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Responses to Conflicts Between Personal Identity and Role Identity: Insights into the Identity Management Strategies of Entrepreneurs

Sascha Hohen  · Lars Schweizer

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Abstract This study explores individuals' identity management by utilizing an inductive approach that builds on grounded theory methodology and 51 interviews as primary data source. While previous identity management research focuses primarily on conflicts between social identities, this study addresses conflicts between individuals' personal identities and role identities. This paper presents an identity management model that builds on key identity factors that are grounded in the sample data. Moreover, four novel identity management strategies (i.e., adjustment, creation, elimination, and enhancement) are introduced. These four identity management strategies enable individuals to solve identity conflicts between their personal identities and their role identities.

Keywords Identity management · Role identity · Personal identity · Identity management strategies

JEL codes L26 · L20

1 Introduction

Identity scholars generally conceptualize individuals as having multiple identities rather than a single identity (Burke 2003; Burke and Stets 2023; Hogg 2018; Ramarajan 2014). Numerous studies suggest that the coexistence of multiple identities can create tensions and, under certain conditions, lead to identity conflict (e.g., Demetry 2017; Ramarajan 2014; Werthes et al. 2018). Identity conflict arises when two or

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more identities prescribe incompatible meanings, values, or expectations (Hirsh and Kang 2016; Horton et al. 2014). Recent literature understands identities as dynamic and potentially changeable rather than entirely fixed (e.g., Burke 2006; Burke and Stets 2023; Hogg 2018; McCall 2016). Identity conflict is therefore a possible consequence of holding multiple identities (Benet-Martínez and Haritatos 2005; Brook et al. 2008; Settles 2004).

Identity management is a complex psychological process involving identity and social aspects (Chaudoir and Fisher 2010; Clair et al. 2005; Jones and King 2013) and focuses on strategies individuals use to manage such conflicts (Jones et al. 2016; King et al. 2014; Roberts 2005). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979), Blanz et al. (1998) map strategies to a devalued social identity using data from East Germany. They show that these responses cluster into behavioral and cognitive strategies, with one frequent approach being to shift group comparisons by changing the temporal frame, evaluative standard, or reference group. Dumont and Waldzus (2015) explore the link between ideal selves and social context, finding that individuals' ideals align with their social environment: Change-oriented when relations feel insecure, advancement-oriented when secure. Niens and Cairns (2003) argue that social identity theory only partially predicts identity management strategy choices, especially for collective strategies. These choices often depend on feelings of group-level unfairness (fraternal deprivation) and authoritarian attitudes, which can push individuals toward social competition and order-restoring responses. Van Os et al. (2015) analyze incident stories in hospitals and find that nurses and residents often soothed identity threat through higher-level or downward recategorization, while physicians used patronizing downward comparisons. Such cognitive strategies help calm identity tensions and enable professionals to continue working.

Taken together, current research suggests that identity management strategies are shaped by three forces: perceived intergroup structure, feasible comparison changes, and psychological states. When boundaries seem permeable and status legitimate, individuals favor mobility or reframing; when illegitimate, collective action becomes likely. Identification, deprivation, and authoritarianism further steer these choices (Blanz et al. 1998; Niens and Cairns 2003; Dumont and Waldzus 2015; Van Os et al. 2015).

The studies mentioned above adopt a social identity perspective and focus on conflicts between social identities. This is understandable, as individuals often derive much of their identity from social groups. However, personal identities (Burke 2004; Stets 1995) refer to essential aspects of the self and define individuals in a unique way (Burke and Stets 2023). Constantly activated through interactions, relationships, and behaviors, personal identities tend to have high salience (Burke 2004). Owing to this constant activation and centrality in the identity hierarchy, Burke and Stets (2023, p. 187) describe the personal identity as the “master identity.”

A study adopting a personal identity perspective could substantially advance identity management research. O’Neil et al. (2022, p. 16) argue that the personal identity construct holds considerable explanatory power, describing it as a “guidepost that sets the direction of travel”. Yet, despite repeated calls to include personal identity in the identity “toolbox,” its role remains insufficiently understood. Integrating this

construct may therefore reveal novel mechanisms and strategies that enrich identity management literature.

While the mentioned studies focus on employed individuals, examining entrepreneurs' identity management offers several advantages. Unlike employees, entrepreneurs can decide what work to do and when (Hessels et al. 2017; Rietveld et al. 2015; Stephan and Roesler 2010), delegate tasks, and are not bound by superiors (Benz and Frey 2008; Millán et al. 2013; Prottas and Thompson 2006). Their autonomy makes them ideal subjects for studying identity management, as their strategies are less constrained by external factors. Moreover, such a focus provides new insights into entrepreneurial phenomena, such as business model pivots and leadership changes viewed through an identity lens.

Hence, this study focuses on entrepreneurs and contributes to identity management research in several ways. First, it introduces a unique model that integrates personal identities. Second, it presents four novel strategies entrepreneurs use to resolve identity conflicts. Third, by examining the role identity "entrepreneur," phenomena such as business model pivots and leadership changes are illuminated from a new identity perspective.

Methodologically, our scope offers several benefits. It preserves level-of-analysis integrity by separating intrapersonal from intergroup dynamics, thus avoiding construct and causal ambiguity. Moreover, it enables a deeper explanation of intrapersonal mechanisms and strengthens the data-to-theory chain from first-order concepts to aggregate dimensions.

To theorize how personal identities shape identity management among entrepreneurs, we ask: "How can the personal identity concept be integrated into an identity management model and what strategies can be identified?" We adopt an interpretive, interview-based design suited to developing grounded, mechanism-focused theory rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). We implement the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al. 2013) since this approach ensures an auditable and transparent data-to-theory chain.

2 Theoretical Background and Literature Overview

This section introduces identity theory (Stryker 1968, 1980), the personal identity construct (Burke 2004; Stets 1995), and social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). It also reviews key identity-related terms in entrepreneurship research and explains how the study captures social feedback and explores participants' identities.

2.1 Role, Personal, and Social Identities

Identity theory (Stryker 1968, 1980) features role identities that are related to social actions and guide individuals' behavior (Brenner et al. 2014; Burke 1991; Burke and Reitzes 1981; Stets and Serpe 2013). The meanings of role identities result partly from culture (social expectations) and partly from individuals' unique interpretations (internalized meanings) of a role (Stets and Serpe 2013). In other words, individuals

are socialized into the meanings of role identities in their cultures and create their own unique understandings of them. Individuals' unique understandings of role identities include meanings that are exclusively defined and not necessarily shared by other individuals (Burke and Stets 2023; Stets and Serpe 2013).

The *personal identity construct* is understood as a set of meanings based on characteristics that individuals internalize as their own and that serve to define them as unique (Burke 2004; Stets 1995). Burke and Stets (2023) describe personal identity as a core part of an individual's self and argue that personal identity acts as a control instance for role identities. Personal identities contain memories and meanings of how a distinctive attribute feels, looks, and sounds (Fiske et al. 2002; Oyserman et al. 2017). For example, a personal identity might include attributes such as masterful, dominant, submissive, sociable, or controlling (Burke 2004; Stets and Cast 2007). The meanings of personal identities infiltrate the meanings of role identities (Stets and Carter 2012) and influence identity choices by signaling which role identities seem appropriate (Hitlin 2003). For example, a woman who defines herself as caring (an attribute of her personal identity) is likely to act caring in her role identity *teacher*. This woman is likely to adopt a role identity, such as *homeless shelter volunteer*, that is consistent with the caring attribute of her personal identity (Stets and Carter 2012).

Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979) focuses on group or category relations. The theory emphasizes how individuals view themselves as members of a particular group or category (the in-group) as opposed to another relevant group or category (the out-group) and the implications of this grouping (Hogg and Terry 2000; Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987). Tajfel (1978) understands social identity as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Becoming an in-group member means becoming one with the group and interpreting circumstances from the group's perspective, thus creating homogeneity among group members (Stets and Burke 2000). Group memberships that distinguish between an in-group and an out-group imply an understanding of "us versus them" (Hogg 2018).

2.2 Identity Terms in Entrepreneurship Literature

While the terms *entrepreneurial identity* and *founder identity* are often used in entrepreneurship research, they describe different concepts (Mmbaga et al. 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al. 2021; Wagenschwanz 2021).

Murnieks et al. (2014, p. 1589) understand the term *entrepreneurial identity* as "individual sets of meanings and behaviors that define those individuals when acting in an entrepreneurial role." Thus, entrepreneurial identity encompasses values and expectations associated with being an entrepreneur or entrepreneurial and is shaped by social discourse (Mmbaga et al. 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al. 2021; Wagenschwanz 2021). Powell and Baker (2014, p. 1409) understand the term *founder identity* as "the set of identities that is chronically salient to a founder in her or his day-to-day work." Hence, a founder identity is broader than an entrepreneurial identity because it encompasses multiple identity contents that may be salient to individuals in their

work. In other words, a founder identity may include an entrepreneurial identity and other identity content that is related to work (Mmbaga et al. 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al. 2021; Wagenschwanz 2021).

2.3 Assessment of Social Feedback and Interviewees' Identities

Individuals' perceptions of how others see them in a given situation may not be how other individuals actually see them. Individuals may selectively perceive others' appraisals or project their own appraisals onto others, mistakenly assuming that others share their view of themselves (Tice and Wallace 2003). What is important, however, is the meaning that individuals derive from their interpretation of social feedback. This phenomenon is known in the identity literature as *reflected appraisals* (Gallagher et al. 2022; Matsueda 1992). Identity literature (e.g., Asencio 2013; Gallagher et al. 2022; Khanna 2004; Merolla 2016) largely agrees that individuals perceive social feedback primarily through reflected appraisals. Therefore, social feedback was assessed by respondents' descriptions of how they interpreted others' feedback because it is less important than how others actually see them (Burke and Stets 2023; Gallagher et al. 2022; Merolla 2016).

Interviewees' roles and role identities were assessed through their self-reports during the interviews. In this study, the following criteria are used to distinguish between roles and role identities: Roles are understood as sets of behavioral expectations associated with specific positions in a social structure (Ashforth 2001; Ebaugh 1988). Role identities differ from roles in that they involve internalized meanings and social expectations and serve as a form of self-expression (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Sluss et al. 2010; Stryker and Burke 2000). Interviewees' personal identities were assessed by their self-reports of their internalized attributes (i.e., traits and characteristics) that define them as unique individuals (Burke 2004; Stets 1995).

3 Research Design

Inductive studies are particularly suited for theory development (Eisenhardt et al. 2016; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). As this study aims to develop a novel identity management model incorporating personal identities, an inductive design is more appropriate than a deductive approach. Grounded theory, a well-established inductive methodology in the social sciences (Corbin and Strauss 2015; Murphy et al. 2017), seeks to build theory empirically grounded in data.

In grounded theory, data collection and analysis proceed iteratively. Researchers begin without prior assumptions, identify patterns, and develop categories. Through theoretical sampling, emerging categories are tested against reality by seeking confirming or disconfirming cases. Categories are constantly compared, refined, and expanded (Corbin and Strauss 2015).

Because identity management often unfolds as a mundane process (e.g., Jain et al. 2009; Sundaramurthy and Kreiner 2008), grounded theory is well suited for its study (Van Burg et al. 2022). The Gioia method (Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2013), building

on grounded theory, has been widely used in identity research (e.g., Grimes 2018; Patvardhan et al. 2015; Snihur 2016; Yitshaki and Kropp 2016). Explicitly interpretive, the method assumes a socially constructed world and emphasizes informants' sense-making as "knowledgeable agents" (Gehman et al. 2018, p. 291).

Our study is explicitly interpretive, focusing on how entrepreneurs make sense of social feedback (reflected appraisals) and translate these interpretations into identity-management responses. The Gioia approach suits such meaning-centered theorizing, moving transparently from first-order concepts (informant-centric) to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions (researcher-centric) and visualizing this progression through a data-structure figure (Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2013). By contrast, Eisenhardt's case-based approach (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) emphasizes replication logic and construct tables rather than meaning-making, and Langley's process approach (Langley 1999; Langley and Abdallah 2011) focuses on longitudinal, time-stamped data. As our study relies on retrospective interviews, these methods are less suitable. We therefore adopt the Gioia method to address our research question.

This research follows the *Statement of Ethical Practice* of the British Sociological Association (BSA 2017), which raises researchers' awareness of ethical issues and emphasizes responsibility for ethical conduct. The implications for this study are outlined in Appendix D, and details of the ethical approval process appear in Appendix E.

To examine multiple identity factors and outcomes simultaneously, we used a cross-sectional research design (Gaski 2015; Goddard and Melville 2004), serving as a preliminary step in exploring the role of personal identities in identity management.

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs were used as the primary data source. Archival data, company brochures, and company websites were used as secondary data sources.

3.1.1 Interview Candidates

A variety of methods were used to identify appropriate interviewees. First, posts about the research project were made in several entrepreneurial newsgroups and forums. These posts introduced the research project and asked entrepreneurs to volunteer. Second, employer associations and business incubators were asked to provide contact information. Third, the snowball sampling technique (Denzin and Lincoln 2017) was applied by asking participating entrepreneurs to contact other entrepreneurs and ask for their support. Fourth, the authors of this study attended an entrepreneurial fair to connect with individuals who were interested in the research project and willing to contribute. The data collection process took more than two years to complete (November 2019 to September 2022). All interviews were conducted separately to obtain as much unfiltered information as possible. The interviews were fully audio-recorded and conducted either in person at the interviewed

Table 1 Overview of Interviewed Entrepreneurs

Interviewee	Age [Years]	Gender	Interviews [#]	Industry of Business	Sales [EUR m]	Employees [#]	Incorporation [Year]
A01	54	Male	1	Real Estate Management	1.5	25	1998
A02	46	Male	1	Software, Apps	28	30	2010
A03	49	Male	2	Veterinary Services	1.8	32	2008
A04	59	Male	1	Printing	19	140	1977
A05	59	Male	1	Metal Processing	4.5	62	1994
A06	67	Male	1	Mechanical Engineering	9	80	1980
A07	57	Male	1	Food Manufacturing	2	50	1994
A08	48	Male	2	Market Research	0.9	9	2013
A09	47	Male	1	Advertising	1.8	13	2010
A10	60	Male	1	Medical Equipment Engineering	5.5	10	1999
A11	60	Male	1	Gardening and Landscaping	2.1	25	1994
A12	67	Male	1	Structural Engineering	20	250	1992
A13	58	Female	1	Wood Processing	15	180	1999
A14	70	Male	1	Construction Material	18	120	1985
A15	53	Male	1	Management Consultancy	2.2	25	2009
A16	61	Male	2	Home Textiles	2.5	28	2015
A17	63	Male	1	Power Engineering	10	58	1997
A18	69	Male	1	Freight Transport	8	50	1977
A19	29	Male	2	Software, Apps	3	80	2014
A20	56	Male	1	HVAC	25	80	1985
A21	58	Male	1	Wood Processing	80	250	1999
A22	48	Male	2	Financial Services	16	12	2010
A23	39	Male	2	Online Advertising	4	50	2011
A24	38	Male	2	Software, Apps	0.2	3	2018
A25	57	Male	1	Financial Services	1.3	12	2000
A26	44	Male	1	IT Services	5	35	2013
A27	48	Male	1	Financial Consulting	2.2	15	2006

Table 1 (Continued)

Interviewee	Age [Years]	Gender	Interviews [#]	Industry of Business	Sales [EUR m]	Employees [#]	Incorporation [Year]
A28	31	Male	1	Food Manufac- turing	2.2	30	2013
A29	35	Male	1	Automotive Supplies	56	125	1999
A30	31	Male	1	Metal Process- ing	4	20	2015
A31	48	Male	1	Mechanical Engineering	18	90	1997
A32	77	Male	1	Rubber and Plastic Manufac- turing	40	100	1974
A33	39	Male	1	Metal Process- ing	7	50	2016
A34	55	Male	1	Management Consulting	4.2	40	2006
A35	39	Female	1	Online Advertis- ing	3.2	70	2008

entrepreneur's company or via online video meetings. A total of 411 people were contacted, and 44 posts were made on business forums to find suitable interviewees.

3.1.2 Criteria for Interviewees

Shane and Venkataraman (2001, p. 218) define the field of entrepreneurship as the scholarly domain of “sources of opportunities; the processes of discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities; and the set of individuals who discover, evaluate, and exploit them.”

This statement shows that for Shane and Venkataraman (2001) entrepreneurship as scholarly domain not only consists of the discovery and the evaluation of opportunities, but also of the exploitation of opportunities. The exploitation process can take place in new or established organizations, as the authors do not mention the age or size of the organizations in which opportunities are pursued (Davidsson 2008, 2016; Shane and Venkataraman 2001).

In this study, interviewees are considered *entrepreneurs* if they derive their income from active involvement in an ongoing business, rather than working for someone else. No restrictions were placed on the age or size of the entrepreneurs' businesses. These restrictions might have reduced the range of novel identity management strategies that could be identified in the sample data. In the end, 35 entrepreneurs who met the above criteria were interviewed (see Table 1).

Triangulation involves examining the phenomenon of interest from multiple perspectives (Jick 1979). Triangulation typically increases the validity and robustness of a study and its claims (Miles et al. 2019; Pettigrew 1990, 1992; Yin 2018). Moreover, triangulation often helps to understand events in greater detail (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

Table 2 Overview of Interviewed Stakeholders

Interviewee	Age [Years]	Gender	Interviews [#]	Relationship
B01	47	Female	1	Colleague of Interviewee A07
B02	60	Male	1	Colleague of Interviewee A07
B03	55	Male	1	Colleague of Interviewee A09
B04	47	Male	1	Colleague of Interviewee A09
B05	41	Female	1	Colleague of Interviewee A27
B06	52	Female	1	Colleague of Interviewee A27
B07	48	Male	1	Colleague of Interviewee A34
B08	45	Female	1	Colleague of Interviewee A34
B09	67	Male	1	Consultant of Interviewee A17

This study makes use of triangulation by including nine stakeholders (see Table 2 for more details). The selection criteria for the interviewed stakeholders are that they have known the entrepreneur of interest for several years and have insight into their workplace behavior.

3.1.3 Validity and Reliability

All interviewees were assured that they would remain anonymous and that the interview protocols would be handled sensitively. In general, this procedure encourages respondents to provide detailed and truthful information (Huber and Power 1985; Miller et al. 1997). All interviews were fully audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language (German) and then translated into English. Other researchers verified the content validity of the quotes cited in this study. The interview guide outlining the structure and themes of the interviews is provided in Appendix B.

Interviewees could not influence each other during the interviews, as all interviews were conducted separately. All interviewees participated in this study voluntarily and without compensation. None of the interviewees were personally known to the authors prior to the study. Interviewees were interviewed a second time if there were any comprehension or follow-up questions that arose. A total of seven interviewees were interviewed a second time. Internal validity was increased by conducting multiple iterations of analysis. External validity was enhanced by studying multiple interviewees and evaluating comparative results. Reliability was addressed by following established transcription and documentation standards, conducting the interviews separately, and taking field notes during the interviews.

The data collection process was completed when theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that further interviews would not add significant value or new insights to the study. A total of 51 interviews were conducted. These interviews lasted 2735 min (45 h and 35 min), or approximately 54 min per interview. Transcription resulted in a total of 1624 double-spaced pages, supplemented by 98 pages of field notes. All interviews were conducted in Germany.

Table 3 Exemplary Quotations for Second-Order Themes

Second-Order Themes	Representative Informant Quotes
<i>Social Feedback</i>	A04: The day we informed our staff was dramatic! [Interviewee sold his company to investors] ... First, we have gathered our executives. We were in the meeting room, and then I said what we had done. There was absolute silence! Nobody said anything! Then they left without saying anything, and then we held a meeting around the printing presses with all the other employees. ... There were a lot of employees who were very reserved! And there were a few who did not even say good morning to me the next day! A14: When I came into my company, they [his employees] greeted me with a storm of applause! A20: We called in the employees at very short notice at 1 p.m. Let me tell you, it was challenging to step in front of these people [his employees] and let them know the news! Interviewer: This was emotionally very stressful for you? A20: Yes! Interviewer: How did your employees react? ... A20: I think diverse. Some of them have certainly understood, or many have understood. ... Certainly, some people were afraid! After all, you always hear what can happen when companies are sold. ... Loss of jobs! These things come up in their minds. That was certainly the case with a lot of these people. ... However, there were also reactions where people were dismayed!
<i>Characteristics</i>	A03: I am more of an optimistic nature. Even if I have personal blows of fate, such as illness or something, then I accept them and do not quarrel with my fate because I cannot change anything about it. I think there are different types of personalities. ... And I am one of those who go through the world with more optimism A06: I am very consequent in many things, either yes or no! That includes the products that I have developed. Either I say I will do it, or I keep my hands off it. However, if I say I will do it, then I will pull it off A08: I would say that I am a strong realist! That means I have screened a lot of ideas in my life. Many, many ideas! I also wrote a lot of business plans. This is important to me as an entrepreneur. ... In the past, I have always compared what I wanted with what I have
<i>Meaning Comparison</i>	A24: I decided that I wanted to do something different. We are back to the personal level if you think of risk-taking and basic security. You must be careful; after all, you are not alone! You do not take risks only by yourself. There is a line that I am not willing to cross A29: I enjoy teamwork! Leading employees, which is perhaps atypical, is not what I particularly enjoy. Quite the contrary! It is instead that I do not enjoy it! I enjoy being on a team a lot more A16: What I enjoy as an entrepreneur is that I see a lot of different things. I can influence things and topics that move me. ... What fascinated me back then when I switched from an employed person to entrepreneurship, is that I have intellectual independence! You get freedom
<i>Work/Non-Work-Related Role Identities</i>	A22: I have five children! You probably only have so many children if you feel comfortable in the father role and enjoy spending time with them and so on. Therefore, the father's role is essential in my life! I am married, so the role of a husband is also essential A33: I am a father of two. I am pleased to be a father, but I do sometimes say that it is excellent that kindergartens and daycare centers exist A35: I do a lot of sports in my free time. More precisely, extreme sport. Long-distance triathlon. I train a lot, and that is important to me ... My job is not my only purpose in life

Table 3 (Continued)

Second-Order Themes	Representative Informant Quotes
<i>Negative Emotions</i>	A16: As a result, the sporting side and sports activities suffered. It went so far that basically everything was reduced. ... Circles of friends and acquaintances were also completely reduced. ... I could express it in a very negative way and say I was eaten up by my company! A21: If something did not work out, they called the mayor, for example, in [place], and in no time, every light was green; the course was set! Now, after twenty years. ... Every stupid public official comes around the corner with something! Annoying! Things with that you never had anything to do, which produce a lot of administrative work A20: That experience, that painful experience was therefore a reason for these considerations
<i>Positive Emotions</i>	Interviewer: Do you like the role of entrepreneur? Do you have a passion for it? A25: One hundred percent! Interviewer: One hundred percent? Are there any other roles that you would like to fulfill? ... A25: For me, being an entrepreneur is not a program! It is something that corresponds to my personal preferences. ... A14: Now they [his employees] greet me with a storm of applause! Because everything stays the same and this is more worth than any million that you do not need anyway! A07: I am not one of those who say, "I gladly take on responsibility." ... I was happy when I was able to hand over that responsibility. Responsibility is a burden!
<i>Internalized Meanings</i>	Interviewer: What does it mean for you to be an entrepreneur? ... A22: For me, that means that you ultimately get a business entity on its way. This goes beyond self-employed work as a web designer or computer scientist or whatever. ... They sell their own working time. That is just a different way of selling your working time as employees do it. For me, an entrepreneur is someone who founds Facebook or who founds a care service that somehow has twenty employees and looks after a hundred seniors in their homes. ... For me, that is an entrepreneur A03: Being an entrepreneur has different dimensions. On the one hand, basically, the dimension, to use Schumpeter's words, ... the creative destroyer. Well, you just must bring innovation to create innovation. ... That is one point. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly a question of character as well. Which is anchored to a certain extent in oneself. ... I believe that entrepreneurship is about great responsibility. That is a thing that stands above everything. After all, you do not just have responsibility for your own money. I think that is the last thing you think about as an entrepreneur; you would rather care about your employees. It starts with the question, "can I keep someone if I hire someone?". ... And in between lies the entrepreneurial freedom that you have. That you can make decisions by yourself; that is freedom! Interviewer: What does it mean for you to be an entrepreneur? A23: To create things and to take responsibility. ... Create things is linked to what I want to do. I decide, and then I face the consequences. Every decision I make, either in dialogue or alone, has consequences. Both for better and for worse. To have the freedom to design the framework. You can create something great and sustainable. ... Of course, financial success is also an aspect, but it is primarily about creating, responsibility, and then financial success

Table 3 (Continued)

Second-Order Themes	Representative Informant Quotes
<i>Change</i>	A35: Whenever I noticed that a situation was no longer right for me, then I counteracted relatively quickly and changed the situation. One example was the situation with my shareholders. I was very upset because I basically did all the work as managing director but was completely blocked by the other shareholders. Those who did nothing for the company in every aspect. It was clear to me that I must change this situation, or I would have to quit ... therefore, I changed the situation and got my control back A29: If I spend a lot of time on these tasks [not business-related tasks], I do not have the time to take care of strategic things. Interviewer: You do not have the time to advance your company anymore? A29: Exactly! That is why I do not like that. Because I just do not want to waste my time on it A22: I worked probably about seventy hours a week! ... I have now roughly halved that since the past year or two. Now, I have the time to do these compensatory things. That means I sit on my bike more often than I did back then. Because back then, there was simply very little time available for compensation. ... Interviewer: Did the entrepreneurial role take up a lot of time and energy back then? A22: Yes! Interviewer: Did you lack this time and energy for other roles, such as an athlete or family man? A22: Yes! Interviewer: You had practically withdrawn the time and energy and then put it into your role as an entrepreneur? A22: Yes! ... Just like that!

3.2 Data Analysis

Initial coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis. Identified patterns were condensed into first-order concepts. After developing first-order concepts, the axial coding process began. Second order themes emerged from the data. The identified second-order themes are *social feedback*, *characteristics*, *internalized meanings*, *meaning comparison*, *work-related* and *non-work-related role identities*, *positive* and *negative emotions*, and *change*. The next step was to create a table with sample quotes to illustrate the identified second-order themes (see Table 3). The selective coding process identified aggregate dimensions that emerged from the second-order themes. Finally, the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions were visualized (see Fig. 1).

4 Results

The entrepreneurs employed four identity management strategies—*adjustment*, *creation*, *elimination*, and *enhancement*—to address conflicts between their role and personal identities. The following section outlines each of these strategies in detail and illustrates them with examples from our empirical data. An overview of the identified strategies is presented in Table 4.¹

¹ By taking the complex nature of identity into account and the need for construct clarity, a description of the identity terms used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

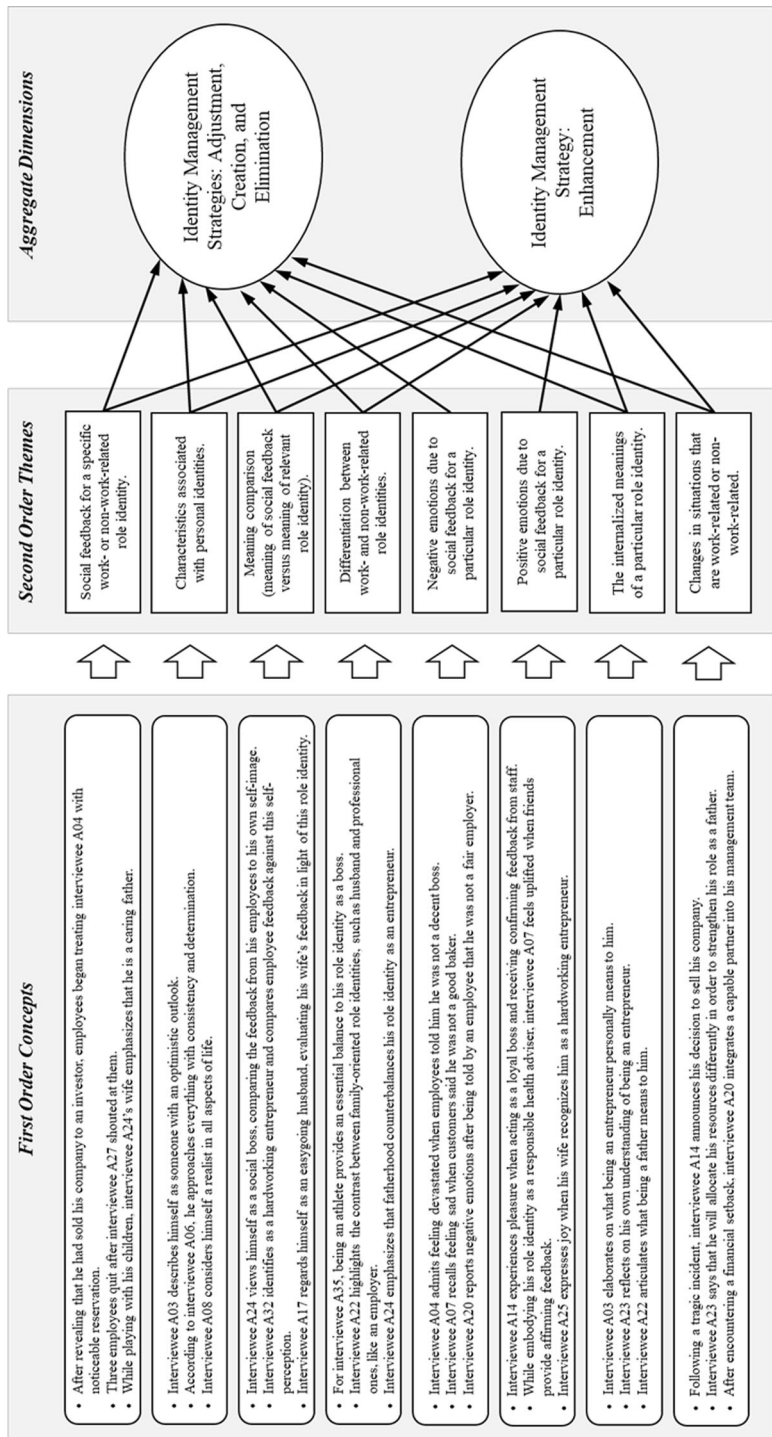


Fig. 1 Data Structure

4.1 Identity Management Strategy: Adjustment

Interviewees experienced social feedback when acting out their role identities. In some cases, the sensed feedback for their work-related role identities was not in line with the attributes of the interviewees' personal identities. This situation resulted in tensions between the interviewees' personal identities and the interviewees' work-related role identities. The interviewees experienced negative emotions as a result.

By using the identity management strategy *adjustment*, the interviewees adjusted their behaviors when acting out the affected work-related role identity. In doing so, the interviewees changed their behavior with the goal that future social feedback for the particular work-related role identity matches the attributes of the interviewees' personal identities (see Table 4 for an illustration of this strategy). Interviewee A27 provides an example of this identity management strategy. The 48-year-old entrepreneur owns a consulting firm that employs 15 people. His personal identity includes the attributes of *charismatic* and *social*. During the interview, Interviewee A27 said, "I am someone who inspires people. ... People are enthusiastic about the things I do. ... People notice me and want to have contact with me" (Interviewee A27). However, in a stressful situation, Interviewee A27 lost his temper and yelled at his employees. Interviewee B06 is an employee of Interviewee A27. She describes this situation as follows:

To be honest, he [Interviewee A27] was unbearable. It was really hard. ... He was nice, and the next moment, he became mad and yelled. I just thought: What is the matter with you? Should I yell at you? That is not how it works! It was not nice, and he did not apologize afterwards. (Interviewee B06).

Subsequently, three of his employees quit. This circumstance hurt Interviewee A27's feelings, and he started to change his behavior when acting out his work-related role identity *boss*. He behaves more generously when interacting with his employees (e.g., by inviting them to lunch regularly). Interviewee A27 said, "I have become a completely different boss" during the interview. Interviewee B06 had noticed that Interviewee A27 changed his behavior. She said the following during the interview:

His behavior has definitely improved! ... It was bad for him. Long-standing employees left. That hurt him a lot back then. ... I think that is why he is so generous now and treats his employees well.

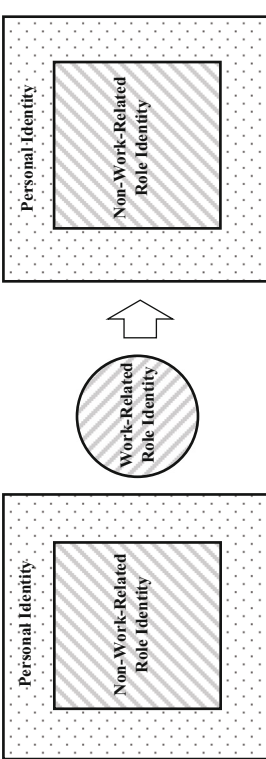
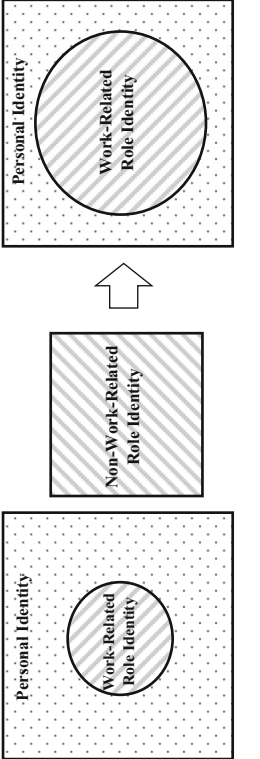
After Interviewee A27 changed his behavior, he received new feedback from his employees. This feedback matched the attributes of *charismatic* and *social* of his personal identity and Interviewee A27 experienced positive emotions. Based on the presented empirical evidence, we propose the following:

Proposition 1. When an entrepreneur perceives social feedback that does not match the attributes of the entrepreneur's personal identity while acting out a work-related role identity, the entrepreneur tends to adjust behavior when acting out this work-related role identity.

Table 4 Identity Management Strategies

Identity Management Strategy	Description	Visualization
<i>Adjustment</i>	An interviewee receives social feedback when acting out a work-related role identity. The perceived meaning of the social feedback is not in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity. The interviewee experiences negative emotions consequently. The interviewee uses the identity management strategy <i>adjustment</i>. In doing so, the interviewee changes behavior when acting out the work-related role identity. The interviewee then receives new social feedback when acting out the work-related role identity. The identity management strategy <i>adjustment</i> is completed when the perceived meaning of the new social feedback is in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity	
<i>Creation</i>	An interviewee receives social feedback when acting out a work-related role identity. The perceived meaning of the social feedback is not in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity. The interviewee experiences negative emotions consequently. The interviewee uses the identity management strategy <i>creation</i>. The interviewee creates a non-work-related role identity. The interviewee receives social feedback when acting out the new non-work-related role identity. The identity management strategy <i>creation</i> is completed when the perceived meaning of the social feedback is in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity	

Table 4 (Continued)

Identity Management Strategy	Description	Visualization
<i>Elimination</i>	An interviewee receives social feedback when acting out a work-related role identity. The perceived meaning of the social feedback is not in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity. The interviewee experiences negative emotions consequently. The interviewee uses the identity management strategy <i>elimination</i>. In doing so, the interviewee eliminates the work-related-role identity permanently. The interviewee will not receive social feedback for this work-related role identity anymore	 The diagram illustrates the 'Elimination' strategy. It is divided into two parts: 'Before Identity Management Strategy Was Used' and 'After Identity Management Strategy Was Used'. In the 'Before' part, a large rectangle labeled 'Personal Identity' contains a smaller rectangle labeled 'Non-Work-Related Role Identity' and a circle labeled 'Work-Related Role Identity'. An arrow points from the 'Work-Related Role Identity' circle to the 'After' part. In the 'After' part, the 'Work-Related Role Identity' circle is gone, and only the 'Non-Work-Related Role Identity' rectangle remains within the 'Personal Identity' rectangle.
<i>Enhancement</i>	An interviewee receives social feedback when acting out a work-related role identity. The perceived meaning of the social feedback is in line with the attributes of the interviewee's personal identity. The interviewee experiences positive emotions consequently. The interviewee uses the identity management strategy <i>enhancement</i>. In doing so, the interviewee increases the time and energy resources of the work-related role identity and decreases the time and energy resources of a non-work-related identity that is not in line with the interviewee's personal identity. Thus, the interviewee's work-related role identity gets more emphasis in the interviewee's life. The interviewee experiences more positive emotions than before the individual initiated the identity management strategy	 The diagram illustrates the 'Enhancement' strategy. It is divided into two parts: 'Before Identity Management Strategy Was Used' and 'After Identity Management Strategy Was Used'. In the 'Before' part, a large rectangle labeled 'Personal Identity' contains a smaller circle labeled 'Work-Related Role Identity' and a rectangle labeled 'Non-Work-Related Role Identity'. An arrow points from the 'Work-Related Role Identity' circle to the 'After' part. In the 'After' part, the 'Work-Related Role Identity' circle is significantly larger and more prominent within the 'Personal Identity' rectangle, while the 'Non-Work-Related Role Identity' rectangle remains the same size.

4.2 Identity Management Strategy: Creation

While most entrepreneurs solved identity conflicts between their personal identities and their work-related role identities by applying the identity management strategy *adjustment*, several interviewed entrepreneurs used an identity management strategy that we call *creation*. In doing so, interviewees created a new non-work-related role identity that likely receives social feedback that matches the attributes of the interviewees' personal identities. An illustration of this strategy is provided in Table 4.

Interviewee A07 gives an example of identity management strategy creation. The 57-year-old is a master baker and owns a bakery. He places significant importance on the quality of his goods (e.g., bread, biscuits, or cakes). He wants to be a baker who sells only healthy products with natural ingredients. His personal identity includes the attributes of being *health-conscious* and *responsible*. However, customers do not like his healthy products and prefer lower-quality products that taste better. When Interviewee A07 interacts with his customers, he receives social feedback that bothers him. He said the following during the interview: "When I noticed that our customers did not want our products for these reasons. ... Then, of course, I felt bad" (Interviewee A07). The 47-year-old Interviewee B01 is a longtime employee of Interviewee A07. The following conversation with Interviewee B01 illustrates the struggle of Interviewee A07:

Interviewee B01: He (Interviewee A07) said that he does not stand for his products! Sugar, white flour, and carbohydrates are nothing he wants to sell! ... It is about customers' eating habits. ... He knows a lot about nutrition and knows that customers' eating habits are not good. ... Interviewer: His customers' eating habits did not match his health-conscious attitude? Interviewee B01: Exactly! He eats very healthy and develops healthy baked goods. However, nobody wanted to buy them!

The 60-year-old Interviewee B02 has worked for many years for Interviewee A07. In the following conversation, Interviewee B02 describes how Interviewee A07 felt about the fact that his customers do not want healthy products:

Interviewee B02: He (Interviewee A07) is very committed to baking without any additives. That is very important to him. Interviewer: Does he miss a reward for his work? Since he makes excellent products, but customers do not want them? Does he wish that there is a demand for healthy products? Interviewee B02: Yes, definitely! ... However, that is not the case, and that is terrible for him.

Summing up, Interviewee A07 wants to sell his customers healthy products with natural ingredients. However, Interviewee A07 perceived social feedback from his customers that they demand products that include unhealthy ingredients (e.g., sugar, fat, and additives). Since his business must be profitable, Interviewee A07 must satisfy the demands of his customers and sell products he does not stand for. Because Interviewee A07 cannot change the social feedback he receives when acting out his work-related role identity *baker*, he created a non-work-related role identity. In doing so, he did a two-year-long training in his free time to become a *certified*

health advisor. In this role identity, he gives health advice to family and friends. When acting out his new role identity, he perceives social feedback that matches the attributes *health-conscious* and *responsible* of his personal identity. Based on the empirical evidence presented, we propose the following:

Proposition 2. When an entrepreneur perceives social feedback that does not match the attributes of the entrepreneur's personal identity while acting out a work-related role identity, the entrepreneur tends to create a non-work-related role identity.

4.3 Identity Management Strategy: Elimination

Some of our interviewees used a third identity management strategy. We name this identity management strategy *elimination*. Interviewees perceived social feedback that did not match the attributes of their personal identities when acting out work-related role identities. These circumstances lead to conflicts between the interviewees' personal identities and their work-related role identities. By using the strategy *elimination*, interviewees eliminate their work-related role identity for which they perceive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identities. Table 4 provides an illustration of this strategy.

The 63-year-old Interviewee A17 gives an example of this identity management strategy. His personal identity includes the attribute of being *easygoing*. Interviewee A17 sold his power engineering company recently to investors. When asked why he sold his company, the interviewee said that having a company demands too much responsibility from him. Interviewee A17 said the following during the interview:

Interviewee A17: I feel relieved! After the firm sale, a burden lifted from my shoulders. The burden of responsibility! I am not a person who likes to take responsibility. However, I had a lot of responsibility back then! I was happy when I was able to hand over this responsibility. Responsibility is a burden! Interviewer: Was it a burden for you? Interviewee A17: Yes! Now I am relieved! I have a completely different feeling! Now I do not have to think about quarterly statements. I do not have to think about how to make sales and things like that.

Interviewee A17 said he would like to spend more time with his wife and travel when asked what he would do next. Interviewee B09 is an M&A consultant hired by Interviewee A17 to find potential buyers for his company and manage the selling process. When Interviewee B09 was asked about Interviewee A17's selling motives, he answered the following:

Interviewee B09: He wants to do other things in his life! He does not want to sit at his desk daily or be in the factory hall. Instead, he wants to travel with his wife and enjoy life.

Interviewee A17 eliminated his work-related role identity *entrepreneur* and did not create a new work-related role identity. Interviewee A17 has less responsibility in his non-work-related role identities than in his former work-related role identity *entrepreneur*. Based on the empirical evidence, we propose the following:

Proposition 3. When an entrepreneur perceives social feedback that does not match the attributes of the entrepreneur's personal identity while acting out a work-related role identity, the entrepreneur tends to eliminate this work-related role identity.

4.4 Identity Management Strategy: Enhancement

Interviewees understand that the amount of time and energy they can use to act out a specific role identity is limited. In other words, the longer an interviewee acts out a particular role identity during the day, the less time is left to act out other role identities. The same applies to interviewees' energy resources. The more energy an interviewee needs to act out a specific role identity during the day, the less energy is left over to act out other role identities. A conversation with 38-year-old Interviewee A24 illustrates this circumstance. The interviewee said the following:

Interviewee A24: It [being an entrepreneur] takes up everything! Interviewer: It takes up everything? Interviewee A24: In terms of time and energy. It takes a lot! ... Of course, if you have children like I have, you notice that pendulum. You realize that you must slow down. ... A counterbalance! Something is wrong if you see that you have too little time for your children. It is always a balancing act for me.

Interviewee A24 mentions two role identities: His work-related role identity *entrepreneur* and his non-work-related role identity *father*. Interviewee A24 expresses that when he uses more time and energy resources to act out his role identity *entrepreneur*, he will consequently have less of these resources when acting out the role identity *father*. The time and energy resources that interviewee A24 can use during the day are limited. Therefore, interviewee A24 chooses a particular role identity he wants to spend these resources on.

In general, interviewees stated that they try to spend more time and energy resources on role identities that receive social feedback that match the attributes of their personal identities and less of these resources on role identities that receive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identities. In other words, the resources of work-related role identities that conflict with interviewees' personal identities are reduced and the resources of work-related role identities that match with interviewees' personal identities are increased. We name this identity management strategy *enhancement*. A visual representation of this strategy can be found in Table 4.

The identity management strategy is illustrated in the example of Interviewee A32. The 77-year-old entrepreneur owns a factory that produces rubber and plastic parts. He has been working in his company for 46 years and does not want to leave, although he has reached an advanced age. Interviewee A32 said that being an entrepreneur is the most important thing in his life. It has been his dream to become an entrepreneur since his childhood. He said the following during the interview: "I went to college in XXX [place] and completed three years of an entrepreneurship class. My educational goal was to become an entrepreneur" (Interviewee A32).

Interviewee A32 was asked how important it is for him to be an entrepreneur, then the following conversation arose:

Interviewer: Are there any other identities you prefer over your identity of being an entrepreneur? Interviewee A32: By far, without anything following, number one! Interviewer: Other things, such as an athlete, a club member, or something like that, are not essential for you? Interviewee A32: No ... I have my entrepreneurship. From that, I get total satisfaction. ... That satisfied me so much that I keep saying I need Christmas five times a year to process this benefit properly. I can hardly explain to anyone what joy and satisfaction entrepreneurship brings me. At home, nobody understands me anyways because I only work. I do not have children. I married it [his company]. ... The company calls the shots.

When acting out his work-related role identity *entrepreneur* Interviewee A32 perceives social feedback that matches the attributes of this personal identity. Interviewee A32 spends more time and energy resources on this role identity than on other role identities that receive no matching social feedback. Interviewee A32 experiences more positive emotions as a result. Based on the empirical examples given above, we propose the following:

Proposition 4. When an entrepreneur perceives social feedback that does match the attributes of the entrepreneur's personal identity while acting out a work-related role identity, the entrepreneur tends to enhance the time and energy resources of this work-related role identity.

4.5 Identity Management Model

The data analysis procedure identified eight second-order themes as key elements in individuals' identity management (see Fig. 1). The following section introduces an identity management model that builds on these factors.

In this model, individuals' personal identities function as superordinate identities in the way that individuals' characteristics and meanings are mirrored in their role identities. Moreover, individuals receive social feedback from their environment when they act out these role identities. The model is divided into three main sections: *Input*, *Mechanism*, and *Output*.

The *input* section receives social feedback for a work-related or non-work-related role identity. In the *mechanism* section, the meanings of the perceived social feedback (reflected appraisals) are interpreted. The interpreted meaning of the social feedback is then compared with the meaning of the affected role identity. When the interpreted meaning of the social feedback does not match the meaning of the affected role identity an identity conflict is present between the specific role identity and the individual's person identity. The individual experiences negative emotions as result. When the interpreted meaning of the social feedback matches the meaning of the affected role identity no identity conflict is present. The individual experiences positive emotions as result.

The *output* section includes identity management strategies. Negative emotions let the individual initiate one of the identity management strategies *creation*, *ad-*

justment, or *elimination*. Positive emotions let the individual initiate the identity management strategy *enhancement*. All four identity management strategies result in active behavior of the individual. The identity management strategies work in the following ways:

Interviewees receive social feedback from other humans when acting out a specific work-related role identity (e.g., *entrepreneur*, *boss*, or *baker*). When the interviewees perceive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identity while acting out this role identity the interviewees experience negative emotions. Interviewers solve these identity conflicts by adjusting their behavior (identity management strategy *adjustment*) when acting out the specific role identity. The interviewees change their behavior with the goal that the future social feedback for the affected role identity matches the meaning of the interviewees' personal identities (Proposition 1).

However, for some interviewees the identity management strategy *adjustment* is not feasible. Hence, some interviewees used other identity management strategies such as identity management strategy *creation*. This strategy includes that interviewees perceive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identity while acting out a work-related role identity. This circumstance let interviewees experience negative emotions. The interviewees create a non-work-related role identity that matches the meaning of the interviewees' personal identity (Proposition 2). Interviewees experience positive emotions from their new non-work-related role identity that does match the interviewees' personal identities in addition to the negative emotions from the work-related role identity that does not match the interviewees' personal identities. As a result, the interviewees do not only experience negative emotions but also positive emotions which improved their overall emotional state.

The identity management strategy *elimination* includes that interviewees perceive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identities when acting out a specific work-related role identity. The interviewees experience negative emotions as result. By applying this identity management strategy interviewees remove the work-related role identity for which they perceive social feedback that does not match the attributes of their personal identities from their lives (Proposition 3). This means that interviewees do not receive negative emotions for this work-related role identity anymore.

When interviewees perceive social feedback that does match the attributes of their personal identities while acting out a work-related role identity the interviewees experience positive emotions. By utilizing the identity management strategy *enhancement*, the interviewees increase the time and energy resources of the work-related role identity that does match the attributes of their personal identities. This results in the circumstance that interviewees act out this work-related role identity more in their lives than other role identities that do not match the attributes of their personal identities (Proposition 4). The interviewees experience more positive emotions as a result. Figure 2 illustrates the identity management processes described above.

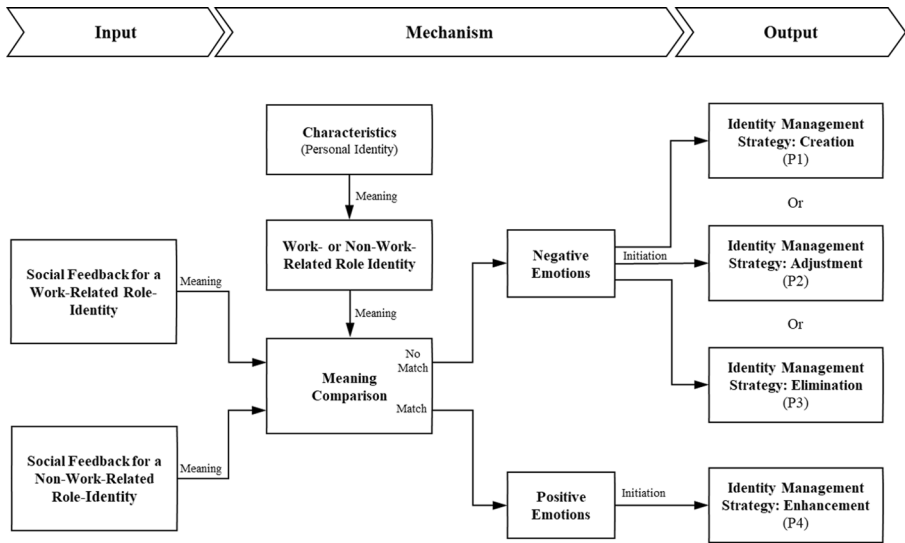


Fig. 2 Identity Management Model

5 Discussion

The following section discusses similarities and differences between the four identified identity management strategies and those introduced in previous studies (Blanz et al. 1998; Dumont and Waldzus 2015; Niens and Cairns 2003; Van Os et al. 2015).

5.1 Identity Perspectives

Personal-, role-, and social identities often operate simultaneously in situations (Burke and Stets 2023). Within groups, there are often roles that people act out in different ways based on the unique characteristics that define who they are. For example, within the larger category of an organization (the in-group), there could be a role identity of a manager. Different individuals will enact this role identity differently, given the characteristics (personal identity) that uniquely define who they are. Depending on which identity perspective a study takes on, some aspects of a situation are emphasized, and others are not. In other words, bringing one identity perspective to the forefront often relegates other identity perspectives to the background.

Previous identity management studies apply an identity perspective that focuses on social identities. In contrast, the identity management strategies presented in this study focus on personal- and role identities.

5.2 Individual, Collective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Aspects

By drawing on social identity theory, previous identity management studies identify several identity management strategies as possible responses to negative social

identity. These strategies include the coexistence of a low-status and a high-status social group. The studies mentioned above introduce a total of twelve identity management strategies (see Appendix C for more details). These twelve strategies can be classified according to whether they are based on responses of a single in-group member (individual) or the entire in-group (collective), and whether these strategies are based on sole cognition or active behavior:

The identity management strategies *re-evaluation of comparison dimension*, *new comparison dimension*, *superordinate re-categorization*, *subordinate re-categorization*, *new comparison group*, *temporal comparison*, and *comparison with standard* are based on cognitive changes in the parameters that define the intergroup comparison context from which the actual status inequality is derived. The identity management strategies differ primarily in the parameters that are compared. Moreover, these strategies can be classified as collective strategies since all members of the in-group try to improve their social identity by changing the evaluation of the entire in-group.

The identity management strategies of *social competition*, *realistic competition*, and *assimilation* imply that group members enhance their own status by improving the status of their low-status in-group. Either by competing for positive evaluations of their in-group (social competition), by competing for resource allocations that favor their in-group (realistic competition), or by becoming more like the high-status out-group (assimilation). These strategies are collective since group members improve their own status by improving the status of their in-group. In addition, the strategies described are behavioral because they involve active behavior by in-group members.

Individualization is an identity management strategy that implies that members of the low-status in-group stop defining themselves as group members and start defining themselves as unique individuals who are not affected by group evaluations. This strategy is an individual strategy because individuals change their own negative social identity while the evaluation of other group members remains unchanged. Furthermore, the strategy can be classified as cognitive because group members do not actively demonstrate their non-affiliation to the low-status group through behavior.

The identity management strategy of *individual mobility* implies that members of low-status groups tend to explore the possibility of individually moving from the low-status in-group to the high-status out-group. This strategy is individual because only the status of a specific group member is changed, not the evaluation of the entire low-status group. In addition, the strategy implies actual behavior, since activities are necessary for the individual to become a new member of the high-status group.

The four identity management strategies presented in this study are all individual rather than collective strategies that involve active behavior rather than mere cognition. In contrast, only one identity management strategy (i.e., individual mobility) of previous studies (i.e., Blanz et al. 1998; Dumont and Waldzus 2015; Niens and Cairns 2003; Van Os et al. 2015) can be considered an individual strategy that involves active behavior. However, despite these similarities, the strategy *individual mobility* applies a different identity perspective by focusing on social identities. In contrast, all four strategies presented in this study focus on personal- and role iden-

ties. These circumstances make it clear that the identity management strategies introduced in this study are novel to the identity management literature.

6 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the understanding of identity management in the following ways:

First, our study utilizes a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2015) with in-depth interviews as the primary data source. The data analysis procedure identified the factors of *social feedback*, *characteristics*, *internalized meaning*, *meaning comparison*, *work-related* and *non-work-related role identities*, *positive* and *negative emotions*, and *change* as key elements in identity management. Our study introduces a novel identity management model that incorporates these key elements (see Fig. 2) and presents four unique identity management strategies.

Second, our findings add an intra-personal layer to identity literature that has largely explained identity management through social identity theory. In contrast, our identity management model shows how individuals regulate meaning at the level of personal and role identities when interpreting reflected appraisals. Individuals utilize the strategies of *adjustment*, *creation*, *elimination*, and *enhancement* to realign with the control standards embedded in their personal identities. Conceptually, our results complement rather than compete with previous studies. Where previous literature emphasizes collective and cognitive strategies (e.g., *new comparison dimension* or *superordinate re-categorization*), our strategies are individual and behavioral, mapping a different corner of the identity-management space.

Third, our empirical examples offer a novel identity perspective on entrepreneurial phenomena (i.e., business model pivoting and change in leadership styles). Our study indicates that these phenomena might be linked to specific identity management strategies (e.g., *adjustment*) that entrepreneurs utilize as response to conflicts between their role and personal identities.

7 Practical Implications

Identity scholars emphasize the significance of authenticity for psychological coherence, which implies that individuals strive to be authentic in their interactions to maintain and verify their sense of self (Friskopp and Silverstein 1996; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Swann 1987). However, individuals' sense of self can be challenged by social interactions. Individuals who are unable to verify their sense of self may experience stress because of feelings of inauthenticity (Clair et al. 2005).

To the extent that authenticity is suppressed, individuals experience a discrepancy between their own understanding of themselves and the social feedback of others. Cognitive dissonance is assumed to emerge when an individual's understanding of the individual's self is challenged (Proulx and Inzlicht 2012). The negative health effects associated with cognitive dissonance have been widely documented in social psychological research (e.g., Gross and John 2003; Pachankis 2007; Strauman et al.

1993; Townsend et al. 2010). Identity management reduces cognitive dissonance through the maintenance of authenticity and the preservation of individuals' sense of self (Chreim et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2016; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Identity management strategies have the potential to reduce cognitive dissonance by preserving an individual's sense of self, which can prevent negative health effects.

8 Limitations

While we believe our paper contributes to identity management research, our study has some limitations.

First, entrepreneurship studies suggest that there are significant and consistent variations (micro-identities) in the overall role identity *entrepreneur* (Shepherd and Patzelt 2018). For example, Cardon et al. (2009, 2013) introduce the micro-identities of *inventor*, *founder*, and *developer*. In other words, there are many nuances of identity that can cause conflict and result in completely different identity management strategies. This is also true for the empirical examples presented in this study. Slight variations in the interviewees' identities can lead to completely different strategies.

Second, it is crucial to note that identities are fluid and not exclusive. The interviewed individuals do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they often have to navigate between their work-related and non-work-related role identities. Because the interviews took place in a work-related setting, other non-work-related role identities (e.g., *father*, *wife*, or *volunteer*) may have been overlooked. In other words, it is likely that the identities depicted are only small parts of the whole identity concepts of the interviewees.

Third, to enhance construct clarity and avoid causal ambiguity, we deliberately exclude social-identity aspects. Consequently, this study does not examine how intergroup structures (e.g., status legitimacy) or group memberships might amplify, attenuate, or redirect the mechanisms we identify. Instead, the Results section focuses on intrapersonal identity mechanisms. Results may differ when group salience is high or collective dynamics dominate, in such contexts. We do not rule out the possibility that social-identity effects could override or weaken the guidepost function of the personal identity portrayed in this study.

Fourth, by asking interviewees to recall past events, there may be bias in the data. Some identity management strategies (i.e., *creation* or *elimination*) leave a lot of evidence for researchers to examine. For example, it is usually documented when entrepreneurs start or sell businesses. However, other strategies (e.g., *adjustment*) leave little verifiable evidence. Therefore, the possibility of recall bias in the data cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, our triangulation efforts and the use of secondary data (i.e., archival data, company brochures, and websites) have reduced potential recall bias to a minimum.

Fifth, this study is limited by the retrospective nature of the sample data, as most individuals were interviewed at a single point in time. Such cross-sectional data provides valuable insights into identity management strategies, but they cannot fully capture how these strategies develop over time. It can be assumed that a longitudinal research design, covering an extended time frame of several years or even

decades, would allow for a more nuanced understanding of entrepreneurs' identity management processes.

Sixth, we interviewed stakeholders to shed light on identity management-related events from additional perspectives. However, relying on stakeholders with long-standing relationships with the entrepreneurs in our study may have introduced bias, potentially resulting in overly favorable accounts of identity management and the omission of critical observations. To mitigate this risk, we incorporated more than one stakeholder account whenever possible and verified specific events and circumstances by using secondary data.

Seventh, entrepreneurship is diverse. Although we made considerable efforts to capture this diversity in our sample, certain types of entrepreneurs are more represented than others. Many interviewees own well-established businesses with substantial numbers of employees and significant sales figures, which led to an underrepresentation of entrepreneurs running start-ups and small enterprises. In addition, a large share of the interviewed entrepreneurs are over 40 years old, with many in their 50s and 60s. The average proportion of female entrepreneurs in German SMEs is about 16% (BMWK 2022), whereas only 6% of the entrepreneurs in our sample are female. While we assume that the identity management strategies identified in this study are relevant across different types of entrepreneurs, it is possible that certain groups may be more inclined to adopt specific strategies.

9 Directions for Future Research

First, future research could examine whether the introduced identity management strategies are unique to entrepreneurs or also occur among employees. Entrepreneurs differ from employees in their level of *job control*—the freedom to decide what work to do and when (Karasek 1979; Karasek and Theorell 1990). Studies show that entrepreneurs have greater job control than employees (Hessels et al. 2017; Rietveld et al. 2015; Stephan and Roesler 2010) and can delegate work, whereas employees typically operate within hierarchies and follow superiors' orders (Benz and Frey 2008; Millán et al. 2013; Prottas and Thompson 2006). Since some strategies (e.g., *adjustment*) require autonomy to function, certain identity management strategies may be less relevant for employees.

Second, future research could explore what drives individuals to prefer one strategy over another. Our data suggest that the choice depends on the discrepancy between the meaning of personal identity and social feedback. Large discrepancies tend to trigger drastic strategies (*creation* or *elimination*), while small ones often lead to *adjustment*. The magnitude of discrepancy also shapes emotional responses: no discrepancy evokes positive emotions; moderate discrepancies evoke mild negative emotions (which often prompt *adjustment*); and severe discrepancies evoke strong negative emotions (which often prompt *creation* or *elimination*). Although these observations offer initial insights, further research should clarify the mechanisms behind identity management strategy choices.

In summary, future identity management research can be advanced by understanding whether the introduced identity management strategies are used by other

groups in addition to entrepreneurs. Furthermore, future research needs to explore what factors influence the choice of strategies. Essential questions are: Are the introduced identity management strategies primarily used by entrepreneurs or are they also used by other groups (i.e., employees)? What factors influence an individual's identity management strategy choice?

10 Conclusion

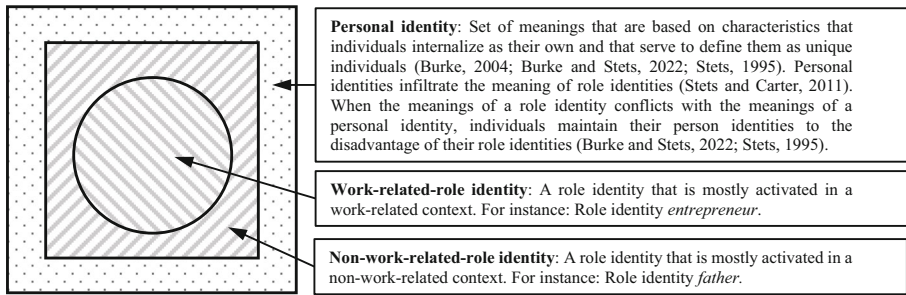
This study examined how personal identity can be integrated into an identity management model and which strategies individuals use to address conflicts between personal and role identities. Our findings show that entrepreneurs interpret social feedback in relation to their personal identities. When feedback does not align with their personal identity, they experience negative emotions and engage in identity management. When feedback aligns with their personal identity, they experience positive emotions and reinforce the corresponding role identity.

Our study identifies four strategies: *adjustment*, *creation*, *elimination*, and *enhancement*. These strategies demonstrate that identity management can involve behavioral changes in how individuals enact, create, abandon, or strengthen role identities.

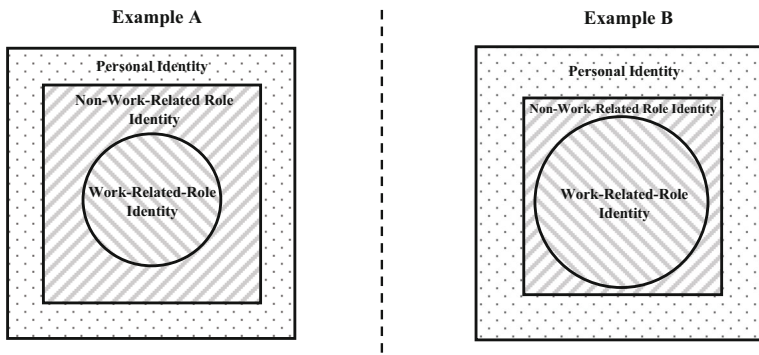
Overall, our study contributes to identity management research by shifting attention from conflicts between social identities to conflicts between personal and role identities. It shows that personal identity functions as a central reference point for interpreting social feedback and selecting identity management strategies.

11 Appendix

11.1 Appendix A. Visualization of Terms Used in This Study

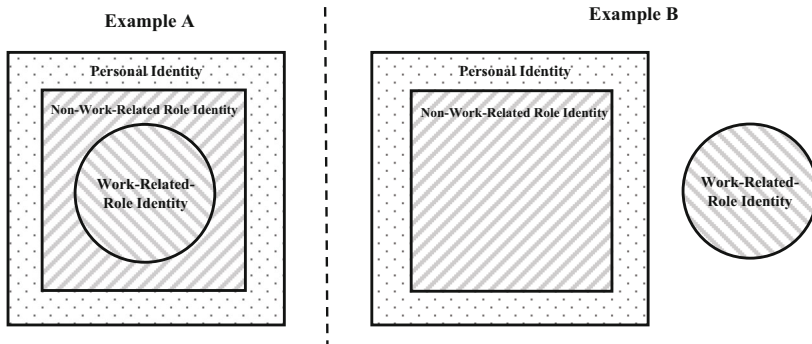


Identity Enhancement



Note: The work-related role identity of Example B is a more enhanced than the work-related role identity of Example A. That means the work-related role identity in Example B receives more time and energy resources. The time and energy resources individuals can spend per day are limited. Therefore, receives the non-work-related role identity in Example B lesser time and energy resources when the work-related role identity in Example B receives more of these resources.

Identity Match



Example A: The perceived meaning of social feedback for the work-related role identity and the non-work-related role identity matches the meanings of the personal identity.

Example B: The perceived meaning of social feedback for the work-related role identity does not match the meaning of the personal identity. The perceived meaning of social feedback for the non-work-related role identity matches the meaning of the personal identity.

Fig. A.1 Identity Enhancement and Identity Match

11.2 Appendix B. Interview Guideline

11.2.1 Part I: Introduction

Introduction of the Research Project and the Interviewer My name is *anonymized*. I am from *anonymized* University. Today, I would like to interview you since you fit my interviewee criteria. I will ask you different questions in the following interview. If you do not understand my questions, do not hesitate to tell me. I will explain my question and give you examples.

Clarification of the Interview Process and the Research Question I examine entrepreneurs' identities. In doing so, I interview entrepreneurs who work in different industries and own firms of various sizes. I would like to have an open conversation in which we speak in full disclosure. My questionnaire is not fixed, which eases an unrestricted conversation. However, I will guide you with my questions on relevant issues if you unintentionally deviate from the topic. My intention through this procedure is to speak over as many relevant subjects as possible. I will try to influence you as little as possible with my questions and comments. I estimate that the interview will last about 50 to 60 min.

Permission for Audiotaping and Data Confidentiality I would like to have your permission to audiotape this interview. The record will make it easier for me to transcribe and analyze the interview subsequently. The record is for my research project only and will not be used elsewhere. All information you give me during the interview (e.g., people- and company names or locations) will be anonymized afterward so that the reader of my study will not be able to recognize you. I guarantee you that I will treat your personal data confidential.

Beginning of the Interview The questioning of the interviewee begins. The first question should be simple and comfortable for the interviewee. He or she should have enough time to warm up and become talkative. The following questions can be more sophisticated and in-depth.

11.2.2 Part II: Interview Content

Note: A grounded theory approach has been used for data collection and analyses. Common primary data for grounded theory approaches are unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Concepts and categories emerge from the data, which are then tested against reality and constantly reviewed and refined through the theoretical sampling process. Therefore, interview questions are not static; they instead alter thru the theoretical development of the study. This interview guideline shows the interview questions from the final phase of the theoretical sampling process.

Interviewee's Motivation to Enter Entrepreneurship

- Do you see yourself as an entrepreneur?

- How did you become an entrepreneur?
- At what age have you decided to become an entrepreneur?
- Was there an influencing experience that led you to become an entrepreneur?
- What was your motivation when you established your business? What was your goal? What did you want to achieve when you founded your company?
- Did you establish your company out of performance orientation and to achieve wealth? Is it essential for you that you are better than your competitors?

Interviewee's Work-Related Role Identities

- What roles do you fulfill when you work?
- Do you have a passion for specific activities when you work?
- What does it mean to you to be a *work-related role identity*?
- How is *work-related role identity* seen in society?
- Which activities do you dislike when you work?
- After you founded your company, did you enjoy building it up step by step?
- Your company is already established. Do you enjoy this current status where processes are fixed, and no strategic adjustments are needed?
- Are you passionate about finding ideas for innovations that have the potential to shake up the market or revolutionize an entire industry?
- Are you passionate about founding a company and collecting the necessary resources to start its operations?
- Are you passionate about fine-tuning your company? For example, to optimize processes that reduce costs in the long run.

Interviewee's Non-Work-Related Role Identities

- What do you do in your free time?
- Are there non-work-related roles that you like to fulfill?
- Do you have family? Do you do sports? What roles do you fulfill in your free time?
- What does it mean to you to be a *non-work-related role identity*?
- How is *non-work-related role identity* seen in society?

Interviewee's Characteristics (Attributes of Personal Identities)

- What traits should an ideal entrepreneur have? Do you have these traits?
- What traits are essential to you?
- How do you see yourself? How do you define yourself?
- How would you describe yourself to a stranger?

Changes in Interviewee's Identities

- In what activities are you interested?
- Has your interest in a particular activity changed over time? For what reason do you think your interest has changed over time?

- When you compare your today's activities to the ones (10 years) ago, what are the differences? Are there some significant changes from then and now in your daily routine?
- Do you think that your character has changed over time? Why and how do you think your character changed over time?

Time and Energy Resources of Role Identities

- Is being an entrepreneur an essential role in your life?
- Do you use much of your time and energy for *role identity* compared to other role identities?
- For what other roles do you spend time and energy during the day?

Entrepreneur's Data

- How old are you?
- What is your education?
- What is your professional background?
- For how many years have you been an entrepreneur?

Company's Data

- In which industry is your company active?
- What are the annual sales of your company?
- How many employees do you have?
- When was your company founded?
- What is your company's ownership structure?

11.2.3 Part III: End of the Interview

Other Aspects

- Do you think there are any other important aspects we have not already discussed? What are these aspects?

Further Questions

- We are at the end of the interview. Do you have any questions?

Other Persons to Contact

- Is it possible for you to introduce me to another entrepreneur? That would help me a lot.

Expression of Thanks

- Thank you very much for the interview. That was kind of you. I wish you all the best for the future.

11.3 Appendix C. Review of Literature that Focuses on Identity Management

Table C.1 Literature on Identity Management

Article	Type	Industry Focus/Region	Main Theoretical Framework	Identity Management Strategies
Blanz et al. (1998)	Conceptual paper	Not specified	Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979)	<i>Individual mobility</i> : Implies that members of low-status groups tend to explore the possibility of individually moving from the in-group to the out-group. If group boundaries are permeable, individuals attempt to become members of the high-status group. <i>Assimilation</i> : Implies that members of the low-status group try to become more like the high-status out-group. <i>Individualization</i> : Suggests that members of the low-status group no longer define themselves as members of this group, but as unique individuals who are different from the low-status group. <i>Social competition</i> and <i>realistic competition</i> : Involve active competitive behavior. Both strategies imply that group members enhance their own status by improving the status of their in-group—either by competing for positive evaluations of their in-group (social competition) or by competing for resource allocations that favor their in-group (realistic competition). <i>Re-evaluation of comparison dimension, new comparison dimension, superordinate re-categorization, subordinate re-categorization</i> , and <i>new comparison group</i> : All five strategies are linked to the strategy of social creativity. The strategies are based on cognitive changes in the parameters that define the intergroup comparison context from which the actual status inequality between the low- and the high-status group is derived. The five strategies differ in the parameters that are changed (i.e., the subject, object, or dimension of comparison). <i>Temporal comparison</i> relies on changing the temporal referent of comparison. For example, if the group's position has improved over time, group members achieve a positive comparison outcome by comparing their group's current position to its past position on relevant dimensions. <i>Comparison with standard</i> : This strategy implies that members of the low-status group compare their in-group to standards (socially shared goals or norms) rather than to the high-status out-group

Table C.1 (Continued)

Article	Type	Industry Focus/Region	Main Theoretical Framework	Identity Management Strategies
Van Os et al. (2015)	Empirical paper. Inductive. Main data source: 14 semi-structured interviews	Health Care Industry/The Netherlands	Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979)	Van Os et al. (2015) apply Blanz et al.'s (1998) taxonomy to categorize the identity management strategies they identified in their study. The authors argue that nurses and residents tend to use the identity management strategies <i>individualization</i> , <i>comparison with standard</i> , <i>new comparison group</i> , and <i>superordinate re-categorization</i> , while physicians tend to use the strategy <i>new comparison group</i>
Dumont and Waldzus (2015)	Empirical paper. Deductive. Main data source: Three surveys with 170, 206, and 105 participants	Not specified/South Africa	Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979)	Dumont and Waldzus (2015) argue that ideal selves are related to identity management strategies and that, accordingly, shared beliefs about relevant intergroup relations influence the preferences for ideal selves. The authors study black and white South African adolescents and adults. In doing so, Dumont and Waldzus (2015) identified the identity management strategies <i>individual mobility</i> , <i>social creativity</i> , <i>social competition</i> , and <i>individualization</i> described by Blanz et al. (1998) in their dataset
Niens and Cairns (2003)	Conceptual paper	Not specified	Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979)	Niens and Cairns (2003) point out the limitations of social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). The authors argue that the inclusion of other identity perspectives, in addition to social identity theory, could provide a broader range of identity management strategies

11.4 Appendix D. Implications of Adhering to the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice

The *Statement of Ethical Practice* of the British Sociological Association (BSA) provides researchers with a clear ethical framework for planning, conducting, and disseminating research. Its main goal is to promote responsible, transparent, and respectful conduct toward participants, colleagues, institutions, and society (BSA 2017). The guidelines emphasize integrity, transparency, and methodological rigor in compliance with legal requirements. They stress informed consent, voluntary participation, and the protection of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Researchers must take special care with vulnerable groups, minimize risks, and disseminate results openly and responsibly, disclosing funding sources and potential conflicts of interest (BSA 2017).

The main implications of adhering to the BSA Statement in this study are as follows:

- The appropriateness of the research design and potential risks were carefully assessed.
- A clear informed consent procedure was developed, including a participant information sheet and a consent form that ensured participants' right to withdraw.
- Data privacy was secured by using pseudonyms, removing identifying information, and storing data securely with controlled access.
- A plan for handling sensitive situations and disclosures was established, and the need for ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board was evaluated.
- The conditions for publishing and sharing the study's findings were clarified.
- Participants were offered feedback and a summary of the study's results if they wished.
- Researcher safety was considered by developing appropriate fieldwork safety protocols.
- Limitations, potential biases, and ethical considerations were made as transparent as possible throughout the study.

11.5 Appendix E. Institutional Ethics Committee Approval

The ethics commission of the authors' institution reviews proposed studies, but responsibility for the research remains with the researcher. Its focus is on minimizing risks, ensuring an appropriate balance of risks and benefits, and verifying informed consent. For this study, the initial checklist below was completed with all answers marked "No," resulting in exempt status without further review by the ethics commission.

Table E.1 Initial Checklist of the Ethics Committee at the Authors' Institution

		Yes	No	Don't know
1.	Does the study aim to examine diseases or the structure and function of the human body?	☐	☒	☐
2.	Does the study involve subjects that are uninformed about their participation in the study?	☐	☒	☐
3.	Does the study involve subjects from populations that are vulnerable (e.g., minors, people with impaired decision making capacity, prisoners, refugees, homeless people etc.)?	☐	☒	☐
4.	Are the subjects deceived or mislead by the researchers?	☐	☒	☐
5.	Does the study involve coercive financial or non-financial incentives (i.e., incentives that threaten the voluntary nature of a subject's choice)?	☐	☒	☐
6.	Is there a substantial dependency relationship between the subjects and any of the involved researchers?	☐	☒	☐
7.	Could the study negatively influence the subjects' psychological integrity (e.g., by triggering severe emotional reactions)?	☐	☒	☐
8.	Could the study negatively influence the subjects' physical integrity (e.g., collection of blood or saliva samples, physical strain through physical exertion)?	☐	☒	☐
9.	Are the subjects asked to provide sensitive personal information (e.g., traumatizing experiences, sexual orientation, drug consumption)?	☐	☒	☐
10.	Is the purpose of the study to significantly influence peoples' lives or real-life behaviors? (e.g., influencing peoples' voting behavior; influencing peoples' job search behavior or outcomes)	☐	☒	☐
11.	Does the study expose any of the members of its research team to threats harming their physical or psychological integrity (e.g., field work in civil conflict region)?	☐	☒	☐
12.	Will the study collect and use data that is not anonymized (Note: data is anonymized if the data cannot be assigned to a specific subject or if the assignment would require an exceptional amount of effort)?	☐	☒	☐
13.	Does any member of the research team have any association that poses or could be perceived as posing a conflict of interest in connection with the results of the study?	☐	☒	☐

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Author Contribution Sascha Hohen determined the study's conception and design. Sascha Hohen prepared the materials and collected and analyzed data. Sascha Hohen wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Sascha Hohen und Lars Schweizer commented on previous versions of the manuscript and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and material Data and material are available from the author upon request.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate This research project follows the statement of ethical practice of the British Sociological Association. All participants of this research project gave their consent to be interviewed.

Consent for publication Approved.

Conflict of interest S. Hohen and L. Schweizer declare that they have no competing interests.

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