



# Strategising practices in an informal economy setting: A case of strategic networking



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing interest in strategy as situated practice, studies that examine strategising practices in the informal economy are lacking. This article draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice to understand strategic networking practices in an informal economy setting. Employing ethnographic techniques, it sets out to study how an informal business and its network partners do strategic networking. We found that their strategic networking practices pivot around co-opetition, and are characterised within four interconnected themes: open communication, mutual surrogacy, fraternal engagement and naturalisation. These themes are constitutive of an interrelated set of field-specific practices, capital, habitus and dispositions of the informal business and its network partners. The study contributes to strategy-as-practice and strategic networking literature by showing how actors adopt and internalise strategising practices, and how this predisposition may be traced to strategic networking practices, choices and outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the increasing interest in strategy as situated practice, studies that examine strategy practices in the informal economy are lacking. The informal economy includes small owner/manager self-employed businesses that are characterised by partial or non-compliance to business, tax and employment regulations but produce and sell legal goods and services (Godfrey, 2011) – they also lack formal internal organisation and bureaucracy, and often have social embeddedness as a defining feature (Hart, 2006; Williams, 2006). We argue that strategising practices in an informal economy setting are an important and worthwhile topic for a number of reasons.

First, contrary to early theorisation, the informal economy has been pervasive, and contributes significantly to social and economic lives through the provision of essential low cost products and services, and generation of employment (Blunch, Canagarajah, & Raju, 2001; Jones, Mondar, & Edwards, 2006). Second, evidence suggests informal businesses contribute to the competitiveness of formal firms, through their involvement in supply chains and

strategic networks (Holt & Littlewood, 2014; Piore & Sabel, 1984). However how they organise and strategise to deliver these essentials to businesses, customers and society has been somewhat overlooked by strategic management scholars. These gaps exist despite their important contribution to world commerce (Webb, Ireland, & Ketchen, 2014). Studying strategising practices of informal businesses constitutes a modest step towards building new knowledge and theories that augment and challenge those developed to explain phenomena in formal settings (Bruton, Ireland, & Ketchen, 2012; Godfrey, 2011). We propose that the informal economy presents opportunities for unveiling new insights, given the peculiar characteristics of the setting and participants, and the consequence these may have for shaping their strategising practices. For example, compared to formal settings, and without the benefit of guiding normative management tools and frameworks taught in business schools, informal businesses and their agents employ atypical resources and management practices (Blunch et al. 2001; Gërkhani, 2004; Godfrey, 2011; La Porta & Schleifer, 2008; Losby et al. 2002).

In pursuing this informal economy research program (Bruton et al., 2012), we investigated strategic networking practices (SNP) by an informal business and its network partners. These are aspects of strategising that contribute to the success of strategy and firm survival, but tend to be lost in the larger scheme of strategy

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research (Chia & Rasche, 2010; Tsoukas, 2010; Whittington, 2007). These aspects of strategy work present opportunities for advancing SAP scholarship that foreground micro-details of strategising. For instance, it is common for firms to form strategic networks as part of a broader strategic change implementation. Strategic networks are particularly critical to businesses operating in the informal economy. Research suggests that informal businesses typically lack access to finance, strategic capabilities and resources and markets due to their informality (Blunch et al., 2001; La Porta & Schleifer, 2008; Tokman, 1990).

We adopted a strategy as practice (SAP) perspective, which studies strategy as something organisations 'do' rather than 'have' (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007). We focused on micro-level strategic networking activities, which to date have not received much attention in either the SAP or strategic networking literature. With this focus, we studied 'what really happens in networks', encompassing a myriad of interrelated activities such as network formation, relations, behaviour, utilisation, and exiting (Chell & Baines, 2000; Coviello, 2005; Hite, 2005; Jack, 2010). These activities may be constrained and enabled by structural and contextual influences. We thus employ Bourdieu's logic of practice incorporating the concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). As a theoretical framework, this highlights the relationships between individual agents' dispositions, their trajectories in time and space, resource configurations and strategising activities.

To achieve this objective, we carried out a study in an informal business in the printing industry in Ghana using ethnographic techniques. The printing industry in Ghana is very competitive, with a lot of informal business participation and characterised by a wide range of specialised activities, which engenders strategic networks. As a developing country, Ghana has a history of a large informal economy (Adom & Williams, 2012; Hart, 1973). Consequently, the chosen setting provided the social space for significant players that characterised the phenomenon, and thus was suitable for a Bourdieusian analysis (Hardy, 2014).

The next section briefly reviews theory on a practice approach to strategic networks, and then Bourdieu's theoretical framework on the logic of practice. Following this, we present and discuss our Bourdieusian analysis of the SNP of an informal business, its agents and partners. We characterise these practices within four interconnected themes: open communication, mutual surrogacy, fraternal engagement and naturalisation.

## 2. Strategic networking as practice

Inter-organisational relationships such as strategic networks are now popular phenomena amongst organisations of all types (Gulati, 1998; Wassmer, 2010). Jarillo (1988) coined the term strategic network (Richter, 2000) and defined strategic networks as 'long-term, purposeful arrangements amongst distinct but related for-profit organisations that allow those firms in them, to gain or sustain competitive advantage vis-à-vis their competitors outside the network' (1988:32). This definition privileges a 'building worldview' of strategic networking which is characterised by planned, purposeful and goal-oriented action (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & Rasche, 2010).

The SAP paradigm provides for the alternative 'dwelling view', which complements the more dominant 'building view' (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & Rasche, 2010). This approach aims to capture the social and relational dimensions of strategising (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009), and account for the purposive and unconscious aspects of local strategising. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice that we rely on supports these alternative approaches to constructing the concept of strategy, strategy making, and strategy research in

SAP scholarship (Grand, Ruegg-Sturm, & Von Arx, 2010). Currently, strategic network studies have concentrated on network content, structure, governance and performance, and have largely been approached from an asocial view (Gulati, 1998; Jack, 2010), because a large proportion have employed quantitative methods (Jack, 2010) and partly, the dominant 'building view' of strategy (Chia & Holt, 2006). A practice perspective, therefore promises to build on these previous studies.

The SAP research paradigm acknowledges the roles, influences and constraints that a multiplicity of factors and actors may have on strategising and its outcomes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007). Consequently, we are able to explore how social structures, which underpin the context of strategy practice, may predispose strategists' actions and decisions (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984), since SAP research assumes strategists do not act without recourse to shared logic – strategies are products of everyday situated and socially-mediated coping activity (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & MacKay, 2007).

Studies suggest that beyond themselves, informal businesses form strategic networks with formal organisations (Holt & Littlewood, 2014; Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987). These evidences notwithstanding, previous studies that investigate the practice aspects of this networking activity are largely non-existent. Research on the 'doing' of strategic networking which encapsulates the role of situated and contextual knowledge, interpretations, assumptions, artefacts and capabilities may offer new insights that build on extant approaches to network studies.

Studies on small business networks have been approached from a wide range of theoretical perspectives (Shaw, 2006). Most of these approaches share commonalities with those of large businesses (see Street & Cameron, 2007 for a review). Perspectives that are relatively more inclined to small business network research are those of 'embeddedness' and 'social networks', because they foreground the level of complexity and subtlety in the differences amongst the small business owner, his/her embedded social relationships, and the business. This intricacy suggests small business owners could favour economic and non-economic goals concurrently (Shaw, 2006; Uzzi, 1997).

For example, the embeddedness perspective suggests that small businesses are more embedded in strategic networks and have lesser concern for appropriation, thus they often employ more open-ended and trust-based governance arrangements (Larson, 1992; Miller, Besser, & Malshe, 2007; Uzzi, 1997). Trust is accorded because network partners expect there will be no opportunism. They tend to rely more on complementarity, reputation, fine-grained information exchanges, reciprocity, informal arrangements, and less on hierarchical and administrative controls and price mechanisms (Larson, 1991; 1992; Uzzi, 1997).

The social network perspective also assumes that the social context within which relationships are embedded shapes behaviour of the businesses and performance (Sydow & Windeler, 1998; Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Yang, Lin, & Peng, 2011). From a social network perspective, strategic networks of small businesses are not independent of social networks, requiring analysis at multiple levels such as the interpersonal, interwork unit, interorganisational and the whole network (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007). This perspective to studying strategic networks provides affordance for a more realistic evaluation of the strategic imperatives of networks encompassing a broader network of an organisation's embedded social relationships (Gulati, 1998; Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000).

In this vein, the embedded and interactional aspects of small business networks have attracted studies focused on network content that depicts a broader set of information, knowledge, advice and other types of economic and non-economic exchanges

(Kingsley & Malecki, 2004; Mackinnon, Chapman, & Cumbers, 2004; Shaw, 2006); their structure in terms of network properties such as number of alliances, membership size and diversity, layers of embeddedness, strength of ties, network prestige (BarNir & Smith, 2002; Johannisson, Ramirez, & Karlsson, 2002), and their effects on economic performance (Etemad, Wright, & Dana, 2001; Miller et al., 2007; Morris, Kocak, & Ozer, 2007; Premaratne, 2001; Uzzi, 1997).

While these studies together represent a significant body of knowledge on small business strategic networks, the generative mechanisms (context) that describe how actors adopt and internalise strategising practices, and how this predisposition may be traced to the above strategic network choices and outcomes, are under explored (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Couched within traditional strategic management paradigm, these studies somewhat treat context subtly and often reduce it to internal-external analysis, thereby missing other important issues of what it contains and what its affordances are (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). This suggests that a practice-based micro-level research on strategic networking, which is theorised to capture these, is particularly relevant to advancing strategic network theory. Practice theories, such as Bourdieu's (1990, 2000) theory of practice provide suitable analytical frames for studying these aspects of strategy work (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Gomez, 2010; Gomez & Bouty, 2011; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006, 2007).

### 3. A Bourdieusian framework for studying strategic networking practices

Bourdieu's theory of practice conceptualizes practices as inter-related concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101) as follows:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

Practices of social and economic groups are a function of the types and volumes of capital that agents possess individually and collectively. According to Bourdieu's (1990) theory, firms and their agents may have various amounts, access, and control of a set of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital to different extents. Bourdieu's logic of practice also includes the field, which is conceptualised as a higher level concept within which the connected social structure and systems of dispositions, habitus and capital are represented (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005).

Fig. 1 illustrates the relationships amongst Bourdieu's key concepts, the logic of practice and SNP in the informal economy setting. Habitus is a generative scheme of dispositions (Hurtado, 2010, p. 54). However, the relationship between the concepts especially habitus and dispositions depicted in Fig. 1 does not represent extents of overlap, instead it illustrates the dynamic interplay amongst the key concepts. It outlines how social positions endow agents with capital that is characteristic of a social world, which in turn generates habitus through socialisation and 'embodied' as dispositions (reified in actions, inactions, choice and use of artefacts, procedures and processes), which then manifest as field-specific practices (Hurtado, 2010).

Habitus thus typifies an individual's set of dispositions by virtue of his or her trajectory with social structures, yet habitus and its associated dispositions may be shared by group of individuals. Collectively, the group may engage in unconsciously imbibed codes of behaviour in the absence of explicit rules (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Rasche & Chia, 2009). Habitus reflects history, perceptions, interpretations, stakes and interests, practical concerns, assumptions and capabilities. Agents in a field however have voluntary action, as they pursue conservation and subversion strategies to

their own benefits (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). As shown with the dashed lines, agents' field-specific habitus, capital, and SNP may be subject to influences by macro social, economic, technological, and political systems, institutions, and structures (including the formal sector) by virtue of their trajectories. These structures more or less embed agents and the field of the informal economy, resulting in interplay between maintenance of field structures and practices, and possible discontinuities.

In this research, the informal economy is conceptualised as the focal field; the informal businesses, their owner/managers and employees are individual and collective agents with field-specific capital configurations. Informal businesses are characterised by a unique set of informal arrangements and practices from which a habitus and thus agents' dispositions may be understood. These may influence the position of informal agents in the social space and invariably determine SNP. For instance, education levels in the informal economy are usually low (Blunch et al., 2001). This, coupled with their formal/informal sector work history, endows agents with institutional resources on which they draw in on-going strategy work within the field. This biography may therefore determine whom agents network with, how they form the networks, where the networks are formed, and the motivations for the network.

SNP by the informal businesses may require the use of technologies, objects and materials (Kaplan, 2011; Whittington, 2007). Bourdieu's (1990) logic of practice gives primacy to the materially-mediated nature of strategy work; SNP is thus dependent on these artefacts which in turn are shaped by agents' habitus and therefore dispositions. Through internalised and situated use of artefacts, SNP are afforded better meaning (Jarzabkowski, Spee, & Smets, 2013; Schatzki, 2006). Typically and historically, informal businesses operate in industries or sub-sectors of industries that are characterised by small-scale; low levels of formal skills, low technology and low economic capital requirements; and lack of division of labour (Losby et al., 2002; Morris et al., 1996). Consequently, a habitus nurtured by these conditions as well as small scale may reflect in the SNP of the informal businesses.

In some cases, aside economic factors, ethnic, social and even religious factors have been found to somewhat influence economic exchanges and decisions of informal businesses (Bromley & Birkbeck, 1984; Varcin, 2000). Invariably SNP may find expression in this social and cultural milieu in which informal businesses are embedded. Exchange and rewards within the field may therefore be governed by these unwritten existing 'rules of the game' conferred and defined by field agents' habitus (Hurtado, 2010: 54). In this sense, an appreciation of the logic of practice of the field is critical to understanding broader assumptions, practices and rules of engagement in their SNP.

## 4. Methods and design

### 4.1. Research setting

The research is based on a single case study of a small informal business, Design Co. (pseudonym), its agents and partner businesses operating in the printing industry in Accra, Ghana. We selected Design Co. as an informal business because although registered and certified to operate as a business, it is not fully compliant with other legal requirements such as regular licence renewal, filing of tax returns, and fully honouring corporate and income tax payment to both local and national collection agencies. It is also not wholly compliant with employment laws such as employee pension contributions. We observed that its physical organisation and operations also lack bureaucracy. However, some

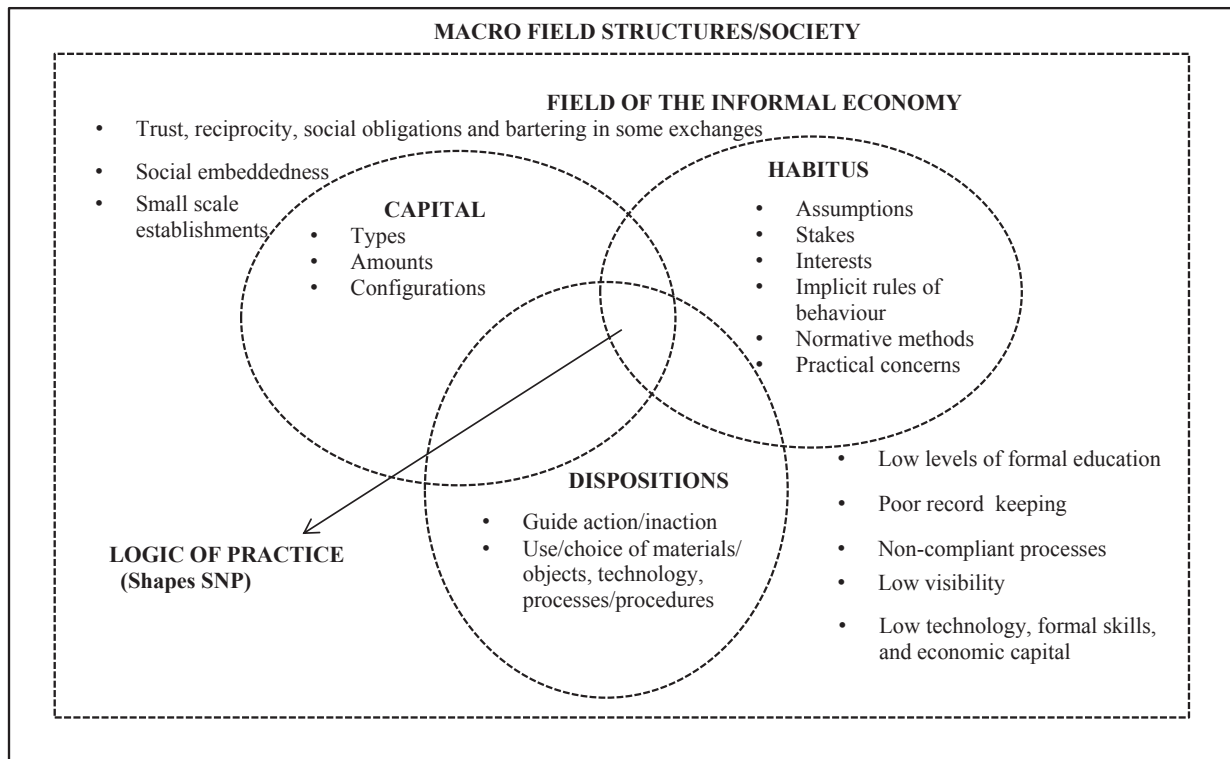


Fig. 1. A Bourdieusian framework informing SNP in an informal economy setting.

of Design Co.'s clients include multinational enterprises and large local hotel chains, universities and businesses.

Design Co. has been operating in the industry and informal economy for about a decade and a half. Design Co. specialises in branding, laser engraving, laser printing, and offset printing. The founding owner/manager Chris (pseudonym) attended an art college, and largely traces his skills and work experience to his job in the printing business and field of the informal economy. Design Co. at the time of the research had four permanent staff who have various responsibilities including operations, design, production and IT even though they multi-task. They also work regularly with about 50 other employees of partner businesses in the industry. Two of the permanent employees interviewed are university graduates with degrees in Finance and Telecom Engineering and have both worked with Design for about 5 years each (both employees were with Design Co. whilst attending university). These employees had their job-specific training and skills on the job, and most of their work experience is in the informal economy.

The printing industry is very competitive, with a lot of informal business participation and characterised by wide range of specialised activities such as engraving, embossing, printing, concept creation and design, plate and paper cutting, colour separation and preservation, production, collation, digital printing amongst others. These informal businesses are small in size and mostly located in an agglomeration known as Accra New Town. Physically, they measure about the size of a standard shipping container and have permanent employee numbers of three to five (see also Siqueira & Bruton, 2010). Accra New Town, which is traditionally a residential area, has emerged into a vibrant industrial area where informal commercial and economic activities co-exist with domestic and residential activities. Almost every structure in the location, from the smallest shipping container to the largest building, houses a printing business with total numbers in the hundreds. Related and supporting businesses such as input material suppliers and mechanics that

provide equipment maintenance services are also located in the hub. As indicated in the introduction, this case and setting were selected because they are characteristic of informal economy setting and businesses, and also because of privileged access to participants by one of the authors. This was an important consideration since the phenomenon being studied often poses access challenges, because of their legally non-compliant activities. Coincidentally, Design Co. has considerable history and experience in the informal printing economy, and thus a significant player suitable for a Bourdieusian field analysis (Hardy, 2014). Design Co. specialises in branding, laser engraving, laser printing, and offset printing.

#### 4.2. Data collection

Data was collected using ethnographic techniques over one month, from mid-October to mid-November, 2013 and centred on the actual 'doing' of strategic networking by Design Co. and its partner businesses. It is important to note that we employ ethnographic data collection techniques rather than a fully-fledged ethnography that requires high levels of immersion over an extended period whilst making culturally-laden participant observations (see also Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002). A multi-method and multi-sited approach to data collection was employed (Nicolini, 2009) where answers were sought in different ways from participants and through observations within and across the informal business and network partners included in the study (Table 1). This ensured data triangulation and enhanced validity of findings.

Visits to partner businesses within the printing hub, Accra Newtown included those involved in paper supplies, plate cutting, colour separating, preservation and paper cutting. The visits took place by way of shadowing employees of Design Co., which also enriched the data collected. Adopting Karatas-Ozkan (2011), observation data was collected which culminated in field notes,



**Table 1**  
Research data set.

Method	Source/participant	Description	Duration
Interviews	Owner/manager of Design Co. and employees Informal business network partners	3 formal semi-structured interviews.	30 min–55 min with each interviewee
		1 formal semi-structured interview. 5 unstructured informal interviews.	20 min–45 min with each interviewee
Observations	Space and objects	Physical space, size location, organisation; equipment and other artefacts as context for a logic of practice.	Half to full day, six days a week
	Actors and activities	Agents involved in the focal and related activities in addition to their actual roles and influence; sequencing of activities; events/meetings.	
	Goals	Intents and purposes that guide decisions and actions.	
Shadowing	Observations, chats and informal talk at partners' premises	Nature of discourse, interactions and relationships with network partners	5 visits of 30 min–1 h duration
Secondary data	Informal economy literature	Information on features and characteristics to construct field of the informal economy	N/A
	Press and news stories	Developments in the informal economy	
Everyday ethnography	An author's participation and experience with the informal economy in Ghana	First-hand knowledge of the research setting and informal economy phenomenon	Unlimited

covering also informal interviews and talk. 'Everyday ethnography' enjoin researchers to act as everyday observers in society, because the organisations and phenomena we study unfold on a day-to-day basis in society (Watson & Watson, 2012).

#### 4.3. Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed on the data; however not in the pure grounded theory sense (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Inductive because the research setting is somewhat under-explored, hence provision was made for the emergence of new insights. However in a deductive sense, existing theoretical ideas informed the research questions and provided background and focus for the study. For instance, some questions in the interview protocol were adapted from Larson (1992) and Uzzi (1997) who studied strategic networks of small formal firms. The adapted questions border on business profile/background/description/organisation, network formation, nature of relationships and outcomes; products/services exchanged, use of written contracts and its alternatives; and preference for subcontracting versus in-house production. Using related questions developed for the study of formal firms in this study provided a sound basis to understand how strategy practice of informal businesses may differ from those of formal firms, which is an important tenet of Bourdieu's logic of practice framework. Furthermore, organisational networks are not a new phenomenon (Blackburn & Kovalainen, 2009; Jack, 2010), we therefore draw on these previous small business networks research to guide framing of interview questions and thus analysis.

Data in the form of audio-recorded 30–55 min interviews were transcribed. This data in addition to those from field notes and literature were read first for the purposes of familiarisation. The question – how are SNP linked to the logic of practice (actions, dispositions, interpretations, materials, capital, symbols) specific to the field was developed as a 'sensitising frame' (Hendry, Kiel, & Nicholson, 2010) for initial coding. Based on this frame, repeated central words, expressions, quotes, and observations in the data set, as well as those that participants explicitly labelled important, were manually coded as follows: actors and agents; communication; equipment and machines; mobile phones; invoice; location; meetings and brainstorming; recommendations, referrals, and references; time and history; benefits and expectations; risks, trust and controls; documents, contracts and agreements; and strategy.

These meaningful units of text were then organised into

recurrent theme upon further reading. It was intended the themes coalesced around direct and indirect influences and outcomes of agency and structure, more so their sources, relationships and affordances. Through a repeated iteration between the data and Bourdieu's (1990) logic of practice theoretical framework as interpretive tool (Fig. 1), the tentative themes were subsequently collapsed and categorised into four inter-related final themes in an inductive manner. The data was thus allowed to suggest names for the themes (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2002), that describe SNP of Design Co. and its network partner businesses. In what follows, the findings under these four themes which describe SNP of Design Co., their agents, and network partners (hereafter called partner(s)) are presented. They are: open communication, mutual surrogacy, fraternal engagement and naturalisation which are illustrated in Fig. 2 and elaborated in the following section. The dashed lines and double-headed arrows illustrate the mediating properties of structure and agency and their influence on SNP.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Open communication

Contrary to received notions of strategy as secretive and non-transparent endeavor (Whittington, Cailluet, & Yakis-Douglas, 2011), a shared disposition towards open communication was internalised by Design Co. and partners as the main factor that drives their networking activities. This disposition was reinforced by way of praxis, practices and artefacts employed in strategic networking (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Observation and interview data suggests, for instance, that Design Co. and its network partners continuously shared impressions about partners and their conduct, as well as their intentions, using the technological artefact of mobile phones. The use of mobile phones and related technological artefacts engenders flexible SNP by allowing and normalising on-the-fly information sharing and the 'signing off' of transactions. Design Co and its employees were often seen and heard offering jobs as well as agreeing to contracts on the phone in the absence of written legally-binding documents as conventional practice in formal settings will have it:

'I don't need to be there for anything to be done. That's why everybody has a PDA, you can ... we have emails running, we link up with each other. We can be having meetings not

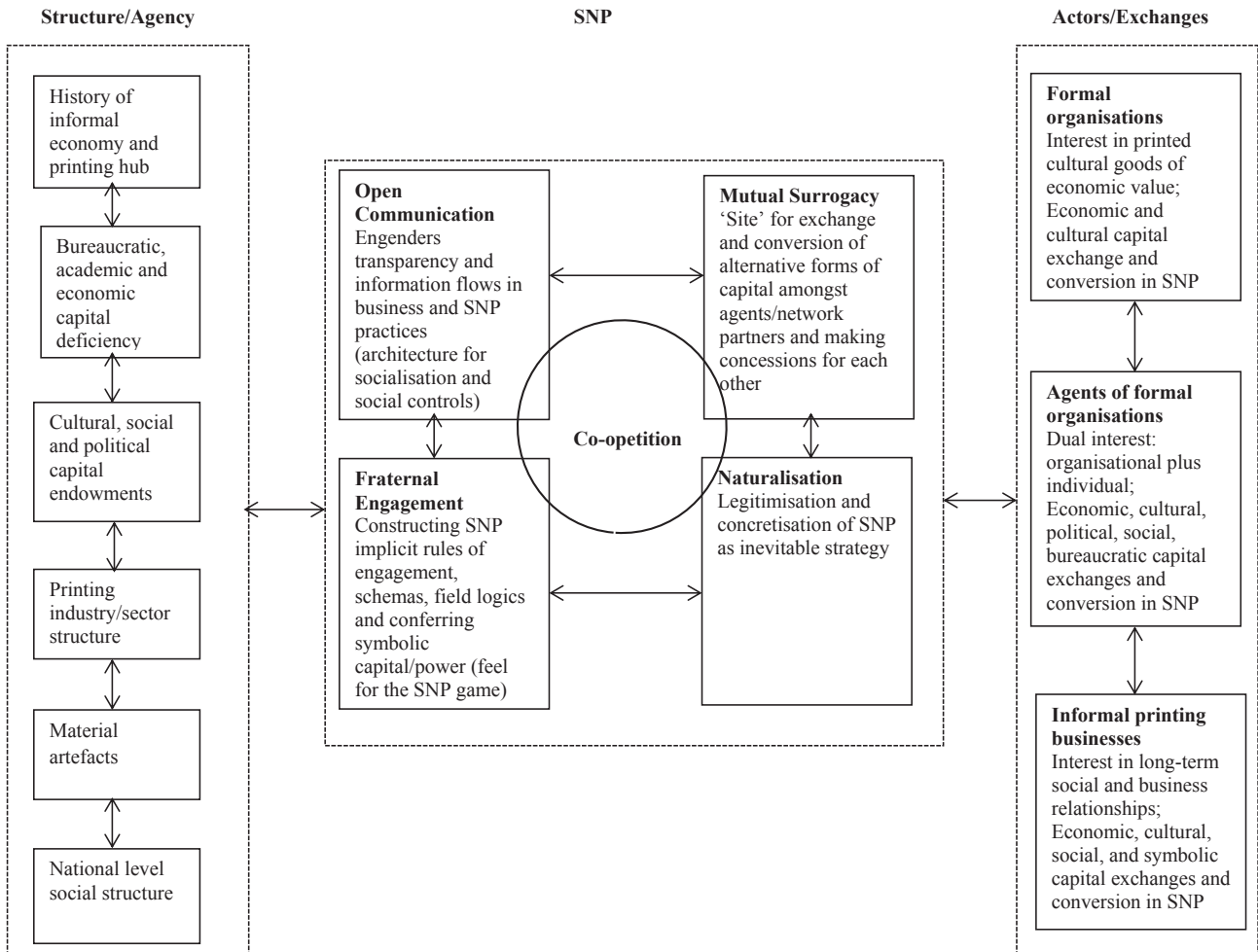


Fig. 2. SNP and influences amongst Design Co. and network partners.

physically but on phone and all that. We understand each other. (Chris, owner/manager of Design Co)

This further reflects participants' aversion to bureaucratic rule-following, which runs counter to field structures and practices as participants believe it imposes restrictions and red tape (this is depicted in more detail in later sections). The level of openness amongst partners includes sharing experiences with particular inputs, machines and supplies and advising partners accordingly. Demonstrations of machines and equipment partners intend to buy are sometimes shared with others:

'... Competitors? I don't think he [Design Co.] is my competitor because he has opened up to me to the extent that, if he gets any equipment and he thinks it will be of benefit he doesn't hide it from me. He tells me go in for this and not that, or I went in for this and it did not help me, so don't do this or that. When I get new equipment he does the installation for me and when he also has difficulties in installation I help out. When he has more jobs, I can even go and control his machine as well'. (TT, owner/manager of partner enterprise)

When asked about what expectations they have of partners and what makes the relationships last, a partner had this to say (in all cases, we use pseudonyms for individuals' names):

'... two weeks ago on a Sunday, I had to call him [Design Co. owner/manager] and ask him – I'm working on a glass (two glasses), how do I join them together? I mean he solved my problem for me just on the phone. You understand? It's not about money ... he is open to everybody and I have learnt that – so this whole place is open'. (TT, partner)

Aside from technological artefacts, a structurally-conditioned practice of regular informal meetings and brainstorming sessions is another enactment of the open communication habitus amongst the informal business partners. The owner of a partner business mentioned that his relationship with Design Co. and most of the other partners he currently works with in the industry can be traced to chit chats and gossips when they used to meet at a digital printing shop, which attracted almost all players in the printing industry on a daily basis:

'... At that time, that was the only printing shop and all the printers I know used to meet there so it became like a 'joint' ... even if you do not have a job, you still want to go there and meet people so if you're not there for a day, it was like you were missing something. That was the main place ...'. (TT, owner/manager of partner business)

Relationally, this habitus of open communication nurtured a culture of references, which characterised relationships in the

network. References are critical to establishing new and maintaining old relationships with competitors and clients alike (see also [Gulati, 1993](#)), thus reducing formal advertising expense given limited economic capital. Partners even recommend their competitors to clients for business, and because of the salience of references in the network, partners strive to get their clients satisfied:

'... One, we would let down the fellow, I mean the client through someone's recommendation came to you and if you can't help the fellow out, it is better for you to find where they can do it from a collection of firms in the same job and recommend the fellow so that they can achieve their objective'. (Alex, employee)

'... even though they are competitors they are not your enemies. You need to be able to work with them, let's say the work you cannot do, you can be able to refer it for them to do it for you. So although it is a competitive industry, it's a cordial one. We have serious competitors but they send us recommendations on work they cannot do, but think we can do. And some work probably we can, but think we don't have the time to do it, we recommend that it's sent to them. It's a kind of 'formal informal competition', so we are competitors but not enemies'. (Alex, employee)

This requires openness and information exchanges amongst network partners on a continuous basis. Subsequently, networking opportunities open or close to partners in the same line of business because of the level of open discussions, interactions, and references which act as social controls amongst network members ([Larson, 1992](#)). This is further illustrated in other themes. According to employees and owner/manager of Design Co., personal association-related references do not make much difference in networking opportunities compared to business-related ones. This underscores the importance of a good testimonial from clients and other partners, especially for informal printing businesses that are not well endowed with political and social capital:

'I mean most of our clients are through business references. About 80% of clients are through reference, we don't even have a sign out there'. (Chris, owner/manager of Design Co)

The main document employed in the SNP is the invoice. This comes across as a symbolic artefact ([Whittington, Molloy, Mayer, & Smith, 2006](#)) as it has been appropriated for unconventional uses in the field. Invoices are used to keep track of partners' accounts and indebtedness for future and periodic 'settling or balancing'. Invoices are also used to record payments made on a partner's behalf by another. They are symbolic, as they have largely replaced the more normative detailed, written and legally-binding contracts and agreements, as well as accounting and finance transaction records amongst network partners:

'It gets to a time we can work for about a year or two without payments, he [Design Co. owner/manager] notes everything down –we all have our invoices. I can work for him to the tune of [ ... ] and he can also work for me the tune of [ ... ]. We just have to sit down later and balance ourselves, so when I get a job; there is no need for me to pile up money to go to him. I readily go there to do whatever, however we have a limit'. (TT, owner/manager of partner business)

'There are also times he sends his jobs to other companies [in the printing industry] ... he [Design Co. owner/manager] may ask me to go pay on his behalf because he can't go in person, all I

need to do is record it/debit him on the invoice I've opened for him' (owner/manager of partner business)

## 5.2. Mutual surrogacy

Mutual surrogacy is patterned and reinforced by the open communication discussed above. Unlike the 50 employees alluded to by an employee, we found out upon further interrogation and shadowing that the vast majority are network partners and their employees with whom Design Co. works closely. As we confirmed later, the employee was painting a picture of the blurred organisational boundaries and roles of partner businesses in the network. This captures the fluid roles and subtle organisational boundaries operational Design Co. and its informal business network partners. Competitors do not actually conceive themselves as rivals, but rather as colleagues and partners in a similar line of business. They use mutual surrogacy to maximise future opportunities for the network through individual and collective capital configurations. This may mean a partner business losing out in the short term by securing offers but not executing the contract themselves due to financial or time constraints, for instance:

'... Sometimes because you are down with a supply [material] that a partner in the same line of business has, or you have loads of work to do, you can pass jobs on because it's like a pool. You try to handle all, you lose all, and you lose your business. But you pass it on to him, he [partner] returns the favour and everybody is happy'. (Leo, employee)

We further observed occasions where a business executes a job at its premises, but in the business name/trademark of another network partner:

'We do most of their stuff. In fact we have situations where they bring their stuff for us to do for them – because of confidentiality clause you can't just disclose their identities, so sometimes we just do it in the background'. (Leo, employee)

These practices are characterised by inherent risk of partners misappropriating others' design samples, backbiting to formal client partners, failing to make payments for work done in advance, or risking a firm's reputation by carrying out sub-standard work in the firm's name. Partners have a shared understanding of these inherent risks, which they internalise as normal and acceptable, and therefore do not manage proactively. Drawing on a shared habitus, they cope by subtly deferring to social controls such as 'whistleblowing':

'Because everyone in the printing business knows you [informal business] handle jobs from this company [client] ... you do work for them, when they realise the work that has been done is not your handiwork, they call and ask how come you lost that job and what happened to that relationship, or whether another informal business or network partner got it through insincere means ... I mean word goes round quickly' (Chris, owner/manager of Design Co.)

'Most of the things we do work more or less in the abstract because there are no concrete agreements on the financial details before work on projects are done, faith and trust become very important in the relationship, the contractor most of the times has to pre-finance so we all work first in anticipation of a future payment when work is finally delivered to the client'. (Leo, employee)

These findings provide insight into how and why an otherwise unconventional business practice may be considered 'common sense' when examined in its social context (Tatli, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, Forson, & Slutskaya, 2014; Vaughan, 2008). Non-compliance and informality have conferred gains to these informal businesses through the passage of time despite the associated risks; this schema has become ingrained in the habitus that shapes owner/managers' cognitive processes and actions. This kind of risk disposition is also consistent with the informal businesses' seeming 'disinterestedness' in economic capital (Bourdieu, 1998), espoused in their preparedness to 'accept anything small that will enable one feed at least' according to Alex, an employee of Design Co. The creative nature of the industry (Karatas-Ozkan, 2011; Shaw, 2006) in which they operate also has its own structuring effect on the downgrading of economic capital in the field and hence actors' disposition towards higher risks:

'Doing signage is so interesting that you might work hard and strain yourself not because of the money, but interest. When it's done well everybody appreciates it ... .. Sometimes as you drive around you see your signs and you get excited ... at that material moment you don't even think about how much you were paid for it' (TT, partner).

As a result, relationships between Design Co. and its network partners are in continuous flux. They tend to assume a number of roles depending on the types of capital possessed, opportunity or nature of job at hand. Again, input material and equipment compatibility were critical to their operations, which reveal another industry-type structural influence on SNP, and has provided affordances for informal businesses to assume supplier positions in some situations where specially imported printing and branding materials are supplied to each other:

'I think it's everything because once you could be a subcontractor, at a point you could be a supplier, at a point you could be a partner to a project. Partnership could come if it's a project and you can do one section and you think another company can do another section, then you have to come together and sublet that aspect, then you guys get to work on the same project for a particular client, so the relationship cuts across. It changes ... ' (Alex, employee)

Mutual surrogacy thus represents an 'arena' for capital accumulation, exchanges and conversion amongst network partners. An informal business possessing higher volumes of political and social capital via affiliations with government officials and formal business managers may win contracts from these agents, who have either economic interests in the contracts or non-economic stakes in the informal businesses or their agents. Some of these agents own informal businesses themselves in other sectors. According to Design Co., they may lack these types of social and political capital, but have superior capabilities (symbolic cultural capital) to deliver the projects:

'So it's about favouritism when it comes to this [informal printing] business and the issue about political and associations comes in, probably they [network partner] are in the same political group or association, so we don't do politics like we belong to this party or that party. We are neutral when it comes to those companies who support this side and you know in Africa when the opposition comes they take business from you so we are neutral when it comes to that'(Alex, employee)

A partner business that is positioned in the market as a competitor and printing service provider to Design Co. becomes a subcontractor or 'client' to Design Co. under these kinds of arrangements:

'I think sometimes we are all [value-adding roles], at any point in time we tend to [act as] one'. (Leo, employee)

The use of 'favours', in Scott's (2012) sense of the term, in their strategic networks is critical to warding off 'competition' from formal firm competitors that equally possess cultural capital, but are more endowed with bureaucratic and economic capital. 'Favours' thus enable the informal businesses to overcome their bureaucratic and economic capital deficiency, and are mediated through agents positioned in formal organisational spaces, in order to network with formal organisations for business:

'... we have companies [informal business network partners] with political backing, so these companies will definitely have a lot from government, and we also have association backing, probably you are into an 'old student' thing, so definitely an old student who manages a big company would like to give jobs to a fellow old student not because of economic gain - so that's the influence you may get from these people'. (Alex, employee)

SNP by the informal businesses is thus subject to influences from embedded actors and agents, including government bureaucrats as well as the business managers, as they are the printing industry's biggest buyers according to participants.

### 5.3. Fraternal engagement

SNP in the informal economy depicts a kind of fraternity with its own rules of engagement, schemas, and institutional logics that constitute cultural imperatives, which in turn condition agents' 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54), as the following quote highlights:

'Yes, it [networking] is very strategic because if you decide to be an island, I'm not sure you can survive because you might need somebody's help but because they realise you always want to be alone, nobody is going to help you out - it's very critical'. (Alex, employee)

Design Co. and network partners lean towards long-term relationships with other informal businesses relative to formal businesses in the industry. This may further be explained by the homophily (Brass et al., 2004) that seems to thrive amongst the informal business owners and their businesses, since they have similar social structural trajectories and thus a shared logic of practice. These agents have had their socialisation, skills and work experience shaped predominantly in the informal economy. As the following quote suggests, the issue goes beyond their aversion to formal documentation and bureaucratic processes:

'If I have to enter that kind of relationship with ... any big company, it's gonna be too formal and restrictive and ... there will be boundaries. They give you a lot of limits, you can't go beyond this - ... you'll be called to come and bid. When you deal with companies that don't come to you and you are the only one going to them all the time ... but I am happy he [Design Co.] comes to me to work and I also go to him and that's the good thing that I'm not getting from big companies'. (TT, owner/manager of partner business)



'You do not need too many red tapes to be able to take decisions ... with them [formal firms], they have everything set up, everything in place but here we do a lot of multitasking, and so for us to do anything with anybody, the person should be like-minded otherwise it is not worth it'. (Chris, owner/manager of Design Co)

Another implicit rule we noted among participants is the level of tolerance businesses are expected to have for 'non-performing' partners in the network, contrary to the case of formal businesses observed elsewhere (Larson, 1992; Uzzi, 1997). The relationships often exist informally and indefinitely, hence to be sidelined totally, a partner must have done something grievous. This further illustrates a disposition towards the use of social controls and sanctions to cope with inherent risks and mistrust in the relationships:

'It takes a lot to do that [dissolve a relationship]; unless the person [partner] is really terrible ... In such situations we [Design Co.] do not totally cut the person off - we get somebody else. Because they [some partners] get the opportunity most of the time they take advantage of that and begin to misbehave - we have a lot of people we can choose from, so we deal with this guy today and the next could be three months' time. They say familiarity breeds contempt so if he doesn't see you for so long, he [partner] will exert more effort in the next job'. (Leo, employee)

These cultural imperatives may be laden with the historical 'social economy' (Ferman & Berndt, 1981) disposition of informal businesses, where relationships were conceived to be founded on trust, social obligation, commitment and reciprocity, rather than pure market exchange (Henry & Sills, 2006). These findings suggest that a systemic logic (Splitter & Seidl, 2011) acts as a veil such that informal business agents in the field (unlike outsiders) fail to see competition as competition, risks as risks, performance as performance, or outcomes as outcomes (Golsorkhi, Leca, Lounsbury, & Ramirez, 2009). Apparently other 'non-rational' considerations go into economic decisions and sense-making:

'... Big guys? We are big guys but power play doesn't come in when we are dealing with others - the issue is that, let posterity judge you, let what you do talk for you. You don't twist somebody's hands to get business ... No, prove that you can do it and when you do, it will come your way'. (Alex, employee)

There is symbolic capital in the level of advancement of a business's materials, machines or equipment, and also the brand, and country of origin of the manufacturer. Dominant businesses possess higher volumes of this type of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and gain more reverence from competitors and partners alike. They also gain advantages, as they get to do the majority of the value creation. Dominated businesses do not possess this capital but defer to its symbolic power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Everett, 2002). A competitor need not possess identical or compatible forms of capital to be attractive strategic network partners (Ahuja, 2000), because the mutual surrogacy logic (described above) engenders a high level of co-opetition in the network:

'Yes, it's [Design Co.'s laser engraver] one of the most expensive and most advanced machines we have in Accra. People have the Chinese version, Korean and all but this is from America, and I'm into that. All my equipment here are from America, I have the table top one - this is the table top version of the engraver (this is roller and his is epilop). So since I cannot afford, I have smaller versions of the machines to do my indoor ones and when it's beyond me, I send it to him'. (Owner/manager, partner business)

'The relationships stem out of the kind of machines you have - and that gives advantages in the relationship. Let me say right now we [Design Co.] have the biggest laser engraving machine so we can do a lot, most people have smaller versions ... The advantage we have is the size and the amount of product we can produce per hour. They can't do it so although we have good relationship, the advantage I have over them is I can do more, so even though they may get a lot of business, they must bring it to us'. (Alex, employee)

This finding reveals that fraternal engagement in the relationships notwithstanding, power struggles and position-taking prevail, and are expressed in printing equipment that serve as symbolic artefacts. An important consequence is the subtle mentorship influence the dominant players (by virtue of their stock of this objectified cultural capital, and which somewhat ties closely with their long history and trajectories with the field), have on SNP in the field.

#### 5.4. Naturalisation

An outcome of the SNP by the informal businesses studied is that they are naturalised as an inevitable strategic choice. We found that agents did not plan, purposefully couch and calculate strategic networking decisions. SNP were more of *in situ* practical coping with bureaucratic and economic capital deficiencies associated with the businesses and their agents, as well as other structural influences (Chia & Holt, 2006). Far from the lack of documented data, academic capital and competence required for formal strategic planning, these field structures pre-empted the adoption of field-specific networking practices as a *sine qua non* if a business is to thrive in the field - thus constraining choice or agency. Because of the opportunity cost in exercising choice, other courses of action become practically unavailable to either existing or new businesses entering the field (Mutch, Delbridge, & Ventresca, 2006).

'They [relationships] are very critical because if you decide to do what everybody does, you will not survive, so you should be able to subtlet some works you think you cannot do, because some specialisation will do. Somebody is an expert in a field you are not'. (Alex, employee)

'... If you try to be by yourself or cheat in this industry [informal printing], there is no problem, you will win but when something goes wrong you bear the cost alone' (owner/manager of partner business).

So besides a tangible capabilities-related decision as the immediate above quote by Alex may suggest, intangible support and reciprocity in the relationships in the field (see other themes) act as drivers that make field-conditioned SNP appear as the 'commonsense' (Tatli et al., 2014, p. 11) alternative. Participants thus warn that a business may not succeed if it chooses to go alone or make an alternative boundary choice decision. We also found that agents acquired some characteristics of habitus before field entry (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Vaara & Faj, 2011). For example, a partner of Design Co. established social and business relationships with partners in the informal printing industry for four years before entering the industry. Aside from the trajectories of potential participants to the field contributing to the kind of fraternal engagement described above, their dispositions towards accepting SNP as natural would have been long internalised in their habitus before field entry.

'For 4 years I was a customer to him, for 4 years I was just giving him [Design Co. owner/manager] jobs. I get the jobs but I didn't

have my own place so I did it at his end and after I opened my own place, I still send him jobs I cannot do at my place or jobs beyond me'. (Owner/manager of partner business)

'After school I decided to ... and it was the only thing on my mind –to work with him [Design Co. owner/manager] so when I went to him with my application, he told me no and that I should pay him to teach me more.. so he gave me a few guidelines that I have to go back and that CorelDraw was not enough –You need to know Photoshop, Illustrator ... and I didn't know about all that because I use to do everything (though perfectly) with 1 software and that there was more to it than what I was doing. He became like a master to me and I always call him when I have problems and even give him jobs that are difficult for me. (Owner/manager of partner business)

Having acquired university degree at business school (academic capital) whilst working in the informal economy, an employee of Design Co. continued to perceive and experience SNP through an 'informality' lens, and thus continued to 'comply with' and had virtually no motivation to 'challenge' existing norms and practices (De Clercq & Honig, 2011). This is despite the leeway provided for influencing such decisions and practices according to own accounts (see also Anderson, Dodd, & Jack, 2010; Shaw, 2006).

'The way we run our kind of business, we are always open to change, any point in time we could change, we could switch overnight. I mean some of the equipment decisions we made was on the spur of the moment, we never ... I wouldn't say plan but we just do so - it's the way you handle the business, the way you do your things, the way you make yourself open to new ideas, open to new high-technologies, open to new input'. (Alex, employee)

Structural industry and informal business characteristics also had subtle but significant influences on the naturalisation of SNP. Design Co. and their partners keep their businesses small, with the small rooms dominated by bulky imported machines and equipment. With limited space, informal businesses rely on others in their networks for inputs, services and products they are unable to produce in-house due to space constraints inherited from social structures of the field including the history of the hub. We learnt and also observed that the premises at the Accra New Town hub are small and usually extensions or conversions of residences. However, and true to their habitus, partners do not perceive the small operating spaces and scale as weakness, competitive disadvantage or constraint. In fact it is historic and a symbolic artefact, as history documents this 'smallness' of informal businesses (Blunch et al., 2001; Hart, 1973). They are therefore not vigorously pursuing growth in size as a strategic imperative:

'Graphics is so wide that it's not all the equipment you can afford or even it's not all the equipment you need to have. If you intend to have all the machines you need, you'll even not have space so you specialise on one side, and somebody else specialises on another side. So sometimes we have to swap works, like he [Design Co.] can do something and I can finish it for him – like laminating, cutting, trimming and all that'. (Ken, Owner/manager of partner business)

The cognitive schema acquired through socialisation in the field that smallness is structural, historic and normal conditioned the habitus of the informal business agents. In the presence of strategic choice, field-specific logics of Design Co. and network partners

(shown in this and other themes) has led to the judgement that given the exigencies of their social space, specialisation and investment in cooperation is more valuable and presents better possibilities than investment in equipment or larger size.

## 6. Discussion

This paper set out to study strategy practice in an informal economy setting by investigating strategic networking of an informal printing business and its network partners, through Bourdieu's 'logic of practice' lens. The findings suggest that SNP do not occur in isolation, but are constitutive of an interrelated set of field-specific practices, capital, habitus and dispositions of network partners and their agents. These were made intelligible in the nature and drivers of SNP, the choice and use of material artefacts, the micro-processes of strategising, their generative mechanisms, as well as outcomes.

With regard to the choice and use of material artefacts, the popularity of mobile phone use in SNP might seem a standard business practice in formal as well as informal firms. We concur however with previous studies highlighting their distinctive socio-material significance in an informal sector context (Donner, 2006; Meagher, 2014). Again these extant informal sector as well as formal sector studies (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Werle & Seidl, 2015) on the use of material artefacts in strategy work emphasise the immediate and particular use, as against the qualities of the materials *per se* (Werle & Seidl, 2015, p. S285). However, we show how in navigating the constraints and affordances of informality, the informal businesses use the mobile phone entirely for the award and receipt of contracts and as a trusted basis for consented agreements in place of normative legally-binding written documentary artefacts. Aside from the mobile phone, the invoice was yet another material artefact that has provided affordances and thus replaced artefacts traditionally employed for legal accounting and financing purposes in inter-organisational relationships. Our study therefore elaborates on our understanding of socio-materiality in strategy work, showing that one set of material artefacts may be appropriated to replace or serve the purpose of another depending on the constraints and affordances of the social context.

Unlike extant small-firm networks research, our study reveals the *nature* and *drivers* of the small size-specialisation-strategic networking dialectic. Supported by our findings, we argue that unlike received knowledge that privileges agency over structure, and treats specialisation and strategic networking by small formal businesses as one of the many options to overcome size constraints and competitive disadvantage (e.g. Etemad et al., 2001), our Bourdieusian analysis reveals the dynamic interplay amongst agency, capacity, strategies and structural conditions (Gomez, 2010). Particularly it demonstrates how in dealing with liability of smallness (Baum, Calabrese, & Silverman, 2000), the informal businesses pursued immanent strategies that structurally reinforced and legitimised smallness. In effect we illustrate how small spaces and size, strategy work, and SNP of the informal businesses are in a dialectic relationship. This revelation shows that built space was an important socio-material characteristic that shaped, and was shaped by SNP of the informal businesses (Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015).

Furthermore, prior studies (Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristö, 2004) made similar findings of naturalisation of strategic alliances in the discursive constructions of agents in the global airline sector. Although their interpretation was somewhat limited to industry structure and competition (Seidl & Whittington, 2014), our study identifies with and extends it by suggesting other influences such

as power relations, history, habitus, capital configurations, and field structures.

Our finding on open communication contrasts with Miller et al. (2007), who found that small formal US-based businesses in a network considered sharing of information about new techniques and technologies as high risk compared to sharing employees or equipment, purchasing supplies/materials together or engaging in joint product development. Operating from scripts of the formal business field where economic and rational logics are given primacy, these formal US-based businesses perhaps considered sharing such information as a greater business risk due to the competitive importance of such intangible knowledge-based resources. Unlike these formal businesses however, Design Co. and their partners lacked significant formal sector work experience, and therefore embodied a different set of historical and structural trajectories and logics, leading to localised construction of risk and decision heuristics. As such, a habitus that shaped open communication inclined their disposition towards sharing resources and experiences, in contrast to the formal businesses; this may explain the differences in 'sharing' practices. Historically, and compared to formal businesses, informal businesses are known to embed social and non-economic considerations in economic action (Henry & Sills, 2006). This disposition is interwoven into the habitus of agents, so in as much as 'business' was a field language, which implied the salience of economic motive, competition of exclusiveness was not necessarily the norm. Though the open communication we observed in our informal firm setting is consistent with what Hanna and Walsh (2008) found for networks of small formal manufacturing businesses, it was as an integral part of dedicated and written policy aimed at improving coordination efforts and stemming appropriation. In the informal setting, however, the role of a coordination agreement was instead fulfilled by a socially-constructed diminution of appropriation concerns rooted in history and field structures.

The incidence of small businesses establishing close business relationships with client firms to reduce formal marketing expense is consistent with previous research (Baines & Robson, 2001; Shaw, 2006). What is interesting from our study however is the level of practice-structure consistency that underpins this finding, and how these references are utilised. In contrast to the conventional normative business disposition to exclusively maximise opportunities (Shaw, 2006; Whittington et al., 2011), partners do not consider recommending their competitors for business as compromising competitive advantage. Instead, their practice is consistent with institutional logic and implicit codes of conduct, which foreground openness and information exchanges amongst network partners on a continuous basis. In a previous study, Larson (1992) similarly found evidence of social controls in the governance of exchange relationships, but we further demonstrate how social controls as a network governance mechanism are structurally constructed by these informal businesses.

We thus contribute to network governance literature by showing empirically why some strategic networks may treat open-ended, relational and trust-based governance practices as more meaningful and worthy of investment compared to normative contractual and arm's length options (Uzzi, 1997). More significantly however, we illustrate how these strategising agents structure and internalise the widely cited enablers: complementarity, reputation, fine-grained information exchanges, and reciprocity (Becerra, Lunnan, & Huemer, 2008; Larson 1991, 1992; Powell, 1990; Uzzi, 1997).

In common with previous small business networks research (Miller et al. 2007; Morris et al., 2007) we found network partners' strategic networks characterised by co-opetition. In contrast to these studies however, our research foregrounds co-opetition as a

major driver of SNP of the informal businesses (see also Damayanti, 2014) as it cuts across all four themes into which SNP of the informal businesses are categorised. In a previous study, Morris et al. (2007) quantitatively measured the propensity of co-opetition amongst small businesses based on the three dimensions trust, mutual benefit and commitment. Here, we complement this study by providing insights into the possible generative mechanisms of these dimensions. Our findings have important implications for the increasing interest and debate on the antecedents and drivers of open strategy (Whittington et al., 2011). For example, they are consistent with Demir's (2015) model on open strategising in formal firms, where he proposes that one amongst nine specific activities that bind or act as generative activities to strategic problems of open strategising amongst a network of top managers, is the agreement that benefits do not accrue to partners in co-opetitive relationships simultaneously.

The findings on co-opetition make another contribution to literature. We extend Peng, Pike, Yang, and Roos (2011, p. 549) study on 'how co-opetition works' by showing that it may involve partners assuming multiple temporal positions in the value chain, aside from co-managing a set of activities revealed in their study. This practice is mediated amongst other things by a shared local construction of risk, and enacted in the manner, and the extents to which field agents with limited types of specific capital go in employing alternative capital accumulation, mobilisation and conversion coping strategies (Scott, 2012).

Received strategic management knowledge tends to treat decisions by managers in formal settings, such as long-term inter-organisational relationship decisions as purely rational, economic and organisation-centred (Ahuja, 2000; Chandler, Haunschild, Rhee, & Beckman, 2013). However, a practice perspective adopted in this study reveals how strategists brought to bear non-economic personal and social considerations on strategic decisions they made on behalf of the organisation, unlike a shared organisation-wide corporate social responsibility programme. These dispositions may draw on their personal experiences, trajectories and beliefs about the informal economy phenomenon. Strategy practices of the informal business cannot be fully understood in the absence of these kinds of influences form embedded formal agents. This finding lends SAP-framed empirical support to Van Aaken, Splitter and Seidl's (2013) Bourdieusian construction of how pro-social activities and practices by individual managers follow a 'practical' rather than rational logic, and are aimed at accumulating social power, rather than economic power. The revelation adds more texture to the social network perspective on strategic networks (Gulati, 1998; Gulati et al., 2000).

The study further offers a richer notion of strategic network formation that draws on knowledge of the types, value and distribution of capital and their convertibility amongst potential partners. It further provides an alternative explanation for alliance network formation in addition to the social network perspective. For example, the types, distribution, volume and convertibility of capital possessed by focal businesses and their agents at any point in time, may influence the future direction and structure of networks, alongside extant research findings of businesses' prior network history and structural embeddedness in network ties (see for example; Anderson et al., 2010; Larson, 1992; Uzzi, 1997; Shaw, 2006).

We also show how an agent's longstanding occupationally-oriented cultural capital undermined his newly acquired academically-oriented cultural capital, and thus habitus (Watson, 2013). Apparently, since university graduates are not dominant actors in the informal printing economy, academic capital from university education, and its associated habitus and practices were



not valuable in the field. The situation could be different in the case of university graduates with no previous trajectory with the informal economy. However, our study did not include any such cases. From an SAP perspective (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009), and in addition to the finding that some agents' field-specific habitus and dispositions were conditioned prior to field entry, we throw some light on the conditions under which an agent is likely to stabilise or effect strategic changes in a field of practice (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). The present study thus extends Battilana's (2006) study that identified individual's organisation status, position in the organisation (informal, formal and tenure), social groups(s) status, and inter-organisational mobility as predictors of their likelihood of effect changes in a fields drawing on Bourdieu's concept of fields. Whilst her model foregrounds post-entry trajectories, we illustrate the likely effects of pre-entry trajectories.

## 7. Conclusion and future directions

In conclusion, this study has addressed some of the calls in the SAP literature for more studies on the relational and structural linkages in strategising practices, as well those amongst strategic network scholars for the study of the strategic networking activity. More specifically, the study described SNP amongst businesses in an informal economy setting within four interrelated themes: open communication, mutual surrogacy, fraternal engagement and naturalisation. The paper outlines detailed activities that characterise each of these themes and shows how they reflect field-specific practices, capital, habitus and dispositions. More importantly, we illustrate the implicit role of agency and structure in constructing SNP.

Our study shows that SNP by the informal business and their partners have generative mechanisms that shape how strategists internalise practices, which led to particular choices and outcomes. Contrary to previous studies conducted in creative industries (Dickson, Smith, & Woods, 1994; Shaw, 2006), co-opetition is salient in the SNP of the informal businesses. As such, other SNP are pivoted around this co-opetitive disposition (see also Damayanti, 2014). These extant works found that businesses did not network with competitors and attributed the reason to industry competition that engendered low trust amongst competitors. We have built on this interpretation and suggest that although the informal businesses we studied were also subject to similar industry influences, a broader set of intricately linked constraining and enabling structural factors embedded in the social context provide a richer explanation for these choices and outcomes. We thus conclude that an SAP perspective that attended to micro-level phenomena in context provided the fine-grained analytical tools for linking these strategy practices to their generative mechanisms.

A number of our findings are identifiable with prior work and received knowledge on strategy and strategic networks, but with our aim to employ an SAP approach to inform strategic network literature, we have noted how the *nature* and *drivers* of similar set of practices or findings may be subject to dissimilar logics. We have thus provided new explanations and insights on extant phenomenon. For example, we offer an alternative explanation of alliance portfolio development and the salience of material artefacts such as mobile phones and invoices in replacing other normative material artefacts of strategy work. We also offer new perspective on the use of references in strategic networks, as well as the generative mechanisms that underpin the significance of space as socio-material characteristic in strategy work. In this regard we emphasise relatedness, and demonstrate how practices identified in each of the four themes reinforce each other, and by so doing add more texture to the understanding of strategy and strategic

networks more holistically. For instance, by outlining how social controls as relational network governance mechanisms are intertwined with high levels of co-opetitive disposition, we provide pointers to informality logics and practices as potential starting points for conceiving the concept of open strategy in formal settings.

By way of final contribution, and an important reading of Bourdieu's practice theory, we suggest, contrary to conventional analysis, that SNP by the informal businesses had influences from 'remote' and embedded actors with personal stakes and interests beyond those of the organisations or businesses they represent. This study reveals the extent to which strategists may bring non-economic and 'non-rational' personal and social considerations to bear on strategic decisions they make on behalf of the organisation. Full understanding of the strategy practices of informal businesses is unlikely without accounting for these kinds of influences. This finding further contributes to a deeper understanding of the social network perspective on strategic networks, and to SAP scholarship on pro-social individual manager-driven strategising activities, choices and practices (Van Aaken et al., 2013).

Our study suggests several avenues for further research. First, given that the study draws on a single case, more research is required to understand whether the SNP that were observed hold in other settings, such as other informal economy industries in Ghana, as well as informal economies in other countries. Comparative studies particularly promise useful insights, given that social structures that embed the informal economy may differ across countries. Second, given that the construction of the field in the current study is somewhat limited, ample opportunities exist to empirically extend the field to include state regulators, as well as other players in the printing industry in Ghana, for example, formal printing businesses or competitors and client network partners (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). This methodological approach is expected to extend our understanding of SNP of the informal businesses further.

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