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The Visibility Paradox

Escaping the Panopticon of Enterprise Social Networks

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by

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Abstract

In this thesis, we present a new perspective on the visibility of communication in Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs). We present findings of a qualitative study on the implementation of such a tool in a fast-growing Swedish consultancy organization with a geographically dispersed workforce. Our key finding is that the visibility of communication can impede active contributions of employees, and hence, counteract visibility itself. We label this phenomenon the *Visibility Paradox*. The emerging theory suggests that the participation of organizational members is hindered by the subjective perception of surveillance, not by surveillance itself. Like in a *Panopticon*, people feel permanently observed in the ESN, even though they are not. However, in contrast to an architectural *Panopticon*, employees have the possibility to escape the perceived surveillance by not actively participating. We present indications showing that, due to this fear of being under close observation, employees feel insecure in exposing themselves in visible forums as there is a risk for being misinterpreted. This is due to two interrelated factors, nonverbal signals and the use of languages.

Key words: Visibility, workplace communication, Enterprise Social Networks, affordances, computer-mediated-communication, knowledge sharing

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1 Introduction

“Surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action”

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

In contemporary knowledge-intensive organizations, the largest part of work is invisible which is partly due to its autonomous nature and “its difficult[ies] assessing processes” making it inaccessible for others to view (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p.963; Leonardi, 2014). This invisibility may be reinforced by the fact that associates do not meet physically due to, for example, different office locations or high travel frequency amongst contemporary knowledge workers. However, in continuously changing organizations like the one we have studied, there is a constant need for cross-functional collaboration (Proehl, 1997). Due to the enormous amount of knowledge, employees cannot possess it all themselves and therefore rely on books, databases, and of course, their colleagues (Ren, Carley & Argote, 2006). In the current fast-moving business environment, some firms “learn from their experiences at a dramatic rate, while other firms exhibit very little learning at all” (Reagans, Argote & Brooks, 2005, p.869). However, being successful in the process of knowledge transfer leads to higher productivity and a higher possibility to assert oneself in today's competition (Argote, Ingram, Levine & Moreland, 2000).

In recent years, visibility and transparency have been fashionable (Stohl, Stohl & Leonardi, 2016) and there have been many initiatives, like workflow visualization (e.g., Kanban) or GPS tracking (e.g., tracked vans in professional delivery services) to make knowledge work visible to others (Leonardi, 2015). Nevertheless, “workplace communication among individuals has been one aspect of the work environment that has long remained private” (Leonardi, 2015, p.748). Representative examples for invisible communication might be a conversation of two employees in a conference room, a direct phone call without anyone listening or a discussion via E-Mail not using the carbon copy function. This private quality of conversations decreases, as it is desirable for organizations to gain visibility due to the above-mentioned desired outcomes.

As a result of advancing digitalization, which is constantly modifying workplaces (Timonen & Vuori, 2018), new technological possibilities to make communication visible arise. Especially, the proliferation of social media in organizations enable tremendous changes in collaboration among employees (Gibbs, Rozaidi & Eisenberg, 2013; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Nowadays, communication between colleagues is progressively happening through social media tools (Leonardi, 2017). Due to its enormous possibilities this thesis focuses on Enterprise Social Networks (for further elaboration, see below) which are increasingly prevalent in organizations and facilitate visible communication (DiMicco, Millen, Geyer, Dugan, Brownholtz & Muller, 2008; Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015; Hampton, Lee & Her, 2011; Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018). Some authors see these web-based communication platforms as generating competitive advantages (Von Krogh, 2012), others see the implementation of such tools as an imperative, themed “digitalize or drown” (Kohne, 2017, p.3). This thesis aims to shed new light on the use of these Enterprise Social Networks and the potential visibility of communication they enable.

1.1 Enterprise Social Networks

Enterprise Social Networks, from now on referred to as ESNs, can be seen as forums for public discussion at work which serve as repositories for information and enable users to meet work-related and social goals at the same time (DiMicco et al., 2008; Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016). Therefore, they can be seen as transactive memory systems where individuals encode, store, and retrieve information (Jackson & Klobas, 2008; Peltokorpi, 2008). Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfield (2013) define ESNs by the possibility to communicate through direct messages or broadcast messages to everyone, the option to choose particular co-workers as communication partners, the feature to post, edit and sort text and files, and finally the chance to be able to see messages, connections and files posted by others. Especially, due to the fact that conversations between colleagues can be made visible, ESNs are distinct from traditional communication technologies and increase in popularity (Leonardi, 2014; Leonardi & Vaast 2017).

Mäntymäki and Riemer (2016) identified that the generation and preservation of new ideas and the discovery of problem solutions work as the main value-driver of ESNs. This supports the idea of recombinant innovation, which is described as the combination of other’s ideas into new

ideas with the help of ESNs (Leonardi, 2014). Another value of ESNs can be seen in the avoidance of work duplication (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018). Being aware of who is working on what or who might have done a similar task in the past may lead to less knowledge duplication (Leonardi, 2014). Contemporary research additionally states that other potential benefits of ESNs may be the increasing motivation of knowledge contributions, the identification of expertise, the overcoming of organizational boundaries, the improvements of team performance and the facilitation of a proactive aggregation of information rather than a reactive search after confronting a problem (Leonardi, 2014; Leonardi, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). These upsides may help the reader to shape a better understanding of why organizations invest in implementing ESNs.

In contrast to the previous paragraph, this part engages in the *dark sides* (Chen, Wei & Yin, 2018) of ESNs. The term *technostress* leads back to 1984 and refers to the increased stress levels among individuals through information and communication technologies (Ayyagari, Grover & Purvis, 2011). This kind of stress seems to be valid for modern ESNs as well, as their usage might lead to employees experiencing *information overload* (Chen, Wei & Yin, 2018). On this note, other researchers question the fact, that higher visibility, facilitated through ESNs, results in more transparency. Stohl, Stohl and Leonardi (2016, p.132) identified a *transparency paradox*, in which they show that high levels of visibility may reduce transparency: “Visibility may produce a flood of information, drowning us in a sea of unstructured and boundless data that overwhelms our cognitive and interpretive capabilities”. Despite the limitation of stress through overload, less transparency through information visibility (Oostervink, Agterberg & Huysman, 2016), the positive aspects of ESNs seem to predominate among scholars and practitioners and lead to a positive connotation of ESNs according to contemporary research.

1.2 Research Question and Research Purpose

The majority of research focuses on the above-mentioned benefits of ESNs (Leonardi, 2017); however, in an effort to adopt a novel angle on the use of ESNs, we decided to target the perceptions and feelings of employees when using an ESN. According to our abductive approach, which is explained more detailed in the methodology chapter, we started our work by adopting a broad research question as a starting point:

How do organizational members experience the use of an ESN?

However, through viewing this question as a “moving target” (Styhre, 2014, p.33), we were able to adapt it during our research. Since we adopted an iterative way of working through simultaneously engaging with our empirical material and contemporary literature, we were able to narrow our focus during our work. While conducting our interviews, we developed further understanding of our interviewees’ experiences and found that the implementation of the ESN in our organization rarely led to the anticipated visibility of communication. As a result, we adapted our focus towards the topic of visibility and decided to examine how employees experience the visibility of communication in ESNs. Our strive was to, not uncritically accept the efficacy of ESNs and the positive effects of visibility, but rather to challenge the assumption amongst scholars that the implementation of an ESN in an organization consistently makes communication among coworkers visible (Van Osch & Steinefield, 2018).

Altogether, by remaining open to our findings and tailor our focus thereafter, we strived to provide a well-reasoned discussion with substantiated findings, creating relevant insights to bring clarity into, what we perceive as, a slightly narrow discussion around contemporary use and experiences of ESNs. Therefore, this thesis aims to shed new light on, and critically investigate, the experiences of employees’ use of ESNs and the visibility of communication therein.

1.3 The Paramount Topic of Surveillance

This thesis shows that the possibility of visible communication in an ESN does not necessarily lead to visible communication, but rather to cautious communication behavior of employees, like restricting the visibility or not participate in the ESN at all. Beside the cause of not seeing value in the tool itself, we present empirical material to show that organizational members experience substantial surveillance while using an ESN. Therefore, we now come back to the quote from the beginning of this introduction to enrich it with more context. The quote refers to the architectural idea of the *Panopticon* which was developed by the moral philosopher Jeremy Bentham (Foucault, 1995). A *Panopticon* can be described as a structure consisting of

a “twelve-sided polygon formed in iron and sheathed in glass in order to create the effect of [...] universal transparency” (Zuboff, 1988, p.320). The innovation about this structure which could be utilized to monitor workers, inmates or even students, was a central tower in the middle of the facility in which observers could not be seen from the outside (Zuboff, 1988). The major effect of the *Panopticon* used in prisons was expressed by Foucault (1995, p.205):

[T]o induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.

The genius with the *Panopticon* was that the prisoner never knew if he or she was observed. This, due to the possibility of being under close observation, was always present, making the “psychological effects of visibility [...] enough to ensure appropriate conduct” (Zuboff, 1988, p.321). We will make repetitive use of the metaphor of the *Panopticon* during this thesis as ESNs show similar qualities: Everything can be seen without knowing if it is actually seen. Of course, we do not view, or label, our interviewees as inmates, however, we will show that the perceived surveillance sometimes shows more similarities than one would intuitively expect.

1.4 Thesis Outline

After this introductory chapter, we present our theoretical framework including essential concepts and current research about ESNs. We continue to present a more critical perspective on ESNs as well as additional theories we found of value, which altogether, build the foundation for our arguments in later chapters of this work. Subsequently, we present the methodology used in order to reach our aims. Here, we include the case context as well as background information about our research approach, data collection, and data analysis. Later, we present our in-depth interpretations and reflections around our empirical findings, which we, together with the theoretical framework, use as foundation when conducting our discussion. As we review our findings in the light of the illustrated theoretical framework, we discuss our points toward an emerging theory. Finally, we finish with concluding our work and findings, present potential limitations, and inspirations for further research.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we display the theoretical framework used as foundation for this thesis. We start with presenting ESNs by using an affordance perspective with a particular focus on visibility. Afterwards, we scrutinize the relation between this visibility and its impact on knowledge sharing and the creation of metaknowledge. Subsequently, existing research around surveillance, its effects on participation and common strategies of employees to handle this are presented as a way to display the more critical aspects of contemporary research on the topic. Finally, we present two more topics, which we consider relevant to our study; language as a way of bridging organizational silos and the difficulties with expressing nonverbal signals in computer-mediated communication.

2.1 An Affordance Perspective on Enterprise Social Networks

In order to understand how ESNs assist organizations, researchers have identified several affordances. Affordance “is a relational concept that takes into account both the material features of the technology and the subjective perceptions and goals of the user”, hence “the same technology may provide different affordances to different users” (Gibbs, Rozaidi & Eisenberg, 2013, p.105). An *affordance lens* can help explain why people use ESNs in different ways (Gibbs, Rozaidi and Eisenberg, 2013). “The affordance perspective assumes that objects are not perceived directly but for the activities for which they may be useful” (Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015, p.106), consequently, it is not perceived what an object is, but rather what kind of use it affords (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Although there is no agreement on a conceptual definition it can be summarized that affordances are neither the object itself, nor a feature of the object, affordances are not an outcome and affordances have variabilities (Evans, Pearce, Vitak & Treem, 2016).

Treem and Leonardi (2013) unraveled four affordances of social media: Editability, Persistence, Association and Visibility. Editability implies that individuals can craft and recraft their

communication, persistence indicates that communication remains accessible and association suggests that connections between individuals are established (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). This thesis focuses on the affordance of visibility, which in fact means that communication between people can be seen by third parties (Leonardi, 2017). Universally, “visibility is the property of being perceptible by the sense of sight” (Timonen & Vuori, 2018, p.5076). Adopting the affordance of visibility using an ESN therefore means that ESNs can be defined as a combination of the attributes of availability of information, approval to disseminate information and accessibility of information to third parties (Stohl, Stohl & Leonardi, 2016). Overall, visibility can be seen as one of the most popular social media affordances among practitioners (Evans et al., 2016) and the implementation of an ESN may make invisible communication between others visible for third-party observers (Leonardi, 2014).

2.2 Visibility, Communication and Knowledge Sharing

The above-mentioned visibility affordance of ESNs, which we focus on in this thesis, can facilitate the sharing of knowledge (Gibbs, Rozaidi and Eisenberg, 2013; Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018) and consequently, change the way how knowledge is shared within an organization (Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015; Leonardi, 2017). This, as models dominating contemporary research assume that knowledge needs to be generated, encoded in a document, uploaded in a shared repository, downloaded and decoded (Leonardi, 2017). This process is usually time-consuming and complex yet shows how simple the knowledge transfer with the help of ESNs can be: First, employees produce visible knowledge through their communication and then, colleagues see those communications by chance and learn by engaging with the content (Leonardi, 2017). The learning could either occur directly or through accumulating metaknowledge.

This paragraph focuses on the above-mentioned creation of metaknowledge in ESNs. “The visibility of social media can also provide metaknowledge about the type of people in the organization and what they may know” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p.153). Looking up the word metaknowledge in an online dictionary, it is described as *knowledge about knowledge* (Metaknowledge, 2019). According to Leonardi (2014), metaknowledge is developed through the two interrelated concepts of *message transparency* (who knows what) and *network*

translucence (who knows whom). Since the empirical data for this study are collected in a small organization, where all employees know each other, this thesis focuses on message transparency, which means that the content of other's messages can be seen and colleagues know who knows what (Ren, Carley & Argote, 2006). This communication visibility can be reached through an ESN and helps "third-party observers to make inferences about others' knowledge" (Leonardi, 2014, p.811). A study in which only one of two matched-sample groups was given access to an ESN showed that the group using the ESN learned vicariously and, as a result, had a 31% improvement in knowledge about who knows what, compared to the non-users of ESNs which did not improve this metaknowledge (Leonardi, 2015).

Moving on now to consider the impact of the possibility to share knowledge with the help of ESNs on learning in organizations. ESNs carry great promise for knowledge management (Von Krogh, 2012) and will further influence the knowledge sharing in organizations because they "overcome many of the limitations of previous generations of knowledge management technologies (Kane, 2017, p.37). In addition to the *experiential learning* by direct communication with colleagues, there will be more and more *vicarious learning* by being a third-party observer of others' communications (Leonardi, 2014). Many initiatives to use IT to support knowledge management in the previous decades failed because the contribution to databases leads to additional work for the employees (Kane, 2017) which is not the case when learning vicariously. That is why some authors use the metaphor of *leaky pipes* because "being exposed to leaky communications can allow people to keep up with what others are doing in an easy way" (Leonardi, Huysman & Steinfield, 2013, p.11). Overall, ESNs generate the possibility to convert the sharing of knowledge from a discontinuous knowledge management process into a permanent knowledge conversation (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016).

Concerning the specific type of organization in which the empirical material for this study was collected, it is crucial to mention the specific challenges regarding collaboration and knowledge sharing of organizations which are geographically dispersed. Since the metaknowledge of employees is usually limited to the colleagues who are contacted regularly (Leonardi, 2015), frequent communication with co-workers, even if they are not in the same office, is vital. Organizational success progressively depends on efficient cross-boundary collaboration and knowledge sharing processes (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018) and geographically dispersed entities, "should foster active situational information sharing practices across locations" (Cramton, Orvis & Wilson, 2007, p.543). Moreover, the departmentalized structure of an

organization often reduces the communication between the teams, although they could learn from each other (Leonardi, 2014). ESNs offer an excellent opportunity for overcoming geographical or structural boundaries (silos) through (Cummings, Espinosa & Pickering, 2009) “breaking down [...] silos on organizations and facilitating more effective and efficient cross-boundary knowledge sharing” (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018, p.647).

2.3 Visible Communication - An Unmitigated Goal?

So far, this thesis has mainly engaged in the intuitive and widespread assumption of visibility as a desirable unmitigated goal, having mainly information overload as a potentially negative consequence. On the contrary, this section applies a more critical perspective and investigates the potential downsides due to communication becoming visible to third party observers. We do so by firstly portraying research around the effects of visible communication on participation in the ESN and later moving on to illustrate how ESNs enables a perception of surveillance.

Unproductive Behaviors

In order to materialize organizational value from ESNs, associates need to contribute to the platform (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016), yet there is an extreme variation of participation between organizations (Brzozowski, Sandholm & Hogg, 2009). Kane (2017) presents an example of an ESN hindering collaboration; in that case, managers discouraged employees from contributing through monitoring and reprimanding ideas that were not in line with the company norms. As this example indicates, the visibility of messages, and the surveillance it enables, may lead to unproductive organizational behavior (Gibbs, Rozaidi & Eisenberg, 2013). Recent literature illustrates some potential reasons for employee’s reluctant behaviors related to contributions in social media. Leonardi (2017, p.52) presents three potential barriers to participation; a lack of perceived required participation, the absence of intrinsic motivation due to a lack of incentives and the belief that one’s knowledge is not valuable. In addition, employees may be concerned about colleagues stealing their ideas since the standing in an organization may be achieved as a result of specialized knowledge (Gibbs, Rozaidi & Eisenberg, 2013). To summarize, there are a number of reasons to not contribute to ESNs, most of them caused by surveillance, which will further be examined in the following paragraph.

Surveillance and Impression Management

The fear of surveillance through technology is not a new topic. Decades ago, Zuboff (1988, p.320) wrote the book *In the Age of the Smart Machine* where she makes a link to the *Panopticon* and referred to information systems as “the computer age version of universal transparency”. Later authors like Ciborra (1997) took up the idea and showed that transparency enhancing systems might lead to employee’s fear of control. The interest in the topic of surveillance seems to be reinforced by constant technological progress. Even in digital non-business environments, there are tensions between the popularity of social media and the surveillance enabled by them (Meikle, 2016). As Ellison, Gibbs and Weber (2015, p.115), yet referring exclusively to the process of asking questions, claim; “employees may not wish to ask questions in a publicly visible and archived forum”, since they “may be concerned that the question makes them appear incompetent or feel that they should already know the answer”.

The surveillance through visible communication may lead to self-preservation (Leonardi & Treem, 2012), self-presentation (Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015) or reputation management (Oostervink, Agterberg & Huysman, 2016), which can be seen as similar denominations for the fact that employees communicate what they are expected to do. Leonardi and Treem (2012, p.37) talk about ESNs as “stages upon which individuals enact performances of expertise” where individuals “position themselves as experts”. If employees want to be perceived as knowledgeable in specific areas, they may exaggerate their proficiency or withhold information if they want to abandon specific expertise (Leonardi, 2015).

2.4 Language Bridging Silos

Throughout contemporary research, there is consensus concerning ESNs’ contribution to breaking down silos through enabling cross-functional communication and collaboration (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018). In order to enable this, and as ESNs can be regarded as “inherently discursive space where individuals are able to put forth arguments and engage in public deliberation”, language, and the use of it, can be seen as central (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p.175). This is especially valid for organizations with dispersed areas of knowledge where knowledge is highly specialized (Ungar, 2000). In such an environment, specialized knowledge might require translation in order to be utilized by others since

knowledge, which is shared but not tailored for the potential receiver, instead is ignored due to its perceived non-importance, i.e. if people do not understand a piece of knowledge it brings no value and, hence, is ignored. (Ungar, 2000).

Pentland (2005, p.33) argues that “today's communication technology seems to be at war with human society”. This, as “people are social animals, and [...] their roles in human organizations define the quality of their lives” while technological solutions steer us away from what we actually desire through notifications, quick feedback and response (Penetland, 2005, p.33). Therefore, “technology must account for this [war] by recognizing that communication is always socially situated and that discussions are not just words but part of a larger social dialogue” (Penetland, 2005, p.33). Consequently, as “communication relies upon a shared language”, language has an impact on the way we think, behave and experience things (Harzing & Feely, 2008, p.3).

2.5 Nonverbal Signals in Computer-Mediated-Communication

This section addresses the lack of nonverbal cues when using computer-mediated-communication (CMC), which is the type of communication taking place in an ESN. In order to analyze human behavior and communication, nonlinguistic signals are seen as highly important and powerful (Pentland, 2005). In a literature review on how people communicate emotions in virtual environments, Derks, Fischer and Bos (2007) conclude, that CMC is rich on emotions and that there are no signs of emotions being more difficult to share in CMC than in face-to-face communication. On the contrary, a majority of researchers describes CMC as “far more primitive than face-to-face conversation” due to the lack of nonverbal communication cues (Wang, Prendinger & Igarashi, 2004, p.1171). Since these nonverbal cues can support verbal communication, reduce ambiguity and bring nuance to statements, they can be seen as being of great importance (Derks, Fischer & Boss, 2007). As a result, the use of, so-called, *emoticons* increased dramatically (Tang & Hew, 2018). These emoticons, sometimes referred to as “quasi-nonverbal cues”, can assist and improve the receiver’s perception of the message and facilitate efficient mutual understanding (Lo, 2008, p.597). This goes in line with the conclusion of Tang and Hew’s (2018) systematic review on emoticons, which refer to emoticons as supplements to verbal communication. This review also concludes that people

might still not fully understand each other as well as through physical interaction. Altogether, contemporary literature mainly agrees that the lack of nonverbal cues in CMC still leads to people preferring face-to-face communication.

2.6 The Significance of this Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the Introduction, the purpose of this thesis is to bring nuance and clarity into the discussion of how individuals experience the use of an ESN and the visibility that is claimed to come with it. Therefore, we provided this theoretical framework as a foundation for the discussion we build ahead when aiming at fulfilling the above-mentioned purpose and answering our research question. We started this chapter by presenting the affordance perspective on ESNs, highlighting the importance of users' subjective perceptions of usefulness, which is vital for understanding the diverse experiences amongst employees, i.e., the focal point of our research question. Since, in our research, we focus on the visibility of communication, we continued to demonstrate suitable research about this affordance to enable a thorough examination of our empirical material. Afterwards, we showed how, according to recent literature, people are expected to use ESNs due to its potential benefits in regard to knowledge sharing. This, as it was one of the main reasons for our studied organization to adopt the tool. Accordingly, we illustrated how most scholars make the link between visible communication and knowledge sharing as a means of bridging organizational silos. Subsequently, we presented the common assumption of communication visibility being an unmitigated goal. This, since we, in this thesis, challenge this assumption as a way of approaching our research purpose. Moreover, we illustrated factors regarding ESNs, which foster unproductive organizational behaviors and demonstrated how employees perceive and handle potential surveillance according to current literature. Finally, we provided the reader with insights into two topics which are rarely discussed in regard to ESNs, namely language and nonverbal signals. This, as will be demonstrated in our empirical findings, since these two aspects play a major role when answering our research question.

3 Methodology

This section starts by providing the context of our organization and the implemented ESN. Subsequently, our philosophical grounding and research approach are presented. This is followed by a description of our data collection method and additional details about the actual data collection process. We end this chapter by describing how we approached our data and how we conducted our analysis.

3.1 Case Context

This section aims to paint the picture of the case and is based on official documents from the organization, their website, domain presentations made by our contact-person and conversations with employees.

Innocent (N.B., pseudonyms are used for all names in this paper) is a professional consulting and SaaS (Software as a service)-company located in Sweden. Innocent's headquarters resides in a small city in Sweden, but they also possess a minor office in Stockholm. Founded in 2005 by the current CEO, Innocent could be regarded as being past its early years. With a vision labeled *Innocentx10*, stating that Innocent aims to grow tenfold within ten years' time starting 2015, Christer, when conducting a domain presentation of the organization, stresses the importance of not only growing financially but also maturing as a company on all levels. Starting in 2015, Innocent's growth-journey gained momentum, and since, the company has grown from 6 employees to 25. Therefore, in 2018, the company went through an organizational transition when establishing four explicit departments; Product Development, Customer Support, Sales and Consulting, each of which gaining respective business area managers. Since then, these managers are also part of an executive team, responsible for the strategic direction of the company.

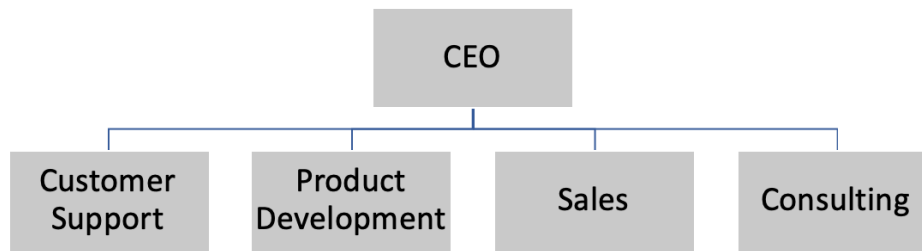


Figure 1: Innocent Organizational Chart

However, due to consultants on assignments, sales on customer-appointments and software developers being able to work remotely, the only department fully residing at the headquarters is Customer Support together with supporting-functions such as administration. As a response to employees being geographically scattered across the country, Innocent adopted an ESN, in this essay referred to by the name Palantír, to enable communication between individuals and teams.

Palantír enables users to communicate with each other through chatting in groups, called channels. These channels can be public to anyone within the organization to join, or, they can be closed where users need an invitation to join a specific channel. Beyond chatting, Palantír also enables calls, video-calls and screen-sharing in both channels or between two or more people. Beyond the main functions of the software, there are numerous possibilities to attach and incorporate third-party applications and features into Palantír. However, as Innocent, at the time of our study, did not use any third-party applications, we believe that having only the main features of the software in mind is of great value for understanding this thesis. Starting off, all users create their respective profile stating contact-information, name, a picture and position within the company. Therefore, nothing which is written is anonymized. However, in comparison to other ESNs, Palantír does not provide a user-feed where all activities from one specific user become visible for everyone. In addition, Palantír also provides users with the possibility to send private messages and enables the use of emoticons (i.e., emojis or smileys) in an effort to provide an ability to express feelings and emotions. Users can use these to react to messages or to add them in a message one writes.

The decision of adopting Palantír as an official communication tool was taken six months prior to when we conducted our study, and through our observations, discussions and interactions with representatives from the company, we experienced the usage and implementation of

Palantír a rather ‘hot’ topic in the company with different opinions and some confusion regarding its role.

Due to Innocent’s recent organizational restructuring and the implementation of Palantír, the different departments within Innocent have a clear dependency on each other, for example, Customer Support described their role as partly being the channel for complaints and feedback on the software created by the software development team, making feedback and communication of improvements a part of their daily tasks.

As Palantír has been used within the product development team during some years, to ease communication and due to its many functions of enabling people getting insights in each other’s work, the executive team started using it to communicate between themselves in order to harvest its benefits. After some months of testing, a decision was made to implement Palantír over the whole organization in order to move towards one central point of communication. As Christer said in one of our initial conversations: “we decided to use Palantír as the only official tool for internal communication and to use email for external usage only”.

3.2 Philosophical Grounding and Research Approach

Our research question focuses on the subjective experiences of organizational members regarding ESNs. This is a result of our view on reality as socially constructed in line with the post-positivist interpretative research tradition (Prasad, 2018). In this work, we adopt the perspective that reality cannot be regarded as stable or fixed but rather made up by all subjective minds and experiences (Alvehus, 2013; Prasad, 2018). In order to provide rich material and depth to our analysis, we work in line with the ideals of hermeneutics, meaning actively engaging in the interpretation of empirical material with the aim to “get beyond the text’s obvious meaning” (Prasad, 2018, p.37; Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). Consequently, we acknowledge that our empirical material is based on the psychological mindset and linguistic world of its creators and a product of their cultural environment (Prasad, 2018). In order to deepen the understanding of our empirical material, we apply the idea of the hermeneutic circle described as a concept enabling an “iterative spiral of understanding”, which asserts that parts of empirical material can only be understood from the whole and vice versa (Prasad, 2018,

p.35). As a result, we get underneath the surface of the verbalized experiences by moving between our data and the context of the individuals until we reach a meaningful understanding of the empirical material (Prasad, 2018).

As Alvehus (2013) argues, adopting an unmitigated approach to exploration and reasoning is close to impossible. However, we aim to approach our research in line with the ideals of abduction to increase “our conceptual understanding of a phenomenon” (Ho, 1994, p.3). An abductive approach allows the shifting, and continuous movement, going back and forth between theory and empirical findings (Alvehus, 2013) complementing our adoption of the hermeneutic circle as a way to understand the whole (Prasad, 2018). We apply this way of working as our research goes beyond just confirming existing theory about employees’ experiences of ESNs. Consequently, we allow both dimensions (theory and empiricism) to be framed and re-framed together in parallel (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This, since it brings leverage to the theorizing-process and the creation of new, or addition to, knowledge as it allows us to “relate to [...] current understandings or explanations” (Alvehus, 2013; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.144; Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016).

By viewing our interviewees, not as passive objects, but as reflecting, aware actors within a socially constructed context, we get a deeper understanding of their reality (Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). We identify common constructions and shared interpretations about the experience of the ESN between individuals which are enabled through intersubjectivity (Prasad, 2018). This is something which would not be possible if using a quantitative method because of the potential lack of nuance, perspectives, storytelling and other forms of elaboration and reflection on one's own experiences, thoughts and answers (Alvehus, 2013; Prasad, 2018). We adopt a critical approach towards interviewee’s answers and demonstrate awareness of the fact that, as researcher, we also interpret statements, answers and ideas based on our own subjectively constructed reality in order to make sense of the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). Since we challenge dominant perspectives about the use of ESNs through a critical perspective, we aim to conduct “research with a strong point”, where the analysis of the empirical material is based on a relatively free approach and, to some extent, freed from too strong influence by methodological techniques (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.39). In other words, our dialog with the material is not too systematic, which aids us in finding discrepancies between, and similarities among, assumptions and experiences as well as within contemporary research. Through adopting this approach, we aim

to contribute to the current research and present a novel interpretation of how individuals experience the use of an ESN.

3.3 Data Collection Method

Throughout our study, interviews conducted with Innocent employees has been our primary source of data. These interviews were of semi-structured nature, aiming at increasing our insight in the interviewee's perceptions and experiences in regard to the recently implemented ESN. Furthermore, in alignment to our purpose, we wanted to learn about employees' lifeworlds, "in which individuals make sense of the phenomena they encounter and order them into taken-for-granted realities" (Prasad, 2018, p.14). We did this through building our interview-guide on broad topics, rather than providing a step by step questionnaire in a structured pre-fixed order. This interview-guide consisted of some easy warm-up questions about the interviewee's role in order to reduce pressure and create an atmosphere where interviewees felt safe and confident. It continued with a broad choice of open-end questions focusing on experiences, perceptions and values of the ESN. Most of the questions were of *how-nature*, easy to understand and gave the interviewees space to share their experiences in regard to topics like knowledge sharing and communication. We continuously let interviewees paint their own picture and enabled discussions from their respective perspectives and around specific topics each interviewee considered relevant. Since we gained new insights and directions from each of the interviews, we continuously updated our interview-guide. Consequently, as our approach and topics were being shaped in accordance to our insights, the most significant change was the shift from broadly based questions towards the perceived effects of the visibility in Palantír.

Moreover, in line with the hermeneutic tradition, we used internal documents, official communication channels and the very ESN itself as parts to further understand the organization and its members as a whole. With the organization's allowance, we gained access to the ESN to view content, questions, use of language, channel-structure and statistics regarding usage. Altogether, these studies of additional material helped providing a context for the lifeworlds of the organizational members. We also aimed at gaining insight in the specific use of language, the creation of narratives and the way the tool is used as we see narratives and language as potential keys in identifying, and potentially, unlocking important mysteries and

phenomena. We also used these studies to gain insight in new ideas and perspectives, for example, as one of the organization's value-words was, loosely translated, “being prestigeless”, we could not resist asking questions around it. This, since research done in the field of ESNs, handles prestige as a potential creator of barriers to, for example, knowledge sharing (Oostervink, Agterberg & Huysman, 2016).

3.4 Data Collection Process

One week before our first interviews, we conducted a Skype meeting with the CTO of the organization, who was responsible for the launch of the ESN. This preparatory talk aimed for us to get to know the organization, learn about the reasons for implementing Palantír and to gain further insights into the initial experiences and feedback by the workforce. This, as our research question was directed towards employee’s experience of the ESN. Since we wanted to grasp a holistic picture of the organization, we decided to conduct interviews with a representative group of employees. Consequently, we interviewed employees from all departments, with different seniority, time spent at the company, age, gender, professional background and with the entire executive team, including all managers.

During most of the 13 interviews, both researchers were present and actively engaged in the conversations. This was enabled through recording all the interviews, relieving the researchers from taking over extensive notes but to, instead, be fully present and focused on the conversations. By letting both researchers ask questions and be part of the conversations, we aimed to also reduce ambiguity, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and add the possibility to capture and evaluate body language (Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). Despite our aim to have both researchers physically present and actively engaged in all interviews, linguistic difficulties, with two interviewees not able to conduct the interviews in English, hindered one of the researchers to actively participate during these. In an attempt to compensate for this, we translated the two interviews in entirety and gave the other interviewer the possibility to ask follow up questions through a phone-call.

Our interviews were mainly conducted face-to-face at Innocent’s headquarters in order to provide a context associated with work. Through meeting and conducting our interviews in the

interviewee's own realm, we aimed to get further understanding and insight in their respective context while simultaneously enabling ourselves to view expressions, body language and get answers beyond interviewee's obvious responses (Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). The interviews which were not conducted face-to-face, due to two individuals' incapable of meeting us in person within our timeframe, were done over phone leaving the potential upsides mentioned above missing. In average, the duration of each interview was approximately 55 minutes with a scope between 45 and 80 minutes.

Through approaching the interviewees with sincere curiosity and interest in their experiences, perceptions and lifeworlds, we aimed to create a good relationship with them. Consequently, this natural setting enabled a sense of security and intrinsic motivation to share experiences and thoughts while simultaneously reducing the feeling of being examined and closely observed. As part of striving towards honest and exhaustive answers, all interviewees were promised secrecy and anonymization within the scope of this thesis.

3.5 Data Analysis Process

With our data at hand, we set out to connect topics and detect consistent patterns in a meaningful way in order to reach our higher purpose, to contribute to theory. To do so, we transcribed all interviews we conducted, gathered all documented first impressions and thoughts and tried to structure our findings without the influence of our theoretical framework. Through using our own interpretations of the material as a base for our structure we strived to relieve ourselves from the influence of our theoretical framework, hence, using inductive elements in order to harvest something meaningful without the influence of fixed ideas from other sources (Styhre, 2014). While having this open way of sorting and coding, we created a color-coded web when identifying key aspects, expressions and threads we found meaningful. These color-coded webs of findings were later restructured into families of topics with headings in order to create parts and use it to understand the whole. This, together with our continuous movements between empirical findings, our theoretical framework and adopting a rather playful approach in regards to structuring our data, are all in alignment with the hermeneutic tradition as it aims at going back and forth between context and text (Prasad, 2018; Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016). Moreover,

we used these themes when reducing our material to what we found most meaningful and interesting from both a theoretical and empirical perspective.

During the writing process, we continuously gathered additional theory in order to build our argumentation as it unfolded. As reading while writing, sparked our creativity and gave us new insights, we continuously went back and forth in between our own text, theory and external sources to provide ourselves with the tools to reach our purpose of examining how people experience the use of an ESN. We, therefore, view the data analysis process as a continuous activity as we permanently engaged with the material and allowed it to shape our work.

4 Empirical findings

In this chapter, we present empirical material relating to our research question about the use and experiences regarding the ESN. We start by portraying the current use and perceived value of the tool. Afterwards, we illustrate our interpretations of the use of language and emotions in ESNs. After presenting our initial reflections on employees' feelings of being observed or perceived as being stupid, we finally analyze our findings on the creation of silos within the organization. Altogether, these findings build the foundation for the upcoming discussion.

4.1 Introduction

During our first day of interviewing at the Innocent headquarters, we were standing in the kitchen by the coffee machine, socializing with employees and introducing ourselves and explaining our aims. We spoke briefly about communication as one of our entry points when Debra, an employee having been part of a number of departments proclaimed:

The lack of inter-team communication is our greatest source of friction. (Debra)

Of course, this caught our attention, especially as we knew about Innocent's work with implementing an ESN in order to ease collaboration and communication. From a technical perspective, the ESN provides everything which seems necessary for having a good cross-functional collaboration. Feeding our interest in inter-team communication was Rubin claiming:

We have one weakness; I would say it's sharing between the teams. (Rubin)

This opinion went on to become one of the profound common agreements amongst employees of Innocent. As Rubin takes, what one can argue is going to extreme measures through stating that sharing and communicating between teams is the one weakness Innocent has, it also

neglects other problems which, of course, they possess. Being aware of this issue, the organization decided to implement an ESN in order to improve the communication between the teams; Palantír, a tool supposed to be the salvation to all their issues.

So Palantír is good but if you want an answer directly, it's generally social to go and ask the person that is here. (Darryl)

As Palantír acts as the primary tool for communicating, Darryl's answer indicates another collective agreement that, overall, employees prefer to communicate through physical meetings and talk to each other face-to-face. Also, we identified a common belief that it might seem unfriendly to sometimes use Palantír for communicating while people are actually present in the office. Not only is it regarded as social to go directly to colleagues, but it is also a convenient way of getting answers to your questions:

[If I have questions] about the product I will walk right in[to] the room, and I'll ask questions to whomever is there. And then Christer calls me and says, "you can't do that". (Derek)

In a fast-moving business environment, this behavior seems to be common, but is this myopic behavior, at large, counterproductive in the long run? Through demonstrating reflexivity upon his own actions, Derek acknowledges that this behavior may not be the most fruitful way of communicating; however, he does it anyway.

The challenges Innocent is facing are manifold, both due to their environment but also because of their extensive growth and internal structure. One of the consequences of this is to create a coherent, including organization fostering a corporate culture which is fruitful concerning the organizational goals. This is due to, for example, the geographically scattered nature of the organization.

It's difficult to build culture in a lot of places. (Derek)

Throughout our interviews, we experienced a common assumption of culture as being important, both for individuals and their sense of community, but also for the organization where employees on all levels expressed the importance of a great culture to foster a successful

company. However, as declared by Derek, there are also obstacles in creating and fostering a culture in many places at once. Even here, in building and fostering soft elements such as culture, Palantír is brought up as a tool within which culture is fostered, built and maintained.

Sometimes it's just to like, 'yeah, good for you' and to support each other. When someone does something very good, we support and cheer for each other. (Debra)

As recognition and rewards are facilitated in Palantír, Palantír work as a helpful tool to create organizational culture. We also interpret Debra's body language and excitement as her appreciating this part of Palantír immensely. Therefore, Palantír helps to foster stories, underlying assumptions and rituals, all of which are part of the definition of organizational culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Other interviewees also refer back to Palantír as something more than just a tool to spread thoughts and ideas, rather, as a facilitator of inclusiveness. Derek expresses being part of a group, which he might not contribute to extensively:

It can give me the sense of involvement in their group. (Derek)

The following sections will aim to more thoroughly examine these issues, inter-team communication, an organization being geographically dispersed and Palantír as a facilitator of culture.

4.2 The Versatility of Palantír

In order to understand and grasp how people experience the use of the ESN and how it affects their life-worlds, it is vital for the reader to understand how the tool is actually used by the different employees. From our empirical material, it stands clear that the way people use the ESN is highly diverse. Some people use the ESN in the simplest way; when asked how she mostly uses Palantír Yancy answers:

I have direct conversations with one or two people, that's the most frequent. (Yancy)

Thereby, Yancy highlights the fact that the communication conducted on the platform does mainly focus on direct messaging and therefore excluding, or at least limiting the inclusiveness of, others on the platform through not exposing communication to third party observers. Through viewing Palantír as a tool for direct communication rather than an ESN, employees tend to miss out on other potential use and aspects of the software, such as broadcasting their ideas and thoughts to others, hence, hindering the potential effects of the ESN to be fully utilized. However, not everyone perceives the value of the software mainly in the use of instant messages. One of the interviewees states:

It's also like a whiteboard [...]: We write things down that we can come back to. And when we have our meetings we stand before a whiteboard and just fill it with notes. So, it's some kind of interactive whiteboard since I am in Stockholm four days a week, we can communicate to each other without having the whiteboard. (Alfred)

By highlighting an alternative use of Palantír through claiming to use it as an interactive whiteboard, Alfred refers to the way he uses Palantír-channels as a way of relieving himself from his own thoughts. Simultaneously, by using Palantír as a forum to communicate these issues, he exposes his thoughts to others in the organization, and when doing so, turns Palantír to a forum for sharing thoughts, ideas or knowledge. However, broadcasting thoughts as they come across one's mind does not solve the issue itself; therefore, employees acknowledge the need for physical meetings in order to fully examine these thoughts, rather using Palantír as a notebook for a moment. In other words, through using Palantír as a tool to remember ideas and thoughts, the ESN could be viewed as a complement, but might not work as a supplement, to physical meetings. Moreover, the use of Palantír is independent of the employees' geographical position and, therefore, one is not bound either to time or place in order to create a sense of carefreeness through freeing oneself from one's own thoughts. In support, Yancy explains her and her manager's way of using Palantír as a tool to create a collective memory and using it to remember each other of what he/she has to do. Darryl offers an excellent example where he emphasizes a value beyond the function of commemorating ideas:

So, you can always go back and read, the tips that you've got from somebody. (Darryl)

Using Palantír as a memory or a knowledge-repository which you get back to once you need specific knowledge was a common understanding by employees. As guidelines on how to do

specific work are not stored somewhere else, employees went back in chat-channels to view discussions and debated topics to see if they could extract useful information or knowledge from it. This also enabled employees to see who wrote what and thereafter, if the need occurred, address questions to specific colleagues who were actively contributing to conversations around that specific topic. In addition, one of the managers highlighted another aspect of the tool as the main benefit:

Well, without Palantír I'm not sure how we would have managed. To lead and to collaborate on a distance works with Palantír, but personally I'm missing the close or near leadership. (Sabrina)

As Sabrina points out, Palantír is of great value to stay in contact with geographically scattered colleagues on an everyday basis, something she views as highly important. However, even though using Palantír is efficient, for most of our interviewees, it still creates a distance between individuals, leaving the close relationships missing. Sabrina further stretches her previous experiences from being a manager in public organizations and claims that leadership is something you do in close proximity to employees and colleagues. Hence, she misses the feeling of being close to her colleagues beyond an intellectual level. This focus on relationships provides a convenient transit to the next chapter.

4.3 The Tone that Makes the Music

A majority of our interviewees perceives writing direct messages to colleagues, or in one of the channels, as not allowing individuals to interpret body language, the pitch of voice and other types of expressions, but only the message itself, as a problem. This, as it reduces clarity and opens up room for potential misinterpretations and ambiguities in communication.

The tonality is always difficult to read through Palantír. (Darryl)

It's hard to find nuance in chat and like sharing emotions. (Darryl)

Elements like the tone of voice, facial expressions, body movements and eye contact are a significant part of understanding a context and underlying meanings of messages (Tang & Hew, 2018). Some of our interviewees remarked that lacking these elements could have immense effects on relationships as it reduces people's ability to read between the lines and to interpret what is written. Altogether, this absence of nuance and the ability to show emotions could act as a barrier for peers and managers to build and develop relationships in Palantír. Yancy provides us with a more detailed illustration:

Sometimes I think it's quicker and gives more value to sit down and actually talk [...]. Because it's hard to communicate by writing. Sometimes you sound irritated or you can sound short. So, what's okay? Because I think we're living in a world that is used to emojis and smileys and that is hard. And also, to explain something you don't know yourself in writing in a chat. (Yancy)

While acknowledging that emotions are hard to express in writing, Yancy also mentions emojis, or smileys, as a tool to add feelings and emotions into messaging. However, these are hard to use due to many reasons, for example, finding a smiley which corresponds to your current state, which also, might include multiple emotions may be troublesome. Or put differently, sometimes people may come across as communicating something that they do not want to communicate, or perhaps even the opposite, e.g., people may be perceived as irritated, while they are actually not. Yancy's statement additionally shows that it can be difficult to express oneself through the right words. As a result, many of the employees seem to prefer physical meetings over Palantír-conversations. Derek, one of the managers, elaborates on his need to extract feelings from employees:

I also need to know a lot about their like, daily mental position, like where they are. Sales are kind of tough. Like, if you have a bad day, you're not going to deliver. (Derek)

In this specific situation, since the sales team is heavily geographically dispersed, Derek points out the emotional roller coaster work could be. Therefore, he discerns it as essential to extract his colleague's mental position. This may be seen as a contradiction to the above-mentioned lack of nuance to express emotions on Palantír. Consequently, he, like many others, claims to favor other ways of communication, like phone calls or face-to-face meetings. Another

interviewee presents a suitable example, where he illustrates the benefit of meeting physically at the office:

But we who work here in Arboga and meet each other almost every day it's obvious if someone is a bit down or you can find out pretty fast if someone has a bad day. (Christer)

From this section, we extract two common ideas. Firstly, expressing and interpreting emotions are of great importance in every work-relationship. Secondly, Palantír is not perceived as a convenient tool for this, creating a high demand for other forms of interactions, such as physical, face-to-face conversations. Altogether, none of our interviewees perceives it as appropriate to solely communicate via Palantír. The statements presented in this section has mainly been about interpersonal relationships and tonality, which constitutes only one aspect of communication within organizations and organizational lives. The following section takes a leap towards the more professional aspects.

4.4 The Value of Visibility

As stated above, there is a desire for physical meetings in order to be able to show emotions and as a complement to communicate in Palantír. Though the frequency of these meetings is rather low. Derek states, when talking about the sales team and their communication through both Palantír and meetings:

We meet like once every second month, some of us. But I still have a connection of "Oh, I saw what you did there [on Palantír]. And can you explain more? That was interesting. Can we use it in some other way?" So, it gives me information to like open up a conversation. (Derek)

Once again, Palantír works as a complement to physical meetings. Without Palantír, and the visibility it brings, Derek would lack understanding and insight in other's work. Through being able to use these observed conversations as starting points might reduce the barrier but rather create a sense of community and inclusiveness to each other as people maintain the insight in each other's activities. As the quote also implies, the actual content of what is communicated

could also be of importance and something that might gain the business, and Derek in his role as a manager, valuable input. On the contrary, he directly provides a potential downside as well:

So, there's always the difficulty of having your ear on one wall, that means you can't have your ear on the other one, right? So yeah, I do that and that helps a lot. [...] So it's very selective as well, where you want to be a third-party observer. [...] But it's also like you can tilt your focus in the company by choosing to be a third-party observer in specific channels. (Derek)

Through using the metaphor of standing in a room and having one ear on one wall listening to what is said on the other side, making it impossible to listen behind the other wall, Derek claims that depending on what you hear, or, in the case of the ESN, see, might tilt your focus as it does not always provide the full picture of a dilemma. Alfred states:

I would say 50 percent of our channels is not public, and 50 percent of them are public. (Alfred)

Channels can be both public to anyone to enter or made private where an invitation is required for entering the channel. Therefore, through creating channels which are not open to everyone, the organization itself chooses to counteract the very visibility which might enable 'having ears on every wall in the room'. As Derek, and others, claim, the ability to be a passive bystander with an ear on the wall, might help a lot in their daily work. To illustrate the logic of closed channels, Derek expresses:

I'm not in the customer service, because I don't want to be in customer service channel, because there's a lot of technical stuff going on, that I don't like... 'Okay, this code went wrong. Can we talk to the developers?'. (Derek)

As a specific channel is perceived as not providing relevant information, knowledge or insights for an individual, the individual can, in some cases, chose to exit it. As Innocent is a small organization, people usually know whom to contact if they would need to gain insight in a specific matter.

Often, I know who's responsible for the thing I need to ask about. So, I usually go straightforward to Palantír and ask that person. (Marinus)

This behavior is representative for all our interviewees. Due to the company size, employees know the responsibility of their colleagues and initiate discussions accordingly.

Altogether, as long as employees do not see any value in making communication visible to others and reading other's discussions, they do not do it. However, we attribute the fact of being reluctant with posting in public channels, not to our interviewees' willingness, but more to the fact that they either perceive no value in such behavior, or, as the following sections addresses, do not dare to write publicly.

4.5 One Company - Different Languages

Innocent is a company with highly trained and educated employees with high levels of experience and seniority, however, it stands clear that there are diverse areas in which this expertise resides. Most prominent are the differences between the Software Development, whose expertise resides within programming and the rest of the organization with expertise in Human Resources and salary matters. Therefore, communication between the entities is not always easy. Many of the employees, from different departments, raise the language as an obstacle regarding communication. Yancy states that there might be a question of different entry points and perspectives causing these discrepancies by stating:

They go from the software or the program and out and we take it from the managers or the HR view into the system, it's like different ways to look at the problem. (Yancy)

While acknowledging these different approaches, there is an awareness for these perspectives flourishing within the organization. This is best expressed by Marinus as he describes the common agreement amongst the software developers to approach other departments in a way they would understand:

*And we'll try to [share knowledge] in a sense that a non-programmer would understand.
(Marinus)*

However, these potential misinterpretations or miscommunications are not only present in the relation in between departments and individuals with different sets of knowledge; it is also present in the relation to customers. Throughout our interviews, we heard about customers frustrations when something in the software is not working as expected or desired. Therefore, the development department highlights the potential lack of common language also in relation to external audiences, causing frustration from both sides. This, due to the inability to be precise and accurate while, at the same time, lack insight and understanding for the underlying processes.

*A lot of questions that we get [from other departments] is like, "nothing is working at the customer". And then we narrow it down and we see that, okay, it was just this report that someone couldn't export, but for other people in this company it works. So, it's nothing.
(Christer)*

This statement depicts that the misapprehensions, caused by language, can be seen as significant issues with an impact on relationships within the organization, but also concerning external audiences. This, as insights and feedback from the customers, regarding the software, is always channeled through Customer Support. Leo indicates an understanding and a sense of responsibility, for the use, and bridging, of languages:

So, we have to, from our staff, our team, correctly describe the problem. And this has been a challenge for us. (Leo)

The next step is actually to write about it [the software] in such a way that our team and customers really can learn and see what new features mean to them. And that's a problem too. So, you don't have to have technical language in that sense, because our users are not technical, they are HR people. (Leo)

Leo stresses the need for communicating externally in a language which is appropriate for the intended audience. Also, there is a need to act and behave in accordance with the rest of the organization in order to act professional and not confuse customers. Altogether, there seems to

be a shared understanding and desire from many departments and individuals to approach one another in terms of language. Moreover, as the linguistic discrepancies are present across all departments within the organization, Christer, portrays his role in terms of being a translator:

Personally, maybe I could correct the people who are asking me a question, but I don't think it's necessary to do that. So mostly, I can translate it to my own words in my head and go through it. [...] I feel that my strengths are more for the market part and I can convert the market to a developer term. Right now, I would say that I am the person who can be the bridge between the developer and the market in the best way right now. (Christer)

While Christer claims that he works as a translator, or a bridge between departments through translation, he expresses no desire in freeing or relieving, himself from this role. Through acquiring the full responsibility of bridging this gap, Christer's behavior makes him indispensable, but it also makes him a bottleneck through letting these problems persist. This, through not teaching others in the organization to translate insights, ideas and problems to each other, and therefore, passively obstructing clear communication between departments which, as Debra stated above, might be the greatest source of friction in the organization. However, the reasons behind this inability or lack of motives might be two-sided:

I don't want to know in detail, or I can't know in detail, since I don't understand the language when Christer talks about code and everything, that's a complete new language for me. Social worker meets programmer, we get excited by different stuff. (Sabrina)

Here, Sabrina captures the inability to know about the software, programming and code, in exact terms. However, she also touches upon an unwillingness to know or to learn. We identify this as a common characteristic amongst employees, that, as people take pride in becoming specialists in their own respective fields, there is a tendency to 'leave others to theirs'. Therefore, language becomes an obstacle across the whole organization. On this note, Debra argues:

We are all working in different teams. And I think the communication within the team is quite good. But between the teams it is not that good. Because we are working with

different things, and we don't really understand each other. And we don't really know what they [other departments] are doing. (Debra)

The linguistic barrier is not only a problem in terms of creating friction between individuals. It also takes immense time to circumscribe one's thoughts due to the inability to express oneself precisely, making the linguistic barrier a time-consuming activity. This steals focus from your actual duties and may lead to further frustration. Another employee explicitly states:

Sometimes, it's a long chat before we know what to say or before we understand each other. [...] Because I think that they get irritated on us and that we get irritated with them, and it doesn't create a good feeling. (Yancy)

Here, Yancy adds an emotional dimension when claiming that employees experience significant irritation due to the different use of language.

Altogether, we see that linguistic discrepancies affect people's emotional well-being by causing friction between individuals internally, but also in relation to external audiences, such as customers. To conclude, one of the interviewees, Kaj, states:

To find this common language that's what we need for us as consultants but also for the customer. (Kaj)

As we have identified the use of language as a present phenomenon at Innocent that might be of great importance to understanding the life-worlds of employees, on the contrary, the inherent function of screen-sharing might reduce the use of language itself. For example, during their daily start-up meetings, so-called stand-ups, the software department uses screen-sharing to, rather than explain through words what they do, show it. However, as stated by Darryl, there is a general lack of knowledge in the potential use of Palantír.

So that is that kind of training probably needed quite badly to the potential of Palantír and then people might feel a bit more comfortable to ring somebody who isn't on location because they know they can share what they're looking at and talk to that person and see the same thing at the same time. (Darryl)

4.6 Stupid is Who Stupid Does

Throughout our interviews, we asked interviewees for potential room for improvements or issues they see within the organization. As a result, we identified a common experience, best formulated by Marinus when stating:

I think something that could be improved here will be make it feel okay to not understand. That will be something that I think I've experienced. I think I've seen others also feel that way, like we could sit in a meeting, talking about something perhaps, and someone maybe not really understands what we're doing at our program but is too afraid to ask. So that's something I think we should work on. But it's okay to ask the stupid questions. There's no problem with that. (Marinus)

When mentioning that people are afraid of asking questions, Marinus also highlights that the real reason for this might actually not be due to organizational pressure or expectations. Rather, Marinus experiences “no problems” with asking these questions claiming that the organization is tolerant towards questions of this nature. Consequently, this made us question, if not due to organizational pressure or expectations, what underlying factors might evoke these feeling. On this topic, Derek, when asked if he, or other people, are afraid to ask questions in Palantír, as the official tool for communication, answered:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think that's the truth in every organization, especially in a knowledge based organization where a lot of people are highly trained and a lot of people have had management positions in huge companies and then you'd be like, 'I'm 22 years old, going into this and writing a stupid question is like, the HR director of Sweden's biggest TV channel will know that I'm stupid.' (Derek)

Thereby, Derek highlights the different levels of experience and seniority as one possible factor to hinder people from asking questions in a visible forum. However, the fact that no one mentioned any potential consequences, left us confused. Marinus elaborates on his experience in regard to why this might be, by stating:

Maybe it's because you don't want to feel stupid. (Marinus)

Together with Marinus, there were several interviewees naming the potential of being perceived as stupid as one of the main reasons for not asking questions in Palantír-channels. In addition, all employees expressed an awareness that others can view what you are writing when posting in channels, best expressed by Derek:

In the main channels, if you have questions, or if you have feedback or something, there's always an issue, like the whole company is watching, I need to know what I'm writing. (Derek)

Therefore, there is a clear discrepancy between what seems to be the mutual approach to these types of questions; that it is okay to ask questions and that people rather appreciate them being asked, and what people actually feel; that due to one knowing that everyone can view what is written, one feel afraid of being perceived as stupid. The fact that Derek is a manager and still expresses this visibility as a potential obstacle to expose oneself through Palantír, demonstrates this feeling as being present at all levels of the organization.

So, I think we have a good atmosphere of you know, being prone to at least try something and it's okay to fail here. (Derek)

Derek counter argues the assumption that being observed hinders employees from posting publicly by claiming that he experiences the atmosphere, the attitudes towards each other, as being characterized by a feeling of that it is okay to fail. Another employee shares his opinion of having a culture, where it is 'okay to fail':

If you do something wrong, you can talk about it without getting your head cut off [...] if you have the guts to tell that you have done something wrong, you shouldn't get punished for it. But if you do something wrong two or three times, you will know that. But I think that if we have a high level of understanding, you can be prestigeless. (Christer)

Christer argues that employees will not risk any direct consequences the first times you make a mistake or do something wrong. However, as it also requires 'guts' to admit that you make a mistake or that something is wrong, this makes us suspect a psychological barrier.

In our first encounter with Innocent, the company was described as ‘being prestigeless’. We also found the description of Innocent as being a prestigeless organization as recurrent amongst employees and as top of mind when describing the very culture, they are part of. On their website, in their domain-presentation and in official documents Innocent promotes themselves as being characterized by being a prestigeless organization with prestigeless employees. As ‘being prestigeless’ is one of Innocent’s outspoken value-words and something they purport themselves to actively work with, and as we identified signs that this not might be the case, this section aims to examine Innocents use of their ESN from a prestige-perspective.

But it's [being prestigeless] very difficult. And we've seen that like when new recruits, especially the highly trained recruits, that there's always some kind of prestige. So, culture is lacking, I guess. (Derek)

Even though being prestigeless was the value word remembered most frequently by our interviewees, it seems as the individual’s reputation plays a major role in employee’s behavior. This quote by one of the managers demonstrates that having a value like being prestigeless does not necessarily lead to a culture without including prestige in one’s decisions. It appears that most of the employees experience the culture as not entirely excusing, for example, lack of understanding.

4.7 The Need to be Seen Knowledgeable - A Critical Incident Exhibition

During our interviews, we came across a story which we identify as a critical incident in regard to the finding described above. Debra and Alfred were doing a tour through Sweden to promote Innocent as a company and what they do, when one of Innocent’s customers met them at a fair and was later in contact with the Customer Support asking questions in regard to the Innocent-software. Later, the customer asked about a statistic project she had discussed with Debra at the fair. As the employee at Customer Support did not know anything regarding neither the fair nor the statistic project, she did not know what to answer. Later, the Customer Support employee sent a message through a public Palantír channel asking what was going on and if there were something Customer Support needed to know in regard to this. As a response Debra answered in the same public channel where everyone is member and explains:

I was giving a lot of information which I think was quite good information and very clear. And the day after, I got a message from Leo (her manager), who have gotten a message from another colleague, who said, "I get this message from a customer regarding the statistics, and I wonder who am I going to turn to?" And I was like, we had this conversation yesterday, me and the person who was asking who he could turn to? We had that yesterday and he also replied to me and said thank you for all the information. And the day after he didn't know who he was going to turn to. [...] And you know, I was a little bit angry. [...] when you take time [...] to be very clear, and you have conversations with people, and they reply and say, thank you for all this information. And you realize that, no, they didn't get it. And they didn't get that it was from me and that I am the one doing this, then it's something wrong, I guess. (Debra)

This example clearly states the need for individuals to communicate and create the impression that they know what they are talking about and answering in order to be perceived in the desired way - as knowledgeable. On this note, Christer elaborates:

I think from time to time; people can be afraid to use channels because it will show their bad knowledge in some areas. [...] you don't want to be displayed as a person who don't have knowledge in our product, for example. So, you don't want to post in a general channel or something where everyone can read about your knowledge level or so. But I think from time to time, it would have been better if we work more in channels to broadcast knowledge. But as we saw in the statistics and analytics, some of us are active almost every day in the month. (Christer)

4.8 The Creation of Islands

In regard to internal communication, there is a clear ambiguity in how Innocent designs its flow of information and communication. While people in all departments emphasize the relationships between individuals as key in communicating, both within and in between departments, there is a lack of clarity about the favored way how to communicate.

I think the company encourages to contact people directly. (Darryl)

However, due to the expansive phase they find themselves in, Innocent has established departments in an attempt to structure the business and to manage flows of information and communication. Mainly, this is due to the previous inefficiency and time-consuming ways of working. One of the managers explains:

Before everyone could access a developer and get changes in the product. But we saw that we need to filter out what requests are going to the developers because we have a big backlog, a to do list, in the product. (Christer)

However, Christer continues describing the new way of organizing through stating:

When the first message goes from the consultant or support people to developer in a direct message. It can rather go to two developers at the same time, because two people from support contact two people in the development-team with direct messages. And those developers start to work at their own because they don't talk to each other that way. And then it could later also reach me or Alfred, and we say that, "oh, yeah, we need to elaborate on this issue or solve it" and then we broadcast it out to every developer, and then two developers are already working with it at the same time. And one is 55% done and the other one is 40% into fixing it. So, the first question could be like, 'nothing is working!'. (Christer)

This critical incident helps the reader to understand why the organization changed their way of communicating in line with the tremendous growth within the last years. Christer sees his role, amongst other things, in a liaison between different teams:

So, I'm not the spider in the web but rather trying to connect the developer and the consultant directly. (Christer)

Christer claims himself being a gatekeeper due to a strict backlog while simultaneously not being the spider in the web. He explains this ambiguity through claiming that once something is confirmed by a manager, a direct contact between an individual having questions, and the

developer supposed to solve the issue, is established. One of his team members explains the practical realization of this rule:

Christer is trying to describe that all issues should go through him but then he gets overloaded and then he doesn't have time to reply so people go to him and then he doesn't reply in the time they like so they go around, to me. Or the best: On Palantír you can add two or more people into the channel at the same time, so they have both me and Christer. (Darryl)

This slightly bizarre problem solving may not be intended by the organizations for two reasons. On the one hand, the main purpose of having the manager as a filter or gatekeeper is circumvented, and on the other hand, the busy manager gets even more occupied. Consequently, the described way of employees handling the problem seems to be inefficient and counterproductive. In the following quote, Derek describes his experience with the newly created structure of the organization:

This is also pretty new, because managers are quite a new thing at Innocent, it was the coffee table company, right? So that actually led to a lot of the employees thinking as we work behind closed doors. And we kind of do, because we really need to focus the information first and be very careful about like, "how do we still create a positive atmosphere in the company, when there's problems". There are problems with the software, with consultancy, there are problems in customer service, and there's problems in sales. (Derek)

The new departments are institutionalized not only through managers as gatekeepers, but also through supplying different spaces, both virtually through Palantír, and physically through office-space. As stated above, employees mainly use their team-channels to communicate through Palantír allocating inter-department users only. At the office, we observed that these departments also constitute the foundation of the physical sectioning of people through putting each department in separate rooms. Altogether, this top-down decision making created through the departmentalization of Innocent is further reinforced by people not really seeing the purpose of getting into the office:

I don't see it practical just to show my face and just go home again. (Kaj)

Kaj goes on to describe the lack of incentives, and value it provides, to come into the office. As a result, there is a lack of physical interactions among the workforce. This absence of natural meetings and cross-functional communication leads to a lack of a common arena for sharing ideas and knowledge. It also obstructs employees learning each other's languages. On this note, communication mostly takes place within teams and consequently, each department constitutes its own *island*, little connected to the others:

I can't wait like three months before I tell them something important. And I don't know really who to call. I think that the consultant team is like, islands, everyone. I don't know, who I am going to call? Because probably I want to call all of them. And that's not how the communication works there. So, then I will probably write on Palantír. (Debra)

While Debra refers not to departments as *islands*, but to each individual, she counter-argues the previous picture as inter-team communication being rather free of friction. However, she also points out that this *ocean* between individuals refers exclusively to the consultant-department, which might be the department most affected by being geographically scattered. As this ocean could be bridged in many ways, many people in the organization point out the lack of physical meetings at all levels except the management team which meets once a week. The inability to conduct physical meetings creates an even greater demand on other types of communication in order to learn whom, when and how to contact and to know what is going on in the organization.

To conclude, this chapter has shown that the ways of communicating within Innocent both are ambiguous and, sometimes, causes work duplication as different people work on the same tasks. The implementation of departments and managers as gatekeepers may lead to the creation of islands. This process is intensified by the low frequency of meetings and the fact that Palantír is mainly used for inter-team communication.

5 Discussion

We start this chapter by taking on an affordance-approach to our empirical findings and discussing the perceived subjective usefulness and value of the ESN. We go on to problematize the use of language and the inability to use non-verbal communication in an ESN. Then we link our discovered phenomena to surveillance enabled by a *Panopticon Effect*. Lastly, we conclude our findings through consolidating them into our emerging theory.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss and interpret our empirical material through our theoretical framework. This, in order to shed new light into the discussion around employees' experiences of an ESN and its effects. As we will show, there is a need for nuance in contemporary research and its assumption that ESNs automatically equals visibility. This, as we found that the visibility itself to some extent hinders organizational members from actively participating in ESNs for two reasons. First, they do not perceive a value in visibility and second, they are afraid of being observed. We will show that this fear emerges from using the right language, being misunderstood due to a lack of nonverbal cues, and not wanting to be perceived as incompetent. At the end of this chapter, we will show how the visibility of communication may reinforce silos instead of bridging them. This, as a result of the *Panopticon Effect* which results in people not contributing to the ESN and consequently counteracting visibility itself. We label this paradoxical phenomenon the *Visibility Paradox*. The following discussion chapter aims to bring the reader on a journey towards this emerging theory.

5.2 Value and Benefit - A Catch-22

As we show in the empirical findings, our interviewees use Palantír frequently, however, the scope of application is quite limited. The majority of the employees perceives the value of

Palantír in direct communication between two, or a small number of colleagues over distance. Consequently, channels are, if at all, mainly used inside teams and the number of possible observers is, by trend, kept as small as possible. We identify considerable differences between the departments in the variety of used features, however the value of the tool is, in each of the departments, mainly generated by the facilitation of easy communication. Rather than being used as a knowledge repository (Leonardi, 2017), Palantír is utilized as a “interactive whiteboard” (Alfred) or to remind a colleague or oneself of something.

In the theoretical framework, we present four main affordances of ESNs (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), namely editability, persistence, association and visibility. Even though, in our interviews, we consistently asked why employees experience the tool as useful, we found few indications of these affordances. Literally no one perceives an affordance in the possibility to recraft existing communication (editability) or establish new connections (association). Only few employees highlight the fact that old communication remaining accessible (persistence) affords an additional use of the ESN. Interestingly, the possibility for third parties to observe communication of colleagues (visibility) is identified as an inherent feature, however, barely seen as an affordance. This, as an affordance would imply this feature as being subjectively useful (Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015).

Generally, the ESN is perceived as valuable for all our interviewees, which is an essential condition for its use and therefore, for the materialization of organizational benefits (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016). However, it is a mystery to us, why our interviewees rarely experience the affordances, which one would expect after studying and analyzing the literature about ESNs. Even the most prominent affordance, visibility, (Evans et al., 2016) is generally not experienced as subjectively useful and in many cases perceived as disturbing: “The whole company is watching, I need to know what I'm writing” (Derek). This negative assessment of visibility, results in a lack of the common discussed benefits of ESNs amongst researchers. For example, it explains the fact that none of our interviewees reported any increasing creativity through recombinant innovation, which is, by many authors, seen as one of the key values of ESNs and the affordance of visibility (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016).

One interviewee provides a case where two developers are working on the same task simultaneously: “One is 55% done and the other one is 40% into fixing it” (Christer). According to the literature, this very issue can be avoided by means of the visibility provided by ESNs

(Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018). We argue, that this duplication avoidance could be extremely beneficial for organizations with high ambitions in regard to growth like the one we studied due to efficiency reasons. In addition, Innocent seems to be missing out on the advantage of effortless knowledge sharing through visibility enabling vicarious learning (Leonardi, 2017). Some authors claim that employees often think that knowledge they possess is not important or valuable for their colleagues (Cress, Kimmerle & Hesse, 2006), which is exactly what we identified as one of the most common logics why there is no perceived value in the visibility. Consequently, the conventional way of aggregating knowledge at Innocent, as in many other organizations, is to use reactive search practices dependent on needs: “So I usually go straightforward to Palantír and ask that person” (Marinus).

As mentioned above, employees at Innocent rarely experience creativity, duplication avoidance, vicarious learning and breaking down boundaries as positive consequences of the visibility. However, these benefits will not occur as long as the employees do not perceive a significant value in the visibility, which in turn would lead to the experience of the mentioned benefits. We define this sequence of reciprocal cause and effect as a catch-22, where “a problematic situation for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the problem” (Catch-22, 2019). In other words, as long as employees do not see any value in contributing to the ESN, they will not contribute. However, as the value of the ESN is dependent on contribution, employees will not experience any value.

5.3 Common Tongue

As Palantír constitutes the official tool for communication at Innocent and therefore might be seen as part of the “inherently discursive space where individuals are able to put forth arguments and engage in public deliberation” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p.175) its use goes beyond obvious inherent functions the tool provides. As explained by our contact-person during a domain presentation of the organization, one crucial reason for Innocent implementing Palantír as a communications tool was their need to bridge the barriers in between departments. In order to do so, Treem and Leonardi (2013) argue that the use of language is vital, especially in a knowledge intensive environment where individuals possess highly specialized knowledge (Ungar, 2000). As in the case of Innocent, it stands clear that employees have acknowledged

their different languages. Sabrina describes how she experiences this as an issue through claiming that she *“don’t understand the language when Christer talks about code”*. As a consequence, Leo acknowledges the need for putting effort in bridging these gaps when stating *“So we have to, from [...] our team, correctly describe the problem. And this has been a challenge for us”*. Consequently, the different languages spoken in the organization hinder the potential of bridging silos, all in line with the claims of contemporary discussions within research.

However, we identified another consequence as a result of the different languages and the inability to express oneself accurately, namely a tendency to escape visibility through not participating in the ESN. This, due to the *“long chat before we know what to say or before we understand each other “ and the friction and frustration it can create, “they get irritated on us and [...] we get irritated with them, and it doesn't create a good feeling” (Yancy)*. In other words, rather than using public channels, employees escape the visibility enabled by Palantír through using direct messages or channels with less members in order to limit the audience. This, due to an insecurity and the potential of being perceived as not knowledgeable and to escape the potential friction these barriers create. Due to this escape, individuals miss out on providing peers and colleagues with insight in one's own language as it hinders vicarious learning of languages which in itself, could help bridging these barriers. Consequently, this vicarious learning could help employees gaining confidence to expose themselves in order to further facilitate mutual language.

As these linguistic differences in between departments are acknowledged, Innocent tries to approach this issue through using individuals as translators in between the different languages. As Christer expresses *“right now, I would say that I am the person who can be the bridge between the developer and the market” since he “can convert the market to a developer term”*. Even though Innocent, through implementing Palantír and using Christer as a translator, takes action against the issues caused by the different languages, employees still do not actively expose themselves to the risk of not expressing themselves accurately. Altogether, as Kaj puts it *“to find this common language that's what we need”*.

As we have identified the use of language as a present phenomenon at Innocent that might be of great importance in order to understand the life-worlds of employees, on the contrary, the inherent function of screen-sharing might reduce the use of language itself. For example, during

their daily start-up meetings, so called stand ups, the software department uses screen-sharing to, rather than explain what they do, show it. However, as stated by Darryl, there is a general lack of knowledge in the potential use of Palantír. *“So that is that kind of training probably needed quite badly to the potential of Palantír (Darryl).* Consequently, the use of other functions within Palantír beyond text-messages could aid employees in many ways, for example, as will be shown in the next paragraph, through acting as a complement to the non-existence of non-verbal cues within text.

5.4 Non-Verbal Communication

The second reason which indicates that our interviewees are afraid of surveillance due to visibility is the limitation of Palantír to use nonverbal signals. In our findings we demonstrate that users of the ESN perceive it “hard to find nuance in chat” (Darryl) and as a result, sometimes are afraid to “sound irritated” even though they are not (Yancy). This, in combination with the fact of knowing about a potentially high number of observers, hinders employees to participate in public channels as it “gives more value to sit down and actually talk” (Yancy). As we have shown in our theoretical framework, using “quasi-nonverbal cues”, especially emoticons, is a common way to reduce misunderstandings (Lo, 2008, p.597). However, “the tonality is always difficult to read” (Darryl), which goes in line with what Tang and Hew (2018, p.191) present in their study: On the one hand, emoticons support “to aid message comprehension”, while on the other hand, there is still a lack of full understanding of these “supplements” i.e. emoticons. However, although Palantír offers the possibility of using emoticons, it seems to us that our interviewees experience the communication in the ESN as problematic. This, and as they are aware of the difficulties to express themselves appropriately to make the reader understand nuances, they try to reduce misunderstandings by avoiding visible communication. Or, as Yancy puts it: *“I think we're living in a world that is used to emojis and smileys and that is hard”, “so what's okay?”*. Hence, due to the difficulties to express oneself clearly, even with the use of emoticons, our interviewees preferred to avoid these misunderstandings by reducing their contributions or the size of their audience.

As mentioned in the paragraph about language Darryl points out the unused potential of Palantír due to its, amongst Innocent-employees, unknown inherent functions. As text-messaging and

screen-sharing are only two ways of using Palantír as a communication-tool, Palantír also allows video-calls between two or more individuals. Using this function may enable individuals using Palantír to gain access to non-verbal cues, such as body-language and face-expression, to a higher degree. This may relieve the tensions and enable individuals to more accurately get their messages across. However, due to a lack of knowledge in regard to these functions, they remain unused.

5.5 The Impact of (Perceived) Surveillance

As we portray in our empirical findings, there is a tendency for employees at Innocent to feel afraid of being perceived as ‘stupid’ when using Palantír, explicitly expressed by Marinus: “*you don't want to feel stupid*”. This aligns with Ellison, Gibbs and Weber, (2015, p.115) who claim that “employees may not wish to ask questions in a publicly visible and archived forum”, since they “may be concerned that the question makes them appear incompetent or feel that they should already know the answer”. Moreover, contemporary research assumes that self-preservation, self-presentation and reputation management follows as attempts of protecting one's own interests and reputation (Ellison, Gibbs & Weber, 2015; Leonardi & Treem, 2012; Oostervink, Agterberg & Huysman, 2016). This, as “social media, by making the practices and contributions of employees more visible, may increase surveillance of workers” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 177).

However, as presented in our empirical findings, even though these behaviors of protecting one's interests and reputation are present with employees of Innocent, we discovered an additional finding. That, rather than trying to manage the way one is perceived through the interrelated mechanisms above, employees at Innocent tend to flee the forum in which their potential incompetence could become visible, i.e. public channels in Palantír. When employees are required to use the tool, they avoid exposing themselves in public channels and rather turn to private messages in order to communicate their thoughts, ideas and insights. In turn, this counteracts the assumption that the implementation of an ESN leads to more visibility. Rather, it is seen as a necessary evil and in order for employees to reduce the potential pain, they attempt to keep the audience as small as possible. In other words, rather than only changing the content of messages in order to facilitate impression management, employees reduce their contribution

to the ESN leading to reduced visibility. This counter argues the assumption amongst contemporary research that it would lead to increased visibility.

As Ellison, Gibbs and Weber, (2015, p.115) touch upon, people sometimes avoid asking questions in visible forums. However, rather than only attributing this hesitation towards asking questions, we point out evidence that employees escape the forum, or try to keep the audience as small as possible. In other words, people do not want any of their contributions to the ESN to become visible, not only their questions. As a result, this inhibits the benefits of ESNs pointed out by scholars, e.g. sharing knowledge and enhancing creativity. To sum this up, we would like to go back to the critical incident portrayed in our empirical findings where Debra posts important information in a public channel. Firstly, some of her colleagues thank her publicly for the provided insights, which might be seen as impression management. However, in a second step, when it goes more into details, one of her colleagues circumvents the visibility through discussing the topic in a non-visible forum with a small audience, i.e. through private messages.

5.6 The Panopticon Effect

The effects mentioned above, for example impression management and the insecurity created by linguistic discrepancies, can be seen as results of the perceived surveillance Palantír enables through visibility. However, neither employees nor managers witness of any direct surveillance, perhaps best put by Marinus, as he explains his current feeling as *“it's okay to ask the stupid questions”*, supported by Derek who claims, *“it's okay to fail here”*. These rather contradicting points made us ask ourselves why, if not due to actual surveillance, this might be. Through our interviews, we identified indications regarding a feeling of surveillance provided by Palantír. As captured by Derek: *“There is always an issue, like the whole company is watching, I need to know what I'm writing”*. As we have shown in our introduction, the idea of feeling surveilled without actually being observed is not novel and referred to as the *Panopticon Effect* (Zuboff, 1988). This effect refers to *“surveillance [which] is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action”* (Foucault, 1995, p.205). To contextualize it, we found that Palantír, due to its enablement of visibility creates a feeling of being surveilled amongst employees as every public contribution in the ESN can be seen, and consequently assessed, without knowing

if it actually is. Nonetheless, we are not the first researchers, linking the *Panopticon Effect* to Social Media. Mitrou, Kandias, Stavrou and Gritzalis (2014, p.3), referred to these platforms as “omnipticon[s] in which the many watch the many” and as a place where “social surveillance” takes place. Noteworthy is that the effects of an Omnipticon described by Mitrou et al. (2014) are in line with the ones of a *Panopticon* illustrated by Foucault (1995). Even though the focal point of surveillance might be dispersed in our case as well, and hence, might be regarded as an *Omnipticon Effect*, we stay with resembling our findings to the more widely acknowledged *Panopticon*.

In contrast to a prison-building, we acknowledge the possibility for employees using Palantír to escape, or to hide, from its effect. Through choosing not to participate to the ESN, one does simply not expose oneself for the potential surveillance the visibility brings. Yet, a lack of participation, or through using the picture of the *Panopticon* prison; a non-presence in the courtyard, might raise attention and concerns itself depending on prevalent norms.

5.7 Emerging Theory

Throughout contemporary research there is a tendency to assume that the adoption of an ESN leads to a number of positive effects due to its affordances, subjectively perceived value, allowed by the ESN. However, we argue that these assumptions require to be scrutinized and treated with nuance. As presented in the theoretical framework, the downsides of visibility enabled through ESNs have been identified mostly in regard to information overload and impression management to protect one’s own interests (Oostervink, Agterberg & Huysman, 2016; Chen, Wei & Yin, 2018). In the discussion above, we portray two interrelated factors obstructing organizational members participation in an ESN; the use of language and the lack of non-verbal signals. The emerging theory suggests, that these factors reduce participation due to the visibility enabled by the ESN which constructs an insecurity due to the potential surveillance it brings. This, as we illustrate with our conducted study, as there were no actual signs of surveillance while the feeling of being under surveillance was still present. This leads us to conclude the presence of the above-mentioned *Panopticon Effect*. Moreover, visibility is not seen as an affordance, i.e. there is no subjectively perceived value of the visibility. This, in itself, reduces the usage of Palantír which further deflates the value of the tool since employees

do not perceive any benefits, causing the above-mentioned catch 22. This counter argues the current premise within academia which rather assumes that the implementation of an ESN equals visibility. Put differently, we found that higher potential visibility leads to less participation and, eventually, less actual visibility. We label this ambiguity the *Visibility Paradox*.

Altogether, as this *Visibility Paradox* means that employees do not participate, or at least try to keep the audience as small as possible, together with the perceived lack of value stemming from the use of the ESN, leads to the contrary effect that most research proposes in regard to bridging silos. The expectation that ESNs would provide the possibility of breaking down silos and unbounded visibility which could facilitate boundary-spanning activities, (Van Osch & Steinfield, 2018) lies on the fundamental assumption that ESNs equals visibility, however, as we have portrayed above, we argue that this might not be the case.

6 Conclusion

This thesis sets out to bring nuance and clarity into contemporary research and discussion in regard to Enterprise Social Networks, or ESNs. Hence, we aim to provide a novel interpretation of the way individuals perceive and experience the use of such tools through adopting the following research question: “How do organizational members experience the use of an ESN?”. However, as we came to get to know the organization and its employees, our focus developed, in line with our abductive approach, into investigating how organizational members experience, and relate to the visibility enabled through ESNs.

As portrayed in our theoretical framework, the main body of research tends to focus on the potential benefits of ESNs and its affordances which are assumed to appear once implemented such a tool. Affordance “is a relational concept that takes into account both the material features of the technology and the subjective perceptions and goals of the user”, hence “the same technology may provide different affordances to different users” (Gibbs, Rozaidi & Eisenberg, 2013, p.105). Treem and Leonardi (2013) point at four affordances to social media: editability, association, persistence and visibility. However, through adopting an *affordance lens* to our research, we found no indications of the two prior affordances existing amongst our interviewees, which did not see any subjective usefulness in these features. Moreover, we found indications of the affordance of persistence as some employees perceived a value in going back to what was earlier discussed in the ESN. Most surprisingly, rather than being perceived as an affordance, visibility, claimed as the most popular affordance amongst researchers (Evans et al., 2016), was mainly seen as only a feature among our interviewees. This, as the visibility lacked subjective usefulness and value-creation for individuals. Altogether, we found indications that leaves us questioning the assumption amongst contemporary scholars that ESNs provide the above-mentioned affordances.

While visibility as an affordance, as mentioned above, requires subjectively perceived value, visibility as a feature refers to the function of making something visible. This section refers to the latter. When conducting our literature review, we also came to identify an underlying assumption amongst contemporary research that the implementation of an ESN leads to a higher

level of visibility of communication. In an effort to balance this picture of ESNs, Ellison, Gibbs and Weber (2015) argue that employees may not want to ask questions in visible forums such as ESNs since they do not want to be perceived as incompetent. As a result, according to Ellison, Gibbs and Weber (2015), users facilitate impression management and self-presentation through portraying a picture of oneself as seen as desirable rather than necessarily accurate. However, as we have shown in the discussion above, we argue that rather than facilitating impression management and self-presentation, employees tend to escape the very visibility provided by the ESN. They do so through limiting their participation and circumvent the public forums through using direct messages or trying to keep their audience as low as possible. According to our emerging theory, this escape from visibility can be seen as a result of a fear of being observed. We have shown that this might be due to the *Panopticon Effect* claiming that, even though employees are not under surveillance, they feel like they are (Mitrou et al., 2014). This, as in our studied organization, nobody witnessed of any actual surveillance while still experiencing a fear of being under close observation. Moreover, we present indications showing that, due to this fear of being under close observation, employees feel insecure in exposing themselves in visible forums, such as channels in Palantír, as there is a risk for being misinterpreted. This is due to two interrelated factors, nonverbal signals and the use of languages.

In regard to nonverbal signals, we identified the difficulty to express emotions in a non-physical interaction, and for the receiver of a message, the lack of quasi-nonverbal cues which is, according to Lo (2008) key in interpreting messages the right way. Tang and Hew (2018, p.191) claim that the use of emoticons, which is a common feature in ESNs, should “aid message comprehension”. Still, as we have shown, employees experience difficulties to express nonverbal cues making them prefer face-to-face communication and escaping the *Panopticon Effect* enabled through visibility.

The use of different languages refers to the use of specific, specialized language in a knowledge intensive environment as the one we have studied. Through not being able to use other’s specific language in an accurate way, for example not being able to describe a problem with the software to the developers, we identified a tendency for individuals to not express issues in a context which is visible for others. Rather, individuals approach colleagues who speak in other specialized terms through physical face-to-face communication in order to avoid misinterpretations.

In conclusion, this escape from visible communication leads to less participation in ESNs which, in itself, counteracts visibility since the level of visibility and materialization of organizational benefits is dependent on contributions by organizational members. In short, the visibility of communication impedes active contributions of employees and hence it counteracts visibility itself. We name this phenomenon the *Visibility Paradox*.

Altogether, our emerging theory suggests that due to the *Panopticon Effect* constituted by visibility, people escape potential surveillance through not posting content in the ESN which strips the ESN from its affordance, and value, of visibility itself.

Limitations

As in any research, this study also contains its limitations. As argued in this thesis, impression management is a phenomenon present in many contexts, so also in regard to us making interviews. Consequently, we acknowledge that interviewees may have shaped their answers in line with what they saw as desirable in that specific context (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Moreover, due to our adoption of a qualitative approach we also acknowledge that our findings are not generalizable (Bryman, 2012). Since our study was exclusively conducted within one organization using one specific ESN, we, rather than generalize, strive to provide a new potential perspective and nuance into the discussion of contemporary research on ESNs and the affordance of visibility.

Inspirations for Further Research

In regard to further studies, as it was beyond the scope of this thesis, we acknowledge the potential need for further research into the intersection of Panopticon surveillance in ESNs, power and the concept of discourse. This, due to our finding in regard to language as a factor which inhibits participation and, hence, this might be due to different realities constructed through the ESN itself. We consider this combination of topics interesting as ESNs can be seen as an “inherently discursive space” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p.175) which might impact and shape the full reality of its *victims* and as power can be asserted through shaping the discourse (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999).

Also, as stated in the discussion, in contrast to a prison-building, we acknowledge the possibility for employees using Palantír to escape, or to hide, through not participating. However, a lack

of participation, or through using the picture of the *Panopticon* prison; a non-presence in the courtyard, might raise attention and concerns itself depending on prevalent norms. Therefore, we encourage further research in regard to this non-presence. as a topic for future research.

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