crisis or creative breakthrough?

A Qualitative Study Situating the COVID-19 Pandemic Within Crisis Management Theory
Through the Lens of Creative Entrepreneurs in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 virus has affected society on a global scale and has tremendously impacted all aspects of human life which constructs the identification of COVID-19 as a global crisis. This crisis influenced the creative industries and entrepreneurs significantly, through which a need came into existence to better understand the impact on strategic practices of crisis management whilst simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the digital age. Therefore, this research tackles the following question: *How do creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis and how does COVID-19 change the understanding of crisis management theory during the digital age?*

Using an inductive qualitative process, in-depth interviews were held with creative entrepreneurs working in the Netherlands. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach for data analysis, different themes were found that led to the answer to the research question. Overall, creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands can manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis by acknowledging important elements in strategic preparation, adaptation, and prevention. The actions that follow this acknowledgement of strategic practices are continuously influenced by the entrepreneurial identity of a creative entrepreneur and their industry perception. COVID-19 changes the understanding of crisis management theory as it showed the extreme importance of mental health during this "social crisis" caused by the essence of digitization of internal and external communication. Currently, this finding lacks presence in contemporary crisis management literature. Furthermore, the importance of digitization during COVID-19 showed contrasting perspectives of actions taken during the crisis regarding online development. On the one hand, creative entrepreneurs focused on optimizing online internal and external relations and found a need for online branding and findability and showed creative breakthroughs online. On the other hand, their online behaviour, specifically their social media strategy, was not affected.

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19, Crisis management, Creative entrepreneurs, Digital age, Strategic management*

Preface

In Dutch we say one can be "as proud as a peacock" and let me tell you how sincerely proud as a peacock I am right now. Not only am I proud of myself for putting blood, sweat, and tears into this thesis but I am also proud of finding joy and fulfilment within and throughout the process, which is something that can be difficult at times within one's academic career. After all, it is still as some would say with a hint of negativity, "school". However, choosing a topic that I find really interesting has truly kept me sane throughout the process as I learned something new and exciting every single day. Entrepreneurship is a career path that felt unattainable for me at times, especially within the creative industries that I love. However, connecting with so many different creative entrepreneurs has taught me that you can do anything your heart desires and that all it takes is for you to believe in yourself and to just go for it! I feel that part of that motto stayed with me whilst writing this thesis as you truly must believe in your research for it to pay off, and it definitely did!

I am thankful for having a great support system and I want to thank those that have not only encouraged me throughout the past academic year but have also kept me going by making sure I took time off if necessary, during a global pandemic. With that in mind, I want to give a special shoutout to my mom and dad who have supported my academics my entire life and now get to see me graduate. Furthermore, which is something a little unusual, I want to dedicate my thesis to my grandfather as he would have loved to see where I am right now and losing him during these times has been one of the hardest things I have gone through. I have learned so much from him and if it is one thing that I wish upon everyone else is to always be able to see the glass as half full as he was always able to do.

The pandemic has taught everyone numerous lessons and being able to perceive it through the lens of those that experienced entrepreneurship in times of crisis first-hand has been extremely valuable. Therefore, a big thank you to Imaan, Bowen, Sanne*, Ninarosa, Miša, Dheeraj, Thomas, Nancy, Dakota, Priscilla, and Joram for sharing their experiences with me and taking time off to schedule an interview. Lastly, I want to express my gratitude for my supervisor Dr. Sven-Ove Horst for encouraging me, making sure I got all the right resources, and believing in me in times of doubt. Cheers!

Happy readings,

Anouk van Niekerk

*Pseudonym

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The past year has been a rollercoaster of change as the COVID-19 virus hit the world on a global scale (Haleem, Javaid, & Vaishya, 2020). As it tremendously impacted all aspects of human life such as health, social interactions, policies, education, the economy, and numerous other factors, the pandemic has been called a global crisis (Haleem, Javaid, & Vaishya, 2020). Focusing specifically on the economy aspect, many organizations and businesses had to incorporate different strategies and unexpectedly got to experience organizational change and innovation (Towse, 2020). One critical industry that had to incorporate these changes and innovative processes is the cultural and creative industries. According to the European Creative Business Network (2020), 7.5% of the European population is employed in the cultural and creative sector making it a vital and valuable industry. Focusing specifically on the Netherlands, the creative industries represented around 4% of employment and approximately 11% of creative organizations in 2020 (European Creative Business Network, 2020). This makes the cultural and creative industries have a substantial contribution to society and the economy within the Netherlands, which now had to go through these crucial organizational changes and developments. With articles in the Netherlands having headlines such as 'Creative sector heavily under pressure due to Corona' by Stichting Certificatie Creatieve Industrie (n.d.) and 'Rapport: Cultural and creative sector hit hardest in Europe' by De Ondernemer (2021), one starts to wonder what kind of impact the COVID-19 crisis truly had on this important industry and what strategic changes they had to endure and implement.

As part of these broader challenges and dynamics, the creative industries showed a growing importance of, and attention towards, entrepreneurship (De Cuyper, Kucukkeles, & Reuben, 2020). These entrepreneurs in the creative industries, creative entrepreneurs, represent a combination of the important sector that is the cultural and creative industries whilst also representing this growing interest in entrepreneurship. This makes them an intriguing subject of interest. De Cuyper, Kucukkeles, and Reuben (2020) indicate that especially these creative entrepreneurs had to find new ways of conducting business and "keep their heads held high" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perspectives of entrepreneurship were completely alternating as the pandemic continued and the future of entrepreneurship was challenged as a whole (De Cuyper, Kucukkeles, & Reuben, 2020). Creative entrepreneurs turned to digitization of their work, incorporating new elements in their business to create opportunities, or even had to switch occupations (Forward, 2020).

Whilst the cultural and creative industries were experiencing great impact of the global pandemic, there was also a need for creative work growing simultaneously (Beckett Jr., 2020). This created an extremely delicate situation as on the one hand the creative sector was experiencing detrimental change, whilst on the other hand a need for creative work started to grow, leading to heavy pressure. This raises an important general curiosity: how are these entrepreneurs managing and transforming strategically during this current crisis and keeping up with this tug of war?

To understand dealing with changes during a crisis, an important concept that comes into play is crisis management. When dealing with organizational crisis management specifically, this notion is understood as a complex process of systematically managing a disruptive event for an organization (Ley et al., 2014). As creative entrepreneurs experience the global COVID-19 crisis and creative entrepreneurship is viewed as an intriguing field of interest, it will be fascinating to understand their strategic crisis management processes and their view on the Coronavirus pandemic. However, in addition to these features of interest, it is important to note that we are currently living in a digital age which, according to Behmer and Jochem (2019), can consciously and unconsciously influence management processes. Therefore, to understand crisis management procedures of creative entrepreneurs during COVID-19 altogether, the current age of digital developments and innovation must be kept in mind. To better understand the interesting individuals that are creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, their crisis management process, and the influence of living in the digital age, the following research question has been developed:

How do creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis and how does COVID-19 change the understanding of crisis management theory during the digital age?

1.1 Scientific relevance

Interestingly, during the last economic crisis (financial crisis) the creative economy was affected hard as well, but its recovery was faster and stronger than traditional industries (Mina, 2014). Partial reasoning for this is that creative industries have acquired an increased economic and social importance through which they have taken on an important role as a driver for social, economic, and environmental growth and creation of non-monetary value (Mina, 2014). In comparison to COVID-19, creative entrepreneurs have currently

experienced a tremendous impact as their revenue decreased with 30% during the pandemic (De Ondernemer, 2021). They are pushed to transform what they do and how they do things, as creativity becomes an important driver and mechanism of value creation (Okpara, 2007). As the creative economy recovered faster and stronger than traditional industries during the financial crisis and creativity is becoming more vital, it is of scientific interest to better understand the perspectives and processes of current members of the creative industries during the COVID-19 crisis as little to no research is currently bridging this gap due to its recent nature. This allows for us to see if we can learn from members of these industries once again like we could during the economic crisis.

Specifically focusing on the processes of which we are trying to understand, crisis management theory is of essence. In their seminal article, Gilbert and Lauren (1980) give a critical reflection on "current" crisis management literature. As of right now, their review is already over 40 years old. Nevertheless, it is too unequivocal to state crisis management theory, or their review, is outdated. However, one may argue that the conception of crisis management and its relevance today need to be critically reflected for sensible adaptation to current contexts and circumstances and that crisis management theory should not be taken for granted (Topper & Lagadec, 2013). For example, while this concept has been around for a long time and lots of theory and frameworks have been created surrounding the notion, we have entered a new digital age in which innovation of technology is skyrocketing which should be kept in mind according to Eriksson (2014). Eriksson (2014) has therefore critically reviewed crisis management in the digital age and proposes three key insights:

(1) There are important tensions between old and new approaches for crisis management

(2) We need a new metaphor for the understanding and practice of future crisis communication, and

(3) We need a redefinition of the concept of strategy in strategic communication and crisis communication (Eriksson, 2014, pp. 515-516)

These insights underline the need for change within crisis management theory and developing its relation and applicability to the digital age which emphasizes the scientific relevance of this research question.

The proposed research question will allow us to better understand the crisis and its impact on entrepreneurs in the creative industries. We might learn how they conceptualize and describe this "crisis situation" and how they manage it. By conceptualizing the current episode as a form of crisis, this thesis will build an updated understanding of crisis

management theory that considers the digital transformations and new ways of work that we are currently experiencing. This adds to the general literature on crisis management that involves research on, for example, the more well-known situational crisis communication theory by Coombs (2007) and the extensive framework of Pearson and Mitroff (1993) which involves four crisis management variables: types, stakeholders, phases, and systems. Furthermore, it will create a better understanding of strategic choices and operations. It will add to the literature of strategic management in an entrepreneurial context that is increasingly digital, such as the ways in which digital media technologies can transform entrepreneurial communication, organization, and strategy operations according to Horst and Hitters (2020) and the ways in which digitization influences entrepreneurial identities, just like other environmental impacts, as they influence strategic choices and processes through entrepreneurial identity at work (Jones, Ratten, Klapper, & Fayolle, 2019).

1.2 Societal relevance

The societal relevance at play is that a better understanding will be created of creative entrepreneurs in times of crisis and their current view on the COVID-19 pandemic as well as where this crisis fits in. This allows for societal learning as entrepreneurs would be able to take away key components of best strategic practices to enforce a better crisis preparation strategy in the (near) future. Furthermore, comparing it to the economic crisis as previously mentioned, it will be interesting to see if the creative industries are getting out of the crisis situation fast and strong once again to enlighten the importance of the creative industries within society. Entrepreneurs are individuals that have been impacted strongly by COVID-19. Therefore, taking entrepreneurs in the creative industries specifically will be an interesting approach to cover two facets that are believed to be hit hard by the Coronavirus within society: the creative industries and entrepreneurs combined.

In addition, as society is currently living in the digital age, it will be relevant to understand how this impacts organizations and their view on a crisis whilst living among great technology. The society in question of this research, as introduced, will be the Netherlands to have a focus within the framing and allow for a more centralized population to purposely achieve more representative outcomes. As digital aspects are believed to influence crisis management practises as stated by Behmer and Jochem (2019), society can benefit from understanding these influences in organizational management to implement relevant

digital aspects within crisis management, but also other forms of (strategic) management processes and developments.

1.3 Structure

Within this thesis, the research in question has been tackled using an inductive qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were held guided and built upon an extensive theoretical framework which can be found in the next chapter. Following, an elaborate explanation of the research design is created within the methodology after which findings are presented within the results section and scrutinized during the discussion component of this thesis. Lastly, a conclusion has been constructed which gives an answer to the research question, potential limitations, and possibilities for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

To tackle the research question, a deep understanding of current theory is necessary to better understand the fundamentals of this research and to frame appropriate underlying concepts. In this section, a framework of existing theory on these most important concepts will be presented and discussed. This framework is used to guide the research and provide a specific viewpoint for interpreting the results of this study. Since the purpose of this research is to better understand crisis management theory and strategic practices in the digital age in relation to COVID-19, this framework is of utter essence.

2.1 The importance of strategic management

To explore crisis management, we begin by situating it within the overarching theme of strategic management as we try to understand how creative entrepreneurs manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis. Parnell (2013) describes the concept of strategic management as a process that involves management's analysis of the environment in which a company operates prior to developing a strategy, as well as the control and implementation of this strategy. The process of strategic management involves the steps of an external analysis, an internal analysis, strategy formulation, strategy execution, and strategic control (Parnell, 2013). Strategic management research today focuses on many new and different issues such as the idea that markets now reach globally and have unimagined opportunities due to new technologies (Burgelman, Floyd, Laamanen, Mantere, Vaara, & Whittington, 2012). These all form the angle of strategy as practice, in which we understand strategy as something that people do and that is continuously developing (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

This view of Vaara and Whittingon (2012) correlates to Preble (2003) as he explains how strategic management and crisis management have "potential synergetic integration" as crisis management has to take on a very strategic approach to allow for problem-solving techniques and for strategies to be alternated through the outcome of a crisis. Hence, strategic management is very important to crisis management and vice versa. Preble (2003) created a framework in which the two are intertwined and it is allowed for one another to give and receive continuous feedback and develop with and amongst one another. Essentially, a big part of crisis management is strategically doing something about the crisis in question which, therefore, relates back to the idea of strategy as a practice. Within this theoretical framework, a focus on crisis management and all its elements is at play to allow for a better

understanding of strategic management during a crisis and the current understanding of crisis management theory to answer the research question.

2.2 Crisis management

So, what exactly is crisis management compared to strategic management and where does it fit in within the corporate environment? Jaques (2009) places crisis management within the scope of public relations and describes the complex definitions this field holds. He enforces the distinction between crisis management and issue management by explaining the roots of their existence and how they differ from one another. Issue management originates from both a public policy approach, in which organizations have to adapt to public policy, as well as an internal process approach, in which issue management is defined as reducing risk, creating opportunities, preserving markets, and managing image (Jaques, 2009). On the contrary, crisis management roots into the approaches of crisis as an event, and crisis as part of a process (Jaques, 2009). The 'crisis as an event' approach deals with a crisis that is considered sudden and unexpected and threatens to disrupt an organization (Jaques, 2009). Considering 'crisis as a part of a process', crisis is seen as having a continuum; beginning with an incident, followed by conflict and ending in a crisis, a serious 'form of disruption' (Jaques, 2009). Although issue management and crisis management have their different approaches, their main difference lies within the concept of time, as a crisis is considered something that happens suddenly and unexpectedly and has the need for quick response as it can develop to be disruptive whereas an issue does not necessarily involve time pressure (Jaques, 2009). Thus, crisis management involves a strategic response and is often bound to time. However, it is important to further distinct crisis management, crisis communication and crisis response as these concepts not only overlap, but are practically interchangeable (Jaques, 2009). Crisis response is essentially the strategic method that is used to respond to a crisis, in which crisis communication largely comprises what is said after and during a crisis by an organization (Jaques, 2009). Both crisis response and crisis communication are a part of crisis management (Jaques, 2009).

However, according to Pearson and Clair (1998) it is important to keep evaluating the framing of definitions of organizational crisis management and an organizational crisis, as they create a framework for a multi-disciplinary approach. In the beginning of their study, they introduce the definitions based on management literature. They state that an organizational crisis is "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the

organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly (Pearson & Claire, 1998, p. 60)". Organizational crisis management is "a systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur (Pearson & Claire, 1998, p. 61)." As they introduce a multi-dimensional process of crisis management, they distinguish the outcome based on success or failure and suggest that allowing for elements of both success and failure reduces the need to protectively mask imperfect decisions or actions. In other words, the way in which you view the systematic attempt of averting or managing crises that occur, and thus organizational crisis management, is extremely important. If one allows for success and/or failure, it diminishes the idea of perfect crisis management. One should view it as a process that can be both successful and unsuccessful but is acceptable either way.

What is important to keep in mind here and what we can take away from these different viewpoints, is that different scholars look at crisis management from a different approach. Jaques (2009) makes a clear separation between crisis management and issue management, in which issue management involves tackling an issue and reducing risks for similar future issues and crisis management involves disruption. On the contrary, within the framework of Pearson and Clair (1998) crisis management also involves a learning process of successes and failures which can lead to reducing risk, either as a stage within crisis management or something that comes after. However, there is another important term at play here, which is that reducing risks is often seen as risk management. Risk management is interested in managing potential issues that may or may not happen, mainly focused on organizational or financial activities that maximize corporate value to deal with these (potential) risks (Dionne, 2013). Crisis management, issue management, and risk management are thus all separate notions with separate definitions and perceptions.

Overall, this study will follow the framework of Jaques (2009) in which crisis management is viewed as having a continuum with a (possibly) disruptive end, both seeing crisis management as an event and as a process which exists out of crisis communication and crisis response. Risk management is a separate notion that will be touched upon later within this theoretical framework. Throughout this research, issue management and crisis management will go hand in hand as the pandemic, which is viewed as the crisis within this study, is ongoing during data collection. Interviewees view the crisis differently based on their time perception of the event which makes constructing a clear distinction difficult within this study. To delve deeper into crisis management, the four major crisis management

variables, as introduced by Pearson and Mitroff (1993), will be used to structure the theory on crisis management. These variables are the types of crises, phases of crisis management, systems of crisis management, and stakeholders during times of crisis. Furthermore, response strategy will be discussed, and a deeper understanding of creative entrepreneurs will be provided.

2.2.1 Types of crises

Within crisis management, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) have completed an extensive five-year research in which they identify four major crisis management variables. The first important variable within crisis management is the identification of different types of crises and how these different types can be prevented (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Pearson and Mitroff (1993) identify the type of crisis by comparing severity to normality and if it is technical or economic compared to human or social. Furthermore, they relate the type "mega damage" as one that can either occur as a result of intentional environmental abuse or neglect (which is the cause), or as the effect of a normal 'break'. Hence, this type can be seen at both sides of the spectrum (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). In total, the following types are identified: mega damage, external economic attacks, psycho, occupational health diseases, breaks, external information attacks, and perceptual, which are visualized within the framework of Pearson and Mitroff (1993) in figure 1.

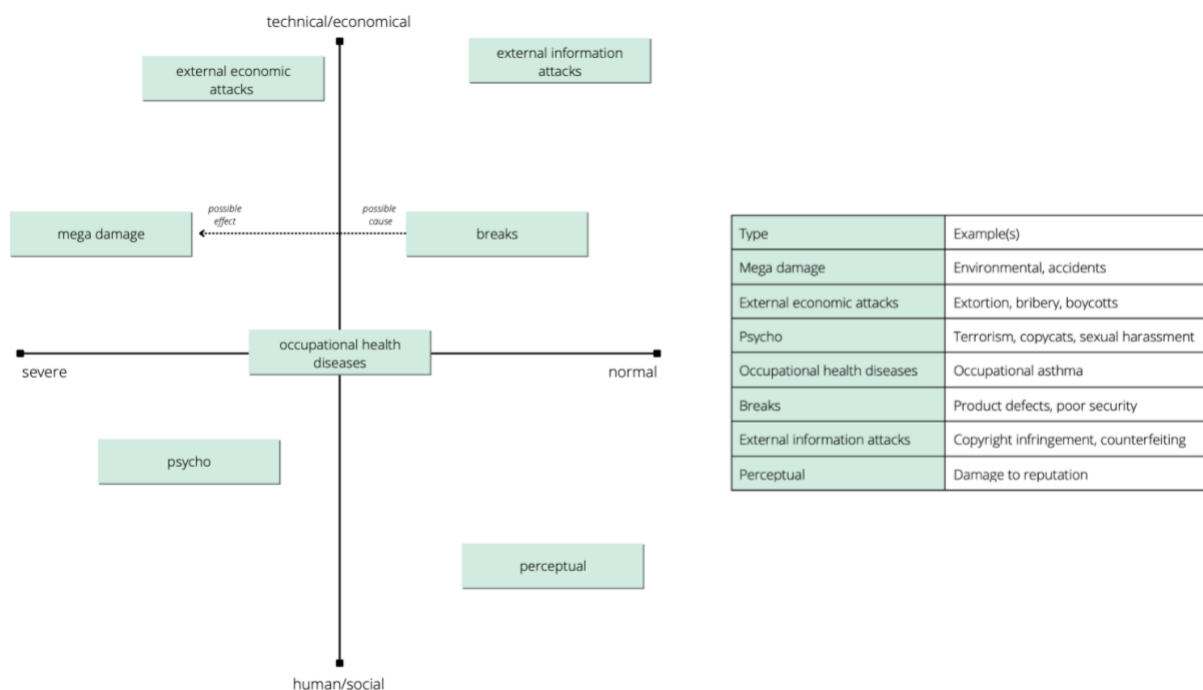| Type	Example(s)
Mega damage	Environmental, accidents
External economic attacks	Extortion, bribery, boycotts
Psycho	Terrorism, copycats, sexual harassment
Occupational health diseases	Occupational asthma
Breaks	Product defects, poor security
External information attacks	Copyright infringement, counterfeiting
Perceptual	Damage to reputation

Figure 1. Crisis types according to Pearson and Mitroff (1993)

The different types of crises have the need for different types of preventive actions. These actions are considered by Pearson and Mitroff (1993) to be in a scope where technical or economical is opposite of human, social or organizational, and internal is opposite of external actors. Building upon the similar framework of the types of crises, one can identify which preventative action out of the following is necessary: internal repair/design, internal emotional preparation, audits, or external info/communication. To minimize crisis risk at best, a company should minimize their vulnerability by strategically planning across all crisis types (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). However, a common mistake identified by Pearons and Mitroff (1993) is that organizations tend to prepare for crises which have the potential to affect the core of an organization. For example, technical companies mostly prepare for loss of data through power outages but lack preparation within other areas (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). A visualization of all preventative actions can be found in figure 2.

Type	Example(s)
Internal repair/design	Improved safety, inspection
Internal emotional preparation	Employee classes, behavioral profiling
Audits	Legislation, environmental impact audits
External info/communication	Media training, government relations
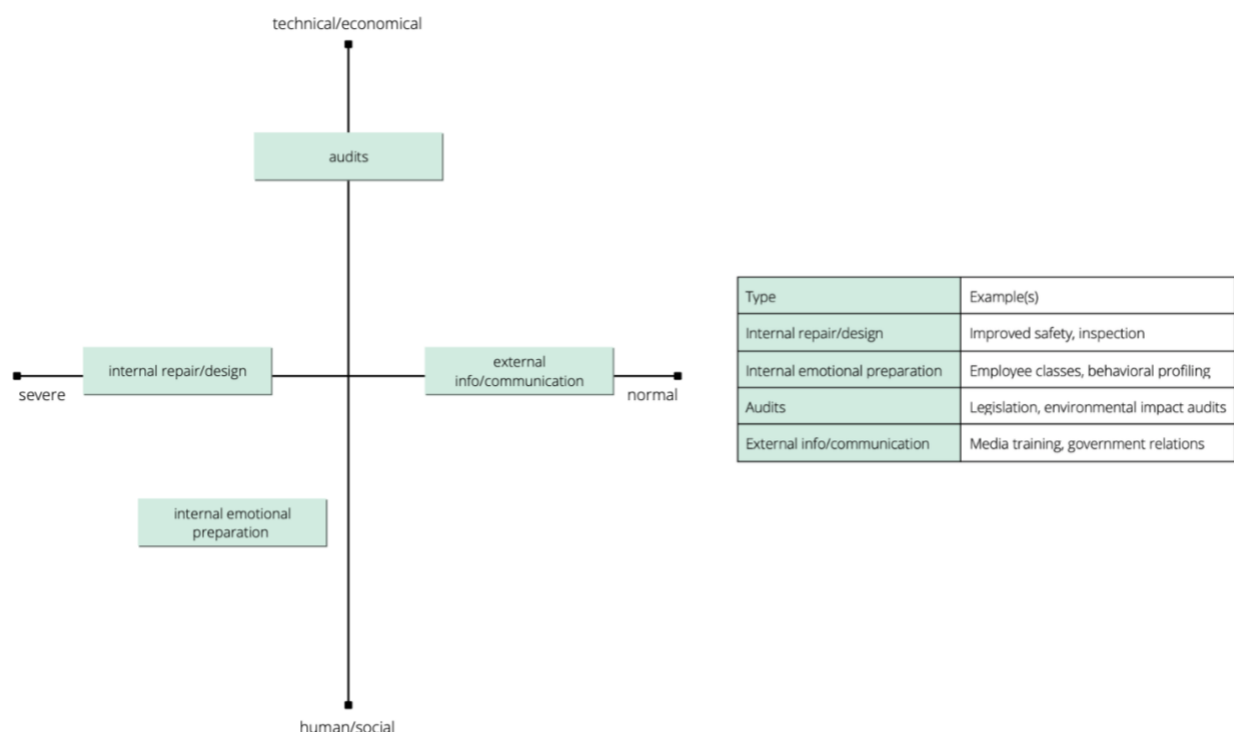
Figure 2. Preventative actions for each type of crisis according to Pearson and Mitroff (1993)

It is important to note that Pearson and Mitroff (1993) are not the only ones that distinguish different types of crises. Coombs (2007) identifies three themes of crises in which multiple types are explained. The first theme is victim crises in which he identifies a minimal crisis responsibility, which exists out of the following types: natural disasters, rumours,

workplace violence, and product tampering/malevolence. The second theme is accident crises in which he identifies a low crisis responsibility, which exists out of the following types: challenges, technical error accidents, and technical error product harm. The last theme is preventable crises in which he identifies strong crisis responsibility, which exist out of human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeed. An overview of these types can be found in table 1.

Victim crises: Minimal crisis responsibility	Accident crises: Low crisis responsibility	Preventable crises: Strong crisis responsibility
Natural disasters: Acts of nature such as earthquakes	*Challenges:* Stakeholder claims that the organization is operating inappropriately	*Human-error accidents:* Industrial accident caused by human error
Rumours: False and damaging information being circulated about your organization	*Technical error accidents:* Equipment or technology failure that cause an industrial accident	*Human-error product harm:* Product is defective or potentially harmful because of human error
Workplace violence: Attack by former or current employee on current employee	*Technical error product harm:* Equipment or technology failure that causes a product to be defective or harmful	*Organizational misdeed:* Management actions that put stakeholders at risk and/or violate the law
Product tampering/malevolence: External agent causes damage to the organization		

Table 1. Crisis types according to Coombs (2007)

There are many other scholars that touch upon the different types of crises. However, to narrow the framework, lastly, this study will introduce the crisis matrix by Gundel (2005). This matrix is perceived as valuable as it narrows crisis types in just four ways based on how predictable and influenceable they are. It provides a narrowed contrast towards the previously mentioned types. The four different types that Gundel (2005) introduces are conventional crises, unexpected crises, intractable crises, and fundamental crises, and can be seen in figure 3.
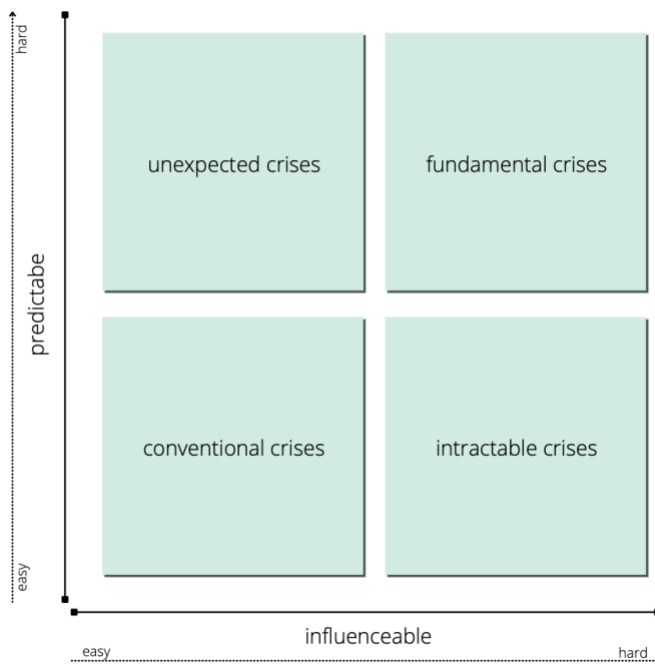
Figure 3. Crisis types according to Gundel (2005)

2.2.2 Phases of crisis management

The next major crisis variable according to Pearson and Mitroff (1993) are the five phases within crisis management. The first phase in their framework is considered to be signal detection which is often found to be ignored. Following this phase is preparation or prevention, which includes systematically preparing for any crisis to happen through creating crisis teams or providing crisis training. The third phase of crisis management is containment or damage limitation which requires effective management and plans or procedures. The fourth phase is recovery, which requires programs of short-term and long-term recovery through procedures and key activities or tasks. The last phase of crisis management in the framework of Pearson and Mitroff (1993) is learning, which is effectively reflecting on a crisis, one's response and one's procedures, to actively process a crisis to prepare for the future.

To provide another perspective of the phases of crisis management, Darling's research (1994) will be elaborated as well. In Darling (1994), Fink's (1986) crisis cycle is discussed and analysed. Similarly to Pearson and Mitroff (1993), Darling (1994) discusses the phases of crisis management. However, these phases are seen as a cycle, and it is emphasized that during a crisis these phases are not black and white and can feel all over the place rather than having a chronological order. The first phase described by Darling (1994) is the prodromal crisis stage which has to become obvious to leaders of the trans-technologies management so

that appropriate plans can be made accordingly. This phase is often oblique and hard to recognize. Following, is the acute crisis stage which is often the point of no return once the warnings have ended. In this stage, organizations have to determine the dangers and vulnerabilities and ensure that appropriate actors know what is happening and that they feel involved in the firm's response to the crisis. Following this phase, is the chronic crisis stage which is considered the 'clean-up' of a crisis situation. It involves self-analysis, healing, or even an audit or interviews and explanations. Lastly, the crisis resolution stage takes place which is the goal of crisis management during the preceding three phases as it seeks to become before the prodromal crisis stage and prevent a crisis from happening (in the future) or limit its impact.

2.2.3 Systems of crisis management

Mostly needed within the preparation process of effective crisis management, organizations should examine their crisis capabilities across five organizational systems: technical, human factor, infrastructural, cultural, and emotional/belief according to Pearson and Mitroff (1993). The technical system is considered to be the core of this figure and it includes mechanisms that organize the company's work, such as equipment, or specific materials or tasks. The availability and existence of these technical tools are critical considerations. The human factor system includes people and machinery and if they are appropriately designed to fit customers' needs, but also if emotional limitations have been taken into account. Stressful situations can create unpredictable decision-making and behaviour. Furthermore, a suitable infrastructure system is necessary. This involves open and effective channels of communication among different levels and/or divisions, as well as clear descriptions for those accountable for crisis management tasks and safety procedures. Following, cultural systems and emotional/belief systems are often dependent on another and can impede crisis management efforts in organizations. It influences responses, thinking-process, decision-making, and the environment of and within an organization. Faulty rationalizations can hinder crisis management efforts, which is why these systems are of great essence.

2.2.4 Stakeholders within crisis management

The last major crisis variable identified by Pearson and Mitroff (1993) is stakeholders. Within their framework, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) make a distinction between two different types of organizational stakeholders: functional organizational stakeholders and archetypal

organizational stakeholders. The idea behind these two approaches is to think of your organizational stakeholders in times of crisis and then select what role they would potentially play, thus how they would be an archetypal organizational stakeholder. Organizations that recognize that a crisis can affect not just them, but also their products, suppliers, general environments, competitors, and other stakeholders, as well as what roles these stakeholders would play, will be better prepared in times of crisis (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Examples of functional organizational stakeholders	Examples of archetypal organizational stakeholders
Media	Rescuers
Suppliers	Enemies
Competitors	Allies
Special interest	Protectors
Regulators	Villains
Consumers	Victims
Management	Heroes
Stockholders	
Workers	
Union	

Table 2. Potential stakeholders and their role in times of crisis (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993)

An interesting phenomenon related to crisis management and stakeholders is the so-called "halo effect". Coombs and Holladay (2006) describe this effect to be very valuable and particularly beneficial in the pre-crisis phase of crisis management. The idea behind the halo effect is that if an organization has a favourable reputation prior to a crisis, this can create protection for the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). The halo effect might encourage stakeholders in times of crisis to give an organization the benefit of the doubt, which could reduce attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Hence, reputation management is of utter essence during, but also prior to, times of crisis.

2.3 Response strategy

An important part of crisis management is response strategy as it involves a strategic process of considering and choosing the right reaction to a crisis situation (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Response strategy is considered a part of the phases of, for example, containment/damage limitation and the chronic crisis stage, of crisis management as discussed by both Pearson and Mitroff (1993) and Darling (1994). Lambret and Barki (2017) identify different elements that are interdependent of one another to decide on the right response as well as the correct type of crisis, the reputational threat and the type of emotions. These elements are the origin of the crisis, the emotion in reaction to the crisis, and the degree of attribution of responsibility for the crisis, and their interdependence on one another which can be seen in figure 4.

Figure 4. Interdependence of elements regarding response strategy according to Lambret and Barki (2017)

According to many different scholars, there are different types of responses to a crisis situation. One theory that is closely related to response strategy is the image restoration theory which, according to Dardis and Haigh (2009), is explained by Benoit (1997) as a theory that outlines strategies that can help restore one's reputation if this has been damaged due to an event. Taking into account the possible damage COVID-19 has caused, five different message options outlined by Dardis and Haigh (2009) should be taken into account as a response. These options are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification.

Similarly, Coombs (2007) outlines different strategies to repair reputation but believes there are eight best practices for initial crisis response, which are shown in table 3. Furthermore, Coombs (2007) outlines a list of the different reputation strategies, which one could implement, which are the following: attack the accuser, denial, take on a scapegoat, justification of the crisis, reminding stakeholders of past good works, ingratiation (praising stakeholders for their actions), compensation, apology, and excuse which exists out of either provocation, defeasibility, accidental, and good intentions.

Best practices initial crisis response
1. Be quick and try to have initial response within the first hour.
2. Be accurate by carefully checking all facts.
3. Be consistent by keeping spokespeople informed of crisis events and key message points.
4. Make public safety the number one priority.
5. Use all of the available communication channels including the internet, intranet, and mass notifications.
6. Provide some expression of concern/sympathy for victims.
7. Remember to include employees in the initial response.
8. Be ready to provide stress and trauma counseling to victims of the crisis and their families, including employees.

Table 3. Best practices for initial crisis response according to Coombs (2007)

An important theory that should be kept in mind regarding strategic response within crisis management is the situational crisis communication theory by Coombs (2007). This theory proposes the idea that responses should be matched to the level of crisis responsibility an organization has and the reputational threat the crisis poses. Coombs (2007) links this to crisis types which he places into three clusters which have been previously presented as well. The first cluster is the victim cluster in which the organization is also a victim of the crisis situation. They will have a mild reputational threat and weak attributions of crisis responsibility. The second cluster is the accidental cluster in which organizational actions that led to the crisis were unintentional. The reputational threat is perceived as moderate, and there is a minimal attribution of crisis responsibility. The final cluster is the preventable cluster in which an organization knowingly put people at risk, violated a law/regulation or took inappropriate actions. The reputational threat in this cluster is severe and the organization has strong attributions of crisis responsibility.

2.3.1 Social media strategies in times of crisis

As we are living in the digital age, social media have to be taken into account as they have become an important aspect within the response strategy of crisis management (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2011). Bratu (2016) states that "organizations should be accessible with generous information through social media channels before a crisis to make sure that information seekers identify the correct sources while examining the social sphere (Bratu, 2016, p. 235)." Social media is thus not only of importance during a crisis or within a response strategy, but also of great essence preceding a crisis to establish a good reputation (Bratu, 2016). Social media have become multimodal, with effortlessly updatable platforms that should be actively used to dialogue via practice both before, during, and after a crisis as they have become an important communication instrument for crisis communication (Bratu, 2016).

Taking into account the essence of the use of social media, Alexander (2014) identifies seven ways in which social media can be used in times of crisis: 1) as a listening function, 2) for monitoring a situation, 3) the integration social media into emergency planning and crisis management, 4) crowd-sourcing and collaborative development, 5) creating social cohesion and promoting therapeutic initiatives, 6) the furtherance of causes, and 7) research. These different strategies are dependent on the management's choice of risk reduction but should be used as social media is now a crucial part of crisis communication efforts (Bratu, 2016).

2.4 Crisis management revision: Risk management and issue management

Within this thesis, the tension between crisis management versus issue management has been established as the perception of time of participants could potentially play a role. Another concept that has been touched upon briefly related to this, is the concept of risk management. As participants will indicate the position of COVID-19 within crisis management theory, revision will come at play. This revision will help lead to better preparation of future emergency situations and to better one's strategic management processes (Cardona, 2013). Using this revision and its recommendations and feedback for preparation or the use of preventative actions is closely related to the concept of risk management. Risk management is a strategic practice in which an organization prepares for an event that may or may not happen (Dionne, 2013). Due to the delicacy of time within the COVID-19 crisis, this concept should also be reviewed succinctly.

Cardona (2013) highlights the importance between reality and possibility within risk

management. If the future would be known, the term risk would have no significance, hence the role of possibility versus reality. Accepting the possibility of an undesirable state of reality could lead to avoiding or reducing undesirable events or actions (Cardona, 2013). Furthermore, Cardona (2013) highlights the importance of the separation of risk evaluation and risk reduction as those two are separate notions within risk management. Where one is evaluating possible risks, the other is actively avoiding them.

Burnaby and Hass (2009) highlight ten important steps within risk management to which they refer to as enterprise risk management (ERM). These steps are "1) mandate from the top, 2) ERM department and buy-in, 3) decide on control framework, 4) determine all risks, 5) assess risks, 6) business units objectives and performance measures, 7) objectives and control summary, 8) monthly ERM reporting system, 9) analysis by ERM department, and the 10) continuously monitoring process (Burnaby & Hass, 2009, p.541)".

Taking into account the possibility of issue management, in which one deals with an event that has already occurred (Palese & Crane, 2006), the process of this notion should be illustrated as well. Palese and Crane (2006) have built a framework for creating an integrated issue management process as a source of competitive advantage. Within their research, they identify a process that exists out of four steps which should be seen as inputs and outputs through which the entire process could be considered a continuous cycle. The issue management process starts with issue identification, either through research, media, web, trends, or third parties. The second step of this process is analysis through network collaborations and key issues briefings. This step is followed by a strategy through action plan, weekly briefings and/or quarterly reviews. Lastly, the issue will be measured in which the impact has been assessed. After this step, Palese and Crane (2006) state one goes back to the first step of the process whenever a new issue arises.

2.5 What characterizes creative entrepreneurs?

As the subject of this research are creative entrepreneurs, a better understanding of these individuals and their characteristics, identity, and the industry in which they operate should be developed. Hausmann and Heinze (2016) have done an extensive study on the emergent field of cultural and creative industries and have concluded that these terms are often intertwined with one another in research and usage of terms. Therefore, it needs to be established that within this study these terms are perceived to go hand in hand with one another but are referred to as the creative industries. Thus, when referring to creative

entrepreneurs it will imply those entrepreneurs working in these industries. As a formal guideline, the following definitions of the creative industries and creative entrepreneurship will be used within this framework: "Creative industries target all that is produced by artistic and scientific creativity and has industrial potential, enters in the economic circuit, produces value, generates public income through taxes, creates jobs and profit, and was proved that helps to national and regional development (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014, p. 151)". Furthermore, creative entrepreneurship is "the practice of setting up a business - or setting yourself up as self-employed - in one of the creative industries (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014, p. 151)". However, it is important to note that creative entrepreneurship is not the only formal terminology used in this field as terms such as media entrepreneurship or digital entrepreneurship have emerged. These could potentially be seen as sub-themes of creative entrepreneurship. This is while media entrepreneurship focuses on entrepreneurship within both traditional media, such as television, but also digital media such as social media (Khajeheian, 2012), and digital entrepreneurship is at play when an intersection of digital technologies and entrepreneurship takes place (Nambisa, 2017). As media and the digital environment are often part of the creative industries, these concepts will be considered as part of and framed within the concept of creative entrepreneurship for consistency.

Another issue within terminology is the perception of industry versus sector (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014). A sector is usually used as a broader term and an industry is a smaller portion within the economy (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014), meaning, as an example, it would be the creative sector of which the music industry is part of. However, these terms will also intertwine within this study. Nevertheless, to give examples of different industries within the creative sector to paint a better picture, Bujor and Avasilcai (2014) highlight the following: advertising, architecture, arts and manufacturing crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software (electronic games), music, performing arts publishing, software and computer services, and television and radio.

To better understand creative entrepreneurs and therefore possibly their view on a particular crisis, entrepreneurial identity should be explored as Jones, Latham, and Betta (2007) state that identity can influence the way in which one operates their business. Entrepreneurial identity is a someone's set of meanings, including attitudes and beliefs, the subjective evaluations of behaviour, and attributes that define that person in an entrepreneurial role (Hoang & Gimeno, 2015). Donnellon, Ollila and Middleton (2014) highlight that the construction of one's identity involves continuous entrepreneurial learning and that it plays a critical part in developing entrepreneurial competency. Thus, through

24

learning, one develops an identity which plays a crucial role in entrepreneurial competency. It is important to keep in mind that, as Horst, Järviente-Thesleff and Perez-Latre (2019) highlight, that researching the development of entrepreneurial identities is imperative due to ongoing changes taking place in the media industry and broadly within society. Thus, entrepreneurial learning is continuously taking place, especially in the digital age we are currently in. Engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising this identity through learning is formally known as identity work (Horst, Järviente-Thesleff, & Perez-Latre, 2019). This being said, some entrepreneurial identity types and characteristics of creative entrepreneurs will be presented for reference even though it should be noted that these can be imperative. Horst, Järviente-Thesleff and Perez-Latre (2019) conclude three different types of entrepreneurial identities within their research. The first type is solution driven, in which one has long term strategic goals and has a pragmatic work ethic. The second type is purpose driven, in which one has value-based motives with a strong creative component. The last type is lifestyle driven, in which one attends conferences, socialises, and develops their network.

In comparison, Zuzul and Tripsas (2020) refer to the founder's identity which has two main types: revolutionary founders and discoverer founders. A revolutionary founder is considered one that wants to change the world and is radically driving change. A discoverer founder builds a successful business by identifying externally created opportunities and engages in ongoing experimentation and adaptation. To link identity specifically to creative entrepreneurs, according to McKelvey and Lassen (2018), there are a few characteristics of those operating in the cultural and creative industries. Creative entrepreneurs can struggle with their identity as it often seems to contrast their artistic identity (McKelvey & Lassen, 2018). The act of creating a venture is often not the priority rather a necessary form of organizing to produce their creative, innovative, and novel opportunities (McKelvey & Lassen, 2018). Furthermore, another aspect of creative entrepreneurs in creative business is passionate engagement, which has two components: passion atmosphere and passion in others (Bhansing, Hitters, & Wijngaarden, 2017). Bhansing, Hitters and Wijngaarden (2017) highlight the need for inspiration for motivational response to a creative idea, which is necessary to be operational within the creative industries. A passionate atmosphere and a passion in others can both have a positive effect on this needed inspiration.

Now that the concepts of the creative industries, creative entrepreneurs, identity work and entrepreneurial learning have been introduced, it is of essence to highlight a few characteristics of creative entrepreneurs to enhance the understanding of the context in which

they operate and thus how they might handle a certain crisis. Bujor and Avasilcai (2016) compare literature on the characteristics of creative entrepreneurs and state that they need a numerous number of skills in order for them to be successful, which are the following: "to invent himself/herself, to prioritize idea and not data, to be nomad, to be defined by his/her activities, way of thinking and seeing things, to be the adept of life studying, to borrow, to innovate, to exploit fame and celebrity, to treat what is virtual as real and vice versa, to be good, because goodness is a success factor, to openly admire success, to be ambitious and courageous, to have fun, and efficient communication (Bujor & Avasilcai, p. 27, 2016)." Furthermore, Gao, Zhang, Ma and Du (2020) highlight how creative entrepreneurs' goal is to create symbolic recognition, for which they need to embody their own interests, skills, and talents within their work. They need to be creative to have significant positive impact on innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking which can be created by moderate extraversion and neuroticism to stimulate this creativity as best as possible (Gao, Zhang, Ma, & Du, 2020). Lastly, Gilkey (2009) adds that creative entrepreneurs need to have perseverance, agility, comfort with discomfort, have risk-tolerance and confidence, in order to be successful. All these characteristics are useful to keep in mind, but it will be interesting to see how the entrepreneurs in this study define themselves in relation to their strategic management of the crisis. This gap of understanding identity in relation to crisis management can be bridged by exploring these notions within this study.

2.5.1 COVID-19, crises and (creative) entrepreneurs

To understand the extent of the importance of identity in times of crisis, some prior research on (entrepreneurial) identity and crises will be brought to light. Furthermore, findings on (creative) entrepreneurs and the COVID-19 crisis will be discussed. The self-identity of a person can be undermined through a traumatic experience and can cause a psychological breakdown which can result in change of a victim's conceptual system through which personal expectations about the world have been created (Pearson & Clair, 1998). A crisis challenges three assumptions one can have about the world (Pearson & Clair, 1998). One, a crisis can destroy the assumption that 'doing the right thing' will bring good things. Second, a crisis can challenge one's beliefs that 'bad things cannot happen to me'. And lastly, a victim can lose their sense of control and worth through a crisis, perceiving themselves as weak, helpless, and needy.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, during the economic crisis the creative industries were affected hard, but its recovery was faster and stronger than traditional

industries (Mina, 2014). Specifically focusing on entrepreneurs, Mühlböck, Warmuth, Holienka and Kittel (2018) found that despite this economic crisis there was an increase in entrepreneurship, making this flourish more as well. However, it was found that these entrepreneurs were mainly necessity based as entering the labour market was extremely difficult (Mühlböck, Warmuth, Holienka, & Kittel, 2018). This proves that entrepreneurship within the creative industries could grow in times of crisis, but that it could be for necessity-based reasoning. Doern (2014) researched entrepreneurship and crisis management during the London 2011 riots. Her findings conclude that small businesses were very vulnerable, which had many negative consequences including serious business and personal losses, although resilience of some was also found. She makes a distinction between vulnerability and resilience and that towards which an entrepreneur tends to during a crisis can depend on experience, mindset, and resources.

Focusing specifically on the COVID-19 crisis and entrepreneurs, little research exists due to its recent nature. Ratten (2020) is one researcher that has examined the relation between the Coronavirus, entrepreneurship, and crisis management. She concludes that the health pandemic changed society and altered business practices and that new approaches of entrepreneurial thinking are necessary in order to succeed in the global marketplace (Ratten, 2020). She highlights that especially the role of cultural, lifestyle, and social entrepreneurs accentuated as a response to current changes. However, she concludes that COVID-19 is a crisis in existence that deals with uncertainty and is in need of further research in combination with crisis management focusing on these types of entrepreneurs (Ratten, 2020). This is an extremely important finding as it highlights the essence of this thesis.

2.6 Reflection

To display reflexivity towards the theoretical framework which has been presented, the overarching themes will be encapsulated and visualized. In figure 5 the conceptual map of this thesis can be found in which the main theories and its related topics are shown. Within this model, the distinction between the concepts of crisis management, issue management, and risk management is presented. Zooming in on crisis management, crisis communication and crisis response, are shown to be part of this overarching concept as explained by Jaques (2009). Furthermore, crisis management has the four different variables: types, phases, systems, and stakeholders, which Pearson and Mitroff (1993) introduced in their framework which have been explored further within this theoretical framework. An added aspect for

crisis management is the tool of response strategy, through which the right process of response is chosen. Risk management exists out of the two processes of risk evaluation and risk reduction as explained by Cardona (2013). Lastly, creative entrepreneurs and their identity and the digital age are two themes that have been presented in this theoretical framework, which will be kept in mind throughout this research.
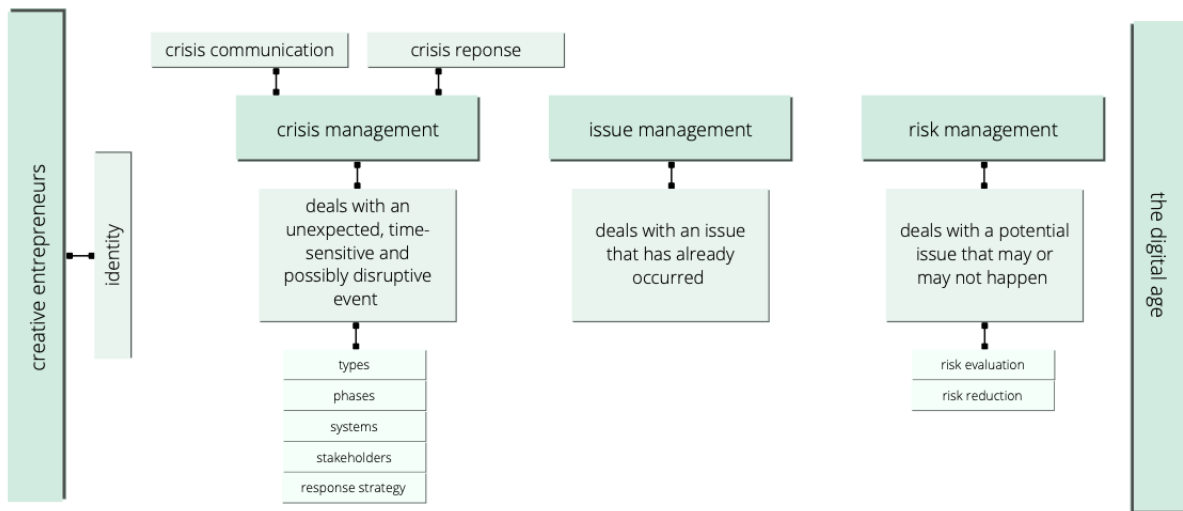

Figure 5. Distinction and relation of concepts within this study

To help answer the research question as to where COVID-19 fits within crisis management theory, an emphasis on the type of crisis will be made to create a core focal point on which can be reflected upon. Through analysis, the type of crisis that is COVID-19 will be indicated to better understand all other tools of crisis management and its findings. As three authors have been presented and discussed within this framework that distinguish different types of crises, a combination has been made to concretely understand the crisis classification. This combination of the works of Pearson and Mitroff (1993), Coombs (2007), and Gundel (2005), can be seen in figure 6. This figure presents a new model of crisis types to create a better understanding of crises and their labels assigned by different authors.
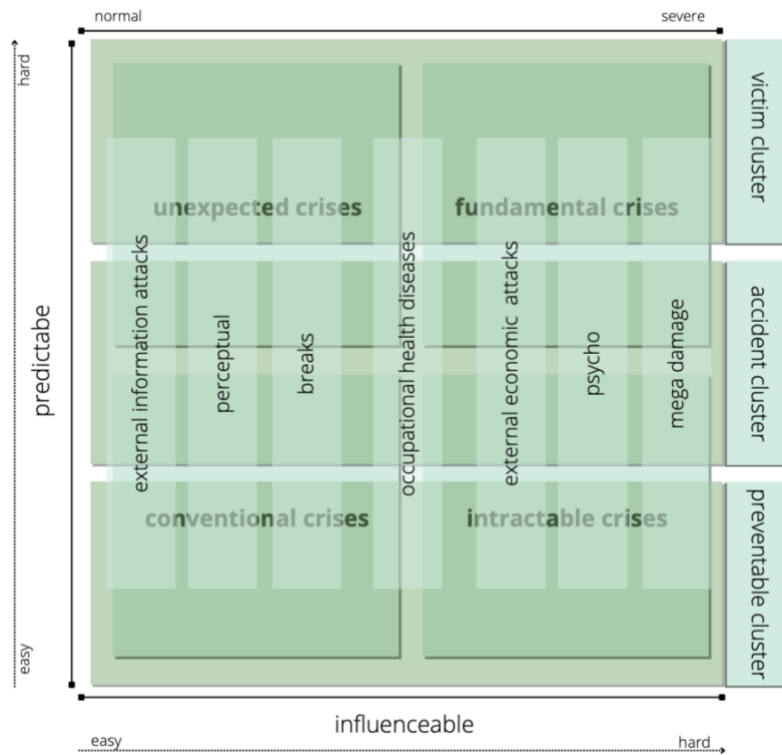
Figure 6. New model of crisis types

Lastly, an overview of the main concepts and their definitions is presented within table 4 to finalize the review of this theoretical framework and allow for a consistent understanding of the concepts of interest within this study.

Concept	Definition
Strategic management	A process that involves management's analysis of the environment in which a company operates prior to developing a strategy, as well as the control and implementation of this strategy (Parnell, 2013).
Crisis management	A continuous process that deals with an unexcepted, time-sensitive and (possibly) disruptive end (Jaques, 2009).
Issue management	A process in which one deals with an event that has already occurred (Palese & Crane, 2006).
Risk management	A strategic practice in which an organization prepares for an event that may or may not happen (Dionne, 2013).
Creative industries	"Targets all that is produced by artistic and scientific creativity and has industrial potential, enters in the economic circuit, produces value, generates public income through taxes, creates jobs and profit, and was proved that helps to national and regional development (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014, p. 151)".
Creative entrepreneurship	"The practice of setting up a business - or setting yourself up as self-employed - in one of the creative industries (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2014, p. 151)".
Digital age	The age in which innovation of technology is skyrocketing (Eriksson, 2014).
COVID-19 pandemic	The COVID-19 virus tremendously impacted all aspects of human life such as health, social interactions, policies, education, the economy, and numerous other factors, through which the pandemic has been called a global crisis (Haleem, Javaid, & Vaishya, 2020).

Table 4. Overview of main concepts and distinctive definitions

3. Methodology

In this section, the method of this study will be explained and justified to illustrate a deeper understanding of the approach taken to conduct this research. Furthermore, a detailed clarification of the analysis will be provided to construct comprehension of the presented results in the next chapter.

3.1 Qualitative methodology and active interviewing

To tackle the research question, an inductive qualitative approach is required to steer towards the aim of finding out whether the social phenomenon COVID-19 can be situated within existing crisis management theory and strategic practices through the lens of creative entrepreneurs or if that new theory is found and/or necessary. *Qualitative research* concerns observing and interpreting social phenomena, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic, to understand social realities and meaningful relationships by discovering meanings and patterns (Babbie, 2011). Furthermore, an inductive approach allows for general principles based on specific observations (Babbie, 2011), which is the purpose of zooming in on the creative industries and finding out if new theory is required by discovering these meanings and/or patterns.

The qualitative method to gather data and interpretations of the creative entrepreneurs is semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange where information is gathered based on a predetermined list of questions, whilst allowing a natural conversation to occur with a participant and allowing them to state what they find important (Brennen, 2017). This predetermined list of questions can be found in appendix A. According to Babbie (2011), qualitative research is necessary when delving deeper into a topic and/or when exploring new insights in relation to understanding *how* certain practices develop. The advantages of qualitative research are that it allows for a flexible approach, it can explain something that numbers alone cannot do, it can provide depth, and detect changing attitudes within a target group (Babbie, 2011). The disadvantages of qualitative research are that it allows for interpretation of the researcher, it can be influenced both consciously and unconsciously, and it could allow for self-selection bias (Babbie, 2011).

When conducting the interview, there was a focus on "active interviewing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). In active interviewing, the researcher considers themselves as an equal partner whilst constructing meaning through the interview. This enables the creation of content in dialogical manner (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). The interviewee was not

considered a passive subject, rather, they were encouraged to have an equal conversation which allowed for dialogical data.

3.1.1 Sample

For this research, I gathered 11 semi-structured interviews within a time span of four weeks. The subjects of interest were creative entrepreneurs working in the Netherlands. However, to represent the creative industries in the Netherlands at best, four participants had a different nationality than Dutch to represent the multicultural society that is the Netherlands (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011). Furthermore, the gender distribution was almost even as 6 of the participants were female and 5 of the participants were male. Other aspects that were considered to allow for diversity were the type of creative business, whether the entrepreneurs worked full time or part-time, and when the entrepreneurs founded their company. Two entrepreneurs were chosen as they started during the pandemic to include that perspective as well. The age range between the eleven participants was 21 to 49 years old which led to a diverse group of entrepreneurs with different amounts of experience within the creative industries. The number of interviews was chosen as a sufficient amount to reach the goal of the study whilst it is simultaneously permitting a diverse group of creative entrepreneurs that can represent the creative industries in the Netherlands. An overview of the research participants can be found in table 4, in which participants are numbered as follows: P1, P2, etc. to indicate quotations. Within this table, the column verbal content permission represents the permission to use social media posts within this thesis to illustrate certain findings.

The creative entrepreneurs were originally reached through my own network via the platform LinkedIn, on which the post had a reach of 1919 people. Through this, multiple respondents were chosen. In the end, the participants were sampled using non-probability sampling methods such as convenience sampling, which is when units of analysis happen to be available to the researcher (McCombes, 2019), voluntary response sampling, which is when units of analysis offer themselves (McCombes, 2019), purposive sampling, when units of analysis are selected by the researcher (McCombes, 2019), and snowball sampling, when participants are selected through other participants (McCombes, 2019) using LinkedIn as a sampling tool throughout these methods.

#	Gender	Age	Nationality	Type of creative business	Time	Founding year of company	Verbal content permission	Interview time
P1	Female	23	Dutch	Art & Marketing Agency	Part-time	2016	Yes	48:51
P2	Male	26	Chinese	Videography & Photography	Part-time	Freelance: 2018 Company: 2020	Yes	40:17
P3	Female	25	Dutch	Copywriting, Marketing & Graphic Design Agency	Fulltime	Freelance: 2017 Company: 2018	Yes	49:21
P4	Female	38	Dutch	Film Production Company	Fulltime	Previous company: [Confidential] Current company: 2019	Upon approval	51:56
P5	Female	28	Slovenian	Fashion & Accessory Design Company	Part-time	2015	Yes	51:07
P6	Female	35	Dutch	Creative Concept and Event Development Agency	Fulltime	2012 & 2020	Yes	57:06
P7	Male	24	Dutch	Branding Agency	Fulltime	2021	Yes	42:15
P8	Male	25	American	Artist	Fulltime	2018	Yes	1:09:37
P9	Male	21	Mauritius	Creative Branding & Marketing Coach	Part-time	2020	Yes	47:20
P10	Male	40	Dutch	Online Marketing Agency & Recruitment Agency	Fulltime	2017 & 2019	Yes	54:17
P11	Female	49	Dutch	Design & Concept Strategy Agency, Creative Youth Foundation	Part-time	Freelance: 2012 Foundation: 2015 Design: 2019 Concept: 2020	Yes	50:26

Table 5. Overview of respondents

3.1.2 Operationalisation

To operationalize the main concepts, an interview guide using these concepts as guidelines for the semi-structured interviews was made. This interview guide was made in both English and Dutch and can be found in appendix A. Within this interview guide, entrepreneurial identity was touched upon by asking multiple questions regarding the entrepreneurs' personal views on themselves as entrepreneurs and actors within the creative industries. Strategic management was reflected upon by questioning their strategy and also how this might have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically focusing on this pandemic were those questions relating to crisis management, keeping in mind crisis types, stakeholders, systems and strategies, phases, and response strategy. Furthermore, respondents were asked to revise the crisis to relate to the concept of risk management. Concerning the framework of the digital age, social media was taken into account for response strategy and revision, following with the question if their social media posts could be used to illustrate findings if necessary. Whether they verbally consented to this can be found in the overview of respondents (table 4). The illustration of specific results regarding the digital age has to be viewed as a substantiation of the research findings, rather than new data. These social media posts have not been viewed as research data nor have they been explicitly analysed, rather they pose as a visualization of the context and have been purposefully sampled. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which a researcher uses their expertise to select a sample that is most applicable to the research purpose (McCombes, 2019). These

posts are taken into account as they are viewed as valuable to better understand the digital context of creative entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.3 Procedure and interview conduct

Although reaching 1919 people on LinkedIn, there was a limited response rate. This LinkedIn recruitment post can be in figure 7. Mostly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, scheduling interviews was a complex process. Due to government restrictions and for safety reasons, interviews had to be scheduled through online procedures and interviews were held on the platform Zoom. After reaching out and having contact with 20 creative entrepreneurs that met the criteria, only 11 took place. The online environment in which people work made the follow-up process difficult and some potential respondents did not reply anymore, were taken back by the Zoom meeting, and/or simply could not fit the interview in their schedule. Furthermore, a consent form was sent to potential participants that could be signed digitally and a link to join the scheduled meeting. Whilst both of these steps are also online, this had intricated the process and two potential respondents denied or did not show up. In the end, fortunately, 11 interviews took place, of which 9 signed the consent form and 2 gave oral consent.

Having meetings through an online video calling platform like Zoom has both its benefits and limitations. Online interviews can limit non-verbal communication, limit spontaneity, they can reduce intimacy, allow for less control, and must rely on internet connections of both parties (Brennen, 2017). However, benefits include that the interviews are less bound to time and place, as they can take place anywhere anytime, and it can allow for more anonymity if required such as turning off the video and only recording audio (Brennen, 2017).

When the interviews took place, the first step was always to ask for consent again to establish rapport before starting the recording procedure. After, participants were also allowed to ask any questions before starting after which the recording would start and they were asked by which name they would like to be registered to establish a feeling of safety and showing respect for their privacy. This also helped establishing rapport and gave a good follow-up for breaking the ice as they were asked to tell a little bit about themselves. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, participants were informed that they did not have to answer a question if they did not want to. Furthermore, to allow for new data to arise, follow-up questions were used to retrieve the best answers as possible. As the interviews were semi-structured, the order of questions was switched around at times if this felt

appropriate during a particular interview or when questions were already touched upon through previous answers. At the end of each interview, participants were asked once more if they would prefer to be anonymous and if they would want to be informed on the results of the study when finished.

After finishing all interviews, recordings were stored on a safe drive, and they were transcribed verbatim. Transcribing interviews in a verbatim manner can protect the original meaning of a respondent, enable a more accurate analysis, and allow the use of direct quotations (Brennen, 2017). All of the Dutch interviews were transcribed in English to have consistency during the data analysis process and allow the use of data for non-English speakers to be analysed in case of a peer-to-peer review for a reliability examination. It must be kept in mind that there can thus be a loss in translation within the verbatim transcripts that were originally Dutch. However, there was an awareness of this delicate issue during the transcription process and each interview has been translated by hand with caution, keeping this potential concern in mind.
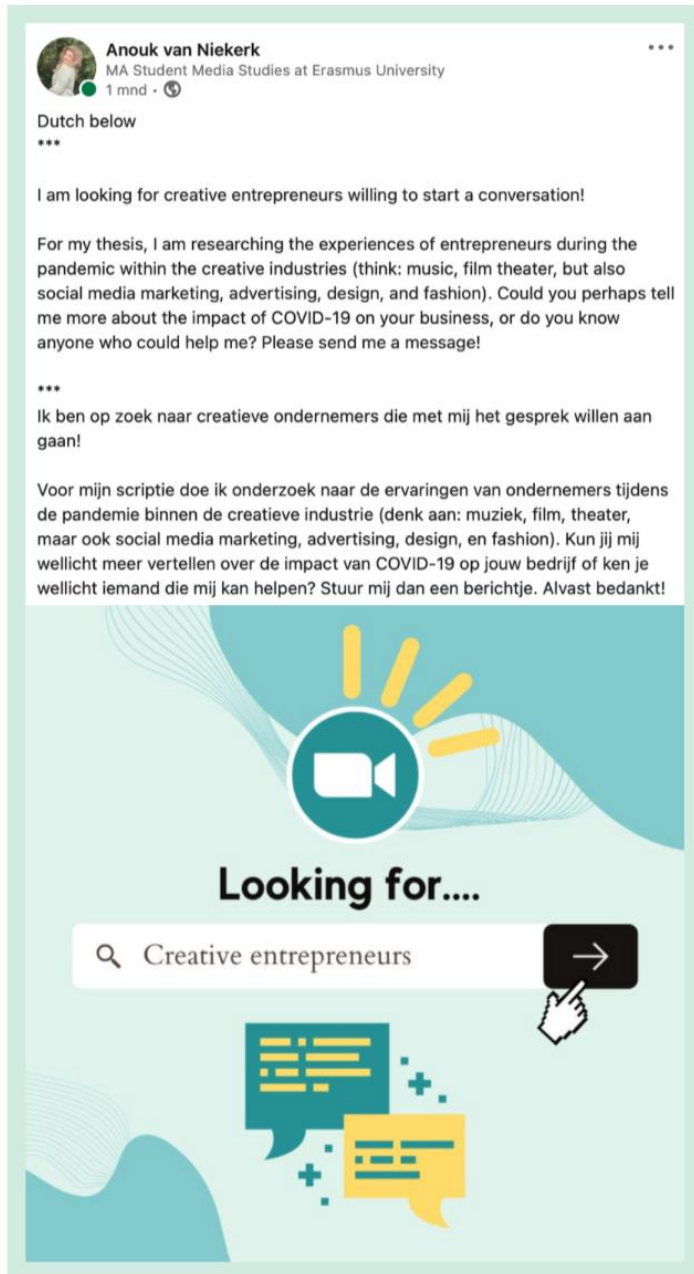
Figure 7. Recruitment post

3.2 Analysis

After obtaining data and the creation of verbatim transcripts, the interviews were analysed using constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory is used when one wants to build from the ground up rather than to impose theory on data or let existing theory guide the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). This type of analysis is interesting for this research as it allows to find new ways in which creative entrepreneurs situate COVID-19 within crisis management theory, rather than to fit a particular way into existing theory. The interview guide based on the main concepts allows for the right framing and for theory within

the scope of existing theory to be found. However, using constructivist grounded theory as the scope of analysis could bring out new and interesting insights outside of this existing crisis management spectrum, which is of interest due to the continuous change of the digital age. Constructivist grounded theory exists out of three coding processes that allow for this type of analysis (Clarke, 2003). The three coding processes of constructivist grounded theory are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Clarke, 2003). The first process, open coding, allows for in vivo coding to take place and it assigns labels to certain sections of data (Clarke, 2003). In vivo coding is a type of coding using direct words or phrases mentioned during the interviews (Clarke, 2003). The process of constructivist grounded theory analysis, starting with open coding, was done using the programme ATLAS.ti. Within the second process, axial coding, these sections of data with open codes are clustered into a certain axis. In the clustering process, the data will be disassociated from its original context. The clusters are named after an active descriptor which allows for an innovative understanding of category building (Clarke, 2003). The third and final process of constructivist grounded theory is selective coding, in which the axial codes are clustered to explain phenomena. This allows for theoretical sampling, in which one goes back to the original theoretical framework and seeks to find overlaps and differences with the selective codes, also called 'themes' (Kelle, 2010). In the case of this research, the found themes through selective coding will be linked to the original theory on entrepreneurial identity, response strategy, and crisis management and its types, stakeholders, phases within the digital world.
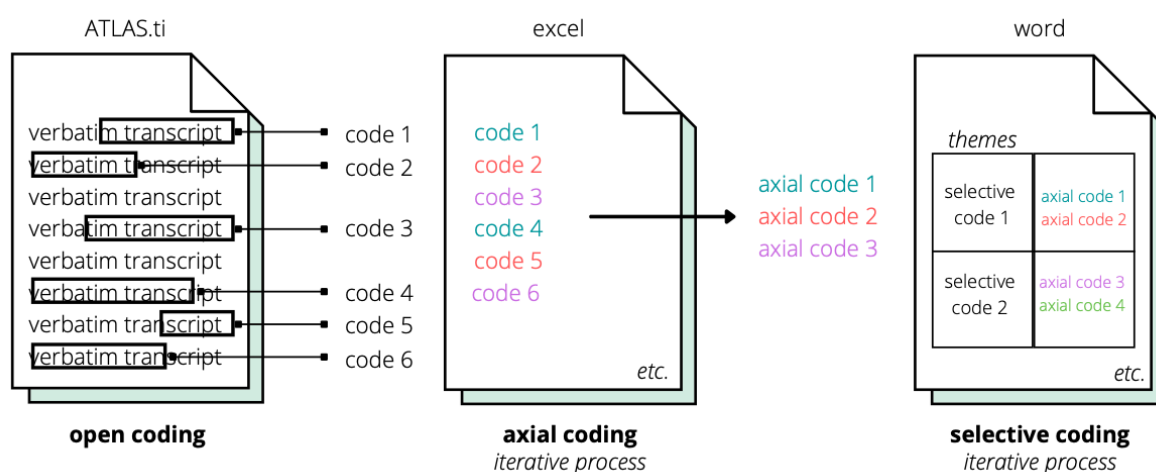

Figure 8. Visualization of my coding process

3.2.1 Open coding

      In the first step, ATLAS.ti was used to create open codes which were mostly in vivo codes or paraphrases of direct quotations. In total, 742 open codes were found of which certain codes were found multiple times. Examples of the open coding process can be found below.
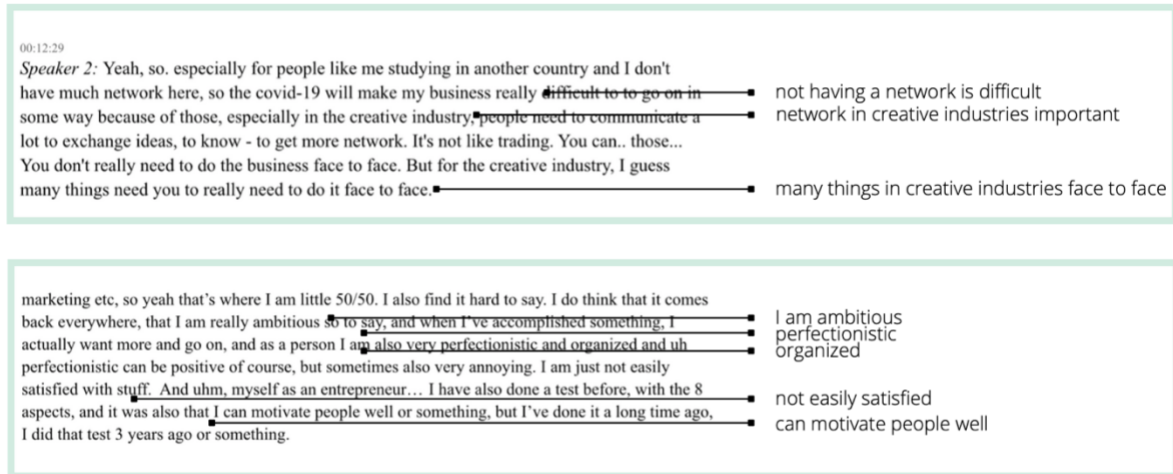
Figure 9. Open coding process examples

3.2.2 Axial coding

      After 742 open codes were found in ATLAS.ti, codes were exported to excel. Using colour schemes, codes that were perceived similar to one another were given the same colour to allow for grouping of these codes. This was an extremely iterative process as codes were similar to multiple codes and decisions had to be made regarding which group they would fit best. Through this, colours often changed, but essentially sub-themes were formed. An example of this colour coding process can be seen below.

Figure 10. Axial coding process example

After groups were created through colours, each colour was given a name to indicate its new group which formed the axial code. These names were active descriptors as found important by Clarke (2003). In total, 38 axial codes were found within the iterative process of grouping open codes.

3.2.3 Selective coding

The last step of coding was selective coding in which the final themes of this study were established. Using tables in Microsoft Word, the axial codes were grouped into different tables to indicate the best correlations with one another to create the themes. This process also entailed a lot of reflexivity and iteration as it is extremely important to create the right themes. In total, five themes have been found which will be presented in depth in the next chapter. In the figure below, the selective coding process is visualized. For the complete code book of the selective, axial, and open codes see appendix B.
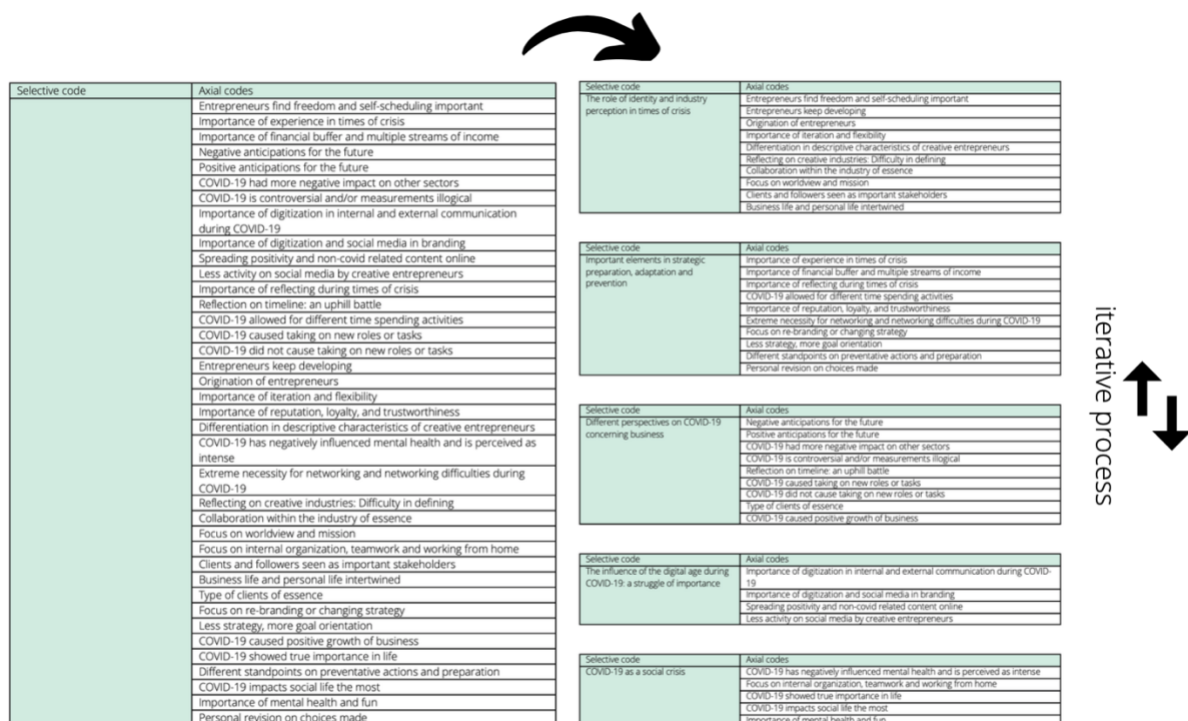

Figure 11. Selective coding process example

3.3 Critical review

To critically reflect upon this research design, aspects that can influence the reliability and validity should be discussed. Babbie (2011) defines reliability as a measurement of quality that suggests if the data will have repeated observation of the same phenomenon at different times. For this study, reliability is a delicate matter as the topic and this research are extremely time sensitive. Data was retrieved during the global crisis, which will make it less likely for other researchers to get very similar results as the experiences were very fresh in participants' minds and opinions were created based on the situation they were currently in. However, as transcripts were cautiously transcribed verbatim and in the same language, this research does allow for the possibility of reliability tests such as peer assessments to seek similar results. Furthermore, a test-retest method would be possible if a different researcher used the same interview guide in the near future.

Validity is defined as a term that describes if something accurately measures the concept it is intended to measure (Babbie, 2011). One could say that validity has been established within this research as the operationalization of the concepts within this research was based on existing theory as the interview guide was created. This interview guide is an important factor regarding the validity of this research. However, although establishing this guide was a rigor process, Cypres (2017) highlights the arguments of validity within qualitative research as it cannot be measured as one does in quantitative research. Therefore, keeping this statement in mind, validity within this research is viewed as important yet not guaranteed undisputedly.

In qualitative research, the quality criteria are often interpreted (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Moisander and Valtonen (2006) present the following features which can influence the quality of qualitative data (analysis): insightfulness and relevance, methodological coherence and transparency, sensitivity to the phenomenon, sensitivity to the ethics and politics of interpretation, and communication and credibility. It is important to note that each researcher (unconsciously) values different features within their study, making it vital to stay critical to these different quality indicators. Throughout this study, there was utmost effort to keep all quality criteria in mind.

3.4 Ethics

In social science research it is important for every researcher to consider ethical principles regarding their study (Resnik, 2020). Following a code of conduct suggested by

Resnik (2020), multiple ethical principles have been kept in mind throughout this study. The first ethical principles that were kept in mind were honesty, openness, and integrity. As a researcher, I have been completely open and honest towards all of the participants and have disclosed the subjects of the study within the recruitment post, at the beginning of each interview, and within the consent form. Within this process, I have kept my promises of sticking to these subjects and I made sure participants were not taken aback by questions or subjects which deviated from the initial topics. Furthermore, I have given each participant the opportunity to leave the interview if they wanted to, they could refuse to answer a question if they wanted to, and I have stuck with the promise of only using their first name or a pseudonym if they preferred not to be named. The ethical principles of confidentiality and privacy were adhered to as transcripts are not published publicly and participants were labelled without their name in the sample description so that name and company could not be linked to one another to respect their privacy as direct permission to be identified through this process was not asked. Their names were only stated to give proper acknowledgement within the preface of this study. Emotional sensitivity was taken into account by letting participants choose to answer or not answer a question to respect their emotional state of mind and questions that are too sensitive were avoided. Lastly, I take full responsibility for the results of this study as they are my mere perception of the obtained data, and I am fully accountable for my part in this research. I have strived to be objective and to follow ethical conducts throughout this entire research process.

4. Results

Within this segment, the five different selective codes that were found through the analysis will be presented as themes of this study. Each theme will be illustrated by axial codes (sub-themes) and quotes that made up the creation and grouping of the theme in question. Participant numbers will be used to indicate the participants' quotes (see methodology for participants overview).

4.1 The role of identity and industry perception in times of crisis

Axial codes
• Entrepreneurs find freedom and self-scheduling important
• Entrepreneurs keep developing
• Origination of entrepreneurs
• Importance of iteration and flexibility
• Differentiation in descriptive characteristics of creative entrepreneurs
• Reflecting on creative industries: Difficulty in defining
• Collaboration within the industry of essence
• Focus on worldview and mission
• Clients and followers seen as important stakeholders
• Business life and personal life intertwined

Table 6. Axial codes of theme 1

The first theme presents the perception of the creative entrepreneurs in terms of their identity and industry perception. This theme is of relevance as these aspects can shape one's management choices in times of crisis, as presented within the theoretical framework, making it important to understand.

The first sub-theme within this theme is that *entrepreneurs find freedom and self-scheduling important*. Most of the respondents indicated that one of the most important benefits of being an entrepreneur is being able to schedule and plan your work as you see fit. Furthermore, freedom is a big element at play here as a variety of entrepreneurs stated they do not like the "9 to 5 lifestyle" and that flexibility of time is very valuable to them. One entrepreneur (P10) points out that there is, however, a certain stigma around this flexibility and freedom concepts that should be kept in mind, because if one is successful it still means someone will or could be busy.

> Uhm, uhm.. you know freedom, what is freedom you know? Because I am, maybe you recognize that from your father, but I don't have to be accountable, and that's what I find best actually. I am responsible for everything myself, but I am also very busy, but I don't experience that let's say. There are moments... It's not like I can say I am taking Tuesday afternoon off, uhm, because that's what a lot of people think often of entrepreneurs 'oh you have a lot of freedom', but if you... you want to be successful, that also means that you're going to be busy. But what I like best is that I don't have to take answer to anyone, unnecessary meetings, and yeah… (P10)

This quote also strongly relates to the second sub-theme, *entrepreneurs keep developing*, as few participants pointed out they continuously try to develop professional skills and are often forced to do so in order for their business to grow and become successful, making them busier through which their self-scheduling comes at play.

Interestingly, a lot of the creative entrepreneurs had different reasons to become one, which is presented within the sub-theme of *origination of entrepreneurs.* However, this could be explained by the fact that all entrepreneurs have a different identity development process (entrepreneurial learning) as pointed out within the theory by Horst, Järviente-Thesleff, and Perez-Latre (2019). A few of the different originations of the entrepreneurs are for example through their studies or internships (P3, P6 & P7), their entrepreneurial family (P4), artistic freedom (P8), through loss of job, a challenging job market entrance (P9 & P10), or the fact that they always knew they wanted to work for themselves (P11).

Through the sub-themes, *importance of iteration and flexibility* and *differentiation in descriptive characteristics of creative entrepreneurs* a neat overview of the given skills and characteristics of the creative entrepreneurs in this study is accessible. An interesting skill within the importance of iteration and flexibility that could be considered important in times of crisis is pointed out by one entrepreneur (P11):

> Yes, yes. I have worked abroad, worked with a lot of uncertainty, uhm, and uhm, that did lead to the drive in me so that I could say 'okay, now it's really shitty, but we're going to work hard and then we will get out of this'. It's also your entrepreneurial will, like where is the emergency exit? [..] (P11)

To sum up the context, this entrepreneur argues that, as an entrepreneur, you must be able to work with uncertainty in order to get out of a "shitty situation", which will require iteration and flexibility. By multiple respondents it is not only pointed out as a requirement, but also as an enjoyable factor of entrepreneurship. Being able to be flexible or allow for iteration, will also allow for you to have multiple projects or the willpower to "take a risk to get further" (P4), which is found to be important. Similarly, to the origination of entrepreneurs, lots of the participants described themselves using different descriptive words. This, again, might be explained by the concepts of entrepreneurial learning which allows for each entrepreneur to identify themselves differently. However, one pattern stood out within these descriptive characteristics as multiple participants referred to themselves as ambitious and/or creative. Furthermore, a consensus was found among a few participants: creative entrepreneurship requires lots of different skills, they are not necessarily specialized, and can also have multiple identities. One creative entrepreneur expressed both of these findings and stated:

> Yeah, that's kind of like the thing as a really creative person that has a lot of interests. For example, I was always interested in... in social systems, so social sciences, so for me social media is really interesting also to see it from this point of view, how we communicate as a society and how we are changing and then I am also kind of like an artist: I paint on bags, then on the other side I'm kind of also an environmental activist on the other side you know, I have a degree in marketing so it's also, well, like somewhere there. It's like a lot of different... I also started learning graphic design by myself because I wanted to express myself in another medium as well, so I think that's it. Like a lot of different roles being an entrepreneur and knowing everything kind of like… And I think that's what is the problem also of entrepreneurs and myself is that we want to do everything by ourselves so at the end it's like okay, I don't know how to write a press release: I will learn it. I will learn how to do it and not give another person a job or search for help or something. No, I will take courses on the internet, I will… I will learn something like that. So, this is how I see it: all over the place and a lot of identities. (P5)

Like identities and identity perceptions, the industry perception also has interesting overlaps and differences among the creative entrepreneurs in this research. In which, overall, lots of differences were found within the sub-theme: *reflecting on creative industries: difficulty in defining*. As the active descriptor suggests, most of the participants gave different answers

when asked for their view on the creative industries. One entrepreneur expresses these difficulties as follows:

> Uhm, complicated, very divided into silos, uhm yeah... it's not really an industry, that's a very weird word, industry, music industry, but there's nothing industrial to it, but oh well. Uhm you really have those compartments, those silos, the fine arts have their own boxes, their own magazines, their own funding, but in the meantime, artists walk right through that, because they don't want to be put into those boxes so that is what already makes it very complicated. [..] (P11)

She refers to the creative industries as having different boxes, whilst in the meantime no one fits into one. This links to a few respondents that indicated that actually everything that requires creativity, creative input or "anything that visually matters" (P7), is a part of the creative industries and that this could be a potential definition, but that it is hard to explain specifically. Few respondents named specific sectors within the creative industries, such as the fine arts, theatre, and film (P6), but stuck to the idea that it is broader than those "main" areas of the creative industries. Furthermore, few respondents specifically pointed out that it is the "arts and culture industries that got a big kick during the COVID-19 crisis" (P4), and/or that the creative industries are still "exploited or underrated" (P5), which are also important indicators of the industry perception in social context and/or in times of crisis.

The last four sub-themes: *collaboration within the industry of essence, focus on worldview and mission, clients and followers seen as important stakeholders,* and *business life and personal life intertwined,* were less prominent sub-themes within the data. However, they are still of relevance to point out as factors of the industry perception of (some of the) creative entrepreneurs. First, the collaboration within the industry was pointed out to be of essence by some of the entrepreneurs as the "art sector is very social" (P6), and the creative industries are all about "creating ideas together" (P1). Secondly, this social part relates to the idea that for lots of creative entrepreneurs their business life and personal life are intertwined within the creative industries. The company is seen as a "personal brand" (P8) or, for example, it is stated that "the company is completely me" (P5). Third, some of the entrepreneurs valued a specific worldview and were mission dedicated which could be viewed within the purpose driven identity perspective introduced by Horst, Järviente-Thesleff, and Perez-Latre, (2019). One entrepreneur related to it as a part of being an artist:

> I, as an artist, I'm concerned about the world, not myself. You know what I mean? Artists, you have to be the recording device, as you say, of the times that you live in. Right? [..] (P8)

Whilst another related their worldview to clients with whom they would work and the worldview they want to create:

> Yes definitely, with our design agency we actually only work with companies that want progressive things. We don't do old fashion stuff; we only work with partners that have similar a mission. And that varies a lot, because we do the branding of a coffee company, that they get their beans fresh from Guatemala, and shorten the supply chains and fair trade, and fair change, and also work with people with a distance from the job market in the Netherlands and outside. So yeah, that's a client, but we also work with a foundation that has similar goals like my foundation. We really want to create a different world view. And with [COMPANY NAME] I really want to hoist youth on the shield and mostly a diverse background, with a different gender background, a diverse cultural background, uh, skin colour, etc. (P11)

Lastly, to follow this link to clients, clients and followers were pointed out by most of the respondents as the most valuable stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2 Important elements in strategic preparation, adaptation, and prevention

Axial codes
• Importance of experience in times of crisis
• Importance of financial buffer and multiple streams of income
• Importance of reflecting during times of crisis
• COVID-19 allowed for different time spending activities
• Importance of reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness
• Extreme necessity for networking and networking difficulties during COVID-19
• Focus on re-branding or changing strategy
• Less strategy, more goal orientation
• Different standpoints on preventative actions and preparation
• Personal revision on choices made

Table 7. Axial codes of theme 2

More specifically related to actions regarding COVID-19, was the theme found on strategic preparation, adaptation, and prevention. Creative entrepreneurs highlighted various important elements of strategic management before and during a crisis. First, a smaller portion of the creative entrepreneurs, usually those that were in business for a longer period of time, highlighted the *importance of experience in times of crisis* whilst this gives you more knowledge, but also a greater network as stated by the following participant:

> On the one hand, I have been doing this for 10 years. 10 years since I have graduated from my bachelor's, so 10 years that I have been in this field. In those 10 years, I have gotten a big network and that helps. (P6)

The second sub-theme along these lines is the *importance of financial buffer and multiple streams of income.* Most entrepreneurs referred to finances as an extremely important notion, especially for strategic prevention and preparation. One entrepreneur highlighted that this could have been the downfall for her and that she did not have the financial buffer that is necessary, and that she believes multiple streams of income are important as one should "bet on more horses":

> Yes, that was also shitty, like a healthy entrepreneur has of course big fat savings to survive let's say a year or something, and with that, would a big change happen like this, to be able to anticipate on it and see - yeah I am going to redesign my whole business, I'm going to.. yeah I don't know, handle that crisis. But I had nothing. I just started [NAME OF COMPANY] [..] I was kind of a start up again, like four months before corona was there, so I just did not have meat on the bones, and I think that you have to have that as an entrepreneur.. and I think that it's good that.. Maybe if you are a bigger entrepreneur, to bet on more horses and not just have one business, but like different angles or that you regularly think 'what if this would happen again'? So that you.. We didn't know it, everything went alright, so yeah having a plan B would be good or at least an innovative side plan and indeed a buffer, but I didn't have that because I just started. So yeah... (P4)

This idea was reinforced by multiple entrepreneurs. One stated that, because of her financial situation, she was not that shaken up by the crisis:

Uhm yes, and also for me as an entrepreneur personally, to hook onto the question of how could you prepare, is to - when the first moment came of all the work is going away and so forth, I didn't really have to worry, because I always made sure I had a buffer and with that buffer I can sit it out for a few months without any work. Uhm and I also think that that's really important for a lot of entrepreneurs, because I think a lot of entrepreneurs don't have that, uhm, so in that way you can prepare. (P6)

Moreover, one entrepreneur even concluded that "companies that went bankrupt ran on unstable revenue models" (P1) during the crisis. Two other entrepreneurs started another company during COVID-19 for multiple streams of income, through which one lost a huge investment. However, since she (P11) has multiple companies, she survived. This financial buffer was also referred to as the "emergency fund" (P3) or an "emergency piggy bank" (P7) and was a recurring theme as one of the most important elements in strategic preparation and prevention.

Related to clients as important stakeholders mentioned within the previous theme, the *importance of reputation, loyalty and trustworthiness* with stakeholders was raised as a sub-theme. Some elements of this sub-theme are related to, for example, experience as one participant stated that "all those years have helped her to be found easily" (P11), meaning a reputation was built through this experience. However, most importantly, loyalty and reputation are perceived elements that provide meaningful trust, which is considered necessary by creative entrepreneurs. One entrepreneur highlights that "a reputation is important, but takes a long time to build" (P10). This reputation, loyalty, and trust, were perceived as relevant elements in times of crisis as one entrepreneur mentioned it could be of use before a crisis and during using an example when asked what advise they would have:

Focus on customer experiences and customer loyalty. These are the two main things, because the people that you provide meaningful experiences to, they're the people who come back, and they're the people who trust you and will want to do business with you. Because you're able to give them experiences in a way that other businesses can't. And I know it's a bit hard to do, for example, but at the same time, one thing that my parents actually did that this is an interesting case from them, is the fact that they were so immersed, like things aren't as online and as they're more… It's more of an offline culture. But the pandemic really threw everything online. One thing that they did was that they quickly optimized their Facebook shops, they don't have an e-

commerce website yet, but then they optimized Facebook shops, so they optimized like WhatsApp orders to be able to deliver to their customers still. When everything went online, and even then, they tried to do it through themselves. So, they will deliver within 24 hours. And this generates a lot of loyalty and engagement because it was fast. It was something that… It was an experience, like a good experience, and yeah... (P9)

Another also highlighted the importance of loyalty during a crisis as she describes the loyalty of her following online as they have a "high engagement relative to the number of followers" (P1), which really helped for recognition during the crisis.

Something that is important to keep in mind, however, is the sub-theme of *different standpoints on preventative actions and preparation.* Although certain elements were highlighted by different creative entrepreneurs as important, it conflicts with the idea that one can prepare for such a crisis as was found as a recurring standpoint by some of the participants. A sum of different standpoints that conflict with one another are as follows: "No, actually, I didn't, I was not prepared at all" (P5), "Well the problem is just that no one saw this coming, so yeah I could say like yeah become an online entrepreneur, because yeah our branch has thrived, but for example tourism has really collapsed" (P3), and "Uhm well, yes. And then mostly, we were not prepared to work online from a distance, whilst we are an online marketing agency" (P10), whilst others would say:

Uhm, could we have prepared? Uhm, yes in a certain way maybe. It depends on how nerdy you are, I was prepared for some sort of health crisis, uhm because yes, there are already things that like a heavy virus or whatever would be coming, uhm, but I can also imagine that it's human to no expect it and I also didn't expect it now necessarily. (P6)

One creative entrepreneur continued by stating you could prepare by having "crisis communication plans" (P3). Overall, some recurring themes in prevention and preparation are not having "all eggs in one basket" (P1), find your passion and "stay close to your heart" (P5), prepare for uncertainty, and follow trends.

Whilst prevention and preparation are debatable, adaptation is of essence illustrated by one participant whilst "we could not prevent the crisis, but we can adapt to it" (P2) and numerous points of interests are mentioned: *importance of reflecting during times of crisis,*

COVID-19 allowed for different times spending activities, extreme necessity for networking and networking difficulties during COVID-19, focus on re-branding or changing strategy, less strategy, more goal orientation, and *personal revision on choices made.* Most of these sub-themes go hand-in-hand with one another, but it is important to illustrate all of them to convey the differences and importance at play.

The first sub-theme, importance of reflecting during times of crisis, illustrates that creative entrepreneurs found continuous reflection of essence during the COVID-19 pandemic and that they had "time to stand still and orientate and grow" (P3), and there should be a focus point of prioritizing and that reflection can cause a change of direction which is perceived as good: "You learn things from it and I have mostly learned from it to think about what I want as positively as possible and to go for it and that's really good" (P4). This positive reflection process goes hand-in-hand with the sub-theme of '*COVID-19 allowed for different time spending activities'*, as it as mentioned by numerous respondents that COVID-19 had given them the time to reflect, as well as focus on growth of the brand, and other processes that would otherwise not have happened, such as automation and innovation. Again, this sub-theme goes hand-in-hand with other sub-themes, namely the ones focused on *re-branding or changing strategy* and *less strategy, more goal orientation*. One significant theme found with most of the participants is that they were either working on re-branding or changing their strategy, which was possible through the time that was given to them through COVID-19. One participant stated:

> It was built by youth and it just look clumsy and now we have subsidy and time, and we can actually design it and also with the youth we have developed an identity, but then like professional. So, yeah that's going to be really different. (P11)

Another participant was completely rewriting a new business model as well as changing the strategy (P1). However, although most of the entrepreneurs were changing their course, most of their focused seemed to be more short-term than long-term, hence the focus on goal orientation. Through the crisis, there seemed to be some sort of consensus to "not ask too much", but rather try to keep your "head held high" and simply "make it", rather than focusing on a certain revenue strategy.

Within the previous theme, the collaborative notion of the creative industries is introduced. However, one of the sub-themes regarding adaptation (and preparation) is the *extreme necessity for networking and networking difficulties during COVID-19.* One

participant stated to "not postpone networking" (P7) as it is highly beneficial for your business. However, although the necessity and positive altitude is established, there were some difficulties during COVID-19 regarding networking, as illustrated as follows:

> Actually, I think it also makes it a little bit difficult to connect more to people because, you know, if you, if I want to know some artists, or another photographer or maybe designer on the- on Instagram. It's a little bit difficult to… If I just message them, maybe they will say, yeah, nice to meet you. OK, next time you can- maybe we can go to have a coffee first. Because of tCOVID-19, we cannot easy- too easily to- to have a coffee face to face. So, it's hard to really know people. Really to build the connection, build a network with them. (P2)

> Where I normally would easily go to someone, so I need some legal advice on agreements, then you would usually go to someone, but now it also has to go like these types of video appointments. So, you notice that on the one hand the distance becomes shorter, because now in principle I can also have a lawyer from Groningen, but on the other hand the distance becomes larger because you can't just go to someone easily. So that has a big effect on how I tackle things. (P7)

Lastly, some participants had a *personal revision on choices made*, which could influence the preparation of a future crisis. The main themes found were that one entrepreneur looked back and would have "contacted parties that could help" (P7) sooner, whilst two different entrepreneurs would not have hired new people or expanded the team. Furthermore, some looked back positively on their choices and would only 'joke' about investing in something beforehand with the knowledge of today to enforce the multiple streams of income as mentioned earlier.

4.3 Different perspectives on COVID-19 concerning business

Axial codes
• Negative anticipations for the future
• Positive anticipations for the future
• COVID-19 had more negative impact on other sectors
• COVID-19 is controversial and/or measurements illogical
• Reflection on timeline: An uphill battle
• COVID-19 caused taking on new roles or tasks
• COVID-19 did not cause taking on new roles or tasks
• Type of clients of essence
• COVID-19 caused positive growth of business

Table 8. Axial codes of theme 3

Preceding the views on preventative actions, preparation, and adaptation, there were a lot of different perspectives on COVID-19 concerning business that should be presented. A first noticeable difference was seen through the differences in *negative anticipations for the future* and *positive anticipations for the future*. Through COVID-19, these perspectives changed for creative entrepreneurs. The negative anticipations mainly derived from monetary perspectives as few respondents expect to see an economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic or the bank/money system to fall. One interviewee noted:

> Yeah, I think that, what I am still really troubled about due to corona is that, what is happening right now, it is really blowing up the whole money system. And there are even really… you can call it crazy stories... that it's going to be really different in the near future between now and five years. That the bank system really falls… [..] (P4)

On the contrary, some positive anticipations that were illustrated were that "a plus could be that one could work from home long-term" (P5) or that you can better prepare yourself in upcoming projects. Succeeding the debate of positivity and negativity, there was an agreement among creative entrepreneurs that *COVID-19 had more negative impacts on other sectors*, mainly mentioning that it "depends on who you are asking" (P6) and that the industries had a big blow, but sectors such as the food and catering industry had a more difficult time. The same interviewee made it an interesting comment whilst referring to the crisis as she asked: "which crisis?" (P6). She mentioned she did not notice too much. However, immediately thereafter she elaborated that it is of course a severe crisis, but she had not experienced major changes. Furthermore, an interesting sub-theme was found for a slight

amount of participants, namely that *COVID-19 is controversial and/or measurements illogical.* Only two participants felt strongly that measurements were too harsh or felt illogical, whilst another admitted to not always follow the rules. The main problem with the measurements was that it felt like taking away a certain choice for these respondents. One participant stated "COVID-19 is one of the biggest lies in recent history" (P4), whilst another described COVID-19 as follows:

> Controversial. Whoa. I think a lot of it is manipulated by governments and things like that to make a lot more f* money. And I'm not saying it's not real. My grandma had it. She had a lung infection. I get it. It's real. But it is nefarious, and governments are using this opportunity, just like they did post 911, to pass new laws that they say are only temporary, but they end up being forever like the Patriot Act after 911. (P8)

Following this negative position on COVID-19, a sub-theme was found in which *COVID-19 caused positive growth of business.* Within COVID-19 times, there were a few different positive notions in terms of growth for different entrepreneurs. For example, one participant stated that due to corona, they were able to work with people who would otherwise be too busy. Moreover, another reason of growth would be that COVID-19 created more time, as mentioned earlier. Using this time efficiently, a few of the entrepreneurs stated that this caused growth. Specifically focusing on finances, one interviewee stated:

> For me as a person it was more social, economically we have grown 30% last year. And I think, outside of the catering industry, most organizations had a pretty decent year. It was in the newspaper last week that most organizations have experienced growth. (P10)

This growth relates to the sub-theme of *'Reflection on timeline: An uphill battle'* as all creative entrepreneurs were in unity when reflecting on the crisis timeline of COVID-19. As expected from this growth and the notion of an uphill battle, most creative entrepreneurs currently find themselves in either a good position or a peak within their business. One entrepreneur describes their timeline as follows:

> It's going really well right now, we've really made a lot. Uhm, so now... Yeah, I think that overall, it was a dip, and it went uphill again, but otherwise it would have been a

clean line from then until now, but yeah, a really big dip and now it's a real peak or something. (P4)

Most entrepreneurs explained how, when the crisis first hit, their initial reactions and impacts were to go into a "survival mode" (P11), losing certain jobs or projects, they were confused, and/or they were at a standstill. Furthermore, some creative entrepreneurs applied for financial help, the TOZO subsidy for entrepreneurs, but are now at a place in which they either do not need it anymore or have paid back most or all of it.

Apart from a debate between positivity and negativity, there were some differences to if *COVID-19 caused taking on new roles or task* or if *COVID-19 did not cause taking on new roles or tasks.* This varied between the entrepreneurs a lot. Although we have discussed adaptation, some did not feel as if they had new roles or tasks. However, a lot of the creative entrepreneurs did indeed take on new roles or tasks which mainly went hand-in-hand with this adaptation. For example, one entrepreneur mentioned:

I find that really fun to do and text and marketing as well, but I just don't have time for it. Uh yeah, that's why I also searched for a copywriter and because of that my copywriters tasks are becoming less, uhm... Another thing is that I also became some sort of coach for the girls, because they are having it pretty tough, well [NAME] is on Bali and she doesn't have her family here, and my developer does live with her family then in Spain, but it's also strict rules at times and then she can't do a lot of things, she cannot go to friends and also not to the Netherlands, because of that they are way more isolated, and also what I said, there was just a lot more time for reflecting, which can be chill but also confronting at times. So yeah, I also think I took upon some sort of mentor role outside of the executive tasks. (P3)

This entrepreneur illustrates how she became a coach for her team, which another entrepreneur mentions as well (P10). One creative entrepreneur stated that she became "her own therapist" at times (P5) during the crisis and others stated that new tasks were added due to the digitization because of Corona, which will be touched upon more in the next theme.

Lastly, although this sub-theme was only mentioned briefly by a handful of entrepreneurs, it is interesting to present the sub-theme '*type of clients of essence*', as this played a role for few within this study but could be interesting on a larger scale. One entrepreneur pointed out:

No, no. And that might have also been luck you know, uhm, because if we did marketing for catering companies then we would have had a very different conversation right now and no one knew that beforehand of course. During your study you'll learn about risk spreading and stuff, but that's very difficult. And of course there is some spreading of risks, because you could see that [NAME] decreased, and [NAME] increased, but yeah that wasn't consciously chosen beforehand. That just happened well.

[..]

Yeah, and automotive also decreased for example, but we serve the Porsche centre in Twente, but Porsches got sold a lot, because that target audience already had money, and they didn't go skiing or make a world trip, or whatever, they couldn't do things anymore, but they do have money. So they bought a Porsche extra. So accidentally, Porsche, Ferrari, Lamborghini, all increased. Yeah until - that wasn't a conscious decision, but we were very lucky with that, that that all went well. (P10)

This creative entrepreneur nicely illustrates how, in order to spread risk, one should have different types of clients as different groups can be affected in different crises.

4.4 The influence of the digital age during COVID-19: A struggle of importance

Axial codes
• Importance of digitization in internal and external communication during COVID-19
• Importance of digitization and social media in branding
• Spreading positivity and non-covid related content online
• Less activity on social media by creative entrepreneurs

Table 9. Axial codes of theme 4

An important theme within this study is the influence of the digital age during COVID-19 in order to better understand the role of digitization in crisis management. Within this theme, the different views regarding digitization during times of crisis will be discussed.

The first sub-theme is the *importance of digitization in internal and external communication during COVID-19*. This sub-theme exists out of different aspects that highlight the importance of digitization. Overall, there was a consensus among entrepreneurs

that digitization is of utter essence and extremely valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme showed that there is a "growing need on the online aspects" (P7). Through and during the COVID-19 pandemic internal and external communication mostly moved to an online environment in which appointments took place online as well. An important factor at play here is that everyone should be up to date with technology: "So that, that's not something that's completely new - or making sure everyone is up to date with technology" (P1). However, a downside pointed out by a few different entrepreneurs of this digitization of communication is that scheduling can take more time:

> So, that is timewise very different, on the one hand I save time by not travelling, on the other hand it costs me more time to make appointments, because then it goes via mail or WhatsApp, and then the reaction time is less quick. (P7)

The growing need of digitization in internal and external communication during COVID-19 also showed that entrepreneurs could have been more digital already and that this was something most did not have yet.

> So, in principle it's fine, but I think that covid before that... You can do preventive things as a company anyway, so make sure you do, this is of course hindsight talk, but that you also have a good system how people can work from home versus only having to go to the office and many companies already had that. (P1)

> Uhm, so yeah, we were mostly busy with communicating, the communication. How are you going to get your planning in order? We did not have a good digital system for that, so we have renewed that in the meantime, we have made all sorts of online content calendars in which the clients can also get into, so that's the positive side again, because you do bump into that. So that is mostly with what we were busy. (P10)

Furthermore, external communication became more digital as well as some entrepreneurs pointed out that there was increase in e-commerce and hybrid customer experiences. This relates to the second sub-theme of *importance of digitization and social media in branding*. As pointed out earlier, lots of the creative entrepreneurs had time for re-branding, which mainly referred to their online presence. This online visibility and findability were a

prominent pattern of interest among the creative entrepreneurs. One summed up this need as follows:

> So definitely having a healthy safety fund is a good tip and I think, what I was talking about before, the online findability has to be priority for a company to keep up in the next few years. I think that the digitalisation is going to develop even more, so if you're not findable online you're just not present if a pandemic would break out. (P7)

Overall, a numerous number of advantages of social media were named by the creative entrepreneurs: it helps to build a network, it helps to build reputation, it is a first marketing funnel, social media is a shopping window, it provides audience, it provides content, and through social media one can get clients. However, what is contrary to the believe of importance of social media, are the sub-themes of *spreading positivity and non-COVID related content online* and *less activity on social media by creative entrepreneurs.* Despite the increase of importance of digitization and social media, some entrepreneurs pointed out they posted less on social media, because "less is happening" although they did understood the increase of importance:

> Yeah, for me personally, on the one hand it has made sure I share less, because less is happening simply said. I'm more at home, I'm not going to a festival, parties and stuff like that just are barely or not there. Uhm, but on the other hand, if I look at my phone and how many hours I am busy with Instagram, that has significantly increased. So yeah, there is definitely a relationship there. (P7)

Furthermore, it is interesting to recognize that most creative entrepreneurs posted little to no COVID related social media content and besides potentially posting less, their content strategy did not change. In their eyes, there was a lot of information about COVID-19 out there already and they did not want to bore their audience, or they felt as if it would not add value to their social media channels. Most entrepreneurs tended to communicate positive content only. However, few pointed out to post some information about COVID-19 which was either positive energy regarding COVID-19, about mental health, or educational content. A few examples to illustrate these findings can be found below. These Instagram posts illustrate the positive, yet concise, mention of COVID-19 within content, a positive influence

of COVID-19 on their business, and lastly one negative mention about COVID-19 on mental health.

Figure 12. Examples of COVID-19 related social media posts (content permission granted)

4.5 COVID-19 as a social crisis

Table 10. Axial codes of theme 5

The final theme found within this study is the perceived view of COVID-19 as a social crisis by creative entrepreneurs. Although finances have been established as an important aspect, it is the lack of social environment that these creative entrepreneurs found most intense about the COVID-19 pandemic. As the digitization of communication has been touched upon within the previous theme, the first sub-theme that will be introduced is the *focus on internal organization, teamwork and working from home*: a sub-theme which shows the impact of social features of the workplace and how these have changed. Due to COVID-19, internal communication became more difficult and time-consuming, but it was more necessary than ever before. One entrepreneur illustrated this as follows:

Uhm, well what I said, we focused more on the internal organization. And then, a lot more communicating, especially with those who are at home alone all of a sudden. Uhm yeah, you shouldn't underestimate that. You see that now, right, with people who drop out, not with us luckily, but we did spend a lot of time communicating, visiting people at home, walking with them, giving them more small presents, and really keeping them connected with the team in that way. So that's really.. that was really added all of a sudden. It also means that you have to work more hours all of a sudden, but yeah that's part of it. That has definitely been different. When I didn't need someone and I called them anyway, and then I was on the phone with them for half an hour all of a sudden, when someone just had the need for a chat. (P10)

A few more entrepreneurs that have a team pointed out that they could really find support with each other and that they really inspire one another to get each other through these times.

Not being able to communicate physically led to the sub-theme in which *COVID-19 impacts social life the most.* Almost all creative entrepreneurs pointed out that they felt socially restricted by the crisis as they "could not travel" (P3), could not "get a coffee face to face" (P2), leisure opportunities were taken away, going to events was not possible, and their "social well-being was affected" (P6). Moreover, the idea of the creative industries being highly sociable was brought up once again indicating the utter importance of social life: "Yes, especially the creatives by the way, they really go bad on being alone" (P1). Some entrepreneurs also pointed out it had affected their relationships as old friends came back into their life through the highly digital environment, whilst others felt released from meaningless conversations with co-workers.

Despite the negative aspects on the impact of social life, the following sub-theme was found: *COVID-19 showed true importance in life.* One entrepreneur highlighted:

Well how I would describe it, uhm intense, what has happened. But, also, that sounds weird maybe, but also beautiful, right? Because you see what truly matters in the world. That your friendships, your family, your health, that really is number one and the rest are side issues. (P10)

Multiple entrepreneurs talked about being thrown off course but seeing what truly matters in the world. The COVID-19 crisis was also referred to as an opportunity or a "blessing in disguise" (P11). Some pointed out that it was a reset button and that one started to appreciate

personal time on another level. Furthermore, two entrepreneurs referred to COVID-19 in relation the worldview and that on a lot of different levels we were all equal as "everything get thrown upside down for everybody and we are all in the same boat" (P10).

However, despite the positive outlook the sub-theme was found in which *COVID-19 has negatively influenced mental health and/or is perceived as intense.* The creative entrepreneurs were mostly affected emotionally and used terms as intense, severe, and heavy to describe the impact of COVID-19. A few examples of this sub-theme are:

> Yeah, I think in general, the impacts are going to be that a lot of people will have… will need therapists, ma'am included. [..] Yeah, as I said the mental breakdowns anxiety, whatever. (P5).

> Yeah personally I found it very intense because as an entrepreneur it was decided for me that I couldn't work from 16 March onwards, I found that really severe, and I have actually... When I was actually going to have a great year... as a person I struggled with that a lot, because out of the blue I worried about money, instead of the world lying at your feet you can do what you want and then I couldn't do anything. I am someone that travels a lot, loves parties, someone that seeks for fun in life and all of a sudden nothing was possible anymore, I really was upside down from that. It also showed me that it's crazy that you let your environment influence you so much, I try not to do that anymore, and yeah as an entrepreneur it was just shitty because I had big plans, nice jobs planned, and all of a sudden that got swept of the table and it was like… Success, you will get some little support, but maybe not, and figure it out. I felt abandoned to my fate. (P4)

A combination of the true importance in life and the intensity is portrayed by the following quote:

> Uhm, well yeah - what I said, it was very severe you know. It was new for everybody. Well, the impact- what I did like, everyone was equal all of a sudden. If you were 80 or 4, I mean I have three children, we hadn't experienced that as parents, so everyone was equal in that manner. So, I do like that. Mentally it also does something. You see how people handle it. With the people here in the office, I said, it's a piece of experience you're going to have and if you are 40 and you have to train an intern then

you say 'hey don't whine, in my time I had to work from home all of a sudden, and I couldn't go to school, so...' Yeah, I do think that that is the positive side of it, like how are we dealing with this situation? Outside from the whole technical health aspects and that it's intense of course. (P10)

Finally, although the COVID-19 crisis is perceived as negatively influencing mental health, an *importance of mental health and fun* came along with this. The emphasis on mental health was introduced by multiple entrepreneurs. One entrepreneur stated:

And also, just like the whole work environment is change as well, because you don't need to be present in a nine to five office all day, because a lot of the work that you can do, you can do from home, you can do it in your own time, take care of your mental health. So big emphasis on mental health, as well as also something that's been seen in the pandemic, I think these are a few things that come top of mind. (P8)

Alongside this emphasis and need of taking care of mental health, a growing importance of fun stood out within the collected data. Creative entrepreneurs highlighted that work should be something fun and that one must have lots of fun every single day. One should "not comprise their own mental health and happiness for money" (P8) and if your work does not get you of your bed in the morning, it is not for you. An illustration of this final sub-theme is presented as follows:

And lately we also try to be entrepreneurial in a way that it also has to be fun, working with fun people. Work has to be fun and it should of course bring in money, but how can we make it as entertaining as possible for ourselves? In all kinds of aspects. (P4)

5. Discussion

In this section, the themes that were found will be discussed in relation to existing literature and conclusions that can be drawn by scrutinizing these results will be presented. It is of interest to analyse the results using the theory as it can lead to overlaps and differences within current crisis management theory which will help to answer the research question. Furthermore, portraying how creative entrepreneurs strategically managed their business during COVID-19 will be optimized through comparisons with existing literature as well.

Throughout the results, it can be concluded that crisis management and strategic management indeed have "potential synergetic integration" as presented by Preble (2003). Within the theme of *important elements in strategic preparation, adaptation and prevention*, actions taken during the COVID-19 crisis were presented which showed strategic operation of creative entrepreneurs, visualizing the synergy of strategic management and crisis management. However, I must point out that a very controversial viewpoint of COVID-19 as a crisis has to be introduced based on the themes that were found. Within the *different perspectives of COVID-19 concerning business*, we can see lots of differences among entrepreneurs. Some felt they had to take on new roles or tasks whilst others did not, and some had negative anticipations for the future whilst some had positive anticipations of the future on a 'worldview perspective'. However, they all experienced an "up-hill battle" and only two had some financial issues within the beginning of COVID-19 which are since resolved. This begs the question, to what extent is COVID-19 a crisis?

Referring to literature, crisis management deals with an unexpected, time-sensitive, and (possibly) disruptive event (Jaques, 2009). All entrepreneurs pointed out they did either not expect the crisis (right now) and/or did not prepare for such a crisis, through which COVID-19 was certainly unexpected. However, at the time the interviews were held, over a year had passed since COVID-19 started and the problem was not "time sensitive" any longer. Thus, one might argue that the COVID-19 crisis switched to an issue. Within issue management one deals with an event that has already occurred (Palese & Crane, 2006) which might be a better fit to the later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic based on the results.

Nevertheless, as it was viewed as a crisis within this study, a comparison to crisis management in particular will continue to resolve the research question at play. As Pearson and Mitroff (1993) identified different variables of crisis management and these were used to structure the theoretical framework, this order will be used to scrutinize the results on crisis management in connection to the literature.

First, Pearson and Mitroff (1993), Coombs (2007), and Gundel (2005) all introduced different types of crises through which a new combined model was created. The placement of COVID-19 as a crisis through the lens of creative entrepreneurs can be found in figure 13 as indicated by the yellow star. This figure overlaps COVID-19 as a crisis in between psycho and mega damage based on Pearson and Mitroff (1993), a fundamental crisis as presented by Gundel (2005), and a crisis which falls into the victim cluster based on the model of Coombs (2007).

First, using the model by Pearson and Mitroff (1993), the combination of a psycho crisis and a mega damage crisis is based on the theme *COVID-19 as a social crisis* and the *different perspectives on COVID-19 concerning business.* This is while the creative entrepreneurs would highlight the crisis as 'severe', 'heavy', and 'detrimental', and point out that it might be more economically severe for other sectors, but that it was most definitely severe on a mental basis. The crisis type 'mega damage' and 'psycho' are both on the severe end of the spectrum, but one is more economically severe, whilst the other is considered more human or social, hence the placement of the star in the middle. Next, using the lens of Gundel (2005) the creative entrepreneurs pointed out that the crisis was hard to predict and/or prepare for and that it was definitely not influenceable as they had to adapt to the situation without choice. This makes the crisis, using Gundel's vision (2005), a fundamental crisis. Lastly, through the fact that the entrepreneurs were also a victim of the crisis, the crisis can be considered within the victim cluster (Coombs, 2007). Within this cluster, it is believed that that organizations have a mild reputational threat and weak attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). As creative entrepreneurs valued reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness, and they are considered a victim, it is pleasant to point out that their reputation only had a mild threat.

As the idea of COVID-19 as a social crisis is established, some of the effects should be pointed out. Mental health played a crucial role during the COVID-19 crisis which might be an unexpected, yet vital learning opportunity of the pandemic. What role does mental health play during a crisis and how does it affect business? As presented in the theoretical framework, Pearson and Clair (1998) briefly presented the effects of a traumatic experience, such as a crisis, on the self-identity of a person. Relevant to call attention to is the idea that a victim can lose their sense of control and worth through a crisis, perceiving themselves as weak, helpless, and needy (Pearson & Clair, 1998). However, these feelings were not prominent among the creative entrepreneurs in this study even though mental health played such a big role. After finding this theme, it was further scrutinized and Uutela (2010)

highlights that mental health during the economic crisis was also affected immensely and Feinstein, Kotara, Jones, Shanor, and Nemeroff (2020) highlight that during the COVID-19 pandemic, health care workers were also highly affected mentally. Through this, we might conclude that mental health is simply a factor that is a part of crises, but it should be noted that it was present to a much bigger extent during the COVID-19 pandemic as this influenced social life enormously as pointed out by the creative entrepreneurs as, for example, networking and leisure activities were restricted intensely.
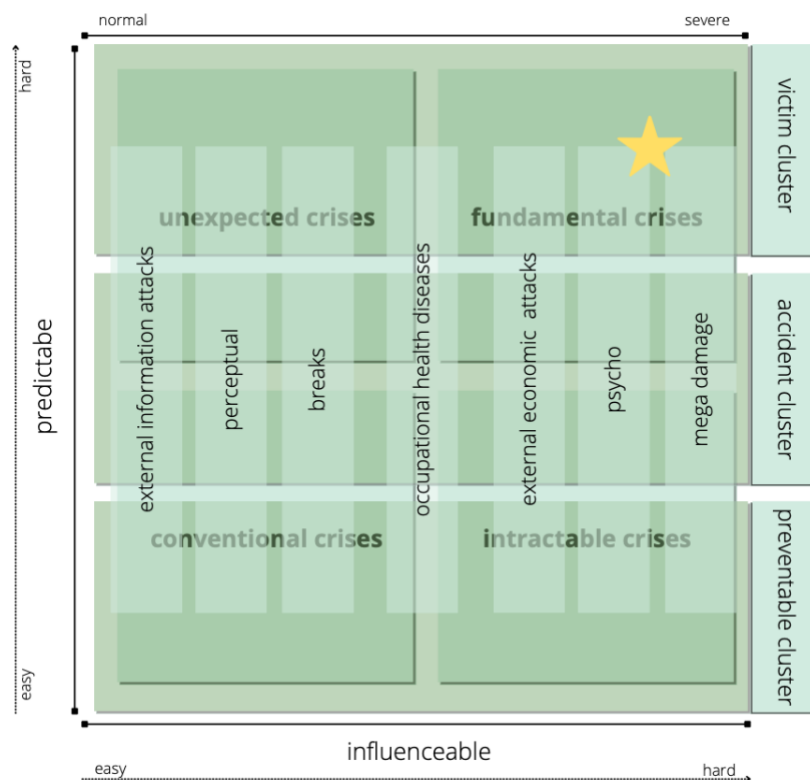
Figure 13. COVID-19 as a crisis type through the lens of creative entrepreneurs

As the discussion of crisis management versus issue management has been introduced, it is interesting to point out the variable of crisis management that is its phases. Based on the results, one could conclude that entrepreneurs went through almost all of the phases of crisis management introduced by Pearson and Mitroff (1993). However, although following containment/damage limitation, recovery, and learning, the first two phases of crisis management did not happen as these were signal detection and preparation or prevention. The interviews showed that most of the creative entrepreneurs did not see it coming and were not prepared for such a crisis. Fink's crisis cycle (1986) suggests that phases are continuous and non-chronological. This perspective seems to fit the results of this

study better, as some creative entrepreneurs pointed out that they felt better prepared for future events whilst also still going through the COVID-19 crisis and learning as they are going on. Fink (1986) describes the prodromal crisis stage as the first in which leaders have to use trans-technologies to make appropriate plans. Although Fink's cycle (1986) is quite old, it could be stated that this is actually still the case as entrepreneurs within this study showed the need for communication technologies in internal and external communication. The acute crisis stage, which is often the point of no return (Fink, 1986), would be when the first lockdown happened for the creative entrepreneurs and most had to pivot out of the blue. Lastly, the chronic crisis stage, also known as the clean-up, is most likely still in process as some entrepreneurs are still restoring from the crisis and life is not "back to normal" just yet. However, as Fink (1986) points out, an important part of this phase is self-analysing which occurred as a sub-theme within the importance of identity. Interestingly, this is thus another point that is not "outdated" as it is still found important during the current COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the crisis resolution stage is also in process as creative entrepreneurs could point out preparation practices. Overall, Fink's cycle (1986) seems to still be relevant, and the digital aspects can be taken into account within this model.

In connection to disregarding the first two phases of crisis management by Pearons and Mitroff (1983) and thus signal detection and preparation, none of the entrepreneurs had specific systems or strategies in place to take on such a crisis. However, elements of strategic management post-crisis were believed to be having a financial buffer or multiple streams of income, having a great network, having experience, and having a good reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness with and among (potential) clients. Although these are preparation practices, these could be perceived as certain systems a creative entrepreneur should have in place prior to a crisis.

These clients, that were mentioned of essence by creative entrepreneurs, seemed to play the biggest role for creative entrepreneurs during the pandemic. According to Pearson and Mitroff (1993) these are viewed as 'functional organizational stakeholders', which portrayed the 'archetypal organization stakeholder' role of allies, rescuers, and/or heroes by creative entrepreneurs. Although a few different stakeholders such as the media and suppliers were briefly mentioned by few, other functional organizational stakeholders by Pearson and Mitroff (1993) did not come up, nor did any play an extremely crucial role. This is an interesting point of discussion as one could wonder why stakeholders were not that vital during the COVID-19 pandemic. One possible explanation could be the power organizations hold on social media nowadays and that lots of stakeholders (such as press) are not as

necessary anymore since this framework was first introduced (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). However, this is simply an assumption that adds to the discussion of the influence of the digital age on crisis management theory. Preceding the variable of stakeholder engagement, it is debatable to what extent the halo effect introduced by Coombs and Holladay (2006) was present among the clients that are perceived as important stakeholders. The halo effect entails that if an organization has a favourable reputation prior to a crisis, this can create protection for the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Some pointed out that the clients, consumers, and/or followers that they had prior to the crisis helped them overcome certain obstacles, but it is unclear to what length or what depth this reputation truly was of essence.

In terms of response strategy, it was made clear that there was little to no response on social media and that most processes and actions taken were internal as we see the rise of importance in digitization of internal and external communication during COVID-19. However, the little to no response can be explained by the literature as the creative entrepreneurs had a mild crisis responsibility as introduced by Coombs (2007). Coombs (2007) links this to the situational crisis communication theory in which it is argued that the amount of crisis responsibility affects the response: less responsibility equals less threat to the reputation and thus less need of (immediate) response. Furthermore, as explained by Lambret and Barki (2017) the response strategy is dependent on the origin of the crisis, the emotions in reaction to the crisis, and the degree of responsibility for the crisis. As the responsibility of the crisis and the origin of the crisis was already out of reach for the creative entrepreneurs, it can be concluded responses would mostly be based on emotions. This correlates with the results as most entrepreneurs were very emotionally and socially involved but could not prevent nor take responsibility for this crisis. As creative entrepreneurs could only act upon emotion, this could be a possible explanation for only wanting to use social media in a positive manner or talk about mental health: sharing certain feelings. A final note on response strategy is that, due to the not-so-time-sensitive factor of COVID-19, the best practices for initial crisis response according to Coombs (2007) were not relevant to reflect upon as there was no sense of a certain urgency for response nor did it take place in a short amount of time.

Another important factor within this study is the time in which we are currently in, the digital age. Referring to the last part of the definition of crisis management it deals with a (possibly) disruptive event. With the results, one can argue that COVID-19 has disrupted internal and external communication through digitization. There was an intense need found for digital communication tools, online findability, and all sorts of digital instruments to increase efficiency whilst working from home. In the discussion if COVID-19 was found to

be a crisis, it could be stated that it led to a lot of creative breakthroughs in the digital age regarding this online internal and external communication. However, interestingly, creative entrepreneurs did not feel the need to post about the crisis on their social media or to drastically change their social media strategies. Surprisingly, some creative entrepreneurs even stated that they were less active online because there was less to share. This growing need for online findability, digital communication tools, and the increase of understanding the importance of social media in branding, directly opposes the behaviour of creative entrepreneurs. What exactly is the cause or correlation between these two contrasting findings are relevant to consider.

Lastly, the identity, entrepreneurial learning, and industry perception of the creative industries should be discussed. As we understand through the concept of entrepreneurial learning and identity work by Horst, Järviente-Thesleff, and Perez-Latre (2019), identity can unconsciously influence the behaviour, and thus in this case the strategic management, of an entrepreneur. One theme that derived from the results was the rising importance of creating a better worldview among several entrepreneurs. This strongly correlates to the idea of a purpose driven entrepreneurial identity, which is an identity in which one has value-based motives with a strong creative component (Horst, Järviente-Thesleff, & Perez-Latre, 2019). Furthermore, the identity struggles that derived within the interviews, such as finding it hard to select descriptive terms about themselves and/or finding it hard to explain the creative industries due to its many components, clusters, and overlaps, correlate to the findings by McKelvey and Lassen (2018). McKelvey and Lassen (2018) explain how creative entrepreneurs can struggle with their identity as it often seems to contrast their artistic identity and that the act of creating a venture is often not the priority but rather a necessary form of organizing to produce their creative, innovative, and novel opportunities.

Among the entrepreneurs, there was also a correlation to the statements of Bhansing, Hitters and Wijngaarden (2017) as they present the need of a passionate atmosphere and passion in others within the creative industries. Almost all of the entrepreneurs enforced this finding as they explained the need of collaboration within the creative industries and the extreme necessity of networking. Specifically focusing on some descriptive characteristics, not many "success factors" of creative entrepreneurs by Bujor and Avasilcai (2016) were present within the findings. However, the need for implementing fun within the work atmosphere was found within one of the sub-themes which Bujor and Avasilcai (2016) do consider a success factor. Agility, comfort with discomfort, and having risk-tolerance as mentioned by Gilkey (2009) as important characteristics of creative entrepreneurs were

present within the findings that touched upon the role of identity and industry perception in times of crisis as well. Having this identity, industry perception, and identifiable characteristics, can be considered influences on the perspectives on COVID-19 of creative entrepreneurs and should be considered as significant factors that are fundamental in the perception on the COVID-19 crisis by creative entrepreneurs.

6. Conclusion

In this final section, a definitive outcome of the study will be unveiled by uncovering the answer to the research question. Thereafter, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research will be presented to conclude this study.

6.1 Outcome

The research question,

How do creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis and how does COVID-19 change the understanding of crisis management theory during the digital age?

has been tackled using a qualitative approach of 11 in-depth interviews with creative entrepreneurs. Creative entrepreneurs in the Netherlands can manage strategically during the COVID-19 crisis by acknowledging important elements in strategic preparation, adaptation, and prevention such as the importance of experience, having a financial buffer and/or multiple streams of income, continuous reflection during times of crisis, the importance of reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness, networking, and re-branding. The actions that follow the acknowledgements of these factors are continuously influenced by the entrepreneurial identity of a creative entrepreneur and their industry perception. Currently, there is an existing consensus among creative entrepreneurs on the complexity that is the creative industries and the many skills one must acquire and keep developing as a creative entrepreneur.

COVID-19 changes the understanding of crisis management theory as it showed the extreme importance of mental health during this crisis caused by the essence of digitization of internal and external communication. Current crisis theory does not relate to the mental health of an entrepreneur and thus their perception of a crisis or their actions taken during times of crisis because of it. Furthermore, the importance of digitization during COVID-19 showed contrasting perspectives of actions taken during the crisis regarding online development. On the one hand, creative entrepreneurs focused on optimizing online internal and external relations and found a need for online branding and findability and showed creative breakthroughs online, where on the other hand their online behaviour on social media was not affected. Creative entrepreneurs did not choose for a crisis response on social

media nor did they show a significant change in content strategy, which conflicts with their standpoint of digital importance. This is a point of discussion that will be referred to in future research suggestions. Overall, the idea of COVID-19 as a social crisis is introduced and strategic management of creative entrepreneurs during the pandemic has been discussed.

6.2 Limitations

To critically review this study, the limitations should be explored. First, it is important to note the subjectivity of a researcher in social sciences as it is often a subject of interest that a researcher wishes to explore and understand (Babbie, 2011). I am a Dutch, 22-year-old female with an interest in public relations and entrepreneurship. This passion can influence the study throughout, either during the interview process, or analysing data for themes. However, as I highly value reliability and validity, I would like to ensure that I upheld continuous self-reflexivity during my thesis process and extreme effort of objectivity.

In relation to the study, an important factor was to scrutinize current crisis management theory to develop a better understanding of this literature during the digital age. However, within this process it is important to keep the following in mind:

1) Not all crisis management theory that is available can be discussed
2) A conflict of crisis management theory and the sensibility of current contexts and circumstances is at play.

First off, relating only to theory presented in the theoretical framework of this study, any direct critique on crisis management theory might be very skewed. Although it was actively tried to use multiple authors for each section of crisis management theory, there is a certain limitation at play. This directly relates to this study suggesting the importance of the digital age within crisis management theory. This relation might be suggested by other researchers already but has not been explored to its core. That being said, most famous crisis management theory such as the situational crisis communication theory by Coombs (2007) and the framework of Pearson and Mitroff (1993) date from over a decade ago, which is important to keep in mind.

Lastly, there was an important difference among creative entrepreneurs in terms of digital and physical scopes of work. The more physical creative entrepreneurs, such as the film producer, showed an increase of negative outlooks on the COVID-19 crisis and

management. Succeeding studies could benefit from making this distinction prior to developing a research plan or focus on either digital or physical creative entrepreneurs.

6.3 Future research

To conclude my thesis, some suggestions for future research on the topic of creative entrepreneurs and crisis management will be presented. First, as mentioned during the discussion, it is debatable to what extent the COVID-19 crisis can be referred to as a crisis whilst elements of an "issue", according to issue management, derived from the data. It could benefit the understanding of COVID-19 to challenge this issue of terminology on a larger scale. Furthermore, although identity is shown to influence the actions during a crisis, it would be relevant to create a deeper understanding of this influence and to what extent it plays a role. Moreover, a deeper understanding of mental health during the COVID-19 crisis and its effect on decision-making, online behaviour, and management is also necessary as the crisis was portrayed as socially restricting and mentally detrimental by creative entrepreneurs. In relation to this, the long-term effects of the importance of mental health of creative entrepreneurs should be explored after COVID-19 to allow for a learning process for following crisis events, which is formally known as risk management. Finally, as the need of optimizing online and digital internal and external communication increased, online behaviour (on social media) decreased by creative entrepreneurs. It would be interesting to better understand this correlation, the causes, and the differences between these two contrasting standpoints as they have been introduced through this research.

In conclusion, this study has tackled the different perspectives on COVID-19 of creative entrepreneurs and their strategic practices in times of crisis and has initiated the debate on the influence of digitization on current crisis management literature and/or processes and the idea of COVID-19 as a social crisis or "issue".

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8. Appendix

A. Interview guides

1. Interview guide English

English
• <u>Consent</u> (Using first name or pseudonym, audio recording)
• <u>Introduction</u>
o Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? (age, gender, nationality)
o What inspired you to become an entrepreneur?
o What do you like most about being an entrepreneur?
• <u>Identity and the creative industries</u>
o Could you tell me a little bit about your company? (name, amount of employees, industry, founding year, part-time/full time)
o How would you describe the creative industries in your own words?
o How would you describe the creative industry you are operating in?
o How do you see yourself? How do you define yourself as an entrepreneur?
o How would you describe the relationship between you and your business?
• <u>Strategic management</u>
o What do you consider a strategy? Do you have one, how is it created? How would you describe your strategy?
o How do you enforce this strategy?
• <u>Crisis management</u>
▪ <u>Types of crises</u>
• How would you describe the COVID-19 crisis in your own words? Was it severe/not severe?
• How would you describe the impact of COVID-19 in your own words?
• Would you say there are preventive actions for such a crisis? If so, what would you say they are?
▪ <u>Phases of crisis management</u>
• Could you explain the path your business took throughout the pandemic? What did you do in the beginning as opposed to where you are now in terms of managing your company?
▪ <u>Systems</u>
• Would you say there were any systems or strategies in place to take on such a crisis? (Systems such as crisis teams or equipment etc.) If so, could you give me examples?
▪ <u>Stakeholders</u>
• What stakeholders of your company would you say were mostly involved and in what way? (Think: media, suppliers, competitors, stockholders, employees)
• What role did reputation play during the COVID-19 crisis? Did your reputation help to keep in touch with stakeholders/not lose them/keep faith for your stakeholders even though a crisis was going on?
• <u>Response strategy</u>
o Could you describe how you initially responded to COVID-19? Could you describe the actions you took when the pandemic first started?
o How are you currently running things during the pandemic?
▪ <u>Social media strategies</u>
• What social media platforms do you use (for your company)?
• How would you describe the role of social media for you and your company?
• What would you initially post on social media about the pandemic when it first hit? Why?
• How did you use social media during the pandemic? Did you put out different content? What type?
• Has COVID-19 affected your social media use for business?
• As an interest, would I perhaps be allowed to take a look at your social media channels and take some posts to use to illustrate this interview?
• <u>Revising and risk management</u>
o How has COVID-19 affected/changed your company? (Tasks, roles, strategy, stakeholders, etc.)
o Has your initial strategy for your company changed due to the pandemic? How?
o Do you manage your company strategically differently than before the pandemic?
o How would you do things differently in the future? Would you respond differently?
o What would you recommend doing during times of crisis like this?
• <u>Closing</u>
o What advice would you give a future entrepreneur in general?
o Any last tips or words?
o Thank you for your time!

2. Interview guide Dutch

Dutch

- <u>Toestemming</u> (Met voornaam of pseudoniem, audio-opname)
- <u>Introductie</u>
  - Kun je me iets over jezelf vertellen? (leeftijd, geslacht, nationaliteit)
  - Wat inspireerde je om ondernemer te worden?
  - Wat vind je het leukst aan het ondernemerschap?
- <u>Identiteit en de creatieve industrie</u>
  - Kunt u me iets over uw bedrijf vertellen? (naam, aantal werknemers, branche, jaar van start, parttime/fulltime)
  - Hoe zou u de creatieve industrie in eigen woorden omschrijven?
  - Hoe zou u de creatieve industrie omschrijven waarin u actief bent?
  - Hoe zie jij jezelf? Hoe definieer je jezelf als ondernemer?
  - Hoe zou u de relatie tussen u en uw bedrijf omschrijven?
- <u>Strategisch management</u>
  - Wat beschouwt u als een strategie? Heb je er een, hoe wordt deze gemaakt? Hoe zou u uw strategie omschrijven?
  - Hoe dwing je deze strategie af?
- <u>Crisis management</u>
  - <u>Crisis types</u>
    - Hoe zou u de COVID-19-crisis in eigen woorden omschrijven? Wat was heftig/niet heftig?
    - Hoe zou u de impact van COVID-19 omschrijven?
    - Zou u zeggen dat er preventieve maatregelen zijn voor een dergelijke crisis? Zo ja, wat zou u zeggen dat ze zijn?
  - <u>Crisis management fases</u>
    - Kunt u het pad uitleggen dat uw bedrijf tijdens de pandemie heeft afgelegd? Wat deed u in het begin in plaats van waar u nu staat op het gebied van het managen van uw bedrijf?
  - <u>Systemen</u>
    - Zou u zeggen dat er systemen of strategieën waren om een dergelijke crisis aan te kunnen? (Systemen zoals crisisteams of apparatuur etc.) Zo ja, kunt u mij voorbeelden geven?
  - <u>Stakeholders</u>
    - Welke belanghebbenden van uw bedrijf waren volgens u het meest betrokken tijdens de crisis en op welke manier? (Denk aan: media, leveranciers, concurrenten, aandeelhouders, medewerkers)
    - Welke rol speelde reputatie tijdens de COVID-19-crisis? Heeft uw reputatie geholpen om contact te houden met belanghebbenden / hen niet te verliezen / vertrouwen te houden voor uw belanghebbenden, ook al was er een crisis aan de gang?
- <u>Respons strategie</u>
  - Kunt u beschrijven hoe u in eerste instantie op COVID-19 reageerde? Kunt u de acties beschrijven die u ondernam toen de pandemie begon?
  - Hoe gaat het momenteel met u tijdens de pandemie?
    - <u>Sociale media strategie</u>
      - Welke sociale mediaplatforms gebruikt u (voor uw bedrijf)?
      - Hoe zou u de rol van sociale media voor u en uw bedrijf omschrijven?
      - Wat heb je in eerste instantie op sociale media gepost over de pandemie toen deze voor het eerst toesloeg? Waarom?
      - Hoe gebruikte u sociale media tijdens de pandemie? Heb je verschillende inhoud uitgebracht? Welk type?
      - Heeft COVID-19 invloed gehad op uw zakelijk gebruik van sociale media?
      - Mag ik als interesse misschien een kijkje nemen op uw sociale mediakanalen en wat posts gebruiken om dit interview te illustreren?
- <u>Herziening en risicomanagement</u>
  - Hoe heeft COVID-19 uw bedrijf beïnvloed / veranderd? (Taken, rollen, strategie, belanghebbenden, etc.)
  - Is uw aanvankelijke strategie voor uw bedrijf veranderd als gevolg van de pandemie? Hoe?
  - Leidt u uw bedrijf strategisch anders dan voor de pandemie?
  - Hoe zou u de dingen in de toekomst anders doen? Zou je anders reageren?
  - Wat zou je aanbevelen om te doen in tijden van crisis als deze?
- <u>Einde</u>
  - Welk advies zou je een toekomstige ondernemer in het algemeen geven? Nog laatste tips of woorden?
  - Bedankt voor je tijd!

B. Codes

Selective codes and axial codes

Selective code	Axial codes
The role of identity and industry perception in times of crisis	Entrepreneurs find freedom and self-scheduling important
	Entrepreneurs keep developing
	Origination of entrepreneurs
	Importance of iteration and flexibility
	Differentiation in descriptive characteristics of creative entrepreneurs
	Reflecting on creative industries: Difficulty in defining
	Collaboration within the industry of essence
	Focus on worldview and mission
	Clients and followers seen as important stakeholders
	Business life and personal life intertwined

Selective code	Axial codes
Important elements in strategic preparation, adaptation and prevention	Importance of experience in times of crisis
	Importance of financial buffer and multiple streams of income
	Importance of reflecting during times of crisis
	COVID-19 allowed for different time spending activities
	Importance of reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness
	Extreme necessity for networking and networking difficulties during COVID-19
	Focus on re-branding or changing strategy
	Less strategy, more goal orientation
	Different standpoints on preventative actions and preparation
	Personal revision on choices made

Selective code	Axial codes
Different perspectives on COVID-19 concerning business	Negative anticipations for the future
	Positive anticipations for the future
	COVID-19 had more negative impact on other sectors
	COVID-19 is controversial and/or measurements illogical
	Reflection on timeline: An uphill battle
	COVID-19 caused taking on new roles or tasks
	COVID-19 did not cause taking on new roles or tasks
	Type of clients of essence
	COVID-19 caused positive growth of business

Selective code	Axial codes
The influence of the digital age during COVID-19: A struggle of importance	Importance of digitization in internal and external communication during COVID-19
	Importance of digitization and social media in branding
	Spreading positivity and non-covid related content online
	Less activity on social media by creative entrepreneurs

Selective code	Axial codes
COVID-19 as a social crisis	COVID-19 has negatively influenced mental health and/or is perceived as intense
	Focus on internal organization, teamwork and working from home
	COVID-19 showed true importance in life
	COVID-19 impacts social life the most
	Importance of mental health and fun

Axial codes and open codes

Axial code	Open codes
Entrepreneurs find freedom and self-scheduling important	9 to 5 does not suit me, a pro is that we can do our jobs everywhere, distinction between 40 hours income and 40 hours work, do not like employed thing, don't like nine to five lifestyles, freedom is very important, freedom to make own schedule, having freedom, I am responsible myself, I like that most, I can do new things all the time, I can organize own time, I can spend time however I want, I get to do lots of different things, I like not having to be accountable to someone else, I like the flexibility and freedom, like to set own hours and prices, likes flexibility, scheduling time for myself, you can really do what you want

Axial code	Open codes
Entrepreneurs keep developing	always encouraged to keep thinking innovatively, as an entrepreneur you have to act upon all sides which is nice, develop professional skills, doing different tasks myself, encouraged to develop yourself, I have never done it before so I think I can do it, I like doing different things, I like the game of entrepreneurship, learning more about adobe programs, like testing out new things, recommend developing myself, teach skills yourself, trying to develop myself

Axial code	Open codes
Origination of entrepreneurs	always had different ideas, always knew he wanted to be an entrepreneur, always wanted to start for myself, became entrepreneur through side job, became entrepreneur through study and internship, business idea came from being in bank crisis, business just for tax reasons, companies had hiring freeze, companies were not hiring as fast, did not want to be entrepreneur since young age, entrepreneurship is in my blood, entrepreneurship runs in family, entrepreneurship was always the plan, fell into entrepreneurship, I always found commercial side interesting, I was always a really creative person, inspired by business partner, kind of slipped in entrepreneurship, never thought about entrepreneurship before, people asked for my products, started business from personal interest, started company and helping businesses because covid impacted them, started during pandemic, started during studies, started own business through covid

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of iteration and flexibility	able to work with uncertainty is important, all plans got swept of the table, be flexible to some degree, businesses were taking less risks, cannot execute projects like usual, covid changed the way we do business, get imposter syndrome, get more competences to compete, having lots of different projects helps, knowingly took risk to get further, lots of ways we earned money were gone

Axial code	Open codes
Differentiation in descriptive characteristics of creative entrepreneurs	Adventurous, ambitious, approachable, can motive people well, connector, considers oneself contrary, creative entrepreneurs have lots of identities, creative entrepreneurs not really specialized, but lots of skills, creative person, describes as ambitious, do not like disappointing people, empowering, find passion to survive pandemic, go-getter, goal oriented, I am a very entrepreneurial type, I am ambitious, I am an artist, I am creative, I am curious, I have identity challenges, I just have an

	entrepreneurial mind, I like to work hard, like to express myself, lots of different skills, perfectionistic, someone who likes to tackle things

Axial code	Open codes
Reflecting on creative industries: Difficulty in defining	arts and culture got a big kick, competitive industry, complex part of sector, some hit hard, others not, creative industries are anything that visually matters, creative industries are film advertising writers artists also facility, creative industries broad sector, creative industries has boxes, creative industries is creativity, possibilities and exploitation, creative industries is everywhere thar requires creative input, creative industries not appreciated as they should be, creative industries overlaps with other industries, creative industries still exploited, creative industries very divided, creative industry revolutionized, creativity can also play role in technical and innovative companies, creativity important in every sector, creativity is core competency in creative industries, everything that requires creative input is creative industries, find it hard to identify industry, industry is underappreciated, media markets very fast, people are creative in the Netherlands, really great industry, sector has had a big blow

Axial code	Open codes
Collaboration within the industry of essence	art sector is very social, Chinese companies seek local photographer for European shoot, collaborating with clients, creating ideas together, creative industry all about people, entrepreneur's community most important, focused on collaboration, have collaborations, loved the people in the industry, people are the best part, works with freelancers

Axial code	Open codes
Focus on worldview and mission	as an artist I'm concerned about the world, not myself, choose a mission that fits you, I have to believe in purpose, I hope for a better world, labelled as activist, societal questions matter to me, strategy is to be eco-friendly, wants to contribute to a better world, wants to create different worldview, work with progressive companies

Axial code	Open codes
Clients and followers seen as important stakeholders	biggest link are clients, clients are really important, come up with new things to satisfy clients, consumers' minds changed during pandemic, customers are stakeholders, followers very involved

Axial code	Open codes
Business life and personal life intertwined	as an artist just have to have business, business and personal is intertwined, business and personal really connected, business builds upon personal brand, company is my child, company is personal brand, hope to build connection with the Netherlands, life overlaps with work, me and agency very connected, my business is completely me, need to find balance between creative and business, really connected to company, you connect with person more than brand

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of experience in times of crisis	10 years of experience helps, get experience and network before starting as an entrepreneur, some people adapts more easily than others, you take things you learn with you unconsciously

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of financial buffer and multiple streams of income	a healthy entrepreneur has big fat savings, able to save money, cannot live yet from just my business, companies that went bankrupt ran on unstable revenue model, covid cost me a huge investment, entrepreneurship is another source of income, especially area of money influenced, found new way to make money, have an emergency fund, have an emergency piggy bank, have healthy safety fund, have multiple streams of income, hope that I can build buffer quickly, I applied for TOZO, I don't pay myself more than necessary right now, had no savings, I just started, I try to get a healthy buffer, make sure to have a buffer, need better financial and social network resources, out of the blue worried about money, started second company to have multiple income streams, think about different income streams, think of ways to get enough income in every project, when it first hit I was not worried, I had a buffer, you should have a buffer as an entrepreneur

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of reflecting during times of crisis	admit when something is not working, entrepreneurship is challenging, figured out what he wanted to do, I had time to think, it was chill, lots of time to stand still orientate and grow, keep reflecting on yourself, more time to reflect, only afterwards you see possible improvements, prioritize in what you want to put effort in, question where you will be, reflect and think: I want to serve someone else, take time to reflect, we had time to think about things, when second lockdown came rethinking, where do I want to go, you have to stand still and thing about certain choices, you learn from it and try to approach it as positively as possible

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 allowed for different time spending activities	before covid photographic physical event, could focus on growth of company, could focus on growth of personal brand, covid created innovation, did focus on copyrights, first very busy, now time to reach out to clients, got to know suppliers during pandemic, I also automated some of the production process, I automized a lot more things, I had more time so company developed, risk spreading important, through corona more time, through covid focused on future, through social media getting clients, time to think about social aspects

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of reputation, loyalty, and trustworthiness	all those years have helped be to be found easily, always try to deliver good quality, creates good reputation, connections and reputation brought projects, do not have to do acquisitions due to network, famous client on portfolio helped built trust, I have gotten a big network that which helps, I hope I am known for delivering quality, more trust in online purchasing, one should focus on customer experience and loyalty before crisis, open about how it was going, openly communicating with stakeholders important, optimized to online really fast which increased loyalty and engagement, people in NL see me a certain way which helps, producing loyalty important, provide meaningful experience for trust, reputation and network important, reputation is important as personal brand and business intertwine, reputation is important but takes long time to build, reputation played a role for engaging following base, reputations plays a big role, the bigger you are the harder reputation can be

Axial code	Open codes
Extreme necessity for networking and networking difficulties during COVID-19	business is very social, discuss with other entrepreneurs, distance becomes shorter, but also larger, do not postpone networking, focused on financing long film which takes connections, focused on working with fun people, gradually lose clients because lost touch with Chinese network, hard to build a connection because of covid, hard to connect with people because of covid, have a person that understand you in times of crisis, international business is in a difficult situation, like contact with different people, look into own network, met a lot of new people because of having a business, network in creative industries important, network is important, networking across borders, networking events were cancelled, networking led to clients, networking opportunities increased, not having a network is difficult

Axial code	Open codes
Focus on re-branding or changing strategy	building international connections is strategy, change course due to corona, change of course through covid, covid destroyed business model, currently switching strategy, due to corona strategy needs to be adapted, focus on website rebranding, in need of better strategy, is a strategist, new corporate identity, rebranding, rebranding because more time led to thinking, started working on content strategy, strategy is keeping online up to date, strategy is mostly about monetary things and certain KPIs, strategy is plan of action, strategy is sticking with own values, working on rebranding, working on strategy, writing a new business model

Axial code	Open codes
Less strategy, more goal orientation	always have a plan B, don't have a strategy, don't have long term strategy, eventually I need to make money, goal is full-time income, goal is to fulfil passion, having a business coach, I do keep track of revenue, I just dived right in, I lack strategy, I let go of growth strategy in beginning, I let go of strategy, if you can make it, go for it, looking to get ultimate income, no revenue goals just want to make more than last year, prefer setting goals, set feasible goal, strategy is a road map from start to goal, we have a few concrete goals

Axial code	Open codes
Different standpoints on preventative actions and preparation	bet on more horses, can't really do anything, cannot change environment, could have prepared for a better system for working at home, could not prevent crisis, but can adapt to it, don't have all eggs in one basket, entrepreneurship prepares you for uncertainty, find passion to survive pandemic, follow the trends, for each entrepreneur it was different, frame your working days, framing workdays of essence now, I knew health crisis was coming, I was mentally prepared for crisis, I was not prepared at all, keep customer needs in consideration, learned from crisis in 2008, lots of changes during bank crisis, media has many trends, need to follow the trends, no one knew pandemic could happen, no one saw this coming, no one was prepared, not prepared to work online from a distance, one should regularly think about what could happen, organized company to be able to respond quickly, other crises very different, prepare by investing in technology, proofing for future hard, started implementing trends on social media, stay close to your heart, surround yourself with like-minded people, we could get an economic crisis, we could have prepared in some way, you can prepare

	by having flexibility and creativity, you should have crisis communication plans

Axial code	Open codes
Personal revision on choices made	businesswise did make smart choices, employed someone, which was a big risk, got to do what I wanted but had to worry about money, I would have contacted parties that could help me sooner, I would have hired less people, I would have kept it smaller, I would not have hired someone, If I would have known I would have saved a lot, positive side is to learn from dealing with it, should have implemented website earlier, should have invested in something, strategically extended contracts of employees, you can never satisfy everyone with crisis plans

Axial code	Open codes
Negative anticipations for the future	a huge economic crisis is coming, bank system is going to fall in the near future, corona is blowing up money system, economic crisis is coming, job market is crazy, we could get an economic crisis

Axial code	Open codes
Positive anticipations for the future	crypto currencies will rise, digitalisation is going to develop even more, it paid off to compromise clients, it pushed me to focus on what I wanted to do, just go for it, maybe change countries in future, more jobs in future on digital aspects, plus that we can probably work from home long-term, you do prepare yourself better in new projects

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 had more negative impact on other sectors	a lot of companies failed during covid, catering industry closed is heavy for those entrepreneurs, depends on perspective, depends on who you are asking, If I would have been a theatre producer, I would not have job right now, other fields heavier, which crisis, which crisis, because I have not notice anything from the crisis

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 is controversial and/or measurements illogical	a lot of covid is manipulation, at first scared, then against it, corona is controversial, covid-19 is one of the biggest lies in recent history, I found it severe that decisions were made for me, it was decided for me that I could not work, makes people believe death isn't part of life anymore, media is one sided corona policy, one of the biggest lies, pandemic is heavily overlaid, point of corona is to confuse and cause chaos, some things feel illogical

Axial code	Open codes
Reflection on timeline: An uphill battle	3 months of orienting before starting, after a big dip we had avoiding behaviour and just do it, after summer people got used to it, after that working hard, at a certain point things cancelled, applied for TOZO, covid messed up linear path, dip in march, first big dip now real peak, first hit, turn things around, first thing you want is to survive, first you go into survival mode, from June it started to pick up, I thought it was going away soon, I was not panicking in the beginning, but a little scared, in the beginning no projects, in the beginning we got paralyzed, in the fourth quarter there was work again, initial reaction to covid was confusion, it was a dip and then it went uphill again, lots of jobs got cancelled in the beginning, now everyone is used to it, now going really well, now it is going good again, survival is first thought

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 caused taking on new roles or tasks	all of a sudden take on new role, became some sort of internal coach, because you are not together you are checking a lot, buying supplies physically not possible, cannot go to store to get supplies, I became a coach for the team, I became my own therapist, I took upon a mentor role, it challenged me to come out of my comfort zone, it has required extra skills, many management tasks have been added, role changed due to new productions; livestreams

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 did not cause taking on new roles or tasks	consequences for us not drastic, covid has not changed roles, covid has not changed tasks, I have to outsource, new assistant important, not necessarily new roles

Axial code	Open codes
Type of clients of essence	fortunately, different types of clients, less jobs so less money for luxury things such as coaches or sustainability, lucky with type of clients, one of biggest clients in IT, we were lucky to not have clients in catering industry

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 caused positive growth of business	because of covid growth, clients had more time to rebrand so my business grew, company grew because I had more time, demand increased due to corona, due to corona work with people who would otherwise be too busy, economically grew 30%, growing really fast, grown a lot as a company, I could have developed more without corona, I requested TOZO, but had to pay back around 90%, there have been great developments, to me it was a reset button, we found it quite heavy

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of digitization in internal and external communication during COVID-19	appointments have to be online, art does not sell online, business is changing towards online, business online for now, communication is online, e-commerce significantly increased, easier to work, just put laptop on, glued to our phone, growing need for online aspects, hybrid customer experiences, initiatives taken to create customer experiences in virtual environment, it is important to think about digitalization, making sure everyone is up to date with technology, moved to online, but online less engaging, negativity in media influenced my clients, not everything should go digital, but parts could have been digitized, on one hand save time by travelling, other hand makes more time make appointments, online conversations happen more, online experience building, online has thrived, people got used to do things remotely, people started supporting small businesses, planning has changed due to online platforms, put focus on online activities, rise in online management platforms, wants to create different worldview, we changed to online tools, we did not have a good digital system for communication, we did not have a good organization and communication tool, we worked online anyway, we worked with zoom already

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of digitization and social media in branding	algorithm influences a lot, building website gained trust and generated more sales, built website due to pandemic, covid caused growth for need of online findability, focusing on one platform is too risky, followers valuable, growth on social media partially due to pandemic, hard to stay

	visible on social media, Instagram plays big role but not at the moment, lot of companies focused online findability, many companies did not understand importance of social media and online presence, no one would know me without social media, online advertising good selling point, online findability has to be priority, online important for visibility, online marketing is important, but we don't do it enough, people notice products through social media, sales went up because everyone was at home, social media helped build network, social media helpful build network, social media helps build reputation, social media is first marketing funnel for me, social media is important, social media is shop window, social media plays big role, social media provide audience, social media provide content, strategy to implement new social media channels: TikTok and Pinterest, through social media getting clients, via social media I stay visible, without social media I do not exist

Axial code	Open codes
Spreading positivity and non-covid related content online	chose to communicate with positive energy online, content stayed the same, content strategy has not changed, content strategy has not changed due to covid, covid does not add value to content, does not post about covid on social media, I don't like to post covid-19 things on social media, I post about having hard days, in the beginning posted about covid, more educational content on social media, not posting about corona, only one post about covid, social media strategy did not change due to covid, some posts about covid, it's not all perfect

Axial code	Open codes
Less activity on social media by creative entrepreneurs	content has to be fun, and it was not fun, I post less because of the pandemic, I share less because less is happening, I think I should use LinkedIn more, less exciting things to do or see to share online, less social media use due to pandemic, when it first hit i was not worried, i had a buffer

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 has negatively influenced mental health and/or is perceived as intense	anxiety all the time, as a person I struggled, covid is intense, covid is taking too long, covid, what has happened is intense, economically intense, emotionally heavy, everyone having hard time, feeling powerless, I am inside my head due to covid, I don't see a lot of pros, I felt abandoned to my fate, I find it very confronting, I found it mostly intense, I found it very intense personally, I found it pretty heavy, impact is detrimental, impact was severe, it was shitty as an entrepreneur, it's crazy how much environment influences us, lots of people are going to need therapists, mental breakdowns and anxiety, mentally severe, not much freedom due to covid, on a personal level it feels pointless, on a personal level struggling, pandemic threw me off course, people are going into depressions, people are sick of it, personally I got stomach-aches, severe crisis, we feel lonely, we found it quite heavy

Axial code	Open codes
Focus on internal organization, teamwork and working from home	biggest impact is on communication, communication became more difficult, could really find support with each other, focus on internal organization, helping others immediately, I like working from home, I really try to do it with other people, it takes longer to schedule something, keep talking with employees, lead with empathy, leaning together entrepreneur, spend more time on connecting team as they are home, team are good friends, team has grown, team important

	stakeholder, team really supported each other, trying to get tight group of multiple years, we communicated a lot more, we inspire one another, work environment has changed, work from home on own times, working at home strategic choice

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 showed true importance in life	covid also beautiful, covid also opportunity, covid both good and bad, covid changed lives in every way, covid is blessing in disguise, covid is oppressive but also good, covid was reset button, everyone in the same boat, everyone was equal all of a sudden, everything gets thrown upside down, friendships, family, health is number one, happiness is simply most important, I try to think about bigger picture lately, it was new for everybody, lots of pros and cons, pandemic threw everyone off course, sometimes it was a blessing, started to appreciate personal time more, thinking about what is important, to me it was a reset button, try to focus on positive of covid, you see what truly matters in the world

Axial code	Open codes
COVID-19 impacts social life the most	cannot get a coffee face to face, coffee conversation was actually important, confronted with yourself, creatives go bad on being alone, freedom taking situation, hated that you could not travel, I cannot see my family, I cannot travel, if you feel good socially, economically will go better, impact is socially and economically intertwined, influences personal relationships, leisure was not possible anymore, many things in creative industries face to face, no leisure opportunities so you work but that's bad, no meaningless conversations with co-workers, pandemic is horrible, people die, personally it was more social, relationships changed, social part was most difficult, social wellbeing affected, socially most impact, you didn't have fun things anymore

Axial code	Open codes
Importance of mental health and fun	as a person we have changed, don't compromise own mental health and happiness for money, emphasis on mental health, having lots of fun every day, how can we make it entertaining, humour, I was really upside down, if it doesn't get you out of bed it's not for you, it does something to your mood, it has to be fun, learned that we should not overthink, mentally it does something, off time is important to stay mentally healthy, seeking fun in projects, take care of mental health, to me it was a reset button, value that we have fun, work has to be fun