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Perceptions of Networks, Access and Collaboration in the Estonian Film

Ecosystem:

From Informal Structures to a Digital Platform Blueprint

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores how networks, collaboration, and access to opportunities function in the Estonian independent film industry, particularly within a small-market film ecosystem. Drawing on interviews with film professionals across the sector, the analysis examines how professional relationships shape collaboration processes and access to career opportunities.

The research employs a qualitative approach based on twelve semi-structured interviews with film professionals and representatives of key institutions. Participants were selected through selective sampling to reflect a range of professional roles, experience levels, and perspectives within the Estonian film ecosystem. Interview data was complemented by secondary industry sources and observational insights.

The findings suggest that the Estonian film industry operates through tightly interconnected networks in which access to professional opportunities is strongly shaped by existing relationships. Producers occupy central brokerage positions by connecting filmmakers, crew members, institutions, and funding bodies, thereby influencing the flow of information, collaborations, and access to resources. Repeated collaboration – driven by trust, efficiency, and the need to reduce creative and financial risk – contributes to the formation of stable professional groups and reinforces reliance on familiar collaborators. Information exchange within the ecosystem appears to rely heavily on informal communication channels and decentralised networks, which may contribute to uneven access to opportunities and reduced transparency across the ecosystem.

Drawing on Ronald Burt's Social Network Theory (1992) and Etienne Wenger's concept of Communities of Practice (1998), the thesis demonstrates how structural and practice-based dynamics jointly shape collaboration and access within the Estonian film ecosystem. Based on these findings, the thesis proposes the concept of a digital platform designed to improve professional visibility, centralise information, and create more inclusive pathways into the industry for emerging filmmakers and other less-connected participants. Rather than replacing existing networks, the platform is intended to complement current informal and institutional structures by supporting more accessible entry points into the ecosystem.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Theoretical Framework	8
2.1 Structural Constraints of a Small-market Film Ecosystem	8
2.2 Social Network Theory and Structural Holes	10
2.3 Communities of Practice	12
3. Methodology	15
3.1 Research Design	15
3.2 Case Selection	15
3.3 Data Collection	16
3.4 Data Analysis	19
3.5 Limitations of the Study	19
4. Analysis	21
4.1 Networked Structure of the Estonian Film Ecosystem	21
4.2 Networks in the Estonian Film Ecosystem	26
4.3 Access in the Estonian Film Ecosystem	31
4.4 Communities of Practice in the Estonian Film Ecosystem	33
4.5 Key Findings	35
5. Project Plan	38
5.1 Project Rationale and Background	38
5.2 Mission, Vision and Value Proposition	39
5.3 Goals, Objectives and Key Performance Indicators	40
5.4 Target Users and Needs	41
5.5 Project Execution	42
5.6 Financial Model and Budget	44
5.7 Partnerships and Stakeholders	46
5.8 Communication Strategy	48
5.9 Marketing Strategy	51
5.10 Risk Analysis and Mitigation Strategy	52
5.11 Feasibility Evaluation	54
5.12 Reflections and Development	54
6. Conclusion	57
References	60
Appendices	63
Annexes	68

1. Introduction

Film industries are commonly regarded as part of the creative industries, which were defined by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (1998) as “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS, 1998, p. 3).

More recent perspectives, particularly those developed by Potts et al. (2008), move beyond this sector-based definition by conceptualising creative industries as networked systems. Rather than focusing solely on creative outputs, Potts et al. (2008) argue that these industries operate as *social network markets*, where value is generated through the circulation of ideas, meanings, and innovations across interconnected networks of producers, consumers, and intermediaries. In this framework, novelty arises through networked exchange rather than isolated production.

Expanding this perspective, Ibrus and Rohn (2019) emphasise that in small-market audiovisual industries, innovation and sustainability depend not only on creative production, but also on institutional coordination, policy support, and interconnected infrastructures. They highlight the importance of “building and strengthening the institutional system and its inherent coordination” in supporting industry development (Ibrus & Rohn, 2019). Complementing these system-level perspectives, Hjort (2005) also highlights the importance of collaboration and transnational networks in small-nation cinema, demonstrating how film production and circulation rely on interconnected professional and institutional relationships.

Combined, these perspectives suggest that film and other creative industries can be understood as relational systems, where collaboration, connectivity, and institutional context shape how value, innovation, and opportunities emerge.

This shift is particularly relevant in the context of independent film production, where value is increasingly created through collaboration and professional networks rather than individual authorship alone (Caves, 2000; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998). As Caves (2000) notes, creative products require the “coordinated efforts of diverse skilled collaborators,” highlighting the inherently collective nature of production. Similarly, DeFillippi and Arthur (1998) emphasise that

careers in project-based industries are sustained through networks of relationships rather than stable organisational structures, noting that “each film project sustains or enhances each project member’s network of industry contacts.” Blair et al. (2001) further suggest that “personal contacts within the industry are a very significant factor in gaining entry to the industry,” highlighting the importance of professional networks in accessing employment opportunities.

While research on film and creative industries has highlighted the central role of professional networks in project-based collaboration and informal labour markets (e.g., DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998; Blair et al., 2001; Caves, 2000), less attention has been paid to how these networks operate within specific national contexts, particularly in small film ecosystems such as Estonia.

This thesis addresses this gap by examining the Estonian film industry as a networked ecosystem through the perspectives of small-market film industries, Social Network Theory by Ronald Burt (1992) and Communities of Practice (CoP) concept by Etienne Wenger (1998). While the small-market framework outlines the structural conditions of the industry, Burt’s network theory explains how access to opportunities is shaped by network positions, and Wenger’s communities of practice provide insight into how collaboration and knowledge-sharing develop over time. Together, these approaches allow for a comprehensive understanding of how networks, collaboration, and access operate within the Estonian film industry.

Estonia was selected as the case study due to its characteristics as a small-market film industry. Previous research on small-market audiovisual industries suggests that such contexts are shaped by limited resources, smaller talent pools, and a high degree of interdependence between actors. In such contexts, professional networks are often more concentrated and visible (Hjort, 2005; Ibrus & Rohn, 2019), making collaboration patterns and access to opportunities easier to observe and analyse. Furthermore, the author’s familiarity with the local industry facilitated access to participants and supported the collection of in-depth qualitative data.

This thesis argues that access to professional opportunities in the Estonian film industry is not equally distributed but is shaped by existing informal professional networks. It further examines how network structures and collaboration practices influence participation, inclusion, and the long-term sustainability of the industry.

Thus, the main research question of this thesis is:

How do professional networks shape collaboration and access to career opportunities in the Estonian film ecosystem?

This question examines how informal professional relationships influence collaboration practices and the distribution of access to work, funding, and professional opportunities within the Estonian film industry.

Additionally, this thesis explores:

(1) How are professional networks structured within the Estonian film ecosystem?

Specifically, how the industry is organised by identifying key actors—such as producers, filmmakers, institutions, and production companies—and how they are connected. It analyses patterns such as central actors, clusters, and brokerage positions within the network.

(2) How does collaboration operate within these networks? This question examines how professional relationships shape working practices. It analyses how teams are formed, how trust and previous collaborations influence decision-making, and how more stable working groups develop over time.

(3) How do networks influence inclusion, exclusion, and access to professional opportunities? This question explores how access to work, funding, and career development is shaped by network structures. It analyses whether opportunities are distributed through formal systems or informal relationships, and how this affects both established professionals and newcomers.

The interview data, discussed in more detail in the following sections of this thesis, indicates that the Estonian film ecosystem operates through closely interconnected professional networks, where collaboration and access to opportunities are shaped by existing relationships. Producers are seen as central actors, while repeated collaboration reinforces stable working groups and limits access for newcomers. Institutional fragmentation and reliance on informal communication further contribute to uneven access to opportunities. Based on these findings, this thesis proposes a

blueprint for a digital collaboration and networking platform, developed as part of the Creative Project Management programme and presented in the second half of this thesis.

Thus, the Master's thesis consists of two interconnected components: the academic research, which includes the theoretical framework, methodology, and analysis, and the project component, which outlines the project's concept, rationale, objectives, target groups, and proposed implementation. Together, these components demonstrate how research-based insights can be translated into a practical intervention within the creative industries.

The proposed solution of a digital platform blueprint takes the form of a community-driven digital hub designed to connect film professionals, support their visibility and collaboration, and improve access to resources, knowledge, and professional opportunities. The platform aims to contribute to a more transparent, inclusive, and sustainable Estonian film ecosystem.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Structural Constraints of a Small-market Film Ecosystem

Global film production is largely dominated by major industries such as the United States, which benefit from large markets, extensive production capacity, and significant financial resources (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Other leading European producers, including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, also play an important role in the global film landscape due to strong domestic markets, high levels of investment and well-developed institutional support systems that enable both sustained production and international distribution (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Hjort, 2005).

In contrast, countries with smaller populations and limited domestic audiences are categorized as small national cinemas or small-market film industries (Hjort & Petrie, 2007). These industries typically serve national audiences of fewer than 15 million people, produce a relatively low number of films annually (around 5–30 feature-length films), and depend heavily on public funding due to limited financial resources (Nielsen et al., 2024). European examples include Ireland, Denmark, Portugal, and Estonia.

Compared to larger markets, small-market film industries face several structural constraints, including limited market size, restricted revenue potential, and challenges in achieving international visibility (Hjort, 2005; Ibrus & Rohn, 2019). The small size of domestic audiences' limits box office revenues, making it difficult to recover production costs locally. As a result, public funding becomes essential for sustaining film production (Hjort & Petrie, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2024). International collaboration plays a key role in addressing these constraints. Co-productions, as a form of networked collaboration, enable filmmakers to share costs, access additional funding sources, expand distribution opportunities, and reach wider audiences across multiple markets (Finney, 2015). Consequently, co-production agreements are central to the sustainability and international reach of small film industries.

Research from *The Small European Film Markets: Portraits and Comparisons* (2024)¹ report, produced as part of the Horizon Europe CresCine project, further supports these findings by highlighting the structural limitations shaping the competitiveness of small European film ecosystems. The report identifies four key development orientations – cultural resonance, export, production service, and cinematic arts – which influence funding decisions, collaboration patterns, the types of projects produced, and the distribution of opportunities. It further notes that these orientations may compete for resources, illustrating how structural conditions, viewed in this thesis through the lens of professional networks, shape the direction of industry development (Nielsen et al., 2024).

According to this CresCine report, Estonia currently places a strong emphasis on production services and international collaboration, both of which rely on established professional networks. At the same time, efforts are made to support local audiences and maintain artistic recognition through festival-oriented films (Nielsen et al., 2024). This suggests that Estonia operates as a hybrid ecosystem with multiple priorities. In such a system, different types of projects are often supported through distinct professional networks, meaning that access to opportunities depends on connections to relevant actors and networks. As a result, network position influences who benefits and how opportunities are distributed.

Small-market film ecosystems typically consist of networks of diverse organisations, including film institutes, production companies (often small and medium-sized enterprises or SMEs), film schools, festivals, and professional associations, all of which contribute to industry development (Ibrus & Rohn, 2019). Within these networked structures, relationships between actors become central to how the industry operates.

As Hjort (2005) argues, in contexts where financial resources and the talent pool are limited, professional networks play a particularly important role by enabling access to projects, funding, and collaborators, while also supporting knowledge sharing and professional development. However, although such networks foster flexibility and strong working relationships, they can also

¹ Nielsen, J., et al. (2024). *The Small European Film Markets: Portraits and Comparisons*. Horizon Europe CresCine Project.

reinforce gatekeeping, limit visibility for less-connected professionals, and contribute to unequal access to opportunities (Hjort, 2005).

The Estonian film industry offers a relevant case for examining these dynamics within a small-market context, as it reflects many of the structural constraints and network-based characteristics discussed above. Following the post-socialist transition of the 1990s, the country has gradually developed the institutional framework of its audiovisual sector. The Estonian Film Foundation, established in 1997 and later reorganised into the Estonian Film Institute (EFI)² in 2013, plays a central role in structuring the industry by supporting film production, development, and professional activity. As the main public funding body (Estonian Film Institute, n.d.), EFI shapes the distribution of resources and, in doing so, is likely to influence collaboration patterns within the local film ecosystem.

Together, these structural and institutional characteristics suggest that the organisation of the film ecosystem affects both collaboration and the distribution of opportunities. In small-market contexts, where resources are limited and professional relationships are closely interconnected, positions within networks become particularly important in determining access to information, resources, and work opportunities. To better understand how these network structures influence collaboration and access, this thesis draws on Social Network Theory, particularly Burt's (1992) concept of structural holes.

2.2 Social Network Theory and Structural Holes

Film industries are commonly understood as networked creative systems in which collaboration between multiple actors, including filmmakers, production companies, institutions, and funding bodies help to develop and realize various projects (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998; Blair et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2015). To analyse how these relationships shape collaboration and access to opportunities within the Estonian film sector, this thesis focuses on the dynamics of networked systems and draws on Ronald Burt's social network theory and Etienne Wenger's concept of communities of practice. These two frameworks offer complementary perspectives: while Burt

² Estonian Film Institute <https://filmi.ee/>

focuses on how network structure and position create advantages, Wenger highlights how trust, shared practices, and learning emerge through ongoing collaboration.

Social network theory, as developed by Burt (1992), explains differences in access to social capital by focusing on an individual's position within a network. Burt argues that individuals hold certain positional advantages or disadvantages from how they are embedded in social structures and that competitive advantage “comes from network position, not from a skill or resources” suggesting that *how* actors are connected can be more important than the number of connections they possess (Burt, 1992).

A central concept in Burt's framework is that of *structural holes*, which refer to gaps between otherwise disconnected groups within a network. When actors occupy positions between such groups, they can act as brokers, facilitating the flow of information, resources, and opportunities. These brokerage positions enable access to diverse knowledge and increase the potential for innovation, as ideas from different groups can be combined and recombined. Burt (2004) argues that “people who stand near the holes in a social structure are at higher risk of having good ideas”, as they are exposed to “alternative ways of thinking and behaving.” In this sense, innovation is more likely to emerge at the intersections between networks rather than within tightly connected groups (Burt, 2004).

While brokerage is often associated with openness and access – as brokers bridge disconnected groups and introduce new ideas, they may also contribute to network closure and limit innovation (Burt, 1992). When brokers repeatedly collaborate with trusted partners, their networks can become stable, leading to the formation of tightly connected professional circles. Over time, the circulation of similar knowledge may limit the emergence of new ideas. In this way, brokerage can unintentionally reinforce closed network structures and informal gatekeeping. Burt (1992) therefore emphasises the importance of balancing brokerage and closure. This involves maintaining trust-based working relationships while also ensuring access to new collaborators, ideas, and information. While repeated collaboration supports efficiency and coordination, it is important that networks remain open to new entrants and diverse perspectives in order to avoid stagnation and exclusion. As Burt (1992) notes, “people connected to one another tend to know

about the same things at about the same time” (p. 70), meaning that tightly closed networks may limit exposure to new ideas and opportunities.

Burt’s (1992) social network theory was used in this thesis because it helps explain how access to opportunities is shaped by an individual’s position within a network. While alternative approaches, such as ecosystem-based perspectives on creative industries (Ibrus & Rohn, 2019) or economic perspectives (Caves, 2000), focus on broader institutional and economic dynamics, Burt’s framework provides a more precise lens for examining how opportunities are distributed between individual actors.

In the context of this thesis, Burt’s theory is specifically used to analyse collaboration, information exchange, and access to opportunities in the Estonian film ecosystem by examining how an individual’s position within the network shapes these dynamics. It helps to identify key actors and brokerage positions, as well as potential barriers faced by newcomers in entering professional networks. However, while this theory explains the structural aspects of networks, it does not fully account for how shared knowledge, practices, and norms develop within them and how these shape collaboration patterns. To address this limitation and to get a more nuanced understanding of collaborative processes, the study draws on Etienne Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice.

2.3 Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP) are formed through regular interaction between people who share a common field of activity or expertise (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). As Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner further explain, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Communities of practice consist of three key elements: *a domain* (shared area of interest), *a community* (relationships between members), and *a practice* (shared tools, experiences, and ways of working). They are also characterised by a process of situated learning, where individuals move from peripheral participation towards more central roles within the community.

Originally, developed from theories of social learning, the concept of communities of practice was introduced by anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger in 1991, who examined how learning occurs in social environments. They showed that when newcomers join an established community, they initially observe and perform simple tasks while learning its norms and practices. Over time, they take on more complex roles and become more central participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The idea that people learn through shared experience and collaboration has existed long before the concept of communities of practice was formally developed. Over time, communities of practice have become an important framework in knowledge management and organisational studies, where they are used to support collaboration, learning, and the sharing of knowledge (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). As Hildreth and Kimble (2004) explain, communities of practice are “a group where such types of knowledge are nurtured, shared and sustained”.

The concept of communities of practice is particularly relevant to the film industry which operates as a project-based creative sector, where professionals collaborate across multiple projects and learn primarily through practice and participation (Blair et al., 2001). Through repeated collaboration, filmmakers, producers, and technical professionals develop shared working practices, professional norms, and collective expertise (Wenger, 1998). In the context of this thesis, communities of practice provide a lens for understanding how collaboration is sustained within the Estonian film industry, how professional knowledge is shared, and how newcomers gain access to the field.

Combining perspectives on small-market film industries, social network theory, and communities of practice provides a broader approach to analysing the Estonian film ecosystem from both structural and practice-based perspectives. The small-market framework and social network theory together highlight the structural conditions of the industry, including resource constraints and the importance of network position in shaping access to opportunities. In contrast, communities of practice offer a practice-based perspective by explaining how collaboration, shared practices, and knowledge develop through ongoing interaction. Together, as illustrated in *Figure 1*, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how professional networks shape collaboration and access to opportunities within the Estonian film ecosystem.

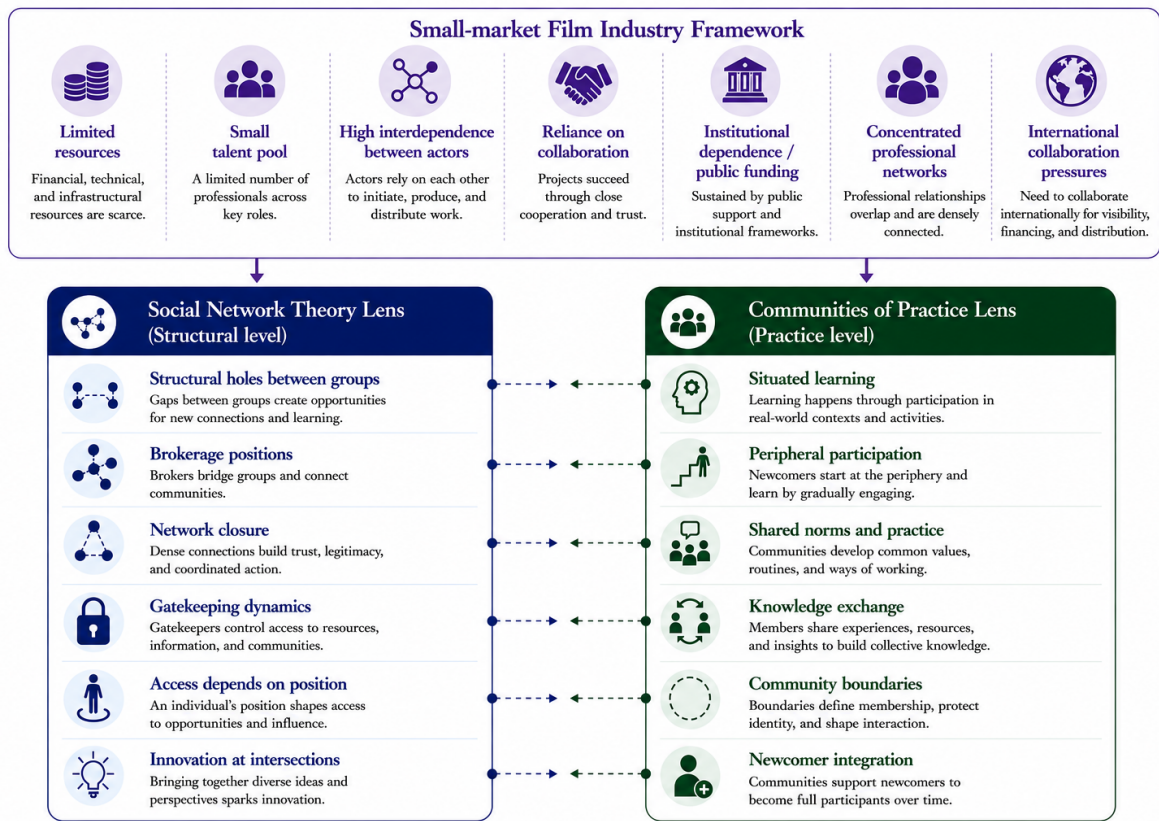


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for analysing the Estonian film ecosystem. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory case study design to examine the relationships, practices, and experiences that shape the Estonian film industry. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it focuses on understanding social relationships and practices from the perspectives of those involved, rather than measuring them (Bryman, 2021).

A case study design also enables an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon within its real-world context, where the two are closely connected and cannot be meaningfully separated (Greenhalgh, 2024; Yin, 2018). A case study design is particularly suited to the study of social systems, as it allows for the integration of multiple data sources to capture both structural conditions – such as institutional frameworks and industry organisation – and everyday practices, including collaboration, knowledge sharing, and access to opportunities (Greenhalgh, 2024). This approach aligns well with the aims of the thesis, which seeks to explore how networks, collaboration, and access to resources operate within the specific context of the Estonian film ecosystem.

The research draws on semi-structured interviews, document analysis (including industry reports), and observations. These methods provide complementary perspectives: interviews capture individual experiences and professional practices, document analysis examines institutional structures and policies, and observations reveal informal interactions. Together, they support an analysis of both structural conditions and everyday practices.

3.2 Case Selection

The Estonian film industry represents a clearly defined case shaped by its national context, institutional structures, and relatively small group of industry actors (Hjort, 2005; Ibrus & Rohn, 2019). These boundaries allow for a focused analysis of network structures, collaboration practices, and access to opportunities. The scale of the industry further supports this approach. A limited pool of professionals results in more frequent interactions and more concentrated networks. As a result, patterns of collaboration and access to opportunities are more readily observable

(Hjort, 2005; Ibrus & Rohn, 2019), making the case well suited to addressing the research questions.

3.3 Data Collection

The primary data for this thesis consists of twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals working in the Estonian film ecosystem. The sample (see *Table 1*) includes film producers (3), directors and filmmakers (5), a head of department (1), and representatives from key institutions: the Estonian Film Institute, the Estonian Filmmakers Association³, and the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School⁴ (1 each). Attention was also given to gender balance (6 female, 6 male), as well as variation in professional roles and career stages.

Semi-structured interviews allow for the exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining flexibility (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The sample size of twelve interviews is appropriate for this qualitative case study, as participants were selected to represent key roles within the Estonian film ecosystem. While the sample is limited, qualitative research emphasises depth and relevance of data over size (Bryman, 2021). In the context of the Estonian film industry, the small and interconnected nature of the sector further supports the use of a focused sample, as key perspectives can be captured within a relatively small number of interviews.

³ Estonian Filmmakers Association <https://kinoliit.ee/>

⁴ Baltic Film, Media and Arts School <https://www.tlu.ee/en/bfm>

No.	Role	Description	Years of Experience
1	Producer/Director	Filmmaker working in documentary with films screened at international festivals.	~10–15 years
2	Director	Director active in documentary and fiction film, with both national and international recognition.	~20+ years
3	Director	Documentary and feature filmmaker with work recognised at international festivals.	~10–15 years
4	Producer	Producer of award-winning films and internationally recognised co-productions.	~25+ years
5	Head of Department	Film professional working in mainly as a HOD role, with recognition within the national and international industry.	~10–15 years
6	Institutional representative	Senior figure in national film funding, industry support, and sector development.	~15+ years
7	Director	Director with international experience and prior expertise in technical production roles.	~10–15 years
8	Producer	Producer with experience in national and international film and media production.	~20+ years
9	Director	Director working in the audiovisual sector with experience in co-productions and national film projects.	~10+ years
10	Institutional representative	Film practitioner and educator with international experience and industry recognition.	~20 years
11	Institutional representative	Senior figure within a national filmmakers' professional organisation.	~5 years
12	Director	Early-career director with festival experience and growing industry recognition.	~5 years

Table 1. *Participants interviewed for this thesis. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting).*

The data sample primarily consisted of directors and producers, as these roles emerged throughout this research as central to the initiation, development, and coordination of film projects within the Estonian film ecosystem. Interview findings indicated that producers play a key role in assembling teams, securing funding, and coordinating collaboration, while directors are closely involved in shaping creative processes and working across departments. As a result, both groups were well positioned to reflect on how professional relationships and collaboration operate within the industry. In addition, selected representatives from key industry institutions were included, as they could provide insights into collaboration at the institutional level to help to understand how networks operate across the broader film ecosystem.

The interviewing process took place over two weeks in March 2026. Eleven interviews were conducted in person and one online. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes. All

interviews were recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis using the Soniox transcription software⁵.

The primary data collection was conducted in accordance with standard academic ethical guidelines. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study in writing prior to the interview and were given the option to remain anonymous. Identifying information, such as names and organisational affiliations, was removed to ensure participant anonymity, and each interviewee was assigned a neutral label (e.g., Int 1).

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, several secondary data sources were used for this research, such as industry reports, policy documents, and statistics related to the Estonian audiovisual sector. The most important sources were *Estonian Creative Industries Mapping (for years 2019, 2023)*⁶⁷, *Estonian Film Institute Development Plan 2025–2029*⁸ and *Vision for the Estonian Film Sector 2030*⁹. These secondary sources provided background information and helped to contextualise the interviews.

In addition to interviews and secondary data, this thesis draws on observational insights derived from the researcher's engagement within the film industry, including participation in production processes, industry events, and informal discussions with professionals. These observations were not systematically recorded as primary data but informed the researcher's understanding of the field and supported the interpretation of interview findings. As such, these observations are used in a complementary role to provide contextual understanding of everyday practices, informal interactions, and working dynamics that may not be fully captured through interviews. This approach is consistent with qualitative research practices where researcher experience can support interpretation, while remaining secondary to primary data sources (Bryman, 2021).

⁵ Soniox. (n.d.). *Speech-to-text transcription API*. <https://soniox.com/>

⁶ Estonian Ministry of Culture. (2019). *Estonian Creative Industries Mapping*.

⁷ Estonian Ministry of Culture. (2023). *Estonian Creative Industries Mapping*.

⁸ Estonian Film Institute. (2024). *Development Plan 2025–2029*.

⁹ Estonian Film Institute. (2023). *Vision for the Estonian Film Sector 2030*.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a systematic process of identifying, coding, and interpreting patterns across the interview material. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all interviews were transcribed and read multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the data. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of the data related to the research focus, including *network structures*, *collaboration practices*, and *access to opportunities*. Third, codes were grouped into broader categories and reviewed to identify recurring patterns and relationships. These were then developed into key themes that reflect the main dynamics within the Estonian film ecosystem. This approach enabled a systematic and transparent analysis of patterns related to ecosystem structure, networks, collaboration practices, and access to opportunities. The final coding framework is provided in *Appendix 1*.

The coding process was supported by an AI-assisted tool (i.e ChatGPT) to help organise and structure the data. However, all coding decisions, interpretations, and theme development were verified by the researcher. AI-assisted tools were also used to support the generation of preliminary structural outlines and early concept drafts during the writing process of this thesis. In addition, ChatGPT was used for language support, formatting and to support the creation of visuals. The content and structure of the visuals was edited and verified by the author before inclusion in the final thesis.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

This thesis has several methodological and sample-related limitations. The findings are based on the perspectives of a limited number of industry participants. While the interviews give insights into industry practices, they reflect participants' perceptions and subjective experiences rather than objective facts. Second, the research captures a particular moment in time and therefore does not provide a longitudinal analysis of how networks and collaboration may evolve over time. In addition, the study focuses specifically on the Estonian film ecosystem, which limits the generalisability of the findings to larger national film industries with different structural

conditions. Finally, the analysis primarily concentrates on feature film and documentary production. Although similar patterns may exist in other audiovisual sectors, such as animation or commercial production, these were not explicitly examined within the scope of this research. As a result, the findings should be understood as context-specific and limited to the selected genres and timeframe.

As the author has prior experience in the film industry, it is acknowledged that this may have influenced both data collection and interpretation. Familiarity with the industry helped facilitate access to participants and encouraged more open and detailed discussions, as interviewees could rely on a shared understanding of industry practices. However, this position may also have introduced bias, as the researcher may hold pre-existing assumptions about how the industry is structured. To minimise this, particular attention was paid during the analysis process. Interview transcripts were coded systematically, allowing themes to emerge from the data. Contradictory and differing perspectives were actively considered, and interpretations were grounded in multiple data points across interviews. This approach helped ensure that the findings reflect the data as closely as possible, rather than the researcher's prior assumptions.

Despite these limitations, the thesis hopes to contribute to broader discussions on small-market film industries by providing detailed insights into how networks, collaboration, and access to opportunities operate in practice. It complements existing research on creative industry ecosystems and small-market film industries (e.g., Hjort, 2005; Ibrus & Rohn, 2019) by focusing on individual experiences and everyday professional interactions. In doing so, it offers a more grounded understanding of how access to opportunities is shaped within the Estonian film ecosystem and provides insights that may be relevant for both academic research and industry development.

4. Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the Estonian film ecosystem by examining its network structure, the perspectives of industry participants, and the theoretical frameworks used to interpret the findings. The analysis identifies key actors and relationships within the network and compares these structural characteristics with insights derived from semi-structured interviews through the lenses of social network theory and communities of practice.

In doing so, the section explores how different stakeholders perceive collaboration, access to professional opportunities, and the organisation of the industry, and how these perceptions relate to the broader structure of the ecosystem. This combined approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how professional networks operate in practice.

4.1 Networked Structure of the Estonian Film Ecosystem

The Estonian film industry operates as a relatively small but interconnected ecosystem, consisting of a range of actors, including filmmakers, producers, production companies, service providers (e.g., casting agencies), institutions, professional associations, and festivals. According to the *Estonian Creative Industries Mapping Report 2023*, the broader audiovisual media sector includes around 1057 companies and employs 1364 people (Estonian Ministry of Culture, 2025).

However, these figures do not necessarily reflect the size of the film sector specifically, as they refer to the broader audiovisual media industry. The available data does not distinguish clearly between film, television, and other audiovisual activities, making it difficult to determine the number of companies and professionals working specifically in film. In addition, official statistics may not fully capture the structure of employment in the sector, as many creative professionals work across multiple projects, roles, and organisations, often on short-term or freelance contracts (Estonian Ministry of Culture, 2025). As a result, it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of active professionals.

In practice, the core film sector alongside its creative workforce, is estimated by practitioners to consist of approximately 50 active production companies, around 10 professional associations, and several public or non-profit institutions responsible for training, funding, and professional representation (Estonian Film Institute, n.d.). This analysis thus focuses on the key actors shaping networks and collaboration within the ecosystem – namely producers and production companies, filmmakers, institutions and professional associations.

The central pillar of this Estonian film ecosystem is the Estonian Film Institute (EFI) – a state endowment primarily funded by the Ministry of Culture of Estonia. According to the Estonian Film Institute (n.d.), its main responsibilities include supporting film production and distribution as well as managing Estonia’s film heritage. In recent years, however, EFI’s role has expanded beyond funding to include a broader, more strategic development of the Estonian film sector and to help shape the long-term vision of Estonian film (Estonian Film Institute, n.d.). This includes the introduction of internationalisation initiatives to attract foreign productions, as well as the organisation of industry events (e.g EFI information days), training programmes, and mentoring schemes aimed at strengthening professional skills (Estonian Film Institute, n.d). EFI also contributes to policy development and strategic planning for the sector, reinforcing its role as an institutional anchor within the ecosystem (Int 6). This central role of public film institutions is consistent with findings by Nielsen et al. (2024), who in his research highlight that small-market film industries are typically structured around strong institutional frameworks and public funding mechanisms.

However, despite this structurally central position, EFI’s broader role is not consistently reflected in industry perceptions. While some participants recognised EFI as a national and international promoter of Estonian cinema, most interviewees primarily associated the institution with its funding function (Int 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12). As one director noted, “Most productions get their money from EFI, so EFI is mainly seen as a funding body” (Int 3), highlighting the centrality of financial support in shaping how the organisation is perceived.

Although all interviewees agreed that the Estonian Film Institute plays a key role as a funder, opinions differed on whether it should expand its role beyond funding to more actively support collaboration, coordination, and connectivity within the ecosystem. Some participants suggested

that the current system functions effectively, while others argued that it is overly “money- and producer-centered,” where “creativity is organised by the EFI funding dates” (Int 3, 4, 7). As one established director suggested, “EFI could stand more behind the field's unity” (Int 3). At the same time, EFI itself does not position its role as that of a central coordinating authority, but rather as “one of the partners in the field” (Int 6). This highlights a disconnect between EFI’s formal role as a strategic actor within the ecosystem and the way many industry participants primarily associate the institution with funding activities.

In addition to EFI, several other public institutions also play significant supporting roles within the ecosystem. The Cultural Endowment of Estonia¹⁰ provides additional, complementary project-based funding, particularly for smaller-scale productions and early-stage development, complementing EFI’s funding schemes. The Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF)¹¹ functions as a key platform for international visibility, networking, and industry exchange, connecting Estonian filmmakers with global partners (Nielsen et al., 2024). While these institutions also contribute to the overall functioning of the ecosystem, this analysis focuses primarily on EFI due to its central role in shaping production and funding structures.

A second pillar of the ecosystem consists of producers and production companies, who, together with directors and other creative and technical professionals, form the operational core of the industry. Interview data from this research indicates that producers and production companies are responsible for initiating projects, assembling teams, securing financing, and coordinating the networks of professionals involved in film production (Int 1, 3, 5, 9, 12). In this sense, production companies function as organisational hubs that coordinate collaboration, manage production processes, and connect different actors within the ecosystem (Int 7, 12).

A third key pillar of the ecosystem is the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School (BFM). In addition to educating new generations of filmmakers and strengthening the professional overall base of the ecosystem, BFM acts as a bridge between the academic environment and the professional film industry in Estonia. Several interviewees noted that they also began their careers through student

¹⁰ Cultural Endowment of Estonia <https://www.kulka.ee/en>

¹¹ Black Nights Film Festival <https://poff.ee/en/>

projects and collaborations developed during their studies at BFM (Int 1, 3, 7, 12), highlighting its significant role in facilitating entry into the industry.

Together, these three pillars form the structural backbone of the Estonian film ecosystem by linking public funding, production networks, and professional education (Figure 2).

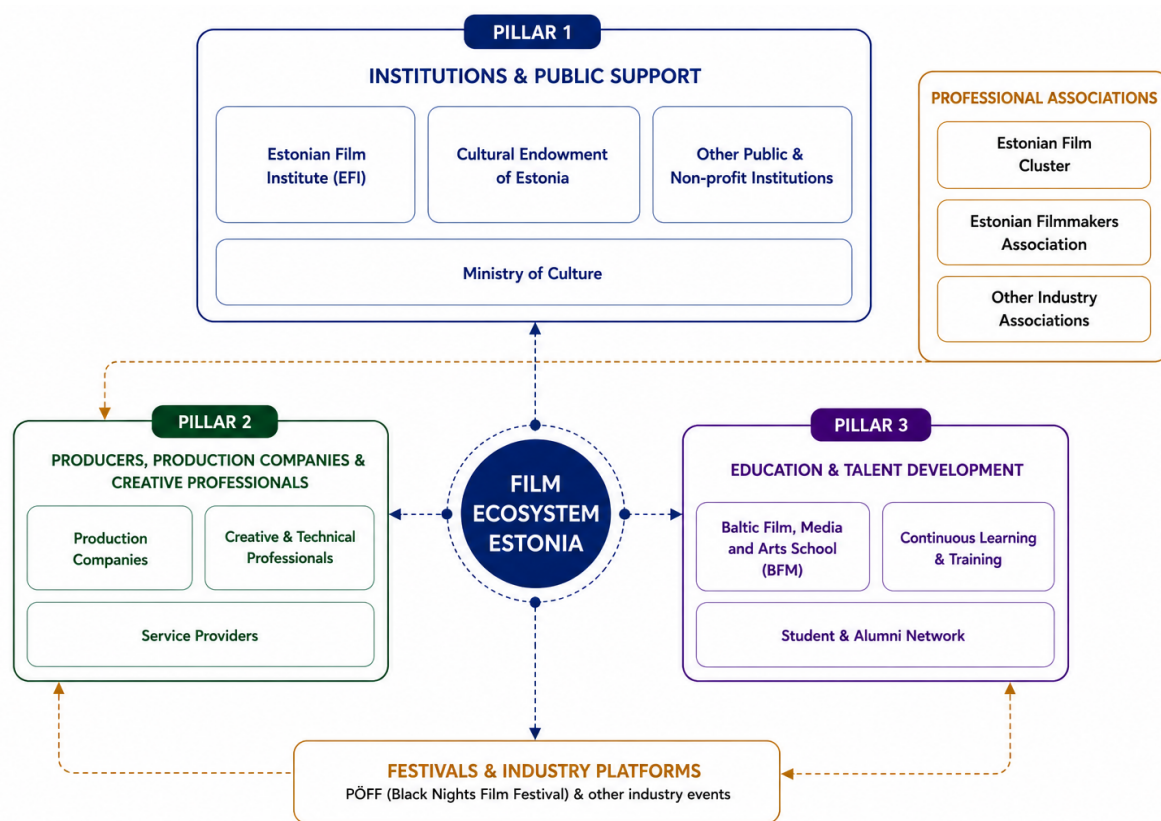


Figure 2. Key pillars of the Estonian film ecosystem. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

In addition to public institutions and production companies, professional associations have also emerged as important actors within the Estonian film ecosystem as the industry has developed and matured. Although some of these organisations were established more than a decade ago, several interviewees highlighted that their role has become more significant in recent years, particularly in supporting professionals and representing industry interests. Notably, the Estonian Film

Cluster¹² (est. in 2015) was identified as enhancing communication and strengthening network connectivity by bringing producers together and facilitating more efficient information exchange (Int 4, 8).

More recently established associations, such as guilds representing directors (Estonian Film Directors Guild¹³, est. 2020) and screenwriters (Estonian Screenwriters' Guild¹⁴, est. 2018), provide professional representation and create platforms for communication and information exchange. Interviewees noted that while these guilds have contributed to improving communication and coordination across professional groups, they are not perceived as the primary channels through which filmmakers access information or establish collaborations. Instead, information exchange and collaboration rely mainly on personal networks and word-of-mouth communication (Int 2, 5).

The findings also suggest that the Estonian Documentary Guild¹⁵ (est. 2018) and the Estonian Filmmakers Association (Eesti Kinoliit, est. 1962) play an important role in fostering a sense of community and supporting social cohesion within the industry (Int 1, 7). According to its statutes, the Estonian Filmmakers Association aims to promote Estonian film culture, support professional development, and represent the interests of its members (Estonian Filmmakers Association, n.d.). Interview data suggests that the organisation is evolving from a historically more passive role, primarily focused on asset management, towards a more active and member-oriented institution. A representative of the association highlighted new priorities such as professional training, advocacy for social guarantees (e.g., health insurance for freelancers), information sharing, and community support (Int 11). This evolving role also reflects broader dynamics of coordination within the ecosystem. Interview findings suggest that coordination in the Estonian film industry is largely perceived as emerging from within the field itself – often through professional associations and informal collaboration – rather than being led by formal institutions (Int 8).

¹² Estonian Film Cluster <https://www.filmiklaster.ee/>

¹³ Estonian Film Directors Guild <https://www.efg.ee/>

¹⁴ Estonian Screenwriters' Guild <https://stsenaristid.ee/en/>

¹⁵ Estonian Documentary Guild <https://dokfilm.ee/en>

Although formal organisations such as EFI and BFM are described as coordinating and collaborating with one another, the coordination is often informal and based on individual relationships rather than structured processes (Int 10). While some participants viewed the current system as sufficient, others pointed to fragmented coordination between institutions and key industry actors. Key stakeholders, including EFI, BFM, professional associations, and industry events like PÖFF, were described as often operating in parallel rather than as part of a coordinated system (Int 10, 11). As a result, activities may overlap, information flows may overlap, and roles and responsibilities are not always clearly defined across the sector (Int 4, 8, 9, 10, 11).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the ecosystem operates as a relatively self-organising yet structurally fragmented system, with limited formal mechanisms for coordination and alignment across actors. In this context, the relative absence of strong central institutional coordination may increase the importance of professional networks, as personal connections become key mechanisms through which information, collaboration, and opportunities circulate in practice.

4.2 Networks in the Estonian Film Ecosystem

To analyse the network structure of the Estonian film ecosystem, this thesis conceptualises actors as nodes (e.g., producers, institutions, filmmakers) and their professional interactions – such as collaboration on projects, hiring decisions, and information exchange – as network ties. The analysis draws on interview data to identify recurring patterns of collaboration, central actors, and bridging roles between otherwise disconnected groups. Following the framework of Burt (1992), particular attention is given to brokerage positions, defined in this study as actors who (1) connect different professional groups, (2) facilitate or control the flow of information and opportunities, and (3) influence the formation of collaborations.

Participants described the Estonian film ecosystem as organised into overlapping professional domains, such as production companies and creative teams, formed through repeated collaborations (Int 4, 7, 12). These domains are reflected in recurring collaboration patterns, where the same professionals work together across multiple projects. Interviewees consistently described relying on familiar collaborators, suggesting that these groups are built on trust and prior working

relationships. As one producer-director noted, “My cinematographer has been the same for 20 years” (Int 1). Similarly, another director stated, “I mostly work with people I trust as friends” (Int 2), while a producer from an established production company explained, “We have directors who we work with regularly” (Int 4).

Across the interviews, producers were consistently identified as central actors within these networks. They initiate projects, assemble teams, secure financing, and maintain relationships with funding bodies and international partners (Int 2, 8, 9). Producers also manage production processes and recruit collaborators, placing them at the center of many professional relationships within the ecosystem.

From the perspective of Burt’s (1992) social network theory, these interview patterns suggest that producers occupy central brokerage positions within the Estonian film ecosystem. As Burt (1992) explains, brokers are individuals who “become the person who first brings together people, giving [them] the opportunity to coordinate everyone’s activities” (p. 70). This highlights the role of brokers as individuals who connect otherwise separate groups and create opportunities for collaboration between them. In the context of the film industry, producers connect creative professionals, crew members, funding bodies, production companies, and international partners who may not otherwise interact directly, facilitating the flow of information, resources, and professional opportunities across the network. This was also reflected in the interview data, where certain producers were repeatedly identified as key actors involved across multiple projects. Their ability to connect different parts of the industry increases both their visibility and influence within the ecosystem.

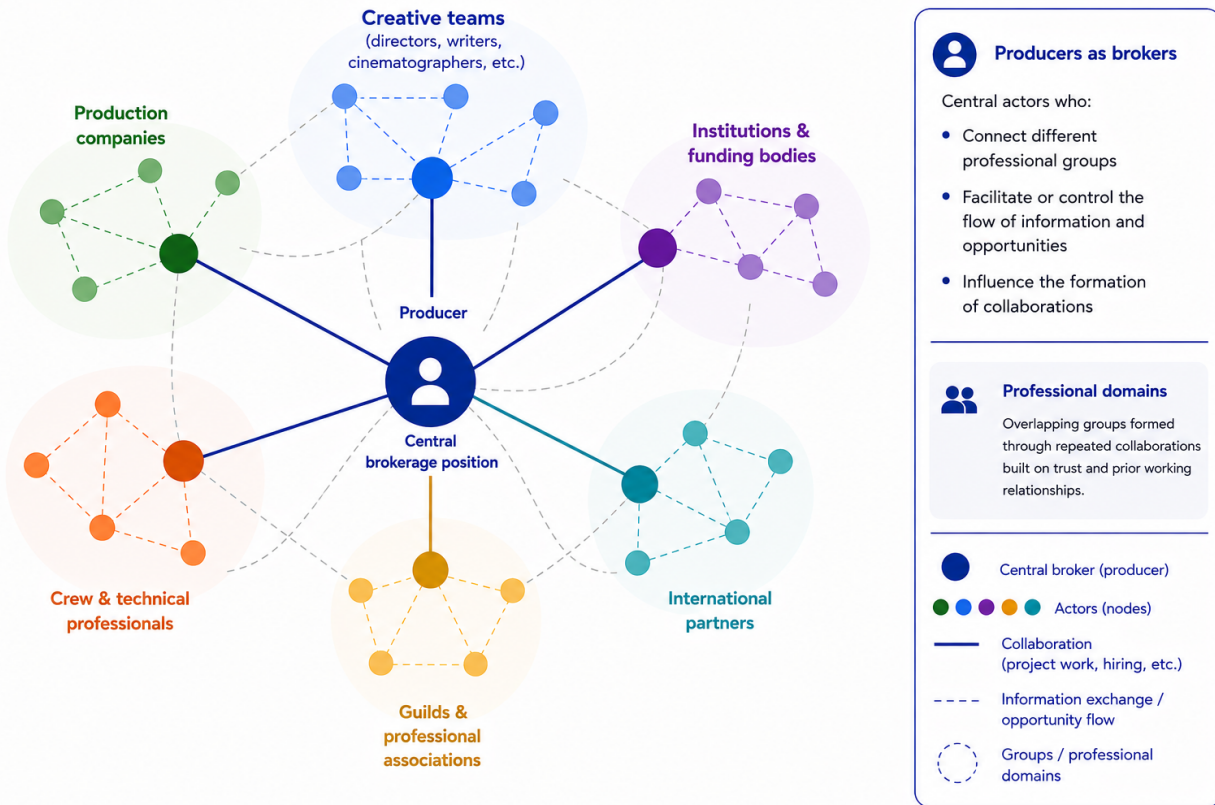


Figure 3. Producers as brokers in the Estonian film ecosystem. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

This central position also gives producers significant control over access to work opportunities, including participation in film projects and involvement in production teams. Because they initiate projects and select collaborators, they play a key role in determining who participates in production. Interviewees noted that while directors and crew may suggest collaborators, final decisions are often shaped by existing relationships, as well as practical considerations such as budget and availability (Int 2, 4, 5). As one experienced producer explained, “collaborators must fit both the director and the producer” (Int 4). This idea was reinforced by a head of department, who stated: “If I don’t suit the producer, I won’t get the call” (Int 5). As a result, access to projects is strongly shaped by producers’ professional networks and existing collaborative relationships.

This dynamic also shapes longer-term collaboration patterns within professional networks in the Estonian film industry. Interview findings indicate that producers frequently rely on trusted collaborators and recurring working relationships. As one producer noted, “If you have developed

a good collaboration with someone, you will want to work with them again” (Int 8). While this approach may reflect personal preference, it is also driven by the need for reliability and efficiency. However, such practices may reduce opportunities for new entrants by privileging established relationships and reinforcing existing professional networks. In this way, brokerage not only enables collaboration, but can also contribute to informal gatekeeping and network closure.

Furthermore, this network structure may influence not only who participates in projects, but also the kinds of projects that are developed. Several interviewees emphasised that the industry is actively seeking fresh ideas and new ways of thinking (Int 1, 3, 12). However, the reliance on familiar collaborators may limit the diversity of perspectives involved in production processes. As several participants noted, hiring decisions are frequently based on prior working relationships and trust (Int 2, 5, 7, 8), which can make it more difficult for new voices or less-connected professionals to enter existing teams. This highlights a structural tension within the ecosystem, where the same network-based mechanisms that support efficient and reliable collaboration may also constrain the introduction of new ideas.

In addition to individual actors, institutions also shape network formation in the Estonian film industry. Film schools such as the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School contribute to network formation by connecting individuals early in their careers and often function as important entry points into the industry. One experienced producer described the school as “like air for us,” highlighting its importance for the local film sector (Int 4). Many interviewees also described starting their careers through student projects and collaborations formed during their studies (Int 1, 3, 7, 12). Thus, BFM appears to play an important role in supporting early professional networks and access to initial opportunities.

Professional associations, such as the Estonian Film Cluster and various other guilds, also contribute to network connectivity by facilitating communication and information exchange. They create spaces for interaction through meetings, seminars, and joint initiatives (Int 8). However, these organisations do not appear to function as central brokers within the ecosystem, as they do not directly control access to projects or collaborations.

Taken together, these observations suggest that, although multiple actors contribute to network connectivity, no single institution is perceived by interviewees as having a central coordinating

role within the ecosystem. As discussed in Section 4.1, this may contribute to a structurally fragmented system, which has direct implications for how networks operate in practice. In the absence of more formalised coordination mechanisms and structured information flows, professional interactions often rely on informal, relationship-based ties. Information about professional opportunities, projects, and collaborations therefore tends to circulate through personal networks, social media, and other ad hoc communication channels rather than through centralised systems (Int 5, 10, 11). This dynamic increases the importance of individual connections and strengthens the position of well-connected actors, particularly those occupying brokerage roles. At the same time, it may reduce transparency and limit access to opportunities for less-connected participants. As a result, institutional fragmentation may contribute to a decentralised and uneven network structure in which access to information and collaboration is shaped more by personal relationships than by formal coordination mechanisms.

Furthermore, reliance on informal structures may also influence collective efficiency and strategic development. Several interviewees noted that the industry does not appear to have a clear shared vision (Int 3, 5). As one interviewee observed, “Even if there is a vision, it is not necessarily felt across the ecosystem” (Int 5). Although EFI’s representative stated that “the broader strategic vision for the sector is developed collaboratively together with film unions and other industry stakeholders” (Int 6), and such a vision is outlined in policy documents such as *Vision for the Estonian Film Sector 2030*, the interview findings suggest that this vision is not consistently perceived across the ecosystem.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the Estonian film ecosystem is characterised by a decentralised network structure in which different actors perform distinct roles. Producers emerge as the primary brokers, bridging structural gaps between creative, institutional, and international actors, while playing a central role in shaping collaborations and access to opportunities. In contrast, institutions and professional organisations support network connectivity and entry into the industry but do not necessarily exert the same level of influence over network formation. These findings suggest that access to opportunities within the ecosystem is closely linked to network position, reinforcing the importance of connectivity and brokerage in a small-market film industry.

4.3 Access in the Estonian Film Ecosystem

While the previous sections examined how networks within the Estonian film ecosystem are structured and how different actors are connected and perceived by industry stakeholders, this section focuses on how these structures may shape access to opportunities and resources. Here, opportunities refer primarily to employment and participation in film projects, while resources refer to access to funding for the development and production of audiovisual projects. The section examines barriers and gatekeeping within the industry and then discusses the pathways through which newcomers are currently able to enter.

As previous research on film and creative industries has shown, collaboration often relies on trust and repeated professional relationships which can influence how access to projects, funding, and professional networks is distributed (Hjort, 2005; Blair et al., 2001). Interview data from this research reflects similar patterns, suggesting that access is not equally available to all actors. Most interviewees noted that the interconnected nature of the Estonian film industry makes it difficult for outsiders to enter, particularly without prior relationships or connections developed through film school networks (Int 2, 3, 7, 8, 12). As one experienced director explained, “Personal connections are very important” (Int 2), while another producer noted that “competition is huge, so it’s definitely hard for newcomers to enter the field” (Int 8).

Visibility was also identified as a key issue within the industry. While some participants suggested that the quality of one’s work can function as a “calling card” (Int 2), others pointed out that, in practice, the ability to demonstrate one’s skills depends on access to projects, which are themselves distributed through existing networks. As a result, newcomers face a circular constraint: without prior opportunities, they cannot build a visible portfolio, yet without visibility, they struggle to access new opportunities. As one producer noted, “without material opportunities, talent cannot show itself” (Int 8), highlighting how visibility is not only an individual attribute but also structurally conditioned by access to resources and participation in production processes.

Interview findings suggest that access to employment in the Estonian network is largely mediated through personal networks and is often influenced by producers or established production companies. At the same time, access to financial resources is shaped by institutional structure and funding decisions. Funding systems are seen to favour applicants with prior experience, creating

barriers for emerging directors and producers who lack an established track record (Int 1, 8). These challenges are further intensified by the small size of the Estonian film industry, where the number of projects is limited and competition for funding is high (Int 6). As a result, newcomers may face difficulties in gaining initial access, particularly when competing with more established professionals.

Despite these barriers, interviewees identified several pathways through which newcomers can enter the industry. One common strategy is for emerging directors to collaborate with experienced producers or production companies, who can facilitate greater access to funding and professional networks (Int 4, 6, 12). This pathway is further reinforced by EFI funding practices, which tend to favour projects submitted by established production companies and teams with demonstrated experience (Int 6). As an EFI representative explained, having an experienced producer attached to a project increases confidence in its successful completion, particularly given the complexity of feature film production (Int 6). This encourages emerging directors to collaborate with more experienced producers in order to access funding and enter the system. However, some interviewees noted that such collaborations may also involve unequal decision-making power. In particular, producers – who are responsible for securing funding and managing the project – may have greater influence over creative and strategic decisions, which can limit the autonomy of directors, especially those at earlier stages of their careers (Int 1).

Another important pathway into the ecosystem is gaining practical experience across different roles. Interviewees emphasised that working on productions, often in entry-level or assistant positions, allows newcomers to build professional networks and gradually gain access to further work opportunities (Int 5, 7, 10). As one director, who continues to alternate between directing his own films and working on other productions, explained: “Working on sets helped me build my network” (Int 7). Film schools such as the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School also play a key role in this process by providing initial connections through student projects, internships, and early collaborations. In addition, interviewees noted that periods of high production activity – particularly during the summer season in Estonia – can create temporary entry points for new professionals, as labour shortages increase demand for crew and assistants (Int 5, 10).

While these pathways provide some opportunities for entry, they do not fully overcome the structural barriers created by reliance on network-based access. Instead, interview data suggests that they often reinforce the importance of connections to established actors within the network, as newcomers typically gain access through collaboration with experienced producers, existing professional contacts, or periods of labour shortage. Several participants noted that collaboration tends to occur within existing professional circles, making it more difficult for less-connected individuals to access projects and opportunities (Int 2, 7, 12). In line with Burt's (1992) theory, this indicates that access to opportunities is closely linked to network position, with more central actors benefiting from greater visibility and access, while newcomers face structural challenges in entering the industry.

At the same time, these patterns of access are closely tied to repeated collaboration within established professional groups. If opportunities continue to circulate within the same networks, it becomes important to understand why professionals repeatedly work with the same collaborators over time. Examining these dynamics helps explain how such networks are maintained and reproduced in practice. This requires moving beyond a purely structural perspective towards a more practice-based understanding of collaboration that considers how trust, shared practices, and professional relationships are developed and sustained over time.

4.4 Communities of Practice in the Estonian Film Ecosystem

As demonstrated in the previous section, Burt's (1992) social network theory provides a framework for understanding how actors are connected and how access to opportunities is shaped within the network. However, it does not fully explain why professionals repeatedly work with the same collaborators over time. Interview findings from this research suggest that these patterns are not random, but are closely linked to the ways in which work is organised within the film industry.

To examine these dynamics more closely, the analysis draws on Etienne Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, which explains how learning, trust, and shared ways of working develop through repeated collaboration.

Interview data from this research shows that professionals in the Estonian film industry frequently work with the same collaborators across multiple productions. This pattern can partly be explained by the project-based nature of film production, where teams must be assembled quickly under conditions of uncertainty and financial risk (Caves, 2000). As Caves (2000) argues, creative production involves significant uncertainty, and working with known collaborators helps reduce risk and facilitate efficient coordination.

Interviewees consistently emphasised that trust and familiarity are key reasons for repeated collaboration, suggesting that these choices are practical rather than purely personal. As one director noted, “Film is such an unpredictable process, you need people you know you can trust and rely on”(Int 9). The instability and pressures of production therefore reinforce repeated collaboration with familiar professionals.

From a communities of practice perspective, repeated collaboration leads to the development of shared working practices. Over time, professionals who work together regularly develop similar ways of communicating, solving problems, and organising work (Wenger, 1998). This means that collaboration is shaped by shared practices built through experience. One reason repeated collaboration becomes valuable within these professional communities is the development of tacit knowledge. As Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (1995) explain, tacit knowledge is developed through personal experience and is difficult to formally communicate.

In film production, tacit knowledge includes skills such as working under pressure, coordinating tasks, adapting to changing situations, and understanding unspoken working routines. Because these forms of knowledge are difficult to formally assess or transfer, professionals often rely on previous collaboration and trust when selecting collaborators. The preference for familiar collaborators therefore reflects not only personal relationships, but also the need to work with people whose skills, working methods, and reliability are already known. As one interviewee noted, “You want to work with people that you know can handle the difficult work” (Int 5).

This reliance on tacit knowledge also helps explain why collaboration patterns are often locally embedded. In small film industries like Estonia, professionals develop not only technical skills but also knowledge of local working practices and informal industry norms. These forms of knowledge

are typically acquired through ongoing participation in professional communities rather than through formal education alone.

Communities of practice can also be observed through informal learning and mentoring within the Estonian film industry. Interviewees described how skills are gradually acquired through experience, collaboration, and occasional guidance from more experienced professionals (Int 2, 5, 8, 12). This suggests the presence of informal learning processes aligned with Wenger's concept of communities of practice.

New professionals typically start in smaller roles and gradually gain experience and trust, often through informal mentoring and peer support (Int 2, 5, 10). In this sense, mentoring functions not only as a mechanism of learning, but also as a pathway into existing professional networks and communities. However, according to the interviewees, the Estonian film industry appears to lack well-established mentoring mechanisms, particularly in early-stage development and career transitions (Int 5, 10, 12). Access to mentoring and professional guidance appears to be largely informal and dependent on individual initiative from both mentors and mentees (Int 5, 10), which may create uneven access to professional support and make it more difficult for emerging filmmakers to build skills, develop projects, and establish sustainable positions within the industry.

Overall, based on this analysis, communities of practice both support and limit collaboration within the Estonian film ecosystem. They enable efficient teamwork, trust, and knowledge sharing, but they also reinforce stable professional circles that may be difficult for outsiders to enter. This creates a tension within the ecosystem: the same practices that support collaboration can also restrict access. Improving access therefore requires not only expanding professional networks, but also creating more open and formal pathways for newcomers to participate, learn, and become integrated into existing professional communities.

4.5 Key Findings

The findings from this research indicate that the Estonian film ecosystem operates through closely connected professional networks, where collaboration is based on trust and repeated working relationships. This reflects the characteristics of small-market film industries, where limited

resources and a relatively small pool of professionals increase the importance of network-based collaboration. According to Burt, access to opportunities is closely linked to network position, with central actors – particularly producers – playing a key role in connecting others and shaping access to projects and resources (Burt, 1992). While these networks support efficient collaboration, they also create barriers to entry because access to work, funding, and opportunities often depends on existing relationships.

Drawing on Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice, the analysis indicates that these patterns are reinforced through repeated collaboration. As Wenger (1998) explains, communities of practice develop through “sustained mutual relationships” and the “shared ways of engaging in doing things together” (p. 125). Estonian film professionals tend to work with the same collaborators due to trust, efficiency, and the need to manage uncertainty in project-based work. Through ongoing collaboration, professionals develop shared working routines, communication styles, and tacit knowledge. Over time, these repeated interactions contribute to the formation of stable professional groups and shared ways of working within the industry. While these practices support efficient collaboration and knowledge sharing, they may also make it more difficult for outsiders to enter established professional circles. Although pathways into the industry do exist, such as film education, informal mentoring, and entry-level roles, these are perceived as inconsistent and often dependent on personal connections, which may limit their accessibility.

These observed dynamics may not be equally visible to all actors. The interview findings reveal that for those already embedded within established networks, the system may appear to function effectively, as trust-based collaboration and informal communication through personal networks support efficient project coordination. However, from the perspective of those positioned outside these networks, the same structures reveal limitations, including restricted access, limited visibility, and barriers to entry.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for more transparent, coordinated, and inclusive approaches to collaboration, access, and mentoring in order to better align industry practices with broader policy goals, ecosystem sustainability, and the development of new talent.

In response, one possible approach to addressing these challenges within the Estonian film ecosystem is the development of a digital platform pilot. The following section therefore introduces a project concept that aims to improve visibility, support collaboration, facilitate new connections, and provide alternative pathways into the industry beyond existing networks.

5. Project Plan

This section presents the proposed project developed in response to the thesis findings on the Estonian film ecosystem, particularly issues related to reliance on existing networks, limited access to opportunities, and informal information exchange. The project introduces a digital platform designed to address these structural challenges. The blueprint of a digital hub was developed based on the findings of this research, insights gathered from stakeholder interviews, and an analysis of existing structural challenges within the ecosystem. The proposal was designed within the scope of this thesis as a conceptual pilot solution, while considering the practical limitations of the Estonian film market, including limited resources and the small size of the professional community.

The following sections outline the project's rationale, objectives, implementation strategy, and expected impact, demonstrating how the proposed solution responds to the structural challenges identified in the research.

5.1 Project Rationale and Background

Building on the research findings, the Estonian film industry can be understood as a small but interconnected ecosystem in which access to work opportunities and collaboration is largely shaped by personal relationships and existing networks. The interviewees noted that information about projects, opportunities, and industry activities is often shared through informal channels, including personal contacts, events organised by EFI, and professional communities, rather than through a centralised platform or system. As a result, visibility and access to information may vary across different actors within the ecosystem.

In response to these challenges, this project proposes a digital collaboration and networking hub designed to improve professional visibility, information exchange, and access to opportunities within the industry. The platform aims to create new pathways for professionals outside established networks to connect with others and showcase their work. By centralising information and making profiles, skills, and opportunities more accessible, the platform seeks to improve visibility and support more transparent access to opportunities within the ecosystem. This is

particularly important for newcomers, who often face difficulties entering established professional networks and gaining industry visibility. In this way, the platform reflects broader arguments that digital tools can make dispersed networks – where professionals operate in separate circles rather than within a unified system – more open and accessible (Van Dijck, 2013; Potts et al., 2008).

In addition, the platform concept aims to address institutional fragmentation by providing a shared space for communication and coordination. By bringing together filmmakers, institutions, and production companies, it could improve information flow and reduce duplication of efforts. Rather than replacing existing trust-based collaboration, the platform is intended to support it by making the system more transparent, inclusive, and accessible.

5.2 Mission, Vision and Value Proposition

The project aims to develop a year-round, community-oriented digital platform that enhances professional visibility, facilitates connections among film professionals, and supports collaboration across the Estonian film industry. It seeks to improve access to resources, knowledge, and professional opportunities, thereby contributing to a more transparent, inclusive, and sustainable ecosystem. The project envisions a more connected and collaborative industry environment in which filmmakers, creative professionals, and production companies can engage and develop beyond the limitations of informal networks and short-term, event-based interactions such as festivals.

The platform is designed to provide film professionals with a centralised and accessible space to showcase their work, discover opportunities, and connect with potential collaborators. By reducing reliance on informal communication channels and increasing the accessibility of professional information, the platform aims to improve visibility and coordination across the ecosystem. For film professionals, it could create new pathways for collaboration and more direct access to industry opportunities beyond existing personal networks. For production companies and institutions, the platform may offer a more efficient way to identify talent, share information, and engage with a broader range of industry participants.

By combining professional profiles, project-based collaboration tools, and a centralised resource hub, the platform creates practical value for its users while supporting more transparent and inclusive industry practices. Rather than replacing existing informal networks, the platform is intended to complement them by providing a more structured and accessible system for communication and collaboration.

5.3 Goals, Objectives and Key Performance Indicators

The project is guided by three main strategic goals: (1) enhancing access and visibility for film professionals, (2) strengthening collaboration and connectivity within the film industry, and (3) centralising information within the sector. These goals are further divided into actionable objectives and key activities, providing a structured framework for implementation and supporting the effective development of the platform (see *Table 2*). Related key performance indicators are presented in a separate table, offering a systematic approach for monitoring and evaluating the platform's progress and outcomes (see *Table 3*).

Strategic Goals	Objectives	Key Activities
 Enhance access and visibility for professionals across the film industry	• Increase visibility of professionals at all experience levels, especially emerging talent • Improve access to industry opportunities (funding, collaborations) • Make talent, opportunities, and resources easier to discover	• Develop a searchable database with detailed profiles and portfolio showcases • Implement advanced search and filtering functionalities • Design and integrate talent showcase features (e.g. portfolios, reels, featured profiles)
 Strengthen collaboration within the ecosystem	• Improve connectivity between industry stakeholders • Enable collaboration across projects, disciplines, and regions • Foster an active, engaged, and inclusive professional community across all disciplines	• Build messaging and networking functionalities • Create project-based collaboration spaces (forums, workspaces) • Establish partnerships with organisations, festivals, and institutions • Organise/promote community engagement activities (events, discussions)
 Centralise knowledge and reduce fragmentation in the film industry	• Consolidate fragmented industry information into a single platform • Improve access to knowledge and resources • Support informed decision-making across the ecosystem	• Develop a centralised resource library (funding, events, news, insights) • Establish information-sharing partnerships with stakeholders • Implement content curation and quality assurance processes

Table 2. Goals, objectives, and key activities. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

KPIs	Description	Target (by the end of Year 1)
Registered Users	Total number of registered users on the platform	100+ users
Active Companies	Number of participating organisations or companies	10+ companies
Monthly Active Users (MAU)	% of users active each month	40–60% of registered users
Profile Completion Rate	% of users with completed profiles	70%+
Session Frequency	Avg. logins per user per month	2–4 logins/month
Successful Matches / Collaborations	Number of meaningful collaborations	20+ annually
Profile Views per User	Average visibility of user profiles	+10% monthly growth
Search Interactions	Usage of search/talent discovery features	Increasing trend
Mentorship Participation	Number of users in mentorship/knowledge-sharing	10+ annually
Newsletter Open Rate	% of recipients opening emails	30–40%
Social Media Engagement Rate	Engagement across social platforms	5–10%
Event Participation	Attendance at events/sessions	15–20 per event

Table 3. Key performance indicators and measurable indicators. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

5.4 Target Users and Needs

The primary users include freelance film professionals (crew and creatives), producers and production companies, as well as film students and emerging talent. Their key needs are increased visibility, more equal access to opportunities, and efficient ways to find collaborators and resources beyond existing personal networks. Based on the research findings, the platform concept proposes several features aimed at improving visibility, access, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing within the industry.

- (1) **Improving visibility for freelancers and companies** – This would be supported through a structured profile system where users can create detailed professional profiles, including portfolios, previous work, skills, and experience. Profiles could be searchable by role, expertise, and project type, allowing professionals to be discovered beyond their immediate networks. This mechanism aims to improve visibility for both emerging and established talent.

- (2) **Providing more equal access to opportunities** – The platform would centralise funding calls and industry opportunities in one accessible space. Instead of relying primarily on informal channels (e.g., social media groups), users could access opportunities through an open and searchable interface. This aims to reduce information asymmetries and improve visibility of opportunities across the ecosystem.
- (3) **Enabling efficient collaboration** – The platform would support collaboration through searchable databases and filtering tools. Users could identify potential collaborators based on role, experience, and availability, and initiate contact directly.
- (4) **Supporting career sustainability and knowledge exchange** – The platform would also support mentorship and knowledge-sharing through features such as discussion forums, resource libraries, and voluntary mentorship programmes. These could be developed in collaboration with institutional partners (e.g., film schools and professional associations) and experienced industry professionals.

The secondary users consist of film institutions, film festivals and industry events, and service providers. Their potential role within the platform is identified based on the broader structural challenges highlighted in the previous sections of this thesis, particularly fragmented information exchange and decentralised communication practices. In this context, institutions and organisations could potentially benefit from: (1) more effective channels for disseminating information, (2) improved ways of reaching relevant industry participants, and (3) tools for promoting opportunities across the sector.

5.5 Project Execution

The project would be implemented with combined phased and agile project management approaches. A phased approach provides structure and clear direction for stakeholder-driven development, while an agile approach allows flexibility and continuous improvement during the development of a user-centred digital platform. A phased approach divides the project into key stages such as planning, development, launch, and growth outlined in the project's Gantt chart (see *Figure 4*). At the same time, an agile approach allows for continuous adaptation during the development process in each stage. Such flexibility is preferred as digital platform projects are

often uncertain and user needs, behaviors, and technical requirements may evolve and change over time.

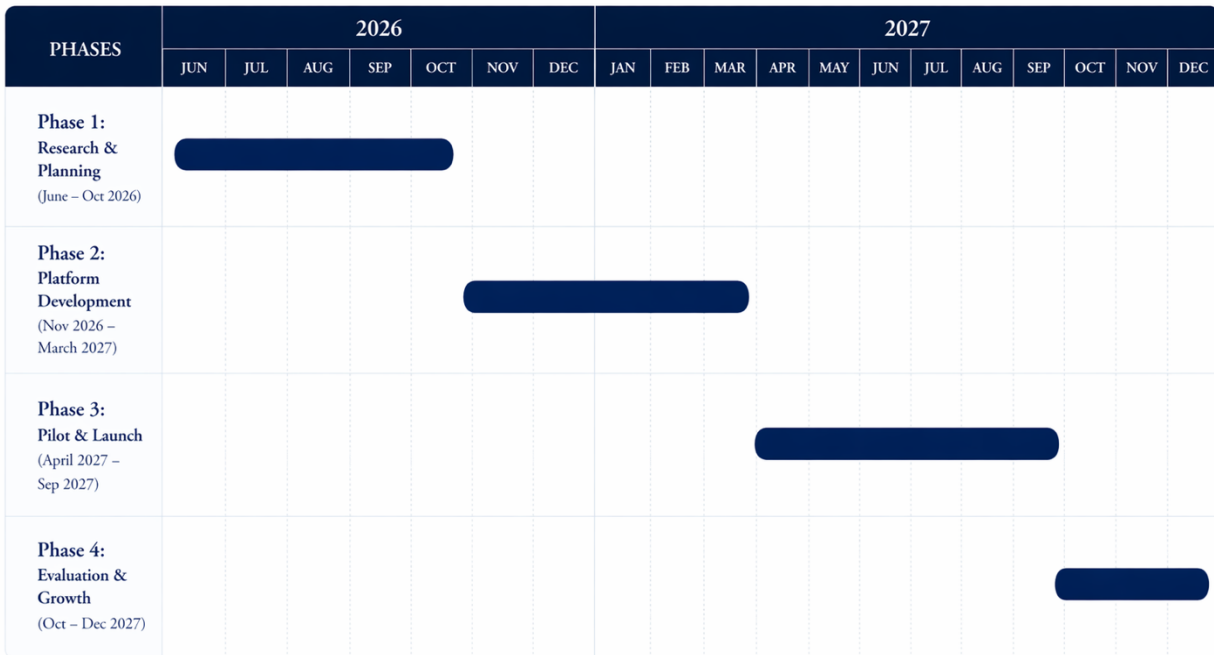


Figure 4. Project Gantt chart. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

Each phase has its set key activities and key deliverables (see *Table 4*) that are used to keep the project on track and aligned with the project’s strategic goals.

PHASE & TIMELINE	KEY ACTIVITIES	KEY DELIVERABLES	RELATED INDICATORS
 Phase 1: Research & Planning (June – Oct 2026)	• User interviews and surveys • Feature prioritisation • Partnership discussions • Technical planning	• Research summary • Platform requirements • Partner agreements	• Validated user needs • Confirmed feature scope • Institutional partners engaged
 Phase 2: Platform Development (Nov 2026 – March 2027)	• UX/UI design • Development of key features • Internal testing	• Beta version of the platform • Functional core features delivered	• Usability validated through testing
 Phase 3: Pilot & Launch (April 2027 – Sep 2027)	• Pilot with selected users • Feedback collection and iteration • User onboarding • Marketing	• Live platform • Onboarding materials	• 100 registered users by the end of Phase 3 • 50 active profiles by the end of Phase 3 • First collaborations initiated
 Phase 4: Evaluation & Growth (Oct – Dec 2027)	• Performance evaluation • User feedback analysis • Feature refinement • Planning next development phase	• Evaluation report • Updated roadmap	• ≥10 collaborations initiated • Updated industry calendar • User feedback on clarity & access

Table 4. Project key activities, deliverables, indicators. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

5.6 Financial Model and Budget

The financial model follows a staged and sustainability-oriented approach. During the initial phase, the project would seek public and cultural funding to support platform development and early-stage implementation. In the longer term, the platform’s sustainability would rely primarily on partnerships with institutions, production companies, and other industry organisations that benefit from improved visibility, communication, and access to professional networks within the ecosystem. Revenue could be generated through paid organisational features, such as promoted listings, recruitment tools, event promotion, and enhanced visibility services. Core access for individual professionals would remain free in order to maintain inclusivity and reduce barriers to entry. This model aims to balance accessibility for users with long-term operational sustainability.

The proposed €60,000 budget (see *Table 5*) is intended to support the development of a minimum viable platform (MVP) with core functionalities such as user profiles, searchable directories,

project listings, filtering systems, and basic communication tools. The estimate is based on current market rates for small-scale digital platform development in Estonia, including UX/UI design, front-end and back-end development, database architecture, testing, and project management.

While early-stage validation may be conducted using low-cost prototype solutions such as no-code tools or pilot environments, the proposed platform is intended as scalable industry infrastructure rather than a temporary prototype. Fully relying on no-code solutions may therefore create limitations related to scalability, maintainability, security, and long-term system integration. For this reason, the project would adopt an iterative development approach in which early validation and user testing precede full technical implementation. This approach aims to reduce development risks while ensuring that the final system is grounded in actual user needs and capable of long-term use within the Estonian film ecosystem.

Cost Category	Amount (€)	Funding Source	Justification
Platform Development	30,000	Public & cultural funding	Core investment required to build MVP (profiles, database, matchmaking, calendar). Professional development ensures usability, scalability, and reliability beyond prototype stage.
Project Management	8,000	Public funding / grants	Necessary for coordinating stakeholders (EFI, BFM, producers), managing timelines, and ensuring alignment with industry needs.
Community & Content Management	7,000	Partnerships + grants	Critical for user adoption in a network-based industry; supports onboarding, engagement, and moderation of platform activity.
Technical Infrastructure	2,000	Grants	Covers hosting, security, and maintenance to ensure stable platform performance.
Testing & Setup	3,000	Grants	Ensures usability and functionality through QA testing before launch. Reduces risk of failure.
Content Creation	3,000	Partnerships	Development of guides, onboarding materials, and resource library content to support users.
Branding & Communication	3,000	Partnerships / grants	Builds platform visibility and trust, which is essential for adoption in a relationship-based industry.
Launch & Promotion	2,000	Partnerships	Supports initial user acquisition and awareness through targeted outreach.
Contingency	2,000	Grants	Buffer for unforeseen costs during development and launch.
TOTAL	60,000		

Table 5. Proposed budget and funding plan for the project. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

The financial plan will rely primarily on public and cultural funding sources during the initial phase, as the platform is positioned as a form of digital infrastructure supporting the development of the Estonian film industry. Potential funding sources could include support schemes administered by the Estonian Film Institute, the Estonian Cultural Endowment, European Union creative industries programmes such as Creative Europe. For example, EFI has also previously supported digital infrastructure projects related to film accessibility and databases, such as the development of the Arkaader platform and the Estonian Film Database.

In addition, strategic partnerships with key industry stakeholders, such as film institutions, festivals, production companies, and professional associations, could contribute through content provision, promotion, and in-kind support, thereby reducing operational costs and strengthening industry integration.

In later stages, once the platform has established a stable user base, the possibility of introducing a mixed revenue model would be explored. This could include optional paid features for organisations, promoted listings, and institutional memberships. Such an approach would help support the platform's long-term sustainability while keeping access free for freelancers.

5.7 Partnerships and Stakeholders

Collaboration with key partners is envisaged as a structured and mutually beneficial process, aligned with each actor's role within the film ecosystem. For the successful development and adoption of a digital collaboration platform, early engagement with key stakeholders would be essential, as they contribute both supply and demand. Production companies would play a critical role in generating opportunities, while freelancers would provide the talent base necessary for network effects. Institutional partners would contribute to establishing legitimacy, providing content, and supporting wider adoption across the ecosystem.

As the platform is currently presented as a conceptual project proposal developed within the scope of this thesis, the partnerships described in this section are exploratory and have not been formally established through agreements or institutional commitments.

The platform is intended to develop strategic partnerships with key institutions in the Estonian film industry, such as the Estonian Film Institute, the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School, the Estonian Film Cluster, and the Estonian Filmmakers Association (Kinoliit). For example, the Estonian Film Institute could contribute by sharing verified information, including funding opportunities, grants, and training programmes, as well as expert insights supporting sector development. In return, the platform could offer a continuous communication channel and access to aggregated data on industry trends. The Baltic Film, Media and Arts School could support mentorship initiatives and contribute educational content, while benefiting from increased visibility for students and clearer pathways into professional practice. The Estonian Film Cluster could engage with the platform as a means of strengthening connections with freelancers and emerging talent, improving its ability to identify and collaborate with a broader pool of professionals.

The Estonian Filmmakers Association could play a particularly important role in supporting community-building and facilitating engagement among professionals. Given its existing function as a representative body and its recent strategic shift towards member-oriented activities, the organisation could contribute to the platform through communication with its members, promotion of events and training opportunities, and support for knowledge-sharing initiatives. In turn, the platform could enhance the organisation's ability to reach both existing and new members, while strengthening its role within the wider ecosystem. Embedding the platform within such a trusted and relatively non-hierarchical institutional context may support its adoption, as participation and collaboration in these environments are shaped by shared practices and trust-based relationships (Granovetter, 1985; Wenger, 1998).

Overall, these potential partnerships would support the platform's relevance, credibility, and integration within the wider film industry, while also enhancing its long-term sustainability. Beyond these specific partnerships, the project is embedded within a broader stakeholder ecosystem that shapes its development and impact.

The primary stakeholders are freelance film professionals, producers, and production companies, who act as the main users of the platform and generate value through their participation, collaboration, and content. Secondary stakeholders include film institutions, educational organisations, festivals, and professional associations, which contribute by providing funding,

training, visibility, and industry coordination. These actors also play a key role in supporting platform adoption by supplying verified information, promoting the platform, and engaging their networks. In addition, public institutions and funding organisations function as enabling stakeholders by providing financial support and aligning the project with broader cultural and industry development objectives. Collaboration between these stakeholder groups is important for strengthening platform participation, ensuring its relevance within the industry, and supporting long-term sustainability.

5.8 Communication Strategy

The project proposes a community-driven communication strategy focused on user engagement and visibility within the Estonian film ecosystem. The strategy aims to support trust-building, encourage participation, and strengthen interaction between the platform and its users through platform-based features, targeted outreach, and strategic partnerships. The main user engagement activities and communication approaches are outlined in *Table 6*.

Key Activity	KPI	Indicator (How Measured)	Target
Early user onboarding and testing (pilot users)	Number of registered users	Total users registered on the platform	100+ users (Year 1)
Feedback loops through surveys and interviews	Feedback collection	Number of survey responses and interviews conducted	50+ responses
Community forums and discussion spaces	User engagement	Monthly active users (MAU)	40–60% of total users
Mentorship and knowledge-sharing activities	Community participation	Number of participants in mentorship/knowledge-sharing activities	Track participation (optional target can be added)
Events, workshops, and networking sessions	Event participation	Number of attendees per event	25+ participants per event

Table 6. User engagement plan. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

Early user onboarding and pilot testing could be implemented through a closed beta phase, involving selected users (e.g. producers, freelancers, and recent graduates) recruited through partners and targeted outreach. The onboarding process would be supported by guided registration, tutorials, and introductory sessions (online and in-person), enabling users to engage with the platform from the outset.

Continuous engagement could be supported through feedback mechanisms, including structured online surveys, follow-up interviews, and in-platform feedback tools. These would allow for iterative platform development based on user experience and evolving needs. Community forums and discussion spaces could be integrated into the platform as dedicated areas for exchanging information, sharing opportunities, and fostering professional interaction. These spaces would likely require moderation by a community manager to maintain activity and relevance.

Mentorship and knowledge-sharing activities could be facilitated through potential partnerships with film institutions, professional associations, film schools, and experienced industry professionals. These activities might include mentorship matching, thematic discussions, and online or in-person sessions. In addition, events, workshops, and networking sessions could be organised in collaboration with industry partners and festivals, combining digital and physical formats to maximise accessibility and participation.

To support outreach and industry awareness, the project would rely on strategic partnerships and multi-channel communication. Institutional partners could promote the platform through their existing communication channels, such as newsletters, websites, and professional networks, thereby supporting user acquisition and organisational participation. In return, the platform would provide partners with a more centralised space for disseminating information, promoting opportunities, and reaching relevant professional audiences within the film ecosystem.

Collaboration with festivals and industry events may further strengthen platform visibility through presentations, networking activities, and direct engagement with industry participants. For festivals and events, the platform could additionally support professional networking and year-round engagement beyond the duration of individual events. The main visibility and outreach activities are outlined in *Table 7*.

Key Activity	KPI	Indicator (How Measured)	Target
Promotion through institutional partners	Number of active company profiles	Total number of registered and active organizational profiles	10+ organisations (by end of Year 1)
Targeted outreach to production companies and freelancers	Project activity	Number of project postings on the platform	20+ annually
Social media campaigns and industry newsletters	User engagement and reach	Number of new users acquired through campaigns; engagement metrics	Steady growth (track monthly)
Presence at key national film events	Platform awareness	Number of event interactions, sign-ups, or contacts generated	Increasing participation per event
Platform usage (cross-cutting activity)	Search and discovery interactions	Number of searches, clicks, and interactions within the platform	Continuous increase over time

Table 7. *Visibility plan. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).*

Targeted outreach to production companies and freelancers could be conducted through direct communication encouraging the sharing of projects and opportunities on the platform. Social media campaigns and industry newsletters would further support awareness-building by promoting platform features, highlighting user experiences, and showcasing available opportunities. Participation in key national industry events could also strengthen user acquisition through demonstrations and networking activities.

The implementation of these activities would likely be coordinated by a small project team, including a project manager and community manager, in collaboration with institutional and industry partners. Overall, these activities are intended to support sustained engagement, strengthen professional connections, and improve information exchange across the Estonian film ecosystem.

5.9 Marketing Strategy

The marketing strategy follows a staged approach tailored to the structure of the Estonian film industry, where access to professionals is concentrated within existing networks, institutions, and industry events. The initial focus is on building credibility and encouraging participation by engaging producers, freelancers, and recent graduates. This approach reflects the findings of this thesis, which indicate that access to opportunities in the Estonian film ecosystem is strongly shaped by professional networks and trust-based relationships. As a result, partnership-based promotion, institutional endorsement, and word-of-mouth communication are likely to play a more important role in user adoption than large-scale digital advertising. The marketing strategy is closely linked to the communication strategy, which focuses on building trust, engagement, and long-term relationships within the industry. While communication activities support continuous interaction with users and stakeholders, marketing activities focus on attracting new users and expanding the network.

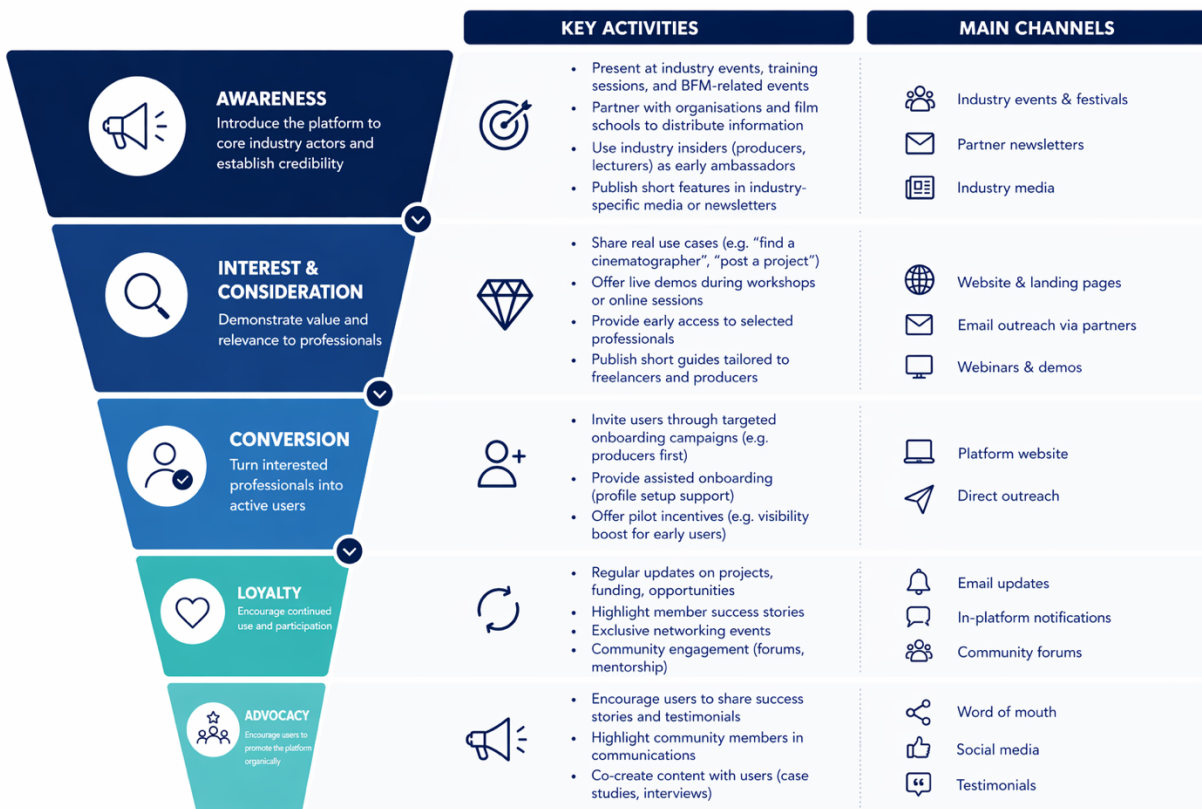


Figure 5. Marketing funnel. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

As illustrated in *Figure 5*, the marketing strategy progresses from awareness to advocacy. In the early stages, activities focus on establishing legitimacy through trusted channels, such as industry events, institutional partnerships, and recognised professionals acting as ambassadors, addressing the importance of trust identified in the findings. The interest and consideration stage focuses on demonstrating practical value through use cases and early access, responding to the need for clearer visibility of opportunities. Conversion is supported through targeted onboarding, particularly prioritising producers as key actors who influence access to opportunities. In later stages, the emphasis shifts to sustaining engagement and building an active community through regular updates, networking opportunities, and knowledge-sharing activities. This complements the communication strategy by supporting continuous interaction and community development. Finally, advocacy relies on peer-driven promotion, reflecting the importance of informal networks in shaping communication and opportunity distribution.

Overall, the combined communication and marketing approach aligns with the network-based and trust-driven nature of the industry, aiming to complement existing collaboration patterns while improving visibility, access, and information flow.

5.10 Risk Analysis and Mitigation Strategy

The most significant risk associated with the project is the absence of a clear value proposition, which may limit user adoption and engagement. In a network-based industry where professionals rely on established relationships and familiar tools, there is a strong possibility that users will continue to use existing methods unless the platform offers clear practical advantages. To address this, the project would prioritise early validation through user testing, including prototype development, pilot use cases, and feedback from key industry actors such as producers and freelancers.

While the concept is informed by qualitative interview data highlighting issues of access, visibility, and fragmented information, further testing is necessary to ensure that the proposed solution aligns clearly with user needs. Unlike existing industry platforms, which are often focused on areas such as funding, training, or professional representation, this platform is intended as a continuous, user-

driven infrastructure supporting everyday collaboration and information exchange. User retention would depend on the platform providing ongoing value through updated opportunities, active engagement features, and increased visibility for professionals, thereby encouraging repeated use and integration into everyday industry practices.

Additional risks include limited engagement, technical issues, and challenges related to data quality and long-term funding. These risks would be mitigated through early user involvement, strategic partnerships, and iterative platform development. The main risks and corresponding mitigation measures are outlined in *Table 8* below.

Risk	Description	Likelihood	Severity	Mitigation Strategy
Low User Adoption	Users not joining or not actively using the platform	High	High	Target early adopters (producers, active freelancers) through direct outreach; partner with institutions to onboard users; provide onboarding support and initial incentives (e.g. increased visibility for early users)
Lack of Network Density	Too few users or interactions	High	High	Pre-seed the platform with profiles, projects, and opportunities; launch with a pilot group; ensure a minimum level of activity before public rollout
Continued Reliance on Informal Networks	Users continue using existing tools (e.g. social media, word-of-mouth)	High	Medium	Integrate platform use into existing practices (e.g. sharing opportunities from institutions); offer clear advantages (centralised information, better visibility); focus on complementing rather than replacing existing tools
Trust & Credibility Issues	Users not trusting the platform or its content	Medium	High	Partner with recognised institutions; introduce verified profiles and moderated content; ensure transparent governance and clear data policies
Data Quality Issues	Incomplete or outdated profiles	Medium	Medium	Encourage profile completion through prompts and reminders; introduce minimum profile requirements; assign moderation responsibility to a community manager
Financial Sustainability	Insufficient long-term funding	Medium	High	Use a phased funding model (public funding → partnerships → gradual monetisation); keep core features free for freelancers; explore sponsorships and premium services for companies
Unequal Access Reinforced	Existing networks still dominate opportunities	Medium	Medium	Improve discoverability through search and filtering; highlight new and emerging talent; ensure open access to opportunities and transparent listings
Technical Issues	Poor UX, bugs, instability	Medium	Medium	Start with a minimum viable product (MVP); conduct user testing during pilot phase; iterate based on feedback; collaborate with experienced developers

Table 8. Risk management and mitigation strategy. (Visual developed by the author using AI-assisted support (ChatGPT) for layout and visual formatting; content and information were provided by the author).

5.11 Feasibility Evaluation

The feasibility of the project is closely connected to the challenges identified throughout the research. The findings indicate that the Estonian film industry operates through closely interconnected professional networks, where access to opportunities is strongly influenced by existing relationships. Interviewees frequently described difficulties faced by newcomers attempting to enter these networks without prior connections, particularly those formed through film school or earlier collaborations. The research also highlighted challenges related to informal and decentralised information exchange across the industry. Interviewees noted that information about projects and professional opportunities is often distributed across personal networks rather than through a shared central channel. This may limit visibility and make it more difficult for less-connected professionals to identify relevant opportunities or establish new contacts.

In response, the proposed platform does not aim to replace existing professional networks, but rather to support visibility, discoverability, and initial connection-building across the ecosystem. By making professional profiles, opportunities, and industry information more accessible in one space, the platform aims to lower entry barriers for emerging and less-connected professionals and create additional points of contact between actors who may not otherwise interact through existing informal networks.

However, the feasibility of the project depends on several critical conditions. Most importantly, the platform must demonstrate a clear value proposition to encourage adoption within an industry that relies heavily on established practices and informal communication channels. Early engagement with key actors, particularly producers and active freelancers, would be essential for building initial network density and professional legitimacy. Institutional support would also play an important role in strengthening trust, visibility, and long-term adoption across the ecosystem.

5.12 Reflections and Development

This project originated from a personal experience following my return to Estonia after more than 12 years working in the film and television industry in the United Kingdom. Despite having accumulated substantial professional experience abroad, I encountered difficulties re-entering the

Estonian film industry. The absence of local networks and context-specific experience significantly limited access to opportunities, prompting the initial research question of this thesis of why entry into the local industry is particularly challenging for outsiders.

At an early stage, the project was conceived as a digital hub idea aimed at improving access to information and facilitating new connections between professionals. This approach was based on the assumption that limited collaboration, and a lack of networking opportunities were the primary barriers within the industry.

However, the research process gradually challenged this initial assumption. The findings showed that collaboration within the Estonian film industry is not necessarily lacking but instead operates through established professional networks shaped by trust and previous collaboration. While these relationships support efficient coordination and long-term working practices, they may also make access more difficult for newcomers and less-connected professionals. As a result, the project evolved from a simple networking and collaboration concept into a broader platform proposal focused on improving visibility, accessibility, information exchange, and inclusion within the ecosystem.

The research process also reshaped my understanding of institutional roles within the ecosystem. Initially, the platform was envisaged as being closely connected to a central institution such as the Estonian Film Institute. However, the findings suggested that organisations such as the Estonian Filmmakers Association (Kinoliit) may play a more significant role in fostering community and facilitating interaction between professionals. This led to a reconsideration of the types of institutional partnerships that may provide the most appropriate foundation for the platform's future development.

These developments also highlight that the project requires further validation and iterative development before practical implementation. At its current stage, the project represents an early conceptual framework that would require continued engagement with industry professionals, prototype development, and user testing. Future work should therefore include further research into users' needs, pilot testing with a small group of industry actors, and evaluation of the platform's effectiveness in addressing the identified challenges.

Overall, the development process significantly changed my understanding of the Estonian film industry and the challenges within it. Although I was already aware of certain issues related to access and opportunities within the industry, the research helped me understand these challenges more clearly and identify the structural and relational factors contributing to them. Rather than revealing a lack of networking or collaboration, the research highlighted the importance of existing relationships, trust, and industry structures in shaping access to opportunities. The process also demonstrated the importance of flexibility in project development, as the findings continuously influenced both the understanding of the problem and the direction of the proposed solution.

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined how professional networks influence collaboration and access to work opportunities within the Estonian film ecosystem, particularly in the context of a small-market film industry. Based on qualitative interviews with film professionals and representatives of key institutions, the research explored how network structures shape working relationships, collaboration practices, and access to professional opportunities across the industry.

The main research question of this thesis asked how professional networks shape collaboration and access to work opportunities within the Estonian film ecosystem. The findings demonstrate that professional networks play a central role in shaping both collaboration practices and the distribution of opportunities across the industry. Collaboration is strongly influenced by trust, repeated working relationships, and informal communication, while access to projects, funding, and professional visibility is closely connected to network position and existing relationships. The findings further suggest that, in the context of a small-market film industry, these network dynamics simultaneously support efficient collaboration and reinforce unequal access to opportunities over time.

The first additional research question examined how professional networks are structured within the Estonian film ecosystem. The analysis showed that the Estonian film industry operates through closely interconnected professional networks shaped by repeated collaboration, institutional connections, and informal communication practices. Within these networks, producers appear to occupy central brokerage roles by connecting different actors and facilitating access to projects and opportunities. At the same time, the Estonian Film Institute (EFI) plays a central role as a funding body within the ecosystem, while organisations such as the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School (BFM), professional associations, and festivals contribute to industry connectivity and organisation. The research also highlighted the presence of overlapping professional communities built around long-term collaboration, shared practices, and trust.

The second additional research question examined how collaboration operates within these networks. The findings show that collaboration is strongly shaped by trust, familiarity, and previous working experience. Due to the project-based and uncertain nature of film production,

professionals often rely on familiar collaborators to reduce risk and improve coordination. Over time, ongoing collaboration contributes to the development of shared working practices and tacit knowledge, reinforcing stable professional groups and communities of practice within the industry.

The third additional research question explored how informal networks influence inclusion, exclusion, and access to opportunities. The research suggests that access to work opportunities, funding, and professional visibility within the Estonian film industry is closely connected to existing relationships and an individual's position within professional networks, rather than depending solely on skills or experience. Although these networks support efficient collaboration and the sharing of knowledge, they may also make it more difficult for newcomers and less-connected professionals to enter the industry. Interviewees also described how information about projects and opportunities often circulates through informal communication and personal contacts, which may contribute to uneven access across the ecosystem.

By applying Burt's (1992) social network theory and Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, the thesis demonstrates that both structural positions and shared professional practices shape collaboration and access within the ecosystem. Brokerage positions provide certain actors with greater access to information and opportunities, while communities of practice reinforce trust, tacit knowledge, and repeated collaboration. At the same time, these dynamics may also contribute to network closure and unequal access over time.

The findings also suggest that strong reliance on closed professional networks may create broader challenges for the long-term development of the Estonian film ecosystem. When collaborations repeatedly occur within the same professional circles, opportunities and information may become concentrated among already well-connected actors, potentially limiting openness to new perspectives and reducing opportunities for emerging professionals. In a small-market film industry, where professional communities and resources are already limited, such dynamics may also affect the long-term sustainability and renewal of the sector.

Based on these findings, the thesis proposes a conceptual digital platform as one potential intervention aimed at improving visibility, collaboration, and coordination within the industry. Rather than replacing existing professional networks, the platform is intended to complement them

by supporting broader connectivity and creating additional pathways for participation and collaboration.

The study has several limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small number of interviews and reflect the perspectives and perceptions of selected participants rather than objectively measurable industry-wide patterns. In addition, the proposed platform remains conceptual and has not been tested through practical implementation or user validation. Future research would therefore focus on user needs, prototype development, user testing, and the further examination of how digital infrastructures may support coordination, visibility, and collaboration within small creative industries.

Overall, the thesis indicates that many of the key challenges within the Estonian film ecosystem are connected to both structural conditions and everyday industry practices, particularly the strong reliance on closely interconnected professional networks and informal forms of collaboration. Addressing these challenges requires not only technological solutions, but also a broader understanding of how trust, institutional structures, and professional relationships shape participation and access within small-market creative industries. In this sense, the proposed platform should be understood not as a standalone solution, but as part of a wider effort to support a more transparent, connected, inclusive, and sustainable film ecosystem.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Example of Themed Coding sheet

Appendix 2: Example of a Coded Interview (Director)

Appendix 1: Example of a Themed Coding Sheet

Theme	Code (Sub-theme)	Evidence from Interview	Interpretation (Meaning)	Theory Link
Ecosystem Structure				
Networks				
Access				
Collaboration				
Institutions				

Appendix 2: Example of a coded interview (Director)

Theme	Code	Evidence from Interview	Interpretation	Theory Link
Ecosystem Structure	Funding-centred ecosystem	“It all still revolves around EFI and Kulka... everyone aims for the money”	The ecosystem is structurally organised around public funding bodies, which act as central nodes shaping activity.	Resource dependency / institutional centrality
Ecosystem Structure	Clustered production groups	“They're gathered around certain companies... build long-term relationships”	Production is organised into semi-stable clusters based on repeated collaboration.	Network clusters / closure (Burt)
Ecosystem Structure	Limited project pipeline	“So few projects get the money... takes five to six years”	Scarcity of funding slows production cycles and limits output.	Small-market constraints
Ecosystem Structure	Weak international visibility	“Films don't spread as much... no big breakthrough moment”	Limited global recognition restricts industry growth and momentum.	Small-market limitation
Ecosystem Structure	Lack of collective organisation among directors	“We actually don't have directors holding together”	Competition undermines collective structures and weakens shared representation.	Fragmentation / weak field cohesion
Networks	BFM as primary network entry point	“Everyone I know comes from my BFM experience”	Film school acts as a key gateway into professional networks.	Network entry / social capital
Networks	Network reproduction through education	“Everyone I work with... has been through BFM”	Networks are reproduced through shared educational backgrounds.	Closure
Networks	Personal ties drive collaboration	“I knew him... we had coffee... then started working together”	Collaboration emerges through informal, relationship-based interactions.	Informal networks
Networks	Institutional legitimacy enables access	“When I had a company title... people started replying”	Institutional affiliation increases credibility and access to opportunities.	Legitimacy / brokerage

Theme	Code	Evidence from Interview	Interpretation	Theory Link
Access	Access depends on initiative and self-positioning	“You have to create the conditions yourself”	Entry is not structured; individuals must actively create opportunities.	Entrepreneurial agency
Access	Institutional backing increases access	“Harder as an individual... easier with a company behind you”	Organisational affiliation mediates access to networks and resources.	Gatekeeping / legitimacy
Access	Funding system as bottleneck	“It's hard to get writing money... projects rejected”	Access to development resources is limited and competitive.	Resource dependency
Access	Informal pathways dominate	“You need an idea to open doors”	Access depends more on informal positioning than formal systems.	Informal access structures
Collaboration	Repeated collaboration within stable teams	“Make films with that group”	Teams are stable and based on prior collaboration.	Strong ties / closure
Collaboration	Trust-based team formation	“Implied across examples of repeated work	Trust and familiarity guide collaboration decisions.	Trust networks
Collaboration	Slow career development cycles	“Five years to first feature”	Project-based work leads to long, uncertain career progression.	Project-based labour (Caves)
Institutions	Weak transition from education to industry	“They graduate but no one knows them”	No structured bridge between training and employment.	Entry barriers
Institutions	Underdeveloped mentoring systems	“Mentoring... unregulated... depends on individuals”	Support systems rely on informal efforts rather than structured programs.	Informal learning
Access + Networks	Closed network system	“If you don't have networks, you're at zero”	Entry is highly dependent on existing connections.	Network closure (Burt)
Access + Networks	Difficulty entering without BFM	“If not from BFM... very difficult”	Access is tied to specific institutional pathways.	Gatekeeping / closure
Innovation	Need for “new blood”	“We need fresh thinking”	Repeated collaboration limits innovation and diversity.	Structural holes (Burt)

Theme	Code	Evidence from Interview	Interpretation	Theory Link
Innovation	Risk-averse funding decisions	“They prefer safe creators”	Institutions favour proven actors over experimentation.	Gatekeeping / risk aversion
Skills & Development	Lack of professional development training	“No one teaches packaging, pitching”	Key industry skills are not systematically taught.	Skills gap
Skills & Development	Importance of “packaging” and pitching	“How you present ideas matters”	Success depends on communication skills, not just creative ability.	Cultural industries logic
Skills & Development	Tacit knowledge accumulation	“Learning curve over years”	Knowledge is gained through experience, not formal systems.	Tacit knowledge (Nonaka)

Annexes

Annex 1: Benchmarking

Annex 2: Resume of a Researcher

Annex 3: Non-exclusive Licence

Annex 1: Benchmarking

Section	Guiding Questions
Project concept and context	What is the initial idea for your project? What issue, need, or opportunity does it address? In which context or sector is it situated? This project aims to create a year-round, community-driven digital hub connecting Estonian (and later Baltic) filmmakers, producers, and service providers. Currently, collaboration mostly happens during festivals or networking events, leaving professionals disconnected the rest of the year. Opportunities often depend on personal networks, and there's no single online space to showcase work, offer services, or find collaborators. This platform will strengthen professional relationships, support co-productions, and make resources more accessible across the industry.
Rationale and objectives	Why is this project relevant and necessary? What are the main goals and intended outcomes? The Estonian film sector is active, internationally connected, and well-supported through festivals, incentives, and institutions. However, the industry lacks year-round connectivity between professionals, projects, and companies. Collaboration often depends on personal networks, which limits access to opportunities for those outside established circles. There is currently no single, community-driven platform for sharing resources, finding collaborators, or exchanging knowledge — leaving the ecosystem fragmented and less efficient. This project addresses these gaps by creating a centralized, accessible digital hub that strengthens professional relationships, encourages co-productions, and fosters a more transparent, sustainable industry. Main Goals: 1. Provide a platform for filmmakers to share production resources, legal templates, funding information, and mentorship. 2. Make the Estonian film ecosystem visible, searchable, and transparent year-round. 3. Strengthen domestic collaboration and enable regional co-productions across the Baltic region. 4. Support professional sustainability through increased visibility, consistent project opportunities, and mentorship.

	Intended Outcomes: -A year-round, digital hub connecting filmmakers, producers, and service providers. - Increased collaboration and co-production projects within Estonia and the Baltic region. - Improved access to knowledge, resources, and professional networks. - Greater sustainability for filmmakers and industry professionals through ongoing support, visibility, and mentoring opportunities.
Personal development goals	What specific competencies or knowledge areas do you aim to strengthen during the programme (e.g., project planning, leadership, research methods, communication, financial management)? During the programme, I would like to strengthen my project planning skills across all stages, with a particular focus on guiding, motivating, and developing a team effectively. I also want to enhance my time-management strategies, learning to balance multiple tasks efficiently, and maximize productivity. These competencies will help me manage complex projects more strategically and lead collaborative initiatives with greater confidence and impact.
Self-assessment of current skills	How do you evaluate your present abilities and experience relevant to creative project management? Which areas do you identify as strengths, and where do you see a need for development? I am strong at structuring tasks, breaking projects into manageable stages, and tracking timelines and deliverables. I am proactive in identifying potential issues early and finding practical solutions, whether related to logistics, creative decisions, or stakeholder expectations, while keeping sight of the larger project vision. My experience in the film and creative industries, both locally and internationally, gives me a solid understanding of how these fields operate and the collaborative nature of creative work. This enables me to anticipate needs and communicate effectively with creative professionals. I would benefit from training in structured methodologies, including frameworks, risk management, and strategic planning tools, to strengthen my technical project management foundation. As digital collaboration becomes increasingly important, I want to improve my proficiency with project management and creative-industry software.

Section	Guiding Questions	Phase 1 (Initiation, Sept–Oct)	Phase 2 (Planning, Nov–Mar)	Phase 3 (Evaluation, Apr–May)
1. Summary of progress	What has been achieved or clarified during this phase? What key steps were taken in developing your research and project concept?	The project idea was initiated based on personal industry experience and an initial understanding of sector needs.	The project concept was further defined through lectures and independent research.	Findings from the empirical data informed and refined the development of the final project concept.
2. Insights gained	What have you learned from literature, supervision, or stakeholder interaction? How have these insights shaped your thinking or direction?	Drawing on industry experience, the initial aim was to develop a tool to support collaboration and networking.	Findings indicated that networks not only enable collaboration but also shape access to opportunities.	The integration of theory and empirical data demonstrated that improving access requires addressing network structures and collaboration practices, not just communication tools.
3. Challenges encountered	What conceptual, methodological, or practical challenges have arisen? How did you address or plan to address them?	Identifying a clear research focus aligned with the project idea was challenging due to the broad scope of the topic.	Selecting relevant literature proved difficult given the extensive body of research in this area.	Translating research findings into a concrete and feasible project concept required balancing theoretical insights with practical applicability.
4. Updated project focus	Has the scope, rationale, or approach of your project changed? If yes, why and how? How does this align with your academic findings?	The initial concept focused on enhancing networking and collaboration through a digital platform.	Based on literature review and empirical findings, the focus shifted toward addressing structural barriers such as visibility, access, and network closure.	The final project proposes a targeted approach aimed at creating more inclusive pathways into professional networks, rather than simply facilitating new connections.

5. Personal development reflection	How have your skills, confidence, or professional understanding evolved? What competencies are you developing most actively?	Established an initial research direction and began engaging with academic literature.	Strengthened qualitative research skills, including interviewing and thematic analysis, and developed a deeper understanding of network theory and industry dynamics.	Enhanced the ability to translate research into practical solutions and adopted a more critical and reflective approach to both research and project design.
6. Next steps	What are your priorities for the next phase? What tasks, research, or stakeholder actions will you focus on?	Conduct a literature review and refine research questions.	Complete data collection and analysis; further develop the project concept.	Explore opportunities for user testing, stakeholder engagement, and further development of the platform concept.

Annex 2: Resume of a Researcher

Kätlin Palm

katlinny@gmail.com

Highly experienced project manager and event coordinator with a strong background in film and television production. Skilled in managing projects across all stages, including budgeting, scheduling, crewing, production, marketing, and stakeholder relations. Proven ability to deliver complex projects on time, within budget, and to a high standard. Combines strong communication, collaboration, and negotiation skills with a proactive and solution-oriented approach.

Experience

Founder & Project Manager – KAPPAR PRODUCTIONS

Apr 2020 – Present

Managing and coordinating film, commercial, and event-based projects.

Selected projects:

- **Project Manager – Allfilm** (*May 2025–Present*)
Leading the project on *Developing the Export Capacity of Allfilm*
- **Project Manager – BANFF Mountain Film Festival (Estonia)** (*2021–Present*)
Responsible for film programming, budgeting, partnerships, sponsorships, and marketing strategy.
- **Project Manager – Allfilmservices.ee Website** (*2021–Present*)
Led website development in collaboration with designers; managed client communication and inquiries.
- **Travel & Accommodation Coordinator – The Agency (TV series)** (*2024*)
Coordinated transport, accommodation, and visa logistics for 300+ cast and crew over a four-month production period.
- **Production Coordinator – Commercials** (*2023- 2024*) *for Audi, Delta Airlines, etc.*
Coordinated logistics, client/agency communication, accommodation, and catering for 100+ crew.

Production Manager – Open City Documentary Festival (UK)

Aug 2017 – Oct 2017

Oversaw production at the Festival Hub, including budgeting, logistics, scheduling, and coordination with partners, sponsors, and designers. Managed staff recruitment and supervision.

Junior Production Manager – Nutopia

Oct 2016 – Apr 2017

Beyond Reasonable Doubt (*6 × 60 min, CNN/HLN*)

Managed documentary and drama production logistics across the UK and USA. Responsibilities included crew hiring, contracts, budgeting, payroll, and coordination of a 30+ crew and 10+ cast during a four-week location shoot.

Junior Production Manager – IWC Media

May 2016 – Sep 2016

Fake! The Great Masterpiece Challenge (8 × 60 min, Sky)

Managed scheduling, multi-location shoots (including national galleries), budgeting, and post-production workflows. Oversaw risk assessments and equipment hire.

Senior Production Coordinator – Shine TV

Apr 2016

Hunted (6 × 60 min, Channel 4)

Coordinated logistics for a three-week rig and set build, including props, schedules, and press shoot organisation.

Junior Production Manager – RAW TV

Jul 2015 – Feb 2016

Two In a Million (6 × 60 min, TLC/Discovery)

Managed complex international shoots involving vulnerable contributors. Responsibilities included permits, visas, insurance, safeguarding compliance, and logistics.

Senior Production Coordinator – Boundless Productions / Fremantle UK

Jan 2015 – Jun 2015

An Hour to Save Your Life S2 (BBC Two)**Production Coordinator – Boundless Productions**

May 2013 – Dec 2014

Projects included:

- **Grand Designs S12 & S13** (Channel 4)
- **Railways of the Great War with Michael Portillo** (BBC Two)

Additional Experience

- **Venue Supervisor** – London International Documentary Festival (2010)
- **Head of Marketing & PR** – Land In Focus (2011)
- **Fixer** – BBC (Estonia-based productions)

Education

- **MA Creative Project Management** – University of Tartu (2024–Present)
- **BA (Hons) Audiovisual Media (First Class)** – Baltic Film and Media School (2001–2007)
- **Documentary Production** – National Film and Television School (2010)

Additional Training:

- **Production Management – DV Talent** (2012)
- **Health & Safety on Shoots – BBC Academy** (2012)

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(author's name)

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10/05/2026