WE ARE ONE:

“How geographically distributed members of a volunteer youth organisation form online networks through digital communication”

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“Society is not some grand abstraction, my friends. It’s just us. It’s the words we use, which are the thoughts we have, which determine the actions we take.”

– Umair Haque
Abstract

In this research study, the effects of digital communication platforms will show how geographically distributed members are developing the online network of the Erasmus Student Network. This research used a cross-cultural perspective on the network society and the actor-network theory. Qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups have been used to conduct a small-scale empirical study. A diverse range of communication methods such as text, audio, and video have been analysed through three different communication platforms: Slack, Google Meet and Facebook Messenger. The acquired data of twelve members of the organisation gave an insight into the values and motives of volunteers within the digitised spaces of ESN which dictates their rules of performance, interaction, and sociality within the online networks. The digital communication platforms that make up the online networks of the organisation have been identified as a complex large-scale social and socio-technical system which imposes challenges on its members such as the lack of privacy and constant connectedness. In conclusion, it is recommended for the members of ESN to strive to create their digital platforms to be able to foster their social to take care of their well-being.

Key words: digital communication, video conferencing, audio conferencing, connectivity, culture, online network, Erasmus Student Network, geographically distributed members
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1. Introduction

With an average annual growth rate of 12% the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is expanding over the continent in an incredible speed and is as of today the biggest student organisation in Europe. At this moment, around 13,000 active members are working on a voluntary basis in 40 countries offering services to 350,000 students and collaborating with more than 1,000 higher education institutions (www.esn.org. Accessed 04.06.2019). The network stretches out beyond physical space as the activity of ESN members can be observed through digital communication platforms by sharing images, text, audio and video.

The need to study the shaping of online networks within ESN is to actively contribute to the understanding of how voluntary youth organisations are evolving through digital spaces to be able to contribute to the enrichment of society. By vigorously inquiring data on the impact and development of such organisations I have sadly come to the conclusion that little to no attention has been paid by scholars on this subject. ESN is penetrating the fabrics of everyday life through engagement with the European Union in numerous projects to improve education and mobility of youth in Europe as well as leading trainings for future global leaders in the field of education in Southeast Asia (Annual Report 2018/19. https://esn.org. Accessed 29.08.2019). Here, I want to raise attention to the challenges of geographically distributed ESN members to assemble and maintain a functioning network which expands over nearly the entire continent and beyond. An interesting perspective would be to investigate the role of digital communication in the development of online voluntary youth networks. To understand what drives ESN members to shift focus from participating in physical spaces to participating in digitized spaces attention should be paid to the rules of performance and interaction, the boundaries of time and space and the role of motivation and feeling of belonging to an organisation.

To make a start, we have to study the ESN culture as a set of values to understand what motivates the behaviour of its members (Castells, 2004). Furthermore, to discern the role of digital communication on the shaping of interaction between geographically distributed members of the organisation it will be of importance to critically analyse the limitations and possibilities of the features of communication platforms. The focus will mainly be on digital communication platforms which convey synchronous information through video, audio and text.
such as Google Meet and Facebook Messenger as these are the most commonly used methods of interaction within the online networks of ESN.

Therefore, the aim of this research will be to answer the following question: **What role does digital communication between geographically distributed members play in the development of online networks of the Erasmus Student Network?**

To support this aim, the following sub-questions have been constructed:

- **What are the rules of performance, interaction, and sociality that contribute to the shaping of online networks within ESN?**
- **What kind of values motivate the geographically distributed members to perform within the digitized spaces of the online networks of ESN?**
- **What are the challenges imposed by digital communication platforms when it comes to the development of online networks of ESN?**

This research will be conducted by using a cross-cultural perspective on the network society (Castells, 2004) and the actor-network theory (Van Dijck, 2013). For this research, qualitative research methods will be used, such as interviews and focus groups, to conduct a small-scale empirical study. By using multiple methods the rigor of my analysis will be increased, which will be important for the development of in-depth understanding of social experience (Brennen, 2012). Through my work and strong connections in the organisation there is a wide scale of valuable data and human resources available to conduct a study which can offer support to the growth of ESN and contribute to future research in the field of strategic communication within voluntary youth organisations.
2. Background / Context

For the past three years, my active involvement in the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) has been in the field of communication as the Communication Manager for the branch in Sweden. The main goal of ESN is to work in the interest of international students to create a more mobile and flexible education environment and enhance the intercultural experience of studying abroad as well as students who do not have the possibility to have an intercultural experience abroad (https://esn.org. Accessed 29.08.2019). Services for international students include 1.) providing relevant information about mobility programmes, 2.) representing the needs and rights of international students on the local, national, and international level through lobbying at governmental and educational institutions, and 3.) providing knowledge and tools to local members of the organisation to support social integration of international students as well as reintegration of homecoming students. The dissemination of information and coordination of volunteers occurs through online as well as offline platforms. Online platforms being Facebook, Messenger, Gmail, Google Meet and Slack. Whereas offline platforms, or physical environments, being local, national and international conferences and events. Working on a day to day basis with multicultural individuals across the globe without being bound to time and space have not only been a great demonstration of how media and communication can shape cultures within digital spaces. It has also provided an insight into how individuals have found a sense of belonging in a digital community on a global level through the online networks of ESN. An example of this is the internal Facebook group ‘ESN couchsurfing and accommodation’ where members of ESN can request a sleeping place or a casual hang out anywhere in the world (see figure 2).

![ESN Couchsurfing & Accommodation](https://example.com/image.jpg)

Figure 2: ESN Couchsurfing & Accommodation, Internal Facebook group for ESN members (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)
Furthermore, internal Facebook groups centered around career and job opportunities of ESN members exist for current or alumni members to announce open calls specifically targeted to individuals with a background in working for the organisation (see figure 3).

![Figure 3: Jobs for ESNers, internal Facebook group for ESN members (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)](image)

Finally, the third and most active internal Facebook group within the organisation is the ESN International (informal) group. With the largest volume in members this group contains data on various topics with the aim to inform, connect, recruit and inspire the members of the organisation (see figure 4). Important to note here is that all three Facebook groups are closed groups, meaning that individuals have to be invited and accepted to be able to participate in these online networks.

![Figure 4: ESN International (informal), internal Facebook group for ESN members (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)](image)
New year, new opportunities:
Maybe you will be the next Coordinator in ICE!
We are looking for:
- Advocacy & Knowledge coordinator
- Erasmus Programme 2021/2027 coordinator
- Skills and Employability coordinator
- Sustainable Development Goals coordinator
- Youth Engagement coordinator
This call is open to all ESNers who are looking for a new challenge! Find out more below.

Figure 5: Example of a recruitment post in ESN International (informal) (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)

ITALIAN TRAINING SCHOOL, 25-27 of October. Do you have questions about Italy and the Italians? This could be your opportunity: you can be Trainer at the National Training Event of ESN Italy! It will be in Genova from 25th to 27th of October, the region of Pesto and 5 Terre. But don't expect just pasta and mare, you will find tons of Italian ESNers eager to learn from you! So, don't lose this opportunity and apply, as usual, fill in the form: [https://forms.gle/CY6TozTs2UT3rw8s9] Deadline 27th of August. Ciao!

Figure 6: Example of an open call for internal trainers in ESN International (informal) (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)
Figure 7: Example of a member asking for inspiration and ideas in ESN International (informal) (source: [Facebook.com](http://Facebook.com). Accessed 30.08.2019)

Hello amazingly beautiful humans,
I am on a quest to organize a Gala event/night in Denmark where we appreciate our volunteers, our fellow board members and all the people that make things happen for international students.
I know there are tons of good examples in our network, but where do I find them all? 😊😊
Here is where you can contribute with tagging the people that could share their know-how and expertise with a newbie like me 😊😊
I am looking forward to see many cool names getting tagged willing to help the viking.

Cheers

Figure 8: Example of a member disseminating information regarding policies in ESN International (informal) (source: [Facebook.com](http://Facebook.com). Accessed 30.08.2019)

Money, money, money - but where does it come from and where does it go?
Big question, big answers are ahead of you 😊.

- ESN International Committee for Education
  August 15 at 10:46 AM
  Ever heard about the Investment Plan? It's worth knowing how 500 billion Euro shall be mobilised by 2020 and invested in European Education!
  https://drive.google.com/open...
Besides the three internal Facebook groups targeted at all of the members of the organisation each country, city and field of interest have their own closed Facebook group with the purpose of publicizing information concerning ESN members within their own online network (see figure 11). Individuals are able to join any group of their liking, however, requests are reviewed and accepted by admins with their own set of rules. Important to note is that the exact amount of numbers of these subgroups is unknown as there are no actual documents that list their
existence. Here, individuals have to be either invited or ‘accidentally’ stumbled upon through the ‘suggested groups’ box on the left side of the Facebook page.

![Example of subgroups displayed in the ‘suggested groups’ box on Facebook.](source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)

Figure 11: Example of subgroups displayed in the ‘suggested groups’ box on Facebook. (source: Facebook.com. Accessed 30.08.2019)

Nonetheless, Facebook is not the only communication platform for data sharing and connecting individuals in a designated digital space. Gmail by Google is used on a frequent basis to provide all the members of the organisation with relevant data and documents as well as registration links to international, national and local physical events. The data in the mailing list is similar to the data in the Facebook groups, albeit packed with more detailed information and documents. Members who join the organisation are able to request their own personal ESN mailaddress which they are able to use to sign up for internal mailing lists to be able participate in the online data exchange within the network. Each way of communication affects the social fabric of the society in its own way (Walther, p.5., 1996). Applying this thought to the way geographically distributed members are building or deconstructing the online networks of ESN through connective media we can assess the influence of platforms such as Google and Facebook.

Here, the actor-network theory (ANT) as adapted by Van Dijck’ (2013) will support the research by concentrating on the co-evolvement of people and technologies, specifically by mapping and explaining their relations (p.26., 2013). By dissembling platforms into microsystems and focusing on the techno-cultural and socioeconomic structures, it will be easier to connect one single platform to the larger ecosystem of connective media (p.28., 2013). The actors that will aid the techno-cultural structure are ‘technology’, ‘users/usage’ and ‘content’. Here, technological platforms are viewed as a performative stage where social acts are shaped instead of facilitated (p.29., 2013). This is done by reviewing their technological features and to what extent the users are in control of their own activity and produced content. Equally important is the analysis of ‘business models’, ‘governance’ and ‘ownership’ of the
socioeconomic structure of technologies (p.36., 2013). Unravelling the ownership status to reveal who controls the social processes may tell us something about the intentions of the platforms’ operational management (p.37., 2013). Once that is clear a close observation to see how control is performed and governed through the platform will affirm how users are controlled and thus their activity, relations and interaction with others (p.38., 2013). All in all, the need to view the user responses in this entire process will be of help to understand how they are making the decision to use a specific platform or service even when they know they are being exploited for profit (p.41., 2013). In the end, knowing whoever holds power, is knowing whom determines the value(s) in the network society (Castells, p.37., 2004). However, the technological aspect is not enough to understand the motivation of volunteers to participate in these digital spaces and therefore the goals and rules of performance have to be appraised.

According to Castells (2004) the nature of a network (the unit) is defined by its goals and rules of program, which are constructed by communicators (the nodes within the unit) through processed flows of information (p.1., 2004). Taking into consideration that the online networks of ESN have a variety of communication technologies available that shrinks time and space, the members are able to receive and process information from different cultures and societies within instance. Thus, the definition of the network is defined by input from human experience on the local level that is contributing to the networks’ goals on a global scale through online communication. Castells provides a clear understanding on the basic construction of a network. However, the effects of communication technologies on intercultural interactions and relations between geographically distributed members of ESN should be observed in greater detail to understand how the online networks are used to sustain the organisation. First, an explanation of the structure of the network will be given to give insight into the construction of the network of ESN (see figure 12).
The structure of the organisation is based on a federal government system which divides the power between a strong national governmental body and smaller local governmental bodies (http://wikipedia.org. Accessed 28.08.2019). To start dissecting the vertical organizational structure of ESN attention should be paid to the local level which consists of more than 500 sections operating in 40 countries. These local sections conduct voluntary work mostly in the physical space as they offer services and organise activities for international and homecoming exchange students. The experience and knowledge accumulated at this level is subsequently shared through online platforms such as internal Facebook groups. When it comes to the decision making power within the organisation the local level does not have voting powers, yet, it is able to express their thoughts and opinions through digital communication channels and physical communication channels such as conferences. The local level does have the power to elect the National Board on the national level, which chooses a representative of the country to hold the voting power to make decisions within the organisation. The National Board, or National Organisation, is able to vote on matters such as structural changes, changes in strategies of the organisation, approve budgets and elect the International Board who represents the organisation towards international institutions and stakeholders. On the
international level, strategies for the entire organisation are being constituted and subsequently voted upon by the representatives of the National Boards of all the 40 countries during the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Through this system, input consisting of values and cultures is travelling from the local level to the national level to the international level to be contributed to the overall growth of the organisation. To understand the input of time and energy for the purpose of maintaining the existence of the organisation a closer look into the motivation of voluntary youth is of importance.

As the members of ESN work on a voluntary basis this means that their drive and commitment towards the organisation differs from the one paid employees have. Boezemans and Ellemers suggest that when voluntary organisations successfully manage to convey information about the importance of voluntary work and a sense of emotion and task-support for its members, they are more likely to develop a strong notion of pride and respect which enhances their commitment to the organisation (p.169., 2008). The notion of pride and respect have been connected to two types of commitments in aiding the understanding of why volunteer workers tend to go the extra mile for their organisation. Here, the notion of pride is mostly being induced by normative commitments (feeling of responsibility) and the enhancement of respect comes from affective commitments (sense of emotional attachment) (Boezemans and Ellemers, p.161., 2008). By carefully examining the drive behind the work of the members of ESN we can lay out a basis for understanding the structure of the network and what defines its program, values, goals and rules of performance. All things considered, understanding of the constituting powers of the organisation, the motivation behind voluntary youth work and the use of connective media between the geographically distributed members provides a starting point to conduct an investigation into the role of digital communication and its influence on the development of the online networks of ESN.
3. Literature review

The scientific literature used in this study has been selected based on its academic relevance to my research topic with careful consideration of the publication dates. It is noticeable that most study papers are from the 90s and early 00s, as one would analyse perhaps the topic was most relevant during those years. When looking for later publications they slowly decline in numbers and make room for more progressive themes such as augmented and virtual reality. A sign that research is moving away from studying video-mediated communication and moving slowly into a new realm. Nonetheless, it is a worthy try to dig once again in this topic in the search for new revelations as the world of then is not the world of today.

3.1. Anthropology of online communities

By diving into the literature on the formation of online communities I have stumbled upon pages of articles and scholars who all were driven by the curiosity of the new technology that was bringing individuals across the globe together in one digital space: the Internet. Most relevant studies, that I will elaborate on in this chapter, come from the nineties and the early 2000s that mention the Internet as a playground of possibilities. Here it is worthy to mention that when going through the many available literature regarding the formation of online communities scholars have been looking at computer-mediated communication. Formation of online communities through video-mediated communication was on the other hand more scarce and generally found in studies with a focus on technology as a tool to enhance teamwork in corporations and organisation. The sociocultural focus on digital societies through computer-mediated communication was widely more researched than video-mediated communication. However, we should not only focus on the technological features of the platforms and how they shape society but also take into consideration the human nature and its motivation to be part of online communities.

Literature with a focus from the field of anthropology on the formation of online communities enables the investigation of sociocultural studies of online communication within a rapidly changing context. The research of the anthropology of online communities, as provided by Wilson and Peterson (2002), suggests that anthropological methodologies are a great way to study cross-cultural, multi-leveled, and multi-sited phenomena which embody a culturally embedded nature of emerging communicative and social practices (p.450., 2002). An exciting
and relevant finding here is that the Internet provides opportunities for communities and groups to adapt old forms of communication to new technology, suggesting that the shared values of networks constitute technology and not the other way around. However, it is important to be cautious as computers are cultural products developed for a world ruled by social and political norms (462., 2002). Attention should be paid to the power that constitutes these rules and norms; their influence in the formation of online networks should not be underestimated, regardless of the fact that the literature of Wilson and Peterson (2002) is based on a limited availability of anthropological research focused on the understanding of new communication technologies on human interaction and sociability, because it was written in a time when the Internet was still in a period of innovation, experimentation, and rapid change (p.461., 2002). It is relevant when studying an organisation consisting of geographically dispersed individuals in 40 countries across Europe as it is important to study the cultural influence on the formation of the online network within the organisation. Wilson and Petersons’ study provides relevant views on the construction of identity, social interactions, and collective action (p.461., 2002) and at the same time raises awareness on the potential powers of those who create the rules of interaction by deploying features through online connective platforms. Same concerns have been raised in Jones (1998). He argues that there is great potential for the online networks to form and visit digital spaces of their own desire. However, the computers’ functionality does not only give opportunities but also imposes challenges for others to create these desires for us (p.30., 1998). In addition, Jones describes the phenomenon of the formation of electronic and non-electronic communities through computer-mediated communication as a formation of community through the ritual sharing of information (p.16., 1998). Here, he raises a relevant note that in the end the computers are the ones that are linking communities through various types of information. This is a worthy insight when analysing allocation of power in the construction of the values of online networks, as it will be important to consider the programmers behind the connective media which the members of ESN use on their digital devices. As Castells (2004) states, whoever holds the power, decides the values of a network.

To build upon the power of technology, Stehr concludes in his study on societal transformations and knowledge society that present-day social systems become fragile through human conduct and the use of computers to penetrate through the social fabric of society (p.149., 2007). According to this study, the more complex large-scale social and socio-technical systems we construct the more risks and vulnerabilities are created. Here, the drive to communicate for the
sake of communication (Castells 2004) could be key to connect the dependency on digital technology of the dispersed ESN members to communicate and form social systems. If the values and identities of the online communities are at risk of being influenced by the programmers behind digital devices and connective media platforms, then what drives these individuals to participate on these platforms? To support this, a look into Matzat's (2010) study on how relations offline affect relations online among members of knowledge-sharing online communities sheds a valuable perspective on the risks and failures related to sociability in online communities and how activities in the offline world can make an impact on that. The foundings in this study claim that compared with purely virtual communities, mixed communities with a higher density of offline members offer certain advantages with respect to sociability (p.1187., 2010). This concerns the application of social control encouraging the sense of trust by developing similar interests and coordinating actions when overstepping communal boundaries and rules. This could be an indication as to why the members of ESN are willing to rely on potential fragile online social systems and is worthy of consideration. That the local offline world and global online world can either enhance or attenuate each other should be taken into account. This means to not only view new technology as something that is black or white but as something that is rather more fluid and adaptable to human circumstances. This will help my research to be more aware of biases that might exist towards the role of digital communication within ESN.

3.2. The roles of digital communication

As an emerging technology there is no shortage of literature on this topic. However, on a critical note, in Jones’ study (1998) a warning is given that research on computer-mediated communication is prone to fueling biases as it takes on an organizational perspective. This perspective assumes that distance and space are to be overcome and controlled by the technology, thus disregarding that the individual is to control them (p.26., 1998). By observing several studies I found that this note not only applies to computer-mediated communication but also to video-mediated communication. The findings in Walther’s (1996) research on how computer-mediated communication enhances impressions and interpersonal relations suggest that this type of communication allows individuals to communicate as they desire. Meaning, that computer-mediated communication is merely an opportunity for humans to selectively minimize
or maximize interpersonal effects (p.33., 1996). This proposes that online networks are in control of interaction through connective media. When it comes to video-mediated communication, it is a viable replacement option for audio-mediated communication for the purpose of building relations as is transmits more social cues. However, it is unable to replace computer-mediated communication when it comes to task-related functions (Walther. P32., 1996). This suggests that the limitations and opportunities of the digital communication channels used within the online networks of ESN should be examined based on the aim of the users.

When observing studies centered around the role of audio-visual communication the goal seems to be to investigate the influence of technology on the performance rate of individuals. This trend could be explained due to the growing popularity of the Internet and mobile communication devices through which video-mediated communication continued to advance as a medium (Fullwood and Finn 2010). When it comes to audio-mediated communication, it is being regarded as a lesser communication method in comparison to video-mediated or computer-mediated communication due to the absence of visual social cues (Isaacs and Tang 1994, Walther 1998). In Anderson et al. (2007) geographically distributed participants were examined on how technology such as video conferencing influences the communication within the company they worked for. Same as with Isaacs and Tang (1994), Straus and McGrath (1994) and Chidambram and Jones (1993), their studies, however, provide a comparison between video-mediated communication and face-to-face communication with a focus on the benefits of audio-visual interaction systems. Benefits include, instant communication capabilities to help coordinate dispersed activities and individuals (Chidambaram and Jones 1993) and enhancement of nonverbal information and verbal descriptions (Isaacs and Tang 1994). Results often direct the reader in thinking how video-mediated communication can be used for specific task-oriented situations within an organizational environment by mimicking certain features of face-to-face communication. Yet, the key findings in Straus and McGrath (1994) conclude that designing technical systems without regard for the social systems in which they are embedded shows negative effects on work-group functioning (p.95., 1994). There are scholars who have been researching the potential negative effects of video-mediated communication on social systems and warn the reader to be cautious when applying such technologies to their everyday work (Hinds 1999, Fullwood 2007). However, experiments where the outcome of video-mediated communication through visual category cues was experienced negatively dealt
with a staged one-to-one verbal task with limited two-way interaction, one can think of an interview for example (Hinds 1999).

As several studies examined, video-mediated communication is indeed less favourable than face-to-face communication through distorted non-verbal cues and an unconscious image formation but only in specific situations (Fullwood and Finn 2010, Straus and McGrath 1994). Therefore, notes of caution apply when reading such results as manipulated laboratory experiments do not represent real life situations; it is recommended to examine the impact of video-mediated communication in more realistic settings (Chidambram and Jones 1993, Fullwood 2006, Anderson et al. 2007, Isaacs and Tang 1994). Walther (1996) suggests that to achieve this kind of realism we should study the continual use of digital communication within the same group of individuals, because the frequency of usage shows the difference in impact on the establishment of relations. One specific research that connects well here is by Anderson (2006) and his point on the ‘principle of justification’. Implications of this principle are that individuals spend considerable effort to find a shared basis for their common ground, which in turn has an impact on their language use (p.276., 2006). What is interesting here is that this research shows that subtle ways of communication between speakers and listeners can achieve mutual understanding through collaboration. This can be done by the individuals themselves through altering their referring expressions to accommodate to the perceived expertise of the ones they are communicating with or to their shared communicative experience (p.251., p.252., 2006). Comprehending how ESN members understand the roles of digital communication could provide an insight into how they systematically choose to include or exclude certain types of interactive technologies to achieve the desired form of interaction. Here, it will be important to find an existing group of individuals within the network and collect data based on their real life experiences with the focus on the extent in which virtualness affects virtual team functioning (Anderson et al. 2007).
3.3. Global virtual teams in organisations

Before investigating literature on global virtual teams it is important to understand what a virtual organisation is and how it differs from other organisations who have a network structure and use communication technologies to interact over distance and time. According to Tamošiūnaitė (2011) virtual organisations consist of groups or individuals who without time or space hindrances communicate through communication technologies to reach a common goal unlike networked organisation who are more flexible and consist of workers who are not bound to structure, time or space while communicating their duties (p.57., 2011) Taking this as the starting point of my search for studies the focus will be on ESN as a virtual organisation due to its complex internal structure of individuals or groups that exist for the purpose of executing their tasks to reach a common goal as observed in the ESN Annual Report 2018/19 (esn.org. Accessed 15.07.2019). Diving into the literature regarding global virtual teams in organisations there is a critical note that should be considered. Mainly that most of the analysed literature is written to contribute to the field of organisational management with a focus on finding methods or solutions to improve teamwork within global virtual teams that exist within organisations (Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1999, Wiesenfeld et al. 1999, Maznevski and Chudoba 2000, Pauleen and Yoong 2001, Chudoba et al. 2005, DeSanctis and Monge 1999, Baker 2002). Nevertheless, there are elements that are applicable to my research as certain studies tap into topics which contribute to the understanding of how global virtual teams within virtual organisations create online networks. The study by Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) taps into the cultural backgrounds of global virtual team members and how the differences influence the generation of trust and therefore performance and interaction. This study also speculates that interchanging regular, intense face-to-face meetings with shorter interactions through various media affects the effectiveness of interaction between global virtual team members (p.489., 2000). Combining these two learnings could help gaining perceptivity on how the physical spaces on the local level of ESN play a role in shaping a global culture in the digital spaces of the organisation. Research by Chudo et al. (2005) and O’Leary and Cummings (2007) who measure the cultural and geographical impact on virtual teamwork indicates certain pointers which leave an impact on a global organisation. A variety of practices such as cultural and work process diversity need to be taken into account (Chudo et al. 2005). Also important is the impact of technology on geographic dispersion (O’Leary and Cummings 2007). The advantage is that all of the elements...
can be credibly measured within the field of experience of an individual. However, the disadvantage that I see here is the danger to categorize personal experiences in either ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ leaving little room for objectivity. As mentioned by Ahuja and Carley (1999) and DeSanctis and Monge (1999), new theories have to be developed to explain the objective performance of ESN members within the virtual teams and/or communities of the organisation. Another point to consider is to use research methods which study the virtual teams in their natural environment instead of a controlled laboratory setting (Ahuja and Carley 1999, DeSanctis and Monge 1999, Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1999, Maznevski and Chudoba 2000, Chudoba et al. 2005). Potter and Balthazard (2002) who use a controlled setting to analyse the interaction styles of virtual teams also conclude that shaping teams specially for research purposes creates limitations as they do not represent real teams (Potter and Balthazard 2002). They conclude that different cultural groups may hold different norms concerning communication behavior and temporary formed teams limit the possibility to observe how teams interact over a long period of time. It would therefore be beneficial to continue in the same trend of research and focus on studying existing individuals within virtual teams. Other issues and limitations were found in the work of Ahuja and Carley (1999) who could explain how the performance of members of a virtual organisation are affected by task routineness but not the actual performance of the organisation. This means that empirical measurements of the communication structure and content of communication among virtual team members is not enough to explain the overall performance of a virtual organisation. However, most of the articles have used empirical measurements in their research and do not claim such limitations. Therefore, I conclude that the circumstances in which the studies have been conducted should all be reviewed individually before applying to my own research results.

3.4. Volunteer youth organizations

As ESN is a volunteer youth organisation (esn.org. Accessed 15-07-2019) it is only logical to conduct an investigation whether this characteristic of the organisation might affect the research results. After digging into a search for studies on volunteer youth organisations some disappointing conclusions have to be made, namely that there is a lack of sources and scholars who conducted research in the area of volunteer youth organisations. Therefore, I had to look at theories who came as close as possible to the theme of my research. As my goal was to
understand the structure and behaviour of volunteers from youth organisations I have analysed the work of Cornelis et al. (2013), a study which examines the impact of motivation on youth volunteer behaviour and satisfaction. The results of this study indicate that altruism is one of the main motives of community involvement, orientated around helping others (p.459., 2013). Another strong motive to participate in voluntary youth organisations was the self-orientated motive such as personal development (p.546., 2013). Strong correlations are found between this study and that of Boezemans and Ellemers (2008). In this study the volunteers are analysed based on what they perceived as being an important drive behind their dedication to their work and organisation, namely pride and respect. Here, pride connects to other-oriented motives as it is being induced by the feeling of being responsible for the growth of the organisation. Per contra, the notion of respect connects to self-oriented motives such as anticipated praise and recognition of the value of their work. Even though the study has practical purposes within the field of organisation management it provides a rich source for understanding human activity and interaction within a voluntary organisation to be applied to understand the commitment of the members of ESN. Last but not least a look into Cravens (2006) who assesses current practices among organisations involving international online volunteers has been considered to gain knowledge on the role of online volunteering in cohesive global community building. However, within the scope of her study, only the organizational tasks and how skills and attributes of volunteers contribute to the success of online volunteering where taken into consideration.
4. Theoretical (analytical) framework

4.1. The network society: a cross-cultural perspective

A cross-cultural perspective, as used to study the network society by Castells (2004), provides an insight into how various geographically distributed actors from different cultural backgrounds are enabling new communication technologies to form sustainable, flexible and expandable global networks. As my research is dealing with communication between people from different countries and cultural understandings such perspective is needed to understand sociocultural influences on interaction within established online networks. From this perspective we study whether available electronic information and communication technologies allow the members of ESN to deploy themselves as a social organisation and stretch the limits of cross-cultural interaction (Castells, p.6., 2004). First, ESN will be analysed as a global digital network as part of a global architecture of self-reconfiguring networks that are constantly being programmed and reprogrammed. As structures express the interests, values, and projects of the actors who produce the structure while being conditioned by it (Castells, p.35., 2004) an analysis on how ESN members from various cultures and countries interact and socialise with each other could shed a light on the geographical conditions that change the program of the network of ESN. This will also provide an insight into how the network of ESN selectively excludes and includes territories, activities, and people that have no or little value for the performance of the tasks assigned to the network (Castells, p.33., 2004). Thus, explaining how the local values of the ESN members shape the global program of the organisation and set the conditions for interaction and their own local activities. Second, the effects of social interaction between geographically distributed members of ESN within the digitised spaces of the organisation will be up for observation, mainly the blurring of sequences of social practices by compressing time and space (Castells, p.40., p.53., 2004). Here, the digitised spaces are the communication platforms wherein the ESN members interact. If according to Castells (2004) time and space express the culture(s) of the network society (p.53., 2004), we can determine how the digital space of digital communication platforms form the values and beliefs of ESN members and why they choose these platforms to express themselves. Finally, as societies are cultural constructs, understanding culture as the set of values and beliefs that inform and motivate people’s behaviour (Castells, p.53., 2004) it will be enlightening to explore how ESN, as a global network,
integrates a multiplicity of cultures. This will lead to a learning about how the organisation as a network is establishing protocols of communication based on the multiplicity of local members.

4.2. Ecosystem of connective media: Actor-network theory

In Van Dijcks’ (2013) study on the culture of connectivity the actor-network theory (ANT) as developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law will be used as the framework of understanding the coevolution of social media platforms and sociality in the context of a rising culture of connectivity. This theory supports a view of platforms as sociotechnical ensembles and performative infrastructures (Van Dijck, p.26., 2013). Looking at the bigger picture, these tech-giants should have goals of their own which they are striving and programming for, looking beyond ESN as their only target group. Ultimately, according to Van Dijck (2013), these choices result in the creation of specific technology which affects the users and their online performance. To discover the stimulus for certain patterns of behaviour and interaction of ESN members all the digital communication platforms used within the online network of the organisation need to be turned inside out. To start with, the platforms will be assessed as techno-cultural constructs which can be divided into three constitutive elements: technology, usage and content. When looking at technology, digital communication platforms that are being used by ESN members will be evaluated based on how much they interfere with their usage through the deployment of algorithms, extraction of (meta)data, regulation of protocols, control of user interface and conformation to the site’s decision architecture. Van Dijck notes here that in line with ANT contentions, technology and user agency can hardly be told apart, given that they are inseparable (p.32., 2013). User agency here means that communication platforms have to be examined whether they stimulate active participation and interaction or whether they control and steer it. This process can be partly traced through explicit user reactions. For my research this means that the real interaction of geographically distributed ESN members as ethnographic subjects has to be analysed to discover how digital communication platforms determine their interaction and sociality or if sociality and interaction shapes digital communication platforms. As the ANT states, it is also important to look at the sharing of content through platforms of connective media as it often tells us what people like and dislike as a way to establish relations and feel connected with others (Van Dijck, p.35., 2013). What first needs to happen here is to establish what counts as content, who owns it and who controls it (Van Dijck, p.36., 2013). In this research that means to detect how geographically distributed ESN
members share and distribute content through digital communication platforms. Whether control of this content is either being performed by programmers or users could determine how and if these platforms govern and shape online sociality. These choices that the owners make could affect the form of the platform and therefore the user experience. Dissecting the operational management of digital communication platforms could provide insights on who controls the social processes of the members of ESN. Once the knowledge is established about who is in control, the next step would be to find out how this control is performed. Looking at the governance of companies and organisations we can identify with what means they are conscious performing control through their platform on ESN members. Most important will be to pinpoint those who can adjust conditions at any time and through what means a site’s governance rules are established or subverted. Yet, does knowing that a platform holds the power of how individuals perform online, interact with communities, socialise with friends and family stop users from logging in? Insights on how ESN members come to the consensus to use platforms knowing that they are trading their private data and granting them total control could provide some learnings regarding their values and needs. Finally, it is important to take note that the model Van Dijck (2013) proposes has its explanatory power no in one of the single constitutive elements, but in the connections between them (p.41., 2013). Therefore, a general view of the big tech players has to be taken into consideration. This to be able to reveal specific patterns in how digital communication platforms and sociality between geographically distributed ESN members mutually constitute each other (Van Dijck, p.43., 2013).
5. Methodology

5.1. Research design and data collection

To achieve satisfying results this research has been developed through the use of qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups. Qualitative research does not provide us with easy answers, however, the results tend to be insightful and fascinating (Brennen, p.1., 2012). Agreeing with this statement, I believe that the truth, though being of course unique, is too complex to be accurately described by a single simple story, and that multiple accounts that claim to be true often contradict each other as individuals and groups experience reality through their own field of experiences (Barnlund, 1970). Therefore, the choice to increase the rigor of my analysis and gain an extensive understanding of the social experiences of individuals and groups hinges on using multiple qualitative research methods (Brennen, 2012). Moreover, I believe that people are open to new interpretations when information improves. For this reason, I have chosen to start with individual interviews in order for the participants to get to know the topic and develop their own ideas. After the interviews the individuals take part in a focus group and get to know other perspectives from where they can either stay with their own opinion or take on a different stance on the topic. Following the constructivism aim of inquiry as Guba and Lincoln (1994) mentioned, the criterion for progress is that over a certain amount of time, everyone will become more aware of the content and meaning of constructions as long as information and sophistication improves. My role as a researcher in this study is to be open, to be observant to new interpretations and to take an objective stance to the information that has been obtained while collecting data. This is needed as the individuals and groups I will be researching are not only part of the same organisation I am working for, but also past and current colleagues. As this raises some ethical questions, such as my objectivity and the influence of my presence on the answers of the participants, I believe that familiarity can create a safe and trusting environment, to improve the quality of the data. A small-scale empirical study consisting of 12 interviews and three focus groups has been conducted within a period of two weeks time to understand the communication process within the ESN network as a means of production based on the discourse of individuals and groups within a specific cultural context (Brennen, p.2., 2012).
5.3. Interviews

When looking for teams within the network of ESN to interview the most important aspects were that 1.) Teams had to consist of three or more individuals, 2.) Teams needed to have worked together for more than three months, and 3.) Teams had to consist of geographically distributed members within the ESN network. Since during the summer period most of the participants were on holidays or simply out of reach I had to work with the available amount of people. Thus, not all members of the team are present. The method of acquiring teams was to use our internal Facebook group for Communication Managers within ESN as the strategy was to find individuals who would be appealed towards the research topic and therefore would be more willing to participate in the study. Unfortunately, nobody replied, which I speculate is due to the summer months. Looking at the short timeline that I had I asked my team members as well as previous team members I have worked with if they would be interested. Here, I was lucky, mainly since the people I contacted were my friends and wanted to help out. Before the interviews, individuals were asked to fill out a form consisting of structured questions for the purpose of gaining factual information to explain behavior within pre-established categories (Brennen, p.27., 2012). See Appendix 1 for an example of the questions. In this form, the individuals were informed about their right of privacy and acknowledge the use of their data. Individuals also got a quick briefing before the start of the research about the purpose of the study and about terms such as ‘video-mediated communication’ and ‘video conferencing platforms’. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were conducted through Google Meet. Due to the bad internet connection we only used audio. As I was striving to understand the meanings of opinions and interests in the lives of the individuals I have chosen to go for the flexibility of a semi-structured interview. Here, I allowed myself the freedom to ask follow-up questions depending on the reaction of the individual to unravel the deeper issues and bring other topics into the light. See Appendix 2 for the interview questions. After the interview, the recordings have been transcribed as soon as possible while the conversation is fresh in mind. During the course of the interviews I have noticed that the same information has been repeated and fewer new learnings have been generated from where I can conclude that 12 interviews is more than enough to understand the topic and issues. Because some participants wanted to remain anonymous I have decided not to share the names of the team members and thus the individuals will be given a number to be referred to in this research paper (see figure 13, 14 and 15 for a summary of the teams and
individuals). The same individuals were later gathered in focus groups together with their other team members.

Figure 13: Summary of the participants of team A. (source: own material)
### Summary Team B

This team consists of a total of 10 members, four members agreed to participate in an interview and focus group. This team has been working together for one year through formal communication channels such as Gmail, Slack and Google Meet. The team also used informal communication channels such as Messenger and Google Meet for the purpose of socializing. Two members have met all of the members before working together and two others have met 7-9 in real life and the others through Google Meet. Some team members meet a few times per year in real life and some meet up once every few months. The team members communicate with each other online on a daily basis, except for one member who communicates once a week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 5</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week</th>
<th>10-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Amount of informal hours spent on ESN per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Växjö</td>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 6</th>
<th>Keeps in contact with friends from ESN after leaving the organisation?</th>
<th>Yes, once a week or so</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Stockholm</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 7</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Amount of informal hours spent on ESN per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Linkoping</td>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 8</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>Amount of informal hours spent on ESN per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Linkoping</td>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14: Summary of the participants of team B. (source: own material)
### Summary

**Team C**

This team consists of a total of 8 members. Four members agreed to participate in an interview and focus group. In this team, three members joined later; thus, one member had been working for 12 months and the other three for four months. This team has been working together through formal communication channels such as Gmail, Slack, and Google Meets. This team also used informal communication channels such as Messenger and Google Meet for the purpose of socializing. Almost all team members had met each other before except for one person. The team members communicate with each other online on a daily basis. Once in six months, the team members meet each other physically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 9</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
<td>Keep being part of international exchanges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 10</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Siena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
<td>Suggestion of my brother, international community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 11</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week max. 5 in the summer months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 in the summer months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>5.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
<td>New cultures and people, travels, improving skills, learning new</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 12</th>
<th>Amount of hours spent on ESN work per week On busy weeks, 15-20 hours. On relaxed weeks, 5-10 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15-20 hours. On relaxed weeks, 5-10 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of residence</td>
<td>Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in ESN</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still involved in ESN?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation for joining ESN?</td>
<td>Meet new people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4. Focus groups

After the individuals finished their interviews a date was set which suited all the team members for their joint focus group session. There were a total of three sessions, one for each team, which lasted between 30-60 minutes depending on the dynamic of the group. These sessions happened on Google Meet from which the audio was recorded and later transcribed in text. The questions for the focus groups were semi-structured and the teams were invited to give insights on their collective communication behaviour during their time working together. See Appendix 3 for an example of the focus group questions. In this research I have used focus groups to identify the motivations and beliefs of the participants as a group in comparison as to what they think as an individual. This functioned as a way to confirm that the information they provided to me in their individual interview was trustworthy. In addition, participants stimulated each others train of thoughts and provided insights to other perspectives which generated supplementary information. Since the participants all knew each other, the researcher (me) included, the environment was friendly and safe to open up and express sensitive issues such as discussing social and cultural differences. A common strategy that helps to create a safe environment according to Brennen (2012) is to bring people together with the same background, perspectives and experiences. At the start of the session, the team was giving an explanation of the role of the researcher as someone who was there to moderate and direct the conversation regarding the topic of video-mediated communication and social interaction within the team. Since I was or still am part of these teams I made it clear from the start that I would not contribute to the session with any of my own opinions, views or experiences to keep my role as objective as possible.
6. Ethics

Before collecting data from willing participants a Google form has been created with the goal to inform about the purpose of the research and how data is being collected and used in this study. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the studies without any coercion or manipulation. As the participants all knew me personally it was important for me to inform them of my intentions and motivates and to not pressure them into participating in the studies for the sake of helping out a friend. On top of that I had to distance myself from any discussion that took place within the focus groups. There are certain positive and negative aspects that I have discovered when interviewing participants with who I have a personal connection outside of the research. The positive notes observed were that participants were more comfortable to share sensitive topics, especially when it came to shared experiences within the organisation. Further, I was able to understand their language use and what kind of words they used to describe certain experiences and feelings, since they all came from a different cultural background with English not being their mother tongue. The negative notes observed were that my personal interpretations could be an interference with the information that the participants were giving me, especially when the same shared experience has been perceived differently. There is also the risk that participants were not completely transparent with me and on purpose hold back information to not insult or offend me since we all contributed to the teamwork. Therefore, it was important for me to double check the information by using multiple sources from various interviews.

Participants’ consent was collected in a Google form where they had to willingly agree and acknowledge that their data will be shared with Malmö University in order to validate and offer support to the research results. They also had to understand that this means that a minimum required data may be shared with third parties such as teaching staff as well as students of the Malmö University. As each respondent has the right to privacy (Brennen 2012) the option to remain anonymous was presented before they had to agree to participate. When choosing this option this person can choose a synonym or a different name in their place. The issue of confidentiality is more challenging in focus groups where the participants have been placed in groups with people they know (Brennen, p.71., 2012). However, participants can request a name change and have the option to review the transcript before the sessions are analysed and presented.
7. Analysis

7.1. Values and motives of volunteers within digitized spaces

This section aims to answer the following question:

What kind of values motivate the geographically distributed members to perform within the digitized spaces of the online networks of ESN?

7.1.1. Findings

When analysing the motives of the volunteers involved in the network of ESN I have observed a certain trend in the answers.

"To help welcome exchange students to my local university"

...  

"Meet new people"  

...  

"new cultures and people, travels, improving skills, learning new things"  

...  

"Meeting international people"  

...  

"I liked the people"  

...  

"Being internationally involved, meet international students and get board experience and soft skills for future work life"
“Helping students. Suggestion of my brother, international community”

“Keep being part of international exchanges”

“I came back from my second exchange studies and wanted to continue to be in an international environment. At the time, I was also about to write my master’s thesis and knew I wanted to have people around me, join events and have fun. I also had a friend who was engaged in ESN already, and told me more about the organisation.”

“Meeting international people, practice English.”

“I was a lonely international student at a Swedish university, and the local ESN section gave me a group to belong to. After a while I wanted to do the same for students coming after me.”

The answered collected from the participants of this research indicate that the main motives for joining the organisation are:

- Meeting people from countries other than their own;
- Being involved in an international community;
- Helping students;
- Develop personal skills;
- Recommendation by friends or family.

Furthermore, by conducting the interviews and focus groups the participants stated that within the environment of the organisation there is a high comfort level and familiarity. The diversity of
cultures is mentioned as the main factor which drives the members to work towards a respectful and inclusive environment. According to the participants, the tools for communication have been chosen to support multiple dialogues and to allow individuals to participate in online discussions. This is done out of a notion of respect, which is regarded as the most important norm in ESN. Within the teams, listening and reacting have been listed as crucial skills when communicating through digital platforms. Here, they mention that in audio conferencing meetings they can express themselves verbally and therefore do not regard video as a crucial feature. However, audio is extremely crucial as the absence of speech in a call without video might create insecurities as participants are unsure whether their team members are listening to them or not. Moreover, the absence of video forced the team members to focus on listening thereby reducing interruptions. Here, the team members also had the opportunity to clear out misunderstandings by either writing in the chat or explicitly asking for clarification through the microphone. However, it is important to note that proactive communication is needed. Participants stated that it was difficult to notice whether their team members were listening to them and if they understood their message. Therefore, active participation from all members is required.

Another interesting finding is the peak in productivity and motivation after a video conferencing call or a physical meeting. Participants stated that they felt a sense of belonging to a community after exchanging communication through audio, video or physical nonverbal communication such as hugging. Within the digitised spaces of the online networks of ESN the team members usually have their camera off. This deprives them of their senses to observe nonverbal communication as well as the physical space of their team members. Participants described it as ‘performing in your own bubble’ and the feeling of being disconnected from the community. Participants stated that when they cannot hear or see their team members, they will most likely presume that they are not participating in the shared online space of their community. When it comes to the identity of the online space within the network of ESN the participants make a clear distinction between the physical and online space based on their functionalities. For the team members, physical space is the place where personal connections are being built, where there is room for spontaneous interactions and a wide range of possibilities to meet each other (on the way to work, at school, the supermarket). Online space is mostly for formal matters where socializing is strictly separated from business to maintain focus and ensure productivity. Excitement is mostly felt in the physical space when team members can finally meet each other after a long time of interacting online. Participants state that the online communication platforms
do not fulfill their needs when it comes to bonding with team members in an informal environment as they are not able to read nonverbal expressions clearly and cannot experience physical contact such as hugging.

7.1.2. Theory and theoretical framework

According to Castells (2004) to understand how the members of ESN shape the global program of the organisations and set the conditions for interaction and their local activities a look should be taken at their local values. Here, I have taken the motives of the participants as an indicator to understand what drives them to engage in the organisation. The majority of participants in my study were driven by self-oriented motives meaning that they are focused on personal benefits such as learning or exercising skills, gaining career experience, establishing social relationships and developing individual growth. Only two participants expressed other-oriented motives which means to increase the welfare of others (Cornelis et al., p.457., 2013). In Cornelis et al. (2013) volunteering is mentioned as a community involvement to contribute to societal problems by participating in communities, groups or organisations. However, the individuals who join ESN seem to have the opposite goal, which is to contribute to one’s welfare. To find out how ESN is fulfilling the needs of their members we will have to look at pride and respect as instrumental means (Boezemans and Ellemers, 2008).

According to this theory, volunteers feel committed based on whether they can derive pride from their organisation as well as the extent to which they can receive respect within the organisation (p.160., 2008). The term ‘pride’ is connected to the value of the organisation and means that the volunteers are striving to meet the goal of helping the society and the members of the organisation. The term ‘respect’ is connected to the value of one’s self as a member of the organisation and means that the organisation is striving to support their members by appreciating their work and taking care of their well-being (p.162., 2008). As analysed, the participants stated that the most important value in their organisation is respect and that the online network is striving to create an inclusive environment where everyone can contribute with their opinion. Here, we can question whether the members of ESN are creating these inclusive online networks for the sake of helping the organisation or if they are constructing networks to fulfill their own needs. When participants state that they join the online networks of ESN to socialize with members from other countries than their own or to feel included in an international
environment this indicates a self-oriented motive. This means that the online network of ESN and the conditions for interaction are shaped through the value of the personal benefit of the members of the organisation. Important here is to note that the personal benefit includes both the social need and the need for personal development.

Wilson and Peterson (2002) state that new technology provides a huge amount of opportunities for communities to adapt their communication according to their values. Within the online networks, this can be noticed through the adaptation of various communication tools to reduce as much noise between the members and to ensure that a conversation feels as natural as possible. Therefore, the drive to communicate for the sake of communication (Castells 2004) is not an entirely complete statement. The members of ESN are striving to create a social system where they can communicate for the sake of fulfilling their social needs. In the process of doing so, an inclusive and caring environment emerged within the digitised spaces of the network.

7.2. Rules of performance and the shaping of online networks

This section aims to answer the following question:

What are the rules of performance, interaction, and sociality that contribute to the shaping of online networks within ESN?

7.2.1. Findings

To build upon the findings from section 7.1.1. I will focus on how the values of the members of ESN dictate the rules of performance and how the choice of communication platforms shape online networks.

Upon asking the participants whether they have established rules for communication in their team or within the organisation the answer was that they categorize their communication into ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ communication. According to the participants, digital communication platforms within their teams have been established based on the best fit for their communication- and social rules. Two functions of formal and informal communication have been analysed. The function of formal communication is to support the members of the
organisation in their daily volunteering work. The platforms that are being used for formal communication are Slack and G Suite (Google Meet, Google Drive and Gmail). The function of informal communication is to support the establishment of social relations between the members of the organisation. The platform that is being used for informal communication is Facebook.

The participants stated that the purpose of their formal online communication is to make sure the team members have access to information as well as to make sure everyone has the opportunity to participate equally in discussions. Here, they chose to use a variety of communication methods such as audio and text to ensure as little miscommunication as possible. Participants stated that most of their decisions regarding organizational tasks were made on video conferencing platforms through audio-mediated communication. Team A stated that they feel more comfortable communicating with their team members with the absence of video because they feel awkward and exposed in their private setting. Participants of team A mentioned that having their video on would increase social nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, however, the absence of these cues was not considered a limitation in their interaction. Team A stated that the use of audio-only increased the productivity in their work as they were able to focus more on the voice of their team members without being distracted by video. Besides, participants of team A found that without video it is harder to estimate when you can interrupt your team members and are therefore forced to focus on listening.

In contrast, to team A, team B and C did not experience the lack of video in communication as an advantage and found that it created more miscommunication. The participants from team B and C found that not seeing the facial expressions and body language it was harder to understand the meaning of the message of their team members. In addition to this, the participants declared that they felt a social distance between their team members when they were not using video in their communication. To use video or not was often dictated by the actions of the team. Participants mentioned that when the majority of the team did not use their camera during the meetings they would not use video at all as they did not want to feel uncomfortable being the only one which the others could see. In contrast to this, when the majority would use video the participants felt peer pressured to turn their camera on.
Regarding informal communication, the teams do not have any established communication rules. The participants stated that their informal communication channels are not of great importance to their work in the organisation. However, the participants mentioned that Facebook Messenger enables them to express their thoughts and emotions in greater detail than video conferencing platforms. Here, the participants can express themselves through animated pictures called GIFs, memes and emoji. Memes are understood as images, videos, piece of texts, etc., typically humorous, that are copied and spread rapidly by Internet users (dictionary.com. Accessed 08.08.2019). As the participants can express themselves emotionally through these visualisations they do not have to turn their video on and can continue to enjoy their privacy. The teams claimed that through the ability of Messenger to send GIFs, memes, and emoji they could increase the sociality within their group. Participants whose mother tongue is not native English stated they felt judged by their foreign accent and were more at ease to express themselves through visualisations.

All in all, the participants stated that their teams expressed a collective feeling towards the digital communication channels used within the online networks of ESN. The participants felt that they had the freedom to adapt their interaction style to their needs and establish their own rules of performance as long as all the members of the team agreed to this. Finally, the team members claimed that the established rules benefit the group to reach a common goal in their work.

7.2.2. Theory and theoretical framework

What are the rules of performance, interaction, and sociality that contribute to the shaping of online networks within ESN?

To find out what the rules of performance, interaction and sociality are that contribute to the shaping of the online networks within ESN the ANT (Van Dijck, 2013) will be used to map out the connective media platforms used by the members of the organisation. The reason behind this is to find out whether technology is shaping interaction or whether the interaction is shaping the technology and therefore also the online networks of the organisation. The three platforms that will be disassembled are G Suite (Google Meet), Facebook (Messenger) and Slack.
G Suite (Google Meet)

In this analysis I will be focusing on Google Meet because it is the most frequently used platform for communication of all G Suite applications.

...  

Technology  

...  

The data that is forming the platform consist of text, image, sound, and video. As it is required of users to log in with their Google account personal data such as profile facts and profile pictures are provided by the users. Google Meet has protocols such as requiring participants of the meeting to have a registered Google account. The features of the platform include a chat where users can communicate through text, a mute button for the microphone, a button to turn off your camera and a big screen where you can either see yourself, your profile picture or the screens/profile pictures of other users in the call. The default setting of Google Meet is that users start the conversation with their microphone and camera turned on, however, before users enter a call they get the option to turn their microphone and camera off.

...  

Users/usage  

...  

Google Meet can be used on a variety of devices such as laptop, computer or mobile cellphone. Users can determine by themselves whether they want to use text, audio or video in the meeting. To enter the call, users need to have access to the meeting link or they can be invited by the users who are already in the chat.
The content of the platform is audio-visual communication, however, the audio or video is not recorded or stored by the platform. Users can also produce textual content in the chat, which will disappear once they exit and re-enter the meeting.

Google Meet has been stated by participants as the platform that is used both for formal as well as informal communication. The participants can choose whether they want to communicate through text, audio or video, however, the majority is in charge of making this decision. Participants can disregard this decision if they feel uncomfortable or not able to use certain functions due to technical limitations. Nevertheless, the participants have to actively contribute to the meetings through any means of communication to let their team members know they are still participating. In this case, it is not only the interface of the platform that dictates the style of interactions. It is also the value of the community that dictates the collective decision of the group which is that all team members should interact through audio to convey clear messages and show their contribution to the community. This finding confirms that even when platforms limit users with their protocols and interfaces the networks are still in control of their interaction. Within mixed virtual communities there is a high social control to maintain the sense of trust. This is done by developing similar interests and coordinating actions when overstepping communal boundaries and rules (Matzat, p.1187., 2010). Within ESN this is done by establishing communication rules and appointing formal and informal communication channels. For the sake of preserving a social digital space, the members of ESN are willing to register an account where they have to give their data to Google.

When it comes to audio-mediated communication, theories have regarded it as a lesser communication method in comparison to video-mediated or computer-mediated communication due to the absence of visual social cues (Isaacs and Tang 1994, Walther 1996). However, it is
the most used method of communication through video conferencing platforms within the network of ESN. Here, I speculate that by removing video the participants are left with their imagination which enables them to create their own space where they can interact with their team members. Building upon the theory of hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 1996). When users receive subtle social cues or personality cues they can build stereotypical impressions of their team members through online communication (p.17., 1996). These idealized perceptions could be an explanation of why most participants claimed that audio contained enough information to interact with their team members. This feature of Google Meet could be regarded as a technological unconscious as the members of ESN are not aware of the active technological environment which influences them (Van Dijck 2013).

**Facebook (Messenger)**

In this analysis I will be focusing on Messenger because it is the most frequently used tool for communication on Facebook.

...  

*Technology*  

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The data that is forming the platform consists of a chat window on the bottom of the Facebook page or a complete page filled with all the conversations listed horizontally. In the conversation, you can see the names of the users, their profile picture, the text they wrote and the time they wrote it. Multiple buttons are supporting multiple functions and an icon of a ‘thumbs up’. All the data exchanged through the Messenger chat is stored by Facebook by default. If users want to participate in the Messenger chats they are required to have a Facebook profile. To enter the chat users have to be friends with at least one person in the chat or get an invitation link.

...  

*Users/usage*  

...

Messenger can be used on a variety of devices such as laptop, computer or mobile cellphone. Since Facebook wants its users to share as much information as possible (Van Dijck 2013) it provides its users with a huge amount of options to share their data through. When getting a
new message Facebook will notify you to stimulate you to check Messenger and therefore drawing you back to the platform. Users have the option to mute the chat, however, when you click on the Messenger app you can still see the chat highlighted when there is a new message.

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Content

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The content shared within Messenger consists of images, animated images, videos, text, emoji and documents.

...

Facebook Messenger has been mentioned by the participants as a platform which enables them to express their thoughts and emotions in greater detail than video conferencing platforms. Participants stated that the features of Messenger enable them to send GIFs, memes, and emoji through which they can create their form of communication suited to their needs. A study by Anderson (2006) mentioned the 'principle of justification' which implies that individuals working and socializing together within teams spend time and effort to find a shared basis for their common ground. As participants stated that within their team they were striving for clear communication they were using a variety of methods to achieve mutual understanding and collaboration. Here, I observe that the members of ESN alter the way they express themselves through the use of multimedia to achieve their desired form of interaction. On a critical note, the participants mentioned that they would rather use GIFs, memes, and emoji to maintain their privacy. However, it is questionable whether the use of Messenger guarantees their privacy. This platform requires users to register a personal profile and has an interface which is specifically designed to extract as much data from their users as possible. The safety of the data of users is up for debate as well after the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, promised to create an option for users to be able to delete all their data. However, users are still waiting for this feature to be deployed and so far there is no timeline to consult for when this feature will be available (The Guardian. Accessed 02.09.2019).
Technology

The data that is forming the platform consists of a list of channels, threads with textual and visual data, the profile of other users who have access to the workspace. All data exchanged through this platform are stored by default, users have the option to erase their messages but not that of other users. Slack has protocols such as registering a personal profile before accessing the platform. The default setting is a clean workspace with one ‘default’ channel.

Users/usage

Messenger can be used on a variety of devices such as laptop, computer or mobile cellphone. When users receive a private message or are mentioned in a message on Slack they will be notified by the application. Users can also turn off their notifications completely during specific times of the day. Users can create channels, send messages to other users and send messages to the channels. There is also the option to call users through audio or video chat. Users have the option to add other applications, extensions, and customized emoji to the workspace. Users have to be invited to the workspace by other users.

Content

The content shared within Slack consists of images, animated images, videos, text, emoji, calendar reminders and documents.
The participants categorized Slack as one of their formal communication tools alongside Google Meet and other applications of G Suite. Here, I noticed that the features of Slack are similar to Google Meet and Messenger. Slack also supports video conferencing, customizable emoji, animated pictures, regular pictures, and the group as well as individual chats. Also, the account you have to register with to be able to use Slack enables users to regulate their private data. Users do not have to use their real information, their account is hidden from the public and they can delete the content they place on the platform. Yet, the members of ESN use Messenger and Google Meet additionally to Slack. Here, I presume that the culture of ESN still strives heavily on Facebook as the three major Facebook groups through which members interact with each other daily only exist there. As Facebook has around 2.41 billion monthly active users (http://zephoria.com. Accessed 03.09.2019), it is safe to assume that future volunteers already have an account they can easily connect with the online networks of ESN. Slack, on the other hand, requires to set up a new account and to install a new application on the digital devices of the user.

Most literature focuses on the benefits of technology and their features to improve communication (Chidambaram and Jones 1993, Isaacs and Tang 1994). In the case of ESN, this is something that should not be considered as it is not about the features of connective platforms only. I believe it is about the values that motivate individuals to strive for the creation of a social system which is centralized around the sense of belonging to a community rather than conducting work. Therefore, the online networks of ESN are shaped by the members of the organisations who are constantly striving to ensure there are no social distances between groups and individuals. They do this by trying to achieve a mutual understanding through various sources of media with disregard to privacy.

7.3. Challenges of digital communication platforms

This section aims to answer the following question:

What are the challenges imposed by digital communication platforms when it comes to the development of online networks of ESN?
7.3.1. Findings

To continue on the findings of section 7.2.1. I will further analyse the digital communication platforms used by the members of ESN to identify potential challenges that might influence the development of the online networks of the organisation.

The reason why all analysed teams are using the same digital communication platforms and why they are following similar rules of communication is because they have adapted this from the predecessors that were holding their position in the organisation before them. Within the organisation individuals hold certain positions related to their tasks (President, Vice President, Communication Manager, Treasurer, etc.) It is common to switch positions every year which results in a high turn-over. To ensure that future teams can work as productively as the previous ones the knowledge regarding the use of communication platforms is preserved and spread across the network. Also, participants have expressed their satisfaction regarding the use of these established communication platforms (G Suite, Slack, and Facebook) and therefore are most likely to continue to use it. Further, the participants of team C stated that the inclusion of members within ESN is of extreme importance and therefore the organisation is striving to employ a diverse range of communication technologies. However, during the focus groups, the individuals were to brainstorm for new communication technologies to help develop the online networks of ESN even further. During this demonstration, the members showcased a wide range of ideas that could be considered beyond the scope of Slack, Facebook and G Suite. In the end, participants in team B expressed that many great technologies already exist but that they simply do not have the financial means to acquire them. Generally, the team members choose communication tools not only because of their features but also because they are ‘free’ to use.

Other than online platforms the participants mentioned that advanced microphones and better internet connection increased the quality of their interaction. According to person 12, these conditions might create advantages and drawbacks for certain team members such as the ability to participate in video conferencing meetings. Team members stated that as they are dependent on online communication platforms to communicate with each other they often have to adapt their interaction style to the limitations of the platform. To show an example, when
using Google Meet the screen will automatically show the person with their camera on as the main screen on everyone’s device. Here, team B stated that this specific feature of Google Meet induced the feeling of exposure and discomfort on their team members.

While striving for connectedness and inclusion of all members into the online networks of ESN certain expectations of individuals have been set. Participants affirmed that belonging to the network means that all members have to commit to participate actively online and adapt to time zones of the majority of the network. Besides, members should also show a willingness to connect their physical life with that of ESN. This means that individuals within certain geographical distances are preferred as members of the organisation as they have to travel to specific events. The participants expressed that within their teams they have a rule which states that team members have to pass down their availability. The reason for this is that your online presence is always assumed and to be able to disconnect from the online network you have to state that you cannot participate during certain hours or days. Participants have disclosed that their performance in the online networks of ESN is disrupting the experience of their activities and social interactions in the physical world. Mainly participants of team B and C mentioned they felt ‘too well-connected’ as they always had access to the online network through their mobile devices and internet connection. The participants in team B said that at a certain point they had to forcefully disconnect themselves from the online networks to take a break from the constant flow of information and interaction. This was done by forcefully deleting all the applications or take distance from electronic devices. This experience has only been observed in the two teams who have been together for one year, the members of team A who have worked together for three months did not feel the same connectedness to the online network of ESN.

7.3.2. Theory and theoretical framework

When it comes to challenges imposed by digital communication platforms on the developments of online networks of ESN I have observed several. The key point that I would like to build upon is that certain communication platforms are regarded as a social norm and as a requirement to function within the organisation. When the entire organisation decides to use Facebook as one of their main communication platforms members have to either connect to the appropriate channels with their existing account or create one. This practice and style of interaction within
the online networks of ESN shed light on how the organisation is selectively excluding and including territories that are of value for the performance of the tasks assigned to the network (Castells, p.33., 2004). As the members of the organisation value their benefit of belonging to a community they have created a formation of online networks of their desire on the platform that was most accessible to the majority. However, Jones (1998) warns that in the end, computers are the ones that are linking communities through various types of information. Therefore, it is important to consider the programmers behind the connective media which the members of ESN have installed on their devices and use in their daily lives (Castells, 2004). Van Dijck (2013) alerts that the features of connective media are explicitly made to serve the goals of the platform. Which means that the programmers of these platforms have the power to decide what the users value. Indeed, if the members of ESN cannot make changes to the features and protocols of their communication platforms how will they know what methods of interaction works best for them? In the end, the participants stated that they were adapting themselves to the limitations of the communication platforms. Which also means that they are limiting their ability to perform in the online networks of the organisation.

On a final note, while striving for inclusion of all members into the online networks of ESN the participants of my research have affirmed that they become ‘too well-connected’. The members of ESN became so well-connected that the only way for them to leave the network was to forcefully delete all the applications supporting these platforms. When members agree to use Facebook as their main communication platform for their voluntary work they essentially intertwine their private lives that with ESN. This for the reason that most volunteers created their Facebook for private reasons. On top of that, staying involved in the online networks of ESN also means to continue providing Facebook with data which their protocols and features are designed to obtain (Van Dijck, 2013). Present-day social systems become fragile through human conduct and the use of computers that are used to penetrate through the social fabric of society (Stehr, p.149., 2007). The more complex large-scale social and socio-technical systems we create the more we become vulnerable. Therefore, the biggest challenge the online networks of ESN has to consider regarding digital communication platforms is to make sure that the members of the organisation have the power to decide what is value. The members have to make sure that technology does not shape their interaction and that they have to strive to create a system that truly fulfills their social needs.
8. Conclusion

To summarise all the findings, through the acquired data of twelve members of the organisation I have been able to understand the values and motives of volunteers within the digitised spaces of ESN. Subsequently, the rules of performance, interaction and sociality could be identified and how it contributes to the shaping of the online networks of ESN. This identified certain opportunities as well as challenges imposed by digital communication platforms and their influence on the shaping of the online networks within ESN. To conclude, in the process of striving to create a social system where the members of ESN can communicate for the sake of fulfilling their social needs an inclusive and caring environment emerged within the digitised spaces of the network. Various sources of media such as text, audio, and video have been used within the online networks of the organisation to achieve a mutual understanding and to ensure there are no social distances between groups and individuals. However, even though the members of ESN have identified the opportunities of connective platforms, the lack of privacy and constant connectedness to the online network imposes challenges. To not succumb under the complex large-scale social and socio-technical system the members of ESN have to strive to create their digital platforms to foster their social needs and to take care of their well-being.

The limitations of this study can be found in the lack of a complete analysis of the entire online network of ESN. As I have only been researching the experience of twelve individuals within the network of one country, instead of all the 40 countries that make up the entire organisation, there is more knowledge to be gained to be able to understand the complexity of the networks' social communication structure. Further, there was a limitation on the research of the Facebook platform as only Messenger has been analysed with little to no regard of the internal Facebook groups. To take on a different approach, future research could focus on studying the interaction of volunteers through the online platforms of internal Facebook groups to understand the motives and rules of performance of a much larger and diverse audience.

All things considered, I hope that this study will be able to contribute to the field of communication strategies and help scholars to understand the social structure of voluntary youth organisations through digital communication.
9. List of references


**Websites**


10. Appendix

10.1. Appendix 1

*Structured questions - Google form. This survey is complementary to the interview with the purpose to collect basic information to build a profile of the participants.*

- Name
- Nationality
- City of residence
- Age
- How many years have you been involved in ESN?
- Are you still involved in ESN?
- If yes, how many hours do you spend on ESN work per week?
- If yes, how many informal hours do you spend on ESN per week? (Meeting and talking with friends)
- If no, do you still keep in contact with friends from ESN and how often?
- What was your motivation for joining ESN?
- How many months have you been working in team XXX? (Team XXX refers to the team they have been working with)
- How many team members did team XXX have?
- List here all the communication channels used to conduct team work.
- Have you met your team members in person before working together?
- If chosen the second option, how many team members have you met in person before working together?
- If not met in person, through what online channels did you meet your team members?
How often do you meet your team members in real life?

How often do you communicate with your team members online?

Through what communication channels do you have formal interaction with your team members?

Through what communication channels do you have informal interaction with your team members?

I would like to stay anonymous (your name will be changed)

10.2. Appendix 2

Semi-structured interview questions

How did you experience working in a team with geographically distributed members? How is it compared to working in a team with members physically closer to you?

Could you describe what kind of rules of communication you had established with your team members? and why?

Do you see similarities between how you behave socially with your team members online and when you meet them physically?

What is the biggest difference that you have noticed between your interaction with your team members online and offline?

How did you use video conferencing platforms to communicate with your team members?

What have you observed when using video conferencing platforms when interacting with your team members?

Do you feel that your ideas and beliefs were clearly communicated to your team members through video conferencing platforms? Why or why not?

What factors do you think influence how your team members communicate towards you through video conferencing platforms?

What would you do differently when working with geographically distributed members of ESN?
• What role does video-mediated communication play in this?

• Do you use audio/video/text in video conferencing platforms when communication with team members? and why?

10.3. Appendix 3

Semi-structured focus group questions

• Could you describe what kind of online activities you did together as a team?

• What have you noticed when doing these kind of online activities as a team?

• How did you observe the communication behaviour in your team?

• How did you observe the communication behaviour in your team through video-mediated communication?

• How do you complement each other in your communication behaviour?

• What do you see is the absolute basis of communication for a team of geographically distributed members of ESN?

• How are cultural influences playing a role in the way your team members are interacting online?

• How are cultural influences playing a role in the way your team members are interacting through video conferencing platforms?

• What kind of communication challenges do you want to see resolved in your team?

• If you could create the perfect communication platform for your team, what features would it have and why?

• Do you feel well-connected to the online networks of ESN?