

***You can go your own way***

**The construction of work identity by online, high-skill gig workers**

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## **Abstract**

The gig economy has gained attention from the public and policy makers and is a rising area of academic inquiry. This research provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of work identity construction by online, high-skill gig workers. It reveals how gig workers embrace authenticity, agency and a certain fluidity in the construction of their work identities. The results identify three dimensions through an in depth analysis of the first hand stories of online, high-skill gig workers. The analysis shows, firstly, a strong and active alignment of gig workers with their personal characteristics. Secondly, external factors which cause gig workers to take control of their work situation. Thirdly, empowerment through building communities and coping mechanisms, whilst keeping an persistent focus on the present. Despite the valuable insights, the study has some limitations, including its focus on one specific platform and one type of gig worker, at a single point in time. Suggestions for future studies include conducting taking into account a multi-country and longitudinal research design. Which also takes into account the multiple types of gig work. The findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the work identity construction of gig workers, offering insights that can optimize the design of gig work platforms.

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## 1. Introduction

“You can go your own way” – Fleetwood Mac

The gig economy has expanded in the last few years and changed the way of work. Characterized by online platforms, it caused significant economic changes. In line with previous literature, the gig economy is accordingly defined in this research as: “paid tasks carried out by independent contractors mediated by online platforms” (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., p. 540, 2020). The emergence of the gig economy reflects a longer trend of increasing contingent work, labour market flexibility, and outsourcing work to independent contractors (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of these online platforms and the impact is already visible (ILO, 2021). Of the Western European workforce, 4.3% earned at least a part of their income through online platforms in 2022 (Piasna et al., 2022).

People working in the gig economy are typically called gig workers. This paper uses the recent definition of Bellesia et al. (p.247, 2019) who define gig workers as: “workers who deliver short-term jobs on demand – i.e. gigs”. According to van Slageren et al. (2022), two types of gig jobs can be distinguished from one another, online and onsite gig jobs. Onsite gig jobs are always bound to a local place and time, such as food delivery (e.g., Uber and TaskRabbit). On the contrary, online gig jobs can be transferred completely digitally, such as programming or translating (e.g., PeoplePerHour and Upwork).

In online gig jobs, a distinction can be made between low and high-skill work. On the lower end of the spectrum, there is microwork, with tasks that are fractured into extremely small parts, like entering data or tagging images. This work typically requires few skills and a small amount of time per task. On the high end of the spectrum, the tasks require professional knowledge and decision-making. Examples include software development, design work, or translation (Webster, 2016).

Gig workers operate in a context that has implications for constructing their work identity. This construction is known as identity work and can be understood as “people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, p. 1165, 2003). Gig workers are often temporarily hired by organizations or individual clients. Therefore, they lack a stable social and physical environment. Research has generated theory on what happens when individuals lack stable situations, but gig workers cope with far more challenging conditions (Ashford et al., 2018; Bellesia et al., 2019; Caza et al., 2022).

Changes in recent decades on a technological and economic level have driven career trajectories to become less linear, as people change their jobs more often and start to do more temporary or independent work (Hollister, 2011; Stone et al., 2015). Most notably, gig workers often experience higher uncertainty, whereas the level of certainty directly intertwines with how people perceive themselves (Ashford et al., 2018; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Hence, scholars are questioning whether the facts and patterns of identity work, which have been identified for other work arrangements, are repeated in the reality of gig work. This paper intends to address how the process of work identity construction unfolds for the strongly expanding group of gig workers (Bellesia et al., 2019). Barley et al. (2017) put it distinctively by stating that for non-traditional workers, such as gig workers, the

question 'Who am I' has received limited attention in the literature. Thus, the following research question ensues:

*Research Question: How do online, high-skill gig workers construct their work identity?*

To address this question, the Dutch context offers a particularly insightful case for two reasons, the first being more evident than the latter. As this research analyzes gig workers, the country analyzed should have a considerable gig economy. While the Netherlands does not have the most substantial gig economy in Europe in absolute numbers, it is however important in relative terms (Huws et al., 2017). The second reason lies in the nature of the Dutch context. Hofstede (2011) identifies six dimensions within a country's culture, which have become a paradigm for comparing cultures. The Netherlands is chosen for this research as it has an extraordinarily high score on individualism, which captures whether people's self-image is defined in terms of the "I" or "We" (Hofstede et al., 2010). This promises to be particularly insightful as gig workers work are hired as solo self-employed freelancers, highlighting the individualistic nature potentially underlying the identity of gig workers. To shed light on the construction of work identity by Dutch gig workers, qualitative evidence has been gathered through semi-structured interviews with seven online, high-skill gig workers (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The contributions of this research are, chiefly, of societal relevance. A better understanding of how gig workers construct their work identity ensures that, regulations can be implemented more effectively to address the needs of gig workers. As George and Chattopadhyay (2005) point out, it is important to understand workers' identities, because they can influence important individual outcomes, such as psychological well-being. By understanding the process of identity work, legislators can construct regulations in such a way that they contribute to the psychological well-being of people. In addition, digital platforms can gain insights into the work identity construction of gig workers from this study, which they can use for improving their platform design and conditions (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021). This study contributes further to the literature on identity work, as it illustrates potential novel factors which determine work identity construction in gig work. By providing an in-depth exploration of how gig workers construct their work identity, scholars can continue to broaden our understanding of this process. To further embed the findings presented, this research will also explore if factors identified in the identity literature are repeated in the reality of gig work.

## 2. Literature Review

“A sense of identity is never gained nor maintained  
once and for all. Like a good conscience, it is constantly  
lost and regained” (Erikson, p.74, 1956)

The statement above illustrates the long way the concept of identity has gone. Since the research of Erikson (1956), progress has been made by scholars in what is known about identity. This section will begin with the widely recognized paper of Snow and Anderson (1987), describing how our understanding of identity developed over the years. Building upon this understanding, this section will dive further into the identity and work identity literature. Afterwards, an elaborate overview on the construction of identity will be presented (Brown, 2015). This section will close off with the current literature on the work identity construction of gig workers.

- *2.1. Identity and Work Identity*

Snow and Anderson define identity as: “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (p. 1348, 1987). It is this interplay between the person’s perception of oneself and the way he or she is perceived by others that creates their sense of self (Snow & Anderson, 1987). This interplay is, in a later stage, described as the way individuals negotiate their ‘being who they are’ in their life. Such negotiations happen at any time, in all varieties of situations, for instance, institutionalized and social settings, organizations, or social movements (Snow & McAdam, 2000; Stryker et al., 2000).

With the rise of identities, researchers have become interested in the processes of the formation, or construction, of identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Building on this, Sveningsson and Alvesson suggest that: “...identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2003, p.1165). The change towards the sense of coherence or distinctiveness is observable, which leans more towards a later understanding of the concept as described by Vorderobermeier (2014). She mentions how identity work involves the person’s perception of oneself, and how this does not have to be identical to the social identity ascribed by others.

Expanding upon the work of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), Watson made an effort to provide a more comprehensive definition, that accounts for external aspects as well. He argues that: “Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives” (2008, p. 129). Other definitions developed more recently do not differ significantly from these versions (Brown, 2015).

In work identity studies the organization mostly functions as a stage for people to construct identities in their work. Organizations use codified roles, exemplary leadership, and boundaries to shape the work identity of their workers (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). This developed work identity guides their work as it sets acceptable behavioural guidelines and a general framework for who they are in relation to their work (Petriglieri et al., 2019; Idowu & Elbanna, 2021). There are even cases in which organizations use technological tools to increase the level of commitment and influence the work identity construction (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). For this research, the definition of Miscenko and Day will be used, who state that: “work identity is the collection of

meanings attached to the self by the individual and others in a work domain. These meanings can be based on unique individual characteristics, group membership, or social roles” (p. 216, 2015).

- *2.3 Identity Construction*

The construction of work identity can be theorized in different ways. There are five literature strands which collectively form the ongoing conversation. They are categorized along the different ways people conduct identity work as well as the ways scholars study them (Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015). The question is about whether identities are: (i) chosen by, or ascribed to individuals; (ii) fluid or generally stable; (iii) coherent or fragmented; (iv) motivated by positive or negative meaning; and (v) framed or not, by authenticity (Brown, 2015).

- *2.3.1 Agency and Structure*

The debate on whether identities are chosen by individuals or whether individuals are shaped by the specific structural context in which they emerge is classified in the literature as the agency and structure debate (Brown, 2015; Van Maanen, 2010). Recently, Petriglieri et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of the agency aspect by putting forward how workers create a holding environment for themselves by defining a purpose as well as choosing certain routines and places. They use this holding environment to define and develop themselves. Van Maanen (2010) shows how US police officers aspire to have autonomy and freedom to maintain a sense of self. While Gutierrez et al. (2010) stress how members of the Catholic church split identification to partly maintain their identification with the normative aspects, while also seeking to change organizational aspects. Other studies underline how agency is part of the identity work of flight attendants or GLBT protestant ministers (Brown, 2015; Creed et al., 2010; Dahler-Larsen, 1997).

On the other hand, scholars argue that identity is ascribed to an individual. For instance, through institutional structures or cultures. Following this line of reasoning, identity work can be described as manufactured, regulated or even designed (Brown, 2015). Research has leaned towards this argument, as organizational structures prove to be fundamental in the construction of work identity. An organization provides examples, values, and meanings which can be used for the construction of work identity (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Bellesia et al., 2019). Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) additionally argue that organizational members define themselves, at least partly, in terms of what the organization is thought to represent. Additionally, organizations provide a stable physical and social environment for individuals to deal with feelings of anxiety and fear (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021)

Organizations, or social relationships, provide resources for people to sustain behaviour in a certain context (Ashford et al., 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Identity work is based upon these resources and “work-related identity uncovers different pathways through which identity construction can build social resources for individuals” (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 266). Dutton et al. (2010) further mention that people with more social resources acquire other resources, like information and trust. Resource theories also emphasize how the level of personal resources of an individual can predict their ability to cope with job demands (Hobfoll, 2011). As the structural work conditions have decreased, gig workers face more difficulties in constructing their work identities. Currently, we know very little about gig workers, including their perception of themselves in relation to their work (Idowu & Elbanna, 2021).

### ○ 2.3.2 *Stability and Fluidity*

Do identities remain relatively stable, or do they change over time? Researchers from the field of social psychology argue that individuals in organizations seek a relative stable understanding of themselves to function effectively (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Building upon this, Petriglieri argues that: "Individuals are strongly motivated to maintain and enact their identities in their current state in order to achieve a sense of stability" (2011, p. 644). Other social psychologists argue that selves, based upon a relative stable set of meanings, are generally stable and not prone to change quickly. Whereas work or familial identities are far more likely to change when contexts and preferences alter (Pratt et al., 2006). On the contrary, Watson (2008) suggests that selves and their associated identities are both more a process or a project, rather than a stable state. This perspective views a stable identity merely as something temporary, and points out how identities are always contested in social interactions (Alvesson et al., 2008).

The majority of the empirical research focused on the process of identity adaption, which suggests a stable and incremental process which requires considerable work (Brown, 2015). Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al. (2006) and Ibarra (1999) argue in this line of reasoning when they point out that identities do indeed evolve, but only to find a new optimum balance. While many scholars are hesitant to theorize identities as being fluid, there is a new recognition that identities have a continuous nature and are often unstable (Collinson, 2003; Brown, 2015).

### ○ 2.3.3 *Coherence and Fragmentation*

The third literature strand regarding the construction of work identity captures the debate about the extent to which an identity is coherent or fragmented. Most scholars mention how individuals in organizational settings describe their identity as a coherent entity, in line with certain personal characteristics. Meaning, all their identity stories form a coherent story without main contradictory aspects (Ybema et al., 2009). Individuals have continuity in their identity over time and know the connections between their different identities. Even when researchers acknowledge a certain fragmentation in the identity work, they also usually stress that individuals reduce unmatching aspects in their identity as much as possible (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

For others, identities are more prone to ambiguity and not entirely coherent. Instead of a consistent story, there is tension about how to give meaning to contradicting aspects of one's identity. After all, self-doubt and insecurity are elements of being human (Beech, 2008). Further research has pointed out how individuals are even capable of using contradictory identities in the same interaction. This has led to discussions regarding the impact of conflicts between professional and work identity (Ashforth et al., 2008). Most of the literature has moved along with the idea that identity is not one vast coherent entity, but more nuanced and with contradictory elements (Ford, 2006; Brown, 2015).

### ○ 2.3.4 *Positive and Negative Identities*

Whether identity work is entirely positive, or whether it has negative aspects, remains debatable in the fourth literature strand. The positive identity research suggests that individuals give a positive meaning to their identity work (Gecas, 1982). Here, identity work evolves around the aspects which bring out the positive side of work. Even individuals who engage in work which is regarded as demeaning to those who perform it, are not prone to mention doubt or negative aspects (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). For example, gravediggers, mention how they like to be outside in the open-air (Petrillo, 1990). Mostly, these individuals have established cognitive defence tactics, like humour, to secure a positive self-meaning (Kreiner, Ashforth, et al., 2006). The positive identities are mostly

characterized by competence and resilience. In this way, a valuable and beneficial self-view is created by the individual (Roberts & Dutton, 2009).

Alternative theories argue how the positive identity view forms a blind spot in the literature. Learmonth and Humphreys (2011) argue that work which is regarded as demeaning to those who perform it is also experienced as degrading. Whereas, according to Collinson (2003), workers who are experiencing highly competitive work need validation because of self-doubt. Researchers have argued at length that identity work consists of an ongoing precarious struggle, characterized by existential insecurities (Sartre, 1956). More recent research also suggests that while individuals do have certain coping mechanisms, they continue to have a negative image of themselves (Costas & Fleming, 2009).

#### ○ 2.3.5 *Authenticity and Identities*

Where the other strands all consisted of two sides of a spectrum, here the other side of authenticity is not 'inauthenticity'. Research which does not take authenticity as a principle builds more upon the idea that identity work is constructed ad hoc (Brown, 2015). The idea within this literature stream argues there is no essence in a person, so there are no 'true' or 'false' performances of the self. There are only performances which are more and less credible. Identities, within this perspective, are based upon discourse and not upon a 'real' identity (Butler, 2004). Therefore, scholars suggest a broader view on identity, where people do not have to align with organizationally prescribed selves (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

Others argue that people do have an authentic identity. Ybema et al. (2009) show how individuals describe themselves with an inner core. Within this view, the identity work of individuals is done by staying 'true' to their inner self (Ibarra, 1999). Considerable studies support this argument by showing how individuals believe they possess authentic and true selves. Take, for instance, Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al. (2006), who show priests who find their occupation to be partly intruding upon their inner selves, by asking too much of them. When obligations are conflicting with the authentic self too much, individuals tend to engage in identity work (Roberts, 2005).

#### ● 2.4 *State of art work identity of gig workers*

Articles on work identity in the gig economy chiefly focus on the low-skill segment (Webster, 2016). For instance, Goods et al. (2019) examine the perception of enjoyment and autonomy by Australian food-delivery workers. In which especially autonomy is illustrated as an aspect which is fundamental for the gig workers. This is resonated in the research of Josserand and Kaine (2019) who analyze personal identity narratives of low-skill onsite gig workers, namely, ride-share drivers. In their research they illustrate how ride-share drivers are attracted by the relative freedom and autonomy associated with gig work. They elaborate further on how gig workers make sense of their ambiguous occupational identity by creating coherent personal identity narratives. This second finding ties into the literature debate of coherence and fragmentation. By arguing how gig workers develop a coherent discourse that allows for the trade-offs, inherent to their occupation (Josserand & Kaine, 2019).

Petriglieri et al. (2019) also review the creation of identity narratives, while researching gig workers who are engaging in gigs with a certain level of knowledge and creativity. They argue how gig workers are confronted with a strong feeling of uncertainty when they are not able to construct a positive self-narrative. To counter this uncertainty they engage in identity work, by continuously adding small stories to create new self-narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This ongoing process aligns more with the idea that identities are relatively fluid, and the construction is an ongoing process.

Other recent research is more in line of the positive and negative identities debate. For instance, Dubal (2017) who studies self-employed, migrant taxi drivers, with many similarities to ride-share drivers. They are prone to create a positive narrative about their occupation. In which they highlight their legal status as a contractor. Whereas on the other hand, the research of Sheehan and Pittman (2019) shows how gig workers of crowdsourcing platforms feel undervalued due to the perception that their work is not regarded as important.

In sum, the literature review provides insights into the current literature on the construction of work identity, which is relevant for understanding the work identity of gig workers. Current research about the work identity of gig workers argues how gig workers are engaging in coherent self-narratives. These self-narratives are in a fluid state, in which gig workers add stories based upon available resources (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2019). The debate about positive and negative narratives uncovers the complex interplay of the feelings of the gig workers about their work (Dubal, 2017; Sheehan & Pittman, 2019). Whereas, the structure and agency debate is potentially interesting as structural work conditions have decreased, leaving gig workers to trust upon their self-reliance to cope with complexities and job demands (Ashford et al., 2018; Idowu & Elbanna, 2021). These theoretical insights lay the groundwork for the empirical chapter, where gig workers will provide firsthand stories of their self-narratives and perceptions of their work identities.

### 3. Method

This section presents the research design used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the work identity construction of online, high-skill gig workers. Given the aim to grasp the complex construction of work identity, this research adopts an inductive qualitative research design. This design enables a detailed exploration of the firsthand stories of the gig workers. The sampling approach (section 3.1.) as well as data collection and analysis (section 3.2.) are accordingly informed by an interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology.

- *3.1 Sampling Approach*

The data consists solely of online interviews with Dutch gig workers from Upwork. This online platform is the result of a merger in 2014 between Elance and oDesk. Upwork was chosen because it is one of the world's largest platforms and, therefore, has a large amount of high-skilled gig workers (Horton et al., 2017). The researcher contacted gig workers by using their contact information on Upwork and LinkedIn. Since, this resulted in no response, the researcher placed paid advertisements on the online platform. Both invitations can be found in detail in Appendix A.

An important part of qualitative research is determining the sample of interviewees. The respondents participating have been selected with non-probability, purposive sampling. Meaning that specific participants will be recruited based on pre-selected criteria (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Three inclusion criteria were used to select the respondents. Firstly, respondents needed to identify themselves as a Dutch person. The Dutch context promises to be particularly insightful because of its individualistic nature which could be an underlying factor of the identity of gig workers (Hofstede, 2011). Secondly, the respondents needed to be a translator, because this profession has one of the highest competitive levels of online labour platforms (Ferreira-Alves, 2011). This fuels the need to continuously develop language skills, which can potentially highlight the aspect of skill development. Thirdly, respondents needed to have billed 100 hours or more on the Upwork platform. The last inclusion criterion was set to make sure that the respondents had enough involvement, know-how, and experience to be sufficiently reliable sources.

For this research seven semi-structured interviews are conducted. This leaves room for participants to narrate their perspectives on work identity construction, where it provides a first structure for the analysis as well. Each interview took around 30 minutes, the interviewees were between 24 and 39 years old, and had different study backgrounds. The interviews took place in May 2023 and one interviewee reached out after the interview to provide additional information. Figure 1 shows a short overview of the, mostly, anonymized respondents.

**Figure 1**  
*Overview interviewees*

| <b>Name</b> | <b>M/F</b> | <b>Country of residence</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Study background</b> | <b>Full/parttime</b> |
|-------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| N.          | F          | Netherlands                 | 25         | Communication Science   | Fulltime             |
| T.          | F          | Turkey                      | 27         | Tourism                 | Fulltime             |
| B.          | F          | Netherlands                 | 38         | Business Administration | Parttime             |
| R.          | M          | Thailand                    | 31         | Tourism                 | Parttime             |
| S.          | M          | Netherlands                 | 29         | History                 | Parttime             |
| A.          | F          | France                      | 39         | French/Anthropology     | Fulltime             |
| Sajil       | M          | Belgium                     | 35         | Marketing               | Parttime             |

- *3.2 Data Collection and Analysis*

The interview questions have been based upon the research of Petriglieri et al. (2019). To determine how the work identity of gig workers can be placed against current literature, questions are linked to certain literature strands. To explore whether the identity construction of the gig workers had an authentic aspect, the question “why did you start to gig work?” was asked. As this can potentially reveal if the gig workers wanted to, for instance, stay true to certain aspects of themselves. By asking, “what are challenges you are facing in your work?” and “How do you cope with these challenges”. The researcher could look into the development of certain coping mechanisms and, more importantly, how they were able to construct these mechanisms. Furthermore, by asking their description of themselves as a professional the researcher could see whether the gig workers mentioned aspects which were remained relatively stable or aspects which changed over the course of multiple gigs. Indicating if they have an identity in a rather stable, or more fluid state. The overview of the entire interview guide can be found in Appendix B. Each respondent filled out the consent form (Appendix C), giving permission to use their data and information in this study. After the interviews, the respondents were anonymized, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim with the help of Word, Office 365. The software ATLAS.ti was used to further support the analysis process. Furthermore, Appendix D provides an ethical statement of the researcher and the principles that were upheld during the interviews.

The researcher used the grounded theory approach of Gioia, to analyze the data from the interviews (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, the analysis was an iterative process between the literature and data. In the first-order coding stage, the researcher focused on staying as close as possible to the terms mentioned by the interviewee. In this first stage, the researcher looked for any repeating first-order concepts. These first-order concepts were afterwards grouped to create second order themes. These themes served already as additional focus points for the interviews yet to come. Eventually, the second order themes aggregated towards third-level dimensions. The final results are visually presented in this paper through a data structure, see Figure 2 (Gioia et al., 2013). In the first round of coding the researcher stayed as close as possible to the experiences and feelings of the respondents. In this way, the researcher stayed true to the ‘real’ feelings and explanations of the respondents. The interpretation of the researcher comes forward in the second order themes (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

## 4. Findings

Building upon the literature review, this chapter presents the firsthand stories of gig workers about their experiences in gig work. By delving into these stories, we gain a better understanding about the way gig workers construct their work identity. The visual overview of the findings is presented through a data structure, see Figure 2. It shows the themes which could be potential novel factors of the work identity of gig workers. Some of the themes are well known, for instance, decision autonomy and independence (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). Whereas others, such as community building, are less common. Furthermore, the recent COVID-19 pandemic turns out to be an enforcing factor to start with gig work.

- *4.1 Personal Motives*

The gig workers were very open about their motives and mentioned how decision autonomy and independence are important aspects which appeal to their personal preferences. In particular, they explained the feeling of freedom, not working for a boss, and being able to work alone. Gig workers mentioned specifically how they like to work independently, or how they do not mind being alone, as shown in the following statement:

“No, no, it was fun. It was a fun assignment, but I understand very well that it is short-lived ... I can be, also very well, independently, focused and working alone.”

(B., 38-year-old woman)

Additionally, the gig workers mentioned the importance of not being forced into the standard nine-to-five office pattern. Throughout the day, they can determine which work tasks they do, when they have the time to do so, and where they perform the task. Together these aspects point towards a personal preference for high decision autonomy. The following statements illustrate this point:

“Yes, yes, but the biggest drive for me is, I can work in the morning between 6 and 8 and I can earn 50 or €60 and the rest of the day I'm free, and then I have my €50 to enjoy life and that is very nice.”

(T., 27-year-old woman)

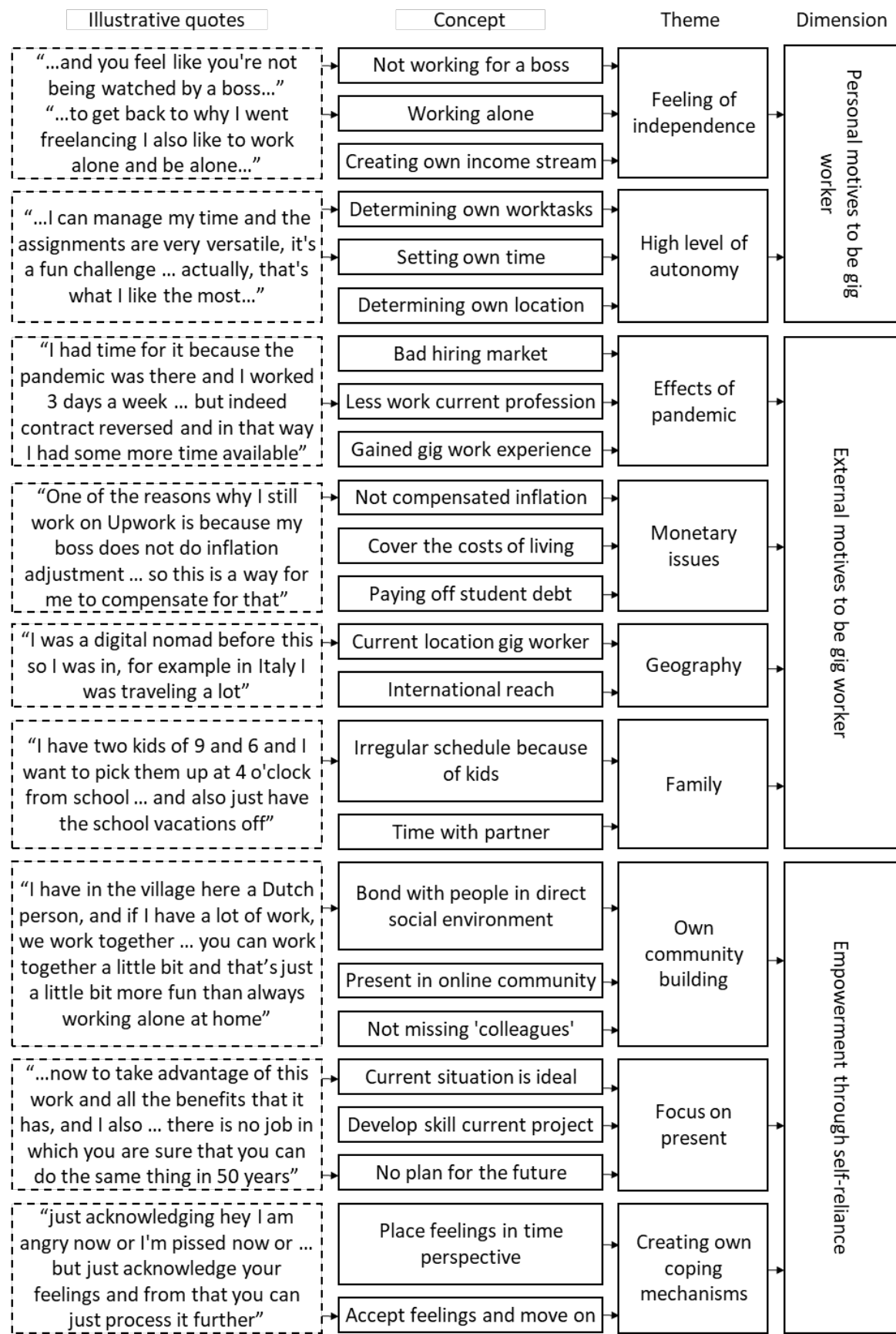
And, for instance:

“As a freelancer, I feel like this is a, you know, the power of the autonomy is more on me. You know, I work when I want how I want. I get to work from the comfort of my home.”

(Sajil, 35-year-old male)

Gig workers also described how their own income stream ensures they are not fully dependent on one employer. So, their identity work takes place through viewing independent work as a fundamental aspect of who they are. Gig workers actively embrace independent characteristics, such as autonomy, as is commonly known in the literature (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). This process takes a central place in their identity work as they entangle these aspects in their self-narrative as a gig worker. Even without an employer, they will always be able to provide for themselves. This finding supports the idea of having an authentic identity. As their independent work is an essential component of their identity, the gig workers can stay true to their ‘inner selves’ via gig work (Ybema et al., 2009).

**Figure 2**  
Data structure<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The arrows from Illustrative quote to Concept indicate which concepts are supported by the quote.

- *4.2 External Motives*

External motives play a significant role in driving individuals towards gig work. As gig workers, for instance, wanted to react on the challenges presented by the pandemic or fulfill their financial needs. Most of the conversations, started off with an explanation about how an external aspect made them look up gig work for the first time. While working on a platform they realized how well they were able to perform online high-level work. Even when the external aspects became less pressing, the gig workers stayed on the platform. The flexibility of gig work, made it possible for them to adapt to the changing circumstances. Their reaction on the external aspects shows a proactive and entrepreneurial. The identity work of gig workers takes form as they actively respond to these external aspects. Instead of passively accepting their situation, gig workers shaped coherent self-narratives to align within the gig economy. When placed within the agency and structure debate, the gig workers acted on structural factors, like the rising cost of living. Which argues for the structure side of the debate. However, gig workers also exercised their agency whilst they took control of their own work situation (Brown, 2015). Zooming in on these external motives, almost all gig workers mentioned they started to explore gig work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Take, for instance, the following statements:

“Well, I had time for it because there was a pandemic and I only worked three days a week ... but indeed a reversed contract and therefore I had some more time available.”  
(R., 31-year-old male)

Another respondent mentioned:

“I had a situation during corona where I was without income. I found myself out of work in February 2020 and graduated in March 2020. Not very convenient timing. It made for an awkward situation because there were expenses but no income.”  
(S., 29-year-old male)

Throughout the pandemic, some gig workers experienced a hiring market in which companies were not eager to hire new employees. Other gig workers mentioned there was less work in their profession, for instance, in tourism. This caused them to be without work, or with a scaled-back contract. Ultimately, they sought a new way to gain income, and arrived at the gig work platforms.

Monetary issues embodied the other external motive of gig workers issues. Whereas some gig workers mentioned how they like to have a side income, to be less dependent on their boss. Many gig workers mentioned how the side income really helped to cover the rising costs of living, or to pay off the debt gained during study. Furthermore, the rising inflation combined with no compensation was for one participant a direct cause to look for additional income. Overall, the platform provides a way to compensate for the rising costs of living.

“One of the reasons why I still work on Upwork now is because my boss does not do inflation adjustment and I could not get a salary increase, so this is a way for me to compensate.”  
(S., 29-year-old male)

The physical location of people also pushed them towards the platform. Four of the gig workers did not live in the Netherlands and were able to still do their work because of the international reach. Moreover, it is worth mentioning, two gig workers were mothers who wanted to have more time with their children and partner. Since gig workers can determine their own workload and work hours, it becomes possible for them to build a close relationship with these close family members around them. So, they ultimately choose their own work location, whether this is at home or in a different country.

With regard to the agency and structure debate, these findings, mostly, argue how gig workers actively embrace their agency to shape their identity. Which shows their own initiative to make choices which align with their personal preferences (Brown, 2015).

- *4.3 Empowerment Through Self-reliance*

The final dimension underlines the active involvement of the gig workers in building their own communities, focusing on the present and creating personal coping strategies to deal with challenges. It emphasizes the significance of self-reliance in navigating through difficult circumstances while also fostering personal growth. The active community building, and therefore the ability to choose their own social connections resonates with their active involvement within their identity work. Gig workers actively shaped their work identities by developing communities and creating coping strategies to their own preference. All demonstrating agency in navigating their own work situation (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Besides, the gig workers focused on continuous skill development to optimally fulfill each gig. This focus on the present, whilst continuously responding to the dynamic tasks, indicates a certain aspect of fluidity in their identity work (Brown, 2015). The dynamic tasks push gig workers to engage in identity work by continuously adding skills and small narratives, coherent to their identity. The reason for community building lay in dividing the work and sharing experiences. Despite their independent and decentralized work, the gig workers often reached out to people in their direct surroundings or online, as shown in the following statement:

“Yes, especially my colleague in the village, but my mother as well. She sometimes reads my translations, she likes it and she is very punctual on spelling mistakes. It is always very nice when she wants to proofread.”  
(T., 27-year-old woman)

While there is a preference for working alone, everyone had certain people close to them with whom they worked together sometimes and shared experiences. Noticeably, they were all in the position to choose these people themselves. Whereas in a work environment, colleagues are more imposed by a corporate structure (Ashford et al., 2018). Therefore, the idea emerges that individuals can foster a certain empowerment by actively engaging in developing their own communities.

The gig workers are open to a high level of change because of their tasks-based work. To cope with this, they mentioned how they focus upon the present. This allows them to adapt to changing work responsibilities, as they can invest their energy effectively in completing the task at hand. It also enables them to focus on the development of the skills and knowledge that are relevant at that moment. The following statement illustrates this focus:

“...but I think I would maybe add that I'm currently sort of playing around with a project in tech right now because so in that sense I'm educating myself towards that and because I feel like there's more work that I would enjoy on that end.”  
(N., 25-year-old woman)

Furthermore, the gig workers mentioned how they created strategies to cope with their negative emotions. Without formal corporate training, each respondent explained how he or she developed their own mechanisms to deal with these negative emotions. These negative emotions could, for instance, stem from bad reviews or harsh feedback. The development of mechanisms suggests that everyone actively sought and found a solution to deal with these negative emotions. Through trial and error, each respondent learned how to rely on these mechanisms and redefine them continuously, as shown in the following statement:

“Yes, for a while I think of it. Yeah, sometimes you have something very frustrating things like, the internet doesn't work, or you have negative feedback on an assignment you did. And then I can get very intense, like oh, no, and help. Then I just have to go do something else for a moment or just think about that for a moment of okay, how bad is this in the big picture? It's also not so bad, so just in hindsight it's not always so bad. Just take a breath and try to do things as best as I can and switch to other solutions. I often ask myself the question, will this still be very bad in a month? Most things are just long since forgotten then.”  
(A., 39-year-old woman)

The statement above illustrates how gig workers take ownership of their own well-being at work. Next to the negative feedback, there is also a close link to the uncertainty surrounding the contracts and pay. Even while Upwork has a relatively protective environment, for both the gig worker, and the advertiser. Still, gig workers mentioned how they found their own solutions regarding the uncertain pay. The following statement illustrates how a respondent reacted when the researcher asked about how he dealt with difficult contract and payment situations:

“There are two ways also deal with that. First is, I want to have at least a piece of communication from the other side, some recognition of okay I know you did this, and this is what we're doing about it or in this time frame expect to hear more, then it's totally fine.”  
(R., 31-year-old man)

In sum, the firsthand stories of gig workers about their work experiences illustrate common, and less common aspects, regarding identity work literature. Independence, and the preference for a high level of autonomy, are central to the identity of gig workers. For them, gig work is a way to stay true to these aspects of their ‘inner selves’, indicating an authentic way of engaging in identity work (Ybema et al., 2009). Even though these aspects fit close to their personality, the enforcing factors to start working on a platform were mostly external. Once the workers started with their new work, they kept on doing it, even when the external aspect were no longer pressing. The external factors, and the reactions of the gig workers, present the interplay of the agency and structure debate. The external factors pushed people towards the platform, arguing for the influence of structural factors. But ultimately, the researcher found that the gig workers to really emphasized their own role and actions. This indicates agency of the gig workers, as they actively react to the challenges presented (Brown, 2015).

The final dimension presents agency within community development and the creation of coping strategies demonstrates to navigate difficult emotions. Ultimately resulting in an self-initiated and active role in the process of their identity work. These findings resonate with the recent research of Petriglieri et al. (2019). Gig workers also focused on continuous skill development, to deliver a great performance at each gig. The focus on skill development for each task present, points towards a certain fluidity in the identity work of gig workers. In which they adapt to changing work responsibilities and actively shape their identities accordingly (Collinson, 2003; Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al., 2006)

## 5. Discussion

The discussion section will hold the findings of this research against the light of the literature debates. Some findings are already commonly known, as independence and autonomy (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). But some others, like agency within community building, and more fluid identity work to stay focussed upon the present, could deepen our understanding as they are more on undiscovered territory. The potential novel factors found, present certain insights into the complex nature of gig workers' the work identity. The various dimensions argue for gig workers who stay deliberately true to their 'inner selves', take control over actively shaping their identities, and are capable of continuous development.

- *5.1 Construction of Work Identity*

The story that emerged from the research, is one of authenticity and agency. The findings uncover relevant factors which contribute to the understanding of gig workers' work identity. The emphasis on independence and autonomy is not entirely new, as literature has underlined these aspects in gig work (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). There is however an extensive inner drive within the gig workers to stay close to these aspects. They view it as a central part of their identity and engage in identity work to stay 'true' to this authentic inner self (Ibarra, 1999; Ybema et al., 2009)

Additionally, gig workers acted with agency when confronted with external factors, like the pandemic or monetary issues. Presenting the complex interplay within agency and structure. Their identity work takes form as they actively choose to respond to these external factors and navigate the challenges ahead. This strong agency, to align their personal preferences with their work, is also reflected in the work location of gig workers. Whether this is at their home with their family or in another country. Therefore, supporting the idea of Petriglieri et al. (2019), who also stress individual agency within gig work.

The aspect of agency also reflects within the active community building in which gig workers engage, it shows how they take deliberate control of their situation. Where the structure of the organization is not present anymore, the gig workers uncover new ways to shape their work identity. They actively construct their identity with the people around them, and build in that way upon social resources of their own choosing (Ashford et al., 2018; Dutton et al., 2010). Another noteworthy aspect is the gig workers' creation of their own coping mechanisms. The gig workers actively find solutions to handle negative feedback or uncertain pay, showing a sense of ownership in their well-being at work (Brown, 2015).

Closing off, the focus on the present allows the gig workers to adapt to changing work responsibilities, it also enables them to develop the skills and knowledge that are relevant in the current moment. The dynamic tasks press gig workers to engage in identity work by continuously adding small narratives to their identity. This suggest a fluid form of identity work which is more of a process, or a project, rather than a stable state (Alvesson et al., 2008; Watson, 2008).

- *5.1.1 Agency and Structure*

This debate evolves around whether individuals are shaped by a specific structural context, or whether identities are chosen by individuals. Arguments for the structure side of the debate are, for instance, presented by Ashforth and Schinoff (2016). They argue how organizations set the stage for members to construct their identities, but they leave little room for the aspect of agency in identity work. The findings of this research also reflect some impact of external structural factors, however, the manner

in which gig workers react to these factors turns out to be more dominant. This argument is in line with the recent work of Petriglieri et al. (2019). Who also notice the ability of gig workers to create a holding environment for themselves. So, even without an imposed corporate structure, gig workers actively navigate their own work challenges. As they develop their own communities and coping mechanisms.

- *5.1.2. Stability and Fluidity*

Whether identities are relatively stable or remain fluid over time, remains a debate within the current literature (Brown, 2015). Petriglieri (2011) argues how individuals are motivated to maintain and enact their identities in a current state. However, this research finds that gig workers continuously develop their skills because of their dynamic work environment. Which causes the identity work of gig workers to be fluid and based upon continuously added self-narratives. Supporting the work of Alvesson et al. (2008) and Watson (2008) who see identity more as a process, or a project, rather than a stable state. While many scholars remain hesitant to theorize identities as being fluid, this research supports a new recognition that identities can have a continually crafted nature (Brown, 2015; Pratt et al., 2006).

- *5.1.3. Coherence and Fragmentation*

Within this literature debate some scholars argue how gig workers make sense of their ambiguous occupational identity by creating coherent personal identity narratives (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). The findings of this research are scarcely touching upon this literature debate. The firsthand stories of gig workers, argue in some way for a discourses more of a coherent nature. As there was little to no mention of really contradictorily aspects. Which is in line the recent ideas of Josserand and Kaine (2019), who argue this coherence to be essential to gig workers as it creates sense of stability within the trade-offs, inherent to their occupation.

- *5.1.4. Positive and Negative Identities*

The findings of this research only relate to a small scale to this literature debate. However the identity work of gig workers, did evolve around the aspects which bring out the positive side of their work. Much, like the gravediggers who mostly mentioned the aspect of being outside in their job (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). The gig workers all focused on the freedom and autonomy they gained by doing gig work. This resonates with the idea of a positive identity narrative, which is characterized by focusing upon the aspects which are liked about the job. Therefore, these findings are in line with the research of Roberts and Dutton (2009), who argue how these positive characterizations are created to realize a valuable and beneficial self-view.

- *5.1.5. Authenticity and Identities*

The final literature debate questions the existence of one 'true' self. For instance, the research of Butler (2004), suggests there is no essence in a person, so one cannot stay 'true' or 'false' to oneself. However the findings of this research show how gig workers engage in a process in which they actively embrace characteristics, such as autonomy and independence (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). Furthermore, this research notes how gig workers engage in identity work to stay true to these characteristics. The perception of independent work as central to their identity, aligns with the idea of authenticity. They see their gig work as a way to stay 'true' to their inner selves. Therefore this research supports the ideas of Ybema et al. (2009), who put forward how individuals describe themselves with having an inner core.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of work identity construction among online, high-skill gig workers. It reveals how gig workers embrace authenticity and agency in shaping their identities, while also being able to continuously adopt themselves to face the gigs at hand. The aspects of independence and autonomy align with previous literature (Goods et al., 2019; Josserand & Kaine, 2019). But the findings uncover a deeper, inner drive among gig workers who engage in identity work by staying 'true' to these aspects of their identity. Despite external structural factors, gig workers demonstrate a strong sense of personal agency while actively responding to challenges and shaping their work identity in the process. Additionally, the study reveals that gig workers engage in active community building, choosing their own colleagues and developing their own coping mechanisms. These findings support the idea that gig workers actively navigate their work challenges and construct their identities based on their own social resources.

This research has its limitations, most importantly, it is based on an analysis of one platform and a small sample Dutch high-skilled online gig workers. This impacts the manner in which findings can be generalized to other platforms, gig workers from other countries, and other types of gig jobs. As the gig economy is a global phenomenon, work identity can be influenced by various other factors such as culture or socio-economic conditions. Further research could focus upon creating larger sample sizes, in different countries, to analyze the impact contexts might have, as earlier noticed by Brown (2015). Next to that, this research interviewed gig workers all at one single point in time. Neglecting the notice of Pratt (2012), who mentions how identity research should focus more around the aspect of time. Further research could take upon a longitudinal research design to overcome this challenge within the literature. Besides, the grounded theory research design of this research, is known to not recognize the role of the researcher within the construction and interpretation of the data (Olesen, 2007). Where the researcher did engage in debriefing sessions with peers, further research could, for instance, involve more expert researchers in the coding process.

Closing off, the platforms of the gig economy could use the findings presented in this research to enhance the experience of gig workers. By, for instance, implementing features that promote a sense of community and provide resources for skill development, platforms could address factors that contribute to a construction of work identity in which gig workers can freely *go their own way*.

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## 8. Appendix

### *Appendix A – Invitation*

Search 'Upwork' on LinkedIn, the company page has 200 Dutch people registered. These are filtered towards the translators based on the description.

#### Invitation – 1 – LinkedIn

*“Hi,  
Sta jij open voor een gesprek? Voor mijn onderzoek naar de gig economie zou ik jou graag interviewen. De gig economie verdient meer aandacht en begrip. Daarom wil ik in een half uur jouw werkervaringen als vertaler in de gig economie bespreken.  
Het zou mij erg helpen met afstuderen! Gr. Jelmer”*

Due to the maximum of 300 characters within LinkedIn, the message is quite short. Loosely translated it says:

*“Hi,  
Are interested in a conversation? For my research regarding the gig economy, I would like to conduct an interview with you. The gig economy deserves more attention and understanding, therefore, I would like to talk half an hour with you about your experiences as a translator in the gig economy. It would help me very much with graduating! Gr. Jelmer”*

#### Invitation – 2 – Upwork

*“Word geïnterviewd! Wil jij deelnemer zijn?”*

*Word een half uur tegen betaling geïnterviewd!*

*Voor mijn onderzoek heb ik deelnemers nodig die op dit platform actief zijn. Dus wil jij jouw kennis delen over het werken op een platform? & Wil jij betaald krijgen om een half uur vragen te beantwoorden? Laat het mij dan snel weten.”*

Due to no response on LinkedIn, I decided to pay people through Upwork. With the advertisement above. Roughly translated it says:

*“Be an interviewee! Do you want to participate?”*

*Be an interviewee for 30 minutes while getting paid!*

*For my research I need participants who are active on a platform. So do you want to share your knowledge about gig working? & Do you want to get paid to answer questions for half an hour? Let me know quickly!”*

Through Upwork it is also possible to invite people for your job post, therefore I send 10 people an additional invitation. And started to offer a small amount of money (5/10 EU) for each interview

## Appendix B – Interview guide

### Introduction

- What type of tasks does your work include?
- How do you experience working on Upwork.com?

### The self

- Why did you become a gig worker? – *ask to elaborate*
  - Which factors did or did not influence you?
  - *Are there additional intrinsic reasons?*
- How would you describe your work to other people?
  - How do people react, and what does this mean for you?
- How would you describe yourself as a professional?
  - Which aspect is important or do you emphasize? And why?
- What are challenges you are facing in your work?
  - How do you cope with these challenges?
- How do you experience a sense of purpose?

*Explanation sense of purpose, it provides a reasons for what we want to do. It can be a goal or intrinsic motivation, which makes us **want** to work.*

- How is this important for you?
- It is normal to experience emotions in your work. How do you deal with difficult emotions?
  - *To whom do you normally talk to, and do you miss not having colleagues/company?*
- Would you describe yourself, as an introvert or extrovert and why?
  - Which aspects of this do you see in your work?

### End

- *Is there anything else you would like to share?*
- Do you have any questions for me regarding this interview?
- *Do you have friends or colleagues who do the same work as you who you could link me to?*

Note, everything in Italics is added after the first practice interview to clarify questions. The underlined question was only added after the 6<sup>th</sup> interview.

*Appendix C – Consent form*

**Master thesis**

*Jelmer Baerends*

*Radboud University*

*Contact: jelmerbaerends@gmail.com*

**To be filled in by the interviewer before beginning the interview:**

0.1.a. Participant number:

0.1.b. Date of interview:

0.1.c. Name of interviewer:

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## **Participant`s Statement**

Before we begin with the interview, I need to inform you of your rights, even if these seem self-evident to you.

Our interview is carried out under the following conditions:

- Your participation in the interview is voluntary.
- You have the right to raise any questions related to this survey.
- You are free not to answer any question if you do not feel comfortable with it.
- You can interrupt and withdraw from the interview at any time.
- You need to be at least 18 years old to participate in this interview.
- The information collected in the interview, as well as all actors that participated in the start-up process, will remain anonymous – unless you give us permission to personally quote your statements in any publications that may result from this research.
- We would like to record this interview so that we can use it for reference while proceeding with this study. We will not record this interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for the interview to be recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission at any time.

### **Do you give permission for your interview to be recorded?**

Yes

No

### **If you make particularly insightful statements, do you wish to have them quoted with mention of your name?**

Yes, I want to be quoted with mention of my name.

No, I want to be quoted anonymously and without reference to my name.

## **Final Consent**

(Please feel free to indicate either your professional or private address.)

hereby confirm that I agree with the abovementioned conditions of this interview.

I,

First Name and Surname:

City / State:

Postal Code:

Country:

E-mail:

Sign \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Appendix D – Ethical statement*

Attention was paid to ethical rules throughout the process of this research. The participants were all informed of their rights, and their answers have been treated confidential and anonymous. Next to that, the goal of the research and the information gathered were explained to the respondents at the end of each interview. Also, the researcher tried to ask unbiased questions which did not manipulate or threaten the interviewee. In this way, a potential for an increased power imbalance was avoided. Whilst, the researcher was aware that a certain power imbalance will always exist. There was a focus on the idea that a good interview should be a discussion or a conversation between two equals. Additionally, the interviewees knew they could stop or pause the interview at any time if they became too tired or stressed. The researcher tried to keep his opinions and prejudices before the interview as limited as possible. However, the data will always be partly influenced by the researcher whether through the formulation of the questions or body language (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).