

Identity work of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs

An in-depth analysis of the identity work of dropshipping entrepreneurs within the sharing economy

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Abstract

As evidence shows, new digital affordances are changing the way we communicate with our social environment. At the same time, the developments in this area create new opportunities for entrepreneurs by extending and innovating already established business models within the e-commerce industry. Considering the enormous impact of the e-commerce boom, dropshipping has become one of these new phenomena. It is a form of entrepreneurship that has lowered the barriers to start successful entrepreneurial journeys and therefore gained a growing interest globally and increasingly within the Netherlands. While this business model is rather new and under-researched in general, no academic attention has been given to identity work around dropshipping entrepreneurs. In other words, there is a paucity of studies addressing who the entrepreneurs behind the scenes are, their entrepreneurial identities and their entrepreneurial identity work. Furthermore, with online Dropship communities on the rise, tribal marketing might help conceptualize and practically support new ways of value-creation of dropshipping entrepreneurs and facilitate new processes and practices of identity work.

In this research Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs have been interviewed based on their experiences with their membership of one or more Dropship communities which have been labelled as E-tribes in order to examine its role in the entrepreneurs' identity formation. As the relation between identity work and dropshipping has not been made before, this thesis aims to offer a contextualized understanding of young adults' entrepreneurial identity formation and identity work within the e-commerce industry. The research question in this Master thesis has been formulated as: *"How do Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identity through identity work in their start-up communities?"* In order to answer this research question, an in-depth literature review was complemented with qualitative empirical research in the field.. To gather empirical data, dropshipping entrepreneurs were selected through both snowball- as well as purposive sampling techniques. The emphasis was on the exploration and interpretations of experiences and perceptions of a like-minded group of individuals, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the topic under study.

Through a thematic analysis of interview data with Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs, I discovered four themes which summarize different aspects of entrepreneurial identity work. These themes have been labelled as; *The Self as a marketing tool*, *entrepreneurial identity struggles*, *a collective identity* and *the entrepreneurial spirit*. These results imply that Dropship communities have a great impact on the identity formation of its entrepreneurs, which smartly make use of current technological affordances. Furthermore, it appears that the discourse around the "sharing economy" is a profound base of all developments. Ultimately, the research shows that it creates impactful pillars that support the entrepreneurs' identity formation through sensitizing them to unique opportunities for building social capital, networking, self-development, entrepreneurial identity formation and the shared creation of a collective identity.

Key words: Identity work, entrepreneurial identity, e-commerce, dropshipping, sharing economy, tribal marketing, E-tribes.

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1. Introduction to the research

This first chapter introduces the topic under study. It clarifies the motivation behind the study and shows the social as well as academic relevance.

1.1 The rise of dropshipping

“If it’s always been your goal to have financial freedom, then dropshipping is one of the fastest, simplest and easiest vehicles to help you reach this” (“The History of Dropshipping”, n.d.).

If you are an entrepreneur using digital technologies in the Netherlands, chances are high that you work with dropshipping. Currently, dropshipping is one of the most profitable e-commerce business models in the world. Although the notion of dropshipping is not entirely new, its impact and popularity due to the electronic commerce (e-commerce) boom asks for a critical and exploratory research approach (The Rise of Dropshipping, 2018). The original dropshipping business model goes back to the early 70’s. It began with a catalogue of advertised goods on television and radio where consumers were already able to order their products without the intervention of the Internet. As this business model grew bigger, suppliers were struggling with high levels of customer demand (“The History of Dropshipping”, n.d.; The Rise of Dropshipping, 2018). The concept of fulfillment warehouses, just as they are used today by Amazon for example, were born. A strategy focused on storing massive inventory in bulk.

When the Internet became more widely used by businesses and customers, mail order catalogues changed into “e-commerce stores” and online shopping was introduced to the public. A decade later, e-commerce giants such as Amazon and eBay started to revolutionize the way online businesses were able to sell their goods. Extensive financial resources for creating and advertising online stores were no longer needed. Dropshipping developed further when Alibaba released AliExpress in 2010, a website where individuals are able to order items directly from Chinese suppliers. Today, Shopify and the affordances of social media allow for the creation of professional semi-automated dropshipping stores which brings us to the current impactful “business model of dropshipping” that entrepreneurs use (“The History of Dropshipping”, n.d.).

1.2 Entrepreneurship in relation to the digital era

The digitalized environment, as we currently know it, asks for a new mindset. With social media and other technological advancements of Web 2.0 having shown to challenge traditional business models, dropshipping was born based on opportunity spotting, innovation and making use

of today's interconnectedness. Following the principle of "*What's mine is yours*", the sharing economy can be interpreted as the natural outcome of the digital revolution. Entrepreneurs are participating in exchanging information, knowledge and data via social media which has helped to increase the popularity of the phenomenon we call "dropshipping" (Richter, Kraus, Brem, Durst & Giselbrecht, 2017). Digital media have become crucial drivers for entrepreneurs and start-ups considering the affordances to connect with their customers, get inspired, enhance value creation, brand loyalty and especially getting into contact with other entrepreneurs (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff & Perez-Latre, 2019).

Following Smith, Smith and Shaw (2016), networking is becoming increasingly important for entrepreneurs as their networks function as opportunity structures while building social capital through the interaction with others. This network-broadening behavior has yet to be investigated even though it is having great impact on business strategies and the entrepreneurial identity formation of individuals (Zheng, Ahsan & DeNoble, 2019). Although dropshipping is often enacted individually, there seems to be trend towards community building and cooperations between entrepreneurs (Andriane, Pinem & Handayani, 2019). Therefore, research will have to show whether and how these entrepreneurs use each other and digital media for their business purposes.

Dropshipping is defined by the act where goods are provided directly from the manufacturer to customers (Li, Zheng & Liu, 2019). Orders are automatically shipped to the customer without the intervention of retailers. Therefore, with the explosive growth of e-commerce, dropshipping drastically lowered barriers for entry, making it accessible for anyone to start, build and grow their own profitable business. Nevertheless, with the impact of this business model stated, there has been little to no attention placed on who the entrepreneur behind this business model is and how he or she develops one's entrepreneurial identity through digital media. As digital technologies are transforming entrepreneurial processes, it is impacting how and whether entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identities. With online dropshipping communities on the rise, there seems to be an under investigated and fascinating world behind the business of dropshipping and the required entrepreneurial identity. Therefore this thesis addresses the following research question: "*How do Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identity through identity work in their start-up communities?*"

1.3 Social relevance

To support the impact of the dropshipping industry, reports have shown that during 2017 Shopify reached already an impressive amount of 27 billion US dollars which is a 70% sales

increase compared with 2016. Moreover, as figure 1.1 shows, it was expected that Shopify would even reach 350 US million dollars revenue in the second quartile of 2019 only (Gupta, 2019). Considering that Shopify is just one of many online web shop providers within the industry, one should envision the large scale operations of the industry having a tremendous impact on today's e-commerce business and so media landscape (Chiang & Feng, 2010). The practice of dropshipping eliminates the need of inventory investment and warehouse space, reducing financial burdens and taking away inventory risks (Peinkofer, Esper, Smith & Williams, 2019). Even well-established manufacturers such as Apple and Samsung implement a dropshipping policy in their brick-and-mortar (BM) channels because it enables them to test new products, gather market data and reduce costs, which allows for building and sustaining their competitive advantage (Li, Zheng & Liu, 2019).

Besides, the motivations to start dropshipping are often “sold” via social media by the exceptional financial freedom entrepreneurs are able to reach in a very short timeframe which is an interesting driver for youngsters these days (Kasser, 2016; Broeck, Schreurs, Proost, Vanderstukken & Vansteenkiste, 2019). This emphasis on materialism is something that comes forward from individuals' extrinsic values which are hold individually, however, shaped in a societal context. The focus on such material drivers is something that is considerably increasing in today's digitalized environment and thus of relevance to study since it provides a better understanding of how societal macro and micro influences affect people's identity formation and self-perception.

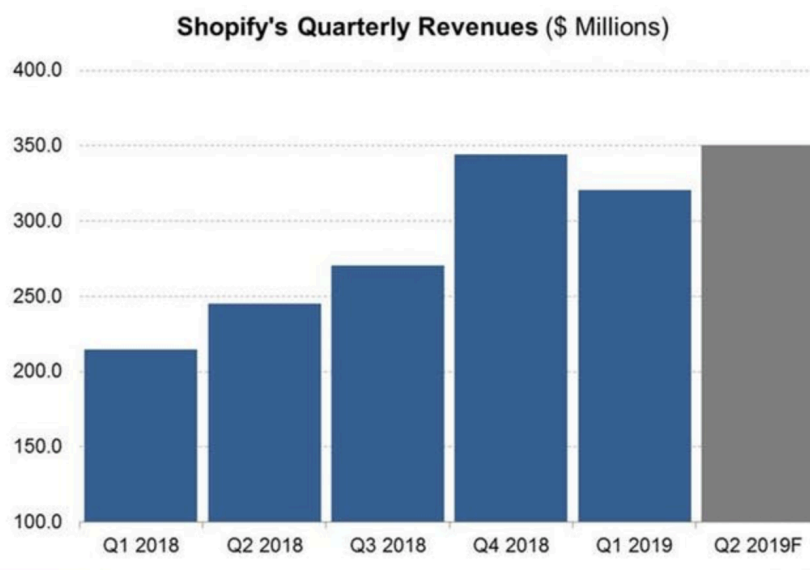


Figure 1.1 Shopify's Quarterly Revenues overview 2018-2019 (Gupta, 2019)

Having stated the importance of understanding the impact of these new opportunities due to today's digitalized environment for starting entrepreneurs, it is of great relevance to study this new phenomenon within the e-commerce industry. New mindsets are needed and online communities have risen. Nevertheless there is little to no academic research yet conducted on this impactful business strategy, including the "behind the scenes" understanding of this new form of entrepreneurship which refers to their personal and entrepreneurial identity formation. This implies that we need more research to address this phenomenon. In particular, more reproach is needed in order to understand more of what is going on "behind the scenes" of this new form of entrepreneurship. The way in which these entrepreneurs develop and form their entrepreneurial identities is an important avenue of investigation. Better knowledge of these developments can further support responsive policy-making and adequate structural support for developing infrastructures and new areas of innovation and knowledge sharing in cities.

1.4 Academic relevance

Dropshipping is not a completely new phenomenon considering its impact in the United States (Singh, Kaur & Singh, 2018), however, according to many economists including Hoebink (2020) and AliDropship ("Why start in Netherlands", n.d.) it is upcoming within the Netherlands and claimed to be severely under-investigated when looking at the continuing influence of digital technologies on new forms of entrepreneurship (Chiang & Feng, 2010). According to Xi, Block, Lasch, Robert and Thurik (2020), contemporary technological developments, especially in the digital range, have created a pathway for new forms of entrepreneurial start-ups that are interrupting the media industry. Over the past few years, these start-ups have greatly impacted the ways of producing media content, marketing, consuming and sharing media products as well as other established frameworks related to media management (Achtenhagen, 2017). This development has for some time not received explicit research attention (Usher & Kammer, 2019).

In particular, it is stated by Brown (2015) that little to no attention has been placed on the understanding of the development of entrepreneurial identity in this context whereby the concept of "identity work" services as a prime resource. Although a study conducted by Fornäs and Xinaris (2013) already placed emphasis on identity formation from a media perspective related to both "old" and "new" media, there has yet not been a specific focus put on the industry of e-commerce which is found to be a fast-changing and dynamic environment (Koch & Möslein, 2014). Considering the meaning of "identity work", Coupland and Brown (2012) formulated identity formation based on a metaphor which is understood as a "liquid modernity" and tries to capture

contemporary trends, even more specifically, the unpredictability, needed flexibility and adaptability of entrepreneurs in today's ever-changing and digitalized world. This development makes the notion of identity creation less secure, more open and increasingly differentiated. Obviously, this makes the context in which they are formed a growing interest of investigation.

A changing environment makes it relevant to study what shapes the becoming of an entrepreneur these days. In relation to this Horst, Järventie-Thesleff and Perez-Latre (2019) already stated that the notion of how entrepreneurs develop their identity through digital media is currently under explored. More research in this area will contribute to the establishment of a better understanding of the latest developments, opportunities and creates a future perspective in the landscape of media entrepreneurship (Edwards, Bendickson, Baker & Solomon (2020). Digital technologies are transforming entrepreneurial processes, however, despite the importance of dropshipping, there has been no attention placed on *who* the entrepreneur behind this business phenomenon is and *how* he or she develops one's entrepreneurial identity through digital media (Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis & Sabelis, 2009). Research on this point will extend the understanding of the effects on a micro as well as macro level related to societal impacts on this development. Therefore the focus of this study is on how Dutch drop-shipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identity through identity work within their start-up communities. Here the aim is to offer a contextualized understanding of entrepreneurial identity and identity work within e-commerce.

1.5 Chapter outline

This Master thesis has been divided into separate chapters which each deal with an independent aspect of the research. First, chapter one covers the inducement of the study together with the social as well as academic relevance of the topic under study. The research is continued by a theoretical framework. This chapter is divided into separate (sub)sections which each focus on an element of the theoretical background of the research. Section 2.1 acts as the fundament for the rest of the chapter as in the subsections identity work is defined. Further sections place the concept of identity work in context and in relation with identity struggles. Besides, entrepreneurial identity which is impacted by societal changes and the sharing economy is highlighted with a narrative construction around it. Chapter 3 subsequently explains the methodology applied to this research.

Chapter four deals with the results and analysis of the data after the full data collection process has been finalized. Finally in chapter five a conclusion has been stated based on the data analysis retrieved from the previous chapter. Here the research question has been answered and

future research implications are indicated based on the limitations of this study which among other things relate to the Covid-19 crisis.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter provides the theoretical base of the study. Overall the theory focuses on identity work (section 2.1) and the construction of entrepreneurial identity in an ever-changing digital environment (section 2.2).

2.1 Defining identity work

Debates continue on whether identities are stable, fixed and static or rather evolutionally adaptive, fluid and shifting. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) state it, individuals are strongly motivated to maintain and perform their identities in their current state in order to achieve a sense of stability. Nevertheless research also suggests that there is an increasing recognition that “The Self” is a working concept, meaning that it is responsive to dynamic developments which are context dependent (Brown, 2015). This argumentation goes hand-in-hand with the metaphor used by Coupland and Brown (2012) in which they try to conceptualize the meaning of identity work by its understanding of a “liquid modernity”. This notion underlines the importance of context-dependent perspectives on the concept of identity work as times are changing and digital revolutions impact our understanding of “*who we are*”, “*how we should relate to others*” and “*what we should strive to become*”. These questions refer to the meaning of identity work as individuals reflect on their sense of selves to make understand who they are, what goes on in the world around them and how they should act in relation to these developments. A multitude of studies have focused on the various ways in which individuals interact with their environments and thus broader societal discourses. What has come forward of these studies is that indeed generally there is not a “fixed”, “true” or “authentic” centre of “The Self”, rather we are continuously negotiating preferred versions of ourselves that are based on cultural and social mirrors around us (Muhr, Cock, Twardowska & Volkmann, 2019). Considering the dynamic field of e-commerce and the complexity of social networks due to an increased digitalized environment, this could mean that for dropshipping entrepreneurs their identity work becomes much more complicated, which underscores the metaphor of a “liquid modernity” presented by Coupland and Brown (2012). Therefore, it will be interesting to see how such an under-researched discourse related to identity work can highlight and explain the entrepreneurs’ identity formation in this specific context.

2.1.1 Emotional reflexivity in relation to identity work

As identity is increasingly understood as a “fluid” concept, it could also be described as a form of reflexive thinking (Brown, 2015). It captures the way in which individuals constantly

engage in a reflection process of negotiating own opinions, experiences and macro influences with the effect of changing one's self perception. So, people are not just passive recipients of discourses, but we are constantly communicating with them, through them, both explicitly and non-explicitly. Going one step further Muhr et al., (2019) extend this view with the notion of emotional reflexivity. This approach stresses the importance rather than the interruptive association of emotions. More specifically the concept refers to a shift towards the advancement of emotional connectivity as a base for identity development. From this perception, emotions can be used to construct better and stronger identities. This also means that identities are closely related to levels of self-esteem which may help in impression management, and thus is a key element of entrepreneurial success (Coupland & Brown, 2012). Relating this to dropshipping entrepreneurs, the role of emotional reflexivity will be an interesting research subject considering the young age of the entrepreneurs. Besides, looking at the important contribution of social networking sites today, the impact on the way Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs interact with their identity work process related to their levels of self-esteem and self-perception might be interesting to investigate.

2.1.2 Identity work in context

Identity and identity dynamics should be understood in the complexity of their context which makes it difficult to formulate "identity work" in one single comprehensive definition. Snow and Anderson (1987) explain identity work as the range of individual activities that people engage in to create, present and maintain personal identities which support the notion of "The Self". Others have argued that identity work involves not just "verbal talk" but also includes physical appearance and other symbolic interactions (Down and Revely, 2009). Besides, identity work should also be defined based on its available cultural resources which is captured by concepts such as "cultural frames" and "cultural vocabularies". Finally have others emphasized that identity work takes place in the present but must be considered in relation to one's entire life course and that identity crafting in the "present" is related to the past and future projected selves which is an interesting perspective related to the ambitions of the young (dropshipping) entrepreneurs (McAdams, 1993). Hereby it has become clear that identities are like life-stories and that they allow for the possibility to experiment with the portrayals of "*possible selves*", "*potential selves*" and "*provisional selves*" (Coupland & Brown, 2012).

With social media having a tremendous impact on our lives, the platforms allow us to be connected 24/7 and not being geographically bounded. Although this development offers a lot of new opportunities, yet to be discovered, there are also a negative consequences as it leaves

individuals to increasingly struggle with identity formation (Nielsen, Norlyk & Christensen, 2018). Most research focused on identity formation within organizations while referring to the social interaction process between employees. Nevertheless, times have changed and entrepreneurs, especially dropshipping entrepreneurs, act increasingly on an individual level meaning that the context in which they perform and construct their identities has changed. Today, there is an increasing emphasis on not only understanding identity formation within organizations, in particular identity of organizations, but also the identity formation of individuals. The analysis of this research will aim at discovering how new media dynamics including social media and social pressure, as a result of it, affect the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs in their identity formation who are the precise target of this complex discourse considering their practices in the e-commerce industry (Nielsen, Norlyk & Christensen, 2018). Taking this notion of “identity work” for the study of entrepreneurship seriously, means reconsidering and describing in greater detail the processes and practices of how entrepreneurs develop their sense of selves and continuously refine their self-presentations, update their profiles and descriptions and “perform their selves” in relation to their audiences (Koch & Möslein, 2014; Newbery, Lean, Moizer & Haddoud, 2018).

2.2 Entrepreneurs’ identity struggles

As indicated in the previous section, technological developments are changing our communication climate and the way we relate to our environment. This means that there is an impact on entrepreneurial identity work as well. Therefore, identity, identity formation and development are a growing concern in entrepreneurship research (Down & Warren, 2008). The following sections focus on what has been addressed by literature as entrepreneurial identity struggles. Implications for what this could mean for the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs addressed in this research will be explained.

2.2.1 Overstepping the effectuation theory

Over the years, established literature and societal mechanisms have created a rather fixed perception of entrepreneurship which relates back to the effectuation theory around identity work. This assumes that identity is a given and relative stable precondition in the entrepreneurial process (Nielsen & Lassen, 2012). Although there is an increasing consensus that identity should not be perceived as a stable unit, still much research on identity work, especially in the discourse of entrepreneurship, focuses on a modernist psychological view of “The Self” (Ibarra & Barbulescu,

2010), implying that it relies on the effectuation theory that perceives identity as a relative fixed asset that determines behavior.

More specifically, effectuation theory states that the entrepreneurial process is shaped from a set given means including an individual's identity as one of the given pre-conditions (Sarasvathy, 2001). This suggests that from the beginning of the entrepreneurial process, individuals hold a coherent and clear perception of who they are and what they wish to become. However, this theory does not take into account the dynamics of new and various meanings that occur due to the interactive evaluation process of the entrepreneur and its environment over time (Sarasvathy, 2008; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012). Besides, this notion currently finds itself to be debatable due to digitalization, societal changes and ages of entrepreneurs decreasing which is indeed the case for dropshipping entrepreneurs, leaving upcoming entrepreneurs to struggle with their identity (Nielsen, Norlyk & Christensen, 2018).

The impact of an entrepreneurial discourse or socio-cultural contexts have major consequences for the dynamic identity work of an individual who is trying to fit the size of stereotypical constructions of the persona around being an entrepreneur. This goes hand in hand with the adoption of a list of attributes or characteristics that would fit the entrepreneurial rubric (Muhr et al., 2019). Identity is found to be an essential aspect of entrepreneurship and it can in various ways be perceived as career identity. These forms of identity performance are often linked to self-reflection, intrinsic motivation, behavior and their route towards self-expression. Moreover, the concept of emotional reflexivity comes again into play as the incorporation of this understanding offers the opportunity to struggle with entrepreneurial discourses and the desire to build one's personal identity around it (Muhr, et al., 2019). This process is in many ways influenced by one's social identity and is thus linked to cultural influences, societal frameworks and personal characteristics rather than fixed pre-conditions as suggested in the effectuation theory (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). It will be interesting to see how Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs encounter this process while taking their modern vision and life-style into account as this might shed a new, "modern" light on potential identity struggles for entrepreneurs.

2.2.2 A Ching climate, a changing perception

The subjective self-image influences entrepreneurs' behavior and decision-making (Kautonen, Hatak, Kibler & Wainwright, 2015). Looking at the personal traits of entrepreneurs, some identity processes are highly driven by someone's inner belief in themselves and passion. This passion is found to have a strong connection with entrepreneurial identities according to the

effectuation theory as this identity satisfies the human need to be unique and distinctive, an interesting element when looking at the impact of social media on this desire (Nielsen & Lassen, 2011). However, following the latest consensus around identity work, this component of entrepreneurial identity resonates from an ever changing interaction process over time (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009; Murnieks, Mosakowski & Cardon, 2012).

A changing climate asks for an adaptive perception and research perspective. Research has found that starting entrepreneurs are struggling with their fluid identity which is caused by, among other things, the impact of new media. Training programs and public presentations, created to design professionals, seem to be a solution. Programs as suggested by Nielsen, Norlyk and Christensen (2018) focus on identity expansion instead of identity change which links to the metaphor of “liquid modernity” presented by Coupland and Brown (2012) before. Interestingly, dropshipping entrepreneurs seem to have created such training programs to learn others the practices of the business model but also to help established dropshippers to grow in their performance and self-development. Performing “the self” is found to have become a strategic part of entrepreneurs’ online narrative in which social networking sites (SNS’s) are used as a communication tool for self-expression and self-promotion. Nevertheless, “how” entrepreneurs should do this, is still not answered. This means, entrepreneurs remain struggling with their identity development and “how” to perform themselves (Nielsen, Norlyk & Christensen, 2018).

2.3 Entrepreneurial identity through digital media

Overall, there has been little research conducted on the perception of how entrepreneurs use digital media and what this means for their identity development. Due to changes in the digital climate one can speak about the mediatization of entrepreneurship which refers both to the opportunities and challenges entrepreneurs encounter today (Horst & Murschetz, 2019). Media entrepreneurship is a form of mediatized entrepreneurship, and refers to the intertwining of new media affordances and established business practices (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Achtenhagen, 2017). The influence of this phenomenon asks for a more strategic approach towards entrepreneurs’ media management in order to sustain success and their need to stay innovative not only in their business models but also in their online presence (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff & Perez-Latre, 2019). This seems to be what dropshipping entrepreneurs do. Therefore, this research will examine to what extent this is indeed part of their identity work and how they practice media entrepreneurship.

Essentially, social media platforms have created an infrastructure for the development of entrepreneurial identity work by providing the opportunity for identities to be established and

maintained. This indicates that entrepreneurs today are able to construct open, differentiated and mediated identities. The importance of constructing entrepreneurial identity is becoming an essential aspect that includes the strategic management of brand-building activities. By posting content, commenting on posts and sharing upholding profiles, entrepreneurs are able to actively construct who they are or how they want to be perceived by others (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff & Perez-Latre, 2019). So, the affordances of SNS's enable us to document, display and share our lives and to do this in more than one specific way (Lindgren, 2017, p.73; Horst, Järventie-Thesleff & Perez-Latre, 2019).

Nevertheless increasing competition in the market is creating pressure on entrepreneurs' survival and their opportunities for innovation which again often leads them to struggle with identity construction. Thus, in order to compete well, entrepreneurs need a pro-active strategy (Nielsen, Norlyk & Christensen, 2018; Horst & Murschetz, 2019). This means that today entrepreneurs might have to establish a concrete plan related to their storytelling that stimulates their online branding process. For example, Horst, Järventie-Thesleff and Perez-Latre (2019) have identified multiple entrepreneurial identities such as the "lifestyle driven identity" which is an increasingly popular identity to be performed on social media. Here, entrepreneurs start to brand themselves, their activities, knowledge and business with a specific focus on "freedom" which seems to be one of the dominant aspects of dropshipping entrepreneurs as well. As literature, advertisements and online articles indicate (Foster, 2017; Putten, 2010; Janssen, n.d.), this notion and emphasis on "freedom" seems to be an important element for dropshipping entrepreneurs as well. Therefore, this research will investigate to what extent this component of storytelling and narrative building is part of their entrepreneurial identity or their identity work in general.

2.3.1 Entrepreneurship in a sharing economy

With the relevance of digital entrepreneurship there has come a change in mindset as well. This mindset finds its base in what is defined by Richter, Kraus, Brem, Durst and Giselbrecht (2017) as "the sharing economy". This phenomenon covers the act and process of distributing what is yours to others for their use and receiving something from others for your use, payed or for free (Belk, 2014). It is defined as an economic model in which individuals share underutilized assets for monetary and non-monetary benefits (Botsman & Rogers, 2011).

The sharing economy has given rise to new business models. With the digitalized environment, boundaries have faded and enabled individual entrepreneurs and their interaction with others (Will, Brüntje & Gossel, 2016). "Win-win" situations have been created that include

knowledge sharing, social capital building and networking (Smith, Smith & Shaw, 2017). With a mentality of “*what’s mine is yours*” entrepreneurs have found a way to not only develop their own success but also help others within the same industry to reach a higher level together.

By embracing digital networks, digital relationships are becoming an important aspect for entrepreneurial success. Entrepreneurs’ networks act as opportunity structures (Richter, Kraus, Brem, Durst & Giselbrecht, 2017). Here social capital is identified as the ability of entrepreneurs to extract and utilize resources from relationships to achieve desired outcomes and is found to be an integral part of entrepreneurship as it helps in realizing opportunities, acquiring resources and gaining legitimacy. Network building and broadening are required to bridge and bond social capital between entrepreneurs (Smith, Smith & Shaw, 2017). Social capital is needed today to launch, grow and support entrepreneurial ventures. It is known that entrepreneurs manage their business relationships online today, however, there still remains a gap in literature that focusses on how social capital is applied for entrepreneurial success and how this is been put into practice by dropshipping entrepreneurs.

2.4 Entrepreneurial identity as a narrative

Entrepreneurial identity can also be understood by career identity (LaPointe, 2010). This perspective suggests a socially-constructed, discursive approach rather than an individually derived perception of who you are or wish to be. Here, the practice of storytelling becomes a crucial element of identity construction (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; Horst, Järventie-Thesleff & Perez-Latre, 2019). By taking on a discursive approach, we have to look back at the social capital that is retrieved from the sharing economy. Through networking, the social capital and possibility of creating online communities it has become much easier for entrepreneurs to surround themselves with like-minded people by which they can be influenced, inspired and motivated (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). Here, (online) social bonding facilitates shared identity constructions as a practice of co-creation between not only the narrator (entrepreneur) and the audience, but also between entrepreneurs as a multifaceted communication flow (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Jones, Ratten, Klapper & Fayolle, 2019). This appears significantly in the dropshipping entrepreneurs, who have found a form of collectivity which are perceived as start-up communities initiated by one or more dropshipping entrepreneurs. Therefore, it will be interesting to see what the role of these start-up communities is, how they are related to entrepreneurs’ identity work and what kind of narrative frames are used to promote these communities.

Essentially, identity becomes a practice of “performing the self” by which possible versions

of “idealized” selves are being portrayed (Jones et al., 2019). It can even be argued that in some cases “the self” has become a marketing object and tool for entrepreneurial success (van Dijck, 2013). Putting yourself out there in a frame that was consciously constructed replaces the persona in a brand, an entrepreneurial identity that might be different from the actual personal identity. So, SNS’ are acting as a stage for entrepreneurs or so called: “digital influencers”.

Interestingly, while e-commerce entrepreneurs’ age seems to decrease it comes with challenges such as financing and knowledge (Richter, Kraus, Brem, Durst & Giselsbrecht, 2017). Nevertheless research has shown that start-up businesses and entrepreneurs with less financial resources have a higher level of persistence and an above-average degree of innovativeness (Hanes, 2006). Besides, individual characteristics of the entrepreneur are vital to a start-up’s success. So, generations that have grown up with social media are expected to experience less difficulty in creating their online entrepreneurial identity (Kohn & Wewel, 2018). Still, entrepreneurial drive is key and is guided by someone’s level of passion and motivation. It is found that passion has a positive effect on inspiration and that one’s social climate impacts motivational mechanisms (Bhansing, Hitters & Wijngaarden, 2018; Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis & Sabelis, 2009).

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological choices in this research. The choices made and the specific steps taken are supported by detailed argumentation and are based on previous academic literature.

3.1 Research design

This study aims to identify how Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identities through identity work within their start-up communities. Within this investigation concepts from current scientific literature are challenged to identify their role and meaning within this specific area of action. Based on the goal of this research and taking into account that the business strategy of dropshipping in the Netherlands is currently under researched, a qualitative research approach is considered most suitable. This research approach makes it possible to get closer to respondents leading to a better understanding and the possible discovery of latent variables that indicate how participants develop their entrepreneurial identities within the dropshipping industry. A qualitative research perspective offers the researcher the opportunity to extend previously established theoretical boundaries even further (Brennen, 2013). Additionally, this research aims at creating a wider picture of the phenomenon around the development of entrepreneurial identity with a specific focus on dropshipping entrepreneurs which is why an in-depth understanding is preferred (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, as this study is interested in the assigned meaning to participants' identity work, a qualitative research approach is considered most suitable (Brennen, 2013).

More specifically, this study follows an interview-based approach by which a total amount of 11 interviews have been conducted. The data has been collected by means of semi-structured interviews. This structure has been chosen as the intention of this study includes exploratory elements (Brennen, 2013). This enables the creation of new perspectives, leading to interesting comparisons of data related to established literature (Qu & Dumay, 2011). An interview guide supported the interview process (see appendix A). This will be explained in greater detail now.

3.2 Sampling

The sampling for this study, considering the timeframe and limited resources, can be defined as a non-probability sampling strategy which combines snowball as well as purposive sampling (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena & Nigam, 2013; Brennen, 2013). This allows exploring the research question in more depth (Matthews & Ross, 2010). More specifically has snowball sampling been

applied as there is no complete list of dropshipping entrepreneurs freely available. The sampling of this “hidden” community started with a few personal contacts. Through “contacts-of-contacts” from the selected participants, it was possible to get in contact with other potential participants. Given that these dropshipping entrepreneurs have certain characteristics and behavior in common, they are part of a network or in this case an online community. According to Matthews and Ross (2010), this is a fruitful approach to take, considering the fit with the research purpose and eventual depth of the analysis.

Secondly, purposive sampling allows for the exploration and interpretation of experiences and perceptions (Acharya et al., 2013). More specifically homogenous sampling enabled the selection of dropshipping entrepreneurs who belong to a like-minded group of individuals which enabled an in-depth and detailed investigation of the phenomenon under study (Matthews and Ross, 2010; Flick, 2007). Considering that the topic under study is yet under-investigated, I took on an exploratory approach whereby I had to draw a line in the sampling procedure. As the point of saturation was reached after 11 conducted interviews, I decided to stop the sampling process.

3.2.1 Units of analysis

The focus of this study is put on the entrepreneurs in a local Dutch context and the entrepreneurial identity development of dropshipping entrepreneurs. The 11 entrepreneurs I interviewed all belong to this group. I checked, whether the participants had at least one running dropshipping store online and whether they already had any sales. Furthermore, in the sampling procedure I emphasized that the interviewees should have relevant experiences with dropshipping practices, meaning that he or she should at least have practiced the business model for six months.

Position of interviewee	Total duration of interview
Respondent 1 Dropshipping entrepreneur	47:49 min.
Respondent 2 Dropshipping entrepreneur	48:37 min.
Respondent 3 Dropshipping entrepreneur	55:26 min.
Respondent 4 Dropshipping entrepreneur	52:01 min.
Respondent 5 Dropshipping entrepreneur	01:10:03h
Respondent 6 Dropshipping entrepreneur	50:01 min.
Respondent 7 Dropshipping entrepreneur	01:02:11h
Respondent 8 Dropshipping entrepreneur	52:13 min.

Respondent 9 Dropshipping entrepreneur	49:58 min.
Respondent 10 Dropshipping entrepreneur	57:50 min.
Respondent 11 Dropshipping entrepreneur	58:14 min.
Total	Approx. 9 hours and 11 minutes

Table 1: Details of the interview data

3.3 Operationalization

Within this research there are some central concepts that need further explanation. In this section the concepts related to the research question are further operationalized, meaning that detailed definitions are provided and concrete interview questions are connected to see what is meant by the concepts' contribution. Starting with *entrepreneurial identity* which is understood by the dynamic and context-dependent notion of “the self”, meaning that it includes the understanding of “*who we are*”, “*how we should relate to others*” and “*what we should strive to become*” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Brown, 2015; Coupland & Brown, 2012). In relation to this is, in this research, *identity work* defined as the continues act of creating, shaping and rebuilding one’s notions of “the self” in performance to others by all symbolic means. Here, a person’s life course is taken into account as the story frame around the identity contraction process (Snow and Anderson 1987; Down and Revely, 2009; McAdams, 1993). Thirdly is *dropshipping* understood as a form of entrepreneurship within the e-commerce industry and is known for the act of selling goods via a self-created web shops by which one acts as a intermediary between the customer and supplier which is why inventory risks are eliminated (Chiang & Feng, 2010; Li, Zheng & Liu, 2019). Finally is the *sharing economy* understood as the process of distributing what is yours to others for their use and receiving something from others for our use, payed or for free (Belk, 2014). This rather new economic model is build upon individuals that share underutilized assets for monetary and non-monetary benefits (Botsman & Rogers, 2011). A concept that evolved as a consequence of digitalization. From this, networking and the evolvment in online communities have risen, including the Dropship communities that are covered in this research. Table 2 shows how the concepts are measured in conducting the interviews.

Concept	Focus within phenomenon	Example questions
Identity work	Self-perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur? - Do you compare yourself to other entrepreneurs within this industry? - How do you see yourself most of the time? (Role(s), attitude, etc.)
	Self-development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How has this image of yourself changed the last few years? - How is your study/ professional background related to your current business practices as an entrepreneur?
	Identity struggles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you describe what aspects of being an entrepreneur are most challenging to you? Make you feel insecure? How do you deal with this insecurity(ies)? - Do you compare yourself to other entrepreneurs within this industry? - Do you sometimes have to perform different roles? - What is the feedback that you get from others?
Entrepreneurial identity	Entrepreneurial skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you describe the skills you need as an entrepreneur? - Could you describe the skills you missed in the start of becoming an entrepreneur?
	Self-presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you present yourself? - How do you feel about “putting yourself out there” and becoming a “brand”?
	Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What stories do you present about yourself? (Where and how?) (self-promotion) - How did this story evolve? (Agency & Structure) What is different now?
	Future perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you see your future? (as an entrepreneur and your identity) - Are there particular goals that you work towards?
Sharing economy	Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think is the role of networking? - How has it helped you? (Relationship with other entrepreneurs/ Networking)
	Dropshipping communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you describe what the purpose of these communities is? - Are you part of a drop-ship community yourself?

Table 2: Operationalization of concepts

3.4 Data collection

The data has been collected by means of semi-structures interviews with dropshipping entrepreneurs who were selected based on the preciously discussed criteria. The participants were selected when they possessed relevant and necessary knowledge and experience concerning the topic of interest. Interviews are specifically useful for collecting data, because they are a form of data that enables researchers to elicit information, feelings and opinions from the interviewees, using question as an interactive dialogue (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

For this research, I was specifically interested in the interviewees' experiences, behaviors, understandings and most importantly the development of their entrepreneurial identities. Hereby both the information an interviewee provided about the topic under study and how he or she communicated about experiences and attitudes stayed central in this investigation. So, the content shared within the conversation as well as the way the interviewees expressed themselves were important (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

I conducted semi-structured interviews, meaning that I asked closely the same questions to all candidates while the rest of the interview was not planned and depended on the flow of the conversation. This interview structure was advantageous to this research as it secured objective comparisons among the candidates, however, at the same time allowed for a personalized and spontaneous approach to the conversation (Adams, 2015). All interviews were conducted using an interview guide. The questions are structured based on the topic of discussion, starting broad while moving towards specific, more concrete questions. The formulation of the questions is based on a concept-driven approach whereby one aims at manifesting theoretical concepts in a concrete design, or in this case the identity work of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. More specifically, this means that I first conducted a literature review and identified theoretical concepts that could be applied to this specific phenomenon from which the interview questions have been formulated (Matthews & Ross, 2010). This way, I have been able to contribute to a theoretical advancement in the realm of identity work.

3.4.1 Setting

The setting for the interviews was selected based on personal agreements with the participants, considering geographical differences. Nevertheless I ensured that in all settings we heard each other well and that the voice recorder recorded the conversation in good quality. Not all interviews were conducted face-to-face. When a participant was not able to physically meet, we used Zoom (an app for online conferences). Hereby, we were able to see each other, which had a

positive effect on the conversation atmosphere and also allowed me to observe the interviewees' body language (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

The interviews were held in Dutch as the interviewees all have the Dutch nationality, meaning it is their mother tongue. Besides, not everyone spoke English well enough to express him or herself fully. Moreover, I chose to do the interviews in Dutch to make sure the interviewees felt comfortable speaking aloud and because they are familiar with Dutch concepts which positively affected the quality of the interviews (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The interviews were transcribed and translated into English afterwards.

3.4.2 Data analysis

The theoretical framework guiding this research has been developed by systematic combining and applies the notion of grounded theory which is understood as the discovery of theory from data - systematically obtained and analyzed in social research - and questions how it can be furthered (Nelson, 2020). The focus was on a close relation of data with observations. Since no studies have yet been conducted regarding the identity work of the dropshipping entrepreneurs within the e-commerce industry specifically, I focused on a rather exploratory approach which is why a qualitative research in terms of interviews has been selected in order to support and extend already established literature. Here theory has been used to contribute to the theory development (Figueiredo, Gopaldas & Fischer, 2016).

The interview questions used in this study are based on this evolving framework. Besides, they have been formulated in such a manner that the analysis of the interviews sheds light on the process of identity formation, as an individual as well as an entrepreneur, including the narrative representations that came forward in the conversation by the experiences of the interviewees. The conversation addressed how participants describe their development as an entrepreneur, the influence of their upbringing, how they strategically manage their business in the e-commerce industry, how they connect with other entrepreneurs in the form of communities and how this, in return, supports them in developing their vision, ideas and self.

After all the interviews have been critically transcribed the texts were analyzed based on thematic analysis. This type of analysis is used to identify and analyze the main repeated patterns (themes) of meaning within the data. Besides, it allows for interpretation of text in relation to the research topic and theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, this research method allows for interpretation of the data regarding the significance of the identified themes and

theoretical implications. The analysis has been conducted based on a coding process described in section 3.4.2.

3.4.3 Open, axial & selective coding

The coding process has been divided into three steps, open, axial and selective coding. With open coding, the first step, I familiarized myself with the data and labelled chunks of data to generate initial codes. Secondly, I used axial coding to identify the relationships among the then already determined single codes. Finally, with selective coding I identified core themes which act as an abstraction within the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process has been graphically showcased in a coding tree (see appendix D). The entire process was conducted by constant moving back and forth between data, codes and the researcher's interpretations – “systematic combining” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). By doing so, this helped me to distinguish theoretical constructs and codes related to the notion of entrepreneurial identity development. Besides this has helped to organize the large body of data and establish a conceiving story that corresponds with my interpretations and experiences.

3.5 Ethical considerations

According to Flick (2007), ethical considerations run throughout the entire process of conducting a qualitative research. It starts with the research topic which is an under researched issue namely, the industry of dropshipping. With the use of semi-structured interviews, there has been a focus on entrepreneurs' experiences, feelings and identity development in the data collection process of this research (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Therefore confidentiality has been assured. I made sure the data cannot be accessed by others and the names of the participants remain anonymous. The data has been kept fully secure during the transcription and analysis process. Besides, as the participants were selected based on specific experience and knowledge on the topic of interest, I has made sure that within the transcription and data analysis the data can not lead to the identification of the interviewees (Matthews& Ross, 2010). Moreover, the participants signed a consent form which included a statement that the participation to the research is voluntary, a short summery of the purpose and procedure of the research and their rights before, during and after the research process. The form is singed before participation so that participants have the opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns before the data is collected (Flick, 2007).

Furthermore, the participants were also in control of the recorder, meaning that they were allowed to stop when feeling upset. Additionally, all participants were provided with contact

information so they could contact me with questions (Matthews & Ross, 2010). A further consideration is the current crisis of Covid19. Doing a study on identity work means asking questions about who they are, how they feel, and how they want to develop. These elements may foster negative feelings like fear or anger, because the crisis shakes up possibilities for being an entrepreneur. In order to counteract these possibilities, I acted mindfully and respectfully in regards of the feelings and the complexity of discourses of the entrepreneurs life and career at this point. When addressing potential identity struggles related to the Covid19 crisis, I carefully chose my wording based on the atmosphere and led the participant draw his or her line as to how far he or she was willing to disclose such personal information. This ensured that people felt comfortable and that ethical considerations regarding their work were addressed.

3.6 Validity & Reliability

To uphold scientific quality, I checked the validity as well as reliability of my research process. Validity is defined by Silverman (2011) as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomenon to which it refers. Therefore, I used analytic induction meaning that I tried to find the best fitting theoretical structure for the topic under study. Together with this I used constant comparison meaning that the findings after each interview have been constantly compared to see whether there could be any variation defined (Boeije, 2010).

The reliability on the other hand is defined by the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of the accidental circumstances of their production (Silverman, 2011). In order to establish this, I focused on the degree of transparency throughout the research process. First, the steps taken are described in specific detail and a structural coding process has been applied. Besides, the topic list has been exposed and the theoretical engagement has been made explicit. Finally, special attention has been provided to reflexivity, meaning my own role. I acknowledged that my personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and class identity, may have an impact on the interaction between me and the interviewee, so I consciously focused on and reflected upon impression management (Berger, 2015; Alvesson, 2003). I also made sure there was enough time planned between each interview, allowing for sense making and reflection.

4. Results and integrated discussion

This chapter presents an analysis of the collected data and the discussion of the results. Considering the qualitative research approach of this study the following sections provide an integrated discussion of learnings and theoretical linkages as presented in the framework of chapter 2. The sections are labelled based on the most dominant themes starting with section 4.1 which covers how a personal as well as entrepreneurial identity is increasingly used as *a marketing tool* for ones' business as to discover how social networking sites are used as an expression tool. Then the analysis continues with section 4.2 in which *a collective identity* has been discovered which relates to an impactful mechanism called "tribal marketing". The third theme, *entrepreneurial struggles*, extends the analysis as this section covers the complexity of today's "liquid modernity" in relation to reflexive thinking. Furthermore, *the entrepreneurial spirit*, as presented in section 4.4, covers the motivational drivers for dropshipping entrepreneurs to start their entrepreneurial careers which relates back to the "possible", "potential" and "provisional" selves as discovered in identity work earlier.

4.1 Presenting The Self as a marketing tool

This section of the analysis reports on the presentation of "The Self" as a marketing tool. It has become clear that dropshipping is becoming increasingly popular among youngsters between the age of 18 and 30 years. Social media platforms, especially Instagram and YouTube, are playing a crucial role in the extension of this business practice. This has become obvious since all interviewed dropshipping entrepreneurs have started their entrepreneurial dropshipping careers by buying a training program of a famous Dutch "Dropshipping Guru" at the time in 2018. The personality and the communication tactics of Joshua Kaats, a repeated example of a "Dropshipping Guru", stayed central in triggering the interest at the time of the dropshipping entrepreneurs included in this study. When looking at his online presentation and the way he connects storytelling and marketing tactics to sell himself as a brand, the entrepreneurs in this study are interested in focusing more and more on the formation and expression of their own personal- as well as entrepreneurial identities online, with the potential of building a business plan around it.

This theme refers to the personal and professional identity work of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs who are trying to find the best manner to communicate their online presentation related to their identity work and the potential business value of it. In this analysis were the two axial codes of **life-course identity** and **personal branding** found qualified enough to encompass all

open codes identified by the researcher. Appendix D.1 graphically shows how the codes were created and are linked to the selective code of *presenting The Self as a marketing tool*.

4.1.1 Life-course identity

The entrepreneurs who volunteered in this research were mostly between the age of 20 and 26, with one exception of 37. Nevertheless these numbers show that many Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs are very young. This already indicates that some entrepreneurs might still be developing their general personality to find out who they are as people, while also being in the process of forming their entrepreneurial self. This underscores that they are most likely - consciously and unconsciously - still struggling with working on and developing their “*notion of the self*”. Looking back at the literature, this has been indicated by Coupland and Brown (2012) as a general hallmark of the liquid modernity (a depiction of our current time), which underlines an ever-changing, fluid and impermanent context, which fosters people to work on their identity as unfinished projects. It also highlights the importance of context-dependent perspectives on the concept of identity work. As times are changing and digital revolutions keep reoccurring it is of great importance to acknowledge that it impacts our understanding of “*who we are*”, “*how we should relate to others*” and “*what we should strive to become*” (Jones et al., 2019). Considering the age of the dropshipping entrepreneurs interviewed in this study, I believe age adds a complexity to this process, especially in terms of the formation of one’s entrepreneurial as well as general identity.

Nevertheless, these entrepreneurs have in common that despite their young age, their youth has not been so easy or stable. Here the open code of *life-events* has been identified to cover the effects of instability and insecurity which the majority of entrepreneurs have encountered. This has greatly impacted the process of identity formation and the way they currently take on their entrepreneurial role. Most entrepreneurs explained that they always take on the entrepreneurial role, referring to a general consensus around a list of characteristics that literature has ascribed to this image and the prior exposure to entrepreneurial roles in one’s social environment. This is an interesting finding considering the previous conflicting arguments around the effectuation theory in chapter 2. It might therefore be suggested that although times and contexts are changing, one is still conscious of the general consensus around the image of “being an entrepreneur” which is likewise the case for Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs and complicates their identity formation process (Nielsen & Lassen, 2011; Nowinski & Haddoud, 2019). This research shows that most often negative life-course experiences related to instability and insecurity effect whether the person sticks

to the entrepreneurial role, even in non-business related settings. This means that certain life-events have left their scars which indicates that this entrepreneurial role related to assertiveness and leadership is created out of a survival mode. They feel mostly the desire to be in charge and in control in comparison with those entrepreneurs that have experienced less impactful life-events. One of the respondents exemplified this by sharing a piece of her history:

“I think that it comes from my own past as my mom died when I was 20 years old.. very young, I was still studying and I had a little brother who is about 2,5 years younger than me.. and so basically I went back home to take care of him, at the same time earn money and finish my studies which was a very hectic period of time.. The money was very much needed for us which has made “money” a sort of central theme in my daily life. So I have always been interested and focused on finding new, innovative ways of earning money... a lot of money let's say it like this.” (respondent 6)

As the entrepreneurs stated, the scope of these life-events is very diverse from losing a parent at a very young age, bullying or harassment which has led them to deal with unexpected and unstable perspectives at the time. Nevertheless the reoccurring factor of insecurity also refers to the reckless and turbulent school periods where some of the entrepreneurs had no clear vision on what their future should look like or where their interests lay in terms of education. With the unfulfilled urge to find one's desired future or work, the entrepreneurs decided to quit their education and struggle further as dropouts who were eager to find their inner flame.

By indicating the effect of this factor on one's life-course identity, dropshipping entrepreneurs have expressed that this has had a great impact on their self-image, self-esteem and creation of one's personal identity. This is also why the majority of the entrepreneurs describe themselves as “born entrepreneurs”. One of the entrepreneurs responds as follows:

“SOO.. YES, HELL YEAH! I mean, looking back when I was a kid I would not stop before I got there and I think that's the same with being an entrepreneur, a successful entrepreneur. You have to be persistent and don't give up also in difficult moments, otherwise you will never be successful. Those are basically my building blocks and although I am still in a learning process... I think that the persistence part, regardless of my difficulties, and the

inner desire have made me the person I am today or maybe even define me as an entrepreneur.” (respondent 1)

4.1.2 Personal branding

As illustrated in section 4.1, the expansion of dropshipping as a business practice find its roots in the impact of social media, with a specific focus on the “personal branding” of the so called, “Dropship Guru’s”. These people act as teachers in the e-commerce industry who offer multiple training programs for those interested in dropshipping. The way these personalities present themselves with luxuries cars, clothes and holidays is something that speaks to the minds of young adults as pointed out by Broeck et al., (2019) earlier. By adopting strategic marketing tactics related to *impression management* and *storytelling*, these Guru’s have shifted the important notion of “branding The Self” in this industry. It has also been suggested by literature that such online self-promoting behavior might be fueled by a user’s attempt to regulate deficits in psychological needs such as social control, connectivity and belonging which potentially has been inspired by the feeling of social ostracism (Buglass, Binder, Betts & Underwood, 2017). An interesting and corresponding insight when reflecting this to the negative life-events as described in the previous section.

As the analysis of the interviews with the dropshipping entrepreneurs shows, they are all interested in framing “The Self” as an online marketing tool and see it as an extension of one’s (future) business. Some are already concerned with this and are trying to find the best fitting pattern. However, finding the right balance between one’s personal and entrepreneurial identity seems hard to find and makes it an act of serious concern. Two of the entrepreneurs described their experiences with personal branding as flows:

I have been struggling lately with the way I want to present myself. What story am I telling others and what should be the frame used? I thought “HOW”? I mean... I have to be “the nice guy”, be sweet and present myself like I want to connect with everyone. That’s what came to my mind first. I also tried that... but it is not who I am! I am also active on YouTube and what I see when looking at myself is that in the beginning I had to get used to it, the online presence, but as time passes I can connect my personality with my online character so to say. I mean I can be nice, but I am also very realistic which might be perceived as “harsh” by others.” (respondent 2)

—

“I’m basically brainstorming about the way I wish to portray myself and how I wish to communicate my story, but I am not fully convinced of my ideas yet. I also have coaching for it, about storytelling, there are so many life-events that have made me who I am today and I could incorporate it in my story and thus online identity.” (respondent 11)

Branding one’s (entrepreneurial) identity comes with the heavy consideration and weighing of the story frame. Two of the entrepreneurs even took coaching sessions to learn the skills of online self-presentation together with a well thought-out plan. Besides, the importance of making a narrative authentic for the audience places the importance of disclosure and the linkages to one’s life-course identity. Narratives have played a crucial role in the humanities for ages, however, they have become increasingly popular as a conceptual frame in contemporary social sciences especially considering the complexity of today’s digitalized society (Rantakari & Vaara, 2016). Interestingly, various studies hold on to slightly different definitions of the “narrative”. In sociology, narratives are perceived as a way to organize one’s experiences, thoughts and help us to construct our identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). However, in communication studies, narratives are seen as the providers of temporal sequencing or even more important, of meanings and structure for those who live and create the stories (Rantakari & Vaara, 2016). When aiming for a narrative construction, the concept is understood as the search for coherent storylines, shared meaning, devotion and common values which by definition includes temporality (Pedersen, 2009). The use of narrative time in the stories of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs comes forward from their entrepreneurial identities and entail language that refers to the present but specifically to the future through words such as “will” since they are so focused on personal development, achievement and future goals. Focussing on the sociologist perception of narratives, I would argue that in the case of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs this is the best definition in order to describe the process of their identity formation. Almost all interviewed entrepreneurs are still struggling with multiple facets of “being an entrepreneur” already and also in relation to the expression of it as a marketing tactic within this industry. They use their narratives as a tool to formulate and organise their thoughts and feelings caused by comparisons they get exposed to through their social media platforms. However, the narratives, due to the intervention of social media are not merely focused on text and discourse anymore, include visuality and other forms of semiosis as also indicated by the entrepreneurs (Meyer et al., 2013). With the mediatization of narratives a focus has been put on media used in the production and consumption of narratives (Lämsä, Auvinen, Heikkinen & Sintonen, 2018).

Nevertheless, research has not kept abreast of such developments for example by examining the abilities and constrains of social media on storytelling (Rantakari & Vaara, 2016).

Interestingly, the analysis also shows that for dropshipping entrepreneurs, within the e-commerce industry, online self-presentation should have a financial advantage. Otherwise it is considered not worthwhile enough to invest in. Therefore this online self-promotion is often postponed to the “near” future. This relates back to a value of “giving back” that is found very important in this industry. People involved find it meaningful or maybe even essential to consider their value in relation to their audience. A reoccurring argumentation to not yet include personal branding in one’s business practice seems to be based on their unfulfilled professional development and entrepreneurial identity:

“Well I think that I would be of true value when I am much older and thus wiser in the practice of entrepreneurship. I think that experiences and life lessons will make the difference. For now I feel just a “loser” in the sense that I just started in comparison to other very very successful businessmen. I feel like I am not competent enough.”

(respondent 3)

When considering “The Self” as a marketing tool, the question remains to whether someone’s online identity reflects an honest and reliable image of one’s true identity, either personal or entrepreneurial. Interestingly, the dropshipping entrepreneurs in this study are perfectly aware of the effects of the needed tactics and framework when trying to convey a compelling and attractive story. They also admit that it might be on the border of misleading, in the sense that the identity portrayed is a more like a provisional and often desired self (Coupland & Brown, 2012). One of the entrepreneurs described his vision as follows:

“I think it is misleading, very misleading... but yeah that’s marketing! Marketing is misleading. Let’s say that the packing of the message has been refurbished.”

(respondent 11)

This quote indicates how today’s dropshipping entrepreneurs perceive the act of marketing in the sense that they do not think or act with restrictions in mind. Although ethical codes have been a topic of conversation in the interviews, this was not considered more valuable than the ultimate financial advantage one would gain out of a doubtful marketing tactic. Besides as St-Onge, Senecal,

Fredette and Nantel (2017) state it, brand loyalty can be easier perceived by the expression of certain personality traits which the dropshipping entrepreneurs seem to understand pretty well. Figure 4.1 has been created to graphically show how the findings of this section relate to each other.

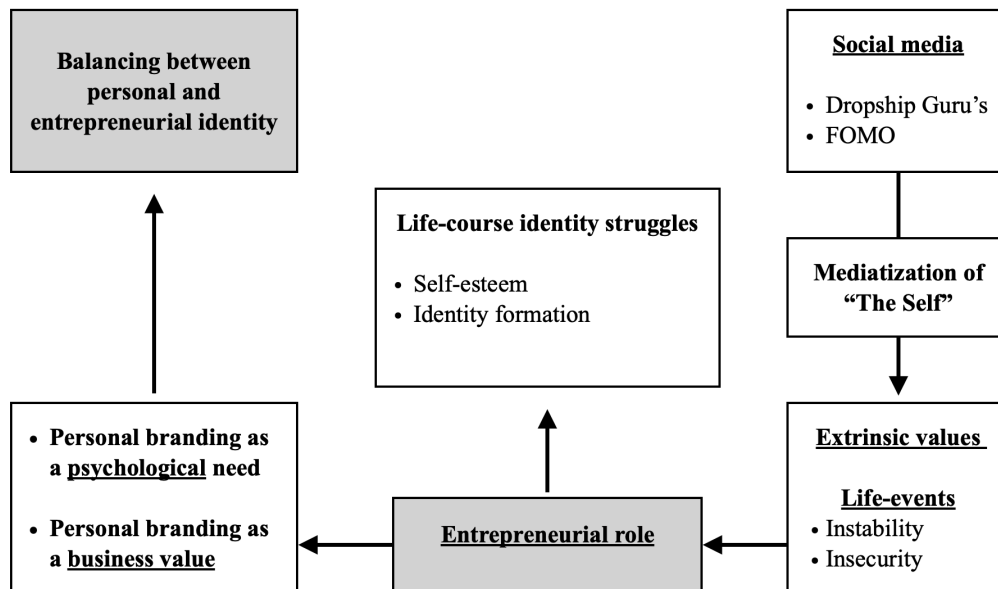


Figure 4.1 Balancing between personal and entrepreneurial identity promotion

4.2 Entrepreneurial identity struggles

This section covers the analysis and discussion of entrepreneurial identity struggles of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs in relation to reflexive thinking, the effectuation theory and the current impact of the Covid-19 crisis. Besides, this section extends already established literature as it puts an in-depth focus on the context of today's ever changing and digitalized reality which has led to the discovery of FOMO theories, having an effect on entrepreneurial identity struggles of the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs in this study. From the research four axial codes have been identified and where labelled as: **traditional frameworks**, **future perspective**, **competition** and **reputational issues**. Appendix D.2 shows graphically how the codes were created and are linked to the selective code of *entrepreneurial identity struggles*.

4.2.1 Traditional frameworks

The most dominant theme that reoccurred during all conversations was the struggle with *traditional frameworks*. The open codes that created this axial code are diverse in their characteristics but resonate from the same standards. In this research the notion of traditional

frameworks captures the socio-economical discourses that have shaped the general consensus on many aspects of human life, including the perception of success and what is considered as the route to success for example. One of the open codes refers precisely to this phenomenon as the dropshipping entrepreneurs expressed how often they felt a disconnection between them, their ambition and to what is expected from them of society. This *socio-economical disconnection*, for example between what education is offered and what is learned as “the way to go” in terms of completing one’s degree and looking for a permanent job, led them struggle with their self-perception immensely.

Moreover, *Societal stereotypes* of success are found to be extreme blockades for young dropshipping entrepreneurs who are already in a difficult position, considering the identity formation of their general personality already. This is an interesting finding as it provides an argument that questions the applicability of the effectuation theory as presented by Nielsen & Lassen (2011). This theory implies that identity should be perceived as a relative fixed asset that determines behavior. Furthermore is it suggested that the entrepreneurial process is shaped from a set given means including an individual’s identity as one of the given pre-conditions. This proposes also that from the beginning of the entrepreneurial process, individuals hold a *coherent* and *clear* perception of who they are and what they wish to become which is, considering the metaphor of “liquid modernity” and the age of dropshipping entrepreneurs, almost impossible to state. This goes hand in hand with the adoption of a list of attributes or characteristics that would fit the entrepreneurial rubric (Muhr et al., 2019). In addition, this research acknowledges the findings by Nielsen, Norlyk and Christensen (2018) who state that especially starting entrepreneurs are struggling with their “fluid identity” which is caused by, among age and other things, the impact of new media.

Within the ever changing field of digitalization the e-commerce industry has found its place as a growing business interest. Nevertheless this change of practice comes with a change of perception as well, not only from the entrepreneurs themselves but also from their social context. It has become clear from this research that the choice to become an entrepreneur within this industry asks for some sacrifices, including *social abandonment*. Social abandonment has been indicated by the entrepreneurs as a side effect of their entrepreneurial journey. As dropshipping asks for a determined mindset and drive, the entrepreneurs are dealing with the fact that they need to “led go” on certain people who stay close to them, either friends or family. This choice brings them in a difficult position considering their emotional internal struggles as well as struggles related to external pressure due to social incomprehension. Often the entrepreneurs then chose to select those

people who do not share the same mindset or compassion to delete them from their address book. One of the entrepreneurs described her experience as follows:

“As an entrepreneur I feel lonely. I think it is a lonely process. I mean my inner circle of friends is pretty small and also different. Almost all of my friends already have kids or are married so that means they are on a completely different level than me. But also in relation to having discipline. I have to set up a routine and stick to it otherwise my work won't be done. This resulted in losing some of my close friends as they just did not understand it. I also felt like they did not WANT to understand it.” (respondent 1)

Looking at the effects of this social abandonment, all the answers seem to refer the struggle related to emotional reflexivity. Reflexivity on one's identity formation captures the way in which individuals constantly engage in a reflection process of negotiating own as well as external opinions, experiences and macro influences with the effect of changing one's self-perception (Coupland and Brown, 2012). Here, literature has indicated that emotions can be used to construct better and stronger identities (Stets, 2004). This also proposes that identities are closely related to levels of self-esteem which is something that has come forward very strongly in all conversations with the young dropshipping entrepreneurs (Muhr et al., 2019). So, as the research has shown, Dutch dropping entrepreneurs are indeed not just passive recipients of discourses but are constantly communicating with it. Nevertheless, this does not vanish the emotional struggle which affects the level of confidence by which these entrepreneurs create their entrepreneurial identity. In the following two citations the emotional attachment towards this struggle has become clear:

“But I think for me personally the fact that I quit school is for most people the biggest reason to not support my actions and choices right now. My brother for example also says ‘why don't you go to a university where they truly learn you how to become a successful entrepreneur?’ Those words can make me SO MAD! I can't! You just don't understand it! That just doesn't exist! They won't learn me the practicalities, mindset, the determination needed to become an entrepreneurs.” (respondent 5)

“It costs you friendships for sure. Of course not all of them but it definitely decreases your inner circle so to say, also because some just don’t WANT to understand it. But yeah there remains this tiny little voice in the back of my head that starts to question if I am doing the right things and if this is all worth it. However, then I also immediately ignore it and say to myself: ‘Hell no, this is what I want, this is my passion and I am going to do it!’” (respondent 6)

All in all, the analysis shows that Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs rely on cultural influences, societal frameworks and personal characteristics rather than fixed pre-conditions as suggested in the effectuation theory as to determine their entrepreneurial identity (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009).

4.2.2 Future perspective

The following section deals with the analysis and discussion of identity struggles around the *future perspective* of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. This axial code is heavily present during all conversations as the analysis has shown that it has everything to do with the reason why these entrepreneurs specifically made the choice to start dropshipping. First of all, becoming an entrepreneur, especially around the age of the dropshipping entrepreneurs in this study, is generally perceived as a relatively risky step (Broeck et al., 2019). This perception finds its argumentation in the insecure future perspective that lays ahead of them and the big responsibility they carry in terms of decision making.

Although the dropshipping entrepreneurs are extremely motivated and optimistic, they are well aware of this dynamic and insecurity. Interestingly, this is not explicitly mentioned but through the tone of voice and the way these entrepreneurs framed their answers, I have been able to identify this underlying process. One of the questions related to their motivation to start dropshipping specifically as a form of entrepreneurship. Generally, this is because the business model is perceived as low-risk, financially fertile and one would experience great independence. The following quotes describe how they explained their choices:

“I was looking for ways to realize this and figure out what would suit me best. So, I Googled; “What are the easiest ways earn as much money as possible?” (respondent 11)

“Well first, and that might sound cliché but that’s my freedom. My independence. I can work wherever I want as long as there is is WIFI. Either it is at home, at the office, in Bali or when I am a weekend away. It is low risk and I can stop whenever I want. These low risks were one of the most important drivers for choosing dropshipping. It kind of seemed the easiest way to start making some real money.” (respondent 9)

As the conversations continued it became clear that dropshipping is seen more as a “step up” for these entrepreneurs as to what the future might hold for them. They started this journey with a relatively short-term vision when speaking about 3 to 5 years. This business model is perceived as a winning machine by which the entrepreneurs are able to build their financial capital, so more as a quick win which acknowledges the argumentation of Broeck et al., (2019) who argue that today’s youth is especially motivated by extrinsic values as these motivational drivers include striking for financial success, status and power. Nevertheless some entrepreneurs are still struggling with their *stability seeking*. Especially the women in this business find it hard to fully rely on their entrepreneurship and are also the only ones who still hold on to a permanent job besides it. This form of security seeking is not the only style in which this behavior has come forward. Also are all entrepreneurs looking for ways to spread their risks and thus consciously apply *risk management* to their business practices and vision. The analysis has shown that indeed all entrepreneurs share the same motivation to find more than one passive income source to manage their risks and feel more secure. For now and for the future. Examples of they way which to achieve this are investing in real estate, shares, crypto and creating a well-established a brand that almost speaks for itself. In order to achieve these passive income sources the entrepreneurs have already taken action by having bought a training program or hiring a coach.

Although these struggles lay more or less in the hands of the dropshipping entrepreneurs, there also remains a struggle that worries the minds of the entrepreneurs which is labelled as *external factors*. The perfect current example that has had a tremendous impact on the dropshipping business in the Covid-19 crisis. As the Corona virus started to affect the Chinese economy in January onwards, production factories were shut down and suppliers couldn’t deliver their goods anymore. This has brought many drop shippers in a difficult position. Should they continue advertising so that they still earn some money with the risk they will have to pay the clients back or should they stop their business for a while and live from their savings? Two of the dropshipping entrepreneurs expressed their concerns as follows:

“Yeah I mean currently I don’t have any income.... I mean the past two months have been good to me so I do not have any financial problems but you will have to spread your risks in the future... I will have to start looking for other income sources so whenever something falls away, I have more back-up plans that will provide me with an income. You get what I mean? So you do not need to stand still and basically spread your risks.” (respondent 2)

“Dropshipping has so many possibilities, you are never done learning. Each day is a new challenge. Now again with the Coronavirus, I have no clue where this is going to take us and where it will end but still you will have to make the best out of it and try to survive.” (respondent 5)

4.2.3 Competition

This third section of 4.2 deals with the analysis and discussion of entrepreneurial identity struggles related to *competition*. The axial code of competition refers to a symbolic meaning by which entrepreneurs encounter both internal competition as well as externally related competition in the field. Nevertheless are the effects of this phenomenon associated with greater societal influences as the analysis has brought forward.

From the research it has become clear that overall the dominance of social networking sites has an immense effect on the all codes related to competitive drivers (Buglass, Binder, Betts & Underwood, 2017). First of all, the way youngsters in general present themselves online in form of a personal brand greatly affects the perception of reality. Although this image might not be entirely true, the picture has already been created. Most often we chose to share the greatest highlights of our lives including a filtered picture to show the audience that what we are currently experiencing is so worthwhile and amazing, that we forget to share the less fancy sides of our lives. This is also reflected in the way most dropshipping entrepreneurs, especially the “Guru’s”, share their personal brand online. By showing luxurious houses, cars, holidays and expensive goods, they try to create this image of well-being and connecting a standard that is not “real”. Nevertheless this speaks to the minds of younger generations that urge the feeling of freedom, independence and financial wealth which was already stated by Broeck et al., (2019). By sharing screenshots of their Shopify sales, they try to trigger this sense and uncomfortable feeling of “missing out”.

Interestingly is that almost all entrepreneurs in this study acknowledge that this online image or the screenshots have triggered them in *comparing* themselves with their competitors on the market. The act of social comparing is human (Jones et al., 2019), however, as research has shown,

the act of comparisons has both negative as well as positive consequences (Robinson, Bonette, Howard, Ceballos, Dailey, Lu, Grimes, 2019). It all depends on how we as an individual react to this internal struggle and to what extent we chose to let it affect our self-perception (Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002). The following quotes are selected to showcase how Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs deal with identity struggles related to comparisons.

“On the one hand it is indeed an inspiration and thus something positive to compare yourself to others, but on the other hand it is almost detrimental that when you are working your balls off and things just do not seem to work. Whenever someone posts such a picture it could even increase this feeling of failure. Honestly, I can really feel like a loser from time to time. But so far it has still been a motivator for me to just not give up. Because what they are doing, I can do better.” (respondent 2)

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“What I really see is that the more effort you put into your dropshipping career the more money you make. That’s also a question I ask myself pretty often, like why are you sitting on the couch right now, in need to take a break, while you could make a difference and grow! I can feel such a loser sometimes. That’s so difficult.” (respondent 10)

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“Everyone has that! I am sure of that! Conscious or unconscious I am sure that everyone, especially in the beginning of such an adventure, becomes jealous when you see someone succeeding in the same business as you. Then again it depends how you handle that and how you look at it. I always reflect on myself, look at my own journey and where I stood a month ago. I mean of course I see the screenshots of other people’s Shopify accounts passing by but yeah..” (respondent 11)

So, overall it could be questioned whether comparisons could lead to sources of inspiration and motivation or rather awake the negative stimulus of competition, jealousy and the feeling of failure. Interestingly were the entrepreneurs who experienced negative life-events more optimistic in the sense that they had a better self-image and handled comparisons more like constructive feedback and placed the comparison into their personal circumstances to make it more applicable and perceive it more like a positive stimulus.

Relating this to today’s digitally driven society, research shows that social networking sites are a pervasive force of currently societal realms providing consumers with the opportunity to

create and maintain social contacts in an interactive sphere where visionary boundaries seem to fade (Buglass, Binder, Betts & Underwood, 2017). The increased connectivity of social media platforms has already often been linked to a fear of missing out (FOMO). This is understood as the psychological state in which people become anxious as others within their social environment seem to lead much more interesting, luxurious and socially desirable lives (Hodkinson, 2019). With the fear of peers possessing more than them, people get anxious and uncertain of their position, leaving them to struggle with their self-perception. Interestingly to state is that FOMO has not been discussed in the realms of offline vulnerability, referring to identity work specifically in this case. This vulnerability should be understood by an individual's capacity to experience detriments to one's psychological or reputational wellbeing. It has been suggested by literature that when individuals experience FOMO, they potentially find themselves in a state of "self-regulatory limbo" (Hodkinson, 2019; Buglass, Binder, Betts & Underwood, 2017). This causes a vicious cycle in which they start behaving in such a manner that they seek to reaffirm their identity and self-esteem which is precisely what has come forward in the conversation with the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs when discussing to what extent online comparisons lead them to struggle with their entrepreneurial identity work. A precise example of how opportunity costs related to FOMO were weighted, leaving the entrepreneur to doubt himself is the first quotation of respondent 2, as showcased above. Here, he experienced his choice to take a moment of relaxation as the loss of an alternative which is to keep up with his competitors on the market. He is confronted with this struggle when he sees screenshots of other dropshipping entrepreneurs' sales on social media.

4.2.4 Reputational issues

The fourth and final axial code identified related to Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs' identity struggles is labelled as *reputational issues*. This code has been constructed based on negativity, skepticism and incomprehension around the image of dropshipping a whole. As stated before, the e-commerce industry is an upcoming and booming business. Nevertheless all its developments are taking place "behind the scenes" since it is something intangible. This makes it hard to comprehend and to keep track for younger generations already. For older generations, explaining the advancements is like speaking a foreign language.

The same phenomenon seems to be applicable to the understanding of dropshipping as a business model. Almost all entrepreneurs have encountered how difficult it is for some people in their social environment to get the idea behind it. Additionally the entrepreneurs expressed how they keep their explanations simple to prevent miscommunication. Still, this form of

“incomprehension” has been identified as a true struggle for the entrepreneurs as one feels almost obligated to disclose information that preferably should be kept private and there is this feeling of having to convince people that what they do is a valid and a truly successful act.

This closely relates to the skepticism and negativity Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs encounter. Especially when the entrepreneurs just started and people got interested in the business model, they often “felt bad” about what they were doing. Because dropshipping is built on the idea that you increase the sales price by a certain margin to your costs, dropshipping entrepreneurs often felt like “committees of fraud”, since consumers could simply place their order directly to the supplier via AliExpress. Nevertheless, the act of increasing the sales price is precisely what all big corporations do as well “to make a living”. However, since these firms are perceived as well-established brands due to a compelling brand story they have already captivated a secure place on the market, leaving people with a less negative perception about their business practices. Some the reactions of entrepreneurs’ social environment have been showcased in the following two quotes:

“Haha well my mom immediately found me a scammer hahah and was first very skeptic but now, after she has seen what I can earn and what the successes look like, she has become my greatest supporter. She even sends me potential products that I could sell on a daily basis. But yeah I think this has everything to do with the fact that this business model is still so unknown. I mean if I would have told people that I will be selling doors, everything would be fine and people will not ask any further questions.” (respondent 4)

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“Most people say what you are doing is fraud since you are doubling the price for consumers. But that’s nonsense, because the milk of a farmer is much cheaper than in the supermarkets. That’s something they understand and feel fine with but only since it happens online and people do not have a face with it, they consider it fraud.”

(respondent 6)

Interesting is that when family members or friends of the entrepreneur were entrepreneurs as well, their reaction was much more optimistic and promising. Although the reactions did not seem to bother the dropshipping entrepreneurs, there were still some that indicated that it majorly impacted their self-doubt, some entrepreneurs even kept their business practices quiet for a while. Only when they started to become successful, they considered whether they should tell their inner circle about it. This is an interesting perspective when reflecting the findings on identity work as a liminal

struggle. Liminality is closely related to emotional reflexivity but is described by Muhr et al., (2019) as the ambiguity experienced by an actor who has left her or his pre-ritual status but has not yet gained the status that she or he will hold once the ritual is over. Here “the ritual” refers to the transfer of someone’s identity shift for example in this case from an “young adult” to an “entrepreneur”. In the context of liminality and emotional reflexivity, emotions can stir promises and hopes about new versions of The Self by offering a feeling of possibility of agency and capability (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). However, these “possible selves” need to compete with other alternatives as well as being contested and regulated by various social influences such as the feedback one receives from its social environment. When this identity is being disapproved by one’s inner circle, possible selves could somehow remain unrealized in the psychological process of the entrepreneur, resulting in anger, agitation, insecurity or resignation (Schaefer & Paulsson, 2013). This negotiation might manifest itself through the experience of an “emotional rollercoaster” as also expressed by the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. Figure 4. has been created to show how the findings of this section relate to each other.

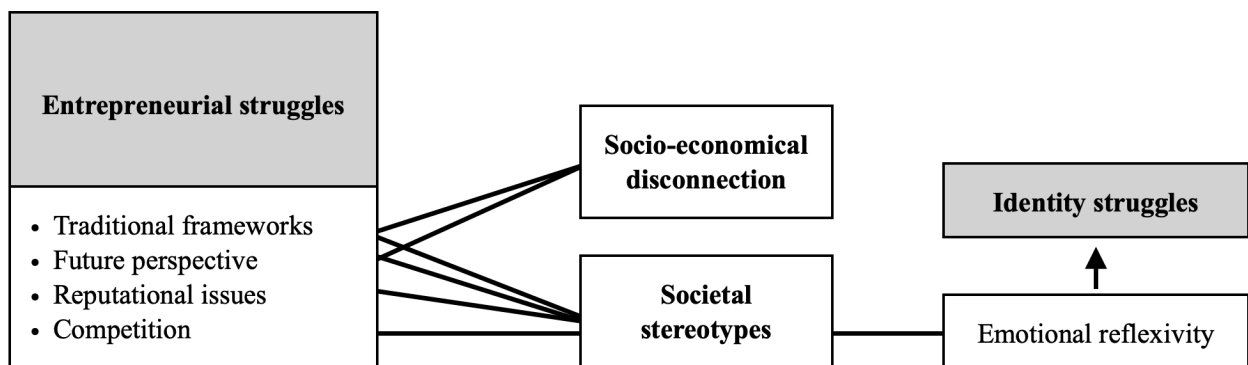


Figure 4.2 Entrepreneurial identity of struggles of Dropshipping entrepreneurs

4.3 A collective identity

This section covers the analysis and discussion of a collective identity of Dutch dropshipping communities in relation to tribal marketing and the theory around the sharing economy. Besides, this section extends already established literature as it combines theoretical perspectives with a new form of entrepreneurship that is characterized by innovative technological affordances. From the research two axial codes have been identified and were labelled as: **like-mindedness** and **networking**. Appendix D.3 shows graphically how the codes were created and are linked to the selective code of *a collective identity*.

4.3.1 A collective identity is rising

Dropshipping is not only interesting for this research because of its commercial impact on today's industry. However, also because it strongly relates to identity work and how social media affordances are used to connect like-minded individuals in the creation of online as well as offline "Dropship communities". These communities have shown to have an enormous impact on entrepreneurial journeys and the way entrepreneurs are able to develop their entrepreneurial identities. One of the axial codes that have been identified is labelled as *like-mindedness*. This notion refers specifically to the network of entrepreneurs who gathered together by sharing the same passion, vision and mindset for the same business interest, values or activities. It could even be stated that these entrepreneurs are connected based on a collective identity. The perception of like-mindedness has clearly come forward by the expressions of the entrepreneurs in this study.

The way dropshipping entrepreneurs communicate with each other is based on a highly optimistic, verbally strong and energetic tone of voice. It seems as if the entrepreneurs do not know any borders or restrictions and are all focussed on the future by which they will be remarkably successful. They strive only for the best, hunger to succeed and have a specific focus on becoming fully financially free. To exemplify how the atmosphere of in these online communities could be describes two quotations have been selected whereby one respondent even compares the entrepreneurial spirit in these communities with the effects drugs:

"The people you meet, the things you learn.. It is a completely different world. You step out of the "standard" routine our society has created. I mean it is something scary but so worthy!" (respondent 1)

"I love to meet more like-minded people, that gives me sooo much energy. I can't even describe it, I also feel like I am constantly "high" so to say when I am around these people hahaha. Everyone supports each other. They provide you with advice and some are really willing to bring you to the next level." (respondent 6)

All dropshipping entrepreneurs are a member of at least one Dropship community. When they stepped into such a community they felt all of a sudden "embraced" by like-minded individuals which has brought and still brings out the best in them. It is described as a social environment that teaches you how to improve yourself. What is interestingly is that being part of a community makes

entrepreneurship feel like teamwork, although the essence of becoming an entrepreneur was initially motivated by their desire to become fully independent, in charge and “disconnected”. Still, they seem to hold on to this form of teamwork, whereby they feel heard in their insecurities and are able to share their ambition and visions safely without the potential of judgment which might be encountered when sharing this same information with one’s offline social environment. Clearly Dropship communities are perceived as a safe place with like-minded individuals who motivate, inspire and coach each other when needed. This form of “we-ness” initiates the feeling of a family and is based on a collective identity. The following three quotations were selected as a to showcase how they describe the value of these online Dropship communities:

“I think that everyone has this drive, everyone is so freaking motivated! Of course on a different level, but it is the opportunity of such a community to get each other out of that comfort zone and make so big and meaningful steps. I also feel like one’s social environment shapes who you are and who you are able to become. So, being surround by highly motivated and passionate entrepreneurs will automatically make you a better entrepreneur yourself” (respondent 2)

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“Those are a lot of money makers together. A lot of guys together that are hunting on money. Those meetings... GOLD... I love them so much! The spirit these guys have together and they all have the same struggles and ideas so we can really help each other to grow and get even further. It is such a positive vibe. Such communities you will definitely need!!” (respondent 10)

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“In the beginning I mostly used the Facebook communities to ask questions and to have a platform to coach each other on basically. However after I while I also created a WhatsApp for a group of entrepreneurs who had reach already a certain amount of profit. We use this as our main platform now. I believe we are with around 16 people in this chat and that is so chill! I mean when you ask something you will receive an almost immediate response. Besides, everyone is basically on the same level”. (respondent 4)

These findings might also be connected with what is labeled as “tribal marketing” (Cova & Cova, 2002). Tribal marketing is defined as the strategic act of marketing which is built upon the focus of shared devotion, a “linking value” and the need for communal value. Through the development of a

collective identity, shared emotion, practices and values individuals gather together while they build a network of like-minded people (Cova & Cova, 2002). Now, considering how much research is focusing on the individualization of our society due to the modern quest for liberation of social ties and the social abandonment due to the impact of social media, the finding of this research shed a light on how the rise of online communities could close this gap and provide a contrasting image to established literature (Cova & Cova, 2002; Cane, Bellag & Lee Fukada, 2020). We know that these individualistic drivers of society lead to the fragmentation of social bonds. In contrast the Dropship communities showcased that there are attempts to re-establish communal embeddedness and social recompositioning (Richardson, 2013). We as human beings are naturally social animals meaning that we feel the urge to connect with others, regardless of our situation (Cova & Cova, 2002). The case of dropshipping entrepreneurs is indeed a good example of this. Individuals feel the desire to be part of a community as this leads to the sense of belonging. This is considered as an essential aspect of tribal marketing which is understood as the strategic act of marketing whereby the focus lays on the support of shared devotion and the need for communal value with a specific focus on a collective identity, shared emotion, practices and values.

Here, the “linking value” acts as the glue that triggers these individuals to gather together around an intangibles object, or in this case the practice of dropshipping and future entrepreneurship which is based on the collective construct of values and emotions on which people freely choose to become excited about (Cova & Cova, 2012; Richardson, 2013). The excitement that comes forward from this is what they wish to share with others of that community. This is based on a shift in perception and refers, according to Cova and Cova (2012), to the concept of social re-aggregation that is linked to the post-modern individuals who seek for others with the same passion and potential emotional connection. To name these communities, literature has suggested terms like “E-tribes” and “virtual brand communities” which are used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the label of virtual brand communities is not fully applicable for Dropship communities because they are not gathered together around a specific brand or object (Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017). With the affordances of social networking sites, individuals are no longer geographically bounded which explains the rapid growth of such E-tribes. Besides, as identified by Cane, Bellag and Lee Fukada (2020), an E-tribe consists of a network of heterogeneous people in terms of age, sex and ethnicity, however are like-minded in their shared identity, passion and emotion. Originally the term “tribe” resonates from anthropology as to characterize the societies that were held together without the existence of a central power (Cova & Cova, 2002). The same applies for Dropship communities as all members are perceived as equal.

At this point it has become obvious that the way Dropship communities are created, also serves a commercial goal related to tribal marketing. It is the powerful tension between commercial and communal advantages that has generated a meaningful contribution to advertising strategies applied in the era of Web 2.0. The dropshipping Guru's who are selling their training programs for example, also "sell" the advantages of their own Dropship communities by offering the exclusive chance to connect with like-minded entrepreneurs through their linking value who could help you reach the next level of one's entrepreneurial journey. As this is a growing interest, it seems like the term "virtual brand communities" as an effect of tribal marketing could become applicable as well since the dropshipping "Guru" portrays him or herself as a personal brand.

4.3.2 The extension of the sharing economy

The final axial code that has been identified in relation to the collective identity of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs is labelled as *networking*. This form of networking specifically has been identified in association with the Dropship communities as these social states act as a platform whereby like-minded individuals are brought together as discussed in the previously section 4.3.1. One of the entrepreneurs describes the concept of entrepreneurship in this industry as follows;

"Entrepreneurship is like a game with various level, opportunities and threats. Communities are based on honesty and being sincere. That's the difference with entrepreneurs within this industry. When we get together and discuss something we are always REAL! Nothing is a lie, you are transparent otherwise you won't be tolerated by the rest!" (respondent 2)

As the members of such communities differ in their "level", they are able to provide each with feedback, advice and possible connections to solve potential problems or offer opportunities. To exemplify how the entrepreneurs weighted the importance of networking the following two quotes were selected;

"Well I think this is absolutely crucial! I mean it determines whether you will go 10 times harder or 2 times.. Looking at myself I wouldn't know where I would be standing if I wouldn't have met these guys. You help each other, your support each other, provide each

other with advice and just maximize each others' businesses and also competences.” (respondent 9)

“Networking is everything! Definitely! I wasn't so into the clothing industry anymore and I wanted to focus on e-commerce, by father is law would call me some other friends and the other day I would sit at the table of someone else.. so yeah networking is indeed key!”. (respondent 10)

The previous quotations refer to one of the open codes, *professional growth*, that constituted to this axial code os networking. Nevertheless has also the importance of “giving back” been identified as to support the importance of networking for these entrepreneurs. With text “the secret of living is giving” did one of the entrepreneurs describe the emotional purpose behind their drive to be so connected to each other. Figure 4.3 has been created to graphically show how the findings of this section relate to each other.

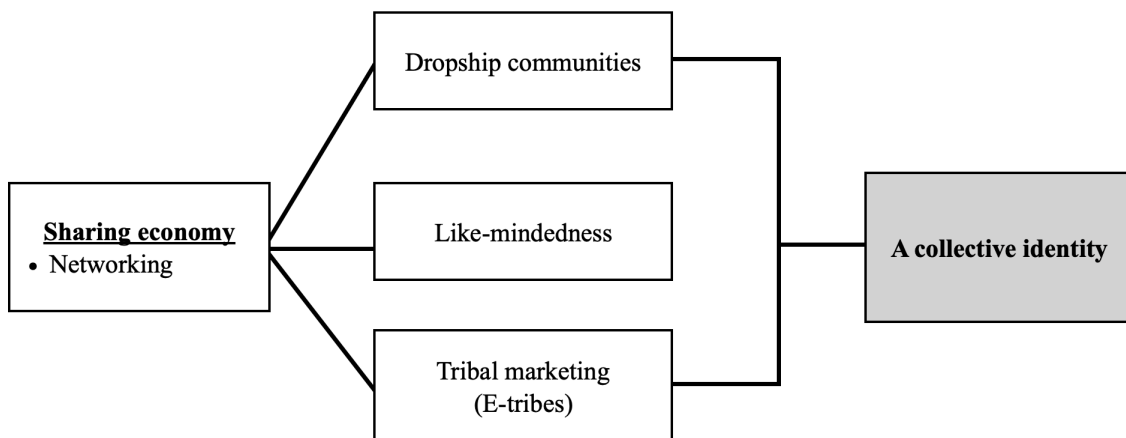


Figure 4.3 The formation of a collective identity among dropshipping entrepreneurs

4.4 The entrepreneurial spirit

The final section of the analysis and discussion of this research covers the selective code of the *entrepreneurial spirit* of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. This spirit has been identified based on the **motivational drivers** as well as the central theme of the **personal development** of the dropshipping entrepreneurs. The findings are related to identity work and extent established literature based on the emphasis on young entrepreneurs within a new and flourishing industry.

Appendix D.4 graphically shows how the open as well as axial codes were created and are linked to the selective code of *the entrepreneurial spirit*.

4.4.1 Motivational drivers

The first and most obvious question one should pose to an entrepreneur is why he or she has chosen to do what he or she does and what the motivational drivers behind this argumentation are. Doing so, it will become immediately clear what the vision and purpose is of one's entrepreneurial journey. Besides, the answers on such a question will also provide one with an idea of the personality and thus identity behind the entrepreneur. In this research the same approach has been taken on and the answers were very fascinating.

First, what has come forward the most were *materialistic desires* that drove them to achieve their goals and become successful. Example of such responses included the desire to buy very expensive cars, houses, watches, go on luxurious holiday trips and become fully financially independent. When digging deeper it seemed as if the entrepreneurs were aiming to possess a certain lifestyle or a certain image that was more or less related to a high societal status which could be related to the influence of social media, whereby influencers specifically, create a desirable image of how one should live in order to be happy and successful. Again considering the age and position of the young dropshipping entrepreneurs it could be stated that indeed their identity has not yet been fully developed and thus more vulnerable to such online imagery (St-Onge, Senecal, Fredette & Nantel, 2017; Suls, Martin & Wheeler, 2002). With such a focus on money, one of the entrepreneurs even compared his urge with his gambling history;

"I mean only having the chance of making more money is such a satisfying idea for me... yeah.. yeah. I also gambled a lot back in the days. It is just the chance, the chance of winning that drags you into this. The chance you otherwise would not have had. Currently I do not gamble anymore but still I heavily invest in potential businesses ventures or 'money chances' so to say. I think it all goes back to this gambling desire of me". (respondent 10)

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"I am sure other people will view it differently but a lot of money and less work that's my definition of freedom."

The fact that such a generation has a particular focus on materialism also relates to what Broeck et al., (2019) stated in relation to self-determination theory. The theory states that particular types of

values, intrinsic as well as extrinsic, matter most in how individuals determine their well-being. Values guide our attitude and behavior. The values people pursue are of great importance as these will direct our thoughts, emotions and actions. Understanding how values relate to young adults' well-being is of particular importance since the formation of such values are an integral element of their identity work. As these motivational drivers include striving for financial success, status and power it can be argued that, according to the self-determination theory, one is motivated by extrinsic values. Interestingly is that literature suggests that these particular kind of values emerge whenever the individual's growth get blocked so people feel the desire to compensate these native experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Nevertheless were there also non-materialistic desires identified that had a considerable impact on the motivational drivers of the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. These aspirations were most often related to concepts such as "freedom", "independence", "responsibly", "in charge" and "accountability". To exemplify some of the entrepreneurs' reasoning three quotations have been selected to showcase the diverse, however, at the same time, complementary motivational drivers:

"I wanted to make a stance, a meaning and not work for a boss my entire life.. like a nobody... or a "normal" person". (respondent 7)

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"I have always dreamed of becoming a CEO! So "being the boss" with a suit and tie basically hahah. However, over the years this picture in my head has changed a bit." (respondent 3)

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"Uhh well on the surface I think it was mostly based on driving very expensive cars hahaha, however, when I think more deeply about it, I think it comes from an inner drive to "do my own thing" basically. At school, when I was younger, it always felt as if I was doing the things I had to for others rather than for myself." (respondent 5)

Reflecting on these non-materialistic motivational drivers, the researcher has been able to find connection between one's life-course identity as discussed on section 4.1.1 and the entrepreneurial desires to "be in charge". As certain life-events have stirred this survival mode, the entrepreneurs really feel the urge to have the freedom and independence not having to rely on someone else. Besides, the desired values could again be connected to the base of this generation, related to the

created perception of reality due to social networking sites (Broeck et al., 2019). It seems as if these motivational drivers are specifically based on intrinsic values, according to the self-determination theory, as they find it important to extend their skills, take up responsibility and contribute to a community.

4.4.2 Developing The Self

The final axial code that relates to the *entrepreneurial spirit* of Dropshipping entrepreneurs is their eagerness for *self-development* and self-improvement. This is a central and reoccurring term in all facets of the conversations. What has come forward from the analysis is that the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs have learned that their entrepreneurial journey has greatly impacted their self-image and places the emphasis on one's self-development or "managing The Self". This has in particular been stirred through the interaction of Dropship community members since their like-mindedness places the topic of conversation on everyone's top priority list. Interestingly, this form of improving "The Self" focuses mainly on the individual's mental growth, as a human being as well as an entrepreneur. As for one's personal growth, things like mindfulness, exercising and physical appearance are brought forward. However, when looking at the entrepreneurial identity formation of these individuals, they actively participate in seminars and events, held by other well-established entrepreneurs, read books and listen to podcasts to broaden their network, vision and understanding of entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurs expressed that these elements help them in keeping up their motivation, provide them with inspiration tools and stir that "hunger" inside of them. One of the entrepreneurs described her journey as an "entrepreneurial mirror", which is a metaphor that could be applied to almost all the answers provided. Here she reflected on how becoming an entrepreneurs has not been easy but has opened her eyes in terms of self-reflection:

"I'm convinced you are never done learning. Entrepreneurship for me was like I was delivering a baby... but for real! I also feel like entrepreneurship is like a game with levels. Each level requires a new type of knowledge and attitude and that is something you grow towards. Entrepreneurship itself is also a continuous form of self-development. I think when you realize that, there is no limit in regards of you passion and drive anymore.. You become the best version of yourself, pushing yourself." (respondent 2)

Besides, the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs interviewed seem to be well aware of where they come from and what has shaped them to the person they are today. Their life-course identity as

formulated earlier in this chapter, shed a different light on their entrepreneurial joinery and might even put more emphasis on the importance of their self-development. Two quotations exemplify how they reflect on this process:

“Look, I have been very vulnerable while growing up and I see that I wasn’t aware of the fact that I should take my self-worth into account as well. I mean you adapt but you should take care of yourself, your own body because nobody else will do it for you. That is also something I have learnt through being an entrepreneur, that is your core businesses. I am currently focusing on self-development as I feel its the basis of a successful business and certainly of a success life as a whole. So, things like: ‘how does my brain work? What happens when I am sad? What tactics can I use to get myself out of it and become positive again.’ I have learnt to set my own borders and dive deep into the materials to get to know myself first before I will be able to lead myself basically.” (respondent 1)

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“Also, when I bought a training program for dropshipping I suddenly HAD to focus on self-development and management it in such a way that self-love became an important aspect of entrepreneurship, especially if you wish to enjoy the journey. I mean the knowledge went so deep that I was immediately triggered. Not just to be successful but especially on a personal level. I mean looking at trauma’s that have made you who you are today and influence your mindset and pathway make you reflect on yourself and potentially what you can do to change these building blocks. So, when I started to incorporate everything I though “HOLY SHIT” this does make a tremendous difference!” (respondent 1)

Overall, Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs seem highly driven by materialistic as well as non-materialistic desires that appear from intrinsic and extrinsic values that shape their perceived well-being (Broeck et al., 2019). Their personal development stays central as to improve themselves a human being as well as an entrepreneur. This process of self-development greatly impacts their entrepreneurial identity and under scribes the statement of Brown (2015) that identity is something fluid and should be perceived as a working concept rather than a fixed and secure construct. Figure 4.4 has been created to graphically show how the findings of this section relate to each other.

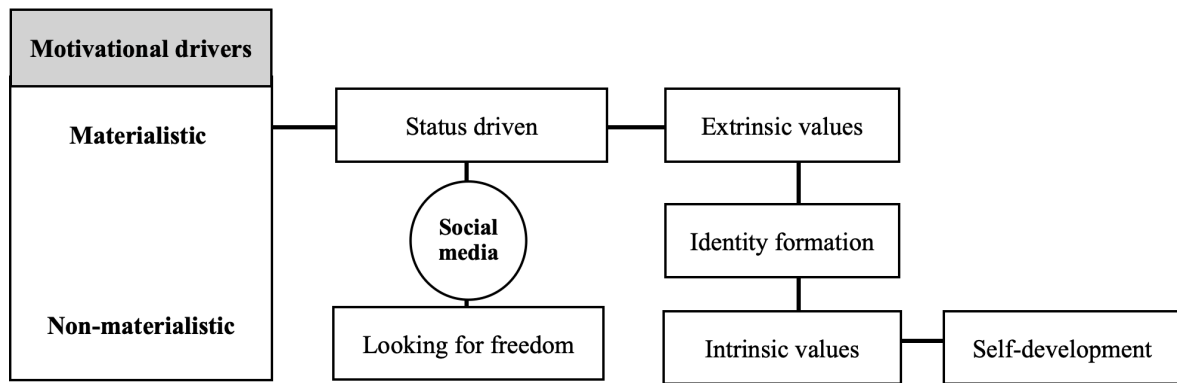


Figure 4.4 The motivational drivers that fluid the entrepreneurial spirit

The overall results of the analysis and the interwoven discussion of this research with previous studies are summarized in figure 4.5. This shows graphically how the findings relate to each other and how they contribute to our understanding of identity work in this context.

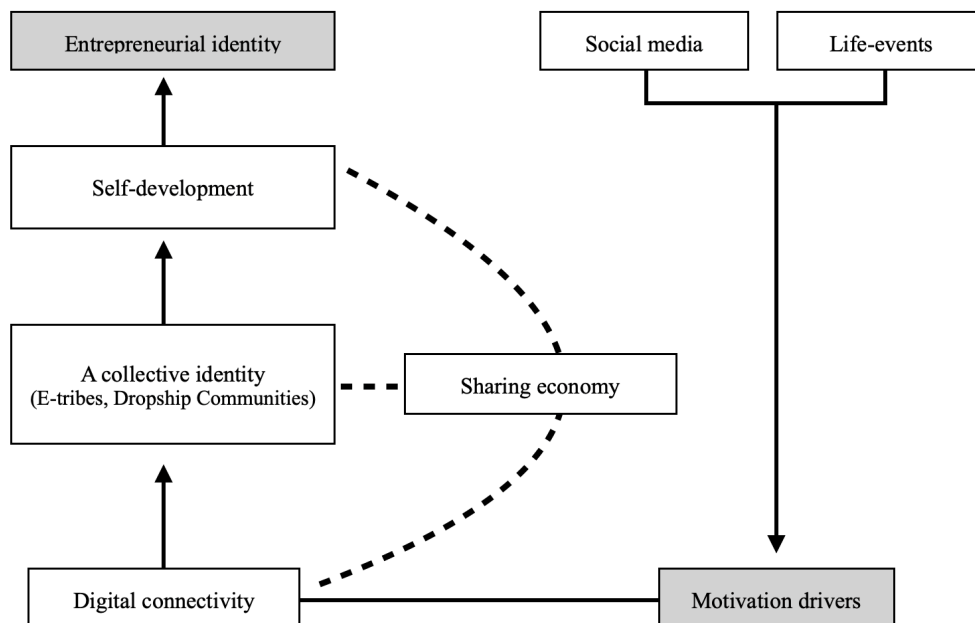


Figure 4.5 Entrepreneurial identity formation of Dutch Dropshipping entrepreneurs

As visualized in figure 4.5, the overall process of the entrepreneurial identity formation of Dutch Dropshipping entrepreneurs is heavily influenced by both life-events and social media. As the analysis of the research shows, both factors impact this process on the same level with some disparities along the participants. These elements both support and contribute as motivational drivers for the individuals to start their entrepreneurial careers based on more intrinsic and extrinsic

held values as determined by Broeck et al., (2019). At the same time the sharing economy functions as a contextual development in which their identity formation unfolds. A context whereby both the act of sharing advice (free of charge), skills and chances and digital affordances are combined and function as opportunity structures in terms of networking and self-development. Networking, based on a level of like-mindedness, has found to unite individuals in online Dropship communities which have been identified as E-tribes. Through forms of tribal marketing and the characteristics of the sharing economy these entrepreneurs are connected based on a shared mission, passion and ambition related to their activities as dropshipping entrepreneurs within the context of the e-commerce industry. As the extensiveness of these communities continues to grow, a collective identity seems to have risen which forms the base of the entrepreneurial identity of all Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. By communicating, inspiring and motivating each other to consciously work on themselves, their identity and their self-presentation they stimulate the emphasis on self-development, the foundation of their entrepreneurial identity.

5. Conclusion

In this final chapter of the research answers on the main research question are presented after which section 5.2 supports these findings based on theoretical contributions to already established literary sources. Here the most prominent linkages with the theoretical framework are presented and extended when possible. Besides, the indications including the research limitations, future research suggestions and social implications are provided in a critical analysis in section 5.3. Finally, section 5.4 reflects on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the research design and outcomes.

The aim of this study has been to explore how Dutch Dropshipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identity through identity work in their start-up communities which have later been identified as online Dropship communities as a form of tribal marketing. In order to answer the research question and explore an in-depth interpretation of this process, 11 interviews have been conducted with Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs. To fully understand how the Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial identities, the interviewees have been sampled based on snowball as well as homogenous purposive sampling since the selection of dropshipping entrepreneurs belongs to a like-minded group of individuals which enabled an in-depth and detailed investigation of the phenomenon under study. In the following sections, the research question has been answered based on the identified codes described in chapter four.

5.1 Thematic conclusions

In this research the identity work of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs stayed central. With a specific focus on the formation of one's entrepreneurial identity formation within the context of online communities, the impact of these start-up communities have shown to be a crucial driver in this process. The discourse of the "sharing economy" seems to be the profound base of all developments and impactful pillars related to this identity formation procedure. With the perception of "*what's mine is yours*", the dropshipping entrepreneurs have been able to find each other, gather together and found their ways of distributing what is yours to others for their use and benefit.

With digital affordances on the rise, geographical boundaries have faded and dropshipping entrepreneurs, across the entire country, are united by their social capital. This diagram of entrepreneurs' network connections act as opportunity structures. As the social capital, understood as the ability of entrepreneurs to extract and utilize resources from relationships to achieve desired outcomes, is found to be an integral part of entrepreneurship as it has shown to help realizing opportunities, acquiring resources and gaining legitimacy. Network building and broadening are

required to bridge and bond social capital between entrepreneurs which has shown to be needed to launch, grow and support entrepreneurial ventures in contemporary society. It was already known that entrepreneurs manage their business relationships online today, however, this research has partially closed the gap in literature that focusses on how social capital is applied for entrepreneurial success which for dropshipping entrepreneurs is more seen as a collective success. Nevertheless the urge to be part of such an online community is not merely based on potential business value. This research has found that the social capital retrieved through membership of such communities is a substitution of the social capital entrepreneurs have missed or currently miss in their social environment. Here obstacles such as social abandonment, societal stereotypes, risk management, socio-economical disconnection, social pressure and incomprehension have been identified as *entrepreneurial identity struggles* which hinder them in the process of their identity formation.

So, this goes to show that the Dropship communities are perceived as a safe environment for self-development and are not only understood as fruitful network structures but also add to the notion of “*family*” and “*teamwork*”. These online communities are an articulation of what has been identified by literature as E-tribes. As a result of tribal marketing, like-minded individuals are brought together based on a similar passion, vision and mindset for the same business interest, values or activities. In the case of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs, *a collective identity* has shown to have risen which majorly impacts the entrepreneurial identity formation of these entrepreneurs. The collective identity acts as a recourse for an inspiring pathway and provides a platform for constant self-development and experimentation with the aim to establish a fair “notion of the self”, as a person but mostly as an entrepreneur. It has shown to be a mechanism for dropshipping entrepreneurs that are constantly moving and developing. These findings support the idea that identity is provisional, fluid and dynamic, rather than a fixed construct (Brown, 2015).

5.2 Theoretical contributions

As chapter four and previous sections have shown, this research often supports but also challenges theoretical implications as provided in chapter 2 of this study. More connections to academic sources have been found and are addressed in the following section.

First, as research already suggests, identity as a construct should be perceived as a fluid concept rather than a fixed asset (Coupland and Brown, 2012). Especially in the context of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs who have expressed their self-perception as an entrepreneur is continuously developing. Moreover, considering the age of the dropshipping entrepreneurs interviewed, the element adds a complexity to the process of fostering one’s entrepreneurial

identity. Besides, the research has also shown that the effectuation theory is not applicable anymore in this day and age considering the many influential factors, including the interplay of social media, that affect the one's perception when identifying who you are and where you want to go.

Secondly, an interesting finding of this study is that new complexities can be added to identity work, which have predominantly been relevant for dropshipping entrepreneurs. Here the impact of social networking sites, one's life-course identity and age have been found to stimulate a focus on extrinsic as well as intrinsic values which affect entrepreneurs self-image. Although Broeck et al. (2019) stated that mainly extrinsic values and thus materialistic desires emerge whenever an individual's growth gets blocked, the influence of social networking sites could be added to the factors of the self-determination theory.

Additionally, when it comes to the narrative around one's entrepreneurial identity Down and Revely (2009) have argued that identity work involves not just "verbal talk" but also includes physical appearance and other symbolic interactions. The symbolic interactions have been fulfilled by the dropshipping entrepreneurs and literature that suggest that due to the intervention of social media, narratives are not merely focused on text and discourse anymore. They include visuality and other forms of semiosis as also indicated by the entrepreneurs (Meyer et al., 2013). Another reoccurring element is the use of narrative time in the stories of Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs which comes forward from their entrepreneurial identities and specifically entail language that refers to the comparisons between the present and the future through words such as "will". The entrepreneurs are highly focused on their personal development, achievement and future goals, which is perceived as a way to organize our experiences, thoughts and help us to construct our identity. Besides, identity work should also be defined based on its available cultural resources which is captured by concepts such as "cultural frames" and "cultural vocabularies". This is indeed acknowledged by the entrepreneurs, however, the impact of these frames have been of advantaged as well as of disadvantage to their identity work as cultural understandings have stirred many entrepreneurial identity struggles as identified in this research.

5.3 Limitations and future research suggestions

Although the research has reached most of its aims, the study is not without limitations. First as a qualitative research has been conducted based on interviews, I have been aware of the effect my interpretation bias of the data could have on the understanding of the findings. Due to my personal reflexivity, admitting that my background and position will affect the angle of investigation and interpretation process, structural steps have been taken to overcome this

limitation. Reflexive engagement while planning, conducting and writing the research consists of an ongoing, recursive relationship between the researcher's subjective responses and the intersubjective dynamics of the research process itself (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). In being explicitly transparent in the steps taken and by applying the same structural coding method across all transcriptions I have tried to ensure good academic conduct. I tried using my personal stance and specific interpretation for creating a more "connected knowing", meaning that the reflexivity between me and the interviewees has led to the construction of new knowledge (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011).

Moreover, this study specifically focuses on dropshipping within the e-commerce industry meaning that the results are only applicable to similar cases. Future research could place its focus on other forms of entrepreneurship within this industry which might bring interesting similar or new findings above that could provide future research with the opportunity to compare identity work within this specific area. Besides, future research is necessary to extent the understanding of identity work within this ever changing and increasingly digitalized environment which has and will have a major impact on societal dynamics and new forms of entrepreneurship. It will be interesting to see what elements future research can discover to the identity work of (future) entrepreneurs within the e-commerce industry and to see if the application of tribal marketing and thus online communities is reoccurring in other facets of this field. In addition, this research has focused in particular on young entrepreneurs within the e-commerce industry as the age range of dropshipping entrepreneurs is considered lower than for other facets within this field. It would be of interest to future research to apply the theoretical understanding of identity work on other segments of e-commerce to see if there is a related phenomenon relevant and if so the understanding can be further extended. Finally has the focus been put on Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs, perhaps the same research could be conducted in other countries to see how dropshipping entrepreneurs from different nationalities develop their entrepreneurial identity through identity work in their start-up communities.

5.3.1 Social implications

In this Master thesis it has become clear that Dutch Dropshipping entrepreneurs primarily develop their entrepreneurial identity through interactions with their Dropship communities and thus fellow entrepreneurs. Besides, with having the role of social media stated in relation to Dutch dropshipping entrepreneurs' self-perception and so identity work, it is important to reflect on how digital tools and affordance are shaping both new opportunities as well as challenges. It has become

clear that the digital revolution, especially in the realm of e-commerce, is providing entrepreneurs with chances to innovate, create and re-establish business models, like dropshipping and that a new terrain of interest has entered, having a great impact of society and social dynamics. This research has shown that dropshipping is an example of such opportunities and how creative young adults are with adapting to a new climate.

Related to the social impact of social networking sites, affordances allow entrepreneurs to (re)connect online and have a major impact on the development of their personal as well as entrepreneurial identity and career which sheds a new light on the application of tribal marking in this field. In contrast to the positive consequences of social networking sites has the research also found that young dropshipping entrepreneurs are heavily influenced by imagery provided online. Their self-perception and thus identity formation gets complicated and shaped by the information they are exposed to, leaving them to strive for extrinsic values, meaning to desire to achieve great financial success and materialism. This related closely to the common “hunger” to become independent, free, in charge and in control. Something that is fueled by one’s life-course identity in combination with again the influence of social networking sites.

5.4 Contextual reflection for writing the thesis during Covid-19

This study was conducted in times of the Covid19 crisis, leading to limitations and impacting the research design. For example, and surprisingly, the data gathering process was not negatively impacted as all participants were contacted through a phone call or by WhatsApp so no physical contact was needed. Because I have not able to conduct all 11 interviews face-to-face due to the lockdown restrictions, I used Zoom, an app for online conferences. Hereby I, the interviewer, and interviewees were able to see each other which had a positive effect on the conversation atmosphere and allowed for indicating whether body language was of influence on the respondents’ answers. Interestingly were the entrepreneurs only affected by the crisis at the time China was in lockdown. This meant that their suppliers did not produce and ship any products. The uncertainly around the impact and duration of the lockdown created a problematic dilemma as the entrepreneurs had to decide whether they would continue their businesses by Facebook advertising or to stop for an indefinite duration. Some took the risk to continue, accepting the chance to pay all customers back and some were hesitant and stopped with financial consequences. However after China lifted its’ lockdown the entrepreneurs explained how fruitful their businesses were regardless of the situation in Europe. Potentially the lockdown was of advantage to the dropshipping entrepreneurs considering the increased time spend of consumers on social media and boredom leading to more

impulse purchases. Nevertheless this time of crises has impacted the research process as a whole and the identity formation of the entrepreneurs due to the domination of feelings of insecurity, fear and frustration.

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Appendix

A. Interview guide

Past/ Background

- Who is the respondent
- Educational background
- Motivation of becoming an entrepreneur
- Getting in touch with drop-shipping

Identity

- Self-perception
- Self-development
- Networking
- Challenges

Identity work

- Self-presentation
- Responsive to change
- Entrepreneurial skills

Narrative

- Goal setting
- Story telling
- Drop-shipping Guru's
- Dropship communities

Future

- Representation of the entrepreneur
- Future perspective
- Role of networking
- Consideration of sustainability

B. Interview questions (English)

Background

Could you please describe yourself a bit:

- What is your age, gender, etc.
- What is your study progress, quick overview, specialism, etc.
- How is your study/ professional background related to your current business practices as an entrepreneur?
- What is your experience with “being self-employed”, working on starting your own business (entrepreneurship)? briefly discuss past experience(s).
- How have you become motivated to start your own business?
- (Has this always been a personal goal/ aspiration?)
- How did you get in touch with the practice of drop-shipping?
- Why did you chose drop-shipping as a business of becoming an entrepreneur?
- Would you describe your initial motivation to become a drop-shipping entrepreneur based on long-term or short-term purposes?
- Is drop-shipping your full time job right now?
- If not, why?

Identity

- Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?
- How do you experience being an entrepreneur/journalist? Could you describe that?
- How do you see yourself most of the time? (Role(s), attitude, etc.)
- In what way does this image of yourself alter in various (work) situations?
- Do you sometimes have to perform different roles?
- Do you feel differently in different situations?
- How has this image of yourself changed the last few years?
- What made you become aware that something was changing?
- What has prompted this change? (Agency & Structure)
- Do you compare yourself to other entrepreneurs within this industry?
- Could you describe what aspects of being an entrepreneur are most challenging to you?
Make you feel insecure?
- How do you deal with this insecurity(ies)?

Identity work

- How do you react to these changes?
- How do you present yourself?
- In what way does this representation of yourself change in various (work) settings?
- How do you feel about “putting yourself out there” and becoming a “brand”? (Tools?)
- How do you feel about your education towards being an entrepreneur?
- Does this help you to be more prepared to what you are facing now?
- Could you describe the skills you need as an entrepreneur?

- Could you describe the skills you missed in the start of becoming an entrepreneur?
- How has your life-style changed after becoming a drop-shipping entrepreneur?

Narrative

- Are there particular goals that you work towards?
- How do you want to reach these goals?
- What stories do you present about yourself? (Where and how?) (self-promotion)
- Have these stories changed over time?
- How did this story evolve? (Agency & Structure) What is different now?
- What prompted these ways of presenting yourself?
- Some experienced drop-shipping entrepreneurs are presenting themselves as “Drop-shipping Guru’s” on social media:
 - Could you explain what how you perceived their online presentation/ activities?
 - How do you feel about this? (Language use)
 - Could you describe what the purpose of these communities is?
 - Could you explain how this entrepreneurs, being part of an online/ offline community, relate to each other? What characteristics do they have in common?
 - Are you part of a drop-ship community yourself?
 - How has it helped you? (Relationship with other entrepreneurs/ Networking)

Future

- How are you learning to present yourself?
- How successful are these representations? (Experiences, successes, failures)
- What is the feedback that you get from others?
- What do you need to become a successful entrepreneur?
- How do you see your future? (as an entrepreneur and your identity)
- What do you need to do to reach that?
- What do you think is the role of networking?
- Could you describe your vision on the role of sustainability in your industry? Is the role of sustainability something you consider in your industry? (China, known for its low wages)
 - Do you feel responsible?
 - If so, How are planning to making a positive impact on society?

C. Interview questions (Dutch)

Achtergrond

Zou je jezelf een beetje kunnen beschrijven:

- Wat is je leeftijd?
- Wat is je studie achtergrond? Loopbaan van je carrière tot nu toe?
- In hoeverre is jouw studie achtergrond gerelateerd aan jouw huidige vorm van ondernemerschap?
- Wat is jouw ervaring met zelfstandig werken/ ondernemen? Beschrijf kort jouw ervaring (of dat van naasten)
- Hoe ben je gemotiveerd geraakt om voor jezelf te beginnen?
 - Is dit altijd al een persoonlijk doel/ droom geweest?
- Hoe ben je bekend geraakt met drop-shipping?
- Waarom heb je voor drop-shipping gekozen als business voor het ondernemen?
 - Zou je jouw motivatie om te beginnen met drop-shipping gebaseerd op korte of lange termijn doelen?
- Is drop-shipping momenteel jouw full-time baan?
 - Indien niet het geval, waarom?

Identiteit

- Vind je jezelf een geboren ondernemer?
- Hoe ervaar je het ondernemerschap tot nu toe? Zou je dat kunnen beschrijven?
- Hoe zie je jezelf meestal? In welke rol?
- In hoeverre verandert deze perceptie van jezelf in verschillende (werk)situaties. (Overleg, by yourself)
- Moet je soms verschillende rollen aannemen?
- In hoeverre is je zelf beeld veranderd over de laatste jaren?
- Wat maakt jou erop attent dat er iets in jezelf aan het veranderen was?
- Wat of wie heeft deze verandering gestimuleerd? (Agency & Structure)
- Vergelijk je jezelf weleens met andere drop-shipping ondernemers?
- Zou je kunnen beschrijven welke aspect van het zijn van een ondernemer je het meest uitdagend vindt? Wat maakt je weleens onzeker?
 - Hoe ga je moment onzekerheden?

Identiteitswerk

- Hoe ga je om met persoonlijke veranderingen?
- Hoe presenteer je jezelf? Online en offline?
- In hoeverre pas je zelf presentatie aan, aan verschillende (werk) situaties?
- In hoeverre is jouw persoonlijke identiteit gelijk aan jouw ondernemers identiteit?
- Wat is jouw gevoel bij “putting yourself out there” en jezelf presenteren als “merk” (Tools?).

- In hoeverre was voorbereid/ beschikte je over je juiste kennis voor het worden van een ondernemer? Geschoold/ vakkennis van het ondernemerschap?
- Mocht je vooraf kennis hebben opgedaan/ over vakkennis beschikken; in hoeverre helpt uitjouw in de uitdagingen waarmee je nu te maken hebt? Voel je je beter voorbereid?
- Zou je de vaardigheden kunnen beschrijven die je nodige hebt als ondernemer?
- Zou je kunnen omschrijven welke vaardigheden je miste toen je begon te ondernemen?
- Hoe is je levensstijl veranderd nadat je een drop-shipping ondernemer bent geworden?

Verhalend/ vertelling

- Zijn er persoonlijke doelen waar je naartoe werkt? Zou je die met mij willen delen?
- Hoe wil je deze doelen gaan behalen?
- Wat vertel je over jezelf/ jouw werkzaamheden aan anderen? (Waar en hoe?) (self-promotion).
- Hoe presenteert je jezelf naar anderen?
- Hoe is dit verhaal ontstaan? Wat is er anders nu? (Agency & Structure)
- Wat heeft ervoor gezorgd dat je deze manier van zelf presentatie inzet?
- Sommige ervaren drop-shippers presenteren zichzelf als “Drop-shipping Guru’s” op social media:
 - Zou je kunnen vertellen hoe je hun online presentatie/ activiteiten ervaart?
 - Wat je gevoel hierbij? Bijvoorbeeld hun taalgebruik (taalgebruik, misleidend)
 - Zou je kunnen omschrijven wat het doel is van zogenoemde “drop-ship communities”?
 - Zou je kunnen vertellen hoe leden van dergelijke communities gerelateerd zijn aan elkaar? Dus, welke kenmerken hebben ze gemeen?
 - Ben je zelf onderdeel/ lid van een community?
 - Hoe heeft dit je geholpen? (Relatie tot andere ondernemers/ Netwerken)

De toekomst

- Hoe leer je jezelf te presenteren? Via welke wegen/ bronnen?
- Hoe succesvol is deze presentatie van jezelf? (Ervaringen, successen, faal momenten)
- Wat voor feedback krijg je van anderen? Naasten/ andere ondernemers? Nu je bent gaan ondernemen?
- Zou je me kunnen vertellen wat je nodig hebt om een succesvolle ondernemer te worden?
- Hoe zie jij je toekomst voor je? Persoonlijk en als ondernemer? (Als ondernemer en persoonlijk)
- Wat heb je nodig om dit te bereiken?
- Wat denk je dat de rol van netwerken is in het behalen van succes?
- Zou je kunnen beschrijven wat jouw visie is op de rol van duurzaamheid in de drop-shipping industrie? Is dit iets waar over na wordt gedacht? (China, staat bekend als lage lonen land, plastic verpakkingen ect.)
 - Voel je je verantwoordelijk hiervoor?
 - Indien het geval, wat zijn je plannen om een positief effect te maken op de maatschappij?

D. Coding tables

D.1 Theme 1: The Self as a marketing tool

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Life events - Identity formation 	Life-course identity	The Self as a marketing tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impression management - Storytelling - Marketing tactics 	Personal branding	

D.2 Theme 2: Entrepreneurial identity struggles

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social comparisons - Social pressure 	Competition	Entrepreneurial identity struggles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stability seeking - Risk management - External factors 	Future perspective	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Socio-economical disconnection - Societal stereotypes - Social abandonment 	Traditional frameworks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negativity - Skepticism - Incomprehension 	Reputational issues	

D.3 Theme 3: A collective identity

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Giving back - Professional growth 	Networking	A collective identity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teamwork - Coaching - Family 	Like-mindedness	

D.4 Theme 4: The entrepreneurial spirit

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Non-materialistic desires- Materialistic desires	Motivational drivers	The entrepreneurial spirit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-image- Social status- Mental growth	Personal development	