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Cultural and innovation intermediation in the cultural-creative industries

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the multiple intermediary processes undertaken by actors in a creative R&D project. Intermediaries of different kinds have long been crucial enablers of economic activity and have been theorised in ways that help us recognise the importance of intermediation in the cultural economy, but at the same time, the flexibility of applications of the concept has been critiqued for its messiness. In other parts of the economy, the focus has been paid to other intermediary processes, be they undertaken by regulatory, financial or innovation intermediaries. Drawing on both these fields of work we follow the role of participants at a university in the UK which acted as an intermediary between SMEs, a global media company and a research funder. We examine intermediation processes from the selection of R&D partners, through the design of a funding call and the R&D activity itself. In so doing, we illustrate the plural and hybrid nature of cultural and innovation intermediation, highlight where internal value is generated, identify the importance of affective intermediation, and the value of using approaches that draw on cultural intermediaries literature and that from innovation studies.

1. Introduction

Cultural intermediaries have long played important roles in enabling the production, evaluation and consumption of cultural-creative industries work. Following Bourdieu's (1984) influential work, academics have explored the roles of different types of cultural intermediary across a range of different sectors. Research examining cultural intermediaries has steadily grown with useful contributions that help us recognise the importance of intermediation in the cultural economy, but at the same time, the flexibility of applications of the concept has been critiqued as a 'melange (or is it a dog's dinner?)' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 227) and its usefulness questioned (Moor, 2012).

In other parts of the economy, the focus has been paid to other intermediary processes, be they undertaken by regulatory, financial or innovation intermediaries.

Despite this burgeoning work, for Taylor 'intermediation in the creative economy has…been comparatively under-theorized' (2015: 362) and this is especially true for understanding the role of innovation intermediaries in the creative industries. This is due to a general lack of work on R&D in the creative industries, particularly those which draw more on cultural and artistic practice, rather than technological and scientific advancement (Tether, 2021). But as digital technologies play increasingly important roles across the value chain of the cultural-creative industries, from origination to distribution and consumption, it is important to understand how innovation intermediaries combine with, overlap with and complement cultural intermediation processes. This article contributes to this aim by exploring the intermediary processes undertaken by a university in a creative industries R&D project.

We begin by examining work on cultural, then innovation intermediaries to delineate the kinds of activities illustrated through our case study. In doing so we highlight a call for further work which we attempt to address: to explore the creation of internal value for intermediaries through intermediation processes (De Silva et al. 2018). Following this, we analyse a case study involving a university, research funder, global media company and two SMEs involved in technology-driven creative R&D projects. We trace intermediation processes through three stages of the R&D projects: pre-project, project setup and funding competition, and the R&D projects themselves. This allows us to identify the roles of key actors at different stages and pinpoint how value is accumulated by different stakeholders. Finally, we conclude by reiterating our contributions: demonstrating the plural and overlapping processes involved in innovation in the creative industries; illustrating how internal value is generated by the key intermediaries; introducing the idea of affective intermediation through relational labour processes; and contributing to Taylor's call for more work on intermediation in the creative industries.

2. Defining intermediaries

2.1. Cultural intermediaries

Intermediaries play important and increasingly sophisticated roles in the economy. For scholars of cultural and creative activities, Bourdieu's work has been influential in shaping how we conceptualise people and activities which influence the consumption of cultural products. His conceptualisation of cultural intermediaries highlighted the role of people 'in occupations of 'social work' and 'cultural facilitation' [who] perform the tasks of gentle manipulation' (Bourdieu, 1984: 365). These occupations are what Bourdieu refers to as 'vendors of symbolic goods and services' (310) who act as tastemakers and influence consumption.

Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* has created a huge amount of scholarly interest in cultural intermediaries since its publication. As is often the case in academic work, subdivisions and divergence of research in this area have led to confusing and elastic applications (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Molloy and Larner, 2010). This confusion includes an ever-increasing list of occupations that can be counted as intermediaries which

in turn has prompted useful work that seeks to understand processes of intermediation. Increasing use of technologies has been an important part of this, with the internet (particularly web 2.0 technologies) generating dis- and re-intermediation processes (Riemer & Lehrke, 2009; Swords, 2017).

There has also been a trend in the work on cultural intermediaries that makes a division between actors influencing production (e.g. publishers, music producers, casting agents) and that shaping consumption (e.g. curators, critics and fans) (Lizé, 2016; Featherstone, 1991). McFall (2014), however, argued processes of production and consumption are simultaneous and 'always already, dynamically connected' (p. 45). Her work draws on that of Muniesa et al. (2007) who shift the focus wider to examine what they call 'market devices': 'the material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets…analytical techniques to pricing models, from purchase settings to merchandising tools, from trading protocols to aggregate indicators' (p. 2). This re-examination places the emphasis not on the (re)production or erosion of symbolic value in Bourdieu's work, but on a range of agents including human actors, socio-economic devices and other processes which shape the perception, valuation, circulation and understanding of cultural products (McFall, 2014; see also Swords, 2017).

As Swords (2017, 2020) argues, this extension of who and what influences these processes requires examination of agents not often considered through a Bourdieuian lens, including financial intermediaries, regulators and socio-technical devices such as recommendation and curatorial algorithms used on media and crowd-patronage platforms. To do this, process-centric approaches are most useful. Furthermore, it is important to recognise the plurality of intermediary functions played by single actors at different points in time, in relation to different parties and in different places. Swords (2017: 64), drawing on (Lizé, 2016) proposes a typology of intermediaries involved in cultural and creative patronage networks summarised in Table 1 below.

These intermediary types should not be understood as functions performed by singular actors, but rather can be performed simultaneously by hybrid actors in 'always already, dynamically connected' (McFall, 2014: 45) networks of production and consumption. For example, Kribs (2016) explains how processes of disintermediation mean musicians are required to undertake multiple intermediary roles, including marketing, PR, promotions, branding and publishing, amongst others, often simultaneously. Intermediaries are not always human actors either but can take the form of socio-technical devices which perform automated functions. For example, recommendation algorithms used by music streaming platforms (Webster, 2020).

2.2. Innovation intermediaries

Work on R&D and innovation intermediaries operating across the economy acknowledges similar plural functions of different actors. Howells (2006) is particularly informative here. In his seminal work delineating forms of intermediation in innovation processes, he argues organisations providing different intermediary functions often provide different types simultaneously and at different times in interactions with clients, customers and others. Howells (2006) has been highly influential in business and management studies, and we argue conceptualisations from these fields help

Table 1. Intermediaries involved in patronage networks.

Intermediary Type	Function	Examples
Mediators	Actors 'guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks' (Lize, 2016: 36) or independent third parties brokering relationships between other actors	Booksellers, museum workers, radio hosts, fans, brokers
Appraisers/prescribers/ selectors	In uential actors making qualitative judgements, curating and selecting based on quality or marketability	Critics, experts, members of juries, reviewers
Curators	Those making implicit and explicit curatorial decisions	Directors of cultural institutions, museum directors, radio programmers, curators, recommendation algorithms
Distributors	'intermediaries of the art market' (Lize, 2016: 37)	Film or music distributors, publishers, cinema owners, online media platforms
Intermediaries of production	'have a hand in the creation process and most of them bring cultural goods to market' (ibid)	Publishers, music producers, gallery owners, TV commissioners
Intermediaries of artistic work	'set between artists and employers' (ibid)	Working for artists: managers and agents Gatekeepers working for employers, investors or producers: talent buyers, scouts, casting agents
Financial intermediaries	Financial agents who facilitate more efficient aggregation and reallocation of finance and capital (Cia, 2018)	Banks, credit card companies, credit unions, venture capitalists, online payment providers
Regulatory intermediaries	Actors involved in the (formal and informal) regulation and accreditation of professional standards, terms of use and legal instruments	Professional bodies, community guidelines, laws, terms of service

Source: Adapted from Swords (2017: 64) and Lizé (2016)

address the under-theorisation of intermediaries involved in R&D processes in the creative industries.

Table 2 is the result of Howells' analysis of the work of companies that undertake innovation and R&D intermediation as well as academic literature. The working definition of an innovation intermediary Howells developed is: '[a]n organization or body that acts [as] an agent or broker in any aspect of the innovation process between two or more parties' (p720). The actions of these agents or brokers range in scale and scope as outlined in the table below.

Howells's work, and research mobilising his framework[1], is incredibly useful but not free from critique. Edler and Yeow (2016: 417), for example, suggest that the work on innovation intermediaries is 'strangely thin when it comes to the long-term learning e ect on the ability of all actors involved' (see also Barraket, 2020; Kant and Kanda, 2019). This is a valid critique but long-term impacts are difficult to study because their effects become dispersed and the nature of academic research means longitudinal research is increasingly di cult. Moreover, interactions between parties may not have long-term goals in mind. For the CCIs, the project-oriented model adopted for much work, the prevalence of freelancers as a mode of employment and a high turnover of small and micro SMEs compounds these challenges.

De Silva et al. (2018) argue the function of innovation intermediaries is to generate value for their clients, but there is a lack of focus on how internal value is generated for the intermediary. Through a study of EU-based research and technology

Table 2. Innovation intermediary processes.

Type	Function
Foresight and diagnostics	Foresight, forecasting, horizon-scanning, needs identification
Scanning and information processing	Information gathering, partnership identi cation and selection
Knowledge processing, generation and combination	Combining knowledge from partners and/or generating knowledge internally to be combined with external partners
Gatekeeping and brokering	Matchmaking, negotiating with/between partners, legal advice, contracting processes
Testing, validation and training	Lab work, testing and experimentation, prototyping, piloting, skills and training provision, production testing, analytical development and testing
Accreditation and standards	Formal accreditation processes, standards setting/advice, voluntary code development, speci cation development/advice
Regulation and arbitration	Formal and informal regulation/advice on regulations, self-regulation processes
Intellectual property	Rights management, protection advice, assessment of IP value/potential
Commercialisation	Market research, business development advice, sales and market advice, funding guidance and support, venture capital, IPO development
Assessment and evaluation	Assessment and performance of technologies/products/processes (preand post-market entry)

(Howells, 2006: 721–722)

organisations (RTOs), De Silva et al. proposed six sets of practices through which innovation intermediaries create internal value:

1. Practices for knowledge capitalisation—activities centred on maximising, recombining and leveraging existing knowledges
2. Practices for knowledge advancement—(1) together with the acquisition and/or generation of new knowledges
3. Practices for knowledge spanning—activities to access knowledges unrelated to the core knowledgebase, skillset or experience of the innovation intermediary
4. Knowledge worker empowerment—practices to empower workers employed by or contracted to the innovation intermediary
5. Practices for access to innovation ecosystem knowledge—work undertaken to understand more about the innovation environment through and in which an innovation intermediary is operating. This may be generated through other processes.
6. Practices for shaping the innovation ecosystem knowledge base—processes to 'externalise relevant knowledge to influence actions and interests of potential partners'

(De Silva et al., 2018: 74)

We apply this framework below in the exploration of our case study to make sense of where value is generated not just for the main intermediary, but how different intermediary processes generate different forms of value. This framework is particularly helpful with a university at the centre of our case study because although universities are not RTOs in the way De Silva et al. de ne them, there are many similarities and they have been defined as such elsewhere (e.g. Hales, 2001; Viljamaa et al., 2010).

A final critique is that it is unclear how work such as Howells's (2006) can be applied to the creative industries. That innovation intermediaries work does not focus

on the cultural-creative industries is unsurprising given Taylor's observation that 'intermediation in the creative economy has…been comparatively under-theorized' (2015: 362). Work has been undertaken to address this gap, notably, a special issue of *Regional Studies* where scholars focus on, among others, labour market intermediaries (Vinodrai, 2015), networking organisations (Foster, Manning and Terkla, 2015) and the role of academics as intermediaries for alternative development trajectories (Rantisi and Leslie, 2015). Research influenced by Bourdieu's work, as cited above, also contributes to addressing the lacuna. Missing, however, is a sustained engagement with innovation intermediaries in processes of R&D in the CCIs. The lack of work is due, in part, to a general lack of work on R&D in the cultural and creative industries, particularly those which draw more on cultural and artistic practice, rather than technological and scientific advancement. The reasons for this are co-constitutive and include not recognising creative practice as R&D, deliberately or unconsciously not using the term 'research and development', a lack of tax breaks for R&D compared to other parts of the economy[2] or not undertaking activity that could be recognised as R&D. There are e orts to address the lack of research in this area through, for example, work by the Policy and Evidence Centre for the Creative Industries in UK and their programme of work on R&D and innovation (see for example Mateos-Garcia, 2021 and Tether, 2021). That work does not explicitly focus on intermediaries, however. Through our case study, we begin to address this gap by combining work from cultural intermediary perspectives with that from business and management on innovation intermediaries.

The rest of this article explores intermediary processes performed by a group of actors involved in a collaborative R&D project in the creative industries. We follow the role of participants at a university in the UK which acted as an intermediary between SMEs, a global media company and a research funder. We examine intermediation processes from the selection of R&D partners, through the design of a funding call and the R&D activity itself. In so doing, we illustrate the plural and hybrid nature of cultural and innovation intermediation, highlight where internal value is generated, identify the importance of affective intermediation, and the value of using approaches that draw on cultural intermediaries literature and that from innovation studies.

3. Methods

This article draws on two research and development projects and the programme which funded them involving five organisations working in the cultural-creative industries: a UK university, a multinational media company, a research funding body and two UK-based SMEs. Promises of anonymity (for ethical and legal reasons) prevent us from revealing the names of the primary stakeholders or detailed information about the subject of collaborations; we use pseudonyms to do this. The broad aim of the R&D project was to facilitate ways for the SMEs (hereafter SME1 and SME2) to work with the multinational media organisation (hereafter MMO) to test new creative media technologies using the latter's intellectual property. UK University's role was to act as an intermediary to identify and fund suitable companies using money from the research funding organisation (RFO), that t with how MMO see its future.

This case study is presented below and draws upon data gathered through working alongside the key people at UK University involved in the project and interviews conducted online using video conferencing software. Interviewees were identified based on their role as stakeholders across the R&D project. Interviews were conducted with ten people from SME1, SME 2, the UK university, the MMO, and the RFO. Conversations ranged between 45 min to an hour in length and were recorded. The audio data from the interviews was transcribed with the aid of transcription software. Analysis was undertaken using a thematic approach using a mix of inductive and deductive coding. Throughout the R&D project, data was also gained by attending and observing project meetings and observing the day-to-day work of UK University employees involved in the case study reported here. Notes were taken and analysed alongside the interviews.

4. Intermediating R&D in the creative industries

In this section we trace intermediation processes through three stages of the R&D project: pre-project, project setup and funding competition, and R&D projects (Table 3). We adopt a chronological structure to help highlight the shifts in different inter-mediation processes, identify the key actors at different stages and pinpoint how value is accumulated by different stakeholders. Italics are used to indicate different intermediary processes drawn from Tables 1 and 2. What we report is a necessarily stylised account to maintain promises of anonymity and contain the complexity within a journal article. Therefore we highlight only the major processes and relationships.

4.1. Phase 1: Pre-project—scanning, brokerage and commissioning

RFO was the key intermediary in this phase, acting to connect MMO and UK University. This was done as part of the UK Government's industrial strategy activity, part of which was designed to ensure R&D activity in the UK was protected against the impacts of Brexit. At this time RFO was working with Government departments tasked with fostering economic growth and international trade:

Table 3. Intermediary process in each phase of the R&D project.

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Research Funding Organisation	Scanning and information processing Gatekeeper/broker Intermediary of production		
UK University		Scanning and information processing Curation and appraisal Intermediary of artistic work Intellectual property intermediary Financial intermediary Assessment and evaluation Appraisal-prescription Brokering Intermediation of production	Gatekeeper/broker Intermediary of artistic work Intermediary of production
Multi-media organisation		Assessment and evaluation Appraisal-prescription	

'[the project] originated from very early discussions that [Government departments] and… advisors were having with major companies on the west coast of the States…there was a sense of a demand from the big, multinational global media companies that were. and always are hungry for new ideas, new ways of working, and in particular, new content.'

(RFO informant 1)

The RFO was keen to demonstrate they could play a role to help the government achieve its aims, and thus secure further funding from HM Treasury for its own activities in the future. To do this they initially acted as a *scanning and information processing* intermediary to identify (a) media organisations interested in working with UK SMEs and universities, and (b) suitable university teams to take over intermediary processes and manage innovation between an MMO and UK SMEs. The pitch to media organisations outside the UK was focused on adapting to change, asking them…

'How are you responding to [market and technological changes] in terms of your R&D investments?'

…and offering a solution:

'Why don't you come and have a look at what we're doing in the UK? … [we can provide] a resource on the ground…access to a set of companies, small and large…connectivity through [university-led R&D projects]…and people, researchers, advisors, and technical support teams.'

(RFO informant 1)

After a period of successful *scanning and information processing* intermediation, RFO was able to act as a *gatekeeper/broker* by introducing an MMO to UK University. At the same time, they were an *intermediary of production* by commissioning a UK University to undertake a project to enable innovation partnerships between UK SMEs and the chosen MMO. In this early phase, we can already see the plural intermediation being undertaken by RFO and a shift in emphasis from understanding the innovation landscape to brokering partnerships.

4.1.1. Internal value creation

The value for the MMOs was pitched as access to SMEs and research knowledge they didn't need to pay for. For the RFO, while undertaking this *scanning and information processing intermediation*, they were generating internal value through 'practices for access to innovation ecosystem knowledge' in De Silva et al.'s (2018) terms. In addition, they were bolstering the potential for future *knowledge processing, generation and combination* intermediation and increasing their reputation as effective *gatekeeping and brokering* intermediaries (Howells, 2006). At this stage of the process, RFO was also leveraging the reputation of the UK Government who were ultimately funding the project, as well as offering logistical support. For UK University, value was generated by building relationships with RFO and MMO, and contributing to their aims of fostering local economic growth by enabling SMEs to work with a US company. Applying De Silva et al.'s framework, we can identify 'practices for knowledge spanning' and 'practices for shaping the innovation ecosystem knowledge base'.

4.2. Project setup and funding competition—curating and intermediating artistic work

Once RFO had introduced UK University to MMO, they took a step back from intermediating between parties and focused on their commissioning relationship with UK University. This involved formalising the aims of the project and various contractual negotiations. The key aims were to:

- develop new media-driven consumer experiences, products and services for MMO
- prioritise concepts for further development

To achieve the agreed aims, UK University took on an intermediary role acting between MMO, RFO and creative SMEs. The main focus at this stage was on the latter, and while the funding call that SMEs could apply to was still being developed, UK University began to 'warm up' companies they thought were suitable to work with MMO. This process involved *scanning and information processing* of existing knowledge of SMEs, drawing on existing knowledge of the sector and developing new knowledge through contacts, networking and snowballing. The project's focus on creative IP meant scanning and information processing also involved judgements of the quality of an SME's creative output and thus UK University took on a *curatorial and appraising* role for MMO. This combination was highlighted as useful because:

> '[MMO] were saying that they've done SME partner innovation before, and they struggled. And the reason they struggled is that they just didn't know how to reach the right people and to select in a really good way…we're a creative [research programme] that's what we're meant to be good at. So I suppose that's one key way we add value.'
>
> (UK University informant 3)

An important part of the curatorial process involved understanding more about SMEs and what they could o er MMO. Here we can identify what Lize (2016) refers to as *'intermediaries of artistic work'*: where agents work on behalf of employers/commissioners and/or creative producers/companies. This is different from a curatorial or appraising intermediation as the work involved more than selecting good work, it include actively partaking in the production process itself. At this stage of the process, UK University was acting for both MMO and SMEs in separate, but simultaneous ways. First, acting on behalf of MMO, *intermediation of artistic work* took the form of sifting for quality and appropriateness:

> 'The next bit was to brief SMEs, to test out ideas, to do some triage as well…to hear their ideas on the way to sending them to [MMO]. So when [colleague] and I were doing a lot of this early work with the companies we were like; 'tell us your early ideas…don't apply just yet. Let's talk about them'. And we could help guide them a bit…and keep people away from just ideas that were great, but wouldn't resonate with [MMO].'
>
> (UK University informant 3)

Second, while UK University was working with SMEs to develop ideas, it was also working with MMOs about which intellectual property they would make available to successful applicants. This was crucial as it needed to be flexible enough to work with the range of technologies the potential SMEs might be developing, valuable

enough that it would demonstrate its worth to senior personnel at MMO and accessible to a UK SME (e.g. it wasn't media exclusive to American audiences). Moreover, it needed to be legally accessible:

> 'Very early on we were trying to pin IP down. [MMO contact] was very conscious of that being really, really complicated because IP ownership is distributed in large organisations, and even a single IP can actually have several owners.'
>
> (UK University informant 3)

This role as *intermediaries of artistic work,* in cultural terms, was simultaneously a role of *intellectual property intermediary* in innovation terms and reiterates the hybrid functions taken on by different stakeholders.

Once these elements were agreed upon, if the ideas from SMEs appeared good enough and suitable for MMO's aims, companies were encouraged to formally apply for funding and the relationship with MMO. Participants remarked that, although access to funding was always there in the background, it was only at this point that UK University's role as a *financial intermediary* came to the fore. It was made clear to all parties from the start it was the role of UK University to fund SMEs to work with MMO using RFO monies, but this role was only actualised through the funding competition itself. This is significant to note because from the outside the R&D project appeared like a funding scheme for SMEs, and while financial intermediation was an important part of UK University's role, it was not the only thing it o ered. That financial intermediation was a dormant process further demonstrates the importance of recognising the plural nature of intermediaries and the other functions intermediaries can offer.

The other support UK University was able to offer included examples such as:

> 'providing [SMEs] with some funding, however, I nd myself being of service in ways other than money. I'm trying to leverage support wherever I can find it…help[ing] get the SMEs into the States so that they can deliver showcases…and then do some business development…while they're there. [We are] helping to kind of amplify. So I think we are the money, but we're also other useful things.'
>
> (UK University informant 1)

Through the process of evaluating applications for funding from SMEs, further plural and hybrid forms of intermediation were at work between UK University, MMO and the SMEs. The judgement of SME's applications by a group of reviewers from MMO, UK University and industry advisors was simultaneously *assessment and evaluation*, in Howells' terms (2006), and *appraisal-prescription*, in Lizé's terms (2016). The former conceptualisation originates from innovation studies and the latter from cultural studies so involves the assessment of different things (e.g. the effectiveness of a technology or the aesthetic quality of a play), but lead to the same outcomes: a judgement of quality, potential and/or value. The review team assessed a range of factors including the SME's: financial stability; previous work; technical knowledge; market knowledge; and strength of proposed R&D activity. Assessment of proposals, then, required a mix of technological, qualitative and financial judgements to be made and allow the process of financial intermediation to be enacted. During the award stage of the competition, intermediation also included *brokering* contracts

between parties, *intellectual property intermediation* to assess and agree to IP protection, and the start of *intermediation of production* which we explore in the next section.

4.2.1. Internal value creation

For UK University the value generated through intermediation at this project setup and funding stage stems from a series of interrelated elements identified in De Silva et al.'s (2018) work. First, the process of scanning for SMEs and then assessing their applications, together with collaboration with the MMO, meant UK University was undertaking 'practices for knowledge advancement' in that they were able to acquire, absorb and internalise new knowledges about the creative sectors they focused on. Second, 'practices for access to innovation ecosystem knowledge' began to emerge through the initial collaboration with MMO. Third, sta at UK University were empowered through this stage of the case study as they gained experience of managing the relationships outlined above. In the next section, we explore the changing role of UK University and how these value generation practices evolved.

4.3. Phase 3: R&D projects—intermediating production and relationships

In the previous phase of this case study, UK University was the key intermediary acting with, for and between the SMEs and MMO. Once funding had been awarded and contracts agreed upon, UK University took a step back as SME1 and SME2 had direct relationships with MMO:

> 'after the companies were chosen and set in the right direction they found a couple of key people in the [MMO R&D team], and they then became enablers for those projects and champions…The two companies chosen are quite good, in the sense that they are con dent they've managed media partner relationships before, they kind of know how it goes.'
>
> (UK University informant 2)

There were instances when SME1 or SME2 asked for some help from UK University to act on their behalf to get something from MMO, for example, if they were taking too long to respond. This could be conceived as '*intermediation of artistic work'* and/ or *gatekeeping and brokering*, depending on the need. As one respondent put it:

> 'I always envision [UK University] as like brokers really. They create a safety net between a company like ours…we've got big ideas and big ambitions and lots of experience, but we're a minnow compared to [MMO]…they are an enormous company, and I've been dealing with large media organisations before, and they can just run o with your idea, or they can just shut it down and take away what they want, and that kind of thing. So for us, the way I say it, is that [UK University] is a safe way to be interfacing with a company like MMO.'
>
> (SME1 participant 2)

The relationship between the SMEs and MMO was generally good enough; however, this was not a frequent request. What was more common, however, was catching up with the SMEs to check things were progressing well.

'SME growth [is crucial to our work]…but also our ability to show [others] what we can make happen or help them is important as well. So I've primarily been focused on [SME1 and SME2]. For like the last six months, I've been spending at least two hours every week with these companies, making sure everything's okay.'

(UK University informant 1)

Here we can identify a different form of intermediation happening. UK University continued as an *intermediary of production* having a 'hand in the creation process' (Lizé, 2016: 37) by being a sounding board and offering advice about the products SME1 and SME2 were working on. Entwined within this process, however, was a different kind of support not listed in work on cultural or innovation intermediaries: *affective intermediation*. Much of the activity we are reporting happened during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns the UK experienced in 2020 and 2021. As with most of the rest of the economy, initial lockdowns saw the creative industries halting the majority of their activity under stay-at-home orders. Restrictions were relaxed for parts of the screen industries while other work was done remotely from home. The uncertainty about how the pandemic would unfold, the health of friends and family and the consequences for the economy saw SME1 and SME2 working in a very different way than usual:

'There's a bit about the pandemic here…Because I'm sure we would have had pizzas and stu and shot the breeze and just got to know each other better. But this whole thing happened throughout that period. And it's, it's just fate.'

(SME2 participant 1)

The weekly 'check ins' from people at UK University were online but still focused on relationship building.

'Sometimes our calls are quite relationship focussed. I think that's the nature of the calls we have…So it is absolutely a relationship focused on the basis that [UK University participant 1] is looking to keep the momentum of that relationship going. And I see it as a partnership anyway.'

(SME2 participant 1)

UK University provided not only production help, but let the companies know their work was valued and that they weren't operating alone with a major corporation during the biggest post-war disruption to the UK economy. The emotional support was a human reaction to the struggles of working through a pandemic, but it was also a form of intermediation for two reasons. First, the encouragement and reassurance from UK University participants was entwined with other forms of intermediation (at this stage, for example, intermediation of production and artistic work). Second, it helped SME1 and SME2 produce better work and have a more effective relationship with MMO.

These enabling functions, then, can be seen as relational labour undertaken by UK University participants as part of their intermediary role. Baym (2015: 16) explains relational labour as 'regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work'. Baym distinguishes relational labour from 'emotional labour' to highlight the interplay of personal relationships with work-oriented labour and, through the example of how musicians connect with fans,

the focus on earning money. They argue relational labour 'o ers something new by emphasizing the ongoing communicative practices and skills of building and main-taining interpersonal and group relationships that is now so central to maintaining many careers' (ibid: 20). This is what SME2 participant 1 and UK University informant 1 are describing, only not focused on customers. It is more akin to what Whitson et al. (2021) describe in their analysis of the role of producers in the indie games sector. They emphasise the difference between relational labour and similar the con-cept of 'affective labour' by illustrating the material outcomes of such work. In so doing, they shift the focus of where relational labour occurs from artists working to develop and maintain a fanbase, to the 'personal–professional relationships…developed [by games developers] with journalists/critics, publishers, platform holders, service providers, sponsors, investors and the larger development support networks and cultural intermediaries described above'. In Whitson et al.'s case they are highlighting the disintermediation that happens when intermediaries of production are removed and artist-creators have to deal with other elements of the creative supply themselves (see also Kribs, 2016). In our case, UK University is taking up that intermediary role and enhancing it with affective intermediation through relational labour.

4.3.1. Internal value creation

In the previous phase of the case study, we identified value creation for UK University as stemming from three interrelated dimensions: practices for knowledge advancement; practices for access to innovation ecosystem knowledge; and knowledge worker empowerment. As the projects and relationships evolved, so did the processes of value generation. Practices for knowledge advancement continued and deepened as UK University learned more about how SME1 and SME2 were developing their creative technologies and how they were working with MMO. This knowledge acquisition was shared amongst the UK University team and through internal practices and external engagement activities, they were able to externalise the knowledge they gained. This allowed them to feed back to RFO, MMO and others in the R&D community what was and what wasn't working in arrangements such as this. This shifted value gen-eration from simply accessing knowledge about the ecosystem to 'practices for shaping the innovation ecosystem knowledge base'.

5. Conclusions

Through this case study we have sought to illustrate the value of using two different, but complementary frameworks for understanding intermediary processes: one from innovation studies, the other from cultural studies. In so doing we have made four contributions. First, we have reiterated how intermediation often involves plural pro-cesses. Plurality can be a function of time, with an intermediary undertaking different processes across time as projects unfold and the requirements of the intermediary change. For example when UK University shifted from *scanning and information pro-cessing*, through *assessment and evaluation* to *intermediation of production*. Plurality can also be seen when different intermediary processes happen simultaneously. In this case study we see this when UK University was an *intermediary of artistic work*

and an *intellectual property intermediary*. Appreciating the plural or hybrid nature of intermediation is important as it reveals the value that intermediaries can have. In this case, it may have seemed from the outside that UK University was just a financial intermediary funding SMEs to work with MMO. But behind the scenes, many other processes were occurring to make that relationship function efficiently and effectively.

Second, we have addressed De Silva et al.'s (2018) call for more work on 'the internal value creation of innovation intermediaries from their interaction with their clients'. Importantly, this happens over time and we can identify this most clearly when examining the role of UK University moving through processes of identifying suitable SMEs, appraising their potential contribution, formally assessing bids, and then supporting their work with MMO. Through this process, UK University was generating internal values linked to the different forms of intermediation and building on capacities generated earlier in the project. For instance, 'practices of knowledge spanning' enabling 'practices for shaping the innovation ecosystem knowledge base'.

Third, we identify affective intermediation through relational labour as a new form of intermediation that supports and enables other intermediary functions. This activity is likely to have been important for cultural intermediaries, and in processes of innovation intermediation, for centuries. Indeed, as Whitson et al. (2021) illustrate, such processes are essential to facilitate the production of goods and services in fragmented production chains.

Finally, we contribute to the growing work on intermediaries in the creative economy. As Taylor (2015: 362) highlighted 'intermediation in the creative economy has… been comparatively under-theorized'. This is especially true for R&D activities in the creative economy which have only recently been recognised as such. We hope, therefore, that mobilising insights from both cultural studies and innovation studies demonstrates their compatibility. Moreover, the case study presented here highlights the overlap between both approaches e.g. *assessment and evaluation* in Howells' (2006) framework is similar to how the work done by *appraisers/prescribers/selectors* Bourdeiuian frameworks. The focus of such judgements and how they are made, however, may di er with emphasis placed on different elements of a product, service or experience.

Notes

1. Howells's 2006 article has been cited over 2500 times according to Google Scholar
2. In the UK, SMEs have been able to claim tax breaks for R&D since 2000 and larger firms in 2002 (Guceri, 2015) and manufacturing, 'professional, scientific and technical', and information communication technology sectors have benefited the most (Fowkes, Sousa and Duncan, 2015). France has used tax incentives since the mid-1990s to support R&D, Spain began using the tax system for similar reasons in 1995, and Italy did so in 2007 (Sterlacchini and Venturini, 2019).

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