally interested in all the things they were interested in. When somebody comes to that place now they're not just seeing a pile of garments and products, they're getting a whole experience and that's what we're after. It's not just a place where you go and buy something it's a place where the people there are genuinely interested in understanding their issues. Although it's a commercial operation it's a little bit more than that. (Org 3)

Those using the notion of community wanted to create the impression that they were not separate entities, but genuine members of the community. Their aim was no longer necessarily just to attract high numbers of followers but to appeal to "relevant" followers who would engage with the firms in ways that added real "value" to both parties, as described by one food and drink brand manager;

Some say that social media is about quality not quantity. But I would like quality and quantity. So for example, for Facebook I would like to have a large pool – is that the word? – group of fans who like to experiment with new flavours. And we – I don't talk about I, I talk about we – we can be a source of inspiration and a source of fun as well, to give them ideas about how they can turn an ordinary night in to a Fiesta. And do it in a relevant way for them, that improves their life and makes things easier for them. (Org 6)

Her aspiration to not only to engage in transactions with her customers, but to improve their lives and to develop a community enabled her to refer to herself as a member of her target group, using the pronoun 'we'. The sense that social media could help engender a more meaningful connection with a community was shared by the manager of an arts and crafts organisation,

who was attempting to build a community of people that had so much in common, they sought real life interactions;

> *I'd like it if we could build a community. A lot of companies have quite a community on their Facebook page and you can see that people have made friends through liking the same company. So to feel that that was happening would be quite nice. It's always something we're trying to do with this shop, we're always trying to build a social group. We run an evening every month where people can come and bring their unfinished projects and we're trying to build that on social media – for people to make friends over a hobby. It would be nice to feel that was happening on social media. (Org 12)*

This manager sensed that her social media community could be connected to the real world and that the potential benefit of social media lay in initiating these connections. The manager of the e-commerce site also drew on the idea of community, recognising that an active, like-minded community had the potential to snowball.

> *It would be nice to have that community of people out there. Our customers are all quite lovely. It would be nice to see what they're up to. It would be nice to be seen to have this lovely community of customers, so anybody looking from the outside would go "oh! There's some people on there that are like me" – that people like us factor or whatever it is. So that people know this company do cater for me. And Facebook might enable that from another point of view. If there are this mixture of people that are liking and being a community on our Facebook page then people will see. (Org 7)*

For this manager the relationships enabled by social media were not the only objective. The ability to publically articulate his hitherto intangible relationships offered potential benefits. One of the outcomes hoped for by those aiming to "be seen" as one of the community is that it would set them apart from other organisations whose interactions and posts to social media seemed

somewhat artificial. The confectionary brand owner was aware of other organisations that posted updates too frequently in an attempt to catch people's attention. He was hoping that by developing a community he would not be viewed in the same negative light;

> *I'd like to get to the stage where it's the customers driving our social media rather than us driving it all the time. That's when it becomes a little bit more organic and it's not just us clogging people's feed up. I'm always aware that you've got people on Facebook who are just constantly updating – and you think –sigh- just go away. We don't do too much at the moment but I'm always aware of the need for balance. If community were contributing a lot of content, it's just a bit less aggressive. (Org 23)*

In addition to the relational benefits of developing a new community on Facebook, many respondents pointed out the advantages of using the platforms to preserve relationships with existing professional connections. The design agency owners who had developed their professional networks over many years, reflected on the role social media played in keeping people in touch with each other;

> *It's already proved really useful. There are people that we literally have lost touch with that have left or moved overseas, or who've left the company and set up themselves, that we're still in touch with. And I doubt we would be if it weren't for LinkedIn. It does seem to just keep those ties there, whereas you would have had to Google somebody and desperately try and make a completely unsolicited approach via email. It just facilitates conversation and keeping in touch. It's then about applying that, furthering it and making good, hopefully generating some business on both sides. (Org 8)*

For others, the idea of engaging with their wider networks on social media was problematic, particularly when it required them to address a diverse audience simultaneously. One charity manager had to carefully manage the

content of social media posts to avoid offending or alienating their various donors. Communicating with everybody via one account was a difficult task for her team;

> *Our audience is so wide we have to be so careful about what we put out. We can't be seen to be favouring any particular group or representing any particular group because we represent the community as a whole. It would be really detrimental to our reputation if anybody felt those things. (Org 14)*

The heterogeneity of her audience of followers made it difficult for her to construct posts that would simultaneously appeal to everyone. She was acutely aware of the need to manage the impressions being formed in the minds of her followers. She found it very difficult to sense their preferences on social media, which meant that the experience of building new relationships with a community or group of followers was not straightforward. It was often difficult for the respondents to identify and engage with the right types of people. The manager of the laboratory described the worry he experienced when the wrong sorts of people began to "follow" him;

> *I tried Facebook, and it was actually quite hard work. You'd look at the quality of hits you were getting. I was spending money with Facebook trying to attract people to the site. But the quality of people hitting the site were the people I didn't want. Certain agenda groups, all they're looking for is a site to put their name on. And you think "I'm not remotely involved in that group or that issue. Do I really want them sat on a page where I'm trying to get across a message about Chemistry research?" So I actually closed it down. I thought this is crazy – I'm paying for - in inverted commas - inappropriate people to be linked with the page. So I closed it down. (Org 15)*

The manager was worried about being associated with the 'wrong kind of people' and the damage this could potentially do to his established reputation and relationships. His concerns highlighted a potentially damaging link

between social media interactions and real life relationships. However, he felt he had the ultimate control to shut down accounts that were not useful for building the right kind of relationships. In the process of striving to build relationships the respondents were on their guard to prevent these kinds of situations. Although many recognised that unexpected things could happen, overall they assessed that the risks associated with social media were low.

4.3 - Understanding the risks of social media

The respondents' accounts showed that they were uncertain on many levels about social media and what it could do for them. As their narratives progressed, they sought to justify their involvement in social media by explaining that although they didn't understand it thoroughly, they perceived very few risks and therefore the majority felt that there was little to lose by participating on social media. The manager of a performing arts organisation had been involved with other technical aspects of online activities such as building websites and writing blogs. He felt that his past experience meant that he was capable of understanding social media.

> I didn't feel cautious, or have any technical worries. It's just a matter of time and energy really in a small business. But I didn't feel there were any dangers to being involved. (Org 27)

Although he felt capable of understanding social media, he described how his busy schedule and the many competing demands of a small organisation prevented him from spending time learning. With the limited time he had, he still found social media "opaque", but his past technical experiences meant that he felt more naturally at home participating on the internet and he considered social media to be an extension of this kind of activity. Likewise, the manager of an engineering firm reported feeling confident that having mastered technical situations in the past, social media was not beyond his ability, and therefore he considered the risks to be very low.

I don't worry about risks as a business particularly. Young kids using it might put on information that could be trouble. But I'm not scared of it. I don't know how to risk-proof. I'd have to look at how to approach that and what the risks actually are, if any. (Org 19)

This manager had not really given any deep consideration to the potential risks of using social media. Assessing that he had the technical capability to safeguard against risks seemed to make him feel secure enough to use social media without analysing the potential risks. He associated the potential risks of social media with younger, less cautious users, who he said he had read about in the news. By extension, his view was that the risks were associated with carelessness in posting personal information and views. He was not the only one who had paid little attention to possible risks. The manager of a telecoms firm, who had been encouraged to set up a social media account by a sister-company in Canada, had not given any thought to the risks of using social media before opening an account.

I'll be honest; I've not given a great deal of thought to the risks (Org 30)

He said that he felt his other colleagues who were already using social media were expert enough and that if they were participating then it must be fine. Many of the respondents felt that if there were substantial risks to being involved then others would have found them by now. The risks identified by the group were considered to be low because they did not threaten their firms' existence. The two risks commonly mentioned were related to their major challenges with using social media; the risk of saying the wrong thing and the risk that social media was "a giant waste of time" (Org 10).

4.3.1 – The risk of saying the wrong thing

The majority of respondents identified the main risk associated with social media as the potential for their reputations to be damaged by inappropriate posts. They saw social media primarily as a medium for communication, and social media posts were the main vehicle for communication. The founder of an electrical engineering firm explained that:

> *It's not high risk as long as you're not posting things that you shouldn't be. (Org 17)*

He felt that some content was more appropriate to a personal social media account and that if firms strayed too far from safe, corporate style they may appear unprofessional. He exercised caution and only made posts directly related to his firm and the work they were doing. In doing this, he said, he felt the risks to using social media were minimal. Many of the respondents described carefully considering the content of their posts in order to minimise the risk of saying the wrong thing. The founder of another engineering firm felt that careful consideration was the key to minimising this particular risk.

> *I don't know of any risks to a company unless it's loose talk, not considering what you've said. It's easy to do that. Not quite considering what you've written. So I consider things carefully. (Org 20)*

He said that he didn't take the risk of saying the wrong thing lightly because he felt that it was easy to do. He shared some news stories about celebrities who had been carried away on social media and damaged their reputations. He felt that people would post first and consider the content of their post once it had been shared. By taking time to consider each post he made, he felt that he could minimise this risk. This view was shared by a number of the respondents, including the founder of a public relations agency, who prided himself on carefully considering every comment he made in the public domain;

> *There are risks to being on there if you go out there and start saying stupid things. If you let your mouth start running away with you; mind you if you've got extreme views it's your own problem. (Org 11)*

In his view people could get carried away on social media and let themselves become too reactive. He often advised his clients on their social media use and gave them guidance on avoiding inappropriate social media posts. He felt

that the risk of saying the wrong thing was the primary concern when using social media, but that this risk could easily be managed, and didn't present an unmanageable problem. He explained that while there would always be people with extreme views which had the potential to offend, individuals could easily control their posts and therefore the risk of saying the wrong thing was low, in his opinion.

Whilst many of the respondents felt able to control the content of their own posts they acknowledged the ability of other people to post to their accounts. The founders of a design agency had given a lot of thought and discussion to what kind of things to say on social media. They felt particularly aware that the posts they made were permanent once they were in the public domain, as one of the founders explained;

> *We've been very mindful of not being able to revoke comments: we are conscious of saying the wrong thing. Sometimes you think I've got something to say about that but I'm not sure I want to be part of it. Because you only need one person to pick up on it and then to proliferate that you said that and you think oh no we're going to be known for saying that! But I think if you are reluctant to comment instantly you've missed the boat. We know that mind-set is our problem and we're trying to get better at just saying what we think; pinning our colours to the mast, as it were. Because that's what social media is for and if you aren't prepared to do that then why participate? (Org 8)*

They understood the risk to be related to the potential for others to take their carefully constructed comments out of context. They wanted to control their reputation on social media carefully by giving a lot of consideration to their posts, but they recognised that others were posting things much more quickly and responsively. Thus, they concluded that they would have to change their way of thinking about and responding to this perceived risk. They felt that it was not a risk of sufficient magnitude to prevent them from using social media.

The founder of a research and development firm also found this aspect of social media particularly frustrating to master, because he felt that even his well-meaning, carefully constructed posts had the potential to be misunderstood on social media.

> *I get frustrated and annoyed with it when things don't come across the way you want them to. Perhaps people don't always read things as they were meant to be read. (Org 29)*

He identified that his posts could be perceived as inappropriate, but that the fault was with those reading. He felt that he was sufficiently careful and professional as he posted but that he had little control in a social media setting over the way his posts were being received by those reading them. In his case, he didn't feel that he was at risk of saying the wrong thing, but of his intentions being misunderstood. However, he said he did not consider these risks to be substantial enough to prevent him from using social media.

The followers of social media accounts were not the only ones identified as being responsible for some of the risk related to saying the wrong thing on social media. The founder of the public relations firm suggested that junior members of an organisation could also present a risk if they were given access to social media with no guidance.

> *If you set up a social media account and hand it over to the office junior because that's a job you think they should do then that might come unstuck pretty quickly. Especially if they weren't fully briefed on your company and someone asked a tricky question, or even an innocent question. A question they weren't prepared to answer. People might think "who's that?" If it's on-line, it's there. Never allow anything to be posted that you wouldn't say in public. (Org 11)*

The risk he perceived was that on social media, you never know what someone might say or ask. His comment implies that managers are able to exercise greater control and judgement in issuing appropriate responses.

Many of the respondents limited the access that their staff had to the organisational social media account, citing this as the main reason. He felt that briefing office juniors appropriately or limiting social media access exclusively to managers would control this risk and therefore it could be considered as minimal.

The manager of a corporate finance firm was also concerned with building reputation on social media, and very alert to the difficulties he might face if colleagues he was connected to made posts that reflected badly upon him.

> *I think where there is potential risk is that a lot of my pals who I work with might say something on twitter to me that could cause an inherent reputational risk. On the flipside does it show you've got a bit of character and that you have a bit of banter with your clients as well? I really don't know it's a tricky one, isn't it? But I think you've probably just got to live with it really. (Org 13)*

He said he felt the tension of trying to maintain a professional image whilst using social media to show some personality. Many of the respondents described finding it difficult to balance maintaining a professional impression and showing a personal side. This manager felt that this conflict was not easily resolved, and that it did not present a high enough risk to threaten the existence of his business. He preferred to live with the tension rather than leave social media.

4.3.2 – The risk of wasting time

The second risk commonly identified by the respondents was that they might waste a lot of time participating in social media use. Time was a limited and precious resource to the respondents, who described themselves as being pulled in many directions and frequently working outside of hours to get things done. Because of this the group usually gave careful consideration to any new activity they undertook. However, the high level of uncertainty associated with social media meant that there was a risk that it may take a lot of time to master, but ultimately be of no worth. The owner of an arts and crafts

organisation considered this to be the only risk associated with social media use.

> *The only risk is time really, spending a lot of time trying to understand it if nothing comes from it. (Org 12)*

Many of the respondents felt time was a scarce resource but they found a variety of ways to work around this challenge (see chapter 5). The overriding sense of uncertainty about social media meant that they couldn't easily dismiss it; therefore they made time for it regardless of the risk of wasting time.

As the respondents accrued some experience with social media they could not identify clear evidence to suggest that it was worth their effort. The founder of a media production agency had talked to many other business owners about what results they were getting. No one he knew had any clear evidence of success and thus he could not dismiss the thought that social media could be a waste of time.

> *The risk is that it's just a giant waste of time. Well initially when people were getting started on it everyone was very excited, but now a lot of people are saying hang on a minute, who is actually getting business from this? Because that's why you want to do it: to get more business. To grow your business. It is hard to find examples that aren't multinational companies that are getting significant benefits from it. (Org 10)*

He felt that he needed evidence of the success achieved by a firm comparable to his. He had been unable to find this type of evidence and yet continued to use social media. In fact, he intended to increase the resources he devoted to social media campaigns. By extension, although he described wasting time on social media as a risk, it was not a significant enough risk to prevent him from pursuing social media activity.

The manager of the performing arts organisation also described looking for evidence that would allow him to dismiss the sense that he might be wasting his time. He turned to the results generated by his own efforts but found that they were not easy to interpret.

> *The only risk I think would be investing too much in it, having too high an expectation of it. Wasting a lot of energy on something where you don't have a clear idea of what the benefit is that you're looking for. You do get this sense of achievement. Like when I saw the little spike in our Facebook reach – I thought 'Oh! We've achieved something' – but actually you haven't. Because what you really want is for people to come to your event. You don't necessarily know whether Facebook activity is equated to anything real. (Org 27)*

He understood wasting time as pursuing activities that did not achieve core organisational objectives. The social metrics that he observed people pursuing on social media, such as 'likes' and 'shares' did not necessarily correspond to the objectives of his organisation, which were primarily driven by numbers of people engaging at his real events. He felt that people persisted in wasting their time because social media promoted a false sense of achievement. Although he was somewhat cynical about this, his fear of wasting time did not present a high enough risk to prevent him from using social media. Like the majority of the respondents, he felt that there were solutions available to the problems of saying the wrong thing and wasting time. By trying to identify solutions, the respondents retained a sense of their own control and minimised the risk they associated with social media.

4.3.3 – Identifying solutions and minimising risks

In response to the risks they associated with social media the respondents tried to identify ways to protect their firms. Many of the safeguards they identified were relatively simple and easy to access which seemed to add to their sense that social media represented a low level of risk.

4.3.3.1 – Controlling others

Many of the respondents expressed concern about the risk that inappropriate posts might be featured on their accounts. They speculated that such posts could originate from them if they failed to be mindful, or from someone else whom they might not be able to control. Although some of the respondents had personal experience of these types of situations, they generally perceived that the associated risks were low. This feeling seemed to be reinforced as they talked about how they would handle these types of situations if they were to occur.

For example, the manager of a national charity had experienced members of the public posting complaints and criticisms to her organisational account. Although she admitted that this was a challenge, she felt that as a team they were able to handle these situations and that the risks to their reputation were minimal.

> *The only thing we have a concern about is when a rogue person tries to communicate on our Facebook and we try and take it offline but they continue to communicate online. So that's very challenging. Perhaps people are ranting and being negative no matter what we try to do. It's difficult to deal with people politely in those awkward situations. Awkward when it's so instant. The answer I believe is to turn them into an ambassador and bring them in rather than trying to control them. (Org 1)*

This manager felt that organisations trying to exercise total control over the posts made to their social media accounts were mistaken. She had observed that a certain amount of freedom and spontaneity was the norm on social media and that organisations should learn to live with that. She felt that if managed correctly, complaints did not represent a risk. In fact, by turning these rogue posters in to ambassadors, she felt that negative situations could have positive outcomes and therefore could be viewed as opportunities not threats.

Other firms took a different approach to exercising control over the posts made by others. The manager of a food and drink organisation was concerned that the positive, family friendly image he wanted his firm to engender could be damaged if people hijacked his social media account. However, he ultimately felt that there was a simple way to control negative behaviour on social media.

> *The main thing is I don't want the wrong kind of people on the page or coming in to the business. We just want to keep things positive. So I suppose that's a risk. But if it happens I just block those people or kick them out so I feel like I have the ultimate control.(Org 22)*

He felt in control because he could simply use his administrative rights to sensor posts and to block those being negative. Therefore he didn't consider this type of situation constituted a high risk. Similarly the manager of a health and beauty business had also had personal experience of his staff making inappropriate posts on social media, said that he had addressed their behaviour in a staff meeting.

> *There are risks to controlling your staff on there. I've told them, I have to control what people see on social media, so please respect that.(Org 24)*

He had focused on training his staff about appropriate behaviour for their social media account. He also clearly laid out consequences for breaching the boundaries he had set. He felt that in doing this he maintained control and that consequently the risks of using social media were low. A number of the respondents felt that establishing social media guidelines for their staff was one way of minimising the risk associated with saying the wrong thing. The manager of a research and development firm acknowledged that ultimately he was responsible for managing the content posted by others. He felt reassured by his ability to delete comments, posts and even accounts:

> *I think there are some risks with it. In terms of privacy as a personal user, and whether you can control what other people post. Also, confidentiality of projects. There could be commercial conflicts there. But then we control that by not posting that information and ultimately we could just shut it down if it becomes a problem. (Org 29)*

His solution did not take in to account the openness of social media, or the potential for others to take his comments out of context. Whilst some of the respondents had carefully formed strategies for dealing with the risks of social media, others seemed to consider the risks so minimal that they had given them little consideration. The less careful respondents suggested that even if they did make a major mistake on social media, the impact would be minimal because they were small firms with comparatively few followers.

4.3.3.2 – Keeping it small

Although the respondents all had the desire to increase their social media followers, many equated a small following with lower risks. For this reason, some intentionally maintained a small size, delaying any efforts to grow the number of followers until they felt more prepared. This was the case for the online clothing retailer's firm. She explained that a small account enabled her to manage social media herself until she felt ready to expand.

> *We took a conscious effort not to try and go mad but to do it gradually so that it allowed us to try and control… not control but not let it get out of control perhaps would be a better way of putting it. There are a few people that are responding at the moment. It's not huge, it's manageable. I'm a cautious of it perhaps. By taking it slow and keeping it small it feels like we're less likely to make huge mistakes. So it's just general, just a drip, drip, drip rather than a flood at the moment. (Org 3)*

She explained that social media attention had the potential to grow too quickly for a small firm to cope with. In her experience, social media followers expected to receive a quick response and she did not have access to the necessary resources to meet such a demand. She worried that this challenge

could become like a flood that she would be unable to cope with. Maintaining a small account enabled her to avoid these issues whilst learning more about her followers. Keeping social media small meant that she saw it as a low risk environment in which she could learn as she went along.

The majority of respondents felt that having a small number of followers enabled them to minimise the risks of social media use. The design agency founders explained:

> *When there are tools at your finger-tips, you think to yourself why not? We're going to have to do it and it seems that there is very little to put us off. But we're only dipping our toe in the water really, because we've only got a few followers. So if we play around with it then it seems to be OK to do that. (Org 8)*

They also felt able to experiment with the types of posts they made because the attention they received was low. They did not seem to realise that by extension this also meant that good posts would also have a low impact. Although they felt that a small group of followers improved their chances to play around and learn about what would "strike a chord with people" in reality they were unlikely to learn this from a small group of followers that seemed to be paying little attention.

For other respondents, their small groups of followers were more engaged with what they were posting, meaning that their posts did not escape unnoticed. One such case was the commodity e-retailer who hoped to grow his online following to impact his sales, although he could recognise that a small following also had its benefits.

> *I don't think there are huge risks, because the amount of people engaged with us on social media is fairly small. They've all been customers or are customers. So we know them. I've got all their details in our system and they're on our email list. (Org 7)*

In this case the small group of followers were individually known. This manager felt confident that should he make a mistake, he could contact people individually to control the damage. He was conflicted about whether he should try and expand his following or keep it small. He seemed to prefer personal association to the anonymity of a large group of unknown followers. Knowing his followers well reduced the risk that he might misjudge a post.

The lure of a large following of people held the same kind of contradiction for other respondents. The manager of a media production agency felt that those that had a large following understood social media well and were therefore unlikely to make inappropriate posts.

You can go wrong with the language you use, maybe perhaps you have deleted things but the impact hasn't been particularly high because not many people are subscribing; it's not really a big issue. I don't think there's a massive risk to social media unless you're really big and then by that point you probably know what you're doing. If nobody's following you there's no risk. The moment that a million people are following you, you probably know what you're doing. There's a reason that all those people are following you so. Maybe that's completely naive, but. . ." (Org 10)

This respondent was trying to emphasise that the risks of social media use were low regardless of the size of an account. If you were small you were not significant enough to be noticed. On the other hand he felt that a large following was an indication that whoever was responsible knew what they were doing and were unlikely to make mistakes. In both cases he underemphasises the potential for other people to respond, interact and take control of a firm's reputation.

Overall, the respondents felt there was safety in smallness. While they expressed some ambitions for growth, their size allowed them to try things out, without being scrutinised by the public in the way that larger corporations

might be. The owner of a domestic installations firm felt that his peripheral position on social media allowed him to be somewhat experimental.

> *Nothing's really gone wrong, but only because we've not got many followers yet, so we've just skirted around the edges, trying a few things out. (Org 16)*

His comments suggest that he felt able to try things out because he had relatively few followers. He said this allowed him to observe what worked well on other accounts and to try things out without receiving unwanted criticism. He had tried his ideas out on his real followers, because he had limited time and he wanted quick feedback. Most of the respondents worked in this way in order to learn quickly about their followers' preferences.

4.3.4 – Experimenting on real followers

In the absence of reliable guidelines about how to use social media, the respondents turned directly to their communicants to improve their understanding. The manager of a food and drink brand was inexperienced with social media when she set up her firm's account. She felt that the best way of climbing the steep learning curve was to try out different kinds of posts on her followers:

> *I don't think there's anything wrong with going head-first because you can learn very quickly by making mistakes. (Org 6)*

In her opinion, even if working this way resulted in some mistakes, they were not serious enough to threaten her firm's existence. Indeed, she had made a number of mistakes whiles trying out different styles of post. She found that mistakes were an unavoidable part of experimenting in this way. She also found that getting feedback from her followers enabled her to learn context specific lessons. By extension, small mistakes were a necessary and even desirable part of learning about social media. Another food and drink manufacturer echoed these sentiments, explaining their approach:

> *We've tried different things out but we've not really made any damaging mistakes. I just tried different types of posts out, just to see if things would be received well. (Org 23)*

Many of the respondents said they would not trust their accounts to an outside agency because agencies would not have the same deep understanding of the social dynamic between them and their customers. This manager felt that mistakes didn't have to be viewed as damaging and if people were too cautious in their approach they miss the opportunity to learn. The manager of a charity also used real-time trial and error to learn how to get a positive response from her followers.

> *I just learned by spending time on it really. We thought about some of the possible risks of course, but then it was just a case of trying to use it and finding out how people responded to the things we posted. (Org 14)*

She was keen to emphasise that taking an experimental approach did not mean that she had a casual attitude towards risk. Her reputation still mattered and she didn't want to make mistakes, she felt that she had considered the risks enough and had judged them to be minimal. She expected to learn from responses to her posts. She felt confident to work this way because of their small size on social media. However, being small did not always provide her with much data to learn from. Her limited number of followers did not provide her with much positive or negative feedback.

Others felt less cautious about experimenting on their social media followers. The manager of a telecoms company described trying all sorts of different posts out to try and get more likes and follows than some of his colleagues.

> *To me social media can feel a little bit like a participation game, to get your followers up and get some likes and retweets. I'll do it in the evening instead of watching telly. It's almost like a game to me, to try*

and get more followers, to try and get likes. And you can only score
those points by actually playing the game. (Org 30)

For this respondent, his work had taken on a game-like quality because of
some of the material factors involved in social media use. He found that the
mediated quality of the interactions had somewhat dehumanised social media
communication. He forgot that the likes and shares he was trying to win were
connected to real people and at times he saw them more as points to be
scored in a kind of game.

Whilst the majority of respondents preferred to glean quick insights by
experimenting with posts on their live followers, there were also limitations to
this style of learning. One charity manager suggested that working in this way
was not always easy and did have its down sides.

Not many of our posts are really deliberated over. There isn't a
strategy, just an idea. The team do it as they go and see how it goes.
It's actually harder to do it as you go without a plan. (Org 2)

His team found that it was not always easy to coordinate efforts and collective
learning when working like this. Capturing what had been learnt collectively
and managing the mistakes made by the group seemed difficult. Despite
some of the down sides to learning on the go, the majority of the respondents
felt that the advantages of learning quickly and directly about the preferences
of their followers outweighed the potential risks and downsides.

4.4 – Conclusion

The findings in this chapter illustrate the role of epistemological uncertainty on
the participants' perceptions of social media. Their sense of uncertainty
played a central part in shaping their narratives, as it resulted in multiple,
ongoing assessments of social media guided by different criteria (i.e. business
value, social metrics and relational value). These criteria were established as
the participants consulted with their social connections and tried to
understand how others were using the platforms. As few of them managed to

achieve their objectives in relation to these criteria their sense of uncertainty lingered. Uncertainty also played an additional role as they were uncertain about what they would be missing out on if they closed their social media accounts. They attributed their uncertainty to their own lack of competence rather than to the fitness of the platforms themselves. Uncertainty created a tension for the participants who could not necessarily understand the value of using social media in their firms, but who felt a normative pressure to use the platforms incase they missed out on something.

Interestingly, their high levels of uncertainty did not discourage them from using social media. The participants explained that this was because they felt they had little to lose by using the platforms. They considered social media to pose a low level of risk which they felt able to control. They described taking control by keeping their social media accounts small and by restricting the social media posts made by other members of staff. Whether actions gave them actual control or not is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the dual perceptions of low risk and high uncertainty did have a significant influence upon their subsequent social media practice. The following chapter explores their practice in more detail.

First, the chapter expands upon the foundation built by the participants' perceptions of social media by exploring how they translated these into interpretations or mental models used for making sense of social media. These psychological constructs were manifest as metaphors, ideas and beliefs that were then used to guide subsequent actions. Chapter five will now elaborate upon how their interpretations shaped their social media practice.

Chapter 5: Social media use in practice

5.0 – Introduction

This chapter moves beyond interpretations to focus on the respondents' subsequent use of social media. Despite their uncertainties (explored extensively in the last chapter) the group opened social media accounts with the intention of communicating with the outside world. Many of their followers were virtual acquaintances that they had never met in person. While they considered the potential for making new connections to be a major pull factor of social media the respondents found that this was not easy to achieve in practice. The first section of this chapter, entitled **Making connections on social media**, examines the challenges associated with communicating on social media. Most of these difficulties involved material and social factors that combined during social media use to create a new kind of social encounter. Many aspects of everyday interactions, such as listening, speaking and holding another's attention, were experienced differently on social media. This created two major challenges for the respondents. First, they had to find time in their busy days to learn about and engage with this new way of communicating. They also had to figure out what the content of their social media posts should be.

Because social media was an emerging phenomenon, there were no rules or guidelines available to the respondents to aide them in solving these issues. Instead they drew on a wide variety of discursive, cognitive, practical, structural and social tools, described in detail in the second section, **Addressing the challenges of social media use**. They tried to use a variety of skills, habits and styles to facilitate this new practice. As new challenges continued to unfold over time they also experimented with less familiar ways of doing things. The respondents made use of a wide range of resources and had to be flexible in the way they approached social media use.

5.1 – Making connections on social media

Most of the respondents initiated their social media activity by activating a new account under the name of their organisation and then inviting their friends to 'like' or 'follow' their accounts. Even those with little technical ability found that this was easy to accomplish and that at least a small number of their friends were willing to take these easy steps. However, they were all keen to move beyond the boundaries of their current social networks in order to interact with a much larger group of followers on social media. They found this a particularly challenging task to accomplish. Although they could observe many conversations and interactions taking place across social media they found that initiating an interaction with a new contact on social media was not achieved in the same way as it was in their everyday lives. The founder of an engineering firm was used to making new business acquaintances at networking events. In face-to-face conversation he said he felt able to quickly judge what kind of conversation to make with a new contact, yet on social media he found the same kinds of introductions much more difficult.

> *You're asking yourself all the time, who am I aiming this at? It's difficult to understand that on social media. I was sold on the idea that it could be used for making new business contacts, but really, how can you get a sense of who you are talking to on social media? (Org 19)*

The difficulty he experienced was related to his uncertainty about whom he was speaking to. He was in the habit of trying to make quick judgements about people in order to tailor his conversation in a way that would appeal to them. By doing this in normal everyday conversations he said he was able to make new contacts that often led to new business activity. However, with social media platforms mediating the interaction, he felt that his ability to discern things about a new contact was impeded. He preferred to engage his physical senses; to observe and listen. This, of course, was not possible during social media interactions where communication occurred via the medium of textual messages, graphic icons (i.e. emoticons) and the posting of multimedia content.

The founder of a media production agency echoed the same sentiment. He had been relatively successful at increasing the number of followers of his organisational accounts and yet he was not convinced it was having the same effect as his efforts to make new contacts face-to-face.

We do get a lot of people viewing our social media account every month, but are they the right kind of views? How can I know when there are so many people and I just can't see who they are? (Org 10)

By 'the right kind of views' he was referring to people who might be genuinely interested in his firm rather than those who were temporarily interested in the content of a particular post. He had randomly selected some of his followers and investigated who they were by looking at their own social media profiles. He found that he couldn't always get a clear idea of who his followers were and on occasion he was discouraged to find that he was being followed by people who had very little to do with his firm or industry. The messages that he was carefully crafting did not seem to be reaching the kind of people he wanted to interact with on social media. Without the ability to clearly identify who his followers were, he supposed he might be wasting his time. Without the ability to see who they were talking to, many of the respondents were concerned that they were wasting their time talking to the wrong kinds of people.

The respondents wanted to initiate interactions with existing and potential followers who had an interest in their firms. The founder of an engineering firm reflected on how difficult it was to initiate meaningful interactions with an unknown audience.

If you look at who's following me, I don't know who half of them are; I don't know why they're following me. If what I'm posting goes to them and they're not interested in it, what's the point? I think you get more traction in business through relationships built the face-to-face way; people buy from people. It's an old adage but it's true. You can tell very quickly what people are interested in. (Org 18)

He described that a key strategy of his firm was to build their reputation among key thought leaders in their industry. With this aim in mind, he was usually very targeted about who he built a relationship with. He felt that he could not target people in the same way on social media and feared that he was wasting time interacting with the wrong people.

Many of the respondents made reference to the importance of physical co-presence during meaningful interactions. The founder of an electrical engineering firm had attempted to interact with other business owners on LinkedIn with little success. He felt that the lack of co-presence was responsible for his failed attempts to build new relationships.

> *I can sit at home and talk to people on Linkedin and make some contacts like that, or I can be outside knocking on doors, taking orders, and making money. Door knocking's more effective because I'm in control. Face-to-face I can see people's reactions. When people see a person they'll pay more attention to you as opposed to a computer screen. People like to buy from people. (Org 17)*

He considered himself to be adept at forging relationships with new people in a face-to-face situation. He said that over the years he had developed a way of reading people's reactions and adjusting what he was saying in order to secure a favourable outcome for his firm. He found that there was a stark contrast between his experiences of making new contacts in the real world and his attempts on social media. Social media prevented him from being able to see people's reactions to his posts. Furthermore, his followers were prevented from seeing him, which he felt drastically reduced his ability to persuade.

The founder of a research and development firm was also used to building rapport with his clients in person. He considered his preferences for the different types of communication tools available to him.

A phone call is better than social media. You get an instant reply; you can hear in their tone of voice whether they are actually interested or wasting my time. And obviously in person is even better. (Org 29)

For this respondent meaningful interactions could be achieved in a range of different ways, although he preferred to communicate face-to-face. He was particularly interested in tone of voice and the synchronous nature of an exchange, in which individuals had to respond spontaneously. Under these circumstances he assumed he would get a more honest response. He said it was not as easy for him to get a sense of immediacy and shared understanding on social media. Although an instant messenger function was available to him, oftentimes his posts would be ignored and he would feel uncertain if they had been read at all.

The respondents made reference to a number of specific aspects of communication that were made more challenging on social media. They considered how some of their familiar patterns of communication had altered during their social media use, where they communicated in the physical absence of their followers.

5.1.2 – Attention on social media

One feature of their everyday interactions that altered during social media use was their ability to give focused attention to their clients. They gave attention by listening to what their clients were saying and also by observing the many non-verbal cues given off both intentionally and unintentionally. They adjusted the style and content of their conversations in response to the understanding that they developed during periods of sustained focused attention. Many of the group reported that their clients responded favourably when they felt that they were being granted this level of consideration. They described their aspirations to show the same kind of attention to their followers on social media. The founder of a fashion brand spoke about her attempts to replicate

the kind of attention they would experience in-store, on her social media account.

> *We like to speak to our customers on social media as though they were in our shop, so that they receive the same customer service. No matter where they are in the world, they'll get the service we give in the shop – we try and talk to them online about what they are buying and they ask us for advice. They need to feel like we're being attentive, they expect that. (Org 4)*

Although she referred to her interactions as 'speaking' to her customers on social media, in reality there were no verbal exchanges taking place. Instead they communicated via social media posts that contained text and images. She created the impression that she was paying attention to her customers by replying promptly to their posts and providing them with advice. However, this level of personal attention was difficult to maintain, because she was simultaneously engaged in other activities such as running her shop. She even found herself picking up messages and replying to them late in to the night.

> *Obviously, we're in a working shop between 10 and 5. I'll carry on replying throughout the night. Sometimes a follower will comment on a picture and then send you a message 10 minutes later saying "I've commented on a picture, I don't know if you've seen it?". I might have seen it but I have a customer in the shop, so I can't reply just this second. They think it's as instant as a big company would be. (Org 4)*

Providing the same level of attention as she would give face-to-face in her shop was not easy to maintain. Although social media enabled her to get on with other tasks whilst communicating with a follower, it was challenging for her to divide her focus and provide attention to both her face-to-face customers and her online followers at the same time. In order to accommodate this way of working she set up an alert on her phone which regularly woke her up in the middle of the night to respond to followers on the

other side of the world in another time zone. Although this was difficult for her to manage, she felt that she was under pressure to perform like a 'big company' although she had none of the resources needed to achieve the same level of attention.

Although social media enabled the respondents to communicate asynchronously with their followers, many of them felt that there was a social expectation that they should pay attention and respond to their followers quickly. The manager of a national charity had struggled to pay attention to her active group of followers.

> *People are very passionate – I suppose because of the speed of communication nowadays they expect responses a lot quicker. Because some big corporations are very good, they have all these automated systems, people get automated responses very quickly. We aren't there yet. How do we communicate that with our followers without sounding like we're always apologising? How do you get them to understand that we're really teeny, little? (Org 1)*

This manager felt that the social norm demanding a speedy response had been established by the practices of large organisations. She explained that because they were not physically co-present it was easy for their followers to underestimate the many demands that this small team had to cope with. Some of her followers had complained on her Facebook page because they had not received a response quickly enough.

The respondents generally felt that it was not always easy to give followers the attention they expected on social media. They worried that if they were not attentive enough they might miss a post and cause offense, or that they might overlook a complaint and this could spiral out of control. The social media manager of an online clothing retailer recognised the expectation of attention on social media and treated social media posts differently to other forms of mediated communication.

I've noticed that social media is a brilliant tool for getting companies to pay attention to you, and I've used it in that way myself. If an email comes in we might think 'I'll do that in 10 minutes' or 'I'll go and get my coffee first' but the second something comes up on your Facebook or your Twitter, somebody complaining particularly, you think – 'oh no, let's get this sorted straight away' (Org 3)

His suggestion was that followers might use social media with the aim of manipulating an organisation to pay attention. He felt that it was risky to ignore followers who were pushing for attention because they were dissatisfied. In order to avoid impression-damaging complaints being made on his social media account he gave social media posts a different level of attention to other types of mediated communication.

Interestingly, there was an asymmetry to the attention given and received on social media. Despite the lengths the respondents went to in order to pay attention, they often received little attention in return. The owner of a food and drink brand found it hard to stop herself from looking at her social media account when she had posted something that she felt was worthy of the attention of her followers.

If I post something that I want people to know about I'm checking it all the time to see if people respond. I want to see if people are excited, are they sharing? (Org 6)

During face-to-face interactions she would hold the attention of those she was communicating with by virtue of sharing the same physical space and time. However, on social media she could not be certain about whether she was receiving any attention from her followers. When they did provide an indication that they were paying attention to her by liking and sharing, she said that she found this particularly encouraging. However, followers did not always respond or provide these kinds of signals, which often made it difficult to gauge whether she was getting any attention at all.

The manager of an internet security organisation was frustrated by the imbalance of attention given on social media. He had carefully developed a group of followers on LinkedIn with similar specialisms and interests. Although he had tried to develop a discussion group for these followers the level of attention it had received was low.

> *The way I feel I should be using LinkedIn is that we should have a group that is quite well populated in terms of interesting questions and interesting answers. But I struggle to get people to respond to me and I struggle to get any sort of interaction going. I can only assume I'm too boring. (Org 9)*

Interactions amongst the members of his discussion group were not as easy to stimulate as he had originally hoped. He explained that he had assumed that because he had carefully invited like-minded individuals that it would be easy to start meaningful conversations, yet he struggled to even get their attention. He jokingly suggested that he was too boring for social media, although he had no way to know whether his followers were choosing to ignore his posts or whether they were passively paying no attention.

The respondents' social media interactions highlighted the challenge of communicating when mutual monitoring is inhibited. During normal face-to-face interactions the group could quickly observe whether others were paying attention, but social media inhibited observation. The manager of a charitable organisation felt that her posts were not getting much attention, because they rarely elicited a response.

> *We haven't had much of a response so far and we want to talk about what the rules of engagement are – how do you start a conversation on social media? How do you get people interested? How do they notice you? It's a different ball game and one that I can't seem to figure out. (Org 14)*

Many of the respondents assumed that likes and shares were indicators of attention. These were the only substitutes available in lieu of eye contact, facial expression and gestures. The respondents sought these social indicators as a confirmation that what they were posting was appropriate and interesting. When their followers did not like or share their posts the respondents experienced disappointment and confusion. They were uncertain about what they could do to improve their performance. They wondered if there were different social norms on social media that they could learn in order to gain more attention.

A few of the respondents had a different view about why they were receiving less attention than they had expected. The owner of a drinks brand had previously been very successful at engaging his followers, who frequently liked and shared his posts. However, he had noticed a significant drop in this type of interaction.

> *It's hard to grow a fanbase now on Facebook. People are less inclined to just click 'like' on everything; they've been bombarded with messages, like "come and 'like' this page". Nobody likes to be told to come and do that anymore. There's stuff that I've tried that hasn't worked and I've thought "why didn't that get a response; that should have worked". On top of that, I've noted more recently that it's hard to engage now. Compared with two years ago, Facebook have made it harder to tune in with all your fans. They seem to limit what your followers can see, unless you pay them to promote your posts. (Org 5)*

Although he had previously felt able to command the attention of his followers, he felt that they had been bombarded by posts trying to convince them to click 'like' and 'share'. He reflected that during a normal face-to-face conversation he would not repeatedly ask them if they liked what he was saying. However, many firms appeared to be doing that via their social media posts. He felt that this created an unnatural social dynamic. Despite his misgivings, there were no alternative ways for him to tell whether his fans were still paying attention.

With their ability to monitor the attention of their followers impeded, the respondents found that their experiences of communicating via social media were very different from the face-to-face conversations they were used to. Although they often referred to their social media interactions as conversations, some of the recognisable features of normal interactions were drastically altered.

5.1.3 – Conversations on social media

As the respondents reflected on their social media interactions, they recognised that the normal dynamics of conversation were changed in ways that they were not always comfortable with. The manager of the internet security firm felt that even though his followers were the types of people that he would regularly associate with in his normal working life, they were not easy to interact with on social media.

> *I have noticed that some of my customers follow me and I occasionally get some interaction with them, but not enough. I feel frustrated about it because I feel that in a group where there are a load of like-minded people communicating together, we should be able to have a decent conversation. (Org 9)*

His original aspirations for social media use had been shaped by his everyday interactions with clients. Although he was communicating with the same group of people, he had been disappointed that they interacted less on social media. He said this was a major source of confusion for him, because under normal circumstances he would expect to make easy conversation with someone who had a similar set of interests. Like many of the respondents, he had based the content of his posts on the interests of his followers. He has assumed that these interests provided a foundation upon which social media conversations could easily be built. However, even when he made particular effort post stimulating content he found it difficult to get a response from his followers.

One founder of an engineering firm found that even some of the informal pleasantries he was accustomed to during face-to-face encounters did not occur during social media interactions.

> *LinkedIn is strange. People link to each other but then they never communicate afterwards. It's a strange dynamic in there. A lot different to meeting someone in person – a hello would lead to a conversation. By joining groups you can reach out to a lot of people though and connecting with people can be good. But you have to understand what a connection means on there. (Org 20)*

His experiences led him to conclude that he should understand connections on social media to mean something different to connections forged during face-to-face encounters. This was because introductions to people on social media were rarely followed by a conversation. Thus, he had grown cynical about the opportunities to develop meaningful relationships on social media. In comparison to face-to-face conversations he found social media interactions disappointing.

Whilst many of the respondents found conversations difficult to initiate on social media, those who were more successful in this respect found that there were additional challenges when people actually started communicating. The founder of a design firm found it challenging to pitch his conversation appropriately on social media.

> *It's such a difficult thing to talk to someone about what we do. I normally tend to adjust the conversation to the level of the person I'm talking to. If you're in a group of engineers you try and talk at their level, if you're in a group of managers you try and summarise it in a management fashion, for students you pitch it at a student level. You're normally very aware of the type of person you're talking to. It's difficult to have that same clarity on social media. (Org 19)*

This manager's comments suggest that the lack of co-presence created added difficulties in successfully managing conversations when they occurred. During conversations he attempted to manage the impressions being formed in the minds of those he was speaking to. Under normal circumstances he described how he would carefully tailor the conversation to suit his co-conversant, based on who he perceived them to be. His perceptions about whether they were a student, a manager, or a fellow engineer were based upon the material details of the situation. On social media, where these physical signals were unavailable he found it difficult to pitch his conversation. He found that he experienced numerous misunderstandings and hiccups because of this. For him, even introducing himself and explaining what he did was complicated on social media.

Other respondents found social media conversations challenging because there were so many users contributing simultaneously that it was difficult to listen and take part. The founder of a design agency had recognised that there were many large conversations happening on social media. Although he thought it would enhance their reputation if they joined in, he was uncertain about how to take part in a large-scale conversation.

> I struggle to understand sometimes how you can just listen. You just scratch the surface as to how big a conversation is – it can be huge! How do you listen to that? We use things like Hootesuite and Tweetdeck to manage multiple accounts and themes, and strands of what's being talked about that interest us. It can be constantly be chirping away in the corner of the room and to constantly be breaking off and considering that it can beggar belief as to how intrusive that can be. (Org 8)

In the absence of the shared focus of attention normally built up during a face-to-face interaction it became difficult for him to listen. This respondent recognised that there were so many comments being made simultaneously that it seemed beyond his own capacity to listen and contribute to conversations. He tried to minimise the difficulty by making use of technology

that could track and alert him to relevant conversations but there were still so many posts for him to consider that he found his work suffered because of the constant interruption. The volume of comments and posts visible to the respondents created a unique challenge. Many respondents were excited by the potential for entering in to conversation with new followers, but found that in practice the only way to cope with the high number of posts was to try and be selective and to focus on the quality of the interaction rather than the quantity.

Whilst some respondents managed to get high numbers of followers, likes or shares, very few reported that they had achieved a meaningful conversation via social media. They attributed this failure in part to the very different dynamics related to speaking, listening and paying attention. Whilst managers like the one above found that it altered the dynamic of their normal working day, others responded to the challenges by simply ignoring or opting out of having conversations on social media. The founder of a research and design firm found that this was the only way for him to maintain a manageable working life.

> *It's easy to get out of balance. One of the challenges is keeping up with all of the conversations on social media. The posts can just keep flowing in and you start feeling bombarded. You end up just not reading the messages because there's just too much. (Org 29)*

This manager's comment suggests that the volume of posts associated with having social media conversations made him feel overloaded. Unlike the manager in the previous comment, he was not aware of technological solutions to his problem. He said he only understood how to listen and respond to posts in a traditional way, one at a time, giving each his attention. His attempts to do this created such a demand that he lost a sense of balance, and felt that he was unable to give the necessary attention to the other areas of his work. Realising this, he made the decision to ignore the conversations going on social media, essentially opting out. He explained his reasoning, saying:

If you're not out there on social media you are potentially missing out on work and opportunities, but equally I think there are stronger ways of networking by building interpersonal relationships. (Org 29)

The respondents all reflected on the possibilities for building relationships on social media, in light of the challenges they had experienced in starting and maintaining conversations.

5.1.4 – Relationships

Many of the respondents emphasised the importance of relationships to their operations. The phrase "people buy from people" was repeatedly used by many of the group. There was a general sense that it was more difficult to understand who people really were on social media and therefore building relationships of trust was not straightforward. The manager of a food and drink business was perplexed by the idea that relationships could be built on social media. He was quite critical of some of his younger clients who claimed that this was possible.

Some of my younger clients get on the internet and play games with their friends in Ireland or Japan or something. It beats me when they say "I'm playing with my friend in Japan". I want to tell them – "you ain't got a friend in Japan. People that I sit with in the pub with me on a Saturday night, they're my friends, because I can talk to them. We can sit and converse" (Org 22)

This manager had experienced confusion and difficulty in trying to have conversational exchanges on social media leading him to the conclusion that social media was not suited to this type of interaction. He felt that it was essential to share space and time when trying to make conversation and establish a significant relationship. This was a sentiment shared by many of the group, who talked about making connections on social media, but building

relationships offline. The founder off a public relations firm described how he transitioned from making a connection to building a relationship and why this was an important thing to do.

> *It's interactions that count and people actually doing something after following you. If they're following you because they clicked like one day and then forgot to unfollow you then it's pointless. You need them to then go to your website, download your free trial or do something. If they're not contacting me to arrange a meeting or a coffee there's no point in them being there, they're just hanging around. I would rather have 100 active followers, listening and responding to my posts and getting in touch with me to build our relationship and do something real, than 1 million followers idly following. I try and encourage that type of interaction in the way I make posts and run my account because without real interactions it all means nothing. (Org 11)*

This manager's comments suggest that when the respondents referred to building new relationships via social media, they were talking about making connections with people that would lead to real world action and interaction. In the absence of this kind of development most of the group felt that social media amounted to little more than idle chatter. The respondents felt that interpersonal relationships were better at producing tangible results for their firms. Therefore, although these relationships seemed difficult to play out entirely via social media, the respondents hoped that their new social media connections could lead to something more meaningful offline.

The respondents shared some thoughts about why the social media environment seemed unsuited to the process of building new relationships. The manager of a research and development firm was careful to manage the reputation of his organisation externally. He was concerned that the visibility of his social media contacts might be a problem, particularly if he became associated with people he did not know well.

One of the things I'm uncomfortable with is the impersonality of social media. There were a load of people who wanted to connect to me as a friend early on but I didn't really know them. Maybe I knew a few of them vaguely. And I thought, well if I associate with them, how good are they? Will I be connecting the organisation publically with people who will ruin our reputation? The other issue is that we have to build a very close personal relationship with the clients we work with; they trust us implicitly to do the best possible job we can for them. They want us to think like one of them. Does social media allow that depth of interaction, where you are working with each other not just for each other? It seems to me that it's very difficult to have a genuine interaction on there. (Org 29)

This manager identified a number of issues with building relationships on social media. He was uncomfortable with publically articulating the new connections he was making. Even if he used his privacy settings to conceal his contact list from view, many of his conversations were still publically available to view on the social media account. He worried that the impressions he had carefully build over time with his existing clients might be impacted by the casual associations made on social media. Because he was connecting with new, unknown followers on social media he was concerned that they might damage his reputation by association. He also sensed that the depth of relationship he was used to developing over time with his clients was not possible via social media. From his perspective, interactions mediated by social media prevented him from truly grasping his clients' perspectives and from thinking like them. He felt that this could only be achieved during face-to-face meetings.

Similarly, although the owner of the online e-retail site hoped to make new business contacts on social media he was reluctant to fully engage with them until he has met them in person.

Our social media account is for professional contacts. Providing it's professional I'll generally accept most people. There are some people

who contact you completely out of the blue. I think, "I've never met you" and they'll say "Hello, we might be able to help each other" and I'll say "shall we maybe meet up first before that happens?" There has to be some offline connection I think, or there has to be something elsewhere digitally, rather than "Hi I think we might be able to do business together" appearing on LinkedIn (Org 7)

His comments reinforce the view that many of the respondents held, that it was fine to make new connections on social media, but the level of trust needed to actually do business together could not be established in this way. He was not comfortable with being approached by potential business partner in this way. He felt that only a face-to-face encounter could establish the necessary trust required for a business interaction to occur. The manager of the chemical engineering lab also felt uncomfortable with the types of approaches he was receiving on social media and decided to take action.

The crux of it was that there were people trying to add me, some of them were from other countries and I couldn't even understand the language they were using. I didn't know if I wanted to be associated with them, I couldn't understand what they were saying. There were a lot of other agenda groups on there too who would just use my account to get their own point across. So in the end I just deleted that account. (Org 15)

He too was mindful of his reputation and the impression that his social media account was creating in the minds of important stake-holders whom he wanted to impress. Although he tried to make new connections and form relationships that would enhance the reputation of his small organisation, he worried that the types of people trying to contact him via social media seemed to be having the opposite effect. Furthermore he felt out of control, unable to understand what was being posted or to prevent these groups from posting more. Ultimately he took the decision to close his account, judging that the types of interactions and relationships he hoped to build could not be initiated on social media.

5.1.5 – Summary

The respondents were keen to leverage their social media accounts as a way of making contact with new followers and establishing new business relationships. However, the social media arena presented them with challenges that seemed to limit their ability to communicate effectively. The material circumstances of their social media interactions meant that their ability to speak, to listen and to give focused attention was drastically altered. The group experienced difficulty in knowing what to say on their social media accounts. From their perspectives, social media represented a markedly different way of communicating that challenged their established patterns of interaction. In addition, social media use created a number of on-going practical challenges for the respondents. The most common of these were the challenges of creating content to post and of finding time for social media in their busy days. In order to overcome these difficulties the group had to access a wide variety of resources, which form the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

5.2 – Addressing the challenges of social media use

The combination of high levels of uncertainty (described in chapter four) and difficulty in communicating via social media (described in the last section) meant that the respondents faced on-going challenges. None of them were immune from these difficulties, which never seemed to be absolutely resolved. Since social media communication was an on-going activity, the respondents were always trying to find ways to fit social media in to their busy days and to come up with new ideas about what they should post. The manager of an arts organisation described the difficulty he experienced with fitting social media in to his full schedule.

> *It's just a matter of time and energy really when there's only a small number of people – you're managing projects, looking for funding, answering emails, communicating with clients, employing people – social media is something that we want to do, but it's not urgent. We*

> *don't have a marketing person who is sitting there doing it on our*
> *behalf. (Org 27)*

All of the respondents shared similar accounts about the busyness of their days and the need to find extra time. This manager felt that the ideal solution would be to employ a new member of staff, but the funds were not available. Thus he was constrained to look for other types of solution. The manager of a national charity expressed the same frustration:

> *It would be great if we could just quickly improve our social media, but*
> *we don't have the wherewithal to do it because we just don't have that*
> *injection of money. So that's where the frustrations are and all small*
> *organisations are stuck in the same situation. (Org 1)*

She also sensed that additional financial resources might be useful in improving their social media account. However extra funds were unavailable and she had to look more broadly at the other resources at her disposal. This was the case for the majority of respondents, who dealt with the challenges they faced by combining the different types of resources available to them. Although they used these in different combinations over time, for the sake of clarity they are described separately below under the headings: *cognitive and discursive tools*; *practical tools* and *structural and social tools.*

5.2.1 – Cognitive and discursive tools

Cognitive and discursive tools were related to the respondents' understanding of social media. Social media was an emerging phenomenon without clear rules or guidelines. The respondents made sense of the ambiguity by selecting concepts and metaphors that helped to give structure and meaning to their experiences and to guide their future actions. They also used these tools to discuss their plans and experiences with others. Their selection of metaphors and ideas enabled them to identify problems and solutions, make their experiences sensible and direct the behaviour of others in relation to social media use.

5.2.1.1 – Metaphors

Social media was a complex new phenomenon for the respondents to try and grasp. It was difficult for them to understand the problems they were encountering and to articulate these problems to other people. One way that the respondents handled this complexity was to draw upon a metaphor as a means of making their abstract thoughts and experiences more concrete. For example, the manager of an online e-retailer had discussed social media many times with clients, who considered him an expert. However, he admitted that he did not understand everything about social media. He used a metaphor to simplify his explanation of social media.

> *Social media is a box I know I should tick if I want to have any kind of presence in today's business world (Org 7)*

By describing social media as a box to be ticked, he was able to take the emphasis away from the more complex questions about social norms that his clients would typically ask him. Understanding and treating social media in these simple terms reflected his approach. He avoided complex social interactions and made posts according to simple rules. His choice of metaphor allowed him to overcome the cognitive dissonance that he associated with learning a complex new behaviour with no clear boundaries.

Another example of the use of metaphor in overcoming a problem was found in the account given by the founder of a food and drink brand. She also had a limited understanding of social media, which she considered to be very complex. However, her choice of metaphor suggests a different approach to social media use.

> *Social media for me is like a beach where I prefer to dip my toe in the water. I just go in to it gradually so I don't get in over my head (Org 6)*

Her choice of metaphor enabled her to articulate her plan to gradually extend her understanding and use of social media. It suggests that she felt relaxed because she recognised that she was in control of the level of her participation. The metaphor also infers the vastness of social media and the potential for it to overwhelm her. However, her steady approach allowed her to retain a sense of control.

Other metaphors expressed the opposite sentiment, suggesting a lack of mastery and a sense of confusion. The manager of a food and drink firm found it difficult to keep up with the rapid technological change represented by social media. His chose a metaphor that helped to explain his lack of personal participation on social media.

It's really an inner sanctum that I don't know how to get into (Org 22)

This metaphor creates the impression of a sealed physical space and his position as an outsider. The metaphor articulated the ambiguity and mystery of social media from his perspective. Although it did not directly help him to overcome his problems with participation, it enabled him to articulate his need for help. Using the metaphor he positioned himself as incapable of using social media and was able to persuade members of his staff to help him.

Other respondents also made use of metaphors to guide the participation of their staff. For example, the founder of a design agency used a metaphor as a rough guide for the members of his team who were posting to social media.

If you treat social media as an after dinner conversation, that's about right. You wouldn't try selling things at a dinner party. You need to treat social media in the same way (Org 8)

The respondent used this metaphor to address the problem of knowing what to post to social media. Many of his staff were used to using social media personally, but wondered whether their posts should adopt a more formal tone if they were representing the firm. This metaphor provided a general rule of

thumb by evoking a social situation with which they were familiar. The respondent said he felt it was quite obvious for people to know what kinds of conversation would be appropriate at a dinner party. He used the metaphor to create a similar picture in the minds of his employees in order to give them a better sense of how to interact on social media.

The use of metaphors enabled the respondents to imbue their intangible, unfamiliar experiences of social media use with attributes of experiences they were familiar with. This aided their internal sense-making and their ability to articulate their thoughts about this complex new way of communicating with others. As well as using metaphors, the respondents drew upon ideas and beliefs about what social media was and what it was good for.

5.2.1.2 – Ideas and beliefs

The respondents also made sense of social media in relation to their own beliefs and ideas about themselves, their firms and wider society. Their ideas were theoretical in nature and related to information about social media that had often come from an outside source. Their beliefs about social media developed during the course of their own interactions with the platforms, as their ideas were confirmed or disproven by their experiences. Their ideas and beliefs helped them to understand the problems they were experiencing and make decisions about how to respond.

For example, the manager of a telecoms firm was uncertain about what to post on social media. He had observed the posts made by others and felt that there was a tendency for people to publically reveal too much personal information on social media. He drew upon the idea of belonging to a particular generation, whose social norms helped him to determine the course of action that he felt most comfortable with.

My generation is wary about airing your life in public. I'm of the generation that doesn't let it all hang out like you youngsters. (Org 30, quote 58)

His uneasiness with the perceived norm of revealing personal information on social media initially made him reticent to take part. However, he drew on the idea of belonging to a generation to establish boundaries. This enabled him to form a rough set of rules that he was more comfortable which guided the types of posts he made and the type of content he shared. The idea of belonging to a generation with its own social norms and rules relieved the pressure he initially felt to adopt what he saw as a juvenile style of expression. He adapted the style of his posts accordingly.

Conversely, other respondents' beliefs about social media negatively impacted their way of working. This was the case for the founder of the public relations firm who managed multiple social media accounts for his own firm as well as for his clients. In order to cope with this he used a social media tool that alerted him when key words were mentioned in posts, giving him a chance to respond. However, this meant that alerts were sounding frequently, interrupting his other work. When considering why he allowed social media to intrude in this way, he drew upon the idea that it was a critical tool in his industry.

Social media is absolutely necessary in my industry now. Journalists like to be pitched on it, clients expect you to be expert at it and news breaks there first. So it's absolutely essential to me as a PR (public relations) professional. But it's also a constant interruption. There's less time to plan and there's more time spent reacting. Before social media you could drill down into a project and do a better job; a more thorough job. Whereas now I have to work in shorter bursts in order to accommodate the speed with which things happen. As I work I'm thinking "gotta react, gotta turn it round, gotta get it done, that'll do, send it." You can't possibly be delivering that amount of content that

often. It has a negative impact on quality. But you have to deal with it because that is how PR operates now. (Org 11)

His beliefs that social media was both an essential tool and a constant interruption shaped his response to the problem of finding time to manage social media use. Although reluctant, he altered his working pattern and became accustomed to working in twenty minute 'bursts'. Although he reflected that this had an adverse effect on the quality of the work that he produced, he also felt that this was the common approach taken by others in his industry.

Many other respondents struggled to fit social media in to their busy schedules although most of them did not alter their working practices as drastically as the example above. Other respondents drew upon ideas that that caused minimal disruption to their way of working. For example, the founder of an internet security firm considered it necessary to be pragmatic when it came to adopting new ways of working. He carefully compared his ideas about social media platforms to the positioning of his firm.

We're on Twitter and LinkedIn. We made the pragmatic decision not to touch Facebook. We're B2B (business to business) and that's for B2C (business to consumer). And we only have very limited time. (Org 9)

He faced the problem of having limited time to devote to new activities. He used his ideas about social media platforms to guide his solution. He had found that Facebook was suitable for products aimed at consumer markets, whilst firms like his used LinkedIn and Twitter. His solution was to opt out of using Facebook in favour of devoting the limited time available to platforms he believed would be more useful.

The respondents also used their ideas about the other social media users to inform their practice. For example, the founder of an e-retail company had difficulty knowing what to post on social media. He used his ideas about the types of people using social media to inform the content of the posts he made.

Quite a lot of our customers are silver surfers that aren't on Facebook and don't have a clue about Twitter and certainly not Google plus. But I think they wouldn't necessarily think about trying to engage with us on social media because our product is a commodity. They wouldn't necessarily see the benefits of it. So I don't think social media is particularly useful for engaging with the customers I already know, but there may be other potential new markets there for us to tap in to. Particularly younger markets – they're much more likely to be there. (Org 7)

This respondent found it difficult to know how to use social media to communicate with his existing clients. He chose to focus his social media efforts on accessing new segments of the market. His ideas about the types of people that used social media informed his decision to create posts aimed at a new, younger group of social media users.

While the group drew on a number of cognitive tools to overcome the challenges of social media use, in many instances their challenges required them to draw upon practical abilities, such as their knowledge, skills and established styles and habits.

5.2.2 – Practical tools

The open-ended problems associated with social media required the respondents to make use of their established knowledge and abilities to enable practical action. Some respondents found that challenges could easily be overcome by using familiar practical tools. For others it was necessary to attempt to form new habits and styles that would facilitate social media participation. The respondents used a variety of practical tools in their attempts to interact with their followers on social media.

5.2.2.1 – Knowledge and skills

The group faced the challenge of creating posts that would interest and engage their followers. They struggled to produce a continuous stream of posts and sometimes found it difficult to discern what their followers would enjoy. They drew on a number of practical tools to help them to construct a post. One example came from the founder of a drinks brand who had a goal of rapidly growing the number of followers of his account. He felt that the key to this was creating content that his followers would like. Although he had no experience of using social media in this way, he drew on skills and knowledge from his previous professional roles to help him form a strategy for constructing posts.

> *The big issue in the beginning was getting enough followers to make it worthwhile. My background is in marketing. I enjoy setting up a brand, coming up with the ideas, writing copy and doing the designs. So that's been useful for our social media work. I think we've seen a big increase in followers thanks to our creative content. (Org 5)*

He wanted to attract young followers, who were already heavy social media users. He said that they were difficult to appeal to, because they had 'seen it all before' and were bored with many of the tactics commonly used by firms. He felt that his skill in creating a visual brand and coming up with quirky, original content made his posts stand out. He was very successful in using these skills to attract new followers.

Other respondents looked to their personal experiences for an understanding of what to post to their accounts. This was the case for the manager of a charity, whose intimate knowledge of the types of people he was targeting as followers informed the posts he made.

> *It's tough to know what people will want to read on social media. I try and think like one of the followers. We're trying to reach out to young church-goers starting at University. I'm part of a local church myself*

and throughout university and growing up I've always been involved in church and communicating church through online mediums and Facebook and Twitter and stuff like that. So I sort of know what will interest people because in a way I am one of them. (Org 2)

He said that his past experiences helped him to understand what tone to use and what kind of content would attract new followers. He was drawing on an embodied knowledge, borne out of a lived experience that allowed him to recall personal situations that informed the style and content of his posts. He said he would often ask himself "how did I feel about that?" or "what was that like for me?" when posting on a given topic. He felt that his followers responded well to this and it allowed him to generate on-going ideas for his posts without "drying up".

Other respondents were targeting followers that they did not have such close personal knowledge of. Under these circumstances it could be particularly challenging to keep up with the continual demand for new posts. The founder of an online fashion brand used a tool that helped to reduce the pressure. She was trying to build a group of followers that were the parents of children with disabilities. She knew that these people were highly sensitive to the language used in posts and that they lived demanding lives that isolated them and pushed them to socialise online. She sympathised with their circumstances but found it difficult to come up with content that would inspire and engage them. She decided to use social media to post positive articles and blogs written by other members of the community. She found these posts by using a technical tool that she was familiar with.

I just set up a Google Alert that sends me an email when happy, positive stories come up online that our followers might like. Then I post them to our account and say something like, "we love this story!". If you post stories that are of interest to the followers you get a lot of likes and shares, and Google alerts is priceless because I don't have time to find those things myself. (Org 3)

Her use of Google Alerts alleviated the pressure she felt to produce her own stories to post. Her posts borrowed the voices of other authors who were often already members of the community of followers she was targeting. Google Alerts was a free tool, but very few of the respondents knew about or used it. This respondent had used it many times in previous professional roles. It saved her a lot of time and also allowed her to generate content that effectively became the 'voice' of her social media account.

The perceived challenges of social media were not limited to respondents' ability to communicate with those outside of their organisations. Some respondents also found that there was some resistance within their teams to using social media. An example of this was given by the founder of an arts and crafts organisation, who was challenged by other senior members of her team to show that social media was a worthwhile endeavour. She drew upon skills developed in a previous professional role to establish the legitimacy of social media as a means for producing a financial impact.

> *Our initial issue was with knowing whether social media could produce sales. I've got a background as a buyer for a previous employer where I had to do this type of analysis. Although we didn't realise when we started it became clear after some analysis that social media was working really, really well. Because we could see that it was having a financial impact we could afford to devote time and resource to it. (Org 12)*

Her skill in using analytical tools to provide some quantitative evidence of social media's impact had been developed in her previous professional role. She had drawn on her skills in direct response to the challenge from her other senior colleagues. Using these tools she convinced her colleagues that social media represented a viable opportunity.

The owner of an e-retail site also found that skills and knowledge developed in another professional role enabled him to overcome some of his challenges. He had a lot of difficulty with knowing what to say in his posts, because his

firm sold a basic commodity. He felt that people were really not interested in talking about it. He drew on previous experiences that he felt would help him to be noticed in a different way.

> *It's difficult for people to be noticed online; there's so much going on. And why anyone would want to get into a conversation about paper (their product) is anyone's guess. This is where my knowledge from the other side of the business comes in (his social media consultancy). I understand about search engine optimisation and how to get noticed by Google, I worked in a digital agency doing search engine optimisation for a few years. So we're on all the main big social media sites and that ticks the box for the purposes of search engine optimisation. Once we're higher up on a Google search result, people are much more likely to stumble across us, come to our website and then follow us on social media. (Org 7)*

The knowledge and skills he had gained during his work at the digital agency provided him with an alternative way of approaching the problem of being noticed by new followers. The practical skill he used to overcome this challenge was drawn from his previous professional life. Although he had considered alternative approaches to gaining new followers, he felt most comfortable with a way that utilised his practised skills.

As well as providing useful skills and knowledge the respondents' previous experiences equipped them with styles and habits that they used to overcome some of the challenges of social media use.

5.2.2.2 - Styles and habits

The practical challenges of posting on social media provoked the use of different styles and habits that represented a less formal kind of know-how. Styles were the characteristic modes of behaving in relation to social media activities whilst habits were the recurring behaviours that facilitated social

media use. The styles and habits they used in response to social media challenges often reflected the materiality of the situation they were faced with.

For example, many of the respondents who found it difficult to find time to post on social media attempted to build habits into their day, facilitated by the use of mobile technologies. The founder of the internet security firm said that he was reticent to allow his staff to post on social media even though it was difficult to make time to do it himself. His solution was to make a habit of posting to Twitter during his daily commute, aided by the use of his mobile phone.

> *I commute in every morning, it takes about an hour on the train, and I take that hour to read and decide what I'm going to tweet about. I try and get through my three tweets in that hour. (Org 9)*

He said that posting habitually in the morning may not have been ideal, because he wanted to spread his posts out throughout the day, but it did prevent him from forgetting to make posts. It also ensured that he had fulfilled his commitment to making posts before he became busy with other tasks. Using his phone during his train journey enabled him to become a more regular Twitter user. The habit overcame the problem of finding the time.

Many respondents overcame the problem of finding the time for social media by trying to build habits into their personal time. The owner of a corporate finance firm said that the habit of using his phone to make social media posts in the evening had developed unintentionally. In his case, he would frequently get home at the end of his working day and realise that he hadn't posted anything on his social media account. Using his phone, he could sit making posts without disturbing the other members of his family.

> *I fit it in every evening. I used to get complaints when I'd sit at my laptop doing work, but we barely even notice it if we just sit on our phones. My wife will be over there on her phone and I'll be over here on my phone. (Org 13)*

He described using his phone to check social media while he was 'out and about', but the habit that developed in the evenings ensured that he posted regularly in a way that didn't disturb his other work activities. Although his family were not happy about him bringing work home with him, the use of a mobile phone made his out of hours working discreet.

Other respondents recognised that the use of mobile devices enabled them to develop social media habits. For example, the owner of the arts and crafts organisation did not limit herself to making posts at a particular time of the day. Her workload was often unpredictable and she juggled running her business with being a mother of small children. For her, the ability to have a device in her pocket that enabled her to use the spare five minutes in between tasks was invaluable. She developed a habit of keeping her phone on her at all times and of always making posts between tasks.

> *I think using it on a phone gives you more time to do it; it's there in your hand and you've not got to get a computer out to do it. So I do it on the go when I've got a spare five minutes. It's easier to keep track of it all on a smartphone. It takes a lot of time to build up but if you're using that spare five minutes you can quickly find things and add to it. (Org 12)*

She reflected that using a mobile phone gave her time. While this was not literally the case, the phone did enable her to make an alternative use of her quiet moments in a way that became a habit. However, this did mean that she had fewer restful moments between tasks during the day. She said that she believed this was just part of running a small firm and that she expected to feel very tired at the end of the day. While the use of the phone created a habit that helped her to overcome the problem of making time for social media, it also created a situation in which she was never off duty. Whilst she claimed that this was not a problem for her, other respondents found the 24 hour access to social media a challenge. The founder of the online fashion

brand was trying to build habits that helped her to find the time to post to social media but found that it was a difficult habit to maintain.

> *How do I manage to find time for it? I get up at 6am and try to remember to check it! (Org 3)*

Although some respondents successfully built habits into their spare time, others found this a very difficult way of doing things. This respondent described that in the early hours of the morning she was not always thinking clearly enough to write a post. In addition she didn't know how to use it on her phone, and therefore she had to remember to set up her laptop. Although her habit was not easy to sustain, she continued to try because it was the only way she could think of to make time for social media before her busy day began.

In addition to developing habits to overcome problems, the respondents tried to establish styles that would enable them to overcome some of their challenges with using social media. For instance, the founder of the design agency was worried that he was competing on social media with many untrustworthy agencies that used clever rhetoric to gain new followers, but then delivered poor quality service. He was concerned that as a result potential followers might distrust social media posts made by organisations like his. He adopted a style of communication that was intended to resolve this problem.

> *Of course there are plenty of people trying to drum up business on social media so we needed to think about how to stand out and gain people's trust. I was looking at a lot of the waffle and jargon that other people were posting to make them look like experts. We decided to use plain, straight-talking English for our posts. That's how our profiles read. I'd attended a short course when the 'Plain English' campaign was around years ago, and I always thought it was the best way to communicate. (Org 8)*

In order to address his difficulty with gaining new followers he adopted a style of communication that he felt gave the impression that he was trustworthy. He said that he never pretended to be a social media expert, because he didn't believe such a thing existed. He had received positive feedback from his existing clients about his willingness to be open and honest. He anticipated that adopting the same 'plain English' style would engender trust and respect from his social media followers.

Other respondents did not have clear ideas about the style that they should adopt for their social media posts. In many cases, they looked at the social media accounts of larger firms to get a sense of what was working well. The owner of the e-retail store followed a number of larger firms on and copied their style on his social media account.

> *I noticed that a lot of bigger companies use social media as a way of showing their followers a bit of what goes on behind the scenes. I like that idea. I post photos on there of times we've had deliveries and things like that, trying to show the human side of the business. I suppose it's showing we're open, we have nothing to hide. (Org 7)*

His main difficulty with social media was related to knowing what to post. He stumbled across the idea of posting behind-the-scenes pictures and felt that there was a benefit to showing that his firm could be trusted and had nothing to hide. He frequently posted pictures of his day-to-day operations to give his followers an idea of who he was and how his firm operated. The style he adopted helped to stimulate new ideas for posts, overcoming difficulties with knowing what to say. Many of the respondents overcame the difficulty of not knowing what to post by observing and mimicking the social media accounts of larger firms. In some cases, the respondents had close relationships with larger entities from which they could draw additional resources.

5.2.3 – Structural and social tools

Some of the respondents were affiliated with larger firms through which they accessed a variety of resources that aided them in their social media use. Through their established relationships they were able to access knowledge, skills and practical tools to aide them in overcoming their challenges. Where the links to large firms were weaker, the respondents merely observed and imitated the activities of their larger counterparts, trusting that they had sufficient resources to be well informed and to be worthy of emulation.

5.2.3.1. - Observation and imitation

It was common for the respondents to observe and take ideas from the accounts of other larger firms. The manager of a charity frequently collaborated with larger charities which he believed had more experience with social media than he did. He followed their social media accounts and took great interest in the types of posts that they made.

> *We've got connections with larger partners who use Twitter and Facebook, so I've always watched them to see how they use it. They've all got Twitter and Facebook feeds. It's very useful to see what works for them and what gets a response. (Org 2)*

He said that he paid attention to these particular charities because he knew that their followers were like his own. This gave him confidence that the types of posts they made could be imitated by his organisation and that they would get a similar response. He said that he had open discussions with these partners about what they could learn from each other's social media accounts. Collaborating like this saved him from putting in extra cognitive effort to create ideas for his own posts. He felt it was an efficient way of working.

Others were more clandestine in their observation and imitation of other firms. The founder of the corporate finance firm looked to the accounts of his direct

competitors for ideas and inspiration but was determined that they should not copy ideas from his accounts in return.

Basically when we updated our account, I looked at my competitors' sites and took a hash of everything I saw that I liked. The twitter stream appears on our home page, and that's how I got that idea. But I don't want my competitors copying from me. That's a risk of being on social media. One Saturday morning I noticed that a competitor had started to follow me and then within about half an hour he had followed a bunch of people from my followers list. I'm not having that! I immediately blocked him from my account. So now I'm pretty careful to watch whose following me. (Org 13)

The openness of the information posted on social media meant that competitors could easily access information about each other. This respondent had initially used this to his advantage and had copied many of his direct competitors in order to overcome problems with knowing how to present his firm on social media. However, he was not happy to be on the receiving end of this kind of behaviour. In a highly competitive industry, the potential for copying and being copied on social media seemed to create as many problems as it solved.

In other instances, imitation was more harmless. The manager of a local charitable fund found that although there were few examples to imitate in her sector, they enabled her to get around the problem of knowing how to communicate with a complicated group of stakeholders via social media.

Our sector is behind in this area particularly, so we've had a look at other organisations trying to do the same thing. We've followed other charities like us – so Manchester, for example, who are a huge community foundation with ten staff and a paid person to do social media, they've got 6,000 followers on their twitter, so I was looking at that and how they feed it. (Org14)

Although she was able to imitate the style and contents of the other charity she followed, she found that her material circumstances were very different. She was restricted by fewer staff and limited financial resources. However, imitating style enabled her to overcome the difficulty of knowing how to craft posts that would interest a diverse group of followers.

Some respondents were unable to identify direct competitors or similar firms to copy. In these instances they still attempted to use imitation, but they simply scanned the social media environment for other firms they liked the look of. For instance, the social media manager of a telecoms company was new to using social media for business. She had been instructed to look for other organisations that made quirky, informal posts to see how she might imitate their style.

> *Initially there were some bigger companies that (my manager) wanted me to follow, just to see how they did things; what they posted. To see if there was anything I could copy. He asked me to follow an online gambling organisation, a drinks brand and a multinational charity. I got some ideas from them, and found some of my own accounts to follow too. (Org 31)*

She gathered ideas from a diverse range of firms to inform the style of her own posts. Imitation of other firms helped the respondents to overcome the issues they had with knowing what to say and how often to say it. There were a number of other benefits that the respondents were able to access from the connections they had with larger firms.

5.2.3.2. - Larger firms

The respondents' formal and informal connections with large firms gave them access to tools that helped them overcome a variety of social media challenges. For example, the manager of the chemical engineering lab found that as a small entity, he struggled to be noticed and gain legitimacy.

However, once he expressed his association with some large organisations in his field on his social media accounts, he found that he caught the attention of a much wider group of followers.

> *Forming partnerships with a major university and a Royal society makes a huge difference. We've connected with them on social media as well and now rather than being a lone entity I've got access to a huge group of people. (Org 15)*

His connection to these large organisations meant that he quickly overcame the difficulty he had with increasing his followers. He had struggled to know how to get people to like his page and share his posts. By articulating his connection to the university and Royal society he was suddenly able to access a much larger group of like-minded people, which he felt made his social media efforts more impactful.

Other respondents had partnerships with larger firms that provided them with hands-on practical support. The manager of a national charity was affiliated with a larger charity that was able to help her overcome the difficulties she experienced with social media use by providing support from their own offices.

> *When we first set up we were given funding by a larger organisation, who provide us with a lot of back office support. We tap into the company's resources. They have their own marketing team and they have digital media and social media people in their team. They have a whole raft of people in the office who have some sort of experience of working in that field. We use their expertise rather than learning it as we go along. (Org 1)*

She identified herself as a novice social media user, but felt that her followers would not tolerate mistakes, since her charity had a national presence and reputation. She was able to use the skills and knowledge of the team in the larger charity to avoid some of the mistakes she might have otherwise made.

Other respondents accessed the resources of other firms in a less open manner. For example, the founder of a drinks brand used friends in his social network to pass him marketing intelligence and other resources that would help him to know what to post to his social media account.

> *I have a friend who works for a large multi-national. He gets me their annual marketing report. It's so detailed and he sends me that every year, which he shouldn't. So I have a good look through that and there's a big section in there on social networking. So I do get to see some statistics from a much, much, much bigger company who has a huge budget and who has researchers and that kind of thing. (Org 5)*

He was aware that that there were some ethical implications of working in this way, but didn't have a personal problem with tapping into the resources of a larger firm in a covert manner. He said he tried where possible to return these kinds of favours to his friends. These resources enabled him to feel informed about the decisions he made regarding his social media account. Many of the respondents reported using their social network to inform their social media activities, although not all of them were able to provide the formal resources accessed by this respondent.

5.2.3.3 – Social feedback

It was common for the respondents to turn to their social networks in their attempts to overcome all sorts of difficulties with using social media. In this way they were able to access knowledge and skills they lacked, advice and opinions about what to do, and stories and hearsay about their friends' experiences. While the help they were able to glean from their social networks varied in its practicability, the respondents tended to trust their friends.

This was particularly the case when they had personal acquaintances that they considered to be social media experts. An illustrative example of this was the founder of the food and drinks brand, who drew on her social network to

access all sorts of skills to help her in her work. She had a particular challenge with knowing what types of things to post on social media and she reached out to both online and offline contacts in order to help her with ideas. She found two close acquaintances particularly helpful on a day-to-day basis.

> *I've got a friend, who we made a shareholder and she's a full time mum and quite a techie. She helped me a little bit with Facebook and Twitter. We post together. So we're looking now at how we're going to use Pinterest, and Tumblr, and how they work. She's very techie, but she's not social media. But, the person who is building my website is; she is a social media expert - that's what she does. She manages it for a well-known national brand. I mean there's no way I can afford her or anything like that, but she's a good friend and she gives me some ideas as to how we can coordinate social media. (Org 6)*

This respondent frequently tapped into her social network for ideas and particularly turned to the two women she mentioned because she considered them to be expert. Although she couldn't employ her friends she was able to offer in-kind rewards in return for their help. She said that the input of these friends had been essential in helping her to overcome her difficulties in knowing what to post, among other issues. They worked together frequently to overcome challenges and generate new ideas for social media posts.

The respondents often based their approaches to problems on what they observed their friends and others doing. The manager of a lettings agency had inquired about how others in his business-networking group managed to keep on top of their social media accounts. Some of them had reported successfully winning new business by using social media and he took their advice particularly seriously.

> *There have been conversations with friends from the business network about social media. Even small companies I know have bought somebody in full-time to focus on social media and they have seen measurable results, big increases in product orders. I have heard*

positive stories from some of my friends about that. Very recently a friend of mine managed to secure a real sizable contract, and it came from LinkedIn. (Org 15)

He felt that it should be possible to emulate the success of others in his business network. After hearing success stories from his friends, he seriously considered taking the steps to hire a new member of staff to oversee social media. He had been disappointed by the results of the other approaches he had used, such as using an agency and giving the responsibility to his secretary. He felt reassured that social media could be worthwhile after hearing the stories of other manager and he talked about his intention to hire a new staff member based on their experiences.

In other instances, the respondents' social networks provided social feedback and encouragement that gave them confidence in what they were doing. The manager of the charitable fund was deeply uncertain about what she was doing on social media and couldn't seem to get a response from her followers that would indicate whether they liked her posts or not. Instead, her feedback came from her personal social network, which provided her with very positive responses to her posts.

I met an old friend of mine, she's a real Facebook queen and she said "I love all the stuff you put on Facebook!" So, I think it's a really good forum to showcase that work. (Org 14)

Although her friend followed her social media accounts, it was implied that she hadn't liked or shared any of her friend's posts, because she had only had these types of responses from members of her team. However, the face-to-face reassurance that her friend gave her helped her to feel confident about the content of the posts she was making. She considered her friend to be "a Facebook queen", and took her positive comments seriously. She felt that she did not need to change her style in light of her friend's comments, even though her posts had not yet received any response from her followers.

5.3 – Conclusion

Chapter five builds upon the previous chapter by elaborating upon the practical experiences that informed the participants sense of uncertainty. These experiences fell broadly into two categories. The first were the participants' social media interactions. They found these challenging because they were not able to use traditional patterns of communication or recognisable social cues for determining meaning. This left them uncertain about how to initiate, understand and manage social interactions on social media. The second category was their ongoing efforts to overcome gaps in their social media knowledge and ability. In this respect, the heterogeneity of the group was particularly apparent. Their accounts show that the resources at their disposal varied widely, impacting the way that they addressed challenges. Furthermore, the challenges they faced were ongoing, necessitating a constant need to access resources to solve problems.

These ongoing experiences recursively influenced the participants' interpretations and use of social media. Each iterative interpretation first manifest itself as a cognitive frame, in the form of a metaphor, idea or belief. These mental models then made particular resources appear more or less suitable. Accordingly, the participants altered their approach to using social media. For example, they might at one point favour the use of an agency to manage their accounts and later feel that social media must be managed in-house. These shifts in their practice followed their framing of social media, which was never entirely fixed or certain. Critical incidents, such as attending a course, receiving contrary advice or experiencing a negative social media experience could trigger a reframing of social media and result in alternative social media practice. Notably, their practice was shaped by the tools that they had access to. This did not necessarily mean that a tool was not available. Many of the tools were generally available at a structural level to all of the participants. However, a level of competence was required in order for tools to become useful. This helps to explain why their social media practice varied so widely. The next chapter discusses these patterns of interpretation and practice in more detail.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.0 – Introduction

The research aim of this thesis has been to explore how firms incorporate social media use in to their communications practices. In their accounts, the respondents talked about using social media platforms to communicate strategically with their followers. Their efforts can be understood broadly as being strategic because they were initiated with a variety of important goals in mind. For example, some respondents clearly stated that they wanted to influence their followers to buy their products or services whilst others were interested in building relationships that could be leveraged to create business value. They used social media to share favourable information about their firms and to communicate with their followers in a way that they hoped would help them to achieve their objectives. Social media represented a new way of communicating for all of the firms participating in the study. The findings chapters focused on two broadly defined areas of their social media experiences, namely their understanding of social media and their practical engagement with the platforms.

Chapter 4 focused on how the respondents developed their understanding of what social media was and what they should use it for. Because of the emergent nature of social media there were no clear right or wrong ways to use the platforms, which resulted in high levels of uncertainty related to many aspects of social media use. They were uncertain about how to replicate the 'success' reported by other firms. They perceived that social media constituted a set of new social norms and conventions with which they felt unfamiliar and thus they expressed doubt in their own abilities to understand and use the platforms effectively. However, their doubts and uncertainties did not prevent them from trying social media and testing out their ideas on their real followers, because they had determined that social media presented low levels of risk. They felt that while there was the possibility for inappropriate posts to be made to their accounts and the chance that social media could just be a waste of time these risks were not serious in nature.

In response to high levels of uncertainty and a perception of low risk, the group experimented with social media. They played with different objectives for its use and adjusted these according to their on-going experiences. They tried out different ways of communicating via social media posts on their real followers in order to gather quick feedback. Their perception of low risk and high sense of uncertainty appeared to support a greater sense of experimentation with social media use.

Chapter 5 focused on their practical engagement with social media. The respondents aimed to present their firms in a manner that was appropriate and generally appealing and that helped them to achieve their goals. Their social media posts, constructed of text and multimedia content, were their primary means of communication in this context. They constructed their posts carefully in order to appeal to and interest their followers. Goffman (1959) treats this kind of strategic impression management as a theatrical performance, claiming that teams of performers collude to present a version of social reality that will elicit a favourable response from the audience. Drawing on the narrative analysis above it is clear that the respondents faced a number of challenges related to interacting on social media. They referred to the difference between their social media interactions and other face-to-face encounters; in particular their difficulty with clearly perceiving their co-communicant via social media. In the discussion that follows, Goffman's (1959) vocabulary is used to explicate features of social media interaction and to highlight the way social media platforms complicate traditional social encounters. The data analysis provides additional insights into social situations that bear resemblances to face-to-face encounters and yet are missing important social cues (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). Goffman (1979) refers to these briefly as situation-like encounters. In light of the findings, it is proposed that social media represents a rich example of a situation-like encounter.

In addition, the respondents encountered many practical challenges as they attempted to integrate social media use into their firms. Some of the respondents found it difficult to comprehend the technical features of the

platforms, others struggled to make time for social media among the pressing demands of their day and all of the respondents had difficulty in producing content for their posts that would interest and engage their followers. Social media was an on-going concern and additional challenges emerged over time. Chapter 5 demonstrated the wide variety of resources the respondents had to access to address these difficulties. In some instances, the solutions were drawn from their embodied skills, habits and styles whilst in other cases they found it necessary to employ help from their wider social and structural networks.

The respondents' response to the challenges of this new way of communicating can be understood using Ann Swidler's (1986) cultural toolkit framework. In this view, the wide-spread proliferation of this markedly different way of communicating (Kiron *et al.* 2012) activated the cultural toolkits of the respondents (Swidler, 1986, 2001). Their narratives describe their experiments with a variety of cultural tools as they tried to ascertain the best approach to take. The findings suggest that this experimentation was influenced by a sense of low risk and high uncertainty. In this sense, this study contributes an alternative scenario in which cultural toolkits are activated by uncertainty rather than an initiating jolt (Swidler, 1986) and an implicit sense of risk (Leonardi, 2011; Ravishankar, 2015; Wry, Loundsbury & Glynn, 2013).

The chapter will now be organised as follows; in section 6.1, **Social media performances**, the encounters and interactions occurring on social media will be explored using Goffman's ideas about dramaturgical performances (1959) and situation-like encounters (1979). This section explores the types of perceptual gaps associated with social media interactions and how these might extend the concept of a situation-like encounter (Goffman, 1979; Rettie, 2009). In the second section, **Drawing together tools to enact social media use**, the practical challenges of social media use are analysed using Swidler's (1986) cultural toolkit framework. In this section, the respondents' experimental use of new tools is discussed, with particular attention given to the way that understanding and experience recursively evolve alongside each

other and to ways in which individuals gradually adjust their strategies of action accordingly.

6.1 – Social media performances

The respondents' overarching aim in this study was to use social media as a means of communicating with their external stakeholders. However, they discovered that this was not straightforward and described many differences between their traditional face-to-face encounters and their social media interactions. Erving Goffman's extensive analysis of social situations (Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1971, 1983) has been used in a small but growing number of social media studies (French & Read, 2013; Hogan, 2010; Kaplan, 2012; Murthy, 2012; Boyd & Ellison, 2007) as a way of highlighting how the platforms have altered traditional face-to-face communication. These studies predominantly focus on the consequences of social media use, particularly those experienced by individuals (French & Read, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Murthy, 2012). As firms have increasingly adopted social media, the focus continues to be on the consequences of social media use (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013). In contrast this study considers the ongoing socio-psychological processes associated with social media use; in particular how social media has altered the dynamics of traditional organisational communications. Studies of organisations are increasingly concerned with the dynamic between organisational members and an external audience (Weber & Dacin, 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Rindova *et al.* 2011). In this study, social media provided the interface between the internal group of performers and the external audience of followers. Social media might therefore be understood as a type of stage upon which organisational performances are increasingly given. The findings chapters particularly highlight the challenges faced by those attempting to communicate with unknown external audiences via social media.

6.1.1 - Perceptual gaps

The findings show that there were a number of social and material factors that created perceptual gaps in the minds of those giving social media performances. In a material sense, social media enabled asynchronous communication between parties that were not physically co-present (Walther, 2007; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). While this allowed them to communicate in ways that were not previously possible, (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) it also meant that many of the social cues accessible during face-to-face interactions were missing (Rettie, 2009). Under these circumstances the respondents found it challenging to develop a sense of what to post on their social media accounts and how to respond appropriately to posts made by others (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming).

The vehicles of communication in social media settings were social media posts. These were predominantly made up of text, but could also contain multi-media content. As individuals attempted to communicate via posts they recognised a number of differences between social media communication and their regular interactions. During face-to-face interactions the shared space and time constituting a traditional situation (Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1971,1983) enables individuals to "share a joint focus of attention, perceive that they do so, and perceive this perceiving." (Goffman, 1983:3). Under these circumstances, it is possible to develop an inter-subjective, shared understanding of a situation built upon the "sustained, intimate coordination of action" (Goffman, 1983:3). The respondents in this study described the importance of this kind of shared focus during their interactions with their clients. Although some of the social media platforms had features intended to augment the communication experience (e.g. messenger functions, emoticons etc.) the respondents reported that so many social cues were missing during social media interactions that they often found it difficult to know what to post (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming).

A number of recent studies exploring social media use by organisations suggest that users may build a sense of 'virtual co-presence' (Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013; Subramaniam *et al*., 2013) despite the physical absence of those communicating. It is reasonable to assume that in some instances (such as the use of an internal social media systems, i.e. Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2012) users will share enough common referents to enable them to make reasonable assumptions about the meaning of posts. For example, globally dispersed members of an organisation may share enough insider knowledge about organisational social norms to be able to judge the type of content that is appropriate and desirable to post on an internal social media account (Koch, Leidner, Gonzalez, 2012; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). However, many organisations communicate with external, less well-known audiences (Kane *et al.* 2014; KPMG, 2011). In some cases, as demonstrated in this study, they may be attempting to communicate with entirely unknown, prospective followers. In these circumstances there may be little or no heuristic information to draw on to enable the users to make informed judgements about what to post and how to respond to others on social media (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). This study shows how, in the absence of reliable heuristic material, users drew tenuous conclusions about what to post based on perceived social norms (i.e. they felt they were expected to post in an informal style and in a speedy and spontaneous manner) and fewer social cues. The resulting confusion was captured in the comments of one respondent who reflected;

> *It's harder to engage with people on social media. There are posts that I've made that haven't worked and I've thought 'why didn't that get a response? That should have worked'. Without some way to get feedback on what you're posting you can sometimes feel like you're groping in the dark. (Org 5)*

In some cases the lack of feedback (usually available through social cues) caused significant communicational challenges for the respondents, triggering inappropriate posts (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming) or causing them to cancel their social media accounts.

6.1.2 – Social media interactions and situation-like encounters

In order to better understand what is new and challenging about social media interactions, it is useful to explore Erving Goffman's (1959) ideas about the elements constituting a complete social situation. In his view, only face-to-face encounters provide the rich array of social cues required by actors to develop a mutually understood definition of a 'situation' (Goffman, 1959, 1967). The material circumstances associated with social media rendered these types of situations incomplete, in Goffman's (1979) estimation, by making many social cues inaccessible. Goffman (1979) disavowed interest in technologically mediated situations, such as social media, describing them as being attenuated and "situation-like" (Goffman, 1979). At his time of writing, technologically mediated encounters were limited to the use of the telephone and television. However, in the light of the vast proliferation of ubiquitous digital technologies (Vodanovich, Sundaram & Myers, 2010) such as social media and the wide uptake of technology by all sorts of organisations around the globe (Treem and Leonardi, 2012; Kane et al. 2014) it is becoming increasingly necessary to understand how social media encounters alter traditional face-to-face interactions (Rettie, 2009). The findings of this study extend the notion of situation-like encounters to include social media interactions (Rettie, 2009) and highlight some of the implications for small firms.

Using Goffman's (1979) treatment as a starting point, situation-like encounters can be understood as social situations rendered incomplete due to the material circumstances of technology use. As such, situation-like encounters are characterised by the presence of perceptual gaps (Rettie, 2009; Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). The examples given by the respondents in this study highlight the perceptual gaps inherent in social media use. The respondents described the pronounced difficulty they had in perceiving who their social media followers were. During face-to-face interactions, the acts of seeing, speaking and listening provided cues that enabled the respondents to understand who their co-communicants were,

based on their appearance, the intonation of their speech, gesture, their reactions, their environment and an array of additional cues (Goffman, 1959). In addition, when interacting in person the respondents were used to sharing space and time and the same focus of attention (Goffman, 1983), allowing them to gauge how appropriately they were communicating and whether they needed to adjust their performances (Goffman, 1959).

By contrast, on social media even fundamental aspects of communication were challenged. Although the respondents sensed that there were many people to communicate with 'out there' on social media, in the absence of a rich array of social cues they had difficulty knowing what to say to them. They attempted to inform their efforts by observing the interactions of others, effectively 'listening in' to the conversations publically available on social media. However, they were frustrated in this regard by their own limited ability to keep up with and make sense of the staggering volume of posts being made on social media platforms. Even when able to focus on fewer interactions, they found that there was insufficient information for them to create a clear idea of the other party. Without the physical cues associated with physical co-presence, they were often uncertain about whether others were paying any attention to them. While the material features of social media communication suggested that interactions in this context should be treated as asynchronous (Leonardi & Treem, 2012; Walther, 2007) the respondents perceived that there were also prevalent social norms that influenced how they interacted on social media (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). For example, they felt that it was necessary to respond quickly to their followers, even if they received no responses themselves. They also felt that there was an expectation that they should communicate in an informal style, which seemed contrary to the formal style they were accustomed to using when communicating with unknown others. In the absence of clear social cues and facing a paucity of available heuristic material, the respondents tended to rely on these assumptions to inform their social media posts, which on occasion led to misinterpretation and further difficulty (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming; Wang *et al.* 2011).

Although performers deal with missing information in other technologically mediated situations (Rettie, 2009; Raghuram, 2013), the social media setting draws particular attention to the interplay of a number of perceptual gaps combined with a paucity of heuristic material to make informed judgements. These circumstances appear to increase the challenge associated with performing on social media and the likelihood of giving an inappropriate performance. This would suggest that performers have a tolerance level for perceptual gaps, which, when surpassed increases the difficulty associated with interacting via social media and the likelihood of an inappropriate performance. By extension, the ascription 'situation-like' (Goffman 1979) is not a static description but more akin to a scale. The more perceptual gaps inherent in a performance situation, the less situation-like it becomes in the mind of the performer. Similarly, the front and back-stage (Goffman, 1959) environs of social media may appear to offer bounded, delineated performance spaces (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Marwick, 2010; Zhao *et al.,* 2013) but these can be undermined if performers fail in their judgement of what constitutes an appropriate performance. This makes the performers' interpretation of whether they are in a front or back-stage setting as important as where they actually are. Thus, there may not be an easily identifiable, 'true' front-stage or back-stage on social media, as these notions become much more associated with subjective interpretations and are based on fewer cues.

6.1.3 – Social media and sociomateriality

Following the discussion above, it is proposed that social media encounters are situation-like encounters. The extended concept of a situation-like encounter (Goffman, 1979; Rettie, 2009) is complementary to recent scholarship on the notion of sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 2007, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Although debates over the definition of the term are ongoing (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.,* 2014, Leonardi, 2013) the concept of sociomateriality has commonly been used to highlight the complex interplay of social and material influences on organisational life (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.,* 2014; Leonardi, 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). The majority of social media studies to date have focused either on the sociological aspects of social media use (French & Read, 2013; Fiesler *et al.* 2015; Lingel & Golub, 2015),

or the material constitution of the platforms (Cusumano, 2011; Hanson *et al.,* 2010). However, in light of the discussion above it appears that in order to more fully understand the impact of social media on organisations, the sociological and material factors need to be considered simultaneously (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014).

There is broad agreement that the notion of sociomateriality highlights the 'entanglement' (Orlikowski, 2010, Mutch, 2013, Leonardi, 2013) of the social and material features of technological artefacts. It follows that neither the materiality of the technologies, nor the social norms prevalent in the use of social media are, on their own, responsible for the difficulties associated with interactions in this environment. Indeed, distinguishing the strictly sociological or material factors influencing social media might almost be impossible. While a number of studies use sociomateriality as an ontological construct (Orlikowski, 2010, Mutch, 2013, Leonardi, 2013; Cecek-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014), in this study social norms and material affordances appear to be converging in practice causing individuals to *experience* social media use as sociomaterial. The notion of a situation-like encounter (Goffamn, 1979; Rettie, 2009) complements sociomateriality by providing a vocabulary for articulating the implications of such an experience, namely that it can complicate and inhibit an individual's ability to clearly interpret the technologies and their interactions with other users (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014).

Moving back to the data, the challenges of social media use were not limited to the interactions between the respondents and their followers. It was also evident from the respondents' accounts that they drew on a variety of resources in order to address the practical challenges of social media use. The next section focuses on the nature of these resources and the role that they played in enabling or inhibiting social media use.

6.2 - Drawing together tools to enact social media use

The respondents' social media use relied not only on their social interactions, but also on their ability to draw together a number of necessary resources. These resources were manifest in a variety of forms that were not merely physical, but also culturally constituted (Swidler, 1986). Studies exploring why actors combine a particular set of resources in response to a new problem (e.g. McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Ghaziani & Baldassarri, 2011; Fine & Hallett, 2014) have long evoked Ann Swidler's (1986) vocabulary. In Swidler's (1986, 2001, 2008) approach, culture provides the resources necessary for action, in the form of embodied skills, habits and styles. These tools are drawn together into 'strategies of action' in response to new problems, particularly during unsettled periods (for examples of this see Ravishankar, 2015; Wry, Loundsbury & Glynn, 2013). Swidler (1986) asserts that whilst individuals have access to a wide variety of cultural tools comprising their own toolkits, they tend to stick to a few well-practiced competencies (Swidler, 2001). These well-worn competencies are re-used in a variety of different situations. In fact, Swidler (1986) asserts that individuals will likely chose a course of action to which their preferred cultural tools are well suited (Swidler, 1986; Molinsky, 2013) rather than one that requires the mastery of new tools. Whilst the narrative analysis in the previous chapters shows the respondents drawing on a number of familiar cultural tools, their accounts also deviate from Swidler's (1986) original assumptions in distinct ways. These differences are summarised in table 2, which forms the basis for the discussion in the rest of this section.

6.2.1 - The activation of organising frames

The first column of table 2 relates to Swidler's (1986) assertions about the role of unsettled periods in activating cultural toolkits. She suggests that in settled lives it can be difficult to identify the use of cultural tools, but that during unsettled periods of social transformation it is easier to identify the "explicit, articulated, highly organised meaning systems . . . [that] establish new styles or strategies of action." (1986:278). A number of organisational studies refer to these meaning systems as 'frames' (Goffman, 1974; Leonardi, 2011;

Ravishankar, 2015; Sandeep & Ravishankar, 2016). Frames (Goffman, 1974) are the schemata of interpretation that guide an individual's thinking and action in relation to a phenomenon (i.e. social media). Individuals may frame the same situation differently depending on their various social realities and mental models (Sandeep & Ravishankar, 2016; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006; Leonardi, 2011; Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). For example, within the same organisation, some people may frame social media as a threat whilst others frame it as an opportunity (Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013).

Swidler's (1986) approach	The respondents' accounts
Swidler asserts that cultural toolkits are particularly activated by unsettled periods, in which new challenges become part of a context, normally with an implied level of high risk.	Social media represented a new challenge, characterised by uncertainty rather than risk, which activated the respondents' cultural toolkits
Swidler asserts that actors tend to formulate strategies of action using tools with which they have a level of competence and familiarity and to avoid unfamiliar, new tools.	The respondents approached the challenges of social media use by drawing on tools with which they had a variety of competency. Some were well established, while others were new.
Swidler describes actors drawing together tools and establishing a strategy of action as a solution to a defined problem.	Social media presented new challenges on an ongoing basis, leading the respondents to iteratively adjust their strategies of action on an on-going basis.

Table 2: Summary of differences between Swidler's (1986) framework and the findings

Swidler's (1986) assertion that frames are predominantly activated by unsettled periods has implications for the way in which individuals interpret situations and formulate strategies of action. This is because describing a period as unsettled also implicitly suggests the existence of risk. Swidler (1986) describes unsettled periods as providing an "initiating jolt" serious

enough to compel individuals and groups to respond. When the stakes are high enough to compel action, then it is logical to assume that individuals will likely take care to appropriately interpret the situation and select tools with which they feel a measure of confidence. For example, in Ravishankar's (2015) study of offshore frame disputes, the conflicts between onshore and offshore teams threatened the very working relationships and contracts that sustained the offshore subsidiary and the livelihoods of the individuals involved.

Likewise, in Leonardi's (2011) study of the problematic development of a new technology, the organisation committed extensive financial resources to the project, creating pressure on the team to succeed. The nature of the problems being faced in these two examples means that the risk associated with making mistakes was high, constituting an unsettled period for those involved. By extension individuals in high-risk situations might be expected to draw frames around tools with which they have some competence and confidence, in order to minimise the chance of mistakes. However, the gravity of the problems facing organisations varies considerably (Harrison & Corley, 2011; Howard-Grenville *et al.,* 2011). As Swidler (1986) herself acknowledges, "there are more and less settled lives and more and less settled cultural periods" (1986:278). Indeed, it may be too simplistic to define the circumstances of organisations as simply settled or unsettled.

The respondents trying to implement social media in this study were not responding to an initiating jolt, but rather to an emergent phenomenon that was characterised by uncertainty rather than risk. They did not feel an immediate sense of urgency or risk attached to social media use, since their firms did not depend on using the platforms. Although risk was perceived to be low, uncertainty about social media use was high. Because social media technologies are interpretively flexible (Orlikowski, 1992; Leonardi, 2011) meaning did not exist within them but rather was attributed to them. There were no established right or wrong ways of using social media, which meant that they had to establish their own ways to make use of it (Garud *et al.,* 2013).

Their accounts suggest that it was the uncertainty related to social media that prompted their use of a variety of different frames (Goffman, 1974). The frames were manifest cognitively and discursively, as ideas, beliefs and metaphors (e.g. social media is like an after dinner conversation). The frames enabled them to interpret social media and contextualise its use (Garud *et al.*, 2013). As frames were generated in response to uncertainty, it was notable that the respondents made frequent adjustments to their organising frames. This was because the frames they selected had to resonate with their ongoing lived experiences and resulting anticipations (Garud *et al,* 2013; Sandeep & Ravishankar, 2016). Thus, their framing of social media was continually and recursively emerging in practice. The contingent nature of their social media frames meant that they were not only used to determine action, but to experiment with actions (this is elaborated upon further in section 6.2.3). This presents an alternative scenario to other research studies in which frames are used to determine a definitive strategy of action in response to a particular problem (Leonardi, 2011; Ravishankar, 2015; McPherson & Sauder, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that circumstances characterised by low risk and high uncertainty trigger the *experimental* use of *multiple* frames, which draw together tools into *tentative* strategies of action.

6.2.2 - The experimental use of new tools

If the frames guiding interpretation were used experimentally, it follows that the cultural tools used in response to social media were also tentative. Although the narrative analysis suggests that social media demands a wide variety of cultural tools, it was surprising to note that respondents did not stick exclusively to their established cultural capacities (Swidler, 1986), but also included moderately familiar and new tools in their strategies of action. Among these were not only new technical tools associated with social media (such as social media aggregators) but also new styles of expression (i.e. changing from formal to informal posts), new habits (such as checking Twitter during a daily commute), and new structural tools (the use of an intern) as well as a host of other cultural manifestations. Furthermore, the respondents did not

seem unwilling to try new tools out, both behind the scenes and during real interactions with their followers. The respondents appeared to be pragmatic in their tool selection, choosing tools based on their practical utility rather than their familiarity.

These findings depart from Swidler's (1986) original framework (as summarised in the second row of table 2), which suggests that individuals tend to formulate strategies of action that make use of their established and well-rehearsed competencies. Her emphasis on familiar tools can possibly be attributed to the underlying assumption of high risks. In high risk conditions individuals establish greater levels of confidence in their ability to successfully cope by sticking to established skills, habits and styles (Swidler, 1986). Recent studies have also shown that this level of confidence can cause them to discredit or avoid alternative approaches. For example, the different departments in Leonardi's (2011) case study built their interpretations and strategies of action using familiar and established technological frames, and were confident enough in their framing of the problem that they discredited and became blind to alternative interpretations by other departments. Similarly, in Wry, Loundsbury and Glynn's (2011) account of the construction of a nascent collective identity, the entrepreneurs identified what they considered to be the most effective identity story to build legitimacy with key stakeholders. As their venture grew and alternative stories emerged, they were rejected on the basis that they were not as appropriate or appealing as the story that was originally selected.

The assertion that individuals tend to use familiar tools rather than unfamiliar ones is intuitively appealing because it means that strategies of action are not devised from scratch every time a new problem arises, but are more like chains of action built using an existing repertoire of skills, habits and styles (Swidler, 1986). Thus it is a central tenet of the cultural toolkit approach that new strategies of action predominantly depend upon the use of familiar competencies. For, as Swidler (1986) argues "One can hardly pursue success in a world where the accepted skills, styles an informal know-how are unfamiliar."(Swidler, 1986: 275). She acknowledges that toolkits evolve

(Harrison & Corley, 2011; Rindova *et al.,* 2011), but maintains that for new tools to be included in a strategy of action, "prefabricated links" between familiar established tools and new ones are essential (Swidler, 1986).

While this study does not directly refute Swidler's (1986) claims, it does suggest that perceptions about risk influence an individual's willingness to include new tools in their strategies of action (Howard-Grenville *et al.,* 2011). The respondents' accounts also shed additional light on the constitution and formation of prefabricated links (Swidler, 1986) during the construction of a strategy of action. Their accounts show that under low risk conditions and in the face of high uncertainty, the respondents appeared to be willing to experiment with new cultural tools. Furthermore, it was not always necessary to establish links between new and existing tools prior to their use. It seemed that in conditions of low risk and high uncertainty the respondents became markedly less inhibited and were more willing to experiment with new tools in practice to establish whether they might become part of a strategy of action.

6.2.3 – Social media strategies of action

Taken together, the previous sections provide additional insight into the formation of a strategy of action. Previous research (Molinksky, 2013; Howard-Grenville *et al.* 2011; Rindova *et al.,* 2011) has explored the circumstances under which individuals and groups may include new cultural tools in their repertoires, but understanding of the micro-processes involved in re-tooling are still limited (Molinsky, 2013). This study shows that during social media use the interpretation of the technology and the corresponding strategies of action emerged over time as understandings and circumstances recursively informed each other. The findings highlight the role of low risk and high uncertainty in fostering experimentation with new tools and their gradual inclusion into tentative strategies of action. This process is summarized in row three of table 2 and visually represented in figure 1 below.
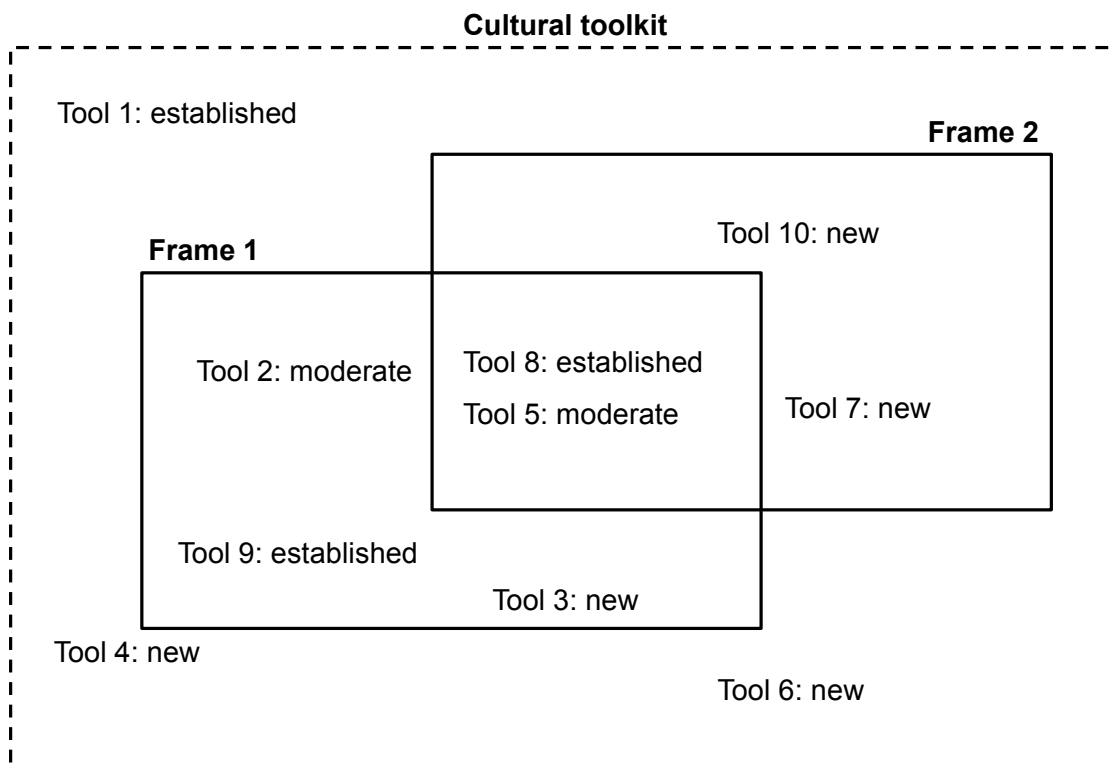
Figure 1: Model of the emergence of strategies of action (adapted from Leonardi, 2011)

The model in figure 1 is adapted from Leonardi (2011) who uses it to show the cultural tools within an organisation and the alternate frames used by different departmental groups in response to the same problem. In figure 1 the model is adapted to show the cultural toolkit available to an individual. The cultural toolkit is represented by the dashed line, while interpretive frames are represented by the solid lines. In this model, the individual uses multiple frames to interpret social media and to group appropriate tools into strategies of action. The adapted model also highlights an individual's varying level of competence with the tools in the toolkit. Some of the tools will be well used on many previous occasions and can be classified as 'established' competencies (i.e. tools 8 and 9). Other tools are not as well practiced and have perhaps not been used for a long time or only to a limited extent (i.e. tools 2 and 5). These are labelled 'moderate' in the model as they are only moderately familiar. A third category of "new" tools is also included (i.e. tool 7 and 10). These might

include tools that individuals have seen or heard about other people using, but never used themselves.

Although previous studies suggest that individuals try to link new tools to established tools in order to minimise risk of making a mistake (Swidler, 1986), the findings suggest that when risk is low, individuals are more willing to experiment with new tools without the need to establish 'pre-fabricated links' (Swidler, 1986). New tools that prove their utility in practice can be given a place in a tentative strategy of action. Thus a strategy of action may simultaneously involve cultural tools with which the individual is more and less familiar. Respondents in this study made use of tools that fell into all of these categories. Recent studies, (Swidler, 1986; Leonardi, 2011; Molinsky, 2014; Rindova *et al.*, 2011) overlook the different levels of competence related to the contents of an individual's toolkit. In doing so, they implicitly assume that individuals will only make use of skills, habits and styles with which they are practiced and familiar. These findings suggest that cultural tools do not necessarily fit neatly into a dichotomy (i.e. familiar or unfamiliar) but will likely be more or less familiar by degrees.

In addition, the two different overlapping frames shown in figure 1 show the same actor experimenting with alternative ways of interpreting social media as they respond to what works in practice. For the respondents in this study, neither the frames used to interpret social media nor the tools drawn together into a strategy of action were fixed or certain. Figure 2 provides an example of how the use of alternative frames naturally led individuals to draw on different combinations of tools.

Frames   **Tools**

```
                                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                                    │ 1.Unstructured, self-directed learning        │
                                    │   (established)                               │
                                    │                                               │
                                    │ 2. Attends workshops run by support agency    │
                                    │    (established)                              │
The informal frame               ╱  │                                               │
"It's a beach where I dip my toe in │ 3. Makes posts about "life behind the scenes  │
water"                          ╱    │    (new)                                      │
                              ╱      │                                               │
                            ╱        │ 4. Uses the help of local college students    │
                          ╱          │    (moderate)                                 │
                        ╱            ├───────────────────────────────────────────────┤
                      ╲              │ 5. Uses 'Google Alerts' to find stories to    │
                        ╲            │    post (moderate)                            │
                          ╲          │                                               │
                            ╲        │ 6 . Observes and imitates others on twitter   │
                              ╲      │    (new)                                      │
                                ╲    └───────────────────────────────────────────────┘
The business frame                ╲  │ 7. Brainstorms ideas with an 'expert' friend  │
"It's a fantastic business          │    (established)                              │
opportunity"                      ╱  │                                               │
                                ╱    │ 8. Only posts professional looking graphics   │
                              ╱      │    (moderate)                                 │
                            ╱        │                                               │
                          ╱          │ 9. Maintains formal distance during posts     │
                        ╱            │    (new)                                      │
                                     │                                               │
                                     │ 10. Allocates budget to social media and      │
                                     │     discusses strategy with board (moderate)  │
                                     └───────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 2: The influence of alternative frames on the selection of tools

The figure shows two alternative frames, used by the respondents to make sense of social media. The informal frame highlights particular tools that resonated with this frame. Some of these tools had been used in many previous situations and were well-established competencies. Others were new or had only been used once before. Critically, the respondents could not use tools that they could not access, either directly or through their networks.

Over time, and in response to additional experience and feedback, the respondents moved from the informal frame to the business frame. The business frame highlights a different set of available cultural tools. While some of the tools that were used before are still appropriate, others are dropped as they are no longer considered appropriate. For example, help is

no longer sought from university interns, but instead from 'expert' friends and board members (tools 7 and 10), and the style of posts becomes more professional and formal (tools 8 and 9). Tools are only used when they resonate with the framing of social media. As respondents play with alternative frames so the tools used to make new social media connections change.

Respondents made adjustments to their framing and strategies of action spontaneously as what they were doing proved to be more or less effective in practice. In this sense, alternative frames enabled the tentative formation of a course of action as well as the potential abandonment and replacement of some of the tools originally selected. Following this pattern, a strategy of action might retain a few key core competencies but continue to evolve over time in a much more iterative trial and error process. Under conditions of low risk and high uncertainty, the process of assimilating new tools as part of a strategy of action appears not to be as drastic or costly as Swidler originally asserted (Swidler, 1986; Molinsky, 2013).

6.2.4. - Gradual re-tooling

In her original work, Swidler (1986) asserted that situations requiring unfamiliar skills, habits or styles are typically avoided because the process of learning to use new cultural tools is "drastic and costly" (1986: 277). Previous studies have noted that she does not elaborate upon what the process of retooling might involve or why it should be considered drastic and costly (Molinksy, 2013). Taken to extremes the approach suggests that individuals may stick to the same limited cultural tools without ever assimilating new tools into their toolkits. This stagnant picture does not explain how the tools used by organisations can change, both in settled and unsettled periods. Indeed a number of recent studies suggest that, over time, organisations can drastically alter the contents of their cultural toolkits (Rindova *et al.* 2011; Harrison & Corley, 2011; Maurer *et al.* 2011).

Recently, Andrew Molinsky (2013) offered a micro-perspective of the process "by which an individual masters important new cultural behaviours over time"

(2013:684). In his study, he focuses on individuals who find themselves in a new cultural setting and find it necessary to adopt new behaviours in order to successfully operate in their environment. As in many previous studies, the new context provides the impetus to incorporate new cultural tools. Molinsky (2013) studies the experiences of foreign-born MBA students trying to adapt to new social norms in the USA. His intention in analysing the experiences of his participants is to determine why the process of re-tooling (Swidler, 1986) is so difficult. Yet his approach is fundamentally at odds with Swidler's original framework. In *Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,* Swidler (1986) argues against the idea that values drive action, offering the alternative explanation that behaviour is organised to take advantage of existing cultural competencies. Although Molinksy (2013) claims to extend our understanding of the process of re-tooling he bases his approach on the assumption that values drive behaviour and therefore concludes that the difficulty with re-tooling is related to a conflict in values between an individual and a new culture. While his process model offers an explanation of how individuals might overcome conflicting values that prevent them from successfully adapting to a new environment, his model offers limited insight in to why the process of re-tooling is difficult when there is little or no values conflict.

The challenges of using social media faced by the respondents in this study were not related to a conflict of values (Molinsky, 2013; Koch, Leidner & Gonzalez, 2013). Instead, the findings suggest that the uncertainty inherent in social media use activated the selection of cultural tools necessary for dealing with social media challenges. Inherent uncertainty meant that frames were only tentatively used as a way of interpreting social media and organising action. This did not occur as a discreet event but as an on-going, recursive process, during which combinations of new and old tools were tested in practice. Thus the process of re-tooling might be better understood as the gradual inclusion of new tools (also alluded to by Harrison & Corley, 2011; Howard-Grenville *et al.* 2011) than as strategies of action requiring drastic or seismic changes in behaviour. The findings suggest that individuals are more willing to make these gradual changes under conditions of low risk and high uncertainty.

6.2.5 - Creating low risk environments

If environments characterised by low risk and high uncertainty encourage experimentation then it may prove useful to organisations to create these types of situations in order to foster organisational change. Indeed, Howard-Grenville *et al.* (2011) found that low-risk environments can be created within organisations and can improve organisational change efforts. While Swidler (1986) states that people are only likely to consider new strategies of action when an initiating jolt compels them to do so, Howard-Grenville *et al.*'s (2011) work contends that the creation of "liminal" (Turner, 1982,1987) settings, which are both low risk and highly experimental might provide an alternative way of encouraging the use of new tools. In these settings participants are invited to consider symbolic meanings, to make new connections and to experiment with new cultural tools. During such experiences participants' imaginations are intentionally stimulated through exposure to new ideas, experiences and interpretations. Liminal experiences are characterised as "safe" settings, where hierarchical and structural differences are levelled, allowing individuals to explore and experiment (Howard-Grenville *et al.* 2011: 537). The findings of this study support the assertion that the creation of safe, low-risk settings might encourage creative experimentation with new cultural tools.

In Howard-Grenville *et al.*'s study (2011) key individuals took the initiative for creating and driving these types of experiences within their organisations with a view to initiating and seeding organisational culture change. They held a kind of meta-perspective in that they understood the existing cultural repertoire of their organisations and were also somewhat adept in the use of new alternative tools. They also showed high levels of motivation and resilience in the face of the complacency of others. In the small firm settings explored in this study there were no such qualified individuals and fewer formal settings in which to invite experimentation. Instead, cultural tools were tried out and proven in practice. The perception of low risk became even more important as the participants tried out new tools in 'live' situations. The ability

of key individuals to combine new and existing tools and to sense what was working "on the fly" was crucial to their use of social media. These findings underline the important role of key individuals in the cultural life of firms. While the desired outcomes for change efforts may have been felt at a firm level, the process of acquiring new tools to enact strategies of action seem to rely on individual level interactions and the experimentation of key individuals.

6.3 – Summary of discussion

This chapter has discussed the theoretical implications of this study. The previous sections contribute to a richer understanding of social media technologies and their implications for small firms as well as providing an alternative scenario in which the cultural toolkit framework might be expanded. In the first half of the chapter, particular attention was paid to the way social interactions are altered by the use of social media. Drawing on Goffman's (1959, 1979) vocabulary, it has been suggested that interactions taking place on social media are experienced as 'situation-like' due to the lack of many important social cues. Social media provides a rich example of what a situation-like encounter involves, which provided additional insights in to previous work on technologically mediated encounters (Rettie, 2009, Goffman, 1979).

In addition, the respondent's approaches to social media use prompted an in-depth discussion of the role of cultural tools (Swidler, 1986) in the implementation of a new practice. Social media use particularly underscores the impact of low risk and high uncertainty during the interpretation of technology and the subsequent formation of a strategy of action. These circumstances triggered the experimental use of alternative frames and new tools which formed tentative strategies of action. Firms are likely to be faced with increasingly uncertain situations as new technologies and contexts evolve at an increasingly rapid pace (Vodanovich *et al.* 2010; Aral, *et al.*, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that if firms are able to create low risk environments, they may find their members willing to experiment with new skills, habits and styles in response to complex challenges. However, the

study also suggests that new tools for driving firm level change are adopted at an individual level, underscoring the important role individuals play in the cultural life of firms.

6.4 – Contributions to theory

The literature review highlighted a number of gaps and implicit biases in the extant social media literature. In particular, the assumption that the platforms' fixed features constitute the primary influence on social media affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) underplays the diversity of social media users and firm settings. Thus, although user interpretations are acknowledged as an important factor in determining social media use (ibid) details about how interpretations are formed have been significantly lacking. This thesis sought to address the gap by focusing on how social media was being used in a diverse range of small firm settings. This included not only the practice of social media as a means of communicating but also the interpretations guiding practice. The small firm setting played a necessary part in contributing additional knowledge about the role of context on social media interpretation. Extant studies focus almost exclusively on large organisations communicating internally and as a result have tended to over-look context or take its influence for granted (Leonardi, 2014; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Majchrzak *et al.*, 2014). By focusing on a group of small firms that operated in diverse contexts this thesis has been able to identify the socio-psychological process underpinning social media interpretation and use.

The details of this process were articulated using Swidler's (1986) framework, which makes a feature of the variety of resources used as material for building interpretations as well as providing a vocabulary for explaining the associated process (i.e. triggering event, frames, tools, and toolkits). The resulting picture does not strive to find a unifying description of commonly held interpretations as others studies have attempted to do (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Kane *et al.*, 2014) but instead outlines a process whereby a wide variety of resources are drawn together in order to render

unfamiliar technologies, familiar and useful. Figure 1 (p.175) adds additional detail to the dominant affordances approach (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), which until now acknowledged the importance of social media interpretation without unpacking it. In advancing this view, this study moves beyond the prevalent treatment of actors as "cultural dupes" (Swidler, 1986) in a scenario driven by technological determinism. This study adds to the small but growing body of work that calls this view of social media in to question (see also Turel & Surenko, 2013; Richey *et al.,* forthcoming). It does this by highlighting the wide variety of tools that individuals must access in order to interpret and use social media. Notably, the actors in this study did not automatically have access to all of the tools they needed which necessitated creativity and experimentation.

Additionally, by identifying and challenging the prevailing selection bias that favours large firms this study expanded the scope of social media research to include alternative narratives from diverse actors. As a result, the role of epistemological uncertainty could be embraced and the potential positive and negative implications considered. The findings cast uncertainty as a trigger for framing that drove social media activity that subsequently created more uncertainty, triggering re-framing, driving alternative activities and so forth. This recursive evolution of social media use (Garud *et al.* 2014) differs from other accounts that suggest that users have a pre-determined view of social media and practice its use in reasonably fixed ways (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Huang, Baptista & Gallier, 2013; Leonardi, 2014). This study asserts that uncertainty is a common feature of social media sense making and use and underscores the potentially positive role that uncertainty can play in triggering experimentation. However, experimentation is limited to the range of tools individuals can access. In light of increasingly rapid technological innovation and change, Kurzweil (2005) and others (Sorenson & Landau, 2014) have suggested that soon technological developments will outpace our ability to keep up or make sense of them. This suggests that the extended understanding of the triggering role of uncertainty has a contribution to make to the wider literature concerned with making unfamiliar technologies familiar.

The second theoretical contribution related to the role of context is the extended discussion about social media platforms as 'situation-like' (Goffman, 1973) contexts (p.). Although previous studies have highlighted particular features of social media use that have challenged traditional modes of communication (French & Read, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kane *et al.*, 2014) none have underscored the combined effect of these features as constituting a dramatically different context, which can at its extremity be understood as a 'non-context'. Conceptualising social media in this way has implications for the social media literature which has predominantly treated the technologies as tools for communication rather than a context (Leonardi, 2014; Huang, Baptista & Galliers, 2013). Understanding social media as a context for communication has the potential to stimulate an alternative research agenda that gives equal weighting to the actor, artefact, context triumvirate (Orlikowski, 1993) than has been typical in the extant literature. Such an agenda might, for example, include questions about the implications of sparse technologically mediated contexts for different activities; how media richness influences a sense of context in social media settings; the interplay of online and offline contexts; how individuals manipulate social media contexts in order to accomplish different objectives; what elements of context must be shared in order for different objectives to be achieved? The view of social media as a 'situation-like' context is complimentary to the burgeoning interest in sociomateriality (Cecek-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014) in that it points to an implication of sociomaterial entanglement. In other words, the inseperability of the social and material factors of social media are perceived by individuals as a new type of context, with familiar and unfamiliar features. This thesis extends Goffman's (1973) original work on traditional social encounters to include social media as a rich example of a situation like context. As communication and other activities are increasingly mediated by technology (Rettie, 2009) social media and other situation-like encounters can no longer be dismissed as 'merely attenuated' versions interactions (Goffman, 1979). More research is needed to determine how social media contexts enable and constrain communications and the work presented in this thesis offers a springboard for such enquiries.

6.5 – Recommendations for stakeholders

The findings of this study make a timely contribution to practitioners who are operating in an era of increasingly rapid technological change (Kurzweil, 2005). Indeed, if the current rate of technological change continues then uncertainty related to technology seems set to become a feature of organisational life (Sorenson & Landau, 2014). This thesis contributes a number of practical contributions for stakeholders dealing with such an eventuality.

The first is to provide practitioners with a vocabulary and framework for understanding uncertainty's role in the process of becoming familiar with unfamiliar technology. This process does not rely exclusively on financial resources but on a wide range of culturally informed skills, habits and styles. Practitioners managing the implementation of social media and other unfamiliar technologies may benefit from using the vocabulary and models presented above as the basis for developing strategies for dealing with unfamiliar technologies. The toolkit metaphor may help them audit the resources available to them in a holistic way. It should be noted that the findings suggest that individual cultural toolkits are finite, but that they can be extended under particular circumstances. Practitioners may find that in order to benefit from this approach they should work in teams or groups, that combine diverse toolkits. They may also find that creating low-risk, highly uncertain settings for the exploration of unfamiliar technologies enables individuals to assume new cultural tools related to social media use.

In addition, the findings present a view of social media as a 'situation-like' context for interactions, rather than a communications tool. By understanding social media as a distinct context for interaction, practitioners are better equipped to evaluate what kinds of communication can be achieved on social media. These evaluations will differ in each instance and will be directly related to the nature of the firm's operations and industry. For example, firms that rely on interactions characterised by complex information exchange or high levels of trust may find it necessary to augment their communications

strategies in order to build these types of relationships. The findings also highlight the challenges and implications of situation-like encounters, particularly the potential for misinterpretation and mistakes to occur. For the practitioners in this study such mistakes were often related to the misinterpretation of a material factor as a social factor and vice-versa (Richey, Ravishankar & Coupland, forthcoming). By understanding social media as a distinct context for interaction, practitioners can pre-empt and potentially avoid or minimise these types of mistakes and instead develop context specific goals and expectations for their social media use.

7.6- Limitations and future research

The choice of methodology for this thesis was driven primarily by the research aim, which was exploratory in nature. Although the literature review chapter gave some consideration to the limitations of this approach (related to generalisability and validity) it is also appropriate to recognise in these closing remarks that, in a broader sense, any methodological choice sets the parameters of a study, limiting the questions that might be asked and subsequently the claims being made. This study focused on collecting detailed accounts which were organised into a narrative analysis that explored the socio-psychological dynamics experienced by the participants. Alternative methodological choices might have resulted in additional insights. For example, discourse analysis could have been used to identify the influence of powerful discourse on the narratives and sense making of the participants which may have more clearly highlighted the normative pressure individuals felt to use social media. The methods of data collection and analysis used were chosen because enabled the researcher to work inductively and to be led by the accounts of the participants.

The theoretical lens used to analyse the data was selected during the inductive process of data collection and analysis. It should be acknowledged that there were a number of potential frameworks considered during this process that might have resulted in an alternative interpretation of the data. However, the researcher discussed each alternative with colleagues and concluded that the cultural toolkit approach (Swidler, 1986) had the greatest

explanatory power in relation to the accounts of the participants. In the spirit of interpretivist research this study acknowledges that the choices of methodology and theoretical framework constitute the researcher's interpretations of the data. During the course of data collection and analysis the researcher discussed emerging conceptualisations and interpretations with colleagues and participants and compared ideas to those in the established literature in order to minimise personal bias. Thus the results might be viewed as an interpretation

The study was conducted among small organisations based in the United Kingdom and caution must be exercised in generalising these findings to other regions or to larger firms. It is acknowledged that some of the behaviours described by the respondents are less likely to be displayed on social media accounts in large firms. However, it is argued that the triggers contributing to inappropriate posts are not unique to small firms alone. Given their structural similarities (e.g. the presence of teams who post content to business accounts), it would be fruitful to compare and contrast these findings with a study of individuals in large firms.

Technological advancements have enabled individuals to access their social media accounts in a variety of different ways including company desktops, laptops, tablets and mobile devices. This study has not focused on whether attributes of the particular devices used to access social media platforms contribute to the experiences described. The extent to which the use of particular devices may lead to situational-like encounters represents a promising avenue for future research.

Many questions about social media use in small firms remain, and these findings offer a few potentially useful starting points. While this study has focused on social media as a tool for communicating with external, unknown others, small firms communicate with a wide variety of external stakeholders for a variety of different reasons. A number of these interactions are now facilitated by social media style platforms, for example the process of

attracting funding via a crowdfunding platform (Mollick, 2013). Future studies might explore how platforms enable and constrain these interactions.

In addition, although the respondents in this study interpreted social media as a low risk and highly uncertain activity, other studies have highlighted the risks approaching social media use too casually (Turel & Serenko, 2012; Lapidot-lefler & Barak, 2012; Hildebrand *et al.,* 2013). Additional work is needed to develop a fully rounded picture of social media as simultaneously representing positive and negative affordances.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Social media have been described as a "moving target" (Aral *et al.* 2013; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010) characterised by continuous rapid development (Kane *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, they are arguably the most widely adopted form of technology (Kiron *et al.* 2012) in an era of exponentially accelerating change (Kurzweil, 2005). Understanding how to participate on social media is not always straightforward (Michelidou *et al.* 2011; Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013). The varying levels of social media understanding across firms has been thought to result in a kind of digital divide (Harris *et al.* 2012) which enables or prevents firms from participating in a "networked society" (ibid). Yet there is still scant understanding in the social media literature about how firms develop their understanding and subsequent social media practice.

This thesis has attributed the gap to the prevailing selection bias among social media studies, which predominantly study social media use in large organisations (Leonardi, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Huang *et al.* 2013; Koch *et al.* 2013; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). The result is the erroneous assumption that individuals interpret social media in similar ways, based on the relatively fixed features of the platforms (Treem & Leondardi, 2012). This study has challenged this assumption and the resulting tendency to underplay the heterogeneity of individuals and firm settings. The aim of the thesis was to explore how firms incorporate social media use in to their communications practices. The question included both psychological and social processes in its scope as well as the potential influence of individuals, the features of social media and the context in which it is used (Orlikowski, 1993). The research question does not take the heterogeneity of individuals or firm settings for granted, but focuses on these as central concerns that constitute features of everyday social media use in firms.

The small firms selected as the research setting comprised a purposive sample (Easterby-Smith *et al.,* 2002) able to address many of the short-comings identified in the literature. The group were extremely diverse, operating in different industries and sectors and in a variety of different

conditions. In addition, the group were unified by their goal to understand how to use social media to communicate with external stakeholders. This made it possible to capture the on-going development of their understanding during its formation. Their smaller size made it possible to easily access everyone involved in social media providing a fuller picture of the processes taking place. Their heterogeneity became a feature of the findings, which enabled the identification of social and psychological patterns across diverse contexts. This is an alternative view of social media use that the common portrayal of the internal use of social media platforms between departments (Koch, Gonzalez & Leidner, 2013; Leonardi, 2014; Kane *et al.* 2014). The characteristics of the small firms studied meant that there were no assumptions made about a base level of competence with social media, access to resources for using social media or about how social media would be used in each firm.

Swidler's (1986) cultural toolkit framework was selected as a means of analysing the narratives as it embraced the variety of individuals and firms. It provided a vocabulary for understanding their responses to change and uncertainty. Instead of focusing exclusively on the implications of social media use for individuals (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Leonardi, 2014; Kane *et al.* 2014) the framework highlighted the social and psychological patterns preceding and permeating social media use. These patterns were triggered by the epistemological uncertainty experienced by individuals attempting to use social media. Uncertainty triggered the cognitive process of framing (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014; Ravishankar, 2015) social media and the selection of the most appropriate, available cultural tools. This process unfolded recursively overtime (Garud *et al.* 2013) as individuals were repeatedly challenged by uncertainty during the course of their social media use. This is an alternative view of how social media use is accomplished than the widely accepted affordances approach (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) which assumes that firms have ready access to expertise and resources and are likely to interpret and use social media similarly. This thesis contributes a view of social media interpretation and use that accentuates the variety of users and uses of social media. The psycho-social process of framing and reframing in

the face of uncertainty has the potential to be extended to other types of social media platform as they emerge as well as other unfamiliar technologies. In an era defined by rapid technological change (Kurzweil, 2005) an understanding of how individuals respond to and make unfamiliar technologies familiar is both timely and relevant.

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Appendix A: Revised semi-structured interview guide

Semi-structured interview questions
(the questions are bullet pointed, the topic headings will not be used in interview)

1. Description of their own enterprise
   - What's it like to work here?
   - What do you like about your job?
   - What do the staff like about working here?
   - Is there anything they don't enjoy as much?
   - What do people like about [name of the company]?
   - How do people here normally communicate with each other?
   - How do you normally communicate with people outside the business?

2. Previous experience of digital technologies
   - How much did you use social media before you started using it for the business?
   - What kind of things did you use social media for?

3. Impressions of social media and its potential for meeting business objectives
   - What did you think of social media before using it for the business?
   - What convinced you to try using social media for the business?

4. Motivations for use
   - What advantages do you think social media use can have for a business like yours?
   - What were you trying to achieve by using social media for your business?
   - Did you have any concerns about social media for business before you tried it?

Practical use of social media

1. Initial contact
   - Describe how you established your business on social media.
   - How did it go initially?
   - How different was it to the way things had been done before?
   - What was the biggest challenge?
   - How did the other staff react to using social media?
   - What kind of response did you get from other social media users?
   - How did you learn about the dos and don'ts of using social media for business?

2. Complications
   - What changes did you make to the way things were normally done in order to use social media for your business?
   - How did the use of social media impact you/ the other staff?

- Were there any particular instances you can remember when mistakes were made in using social media? Or when things went wrong?
- How did you manage any difficulties that arose?

3. Adaption
- Do you feel like you can be yourself on social media?
- How well do you feel the business is represented on social media?
- How has social media changed the way things were done before?
- What has stayed the same since you started using social media for the business?
- Do you intend to continue using social media for the business - Why?

Appendix B: Cultural tools used by participants

	Sense-making tools	Practical tools	Socio-structural tools
1	• Beliefs about their followers interests (EST) • Beliefs about Facebook (it is easy; it can remind the community; it makes us look bigger) (NEW) • Facebook users expect a speedy response (NEW) • Facebook hides the chaotic backstage reality of a small firm (NEW)	• Habit of vets tweeting whilst on the road (NEW) • Has an MBA and can produce plans and guidelines (EST) • She has always been a dog-lover (EST) • Promotes Facebook page using a PR Agency (MOD) • Allows staff to monitor but not to respond (NEW) • Uses formal style and grammar (EST) • Picks up the phone to disappointed donors (EST)	• Larger organisation that lends back office support and expertise (EST) • The venues they use promote their Facebook page (NEW) • They got some promotion by the BBC (NEW)
2	• Agencies wouldn't understand us enough to run our social media (EST) • Followers want to see and hear from you often (MOD) • Facebook makes us look bigger (NEW) • Facebook is easy and self explanatory (EST) • In her previous firm she had negative s.m. experiences that have helped her to learn (EST) • Considers followers her friends (MOD)	• Runs competitions to attract attention (NEW) • Checks social media often, 24 hours a day (EST) • Uses emotive posts to get a response (EST) • Tries to mirror the interaction that customers would get in the shop (EST) • Makes personal contact with people when mistakes occur (MOD)	• Uses celebrity followers to promote her brand (MOD) • Watches what other firms do on their acconts (EST)
3	• Social media is fundamental to achieving a national reach (EST) • People prefer positive posts (NEW) • Social media is story-telling (MOD) • There are no risks, just missed opportunities (EST)	• Identifies personally with his target followers (EST) • Build a habit of one tweet a day for all staff (NEW) • Only makes positive posts (EST) • Targets different sets of followers using different accounts (NEW) • Has a team of contributors who have to use the	• Reads books from the library to learn about s.m. (EST) • Attended a social media course (NEW) • Interacts with other churches to share ideas for s.m. (MOD) • Observes and copies good ideas of others on s.m. (EST)

		• guidelines (NEW) • Checks his accounts at all hours (EST)	
4	• All business are floundering to make sense of social media (MOD) • Social media is a "place" for her "community" (NEW) • People must feel that you are not just trying to sell (EST) • Social media adds personality to a sterile environment (MOD) • Reflects on negative experiences on sm to inform future action (MOD)	• Deals with s.m. complaints immediately, often on the phone(EST) • Has measured the impact of s.m on sales thanks to analytics background (EST) • Uses Google Alerts to find positive stories to re-post (MOD) • Carefully considers the language used on Facebook (EST) • Gets up at 6am and checks social media (NEW)	• Used a young college apprentice to set it all up (NEW) • Attends social media workshop when at conferences (MOD)
5	• Social media is a full time job (MOD) • Social media success is based on numbers (EST) • You need to embrace social media or fall behind (MOD) • Lots of creative content is the key to success (EST)	• Previous marketing experience (EST) • An extreme sports enthusiast like his followers (EST) • Uses competitions to draw attention (MOD) • Checks in to social media a lot using his phone (EST) • Has a team of staff but doesn't know how to safely hand it over to them. (NEW)	• Friends working in large organisations who pass him information (EST) • Uses other influential bloggers and social media accounts to promote his page (MOD) • Uses a friend's robot to grow following (NEW)
6	• Different platforms are useful in different ways (EST) • Twitter is listening (NEW) • Social media is casual and easy-going (MOD) • Takes into account negative feedback from others (MOD)	• Understands branding and uses this to tailor s.m account (EST) • Tries to appear 'authentic' and not 'corporate' (EST) • Brainstorms ideas with other professional mums (EST) • Checks social media first and last thing (NEW) • Tries to collaborate with social media followers to develop a community around ideas (NEW) • Wants to appear professional and use high standards for graphics and	• Discusses decisions with her board (NEW) • Uses the skills of local college students for cheap results (EST) • Receives support from a closed group on Facebook (MOD)

		pictures on posts (MOD)	
7	• Cynical about the benefits of social media (NEW) • People want you to be honest on social media (EST) • Believes his customers are not on social media (MOD) • People don't want to talk about his product on social media (EST) • It's a box that needs to be ticked (NEW) • It's a shop window I'm not proud of (MOD) • It's useful for keeping up appearances. (NEW)	• Understands how to do SEO from previous job in an agency (EST) • Doesn't delete posts (EST) • Shares articles by others, doesn't create new content himself (EST) • Wants to appear to be doing social media well to attract clients (MOD) • Didn't respond to followers on social media although he felt he should (MOD) • Tries to show behind the scenes pictures to add interest (NEW) • Tries to make connections with other relevant interest groups (MOD)	• Keeps in touch with friends from his old agency, but too embarrassed to ask them for advice (EST)
8	• Social media is a large conversation and you need a loud voice (MOD) • Creative thinking can help you stand out on S.M (EST) • Social media comments cannot be revoked (NEW) • The technology is not hard, the way of thinking is hard (NEW) • Social media can be intrusive (NEW)	• Use social media aggregators to monitor channels (NEW) • Work on social media out of hours (MOD) • Use 'Plain English; style for posts (MOD) • Try to take time away from social media and turn it off (NEW)	• Use an expert friend to advise on social media (EST)
9	• There is a social media etiquette (MOD) • All social media costs is time (EST) • Not sure it's worth the time (NEW) • Social media can help us to interact (MOD)	• Has a detailed technical knowledge of risks and proactively protects against threats (EST) • Wrote some specialist blog posts, now out of date (MOD) • Posts three times a day or it seems dead (MOD) • Tweets during his train commute (NEW) • Set up LinkedIn group to have	• Watches media releases to learn about problems and threats. (EST)

			discussions – little uptake from followers (MOD)	
10		• Social media is about creating and sharing content (EST) • Posts are always seen by a mixed audience (EST) • Social media should not be done by an agency, it should be integral to the business (NEW)	• Monitors the views his posts receive to learn what works (EST) • Posts have to be grammatically correct (MOD) • Contributions made by a number of team members (MOD) • Monitors the activities of followers (EST)	• Used an external agency to brainstorm ideas (MOD)
11		• Social media requires quick reactions (EST) • In his industry social media is essential and cannot be ignored (EST) • It's essential to be neutral when posting to s.m. (EST) • The people and information on s.m are of questionable reliability (EST)	• Uses Google Analytics to measure traffic (MOD) • Scopes out new followers using their profiles (EST) • His working day is interrupted by s.m every 20 minutes (EST) • Social media posts have to be grammatically correct but have a less serious tone (EST) • Never claims to be a social media guru (MOD) • Pitches news stories to journalists on social media (EST)	• Watches other companies like Innocent (EST)
12		• Social media can help me to establish a community (MOD) • Social media is always changing (EST) • Social media is about relationships not numbers (NEW) • Followers buy into the family business image (NEW)	• Uses a lot of pictures to draw interest (EST) • Uses some automation to help with time (MOD) • Monitors the response rate to her posts (NEW) • Only makes posts related to the business (EST) • Uses branding principles to establish her account (MOD) • Posts occasional shots of family, new baby etc (NEW) • Retweets local businesses to show support (NEW) • Posts using her phone in a spare five minutes (MOD)	• Observes other businesses and copies their styles of posting (MOD) • Discusses social media strategies with other local business owners (NEW)

13	• The results of social media activity are impossible to quantify (EST) • If it doesn't add business value, social media should be dropped (NEW) • Social media makes them appear bigger (MOD) • Social media can be entertainment (EST)	• Adds social media links to bottom of emails and business cards (NEW) • Adds new connections to his social media accounts as soon as he meets them (EST) • Only uses social media via his phone (EST) • Lies on sofa at night an checks his accounts (EST) • Articulates his connections, including high profile followers (MOD) • Doesn't spend long agonising over tweets (EST) • Features his twitter feed on his homepage (MOD) • Never shares competitive information (EST) • Competes with his rugby and pub friends to see how many followers they can get (MOD)	• Observes and copies his competitors social media accounts (EST)
14	• Social media helps us to be visible (EST) • People believe what they read on social media (MOD) • People are prone to posting personal information on social media (MOD)	• Tries to share neutral stories that won't alienate anyone (EST) • Closely monitors the posts made by volunteers (MOD) • Uses guidelines for volunteers to follow (MOD) • Asks IT proficient husband for advise (EST) • Follows and likes people she meets at networking events (NEW)	• Observes and imitates larger organisations (MOD) • Uses volunteers and interns from local universities (EST)
15	• Social media is an experiment (MOD) • Social media is a skill set he doesn't have (NEW) • You can't do everything yourself on social media (NEW) • Social media is a state of mind (EST)	• Tried paid for social media advertisement (MOD) • Uses Google Analytics to monitor how many people are directed to his site from social media (NEW) • Closes down accounts if he is uncomfortable with interactions (MOD)	• Taps into resources of larger Royal Institute and University connections. (NEW)

		• Tried to use help from Facebook generation kids (EST)	
16	• Social media should be in house (EST) • Social media is more like a conversation (MOD) • Social media is like another shop front (EST) • If you don't understand s.m. you'll get fleeced (NEW) • Social media should be free (NEW)	• Uses experience from a previous Ebay business, (SEO, targeted ads etc.) (EST) • Posts a lot of pictures and personal recommendations (MOD) • Got his friends and family to like his sm page (EST) • Never use it to moan – only positive comments (MOD)	• Watches and copies other businesses (EST) • Uses an agency (EST)
17	• Social media success is increased sales and more followers (MOD) • It's about image more than financial value (NEW) • It shows you've got nothing to hide (NEW) • It makes us look bigger (EST)	• Asks friends and no one he knows has had social media success (EST) • Thinks about articles he could write whilst out on the road (MOD) • Closed down an account when he was unhappy with the content (MOD) • Prefers to make new connections by knocking on doors (EST) • Don't say things that you wouldn't say face to face (EST) • They retweet other people a lot (EST)	• They follow and copy other peoples accounts (EST) • They look out for courses but haven't attended one (NEW)
18	• Social media doesn't work for all businesses (EST) • The art of communication is lost in text (MOD)	• Uses an aggregator to manage posts (NEW) • Uses it to check out new contacts (MOD) • Keeps business and personal life separate (EST) • Still establishes new connections face to face and links on social media afterwards (EST)	• Planning to use an external agency (NEW) • Follows other company directors to copy what they tweet (MOD)
19	• Social media is not natural for his generation (EST) • People get carried away on social media (EST) • Businesses need to be seen to be using it (MOD)	• Retweets other people's content (MOD) • Tries to tweet in the evenings (EST) • Unfollows people if he doesn't like their behaviour (MOD) • Tries to get tips	• Attends training for social media put on by the business offices (NEW)

		• from his business network (NEW) • Avoids letting personal and work contacts mix on social media (EST)	
20	• Technology changes too quickly to keep up with (MOD) • Our main problems with s.m are money and time (EST) • Social media is just talking to a group instead of an individual (MOD)	• Uses LinkedIn to scope people out (EST) • Had some conflicts on Facebook and closed it down (MOD) • Thinks very carefully and plans each post (MOD) • Uses team to try and makes posts, but fears they don't know enough (MOD)	• Talks about accessing an agency but hasn't done it yet
21	• Social media is entertainment (EST) • It's another media channel (EST) • It's hard to get people to respond, they want to be passive (MOD) • It's good for improving image (MOD)	• Tweets from events and uses event hashtags to raise profile (MOD) • Posts pictures and posts to entertain and provoke discussion (EST) • Uses social media in between other tasks on his phone (MOD) • Tracks responses using an analytics package (MOD) • Asks other film makers what they do on social media (MOD)	• Tries to interact with bigger organisations on social media so that his reputation is enhanced (MOD) • Attended a free workshop in his office building (NEW)
22	• Social media is an inner sanctum that he can't get into (NEW) • It's what the whizz kids do (EST) • Community is disappearing but its still there on social media (MOD) • Social media is a way to get new customers (EST)	• Got a young member of staff to establish his account (EST) • Tried to connect his social media accounts to his email list to make different sales offers (MOD) • Tries to post pictures of events at the pub (NEW) • Tries to make marketing offers via social media posts (EST)	• Reads about social media in the press – worries about the risks (MOD)
23	• Social media helps to boost popularity (EST) • It should be good for building a community (MOD) • People don't want to be sold to on social media (EST)	• Use an aggregator to make the same post across different platforms (MOD) • Use Facebook statistics to monitor popularity of posts (EST) • Looks for help online and downloads ebooks	• Talks to neighbouring retailers about sm and shares ideas (EST)

		• (EST) • Tried to establish regular feature posts i.e, Cake Thursdays (MOD) • Posts provocative pictures to get responses (NEW) • Try to get customers to post pictures whilst they are in shop (MOD) • Try to get customers to be active rather than them posting all the content (MOD)	
24	• Social media users like to be self-indulgent (MOD) • Reflects on accounts of negative experiences with staff. (EST) • Facebook is an extension of word of mouth (MOD)	• Runs competitions (NEW) • Tries to appear humble and non-commercial in his posts (EST) • Took advice from a social media expert recommended by a friend (MOD) • Controls staff -use of social media both in and out of work (MOD) • Tries to encourage customers in store to like them on Facebook (MOD)	• Considers using an agency (NEW) • Follows other businesses to copy what works well (EST)
25	• Social media should enhance my image (EST) • It's unfair to use things for free (EST) • Social media can be an addiction (MOD) • Social media can create a happier society (NEW)	• Considers time of day and who will see his posts (NEW) • Uses some marketing principles learned from previous industry (EST) • Pays for Facebook ads. (NEW) • Careful to use it only at work to maintain a balance (MOD) • Posts motivational messages and images (NEW) • Spends fleeting moments inbetween work on there (EST) • Never makes personal posts (MOD)	• Attended a workshop about social media (NEW) • Observes and copies other businesses (EST) • Plans to give you intern some experience at running social media (NEW)
26	• Social media is too informal for a professional business. (EST) • It's like wearing flip flops to work (NEW) • It helps you to	• They use it to gather information about clients (MOD) • They take advise from their web developer (EST) • They have	• They look at other organisations for ideas (MOD)

	• appear modern. (EST) • Other professional firms are not using it (MOD) • The type of interactions that take place on sm are irrelevant (EST)	• accounts but they are static, other users cannot comment or make posts (EST) • Grammar must be correct (EST)	
27	• In their industry everyone has to use social media. (NEW) • Social media is long term, it takes a while to kick in (MOD) • Websites are dead, all the energy is going in to social media (MOD)	• Uses SEO to boost visitors (EST) • Took some advice to write shorter posts more often (MOD • Inconsistent at posting – sometimes a lot, then nothing at all for months (EST) • Posts must be relevant, not every moronic thought (EST) • Posts pictures of events (MOD)	• Attended a social media course by a larger organisation (MOD) • Considering employing an intern to focus on social media duties (NEW)
28	• If you don't have social media you don't have a business (NEW) • Social media can help us with survival (NEW) • If we want to grow we need to use unconventional means (NEW)	• Tried to use staff to make posts, but they are all busy (MOD) • Tries to use Dictaphone to think about messages to post whilst he's on the road (NEW) • Uses agency to manage posts (EST) • Tweets at events using event hashtags (MOD) • Is careful not to slag others off on social media (EST) • Was told by an expert to use Sunday afternoons (NEW) • Hardly makes any comments but does like other peoples stuff (MOD)	• Attended a free workshop run by local network (NEW) • Watches relevant groups but doesn't participate much (MOD)
29	• Social media implies that they are in touch with reality (NEW) • Life is too short for social media (EST) • Social media can bombard and distract (MOD) • There are better ways to build meaningful relationships	• They were convinced by web developers that they need it – but they are cynical (NEW) • Keep posts short and succinct (MOD) • Delete any posts made by others that they don't like (MOD) • Don't update their	•

	• (EST) • Social media is like chaos (NEW) • Social media could mushroom out of control (MOD)	statuses too often.(EST)	
30	• Social media gives the appearance of life and activity (EST) • Social media is a participation game, to get likes and followers up (MOD) • Social media is better use of down time at work (MOD) • Social media can raise the profile of your business (NEW)	• Strictly separates work and social life on social media (EST) • Does social media at night for entertainment (MOD) • Drew on insights from marketing manager in Canada (NEW) • Tweet business and local interest items (NEW) • Trying to establish a social media plan (NEW) • Never tweet when drunk (EST) • Tries to create content that will entertain people (videos) (EST)	• Attended some training provided by the innovation centre he is part of (MOD)
31	• Social media allows them to change their image (EST) • It is essential in their industry (EST) • People want to see that you are dedicated to your business (EST) • I should be able to find new clients here (NEW)	• Automates some tweets so they are spaced out (MOD) • Learns from blogs (EST) • Mixing work and personal accounts to give the impression he is dedicated (EST) • Thanks people individually for following them (MOD) • Gets carried away in arguments on social media (EST) • Deleted problematic accounts (MOD) • Only make positive and light hearted tweets (EST) • Interact and compliment other companies (MOD)	• Follows other businesses to find out how to do things (EST) • Has approached some clients who are experts (MOD) • Attended a free training by a local agency (NEW)