

# **Identity construction within young employee networks**

## **A qualitative case study**

Master Thesis

Strategic Human Resources Leadership

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## **Abstract**

In the last decade, the recruitment and retainment of young employees seems to be moving up the management agenda. Young employees are valued for their skills and new insights but seem to be rewarded with temporary contracts and insecurities in their work. In the process of becoming a professional, young employees (re)construct their own identity, also referred to as identity work, and their identity construction can be influenced and regulated by organizational culture, rules and restrictions, which is referred to as identity regulation. One of the alleged contextual contributors to the construction of young employees are young employee networks, a specific form of a diversity network. The aim of this research is to contribute to the knowledge about the identity construction of young employees within young employee networks from a critical management perspective. My analysis focuses on the (power)relations generated by or through the young employee network, influencing the identity construction of young employees. From this analysis, it can be derived that in this case study, young employees are generally more valued as a collective identity than as individuals, making the young employee network functioning as a way in which young employees get valued more for their ideas. Furthermore, identity construction is regulated by board members, directors, organizational management, and supervisors, by controlling how and which activities take place and who takes place in the board.

**Keywords:** identity construction, identity regulation, identity work, diversity networks, young employee networks

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## 1. Introduction

When looking at recruitment campaigns of big companies established in the Netherlands, their campaigns highlight the importance of young employees with quotes as ‘they are the future’ (Utoday, 2019; BNDeStem, 2012; Disgover, n.d.). But why do organizations believe that? And why do some employers focus on the recruitment of these young professionals, while others do not? And what distinguishes young employees? Young professionals are for example pursued because of the idea that they are not likely to be restricted through common patterns and stated ideas (Ros, van Miltenburg, Naus & Koot, 2015). Young employees are also known for their ‘hard skills’, like flexibility, physical and mental capacity, willingness to learn and new technology skills, which are highly valued by employers (van Dalen, Henkels & Schippers, 2010). However, young employees have been sufficiently affected by non-standard and temporary employment, and these precarious employment characteristics can diminish the career development of young employees (Nunez & Livanos, 2015). Especially in the current times, where the COVID-19 crisis is influencing the global economy and increasing insecurities for the work field (McKibben & Fernando, 2020).

In this process of becoming a ‘young professional of the future’ in the current precarious environment (Nunez & Livanos, 2015), young employees evolve and experience personal growth (Karmel, Blomberg & Vnunk, 2010). Experiences and impressions in this process contribute to one’s personal growth (Karmel et al., 2010), and within this growth, these impressions and experiences influence the way in which individuals construct their identity over the years (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Individuals in organizations have multiple identities, ranging from social identities based on collectives, like team and occupation and categories like race and age, to personal identities that could for example be based on personality or sense of humor (Ashford & Schinoff, 2016). These different identities can sometimes cause conflicts for individuals since they sometimes struggle with conflicting identity positions in different contexts. Employees for example struggle to balance their work identity and personal identity, when one’s identity at work does not match how one would like to see themselves in a personal context (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). However, besides the possibility for our personal identity and work identity to conflict, our personal identities are also defined according to the tasks we accomplish and how we accomplish them, which makes our work part of how we see ourselves (Buche, 2006; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand how these different identities in the workplace emerge.

Throughout their lives, people are in a continuous process of negotiating the construction of their self-identity by getting feedback from others and themselves on how they portray themselves (Saayman & Crafford, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). They keep (re)constructing their identity in order to create a positive self-view (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). This continuous process of re(constructing) one’s own identity is referred to as identity work (Alvesson & Willmott,

2002; Alvesson et al., 2008; Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Identity work can be seen as a continuous, stable process, that might be prompted by occurring issues, like a crisis (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson, 2008). Thus, individuals engage in identity work by (re)constructing their own identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Besides identity work, the construction of identity is also influenced by identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity regulation refers to the social practices that affect the construction and reconstruction of identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). These social practices are for example the organizational culture and rules and restrictions that affect the identity construction of an individual (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008).

Identity work is thus described as an agency concept, in which people shape their own identities, and identity regulations is seen as a social practice, in which the practice shapes the personal identity of other individuals (Saayman & Crafford, 2011).

The (re)construction of one's identity is thus influenced by both identity regulation and identity work: the interaction between an individual's self-identity, identity regulation and identity work can be seen as the process of identity construction (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Self-identity is described by Alvesson & Willmott (2002) as the way in which an individual reflects on their own identity.

Ashford & Schinoff (2016) describe that how this process of identity construction is formed depends on the context that influences an individual. So, in order to understand how young employees construct their identity, we have to understand the context in which these identities emerge, looking at contextual contributors that affect the identity construction of young employees.

One of the alleged contextual contributors to the construction of identity of young employees are young employee networks (Foldy, 2002, 2019), however little is known on their effect on the identity construction of young employees. Young employee networks are diversity networks that bring together a specific group, organized around one single social identity (Benschop, Holgersson, van den Brink & Wahl, 2015; Foldy, 2002), being a young employee. Young employee networks are used in organizations to provide young employees with advice, information, and social and career support (Benschop et al., 2015). Young employee networks focus on personal development, build bridges between organizations and within their organization, contribute to the development of the organizational image, and facilitate the social networking (Dennissen et al., 2019). In the recent years, the use of these diversity networks in organizations strongly increased (Dennissen et al., 2019; Benschop & van den Brink, 2019), making them a widely popular practice in organizations (Benschop et al., 2015; Dennissen et al., 2020; Kaplan, Sabin, & Smaller-Swift, 2009). However, literature on diversity networks has mostly focused on research of diversity networks for women, ethnic minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees (Dennissen et al., 2019). Researchers have argued that little research has been done on young employee networks, and the value of these networks for young employees (Benschop et al., 2015; Dennissen et al., 2019).

To understand the actual impact of young employee networks in organizations, research on their effect on identity construction is essential (Foldy, 2019). The research of Foldy (2002, 2019) has focused on identity construction in diversity networks in general. The little research that has been done on this topic states that diversity networks might affect identity construction of individuals within organizations (Foldy, 2002, 2019). Deriving from this findings of Foldy (2019), gaining insight into the contribution of young employee networks to the identity construction of young employees is therefore relevant as research on identity construction within young employee networks is crucial to understand the actual impact of these increasingly implemented and popular young employee networks in organizations. The actual impact of the existing networks could not be determined without knowledge on their effect on identity construction (Foldy, 2019).

How young employee networks in particular affect the identity construction of young employees, and which power relations are present in this effect has, thus far, not been researched. Therefore, the aim of this research is to contribute to the knowledge about the identity construction of young employees within young employee networks, in order to contribute to the knowledge of identity construction within young employee networks, and therefore contribute to the knowledge on young employee networks in general, since this is an under researched item (Dennissen et al., 2019). This aim will be met by formulating an answer to the following research question: ‘How do young employee networks contribute to the identity construction of young employees?’.

This study contributes to theory and practice by elaborating on the influence of a young employee network on identity construction of young employees. Taking identity construction in relationship to the young employee network into account, this study contributes to the little research on young employee networks in general (Dennissen et al., 2019), and elaborates on the work of Foldy (2002, 2019), on identity construction within diversity networks. Even though in the recent years, the use of young employee networks in organizations strongly increased (Dennissen et al., 2019), little research has been done on these networks and the impact on the identity construction of young employees in the workplace. However, to understand the actual impact of these increasingly implemented young employee networks in organizations, research on their effect on identity construction is essential (Foldy, 2019). In the current COVID-19 pandemic, this is an even more topical issue than before, since a crisis could cause for a shift in people’s identity work (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson, 2008).

Furthermore, this study shows organizations and individuals how identity construction of young employees is (unconsciously) influenced by young employee networks, and how power and control work through the young employee network, and whether this can be seen as identity regulation and therefore contribute to the identity construction of young employees. This is also an addition to current literature on how identity construction is regulated through young employee networks, since little research has been done on these power relations generated by and through a young employee network.

For practice, this provides both the organization as the individual young employee with information about whether identity construction of young employees is influenced through factors related to the young employee networks, and if this is the case, which factors have an influence on the identity construction of young employees. According to the findings of Deetz (1995) it is relevant to look at these relations, since identity and the construction of self-identity of employees is commonly used within business management, managing the intrinsic feelings of employees in order to create desired behavior, instead of managing their behavior directly (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). So, this research helps to create insights in how young employee networks might play a part in identity construction and therefore the creation of the desired behavior of employees.

In order to generate these contributions, I will formulate an answer to the research question in a five-chapter research. The main concepts will be explained in Chapter two, involving young employees, identity construction and the interrelations of these concepts.

The research question will be answered with the use of a case study, where one case is looked at in depth (Yin, 2014). This case study took place within a large governmental organization, including interviews and gathering of (policy) documents. I will elaborate on this method in Chapter three.

In chapter four, the analysis of the results is displayed. In Chapter five, I have formulated an answer to the research question, discuss the limitations of this research and elaborate on the theoretical contribution of this research.

## **2. Theoretical background**

In this chapter, the main concepts of this research will be explained. First, I will address young employees and their contribution to the workforce. Second, I will discuss the concept of identity construction in organizations. Third, I will discuss young employee networks. Finally, I will explain the current literature on identity construction in diversity networks and young employee networks in particular.

### **2.1. Young employees in organizations**

In the literature, a distinction is made by two generations on the labor market that can be defined as young employees: the millennials (Larking Cooney, 2007; Waljee, Chopra & Saint, 2018) and generation Z (Talmon, 2010; Wiastuti, Lestari, Ngatemin, Mulyadi & Masatip, 2020). According to Waljee et al. (2018) and Larkin Cooney (2007), millennials are born between 1981 and 2000. According to Talmon (2019) and Wiastuti et al. (2020), people from generation Z are born between the 1990s and the late 2000s. In this research, when focusing on young employees, the underlying thoughts and structures of these two generations will be considered.



The young employees on the labor market are shaped by information technology, social networking and are trying to connect with the global culture (Waljee et al., 2018). The values, ethos and expectations of those younger employees are defined different from those of older generations, which might create a gap between those generations (Waljee et al., 2018). Young employees are perceived by organizations to possess ‘hard skills’, such as flexibility, physical and mental capacity, willingness to learn and new technology skills, whereas older workers are perceived to possess ‘soft skills’ like commitment to the organization, reliability and social skills (van Dalen, Henkens & Schippers, 2010). According to van Dalen et al. (2010), hard skills are weight heavier in the evaluation of a worker’s productivity compared to soft qualities. Because of the perception that these hard skills are wider possessed by young employees, young employees are a desirable asset for employers (van Dalen et al., 2010).

## **2.2. Identity construction in organizations**

Research on the processes of identity construction is of major influence on organizational studies on identity (Alvesson et al., 2008). This approach takes the understanding on how individuals deal with their experiences of work and organizations into account (Alvesson et al., 2008). The construction of one’s own identity in organizational studies, according to Alvesson et al. (2008) and Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) is influenced by both identity work; constructing one’s own identity (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and identity regulation; identity construction through power and control (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993).

Alvesson & Willmott (2002), refer to one’s personal identity as self-identity, which they refer to as the way in which a person reflects on their own identity and how an individual interprets one’s identity themselves. Alvesson & Willmott describe the construction of self-identity as *‘sustained through identity work in which regulation is accomplished by selectively, but not necessarily reflectively, adopting practices and discourses that are more or less intentionally targeted at the ‘insides’ of employees, including managers’* (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.9). Alvesson & Willmott (2002), describe that one’s self identity is an ongoing process between the concepts of identity work, identity regulation and self-identity. They have visualized their thoughts, which can be seen in Figure 1.

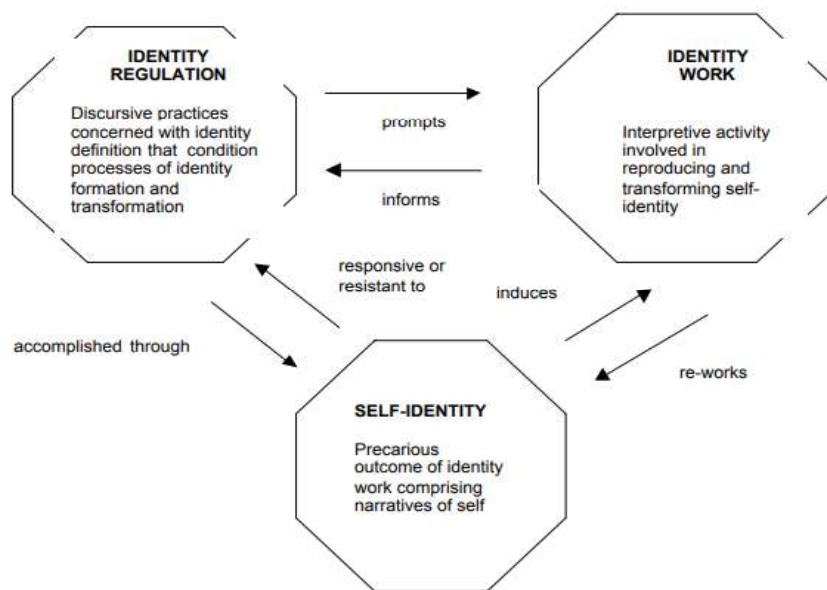


Figure 1 - Identity Regulation, Identity Work and Self-Identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.10)

In their model, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe self-identity as accomplished through identity regulation and describe that individuals re-work their identity based on one's own identity work. Self-identity can induce identity work, and it can create resistance towards identity regulation. For example, when you do not identify with certain rules, resistance can surface. Finally, the concepts of identity regulation and identity work also interact. Identity regulation influences identity work, since identity regulation gets interpretation in such a way, that it influences the construction of self-identity. When the other way around, identity work informs on which practices are successful in the regulation of identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). I will explain both concepts of identity work and identity regulation below. The relations between those three concepts and their interaction will be used in this study as describing the overarching concept of identity construction.

Identity work is described as *'the ongoing mental activity that an individual undertakes in constructing and understanding of self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued'* (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.15), and is referred to as an agency concept, in which people shape their identity themselves (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). When looking at identity work, it raises questions like 'who am I' and 'who are we?' (Cerulo, 1997). Individuals try to answer these questions, and in order to do this, they craft a self-narrative, drawing on cultural resources, memories and desires, to reproduce or transform their sense of self (Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The emphasis of identity work is on 'becoming', instead of 'being' (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Alvesson et al. (2008), describe different ways in which identity work is described by different researchers. Simpson and Carroll (2008) and Carroll and Levy (2008) for example, see identity work as more or less of a continuous process. Others, like Beech (2008), Lutgen-Sandvik

(2008) and Watson (2008), see identity work as a continuous context. However, they believe that identity work may be prompted or identified by occurring issues, like a crisis. Alternatively, identity work may be influenced by encounters with others, which result in challenging the understanding of self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Klein, 2000). Saayman and Crafford (2011) state that identity work can happen both on a conscious and an unconscious level, and describe that an individual's identity work depends on the social context this individual is in. Deriving from these findings, this could suggest young employee networks as a social context also influence one's identity work.

Identity work is thus, as described, the agency concept of identity construction. However, identity construction is also influenced by social practices and power relations, referred to as identity regulation (Saayman & Crafford, 2011). Therefore, in this section, I will elaborate on the concept of identity regulation as influencing one's identity through power (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation is the process that *'encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction'* (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 7), and emphasizes the role of 'power' in identity construction (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). An organization can for example use its power to regulate the employees' identities, in order to impose a more collective, uniform organizational identity (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Employees' identities can be regulated through appeals like self-image, feelings, values, and identification (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993) and this regulation can be initiated by for example training and promotion (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). These training and promotion procedures might be designed to fit the direction in which the organization wants to shape their employees' identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), since organizational training can influence one's identity and is sometimes used by organizations as a precondition to promote to a different function (Franco & Tavares 2013). However both training and promotion can also be used as a regulation tool on itself (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), since it there are both perceived to possibly affect the identification of an employee with the organization (Chih & Lin, 2019).

These regulation techniques can be positively experienced by employees, because they can play a critical role in helping to construct a narrowed down path of one's identity (Ibarra, 1996; see Alvesson et al., 2008). However, the concept of identity regulation can also be framed in negative terms. Managers are more and more aware about how organizational control is accomplished through the self-positioning of employees within managerially inspired discourses (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity regulation can then be seen as a critical element of the employer-employee relationship, with the employer in power (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008). Besides, when an organization becomes a significant source of identification for one's individual identity, the organizational identity influences one's own identity work which can be seen as the regulation of an individual's identity work, since the organizational context influences the way in which one's identity is constructed (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

However, there are boundaries to this regulation (Bardon, Brown & Peze, 2017; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018). Bardon et al. (2017) showed that the identity construction of middle managers in Disneyland was affected by higher management through regulation. However, their identity construction was not merely affected by this power. This made the identity construction among middle managers differ according to their own beliefs and values, even though the same identity regulation took place. Therefore, the effect of identity regulation also depends on the beliefs and values of individuals, since individuals can react differently on the same social practices and regulations (Bardon et al., 2017). This indicates that there are boundaries to the effect of identity regulation, since every individual responds differently to certain regulations (Bardon et al., 2017; Caza et al., 2018).

Thus, one's self-identity is influenced by identity regulation (Nair, 2010), but is also influenced by one's own identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008; Bardon et al., 2019), since some people react different to the same identity regulation practices (Bardon et al., 2017). Furthermore, employees can feel resistance when they do not feel comfortable with the regulation systems in place (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Caza et al., 2018). Employees seem to balance between wanting control and resist this control (Bardon et al., 2017; Caza et al., 2018). Westwood and Johnson (2011) stated in their research that employees often use humor to tackle identity regulation attempts, since humor is less likely to generate opposition. Employees in this study for example challenge the organization or HR-management by making joking comments on rules or restrictions. Humor is perceived then as keeping the balance between not stepping on anyone's toes, but still speaking up about things (Westwood & Johnson, 2011). This makes identity regulation a fragile aspect in organizations (Caza et al., 2018), that mixes both conscious and unconscious elements (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

This study takes the different dynamics within identity construction as described above into account. Therefore, this study believes that identity construction in organizations, both regulated through power and through one's personal identity work, is perceived as a continuous process, that is influenced by encounters with others in a particular context (Alvesson et al., 2008). As diversity networks, young employee networks are contextual situations in organizations wherein groups of people encounter each other and influence each other (Foldy, 2019). Therefore, young employee networks can be seen as the context in which identity is constructed (Foldy, 2019), through the interaction between the self-identity, identity work and identity regulation.

### **2.3. Young employee networks**

Young employee networks are in-company diversity networks (Benschop et al., 2015; Foldy, 2002), that bring together young employees within an organization (Dennissen et al., 2019). Even though researchers struggle to find an agreement on the aim of diversity networks (Dennissen et al., 2019; Foldy, 2019), diversity networks are perceived to be used in organizations to provide young

employees with advice, information and social and career support (Benschop et al., 2015). Young employee networks in particular focus on personal development, build bridges between organizations and within their organization, contribute to the development of the organizational image, and facilitate the social networking (Dennissen et al., 2019).

Even though young employee networks are a little researched topic (Dennissen et al., 2019), Dennissen et al. (2019) have found that young employee networks seem to be less restricted in comparison to other diversity networks. Young employee networks seem to be able to legitimize their existence by facilitating socializing among young employees, whilst other diversity networks must focus more on professional development, in order to legitimize their existence. Dennissen et al. (2019) point out the fact that young employees are mostly taken for granted in the organization as a reason for this difference in restrictions and need for legitimization.

## **2.4. Identity construction in young employee networks**

Since the little research that has been done on networks for young employees (Dennissen et al., 2019), their particular contribution to one's identity construction is little known, even though this research is essential in understanding the effect of a young employee network (Foldy, 2019). However, some research has been done on identity construction in diversity networks in general (Foldy, 2002, 2019). Foldy (2002, p.108), states that *'managing diversity means managing identity'*. Since diversity networks are seen as a way to manage diversity (Benschop et al. 2015; Dennissen et al., 2019; Dennissen et al., 2020), Foldy (2002, 2019) states that these networks are a way to construct one's identity. Members from a particular network join this network because they feel related to the group and can identify themselves with this group of people (Friedman & Holton, 2002).

The identification with a certain network and being a member of this network can affect one's identity construction in different ways (Foldy, 2019). By joining the network one can identify oneself with, Foldy (2019) describes several possible influences on one's identity. First, she addresses that these groups can reinforce 'old' oppressive patterns through interaction, instead of challenging them. Huckle and Lipinski (2016) for example experienced women in the women's networks did not feel appreciation and recognition in their work they put into the network. This reinforced the already existing feelings of not being noticed and feeling underappreciated, instead of helping them overcome these feelings.

Second, Foldy (2019) states that these networks are accompanied by tensions, since on the one hand, these groups want to be like everyone else, but on the other hand, in order to exist, they have to portray their "otherness". This distinction and feeling of being like anyone else or being different, is part of the collective identity as lived by all organizational members.

Finally, Foldy (2019) also elaborates on the impact of diversity networks on the constructing categories of identity. For example, within diversity networks, new categories can arise. Zane (2002)

for example studied a bank in which they split up the women's network with a separate group for black women, since the black women felt dominated by the white women in the group. So, these networks can contribute to the construction of (new) identity categories and influence whether these identities are seen as competing identities (Foldy, 2019).

Foldy (2002) has elaborated on identity construction within diversity networks from three different perspectives: those of resource mobilization theorists, critical theorists, and the Foucauldian approach. This study looks at identity construction within young employee networks from a critical management perspective, and takes into account that the power structures related to the young employee network could prevent efforts to use the group as a forum for the raising of more consciousness from succeeding (Foldy, 2002). Some critical theorists do agree that diversity networks are an '*alternative source of organized identity practices within companies*' (Foldy, 2002, p. 107). Networks are based on identities, and therefore can create a collective identity (Foldy, 2002; 2019), contributing to one's identity work. This study will therefore look at which power relations are present within young employee networks and how they regulate the identity construction of young employees.

Taking a critical management perspective, I will look at the concepts of identity work and identity regulation as discussed; a young employee network is looked at as the context to challenge the understanding of self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Klein, 2000). So, it is believed that an individual is becoming someone, because of their active interaction with other young employees, instead of simply 'being' something (Alvesson et al., 2008), as an ongoing process (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson, 2008).

With the insights of Alvesson & Willmott (2002), Klein (2000), and Foldy (2002, 2019), it might be expected that identity work is influenced by the participation in activities initiated by a network for young employees, because young employees meet each other, can learn from each other and as a result reflect on one's self. Identity regulation is considered in this study, because of the managerial implications and interest that may underlie the founding of a young employee network, and therefore influences how these networks influence the identity construction of young employees and the implications that the young employee network can work as a form of identity control on their members (Foldy, 2002).

### **3. Research methods**

In this chapter, I will discuss the different aspects of the research methods and the methods of analysis. Furthermore, research ethics of the researcher and limitations of this research are discussed.

### 3.1. Research strategy and epistemology

A qualitative study is conducted. Understanding identity and identity construction calls for a qualitative approach, since people can explain their experiences and by telling them, they make sense of them for themselves and the researcher (Martin, Jerrard & Wright, 2018). In this qualitative research, I have looked at the data from a critical management perspective. From this perspective, the research is influenced by the worldview of the researcher (Goldman, 2016; Symon & Cassell, 2012), and focuses on the inherent connection between politics, values and knowledge and thereby provokes a deeper consideration of the politics and values that underpin scientific knowledge (Alvesson et al., 2009; Duberley, Johnson, & Cassell, 2012). A critical management perspective is known for second guessing the mainstream understanding of the world around us and looking at these mainstream perspectives through a critical lens (Goldman, 2016). The aim of this critical management perspective is *'to understand how the practices and institutions of management are developed and legitimized within relations of power and domination'* (Duberley et al., 2012, p.22).

Deriving from the critical focus of this research, identity is seen as a fluent concept, (Alvesson et al., 2008), and relates to the definition of identity that is made in the previous chapter; believing identity construction is built upon one's own identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008). But especially the part that believes identity construction is also regulated through power and politics, referred to as identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), fits the critical focus of this research. From a critical management perspective, I have looked at those (asymmetrical) power relations and their effect on identity construction (Duberley et al., 2012), by looking at how identity construction is influenced through power regulations.

Deriving from this critical management perspective, an abductive approach will be used to gather and process the data. Abductive research constantly moves between empirical and theoretical knowledge (Alrajeh, Fearfull & Monk, 2012). This approach is suitable for this research, because on the one hand, this research derives ideas of identity construction from theory. But, on the other hand, it aims at establishing new theory deriving from data, since little literature is available on young employee networks in general (Dennissen et al., 2019), and identity construction within young employee networks.

This abductive approach fits the qualitative research design of this study, because qualitative research provides tools to go back and forth between theory and data, to establish new theory and elaborate on the existing theory (Alrajeh et al., 2012; Bleijenbergh, 2015).

### 3.2. Data collection

A critical management perspective asks for in-depth interviews and participant observations, to take power structures into account (Duberley et al., 2012). Therefore, a single case study is conducted, looking at a young employee network within one organization in depth (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Yin,

2014), to identify how this employee network contributes to the identity construction of young employees. As Yin (2009, p.18), mentions: *'A case is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context'*. For this research, identity construction is looked at as the phenomenon, within its real-life context of a young employee network, to detect whether identity construction of young employees is affected by young employee networks.

The qualitative case study was conducted within a young employee network, part of a large governmental organization in the Netherlands. They define their employees as 'young' when they are aged below 36. Taking this definition of 'young employees' into account, there are approximately 900 young employees within the entire governmental organization (Personal communication, 6 February 2020).

The organization is divided into thirteen different service components, most of these service components having its own association for young employees. There are 7 national services, with employees spread over some places in the Netherlands, and 6 regional services, divided per local region in the Netherlands. Furthermore, a national 'young' board is assigned for the entire organization. In addition to the regional and national services and the national organizational young board, an overarching young initiative, bound to the overarching governmental institution, and a young initiative for all young employees working for the government, are in place, transcending the organizational borders. An anonymized, simplified structure of the reality of this young employee network is displayed in Appendix 1. Because of the variety of associations and initiatives, there was not one set date of the establishment of the 'network', but the different initiatives have emerged over time and initiated by young employees throughout the organization. The organizational young employee board for example is established two years ago (Personal communication, 6 February 2020), whereas the establishment of some young associations differ between a couple of years and a couple of months ago.

The active young associations of the services mostly have a board, existing of young employees, with the amount of board members varying between 2 and 5 board members (Personal communication, 6 February 2020). The activities that are organized by the young employee network are mostly field trips, drinks and other activities, like a pub quiz or a lecture on a certain topic (Personal communication, 6 February 2020). However, due to the current COVID-19 crisis, most activities are postponed, and others were hosted online (Personal communication, 21 April 2020).

Researching this case, interviews were conducted, and documents were gathered. Using multiple data methods can enhance the quality of a research, compared to the use of only one data collection method (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Yin, 2014), since the researcher can compare different data sources and their outcomes (Bleijenbergh, 2015).

The first data collection method is the conduction of interviews. Therefore, semi-structured



interviews were chosen (Alvesson & Ashcraft 2012). Only a few questions were made beforehand (Bleijenbergh, 2015). The interviewer started the conversation with an open, interpretable questions, leaving room for the respondent to answer to their insight (Alvesson & Ashcraft 2012; Bleijenbergh, 2015). The follow up-questions were determined based on the answers and stories of the respondents (Bleijenbergh, 2015). Such an approach is chosen, because of the abductive nature of this research. Interview guides that are minimal structured, give room to the establishment and detection of new perspectives and theories, and they implementation of theory (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012; Bleijenbergh, 2015). However, for my support, I formulated potential follow-up questions beforehand, to help try to get to the bottom of what a respondent means. The interview questions and potential follow-up questions and can be found in Appendix 2.

Currently, due to COVID-19, people are asked to minimize personal contact and work from their homes. Due to these current circumstances, real-life interviews and observations were not possible. The employees that were interviewed are mostly working from home and avoid visits (Personal communication, 25 March 2020). Therefore, the interviews were conducted via video calls, since the reliability and validity are mostly scored similar to real-life interviews (Ciemins, Holloway, Coon, McClosky-Armstrong, & Min, 2009).

I conducted 14 interviews among young employees (aged below 36) within the aimed governmental organization. Eight respondents were men, and six respondents were women. To collect these participants, a non-probability sampling technique is used, where the researcher has reached out to possible participants, based on certain characteristics (Saunders, 2012), in order to interview young employees in eight different young associations, that are all part of the young employee network. Diversity in people from different services throughout the organization is chosen, since this provides an overview of young employees throughout the entire organization, instead of concentrating the interviews in one or some services. These respondents include nine board members of one of the young associations, to get an understanding of the power relations from a managerial perspective, and four 'member's, to get an understanding of the meaning of the young employee network for both board members and non-board members. This fits the recommendation for future studies of Dennissen et al. (2019) to look at a broader range of both board members and non-board members, when looking at young employee networks. Furthermore, one young employee from the corporate division is interviewed, to look at the phenomenon from a different perspective than solely interviewing people from the young association.

I reached out to those people by contacting the different young associations on the email address, which were provided to me by my contact person within the organization, who is part of the national organizational board. After contacting these young associations, the board members of these young associations either participated themselves, referred me to their board members or referred me to other young employees who were willing to participate. After getting their permission to contact them, I reached out to them to plan the interviews.

Furthermore, I reached out to all the young employees by sending my request in their monthly newsletter for all young employees in the organization. One employee of the organization responded. So as a result, I also got the chance to speak to a member of the corporate team, who has an overview on all development opportunities and initiatives for young employees. An anonymized overview of all respondents is displayed Appendix 3. Due to privacy reasons, the service names are anonymized by using a letter, from A to H, but this gives an indication of the distribution of the respondents among the different services. These letters were derived from the structure of the young employee network presented in Appendix 1.

Furthermore, I gathered documents that refer to the practices and policies of national board and the young associations of the different services, which are set and recorded at a given point in time (Bleijenbergh, 2015). A total of ten documents were gathered and analyzed, including an ‘ambition’ document of the national board, that describes their ambition and how they plan to get there (Personal communication, 5 February 2020), as well as year perspectives, their planning and year reports of seven different young associations. An overview of the used documents can be found in Appendix 3. The documents were collected by asking the different respondents whether there were documents in place for their particular young association. These documents were used to see which indicators regarding identity construction, for example in the concept of identity regulation, could be detected.

### **3.3. Sensitizing concepts**

As a base for the interviews, sensitizing concepts were created. Sensitizing concepts are general concepts that provide the little needed structure when collecting data (Bleijenbergh, 2015). These sensitizing concepts provide some structure for data collection, but still leave room for the way in which a particular phenomenon appears in this situation, in contrast to an operationalization with set concepts, often used in a deductive approach (Bleijenbergh, 2015). This is chosen, since young employee networks and identity construction within young employee networks are little researched (Dennissen et al., 2019; Foldy, 2019). Therefore, this approach leaves opportunities to look at this concept with an open mind, but still taking the literature on identity construction into account. These sensitizing concepts are derived from the theory, elaborated on in Chapter two. These sensitizing concepts have helped to create a guideline for the interviews and some preliminary interview questions (see Appendix 2).

The first sensitizing concept relates to *‘the goal of the young employee network’*. Since researchers struggle to find agreement on what diversity networks aim for, (Dennissen et al., 2019; Foldy, 2019), and research on the aim of the young employee network in particular is limited (Dennissen et al., 2019), this sensitizing concept focuses on the goal of the young employee network in particular, looking at a possible relationship to identity construction. An example question from the

interview guide is: *'What is the goal of the young employee network?'*, focusing specific on the young associations and on the total young employee network.

The second sensitizing concept, *'identification'*, relates to identity construction, since identification is a fluent process, that is constantly working towards some kind of position, which can be described as identity (Gioelli, 2013) and this process is believed to be able to be regulated through different forces (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). The questions asked relate to whether people feel like they belong to a certain group, and feel like they can identify themselves with this group (Sabsay, 2013). An example from the interview guide regarding this concept is *'Why do you visit certain activities of the young association?'* in order to elaborate on *'Do you feel like you belong to this group?'* or *'To what extent can you relate to the people you meet at the activities of the young employee network? And to your other colleagues?'* With these questions, I wanted to determine to which groups of people the respondents feel related and to what extent they can identify themselves with these groups.

The third sensitizing concept is focused on one's *individual development*, which refers to one's own experiences development regarding one's individual identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008). This concept elaborates on how one's individual identification and skills have developed and whether this development is related to the young employee network. An example of an interview question regarding this concept is *'How do you experience your own development'* and as a follow-up question *'How does the young employee network contribute to that?'*

The last sensitizing concept is *power and control*, which relates to the powers that might be forced on or by the young employee network, or on individuals within the young employee network (Alvesson et al., 2008). As described, identities can be regulated through appeals like self-image, feelings, values, and identification (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). This study looks at how this power and control works through the young employee network, and whether this can be seen as identity regulation and therefore contribute to the identity construction of young employees. Members of the board might have a different vision and insights on certain topics than non-board members, since non-board members are not concerned with for example asking for permission for different activities. But, both their vision on the concept will be asked, to have a broader outlook on the topic. For example: *'To what extent do you need to justify certain decisions? And to whom?'* and *'How do you experience the presence of the young employee network?'*, were asked in order to find out whether the presence of the young employee network makes them feel obligated to contribute, or if they do not feel this pressured.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

Regarding the data analysis, the interviews were all literally transcribed, which gives a complete overview of not only the answers of the respondents, but also the social interaction of the

conversations (Bleijenbergh, 2015).

For the data analysis process, the Gioia method was used, using open codes, first order codes and second order themes, and assigning these themes to overarching themes (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). This was an iterative process, moving back and forth between the gathered data and the codes (Langley & Abdallah, 2011), in order to group them into the main themes as distinguished through literature (Alajeh et al., 2012). The data was coded with ATLAS.ti, a computer program that can register memo's and hierarchical organize codes (Bleijenbergh, 2015), to establish the different code orders, needed in the Gioia method (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). A matrix of the different codes found through these different rounds of coding, accompanied by examples of quotes from the respondents, can be found in Appendix 4.

First, open codes were applied to the text, which included words that are close to what the respondents actually said (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Open codes that were for example used were 'contact with the directory board', referring to the contact the board members of the young associations have with the directors of their service, 'retain young employees', which refers to the role of the young employee network in the retainment of young employees, and 'levelling with peers', which refers to the feeling of sharing interest with people that are the same age.

Second, these open codes were grouped into first order codes and second order themes, by looking at the meaning of the open codes and comparing the meaning of these quotes (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). 'Contact with the directory board' was for example grouped into the second order theme of 'hierarchical communication', referring to communication that moves on hierarchical lines through the organization. 'The retainment of young employees' and 'levelling with peers' were grouped into 'the reasons for the existence of the young employee network', and 'levelling with peers' was also grouped into 'reasons for people to join the board of the young association', since it was described as being both a reason that the young employee network exists, as a reason for board members to join the board.

In the third step, I have arrived at some final key themes, that summarize the theoretical elements of my research (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Examples of these key themes identified were 'identity regulation', which for example the second order theme of 'hierarchical communication' was assigned to, and 'identity work'. Both themes were derived from the literature about identity construction, elaborated on in Chapter 2, and were distinguished as some of the main themes of the data .

After this coding process, a report of all codes and accompanied quotes was generated through ATLAS.ti, including the codes and the corresponding quotes (Kenealy, 2012; King, 2012). Due to privacy reasons, the overview of all quotes linked to these codes is excluded from this research. However, anonymized quotes were used in the results section in Chapter 4.

### 3.5. Research ethics

First, the reflexivity on my own role as a researcher had to be taken into account. Reflexivity is “*an awareness of the researcher’s role in the practice of research and the way this is influenced by the object of the research, enabling the researcher to acknowledge the way in which he or she affects both the research process and outcomes*” (Haynes, 2012, p.72). Taken this concept into account, the interpretation of the results is affected by my personal reality (Haynes, 2012). Therefore, in the discussion, I have critically reflected on my personal role as a researcher and the alleged effect of my personal view on things on the results.

The research ethics were furthermore addressed by the guarantee of anonymity of both respondents and the organization, by not referring to any names, or job-positions that might ring a bell to people involved. In the quotes presented in Chapter 4, the organizational and service names that were used were replaced by only mentioning ‘the organization’ to make sure I could provide anonymity. When names are anonymized, this is stated in the text to make sure the reader knows when this has happened.

Only me, the respondents and the supervisors are able to look at the transcripts, which will be handled with care and confidentiality. Furthermore, the confidentiality of the video system used was assessed, and an overview of all quotes is also excluded. Only some anonymized examples in Appendix 4, and in-text, anonymized quotes will be used in Chapter 4. Furthermore, respondents signed a consent-form, and were allowed to withdraw their permission of interviewing at any time, even when the data was already gathered, to make sure that their insights will not be used in the research. The respondents have also received the transcript of their personal interview, to check whether they are still committed in participating with their given answers. When asked, I have skipped the parts that they did not feel comfortable when displayed as quotes in the research. This happened with one transcript, where a respondent wanted me to skip certain (perceived by him as) sensitive information from the transcript. This involved the skipping of one paragraph from a transcript. In the transcript, these lines were replaced by black lines, to make sure it can still be seen that there used to be text and the transcript is altered.

After the research is officially approved, all respondents receive the research, as well as the participating organization, alongside ideas and recommendations. These recommendations are directed to the board of the young employee network, in order to get insights in whether their activities are appreciated by young employees, and if they might desire or expect other things from a young employee network, to see whether supply and demand match each other. This will be an addition to the managerial implications you can find at the end.

## **4. Results**

In this section, the results of the research will be displayed. The results will be structured according to the main themes that were found in the analysis of the data. Respectively, the background and goals of the young employee network, young identity within the organization, identity work and identity regulation.

To introduce the young employee network and its occupations, this results section will start with an overview of the background, goals and activities of the young employee network as derived from the data. After that, I will explain the way in which the identity of young employees is showcased in the organization and in relationship to the young employee network. After this, the way in which these young employees (re)construct this identity by identity work will be addressed. Finally, I will explain the power relations that accompany the young employee network and the way in which these power relations might regulate the identity construction of young employees.

### **4.1. History, development, goals, and activities**

As discussed in Chapter 3, the young employee network exists of different initiatives for young employees. The young employee network has different goals, perceived by both the respondents as recorded in organizational documents. In this part, I will elaborate on the development and background of the young employee network, the (alleged) goals of the young employee network, and their activities, as distinguished through documents and interviews. This background will provide the basis on which I will elaborate on in the other parts of my results section, explaining how these goals and activities contribute to the identity construction of young employees.

#### **4.1.1. Background and development**

As described in Chapter 3, the young employee network consists of a young initiative on the governmental level, a young initiative of the overarching governmental institution of the organization, an organizational young employee board and local young associations, connected to the different services. When talking about the ‘young employee network’, one respondent said:

You know, you say ‘the young employee network, but basically, it is not really one, the young employee network. Because you have a national board and that national board organizes things and supports the organization of the young employee day [...] To my mind is a <sup>1</sup>, which is a national organizational unit, which is very strong organized, and they have a

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymized: Service name

small board, but at our unit<sup>2</sup>, it is just not there. It is just not there. So, it really depends on the organizational unit. (Respondent 2, board member)

In this quote, the respondent states that because of all different shapes and forms, he can hardly talk about a young employee network as a coherence unity. Even between the different young association, it depends how strongly these associations are organized, and if these associations are organized at all. Therefore, the different initiatives must be distinguished, and I will focus primarily on the background of the young association and the organizational young employee board, since they are part of the organization all respondents are from.

The organizational young employee board is established 1,5 years ago. When it comes to the local young associations, the development and establishment depends on the service; some young associations have been active for a few years, while others are just recently established. The establishment of these young associations takes place on the own initiative of young employees, when they feel like an association in their service is needed. One board member of a young association established in October last year for example said:

Well, for the past I think, one and a half year, there are way more young people recruited and because of that is, the founder<sup>3</sup>, which you have approached, he initiated this young association<sup>4</sup>. He has sent all sorts of mails to the directory board of our service and then the director of operations mentioned my name. [...] And that is how we established the young association together. (Respondent 10, board member)

In this quote, she elaborates on the fact that the founder has initiated the young association himself, by contacting the board of directors. From this quote, I observe that the board of directors seem to be approachable and in contact with young employees, since the founder was able to directly contact the board of directors of his service, and this board helped him get in contact with my respondent, in order to establish the young association together. This indicates that even before the establishment of the young association, young employees were able to get in contact with the board of directors.

#### **4.1.2. Goals of the young employee network**

The overall goal of the young employee network was described in different ways. In the organizational documents, four major goals can be distinguished: networking by binding all employees together, promoting the interest of young employees to the board, visibility of the young

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymized: Service name

<sup>3</sup> Anonymized: Person's name

<sup>4</sup> Anonymized: Name of the young association

association, and development of young employees. These goals may differ across the different young associations.

The goal is to stimulate the network of young colleagues within the service<sup>5</sup>, connect them with other young associations in and outside the organization<sup>6</sup>.

(Document 4, Team & Policy).

We can help new young employees to discover and build a network within the service<sup>7</sup>. We can connect young employees and directors. And we can transfer knowledge to the new generation. (Document 2, Year Report)

In the latter quote, this young association adds the goal of the transfer of knowledge onto the ‘new generation’, in which they refer to the people aged below 36. These goals were also mentioned by the respondents, like for example networking and the promotion of the interest of young employees.

It is just the network you create around yourself. That is it first and foremost. Whether it has had a big influence? I do not think so. It is just the network. It brings a bit more joy to my work and makes it a bit easier. A bit easier, a bit. Really a bit. And more joy, because of the activities you have. (Respondent 14, non-board member)

This respondent states that the young employee network helps in establishing a network around him and making his work ‘a bit’ easier. Which seems to imply that the establishment of the network around him makes his work easier. However, he does not seem to be too enthusiastic since he refers to the effect as ‘a bit’. Besides, he couples the networking goal solely to making the work more easy, whereas he couples the activities to experiencing more joy in his work, even though he meets people and can establish his network when visiting these activities. This makes some kind of loop he did not mention.

Another respondent elaborates on this networking function by speaking of some kind of networking platform:

I think you really need it when you are new in an organization, especially such a large organization as this<sup>8</sup>, which can be such a maze. I think that it is necessary that you have an association where new people can ask their questions, dare to ask questions too, to other young employees. You can ask them to older employees too but yeah, a bit accessibility, I think. (Respondent 6, board member)

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymized: Service name

<sup>6</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

<sup>7</sup> Anonymized: Service name

<sup>8</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name



On the one hand, she states that a young employee association is necessary in such a large organization, in order to ask your questions, but on the other hand, she states you could ask them to older employees too. She might experience the age difference between her and the older colleagues as making them less accessible to ask questions than people from her age, who are harder to find outside the young association. Therefore, the young association fulfills her need of getting in contact with other young employees.

Furthermore, the respondents also referred to the promotion of the interests of young employees throughout the organization. This goal is for example explained to be met by the opportunity for board members to visit of director meetings or management conferences, and by the existence of a special ‘Young Group Council’, in which people from every service sit at a table with organizational management, to discuss certain topics.

You have the Group Council, and it exists of all high directors and the highest directors, they talk about organizational issues once in a couple of weeks. And now, there is also a Young Group Council, that meets parallel to this. And then from every organizational unit, there are people who join those meeting. (Respondent 2, board member)

So, the goal of supporting the interests of young employees seems to be for example practiced by establishing and attending the Young Group Council.

To add on the goals determined in the documents, the respondents also mentioned additional goals of the young employee network: the creation of a platform for renewal and the recruitment and retainment of young employees.

By bundling the powers of young employees, some respondents feel like the young employee network functions as a platform for renewal and the creation of new ideas and these young employees can function as a power to change the organization. This fits the idea of Ros et al. (2015), that young employees can initiate change and renewal. One respondent for example stated:

Well, I think that if you want to change as an organization [...], you see a lot of people who have been doing the same things for years, so it is a good thing to have a flow of new young employees, by which you get more new and fresh ideas, and people who do not have a whole past with experience and things that have gone wrong. (Respondent 12, board member)

In this quote, the respondent seems to display a certain vision on young employees, implying that young employees might look at certain situations with an open, new view, leaving room for changes and new ideas. The respondent seems to describe this characteristic as typical for young employees, even though he couples it with experience, and a past of things that could have been tried but did not work. However, being a young employee does not necessarily have to mean that you are under

experienced and unbiased, even though the respondent still couples these things and uses it to describe an asset of young employees; their power to look at things in a new, freshening way.

The goal of retainment of employees is also presented in a document that is formed by the national board, presenting their ambition, which is twofold:

We, as young employees, have the ambition to contribute to the survival of the organizational goals and therefore make the organization future proof. We do this for two reasons: To make sure the organization<sup>9</sup> fits the ideas of us young employees and to keep retaining young employees. (Document 3, Ambition Document)

In this textual fragment, the young association has split up their goal. However, these goals seem related, since a better fit of one's ideas with the organizational ideas, and especially the feeling of being valued for one's own ideas, makes people feel more engaged, which enhanced the chance of retention (Dinnen & Alder, 2017). However, how these goals are met exactly is not further explained or elaborated on by one of the respondents.

Furthermore, the development of young employees and in particular the development of their organizational knowledge was pointed out, both in documents and in the transcripts. For example, a goal as described:

Development of young employees within the service<sup>10</sup>, on a knowledge and personal level, in different disciplines and (topical or new) topics. (Document 2, Year Report)

This service focuses on the development of all young employees across multiple disciplines in their service. However, most of the respondents do not seem to focus on this aspect of the young employee network.

I have not seen any activities for development or something. So, most of all lectures and invitations for a meeting. But I do not know if that is development.  
(Respondent 8, non-board member)

But later on, he says:

Personally yes, you learn from it, if I look back at the lecture from last week, that teaches you about the history of the organization<sup>11</sup> which I have not heard before, so then it is for my own development. (Respondent 8, non-board members)

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

<sup>10</sup> Anonymized: Service Name

<sup>11</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

So, on the one hand, he does not link lectures and meetings with personal development, but after attending one, he does think that it has influenced his personal development, because he learned new things. Even though he did not mention it at first, he experienced this development, even though it is on an unconscious level.

Employees however seem to focus more on the fun part of the young employee network, and the joy it brings to their work, alongside with the goals described above, instead of the development function as described in the documents. Therefore, this goal as stated in documents, does not match entirely match the feelings of most of the young employees. Respondents for example mention:

I think I would not like my work as much if there was nothing for young employees at all.  
(Respondent 6, board member)

Yeah, because I think it is an addition to your work with all those different activities that are organized, it is a nice way to get to know the organization and have a fresh outlook on it, and to get to know people. (Respondent 11, board member)

Yes, well I do not want to say like I would not have been working here<sup>12</sup>, I enjoy it more because of it. (Respondent 12, board member)

From these quotes, I observe that the joy the young employee network brings to one's work is described as a valuable contribution of the young employee network. By offering different activities, which I will elaborate on in part 4.1.3, the young employee network seems to increase the joy young employees experience in their work. The joy that seems, as can be derived from the quotes, not to be met by not being in contact with young employees through the young employee network. This raises the question why it is important for young employees to have such contacts. I will therefore elaborate on why they experience extra joy in their work because of the existence of the young employee network in part 4.2.

#### **4.1.3. Activities**

The type of activities hosted depends on which initiative of the young employee network hosts it. The activities on the governmental level and of the overarching governmental institution are characterized by hosting big events, like drinks or sports tournaments, like beach volleyball. Most of these bigger events are hosted by a group of young employees willing to contribute to such an activity, who do not need to be board members of one of the young initiatives.

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<sup>12</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

..they host a beach volleyball tournament every year, and I organized it two years ago. In my first year, I joined the tournament as a volleyball player, and I thought ‘well I am fine with organizing it next year. (Respondent 10, board member)

So, even though she is a board member of a young association now, she also joined in on the organization of the activities of the young initiative for all young employees working for the government, by being a both a participant as organizing the event herself.

The local young associations also organize drinks, like the other initiatives do, but these are mostly focused on the young employees of their own service. Furthermore, they for example provide sight visits, workshops and one of the young associations organizes a two-day road trip every year. Some of these activities are hosted together with other young associations or are field trips to other organizational units. With the organization of these activities, they strive for meeting the set goals for the young employee network as set in the previous section. However, yet again, the developmental nature as mentioned in the documents did not really come forward in activities, in terms of training or other developmental opportunities. About those activities, one respondent for example said:

They basically have everything already. They have field trips, boat trips, trips to a foreign country. There is something for everyone. [...] There is enough.

(Respondent 9, non-board member)

In this quote, the respondent talks about the young employee network offering everything. However, he only describes field trips and socializing activities, instead of for example trainings. So, when thinking about activities the young employee network should host, he thinks about those activities. Therefore, the goals of the young employee network as discussed do not all seem to shine through to other members through the recent activities.

## **4.2 Young employee identity**

As discussed, these networks are organized for young employees. Therefore, I looked at what it means for young employees to be identified as a ‘young employee’, and what other identities are present that young employees identify themselves with. To look at the identity of young employees, I will elaborate on the young employee identity and the effects of this identity in both the organization as specific within this young employee network. Understanding the establishment of these identities is crucial in understanding one's personal construction of the self-identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2008).

### **4.2.1. Young employee identity in the organization**

In the interviews, the respondents have distinguished the salience of their young identity, compared to other, older colleagues. They see themselves as a different group, compared to older employees.

To notice like oh, everybody runs into the same things. And then I am speaking about you being the only person in a meeting with all people above 50, how do you deal with the fact that everybody disagrees with you, even though you are pretty convinced about your own point of view. Is it because they feel like you are too young? Or does your plan just suck? And it can be both, but you should not always think that you have a bad idea. It can also be that they have a different view on reality and therefore it is good that you join them. It is also your job to really look at projects and proposals with a fresh outlook, to make sure we do it different sometime. (Respondent 7, Corporate)

In this quote, I observe a possible connection between the age of an employee and the way in which the ideas of this particular employee are perceived. Young employees might not feel like they are taken seriously because of their age, and second guess themselves because of this. However, the respondent also zooms in on the fact that having a ‘different’ idea then the rest of the table, is embedded in the function of the young employee; as young employee, it is perceived to be your task to give new, fresh ideas, that might challenges the status quo. This quote can be interpreted as if giving new, refreshing ideas is part of the identity of young employees in the organization, and might be one of the reasons they get the job. However, deriving from this quote, young employees still encounter problems when fulfilling this ‘invisible assigned job task’. So, even though people might be selected for being young, and having refreshing ideas, it does not always seem to work that way in practice.

When employees experience this, they seem to turn to each other to look for the recognizability of these situations. In order to tackle these thoughts and look for people who experience the same things, they see other young employees as:

A sparring partner. Exchange experiences. Maybe they run into the same things.  
(Respondent 9, non-board member)

About the things he runs into, this respondent states:

And sometimes it is also look, let us say you are in a meeting with five people above 50, then you would probably feel a little bit odd, like ‘Can I say something?’. It sounds a bit stupid, but it happens. You are in a meeting and you see people looking like, ‘he has only worked here for 2 years, I have worked here for 20 years. And it does not make your ideas less great, in any way possible. (Respondent 9, non-board member)

In the last quote, respondent 9 also elaborates on the fact of being looked at as the new kid on the block, because of one's age, and making your ideas less valuable because of it. From this quote, I observe that the respondent mainly gets a feeling from the other, older, employees not to speak up, or giving him the idea that his ideas are not as great as he thought.

Respondent 7 and 9 see the contact with other young employee as a way to get acknowledgement for some of the issues they run into, but do not address how these issues could be tackled. I observe from both quotes that they might have a harder time speaking up about some issues to their direct colleagues, who might be older, but look for the safe haven of people of their own age within the network, to get a more of an understanding if people recognize themselves in their stories. If they do, this might be an indicator for them that they are not judged on their individual ideas, but their age might play a part in the validation of their ideas too.

However, being identified as a young employee was not only identified by the respondents as a factor that might influence the value of your ideas in a bad way, but also in a positive way.

In my personal case, I benefit from the fact that if I get invited to sit around a table with all kinds of managers, I mostly have to tell about young people, so than I am invited as some kind of expert, so I benefit from the fact that because I am young, I am an expert. Normally, a lot of experts feel like 'but I am so young, how can I be an expert in this field?' I am the only one that is an expert because of little experience. So, I think that is funny.

(Respondent 7, Corporate)

In this quote, the respondent seems to describe a connection between age and experience. To my observation, see explains that believing you are an expert on something, or making others believe you are an expert on something, also depends on the age. Is it even possible to be an expert when you are still young? And what is considered an expert?

What she mentioned as funny is that even though she is young, she is considered an expert, since she is consulted about young employees in the organization. So, because of her young identity and expertise in the field of young employees, she is considered an expert, and seems to be valued for her ideas that consider other young employees. When comparing this to the feeling of young employees not feeling heard because of their age, this quotes also indicates that it does not merely depends on one's age, but also on the occupation and kind of expertise they have. Someone young, with an expertise on young employees, seem to be perceived as possessing expertise and skills not possessed by management, and therefore they choose to consult her, because of her age. However, if someone is not an expert for their age, it seems to be harder to get their ideas across.

#### 4.2.2. Young employee identity in relation to the young employee network

Creating a young identity employees relate to, they create some kind of ‘identity group’ within the organization by setting up such a young employee network, which might be perceived in a negative way by others. As explained in the first section of this results section, the young employee network is by young employees perceived as something to increase the joy they feel in working for the organization, which can be tracked down to the bond they feel with other young employees, and the way they identify themselves with other young employees. A line between people aged above 36, and the young employees withing the young employee network is drawn.

You notice that it is hard sometimes. Older colleagues could feel discriminated. Like ‘oh, you can only go if you are aged below 36’. But no, it is just, it is a good thing we unite, because when you are young and new in an organization, you can use some help and support from people from the same age. (Respondent 10, board member)

In this quote, the need for uniting with fellow people from the same age and consulting them when needed seems to outweigh some people above 36 feeling discriminated. This indicates that people that are part of the younger generation seem to experience the existence of the young employee network as positive and can relate and identify themselves with these groups. But the older generation could experience the feeling of exclusion due to the existence of this network. However, this respondent believes that the need to unify for the identity group she relates to outweigh the need for older people to fit in.

It was the first activity that was open for, well how we call it internally [...], we call it ‘young plus’, which are colleagues aged above 36. And well, that was awesome, since a great mix emerged of very young, enthusiastic colleagues, but also colleagues a bit older, who normally do not have access to such opportunities. Another possibility to network and draw upon the experience of colleagues who are a bit older. (Respondent 5, board member)

In this quote, the respondent elaborates on the fact that even though they are a young association, focusing on people aged below 36, organizing an event that brings together both groups aged below and above 36, grants new networking opportunities and gives the opportunity to learn from older colleagues. From this quote, I observe that she sees people aged above 36 as being another group, since she stated that they have made the activity available for two groups, based on a certain age; the ones above 36 and the ones below, the members of the young association. Both these groups can be seen as groups of identification, in which your age determines with which members you identify yourself with.

Furthermore, she seems to link experience to age, since the older people are described to bring in the experience. Even though this is not in line with the association's goal; organizing activities for people aged below 36, it is still believed to be an addition to the association's activities to bring in this experience.

Moreover, respondents mentioned that the young employee network brings extra joy to their work, because of the contact with other young employees, and the fact that they identify themselves with the employees within the network.

The work is less fun if you have less contact with younger colleagues.

(Respondent 4, board member)

This respondent states that being in contact with younger employees increases the fun. I observe from this quote that this respondent thinks that being in contact with young employees gives a fun dimension to one's work, that cannot be accomplished through contact with older employees. This raises the question if contact with people above 36 would not be as fun, as hanging out with people your 'own age'. Why does this respondent think that having fun can be related to another person's age? Another respondent gives a possible explanation for this matter:

You meet other people your age, since there are a lot of people above 50, and if you are aged between 20 and 30 years old, you don't really feel like listening to stories about one's pension, so it helps with the fun at work and feeling at home. (Respondent 3, board member)

In this quote, a connection can be seen between feeling at home and being in contact with other young employees, through the young employee network. To my observation, the respondent believes that age is related to the topics people talk about and are interested in, which makes him feel more related to people his age, than people that are significantly older. Therefore, he seems to identify himself with the people connected to the young employee network, based on their age. In my observation, the more fun he describes is therefore related to the feeling of connection with other young people and the feeling of identification with people that are interested in the same topics. This therefore indicates that a feeling of identification contributes to the fun one has in one's work.

Finally, the feeling of identification within the young employee seems to differ across the different initiatives. One board member explained herself by the following:



Well.. it is for a part interest, a part traveling time, but also for a part the level in which you identify yourself with something. And that, with the young association<sup>13</sup> and the organizational young employee board<sup>14</sup>, it is more compared to the overarching national initiatives<sup>15</sup> [...] I do not really feel connected to those. (Respondent 5, board member)

So, even though the age in all initiatives is the same, the level of her personal identification with the local young association and the national initiative of the organization differs. And she couples the identification with those groups to the feeling of connection. So, this feeling of connection and identification is not solely based on age, but there are also other factors in play, for her a direct link to the organization seems to be important for identifications as well, by describing both the young association as the organizational young employee board as initiatives she can identify herself with most.

Furthermore, by bundling the powers of young employees through the different young association, there seems to be a change in how ideas of people identified as young employees are valued, since as individuals, some employees doubt whether their ideas are valued for what they are worth. This difference can be detected by the establishment of the Young Group Council, also briefly explained in the first part of this chapter. The Young Group Council has an advisory role towards top management of the organization.

What I think is very valuable for example is that you have our Group Council, which is filled with directors, but now they have some kind of ‘Young Group Council’ so there really is the opportunity as younger people to, if we have an opinion on a certain topic, that we can let it know through that council. They really listen to us. We have a bigger voice towards our board. I experience that as really positive. (Respondent 10, board member).

In this quote, the existence of the Young group council is explained. She explains the advisory role of the group council. It seems that by bundling the powers of young employees, they have a stronger voice towards the management. In this quote it seems that when those ideas are bundled and then directed towards management, they are more highly valued, then when those ideas are presented by one young employee individually, as presented by previous quotes.

Furthermore, even though the respondent does not take place in the Young Group Council herself, she feels more represented by the Young Groups Council than she felt with the ‘regular’ Group Council, consisting of mostly people aged above 36. She seems to feel like her ideas are more represented, even though she is not participating herself, which is also the case in the normal Group

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<sup>13</sup> Anonymized: Name of the young association

<sup>14</sup> Anonymized: Name of the organizational young employee board

<sup>15</sup> Anonymized: Names of the overarching young initiatives

Council. This highlight the difference in feeling connected and represented by a certain group, the young employees, which she might have based on age or experience. Therefore, I observe from this quote that the identification with a certain group has an influence on the feeling of being represented, in the case of this respondent.

#### **4.2.3. Recap young employee identity**

To sum up, young employees identify themselves as such, and feel related to their young identities and other young colleagues in terms of for example interests, and therefore feel like being in contact with other young employees increases the fun in their work. This makes that the young employee network facilitates having fun, since it provides the opportunity for your employees to meet. However, in some cases their young identity feels as hindering their tries to implement their (new) ideas, even though they are expected to come up with new ideas, due to their young identity. However, even though their voice as individuals may not always be heard, their voice as a collective is more valued, as represented through the group council, and the fact the young employee networks are consulted as a group.

#### **4.3. Identity work**

As described in the previous section, a salient identity can be identified of young employees in the organization, and in relation to the young employee network. However, one's personal identity (as a young employee) is influenced and re(constructed) by a person, which can be referred to as identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity work may be influenced by encounters with others and contextual factors (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Klein, 2000). So, therefore, in this section, I will look at the organization and the young employee network as the context in which young employees (re)construct their own identity as a young employee, through identity work.

##### **4.3.1. Identity work in the organization**

In the data, there could be found that some of the offered development opportunities throughout the organization can affect one's identification with the organization, and to a certain group within this organization, and this development can affects one's identity work, in particular the traineeship.

The traineeship focuses on people who just graduated college. They start a 1,5-year program with a group of approximately thirty to forty people. Every six months, they change to a different project throughout the organization. Respondents explained that the way of entering the organization,

for example the contrast between entering as a trainee or as a ‘regular starter’, could influence one’s development process.

I entered via the traineeship. If you just apply for a position, it’s harder to get to know the organization. (Respondent 10, board member)

This woman has been a trainee herself and feels like the onboarding in the organization would have been harder if it she had not joined the traineeship.

One respondent that was not part of the traineeship himself, also stated some positive things about the program:

They have their own program on how to get to know the organization, and they change assignments every half a year. So, they already learn a lot, but for young employees who come from outside the organization, it can definitely help. (Respondent 2, board member)

From both quotes, I observe a deviation between the identification as a trainee, and as a non-trainee, since they seem to refer to people as being part of the trainee group, or not, which has an effect of the way they onboard in the organization. So, even with their shared identity of being a young employee, they seem to categorize according to the fact that you were part of the group of trainees or not. The last quote therefore indicates that the identity of trainee (or non-trainee) is salient above the shared identity of ‘young employee’; being identified as a young employee trainee comes with different aspects than being identified as a young employee that has not been a trainee. When regarding one’s identity work, the question ‘who am I’, as described by Cerulo (1997) to be an indicator of identity work, will probably be different answered by a trainee, framing oneself as ‘a trainee’, then other young employees, that do not feel part of the ‘trainee-group’. Therefore, this salience of identity has an effect on one’s identity work by influencing how individuals perceives themselves.

#### **4.3.2. Identity work of young employees within the network**

As explained in Chapter 3, the young employee network consists of different initiatives. In order to look at the effect of all these connected, but somehow independent initiatives, I have looked at the extent to which the young employees in the organization valued and were (unconsciously) influenced by the different local young associations and the other, overarching initiatives.

Generally, the board members of the young associations valued their own local young association more, in comparison to the national initiatives, whereas some non-board members did not really distinguish the different initiatives. The most mentioned reason was that the local young association

gives you the opportunity to get to know people more on a personal level, and they have connected with the association, since they are a board member themselves.

Even though the respondents have a positive feeling in relation to the young employee network, they seem to look at the network as a contribution to their work, and not their personal identity.

Corresponding to the latter, one respondent for example said:

I do not think that it has a lot of influence.. I would not directly think that I became a different person because I am part of a young employee network. No. (Respondent 12, board member)

Another respondent stated that the young employee network only contributes to his working life, not his personal life and himself as a person.

If there is a young employee day, that is the entire day and well, [...] if they say it is after office hours, I will not attend. Because the only reason you join such an activity is because of your work, you are not there for your own joy. [...] I visit these activities in my spare time as little as possible. I do not do it for myself, my personal life. You do it for your work.  
(Respondent 2, board member)

This comment seems to be in contrast with the previous findings, that the young employee network provides young employees with more joy. However, from the observation of the quote, this respondent seems to unlink his 'own joy' and his work, even though other respondents have made the comment that it increases the joy they feel at work. Therefore, this particular respondents seems to address a different issue than in the earlier findings, where only the joy at work was addressed, instead of one's joy in their personal life.

The deviation between joy and work is made more clear in this statement by categorizing the activities of the young employee network as 'work', which should mainly be included in the stated working hours, instead of visiting all activities in one's spare time.

Finally, this quote indicates that he relates the young employee network to his work identity, which in his eyes seems not related to his personal identity at home and their own identity work. This fits the quote of respondent 12, that does not see a change in himself as a person, because of the young employee network. However, employees form and modify how they define themselves in work-based situations (Dutton, Roberts, Bednar, 2010), and an individual's response to this dynamics influences one's personal identity work (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). Therefore, even though both respondents state they do not experience the young employee network as an influence on their identity work, the fact that it influences themselves in work-based situations can still influence one's identity work. This can be further explained by another quote of the last-mentioned respondent:

And working, I do that on the side you know, to support for my family. So, I do not feel that need that much. And I do not think other people will have that as well. But, it is true that when, you know, the people that I meet for ‘young’, if you run into them during your work, it is more easy to have a little talk, and makes it easier to talk about your private life at work. It is pretty nice to share things at your work every once in a while, that happen at home, to talk about football. Well, if you then find people you can level with, yes of course, it helps, but that again is related to your work (Respondent 2, board member)

From this quote, I observe that even though the respondent seems to make a clear line between his personal life and his work life, he still appreciates it if it gets mixed a little bit. However, he still merely couples this to his work, even though his working life can influence his personal life, as described by Dutton et al. (2010).

#### **4.3.3. Recap identity work**

To sum up, identity work is present through the feeling of identification with the different groups and initiatives, and in the interactions of young employees with this identification. Board members of the young associations for example seem to identify themselves with the young associations more than with the other initiatives, and their identity work is therefore influenced by these young associations more. Furthermore, the identity of being a trainee is salient over being ‘just’ a young employee, which makes the identity work of both groups different, since they might give a different answer to the question ‘who am I?’, based on these groups.

Furthermore, respondents express that the young employee network only affects themselves at work and does not affect who they are. However, employees form and modify how they define themselves in work-based situations (Dutton, Roberts, Bednar, 2010), and an individual’s response to this dynamics influences one’s personal identity work (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). Therefore, by being affected in their work life, they are also influenced in their own identity work.

#### **4.4. Power relations**

Another aspect that has an influence on identity construction, is identity regulation (Alvesson et al., 2008), as elaborated on in Chapter 2. To look at this concept, I have looked at the different power relations related to the young employee network, that affect identity construction of young employees in the organization. The relations that I will look at are the relationship between the young employees and the network, between the different networks, between the network and management and between

individual members and management, zooming in on both the directors of the local services and the direct supervisors of the young employees.

#### **4.4.1. Relation between members and the network**

When looking at the relationship between the members and the young employee network, one respondent talked about the role of the young employee network in the retainment of young employees.

One of our goals is to retain young employees for the organization<sup>16</sup>. Because if we just offer them nice activities, or just trainings they can learn from, or sight visits, it increases the fun for young employees, which increases the chances for them to stay at the organization.  
(Respondent 12, board member)

Deriving from this quote, I observe that the respondent couples the fun young employees have to the chance they stay in the organization. So, in order to give them extra joy in their work, they provide them with certain activities. What is interesting in this quote is that he describes ‘nice activities’ apart from trainings or site visits, that seem both work-related. Maybe, by describing nice activities apart from trainings and site visits, the respondents take both work related activities and other activities apart from one and other, even though these work-related activities could also be perceived by others as ‘nice’. And, even though he does not assign trainings and site visits to ‘nice activities’, he still seems to believe that they all can contribute to the fun an employee has in one’s work.

This quote also seems to fit the way in which the young employee network is perceived, as a tool to mainly provide for more joy in one’s work. By providing this joy, the young employee network seems to regulate the retainment of young employees.

Furthermore, one respondent also talks about the power of the young employee network that influences his development.

When I joined the organization I had kind of a hard time connecting with people. And because of the young employee network, you are forced to talk to people on meetings. Yes, I still feel the shyness, but I can put it aside more easily. (Respondent 2, board member)

In this quote, the respondent noted that the young employee network forced something on him, which he has experienced as something positive, even though it challenges his natural self. This can be seen as identity regulation, since his self is influenced by the regulation mechanisms of the young employee network. By signing up as a board member and joining certain activities, this board member

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

felt forced to talk to people, maybe since the network's activities are mostly socially events, to extend one's network. So, this indicates that because of the feeling that the young employee network is a way to establish networks and talk to other young employees, this respondent seems to be regulated in challenging how he would normally react in such a situation.

Finally, to elaborate on the management of the board of the young association, one respondent for example said the following:

I think the young associations are very well managed. You have the opportunity to join such an association, if you are in one. If you want to join in, it's all pretty informal, nothing gets forced onto you. I would not change a thing. (Respondent 5, board member)

She reflects on the management of the young associations in a positive way, stating they are well managed by board members, which she is one of herself. Furthermore, by observing the quote above, a board member seems to need two things to be able to join the young employee network: the opportunity and the intrinsic motivation, indicated by 'if you want to join'. So, on the one hand, one has to be motivated and wanting to join, which indicates that that person is in control about her position. However, on the other hand, 'having the opportunity' indicates that being a board member is also influenced by other forces. This raises questions about who would provide this opportunity, and by whom this opportunity is controlled and influenced.

When moving to the second part of the quote, she elaborated on the atmosphere within the board, which seems to be informal, and not forced. However, when being in a board, this naturally comes with responsibilities and maybe with certain tasks. Therefore, the complete informal nature where nothing is obligated seems to be a bit contradicting with the natural role of a board member.

#### **4.4.1.1. Relation between different young associations**

The relationship between board members of different young associations could also be distinguished. The primary reason for board members to get in contact with other board members is to organize activities together.

We were occupied with hosting an event with four different young associations.  
(Respondent 11, board member)

No, we do not really know each other, so that is the point. You want to get to know each other, and we wanted to plan an event for this summer or something, but yeah, obviously that

is not going to work right now, so we can only stay in touch via email. But at one point, we would want to meet each other. That is just not possible right now.

(Respondent 11, board member)

I think it is nice to organize some activities with other young associations in the future.

(Respondent 12, board member)

From the quotes above, the aspect of organizing activities together can be detected. From the quotes above, and other quotes from employees that were explained in the transcript, I cannot observe any power struggles that might influence this contact. It seems like the contacts are easily made, and probably directly from board member to board members. How can we explain the lack of the visualization of power relations in this relationship? It might hint to people feeling more equal, since there is contact between a board member and a board member, which might balance out the power relationship.

#### **4.4.2. Relation between management and the young associations**

With regards to the relationship of the young employee network with management, there were indicators found that showcase the power relation present between management and the young employee network and show possible signs of therefore regulating one's identity construction. One respondent says about the role of management:

It is not possible to bring together all those worlds. You see it throughout the organization, so you also see it within 'young'. You could, you could try to, let us say, let the board of an organizational unit say like well, you have to be organized and you three or four make a board. But well, I do not think that working top down, that it works you know. I think eventually, eventually not. It makes or breaks with the internal support and needs. So, I do not know whether that would work. (Respondent 2, board member).

This quote states that in order to do something, one has to be intrinsically motivated and not feel pushed. However, this respondent did agree and felt motivated again when someone from top down asked him to initiate some activities for young employees again.

I needed it then because I was kind of done with it. And then one of our directors asked, 'I do not see 'young' within your unit<sup>17</sup>, what is the reason for that?' [...] And then yeah, someone from line management asks like 'Would you want to do it?' And then well, you do it because

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name



someone asks you to, but I was not feeling like doing it anymore. I was kind of done.  
(Respondent 2, board member)

So somehow, this top down approach, regulating one's steps, seem to eventually turn out the other way. Since he later on states to enjoy it now, even though it is 'forced'. So even though stating this top down approach does not seem to work, he himself does what he is asked when such an approach is used. By stating that he was done, but still did it because he was asked, indicates that the weight of his manager asking him somewhat overshadows and overpowers the fact that he himself was done with it. So, in this quote, the membership of the board of this respondent was controlled by upper management, since they wanted to establish a young association within this particular service, and saw him as a candidate for the job because of his identity as a young employee that was visible in the organization.

#### **4.4.2.1. Relation between directors and the young association**

To zoom in on the power relation between the management and the members of the young employee network, I will zoom in on the power relations between the directors of a particular service and the board members of the young association of this particular service.

The communication between the young employee network and directors has multiple dimensions. The first dimension is that the board asks for approval to their (assigned) director for the establishment of the young association, or for the amount of budget which can be assigned to their activities. For example, about the establishment of a new young association, one respondent stated:

Well, there is a plan and that is we submitted in the board of directors. [...] Which we got approval on. (Respondent 10, board member)

When a young association comes up with certain activities, they go to their assigned director to get permission from the board to host those activities. Another respondent says this is also the case in her service.

He approves our yearly planning, grants budget and he wants to be involved himself, so wants to be invited to drinks etcetera. Well, super nice of course, but that is how it works.  
(Respondent 6, board member)

From those quotes, I observe that by leaving the type of activities up to the board members of a certain young association, the directors are not trying to regulate what these activities should be, and how they should influence young employees in the organization, which might have an influence on

the identity construction of the young employees in this particular young association. Therefore, the directors leave this regulation up to the board members, which can result in board members steering one's development and self-identity by regulating the identity construction through determining what activities take place.

Furthermore, zooming in on the last quote, instead of just having an overview and approving things, this director wants to be a part of this network, making the one hierarchical speaking in charge, part of the group. The respondent experiences this as something positive.

Even though mostly the different young associations can come up with the ideas for activities themselves, one respondent believes that this might differ when it comes to the national organizational board.

Maybe they do give suggestions to the national board, since they have a bigger network and are more in the picture. But, the young associations of the services do not experience that.

(Respondent 4, board member)

From this quote it can be derived that the respondent thinks that there is a difference in regulation of management in relation to the local young associations and the national board. However, there is no direct statement that would indicate this as such.

However, some board members from local young associations also mentioned that their assigned director also gives suggestions.

Well, we get all the opportunities. Last year I joined in on the conversation with our supervisor<sup>18</sup>. He had a couple suggestions like, you might look at the points of focus we have this year. Could this theme fit? 'I know someone who does this and this, it would be cool to be able to do that'. But it is a suggestion, not an obligation. (Respondent 5, board member)

So, in this particular case, the assigned director gives directions or suggestions that might complement the goal of the association, which is not felt as an obligation. But, does this really does not feel this way? Or is it just not told in this way? The power of the board might influence the decision made by the young employee network, in contrast to the employees stating they just get an approval on their stated plans, and how these plans are formed are sufficiently not influenced.

One respondent also mentioned that the director gives suggestions, but also asked them to organize one thing, that was not directly linked to their goals that focus on young employees.

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymized: Function name

She wanted us to organize a barbecue for the entire region<sup>19</sup>. So, we as a young association did that. [...] It was done before by others, and everybody liked it, so I think she got her chance to let us do it. (Respondent 6, board member)

Even though the director gave them a task that did not seem to match the goal of organizing activities for people below 36, the respondent still says to have experienced it as something positive. However, her stating that “I think she got her chance to let us do it”, indicates more of a top down decision, based on power. Since from this quote I observe that the director might have used her power in the organization to give the network a task. But, could they have said no? Or was it expected that they would do it no matter what? The respondent herself was positive about this suggestion:

Always welcome. (Respondent 6, board member)

This seems to be a bit conflicting since, as a member of the board of a young association, you sign up to host activities for a certain target group, which might not match an activity for the entire unit. However, the board member has a positive attitude towards letting the young association organize this barbecue. This might raise the question why this is perceived as positive. Did she really feel this way? Or did she perceive it as such since the manager asked them?

The second dimension, regarding the contact with the directory board, is the board asking for advice from the young association on certain topics, which is experienced by four board members of different young associations.

[..] You notice that if they need something, or they say like ‘How can we reach out to more students?’, they ask me or the other board member<sup>20</sup> like ‘Hey, can you help us with this?’ ‘How do you see this topic?’ So yes, I think it is a positive thing that they want our input, yes. (Respondent 10, board member)

So, instead of the communication coming from the young association, the board members of this young association got asked for their input by the directors, which makes the communication more two-fold, instead of top down only. Because of their young identity, they are perceived as being closer to students, and can use their expertise of being young to help and give advice to the board. This fits the earlier findings of young employees as a collective being valued for their advice.

One other respondent said:

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<sup>19</sup> Anonymized: Service name

<sup>20</sup> Anonymized: Personal name

Yes, they ask for our input. For example, we can join some of the board meetings, or if we see something interesting which they are going to discuss, this gets appreciated.

(Respondent 11, board member)

The respondent explains that directors can both ask for input themselves, or the board of the young association can give input whether they have an interesting topic themselves, or they see a topic on the agenda they want to talk about.

The latter brings me to the last dimension regarding communication with the directory board. The last dimension regards the ideas or contribution the young associations have, promoting the interest of young employees in their service. One young association for example mentions this as a goal.

Management: challenge the management, contribute to changes within the service<sup>21</sup> with young employees and promote the interests of young employees towards the management.

(Document 2, Year Report)

In terms of power and control, this statement from a year report indicates that the young employee network might be seen as a tool to try to influence the way in which the interests of young employees are promoted. Therefore, the young employee network could be seen as a way to extend the voice of young employees and challenge their management. This might have a connection with the earlier findings that the young employee network as a collective is consulted, but for the young employees individually, it is harder to get their ideas across. This raises the questions why this young association has set up this goal. Did they for example experience difficulties in challenging management as individuals? Are they trying to expand their influence by bundling their powers?

How this goal is formulated in this document, does not describe how it always works in practice. Looking back at the interviews, this communication flow seems to depend on the services and different young associations of this services. Some young associations have a greater role, with the opportunity to sit around the table with the directors, whilst others are still trying to establish a more stable position.

It is a national suggestion to involve young associations more in directory meetings [...] And we have had the conversation with our director on how we, as a young association<sup>22</sup> can join directory meetings, but we always have to make the first move, whilst we would want the directors to feel the urge instead, since you would want them to have the outlook of young employees on things. But, because we have to initiate it ourselves, it is not working properly.

(Respondent 4, board member)

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<sup>21</sup> Anonymized: Service name

<sup>22</sup> Anonymized: Name of the particular young association

So, this respondent states that to him, it would be positive to be more in direct contact and give advice to the board of directors. I observe from this quote that because of his young identity, he has the feeling he should be consulted, stated that management should want the outlook of young employees. In this context, the young employee network seems to work as some kind of platform where these young employees can be found. In fact, the employee states in his quote that the outlook of a young employee is needed, but therefore he states that the manager should consult the young association. This raises the question why the management is not questioned about consulting individual employees but asked to consult the young association. This again seems to indicate that the collective voice of a young association of a service is higher valued compared to the individual young employees in this service.

It is also interesting that he thinks that the directors should have the urge to consult them, instead of the other way around. The board members of the network expecting things from the organizational environment around them, by expecting to be consulted by management because of their identity and board member role, can be seen as an example of power or regulation. Through being on the board, this respondent thinks this should regulate the urge of directors to consult him, which might not be the case if he was not part of the young association. So, his identity of being in the board gives him the feeling that his ideas should be heard and consulted, which urge might have been less prominent if he was not part of the board. Therefore, the identity of a board member seems to be salient compared to the identity of a young employee, and regulates the way in which the respondent sees himself, since as a board member he believes to have a more prominent role as consultant within the organization. And even though it is a suggestion throughout the company to involve the young association and grant them an advisory role, which is therefore tried to be regulated from higher ranks, to this respondent, it does not seem sufficient.

#### **4.4.4. Relationship individual members and management**

When looking at the power relationship between individual (board) members of the young associations and management, I can distinguish two main relationships; between the individual (board) members and the supervisors, and between the (board) members and the directors of their services.

##### **4.4.4.1. Individual (board) members and supervisors**

When it comes to the role of the supervisor, the supervisor could play a role in the process of becoming a board member, or joining certain activities, both as a board member and not. Most respondents stated that being on the board or visiting certain activities was supported by their supervisors. One board member for example said about joining the board of the young association:

Well, I just discussed it with my supervisor, and she definitely thinks that, since I am new in the organization, it is a good way to get to know the organization. So, it is very positive, and there is room to do so. (Respondent 1, board member)

She stated that her supervisor sees being on the board as a way for her to get to know the organization, and therefore, the supervisor seems to have a positive attitude towards being on the board. But, if she would not have had this positive attitude, this might have influenced the chances of the respondents for being in the board. With her supervisor having the power to approve or not to approve, the supervisor seems to regulate some decisions.

However, the tone of voice of this respondent differs from another respondent, who states the following:

If you say like 'I want to do something with 'young', and I want to spend time on it', but you are super busy. You can just go to your supervisor, and he or she has to come up with some great arguments to say like 'no, you cannot do that, you have to prioritize your work', because that's just stipulated in organizational documents. (Respondent 2, board member)

This tone differs from the tone of the first respondent, since the first respondent seemed to actively ask whether it would be okay with her supervisor, where the second respondent refers to the fact that being part of the board and participating in activities outside his regular job tasks is recorded in an organizational document. This is both a different perception of the power of the supervisor. Since the second respondent seems to feel like the overarching organizational document is leading and might only be questioned with some great arguments. But, what would those arguments be? Or how would he react if these arguments were present or his supervisor did not allow it? The first respondent however seems to value the opinion of her supervisor as leading and did not mention any document.

One respondent stated that even though he probably would be allowed by his supervisor, he still would not join the board.

No, since now I am doing something, I am good at. And I think it could be possible, but I choose not to, to focus more on my profession. (Respondent 13, non-board member)

So, according to the respondents, it seems like they are limited controlled by their supervisors, who are open for them to come up with ideas and for example join the board but sometimes just choose not to do so themselves. However, how I observe this quote, is that the respondent is not 100% sure that his supervisor would agree, since he thinks it is possible, instead of knowing in practice.

This pattern of being allowed to join the board, can also be seen when looking at getting the permission to go to certain activities of the young associations, which also seems to be positively

approached by supervisors. One respondent elaborates on both the role of the young employees themselves as the supervisors in attending these activities.

They are more in the way of themselves then somebody saying to them like ‘You cannot go.’ But it is more like they think to themselves like I have to finish this, I skip this. But then yeah, you do it more often. And you do not have to join every time, but I think sometimes people are in the way of themselves. It can be fun for your work in this organization<sup>23</sup>.  
(Respondent 1, board member)

This respondent somewhat confirms the idea most respondents had, by not feeling limited by their supervisor. But on the contrary, she feels like some employees might be in the way of themselves, putting pressure on themselves. However, this raises the question why they put this pressure upon themselves. Do they maybe feel the supervisor’s pressure to finish their job? Or is it really solely an internal pressure, as described by the respondent. Although, by stating it could be fun for people to go, she also acknowledges the fact that for some people it might not be fun, which also can be a reason for people not to attend, which she does not mention.

These insights indicate that the supervisor plays a role in the regulation process, since he or she is believed to be allowed not to allow someone to be in the board or visit activities, which can regulate how one develop and how one develops their identity. However, in this particular case, most respondents believe that this choice is up to them, experiencing minor feelings of regulation, but might be regulating themselves by prioritizing, and for example choosing to join or not to join certain activities, that might have an influence on one’s development.

#### **4.4.4.2. Relation between individual members and their directory board**

Finally, one respondent also mentioned that as a board member, she has contact with the board of directors that she probably would have not had if she would not have been a board member.

As a board member, we really sit around a table with the director, previously the highest director<sup>24</sup>. As a result, we are more in direct contact with people higher up in the organizational ladder. Normally, you would not have that as a young person. There are plenty of colleagues that never sit around the table with a director or the highest director<sup>25</sup>. The directors know us because of that, and you learn from it. If we write memos [...] we learn how to write it, how to submit it, how you do it in a correct way. (Respondent 6, board member)

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<sup>23</sup> Anonymized: Organizational name

<sup>24</sup> Anonymized: Personal name

<sup>25</sup> Anonymized: Personal name

This respondent talks about the influence the contact with the board has on both her personal development and the visibility within the organization. By making contact as a directory board, and forcing individual members to take the correct ways to correspond and bring in new ideas, the directors influence the development of the board members and establishing the confidence to present themselves in front of a board.

#### **4.4.5 Recap identity regulation**

To sum up, (identity) regulation can be found in different power relations, respectively the relationship between individual members and the network, between management and the young associations and management and individual members.

The young employee network can work as a tool to retain employees for the organization and can force people out of their comfort zone, by certain activities. Furthermore, the young employee network is perceived as informal and not forced on people, however it can function as a tool to get people out of their comfort zone, which challenges their inner self.

Furthermore, there are power relations present between management and the network, when management influences who joins the board of the young associations. The relationship between directors and the young association can be divided into three dimensions; the board of the young association asking for permission to their assigned director, the directory board asking the young employee network for advice, and the young association promoting the interests of young employees. Regulation takes place by the directors assigning certain tasks to the network, and steering them in a certain direction when needed, but also by board members filling in the content of what they offer. They therefore could regulate what activities take place, and how these activities affect for example one's identification with the young employee network. Furthermore, in asking the advice of the board, there could be seen that as a collective, the young employees seem to be highly valued even though this does not always happen individually, as discussed. By being part of this young employee network, board members might also feel like they should be consulted. This indicates that they think they should be consulted because of their identity as a young employee and a board member of the young association, for only their identity as a young employee.

In addition, individual board members have to do with both supervisors and the directory board, in which supervisors could determine whether to join the board or not, but are perceived to be willing to accept it, or are not left a choice since there are documents about doing other things besides your work. And finally, the directory board can regulate the development of the board members and their identification with the organization by involving them in daily routines, and learning how to get certain information across to the board, since this can affect their organizational development.



## **5. Discussion**

The aim of this research is to contribute to the knowledge about the identity construction of young employees within young employee networks, in order to contribute to the knowledge of identity construction within young employee networks, and therefore contribute to the knowledge on young employee networks in general, since this is an under researched item (Dennissen et al., 2019). In order to fulfill this aim, the following research question was formulated: ‘How do young employee networks contribute to the identity construction of young employees?’. In this final chapter, I will formulate an answer to my research question and derive theoretical implications and possible ideas for future research from my results. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the practical implications deriving from this research, and I will conclude with the limitations of this research, with special attention to my role as a researcher.

### **5.1. Answering the research question**

To answer the research question, multiple components of identity construction found in the results section have to be taken into account. Respectively: the identification as a young employee, identity work, and identity regulation in terms of power and politics (Alvesson, 2008).

The young employee network is organized around the identity of being a young employee. The young employees in this network can identify themselves with one and other and relate to one and other because of this shared identity. This shared identity of being a young employee however, also comes with certain prejudices. On the one hand, individual young employees are expected to come up with new, refreshing ideas, while on the other hand, they do not always feel listened to and heard, when trying to come up with new ideas. However, when seen as a collective group of young employees, for example in the young employee network, their ideas seem to be more appreciated and valued.

Even though there is one shared identity, the identity work of young employees within the network also depends upon how they identify themselves to other groups. Board members of the young associations for example seem to identify themselves with the young associations more than with the other initiatives, and their identity work is therefore influenced by these young associations more. Furthermore, the identity of being a trainee is salient over being ‘just’ a young employee. Deriving from the findings of Cerulo (1997), linking identity work to asking yourself ‘who am I?’, this makes the identity work of both groups different, since they might answer this question differently.

Furthermore, regarding one’s identity work, the presence of the young employee network is perceived as positive, but is only perceived to be of influence on their work, and how they feel and function at work, instead of their own personal identity work. However, employees form and modify

how they define themselves in work-based situations (Dutton, Roberts, Bednar, 2010), and an individual's response to these dynamics influences one's personal identity work (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006).

Finally, regarding the concept of identity regulation and its influence on the identity construction of young employees, there are different power relations affecting the identity construction of young employees, connected to the young employee network: the relationship between individual members and the network, between management and the young associations and management and individual members.

The young employee network itself can be perceived as a tool for identity regulation because of its alleged effect of the identification of young employees with both the network and the organization by hosting certain activities and getting together young employees. Influencing this identification process can be seen as identity regulation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). However, because of the managerial influence and the influence individual board members have on these activities that define the young employee network, they are also key in the regulation of the identity of young employees.

Furthermore, supervisors and management are important when it comes to both visiting the activities of the young employee network, as described as a way of identification, and being a board member. Being in the board was for example mentioned to enhance ties and expand the network within the organization and give the opportunity to talk to other young employees and therefore increase the joy and job satisfaction young employees have in their work, as a result of identification with a certain group (Mael & Ashforth, 2001). Influencing this identification process can, as discussed, be seen as identity regulation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Supervisors, management and individuals themselves can therefore regulate their identification process by joining the board or not. This process of joining the board is mostly cheered on by supervisors and management, even though management can also ask people to join the board, making it not solely and intrinsic motivated choice.

## **5.2. Theoretical implications and recommendations for future research**

Drawing on a critical management perspective, I have elaborated on the contextual factors related to a young employee network, influencing the identity construction of young employees. So to sum up, the findings of this research have identified that the identity construction of young employees is affected by the young employee network through the influence of the young employee network on their personal identity work, and the power relations accompanied by the young employee network that influence one's identity construction.

This study draws on the idea of Foldy (2019), that diversity networks can play a role in identity construction of their members. This study has focused on the specific factors related to the

young employee network, like the power relations and that might influence the identity construction of young employees. As discussed, there are indications that a young employee network might influence the identity construction of young employees by hosting certain activities and by creating a collective identity within the network, which seems to make it more interesting to consult its members, compared to consulting individual young employees.

Furthermore, this study also draws upon the study of Dennissen et al. (2019) who stated that a young employee networks can also be legitimized by offering socializing opportunities, instead of having to legitimize themselves by offering developmental opportunities. I derived from my study that young employees see 'the increase of joy in their work' as their number one reason for the existence of the young employee network, and whether or not to join the board, and the organization seem to feel like this is a legitimate reason for their existence. Therefore, this confirms the findings of Dennissen et al. (2019).

Furthermore, as stated, diversity management and diversity networks are linked to power (Dennissen 2019, Foldy, 2002), and a specific network can play a role in the identity construction of their members (Foldy, 2019). This study has distinguished multiple power relations related to a young employee network, and their impact on identity construction by for example influencing who could be in the board and which activities are hosted. In these power relations, board members, supervisors and management play a crucial role in regulation how people develop themselves and identify themselves with the organization. This regulation of one's identification has influenced the way one's identity is constructed (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). These different power relations have different effects on one's identity construction, since young employees feel more hierarchical pressured by directors, then for example board members of their own age. The hierarchical feeling they experience from their supervisor to join the board is toned down by the organizational arrangements that include participating in tasks outside one's standardized work tasks. These insights deepen the overall understanding of power relations that accompany diversity networks by looking into the exact power relations involved, focusing on young employee networks specifically, and identifying the regulation that takes place by the assignment of board members and the selection and execution of certain activities.

Furthermore, this study has found indications that some people that do not fit in the category of young employees, might feel left out, when they notice that initiatives are there for young employees. This suits the idea that diversity networks can create a base for exclusion and the feeling of being left out (Dennissen et al. 2019). When initiating such a network, the young employee network becomes visible, not only for young employees. The presence of a diversity network makes that group more visible within the organization (Foldy, 2019). But, how young employee networks in particular contribute to the visibility of young employees throughout the organization is, to my knowledge, an under researched item. Therefore, future research could focus on this aspect of diversity networks and how these dynamics evolve throughout the organization.

Finally, to get a deeper understanding of how young employee networks contribute to the identity construction of young employees, I would suggest researching a young employee network or one facet of this young employee network in dept. Because of all the different initiatives, the effects of identity constructions differed across these initiatives since some employees could identify them more with certain initiatives and less with others. In order to understand the actual effect of these young employee networks, the understanding of their effect on identity construction is crucial (Foldy, 2019). Therefore, I would recommend future research to look at a case only one initiative is in place to look at the actual effects of only one initiative, to elaborate on the results of this study and deepen the alleged effect of young employee network on identity construction, instead of focusing on an intertwined young employee network, like this study did.

### **5.3. Practical implications and recommendations**

The young employees questioned have stated that they have positive feelings towards the young employee network, feeling connected with their fellow peers, and having the feeling like they can connect. Therefore, I would recommend HR management and direct supervisors to support this kind of initiatives, when young employees are motivated to be in such an initiative themselves. However, people above the prescribed age could get a feeling of exclusion, since they cannot visit some of the activities. I would recommend management to grant the opportunity for those people to initiate things for themselves, trying to make them feel like they can establish something on their own when needed.

Furthermore, when an organization is complex and divided in different sections that together form the young employee network, as in the discussed case, I would recommend for the different initiatives to aim for more cohesion between these initiatives, which can be supported by the management of the organization. This could enhance the feeling of being part of the bigger picture and reduce the repetitiveness of multiple activities. When combining these activities and bundling one's power, people receive less information, which could therefore be taken in more. Next to that, the bundling of powers can reduce the time which board members have to spend organizing, making it more time efficient, which could be interesting for managers.

### **5.4. Limitations and reflection on my personal role**

Finally, I want to address some limitations of this research, including the reflection on my personal role as a researcher, and my personal influence as a researcher on the process.

When choosing this topic, my personal interest in this topic was based on my own feeling of identification with the research group, because I felt connected to young employees. I will enter the work field myself soon, and I felt like I could therefore relate to them, reducing the gap between me and my respondents. This presupposition might have influenced the way I have looked at the

respondents (Haynes, 2012), because I have had positive feelings towards them. This made me go into the interviews with a positive mindset, which might have influenced the results. In order to still analyze in depth, I tried to look at the power relations throughout the organization and the meaning behind text, instead of only following my positive way of thinking. However, this feeling towards this group of respondents cannot be disregarded and should be taken into account when examining the results.

Furthermore, when we look at the young employee network as discussed, I think the variety of different initiatives makes it hard to speak about the researched case as one employee network, since there are different initiatives, serving both the same or a different target audience: all young employees working for the government, young employees from the organizational institution the organization belongs to, all young employees in the organization, and young employees of a particular service. These different initiatives can affect identity construction differently, since the results have shown that board members of the young associations for example can identify themselves with the local young associations more, compared to the national initiatives. Therefore, the effect of the young employee network on identity construction might differ across different initiatives, making it hard to speak about a unified effect on identity construction by ‘the young employee network’ since it cannot be so clearly identified as one concept.

The third limitation refers to the non-probability sampling technique used, where I have reached out to possible participants, based on certain characteristics (Saunders, 2012). However, possible participants were put forward by board members of the particular young associations, which made them partly in power of who were selected. And, after reaching out to these respondents put forward, I did not get the chance to filter all respondents based on certain characteristics, which makes the ratio between members of certain young associations a bit odd. Therefore, the board members of the young employee networks have affected the choice of respondents, which might have influenced the results if they for example deliberately pointed out people with a certain attitude towards the young employee network.

When examining the data, there has to be taken into account that only board members and active members of the young employee network were questioned, who are part of the network themselves and belong to a certain group; whether active members or board members. Individuals feeling a sense of belongingness towards a certain group influences the establishment of social identity (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Kyei-Poku, 2014). Therefore, this feeling of belonging to the network has allegedly had an effect on the construction of the social identity of the young employees questioned and therefore the answers they have given.

Furthermore, due to the recent COVID-19 crisis, some limitations occurred in the data gathering process. Not being able to interview all respondents in person, limits the chance to analyze their (subtle) body language (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). The video interviews also came with some technical issues, which some respondents referred to as disturbing. This might have influenced their

mood or way in which they answered the questions, due to for example delay, which made them having to hurry through the interview (Rowe et al., 2014). Testing the technology before every interview, instead of testing it one time at the start of the interviews, might have reduced this problem. For future research, I would suggest applying this technology testing tactic before every interview.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has also blocked the chance to do participant observations, which would have completed data triangulation (Yin, 2014), and highlighted the concept participating in a social situation within the organization (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Brannan & Oultram, 2012). For future research, I would suggest to include the participating observations, since participant observations allows the researcher to be close to the issues of interest in a somewhat natural setting, with the chance to observe the dynamics up close (Brannen & Oultram, 2012). Looking at the interaction within the young employee network in practice could have brought an extra dimension in the practical sense: does practice play out like described by the respondents?

Finally, the erasing of parts of the transcript of one respondent has reduced my power to select the data from all data available, making the results somewhat biased, since not all data could be used in the final report due to sensitive information.

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