

Embracing entrepreneurship without a vocation: A co-construction approach to identity formation

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Summary:

Extant research on entrepreneurial identity formation has primarily focused on individuals who manifest strong aspirations to self-employment both at the early stage or later in their professional career, neglecting the process of identity construction of individuals who are forced to become entrepreneurs. Relying on the identity work literature and adopting a narrative inquiry, the present study aims to investigate the process and related mechanisms that contribute to shaping entrepreneurial identity in a sample of successful female Italian entrepreneurs that are characterized by an initial non-entrepreneurial vocation. This setting provides the opportunity to observe the complexity of entrepreneurial identity formation, shedding light on different mechanisms that have been overlooked by prior studies. Specifically, the findings provide insights on the interplay between individual agency and social structure, which past research has considered separately, advancing the understanding of entrepreneurial identity as an ongoing process of personal and social emergence.

Track: Entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Becoming an entrepreneur is a major role transition (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010), which, if left unresolved, may adversely affect motivation, well-being, and performance (Petriglieri, 2011; Thoits, 2003). In the attempt to understand how individuals successfully experience this transition, research adopting an identity-based perspective maintains that entrepreneurial activities provide significant self-meaning, enabling entrepreneurs to explore who they were, are and desire to become. Thus, this identity lens helps to explain the diverse motivations that drive entrepreneurs, including their distinct decision making, strategic actions and, eventually, the overall venture performance (Mmbagaa et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Prior studies outlined that entrepreneurial identity (EI) and identity aspirations predict entrepreneurial behaviour (Dheer and Lenartowicz 2018; Farmer et al., 2011; Leitch & Harrison, 2016), thus assuming that an EI is formed before having acted as an entrepreneur. Others have investigated the formation of an EI during initial entrepreneurial experiences (Newbery et al. 2018). In both cases, the individuals display a strong initial entrepreneurial aspiration. Yet, these studies do not account for entrepreneurial identity development that may happen in later stages because the person is initially forced to the entrepreneurial role. We identify push-driven individuals as those who opt for self-employment not because it is their desired career path, but because it is a better option than those available (Amit & Muller, 1995). In general, looking at entrepreneurs' motivations to start a new venture, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor shows that thirty percent of respondents identified "push-motives" (Amorós et al., 2021). This percentage is expected to increase when also considering individuals forced to join the family business or established companies. Unlike volunteer entrepreneurs, in the case of individuals without a clear entrepreneurial vocation, the process of identity construction may present distinctive challenges and a more complex combination of personal and social forces.

Considering the dearth of research in this area, the present work, relying on the identity work framework and adopting a narrative research approach, aims to investigate the process and related mechanisms that contribute to shaping entrepreneurial identity in a sample of female entrepreneurs that are characterized by an initial non-entrepreneurial vocation. The aim is relevant because it highlights the dynamics that enable the construction of an identity with a profound awareness of the entrepreneurial role, effectively guiding the person towards achieving goals associated with being an entrepreneur. Indeed, this setting may provide the opportunity to observe the complexity of EI formation, shedding light on different mechanisms that have been overlooked by prior studies. Moreover, women usually face gendered assumptions and stereotypes regarding being an entrepreneur and a non-voluntary decision to become self-employed implies a profound destabilization of the internal state about what one wants to be and become. For this reason, identifying identity work mechanisms that can be activated, either autonomously or with the support of external individuals (e.g., coach), becomes even more urgent when a personal identity crisis might occur. In doing so, we examine in our purposive sample the founder's identity (Wagenschwanz, 2021), meaning the overall self-concept of the entrepreneur as a person, embracing within-person identity complexity. Answering calls on the need to integrate identity concepts (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011), and to solve the ambiguity in the role of individual agency and institutional pressures in determining the identity of entrepreneurs (Wagenschwanz, 2021), we adopt a co-construction approach (Ybema et al., 2009; Watson, 2008, 2009) to show the interplay between self and social identity, still poorly investigated in the EI literature.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we introduce the theoretical framework adopted to address the research question, namely identity work, and its application in the entrepreneurial field, motivating the adoption of the co-construction approach as a lens to understand the individual and social mechanisms underlying the identity formation of non-

vocational women entrepreneurs. Then the qualitative research method is illustrated, illustrating the purposively sample and the data collection and analysis techniques. In the final sections, the findings of the research are presented deriving theoretical insights and managerial implications that advance the debate on entrepreneurial identity construction.

Theoretical background

In the entrepreneurial identity literature, identity work is conceived as the cognitive, affective, and both social processes and tactics used by entrepreneurs to consolidate a coherent (work) identity (Arshed et al., 2022) in the face of identity conflicts that can happen both within one's work identity (e.g., different roles of an entrepreneur) and between work and non-work identities (e.g., entrepreneurship, gender, religion) (Wagenschwanz, 2021). In the first case, entrepreneurs may have to negotiate their role as investor, with their role as manager (Mathias and Williams 2017). In second case, for instance, women entrepreneurs dynamically construct their EI together with their gender by resisting or finding ways to acquiesce to male archetypes. In this way, identity work helps women entrepreneurs manage possible discrepancies between their feminine identity and the expectations inherent in playing an entrepreneurial role and ultimately to achieve positive distinctiveness despite being disadvantaged (Gherardi, 2015).

In a recent review on EI, Wagenschwanz (2021) underlines that one of the challenges of entrepreneurial identity research is simultaneously acknowledging that identity content is determined by both the societal discourse and entrepreneurs' agency. Besides a few exceptions (e.g., Bredvold & Skålén, 2016), the literature tends to draw on different underlying assumptions that lead scholars to focus on one of the two perspectives. A range of work either implicitly or explicitly assumes that individuals have considerable agency in matters of identity, emphasizing the individual's active engagement in the formation and reformation of identity. For instance, Jain et al. (2009) assume that individuals possessed relatively high levels of discretion in deciding if (and to what extent) they wanted to modify their role identity, thus look at the actors' subjective experiences and related actions as part of their identity crafting. However, business creation is a social activity (Ebbers, 2014), where entrepreneurs also shape their behaviours in relation to how they perceive themselves relative to others and to how they are perceived in society (Alsos et al., 2016). Thus, scholars adopting a constructionist approach see identity as socially constructed through language, and public narratives a driver that generates disparate groupings of attributes and actions that supposedly characterize entrepreneurs (Anderson and Warren 2011). Similarly, Down & Reveley (2004) acknowledged that "external" discourses are embraced to varying degrees by individuals, having a hegemonic effect.

To highlight the interplay between agency and structure, we apply a co-construction approach (Ybema et al., 2009; Watson, 2008, 2009) to entrepreneurial identity work. As entrepreneurs do not construct their identities alone, Leitch & Harrison (2016) suggest it is fundamental to bridging the individual and the social aspects of identity. The co-construction is enacted in the interaction between an individual's 'self-identity' (who I am) and their 'social-identity' (the notion of that person in external discourses, institutions and culture), given the norms and prescriptions arising from social interaction impact upon individual behaviour (Beech, 2011). Watson (2008) conceptualize identity work itself as mutually constitutive processes. In this processes people, in order to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity, on the one hand, struggle to come to terms with the social identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives; on the other hand, people try, within limits, to influence those identities (Watson, 2008). Indeed, a considerable body of organizational literature have focused on how organizational actors' search for the resolution of tensions to secure their identity claims (Brown, 2015). They do so as a natural response to

different and often conflicting scripts and roles imposed by organizations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), but also to social imaginaries that concern shared truths, stereotypes, and preconceptual images (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023). Research mainly aimed at identifying various types of strategies or mechanisms of identity work (Brown, 2019). Some studies conceptualize these mechanisms looking at the integration or separation of identities. For instance, Kreiner et al. (2006) focus on identity work in response to situational demands in a challenging occupation that create a tension between personal and social identity. They delineate a set of integration and differentiation tactics individuals adopt to pursue an optimal balance between their individual and occupational identities. Similarly, Mäkinen and Esko (2023) look at hybrid professional identities in which individuals are exposed to different professional values and practices, and identify three identity processes—hybridization, rejecting hybridization, and transitioning—through which one manages the boundaries of professional domains. Other studies look at identity work as a form of legitimacy construction both at the individual level (e.g., Bloom et al., 2021) and the organizational level (e.g., Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Another group looks at more contextually specific mechanisms that allow, for instance, to construct a managerial leader identity in the health sector (Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015), or in historically marginalized groups in India (Srinivas, 2013). However, despite the identification of strategies, research still tends to investigate the construction and enactment of identity through largely static temporal lens, while entrepreneurial identity can be considered as an ongoing accomplishment (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Methods

To advance theory about how entrepreneurs construct their identity, we engaged in an inductive study grounded in narrative inquiry. The research originated from a broader project which aimed to identify the distinctive leadership behaviours of female entrepreneurs operating in northeastern Italy, among the most vital European economic geographical areas. Consultation with the territorial associations of business firms allowed the identification of a preliminary sample of companies where women not just assume a formal role but strategically lead the company. Other criteria have been applied for selecting women entrepreneurs: i) companies must have positive financial performance, even during the pandemic period, as a proxy of the successful performance of their entrepreneurs; ii) a minimum company size of 20 employees; iii) the selection of companies must reflect the variety of sectors that characterize the local industrial context. After a preliminary contact with the companies that met the criteria, thirty entrepreneurs agreed to participate. Documentation and semi-structured interviews were the primary sources of data collection. Desk research enabled the collection of background information about the selected firms and the entrepreneurs' stories through the consultation of websites and the press, financial statements, company registration reports, and social media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between December 2022 and May 2023 in Italian via Zoom Platform for a total of 43 hours of recording, meaning that each interview lasted on average 90 minutes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the video-recording also allowed to keep track of visual clues referring to the interviewee's emotional state. In planning the interviews, the local business association acted as a gatekeeper and facilitated the researchers' contact with entrepreneurs.

To minimise possible memory lapses of the participants' stories, the interviewers' protocol guides the reconstruction of events by time phases and in a detailed and accurate manner. The reliability of this method is supported by the autobiographical research (Rubin, 1986) which highlights that the accuracy of recalled memories increases dramatically when recalled events have high personal valence or saliency, and involve specific actions. To maximize recall

accuracy, the interviewer focuses on highly salient events in the career path of the entrepreneurs and explore them by asking about specific actions in detail.

During the preliminary stages of data collection, the researchers observe a recurrent peculiarity in the respondents' stories, namely the lack of an initial vocation to become an entrepreneur. Thus, the research team decided to revise the research protocol and explore in-depth the role transition and the subsequent EI formation of these successful women who were forced to embrace self-employed by external influences. The cross-sectional design selected for the study enabled a reliable retrospective inquiry to reconstruct each identity formation path. Additionally, it allowed for the comparison of different experiences in structuring an entrepreneurial identity, thus improving the robustness of the analysis and results. Due to the nature of the research question, a longitudinal approach would have been inapplicable, as it is impossible to identify non-vocational career subjects who would eventually become successful entrepreneurs. The setting chosen, women entrepreneurs without a clear entrepreneurial vocation, represents an extreme case that might reveal complex dynamics in the process of identity work that may not be understood otherwise. The final purposive sample consists of twenty entrepreneurs whose main characteristics are reported in the case summary Table 1.

Data analysis followed a narrative approach, where researchers started to read each transcript in its entirety creating memos that sketched out the kinds of stories contained in narrative segments using in vivo codes. The analysis focused in particular on episodic memories that comprise what happened in a particular "event" of identity construction. The researchers then returned to the beginning of the transcript and conducted open coding of the transcript. The team then met to go through each transcript, debating and discussing places of disagreement. Then the analysis moved into second-order coding by interpreting the participants' stories, trying to delineate the agency and social influences which influence the EI process, as well as the interplay among the mechanisms emerged in the narratives.

TABLE 1 HERE

Findings

The data interpretation allowed the identification of the initial vocation expressed by the participants and the mechanisms that intervened in their professional path that led them to construct over time their entrepreneurial identity. The final processual model emerged from the empirical data contemplates the initial conditions which moved away the participants from the intention to become an entrepreneur, the turning points or triggering events that induced them to reconsider their identity and the interplay between agency and social mechanisms through which EI is co-constructed as an ongoing process of personal and social emergence.

Initial vocation and shift towards the ought-self

As reported in Table 1, the entrepreneurs involved in the study at the early stage of their career expressed a future professional self not related to the entrepreneurial field. They were forced to start a self-employment path to meet external expectations on their self. Some examples reported below represent the context in which the interviewees abandoned their desired self to pursue the ought self, generating a discrepancy.

“I joined at a very young age the family business because when I finished my accountancy studies I was immediately involved as my relatives said ‘you are needed here, join the company because there are so many things to do’. I wanted to continue another type of training anyway, but I had no choice...”

“Then at the end of high school I wanted to do psychology because it interested me a lot, but my father said that with psychology you can’t eat and that I had to do management or engineering studies. At the time, there was no way I could keep up with him.”

Turning points towards entrepreneurial intention

In the narratives, the entrepreneurs identified salient moments or events in their life that spurred them to consider the entrepreneurial vocation. The drivers of this vocational change can be summarized as follows.

- the risk of losing the family business that led to recognise the company as part of oneself, as one of the interviewee explained: *“At a certain point, neither I nor my brother were working in the company, my father had received an offer to sell it and I felt like crying because I realized that I was very attached to the company, I also have many good memories, for me the company was home, for me the company is family. Since I was a child, I used to do my homework in the meeting room, my brother and I used the pallets to play in the garden...”*
- the self-assignment of a role of responsibility in the company, as in the case of an entrepreneur who narrated: *“In 2012 I decided to take charge of the human resources and organisation area, and I embraced this responsibility with enthusiasm, even with a bit of concern because so many responsibilities in an area I did not know”;*
- the opportunity to explore the business environment due to an external event, for instance as reported by an interviewee: *“the family business faced difficulties in that period and I got pregnant, so in the maternity leave I was able I put my foot in the door of the family company”;*
- external events that stimulated a deep reflection on the self and on the entrepreneurial abilities, as occurred to an interviewee who explained: *“I had some very serious health problems and that gave me an unexpected chance because in that year I made some changes I didn't even think I could make. That's where a new me came out. Maybe it was the most important phase of my life that enable me to become aware of my strengths”.*
- an external request to experience a self-employment role, as illustrated by this entrepreneur: *“Then by chance a client asked me, ‘do you want to manage the activity autonomously?’ I said no a hundred times and finally gave in. And from there something changed, because I started on my own”.*

The revision of their initial vocation allowed the interviewee to include in their “self” the possibility to become self-employed. In their narratives, different mechanisms contributed to a deep and ongoing reflection of “who they are” as entrepreneurs. The mechanisms are, on the one hand, activated by the entrepreneurs themselves and classified as “individual agency” in which the interviewed women demonstrated the power to influence the formation of their own identity. On the other hand, the mechanisms come from the interaction of the entrepreneurs with the social environment, and specifically with the external representation and evaluations of the entrepreneurial role, namely the “structure”.

Agency mechanisms

As highlighted by Eteläpelto and colleagues (1996: 46) “Individuals practise agency while they construct knowledge, and they use meta-cognitive and reflective processes that operate via self-control and self-management in their learning and problem-solving”. In our empirical studies, women entrepreneurs activated in different stages of their identity construction an array of agency mechanisms, illustrated as follows.

Identity discovery

The entrepreneur become aware of an emerging personal passion or recall emotional experiences from the past that allow her to make her identity coherent with the entrepreneurial one. The quotes exemplify this mechanism:

“I discovered a passion in me that I really didn't know I had, which gave me great satisfaction and with an enormous charge of energy and strength, because wood flooring is a living, crazy, incredible material: every day you learn something because every day wood teaches you something, it is never finished.”

“I still remember when I came to the company as a child, I went to the tool workshop, I smelled the electric scent of the equipment, and I liked it a lot. And then it all started from there and then I have always moved forward, because honestly when I come in here it's like being at home for me.”

Learning and support

The entrepreneur feels the need to improve her knowledge of the firm, of its departments and processes, through a direct involvement on different tasks, or by asking some trusted employees to help and explain how some processes work. These activities, based on individual agency, are sometimes supported by external resources, such as coaches, consultants, training courses, in order to strengthen the individual competencies needed to lead the firm, but they also leverage on other family members which help to take difficult decisions or to reconcile personal roles. As one the participant said:

“I'm attending a coaching course because there are moments in which I got stuck, in the sense that there were some projects, some dynamics that at a certain point I couldn't unhinge and in this type of approach I managed to find the solution more than in any other, because this approach allows you to bring out your potential.”

Awareness of the organizational system and logics

The interviewees engage themselves in a path of exploration of the company environment. In doing this, they also rely on trusted and competent persons who have enabled them to understand how the company works and the logic behind the operation of its various departments, as exemplified by the quote:

“When I joined the company, I was first employed to organize documents and as a telephone operator. Then, I stayed in administration department, after that in sales. In these roles I always tried to learn and study. So, if the administration had to record an invoice for a rectification, I would get an explanation of the process, just so that through this experience I could get to know the company. For example, in the sales department I was assigned the task of defining the prices of some specific components as a "rotary table", I asked myself what this rotary table was. I

went to the technician, put on my safety shoes and ask him ‘when you produce that, please call me so that you can explain the process so that I can understand what it was’. And eventually the numbers, the words, the processes took shape in my mind.”

Self-discrepancy reconciliation

The participants revised their initial vocation, namely their desired self in relation to work that they abandoned for the entrepreneurial endeavour, incorporating it in the entrepreneurial identity, as illustrated by the following quote:

“It was a sacrifice because I had to give up the chance to continue my studies, then I realised that there could be many ways to achieve the education I wanted to do in life, I tried to train myself on what I felt was most consistent with my attitudes, on which I would have liked to have more skills and more knowledge.”

“When I graduated, I wanted to do a job where I travelled abroad, but instead I stayed here. With this new branch, we are looking for a person who knows German to do the tastings with German customers and I have a degree in German literature so, when I have time to follow these things, I kind of relive that passion.”

Search for identity legitimization

The entrepreneur overcomes prejudices or stereotypes and affirms her own value, which is expressed in her entrepreneurial role. The present mechanism is based on an array of individual agency behaviours, such as expressing knowledge, expertise, efforts, self-confidence, self-awareness and courage. It requires to act differently from others’ expectations and to prove her adequacy to the role played, with some specific behaviours:

- Responding to the external limitations with an affirmation of her self-awareness and self-confidence;
- Declaration of personal values that meet those embodied in the company culture, even in the face of external trends that are contrary to the declared values by the entrepreneur;
- Setting a limit to the expectations of others by strongly asserting one's own capabilities;
- Becoming an expert in a field of action of the company, as it is not considered to be associated with the person due to stereotypes;
- Put more effort into presenting a persuasive statement such as increasing efforts to demonstrate positive indicators.

Some quotes illustrate the aforementioned behaviours:

“I also had a bit of this desire for revenge, because when other claimed that I am worthless, I thought ‘now I’ll show you what I’m capable of doing’. So, I got really pumped up and carried on like this. I had the passion, the determination to do things anyway, even though there were many difficulties.”

“The internal and external stakeholders took for granted that I wouldn’t understand, especially from a technical point of view. So, I put on my safety shoes I went into production department. I then gave evidence of my knowledge because I had done the moulding course and therefore learnt what an amorphous, crystalline, injection point is. I learnt their language, so I asked the right questions, that I also made the right observations.”

Identity infusion

The entrepreneur shapes the business environment through the infusion of personal characteristics and approaches that the individual expresses and transfers through her work. It is composed of personal styles, methods, values, mindsets that are transmitted by the entrepreneur and that contribute to shape an organizational culture, and subsequently are encouraged to be expressed by the employees. The following quote offers an example:

“When we designed these offices, I thought of them a bit like a home. In fact, we are a family passionate about motors, there are motorbikes everywhere, inside the offices, there are also historic, important motorbikes. There are also works of art because this is also a stimulus. I wanted this building with all these windows so that it gives the idea of transparency, because we wish to express our willingness to be a transparent company.”

Structure mechanisms

As the co-construction approach propose, identity is developed by the agency-structure dialectic in action (Beech, 2011; Ybema et al., 2009). The notion of structure encompasses the structural properties of the social setting in which the possibility of personal reflexivity and the construction of knowledge are inscribed. Indeed, as prior studies highlight, “since institutional structures constitute the medium for individual thought and action, they profoundly shape the individual’s lifeworld when she/he becomes a member of society or of an organization and internalizes the outer world by learning the cultural knowledge and accepted behaviors of the community” (Ybema et al., 2009: 302).

External recognition

The participants search or spontaneously obtain an external recognition of their own identity receiving feedback on their entrepreneurial capacity, even from people who initially did not recognise their role. The following quotes depict this mechanism:

“The fact that my father, as a founder of the company, told me that I am very good in my role filled me with pride and in fact now he is the one who compliments on my achievements”.

“Once a supplier was delivering goods and treated me very rudely, I went outside and emptied the whole truck myself and told him 'I don't need you, and you don't have to be rude to me anymore. You must respect me'. If I continued to be submissive, he would have overwhelmed me more and more. Instead, since then I have become untouchable to him, and he pays me enormous respect”.

Disavowal of identity

In some phases of their identity formation, entrepreneurs have been subjected to prejudice from people who do not associate their person to the image of the organizational role, as the following quotes exemplify:

“There were people who got in my way or had a lot of prejudice against me. The reasons were because I was the daughter of the founder, because I was young, because I was a woman... For example, I was supposed to attend meetings, and a colleague systematically didn't invite meetings, so I had a total closure from him.”

“When the client invited me, he knew I was a woman. At the table of twelve people, I could have said anything, even the most important things, but they addressed the same questions to our male engineer. They only listened to him to understand what we had to propose.”

Networks belonging

The participants explained the role of professional networks (associations of entrepreneurs, industrial associations etc.) in improving the firm’s and the entrepreneur’s visibility, taking advantage of a comparison with others, and making oneself feel part of a greater community with similar identities. The following quote exemplifies:

“Attending the industrial association meetings, I began to meet other entrepreneurs, to consult with them, also with many women entrepreneurs. I found myself in the situation of meeting a woman who had gone through a similar experience to mine, because for better or worse we have these problems to solve every day.”

Allyship in identity formation

Entrepreneurs narrated that they activated internal relationships with the aim of supporting the construction of their identity. It consists of behaviours through which some cooperative relationships are constructed internally to the firm with some key roles. The following quotation provides an idea of this mechanism:

“What helped me is the fact that I created strong and good alliances where people inside the organization who helped me grow and supported me when I needed it. And of course, also out of gratitude, I commit myself to supporting not only these people, but also other people”.

The agentic and societal mechanisms interplay over time in the stories of the non-vocational entrepreneurs. This interplay activates a process of identity construction that enabled them to become aware of their self through (1) the activation of personal resources, (2) the influence exerted on the external context, (3) the interpretation and the meaning making derived from the external interactions and relationships. Figure 1 summaries the different components of the process above described. As a matter of fact, the agency and the structure interact dynamically while simultaneously contributing to the construction of the entrepreneurial identity; for instance, the structure mechanism *Disavowal of identity*, in which the external context tries to diminish and not recognise the entrepreneurs' self, in turn triggers the activation by the entrepreneur of agency processes to affirm her entrepreneurial self through legitimisation mechanisms. Thus, the interaction among agency and structure may activate a recursive process in which different mechanisms are activated and finally reinforce the entrepreneurial identity.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Theoretical contribution and limitations

The present research advances the literature on entrepreneurial identity and specifically identity work in several ways. First, the study delves into the complexity of entrepreneurial identity

formation considering the context in which the individuals are forced to embrace self-employment, contrary to prior research which primarily considered pull-driven individuals with a clear entrepreneurial vocation. In so doing, we delineate emergent mechanisms that individuals rely on to construct their identity and effectively perform as entrepreneurs. Second, the findings provide insights on the interplay between individual and social resources entrepreneurs use to define who they are and strive to behave in ways that are consistent with this self-definition. Finally, addressing a recent call about the relationship between time and EI (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), the study has abandoned the static temporal lens primarily adopted in the literature, in order to explore how EI can be constructed and enacted over time, describing the transition from nascent to experienced entrepreneurs.

The study presents some limitations that can represent avenues for future research. First, the entrepreneurs included in the sample operate in the same geographical area with a high dynamism in terms of entrepreneurial activity. Moreover, the respondents are primarily leading a business family. These specific characteristics of the sample could emphasise the predominance of some individual and social mechanisms of EI instead of others. Thus, scholars should enhance the transferability of the findings considering different geographical settings representative of a specific culture toward entrepreneurship. Moreover, even though gender in family business offers a unique setting for addressing EI construction (Pavan Bang et al., 2023), future research should consider comparing the results obtained in this sample with non-vocational entrepreneurs disconnected from the context of family firms.

Practical implication can also be identified at both the individual and venture levels. Our insights offer valuable guidance for entrepreneurs and managers by enhancing their understanding of the identity construction process. Additionally, this increased awareness can help secure more support for entrepreneurs during times of identity crisis and throughout the process of identity work.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Summary of Participant Characteristics

Entrepreneur	Year of birth	Tenure	Initial vocation	Sector	Company size (Nr of employees)
1	1955	1977	Employee	Transport	33
2	1962	1986	Journalist	Machinery	22
3	1960	1999	Employee	Mechanical	57
4	1959	2002	Elementary teacher	Machinery	100
5	1963	2007	Potter artist	Construction industry	11
6	1969	2004	Professor of law	Construction industry	215
7	1968	2001	Psychology studies	Construction industry	215
8	1983	2022	Journalist	Furniture	15
9	1967	1990	Computer scientist	Transport	30
10	1975	1996	Architecture studies	Furniture	21
11	1973	1999	Lawyer	Tourism	23

12	1961	1989	Post employee	Furniture	50
13	1968	2017	Artistic studies	Metal industry	87
14	1979	2018	Employee	Tourism	10
15	1957	2008	Interpreter	Food	28
16	1975	2000	Lawyer	Apparel industry	79
17	1983	2012	Psychology studies	Plastic industry	220
18	1969	2007	Teacher	Mechanical	18
19	1976	2015	Personal trainer	Glass industry	37
20	1972	2007	Personal trainer	Food	98

Figure 1. Process model of non-vocational entrepreneurial

