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**UNMASKING THE INTERNET: INVESTIGATING  
UK WOMEN'S DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
THROUGH INTERSECTIONALITY**

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**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**July 2015**

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## Abstract

### **Unmasking the Internet: Investigating UK Women's Digital Entrepreneurship through Intersectionality**

This thesis investigates the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom from an intersectional cyberfeminist perspective. Informed by feminist theories of technology and critical entrepreneurship scholarship, it challenges mainstream discourse on digital entrepreneurship with the argument that, similar to traditional (offline) entrepreneurship, online or digital entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in the social world. It draws upon intersectional feminist theory that conceptualises the social world as composed of intersecting hierarchies of race, class, and gender, in which individuals and groups are positioned in dynamic yet durable ways, and by which they are affected simultaneously. This positionality is understood to be tied to unequal resource distribution, and for this reason, holds important implications when mapped to extant entrepreneurship theory. The thesis also provides interdisciplinary evidence for the continued coding of Internet technology as predominantly white and male, and for the online environment itself as a stratified and unequal space, countering public discourse that portrays it as a neutral and meritocratic 'great equaliser.'

Building upon this theoretical framework, the thesis proposes, investigates and answers the following research question: *'How do social positionality and resource access affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship?'* Underpinned by a critical realist methodology and using thematic, retroductive and comparative case study analytical methods, a qualitative study of twenty-six women digital entrepreneurs was undertaken. The objectives of the research were:

- To address the theoretical and empirical gap in existing entrepreneurship literature on digital entrepreneurial activities
- To ascertain how gender, class, race/ethnicity, and other relevant categories of social positionality intersect and affect resource access in the context of digital entrepreneurship.

Evidence suggests that social positionality (in particular, the intersections of gender, class and race) have significant impacts upon the experiences of participants, including their reasons for engaging in digital entrepreneurship as well as in particular industries and sectors, their access to crucial resources such as finance, know-how, and networks, and to what extent they are able to utilise the online environment for entrepreneurial activity.

The thesis makes a number of novel contributions to the literature on digital entrepreneurship. In particular, it proposes a critique of the Internet as a neutral and meritocratic space for entrepreneurial activity, due to persistent inequality in the offline world of which it is a part. It extends the entrepreneurship literature with a theoretical framework and empirical evidence illustrating the constraining and/or enabling effects of offline social positionality on digital entrepreneurial activity. In this way, it develops a platform for future research into the relationships between social positionality, entrepreneurship and digital technologies in the contemporary era.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The development and deployment of information and computing technologies (ICTs) at the turn of the twenty-first century is widely understood to be the foundation of one of the most significant economic and social shifts in Western societies since the Industrial Revolution. Not only has it engendered a social world both saturated with and dependent upon information, but it has also changed a great number of working practices and created an entirely new category of worker, whose primary function is to apply knowledge to information (Castells, 2010). The Internet, and in particular, the World Wide Web, is the main channel for public engagement with ICTs, and interactions in the online environment have become central to relationships between businesses and customers. In the twenty-five years since Internet technology has been available to the public, the technology has seen a number of iterations, from being primarily text-based, with limited control in the hands of the typical end-user, to an interactive environment rich in graphic texts, visual imagery and videos where creative contributions, re-posts, and responses from the public are the norm. Once identified as Web 2.0 and now commonly known as social media, the social aspects of Internet technology are still evolving, with organisations regularly being formed to try to capture or capitalise on the power of Internet users to contribute, circulate and popularise information.

Entrepreneurship is a phenomenon understood to be linked to social and economic shifts, for with such change comes the emergence of new opportunities for exchange (Kirzner, 1973; Schumpeter, 1934). The relevance of the Internet to entrepreneurship is often touted (Johansson et al., 2006); indeed, it was newly developed Internet businesses at the heart of the 'dot com' boom (and bust) that was a feature of the turn of the millennia (Kroll et al., 2010). However, despite acknowledging the rapid pace of change in digital technologies, the academic conversation on Internet entrepreneurship (also referred to as online entrepreneurship, e-business, and more recently, digital entrepreneurship), seems in many ways to be anchored in an earlier era. Much of the prominent literature on digital entrepreneurship is from the early 2000s, when the phenomenon was characterised by the creation of new 'dot coms', and when being at the digital cutting edge meant learning how to incorporate Internet technology into a traditional company's existing business strategy (e.g. Poon & Swatman, 1999; Taylor & Murphy, 2004). Neither the entrepreneurship nor the management literatures have explored in detail the experiences of digital entrepreneurs in the contemporary period. In particular, the role the Internet plays in the entrepreneurial activity of people who form and manage micro and small enterprises, as opposed to its significance for medium and large corporations, is under-theorised and remains unclear.

In developed Western economies where a majority of the population has Internet access, it can be assumed that many individuals are using the technology for some kind of entrepreneurial activity, whether that involves trading via a third-party platform, or developing and managing an international value chain (Davidson & Vaast, 2010; Hull et al., 2007). Davidson & Vaast (2010: 2) define digital entrepreneurship as "*the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies.*" Digital enterprises often have distinct features: they may take unexpected organisational forms, composed of 'virtual' teams of freelance workers, and their organisation's offerings may blur the boundaries between products and services as well as between

online and offline (Hull et al., 2007). But despite the prevalence of digital entrepreneurship as a regular feature in public discourse, as the opening chapters of this thesis will explore, relatively little is known about the entrepreneurial activity of these individuals, or the details of their experiences of doing business in the current online environment. This lack of understanding is problematic for a number of reasons, both theoretical and practical, that this thesis endeavours to clarify and address.

A primary argument for why it is necessary to learn more about the realities of digital entrepreneurship is that such activity has been promoted as a means by which marginalised and socially disadvantaged individuals can become economically self-sufficient (e.g. Thompson Jackson, 2009), as the final section of Chapter 2 will demonstrate. It is portrayed in the media as a route out of the corporate 'rat-race', low-waged service jobs, and unemployment (Crotti, 2011; Lowe, 2011; Salzwedel, 2007; Schmidt, 2011a), motivations which feature prominently amongst the experiences of the sample population of this thesis. Regarding women in particular, key political figures, for example, former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, have asserted that the promise of increasing women's entrepreneurial activity extends beyond individual self-sufficiency to wider economic regeneration (2005). To this end, the UK and European Union governments are investing substantially in women's digital entrepreneurial activity (Government Equalities Office, 2014), and although there is insufficient statistical evidence regarding the participation of marginalised people specifically in digital entrepreneurial activity, existing data does indicate that online trading in general is an area of marked growth (Williams, 2011). This raises the question of whether digital entrepreneurship has the potential to improve micro and macro-economic conditions, either as a route out of poverty, or a viable economic substitute for an established career that has been cut short. If so, it must then be asked whether this is true for everyone, and if not, for whom it does work, and why. This line of thinking then leads onto the overarching question of whether or not digital entrepreneurship actually holds the potential to regenerate stagnated economies, as it has been purported to do.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the extensive deployment of Internet technology as well as the widespread addition of mobile web technologies in the past decade, there has been little academic research into the experiences of people using such technologies for entrepreneurial activity. This was ascertained by conducting a broad review of the scholarly conversation on entrepreneurship, and a more focused review of work on Internet, digital or online entrepreneurship, found in Chapters 2 and 3. Despite general recognition of the pervasiveness and indispensability of digital technologies, the literature has not yet adequately addressed nor accounted for the numerous individuals trading, providing services, applying knowledge to information, and otherwise creating value via the Internet in a myriad of ways. At the same time, large-scale quantitative research on Internet usage (e.g. Harding, 2007; Pew Internet and American Life Survey, 2012; Ofcom Communications Market Report, 2011) is also strangely quiet on applications of the Internet for entrepreneurship, seemingly overlooking or omitting the phenomenon from national surveys. The result is that there is very little known about who is using the online environment for entrepreneurial activity, in what ways it is being used, and their experiences of doing so. The limited amount of research that does exist on contemporary digital entrepreneurial activity is located primarily outside of the leading entrepreneurship journals, and thus, not steeped in the current conversation (e.g. Davidson & Vaast, 2010; Hull et al., 2007). Hence, key work is located in literature on

techno-entrepreneurship or international business, and framed by dominant conceptions of the entrepreneur as either a Schumpeterian innovator or a Kirznerian arbitrageur (Chandra & Coviello, 2010). Although this is useful as an analytical starting point, it does not enable us to address the questions of whether or not such activity actually functions as a viable economic option for socially disadvantaged and marginalised people.

Due to gendered positionality, women comprise a marginalised group both in entrepreneurship in general (Delmar & Davidsson, 2000; GEM, 2013; Shane, 2008) and in the technology sector in particular (Kelan, 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2012; Startup Genome & Telefonica, 2012). Thus, women digital entrepreneurs provide an appropriate starting point from which to begin mapping experiences of social and economic marginality within the online environment. As gender is a generic universal ascription that serves as a fundamental marker of humanity (Butler, 1993), it is used here as a framing analysis; however, the research adopts an intersectional perspective attuned to heterogeneity within any group of women, and which critically considers issues of race and socio-economic class in concert with those of gender. An intersectional feminist perspective considers not only the personal characteristics and motivations of participants, but importantly, their social positionality, and the structural resource access (or lack thereof) that accompanies their dynamic, yet durable, social locations.

The notion of heterogeneous access to resources has featured significantly in entrepreneurship theory for some time; however, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on differences in belief about resource value as a catalyst for entrepreneurial activity rather than differential access to resources themselves (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). Introducing intersectionality and positionality theory, with their explicit links to resource distribution, offers a useful way of augmenting and extending existing entrepreneurship theory. Grounded in the intersectional perspective put forward by Anthias (2001a & b; 2006, 2007, 2008, 2013), the theoretical framework of the thesis is introduced in Chapter 3. It is developed in detail, with critical realism as a philosophical under-labourer, in Chapter 4. It is proposed that this theoretical frame will provide a more fruitful avenue for research into questions around what kind of impact upon inequality, if any, it is possible for digital technologies to facilitate. By paying closer attention to social context, further insight can be offered into the diversity of people who are engaging with Internet technologies entrepreneurially, the resources to which they have access, and the relationships between these resources and their experiences of digital entrepreneurship, in order that the realities of the phenomenon may be better understood.

Such issues provide the impetus for focused research to be undertaken in two vital areas: quantitative research that investigates the rates of digital entrepreneurship over time, and qualitative research that explores the experiences of individuals who are engaging, or have engaged, in digital entrepreneurial activity. This thesis addresses the latter. In it, the individualist ideology and meritocratic rhetoric of entrepreneurialism in the contemporary era is explored and analysed against the experiences of marginalised actors working in an online context. The gap in extant literature is addressed with the proposal of the following research question: *'How do social positionality and resource access affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship?'* To this end, in-depth interviews are conducted with women digital entrepreneurs based in the UK, from a variety of socio-economic and demographic backgrounds, who use the Internet to reach customers, sell goods, or provide services.

The objectives of the research are:

- To address the theoretical and empirical gap in existing entrepreneurship literature on digital entrepreneurial activities
- To ascertain how gender, class, race/ethnicity, and other relevant categories of social positionality intersect and affect resource access in the context of digital entrepreneurship.

The purpose of the research is to explore the worldview of the participants in order to better understand their experiences of using the online environment for entrepreneurship, identify key structural enablers and constraints they encounter in doing so, and consider their significance in relation to extant theory.

The thesis will proceed as follows. Chapter 2, *Entrepreneurial Activity in Online Environments*, presents an analytical review of entrepreneurship literature, and in particular identifies the conspicuous gap around contemporary digital entrepreneurship in both academic and non-academic research. To address this gap, it builds on previous work to offer a new theoretical typology of entrepreneurial activity online, characterised by mode of exchange. The final sections of the chapter historicise the appearance of entrepreneurialism as ideology into public discourse, and cite international media sources to illustrate how digital entrepreneurship is promoted worldwide, and aimed especially at members of marginalised populations as a way to overcome the challenges of poverty, under- and unemployment.

Chapter 3, *Digital Entrepreneurship and Intersectionality*, explores the impact of an implicit success bias in entrepreneurship literature, and the subsequent lack of attention to women's digital entrepreneurship, much of which takes place in the home and is therefore less visible. In an interdisciplinary review, it draws upon cyberfeminist literature, race and cyberculture studies, and critical gender studies on entrepreneurship and work to contextualise the phenomenon of women's digital entrepreneurship. In particular, it refers to findings on home-working and telework to argue that digital entrepreneurship may not live up to its promises of an increased income and a better work-life balance for women, nor may it necessarily enable offline social hierarchies to be overcome. It builds upon the literature review in Chapter 2 to demonstrate that although existing entrepreneurship theory acknowledges the significance of resources to entrepreneurial activity, it generally lacks attention to social context and its relationship to resources. The paradigm of intersectionality, which draws links between social positionality and resource access, is introduced as a theoretical intervention that can address and resolve this oversight.

Chapter 4, *A Critical Realist Feminist Approach to Intersectionality and the Internet*, conducts an immanent critique of existing intersectionality theory to develop a novel critical realist and intersectional feminist methodology which underpins the research. This is complemented by Chapter 5, which provides details of the sample and outlines the methods used, in particular highlighting the critically reflexive approach taken to interviewing and data analysis. Two empirical chapters follow: Chapter 6, *Structural Inequality in Women's Digital Entrepreneurship*, presents thematic evidence that social positionality did indeed affect numerous aspects of the experiences of participants, including the reasons they took up digital entrepreneurship, the industry sectors in which they engaged, and the

material, cultural and political resources to which they had access. Chapter 7, *Actualising Entrepreneurship in the Online Environment*, uses the critical realist analytical method of retroduction to identify key enabling mechanisms for digital entrepreneurship at the social and psycho-social levels. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss and analyse the research findings in light of the extant literature. Chapter 9, *Structural Trends of Gender, Class and Race*, foregrounds inequality in each of these areas in succession, while Chapter 8, *Intersections in Individual Experiences*, presents three comparative cases to examine how these categories and other relevant characteristics affect people simultaneously based upon social positionality, producing a nuanced interplay of mechanisms of privilege and disadvantage in their experiences of digital entrepreneurship. The thesis concludes by reviewing the central theoretical and empirical contributions made, examining the limitations of the study, implications for policy and practice, and finally, considering directions for future research.

The title of the thesis, *Unmasking the Internet*, is a gesture to the work of critical entrepreneurship scholars Jones and Spicer, *Unmasking the Entrepreneur* (2009). In their book, they analyse and challenge mainstream assumptions about the figure of the entrepreneur, vivid in the public imagination as a visionary business leader and economic hero, to reveal a more complex and murky picture. The text brings to light shifting boundaries around the notions of both 'entrepreneurship' and 'entrepreneur', and points out discrepancies and inconsistencies in academic research on such things as the existence of an entrepreneurial personality type, or the impact of entrepreneurs on social and economic structures. Although the scope of their work is far beyond what is attempted here, and their influence on entrepreneurial discourse already apparent, it is hoped that this thesis may similarly disrupt some of the taken-for-granted assumptions around the relationship between the Internet and entrepreneurship, and, in so doing, continue the tradition of critical management scholarship that persists in expanding our understanding of the social world by questioning what has come to be accepted as true.

## Chapter 2: Entrepreneurial Activity in Online Environments

Existing entrepreneurship studies rarely focus on the online environment as an entrepreneurial context, while large-scale surveys of Internet usage overlook the entrepreneurial activities it enables, leaving a prominent knowledge gap in entrepreneurship discourse around existing and emergent entrepreneurial activities taking place online. To address this gap and establish a preliminary conceptual foundation for the investigation, this chapter reviews key literature in entrepreneurship studies, beginning with early approaches influenced by the disciplines of economics and psychology which explored the economic impacts of entrepreneurship and the individual profile of the entrepreneur. The conversational turn to the concept of the opportunity is discussed, followed by more recent theoretical approaches that emphasise the processual and socially embedded nature of entrepreneurial action. It is argued that although extant theory acknowledges the relevance of unequally distributed resources to entrepreneurial action, this inequality is rarely contextualised within social hierarchies, preventing it from being fully explained. In addition, the social embeddedness and resource inequality understood to precede entrepreneurial activity has yet to be thoroughly explored in the context of the contemporary online environment. Extant typologies of digital entrepreneurship portraying the online landscape as relatively 'flat' are critiqued, and in their place, a more socially and technologically relevant typology of digital entrepreneurial activity is offered.

The chapter also reviews prominent public discourse on entrepreneurship, focusing on rhetorical claims emerging from the US and UK that entrepreneurship, particularly online, offers a solution to widespread human concerns like unemployment, poverty, and economic stagnation. Based on an implicit assumption that the online environment is a neutral space in which to conduct entrepreneurship, an activity typically presumed also neutral and meritocratic, this rhetoric is shown to encourage historically disadvantaged and socially marginalised people to use the Internet to be more entrepreneurial. The need to investigate the veracity of this assumption provides justification for the subject and timeliness of this thesis, for as digital entrepreneurship rates increase in the UK and worldwide (Manyika & Chui, 2014; Williams, 2011), empirical research is needed to ascertain whether or not the online environment offers the universal potential for successful entrepreneurship that contemporary rhetoric implies.

### 2.1 The Entrepreneurial Conversation

#### *What is Entrepreneurship?*

A discussion of digital entrepreneurship must be grounded in the concept of entrepreneurship in general. An age-old phenomenon but relatively recent field of study, the definition of entrepreneurship is itself a subject of debate (Brazeal & Herbert, 1999; Gartner, 2001; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Steyaert, 2007; Watson, 2012; Wilken, 1979: xi). Despite growing recognition and legitimacy, the boundaries of the field are not clearly defined, agreed upon, or understood (Busenitz et al., 2003; Zahra & Wright, 2011). A possible reason for this is that dependent on one's definitions, it can be difficult to distinguish between entrepreneurship and activities like self-employment, owner-management, micro-business, and 'lifestyle' business. Because of this difficulty, and the blurred boundaries between



categories, self-employment is often used as an operationalizing variable for entrepreneurship researchers, both in large-scale, global entrepreneurship research (e.g. Fairlie, 2005; GEM, 2013; Hofstede et al., 2004; OECD, 2000 as cited by Fairlie and Woodruff, 2007; Shane, 2008) and in related areas, such as applied economics (Parker, 2004). But although the terms 'self-employed' and 'entrepreneur' are often used interchangeably in both academic and popular spheres, this does not necessarily indicate that they always refer to exactly the same phenomena. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

Since the late twentieth century, entrepreneurship as a paradigm has assumed a prominent place in both academia and popular culture. The modern academic conversation marks its birth in the 1980s (Bygrave, 2006), alongside policymakers calling for a 'revival' of entrepreneurship in response to waning productivity growth in the United States (Hebert & Link, 1989). Initially focused on the questions "What is entrepreneurship?" and "Who is the entrepreneur?" (Wilken, 1979: xi), attempts to secure answers to these inquiries pervade the early literature. This was followed by a push to turn attention away from the individual and towards organisational emergence (Gartner, 1988; 1990). Economics-based approaches have traditionally been utilised to address the structural aspects of the phenomenon, while psychological-based approaches have dealt with the individual aspects (Watson, 2009).

Regarding its structural impacts, the work of economists Schumpeter and Kirzner have been among the strongest influences. Building on the neoclassical concept of economic equilibrium, Schumpeter argued that entrepreneurs are primary economic drivers who disrupt this balance and catalyse the 'creative destruction' of established industries via innovation and enterprise (1934). His portrayal of the entrepreneur as independent, innovative, and heroic set the foundation for an archetype that still finds much favour today, the impacts of which will also be examined in the following chapter. In contrast, Kirzner (1973; 1997) portrays the entrepreneur not as an innovator, but instead as an arbitrageur, alert to profitable opportunities, whose actions serve to mitigate economic inefficiencies. Kirzner defines entrepreneurship as the recombining of resources to create new means-ends relationships with associated value, and the entrepreneurial opportunity as the possibility for such action (Kirzner, 2009, as cited by Dimov, 2011). Assumed to face risk and uncertainty as described by Knight (1921), Schumpeterian and Kirznerian entrepreneurs are posited to work in tandem, alternately destabilising, then stabilising the economy. This complementary disequilibrium perspective (Cheah, 1990; Chiles et al., 2007) with the heroic entrepreneur at its centre has become the mainstream view of entrepreneurship in the literature.

Yet although it appears relatively cohesive on the surface, the domain is replete with debate. Scholars have problematised the dominant Austrian school of thought (Chiles et al., 2007), called attention to the instability and simultaneous reification of the categories of 'entrepreneurship' and 'entrepreneur' (Jones & Spicer, 2005; 2009: 10; Ogbor, 2000), and questioned the focus, purpose and applicability of entrepreneurship discourse in general (Busenitz et al., 2003; Imas et al., 2012, Moroz & Hindle, 2011). Although psychological-based approaches produced interesting and influential insights into entrepreneurial traits, dispositions and behaviour (e.g. Baron, 1998; 2008; Begley & Boyd, 1987; Rauch & Frese, 2007), their discussions often produced contradictory and inconclusive evidence (Jones &

Spicer, 2009). Economics-based approaches attempted to predict and explain Schumpeterian entrepreneurship by mapping the entrepreneurial process to mathematical models, most with little rigour and less success (Bygrave, 1993; 2006: 19). Aldrich and Zimmer (1986) critiqued both personality-centred perspectives and economics-based 'rational actor' theories as well as deterministic socio-cultural models, arguing instead for a social network perspective. However, Gartner (1990) reiterated heroic Schumpeterian concepts of innovation and creative destruction by explicitly associating entrepreneurship with novelty, growth and the formation of a new venture. At the same time, Baumol (1990) called for attention to macroeconomic context beyond the individual, emphasising the relevance of the 'rules of the game,' or the reward system of the era, to the wider economic contributions – productive or destructive – an entrepreneur is likely to make.

While entrepreneurship is generally construed in both academic and public spheres as a positive economic activity (Calás et al., 2009), this portrayal is not without critique. That entrepreneurship could potentially be economically negative is a point made by scholars from both mainstream (Shane, 2008: 151) and critical (Jones & Spicer, 2009: 12) strands. Acs maintains that necessity entrepreneurship – that which is driven out of a lack of other employment options – has either “no effect” on economic development or can “even lead to under development” (2006: 97-98). While the negative correlation between necessity entrepreneurship and economic development has not been explored sufficiently to provide evidence of a causal relationship, he makes important observations: that entrepreneurial activity is far from homogenous, and while some entrepreneurs may be strongly oriented towards growth and job creation, others, usually with fewer resources and employment options, simply seek a source of income. Furthermore, Imas et al. (2012) argue that traditional entrepreneurship discourse simply cannot account for actors who are marginal or peripheral to the main economic system. These insights are particularly relevant in an era in which the study and promotion of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon is further routinised and brought into the mainstream (Goss, 2005), and the ideology of entrepreneurialism is celebrated as universally applicable, as the final section of this chapter will explain.

### *Entrepreneurship as a Process of Opportunity Development*

The notion of opportunity was brought to the fore of the scholarly conversation with Shane and Venkataraman's seminal paper (2000) which introduced the construct of the 'individual-opportunity nexus' (ION). The conversation is now centred on the idea of the opportunity: in particular, its identification, development, and exploitation (e.g. Ardichvili et al., 2003; Dimov, 2011; Corbett, 2007; Haynie et al., 2009). Debate has emerged around whether opportunities are discovered or created, and whether or not they exist independently of the entrepreneur who pursues them (e.g. Alvarez & Barney, 2007; Fiet, 2007; Sarasvathy, 2001; Venkataraman et al. 2012; Zahra, 2008). These debates reveal deeper differences in ontological beliefs about the nature of opportunities, and by association, the entrepreneurial process. Busenitz et al. (2003: 297) agree that opportunities are the arena in which is located the most potential for the research domain, but argue that entrepreneurship surpasses individuals, such that “individual differences, opportunities, or modes of organizing by themselves are relatively unlikely to result in important findings.” Building on Shane and Venkataraman's definition (2000), they hold that entrepreneurship exists beyond the ION and at the “nexus of opportunities,

enterprising individuals or teams, and mode of organizing within the overall context of wider environments” (Busenitz et al., 2003). Their emphasis on context and wider environments prompts the question of how the online environment poses a meaningful contemporary context for opportunity development, enacted by individuals and teams who are socially embedded.

Alongside the notion of the opportunity came scholarly attention to the process of opportunity development. Initial attempts at modelling the entrepreneurial process reflected the focus of earlier definitions on new venture creation (NVC) (e.g. Gartner, 1985). For example, Bhavé’s (1994) model (Figure 1) outlines the stages involved in the formation of a new business, detailing an orderly sequence of events from opportunity to exchange.

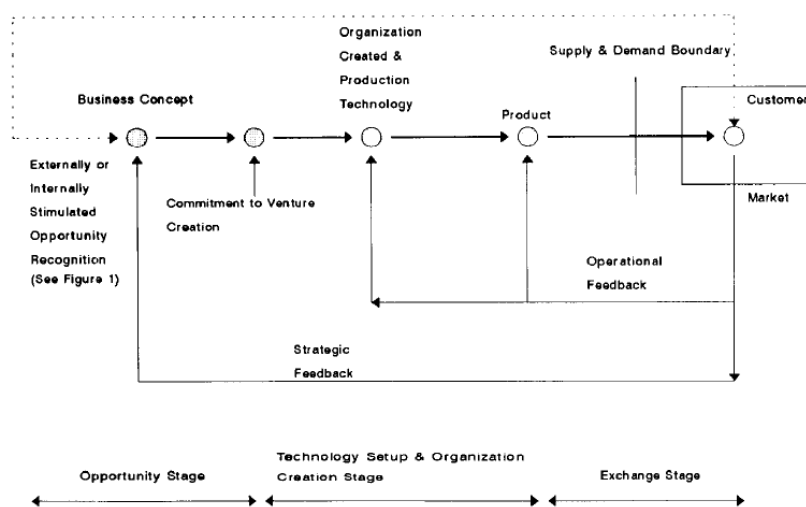


Figure 1: A Process Model of Entrepreneurial Venture Creation (Bhavé, 1994)

In a meta-review of processual approaches emerging from diverse epistemological and theoretical angles, Steyaert (2007) placed models such as Bhavé’s in a more analytical frame and called attention both to their developmental emphasis and the assumptions of linearity, growth and progression underpinning them. The many processual approaches identified suggest that the notion of entrepreneurship as a process is a generally accepted stance within the domain. The primacy of process has been taken up by scholars who have reframed entrepreneurship as a process of social or environmental change, perhaps with emancipatory potential (Calás et al., 2009; Rindova et al., 2009). It is also visible in Watson’s (2012) assertion that the concept of ‘the entrepreneur’, extensively problematised by critical scholars (e.g. Jones & Spicer, 2009; Mirchandani, 1999; Ogbor, 2000), is ineffective and outdated. Instead, entrepreneurial action is conceived as a ‘fundamental human activity’ (Johannisson, 2008 as cited by Watson, 2012) centred around processes of exchange or ‘dealmaking’. Watson argues there are no entrepreneurs per se, only entrepreneurial actors and action, defined as the making of adventurous, creative or innovative exchanges (‘deals’) between the entrepreneurial actor’s home ‘enterprise’ and other parties (2013). McMullen and Shepherd (2006: 134) define entrepreneurial action as “behavior in response to a judgmental decision under uncertainty about a possible opportunity

for profit''. According to this view, entrepreneurship is an activity open to anyone capable of identifying opportunities for, and creative means of, exchange; thus, it will necessarily take a variety of forms, precipitate diverse outcomes, and occur in many different contexts. But as many prominent scholars have noted, the heterogeneous nature of context is an important area that is still currently under-theorised (Acs & Audretsch, 2003: 329, Davidsson & Wicklund, 2001: 81-2 as cited by Blundel, 2007: 60; Wright, 2012). By investigating the online context for entrepreneurship and its social antecedents, this thesis heeds their call for attention to the considerable impacts of context on entrepreneurial action.

A processual perspective is also a useful way to move forward in a domain full of debate. Maroz and Hindle (2011) echo others in suggesting that the study of process is at the epicenter of the discussion on entrepreneurship and offers much unexplored potential for understanding, if not unifying, a highly disparate research domain (Bygrave, 2006; Low & MacMillan, 1988; Ucbasaran, Westhead, & Wright, 2001; Zahra, 2007 as cited by Moroz and Hindle, 2011). Steyaert (2007) notes process theories are diverse; they may be built upon the traditional, equilibrium-based model of entrepreneurship, like the discovery (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) and evolutionary (Aldrich, 1999) perspectives, or the creative process view, like the effectuation perspective (Sarasvathy, 2001). Yet, in general, these approaches critique a number of established assumptions within the field: they question an individualist 'alertness' theory (Kirzner, 1973; Minniti & Bygrave, 1999), destabilise and supplement the rational choice paradigm inherited from economics, and challenge the notion that entrepreneurs simply choose between available, pre-existing options (Steyaert, 2007). While much existing entrepreneurship literature still tends to foreground either the external environment around the opportunity or the individual entrepreneur (Sarason et al., 2006), a processual approach considers these not singly, but in tandem, which enables analysis of how they combine to produce entrepreneurial action.

#### *A Socially Embedded, Resource-Dependent Process*

As the thesis is concerned with a diverse group of actors engaging in a range of entrepreneurial activity online with a wide variety of outcomes, it utilises a neither a psychological nor economics-based definition of entrepreneurship. Instead, what is emphasised is its processual and socially embedded nature. Drawing upon both entrepreneurship literature and intersectionality theory, which will be introduced in the next chapter, it will argue that this social embeddedness is still relevant, even in the case of digital entrepreneurship. Although psychological and economics-based definitions have helped to provide significant insights, they present certain limitations that prevent them from being applicable here. Psychological approaches have been critiqued for their narrow and essentialist conception of 'the entrepreneur' (Jones & Spicer, 2009; Ogbor, 2000); as such, these frameworks neither centralise nor incorporate the actors with whom this study is concerned. Definitions such as Gartner's (1990) and similar, premised upon the economic contributions of the phenomenon, tend to delimit entrepreneurial activity by the creation of a new venture. In so doing, they obscure many actors whom, for example, Baumol (1990) and Watson (2012) would recognise as entrepreneurial. A definition requiring new venture creation does not account for such activities as freelancing, ad-hoc trading, or the novel use of existing resources, all of which are already prevalent throughout the contemporary digital economy, and are further encouraged by systemic trends like outsourcing and the development of new peer-to-peer

(P2P) marketplace platforms. There is also a tendency within the literature to consider as legitimate only the entrepreneurship which generates economic wealth, and to define 'entrepreneurs' and 'opportunities' retrospectively, that is, after they have been shown to be successful (de Bruin et al., 2007; Ekhardt & Cicuchta, 2008; Kirzner, 1997; Shane, 2003 as cited by Alvarez et al., 2012). This 'success bias' poses a number of research limitations. It makes it difficult to evaluate entrepreneurial behaviour because it relies on the generation of economic wealth to identify entrepreneurs (Alvarez et al., 2012), causes investigators to overlook numerous founding teams that form but abandon their effort, and ignores the impact of changes in composition following initial team formation (Ruef et al., 2003). Additionally, the next chapter will elaborate, it may also contribute to the underrepresentation in the literature of the entrepreneurial activity of marginalised actors, especially in the realm of digital entrepreneurship.

However, such limitations may be overcome by a focus on the entrepreneurial process, which, it will be argued, is socially embedded and thus closely tied to resource access. Stevenson and Jarillo (1990) link the entrepreneurial process to resources when they define entrepreneurship as "a process by which individuals – either on their own or inside organizations – pursue opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control." Although this thesis argues that the resources entrepreneurs control are in fact of extreme relevance to their pursuit of opportunities, their definition is useful in the way it widens the pool of entrepreneurs to encompass actors at all stages of the entrepreneurial process. In addition, the importance of entrepreneurial groups and teams has been identified as a key aspect of the phenomenon (Ruef et al., 2003; Ruef, 2009, 2010). Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, entrepreneurship is considered to exist on a continuum of informal to highly formalised activities, including ad-hoc trading, freelance and contract work, self-employment/lifestyle business, traditional (Schumpeterian), as well as corporate entrepreneurship. This necessarily includes self-employed sole proprietors, small business owners, part-time, nascent, past and failed entrepreneurs, all of whom may be excluded by other definitions.

Combining Stevenson and Jarillo's (1990) and Watson's (2013) definitions, entrepreneurship is defined in this thesis as *a process by which opportunities for profitable exchange are pursued*. As such, consideration must therefore be given not only to the individuals, teams, opportunities, and modes of organising involved, but also to the particular social, economic, political and technological contexts in which the activity is taking place, and the structural conditions, barriers and enablers they present. Understanding entrepreneurship as processual (Steyaert, 2007) and socially embedded (Anderson & Miller, 2003; Jack & Anderson, 2002; Ruef et al., 2003; Ruef, 2009), and encompassing a variety of modes of exchange (Watson, 2012), enables the perception of how it may be affected by marginality and social disadvantage. Opportunities are no longer discrete ideas encountered and pursued by happenstance, but are instead nested within entrepreneurs' lives and experiences (de Bruin et al., 2007) and will be shaped by the social conditions they experience therein.

Entrepreneurship theory readily acknowledges the importance of resources, broadly conceptualised to include social, financial, and human capital (Bourdieu, 1984), knowledge and information, capabilities, and social networks. But because this theory is not usually contextualised socially or historically, the

heterogeneity of this access to resources is often left unexplained (Jayawarna et al., 2014). It is generally accepted that resource asymmetry is a key factor in why some people pursue entrepreneurial opportunities and are successful, while others do not and are not (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Ardichvili et al., 2003; Hayek, 1945; Haynie et al., 2009; Kirzner, 1973; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Moreover, according to Alvarez and Busenitz (2001: 756), traditional entrepreneurship theory holds that differences of belief about the value of resources are a primary source of opportunity. Within the literature, they find consensus: “entrepreneurial opportunities exist *primarily because different agents have different beliefs* about the relative value of resources when they are converted from inputs into outputs” (Schumpeter, 1934; Kirzner, 1979; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, as cited by Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001: 756, emphasis added). However, this thesis argues that not only are differences of *belief* about the value of resources significant to processes of opportunity development, but so is the inequality of *access* to resources themselves, an access inherently and necessarily tied to social positionality.

As the next chapter will argue, the social world is understood to be shaped by implicit and explicit social hierarchies, which correspond to life chances and attendant resource distribution (Anthias, 2001a & b). Entrepreneurs, like other individuals, are products of their environments; the socio-economic positions into which they are born have important implications for the development of human and social capital, highly relevant to entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes (Anderson & Miller, 2003; Jayawarna et al., 2014). For example, higher socio-economic positions are found to correspond directly with higher financial and human capital, and entrepreneurs in these positions are more likely to be located at advantageous positions within networks, compared to entrepreneurs with fewer of these resources (Anderson & Miller, 2003: 22). Additionally, the notion of social similarity, or the tendency of people to interact more frequently with those with whom they socially are most familiar (Prandy, 1988 as cited by Anderson & Miller, 2003: 22), corresponds with strong evidence of homophily amongst entrepreneurial founding teams (Ruef et al., 2003). This homophily, characterised by the degree of closeness in network ties and demographic homogeneity, serves as a “uniquely social predictor of between-group variation in economic inequality”, as it “reflects a tendency for social groups to employ a “like-deserves-like” rule in the allocation of collective rewards” (Ruef, 2009: 57; 82). Thus, the embeddedness of entrepreneurial processes in the social world means that access to resources, and the entrepreneurial activity they enable, will be unequally distributed, a notion which will be framed in the following chapter using the feminist theories of intersectionality and positionality.

## **2.2 Digital Entrepreneurship Literature: A Panacea Ignored?**

### *Inequality in the Online Environment*

The development of information and computing technologies (ICTs) during the twentieth century has had significant historical, social, economic, political and cultural consequences for human society, and by implication, for entrepreneurship. The introduction of the Internet and subsequent growth of the World Wide Web arguably changed the “rules of the game” that Baumol (1990) stressed were especially relevant to entrepreneurship. New technologies transform the nature of work, and by consequence,

economic structures. Prominent technosociologist Castells notes the contemporary era is characterised by the “transformation of our ‘material culture’ by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies” (2010: 28). ICTs have facilitated the creation of an interdependent, global financial market centered upon the world’s richest nations, while much labour, both industrial and knowledge, is now outsourced to developing nations in the Global South. This ‘new economy’ is organised around globalised networks of capital, management, and information, in which access to technological know-how, or tacit knowledge, is at the roots of productivity and competitiveness (2010: 502).

Due to these structural and technological developments, opportunities to combine resources, reach markets, and otherwise create value in novel ways are evident and continually emerging. Mole & Mole note that “technological changes like the Internet have created opportunities...whether or not they are acted upon by an agent. Entrepreneurs view the structural changes, act on them (or not) and then change the existing structure to their advantage” (2010: 233). The actions of many actors – for example, the influx of many individual entrepreneurs and firms during the era of the dot.com boom in the late 1990s – can have emergent structural effects, like the legitimization of the Internet industry (Mole & Mole, 2010). In addition, Acs (2006) suggests the improvements in information technology may increase the returns to entrepreneurship, as it is less expensive and time consuming to exchange information across distance. Yet, like the phenomenon of entrepreneurship, there exists little scholarly consensus as to what exactly constitutes the Internet. Despite general agreement that it is “distributed, net-like, and web-like” (Cavanagh, 2007: 48), most definitions struggle to contain the concept, ranging from “vast interactive network” to “the technological basis for the organizational form of the information age” (Slevin 2000: 1 and Castells 2001:1-2, as cited by Cavanagh, 2007: 51). It has been characterized as a social space, a form of media, and a technology, and depending on user and use, it can be all of these simultaneously or none at all (Cavanagh, 2007: 4).

For the purposes of this thesis, the Internet is defined to be “*the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to person communication and information retrieval*” (DiMaggio et al., 2001b, emphasis added). This same network, and in particular, its publicly accessible (e.g. non-proprietary) aspects, may alternatively be referred to as ‘the Net’ or, more commonly, ‘the Web.’ DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001a) call attention to the Internet’s dynamic and political characteristics by describing it as “a protean family of technologies and services that is being rapidly reshaped through the interacting efforts of profit-seeking corporations, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.” This space is highly politicised: material on the Web is continually prioritised, restricted, and/or censored in a political manner by individuals, companies, institutions, or governmental bodies, with protected information contained in private networks, proprietary information owned by businesses or corporations, and the majority of academic and scientific knowledge contained in journal collections, databases and detailed market research unavailable to all but academics, university students, and corporate clients. Terranova notes that masses, segments and microsegments of the Web are captured within “a common informational dimension in which all points are potentially if unevenly affected by all other points” (2004: 153). So, while the technology of the Information Age does serve to link and connect actors, “the result seems to

be a political field that cannot be made to unite under any single signifier or even a stable consensus [nor] split into separate segments...a space that is *common*, without being *homogenous* or even *equal*.” (2004: 154, original italics).

This contemporary and dynamic Internet space, as it is utilised and experienced by individual actors via desktop, laptop, and mobile devices, is herein referred to as the ‘online environment’ – and yet, each individual, due to their access, knowledge and capabilities, can be assumed to experience the online environment differently, or indeed, to each be interacting with somewhat unique online environments. Thus, in contradiction to the dominant discourse discussed in this chapter’s final section labelling the Internet a ‘great equaliser’, users will more likely encounter *unequal* potential to facilitate entrepreneurial processes online, due to not only the Internet’s inherent inequality as a political field, but also how its use reflects people’s positionality in the social world. This is the central paradox of this thesis, and one which warrants further investigation.

### *Defining Digital Entrepreneurship*

With the obvious relevance of the online environment to contemporary entrepreneurial activity, it is surprising that the body of literature on the phenomenon of digital entrepreneurship is relatively slim. Kollmann (2006) has modelled electronic value creation and business development online, and the personal characteristics of ‘dot com’ entrepreneurs have been explored (Jome et al., 2006; Serarols-Tarrés et al., 2006). Some typologies of digital entrepreneurial activity have been offered (e.g. Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Hull et al., 2007; Mahadevan, 2000) and are discussed in the penultimate section of this chapter. Davidson and Vaast emphasise the sociomaterial aspects of digital entrepreneurship, arguing that it entails the linking of business, knowledge, and institutional opportunities (2010). However, Matlay and Westhead (2005) point out that many of the salient aspects of virtual teams and e-entrepreneurship, as they call it, have yet to be comprehensively researched. In particular, the impact of social marginality and unequal resource distribution on digital entrepreneurship is still significantly underexplored. As the technology is further developed and more widely adopted, an understanding of the relationships between the Internet and entrepreneurial activity becomes increasingly vital. Online trading is a sector of marked growth: more than 12 million people, or 31 percent of UK Internet users, sold goods or services online in 2011, compared to 7.9 million (21 per cent) in 2010 (Williams, 2011), a year-on-year increase of 50 percent. In the wake of the deepest UK recession since 1948 (Inman, 2012; Tolley, 2014) and a US financial crisis with a “frustratingly slow” recovery (Bernanke, US Federal Reserve Chair, 2012) that has not yet brought relief to Black and Latino households (Dickerson, 2014), Internet usage is still on the rise in both places (Fox & Rainie, 2014; Williams, 2011; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Thus, digital entrepreneurship, with its expected lower barriers to entry (Bury, 2012; Porter, 2001; Quarton, 2014), may be an increasingly attractive option for income generation, particularly for actors who may be socially marginalised or economically disadvantaged. Given this, it is important to inquire into the specifics of the environment the Internet offers for their entrepreneurial activity.



Davidson & Vaast (2010: 2) define digital entrepreneurship as *“the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies.”* This is the definition of the phenomenon that will be used throughout this thesis, and encompasses a variety of activities:

*“the diverse opportunities generated by the Internet, World Wide Web, mobile technologies, and new media, such as: dot-com companies that benefited from the opening of the Internet for commercial purposes; the fluid army of “ebay entrepreneurs” who sell goods with little overhead cost by using the digital infrastructure of the electronic auction company; the wave of “web 2.0” initiatives where companies or individuals develop new business models based upon the growth of social networks and mobile technologies; and, the development of weblogs (“blogs”) that have credibly begun to rival traditional media firms.”*

Clearly, numerous applications of the Internet for entrepreneurship already exist, and others are continually in development. But it cannot be assumed that digital businesses are necessarily created equal. Some of the technological aspects of the Internet (e.g. the potential for new platform development and mass economies of scale) will likely be more useful for technology-based online businesses where the platform itself is the product, where products are easily replicated, and various business models can be introduced simultaneously. They are not likely to benefit handicraft-based companies, or providers of professional services such as copy editing and social media consultancies to the same degree, as in these cases, Internet infrastructure does not significantly lower labour, production or distribution costs. This divides the field from the outset between those who can expect to grow their businesses primarily by rolling out electronically to a larger online customer base, and those who cannot. Digital entrepreneurship is therefore argued to be far from a ‘level playing field’. Instead, it can be likened to a pyramidal structure divided into strata by a host of social factors, wherein those forming high-technology businesses are optimally positioned to take advantage of the potential uses of the Internet for entrepreneurship. Yet these businesses are, by virtue of extremely high barriers to entry, necessarily inaccessible to most of those to whom digital entrepreneurship is promoted as a means by which to ameliorate such conditions as poverty, under- or unemployment.

#### *Marginalised Entrepreneurial Actors Online*

Marginalisation is a term that can refer to underrepresentation, low position in the social hierarchy, or disadvantage as a result of categories of exclusion such as race/ethnicity, gender and class (Thompson, 2006). As Chapter 3 will examine more closely, marginalised people are more likely to experience social exclusion, financial poverty, and a lack of time, resources, and access to opportunities. Members of marginalised groups, including women, people of colour/Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME), lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer people (LGBTQ), as well as disabled, less-educated, elderly and young people are likely to be under-represented both in actual entrepreneurial activities as well as marginalised within the entrepreneurship domain: for example, women are less likely than men to be self-employed in all but seven countries worldwide (GEM, 2013).

Given their subordination in the gender binary and associated socio-economic limitations, women, though not a minority group, may be considered a marginalised class. The concept of gender is increasingly considered to be a mental (cognitive and affective) perspective that is not coterminous with biological sex, despite its informal synonymity (Bird & Brush, 2002; Carter et al., 2015). Feminist theorists point out how narrow definitions of gender are used to shape and constrain the behaviour of women, men and children, as well as maintain the subordination of women and girls within the gender binary, and of non-white, working class, and poor women in particular (hooks, 2015). By theorising how exclusionary categories work simultaneously, the black feminist concepts of intersectionality and positionality, detailed in Chapter 3, usefully complicate simplistic notions of gender-based oppression.

Marginalised and disadvantaged people are of significance to entrepreneurship studies because of claims by academicians, influencers and policymakers that entrepreneurship provides “a route out of poverty and an alternative to unemployment or discrimination in the labor market” (Fairlie, 2005) as well as an effective way to generate employment (Accenture, 2014). Due to dissatisfaction with employment circumstances or inability to find work, marginalised individuals may consider the option of entrepreneurship or self-employment, especially in enterprise-promoting cultures in which microenterprise is touted as the key to more satisfying work, an increased income, and a better work-home balance (Bachrach Ehlers & Main, 1998). But because of their substantially lower earnings and less access to capital (Fairlie, 2005), they may choose digital entrepreneurship for its apparently lower barriers to entry (Bury, 2012; Quarton, 2014).

Eriksson-Zetterquist et al. (2009) argue that in order to understand technology’s potential effects, analysing the social settings, political, economic and cultural contexts in which it is used is essential. Such a contextual analysis uncovers numerous factors that may hinder marginalised actors from using technology to build sustainable, scalable businesses. This could include such things as lower access to home broadband Internet and digital literacy education for people of colour (O’Neill, 2015; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), the growing racial wealth gap (Dickerson, 2014), underrepresentation and pushing out of women in the SET sector (Kelan, 2009; Lien, 2015), and women and people of colour’s generally constrained entrepreneurship experiences, of which limited access to capital is a key feature (Carter et al., 2015; Fairlie, 2005). Examining the relationship between gender and technology, technofeminist theorist Wajcman (1991: 38) notes the important connections between women’s relative lack of power and lack of technological skills. She points out that technology includes “not just things themselves but the physical and mental know-how to make use of these things”. Know-how, which will be used throughout this thesis to refer to tacit or applied knowledge, or the ability to utilise knowledge for particular practical ends, is understood to be an important resource that “bestows a degree of actual or potential power on those who possess it.” As such, it is central to the class and sexual politics of technological work, for it enables the capacity to command higher incomes and scarce jobs (Wajcman, 1991: 38). Additionally, although groups historically disadvantaged by a lack of basic Internet access in the US are now using mobile devices to go online, their mobile Internet connections are subject to wireless providers who have the ability to control and restrict users and content, resulting in access that is “separate and unequal” (King, 2011). With no acknowledgement of these inequalities, media outlets, policymakers and institutions appear to be encouraging members of these groups to take up

entrepreneurship and use Internet technology to do so. In their rhetoric, a dual purpose is intimated: disadvantaged groups should act entrepreneurially both to reduce their own poverty and unemployment, and to pull economies out of recession and into recovery. This is illustrated in this chapter's final section.

If digital entrepreneurship as a panacea for economic recovery occupies the rhetorical end of the spectrum, on the empirical end is the startling lack of discussion of the relationship between the two elements. High-tech businesses, or those premised upon expected high-growth and value technological platforms or services, comprise a minority of digital businesses, yet are the focus of most existing surveys (e.g. Manyika & Chui, 2014; Malach-Pines & Ozbilgin, 2010; Mayer, 2006; Sanz-Velasco, 2007; Shoham et al., 2006). Digital entrepreneurship, that may or may not be based around a technology product or service, has only recently begun to be addressed (Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Hull et al., 2007). Furthermore, in many studies, it seems that treatment of the Internet is generally oversimplified. Extant literature (e.g. Amit & Zott, 2001; Dheeriyaa, 2009) appears to construct it as a neutral resource that needs only to be exploited appropriately. It does not illuminate the full range of current and emerging applications, and the enablers or barriers they present, for enterprise. Conversely, most large-scale studies of entrepreneurship do not address the role the Internet plays in entrepreneurial behaviour. Nationwide studies, such as the UK State of Women's Enterprise Report (Harding, 2007) omit mention of the Internet entirely, while prominent large-scale surveys of Internet usage and activity (Pew Internet and American Life Survey, 2012; Ofcom Communications Market Report, 2011) fail to include 'business purposes,' 'entrepreneurship,' or 'self-employment' as a response option. At the same time, Internet companies, such as etsy.com, claim that sellers using their platform have had significant economic impact in recent years, and that the use of Internet-enabled marketplaces is redefining the nature of entrepreneurship (etsy, 2013). Evidence is therefore required to determine whether or not rhetorical claims about what the Internet offers to entrepreneurs are justified, providing rationale for the research that is the subject of this thesis.

### **2.3 Typologies of Digital Entrepreneurial Activity**

Most existing typologies of the Internet's applications for business are dated, having been developed in the early years of Internet adoption, and do not explicitly focus on entrepreneurship. Early literature centred upon SME barriers to adoption of e-business technologies (Poon & Swatman, 1999; Taylor & Murphy, 2004), and is not applicable to contemporary businesses that may be described as 'born digital'. Building on social network theories on structural holes and weak ties (Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1983), Lin (1999) was optimistic about the ways the Web would enhance connections and business between individuals and organisations. But this work predates the rise of Web 2.0, social media, and other P2P platforms, which have had significant impacts upon the networking landscape. Influential management specialist Porter maintained that the Internet was not necessarily a disruptive technology, as many believed, but instead a complement to overall strategy. He presented a typology of "prominent applications of the Internet in the value chain," which included the widely adopted observations that the Internet could reduce barriers to entry and widen markets for suppliers, but also lower switching costs for customers, increasing the threat of substitution (2001).

A push was made to delineate various business models for, and typologies of, the new e-business landscape (e.g. Amit & Zott, 2001; Gordijn & Akkermans, 2001; Dai & Kauffman, 2002; Mahadevan, 2000; Tapscott, 2000). These typologies focused mainly on B2C business models for e-commerce, with the firm as the primary unit of analysis. Pateli and Giaglis (2003) offered a framework for understanding the many e-business models that had emerged until that point, followed by a similar attempt by Poong, Zaman and Talha (2006). None of these inquiries specifically addressed the area of entrepreneurship; in fact, their explicit focus on the firm meant that they generally ignored the individual Internet user, a primary limitation. Additionally, due to the speed of technological development in hardware, software and applications, and corresponding changes in end-user activity and abilities, a decade later many of these assessments are outdated. For example, Barua et al.'s conceptualisation of a four-layered online environment composed of infrastructure, applications, intermediary, and commerce (1999), is no longer appropriate in the age of Google and cloud computing, in which, for example, many applications are developed for commercialisation, and the line between applications and infrastructure is blurry or indistinct.

Mahadevan (2000) created a typology by categorising types of Internet businesses, identified by website. He critiqued the limitations of earlier accounts of e-revenue streams, stating that they were "too narrow in their scope" and did not "cover the gamut of alternatives employed by today's Internet-based businesses" (2000: 8). Ironically, these same charges can now be directed at his typology of portals, market makers, and product/service providers, which reflects the Internet of more than a decade ago. He described three main "market structures": portals, market makers, and product/service providers, and two areas of application: B2C (business-to-consumer) and B2B (business-to-business). A portal was defined as a site aimed at building a community of consumers of information about products and services. A market maker was described as being similar to a portal, but aimed specifically at facilitating e-commerce transactions, through a variety of means. The final category, product/service providers, described more traditional retailers whose business was either exclusively online or who operated an online channel in addition to bricks-and-mortar businesses.

**Table 1: Sample List of Internet Based Businesses in the Emerging Market Structure (Mahadevan, 2000)**

Market Structure	B2C Segment	B2B Segment*
Portals (POR)	AOL.com Askjeeves.com Compare.com MSN.com Personallogic.com Yahoo.com Orlando.com	Cnet.com ec-portal.com MarketSite.net Netmarketmaker.com Questlink SmartOnline.com VerticalNet
Market Makers (MMK)	Autobytel.com Beyond.com Buy.com Cameraworld.com Careerbuilder.com Ebags.com Ebay.com Etrade.com NetMarket.com Priceline.com Travelocity.com Ubid.com	@griculture Online AdAuction.com AsianSources.com Bloomberg ChemConnect Manheim Auctions MRO.com NetBuy.com PaperExchange.com PlasticsNet.com Ultraprise Works.com
Product/Service Providers (PSP) <sup>§</sup>	Amazon.com Egghead.com EthnicGrocer.com Landsend.com Stacianewyork.com	Cisco Compaq Dell

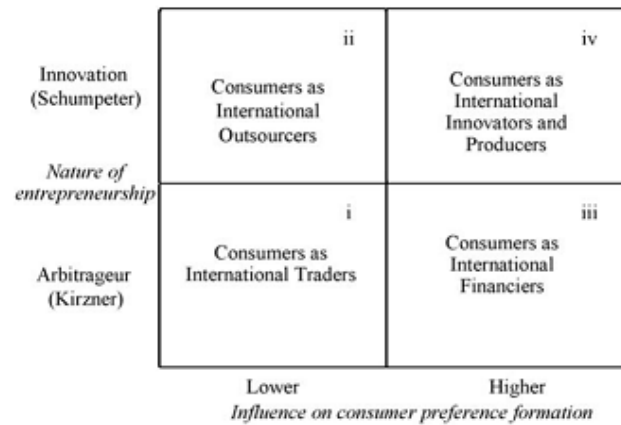
\* Many portals in the B2B segment have evolved into market maker structure.

§ Several existing brick and mortar retailers such as Wal-Mart and manufacturers such as Barnes & Nobles and Sears also engage in Internet based businesses with newly incorporated dot coms. Similar examples exist in B2B segment also.

Although it likely had some accuracy at the time, this typology was created prior to the widespread impact of brokerage sites like Craigslist and Gumtree, P2P marketplace platforms like etsy and AirBnB, social networking sites, and other post-Web 2.0 virtual agoras in which users communicate freely, share information and/or seek products, services, or customers. In addition, it poses other significant limitations. First, it appears to regard the Internet as a flat, homogeneous, neutral space, an assumption which both political (Terranova, 2004) and sociological (Hargittai, 2007) perspectives strongly critique. Second, there is no allowance for companies that transcend the stated categorical boundaries; for example, Google does not fit neatly into any of the existing categories. Although primarily a B2C product/service provider, Google does not charge for its primary product-services – the search function and Gmail – but has developed numerous associated for-profit products, like the Adwords program. As a result of the diversity of its various business models, an organisation like Google illustrates the insufficiency of the above categorical descriptions.

As ICTs enable communication and trade across borders, their application to business appears more recently and explicitly in international business literature than in either management or entrepreneurship journals. ‘Internetization’ is seen as the new route to internationalisation (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005; Etemad et al., 2010), and the field is beginning to consider various entrepreneurial uses of the Internet. Chandra and Coviello (2010) propose a typology of consumers as international entrepreneurs, with one of their categories including C2C, or consumer-to-consumer, transactions. Building upon traditional entrepreneurship theories, they frame actors as either Schumpeterian (1934) innovators or Kirznerian (1997) arbitrageurs, citing examples such as a teenage eBay trader and a software engineer providing services internationally. Individual entrepreneurship online has thus been identified as an emergent phenomenon and area of research within international business literature.

C2C e-commerce has appeared in the legal (Colon-Fung, 2007) and information management (Jones & Leonard, 2008); however, recognition of this phenomenon has yet to definitively reach the entrepreneurship literature.



**Figure 2: A Typology of Consumers as International Entrepreneurs (Chandra and Coviello, 2010)**

Chandra and Coviello’s (2010) typology is appealing for a number of reasons. First, it covers a great deal of ground with a simple framework, making it easy to understand, delineate between categories, and account for major segments of entrepreneurial actors. Second, it efficiently illustrates how Internet facilitates activities that were previously much more difficult or even impossible, and is attentive to the relative possible value creation of each activity, as indicated by the scale of consumer preference formation. Third, it maps well to traditional conceptions of the entrepreneur, and thus resonates with mainstream entrepreneurship literature.

However, it also presents a number of limitations. Its attention is focused on an international context when the Internet enables communication and trade across simple geographical distance, not necessarily international. The simple categories of ‘traders’ and ‘outsourcers’, seemingly homogenous, obscures the diversity of activities undertaken by digital entrepreneurs, facilitated by the dynamic nature of the Internet itself. The variety of activities in these two categories in particular continues to expand, with new specialist platforms continually being created to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. Their typology does not distinguish between those who engage in digital entrepreneurship informally vs. formally, and does not consider the technical knowledge and resource requirements of the business, nor the scalability of the idea. By describing actors as “consumer-turned-entrepreneur,” discursive precedence is again given to their consumptive habits as drivers of opportunity. People are not only consumers, but also agents and producers (Sayer, 2005: 19). Thus, limiting a theoretical framework to consumption alone thus serves to unnecessarily narrow the scope of the analyses, as it does not sufficiently take into account the agency of entrepreneurial actors to formulate novelty in their processes of exchange.

There are also limitations to focusing too narrowly on to what ends, and to what extent, businesses are using digital technologies. Existing work has identified the following primary business models for Internet businesses (Burns, 2014: 16): direct sales, advertising, pay-per-click, subscription, freemium, and affiliate. Yet, the notion that some businesses are exclusively 'Internet' businesses, and others are not, is outdated, as the line between online and offline is increasingly blurred. Furthermore, if the definition of digital enterprise is taken to be more broad and includes all "opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies" (Davidson & Vaast, 2010: 2), then it will encompass providers of services as well as product/service combinations, and the existing models will not encompass all possibilities or configurations. Instead, digital enterprise is conceptualised to include ventures who use the online environment to different degrees: mild, moderate and extreme (Hull et al., 2007). However, extant typologies lack the nuance necessary to include what this thesis identifies as increasingly relevant to the conversation on digital enterprise: barriers and enablers to business development.

If entrepreneurship is considered a form of social action rather than a systemic function, attention should be paid to new and emerging forms of entrepreneurship (Goss, 2005). Thus, a typology of digital entrepreneurship should look beyond high-tech activity and retain or open conceptual space for new and emerging forms enabled by technological development. Although a complete typology is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is possible to categorise entrepreneurial activity online on four dimensions that prove useful for understanding barriers and enablers to digital entrepreneurship: 1) mode of exchange, 2) knowledge and skill, 3) resource and investment, 3) scalability. Scalability is directly related to the degree to which the majority of business activity can be carried out online, for the greater the requirement for offline products and services, the less easily scalable the idea. Such a typology is presented in Figure 3, which aims to represent a variety of digital entrepreneurial activities and multiple modes of exchange, including, but not limited to, new venture creation (NVC). The listed websites are platforms by which the type of activity noted in bold can be accomplished. It can be populated further with additional activities and examples over time. The use of continuums along these dimensions adds texture to the topography of the digital entrepreneurial environment, once assumed flat but here illustrated to be, in Terranova's words, heterogeneous and unequal (2004: 154).

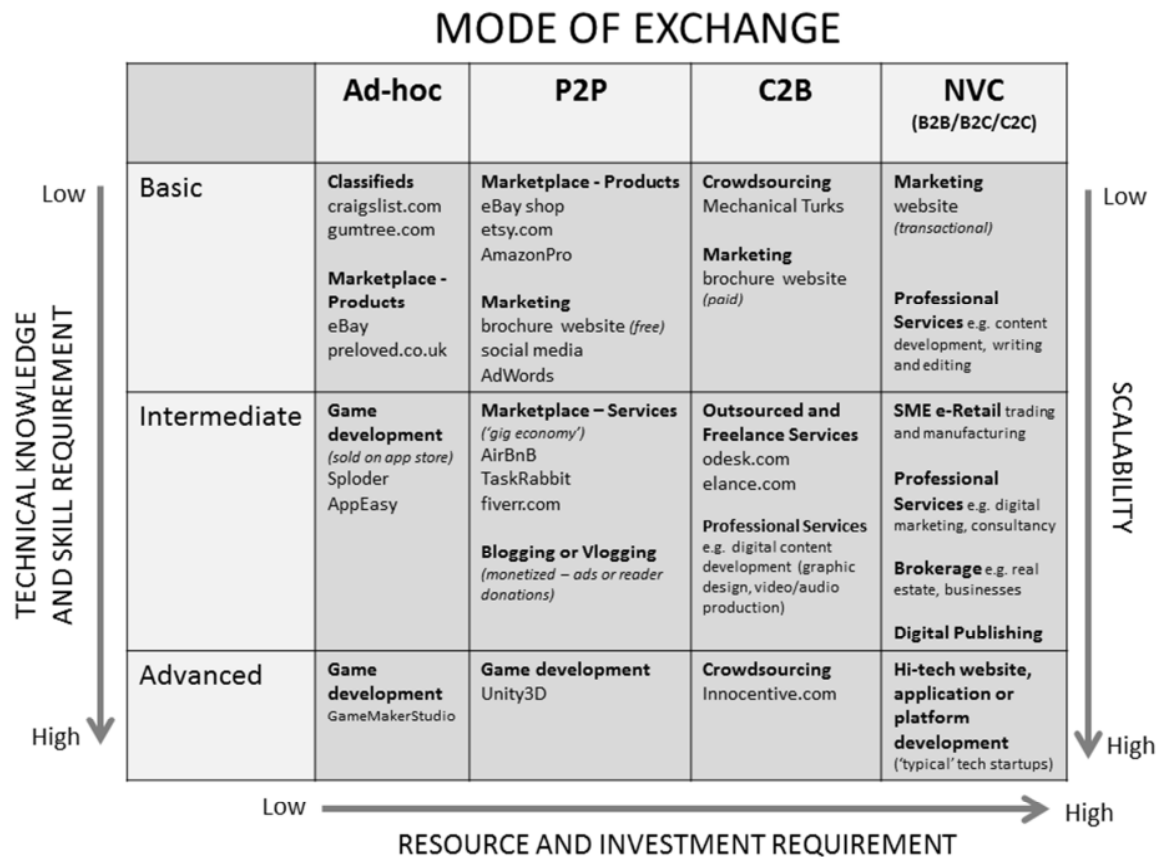


Figure 3: Typology of Digital Entrepreneurial Activity

#### 2.4 Rhetoric on Digital Entrepreneurship: Levelling the Playing Field?

The volume of discourse related to entrepreneurship has increased dramatically since the early 1980s. To illustrate, the number of documents in English language news using the terms ‘entrepreneurship’ or ‘entrepreneur’ rose from 1656 in the decade between 1970 and 1980, to more than 3000 in the two years between 1980-1982 (Nexis search, 2014). Two of the most prominent academic journals on entrepreneurship, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* and *Journal of Business Venturing*, commenced publication in 1976 and 1985, respectively. Being ‘entrepreneurial,’ i.e. innovative, independent, flexible and risk-taking, is now a commonplace concept across academia, media and public policy. It is nearly always portrayed positively, in contrast to that which is bureaucratic, slow-moving, and resistant to change (Du Gay, 1996: 153). However, this type of dichotomous thinking could be misleading. While entrepreneurship is widely promoted by institutions and policymakers as a catalyst for “renewed economic growth” (World Economic Forum, 2009), critical scholars caution that viewing entrepreneurship, enterprise ideology, and their various epiphenomena solely as positive economic activities may “conceal much else that entrepreneurship is and does” (Calás et al., 2009).



The rise in the volume and positive nature of the discourse around entrepreneurship reflects a shift in macroeconomic paradigm from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, and the socio-economic conditions this shift precipitated. The 1970s saw the Keynesian notion of full employment, defined as “a situation where there are at least as many job openings as there are persons seeking employment” (Vickrey, 1993 as cited by Cook et al., 2003), replaced by Natural Rate of Unemployment (NRU) thinking (Friedman, 1968, as cited by Cook et al., 2003). Cook et al. (2003) note that this paradigmatic shift was in reaction to accelerated inflation in most countries following the first oil price rise in 1974, to which governments responded with policies intended to counteract inflation, which resulted in high levels of unemployment. They detail the diametric opposition, and the relative strengths of the roles assigned to government and individuals, between the two paradigms:

*“The Keynesian notion that unemployment represents a macroeconomic failure that can be addressed by expansionary fiscal and/or monetary policy is rejected. Instead, unemployment reflects supply failures such as poor incentive structures facing individuals, skill mismatches between demand and supply, and excessive government regulation (OECD 1994). Consequently the role for government is confined to dismantling supply impediments (like minimum wages, social security payments). The NRU and Keynesian notions of full employment are thus diametrically opposed.” (2003: 60)*

Thus, with high rates of unemployment pushing previously industrial countries such as the US and UK into economic downturn, entrepreneurialism as an ideology entered public discourse as a potential solution. Absolving governments and authoritative bodies of a responsibility to provide a system that aspires to full employment, enterprise discourse instead passes responsibility for economic self-sufficiency to the individual or organisation. A self-starting, ‘go-getting’ approach is now assumed to be the ideal and universally applicable mode of conduct for personal and organisational behaviour. It can be argued that this ideology has become hegemonic, as “the more routine entrepreneurship becomes, the more, in Weber's words, it ‘congeals into a permanent structure’ of domination” (Weber, 1978: 1146, as cited by Goss, 2005: 216). Enterprise ideology has permeated sectors as disparate as education (Woods, Woods & Gunter, 2007) to public services, such as health care and social work (du Gay, 2004; Gibson, 2013; Reichert, 1977), often with problematic results. Respected universities have begun to offer courses on entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship, while many business schools have implemented entrepreneurship courses and degrees. Although they generally aim to teach theory as well as practical skills, there is a call to teach less ‘about’ the subject, and more ‘for’ it (Kirby, 2004).

The popularity of entrepreneurs in the mass media, with programs like *The Apprentice*, *Dragon’s Den* in the UK, and *Shark Tank* in the US, is considerable and growing. The typical entrepreneurial narrative is a Horatio Alger story, wherein the protagonist starts with minimal resources, but is able to ‘pull himself up by the bootstraps’ as a result of ingenuity and hard work. In true discursive fashion, the story is told repeatedly in different contexts: from Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com (Spector, 2002) to James Dyson (Dyson, 2003) to Steve Jobs of Apple (Isaacson, 2011). This portrayal engenders a cultural perception of entrepreneurialism as laudable and positive, and paints ‘the entrepreneur’ in traditional Schumpeterian style: aspirational, independent, driven and heroic, not to mention white, Western and male (Ogbor,

2000). The supposed inclusiveness of the model of conduct proffered by this image is observable in the recent appearance in the discourse of the term 'mumpreneur.' Used to refer to women who set up a business in order to enable them to both work and care for young children (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012), it is not simply a cute neologism. Instead, by discursively marginalising entrepreneurial actors who are also mothers, it effectively illustrates the continued narrowness of the category of 'entrepreneur,' as well as the primacy of woman's role as mother in social perception. The term's rapid uptake indicates the contemporary social readiness to apply the ideology of entrepreneurialism to disparate arenas but preserve a rigid definition of a traditional Schumpeterian entrepreneur, evident when only such altered or invented terminology permits audiences to conceive of a mother as a capable business owner and manager.

Reflecting concurrent and cross-fertilising developments in technology and paradigm, digital entrepreneurship has become a key subject within public discourse. The growing predominance of positive discourse on entrepreneurialism chronologically parallels advances in ICTs, the introduction of the personal computer and rising Internet use across the US and UK, with the IBM PC brought to market in 1981, and the World Wide Web publicly accessible in 1994. Of particular interest within this discourse is the entrepreneurial activity of people from marginalised groups. Academicians, policymakers, and news media outlets regularly treat digital entrepreneurship as a logical solution to social disadvantage. It is suggested that virtual nature of exchanges can reduce the stigma experienced by marginalised groups, and empower them to participate in entrepreneurship at levels comparable to those of their higher-income, white and/or male counterparts. This is seen as a key strategy to revitalise flagging economies and spur economic growth. Contradicting Terranova's assertions that the Web is a common but unequal space, Internet technology is depicted in this discourse as an equalising force. Terms like 'empowerment', 'great enabler', and 'great equaliser' are used liberally, along with the suggestion there is "no gender in cyberspace" (Martin & Wright, 2005), or at least, less discrimination (Jome et al., 2006). Some assume that online, women can be 'automatically' placed on an equal level with men (Singapore News, 2002). In the United Kingdom, institutions and policymakers, aided by news media, are trying to revive the economy through encouraging entrepreneurship by underrepresented groups such as women (Harding, 2007; Federation of Small Businesses, 2011) and young people (Tobin, 2013), offering incentives such as seed funding and mentorship programs. Digital entrepreneurship is presented as a simple path to economic recovery and national prosperity (Schmidt, 2011a & b). In the United States, discourse explicitly points to the Internet as the means by which marginalised people are expected to embrace entrepreneurship, empower themselves (e.g. Thompson Jackson, 2009), and in turn, advance the economy. In one prominent example, at the 2011 Minority Media & Telecom Council Broadband and Social Justice Summit, Chairman of the US Federal Communications Commission Julius Genachowski presented broadband Internet access as a "platform for economic growth and job creation" that can be "the great equalizer – giving every American with an Internet connection access to a world of new opportunities that might have previously been beyond their reach, and expanding their opportunities to succeed and thrive in a digital economy."

The rhetoric of digital entrepreneurship is particularly aimed at many populations whose business activity is marginalised by traditional conceptions of entrepreneurship. Women, especially mothers,

people of colour, disabled people, the unemployed, the aging and the young are all encouraged to build businesses online (e.g. Accenture, 2014; Crotti, 2011; New Straits Times, 2012; Salzwedel, 2007; Women Entrepreneurs UK, 2010). Their successful entrepreneurship is spotlighted not only in the US and UK, but worldwide (e.g. India – New Indian Express, 2012; Malaysia – New Straits Times, 2012; Middle East – Rooney, 2012; Singapore – Singapore News, 2002; South Africa – Salzwedel, 2007; United Arab Emirates – Lowe, 2011). Investors are urged to capitalise on these new ventures (MENA English, 2012), and e-commerce is portrayed as an area of stable growth despite a lasting recession, with the UK upheld as a global leader (Schmidt, 2011b). Small tech start-ups assert that e-commerce is for anyone (Quarton, 2014), while influential corporations actively promote digital entrepreneurship by marginalised individuals: a US/UK Google Chrome advertisement campaign claims “The Internet is what you make it,” featuring a mother-turned-entrepreneur who overcome her lack of resources and now influences the world of high fashion (Sowray, 2012). This appears to be a technology-centred rhetorical evolution of the encouragement of microenterprise that has existed since the 1980s, when microenterprise development programs began being lauded as strategies to alleviate poverty and overcome welfare dependency, when in fact they mainly encourage economic vulnerability (Bachrach Ehlers & Main, 1998). Accordingly, there has been little research done into the realities of online opportunity for members of disadvantaged groups, as well as few voices, academic or otherwise, questioning the potential profitability of most online businesses today (Jarvis, 2010). In particular, there is a dearth of investigations into whether or not the Internet can actually ‘level the playing field,’ or offer equal opportunities for entrepreneurship to all.

Furthermore, any rhetoric encouraging ‘entrepreneurship for all’ and promising success is built upon problematic premises. Influenced by the rational choice paradigm, it incorrectly assumes that entrepreneurship is a neutral space in which every agent has access to the same set of information (Mole & Roper, 2012: 16), an assumption that has become even more pronounced since the advent of the Internet. Despite appearing to be underpinned by economic theory, the logic that a supposedly ‘equalising’ resource like the Internet will result in successful entrepreneurship is actually in competition with traditional entrepreneurship theory, which posits that it is actually the *asymmetry* of information and resources that predominately influence entrepreneurship and its potential for success (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Haynie et al., 2009; Kirzner, 1973; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001). Against a backdrop in which a technological resource is assumed to have ‘levelled the playing field,’ inaction is perceived as laziness and failure is individualised. Unsuccessful entrepreneurs are assumed to have not worked hard enough, while structural and contextual issues are downplayed or ignored. A culture of ‘blaming the victim’ is created in which it is the disadvantaged themselves, not the conditions of disadvantage, who are blamed (and punished) for their circumstances. Like the technology of the Internet itself, entrepreneurialism as hegemonic ideology rides on a tripartite tide of Western cultural imperialism, or imposing Western norms on non-Western countries, sexual imperialism, or imposing male norms on women actors (Stevenson, 1990; Ahl & Marlow, 2012), and heroic individualism. The mythic figure of ‘the entrepreneur’ developed in the West is the image of entrepreneurship promoted around the globe, with little or no consideration of the diverse national, cultural, and post-colonial contexts in which it is embedded. Not only is the ideology highly individualist, clashing with value systems that may be more collective, but its voluntaristic accounts of

entrepreneurial agency (Blundel, 2007) turn attention away from structural issues such as globalisation and post-colonial legacies and towards individual 'responsibility'. Impoverished nations and people come to be seen as not entrepreneurial enough, and both micro- and macro-economic problems come to be attributed predominantly to the attitudes and actions of individuals, rather than to structural conditions which engender them.

There exists significant scope for a new critique of the Internet as a neutral environment for entrepreneurship. The problematic yet common assumption that technology is neutral leads to the simplistic conclusion that Internet access is all one needs to avail of the full scope of its benefits, and fails to take into account the existence of other forms of 'digital divide' (King, 2011). The majority of studies on digital entrepreneurship have assumed the neutrality of both component parts, and taken an uncritical optimistic stance about the phenomenon's potential. For these reasons, they do not provide a nuanced analysis of the various outcomes that occur when individuals undertake entrepreneurial activity online. The claim that the Internet is a neutral or objective activity space is roundly contested by viewing the Web through a sociological or political lens (boyd, 2009; Hargittai, 2007; Terranova, 2004) alongside an analysis of the new Internet-based ventures succeeding today. Despite the rhetoric that anyone can succeed as a digital entrepreneur, successful online business models still need sales volume with minimal manufacturing and distribution costs to compete globally. Significant financial investment is often needed to build company infrastructure and achieve the efficiency of economies of scale. Considering this, one must ask if the Internet really provides the kind of access to entrepreneurship that it is purported to do.

While rhetorical focus is placed on the technical or financial barriers to entry that the Internet can lower (e.g. Bury, 2012), little or no attention is given to the significant social barriers it cannot affect. Therefore, most discourse on digital entrepreneurship does not realistically consider social disadvantage, nor the ways in which this disadvantage is reproduced online (boyd, 2009; Ituma & Simpson, 2009; Marwick, 2014). To do so, it must take into account social hierarchies, positionality and respective resource distribution. It must also consider that marginalised individuals live with what is termed 'marked' bodies (Haraway, 1999), or "social identities that are attached externally to individuals (e.g., ascribed characteristics such as gender, race, or age)" (Ruef et al., 2003: 197) which are othered or excluded by hegemonic conceptions of normativity. On the occasions such topics are addressed, it appears that technology is assumed to be able to erase stigmatised identity and disadvantage. Boudourides and Drakou (2000: 1) discuss the roots of this logic, and its errors:

*"This belief or hope was (and for some still is) based on the logic that because bodily features are not obviously discernible in cyberspace, they would cease to be a primary means of structuring interaction. Floating free of corporeal experience, the mind would generate new forms for rendering self and other and for organizing interpersonal communication.*

*However, these features continue to act as defining factors of the social systems of difference. Cyberspace, until now, has not managed to neutralize gender: on the contrary, it appears to be organized by the patriarchal forms."*

Czarniawska & Gustavsson (2008) assert that it is unreasonable to expect that a sheer increase of technical artefacts will change reality until the institutional core of our world is changed. Instead, a more nuanced perspective on the online environment, and on the entrepreneurial actors who utilise it, must be taken in order to determine in what ways and under what conditions this technology can ameliorate issues of social inequality, as well as when it cannot.

Dominant discourse appears to accept that 'entrepreneurship' and 'the Internet' are both positive phenomena, and that their combination will be productive of only positive epiphenomena. And yet, if one engages with the diversity of people acting entrepreneurially online, and the complexity of their activities and the online environments in which they are working, it becomes clear that this is not the case. It is therefore advantageous that the academic conversation on entrepreneurship research is moving to consider the importance of context (Wright, 2012). However, because context in business studies is traditionally taken in a literal sense, meaning place, region, or institution, the concept of virtual space is absent within the discipline, while attention given to social context is minimal. The online environment as meaningful entrepreneurial context is not a key feature of current literature. Due to the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, its non-uniformity, and inequality of use amongst entrepreneurial actors, it can be assumed that digital entrepreneurial activity will take a number of forms, and precipitate a variety of outcomes. How social positionality shapes and affects these outcomes is the subject of the inquiry that this thesis proposes.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the evolution of critical literature surrounding entrepreneurship. Although initially presented by scholars and academics as a neoliberal solution to economic problems, the academic conversation around the phenomenon has taken the conception of entrepreneurial action from a heroic narrative of venture creation and broadened it into a more complex, heterogeneous, socially embedded process with the potential to precipitate a variety of unequal outcomes. The Internet, one of the key technological developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emerged in parallel with the hegemonic notion of entrepreneurship. Internet technology in public discourse been portrayed as a tool with which the entrepreneurship of historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as women, working class, and people of colour/BME groups, can be facilitated. It is intimated that the uptake of entrepreneurship by members of these groups can help to stimulate and grow recessive economies. Yet entrepreneurship theory suggests that this kind of growth-oriented, economy-boosting entrepreneurship is only achievable by a few – an exclusionary subtext unacknowledged by those promoting entrepreneurship universally.

When the concepts of entrepreneurship and the Internet are combined, an analytical gap is illuminated. There has been little research done on the realities of entrepreneurial activity in the contemporary online environment, and few investigations into the digital entrepreneurship of marginalised actors. Surveys on Internet usage the Internet do not address its uses for business, and most entrepreneurship studies do not investigate the relevance of the online environment to entrepreneurial activity, nor do they consider it contextually significant. As a result, the diversity of entrepreneurial activity online has

yet to be fully acknowledged or theorised in the entrepreneurship literature. The aim and contribution of this thesis will be to address this gap by conceptually and empirically examining how social marginality maps onto the landscape of digital entrepreneurship. If entrepreneurship is assumed to be a meritocratic activity and the Internet a neutral, unbiased and unbounded space of opportunity, then the online environment should be a space in which marginalised people can overcome social stigmas and hierarchies to form and grow their businesses. But if they cannot, it can be inferred that online environment is not neutral, does not erase social barriers, and could in fact reproduce or exacerbate inequalities that have been shown to exist offline.

### Chapter 3: Digital Entrepreneurship and Intersectionality

*“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”*

– Audre Lorde

The heterogeneity of entrepreneurial activity, actors, and resources is acknowledged but under-theorised in the entrepreneurship literature, and has not yet reached the literature on digital entrepreneurship. This chapter proposes that this may be due to an inherent ‘success bias’ (Ruef et al., 2003) because of which entrepreneurial activity that has generated or is aimed at generating economic wealth is afforded primary legitimacy. It is argued that the prevalence of such a success bias within studies of digital entrepreneurship has likely contributed to the retained focus on high-tech businesses and concomitant paucity of theory on other digital entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, the way in which social positionality and marginality contributes to the types of activities actors are able to pursue online is a related area that is still significantly underexplored.

To extend the literature, this chapter builds on critical gender and entrepreneurship scholarship to propose the paradigm of intersectionality as a framework for understanding the heterogeneity of actors, and the intersectional notion of positionality as a lens for evaluating digital entrepreneurial activities as functions of resource distribution. Intersectionality, defined as the interaction of structural categories such as race/ethnicity, class and gender (Hancock, 2007), will be used to understand the social conditions enabling or constraining actors in pursuit of opportunities. It is argued to give rise to the positionality of actors within complex social hierarchies, as well as an associated unequal distribution of tangible and intangible resources (Anthias, 2001a & b).

Combining a reference to social position as outcome and social positioning as process (Anthias, 2001a), positionality is argued to provide a critical intervention to existing entrepreneurship theory that acknowledges the relevance of resources to business performance, but fails to consider them against the backdrop of social stratification. While extant theory focuses primarily on differences in *beliefs* about the value of resources (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001), it is argued that concrete differences in resource *access* are even more relevant to the entrepreneurial process. Positionality theory is useful for digital entrepreneurship research in particular as it presents the practical view that entrepreneurial activity online, rather than being unbounded, could be limited by resource access. Informed by feminist theories of technology, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how digital entrepreneurship can be seen as a function of trans-locational positionality, as defined by Anthias (2008).

#### 3.1 Impact of the Success Bias on Studies of Digital Entrepreneurship

As the previous chapter described, early entrepreneurship scholarship subscribed to and perpetuated ‘great man’ narrative myths about the phenomenon (Imas et al., 2012), defining it narrowly as the creation of a new venture by a rational actor with significant economic impacts (Mole & Roper, 2012). Schumpeterian ‘creative destruction’ (1934) and Kirznerian arbitrage (1973, 1997) were predominant themes, and ‘the entrepreneur’ was overwhelmingly assumed to be white, Western, and male. Over

time, a critical strand emerged within the literature that called attention to entrepreneurship's processual aspects, its commonplace nature, and its potential 'dark side'. This strand of literature argued that entrepreneurial action encompasses a variety of exchange contexts and scenarios embedded within human society (Baumol, 1990; Calás et al., 2007, 2009; Stayaert & Katz, 2004; Stayaert, 2007; Watson, 2009, 2012) and could thus precipitate a variety of outcomes. Critical scholars also problematised the mythical figure of the 'entrepreneur', highlighted the heterogeneity and diversity of entrepreneurial actors, and challenged normative assumptions regarding entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; de Bruin et al., 2007; Fairlie, 2005; Ogbor, 2000; Jones & Spicer, 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2013).

However, due to the long shadow cast by the heroic entrepreneur archetype over the domain, there still exists a strong tendency to define entrepreneurship based on its 'success', or the economic wealth a venture generates. Some scholars still suggest that an opportunity is only an opportunity, and an entrepreneur only an entrepreneur, if and only if they generate measurable economic wealth (Alvarez et al., 2012). The narrowness of these definitions and their dominance within the field can be seen as a 'success bias' (Ruef et al., 2003). Chapter 2 discussed the concerns this bias poses for entrepreneurship research in general; this chapter explores its impacts on the study of digital entrepreneurship and marginalised actors. In keeping with its functionalist endorsement of the successful entrepreneurial capitalist (Jones & Spicer, 2009), the success bias within the field of entrepreneurship research implicitly legitimises the activity of high-investment and high-growth oriented actors, while delegitimising that of others. But those activities which the bias recognises as legitimate are generally carried out by only a small minority of firms (Ahl & Marlow, 2012), undervaluing the majority of entrepreneurial activity as a result. Authors subscribing to the bias conceptually separate 'high-potential' firms from all other entrepreneurial activity. This is demonstrated by Bygrave (2006), who sets up a dichotomy of 'high-potentials' vs. 'mom-and-pops', maintaining that it is 'high-potentials' with which we should be concerned. He suggests micro-businesses are not 'real' entrepreneurship, thus delegitimising entrepreneurial activity outside of the high-growth realm: "[w]e are fooling ourselves if we believe we are researching entrepreneurship when we are really studying micro-businesses" (2006: 26). He also states that he simply "[doesn't] believe that we can learn a lot from mom-and-pops which is relevant to high-potential entrepreneurs" (2006: 22). Yet the construction of such a dichotomy precludes useful comparison between the categories, ignores the ways in which they are similar or could exist on a continuum, and obscures entrepreneurial activity that does not fit into either, as well as its potential contributions to knowledge and economies.

As the previous chapter has illustrated, it is now understood that entrepreneurship, rather than being a fixed phenomenon, is a processual activity (Stayaert, 2007) that encompasses a variety of modes of exchange (Watson, 2012). It can be carried out by individuals as well as organisations and firms of all sizes, and oriented towards growth and economic maximisation, or not (Acs, 2006; Alvarez et al., 2012). But it was only with time that entrepreneurship scholars were able to challenge the success bias and introduce the heterogeneity of activity and actors into the literature. Furthermore, while heterogeneity beyond the white Western male entrepreneur is now generally acknowledged, mainstream literature has not widely adopted critical feminist and anti-racist approaches to studying entrepreneurship.



Marginalised entrepreneurial actors such as women are still measured against 'successful' entrepreneurs, and positioned in deficit in comparison (Ahl & Marlow, 2012), while the impacts of structural inequality tend to be left unconsidered. As a result, the entrepreneurial experiences of disadvantaged groups are under-theorised, and a preponderance of research is based on problematic assumptions. The success bias still looms large: for example, high-growth women entrepreneurs are perceived as more ambitious, disciplined and committed than other women, while advantages that likely result from positions of social privilege, such as adequate capitalisation and utilisation of a wider range of funding sources (Gundry & Welsh, 2001), are not placed into social context. Low growth, failures and closures are attributed to a lack of hard work, commitment, or pure personal 'choice' (e.g. Gundry & Welsh, 2001; Shane, 2008). This is in line with the assumption of most entrepreneurship discourse that entrepreneurship is a meritocratic and neutral space of opportunity (Ahl & Marlow, 2012) dependent wholly upon individual effort for its success or failure. The literature generally fails to take into account the crucial context of unequal structural conditions such as the gendered nature of work and labour (Mirchandani, 1999; Moore, 2004), undercapitalisation due to discrimination (Ram et al., 2003, Marlow & Patton, 2005), or inadequate access to resources due to intersecting social categories of exclusion (Anthias, 2001b). Moreover, the entrepreneurial activities of profoundly marginalised people are ignored and unaccounted for (Imas et al., 2012).

Although recent years have seen a slight increase in literature that specifically explores the relationship between inequality, entrepreneurship, and empowerment (Scott et al., 2012), within the scant literature on digital entrepreneurship, even the basic heterogeneity of actors and activity has yet to be acknowledged. Investigations continue to be focused primarily on high-tech firms and generally do not appear in mainstream entrepreneurship journals. They have been published in journals of international business, business psychology, techno-entrepreneurship, and information science, respectively (Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Jome et al., 2006; Sanz-Velasco, 2007; Shoham et al., 2006). One appeared in the *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research* journal (Mayer, 2006), and another in the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* (Martin & Wright, 2005). What can be inferred from this paucity of literature and its omission from mainstream journals is that entrepreneurship discourse has not adequately theorised the impacts of the Internet on entrepreneurial activity, and that insights into digital entrepreneurship drawn from other disciplines have not been consolidated in the entrepreneurship literature. The sheer variety and diversity of existing and emergent digital entrepreneurial activity is noticeably absent from the literature.

Furthermore, despite being encouraged by public-facing rhetoric as the previous chapter described, the online environment as platform for the entrepreneurial activities of marginalised actors has not been sufficiently explored. The few existing investigations on women 'web entrepreneurs' maintain traditional theoretical perspectives on entrepreneurship by adopting either psychology-based or economics-based approaches, and attempting to ascertain the personal characteristics, economic impacts, or entrepreneurial motivations of these individuals (Forson & Özbilgin, 2003; Jome et al., 2006; Mayer, 2006). These approaches, as discussed above and in the previous chapter, tend to be influenced by a success bias that aims to predict the possibility of wealth generation from their activities. The psychology-based approach takes the individual, or micro level of analysis, while the economics-based

approach remains at the macro or systemic level. Neither approach considers the phenomenon at multiple levels of analysis, nor do they consider the intersections of gender with other relevant social categories such as race/ethnicity and class.

As the following sections will elaborate, it is argued that like offline entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship is similarly affected by the social position of the entrepreneurial actor(s). The effects of categorisation form structural conditions that shape the potential modes of exchange available to different individuals, affecting the opportunities they are able and likely to pursue (Carter et al., 2015). For example, gender constraints mean women owners are overrepresented in small-scale, undercapitalised, 'pink-collar' businesses with low profit margins, many of which are home-based, which constrains growth (Bachrach Ehlers & Main, 1998; Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Mirchandani, 1999). It is likely that women's digital businesses are still likely to be home-based as a result of continuing structural inequality, such as lower access to financial resources and higher childcare responsibilities. Indeed, in the UK, Mason et al. (2011) find that more women than men use their home as a business base, while Thompson et al. (2009) find a correlation between poor entrepreneurial resource access and women with home-based businesses. Furthermore, as home-based businesses have less social and economic legitimacy due to being less visible to the public and to researchers, and many of them operate part-time, contributing further to their marginality (Mason et al., 2011; Mirchandani, 1999; Thompson et al., 2009), it is therefore likely that the success bias has contributed to the theoretical and empirical neglect of these entrepreneurial ventures.

If adhering to definitions set by the success bias, the digital entrepreneurship of many actors would go mostly unnoticed. Yet, perhaps due to the social appeal of being seen as an entrepreneur or the simplicity of measuring a reportable statistic like self-employment, many people who are self-employed via the online environment consider themselves to be entrepreneurs and are being studied as such (e.g. Jome et al., 2006). In addition, studies influenced by a success bias that ignores historical and structural conditions may have difficulties accurately accounting for the emergence of new entrepreneurial opportunities. Bygrave's (2006: 22) unlikely dichotomy of "mom-and-pops" and "high potentials" does not reflect the modern digital economy, in which highly creative, educated and skilled people may self-employ as freelancers, contractors, and consultants, often prior or in addition to creating new independent ventures. Thus, it becomes clear that there could be many actors whose digital entrepreneurship would be obscured by a success bias, as well as many self-employed people who identify themselves as entrepreneurs. Section 3.2 will discuss this aspect of the phenomenon further.

### *Necessity vs. Opportunity Entrepreneurship*

A continuation of the long-standing 'push' vs. 'pull' debate over entrepreneurial motivation (Amit & Mullen, 1995; Benjamin & Levine, 1986), the concept of necessity entrepreneurship is a motivation-based approach to studying the activity of certain entrepreneurial actors (Block & Koellinger, 2009; Byrne & Fayolle, 2012). Acs (2006) defines the necessity entrepreneur as someone who never considered starting or owning a business until there was no other option, while Block & Koellinger (2009) prioritise a previous period of unemployment and a lack of better work alternatives. Necessity

entrepreneurship is generally defined in opposition to 'opportunity' entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurship as it is traditionally defined: a new venture undertaken in response to the identification of a novel opportunity for exchange. Acs suggests that 'necessity' entrepreneurship "reflects the individual's perception that such actions presented the best option available for employment" while 'opportunity' entrepreneurship "represents the voluntary nature of participation" (2006: 101). The links between necessity entrepreneurship and poverty have been explored (Byrne & Fayolle, 2012; Lambrecht & Beens, 2005) with Pines et al. (2010) finding it to be more prevalent amongst disadvantaged and marginalised groups, and Byrne and Fayolle (2012) concluding that the phenomenon was gendered, and disproportionately associated with the activities of women.

However, in line with findings suggesting actors engage in entrepreneurship due to a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors (Kirkwood, 2009), these two opposing 'motivations' have also been challenged in the literature. The simplistic nature of the necessity/opportunity dichotomy appears to play into the success bias, echoing Bygrave's (2006) 'mom-and-pops' vs. 'high potentials.' Williams & Williams (2012) suggest that both necessity and opportunity are often co-present in entrepreneurs' motives, which are complex and dynamic. As necessity entrepreneurship is noted to be associated with women (Byrne & Fayolle, 2012), there is a risk of problematically and needlessly associating necessity entrepreneurship with women and opportunity entrepreneurship with men. Instead, within-group diversity should be acknowledged, and the tendency of entrepreneurship scholarship to focus on endogenous 'motives' should be combined with attention to the exogenous, structural, social and material conditions surrounding decision-making processes. For it is not only motivations for starting a business that influence the nature of activity, but also the resources available, which will be explored further through the notion of positionality.

### **3.2 Self-Employment as Entrepreneurship by Marginalised Actors**

In the manner of most large-scale entrepreneurship studies (e.g. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, or GEM), empirical research on the entrepreneurship of marginalised groups tends to use self-employment as the operationalising variable (e.g. Fairlie, 2005; Marlow & Carter, 2004; McEvoy & Hafeez, 2009; Ram et al., 2003). Particularly in a society that promotes the discourse of enterprise, self-employment and entrepreneurship are often conflated. But they are not necessarily the same phenomenon. There are definite overlaps between the two categories, such that although not all entrepreneurial activity is linked to self-employment, some self-employment can be considered entrepreneurial activity. This is particularly so for members of disadvantaged groups, whose lack of access to resources may prevent them from pursuing high-growth opportunities. If entrepreneurship is defined as the process of pursuing novel opportunities for exchange, it can happen within or outside of the context of self-employment. Not only individuals, but firms small and large, old and new, family-owned and publicly traded can all be entrepreneurial (Alvarez et al., 2012). Entrepreneurship includes activities as disparate as 'high-tech' businesses and 'lifestyle' ventures (Steyaert & Katz, 2004). Entrepreneurial status may also be related to experience, which can range from novice, to nascent, habitual, and serial or portfolio entrepreneurs (Westhead et. al, 2005; Wright and Marlow, 2012). Therefore, entrepreneurship as a phenomenon is clearly not homogenous (Acs, 2006).

Likewise, heterogeneity in the population of self-employed is acknowledged (Hofstede et al., 2004; Marlow & Carter, 2004), although more traditional scholarship divides 'entrepreneurial' from 'managerial' actors based on the success-bias-influenced criteria of growth orientation and innovativeness. Hofstede et al. note: "Within the population of self-employed, some are economically marginal, others run their business in a managerial manner, and only a subset are intrinsically entrepreneurial" (2004: 165). Yet, because of the distinct social and economic challenges marginalised people face in growing their businesses, self-employment may for them be a useful marker of entrepreneurial orientation. For example, networking, a key aspect of entrepreneurship, has been found to be an area of particular inequality for women (Moore, 2004), while traditional financing is an area of differential treatment for both women and people of colour/BME individuals due to issues of discrimination (Ram et al., 2003, Marlow & Patton, 2005). Those who are marginalised by more than one factor, such as women of colour, queer or disabled women, face additional complications and challenges from intersecting social hierarchies and their concrete impacts upon resource allocation (Anthias, 2001b). Therefore, actors may be both entrepreneurial and economically marginal, illustrating the insufficiency of the distinctions described by Hofstede et al. (2004). Marlow, Carter and Shaw (2008) argue that self-employment can be subsumed into entrepreneurship because those lacking resources may use self-employment as a lower cost market entry strategy and remain self-employed for the duration, while individuals with higher resource capacity will move from self-employment into business incorporation. They suggest self-employment may accommodate the weakest economic activity amongst the poorest population groups, while business incorporation can indicate a growth-oriented focus amongst the resource rich (2008).

Moreover, it seems appropriate to link self-employment and entrepreneurship if the latter is framed as a career choice. Building upon Knight's conception of entrepreneurship as an occupational choice (Parker, 2006: 437), entrepreneurship has recently been contextualised in academic literature in the concept of the boundaryless career, to the effect that "becoming or acting as an entrepreneur is [implied to be] a career move just like the choice of any other profession, rather than a singular unique event" (Hytti, 2010: 66). Actors may also be turning away from traditional waged work as a result of its growing precariousness, for in the current historical moment, the traditional meanings associated with waged work and entrepreneurship may be shifting. While waged work is becoming or at least seeming increasingly risky and less secure, entrepreneurship (or working for oneself, being one's own boss) may be perceived as a more reliable and less risky option (Hytti, 2005; Hytti, 2010: 67). Additionally, the proliferation of the heroic or celebrity entrepreneur archetype, and associated conceptualisations of entrepreneurship as a positive individual achievement, social good, and contribution to economic activity, lends status and prestige to the title, even if self-adopted. Groups wishing to encourage business formation (such as business development organisations, policymakers aiming to drive economic activity, and multilevel marketing companies) may use these positive conceptualisations of 'entrepreneur' euphemistically when encouraging un- or under-employed individuals to start businesses. It is clear that numerous political and discursive factors are at play when self-employed people are described or choose to describe themselves as entrepreneurs, to the extent that despite academic focus on the successful entrepreneurial capitalist, many of the actors today called 'entrepreneurs' are quite unlike those described by Schumpeter (Jones & Spicer, 2009: 11). According to

the criteria of the success bias – growth orientation and innovativeness – the majority of new businesses would not be considered entrepreneurial (Shane, 2008: 65), and may even belong to the group to which Hofstede et al. (2004) refer as economically marginal. But according to Imas et al. (2012), traditional entrepreneurship theory, focused as it is on economic contributions, cannot adequately account for these marginalised actors. Thus, more appropriate explanatory concepts are required.

At present, entrepreneurship is touted as a universal solution for such major human concerns as economic underdevelopment, unemployment, and poverty (Calás et al., 2007), while entrepreneurship by members of marginalised groups is being promoted by organizations, institutions and policymakers (Fairlie, 2005). The promises of entrepreneurship for members of these groups have existed within academic and popular discourse since the birth of the paradigm, with the entrepreneurial experiences of Asian communities in the US and UK often problematically upheld as models that other ethnic groups should imitate (Ram et al., 2000). It is often repeated that “[t]hrough entrepreneurship, women and other disadvantaged groups can achieve material and personal success, gain independence and control over the products of their labor, and avoid many of the barriers they would face in large organizations” (Goffee and Scase, 1987, p. 8, as cited by Mirchandani, 1999: 225). Gill and Ganesh (2007) add that, despite the masculine image it conveys, entrepreneurship is often seen as a form of empowerment for women. Yet traditional entrepreneurship research is based on – and measured against – an essentialist conception of the entrepreneur as male/masculine and white (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Ogbor, 2000). Aided by popular mythical narratives (Imas et al., 2012; Ogbor, 2000; Shane, 2008: 1) and an elite pool of celebrity (e.g. Duncan Bannatyne, Richard Branson, Sir Allan Sugar, Donald Trump) and high-tech entrepreneurs (e.g. Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg), dominance of the archetype of the white Western male entrepreneur in both academic and popular spheres generally leaves the entrepreneurship of marginalised actors under-theorised.

Contemporary scholarship has challenged and problematised this archetype, expanding the literature to include non-white and women actors and critiquing the biases underpinning previous studies focused upon them (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Bruni et al., 2004; Calás et al., 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Fairlie, 2005; Jones & Spicer, 2005, 2009; Mirchandani, 1999; Pio, 2007; Ram et al., 2000). But although their existence is now generally acknowledged, most entrepreneurship theory still does not provide sufficient treatment of them and their experiences. Instead, it ‘others’ them (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2007: 82, Ogbor, 2000; Mirchandani, 1999), comparing their performance to that of dominant groups (e.g. Shane, 2008), or ignoring their different value systems and ways of organising (Imas et al., 2012). For example, many studies adapt theories developed through analyses of men's lives to the experiences of women (Mirchandani, 1999), which results in women and their experiences being seen as secondary, and their businesses of less significance or, at best, a complement to men's (Ahl, 2006). Despite calls to employ feminist theory as an analytical frame to demonstrate the reproduction of such subordination, there is scant evidence that this has emerged in mainstream research (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

### *Problematising the Myths of Entrepreneurship*

In addition, while entrepreneurship is often portrayed as route to social empowerment and economic independence, it may not actually be so. Marginalised actors starting their own businesses put themselves at significant risk, for the failure rate of small businesses is high (Shane, 2008; Jones & Spicer, 2009) and the choice of self-employment often results in lower, not higher, economic status, as well as a higher chance of poverty (Lambrecht & Beens, 2005; Weiler and Bernasek, 2001 as cited by Winn, 2005). For example, in the UK since the 1980s, a self-employed person is more than three times as likely as an employee to be in the lowest decile group of the overall labour income distribution, illustrating links between self-employment and low and unstable incomes, insecurity, and relative poverty in later life (Meager & Bates, 2001 as cited by Lambrecht & Beens, 2005: 206). Furthermore, in an era of individualization where failure becomes personal (Lambrecht & Beens, 2005), blame for failed businesses is placed squarely upon the actor, who is implied to have 'not worked hard enough,' or had ideas that were 'not good enough,' resulting in associated stress, grief and possibly even mental health issues (Shepherd, 2003; Singh, Corner & Pavlovich, 2007). In addition, contrary to rhetorical claims about entrepreneurship as a means of empowerment and increased wealth for marginalised groups, traditional entrepreneurship theory does not assume that any group, disadvantaged or otherwise, can use entrepreneurship as a route to economic security, for "only some subset of the population will discover a given opportunity" (Kirzner, 1973 as cited by Shane & Venkataraman, 2000: 221).

Nonetheless, there has been a surge of interest in entrepreneurship and business development programs for marginalised people and groups, spurred by arguments from academicians and policymakers that entrepreneurship provides a route out of poverty and an alternative to unemployment or discrimination in the labour market (Fairlie, 2005: 1-2). Marginalised people are not only targeted by rhetoric, but may also be pushed into entrepreneurship for reasons of social disadvantage. Intersecting exclusionary categories of gender, race/ethnicity and class limit opportunities and resource access, making it likely that members of historically disadvantaged populations will disproportionately face structural challenges to economic stability and wealth creation. Such challenges may include barriers to education, unemployment, underemployment, and difficulty funding and growing new ventures (Bruni et al., 2004; Essers et al., 2010, Marlow & Patton, 2005; Noon & Hoque, 2001; Ram et al., 2000; Ram et al., 2003). Insofar as these structural challenges enable or constrain educational and economic opportunity, the scope of the entrepreneurial activity of actors will be impacted by the intersecting effects of social marginality.

Even so, the promises of entrepreneurship and working from home, such as 'flexibility' and 'being one's own boss,' may seem particularly appealing to women in particular. Researchers have pointed out numerous gendered motivations, at both structural and individual levels, for women making the transition into entrepreneurship, including their desire for challenge and self-determination, desire to balance work and family responsibilities, and blocked mobility within corporate structures (Buttner & Moore, 1997 as cited by Mirchandani, 1999; Hytti, 2010; Patterson & Mavin, 2009). Having a flexible work schedule and working from home have been identified as key motivating factors for US women web entrepreneurs in particular, with Jome et al. (2006) concluding that for women, Internet businesses are more accessible, may offer more work flexibility, and, due to expectations of 'neutrality' and 'invisibility' online, be less discriminatory against women. They may appear to make it more possible to

achieve the work-family synergies that Eddleston and Powell (2012) find many women entrepreneurs try to build. However, in their study of 'mumpreneurs', Duberley & Carrigan (2012) contest that women owners of home-based businesses actually face longer working hours, lower earnings, trading limitations, a lack of credibility and constrained growth.

Mirchandani (2000) points out that the much-extolled promise of home-based work to provide flexibility, allowing actors to better integrate work and family responsibilities, is exaggerated, perpetuating the gendered divisions of household labour that place women as primary caregivers. She notes that "the balance between work and family is often experienced as the management of the damage borne by the family in the need to fulfil work demands, and the management of the damage to work legitimacy which accompanies the fulfilment of family responsibilities" (2000: 178). Despite the contributions of some home businesses to economic development (Mason et al., 2011), the location of businesses in the home is seen to have a negative impact on legitimacy from the point of view of creditors, customers, community and family members (Mirchandani, 1999; Walker & Webster, 2004). In addition, Kelan (2009) argues that increased 'flexibility' can lead to an intensification of work, the blurring of boundaries between work and private space, and a solidifying of existing gender relations, all of which hold negative implications for those with caring responsibilities, who are disproportionately likely to be women. For the same reasons that many women are more likely to own home-based and handicraft-style businesses – user, not developer, relationships with technology, alongside greater responsibilities for unpaid domestic work – they are also less likely to have access to the finance, time, skills or team necessary to actualise the Internet's potential, grow their businesses outside the home, or take a technology-based business beyond the idea stage. Thus, as the number of women engaged in entrepreneurial activity online appears to be on the rise, there is a prescient need to look more closely at their experiences of entrepreneurship.

### *Contextualising Women's Digital Entrepreneurship Using Critical Gender Theory*

Gender, as a social construct affecting what is regarded as masculine or feminine, independent of a person's biological sex, affects men as well as women (Ahl, 2006). However, to explore experiences of marginality in digital entrepreneurship, an investigation of women's experiences is a useful starting point. Mainstream entrepreneurship research tends to equate gender with biological sex, stressing that it may be the strongest distinguishing factor between those who participate in entrepreneurship and those who do not (Delmar & Davidsson, 2000; Shane, 2008: 125). Despite many initiatives to increase women's participation, in the Anglo-American context men are still twice as likely to start businesses as women (Carter et al., 2015; Marlow et al., 2012). But critical gender and entrepreneurship scholars have helped to advance the conversation beyond simplistic 'women vs. men' comparative studies, illustrating how such investigations are themselves gendered (Ahl, 2006) and identifying problematic assumptions that result in the portrayal of women entrepreneurs as deficient and their organisations as underperforming, when in fact they reflect the constrained performance of most small firms (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2013).

The sectors entrepreneurs enter are often closely related to previous employment experience (Jayawarna et al., 2013). Although women make up nearly half of the employed workforce in developed economies, they are still disadvantaged in waged work in terms of returns and status (McRobbie, 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2012), limited to crowded, low-value added sectors by both vertical and horizontal occupational segregation, and under-represented in the higher-performing and masculinised science, engineering and technology (SET) sectors (Kelan, 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2012). It is now generally accepted that both organisations and the technologies they employ are gendered by design and association, as are assumptions about job roles and their performances, such that the job roles that seem to be available are influenced by our gender identities as well as the gendered appearance of workplaces and technologies (Kelan, 2009: 29). Thus, in Western societies where technology is equated with masculinity, technology professions support a masculine identity construction (Kelan, 2009: 32), the norms of which remain hostile to women in heterosexual partnerships who are traditionally more heavily burdened by domestic responsibilities and childcare than their partners (Sürgevil & Özbilgin, 2010).

Even when they work directly in the technology sector, women are clustered in 'softer' and 'less technical' areas, such as design and consulting (Kelan, 2009; Mayer, 2008). This is a trend that extends to the area of digital entrepreneurship by women, in which women are overrepresented as providers of feminised services and retailers of predominantly 'feminine' products (Forson & Ozbilgin, 2003; Jome et al., 2006), and could thus seem to be less associated with technology and more with femininity. This constitutes an evolution of the assumption that feminised domestic activities can be easily transformed into money-making ventures, but which may actually lock women into sectors that are low-skilled, labour-intensive and generate little or no profit (Bachrach Ehlers & Main, 1998; Mirchandani, 1999: 231; Hess, 2013). Simultaneously, the contemporary era is characterised by a shift to what Wetterer (2003; as cited by Kelan, 2009: 25) calls 'rhetorical modernisation' and McRobbie (2009) calls 'post-feminism'. In this period, following the widespread entry of women into education and the workforce, gender is assumed to no longer matter, despite its continual influence upon, and structuring of, people's lives. This, along with the increased valuing of traditionally 'feminine' skills such as communication and relationship-building at work, has led to oscillating and contradictory representations of gender as irrelevant and being a woman as an asset in the workplace (Kelan, 2009; McRobbie, 2009).

There is now a plurality of feminist approaches to entrepreneurship, including liberal, socialist, radical, and pragmatist perspectives (Calás et al., 2007, 2009; Scott et al., 2012). Scott et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive overview of the entrance of feminist theory into entrepreneurship discourse in the 1990s, contemporaneous with the emergence of nation-level databases on gender inequality, and critical sub-disciplines such as feminist economics. It is therefore crucial to attend to the context specificity and social embeddedness of entrepreneurship often neglected by mainstream entrepreneurship research (de Bruin et al., 2007; Wright, 2012) but which feminist and critical scholars have helped bring to light. Yet, while the entrepreneurship literature acknowledges the key contributions of knowledge, networks, and social capital to entrepreneurial success (Acs et al., 2009; Aldrich & Kim, 2007; Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Jenssen & Koenig, 2002; Ramos-Rodriguez et al., 2010), it overwhelmingly persists in doing so in the absence of sociological theory that frames such attributes in



notions of privilege and disadvantage. For the recognition of entrepreneurial processes as socially embedded raises the question of how the heterogeneous social positionality of actors, and the privilege or disadvantages it affords, affects their pursuit of opportunities. Feminist and critical gender theory has been central to advancing the conversation on how women's opportunities are shaped by gendered assumptions and constraints. As the next section will demonstrate, the paradigm of intersectionality, offered here as an alternative feminist approach to the study of entrepreneurship, can serve to further advance the framework for approaching this question.

By pairing intersectionality and entrepreneurship theory, we will see that not only gender, but social positionality in general has concrete impacts on resource allocation (Anthias, 2001b) which in turn affects processes of opportunity identification (Haynie et al., 2009) and development (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). Divisions of gender and ethnicity will be especially relevant, as they "constitute particularly salient constructions of difference and identity on the one hand, and hierarchization and unequal resource allocation modes on the other" (Anthias, 2001b: 368). Although substantial evidence exists to suggest that females, immigrants and ethnic minorities are still seen as 'other' and excluded from inner circles of entrepreneurship, most studies of this exclusion have addressed gender and ethnicity separately, not simultaneously (Carter et al., 2015; Essers et al., 2010). Known among intersectionality researchers as a 'single-issue' or 'single-axis' approach, it problematically tends to focus on the most privileged members of the group and "marginalize those who are multiply-burdened" (Crenshaw, 1989: 140 as cited by Nash, 2008). For example, when considering women, single-issue approaches foreground white women; when considering people of colour, they foreground men (hooks, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991). While while women of colour entrepreneurs are a rapidly growing group (Moore, 2004), with few exceptions, research on women entrepreneurs has thus far been mostly mute on representations of them (Calás et al., 2007: 83; Knight, 2014). Intersectional studies of entrepreneurship thus far have focused primarily on notions of discursive identity construction and maintenance (e.g. Essers & Benschop, 2009; Essers et al., 2010), not on issues of resource allocation or social positionality, although some are moving into this theoretical space (e.g. Knight, 2014).

While UK women are being encouraged to engage in digital enterprise (Government Equalities Office, 2014), evidence from the US suggests that it is specifically women of colour who are driving entrepreneurship rates, comprising one-third of all women-owned firms in the nation (Ahmad, 2014), which only further underscores the need for an intersectional perspective on entrepreneurship. In a recent exploration of barriers to ethnic minority and women's enterprise, Carter et al. (2015) highlight the benefits of such an approach. However, limited extant research on those who are marginalised by more than one social category, as well as those entrepreneuring online, means there is scope for intersectionality theory to provide valuable insight into their experiences. Applicable to more than just issues of identity, intersectionality and an associated concept, positionality, can usefully frame the impacts of social positions on resource allocation. When placed in conversation with entrepreneurship theory, significant implications for entrepreneurship research emerge.

### **3.3 Intersectionality, Positionality and Resource Distribution**

#### *Introducing Intersectionality*

While encouraged to engage in digital entrepreneurship, marginalised actors have until now been underrepresented in the literature and their activity under-theorised as a result. Yet, due to their increasing participation in digital entrepreneurial activity, and its prevalence in rhetoric, their experiences should be of concern to entrepreneurship researchers. For these reasons, appropriate conceptual tools for this analysis must be encouraged in the domain. Drawing insights from the discipline of sociology, we see that social categories such as gender, race/ethnicity and class are central elements structuring resource allocation (Anthias, 2001b). Furthermore, the notion of intersectionality shows these categories to be “inextricably interconnected in the production of social practices of exclusion” (Crenshaw, 1997 as cited by Essers et al., 2010). This section will explore how grasping intersectionality can deepen an understanding of social positionality and its relevance to entrepreneurial activity.

Intersectionality has emerged over the past thirty years as an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the interaction of categories that form the organising structures of society, one that recognizes their influence on political access and equality (Hancock, 2007). There has been a turn towards intersectionality as a new research paradigm rather than simply a content specialisation in populations with intersecting marginalised identities (Hancock, 2007; Oleksy, 2011). Originating in Black feminist thought (e.g. Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 1990/2000; hooks, 1981), the concept of intersectionality has been brought into the field of entrepreneurship by scholars studying the intersections of race, class and gender (Harvey, 2005), gender and ethnicity (Verdujin & Essers, 2013) and gender, ethnicity and religion (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Essers et al., 2010) in relation to entrepreneurial activity. Intersectionality theorises the complexities of social categorisation that marginalised actors undergo, which is unaddressed and inadequately captured by separate analyses of the female entrepreneur and the immigrant or ethnic minority entrepreneur in existing literature (Essers et al., 2010). Because they lie “at the heart of the social” (Anthias, 1998a, as cited by Anthias, 2001b: 368), gender and ethnicity specifically are found to influence opportunities simultaneously and in concert (Wekker & Lutz, 2001 as cited by Essers et al., 2010; Healy, Bradley & Forson, 2011). Furthermore, although in recent years, class has been subsumed by identity politics, it should once again be considered (Acker, 2000; Sayer, 2005) due to its impacts on the respective life chances of individuals. Thus, while this thesis acknowledges that other characteristics such as age, sexual orientation and disability may be relevant to experiences of digital entrepreneurship, it utilises the categories of gender, race and class, or what Acker (2006) describes as key ‘bases for inequality’, as analytical starting points, taking additional characteristics as significant if they are made evident in the accounts of the participants. This will enable the avoidance of an unlimited focus on the seemingly endless number of intersections any one individual may experience that would prevent general analytical claims from being made.

While earlier debates on marginality may have sought to prioritise one category over others, or utilised an additive approach that treated each category separately, assuming increases in inequality with each additional stigmatised identity (Anthias, 2008; Bowleg, 2008), most intersectionality researchers have moved away from these approaches. In general, intersectional approaches now take exclusionary categories, and the social inequalities they precipitate, as interdependent and mutually constitutive

(Bowleg, 2008), such that “classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on” (Anthias, 2008: 13). The processes of their production are complex, and may be mutually reinforcing or contradicting (Acker, 2006: 442). However, despite intersectionality theory’s ability to consider multiple categories of oppression as well as multiple levels of analysis, an important limitation is that has not comprehensively theorised how individuals may experience privilege. This is likely a result of its early focus on complicating and problematising existing perceptions of oppression, a focus that addressed significant gaps in single-issue approaches. More recently, Nash (2008: 12) has pointed out that the retained focus on oppression could obscure experiences of privilege, such that intersectionality “neglects to describe the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect”. For example, the freedom to engage in legal entrepreneurial activity, even by marginalised actors, can be seen as a privilege not available to those more severely marginalised, such as people who are imprisoned, or living under politically or economically repressive governments. Challenging intersectionality theorists to go deeper, Nash writes: “In conceiving of privilege and oppression as complex, multi-valent, and simultaneous, intersectionality could offer a more robust conception of both identity and oppression” (2008: 12).

Across disciplines, intersectionality has thus far been most commonly used to explore issues of identity. Identity is a common construct in entrepreneurship studies, with researchers often using narrative analysis to illustrate the discursive construction of entrepreneurial identity (e.g. Warren, 2004; Jones et al., 2008). Yuval-Davis defines identities as “individual and collective narratives that answer the question ‘who am/are I/we?’”, but she notes that “in contemporary literature they are often required to ‘perform’ analytical tasks beyond their abilities” (Anthias, 2002; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997 as cited by Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197). One such task which the notion of identity seems ill-suited to perform is to provide contextual analysis for a given situation, such as entrepreneurship. For while exploring identity can provide insight into individuals’ perceptions of particular circumstances, and how they attempt to negotiate and make sense of them, it cannot speak decisively about how structural components of those circumstances may be determined by the wider social field. Anthias (2008: 7) notes how identity has come to say ‘both too much and too little’: too much in that there are “a range of different elements of focus that are incorporated, often rather carelessly, under its ambit,” and too little in that “it does not flag central questions of structure, context and meaning and therefore, cannot fully attend to the conditions of existence of the production of the different component elements under examination.” In addition, a common feature of identity research is a general tendency to treat it, and by extension, difference and inequality, as a static and possessive attribute of individuals or groups (Anthias, 2006; 2008). This stance, and the fragmented identity politics it foments, has been thoroughly problematised by intersectionality scholars, and a more dynamic, non-essentialist, processual conception of identity, difference and inequality adopted (Anthias, 2006). So although the pairing of intersectionality and identity theory has been useful and may be appropriate for certain research questions, it is not the focus of this thesis.

Another potential application for intersectionality theory within entrepreneurship studies may be that of social capital. Human and social capital theories are popular explanations for the phenomena of opportunity recognition and exploitation (e.g. Davidsson & Honig, 2003; De Carolis & Saporito, 2006);

and yet, without a social context, their relationship to each other and to entrepreneurship is murky. Ramos-Rodruiguez et al. (2010) argue that social capital, or access to external knowledge through social networks, is fundamental for developing the capacity to recognise new business opportunities. However, Davidsson and Honig (2003) found that only one aspect of social capital – being a member of a business network – had a significant positive effect on profitability. In contrast to Batgarjal's (2003) argument that the instrumental value of networks is contingent upon the human capital of entrepreneurs, they also found that although human capital could help predict entry into entrepreneurship, it did not serve to carry the process through to completion. DeCarolis & Saporito (2006) attempted an endogenous/exogenous explanation of entrepreneurship using social capital as a proxy for exogenous factors and cognition for endogenous factors; however, their treatment lacks the holistic perspective necessary to "attune researchers to opportunities nested within entrepreneurs' lives and experiences" (de Bruin et al., 2007).

Anthias (2007) highlights the limitations of a social capital perspective and stresses the need to embed it within social hierarchies. She argues that "whilst the notion of social capital in the literature is generally, although not exclusively, tied to specific types of resources, such as networks...a greater distinction between the notion of resources and social capital needs to be made" (Anthias, 2007). Devoid of the context of social hierarchies and a broader, more practical conception of resources, the social and human capital perspective does not have the scope to address structural issues of marginality and intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression. While a capital-based analysis may attribute the unsuccessful entrepreneurial experiences of marginalised actors to poor social networks or lack of human capital, it would fail to theorise these disadvantages at a structural level, and thus also fail to recognise the unequal distribution of resources that typically manifest in such ways.

### *Introducing Positionality*

Despite intersectionality's influence across various disciplines, it has been difficult to operationalize in research contexts. Although it helps to make visible the influences of multiple categories of oppression in subjects' experiences, the theory poses problems when researchers attempt to tease out the various forces involved. Also, due to its focus on intersecting structural forces of oppression, it may lack attention to questions of agency and privilege. While a plethora of scholarship on the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation exists in the multidisciplinary literature, there is a paucity of literature on intersectionality from a methodological perspective (McCall, 2005; Bowleg, 2008). However, Anthias' work on translocational positionality (2001a, 2001b, 2006, 2007, 2008) has the potential to advance intersectionality theory beyond the "thorny methodological challenges" it presents (Bowleg, 2008: 312). Were the field to respond to Nash's call to deepen intersectionality theory to include concepts of privilege (2008), these tools would be well-poised to provide a holistic intersectional analysis of the contexts in which marginalised actors engage in entrepreneurial activity.

Anthias (2001b, 2006, 2007, 2008) introduces the concept of social positionality, which she posits as a product of intersectionality, but with practical consequences of its own. Defining intersectionality as a "social process related to practices and arrangements," she argues that this process gives rise to

particular forms of positionality (2006: 27). The concept of positionality is multiple: it “combines a reference to *social position* (as a set of effectivities, or as outcome) and *social positioning* (as a set of practices, actions and meanings - as process)” (2001b: 634, italics added). This suggests that from a temporal view, positionality encompasses both the present outcome of intersectionality – i.e., the *being* – as well as the process of development continually occurring, or the *becoming*. As such, positionality, like its precursor intersectionality, is a dynamic concept with real effects that impact the present, but are subject to change due to changing circumstances of structure and agency. From a spatial view, positionality is defined as “the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice)” (Anthias, 2001a: 635), indicating its applicability to multi-level analyses. Anthias describes positionality as *translocational*, or “in terms of locations which are not fixed but are context, meaning and time related and which therefore involve shifts and contradiction” (2008: 5). It is an intersectional frame that moves away from the idea of given ‘groups’ or ‘categories’ of gender, ethnicity, and class which then intersect, and instead pays much more attention to broader social locations and processes (2008). Positionality is herein argued to provide an important intervention for entrepreneurship studies. Its particular relevance for digital entrepreneurship will be addressed in the final section of this chapter.

#### *Implications for Resource Distribution*

Positionality, and the social position/ing it describes, holds significant implications for marginality research in its portrayal of the concrete effects of intersecting social hierarchies. Anthias argues that social positions are characterised firstly by hierarchical difference: “a pecking order of places, symbolically and materially” and secondly, by unequal resource allocation: “concrete access to economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources” (2001a: 635). Resource allocation here references not only economic resources but also the allocation of power, authority and legitimacy in relation to political, cultural and representational levels, as well as the validation of different kinds of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990 as cited by Anthias 2001a: 635). This then leads to “naturalized, collectivized and relational hierarchization and unequal resource allocation” (Anthias, 2001a: 635).

By illustrating its implications for resource allocation, the notion of positionality takes intersectionality from the realm of the theoretical and applies it to the practical. For while intersectionality theory could remain mired in identity politics, positionality “is about more than identification; it is also about the *lived practices* in which identification is practised/performed as well as the intersubjective, organisational and representational *conditions* for their existence (Anthias, 1998a as cited by Anthias, 2001a: 635, emphasis added). These lived practices will be enabled or constrained by the positions of actors in complex social hierarchies made up of stratifications of exclusionary categories such as race/ethnicity, class and gender. Naturalised via a continuous process of social reinforcement, these hierarchies are, by their apparent normalcy, made to appear invisible. This is particularly an issue in cultures dominated by the discourse of enterprise, where a myth of the meritocratic society is still prevalent. However, even if made to seem invisible, the places occupied by marginalised actors in the ‘social order of things’ will be crucial to their experiences, not only of entrepreneurship, but of all the opportunities available to them. Individuals and

groups disadvantaged by social positionality will have access to fewer economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources, and their processes of opportunity pursuit will doubtlessly be impacted as a result.

### **3.4 How Positionality Advances Entrepreneurship Studies**

#### *From 'Sameness vs. Difference' to Structural Conditions*

The treatment of gender in mainstream entrepreneurship literature is often a reductionist one in which gender is equated with women, and women are essentialised, leading to discourse primarily focused on women's supposed sameness or difference, at best, and inferiority, at worst, to men. The predominant research questions regarding women's entrepreneurship have centred on women's supposed deficiency, asking 'Why are women different than men, and how can they become more like them?' (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). This is also true of the literature on women's technology entrepreneurship (e.g. Kaplan & Malach-Pines, 2010).

Williams (1991) explains how scholars addressing issues of inequality have tended to argue from positions of either sameness or difference. Those who argue from the sameness position work under the assumption that marginalised individuals and groups can do as well as 'anyone else' if given the chance, and assert that the simple provision of 'equal' opportunities extended to the disadvantaged will ameliorate issues of inequality. Conversely, those arguing from a position of difference claim that differentiated treatment (e.g. hiring quotas, affirmative action policies) is necessary to equalise representation of disadvantaged groups in organisations and institutions. However, Williams (1991: 305) critiques both positions, stating that they "concede the legitimacy of...structural disadvantage" and are "equally vulnerable to being used to reinforce the status quo" for the important reason that "neither [position] formulates a direct challenge to the structures that disadvantage outsiders." She elaborates:

*"Women will remain economically marginalised until wage labor is restructured, and sexually subordinated until the eroticization of dominance and submission is replaced with a healthier sexuality. Minorities will be subject to racism until racism is disentangled from the "legitimate" power dynamic in this country. To join our society on anything like equal terms, minorities and women must demand neither mere entry nor special accommodation. Instead, they must demand transformation" (Williams, 1991: p. 305)*

Underpinning the positions of both sameness and difference is the assumption that an authentically meritocratic society exists, which, as mentioned, has particular application in neoliberal enterprise culture. Although Williams' analysis has yet to include an intersectional perspective, its relevance to the field of entrepreneurship is clear. The increase in development programs, funding bodies and public policy to support the entrepreneurial activity of marginalised individuals is premised upon the difference position, and as such, operates under the assumption that this type of specialised assistance is necessary in order to equalise representation of marginalised individuals amongst the population of entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, claims that a marginalised population such as 'women' do not participate in entrepreneurship due to 'choice' (Shane, 2008) are revealed to be unsound when we see that they are predicated on the sameness position. Williams illustrates this with the example of a woman who left

employment to care for children, not due to preference, but because the structural conditions of her lived experience (e.g. inflexible work schedule, low pay rate, high childcare costs) made it more costly for her to remain employed than to stay at home. If conditions had been more conducive, she would have chosen to remain in employment. As Williams states, "Her resulting decision to "choose" family over work stemmed directly from her dissatisfaction with a work life constricted by structural disadvantage. It makes no sense to cite her "choice" as evidence that no structural disadvantage exists" (1991: p. 303). This is echoed in contemporary findings that women's decisions to leave careers to care for children are not based on a 'new traditionalism' but instead are highly conflicted, with work and partner-based factors playing a primary role (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004).

Because they fail to place marginality within the context of structural conditions like social hierarchies, existing conceptions of sameness and difference that have thus far informed entrepreneurial discourse on marginalised groups are inadequate ways of conceptualising inequality. They must be replaced with a notion that acknowledges how inequality is a function of hierarchisation and its resultant unequal resource allocation. Translocational positionality is such a notion. It clearly articulates how intersections of class, gender and race/ethnicity contribute to material inequality, although Anthias (2001b) explains that most sociological approaches still assume that gender and ethnicity pertain primarily to the symbolic or cultural realms, while only class is regarded as pertaining to material inequality. To the contrary, she argues that "material inequality, as a set of outcomes relating to life conditions, life chances and solidary processes, is informed by claims and struggles over resources over different types, undertaken in terms of gender, ethnicity/race and class" (2001b: 368). It is because these categories definitively inform life chances and conditions that they contribute to social stratification, determining the allocation of socially valued resources and social places/locations (2001b).

Because of the access to resources entrepreneurship requires, the positionality of actors in social strata will be relevant to the activities they undertake. A marginal positionality resulting in a lack of material (e.g. knowledge, networks, and funding), and/or symbolic resources (e.g. masculinity, cultural capital) can be expected to pose structural barriers to the chances of engaging successfully in entrepreneurship. Equally, it may be expected that in societies where women have more opportunities for education, employment and social mobility, that their entrepreneurship levels will rise accordingly. However, recent research suggests that paradoxically, the greater gender equality on the national level, the greater the gender gap in self-employment (Klyver et al., 2013). Thus, a framework is needed with which the impact of various interacting structural conditions upon entrepreneurship by women can be explored. Using positionality to study women's entrepreneurship allows researchers to circumnavigate the sameness/difference debate by taking into account women's subordination in the gender binary, and combating essentialism by facilitating investigations into within-group heterogeneity.

Positionality is also useful for entrepreneurship studies more generally precisely because it is explicitly concerned with the unequal distribution of resources that entrepreneurship theorists maintain are key to entrepreneurship and its potential for success. While Stevenson and Jarillo described entrepreneurship as a "process by which individuals...pursue opportunities *without regard to the resources they currently control*" (Stevenson, Robert and Grousbeck, 1989 as cited by Stevenson &

Jarillo, 1990: 23, italics added), more recent scholarship suggests that far from being disregarded, available resources play a significant role in the processes of opportunity identification and pursuit (c.f. Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Haynie et al., 2009). Whether cognitive or material, the asymmetry of resources amongst actors contributes significantly to the potential success or failure of entrepreneurial activity (c.f. Hayek, 1945; Kirzner, 1973; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Alvarez and Busenitz hold that it is a firm's "unique bundle of resources that is different from competitor firms that are potentially valuable and contribute to a firm's competitive advantage" (2001: 756). Crucially, they also note that "entrepreneurship theory has tended to focus on heterogeneity in beliefs about the value of resources," with the mainstream consensus being that "entrepreneurial opportunities exist primarily because different agents have different beliefs about the relative value of resources when they are converted from inputs into outputs" (Schumpeter, 1934; Kirzner, 1979; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, as cited by Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001: 756). However, it is the argument of this thesis that not only are differences of *belief* relevant to processes of opportunity development, but so is unequal *access* to resources. This opens up positionality theory's primary point of intervention within entrepreneurship literature. Exploring entrepreneurship as a function of positionality provides the critical context necessary for an in-depth analysis of resource inequality. Importantly, it moves the conversation beyond the sameness vs. difference debate towards a discussion of who has access to essential resources and who does not. Intersectionality, as the process which gives rise to positionality, then becomes an explanation for why such inequality exists.

#### *From Social Networks to Social Hierarchies*

That social embeddedness contributes to entrepreneurial resources is not new to the literature. It has been acknowledged by those considering the impacts of social networks or capital on entrepreneurship (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Casey, 2012; Casson & Della Giusta, 2007; Greve & Salaff, 2003; Jenssen, 2001; Jenssen & Koenig, 2002; Ulhoi, 2005). As early as 1986, Aldrich and Zimmer alluded to the existence of social hierarchies in networks when they recommended increasing ties to contacts as high in the hierarchy as possible in order to gain access to social resources and more entrepreneurial opportunities.

But despite claiming to utilise a sociologically-based 'structural' approach (Granovetter, 1983), a primary shortcoming of social network approaches is the way their concepts of 'network' are abstracted from concrete structural conditions, which initially determine social hierarchies and their associated implications for tangible and intangible resources. Aldrich and Zimmer's (1986) suggestion above for increasing access to resources is an unlikely route to success for people in low positions who are generally impeded from making personal connections to people in positions of power. Therefore, attempts to assess 'structure' that remain limited to the level of the individual, and simply aim to measure the number and strength of her or his connections, are myopic. The absence of an appropriate social context that acknowledges intersecting social hierarchies and practices of exclusion drains explanatory power from social network theories, which then lack scope to discuss issues of privilege and disadvantage affecting individuals at the level of practice. Positionality, in contrast, theorises the hierarchical structural conditions that contribute to network formation, and constrain or enable practices accordingly. It not only provides conceptual space to account for existing connections and



resources, but also any lack thereof. Thus, it holds considerable explanatory power for the phenomenon of heterogeneity in resources between actors.

### *Bringing Forth a Multi-Level Analyses*

The focus of positionality on lived practices also ties in well with the practical turn in entrepreneurship studies. Its attention to conditions at both structural and individual levels makes it ideal for investigating the entrepreneurial experiences of marginalised actors. Zahra and Wright (2011) have highlighted the need for a multi-level approach to appropriately frame and contextualise entrepreneurial activity, and intersectionality theory, via positionality, serves this purpose well. Pioneering intersectionality scholar Hill Collins explains: “Intersectionality is sympathetic and applicable to both the structural level of analysis, and individual-level phenomena via its domains of power thesis, which recognizes the various terrains on which politics plays out – structural and interpersonal” (Hill Collins, 2000 as cited by Hancock, 2007: 74). This type of multi-level analysis is essential for understanding entrepreneurship as well as the social and economic issues it is purported to solve. To wit, Hancock states: “structural and micro-level research pursued in isolation from each other lack significant utility in addressing intractable political problems like persistent poverty, lack of political empowerment, and educational inequality” (2007: 74). Focus on one level of analysis without consideration of the other leaves out critical information and could lead to incorrect assumptions about the balance of power, and thus, an inability to effectively understand or explain problems arising from issues of inequality. If concepts of structure and agency in intersectionality theory are appropriately deepened, there is scope to usefully map them onto multi-level frameworks of entrepreneurship to help identify structural and agential mechanisms at work in processes of opportunity pursuit.

But as Nash (2008) notes, the interaction between structure and agency in intersectionality literature is currently under-theorised, and is a crucial area for theoretical development – not only so that intersectionality may be applied to entrepreneurship studies, but if its larger theoretical and political project is to be accomplished. To begin with, however, a coherent ontology and epistemology for intersectionality must be theorised, and problems resulting from the lack of a defined methodology (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008, Yuval-Davis, 2006) addressed. It is herein argued that the absence of an articulated ontology and epistemology, combined with the “ambiguity and inconsistency” (Mehrotra, 2010: 418) of intersectional methodology, have led to issues within intersectional scholarship, including inadvertently conflating experience and theory (Nash, 2011: 462-3), replicating critiqued approaches (Nash, 2008: 6), analysing exclusively at the level of the experiential (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197), or collapsing macro-level notions of structural discrimination into the micro-level concept of ‘identity’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This thesis proposes the use of a critical realist perspective to develop an appropriate ontological, epistemological and methodological framework for intersectionality theory, one that is applicable to the study of digital entrepreneurship, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

### 3.5 Cyberfeminism and Digital Entrepreneurship

The full extent of the consequences of the development of ICTs and Internet technology in particular in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are as yet undetermined, and due to the dynamic nature of the Internet, are still emergent. Castells notes that the phenomenon is “too recent to attempt to make firm conclusions on its meaning” (2010: 386). But it is clear that Internet technology and entrepreneurialism are closely linked, with Castells describing entrepreneurial culture as one of the four layers of Internet culture (Wajcman, 2004: 61) and the Internet perceived as an ideal space for entrepreneurial activity. Thus, the popular portrayal of the online environment is that it is a neutral, unbounded entrepreneurial space in which any target audience or market can be reached, any information or knowledge resource found, and the offline stigmas of identity or marked bodies overcome. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is strong evidence to suggest that this portrayal is misleading.

However, literature within the feminist studies of science and technology speaks to why the Internet has come to be seen in this way when it frames technological development in the context of a modernist legacy that regards technological ‘progress’ as unfailingly positive (Wajcman, 2010). Cyberfeminism, a subset of feminist technology studies that engages specifically with the effects of the Internet upon gendered power relations (Daniels, 2009), points out that Internet technology is socially embedded, such that there is no purely digital or virtual economy or community (Sassen, 2002). Although some cyberfeminists have argued that ICTs hold the potential to positively impact gender relations (Oleksy et al., 2012; Plant, 1998), it is generally understood that men’s domination of science and technology has, in most contexts, continued (Wajcman, 2004: 34). Girls and women are found to use the Internet in complex ways that both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race (Daniels, 2009). Such assertions counter dominant discourses about women necessarily prospering in the emerging digital economy. If it is the case that the Net is a socially embedded, political field, then it can be neither homogenous nor equal (Terranova, 2004), and contrary to popular rhetoric, seems unlikely to serve as a “great equaliser”.

A cyberfeminist approach to digital entrepreneurship would underscore the notion that as an artefact made, maintained and developed by humans, the social stratification of the offline realm can be expected to be reflected in the Internet itself: Sassen notes that such stratified hierarchies and power relationships in fact “inscribe electronic space” (2002: 366). Conversely, the online environment will likely have social, political, economic and cultural implications for offline society, resulting in Wajcman’s assertion that it will thus be both a “source and consequence” of gender relations (2010). Because Internet users and producers are hierarchically embedded within society, the online environment and its applications cannot escape being subject to the effects of social hierarchies. Those who spend time online are shaped by what matters offline, and thus bring their knowledge, experiences and values with them to the online space (Kolko et al., 2000; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). In addition, while information technologies can offer “identity prosthesis to redress the burdens of physical body such as age, gender, and race,” they are also found to produce cybertypes, or racialised stereotypes that are central to the signifying practices of cyberspace, which serve to stabilise a sense of white self and identity (Nakamura,

2002). Furthermore, habitual practices carried out online can lead to the unconscious enactment of embodied identities (Schultze, 2014), rendering them inescapable.

#### *Digital Entrepreneurship as a Function of Positionality*

It is thus proposed that the activities taking place within the online environment, as in any other social space, can be fruitfully analysed using the social framework of intersectionality. Furthermore, the activity of digital entrepreneurship in particular can be seen as a function of the social positionality of the entrepreneurial actor(s). By mapping positionality onto traditional entrepreneurship theory about resource and information asymmetry, we see that inequalities in resource distribution and access can pose concrete barriers to entrepreneurial success, subsistence and/or growth. Because of the higher barriers to entry to high-tech, high-growth entrepreneurship (i.e. application and platform development), there will be fewer people able to enter these sectors. Yet those who do are best positioned to take advantage of the Internet's powers, and to be the recipients of necessary funding for their entrepreneurial ventures (Lockett et al., 2002). It is argued that entrepreneurial activity online *will be a function of positionality*. Indeed, Braguinsky et al. (2012) find that high-tech entrepreneurs tend to come from the top part of the paid earnings distribution, while Dashti (2010) notes their access to social networks with more power and influence. This unequal distribution of resources has thus been shown to have significant impacts upon the foundations of entrepreneurial activity, even in a supposedly 'equalising' online environment.

Additionally, high-tech entrepreneurs are much more likely to be men (Startup Genome & Telefonica, 2012). Women tend to predominate in such arenas as craft-based online businesses (etsy, 2013; Hess, 2013); conversely, they make up only a small percentage of high-tech entrepreneurs (about 9 percent in most technology hubs – Startup Genome & Telefonica, 2012). This may be partly explained by the amount of in-depth industry knowledge needed to begin a high-tech venture, combined with the dearth of women in the technology field in general – shown to be attributable not to individual capability levels, but to social and environmental factors, such as the sexual division of labour excluding women from science, engineering and management (Wajcman, 2004), dominant beliefs about women's intelligence and implicit biases in education and the workplace (Hill et al., 2010), and narrow understandings of the gender-technology relationship (Heenwood, 1999; Kelan, 2009). Panteli et al. (1999) found that though the UK IT industry does not explicitly exclude women, it does little to promote them or retain them. Although the UK has undergone three decades of initiatives to reconcile women's underrepresentation in technology, results have been mixed at best (Phipps, 2008). Moreover, intersectional social positionality and structural conditions precipitating unequal resource distribution may prevent individuals from minority ethnic groups and poor and working-class backgrounds from starting high-tech businesses. If they do begin online ventures, they may be restricted to lower-value segments of the online landscape. This analytical approach illuminates how actors' positionality enables or constrains them within the heterogeneous and unequal Internet landscape described by Terranova (2004), as well as explain why the digital entrepreneurial activities of some people are likely to be high-value and high-growth, while those of others are not.

### 3.6 Summary

This chapter extends existing entrepreneurship literature by bringing acknowledgement of heterogeneity amongst entrepreneurial activity and actors into the literature on digital entrepreneurship. It underscores the need for a feminist critique of axiomatic assumptions in entrepreneurship research (Ahl & Marlow, 2012) and critiques the success bias that implies that only high-growth, high-value (and in digital entrepreneurship, high-tech) ventures are legitimate (Ruef, Aldrich & Carter, 2003; Alvarez et al., 2012). It argues for the visibility of marginalised entrepreneurial actors in the online environment, advocating for a focus not on their markers of sameness nor difference, but instead on the structural conditions that pose barriers to their entrepreneurial activity. The paradigm of intersectionality is used to bring these structures to light and critically evaluate how people are impacted by intersecting social categories including race/ethnicity, class and gender, thus usefully complicating the understanding of marginality amongst entrepreneurial actors. This is in contrast to most existing studies of marginalised entrepreneurs, which tend to approach marginality from a single-issue perspective.

Entrepreneurship theory acknowledges the importance of resources, including social capital, knowledge, and networks, and recognizes that the heterogeneity of these resources affects the pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Haynie et al., 2009; Kirzner, 1973; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). But because this theory is not contextualised in a broader social field, the heterogeneity of these resources is left unexplained. Critical entrepreneurship scholars have helped us to understand entrepreneurship as socially embedded (Steyart & Katz, 2004; Steyart, 2007), and introducing intersectionality serves to deepen this analysis. In particular, the notion of positionality (Anthias 2001a, 2001b, 2006, 2007, 2008) demonstrates how the intersections of exclusionary social categories give rise to complex social hierarchies, and the unequal allocation of resources between actors. While entrepreneurship theory assumes that “entrepreneurial opportunities exist primarily because different agents have different beliefs about the relative value of resources” (Schumpeter, 1934; Kirzner, 1979; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000, as cited by Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001: 756) it is not only agents’ differences of *belief* that are relevant, but importantly, their concrete *access* to resources as well. A key point of intervention for positionality theory in the entrepreneurship literature is thus identified.

In addition, it is clear that the Internet, as a socially embedded human artefact, will no doubt reflect the social hierarchies described by positionality theory. Hence, digital entrepreneurship, because it is constrained or enabled by social positions of actors and their attendant access to resources or lack thereof, can be read as a function of positionality. This chapter argues that agents’ positionality within intersecting social hierarchies, and the access to resources to which this gives rise, adds important social context to the entrepreneurial process that will impact the specific modes of exchange with which they engage, as well as the outcomes of their activities.

However, for a discussion of socially embedded entrepreneurial agency, it is necessary to draw upon coherent, well-articulated concepts of structure and agency. Despite its usefulness for understanding

differential access to resources, intersectionality theory, which forms the basis for the concept of positionality, is limited in its ability to theorise the structure-agency relationship (Nash, 2008). This is due to its apparent lack of a defined ontology and epistemology. This thesis proposes that these concerns and others could be ameliorated by augmenting intersectionality theory using concepts from the critical realist philosophy of science. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology - A Critical Realist Feminist Approach to Intersectionality and the Internet**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the methodology which provides a philosophical foundation for the methods utilised in this research. Defining methodology as the philosophy and methods that underpin the research process and production of knowledge (McCall, 2005), it will introduce critical realism as the underlying methodological position informing this thesis. Focusing on ontology and epistemology, it provides an overview of the critical realist philosophy of science, followed by an immanent critique of the predominant philosophical positions informing most contemporary research and theory on intersectionality. It outlines the relevance of applied critical realism for research on intersectionality and the online environment, and proposes ontologies for intersectionality and digital entrepreneurship that will enable the key arguments and knowledge claims of the chapters to follow. Both this chapter and the one that follows adopt a first-person perspective when appropriate for the sake of reflexivity and argument. The chapter will close by identifying the research question, and the methods of the research will be described in the following chapter.

### **4.1 Introduction**

Methodology consists of the underlying beliefs and principles that guide research and inform its practices. Ramazanoğlu states that a social research methodology “comprises rules that specify how social investigation should be approached” by linking a particular ontology with a particular epistemology, and using these to determine a method by which one may arrive at truth or valid knowledge of social reality (2002: 11). The assumptions made regarding the nature of the object of inquiry are what determine the suitability or appropriateness of a particular methodological approach. But the methodological stance of this thesis is also significantly informed by my understanding of the history of the philosophy of science and my grounding in Black and queer feminist, post-colonial, and science and technology studies, as well as my own reflexive understanding of the world.

The object of inquiry in this thesis combines the social, the psycho-social, and the psychological; thus, drawing upon the definitions of objectivism and subjectivism proposed by Cunliffe (2011), I argue that it is best served by a hybrid objectivist/subjectivist approach. The topics of investigation may be roughly divided into the following areas: 1) the dynamic structures of the Internet and contemporary online environment, 2) entrepreneurship as a context-dependent activity and process, 3) pre-existing social categories, such as race/ethnicity, gender and class, providing some of the backdrop for an individual’s entrepreneurial activity, and 4) the experiences and agency of individual actors. Due to the scope of these areas, which are concerned with both structure and agency, mechanisms and actors, neither a big-picture objectivist stance nor a more telescopic subjectivist positioning is in itself sufficient. An objectivist stance is arguably more useful for an analysis of enduring yet dynamic structures like the Internet and the online environment, as well as social institutions such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, while a subjectivist stance allows for deeper research into the social realities of individuals. The study of historically disadvantaged and marginalised people particularly lends itself to a hybrid

objective/subjective analysis, as the experience of marginalisation as a result of the aforementioned exclusionary categories manifests on both personal and structural levels. How actors interact with, shape and construct meaning in their worlds requires a subjectivist perspective; how they are impacted economically, politically and socially demands the wide-angle lens of objectivism. Neither of the predominant philosophies of science, i.e. positivism and postmodernism, have the capacity for this dual-pronged approach. However, the critical realist philosophy of science attempts to bring together an objectivist ontology with an interpretivist epistemology. As this approach best suits the object of inquiry, it is the methodology which has been chosen to underpin this thesis.

## **4.2 Introducing Critical Realism**

Critical realism is a philosophy of science that approaches social reality from a realist viewpoint. It aims to reveal and respond to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the two predominant scientific traditions of the contemporary era: empirical realism (also known as positivism), and transcendental idealism or hermeneutics, which it can be argued has developed over time into poststructuralism (also referred to as postmodernism). Critical realism assumes that there is a reality independent of our knowledge of it, and that social reality is stratified, such that events may occur and possibilities can exist whether or not they are observable or measurable (Mole, 2012: 138). Combining this realist ontology with an interpretive epistemology (Archer et al., 1998 as cited by Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011), knowledge is understood to be formed through the development of fallible theories, with some theories more plausible than others (Bhaskar, 2008a). Contrary to positivism, a critical realist methodology looks for regularities at the level of objects and structures, not in the empirical data (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011).

Primary to the critical realist endeavour has been the work of Bhaskar (1978/2008; 1979/1998) and Archer (1998a & b; 2000; 2007) which challenged the underlying assumptions of the mainstream traditions by introducing conceptual depth in key areas. Three kinds of ontological and epistemological depth within critical realism – stratification, intransitivity, and transfactuality (Archer et al., 1998: xii) – are discussed here. These refer to the respective distinctions made by critical realism between a. the layers of its stratified or depth ontology, b. the objects of science and scientific knowledge itself, and c. its conception of causal powers and their actualisation. Although considerations of space preclude a full description of the arguments Bhaskar proposes, each of these concepts will be discussed in turn, followed by an introduction to the critical realist conceptions of emergence and the relationship between social structure and agency.

### *Depth Ontology*

Critical realism holds that there is more to reality than simply that which can be observed or perceived. Expanding the notion of 'reality' beyond that which is perceivable (the empirical) with the recognition of two deeper levels (the actual and the real), is at the heart of the critical realist depth ontology (Figure 4):

## Critical Realist Depth Ontology

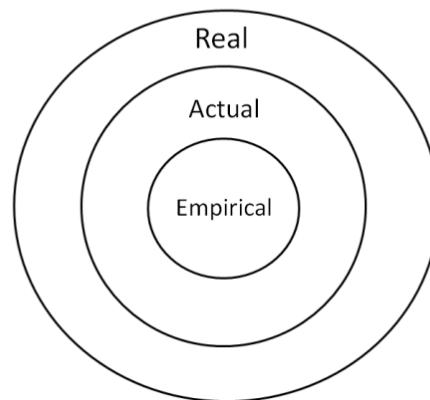


Figure 4: Domains of the Real (Deep), Actual, and Empirical

In this ontology, real causal powers, both natural and social, are understood to have the potential to act upon the world. These powers, also described as mechanisms, may be actualised or not. Once actualised, they may be perceived, or not. They are assumed to be independent from the events they generate (Bhaskar, 2008a: 13). Therefore, the absence of an event, or the imperceptibility of an effect, does not preclude the existence of an associated causal mechanism.

### *Intransitive Objects/Transitive Products, Transfactual Powers and Emergence*

Critical realism distinguishes between the objects of knowledge, which it describes as intransitive, and the products of science, known as transitive. Intransitive objects of knowledge are those things which science seeks to understand: for natural science, this includes objects in nature, their powers and mechanisms; for social science, this includes such things as practices, beliefs and meanings (Bhaskar, 1998: 22; 2008: 30). In contrast, transitive objects of knowledge are the items of knowledge fashioned by science: for example, facts and theories, paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry (Bhaskar, 2008a: 30). It is maintained that intransitive objects exist and operate prior to and independently of their discovery and subsequent incorporation into transitive products of science. Failure to make this distinction results in the “reification of the fallible social products of science” (Archer et al., 1998: xii) and the epistemic fallacy, which collapses and reduces the intransitive into the transitive dimension (Bhaskar, 2008a; Nunez, 2012).

Critical realists hold that the intransitive objects of knowledge – natural and social objects, things and structures – have associated causal powers. While positivism asserts that these powers, which it terms laws, are dependent upon the existence of observable empirical regularities (Bhaskar, 1998b: 26), critical realism understands them to function independently of any particular sequence or patterns of events (Bhaskar, 2008a: 14). This is defined as transfactuality. Failure to consider transfactuality results in the fallacy of *actualism* (Archer et al., 1998: xii, original emphasis; Nunez, 2012) in which the domain of the real is reduced to the domain of the actual, such that mechanisms which are real, and yet



unactualised or unobserved, are simply not acknowledged to exist. Thus, the causal powers of nature and society, and the activity of generative mechanisms and structures, are held to operate *whether or not they are actualised or observed*. Mechanisms are also understood to have contingent or conditional causality, where their outcomes are dependent on the acting of other mechanisms; as such, they will produce different outcomes dependent on context (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011).

As transfactual, i.e. not necessarily actualised or observable, these powers must be identified and analysed in terms of their tendencies. Tendencies are defined as “powers or liabilities of a thing which may be exercised without being manifest in any particular outcome” (Bhaskar, 2008a: 14). ‘Powers’ is in this case a non-technical term designating what something does, or can do (Collier, 1994, as cited by Fleetwood, 2009: 3). To say that a thing has a power to do something is to say that it “possesses a structure or is of such a kind that it would do it, if the appropriate conditions [were] obtained” (Bhaskar, 2008a: 88). Like mechanisms, powers can act transfactually; they can be exercised but unactualised (Fleetwood, 2009: 364) or alternatively, actualised but unrecognised. Reality is assumed to consist of hierarchical ordered levels in which a lower level creates the conditions for a higher level, which ‘emerges’ from the level below. Each level has its own generative mechanisms, the existence of which constitute a level (Danermark, 2001). Critical realism, then, aims not to uncover general laws or enable prediction, but to understand and explain powers, structures and generative mechanisms by theorising them at the different levels of reality and theorising how observed events can be explained (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011).

### *Structure and Agency*

The relationship between structure and agency is usefully articulated within critical realist literature. Structure is conceptualised as systems of human relationships amongst social positions (Porpora, 1998). These structures are understood to give rise to structural emergent properties (SEPs). Defined as the powers of particular configurations of social systems, SEPs are relational, arise from the organisation of the entity’s parts, and cannot be reduced to the powers of the individuals which comprise them (Elder-Vass, 2007). With regard to agency, critical realism portrays people not as “passive recipients of given facts and recorders of their given conjunctions” (Bhaskar, 2008a: 16). Instead, human beings are causal agents and producers (Sayer, 1992: 19), making science and knowledge more generally a “social product produced by means of antecedent social products” (Bhaskar, 2008a: 16). Reader (2007: 581; 603-4), although not a critical realist, contributes to this discussion when she expands the notion of personhood beyond agency to include ‘patiency,’ or the passive, constrained and dependent aspects of personhood, which she argues are as constitutive as the active, free and independent aspects signalled by agency.

In Archer’s realist model of structure and agency (1995; 2000; 2007), termed the morphogenetic approach, structures are regarded as existing prior to the development of agency and influencing actors in the present, who can then contribute to either the reproduction or transformation of these pre-existing structures. The influence of structure upon actors is two-pronged. First, structure is held to affect life-chances, endowing them with initial interests and providing the leverage upon which reasons for different courses of action operate. Thus, while life chances are not deterministic, they “strongly

condition what type of Social Actor the vast majority can and do become” (Archer, 2000: 285) Second, structure is argued to be mediated by social actors primarily through affecting their ‘constellation of concerns’ in relation to the natural, practical, and social orders of reality. This mediation manifests and takes shape through a process of reflexive internal conversation, which then results in courses of action. To conceptualise the interaction between the micro and the macro-levels of analysis, critical realist theorists use a triad of structure, culture, and agency (Archer, 1988; Porpora, 1998), in which structure is conceptualised as systems of human relationships amongst social positions (Porpora, 1998), culture is the systems of thought, belief, and ideology in which actors are embedded (Archer, 1988), and agency is the ability of individuals to choose among various courses of action (Archer, 2007).

With this model, Archer challenges the conflation within contemporary social theory that attribute social phenomena either entirely to the influence of structure (e.g. structuralism) or agency (e.g. rational agent models), or, as in the case of Giddens’ structuration theory, collapses the two. In response to these alternately deterministic and individualistic approaches, the morphogenetic approach: “shows (a): how human agency is socially mediated but is irreducible to social norms, and (b) how any account of human agency must include emotional and normative factors as well as any reference to rationality” (Cruickshank 2003a: 4). It acknowledges the historicity and objectivity of the circumstances of social structure, its consequent impacts on life-chances, and the potential for agential reflexivity and choice within the options available to them. At the same time, it addresses subjectivity by acknowledging an agent’s personal powers, considering reflexivity, or the internal conversation, to be the primary medium by which the social world is mediated in action (Archer, 2007).

Although it recognises social positioning, or the “differential placement of agents in relation to the distribution of resources,” it highlights “the impossibility of deducing determinate courses of action from such positionings alone” (2007: 13). It thus rejects both determinism and voluntarism, and instead offers a dialectical, interactionist and mutually constitutive approach to the explanation of social phenomena. It also interrogates contemporary feminist scholarship in which discussions of agency are limited to the discursive construction of power (New, 2003). Instead, it centres on and upholds the primacy of practice, or, in intersectional feminist terms, ‘lived experience’, which Archer holds “yields reasoned knowledge nondiscursively” and also “underlies practical proficiency in the linguistic domain” (Archer 2000: 151). This thorough articulation of the temporal relationship between structure and agency will be useful for the discourse on intersectionality, where the absence of such a conception has presented a significant challenge for theory development and research.

### **4.3 Interrogating Intersectionality Using Critical Realism**

Intersectionality theory was discussed in the previous chapter as a way of understanding heterogeneity amongst actors due to the impacts of various intersecting social categories, such race, ethnicity, class, and gender, on their lived experiences. Positionality was introduced as a contemporary intersectional frame that moves away from the idea of given ‘groups’ or ‘categories’ of gender, ethnicity, and class which then intersect, instead paying much more attention to broader social locations and processes, social hierarchies, material and cultural resource distribution (Anthias, 2008). However, in recent years,

intersectionality theory has been the subject of debates that challenge some of its underpinning assumptions and highlight its limitations (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). These critiques have been made not to dismiss intersectionality's theoretical value, but instead with the intention of complicating and deepening the premises on which it is based, developing both its foundation and ability to explain (Nash, 2008).

The previous chapter argued that the lack of a defined intersectional methodology is due to the absence of a well-articulated ontology and epistemology within the literature. Nash notes that "the project has yet to produce a mechanism for systematically articulating, aggregating, or examining" the complex, layered and multifaceted subjectivities with which it is concerned (2008: 8). Although Davis has contested that it is precisely intersectionality's ambiguity and "myriad missing pieces" (2008: 76) that have made it useful as a flexible heuristic device for critical feminist studies, Nash (2008) highlights the vague definition of intersectionality and its lack of a well-defined methodology as key tensions within the literature. McCall (2005) notes that "there has been little discussion of *how* to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology", observing that the theory has introduced new methodological problems and perhaps inadvertently limited the range of approaches that may be used to study it (2005: 1771-2, original emphasis). To lend more cohesiveness to diverse intersectional scholarship, intersectional approaches have been typologised (McCall, 2005) and placed on a continuum (Mehrotra, 2010). Scholars appear to agree that each of the various approaches possess both benefits and limitations, will produce different kinds of studies based on their particular assumptions and forms of knowledge, and can and should be strategically applied "depending on the goals of a particular project or practice context" (Mehrotra, 2010: 1).

However, despite the now-rich history of intersectionality theory and research, the philosophical underpinnings, or "tacit presuppositions" (Bhaskar, 1998: 21) of these approaches have neither been clearly elucidated nor subjected to extensive critique. McCall notes that "In [her] research and that of many social scientists, a postpositivist stance is often taken for granted" (2005: 1792) while the effects of positivist and hermeneutic philosophical traditions on intersectionality theory have not been discussed. However, in light of the relatively recent mainstreaming of intersectionality, the philosophical assumptions of the paradigm are now under closer scrutiny. While many poststructuralist scholars have embraced intersectionality and vice versa, Carbin and Edenheim (2013) have critiqued intersectionality's apparent hegemony within current feminist theory, arguing that there is no room in the field of intersectionality for a poststructuralism based on the premise that reality is inherently unknowable, and which does not share the 'dream of a common feminist language' (2013: 232). They argue that intersectionality's widespread adoption into feminist theory, constructivist intersectionality especially, has come to signal a "liberal consensus-based project...in an increasingly neoliberal and conservative European context" (2013: 245). Intersectionality has also been challenged by feminist new materialists Geerts and van der Tuin (2013), who critique what they see as its denial of agency and, addressing the gap around intersectional ontology, argue for an explicit onto-epistemology, or 'entanglement' between being and knowing. Thus, it is both useful and timely to introduce the concepts of critical realism to intersectionality theory in order to address these debates (Martinez Dy et al., 2014). In the section below, the intersectional approaches typologised by McCall (2005) will be explored, their implicit and

'taken for granted' positivist and hermeneutic perspectives outlined, and their prevailing ontological epistemological assumptions and resulting methodological problems critiqued. This will be followed by the proposal of a critical realist methodological approach to intersectionality.

### *Intersectional Complexity and the Limitations of Current Approaches*

McCall (2005) explores three methodological approaches within intersectional research, which she sees as "attempting to satisfy the demands for complexity" posed by intersectional research (2005: 1773). The strands she identifies, of which Nash (2008: 5) gives a useful overview, are: anticategorical complexity, intracategorical complexity, and intercategorical complexity. The first, *anticategorical complexity*, deconstructs and rejects analytical categories, starting from the assumption that categories, including race and gender, are too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience (McCall, 2005: 1776 as cited by Nash, 2008). The second, *intracategorical complexity*, is the original approach of intersectionality theory. It "tend[s] to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection" (McCall, 2005: 1774). Intracategorical analyses "attend to the dangers and inadequacies of categorization, yet do not necessarily reject the categories themselves" (Nash, 2008: 5). The third approach is *intercategorical complexity*, which McCall (2005) describes as the strategic use of categories. This approach "begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of the analysis" (McCall, 2005: 1784–1785). With this in mind, intercategorical scholars "provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions" (McCall, 2005: 1773). It should be noted that McCall (2005: 1774) raises some caveats about her typology, recognising that not all research on intersectionality can be categorized into one of the three approaches, that some will cross categorical boundaries, and that she may have misunderstood or misclassified some pieces of research. Finally, she points out that she does not claim homogeneity within the categories themselves: for example, she notes that "there is no seamless overlap between feminist poststructuralists and anticategoricalists" (2005: 1774). However, she contextualises the typology historically, pointing to its emergence in a particular historical moment of critique, and maintains that it is broadly representative of current approaches to the study of intersectionality (2005: 1774, 1776).

But while it has made a significant contribution to the literature by bringing to light the "tremendous gap between conceptions of intersectional methodology and practices of intersectional investigations" (Nash, 2008: 6), the continuum identified by McCall (2005) and built upon by Mehrotra (2010) does not take into account the issues caused by being uncritically rooted in positivist and hermeneutic traditions. Left unarticulated, problems stemming from implicit positivist and hermeneutic assumptions are present across and interwoven throughout the various approaches. With no depth ontology, no concept of transfactuality, and no distinction between theory and experience, intersectional scholarship has alternately conflated the bounds of experience with the extent of knowledge, collapsed structure into identity, or both. Table 2 outlines the existing approaches to intersectional complexity, and uses a

critical realist reading to highlight their predominant philosophical influences and the problematic assumptions and outcomes that result.

**Table 2: Intersectional Approaches to Complexity**

(adapted from McCall, 2005; Mehrotra, 2010; Nash, 2008 and Bhaskar, 1998; Gunnarsson, 2011)

	<i>Intercategorical (Categorical)</i>	<i>Intracategorical</i>	<i>Anticategorical</i>
<i>Approach to Categories</i>	Provisionally adopt	Categories inadequate, but identify complexity	Deconstruct and reject
<i>Predominant Philosophical Influence</i>	Postpositivist	Positivist-Hermeneutic	Hermeneutic (Discursive approach)
<i>Problematic Assumptions</i>	Categories fixed, can be analysed discretely	Intersections fixed, experience = theory	Categories are fictional and irrelevant
<i>Problematic Outcomes</i>	Additive or Multiplicative approaches	Epistemic Fallacy	Focus limited to 'identity' or 'discourse'

The lack of a well-defined relationship between structure and agency has proved another significant hurdle within intersectional theorising. Nash observes that due to its lack of a theory of agency, intersectionality theory has thus far been unable to “answer...questions about the fit between intersectionality and lived experience of identity” (2008: 11). Neither positivist nor hermeneutic approaches have been sufficient to conceptualize this relationship from an intersectional perspective. The lack of a sophisticated depth ontology impedes the complex interplay between multiple structural and agential forces, critical to an intersectional perspective, from being accurately mapped or understood. Although the lack of a theory of agency has not prevented researchers from exploring how individuals negotiate intersecting oppressions within their experiences (e.g. Essers et al., 2010), this thesis argues that a critical realist ontology is needed to theorise the intersecting structures that constrain or enable human action, affecting actors’ lives both materially and conceptually.

#### *Residual Positivism in Intersectionality*

The philosophical underpinnings of intersectionality theory have not been at the foreground of intersectional discourse, although McCall notes that those in anticategorical and intracategorical camps

tend to associate advanced quantitative techniques, large data sets, and surveys with the negative legacies of positivism (2005: 1791). However, the positivist tradition has implicitly informed the epistemology of intersectional theorists who do not tend to acknowledge its presence in their thinking. Based on the premise of the existence of causal laws, inter and intra-categorical intersectional approaches attempt to theorise the nature and kind of laws at work in structures of domination, as well as to articulate the historically specific conditions under which they exist. Yet the positivist concern with causal laws and quantifying their effects has arguably led theorists to treat the categorisations as discrete and separable, such that race, class and gender are often portrayed and analysed as fixed categories with discrete, consistent and measurable effects (Mehrotra, 2010; Nash, 2011) when they are in fact 'shifting, slippery, [and] highly contextual' (Nash 2011: 461). These same positivist underpinnings imply that the goal of theory is prediction; thus, such assumptions are arguably at the root of why oversimplistic quasi-predictive conceptualisations like the additive approach (i.e. race + class + gender + any additional categories = experience of oppression) became popular in the literature, although since extensively problematised as both unlikely and essentialising (c.f. Bowleg, 2008; Hancock, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

And despite strong critiques of conventional notions of theory as elitist and exclusionary, concordant with critiques of the androcentric construction of scientific 'knowledge' (e.g. Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988), intersectional scholars have not erased the positivist shadow from their epistemology. Nash notes that in order to contest the idea that theory is 'neutral', the Black feminist scholarship from which intersectionality theory emerged "collaps[ed] the distinction between theory and experience" (2011: 462-3). Yet in spite of this move's admirable aims, it is subject to the epistemic fallacy as described by Bhaskar (1998: 133; 2008: 13, 36). The positivist conflation of experience, theory, and knowledge that feminism critiqued in the scientific tradition was uncritically replicated, albeit with important differences: the vantage point was now articulated and embodied, and occupied a subjugated position in the social hierarchy. As such, it arguably precipitated an acute awareness of relationships of power. So while the lived experiences of marginalised people, described by Haraway as 'vision...from below' (1988: 583), are no doubt valuable sources of insight for capturing actualised, observed causal mechanisms in the social world, theory should also factor in mechanisms that may not be actualised or observed, outside the experiential realm.

The assumption of the fixed nature of categories is an issue within identity-centred intersectionality scholarship in general, as identity and by extension, difference and inequality are often treated as static and possessive attributes of individuals or groups (Anthias, 2006; 2008). Intersectionality theory itself emerged to challenge the concept that categories (such as "woman") do not affect every person within their bounds in the same way, nor should their boundaries be seen as stable. In addition, early theorists' work on the intersections of race and gender in particular pushed these constructs to the fore, and the theory as a whole away from grappling with other issues of multiple marginality (Nash, 2011). As a result, Nash finds that "intersectional projects often replicate precisely the approaches that they critique" (2008: 6) when they reify categories or overlook heterogeneity due to bracketing or ignoring categories with which they are not explicitly concerned.

Not only is the theory's conception of the categorical constructs themselves inadequate, argues Nash, but so is its understanding of how they interact. She notes that intersectionality "has offered little space for considering how structures of domination are connected, and through what social processes these connections originate and replicate themselves" (2011: 469). Although pioneering scholar Hill Collins (1990/2000) theorised the 'matrix of domination', her term for the structural conditions that result in intersecting social hierarchies, she saw intersectionality as concerned primarily with subjectivity (Nash, 2011: 458). In contrast, Nash (2011: 458) maintains that intersectionality is inherently interested in the ways that structure and subjectivity interact. Yet it may be the case that intersectionality theory has thus far left critical structural issues under-theorised due to lasting influences from dominant philosophies. Mehrotra (2010: 420-421) points to the prevalence of mathematical and geometric metaphors invoked to structurally describe intersectionality, including vectors of difference, matrices of oppression, and axes of power, along with the problematic additive model, and its cousin, the multiplicative model (Nash, 2008: 7). The extensive use of mathematical tropes to portray structural conditions is reflective of a positivist legacy that has created a conceptual cul-de-sac from inside of which it is difficult to imagine other ways these structures may interact.

#### *Historical Hermeneuticism and Intersectional Identity*

Hermeneutics has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy, although modern hermeneutics is derived from many thinkers, such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas. Whilst there is heterogeneity in these approaches, they are linked by their focus on meaning via textual interpretation. Phenomenology, the study of the structures of experience, and constructivism, the argument that all knowledge is a social construction, are based in this tradition, whilst poststructuralism can be considered part of its radical intellectual evolution. Like phenomenology, poststructuralism is primarily concerned with how people experience and make sense of the world (Brown & Heggs, 2005), taking as a basic premise that accurate representations of the world or underlying truths are that it is fundamentally impossible (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Although differences between authors are acknowledged, this thesis subsumes these schools of thought under the umbrella of the hermeneutic tradition (Martinez Dy et al, 2014).

Contemporary intersectionality theorists are predominantly associated with the anticategorical approach. Within this approach, taking a broadly defined post-structural position, anti-categorical approaches view categories as 'simplifying social fictions' (McCall, 2005: 1773) that are in fact fluid and co-constitutive, and so cannot be depicted in discrete ways. (Mehrotra, 2010: 421) But while serving to highlight categories' social origins, these perspectives become "drained of causal import" (Bhaskar, 1998: 12) as they follow hermeneutical logic, turning their attention away from structures to focus more intently on individuals' interpretations of reality. The risk here is that it is inferred that 'the natural world becomes a conception of the human mind' (Bhaskar, 2008a: 25) and reality nothing more than a discursive construction. Hence, structural issues are analysed only in terms of individuals' experiences and understanding of them, to the detriment of analysis of both structure (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and agency (Clegg, 2006).

Within the literature, intersectionality theory is more frequently used for studies of the various dimensions of identity than it is for analyses of structural conditions. The preponderance of identity studies falls neatly in line with the implicit belief of the hermeneutic tradition that society is conceptual in character, and the central category of inquiry is that of meaning (Bhaskar, 1998; 134-5). Hence, structural issues are analysed only in terms of individuals' experiences and understandings of them. Notions of positionality or structural discrimination are collapsed into 'identity', while concepts of 'identity' are simultaneously called upon to "perform analytical tasks beyond their abilities" (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197). This signals a conspicuous absence of theory on the structural conditions that engender intersectional positionality, discrimination and privilege, leaving scholars ill-equipped to explain macro-level conditions.

#### **4.4 Towards a Critical Realist Intersectionality**

McCall (2005) sees scope within intersectional theory for a realist philosophy, holding that the real world itself places limits on knowledge, such that "not all interpretations are equally plausible" and that it is "not knowable in any absolute sense because of the role of human interaction and interpretation" (2005: 1793). By inviting and preparing thinkers to "determine the source of the complexity...describe it....and...theorize it" (2005: 1794) critical realism "maintains a prominent place for the development of theoretical knowledge about unobservable phenomena" (2005: 1793-4). Critical realism thus intuitively aligns with intersectionality theory, as both schools of thought conceptualise of "changes in patterns of inequality and in the underlying structural conditions of society" as "dynamic, complex, and contingent but also amenable to explanation" (2005: 1794).

Although critical realism has seen only initial deployment within feminist theory in general (Clegg, 2006) and intersectionality theory in particular (Gunnarsson, 2015; Walby et al., 2012), critical realist feminists have responded to the poststructuralist and anticategorical approaches that appear to predominate in intersectional literature. Postmodernism in particular "pronounce[s] ontology dead" because "all knowledge of the real world requires human interpretation" and "the truth claims of one interpretation cannot be distinguished from those of another" (McCall, 2005: 1793). As a result, Gunnarsson (2011) observes that the category 'woman' is now assumed to have little positive theoretical validity in feminist literature. McCall corroborates this observation, noting that anticategoricalism has led to "great scepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way" (2005: 1773). The rejection of the category 'women' stems from "deny[ing] categories any analytical validity by virtue of their empirical inseparability" (Gunnarsson, 2011: 26). However, Gunnarsson argues that it is not impossible to distinguish gender analytically from other categories, and indeed, that an intersectional standpoint is premised upon a category called 'gender' being analysed in conjunction with other categories.

In response to poststructuralists, critical realists hold that there is a reality beyond discourse that can be known through fallible theories. In response to anticategoricalists, they maintain that women are a real group, joined by the abstract social category of 'woman' (Gunnarsson, 2011), who may have some universal interests despite the reality of heterogeneity (New, 2003). Gunnarsson asserts that the



radicality of the insight that gender is socially constructed does not lie in *refuting* the reality of that which is constructed, but in understanding individuals' experiences of gender as dynamic products of human history (2011: 29, original emphasis). So although categories like race/ethnicity and gender are understood as constructions, this does not negate the fact that they have social meaning, and hence, real impacts. Although prominent poststructuralists such as Judith Butler have argued that hegemonic discourses do have significant material consequences (1990; 1993; 1998), the problematic methodological implication of this line of thinking when translating these abstract arguments to research is that structural issues tend to be analysed primarily in terms of individual experiences and related understanding of them, to the detriment of the analysis of unrecognised structural impediments and their relationship with individual agency.

And although gender and ethnicity have generally been seen as pertaining primarily to the symbolic or cultural realms, and class to material inequality (Anthias, 2001: 367), Anthias challenges this polarity, arguing that material inequality "is informed by claims and struggles over resources of different types, undertaken in terms of gender, ethnicity/race and class" (2001: 367). Thus, despite (or in addition to) their constructed status, categories are seen to have real material and social effects, particularly on the "set of outcomes relating to life conditions, life chances and solidarity processes" (2001: 367). However, the usefulness of even abstract categories is still under debate within critical realist feminism; Walby et al. (2012) argue for a move away from concepts such as 'category' that connote unity, and toward phrases like 'regimes' or 'set of unequal social relations'. Thus, any critical realist understanding of categories as abstractions "implies neither essentialism nor homogenisation" (Gunnarsson, 2011: 24) of the people to whom the categories refer. Instead, it is the social meanings that categories convey, and the structural positions to which they correspond, that leads to such essentialising or homogenising taking place, resulting in treatment that reproduces or exacerbates inequalities in social conditions.

Because of a tendency within intersectionality literature to avoid conceptualising privilege (Nash, 2008), the theory has not clearly articulated ways in which individuals may be subject to oppression by certain mechanisms while benefiting from privilege because of others. This could be addressed by incorporating an understanding of transfactuality into intersectionality's conceptualisation of complexity. It is particularly useful for theorising privilege, since the ways it is made to seem invisible and natural mean that it tends to go unacknowledged and unrecognised, particularly by those whom it benefits (Ahmed 2012; Frankenberg 1993). For example, it is entirely possible that someone could believe they are not privileged on the basis of their normative race, dominant gender, or higher social class, and for this belief to be incorrect. Another way of conceptualising privilege could utilise the critical realist notion of absence (Bhaskar 2008b); in this case, privilege could mean the absence of additional obstacles to success as a result of belonging to the dominant race, class, or gender (Martinez Dy et al., 2014). These concepts would be especially useful for enabling intersectionality theory to explain how individuals may be subject to oppression in some ways but privileged in others. Such a move would help to advance intersectional theory at both the micro- and macro-levels. At the level of the individual, it would "broaden its reach to theorize an array of subject experience(s)" (Nash, 2008: 10), while at the structural level, it could help to contextualise and explain complicated findings like McCall's, wherein changes in a

particular economic environment created advantage for some groups of women and disadvantage for other groups of women, relative to similarly situated men (2005: 1790).

Table 3 identifies some theoretical gaps within intersectionality theory where critical realism could provide conceptual scaffolds to enable further development. The table is not meant to be exhaustive but is intended as a starting point for identifying some valuable ways in which critical realist philosophy could potentially advance the intersectional project.

**Table 3: Limitations, Gaps, and Conceptual Augmentations**

<b>Intersectionality Limitations and Gaps</b>	<b>Critical Realism Conceptual Augmentation</b>
Tendency to collapse theory and experience (Nash, 2011)	Depth ontology (Bhaskar, 2008a)
Focus on individuals to the detriment of structural analysis (Yuval-Davis, 2006); structure undertheorized or limited to mathematical tropes (Mehrotra, 2011)	Emergence theory (Bhaskar, 1998; Archer, 1995); Morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995/2000)
Push to deconstruct social categories and dismiss them as irrelevant (McCall, 2005)	Categories as abstractions with real implications: social, political, cultural and economic (Gunnarsson, 2011)  Concrete universality (Bhaskar, 2008b)
Lack of theory on agency (Nash, 2008)	Morphogenetic approach, three-stage model (Archer, 1995/2000)
Lack of theory on privilege (Nash, 2008)	Transfactuality and absence (Bhaskar, 1998/1993)

*A Positional Approach to Methodological Complexity*

This thesis introduces a novel approach to the methodological complexity of intersectionality. It aims to rectify the problematic assumptions and outcomes of the three approaches outlined by McCall (2005) by drawing upon critical realist philosophy to develop useful and relevant intersectional social ontology. The treatment of social categories within existing approaches has been taken as their most prominent feature and lent itself to their names. However, the approach introduced here prioritises not its treatment of categories, but its understanding of social positionality. It will therefore be referred to as

the ‘positional’ approach, and is presented as an augmented conceptual framework to existing intersectionality theory (Table 4).

**Table 4: Positional Approach to Methodological Complexity**

<i>Approach to Complexity</i>	Positional
<i>Approach to Categories</i>	Use as starting point to analyse broader social locations and processes.
<i>Predominant Philosophical Influence</i>	Critical Realist
<i>Key Assumptions</i>	Depth ontology, transfactuality, and morphogenetic approach to structure, culture, and agency.
<i>Key Outcomes</i>	Structure = durable relationships that position, constrain and/or enable. Social positioning as a continuous process, negotiated by agency. Marginality not a monolith. Nuanced experiences of privilege and oppression.

Taking a positional approach, abstract concepts such as ‘women’ would be acknowledged to be “qualitatively different from lived reality”, and so could be used as categories of analysis “without any expectation that they will correspond to...lived reality in any clear-cut sense” (Gunnarsson, 2011: 32). Instead, what they will be seen to correspond to are structural positions. Into each of these positions will be built “certain structured interests, resources, powers, constraints and predicaments” instituted by the web of relationships that make up a social structure (Porpora, 1998: 344). Structural positions exist in an array of overlapping structures on different levels of reality, and because of their enabling, constraining, and motivating power, make us able and inclined to act in specific ways and likely to suffer certain things (Gunnarsson, 2011: 33). They are relational, and conceptualise of people as dynamic and agential products of the relations and forces that constitute them (2011: 33).

The notion of structural positions within critical realism strongly echoes the intersectional notion of positionality. Aligning the two concepts, the positional approach would argue that generative structural mechanisms emerge from the various intersections of social categories, and that these mechanisms

position agents in social locations in which they are constrained or enabled, and which they then negotiate via agency. Archer's well-elaborated notions of agency (2000) can draw feminist theorising away from poststructuralist conceptions of a fragmented, disempowered subject and towards a unified, embodied subject capable of agency (Clegg, 2006) and engaged in processes of social positioning. Positionality would be understood to influence life-chances (Archer, 2000; Anthias, 2001b), concrete access to material, economic, political, symbolic and cultural resources (Anthias, 2001a: 635), and condition the cognitive resources available for conducting the internal conversations, both conscious and unconscious (Mutch, 2004), that influence agents' courses of action.

### *Developing a Realist Intersectional Ontology*

A critical realist ontology advances the intersectional project as it offers a foundation from which to develop theory on the "nature of structures of domination", as well as how they are connected and replicate themselves (Nash, 2011: 470). It would reject the additive approach common to positivism in favour of a constitutive approach (see Yuval-Davis, 2006), and instead of doing away with categories in a postmodern fashion, would conceptualise of them not as prescriptive, embodied realities, but as abstractions that correspond to *structural positions*. From a postmodern perspective, social categories may be deconstructed and rejected in favour of a micro-level focus and "the constitution of subjectivity within discourse" (Weedon, 1997: 163 as cited by New, 2003: 65). From a positivist perspective, prediction is desired, categories are treated as "fundamentally fixed" (Nash, 2011: 461) and their intersections are conceptualised as separable and calculable (Mehrotra, 2010). In contrast, a critical realist intersectionality would be aimed primarily towards explanation, not prediction. It would link the macro and the micro (Mole, 2012) by accepting the processual and fluid nature of intersections and categories as they impact identities, while acknowledging that the social meanings attached to such categories are determined by structural forces. As such, the social meanings of categories may be somewhat fixed, homogenising and essentialist, and significantly less dynamic than individual identities. Using its ability to distinguish between theory and experience, realism would analytically separate categories from the lived experiences of the people to whom they refer. Categories would be seen as abstractions and actors as their referents, occupying dynamic, non-deterministic structural positions that constrain or enable them, in concert or in conflict, in intersecting ways.

A critical realist intersectional ontology would account for the various structural forces privileging and disadvantaging individuals, even if events expected to arise from them did not occur or were not recognised (transfactuality). These forces would be understood to be emergent; as such, they adhere to the critical realist conception of emergence (Bhaskar, 1998; Archer, 1995) in which reality is arranged in levels, and something qualitatively new can emerge from a lower level (Danermark et al., 2002). Some key examples of mechanisms emergent from the level of society are racism (discrimination for not belonging to the dominant race), sexism (discrimination for not belonging to the dominant gender or refusing the prescriptions of one's assumed gender), and classism (discrimination for not belonging to the dominant classes).

Emergence also means that new forces can arise from the historical interactions of other mechanisms. The notion of *misogynoir*, defined as the hatred of Black women and girls (Durham et al., 2013) is an example of such a mechanism, structurally emergent from the interactions of racism and sexism. A realist intersectional ontology would illuminate how, although social categories may be abstract constructions, they serve to define real relationships of power from which causal mechanisms emerge. Moreover, these mechanisms can in some cases exist un-actualised, or be actualised but unrecognised by actors, groups and institutions. Subsequently, research can identify how intersectional forces are perceived (or not) by individual agents and wider social structures. This opens research methodology to explore intersectional forces on the three levels of reality Bhaskar identified, as well as the emergent levels within them.

Table 5 presents a critical realist depth ontology from an intersectional perspective (see also Martinez Dy, et al., 2014). It should be noted that this is a general overview, and that at the empirical level, processes of recognition, acknowledgment, and understanding are more detailed and may or may not be discrete, iterative, and/or non-linear. As such, it can be expected that individuals will experience their own contextual and conditional outcomes.

**Table 5: Critical Realist Intersectional Ontology**

<b>Real</b>	<p>Real generative mechanisms emerge from intersecting structures of domination that serve to position individuals and groups within social hierarchies.</p> <p>These complex and dynamic mechanisms privilege or disadvantage (enable or constrain) agents in relation to social mobility and material, political, social, cultural, and economic resources.</p>
<b>Actual</b>	<p>Enablement or constraint on the basis of positionality impacts people’s lives – in particular, by offering or limiting opportunities and choices, and affecting how they are perceived and treated by institutions, groups and individuals.</p>
<b>Empirical</b>	<p>Via their tendencies, privileges and disadvantages are recognised, acknowledged, and understood by individual agents, others, institutions. They may (to some degree) be measurable or quantifiable. They may (or may not) be taken into account and considered in the exercise of agency.</p>

This ontology illuminates how, despite being abstract social constructions, these categories serve to define real relationships of power that can potentially exist at three levels: unactualised, actualised yet unrecognised, or actualised and recognised by actors, groups and institutions. This enables the argument that the structural powers emergent from intersecting social hierarchies are real, but in some cases may be unactualised, or actualised but unrecognised, which explains they may not be apparent in

all cases. In another example, an institution or organisation may have an implicit culture of sexism and racism in relation to career progression and the allocation of financial rewards yet, these mechanisms may not be perceived by those benefiting from them, and unacknowledged by those perpetuating them. However, the transfactuality of mechanisms of privilege and discrimination means that they operate whether or not they are acknowledged to exist. It also explains why, within the same organisation, individual women and people of colour might advance but the demographic composition of the management structure remains predominantly white and male. Though the overall tendency of the structure is governed by the dominant mechanisms of sexism and racism, discriminatory mechanisms may not be actualised in all cases, and other mechanisms – say, a corporate call for diversity or an equal opportunities policy – may potentially provide some countervailing forces. Understanding them from a critical realist perspective means that these forms of discrimination are held to be real, but because they are transfactual and contextually contingent, they will not affect every subject in the same way. Incorporating the concepts of transfactuality and absence in this way can help advance intersectional theory at both the micro- and macro-levels, in order to more accurately theorise the nature of systems of oppression and privilege (Martinez Dy et al., 2014).

#### *Articulating the Structure-Agency Relationship*

Intersectionality scholars have called for the development of a cohesive theory of agency in order to deepen intersectional analyses (Nash, 2008). The morphogenetic approach to structure and agency proposed by Archer (1995; 2000; 2007) has much potential for intersectional theorising; however, Akram (2010) and Mutch (2004) have suggested that it may overemphasise the role of the agent. By assuming full consciousness and reflexivity, the model does not consider activities induced by the unconscious; Akram draws upon the Bourdieuan concept of habitus to argue for the possibility of “myriad forms of structural influence” (2010: 8) which impact agency both within and outside of agential reflexivity. Similarly, Mutch (2004) points to the need to acknowledge the constraints imposed by structural limitations on the internal conversation, and suggests that “structural influences can operate by conditioning the resources available for the conducting of the internal conversation” (Mutch, 2004: 1).

Below is an amended three-stage model (Table 6) that takes into account intersectional conceptions of structure and positionality, as well as the function of unconscious conditioning.

**Table 6: Amended Three-Stage Model of Structure-Agency Interaction**  
(adapted from Archer, 2000: 17; Akram, 2010; Mutch, 2004)

<p><b>1 Intersecting and dynamic</b> structural and cultural properties <i>objectively</i> shape <b>the social positioning, conditions and</b> situations that agents confront involuntarily and <i>inter alia</i> possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to</p>
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2 Subjects' own constellation of concerns as *subjectively* defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality, nature, practice and the social.

3 Courses of action are produced through the **unconscious conditioning and reflexive deliberations** of subjects who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances.

The amended model draws upon intersectionality theory and Archer's own work (2007: 13) to note that structural and cultural properties are intersecting and dynamic (Stage 1), and that their impact is not limited to the situations that agents confront, but extends to the social positioning and conditions that frame these situations. Incorporating critiques by Akram (2010) and Mutch (2004), it includes the idea that courses of action are influenced by unconscious conditioning as well as conscious, reflexive deliberation (Stage 3).

#### **4.5 Situated Knowledges: A Critical Realist Cyberfeminist Standpoint Epistemology**

This section introduces and contextualises the particular epistemological perspective adopted by this thesis. Although realist in approach, its epistemology is informed by the traditions of post-structuralism and the feminist studies of science and technology, which questioned and challenged the dominance of the hegemonic and largely unmarked white, Western, male, middle-class, heterosexual perspective. This perspective had dominated mainstream concepts of knowledge and scientific objectivity since the European Enlightenment (England, 1994). The traditions of post-modern and post-colonial studies have also influenced the push to interrogate of grand historical narratives, particularly the discourses of modernisation, civilisation and technological progress, which have been used to influence, justify, and validate particular kinds of human knowledge and socio-economic activity, while deriding and even demonising indigenous, premodern, and precolonial knowledge and ways of life. In these discourses, knowledge is conceptualised as delivered from the top down, rather than learned from experience, or realised through practice. By privileging certain forms of knowledge and knowing, knowledge from the periphery and the margins is effectively undermined and devalued, illustrating the inexorable connection of knowledge with power, a Foucauldian concept (1977: 27) echoed throughout the feminist cultural studies of technoscience.

These theoretical shifts introduced a more critical and nuanced understanding of knowledge that considers the limitations of knowing subjects. Feminist theorists of science destabilised the myths of biological and technological determinism (Lykke, 2008) and developed a sophisticated analysis of the histories of science as the "powerfully told...histories of the technologies" (Haraway, 1988). In this literature, the relationships between being, knowledge, practice, technology and history are compellingly articulated. Seminal to this work was Harding's feminist standpoint theory, which deconstructed mythicised notions of a universal, essential 'man' and 'woman' and replaced them with "myriads...living in elaborate historical complexes of class, race, and culture" (1986: 647). Haraway (1988) built upon this point with the assertion that "feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated*

*knowledges*" (1988: 581, original emphasis). Like Harding, she abandoned the idea of knowledge as monolith, moving instead towards the "radical multiplicity of local knowledges" grounded in both a critical recognition of our own "semiotic technologies" as well as a commitment to "faithful accounts of a 'real' world that can be partially shared" (1988: 579). By acknowledging embodied vision, she argues, we become "answerable for what we learn how to see" (1988: 583). These arguments put forth an understanding that individual knowledge from any perspective is embedded in bodily experience, and attempts at objectivity are thus by nature finite, partial, and limited. Therefore, she argues that inclusiveness of a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices is vital in social science, with the aim of "joining...partial views...into a collective subject position" (1988: 590). And although Haraway asserts that her approach is not realist, New stresses that realism can indeed recognise and account for the historicity of knowledge claims of which Haraway speaks, using Bhaskar's concept of the transitive dimension of science (1998: 366).

In a useful overview of the emergence of and debates around feminist standpoint theory, New highlights the realist vein implicit in the work of many key standpoint theorists (1998). She notes that although standpoint theory has been critiqued for determinism and reification as well as its privileging of women's epistemological position (1998: 355-356), key theorists such as Hill Collins have negotiated these critiques by tying epistemologies to wider social relations and by recognising levels of and different types of knowledge (1998: 359). She emphasises realism's capacity to differentiate between epistemic relativism, or the recognition that although all beliefs and knowledge are socially produced and transient (Bhaskar, 1989: 57 as cited by New, 1998: 366), some knowledge can be determined to be better than others, and judgmental relativism, which assumes that all beliefs are equally valid (1998: 366). Realism, she asserts, can be epistemically relativist without being judgmentally relativist. For example, subjugated knowledges (what Haraway (1988) calls 'vision from below'), include information and ways of thinking that dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing; as such, they may contribute to a more adequate representation of reality (New, 1998: 360). New echoes Haraway's suggestion of compiling partial and overlapping situated knowledges, and recommends recognising the partiality of one's own knowledge and considering that of others through dialogue, so that better knowledge, and eventually, a *human* standpoint may be developed (1998: 360, original emphasis).

In an intersectional realist epistemology, analytical primacy would be given to situated knowledges, or in intersectional terms, knowledge produced by 'lived experience' (Carasthesis, 2014; Hill Collins, 1990/2000). Post-structuralist Gherardi (2001) would emphasise that such knowledge is enacted and mediated by social relations, while both Gherardi (2001) and Haraway (1988) link it with practices. Therefore, for them and many other intersectional scholars, knowledge is limited to the realms of the actual and empirical. However, New argues that feminist standpoint theory would be enhanced by introducing ontological depth, which would enable it to argue and analyse beyond the level of the actual, or life events, to the level of the deep, or the structures which give rise to life events (1998: 367). This is the epistemological approach that this thesis adopts, beginning with situated knowledges at the empirical level, that are then brought into dialogue with one another, in order to ascertain tendencies that may indicate the existence of structural mechanisms working at deeper ontological levels.



#### 4.6 A Critical Realist View of Internet Use for Entrepreneurship

It was argued in Chapter 2 that, contrary to popular belief, the Internet is a heterogeneous and unequal space for entrepreneurship. Chapter 3 then made the claim that the ability to exploit the online environment's powers for entrepreneurship would be related to one's social positionality. The critical realist premise that reality is stratified into the real, the actual and the empirical also supports this notion of the Internet as a texturised and non-neutral space for entrepreneurship. By acknowledging the existence of powers that enable this activity, but in a transfactual way, it explicitly recognises that while real, these powers can exist unactualised. This helps to explain why the myth of digital entrepreneurship 'levelling the playing field' is so pervasive: because the Internet does possess real and unique powers for people who use it to enter into activities of exchange. Yet, drawing upon Bhaskar (2008), it is not guaranteed that the appropriate conditions will be obtained in order for these powers to actualise. Mainstream entrepreneurship theory, focused as it is on the independently acting, rational economic agent, might attribute this unactualised potential to individualised factors, such as entrepreneurial alertness, motivation or social capital. However, an intersectional approach places these factors in social context by relating them to positionality. Underpinning this approach with critical realism helps to articulate how this positionality is mediated by agency in practice (Archer, 2000; 2007). Thus, understanding digital entrepreneurship from a critical realist positional perspective can contextualise and explain the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial outcomes between actors in a rich and holistic way.

In the first column of Table 7 below are listed some of the ways it is typically assumed that the Internet can be used for entrepreneurial activity. This was developed from an immanent critique of the extant literature on digital entrepreneurship, asking what conditions must be fulfilled for digital enterprise to be possible. This will be expanded in Chapter 7 with empirical evidence emerging from the research. In critical realist terminology, the items in the left column of the table below can be considered powers, or things that people using the Internet can do, if appropriate conditions are obtained (Bhaskar, 2008a: 88; Fleetwood, 2009). The middle and right column detail some of the barriers internal and external to users that could prevent these powers from being actualised. This table is not intended to be comprehensive, but is instead meant to illustrate how the benefits generally attributed to the Internet as regards entrepreneurship cannot be taken for granted, as differences across users and that which is external to them mean that these benefits may not be actualised. It also emphasises the Internet's position as a tool in the hands of users, not a magic wand for entrepreneurial success.

**Table 7: Critical Realist Immanent Critique of Existing Digital Entrepreneurship Literature**

<b><i>Power of Internet Use</i></b>	<b><i>Internal Barriers</i></b>	<b><i>External Barriers</i></b>
access to market research and business data (Hair et al. 2012; Thompson Jackson, 2009; Shoham et al., 2006)	lack of digital literacy insufficient business know-how	Information overload incorrect or misleading information quality of information indeterminate
wider reach and lower cost of client-facing operational functions, e.g. advertising, communications, distribution (Fairlie, 2006; Hull et al., 2007; Hair et al. 2012)	insufficient financial resources or know-how insufficient time resources	clients visit site, then leave without purchase difficult to stand out amongst all the 'noise'
lower cost of internal operational functions, e.g. site and product development (Thompson Jackson, 2009)	fear of delegation, unfamiliarity with outsourcing processes insufficient financial resources	contractors do not complete the work or complete it poorly contractors bar site access if unsatisfied
customer relationship building through social media (Hair et al. 2012)	insufficient knowledge or time resources	head-to-head w/competition continuously changing PR problems might be unfixable
use of existing sales channels (Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Hair et al. 2012; Reuber & Fischer, 2011)	lack of knowledge about what platforms are available fear of engaging with unfamiliar platforms	monthly limits on how much one can earn through Amazon, eBay, etc. existing sales channels/platforms take a percentage of sales
creation of new sales channels (Mahadevan, 2000)	lack of technical knowledge: site development, digital	visitors do not convert to sales

	marketing strategies, etc.  lack of financial resources to develop these channels	
new platform development (Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Mahadevan, 2000)	insufficient finance and technical knowledge	poor product/market fit
research and develop reputation with investors (Chandra & Coviello, 2010; Reuber & Fischer, 2011; Shoham et al., 2006)	desire to maintain autonomy	funding bids may be unsuccessful
creation of economies of scale (Reuber & Fischer, 2011)	insufficient business know-how  no desire for growth, delegation or relinquishing control	may not be appropriate or accessible for low-tech products (e.g. handmade crafts, professional services)

As the table suggests, there are a variety of possible barriers to actualisation of these potentials; many of the internal barriers are related to access to resources like business and technological know-how, time, and finance. In order to correctly assess to what extent the Internet does enable people to do entrepreneurship, we must analyse what the Internet is not able to do. Critically, the Internet does not grant potential or nascent entrepreneurs easy access to political, social, and cultural resources and capital. Likewise, it does not automatically increase funding or establish network connections to key industry players. These are social components to entrepreneurship whose distribution is likely governed by actors' positionality. On the rare occasion that a person in a position of power reaches out to an upcoming entrepreneur online, it is usually because their name or work is already beginning to be recognised. Also, while it is an incomparable source of information, the Internet does not offer tacit knowledge. That is, independent learning is still required, which takes time and cognitive ability, or outsourcing, which takes knowledge and financial resources. If a business idea is low-tech but labour-intensive (e.g. knitting and selling scarves), the Internet may help to source cheaper materials, but will not lower the primary production cost (time) or distribution cost (shipping). If a business idea is high-tech ('traditional' digital entrepreneurship), the online environment itself does not offer the extensive technical knowledge nor funding necessary to develop a new service or platform, or necessarily help to establish new routes to market – access to these, too, will be subject to the resource distribution precipitated by positionality.

#### **4.7 Research Question**

Due to the tiered and textured nature of the online environment, navigated by actors with diverse social positionality and access to resources, it can be expected that not all digital entrepreneurial activity will have the same likelihood of success. In light of claims that the Internet is a neutral and meritocratic space for entrepreneurship, this research area is of significant interest. Drawing together theory from the literatures on entrepreneurship, intersectionality, and feminist theories of technology, underpinned by critical realism, the following research question is proposed: *'How do social positionality and resource access affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship'?* As gender is considered to be a fundamental marker of humanity (Butler, 1990; 1993) and women as a class are subordinated within the gender binary as well as underrepresented in research about digital entrepreneurship, gender is here used as the framing analysis and women are the subject of the investigation. In addition, an intersectional approach calls for issues of class and race/ethnicity to be explored as well in order to understand how they influence participant experience. The research method used to answer this question is described in the chapter that follows.

#### **4.8 Summary**

By introducing and arguing for a critical realist methodological stance, this chapter offers a novel approach to understanding intersectionality and digital entrepreneurship. This perspective bolsters intersectionality theory with concepts from critical realist philosophy, including a depth ontology, notion of transfactuality, and robust conceptualisation of the relationships between structure and agency and privilege and disadvantage, strengthening its analytical foundation and increasing its ability to explain. Using the same methodology, the online environment and World Wide Web is understood to have specific properties that can enable people to use it for entrepreneurship. However, the chapter makes the argument that the appropriate conditions needed for this to occur may not be obtained. It is proposed that internal and external barriers may exist to effective use of the Internet for entrepreneurship, which will be explored in greater detail in the findings of Chapter 7. These assumptions form the basis of the methodological logic informing the whole of the thesis. The chapter closes by proposing the research question, while the next chapter will describe the methods used to undertake the research.

## Chapter 5: Methods

This chapter will cover the research methods used in undertaking empirical data collection. Grounded in qualitative methodological literature and drawing upon sociology, cultural, and gender studies literature, it will address how the categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and class were operationalised, describe the sampling method, criteria and participants, and give a critically reflexive and detailed account of how the processes of interviewing, interpreting, coding, and analysing the data were executed by the researcher.

### 5.1 Operationalising Social Categories

A qualitative study was undertaken consisting of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty-six women digital entrepreneurs based in England and Scotland. As the research question sought to understand heterogeneity of experience, a qualitative approach was chosen to reflect the diversity within the given population (Barbour, 2001). In keeping with the critical realist methodology described in the previous chapter, the social categories of gender, race/ethnicity and class were regarded as high-level abstractions. This reflects the fact that contemporary intersectionality has moved away from the assumption that gender, race/ethnicity and class refer to specific objective truths about the bodies or lives of individuals or groups, and toward the notion that they instead serve to convey contextually shifting social meanings. Such a notion aligns well with the turn in feminist entrepreneurship theory in general, where gender is increasingly considered to be a mental (cognitive and affective) perspective not necessarily isomorphic with biological sex (Bird & Brush, 2002; Carter et al., 2015).

The second category of inquiry, race/ethnicity, is a compound term that combines reference to race, which is generally associated with physical characteristics, and ethnicity, which is related primarily to culture (Karner, 2007). This thesis focuses primarily on race rather than ethnicity because of the ways one's physical appearance can be 'read' online and serve as a marker for how one is identified by others. However, neither race nor ethnicity are considered to have a biological basis or definition, but a socio-cultural one (Hall, 1997a) as the products of a range of discourses and practices (Byrne, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).

Social class was understood to be a multi-dimensional construct encompassing not merely economic phenomena but also social and cultural distinction and reproduction, although economic relations are still key shapers of this dynamic (Savage et al., 2013; Bradley, 2014). Although the term is fluid, and the problem of categorising people into social classes is the subject of considerable debate, the substance of which Anthias (2013) gives a comprehensive overview, it is here used to refer to "enduring and systematic differences in access to and control over resources for provisioning and survival" (Acker, 2006: 444). This overt association between social locations and resource access is embedded in and consistent with predominant intersectional perspectives.

Additionally, from an intersectional perspective, these categories are co-constitutive. This implies that, for example, "processes of racialised subject construction do not occur independently of gender and class" (Byrne, 2006: 3). The ways in which such intersections manifest are dynamic and change over

time. Rephrasing Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie observes that “white women in the UK increasingly live out their class positions...through the modality of gender and femininity” while “Black and Asian women...live their class identity through the modality of race, but their femininity also increasingly comes forward” (2009: 7). Additionally, one’s positionality in such categories is also a relational process, developed through interactions with others (Garcia & Welter, 2013). However, while the notion of the co-constitutive nature of categories, and the meanings and effects they produce, is fundamental to the arguments of this thesis, it is maintained that gender, race and class as concepts can be analysed separately from others, although in practice they are played out in conjunction with other categories (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Bearing this in mind, gender and race were operationalised in this research by means of self-identification with a particular group. Study criteria specified that participants identify as women, and the questionnaire used to collect demographic data used the “recommended ethnic group question for a survey in England” provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2014). The groupings would thus likely be familiar to the participants and enable them to self-identify in a manner typical to them.

Savage et al. (2013) offer a comprehensive overview of the evolution of class schema in the sociological field; however, their influential approach to a new model of British social classes has been critiqued for its gradational, rather than relational, approach (Anthias, 2013; Bradley, 2014). Instead, Bradley’s (2014) 4-layer model of social class, consisting of the elite, middle, working classes and the precariat, with discernable fractions in each, is the model used in this thesis to inform the understanding of the socio-economic class position of the individuals within the sample group.

**Table 8: UK Class Model (adapted from Bradley, 2014)**

<b>Class Status</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Elite</b>	Possession of wealth (land, property, shares and investments, ownership of companies), often internationally	Politicians, ‘super-rich’, government and corporate officials, celebrities, royalty
<b>Middle Class</b>	Command earnings on the base of qualifications, skills and appropriately valued experience	
- <i>Upper</i>	High-level wage-earners	Traditional professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers); managerial elite
- <i>Middle</i>	Highly educated, less rewarded	Teachers, social workers and computer specialists.
- <i>Lower</i>	Qualified but less well-paid	Nurses, council workers and technicians
<b>Working Class</b>	Lower-paid wage-earners. Lack of higher educational qualifications, although may have NVQs or other forms of certification. May have labour to sell but nobody to buy it; dependent on benefits.	
- <i>Upper</i>	Relatively affluent and aspirant	Skilled manual workers, self-employed mechanics
- <i>Feminised</i>	Low-paid workers in retail, care and leisure	Nursery nurses, carers
- <i>Un/underemployed</i>	Benefit-dependent	
<b>Precariat</b>	Heterogeneous group which contains highly educated as well as very low-skilled people. Characterised by marginal and insecure relation to employment, in and out of various types of temporary and part-time work and inferior contracts.	Young people, including students and unemployed graduates, temps, cleaners, classroom assistants and hourly paid lecturers, call-centre workers, fruit-pickers, bar/restaurant staff

To operationalise the concept of class, substantive and reflective indicators from the participants and observational indicators from the primary researcher were used, paying particular attention to their household income, personal income, education and employment history, job title at last paid position, and the inferred social level of those in personal and business networks. Links were drawn between this data, the kinds of resources they described having access to upon start-up and in the present, and the intersectional theoretical framework, in order to infer information about their socio-economic class, which were then mapped to the UK class model outlined by Bradley (2014). Some examples of this process are illustrated in the following table.

**Table 9: Operationalising Social Class**

Participant	Indicators	Map to Model	Assigned Class Status
R18 transcription services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MBA degree</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> generation to attend university</li> <li>- £10-20K startup funds</li> <li>- Personal income over £100K/annum</li> <li>- Married, 2 children ages 21 and 18</li> <li>- Secondary household earner</li> <li>- Currently employed as: Chief of Staff</li> </ul>	<p>High-level wage-earner. Although 1<sup>st</sup> generation to attend university, attained postgraduate degree and senior position in a large company.</p> <p>Well-established, professional career. Household income is well above £100K/annum.</p>	Upper Middle
R8 vintage fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- BA German &amp; Spanish</li> <li>- Parents and grandparents attended university</li> <li>- £20-50K startup funds</li> <li>- Personal income £25-50K/annum, household £50-100K/annum</li> <li>- Partnered, no children</li> <li>- Secondary household earner</li> <li>- Last job title: Retail Manager</li> </ul>	<p>Qualified, with substantial savings for start-up capital.</p> <p>Worked as management-level retail employee in dual earner household.</p>	Middle Middle
R23 editing and journalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MA Education</li> <li>- £0-500 startup funds</li> <li>- Last job title: teacher</li> <li>- Single, 1 child (age 8)</li> <li>- Owns home</li> </ul>	<p>Highly educated, less rewarded in past role as teacher, suggesting middle-class; however, sole earner with a young child and little savings despite owning her home.</p>	Lower Middle
R3 web design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- HND Graphic Design</li> <li>- £0-500 startup funds</li> <li>- Last job title: Web Designer</li> <li>- Owns home</li> <li>- Partnered, no children</li> <li>- Partner is employed by her business</li> </ul>	<p>Lack of higher educational qualifications, but other certification.</p> <p>Very little savings, but home and business ownership suggests some affluence/aspirations</p>	Upper Working

<p>R7</p> <p>fashion design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MA Pattern Cutting</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> generation to attend university</li> <li>- £500-1K startup funds</li> <li>- Personal income: less than £10K/annum</li> <li>- Single, no children</li> <li>- Last job title: restaurant server</li> <li>- Rents home</li> </ul>	<p>Young person in her 20s, recent MA graduate, working as part-time restaurant staff at minimum wage.</p> <p>Precariat group also contains highly skilled individuals w/ marginal/insecure employment</p>	<p>Precariat</p>
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## 5.2 Sampling and Criteria

A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling method was used. Purposive sampling, in which participants are selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to a particular research objective (Guest et al., 2006), is effective for research questions such as this, wherein one needs to study a certain cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within (Tongco, 2007). Initial contacts to UK women’s business organisations were obtained through one well-established women’s business incubator. These key contacts circulated my research request and criteria amongst their networks, and participants were chosen through purposive sampling, followed by limited snowball sampling. Some participants volunteered in response to the request, while others were contacted directly. The criteria circulated to potential interviewees were that in order to participate, they must:

1. Identify as a woman owner of an online business
2. Live in the UK (England, Scotland, N. Ireland and Wales)
3. Conduct the majority of marketing and/or sales online
4. Have begun trading (any length of time is fine).

This sampling method and relatively broad criteria indicates the research was not aiming to achieve statistical representativeness nor generalisability, but rather to capture the richness of the sample population. The sample included participants engaged in a range of entrepreneurial activities with a wide variety of demographic backgrounds and experiences of the online environment, encompassing start-ups, early-stage, and established businesses. For this reason, the focus of the sampling method was less on sample size and more on sampling adequacy; the resulting sample was appropriate as it was composed of participants who had knowledge of the research topic (Bowen, 2008). Although the sample was not selected based upon their type of digital entrepreneurial activity, most respondents could be mapped to the Intermediate/New Venture Creation segment of the typology from Chapter 2 (Figure 3).

Although the notion of saturation has become a marker of quality for qualitative research, O’Reilly and Parker (2013: 194) point out two things: first, that saturation is “not always an appropriate criterion” for all types of analysis, and second, following Morse (1995), that if saturation is not reached this simply means that “the phenomenon has not yet been fully explored rather than that the findings are invalid.” They hold that it is acceptable, therefore, that any limitations of sampling adequacy are transparently



reported. To address their first point, achieving data or theme saturation is typically considered a relevant criterion for the thematic analysis conducted in this study. Regarding their second point, one limitation of this study is that the criteria were developed to include women who would be considered high-tech platform developers or the owners of such businesses; however, members of this population whom I contacted did not respond to my repeated efforts at communication. The sample is therefore composed of primarily e-retailers, service providers, and combinations of the two. These arguably comprise the majority of the population of digital entrepreneurs and yet, as explained in Chapter 2, are in the literature given lesser attention in favour of high-tech entrepreneurs. More detail on the nature of their businesses is included in the following section. Another limitation to the notion of saturation is that while the study was intended to be UK-wide, I was able to procure only one respondent in Scotland and none in either Wales or Northern Ireland. Thus, the study was primarily focused on participants in England. Such limitations will be discussed further in the conclusion to the thesis.

Patterns became evident in the accounts after approximately twenty interviews, while new information produced diminishing returns (little or no changes to the codebook) and data replication and redundancy after twenty-six interviews, suggesting that data and theme saturation for the types of entrepreneurs included was achieved and that the categories were adequately explained (Bowen, 2008; Guest et al., 2006; Hyde, 2003). This is consistent with the recommendations of Guest et al., who suggest that twelve interviews should suffice to assess common perceptions and experiences amongst a group of relatively homogenous individuals, but that larger samples are needed if the goal is to assess variations between groups, as is the case here. It is also consistent with the findings of Nielsen and Landauer (1993, as cited by Guest et al., 2006), who for a study of technology usability, similar to the technology-centred inquiry of this research, quantitatively demonstrated that twelve evaluators can uncover ninety percent of the major usability problems within a system. For these reasons, the sample size is considered adequate and justified.

### 5.3 Sample Characteristics

Table 10 reports various demographic characteristics of the participants, their industry sectors, the start-up funding available to them, whether their businesses are product or service-based or both, and the length of time their businesses have been in operation, in years.

**Table 10: Sample Characteristics (n=26)**

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Age</b>		
18-30	3	11.5
31-40	10	38.5
41-50	9	34.6
51-60	4	15.4
<b>Race</b>		

White British	13	50
Black British	8	30.8
British Asian	4	15.4
Mixed-Race	1	3.8
<b>Socio-economic Class</b>		
Elite	0	0
Upper – Middle	7	26.9
Middle – Middle	11	42.3
Lower – Middle	3	11.5
Working Class - Upper	3	11.5
Working Class – Feminised	0	0
Working Class – Un/underemployed	1	3.8
Precariat	1	3.8
<b>Start-up Funding (£)</b>		
0-500	9	34.6
500-1K	4	15.4
1K-5K	1	3.8
5K-10K	0	0
10-20K	4	15.4
20-50K	5	19.2
50-100K	1	3.8
Declined to answer	2	7.7
<b>Industry Sector</b>		
Health and Beauty	5	19.2
Fashion & Accessories	7	26.9
Digital Marketing	5	19.2
Publishing	2	7.7
Children’s Products/Services	3	11.5
Other Professional Services	6	23.1
<b>Product/Service</b>		
Product Only	9	34.6
Service Only	11	42.3
Combination	6	23.1
<b>Years of Operation</b>		
0-1	4	15.4

1-3	10	38.5
3-5	2	7.7
5-8	6	23.1
8-10	1	3.8
10+	3	11.5

All participants identified as women, and one as a transgendered woman. Twenty-five were based in England and one in Scotland, across rural, suburban, small urban and large urban areas. Amongst them, there was a diversity of financial resources, educational backgrounds and employment histories, as well as business knowledge, the online environment in general, and digital entrepreneurship, in particular. This is reflected in Table 11. Their relationship and family statuses were a mix of single, partnered, married and divorced, with young, older, adult, or no children. Three participants indicated they had a disability but none noted that it had any significant impact on their business experiences.

The start-up finance to which they had access ranged from less than £500 to more than £50,000. Thirteen members of the sample started their businesses on less than £1000. Four respondents had £10-20,000 and five others £20-50,000; only one had in excess of £50,000. All but one respondent indicated that the entirety of their start-up capital was sourced from personal savings, with the other indicating that she had used credit cards. Two did not respond to the survey, while one chose not to answer the start-up finance question. The majority of respondents (19) had businesses based in the home, while seven had premises outside of their homes.

Participants operated in these overall business sectors: health and beauty, fashion and accessories, digital marketing, children’s products and services, publishing, and other professional services. The category of ‘other professional services’ included such businesses as a small business networking group, safeguarding training and certification services, a cross-cultural communication consultancy, and business consultancy and coaching. ‘Fashion and accessories’, with seven respondents, was the most prevalent category, while ‘other professional services’ had six respondents, followed by ‘health and beauty’ and ‘digital marketing’ with six respondents respectively. The business sector of respondents is noted in Table 11 below.

**Table 11: Participants Sorted by Industry Sector**

Health & Beauty	Fashion & Accessories	Digital Marketing	Publishing	Children’s Products & Services	Other Professional Services
1, 2, 5, 11, 20	6, 7, 8, 13, 16, 17, 20	3, 9, 14, 25, 26, 20	10, 21	4, 12, 19	15, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26

**Table 12: Participants Sorted by Age and Years of Operation**

	0-1	1-3	3-5	5-8	8-10	10+
18-30	7	9		1		
31-40		5, 6, 8, 10, 13	12	3, 11, 21		20
41-50	23	14, 16, 26	15	19, 22	4	18
51-60	17, 24	2				25

As illustrated in Table 12, the length of time the businesses had been trading ranged from a minimum of three months to a maximum of thirteen years, with the one-to-three year range being the most frequent (ten businesses). Nine respondents were e-retailers, with product-based businesses operating via e-commerce only; eleven were service providers and used the Internet primarily for marketing, and six respondents had a combination of product and service-based businesses. Three had started online businesses in the past and so could be considered serial digital entrepreneurs. Five were portfolio entrepreneurs with more than one online business operating at once, including one respondent with a portfolio of e-retail sites and a digital marketing strategy consultancy. Some of these operated in multiple sectors, which is reflected in Table 11.

**Table 13: Demographic and Business Data of Participants**

#	Business Type	Base	Years Op	Age	Race	Class	Relationship / Children	Sole/Joint Owner
1	nail art supplies	Rural	5-8	18-30	WB	MM	single / none	Sole
2	skin care line	s. urban	1-3	51-60	BB	MM	divorced / older	Sole
3	web design	s. urban	5-8	31-40	MR	UW	partnered / none	Sole
4	label manufact. & retail	s. urban	8-10	41-50	WB	UM	married / older	Sole
5	holistic therapy/product	l. urban	1-3	31-40	BB	UM	married / young	Sole
6	ethical fashion retail	l. urban	1-3	31-40	BA	UM	single / none	Sole
7	fashion design (closed)	s. urban	0-1	18-30	WB	P	single / none	Sole, father is tech support
8	vintage fashion	s. urban	1-3	31-40	WB	MM	partnered / none	Sole
9	digital marketing	l. urban	1-3	18-30	WB	LM	single / none	Joint, male partner
10	magazine publishing	s. urban	1-3	31-40	WB	MM	partnered / none	Sole

11	make-up school	l. urban	5-8	31-40	BB	UM	partnered / none	Sole
12	arts workshops	s. urban	3-5	31-40	WB	MM	single / none	Sole
13	petite fashion design & retail	s. urban	1-3	31-40	BA	UM	married / young	Sole, co-owns other businesses
14	digital marketing	suburban	1-3	41-50	WB	UW	divorced / adult	Sole
15	cross-cultural communication	s. urban	3-5	41-50	WB	MM	married / adult	Joint w/husband, she is director
16	shoe retail	suburban	1-3	41-50	BB	LM	single / older	Sole
17	vintage fashion (not currently trading)	s. urban	0-1	51-60	WB	UU	single / none	Sole
18	transcription services	suburban	10+	41-50	WB	UM	married / older	Sole
19	nursery broker	rural	5-8	41-50	WB	MM	married / older	Sole, husband is tech support
20	e-retail & digital consultancy	s. urban	10+	31-40	WB	MM	partnered / none	Sole
21	professional blogger	suburban	5-8	31-40	BB	MM	married / young	Sole
22	decorative packaging training / business coach	s. urban	5-8	41-50	BA	UW	married / older	Sole
23	editing services and journalism training	s. urban	0-1	41-50	BB	LM	single / young	Sole
24	digital marketing business coach	l. urban	0-1	51-60	BB	MM	married / older	Sole
25	safeguarding services	s. urban	10+	51-60	WB	MM	married / adult	CIC – director
26	digital marketing business coach	s. urban	1-3	41-50	BA	UM	divorced / young	Sole

**Key:**

*Base:* Geographic location indicator; l. urban = large urban area, s. urban = small urban area, suburban = suburbs of large urban area.

*Years Op:* Years the business has been in operation

*Race:* WB = White British, BB = Black British, BA = British Asian, MR = Mixed Race.

*Class:* UM = Upper Middle, MM = Middle Middle, LM = Lower Middle, UW = Upper Working, FW = Feminised Working, UU = Un/underemployed Working, P = Precariat

*Children:* young = <12, older = 13-20, adult = >21.

#### **5.4 Interviews, Transcription and Reflexive Practice**

A pilot study took place in 2011-2012 with ten interviewees in order to develop and refine the interview schedule. Interviews took place between May and December 2013. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with the shortest interview being thirty-six minutes and the longest being one and one-half hours. The majority were between fifty to sixty minutes long. Where possible, I met with the interviewee in person, in their homes, a meeting room or a public place like a café or restaurant (11). The interviews were audio-recorded and, between August and December 2013, were transcribed verbatim.

Informed by the extant literature on entrepreneurship and positionality, the interviews were focused around three areas: social factors and resources that enabled or constrained the formation of the business, technical skills, and the challenges and benefits of digital entrepreneurship. As recommended by Guest et al. (2006), a similar set of questions were asked of all participants in order to lend structure to the interview. Demographic information was also collected through a participant profile questionnaire, which all but two of the participants returned. The final interview schedule, questionnaire, and pilot schedule can be found in Appendices A-C.

Drawing upon the intersectional method of interviewing utilised by Byrne (2006: 37-39), immediately following each interview, I took field notes on my general impressions, responses, links or contrasts to other interviews, how the interviewee spoke and her approach to answering my questions, including such things like delivery speed, tone, pauses, level of perceived comfort or stress when answering particular questions, and questions avoided or left unanswered. I used these notes to develop a summary document for each participant. In these, I attempted to sketch an overall picture of each participant's social positionality, current life circumstances, general demeanour about and approach to her business, past and present access to various relevant resources, and key events in and/or conditions of the process of business development. Although the process of transcribing, analysing and interpreting interviews is necessarily subjective (Byrne, 2006: 38), this series of steps enabled me to begin to think systematically about how structural forces could have contributed to the participants' experiences of digital entrepreneurship.

#### *Critical Reflexivity as a Situating Technology*

The importance of reflexivity in research is widely accepted within feminist scholarship and other critical theoretical positions that have demonstrated how implicit biases have historically underpinned the production of knowledge. Drawing upon Haraway's notion of 'situated knowledges' (1988), not only are the research subjects, but the researcher herself is understood to be located in a particular social position and informed by a specific history and worldview that then informs her research and analysis. In addition, the inevitable relationships of power that exist between the researcher and the researched must be acknowledged and addressed. Haraway has called for 'situating technologies' to help us in the process of negotiating understandings of situatedness; Rose has pointed to reflexivity as one such technology (Haraway, 1991 and Rose, 1997 as cited by Maxey, 1999: 201). Reflexivity is defined by England as "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as

researcher” (1994: 82). Sultana (2007) emphasises that such a process is not self-indulgent, but instead asks researchers to reflect on how they feature in relationships of power and how their methods, interpretations, and knowledge production are affected as a result. However, Maxey points out that the notion of reflexivity, rather than highlighting power relationships, can paradoxically be used to hide relations of power and oppression in the guise of ‘transparency’: “For the ‘reflexive researcher’ to assume that they can be fully aware of their own self-conscious and simultaneously survey the entire landscape of power is extremely problematic” (1999: 202). Short of refraining from research altogether, England (1994: 86) advises accepting responsibility for the intrusions of research into informant lives as well as for its representation of those lives, and recognising that the research relationship is inherently hierarchical; reflexivity can increase our awareness of this tension, but cannot, she cautions, resolve it. Thus, rather than attempting a simple or ‘transparent’ reflexive account of my research, my aim is instead a critical reflexivity, in which the limitations of reflexive practice itself are acknowledged, and focused attention given to the complexities of social positionality and power dynamics within the research process.

However, in order to reach a space of critical reflexivity, one must first pass through the stage of transparency. This entails exploring my own history and positionality to ascertain what they might say about my worldview, my potential biases and assumptions, blind spots, and understanding of interpersonal and structural power dynamics. Quoting Stanley and Wise (1993), England (1994: 84) notes that *“Our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher.”* What follows is an attempt to explain some of my own situatedness so that the medium through which this research occurred may be made more apparent. I am a queer femme woman in my early thirties from a mixed ethnic and cultural background; my mother is Spanish-Filipino and my father is Chinese. Both are from the Philippines and moved to the United States in their twenties while the Philippines was under martial law. I, an only child, was born and raised in suburban America with a close relationship to my family in Manila and, with the time I spent there during my childhood and adolescence, a personal understanding of the post-colonial experience of the country and its people. For the past four generations, my family on my mother’s side has been middle-class and highly educated, but due to the effects of World War II on the Philippines, my mother, the eldest daughter of twelve, grew up poor, although through education and employment the family was eventually able to regain a middle-class socio-economic status. My mother is Catholic and religiously conservative, and does not approve of my queer identity nor my feminism, though she is arguably my inspiration for it. My politically conservative father, who did not complete his university education, accepts my sexuality but rejects what he sees as my ‘liberal’ politics. Between them, my parents speak four languages; I speak only this one fluently. I now live in the United Kingdom, having come to improve my socio-economic status through post-graduate education. I have never been married and I have no children. My interest in intersectionality, Black and queer feminism thus emerged from my lived experience of being ‘othered’, exoticised, and excluded as an Asian-American woman, and silenced as a queer woman and as a feminist. I am a daughter of immigrants and an immigrant myself who lives daily in a liminal space between worlds, languages, and cultures. For all of these reasons, I am concerned with social marginality and highly attuned to the issues

it presents; Haraway's notion of 'vision from below' (1988) resonates with me, as my "commonsense knowledge of social structures" (England, 1994) is intimately informed by these experiences.

A critical reflexivity acknowledges and interrogates how the researcher's social positionality and perspective interacts with that of the participants and frames interpretation and analysis. My particular positionality, with its mixed experiences of privilege and oppression, alongside my personal interest in feminism, critical race studies and other critical theoretical traditions, lend themselves to a worldview where I am consistently alert to the influences of social structures on people's life conditions and perhaps slightly less focused on the narratives of meritocracy, individual hard work and agency that inform much entrepreneurship scholarship. I am deeply interested in the workings of power, both structural and interpersonal, and have a strong awareness of the privileges and oppressions engendered by such things as normative gender roles, differential access to education and being (or not) of the normative race; these arguably informed the processes of interviewing and analysis and are some of the primary influences on my role as mediator of the accounts shared by interviewees. Having lived in England for only five years, I also bring my American middle-class cultural experience to the research, and a primarily intellectual familiarity with the systems of social stratification of the UK and their history. Thus, I acknowledge that my assessments and interpretations of class status and racial dynamics may be limited by my outsider's perspective and lack of inherent cultural knowledge. I attempted to make up for this with academic reading on race, class, gender, and intersectionality in the UK (e.g. Ahmed, 2012; Byrne, 2006; McRobbie, 2009, Bradley, 2014), and numerous in-depth discussions with English-born and raised friends and peers with whom I reviewed some of my interview experiences, careful to maintain participant anonymity, for their feedback on what I was perceiving. Despite this, I acknowledge that some limitations to my understanding of UK social dynamics will still of course exist. Finally, my educational privilege as a doctoral student and researcher has the potential to introduce yet another hierarchical power dynamic, particularly if I were to use obviously academic language, which I find often alienates non-academics because of its inaccessibility. To address this, I was careful to reflect upon my own use of language and consciously avoid academic jargon and terms which would be incongruous in everyday speech.

Yet, as Maxey (1999) observes, transparency, though necessary, is not sufficient to achieve critical reflexivity. What must also be considered are the inherent limitations of the research method itself, and the limitations of the researcher's own assessments of the landscape of power. Semi-structured interviews are an exploratory approach to data generation that enables critical analysis. They are open to plurality and multiplicity of experience, and can encourage contributions from the situated knowledges of actors (Haraway, 1988) as well as from their practical or lived experiences (Nash, 2008; McCall, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991). They are an attempt to achieve an understanding of people's experiences of social life by studying them "in their own terms", sometimes described as "the insiders' view" (England, 1994: 82). Yet there are limitations to this approach. First, a researcher is part of, and therefore, embedded in the world being researched. Hence, we actively shape the accounts produced in the research as well as being shaped by the research process (Cunliffe, 2011). We do so by acting as a mediator for the reported experiences of actors, enabling elements of the accounts to emerge or be prioritised in ways that would not have occurred otherwise. As England notes, the relationship between



the researcher and the researched is inherently hierarchical, though it may be reciprocal, asymmetrical, or exploitative (1994). Traditionally, power lay in the hands of the researcher, but many reflexive researchers, including myself, try to intentionally alter this dynamic so that it is more balanced. One technique I utilised in an attempt to bring more balance to the power dynamic was to encourage participants to discuss whatever aspects of a topic that they found most significant, and to feel free to move between topics – to go back to previous questions before moving on, add things, qualify their responses, or bring up topics that had not been asked about, as they saw fit. But speaking at all can still lead to a loss of agency, since “testimony which produces texts allows words to be used by others for many purposes” (Jackson, 2012: 1018). In my analysis, therefore, I was careful to try to keep the responses of interviewees in some context and not to frame them in a way that did not seem to be in keeping with their accounts as a whole.

Second, we cannot expect that what participants say during interviews is a direct and unadulterated account of their lives and experiences. There can be lapses in memory, embellished narratives, rose-tinted glasses on the past, and various response biases (Furnham, 1986; Randall & Fernandes, 1991). Jackson notes that “fresh talk”, or extemporaneous speech, is constructed under the pressures of current situations and as such, much of it is not a direct expression of subjectivity (2012: 1006, c.f. Goffman, 1981). While I assumed that the knowledge of interviewees regarding the particular questions asked was greater than mine (England, 1994), I recognise that what was captured in the interviews is simply one version of their perception of a situation or experience at one moment in time, and it cannot necessarily be extended to mean more than that. Although I explained that I would be happy for participants to reflect on their interviews and supplement them with additional commentary by email, none did. I tried to address the limitations of “fresh talk” by putting their observations in context with their responses to the participant profile questionnaire, the summary documents I compiled about them, and my in-depth, yet fallible, knowledge of how social structures function. I looked for consistency across accounts to signal patterns, tendencies and potential social mechanisms at work. Finally, a dialogue or conversation creates its own effects, as hearers also have power to co-construct, enable and shape speech (Jackson, 2012: 1011). My natural interpersonal style is not to simply ask questions and listen to the answers in a robotic manner, but to be an engaged and active listener: throughout the conversation, I affirm or confirm what speakers are saying, ask probing questions, or paraphrase what they have said to ensure I have understood. While this method of dialogue can be very productive in that it encourages speakers to elaborate and clarify their contributions, it is possible that my additions to the dialogue could have lent more emphasis to certain aspects of the accounts than would otherwise have emerged.

The last consideration in my aim to achieve a critical reflexivity involves understanding the limitations of my own assessments of the landscape of power. To this end, I know very little about how participants viewed me and who they perceived as holding power in our interactions, or in fact at all how they related to me, either as an academic or researcher, a younger or older woman, an Asian woman, or as an American. I did not share my biographical information with them before the interviews began; they knew perhaps only that I was a woman, what university I represented, and what it was I was studying. When we met or spoke, I can assume my accent revealed that I was not English, but as I have heard that

I sound only vaguely North American and none of them asked where I was from or my ethnicity, I think it unlikely that they knew anything specific about my origins. However, if we were meeting in person I expected that my Asian and feminine appearance came across as stereotypically non-threatening. At the end of each interview, I asked if they had any questions for me. Some asked why I was interested in the topic, and I shared my own experiences of social entrepreneurship in America. But these exchanges occurred at the end of the conversations, and so could not have had an influence on their responses. Thus, my assessment of the landscape of power is inherently limited by my lack of awareness of what participants thought of me. The most revealing evidence that I have that they felt open with me was the candidness and amount of detail with which most of them answered my questions. However, there was one notable exception to this general sense of openness: when confronted with questions of race, there were some white participants who simply did not respond, turning instead to another topic, even when asked about race more than once. In these cases, it seemed that their silence was functioning “as a positive reaction to a sense of being controlled” (Jackson, 2012: 1018), but as I do not know what they were thinking, I cannot be certain. As “the ‘how’ of speech matters” both “for the conduct of research and improved ‘hearing’ by researchers” (Jackson, 2012: 999), my interpretations and analysis paid close attention to the manner in which respondents spoke: the speed, the sense of urgency or calm, the emotion with which they spoke, their allusions, and their silences. This said, I recognise limitations here as well, as I cannot presume to have access to the ‘truth’ of what they were saying ‘below the surface’ of their accounts.

The interviews could be seen as quite personal, as they asked participants to engage with and share experiences of discrimination in their work and personal lives. However, due to my social positionality, I am more familiar with experiences of oppression in relation to gender and race/ethnicity than I am with those of class. My shared gender, and in some cases, non-white identity, may have worked to “contribut[e] to the assumption of certain shared experiences, views and positions that made the interview more relaxed” (Byrne, 2006: 36). Thus, the most difficult category for me to access in the interviews was that of class. As Byrne (2006: 35) notes, without explicit positioning taking place in interviews it was “difficult to acknowledge class position.” An interesting outcome of the interviews was that when the subject of class was broached, respondents tended to speak about others of either higher or lower social classes than themselves, very rarely speaking openly about the social class they themselves occupied. This is similar to Byrne’s observation that with white interviewees, the topic of race “was always about others, those who were Black, Asian or otherwise non-white” (2006: 76). She quotes Fraser, who states how class “may not be amenable to a politics of visibility because of the way in which people may be reluctant to identify as working class” (Fraser, 1999: 126 as cited by Byrne, 2006: 35) or, I would add, to identify with positions in more privileged classes, as privilege tends to be significantly less visible to those who possess it (Ahmed 2012; Frankenberg 1993).

## **5.5 Data Coding and Analysis**

To begin the coding process, I developed a start list of broad codes based on key concepts extracted from analysis of the literature and methodology. This included such codes as: gender, race/ethnicity, class, resources, intersections, and benefits and challenges of the online environment for

entrepreneurship. Building upon this start list, I coded the data in three rounds. The initial round took place during transcription, in which any passages that appeared relevant to the research question or emergent themes were marked and possible initial codes noted. The second round took place after data was imported into NVivo10, when every interview was read thoroughly and coded with the broad codes from the start list. Many additional broad codes not contained in the start list (e.g. attitudes, goals, networks, discrimination, time) were developed during this round as common topics were noted in the data, and previously coded interviews were re-coded for these additional codes. The third round involved re-reading the interviews multiple times and coding line-by-line for more detailed themes, framed by the personal, social, and technological experiences of digital entrepreneurship, as well as the effects of social positionality.

The constant comparative method was used, meaning that all newly gathered data was systematically and continually compared with previously collected data and their coding (Bowen, 2008). This was an iterative process that included identifying emergent links or themes between data points and adding these new codes to segments of previously coded interviews. By continually comparing the views and experiences of respondents in this manner, I sought to use the qualitative dataset to its full advantage and “illuminate subtle but potentially important differences” (Barbour, 2001). The result was a codebook built around higher level meta-themes which served as parent codes to more detailed children codes (Guest et al., 2006). Example codes and passages are contained in Table 14 below.

**Table 14: Example Codes and Passages**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Parent Category</b>	<b>Example Passages</b>
fear and insecurity	attitudes	...certain things I’m sort of nervous to do it in case I sort of mess it up.  I’ve never had that self confidence in myself to stand up and say, well, actually, this is my opinion.
sexism in sector	discrimination	A lot of people do think that women in technology are a bit thick.  I have to use my husband as well to go into meetings sometimes to seal deals.
performing gender effectively	gender	Being approachable, cause sometimes women can be coming in really tough and hard, and it can turn people off, and if you come in too soft, it can turn people off as well.
less start-up capital if knowledge-based service	know-how	We didn’t invest any money into the company other than making sure we had the right software.

provider		...need to buy some kind of basic things, a domain name and some web space...But other than that, a lot of stuff you can do through your own hard work online.
cannot afford tech support	finance	if I had a grand right now, it wouldn't go to paying a webmaster, because I need to buy raw materials and packaging so I can fulfill orders and pay the postage.  But I guess you have that interim stage really where there's perhaps budget to outsource something but not as yet to bring on board the person who would be solely focusing on that.
desire for growth	goals	It's not as big as I want it to be yet. There's still a lot more we could do.  So I think I'm just, I'm really conscious that I want it to grow. Obviously look after my existing customers. But I'm really keen on growing that customer base.

Once the entire data set was coded, I conducted three types of analysis: a traditional thematic analysis that revealed ways in which social positionality broadly shaped experiences of digital entrepreneurship, a comparative case study analysis to explore the effects of positionality in individual experiences, and a critical realist retroductive analysis of the mechanisms because of which the Internet can be used effectively for entrepreneurship. These two analyses form the basis of the findings in Chapter 6 and 7, respectively. Bringing these together in the discussions of Chapters 8 and 9, it is argued that the actualisation of such mechanisms is likely to be enabled or constrained by one's specific social positionality and related life experiences. The unit of analysis is primarily the individual respondent, with attention paid to other participants with whom she may share some aspects of social positionality. The data item is a coded extract from the data.

For the thematic analysis, following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006) and the example of Guest et al. (2006), I first mapped out the codes by hand and related them conceptually to each other. I then sorted them into potential themes, and, using NVivo10, collated the relevant data extracts within the identified themes, which allowed me to consider how different codes could combine to form an overarching theme. To ascertain the importance of each potential theme, I considered both its frequency across interviews (Guest et al., 2006), and the varying weights and meanings it was given by different interviewees. I also considered how in some interviews, certain topics did not seem important or relevant to the interviewee at all, while in other interviews the same topics were described as critical. This indicated the possible presence of themes which addressed the diversity of experiences of the sample group. This stage of the analysis ended with a collection of candidate themes. To refine these themes, coded data extracts were reviewed for their suitability and fit with the emergent themes, and the entire data set considered for whether the thematic map accurately reflected the data set as a whole, as well as addressed the original research question. As a result, some themes were eliminated,

while others were combined or broken down into separate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six final themes are explored in the next chapter.

To highlight the effects of differing positionality upon entrepreneurs working in similar sectors, I used a comparative case study analysis to which I took an interpretive approach, meaning I was using theory to explore cases (Lijphart, 1971 as cited by Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). I used the critical realist positional theoretical foundation described in Chapter 4 to examine and interpret the cases. Following Kaarbo and Beasley's (1999) suggested steps, I identified variables based on theory and selected cases based on relevant comparable dimensions (here, similar entrepreneurial aims in the same industry sector). I extended the thematic codebook described above to create a case codebook in which the variables were operationalised consistently across the multiple evidence sources (interviews and questionnaires). I then code-wrote the cases in narrative form (Yin, 1994) and in my analysis highlighted the differences attributable to inequality in social positionality. Although my critical realist approach meant that I was seeking to explain differences in experiences, rather than to predict outcomes or test hypothesis, I followed the form of logic in which the evidence seen in the cases are mapped against effects expected by the theory (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999: 386) – in this case, a nuanced and complex picture of privilege and disadvantage resulting from the interplay of structure, culture and agency. The results of this analysis are presented in Chapter 8.

For the retroductive analysis, in order to understand the mechanisms by which the Internet is actualised for entrepreneurship, I looked more specifically at the descriptions by participants of the challenges to entrepreneurship presented by the online space. I used the coded data extracts relevant to these themes to conduct a critical realist retroductive analysis (Sayer, 1992; Mole, 2012) of the mechanisms by which the Internet can be used effectively for entrepreneurship. This method of analysis follows the general form RRREIC (Mole, 2012):

<i>Resolution</i>	A complex situation of interest is resolved into its separate components.
<i>Redescription</i>	The components are redescribed in terms that are theoretically significant.
<i>Retroduction</i>	Antecedents to the event or situation are inferred in order to determine what caused the events to happen, looking specifically at how mechanisms may have been triggered as well as how they interacted.
<i>Elimination</i>	Mechanisms which do not appear to apply can be eliminated.
<i>Identification</i>	Attempt to tease out evidence for each of the mechanisms involved, leading to the identification of causal mechanism(s) at work.
<i>Correction</i>	The initial theory is updated with the new knowledge gained from the process.

In this way, the analysis moves from abstract concepts of objects, structures, and mechanisms step by step towards the concrete, combining theoretical claims with empirically discovered knowledge of contingently-related phenomena (Sayer, 1992: 140). This combination of theoretical claims and

empirical research aims to discover which kinds of objects (or mechanisms) are present, the contingent forms they take, and under what conditions they exist in this instance (Sayer, 1992: 143). Bygstad and Munkvold (2011) offer a slightly different stepwise framework for this method of analysis, appropriate for studies of large socio-technical systems such as information systems. Their framework is listed below and detailed in Appendix D.

1. Description of events
2. Identification of key components
3. Theoretical re-description (abduction)
4. Retroduction: identification of candidate mechanisms
5. Analysis of selected mechanisms and outcomes
6. Validation of explanatory power

Step 1 was addressed in the individual summaries of each participant, as well as in the thematic analysis conducted prior to the critical realist analysis. In Step 2, I took the statements of participants regarding why they chose to begin an online business and the benefits of working online, and used thematic analytical techniques to group them into categories and identify the key components of the phenomenon. I then used these same categories to analyse the challenges reported by participants. In Step 3 (Section 7.4), I re-described these challenges, and the strategies respondents used to overcome them, in terms of intersectionality and positionality, the primary theoretical framework. Via this re-description, I was then able to identify the social conditions that are linked to the actualisation of the Internet's main mechanisms for entrepreneurship. The aim of this analysis was to uncover mechanisms functioning at the structural and individual levels that may be either enabling or constraining the phenomenon. To accomplish this, in Step 4 I postulated models of mechanisms functioning at the social and psycho-social levels of digital entrepreneurship, creating one model for each level. The models were developed by looking at the social positionalities of the participants in relation to how they described the benefits and/or challenges of doing digital entrepreneurship, and considering the presence or absence of the enabling conditions and critical resources that were likely to inform their experiences. Steps 5 and 6, analysis and validation of selected mechanisms, will be addressed in the discussion in Chapter 9.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter has provided a detailed discussion of the methods used to carry out the research of this thesis. Based in the critical realist intersectional feminist methodology described in Chapter 4, it explained how social categories were operationalised and how participants were categorised by gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Although these categories are considered to be co-constitutive of identity, for the purposes of this thesis it is held that they are abstractions and as such can be separately analysed as concepts, with attention paid to how they intersect and relationally position individuals and groups. Gender and race/ethnicity were self-identified by participants, while social class was based on a recent sociological model developed specifically for the UK population. The chapter then explained how the sample criteria intended to capture the diversity of the population of women digital entrepreneurs,

the purposive sampling method, and how participants were recruited to the study. The sample characteristics were outlined and details given on the processes of interviewing and transcription.

A statement was then made on the intended reflexivity of the researcher. It reviewed literature emphasising the importance of not only transparent, but critical reflexivity for feminist research methodologies in general, and then engaged in a critically reflexive discussion of this research process in particular. This involved exploring the inherent limitations of the interview method, the social positionality of the researcher, how this positionality may have influenced the processes of interviewing and analysis, and the limitations of the researcher's perspective on power dynamics with participants. This was followed by an explanation of the processes of coding and analysing the data via thematic analysis and critical realist retrodution. The next two chapters will cover the findings of the research, followed by a discussion of the research findings.

## Chapter 6: Structural Inequality in Women's Digital Entrepreneurship

In the methodology described in Chapter 4, a deepened understanding of intersectionality theory augmented by the conceptual tools of critical realism was introduced. It argued for the use of social categories as a starting point to analyse positionality, which focuses on broader social locations and processes, as well as complex notions of privilege and disadvantage, and not limited to notions of group belonging. This novel critical realist positional perspective is valuable because it complicates simplistic understandings of social categories while still preserving the usefulness of the categories themselves as starting points for investigation and analysis. Its attention to a macro-level perspective uncovers structural trends and constraints, while simultaneous attention to the micro-level reveals within-group diversity. This dual-level analytical approach informs the findings in this chapter and the next, which first attempt to identify key structural trends amongst the sample group, and then illustrate the effects of intersectionality and positionality upon its members. This chapter uses a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore the effects of macro-level positionality in the experiences of participants, as prompted by the original research question: *'How do social positionality and resource access affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship'?*

Popular rhetoric around digital entrepreneurship tends to portray the Internet and online environment as a level playing field. However, the findings from this research contradict this assumption. From thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), six key areas in which structural inequalities in social positionality and resource access manifested – in particular, those relating to the intersecting categories of gender, class and race – were identified in participant accounts of their experiences. These areas are: reasons for starting an online business, gendered divisions of online work and labour, homeworking and work-life balance, financial resources, know-how and keeping up, and racial discrimination online. This chapter introduces the significance of these areas and then offers detailed findings and initial analysis for each. It also draws attention to other bases for inequality, such as age, that arose in participant accounts. Textual evidence from the data is used to illustrate these trends and capture the perspectives of participants in their words, with quotations marked in the main text, block quotations indented and italicised and key passages highlighted in bold. The findings will be analysed in further detail and their consequences for existing theory discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

### 6.1 Reasons for Starting an Online Business

Some of the most striking manifestations of an unequal distribution of material, political and cultural resources were apparent in the various reasons given for entering into entrepreneurship and choosing to start an online business. These reasons can be sorted into four main categories: underemployment or unemployment, experimentation or hobby, dissatisfaction with current employment, and entrepreneurship in place of a return to the labour market after maternity leave.

First, approximately one-third of the respondents (R1, 3, 7, 12, 15, 17, 24, 25, 26) decided to begin a business due to unemployment or underemployment. At least two of these experienced redundancy as a result of the UK budget cuts and public sector closures that began in 2010 (R24, 26) and



disproportionately negatively affected women (Allen, 2013). In particular, Respondent 24 explained that discriminatory treatment due to race was more prevalent in the private sector than in the public sector, and that the job-seeking after redundancy process was 'traumatic', which is why she decided to try to begin her own business. During this period, two other respondents lost funding to the charitable organisations they ran and decided to replicate their organisations, one as a consultancy (R15) and the other as a community interest company (R25). Respondent 17's hair salon had gone out of business and she was receiving unemployment benefits. At the job centre, she was encouraged to start an online business by a representative from a now-defunct government programme, Getting British Businesses Online, who offered her a basic website, £200 seed funding, and some training. She had not previously considered entrepreneurship, but upon their offer she decided to try to start an online business. Respondent 3 became unemployed for the second time after the small start-up for which she worked eventually folded, so she turned her web design hobby into a business. The three youngest of these respondents (R1, 7, 12) had bachelor's degrees but were underemployed, either working at low-waged service sector jobs or volunteering, and began online businesses to supplement their income.

More than a quarter of the respondents were employed and began the business as a side project, hobby or experiment (R6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 18, 22). A number of these eventually left their positions to pursue their business venture full-time; for example, Respondent 14 was employed but took voluntary redundancy in order to start a social media services business. However, Respondent 13 noted that she would not leave her profession until 'business was booming', as it was 'too much of a risk to leave a well paying job.' Respondents 13 and 22 had families who pressured them into careers not of their choosing; their entrance into entrepreneurship was an attempt to pursue a line of work that they found more meaningful. Respondent 18 was earning a high salary as a consultant and decided to start a virtual transcription business as an experiment while on maternity leave. It was neither a necessary source of income nor a passion for her, and she never intended to leave her employment to pursue this venture full-time as it was not nearly as lucrative or fulfilling as her career. Respondents 8, 13, and 18 explicitly mentioned that they or their partners had sufficient income and savings to support themselves and their households without income from their entrepreneurial ventures.

Another quarter of the respondents (R2, 5, 9, 10, 16, 20, 23) were employed at the appropriate level for their skillsets, but in circumstances with which they were unhappy or frustrated. Respondent 9 worked for an SEO (search engine optimisation) company alongside her business partner. They were unhappy with how the company was treating clients, so they broke away and started their own company. Respondent 5 felt overworked with no time for her young family; similarly, Respondent 23 'felt exhausted' with her workload. Respondent 2 experienced unequal treatment due to race when she was passed over for promotion, and said that her job would 'never give her satisfaction'. A Black British woman, she described a constant struggle to see herself positively, in contrast to the way that other people perceived her:

*it has been difficult to see yourself as a professional, qualified individual and not to let the social factors or the perception that other people have of you get in the way. Once that happens, people say you've got a chip on your shoulder or something like that, but you're a human being*

*and you've got feelings and your own values about how people should treat you...Running my own business gives me the opportunity to say "I am who I am." (R2:BB:MM)*

Although middle-aged, she also described not being taken seriously, a theme only echoed by other, mostly white participants who were young, as an issue that she consistently faced in her workplace:

***Sometimes I used to feel as though I wasn't taken seriously and I had to prove myself beyond reasonable doubt, if that makes sense, that I actually knew what I was talking about and I understood what I was doing. And to prove yourself beyond reasonable doubt means that you have to work harder than the average person would. (R2:BB:MM)***

Respondent 16 noted that she was 'career climbing' but there were 'issues' with senior management, and so she was 'never happy'. Respondent 20 did web design for a large engineering company, but left to start her own business after her manager took credit for closing a major deal that she orchestrated. Respondent 10 had extensive experience and an editorial position in magazine publishing, but wanted the challenge and the experience of working for herself, so began her own magazine.

The final group (R4, 19, 21) had taken time out from work for maternity leave or to care for young children, and decided to begin a business rather than re-entering the labour market. Two of these women originally planned and desired to return to full-time employment. But in one case, the organisation was unprepared for her return (R21), and in the other, her husband asked her to stay at home and help with his web design business, so she gave up her position as a nursery manager to do so (R19). Respondent 4 had taken seven years off, and instead of seeking employment after such a lengthy break she decided to fulfil a long-held desire to have a business of her own.

When asked why they began an online business over a traditional bricks-and-mortar business, nearly all respondents cited lower start-up costs, lower overheads, and more flexibility with time and location of work as primary reasons. Being able to work from home was generally seen as a benefit, although numerous respondents cited hopes and intentions to open an office space or shop in the future. No matter how much or how little start-up funding they had or required, all of the respondents perceived digital entrepreneurship as a more accessible way to begin a business with less initial investment. Only one (Respondent 2) chose to begin an online business due to its potential for growth both now and in the future. The respondent with the most financial capital at start-up (Respondent 26) was the one who most strongly considered opening a physical shop, but she decided against it because the 'numbers didn't stack up', so she purchased an online franchise instead.

Evident in the above accounts are structural social inequalities dividing those who chose entrepreneurship as a means of income generation *because they perceived there was no better option* from those who perceived it as a hobby or chance to pursue their interests, as well as those who could have re-entered the labour market but chose entrepreneurship instead. There is a clear stratification between these groups, in which those who began a business due to a lack of options for income generation occupy a lower stratum. These participants have been most affected by and vulnerable to employment precarity and have the fewest material, cultural, or political resources, reminiscent of what

has been described as necessity entrepreneurship (Block & Koellinger, 2009). Those employed at a level appropriate to their skillset, but who were unhappy in their jobs, seem to compose a middle layer, where employment is present and available but unsustainable in its current form. Yet, this middle layer is not homogenous, as their reasons for dissatisfaction ranged from feeling constantly overworked to being generally unhappy with management. Those who could have re-entered the labour market but opted for an alternative means of income generation, alongside those who were gainfully employed, but began a venture for pleasure rather than necessity, tended to have had professional employment experience and a social position with access to more material, cultural and political resources as well as greater degrees of privilege. Those with sufficient family or partner support, alternative income sources or other forms of financial security should their business fail also reside in the middle and upper strata.

This evidence illustrates the within-group diversity and heterogeneity of the circumstances leading women to engage in digital entrepreneurship. It should be noted that intersections of race and class contribute to, but do not determine, the composition of these strata, which are evidently the result of a combination of factors, including age and experience, industry, and external considerations like the fiscal crisis and resulting contraction of the public sector. However, racism and intercultural challenges still complicate the experiences of Black and Asian women across the tiers, and present additional obstacles to their success. This will be explored further in later sections and Chapters 8 and 9.

## **6.2 Gendered Divisions of Online Work & Labour**

The structural effects of gender were present both in the participation of most respondents in lower-growth feminised sectors (Marlow & McAdam, 2012) as well as in their accounts of why they chose to enter into digital entrepreneurship. Most participants tended to occupy traditionally feminised sectors, such as health and beauty, fashion and accessories, children's products and services, or marketing services. Most considered women to be their primary target market. This corresponds with Jome et al.'s (2006) study, which found that feminised products such as gifts, jewellery, and baby products were among the most frequent products of women e-retailers. Only seven respondents worked in businesses that were identifiably gender-neutral, defined as being aimed equally at both women and men (Jome et al., 2006). Nearly all were micro-businesses, employing fewer than ten people, and most had networks of freelancers and contractors to save the expense of hiring employees.

Participants also tended to begin businesses in areas where they had skills or knowledge as a result of past employment experiences, or to address personal needs that they had identified as a gap in the market. Sixteen of the respondents started businesses that were related to work they had done as an employee in the past; of these, seven had worked in sectors considered traditionally feminine or feminised. Thus, a good proportion of respondents began women-orientated businesses as a result of having worked in related sectors in the past. However, eight of the ten respondents who entered sectors outside of their employment histories chose sectors related to feminine gender socialisation (e.g. make-up, skin care, and fashion) or their experiences of motherhood and childcare (e.g. school clothes labels, large size school shoes). Hence, the majority of participants starting businesses in sectors that were new to them began women-orientated businesses, illustrating the embeddedness of

entrepreneurship in an individual's life history and experience (de Bruin et al., 2007) of which gender socialisation is a key aspect. Despite the digital medium, most did not use it to begin either gender-neutral or technology-based businesses. All but one who did begin technology-focused businesses had past experience in the sector.

The accounts of a number of respondents provided useful insight into the gendered divisions of online labour. Respondent 3, owner of a digital marketing agency, revealed that aside from herself, those people employed to do the 'hard' technical work in her business, such as coding, were men, and that those doing more 'soft' work, such as graphic design and photography, were women. Respondents 7 and 19 both had male family members who built their websites for them, which they were then taught to run and update. This illustrates a gendered division of labour consistent with the literature. Respondent 18 gave insight into the continuity of offline gendered labour divisions into the online space when she reflected upon the fact that her virtual network of typists was composed completely of women, and that this had not changed in fourteen years:

*I had always anticipated that I would get more of a mix of gender in the business, contracting with me. No. All women. In fact I think bar one enquiry, **it's always been women who have enquired.** Which really surprised me because you suspect or you hope that by now you would have more men looking after children, and keyboard skills are fairly common...So every single person I've ever had in the network...is women. And that surprised me. And I don't know what that says really about the whole sort of typing services world. And how gender specific it is. But I suspect that it's a reasonable indication that **every single person in my network and also other networks that I've come across has always been women.** (R18:WB:UM)*

Her account suggests that the trend of women being overrepresented in offline administrative and secretarial positions has continued into its contemporary manifestations in the online environment.

#### *Women in Technology-Focused Businesses*

Consistent with the findings of earlier studies of women web entrepreneurs (Forson & Ozbilgin, 2003; Jome et al., 2006), the technology businesses in the sample were not high-growth product or application ventures, but instead were smaller, service-based businesses: for example, website design and digital marketing services. The gendered nature of this division will be explored further in Chapter 9. Although technology-focused businesses are expected to be more gender-neutral, since women are not characteristically associated with technology (Wajcman, 2010), they may face additional sexism when working in this sector, as one respondent noted:

***A lot of people do think that women in technology are a bit thick. And quite often at meeting I will say, I'm not just a pretty face.** I do know how to build a website. And people are a bit taken aback by that. (R3:MR:UW)*

A mixed-race woman in her thirties, from a working-class background, explained that she "started at the bottom" in every company in which she had worked. She was often assumed to be much younger than

she actually was, and continually encountered the need to have to prove herself and her skills, wherever she went:

*In every single business I've worked for, in my career, I've started at the bottom. I had to prove to them that actually I can build a website. (R3:MR:UW)*

Thus, it is clear that working online and even in the technology sector itself does not preclude the possibility of sexist treatment; in fact, it may be heightened in this sector because of the expected coding of technology as masculine. Respondents reported experiencing less sexism in more feminised industries, although it was still a frequent occurrence at networking events where men were present.

### *Sexism On and Offline*

Participant accounts had mixed reports on experiences of sexism, with some clearly naming it as an obstacle to business activities, and others expressing that they did not encounter it, and that they saw being a woman as perhaps even beneficial to their business. Despite evidence that women and girls frequently experience sexism and misogyny online in the form of cyber sexual harassment and abuse (Bartow, 2009; Bates, 2013; Doward, 2014; Jane, 2014; Megarry, 2014), respondents did not describe these kinds of experiences. However, it should be noted that nearly all participants reported the need for some degree of interpersonal interaction in their business activities, and that it was during these offline interactions that sexist treatment was most frequently encountered.

Although most respondents stated that they did not feel being a woman necessarily 'held them back' in business, for some, this may be partially due to the fact that women comprised their primary target market. For at least one respondent, this was intentional, as she chose not to target businesses in male-dominated industries because she did not feel she could relate to them:

*I wouldn't really target them as clients, a male dominated industry, because I like to deal with people that I understand. Businesses that I understand. (R14:WB:UW)*

For others, the fact that women were their primary target market was simply a result of the nature of their products. In these cases, it appeared that the feminised nature of the respondent's industry sectors enabled them, on the whole, to avoid sexist treatment from their clients. However, this does not guarantee they will not encounter it from others, such as suppliers, their web team, business contacts, people at networking events, or even members of their own family.

Age appeared to be a factor in some of the participant accounts of sexism and feeling dismissed by men, particularly so for those in their twenties and thirties. Respondents commented that they experienced differential treatment due to the fact that they were young women, or looked younger than they actually were, which often led to feelings that they were 'not being taken seriously':

*I think when I very first started out I wasn't sure that people took me seriously, and **they saw me as a bit of a little girl**, and they just, was just entertaining me really. I think now as the business*

*has grown, people are starting to take me more seriously... **You've really got to put your foot down, in order for people to take you seriously** (R12:WB:MM)*

Respondent 7 noted similar differential treatment, but found it difficult to attribute it to either her age or her gender:

*I think when they meet me, I sound and look younger than I am, like I always get ID'd and stuff, people are really surprised. **And you always get talked to like, oh, silly child, that's never going to work...But I'm not sure whether that's a gender thing or an age thing.** (R7:WB:P)*

Conversely, Respondent 9 expressed a belief that it was her age, rather than her gender, that caused people to question her legitimacy as a businessperson. This indicates the relevance of an intersectional approach to understanding the effects of such simultaneous processes of categorisation.

Others described the sexism they had experienced at male-dominated networking events, as a result of which they generally did not return:

*And I've been to networking events, and I just find – I don't know if it's me being paranoid, but if I say oh, I own [business name], they just think you're a beautician. It's like no, I do a website and then it's like oh, eBay. **So they just think you're new and you're stupid...I just find they don't take you that seriously.** (R1:WB:MM)*

The above also points to a lack of understanding on the part of other attendees to these meetings about digital businesses and e-retail beyond eBay.

One respondent, who was in her early thirties, suggested that the sexism was more prevalent from men of the generation older than she:

*I was at a networking event and one of the gentlemen there just assumed I was there to pour the tea out. And he was like, I'll have a cup of coffee please. And I said you can help yourself...I think that's more with age as well. It's a lot of the older people, a lot of older gentlemen do that really. (R12:WB:MM)*

Another respondent with twenty years of industry experience suggested that sexism was 'coming back':

*I went to the growth fund meeting and then I found out how much they were so sexist! I'm sat in the meeting and they made a comment about me being an LLP and my husband was a partner. And laughed about it...it was in a football club as well, and I was the only woman...I thought, that was happening to me twenty years ago when I was a manager. Things like that were happening to me twenty-five years ago and it's still happening round the boardroom table...what you're seeing is now, especially in Liverpool, you're seeing that disparity coming. **You're seeing the sexism coming back and you're seeing the way that they're treating women.** (R15:WB:MM)*

On the other hand, one respondent who reported feeling that the networking events targeted specifically at women were not beneficial either, due to the way the women attending appeared, in her mind, both overly emotional and to be placing themselves in a position of deficit:

*I'm a very logical, practical person...you know you have thinking and feeling people, I'm very much on the thinking side. If I hit a problem, I'll resolve it, I don't get drawn into the emotional side. And I remember this first networking event, everybody was kissing and cuddling each other and **the whole kind of session was like, aren't we these poor souls...I think if you're in that environment where everybody's talking to each other and saying we're in a lesser position, then you're going to believe that, and it's going to affect your belief system and your confidence. So I don't go to any of those.** (R26:BA:UM)*

Thus, in general, to the extent that one's business activities require interpersonal interaction with clients and colleagues, it is evident that sexist perceptions and unequal treatment are still features of the experiences of many women digital entrepreneurs. In response, some participants targeted women-owned businesses as clients, while others became more selective about what networking events they attended. However, at least one respondent felt that the women-only networking events she had attended were not constructive because of the way they represented women in business as inferior.

#### *Encountering Hegemonic Femininity and Masculinity*

On the whole, respondents tended to uncritically associate feminine qualities with women and masculine qualities with men. Characteristics such as professionalism and decisiveness were identified as masculine, and empathy, sensitivity, communication and understanding as feminine. The popular gendered assumption that women are better than men at communication and relationship-building underpinned the comments of multiple respondents, who explained that a key benefit of being a woman business owner was being able to connect with clients in ways they supposed a man could not:

*I suppose the female side might be that people feel they can build a relationship with me better. (R26:BA:UM)*

*I'm not saying anything about men at all, but I've got quite a friendly approachable way about me that sometimes men don't necessarily have. (R12:WB:MM)*

Acknowledging the sexism inherent to much of the business world, Respondent 26 elaborated on why she felt women's typical characteristics enabled them to compete, at least in small business:

*it is a man's world, in a lot of industries, but I think actually in small business world you can make yourself stand out and compete against men in the same, if not in a better way, because **you've probably got the empathy and that side of things that men might not necessarily have.** (R26:BA:UM)*

Another respondent, the co-owner of a digital marketing agency with a business partner who is a man, suggested that their partnership could benefit from this for the same reason. However, she also noted

the pressure she put on herself to perform an appropriate femininity, and that the roles that they play in the business seem to be gendered in a stereotypical fashion:

*I think I put more pressure on myself as a woman. Even so far as the way you dress, you sort of do yourself up in the morning, you've got to make sure you look presentable because there's a certain standard with women in the business environment...*

*But typically a woman would be the organiser, the sort of the person running the back end of things making sure everything's running smoothly, and I definitely fit into that, so maybe there is some truth in it, I don't know. (R9:WB:LM)*

One respondent likened working on her clients' social media projects to raising children, reiterating the gendered nature of work activities and perhaps suggesting a link between business performance and her performance of femininity:

*These platforms are like my babies. I look after them, I nurture them. (R14:WB:UW)*

Another respondent associated indecisiveness with women and decisiveness with men, explaining that some of the men with whom she worked did not take her seriously if she changed her mind or took her time making a decision. In these situations, she described the need to 'stand her ground' against the sexism she would experience, in this case, when making branding decisions:

*I just have to stand my ground...if I'd gone in from the beginning and said this is what the colour's going to be, there would be no argument, there would be no discussion. But because I've dilly-dallied a bit, men don't get that, that kind of, unsure things. **They like to make a decision.** (R23:BB:LM)*

She elaborated on how she had seen this kind of behaviour in her father, and how she believed a lengthy decision-making process was a source of 'frustration' for men:

*They're very much kind of, one track. My dad was like that. He was very much, if my mum couldn't make up her mind, he'd go mad that she couldn't make a decision. He was just like, choose that, and that's it. **Men seem to be like that, because I've not made my mind up, and it's frustrating for him.** (R23:BB:LM)*

She also noted that in order to problem-solve effectively, one may have to be both 'man and woman' simultaneously:

*...people might write in complaining about an article. [We have to] address it, deal with it, write back to them, say I acknowledge your viewpoints, we'll take it into consideration in the next piece we do...that sort of thing. Sort it out. Sort out problems. You know. **So you have to be a man, but a woman.** (R23:BB:LM)*



This respondent also suggested that one may need to use femininity to an advantage, but that there is a thin line between doing this and 'losing one's dignity'. She again described the need to strike the difficult balance between being feminine and masculine:

*Being approachable, cause sometimes women can be coming in really tough and hard, and it can turn people off, and if you come in too soft, it can turn people off as well. **So it's getting that middle ground of confidence, but still being human, and being a woman...And when you're talking to a man...you still have to be – you need your femininity to get what you want. But...without losing your dignity, do you know what I mean. You still have to be feminine but still be strong.** (R23:BB:LM)*

Respondent 20, a transgender woman, found that after transitioning she was able to use her new feminine appearance to obtain help from men in an online forum:

*[After transitioning] **I would just ask them stuff and they would just tell me the answer...Guys, it's just one of those things of nature and long may it continue, guys will do lots to help women.** (R20:WB:MM)*

It is evident in the above accounts that the virtual aspects of a business do not preclude traditional and hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity, which are central features of the offline social world, from shaping participant mind-sets and impacting upon their experiences of digital entrepreneurship. This will be explored in more depth in the discussion found in Chapter 9.

### **6.3 Homeworking and Work-Life Balance**

Reflecting the literature on homeworking and women's entrepreneurship, many participants spoke of choosing digital entrepreneurship with the expectation it would enable a better work-life balance:

***It makes it easier for women because they can manage home life, family life, and run a business from home.** They don't have to commute. You can pick up the kids from school and take them to their various activities and so on...it does allow you to have that time, you can work your job...fix the kids breakfast and so on. So it's so much easier for women to have an online business. (R16:BB:LM)*

Most of those who were mothers cited choosing digital entrepreneurship due to a desire to work flexibly around caring responsibilities. Tellingly, only one described the reconciliation of this tension as a feature of their experiences. On the contrary, the constant work of managing an online business encroached upon the time with their children they expected to gain by choosing entrepreneurship over employment:

*I gave up one high-stress job for time with my kids, and I'm just not having time with my kids. (R5:BB:UM)*

This was complicated further by traditional expectations that place childrearing as a woman's most important role. Respondent 22, a British Asian woman, said working from home when her children are there was her 'biggest challenge:'

*So that is the end goal for me, from anything that I do...To be here for my family. The biggest challenge for me now is they [my children] are here and **I feel that I'm not as constructive as I could be if I was working away from the house.** So that's my biggest challenge at the moment. (R22:BA:UW)*

Respondent 13, a British Asian woman whose husband's 'traditional' family did not support her entrepreneurial activity, was unable to convince them that working from home was still work:

*...they've tried to turn me away and say look, **leave it to your husband to bring in the money** and you don't need to do this, they couldn't understand my reasons for it, and even when working online at home, **initially at the early stages they would think, you're only at home, what work do you have to go to.** They couldn't understand that people work from home, they can run a business from home. (R13:BA:UM)*

As one of the few respondents explicitly focused on building a global, growth business, she also noted that motherhood made it 'difficult to start a business,' and that had she not had children, she might have been 'in a better position' and more able to travel for business:

***Had I not had children, maybe I would be in a better position because I would be up and down in London. But having a child makes it even more difficult; being a mum it's much more difficult to start a business.** (R13:BA:UM)*

In contrast, Respondent 24 noted that having a home-based business worked for her as a mother, describing it as 'a gift' in response to the area's danger and threat of racialised violence against her children:

*My sons, they were in teenage years. My son's eighteen so he was fifteen then. **And there was this time in London where a lot of black boys were getting stabbed. And I was actually, really...if there's one gift that trying to work for myself has given me, it's being here. At home.** While my children were going through that phase...one of the things that I consciously thought about in terms of working for myself, was the freedom of my time to mother my children now that they're going into manhood. (R24:BB:MM)*

Conversely, those respondents who did not have children perceived the flexibility of working online and from home as a key benefit that enabled the possibility of a good work-life balance, especially as compared to their past roles:

*...retail, sort of, in an actual shop was not for me. I think just that **it was too invasive for my personal life, and you had to devote your whole life to retail and to a store.** (R8:WB:MM)*

Yet, the lack of structure when working for oneself from home could lead to both a perceived lack of productivity as well as the desired balance not being achieved:

*I think one thing I do need is a more structured week. Cause I can be on Facebook at 11pm at night. **I need to have more of a work-life balance...to be a bit more productive with my time.** And that's something I need to sort of challenge myself on now and look at. **What does my working week look like and how I'm spending my time and is that actually the best use of my time...time can just be sapped and you haven't necessarily done anything.** (R8:WB:MM)*

Thus, it is clear that the ability to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance varied amongst participants; in general, mothers appeared to find it extremely difficult, while those without children found it more feasible, although still far from simple. This speaks to the structural issue that women still tend to be more responsible for childcare duties, and underscores the fact that simply working online and from home does not serve to relieve them of this 'double burden' (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). These findings also suggest that instead of easing work-related pressures and increasing flexibility, home-based digital entrepreneurship opens up new challenges arising from a lack of structure combined with a seemingly limitless demand for one's attention and energy.

#### **6.4 Financial Resources**

In general, access to financial resources was still relevant to entrepreneurial processes despite the online context in which trading took place. The ability to start up and sustain a business on very little initial financial investment (less than £1000) was limited to two main groups of respondents: those who were trading low-value, low-margin products (R1, 5), or those who were knowledge-based service providers with professional experience (R3, 9, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21, 22, 23). In contrast, the respondents who started with less than £1000, were attempting to trade higher-value, higher-margin products that required a significant investment in stock, and were not knowledge-based service providers, found their business models to be unsustainable. Respondent 7 closed her business after the first year, and Respondent 17's business, which she started with a government grant of £200, was in a state of stagnation, where she could not afford to buy new stock and yet was unable to sell existing stock.

Although it cannot be unequivocally related to social class, access to financial resources is understood to arise from one's positionality, which can constrain or enable access to existing resource pools. Therefore, respondents who were not knowledge-based service providers, tended to be located in lower socio-economic positions and to be situated in working-class or precarious class backgrounds. If they aimed to trade higher-value, higher-margin products, they faced structural obstacles to business development and success due to a lack of sufficient finance. Even the perceived low cost of entry of an online business was, in these cases, prohibitive, leading to what might be termed a 'structural impasse,' or a practical obstacle posed by actor positionality in social structures, beyond which a business cannot progress. Respondent 17, who had owned a hair salon in the past but whose current primary income source was unemployment benefits, repeatedly cited a lack of finance underpinning every business challenge she was facing, most of which were related to the obtaining of stock and a need for technical understanding and know-how.

*...there's so many different things that have to be done if you want to be successful selling on the Internet. I thought it was an easy thing but it's not. It's only easy if you've got money.*  
(R17:BB:UU)

The same respondent described confronting yet another structural impasse that emerged from being unable to afford sufficient stock, nor sell existing stock because of low traffic to her site.

Respondent 7 was of the first generation in her family to attend university. But like many young graduates, she had a degree but was underemployed. Even though her father, a web designer, created a transactional website for her, the minimum wages she earned at her part-time jobs created a significant structural obstacle that impeded her from being able to sufficiently fund her fashion design venture, which she would have pursued full-time if she had been able to afford it. Below, she explains how working additional hours at a low-wage job in order to fund the business resulted in not having enough time to run it, while more time spent working on the business meant that not enough money was earned to continue its funding. This constant struggle between money and time led to a significant structural impasse, which she described as a 'difficult balance to achieve':

*...finance was the other thing that was difficult at first. I funded mine through my part time job. And then I started to work full time, and I had the money to fund it, just not the time...it's a difficult balance to achieve.* (R7:WB:P)

Elaborating on the above, she stressed that the labour intensive nature of her business made it difficult to both run the business and work at the job that provided necessary income. She ended up closing the business after one year, stating that her 'heart was no longer in it.' But when asked if she would have given up her employment if she had a sustainable business model, she answered:

*Yeah. Yes. Definitely. My part time jobs have always been...a crappy job. They're just like service jobs and stuff, just to earn enough to get by...I think if you didn't have to work, you would be ok, probably. But it was trying to balance it with earning enough money as well, was really difficult.* (R7:WB:P)

As may be expected, participants who were able to successfully develop resource-intensive businesses with higher growth potential, particularly in retail, belonged to higher socio-economic strata, either new affluent workers, technical or established middle class. Typically, they had previously been employed in professional or management positions, and had access to more start-up funding, with £20-50,000 being the most frequently cited amount. These included businesses that required product formulation (R2), design (R13) and manufacturing (R2, 4, 13). However, even this amount was not necessarily sufficient: Respondent 8, whose vintage clothing business did not appear to be especially resource-intensive and who had access to £20-50,000 at start-up, still did not perceive that a website with her desired functionality was affordable. For this reason, she continued to sell primarily through Facebook.

Although not representative of a tendency, a counter-example to the assumption that digital entrepreneurship is necessarily low financial risk is found in the account of Respondent 2, a middle-

aged, middle class Black British woman who, when refused finance by banks, decided to use the money in her pension fund. In doing so, she risked her only source of future security:

*I went looking for it, I went to the usual business links, I went to [city name] business venture, I went to the banks, who refused me finance, I did – went everywhere really. I suddenly thought to myself, I have to think like an African. Because if I think like an African, there's no banks to go to...**how do I do it? I've got no money.** So basically, what happened was, during that process...I turned fifty. And I was able to actually **cash in a percentage of my pension** and that's actually what I used to initiate the business. **Imagine having to start a business, starting a business at fifty with a pension.** (R2:BB:MM)*

Contrary to popular rhetoric that focuses primarily on the Internet's potential to lower financial barriers to entry, finance was still a concern for online businesses that had passed the start-up stage. The passive generation of income from online sales, the end goal to which many e-retail businesses aspire, may not be actualised due to a number of factors, such as: a transactional website may be too expensive or difficult to run, there may not be enough stock on the website, the website, graphics, or photos of the stock may not appear professional or are otherwise ineffective, there may not be enough traffic to the website, and there may not be enough conversions on the website itself. Insufficient finance is a primary obstacle to businesses experiencing these challenges.

Additionally, a successful site is not static, but must be continually optimised for navigation by customers and discovery by search engines, a process usually requiring continuous financial investment. Participants who could afford website development described access to a significant marketing budget as crucial to its visibility:

***I've found that if you don't have significant [marketing] budget, you won't attract new customers.** So for example, if you're doing a Google advert and you only have £100, no one's going to see it. Cause other people are spending £1000 every day. **So you're competing with much, much bigger players. Whereas in a magazine... you'll be right there next to Lancome. It doesn't work the same way on the Internet.** (RLL:BB:UM)*

This implies that, the Internet does not produce the 'level playing field' it is envisioned to bring about, since bigger players, with more resources, are still able to dominate the landscape. From this participant's perspective, contrary to popular belief, the online environment may in some ways be less level, or more unequal, than traditional platforms.

Respondent 18, an upper middle class white British woman with an executive career in marketing and sales, used her personal savings to fund what she called an 'experimental' online business in professional transcription services. Like other respondents looking to keep costs down, she built the business exclusively with contractors rather than employees; unlike other respondents, she planned to retain contractors with no intentions of hiring them as employees. Even with these strategic cost savings and despite being exclusively 'virtual,' her business, like other small businesses, still faced the challenge

of finding 'cost-effective solutions'. She stressed that it would not have continued without cross-subsidisation from her other income sources:

*...it's very hard for small businesses to get cost-effective solutions. That's the other thing I think is really a problem...in terms of being able to market and to have all of the periphery around the business, accountancy skills, banking, legal advice, marketing and web-based services, it's really expensive...**It's only because I am able to cross subsidise from one business to the other that I have been able to keep this one going as long as I have.** (R18:WB:UM)*

This demonstrates important similarities between online businesses and other small businesses that are often overlooked in popular rhetoric on digital entrepreneurship, which tend to portray the online environment as a panacea for small business challenges and concerns, ignoring the issues it does not and cannot ameliorate.

## **6.5 Know-How and Keeping Up**

The possession of know-how, capacity to accumulate it, or alternatively, access to knowledgeable people who could transmit it, was a significant technological resource that was inherently linked to the resources of finances and time; as such, those who had it had significant advantages at every stage. Those who had sufficient finance and at least the initial know-how to begin their businesses appeared to face challenges primarily in keeping up with the online space, which meant understanding it and learning how to use it to their advantage. This also required making time to both run the business and stay abreast of rapid technological changes and developments. For example, Respondent 8, described above, who thought she could not yet afford to create an appropriate transactional website, was unaware of software enabling users to create a transactional website for free. Another respondent noted that learning to use new software and tools could be overwhelming:

*There's so many platforms. Sometimes it's overwhelming cause there's so much. (R24:BB:MM)*

Those who lacked in-depth knowledge of digital selling technologies and tools had to compensate for this by either self-teaching through research, paying for training, accessing useful network contacts if available, or hiring in the appropriate assistance. Those who could afford to pay for training did, while those who had the resource of time used it to learn as much as they could through independent research and seeking out advice from trusted sources. One respondent noted that the rapid pace of change online forced a process of continual learning in order to simply communicate effectively with website developers or other outsourced assistance:

*...it's constant learning and developing. Because the online space changes so quickly, one has to know, and **if you don't know, you cannot really work with anybody to tell them what you want because they will talk in a language that you can't understand.** You need to at least have your basics right, so you can help work efficiently with your web developer, your programmer, your team. (R6:BA:UM)*

This was confirmed by another respondent, who highlighted exactly why constant learning is so critical:

*Be willing to learn. **If you don't learn, you'll die, very quickly. And if you think you know it all, you'll die.** (R11:BB:UM)*

Another respondent, the co-owner of a digital marketing agency, confirmed this when discussing what she tells her clients:

*You need to get involved. You need to know what's going on. We need to tell you what's going on as well, it works both ways. We need to have that kind of relationship where we can talk to you about what we're doing and you understand it. **Because if you don't understand it, then how are you supposed to understand where your money's going?** It doesn't work. (R9:WB:LM)*

Thus, being unable to independently research on the web poses a significant obstacle to filtering through available information and using key information to one's advantage. This is clear in that respondents who expressed fear and insecurity about this aspect of the online space, yet were unable to afford training or skilled technical support, identified this as a primary barrier to business development. Respondents who described themselves as having 'no tech skills' or 'not technically minded' expressed difficulty in understanding and effectively utilising the online space, particularly in the earlier stages of their ventures:

*I've got no technical experience. I'm not very good with, you know, the Internet...So that hinders my progress. (R17:BB:UU)*

This tended to impede the growth of their businesses, resulting in them likely not being able to take full advantage of the possibilities for, as Respondent 13 put it, "experimentation and pivoting" offered by the web. At the next level up, actors who understand the online space, but are not professionals within it, described a state of 'multi-application chaos' in which they are utilising in a haphazard way multiple pieces of software with different functionalities that are not aligned with each other, and possibly losing information and opportunities as a result. Numerous respondents at a similar level of know-how commented upon the difficulty of making time for strategic planning, despite their acknowledgement of its importance:

***You get so tired of actually running your business, you don't ever reflect and evaluate on what's working and what's not. And how to grow, and that's something that's so vital and that's probably more important than anything else, isn't it. But you never sort of prioritise that, do you, but it's sort of important.** (R8:WB:MM)*

This is in stark contrast to other respondents who clearly stated that they had access to all necessary resources, or felt comfortable accessing the resources they might need, including business coaching that helped with long-range planning, or appropriate and affordable technical support.

Finally, amongst the key properties of the online environment are its expansiveness and its dynamism. Therefore, those who were able to recruit and employ an effective network or team of individuals to

assist them in the continuous learning required were much better positioned to avail of the Internet's powers for entrepreneurial activity. Disparity in access to financial resources featured here as well, for some participants simply could not afford this assistance, or were hesitant or uncomfortable with hiring others and processes of delegation, perhaps due to a lack of management experience in previous roles. One respondent explained why she would not want to delegate, even if she could afford it:

*I need to be able to know, I need to be able to function, I need to be able to know what it is I'm doing, what it is so that if there's any problems, I'm hands on. I know exactly what it is I need to do...Whereas if you just paid somebody to do that, that person doesn't turn up, then your business is lacking. There's problems. So I couldn't do it that way. (R17:BB:UU)*

As such, these individuals tended to be positioned at considerable disadvantage, especially as regards entrepreneurial growth.

## 6.6 'Whitewashing' on the Web

Despite the online environment in which interactions took place, whiteness still served as a privilege and political resource that is, by nature, inaccessible to entrepreneurs of colour. As a resource, it is clear how its absence shaped many decisions made by Black British and British Asian participants about how best to portray themselves online. They faced extra challenges when deciding how to represent themselves and their businesses in online profiles, branding and communications, in order to appeal to target audiences while minimising stereotyping, discrimination and racism. The notion of 'whitewashing' one's website, or keeping one's non-Anglo name, identity or physical appearance hidden in order to appeal to a wider market, arose several times. In one case, this led to a structural impasse wherein a Black British entrepreneur could not resolve how to include Black people in her marketing materials while still appealing to white people in her target market:

*As soon as you have it, the skin care line, there's a black face or a minority face behind it, it seems to be generally accepted that those products are for the black people. **So you have to kind of whitewash it in order for it to swing, which I'm not happy with. I see it happening and I see if you whitewash it you'll get more sales...** it still is very frustrating which is why I haven't really done much about it since then. (R5:BB:UM)*

Another Black British participant, with a Nigerian name, was asked by a business partner to whitewash her online profile in order to appeal to a wider market:

*...my last business partner...a white woman... said: 'I don't want to sound horrible, but do you think it would be better if we didn't put your profile picture up. Cause then people wouldn't see it. But then you'd have to change your name.' **So you'd have to change your picture, change your name, so you're a white person with a white name.** And she said, you know, **have a think about it.** (R24:BB:MM)*



She stressed that people do business with others they 'know, like and trust,' a saying repeated in conversations with several respondents, and noted achieving this favoured status with customers was necessarily harder to achieve due to the prevalence of anti-Black racism.

*That's really hard, because, **that whole barrier, to get over the 'know, like, trust,' I think it's harder for black people.** It really is. You say that, and people say, 'oh no, but we all get by, you should still be out there trying,' and all the usual pep talk stuff. Which is great, fine. I get it... But it's still true. (R24:BB:MM)*

Her account and other stories of 'whitewashing' illustrate how racist discrimination can result in the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital even in the online space, creating significant structural barriers and perhaps even impasses to gaining customers and growing their businesses. Ethnic minority entrepreneurs are forced to make difficult choices about self-representation online, knowing that if they represent themselves and their identities as is, without whitewashing, they risk inadvertently limiting their target market, which could be detrimental to their business. However, the alternative requires an intentional dishonesty and misrepresentation with which many people would understandably be uncomfortable. Instead, R24 refused her business partner's suggestion to whitewash, and said she would "go where the love is":

*go where the love is. Yeah, there are going to be people who will not do business with you 'cause you're black. But then there are going to be people who don't care. And so go with those people. (R24:BB:MM)*

Respondent 22, a British Asian woman, for a time changed her name to one that was more Anglicised, but eventually decided to 'embrace' her identity as an Asian woman. She noted that, unlike before, authenticity was now a primary aspect of her business strategy, and described her decision to stop whitewashing and to embrace her identity thus:

***So I took all the masks off, I put the little decoration on my forehead, the bindi, and I thought, you know, I'm an Asian woman, this is what I'm good at, this is what I'm going to do.** (R22:BA:UW)*

Respondent 26, another British Asian woman, pointed out that authenticity (or at least the semblance of it) was particularly relevant for service providers, because "people are buying into me as an individual...who I am." To convey this authenticity to potential clients and making herself 'look real', she uses her own picture and tells a story about who she is and why she is good at what she does. Although whitewashing did not come up in her account, it is clear that to decide to use an assumed name, picture, and backstory to create a similar online profile would be extremely challenging. Not only could it perhaps lead to emotional conflict, but it would be highly problematic for future business interactions, as the falsehood would have to somehow be perpetuated, if, for example, customers should wish to speak over Skype or meet in person, or if the entrepreneur wished to create a video of themselves to be posted online.

Other respondents echoed the need for and value of 'authenticity':

*It's not just about the hits anymore, or the likes or the followers – it's about being an authentic brand that people actually want to, you know, put their name to. And be seen with, that kind of thing. (R3:MR:UW)*

*I think the more you can get yourself and your personality into [your marketing], I think the more successful you're likely to be. (R26:BA:UM)*

There was, however, one Black British respondent who did not consider whitewashing her site – but neither did she share any images of herself as the business owner. Only by omitting information about her identity did she perceive it possible for her to remain 'hidden' online:

*...we know there are people out there, that will be racist or have certain stereotypes, whether it's out of ignorance or blatant racism, they prefer not to buy or trade with someone from particular background or colour, I guess, you know, **you're hidden, when you're on the internet.** (R16:BB:LM)*

Yet, although most of her customers were African or Afro-Caribbean, she was unable to reflect or target the majority of her customer base with these representations, as she stated she would have liked to do, because the selection of stock photos for her sector was limited to those featuring white women. Although it was unintentional, her site was effectively whitewashed. It seems, then, that even withholding information about one's non-normative identity, particularly when combined with a severe lack of diversity in stock photos, can still lead to the appearance of a white entrepreneur behind the business.

A decision to whitewash one's online business can be seen as a kind of enforced silence that requires entrepreneurs to remain mute about their true identities. It can be assumed that the stress and difficulty of having to maintain this deception across online platforms and over time will eventually take its toll. Yet whitewashing one's web presence did not allow participants to overcome or solve the problems posed by structural racism as may be assumed. Instead, it was a non-ideal coping strategy that could perhaps facilitate business activity in the short term, but could also be highly detrimental to the business and the entrepreneurs in many other ways. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of repercussions a business might suffer if whitewashing was used as part of a marketing strategy and one's true identity was eventually revealed.

In contrast, white British participants never considered the relevance of their own race to their business, and rarely, if ever, found it necessary to make important business decisions related to race or ethnicity. When asked if they had ever considered the impact of race or ethnicity on their experiences of business, most responded that they had 'never really thought about it.' When they did consider it, it was not their own race about which they were concerned, but instead such topics as cultural challenges they experienced when serving clients of an ethnic minority background, or the ethnic makeup of a pool of models, if they aimed to showcase diversity. White respondents were generally able to represent

themselves as they chose without worrying over the impact it would have on the business, and nearly all were comfortable with putting their names and faces online in connection to their businesses.

This points to essential differences between the processes of self-representation in which white and ethnic minority participants engage as part of developing their web presence. In general, Black British and British Asian participants had to expend considerable effort and thought in this process, and had to choose whether or not to make substantial changes in an attempt to lessen their 'markedness' and fit an expected norm, whereas white participants did not have to do so. If there were aspects of their identity that they wished to keep private, they could simply omit this information without repercussion to their business. For example, Respondent 20 explained why she is selective about publicising her identity as a transgender woman online:

*I'm somebody who's open about being trans, but at the same time it's not like I go around telling everyone. **Cause it's like one of those things, like why would you want to go around with like a tattoo on your head saying you're a lesbian or you're black or you're...do you know what I mean?** It's one of those things that you would bring into a relationship, whether that's a professional relationship or otherwise. **Because it adds value to the relationship, there's no point in just chucking it in there all the time anyway.** (R20:WB:MM)*

In this quotation, Respondent 20 places race alongside gender and sexuality in her list of things one may not wish to reveal unless it 'adds value.' However, what she neglects to note is that belonging to a marginalised race, unlike the other categories she mentions, is neither private nor concealable. It is, by definition, the possession of a marked body. Of the identities she describes, it is the most like a 'tattoo on your head' – ever present and visible. To hide it, even online, it must be either absented or concealed. The difficulty of this decision is overlooked by both Respondent 20 and Respondent 9, a white woman who suggested that ethnicity, alongside gender and class, is not a limiting factor in the online space if one only 'chooses' to portray themselves differently:

*You're not restricted by class, gender, ethnicity, because **you can portray yourself however you want, basically.** (R9:WB:LM)*

Here, evidence of white privilege (Maier, 1997; McIntosh, 1991) is present in the suggestion that the decision to conceal one's non-normative identity is uncomplicated and unproblematic, simple and easy to accomplish online. Yet the participants expressing these views have never faced the need to make this decision. The difficulty of the choice is explicated by the detailed struggles of Black British and British Asian participants to represent themselves and their businesses authentically while minimising their exposure to discrimination. It is worth noting that the only respondents who reported having access to all the resources they might need were educated, middle-class white women with professional and management experience as well as access to sufficient financial resources:

*I can't think of anything that, any resources that I need at the moment. (R19:WB:MM)*

*I think everything that I would need, I would be comfortable in accessing. (R8:WB:MM)*

## 6.7 Summary

The findings presented by this chapter effectively illustrate the ways in which digital entrepreneurship is nonetheless subject to the structural effects of gender, race and class due to their intersecting impacts upon entrepreneurial actors. The effects of race and class serve to explain much of the within-group diversity amongst women digital entrepreneurs regarding the resources they have available to them when using the Internet for entrepreneurial ends, and whether or not they are able to represent themselves and their businesses satisfactorily in the online environment. The effect of gender, specifically in the areas of feminine socialisation and gendered expectations of women, and mothers in particular, explains the feminised sectors of many of the businesses, the low number and service nature of the technology businesses in the sample, and the tensions expressed by many of the participants around homeworking and work-life balance. However, the effects of each category in individual lives are complicated by the effects of the others. Chapter 8 will look more specifically at examples of such intersections.

Evidence presented in this chapter challenges the popular notion that the online environment allows individuals to unproblematically transcend social hierarchies through invisibilisation of the entrepreneur in virtual space; in contrast, it points to ways in which interpersonal interaction is still a key feature of online businesses, and how race and racist discrimination especially are still present online. It underscores the perspective that the online environment is not a neutral space in which to conduct entrepreneurship, and instead reiterates the importance of entrepreneurial context and especially of resource access. These findings support the argument that experiences of doing business online are dependent upon not only one's endogenous characteristics, but also by a host of exogenous social and environmental factors that precede and precipitate social conditions and thus, enable or constrain entrepreneurial activity. Thus, they serve to critique and challenge the existing notion of the Internet as a neutral entrepreneurial space. The next chapter uses a critical realist analysis to look more closely at the online environment itself, and in particular, the benefits and challenges it presents to entrepreneurship. These will be used to identify the mechanisms that drive effective digital entrepreneurship, which the discussion chapters will analyse further and relate to the literature, as well as to the themes described here.

## **Chapter 7: Actualising Entrepreneurship in the Online Environment**

The previous chapter focused on the manner in which social positionality and unequal access to resources shaped women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship. This chapter will examine in more detail why higher social positionality serves as an enabling condition for the actualisation of the powers of people using the Internet for entrepreneurship. It will do this by analysing findings on the central challenges to entrepreneurship posed by the online space, and, using the stepwise framework suggested by Bygstad and Munkvold (2011) for critical realist retrodution, identifying and exploring possible generative mechanisms at work in this phenomenon. Critical realists posit cultural, class and gender factors as important contextual determinants of the outcomes of such mechanisms (Danermark, 2001); the intersectional approach adopted by this thesis suggests that these factors may interact with each other and produce additional emergent mechanisms in their own right. A critical realist retroductive method, then, may be used to help identify which categories in an intersectional analysis are the most relevant and should be foregrounded in data analysis.

The chapter begins by identifying the properties of the Internet for activities of commercial exchange. Informed by evidence from participant interviews, it explores the intrinsic and extrinsic conditions that are necessary for people to use the Internet effectively and take advantage of these properties, and to overcome the challenges the online space presents for entrepreneurship. From this analysis, it proposes key mechanisms at work on the social and psycho-social levels, and the relationship between them.

### **7.1 Properties and Uses of the Online Environment for Entrepreneurship**

From a critical realist perspective, things have inherent characteristics or properties which enable their specific powers, or what they are able to do; it is from this ensemble of things, properties and powers that events can occur (Fleetwood, 2009; 2011). The intrinsic properties of a thing endow it with the specific tendencies, or powers, that it has; furthermore, they are synonymous with the intrinsic enabling conditions of that thing (Fleetwood, 2011). Fleetwood (2011) argues that for each tendency, there are both internal and external enabling conditions, and internal and external stimulating or releasing conditions. Depending on which conditions are present, any tendency may exist in one of eight states, which he labels: exercised, actualised, prone, motivated, lapsed, realised in normal circumstances, realised in a closed system, and realised in an open system. Table 15 (Fleetwood, 2011) illustrates which conditions are necessary for each of these states to be achieved. That stimulating or releasing conditions are required to reach states 4-8 means that causal powers cannot be studied with consideration of context, which determines whether or not they actualise beyond states 1-3. Thus, a realist analysis requires attention to the social and technological contexts in which such powers unfold, which in this thesis is accomplished through consideration of social positionality and the dimensions of the typology of digital entrepreneurship.

**Table 15: Critical Realist Conceptualisation of Tendencies (Fleetwood, 2011)**

Moments in the causal chain	Denotation	Enabling conditions		Stimulating or releasing conditions	
		Intrinsic	Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Tendency <sub>1</sub>	exercised		x		
Tendency <sub>2</sub>	actualised	√	x		
Tendency <sub>3</sub>	prone	√	√		
Tendency <sub>4</sub>	motivated	√	√	√	x
Tendency <sub>5</sub>	lapsed lagged or late	√	√	x	√
Tendency <sub>6</sub>	realised in 'normal' circumstances	√	√	√	√
Tendency <sub>7</sub>	realised in a closed system	√	√	√	√
Tendency <sub>8</sub>	realised in an open system	√	√	√	√

Using this terminology, amongst the most important intrinsic properties of the online environment for entrepreneurship are its *connectivity*, or its ability to link any user to any other user via the platform of the World Wide Web, its trans-locational *accessibility*, its *instantaneity* and inherent dynamism, and its extensive *functionality*, or the continually expanding range of operations for which it can be used. These properties were ascertained from the statements of participants regarding why they chose to begin an online business over a bricks-and-mortar business, as well as about the benefits of working online. These may be said to comprise digital entrepreneurship's intrinsic enabling conditions. Extrinsic enabling conditions would include electricity, appropriate hardware and software, and a functioning connection to the Internet. If these are satisfied, then according to the chart above, an Internet-connected device on its own is all that is needed to arrive at a 'prone' moment in the causal chain of digital entrepreneurship.

However, it is the argument of this thesis that digital entrepreneurship requires more than the satisfaction of this first set of enabling conditions – it also requires that the corresponding stimulating/releasing conditions exist to facilitate entrepreneurial events. Whether this second set of conditions is satisfied is necessarily dependent upon users and use, alongside their access to resources and other social conditions. It is the interaction of the user with the device, as well as what resources are available for implementation, that determines whether all the conditions for digital entrepreneurship are met. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, there are a variety of barriers, both internal and external, to users that could prevent them from taking advantage of the ways the Internet can be used for entrepreneurial activity. Releasing conditions intrinsic to the user may be such things as search ability, technological competence, or business know-how, while external releasing conditions could include, for example, access to finance or connections to advantageous networks. If only the internal conditions are satisfied, the tendency could be motivated; if only the external, the tendency could be lapsed. Only when both intrinsic and extrinsic stimulating/releasing conditions are present can digital entrepreneurship be realised in normal circumstances. This section illustrates how barriers either internal or external to users could impede their powers to use the Internet for entrepreneurship from being realised, caught at an earlier moment in the causal chain.

Participants described a number of uses of the online environment that were instantiated by the aforementioned properties. These uses can be grouped into the following categories: financial,

spatial/temporal, technical and informational. From the perspectives of the sample group, the financial uses of the online environment include lowering costs of entry, financial risk, and cost of overheads, with the predominant cost eliminated being that of renting or purchasing space for an office or a shop. Labour costs could also be reduced as the online environment enables the hiring of contract or freelance workers across distance. Spatial/temporal uses included the ability to transcend distance to reach markets, and the ability for the business owners and employees, contractors or freelance workers to work from any location and at any time of day, enabling the assembly of 'virtual' teams. Technical uses included ease of experimentation and pivoting (for example, A/B testing), accessing online software for business management, and facilitating sales via transactional websites, thus enabling passive income generation. Informational uses included the ability to access the abundance of information available online for research and learning purposes, the ability to communicate both broadly and intimately with their market, and, via analytics, obtain detailed information about customer behaviour and preferences, and the ability to display information about oneself and one's business ventures across various platforms. In effect, this treats the online space as a relatively 'permanent' historical record. These properties and the entrepreneurial uses of the Internet they enable are organised in Table 16. Although this list is necessarily limited to the perceptions of the sample group, the list of uses generated corresponds with those described in existing literature on e-business and e-entrepreneurship, which has identified uses in the areas of information, communication and transaction (Kollmann, 2006).

**Table 16: Properties and Potential Uses of the Internet for Entrepreneurship**

<i>Property</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Uses</i>
connectivity, functionality	financial	lowering costs of entry , financial risk, overheads, labour costs
connectivity, accessibility	spatial/temporal	transcend distance to reach markets
connectivity, accessibility	spatial/temporal	anywhere, anytime working; 'virtual' team
instantaneity, accessibility	technical	ease of experimentation and pivoting
functionality	technical	passive income generation
functionality	technical	accessing online business management tools
functionality	informational	accessing information for research and learning
functionality, instantaneity	informational	market and customer communication
functionality	informational	obtain information about customer behaviour
functionality, accessibility, connectivity	informational	represent self and company; 'permanent' online record

## **7.2 Challenges to Digital Entrepreneurship**

Consistent with the argument that both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to attaining the stimulating/releasing conditions can prevent users from being able to effectively use the Internet for

entrepreneurship, levels of entrepreneurial activity online were unequally distributed across the sample group. Whereas some participants were able to use the Internet effectively for a wide range of entrepreneurial purposes, including such things as market research, tracking customer behaviour, A/B testing, and assembling a virtual team, others were extremely limited in their usage. In order to ascertain what the stimulating and releasing conditions for the wider range of activity were, participants were asked about the challenges they experienced when working in the online environment, and how, if at all, they were able to overcome them. The findings suggest that social positionality and resources are especially relevant to the usage of the Internet for entrepreneurship, as higher social positions and greater access to critical resources tended to enable participants to effectively overcome, or develop strategies to contend with, many of the stated challenges, and to use the Internet for a range of applications. In contrast, those with lower social positions and lesser access to resources tended to be restricted in their usage. If they lacked extrinsic stimulating/releasing conditions, their digital entrepreneurship could be considered 'motivated' (tendency<sub>4</sub> in Table 15); if they lacked intrinsic stimulating conditions, their digital entrepreneurship could be considered lapsed (tendency<sub>5</sub>). If they lacked both intrinsic and extrinsic stimulating conditions, their digital entrepreneurship could be considered prone (tendency<sub>3</sub>). However, these states were dynamic as they were subject to some degree of agency, particularly in the case of intrinsic stimulating conditions, which were the most likely to be developed with time and effort. Yet social positionality, resource access, and the know-how afforded by this combination, were nonetheless seen to be key stimulating and releasing conditions enabling actors to overcome many of the challenges to entrepreneurship that the online environment presents.

The reported challenges are mapped to the groupings of uses for the online environment: financial, spatial/temporal, technical, and informational, with the addition of a 'logistical' category, as seen in Table 17. The groupings, and the types of challenges they include, suggest more and similar challenges beyond those that were specifically discussed by members of the sample. Each group will be explored in turn, after which a critical realist retroductive model of generative mechanisms at work in this phenomenon will be offered.

**Table 17: Challenges to Digital Entrepreneurship**

<b>Financial</b>	Access to finance and investment High cost of marketing Cash flow problems Need additional income streams during start-up Finding cost-effective business solutions
<b>Informational</b>	Effective portrayal of company online



	Developing online marketing strategy Growing organic traffic Developing content Information overload Market saturation - visibility Hard to keep up with online space Fear of trying new things
<b>Spatial/Temporal</b>	International shipping/trading problems Customers cannot test/try on goods Managing customer expectations
<b>Technical</b>	Finding affordable and reliable tech support Not technically minded/low tech skills Overreliance on single platform Multi-application chaos
<b>Logistical</b>	Balancing online/offline work Overwork and time management Hiring and delegation issues

### *Financial Challenges*

Although it may eliminate the need for certain start-up and overhead costs, helping to lower the costs of entry, it should be noted that 'low' is a relative term, and that significant costs were still generally incurred at all stages of the business. In particular, for lower-income respondents with limited access to financial resources, even the perceived 'low cost of entry' of an online business could be prohibitive and lead to structural impasses beyond which their businesses could not progress. Costs of entry were generally lower for knowledge-based and professional services workers, who did not require the purchasing of stock, while e-retailers of larger or more costly products required significant investment in stock purchase or manufacturing equipment. Significant investments in stock are nearly always required to make an e-retailer's website look 'full'. New, Internet-specific costs are introduced as a result of

working in the online environment, many of which are recurring overheads, such as website maintenance, shipping costs, and the costs of implementing a digital marketing strategy, including services like search engine optimization (SEO), Pay-Per-Click advertising, graphic design and video production. Due to resource limitations, most respondents tried to keep their expenditure in their area low, recognising that it was entirely possible to spend tens of thousands of pounds on digital marketing services:

*If you go to a big agency, they charge you a lot of money that sometimes you can't afford. Sometimes they charge you thirty, forty, fifty thousand pounds. (R6:BA:UM)*

Some of the most significant early costs included website design and development, purchasing of stock for e-retailers, and the costs of training, often continuous or subscription-based, to understand the online space to assist with site development and maintenance and to take advantage of the tools that were available for business. Respondent 16, a shoe e-retailer, invested between £20-40,000 in start-up, spending thirty percent on website development and seventy percent on purchasing stock. Website re-design and re-branding also required significant financial resources, with another respondent citing an investment of £40,000 in a new website:

*We've just put about £40,000 into a new website, and it's supposed to be all singing all dancing, much better than we've currently got. (R4:WB:UM)*

She continued on to explain that it took two years to break even:

*The first year I saw we lost money, we put £20,000 in, more like £25K or something, and the end of the first year we were probably in £11,000 loss situation, I thought ok, well we got some of it back. At the end of the second year we broke even, ok well, maybe this is doable. (R4:WB:UM)*

Thus, the popular assumption that online businesses can be started with nothing more than an Internet connection and an idea is neither the norm nor the reality. On the contrary, for e-retailers like the above respondents, significant investment capital and supplementary income was needed. To obtain this supplemental income, Respondent 16 worked part-time in a consultancy role, and Respondent 4 relied upon her partner's income for the two years prior to breaking even.

### *Spatial/Temporal Challenges*

Emerging from its properties of accessibility and instantaneity, the Internet's promise to transcend distance to reach markets and to work from anywhere was in most cases only partially fulfilled. For example, e-retailers noted that customers still wanted a way to pick up, try on or test the products. They suspected that not being able to afford a physical location could perhaps be costing them customers:

*...they don't wanna pay postage, and they say can I come by and pick it up? Or they say do you have a shop where I can see it and sample it and test it? And then decide. And the answer to that is no, no I don't...**It's almost like you need both. But you need so much more initial money to do both.** (R5:BB:UM)*

*I've always said no to having a shop, because the overheads just straightaway are so high in comparison to what I've got now. I feel I am losing customers...So people who aren't prepared to shop online or can't make it to one of my fairs, I'm losing out (R8:WB:MM)*

One e-retailer addressed this by arranging fitting appointments in her home:

*I do private appointments at my home...there's a lot of demand from customers to go to, have I got a shop, they want to try on, can they pop in and try on? (R16:BB:LM)*

Respondents who were not e-retailers stressed that Internet communication, while useful, did not replace the importance of in-person meetings, which were still often required in order to initiate or close a deal or a sale.

*...although we may spend hours at our computer, and I guess a bulk of the work may be done in that way, quite often, to get somebody to say yes or to sign off on budgets initially, that still quite often arises from a face-to-face meeting. I think, I do still believe if you...need a certain thing to happen...it really really helps. (R10:WB:MM)*

Nor did it preclude the need for travel when sourcing stock internationally or seeking an overseas manufacturer of goods:

*I couldn't find any units in the UK so I decided to make a trip to China and go and find a factory there that would be cheaper. (R13:BA:UM)*

Additionally, the assumption that the Internet allows companies to easily 'go global' is complicated by the fact that e-retail businesses, from sole traders to industry leaders, still experience considerable difficulties with international trading. Respondent 4, who sits on a government advisory board for online business, and at the time of the interview, was developing strategies to enter the European marketplace, elaborates:

*...lots of businesses are online trading within the UK but they're scared of crossing borders...SMEs in particular, very few of them have done what we have done and set up foreign websites. And they were asking...why is that, and the big companies like Asos and Wiggle and M&S, even eBay and Amazon and all that, they've all said it's the cost involved.. Basically postage is a massive issue. Logistics of postage, the cost of getting experts to try to translate sites, and everything. (R4:WB:UM)*

Thus, despite the prevalence of the belief that online ventures can easily be 'born global', numerous challenges to international trading still exist, include such things as national product marking requirements, government blockages of popular websites, translation and shipping issues, many of which, while they may appear in literature on international business, remain poorly recognised in the entrepreneurship literature.

#### *Technical Challenges*

A number of challenges exist to the aforementioned technical uses of the Internet for entrepreneurship. The first are issues of accessibility, faced when there is a problem with accessing reliable broadband Internet service. There is often only one broadband provider in many areas, and if their service is unreliable, there may be no alternative. Additionally, respondents pointed out that there are inherent dangers to building a business on a platform that you cannot control – whether that is the web itself, or an application such as Facebook, which one respondent used as the primary sales vehicle for her goods.

Google was also identified by many interviewees as a key factor in all of their online business activities, and that the changing preferences and behaviour of the Google search engine had to be factored into account in their digital marketing strategy. The respondent with multiple e-retail sites noted that some of these sites had been created to diversify risk across her businesses, as she had experienced issues in the past with Google changing its algorithms and dropping her site in its rankings.

*...if you haven't built lots of streams of traffic, you really are exposed to a lot of risk.  
(R20:WB:MM)*

Similarly, the role Facebook played in the trading and communications activity of many respondents cannot be underestimated:

*[Facebook is] definitely a selling platform, selling, marketing, promotion, customer service, everything. So you've got a salesperson, a marketer, a customer services representative and a social media manager all tied into one. (R14:WB:UW)*

When asked about the effect of the external provider company making changes to such a vital component of the business, Respondent 14 continued:

*It's affecting the clients quite badly. Larger clients that have got budget to spend, not a problem to them – small startups, it is. **It's a problem to them and it's a problem for me.** (R14:WB:UW)*

Thus, if there are changes to or problems with key platforms that are essential to business operations, yet external to the business and beyond their control, it is clear that business activities can be detrimentally affected as a result.

Respondents who described themselves as having 'no tech skills' or 'not technically minded' expressed difficulty in understanding and effectively utilising the online space, particularly in the earlier stages of their ventures. This could hinder the growth of their businesses by preventing them from being able to take full advantage of the possibilities for experimentation and pivoting offered by the web. The ability to access existing and emergent online software for business management is complicated by the fact that, as respondents noted, introducing new software into business processes is largely a process of trial and error.

*I've gone through so many task management systems that it would beggar belief if I actually wrote down how many... **What happens is sometimes you don't know realistically how something's going to work until you're actually in it and using it.** (R21:BB:MM)*

Experience working with technology, particularly in roles that required an understanding of coding and web development, were useful sources of both know-how and confidence in such circumstances. When confronted with a technical problem, they could experiment and ‘work it out’:

*...[working with code in an IT role] helped, it gave me the confidence to know that I could do it if I needed to, if that would be something I wanted to go into, whereas now the website I’ve got does require a bit of coding, so although I’m not great with it, I can work it out. (R1:WB:MM)*

Thus, actors who have very little technical know-how, or the digital literacy needed to research the online space, experiment with software and make effective decisions based upon this research and experimentation, are likely to be significantly disadvantaged. At the next level up, the same respondent mentioned above, with enough know-how to understand the online space but not at a professional level, described a state of ‘multi-application chaos’, such that she was haphazardly utilizing multiple pieces of software with different functionalities that were not aligned with each other, and possibly losing information and opportunities as a result.

*The software that I currently use in a very chaotic way...they have a technical term for it, well, an in-house term, they call it multi-software chaos, or multi-application chaos...I pay all this money for various different softwares...I need to address this [and] be more strategic in what I’m doing. (R21:BB:MM)*

The passive generation of income from online sales, the end goal to which many e-retail businesses aspire, may not be actualised due to a number of factors, including: a transactional website may be too expensive or difficult to run, there may not be enough stock on the website, the website, graphics, or photos of the stock may not appear professional or are otherwise ineffective, there may not be enough traffic to the website, and there may not be enough conversions on the website itself. While overcoming these problems did require strategic planning and could not be addressed simply by “throwing money at them”, insufficient finance did pose a significant obstacle to businesses experiencing such challenges.

### *Informational Challenges*

A primary challenge to using the Internet for information-gathering was the process of understanding the online space, and keeping up with it as new functionalities, tools and platforms emerge and become popular. The ability to teach oneself or to find the necessary information online becomes increasingly important. All of the respondents who described themselves as self-taught with regards to technical skills and understanding stated they were able to accomplish this as a result of independent research, trial and error. Thus, a lack of skills and confidence in independently researching on the web poses a significant obstacle to filtering through the masses of information available and using key information to one’s advantage. A degree of fluency in the English language is also required, as a majority of information on the web is in English and translations are not always available. Also, many respondents noted that with an online business and particularly as a sole proprietor, so much time was consumed in day-to-day processes that very little time was left to look at business development, meaning that new developments and tools may often be overlooked.

Another significant challenge was that of visibility on the web. In order to reach their target markets, companies must find ways to cut through the “noise” (Terranova, 2004) of a saturated online space, and communicate effectively. Attaining visibility online and increasing site traffic and conversions were some of the most cited and significant challenges reported by respondents. Often, this visibility is linked to financial and temporal resources, as online marketing has high costs in terms of both money and time.

*For the majority of people it's going to take a mixture of money and time [to become visible]. There's not really a way of kind of fast-tracking all of that. (R20:WB:MM)*

Respondents with little experience doing business online expressed their surprise at the difficulty and length of time it took to become visible:

***In my ignorance I thought once I got the website up I assumed people would just find me...it took, before I started getting recognized and sales coming in, probably about 4 or 5 months.***  
(R16:BB:LM)

Those with the most experience of entrepreneurship in the online space stressed how different their experiences today were to when they first started online businesses in the early 2000s, and how since then the level of difficulty and complexity of running an online business has greatly increased, as have the costs.

*A lot of it's now driven by Google algorithms, PPC was the basis of your online marketing back then but now it's too competitive so you need a strategy which combines blogging...there's so much more to online marketing now. In '05 it was a lot easier just to get a domain, to place yourself. It was a simple SEO process ...you could pay 500 pounds a month and that's how we got the website started and it was just already on the first page within 3 months...now, it's so much more complex. (R13:BA:UM)*

They described increased saturation and information overload as two of the key contemporary challenges of digital entrepreneurship differentiating it from previous years:

***I think pretty much every industry now on the web is completely saturated.** You know, there's thousands, if not millions of companies around the world that are trying to do the same thing...it is incredibly difficult to get out there and get seen. (R9:WB:LM)*

Finally, one respondent pointed out that despite the importance of visibility, it does not on its own ensure profitability:

*One of the biggest challenges for new ventures and new entrepreneurs is visibility right now... when I first started websites, we had a lot less ways that they were discovered. ...there's so many more sites competing to be visible within those search engines, it takes longer and you may have to work harder at it. And at the same time there's all the noise that comes from things like social media...**they can be quite time consuming because they will raise somebody's visibility...but they don't necessarily raise your profitability.** (R20:WB:MM)*

Of particular concern when using the Internet for informational purposes were the feelings of fear and insecurity that some respondents expressed. These feelings impeded processes of learning and experimentation in which they should be exploring new tools and how they could benefit the business. Respondents who cited nervousness, shyness, or fear of aspects of the online space spoke of simply avoiding and not engaging with those areas or platforms, preventing them from availing of many potential informational uses. These respondents cited a number of challenges in the area of conveying information and communicating with the market. For example, rather than considering it a tool, R17 was insecure about the fact that the Internet can serve as a “permanent historical record”, and did not engage with social media platforms for fear of “saying the wrong thing.” R8 explained that she did not feel confident with writing and developing online textual content for her blog, and so posted on it only very rarely, while another said she knew that certain online platforms would be well-suited to her business, but because they were so unfamiliar, she had to really “be brave and overcome her fear” in order to begin to use them. The self-reinforcing effect of these attitudes towards the online space will be explored more in the section below on mechanisms.

As discussed in the previous chapter, respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds often cited particular challenges when exploring how to portray themselves and their business online, how to appeal to a target market, and how to look professional, genuine and trustworthy. Some of the aspects of these choices included such things as branding, presentation, language, pictures of the owners, and finding appropriate stock photos to represent the customers with whom they were aiming to communicate. Issues of intersectionality were evident here: despite having extensive technological know-how and the human capital of higher education and professional experience, whiteness proved to be a key enabling political and cultural resource that these individuals were unable to access.

#### *Logistical Challenges: Overwork, Hiring & Delegation*

The notion of anytime, anywhere working implies an actualisation that features increased flexibility and the easing of a workload, as it can be done continuously rather than tied to a single location or schedule. However, impeding this actualisation is the increase in expectations for entrepreneurial actors to be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This heightened expectation tends to increase workloads and commitments. Also, the continual presence of the online environment, accessed through laptops and mobile devices like smartphones and tablets, combined with the raised expectations of customers for immediate responses via social media and e-mail, leads to the sense that one’s work is never done, and to difficulties in balancing online and offline work. Respondents spoke repeatedly of ‘exhaustion’ and noted how being a sole proprietor posed significant limits to growth:

*I do spend quite a lot of time on the admin and Internet stuff at the moment... I’m exhausting myself trying to do everything really, so I’m exhausting myself and I do work very long hours.  
(R12:WB:MM)*

*With one person running a business you’re limited on how much you can actually grow, and how much earning potential you’ve got. (R8:WB:MM)*

A typical response to such situations is to advise the individual to seek outside assistance. However, despite the perceived potential of the ease of hiring a virtual team, this was still a challenge for respondents who cited a strong need for control or an aversion to delegating work to others. For some, this aversion came from unsatisfactory experiences working with interns or employees in the past:

*I had a work experience girl last year. She was awful. I had to sack her. And she's free. She did a degree, and she couldn't spell for anything. She sent an email to the editor of a really high magazine that had six mistakes in [sic], and the website address was wrong. (R1:WB:MM)*

For others, this emerged from a perception that delegation would hinder their acquisition of critical knowledge and information. Others would have liked to hire technical assistance but could not afford to do so. Thus, it is apparent that the mere fact that the online environment enables virtual working does not ensure this outcome. On the contrary, there are a number of individual and social-level factors that can pose obstacles to the successful hiring of a virtual team.

### **7.3 Strategies for Overcoming Online Challenges**

As the thematic analysis of the previous chapter illustrates, participants who overcame many of these challenges were able to do so primarily as a result of three main strategies: self-teaching, building and calling upon personal and professional support networks for information, and enlisting and delegating others (volunteer, freelance, or employees) in business processes. It follows, then, that the ability to enact these strategies depends upon three preconditions, or life circumstances, being in place: first, having the time and the initial know-how necessary to engage in self-teaching strategies, second, having access to such useful networks, and third, the willingness and capacity to delegate work. Findings in these three areas will be explored in this section.

In addition, as illustrated in Chapter 5, participants had to have access to sufficient financial capital for business development, and had to be able to make themselves and their businesses look authentic and trustworthy online. The availability of additional income streams enables experimentation in the way respondents describe in this chapter, using trial-and-error as a primary means of entrepreneurial learning, *without the pressure of having to turn a profit immediately*. At the same time, having a normative identity facilitates the process of positive online self-representation, eliminating the need for 'whitewashing' as described in the previous chapter. These two circumstances, plus the three above, form the basis for the enabling conditions that will be discussed in section 7.4.

#### *Self-Teaching Online: Having Time and 'Having a Go'*

The online environment in general, and the World Wide Web in particular, is characterised by the wealth of information available, and by the dynamic nature of its content – stores of information are constantly being added, updated, and growing. As such, the confidence and ability to continually research independently, discern useful information, and teach oneself new understanding and skills are critical to the effective use of the web as a tool for entrepreneurial activity. Respondents unanimously



agreed on the necessity of this skillset. One respondent's account of her self-teaching process is described as a series of steps:

*...a few weeks ago, I suddenly go, "Oh, I haven't done search engine optimization for a while," so I looked into it and got loads of reports, printed out what I needed to do. And half of it I'm going to have to spend quite a lot of time on because I haven't got a clue what they're on about, and other's I'm like "Ooh, that's just an easy thing, I'll just change that." **It's just progression really.***  
(R1:WB:MM)

Her listed steps include "looking into it," or the initial searches performed using keywords and search engines, "printing reports," which means discerning useful information from the vast amount of information returned in the searches, and studying this information in-depth and over time to understand "what they're on about".

Respondents noted that a fundamental decision arises when encountering new information on the web: to either learn it yourself or outsource it. Respondent 13 points out that the "all the information is available on the web, which makes it a lot easier," and that it is down to the individual to either "research more into it or outsource to somebody who can deal with it." However, as noted in the previous chapter, even when outsourcing, you must learn enough about the space and what you hope to accomplish so you can communicate effectively with your team (Respondent 6). For those who do not want to outsource, or cannot afford to, extensive amounts of time must be expended in "learning how to do that sort of thing," as Respondent 18 explains:

*I think really it was trying to find for myself, cause I didn't want to outsource all of my web design, I didn't want to outsource all of my web marketing, so I spent an awful lot of time learning how to do that sort of thing for myself.* (R18:WB:UM)

This indicates that spare or free time is a key entrepreneurial resource that enables processes of self-teaching. A number of respondents (e.g. 18, 21) explained that they started their businesses while on maternity leave, which offered them valuable time as well as financial resources. Time is a key requirement because this type of learning is done not only by rote, but also experientially, or learning-by-doing:

*In online stuff, it's like teach yourself, books, articles, just teach yourself. People learn what social media is about by really exploring it, doing it, asking the questions.* (R24:BB:MM)

Saving money is also often a concern that leads to self-teaching strategies. One respondent highlights the importance of Google searches in her learning processes, explaining that it allows her to learn and save money simultaneously:

*I'm a Google freak. I go on Google, what they've done. And then I learn how they've done it. Instead of someone charging me, to, cause it's expensive a lot, so I kind of see what the marketing experts, what's that, a hashtag, and that's how I built it up.* (R15:WB:MM)

Others sought out and purchased subscriptions to training courses on specific areas, but noted that at the speed at which the online environment advances, she must engage in independent learning daily in order to stay abreast of industry developments:

*I still do training every day. Every single day. Social media moves so quickly, that there's always something new coming out, there's always a new app, there's always a new, something, something else. (R14:WB:UW)*

Again, fear of trying new things online appears to be a barrier to engagement with the online space. In order to learn, respondents describe “not being afraid”, “having a go”, and “learning as you go along”.

***A lot of people are a bit afraid of the internet** and maybe the reputation you could get from it, or that they're not 100 percent sure on how to blog or how to do this, I think it's just – give it a go. (R12:WB:MM)*

The prevalence of “having a go,” trial-and-error, and other experimental learning methods that tend to require a level of comfort with the tools used underscores the importance of existing experience and tacit knowledge of the online space in contributing to specific technological know-how. This is reflected in Respondent 7's comment that: “*It was trial and error, and **the more you use it, the easier it gets.***” The self-reinforcing nature of this know-how and unequal social distribution of the experience and knowledge that precipitate it will be examined in more detail in the sections on enabling conditions and mechanisms.

#### *Personal Networks: ‘Making The Right Contacts’*

The importance of personal networks in facilitating the development of their ventures was underscored by many of the respondents, who called upon existing networks for general business advice, tech support, and help with problem-solving. While family members often offered immediate technical and logistical support, the most useful networks tended to be others who had business experience. Higher-ranking networks, or contacts in senior roles at large companies, were seen as especially helpful. One respondent described her access to a network of business owners as “lucky”:

*I was very lucky, **I have a good network of people that either have their own businesses or worked in businesses**, and being able to call on them. (R2:BB:MM)*

Another stressed the value of speaking with other business owners, including her company's clients:

*I think the best thing you can do is just talk to other business owners. Even our clients, I mean we've had in-depth conversations with our clients about running a business and you know, what to look out for and that kind of thing. (R9:WB:MM)*

Initial personal networks consisted of immediate family members, often providing technical (e.g. building a website) or logistical support (e.g. packing and shipping orders). Wider personal networks often consisted of people whom respondents knew from their time in previous employment. Some even

obtained employees through this network, as it enabled them to hire individuals with whose quality of work they were already familiar:

*In terms of the core team that helped with the magazine, **again I think my previous roles were a real help in kind of pulling together the team that I wanted.** (R10:WB:MM)*

*I've either worked with them in the past, one is an ex-boss, worked with in the past, I've trained them somewhere in a job role, **so I know the quality of the work and I'm happy to have them work for me.** (R3:MR:UW)*

A combination of industry experience, and the associated reputation amongst a network, enabled Respondent 10 to be "comfortable" when meeting new contacts, and in how she is perceived by others:

*I get a lot of word of mouth recommendations so quite often...so that always helps in terms of initial perception. **I think working within the field that I do, because I've built up kind of a degree of experience and I suppose, some degree of reputation in that field, that I do tend to feel fairly comfortable when I'm going out to meet new contacts.** (R10:WB:MM)*

Higher-ranking networks were described as particularly significant for accessing sound business advice. Respondent 4, a member of a governmental task force on e-business, described this network as "really useful" because of the way it enabled her to ask questions of "people that are quite high up":

***...you get to meet people that are quite high up in the other businesses. To me that's really useful,** cause I can then drop them a line on Linked In and go listen, I've got a problem, have you ever had this problem before, how would you solve it, do you have any suggestions, could you help me out? And because I'm a small business and I'm not in direct competition to them, they're quite happy to give me advice. (R4:WB:UM)*

Similarly, Respondent 6 found having access to classes and professionals on the Google campus extremely valuable for her technical learning processes, as well as those of her employees:

***I've gone to the Google campus a lot for classes, that, you know, help you code, they help you understand SEO,** or help you, you know, they have the professionals that come there and they talk about their journey and what they learnt from it, so going to those kind of events. Meeting, you know, people who've created apps, I've also sent one of my employees to these kind of workshops so that she can learn as well. (R6:BA:UM)*

Respondent 15 intentionally reached as high in her networks as possible to obtain support for the launch of her business, as she saw value in having people with "clout" and "big names" acknowledge her company opening:

***We had guest speakers, one of the major women councillors in the city who had worked with me, and a man who had mentored me who was the regional development for the Council of Ethnic***

*Minorities. So we had some big clouts coming to the launch, cause I realised I needed to have some big names. (R15:WB:MM)*

Significantly, what was continually emphasised was “making the right contacts,” or the value not of an entire network, but of *key contacts* within a network. However, if these key contacts were not already known to the respondents, the process of how they were to be obtained was not so straightforward. It was described by some as somewhat random, necessitating an attitude of “being open with people” and talking about your business to those you meet in person. The importance of these offline networking skills, and building the appropriate networks in which to use them, was reiterated by many:

*It's just basically making the right contacts. I can't stress how important that is. It's ok being behind a computer, eight to nine hours a day, but you actually have to get out there in the real world as well and meet people and speak to people. (R14:WB:UW)*

Respondent 6 described this process of developing and learning from key contacts as “a constant effort, while Respondent 4 attributed making the right contacts to luck and the ability to “ask for stuff”:

*I think I found a few contacts and it was just luck. A lot of it is luck that you meet the right person at the right time, and you ask questions, and you ask for stuff. (R4:WB:MM)*

In contrast, respondents who had access to primarily lower-ranking networks did not report reliance on key contacts, but instead described their attempts at trying to build a network of key contacts that did not yet exist. These contacts were unlikely to belong to higher social strata, as they included people who they encountered on a daily basis and who thus tended to be in similar socio-economic circumstances:

*I realised quite quickly that networking was the key. And especially for a small business, the more people that you meet, the more people you can tell who you are and what you do. And one thing that they said on one of these courses that I came on was they challenged you to tell 5 people a day...who didn't know what you did. Even the person who was at the till. And one day I did actually say to someone, she was starting a conversation with me, and I said, “Do you know that just I've started my own company?” And she just looked at me like I had 3 heads. (R3:MR:UW)*

*I've started up a business networking forum. And we've had our first event I think three weeks ago, and...about seventeen people turned up. And it's just a matter of getting like-minded businesses, people in the same situation as myself, unemployed, or self-employed, you're looking for work, you're looking to get your business up and running somewhere along the line, but finance is very difficult. (R17:BB:UU)*

What is evident here are the impacts of socio-economic position on network access. As higher class rankings tend to provide access to more effective business support (Anderson & Miller, 2003), whether or not an individual's networks are higher or lower-ranking can influence their access to key contacts that are useful for business development, even in the realm of digital entrepreneurship.

### *Delegation: A Key to Growth?*

Within the sample group, there was a clear delineation between people who were willing and able to delegate work to other people, and those who did not wish to or were hesitant to do so. However, those who were not able to delegate some processes encountered difficulties in scaling up their businesses, while those who did noted that this was an important step in being able to grow. Notably, those who were most comfortable with delegation had worked in management positions in the past, and so it could be assumed that their experience with this aspect of management facilitated processes of delegation in their entrepreneurial ventures. Social class is thus a consideration here, as those who had not previously held management roles due to their socio-economic positions were at a disadvantage.

Those who avoided delegation cited both financial limitations (could not afford the help) or issues of control (wanting to retain control of their business processes):

***I know if it's a really big thing that could cost me, then obviously I will get someone in. If it's something, like you know, really important, then I'll get someone in. But generally that's only the design side of stuff. (R1:WB:MM)***

***...that was the frightening bit, I suppose, having to – placing that knowledge and expertise in someone else's hands and me having very little knowledge about how to go about it. But it was frightening when things start to go wrong, I'm not very happy, and being a sole trader, it's who you go to, to access information and get that support which is very limited when you're out there. (R16:BB:LM)***

Some cited a lack of experience with delegation and “not knowing the procedure” as a barrier to seeking help, despite knowing it was needed and being able to afford it:

***...just the fact that I've never outsourced anything before, so I don't really know what the procedure is, how you go about it, finding somebody, or anything else, really. (R19:WB:MM)***

In contrast, those who were able to afford and were comfortable delegating appeared to adopt a more relaxed attitude towards the process, including it in their strategic planning:

***I think there are things like that that I'm happy to delegate, really. So I think that having the knowledge base that I personally need for the development of the magazine, I'm happy on that front. (R10:WB:MM)***

Respondent 21 pointed out that delegation could be a more economical choice than doing it herself:

***it's actually more economical at times in fact for me to pay somebody if I can find the right person to do that to do that job for me. Cause why I am I going to spend a week faffing about on something when somebody else who's actually professional at it and get it done in quick time. (R21:BB:MM)***

She stressed that growth meant “finding a way to involve others”:

*But obviously as a business, you realise that you have to try to find a way to kind of, you know, delegate and involve others. **Otherwise, you can't really grow.** (R21:BB:MM)*

This was echoed by Respondent 26, who had put together a virtual team and noted that outsourcing was critical to growth processes. She explained that in time, she hoped to bring her virtual team together in a physical office, so she could “start stepping back”:

*...ideally what I'd like to have at some stage is an office with a team, somebody that's ringing and making sales calls, someone else that's doing all the stuff on the Internet for me, and maybe a marketing consultant, so when I go and do marketing support, **someone else that can go in and do that as well so I can start stepping back. That's the only way you can grow your business, isn't it.** (R26:BA:UM)*

Thus, there seemed to be an important difference between individuals who could not afford to delegate or avoided involving others, and those who were equipped with the financial and cultural resources necessary to outsource work and hire help when needed, leaving the latter evidently significantly better positioned for growth.

#### **7.4 Enabling Conditions**

Building upon the critical realist methodology described in Chapter 4, it is argued that the presence of key stimulating or releasing conditions increases the likelihood that actors will be able to avail of the full range of uses of the online environment for entrepreneurship. This chapter and the previous identified five circumstances that enabled participants to overcome many of the central challenges to digital entrepreneurship; these include:

1. Time and initial know-how to self-teach online
2. Access to useful business networks and key contacts
3. Willingness and capacity to delegate work
4. Access to sufficient financial capital for business development
5. Possession of a normative identity

The first three were explored in the previous section, while the final two were key themes of the previous chapter; their lack presented structural impasses beyond which individuals found it difficult to progress the business. These five circumstances reflect the arguments of Chapter 3: that the access to material, cultural and political resources determined by positionality will be inherently tied to one's ability to effectively use the Internet for entrepreneurship. Theoretically re-describing them in these terms results in the following:

- **Material Resources:** finance, time
- **Cultural Resources:** tacit knowledge, e.g. digital literacy, technical competence/know-how, self-teaching, delegation and management skills
- **Political Resources:** influential networks, normative identity privilege

Re-grouping the above into social and individual-level factors results in the following:

1. **Social level:** access to resources
  - Material: financial, temporal
  - Political: influential networks and normative identity privilege
2. **Individual level:** tacit knowledge
  - Cultural: digital literacy, technical competence, self-teaching, delegation and management

The above theoretical re-description indicates that the primary conditions needed to enable people to use the Internet to support and benefit entrepreneurial activity are *social resource access* and *individual know-how* of various kinds. The generative mechanisms behind each of these conditions are theorised in the next section. The following two chapters will discuss how social positionality serves to set these enabling conditions in place, and relate these findings back to the literature on entrepreneurship as well as on positionality and its impacts on life chances and conditions.

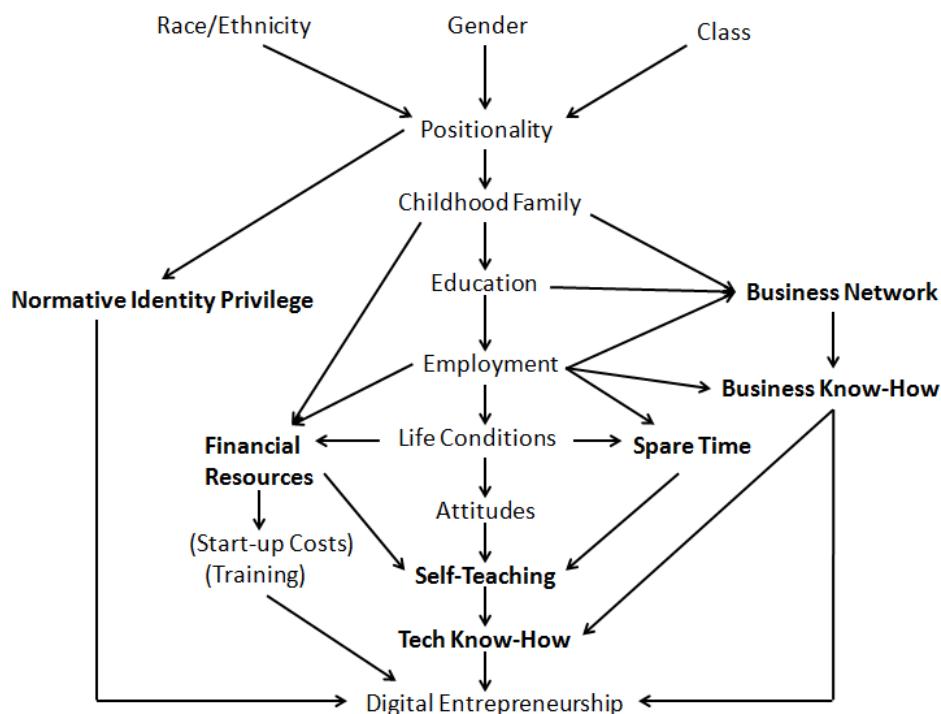
## 7.5 Mechanisms

This section outlines the generative mechanisms at work in the phenomenon of digital entrepreneurship according to the findings contained in this and the previous chapter. Generative mechanisms are defined in critical realism as powers existing at the deepest level of reality that have the potential to act upon the world (Bhaskar, 2008a). Each level of existence, e.g. the biological, psychological, and the social, are assumed to have their own generative mechanisms. Assuming a stratified ontology and the idea of emergence, the problem must be analytically divided in relation to different levels (Danermark, 2001) of behaviour and functioning.

The phenomenon of entrepreneurship is generally understood to operate at the psychological and social levels; the entrepreneurial challenges listed in Table 17 indicate that the sample group perceived challenges at both strata. Factors such as know-how, willingness to delegate, digital literacy, attitudes and emotions such as fear or confidence, and entrepreneurial identity are located at the psychological level, while at the social level are factors like positionality, privilege, discrimination, access to finance, and the distribution of work and care responsibilities. However, according to feminist theory more generally (Butler, 1993; Fine, 2010; Lykke, 2010) as well as intersectionality and positionality theory

specifically (Anthias, 2001b, Hill Collins, 2000), many apparently psychological-level factors are called into being by experiences of social positionality. So although things like gender identification, know-how, and attitude towards learning may operate at the psychological level, their distribution is arguably related to circumstances at the social or structural levels, such as gender socialisation, formal education and employment experience. For this reason, some factors at the psychological level can be considered psycho-social mechanisms. A model of generative mechanisms for each enabling condition was sought: one for the social level, and a second for the individual (psycho-social) level, although interplay between the two levels is acknowledged. Taken together, the two models illustrate how digital entrepreneurship is enabled by social, psychological, and psychosocial mechanisms.

*Social Mechanisms of Digital Entrepreneurship*



**Figure 5: Social Resource Access Mechanisms for Digital Entrepreneurship**

The above model details the first set of mechanisms that arise from one’s social positionality and life chances. The items in bold are taken directly from the thematic analysis of the empirical material found in this and the previous chapter. This set of mechanisms is focused upon social resource access. The notion of resources being socially acquired rather than obtained by individuals is contrary to mainstream notions of entrepreneurship; however, it serves to highlight the role of social positionality at birth and through childhood, the resultant opportunities for education and employment and how these are related to an individual’s present life conditions. These life conditions then contribute to the presence or absence of the financial and temporal resources, as well as the initial openness to online experimentation and learning-by-doing, that respondents indicated were necessary for processes of



self-teaching. This self-teaching in turn was critical to developing their understanding of the online environment and how to utilise it for entrepreneurial purposes. If the distribution of antecedent social resources was favourable, as an adult they were likely to experience fewer challenges in acquiring further resources, have access to business networks located higher in the social strata, and the financial and temporal resources necessary to experiment with their online businesses. Technological competence, then, becomes secondary and can be acquired as one progresses in developing the business.

All but three of the respondents were educated to degree level, but their employment histories and household income conditions varied greatly. These variations in life conditions led to disparity between those who had access to the time, money, and tacit knowledge needed to begin an online business and those who did not, and thus had to obtain more basic resources at the outset of business development. For example, respondents who described having sufficient income from their primary employment or household savings to fund their entrepreneurial venture earned substantial incomes from professional positions where they had the flexibility to choose their working hours. They also belonged to dual-earner households where both partners were earning at professional levels. Significantly, these respondents described engaging in entrepreneurship not to gain income, but primarily for reasons of personal challenge and fulfilment. In contrast, those who worked in low-waged service roles, had little or no financial savings, and took on entrepreneurship as a way to supplement their income found that these life conditions generally did not endow them with the resources needed to effectively sustain a business venture. To fund their businesses, they had to increase their working hours, and yet, because this time was not flexible or elective in the way it was for professional-level earners, their capacity to develop their knowledge and their businesses was undermined.

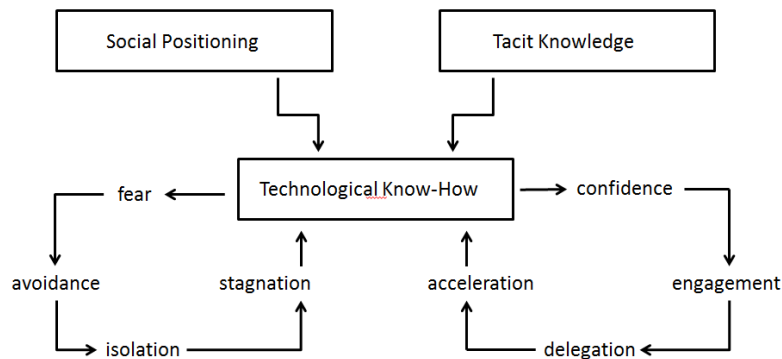
In several cases, those who were in possession of the necessary financial and temporal resources, as well as business and management experience from previous employment, only had to acquire the technological know-how to mobilise these resources in service of an entrepreneurial idea. For middle-class women with professional experience, their social positionality tended to equip them with sufficient antecedent social resources, such that technical know-how was often the last resource they needed to acquire. They did so by using their spare time to teach themselves through experimentation. For a number of these women, paid maternity leave offered the valuable resources of time and money in which they could begin experimenting with business ideas. Once they learned what they wanted to do in the online space, they could enroll others to help them carry out these activities, and had existing access to useful networks that enabled them to accomplish this. Thus, for them, extant knowledge of the online space was not the primary resource necessary for digital entrepreneurship. Instead, antecedent material and cultural resources took precedence, providing the foundation upon which their technological know-how was developed. Some could even be successful despite very limited engagement with the online environment. For example, one respondent had enough management experience in fashion retail and knowledge of her customer base that she was able to trade only via Facebook and vintage fairs, and still reach a level where she was satisfied with her income. Women with degrees, but little or no professional experience, generally had time for self-teaching, unless they were caring for young children or funding their businesses by simultaneously working long hours in low-waged positions. These women

tended to not be able to afford outside assistance, and unlike those with management experience, they often had less inclination to delegate, preferring instead to have more control over day-to-day processes. Working-class women with trade qualifications and without degrees repeatedly spoke of having to build networks that did not exist, and a strong need to prove themselves throughout their careers, illustrating an absence of cultural resources. Because of this disadvantage, technological know-how and competence became their primary currency, and was critical to them and their businesses in a way that it was not for more affluent women.

However, for many women of colour, these experiences were complicated by extra challenges to self-representation online. Despite coming from families in which parents and sometimes grandparents were educated to degree level, being educated to degree and/or postgraduate level themselves, and having professional and management experience, they continued to face unique barriers to portraying their online businesses because of the racial discrimination, and anti-Blackness in particular, encountered in response to posting their names and photographs, or using marketing photographs of non-white people. This was in addition to the discrimination that they encountered in interpersonal interactions. As the concept of 'normality' is crucial in explaining social stigmatisation (Danermark, 2001) it is clear that acquisition of key cultural resources, while beneficial to most entrepreneurial processes, is not sufficient to overcome all of the disadvantages posed by the absence of a normative identity.

#### *Psycho-social Mechanisms of Digital Entrepreneurship*

Social positionality, and the tacit knowledge that accompanies it, contribute to the initial stock of technological know-how with which participants are equipped prior to engaging in digital entrepreneurship. It is herein suggested that the presence or absence of this know-how is self-reinforcing, and related to the attitudes of fear or confidence with which individuals approach using technology. Attitudes like fear and confidence, which can be interpreted as psycho-social mechanisms because of the ways they are both precipitated by social conditions and influence interpersonal interactions, can be respectively constraining or enabling to the development of further and more advanced know-how. Self-reinforcing mechanisms are well known from earlier information systems research (Davenport & Short 1990; Grindley 1995 as cited by Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011: 12) as the human relationship to technology is often path-dependent and based upon early encounters. Respondents described fear leading to avoidance and stagnation, while confidence led to engagement, experimentation, delegation and further learning. Drawing upon these accounts, a proposed model for this mechanism is presented below.



**Figure 6: Psycho-social Mechanisms of Technological Know-How for Digital Entrepreneurship**

### *Social Resources as Entrepreneurial Foundations*

According to these findings, the set of mechanisms enabling social resource access (Figure 5) were antecedent to the mechanisms of technological know-how (Figure 6). This is evident in the cases of those respondents who possessed a degree of technological know-how, but whose lack of social and cultural resources left their businesses unviable. Although a high degree of technological know-how could sometimes substitute for education and lead to better employment opportunities and entrepreneurial partnerships, at a basic level it did not precipitate social resource access. For example, one respondent of Nigerian heritage based in London (R24), despite having extensive experience in strategic planning and social media, found it difficult to obtain customers against a prevalent negative stereotype of Nigerians as being involved in fraudulent financial activity. Another respondent (R17) was offered training by a government body on how to develop an online business, which ostensibly should have provided her with sufficient knowledge to begin trading. But as she had no initial technical knowledge, she spent the six months during which she was expected to begin test trading simply learning about the online space. At the end of this period, she had neither the financial resources to put what she learned into place, nor to hire assistance to do so, and turned instead towards building a business network of others in a similar position. Thus, purely technological know-how, without access to social resources, seemed to be of little use of its own accord. However, the reverse situation saw a different result: those who had access to sufficient social resources but lacked technological know-how were, in general, able to mobilise existing resources to help them gain the know-how they needed and develop their ideas.

### **7.6 Summary**

This chapter has explored the properties and uses of the online environment for entrepreneurship. From thematic analysis of empirical data regarding the ways participants overcame (or not) the challenges of the online space, it has identified the circumstances that create stimulating and releasing conditions, inextricably linked to users and use, that enable the Internet's ability to support entrepreneurial activity. From these conditions, it proposes a set of social resource access mechanisms as fundamental to the

effective development of online ventures, as well a set of psycho-social mechanisms that constrain or enable the development of technological know-how.

However, evidence suggests that this technological know-how, which is assumed to accompany access and appears to take primacy in discourse and policy around digital entrepreneurship, is secondary in importance to socially distributed resources such as finance, time, and access to beneficial business networks. If these critical social resources are lacking, it finds that basic technological competence is generally insufficient to compensate for this absence, as development is dependent on having the necessary time to experiment and the financial resources necessary to fund the business through its start-up phase. It also finds a high degree of technological know-how to be significantly more important for women with fewer social resources and lower initial socio-economic positions, as it enables the possibility of better employment and thus more beneficial network connections. For women with greater resources, increased technological know-how appears to be beneficial but not essential, as they are generally able to hire professional technical support.

These findings thus provide evidence for the argument against people experiencing the online environment as a neutral space. The next chapter will discuss in more detail how social positionality is tied to the presence or absence of enabling conditions on both the social and individual levels. It will also relate the findings of this chapter and those of Chapter 6 to the literature on entrepreneurship, gender, positionality and Internet technology.

## **Chapter 8: Positionality in Individual Experiences**

This chapter and the next will connect and distil the two sets of findings from Chapters 6 and 7 by examining how the mechanisms of social resource access and individual know-how are inherently related to social positionality, and serve as enabling conditions for digital entrepreneurship. The chapter analyses the ways in which specific positionalities in hierarchies of gender, class, and race functioned in to enable or constrain the digital entrepreneurial experiences of individual participants. It underscores the interaction of the themes identified in Chapter 6 and illustrates the explanatory power of the mechanisms identified in Chapter 7 by mapping them onto events reported in the empirical findings. It does so by presenting comparative case analyses of three pairs of women working separately, in diverse circumstances, but in similar roles in the same industry sector, with similar entrepreneurial aims: as fashion designers, social media consultants, and vintage wear retailers. The chapter is structured as follows: first, it makes the case for using a critical realist method of multi-level analysis in an intersectional research project, attuned to mechanisms of structure, culture and agency. Next, it offers a profile of each of the three pairs of women and their circumstances, illustrated by quoted passages from the data. This is followed by a critical discussion of each paired case, in which their intersectional positionality is compared and contrasted, and its effects on their entrepreneurial experiences analysed.

Due to restrictions of length, it is not possible to conduct a full critical realist retroductive analysis of the main structural mechanisms affecting each individual respondent; that method would likely be fruitful in future research. Instead, the chapter identifies the effects of known mechanisms emerging from inequalities of gender, race and class, and their intersections, as well as other key issues and characteristics in participant accounts. Its focus is on within-group diversity, and how women's experiences may be extremely divergent due to the interactions of core and countervailing mechanisms. It is presented after the findings to illuminate positional effects that would not otherwise be clear in thematic discussion. The chapter calls attention to how the key mechanisms of social resource access and/or individual know-how identified in Chapter 7 were enabled or constrained in complex ways by the positionality of respondents, and how their digital entrepreneurial endeavours were affected as a result.

### **8.1 Introduction**

A key feature of feminist debates on intersectionality is methodology and methods, and in particular, how to approach analysis (McCall, 2005; Anthias, 2013). Bilge (2010: 62-63) gives a useful overview of these debates, noting their quasi-national character: the United States and North American approaches tend to be influenced by Black feminism, giving greater weight to systemic or structural impact. In contrast, the European and particularly Nordic and Netherlands approaches tend to be influenced by post-modernism and a focus on identity construction, while British scholarship focuses on the 'dynamic and relational aspects' of social identity and relations. There is also some contention over how to analyse and which levels of analysis to consider (e.g. Hill Collins, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, despite these debates, scholars generally concur that intersectional analytical approaches should consider both the macro and micro-social levels. Bilge (2010: 60) describes the micro-social level as centred upon the unique configurations of intersections in individual lives, while the macro-social level is

concerned with ‘the ways in which multiple systems of power are involved within the production, organization and maintenance of inequalities.’ She notes that the existence of debates regarding which level to emphasise points to a persistent tension across intersectional approaches about how to understand and apply intersectionality in order to analyse the relationship between actor and structure.

To address this tension, this thesis has introduced a critical realist philosophical perspective on intersectionality. It has argued that there is much potential for the fruitful alignment of the two paradigms, which both aim to offer an alternative to the dichotomy of positivism and post-modernism dominating Western epistemology (Hill Collins, 2000; Bhaskar, 2008/1978). To analyse the relationships between the micro and macro-social levels, critical realist theorists use a triad of structure, culture, and agency (Archer, 1988; Porpora, 1998) in which the relationship between structure and agency is explained through the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995), wherein structure precedes agency and is either transformed or reproduced by it. Structure is conceptualised as systems of human relationships amongst social positions (Porpora, 1998), while culture is considered to be systems of thought, belief, and ideology (Archer, 1988). Structure can therefore roughly be analogised to social capital, and culture to human capital; however, structure and culture are understood to extend beyond those capitals which are possessed by any one individual, as they are present also in the systems of relationships and thought of those external to the individual, that make up their social world.

Informed by this approach, this intersectional analysis aims to examine the intersecting and dynamic structural and cultural properties that shape the social positions, conditions and situations of agents, their constellation of concerns and their courses of action. Following Anthias (2013), it makes the following assumptions: first, that the force of certain categories at particular points in time and social locations may be stronger and more manifest than others, and second, that social categories of difference are not necessarily mutually reinforcing, but could be dialogical and contradictory to one another. Drawing upon the intersectional analytical methods of Byrne (2006) and Healy et al. (2011), it will strive to make evident in the analyses the structurally emergent mechanisms that appear most relevant to the outcomes of each situation, and describe their relationship to each other as well as to the overall social conditions experienced by the individual respondents. It seeks to identify core as well as countervailing mechanisms at both macro and micro-levels. While it cannot be assumed that this analysis will be exhaustive nor produce a deeper level of insight into the events of the lives of individuals than they themselves possess, what it attempts is an explanatory critique of the interplay between the micro and macro-social conditions of intersectionality that resulted in these particular entrepreneurial experiences.

## **8.2 Three Comparative Case Analyses**

### *1. The Fashion Designers: Profiles*

Respondent 7 is a white woman in her early twenties who recently graduated with a MA in pattern cutting, a specific aspect of fashion design. She lives in a city in the north of England, is single with no children, works as a waitress, is paid minimum wage and was of the first generation in her family to attend university. Encouraged by her tutor, she began designing and set up her own fashion label. Her

father, a web designer, built the transactional website through which she sold her handmade clothing. She wrote a business plan and conducted some competitor research, but had no previous business experience and only £500-1K start-up capital. With so few financial resources, she had a piece-work business model in which she produced a sample of the piece, took pictures, put it on the website, and then produced the items to order. To accomplish this, she worked with local networks of photographers, models, and a seamstress who she met through university. Her main sales traffic came through Google AdWords; Facebook, she said was 'good for getting to people to look' at her site but did not result in sales. She noted promotion and marketing as one of the most difficult aspects of her business, and in particular, she found it extremely challenging to make time to work on the business in addition to her job, through which the business was funded. She explained that if she worked more hours, she had money for the business but no time; if she worked fewer hours, she had more time, but not enough money. She eventually moved back to her hometown, left her university city and lost access to its creative sector networks. She decided to close her business approximately eighteen months after opening due to a lack of sales, because of which her 'heart was no longer in it'.

Respondent 13 is a British Asian (Indian) woman in her mid-thirties who is a second-generation university graduate and a trained optician. She lives in a large city in the West Midlands and is married with a young daughter. Since childhood, she wanted to work in business, but her family strongly discouraged this, giving her only four options: doctor, pharmacist, dentist or optician. She became an optician 'to keep them happy'. Alongside her career as an optician, for eight years she and her husband have run two online businesses, one in the property market and the other matching UK investors with Indian entrepreneurs. Her experience in this area was useful in the founding of a recent solo online venture designing and selling professional women's clothing. She has an intern, no employees, and between £20-50,000 start-up capital. Her husband does photography and graphic design for her site, and she outsources website development and maintenance at a cost of £1,500 per month. She travelled to China to source a factory at which to produce her designs. It took approximately six months for her to gain a critical mass of customers, during which time she maintained her full-time work as an optician, gradually reducing her workload as her fashion business increased. She uses technology to closely track customer behaviour on her site and assess it in terms of targets, A/B testing, and overall strategy. Her husband is supportive; however, she hides her business from his 'traditional' family, who disapproves of her desire to work and be an entrepreneur. Therefore, she is unable to take advantage of childcare they would provide that would otherwise be available to her, which hinders her ability to travel for business as much as she would like.

### *The Fashion Designers: Analysis*

The primary structural difference between the entrepreneurial experiences of Respondents 7 and 13 was one of socio-economic positionality, and the work experience and accumulated resources that are a function of higher class positions. Respondent 13 was advantaged over Respondent 7 in that she had experience of running two previous businesses and so had much more tacit business knowledge, and in particular, knowledge of how online tools could enhance her understanding of customer behaviour. She also had a higher-paying job, commensurate to her skillset, that she could work flexibly, which meant

that significantly more financial and temporal resources were available to her at start-up. This allowed her to outsource the production of her designs, and even to travel internationally to do so. Consistent with the opportunity cost argument of Jayawarna et al. (2014) who argue that those who face a higher opportunity cost for foregoing employment will start businesses with higher earning prospects, she had high aims for her business, including intentions for national and international growth. Respondent 7, in comparison, had very little relevant work experience, and was underemployed at a low-paying job with very little flexibility. Her youth was arguably another source of disadvantage, in that it limited the amount of time she had to gain experience in the labour market; she also mentioned that she had been treated like a 'little girl' in a number of business situations. Making pieces by hand was time and labour intensive, and her lack of experience and access to financial and temporal resources hindered her ability to outsource her production and to fully use the online space to market her business. This led to structural impediments she could not overcome, and she closed her business as a result.

However, attention to the structural relationships that are shaped by culture add additional nuance to the picture. Although Respondent 13 was privileged in the area of social class, she was disadvantaged by an intersection of gender and race/ethnicity. While Respondent 7 had the agency and privilege to pursue her entrepreneurial endeavours with encouragement by her father and tutor, Respondent 13 had to contend with the disapproval of husband's family regarding her business activities. In response, she maintained an unwanted silence around her entrepreneurship in order to avoid attracting their negative attention, and her agency to pursue her entrepreneurial activities was somewhat constrained as a result. The family's stance, which was likely informed by intersecting traditional notions of female ethnicity (Essers et al., 2010), meant that they refused to see Respondent 13 as she saw herself, a modern entrepreneurial woman, instead expecting that she limit herself to the role of primary carer. This supports Jayawarna et al.'s (2014) conclusion that gendered divisions of household labour will affect capacity to apply class-structured privilege to entrepreneurship, and highlights how race and ethnicity can complicate the notion of the 'entrepreneurial woman', a development this thesis has put forward on McRobbie's figure of the 'working girl' (2009). However, the countervailing mechanism emerging from this intersection was evidently not strong enough to prevent her from pursuing her entrepreneurial venture, albeit within the outlined constraints.

## *2. The Social Media Experts: Profiles*

Respondent 24 is a Black British woman of Nigerian heritage in her early fifties who lives in Southeast London. A third-generation university graduate, she was employed in the public sector for twenty-five years, and during the UK austerity cuts of 2010-2011, took voluntary redundancy with severance pay. She did not apply for another public sector job because of what she perceived as the ultimate ineffectiveness of the numerous regeneration programs of which she had been a part. Her experiences of being a Black woman in employment were described as 'soul destroying' and 'tiring', and that it "eat[s] away at your confidence 'cause you start to think well, something must be wrong with me." She is married and has older children. She chose entrepreneurship because, as Hytti (2005) describes, she perceived it to be more economically secure than waged work. She noted that she knew many unemployed Black women of a similar age, and attributed their unemployment to structural racism,



misogynoir in particular, as well as ageism against Black middle-aged women. She identified that older Black women face significant barriers when they are 'up against what is most desirable, which is white, male, then white female, and young.' As such, she thought entrepreneurship was a way to become economically secure and to be her own boss. As her experience was in the area of business coaching and mentoring, she first started a coaching business, then joined a small social media business, and later, began another social media business with her sister. She moved between these businesses because the first was unsuccessful, and the second business partner recommended that she whitewash her profile. This respondent had a number of critical resources to hand; she was extremely skilled and knowledgeable in the area of social media, and had between £10-20,000 to fund the business at start-up. However, she found it incredibly difficult to obtain clients, despite doing 'all the things they say you should do.' Business networking meetings were ineffective because 'everybody was there to sell.' She engaged in additional self-funded training, but to no avail. She points to the stereotype of Nigeria being linked to fraud as a likely reason she has had so much trouble obtaining clients, because despite being 'very Anglicized,' she says, 'I've got a Nigerian name and a black face...Forget it! Literally, people don't give you a chance.'

Respondent 14 is a white British woman in her forties who lives in an English seaside town in the North West. She does not have a degree but built a career in sales and marketing as a manager for a large property company in Spain. When the recession hit, she moved back to the UK and began working in sales for a company in the water treatment industry. She began exploring social media and had a surprise success securing a large number of contracts via Twitter, and a new position was created for her in her company as social media manager. When the company began to downsize, she volunteered for redundancy, and used her redundancy pay to buy a new computer and marketing materials to begin her own social media management business. After researching online training options, she paid for a lifetime membership for online social media training with two mentors (approximately £140 each). Within six months, she had ten clients, which she acquired primarily by networking and word of mouth. As her client base grew, they started asking if she could do other public relations (PR) and marketing work for them, so she took additional online courses in PR and Marketing and expanded her business to include these services as well. She specifically targets and takes on clients whose businesses reflect her interests and in which she could envision herself as a customer, and measures success by whether 'my customers are happy.' All of her clients are white except one, whose business is Indian cuisine. She says it is a challenge for her to market this business because she does not 'like spicy food.' She counts amongst her clients one of the biggest tourist attractions in a nearby city, which has a number of businesses on its property, many of which have approached her and become new clients independently.

#### *The Social Media Experts: Analysis*

There are a number of key differences in structural positions that appear to have led to the divergent experiences of Respondents 24 and 14. Geographical location arguably plays an important role in these narratives. Respondent 14 is based in a small city with less competition, evident in the number of people she described encountering with no social media components to their business, and therefore, no one currently in the role of social media manager. In contrast, Respondent 24 is based in London, where the

competition is likely to be much higher and more intense. This competition would be compounded by the structural force of race and racist discrimination. Racism was a key feature of the employment experiences of Respondent 24 and influenced her decision to enter into entrepreneurship, reflecting the findings of Knight (2014) that for Black women, entrepreneurship may hold the promise of an escape from racist and sexist workplaces in which they face both blatant and subtle forms of discrimination (Van Laers & Janssens, 2011). However, as an entrepreneur, Respondent 24 still perceived that everyday interpersonal and online racism, due to her name, skin colour and ethnic origin, was preventing her from obtaining clients. This is despite the fact that she has a degree, extensive industry experience, and more training than Respondent 14. In comparison, Respondent 14 experiences white privilege, because of which she is unconcerned with issues of race except when confronted with clients who are ethnically different to herself. She describes targeting only clients whose businesses she understands because they are similar to her; because of her normative identity privilege, this selectivity does not limit her potential client base. White privilege means she can expect that her race is not a hindrance to her obtaining clients, and moreover, that she can choose to work only with clients that are like her. In addition, it can stand in for qualifications: she does not need to have a degree to be seen as qualified. She will not be grouped with others, as Respondent 24 is grouped with other Nigerians; instead, she will be judged as an individual on the basis of her work and accomplishments. Thus, her agency is more recognised by others in the social world than the agency of Respondent 24.

The dominance of whiteness also means that white privilege increases the likelihood of being able to link into influential social networks. Although Respondent 24 was not from a high-ranking socio-economic grouping, she had a number of individuals within her social network that were familiar with business and were themselves entrepreneurs, which Anderson and Miller (2003) note tend to be extremely beneficial to nascent entrepreneurs. Members of these networks, some of whom were high in the occupational strata, recommended her to potential clients with whom they came into contact. It may also be argued that the impact of these recommendations would be amplified in a smaller city with less competition. This was how she obtained the recommendation to the management of the large tourist attraction that became one of her top clients. Yet, this was not the case for Respondent 24, who, as the resident of a large metropolitan area, did not have the same level of network influence. Although it appears that both respondents elected to take redundancy as a result of downsizing due to the economic recession, it can be argued that there was more of a push factor for Respondent 24, who spoke of extreme dissatisfaction with her previous employment because of racist and sexist discrimination as well as with the overall ineffectiveness of the programs with which she had been involved. Accordingly, she was looking for a means of economic security in which she would not be subject to such discrimination. In contrast, it seemed that Respondent 14 felt valued and effective in her role, but entered into business for herself so she could be more emotionally engaged in her work.

Overall, Respondent 24 was from a higher socio-economic position and possessed extensive human capital, but faced overt and subtle racism in a difficult market that left her struggling to gain clients. It is clear in this case that her powers of agency were severely constrained by countervailing mechanisms emergent from both structure and culture. Respondent 14 had significantly less human capital and came from a lower socio-economic position; however, a combination of higher social capital in an area with

less competition alongside her white privilege enabled her to gain clients successfully. In this case, structural and cultural mechanisms were seen to enhance and enable the successful exercise of her agency. The dialogical and contradictory effects of social categories of difference (Anthias, 2013) are therefore evident in these complex experiences of privilege and oppression.

### *3. The Vintage Wear Retailers: Profiles*

Respondent 17 is a Black British woman of Afro-Caribbean heritage in her fifties in a small city in the West Midlands. She has a hairdressing qualification and had previously owned a hair and beauty salon that eventually closed due to problems with the landlord. She is on Jobseeker's Allowance and, when there is work available, is a self-employed hairdresser in another salon in her area. At the job centre, she was advised of a now-defunct government scheme, Get British Businesses Online (GBBO). The scheme provided seed funding of £200, and a domain name and web hosting for two years; however, she had to build the website herself. It also provided a small amount of income support money for six months. She described nervousness using Internet technology and a lack of finance as the most significant barriers to her success. In addition, her unfamiliarity with the realities of selling online was a severe hindrance to her activity. Before she built the website, she tried unsuccessfully selling a few pieces of clothing on eBay. It was only after she used all the seed funding buying stock that she then realised that she needed money for advertising, without which the stock would not sell. She did not have enough stock to make her website look full, and was unaware that she was not legally allowed to use copyrighted photographs of her stock but could not afford professional photographs. It seemed that the basics of digital entrepreneurship were overlooked: her domain name was complicated, the website was confusing, and although she was aware of the principles of online marketing, she did not know how to implement them. She relied upon her adult daughter to assist her with a number of computer and website-related issues. Despite this, she was averse to outsourcing and delegation. Even if she were to have sufficient finance to hire assistance, she feared doing so would prevent her from knowing how to problem-solve were something to go wrong. Her business had thus reached structural impasses in both the areas of social resource access and individual know-how; she was attempting to set up a business networking group to try to overcome these challenges, but prospects did not seem promising.

Respondent 8 is a white British woman in her thirties, a third-generation university graduate in a large city in the North West of England. She had about five years of management experience in large fashion retail chain stores. During her time in employment and for some time prior, she test traded vintage fashion items on eBay, and in her last year of employment, began selling at local vintage fairs once monthly. Her boyfriend could, if necessary, support her financially, but she also had savings, and so decided to leave her job and start her business full time. She has experience in retailing, sewing, dressmaking, and photography, which are skills that she regularly employs in her business activities. Unsure about setting up a new business, she reached out to a local women's business incubator, which provided her significant support with the legal and practical aspects of start-up. This included developing a business plan and taking courses on marketing and online presence; she spent about £1000 in start-up costs, which she described as a low financial risk. Along with the monthly fairs, she was selling on eBay, and in time developed a Facebook sales page. It took her two and half years to get the business

established, which she described as 'quite a slow process.' She does not have an independent website because she perceives it to be too costly, and she observes a number of advantages to selling primarily through the Facebook platform: first, people are on it all the time, second, they are willing to shop on it, and third, she was able to have a more 'personal' relationship with them there. She identified her relationship with her customers as the key to her business growth. Describing her typical customer profile, it is very similar to her own: 'professional woman between about 25-30, 25-35, white, potentially...I don't think a really high income, maybe £20-25,000-ish, quite confident in her own style.' Seventy percent of her customer base is in the local city area, and she hopes to eventually expand throughout the UK and possibly into Europe.

#### *The Vintage Wear Retailers: Analysis*

When considering the numerous differences between the cases of Respondents 8 and 17, the structural mechanism that comes to the fore is that of socio-economic class, which accounts for their marked difference in access to financial, human and social capital resources. Respondent 17 was in a precarious economic position, having had her business closed against her will and working intermittently in a low-margin service industry as a hairdresser. She began an online business at the behest of a government scheme appealing to unemployed people to start businesses online, and her financial resources were limited to the £200 seed funding. She had no experience selling the product, and yet was encouraged to do so by the job centre representatives of the GBBO scheme. In this way, she exemplifies the marginalised and vulnerable populations who are being exhorted to 'pull themselves up by the bootstraps' and start a business, even in an area they knew nothing about, in order to get off benefits and provide for themselves. Yet her level of digital literacy was so low that she was not able to begin test-trading in the GBBO programme's allotted six month period.

In contrast, Respondent 8 was from a higher socio-economic background and had savings as well as the back-up income of her partner. She also had significantly more human capital in a more relevant area: fashion retail management experience in a large company, as well as experience selling vintage wear online via eBay. She had essentially been test trading for a few years prior to leaving employment and opted to leave her job only when she knew she could earn sufficient income through her vintage retailing. Respondent 17 did not have the support of an incubator, nor friends in business who gave her business advice, as did Respondent 8. The GBBO scheme provided Respondent 17 some information, but no hands-on training regarding sales and marketing like that which Respondent 8 accessed for free. It is evident that the effects of higher positions and greater access to more beneficial social networks made critical differences that benefited Respondent 8 and disadvantaged Respondent 17. Although race does not seem to come to the fore as a deciding structural force in these women's experiences, experiences of racism in the case of Respondent 17 and white privilege in the case of Respondent 8 doubtlessly shaped the life conditions of these two women. Respondent 17 recalled being denied bank support for her hair salon business on account of her race, while Respondent 8 could count on her race not being a hindrance to her business transactions because she was marketing to people who were very much like herself. This is illustrative of white privilege, because of which, as seen above, selectivity in choosing to

work primarily with others like her does not appear to constrain her potential client base. Thus, both structural and cultural mechanisms are seen to enhance and enable Respondent 8's exercise of agency.

The choices of Respondent 8 and 17 to enter into entrepreneurship, and the relative success of Respondent 8 as compared to Respondent 17, add qualitative evidence supporting the conclusions of Jayawarna et al. (2014) that privileged class backgrounds enable resource acquisition through mobilisation of this privilege in the labour market. This results in years of accordingly privileged work experience and general accrual of financial resources in adulthood, all of which facilitate business start-up, as in the case of Respondent 8. Although Respondent 17 was a small business owner in the past, her experience as a salon owner was not relevant to trading online, while her lack of financial resources combined with a fear of the online environment hindered her from accessing outside help or relevant training. It is clear that Respondent 17 did not have any of the resources necessary to engage in successful digital entrepreneurship, and her participation in the GBBO scheme arguably diverted her time and energy from job-seeking to an entrepreneurial venture with very little realistic potential for success. Her entrepreneurial agency was, therefore, heavily constrained by structural inequalities and the absence of the right kinds of cultural know-how.

### **8.3 Summary**

This chapter has compared the cases of women working in similar roles in the same industry sectors to reveal how their entrepreneurial endeavours and ability to use the online environment were affected by structural mechanisms emergent from intersecting hierarchies of gender, race and social class. It has highlighted some of the various structural effects of social positionality on the basis of these categories. Specifically, it emphasises the enabling effects of class and race privilege in the accounts of participants who are attempting to develop entrepreneurial ventures in similar fields, and the constraining effects of such mechanisms as anti-Black racism, misogynoir and occupational strata disadvantage. It should be noted that certain elements of these profiles were not limited to these accounts alone, but were also evident in the accounts of other participants with shared characteristics as explored in Chapter 9. For example, Respondent 7 being made to feel like a 'little girl' was echoed by other young respondents, and the account of Respondent 24 regarding discrimination in the workplace was similar to those of other Black respondents. Although these experiences may not be necessarily representative of, for example, all young women, or all Black women, these tendencies suggest the existence of constraining mechanisms emergent from the intersecting social structures in which these respondents are positioned.

Overall, the chapter illustrates how structure and culture can constrain or enable agency separately or in concert, leading to nuanced accounts of privilege and disadvantage that may be, in Anthias' words, dialogical and contradictory (2014), or which, alternatively, may work together to enhance the exercise of agency. Attention to the dynamic interplay of mechanisms of structure, culture and agency in these accounts both enables a multi-level intersectional analysis in line with the critical realist notion of conditional causality, where the effects of active mechanisms are not predetermined but dependent on interactions with other mechanisms acting simultaneously (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011).

## **Chapter 9: Structural Trends of Gender, Class and Race**

While the previous chapter looked more closely at how particular positionalities served to enable or constrain aspects of digital entrepreneurship, this chapter will link the findings on gender, class, and race to established literature on entrepreneurship and the online environment, and discuss their contributions and value to the existing literature. It is organised into three sections, each of which will foreground one of what Acker (2006) calls 'bases for inequality', albeit with an intersectional sensibility: for example, the discussion of gender includes considerations of class and race, and the discussion of class addresses how class status is mediated by gender and race relations. Thus, it builds upon and extends literature from gender studies, critical race studies and cyberfeminist technoculture studies. In keeping with arguments emerging from feminist theories of technology, evidence suggests that rather than being erased by the virtual context, offline issues of inequality in entrepreneurship precipitated by positionality are in many ways replicated in the online space. By providing empirical insight into the nature of the phenomenon, this discussion extends current literature on digital entrepreneurship, extending and developing the theoretical contribution of the thesis in an interdisciplinary way.

### **9.1 Introduction**

The theoretical contributions of this thesis were framed by drawing together two well-established strands of literature: entrepreneurship and intersectionality/positionality. Contemporary entrepreneurship discourse recognises that entrepreneurship is a socially embedded process dependent on resources, broadly defined to encompass both the cognitive and the material (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). Intersectionality and positionality theory (Anthias, 2001a&b) suggest that one's positionality in intersecting social hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and class is intimately tied to material, cultural, and political resource access. If so, then it would also have undeniable effects on cognitive and material resources, and thus, entrepreneurial ventures. Yet, because of the ways it is assumed to transcend the physical, the online environment is often portrayed as a more neutral opportunity space. The research question, therefore, inquired how social positionality affected digital entrepreneurship.

The empirical research undertaken explored these theoretical notions in the context of women's digital entrepreneurship. Grounded in feminist theories of technology (Nakamura, 2002; Sassen, 2002; Wajcman, 2004; 2010) challenging the modernist assumption that technology necessarily improves and advances the human condition, it investigated women's digital entrepreneurship from an intersectional perspective, and asked how social positionality, by way of the simultaneous structural effects of gender, race/ethnicity and class, factored into people's experiences of the phenomenon. The findings of Chapters 6 and 7 extend the literature on digital entrepreneurship by providing evidence that that social positionality, far from being irrelevant or transcended in the online space, is of critical importance to women entrepreneurial actors online. As Chapter 6 describes, it informs many aspects of their experiences, from reasons for starting an online business to the sectors they enter: for example, the negative effect of the UK austerity measures on women's employment in the public sector (Allen, 2013) was a key factor of the entrance of numerous respondents into entrepreneurship. Positionality also has impacts upon funding, working relationships with others, and the successful design and implementation

of a viable and sustainable business model. Chapter 7 used positionality theory and a critical realist notion of mechanisms to frame what respondents cited as being of vital significance to their entrepreneurial ventures: the crucial things that enabled them to overcome challenges posed by the nature of the online space itself. It was made evident through these findings that the landscape of digital entrepreneurship was not a 'level playing field', because differences and inequalities in positionality meant that some people were better equipped to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the online environment for entrepreneurial action. For example, although 'anyone can build a website,' without tacit knowledge of online sales and marketing strategies and access to a significant budget for marketing or stock to make a website look full and genuine, one's online ventures can quickly reach a structural impasse. The demands of the online environment for not only basic digital literacy, but a dynamic technological know-how developed through continuous processes of self-teaching, clearly indicate that people who are positioned higher in the social strata, with access to more human, social, and financial capital, as well as leisure time, will likely be more able to engage with the processes required to 'keep up'. As boyd suggests, this kind of offline inequality has led to a number of significant ways in which 'pervasive social stratification is being reified in a new era' (2009) online (see also Marwick, 2014).

An additional critical finding emerging from the research is the role that normative racial identity plays in digital entrepreneurship. Racist discrimination must still be contended with, because of the fact that digital entrepreneurship takes place in an environment based primarily on visual perception. Byrne argues that perceptual practices, especially those centred on the visual, are particularly important to the construction of race and the repetition of racialised discourses (2006: 13). This is regarded as a key factor in the phenomenon of whitewashing described in Chapter 6 and which will be examined in further detail in the final section of this chapter. Positionality is a feature not only of the body, but of other social locations to which subjects develop "passionate attachments...even though it inevitably involves foreclosure and the loss of other possibilities and ways of being" (Byrne, 2006: 17). Therefore, in response to encouragement from business partners and advisors to whitewash their profiles, subjects of colour struggle with the decision to distance themselves from this aspect of their positionality, even if the opportunity arises to do so. The findings of this research indicate that positionality is not only an important component of subject identity, but also a central factor in whether or not they are endowed with, or have access to, certain key resources that affect how they fare in entrepreneurial endeavours, and is still relevant even when those endeavours are primarily online.

## **9.2 Entrepreneurship, Women and Gender**

### *The Value of a Positional Perspective*

Evidence from this research underscores the theoretical value of positionality, as it allows both the investigation of trends at the structural level and heterogeneity at the individual level. The macro-level positional framework revealed that women whose social positions had given them access to employment experiences higher up the occupational ladder had more of the resources necessary to build a successful online business. These women were more likely to report that they were happy with

their decision to enter into digital entrepreneurship and that they had access to all the resources they might need. In contrast, women who had less access to such resources, such as those who were unemployed, working minimum wage jobs, or encountering racist discrimination encountered more significant structural barriers to success. These participants may have had to shift their business propositions, halt trading while attempting to gather resources, or close their businesses altogether. Normative gender role expectations meant that successfully performing femininity was as a cultural resource, evident in the reports of respondents that stereotypically feminine skills, such as empathy and relationship-building, are assets to their business. Normative racial identity (whiteness) is too, as seen in the example of Black women digital entrepreneurs being pigeonholed when potential customers assume that their products are only for people of African heritage. This thesis calls barriers arising from the absence of these resources 'structural impasses' to signify that they are due to systemic inequality in resource distribution. Contrary to the popular mythos around entrepreneurship, such systemic inequalities are generally unable to be overcome by the simple application of 'hard work'.

### *The 'Entrepreneurial Woman' Online*

There are some within-group similarities that may be accounted for and explained by the notions of how gender and traditional gender roles function in the contemporary, so-called post-feminist era of developed Western economies. McRobbie identified the figure of the 'working girl' as a technology for understanding post-feminist femininity, as one of four archetypes that have 'emerge[d] as new constraining forms of gender power which operate through the granting of capacity to young women' (2009: 7). She argues that the notion of the working girl is "made available to young women as part of a process of substitution and displacement" – that is, in place of real social power – as it "appears to offer possibilities of freedom and change in the status and identity of young women today" (2009: 7). The findings of this study reveal that the figure of the working girl has an emergent permutation in the 'entrepreneurial woman'. The working girl, despite her educational achievements and bold entry into the stereotypically male world of work, is still expected to operate within prescribed feminine boundaries through which she is constrained. Similarly, we see the 'entrepreneurial woman', who has emerged as a complement and contrast to the hegemonic stereotype of the male entrepreneur (Ogbor, 2000), starting businesses that are based on commercialising their experiences and knowledge of femininity and, in particular, their roles as mothers, in an attempt to empower themselves. Such businesses have been popularised through such internationally widespread notions as the 'mumpreneur' (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmyth, 2013a & b). The figure of the entrepreneurial woman normalises these kinds of feminised business activities, assuaging the dissonance between the stereotypically masculine world of business and a feminine gender ascription and identification.

Rhetoric around entrepreneurship and the figure of the entrepreneurial woman, especially one whose work environment is online, hold a promise for women of independence from employment constraints and a better work-life balance. Ekinsmyth notes that transformations in working practices leading to the emergence of the mumpreneur figure are in fact enabled by developments in information and communication technology (2013b). Like the working girl, the entrepreneurial woman and mumpreneur are expected to be able to manage the dual roles of businesswoman and woman/mother smoothly and



seamlessly, fulfilling their responsibilities in both arenas and neglecting neither defining aspect of their identity (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012). It should be noted, however, that this promise is not generic for all women, but is complicated by race and ethnicity as well as socio-economic class, which intersect to affect the reasons participants enter into entrepreneurship, as well as their experiences of being entrepreneurs. For example, Knight (2014) indicates that Black women may use the status of entrepreneur to escape racist, sexist workplaces and claim a respectable professional subjecthood that they are often denied. Evidence from this research supports these theoretical conclusions. The data on women digital entrepreneurs echo findings around telework, which describe it as enabling mothers to “fulfil the script of good mother and good worker” without altering traditional gender roles in the home (Kelan, 2009: 25). Many participants cited that they began their online businesses with the hope of working more flexibly around caring responsibilities, or wanting to spend more time with their children. There is a clear continuity between their experiences and those of home-working or teleworking mothers who selected this type of employment for the same reasons (Kelan, 2009: 24). Consistent with findings around home-working (e.g. Mason et al., 2011; Mirchandani, 1999), the balance they sought was generally out of reach, and the tension between work and family life unresolved.

Digital entrepreneurship is an activity which requires, as McRobbie explains, “disembedding from old institutions and entering the flexible economy”; she argues that such a process can actually precipitate a “return to older, pre-modern family based units” and the norms of the patriarchal household (2009: 47). The feminist practices which were an embedded feature of social institutions, such as the corporate or public-sector jobs many of the participants occupied before, are “undone or disarticulated in this more flexible economy” (McRobbie, 2009: 47). Women digital entrepreneurs with children are often expected, by others and themselves, to conform to traditional norms around childcare while still participating flexibly in the world of work via Internet technology. It is perhaps because of this expectation that Kelan notes that the shift to “temporal and spatial flexibility allows gender relations to solidify” (2009: 25). In particular, the flexibility in terms of “where, when and how much to work” tends to have negative implications for people with caring responsibilities, who, due to traditional gender role expectations, overwhelmingly tend to be women: as a result of their double burden, they face more time constraints and have lower earnings (Kelan, 2009: 24). This was supported by the accounts of many of the participants who were mothers, who reported being pulled both ways: not having enough time with their children, and not having enough time to spend on their businesses. This is consistent with the findings of other studies of mumpreneurs (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Ekinsmith, 2013a & b) which describe the roles as fraught with tensions, both practical and those emerging as a result of contradictory societal expectations. Interestingly, it also echoes accounts of increased pressures on working mothers since the social shift to more “structured and purposive” childhoods (Arendell, 2000; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012), suggesting that little has substantively changed for mothers with a double burden, whether their second role is that of the entrepreneurial woman or the working girl.

Even for respondents without children, not having enough time was still a prevalent issue. Many spoke of exhausting themselves and finding it difficult to manage all of the various aspects of the business, while multiple respondents noted that after coping with the demands of day-to-day processes, they did not have time for important long-term planning or business development strategies. Influenced by

popular discourse and some public policy emphasising the simplicity and ease of digital entrepreneurship and its ability to be integrated into the lives of busy modern women, many stressed that their original impressions that 'running an online business would be easy' were soon erased once they encountered the realities of day-to-day digital business management.

### *The Paradox of Post-Feminism*

Another promise of digital entrepreneurship is the idea that it allows one to transcend the body by making all interaction virtual and eliminating the need to meet or speak with people in person. The experiences described by interviewees verifiably challenged this notion, as they stressed the importance of interpersonal interaction to their businesses. They described the relevance of networking and meeting other business owners for gaining advice and mentorship, as well as making links to potential clients and customers. Significantly, many still report experiencing sexism in their interpersonal encounters, with one participant expressing surprise that the sexism she was experiencing reminded her of twenty years ago. This is consistent with McRobbie's argument that sexism is re-emerging in the post-feminist era in new and insidious ways, which she terms retrosexism (2009).

However, another set of respondents communicated that they believed that being a woman was in fact beneficial to their businesses, in that it enabled them to use 'soft skills' such as listening and empathising (Kelan, 2009) that were better for relationship building. This resonates with Kelan's observation that although gender in contemporary work environments is said to no longer matter, women are still assumed to possess typical feminine skills that are now considered an asset in business interactions (2009: 25; 2014). Adkins (2002, as cited by Kelan, 2009: 26) asserts that we "currently see a cultural feminisation in which femininity is vital in many aspects of (working) life" where "cultural feminisation...means that elements normally associated with femininity become relevant for both men and women and are used as a cultural currency in a work context". This was visible in the example of one respondent (R24) with a marketing consultancy who described a campaign to promote businesses she worked with as 'huggable', a typically feminine adjective; when asked if this was aimed at primarily women-led businesses, she said it was not, and that men "really liked the idea". It is possible that this is due to the fact that her promotion of the concept complemented, and did not challenge, her expected gender role. Another respondent (R9), who stated that being a woman was beneficial, describes at the same time putting pressure on herself to conform to a certain feminine standard of appearance. Yet another (R13) described her preference for interacting with women entrepreneurs who were feminine and family-focused, not masculine as she perceived women entrepreneurs from earlier eras were expected to be. Thus, despite being de-traditionalised and removed from an institutional context, gender, and in particular, traditionally prescribed gender roles and expectations, are still very much "present in the work life and enacted daily" (Kelan, 2009: 26) by many women digital entrepreneurs.

McRobbie might identify such a contradiction, wherein an awareness of gender oppression or discrimination moves to the background while traditional gender roles are internalised and foregrounded, as the essential paradox of the post-feminist era (2009). Normative gender identities were internally, rather than externally prescribed, and functioned as cultural resources that allowed

respondents who utilised them to engage more effectively with clients. In contrast, any challenge to traditional gender roles was a tricky process of negotiation, evident in the accounts of Respondent 23, who noted the need to be both masculine and feminine to achieve entrepreneurial ends, and those respondents in the technology sector who found it necessary to challenge stereotypical notions of women and technology as incongruent. Kelan (2009) and McAdam and Marlow (2013) argue that circumstances such as these are demonstrative of an ideological dilemma, in which individuals deny the structural bases of discrimination as a means by which to reconcile their beliefs about a post-feminist society with contradicting experiences that continue to be constrained by, and often reproduce, the existing gendered order. Self-identification as an entrepreneurial woman or mumpreneur may be an attempt to resolve a similar dilemma that occurs when cultural expectations around femininity conflict with the masculinised ideology of entrepreneurship, which now appears to promote equality and possibility (McAdam & Marlow, 2013).

### *The Gendered Nature of Online Work*

As Chapter 5 and 6 illustrate, the structural effects of gender and normative gender roles had impacts upon not only the decision to enter into digital entrepreneurship, but also participation in particular sectors. Gender is a performative (Butler, 1990; 1993; Kelan, 2009) that fundamentally informs how human beings identify, are identified, and operate in the social world. Thus, identification (or not) with a particular gender and conformity (or not) with its associated expectations shapes our life experience, interests, interpersonal relationships, choices and opportunities. In particular, industries, sectors and professions are gendered both symbolically and literally. They are said to be feminised when women enter en masse into what have been until that point exclusively male domains, as a result of which salaries tend to be driven down due to the marginalization, downgrading and exploitation of women and women's work (Bradley et al., 2000; Bolton & Muzio, 2008). There are thus important economic implications for the gendering of particular sectors as feminine, and corresponding structural constraints for women who work in them.

In the sample, the most prevalent industry sectors in which participants began businesses were first, fashion and accessories, and second, health and beauty, both highly feminised and traditionally feminine sectors. These businesses, when combined, made up nearly half of the sample. Participants did not choose these sectors randomly; on the contrary, they tended to begin businesses in areas where they had skills or knowledge as a result of past employment experiences – many of which were shaped, as described above, by gender. It should not be expected, therefore, that the online environment, simply because it *can* be used to access most types of information, necessarily *enables* people to take up any type of entrepreneurial activity. Consistent with Doyle Corner and Ho's (2010) idea of 'experience corridors', it makes sense that individuals would begin businesses in areas in which they have previous knowledge and experience, or, barring this, a personal interest that would inform their knowledge of the area and help them to develop an understanding of the market. Interestingly, many of those whose ventures differed markedly from their past employment developed businesses with women or mothers as their primary target market, suggesting a desire to address a 'market gap' that they themselves had experienced as a result of their feminine identification and gender role.

Although technology-focused businesses tend to be perceived as gender-neutral, this study reiterates findings that there is in fact a readily apparent gendered division of labour amongst tech businesses. Findings from this research corroborate those from the few existing investigations into women web entrepreneurs, showing that the area of the technology sector that women-owned businesses tend to occupy are smaller service-based businesses and not high-growth product or application ventures (Forson & Ozbilgin, 2003; Jome et al., 2006). This is because, as feminist technology studies point out, technology is still a male-dominated field where women are underrepresented due to the traditional sexual division of labour (Phipps, 2008; Wajcman, 2004). Only three of the twenty-six participants were providers of technology services, and of those three, two did web design and programming work. None had launched, or even considered it feasible to begin, a high-tech ICT business. These findings echo those of an earlier UK-based study (Forson & Özbilgin, 2003) and indicate that efforts of the past decade to promote women-led Internet companies have not resulted in marked changes. It is known that women make up a very small percentage (about 9-10 percent worldwide) of tech entrepreneurs (Startup Genome & Telefonica, 2012), which scholars have suggested is due primarily to the effects of traditional perceptions of women's role in society, leaving them less likely to operate in these sectors and to engage in this type of technological innovation (Brink et al., 2014). Kelan's (2009: 7) observation that women are overrepresented in low-end ICT work and are rarely in the elite jobs of the network society is supported by this research, suggesting that the new economy may not in fact open 'equal chances to all.'

Evidence from this study, therefore, concurs with the limited existing scholarship on the subject in its indication that women's online businesses tend to be gendered along similar lines as offline businesses (Mirchandani, 1999; Moore, 2004; Wajcman, 2010). This can be attributed to gendered employment or personal experiences preceding the founding of an online business, underscoring the inherent connectedness of the online environment with the social world of which it is a part and the embeddedness of opportunities in the lives of entrepreneurs (de Bruin et al., 2007). While many of the businesses evaluated had lasted for some years and arguably attained a degree of success, nearly all respondents were running micro-businesses: as sole proprietors, employing contractors or freelancers or fewer than ten employees, and most personally earning less income as digital entrepreneurs than they earned when employed. Such constrained performance may be attributed to women's gendered socio-economic positioning (Marlow & McAdam, 2013) and enduring structural differences between the businesses that women and men operate (Mirchandani, 1999: 230). The findings suggest that Loscocco et al.'s conclusion that "women's relative disadvantage in the ability to generate sales volume and income relates to their tendency to operate small businesses in less profitable industries" (1991, as cited by Mirchandani, 1999: 230) is, perhaps surprisingly, still applicable more than twenty years later in the context of digital businesses and the online environment.

### **9.3 Social Class & Know-How**

With its arguments regarding the significance of positionality for entrepreneurship, this thesis contributes to an emerging literature (Anderson & Miller, 2003; Jayawarna et al., 2014) emphasising the relevance of social class to the entrepreneurial endeavour. This literature argues that impacts of class on

life chances, family status, education, wealth, and social networks together influence access to financial, human and social capital resources, which then serve to shape the start-up process (Davidsson & Honig, 2003) and the nature of businesses in terms of industry sector, profit and growth (Anderson & Miller, 2003). Although it cannot be claimed that class position necessarily determines access to resources like finance and knowledge, it can be understood to give rise to a social positionality likely to facilitate such access. Higher positionality in the class structure was here found to be a trigger for the enabling conditions of the online environment for entrepreneurship, particularly as regards access to finance, beneficial positions in networks, and educational and employment experiences that contribute to know-how, all of which were described by participants as critical to the start-up process. This echoes the literature on high-tech entrepreneurs identifying their positionality in the top part of the paid earnings distribution and their access to powerful and influential social networks (Braguinsky et al., 2012; Dashti, 2010). Social positionality also enables or constrains the activities pursued, as the higher-margin, knowledge-based online services businesses described by Mason, Carter and Tagg (2011) as requiring little investment in equipment and stock appeared relatively inaccessible to people of working-class backgrounds without qualifications and professional experience. Prospects for sustainability and growth appear to be dependent on the assembly of a skilled, effective, reliable and affordable team, challenging the popular assumption that online businesses are necessarily simple and easily started.

The definition of social class utilised by this thesis treated it as a multi-dimensional construct based upon economic relations, but also inclusive of social and cultural distinction and reproduction (Bradley, 2014). The findings show that social class is relevant to processes of digital entrepreneurship at all three of these dimensions. In particular, it offers qualitative support for the online context to the argument of Jayawarna et al. (2014) that class privilege, mediated by the effects of gender, structures a pathway to start-up beginning with intergenerational resource transmission and continuing over a life-course via the mobilisation of this privilege in the labour market.

### *Financial Capital*

On the basis that all but one of the respondents financed their business from personal savings, access to financial capital for online business start-up was very clearly related to socio-economic class. Participants occupying lower positions in the social strata (precariat, working class and lower middle-class) tend to have very little savings and either no or limited alternative income sources. As their social positions and work histories meant that they were unlikely to be knowledge-based service providers (with the exception of R3), they tended to trade lower-value, lower-margin products requiring high volumes for a viable business model. In contrast, respondents who were higher in the social strata as a result of class-based work experience and wealth creation (new affluent workers, technical and established middle classes) had higher amounts of start-up capital and could invest in higher-value products, develop and test their own product lines, and hire assistance and/or technical support. Participants with substantial alternative income sources also tended to occupy higher class positions. This corresponds with the findings of Jayawarna et al. (2014) which suggest that entrepreneurship is related to a longer-term pattern of saving and wealth creation, facilitated by occupational and financial privilege in adulthood.

Hence, the presence or absence of an economic imperative driving entrance into entrepreneurship seems to present a significant dividing line between members of the sample, resonant with Byrne and Fayolle's argument that necessity entrepreneurship has a gendered dimension (2012), and Marlow and Patton's findings of a division between traditional and 'new modern' women entrepreneurs (2005). Although the online environment does seem to lower some initial financial barriers to entry, those who reported being drawn towards digital entrepreneurship primarily because it was a cheaper option, and not because of the technological possibilities it presents, also spoke of choosing entrepreneurship because of a need for income and a lack of better employment alternatives. These respondents can be categorised into one of two groups. The first tends to have fewer resources initially; for this reason, they are unlikely to be able to take full advantage of the technology's possible applications for entrepreneurship, which may limit them to pursuit of lower-quality opportunities. This group was typically composed of younger, low-waged service sector employees, who had very little savings with which to start their businesses, and so tended to begin trading low-value, low-margin items because of the need to generate a profit immediately, no matter how small. The second group tended to be older, with greater amounts of both business experience and savings. A number of them had extensive business and management experience, and had lost government-sector jobs as a result of the UK austerity cuts. Due to reasons primarily related to the intersections of gender, age, and race, middle-aged Black and Asian women perceived they would be less desirable candidates for employment, did not want to undergo a potentially humiliating job application process or become under-employed, and for these reasons, chose entrepreneurship. They risked resources to enter into more ambitious ventures that required more knowledge, planning and start-up capital: for example, starting their own product line or consultancy business. They had greater amounts of savings with which to finance start-up, but economic necessity and profitability was still a primary concern. This corresponds with the findings of Jayawarna et al., who describe "middle class defence against downward mobility" (2014) as a particular pathway to entrepreneurship within a life-course model framework.

In contrast, respondents who had another substantial source of income and entered into entrepreneurship primarily for personal fulfilment or as a hobby were not reliant upon their business venture for income and economic security. This meant they were more able to use the Internet experimentally: for example, starting a fully virtual business in which they never met their employees in person, or trading only through a single platform rather than trying to create multiple income streams as is often expected or recommended. Alternative sources of income varied: some participants were employed at a level commensurate with their skillset and began ventures alongside, some left employment after test-trading for a period of time, others began businesses while on maternity leave and did not return to their former roles, and still others had partners who were primary earners of the household. One respondent (R16) left a corporate managerial role, and entered into part-time contract work in order to fund her business. Having a substantial alternative income source, or multiple streams of income, enabled these participants to sustain the business over time, as the venture could be cross-subsidised if needed and business development funded. The economic aspects of social class are relevant here, in that access to economic resources in the form of either savings or alternative income sources was closely related to the kinds of opportunities the respondents engaged with, the ventures they began, and whether or not those ventures were able to be sustained over time. Evidence of such

within-group diversity due to differential access to financial resources is one particularly significant outcome of these findings.

### *Human and Social Capital*

The resources provided by the social and cultural dimensions of social class may be usefully described in terms of social and human capital (Anderson & Miller, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984), wherein social capital primarily describes access to and influence amongst particular social networks, and human capital encompasses skills, tacit knowledge or know-how, and cultural knowledge. Although capital theory is used extensively in entrepreneurship scholarship, it often lacks social context. By associating them with social class, in the Bourdieuan tradition, as Anderson and Miller (2003) and Jayawarna et al. (2014) do, the effects of structural positionality on these essential entrepreneurial resources are brought to light. These two kinds of capital are very closely interlinked, with a direct correlation between the level of one's human capital and that found within one's social network, as well as impacts from one to the other: limited human capital may even preclude access to beneficial social networks that would provide additional resources and information (Anderson & Miller, 2003: 29, 33). Financial capital often tends to accompany the other kinds of capital; Anderson and Miller observe that "families from higher socio-economic strata can utilise social capital to foster the accumulation of both human and financial capital in offspring" (2003: 20). All types of class-based capital are seen to have significance for entrepreneurship: Jayawarna et al. (2014) find that the process of accruing skills, know-how and wealth begins in childhood and affects capacity to start a business later in life.

The human capital aspects of class were apparent in whether or not the participants had the skills and know-how to run an online business, as well as the time and tacit knowledge it took to gain these resources, all of which are arguably functions of social class. Jayawarna et al. (2014) found that of three human capital variables in relation to new business founding – work experience, having higher qualifications, and ongoing training – only work experience is a significant determinant of start-up, with each level up the occupational strata increasing start-up chances. Prior entrepreneurial experience was even more strongly related to new business founding. Overall, evidence from this research offered qualitative support for their findings in the context of online businesses: it was primarily the work experience of participants, not their qualifications or training, that was related to the level and kind of opportunities with which they engaged. Higher occupational levels were indeed associated with more savings and thus, start-up capital, as well as with more tacit knowledge about business, often including management experience, which led to experience-led delegation and strategic planning. This extends the opportunity cost argument of Jayawarna et al. (2014, c.f. Cassar, 2006, Petrova, 2010) positing that the educated may start businesses with high earning prospects because they face a higher opportunity cost for foregoing employment, and suggests that this is similarly relevant to those who are higher up on the occupational ladder. Additionally, only those with higher levels of human capital were able to begin businesses with higher earning prospects on very little start-up capital, which is the dominant discursive model of digital entrepreneurship. This challenges the notion that 'anyone' can start a highly profitable online business with minimal investment, and instead narrows this pool to those with enough human capital to become knowledge-based service providers.

It seemed that heterogeneity amongst the sample could be attributed to the mobilisation of privilege in the labour market (Jayawarna et al., 2014) and not to educational qualifications, as most of the sample was educated to degree level or beyond. The ability to self-teach or to source useful information, which is one of the intended outcomes of a degree-level education, was regarded by all participants as critical to the processes of digital entrepreneurship. The three respondents who were not educated to degree-level did not necessarily have less know-how in this area, but if this was combined with a lack of formal work experience within a larger organisation, it seemed to be associated with lower confidence in their abilities. This supports the argument of McRobbie (2009: 73), who notes that “the acquisition (or not) of qualifications comes to function as the mark of a new gender divide” and that qualifications provide young women with an identity as “female subjects of capacity.” In this study, this applied not only to young women, but to older women as well – fear and uncertainty in their skills and abilities, especially in the online environment, was a common theme in the responses of two older women without degree-level qualifications and work experience lower on the occupational strata. There were, however, others without degrees whose work experience at higher levels had obviously developed their confidence in their abilities. This kind of confidence, as an aspect of human capital, is argued in Chapter 7 to be self-reinforcing, particularly in the context of the online environment.

The effects of having more or less influential social networks and thus higher or lower degrees of social capital were readily apparent amongst the sample population. McRobbie points out that the freelance precarious economies of the cultural and creative sector in which many women digital entrepreneurs are engaged are dominated by informal networking practices, which “reproduce social elites and create material barriers to those who lack the social and cultural capital to participate” (2009: 82), a reality that she argues is ignored by dominant theories of network sociality. To illustrate, beneficial social networks for participants who were, or had been, higher up the occupational strata were primarily formed from existing business contacts. Many cited that other business owners were some of the most helpful contacts within these networks. Such existing personal networks have been shown to assist in the resource acquisition strategies required for new venture creation and success; additionally, entrepreneurs from higher socio-economic groupings are more likely to have individuals within their social network that are familiar with the business environment, or may themselves be entrepreneurs (Anderson & Miller, 2003: 21-22). Having the right social capital resources could be seen as reinforcing the other types of capital, as entrepreneurs who were positioned higher in the social field with more access to financial and human capital could also, if needed, afford to hire business mentors or coaches to individually help them develop further capital resources. In contrast, those who were lower in the occupational strata did not have these networks already formed. Instead, they more often attempted to build or join networks by attending networking events and introducing their businesses into conversations with people they encountered in their daily lives. Instead of hiring one-on-one coaches, they attended less expensive in-person or online courses. These findings concur with Anderson and Miller’s observations that, following the social similarity thesis, individuals from higher socio-economic groupings and class positions are more likely to possess greater financial and human capital endowments as well as social contacts who are in positions to provide effective support, while those from lower socio-economic backgrounds with limited human capital are more likely to have social networks that also possess limited human capital (2003: 22, 33). Thus, it is clear that the effects of such



social class positionality are not limited to offline entrepreneurship, but as shown in the accounts of the interviewees, were equally relevant for digital entrepreneurship.

In addition, intersections of class, race/ethnicity and gender that complicate simplistic or deterministic notions of class cannot be ignored. McRobbie (2009: 7) has noted that gender and especially femininity is the modality through which women in the UK increasingly live out their class positions. She specifies that the intersection of gender and ethnicity has a particular social meaning and significance for Black and Asian women, while Byrne (2006) emphasises the significance of race and whiteness in the classed experiences of white women. Jayawarna et al. (2014) complicate class-based pathways to entrepreneurship by pointing out that they are disrupted by gendered childcare responsibilities. Such intersections will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

#### **9.4 Race in Cyberspace**

This thesis has heavily drawn upon feminist theories of technology, and in particular, cyberfeminist theories on the implications of the online environment for gender relations, to make its argument that the online environment is typically coded as masculine (Wacjman, 2004, 2010; Daniels, 2009). However, a significant limitation of much existing cyberfeminist theory is its implicit suggestion that gender is a unified category, and that digital technologies “mean the same thing to all women across differences of race, class, sexuality” (Daniels, 2009: 103). On the contrary, evidence from this study shows that there is a diversity of experiences of digital technologies amongst women on the basis of these differences, of which race and class in particular have shown themselves within this sample to be primary. In particular, findings from the research suggest not only the continued coding of the online environment as masculine, but also as white.

Racism online is largely ignored and under-theorised by Internet studies (Daniels, 2012). When issues of race have been considered in relation to Internet technology, three main themes arise in the sociological literature: first, that racialised bodies can somehow be transcended in cyberspace and that there is a desire by people to do so; second, that the central question with regard to race and the Internet is one of access, and third, that there is an inherent contradiction between the idea that ICTs are inherently ‘liberating’ when they are produced at the economic and ecological expense of impoverished people in the Global South. While the latter two themes are deserving of careful attention and consideration, the second is extensively addressed (Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2004) and critiqued (boyd, 2009; Daniels, 2012; Hargittai, 2002; Nakamura, 2008; Sassen, 2002; Thompson Jackson, 2009) in literature around the so-called digital divide, and the third in studies of the globalisation of technology (Gajjala, 2003; Robinson, 2009). Thus, due to considerations of space and relevance, this section concerns itself with the first theme only, in relation to the phenomenon of ‘whitewashing’ in the accounts of Black and Asian digital entrepreneurs. Then, following Daniels (2012), it offers a critical understanding of how whiteness and the white racial frame on the Internet functioned in the experiences of white participants.

##### *Whitewashing Entrepreneurship: No Escape Route*

The notion that the online environment is one in which negative or discriminatory ascriptions attached to marked bodies can be overcome by the nature of the medium of transmission is long-held and widely accepted in Internet studies (Daniels, 2009; 2012). Daniels (2009) traces the idea that racial oppression is linked to embodied visibility to the writings of black American sociologists, such as WEB Du Bois (1903/1995). She points out that this is the basis of the assertions of both mainstream press and the scholarly literature on race and the Internet that one may, if one wishes, conceal or hide one's racial and gender identity in order to escape the discrimination faced due to having a marked or othered body. But instead of offering an escape route from offline notions of race based on embodiment, the visual culture of the Internet "complicates race and racism in new ways" (Daniels, 2012: 699). The idea of escaping racism by concealing one's racial identity online is built upon inherently problematic logic: it "rests on an assumption of an exclusively text-based online world that belies the reality of digital video and photographic technologies, such as webcams (and image-sharing sites, among them Flickr and YouTube), which make images of bodies a quotidian part of the gendered, and racialized, online world" (Daniels, 2009: 111-112; see also Nakamura, 2008). Such a simplistic view of how the Internet works and what it enables is an apparent holdover from its earliest manifestations, and fails to consider the realities of the contemporary online environment, in which embodied visibility is still very much present and precipitates the continuation of oppression based on representations of the physical body.

Not only does the phenomenon of whitewashing for entrepreneurial purposes avoid critically questioning this state of affairs, but it actually encourages people of colour to try to exploit the fact that the online environment is coded as white. For when race is not made explicit online, whiteness is the default assumption, and in some virtual settings, is the only racial option available (Dietrich, 2013; Kolko, 2000). As offline, whiteness and masculinity provide a form of legitimacy not accessible to women, and particularly so for women of colour, whose obvious markers of difference can pose a significant disadvantage. Acker (2006) notes that white males dominate positions of power in advanced Western economies; this is normalised and naturalised by hegemonic, socially constructed practice. Rather than assuming that Internet technology can erase stigmatised identities, it should be acknowledged that creating believable, trustworthy self-representations is an integral part of digital entrepreneurship. Thus, entrepreneurial actors who fit normative profiles are not called upon to consider how the marked aspects of their identity are communicated to (or hidden from) their audiences and potential clients. These are aspects of privilege, a significant political resource inherently inaccessible to those whose bodies and beings are Othered by such distinguishing features as gender, race, or class.

Critical race scholar Nakamura has investigated the phenomenon of 'identity tourism' in which white people take on ethnic identities for role-playing or entertainment purposes (2002). However, the reverse – people of colour taking on white identities, is under-theorised in both the cyberfeminist literature and that on race and cyberspace. It has been recently employed as an informal social experiment by women of colour on Twitter, who found that there was indeed a dramatic reduction in the amount of racist and sexist trolling they experienced (Nesbitt Golden, 2014). But as a technique to facilitate entrepreneurship, there is still very little known. Thus, the empirical findings of this thesis offer valuable insights into the experiences of those to whom it is recommended. Nakamura (2002) describes how the activity of commerce itself 'outs' marked bodies online:

*Rather than being left behind, bracketed, or 'radically questioned' the body – the raced, gendered, classed body gets 'outed' in cyberspace just as soon as commerce and discourse come into play. Fluid identities aren't much use to those whose problems exist strictly (or even mostly) in the real world if they lose all their currency in the realm of the real (2002: 11)*

In the commercial world of digital entrepreneurship, wherein money is exchanged in return for a product or service and buyer and seller may never meet, authenticity and trustworthiness, particularly of the seller, is critical. Such authenticity is conveyed primarily by pictures, video, start-up stories, and testimonials from other customers. This may not be the case with brokered sales platforms like eBay or etsy.com, but when entrepreneurs attempt to grow their businesses beyond these platforms to transactional websites, there are expectations for their picture, biography and history of the business, considered typical website features, to be present and available. A similarly branded profile would be expected across social media platforms, and respondents consistently noted the value of this authentic profile.

If authenticity is considered an online marketing asset, it is logical, then, that Black and Asian participants consistently expressed discomfort and frustration with the notion of whitewashing. When recommended or enacted, it appeared to cause more problems than it alleviated. In one case, it led to the breakup of a business partnership; in another, a structural impasse in a marketing strategy and conflict between an entrepreneur and her business advisors. R22, who had been Anglicising her name, was unhappy with online representations of herself until she 'embraced her identity as an Asian woman,' while R26 spoke of how important it was to represent her real self because her clients were buying into her as an individual. Those who had never considered whitewashing, or considered it and chose not to do so, did report receiving some discriminatory treatment both on and offline, but they consistently expressed a refusal to let it hinder them from achieving their goals.

This desire by women of colour to be true to themselves and their identities, even online, is consistent with the conclusion made by Daniels that 'rather than going online to 'switch' gender or racial identities, people actively seek out online spaces that affirm and solidify social identities along axes of race, gender, and sexuality' (2009: 110), or, as danah boyd notes, sites that reflect "people like me" (2009), a concept echoed in Byrne's work on computer-mediated communities (2007; 2008). This need for social affirmation of identity particularly applies to people whose identities are marginalised, because those in possession of normative identities regularly affirmed by mainstream culture do not generally need to actively seek ways to affirm them.

Byrne describes people as passionately attached to their positionality (2006: 17); such attachments are reflected in the findings, which suggest that even when whitewashing is enabled by technology, it is still deeply troubling for people of colour. Whitewashing, although it has yet to be examined in detail online, has been explored in the workplace, wherein processes of racialisation took place in dominant group space: Reitman notes that whitewashing "simultaneously denies race and superimposes white culture" (2006: 267) in order to create and maintain white spaces. This understanding of whitewashing is easily transposed to the context of the online environment, as emotional attachments to racial identities and

positions lead to an understandable aversion to denying them and superimposing white culture in their place. Yet it is not these emotional attachments that are the problem. Instead, it must be asked if it is not more problematic to propose that the ultimate solution to racist discrimination online is to pretend to be white, and by doing so, continue to normalise and centre whiteness. Such a 'solution' places further burden on already-oppressed individuals to struggle with the complex issues that arise when deciding whether or not to whitewash, a practice which does not work to address or challenge structural discrimination at the level where it would be most effective. In fact, it appears to present another ideological dilemma, in which the emulation of whiteness is expected to resolve the conflict of ethnic Otherness in the context of racist discrimination.

### *The Privilege of Normative Whiteness*

Frankenberg (1993: 6) defines whiteness as "a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and...intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination." She argues that race and racism shape white people's lives and identities in ways that are seemingly normative and thus benefit from 'structured invisibility'. The findings of this study provide evidence that white British women working online experience the same privilege of normative whiteness that they do offline, in that their racial identity is, as Ahmed describes, "invisible and unmarked, the absent center against which others appear as points of deviation" (2012: 35). The normative, unmarked, and invisible nature of whiteness means that white participants were able to consistently express notions that their race was unimportant to processes of business, did not factor into most of their business decisions, and that they rarely, if ever, considered their own race in decisions about self-representation online. Yet race was an implicit consideration in many of their marketing strategies: when asked to describe their target markets, they were very often like them in most aspects, including race. This supports Daniels' observation that race still matters online, a counterpoint to the "the oft-repeated assertion that cyberspace is a disembodied realm where gendered and racialized bodies can be left behind" (2009: 116). Some participants ignored the questions regarding race altogether, even if asked repeatedly. When participants did address issues of race, they were in relation to the difficulties faced in relating to the cultures of their customers of colour. This echoes Byrne's findings of resistances and silences by white participants around the subject of race itself (2006: 37), and illustrates how it remains unmarked and unsaid that 'white people, too, have race' (Daniels, 2012: 708).

White participants described being comfortable portraying themselves online; Ahmed points out that "If white bodies are comfortable, it is because *they can sink into spaces that extend their shape*" (2012: 4, original emphasis). Thus, the online spaces they inhabit – their websites, social networks, and other spaces – can be seen a virtual extension of the white shape, into which white people sink comfortably, without having to face the tension that comes when deciding what aspects of your racial or ethnic identity to reveal or conceal because they may have negative impacts on business. Ironically, it was white participants who identified that a benefit of the Internet is that it allows you to overcome discrimination and portray yourself 'however you want' – ironic because this was something they never had to do. In contrast, neither Asian nor Black participants cited this as their experience of the Internet. Due to issues of racism and a desire for authenticity, both options – either portraying themselves as they

are, or choosing to whitewash – were difficult decisions, the outcome of which made a tangible difference to their businesses. If they portrayed themselves and their businesses as white, they struggled with feelings of inauthenticity and the problems that would come were they to be ‘outed’. If they portrayed themselves as they are, or used images of people of colour in their marketing, they risked being racially discriminated against, or pigeonholed into an ‘ethnic’ market, even if their aim and intention was to appeal to a broader market base.

McRobbie argues that the contemporary era is one in which Western popular culture and media, after two decades of emphasis on multiculturalism, is experiencing a cultural shift in response, in which whiteness is being reinscribed as the norm (2009). This speaks to Nakamura’s point that cyberspace enables a “radical fluidity and disconnect between mind and body” that threatens a stable sense of white self and identity (2002: 6), which is addressed by the appearance and reinforcement of cybertypes, the racialised stereotypes that are central to the signifying practices of cyberspace. Both theorists note that in recent history, whiteness has, either through political activity or technological developments (or a combination of the two), been destabilised or called into question. McRobbie suggests that in a reactionary response to this destabilisation, the boundaries between white culture and other cultures are in many ways being re-consolidated, and divisions between them firmed up (2009: 42). This has useful implications for analysing the accounts of respondents of colour, expected to target either a white or an ‘ethnic’ market, in terms of the continued racialised division of the online environment. Drawing upon Stuart Hall’s notions of ‘imagined communities’ “in which those who are ‘normal’ are bound together, separated from those who are marked by difference”, Daniels argues that “on the Internet, and in Internet studies, this ‘imagined community’ is constituted by whiteness” (2012: 710, citing Hall, 1997b). When Black and Asian entrepreneurs represent themselves as they are online, they are identified by white audiences as different – they are not part of the imagined community; they are not ‘us,’ but ‘them.’ As Ahmed would say, they ‘stick out’, because of which the “the gaze sticks to you” and the whiteness of the space is reconfirmed (2012: 41). However, the context about which Ahmed is speaking is an institutional one. Translated to the online space, the normative whiteness of the virtual environment is reconfirmed when a site or business ‘sticks out’ because it is non-white (identified, for example, by the design of the site, photographs of the entrepreneur/their team or by the use of marketing images of people of colour). The business is then assumed to be aimed at a market made up primarily of ‘people like them’, an assumption which serves, in McRobbie’s terms, to re-consolidate and firm up the boundaries and divisions between white culture and ‘Other’ cultures.

## **9.5 Summary**

This chapter has analysed the findings on the structural effects of gender, class and race in the experiences of study participants and elucidated their significance in relation to existing literature. It has explored each of the categories in turn, with attention to the ways in which each category is complicated by the others. The critical post-feminist analysis advanced by McRobbie (2009) was used to conceptualise the figure of the entrepreneurial woman, through which participation in feminised business sectors and celebration of traditional feminine characteristics allowed participants to reconcile the ideological dilemma (Kelan, 2009; McAdam & Marlow, 2013) posed by bringing entrepreneurship, a

stereotypically masculine domain, together with a feminine gender identification. Links were drawn between the findings on digital entrepreneurship and the literature on home-working and teleworking showing that such arrangements tend to disproportionately disadvantage women, who generally have more caring and household responsibilities, by intensifying their 'double burden' (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000) and relegating them to smaller businesses in sections of the economy with lower earning and growth potential (Kelan, 2009; Mason et al., 2011; Mirchandani, 1999). The findings show that the conclusions of extant entrepreneurship literature about the relevance of social class to unequal entrepreneurial resource distribution (Anderson & Miller, 2003; Jayawarna et al., 2014) and the specific findings of Jayawarna et al. (2014) that the gendered division of childcare labour mediates class-based resource privilege, are still applicable even when business processes take place primarily online. It extends these conclusions qualitatively with findings showing how such class-based resource privilege is also mediated by the presence or absence of normative racial identity privilege, despite the supposedly 'virtual' nature of the online environment. These findings are theoretically supported by literature on race and cyberculture (Nakamura, 2002; Daniels, 2009; 2012) that provide substantive arguments and examples of the way in which race matters online. They also resonate with the work of new media scholars illustrating how socio-economic resource disparity is reproduced online (boyd, 2009; Marwick, 2014). This critique of the online world presents a powerful contradiction to the claim that digital entrepreneurship is as accessible and meritocratic an activity as it may appear.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusion**

This thesis has addressed the gaps in entrepreneurship scholarship and Internet usage research around the phenomenon of individual actors using the Internet for entrepreneurship, and investigated the veracity of a number of popular assumptions about engaging in entrepreneurship online. Building on literature that has broadened the notion of entrepreneurship from the economy-shifting activities of heroic individuals to a more commonplace, everyday activity of deal-making and exchange, it moved the conversation on digital entrepreneurship away from its narrow focus on high-tech entrepreneurs, and to the growing number of individuals who are using the Internet to build businesses and facilitate processes of exchange. The portrayal of the Internet as a great leveler or equaliser, frequently found throughout popular media and political rhetoric, was questioned and critiqued to reveal an underpinning assumption that offline inequalities may be overcome simply by the digital nature of the means of transmission. It is often assumed that the online environment necessarily lowers barriers to entry and creates a 'level playing field' on which new and small firms can compete easily with large and established companies, and where access to offline resources is no longer important. Yet, although small businesses are ostensibly the focus of this discourse, most investigations into digital entrepreneurship have been limited to high-technology businesses, while the literature has generally ignored the many other kinds of entrepreneurship occurring online.

The review of literature on digital entrepreneurship revealed questions around inequality and social marginality that this thesis has strived to bring to the fore; namely, how resources are key to entrepreneurship even in an online context, how social positionality affects resource access, and thus, how people's experiences of digital entrepreneurship are affected by gender, class, race, and the intersections thereof. The theoretical paradigm of intersectionality and positionality, or the notion that one's position in social hierarchies enables or constrains access to opportunities and resources, was introduced in order to frame the multiple issues of marginality at work in the phenomenon. The thesis also drew upon cyberculture and cyberfeminist literature to bring to light two related issues: first, the manner in which the online space continues to be coded as White and male, and second, the prevalent assumption that issues of racial and gender-based discrimination are obsolete online, where socially marginalised bodies are expected to be able to remain hidden behind computer screens. The thesis adopted a critical realist methodological stance arguing that digital entrepreneurial activity required the presence of both internal and external enabling conditions, challenging the assumption that mere access to the Internet serves as a neutral, equalising means by which entrepreneurship can be meritocratically achieved. Overall, it has been argued that the literature on digital entrepreneurship is in need of a new perspective. The theoretical foundation and findings of the thesis support the position that social positionality is relevant to digital entrepreneurship – or, in other words, that digital entrepreneurship still requires offline resources, a contribution that should be taken into account by entrepreneurship scholarship, which is due to update its conception of the online environment so as to better and more accurately theorise entrepreneurial activity in a digital age.

### **10.1 Project Review and Contributions**

#### *Theoretical Foundation*

The online environment as a meaningful entrepreneurial context is currently under-theorised in the entrepreneurship and management literatures. Where it has been addressed, the literature is dated (e.g. Amit & Zott, 2001; Mahadevan, 2000). In addition, the heterogeneity of actors and activity now acknowledged by the general entrepreneurship literature has yet to reach the sparse literature on digital entrepreneurship (e.g. Dheeriyaa, 2009; Sanz-Velasco, 2007), which still appears to be primarily informed by a narrow 'heroic' white male model (Ogbor, 2000). Using the definition offered by Davidson and Vaast (2010: 2) of digital entrepreneurship as 'the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies', we see that the diversity of actors engaging in this type of entrepreneurship, and the gendered, classed and raced nature of their activities, have yet to be fully theorised in the literature. This is the first research gap that this thesis has addressed.

Next, the availability of resources is known to influence entrepreneurial outcomes (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Kirzner, 1973; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), but the literature rarely considers how and why resources are unequally distributed. This is a second gap, which was addressed by drawing upon notions of intersectionality and positionality (Anthias, 2001a & b), processes of social positioning on the basis of intersecting social categories such as gender, class, and race, resulting in 'naturalized...and relational hierarchization and unequal resource allocation' (Anthias, 2001a: 635). This thesis has argued that positionality is relevant to entrepreneurship, even in an online context. It drew upon interdisciplinary literature from gender studies, feminist theories of technology, cyberfeminism, critical race studies, and cyberculture studies to support these arguments and extend the literature on digital entrepreneurship.

The empirical component of this thesis was an investigation of women's digital entrepreneurial activity. It used an intersectional and positional framework that considered the impact of unequal access to material, political, and cultural resources, and sought to answer the proposed research question: *'How do social positionality and resource access affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship'?*

The objectives of the research were:

- To address the theoretical and empirical gap in existing entrepreneurship literature on digital entrepreneurial activities
- To ascertain how gender, class, race/ethnicity, and other relevant categories of social positionality intersect and affect resource access, and thus, UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship.

### *Methodology and Methods*

This thesis adopted a critical realist perspective in which reality is understood to exist independent of human knowledge. This view posits social categories as abstractions that do not refer to any 'essential truth' or set of specific life circumstances held in common. However, the social roles ascribed to people due to categories they occupy, or may be perceived to occupy, have concrete and real effects. The category of 'woman' (Gunnarsson, 2011) here signifies female-bodied or woman-identified people occupying a non-dominant space relative to male-bodied or man-identified people in social hierarchies. This study took an intersectional approach which considered the impacts of social positionality, primarily



in terms of gender, race and socio-economic class, on the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs. It conducted an immanent critique of existing assumptions within intersectionality theory and developed a critical realist positional approach to intersectional complexity. As gender is considered to be a fundamental marker of humanity (Butler, 1993) and women as a class are subordinated within the gender binary as well as underrepresented in research about digital or digital entrepreneurship, gender was used as the framing analysis and women were the subject of the investigation. However, an intersectional approach calls for issues of class and race/ethnicity to be explored as well in order to understand how they concurrently influence participant experience. In particular, the thesis investigated the experiences of women, who are marginalised as a group in entrepreneurship research and activity but, in developed Westernized economies, are understood to be increasingly using the Internet for entrepreneurial purposes. As the research question sought to understand heterogeneity of experience, a qualitative approach was chosen to reflect the diversity within the given population (Barbour, 2001).

A critical realist immanent critique of literature on digital entrepreneurship, asking *What conditions must be present in order for digital entrepreneurship to be possible?* revealed internal and external barriers that could prevent people from using the Internet effectively for entrepreneurship. Drawing upon critical realist theory on the conditions necessary to actualise the sequence of moments in a causal chain (Fleetwood, 2011), intrinsic and extrinsic enabling conditions as well as stimulating and releasing conditions for digital entrepreneurship – described in critical realist terms as the tendency of the Internet to support entrepreneurial activity – were identified. This critique supported the argument that the requirements for digital entrepreneurship go beyond simple Internet access to include qualities intrinsic to users as well as resources and conditions external to them.

The investigation method consisted of twenty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews with UK women digital entrepreneurs. The data was transcribed, entered into, and coded in NVivo10. A combination of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and critical realist retroductive analysis (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2011; Sayer, 1992; Mole, 2012) was used to identify findings in two main areas: how unequal social positionality and resource access manifested in the entrepreneurial experiences of participants, and how these inequalities affected their experiences of using the online environment for entrepreneurship.

### *Empirical Contributions*

Social positionality and resource access were found to affect UK women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship in a number of ways. A combination of critical resources and tacit knowledge was found to be essential to overcoming the various challenges presented by the online environment to entrepreneurship. Positionality in intersecting hierarchies of gender, race and social class was found to affect both resources and knowledge because of the way in which it impacted upon the social and psycho-social mechanisms behind digital entrepreneurship. The findings in Chapters 6 and 7 empirically demonstrate how material, cultural, and political resources are as important as technological knowledge when starting an online venture. Such resources, although recognised as critical to entrepreneurship, are here theoretically framed as fundamentally related to positionality; moreover, their unequal structural distribution remains relevant in an online context.

The set of mechanisms enabling social resource access was found to be antecedent to the mechanisms enabling technological know-how, suggesting that in order for people to use the Internet to support entrepreneurial activity, some degree of social resource access is required in order to develop the necessary individual know-how to take the business forward. Higher overall positionality increased the likelihood of social resources being accessible, and thus, the likelihood that participants could develop the know-how needed to establish a sustainable online venture. In a number of cases, a lack of structurally distributed resources that were the result of positionality (e.g. finance, time, or normative identity privilege) was shown to lead to structural impasses beyond which the business could not progress, or because of which crucial business decisions could not be made. However, higher positionality and increased access to greater and more valuable resources, such as finance and social networks higher in the social strata, appeared to decrease the need for technical expertise beyond an intermediate level, as this could be hired into the business. In contrast, lower social positionality and resource access increased the need for technical expertise, which served as a currency in the absence of other resources.

Heterogeneity in positionality and resource access also led to key differences in the reasons women chose to engage in digital entrepreneurship, the kinds of entrepreneurial activity they chose, and whether their experiences were generally positive or negative. Gender and normative gender roles played a major role in these decisions, in that an overwhelming majority of the women participants chose to enter into feminised sectors. Many chose digital businesses for the flexibility around caring responsibilities that they appeared to offer, or because having an online instead of a traditional business meant that they would be able to simultaneously contribute to the operations of other businesses within their household. The thesis lends further evidence to the established literature on homeworking and telework indicating that women, especially mothers with children at home, tend to be disproportionately disadvantaged by arrangements intended to enable them to 'balance' their work life and home life by dissolving the physical boundary between the two spaces (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Kelan, 2009; Mason et al., 2011; Mirchandani, 2000). In contrast, the accounts of many of the participants who were mothers and ran home-based online businesses suggest the intensification of both sets of responsibilities rather than any achievement of a confluence between the two.

Although respondents spoke of how motherhood was a source of idea generation, they also noted ways in which it tempered their aspirations or presented a major obstacle to growing their businesses. Some described intentionally keeping their businesses home-based in order to simultaneously care for children or even grandchildren, others expressed internal conflict about not being with their children enough, and still others described motherhood as an impediment to meeting all the demands of a growing business. The findings were consistent with investigations that suggest women's overrepresentation in smaller businesses and sectors with lower growth and earning potential is due in part to the caring and household responsibilities expected of them by the socially constructed normative gender roles for women (Kelan, 2009; Mirchandani, 1999). In addition, those respondents who did not have children also pointed to the seemingly never-ending nature of their work life, as having an online business means that the business was 'always open'; therefore, they described time management as

one of the most significant challenges they experienced. This sense of work 'never being done' appears to be significantly amplified by the presence of children in the household.

Having the support of family members for their business appeared to make experiences more positive, while having caring responsibilities made them more negative or, at the least, more challenging. The presence of other substantial income sources, such as from professional-level employment or a partner's income, tended to make the experiences of participants more positive and easier. Similarly, being simultaneously employed at a level where one could work flexibly, or on paid maternity leave, also tended to contribute to more positive entrepreneurial experiences. Conversely, low-paid employment in the service industries tended to impede entrepreneurial activity by limiting available finance and time. Although some participants noted that being a woman was a benefit to their businesses, many still reported experiencing sexism and not being taken seriously as a business owner.

Issues of racism due to racial positionality also contributed to experiences of frustration: for example, when products made by Black participants were unduly assumed to be limited to a Black target market, or when whitewashing was recommended to Black and Asian participants as a way of avoiding racial discrimination. Other aspects of social positionality, such as age and geographical location, were (in conjunction with their gender, race and class) also found to have impacts upon key areas of their experiences: for example, why they started an online business, how they were treated by potential clients and colleagues, and whether or not the places in which they lived generally enabled or constrained their entrepreneurial activity.

This evidence supports literature emphasising the relevance of social positionality and life conditions to entrepreneurial activity, and in particular, the work of Anderson and Miller (2003) and Jayawarna et al. (2014) on the impact of class and life course pathways, and Marlow and McAdam (2013) on how women's gendered socio-economic positionality gives rise to performance constraints. It complements these investigations with an explicit intersectional perspective that qualitatively illustrates Jayawarna et al.'s (2014) findings that class privilege is mediated by gender. Not only does the thesis corroborate such findings, but it also extends them in two important ways – first, by illustrating how they apply in the realm of digital businesses, and second, by offering insight into other ways in which categories intersect – for example, that class privilege mobilised in the labour force is mediated by race as well as gender, leading to simultaneously raced, classed and gendered employment histories affecting the entrance of participants into digital entrepreneurship as well as their experiences therein. By providing evidence for the relevance of positionality and attendant resources to the entrepreneurial process, this work counters the hegemonic, heroic notion of entrepreneurship (Ogbor, 2000) that features a rags-to-riches white male protagonist marshalling resources outside of his control, and instead illustrates how resources currently controlled are of critical importance, even if the business is primarily organised and enacted using digital technologies. The presupposition that the use of such technologies enables restrictive social hierarchies to be transcended and resource limitations to be overcome is challenged by the findings of this thesis.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

The primary broad contribution of this thesis is its novel critique of the Internet as a neutral and meritocratic space for entrepreneurship. Drawing upon cyberfeminist arguments that there is no exclusively virtual environment that exists separate from the social world, it calls attention to the differential resource requirements and enabling conditions for various digital entrepreneurial activities, as well as highlights how the hegemonic ideal entrepreneur archetype articulated by critical scholars of entrepreneurship is translated into the online space. It makes a case for why social factors such as positionality and resource distribution have significant impacts upon the processes and outcomes of digital entrepreneurial activities. The supposedly virtual nature of interaction does not preclude the need to create an accurate, authentic representation of oneself that is inextricably linked to an embodied subject being. Furthermore, the challenges of representation online reflect those of representation offline, wherein legitimacy is gained primarily through attempts to conform to or portray the ideal entrepreneurial type. In the event that entrepreneurial actors of colour engage in online whitewashing practices to try to more closely resemble this type, further challenges are introduced. Thus, the paper identifies a theoretical tension between a conception of the Internet as a place where entrepreneurial opportunity is equally available to all, and the issues that arise due to unequal social resource access and the expectations of an accurate virtual representation of the digital entrepreneur's embodied subject being. This is in concordance with feminist theories on science and technology indicating that as a socio-technical artefact, the online environment can reflect, reproduce, and potentially exacerbate offline social hierarchies.

The implications of such an argument are substantial. The current trend of encouraging digital enterprise as a means to social mobility and economic independence for marginalised and disadvantaged people, without accounting for the ways in which offline positionality may serve to constrain entrepreneurial activity and explicitly introducing measures for this to be overcome, seems to be a recipe for imminent failure. Yet, if the alleged neutrality of the digital environment in which they are working is maintained, then such failure can more easily be attributed to agential error rather than to structural barriers, even if it is unable to be overcome by simply increasing the output or quality of individual labour. However, the overarching contribution of the paper extends beyond its central critique of the Internet as a neutral and meritocratic entrepreneurial platform, to a wider critique of entrepreneurship in general as a meritocratic activity. It concludes that the ontological assumptions underpinning much of the discourse on entrepreneurship, and on digital entrepreneurship in particular, are marred by their inattention to the socially embedded nature of such activities.

Another broad contribution of the thesis is its development of intersectionality theory using a critical realist philosophical perspective (Martinez Dy et al., 2014). Not only has it drawn upon critical realist tools to conceptually advance intersectionality theory, it has also conducted an intersectional data analysis using the critical realist retroductive method. In so doing, it has emphasised how such a method may help to identify which categories in an intersectional analysis are most relevant and should be brought to the analytical foreground, a methodological question that has been confounding intersectionality research for some time and which is only now beginning to be addressed (Anthias, 2013).

The research also makes a contribution to the critical gender studies conversation on post-feminism by applying it to the context of digital technologies and entrepreneurship. McRobbie's figure of the working girl (2009) is here theoretically extended to include the related figures of the entrepreneurial woman and the mumpreneur. Their ventures, likely to be in feminised and woman-oriented business sectors (e.g. children's products, beauty and fashion), alongside a celebration of stereotypically feminine characteristics (e.g. physical attractiveness, co-operation and relationship-building) as beneficial to their businesses, serve not only to reconcile traditionally masculine entrepreneurship activities with a feminine gender identification, but also to shift the image of the entrepreneur in public discourse so that women entrepreneurs do not present a challenge to, but are instead made to appear compatible with, normative gender roles for women. Additionally, the emergence of these figures, and women seeking to emulate them, is arguably accelerated and enabled by the digital technologies that have transformed working practices. Entrepreneurial women and mothers are now expected to use these technologies to seamlessly connect work and home life (Ekinsmyth, 2013b), without acknowledging that responsibility for unpaid work has traditionally been a primary feature of women's home lives.

A key contribution to the emerging literature on digital entrepreneurship is that the pool of individuals who are able to establish viable online businesses with minimal financial capital tends to be limited to knowledge-based service providers. These individuals, because of the knowledge and experience required for these roles, are likely to belong to higher class and occupational strata, and have extensive professional experience that they can convert into a valuable B2B or B2C service. Conversely, those respondents who were not knowledge-based service providers, but were from working-class or precarious class backgrounds and were attempting to trade higher-value, higher margin products, tended to face structural obstacles due to lack of sufficient finance and no alternative funding sources or options. Start-up businesses generally rely on personal savings, friends and family for their first round of funding. This was supported in the findings, which showed all of the businesses were started on personal and household savings, with one business additionally using credit cards. Thus, due to the homophily of social networks and start-up teams (Ruef et al., 2003), individuals positioned lower in the class strata are likely to have less access to finance, because both they and the people they know will most likely possess fewer financial resources. For these individuals, even the perceived low cost of entry of online businesses can still be prohibitive, leading to structural impasses, or practical obstacles posed by actor positionality in social structures, beyond which a business cannot progress.

Finally, this thesis makes a timely contribution to the conversations on digital entrepreneurship as well as race and cyberspace by calling attention to the phenomenon of whitewashing in an online context for entrepreneurial purposes. Whitewashing means to take on a false white identity online in order to hide a non-white race or ethnicity, ostensibly to minimise discrimination and facilitate business transactions. This phenomenon, independent of entrepreneurial activity, is under-theorised in both cyberfeminist literature as well as that on race and cyberspace. Therefore, as a technique to facilitate entrepreneurship, there is very little known. However, these literatures stress that gender and race do still matter in cyberspace (Boudourides & Drakou, 2000; Daniels, 2009; 2012; Nakamura, 2002), and that socio-economic disadvantage is in fact reproduced online (boyd, 2009). Notably, Nakamura (2002) points out that commercial activity 'outs' marked bodies online, an insight supported by evidence from

the findings that stress the value that an authentic, or apparently authentic, owner identity lends to online business transactions and attracting customers. If, as the literature contends, racist discrimination is still present online, then entrepreneurs of colour face arguably more challenges than white entrepreneurs in representing themselves and their businesses. This was found to be the case amongst the sample population. By illustrating encounters with whitewashing in the experiences of BME digital entrepreneurs in the UK, and contrasting them against the experiences of white digital entrepreneurs, the thesis highlights how processes of self-representation necessary for digital entrepreneurial activity are enabled or constrained by the presence or absence of normative racial identity privilege; in this case, whiteness. It concludes that the phenomenon of whitewashing is problematic in both concept and practice, as it creates new problems for entrepreneurs rather than solving existing ones as it is meant to do. Neither does it critically analyse nor question the ways in which the Internet in Western societies continues to be racially coded as white. The thesis supports the assertion by Daniels (2009) that the notion that racialised bodies can be transcended in cyberspace is based on an outdated concept of a text-based Internet that does not reflect the visually rich platforms of today. Hence, it serves to critique and challenge the popular notion that the online environment allows individuals to unproblematically transcend social hierarchies and discrimination through invisibilisation of the entrepreneur.

## **10.2 Limitations**

A number of limitations to the empirical research of this thesis must be acknowledged, most of which are practical and related to the boundaries and characteristics of the sample population. Certain sectors and geographical locations were meant to be included amongst the sample; unfortunately, individuals from such groups were unable to be accessed. In particular, high-technology entrepreneurs are not included. However, they tend to be the focus of most studies of technology-related entrepreneurship, and a central objective of the research was to diversify and complicate the mainstream perception of digital entrepreneurship by drawing attention to those who are working outside the boundary of the high-technology sector. Thus, this limitation is not considered to be severe as the literature on high-technology entrepreneurship seems well-established. There also exist a small number of investigations into women high-technology entrepreneurs (e.g. Mayer, 2006; Kaplan & Malach-Pines, 2010) from which useful insight can be drawn, both to supplement this investigation and as a springboard for future research. The study was also intended to be UK-wide, but participants were unable to be obtained in Wales and Northern Ireland due to insufficient contacts in these areas at the time the research was undertaken. These are identified as areas for future research; however, the range of geographical contexts (rural, small/suburban and large urban) included in the present sample population may help somewhat to ameliorate the effect of this limitation.

The sample was obtained primarily through purposive sampling in which most respondents voluntarily agreed to participate after self-selecting into the population based on a set of provided criteria, and some agreed to participate after being individually invited to do so. However, a small number of the respondents were obtained through snowball sampling, in which a purposively selected participant recommended another potential participant for the study. There is the potential for some degree of associate bias with the snowballing method of sampling, in that the number of participants who are

working in feminised or traditionally feminine sectors may be overrepresented. However, the high proportion of the sample working in feminised sectors or professions is consistent with existing studies on women web entrepreneurs in the UK and US (Forson & Özbilgin, 2003; Jome et al., 2006). Thus, it may be assumed that any bias due to the sampling method is inconsequential.

Additionally, there is also the potential for some self-selection bias that led to the majority of the sample consisting of established entrepreneurs who had been trading successfully for some time, alongside early-stage entrepreneurs whose businesses were trading, but were still in development stages. It is possible that entrepreneurs whose businesses had failed or closed would not self-select into participation, for either emotional (e.g. shame, disappointment, or regret about business closure) or practical reasons (e.g. assuming they did not fit the criteria) or a combination of the two. This is suggested by the circumstances of the two participants whose businesses had closed or were not currently trading, as both were individually invited to participate and initially questioned their suitability for the study when contact was made. This limitation could be reconciled by future research in which digital entrepreneurs whose businesses had failed or closed were explicitly included in the selection criteria.

Another limitation is that the sample population is not representative of the entire theoretical typology of entrepreneurial activity in the online environment proposed in Chapter 2. Ideally, the research would have included participants in each segment, or at least in each mode of exchange, working at various levels of expertise. Unfortunately, due to time and resource constraints, this was not possible. The participants and their businesses were primarily located in the NVC mode of exchange, and most were working at a basic or intermediate level of technical expertise. In addition, the sample was unintentionally but completely composed of micro-businesses, employing ten or fewer people, which could be read as another limitation. However, there is an expansive range of diversity and high degree of qualitative richness amongst the sample population, which crosses boundaries of age, sector, experience and demographic background. What this suggests is a significant amount of within-group diversity amongst women digital entrepreneurs, even amongst a limited number of segments of the typology. As a platform for future research, it seems likely that selecting a single mode of exchange and skill level could be a fruitful method of developing criteria to explore the different component populations of the typology in more depth.

A key population not included in the study, but which it is essential to consider in an investigation of women's entrepreneurial activity online, are the growing numbers of women who engaging in sex work via the online environment. This includes adult models, actresses and webcam 'girls'. Although most industries have been transformed by the influx of digital technologies, arguably there is none more so than the adult entertainment industry. There has been some coverage of this topic in the popular media (e.g. BBC, 2014), but there is little academic research in the area (see Bailey, 2009; Senft, 2008). There are likely a number of context-specific ethical considerations and unique research challenges that would have been entailed had sex workers been included in the sample population. This would have required reviews of specific literature and additional practical preparation; therefore, due to time and resource constraints, it was decided that they would not be considered in this particular study. This is arguably a substantial limitation, as it is possible that the relevance of offline resources to digital entrepreneurship

suggested by the findings could potentially be challenged by evidence from the adult entertainment industry. However, the thesis provides a theoretical platform for future research into this sector. There are also other limitations regarding the sample population, in that it was unable to access members of certain prevalent UK immigrant populations (e.g. white and non-white Eastern European) and non-English speaking ethnic minority entrepreneurs due to a lack of contacts and communication with potential participants from these groups. Neither did it include the experiences of men. It is again suggested that the theoretical framework and contributions of this research can facilitate future research into how digital entrepreneurship is experienced by members of these populations.

A final practical limitation of the study is that due to time and resource constraints, additional sources of evidence beyond interviews were not able to be systematically collected and included in the analysis. Future qualitative research into digital entrepreneurs would benefit from incorporating and analysing aspects of their online footprint: for example, text, video and imagery from websites and social media accounts, or content from crowdfunding campaigns, in order to provide further insight into how they are using the online environment for entrepreneurial ends. There is also an emerging trend in entrepreneurship research to use textual analysis tools for quantitative analysis of digital texts; this is another possible approach to researching, for example, social media engagement and crowdfunding campaigns.

A more conceptual set of limitations to the study are presented by the choice of a critical realist methodology, which, in attempting to bridge the macro and the micro, leaves certain aspects of the phenomenon beyond the scope of investigation. First, it was not possible for the research to be representative of, or generalisable to, a larger population due to the combination of sample size, purposive sampling method, and qualitative nature of the investigation. It is likely that an empirical realist approach using random sampling and quantitative methods, collecting data via tools such as surveys, text or data mining would be useful for making broader claims about the phenomenon. Second, the methodology was not suited to produce fine-grained insight into the agential processes in which people engage when navigating intersectionality in the context of digital entrepreneurship. Such information may be better gleaned by a post-structuralist approach that looks closely at identity construction, perhaps with a narrative method of analysis upon the life histories of participants, or a discursive analysis that deconstructs the digital texts the entrepreneur produces to ascertain how entrepreneurial identity is constructed online. While methodological limitations and the value of different approaches for exploring various aspects of the phenomenon are certainly acknowledged, the choice of methodology for this thesis was driven primarily by the research question, which was exploratory in nature. Accordingly, some initial claims about the effects of social structures upon the experiences of these participants were able to be made. It may be that a pluralism of methodological perspectives, methods and tools, attuned to key social and technological developments in the subject area, is the most effective means by which to produce a body of research which collectively addresses the impact of the online environment upon entrepreneurial activity and the experiences of digital entrepreneurs.



### 10.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

As the qualitative empirical study of this thesis was intended to be generalisable primarily to theory rather than to the population, caution should be exercised when drawing out policy implications. However, the findings provide some evidence illustrating that small amounts of seed funding for online business ideas may be ineffective if the entrepreneurs are not already in possession of the other resources and skills necessary to build a successful online venture. General business knowledge, access to key networks, tacit knowledge of the online space, the ability to learn and be dynamic are all critical to digital business development, and these are only built up with experience and over time. Therefore, it seems unlikely that individuals with no experience of running an online business will be able to use seed funding and minimal training to quickly build businesses that are a significant and sustainable source of income for themselves and their households. The findings also suggest that those entering into entrepreneurship, even digital entrepreneurship, benefit significantly from having a primary income source to sustain themselves during the start-up process, as it enables them to experiment and grow the business gradually, in stages, in order to develop their skills, competencies, and confidence over time.

Next, policymakers and media professionals should be aware that many women are entering into digital entrepreneurship with the intention of developing a better work-life balance, and finding that this is not the case. Thus, any attempts to encourage and promote digital entrepreneurship amongst women as a means to such an end should be tempered, not sold as a panacea that will serve to create unrealistic expectations in the minds of the public. The possibility that such schemes may be setting unprepared people up for failure must be a key point of consideration in these debates.

One conclusion that should importantly *not* be taken from these findings is the view that only individuals from higher social positions will be successful with their online ventures. This is patently not the case. What should be understood is that these individuals are better equipped and therefore, more likely to have the resources available to build online ventures that are sustainable, adequately capitalised and resourced, and more orientated towards growth. There will undoubtedly be individuals from positions lower in the social hierarchy who are able to work with minimal resources to develop successful online businesses, despite disadvantages in some areas; it can safely be assumed that what they are lacking is made up for in other areas. However, these people appear to be the exception, not the rule, and policymakers should take this into account.

One practical trend that emerged from the findings is that a number of participants noted that it took about six months of trading to gain a critical mass of users to their sites, or to obtain sufficient sales revenue such that there was clearly a market for the business and that it could be made sustainable. Although this evidence is more anecdotal than conclusive and should be investigated further, it suggests that a six month trading period may be an appropriate amount of time after which new digital entrepreneurs should seriously evaluate the viability of their businesses, or at least, the effectiveness of their websites and other aspects of digital marketing.

The study also contains another key implication for practice, which is that the existence of the phenomenon of whitewashing underscores the fact that race is still relevant, and racist discrimination

still present, in the online environment. The findings clearly demonstrate how being compelled to whitewash serves to create new challenges rather than rectify existing ones. Thus, it should not be considered a viable option for minimising racial discrimination online, nor should it be recommended to ethnic minority digital entrepreneurs. An alternative and perhaps effective approach is to omit the picture and personal information of the business owner; however, this may lead to an implicit whitewashing, and is generally not an appropriate option for service providers, although it is their choice. Authenticity is valued online, as are personal stories and seeming 'real' in order to inspire trust, and the act of whitewashing is both a contradiction and an impediment to any aspirations of authenticity. This critique is particularly relevant for practitioners, business advisors and mentors.

#### **10.4 Directions for Future Research**

This thesis opens up a number of topics for future investigation and provides an initial conceptual platform for future research. Not only may the research questions be investigated in a number of other contexts, but as a result of the findings, interesting questions also arise in numerous related areas. A primary knowledge gap that this study has identified is a need for rigorous quantitative data on digital entrepreneurship rates over time, an area that has thus far been overlooked by most large-scale surveys of Internet usage, such as those conducted by Pew Research (US) and Ofcom (UK) and yet which should be a priority in light of UK and European government and corporate initiatives to stimulate digital enterprise.

The research questions posed by this thesis could be investigated with more homogenous research samples, and critical realist retroductive analyses conducted to identify the key intersectional structural mechanisms affecting each individual. The study could also be replicated in other national or cultural contexts, or in cross-country comparative studies. Expanding the investigation to other countries, both those similar to the UK, where whiteness is considered the norm, as well as others where it is not, would give us insight into how people from various national, racial and ethnic backgrounds engage with self-representation online and any challenges they face in doing so. There is scope for the study to be replicated with the inclusion of men, and more transgender or genderqueer individuals. Rather than aiming for comparisons between men and women as has often been the case in the past, intersectionality and positionality could provide a framework to explore either access or obstacles to the range of entrepreneurial resources in the experiences of individuals of a variety of demographic backgrounds. In particular, qualitatively exploring the perceptions and experiences of men and masculine-identified people could be valuable, as technology and the online environment tend to be coded as masculine, so it can be assumed that they will experience a lesser degree of markedness and marginality than that faced by women, especially women of colour. Thus, it would be interesting to determine if this is true, and if so, if it makes a difference to their experiences of digital entrepreneurship. It would be especially useful for such a study to further investigate the gendered divisions of online labour suggested by the empirical findings of this thesis, which could be facilitated by exploring gender-based divisions across the typology of digital entrepreneurial activity offered in Chapter 2 (Figure 3). The findings could also be developed into hypotheses and tested quantitatively with larger samples in order to be more representative and increase generalisability.

The findings of the research also give rise to a number of related issues that it would be worthwhile to explore further in order to develop a more well-rounded understanding of entrepreneuring via digital technologies. The notion of authenticity or inauthenticity in one's online presence is a rich and under-theorised topic area in entrepreneurship and management studies that could be explored in a number of social contexts. Building on current work on online anonymity and socio-materiality (e.g. Scott & Orlikowski, 2014), there is scope for experimental investigations in which multiple online profiles are created, featuring people of different races but similar qualifications, to see how they fare in entrepreneurial activity such as social networking. Studies could also be undertaken into any aspects of the models of generative mechanisms developed in Chapter 7 to explore the preconditions necessary for effective engagement with digital technologies resulting in entrepreneurial activity. Additionally, longitudinal studies of digital entrepreneurs from the idea generation stage to stages of trading and growth would give us a much better understanding of how resources are employed in the process of developing online businesses. In particular, it would be interesting to look more closely at how entrepreneurs use third-party platforms, such as eBay and Amazon marketplace, how such tools enable or constrain their business performance, and the decision-making processes around whether to sell via these tools exclusively, in conjunction with independent websites, or via independent websites alone.

Some recent social phenomena in which the areas of entrepreneurship, gender and digital technologies converge are 1) the TransH\*ck movement (<http://www.transhack.org>), organised on the concept of transgender individuals building and using open source technologies to improve the lives of trans and gender non-conforming people, and 2) specialist technology education directed at marginalised individuals (e.g. Black Girls Code: <http://www.blackgirlscodes.com/>). This appears to be an emergent and growing, yet under-researched set of phenomena prompting many interesting questions which could be addressed using some of the concepts from this thesis. Studies of this kind could be accomplished either qualitatively, through interviews, observation, and journals, or quantitatively through surveys and self-monitoring tools.

Finally, as previously mentioned, engaging with the topic of women's digital entrepreneurship raises questions around the experiences of people using digital technologies to participate in sex work and the adult entertainment industry. This type of grey market entrepreneurship is a widespread phenomenon with significant economic effects, but due to the taboo and marginalised nature of the subject, is severely overlooked and under-theorised in academic literature. The entrepreneurial activity of those people, of any gender, who use digital technologies to sell adult images, videos, screen time and other sexual services may be studied via interviews, netnography (Kozinets, 2010), textual and discourse analysis, and/or longitudinally to ascertain answers to such research questions as: understanding their digital 'footprint', the role of digital technologies in their entrepreneurial activity, what the entrepreneurial process looks like in the sector, online and offline resources required, particular strategies employed, questions around entrepreneurial agency in online sex work, and challenges or concerns unique to their specific industry and work experiences. Quantitative surveys could also provide further insight into the prevalence and scope of this phenomenon. With its intersectional framework and simultaneous focus on resource access, this thesis provides a theoretical and empirical foundation for future research in this area.

## 10.5 Concluding Remarks

This thesis challenges contemporary perspectives upon digital entrepreneurship. While it has shown that the academic conceptualisation of entrepreneurship in the online environment must strive to be as dynamic as the technologies it aims to study, it also theoretically and empirically critiques the taken-for-granted positive assumptions about the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunities for all presented by the digital age. Drawing upon feminist theories of technology, alongside insights from intersectionality and positionality theory, this thesis has illustrated the interconnectedness of the online and offline worlds, and called attention to the blurred boundary between the two. It has argued that although the Internet's potential contributions to entrepreneurship are many and varied, it is not a neutral technology, nor does it level the playing field. Simple Internet access is not enough to ensure that entrepreneurial activity will necessarily be supported by the online environment – a degree of tacit knowledge is required in order to make the Internet work for you. Moreover, entrepreneurial activity is arguably one of the more challenging uses of the online environment, requiring continual processes of learning and re-training as some skills become obsolete and others become central. Similar to the offline world, those who are better positioned and have greater access to the skills and resources necessary to achieve their goals will be more likely to do so. However, this is neither meant to discourage those from disadvantaged backgrounds from starting online businesses, nor to assert that those who are privileged will be assured success. It is instead the primary intention of this thesis to complicate existing notions of the Internet as a place where all entrepreneurial dreams come true. For many, the Internet is more than a source of information and entertainment, but a part of life in which interactions taking place via screens and pixels are as real to them, if not more so, as those that occur in the world of flesh and blood. As a branch of the real world, then, work in virtual space is neither divorced nor divorceable from its offline context. So, if a means to effective poverty alleviation or a cure for economic stagnation has not yet been created in the offline world, it is unlikely to be found online.

Researchers, policymakers, and media commentators have a responsibility to be accurate about the limitations of digital technologies, and to realistically evaluate and present what they can and cannot do. Although it may be true that the development of Internet and computing technologies have been at the forefront of changes in economic structures, industry and work practices in the contemporary period, we must resist the temptation to join any bandwagon that makes blanket assumptions regarding their liberatory or equalising potential. We would do well to recall that in the case of any technology, some will be better prepared or more able to use it than others. Therefore, a complex, even wicked, problem like social inequality cannot and will not be solved by the widespread introduction of a new technology. Amongst those who are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, it may be assumed that a good number will be excluded from its use, and only a limited few will be able to use it to overcome the many tangible and intangible barriers they face. Although this fits with a neoliberal ideology of individualist success, it is not a solution to widespread inequity. Simultaneously, those who are generally socially privileged will continue to benefit from the sources of privilege, which, as this research shows, are likely to be amplified by the addition of such technologies. The result is the very real potential for inequality, rather than being ameliorated by technology, to be exacerbated by it. It cannot be expected that individual use of the Internet, as heterogeneous as it is, can somehow compensate for centuries of marginalisation and

discrimination that have led to some people facing greater obstacles to socio-economic well-being than others. Instead, challenges to inequality will have to be more intentional, more comprehensive, and executed at a more structural level, if any meaningful and lasting change to the existing social order is to be made.

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## 12. Appendices

### A. Interview Schedule

#### Women's Online Entrepreneurship Interview Questions

1. How did the business get started? Where did you get the idea? How did you go about setting it up?
2. What kinds of resources did you have at the time, and what did you need? How did you go about obtaining start-up resources?
3. Are there any specific resources you still need? What would you do if you had these resources?
4. Describe the role that the Internet or online environment plays in your business.
5. What has been your experience of working in the online environment?
6. What are the benefits and the challenges of having an online business? What does the Internet allow you to do? What obstacles does it pose?
7. What technical knowledge or skills have you needed to develop/build your business? What technical skills have you learnt/are you learning/do you plan to learn?
8. Do you think being a woman is relevant to your experience of doing business? If so, how?
9. Do you think race, ethnicity, or culture is relevant to your experience of doing business? If so, how?
10. Do you think social class plays a role in your experience of doing business? If so, how?
11. What kind of advice/support did you seek or receive? Who has been the most helpful to you in terms of business development and growth?
12. Does your social position – e.g. people you know, resources to which you have access, and the way you are viewed by others – have a positive or negative impact on your business? Please explain.
13. Do you have plans for growth? Why/why not? If yes, what steps are you taking to get there?
14. What are the most important things to remember when conducting business online?
15. What are the most significant obstacles to you getting to where you want to be?
16. If you could change anything, what would you have done differently?

**B. Participant Profile Questionnaire**

Women's Online Entrepreneurship Study

Participant Profile Questionnaire

*(please tick or write in as appropriate)*

1. Age     18-30     31-40     41-50     51-60     60+

2. Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

White

English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British

Irish

Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Any other White background, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

Asian / Asian British

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Arab

Any other Asian background, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

African (please specify country) \_\_\_\_\_

Caribbean (please specify country) \_\_\_\_\_

Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups

White and Black Caribbean (please specify country) \_\_\_\_\_

White and Black African (please specify country) \_\_\_\_\_

White and Asian (please specify background) \_\_\_\_\_

Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

Any other ethnic group, please describe \_\_\_\_\_

3. Sexuality

Straight (Heterosexual)     Lesbian     Bisexual     Other (please specify)

4. Marital Status



Single     Partnered     Married     Divorced     Widowed

5. Do you have children?  Y  N    If yes, how many?  Ages: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you have a disability?  Y  N    If yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your highest level of qualification?

none     GCSE (1-5) or  (1-8)     A Levels     Degree (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

8. If you attended university, are you of the first generation in your family to do so? ( Y / N )

9. If no, which generation(s) attended university? (Mark any that apply/are known)

Parents

Grandparents

Great-grandparents

10. What is your annual household income?

Under £10K

£10-25K

£25-50K

£50-100K

Over £100K

11. What is your annual personal income?

Under £10K

£10-25K

£25-50K

£50-100K

Over £100K

12. Are you the sole, primary, or secondary earner in your household?

- Sole
- Primary
- Secondary

13. If you are not the primary earner, which of the below best describes the type of work that the primary earner in your household does:

- Professional
- Administrative
- Managerial
- Freelance
- Service or Retail
- Other (please specify)

14. How much finance did you have when you started your business?

- £0-500
- £500-1K
- £1K-5K
- £5K-10K
- £10K-20K
- £20K-50K
- £50K-100K
- £100K+

15. What was your primary source of start-up finance? (can tick more than one)

- Personal Savings
- Credit Card
- Friends & Family
- Bank or Financial Institution Loan
- Venture Capital

16. How many employees, if any, do you have in your business? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you rent or own your current home?  rent  own

### **C. Pilot Interview Schedule**

1. Age, gender identity/sexual orientation, ethnicity, educational background
2. How do you make a living?
3. Would you describe yourself as self-employed? Full or part time?
4. If you are self-employed, is this by choice or by necessity? Please explain if possible.
5. Is the Internet a major factor in the way you do business? How/Why?
6. What do you do online to make money?
7. Please tell me what you see as an opportunity.
8. Have you ever thought about going into another sector or had an idea for another kind of product? Would you pursue it? Why/Why not?
9. How have you financed your business? Do you have any external funding?
10. What kind of barriers/challenges have you faced? Are they similar to or different from barriers or challenges you have experienced with “regular” employment? How?
11. Have you experienced discrimination? Has it hindered your business opportunities or processes at all?
12. How does the Internet contribute to your activities?
13. What are the challenges of working in an online environment? What barriers or stresses might it present to your work habits, connecting with your customers?
14. What are your main goals in your online business activities?
15. Are you/would you incorporate or register your business? Why or why not?
16. Do you have ambitions or targets, goals for growth? Why or why not?
17. How do you see yourself as a business person?
18. How do others see your online business activity? What do your family and friends say?

#### **D. Stepwise Framework for Critical Realist Data Analysis**

(cited from Bygstad and Munkvold, 2011: 5-7)

##### Step 1: Description of events

In a critical realist context events are clusters of observations, which may have been made by the researcher or by the researcher's informants (Sayer 1992). Typical events in an IS case are, for instance, the decision to buy an ERP system, the technical integration of the ERP system with other systems (which may be problematic), and the training of users (which may be met with resistance).

##### Step 2: Identification of key components

The key components are the real objects of the case, for example persons, organizations and systems. They constitute structures, i.e. networks of objects, with causal powers. Entities may emerge from data, in a grounded way (see Volkoff et al., 2007), or they may be embedded in a theoretical framework (Danermark et al. 2002). For example, Easton analyzes a CRM case, and identifies four entities based on an economic exchange model: the company, the CRM vendor, the exchange relationship and a government knowledge transfer program (Easton 2010).

##### Step 3: Theoretical re-description (abduction)

To be able to work with retrodution we need to abstract the case, exploring different theoretical perspectives and explanations (Danermark et al. 2002). A case is a *case of something*, which transcends the actual events. Theoretical re-description could be based on social theory (such as Giddens' structuration theory) or more limited middle range theory. According to Danermark et al. the researcher should identify relevant theories, and compare and integrate them when possible, in order to increase theoretical sensitivity and understand the events in more depth. For example, Smith researched the relationship between e-government and citizens' trust in government institutions. Discussing theories of trust at three different levels (starting with sociology and psychology) enabled him to reframe and generalize the case (Smith 2010).

##### Step 4: Retrodution: Identification of candidate mechanisms

This step is the most crucial, and we will detail it into two sub-steps.

*Sub-step 4.1: The interplay of objects.* In the IS field this interplay is often between social and technical objects (identified in step 2), which allows for the identification of socio-technical mechanisms. Objects have internal attributes (such as structure) and external attributes (such as interfaces, or modes of communication), which allows for interplay with other objects, and we should focus on these in order to identify relations of exteriority: for example, we should look for *how* social entities interact with technical entities, to produce the observed outcomes. As an example, Lyytinen and Newman (2008) used the four elements from Leavitt's diamond (people, technology, organization and tasks) to describe how the interplay between them constituted the mechanisms of socio-technical change.

*Sub-step 4.2: Looking for micro-macro mechanisms.* According to DeLanda (2006, p.34), we should look

for two types of mechanisms:

- The *micro-macro mechanisms*, which explain the emergent behavior, i.e. how different components interact in order to produce an outcome at a macro level.
- The *macro-micro mechanisms*, which explain how the whole enables and constrains the various parts.

The notions of macro and micro should not be understood absolutely, such as human individuals at a micro level and society at a macro level. Rather, DeLanda uses these terms in a relativistic way; an object is *macro* related to sub-level components, but *micro* related to higher levels. A particularly interesting kind of mechanism in IS research is the self-reinforcing mechanism, which combines both DeLanda's types.

#### Step 5: Analysis of mechanisms and outcomes

In an open system there are a number of mechanisms. When we have found a new mechanism, we can identify others by asking how the context (i.e. other mechanisms) influences on the triggering of the mechanism (Sayer 1992). A more detailed analysis of the selected mechanism(s) includes using the Context-Mechanism-Outcome form (Pawson and Tilley 1997). The outcome of mechanisms could be analyzed with forward chaining (in order to understand intentions) and backwards chaining (to understand results) (Pettigrew 1985). Context includes other active mechanisms; at a deeper level there is a continuous interaction between causal powers which will change contingencies (Yeung, 1997). For instance, if we studied user participation in IS development, and found that in some cases it did *not* result in user acceptance, we should look for other mechanisms that are influencing on the outcome, and describe the necessary context (for successful user participation) accordingly.

#### Step 6: Validation of explanatory power

In any open system there are a number of mechanisms, and the aim of analysis is not to find as many as possible; on the contrary, the aim is to identify a key mechanism. This would be the mechanism with the strongest explanatory power related to the empirical evidence, i.e. the causal structure that explains best the events observed (Sayer 1992). A proposed mechanism should be treated as a candidate explanation, and the data collection and analysis should be repeated until closure is reached. In addition, other techniques for validation could be used, for example informants' feedback (Bygstad and Munkvold 2011). The results from points 1-6 do not complete the research process, but constitute the evidence for a further discussion on (i) the similarities with other mechanisms and (ii) the theoretical and practical implications of the analysis conducted. According to Easton (2010), "generalization to theory via case research carried out under critical realist conventions occurs by virtue of clarifying the theoretical nature of the entities involved, the ways in which they act and the nature and variety of mechanisms through which they exert their powers or acted upon by other entities" (p. 128). We also refer to his study for discussion on critical realist case method leading up to the data analysis stage. Summing-up these points, we would suggest that an objective for a critical realist-inspired IS researcher could be to identify *socio-technical mechanisms*, i.e. mechanisms that are triggered by the interaction of

social and technological objects. Further, since we often are dealing with large socio-technical structures, such as information infrastructures, we should look for socio-technical mechanisms that are “self-feeding” or self-reinforcing. Such mechanisms are for example growth mechanisms; that certain forms of technology adoption leads to more use, and so on. An illustrating example was described by Ciborra and Failla who investigated a CRM implementation failure (Ciborra and Failla 2000). Analyzing the reasons for the failure they concluded that there was nothing wrong with neither the organization nor the CRM software, but that "CRM seems to have no built in mechanisms by which it acquires its own momentum and the diffusion becomes a self-feeding process". This implied that although the implementation process was well conducted, there is an underlying problem with the CRM concept that makes implementation an uphill struggle. Thus, the knowledge of mechanisms is not only theoretically interesting, but also has practical implications.