Aalto University
School of Business

Entrepreneurial identity of freelancers and their relationship to online platforms:

A qualitative study in the Finnish context

Master's Thesis
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Abstract of master's thesis

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Abstract

In the modern business world, flexible working methods have raised the demand for a project-based workforce. Freelancing has grown around the globe extensively in recent years. Digitalization has made freelancing easier since the work can, in most parts, be allocated online. Lately, two-sided platform business models have been applied to several sectors - employment markets as well.

Entrepreneurial identity has been a growing body of entrepreneurship literature, but it has not extended in a freelance context. Freelancers is an appealing context because we do not know to what extent they can be considered entrepreneurs and understand better how freelancers define themselves in relation to entrepreneurialism. Social identity (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) and role identity (Mathias and Williams, 2017) have been applied to entrepreneurship successfully. In this study, the developed theories will be applied to freelancers to explore the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers. Additionally, this thesis takes into consideration how the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers evolves in the online platform economy, where anyone can, by setting up a profile, call themselves an entrepreneur. The fundamental research aim is to explore the entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and their relationship to freelance platforms.

The study conducted a qualitative research with semi-structured thematic interviews with seven different freelance representatives. A framework combining freelancing, entrepreneurial identity, and online freelance platforms was built to support the research.

The key reason to become a freelancer is often the freedom it provides. Freelancing allows working entrepreneurially and according to an individual's personal needs, enabling them to work where and when they wish. Online freelance platforms are seen as good opportunities to discover new work opportunities. However, the larger a platform grows, the problematic it becomes to freelancers that have a more entrepreneurial identity. In the Nordics, where the price level is higher than globally, the price convergence makes globally operating online freelance unattractive. Furthermore, small projects are often economically unprofitable after wage reductions. Though the price level needs to be kept low initially in the competitive global freelance platforms, the possibility of doing small projects is an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, it may result in faster progress in entrepreneurship or consider it more seriously. However, the attitudes towards freelance platforms and the entrepreneurial identity depend on the occupation of a freelancer. Some professions might push the person to freelance since it is the best working method in their field.

The findings of this thesis offer practical implications for online freelance platforms, freelancers, and the educational sector.

Keywords Freelance, entrepreneurial identity, online freelance platforms

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Tiivistelmä

Nykypäivän liike-elämässä joustavuus on lisännyt projektikohtaisten työntekijöiden kysyntää. Freelancetyö on kasvanut ympäri maailmaa viime vuosina. Digitalisaatio on tehnyt freelancetyöstä helpompaa, koska työ voidaan suurimmaksi osaksi tuottaa verkon kautta. Viime aikoina kaksipuolisia alustaliiketoimintamalleja on sovellettu useille aloille - myös työmarkkinoille.

Yrittäjyysidentiteetti on kasvanut yrittäjyyskirjallisuuden parissa, mutta se sitä ei ole tutkittu freelancereiden keskuudessa. Freelancerit ovat houkutteleva tutkimuskohde yrittäjäidentiteetin suhteen, koska emme tiedä missä määrin freelancereita voidaan tutkija yrittäjinä, ja ymmärtääksemme paremmin, kuinka freelancerit määrittelevät itsensä yrittäjiksi. Sosiaalista identiteettiä (Fauchart ja Gruber, 2011) ja rooliidentiteettiä (Mathias ja Williams, 2017) on sovellettu yrittäjyystutkimuksissa menestyksekkäästi. Tässä tutkimuksessa kyseisiä teorioita sovelletaan freelancereihin tutkitakseen freelancereiden yrittäjyysidentiteettiä. Lisäksi tässä opinnäytetyössä otetaan huomioon, kuinka freelancereiden yrittäjyysidentiteetti kehittyy internetin digitaalisessa alustataloudessa, jossa kuka tahansa voi luoda profiilin ja kutsua itseään yrittäjäksi. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää freelancereiden yrittäjäidentiteettiä ja heidän suhdettaan digitaalisiin freelance-alustoihin.

Tässä opinnäytetyössä tehdään kvalitatiivinen tutkimus, joka on tehty puolistrukturoiduilla teemaattisilla haastatteluilla seitsemän eri freelance-edustajan kanssa. Tutkimuksen tueksi on kirjallisuuden pohjalta luotu viitekehys, jossa yhdistyy freelancerit, yrittäjyysidentiteetti ja digitaaliset freelance-alustat.

Tärkein syy tulla freelanceriksi on usein sen tarjoama vapaus. Freelancer-työ antaa mahdollisuuden työskennellä yrittäjämäisesti ja henkilökohtaisten tarpeiden mukaan ja antaa mahdollisuuden työskennellä missä ja milloin freelancer haluaa. Digitaalisia freelance-alustoja pidetään hyvinä mahdollisuuksina löytää uusia työmahdollisuuksia. Freelancereille alustojen ongelmalliset puolet yrittäjiksi itsensä kokeville freelancereille tulevat esiin, mitä suuremmaksi freelance-alusta on kasvanut. Pohjoismaissa, joissa hintataso on keskimääräistä korkeampi, hintojen konvergenssi tekee globaalisti toimivasta freelance-alustasta epähoukuttelevan. Sen lisäksi, pienemmät projektit ovat usein taloudellisesti kannattamattomia palkkojen vähennysten jälkeen. Vaikka hintataso on pidettävä alhaisena alussa kilpailullisilla freelance-alustoilla, mahdollisuus tehdä pieniä projekteja on mahdollisuus kehittää yrittäjyystaitoja. Täten tämä taitojen kehitys voi johtaa yrittäjyyden nopeampaan edistymiseen tai ainakin sen harkitsemiseen vakavammin. Suhtautuminen freelance-alustoihin ja yrittäjyysidentiteetti riippuvat kuitenkin freelancerin ammatista. Jotkut ammatit saattavat ajaa henkilön freelanceksi, koska se on paras työskentelytapa omalla alallaan.

Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset tarjoavat käytännön hyötyjä digitaalisille freelance-alustoille, freelancereille ja koulutustahoille.

Avainsanat Freelancer, yrittäjäidentiteetti, digitaaliset freelance-alustat

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Acknowledgements

Thank you for having my thesis in front of you.

As a progress, writing the thesis was like an airplane takeoff. You have to be early at the airport, feel annoyed of all the queuing and all that stuff. When you eventually enter the plane, it still feels like it just drifts around the runway area, while passengers muse on why it's not just taking off from the first free runway.

Then it stops for a while. In one minute, you feel the turbulent. After another minute, you are already in the air. It's all done, right?

So, I guess now I am in the air on my way to the destination. In other words, graduating from university is not an ending to any what. But I got the ticket 6 years ago, and next something new is waiting somewhere else.

I thank all my closed ones that have supported me in my studies. And of course, everyone in the student community KY that I got to know during my university years. The past half a decade at Aalto has been a blast!

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Linda Veijola

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Modern business world requires even more people who can be flexible and open. Digitalization has opened new forms of self-employment, and innovation for freelancing online has been developing. Today, to become a freelancer, not that much is required. For starters, an easy way to browse freelance opportunities and to communicate with potential clients. One solution is to register on a freelancer platform, where one can select specific services s/he is willing to provide, and decide on the price (Akhmetshin et al., 2018). Freelancers have freedom to organize their daily working routines and balance their free time and work time according to their personal needs. It is no wonder that freelancing as way of work is rising its popularity.

Meanwhile, as freelancing is growing in popularity, governments want to lower the barriers of entry to become an entrepreneur, and people are more aware of the possibilities. Share of freelancing is growing in different parts of the globe and in some areas massively, particularly the United States. To some estimations, the freelance economy will grow up to $335 billion by 2025 from $14 billion in 2014 (Yaraghi and Ravi, 2017). Similarly in Europe, freelancing is the fastest growing employment form (Torregrossa, 2017), where the share of independent workers compromised only 5% in 2000 but has been extremely growing in the last decade (figure 1). In 2019, there were 33 million self-employed in the European Union (Statista, 2021). Hence, it is certainly worth researching further.

Today, when discussing freelance work, two-sided employment platforms cannot be discarded. Platforms as the new booming business model rose from the sharing economy culture, with successful examples of Airbnb and Uber to dominate the idea of two-sided platform, where the platform firm's business model is to control the platform for its users (both sellers and buyers of the service). Numerous businesses have initiated this business model as a new opportunity to organize consumption, and employment services makes no exception. On-demand work force has evolved to large freelance distribution platforms where companies and freelancers can easily find each other.

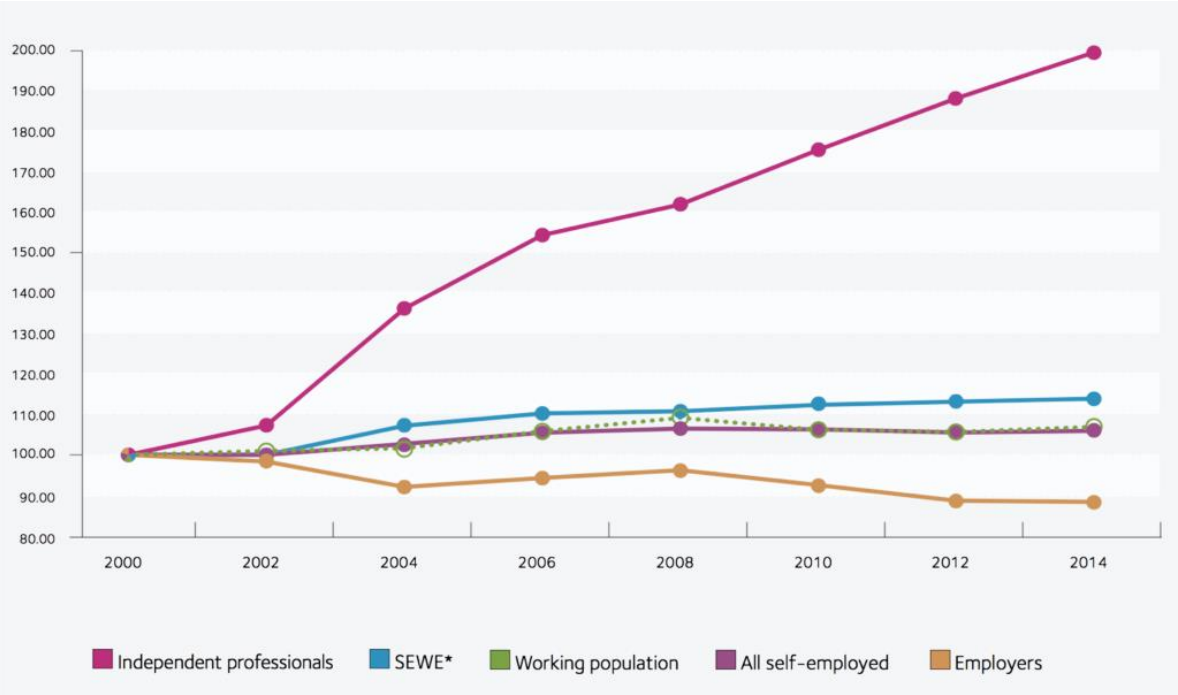

Figure 1. Workforce growth by segment of workers between 2000 and 2014 (million) (Eurostat, 2015, as cited in Torregrossa, 2017).

Since on-demand work is rising its demand, online freelance platform companies have grown massively during the latest years. Dominating global online freelance platforms are for instance Upwork.com, Fiverr.com and Freelancer.com. These services allow any individual to setup a profile and offer their services to anyone. Largest services are growing rapidly in profitability. More mergers and consolidation between different firms is expected, which signals a new growth phase and profitability in the online freelance platform sector (Younger, 2018).

In general, platform economy is seen to increase innovation and economic growth. Freelance platforms often help freelancers with administrative matters when, for example, billing work is done on behalf of the platform. However, it remains unclear how much the platforms support freelancers professionally, and how much resources are devoted to capturing as large market share as possible instead of improving the utility of both freelancers and clients. For example, it has been recognized that working conditions and protection of both sides of two-sided platforms should be given more attention (De Groen et. al, 2018).

Consequently, though online freelance platforms can be beneficial for economy and discover new employment methods for people, it has its difficulties as well. Just as entrepreneurs differ in attitudes towards entrepreneurship, also freelancers have different motives to start outsourcing their services as individual contractors. We do not know much about freelancer's entrepreneurial identity. Freelancers are said to enjoy their position as their own boss (Cohen, 2017), but we don't know if they otherwise have the same motivations as regular entrepreneurs. Moreover, there is a call for examining entrepreneurial identity from a more comprehensive context (Radu-Lefebvre, et al., 2021). Freelancers have not been as an empirical context in the entrepreneurial identity literature.

Entrepreneurial identity has been a way to distinguish the mind of an entrepreneur in relation to others (e.g., Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial actions are argued to have a strong link because identity guides entrepreneurs' decisions and feelings (Alsos et al., 2016). Online freelance platforms allow anyone to become a freelancer and thus indirectly an entrepreneur. Therefore, also the usage and attitudes towards these platforms can be explored from an entrepreneurial identity perspective.

Freelancers with occupations that are naturally self-employed (for example, journalist, designers, artists, among others) may differ with their entrepreneurial identity from the ones with not so obvious self-employed occupations. Instead, they may be "pushed" as opposed to being "pulled" to entrepreneurship (Dawson and Henley, 2012), meaning that it was not a determined and ambitious aim to become a successful entrepreneur. Rather because of the nature of their profession, they get naturally jobs with independent "gigs", which drives (pushes) them work as a freelancer.

The popularity of freelancing globally arouses interest in Finland as well. However, the share of entrepreneurs in the labor force has not grown strongly in past years. Instead, the biggest change has happened within the nature of entrepreneurship itself: the number of entrepreneurs is declining while the number of self-employed is growing and the number of regular employees has remained roughly unchanged (Stat, 2018). Despite the major change in the entrepreneur landscape, freelancing and entrepreneurial identities have remained relatively unstudied in the Finnish context.

1.2 Research aims

Since freelance platforms have only existed for a short period of time, most of its literature is also quite recent. Currently, there are no studies found on combining freelancing, entrepreneurship identities and online platforms. Although freelancing has been studied from several angles (e.g., Meager, 2016), it is essential to look more closely at how freelancers differ in their identities and reasoning to become self-employed. The aim is to develop a holistic understanding of *entrepreneurial identity of freelancers and their relationship to online freelance platforms* with a qualitative study.

Previous literature on freelancing has focused on approaching freelancing in relation to regular employment. Not too much of literature has focused on approaching freelancing in relation to entrepreneurship. Majority of the existing literature focuses on for example the polarized incomes of freelancers and discusses whether freelancing is a positive phenomenon or a more problematic feature of the modern labor market (Meager, 2016).

The freelance definition is broad: gig-worker, self-employer, on-demand worker. It is necessary here to draw a line between gig-workers and freelancers. (For example, the cab service platform company Uber is not the right empiric choice because Uber drivers are not considered here as freelancers, rather regular employees - even though self-employees). This thesis focuses on freelancers considered as independent contractors that outsource services.

Of the several different terms that relate to self-employment, freelancing can certainly be considered as some sort of entrepreneurship, but it is slightly rough to assume that they are exactly the same. Freelancers do not have the same desire to establish an own company even though they are working under their own name. Thus, this thesis explores the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers and how they evolve in their career. As an empirical context, freelancers are an appealing choice, because they are defined more closer to a micro-entrepreneur than a pure self-employed (Grimov, 2016).

Entrepreneurship literature has expanded to researching the identities of entrepreneurs which is relevant when identifying reasons of actions for different entrepreneurs. In the social sciences, identity refers to the perception of an individual or a group as a separate, distinct entity. Social identity theories have recently been used to understand the behaviors of

entrepreneurs (e.g., Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). Another approach on entrepreneurial identity is to explore different roles individuals adopt in different parts of their career (Mathias and Williams, 2017). Entrepreneurial identity studies have not however been connected to extend to freelancers. Furthermore, according to Mmbaga, et al. (2020) identity research on entrepreneurship should consider more digital online communities. Therefore, this thesis will as well cover consideration on how the online context - the easiness of becoming an freelancer in just minutes - affects the entrepreneurial identities of different individuals.

In this study, online freelance platforms are explored because of the potential of influencing the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers. Platforms disrupt the labor market and lower barriers of entry for individuals to become self-employed. We need more understanding of how this modifies the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers, and on the other hand, how entrepreneurial identity affects the attractiveness of online freelance platforms.

Furthermore, this thesis seeks understanding how different types of freelancers identify themselves as entrepreneurs. Identities shape freelancer's behavior, which occurs in the usage of online freelance platforms that are being today's most essential marketplaces for freelance work. This thesis also discusses what support freelancers expect to receive from platforms and whether the expectations meet.

In sum, this thesis explores the relation between entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and online freelance platforms. To reach the goals of this study, this work builds up a framework that guides the analysis. The created framework helps to identify different types of entrepreneurial identities that can be applied to freelancers and to connect them to their attitudes on online freelance platform. The study explores the mechanisms of work allocation for freelancers and the freelancers' attitudes towards platforms, and how this is shaped by and shapes the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers using the online freelance platforms.
Beyond advancing the literature on freelancing, identity and platforms, this thesis offers practical contributions in three essential areas. First, this research has benefits for online freelance platform business designers, to understand how to serve their freelancers better. When the extent to which freelancers may differ, for example, from their expectations or motivations, we better understand how to support their work.

Secondly, for freelancers themselves, this research is helpful information, as they gain a broader understanding of how they position themselves as entrepreneurs in society. This work can encourage people who shy away from entrepreneurship, to see that there may be an opportunity to become self-employed without emphasizing too much entrepreneurialism.

Lastly, this thesis has practical relevance for educational organizations among sectors that relate often to freelancing. This research reveals what is potentially left ignored in the preparation of certain occupations. This is also beneficial for organizations hiring freelancers. When both freelancers are prepared to self-employment and organizations anticipate the freelancer's need, they can collaborate better.

1.3 Structure of thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. The current introductory chapter 1 described the world of freelancers on a glance and provided an introduction to the research goals of this thesis. The research objective has been represented and the main research aims has been described. Chapter 2 provides the literature review of the research topic, which provides an overview of known research about freelancing, entrepreneurial identity, online freelance platforms. The chapter finally builds a framework of the literature review. Chapter 3 presents the qualitative research method. Chapter 4 will describe the findings of the interview data and present five themes that were found. Chapter 5 will further discuss the findings and the final chapter 6 provides a conclusion, implications, limitations, and an agenda for future research.

2. Literature review

The purpose of the literature review is to lean on the theoretical support and earlier studies related to this thesis' topics. This chapter is organized to first open up the freelance economy in general and then move on to discuss the research on entrepreneurial identity. Next, it reviews the existing literature on the online platform economy which is in recent year grown relatively fast and therefore, the literature is also evolving. Lastly, this chapter builds a framework form the three themes (freelancing, entrepreneurial identity, and the online platform economy) that will be used as a guideline for this research.

2.1 Freelancing

This section of the literature chapter defines freelance into the purpose of the context of this thesis. Freelance has been discussed earlier in terms of its positive and negative sides that are being reviewed in this section. Freelancing's distinction of entrepreneurship is also being reviewed.

2.1.1 Definition

Freelance comes from the words free and lance. It appeared for the first time in 1820 when historical novelist Walter Scott described an ancient paid soldier as a "free-lance," indicating that the lance was not sworn to any leader's services. Today, a freelancer is a person who sells his/her expertise as an outsourced service (e.g., Cohen, 2017). A freelancer is not an employee for an organization; instead, it sells his/her knowledge as an outsourced service.

Because of digitalization, it is easier than ever to become a freelancer. One just need to have an internet connection. Freelancing enables a person to work from wherever and connect to the global world from his/her living room. Since the remote work revolution because of COVID-19 pandemic, people are familiar with remote working and recognizes more the negative side of, for example, commuting to work (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Therefore,

freelancing may be considered more often as an employment alternative for people enjoying the location flexibility that freelancers have always had naturally.

Consistent with this, freelancing is also a matter of transformation of attitude to life (Grimov, 2016). According to some reports, freelancers represent about 35% of the global workforce (Schulz, 2020), and independent workers (that include freelancers) would encompass 40% of all workforce by 2020 (Intuit report, 2020). Hence, freelancing is a growing employment sector, and the work is out there. However, it is important to note that the largest freelance market area is the United States. The institutional setting affects the popularity of self-employment, but freelance as a form of work is growing a lot in Europe as well. In recent years, especially in the Eastern European countries, freelancing has raised much its activity.

Despite the recent popularity, freelancing has a long history, but it has stayed relatively understudied compared to entrepreneurship research (e.g., Grimov, 2016). For example, career prospects and freelancing's effects on labor markets have remained relatively unstudied. According to Grimov (2016), career development can be less stable but more flexible in freelancing. This is because there is no hierarchy between the employee and the employer since it is a customer's purchased service. Therefore, their relationship is naturally different from a regular employee and employer relationship. The author suggests, this gives freelancers an opportunity for greater social mobility. The greater a freelancer's network is, the greater the career progression will most likely become. Therefore, Grimov also points out that freelancers tend to have more likely a vertical career path.

Reputation becomes important when freelancers are growing their own network, because reputation typically reflects the amount of work ordered of a freelancer (Grimov, 2016). Yoganarasimhan (2013) suggests that when companies buy work service from a freelancer, they confront higher risks. This is because services do not usually have external brand value compared to physical goods, and therefore, the physical qualities are harder to show in photos or other related assessments.

Baines and Kennedy (2010) have studied in the journalism context, should a journalist be educated more towards entrepreneurialism in order to compete with media organizations.

The authors make a difference between self-employment and entrepreneurialism. The self-employed person is in a dependent relationship with clients and might be more insecure and powerless. According to the authors, entrepreneurialism describes a freelancer that is seen as having a sense of independence, empowerment, and self-direction.

Grimov (2016) defines freelance as "a realization of freedom, independence, creativity, and non-standardization in labor activity", which would fit as a definition for an entrepreneur as well. Freelancers and entrepreneurs are not synonyms since entrepreneurship is not outsourcing work. The simplest distinction between an entrepreneur and a freelancer is that freelancers work for their income while entrepreneurs work to set up systems that make the economic value (DiPiazza, 2016).

Hence, freelancing is typically defined as outsourced work that a self-employed freelancer does. Several similar terms tend to refer to freelancing: self-employer, micro-entrepreneur, solopreneur, gig-worker, and so on. Self-employment has a lot of room in academics, describing how it is a "grey area" between employment and self-employment (Kautonen et al., 2010).

2.1.2 Advantages and disadvantages of freelancing

Akhmetshin et al. (2018) lists advantages and disadvantages of freelancing. Shortly, as above described, remote working enables one to determine when to work, where to work, and with who. Some of the disadvantages include searching actively for a job and the lack of future security, like pension and healthcare.

Being able to organize own time allows a freelancer to for example study alongside work or combining family care to his/her career because different parts of life are more comfortable to bring together thanks to flexibility. Freelance work has less fixed matters (mainly, time and place) which attracts many people to choose the form of freelance work (Woronkowicz and Douglas, 2019). This means independence from the workplace location, and not to mention that work should be done during the regular office hours five days a week. Hence,

freelancers have the freedom to do their work when they want, where they want, and there is no need to follow an organization's social norms. Furthermore, from a geographical perspective, online freelancing enables for some people to get a higher level of employment in isolated communities (Akhmetshin et al., 2018).

There are doubly several positive reasons which together enhance the growth of freelancing. Current technology makes it easy and the demand towards project specific recruiting is up which indicates more work for freelancers. Cohen (2017) also points out how freelancing helps firms (in the context of journalism) in that they do not need to carry as much risk. From a firm's perspective, hiring a freelancer to perform the needed work can be more effective financially (Grimov, 2016). For example, when regular employees need to be laid off in bad economic periods, a freelancer can be a better replacement for short-time work. It enables a firm to use irregular payments for certain essential jobs. Another context is to get a replacement workforce for maternity leaves, sick leaves, and other types of periods.

Freelance work is of course not all glorious life. It is possible that freelancers actually earn lower wages than regular employees. Cohen (2017) points out in the context of writers, that they face uncertainty, have limited social protections, and experience decreasing control over their work. Many freelancers need to attain their reputation as a trustworthy professional and grow their network. Therefore, the pressure to accept low-paid or even unpaid work to achieve the experience needed to become successful, limits who can afford to take this strategy (Cohen, 2017).

Freelance work is uncertain and involves a lot of learning new skills regarding project management, organizing, budgeting, invoicing, that is a similar feature for entrepreneurs as well that are wearing several "hats" (Mathias and Williams, 2017). According to De Cock, et al. (2016), to achieve a successful freelance career, one must have discipline and skills in risk-taking, negotiation, and presentation. For some freelances, these can come as a surprise. Self-promotion, referring here as proactive presentation for potential clients, can feel for new freelancers an uncomfortable skill to attain (De Cock, et al., 2016).

Since freelancers do not necessarily work as many hours per week compared to regular employees, freelancers work usually irregular hours. Studying the topic, Gold and Mustafa (2013) suggest that this is because freelancers tend to put their work gigs on a priority, which the authors summarize by arguing that "work always wins" for freelancers. Unstable life is a consequence of choosing this type of work lifestyle.

Though many find irregular hours as flexibility and an advantage for freelancing, Shevchuk et al. (2019) find that night work can weaken personal well-being in their study regarding freelance work. The authors show that work-life balance, life satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion are influenced by freelancing in internet-based freelancers.

Income volatility is a critical concern for freelancers. Most of them suffer from a lack of financial support in bad economic times. Individual freelancers experience a “precarious freedom” in taking up and sustaining freelance work careers (Kitching and Iskandarova, 2019). Even though freelancers are free in their own decisions regarding work, they will carry the risk of having a sufficient number of clients and sales to sustain their living.

Counting the pros and cons of freelancing might be enchanting, but De Cock, et al. (2016) point that a list of advantages and disadvantages for freelancing does not exist because nearly all freelancing features can be considered often both as an advantage and a disadvantage. For example, flexible working hours are indeed a benefit of freelance work. Still, from the other spectrum, clients and personal relations can be expecting more adjustment of a freelancer’s usage of time. Unintentionally family and friends might have the idea that a freelancer has most of the time to use to whatever they want. This is also true because of the work's flexibility, but it does not mean that the freelancer necessarily works less (De Cock, et al., 2016).

This section of the literature chapter has reviewed the freelance literature. Although there is somewhat a recognition that freelancers need to learn to be both an employer and an entrepreneur, little has been written about the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers. Other concerns are the channels that freelancers use. A trending one is the online freelance platforms that this thesis will cover after presenting the current literature of identity research of entrepreneurship and freelancers.

2.2 Identity and freelancing

More insight into entrepreneurs' identities helps us to better understand their actions and decisions. This section discusses research about entrepreneurial identity and recognized different types of typical classifications that can be applied in this thesis for the freelancing context to understand the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers.

When looking at entrepreneurship research discussing identity research, similar patterns in freelancers can be recognized. Entrepreneurs behave and make choices as individuals, which depends on their identity (Alsos, 2016). Therefore, Entrepreneurs consider opportunities and decisions about them differently, depending on their both natural and adopted identity. As a result, identities have an impact on the actions of entrepreneurs, which can have a significant outcome on the growth and operations of their firms (Mathias and Williams, 2017). In this section, social identity theory (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) and role identity theory (Mathias and Williams, 2017) are viewed in entrepreneurship research. Additional literature on entrepreneurial identity is provided to supplement the literature review of this section. The end of this section applies the discussed theories to freelancing.

2.2.1 Social identity theory on entrepreneurship

Social theory sheds light on how different individuals differ from their behavior because of their identities (Turner and Oakes, 1986). Identity means how one sees themselves in reflection of others. In order to understand entrepreneurs better as individuals, researchers have turned their attention to identity theory, and especially to social identity theory. According to Fauchart and Gruber (2011), social identity theory can help in identifying differences in entrepreneurial identities. An individual's self-evaluation and positioning as an entrepreneur are at the core of the author's research.

The work made by Fauchart and Gruber (2011) classifies identities into darwinians, communitarians, and missionaries. Entrepreneurs differ in their reasons to become entrepreneurs, and their identity can be classified as one of the third founder identity, or it

can also be a combination of them. The three different entrepreneurial identity type was defined by the authors to explore how the type of identity affects entrepreneurial behaviors in the beginning of entrepreneurship. Summarized, Fauchart and Gruber (2011) describe the different identities as follows:

- Darwinians are associated with profit maximization and seek economic benefits. Most of their attains are devoted to ensuring the firm's success. They aim for either big or growing markets, and they see potential in there. They are more focused on the competition of their offering than others, and competitors are the primary external reference to them.
- Communitarians usually found their firm because of being part of a community. For example, they might come up with an idea to serve themselves, because there is currently not one in the market. Because of being part of a community, the new idea spreads to friends and friend's friends and so on. When they achieve recognition by their peers, the new idea evolves into an entrepreneur. Communitarians do not necessarily seek for profit, but they are entrepreneurs to serve a certain community they are part of. They believe that authenticity is the most important asset they have. (As an illustrative example, a football player comes up with a new alternative of compress socs, which then spreads to the playing team, and later the larger football community itself. S/he is not aiming to be an entrepreneur but became on in order to serve the community.)
- Missionaries aim to change the world and offer products and services that make the consumers' lives better. Often, they serve society usually to promote sustainability issues, and their goal is to pursue their political visions. In addition to entrepreneurship, missionaries also tend to act as role models.

Fauchart and Gruber (2011) find that entrepreneurs' strategic decisions depend on their identities. Social identity theory helps understand why there are differences in creating processes and outcomes among different entrepreneurs. The authors compared social motivations as a founder, self-evaluation as a founder, and the frame of reference (what are the important stakeholders). Fauchart and Gruber further analyzed the activities in what they differ, which included market segment served, customer need addressed, and capabilities

and resources deployed. In sum, the conclusion is that differences in identity can also make differences in chosen actions.

Furthermore, Alsos et al. (2016) argue that differences in effectual and causal behavior may stem from differences in entrepreneurial identity. Therefore, it is possible to apply social identity theory to freelancers as well and examine how freelancers representing different identities use platforms. However, it is possible that differences of causal and effectual behavior stem from somewhere else than identity as well.

2.2.2 Role identity theory on entrepreneurship

There are several studies about different kinds of entrepreneurs. According to Mathias and Williams (2017), previous literature has recognized that entrepreneurs don't necessarily have one specific identity from others. Hence, in their study, the authors show that an individual entrepreneur can have several roles in their identity. They wear several "hats" in different contexts during their career.

In their inductive, qualitative study, Mathias and Williams (2017) explored how changes in role identities affect entrepreneurs' evaluation and selection of opportunities. They argue that three major roles - an entrepreneur, an investor, or a manager – are important different "hats" individual entrepreneurs take when founding a firm and making decisions.

Mathias and Williams (2017) propose that assessments and considerations of risk vary by the role an entrepreneur is having:

- Entrepreneurial role:
  Those who have an entrepreneurial role seek opportunities related to their current venture. They also use more their prior knowledge to find opportunities. Founders take an innovative, proactive, and passion-oriented approach.

- Managerial role:
  Those who have a managerial role seek opportunities for new but related products and services. Founders take a customer-, profit-, and market-oriented approach.
- Investor role:
  Those who have an investor role seek opportunities to new unrelated opportunities. Founders take a long-term and future-oriented approach.

The authors state: "We show that entrepreneurs do not just search for the best opportunities *for them* but for the best opportunities *for their role*. We demonstrate that as entrepreneurs' roles shift, they reorient themselves to the situation, and their goals change." (p. 912).

The idea that entrepreneurs have more roles than just a founder identity (also a manager and other occupations that include running an own company) may not be straightforwardly applied to freelancers. Suppose we put freelancers on a framework according to DiPiazza's (2016) argument that they work for themselves and not for a system (an organization) - in that case, the amount of carried "hats" might be expected to be fewer than an entrepreneur has.

2.2.3 Other literature on identity and entrepreneurship

Since some freelancers may be considered as persons who "control their own life themselves", one useful approach on the topic is self-determination theory. Nawaz (2019) discusses the self-determination theory that suggests that intrinsic and extrinsic factors impact the behavior to reach some predefined goals. Intrinsic factors are related to the inner person, factors which tend to fulfill self-satisfaction (in other words, enjoyment, passion, competence, relatedness). Nawaz explains that these are not related to rational thinking. Extrinsic motivational factors refer to external rewards, which might be income, employment status, political instability, technological change, or economic growth. The author points out that we should remember that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are not the opposite of each other.

In the entrepreneurship literature, pushed versus pulled entrepreneurialism has been discussed increasingly. Entrepreneurs are, in some cases, pulled to the entrepreneurship, as opposed to having the sometimes described enthusiastic, brave and determined personality traits that drive them into becoming entrepreneurs (e.g., Dawson and Henley, 2012).

A lot of the literature on entrepreneurship has identified that individuals might be motivated to become entrepreneurs because of financial motivators (pushed entrepreneurship) (e.g., Amit and Muller, 1995). Still, on the other spectrum, some end up entrepreneurs because they are unable to find a job or seek more flexibility in their working schedule. The reason can vary, but the point is that they "end up" entrepreneurs (pulled entrepreneurship).

Hytti (2005) shows how shifting careers and professional identities enable us to interpret the meaning of entrepreneurship from a newish view. In contrast to more usual entrepreneurship trait studies, she argues that entrepreneurship is not only for any particular group with superpowers and abilities. A negative experience in the work-life can trigger a decision to become self-employed and an entrepreneur. In a narrative interview with a former freelance journalist, she finds that time and place become important to understanding entrepreneurship. Working in an organization can include the fear of losing one's position, and by founding an own enterprise, a worker can secure a stable social and professional identity. Hytti suggests that the social context should be studied more in the entrepreneurship research field. Also, aging and gender issues are closed in the study. The discrimination of them is seen as important sources of dissatisfaction with the organizational life and potentially pushing the alternative to become an entrepreneur. "The entrepreneurship is a solution for a person to take the professional destiny into own hands; being self-employed is a position that cannot be taken away by others." (p. 606).

2.2.4 Identity theories on freelancing

Little is known about freelance identity, but Hye-Ryon (2019) describes the conflict of identities. She suggests that freelancers might face problems balancing the flexibility and autonomy that they have. She points out that even with the flexibility and freedom freelancers presumably have, "free" in the term of a freelancer should not suggest that freelancers would be free from time pressure and professional responsibility, among other things. With a concept of double identity - a freelancer being a boss and an employee - the author emphasizes that a freelancer should manage an objective and critical view of the work.

Nemkova et al. (2019) has found that “entrepreneurial freelancers” view themselves more as “business owners”. In this way, they see being able to control their careers. The authors discuss a recent phenomenon about entrepreneurship glorification that refers to a dream picture of young millionaires that started from zero. Thus, they suggest that freelancers that are more entrepreneurial would use freelance platforms more enthusiastically to enter the entrepreneurial journey.

Applying social identity theory of entrepreneurs (Fauchart and Gruber 2011) to freelancers, darwinian ones could be seen as freelancers that are taking "the destiny in their own hands". They are more risk-averse and see freelancing as an opportunity to earn better than as an employed person in an organization. For this reason, darwinian freelancers may include more occupations from other than traditional freelance professions. For instance, a consultant could work in a consultancy firm, but as a darwinian, s/he may see freelancing as an opportunity to compete with his/her expertise in the market and make better off. Here, the motivations come rather from economic and rational matters.

Communitarians may be the traditional way of ending up as a freelancer. Several occupations that have traditionally been required working as a freelance, have been carried by people that do not employ as much in organizations. Instead, their income consists of separate work gigs that employ them. Such way of working is typical for instance for photographers, artists, designers, and so on. From their entrepreneurial identity, they do not

belong to darwinians nor the missionaries, but they are already from the beginning of their "career" been in the freelance world, because of the nature of their occupation.

Freelancers that are missionaries are people who could work in an organization but "have a call to make a change in the world," and putting themself into action is the best way. For example, a journalist could be working for a paper/media as a full-time employee, but because of the eagerness to publish the content they feel is important, they decide to be freelancers.

Entrepreneurs do not usually specialize in one role, which makes it an interesting context to study their identities and variations (Mathias and Williams, 2017). But we do not know if this is the case for freelancers. In addition to applying social identity theory of entrepreneurs, also role identity theory on entrepreneurship (Mathias and Williams, 2017) could be applied to freelancers.

The question to be asked is that how changes in role identities - an entrepreneur, an investor, or a manager - affect a freelancer's career? Freelancer as an entrepreneur refers to the decision to become self-employed. An investor role is taken when a freelancer seeks new job opportunities, perhaps more proactively. The role identity turns into a manager when a freelancer deals with administrative tasks.

The theory of pushed and pulled entrepreneurship applies almost to freelancers in that sense that some do get more pushed, and some more pulled. However, the difference in the entrepreneurship literature is that in the entrepreneur context, literature tends to argue that "pulled" entrepreneurs are more successful than "pushed" entrepreneurs (Amit and Muller, 1995). In freelancing, some occupations fit naturally into both being pushed or pulled into entrepreneurship. Not all are having a drive of motivation for flexible working hours and other freelance benefits. For instance, the success of graphic designers, artists, journalists, and others that have always been naturally freelancers, can't be judged because of the possible pushed entrepreneurialism.

In connection to the pushed and pulled entrepreneurialism discussion, the relevant literature recognizes moderately that there are different types of freelancers: those who do it because they have to and those who just found it (Hye-Ryon, 2019). For example, some people end up doing freelance jobs temporarily until they get hired again by a company. Moreover, from a wider view, freelancing is both a job and a career (Akhmetshin et. al, 2018). Some might do it just as a side-job, more or less taking gigs alongside their regular day job.

2.3 Online freelance platforms

Freelance jobs are widely distributed through the internet on different platforms. This section discusses the literature on the platform business in general and the online freelance platforms.

2.3.1 Platform definition

Platform refers to a business model where two-side markets meet through a platform, where the platform works as an intermediary. The most familiar examples are companies such as Airbnb, Uber, or any firm that consist of two participators, and the firm is mainly responsible for the platform function itself (Ert et al., 2016). In the platform economy, the internet infrastructure plays an essential role. Therefore, in this thesis, platform refers to internet-based online platforms (although as a broader definition, it can mean much more, such as sharing economy or transaction services, among other things).

Examples of successful platforms vary. The definition of a platform sometimes differs, and several firms have started to brand themselves as a platform, even though they have not previously been typically classified in this category (as an example, a Finnish private hospital company, Terveystalo, labeled its strategy recently as a platform since the company positions itself connecting the patients and the doctors through its online application). In this thesis, the term platform mainly refers to an open one where anyone can join and create a profile either as a service provider or buyer.

2.3.2 Platform business model strategies

Platform business is often described with a chicken and egg problem: it requires a critical mass of either of the other side to the other party to participate (e.g., Evans and Schmalensee, 2010). Typically it means that in a two-sided platform business, the market adoption on the one side affects and depends on the adoption on the other side.

When discussing platform business models, it is important to note the network effects that are essential to a platform to function sustainably (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018). Network effects mean that the more there are participators on a specific service, the more attractive the platform is for the potential users (for example, the incentive to join Facebook is more prominent the more people there are). Subsequently, on a two-sided platform, it applies for both sides (for example, Airbnb attracts more travelers the more there are accommodation providers). Therefore, a platform needs to control both product design and the intensity of network effects (Bhargava, 2014). It means that the platform's responsibility is to build a supportive infrastructure and set the rules for participation.

According to Rochet and Tirole (2003), many if not most markets with network externalities are two-sided. The economists are describing the platform business model, and they state that the key to a platform's success stems from the chosen business model. According to these authors, usually in platforms, one side is treated as a profit venter and the other side as a loss leader (or financially neutral). In other words, costs are often allocated to either side of the platform.

Furthermore, Rochet and Tirole (2003) give attention to the concept of multihoming which means that an end-user can use several platforms. For instance, transaction firms Visa and MasterCard: when Visa raises costs that the shop needs to pay, the shop prefers to accept only MasterCard as payment. For the multihomed end-user - the consumer in the shop - it does not matter which one to use. Therefore, platforms are not only deciding the price level that they offer, but also the price structure.

Kyprianou (2018) has conducted an inductive multi-case study in peer-to-peer marketplace context to determine how companies control the two sides and manage to create value. While the literature has strongly emphasized the role of participant reviews and ratings, the author starts from the chicken and egg problem of reaching the critical mass and which side should be first induced, and what happens after considering governing the two sides. Kyprianou finds two types of controls to governance:

1. supply-side heterogeneity, which refers to the variance in producers' offerings, qualifications, and personal interests and values, and
2. cross-side interactions that refers to the interactions between producers and consumers throughout the transaction cycle.

Moreover, the author finds that the value is created either from inside out or outside in. Inside out means that the firms have only a few limitations to become producers to enable early-stage growth. Later, as the risk of participants' nonconformity grows, the firms limit participation and govern more the conditions under which the two sides interacted. Outside in means, the firms limit the participation, and when the quality is guaranteed, they open the access to the platform for more mass.

A problematic part is in the beginning to manage the tradeoff between profitability and growth. In the platform business, its chicken and egg problem raises in the beginning of the business a tradeoff between putting effort into growing the user base or having a profitable business (Bhargava, 2014). A platform company can offer a more priced version to a premium user that gets better features of the service. While the priced version generates revenues, with the free version, the company is able to put effort into the growth side as well. This “freemium” strategy has been developed to tackle this dilemma of "growth versus profitability". In a business with network effects, a freemium approach aims to manage both growth with the free version of the service and the profitability with a premium highly priced version (Bhargava, 2014).

Through the internet, anyone can make a profile on a platform website, claiming to offer a certain service. In a two-side platform, how can the person on the other side be sure that the service provider is trustworthy? On the other hand, how the service provider can ensure that

the agreed payment will be received? Several studies have given attention to how platform firms respond to trust issues.

For the platforms, a review system has typically been a response to the challenge (e.g., Mateescu and Ticona, 2018). Both sides of the platform can ask for public feedback from each other's afterwards. Reviews have been one of the basic pillars of reputation systems in the online marketplace for a long time. The public reviews also add the incentive to increase quality (Luca, 2017). By increasing positive feedback, service providers reputation grows, and they get easier more work orders.

However, Luca (2017) raises the problem of the review systems that it is possible to manipulate the reviews. Furthermore, individual negative experiences in online platform services damage public trust that gets reinforced by negative press attention (Mateescu and Ticona, 2018).

Ert et al. (2016) show in the context of Airbnb that reviews do matter, but the personal photos of hosts on Airbnb are in a much larger role when it comes to consumer decisions. According to the authors, a reliable photo leads to a higher value and increased purchasing probability. "This implies that the strong need for trust in sharing economy platforms leads consumers to *use any information available* to them" (p.72).

In sum, there are several strategies developed for two-sided online platforms. However, the phenomenon is still relatively new, and firms constantly learn what works. Not all platform business models are straightforwardly possible to copy-paste in other industries. The following describes what online platforms have been in the context of freelance work.

2.3.3 Online freelance platforms

In freelance work, modern information and communication technologies are often used (e.g., Grimov, 2016). Freelancers can be represented by a firm or an agency that distributes freelance work to customers (Akhmetshin et al., 2018). Even though freelance platforms have become more general job marketplaces for freelancers, some freelancers work independently or use professional associations or a personal website to get a job. Even though online freelance platforms are becoming more popular, the importance of personal contacts of a freelancer will stay important (Gandini, 2016).

Today, the most bulging freelance platforms are most likely Fiverr and Upwork, which offer various channels to seek and announce freelance work globally. Freelancers can place a profile with information about themselves and their professional skills at a freelance platform. Many online platform workers imply that more autonomy and flexibility are important motivations for the platform activity (De Groen et. al, 2018), which are the similar motivations as freelancers or self-employed people overall have in common.

To succeed in designing a good platform strategy, Srinivasan and Venkatraman (2018) suggest that the most critical matters in this regard are:

1. The positioning of a digital platform within the digital ecosystem
2. The design of a platform in terms of technology and architecture
3. Relationships to build legitimacy

When applied to online freelance platforms, the raising questions are:

1. How should an online freelance platform business position itself withing the digital ecosystem? For example, how does it compete with non-freelance platforms like LinkedIn, where making connections is easier, or on the other spectrum, how does it compete with on-demand gig-work platforms (such as Treamer)?
2. How should an online freelance platform be designed in terms of technology and architecture to serve freelancers? What are the most important support functions and features of the platform that serve especially the freelancers?
3. How can an online freelance platform manage relationships to build legitimacy? How can freelancers manage trust issues with employers and the other way around?

Nemkova et al. (2019) discuss the usefulness of a platform for creative freelancers. For creative freelancers, it is not just about work to do for others. They also want to be themselves proud of their work. The authors argue that most of the concerns for creative freelancers are about how well these platforms will undermine their job's meaningfulness. It remains uncertain how well freelance platforms are taking this into consideration when designing the features of the platform for the users.

The author continues arguing that freelance platforms are sometimes unfair, because of the review and rating systems rooted in the platforms. Nemkova et al. (2019) furthermore suggests in her study context that freelancer and its client experience a power inequality between their relationship (Nemkova et al., 2019).

This is somewhat in line with a recent notation that emphasizes that freelancer service and community support are needed for a sustainable freelance platform business (Younger, 2018). According to Younger (2018), freelance platforms that don’t provide much support to individual freelancers won't last, and that is why platform firms should consider freelancers as their most important customers, rather than resources. Investing in supporting freelancers will increase freelancer loyalty and exclusivity (Younger, 2018).

Online freelance platforms can partly solve the trust issues also with their transaction transfer methods (Popiel, 2017). This means that after a freelance work has been successfully completed, the buyer accepts the work which releases the payment to the freelancer. Platform controlling the transactions lowers the risk for both sides of the platform (Popiel, 2017).

As freelancing in general is a relatively more popular option to work in the United Stated, also the online freelance platforms are as well more familiar there. In the EU, the importance of the platform economy for the labor market has remained relatively unknown, but a report of De Groen, et. al (2018) shows employment and working conditions of platform work in EU. According to the report, a push factor for online freelance work is the lack of other work possibilities. From a pull perspective, attracting people to join a platform is the lack of entry

barriers: online freelance platforms do not require formal job interviews or application. In other words, the report found motivations from both pushed and pulled aspects.

Online freelance platforms can shape the labor market. The report of De Groen, et al. (2018) emphasizes that since any person is able to join the platform, workers are not required to prove upfront that they have certain professional skills. While this could be seen as a good improvement to the employment situation in society, in the study, people with higher university degrees did not feel their qualifications provided as an advantage compared to they are in the traditional labor market. Another labor market facilitator is the possibility for immigrants to work. New immigrants having no language skills in a foreign country do not have the proficiency needed for most of the traditional work that labor markets offer. Therefore, working globally through an online platform seems to give an entry to the labor market (De Groen, et al., 2018).

As furthermore insight of the report of De Groen, et. al (2018), the research found that several platform workers are not sure about tax issues regarding their payments. However, using a platform overall seems to be one way to avoid bureaucracy compared to working as a pure entrepreneur.

Increasing quality is for freelancers a relevant way of receiving good feedback, and thereby getting more work because of a higher positive reputation (Luca, 2017). Thus also freelancers have the incentive to reach quality in their work as it represents themselves, rather than a company. In addition to the actual work, freelancers can increase their validation on the platform though their profile. In some cases, when it is not possible to beforehand make evaluation of the work, clients make conclusions of the freelancer through other information available of the platform's service provider (Ert et al., 2016).

2.4 Theoretical framework

This section brings together freelancers, online freelancing platforms, and the entrepreneurial identities of freelancers. Today, most of freelance job announcement are online, which has risen a great demand for freelance platforms. It is however uncertain what are the relations between the entrepreneurial identity of freelancers and the platforms.

This thesis develops a framework to understand the underlying connection between freelancers' entrepreneurial identity and online freelance platforms. Understanding about how freelancers position themselves as entrepreneurs can shed light how they behave in opportunity actions and risk-taking decisions. The relation between online platforms and freelancers gives the structure for a working freelance work allocation between companies hiring freelancers and freelancers. In order to serve freelancers better platform, firms need to design the employment marketplace supporting different needs of freelancers that differ from their entrepreneurial identity.

The purpose of the framework is to offer a tool to examine what drives freelancers to use platforms and how entrepreneurial identity is related to it. Researching the entrepreneurial identities not only sheds light on the motivations for freelancing and further for entrepreneurship, but also reveals the underlying approaches for using online freelance platforms. The framework also helps to show the mechanisms of work allocation for freelancers because online platforms are a rising freelance marketplace. The framework created for this research is in figure 2.

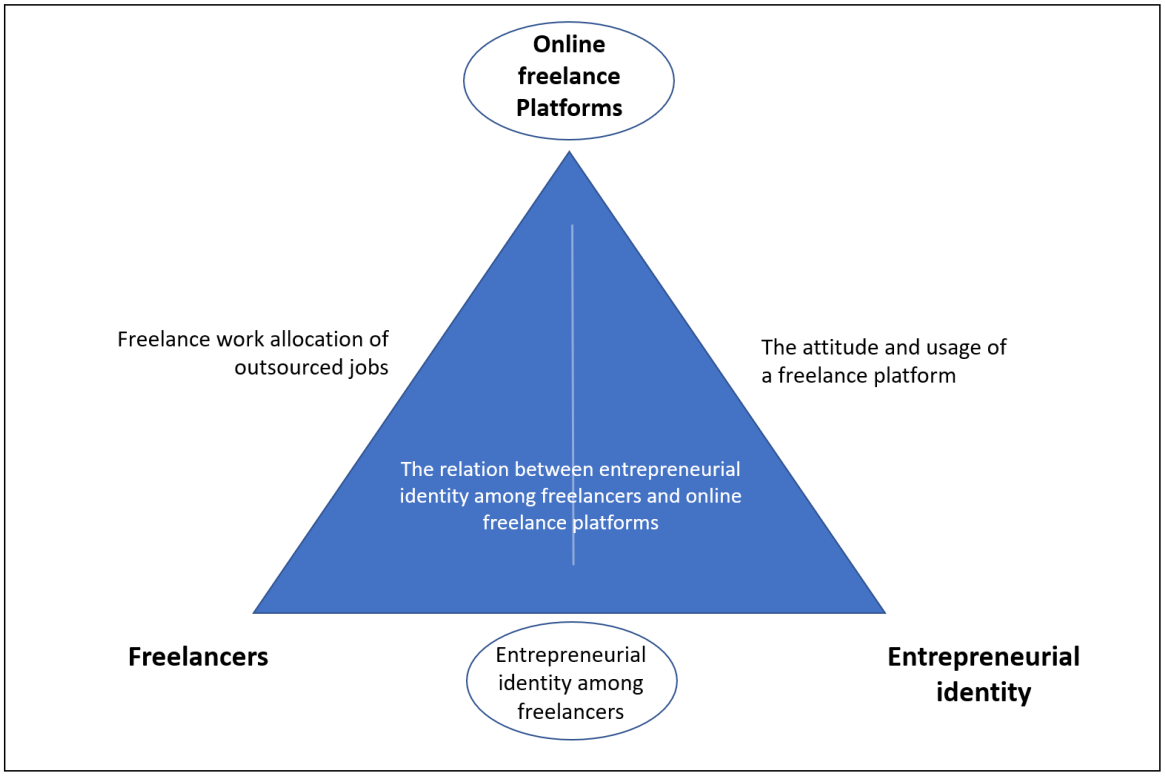

Figure 2. Research framework

Nemkova et al. (2019) argues that freelancers who are more entrepreneurial orientated can benefit more from the platforms. These freelancers see that they can control more the career development and go more out of their comfort zone and are more active in self-development.

However, people join the online freelance platforms for different reasons. One way of categorizing reasons is that some are more pulled, and others more pushed into entrepreneurialism (Kautonen et al., 2010), which could be seen as one research approach to examine the freelancer behavior in the platform context. As found, De Groen, et. al (2018) were able to show that there exists both pushed (lack of other work possibilities) and pulled (the lack of entry barriers) reasons for joining a platform.

Identity theory shows how entrepreneurs relate themself in relation to others. The classification of darwinian, communitarians and missionaries as a type of entrepreneurial identities gives one base on which to build on research. The work of Fauchart and Gruber (2011) continues with a behavior perspective. Their theory is showing how entrepreneurs might behave, and hence, suggests a connection between entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial behaviors and outcomes. Question remains can we apply this to freelancers and do the same assumptions?

Identity gives a freelancer the inner motivation to become self-employed instead of being a regular employee, and that identity also guides his/her behavior. If a freelancer's motivation has been making money, it could be assumed that s/he is a darwinian, and then behave in the causal way. Therefore, a darwinian freelancer looks at the end and focuses on the goal. S/he makes a lot of predictions with the existing pre-knowledge and seeks actively new opportunities. But it might be too straightway to make such conclusion about freelancer.

The second type, communitarian is suggested to behave in an effectual way. A communitarian entrepreneur, and hence perhaps a communitarian freelancer, does not care much about the business side of his/her work, but rather just goes with the flow of what the work brings on the table. The third category, missionary freelancers follow mainly casual behavior, so s/he would also act in a determinist way.

In other words, identity influences decision-making, and thus the use of platforms. On the other hand, since identity is about positioning in relation to others, the platform messes the positioning.

3. Data and methods

This chapter includes the research methodology of the study that explores the relation between the entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and online freelance platforms. To study individuals' identities, an exploratory, qualitative study research design was chosen, because it is recommended for investigating phenomena that are subtle and/or poorly understood (Yin, 2008).

3.1 Research method

As the research question is a sociological phenomenon, this study is a qualitative research made with semi-structured thematic interviews. Doing qualitative research aims to find sensemaking of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). This research has several notices that need to be introduced before representing the analysis of the interviews' findings.

Thematic interviews are suitable as a research method when it is unknown what kind of answers will be received or when the answers base on the interviewee's own experience. This method is also used when attempting to find deeper information about the subject (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2001). In thematic interviews, it is typical that with the interviewee's answers, s/he refines and deepens the subject areas (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2001).

By using a thematic method, it is possible to analytically do research within identity, because one of its benefits is its flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While it is expected that the interviewees in this research can differ significantly (for example, by their occupation or identity), this kind of flexibility in the conversation situations is required. Thematic analysis is a good approach for seeking insights into for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), using thematic analysis is needed to find patterns in detail. The authors argue that thematic analysis in qualitative research gives a theoretically flexible approach to analyzing the data. In this research, the goal is to explore how different freelancers identify themselves as entrepreneurs and how the entrepreneurial identity

evolves in the online freelance platforms where a novice non-entrepreneur can become self-employed. Therefore, it is necessary that the interviews are not too restricted so that there will be room for deeper analysis and a possibility to find information that wasn't perhaps asked in the interview questions.

This research method is a good approach because it allows to understand what distinctive in the phenomenon is. This thesis has not worked from any presuppositions in theory but rather conducted the research abductively. The existing theory on entrepreneurial identity, freelancers and online platforms helped to see the patterns in the data.

3.2 Research context

Doing qualitative business research requires taking into account the context in which a specific phenomenon occurs (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This study has matters in three aspects that have to be taken into account when considering the research context.

Firstly, freelancers differ from entrepreneurs and employers, as they are working between the grey area of entrepreneurship and self-employment (Kautonen et al., 2010). Freelance work is distinct from entrepreneurs since they do not work through a company but as themselves. Likewise, the definition of the employment status is often not clear for freelancers (De Groen, et. al, 2018).

Secondly, the context of online freelance platforms gives us an understanding of the allocation methods of freelance work. Considering online platforms helps to question how a person become freelancer today, and how the platform mechanism develops a person's entrepreneurial identity over time (if it does).

Thirdly, this study is limited to Finland, which is a context to consider while platform freelancing is still quite new for the people. Overall in Europe, the platform work is relatively small, but is rapidly developing (De Groen et al., 2018). However, because of the online platforms, for the work that do not depend on the location, freelancing is a global cross-country activity, meaning that anyone from any corner of the globe can do the required work that a company is seeking to outsource to a freelancer as a temporary work task.

3.3 Sample and data collection methods

As a person's approach to a subject (here being an entrepreneur as a freelancer) may vary due to personality factors, it is important to interview more than one person. To receive enough of comparability and replication, this research is conducted by interviewing seven individuals that are working as freelancers. When a study is based on several sources of data, the research is considered more accurate, convincing, and rich (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

This study was carried out through *semi-structured thematic interviews* where a thematic interview is a conversational interview method used as a way of data acquisition in qualitative research. A semi-structured interview has a more predetermined structure than an open interview but a narrower system than a structured or form interview. In this research, the purpose was to have a specific design in all interviews. Hence, the conversations will not get too away from the theme. Still, it was allowed to ask further questions if needed in the interview situation. It was even desirable to have conversations that flow naturally. The designed structure worked only as a guideline so that the multiple interviews are comparable with each other, and founding similarities and differences are more straightforward. Repeated interviews were useful in minimizing recollection bias, triangulating findings (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

There are some predetermined topics to be presented in the thematic semi-structured interviews. This research aims to find out if there is an effect on how platforms shape the entrepreneurial identity. Therefore, this study is attempting to find the information on what knowledge and management experiences the selected interviewees have. Furthermore, do they feel their own skills sufficient, or what do they think are the drawbacks in their career as freelancer. Therefore, the semi-structured interview guide included themes of the interviewees' opinions about the current career prospects of freelancing. The used interview guide in this study is included in the appendix.

The interviews were done either online in a Zoom conversation or by a phone interview. Being in their natural physical place, the interviewees can experience a more comfortable environment. The interviews were aimed to feel more like a conversation where the discussion can flow naturally from subject to another. The estimated duration of one interview was approximately 40 minutes. However, there is no obligation to keep the interviews lasting for that time. For example, it was allowed that an interview took less or longer if it resulted in a more in-depth analysis about the themes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for later coding.

In the *selection of interviewed freelancers*, some qualification criteria were set to obtain comparability. Firstly, the interviewed must work or have work experience as a self-employed. Secondly, the interviewer should be working as an independent contractor that makes the interviewee defined as freelancer. In the self-employment definition, a person doing gig jobs (for example, an Uber driver) was not included in the reference group. Thirdly, the selection on interviewed participators must differ from each other in a moderately amount to not make misleading conclusions in the findings. Hence, it was allowed that the occupations of the interviewees vary. If someone is a writer and another one a marketing expert, then it can be found interesting comparisons of the data between these occupations as well. There was no specific criteria of the interviewees' education background or other demographic qualifications. The interview contacts were founded through LinkedIn, freelancer listings and online freelance platforms.

An overview of data collected from the seven interviewees is provided in a table in the appendix. The table shows the interviewees' occupation and form of employment. The relationship to online freelance platforms is also described. Gender categorization is also provided, although it had not relevant emphasizes in the initial research method design.

3.4 Data coding and analysis method

There are different approaches to conducting a thematic analysis. This thesis follows a common form of a six-step process created by Braun and Clarke (2006) (table 1).

Phase	
Step 1: Familiarization with the data	Transcribing, summarizing, reading and re-reading the data, writing down the initial ideas
Step 2: Coding	Organizing the data to meaningful groups by using different keywords
Step 3: Generating themes	Sorting the different codes into potential themes and gathering all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes
Step 4: Reviewing themes	Checking whether some separate themes could have been combined into one theme and removing parts which turned out to be less relevant.
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	Finalizing the themes and forming sub-themes to give structure to some large and complex themes
Step 6: Producing and writing the report	Write-up of the results by using analytic narrative with example quotes from the data

Table 1. Process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

After transcribing the interviews, the goal was to find connections from the data to earlier theory empirically. This required first pre-coding by analyzing the transcribed data with an overview and detecting similarities of the entrepreneurial identity of the interviewees (step 1). Coding can be seen as an interpretive act that is part of the actual final analysis (Saldãna, 2013). The actual coding was exploring for more specific patterns with keywords, to categorize the data in groups (step 2). Examining the relation between entrepreneurial identities of freelancers and the online freelance platforms required grounded coding. It means that the coding allows themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Saldãna, 2013).

In order to do a successful analysis of the data, the data needed to go through with reflection and make extensive notes that generated themes (step 3). As a result, there were topic descriptions that are the basis for the findings of the study. After reviewing once again the data and the generated themes (step 4 and 5) the final findings were out to be written (step 6).

Although there were some pre-demitted themes in the semi-structured interviews, the aim was to observe phenomena that have not been previously reviewed in the literature. The semi-structured interview method gives the possibility to move outside the predetermined interview guide and a chance to go deeper with the themes.

3.5 Concerns on research method and ethical issues

There are few concerns with the semi-structured interview with a guideline done in advance. The predefined themes might affect what is being analyzed in the study. A detail in a singular interview can be a remarkable observation that does not get enough attention theoretically when aiming to find comparability and replication.

There is also a risk that the data analyst is too subjective after being familiarized with previous research. The context always varies in different studies, and it is important to be aware of this when doing conclusions in qualitative research. Therefore, it is necessary to strive for objectivity so that the researcher can find something that is not supposed to find.

Ethical considerations (Academy of Management, 2006) were taken into account in the design of the research, data collection and reporting of findings. Participants were explained the purpose of the study and they had the opportunity to refuse to respond. All the participants that were selected for the study are kept anonymous and respondents cannot be identified. This study did not address personal issues and the data material was kept and treated confidentially. All data is used in the analysis and the citations are presented without distortion.

4. Findings

This chapter present the findings of the study conducted in this thesis. In this study, a thematic analysis was made by coding interview data of seven freelancers or in other term self-employed people. Literature was supporting the background for the study and allowed designing a framework for the research design. The research aim was to explore the relation between entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and online freelance platforms.

The central aspect in the findings is that freelancers' careers develop in the context of time and place. Hence, also the entrepreneurial identity and different identity roles also move and are not stable, just as Mathias and Williams (2017) suggested when discussing entrepreneurs' different role identities. Furthermore, online freelance platforms can help a person to get started with their interest in self-employment but does not carry relatively far in Finland, though there are some exceptions. Coding the data revealed 5 different themes that are presented shortly in table 2 and in more detail in this chapter.

Theme	Summary of the theme
1. Freedom as a key reason for freelancing	Though some freelancers are pushed, and some pulled to freelancing, they all enjoy the flexibility that their independent work offers.
2. Critic on too wide online freelance platforms	It is difficult to compete on an online platform the larger it grows. In Finland, reductions on payments make small projects less attractive for freelancers.
3. A platform can help in getting started	Novice freelancers can with relatively small risks practice self-employment before becoming an actual entrepreneur.
4. Skills that freelancers need to learn	Freelancers should understand basic entrepreneurial skills (e.g., time management, accounting, communication). A platform can support in the lack of knowledge.
5. Networking is essential for all freelancers	A freelance platform can help reaching the first clients, but attaining contacts is nevertheless important.

Table 2. The emerged themes of the findings.

4.1 Theme 1: Freedom as a key reason for freelancing

There are different reasons to become a freelancer but there is no arguing that one of the main benefits is the freedom and flexibility on organizing own work. Several freelancers enjoy the possibility to work remotely when and where they wish. However, with freedom comes responsibility, meaning that it requires somewhat discipline to get the ordered work done independently. Other downsides of freelancing include mainly the lack of a community that an organization could offer.

> *"Definitely the good thing is that if you like to be at home a lot, then you can define your own rhythm. And I concentrate much better when I'm alone or in a small group, compared that I would work in a loudly open office, where would be a lot of work interruptions. I noticed that I was stressed out during the day and in a bad mood, and then when I became a freelancer, I was better. But there are a lot of downsides to freelance work. While you have the freedom to work at your own pace, you have to be pretty flexible. Sometimes you find yourself taking your laptop with you on vacation to get something finished. Another downside is that a freelancer is never part of any work community and kind of stays a distant figure when ordered from a freelancer instead of being a me mber of some team."*
>
> Interviewee 2

> *"You can choose how much work you want, and you can do other stuff like study while working. And I get to choose what kind of jobs I take. The disadvantages are all the practical things, which you have to find out yourself, for example, tax-related issues."*
>
> Interviewee 7

There is no one reason to become as a freelancer. There are some occupations that for the sake of their nature, freelance form of work is beneficial. In this way the freelancers can be thought as pushed to the entrepreneurialism. However, even "ending up" as a freelancer, does not mean that the freelancer would not enjoy the independence that freelancing offers.

On the other spectrum, some people end up as freelancers purely because they are interested in self-employment as such. This refers for the pulled entrepreneurialism, meaning that these people, regardless of if their profession required freelancing or not, they are seeking for opportunities how to employ themselves as independent freelancer.

> *"If you look at it from the outside, then you just have to be a freelancer in my field. I wanted to do certain kinds of stuff at magazines that only hired freelancers. So it was the only option to get to do those tasks. But in practice, I was also used to independent work and I like the freedom of an entrepreneur, so that I do tasks when and where I want."*
> Interviewee 6

> *"In other words, the freedom of a freelancer is the thing that actually became clear to me only afterwards. Now that I've been doing this for so long, I don't even want an employment relationship. Sure, if something really interesting was offered and I still got the freedom to work where I want, then I could consider. It [freelancing] is compulsory because of the nature of the sector, and it suits me, that is, by no means do I feel like a forced entrepreneur. I am a self-employed person in what I want to do."*
> Interviewee 6

4.2 Theme 2: Critic on too wide online freelance platforms

Opinions about online freelance platforms varied among the interviewees. The main problem of globally operating platforms is the convergence of price levels between countries. For example, completing a work task for the price of 20 euros might be a substantial income for a worker in India, but in Finland it pays not off (economically) to accept the job. When most sellers are from low price level countries, it becomes hard to compete within the Finnish context because people are used to a higher price level.

> *"That is not a sensible place for a Nordic person to sell a job, because it is a global platform with a lower price level, meaning the hourly wage does not correspond to skills."*
> Interviewee 3

> *"I have talked to some colleagues and most don't seem excited about these. That's because those who feel so don't do things at low prices, so they don't use these platforms because that price level is bad."*
> Interviewee 6

Another problem of the global platforms is the explosion of supply. On platforms without restriction of who can join in, the supply side will grow massively, and it becomes hard to navigate on the platform to find the right service.

> *"You can sell anything on Fiverr [one of the biggest online freelance platforms], but the problem is that anyone can sell anything. There are a lot of providers with cheap prices but to find quality is hard."*
> Interviewee 1

Although it is not too much to argue about that open marketplaces are beneficial for the economy, but the problem of online global freelance platforms, is that they become *too open* marketplaces. Some sort of exclusivity would be important for professional freelancers to get the respect for their profession. An interviewee mentioned that at an open marketplace

anyone can offer anything, which might result in even kids offering translator services for companies (Alanne, Iltalehti, 2021).

The problem of the too wide freelance platforms works the other way around as well. As found, anyone can sell there pretty much anything, but this can also apply the buyer side. If a freelancer is ranked well on the platform, the more request it will receive. Hence, one finding inside the theme is that the bigger the platform goes, the more problematic its functioning will become on both sides.

> *"The worst thing right now is that I also get orders from scammers. The platform has a feature that an order can be placed there before we've discussed it, so I have to cancel it separately if it doesn't suit me, and that results how good I look on the site."*
> Interviewee 7

Furthermore, an interviewee noted that on some platforms, the commissions are too unreasonable. While opinions about commissions might vary as much as there are freelancers or platforms, one common view is that in the Finnish context, a freelancer must take into consideration the higher taxation that they face compared to many other countries. Therefore, doing small tasks that takes from one to couple hours, is not usually economically worth. One interviewee suggested that one need to understand, if asking 100 euros for a job on a platform, in reality one might receive 50 euros eventually after all reductions. Moreover, the cultural context of Finland raises the notation of the Nordic tendency of strong labor unions.

> *"We considered setting up a similar service in Finland, but the idea was quickly rejected because of the strong trade unions, which impose rather heavy obligations. In other words, it does not make sense to employ a person for 2 or 5 hours and deal with these obligations, which would not make sense for the platform operator in Finland."*
> Interviewee 3

As noted, that the bigger a platform is, the harder using it might become. According to the interviewees, it's somewhat a matter of luck whose profile one will be considering.

> *"Freelance journalists' platforms are usually just lists of names, and I don't think it's very appealing and I haven't heard that very many have gotten jobs through them. And it's a bit of luck that whose profile there ends up looking at, since there are no useful filters. They are not interactive or social platforms. In other words, it would be good if every field had some kind of platform in which to better present own expertise. For example, LinkedIn is pretty much just a CV, and when many have different skills from different backgrounds, all of them may not be relevant to a particular job. So, it may seem confusing. So, it would work well if each industry had its own platform."*
>
> Interviewee 5

As quoted above, it is seen as positive idea to have working platforms. A platform that would not work as a listing of people, or at least the way to connect the right people is essential.

> *"If someone wanted to do decent platform agencies, so that there would be professionals that stand out from there, the important thing would be that that freelancer would receive a decent reward, so that the platform would be able to brand itself with its quality and the customer is willing to pay for that quality."*
>
> Interviewee 6

> *"Of course, it's good in them that if there are good ready-made contract bases, then the paperwork will be done easily. But apparently some of the people in beginning of their career on the consumer side will join them here in Finland as well."*
>
> Interviewee 6

Although online freelance platforms face a lot of critic among several interviews, most of them connect to the concern will the work quality, professionalism, and price level meet. As interviewee 6 pointed out, some people in the beginning of their career might use platforms or similar services. This gives us the third theme that is the platform's possibility to help in getting started the freelance working form.

4.3 Theme 3: A platform can help in getting started self-employment

> *"After all, it's a pretty contradictory thing, if you think about it. If you want to go full time to do independent freelance work through such a platform for some 20 euros, then it's a pretty ridiculous thing to do. Personally, I've mostly thought of it as a starting kick-off if a few projects could be done and the platform would elevate you to an active user. At least for my part, it has worked well."*
> Interviewee 4

As the interviewee 4 put it, the problematic side of the platforms is recognized. However, a platform can offer a possibility for people who wants to "try out" self-employment. Similarly, from the buyer perspective, an interviewee that also buys services through a platform indicated that it's a good place to start testing cheaply. Risk are not that high since one does not invest too much on it.

Although online freelance platforms do receive critic, the chances they can offer are mostly recognized by all the interviewees. For a novice one, who is interested in selling his/her work, but not quite ready to establish a trade name yet, a platform can offer a softer landing for the self-employment world.

> *"I hadn't previously thought about self-employing more seriously, but my unemployed period took me to try it. The platform had a soft landing on it. Of course, I was considering setting up a business name, but the thought was put a side when I got a day job, which attracted me because of the financial security. The platform was also attracted by the possibility that the more projects a person received, the better the platform will rank the person. That is, they actually promote the freelancers in their own social media, for example. So they do the marketing work for me, which is of course great, and helps to get ahead."*
> Interviewee 4

The benefit of an online freelance platform are the features it can offer for a freelancer. People who are not used to marketing their own job, might find it easier when a platform connects them to new clients. Though the price level needs to be kept low in the beginning, the possibility to do small projects is an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, it may result in a faster progress in entrepreneurship or at least considering it more seriously.

> *"I would certainly have become an entrepreneur at some point without a platform as well, as I come from an entrepreneurial family. Perhaps, however, it would have taken longer to start entrepreneurship, and the industry would not necessarily have been content production. The journey would certainly have been more rocky, just in terms of how I find my first customers and other things."*
> Interviewee 7

> *"I was interested in doing work independently on a project basis for different clients and from around the world. It would be great sometimes to dare and jump completely into it, but time will tell. The fact that I already put a profile on the platform and took on projects was a good first step."*
> Interviewee 4

As quoted above, a platform helps in getting customers in the beginning and can foster the network building process, among other things. When having the first projects completed with happy clients, they can recommend the freelancer, which makes the freelancer more attractive to further clients. However, interviewees say that this might take a while and patient is required. To overall receive orders, also the profile must look good, and it should be put effort to make it attracting and optimized to potential clients.

> *"I would recommend the service to my friends, but it has to be taken in the sense that it takes a moment before it can be called really work. That is, to be on the platform requires to progress there in a way."*
> Interviewee 7

"When you think about the pain of pricing, you would think that this is a great platform for, for example, a student or a person who wants to develop their skills. That is, if you want to be able to work with clients and gain experience on working and feel entrepreneurial in terms of an internship, then such a platform could work well."

Interviewee 4

In other words, strategy knowledge on how to proceed in the freelance business is beneficial for new freelancers on the online platforms. The needed business skills for freelancers are relevant to put as an own theme.

4.4 Theme 4: Skills that freelancers need to learn

"It [an online freelance platform] is an easy way to market your own product for sale. But how to make it visible there in the service is the thing. That is, you need to understand how to optimize the content of your own work, that is, what to bring out, so that people will order from you."

Interviewee 1

Although an online freelance platform can help people to start employ themselves, it does not mean that one should not have the basic skills of how to sell their work. A typical problem that many freelance novices face on the platform is to put their prices too low in the beginning, and thereafter they face too much demand for their work and are unavailable to respond the deadlines. There are a lot of people on the platform who do not know the basics of entrepreneurship. Interviewees tell that they face people who don't know how to price their own work or even communicate well (especially sellers from low-priced countries).

"Many don't have an understanding of the business of taking all the orders you get, especially if you do a gig that costs really little, but the work is valuable, then suddenly it has 100 orders that should be done in a day, something you can't do.

That is, it lacks coaching for that salesperson on how he or she can cope with what he or she is doing. In other words, the work is done there alone."
Interviewee 1

"You have to know how to do the boundaries of what kind of work you want to do. And you have to know how to price your own work, that is, if it is cheap then surely the work is enough, but you do not earn anything from it, which is important."
Interviewee 1

Entrepreneurial skills are however not only a concern for online platform worker. All of the interviewees find a learning curve from their freelance career. The most important ones are time management, prioritizing skills, and economic skill. Communication skills came also several times up when discussing skills.

"That is, communication with the customer is important. In that sense, the platform offers those tools to operate, but you need to understand how to work. "
Interviewee 1

"As for the different roles, it can be said that at least half of the possible mistakes have been due to it, and it has paid off specifically in its own use of time since then. But of course, there are good guidelines, for example, on the website of the freelance association and other similar services that help with these matters."
Interviewee 6

"Many people do not necessarily think when they start as an entrepreneur that they have to do accounting, for example, although of course their own accountant can be used, but something must be understood about financial matters. And many seems to think there is a contradiction, that if there is a artistic freelancer, he or she would not need to understand billing, which is a misunderstanding."
Interviewee 5

Some freelancers preferred to use the help form others as purchased serviced. Typical ones are bookkeeping services, but some considered also further services, such as marketing. Most of the interviewees see that a well functioning platform can help in these issues. In some cases, the online platform boosts the reputation of freelancers that have received successful projects.

> *"I'm bad at selling my work. I made my work pretty cheap at first when no one had yet validated my work. The more I have received good reviews, the more people will be interested in me and the platform highlights me. So I haven't done that much self-promotion, rather I've been striving for good work and good customer service and it's taken me far."*
> Interviewee 7

> *"All website making and stuff like that, so if a freelancer has money, then I think you should use help. Personally, I am bad at selling my work. Sometimes I might contact new clients, and usually I attach some work samples."*
> Interviewee 6

The work towards building an own network is nevertheless vital for freelancers. Several skills can be outsourced either to a platform or to another party, but it seems form the data, that building the social contacts is relevant in all cases.

> *"It is definitely for a novice freelancer the hard part, that where to find a job and how to market and promote itself because I'm pretty bad at those. So I have been lucky in the sense that I've got some mates, through which I've founded jobs."*
> Interviewee 2

4.5 Theme 5: Networking is essential for all freelancers

The fifth theme of the findings is that whether a freelancer works more independently, or through a freelance platform, networking stays important either way.

> *"Certainly it [a freelance platform] is a possibility if someone faces a longer quiet season. But in terms of working, it would be a frustrating way to work. Freelancing is best when you find regular clients with whom you build a relationship of trust and you know each other and that's the least stressful way. If there is an unknown customer in a one-time relationship through an app, then I would have a hard time imagining how to build a relationship of trust."*
> Interviewee 2

> *"Contacts have a pretty high value, even though I am at a platform. The same client may come back several times and it brings security to my work when I then know the client. It will also be easier for me to plan my schedule when I roughly know that this person will probably come to order a text from me at a certain time. The more different customers there are, the more time it takes me to learn their needs and get to know their company. It's easier to communicate with familiar customers and it's also easier for them to order from me than to switch to another freelancer, even if someone else was cheaper."*
> Interviewee 7

A platform can help to receive the very first contact if a freelancer starts form zero. Ideally, first contacts grow further into a network with a snowball effect. Likewise, instead of constantly connecting with new clients, it is more beneficial to keep the quality with the existing clients and nurture the relationship already build. Most interviewees agree that existing connects often return to continue collaborating when they were happy with the service.

> *"Through the platform, I have received references to other potential clients, meaning I was not directly in personal contact. In Finland, it is of great importance that the word spreads, good projects bring recommendations for continuation."*
> Interviewee 4

Above descriptions clearly indicate that no matter how convenient it would be to start freelancing on a platform, one still need to build the personal network around them. It also connects to the theme of learning, since also networking is often a matter many freelancers learn during their career.

> *"A freelancer is a dilemma in the sense that for an introverted person who likes to be on their own, a freelance job is a good fit. But if you want to be a successful freelancer, you have to be really good at networking and social and have beer with people from school to have those contacts. Most of my work comes through people. For example, another freelancer says "Hey I got a job offer, but I don't have time to make it" and then sure I'm interested in doing the job."*
> Interviewee 2

Several freelancers have learned during their career to be more open to people and recognize when there is a job opportunity. However, some find networking hard when it doesn't come naturally from the freelancer.

> *"The word networking is somehow a cold word, because it reminds me that you only know a bunch of people for benefits reasons. But the fact that you get to know many people and have friends that they know and remember you later is good. It's a bit difficult for many in my artistic field. Developing technology at home alone is not always enough, we should be seeing people as well. All the ways you get to work, even if there are such applications [like online freelance platforms], they are completely secondary to the fact that how you get along with people. When you have contacts, with a snowball effect there will be more of them and work offers."*
> Interviewee 2

> *"Basically, colleagues do help, but people are usually busy, so there is little time left to see you talk freely in your free time. Knowledge of good job opportunities accumulates slowly, meaning I know something about something. Sometimes I contact old customers and remind them that we did this last time, would you need this again? So yes of course, you have to be proactive, but I should do it more."*
> Interviewee 6

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings in terms of the research aim that was to explore the entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and their relationship to online freelance platforms. The qualitative study that was conducted with seven freelancers revealed five different themes that were described in the previous findings chapter. This chapter returns to the framework developed based on the literature review and aims to connect the findings to the existing literature.

In line with the literature, freelancers enjoy the flexibility of their work, and for some freelancer it is even the main reason to become a freelancer (Woronkowicz and Douglas, 2019). The possibility work where and when is a significant advantage of freelance work.

However, as De Cock, et al. (2016) also note, there are two sides of the same coin when it comes to the benefits of freelancing. With freedom comes responsibility, discipline, and required skills that include risk-taking, negotiation, and presentation. For several freelancers, the line between free time and working time is blurred. Just as Gold and Mustafa (2013) suggest, “work always wins” for some freelancers, which requires balancing in organizing the work.

This thesis developed a triangle of freelancers, entrepreneurial identity and the online freelance platforms to understand the connection and interaction of each of them. Entrepreneurial identity among freelancers depends on several aspects such as the occupation and the motivations to start freelancing. Freelance work allocation can benefit from platforms, but that will not undermine the importance of freelancer’s own skills and networking. The attitudes towards online freelance platforms are generally positive when freelancers consider the possibilities it can offer. However, global platforms have problematic parts as well. The completed framework is in figure 3.

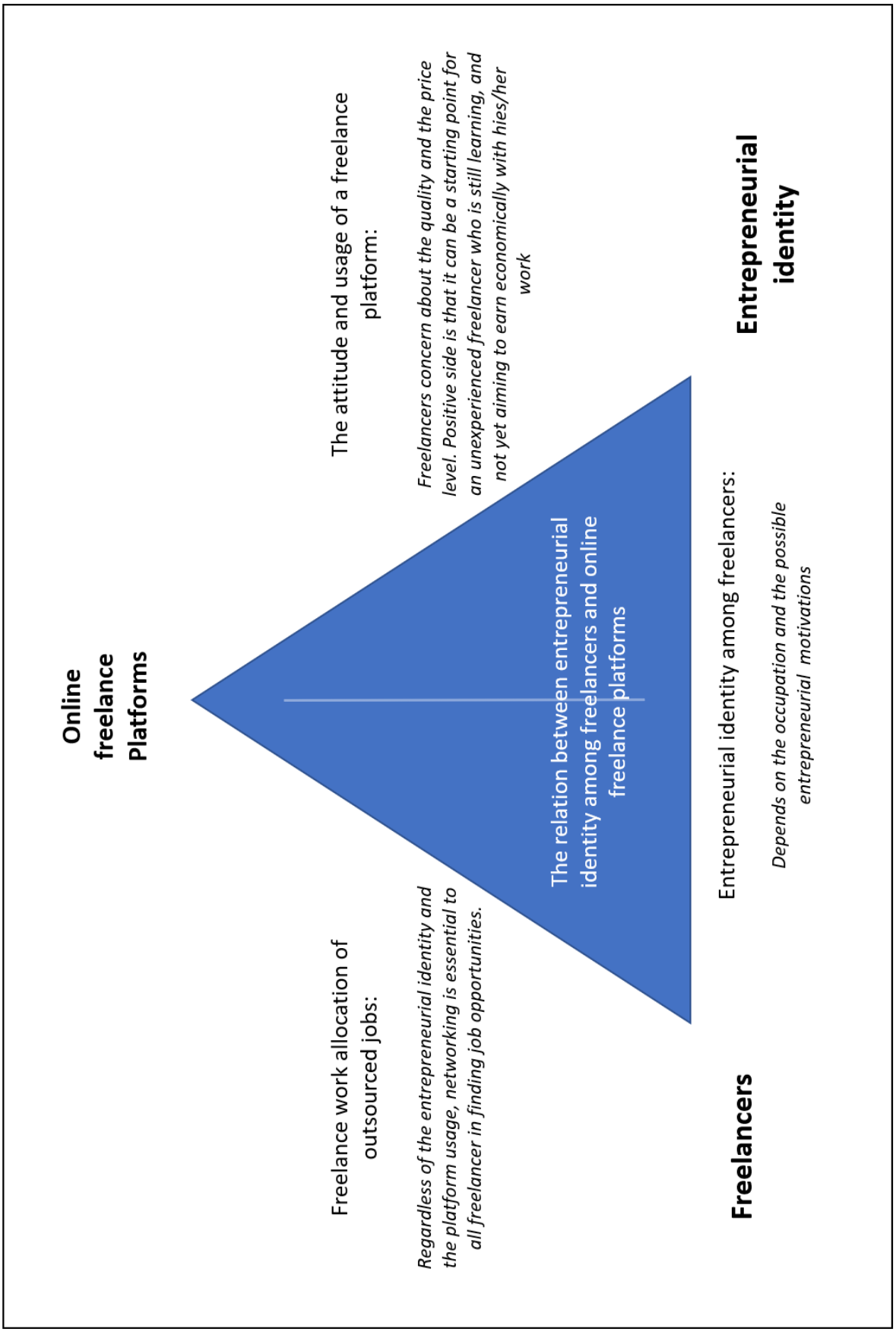

Figure 3. Extended research framework.

5.1 Entrepreneurial identity among freelancers

It could be said that "pure" entrepreneurs don't see platforms as opportunities. Making money, especially in the Finnish contexts is not really attracting. However, most freelancers were not exactly as straightforwardly profit seeking entrepreneurs, rather they did their job as a freelancer since it was natural, and they enjoyed the benefit of the freedom.

Turning back to the social identity theory by Fauchart and Gruber (2011), it gives us understanding of the motivations to start freelancing. Of the three types of identities – darwinian, communitarian and missionary – it is possible to recognize loosely form the freelancers darwinians and communitarians. Darwinians have merely rational financial reasons and aim for success. These freelancers tend to try self-employment, because it pays better off than working as a regular employee. However, this is not typical, at least in Finland. Mainly people try out freelancing either because it's natural for their occupation or because of curiosity.

Currently the major reason to become a freelancer in Finland, steams form the nature of the work. Certain services are in a large amount purchased as a one-time gig, which therefore makes the occupation more attractive as freelance based form. These freelancers might be considered as communitarians of their entrepreneurial identity. For example, in the data a photographer, a journalist, and a translator employ themselves easier when working as freelancers. Therefore, it can be interpreted that they are part of the certain "community" with their field of work.

Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) concept of missionary entrepreneurs did not show up in this freelance study context. Therefore, this study cannot suggest that the social identity theory of Fauchart and Gruber could completely as such be applied to freelancers. Still, it gave a baseline to the exploring different motivations for becoming a freelancer.

Moreover, this study found external motivations for freelancing, especially in the online freelance platform work. Freelancers who have that entrepreneurial interest but may not have

the strong courage to become an entrepreneur, see the platforms as a response to their curiosity. Consequently, for "shy entrepreneurial" people, platforms can be an opportunity.

There was another type of curiosity in the research emerged. Mainly curiosity means in this thesis that a freelancer is willing know how it is to work as a self-employed person and to know if it could be for them a suitable form of working. But some participated interviewees said that they are simply curious to see the market on the grass root level.

While Mathias and Williams (2017) suggest that entrepreneurs wear different "hats" in different contexts in their career, every interviewee recognizes the need for different roles, but some of them may not experience eagerness in the other possible roles. Making the work that is their own "thing" is the most pleasant part and everything else is somewhat "obligatory" to take care of.

Perhaps there are at least loosely two different groups here (or from literature one could think of darwinian and communitarian, no one was really a missionary here now). "Natural" freelancers were not entrepreneurial at all when they started their careers, and may even experience headaches, at least in the beginning, from all the side roles related to entrepreneurship. Then again, those working in "other" fields have started as freelancers from their own interest in entrepreneurship, but still do not dare to jump yet into a complete entrepreneur.

5.2 Freelance work allocation and the needed skills

In analyzing the relationship between freelancers and the online platforms, the work allocation mechanism is the underlying topic behind the platforms' function. However, the allocation of freelance work is a concern that platforms cannot alone solve. Freelancers need certain professional skills to work independently, or as Hye-Ron (2019) put it: as a boss and an employee.

Hytti (2005) found in her study that self-employment can also be a response for unemployment, and that entrepreneurship is a way to have the own professionalism in one's own control. Also in the data of this thesis, one interviewee started using an online freelance platform since the person was laid off because of covid-19 depression, to receive some income and to maintain the professional skills. Another interviewee also stated, that since she was no longer working around her initial education, she did as a freelancer the work related to her initial occupation, to stay connected to the skills.

Among all the interviews, the research shows that networking skills are important. Gandini (2016) pointed out that the significance of personal contacts of a freelancer is essential even though online freelance platforms are becoming more popular, which also all of the freelancers agree on, regardless of using or not a freelance platform. However, A platform can help to get the first contacts and push the beginning of the career. Nevertheless, in the long-term it is important to build relationships with both personal contacts and clients to maintain good reputation and receive more jobs (Grimov, 2016).

Freelancers, especially new ones, would like to have more support for entrepreneurial issues. Often, many of them did not think about them properly when they became self-employed and had to learn a lot about organizational matters alongside their job. Freelance platform firms will stay sustainable if they provide proper support to their freelancers (Younger, 2018). This is also what was seen in the data as a helpful feature of the platforms. According to the interviews, working platforms offered trainings and support forums. Similarly, they

who did not have experience of platforms saw support as an important feature of a potential platform for themselves.

Surprisingly many would be even willing to outsource issues - if they could afford it (eg invoicing services or marketing services). Thus, they also see the platforms as good in the sense that someone would take care of all such things, allowing themselves to focus on the professionalism itself. As noted above, freelancers do wear different roles in completing different tasks next to their profession, but several freelancers rather would focus on the actual job that they are doing.

Baines and Kennedy (2010) have suggested that a self-employed person is insecure, powerless, and in a dependent relationship with clients, whereas entrepreneurialism refers to a freelancer that is perceived as having a sense of independence, empowerment, and self-direction. Therefore, it can be recognized form the research of role identities among freelancers. For instance, several interviewed freelancers stated that they do not feel being good at marketing or selling themselves but feel in general it's an important skill to attain. This was also found in the literature review that self-promotion might be seen among some freelancers an uncomfortable skill to achieve (De Cock, et al., 2016).

Some of the freelancers were willing to do underpaid gigs in the beginning of their career. This is a typical strategy that freelance novice do to grow the network and the reputation (Cohen, 2017). These freelancers saw online platforms in a more positive light that it offers the possibility to find the first clients and a baseline for the freelance career. Next section will discuss more about the attitudes that came up analyzing entrepreneurial identity and the online freelance platforms.

5.3 The attitude and usage of a freelance platform

In general, the perception towards globally operating online freelance platforms is negative in Finland, because of the price convergence. It seems that at least in the higher priced Nordic context, freelancers would be more open to a high-quality platform that would emphasize professionalism rather that quantity.

Kyprianou (2018) had noted that platform firms govern the platform either from inside out or outside in. A quality driven platform would be using an outside in strategy, where a firm limits the participation. This kind of exclusivity could in the context of freelancers protect the professionalism of freelancer. Several interviewees did refer to agents, that do work in such a manner. However, an agency can not involve new freelancers without experience.

An open online platform can offer possibilities also to Finnish freelancers, though perhaps in a bit different way. The entry barrier is low on the platforms, which makes it easy to get on board. From the findings of the data it was also clear that a platform can be an convenient way of trying out self-employment when it is new to a person.

As it is suggested that there is transformation of attitude to work life (Grimov, 2016), freelancing as form of work do get a lot of positive thoughts to people. There were no straight negative attitudes for entrepreneurialism, and all the interviewees seemed happy with the benefit that freelancing brings.

Yet, for many, a day job with a steady income represents an important safety in everyday life, and the Finnish labor culture supports employees from that perspective compared to other cultures. Culturally, in Europe and especially in the Nordics, trade unions are important matters that affect the labor market. However, De Groen et al., (2018) note that also platform workers are ever more represented by trade unions or initiatives on their own.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Research summary

Freelancing as the new form of work has grown worldwide in recent years. This thesis developed a framework to explore the entrepreneurial identity among freelancers and their relationship to online freelance platforms. The qualitative study conducted by thematic interviews with seven different freelance representatives showed how the freelance platforms are being used in the Finnish freelance context.

This study showed that entrepreneurial identity could be applied to freelancers as well to examine their entrepreneurialism. The occupation of a freelancer affects the entrepreneurial identity. Some professions might push the person to freelance since it is the best working method in their field.

Currently, online freelance platforms are not in an active use in Finland. The main reason is the low-price level on the platforms due to price convergence. Open platforms enable inexperienced nonprofessionals but also professionals from low-wage countries to enter the global freelance market. For this reason, the price competition becomes for many Nordic people too unreasonable because they are used to a higher income level.

However, this research found that because platforms are relatively easy to use by individuals, it can be a good starting point for a person willing to try out self-employment but not jump into entrepreneurship yet. Hence, this study shows that entrepreneurial people can start their careers without bigger risks on an online platform. Nevertheless, in the beginning, it's important to keep the price level low to gain clients and grow the reputation.

A freelance platform can help receive the first clients in situations where the freelancer has no own network yet. In this way, the work allocation of freelance work is shaped by the platforms. Still, it does not take away the overall importance of personal contacts and networking skills that bring orders for freelancers. Freelancers also need other managerial skills in coping with their work, such as time management, communication, and pricing.

6.2 Practical implications

The insights of this thesis are relevant for online freelance platform business designers, people working as freelancers, and the educational sector.

Online freelance platforms business designers benefit from the findings of this research because it takes into consideration the difference between platforms without entry barriers and quality-focused platforms. A platform's business model can be created either inside out or outside in (Kyprianou, 2018), and this thesis has found that the outside in strategy - that limits the participation of freelancers - would be more welcomed to the Finnish freelance work market. The inside out strategy where profitability comes by user growth is a place to mainly try out and develop as a freelancer, rather than succeed economically (though one exception existed in the data).

Freelancers who operate in a field where they become naturally self-employed can learn the needed skills that are important in freelancing in the early stage. People who do not identify themselves as entrepreneurs don't usually learn the needed skills in advance, rather alongside their careers. For freelancers, this study shows the advantages but also the problems of online freelance platforms.

The entrepreneurial identity of freelancers is good to consider when freelancers in different fields prepare their profession. Not many interviewees said their education would have come across with aspects related to entrepreneurship or freelancing. Furthermore, the opportunities brought by the platforms may be relevant for teachers to be aware of in entrepreneurial matters (especially when the entrepreneurship education for youth in Finland is at an excellent level looking from a global perspective).

6.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Because this study was conducted in the context of Finnish freelancers, it cannot conclude that in general freelancers from high price level countries would not benefit economically of online freelance platforms. For instance, in the United States, online freelance platforms have significant activity, even though the price level is not low. The labor culture affects the on-demand work realization. In Finland, trade unions have a strong representation, and the needed paperwork for small tasks is often seen as too unreasonable for small tasks that the global online freelance platforms favor.

This research was conducted with different freelancers to achieve a comparison between the identities. Future research should distinguish between natural freelancers and other freelancers to further gain insight into the entrepreneurial identity. In other words, different business segmentations offer beneficial contexts for further studies.

It would be noteworthy to study non-Finnish freelancers in Finland since the literature suggested that platforms could be one way of employment in a foreign country (e.g., Meager, 2016). Two of the interviewees started their self-employment journey when yet living abroad. Overall, career prospects and freelancing's effects on labor markets have remained relatively unstudied (Grimov, 2016).

Furthermore, equality questions came up during the analysis but were left out of the scope because of its complex and deep topic context. This study aimed not to discover the differences among gender and age. However, it cannot be ignored that the positive approaches towards online freelance platforms came merely from younger women. The discussion about why women settle for lower rewards of work links to this study’s findings. However, since the number of interviewees was not that extensive, it is hard to suggest conclusions about this matter. Therefore, future research could extend this study in investigating how platforms shape gender inequality in entrepreneurship.

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Appendix

Interviewed freelancers

Interviewee number	Description	Gender	Interview channel
1	Head of digital services. Uses a freelance platform mainly as a hobby.	male	Zoom
2	Freelance graphic designer. Does not use an online freelance platform.	male	Zoom
3	Entrepreneur that offers rarely services on an online freelance platform, but often represents the buyer side of a freelance platform.	male	Phone
4	Full time in marketing. Sells digital marketing, photography and content production services through a freelance platform.	female	Phone
5	Partner in a startup (communications manager and creative director) and a freelance journalist and publisher. Former freelance translator as well.	female	Phone
6	Freelance photographer and occasional writer. Does not use any online freelance platform. Exploits actively a freelance association.	male	Phone
7	Freelance translator and writer. Uses an online freelance platform as the main income and have been doing it fulltime as well.	female	Zoom

Interview guide

General questions		Objective
1.	Tell about yourself.	How does the interviewee describe him-/herself.
2.	Tell about your work, and how do you define the form of employment you have?	The nature of the work.
3.	Describe the advantages and disadvantages of the form of employment you have?	Reasons for freelancing.
Identity related questions		
4.	How did you end up self-employed?	Exploring the founder identity.
5.	Why are you a freelancer?	Exploring motivations for freelancing.
6.	How do you believe others define your employment?	Positioning related to others.
7.	What have you learned during your career of freelancing?	Possible changes in the identity.
8.	What thoughts does entrepreneurship evoke?	Attitude towards entrepreneurialism.
Questions of online platforms		
9.	How do you find work, and what are the channels that you mainly use?	The usage/not usage of platforms.
10.	How did you end up to the mentioned platform / way of finding work?	Reason to start using the platform.
11.	What do you find easy or challenging?	Advantages/disadvanges of the different features of a platform.
12.	How do you trust your employers/customers? How do they trust the quality of your work?	Exploring trust issues.
Closing questions if not appeared earlier		
13.	How do you define yourself as an entrepreneur/employee?	
14.	Do you think platforms could change someone's self-employment situation?	
15.	Free comments.	