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THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE SELF CHASING THE FUTURE WITH LINKEDIN

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Abstract

For many young people across societies, precarity is the condition of life that they have to confront in their path to adulthood. As this condition is further intertwined with the rise of the digital age, attempts have been made by youth and media scholars to theorize and investigate the role that digital media plays within this socioeconomic conditions. This research project is an empirical contribution to this current burgeoning critical scholarships on youth, precarity, and digital media. The focus of this research revolves around the experiences of university students on the professional platform LinkedIn as they prepare for the transition from higher education to the world of work. The research approach adopted in this paper is based on case study methodology—a method of inquiry that seeks to produce in-depth understanding of an empirical phenomenon within a context. Data was collected through thirteen semi-structured qualitative interviews with university students who are active users on the platform. The thesis proposes a dialectical relation of the self on LinkedIn that illuminates the operation of the platform and the experiences of the participants within it. On LinkedIn and through LinkedIn, the participants had to navigate through contradiction between the dominant discourse of human capital and an employment relation that is still based on the selling of one's labour-power. The end result was a self and a form sociality that are constantly in flux. However, without an alternative to these contradictions, the solution for our participants often takes form of a retreat into therapeutic entrepreneurialism. Within the current era of neoliberal capitalism, rather than being a detrimental aspect for the platform and for the users, these contradictions are the moral resources that fuel the economy of the platform and for our participants as a whole.

Keywords: case study, digital capitalism, digital labour, entrepreneurial self, LinkedIn, precarity, transition, young people.

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“Who guarantees that willingness to work shall suffice to obtain work, that uprightness, industry, thrift, and the rest of the virtues recommended by the bourgeoisie, are really his road to happiness? No one. He knows that he has something today and that it does not depend upon himself whether he shall have something tomorrow.”

*Friedrich Engels - The Condition of the Working Class in
England (1845)*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

CNBC running a segment now advising people who are losing their unemployment benefits to “make ends meet” by “following a pandemic budget;” contact “lenders and creditors” for help; and “post your skills” on Nextdoor, Instagram & Facebook.

This was the tweet by Washington Post reporter, Jeff Stein, on July 31, 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States (Stein, 2020). Amidst this context, readers would inadvertently connect this passage to the social-economic impact of the pandemic on societies (the American society, in this case), especially in regard to the problem of unemployment. However, the last sentence in this Tweet deserves critical attention. It signifies something that seems to be ordinary: the role that digital media play in our work lives. In many cases and in many societies, “posting your skills” on the Internet has become a new common sense. The following anecdote from an art school graduate exemplifies what life under this common sense might look like: “It’s a brutal and numbing sensation to spend hours and days and weeks agonizing over a succession of near-identical documents written in a specific yet inscrutable job application tone, only to cast each of them into an un-replying digital ocean like a message in a bottle” (Glencross, 2020). As shown in this story, for many young people in the 21st century, before they can land an interview with employers, they have already had to navigate through an entire digitalized ecosystem of employment relations and their associated rituals. The banality of digital media and the internet seems to have transformed the way young people prepare and look for work.

Positioning within the scholarship on youth, precarity, and digital media, this thesis offers a critical investigation into this new common sense using empirical data obtained from interviews with thirteen university students. The topic of this research revolves around their experiences preparing for the transition from higher education to the world of work through the professional platform LinkedIn.

1.1 Backgrounds and Research Problem

For young people across the world, especially in Western societies, unending cycles of economic crises have left nothing but a future of uncertainties. In this age of crisis capitalism, insecurity and precariousness characterizes the lives of young people as they navigate through higher education to a world of work that is increasingly competitive (Ross, 2009; Standing, 2011). Under this

context, “posting your skills on Nextdoor, Instagram & Facebook” constitutes the latest form of neoliberalism once lamented in the critiques of late-modernity by scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, or Stuart Hall and colleagues (Bauman, 2004; Beck, 1992; Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2015). Parallel to these canonical works, in the past 20 years, attempts have been made by youth and media scholars to theorize and investigate this relationship between digital technologies, capitalism, work, and youth. On one hand, scholars from youth studies tradition have mainly looked at how young people navigate the precarious socio-economic conditions that are increasingly intertwined with digital technologies (Itō et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2019; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). On the other hand, scholars from media and communication discipline have tackled the same issue without focusing exclusively on young people. Instead, by placing emphasis on the development of capitalism in the digital era, these works have wrestled with the transformation of work and labour relations within the rise of digital media and the digital economy (Andrejevic, 2010, 2015; Dean, 2009; Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Fisher & Fuchs, 2015; Fuchs, 2015; Huws, 2014; Jordan, 2019; Lund & Zukerfeld, 2020; Scholz, 2017; Srnicek, 2017). Yet, given the theoretical richness from these undertakings, there is still a lack of research that possesses a sensitivity toward the concepts and approaches that come out of both disciplines, especially when we consider the similarities in the critical stances and the subjects of study. Often, media researchers are content with staying at a macro-technological level of analysis and overlook the operations of platforms through the level of the users. Likewise, youth scholars have focused predominantly on how young people use digital media without taking into account the socio-technological logics of these platforms. As the narrative of “the future” continue to be colonized by market logic and market-based solutions (Duggan, 2019; Means, 2018; Mirrlees & Alvi, 2020) a critical interdisciplinary perspective of media and youth is required more than ever. A project that takes on the legacy of both disciplines could illuminate not only the logic of digital media in the current era of neoliberal capitalism but also the concrete lived experiences of its so-claimed “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b). Only through this can we produce a critique of digital capitalism that is relevant in both theory and praxis (Bakardjieva & Gehl, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Pace, 2018).

1.2 The Research Site: LinkedIn

This study focuses on none other than the elephant in the room: LinkedIn. Founded in 2003 as a business-oriented social networking site (SNS), the platform has grown into the biggest SNS for the professional world. Acquired by Microsoft for a hefty sum of 26.2 billion dollars (Microsoft News Center, 2016), the platform currently boasts a user base of 706 million people, bringing in over 8 billion dollars of revenue in 2020 (Microsoft, 2020). No longer just a website for networking, the platform has evolved to become an important mediator for the labour markets around the globe and plays an active role in shaping hiring practices. It is also the key player behind Microsoft's continuous involvement in education by serving as the core infrastructure for online learning, training and job-seeking (Smith, 2021). Speaking about LinkedIn, CEO Ryan Rolansky describes equitable access to employment opportunities as the core goal for the platform:

Professionals and companies are at the heart of our platform. And ultimately it's these two groups that will lead the world to a more diverse and inclusive future. Because they come together on LinkedIn, we are uniquely positioned to create equal access to opportunity and help drive more equitable outcomes for all members of the global workforce (Rolansky, 2021).

Likewise, Melissa Selcher, Marketing and Communication Chief, echoes the value of equality as the principle of the platform:

As an organization deeply rooted in our vision to create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce, we have a responsibility to use our platform and resources to intentionally address the systemic barriers to economic opportunity (Selcher, 2020).

While LinkedIn continues to put faith in its technological solutions to these problems (Vasudevan, 2020), critical scholars have raised skepticism toward the economic underpinning of the platform and its efficacy as the mediator of the labour market as well as its sociological implications (Gershon, 2017; Komljenovic, 2019; McDonald et al., 2019; Sharone, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). These critiques echo the broader perspective of scholars who question the popular narrative that digital technologies and the internet holds the promise of solving any problems of our modern lives, especially problems for young people (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2016; Dean, 2009; Fuchs, 2017; Means, 2018; Mirrlees & Alvi, 2020; Morozov, 2014). The common critique

toward this techno-solutionism points toward the political and economic assumptions that are left unaddressed in the making of these technologies.

1.3 Research Questions:

The purpose of this research is to capture the experiences of university students with the professional platform LinkedIn within the context of higher education and the transition to the world of work. By capturing these experiences, this research seeks to understand not only the activities that these young people engage with on the platform, but also the ways they reflect on and make sense of these. In doing so, it takes the cultural materialist philosophy (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007; Peck, 2006; Williams, 1977) or “media sociological imagination” (Orgad, 2020) as the starting point. This ontology treats the knowledges produced by these young students as products of a conscious deliberation between the situated social-cultural conditions and the lived experiences as well as the practical consciousness of these experiences. With this focus on the dynamic between practical knowledges and practices, this research guard against the idea of precarity as a stable, democratized condition (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016). Moreover, it also demystifies the dualistic either/or assessment of digital media, which often stems from heavily theorized and macro-structural analyses of platforms (Gandini, 2021; Pace, 2020). The end product is a deeper understanding of how young people negotiate their personal experiences within the technological and cultural limits and pressures of the platform as well as their their youthhood.

Specifically, the following research questions will help orient the research project:

1. How do the participants utilize LinkedIn within the context of transitioning from higher education to the world of work?
2. What kinds of socio-economic relations and subjectification are formed through these digital practices and how can we account for these processes?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter surveys the current scholarships on precarity, youth, and digital media. It starts with the literature on precarity before moving into the work of critical youth studies scholars regarding its implications for the lives of young people. Next, it connects these issues to the field of media and communication studies by reviewing the critiques mounted by media scholars regarding digital media and their roles within the current social-economic and political context. Then, it will delve deeper into literatures regarding digital media and its relationship with labour as well as employment relations in current era of capitalism. Finally, the review ends with a survey of the works of critical media scholars on the case of LinkedIn.

2.1 Precarity and Young People

2.1.1 Precarity as the Norm

The triumph of the neoliberal revolution in the 1980s ushered a wave of critiques of late modernity that spanned across disciplines. In this context, scholarships on neoliberalism and late-modernity have focused on *precarity* as the socio-economic as well as the political condition of this current epoch. At its broadest, precarity is used to denote the condition of total flux and uncertainty. Situating her argument within the era of dispossession, Judith Butler describes precariousness as the ontological conditions of life. It is “the constant questioning of conditions in which the human is determined by normative and normalizing regimes of intelligibility” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 119). Through this conceptualization, precarity implies that performativity is the way through which the claim about normativity is made true.

Moving outside this ontological argument, precarity has often been used as an economic concept to describe the conditions that confront workers in the current neoliberal economic order. Precarity results from the dismantle of the Fordist welfare-state in the West and the overturn of the stable labour relations of this bygone era. Along with this is the rise of “flexible” and contingent employment conditions that distances themselves from the ideal of social welfare, collective bargaining, and long-term employment (Ross, 2009). In his 2011’s work, British scholar Guy Standing uses the term *precarariat* to describe a class of workers specific to this current era (Standing, 2011). Unlike their predecessors who fit into the traditional category of the *proletariat*, the precariats “would not know their employer or how many fellow employees they had or were likely

to have in the future. They were also not ‘middle class’, as they did not have a stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people were supposed to possess,” Standing describes (p. 6). Nevertheless, the precariats do not exist as the umbrella class of this era. Above them still exists the waged industrial working class, the salaried white-collar *salariats* and the elite *proficians* with their marketable expertise - all of whom face the risk of precariatization: “living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (p. 16). Using the example of knowledge workers, Armano & Murgia (2013) describe the subjective experience of this structural condition as *precariousnesses*: “an experiential condition to do with the person’s life as a quality inherent to that person and his/her specific positioning” (p. 488). Through this conceptualization, the authors point to the normalization of disorganization, uncertainty, and anxiety in the lives of the workers in 21st century capitalism. In this case, two choices remain for the precariat: settle with precarious jobs to stay relevant to one’s education or suffer down-skilling and under-employment (p. 498).

One way through which these critiques have been addressed is by rejecting the novelty of precarity and focus on the historical-structural characteristics of this phenomenon. Indeed, many scholars have long maintained that precarity is not a new development in global capitalism. The opposite is true. In their analysis of precarity as a political concept, Neilson & Rossiter (2008) argue that precarity has been invoked mainly within a Western-European context to describe an irregularity in labour relations. However, it is only irregular “when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm” (p. 54). Likewise, Tayyab Mahmud (2015) charts the transformation of the state throughout the 20th century and observes that precarity is the intrinsic condition of the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, capitalism since the age of Marx has always relied on the dynamic of dispossession and the commodification of living labour into labour-power. As a result, this mode of production requires the existence of a surplus population — a reserve army of labour — who are always at the ready to be commanded by the movement of capital (Marx, 1990). Thus, when looking through a wider historical context, the socio-economic conditions of contemporary neoliberalism “is as much a product of late capitalism as a return to its origins,” Mahmud concludes (Mahmud, 2015, p.725).

If precarity is the return to origin, then what is the analytical value of *neoliberalism*? As Mahmud would argue, neoliberalism is the era through which the structural tendencies of capitalism are deepened (ibid.). Similarly, in the view of economic historian Phillip Mirowski,

neoliberalism represents a novel struggle to carve out more space for market colonization with “trial-and-error mutual adjustment of the politically fortified market and the everyday entrepreneurial self” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 113). Unlike the laissez-faire liberals of the 19th century, the neoliberals¹ require a ruthless state to enforce their idea of a free-market—an oxymoron that the scholar attacks throughout his analysis. On the other hand, for the Italian school of the autonomist Marxists, capitalism in the 21st century has moved beyond the factory doors into every fabrics of social life, seeking to transform living moments under the imperative of capital. Biocapitalism is the term used to describe this development (Chicchi, 2020; Fumagalli & Morini, 2010; Lazzarato, 2004). Thus, the concept of neoliberalism exists not as an empty signifier but rather a way through which this process of “returning to origin” can be understood within the contingent and historical context of the current era. As Vrasti (2021) argues, by breaking down the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic welfare state, neoliberalism promises a new labour relation that is characterized by autonomy and flexibility. The ideal subject of the post-Fordist economy is the entrepreneur, the knowledge and cultural worker who embodied this utopia of gratifying autonomous work. Precarity, in this sense, is a double condition of promise and misery: “it is a reality on both sides of the divide but whereas the mobile and educated few can ‘afford’ precarity as a worthwhile price to pay for gratifying, independent work, for de-skilled industrial workers, low-wage service workers, feminized and migrant labour precarity is a life sentence,” Vrasti describes (p. 162).

2.1.2 Young People in the Age of Precarity

The turn of the 21st century marked a new era whereby precarity became the modal conditions of life. Critical youth studies scholars have since casted their attention toward the implication of this transformation toward the lives of young people. We find within these the work of the North American critical pedagogy scholar, Henry Giroux. Most prominently, Giroux sees young people as subjects under a “politics of disposability” (Giroux, 2009). Drawing from Bauman and his analysis of the modern consumer society, the “politics of disposability” is a politics reserved for those within society that fail to have an economic role in the neoliberal order. The social imaginary of this New Gilded Age is marked by “predatory narcissism, a zany hubris, and a neofeudal worldview in which self-interest and the laws of the market were seen as the only true measure of

¹ In Mirowski’s analysis, *neoliberals* are used to denote individuals associated with the The Mont Pelerin Society and the subsequent think-tanks and academic departments staffed by members of this society.

politics” (p. 2). Moreover, it is also pedagogical, understood as “a moral and political practice, functions as a form of cultural politics and governmentality that takes place in a variety of sites outside of schools” (p. 181). As a result, the struggle for young people in this age is the struggle to escape the violence of disposability, often through acquiescing with the hyper-individualist logics of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2019).

Moving beyond the American-centric analysis of Giroux, we can also see the familiar conclusion in the work of youth studies scholars from the other side of the globe. Drawing on the work of Foucault and critics of late-modernity such as Bauman and Beck, Australian scholar Peter Kelly focuses his analysis on the figure of Youth (with capital Y) as an artefact of governmentalized expertise (Kelly, 2001, 2006; Kelly et al., 2019; Kelly, Campbell, & Howie, 2019). Within the popular discourse of risk, young people undergo a *responsibilization* process that constructs the image of a young person as a “rational, choice-making citizens (to-be), who are responsible for their future life chances through the choices they make” (Kelly, 2001, p. 30). The most important keyword for Kelly is *becoming* - a future-oriented narrative of Youth that seeks to “tell truths” about young people through institutionalized, scientific, and administrative processes of governmentality (Kelly, Campbell & Howie, 2019, pp. 41-42). This “normative epistemology” (ibid.) produces a distinct figure of the *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling, 2016) as a normative mode of selfhood. Yet, while the opportunities for the future are marked with promises of equality and the freedom of choice, traditional forms of inequality continues to exist along class and gender line as the British youth scholar Andy Furlong reveals (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Moreover, since access to education has become standardized, young people (and their parents) can only have themselves to blame for any failure in their careers—an intensification of individualism amidst the crises that go beyond the control of any individuals (p. 144).

Putting the analysis of young people within the narrative of transition opens a space to think about what it is like for young people to live in precarity, and to question the oft-held sacrosanct ideas about becoming adult. At this juncture, Peter Kelly identifies the problem with the neoliberal *becoming* thesis. Through the logic of market fundamentalism and capital accumulation, the process of *becoming* is an endeavor without end, for the entrepreneur self is a roaming self that is always at the ready to be reinvented and transformed according to the perceived market trends and opportunities (Kelly, Campbell & Howie, 2019, p. 106). Kelly problematizes this orthodoxy by showing that, in the age of neoliberal capitalism, work has transcended from

being a mean to an end into “an aestheticised object of consumption/choice” (Kelly, Campbell & Howie, 2019, p. 69). Thus, in the age of precarity, “work as vocation” is a commodity of the privileged—a romanticized object that brings with it the promise of fulfillment and self-worth, marking its possessors as “active, choice making, capable consumers” (p. 68). This line of argument can also be traced back to the work of the French philosophers of 20th century. André Gorz (1999), in his critique of the work-based society, sees the transformation of work as a human activity into a commodity of conspicuous consumption to be possessed (or not). Individuals living under this condition tread the line between “a job and oblivion; between inclusion through employment and exclusion; between ‘identity-giving socialization through work’ and collapse into the ‘despair’ of non-being” (p. 67). Similarly, Henri Lefebvre sees in this value-form the ultimate mystification of reality—“it is precisely when some aspect of reality has been consumed by bourgeois life that it becomes a ‘value’” (Lefebvre & Guterman, 2006, p. 76). The romantic notion about a meaningful job helps explain the anxiety toward precarious employments across the public, from young people to policy-makers and to the academic sphere. As Andy Furlong explains, with the breakdown of the traditional pathways toward stable careers and the rise of precarious jobs,

it becomes harder for the young to be incorporated into established notions of paid employment, to become workers and fully adult. So, young people in the adjustment to adulthood are also in a kind of limbo. They are no longer children, nor are they yet fully adults (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016, p. 18).

In this aspect, many scholars have carried these theoretical foundations into their empirical researches, allowing us to expand our understanding of the entrepreneurial figure with more nuances. As Threadgold (2020) agrees with Kelly, the figure of Youth chosen for analysis carries with it the implications for the governmentality process. In his observation, young people are often misrepresented and anthologized because of their failure to adhere to the human capital theory of the neoliberal order. Empirical research has shown that young people are reflexive of the socio-economic conditions into which they are born into and the entrepreneurial imperatives that are placed upon them. Threadgold himself offers the *DIY-self* as a figure of youth in precarity: a form of selfhood that puts ethicality before materiality, choosing “strategic poverty” as a mean to escape the cycle of precarity (Threadgold, 2018). Similarly, Kelly’s colleagues — Howie and Campbell — contribute the theory of the *guerilla self* as a distinct form of the *entrepreneurial self* in the post-2008 context: a type of individualized responsabilization that “require participation through

resistance, institutionalization through the appearance of not being institutionalized, and individualism in the midst of a failure of individualism” (Howie & Campbell, 2016, p. 907). The *guerilla self* invokes the image of a therapeutic personhood that seeks to shelter itself from uncertainty and precarity by going against the often-celebrated virtues of the neoliberal discourse. It points to the empirical work of Ikonen & Nikunen (2019) that details that the entrepreneurial self in the age of precarity takes on a therapeutic nature: to guard oneself against depression, to maintain happiness, and to stay grateful. Only then will one be able to work toward one’s future. In this sense, entrepreneurialism has taken on an affective dimension. It is “an affective escape from being a self without hope, a self wounded by austere times,” concluded the authors (p. 836). Nonetheless, at the same time, with the proliferation of digital communication technology in the past 20 years, Whitmer (2019) traces the development of the entrepreneurial self that incorporates these changes into account, producing the latest phenomenon of the *branding self*, described as a form of selfhood that takes self-promotion and self-branding as its motto. Under this framework, the therapeutic discourse is seen as compatible with the market logics of neoliberalism. Utilizing a myriad of social networking sites, the entrepreneurs embark on an affective labor process to re-discover themselves and produce an authentic self-brand while, at the same time, expressing it to an audience with the hope of acquiring material gains. This development brings us to the realization that technological development and youth is a significant conjuncture. The question for critical research cannot stop at the figure of youth and the questions of transition as Giroux or Kelly posit. There is the need to incorporate the increasing banality of digital media into the study of youth, to situate the life of young people and the narratives of Youth within the intricate relations between technology, governmentality, and the digital economy.

2.2 Critical Approaches to Media and Society

In asking critical questions about capitalism, youth, and digital media, the review so far has mainly began from a youth study perspective. In this section, the review will shift the direction of inquiry to explore how contemporary critical media and communication scholarships can contribute to the research problem described above.

As privacy scandals like that of Cambridge Analytica continue to make headlines, media and communication scholars have drawn attentions toward the logics of digital platforms within our societies. In their landmark work, Curran and colleagues (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2016)

provide a detailed analysis of how popular and celebratory discourses have misunderstood the potential impacts of the internet toward societies. According to the scholars, their fault comes from the inability to consider the internet and its various aspects as intertwined with the existing socio-material conditions of society. Looking at various failures of the internet to produce fundamental socio-political changes, they expound: “If the sociocultural context consists of the consumerist and individualistic ideology of neoliberalism, then any claims to the liberating potential of the expansion of the means to self-expression should be treated with extreme caution” (p. 159). This line of argument corresponds with what Jodi Dean coined *communicative capitalism* in her 2009’s book (Dean, 2009). Similar to Curran and colleagues, Dean contends that celebratory accounts of the internet are pushing three fantasies: the fantasies of abundances, participation, and wholeness. For Dean, network technology cannot be the force of democracy if its techno-ideological structure is rooted in neoliberal capitalism with its relentless “corporatization, financialization, and privatization” (p. 23). Correspondingly, these arguments echo the work by Nick Srnicek in his description of *platform capitalism* as the latest regime of capitalist accumulation. In this case, the “extraction, analysis, and control of data” constitutes the sole logic of the digital economy, which results in platforms striving for monopolistic control of social infrastructures, especially the means of communication (Srnicek, 2017, p. 97). This encroachment of digital technologies into more and more aspects of social life has been challenged by Evgeny Morozov (2014) using the term solutionism—a technocentric ideology that sees digital technologies as the answer to all problems of society. Education nor young people are not exception of this techno-utopian vision. Building on Morozov’s argument, Alexander Means (2018) connects solutionism to higher education by describing *educational solutionism* as the vision for the structural problems faced by young people. Situated within the orthodox theories of human capital, educational solutionism follows the orthodoxy that see individuals’ intellectual and technical capabilities as human capital to be captured by the circuit of capital. In doing so, education becomes beholden to the algorithmic logic of Silicon Valley and corporations, who see their technological solutions as superior to traditional education in producing the flexible knowledge workers for the need of the economy. In doing so, these techno-solutionist interventions present themselves as a rational force beyond ideology or politics, through which “problems such as racial segregation and social inequality are simply framed as ‘design problems’ to be fixed through educational apps and learning software” (p. 103). Similarly, in his empirical analysis of the Australian context, Shane Duggan (2019) depicts how

this is carried out through the intertwine of public and private initiatives. “Digital disruption”, the narrative of a future embedded with disruptive networked technologies, calls for policies and initiatives that open up higher education to market-based interventions that can better prepare young people toward this future: coding classes, entrepreneurship programmes, or massive online courses. Through this, digital technologies both serve as the problems and solutions for the future of young people. Yet, in doing so, the narrative of digital disruption is inherently ideological. In imagining a particular vision of the future, it frames the discussion about young people based on an ideal figure of Youth (Kelly, 2006) that represents “an idealized economic subject who makes, unmakes, and remakes the present within a form of techno-centric capitalism” (Duggan, 2009, p.53). This need to prepare young people for the future coincides with the rise of EdTech, an ecosystem of digital technologies that are used in educational context, usually bank-rolled by the big-five tech companies (Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Facebook). By imbuing the political economy of youth with the political economy of EdTech, Mirrlees & Alvi (2020) interrogate the democratizing and empowering narratives behind the intervention of EdTech into education, showing that the business logic of EdTech runs on “over-simplifying and then amplifying problems around and within higher education and then producing and selling commercialized pre-fabricated technological solutions” (p. 69). Thus, in doing so, the authors show how the logic of the networked society is interconnected with the structural tendency of neoliberal capitalism that seeks to render more of our social lives under market logic (Mirowski, 2013). All of the work described above suggest that any critical project on digital media must take into account the structural-functional logic of capitalism that serves as the backdrop for the development of digital platforms.

Nonetheless, when using terms like “the economy”, “capitalism”, “ideologies”, these theoretical arguments bring us back once again to the once heated debate between the cultural studies and political economy tradition more than 20 years ago (see Gandy & Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995). Unfortunately, it would be infeasible to re-introduce this theoretical baggage into the limited space of this paper. Rather, what is important here is to stress the advancement in theories in critical media study that resulted from this dialogue. Here, the work of Janice Peck (2006) and Deetz & Hegbloom (2007) are the fundamental proposals of what such an approach look like. According to the authors, what needed is a serious reconsideration of the connection between “economy” and “culture” as an indissoluble whole as Raymond Williams posits

(Williams, 1977). Ideas such as “materializing signification & signifying the materials” (Peck, 2006) or “culturalizing the economy and materializing the culture” (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007) are testaments to this legacy.

In situating digital media within a dialectical relation between economy and culture, critical theory of media and communication also takes into account the structural and institutional conditions of capitalism. Drawing from the work of Karl Marx and Andrew Feenberg, critical media scholar Thomas Allmer establishes that:

Technology is in capitalism medium and result of economic, political, and cultural processes, and is mutually mediated with antagonisms in economy, politics, and culture. Technology is the medium and outcome of these contradictions (Allmer, 2015, p. 20).

Similarly, Jonathan Pace put it succinctly in his re-statement of this theoretical grounds by using the term *digital capitalism* (Pace, 2018). Pace argues that media scholars often fall into the nominalist versus structuralist dichotomy in their analyses:

If particular digital processes are the exclusive objects of study, then capitalism as an economic structure enters the analysis as an indeterminate backdrop. If capitalism as an economic structure is the exclusive object of study, then particular digital processes enter the analysis as retroactive evidentiary support (p. 258).

In arguing for this position, Pace rejects the idea that technology drives structural changes. Instead, technologies are contingent means through which the structural tendencies of capitalism are mediated. It is true that digital media are become a banality in our daily lives, but analyses that focus only on platforms on the economic and technological level tend to overlook their existence as *social objects* (Gandini, 2021). Conversely, because of the banality of digital platforms, there is also tendency to treat them as a given mean of communication without much deliberation about their socio-technological makeup. At its extreme, such approach can give rise to technological instrumentalism and determinism—the ideas of technology as the neutral driver of societal changes (Fuchs, 2019). As a result, a critical approach toward digital media must be sensitive toward how they are “enacted and constituted through the practices, decisions, and conversations of everyday life” (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007, p. 325) and how these processes situate within this structural-functional logics of capitalism. A critical approach to study digital media, then, would closely mirror what Deborah Lupton describes as critical digital sociology: “the reflexive analysis

of digital technologies informed by social and cultural theory” (Lupton, 2015, p. 16). Moreover, a critical approach would take on the *digital economic practice* of users as a basis to advance the analysis (Jordan, 2019). When we choose to investigate young student’s activities on LinkedIn, we are concerned with “the habits, actions and meanings, formed into repeated routines, that sustain how we produce and exchange the goods that provide for life, wealth and their reproduction” (p. 15). This conceptualisation for Tim Jordan shows that habits of actions and routines, or “ways of life” (Williams, 1977), constitute the essential cultural foundation that makes possible the organisation of human productive and reproductive activities. However, the autonomy of this culture derives not from any metaphysical origin but from the real material practices aim to satisfy our human needs (ibid.). To situate these practices and narratives within the current context of neoliberalism is to adopt what Shani Ograd describes as *a sociological imagination* (from C.W. Mills). This approach requires a sensitivity toward how “cultural and media narratives and technologies construct and normalize inequalities and power relations in neoliberalism, and how people experience, negotiate, and cope with these inequalities in their everyday lives” (Ograd, 2020, p. 637). Therefore, the activities that young people do on LinkedIn, in so far that they serve the purpose of their transition from higher education to the world of work, are particular and real social processes that are infused with meanings. Moreover, these meanings are produced through the living experiences with the the platform under the existing structures of neoliberal capitalism with its “limits and pressures” on the forms of practices and cultural narratives available for the users. By seeing this through a dialectical relationship, critical theory of media and society rejects the caricatures of economic and technological determinism to recognize the intersection between culture and the economy as well as between human agency and structural constraints—a sensitivity toward structuration (Haugaard, 2003; Mosco, 2009; Peck, 2006; Williams, 1977). As the critical education scholar Neil Selwyn notes in his engagement with EdTech, the obstacle for the critique of technology and education lies in the seemingly noble nature of this discipline. It is a field of “‘boundary pushers,’ responsible for ‘flaming the revolution,’ and making an ‘impact,’ where the role of the social scientists is often reduced to producing “‘applied’ academic evaluations concerned with developing more efficient ways of ‘doing technology’” (Selwyn, 2015, p. 248). If the critical projects envisioned by Kelly or Giroux are to be realized, there is a need for a critical scholarship that interrogates the connection between 21st century neoliberal capitalism, youth, and the increasingly banality of digital media in the daily lives.

2.3 Digital Labour and the Making of the Self on Platforms

Two decades after the turn of the 21st century, the study of the internet has ceased to be a niche pursuit of media scholars and become embedded in an interdisciplinary conversation (Puschmann & Pentzold, 2020). Within this, attempts have been made to theorize the internet and the digital economy within the broader social, political, and economic structure of capitalism (Bakardjieva & Gehl, 2017). *Digital labour* is a key research theme in this endeavor, taking the free and democratized participation structure that forms the backbone of the internet as the starting point. As Gandini (2021) argues, understanding the connection between “labour” and “digital” is crucial to understanding and critiquing “the relationship between capitalism, work and technology in the 21st century” (p. 377). Therefore, to connect the idea of entrepreneurial self and youth transition to digital media, it is fundamental that we take *digital labour* as the entry point. The concept of digital labour is brought into this context not to limit the approach to the traditional wage-labour relationship. As the literatures on precarity and neoliberal have shown, the post-Fordist turn of capitalism brings with it the removal of the boundaries between work and leisure, between productive and unproductive labour (Lazzarato, 2004; Fummigalli & Morini, 2010; Chicchi, 2020). Therefore, digital labour is concerned with this transformation of the traditional industrial form of labour into the current neoliberal form of biolabour with digital technology as the mediator.

While the most prolific debate around *digital labour* have revolved around how values and profits are produced on social media (Andrejevic, 2010, 2015; Comor, 2011; Fuchs, 2012, 2015; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Kaplan, 2020; Rigi & Prey, 2015), the concern of this thesis revolves around how *labour* is understood as an intrinsic component of the digital media environment. Here, the chief contributors come from the autonomist Marxist scholars, whose main theoretical works revolve around the immaterial and affective turn of the post-Fordist economy. The work of Tiziana Terranova (2000) on *free labour* in the Web 2.0, or broader, the concept of *immaterial labour* by Maurizio Lazzarato (1997) and Hardt & Negri (2001) constitute the backbone of this scholarship. *Free labour* denotes a form of affective and cultural production carried out by users that create and sustain the cultural artefacts of the internet that is “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Terranova, 2000, p. 33). Here, Terranova talks about a cultural shift that arises along with the development of capitalism in the digital age: “It is not about capital descending on authentic culture but a more immanent process of channeling collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices” (p.

38). Applying this theoretical framework to their analysis of Facebook, Coté & Pybus (2011) argue that the ability of the platform to maintain profits lies in its ability to “actively encourages the circulation of sociality via the production of individuated digital archives [of the self]” (p. 177). Similar to Coté & Pybus, albeit from a different tradition, Kylie Jarrett (2015) argues that this affective and relational labour on social media is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it takes on the same characters of the traditional housework performed by women—the affective and un-alienated care work that reproduces the capital-labour relation outside of the household. On the internet, users share contents, build relationships, and produce “the social” for social media. It is these affective relations that maintain the “stickiness” that draws users back to the platforms.

Based on the discussion so far, we can see that the promises of neoliberalism find the participatory and involuntary nature of internet activities as its closest allies. Indeed, Federico Chicchi (2020) extends the Autonomist framework to analyze how digital platforms have become a prominent tool in a post-Fordist post-wage “society of performance”. According to the Italian scholar, the platformization of modern employment relation transpires according to three dynamics of post-Fordist employment relationship: (1) *cognitivization* - the immaterial and subjective source of valorization; (2) *entrepreneurialization* - the deployment of the self as a form of human capital and the necessary self-valorising imperatives associated with it; and (3) *overflow* - the breaking down of space-time boundaries between work and non-work, between productive and reproductive labour, as well as the traditional concepts of value and non-value. Similarly, Heidkamp & Kergel (2017a) propose the concept of “double precarity” to explain the relationship between precarious employment conditions and digital media. As the name suggests, “double precarity” denotes two levels through which precariousness is experienced by individuals: (1) precarity within digital media, characterized by the rapid change of media practices and (2) precarity through digital media, characterized by the ways through which the structural conditions of precarity “unfolds itself within the use of new media and plays a part in the way ‘precarized individuals’ use media” (p. 12). Using this concept, the authors make a move to describe how the subjectivation process of the entrepreneurs is carried out. Advancing the argument of Standing (2011), Heidkampp & Kergel see the figure of the entrepreneurial self as a precarious self:

It requires on the one hand a self-narration and self-presentation which displays the own strengths to gain a competitive advantage. On the other hand, the pressure of the permanent

competition/the precarious (employment) situation effects fear [sic] (Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017b, p. 104).

Through social media, these entrepreneurial needs are fulfilled, or rather, they are made true through a process of *entrepreneurial interpellation*, which describes how the “affective labour” described by other scholars above are made to be imperative through mutual surveillance and valuation. “Not to follow this imperative means the symbolic death within the social network,” the authors argue (p. 107).

Like Chicchi and Heidkamp & Kergel, Alisson Hearn (Hearn, 2010, 2017) charts the transformation of neoliberal selfhoods along the development of a myriad of social media platforms that seek to turn these subjectivities into the sources of value. Such affective conditioning requires an infrastructure through which the subjective is turned into commensurable metrics—a “structure of feeling” of the self that needs to “talk back, weigh in, and be seen” (Hearn, 2010, p. 435). Looking at the activities of self-branding, Hearn describes how the ideal selfhood of the contemporary epoch is an *anticipatory-speculative self*, predicated “entirely on externally generated predictions about our future potential ‘optimization’” (Hearn, 2017, p. 74). Similarly, using the case study of Klout, a social media influence aggregator, van Doorn (2014) applies the concept of the *neoliberal subject of value* to critique of human capital theory. In doing so, she shows how the discourse of human capital requires a technical infrastructure that can “collect, organize, and measure multivalent value-creating activities and the data they generate” (p. 361). Through rendering human capital into public data, these online metrics offer the means through which users can gauge their human capital stocks in relation to their competitors, and from this, to work on preventing this capital from depreciating (ibid.). The analysis of van Doorn points to a hyper-marketized logic of the self in neoliberal capitalism, where the threat of precarity motivates a strategic performance of the self-as-brand with the hope of improving one’s reputation and securing future benefits.

Parallel to these analyses are the work of scholars who focuses on the aspirational and speculative qualities of this self-branding labour carried out on digital platforms. The work of Kuehn & Corrigan (2013) on sport bloggers and Yelp reviewers sheds light on an important phenomenon that they term *hope labour*: “un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow” (p. 10). Similar to Kuehn & Corrigan, Duffy’s (2017) study of online fashion bloggers

also elucidate a similar phenomenon which she described using the term *aspirational labour*: “a mode of (mostly) non-compensated, independent work” through which the labourer hope to be rewarded in the future with “material rewards or social capital” (p. 5). Immaterial labour with aspirational characteristics point to the utopian vision of autonomy and reward that is championed by neoliberalism, as Duffy argues: “It has glamorized work just when it is becoming more labor-intensive, individualized, and precarious” (p. 195). Here, the two studies unveil how the various practices of aspirational labour on the digital realm mediates the structural tendencies of neoliberal capitalism, while at the same time, the results of these labour supply the “narrative raw material” (ibid.) that keeps these practices meaningful.

While these forms of digital labour have been analyzed through the perspective of the labourers, scholars like Berkelaar & Buzzanel (2015), Fourcade & Healy (Fourcade, 2017; Fourcade & Healy, 2016), and McDonald et. al (2021) have recently attempted to examine these activities in light of how they are perceived by the employers. Berkelaar & Buzzanel (2015) use the term *digital career capital* to describe the “competencies, identities, motivations, and relationships” produced by workers on social media (p. 106). They are the signals that are given off through users’ activities on social media which present them as employable in the eyes of the employers. Similarly, McDonald and colleagues (2021) explore how the convenient access to personal information on the web combined with the normalization of cybervetting have changed how hiring decisions are made. Here, skills no longer play a central role in hiring decisions. Rather, it is subsumed by a new mode of vetting whereby the employees are judged based on their moral qualities. In turn, it demands a form of moral performativity by the jobseekers on social media, which is constructed and proliferated by the demands of the cybervettor. Within this *economy of moral judgement*, “outcomes are thus likely to be experienced as morally deserved positions, based on one’s prior good actions and good taste” (Fourcase & Healy, 2016, p. 24). This can have significant implication for how we understand what it means to be a worker and what it means to be job-searching in this digital age. When skills and experiences no longer determine one’s access to employment, the long-cherished ideals of meritocracy and fairness would no longer hold true. In this case, the economy takes on a moral characteristic that separate the haves and have-nots through their capabilities to follow the ethic of neoliberalism characterized by individualism and responsabilization. Similarly, for young people, the narrative of getting a good job based on one’s hard-work and education would be put under question.

2.4 LinkedIn as the Mediator of Digital Capitalism

Despite its prominent role in the digital economy, LinkedIn has not been the chosen target for critical media research. For the most part, scholars interest in the platform have largely come from the administrative tradition (Lazarsfeld, 1941) using quantitative and behavioral approaches to produce knowledge on how to better utilize the platform (for example, see Florenthal, 2015; Gerard, 2012; Koch, Gerber, & Klerk, 2018; McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Ruparel et al., 2020; Skeels & Grudin, 2009; Utz, 2016). Nevertheless, there have been recent interests of critical scholars into the operation of the platform.

One of such critical research into LinkedIn is the work of Janja Komljenovic (2019), which delved into the relationship between LinkedIn and higher education. Based on document analysis and qualitative interviews with higher education officials, Komljenovic unveils the role that LinkedIn plays as the intermediary and promoter of the employability discourse through higher education. Through its digital infrastructure and its monopoly of big data on employment relations, the platform is doing both the micro-level work of defining employability for students and universities as well as the macro-level work of structuring labour and education policies. Komljenovic describes:

By communicating numbers on people, jobs, skills, universities and employers, LinkedIn is gathering things and people around itself as well as it enables its potential to grow. LinkedIn claims the expertise in the conceptualisation of employability through the ownership of the infrastructure required to calculate big data around it. It has built a geopolitical superstructure with market monopoly tendencies (p. 38).

Outside of this macro analysis, the work of Papacharissi (2009) and Van Dijck (2013) have turned to the interface of the platform, asking questions about the sociological implications of such design. Comparing the infrastructure of LinkedIn against Facebook and ASmallWorld, Papacharissi (2009) argues that the platform is designed to be a strictly normative space with pre-defined set of norms regarding users' behaviors. Thus, on LinkedIn, conforming to the norms that is based on a privileged white-collar class become the imperative for users. Correspondingly, looking at the design of LinkedIn, Jose van Dijck (2013) argues that the platform is a not a stage for authentic self-expression but rather a space for identity construction. It "goes beyond its self-claimed ambition as a professional matchmaker and ventures into behavioral monitoring," she

maintains (p. 210). Moreover, through its design of the profile and the curated metrics about one professional's achievement, LinkedIn is playing a role in blurring users' need for self-expression with self-promotion. Through its subtle nudges and hints, the platform constructs what it means to be the ideal employee and what the users need to do in order to achieve this idealized version of the self (gain more likes, connect to more people, attract more profile views, etc.) (ibid.). Through these studies, we can point to the role of LinkedIn as a technology of precarity. In the era of precarity, the design and the strict normative infrastructure of the platform fulfills the entrepreneur interpellation as describe by Heidkamp & Kergel (2017b) by appealing to users' need to self-promote and act employable. Through maintaining a professional persona and networking on LinkedIn, users are engaging in the immaterial labour that reproduces not only themselves as the entrepreneurial subjects, but also the affective economy that keep the platforms meaningful for its users.

Nevertheless, is it the case in empirical observation? Researches that take on the framework of precarity, neoliberalism and job-search in the analysis of users' conduct on LinkedIn have given us a glimpse into how these dynamics plays out on the side of users. Scorlee, Purchnewska & Duffy (2018) show that creative workers do internalize the self-brand imperative on LinkedIn and other social media. Similarly, Risi, Briziarelli & Armano's study of freelance workers also point to LinkedIn as a site where these individuals "spent" their biographical and reputational capital accumulated through their freelance work. Moreover, the authors argue that platforms like LinkedIn plays the central role in the "mobilization and transformation of the workforce into a "crowd" [where] millions of profiles [are] managed as "reserve industrial army" of (frequently) over-qualified work" (Risi, Briziarelli, & Armano, 2019, p. 778). Similarly, in her in-depth study with unemployed jobseekers on LinkedIn, Ofer Sharone (2017) points to two conclusions regarding the platform's role as a filtering infrastructure. First, it reconfigures the hiring process in such a way that the evaluation of merits become increasingly irrelevant for winners and losers. Factors such as physical appearances or moral behaviors become important categories for evaluation. Second, it applies pressure on the jobseekers to manage their lives in a way that fit the logic of the platform, which entails self-censorship and self-surveillance. Through these findings, Sharone poses a robust challenge toward the vision of equality that the platform promotes. On the other hand, the most extensive ethnographic work on LinkedIn and job-search conducted by Ilana Gershon (2017) points to a more holistic view of LinkedIn. While LinkedIn does try to steer users

toward a certain mode of usage, her observation shows that users are often confused over the correct way to use the platform. Moreover, Gershon unveils that LinkedIn only plays a part in structuring the employability narrative. Behind the platform lies a culture of job-search represented by a multitude of actors from career counselors, workshop leaders, to motivational speakers. She concludes:

LinkedIn did not bring about this change on its own by creating the platform through which people could post their resumes online. Thousands upon thousands of people had to tell each other that this was now the new way to look for a job. And yet [...] people are still figuring out what LinkedIn is good for and how to use it (p. 183).

The findings of Gershon here show that once the experiences of the users are taken into account, the messiness of LinkedIn becomes an apparent issue. Despite the platform's design and its inherent logic as described by scholars such as Van Dijck or Papacharissi, users still have to find ways to make sense of the platforms. These processes of discovery and learning signify the need for media scholar to take into account both the logic of the platform and how users' use it as a dialectical whole. If digital labour and entrepreneurial subjectivation is to have theoretical value, it would benefit from an approach that takes into account these contingent and often contradictory practices.

The literature review began with a survey of scholarships on precarity and the lives of young people within this socio-economic as well as political context. It has shown that the process of becoming for young people is conditioned by these structures and the myriads of public and private solutions to these crises. These are the important backdrops for the critical study of digital media, with LinkedIn being the example of the latest intervention into labour markets. Given the burgeoning scholarships on digital labour and digital platform, it is imperative to have more empirical research on the users of the platform to better understand the role of digital media in the lives of young people and whether a normative critique of media and culture can be mounted (Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Case Study

The aim of this thesis is to understand how university students use LinkedIn, and through this, to explore how they reflect on this experience within the context of higher education and the transition to the world of work. Therefore, *case study* was chosen as the research strategy to pursue these aims. Case studies have been used for different purposes by scientists in the history of social science (see Johansson, 2007; Yazan, 2015). Because of this, there exists no official definition of a case study research nor is there a strict set of protocols which researchers have to follow. Rather, the common principle behind various forms of case studies lies in the end goal of these intellectual pursuits: an in-depth understanding of an empirical phenomenon within a context. According to Gary Thomas, case studies can be defined as:

analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods (Thomas, 2011).

Through an extensive review of the work of key scholars, Thomas typologizes the research strategy for case studies as follows:

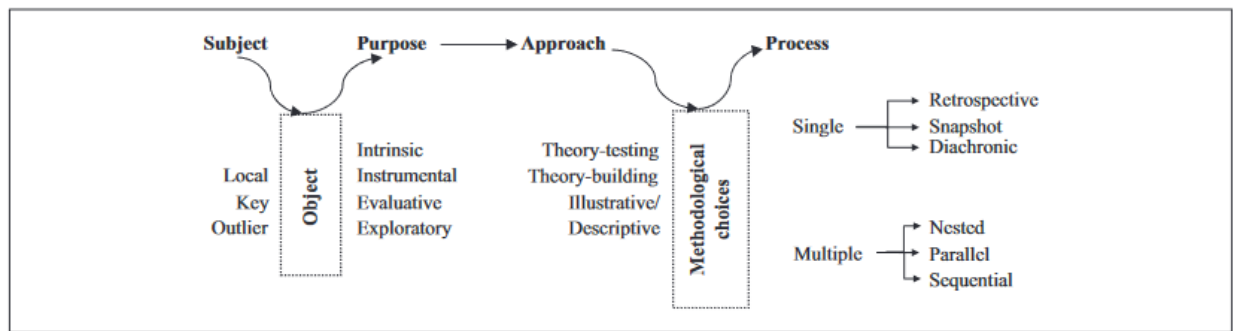


Figure 1: A Typology of Case Study (Thomas, 2011).

According to the scholar, a case study comprises of two fundamental aspects: a subject (a case) and an object (an analytical frame). As shown here, the design of the case study depends on the researcher's stance toward the relation between these two aspects. In turn, this stance will guide the purpose of the research, its approach to theories, as well as its methodological choices. Using this typology, the design of this thesis as a case study could be describe as followed:

Table 1: Research Design.

Component	Type	Characteristic	Details
Subject	Key case	Case that “exemplifies the analytical object of the inquiry”, ie. <i>exemplary knowledge</i> .	University students on LinkedIn
Object	N/A	The analytical frame(s) within which the case is viewed and which the case exemplifies. (Thomas, 2011)	Precarity Youth and Transition Digital capitalism and Digital labour Neoliberalism & the Entrepreneurial Self
Purpose	Instrumental	Using case(s) to provide insight into an issue of interest (Stake in Thomas, 2011).	To understand how the rise of digital media and digital platforms mediate young people’s experiences within neoliberal capitalism.
	Intrinsic	Focus on understanding the complexity of a case itself (Stake in Thomas, 2011).	To understand the experiences of university students with the professional platform LinkedIn.
Approach	Descriptive/illustrative Phronesis/naturalistic generalization	Data is not used to test or build theories, but to provide exemplary knowledges within a context so that readers can interpret it within their own experiences and guide their future actions (Flybjerg, 2001; Thomas, 2010).	To understand how the cultural and technological narratives of LinkedIn and youthhood are reproduced, negotiated, or challenged (successfully or unsuccessfully) by university students.
Methodological Choices	Semi-structured interviews	To “understand the context and meanings of the information, opinions and interests mentioned by each interviewee” (Brennen, 2017).	13 semi-structured interviews conducted digitally with university students.
Process	Single (Snapshot)	One single case with no comparison, looking at the case as a continuing phenomenon.	Looking at the activities that these students engage with on LinkedIn and asking them for their reflections on these activities.

The subjects and objects of this study have been thoroughly described in the previous chapter. This section will describe how their relations guide the design of the case study, especially with regard to its understanding of social scientific knowledge. First, as mentioned before, the ontological foundation of this research concerns with human knowledges as a product of a mediation between existing structures and the consciousness of one’s experiences within it. It sees human practices within structures under a dialectical relationship akin to Raymond Williams’ idea of “a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressure” (Williams, 1977, p. 87). In this case, theory and theorizing are not so much the exclusive domains of academia as rather a practical activity conducted by individuals to make sense of their past experiences and to guide their future pursuit of practical needs. To place this within current context of neoliberal capitalism, the task of critical research then is to unveil how this process of limits and pressure are structured, negotiated, or challenged (successfully or unsuccessfully) by social actors, resulting in the possibilities for future resistance and changes (Haugaard, 2003; Orgad, 2020). With this in mind, this case study could be categorized as an *instrumental case study* that focuses on exploring a specific

phenomenon or issue through a study of a case (Stake in Thomas, 2011). At the same time, due to the monopoly and unique status of LinkedIn as a labour mediating social network (Komljenovic, 2019), this case study could also be characterized as an *intrinsic case study* that focuses on understanding the “whole way of life” (Williams, 1977) of the university students on the platform.

Second, the questions over theories and generalization will also need to be discussed. While case studies have often been used for theoretical generalization using deductive analysis (theory-testing) or inductive analysis (theory-building), a third logic of generalization that relies on abductive principle can also be applied to a case study (Johansson, 2007). This approach departs from the scientific methods of theory-testing and theory-building because of a different understanding of social science and theories that is reflected in the concept of *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Thomas, 2010) or *naturalistic generalization* (Stake in Johansson, 2007). Here, intensive case analysis does not serve to produce laws-like abstractions over the social world (scientific theory). Rather, the purpose is to uncover the complexities and context-based knowledge over a specific social phenomenon, from which deliberation over its implications for future actions can be performed—praxis is the goal of social scientific research (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This power of example is also argued by Gary Thomas (2010) when he wrote that the validation of a case study comes from “the connections and insights it offers between another’s experience and one’s own” (p. 579). In this thesis, this third approach to case study is adopted as the *modus operandi*. The researcher wished to delve into the deep and complex experiences of university students on LinkedIn with the aim to generate knowledge about a particular “way of life” for this cohort in the current precarious digital age. Moreover, while this knowledge was produced through the subjective interpretation of the researcher, its value as social scientific knowledge will ultimately be decided by the reflection and praxis it can promote among readers: what does it mean to be a young person entering the world of work; how is it like to engage in self-branding on the internet; what are the mechanisms and incentives behind these “ways of life”; and what is to be done about it, if needed? In other words,

The value of the case study and its generalizability is confirmed when, if faced with a similar situation, the reader is able to recognize the resemblance of experience and is able to put it into practice (Moriceau, 2010).

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews with Digital Characteristics

In this thesis, semi-structured interview was the chosen technique for data collection. This method allowed the researcher to explore the meanings that the participants ascribe to LinkedIn and their reflection towards the platforms as a part of their student lives. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to freely move around different topics of discussion. They were given the time and space needed to clearly articulate what were important to them (Brennen, 2017).

Due to the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online using Zoom. Given this, the researcher decided to take full advantage of this program to supplement the interview process with two similar digital methods: *digital re-enactment* (Kelly, Campbell, & Howie, 2019) and *media go-along* (Jørgensen, 2016). According to Kelly, Howie & Campbell (2019), digital re-enactment invites participants to re-enact a “scene” of their digital media usage and to reflect on this experience of moving between non-media and media environment. In doing so, participants have a chance to “change the meaning of the scene and build something that exists and has meaning in a different way” (p. 118). Likewise, in media go-along, the researcher grants participants the full-reign to give “a tour” of their media environment and their practices within it. In doing so, the goal of the method is to “actively explores the subject’s stream of experience and practice in relation to a given setting,” with the researcher simultaneously sharing the “sensorial experience” of this media environment with the participants (Jørgensen, 2016, p. 39). In this thesis, these methods were pursued using the share-screen function of Zoom. Participants were invited to share on screen how they use LinkedIn and to give comments on what they identified as important about this whole process. Thus, participants had a chance to look at their whole LinkedIn life from a distance with the researcher, from which new insights and critical reflections arose. “This is actually interesting now that I get to think about it,” was one of such disclosure from a participant during the screen-share portion (participant #12 - Sanic).

3.3 Research Process

3.3.1 Recruitment and Sample

For this research project, participants were recruited through a purposeful sampling strategy using mutual connections as the intermediaries for recruitment. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling allows researchers to acquire “information-rich cases” that can provide a wide-range of

information on the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002, p. 242). However, in studying young people and their LinkedIn usage in the context of precarity, the first issue to be addressed would be “who are the university students that use LinkedIn?” As the timely work of Hoang, Blank & Quan-Hasse (2020) have shown, individuals from specific demographic groups are often associated with specific forms of platform labour than others. In the case of LinkedIn, its normative emphasis on professional networking is argued to appeal to the middle-class professional knowledge workers who have the social and cultural capital to be active on the platform (Papacharissi, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). Given these reasonings, the researcher anticipated that by choosing LinkedIn as the platform to study, it is expected that this would be the modal demography. Indeed, many participants in this research could be categorized as the middle-class transient migrants (Gomes, 2017) or global middle-class (Polson, 2011, 2015) who have the capacities to migrate overseas for education and enjoy this cosmopolitan lifestyle. Given this, sampling had to be conducted to achieve heterogeneity within this cohort. As the topic of LinkedIn and young people is grounded within the discourse of graduate employability (Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2020; Komljenovic, 2019), a good way to ensure heterogeneity was to look at variables regarding participants’ education that affects their employability and the adoption of LinkedIn to fulfil this need. This meant paying attention to variations in term of geographies and education such as the countries of education, the schools, or the programmes (Hartmann & Komljenovic, 2020). Moreover, the researcher also included in the sampling criteria demographic variables related to these two factors such as age, country of origin, or field of study.

In total, the researcher inquired nine closed acquaintances to reach out to potential individuals who meet the research’s criteria, with six being able to connect the researcher with actual participants. These recruiters and the participants were residing in the following countries at the time of recruitment and interview: Sweden, Austria, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, and the United States. Each of the recruiter was asked to use an invitation letter that was written by the researcher to establish contact with the potential participants. The criteria for participants were clearly declared in the invitation letter: (1) they had to be university students; (2) they had to be active on LinkedIn on a weekly basis; and (3) they had to be graduating from university in less than 2 years. These criteria were relevant to the context of the research: young people and their transition from higher education and the working life. As mentioned above, the researcher tried to have a diverse group of students to take into account how different students from different

education backgrounds might have different attitudes toward LinkedIn. Therefore, as participants slowly filled the sampling list, efforts were made by the researcher to ensure that the sample is not skewed toward one specific demography. After the potential participants had been identified, the researcher would establish contact and schedule the interviews through Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. According to Bonnie Brennen (2017), the important task of the researcher in conducting qualitative interview is to build rapport and acquire trust from participants (p. 32). The purpose of recruiting through mutual connection was that, as the term “mutual” suggests, there had been a common ground established the moment our participants received their invitation letter. Indeed, this sense of trust could be felt during the ice-breaking of all the interviews, which allowed the subsequent conversations to be light-hearted and friendly. In retrospect, this perhaps was the idea behind “networking” that LinkedIn users engage in. Without the researcher’s intention, networking became the means through which connections with participants were established.

Due to time constraint, several criteria were loosened at the later stage to allow in more participants. One participant had just finished 1st year of university and was not graduating within 2 years. However, since she was active on the platform every day, the researcher decided to include her in the study. On the other hand, one participant turned out to be a part-time recruiter on LinkedIn. While his personal LinkedIn usage was not as active as the others, his knowledge of recruitment processes on the platform proved to be a fine addition to our collection of testimonies. Therefore, data from this interview were also used in the final analysis. Lastly, regarding the distribution of sexes, the researcher could not maintain a perfect distribution between male and female. However, since the theories of gender were not pursued in this research, the researcher contended that a less-than-perfect distribution was acceptable.

The final sample of the research is as followed:

Table 2: Interview Participants.

#	Codename	Sex	Age	Origin	Residence	Field of Study	Level
1	Floppa	F	24	Germany	UK	Fashion and Lifestyle Marketing	Master
2	Chad	M	20	Indonesia	Indonesia	International Relations	Bachelor
3	Wojaki	F	21	Poland	Sweden	Development Studies	Bachelor
4	Bingus	M	20	Indonesia	Indonesia	International Relations	Bachelor
5	Kaz	F	22	Italy	Sweden	European Studies	Master
6	Ember	F	20	UK	Sweden	Liberal Arts and Natural Science	Bachelor
7	Amogus	F	23	Austria	Sweden	Global Studies	Master
8	Maurice	M	25	Mexico	Austria	Political Science	Master
9	Viola	F	20	Indonesia	US	Food Science	Bachelor
10	Nook	F	23	Turkey	Sweden	International Business	Bachelor
11	Sussy	F	19	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	International Relations	Bachelor
12	Sanic	M	26	Singapore	Singapore	Asian Studies	Master
13	Enver	M	22	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Japan	Business Economics	Bachelor

n=13

3.3.2 Interviewing

The interview guide was designed to leave participants enough space to share their stories on their own terms. This allowed for a rich account of the phenomenon that connected to more than one single theme. Nevertheless, to aid the flow of the conversation, the interview topics were organized according to the following order: (1) icebreaking and current education, (2) LinkedIn usage habits, (3) LinkedIn profile, (4) networking, and (5) reflections on LinkedIn usage and higher education. The interview guides were tested using two pilots with participants who came from the researcher's mutual network. In total, it was revised four times based on these pilots and meeting with the research supervisor. After the initial three interviews, the interview guide was revised two more times to make some questions more intelligible for the interviewees and to add more fluidity to the flow of the conversation (to see the changelog of the interview guides, see Appendix).

Interviews lasted from 50 to 75 minutes of effective conversation (without warm-up, introductions, and technical issues). All interviews were audio and video recorded using Zoom's native recording function. The files were stored on the researcher's personal computer for retrieval. Before the interviews, participants were asked for their vocal consent to supplement the written

consent. When it came to the screen-share portion, the researcher clearly indicated to the participants when they were invited to share their screen. In the consent form, participants were reassured that all identifying information showed on screen would be confidential and would not be used in the write-up of the thesis. During this time, the researcher let the participants to take full-control in how they would like to describe their LinkedIn profile and their activities. However, if there were things of interested showed on screen, the researcher would ask the participant to stop and explain more about them. The researcher would also ask the participants to end the screen-share once they no longer needed it to ensure they were not distracted by the screen. At the end of all interviews, participants were given time to ask questions or to share their reflection. While most participants did not use the opportunity, some took the chance to emphasize certain messages that they had shared during the conversation, to suggest interesting points they hope the research would address, or to ask the researchers for the final manuscript. Based on the reactions, it was clear that these participants had a stake in this research—a welcoming sign that the project has managed to “get close to reality”, which is the most important aspect of a phronetic research (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

3.3.3 Ethics

Scholars who conduct research on social media environment have identified the need to take into account the blurred boundary between private and public information on the internet and the related risks to privacy (Hennell, Limmer, & Piacentini, 2020). The approach of this research was to stay away from any design decision that might fall into this ethical dilemma throughout the research — from recruitment to the final write-up of the analysis. During recruitment, the researcher would only message the participants on Messenger or WhatsApp after they have relayed their permission through the mutual informants. Moreover, while using his own personal Messenger account, the researcher would not add the participants as friends on Messenger (Facebook) to maintain a professional research relationship (Robards, 2013). Similarly, the researcher only used the participants’ testimonies as data for analysis, leaving out all other information that have been shared on screen, or could be acquired by looking up the participants’ profiles on LinkedIn. The participants were also reassured of this in the consent form.

3.3.4 Data Analysis

As mentioned above, the phronetic approach of this thesis is rooted in abductive logic (Thomas, 2010; Johansson, 2007). Here, the role of existing theories is to provide the heuristic tool through

which empirical observations can be contextualized and understood in-depth. In the description of Hodgetts & Stolte (2012), a researcher conducting abductive analysis will bring “theory and previous research findings into dialogue with the particular case under examination” (p. 383). In other words, findings and theories from previous researches are brought into the analysis of the case to validate their transferability from these previous contexts to the context of the case at hand (Thomas, 2010). Therefore, in this thesis, theory and empirical observations mutually informed each other throughout the analysis.

For this, data was analyzed using abductive data analysis strategy developed by Tavory & Timmerman—a form of qualitative data analysis that focuses on developing insights through the interplay between theories and data (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, 2019). According to Jensen (2012), qualitative research is an approach whereby the researcher, as an interpretative agent, tries to understand how research subjects make sense of the world. However, in abductive data analysis, researchers do not take these ethno-narratives as the final destination of knowledge-making. Instead, they are interrogated in a conversation with the previous works of the scholar community (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, 2019). Often discussed along with grounded theory analysis, abductive data analysis shares the common ground with the former in its quest to seek explanation to observed behaviors. Nevertheless, in abductive research, existing theories are treated as a companion of the entire research process. With this in mind, the researcher started the research project by immersing in a wide-range of literatures to build the broadest possible frame of reference for the empirical observation (Yuill, 2017).

With all interviews completed, the researcher duly transcribed them verbatim. During this process, interesting themes or talking points were noted down on an Excel spreadsheet as memos. Afterward, all transcriptions were put in the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner Lite. The purpose of this software was to keep the data and codes organized in one place and simple to retrieve. No analytical functions were used in the analysis.

The coding process takes into account Tavory & Timmermans’ three movements of coding for abductive data analysis: mnemonics, defamiliarization, and revisiting observation. The purpose of these techniques is to defamiliarize the researcher with the data and to look at it from a new perspective that are not rooted in a taken-for-granted manner (Tavory & Timmermans, 2019). The first round of open coding aimed to produce “descriptive” codes of the data. During this phase, the

purpose of coding was to “break open the data” into “meaning units” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 161). The question that guided this coding process was not only “what is the story here?” but also “what is this a case of?” (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). At the end of this stage, the researcher ended up with over 1000 descriptive line-by-line codes that were often duplicated. This massive number of codes were acceptable in this research project because they were not used for categorization but as mnemonic devices and heuristic tools for understanding the data. During this stage, the researcher utilized memos extensively to keep track of possible theoretical frames that arose as well as deviant observations. Through this analytical process, the researcher determined that the critical concern of the study revolved around the contradictory nature of LinkedIn and how participants tried to alleviate the anxiety as well as the uncertainty that stemmed from these contradictions. Once the phenomenon of interest has been identified, the researcher then examined the variation of the phenomenon across the cases. This was done through axial coding. Here, the research went over each case and coded section-by-section with the aids of the mnemonics devices from open coding. After the first case was coded, the researcher would compare its code with subsequent cases to see if categories could be established or not. The process ended with the final case whereby a number of categories related to the phenomenon were identified across cases. Finally, these categories were organized into a coherent argument scheme through selective coding. As the process went on, the researcher continued to use memo-writing to refine the characteristics of the phenomenon in light of existing theories. The result of this process was that instead of describing university students’ digital practices on LinkedIn as a coherent phenomenon (an ideal type), the researcher described it as a process of navigating through the contradictions between the neoliberal discourse of human capital and the reality of wage-labour relation. This description allows us to understand the motivation behind the wide-range of practices that the participants engaged in on LinkedIn and the subsequent reflections that they have regarding these experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, interview data is used to investigate university students' experiences with LinkedIn and to understand their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding their future transition from higher education to the world of work. The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section of the chapter presents the findings related to how participant used LinkedIn, followed by the analysis on how they engaged in self-branding activities. The third section explores the role of LinkedIn networks in our participants' usage of LinkedIn. The fourth section will then explore how the therapeutic subjectivities were presented in our participants' accounts of how they used LinkedIn. The final section discusses how precarity, as "a structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) helps maintain the logic of the platform and the processes described in the previous sections. Finally, the chapter ends with an attempt to synthesize the findings by presenting a theory on how the precarious experiences of our participants can be illuminated through the neoliberal discourse of human-capital and the wage-labour relations in capitalism.

4.1 Usage Habits: Purposes and Values

This section begins with a look at participants' daily use of LinkedIn. It looks at the reasons they chose to become active and the perceived benefits of the platform. Subsequently, the section details the usage habits and the different activities that they undertook on the platform.

As mentioned above, participants are in different stages of their university lives. With this, the perception of the job market as well as their post-graduation plans play an important role in how they approach LinkedIn. One finding revolves around their first interaction with LinkedIn. In this case, the role of the universities as an advocate for the platform cannot be ignored. Floppa, for example, had been introduced to LinkedIn as part of her homework in fashion school in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Kaz, Ember and Amogus mentioned how LinkedIn had been a part of extra-curricular seminars that they encountered during study in Sweden. For the others, interaction with fellow students within the context of school and student-organizations were the source of exposure to the platform. Bingus, a student from Indonesia, shared about his experience:

Whenever I am registering myself into these student organizations, we always have that sharing session from HR department called "Empowerment Plus", you know, that kind of thing. And then, we have LinkedIn as part of our contention. They teach about how can you utilize your

network, how to be professional, how to showcase your skills, how to maximize your little experiences to become impactful in the professional showcase.

We can see from these examples that LinkedIn has a clear presence within the higher education environment across Europe and South East Asia, with students being exposed to the platform as part of their education. Moreover, in many cases, being on the platform is a prerequisite for different activities within the higher education environment. Taking Bingus again, for example, LinkedIn marks a clear boundary between being a carefree high-schooler and a serious university student who think about their future. “Okay, dude, we’re entering professional lives; we’re no longer high school students,” he recalled his conversation with a friend.

For our participants, one important value they recognized from LinkedIn is its seemingly egalitarian and convenient approach to job-searching and career-building. On the platform, everyone is just another a profile. Nook illustrated this point when reflecting on the communication with other people in the industry:

As students, it’s really hard for us to reach people who play the decision-making roles in recruitment normally. But with LinkedIn, they become more accessible, easier to communicate, and that communication is normalized.

As this quote shows, the ability (or the possibility) to contact people in a higher position directly gave our participant a sense of agency and ease when it comes to their career prospect. Like Nook, others also discussed how they could ask for advices, or look at these individuals’ career history. The idea of being able to contact hiring managers or people within the industry directly without having to go through corporate bureaucracies constituted one valuable source of information as well as motivation for participants. Thanks to this ability to communicate with other professionals, our participants could gain valuable insights into hiring practices and prepare for job-search. These are part of a toolkit that our participants found valuable toward their desired career as knowledge workers. Sanic, the youngest participant, helped summarize the analysis up to this point:

It’s a big platform to basically build your resume, I would say. It’s like, you get to see your work experiences, and the potential employers know what you have done so far, and what your skills are. So yeah, I feel like it would come in handy when I’m doing job hunting. Other than that, I just feel like... it’s just a staple in everyone’s life, so it’s just better to have a LinkedIn account than not having one.

Given these perceived values, what did the participants share about their usage habits? Usage habits often depend on the occasion, or, to loosely borrow a term from labour discourse: seasonality. When participants are in need of employments, either part-time jobs or internships, they use the platform more actively, focusing mostly on the job-search function of the website and on revamping on their profiles. For participants under this mode of usage, the Job page of the website and LinkedIn e-mail notifications receive most of their attention. Nook, for instance, uses LinkedIn during the month of December to March primary as a job-search website for the summer internship season. Similarly, Chad, who was looking for internship, shared that he has been more active on LinkedIn than he was 6 months ago. Seasonality also applied to higher education contexts as well. Wojaki, for example, shared that she would be more active based on the activities of her student organizations—for example, when they hosted a conference, or when they published an article. On the other hand, when the pressure to do job-search is not apparent, participants shared that they would revert back to a mode of usage that was more preparatory and speculative. They would browse the feed to keep up with friends, read articles, or scout for opportunities in term of online courses or future internship ideas. As the participant shared, this sense of purpose characterizes the difference between LinkedIn and other social media. Using LinkedIn gave them a sense of pride and accomplishment as opposed to the embarrassment of mindlessly scrolling through other social media. They are actually using the platform with a future-oriented purpose.

Yet, most, if not all participants shared that they seldom post on LinkedIn. This function is only reserved for special occasions in real life that they are proud of such as getting an article published, finishing a project, or finding a new internship. Many expressed their antipathy with the idea of posting every day like many other users on their news feed. Enver, a part-time recruiter, has a strategic mindset toward this activity. For him, posting every day means that he was giving away information to his competitors. Especially in the context of a professional life, it is in his best interests not to “show a lot”. For other participants, there is a limit to what they can really post as university students. Floppa, for example, shared that she would like to post more, but since she is only a university student, she doesn’t have the time to do “something really exciting other than just writing reports”. Hence, the observations from the interviews go against the ideal image of the *reputation economy* described by Hearn (2010), van Doorn (2014) or *online social capital* by Faucher (2018) with the ideal-type being the micro-celebrity (Abidin, 2017) who is active in producing contents and promoting themselves. It invites us to reconsider our understanding of

social media practices in this case study. It's not that these metric-chaser micro-celebrities do not exist on LinkedIn. However, the attitudes of our participants toward this culture show a different understanding of promotion on LinkedIn and the ideal-type of self that go beyond the idea of quantification. In the following section, this question over the self will be analyzed in details.

4.2 Self-branding: The Moral Economy of Human Capital

Connecting with the activities on the platforms, the second section of this chapter moves closer into one of the main components of LinkedIn, which is the work of producing and maintaining the ideal edited-self (Marwick, 2013) that is attractive to employers. Data from the interviews show that the impression management work (Goffman, 1969) consists of maintaining a curated LinkedIn profile and following a professional script while interacting with others on the platform (Papacharissi, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). Yet, while these tasks can be easy to follow through, there are no reliable ways through which the participants can assure themselves of their effectiveness.

As all popular literature, career seminars, as well as LinkedIn official statement would assert, the profile should be the first on the checklist for any jobseeker. For our participants, the process of making a profile is straight forward. The design of LinkedIn synergizes well with their identity as students with relevant categories to fill in such as Education, Experiences, or Skills & Endorsements. While there was no official script to this, by imagining who would be the observers of their profile (B. E. Duffy & Chan, 2019), our participants could anticipate what they should present. These consisted of different combinations of characters such as enterprise, passions, wide-range of experiences, or competency. These characters are then crafted into a coherent narrative of their desired career path using short and concise language. Moreover, the information must be up-to-date, especially if the participants were looking to apply for a job. Most importantly, they must serve to differentiate the participants from other users on the platform. Let's illustrate this through an example of Wojaki, who differentiates herself by treating her profile as a visual portfolio instead of a text-based CV:

I always need to recall the responsibilities I did on a given position, and then I need to format it properly - make sure that it sounds nice; it's not too bulky; it's not too long. Yeah, then, possibly attach something to it like pictures and links and make sure that they actually work. I also try to make sure that there's no typo, and everything is coherent, even when it comes to tiny things like the way I write dates, or the way I use punctuations or abbreviations, etcetera, etcetera. I definitely try to make it coherent; make sure that everything checks out, like the dates, the

places—make sure there's no mistakes. Yeah, and of course, [I] identify what kind of information would be most interesting to the person who's going to view my profile, and also how to format in a way that will be understandable without them knowing the whole context that is behind it.

As a long-term LinkedIn user, Wojaki is an expert in her profile craft, as shown in the ways she strategized her profile from the macro choices of contents to the micro details of grammar and syntax. Moreover, she makes these choices by anticipating who would be the observers and what type of impression would be appropriate. The differentiating features come from the use of links and photos to attract attention toward her profile, which according to her, was something that she had received compliments for.

However, unlike Wojaki, for participants who are new to LinkedIn, creativity was not a luxury they could afford. The main sources of inspirations for their profiles are the standardized LinkedIn seminars provided by universities or the examples from other users in their network. Here arise the contradictions of self-branding. Gershon (2017) uses the metaphor of an hourglass to describe this problem with LinkedIn and the job-search genre in general. At the top of the hourglass lie the jobseekers with their intricate “social relationships and life experiences” (p. 75). As these jobseekers go down the hourglass, they encounter the constricting section at the middle which represents the “genre repertoires” of job-search—system of classifications regarding “how a certain story or an event will be structured (p. 63). These genres (CV or LinkedIn Profile) then reduce and standardize the complexities above into “the most telegraphic of glimpses into what someone has done with their days in the past and could do with their days in the future.” Yet, as the jobseekers continue down from the constricting section, they are confronted with the bottom half of the hourglass, representing the myriads players in hiring decisions - recruiters, HR staffs, managers, “each with his or her own strategies for interpreting the documents and selecting likely job candidates” (p. 75). This description helps us understand the contradictions that our participants have to resolve in branding themselves: as students from diverse backgrounds, they are expected to follow the same narrative structures provided by LinkedIn to differentiate themselves from each other. This drive to differentiate without substance is societally expected as Sanic cynically put it:

Just try to brag as much as you can. As I said, this is the time where you can actually brag and people won't [fault?] you for it. So, make yourself better than you actually are.

In this case, Sanic was not talking about making up things to lie on one's profile, but instead, the act of displaying and trumpeting one's achievements were considered a form of differentiation that contradicts the idea of being authentic and humble. This happens because the genre of LinkedIn does not allow a complete insight into a person's complex history, but only to give a codified glimpse into their individuality as many of our participants describe in their interviews (Gershon, 2017).

Furthermore, as the figure of the hourglass describes, and as our participants admitted, there is no reliable way to know if these impressions are correctly observed by potential observers. The best one could hope for is to do guesswork through profile-view metrics or to ask their peers for their comments. Nevertheless, these cannot replace the actual comments from those that matters: employers. As Hogan (2010) discusses, workers who engage in impression management online can only confirm its effectiveness post-factum: the only time when they receive confirmation is when they are successfully contacted by a recruiter. This asynchronous feedback of impression management plays an important role in cybervetting (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Without cue for the effectiveness of their digital persona, the jobseekers must "cultivate enduring shows of competence, professionalism, and connectedness across any sources employers might use" (p. 107). Thus, as part of this process, "workers are expected to fulfill growing expectations to view and enact work as one's singular passion" (ibid.) In this case, interaction does not revolve around individuals who "come into the presence of each other" and "try to give the others present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened self-interest" as Goffman would describe it (Goffman, 1969, p. 160). Without the exact idea about who are the observers, the jobseekers now have to engage in continuous labour to maintain the impression that they hope their imagined audience would endorse. In this sense, the idea of an individual possessing a "human capital" seems moot unless these human capital is presented visually, and more importantly, it is recognized by others: the valuation of one's human capital "is dependent on the judgments and estimations of others" (van Doorn, 2014, p. 358). In other word, they perform hope labour (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). This is exemplified by Nook when talking about differentiation:

If you have a strong-enough profile and a good-enough attitude toward the people you're networking with, it could just really differentiate you, because on LinkedIn, you're just more than your paper CV.

In this quote, Nook discussed how LinkedIn is more than just a paper record of one's skillsets and experiences. One must show the right attitudes toward people in one's network. The difference between LinkedIn and a CV lies in the active performance that the social media allows users to engage in. Thus, presenting the bundle of skills on the profile only plays a part in the show. The remaining lies in the ability of the participants to show the desirable behaviors that follow the professional script. The figure of the jobseeker in the contemporary job-search genre represents an enterprise that is engaging in economic transactions with others (Gershon, 2017). Gershon shows that the *self-as-enterprise*, as opposed to the *self-as-commodity* in the Fordist era, must actively present itself as a service for others. Therefore, it requires a presentation strategy that focuses presenting the ideal behaviors instead of the bundle of quantified skillsets. One must show the capability to "alter one's very quiddity in an ongoing adjustment of agency to the requirements of social and physical adaptability to shifting market forces" (Mirowski, 2013, p. 122). Not only can these behaviors be seen through the real-life activities that they undertake, they can also be seen through the way they conduct themselves on LinkedIn. Tact is the name of the game: saying the right thing, using the right language, showing the right attitudes. Sanic showed us his experience posting an article that he had written for a publication:

Following LinkedIn convention, I shared this article that I just wrote on the Diplomat [...] and there's a paywall if you have read more than 3 or 5 articles for a month. So, I shared the article, but I realized that I couldn't even read my own article [...] So, I wanted to say: "Thanks guys. Very pleased to have published on the Diplomat. Unfortunately, I can't even read my own article, so if any of you know what I wrote, please tell me" (smile). I wanted to say that, but, my friends advised me like: "No no no no no! you can't do this on LinkedIn. You can do it on Facebook, but you can't do it on LinkedIn."

Through this story of Sanic, we can re-conceptualize the branded self as an artefact of moral characters instead of a bundle of skills. Here, Sanic had to make sure that he could present his achievement in a scripted way and not to show his personalities. Moreover, as he reflected later on, the purpose of this post was to announce that he had achieved something, not to advertise for the actual publication. "You are more concerned with saying 'I'm very pleased to have published it' rather than to saying 'this is my message. This is the message that should come off from this that I share,'" he said.

Based on this finding, we can identify the personae of the participants on LinkedIn as *übercapital* (Fourcade & Healy, 2016): a form of capital based on digital records that shows desirable economic behaviors including “social ties (now measurable through the value of one’s social network) and moral worth (a quantified appreciation of one’s ‘trustworthiness’ or ‘accountability’)” (p. 18). The difference between *übercapital* and the traditional notion of human capital is that *übercapital* focuses on conspicuous behaviours similar to the Bourdieusian symbolic capital. Moreover, *übercapital* exists mainly *in potentia*. It is visible only when realized, just as our participants can only understand the effectiveness of their LinkedIn profiles post-factum. Indeed, as Sanic and other participant described, human capital is one important facet of one’s profile, but the moral characters signified through the willingness to valorize this capital presents the other important part (Gregory & Sadowski, 2021). For example, the idea of doing something aside from one’s study is highlighted by our participants as the important aspect of the self-brand on LinkedIn:

I think volunteering experience is probably important as well because that's showing you kinda do something extra that you don't need to do (Floppa).

I try to keep them up-to-date so they can see that [...] I'm an engaged student who's doing things apart from their study (Wojaki).

If they want to make their LinkedIn look substantive enough, [...] then they need to be high achievers; they need to be ambitious and achieve new things and do some tangible internships, for example—or organizational work, volunteering, so they can put something on LinkedIn, because if you don't do anything, your LinkedIn will be empty then (Bingus).

As shown here, it’s not just the experiences and the skills gained from extracurricular experiences that are important, but also the conspicuous status signaled through these activities. They demonstrate the participants’ ability to “manage life projects through the development of effective navigation skills” as Andy Furlong and colleagues argue (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016, p. 96). For this to happen, the impression management work on LinkedIn requires resources in forms of real-life activities, which are then used to update and strengthen ones’ profile: taking part in events, finishing an online course, or getting an article published. Talking about real-life activities bring us to the realm of the social, to the space where our participants interact with their peers.

4.3 Networking and the Entrepreneurial Compass

The economy of SNS rely on the circulation of affective communication of users (Coté & Pybus, 2011; Jarrett, 2015; Pybus, 2015). As a SNS for professionals, LinkedIn follows the same script. In the previous chapter, we have seen how this plays out through the individual efforts of self-branding. This section will connect these findings to the wider sociality of LinkedIn and investigate how they are intertwined together. Despite their passive approach to posting and engaging with the LinkedIn feed, for our participants, the social value of LinkedIn lies in the support and recognition they receive from their peers and the amount of information that they can acquire in regard to career building. The platform functions as an “entrepreneurial compass” that provides our participants with the directions and purposes in term of their entrepreneurial pursuit. However, for the participants, adopting this toolkit means submitting to the entrepreneurial gazes of other users and the pressure that comes with this imperative to be entrepreneurial (Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017b).

According to the participants, their network comprises mostly of peers from schools or student organizations. Outside of this circle, they also have people in the same field of interests and people who are already working in these fields. The idea of having a close-knit network that they know in real life is important for many of our participants. Viola, for example, described the sense of solidarity she shares with her peers through reading her newsfeed:

There's a sense of solidarity. There's a sense of community that when your friends are achieving something and you are supportive and you giving them good words, good encouragement.

As this quote shows, the value of having a peer-support network exists through the interactions between the participant with her peer-group: congratulating each other, showing solidarity in midst of hardship, and giving each other help when they need. Outside of these purposes, they can also be used for instrumental reasons, as the concept of networking implies: getting advices, sharing tips, or lending a hand in finding internships. Friends can help each other not through affective but practical means as well. Nook talked about this type of interaction when asked about her Skills & Endorsement on her profile:

Uh, to be really honest, in the project that I'm part of [redacted], the e-day, we had a LinkedIn session together, and everyone just gave each other Endorsements. That's how I got them (laugh).

This reciprocal interaction here constitutes the relational labour that is the hallmark of the digital media economy with its emphasis of self-branding and reciprocal exchange of digital social capital (Chia, 2012; B. E. Duffy, 2017; Gaudeul & Giannetti, 2013). To an extent, these forms of reciprocal exchange also infiltrate the affective relations described above. In such cases, our participants shared that they would engage with their connections only as a courtesy to ensure their names are remembered by the other parties. Bingus, for example, uses LinkedIn but also Instagram to actively interact with his connections and keep them fresh. Certainly, this was what our participants meant when they described the relations with their connections as public and professional. It can feel as something that are more on the surface and based on exchange relation. Floppa, for example, shared this answer when asked about the relations she has with people in her network:

Probably more on the surface. I wouldn't say it's a very deep connection (smile) or anything. I mean, a lot of them are people I know that are my friends - some of them. So I probably wouldn't use LinkedIn to really...message with them or anything.

As the quote describes, friendship means something intimate, affective, and private for Floppa. Nonetheless, because of the “professional sense of place” (Papacharissi, 2009) that permeates on LinkedIn, it feels uncanny and unnatural to communicate with friends whom she knows in real life. Having intimate interactions with friends is considered more appropriate on other social media that are more private and personal in their nature, not on LinkedIn. This is also reflected by Sanic: “when you message someone on LinkedIn, or when someone messages me on LinkedIn, I would think of them always the perception that this person wants to network with me, and it doesn't feel as genuine.”

Going further, on LinkedIn, peers also act as a source of information that our participants can use to orient themselves in their preparation for the future: what kind of experiences they lack, what kind of skills they need, or what kinds of opportunities they can benefit from. Here, the act of comparison turns out to be a vital aspect of LinkedIn. When they cast gaze toward others, our participants don't just look for information. They make assessment about themselves and others. Comparison serves as an “entrepreneurial compass” because it gives our participants an awareness of their places within the context of LinkedIn and the context of their youth. We can see the role of LinkedIn in maintaining this assemblage of surveillance through the way it is designed. For example, as many of our participants are aware of, the platform will send notifications to users

when their profiles are being looked at by other users. The act of gazing is made public for both parties to acknowledge, and it carries a significant power relation. For those being gazed, it can bring a sense of pride and recognition. Our participants talked about how they felt proud whenever a new person look at their profile, especially if that person belongs to the higher strata of the corporate world. Nonetheless, when the direction of the gaze is reversed, it can bring anxiety and embarrassment as the digital trace of gazing is announced to the gazed. The fear of being seen as a stalker is an unpleasant feeling. Nook, for example, spends 20 dollars a month on LinkedIn Premium just so she could hide her identity when looking at other people's profile because she feels "weird" doing so without anonymity. Not only so, this subscription service also allows access to job-search statistics that allows her to compare herself with others who are also applying for the same positions. These metrics are also a temptation for other participants who shared that they would think about paying for Premium when they are serious about finding a job. Thus, comparison and competition are not only felt on the subjective side of our participants, they are a source of monetization for the platform as well.

Moving past the discussion about LinkedIn Premium, we can see how the social media function of the platform operates as an "entrepreneurial compass". For instance, Amogus talked about looking at other profiles to orient herself within the culture of LinkedIn:

I'm doing a sort of administrative job at the university, which is very, you know--it doesn't require a lot of skills and doesn't require a lot of previous experiences. But, being able to still present what I'm doing right now as relevant to future employer [is] quite important, and I think, by being on LinkedIn and by looking at other people's profiles and see how they sell themselves, I've definitely learnt something there.

Likewise, Kaz described how this "entrepreneurial compass" goes beyond the interface of LinkedIn and into her university life:

Now that we are all students at university level, I think that some of the internships and other possibilities that are opened to other people with more or less my same background will also be open for me. In that sense, it's sort of interesting whether I could also possibility [follow?] when I see this people might be posting about an interesting seminar, and interesting course - and that's another kind of inspiration.

We see from these testimonies that the participants need the social functions of LinkedIn to learn how to be entrepreneurial both on and off LinkedIn. For Amogus, she needs to look at her

peers to understand the culture of LinkedIn and the correct way to use the platform to “sell” herself. Meanwhile, Kaz uses the information that her peers published on the platform to identify what kind of self-developing activities are opened to her. The idea of looking at peers to assess one’s human capital is a prevalent theme throughout the interviews. It gives our participants not only the inspiration but also the belief that they, too, could also achieve the same things as their peers. Nevertheless, not all comparison brings the same sense of pride and accomplishment. Comparing oneself to other means treading on a thin line between inspiration and discouragement. Viola demonstrated this through her reflection on peer comparison:

I think it can be bad and good at the same time. Bad because it kinda affects my self-esteem of what I can offer, but in a sense that it makes me more driven, so I think it depends on the time. Like, if I’m feeling a little bit low and I compare myself, it will bring my self-esteem down even more, I’d say.

Here, Viola identified that comparison has pros and cons which resonate with her moods. When she feels optimistic, comparison against friends gives her the motivation to get out there and strive for the same goals. Nevertheless, when she feels discouraged, comparison against friends would not give her inspiration but a sense of dread and hopelessness due to the difference in the level of achievements. Like Viola, other participants are aware of the self-surveillance and valuation that happens on LinkedIn. This self-gaze possesses a moral and normative quality that motivates our participants to engage in the right entrepreneurial behaviors that they see in their peers. This type of peer-pressure is recognized by many of the participants as a troubling aspect of LinkedIn. At its extreme, it can manifest into a perverted sense of sociality. For example, Chad talked about LinkedIn as the driver behind the hustle culture in university that he detests:

People are really motivated to have jobs so they can have updates on LinkedIn. For example, they have an update on their timelines: “you know what, I’m starting a new position at blah blah blah” or something like that. And if you have a ton of experiences on LinkedIn, you’re going to say that you’re cooler, or people are going to assume: “oh my god, you’re so cool, because you have tons of experiences on LinkedIn,” and people are so crazy about that, I would say. [...] Sometimes, I would say LinkedIn is one of the social media that give me or some people the most insecurity, because we’re all on LinkedIn and we see others are starting new position, and we will start comparing ourselves: “oh, this person has started the position in this, and why haven’t I?”

The quote here from Chad advances two issues. First, it presents the idea of a job as an aestheticized commodity of conspicuous consumption (Gorz, 1999) that broadcast “a powerful signal to others, and affirmation to oneself, of the worthiness of the lifestyle one can fashion” (Kelly, Campbell, & Howie, 2019, p. 69). Moreover, it also presents a normative idea of entrepreneurialism as an equal game for everyone. Since members of a network share the same starting point as students of a university or programme, it is the sole responsibilities of the losers if they fail to reach the same standard of entrepreneurialism that their peers have achieved. On LinkedIn, peer-to-peer valuation through networking is a mechanism for this ideology. Ulrich Bröckling (2016) describes in his book: “Entrepreneurship is determined by comparison. You only act enterprisingly when you are more innovative, alert, daring, self-responsible and more of a leader than all the others” (p.77). Yet, the paradox of entrepreneurialism is that, since it is rooted in comparison, the idea of everyone being equally successful is logically impossible (ibid.). Therefore, competition becomes the name of the game when comparison is taken to the extreme. Bingus had this to share when asked about competitiveness and solidarity through LinkedIn:

Competitive. Because solidarity - I mean (chuckle) - it's not a personal platform. It's not Instagram. It's not a crowdfunding platform. So yeah, it's a matter of professional affairs, and I think it will be more on the competitive [...] For example, okay, “I'm insecure for my profile, let's register myself into five internship positions. Let's see where I get accepted, so I can start a new position and people will like my post.” Well, I can see it that way, but for me, personally, I feel the competitiveness in...professional matters - like, not mixed with personal feelings where you get jealous and you want to be more competitive than a particular person.

Here, Bingus identifies competition as a rational, impersonal and apolitical way of life. He recognizes competition as a virtue of being a professional and not a perverted personality. Therefore, for him, LinkedIn is a useful tool because it motivates him to persistently become better and more prepared for the professional world. Likewise, using LinkedIn under this specter of competition is understood by many of our participants as a natural phenomenon. For example, Ember described this in her reflection:

They've told us at school and university: “never compare yourself to anyone else; you are your own individual part,” (mocking tone) but I feel like it's human nature. I feel like everyone does. Even if someone says “oh I don't care what they do, what they are doing,” I don't really believe that, because we are inherently competitive.

The idea of competition as a human-nature is a curious claim. What Ember described here gives the impression that LinkedIn should not be used as a mean of comparison and competition. However, since it is claimed as a human-nature, the competitiveness on LinkedIn became an inevitable way of life that one should make peace with, and perhaps, utilize for one's benefits, like Bingus shared earlier.

Certainly, this idea of comparison and competition is connected to the broader idea of being university students in this current socio-economic context. This is represented through how our participants perceive as the ideal pathway to adulthood and their place within it: getting the job that they like, having a stable source of income, and being in the upper echelon of the labour hierarchy (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016). These were shared by multiple participants as the point where they might consider stopping LinkedIn. Bingus talked about what it means to be young and using LinkedIn as compared to older users:

People with younger age, they tend to be, you know, really touching up their LinkedIn, and make sure it is perfect to the recruiter. They are really being ambitious on LinkedIn: they are publishing articles; they are engaging the opportunities. For example, you see the post like: "ok, if you want the resume template, comment 'yes' and I'll send it by your email," [...] and people who are posting this kind of thing tend to be the older people. So, older people giving opportunities, like: "I'll give you this invitation, comment me your e-mail and say 'Amen'." Yeah. People who are younger, they will react to it. So, the olds provide, the youngers take it.

Here, Bingus describes the pathway of becoming adult through the valuation of social and cultural capital. This idea is predominant in how our participants perceive themselves and why they use LinkedIn: the idea that they are in a lesser position when it comes to experiences as well as social and cultural capital. Being young means that one must take the chances that are given out by those who are older and more capital-rich. With this in mind, the correct mindset to have is to always be ready for unexpected opportunities. Our participants showed their appreciation for opportunities and take personal responsibilities as the *modus operandi*. For this, knowing how to meet people and have them as potential opportunities is an important skill to have as Maurice discussed here:

I think that's a skill in itself - knowing how to know more people - because you never know when it will be helpful for you or for the others. It's nice to [inaudible], like those fields, and you don't have to be stuck with people you know in real life.

When putting networking as a skill to be learned, the other side of the coin is that those who fail to learn it have nothing to blame but themselves. Once again, as Bröckling (2016) describes: “The maxim of the entrepreneurial self today could read something like this: if you are not prepared to throw yourself into the fray, you have already lost” (p. 76). Indeed, for some of our participants, using LinkedIn had taught them to appreciate the networking imperative as a way of life. Ember, for example, has grown from being a cynic toward networking in the past to a person who see it as “the way of the world”. Similarly, Nook have learned to become more comfortable with networking on LinkedIn, something she would have described as “something very weird” in the past. This sense of being molded to a new way of life is reflected by Viola when discussing the problem of “network gap”, defined by LinkedIn as the situation where people with the same talents are not having the same access to opportunities because of their lack of network (Garlinghouse, 2019):

It all comes down to how much effort you put in. I think comparing myself to my peers who don't really update their LinkedIn or who are not really active on LinkedIn, there's definitely a gap for them, but I think it also comes down to your effort, like, how much time you want to put into your LinkedIn account—how much time you want to spend growing your connections, reaching out to someone first even though you don't know them.

Here, Viola used her experiences to discuss the implication of LinkedIn for young people. She explained how LinkedIn had already provided the groundwork for networking, and the rest was up to the users to put themselves out there and meet people. Nevertheless, as the findings so far have shown, the practices on LinkedIn are not always as clear-cut as Viola described, especially for participants who were still adjusting to the culture of the platform. Sometimes the platform could appear straight-forward, but sometimes, they would leave our participants with more doubts and anxiety than answers. The next section analyzes in details what this meant for the participants and how they navigated through these uncertainties.

4.4 The Therapeutic Entrepreneurial Self

The analysis so far has looked at the activities that our participants undertake on LinkedIn and the social relations that they produce. With the analysis on self-branding and comparison above, we have taken a glimpse into some of the contradictions of entrepreneurial selfhood on LinkedIn. They are hopeful yet anxious about themselves; they stress pragmatism and practicality while valuing authenticity at the same time; they amass potential opportunities with the hope that these

would materialize into real benefits in the future; at the same time, there lingers a sense of cynicism and suspicion about the current conditions of their digital lives. Deeper analysis into the empirical data suggests that, due to these contradictions, the entrepreneurial self on LinkedIn goes beyond the ideal rational and calculative *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2010). Faced with the uncertainty and the contradictions of these digital practices, at the end of it all, the entrepreneurial self described here takes on a therapeutic characteristics similar to those observed by recent scholarships (Howie & Campbell, 2016; Ikonen & Nikunen, 2019; Threadgold, 2018; Walsh & Black, 2020). However, this resistance toward the neoliberal narrative of entrepreneurialism does not happen outside its boundary but within it. Only through these affective molding of one mindset that one can effectively be entrepreneurial and successful with LinkedIn. In a sense, the purpose of the platform is not so much to be a place for the accumulation and presentation human capital, but rather a place through which the anxiety of “disposability” (Bauman, 2004; Giroux, 2009) is managed: “the individual has no choice but to balance out in her own subjective self the objective contradiction between the hope of rising and the fear of decline, between empowerment and despair, euphoria and dejection” (Bröckling, 2016, p. viii).

In the context of competition and comparison, for example, this therapeutic act plays out through the way participants use their own profiles to reassure themselves of their qualities. For example, Ember shared that she was having problem with her self-esteem and confidence before moving to Sweden and becoming involved in her student organization and LinkedIn. As she became more active, she felt a sense of relief knowing that she could achieve things like her peers:

Six months ago when I wasn't using LinkedIn, and I would see a lot of people posts “oh, I'm doing this; I'm doing that; I'm doing internship here.” Then, I'd be a lot more stressed. So I felt to myself like “I wasn't at that level; I wasn't at the same stage as them, and these people were my peers, so I should be. That makes sense.” But now, it is depending on how you honestly feel about where you are at. I feel a lot more comfortable with the stage I'm at, so then, I feel like it's less stressful and more like: “oh, that's really actually motivational, seeing what they are doing. I can also do that.”

We can see here that, over time, the anxiety of being left-behind had been replaced by a sense of motivation. However, this is only possible when our participant get access to the means to be entrepreneurial—this case being a member of a student organization and active on LinkedIn. This respite from “entrepreneurial guilt” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013) shows how important it is

for our participants to have a means of reassurance of their entrepreneurial qualities and that they are comparable with their peers on the platform.

Furthermore, take the issue of self-branding, for example. In her book, feminist labour scholar Ursula Huws (2014) details labour relations in the current era of digital capitalism through the dual process of “begging and bragging”—a process that is exemplified by the ritual of writing and submitting applications. According to Huws, this ritual carries significant moral characters because both practices are frowned upon in the context of Western society. “Don’t blow your own trumpet,” “The empty vessel makes most noise,” “Stand on your own two feet,” and “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” are the moral codes of life, but before the employers, “Beggars can’t be choosers” become the rule of thumb (p. 65). As our conversation with Sanic and many other participants above have shown, this contradictory dynamic is detrimental to their sense of autonomy. However, the most important example of the therapeutic self is seen through this reflection by Sussy regarding rejection and how she coped with it:

When I got on LinkedIn, I saw that that's 100% true. It's hard to find job and you have to keep trying. Rejection is ok. [You] are not gonna be the greatest fit for a company, and the company might not recognize what you can offer to them, that you can create value for them, and that's ok [...] I don't let rejection get to me. If I'm applying for something. It's just a 50-50 chance - I might get it; I might not. I'm not gonna be that sad about it. So, it has desensitized me from that.

Sussy talked about how she had learned to make peace with rejection after spending her time on the platform. Not only that, but she also rechannels the negativity of this experience into a motivational drive that pushes her to be more persistent with her goals. This self-therapy describes a process through which *responsibilitization* (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Kelly, 2001) becomes internalized. One must take responsibility in re-adjusting one’s mindsets when confronted with hardship. Moreover, this conversation with Sussy gave us a sign of something that is not inherent in the data themselves but can only be elevated through critical reflection on the interview. As the interviews went on, it became clear that for every occasion where a negative point was raised by the participants, there was equally an attempt to balance it and keep the mood of the conversation positive. This idea of keeping things positive or maintaining a balance between positivity and negativity is a key part of the contemporary therapeutic discourse for young adults in the age of precarity (D. Duffy, 2017; Ikonen & Nikunen, 2019). Take Maurice, for example,

who discussed the inevitable sense of competition that he feels toward his peer-network, which he had just described earlier in the interview as a source of “empathy and friendship”:

Well, in general, in the end, it's competitive. Like, you will get an offer or you will see an opportunity, and then you have to compete, in the end, with other people for a place. But,...I don't know. There are many opportunities there, so it's not as [inaudible], I guess. You can benefit in a way or another way in the end.

In this passage, Maurice started with the negative observation that he had. However, to end his point, he argued that there are many opportunities on the platform, and “one way or another”, everyone can reap the benefit. This reminds us of the testimony of Viola in the previous section about comparison. If one fails to have a balanced mindset, one would be consumed by the negativity and become a nihilist instead of a positive entrepreneur. This strive for a balanced mindset is the hallmark characteristic of the entrepreneurial self in the age of precarity. It is a form of “survival and resistance in hostile environments” as Howie & Campbell describe (Howie & Campbell, 2016, p. 918). Taken as a whole, the analysis in this section has shown how a culture of therapy have entwined with the entrepreneurial dispostif for our participants. It demands the virtues of initiative, competitiveness, and most of all, the ability to set one’s mindset at its correct place: “Don’t let the moochers and complainers drag you down! Become your own boss, after you embrace the power of positive thinking,” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 114), or as Wojaki described it:

I think it's very easy to spiral down in this comparison contest and then just feel like shit. I think the people who actually have the advantage are the one who can compete and are willing to compete, but they also remind themselves of their own values, and I'd say, that they can balance those thing. And I think I do it, and I think that's also why I can use LinkedIn effectively without being anxious.

4.5 LinkedIn within Precarity and Digital Capitalism

As Jonathan Pace (2018) and Thomas Allmer (2015) argue, digital capitalism is the processes through which the structural tendencies of capitalism are mediated through digital technologies. They are the contingent and historical moments whereby the contradictions of capitalism are played out in specific political economic configurations. Looking at the data and our analyses so far, it can be concluded that the “stable instability” ontology of precarity is the key to tie the findings together (Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017a). In an epoch where insecurity triumphs and the Fordist notion of the welfare-state is seen as exceptional (Mahmud, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter,

2008; Vrasti, 2021), the processes of “posting your skills” on LinkedIn for our participants are the ways through which they confront with this precarious wage-labour (or post-wage) relation of neoliberal capitalism (Chicchi, 2020). As a part of Microsoft’s intervention into higher-education (Smith, 2021), LinkedIn represents the “commercialized pre-fabricated technological solutions” (Mirrlees & Alvi, 2020, p. 69) that offer our participants “a set of prescriptive standardizing techniques” (Gershon, 2017) that allow them to make sense of their entrepreneurial journey amidst the instability of young-adulthood.

As Phillip Mirowski (2013) posits, the key aspect of the neoliberal discourse is not about the triumph of the market. Market does not exist. It must be relentlessly pursued and created. This idea of enforcing a free-market constitutes the “double truth” doctrine of the neoliberal intellectuals. Moreover, Mirowski argues that critics of neoliberalism often fall into the trap of believing the exoteric doctrine of the neoliberals that market fundamentalism and governmentality applies to everyone equally: “their version of governmentality elevates the market as a site of truth for everyone but themselves,” he argues (p. 110). This argument points to the dissonance between the mass and the elites within the narrative of entrepreneurialism and market fundamentalism. In the case of LinkedIn, the same has been discussed by McDonald and colleagues using the metaphors of *the black hole* and *the purple squirrels* (McDonald et al., 2019). Through a study with 61 HR officers, the scholars identify that there exist two distinct labour markets for two distinct types of users on platforms like LinkedIn. On one hand, there is a market for passive candidates—the purple squirrels, defined as “potential job candidates who have a set of characteristics that is so extensive and rare that they are nearly impossible to identify” (p. 109). In other words, they are the posterchildren of the professional class due to their monopoly over expertise (Larson, 2013). As a result, these are the prized targets that recruiters actively spend their time hunting. On the other hand, there is the most-dread *black hole*—the space where myriads of undifferentiated mass who have access to computers can “blast their resumes” to the HR officers (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 101). For this mass of users, the inconvenient fact is that they would not be able to be noticed by recruiters due to the sheer number of competitors and the de-personalized nature of this recruitment channel (ibid.). For the participants in this case study, this dynamic can be observed. It is the common vision of many of them to be the “purple squirrel” one day and be contacted by a recruiter.

I would hope to get maybe some kind of work experiences, or just maybe to be able to reach that step where someone contact you and being like “oh, would you like to do this?” That’s what I hope to get out, eventually, but this is the step that everyone - I’d say, on LinkedIn - isn’t sure how to get to.

This was Ember’s answer when asked what she hoped to get out of LinkedIn. It is this vision of one day being contacted by a recruiter that keeps her invested in LinkedIn. Yet, as university students, that scenario is something of a fleeting vision. Enver, a participant whom we haven’t seen in the analysis so far, helps us untangle this problem. Working part-time as a LinkedIn recruiter, Enver is tasked with the exact job of finding “purple squirrels”. Showing his recruiting routine on LinkedIn on his computer screen, he repeatedly explained why students would not be the target for recruiters: they do not possess the industry-specific skills; they don’t have experiences; and lastly, their profiles contain none of the keywords that recruiters use in their Boolean search (these were also observed by participants from social science majors). In his reflection on LinkedIn, Enver openly detested the social media aspect of LinkedIn because it is completely irrelevant for the hiring processes. “I don’t really go on there. I don’t need people showing me how much they’ve achieved today so they feel better about themselves. I don’t care, and I don’t really feel the need to do that or share my opinion or whatever,” he expressed. More importantly, according to Enver, the competitive advantage of LinkedIn lies entirely in its ability to pursue users to be public with their CV-like profiles, which makes the recruitment process convenient for the recruiters. Thus, for him, if he could make a change to the platform, he would remove the social media aspect entirely and keep the platform “to the point”. This brings us to the same observation of Gershon in her ethnographic study: “personal branding was a concept and set of activities that career counselors and motivational speakers promoted, job seekers engaged with, and those hiring ignored” (Gershon, 2017, p. 25). If this is the state of the platform, then what is the logic behind this?

The findings suggest that it is the anxiety toward precarity, and subsequently, the supposed entrepreneurial solutions that keep the platform running. In the age of precarity, LinkedIn operates as a digital infrastructure for the *moral economy* of 21st-century capitalism (Fourcade, 2017; Fourcade & Healy, 2016). As discussed in the self-branding section above, the digital economy of social media is characterized by the “vast amounts of concrete data about actual ‘decisions’ people make”, which are then used to determine one’s moral positions based on “one’s prior good actions

and good taste” (Fourcade & Healy, 2016, p. 24). This moral economy requires the technological apparatus that is capable of extracting and appropriating these übercapital. LinkedIn, in its quest to integrate into the current higher education pipeline (Komljenovic, 2019), finds young university students as the honey pot for this very purpose. However, as Gershon (2017) observes, the platform cannot bring about the shift in the way young people and jobseekers engage with it, “thousands upon thousands of people had to tell each other that this was now the new way to look for a job” (p. 183). Here, Gershon points toward the social and cultural aspect of the platform that renders it meaningful for the users. Nevertheless, this is not to conclude that users are merely cultural dupes being wooed by a cabal of conspiring elites from Silicon Valley. The opposite is true. Just as it is the same for all other social media, it is these autonomous, voluntary and affective interactions between users that produces the “stickiness” for social media platforms. Pybus (2015) argues for this through the metaphor of the digital archives of the self:

When a user places something into the archive, he or she is uploading an object that has social, and hence affective, value. The object in question has the potential to affect as it moves between the user and the larger network of friends who come into contact with whatever has been uploaded. Thus affect accumulates, sediments, and provides additional cultural significance to that which gets circulated (p. 240).

Through the circulation of these affects, the *structure of feeling of the reputational economy* (Hearn, 2013) or of the *society of performance* (Chicchi, 2020) are made and felt. Moreover, according to Pybus, these archives come into the presence of each other, and through these interaction, they bind the users on LinkedIn together. “If these profiles did not exist in this composition with other archives, then their resonance within our everyday lives would be significantly diminished,” she concludes (Pybus, 2015, p. 242). The findings above have shown how this plays out in the experiences of our participants. The acts of self-branding, the anticipation, the anxiety, the solidarity of a peer-support network, the dreadfulness of competition, the hope in a future, the relief through the assurance of one’s capabilities, these moments are contradictory yet evident of the affective investment of our participants in the platform. As Marion Fourcade (2017) describes,

the purpose of most choice architectures is not simply to produce conformity with an ideal: it is, first, to produce a valuable form of conformity; second, it is to *reveal differences*

(author's italic) in the march toward the ideal. The ability to differentiate and measure the distance from the ideal, it turns out, is the other source of value (p. 670).

Hence, if the platform was to be restructured into a pure job-search website like Enver envisaged, perhaps it would lose its very own lifeblood.

4.6 The Commercial Mediation of Our (Un)Alienated Relationships

To conclude the analysis, this paper suggests that we can systematically answer the research questions by seeing at it through the analysis of structuration and social power (Haugaard, 2003; Mosco, 2009). The experiences of estrangement are reflected by the participants when the *practical consciousness* is made into *discursive consciousness* regarding their digital practices (Haugaard, 2003), or to use Shani Orgad's terms: when the *cultural narratives* are juxtaposed against the *personal narratives* (Orgad, 2020). According to Mark Haugaard's theory of power and the social order, the stability of any social structures require predictability and consensus rather than pure coercion, as he argues: "the source of social order stems from social structures which lend order to an action through the reproduction of meaning," (p. 90). For the agents, the "reproduction of meaning" within a social order constitutes the *practical consciousness*: "tacit knowledge which enables us to 'goon' in social life" (p. 100). Consequently, the social order is opened for disruption when agents turn this practical consciousness into *discursive consciousness*: knowledge that are put into words by the act of reflection (ibid). Haugaard argues that this process is not about overriding the "false consciousness" with a "true consciousness", but rather about recognizing that these meanings are products of real human practices. He concludes: "while knowledge remains merely tacit, it is not confrontable, but once rendered discursive, it becomes something which we can distance ourselves from, recognize and evaluate" (p. 102). In Gershon's study, she observes the historical evolution of employment relations from the idea of the self-as-commodity to the self-as-enterprise. Yet, as she argues, these are not mutually exclusive. Rather, while self-as-commodity are still used by the jobseekers to describe the relations between themselves and the employers, self-as-enterprise remains the dominant discourse that they confront through the job-seeking processes (Gershon, 2017). The same dynamic can be observed in the case of this thesis whereby the interview method allowed participants to put the tacit understanding of their place within LinkedIn into discursive forms. From this, the participants could evaluate whether the idea of themselves as the bearer of human capital (self-as-enterprise)

or as bearer of labour-power (self-as-commodity) is appropriate and meaningful and what can be done about it. This is summarized using the following chart:

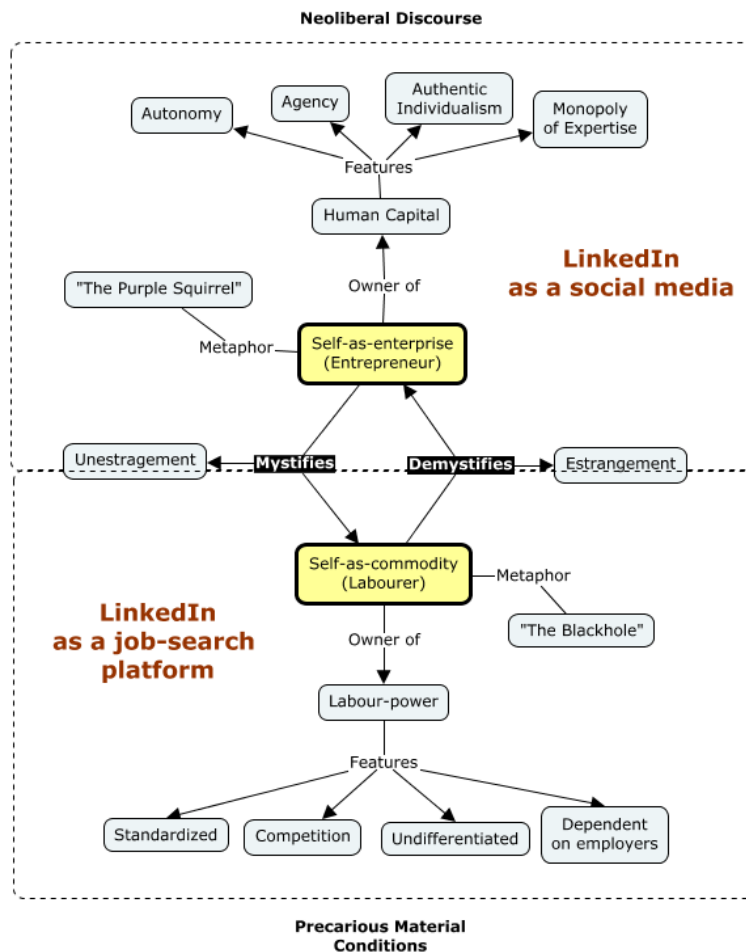


Figure 2: Graphical summary of the relation between human-capital and labour-power.

When we use human capital, we are looking at the neoliberal discourse of accumulation and investment, with the hope of this capital yielding profits in the future. This corresponds to the development of universities as the promised environment to develop one’s human capital (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016; Hearn, 2013; Means, 2018). The role of LinkedIn in this context is to be the place where our participants present their human capital stock and to ensure that it’s constantly being appreciated (van Doorn, 2014). Thus, LinkedIn is un-alienating when the participants can perceive the possibilities to fulfilling these purposes: when they get an internship, when they get connected to new people, when they get recognized by their peers. In other words, it is when they have the capability to aspire (B. E. Duffy, 2017; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013)—to present their moral alignment with the imperative of human capital in a “morally thick economy”

of neoliberalism capitalism (Fourcade, 2017). These were what our participants said when asked about what they would like to get out of LinkedIn. The example with Ember in the previous chapter is an example of this. The ability to be active at school and on LinkedIn is empowering because it gives her the confidence that she could follow the entrepreneur ethics. Correspondingly were the examples of other participants when they discussed the pride they felt after looking at their own profiles. As the feminist framework of Jarrett has shown, the reproductive work within the household is seldom alienating work (Jarrett, 2015). The experiences and self-development that our participants acquired are inherently meaningful. This cannot be denied. However, it is only when they are made to be objects of competition, or when they are made to be the mediator of exchange relations they become troublesome as Peter Kelly (2006) argues about the entrepreneurial dispotif for young people:

It is not that ‘initiative’, ‘enterprise’, ‘responsibility’ or ‘activity’ are not worthwhile human capacities [...] Rather, it is that within the frame of an entrepreneurial Selfhood, as it is imagined at the turn of the second millennium CE, ‘initiative’, ‘enterprise’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘activity’ are narrowly imagined in relation to the performance of exchange relations in the extended order of capitalist markets (p. 28)

It is when our participations confront with the inadequacy of human capital theory to account for their precarious labour relation that they experience estrangement. In this case, they are confronted with the fact that their skills and capabilities are still held dependent to wage-labour relationship, mediated through the privately owned means of communication in the form of LinkedIn. If human capital relies on the ideology of autonomy and freedom, then the imperative of following self-branding and hoping that it would eventually yield return is not very liberating. The American cultural critic Andrew Hoberek describes this contradiction:

The possessors of even high-level cultural capital, that is, remain beholden as employees to those who own economic capital [...] Workers are free to trade their human capital precisely as workers are free to trade their labor: largely at the will of those who can purchase it. In this respect, the idea of the mental laborer as entrepreneur—which arose at a time when stable jobs were equated with ennui—now provides a fantasy of agency within an economy in which job security is increasingly tenuous (Hoberek, 2018, p. 253).

In other words, as our analysis earlier have shown, when our participants confront with the fact that their human capital depends entirely on external appreciation (van Doorn, 2014), it is when the discourse of human capital encounters a breakdown. As Matthew Flisfeder explains in his 2015's article, investing in human capital "is simply the neoliberal ideology speaking to the necessity to reproduce labor-power as an object" (Flisfeder, 2015, p. 564). The logic of human capital mystifies this wage-labour relation and reorganizes it under the lense of "an entrepreneurial activity, where both work and work on the self are reduced to a command to become one's own boss" (p. 563). Based on Jonathan Pace's concept of digital capitalism (Pace, 2018), the activities of self-branding and professional networking on LinkedIn characterizes the historical processes whereby the structural tendency of wage-labour of capitalism is mediated by digital technology. While it is novel in its discourse, the material practice remains all too close to the origin, just as precarity is seen as the return to the normal capitalism (Mahmud, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Vrasti, 2021). Therefore, what observed in the interview was the constant rift between the discourse of human capital and the traditional wage-labour relation, which resembles the ontology of "stable instability" that Heidkampp & Kergel (2017a) theorize. If we apply this framework to the findings of our analysis, we can understand how the contradictions between our participants' accounts can be made intelligible: from the seasonality and transition pressure behinds their usage habits, to the authenticity crisis of self-branding, and to the affective yet cynical individualism of the social relations on LinkedIn. They signify the continuing struggle over meanings and practices of the self as it moves between the contradicting realm of self-as-enterprise and self-as-commodity—a struggle between "the illusion of choice and the ambivalence of freedom" as Peter Kelly would describe (Kelly, 2019, p. 112). Given these conditions, the therapeutic turn of our entrepreneurs suggests not only an anxiety before the entrepreneurial gaze, but also a fear of backsliding from the idealized professional career (acquired through human capital) toward the subordinate proletarian occupations (acquired through the selling of oneself) (Larsson, 2013). In other words, as the specter of precarity becomes immanent in our participants' accounts, the more unstable the neoliberal discourse of human capital becomes, which demands active attempts from the participants to resolve it. Without an alternative, these solutions often take the form of a retreat into individualism and personalization, exemplifying by the therapeutic selfhood. These findings, in turn, could only arise through critical reflections by our participants, in the moment whereby their "practical consciousness" are made into "discursive consciousness" (Haugaard, 2003). The

arguments that Shani Orgad (2020) makes regarding the value of “the sociological imagination” in media research remains more relevant than ever:

Narratives—both personal and cultural—are key sites through which inequalities and injustice are articulated, sustained, reproduced, and normalized, but, also, where injustice can be disrupted, resisted, and subverted. Thus, examining the connections and disjunctures between the realms of people’s personal and private stories of their experience and cultural and media narratives, offers a framework for understanding how social narratives furnish and condition our most intimate personal experiences and, crucially, how we might be able to negotiate, challenge, and change these narratives (p. 638).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

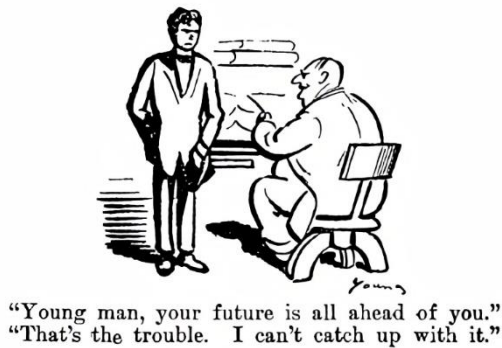


Figure 3: Curious Cartoon (Art Young, 1921).

To conclude this research, let us step out of the dense theories and have a moment of retrospection with this curious cartoon. Here, we can see a dialogue between a young fellow and an older man, who we can presume to be an employer of some sorts. The well-endowed old man, sitting comfortably on his desk, gives the young fellow an advice that is brimmed with hope and opportunities: “Your future is all ahead of you!” Yet, the young fellow, with a grim expression on his face, returns the optimism with a cynical posture: “That’s the trouble. I can’t catch up with it.” It seems from his response that the idea of “the future” is a subject of mockery and satire. Perhaps, there is also a sense of hopelessness in the words of the young fellow. How could something so hopeful like “the future” be met with disdain and to be the subject of satire? The answer is as the young man put it: “The future” is a myth. It is not reachable as a destination. As an idea, “the future” only means contingency and possibilities—the promises, but not the promised land. It is out there, ready to be reached, but no one can tell where it is and what it looks like. It is a narrative, not a material reality. Thus, for the young man, the more he moves ahead, the more he strives toward this future, the further it dodges him. He can never reach that position, because *it is the future*. It is “all ahead of you.” To reach “the future” would render the concept meaningless. Unfortunately, we now have to leave this cartoon aside to return to the thesis. Would it be sensible to use this cartoon to think through the findings of this paper? After all, is it not true that LinkedIn is the digital means through which our participants can chase after their post-graduation future?

Perhaps. This cartoon would have been a perfect illustration to end this paper if it wasn’t for the fact that it was released in 1921 by the American cartoonist Arthur Young—exactly one hundred years ago from today (2021). A sensible observer would find the absurdity in using a

visual artefact from one century ago to talk about the present conditions. Yet, somehow, the stories of 1921's America seem too familiar with the world in 2021: the dismantle of progressivism, the return of pro-business policies, and the deterioration of the workers' living conditions (Ross, 2009; Standing, 2011; "United States," 2021). Indeed, as scholars argue that the rise of precarity signifies the return to normalcy under capitalism (Mahmud, 2015; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Vrasti, 2021), this cartoon from Young does invite us to reflect on the enduring structural tendencies of capitalism and how they are tailored to the current digital age (Pace, 2018).

5.1 Recap

Situating itself within this "return to normal", this thesis set out to study the experiences of university students as they navigate precarity with digital media. Motivated by the critical approaches by youth studies scholars, it started by recognizing the precarious conditions of life that young people have to confront these days and the governmentalized solutions that are offered to them. It also recognized that, with the increasingly banality of digital technologies, these critiques will have to take into account the role of these technologies as the mediator of and the promised solutions to precarity. In doing so, it also took into account the critical scholarships on the role of digital media in constructing this precarious socio-technological order. To contribute to this rich theoretical foundation, the thesis chose the professional platform LinkedIn as the case study. From a niche social media for working professionals, the platform has developed into an important player in various labour markets and continues to present itself as the technological remedy to the crisis of employment, especially within the context of higher education. Considering this transformation, the thesis chose to study the experiences of university students with LinkedIn as they prepare for the eventual transition to the world of work as a case study of this development of digital media. The aim is to gain a better understanding of how young people negotiate their personal experiences within the technological and cultural limits and pressures of the platform as well as their their youthhood. Specifically, it pursued the following research questions:

1. How do the participants utilize LinkedIn within the context of transitioning from higher education to the world of work?
2. What kinds of socio-economic relations and subjectivation are formed through these digital practices?

Data to answer these research questions came from thirteen semi-structured qualitative interviews with students from different universities across Europe to Japan and South East Asia who are active users on the platform. They were then analyzed using abductive data analysis—a method of inquiry that seek to produce knowledge about empirical observations in light of the broader literatures on the topic of the case study (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, 2019; Yuill, 2017). In abductive analysis, the objective goes further than producing thematized descriptions of participants’ accounts. Rather, researchers seek to understand the mechanisms behind these variations in these accounts through engagement with the relevant theoretical literatures. In this thesis, findings were discussed through the combination of theories surrounding digital labour, entrepreneurial self, and precarity. Throughout the analysis, the dynamic of double precarity — “stable instability” through and with digital media — was the ontological condition that described LinkedIn for our participants (Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017a). Moreover, this dynamic of double precarity is based on — if not the necessary conditions of — the dominant neoliberal morality of entrepreneurialism. The thesis proposed the dialectical theory of the self on LinkedIn that illuminates the operation of the platform and the experiences of the participants within it. Through LinkedIn, the participants had to navigate with the contradiction between the dominant discourse of human capital and an employment relation that is still based on the selling of one’s labour-power. The end result was a self and a form sociality that are constantly in flux. Without an alternative to these contradictions, the solution for our participants often take form of a retreat into therapeutic entrepreneurialism with a touch of cynicism toward this condition of life.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the conclusion, there are limitations in this research that warrant attention. First, the scope of this research could benefit from a more extensive engagement with empirical data to enrich the analysis. Pursuing the ethno-narratives from the students regarding their experiences with LinkedIn was just an inkling of what the research problem can be pursued. Here, it could be beneficial to add to these testimonies the analysis of text or discourse using official LinkedIn documents, blog posts, statements regarding their role within higher education, the toolkits that they offer and the type of visions they have for university students. Approaching the research problem through this extra prong would allow researchers to compare these discourses with the real practices taken by university students to fully understand the dynamic of the phenomenon.

Second, due to time constraints, this research relied only on participants' testimonies as a one-off event without taking into account the possible variation through times and across contexts. As shown in the findings, the participants use LinkedIn differently in different occasions. It would be interesting to have a longer timeframe for the research where the researcher could observe how participants use the platform over time, tracking the changes and developments as they go through their school years and approaching graduation and maybe even after they graduate. Combining this with the extra perspectives mentioned above would provide a much more thorough understanding of the phenomenon without relying solely on retrospective ethno-narratives. After all, talking about one's dream and aspiration is certainly a sensitive and personal topic. It's possible that the participants would be more reserved with their accounts during the interviews for the purpose of maintaining a good impression of themselves. A more extensive research design would allow the researcher to build trust and rapport with the participants with the possibility of gaining access to more private accounts of their conducts over time.

Third, while the researcher tried to incorporate theories into the analysis empirical observation, these findings should be understood within the boundaries of the participants' experiences. This paper does not claim that LinkedIn is the universal instrument of labour markets, nor would it be the mandatory "social media" of young people in the near future. Such claim can only be made by scholars who would carry on the work of Komljenovic (2019)—something outside than scope of this paper. Moreover, as the work of Andy Furlong and colleagues have shown, when it comes to the labour market, precarity is not a democratized condition for all. Some youths would have a more fulfilling time and better experiences living under precarity than others who might be more susceptible to psychological distresses (Furlong, Goodwin, & Hadfield, 2016). The findings of this thesis have teased out these differences in term of the participants' attitude toward LinkedIn. With this, future research would benefit from the question about who can afford to be entrepreneurial on LinkedIn; who has the power in the interactions on the platform; and how various forms of social inequalities play a role in this. While LinkedIn provides the same playing field, categories such as class, gender, or ethnicities can help us in distinguish between the average self-branding connoisseur and the average privileges-enjoyer.

5.3 Reflection

At this stage, it is reasonable to ask whether or not the conclusion of this thesis is too hasty in painting a gloomy picture about the functions of the platform and the wider implications for the participants. Indeed, it is productive to stand back from a distance and re-evaluate the merits of the conclusion in a wider context. The researcher would agree that we should not get ahead of ourselves and assume that the participants are somehow living in a hellscape called LinkedIn. Let's be vigilant against the tendency to treat media practices as something encompassing of all of our lives. Perhaps, the platforms might not be as relevant in the lives of our participants as they described. The testimonies from our participants have shown that LinkedIn does not trump other social media in term of the time they spend on it. Paying attention to their practices on LinkedIn is one thing, but paying attention to the real life outside of LinkedIn is equally important. As the previous chapter has shown, LinkedIn does not come into the lives of our participants randomly nor can it function without the active entrepreneurial subjects who are active in cultivating their own human capital. Thus, LinkedIn might come and go like many other social media and digital platforms before it, but the conditions from which it first arises and acquired meanings would still be there. As the Marxist scholar Christian Fuchs put it, "the mobile phone does not change the mode of relations between you and your boss, and does not alter the fact that your boss is your boss" (Fuchs, 2019, p.208). Being aware of this struggle is the only way through which the critical theory of media can stay true to its ontological ground that society and technology constitutes a dialectical whole.

While this reflexive perspective is important to have, it should not be used as a justification to surrender the critical implications of the findings for the sake of "balance". At the same time, it does not mean being totally nihilistic. Rather, it means refusing the temptation to declare that the goods and the bads of LinkedIn — and of digital media in general — are equally and universally prevalent. Taking this stance can lead to the conclusion that the best solution is to have the balanced mindset that can juggle between these goods and bads in order to utilize these technologies in the best way. This is the retreat to the very own therapeutic individualism that this paper has spent time examining. At its extreme, it justifies the quasi-religious idea of meritocracy that taking responsibilities and having the right mindset toward oneself will be rewarded in the end. Moreover, it would also imply that the practical solution for the problem is to find the way to maximize the

goods and minimize the bads. How can Big Data be better utilized to better serve the entrepreneurial need of our users? “At the level of capitalism and politics, nothing can change. At the level of technology, everything can” (Means, 2018). This is the same idea of surrendering the critical intellectual work of scholarship to the administrative imperative of finding the better ways of “doing technology” that Peter Selwyn has lamented (Selwyn, 2015). Again, these are the vocabularies of neoliberalism, not of a critical project (Kelly, 2018). A critical approach in media and communication studies, as Alisson Hearn (2013) has shown, is an endeavor that requires principles and wills: “these activities necessarily involve questioning ourselves, risking the stability of our own social worlds and personal relationships and, as a result, always require courage” (p. 274). Only through the sustained and willing engagement with the contradictions between “what is given as ‘knowledge’ and what is actually lived” (ibid.) can scholars live up to their role in society: not as truth-bringer, but as the “eyes and ears in our ongoing efforts at understanding the present and deliberating about the future” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 166).

Talking about the future, let us invite Art Young back one last time to see what sort of (satirical) wisdom he had for the young fellows of 100 years ago and the young fellows of 2021:

WISDOM OF THE POOR FISH



*The Poor Fish says
there is always room at
the top. It all depends
on character, and work-
ing over-time while the
Boss is looking.*

Figure 4: Wisdom of the Poor Fish (Art Young, 1919).

APPENDICES

Appendix I: Research Timeline and Key Dates

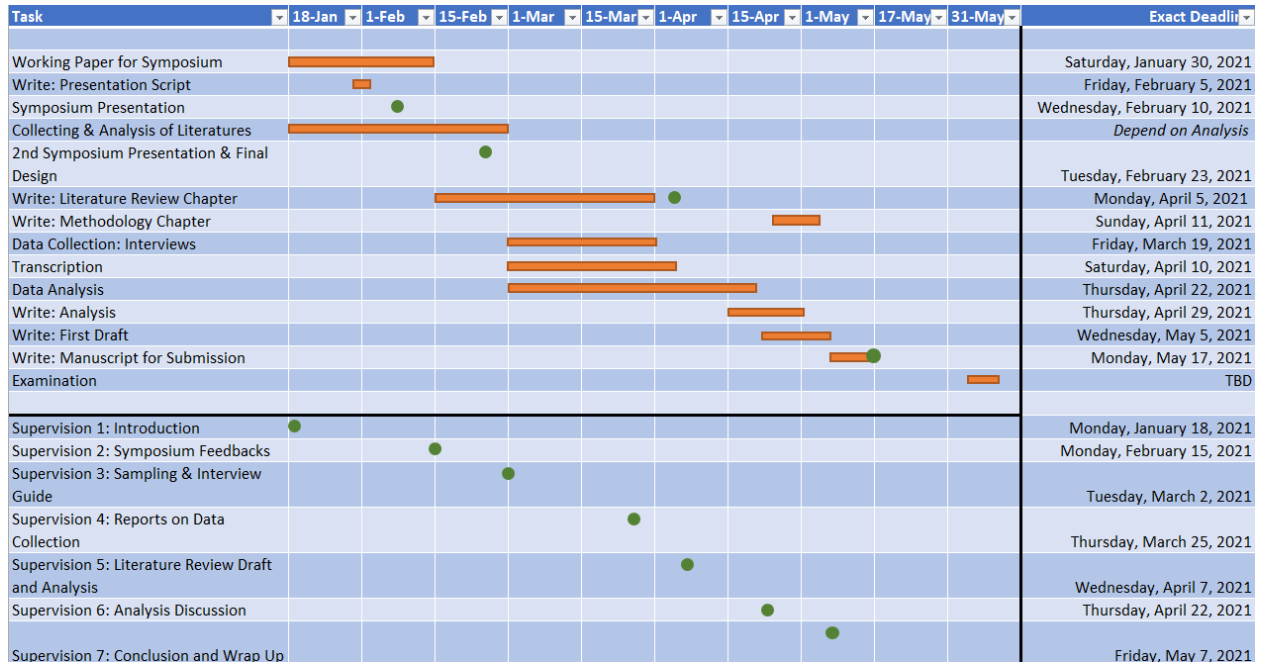


Figure 5: Research timeline and key dates. Screenshot from researcher's computer. May 11, 2021.

Appendix II: Invitation Letter and Informed Consent Form

Subject Line: Is LinkedIn the future?

Hello,

My name is Long Nguyen. I'm a master student at the Media and Communication Programme at the Department of Communication and Media, Faculty of Social Sciences, Lund University, Sweden.

I'm currently conducting a master thesis project on young adult's activities of LinkedIn and their transition from higher education to the world of work. The aim is to gain an understanding into the thoughts, feelings, and consciousness of university students regarding their self-branding and networking practices on LinkedIn within their current stage of life.

I would like to interview you for this research if you match the following criteria:

1. You are a university student, graduating within 2 years.
2. You use LinkedIn actively and frequently. This might include:
 - a. You go on the platform every week.
 - b. You engage with the contents & functions of the platform.
 - c. You post contents on the platform.

The interview will be conducted online through Zoom or Skype. I expect the conversation to last from 45 minutes to 75 minutes.

You will be asked a series of questions about your backgrounds, your LinkedIn profile, your experiences with the platform, and how you reflect on these experiences. You will also be asked to share your LinkedIn profile with the researcher during the interview. All information shared will be kept confidential and will remain anonymous in the published work that results from this research.

Thanks so much for your time!

Long Nguyen.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. Please accept this form as an official invitation to participate in an interview as discussed in our previous communication(s). The purpose of this form is to provide you with the information about your involvement and your rights as a participant of this research.

The 2008 financial crisis marked the turning point by which perpetual crisis and uncertainty come to be the norms of global capitalism. More than any one, young people are directly experiencing these conditions in their daily lives. Amidst this context, a plethora of digital communication technology have proliferated with their own promised solutions for these problems of the future. Using the case study of LinkedIn, this thesis project seeks to better understand the work that young adults do on the platforms as they approach the transition to the world of work, their reflections and conscious regarding this mode of online activity, and the sociological significance of it.

Your participation in this study will consist of an online, one-on-one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to 75 minutes. The chosen platform for the interview is Zoom. You can choose whether or not to use a webcam. During the interview, you will also be invited to use the “Share Screen” function of Zoom to show the researcher your LinkedIn profile.

During this interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your education backgrounds, your LinkedIn profile, your activities and experiences with the platform, and how you reflect on these experiences. Your participation remains entirely voluntary at any stage of the interview. You have the right to pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation.

The interview will be audio and video recorded through Zoom’s recording function. The digital copy of both this recording and the subsequent transcription (carried out by the researcher) will be securely stored on the researcher’s computer. The transcription can be provided to you per your request.

All of your information and interview responses will be kept confidential. All real names and identifying information acquired in this interview (of you and other LinkedIn users) will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research and will be permanently deleted after the completion of the research.

For any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the researcher at: ****@student.lu.se, or through the messaging platforms where we first established communication. You may also contact my thesis supervisor at the Department of Communication and Media, Lund University using the following contact information: ****@kom.lu.se

Please save a copy of this letter for your future reference. If wished, you may also request a digital copy of the finished manuscript from the researcher, to be delivered by the end of May, 2021. At the beginning of our interview, you will also be requested to read out loud the section below as a form of vocal consent.

SIGNATURE

By signing this consent form, I certify that, I [Your Full Name], understand and agree to the terms of this agreement.

Date: [Today’s Date]

Appendix III: Interview Guide

Interview Guide 3.0

Part 0: Explanation about the research:

1. Greetings.
2. Introduction to the interview.
3. Brief on informed consent and participants' rights.
4. Acquire vocal consent: "Since I've already received your written consent, for now, I just need to quickly acquire your vocal consent. If you could please read the signature of part of the consent form out loud after the question that I ask:

Do you confirm that you understand and agree to the terms of this agreement as indicated in the consent form?"

Part 1: Background Information

1. What motivated you to choose your current education? **Do you have a vision of what your life will be like when you graduate?**
2. How do you finance your education and the daily expenses related to it? Is it the norm for the students in your school & programme?
3. **Do you have any work or intern experiences?**
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. Were they paid?

Part 2: LinkedIn Usage:

1. **How long have you been active on LinkedIn?**
2. **How did you first encounter LinkedIn?**
 - a. Describe the circumstances.
 - b. What motivated you to join?
3. **How often do you go on LinkedIn?**
 - a. Describe the circumstances during which you would use the platform during your daily life.
 - b. Would you say that you have a routine regarding LinkedIn?
4. **What kind of activities do you often spend your time doing?**

- a. What are the motivations behind these activities?
5. Do you tend to use LinkedIn more actively during a particular time period? If yes, describe them.
 - a. How does it differ to how you use it on regular days?

Part 3: LinkedIn Persona:

1. **On Instagram, you produce photos, videos, stories, what would be the equivalent for LinkedIn?**
2. **What do you do to ensure you have the best profile possible on LinkedIn?** (Ask to share screen)
 - a. What kind of efforts go into making these decisions?
3. **What kind of messages do you hope to convey to people who visit your profile?** (Ask to share screen)
 - a. How do you know if the impression you are trying to convey is accurately received by the observers?
 - b. Do you ever feel anxious about what other might think of you through your LinkedIn profile? If yes, what do you do to minimize this?
4. **What are the necessary resources that a university student needs to use LinkedIn effectively?**
 - a. **Where do these resources come about?**
 - b. Do you subscribe to LinkedIn Premium? How come?
 - c. Do you take courses, seminars, read books and articles on how to use LinkedIn? Describe them.
5. With all these activities on LinkedIn, would you describe yourself as a product on a marketplace? (If participants mention the ideas of “selling oneself” or “advertising oneself”)
6. **What do you hope to get out from your time on LinkedIn?**
 - a. So far, would you say that you have been able to achieve this?
7. How much do you identified with your LinkedIn version of yourself?

Part 4: The Network and The Community

1. **Do you network on LinkedIn? What goes into this process?**
2. **How would you describe the people you have in your network and your relationship with them?**
 - a. Do you feel a sense of equality and solidarity with people in your network? Or is it hierarchical and competitive?
3. **What kinds of values does the network create for you? What about the network as a whole?**
4. **Can you describe the rules or norms that regulate users' conduct on LinkedIn, either explicit or implicit?**
 - a. What will happen if you break these rules?

Part 5: The Self, Education, Future, and the Role of LinkedIn

1. **Scholars observe that LinkedIn is playing a prominent role as a bridge between higher education and the working life.** For example, universities are incorporating LinkedIn into their curriculum or extracurricular activities.
 - a. Have you encountered this during your time in university?
 - b. **What do you think about the existence of platforms like LinkedIn in the life of young students these days?** How important it is that young people should have a presence on LinkedIn these days?
2. **Do you think that the skills and qualifications obtained in higher education are becoming irrelevant with the presence of LinkedIn?**
3. **Would you say that platforms like LinkedIn is erasing the traditional boundaries of what we usually call “the job market”?**
 - a. What are the implications for young students like yourself?
4. **What do you think about your own quality as a person before and after using LinkedIn?**
 - a. How would you compare yourself to your peers on LinkedIn?
 - b. Do you think the categories on LinkedIn is an accurate representation of your qualities?
5. **As declared in their blog post, the core issue that LinkedIn tries to is “the network gap”,** in that people with equal talents are not having the same access to opportunities

because of their lack of network. One solution that LinkedIn promotes is called the *Plus One Pledge*, in which members are asked to share their time, talent, or connections with someone outside of their network whom they wouldn't normally interact with. Based on your experiences:

- a. Do you think this a problem for young people like yourself?
- b. Would you say that the spirit of the Plus One Pledge is what you can feel in your LinkedIn experiences?

6. Do you envision a moment when you would stop using LinkedIn for good? How would that come about?

- a. Have you ever attempted to stop using LinkedIn or limited your LinkedIn use? What was the circumstance?

7. How much do you feel like you are in control when you use LinkedIn?

8. Do you know about the business model of LinkedIn?

- a. (Show screen cap of business model in Komljenovic 2019). I would like to share with you a table from a study into LinkedIn's business model by Janja Komljenovic in 2019. In this table, the author describes the different features that comprise of LinkedIn's business model. Here, on the left, we have the "Free Solutions", which are what we would normally interact with when we go on that platform: the social media and the job pages, for example. On the right, we have the "Monetised Solutions". So, for example, we have the Premium Subscription. Then, we have the Advertisement, which are similar to what we have on Facebook or Instagram. Lastly, there are the Talent Solutions, which are the main source of income for LinkedIn. These are business solutions that cater toward recruiters from companies that are looking for employees, allowing them to post jobs or access the user's database to look for the right candidate. The author argues that: "LinkedIn constructs its platform in order to sell user data for the labour market in various repackaged form."
- b. According to Microsoft, in 2020, the revenue of LinkedIn was 8 billion dollars, which was an increase of over 1.3 billion dollar compared to 2019.
- c. **Do you ever feel worried about your privacy and the data you produce on LinkedIn?**

- d. **Do you think that Microsoft is taking advantage of or exploiting the work you do on LinkedIn?**

Ending: Is there anything else you want to add? You can contact me if you have any question at:

****@student.lu.se

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