

KANSAS CITY STARTUP VILLAGE: A CASE STUDY

by

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## **Abstract**

Innovative communities create cities rich in culture and opportunities to attract like minded residents and business owners to advance their city and their community. This study looks at the entrepreneurial startup community, Kansas City Startup Village (KCSV) and seeks to understand how social networks benefit entrepreneurs and how KCSV helps establish these networks.

Through a review of similar startup communities and literature surrounding the topic, essential components within startup communities and characteristics of entrepreneurs were identified. To better understand the role of these elements within KCSV, ten entrepreneurs and members of support organizations of KCSV were interviewed regarding the social networks of the Village. The interviewing process utilized a grounded theory approach, with a text coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews to identify the role of entrepreneurs and social networks within KCSV.

Findings were consistent with many of the topics discussed in the literature review and within the Comparative Communities section. Kansas City shares many common elements of the startup communities of Saint Louis, Missouri, and Boulder, Colorado; most notably the networking and social capital-building practices that keep entrepreneurs connected. The entrepreneurs possess traits that gave them an entrepreneurial advantage including formal education, past business experience, risk taking, and broad, forward thinking goals. Strong and weak ties were used in different scenarios and at different stages within their company's lifecycle to assist with opportunity identification, resource acquisition and gaining legitimacy. KCSV was most influential in establishing the peer networks of entrepreneurs, which assist primarily with opportunity identification and resource acquisition.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

This paper examines the actions of entrepreneurs and their social networks in the entrepreneurial community, Kansas City Startup Village (KCSV). KCSV is an entrepreneur led community helping to grow and support local entrepreneurs and the startup ecosystem in Kansas City. “Entrepreneurship comes about through the interaction between a specific situation and a specific individual or group of individuals” (Shapero, 1984 p. 29). Analyzing the social networks of the individuals within KCSV and their support organizations can determine what types of social ties are beneficial in identifying opportunities, acquiring resources and establishing legitimacy for startups.

This paper seeks to understand two questions. The first, how do social networks benefit entrepreneurs? And second, how does Kansas City Startup Village help establish these networks?

The first section begins with a brief overview of startup communities and KCSV. The second section presents a review of the existing literature surrounding startup communities and the variables to be studied in the methodology. The methodology section follows, describing the interview and analysis process. The final section presents the findings from the methodology and discussion of the results, limitations and direction for future research.

## Chapter 2 - Background

### Startup Communities

Startups are grounded in creative advancements of an industry or idea. Vidal (2013) defines startups as a unique class of business with an extremely high growth potential, creating something that is desirable for a large population. A community based structure can provide collective assets that individual startup endeavors cannot provide individually including knowledge transfer amongst peers, shared resources such as capital, and local entrepreneurial development.

Startup communities are small geographic regions of energy, activity, and innovation (Feld, 2012). Kansas City Startup Village (KCSV) began from an organic assemblage of small startups located in Kansas City's Hanover Heights and Spring Valley neighborhoods and from collective action of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial communities must be inclusive and welcome other entrepreneurs into the community, with the view that growth within the startup community is a positive force for everyone involved (Feld, 2012). The entrepreneurs associated with the Village work to advance Kansas City's startup scene by establishing successful startups and providing valuable resources to other entrepreneurs. The community based focus extends beyond the desire to make the Village a successful startup community and affect the larger Kansas City community in a positive way.

### History of Entrepreneurial Communities

Entrepreneurial communities have been developing and changing for many decades. Macke, Markley & Fulwider (2014) outlined the history of entrepreneurial communities in their book *Energizing Entrepreneurial Communities: A Pathway to Prosperity*. A majority of federally supported small business programs began in the mid - 1960s in larger cities. Around the same time, some of the most well-known startup and entrepreneurial communities, Silicon Valley and Research Triangle Park were created to spur economic development. A similar federally supported effort was occurring in rural areas with the Title VII program, focusing on growing communities from within and creating jobs in areas with persistent poverty.

Within twenty to thirty years, entrepreneurship development evolved “from a focus on programs and entrepreneurial support organizations to a systems approach that incorporates the broader community” (Macke et al., 2014, p. v). The systems approach in tandem with the Economic Gardening movement that focused on surrounding entrepreneurs with the information, connections and infrastructure they needed to grow supported the comprehensive systems approach. Economic gardening seeks to grow businesses locally, with the understanding that small and local businesses are an important driver of economic growth in communities (Farr, 2008). The focus on creating a holistic environment for entrepreneurs to grow their businesses is still seen in startup communities today.

Today, the functions and successes of entrepreneurial communities are viewed through a systems approach. “Traditional methods used to evaluate entrepreneurial ecosystems have focused on sizing up risk capital, incubators, a supportive culture, or other elements in an entrepreneurial community. We believe there is significant room for improvement by focusing instead on the relationships between these elements and the evolution of an ecosystem over time,” (Motoyama & Watkins, 2014, p. 2). Both Motoyama & Watkins (2014) and Markley et al. (2015) advance the study of entrepreneurial communities as ecosystems, considering all interrelated components. Approaching startup communities as an ecosystem strengthens the relationship between the startup community and the place based assets that contribute to a place’s entrepreneurial culture. The importance of place is identified through asset-based economic development, using a location’s strengths to create an economic base. “The capacity of the community or region to embrace and advance ecosystem development becomes a precursor to, a necessary condition for, developing entrepreneurial talent” (Markley et al., 2015, p. 6). For a place (neighborhood, city, region) to develop entrepreneurial talent, additional focus must be placed on the assets of the place and how the entrepreneur utilizes them. This requires city planners and officials to be knowledgeable about types of infrastructure, policies and development that is supportive of entrepreneurship.

## **Startup Communities in Cities**

Creating communities that offer a wide variety of employment and lifestyle opportunities can be the key to attracting and retaining residents. Kansas City Startup Village located within urban Kansas City provides live-work spaces, coworking spaces and a collection of entrepreneurs is an example of this type of community. In his article, “Why Today’s Start-Ups Are Choosing Urban Lofts Over Suburban Office Parks,” Florida (2013) discusses why more start-ups are locating in downtown areas as opposed to suburban office parks. Reasons include increased access to talent and cities being denser, efficient and affordable for small startups. “Cities bring diverse collections of talented people together, allowing them to combine and recombine their ideas and swiftly mobilize entrepreneurial resources. As such, they have long been leading epicenters of creativity and innovation” (Florida, 2013). As cities begin to realize the value of entrepreneurship they can create communities supportive of the entrepreneurial culture.

Effective regional and community planning understands and promotes the interconnectedness of persons and agencies working to create unique communities: both physical communities bounded by geographical constraints as well as social communities connected through relationships. As our world seems to become larger and more connected through technology, smaller social scales and business communities become more important to creating desirable places to live and work such as Kansas City Startup Village.

## **Comparative Communities**

From the original entrepreneurial communities in Silicon Valley and the Research Triangle, to today’s major cities such as New York and Boston, new cities are finding ways to attract the creative class. “The energy, activity, and innovation in society is diffused across the network and concentrated in unexpected places that often didn’t exist before,” (Feldman & Zoller, 2012, p. 1). Today startup communities are forming all over the country as centers for innovation and development and are no longer exclusive to large metropolitan areas. This section identifies key

components that were instrumental in the formation of startup communities in Boulder, Colorado and St. Louis, Missouri.

### *Boulder, Colorado*

As communities gain legitimacy, they are often studied for the attributes that led to their success. Neck, Meyer, Cohen & Corbett (2004) analyze the interactions of elements of an entrepreneurial system in Boulder County, Colorado. Through semi-structured interviews Neck, et al. (2004) identify three main interactive components within the Boulder County entrepreneurial system: informal and formal networks, physical infrastructure and culture.

Formal networks include university, government, professional and support services, capital sources, talent, and large corporations and informal networks were composed of friends, families, colleagues and informal relations with similar companies. The second component physical infrastructure, is the tangible components of the place. The constraints of physical infrastructure can cause entrepreneurs to migrate to more cost effective areas (p. 204). The last component of the system is the area's culture, or what an organization, industry, or nation unique. "Culture may be the single most important element for a system to develop and also may be the most difficult element to replicate and to manage," (Neck et al., 2004, p. 204). Through their interviews, 100 percent of the founders identified culture as an important element of the entrepreneurial system. According to the researchers, these are the elements that must be in place for a region to attract high levels of entrepreneurial activity.

Feld's (2012) Boulder Thesis and the system discovered by Neck et al. (2004) rely heavily upon the aspect of relationships amongst entrepreneurs and their partners. Feld (2012) offers specific insight into how entrepreneurs can develop their informal and formal networks. Based on his experience with the Boulder startup community, Feld created a four component theory called The Boulder Thesis:

1. Entrepreneurs must lead the startup community.

2. The leaders must have a long term commitment.
3. The startup community must be inclusive of anyone who wants to participate in it.
4. The startup community must have continual activities that engage the entire entrepreneurial stack.

The first component acknowledges the role of many other people and organizations involved in the startup community including government, universities, investors, mentors, and service providers. However, a critical mass of entrepreneurs must be the leaders to enhance the sustainability of the community. The second component requires startup community leaders to have a long term vision in order to sustain through the cyclical phases of the economy.

A startup community must be inclusive for anyone beginning their career, moving to the city with previous startup experience or interested in participating at any level of the startup community. One way to accomplish the third and fourth components is by providing regular activities that engage all the local entrepreneurs. This includes hackathons, new tech meetups, open coffee clubs and start up weekends. Some of these activities will become traditions and some will pass, which is essential to the startup community's sense of successes and how to best engage the entire entrepreneurial community for a long period of time.

### *St. Louis, Missouri*

The startup community in St. Louis was chosen because it has not been known as an entrepreneurial hub and its substantial transformation as one has provided greater insight into the evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems. This further advances previous ideas from Feld (2012) that communities that have not been known for startup activity can take measures to create their own ecosystem. Cohn (2013) expresses the same belief as Feld for smaller, less known communities having the ability to develop their entrepreneurial culture. "When smaller cities play to their strengths while simultaneously working to shore up their deficiencies, they can attract talented entrepreneurs and help them succeed," (Cohn, 2013). This examination of the startup community and activities in St. Louis rely on a case study by Motoyama and Watkins (2014) and a reflection by Cohn (2013) on the local entrepreneurial development. While these two provide

different interpretations, there are similarities in the information provided which can help provide a more accurate picture of characteristics of startup communities. In their study of the St. Louis Startup Ecosystem, Motoyama and Watkins (2014) identify four key social connections:

1. Connections Between Entrepreneurs: A critical aspect was mentorship and the connections between novice and experienced entrepreneurs.
2. Connections Between Support Organizations: The collaboration of support organizations through shared board members, attending events and jointly organizing events strengthen the individual and collective goals of the organizations.
3. Connections Between Entrepreneurs and Key Support Organizations: Support was divided into two types: broad types which included practices such as mentoring and connecting, and financial and functional types such as business model assistance and incubation.
4. Miscellaneous Support Connections: These were events that connected entrepreneurs who might not meet otherwise.

The larger implications from their study found that local or regional startup ecosystems must focus on creating opportunities for the aforementioned connections to take place through location and support organizations.

Cohn (2013) started his company in St. Louis in 2007, when the entrepreneurial ecosystem was beginning. He identified seven factors to contributing to the success of entrepreneurial activity in St. Louis including:

1. Reduced costs: The availability of the internet to launch a digital company anywhere and the low cost of living in St. Louis make starting a company in the area fairly inexpensive compared to some areas.
2. Local support from universities: Washington University and Saint Louis University offer nationally respected entrepreneurship programs that provide a talented and knowledgeable workforce.

3. Growth of local venture capital (VC) firms: Early-stage technology VC firms provide local investors the opportunity to reinvest in communities they believe in.
4. Emergence of wealthy angels: Within the past 20 years, a large number of St. Louis based Fortune 500 companies have been acquired providing additional financial support from potential investors.
5. Mentoring assistance from entrepreneurs: St. Louis has recently began the creation of several formal programs to provide mentorship to entrepreneurs.
6. Attracting entrepreneurial talent: Local St. Louis accelerators, such as Arch Grants and Capital Innovators are offering prizes and grants for companies and entrepreneurs to relocate, elevating the local talent level within the area.
7. Emphasizing education: Providing educational opportunities to students at a young age integrate real world, employable skills into the educational culture of a city.

The separate studies by Cohn (2013) and Motoyama and Watkins (2014) reflect similar elements of the St. Louis entrepreneurial community that contributed to the establishment of the startup community including mentorship practices, support from well established organizations and to the community.

## **Kansas City Startup Village (KCSV)**

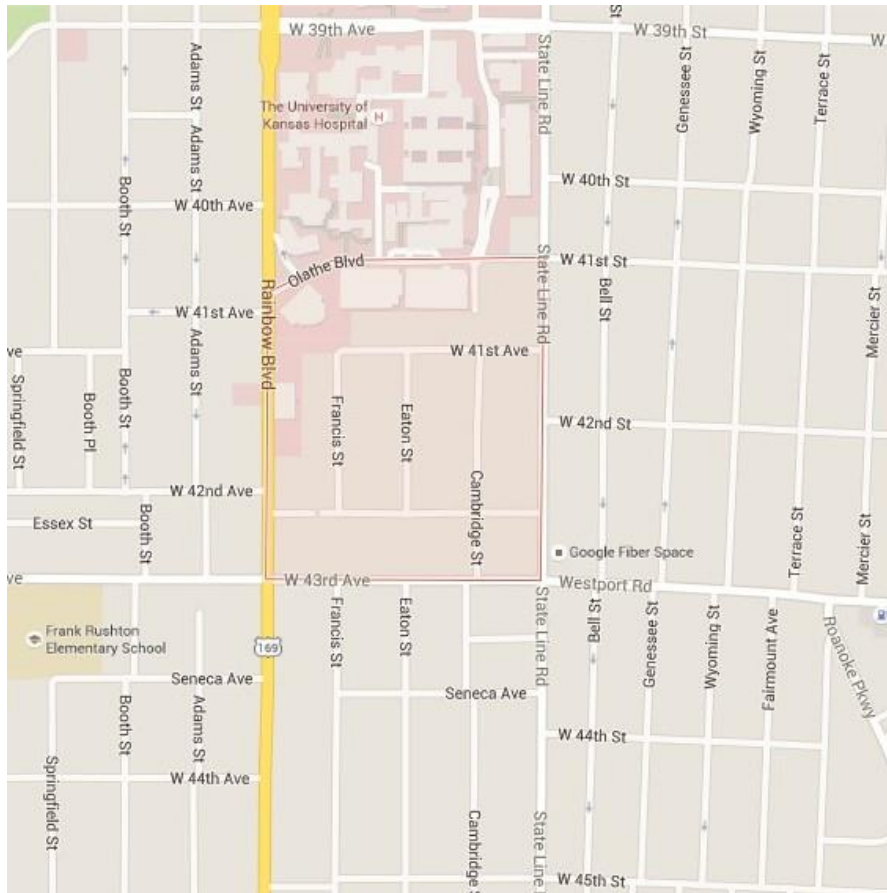
### *History*

Kansas City Startup Village started as a collective effort of entrepreneurs in September 2012 as a result of the congregation of startups in the Hanover Heights and Spring Valley neighborhoods of Kansas City, two of the neighborhoods that were first to receive access to Google Fiber. “What seems to matter is the capacity to build on early events or accidents through entrepreneurial actions and the construction of institutions conducive to the industry,” (Feldman, 2014, pg. 15). While many startups were already in existence in Kansas City, the entrepreneurs who sought to take advantage of Google Fiber were the ones to initiate the creation of KCSV. At the Village’s peak



in June 2014 it was home to 32 startups, 72 jobs and 14 properties and today the Village is home to 22 startups, 48 jobs and 10 properties (Hungerford, 2016).

Figure 1. Hanover Heights Neighborhood, Kansas City



Source: Google Maps

### *Location and Boundaries*

KCSV includes the Kansas neighborhoods of Hanover Heights (Figure 1), Spring Valley, Frank Rushton and the Missouri neighborhoods of West Plaza North and West Plaza South. According to KCSV, there are several reasons or advantages for startups locating in these areas including the area being the first national “fiberhood,” room for startups in low cost commercial and residential spaces, and the location along State Line Road, allowing for startups to base themselves in either state, Kansas or Missouri, depending on their needs and potential benefits (KCSV, About, 2012).

As startups grow and develop, they move out of the Village, while remaining active in the larger Kansas City entrepreneurial community.

## KCSV Components

Each entrepreneurial community is unique, determined by the assets of their location. The importance of place is identified through asset-based economic development, using a location's strengths to create an economic base. No two cities are the same, with some cities providing superior technological capabilities, institutional support and culture. "The capacity of the community or region to embrace and advance ecosystem development becomes a precursor to, a necessary condition for, developing entrepreneurial talent" (Markley et al, 2015, p. 6). These assets form the foundation that contribute to the inception and sustainability of the startup community. There are several components that contributed to the initiation and the advancement of KCSV, as described below. The methodology section will further explore how social connections were formed to acquire and develop these resources.

### *1. Access to Technology : Google Fiber*

Kansas City was the first city to receive advanced high speed internet provided by Google. KCSV is located in the Hanover Heights and Spring Valley neighborhoods, two of the neighborhoods that were first to receive Fiber access in Kansas City. Jauhiainen & Moilanen (2012) describe high-technology clusters as belonging to a broader innovation system, characterized by cooperation and networks in innovation activities. The evolution of technology within Kansas City strengthened networks of entrepreneurs seeking to advance startup activity within Kansas City. Google Fiber was a catalyst for Kansas City Startup Village and many other technological advancements in the area.

### *2. Entrepreneurial Initiatives : Homes for Hackers*

Homes for Hackers (4428 State Line Road, Kansas City, Kansas) is a four bedroom house located in Hanover Heights that offers rent free living and workspace for startups relocating to Kansas City

(Homes for Hackers, 2016). Homes for Hackers was one of the initial institutions and properties associated with the Village.

### *3. Coworking Spaces : The Village and Village Square*

The Village is the where KCSV began, located in the Hanover Heights and Spring Valley neighborhoods, along State Line Road. The physical location of neighborhoods helps provide identity to the Village.

Village Square (4436 State Line Road, Kansas City, Kansas) is owned and operated by CEED, opened in April of 2015, is a co-working space that offers entrepreneurs and startups a place organize and connect. The co-working is a 3,000 square foot space with 20 desks dedicated to monthly members and space for up to 16 drop in workers and access to event space, meeting rooms, Google Fiber internet and teleconferencing capabilities (Collins, 2015).

Centralized space for startups to work in The Village and Village Square coworking space creates an opportunity for network formation and startup development. “More than facilitating face-to-face interaction and the exchange of tacit knowledge, geography enhances the probability for serendipity- the chance for something unexpected to have a profound and transformative impact” (Feldman, 2014, p. 19). What initially began as an independent, organic progress amongst individual startups has grown into a strategic, collaborative localization process driving KCSV. While technology is constantly advancing and creating situations where geographic proximity seems unnecessary, Feldman & Zoller (2012) argue otherwise. “Evidence suggests that location, rather than being irrelevant, is more important than ever,” (p.22). Creating physical spaces within communities brings together members of the creative class and creates opportunities to transform cities. The physical boundaries of The Village create a central location within Kansas City to bring together entrepreneurs.

#### *4. Entrepreneur & Technology Support Organizations: The Kauffman Foundation, KCSF & CEED*

The Kauffman Foundation is a non-profit foundation focusing on entrepreneurship and education in Kansas City and was identified as an influential partner in the establishment of KCSV. The Kauffman Foundation created and hosted the 1 Million Cups event (see below).

Kansas City Startup Foundation (KCSF) originated from the volunteer efforts of Kansas City Startup Village. Focused on supporting Kansas City's entrepreneurial community through broad ideas of collisions, co-learning and community by supporting organizations such as CEED & KCSV. These ideas are implemented through various activities including raising awareness, collaboration, mentoring & coaching, solve problems, tours & panels, and research.

The Center for Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Development (CEED), was founded in July of 2014 to strengthen Kansas City's startup system. CEED operates Startland News, a digital publication reporting on the entrepreneurial ecosystem, focuses on educating students by running the MECA challenge and operating the Village Square Coworking Studio in the Village (Center for Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Development, 2016).

#### *5. Networking Events: 1 Million Cups*

These are events that connect local entrepreneurs and allow them to expand their networks. Feld (2012) considers events that continually connect and engage members of the entrepreneurial community as a primary component of a startup ecosystem. One Million Cups was started at the Kauffman Foundation and is a weekly meeting for entrepreneurs in Kansas City to come and present their companies to a diverse audience of their peers, mentors, educators and advisors.

## Chapter 3 - Literature Review

This literature review focuses on entrepreneurs, social capital and social networks. Entrepreneurs actively engage in the process of building social capital through social networks. The importance of social networks for entrepreneurs and startups is explained in the following sections and further examined in the methodology.

### The Entrepreneur

Kansas City Startup Village (KCSV) is a startup community established by entrepreneurs seeking to advance the startup ecosystem in Kansas City. Entrepreneurs are “agents who recognize opportunity, mobilize resources, and create value are key to the creation of institutions and the building of capacity that will sustain regional economic development” (Feldman, 2014, p. 9). While the definition of the entrepreneur varies widely, this definition touches on two important aspects of entrepreneurship: the ability to recognize opportunities and collect the required resources for the task at hand. Previous research on the entrepreneur identified two key concepts known as the entrepreneurial event and the entrepreneurial advantage. These two terms describe why the entrepreneur embarks on a new venture and how they use their strengths to do so.

#### *The Entrepreneurial Advantage*

The ability of entrepreneurs to recognize unique opportunities provides them with additional advantages for reaching their goals. Feldman (2014) calls this the entrepreneurial advantage, “entrepreneurs excel at being able to identify opportunities that are not obvious to others” (p. 11). An entrepreneur’s familiarity with the history and context of a place allows entrepreneurs to see opportunity that is not obvious to others and may defy traditional norms of the place. Feldman (2014) says the perception of opportunities that are not obvious to others is the essence of entrepreneurial advantage “and when entrepreneurs act upon place-based opportunity, they are in a position to apply their skills and potentially create prosperity and economic change” (p. 11). Entrepreneurs are the innovators that push the community forward.

### *The Entrepreneurial Event*

Once entrepreneurs recognize their initial opportunities, they begin to collect resources for their organization to grow. The organization's beginning is what Feldman (2001) and Shapero (1984) call the "entrepreneurial event," the initiation of organizational formation by entrepreneurs. Shapero (1984, p. 24) gives five characteristics of the entrepreneurial event:

- (1) initiative taking, an individual or group takes the initiative;
- (2) bringing together or reorganizing resources in organizational form to accomplish some objective;
- (3) management of the organization by those who took the initiative;
- (4) relative autonomy, the relative freedom to dispose of and distribute resources and
- (5) risk taking, the organization's success or failure is shared by the initiators/managers

As a grass roots organization, several local entrepreneurs initiated the creation of KCSV once Google Fiber was announced in the neighborhoods. KCSV entrepreneurs began by collecting resources and creating structure to the entrepreneurs' vision. While entrepreneurs have unique skills that assist with initial opportunity identification, they often rely on social networks to advance these opportunities.

### **Social Capital**

The social relationships amongst entrepreneurs and support organizations create a critical element to the success and sustainability of entrepreneurial communities. Entrepreneurs have long been characterized by their unique skill set and business tactics which lead them to success in their business ventures. Burt (1992) identifies three types of capital brought to new business ventures by entrepreneurs. The first is financial capital: cash in hand, reserves in the bank, investments and lines of credit. The second is human capital, natural qualities that make one likeable and the skills acquired in formal education and job experience. The third is social capital which can be described as the relationships with other entrepreneurs. While each KCSV

entrepreneur brought their own individual level of social capital, the partnership of KCSV entrepreneurs establishes the organization's social capital. "The social capital of people aggregates into the social capital of organizations" (Burt, 1992, p. 9). The shared capital of entrepreneurs broadens the organization's social network which expands the opportunities and resources available to their organization.

Well developed social capital is a valuable asset to an organization. "The construct of social capital comes from sociology: capital suggests the existence of an asset while the qualifier social suggests that benefits accrue to being connected to a network or community" (Feldman, 2014, p. 15). Social capital is particular to each organization, with no two organizations having the same network. Burt (1992), argues that social capital is the final component of competitive success as it distinguishes the entrepreneur from others who may have similar levels of financial and human capital. "Criteria other than financial and human capital are used to narrow the pool down to the individual who gets the opportunity. Those other criteria are social capital" (Burt, 1992, p. 10). Therefore, the development of social capital is critical to an organization's ability to thrive.

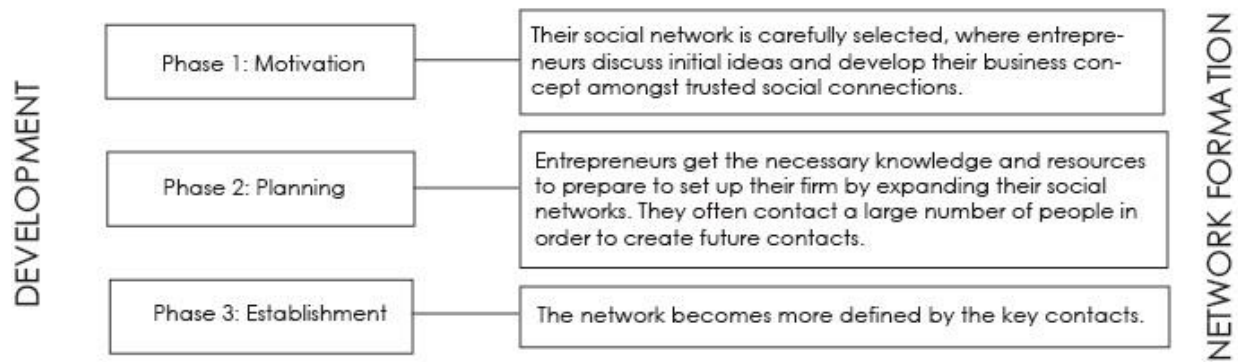
## **Social Networks**

Like any network, a social network is formed by a series of links and relationships between the entrepreneur and other individuals and organizations in the community. The social network can be influential in opportunity identification, resource gathering, and organization development. "To the extent that people play an active role in shaping their relationships, then a player who knows how to structure a networks to provide high opportunity knows whom to include in the network," (Burt, 1992, p. 13). Entrepreneurs create social networks based on their organization's needs. Networks are dynamic and can be characterized by the stage of the development and the benefits provided from the relationship of the entrepreneur and their partner.

### Stage of Business

Social networks are dynamic and change according to the needs of the business, or the stage of development the business is in (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Bloodgood et al., 1995). “Each stage of the network development process is characterized by distinctive changes in the content of the relationship and the governance mechanisms used to manage the relationship,” (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p. 175). To break down the phases of the businesses and their networks Greve & Salaff (2003) and Hoang & Antoncic (2003) utilize a three phase model (Figure 2) of enterprise establishment in understanding the social patterns of entrepreneurs:

Figure 2. Network Formation by Business Lifecycle

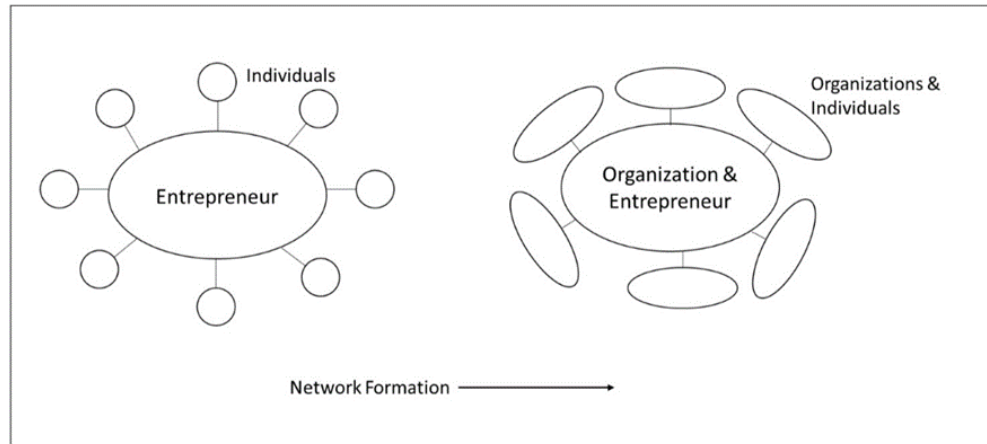


Source: Adapted from Greve & Salaff (2003) and Hoang & Antoncic (2003)

The phased model above shows the dynamism of relationships through the entrepreneurial process. Larson and Starr (1993), creating a similar three-phase framework for network formation, arguing that network models are more effective in capturing the process of organizing as it stresses the evolving nature of exchange relationships (p. 6). An entrepreneur will structure their network based on the resources they need at a certain point in a startup’s lifecycle. As the entrepreneur becomes more connected in the community and forms their organization, they become more connected with other organizations and individuals (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Network Evolution of Entrepreneurs



Source: Larson & Starr (1993)

### *Strong and Weak Ties*

Bloodgood et al. (1995) and Elfring & Hulsink (2003) advance that the outcomes of relationships in startups also depends on the type of relationship between the entrepreneur and the other person. These types of relationships can be characterized as strong ties or weak ties. Bloodgood et al. (1995) characterize a strong tie as “a social relationship characterized by a high level of trust that develops over a period of time in which the members in the tie interact frequently,” whereas in a weak tie, interactions are less frequent and can be characterized by persons in different contexts (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003). A relationship amongst two people is distinct, formed for different reasons and providing different benefits. “Strong and weak ties are utilized for different purposes by entrepreneurs because the ties provide different types of advantages for the entrepreneur” (Bloodgood et al., 1995, 128). Elfring & Hulsink (2003) and support this claim, adding that a social network of an entrepreneur is often more effective when it has a mix of strong and weak ties.

Strong ties and weak ties benefit startups in different ways and at different stages in the development. Elfring & Hulsink (2003) studied the ways different ties benefit emerging ventures and the way they contribute to the entrepreneurial process at three phases: *the discovery of opportunities, the ability to acquire resources and obtaining legitimacy*. The ability of strong and

weak ties to influence the methods in which entrepreneurs gather resources is a critical component to network formation.

### *Discovery of Opportunities*

Both strong and weak ties are utilized in the discovery of opportunities. Due to a higher level of trust in strong ties (Bloodgood et al., 1995) they can be more influential in evaluating and discussing the feasibility of the opportunities. However the like kind nature of strong tied partners, entrepreneurs can rely on weak ties to seek new opportunities and new information (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003). The entrepreneurial advantage provides entrepreneurs with a starting point, but access to a network can lead to opportunities that are not as apparent.

Brüderl & Preisendörfer (1998) found three common mechanisms of networks on business success including: (1) Social contacts are valuable channels for gaining access to information. (2) Network contacts provides access to customers and suppliers, lending to a “snowball effect” of potential partners. (3) Network contacts can lend to the possibility of broadening the financial basis of a new firm.

### *Resource Acquisition*

The acquisition of resources by entrepreneurs requires the formation of social networks. “If we conceive of entrepreneurs as organizers and coordinators of resources, social networking is directly connected with the very idea of an entrepreneur” (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998, p. 214). Entrepreneurs understand that social networking is a key to resource collection. Securing resources often depends on partnerships characterized by strong ties (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003) as strong tie partners were often found more willing to go out of their way for others (Bloodgood et al, 1995). While entrepreneurs may already possess some of the necessary components to starting a business, including information, capital, skills and labor (Greve & Salaff, 2003), they often rely on social contacts to access additional resources. Viewing the entrepreneur’s role as the organizer of valuable

resources requires an analysis of the resource collecting process and is dependent on the stage a business is in.

### *Gaining Legitimacy*

Lastly, Elfring & Hulsink (2003) found that strong ties are an important asset in gaining legitimacy as they allow start-ups to associate with similar people and institutions with good reputations. As businesses succeed, they develop legitimacy. The relationships between entrepreneurs and network members is not only used for opportunity identification and resource acquisition, but can improve the success of newly founded businesses and entrepreneurial ventures (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Elfring & Hulsink, 2003) and can reduce the risks associated with entrepreneurial activities (Nijkamp, 2003). The success of a business is dependent on the startup to develop, requiring the necessary resources and having access to new opportunities.

## **Chapter 4 - Methodology**

This case study seeks to analyze the social connections that contribute to the success of Kansas City Startup Village through interviews with entrepreneurs and members of support organization. Concluding evidence seeks will identify important social connections and networks within the Village. The interviewing process uses a grounded theory approach, with a text coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews to identify the networks within and between KCSV and other organizations. The following section describes the sample, a description of the research method and the concepts being explored.

### **Sample**

To fulfill the purpose of this study, direct communication with KCSV stakeholders and their partners was critical. Key respondents were identified through research on KCSV, and subsequent respondents identified by the initial respondents. Ten entrepreneurs and members of support organizations were interviewed. Contact with respondents was developed through email correspondence, explaining the purpose of the project and intent of the interviews.

### **Research Method**

A case study method is best intended to explore social phenomena, such as the community organization and social operations within the Village. According to Yin (2014), case studies provide the best advantage for answering a “how” or “why” question through examining a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control. The interview questions were influenced by information on comparative cities, the history of KCSV and key components of startup cities identified through the background and literature review sections. The use of interviews from key persons was critical in providing specific, in-depth information on KCSV.

Case studies have a two-fold design to address the scope and the features of the case study which comprises an all-encompassing method to cover the logic of design and data collection and analyzation techniques (Yin, 2014, p. 16-17).

1. A case study is an empirical inquiry that
  - investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when
  - the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.
2. A case study inquiry
  - copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
  - relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
  - benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

## **Interviews**

Focused interviews permit the researcher to obtain details of personal reactions, specific emotions and additional insights of the interviewee. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008, p. 215) outline four characteristics of focused interviews: (1) It takes place with respondents known to have been involved in a particular experience; (2) It refers to situations that have been analyzed prior to the interview; (3) It proceeds on the basis of an interview guide specifying topics related to the research hypotheses; (4) It is focused on the subjects’ experiences regarding the situations under study.

Through previously conducted research of the organization’s history, current programs and partnerships, key stakeholders and other organization leaders were identified as potential respondents. These respondents were able to provide firsthand information relating to partnerships and their experiences within KCSV. A sample of the interview questions listed below

were influenced by the literature review that explore the components of startup cities as well as information collected on the comparison cities.

### *Questions*

How did you become involved in the entrepreneurial community of Kansas City?

How relevant certain resources are to success?

How did you gain access to critical resources?

In what ways are networks important?

When do you need a network?

How does the network limit you?

Do you have to follow someone else's thoughts?

Resources: help or hinder advancements

How much do you use or rely on your networks?

When do you rely on certain contacts for different mentorships or advice?

If an organization moves in or out of the Village, how does their network change?

Moving in: network expands

Moving out: network shrinks as startup has gained more independence

How does a network help establish legitimacy?

### **Transcription and Coding**

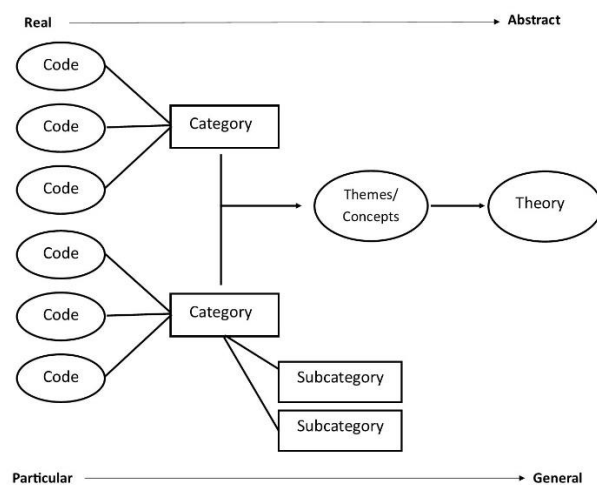
Following each interview, a transcript of the interview was produced from the recorded conversation. The transcription included the questions in the order they were asked, with comments by both the interviewer and respondent. The transcribed interview was then coded to establish commonalities amongst the responses. The codes established from the literature review and within the transcribed interview provided the answers to identify the social networks that contribute to the success of KCSV.

In addition, comparing the commonalities from the interviews with the comparison cities provided a basis for understanding what is typical of startup villages and also what differed amongst them, especially within KCSV. A similar method was utilized in Neck et al. (2004), who found that a benefit to using qualitative methods such as interviews to study entrepreneurship provided in depth perceptions regarding the components of an entrepreneurial system.

## Chapter 5 - Findings

Ten semi-structured interviews lasting half an hour to an hour in length were conducted with KCSV leaders and entrepreneurs and members of support organizations (Table 2, Appendix). The interview transcripts were then coded to identify similarities amongst responses and consistency with information from the literature review and comparative cities. The following coding process was adapted from Saldana (2009):

**Figure 4. Coding Process**



Source: Saldana (2009)

The key concepts from the literature review and background sections helped to guide the interview topics:

Entrepreneur (Figure 5)

- Entrepreneurial event
- Entrepreneurial advantage

Networks (Figure 6)

- Social Capital
- Stage of Business
- Strong and Weak Ties



## Entrepreneur

### *Entrepreneurial Advantage*

Common traits amongst the interviewees were formal education, past experiences with the corporate workforce, risk taking and forward thinking ideas as well as a personal identification with Kansas City.

Forming and running a startup has been described as a difficult and challenging task. Entrepreneurs interviewed tended to have both a formal education and past corporate experience which provided them with additional knowledge. The formal education was often in a business or technology field from a college or university. Those who had past experiences in corporate life had two main advantages. The first was that the entrepreneurs had experience running a business. The second was that they were able to incorporating past experiences and better able to identify problems or weaknesses in the corporate world that could be fixed or enhanced by startup services.

Many of the interviewees called Kansas City home, either leaving and returning at a later stage in their life or being a long term resident of the area. An entrepreneur's familiarity with the social, business and economic cultures of Kansas City is another aspect the entrepreneurial advantage as described by Feldman (2014). The entrepreneur's identification with the city could also increase their desire to contribute to a city.

Entrepreneurs tended to have some level of risk taking and possess forward thinking visions or goals for not only their business, but for Kansas City itself. Creating a startup is a risky venture; it requires dedication, significant amounts of time and financial capital. Some viewed it as an economic development opportunity to create more jobs and advance the technological opportunities while some held more of a philanthropic approach of enhancing the community through educational opportunities and outreach programs.

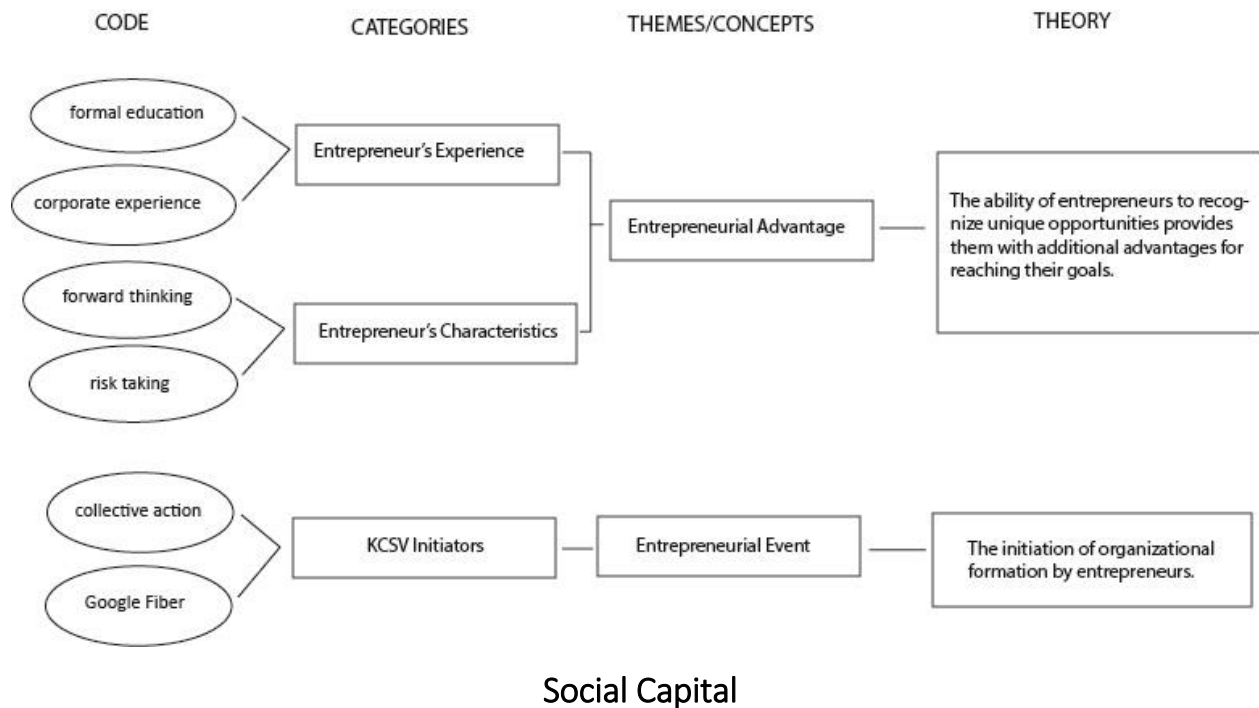
### *The Entrepreneurial Event*

The creation of KCSV was driven by the installation of Google Fiber within the neighborhood. One entrepreneur and co-founder of the Village described Google Fiber as a “lightning rod.” Following Shapero’s (1984) five characteristics of the entrepreneurial event:

- (1) KCSV is a grassroots organization effort by local entrepreneurs and those interested in Google Fiber.
- (2) In order to create KCSV, individuals organized themselves by hosting weekly meetings to make sure the necessary tasks were being accomplished.
- (3) Today the Village has co-leaders, which embodies the inclusive and group led effect of KCSV.
- (4) For many years the Village did not operate as an official non-profit or a business, providing them a degree of autonomy.
- (5) While some initiators of the Village had more vested in the Village in terms of time or money invested in property, they all shared the success or failures of the Village.

One of the interviewees, a member of a support organization was one of the founders of One Million Cups, a weekly meeting for entrepreneurs in Kansas City to come and present their companies to a diverse audience of their peers, mentors, educators and advisors. One Million Cups was started at the Kauffman Foundation as a way to connect the local entrepreneurs and capitalize on Google Fiber. Five of the entrepreneurs and one member of another support organization identified this as being one of their primary ways into the startup community in Kansas City.

Figure 5. Coded Findings for Entrepreneurs



*Collisions*

The social relationships amongst entrepreneurs and support organizations create a critical element to the success and sustainability of entrepreneurial communities. The interviewees commonly referred to “collisions” as ways to develop networks and create a well-connected community. Collisions are chances for entrepreneurs, investors and potential supporters to meet and connect. While some collisions are serendipitous, as some events in life are, many collisions are artificially created through local events and co-working spaces. Being surrounded by like-minded people was a benefit to the community effect of the Village, especially co-working spaces. Co-working spaces were attributed to an increase in collaborative, creative thought. The creation of collisions is especially important in less dense startup communities such as Kansas City (when compared to places such as Boston or New York).

### *Touchpoints*

Respondents identified “touchpoints” as a way to maintain one’s network. Referrals made from common touchpoints were seen to be extremely personal actions, putting the entrepreneur’s reputation on the line.

## **Social Networks**

### *Strong and Weak Ties*

The types of relationships provided entrepreneurs with different benefits, as shown in the literature review and found through the interviews. Two entrepreneurs cited a mix of strong and weak ties as being an important balance to one’s network.

Weak ties and informal relationships were often founded on a sense of friendship, where the entrepreneurs enjoyed one another’s company without the expectation to discuss business. Advantages to these types of relationships include flexibility, where they can be relied on at different points as a startup develops. One support organization member also serves on the board of the Village. She attributed informal relationships as a way to form relationships that might not otherwise exist.

One entrepreneur characterized the friendship associated with weak ties by the willingness to go further for another person to help them succeed because of the natural friendship associated with the relationship. Another entrepreneur described this type of relationship by saying he and his co-founder look up to the co-founders of another startup who is slightly ahead of theirs in terms of recruiting and growth and while they often get together and share a lot of advice and experience, they do not have a standing date or appointment, but get together whenever it works. This flexibility allows for relationships to develop naturally and can provide additional support for entrepreneurs.

When describing what traits were most common in an entrepreneur's social network, the concept of a "peer network," was prevalent. Entrepreneurs wanted to be surrounded by like-minded people whose company was at the same or very similar stage as theirs. The shared experiences were able to build trust amongst entrepreneurs. However, a limitation to the peer network is its ability to provide more emotional support and broad advice rather than specific advice for one's company.

For more professional, specific advice entrepreneurs tend to rely on their strong ties and formal relationships. Formal relationships outline expectations and can ensure quality. One entrepreneur said she is more transparent with her lawyer, CEO and accountant as they are advisors and helping her with the future growth of her company. However, formal relationships can also be more restrictive. This was seen as a downside when applied to the Village as establishing too many formal connections could have limited the organic nature of its growth.

As found in Elfring & Hulsink (2003), the strong and weak ties contributed to the discovery of opportunities, resource acquisition and obtaining legitimacy in different ways.

The discovery of opportunities came from both strong and weak ties. When the Village was formed it was from a group of entrepreneurs that met at 1 Million Cups and other events in the city. However, as the relationships, especially between the co-founders and co-leaders of the Village worked together for years, they have started to form strong ties which allows them to evaluate the feasibility and envision the future for the Village.

When asked what advantages there were to being located in the Village, answers included the sense of community and support, potential investors or clients and additional opportunities for partnerships with other organizations. One of the entrepreneurs said that due to his location in the Village, two workforce companies contacted him to set up on the job training, which also provided him with workforce and talent, an important element to startups; this is an opportunity and resource that came of his network established within the Village.

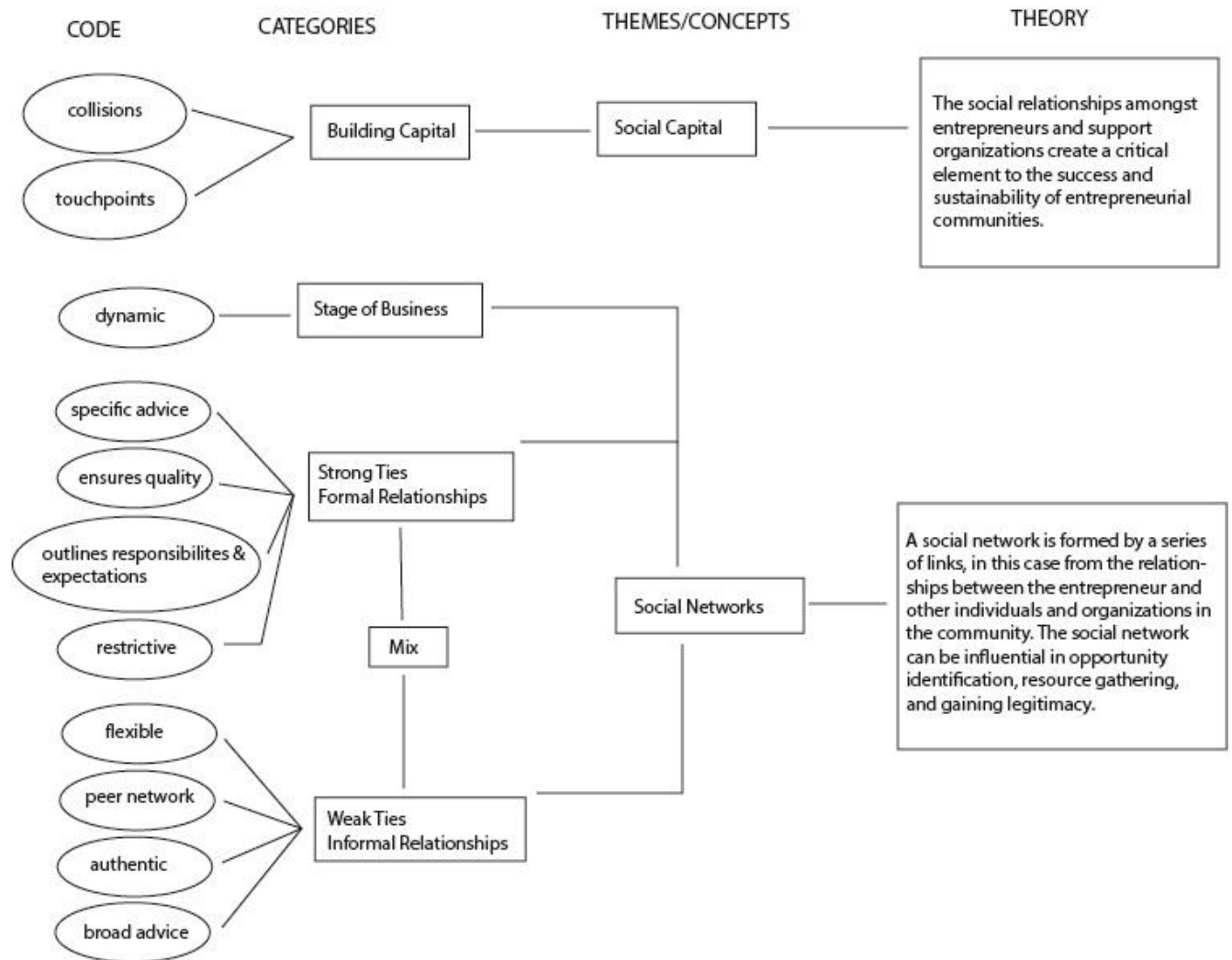
Gaining legitimacy was seen to come as a result of the startup's longevity. For Kansas City as a fairly small, but well connected portion of the Kansas City startup community, name recognition for entrepreneurs and startups can lead to increased legitimacy. However, a startup's success and longevity does hinge upon an entrepreneur's ability to access the best opportunities and secure the most advantageous resources, which is a result of the entrepreneur's social networks.

### *Stage of Business*

Three of the entrepreneurs that have founded their own startups characterized their social networks similarly. At the beginning of their company's development they were regularly attending events to network and meet new people, whereas now that their startup has been operating for several years, it is no longer as necessary to meet new people. One entrepreneur said he hoped that rather than expanding his network, he was better able to leverage the network he had already formed. Many of the entrepreneurs said that at this stage in their startup's lifecycle they were too busy running their company to be focused on network formation.

The stage of business was also important in what opportunities were available and the resources available and needed for the startup. One member of a service group said that at the initiation of a business, during the ideation stage it is most important to have the connections that will help you form your business plan and product concept. Whereas, later on in the startup's business stage when it is ready to be produced, connections that will help with the physical manufacturing of the product will be more important. The needs of the business at a certain stage determine the types of relationships a company forms or relies on the most.

Figure 6. Coded Findings for Networks



## Entrepreneurial Communities

Throughout the research, it appears that the Village is a smaller, but significant part of the larger startup ecosystem. The entrepreneurial ecosystem encompasses all the economic, social and political efforts within Kansas City to encourage and develop entrepreneurialism. The Kansas City entrepreneurial ecosystem is important to establishing many of the cultural characteristics found within the Village. When comparing this to the elements identified in the Comparative Cities section, there were several similarities (Table 1). This suggests that while there are common characteristics of startup communities, they are implemented in different ways, in different places, maintaining the idea that each community and city is unique.

The Village was formed organically, without strategizing by city planners or city administration. Yet, it still functions as a valuable part of the larger Kansas City startup ecosystem, much of which was driven by planning and policy initiatives. Often when outsiders of the entrepreneurial community attempt to create similar initiatives or planned communities they are not successful. It would seem that it takes a level of ownership on behalf of the entrepreneurs to gain the resources they need, rather than have a planned community of resources that are not beneficial to the entrepreneurs. At the end of the day it is the entrepreneurs who know what their startup needs. Therefore, it is about creating environments that are supportive of entrepreneur led activity.



**Table 1. Startup Community Characteristics**

Important Characteristics Observed in Other Entrepreneurial Communities	Expression of Characteristics in Kansas City
<b>Boulder, Colorado</b>	
Neck, H. M., Meyer, G. D., Cohen, B., & Corbett, A. C. (2004). An entrepreneurial system view of new venture creation*. <i>Journal of Small Business Management</i> , 42(2), 190-208.	
Formal and Informal Networks	Formal Networks: Universities such as KU, UMKC; Governments in Kansas and Missouri; Support services such as the Entrepreneurial Center of Johnson County, KCSourcelink, Kauffman Foundation; Capital sources such as Digital Sandbox; Talent through partnerships with workforce development programs; Large corporations such as Sprint. Informal Networks such as peer networks and friends and families of the entrepreneurs.
Physical Infrastructure	Google Fiber, low cost housing within the Village and in the KC area as a whole.
Culture	Open and helpful, described as the "midwestern nice."
Feld, B. (2012). <i>Startup communities: building an entrepreneurial ecosystem in your city</i> . Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc.	
Entrepreneur Led	KCSV was formed and is still co-lead by entrepreneurs.
Long Term Commitment	The Village has been operating since 2012, now creating future goals and support organizations to help sustain the Village.
Inclusive	Seeks to connect all prospective startups with the right resources.
Continual Engagement	Constant events happening at the Village such as Second Fridays and within the Kansas City entrepreneurial community.
<b>St. Louis, Missouri</b>	
Motoyama, Y. & Watkins, K. (2014). <i>Examining the connections within the startup ecosystem: a case study of St. Louis</i> . The Kauffman Foundation	
Connections Between Entrepreneurs	Collisions, co-working spaces, peer networks.
Connections Between Support Organizations	KCSourcelink hosts quarterly resource partner meetings.
Connections Between Entrepreneurs and Key Support Organizations	Numerous support organizations serve to connect all entrepreneurs with the correct resources.
Miscellaneous Support Organizations	Ongoing events such as 1 Million Cups and many others.
Cohn, C. (2013, July 25). <i>St. Louis: A Model For Aspiring Tech Hubs</i>	
Reduced Costs	Kansas City has a lower cost of living compared to many other cities with startup communities including Boulder, New York and Silicon Valley.
Local Support from Universities	Partnerships with UMKC and KU.
Growth of Local Venture Capital Firms	The research did not focus on the financial support and opportunities within the entrepreneurial and startup communities, though it was identified as a critical need and gap within Kansas City as a region.
Emergence of Wealthy Angels	
Mentoring Assistance	Programs such as the Sprint Mentoring Program.
Attracting Entrepreneurial Talent	Creating unique communities such as the Village that draw people in. One interviewee relocated his company from another state to join the Village.
Emphasizing Education	The Village and entrepreneurs interviewed host and speak at many events for students in elementary, middle and high schools; including the MECA Challenge sponsored by CEED.

## Summary

### *Unexpected Findings*

Unexpected findings included the broad, overarching goal that many of the interviewees expressed in that their work was enhancing the quality of life in and advance opportunities in Kansas City. Feld (2012) said that entrepreneurial communities must be inclusive and welcome other entrepreneurs into the community, with the view that growth within the startup community is a positive force for everyone involved. Within the small community of the Village and sample size of entrepreneurs, a large number of interviewees shared this common vision. The community based focus extends beyond the desire to make the Village a successful startup community and affect the larger Kansas City community in a positive way, either through economic development or community development.

Another unexpected finding was the requirement of entrepreneurs to be able to “pivot” on their business plans. This requires the entrepreneur to have a very keen sense of their business in terms of feasibility. Two entrepreneurs expressed the belief that failure was seen as a learning opportunity. The ability to take one’s unsuccessful venture and turn it into either another venture and build upon it is an uncommon mindset, not one that is apparent in many other fields.

### *Limitations + Future Research*

There were several limitations within this study. First, there was a limited sample size of only ten individuals. To gain a better picture of the Village or the larger entrepreneurial and startup community within Kansas City, more individuals should be contacted. Three of the entrepreneurs with startups in the Village had similar stage companies. While one had moved out of the Village, one had started in the Village and one had left and come back, they all experienced the Village at different times which was helpful. However, no very early stage startups were a part of the research.

Secondly, the interviewees were identified through a snowball method. Meaning the interviewees provided the names of other potential interviewees. This could lead to many individuals who express the same thoughts as part of a similar or concentrated social circle; ultimately resulting in the potential for others who were not a part of the same social circle who might provide differing opinions.

Future research could include a broader sample size and different set of entrepreneurs. A way to further conduct the study and build upon it would be to conduct a complete social network analysis with a larger sample size. This type of analysis would show more in-depth connections and how connect the Village is within the larger entrepreneurial ecosystem of Kansas City.

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## Appendix A -

Table 2. Interviewees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Date</b>
Adam Arredondo	Co-Leader KCSV	Entrepreneur	2/11/2016
Matthew Marcus	Co-Leader KCSV	Entrepreneur	2/11/2016
Melissa Roberts	Entreprise Center for Johnson County	Support Organization	2/17/2016
Jenny Miller	KCSOURCELINK	Support Organization	2/25/2016
Andy Kallenbach	Founder & CEO Lending Standard	Entrepreneur	2/25/2016
Julie Edge	Co-founder Creelio, currently located at Village Square	Entrepreneur	2/25/2016
Stuart Ludlow	Co-Founder RFP 365, former tenant of the Village	Entrepreneur	2/25/2016
Ben Barreth	Founder Homes for Hackers	Support Organization	2/26/2016
Cameron Cushman	Formerly Kauffman Foundation	Support Organization	3/2/2016
Brandon Schatz	Founder sportsphotos.com, currently located in the Village	Entrepreneur	3/7/2016