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Under which condition does platform work enable or restrain work identity construction of platform workers?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate under which condition platform work enables or restrains work identity construction of platform workers. As new structures within the labor market develop leading to the so called ‘platform economy’, a new type of work has emerged (named ‘platform work’ in this study). Thus, uncertainty about work identity construction of those individuals involved in ‘platform work’ still exist within common literature about online platforms. However, clear and successful work identity construction is especially important for e.g. job involvement, extra-role behavior and job performance by considering the aspect that individuals usually spend most of their lifetimes at work, clarity about this identity construction process may offer valuable insights on both an individual as well as organizational level.

Thus, the concept of identity work, which describes the process individuals make to attain and hold on identities has been investigated with a case study (namely, an online platform offering online food delivery services by connecting requesters (customers) and providers (restaurants)). Identity work serves as the specific phenomenon within this research that has been examined within the unique context in which it takes place in order to construct one’s work identity. Furthermore, identity work has been analyzed on three main dimensions, namely social, structural and individual-psychological dimensions in order to enhance overall understanding of this complex process. Nine semi-structured interviews with platform workers, two with their managing employees plus five hours of shadowing and one interview with the Account Manager of an external party (responsible for platform workers’ employment contracts) have been conducted.

In short, the main findings of this study contradict prior assumptions that the social and structural dimension within platform work may restrict successful work identity development of platform workers. Conversely, these dimensions may actually enable work identity construction as long as certain conditions apply, such as keeping main work based contact groups for platform workers at the online platform. Thus, essential sense-making and sense-breaking processes between the platform worker and the online platform can be ensured within the concept of identity work.

Keywords

Identity work, online platform, work identity, platform work, platform worker

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1 Introduction

This master thesis will investigate the concept of work identity, which describes “the processes through which individuals define and build their *work* identities – i.e. the values, beliefs, and attributes they use to define themselves in the workplace – work identities are closely related to how individuals behave and perform as workers” (Bellesia et al., 2019, p. 3). Petriglieri et al. (2018) even state that “identities make people’s inner and social worlds intelligible and manageable” (p. 3).

In order to better understand work identity construction, this study relies on well-established identity theory approaches, namely social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), as it may be difficult to drive clear separations between social identity theory and identity theory as elaborated in more details within the next chapter. Hence, this study focuses on the overlaps between both theories (Stryker & Burke, 2000), in order to better understand the identity construction process of individuals. Such identity construction happens through social interaction by constantly comparing one’s self with others and consequently, classifying themselves into specific social groups (Jansen & Roodt, 2015; Stets & Burke, 2000, p.28). This however assumes an already structured society and social categories (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Examples of these social groups may include race, gender, age (Jansen & Roodt, 2015) or “specialized networks of social relationships” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285) that are supported through individuals’ roles. Sense-making and sense-breaking processes are essential within identity construction processes, as responses from others shape one’s (re)actions in different situations, environments or networks (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). As a result, one individual holds multiple identities within different environments, which are shaped through social interaction with others (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018).

However, work identity is only one part of one’s multiple identities and refers to one’s work related role (Bellesia et al., 2019; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). A role determines “what it means to be who one is” (Burke & Tully, 1977, p. 883) and intimately linked is the concept of identity work, which refers to the efforts individuals make “to attain, hold on to, repair, or give up identities” (Bellesia et al., 2019, p. 4). Identity work can also be characterized by strong organizational cultures, rules, regulations or communities (Bellesia et al., 2019). According to Saayman and Crafford (2011), identity work supports one’s identity construction by “negotiating” possible conflicting demands and tensions between personal and social identities.

The concept of work identity is especially interesting to investigate, as it is assumed that employees with a clear and strong work as well as social identity are more likely to engage in

extra role behavior, which benefits overall organizational performance and supports the understanding of specific organizational goals (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012). Additionally, strong individuals' work identities result in higher levels of commitment to the organization and increased control over their work (Bellesia et al., 2019; Boons, Stam & Barkema, 2015). Researchers therefore have examined that fear, uncertainty and anxiety are results of missing or not clearly defined (work) identities (Petriglieri et al., 2018). Moreover, individuals usually spend much of their lifetimes at work, thus, work identity might be one of the “key constructs in explaining job involvement and consequently also work performance” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 26).

As social identity theory argues that work identity construction is a dynamic process and determined by social interactions, the social environment seems to be the key aspect of success or failure of one's work identity construction (Saayman & Crafford, 2011; Stryker & Burke, 2000). As identity construction in general assumes an already structured society (Stryker & Burke, 2000), one could argue that an already structured organization is needed for successful work identity construction and may influence this process. However, changing structures of the labor market and technological change lead to more people working independently and directly connected to the market rather than within strong contexts of the organization (Bellesia et al., 2019; Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016). Therefore, one can experience a special type of working environment within the current labor markets referring to online platforms. Online platforms mediate social and economic interactions online by connecting requesters and providers worldwide of certain services (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016; Frenken et al., 2018). As various types of online platforms can already be found within the labor market (e.g. e-commerce platforms, travel websites, crowdsourcing, etc. (Chen et al., 2020)), researchers even talk about platform economy (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016). As a consequence, not only unique working environments (i.e. organizational structures), but also special type of workers arise, namely platform workers. These workers refer to the providers of such services and subsequently, operate in technology-intensive environments (Horton, 2010, p. 515; Pesole et al., 2018). More precisely, platform workers “are neither employed by a single organization, nor experience a classic organizational setting, where exposure to social relations with colleagues and role expectations help to forge a coherent work identity” (Bellesia et al., 2019). For this research, the special type of work performed by platform workers will be named platform work and elaborated in more detail later.

However, researchers argue that work identity construction may already be successful when experiencing a so called “reference environment to nurture identities” (Bellesia et al.,

2019, p. 4). Reference environments include online communities, client organizations or personal holding environments (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018). Reference environments can be defined as “social contexts that reduce disturbing affect and facilitate sensemaking” (Petriglieri et al., 2018, p. 9) and therefore refers to ones’ interpretation, meaning and management of (difficult) or conflicting emotions or ideas, which is part of one’s work identity construction process to avoid unclear identities. Nonetheless, Petriglieri et al. (2018) have examined that the lack of a holding environment (i.e. reference environment) results in strong emotional tensions of the individual. Similarly, George and Chattopadhyay (2005) argued that individuals start questioning their (work) identities when experiencing incongruence between multiple identities, which may result in questioning the relevance of the organization.

We however know little about work identity construction within the rather new emerging field of the platform economy (e.g. Bellesia et al., 2019; Huws, 2017; Petriglieri et al., 2018). Hence, it could be that, on the one hand, platform work may restrain work identity construction of platform workers due to the structural setup of the work environment (e.g. lack of sense-making/breaking processes) (Bellesia et al., 2019), which would result in rather negative consequences on the individual level (e.g. feelings of uncertainty, fear or insecurity) (Petriglieri et al., 2018) and subsequently, may also impact the organizational level negatively (e.g. lower levels of commitment or decreased job performance) (Bellesia et al., 2019; Boons, Stam & Barkema, 2015). On the other hand, it could be that platform work may enable work identity construction instead of restraining it because of more opportunities (i.e. sense-making and sense-breaking processes) for self-categorization and classification (Jansen & Roodt, 2015; Stets & Burke, 2000) due to the complex work environment of platform workers, which will be elaborated in more detail in the next chapter. Additionally, there is also a scarcity of evidence regarding which conditions may be necessary to enable or restrain work identity development of platform workers (e.g. Bellesia et al., 2019; Huws, 2017; Petriglieri et al., 2018).

This uncertainty about work identity construction within the field of online platforms is the reason why it is increasingly interesting to examine whether such construction may be hindered or enabled within the unique environment of the online platform economy. Especially due to the importance of clear and successful construction processes (Jansen & Roodt, 2015) for e.g. job involvement, extra-role behavior and job performance by considering the aspect that individuals usually spend most of their lifetimes at work (Jansen & Roodt, 2015), clarity about this identity construction process may offer valuable insights on both an individual as well as organizational level. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the complex work

identity construction process in the era of the platform economy leading to the following research question: *Under which condition does platform work enable or restrain work identity construction of platform workers?*

Consequently, this study attempts to theoretically contribute to existing literature about online platforms and the special emerging type of platform work by providing a clearer understanding of work identity construction of platform workers, as it is also not clear if and which identity is more important or dominant in these social contexts. Thus, identity theory approaches have been chosen as a basis for this special research field with the aim to inductively generate new insights from collected data. Furthermore, this research may offer useful practical implications for managers involved in managing platform workers who desire to encourage extra role behavior of platform workers for achieving team and organizational goals.

In order to answer this research question, interviews ($N=12$) with platform workers who are employed temporarily by an agency but managed through an online platform were conducted. The workers' (social) work environment was also taken into account. Interviews were analyzed by implementing thematic analysis.

The following chapters will provide more theoretical insights about literatures relating to work identity, identity work and platform work. After that, the methodology explains the data collection techniques of this exploratory research. Finally, after presenting the results followed by its discussion, this study ends with theoretical as well as practical implications and a conclusion.

2 Theoretical framework

In order to profoundly understand the theoretical background of this study, further sections will provide more details about the key concepts of work identity, identity work and platform work, supported by social identity theory with an identity theory approach.

2.1 Work identity

Before reviewing work identity and identity work, it is important to mention that identities in general are substantial, as they determine ones' thoughts, feelings and actions. An identity refers to an individual's perception about who (s)he thinks (s)he is and interpretations about actions and words within the world around him/her, which influences own behaviors/reactions depending on "what corresponding roles individuals assume" (Walsh & Gordon, 2008, p. 47). For instance, Puusa and Tolvanen (2006) characterize identity as a "theory of oneself" (p. 29).

Similarly, Jansen and Roodt (2015) state that identity is a common term in social sciences to explain individual as well as group behavior. Therefore, identity may not be a straightforward concept, but rather involves many complex processes and concepts and may be even seen as a multilevel notion (Puusa & Tolvanen, 2006). According to Jansen and Roodt (2015), the term identity can be used in different contexts. For instance, identity may refer to “the existence of something” (p. 24) with multiple attributes/characteristics. In an organizational setting, these attributes may include values, norms, actions, goals, descriptions or beliefs. Additionally, identity “is used as the reference to the self” (p.24) aiming to answer the question “Who am I?”. Lastly, identity “is used with reference to a social category that contributes to social identity” (p. 24) aiming to answer the question “Who are we?”.

Identity theory. Identity theory may support the understanding of identity as such. In their research, Stryker and Burke (2000) explained two major perspectives on identity theory; namely, the linkage of social structures with identities and the internal process of self-verification. They argue that both perspectives relate and provide “the context” for each other (p. 284). Furthermore, they distinguish between three main usage scenarios for the term ‘identity’. Firstly, identity may refer to one’s culture; secondly, the term may be used to refer to common identification with social groups and thirdly, identity may refer to the intentions attached to one’s particular roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Closely related to identity theory is social identity theory. Both theories may overlap and relate to each other, as argued by different researchers (e.g. Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Hence, social identity theory will be explained within the next paragraph to reinforce the overall understanding of individual’s identities.

Social identity theory. In more detail, social identity theory combines the individual’s self with group membership. The self “is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224) and subsequently, an identity can be formed. Similarly to identity theory, social identity theory also refers to how social structures affect the self and the other way around (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Consequently, having a social identity relates to one’s group membership of a collective with members who hold similar views and perspectives. The individual therefore feels “the sense of belonging somewhere” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 29; Stets & Burke, 2000) and adjusts their own behavior to the group (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). The aforementioned ‘self-categorization’ process to form an identity (Stets & Burke, 2000) refers to the self-categorization theory, which is seen as an extension of social identity theory (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). A social category or group describes

a bundle of individuals who hold the same identification and categorize themselves similarly through a “social comparison process” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). As an example, social categories could include gender or age groupings (Stets & Burke, 2000). In summary, individuals construct a social identity through social categorization and social comparison to “place and define themselves in the social environment” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 31). Thus, individuals first compare themselves with others and then classify themselves into specific social groups (Walsh & Gordon, 2008).

However, self-categorization theory also argues that individuals aim to classify themselves into higher social groups referring to a hierarchical order of social groups perceived by individuals, meaning that they “distance themselves from the norms, beliefs and behaviors of out-groups” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 29). This means that individuals adapt to norms and behaviors of the social groups they identify themselves with through depersonalization and keep distance from groups they do not identify themselves with, which might even result in discriminatory behaviors towards the latter (Jansen & Roodt, 2015).

In sum, it may be difficult to draw clear distinction between identity theory and social identity theory (and self-categorization theory). However, all these theories presuppose a structured society and recognize that individuals view themselves in respect to their meanings, interpretations and expectations of this structured society. Most importantly, such theories contribute to the theoretical background of this study and provide the basis for this research. From now on, in this thesis the term identity theory approaches is adopted to depict the applications of these different, yet complementary, theories.

After having described identity on a broader level, work identity is only one form of one’s multiple personal identities, which include for example, being a caring parent or a loving child. Work identity can also be described as a complex construct within the self (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Similarly, Hogg and Terry (2000) argue that individuals “derive part of their identity and sense of self from the organization or work groups to which they belong” (p. 121), which underlines the importance of one’s work identity as one of the core concepts of this research.

Work identity. To elaborate, work identity describes the part of an individual identity that is concerned with “the enactment of a work-related role” (Bellesia et al., 2019, p. 5; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). While many definitions of work identity can be found in literature, this paper focuses on research of Walsh and Gordon (2008) about creating an individual work identity. They define work identity as “a work-based self-concept constituted of a constellation of organizational, occupational and other identities that shapes the roles individuals adopt and the

corresponding ways they behave when performing their work” (Walsh & Gordon, 2008, p. 49). Therefore, three key concepts can be linked to work identity, namely work-based self-concept, roles and constellation, which will be further described in the sections below.

Work-based self-concept. For clarification, “work-based self-concept” in the given definition of work identity refers to the previously-explained social identity theory when the individual classifies him/herself as part of a specific social group (Turner, 1982; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). As explained, individuals can choose between different social groups, such as race or gender, to place their identities in. However, work-based self-concept refers to the different social groups at the workplace. According to Walsh and Gordon (2008), examples of such work-based groups could be the membership in the organization and occupation, which impacts one’s work identity construction. An individual can therefore represent his/her belonging or distinction from other social (work-based) groups through (work-related) social identities. Walsh and Gordon (2008) even argue that individuals tend to select membership to social groups that “maintain a sense of both social belonging and individuality” (Brewer, 1991, p. 48).

Roles. The term roles within the aforementioned definition of work identity refers to one’s definition of “what it means to be who one is” (Burke & Tully, 1977, p. 883). Jansen and Roodt (2015) explain that an individual maintains multiple roles within his/her lifetime, relating to work, career, study, family roles etc. Each role is associated with a specific social group that can be distinguished from any other. How one interprets and defines one’s role is dependent on social interaction. Interaction with others in different situations and consequently, receiving different responses from others, shapes an individual’s understanding about his/her particular role in different situations (Burke & Tully, 1977). Therefore, “meanings of the self are learned by the person because others respond as if he had an identity appropriate to that role performance” (Burke & Tully, 1977, p. 883). Similarly, Stets and Burke (2000) state that “having a particular role identity” means to fulfill the expectations from others related to one’s specific role by “coordinating and negotiating interactions with role partners” (p. 226). Consequently, certain cues are provided by others via responding to an individual’s action. Therefore, the meaning of one’s actions are developed through social interaction, which is linked to the aforementioned social identity theory (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000). Adding to this, Burke and Tully (1997) even argued that one role does not stand in isolation, meaning that each role relates to other roles, as for instance, the role “father” relates to the role “daughter”. Consequently, in order to successfully construct one’s work identity, one’s work role helps the individual to conform into a certain work community that is inimitably linked

with his/her role and which can be distinguished from other work communities. Due to the fact that an individual usually spends much of his/her lifetime at work, work roles and work identity might be “key constructs in explaining job involvement and consequently also work performance” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 26).

Constellation. Subsequently, individuals can choose with what they identify, which also includes their beliefs about the organization’s character (Walsh & Gordon, 2008). As an individual’s work identity is always linked to his/her work role, shaped through social interaction, researchers examined that work identity is therefore closely linked with organizational commitment, loyalty and supportive work behaviors. Understanding work identity construction and how this can impact human behavior would support organizations/managers to stimulate employees’ best work performances (Walsh & Gordon, 2008).

Summarized, one individual holds multiple identities connected to multiple roles (e.g. being a loving parent or an aggressive corporate manager) that are shaped through social interaction by receiving responses from others, which will be further elaborated within the next section.

2.2 Identity work

As an addition to the previous section, Jansen and Roodt (2015) separated work identity into three dimensions: the structural, social and individual-psychological dimensions. These dimensions will support the understanding of identity work and further described below.

Structural dimension. Firstly, the structural dimension refers to “concepts of work, patterns of employment and training systems” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 37). The identity construction is therefore influenced by the contextual and situational factors that are fundamental in the specific social setting, such as a cultural or racial group.

Social dimension. Secondly, the social dimension relates to the previously mentioned identity construction process through interaction between the individual and in this context, work related focal points, such as work groups, characteristics, profession, etc. For instance, multiple work identities could result from these interactions, such as career or professional identity (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Consequently, these identities relate to multiple ways of how an individual defines him/herself in work-related contexts.

Individual-psychological dimension. Lastly, the individual-psychological dimension refers to the “person-environment fit”, which encompasses an “individual’s attitude towards work, perception of the work content, level of career or professional development, occupational

history, work centrality“ (Jansen & Roodt, 2015, p. 37) and job involvement, which refers to the degree an individual identifies him/herself with his/her work and the importance of such (Jansen & Roodt, 2015; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965). Similarly, Walsh and Gordon (2008) argue that the “process of social identity represents for individuals an ongoing process of self-construction that reflects multiple and complex dimensions” (p. 48). Usually, an organization aims to attract individuals with high levels of “person-environment fit”, describing the match between an individual and his/her social environment. It is argued that higher levels of such matches decrease overall employee turnover (Ballout, 2007; Jansen & Roodt, 2015).

Summarized, these three dimensions describe the importance of an individual’s context and environment for successful work identity construction, which refers to the intimately linked concept of identity work.

Identity work. Identity work describes “the effort people make to attain, hold on to, repair, or give up identities” (Petriglieri et al., 2018, p. 2). Previous research has determined that identity work is usually characterized by straight rules, strong cultures and communities (Petriglieri et al., 2018). Additionally, identity work refers to the narrative process of individuals trying to fit into demanding roles without losing their individual identities, which refers back to the constellation of work identities that allows the individual to distinguish him/herself from other social groups, but also maintain individuality. For example, a narrative process can be defined as a set of related events that are valuable for understanding the roots of specific ‘stories’ by giving meaning to such. More precisely, narrative processes refer to how individuals manage their “different senses of self” (Burck, 2005, p.252). In this study, identity work serves as the narrative process necessary for work identity construction. According to Brown and Toyoki (2013), “identity work refers to the mutually constitutive processes by which people strive to shape relatively coherent and distinctive notions of their selves” (p. 876) meaning that individuals need to perceive their tasks (i.e. what they do) as aligned with who they are in order to successfully build their work identities (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). More precisely, Jansen and Roodt (2015) describe identity work as a continuous process aiming to balance and manage conflicting demands and tensions that form one’s work identity. As different demands, tensions, responsibilities and constraints are linked to various roles and identities, the individual needs to negotiate between them by “creating a sense of coherence and distinctiveness by shaping, restoring, preserving, fortifying or modifying the constructions that produce this sense” (Jansen & Roodt, 2015; p. 54). Similarly, Saayman and Crafford (2011) argue that identity work “mobilizes at the interface between the person and the various social networks that one’s job requires in terms of its

inherent roles and responsibilities” (p. 4). In essence, identity work describes the process of building a sense of coherence and distinctiveness by constantly forming, repairing, revising and/or strengthening (work) identity constructions (Jansen & Roodt, 2015).

Referring to organizational settings, it is argued that organizations may provide tools, resources or values for individuals to support and shape their work identities by creating “cycles of sense-breaking and sense-making” (identity work) (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Sense-breaking and sense-making relate to the process of interpreting one’s environment and break or make sense of already existing interpretations (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008).

Sense-breaking. Contrary to sense-making, sense-breaking “involves a fundamental questioning of who one is when one’s sense of self is challenged [. . .] [creating] a meaning void that must be filled” (Pratt, 2000, p. 464 as cited in Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012, p. 842). If their work identity can fill this lack, individuals are likely to highly identify themselves with the organization. However, if individuals may be challenged with multiple conflicting identities, they are likely to form a self that “serves to organize” these identities [“hybrid” identity] (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012, p. 842). Consequently, sense-breaking results in individuals questioning themselves regarding who they are, and they may then choose the identity with most similarities to their roles and values (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012).

Sense-making. In contrast, sense-making refers to the dynamic work identity construction process and provides individuals with given perceptions about certain actions, ideas, etc. to support their understanding and interpretation of their (social) environments (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). This is especially important for new starting employees or individuals who operate in rather virtual contexts as such individuals might search for new meanings of new signals they receive and the organization can influence one’s interpretation of such meanings in alignment with organizational preferences. Therefore, having a stable physical and social environment as sources or references is crucial for one’s work identity development process as social identity theory suggests (Bellesia et al., 2019; Jansen & Roodt, 2015; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Similarly, Pitsakis, Biniari and Kuin (2012) argued that sense-giving impacts one’s “meaning construction of others” (p. 843) towards favored definition of “organizational reality” (p. 843).

As aforementioned, organizations are likely to influence the construction process of their members work identities’ by providing tools, resources or values. For instance, DiSanza and Bullis (1999) examined different communication practices that organizations commonly use to evoke and protect preferred meanings for individuals about being a member of that

organization. More precisely, organizations commonly say “we”, use common language, symbols or artifacts (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009). If these practices are successful, it is likely that more individuals experience similar (work) identity construction processes (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012).

In sum, work identity construction is a dynamic process and highly important for organizations, as one’s identity determines one’s thoughts, feelings and actions (at work). As mentioned, individuals hold multiple identities that influence role related behaviors and vice versa. Through sense-making practices, organizations may shape individuals’ work identities as preferred by the organization, whilst individuals constantly try to make sense of given definitions, interpretations and combinations of roles. However, sense-breaking can easily be experienced and should not be underestimated, as it may result in insufficient work identities or a “hybrid” identity to balance conflicting identities, which in turn may cause valuable members to leave the organization.

2.3 Platform work for restraining and enabling identity work

Having described the work identity construction process through identity work and supported by social identity theory, it is increasingly interesting to investigate whether work identity construction can be successful without or changed (physical) social environments. Therefore, this study will focus on identity work construction in the special environment of online platforms, focusing on platform work. In this study, the phenomenon platform work describes the context in which identity work takes place. The next sections will provide more details about such special environment and how this may enable or restrain identity work.

Online platforms. As aforementioned, labor market dynamics considering rapid technological development result in changed labor organizations, namely online platforms. Online platforms mediate social and economic interactions online by connecting requesters and providers of certain services (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016; Frenken et al., 2018). According to Drahokoupil and Fabo (2016), online platforms “create an open marketplace for the temporary use of goods or services often provided by private individuals” (p. 2). Similarly, Frenken et al. (2018) introduced the term “peer-to-peer” platforms, as platforms offer opportunities to exchange services between requesters and providers themselves, which contradicts classic organizational settings of employees simply producing goods and services. Consequently, online platforms “provide a matching service, linking the demand for labor with its supply” (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016, p. 2).

More precisely, a variety of online platforms can be found in the labor market. For instance, one can distinguish between platforms that support access to goods and services and

those that enable access. On the one hand, online platforms can provide online marketplaces, such as eBay and on the other hand, connect matching providers and requesters. Additionally, it can be differentiated between platforms that organize service exchanges on a local or global level. This can be done by for example, connecting demand and suppliers from either the same location or different countries. Lastly, platforms can enable or support service exchanges for low to medium skilled workers or highly skilled workers. Due to the huge variety of platforms, researchers already talk about a “platform economy or sharing economy”. However, making clear distinctions between previously explained varieties of platforms can be difficult (Chen, 2020; Drahekoupil & Fabo, 2016).

Platform workers. Having said this, the term “platform workers” refers to providers of such services. Online platforms have enabled individuals to move more easily from traditional employment relationships to self-employment. These workers tend to operate in online communities or even online labor markets instead of working within classic organizational settings (Bellesia et al., 2019; Chen, 2020). Such online labor markets enable workers to sell their unique skills around the world to a “global pool of buyers” (Horton, 2010, p. 515; Pesole et al., 2018). Consequently, more general working activities may be separated in individual tasks, potentially resulting in increased competition, as platform workers may need to present themselves as more valuable for certain services than competing individuals (Drahekoupil & Fabo, 2016). Platform workers therefore sell their services to requesters through mediation by online platforms. Thus, they work for different entities and may be managed through technology and algorithms. In essence, online platforms have enabled essential changes within labor market structures by mediating specific (matching) services between requesters and providers. This has led to greater opportunities for self-employment and more complex employment relationships.

Platform work. Referring back to identity work and social identity theory, it is increasingly interesting to investigate the special type of platform work that results from the platform economy. As explained, three key dimensions are crucial for successful work identity construction. In this study, platform work describes the special context in which identity work takes place. However, the phenomenon platform work may restrain or enable identity work within the scope of these dimensions.

Social dimension and platform work. As aforementioned, platform workers operate in technology-intensive labor environments and therefore, might be challenged in work identity construction due to the absence of a physical and social environment, which will be elaborated later in this section. For instance, research of Bellesia et al. (2019) about how online labor

markets shape work identity examined that individuals still need so called ‘personal holding environments’ or reference environments for successful work identity construction, which is in line with previous explained social identity theory. Petriglieri et al. (2018) define holding environments as “sensitizing concepts” (p. 9), which support individual’s sense-making of social contexts by facilitating, managing and interpreting emotions, tensions and actions. Researcher argue that these are necessary in order to handle feelings of uncertainty or insecurity by having the opportunity to “sustain meaning and routines” (Bellesia et al., 2019, p. 7). Additionally, such holding environments are provided by the platform they subscribed to, but are also influenced by the rules of the entity from which they receive their payments (Bellesia et al., 2019).

However, online platforms may not provide individuals with a social environment due to limited contact with peers, which is crucial for identity work and work identity construction (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018). Limited contact with peers might occur, because of the technology-intense environment, which needs investigation. Therefore, work identity construction might be on one hand, restrained or on the other hand, enabled. For example, the lack of (physical) social interaction may restrain crucial sense-making and sense-breaking processes, as constant responses and reactions from colleagues might not be received (properly) (Burke & Tully, 1997; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). However, limited contact with peers but increased interaction with other parties of the work environment might enable identity work of platform workers, as the individual may be offered with more opportunities to define oneself and therefore, may not be restrained/determined by given sense-making and sense-breaking processes of only one social actor.

Structural dimension and platform work. Contrary to classic organizational settings, platform workers usually provide services to requesters temporarily and therefore, may not be employed by the platform directly - they may receive their payment from a different entity and thus, have their employment contract at a different entity, such as an agency (Bellesia et al., 2019). Furthermore, platform workers sell their services on a global level, which may result in regular contact with a variety of customers, which could be on the one hand, multiple platforms, but on the other hand, customers of that platforms themselves (Horton, 2010; Pesole et al., 2018). Consequently, platform workers may be challenged by experiencing different signals from different reference organizations (such as the “payment entity”, customers and the platform itself) leading to increased issues in developing one’s work identity, as these signals can either be perceived as conflicting with or contributing to each other. Due to the fact that platform workers are not directly employed at the platform, their work identity construction

could be enabled or restrained. On the one hand, multiple relations for identity work and sense-making can offer more possibilities to choose from and develop one's work identity. On the other hand, classic organizational practices that are used in classic organizational settings might be limited, such as communication practices or training systems and therefore, the platform might not be able to successfully apply aforementioned communication practices and influence preferred work identities (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012).

Individual-psychological dimension and platform work. As the individual-psychological dimension refers to the person-environment fit and job involvement (Jansen & Roodt, 2015), online platforms likewise may restrain or enable work identity construction within the scope of this dimension. Platform workers operate in technology-intensive environments, meaning that technology usually serves as the main tool(s) for communication and (social) interaction (Bellesia et al., 2019). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate whether technology enables or restrains work identity construction. Referring back to previous definitions of job involvement as a major aspect of this dimension, it is important to investigate whether individuals can still identify themselves with their work and perceive such as valuable in technology-intense environments. Additionally, this dimension refers to the importance of the "person-environment fit" as explained, which is in line with the social identity theory that examined physical social interaction as the key aspect for successful (work) identity development. Technology could therefore restrain the construction process simply by the fact that the individual does not physically interact with colleagues/other individuals. Nevertheless, social interactions might be realized through technology by for instance, chatting with each other. Thus, a physical social environment might not be necessary for successful work identity construction as long as interaction for sense-making and sense-breaking is still executed (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018).

Summarized, this study will investigate whether the special characteristics of platform work enable or restrain work identity construction of platform workers and under which conditions. In order to answer the research question, this study will rely on empirical evidence, which will be elaborated in the next sections.

3 Methodology

In order to answer the research question "*Under which condition does platform work enable or restrain work identity construction of platform workers?*", this study relies on a case study of one of the fastest growing online platforms within the Netherlands, combined with semi-

structured in-depth interviews with platform workers and other respondents as explained later. Due to legal reasons, the name of the online platform used for this analysis as well as all personal data related to the participants are anonymized. In this study, the online platform used for analysis will be named 'PlatformCo'. More detailed information about the reasons behind the methodological choices will follow in the next sections.

3.1 Data collection techniques

Case study. Case study methods are broadly recognized research methods when aiming for “exploration and understanding complex issues” (Zailnal, 2007, p. 1). As “case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context” (Zailnal, 2007, p. 2) by focusing on a smaller group of respondents, but aiming for more in-depth results, this method has been chosen for this research.

More detailed, a case describes an individual, event or a unit of analysis. A case inquires empirical investigation of a “specific phenomenon within its real-life context” (Noor, 2008, p. 1602). The phenomenon in this study refers to aforementioned identity work and the unique context in which it takes place in order to construct one’s work identity. Furthermore, case studies aim to answer *why* and *how* questions and focus on particular issues instead of the whole organization, which makes this method most suitable for this research, because the (social) environment of platform workers is a key aspect within this study (Noor, 2008).

The online platform. The online platform (PlatformCo) used for analysis is operating in the online food delivery industry and provides online services to customers and restaurants for food delivery. On the one hand, restaurants who use services provided by PlatformCo can choose to deliver ordered meals through the platform themselves with own delivery staff. On the other hand, such restaurants can use PlatformCo’s logistics department, which consists of meal deliverers offering services to restaurants for delivering ordered meals to consumers. Consequently, PlatformCo connects requesters and providers and enables both to exchange food delivery services, which is aligned with previous given definitions and characteristics of online platforms (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016; Frenken et al., 2018; PlatformCo, 2019). As aforementioned, this study will focus on identity work of these meal deliverers, which will be elaborated in more detail later in this chapter.

Besides, PlatformCo is chosen for analysis for three main reasons. Firstly, the logistics department meets the characteristics (Bellesia et al., 2019; PlatformCo, 2019) of previously described platform work, as the meal deliverers working within logistics department do not work in classic organizational settings. They do not follow a ‘normal office job’, instead, the

meal deliverers cycle through the city and transport ordered meals from restaurants to customers without ever seeing one of the corporate offices. Additionally, their employment contracts are not set up by PlatformCo; contracts are set up and signed by an external party (i.e. an agency), which again matches with aforementioned platform work characteristics (PlatformCo, 2019).

Secondly, due to the fact that they are delivering meals during their whole working shifts, contact with peers might be limited. However, they may be in regular contact with customers and restaurants, which again creates an unique environmental setting and makes it interesting to investigate whether the possible lack of social interaction with peers from PlatformCo restrains work identity, or whether the interactions with customers and restaurants enables work identity. Therefore, crucial sense-making and sense-breaking processes may not be possible vis-à-vis the platform, but could be possible with other stakeholders of the platform, which requires investigation.

Lastly, these meal deliverers are mainly working with an application, which directs them through the orders; meaning that the app informs the meal deliverer from which restaurant the next order needs to be picked up and to which address it needs to be delivered. Consequently, the influence of technology may contribute to limited social interaction. Additionally, as job involvement and the person-environment fit are seen as crucial for successful work identity construction, this innovative technology-intense way of working, again, provides suitable environmental settings for investigating whether technology enables or restrains work identity construction.

As little is known about work identity construction within online platforms, PlatformCo has been chosen as an adequate representative/case study for online platforms (Eisenhardt, 1989), which provides the special environmental settings of interest for this analysis.

Semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were used for collecting the data. More details about data collection techniques can be found in the next section. However, semi-structured interviews have been chosen as they provide the researcher with the opportunity to react on unexpected behaviors and to ask in depth follow-up questions (usually *why* and *how* questions) when more detailed answers are desired (Newcomer, Harty & Wholey, 2015). This is in line with the aim of case studies that investigate *how*- and *why*-questions on particular issues. Usually, the researcher develops an interview protocol that serves as an interview guideline/agenda before starting the interview or even before contacting respondents of interest. Commonly, the interview protocol consists of a broad structure of topics of interest by also considering time for aforementioned follow-up questions. However, if the

list of topics is long, the researcher needs to decide in advance which topics to prioritize and which can remain optional (Newcomer, Harty & Wholey, 2015).

3.2 Data collection

Sample. In order to investigate the core research question by taking into consideration the unique technology-intensive environment of online platforms, nine interviews have been conducted with platform workers who deliver orders/meals from restaurants to consumers who ordered through PlatformCo. As mentioned, these platform workers are classified as meal deliverers of the logistics department. As shortly explained, these meal deliverers work for PlatformCo, however, they do have employment contracts with an external agency from which they receive their payments. But more importantly, these meal deliverers are partly managed through technological algorithms developed by the platform, and partly by humans who are permanent employees at the platform (PlatformCo, 2018). Consequently, the choice has been made to also interview two of those employees who are managing the meal deliverers ('managing employees' or 'ME' in the following) in order to enhance the understanding of the complex working environment. These managing employees have also been shadowed for approximately five hours in total to get insights on both their morning and evening shifts and their interaction with meal deliverers, and field notes have been taken. Access to the online platform has been provided by supervisory employees who supported in arranging these interview sessions. In addition, the Account Manager ('AM') of the previously mentioned agency has been interviewed who is responsible for the strategic set up and planning of the meal deliverers' employment contracts as well as the way of communicating/interacting with employees from PlatformCo. All interviews lasted between 30 – 40 minutes each. Considering all parties involved, this represents the complex environment of meal deliverers and thus, suitable settings to investigate their identity work. The number of interviews for this research have been determined by the point at which data saturation has been achieved (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006), as guidelines for determining sample sizes within qualitative research differ. More precisely, data saturation refers to theoretical saturation in qualitative research, meaning "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook" (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006, p.65)

Operationalization table/interview protocol. Based on the theoretical set up of this study, an operationalization table and interview protocol have been developed before research was conducted. More details about used data collection techniques can be found in the next paragraph. For transparency and clarity to the reader, these two documents can be found in the

appendix (see appendix 9.1). The interview protocol was developed based on the operationalization table and provided the researcher with an overall structure for the individual interviews (see appendix 9.2). More precisely, the operationalization table has been developed based on previous research about work identity, identity work and platform work as explained in the theoretical framework of this study while the protocol structures the open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were chosen, because this type of questions produces more diverse answers and allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions when more in-depth information is desired on a specific topic (Britten, 1995; Reia, Manfreda, Hlebec & Vehovar, 2003). Thus, open-ended questions define the topic of exploration while also allowing the researcher as well as the interviewee to clarify certain statements (Britten, 1995). Additionally, recommendations of Newcomer, Harty and Wholey (2015) were taken into consideration for structuring the protocol including an opening and closing part. As a result, pre-defined research topics have been addressed during the interviews (see appendix 9.1) by also using questions that were found in the online appendix of Petriglieri et al. (2018) and used for their research about holding environments and work identity. Besides, questions referring to the motives to join the platform were included, because research of Bellesia et al. (2019) about work identity construction examined the importance of these questions (see appendix 9.2).

To sum up, a more detailed overview of the data collection (separated into ‘descriptive’ and ‘dimensions’) can be found in Table 1 and 2 below. These tables also present which variables and dimensions have been assessed with which respondents, which respective definitions have been used, and provide a few example questions for each dimension.

Table 1

Data Collection – Descriptive

Sample group	Sample size	Data collection technique	Location	Duration
Meal deliverers	9 respondents	(virtual) interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * usage of "whereby", which is a tool to create virtual meeting rooms * user account was provided by PlatformCo to both parties, researcher and meal deliverers * virtual meeting room was created by PlatformCo and link was sent to meal deliverers and researcher by employees working at the hub 	approx. 30 - 40 mins each
Workers at PlatformCo managing meal deliverers	2 respondents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * (personal) interviews * shadowing + field notes 	* at office building of PlatformCo in the Netherlands where these workers are based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * interviews approx. 40 mins each * shadowing approx. 5 hours together
Account Manager of agency	1 respondent	(virtual) interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * usage of "Hangouts", which is an add on for video calls implemented in Google calendars * both parties, researcher and Account Manager, use Hangouts as a common tool at work 	approx. 30 mins

Table 2

Data Collection – Dimensions

Sample group	Variable + Definition	Dimension + Definition	Example questions
	<p>work identity a work-based self-concept constituted of a constellation of organizational, occupational and other identities that shapes the roles individuals adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work</p>	<p>work-based self-concept which specific social work related group the individual classifies him/herself into</p> <hr/> <p>roles behaviors and actions an individual is expected to perform at work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * In which situations do you feel most comfortable? * What do you like the most/the least about your job? <hr/> * If I would ask you what your job is, what would you say in one sentence? * At the end of the day, when would you say you had a successful working day? * How would you describe your role at work? * Which services do you provide and to whom?
<p>Meal deliverers</p>	<p>identity work the effort people make to attain, hold on to, repair, or give up identities based on the structural, social and individual-psychological dimensions of their environment</p>	<p>structural dimension concepts of work, patterns of employment and training systems</p> <hr/> <p>social dimension identity construction process through interaction between the individual and in this context, work related focal points, such as work groups, characteristics, profession, etc.</p> <hr/> <p>individual-psychological dimension person-environment fit, which encompasses an individual's attitude towards work, perception of the work content, level of career or professional development, occupational history, work centrality and job involvement, which refers to the degree an individual identifies him/herself with his/her work and the importance of such</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Do you have an employment contract with PlatformCo? * If you have problems at work, who do you contact? * Who do you think is your employer? <hr/> * How do you obtain feedback about your performance? * What are the biggest challenges/opportunities at work? * How and with whom do you communicate at work? <hr/> * How important is your work to you and why/why not? * Why did you choose to apply/work at PlatformCo?

Workers at PlatformCo managing meal deliverers	work identity of meal deliverers	work-based self-concept of meal deliverers	* If you were to describe the job of a meal deliverer in a few words, what would you say?
		roles of meal deliverers	* How would you describe the role of the meal deliverers? * What are the main responsibilities of meal deliverers?
		structural dimension	* Who do you think is the employer of meal deliverers? * Have you ever met a meal deliverer in person? * With whom do meal deliverers have their employment contract?
	identity work of meal deliverers	social dimension	* With whom do meal deliverers interact the most and how? * Who do meal deliverers contact in case of issues?
		individual-psychological dimension	* What do you think meal deliverers like the most/least about their job? * What do you think can be challenging for meal deliverers?
Account Manager of agency	work identity of meal deliverers	work-based self-concept of meal deliverers	* What do you think meal deliverers like/dislike about their job?
		roles of meal deliverers	* How would you describe the job of the meal deliverers? * Do you have certain expectations of meal deliverers?
	identity work of meal deliverers	structural dimension	* Are you already involved in the recruitment process? * Are you informed about their performance? * Do you train meal deliverers? * How and when do meal deliverers contact you? * Are specific employees at your agency responsible for specific meal deliverers?

Due to the fact that this research is mainly interested in the concept of identity work of platform workers, ‘identity work’ as well as ‘work identity’ are the two main variables assessed in interviews with meal deliverers, their managing employees and the agency representative. These two variables have been broken down into the aforementioned dimensions; namely ‘structural’, ‘social’ and ‘individual-psychological’ dimension for identity work, and ‘work-based self-concept’ and ‘roles’ for work identity. Respective definitions based on the theoretical framework of this study can be seen in Table 1.

Furthermore, nine interviews with meal deliverers and one with the Account Manager were conducted virtually instead of in person, due to the global Coronavirus outbreak and the related special circumstances. However, sufficient distance could be ensured while shadowing and interviewing the ‘managing employees’ at PlatformCo, which is the reason why personal interviews could have been conducted with these respondents in one office building of PlatformCo in the Netherlands. Referring to the virtual interviews, employees working in the applicable ‘hub’ (which will be elaborated in the results section) of the meal deliverers supported in this process by creating and providing all parties, meal deliverers and the researcher, access to such meeting rooms. Furthermore, the Account Manager was interviewed using a common add-on for video calls in Google calendar. More details about the procedure can be found in appendix 9.3.

Generally, the Account Manager and the managing employees were asked about the identity work and work identity of meal deliverers. As Table 1 represents, similar questions have been asked to these two sample groups in comparison to the meal deliverers’ questions but referred to meal deliverers’ identity work/work identity.

Trustworthiness. In this study, trustworthiness refers to the more specific criteria of “credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 118). One could also refer to “interpretive rigor”, which is about overall consistency between own findings and inferences made with existing literature (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In order to increase overall trustworthiness of this study, precise coding definitions and peer debriefing have been used for analysis. Furthermore, collected data has been verified by respondents resulting in member checks (Creswell et al., 2007) and the basis for coding and analysis processes (operationalization table) has been made transparent (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) and can be found in the appendices of this study (see appendix 9.1). Furthermore, the overall research planning has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente to ensure compliance with ethical aspects and boundaries. Additionally, triangulation has been used, which can be defined as “the mixing of data or

methods so that diverse viewpoints or standpoints cast light upon a topic” (Olsen, 2004, p.3). In this study, interviews, shadowing and taking field notes contribute to overall trustworthiness, as these different data collection techniques aimed to investigate the main concept of this study, namely identity work of platform workers. However, substantial for the trustworthiness of this study are regular discussions with the experienced thesis Supervisor during all stages of this research project and the integration of his feedback. This offered different perspectives on the numerous stages of this research project from a more ‘objective’ position.

3.3 Data analysis

In order to profoundly analyze collected data, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Generally, recording the interview benefits the researcher, as (s)he will be able to actively engage in the conversation with the respondent and fully concentrate on the respondent’s behaviors and answers due to the minimization of distraction, which may occur by for example, taking notes (Hruschka et al., 2004). After transcribing, data has been analyzed by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis benefits the researcher as it offers more flexibility in detecting (theoretical) patterns or differences in the collected data. Due to the (theoretical) complexity of this research, flexibility is especially important. Consequently, possible new themes or concepts emerging from interviews can be discovered and reported to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nonetheless, in this thesis, a deductive approach to thematic analysis has been chosen, as the data has been coded by applying existing categories and predefined research topics (e.g. identity work, work identity) suggested by the literature. These predefined research topics have been labelled as different coding categories (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), which have been shared with the thesis Supervisor employed at the University of Twente to incorporate other opinions and therefore, increase the trustworthiness of this study (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). For analysis, the program ATLAS.ti has been used, which is a comprehensive scientific software used for qualitative data analysis (ATLAS.ti, 2019; Hwang, 2008) developed to assist researchers in “organizing, managing and coding qualitative data” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 323) and has been provided to the researcher by the University of Twente.

Coding strategy. Referring to the coding strategy, data collected has been analyzed within different coding rounds. For clarification, detailed transcripts of recorded interviews have been uploaded into ATLAS.ti in order to begin with open coding; conducted to explore and capture themes, patterns, meanings, similarities and differences within the data (Hwang,

2008). However, the operationalization table (see appendix 9.1) has been served as a guideline for classifying and analyzing identified categories (Hruschka et al., 2004).

4 Findings

The different data collection techniques with platform workers, their managing employees and the Account Manager of the temporary agency lead to the following findings.

Introduction PlatformCo. First of all, it is important to understand the complex environment of platform workers by introducing the online platform of this research project in more detail. As already explained, PlatformCo operates in the food delivery market by connecting restaurants and consumers through online services. Its core business model, however, relies on restaurants delivering food themselves. PlatformCo's organizational goal is to serve as an additional source of orders for restaurants and assist in the process of online payments. Therefore, its mission is to connect consumers and restaurants by also offering a simple consumer-friendly interface to ensure a high-quality user experience. Additionally, PlatformCo implemented an order-tracking feature for transparency to consumers (PlatformCo, 2019). PlatformCo was founded 20 years ago and due to the rapid organizational growth, own delivery services were introduced in more than 90 cities across more than 10 countries; meaning that restaurants do not need to deliver food themselves. Instead, they have the opportunity to utilize PlatformCo's logistics department. Due to anonymization, this department within PlatformCo will be named 'logistics department'.

Special environment of platform workers. Furthermore, the special environment of platform workers who participated in this research will be described in the following ways. As already explained in the method section, platform workers in this case refers to those workers at PlatformCo who deliver meals from those restaurants, using the logistics department of PlatformCo, to reach the consumers. For anonymization purposes, those platform workers will be named 'meal deliverers' ('MD') in the following. Findings of this research supported an enhanced understanding of the complex working environment of these meal deliverers as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

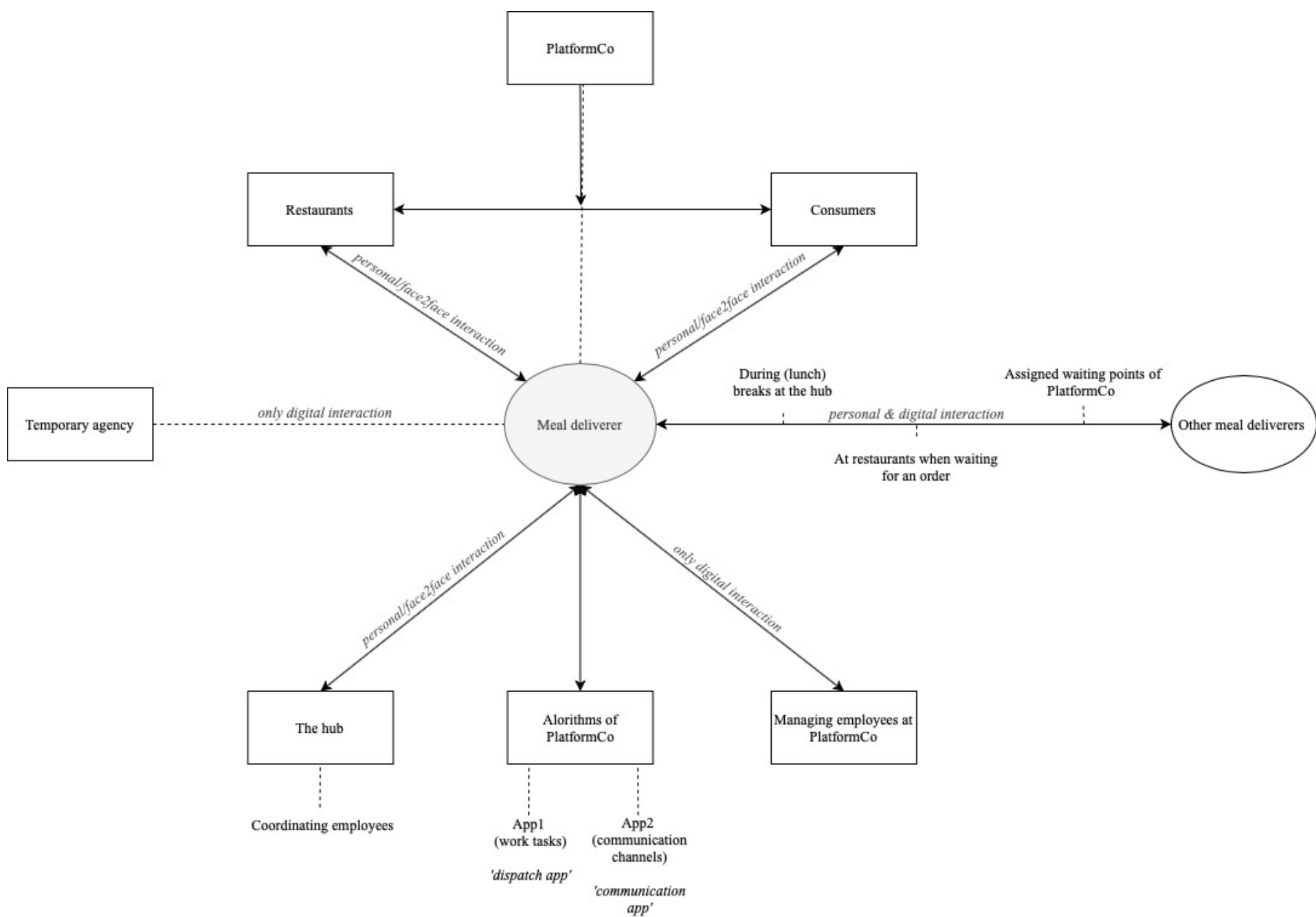


Figure 1. Work environment of meal deliverers at PlatformCo.

As it can be seen in Figure 1, meal deliverers interact with different work groups during their daily work. Firstly, they interact regularly with restaurants to pick up ordered meals and consequently, interact with customers who ordered these meals via PlatformCo when delivering. Secondly, MDs are in frequent contact with their managing employees at PlatformCo who are managing them from a different city by being able to track their locations - displayed on a map on their computer screens. Due to the reason of anonymization, this work group will be named 'managing employees' ('ME') within the following. This work group represents one of their two biggest contact points at work, which will be elaborated in more detail later. The other one refers to 'the hub'. The hub describes the location in the relevant city where all equipment needed is stored, such as bikes, bags, phones, clothes for MDs, etc. However, previously mentioned 'managing employees' are not located within these hubs, they are located at an office building of PlatformCo in only one city from which they manage all MDs across all cities (ME1, ME2). Nevertheless, there are also employees working at these hubs who are coordinating the equipment, preparing MDs for their shifts, onboarding new starters, providing a place for (lunch) breaks, etc.. This work group will be referred to as 'coordinating employees' within this research. To elaborate, 'managing employees' serve as the main contact point for MDs during their shifts and especially in cases of bike issues, phone issues, location issues, issues with customers or restaurants and even for ending their shifts. However, this communication is purely digital, whereas the locally present 'coordinating employees' are responsible for recruitment, onboarding, preparation before and after MDs' shifts and interacting face-to-face with meal deliverers. This will be further clarified within the upcoming sections.

Moreover, MDs receive their working tasks through an application, named 'dispatch app' in the following, which notifies them when they need to pick up an order and provides the necessary information for delivery regarding the restaurant and consumer. In addition to this application, MDs use a second application, named 'communication app' in the following, which serves as a communication channel between all parties involved and will be elaborated in following sections. Furthermore, meal deliverers work with assigned waiting points set up by PlatformCo where they can wait for a new order and meet other meal deliverers. Findings have also shown that they regularly meet with other MDs at restaurants when waiting for an order or during lunch breaks at the hub. Lastly, meal deliverers have the opportunity to interact with employees from the external temporary agency. This agency's main responsibilities are to set up MDs employment contracts, arrange their payments and keep track of their working hours.

Summarized, findings clarified the complex work environment of meal deliverers and examined various work identities of platform workers, which were either be enabled or restrained by platform work (see Figure 2) and explained within the following.

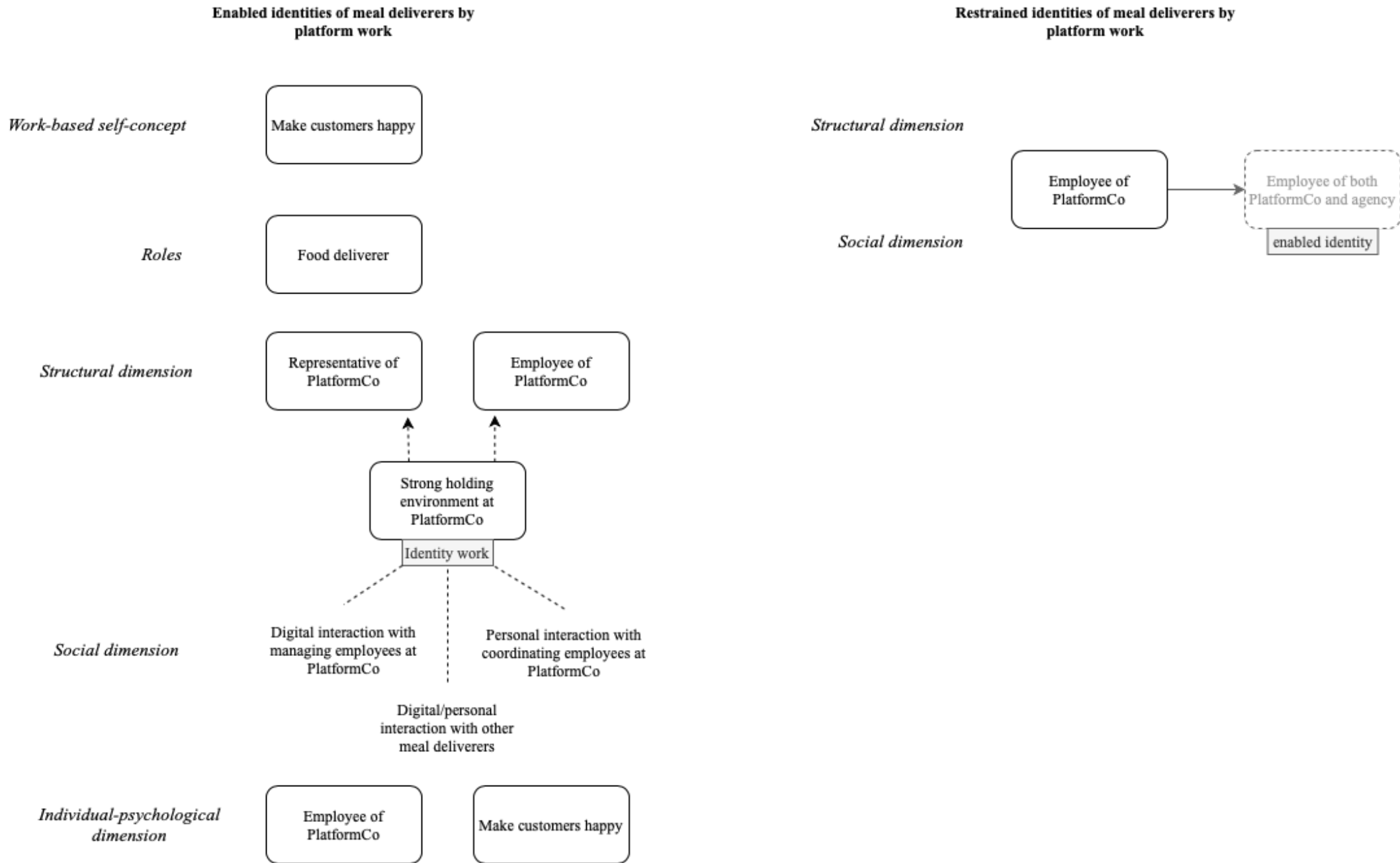


Figure 2. Overview of enabled and restrained work identities by platform work of meal deliverers at PlatformCo.

4.1 Work identity construction enabled by platform work

Findings examined that work identity construction of meal deliverers may be enabled by platform work. Furthermore, findings examined a variety of identities, which will be elaborated with respective dimensions below.

Work-based self-concept. Referring to interviews with the managing employees and how they think meal deliverers identify themselves, respondents mentioned that they could be two opportunities. On the one hand, some meal deliverers may say that they are “just good enough for picking up and delivering food” (ME2). On the other hand, they may perceive this identity more positively and with pride. Thus, they may add a purpose to their work, which could be “deliver food to make customers happy” (ME1). Interviews with meal deliverers have shown that both identities are represented. For instance, one participant clearly elaborated that they “bring joy to the customer” and that they aim to “make the day of the customer better” and at the end, set customer happiness as a priority (MD6). The identification of customer happiness is also reflected in main overall organizational goals of PlatformCo, as services provided should on the one hand, offer a source of more orders but on the other hand, provide an user friendly interface for ordering food and making the customer happy. Therefore, the business model of PlatformCo enables this identification.

Roles. Referring to roles, all respondents described themselves as delivery persons.

"You deliver the order to person who has ordered the food and that's it basically. And you do it again, again and again. That is basically the whole job" (MD3).

“Ehm... delivery boy” (MD7).

“I am just a delivery meal deliverer” (MD9).

However, some respondents pronounced this description with pride. For instance, one platform worker even described himself as a “guardian angel of the [...] delivery” (MD4). Summarized, they explained that they would identify themselves as food deliverers or meal deliverers. Their managing employees, however, described their role as “simple work” (ME1, ME2). They claimed the main responsibilities were to pick up food from the restaurants and deliver this in time to the customers by being polite, social and following the traffic rules (ME2). Thus, these two sample groups have similar expectations regarding MDs' roles. Even though meal deliverers operate in technology-intense environments and are in regular contact with different parties, such as the customer, the restaurant, the hub and workers at the platform, all respondents defined their role the same way; in this study, delivering food fast in a polite way by following the traffic rules, which represents one work identity of meal deliverers. Furthermore, as meal

deliverers link their roles to customer happiness, these findings indicate that they identify with serving the customers who are using services provided by PlatformCo.

Structural dimension. Referring to the structural dimension, respondents indicated that they identify themselves with PlatformCo due to the fact that they are wearing labelled uniforms and feel like a representative of the platform. They also clearly stated that they are proud to represent PlatformCo, which leads to more enabled work identities of these platform workers.

"And then also about the clothing you wear, so that you express yourself and everything" (MD3).

"Cause we are presentable, we wear uniforms, we have e-bikes" (MD4).

Additionally, all respondents clearly stated that they feel like an employee of PlatformCo even though their employment contract is set up with a third party. Most of them explained that this is due to the lack of contact with the temporary agency, as they only had digital or phone contact at the beginning of their job. They have never seen a representative in person and only a few communicated via phone instead of emails

"I have actually never had anything to do with [temp agency] besides putting in my holiday hours on their website and nothing else. I sometimes get emails from them occasionally, but who ever reads those? Let's be honest..." (MD4).

Moreover, respondents explained that the agency is just "for legal issues and paperwork" (MD9). Additionally, they always communicate with employees from PlatformCo during their whole shifts. Even though their communication is mainly digital, they feel rather part of the platform than of the agency. Therefore, most of the respondents would not know who to contact and only have a general email address; they indicated that they would always first contact employees of the platform. In contrast, their managing employees think that meal deliverers would feel more like employees of the agency, as they would be the "ones helping with payrolling and hour issues" (ME2). However, findings have shown that meal deliverers develop a strong holding environment with PlatformCo, which enables their work identity of being an employee of PlatformCo.

Furthermore, the onboarding process already made them feel like employees of PlatformCo and not of the external agency. One respondent even mentioned that he feels part of "the family" (MD5).

"But also almost every day I work for [PlatformCo], so that makes me feel like a bigger part of the family. I was also hired through an interview with someone from [PlatformCo]. Someone that I actually met when I entered the hub for the first time for my onboarding session. So that already makes a bigger connection to [PlatformCo] than [the temp agency]" (MD5).

Referring to the interview with the Account Manager, outcomes are aligned. Firstly, the respondent explained that the main communication tool with meal deliverers is digitally, namely via email. Sometimes, meal deliverers are contacted by phone but this only happens occasionally. Secondly, meal deliverers do not have a specific contact person at the agency, they can get in contact only via a general email address or general phone number. Lastly, the

respondent justified that they are the legal employer and mainly support PlatformCo with “all the paperwork and pay-rolling and making sure that everything is legally correct” whereas PlatformCo “just provides them the work” (AM).

“You guys just provide them the work. You just provide that they can work and drive and deliver food. But all the rest is on the agency. This is how you can see it really black and white” (AM).

Even though respondents receive their payment from the temporary agency, all respondents clearly defined themselves with PlatformCo, which can be seen as an enabled identity.

Social dimension. Referring to the social dimension, meal deliverers explained that they are using two applications of which one is for receiving their working tasks (‘Dispatch app’) and the other one is for communication with colleagues only (‘Communication app’), such as with their managing and coordinating employees or even other meal deliverers.

“It goes through [Communication app], which is really handy. So you can chat with them and explain your problem and they will most of the time directly give you an answer” (MD6).

“We are using [Communication app] as our main communication platform between the meal deliverers, managing employees, hub coordinators and all the different buddies that are at work. So all communication goes through there” (MD2).

As mentioned, all respondents stated that they usually contact the managing employees first in case of any question or issues.

“so the managing employees are basically who you would contact during your shift if you need anything. If you have any issues with your bike, you would just tag the managing employees and ask if you can get a new bike and they would tell you if it’s fine or no please do this and that ... so they are the ones who always tell you what to do or find out what you would need to do” (MD9).

Interestingly, those managing employees are encouraged by PlatformCo to always express trust, believability and support to meal deliverers (ME1, ME2) in case of any issues with other parties, such as the customer or restaurants. Especially when receiving conflicting signals from different parties within their working environment, such as customers and restaurants, identity construction with PlatformCo is backed due to strong holding environments created by trust. Thus, even if different departments at the platform may be involved in the solution process MDs are not updated afterwards, as workers at the platform “promise” they will solve their issues (ME1, ME2).

However, they have “never called the managing employee” (MD9). The entire communication happens solely via chat, except in cases of serious problems, such as the meal deliverer having an accident. Thus, sense-giving or breaking processes can only be executed via chat with this work group.

“For example, we have a main channel for very general things, then we have a delivery issue channel e.g. when the customer does not open the door or anything and we have a bike issue channel when the bike brakes down... so there is a channel for every case” (ME1).

The managing employees explained that they have these numerous different channels in order to keep all issues structured, collect all information in the same places and to be able to take over shifts from each other, as well as take on responsibilities when colleagues want to have a

break (ME1, ME2). However, they only communicate with meal deliverers once they have turned on both applications, as this enables their locations as well as the order/restaurant on a map on the screen. Additionally, managing employees explained that some meal deliverers even contact them when they are not the applicable contact person in that specific situation, because they trust them the most. As an example, meal deliverers may contact them in case of problems with their coordinating employees at the hub and ask for advice or simply, want to talk about their problems. Therefore, even though sense-making and breaking processes with this work group is only of a digital nature, strong holding environments between meal deliverers and their managing employees can be established, which enables the identity of being an employee of PlatformCo.

Generally, respondents made clear that they usually contact the managing employees during their working shift and the hub is for “questions outside *[their]* working hours via the application” (MD9). They do have the option to call or personally talk to people working at the hub, such as the hub coordinator. The channel of communication depends on the situation, for example, if they have a concern while they are at the hub or at home (MD9, MD7, MD3, MD4). However, results show that meal deliverers may be confused regarding who to contact in which situations. Thus, many MDs “contact the ME they feel most comfortable with when they have problems, also with the hub” (ME2). But on the other hand, some MDs may “feel that MEs do not care about them, as MEs have to follow rules that MDs do not know about and they always connect the ME to that problem, for example, when the MD needs to be sent home earlier than planned” (ME2). Furthermore, all respondents answered that they like to socialize with other meal deliverers. They described this process as a physical one, as they often meet other meal deliverers at restaurants or specific waiting points when they pick up orders or wait for a new one.

However, respondents indicated that in the event of conflicting instructions received from the managing and coordinating employees, the meal deliverers would most often listen to instructions from the coordinating employees based at the hub. Their managing employees explained this by the fact that they have never seen each other in person.

“We just know them from chatting. So if there is really a problem, we contact the hub coordinators because they are in contact with them face-to-face” (ME2).

“Because the hub are the persons who make decisions about drivers. So we are only there to fix bike issues, delivery issues, to be the contact between the customer, the restaurant and the driver. The hub is more the contact between us and drivers in most cases” (ME2).

Additionally, MEs explained that possible miscommunication via chat may also be a reason why meal deliverers would listen more to hub coordinators. MEs do try to avoid miscommunication by using many emoticons in order to personalize messages and ensure their

instructions are understood. However, the hub coordinators are always the ones who conduct face-to-face conversations with MDs and make final decisions.

“But it’s the same for miscommunication, I think that this happens more because they just don’t see us. For example, I am really extreme on chat with emojis like happy face emojis etc. but it’s more because I really want to make sure that they have a positive way of reading my messages to prevent misunderstanding of messages or thinking that I am angry typing or stuff. So I try to give them a picture of how I am but it’s very hard. And I think that’s also why they don’t always listen to us because we are on the other side of the country. So if we are saying something and they don’t listen, we are not the ones giving them the talk. They don’t see us come in contact, so they don’t see the consequences. And I think that might be the issue why they would first listen to the hub than to us.” (ME2).

Interestingly, respondents explained that non-work related chat channels between managing employees, the customer services department (which is one of the main contact points of them) and meal deliverers exist. These channels are mainly used to plan parties and meet-ups outside of work and in person. This finding supports MD’s identification with PlatformCo due to strong holding environments.

Additionally, findings of this study have shown that the managing employees can always overrule the algorithms, which automatically assign orders to meal deliverers based on his/her location and shortest distance to the restaurant so that the fastest delivery can be ensured (ME1, ME2). More precisely, managers can view the meal deliverers’ locations on the map and can manually reassign orders if the system may be inefficient or if a meal deliverer has an issue and a colleague needs to step in (ME1, ME2). The meal deliverers are aware that they can interfere, however they do not know when they have been manually assigned orders and when they have been assigned by PlatformCo’s algorithms (MD1, MD2, MD5). This again contributes to the development of strong holding environments and, therefore, enables MDs’ identification with PlatformCo, as meal deliverers know that humans are ‘behind’ those algorithms and hold the (main) power.

Summarizing, one of the MDs’ main points of contact/interaction within their work environment is, without exception, digitally. Besides this digital work based group, MDs interact regularly with their coordinating employees who are located at the aforementioned hubs. This enables the identity of being an employee of PlatformCo. Additionally, personal regular interaction with other meal deliverers at assigned waiting points or restaurants again support their identification with PlatformCo due to sense-making and sense-breaking processes enabled by the platform.

Furthermore, a clear distinction has been made between two applications: one used for communication only and the other one used for receiving work related tasks. Therefore, all respondents clearly understood that one application is based on algorithms only whereas the other one involves real people. This will be further elaborated within the discussion of this research.

Individual-psychological dimension. It became obvious that the onboarding process as well as regular trainings, including performance-based feedback, are provided by PlatformCo. The agency is not involved in these processes. They are only involved at the end of such processes, for example, in case of constant negative performance resulting in a dismissal of the meal deliverer or the other way around, in case of positive feedback and resulting in a promotion of the platform worker. In both cases, this requires changes in the employment contract (AM). Consequently, PlatformCo is enabled to influence and support the desired work identity, namely meal deliverers identifying as an employee of PlatformCo.

As aforementioned, findings examined that meal deliverers enjoy the moment of making customers (of the platform) happy. Thus, their personal beliefs about customer happiness is aligned with main organizational goals of PlatformCo.

“Sometimes, they run out of their house and track you with the phone, they are so impatience, they wanna eat so bad. Food is one of the primary resources that we need in order to survive. That makes them so happy when we arrive. When I see that, it’s just amazing. We try to bring joy to them. Even when it’s only 1 or 2 minutes interaction with them, it’s a good one, it’s a positive one” (MD4).

To sum up, various identities with PlatformCo could have been enabled by platform work mainly due to sense-breaking and sense-making processes offered by the platform, which contributes to the development of strong holding environments at PlatformCo. In more detail, findings examined the following identities that could be enabled by platform work: to make customers happy (work-based self-concept), being a food deliverer and serving customers (roles), being a representative of PlatformCo and an employee of PlatformCo (structural dimension) mainly enabled by the social dimension where identity work can be executed. In this case, strong holding environments at PlatformCo could be established by digital and personal interaction between MDs and their managing employees, digital and personal interaction between MDs and other meal deliverers, and personal interaction between MDs and their coordinating employees at PlatformCo. These interactions offer meal deliverers essential sense-making and sense-breaking processes in order to develop and shape their work identities.

4.2 Work identity construction restrained by platform work

Besides the various identities that are enabled by platform work, findings of this study have also examined the concept that platform work may restrain work identity development.

Structural & social dimensions. For instance, it became obvious that respondents who faced more issues about their employment contracts or hours have been in more regular contact with the agency. Subsequently, one respondent explained that he feels like an employee of both

organizations and describes PlatformCo “as a corporate employer and the temporary agency as a legal employer” (MD7). Consequently, the work identity of being an employee of PlatformCo is restrained by platform work. Nevertheless, only one respondent revealed these findings, as all other meal deliverers did not experience many issues regarding their employment contracts (MD1, MD2, MD3, MD4, MD5, MD8, MD9) and subsequently, did not receive crucial sense-making or sense-breaking processes from the agency. However, one could also question if this finding is actually restraining work identity. On the one hand, multiple work identities may contribute to conflicts between identities and therefore, may weaken the desired work identity. But on the other hand, clear separation between above mentioned work identities have been made and the respondent perceived PlatformCo as the corporate employer, which could be an argument for an enabled identity of being an employee of PlatformCo.

In summary, results have shown that main contact persons for meal deliverers are workers at the platform itself, personally as well as digitally. Additionally, physical interaction influences their behavior in case of conflicting expectations in the sense that they would rather comply with instructions made by workers at the platform with whom they regularly and personally communicate. Moreover, findings examined that meal deliverers’ contact with the external agency is very limited and managed on a general level.

5 Discussion

The previously explained findings offer interesting points for discussion, which will be elaborated in more detail within the following sections. At first, findings of this study are interpreted and linked back to the theoretical framework used and existing scholarship. After this, theoretical as well as practical implications are provided.

Referring back to the theoretical framework of this study, results of this research have offered different and novel perspectives that can enrich the existing literature. Following the current scholarship, for instance, it was argued that the structural and social dimensions of platform work may hinder identity work and thus, successful work identity construction of platform workers for different reasons. Firstly, the technology-intensive work environment of platform workers may restrain their identity work due to limited contact with peers and consequently, restrained sense-making/breaking processes (Burke & Tully, 1997; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Secondly, the temporary agency may limit identity work, as platform workers may be

influenced by the fact that they receive their payments from a different organization than the platform (Bellesia et al., 2019). Thirdly, the complex multiparty environment may hinder identity work, as crucial sense-making/breaking processes may conflict with each other (Horton, 2010; Pesole et al., 2018). Lastly, essential communication practices and training systems may be limited or restricted in comparison to classic organizational settings which, again, may inhibit identity work and successful work identity development (Pitsakis, Biniari & Kuin, 2012).

Structural & social dimension: technology as communication tool. Nevertheless, findings of this study underlined that the structural and social dimensions of platform work actually enables identity work and that these concepts may even reinforce each other, because technology serves as the communication tool for platform workers of this study; thus, the social dimension needed for identity work (Jansen & Roodt, 2015; Stets & Burke, 2000) overlaps with the unique technology-intense structural dimension of platform work (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018). However, the use of emoticons in communication via technological tools seemed to play an essential role, since it offers an interesting alternative form of sense making/giving processes, as common literature refers to personal instead of digital interactions needed for such processes (e.g. Burke & Tully, 1997; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). For example, previous researchers argued that “facial impressions” influence the interactions of other individuals by simultaneously keeping the own image of the self (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009), meaning that individuals may adapt their (re)actions to (facial) impressions received of the counterpart without ‘loosing’ the own most important/present identity in that moment (Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Adding to this, researchers also outlined the importance of bodily action or tone of voice in communication, on a broader level. Especially bodily actions (or body language) are crucial in (daily) interactions, as different gestures support one’s understanding of messages and interactions by helping to ‘read’ and understand underlying utterances of the counterpart (Müller et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these nonverbal aspects in communication/interactions cannot be executed via these digital communication channels of platform workers in this study. Thus, one could argue that the use of emoticons may compensate for the lack of ‘real’ facial, personal or nonverbal impressions in order to ensure desired sense-making and correct understanding of messages. Consequently, this study extends current works on technological communication by highlighting a different perspective on this matter, as common literature mostly refers to the use of technological tools within the workplace from a ‘cost saving’ and ‘efficiency’ perspective (e.g. Cameron & Webster, 2005; Jackson, Poole & Kuhn, 2002). Indeed, technology does not restrain identity work as it was assumed, but it

actually provides a different form of sense-making and sense-breaking and enables identity work.

Structural & social dimension: separation in digital channels. Another interesting point seems to be the clear distinction between algorithm-based channels (i.e. application for work tasks) and ‘human influenced’ channels (i.e. application for communication only), because respondents of this study clearly separated these two applications during the interviews. Thus, the former is clearly used for connecting requesters and providers to deliver specific services (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016; Frenken et al., 2018). The latter is mainly used for creating ‘personal holding environments’ or reference environments (Petriglieri et al., 2018), which is reflected by the results of this study. While the communication application enables identity work and work identity construction, the algorithm-based application does not seem to neither enable nor restrain identity work, as respondents of this study rarely referred to this application. One could argue that the application for work tasks only may not influence identity work and work identity of platform workers, because no interaction takes place within this application. Instead, this application may function simply as a ‘source of information’ (in this case, where to deliver and pick-up orders and how to get their) while the other application serves as the tool for interaction with peers and thus, provides sense-making/breaking processes for platform workers’ identity work (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Walsh & Gordon, 2008).

Structural & social dimension: digital and physical work groups. Interestingly, respondents indicated that they adapted their behavior to expectations from their ‘physical work group’ in case of conflicting signals received but at the same time, their very first point of contact in case of issues or questions was always their ‘digital work group’. This could be dependent on the situation itself, as all respondents agreed that contacting the ‘digital work group’ was the most efficient and fastest way to receive needed information. Still, other than that, they preferred physical interaction. Hence, one could argue that digital channels of communication may only be used to increase efficiency but depending on the individual's personal preferences, important holding environments can be created as well (Petriglieri et al., 2018), which may enable successful work identity with the online platform as long as this channel is provided by the platform. Consequently, if platform workers have the opportunity to maintain human contact points within their management, the support of algorithms does not affect their work identities. This may offer further nuances on our understanding of multiparty relationships, as algorithm-based management peacefully ‘coexists’ next to human-based

management to ensure and increase overall efficiency without affecting platform workers' identity work (see e.g. Lee et al., 2015).

Structural dimension: contact with peers. Furthermore, prior to this study, it was assumed that platform work may lead to limited contact with peers, which would impact sense-making/breaking processes negatively (Burke & Tully, 1997; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). However, the findings have shown that the structural dimension of platform workers in this study actually enabled physical as well as digital contact between each other. Besides of the communication application, the online platform assigned specific waiting points for platform workers during less busy working slots where they can physically socialize with each other. Also, restaurants were used by platform workers to physically socialize. Subsequently, essential personal and nonverbal (Müller et al. 2013; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009) sense-making and breaking processes (with other platform workers) could be guaranteed by the structural setup, which contributes to clear work identity processes with the platform.

Structural dimension: third party influence. Additionally, the findings of this research contradict the assumption at the beginning of this study that the payment institution would impact identity work of platform workers by offering an additional source for (work) identification to the platform worker, which may challenge clear work identification processes (Bellesia et al., 2019). Due to the structural setup of their working environment and the technological communication tools, which offers constant and fast contact between different work groups (Walsh & Gordon, 2008) at the online platform, strong holding environments with the platform could be established. Hence, these findings disagree with Bellesia et al. (2019), who stated that such holding environments are influenced by the payment organization. The main reason for the lack of influence is most likely to be the lack of contact between platform workers and the temporary agency. In addition, no specific contact persons at the agency were assigned to them, which again enables a strong holding environment and identification with the online platform (Petriglieri et al., 2018). However, findings also pointed out that the payment institution does impact identity work of platform workers if more regular contact between these two parties occurred, as this, on the one hand, weakened the holding environment (Bellesia et al. 2019) with the online platform and, on the other hand strengthened the allegedly weak one with the temporary agency. Hence, these findings are aligned with the key argument by Burk and Tully (1977) according to which work identities and corresponding roles are mainly constructed through social interaction and, therefore, the individual is more likely to identify with work-based groups with whom one interacts most regularly.

Social dimension: holding environments. As a result, these findings indicate that identity work is executed within the social and structural dimensions, both digitally and personally. Consequently, platform workers create strong holding environments at the online platform, which are essential for identifying as an employee of the platform. These holding environments are created through important sense-making and sense-breaking processes for managing their emotions and supporting in their actions (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018), as explained prior to this research. Interestingly, these findings indicate that even though platform workers operate within a special structured work environment, which may impact their work identity construction negatively (Jansen & Roodt, 2015), all respondents clearly defined themselves with the online platform. Thus, it should not be underestimated that the regularity of contact between platform workers and the temp agency was determinant. Referring to Jansen and Roodt (2015), these findings support their results that multiple work identities may be triggered based on the amount of social interaction with specific parties within such a complex work environment.

Structural dimension: multiparty relationships. Referring to the complex multiparty environment of platform workers, the existing literature leads to the assumption that this may restrain identity work and work identity construction of platform workers due to conflicting signals and sense-making/breaking processes received by all the different parties. The findings of this study align with this assumption to a certain extent. Indeed, they showed that multiparty relationships within the structural and social dimensions of platform workers do play a role for identity work. Still, the results also underlined that such multiparty relationships are much more complex than assumed at the beginning of this study and may actually enable identity work instead of restraining it (Bellesia et al., 2019), which will be elaborated in the next paragraph. More precisely, findings have shown multiple relationships that we were not aware of prior to this study, such as the relationship between the online platform and the payment organization and how they interact with each other (in this case, digital communication but mostly to set up or end contracts of platform workers and to support platform workers in case of questions).

Furthermore, one could distinguish between the structural and social dimensions inside and outside the online platform. Those dimensions outside the platform seem to play a less prominent role in identity work if constant points of contact of platform workers were inside the platform. However, since customers add value to platform workers' work-based self-concept (Turner, 1982; Walsh & Gordon, 2008) and restaurants offer points to socialize with peers, customers and restaurants also enable workers' sense of 'belonging somewhere' (Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Furthermore, findings indicated that managing employees, restaurants,

customers and platform workers have similar expectations of platform workers' roles, which supports the argumentation that one's role supports one's work identity construction if received cues from one's social environment do not conflict with each other (Burke & Tully, 1977; Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Thus, this may show the influence of job design, because a clear design of the job may offer clear expectations for all parties involved already from the start of employment of a new (platform) worker. Moreover, this may even add to common perceptions on job design (which is seen as a fundamental practice to trigger knowledge sharing between employees by focusing on the tasks, structure and characteristics of the job in the first place, instead of on individuals (see e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Foss, 2009) in the sense that clearly defines tasks, structures and characteristics of the job may enable clear work identity construction even within complex work environmental settings (Foss, 2009).

Additionally, the technology-intensive environment of platform workers is also essential for overall communication in this case study. Workers would not be able to get in contact (fast) with each other without technology, which leads to a pivotal role of technology in the sense that technology does not limit their contact with peers (Bellesia et al. 2019), but actually enables it. In this regard, the finding that emoticons are used to add value, personality and emotions to messages and avoid misunderstanding of certain phrases is again to be highlighted. Indeed, they contribute and foster successful work identity of being an employee of the online platform, as explained previously.

Structural dimension: communication and training systems. Lastly, essential communication and training systems can be provided by the online platform, which also contradicts prior assumptions (Jansen & Roodt, 2015). Findings of this study have shown that the online platform not only offers the communication tools and multiple contact points for different purposes, they also offer a unique training program, which enables platform workers to receive performance-based feedback regularly. This spurs regular sense-making processes within their identity work (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Walsh & Gordon, 2008) and shapes platform workers' work identities into the desired direction. Moreover, findings have shown that platform workers of this study developed the identity to make customers happy, which reflects one of the main organizational goals of the platforms (PlatformCo, 2019). This contributes to the importance of person-environment fit within the individual-psychological dimension as argued by Jansen and Roodt (2015), because platform workers can more easily identify with the online platform if personal and organization goals conform. Again, this identification is already influenced during the recruitment process of the

online platform and is then further developed by shaping platform workers' behavior through regular training and feedback sessions offered by the platform.

To summarize, findings of this study support but also contradict previous studies about identity work and work identity construction within classic organizational settings. In essence, the findings showed the importance of the structural and social dimensions for enabling identity work of platform workers. More precisely, the importance of regular contact between platform workers and workers at the platform became obvious, which offers crucial sense-making and sense-breaking processes by simultaneously keeping interaction with the payment organization low. Additionally, findings underlined a pivotal and nuanced role of technological tools and the multiparty relationship structure within platform work for offering sense-making and breaking processes in a different way. As a consequence, the online platform can create strong holding environments, which enables one's identification with the platform and weakens possible identification with other parties involved. Furthermore, the prior assumption of holding environments necessary for clear work identity construction may offer the most suitable perspective to understand the concept of identity work within the context of platform work.

5.1 Implications for Research

This thesis makes several theoretical contributions to existing literature within the field of online platforms by offering different perspectives of identity work and work identity in the complex environment of platform work.

Firstly, findings examined the importance of support and trust expressed by managing employees to platform workers, which supports research about identity, organizational commitment and trust by Puusa and Tolvanen (2006) who investigated that trust is “the key in creating greater commitment to the organization” (p. 31). Nevertheless, they clearly argued that trust does not create (work) identity. Instead, “organizational identity affects the level of identification of individuals within an organization, which in turn creates trust” (p. 31). In this research, managing employees are trained by the online platform to express trust (organizational identity) in conflicting situations of the platform worker and take over or support in the solution processes. Consequently, organizational commitment can be developed by platform workers and the ‘level of identification’ (Puusa & Tolvanen, 2006) with the online platform increases.

Secondly, a pivotal but nuanced role of technology and multiparty relationships has emerged. Hence, work identity construction is not restrained by platform work. Platform work

may even offer more opportunities to enable work identity construction and execute identity work in comparison to classic organizational settings (Bellesia et al., 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Furthermore, technology may not be restraining for identity work as long as human interaction still occurs or at least, as long as humans remain the power over technology and platform workers are aware of this. Consequently, this research project examined a clearer understanding of work identity construction within the emerging platform economy. As a broader perspective on theoretical concepts have been elaborated prior to this research, findings examined a more specific identity approach linked to platform work (Huws, 2017).

Lastly, this research project may even underline the importance of job design and may even add to common perceptions of job design in existing literature (see e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Foss, 2009) by examining that clear structured tasks and characteristics of the job itself support clear work identity construction even in assumed complex and uncommon structured work environmental settings.

5.2 Implications for Practice

Besides the above theoretical implications, this research also offers practical implications for managers and leaders working in online platforms. Firstly, the importance of trust (Puusa & Tolvanen, 2006) has been highlighted. Findings revealed that expressing trust to platform workers is essential to build supportive work relationships. This implies that managers (who are responsible for managing platform workers or are involved in these processes) should encourage and train employees, who are part of main work based contact points of platform workers, in supporting platform workers in difficult or conflicting situations and solution processes.

Furthermore, the regularity of interaction has a huge effect on work identity development. Findings examined that it is important to keep main points of contact at the online platform; regardless of digital or physical interaction in the first phase, as the significance of holding environments has been backed. Linked to this, it may be important to simultaneously keep digital or physical interactions between platform workers and the payment organization limited and compensate this lack of contact by providing platform workers with a contact person at the platform (who is then in contact with the temporary agency). Consequently, managers are advised to assign specific contact persons at the online platform for all different questions or possible issues of platform workers. This will most likely increase clear identification with the online platform. Indeed, the influence of physical interaction should not

be underrated, as findings emphasized that this form of interaction is always preferred. Thus, managers are advised to keep at least a small part within the work environment physical, as this will enable the identification process with the online platform.

Lastly, HRM practices offered by the online platform seem to provide the starting point for fruitful work identity development. For instance, if the recruitment process or at least part of it is executed by the online platform, platform workers' work identity could be already influenced positively. Further HRM practices, such as onboarding, training, performance appraisals and regular feedback, may enable desired work identity if provided and executed by the online platform instead of for example, a temporary agency. Similarly, findings support the person-environment fit explained by Jansen and Roodt (2015). Thus, HR employees are recommended to already start supporting work identity within the selection process by selecting potential employees who may fit best with the platform and may have personal beliefs aligned with overall organizational beliefs and values.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study is of course not without limitations. Firstly, this study focused on one sample group within the Netherlands of an internationally operating online platform whereas it might have been interesting to investigate whether there are any changes within identity work and work identity construction between platform workers operating in different (organizational) cultures. For instance, Hofstede examined five main cultural dimensions (power distance, long-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity) to explain and analyze cultural differences (Hofstede, 1984; Sorge, 1983). For instance, the Netherlands may be classified as a more individualistic culture meaning that individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their families (Hofstede & Soeters, 2002) whereas platform workers operating in more collectivistic cultures may experience more difficulties (in work identity construction processes) within the unique work environments of online platforms. Therefore, future research may want to expand the sample scope to a global level by considering possible effects of cultural differences based on, for example, those five dimensions.

Furthermore, this project offers interesting findings of only one case study in a specific market, which could limit the generalizability of findings, since the emerging platform economy presents different markets for online platforms, such as social media, delivery of goods (logistic), housing, etc. (Kenney & Zysman, 2016), resulting in different types of online platforms and platform workers (e.g. freelancers). Whereas this research project conducted research within e-commerce platforms, similar research projects may examine different

outcomes within the platform type of travel websites or crowdsourcing (Chen et al., 2020) due to the business models and organizational purposes being different (Chen et al., 2020). Consequently, a study exploring different online platforms operating in different markets may be worth to investigate in future similar research projects.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to answer the research question: ‘*Under which condition does platform work enable or restrain work identity construction of platform workers?*’. Findings have shown that platform work offers various opportunities to enable work identity construction of platform workers rather than restraining. However, certain conditions need to be met.

Conditions to enable work identity construction. In order to enable work identity construction of platform workers, it is essential that their main work groups and, thus, their points of contacts are at the online platform instead of other possible (third) parties relevant within their daily work. Also, constant communication with such work groups need to be ensured in the first place, regardless of whether this communication is of digital or physical nature. Simultaneously, communication between platform workers and possible third parties needs to be limited. Referring to the characterized technology-intense environment of platform workers, this study examined that a clear separation between algorithm based technological tools and ‘human influenced’ tools (i.e. work tasks vs. communication tool) is crucial for enabling successful work identity development. Furthermore, the impact of trustworthy relationships between platform workers and other work groups based at the online platform should not be underestimated, as support in solving encountered issues with any other party in their complex work environment can be classified as an enabling condition. Interestingly, wearing branded clothes/uniforms with the corporate logo of the online platform strongly supported their identification with the online platform, which can be seen as another key condition.

Conditions to restrain work identity construction Nevertheless, findings of this study have also investigated that platform work may restrain successful work identity construction of platform workers if certain conditions are not met. For instance, in cases of sickness. In this study, platform workers’ employment contracts were set-up at a temporary agency, thus, they were required to contact this temporary agency in case of sickness. This may restrain their work identity construction, as the platform worker needs to contract the temp agency as well as the online platform. Especially in cases of long-term sickness, those individuals experienced

challenges during their work identity development, because their work identity of being an employee of the temp agency was supported, subsequently, the identification with the platform was weakened. Adding upon this, work identities of platform workers facing more legal or bureaucratic issues were restrained due to the same reason; meaning that with increased contact to the temporary agency, their work identity development with the online platform was rather challenged.

In essence, platform work may even offer more opportunities to influence and enable successful work identity construction of platform workers due to the multiparty setup on the structural as well as social dimensions. In this sense, technology may not be restraining as it was assumed at the beginning of this study, but, on the contrary, it may even offer more possibilities to add value to one's work identity development.

We hope that these findings support a clearer understanding of the work identity construction processes within the new emerging market of online platforms and underline the importance and effects of such on an individual as well as organizational level. Furthermore, we hope that future work may be inspired by our findings to support required conditions not only for increasing efficiency or work performance of platform workers but also to support satisfying and meaningful work within this changing labor market.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Operationalization table

Table 3

Operationalization Table

Nr.	1. Construct (definition)	2. Sub-construct (definition)	3. Sub-construct (definition)	Example questions	Data source		
					Logistics department	Managing employees	Temporary agency
1	work identity (a work-based self-concept constituted of a constellation of organizational, occupational and other identities that shapes the roles individuals adopt and the corresponding ways they behave when performing their work)	work-based self-concept (which specific social work related group the individual classifies him/herself into)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you define yourself at work? Which groups of people/organization do you identify yourself with at work? In which situations do you feel most comfortable/most like yourself? Around which colleagues? Many people engage in self-talk. What kinds of things do you say to yourself while working? 	about themselves	about themselves and meal deliverers	about meal deliverers (how they think how meal deliverers define themselves at work)

2	<p>roles <i>(behaviors and actions an individual is expected to perform at work)</i></p>	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell me a little bit about what you do at work? • How would you describe your role at work? • Which behaviors and actions are you expected to execute at work and by whom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your main responsibilities? • How will you know if you are successful in your job? • Do you feel a sense of purpose in your work? When? How does it help? • Which services do you provide and to whom? 	about themselves	about themselves and meal deliverers	about meal deliverers
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3 **identity work**
(the effort people make to attain, hold on to, repair, or give up identities based on the structural, social and individual-psychological dimensions of their environment)

structural dimension
(concepts of work, patterns of employment and training systems)

-

- How much freedom do you have in determining the final product of your work? How about how your work gets done? [Please give an example.]
 - Who do you think is your employer?
 - Where and how do you receive your training?
 - Do you have regular contact to PlatformCo or more contact with the agency?
 - If you have problems at work, who do you contact?
- Do you have a fixed employment contract? For which period?
- Do you have other jobs besides this one? If so, which one is most important to you and why? If so, with which job do you identify most strongly with and why? If so, why did you chose to work for PlatformCo as well?
 - What are the biggest challenges/opportunitites of doing this type of work?
 - Can you give me some examples? If you were discouraging someone from working independently, what would you say?

about themselves

about meal deliverers

about meal deliverers

4	<p>social dimension (identity construction process through interaction between the individual and in this context, work related focal points, such as work groups, characteristics, profession, etc.)</p>	<p>sense-making (work identity construction process and provides individuals with given perceptions about certain actions, ideas, etc. to support their understanding and interpretation of their (social) environments)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are your main contact persons at work? • In case of insecurity about a situation, who do you contact and why? • Do you behave differently around different colleagues and why/why not? • How do you obtain feedback about how you are doing? • Imagine you had an apprentice learning to do your job. What would you tell them? How should they prepare for this kind of job? What are the key practices that lead to success? What would you warn them about? • Do you have people you rely upon at work? In what way? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you physically interact/communicate with your colleagues (a lot)? • If not, how do you interact with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the biggest challenges/opportunities working for PlatformCo, Temporary agency, restaurants and customers? 	about themselves	about meal deliverers	-
5		<p>sense-breaking (involves a fundamental questioning of who one is when one's sense of self is challenged creating a meaning void that must be filled)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In case of problems, who do you contact and how? • If you disagree with a decision at work, do you speak up? If so, who do you contact and how? • Do you receive any feedback from your colleagues/manager about your work? If so, how do you deal with this feedback/do you take it into consideration? 	about themselves	about meal deliverers	-

6	<p style="text-align: center;">individual- psychological dimension</p> <p><i>(person-environment fit, which encompasses an individual's attitude towards work, perception of the work content, level of career or professional development, occupational history, work centrality and job involvement, which refers to the degree an individual identifies him/herself with his/her work and the importance of such)</i></p>	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you choose to apply/work at PlatformCo? • What do you like/dislike the most within your job? • Do you think that your needs are fulfilled through your work? And by whom/who not? • Do you think that you have the required competences to do your job? Why/why not? • Do you like your job? Why/why not? • How important is your work to you? Why/why not? • For who do you think is your work important? Why/why not? • How do you communicate with your colleagues/main contact persons at work? 	about themselves	about meal deliverers	-
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Table 4

<i>Interview Protocol – Platform Workers</i>		
Opening	Questions	Closing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> researcher introduces herself 	<p>Opening questions:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> researcher expresses appreciation for participation and time of respondent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> asking for permission to record the interview 	O1. In which department do you work? What is your job title?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> researcher repeats confidentiality of data and explains follow-up procedure, which includes verification of interview transcript
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> explain duration of interview: approx. 30 mins 	O2. How long are you employed at PlatformCo?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> researcher provides own contact details in case of any follow-up questions after the interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promise and explain confidentiality and express appreciation for respondent's time shortly explain the research purpose: to investigate the influence of technology in identifying with the company 	O3. Could you explain me your job? What are your daily tasks?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> explain that questions are welcome at any time during the interview clearly inform research participants that they can withdraw from the research at any time without explanation/justification 	<p>Motives to join the platform:</p>	
	M1. Why did you decide to work at PlatformCo?	
	M2. What do you like the most about your job and why?	
	M3. What do you like the least about your job and why?	
	<p>Work identity (example questions):</p>	
	How do you define yourself at work?	
	Which groups of people/organization do you identify yourself with at work?	
	Can you tell me a little bit about what you do at work?	
	How would you describe your role at work?	
	...	
	<p>Identity work (example questions):</p>	

How much freedom do you have in determining the final product of your work? How about how your work gets done? [Please give an example.]

Who do you think is your employer?

In case of insecurity about a situation, who do you contact and why?

In case of problems, who do you contact and how?

If you disagree with a decision at work, do you speak up? If so, who do you contact and how?

Why did you choose to apply/work at PlatformCo?

What do you like/dislike the most within your job?

...

Closing questions:

C1. Are there any other questions that may help me understand your work and life?

9.3 Procedure

After the sample of interest has been defined, data collection was launched by contacting the managers as well as the applicable Human Resources Departments of respondents of interests. As a follow-up on the first contact via email (with HR and managers) introducing the topic of interest, reasons for research and benefits for PlatformCo, a personal meeting was arranged to further introduce and discuss the topic of interest. After approval was given by managers and the responsible HR manager, the legal department has been contacted to ensure confidentiality and legitimacy for all parties involved in this research. Next, managers of respondents have supported in arranging individual interviews by informing, choosing respondents and providing information about availability in order to simplify the process (Newcomer, Harty & Wholey, 2015). The nonrandom technique, purposive sampling, was executed, as this research concentrates on individuals with special characteristics that are relevant for the desired research topic (Etikan et al. 2016; Tongco, 2007), namely identity work within online platforms. Respondents were chosen with support from the responsible manager(s) to choose for respondents with sufficient English skills to overcome the language barrier between researcher and respondents. However, the applicable manager decided on which respondents to interviews based on their level of English, which provided the researcher with randomly selected respondents. Thereafter, individual interviews were performed in previously arranged virtual as well as physical meeting rooms. In contrast to initial planning, virtual interviews with representatives of platform workers were arranged due to the exceptional situation of the global Coronavirus outbreak to ensure safety and health of all parties involved. Virtual as well as meeting rooms were arranged by managers of PlatformCo together with the researcher and respondents were provided with sufficient information on how to access those beforehand. However, one sample group could have been interviewed and shadowed personally, as sufficient distance between researcher and respondents could have been guaranteed in one of PlatformCo's office buildings in the Netherlands. Generally, (virtual) meeting rooms were arranged to ensure confidentiality and minimize possible distractions. Furthermore, respondents were shortly informed by their managers and the researcher about the overall purpose of the meeting by also expressing the importance and appreciation of the respondent's advice. However, information about the research were held as neutral as possible to avoid biasing respondents (Newcomer, Harty & Wholey, 2015).