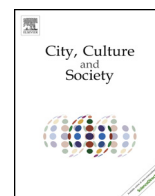




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# The field of fashion production in Milan: A theoretical discussion and an empirical investigation

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## ABSTRACT

The paper looks at the fashion industry in Milan, where, as in other cultural industries, entrepreneurs and professionals rely on their networks for the exchange of information, the building of reputation, accessing critical resources and many other crucial activities. Recently, research has been done about how actors access networks, emphasising the role of social and cultural capital, stressing how inequalities are reproduced and highlighting dynamics of exclusion. What is less explored are actors' strategies to exploit the potential of networking. With this aim, the paper investigates the dynamic positioning of fashion professionals in the fashion system of Milan by using Bourdieu's concept of field of cultural production. Key questions concern actors' strategy in using and combining their social, cultural and economic capital in order to gain better positioning in the system and therefore gain success. In depth interviews and histories of professional life of fashion designers constitute the basis of the empirical investigation. Empirical results show that the notion of field enriches our understanding of local organisation of creative workers.

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## Functions of networks within the creative economy

In the 1970s Becker paved the way to the study of cultural production, illustrating that artistic work is the product of collaboration and of a complex division of labour among many different people: art is social in character, as well as knowledge, innovation, creativity and culture which are grounded on a large social base.

The local organisation of creative workers has been described as creative communities (Scott, 2000) or, more generally, place-based networks of relations. The basic theoretical assumption recalls Becker's idea that culture is a social phenomenon and a social construct, and cultural or artistic forms are comprehensible only in terms of a wider system of human relationships (Scott, pp. 30–31).

Local networks represent the environment where social relations develop. A large body of literature flourished in particular at the turn of the twentieth-first century, focused on face-to-face interactions, co-presence and proximity and showed that, notwithstanding improvements in mobility and communication, people have to meet in person and face-to-face interactions and physical proximity still matter.

Information exchange, knowledge (re)production, organisation of work, developing of trust and recognition (of talent) are the main functions which the literature agrees to be accomplished by interaction within networks (Banks, 2000; Menger, 2009; Molotch, 2002, 2003; Pratt, 2000). Therefore being into such networks, or, as Storper and Venables put it, *being into the loop* (Storper & Venables, 2004), is crucial for the success of creative professionals. Recent research has been done about how actors access networks, emphasising the role of social and cultural capital, stressing how inequalities are reproduced and highlighting dynamics of exclusion (Ashton, 2013; Freire-Gibb & Nielsen, 2014; Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012; Lee, 2011).

In previous researches on the fashion professionals in Milan and in London (d'Ovidio, 2010), the importance

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and functions of networks among fashion operators have been deeply analysed. Those results confirmed the general outcome of researches in the creative industry, and they proved the importance of developing and maintaining social relations for fashion designers. It is by being connected with other people that they do business, solve problems and acquire information, visibility and recognition as they build their reputation. Through social relations, trust is built and collaboration is fostered. As they need to be connected in order to function successfully in their profession, time and energy are constantly invested in networking, in seeing each other and being seen in the “right” places and events.

The paper discusses this literature proposing to frame the action of a sample of fashion entrepreneurs in Milan, Italy, within Bourdieu’s action theory and to analyse their strategy in using and combining their social, cultural and economic capital in order to succeed. We will see that this theoretical framework enhances our understanding of the cultural production as it offers a deeper insight about conflicts among actors, about their competitive strategies and their use of capital. We will also see that such perspective is complementary and not antithetical to the one focusing on networks and local communities.

### Accessing the network or exploiting capitals in the field of cultural production?

The large body of work exploring functions and importance of networks focuses on reasons and mechanisms through which networks ease a whole set of tasks; secondly it shows that being inside the network is crucial for talent recognition and reputation; and thirdly, that entering the network implies the use and practice of specific capitals (in particular social and cultural ones) and that not all actors are accessing such networks. Granovetter’s legacy is clear: actors’ embeddedness refers to the role of concrete personal relations and structures (Granovetter, 1985, p. 490) and the underlying hypothesis is that the more embedded are the actors, the more they are successful. Accessing the network seems thus necessary for the survival of operators within the system, but is it enough for achieving success?

In such literature it is not the degree of actors’ embeddedness that is in question, nor the means through which actors become embedded, but the role and functions performed by the relations developing within the network; the density of network and basically the number of contacts which an actor can count on, is assumed as a proxy of success of the functioning of a network for the given actor, without questioning how these contacts have been made, whether they are redundant or not, whether they are effectively conducive to success or not (Blair, 2009).

While studying interactions’ functions, networks are often conceived as a “reified” social space, with clear boundaries, where the inside actors win, not focusing enough on how they accessed such space nor what has happened to those who remain outside.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, focusing the attention on the functions performed by interactions within networks, the *conflictual dimension* is often neglected and actors tend to be observed only when collaborating together. As Blair claims, “in looking predominantly within networks to explain their existence research has concentrated on understanding structural features” (Blair, 2009, p. 118).

Here, a different perspective is offered, that looks at actors’ dynamic and relative positioning in the field of production, using the action theory elaborated by Bourdieu. Developing a sociological theory of cultural production, Bourdieu focuses on the relational nature of the field where actors are seen according to their position-taking characteristics (Born, 2010). This point of view is by no means antithetical<sup>2</sup> to that of network, but complementary, as it conceives the field of production as a social space where actors are qualitatively and hierarchically positioned. Moreover, if network-thinking allows to understand cooperation and connection among actors, field-thinking also helps to identify and analyse conflict. Of course both cooperation and competition exist in the economic world, in particular with the emergence of the cognitive-cultural economy that requires often a more spatially dispersed but integrated organisation of work (Scott, 2008).

So, key questions concern actors’ strategy in using and combining their social, cultural and economic capital in order to gain better positioning in the field and therefore succeed.

### An “heretical” use of Bourdieu’s notion of field

Bourdieu’s action theory aims at overcoming the dualistic idea of agency and structure with a more complex relation between internal drives and external forces which results in the actor practice. The agent owns a set of capitals (economic, cultural and social one) that combine in the social action following two forces: an *internal* one, namely, the *habitus*, and an *external* one, determined by the social space. The *habitus* is conceived as a subjective predisposition in using

<sup>1</sup> An interesting exception is the study performed by Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012) where authors observe some disadvantaged groups of people (namely, working-class, women, black and other ethnic minorities) in the film industry. Their findings are that although actors from these groups are strongly embedded into networks, these are less effective and fail to secure them good job position and high mobility.

<sup>2</sup> Some authors within the sphere of the cultural sociology and, to some extent, Becker himself, see the relation between field theory and Becker’s world theory and social network perspective are in sharp contrast (Becker & Pessin, 2006; Bottero & Crossley, 2011; Dubois & Méon, 2013).

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