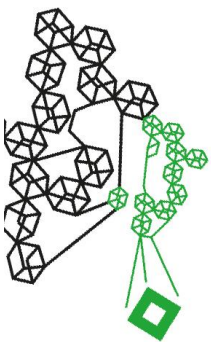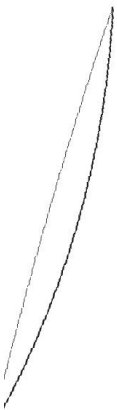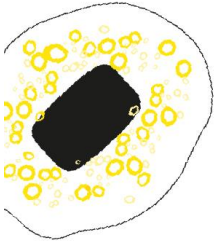# UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

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Navigating Paradoxical Tensions in Online Labour Platforms: Insights from Explorative Research on Experiences and Responses

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ABSTRACT

In the platform literature three tensions can be identified: supply versus demand of labour, value creation versus value capture, and autonomy versus control. It is important to know whether tensions are paradoxical in nature, since dealing with paradoxes is different from dealing with tensions. By conducting explorative qualitative research, broadening knowledge was obtained on the experiences of strategic decision-makers of platforms in managing paradoxical tensions. My study shows that the three tensions are perceived by the strategic decision-makers as paradoxical and how they deal with these tensions. While tensions are always present in platforms, they are at first latent. My study shows that factors triggering tensions into a salient state are laws and regulations, labour market dynamics, type of work, and types of requester. Response strategies helping platforms to deal with paradoxical tensions to maintain long term sustainability are acceptance followed by creating a solution of synthesising, splitting and integrating. In doing so, the platform aims to rebalance the tensions. My study found an additional layer in response strategies in which strategic decision-makers can take a more conservative approach or assertive approach in dealing with tensions. These key findings contribute theoretically to the paradox theory and platform literature. As a practical utility for platforms, it contributes to a better understanding of the paradoxical tensions they may experience, what triggering factors there are and how they can deal with the tensions.

Keywords: online labour platforms (OLPs), paradoxical tensions, triggering factors, response strategies

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1. INTRODUCTION

With rapid technological developments and the digitalisation, the gig economy grew fast, disrupting the more traditional economic structures (Garben, 2017). The gig economy - also called platform economy - is an economic system using online platforms via which workers and requesters can connect digitally (Harris, 2017). Via the platform employment arrangements are mediated between workers (supply) and requesters (demand) (Kuhn & Galloway, 2019; Todolí-Signes, 2017) and workers can offer and sell their products or services to requesters (Taylor et al., 2017) either locally or digitally (Kuhn & Galloway, 2019). Gig work differs from traditional jobs because there is no long-term employment. It also implies that gig workers are hired on a flexible basis, as a temporary agency worker or freelance worker to perform a particular task for a certain period of time (Friedman, 2014). Within the gig economy the number of legally employed workers for an organisation is relatively small (Todolí-Signes, 2017).

Online labour platforms (OLPs) are part of the gig economy (Duggan et al., 2019). This type of platform matches and mediates services requested by requesters and offered by workers who perform the task on site (e.g., food-delivery, transport, or cleaning). The requester pays for the completed service from which the platform organisation receives commission (De Stefano, 2016). Work is performed locally and at a specific time and location. Furthermore, performance standards are low, and workers are hardly managed by OLPs. Within platform work, an algorithm decides and matches supply and demand, quickly creating working relationships (Duggan et al., 2019). The algorithm is used to automatically organise and coordinate large groups of requesters and workers and facilitating short term and on-demand jobs (Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019). Research has shown that OLPs experience multiple tensions in organising the platform. In my study, tensions can be understood as a conflict or imbalance between different elements, derived from Smith and Lewis (2011). There are three tensions within OLPs that are widely studied by researchers. Based on the literature, platforms continuously experience tensions in supply and demand of labour (Mohlmann et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015), value capture and value creation (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023), and autonomy and control (Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021). Firstly, platforms experience a tension between labour supply and demand. When there is a shortage of workers, prices are raised to attract more of them, increasing supply. High prices then make requesters less willing to use the service. As a result, demand drops and prices are driven down. Changes in labour supply and demand continuously affect each other, creating a tension between them (Kenney et al., 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Secondly, the tension between value creation and value capture is experienced by platforms. While value creation is important for platforms to engage workers, platforms also want to capture value. If value capture by the platform is too high, it risks losing both

workers and requesters for whom usage is no longer beneficial (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). Lastly, the tension between autonomy and control arises since workers are considered freelancers, they should have high autonomy. However, the platform applies control practices that limits worker´s autonomy (Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021). These three tensions are widely discussed in the platform literature. Hence, they can be considered as important to gain knowledge about. It is precisely these tensions that are centre in my research.

Specifically, it is unknown whether the beforementioned tensions experienced by platforms are paradoxical. Since dealing with tensions is different from handling paradoxes, it is important to know whether a tension is a paradox or not (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Schad & Bansal, 2018). Paradoxical tensions are described by Smith and Lewis (2011) as the following: "We define paradox as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (p. 386). Tensions and their interdependencies are the first base for paradox studies (Schad & Bansal, 2018). However, tensions do not necessarily have to be a paradox, they can also be similar constructs like a dialectic or dilemma (Smith & Lewis, 2011). As a research gap, Rietveld and Schilling (2021) argue that limited attention is paid to paradoxical tensions by overlooking the consequences that arise from managing paradoxes. Therefore, this study adopts paradox theory to gain a better understanding on the tensions that occur in online labour platforms. Studies explain that failure to understand paradoxical tensions carries risks. According to Schad and Bansal (2018), there is an understanding about tensions, but not understanding and recognising whether they are paradoxes or not, hinders our ability to approach them appropriately. As a result, these limitations can lead to backlashes and unintended outcomes within the organisation. Moreover, failure to deal with paradoxical tensions can jeopardise the sustainability of a firm and foster vicious cycles, while properly managing paradoxical tensions enables a firm's sustainability on the long run (Smith & Lewis, 2011). More in depth, within organisations multiple tensions occur on different levels and in different aspects. Paradoxes occur at levels such as the individual, group, project, and organisation. Paradoxical tensions flow through the different levels creating both new challenges and tensions when changes occur at a particular level (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, changing tensions in one part of a system can bring about changes in other parts of the system (Schad & Bansal, 2018). As Lewis and Smith (2022) say: "navigating paradox is paradoxical" (p. 529). This means that different elements and categories of paradoxes are intertwined and related, creating great complexity. The authors also argue that paradoxes need a different approach and treatment than tensions that are not paradoxical. In short, it is crucial to understand the nature of tensions, whether they are paradoxical or not, in order to manage them properly to ensure long term sustainability and survival of the platform. In my study paradoxes can

be understood as a tension that consists of contradictory elements that are interrelated, exist simultaneously, and persist over time.

The three tensions within platforms described in my study will be examined from the perspective of strategic decision-makers, being leaders, directors, and strategists, who are thus considered to represent a platform. Considering the above, the research question that follows is: *'Which tensions associated with online labour platforms are perceived as paradoxes by strategic decision-makers and how do they deal with these paradoxical tensions?'*. On a theoretical note, my paper contributes to broadening knowledge about tensions in the platform literature. It leads to a better understanding of the tensions in platforms and which of them are perceived and experienced by strategic decision-makers as paradoxes. It will also provide an understanding of how platforms deal with the paradoxical tensions. Additionally, my research contributes to the paradox literature. From a practical point of view, this paper provides new insights for OLPs of paradoxical tensions. In addition, knowledge about the occurrence of paradoxes can help OLPs to recognise and manage them to be sustainable.

This paper starts off with a theoretical framework, which is divided in two subjects. First, the platform and its characteristics are discussed in the literature review, explaining in more detail the tensions covered in my study. Second, the paradox theory is discussed in the theoretical background section, going deeper into the characteristics of paradoxes, and navigating strategies to deal with paradoxes. Then, the methodology followed by the findings are outlined. Next, the discussion provides theoretical and practical contributions. Additionally, the limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed. The paper closes with a conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories discussed in this framework are the platform literature and the paradox theory. The existing platform literature is used to describe the current knowledge about platforms and the tensions they experience. These tensions are supply versus demand of labour, value creation versus value capture, and autonomy versus demand. As mentioned above, these three tensions are widely studied in the literature and therefore have been perceived important to include in my study to broaden knowledge and understanding by taking the paradox perspective. Hence, the theoretical background applied in my research is the paradox theory. Tensions and their perceived paradoxical nature will be explained more in depth. Additionally, the knotted nature of paradoxes is included in my study. Finally, the response strategies that can be used to deal with paradoxical tensions are explained.

2.1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections provide information about platform literature relevant for my study. Starting with the description of online labour platforms based on existing research. Next, the tensions are discussed.

2.1.1. ONLINE LABOUR PLATFORMS

In my research, platforms are assumed to have three characteristics. The first characteristic of OLPs is the basic concept of platforms bringing together labour supply and demand (Aloisi, 2016). More specifically, platforms match and mediate digitally the services offered by workers and wanted by requesters (De Stefano, 2016). Workers and OLPs enter a capital-labour relationship, while requesters ask for services and workers provide them. The platform acts as an intermediary in this relationship (Friedman, 2014). Examples of platforms include Uber, TaskRabbit, ListMinut and TakeLessons (De Groen & Maselli, 2016) where these platforms mediate local consumer demand for a particular service (Gandini, 2019). Platforms are described by Gori et al. (2015) as a multisided marketplace for labour where end users are on both the supply and demand side. As described by Smorto (2018) a platform is an intermediary that must limit its activities to facilitate end users to exchange gigs by matching labour demand and supply. When platforms limit workers' autonomy, they are service providers rather than merely a platform.

A second important feature of platforms is that matching decisions of supply and demand of labour are made by algorithms, to quickly create work connections (Duggan et al., 2019). An algorithm can be described as a computational formula that makes decisions autonomously, without human intervention, based on decision rules or statistical models (Eurofound, 2018). Large groups of requesters and workers are automatically organised and coordinated by the algorithm, facilitating short term and on-demand jobs (Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019). Likewise, algorithms are used to replace middle management by accurately and efficiently managing a distributed workforce through monitoring and controlling (Mohlmann et al., 2021). More in depth, in the literature algorithmic management (AM) is described as the generation and use of digital data, processing data by these software algorithms, and subsequently using it to partially or completely automate management, including decision making and human resources (Duggan et al., 2019; Veen et al., 2020; Waldkirch et al., 2021). Mohlmann et al. (2021, p. 2001) define AM: "as the large-scale collection and use of data on a platform to develop and improve learning algorithms that carry out coordination and control functions traditionally performed by managers." Furthermore, the authors distinguish two dimensions platforms operate their AM alongside: algorithmic matching and algorithmic control. The first involves matching labour supply and demand; the latter concerns monitoring workers' behaviour to ensure it is in line with the platform's objectives. The aim of

AM is to control and monitor workers in order to provide requesters with standardised and high-quality services (Mohlmann et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Algorithms are used in practices such as rating systems, affective messaging (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015), dynamic pricing (Rosenblat, 2018), and upfront pricing through which workers are coordinated, monitored, and controlled (Mohlmann et al., 2021).

Thirdly, platforms deal with workers hired on a flexible basis, as a temporary agency or freelance worker. There is no long-term employment and no guarantee for future tasks by the same requesters after completing the task (Aloisi, 2016; Friedman, 2014). As a result, the number of legally employed workers for an OLP is relatively small (Todolí-Signes, 2017). The work assignments (e.g., food-delivery, transport, or cleaning) will be performed locally, at a specific time and location (De Stefano, 2016; Duggan et al., 2019; Friedman, 2014). Once the task is completed the requester pays the worker and the platform receives commission (De Stefano, 2016). According to Meijerink and Keegan (2019), although the employment relationship is absent, platforms do apply HRM activities such as performance management with requesters rating workers' performance. Workers who perform poorly are at risk being deactivated by the algorithm. Also, job design where workers are given prescribed ways of working gives limited autonomy.

Based on previous discussion, OLPs are defined in my research as a) intermediaries that create a multisided market, bringing workers (supply) and requesters (demand) together b) through algorithms that serve to control workers and coordinate the multisided marketplace, and c) the work assignments offered are performed locally on a temporary base by freelance workers. Now that the characteristics of platforms have been discussed, the core activities of platforms can be explained. Studies show that although platforms mainly act as intermediaries by matching end users, they also have a monitoring and controlling role (Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Mohlmann et al., 2021) in order to manage workers' performance (Gandini, 2019). Tensions can be derived from these activities matching, and monitoring and controlling. To repeat, the most widely discussed tensions in the literature are the tensions of supply versus demand of labour (Mohlmann et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015), value creation versus value capture (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023), and autonomy versus control Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021). Therefore, these three tensions fall within the scope of my research in answering the research question.

2.1.2. SUPPLY & DEMAND

To better understand the three tensions, they are discussed by considering the core activities matching, and monitoring and controlling. To begin with, this paper discusses supply vs demand of labour. Firstly,

the aim of platforms is to create a network effect by increasing both supply and demand (Gawer and Cusumano, 2002). A network effect can be described as: the more people use the platform and its products or services, the more valuable it becomes for each user (Farrell & Saloner, 1985; Gregory et al., 2021). Digitalisations has led to algorithmic matching which is used to obtain these network effects (Gawer, 2021). By using algorithms, OLPs can optimise workers and requesters matching and make it more efficient and accurate (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Mohlmann et al. (2021) argue that algorithms are used to optimally match end users, looking for the most favourable matches for both ends of the platform. A network effect exists when the larger the network, the greater the benefits of the network to end users. According to the study of Meijerink and Keegan (2019) the network effect can be achieved by maximising labour supply and demand. Therefore, it is essential to increase both the number of workers and requesters parallel to each other. When they do not increase equally, mismatches occur, and consequently this may lead to workers or requesters leaving the platform due to too little demand or supply of labour. Meijerink et al. (2021) argue that difficulties in balancing supply and demand of labour will lead to dissatisfaction of workers and requesters. Abundance of workers is bad because they earn too little, while too many requesters will lead to unfulfilled services.

For optimal matching, for the benefit of end users, platforms adopt practices to influence labour supply and demand (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). As an example, platforms use higher rates - e.g., surge pricing - to encourage workers to perform gigs and thus aim to reduce the supply shortage in a specific area (Mohlmann et al., 2021). Rosenblat and Stark (2015) explain that Uber applies surge pricing when demand exceeds supply; raising earnings encourages workers to work more, thereby increasing supply. Subsequently, requesters are willing to wait until more drivers are available and prices return to normal. Demand decreases and the labour market moves back to equilibrium. In this way, as the authors explain, OLPs try to secure systematically that supply of labour fits demand, which is important for the OLP to create balance and remain reliable. Moreover, by attracting new supply in high-demand areas, Uber aims to create a positive experience for requesters. Although Uber intends to motivate drivers through surge pricing to start working when there is high demand, there are indications that it mainly redistributes existing supply of labour instead of adding to it (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Importantly, as new workers can easily enter the market and start gigs, increasing supply, prices are pushed down (Kenny et al., 2019). To conclude, on the one hand, if there is an abundance of supply and a shortage of demand, prices are driven down. This means requesters pay less, which is beneficial for them; while workers earn less, which is unattractive, meaning they tend to leave the platform. On the other hand, if there is a shortage of workers and an abundance of requesters, prices go up (e.g., surge pricing). As a result, requesters must

pay more for the service they then want to use less, driving down demand; workers are encouraged to work, because of higher earnings, increasing supply. It is important for OLPs to match end users efficiently and accurately to create network effects. Platforms try to balance labour supply and demand by using practices, however, this remains challenging. If a platform is unable to match properly, there is a risk of dissatisfaction and losing requesters and workers, and it can even be assumed that the network effect may disappear or become negative. Thus, labour supply and demand are constantly changing according to each other, manifesting as a tension.

2.1.3. VALUE CREATION & VALUE CAPTURE

To explain the tension between value creation and value capture, the discussion continues from the network effects explained previously. Gawer and Cusumano (2002) say that platforms aim for network effects to create more interactions and exchanges between workers and requesters, thereby increasing value. The value is co-created by different actors (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017), while the value for each group of actors is depending on the size of the other group (Armstrong, 2006). Within platform work, several parties are involved in creating and capturing value. Platforms can be seen as an ecosystem and a key feature of the ecosystem is the creation of value (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Jacobides et al., 2018; Rietveld et al., 2019). Value creation, also called use value, refers to how the service or product is perceived by users in fulfilling their needs. Value capture is value exchange, the monetary exchange for the created value; the payment for the delivered product or service (Lepak et al., 2007). According to Eisenmann et al. (2008), first, there are the end users, who offer services and request services. Second, there are the platform providers, who have an intermediary role and are a point of contact for end users. Lastly, platform sponsors – also called the owner or leader of the platform – are described by the authors as the following: "platform sponsors, who exercise property rights and are responsible for determining who may participate in a platform-mediated network and for developing its technology" (p. 132). They actively manage the ecosystem by using informal authority such as control or knowledge over key resources. This creates asymmetric dependencies and stratification, wherein the platform sponsor has a key role in creating and managing the ecosystem (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018).

It is argued that the higher the number of requesters, the higher the value for workers and vice versa (Cennamo & Santaló, 2013). Moreover, network effects create multilateral value for all actors. Workers benefit from more requesters, because there are potentially more gigs which leads to higher income, value exchange. Vice versa, requesters benefit from an excess supply of workers, subsequently

leading to better fulfilment of demand. This results for the OLPs in network effects creating even more exchanges between workers and requesters, and the platform can capture value (Gawer and Cusumano, 2002). The value generated for the worker and firm is via the requesters who pays for the service. The payment can be split between the worker and the platform (Chadwick, 2017) or the requester pays the worker, and the platform receives commission (De Stefano, 2016), which is decided upon by the platform sponsor (Jacobides et al., 2006). Platforms can increase value capture by driving down costs for their human capital and by boosting value creation. To capture value, a platform must continuously engage and induce workers. On the other hand, the value captured reduces when costs rise and/or when the value created is lower. However, the platform sponsor should be cautious in their value capture because a worker will leave the platform if the income is lower than that of competing employers, considering perfect competition (Chadwick, 2017). Jacobides et al. (2006) warn that focussing only on value capture can hinder value creation. When a platform captures too much value, it risks losing workers who believe they earn too little or losing requesters who pay too much (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023).

Moreover, Uzunca et al. (2022) state that focus shifts from value creation to value capture as the sector in which the ecosystem operates matures. According to predictions, a network effect may eventually lead to a 'winner takes it all' outcome, with the platform with the highest number of end users dominating the market (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Shapiro & Varian, 1999). Subsequently, the platform sponsor of this dominating OLP captures the largest share of the generated value (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Piller et al., 2021). Based on this review of the existing literature, the following can be concluded about the tension between value creation and value capture. For the platform, the higher the value creation, the more value can be captured. However, an OLP capturing too high value leads to lower value creation and the platform risks losing workers and requesters. Furthermore, value creation can be enhanced by network effects.

2.1.4. AUTONOMY & CONTROL

The third frequently discussed tension in the literature is between autonomy and control. Platforms strongly experience a tension between autonomy and control both during the matching activity and the monitoring and controlling activity. OLPs bring together supply and demand (Aloisi, 2016) and control and monitor workers´ behaviour and performance (Gandini, 2019) by using the algorithm. As mentioned in the section about the characteristics of OLPs, workers are considered freelancers, without an agreement of work (Aloisi, 2016; Friedman, 2014). It is assumed that workers have high autonomy and flexibility in deciding when and where they work (Healy et al., 2017). According to Meijerink et al. (2021) workers have

autonomy to decide when and where to work, and how to deliver the product or service, in a marketplace that has free and unregulated competition. However, the freelance status of workers is challenged by platforms that exercise control by applying HRM activities, in pursuit of network effects to grow the platform. Such activities are recruitment & selection, trainings, workforce management, compensation, and performance appraisal. As an example, training is outsourced to third parties who approach workers. In this way, platforms exercise control but retain the freelance status of workers. Another example is that workers do not have the freedom to set their own prices, even though they are self-employed according to OLPs.

To further elaborate, the assumed high degree of autonomy is more limited than platforms claim. Some workers feel exploited by the platform because they have little say in how work is assigned or completed (Wood et al., 2019). Furthermore, once a worker is logged into the app, algorithmic management decides how gigs are allocated (Duggan et al., 2019). The algorithm assigns workers who can serve a particular requester better and faster. In doing so, gigs are efficiently distributed among workers (Gramano, 2019). Another study argues that actors are semi-autonomous, they are controlled to some extent to avoid extreme imbalances between supply and demand of labour (Wareham et al., 2014). Rosenblat and Stark (2015) explain that the platform balances labour supply and demand to ensure reliability and positive customer experience and thus ensure value creation. This is enabled by using an algorithm that measures supply and demand and tries to motivate workers to take gigs to achieve a balance in the labour market. For example, Uber incentivises workers to stay logged in the app, and in doing so the platform pushes workers to take gigs to fulfil demand (De Stefano & Aloisi, 2018) or uses surge pricing to efficiently and accurately match end users (Gandini, 2019; Mohlmann et al., 2021). OLPs rely on control practices to ensure that gigs are quickly accepted by workers. For example, Uber does only reveal the destination of the customer to the driver after the drive is accepted. Uber uses such practices to try to systematically secure labour supply for its services (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Because of demand and time pressure, workers are limited in choice to work according to their own schedules (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017).

Now the tension between autonomy and control during monitoring and controlling activities will be explained using relevant literature. Algorithms are used to replace middle management by accurately and efficiently managing a distributed workforce through monitoring and controlling. The system exercises algorithmic control by setting and enforcing rules and standards which ensure that workers' activities are in line with the platform's goals (Mohlmann et al., 2021). Platforms apply various practices to control and monitor worker performance. Ranking systems, reviews and ratings are tools that platforms

use to have supervisory power, which is partly delegated to end users. Workers are traced, monitored, and evaluated to ensure requester satisfaction without having an employment relationship (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015; Steinberger, 2018). Workers are strongly controlled, where requester evaluation is often crucial (Healy et al., 2017). Furthermore, OLPs can penalise workers if they frequently reject gigs offered (Duggan et al., 2019). As an example, Uber drivers have been declared unavailable for work by the platform if they have refused three rides in a row (Steinberger, 2018). Platforms can also encourage workers to maintain high acceptance rates by offering higher pay (Lee et al., 2015). Standardised processes and embedded rules actively control worker behaviour, as the algorithm automatically sanctions unwanted behaviour and rewards desired behaviour. In this way, platforms nudge workers and exercise soft control (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). During high demand workers are encouraged by the app to work long hours and during peak times to get higher pay. At the same time, they need to maintain good ratings and accept the gigs offered to them. This heavily limits workers' autonomy (Prassl, 2018).

The algorithm can track all actions of workers and collects, analyses, and processes this information to monitor worker behaviour. Most algorithms are machine-learning, also referred to as predictive analytics, meaning that it predicts output based on data input. The machine-learning algorithms continuously improve themselves to meet the platform's objectives and to best shape worker behaviour informally and without force. In doing so tasks, like job allocations, can be optimally assigned to workers. Due to the high number and distribution of workers, platforms rely on the algorithm to influence workers' behaviour (Mohlmann et al., 2021). According to Rosenblat and Stark (2015) relying heavily on the algorithm is for OLPs a way to justify the information asymmetry existing in the network. This information asymmetry is produced by the algorithmic system and enables platforms to gain indirect control over workers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) and give power (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). Moreover, by creating this information asymmetry platforms limit well-informed decision making by workers and constrain their choices and agency (Veen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, for platforms it is important to match efficiently and accurately and by controlling and managing workers to some extent to be able to create and capture value (Chadwick, 2017; Piller et al., 2021). In addition, balancing supply and demand ensures reliability and controlling workers is important to be able to ensure worker and requester satisfaction (Meijerink et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015) and the quality of services delivered (Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). For instance, poor performing Uber drivers can be deactivated or are required by the platform to attend outsourced training to improve service quality. These HRM practices help OLPs to prevent requesters from leaving due to poor worker performance (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). De Groen and Maselli (2016) argue

that platforms limit workers' autonomy to increase efficiency of the platform. However, workers perceive the algorithmic management as unfair because it is a one-way system and leads to high information asymmetry (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). As an example, workers who are low in the rankings are less likely and must compete hard to increase opportunities to be assigned a gig. Hence, high control over workers leads to uncertainty and unpredictability about the gigs they may or may not get and thus work and income are unreliable (Laursen et al., 2021). Eventually this may lead to negatively affect their health and well-being (Duggan et al., 2019). In summary, a platform needs to match supply and demand to keep workers and requesters satisfied. To do so, it applies practices using algorithms to deal with fluctuations. To match end users efficiently and accurately, workers do not have complete autonomy and are controlled to some extent by the platform. So, while platforms that give high autonomy to workers, risk being unable to match optimally; OLPs that exercise a high level of control conflict with the freelance status of workers. This creates a tension within OLPs between autonomy and control.

2.2.   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For my study, the paradox theory is adopted to meet the research question. First, paradoxes and their characteristics are outlined. It is explained how paradoxes relate to the previously three tensions. Also, the concept of knotted paradoxes is explored wherein paradoxes can be tangled with one another, triggering, amplifying, or mitigating each other. Moreover, the literature is used to discuss the strategies adopted by organisations to navigate and manage these paradoxes effectively. This part is concluded with a recap of my research. The following discussion is based on relevant literature of the paradox theory.

2.2.1. PARADOXES

It is important to understand the nature of previously mentioned tensions because dealing with tensions is different from handling paradoxical tensions (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Schad & Bansal, 2018). Tensions arise between conflicting demands of different stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The first base for paradox studies are the tensions and their interdependencies (Schad & Bansal, 2018). The paradox perspective explores how firms can simultaneously meet competing demands that pose a tension. Continuous efforts to meet paradoxical demands are required to gain long term sustainability of a firm (Cameron, 1986). A paradoxical tension can be described as contradictory yet interrelated elements that are mutually exclusive, exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Both elements of the duality are equally necessary than either element on its own (Cameron, 1986) and both sides seem important (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). They are mutually exclusive opposites rather than mutually

reinforcing opposites. Hence, choosing between or synthesising the two elements is impossible or undesirable (Cameron, 1986) because they are incompatible and difficult to reconcile in some sense (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989).

However, tensions need not necessarily be a paradox, they can also be similar constructs like a dialectic or dilemma (Smith & Lewis, 2011) Paradoxes can be distinguished from similar tensions, such as dilemmas and dialectics, that arise in organisations. A dilemma is a tension where a choice must be made between two or more options, also named an either-or-situation (Cameron, 1986). A dilemma implies having to choose between two elements of which each has both high costs and valuable benefits (Smith & Berg, 1987). The advantages and disadvantages of both options are considered, on which the choice is based (Smith & Lewis, 2011). A dialectic is a both-and-situation and can be described as a method of thinking and acting (Nonaka & Toyama, 2002). The dialectical tension is continuously resolved by the integration of a merged and synthesised solution of contradictory elements/ideas. This new solution will again encounter a new opposite after some time and a new dialectical tension will arise and be resolved again. This is a repetitive process (Bledow et al., 2009). It is the process and its repetition rather than the outcome that matters most (Nonaka & Toyama, 2002). Both dilemmas and dialectics can be paradoxical of nature if the contradictions are interrelated and persist over time. In this case, to synthesise tensions of a dialectic the similarities are stressed, and differences are neglected, which makes the solution temporary (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Paradoxes are complex constructs that will now be explained more in depth. Paradoxes are dualities, consisting of two elements that are opposites, intertwined and related, creating great complexity (Lewis & Smith, 2022). The elements are interrelated and exist simultaneously while opposing each other, creating a dynamic connection and persistence over time. The paradoxes can be distinguished by their boundaries and rationalised by formal logic, and they contain either-or-thinking to highlight differences. However, this either-or-thinking risks blurring the interrelatedness of paradoxical tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the either-or-situation, actors simplify the complex construct of paradox by distinguishing the two elements, but this obscures the interconnectedness of the two contradictory elements (Lewis, 2000). Moreover, it may be an effective way of thinking in the short-run, however, in the long-run it can be challenging as paradoxical tension create ongoing conflicts (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Importantly, Lüscher and Lewis (2008) describe that through either-or-thinking, managers try to choose between elements by examining them separately. However, the more they stress the importance of one of the elements, the more the opposite element is accentuated, and making a choice becomes impossible. According to another study by Cameron (1986), in extremity, an organisational decision maker chooses

one element over the other, resulting in a continuous reinforcing vicious cycle, eventually leading to dysfunction of both elements. As an example, when overemphasising autonomy, this can lead to loss of direction and disruption of continuity. While on the other hand, when overemphasising control, the effects can be energy loss, production stagnation, and eliminated trust and morale as workers experience a loss of freedom/autonomy to make decisions themselves. Therefore, both opposites must be balanced to avoid extremism (Cameron, 1986). Furthermore, Schumacher (1977) writes that by having two opposites simultaneously operating in a system creates flexibility and freedom that are not present in a linear system. The flexibility and freedom will be eliminated when trying to resolve the paradox. The coexistence of interrelated elements of paradoxes results in rising frustration and the unresolvable conflict triggers both-and-thinking (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Thus, as Cameron (1986) importantly states, balancing paradoxical tensions is crucial for optimising and strengthening organisations. Importantly, Cunha and Putnam (2019) emphasise that besides understanding a paradox it is as equally important to understand actors' experiences and perceptions to have a complete understanding of paradoxes. Another study explains that perceptions of tensions are a starting point for understanding whether tensions are paradoxes. Additionally, in reality, individuals' perceptions may differ and vary with respect to other actors (Schad & Bansal, 2018). In summary, paradoxes can be understood as a tension that consists of contradictory elements that are interrelated, exist simultaneously, and persist over time. Especially important in my research is the perception of the strategic decision-makers (actors) of paradoxical tensions, since dealing appropriately with these tensions is crucial for the sustainability of the platform.

For the tensions within OLPs (i.e., supply-demand of labour; value creation-capture; autonomy-control) to be paradoxical, they must be experienced and perceived by actors as interconnected, yet opposing, existing simultaneously, and persisting over time. Now the three tensions will be described on the assumption that they are paradoxical, drawing on the literature. For instance, supply and demand of labour in OLPs' online marketplaces are two elements that exist simultaneously and are opposites of each other. That is, while accentuating supply of labour, demand of labour cannot be left out of sight. Especially when a network effect is desired, the focus should be on both sides of labour. It has been stated clearly that a disbalance of supply and demand has negative consequences for the platform and its end users (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Mohlmann et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Secondly, as indicated before, when there is no value creation there can be no capture of value and vice versa. This implies that value creation and value capture are interrelated elements and for long term success, an OLP should balance both elements. On the one hand, if the focus is strongly on creating value, and focussing less on value capture can lead to financial instability of the platform. On the other hand, if the focus is strongly

on capturing value without considering value creation, this can lead to dissatisfied end users resulting in less value creation (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). This situation highlights the contradictory interrelationship between value creation and capture. Taken together, this implies that value creation and capture are paradoxically interrelated. Lastly, autonomy and control are clear opposites. That is, when managerial control increases, this comes at the cost of workers' autonomy as control limits workers' decision-making freedom. In the case of OLPs, autonomy and control need to co-exist; platforms need to control workers to create network effects, but at the same time give workers autonomy to maintain the freelance status of their gig workforces (Meijerink et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). As the above examples show, the tensions faced by OLPs can be perceived as two opposites and it is undesirable to synthesise them together or to choose for one element of the duality.

2.2.2. KNOTTED PARADOXES

Not only are the tensions that construct a paradox interwoven and interrelated, the study of Cunha and Putnam (2019) mention that paradoxes can also be knotted within other paradoxes and can open-up or trigger each other. These tangled knots of paradoxes exist due to the interrelationships between paradoxes and their function of triggering, amplifying, and mitigating other tensions (Sheep et al., 2017). Moreover, within organisations multiple tensions occur on different levels and in different aspects. Paradoxes occur at levels such as the individual, group, project, and organisation. Paradoxical tensions flow through the different levels creating both new challenges and tensions when changes occur at a particular level (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, changing tensions in one part of a system can bring about changes in other parts of the system (Schad & Bansal, 2018). If the three main tensions of this study are perceived as paradoxes, it is also assumed that they are not isolated but rather knotted and interrelated. Based on this, the three tensions can be conceptualised as Figure 1, showing this assumption.
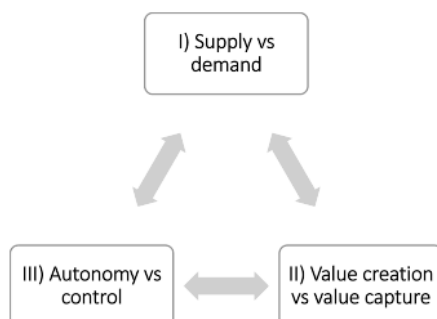

Figure 1, Knotted paradoxes

Now the paradoxical tensions are explained as knotted together. First, workers are controlled (III) to some extent to avoid extreme imbalances between labour supply and demand (I) (Meijerink et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015; Wareham et al., 2014). Through control practices (III) gigs are quickly accepted by workers, leading to efficient and accurate matching (I), and thus enabling value creation and capture (II) (Chadwick, 2017; Piller et al., 2021). Furthermore, by controlling workers (III) positive requester experience is ensured, leading to value creation (II). (Rosenblat & Stark, 2015). Also, because of pressure to properly match supply and demand of labour to create network effects (I), workers are limited in their freedom to make decisions (III) (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Meijerink et al., 2021). Clearly, the changes in one paradox affect other paradoxes. Therefore, it can be assumed that the tensions that are perceived as paradoxical are also knotted.

2.2.3. STRATEGIES

To empirically study these proposed perceived paradoxes that the strategic decision-makers of OLPs face, this study relies on the dynamic equilibrium model of Smith and Lewis (2011) because it highlights under what conditions paradoxes become salient and how organisations respond to paradoxical tensions (see Figure 2). The cycle begins with latent tensions (1). These are tensions that persist over time, exist in the background and are not readily observable or expressed openly. They are present, but can be dormant, unnoticed, or neglected by actors. The contradictory and interrelated elements are embedded in the organisational processes. They persist over time because of the complexity and adaptation of the organisation. While latent tensions are present but not directly noticed by actors, they can shift into a salient state (2) (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, the inherent nature of paradoxical tensions does not necessarily trigger salience for actors (Knight & Paroutis, 2017). Importantly, the first factor triggering tensions from latent to salient is when actors *experience* the inconsistent and contradictory nature of the tension due to changes in cognitive conditions of actors or environmental conditions that are plurality, change and scarcity (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The cognitive conditions that render salient paradoxes relate to actors recognising and being aware of the interrelated contradiction of elements that constitute the paradox (Lewis, 2000). Saliency remains temporary but can be repeated over time and triggered by different contexts or become reinforced by a given context (Lewis & Smith, 2022). The first environmental condition that makes tensions salient is plurality. For example, plurality can be found in a tension of identity (individual vs collective), the number of stakeholders, or the multiplicity of views by actors. Plurality increases uncertainty and exposes conflicting views, goals, and processes. Secondly, change leads to new opportunities, but at the same time brings along conflicting needs on the short- and long-term.

Rapid technological change, for example, requires firms to excel in both exploration and exploitation at the same time. Lastly, scarcity refers to resource limitations, such as temporal, human, or financial resources. When decision makers choose a certain distribution and spending of resources, it increases tensions between opposing and interdependent options (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Also, when workers have limited resources, this leads to an increase in tensions experienced (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). As outlined above, tensions are always present in organisations, but actors do not always notice them and therefore tensions remain latent. After a change in actors' cognitive conditions or environmental conditions of plurality, change or scarcity, the tension becomes salient.
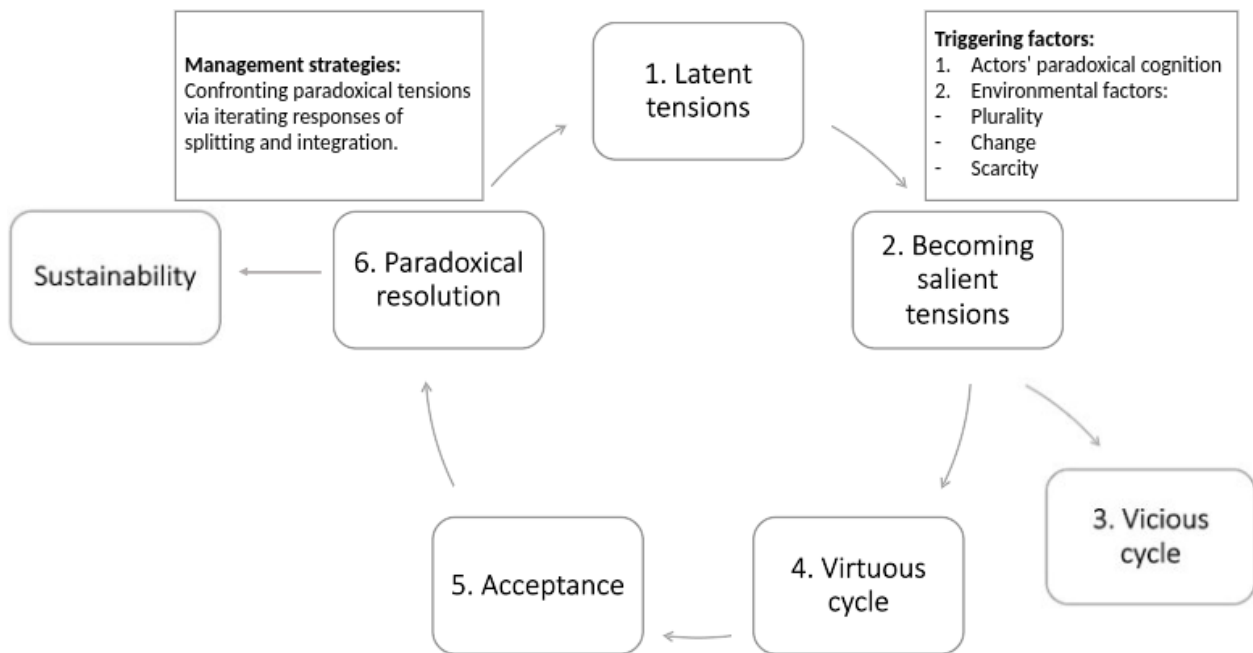
Figure 2, Based on Smith & Lewis (2011) dynamic equilibrium model.

OLPs also experience latent and salient tensions. Meijerink et al. (2021) found that two court cases against Deliveroo resulted the tension between autonomy and control to shift from a latent to a salient tension. On the one hand, Deliveroo claimed workers are freelancers. On the other, the opposing party argued that workers are under the control of the platform through HRM activities leading to an employment relationship. However, before the case went to court, the tension between autonomy and control was already present, and thus latent. Then, the tension was recognised and acted upon, making it salient. Another example in value creation vs value capture, Uzunca et al. (2022) argue that platforms first focus on value creation (latent tension) and as an OLP and its ecosystem matures, the focus shifts towards value capture. This results in the tension becoming salient due to changes of the environment the OLP operates

in, and the platform becomes aware of changes and effects on the tension. It shows that environmental and cognitive changes lead to the recognition of tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Once they are salient, paradoxical tensions stimulate reactions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These reactions can foster reinforcing cycles that can be negative (3) or positive (4) depending on the response of actors (Lewis, 2000). Negative responses are due to misunderstanding or mistreating paradoxical tensions, which carries risks and can lead to vicious cycles. According to Schad and Bansal (2018), misunderstanding or defensiveness can lead to mishandling paradoxical tensions, which in turn can lead to vicious cycles that manifest into backlashes and unintended outcomes within a platform. Smith & Lewis (2011) explain that vicious cycles stem from actors' anxiety and desire for consistency. One manifestation of a vicious cycle is the avoidance of the duality of the paradox by using defensive reactions like denial, repression or splitting (Smith & Berg, 1987). Other reactions are to choose one element of the duality, leading to either-or-thinking and oversimplifying the complexity of paradox, or to not change behaviours to pursue consistency. The focus on consistency and choosing one element results in a reinforcing cycle, which leads to vicious cycles (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and extremity (Cameron, 1989). Failure to deal with paradoxical tensions can jeopardise the sustainability of a platform and foster vicious cycles.

In contrast, positive responses to paradoxes and properly managing them, result in virtuous cycles (4) and enable them to become sustainable in the long run. Response strategies are acceptance (5) and solution-oriented (6) to enable virtuous cycles. The first step in the response strategy towards virtuous cycles is acceptance of the paradox, creating comfort in dealing with both elements, and from there actors can search for resolutions. Resolutions can be splitting and choosing between tensions and finding a synergy that responds to opposite elements (Smith & Lewis, 2011). As either-or-thinking can be effective in the short-run, it can be challenging in the long-run since paradoxical tensions create ongoing conflicts (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Therefore, the second step of the response strategy is the process of shifting attention between splitting and integrating paradoxical solutions will lead to long-term commitment for both elements of the paradox. Actors should be aware that making short-term choices, leads to accepting contradictions in the long run (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). This iterative process of organising around tensions by splitting and integrating strategies to deal with them, leads to a dynamic equilibrium. The model is dynamic because opposing elements are in constant motion and persist over time and therefore need cyclical responses to enable sustainability. This means that paradoxical resolutions result in constant iterations between the two elements to assure that both receive simultaneous attention over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This entails the both-and-thinking which allows for simultaneity and the examination of the interdependency of both elements of the duality (Lewis, 2000). Another response strategy is to

generate a solution that incorporates both opposing elements and thus aims to resolve the tension (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). The response strategies in short: once paradoxical tensions have become salient, actors are well advised to accept them. From there, they should proceed solution-oriented by considering both elements of the tension by finding a synthesising solution that includes both elements or in an iterative process of splitting and integrating solutions. As an example, in the case of OLPs it can be assumed that this strategy of splitting and integrating can be applied on value creation and value capture. To explain, Uzunca et al. (2022) state that first platforms should focus on value creation before they can aim on capturing value. As the platform and its ecosystem mature and gain a stronger foothold, the OLP can increase its value capture. Subsequently, focus needs to shift again to value creation since only focus on value capture can hinder value creation (Jacobides et al., 2006).

Based on previous discussion, it suggests that the three tensions can be understood as paradoxes, since their characteristics can be perceived as paradoxical in nature. Then, different strategies can be applied in responding to and treating paradoxical tensions leading to vicious or virtuous cycles. Response strategies for paradoxical tensions are acceptance, and synthesising, splitting and integrating solutions continuously. Nevertheless, it is still uncertain whether they are paradoxes and thus whether OLPs address them in the proper way as suggested by Smith and Lewis (2011). Therefore, my study will answer the research question: *'Which tensions associated with online labour platforms are perceived as paradoxes by strategic decision-makers and how do they deal with these paradoxical tensions?'*.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study the explorative qualitative method was applied to answer the research question. This qualitative approach was chosen because quantitative data methods produce linear trends, medians, and averages from which statistical analysis and inference can be derived. This is not useful for this research since means, midpoints, and linear trends in regression analysis can mask the presence of paradoxes (Cameron, 1986). Furthermore, this qualitative research method is exploratory and therefore descriptive by nature. It focuses on interpretations, meanings, and experiences of people (Hermanowicz, 2002). The method is suitable for investigating perceptions of people, as qualitative studies provide detailed data that allow a better understanding of the context of the research group (Ritchie et al., 2014). Fundamental to this study are the respondent's personal perceptions, understandings, and experiences which makes the qualitative research method a good fit given the research question. A possible disadvantage of this method is that the outcomes cannot be used to generalise or find causality (Bryman, 2016). However, this

is less relevant for this study as the study is exploratory and in-depth by nature. Hence, generalisability can be considered as a follow-up step.

The study was conducted in the context of online labour platforms in the Netherlands. Some of them operate only in the Netherlands and others internationally. A total of nine interviews were conducted at six firms, consisting of five OLPs and one company focusing on platform design and realisation. The sectors in which the platforms operate range from construction and engineering to healthcare and business.

The studied platforms are explained. Firstly, the *Design* platform is a twenty-year-old company specialised in platform design and implementation. The platform is involved in shaping and organising various types of platforms. Therefore, the Design platform can provide knowledge about the decision-making processes and tensions experienced by wide spectrum of platforms. These developed platforms can be situated in the Netherlands or organised internationally. Secondly, the *Care* platform has existed for seven years, it is active in the Netherlands, and focuses on providing care. In matchmaking, caretakers and requesters can make the match by themselves, assisted by an algorithm which is used to show end users what is on the supply and demand side. The algorithm considers several variables such as distance, skills, and requirements of end users. The system then shows available and relevant gigs to workers based on their interests. Conversely, it shows requesters which workers meet their requirements. Based on this, both parties can decide with who to match. Importantly, the value proposition is to guarantee reliability of workers, as requester have a vulnerable position. Consequently, the Care platform tends to be more controlling, to safeguard the well-being of the requesters. Thirdly, the *All-round #1* platform, existing about ten years, matches workers and requesters by using high advanced AI which is the digital twin. The digital twin of a worker is generated by data collection, analysis, and application. The information from the workers such as characteristics and capabilities, also performance and progress are continuously processed in the digital twin. From there matches are proposed based on skills, availability, and distance. It can also give workers suggestions for trainings and improvements. Hence, the best matches for end users are generated by using the digital twin. Workers and requesters have freedom in deciding who to match with. Fourth is an *All-round #2* platform that has been active for seven years. The platform does not use an algorithm to match end users. It offers workers to freely look for gigs that fit their skills, capabilities, and availability. Workers can choose which gig they want. To complete the match, the requester can choose someone from the group of workers who have applied for the gig. Fifthly, an internationally oriented platform called *All-round #3* does its matching comparable to the *All-round #2* platform. It has existed over five years. Lastly, the *All-round #4* platform can be compared to the *All-round*

#1 platform, using the digital twin as highly advanced AI. It has existed over two years. In overall, these platforms may have different practices, target groups and working mechanisms. While the *Care* platform focus on ensuring reliability of workers, the focus of the *All-round* platforms is more on efficient matching. However, they have the same characteristic: matching end users online.

The participants of the study have a role as founder, director, or strategist. These participants are expected to be able to provide insights on platforms in terms of business models, organising the online marketplace, bringing together supply and demand and realising profitability, as they have a decision-making role in these aspects. Note, in my study they are referred to as strategic decision-makers. Additionally, it is assumed that they encounter (paradoxical) tensions in running the platform and decision-making. These participants are expected to give insights in their response strategies of how they deal with the paradoxical tensions.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Data was collected through desk research and fieldwork. The former took the form of a literature review and the latter of semi-structured interviews. The combination of multiple collection methods is called triangulation. This means that the collected data from both sources can be compared and lead to matching and confirming findings (Bryman, 2012). However, the interviews may provide insights that were not encountered in the literature and therefore went unnoticed and were thus not included in the desk research. This is simply because the data from the interviews depend on the perceptions and experiences of the participants, which may differ from the theory. This results in weaker triangulation. Nevertheless, new characteristics of OLPs may emerge that may be of interest for follow-up research.

3.1.1. INTERVIEWS

Data for this study was collected through nine semi-structured interviews. Interviews are useful in the analysis of decision-making processes, how and why people make certain decisions. This is because interviews reveal the meanings and interpretations of respondents, which are relevant in decision making (Blaikie, 2009). Some structure in interviews is necessary to ensure comparability between findings. Semi-structured interviews therefore provide both structure and flexibility to the interview and allows for interviewees' own perspectives. In addition, the interviewer can deviate from the interview guide by skipping question already answered or asking new follow-up questions to the interviewees' responses (Bryman, 2016). For this study of paradoxical tensions, the semi-structured interview provided an opportunity to understand the decision-making processes underlying the management of tensions. The

interviews revealed individual experiences and provided information on how decision-makers deal with choices about the business model, the organisation of the online marketplace and the demand and matching of job supply and demand. The questions of the interview guide are prepared following these three points (appendix 1). The interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure consistency of the interviews conducted across all participants. Moreover, this ensures that all important topics are covered, and that the researcher has freedom to go deeper into answers given (Yin, 2018). The following points were covered: the introduction, general questions, matching workers and applicants, worker behaviour and platform interests, making a profit, managing tensions, and the conclusion.

Participants were recruited by using the purposive snowball sampling method. The purposive sampling method implies that participants must meet certain criteria (Ritchie et al., 2014). In the case of this study, participants must have a role as a founder, director, or strategist within a platform active in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited via the network of the supervisor, or LinkedIn. To make it a snowball sampling method, new respondents are found through previous respondents (Bryman, 2012). The invitation to the interview was sent via email or LinkedIn where further contact was maintained. After the person agreed to participate, date and time were scheduled.

3.1.2. INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Due to practical considerations of time and resources, it was chosen to conduct nine interviews which allowed for sufficient data. These were conducted at six firms, consisting of five platforms and one company focusing on platform design and realisation. The interviews took place between 26 June and 19 July 2023. The duration of the interviews ranged from a minimum of 40 minutes to 65 minutes. The interviews took place either face-to-face or via Teams, depending on the respondent's preference. This choice was made to make it more convenient and comfortable for the participant. An overview of the platforms, the interviewed participants and the duration of each interview is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1, Overview interviews

Design	Strategist	60 minutes
	Business designer	60 minutes
	Director	45 minutes
Care	Founder	65 minutes
	Strategist	65 minutes
All-round #1	Director	50 minutes
All-round #2	Founder	40 minutes
All-round #3	Founder	50 minutes
All-round #4	Director	60 minutes

Following informed consent, permission to participate was asked both written via email upfront the interview, as well as verbally at the start of the interview. The informed consent document was derived from the UT website at the Ethics (BMS/domain HSS) and adjusted to be applicable to this study. It was sent to all participants before conducting the interviews and permission was applied by the ethics committee.

In the introduction of the interview were explained the goal, the relevance, and duration of the interview. The principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly complied with throughout the research. The participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequences. None of the participants has withdrawn from the study. To ensure anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were used. The transcripts were sent back to the participants with the aim to assure their story is correctly displayed. All participants agreed with the transcript, so no changes were made. The interviews were recorded via Teams or a recorder via mobile phone. The recordings and transcripts were securely stored and after the research all these files will be removed.

3.2. DATA ANALYSIS

Word was used to transcribe the interviews, whereafter the transcripts were transferred into ATLAS.TI to be coded. Transcribing helped to facilitate data immersion and familiarisation. The transcripts were analysed to identify meaningful phrases of text, which were subsequently coded using open coding techniques. The codes were compared and grouped into preliminary categories, and connections between categories were explored to develop overarching themes. Open coding was chosen to have the least control and to stay close to the interviews (Gioia et al., 2012). This thematic analysis is a method where is looked for patterns and clusters of meanings, which are interpreted and reported (Ritchie et al., 2012). In addition, it helps to interpret the data to generate new insights and it offers rich and detailed information. This method of analysis fits this research because it provides the opportunity to stay close to the experiences, feelings, and perceptions of interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This led to a structured overview of the data.

4. FINDINGS

The findings are derived from the interviews and quotes are used to strengthen these outcomes of my study. The respondent's (strategic decision-makers) experiences and perceptions are fundamental in the

findings and concern their perspective towards paradoxical tensions, triggers that make these tensions salient and the response strategies used by OLPs. The perceived and experienced tensions discussed in this chapter do mainly exist for platforms in matching, coordinating, and monitoring workers wherein the interests and needs of end users are crucial. Firstly, the tension between supply and demand of labour and its paradoxical nature will be discussed, followed by the paradoxical tension between value creation and value capture. Then, the paradoxical tension between autonomy and control is discussed. Lastly, the factors that trigger the tensions to move from a latent state into a salient state are explained. Additionally, the response strategies towards the salient paradoxical tensions are lined out. It is explained how OLPs deal with these tensions.

4.1.   SUPPLY VERSUS DEMAND

The first tension to be discussed is between supply and demand of labour. This section will explain the paradoxical nature of supply and demand described by the interviewed strategic decisions-makers, which means that both sides are experienced as contradictory, exist simultaneously, are interrelated, and persist over time. The tension shows itself in the creation of sufficient supply and demand of labour. Respondents say that if there is not enough demand, workers will be unhappy and leave the platform. Vice versa, if there is not enough supply, requesters will be unhappy and leave. This means that supply and demand are contradictory and interrelated. Therefore, both sides of end users must be balanced because insufficient supply and/or demand threatens survival of the platform. However, it is experienced and perceived as a big challenge by strategic decision-makers to ensure that there is always a match to keep both sides satisfied.

(1) "Suppose on the demand side you have only two parties looking for workers and you have a whole mass of workers. Then you have way too much supply and the chance of anyone finding a job is low. So, a lot of people miss out on work, get disappointed, leave, and don't come back. (…) The other way round, you can have too much demand and not enough supply. Then you have a tight labour market. They have no reply or only one reply, and then you don't really have a choice. Then the demand side is not happy. So, the trick is to grow that together simultaneously. And yes, the biggest challenge is to make sure that there is always a match." (Strategist, Design platform)

Quote 1 also shows that growing supply and demand of labour simultaneously is important and challenging. In quote 2 the founder says that the tension persists over time and must be balanced. The contradictory and interrelated nature is perceived by respondents in the fact that both workers and requesters must have their needs and interests satisfied, otherwise they leave the platform. This satisfaction of end users can be described as created value, which respondents name as important and

which influences supply and demand of labour. This also resonating with the network effects that platforms strive for.

(2) "I think it's a never-ending story. It has always been one of the main metrics we were steering on. That was membership growth from both sides. The growth in the number of bookings. (...) It must work for both sides. If it only works for the requester, it won't work for the worker and vice versa. (...) Yes, we have a lot of interests on both sides. For example, if we don't have these workers, if they don't like it, then you don't have an offer. And if they're having a good time but it's not benefiting the requesters, then they won't apply, and you won't have any demand. So, it's quite a balance." (Founder, Care platform)

Platforms must ensure that there is always a match for survival. Therefore, creating network effects is crucial to grow supply and demand of labour and to match efficiently as mentioned by the strategist in quote 3.

(3) "Yes, that's, again, about scalability, about network effects. (...) So that's the strength of the platform, if you have a lot of people on the supply and demand side then that match will happen. But if there are not many, then it's not going to happen." (Strategist, Care platform)

According to these quotes platform leaders experience that supply and demand of labour are contradictory, interrelated, exist simultaneously, and the tension between them persists over time. Therefore, the tension between labour supply and demand can be perceived as paradoxical in nature by strategic decision-makers. Furthermore, the entanglement of value creation and labour supply and demand is clearly perceived by strategic decision-makers of OLPs.

4.2.   VALUE CREATION VERSUS VALUE CAPTURE

Respondents experience and perceive the tension between value creation and value capture in the earning model, growth, and costs of the platform. Firstly, OLPs can use different earning models. Mentioned in the interviews are a subscription model, payment per hour or booking, and a bidding model. With the subscription model, requesters pay a recurring fee to make use of the platform's services. The platform earns via the payment per booking as requesters pay a fee for each booking they make. From the hourly payment, the platform generates its revenue by taking a percentage or absolute share of the requester's payment. With the bidding system, requesters pay a price to publish the gig on the platform and workers can start bidding to apply for the gig. Platforms consider what kind of earning model fits best. Note that in quote 4, the founder considers the differences in value capture between the hourly pay model and the subscription model.

(4) "So, if you go towards a subscription model, where you give [requesters] access to freelancers via the platform for a fixed amount per month. You don't make money on the number of hours. (...) At least you remove the incentive for the platform to get those freelancers to work as many hours as possible. (...) Because an hourly model is lucrative and with a subscription model you have to connect a lot of requesters who are willing to pay, if you want to be able to balance that business case." (Founder, All-round #2 platform)

For a platform that uses the subscription model, it is key to increase the demand side to capture value. To increase the demand side, requesters must be willing to pay for the membership, which means there must be user value (value creation). Part of value creation for requesters is sufficient supply. After value is created, demand will increase, subsequently value can be captured. This shows the interrelatedness between value creation and capture. Moreover, this shows that paradoxes are entangled and can even trigger each other: value creation brings along changes in supply and demand that again affects value capture. Furthermore, quote 4 shows that capturing value by applying the hourly pay model is generated by increasing work hours of workers. These platforms therefore must create value with the aim of increasing supply of labour in both the number of workers and working hours to be able to capture value. Both the subscription and the hourly pay model show that value must be created before value can be captured by the platform. Based on the quote, it can be assumed that the OLP must continuously ensure value creation in the willingness of workers and requesters to use the platform and work/pay for the services to be able to keep capturing value and balance the business case for survival.

According to respondents, the early years of platforms are costly with heavy investments in technology and automation of processes. The focus is on growth (value creation) rather than profitability (value capture).

(5) "I think a lot of platforms say for the first few years ´we don't need to make a profit´. Most platforms, they see it as a long-term investment where they say, ´okay those first few years, first two three years invest, make a loss even maybe. And then to break even within two or three years´." (Director, Design platform)

The director tells that by focussing on value creation, by doing investments, the platform is unable to capture value, thus being unprofitable. It shows the interrelatedness, because by focussing on maximising value creation, the platform cannot make a profit. It also shows its simultaneousness, because after some years the created value will bring its fruits and the OLP can shift more towards capturing value, balancing between creating and capturing value.

Quote 6 clearly expresses the interrelatedness, simultaneousness, and persistence of the tension between value creation and value capture. To increase value capture, platforms can decide to cut costs by downsizing the platform. On the short-term the platform will succeed in higher profit, however, on the long-term this can have negative consequences for survival of the platform.

(6) "But ultimately that [cutting costs] comes at the expense of your sustainability in the future. So, suppose we have a lot of developers. You need those developers, not only to build new features, but also to maintain the platform. But if you choose not to do maintenance, you can do that, you won't have maintenance costs for a while. But eventually you will have to do that maintenance anyway. So, you can become perfectly profitable in the short term. The question is whether you are then building the right foundation to be a profitable company in the long term." (Founder, All-round #3 platform)

By cutting costs, the platform increases value capture in the long term. An OLP that focuses only on capturing value will lose sight of value creation. Therefore, simultaneously, value creation drops due to a lack of maintenance and development of the platform. On the long term, the focus on value capture and drop in value creation will result in the platform being unable to make profit.

In summary, the tension between value creation and capture shows itself in the earning model, growth, and costs of the platform. It can be considered paradoxical of nature because value creation and capture are interrelated, exist simultaneously, and persist over time. The interrelatedness can be explained as the following. By only focussing on value capture and leaving value creation out of sight this negatively affects labour supply and demand (knotted tensions), and maintenance of the platform; while, only focussing on value creation makes the platform unable to be profitable. Both threatens the survival of the platform. Accordingly, value creation and capture exist simultaneously, and it can be said that platforms must find balance to sustain and therefore the tension persists over time.

4.3. AUTONOMY VERSUS CONTROL

The tension between autonomy and control is experienced and perceived by strategic decision-makers (respondents) in providing the service, efficiency in matching, and the intermediary role of the platform. In providing quality of the service, it is important for platforms to have control over workers. In quote 7, the founder talks about balancing the needs and interests of workers and requesters. To maintain end users on the platform, it constantly needs to balance between workers' freedom and providing quality of the service for requesters, also for sustainability of the platform. To provide services for requesters, platforms can apply various practices to control workers and manage the online marketplace. The practices encountered during my interviews are discussed in the section on 'preserving the freelance status and platform role'. While on the other hand the platform should consider workers preferences for flexibility and freedom. Moreover, OLPs need to consider laws and regulations and the freelance status of workers that platforms need to behave according to.

(7) "So that's why we do a few things, because otherwise the platform becomes a completely unmanageable, unguided projectile. Because a requester books and expects delivery of the service. If you share a booking with five potential workers and nobody responds, and you share another five and again nobody responds. Then you stop using the service. So, we must strike a balance of leaving everything as free as possible, but still being able to provide a service. (…) We have been there from the beginning, and I think that is one of the reasons why we have come so far and are still here. [Because] Often a platform is built either from the point of view of the requester or the worker. (…) And we constantly try to keep the balance in everything we do. Because certain things are not good for the worker but are good for the requester. And if I only look at the requester, I would be restricting those workers. But workers don't want

that, they want freedom, to decide when they work, things like that, what they earn. (...) So I try to protect those interests, but also the interests of the judges, being an employer and all that. (...) It must work for both sides. If it only works for the requester, it won't work for the worker and vice versa." (Founder, Care platform)

In addition to this quote, respondents say that flexibility and freedom are one of the reasons why workers want to work for a platform. This challenges platforms as it results in uncertainty whether workers will fulfil the gigs offered. Workers have freedom to choose when and how to work and what they earn. While requesters want flexibility for themselves, so as an organisation they can adapt better and as an individual they have easy access to services to fulfil demand. However, in contrast, requesters also want a certain level of dependency and stability where they can trust that the service will be provided when demanded. Requesters want their demand to be fulfilled as soon as possible once they ask for a service. For platforms, this results in a challenge in the tension between autonomy and control. In addition, it can be explained as a knotted tension with supply and demand of labour, and it affects value creation for end users. On the one hand, controlling workers should thus lead to stability in provided services (value for requesters), meaning that platforms aim to ensure labour supply. On the other hand, workers value their autonomy in when, where and how to work (value for workers) and for this to be achieved, there must be sufficient demand. Thus, platforms need to be aware of the balancing act between autonomy and control that affects labour supply and demand, and value creation and thus value capture.

The importance of autonomy of and control over workers is emphasised in quote 8 by the director. Control is necessary to deliver the service. Autonomy is necessary because of the freelance status of workers, which is also dictated by the law.

(8) "Workers have to deliver for those requesters. Because the requester only comes back if that worker does his job well and if he is there. That is also important, and the platform also steers on that and has built in all kinds of mechanisms to ensure that he [worker] is there. And if he can't come, he can arrange a replacement himself, choose someone, pick someone from a pool. This is also to some extent because the law is such that you must be able to do that. Otherwise, they won't see it as freelance work." (Director, Design platform)

In quote 9, the founder talks about the ability of platforms to become *more efficient in matching* together supply and demand by exercising more control over workers and how gigs are obtained. This shows that autonomy and control are closely entangled with the tension between labour supply and demand. An OLP can use an algorithm that decides which gigs are or are not shown to a certain worker, based on the probability that the worker would accept the gig. The founder says that too high control is expected to lead to efficiency in matching, however, it is also expected not to be beneficial in the long term. That means autonomy and control must be balanced.

(9) "There is a coming together of workers and requesters who decide for themselves that they want to work together. You could become more steering as a platform. (…) But in this way, you are slowly slipping into a role as a platform where you have a lot of influence on how work is obtained, because you no longer have the freedom to see all the jobs. We never thought about it, but yes, everyone can understand that such steps probably make the matching of supply and demand of labour a lot more efficient and easier. But then we are heading in the wrong direction and in the end we will not add any value to the labour market in the long run." (Founder, All-round #2 platform)

The tension of autonomy and control also arises because of *the role of the platform*. Due to the freelance status, the laws and regulations dictate that platforms should keep their intermediary role and not take on the role of employer. Therefore, platforms must consider the practices they apply to control workers and be cautious to not violate the freelance status and legislations.

(10) "That is also quite big [freedom in matching], and that is also because we are not allowed to exclude people. So, we are looking closely at the legislation to see how much control we can have. And that is limited, because you have to leave it largely to the market, so if you intervene too much, it goes back to being an employer." (Strategist, Care platform)

In quote 11, the director says that multiple practices can lead to high control of platforms which is not allowed by legislation. Therefore, respondents experience a constant balancing act between control practices and worker autonomy to avoid conflict with laws and regulations.

(11) "This does bring you to the intersection of what do you do, what don't you do? And we still find it tricky. (…) I think we also must look very critically every time. And in the practice itself, it is never that bad, but all the practices in a row, then suddenly it can be bad, legally speaking." (Director, All-round #4 platform)

Based on previous quotes about and explanations for the tension that strategic decision-makers experience and perceive between autonomy and control, it can be said that they are interrelated and exist simultaneously. The platform must deal with this tension considering the needs and interests of workers, requesters, and legislation. It is also mentioned by some respondents that autonomy and control continuously need to be balanced in order to provide the service, maintain the freelance status, and act according to legislation. This shows that the tension persists over time. Furthermore, the paradoxical tension between autonomy and control is perceived by strategic decision-makers as entangled with the paradoxical tension between labour supply versus demand and value creation versus value capture.

4.4.   TRIGGERS & RESPONSE STRATEGIES

External or internal factors can turn latent tensions into salient tensions, to which platforms respond. Based on the interviews, triggering factors are laws and regulations, the labour market dynamics, the type of requester, and the type of tasks/gigs. In the following sections, each trigger is explained using this four-step structure: 1) the triggers that platforms encounter, 2) the tensions that are affected by the trigger

and are turned into a salient state, 3) the response strategy on how platforms deal with these salient tensions, and 4) how the response strategy affects the tensions.

4.4.1. LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Platform work is confronted with ever changing laws and regulations and a dynamic labour market. The following sections focus on challenges in legislation experienced and perceived by the strategic decision-makers of the interviewed platforms. The challenge of a dynamic labour market is also discussed. Firstly, uncertainties and changes in laws and regulations trigger latent tensions into a salient state within the platform, provoking the platform to act. Secondly, the labour market dynamics play a role in triggering tensions the platforms experience. The response strategy of the OLP creates a new tension, which is triggered salient by regulations. This leads to another response strategy. Lastly, challenging for the platform is aligning its practices with the freelance status of workers and the platform role. The triggered tensions and the platform response strategies are explained.

4.4.1.1. LEGAL UNCERTAINTIES

In all the interviews it is mentioned that laws and regulations are a factor triggering tensions and requiring the OLP to deal with the tensions. Legislation triggers tensions differently. Firstly, while the understanding of platform work is growing, legislation remains largely unclear. Although, the past years, jurisprudence in platform work has increased and developments regarding laws and regulations are happening faster than before. This leads OLPs to find it challenging to act in accordance with laws and regulations and their rapid development. Platforms take risks in the response strategies they adopt, and new jurisdictions lead platforms to adjust their response strategies. Also challenging is that OLPs need to make decisions with little information and so they do not know whether they act according to the law or not. The founder of the Care platform says the following.

(12) "We make decisions with little information. (...) Then you walk on a tightrope of 'maybe it's allowed, maybe it's not'. Sometimes you just must take a risk in that. (...) There was a period when we were more pious than the Pope. And then we thought 'if in doubt, don't do it, we'll go the other way'. We also went through another period when we thought 'if in doubt, just go ahead and wait and see'." (Founder, Care platform)

This quote shows that a strategic decision-maker can experience uncertainty about whether the platform's organisation and its practices are accepted by the law. As a result, this uncertainty leaves OLPs taking risks and making decisions despite limited information. In dealing with the uncertainty, platforms may alternate between more conservative or cautious approaches, refraining from certain actions, and more assertive approaches by taking risks and adapting along the way.

Secondly, delays in jurisdiction and a resigning Cabinet are also mentioned as factors contributing to unclear laws and regulations and making the organisation of the platform challenging. These factors trigger tensions and lead to a response from the platform. The director said the following about organising the platform.

(13) "Those steps to get to a product [organising the platform] that makes a profit, I can only do that when there is clarity. (...) That is our success factor, that we say ´we make everything transparent, plain, clear, and tangible'. And with that it complies or you [workers] comply if you abide by the rules and so you can work freely with each other. That's our market promise. And it is annoying if there is still no clarity on what then false self-employment is." (Director, All-round #4 platform)

Here, the director talks about the tension between autonomy and control when he talks about 'false self-employment'. The platform wants to organise itself by controlling workers to make it function between workers and requesters when he says, 'abide by the rules'. Additionally, it wants to uphold autonomy of workers because of the freelance status when he says, 'work freely with each other'. However, unclarity of legislation about the freelance status leaves the OLP in uncertainty about the degree of control it may have over workers, resulting in a constant tension in autonomy and control. Moreover, delaying laws and regulations leads to platforms experiencing a tension between value creation and value capture according to the same respondent.

(14) "You develop technology, there is a cost for that. It is a fundamental cost which becomes outdated quickly. If you are in technology, platforms, you build something, that costs you a lot of money and you must recoup that in a short time. (...) So the longer you must wait for laws and regulations, there is your risk. So, the longer a change is delayed, the risk you run is that you have not been able to recoup your investment and need to invest again." (Director, All-round #4 platform)

Developing new technologies leads to value creation. However, the platform needs to invest first. Investing costs money and therefore lowers the value capture for the OLP. In addition, if changes in legislation are delayed, it creates uncertainty for the OLP in using the technology and so it can lead to OLPs taking a more cautious approach in how technology can be used. Therefore, the risk for the platform is that it cannot recoup the investment or reach the full potential of the technology. This trigger of legislation leads to platforms experiencing a tension in value creation and value capture. How OLPs deal with this is unclear from the interviews, therefore the following scenarios are based on assumptions derived from quote 12 and 14. Involving quote 12 to discuss how platforms deal with this tension, it can be assumed that platforms have different response strategies. As a first scenario, in the case of quote 14, the platform could use the technology to its full potential. Value will be created with the aim of capturing value. If legislation turns out favourable, the platform can capture value. However, if legislation turns out negatively, both value creation and value capture are undermined. In the second scenario, the platform can use the technology to the extent allowed by the law. The question, however, is to what extent value

is created if the technology is not used to its full potential. There is also a risk that the investment will not be recouped, leading to the decision whether to reinvest. Value creation and value capture cannot be maximised. As a third scenario, the platform can even decide not to invest in a new technology to avoid dealing with the tension between value creation and value capture. Consequently, it can be expected that the platform does not create and capture value, which can be detrimental to the platform.

Thirdly, changes in legislation can trigger tensions in the platform from latent to salient. Mentioned by the founder of All-round #3 platform is the DAC7, a new European directive that requires workers to provide information to the platform, such as a citizen service number and other personal information. This directive demands workers' information, which makes it harder for workers to access the platform resulting in reduced numbers of new workers joining the platform. The next is said about following the directive.

(15) "You will see a drop in your conversion from people who are not yet a worker to people who are going to be a worker. A lot more people are not going to join. Yes, you will just have to do it. So just make it as pleasant and clear as possible. But, in the end it is often a dilemma of whether you want to do it according to the law or not. Well, then we are a neater party who just do it according to that law." (Founder, All-round #3 platform)

Here, the triggered tension is autonomy versus control. The directive requires platforms to exercise more control because they need workers' information. Because of reduced autonomy, access to the platform is harder for workers. A drop in supply growth is expected. It shows the entanglement of the tensions autonomy versus control and supply versus demand of labour. The founder says that the platform will follow the directive. As a response strategy, the process will be organised as simple as possible for workers to keep control low and thereby limit the drop in supply growth. In doing so, the OLP recreates balance between autonomy and control while complying with the directive.

To conclude, unclarity, delay and changes in laws and regulations are factors triggering tensions in platforms. These triggered tensions can be autonomy versus control, and value creation versus value capture. Platforms may alternate between taking a more cautious approach in dealing with tensions that are triggered by laws and regulations, and a more assertive approach while adapting along the way.

4.4.1.2. LABOUR MARKET DYNAMICS WITHIN REGULATORY BOUNDARIES

Changes in the labour market can turn latent tensions within platforms into salient tensions. The founder of All-round #2 platform mentions that an agreement with the Tax Authority defines that freelance work means that workers work for at least three different requesters annually and that the worker can work a maximum of 660 hours per requester. However, the growth of platform work has led to workers being able to bypass these rules by working for the same requester through different platforms, which violates

the freelance status. According to the founder, this regulation needs to be reviewed. The consequences are described as the following.

(16) "So, are you then helped, are we serving society, the company and the worker? Yes, the latter two in the short term, because they have found each other, and they can do more work. But then when the tax authorities show up at your doorstep and say, 'Gerda, you only worked for one requester. You'll get a fine.' Then you haven't helped each other, I think. So now you could ask, is that rule still up to date or should we do something with multiple platforms, or should we adjust the rule a bit? We are thinking about that. But that's more in nuancing than adjusting essential and crucial things." (Founder, All-round #2 platform)

From the platform perspective this bypass results in multiple tensions turning salient. Firstly, the tension between autonomy and control. The OLP must safeguard workers' autonomy and allow workers to freely work with multiple requesters. While at the same time platforms must ensure workers to comply with laws and regulations and their freelance status. However, when workers bypass this regulation, they endanger their freelance status, requiring both platforms and regulators to consider new approaches to ensure workers act according to freelancing. Secondly, a tension between supply and demand of labour can be experienced, which can be challenging for the platform itself. Workers who do not comply with the regulation are less available since they will work via another platform for the same requester. This disbalances supply and demand of labour and can negatively affect the platform growth and generating network effects, and the ability to effectively serve the needs of requesters. Thirdly, while workers and requesters may desire to work together for more than 660 hours, regulations restrict them from doing so because of the freelance status. In this case the created value for end users is in 660 hours. Consequently, the platform cannot maximise value capture because it can only capture value from the collaboration that occurs within the 660 hours boundary of the regulation, because the worker can work via another platform for the same requester another 660 hours. This means that the platform is potentially missing value capture beyond the 660-hour limit. In this case it is important for the OLP to review the rules to align with the new dynamics in platform work, allowing for more flexibility in value creation and value capture for workers, requesters, and the platform itself. To conclude, the ever-evolving labour market in platform work challenges platforms to rebalance tensions.

As a freelancer, workers can set their own prices for the service they offer. However, this can be challenging for platforms, as workers charging too high prices cause requesters to be less willing to pay for the service and will leave the platform. This was brought up strongly in the interview with the founder of the Care platform, while in the other interviews it was not mentioned as a tension by the respondents.

(17) "A worker is too expensive and then requesters find us partly too expensive. They find especially the worker too expensive, but that reflects on us. And the challenge is to somehow get those hourly rates stabilised and at a slightly lower level." (Founder, Care platform)

The founder told that in the early years, the Care platform controlled the price workers could charge by setting a cap. Only after one year the worker could set his own price. The platform also showed prices charged by other workers to give a benchmark. However, this tension between autonomy and control was triggered by jurisdictions. OLPs were prohibited from using these kinds of practices to control workers' hourly rates, and the Care platform responded by deciding to stop using the practices. Workers, who now have full autonomy in setting prices, started charging higher prices, resulting in a drop in the number of requesters booking the service. Subsequently, workers became unhappy because they were not booked. By increasing autonomy, the strategic decision-maker experienced a strong effect on the tension between labour supply and demand. At the same time this affected the created value. As a response strategy to restore balance, the OLP now provides workers with information on how to get booked more often, with things like hourly rate, a photo, clear description, etc. being important. In doing so, the platform indirectly applies control by making workers aware about pricing, but still leave their full autonomy. Consequently, due to entanglement of the tensions, this led to a more balanced labour supply and demand and increased value creation.

The director of the Design platform says that platforms can apply an earning model based on the lowest bidder. In the case of this platform, the trigger was in autonomy versus control when the labour market had an abundance of labour supply. So, workers took gigs for such low prices that the platform had to intervene in the situation.

(18) "You set up a gig and the lowest bidder, he gets the job. But at one point, the bids were so low that we said, 'that's not possible'. So, we banned those people from the platform. And then the AFM came and said, that's not allowed, because if someone wants to do it for that price, you must allow it. Because then you're influencing the market." (Director, Design platform)

The response strategy started in trying to have more control in the bidding system. The OLP banned workers, and this influenced the online labour market. Workers went from full autonomy to a high degree of control by the platform in setting prices. Banning workers from the platform is not allowed by legislation. In addition, the law dictates that platform workers are freelancers who set their own prices. Therefore, the legislation retriggered the tension between autonomy and control. The OLP cannot exercise this strong control over workers. This OLP responded by changing its earning model and so the bidding system was removed to achieve a more balanced relationship between autonomy and control.

4.4.1.3.   PRESERVING THE FREELANCE STATUS AND PLATFORM ROLE

To guarantee providing services to requesters, platforms want to control workers. Derived from the interviews, OLPs apply practices such as notifications, algorithms, ratings and reviews, interviews, insurances, screening, cancellation agreements, complaint policies, and acceptance metrics to exercise

control over workers. However, due to the freelance status, these kind of control mechanisms conflict with workers autonomy. If OLPs adopt multiple practices, they compromise the freelance status, risking being seen by the law as an employer rather than a platform. Hence, the main trigger for platforms to carefully apply practices is the freelance status of workers, which must be complied with according to laws and regulations. In that sense, legislation strongly dictates how platforms can organise themselves. In the following quote the director talks about adopting multiple practices that would risk the OLP taking on the employer role.

(19) "But what you notice in certain jurisprudence. If you juxtapose many elements in a chain, then you also create a certain suggestion. (...) I think we also must look very critically every time. And it's never that bad in the element itself, but all elements in a row, yes then suddenly it can be bad, legally speaking." (Director, All-round #4 platform)

So, legislation triggers the tension between autonomy and control into a salient state. The respondent says that the platform constantly seeks to rebalance autonomy and control. A critical aspect of the freelance status is that free substitution is imposed by law. Strategic decision-makers experience this as challenging because it leads to inefficiency in matching as the founder says in quote 20. This means that the freelance status has impact on supply and demand of labour. Importantly, respondents have different perceptions and experiences of free substitution.

(20) "If we had wanted to make that even more efficient and thus be even more successful, in the short term, we would have let go of that free replacement." (Founder, All-round #2 platform)

Besides inefficiency, the director of the Design platform says requesters only return if the service is delivered and of quality.

(21) "They have to deliver for those requesters. The requester will only come back if the worker does a good job and is present. (…) And if he [worker] doesn't make it, he arranges a substitute himself, choose someone, picks someone from a pool, etc. To some extent it is also because the law is such that you must be able to do that. Otherwise, they don't see it as freelance work." (Director, Design platform)

To ensure delivery of the service, platforms have rules for cancelling. All interviewed platforms, except the Care platform, apply free substitution for workers. In these platforms it is necessary for requesters that the worker has the right skills to fulfil the gig. Although requesters on the Care platform also want skilled workers, it is mainly the reliability of workers they want. With free substitution, a reliable worker is difficult to identify because it depends on behaviour, while skilled workers are easier identified because it is based on qualifications and experiences.

(22) "They can always pass the gig on to a colleague. So, they all have the right to substitute, they can do that. Of course, these are people who also have to be qualified for that, that is the promise we make to our customers." (Founder, All-round #3 platform)

First, the tensions that arise. The tension between autonomy and control can be found in the trigger the laws prescribing the freelance status. It can be challenging for platforms to keep autonomy high by

guaranteeing workers their freelance status, including free substitution, while at the same time wanting to ensure delivery of services, quality, and efficient matching through control. OLPs must balance autonomy and control while navigating legislations, worker autonomy, and its own and requesters' needs and interests. The tension resonates in value creation versus value capture. Platforms strive to create value by providing efficient matching and ensuring delivery and quality of the service. Value is created when requesters are satisfied with the delivered services, only then they will return. For workers the created value is in the freelance status, their autonomy, like free substitution. In balancing the needs and interests of end users, value is created. Once value has been created, the platform can shift its focus to value capture. The last tension, labour supply versus labour demand, occurs in efficient matching and satisfied requesters. In efficient matching the platform aims to ensure a constant supply of workers to fulfil demand of requesters, therefore it must take control. However, this is challenging because the platform must follow the freelance status and allow for example free substitution. Satisfying requesters is important for the platform to maintain demand of labour.

Respondents mention that as a response strategy to balance these tensions most platforms have a cancellation period for workers. If a worker cancels before the cancel deadline, the gig returns on the platform and matching starts over. If a worker cancels too shortly before the delivery of the gig, the worker himself must arrange a substitute. This can be via the platform or outside of the platform. Cancellation deadlines can vary, with respondents mentioning four days' notice and others two.

A different approach towards cancellations is applied by the Care platform. Workers can cancel the gig and as a consequence the cancellations are tracked and made visible. Based on the information provided by this cancel metrics, requesters can decide which worker to choose. In this way, the platform exercises control over workers. Providing reliable workers is the Care platforms' value proposition and therefore, with these metrics, it aims to incentivise workers not to cancel gigs and so secure its value proposition. However, the founder says the following about acting on the metrics.

(23) "But we can't hit very hard with these metrics. If we start hitting too hard with these metrics, we might get a wrong name, and a wrong name means less supply." (Founder, Care platform)
This quote shows that the platform risks losing workers if it uses the metric to actively control workers. Therefore, too high control can have a negative impact on supply of labour for the Care platform. While on the other hand, with high control the value proposition can be realised, and value is created for requesters because workers are reliable in fulfilling gigs. Moreover, as mentioned before, higher control on workers ensures efficiency in matching and the quality and delivery of the service for requesters. The created value leads to requesters returning to the platform. The response strategy of the Care platform towards workers cancelling gigs is to create a metric that reflects cancel behaviour of workers. In that

sense it does control workers, but to maintain workers autonomy, the platform does not act upon the outcomes of the metric. In doing so, autonomy and control are balanced. Moreover, the entanglement of the different tensions leads the OLP to simultaneously try to balance value creation and value capture, and supply and demand of labour.

As mentioned previously, OLPs do not want to be considered an employer by law, which can be challenging in applying practices. The upcoming discussion focuses on platforms adopting the following practices: conducting interviews with workers, applying ratings and reviews, and offering insurances. Again, laws and regulations trigger tensions in platforms. In quote 24, the founder mentions that the platform uses a questionnaire as a feedback system, because it gives valuable information for all stakeholders about the performed work. In case of negative feedback, the platform will have an interview with the worker. In doing so, the platform has more control over workers.

(24) 'Requesters often get a customer satisfaction questionnaire following the visit. And if that's not good then you [worker] have a conversation with us. It's in everyone's interest that it goes well." (Founder, All-round #3 platform)

The director of All-round #4 platform, in quote 25, has a different view on doing interviews with workers, ratings and reviews. According to the director, ratings and reviews allegedly are selecting mechanisms, according to the law, this belongs to employment. Additionally, interviews are typical indicators of being an employer. This platform wants to avoid being seen as an employer by the law and therefore does not apply practices such as interviews, ratings, and reviews.

(25) "What we do after matching is organise the work. There we strongly follow legislation. And there are many elements in that. So, you often saw that the platform was rating on freelancers. And we said 'we think that's for an employer, who does the performance and assessment interview. That does not belong here.' (...) For the time being we stayed away from that because we found it risky. But that's more from a legal perspective than a consideration from ourselves." (Director, All-round #4 platform)

Respondents have different opinions about ratings and reviews in terms of whether to implement them and, if so, how to use them. According to the director of All-round #1 platform the ratings and reviews made end users nervous and insecure, it prevented them from starting to work via the platform. Therefore, it was decided to not work with a feedback system.

(26) "We created that [feedback system] first and then later turned it off, purposely put it aside because it made it too nervous for people to participate in this. (...) It just provided a barrier for individuals and for employers to participate, 'wait a minute, what is going to happen with that data?' There were just a lot of questions about it and those questions hindered getting started." (Director, All-round #1 platform)

Three other respondents say that ratings and reviews can be helpful in increasing reliability of workers. Both the Care platform respondents and the founder of the Design platform talk about this.

(27) "I'm also going to facilitate helping you to make the right choice of those candidates. So, I'm going to do something with ratings or other things. (...) But platforms, for example, also very much relieve

the requester of the question: 'is this worker reliable? Does he have good reviews?' In that, a platform also plays a role in reputation management." (Director, Design platform)

Based on the interviews with the Design and Care platform, reputation management is for both the workers and requesters. Additionally, ratings and reviews make workers accountable for their own work behaviour. Therefore, it can be seen as a control mechanism for workers.

(28) "You are responsible for your own reputation. So, reviews count heavily." (Business designer, Design platform)

Platforms also consider offering insurances to workers from the idea of giving them a stronger position or from a society's perspective on supporting the welfare state. However, by providing these kinds of services for workers, platforms take on the role of employers, which is undesirable for platforms. The more the OLP does, the more it is considered an employer under the law. Since there is a high degree of unclarity in legislation, platforms are uncertain about what can and cannot be done. Therefore, platforms are reluctant to provide additional services for workers. In this way, laws and regulations trigger the tension between autonomy and control into a salient state, as practices lead to more control by the platform and reduced autonomy of workers with their freelance status being jeopardised.

(29) "If you are going to offer insurance for workers, or if you are going to offer pensions, in the current discussion you are an employer as a platform and that is what they do not want. (...) It's a bit unclear now in laws and regulations, more case law is emerging and now you see more how that [employment] actually works. And that's also where platforms are reluctant, you must have clarity first. And only then I want to start setting things up for that as well." (Director, Design platform)

The founder says in quote 30 that the platform decided to offer workers insurances. The platform considers the law but is willing to take the risk and will see how future case laws turn out.

(30) "Insurance, for example, we pay for that now. We could also have said we'll ask someone else to pay for that. But we think that's important, we think it's more part of the service and part of the experience of earning extra through the platform." (Founder, All-round #2 platform)

Contradictory, the strategic decision-makers from the Care platform consider offering extra services for workers such as insurance and for requesters screening (which will be discussed in the 'Type of requester' section). But due to legislation and case laws, the OLP is reluctant in organising and offering insurances.

(31) "We want to do the best we can for both sides, so insurances and such, screening. But because of all the verdicts, we are pushed into a position to turn the platform into a bulletin board and do nothing else. So, anything we do extra can be used against us. (…) We would like to go further with insurance. So that a worker can build up a penny, so to speak, or extra accident insurance, all sorts of things. We don't do that because it gets in the way of Uber and Deliveroo's verdicts." (Founder, Care platform)

To conclude, practices such as ratings and reviews and interviews are controlling mechanisms. Through ratings and reviews value can be created for requesters because workers are responsible for their own reputation. Secondly, more control can be exercised over workers by managing their behaviour through interviews and in doing so aligning it more with the requesters needs. Lastly, platforms consider offering insurances. Since laws and regulations do not give a clear statement, for platforms it is risky to offer

insurances, although many platforms want to offer this service. Some platforms do not offer insurances because of the uncertainty in legislation. Others choose to offer them because they consider it as part of platform work. Only, all these types of practices are at odds with platform work and freelance status because they are indicators of employment by law. OLPs want to avoid being seen as an employer and therefore must make choices and take risks in what practices they use or do not use. Risks are taken because legislation on platform work is not yet fully developed, and many issues change rapidly as will be explained in the next section.

4.4.2. TYPE OF WORK

For platforms the type of work can be triggering in how strategic decision-makers experience tensions and deal with them. In this discussion we focus on the Care platform. The worker from the Care platform provides services for a couple of hours on a specific day. In general, the worker and requester meet in-person both at the start and the end of the service. Requesters preferably have the same worker each service. Therefore, if a worker provides the service well, the requester will want to ask this worker again for the next time. In doing so, end users can get in contact directly, without involving the platform. This is called bypass. So, the first time end users match via the platform and the next time they interact directly with each other without using the platform. The founder of the Care platforms mentions in the interview that if end users cannot match directly with each other, they return to the platform to find another worker or requester to fulfil the gig. The strategist said that bypassing negatively affects network effects (labour supply and demand) and so negatively affects value creation, making value capture also challenging. This means that the tensions are entangled.

(32) "Threats are often a by-pass, where people easily interact outside the platform or that a platform has little value, because, for example, network effects don't get off the ground." (Strategist, Care platform)

Network effects do not come off the ground because end users find each other outside of the platform, resulting in slower, or worse, negative supply and demand growth. The earnings model of the Care platform was based on payment per booking. Since bypassing means that end users do not make bookings via the platform, this led to lost income. Therefore, as a response strategy, changing the earnings model helped the Care platform to overcome lost income.

(33) "Finding the right business model. What we are discovering more and more is that we are often used by the requester for finding workers. But then with the second and third service, they do it directly. So, we have now made the change and made the subscription more expensive. And so, we are less dependent on whether these bookings happen or not." (Founder, Care platform)

In this case, the Care platform consciously chose to focus more on the subscription model rather than the payment per booking. In doing so, the platform overcame lost income, due to bypassing, by charging higher subscription prices and lower prices per booking, making it less dependent on the number of bookings. For the platform, it is then less of a problem if end users interact outside the platform. Bypassing is also mentioned by the founder from All-round #2 platform, in quote 16, who also experienced this challenge.

To conclude, the tension strongly arises between value creation and value capture. As mentioned before, bypassing negatively affects value creation because there is a high chance that network effects will not get off the ground due to less workers and requesters using the platform. It negatively affects value capture because end users interact and therefore also transact outside the platform. The balance between value creation and value capture is recreated by changing the earnings model.

4.4.3. TYPE OF REQUESTERS

For the Care platform, the type of requester triggers tensions in the platform. The requesters of the Care platform are considered vulnerable, as mentioned in the methodology section. The vulnerability of requesters has triggered the platform to adopt a screening process to realise the reliability of workers. The other types of platforms do not use screening because, what can be interpreted from the interviews, the strategic decision-makers consider it as an indicator of employment by legislation, which these platforms want to avoid. Additionally, it can be interpreted that they do not use a screening method because their requesters do not belong to a vulnerable group.

The screening process is a response strategy to deal with the vulnerability of requesters. In the first years of the Care platform, screening was done in-person. It was used to exercise control over workers who join the platform. Hence, the paradoxical tension between autonomy and control was expressed in this screening mechanism. Besides the autonomy and control tension, the strategic decision-makers also experienced a tension between value creation and value capture. Value was created for requesters because with the screening method the reliability of workers is higher. Reliability of workers is also the value proposition of the Care platform. On the other hand, value capture was lower because of the time spent on in-person screening of workers, resulting in higher costs. In quote 34, the Care platform strategist mentions that screening is important, among other things, to fulfil the value proposition of workers' reliability for requesters.

(34) "We sell that to the outside, to the requester of 'hey, with us you can find a reliable worker'. And then we say that we have screened them, had an interview with them, checked them, provided references. (…) So that's our interest of what we expect from that worker." (Strategist, Care platform)

After some years, a different trigger arose. Because of growing supply, spread across the Netherlands, it was no longer tenable to screen workers in person. This trigger is the labour market dynamic. Nevertheless, the vulnerability of requesters remained and so did the value proposition of promising reliable workers. The new response strategy of the Care platform was to automate the screening method, instead of doing it in person.

(35) "You have the loyalty of that worker, whether they are active, etc. (…) We used to do interviews, for half an hour. You just noticed that the first few years' base, that they were hugely loyal to us. (…) And as we started to automate more, we became more in the background, (…), you also see that in loyalty, that you are really seen as a platform. And if you [worker] don't feel like it for once, you say you don't want to come to work or don't say anything, and you just don't show up. We didn't have that at all or hardly those first years." (Founder, Care platform)

The shift from in-person screening to an automated process had consequences for the tensions of autonomy and control, and value creation and value capture. The automated screening process resulted in higher autonomy of workers; they are less controlled by the platform. However, the autonomy of workers resulted in reduced loyalty, leading to decreased reliability, because workers are less likely to fulfil gigs or they easier cancel gigs they applied for. This means that the created value for requesters was reduced, as the value proposition of the platform is guaranteeing reliable workers. On the other hand, the Care platform has lower costs. The automated screening method saves the platform time and therefore money, increasing value capture. The founder also mentions that the automated screening process, compared to in-person, contributes to growing faster and avoiding the employer role.

(36) "They [workers] can just get on the platform easier now. It is twofold: we are growing a bit easier, on the other hand, if you do a job interview with someone then you pull the employer role towards you.' (Founder, Care platform)

The new screening method leads to easier access and thus growing the supply side. In addition, under the law, OLPs must be careful not to adopt the employer role. The new method is more in line with the freelance status by giving workers more autonomy.

To conclude, the type of requesters of the platform can trigger tensions to which the platform needs to respond. In doing so, the Care platform adopted a screening process. Leading to higher value creation and higher control over workers. After a new trigger of dynamics in the labour market occurs, the platform reacts by changing the practice leading to lower value creation and higher value capture, and increased autonomy of workers. The increased autonomy leads to workers being less likely to fulfil gigs or easier cancelling gigs they applied for. There is a strong entanglement of the three tensions occurring in this practice of the Care platform.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the tensions that are experienced and perceived as paradoxes by strategic decision-makers of online labour platforms and how they deal with these paradoxical tensions. Hence, my research question is: *'Which tensions associated with online labour platforms are perceived as paradoxes by strategic decision-makers and how do they deal with these paradoxical tensions?'*. This chapter starts by discussing theoretical implications, followed by practical implications. Findings that align with theory, give new insights, or deviate from theory are included. To finalise, the limitations of my research and recommendations for future research are described.

5.1. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical implications and contributions to broadening the understanding of platform literature and paradox theory are now discussed. The first contribution to platform literature is that the three tensions central in my research are perceived and experienced as paradoxical by strategic decision-makers. For future studies it is important to know this because Smith and Lewis (2011) state that the perceptions of actors are crucial in dealing with paradoxical tensions to become sustainable. Not understanding and recognising the paradoxical nature of tensions, hinders the ability to approach them appropriately, which can result in unintended outcomes and backlashes (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Moreover, failure to deal with paradoxical tensions can jeopardise the sustainability of a firm and foster vicious cycles, while properly managing paradoxical tensions enables a firm's sustainability on the long run (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The findings of my study show that if strategic decision-makers recognise a paradoxical tension, they are aware of the complexity in balancing the two elements of the paradox. They understand that the focus cannot be on only one of the elements since that can have detrimental effects for the platform. Therefore, for the platform literature it is important to recognise the paradoxical nature of the three tensions and how they are perceived by actors. Although only the strategic decision-makers perspective is included in my study, it would be interesting for future research to gain insights of perceptions and experiences of other actors, such as operators, technology developers, and even workers or requesters. This leads to a broader understanding of perceived tensions on different levels of OLPs.

Secondly, my study contributes to the platform literature that the three paradoxical tensions are knotted. In the literature, studies focus on supply and demand of labour (Mohlmann et al., 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2015), value creation and value capture (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023), or autonomy and control (Duggan et al., 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021). Although these studies mentioned that tensions affect each other, the three tensions have so far not been studied simultaneously in the same research. Throughout the result section the strategic decision-makers often

mention the entanglements of the tensions and how a change in one does affect another. As mentioned in the study by Cunha and Putnam (2019), knotted paradoxes can open-up or trigger each other. This also emerged in my research and the knotted paradoxes were thus confirmed. Interestingly for OLPs, my findings show strongly that platforms often experience that changes in autonomy versus control spill over into the tensions of labour supply versus demand and/or value creation versus value capture. This may be due the fact that strategic decision-makers experience a strong challenge in managing freelance status while behaving according to their platform role, thereby avoiding the employer role. Thus, the contribution to the platform literature is the recommendation that all three tensions should be included in platform studies to gain a more complete understanding of the dynamics between tensions within OLPs.

Thirdly, the contributions made to the paradox theory are the triggering factors. First, actors' cognitive conditions are crucial for recognising paradoxes and being aware of the interrelated contradiction of elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The perceptions actors have of tensions is crucial in recognising and dealing with paradoxes (Schad & Bansal, 2018). The literature states that bringing tensions from a latent into a salient state requires an environmental factor that triggers the tension, or the actor must recognise the triggered tension and perceive it as paradoxical. Saliency is temporary but can be repeated over time and triggered by different contexts or become reinforced by a certain context as mentioned by Lewis and Smith (2022). My study shows that the perceptions of strategic decision-makers with a triggering factor make a tension salient. In the paradox theory, the environmental triggers are plurality, change and scarcity (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The triggering factors found in my study are *laws and regulations, labour market dynamics, type of work*, and *type of requesters*. Now it is discussed under which environmental factor of Lewis and Smith (2011) they can be categorised and what new insights have been gained. *Laws and regulations* can be classified as an environmental factor of change. As jurisdictions lead to the development of legislation for platform work, strategic decision-makers constantly experience a tension triggered by the changes they must deal with. Also, delay can be considered as the environmental factor of change. As delay of jurisdictions or delayed adjustments in law changes the prospects of the platform in which it can operate. Uncertainty and unclarity in laws and regulations, however, can be considered as the environmental factor of scarcity. Legislation is perceived as insufficiently clear by strategic decision-makers. Additionally, there is also perceived uncertainty about what can and cannot be done. *Labour market dynamics* can be included in the environmental factor of change from Smith and Lewis (2011). Changes in the labour market trigger tensions into a salient state and strategic decision-makers perceive and experience the paradoxical tension which leads them to respond. A new contribution from my study to the paradox theory and

dynamic equilibrium model of Smith and Lewis (2011) are the following internal factors that can trigger tension salient: *type of work* and *type of requester*. These newly added internal factors prove relevant as triggers for tensions to become salient and have been added to the model in Figure 3. The type of work and type of requester are internal factors because they are inherent to the nature of the platform and the service it provides. Moreover, internal factors can be distinguished from environmental factors because they can be directly influenced or controlled by the platform itself; on the other hand, platforms are subject to environmental factors that they cannot directly control or influence. In my findings the strategic decision-makers of the Care platform occasionally experienced tensions due to these internal triggers, while platforms dealing with different types of requesters and work did not have the same experiences. This makes it necessary to add the internal factors that can trigger tensions salient as well. This finding contributes to the platform literature that suggests including the triggering factors laws and regulations, labour market dynamics, type of work, and type of requester when studying tensions in platforms.
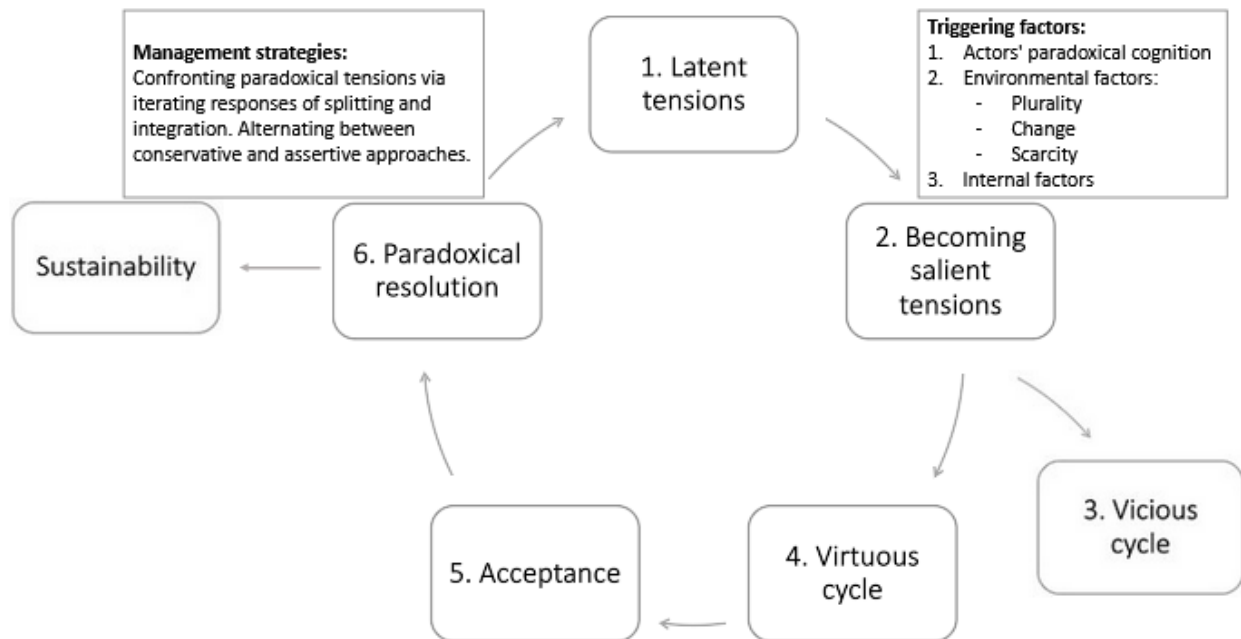

Figure 3, The expanded dynamic equilibrium model

Fourthly, my study contributes to paradox theory in response strategies of platforms. Since saliency is temporary, can be repeated over time, and triggered by different contexts or become reinforced by a certain context as mentioned by Lewis and Smith (2022), this leads to the cyclical equilibrium model of Smith and Lewis (2011). Dealing with tensions starts with recognising and accepting the tension, followed by repetitive responses of splitting and integration of solutions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) or creating a integrating a synthesising solution that deals with both elements (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). This is also

found in my study, that the strategic decision-makers perceive the tensions as paradoxical and recognise and accept the complexity of dealing with the tensions, implementing solutions of synthesising, splitting and integrating. A new insight from my study are the approaches of actors in dealing with paradoxical tensions. My study found that when dealing with tensions to rebalance, strategic decision-makers can alternate between a more cautious approach or a more assertive approach. When uncertainty in platforms circumstances was high, it responds to tensions in choosing one of the approaches. Strategic decision-makers can switch between a conservative and assertive response strategy. A conservative response strategy is more likely to lead to small changes in practices and/or are less risky decisions. While an assertive response strategy is riskier and more likely to lead to major changes in platform design. As an example, a more assertive approach of a platform was in having more control in the bidding system by banning workers who asked too low prices. Because this was not allowed by legislation, the platform removed the bidding system and adopted a new earning model, rebalancing tensions. The platform could also have adopted a more conservative approach, as another platform did in changing its earning model to balance tensions. This also leads to a more stable organisation of the platform. These insights are a useful contribution to the paradox theory since it provides a deeper layer of how actors can respond to paradoxical tensions. The alternation between the two approaches can also be considered part of the iterative response strategy.

5.2.   PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For platforms this study contributes to a broader understanding of the three tensions, specifically their knotted relationship. Also, in dealing with tensions, with this study it becomes clear that by responding and dealing with one tension, a new trigger can arise, and the platform must again deal with the same tension or another. In responding to paradoxical tensions, the cognition of a strategic decision-maker in recognising the tension and accepting it is crucial. Strategic decision-makers can alternate between a conservative or assertive response towards tensions.

In practice, this study contributes to platforms to be aware of the factors that trigger tensions within the platform, which can be triggering environmental factors or internal factors. The internal triggering factors found in my study are the type of work/gigs and type of requester. Platforms can take these internal factors into account in how strong tensions can be triggered. The more demanding one of these types is, the more likely tensions can be triggered. With demanding is meant that the internal factor has a strong foothold in the platform and strategic decision-makers are more likely to have a tension triggered because of this factor. Therefore, it should be considered that these internal factors are platform

specific and are inherent to the organisation of the platform, meaning that a platform can have a direct influence on this. While, conversely, platforms should consider that environmental factors influence the platform. Secondly, platforms should be aware of how they deal with the tensions. In taking a conservative approach, the platform takes less risks and has higher stability in its organisation. However, it can change its response strategy by shifting to an assertive approach. As a result, strategic decision-makers take more risks and changes are more likely to be big. Alternating between the approaches can help platforms to tackle and resolve tensions efficiently and effectively.

5.3. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation of this study is the subjective view of the strategic decision-makers on tensions. Tensions may be perceived and interpreted differently by actors, based on their individual perspectives, experiences, and role. In fact, actors may overlook tensions while there are tensions. Another limitation can be the respondents´ intentions and purposes to participate. A respondent may not always reveal his true intentions for participating. This makes it difficult to assess to what extent the answers of respondents are influenced by underlying purposes. A third limitation of the methodology can be that the interviews did not specifically ask about paradoxical tensions. Questions asked where not directly aimed at determining paradoxes. Whereby it is questionable whether the respondent helped clarify paradoxical tensions, as this was left entirely up to the researcher's interpretation. Finally, although the sample size had different types of platforms, giving a diverse view of platform work and their tensions, the sample size was rather small. This leads to caution in generalisability of the findings in a wider context.

An interesting approach for future research could be to study the decision-making processes in dealing with paradoxical tensions in platforms that have gone bankrupt and to understand the vicious cycles. In my study this has not been uncovered because respondents mentioned that until now, they have not been in a situation that has negatively impacted the OLP as such that the survival of the platform was threatened. This may result in gained theoretical and practical knowledge about why and how OLPs mistreat paradoxical tensions and how this leads to bankruptcy. This broadens theoretical knowledge in management and paradox theory, while practical knowledge is broadened for platforms on which pitfalls can have severe outcomes and how. Another interesting topic for future research can be to examine less commonly discussed tensions in platform literature and whether they are paradoxical in nature. As it can help to broaden the understanding of the complexities that paradoxical tensions bring to OLPs. Thirdly, to gain a better understanding of the newly found triggering internal factors and the tensions triggered, studies can examine platforms that have a similar type of requester and work.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to answer the research question: *'Which tensions associated with online labour platforms are perceived as paradoxes by strategic decision-makers and how do they deal with these paradoxical tensions?'*. The three paradoxical tensions central in this research are supply versus demand of labour, value creation versus value capture, and autonomy versus control. The three paradoxical tensions can be triggered by the factors laws and regulations, the dynamics of the labour market, the type of work, or the type of requester. These triggering factors change one or more of the tensions from a latent state into a salient state requiring platforms to respond. During their lifetime, OLPs are often challenged to rebalance tensions. The response strategies of platforms are first acceptance and then they respond by providing a solution that can be synthesising, splitting, and integrating. Additionally, platforms can apply response strategies by taking a conservative approach or assertive approach to deal with tensions. After a new balance is regained, the tensions become latent again. Although platform leaders may not be aware of the paradoxical nature of the tensions, they are aware of the challenges that they encounter in balancing tensions and the reappearance of this challenge.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1

General questions

1. What is your role within this platform?

2. What type of services does the platform offer? And to whom?

3. What are the most important goals of the platform?

    a. Which of these goals are conflicting?

    b. Why?

    c. Can you give examples of these conflicting goals?

4. In managing the platform, that is in making sure the platform works for requesters and workers, are there any contradictory requirements or alternatives that the platform needs to deal with?

    a. What is contradictory about this?

    b. Why?

    c. Can you give examples of these conflicting choices?

Matching workers and requesters

5. What is the platform's role in matching workers and requesters?

    a. What role does it not play, so what freedom do workers and requesters themselves have in this?

    b. Are there any challenges in this?

    c. If so, which ones?

    d. Can you give examples?

    e. Why is this a challenge?

6. Has this always been a challenge?

    a. Is it a recurring theme?

    b. Why (not)?

    c. What made this challenge salient?

    d. How did you deal with this challenge?

7. Are there choices you have considered regarding matching workers and requesters, but have consciously put aside?

    a. What were these choices?

    b. Why did you have to consider these choices?

c. Can you give examples of conflicting choices?

    d. What made these choices contradictory?

    e. Is this a recurring theme?

    f. Why (not)?

Workers' behaviour and platforms' interests

8. What does your platform do to ensure that workers behave in line with the interest of the platform and requester?

    a. What are these interests?

    b. How are these interests aligned?

    c. Are there any challenges in this?

    d. If so, which ones?

    e. Can you give examples of conflicting interests?

    f. Why is aligning interests a challenge?

9. Has it always been a challenge?

    a. Is it a recurring theme?

    b. Why (not)?

    c. What made this challenge salient?

    d. How did you deal with this challenge?

10. Are there choices you have considered regarding worker behaviour and platform and the interests of the platform and requester, but have consciously put aside?

    a. What were these choices?

    b. Why did you have to consider these choices?

    c. Can you give examples of conflicting choices?

    d. What made these choices contradictory?

    e. Is this a recurring theme?

    f. Why (not)?

Generating profit

11. What are you doing to ensure that the platform generates profit?

    a. Do you make profit? Why (not)?

    b. What are the main challenges in making profit?

    c.   Are there any challenges in the way you (try to) make profit?

    d.   If so, which ones? Can you give examples?

    e.   Why is it a challenge?

12. Has it always been a challenge?

    a.   Is it a recurring theme?

    b.   Why (not)?

    c.   What made this challenge salient?

    d.   How did you deal with this challenge?

13. Are there choices you have considered regarding making profit, but have consciously put aside?

    a.   What were these choices?

    b.   Why did you have to consider these choices?

    c.   Can you give examples of conflicting choices?

    d.   What made these choices contradictory?

    e.   Is this a recurring theme?

    f.   Why (not)?

Managing tensions

14. How do you manage conflicting priorities or goals?

15. What triggers the platform to choose for different priorities and goals?

16. Do you think there is a "perfect" solution for choosing between conflicting solutions, or is it always a matter of choosing the "least bad" solution?

    a.   If so, which ones? Can you give examples?

    b.   If not, why is this the case?

17. What were the results of how you dealt with conflicting solutions?

18. Is this a recurring theme?

    a.   Why (not)?

Closure

19. Do you have any comments on the topics discussed or additions to issues not covered?