'Who Am I? What Am I Doing?' The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Work Identities

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1.0 Introduction

England underwent three lockdowns and several periods of social distancing restrictions between March 2020 and June 2021 to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak (Hurley and Walker, 2021; Institute for Government, 2022). These measures produced complex challenges that reverberated across various domains (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Carillo *et al.*, 2021; Shoss *et al.,* 2021). Careers were disrupted (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020) when all organisational employees—also denoted as knowledge workers in this paper—were mandated to shift to remote working for an extended duration, irrespective of their preferences and norms (Waizenegger *et al.,* 2020). According to the events system theory developed by Morgeson et al. (2015), large-scale unforeseen events have the potential to unsettle and undermine established structures and norms. The COVID-19 pandemic aligns with this concept because it had far-reaching consequences at both micro and macro levels. Knowledge workers accustomed to conventional office environments faced abrupt changes in their established routines, which prompted a fundamental review of their work identities. Concurrently, the pandemic reshaped work landscapes through the widespread adoption of remote work, signifying a noteworthy societal shift in the realm of knowledge-based work (Hennekam *et al.*, 2021; Singh *et al.*, 2022).

Work identity refers to an individual's self-perception of their professional self and encompasses a fusion of organisational, occupational, functional and other identities (Walsh

and Gordon, 2008). This composite identity influences their corresponding behaviours in the workplace. Identity scholars have elucidated that individuals shape, alter, uphold or fortify their work identities within their social structures, driven by the pursuit of better financial rewards and elevated status (Alvesson and Willmott, 2022; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Walsh and Gordon, 2008; Wrzesniewski, 2002). This dynamic process of identity work assumes particular importance when organisational members encounter ambivalence and conflicts arising from various scenarios, such as when they have doubts about their competencies (Horn, 2017), when their organisations undergo major corporate transformations (Corley and Gioia, 2004), when they are members of stigmatised institutions (Eury *et al.*, 2018), when the imposed changes change the meanings of their occupations (Kyratsis *et al.*, 2017) and when clashes stem from the intersection of their multiple social identities (Caza *et al.*, 2018; Clair *et al.*, 2005; Dahm *et al.*, 2019; Ramarajan, 2014). These concerns become more pronounced when triggered by macro-level events (Hennekam *et* al., 2021; Leigh and Melwani, 2019; Petriglieri, 2011). The previous literature has shown that such large-scale and unforeseen events disconnect the past from the future, prompting organisational employees to re-evaluate the work identities they had previously embraced or aspired to achieve (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya *et al.*, 2019; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2017; Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Wrzesniewski, 2002). Being forced to relinquish cherished identities can damage one's selfhood and evoke negative emotions (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). According to a model developed by Williams and Murphy (2022), individuals typically need 12 to 18 months to make adequate sense of career-altering events before they can respond appropriately.

A review of prior research on remote working, also known as virtual working, provided insights for the present study. Notably, even before the pandemic restrictions, organisations had already begun moving towards virtual or remote working to address workforce demands (Jackson *et al.*, 2006) and economic pressures (Gao and Sai, 2020). Parallel to these transitions, another significant shift emerged with the rise of gig work, which altered knowledge workers' participation in the workforce (Ashford *et al.*, 2018; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, there is some value in considering the extant literature on the work identities of

knowledge workers engaged in both virtual and gig working practices (Hodder, 2020; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019).

Academic research documenting these trends presents diverse definitions of virtual and gig workers (see Caza *et* al., 2022 and Charalampous *et al.*, 2019). In the knowledge industry, virtual workers are salaried employees who are often geographically separated from their employers' offices and rely on technology to collaborate with colleagues (Au and Marks, 2012; Makarius and Larson, 2017; Soga *et al.*, 2022). Gig workers, on the other hand, operate more independently, maintaining both physical and relational disconnection from their collaborators and clients (Ashford *et al.*, 2018: Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have examined the benefits of virtual and gig work for individuals and organisations (refer to Ashford *et al.*, 2018; Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Charalampous, 2019; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019; Watson *et al.*, 2021). However, academic perspectives also highlight the distinctive challenges that can threaten and undermine the work identities of virtual and gig workers. These challenges include feelings of estrangement from organisations and co-workers, invisibility, status threats, interpersonal conflicts and the absence of established routines and designated workspaces (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Barsness *et al.*, 2005; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019; Walsh and Gordon, 2008; Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 1999). When cultural differences exist among workers in geographically dispersed teams, stereotypes are often employed to characterise each other (Au and Marks, 2012). Similar to their counterparts working in conventional work settings, remote and gig knowledge workers rely on regular formal and informal interactions to solidify their work identities and cultivate a shared identity with others (Alvesson, 2001; Makarius and Larson, 2017; Methot *et al.*, 2018; Sutherland *et al.*, 2020; Wiesenfeld *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, because of the gendered dynamics of family life, women who work remotely face unique challenges in balancing their work and parenting roles, leading to difficulties in reconciling their identities in both domains (Wilson and Greenhill, 2004). To offset these barriers, virtual and gig workers are driven to bolster their confidence and enhance how others perceive their abilities and accomplishments (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Barsness *et al.*, 2005; *Brocklehurst*, 2001). Recreating work-related routines and artefacts at home, carving out distinct spaces to decouple

work from non-work activities and creating new narratives about their professional selves are some strategies employed by virtual and gig workers to project their work identities to others (Brocklehurst, 2001; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006).

Collectively, the aforementioned studies provide a good foundation for understanding the relationship between circumstances and work identities. While it is possible to draw similarities from these studies to theorise the pandemic's impact on knowledge workers' daily work, COVID-19 presented distinct challenges, thereby necessitating the development of new theoretical insights. The lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, initially expected to be short-term, created a period underpinned by volatility and enforced confinement. The emerging literature on COVID-19 confirms that the environmental duress due to the pandemic produced adverse emotions in employees as they tried to make sense of a world where familiar structures had swiftly disintegrated (Barclay *et al.*, 2022). Knowledge workers faced two formidable challenges that threatened their work identities: the complete dissolution of borders between personal and work domains, and the depletion of crucial relational assets.

As observed in the literature on remote and gig work, work and other social identities were moving towards integration (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). However, the onset of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions rapidly dismantled the boundaries between work and personal life, causing a pronounced deterioration of work-life balance (Hughes and Donnelly, 2022). Parental and work identities dissolved into each other (Bowyer *et al.,* 2022) as people's homes morphed into both workplaces and educational settings (Bellmann and Hübler, 2020; Boncori, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.,* 2020). Overall, the existing evidence suggests that pandemic measures amplified the gendered dynamics of family roles, resulting in drastic spillover effects on women (Cataldi and Tomatis, 2022). Women had to manage work demands while also looking after their dependents more than men (Boncori, 2020; Clark *et al.,* 2021; Johnson, 2022; Mihalache and Mihalache, 2022; Smith, 2022). Consequently, the pandemic may have had a negative impact on women's career progress (Bowyer *et al.,* 2022; Soga *et al.,* 2022).

Additionally, organisational employees experienced a loss of emotional connection and commitment to their co-workers and employers (Adisa *et al.*, 2023; Becker *et al.,* 2022; Mihalache and Mihalache, 2022). Before the implementation of pandemic-related restrictions, the traditional work environment served as the primary arena for employees to develop and perform their work identities (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Being physically separated from organisations diminished employees' collective identity with their institutions (Wang *et al.*, 2020). The discontinuation of informal, face-to-face interactions hindered career development (Carillo *et al.,* 2021), causing further isolation and loneliness, as individuals were unable to observe and mimic behaviours that were considered valuable at work. Seeking help on virtual platforms was difficult. Many found the sole dependence on technology to interact with others to be challenging (Hughes and Donnelly, 2022; Hafermalz and Riemer, 2021).

Since work plays a pivotal role in people's lives (Wrzesniewski, 2002) and events serve as significant contextual factors (Johns, 2006), the impact of enforced confinement on knowledge workers warrants further investigation (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). The manner in which individuals experience their everyday work and work environment is related to their work identities (Bartel *et al.*, 2012; Bimrose *et al.,* 2019). The present study examined the perception of work identities among employees in the London Insurance Market during a period marked by turbulence and isolation. To address this enquiry, this research drew on Goffman's institutional, dramaturgical and stigma theories. This study makes three major contributions to the existing literature in three major ways. First, it expands the growing body of research examining the impact of COVID-19 on work by foregrounding employees' perspectives (Collings *et al.*, 2021a and 2021b). The extant literature does not fully capture the dynamics between individuals' work identities and the broader context of institutions and macro-level events (Brown, 2015), a gap that this study seeks to bridge. Second, this study integrates insights from different research areas—identity threat, identity work, remote working and unplanned events at the macro-level—to illustrate

the multifaceted challenges faced by organisational members at a time of crisis and the strategies used to mitigate some of the risks to their work identities. Third, it provides prominence to the London Insurance Market, a domain that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has received limited attention in employee studies.

In the upcoming sections, the research setting and the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study are introduced. Thereafter, the research methodology and findings are presented. An analysis of the findings and implications for practitioners are discussed in the penultimate section. The paper concludes with an acknowledgement of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

2.0 The research setting

The London Insurance Market is located in the City of London and deals with complex and specialty risks for large international businesses (Insurance Information Institute). The largest centre for insurance in the world, the London Insurance Market is more than 330 years old, making it an older institution than the Bank of England. Its diverse ecosystem comprises insurers, reinsurers, brokers and other associated bodies (Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Walsham, 1999). It underwrites around USD 110 billion in the global insurance business and has a 47,000-strong workforce (Horton *et al.*, 2020). Employees are broadly divided into two main groups: front-office roles, such as underwriting, broking or claims, and back-office roles, such as finance, legal and risk management. Collectively, the industry insures and reinsures against major industrial risks from marine and aviation to cyber, energy and climate change. It is an industry that lends itself to be classed as 'knowledge-intensive' (Alvesson 2001) playing a critical role in the way companies manage uncertainties, plan activities and allocate resources. Despite its economic and social influence in the modern world, this industry has been largely neglected by scholars in the field of employee studies.

Trading activities in the London Insurance Market have always been underpinned by intense face-to-face interactions among underwriters, brokers and claims specialists (Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Walsham, 1999; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Smet *et al.*, 2015). This is because the London Insurance Market operates on a subscription model wherein multiple insurers join forces to share policy risks. This dynamic requires close collaboration and trust between all parties, a characteristic that is commonly observed in knowledge-intensive industries (Alvesson, 2001; Methot *et al.*, 2018).

Heracleous and Barrett (2001), in their longitudinal study on the industry's transition from 'paper slip to electronic risk placement' (page 763), found that there was significant opposition to this move despite support from the senior leaders. Employees in trading roles perceived the shift to remote electronic trading as a threat to their work identities and specialist knowledge, which had traditionally been developed and nurtured through personal relations and physical proximity (Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Walsham, 1999; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). The prevailing institutional logic states that complex risks can only be adequately understood and priced through a series of face-to-face negotiations between representatives of different companies. Therefore, any deviation from this institutional practice is met by resistance (Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Walsham, 1999; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). This is consistent with other studies which emphasise that individuals who are deeply rooted in institutional norms tend to reject changes that contradict these established principles (Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017). In this context, the London Insurance Market is an appropriate site for investigating the effects of pandemic-induced work practices on the individuals employed therein.

3.0 Theoretical perspectives

Considering the above-mentioned environment, COVID-19 restrictions were particularly salient in the industry in which interactions gave meaning to the roles that actors played and the

identities they constructed. In this setting, Goffman's institutional, dramaturgical and stigma theories are relevant to the way participants understood their work identities during this period. This study draws from three of his seminal works: *Asylums* (1961), *Presentation of Self* (1959) and *Stigma* (1963).

Goffman introduced the concept of 'total institutions' (1961) as a framework to describe environments such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals that encompass every aspect of an individual's life. Life in total institutions entails prolonged seclusion from the society. In such confined settings, the designated areas for sleeping, working and eating lose their distinct boundaries and merge into one another. It is more difficult to conceal private activities from others and discreditable information may become openly accessible. Upon entering a total institution, members forfeit their various past identities and erase the different roles they played in society. Instead, they have to adopt the norms of the new social order. Thus, institutional identity assumes a definitive role in shaping its members' identities. Maintaining or distinguishing one's status in such an enclosed space can be challenging. Although Goffman did not envision enforced remote work arrangements when he conceived total institutions, the pandemic's restrictions can be understood as exhibiting totalising tendencies within a novel institutional context.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory enhances our understanding of social interactions by challenging the notion of fixed identity. It presented the concepts of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' settings, illustrating the ways in which people segment their audience in everyday life and adapt their behaviours accordingly. Frontstage work performance is learned by observing cultural habits and prevalent norms. Behaviours and performances in frontstage workplaces become impression management strategies. In turn, the audience responds either by accepting or rejecting the actor's identity. Identity formation hinges on interactions between performers, audiences and contextual dynamics. In backstage settings, performers can reasonably assume a lower risk of accessibility among frontstage audience members.

Consequently, in backstage settings, individuals are not bound by the norms, formalities or expectations associated with frontstage settings. Nevertheless, backstage settings provide opportunities to rehearse or experiment with behaviours to construct one's frontstage identity, emphasising the interplay between frontstage and backstage audience members.

Goffman's *Stigma* (1963) extended his theory of multiple identities by classifying them into three dimensions: personal, social and ego. This study examines the domain of work identity, which falls within the scope of social identity. Goffman outlined three forms of stigma: stigmas related to bodily impairments, stigmas associated with deviant behaviours and stigmas from tribalism, which separate people based on their group affiliations. In the workplace, stigmatisation can have detrimental effects by devaluing individuals and collective groups. Goffman distinguished between two groups of stigmatised people: discreditable and discredited. Discreditable individuals are those whose stigmas are less apparent whereas discredited individuals are those whose stigmas are visible. Both groups actively engage in identity work to manage how others perceive them.

By mobilising Goffman's concepts, the present study examined the impact of COVID-19 disruptions to working patterns and violations of the social order on the work identities of knowledge workers in the London Insurance Market. Being mandated to work from home for an uncertain period forced organisational members to become captives of a total institution, triggering a transformative process known as the mortification of their former selves. As the traditional work setting moved from the frontstage to the backstage, individuals' homes no longer remained private and trusted backstage settings, but were exposed to a frontstage audience to survey and make judgements about the individual(s) living there. Simultaneously, the backstage settings offered by a traditional workplace vanished abruptly, with individuals losing the types of backstage interactions that had previously benefited their work identities. Therefore, employees had to negotiate and renegotiate their work identities to find some form of social order within this total institution, a situation that was unfamiliar to them. Only after

spending a significant period in this totalising context can individuals gradually acclimatise and shape new work identities that align with institutional expectations (Williams and Murphy, 2022). Goffman's insights served as effective resources for examining identities in a shifting environment and for bridging the gap between daily work experiences in the microcosm and disruptive events in the macrocosm.

4.0 Methodology

This study used data from an ongoing PhD research investigating the ways in which individuals comprehend, construct and conduct their careers in the London Insurance Market. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data after obtaining ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Brunel University London in 2020. A combination of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants (King and Horrocks, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2017; Yin, 2016). All participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement and the use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 36 participants included in this study. The goal was to incorporate the diversity among participants, including sex, age, employment tenure, ethnicity and occupation. More than 60 percent of the participants in this study were female; whereas in 2019, approximately 45 percent of employees in the industry were female (Horton *et al.*, 2020). The distribution of participants across the different age groups in the sample was broadly representative of the 2019 workforce, except for the 40 to 49 age group (Horton *et al.*, 2020). On average, the participants had 9.91 years of experience in the industry. Concerning ethnicity, 41 percent of the participants identified as White, 30 percent as Black or Black African, 22 percent as Asian and 8 percent as mixed ethnicities. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, ethnicity data was not available for the London Insurance Market workforce to make a meaningful comparison with the study sample. Regarding job roles, over 40 percent of the

participants held front office or trading roles, whereas the remaining participants held back office roles.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and February 2021, a period defined by the changing lockdown restrictions in England (Hurley and Walker, 2021; Institute for Government, 2021). In July 2020, the lockdown measures were eased; however, the government introduced stringent measures in September 2020. The country subsequently experienced a second and third lockdown in November 2020 and January 2021, respectively. At the time of their interviews, participants had not returned to their respective offices since March 2020 and were uncertain about when they might be able to do so.

The interviews lasted between 52 and 140 minutes and took place via a video or audio call. The author listened to the recorded interviews multiple times and transcribed them verbatim to understand the data (King and Brooks, 2016; Silverman, 2017; Yin, 2016). Furthermore, the author maintained a research diary to document observations immediately after each interview. A critical realist-constructivist paradigm underpins this study. This paradigm accepts that structures, such as the limitations posed by the pandemic, govern people's decisions and actions in their social world and that there are multiple realities during periods marked by changes and turmoil (King and Horrocks, 2010; Layder, 1993).

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006 and 2013). The author reviewed the transcripts multiple times and referred to the field notes to determine recurring topics and their relationships, before clustering them into empirical themes and developing aggregate concepts. Alternating between the data and theory provided room for multiple revisions during the data analysis process. Table 2 illustrates the development of conceptual categories from the data and Table 3 presents the percentage of sample responses per topic.

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Table 2: Summary of findings

Table 3: Topics linked to percentage of sample

5.0 Findings

<mark>This study focused on how employees in the London Insurance Market experienced and navigated their work identities</mark> during a period of significant macro-level changes in work practices (Hughes and Donnelly, 2022). The findings were examined through Goffman's lens to determine how participants perceived the impact of this global phenomenon on their professional selves. The loss of partitions of everyday life impaired their work identities because participants were unable to compartmentalise their different identities for different audiences. Concurrently, physical separation from their institutions and co-workers posed the risk of disconnecting their past work identities from the present. The structures of the past were obliterated and careers loomed uncertain and unfamiliar.

5.1 Deterioration

The mandated work-from-home restrictions had a deteriorating impact on participants, with many experiencing stress, fatigue and other negative emotions as they struggled to adapt to work without boundaries. The pandemic's restrictions embodied Goffman's 'total institution' notion (1968) as participants viewed the context as severely limiting and dehumanising. The words 'depressed' and 'frustrated' were recurring emotional expressions in the interviews. Participants resented having to relinquish control over their schedules and identities as their personal and public selves merged in a confined space. They were forced into a position in which they had no prior knowledge of the identity they should adopt in a situation with totalising characteristics.

> 'I get bored of waking up in my bedroom, working in my bedroom, and then going to sleep in my bedroom. I feel like I am a hamster. I feel like a robot and I do not like it.' (Kate)

Particularly, female participants with children found it extremely difficult to reconcile their private and work identities. They were anxious about simultaneously protecting their work

identity and fulfilling their family duties. When their power was tightly circumscribed, they were forced to consider new ways of performing at work.

> 'It is really challenging because my youngest needed home-schooling. I got to a point when I had to tell everyone that I cannot have meetings in the mornings because I have to home-school my child. But you cannot do it the way they do in school. Children do not understand that they need to focus for two hours to get their work done for the day. I then spend the afternoons persuading and telling my child to complete schoolwork. It is really challenging to do this while working. Once the homework is completed, I still have to deal with all the email traffic that has been accumulating for the whole day and make sure that I respond to people. You do not want people to think that you are slacking. I have aged faster during this time.' (Olivia)

Additionally, the intersection of sex and ethnicity has an additional influence on work identity. According to Goffman (1963), members of stigmatised groups are socially accepted only when they achieve an extraordinary level. Black female participants feared that existing inequities could become more entrenched during periods of macro-level changes, imposing more emotional labour on them to negotiate and manage their work identities online.

> 'I worry specifically about Black women with children. If this continues for longer, it will have a negative impact on their careers. The Black women I know are concerned about balancing everything. Will they get passed up for opportunities for promotion because they have less time at work and less face time with people?' (Falcon)

In contrast, male participants either had a spouse at home who was not in the labour market or had no children. However, the status of the male participants in this study did not reflect that of other male employees in the industry. In one organisation, fathers with young children had formally requested adjustments to their works schedules to cope with family duties. The

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difference in the approaches adopted by male and female parents could be seen through

Goffman's stigma lens: men did not fear that their requests for flexible working practices would

stigmatise their work identities.

> 'During the lockdowns, it was the guys in my company that found it hardest to
>
> cope. The mums are not asking for extra time off to work four or three days a
>
> week. It is the dads, really, although it is not surprising because some of them
>
> have wives who are key workers. The dads are all like "can I do two days a
>
> week until this pandemic finishes or until my wife's shift patterns change or
>
> until the school holidays?". The men told us that they cannot do both. But the
>
> expectation of the young mums is somehow do both.' (Fiona)

Frontstage work lives overshadowed backstage personal lives to such an extent that

participants found it difficult to withdraw from the frontstage demands. While everyone

experienced an increase in workload, participants had different motivations and circumstances

that influenced their work practices. Remote-working technologies played a significant role in

prolonging working hours. Paradoxically, working in a backstage setting created a culture of

surveillance within organisations, resembling the characteristics found in total institutions

(Goffman, 1961). People became aware of their colleagues' working patterns and of being

observed by others. Participants felt obligated to use the new organisational structures to

rationalise their experiences and develop their work identities (Goffman, 1961). During the

interviews, they frequently compared their working hours with those before COVID-19,

expressing frustration that the imposed restrictions were institutionalising long working hours

and forcing them to adopt a new work identity, often at the expense of their well-being.

> 'Before the pandemic, the only people who would be logging on in the
>
> evening at home were senior people who were very busy and who had a lot
>
> of work to do. Now you are receiving many more emails and questions at
>
> different times of the day from different people at different levels. You feel
>
> obliged to respond to them until you go to bed. It has been relentless.' (Anuj)

The interviews revealed that employees in different age groups responded differently to their hectic schedules. Junior employees expressed that since they were not paid as much as their senior colleagues, they did not want to comply without a corresponding increase in financial rewards, one of the several adaptation strategies common in total institutions (Goffman, 1961). Simultaneously, they also acknowledged that if they strictly adhered to the designated working hours stipulated in their employment contracts, their peers and managers would see them as resisting the new norms and potentially devalue their work identities. They faced a challenging dilemma in balancing their sense of justice with the compulsion to meet the evolving workplace practices.

Meanwhile, the managers in the sample experienced mounting pressures from their subordinates and leaders. Their new roles now encompassed not only driving organisational goals but also providing support akin to 'therapy' and 'counselling' for their team members, sometimes against their will. Balancing these responsibilities often resulted in additional strain and tension, which directly affected their ability to maintain and adapt to their work identities.

> 'I recently had a meeting with my peers across the market. Everyone was deadbeat. Work has been busy, but on top of that, we have to check on each person to make sure they are okay. Difficult to get our job done without working seven days a week. This may sound selfish, but as a manager, you have to look after yourself first.' (Eddie)

However, not all participants experienced the external pressure to work long hours. Some individuals talked about the psychological need to start work earlier and end later because they were 'saving time on commuting'. This strategy demonstrated their commitment to their organisations. For others, being incarcerated from society allowed work to monopolise their everyday lives (Goffman, 1961). They immersed themselves in their work in the absence of other obligations and distractions.

'Before the lockdown, you went out with your friends, went shopping and had

a separation between work and life. When we went into lockdown,

everything was closed, so naturally the only thing you could do was work.

Even on weekends, there is only so much television you can watch. There is

still so much daytime left, and you are logging in and working again.' (Alex)

5.1.1 Losing control over one's presentation of self

The fusion of work and personal identities in a virtual work setting created a problematic

context that limited participants' ability to control their performances (Goffman, 1959 and

1961). Consequently, individuals no longer felt empowered to manage the portrayal of their

work identities in this volatile environment. The loss of control over their self-presentation

heightened their anxiety regarding potential stereotyping. In particular, the convergence of

appearances and racial dynamics in online settings emerged as a significant hurdle for Black

female participants. While others comfortably shifted to casual attire during work, Black

women hesitated to adopt a more informal appearance in front of their work audience. They

saw dressing as a way to present legitimacy and authority (Goffman, 1959 and 1963) and feared

that being seen in casual clothes would invoke stereotypes and harm the work identities they

had worked diligently to cultivate and present to others. They resisted changing their

appearances because the relationship between physical appearance, social status and access to

opportunities was important to this group.

'Wearing jeans or t-shirts, that would have a detrimental effect on me as a

person. My uniform is a smart shirt and skirt, which looks professional. I have

spent a lot of time and energy in creating myself. It is extremely difficult to

unlearn this after 20 years of work.' (Rose)

Previously fully or partially hidden social identities were involuntarily disclosed to a scrutinising

frontstage audience for judgement and potential rejection. The lack of appropriate workspace

at home further compounded employees' difficulties during this period. During the interviews,

the video technology did not allow users to conceal their backgrounds. Approximately 75 percent of the participants did not have a desk for work and had to convert different areas of their home as a makeshift workspace. For some, this created a sense of deprivation compared to their wealthier colleagues. They worried that this method of working would discredit their status among their co-workers. Those who had no choice but to use their beds as workstations feared and faced a significant denigration of their work identities.

> 'I have had it so bad during the lockdown with the privilege that is all around me with my peers from private schools, massive houses and no worries about money. I have never been made to feel like an outsider before. I have never felt this strongly before that I do not belong to their middle class. Everyone has impressive offices on Zoom while my husband and I are taking turns to work on the bed and dining table.' (Rachel)

One female participant was admonished by her Human Resources colleagues about working while 'staying in bed'. This was deemed as a stigma when attending meetings with colleagues. Despite her limited domestic setting, she accepted that being seen on bed created an unfavourable impression of her work identity. This participant's experience underscores the challenges faced by individuals when attempting to project suitable work images in unconventional settings.

Not all indignities were visible or revealed in physical embodiments, however. Some participants, whose pre-existing medical conditions were exacerbated by the pandemic, voiced concerns that their deteriorating health could have an adverse effect on their immediate and future employment. Not every participant with a medical condition had openly disclosed their medical conditions to colleagues. Thus, they were worried about potential workplace marginalisation if their previously concealed health issues were to become apparent to colleagues (Goffman,1963).

Additionally, carefully crafted work identities were at risk of being undermined by a lack of understanding and support from household members. Participants who had difficult relationships at home faced an agonising dilemma concerning the potential disclosure of their private struggles to their frontstage work audience. Typically, such behaviours would have remained limited to their personal backstage home settings. However, the interview data also showed that not all employees in the industry shared this concern. For instance, managers in the sample were drawn into discussions with their subordinates about domestic situations that had become worsened by the COVID-19 restrictions. These different reactions highlighted the complex undercurrents faced by employees in managing their work identities at home, wherein some encountered additional challenges while others received support and understanding.

5.2 Disconnection

The wholesale move to virtual work created an unbridgeable distance between individuals and between individuals and institutions. In an industry that relied heavily on interpersonal relationships, physical separation posed relational problems. Establishing new relationships and maintaining or strengthening older ones became difficult. Interactions with colleagues, leaders and clients play an essential role in shaping one's work identity (Goffman, 1959), and the switch to remote work made it difficult for some employee groups to secure and uphold a commendable work identity.

Participants reflected on their pre-lockdown work lives, with their recollections primarily focused on interpersonal relationships. The total institution of work-from-home regime disrupted the development of profitable workplace relationships, thus impeding individuals aspiring to effectively manage their career progression. They valued engaging in backstage activities with their colleagues in backstage settings in the traditional workplace, such as eating meals in a canteen, and recognised the importance of these interactions for team bonding, knowledge dissemination and career advancement. With the sudden move to virtual work and

the elimination of shared backstage spaces, the ability to build or strengthen a collective

identity suffered greatly.

> 'I miss being with my colleagues. I liked going into the office even if I did not
> always like the commuting, but I liked being in the office, sitting, having lunch
> with people or having social chats with them. Meeting for coffee, you learn a
> lot more about people than when you're in a formal meeting room. It's worse
> on Zoom. You cannot eat lunch together online because people have other
> things to do at home. When you are out of sight, you are out of everyone's
> mind.' (Gillian)

Developing good cross-ethnic relationships at work became more difficult by the addition of

virtual complexity. Trust, a key component of interactions between individuals from different

backgrounds, was damaged by the sole reliance on virtual interactions.

> 'Every time you meet someone face-to-face and you have an interaction with
> them, your interaction is enhanced. You can be two completely different
> individuals; however, your empathy for that person grows and develops.
> Meeting someone over Zoom erodes relationships when we are accustomed
> to face-to-face interactions.' (William)

Black women across all age groups faced a predicament, torn between the fear of being

overlooked or unseen by others, while simultaneously facing heightened visibility during virtual

team meetings. For Black women who were comparatively new to their teams, virtual

interactions with co-workers underscored their outsider status.

> 'On the video calls, they have a lot of internal jokes. And I feel I cannot relate
> to them. I sometimes feel isolated. If I want to talk to them, it ends up being a
> formal conversation.' (Micki)

Conversely, Black women in senior roles emphasised that individuals bore the responsibility of

finding new impression management behaviours in virtual meetings.

'Your company is not going to help you. Be vocal, be visible and find the representation you need to project in online meetings. Know your weaknesses and work to compensate for them. Do it yourself.' (Louise)

Furthermore, the lack of access to backstage activities in the workplace eliminated small talk, which is an important resource for work identity. Its absence hindered employees' proactive efforts to minimise the risk of exclusion from important decision-making processes. For participants considering future career prospects, the paucity of small talk compounded the challenges of maintaining visibility within the professional sphere.

'When you are in the office, you have access to a lot of information because people talk. You can find out things from senior people to the cleaners. You have ears everywhere in the office. Now, everyone is working from home, and there are meetings that are taking place that you are not aware of. Before if you learned about these meetings from other people, you could ask why you were not invited and make a case for why you should attend. Now, you do not have any awareness about these things.' (Angela)

The inability to participate in small talks was not the sole aspect being mourned. The significance of watching small-talk interactions in backstage settings of organisational life, even without direct involvement, gave participants a valuable tool to understand their social world, prepare for their present or future roles and adjust their behaviours for their audience.

Contrary to the above experiences, participants whose work identities were damaged by their experiences of discrimination welcomed being separated from their colleagues and the industry at large. The variance in participants' experiences emphasises the complex relationship between workplace interactions and work identities.

'From a mental health perspective, every day has actually helped me. Not seeing the people who put you down helped me. I feel much better. And if I have to face those types of bullying people over the phone or video, I can take

15 minutes off and go on my Xbox to forget about them. If I were in the office,

it would stew inside me all day.' (Zoe)

5.2.1 Protecting occupational identities

The challenges produced by the COVID-19 pandemic also affected participants in front office roles. Networking and interaction frame employees' work identities in trading roles (Goffman, 1959). This was especially salient for participants beginning their front office careers who wanted to establish themselves in the industry. Unstructured routines and interactions created doubts about ways to enhance their work identities in a changing work landscape.

'I am serious about my underwriting career. Meeting or talking to other

underwriters helps because I learn from them. You can learn more from

listening to their experiences, frustrations and plans. I feel that there is going

to be a gap in my development, which slightly worries me. If this pandemic

continues, I worry about how much longer it will take me to become a senior

underwriter.' (Nala)

Echoing these views, participants in the senior front office roles also shared similar perspectives on the formidable disadvantages that social distancing posed for new employees, thereby preventing them from forging an affinity with front office occupations and the industry. A recurring sentiment shared by this group was that a true appreciation for the industry came only through active involvement. As mentioned above, the London Insurance Market's institutional context necessitates strong relations among employees in trading roles. Underwriters and brokers strongly identified with the industry and saw remote working as a constraining factor in fostering solidarity and a sense of belonging among their recently joined colleagues.

'If we are all working remotely, underwriting will end up just like another desk

job. I worry about this. You do not develop your soft skills, such as negotiating

skills. What is great about our market is that you pick up many different skills

and knowledge because you are exposed to many different people. If you just

sit behind a desk at home and if you are socially distant from your colleagues,

it becomes a lonely and boring job. Why would you want to become an

underwriter?' (Heather)

Moreover, front office senior employees expressed apprehensions that COVID-19 restrictions could potentially transform the industry into an invisible, backstage realm. They shared their worries that the symbolism behind the industry's tangible and intangible props would have no meaning to the broader public. This perceived loss of meaning was considered detrimental for the preservation of their occupational identity.

'It was a hidden market to begin with but now it is buried. How can we excite

young people to join us when they cannot see the buzz and energy of working

here? Everything is soulless.' (Nick)

Senior Black employees in front office roles had additional concerns that the isolation of the industry from the public would act as a catalyst to amplify nepotism during the recruitment process for junior brokers and underwriters. They saw the gulf between the industry and Black communities widening during this period because 'young Black people do not know anything about insurance in the first place'. While this indicated a fear of reduced access and opportunities for prospective Black labour market entrants, it also highlighted concerns that a severe underrepresentation of Black employees in the trading segment of the industry would marginalise the group's collective work identities.

5.2.2 Power disparities between front and back office employees

The removal of shared physical spaces deepened the power disparities between front and back office employees. Participants in back office roles claimed that the power of the industry resided with underwriters and brokers, resulting in a feeling of being relegated to the status of a 'second-class citizen'. In face-to-face interactions, employees in back office roles could

counter this low status by presenting themselves as valuable and worthwhile members of their organisations (Goffman, 1959). However, the shift to remote work strained the relationship between these two employee segments. Participants in back office roles lamented that the lack of direct personal interactions with their front office counterparts diminished opportunities to build cohesion between them.

> 'The greatest challenge is the ability to connect with people. I do not need to talk to everyone for more than 15 minutes. Sometimes, it only lasted for 30 seconds. Like in "Hi, do you remember me? How was your weekend? By the way, you kind of owe me something." However, this is difficult to achieve now. As soon as you message someone, they know that you are chasing them, which creates negative vibes. Much of our work depends on relationship management because we are asking people to do things that are not central to their day-to-day jobs.' (Ian)

The elimination of in-person interactions presented obstacles for individuals who were considered out-group members based on their occupational backgrounds. Specifically, participants who shifted from back office to front office roles encountered difficulties in penetrating existing industry-wide networks, which primarily consisted of long-standing connections. They believed that they would have achieved some success in integrating with these networks in the absence of disruptions due to the pandemic. During the interviews, these individuals considered reverting to their back office roles. Their experiences further highlighted the segregation between front and back office functions in the market and the hierarchical relationship between the two. This hierarchy persisted even in digital working environments. The formation of new work identities were hindered when existing institutional norms intersected with disruptive external events.

Environmental duress triggered questions for back office participants regarding their involvement in the industry. Concerns about economic and labour market risks featured heavily

in their accounts. Some encountered obstacles in pursuing their plans to relocate to different industries because the pandemic had halted hiring plans everywhere. Others opted to protect their interests in case the industry faced substantial losses. The escalating economic uncertainties, coupled with a severed sense of connection with colleagues, compelled participants in back office roles to consider separating from the industry to create space for the emergence of new work identities.

> 'I am undergoing introspection. Who am I? What am I doing? Where do I want to belong? I have five years of experience in this area. I learned a lot and became this person. I like the people I work with, but I wonder if I should do other things.' (Anya)

Notably, front office employees were not fazed by the threat to employment. They indicated that the industry's stability, especially during economic downturns and other macro-level threats, was its enduring appeal. This stark contrast in perspectives further exemplified the ways in which the pandemic had accentuated the disparities between front and back office roles.

> 'When I was in university, a lecturer said this to me: that insurance is a trillion-dollar industry and if you go into insurance as an underwriter or broker, you will always have a job. And I thought, yes, I would always like to have a job and not worry about it. So, whatever is going on outside, I know that I am safe inside here.' (Falcon)

6.0 Discussion and implications

To address the need for developing new theoretical perspectives that provide a deeper understanding of how knowledge workers fared during the pandemic crisis (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020), this study employed Goffman's concepts as a theoretical lens to investigate the manner in which employees of the London Insurance Market perceived and managed their work identities

during this challenging period. Two key conceptual contributions were identified from this qualitative analysis: deterioration and disconnection. These concepts highlight that the erosion of distinct boundaries, disintegration of established structures, imposition of novel structural forces and estrangement from co-workers and institutions had adverse effects on participants' work identities. Moreover, participants' experiences of deterioration and disconnection were intertwined with their demographic and occupational identities, leading to the further entrenchment of existing inequalities and power dynamics. While some differences were observed in the data, there was a noteworthy degree of uniformity as a consequence of participants' collective navigation of the same unprecedented crisis (see Table 3). The notion that actors need social interactions to shape and define their work identities is consistent with the stream of research that has focused on the dynamic process of constructing work identities (Alvesson, 2001; Methot *et al.*, 2018; Walsh and Gordon, 2008). However, the establishment and sustenance of work identities is also reliant on individuals having separate frontstage and backstage settings to understand and interpret their conduct and those of their significant others.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three major ways. First, it expands the growing academic focus on the ramifications of COVID-19 for knowledge workers (Adisa *et al.*, 2023; Akkermans *et al.*, 2020; Carillo *et al.,* 2021; Hughes and Donnelly, 2022) to help recognise the critical importance of employees to contemporary organisations (Collings *et al.*, 2021a and 2021b). This was achieved by placing a central focus on employees' perspectives to understand the evolving relationship between their work identities and the pandemic. Second, it applies and extends the existing knowledge on work identities from diverse literatures by analysing the challenges faced by participants in upholding, adjusting or safeguarding their work identities within an extraordinary context defined by unplanned and profound changes (Ashford *et al.*, 2018; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2017; Petriglieri, 2011; Wrzesniewski, 2002). Finally, it advances knowledge of the underexplored domain of the London Insurance Market, where the fundamental aspects of conducting and transacting

businesses (Barrett, 1999; Barrett and Walsham, 1999; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Smet *et al.*, 2015) were upended by the macro-level restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

These findings are significant for practitioners in the London Insurance Market and other occupational sectors. Organisations can enhance their and their employees' resilience by developing and implementing protocols that address unplanned crises. These protocols should include clear communications on measures to safeguard employee welfare and security during challenging times. At the time of writing, the surface resumption of everyday life does not conceal the fact that fundamentally society has changed. Data from the Office for National Statistics (2023) confirms the enduring transformation of the organisational work domain brought about by the pandemic. As companies downsize their physical spaces (Sweney, 2023), some employees have transitioned to full-time remote work (Venkataramakrishnan, 2023). Evidence from this study and the Office for National Statistics (2023) shows that employees holding senior positions, belonging to older age groups or having longer tenures in their organisations may face fewer career disadvantages while working remotely. On the other hand, younger employees and newer labour market entrants face hurdles in cultivating skills and knowledge through observation, inquiry and mentorship from their more established and experienced colleagues when the latter group is working remotely (Foy and Gill, 2023; Quinio and Uddin, 2023). The deterioration of work identities, intensified by disconnection from others, may lead to demoralisation and a shortage of the human capital needed to address future challenges. Thus, organisations will have to confront several challenges, including the task of building a workforce aligned with their values and goals, devising initiatives to cultivate skilled workers and developing strategies to help remote workers recognise the value that their skills and contributions bring to the broader institutional context.

7.0 Limitations and future research

The study findings should be understood in the context of mandated work-from-home structures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. The disproportionately high representation of women and underrepresentation of men in the sample could have led to the findings inclining towards women's experiences. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small (N = 36). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the findings of this study are applicable to all knowledge workers who grappled with changes during this period.

This study targeted organisational members of a single sector in the UK. Similar studies should be conducted to extend these findings to other sectors. In this study, the blurring of frontstage and backstage settings was found to undermine career identities; however, employees could have substituted their in-person backstage settings with virtual ones (Hafermalz and Riemer, 2021). More research is required to understand if and how employees created virtual backstage settings during this period, and the types of backstage interactions they used to support their work identities. Finally, while visible and invisible demographic attributes received some consideration in this study, there is an opportunity for further research to delve deeper into how various workplace demographic groups reacted to the pandemic duress.

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Table 1: Participant characteristics

No	Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Occupation	Years in industry
**Participants in front-office roles**						
1.	William	Early 50s	Male	White	Underwriting	30
2.	Chris	Late 40s	Male	White	Underwriting	15
3.	Heather	Early 40s	Female	South Asian	Underwriting	14
4.	Basanti	Early 40s	Female	South Asian	Customer relations	10
5.	Nick	Early 50s	Male	White	Claims	10
6.	Ravi	Mid 30s	Male	South Asian	Broking	10
7.	Yulia	Mid 40s	Female	White	Underwriting	9
8.	Alex	Late 20s	Male	Black African	Underwriting	6
9.	Falcon	Mid 30s	Female	Black	Broking	5
10.	Anuj	Mid 20s	Male	South Asian	Broking	4
11.	Monica	Late 30s	Female	Black African	Broking	4
12.	Rose	Late 30s	Female	Black African	Sales	4
13.	Zoe	Early 40s	Female	Mixed race	Broking	4
14.	Nala	Early 20s	Female	Black African	Underwriting	3
15.	Micki	Early 20s	Female	Black African	Broking	2
16.	Tien	Mid 20s	Male	East Asian	Broking	2
**Participants in back-office roles**						
17.	Fiona	Early 50s	Female	White	Executive	32
18.	Mike	Early 50s	Male	White	IT	26
19.	Olivia	Early 40s	Female	Black African	Legal	20
20.	Rachel	Mid 40s	Female	White	Project management	18
21.	Louise	Mid 40s	Female	Black	Operations	16
22.	Charlie	Mid 40s	Female	White	Administration	14
23..	Eddie	Early 40s	Male	South Asian	Executive	14
24.	Sheila	Early 40s	Female	Mixed White and Black	Project management	11
25.	Ramya	Late 30s	Female	South Asian	Finance	10
26.	Kwame	Mid 40s	Male	Black African	Finance	9
27.	Lynn	Late 40s	Female	White	Marketing	9
28.	Jolly	Early 40s	Male	Black African	Risk management	8
29.	Lauren	Late 30s	Female	White	Legal	7
30.	Angela	Late 40s	Female	Black African	Legal	5

No	Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Occupation	Years in industry
31.	Anya	Late 20s	Female	White	Operations	5
32.	Lisa	Late 20s	Female	White	Operations	5
33.	Ian	Early 30s	Male	White	Finance	5
34.	Bert	Early 40s	Male	White	Change management	4
35.	Gillian	Mid 50s	Female	South Asian	IT	4
36.	Kate	Early 30s	Female	Mixed White and Other	Risk management	3

Table 2: Summary of findings

Topics from data	Thematic clusters	Aggregate concepts
Negative emotions. Tensions between work and domestic duties. Long working hours.	Loss of clear boundaries meant participants could not compartmentalise their different identities.	**Deterioration**
Concerns about being judged differently on virtual settings. Discomfort about switching to casual outfits for work. Fears about stigmas being exposed.	Loss of clear boundaries led to participants fearing a loss control of how they presented themselves to their co-workers.	
Informal interactions came to a halt. Barriers reinforced when cultivating cross ethnicity relations at work. Loss of small talk among colleagues.	Disintegrating shared identity.	**Disconnection**
Junior members in front-office roles worried about prospects. Senior members in front-office roles worried about the industry losing its meaning to others.	Protecting occupational identities.	
Further lowering of the status of back-office employees. Back-office employees unable to transition to front-office roles. Back-office employees considering disaffiliating from the industry.	Power disparities between front- and back-office employees.	

Table 3: Topics linked to percentage of sample

Topics	*N* =	Percentage of sample
Negative emotions.	29	80
Tensions between work and domestic duties.	16	44
Long working hours.	36	100
Concerns about being judged differently on virtual settings.	27	75
Discomfort about switching to casual outfits for work.	8	22
Fears about stigmas being exposed.	11	30
Informal interactions came to a halt.	35	97
Barriers reinforced when cultivating cross ethnicity relations at work.	17	47
Loss of small talk among colleagues.	30	83
Topics related to front- or back-office	*N* =	Percentage of front-office or back-office sample
Junior members in front-office roles worried about prospects.	8	50
Senior members in front-office roles worried about the industry losing its meaning to others.	7	44
Further lowering of the status of back-office employees.	15	75
Back-office employees unable to transition to front-office roles.	6	30
Back-office employees considering disaffiliating from the industry.	10	50

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