

AN EXPLORATION OF ENTREPRENEURS' IDENTITIES AND BUSINESS GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand whether types of identity are more likely to be present before and during business growth. This study collects data from six entrepreneurs and adopts an interpretivist approach using Van Gennep's theory of transitions to explore the challenges faced by entrepreneurs after start-up and during business growth. The findings show that business growth challenges an entrepreneur through their identities, as they aspire to achieve their personal goals and reach self-fulfilment. These multiple identities consist of entrepreneurial, manager, personal, and social identities, along with their role within the business. This research concludes by discussing the managerial implications for entrepreneurs and policy makers. It recommends for entrepreneurs to receive a combination of personal and business support, especially during more uncertain, highly pressured, and more complex times.

Key words: Entrepreneurs, Business Growth, Identity, Identity Transitions

ENTREPRENEURS' IDENTITIES AND BUSINESS GROWTH

Entrepreneurial businesses make a salient and significant contribution towards a country's economy. For example, the UK had 5.7 million small and medium sized businesses in 2017, which accounted for 99.9% of all businesses, 60% of the UK workforce and 51% of UK turnover (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2018). The number of businesses in the UK that started trading between 2015 and 2016 was 414,000, an increase compared to the 383,000 that had started the previous year and the largest annual increase since the records began in 2000. The number of businesses ceasing to trade also increased during the same period, from 283,000 to 328,000 (ONS, 2018). A high proportion of entrepreneurial businesses are susceptible to fail with only 40% surviving for 10 years (Levy & Powell, 2005). Different factors constitute towards the survival of these businesses such as effective organisational planning (Duncan, Yeager & Rucks, 2011), innovative behaviour (Mazzei, Flynn & Haynie, 2016) and the small business owner or manager (McCartan-Quinn & Carson, 2003). The authors consider the identities of entrepreneurs to be an important aspect of the survival of entrepreneurial businesses because they tend to be the key decision maker and shape how their business emerges and grows (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). This research therefore explores whether certain types of identities are more likely to be present in entrepreneurial businesses before and during their growth stage.

An entrepreneur makes all the decisions for a business. Central to this debate is the expression 'my business is my baby', capturing how business decisions are central to, and based around, the entrepreneur's identity (Chaplin & John, 2005). Entrepreneurs

therefore become a key influence in shaping and building the business's identity based around their own tastes, traits and personality (Morris, Kuratko, Schindehutte & Spivack, 2012). The evolution and direction of the business, along with the tactical decisions made, stem from how the entrepreneur reacts personally to change (Levy & Powell, 2005; Singh, Garg & Deshmukh 2008; Vargas & Rangel 2007). This change may be driven primarily by their end goals, their adversity to risk (Powell & Baker, 2014), 'forced' through stakeholder pressure or natural evolution through personal choice (Slade, 2016). It is therefore clear how vital the entrepreneurs' identities are to the growth of the business, which this paper will explore.

This research contributes to the existing literature in two different way; by looking specifically at the multiple identities of entrepreneurs and their identity transitions after business start-up and during business growth. The growing amount of literature on entrepreneurial identity has focused around business start-up (e.g. Cardon, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Murnieks & Mosakowski, 2007; Powell & Baker, 2014; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009) or business growth (e.g. Morris et al., 2006; Murnieks et al., 2014, Philips et al., 2013) rather than in the transitional period between these two key stages. "It is also important to examine how founder role identity may change over the different stages of a new venture's development" (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010, p. 50) as they are likely to dominate the decision-making process during the company's early years. Entrepreneurs may adopt other roles during the different business stages such as growth, such as a small business owners (SBOs) and managers (Gartner, 1988). Stewart et al. (1998) found that SBOs and managers were less risk-averse, less motivated for achievement and had a lower degree of

preference for innovation than entrepreneurs. SBOs were however more likely to take risks than managers, which is also supported by Carland et al. (1984, 1988, 1989). This study looks at how multiple identities are adopted by entrepreneurs (e.g. entrepreneurial identity, SBO identity, manager identity, social identity, personal identity and role identity) and how they evolve leading to and during business' growth. Picken (2017) describes how growth achieves competitive scale and sustainable market leadership, which requires differences in the organization's structure, process and discipline. This shows that a different skill set is required to grow a business than launch one. This research finds that it is the willingness of the entrepreneur to change their role from being fully operational, to either strategic and operational, or purely and strategic-led, to facilitate business growth. This will have different identities associated with these.

It would be financially beneficial to understand the types of identities that are more likely to be present before and during business growth to improve the positive impact this has on an economy. Limited research has addressed this to date to the authors' knowledge. Hence, this research is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand "What identities are more likely to be present before and during business growth for entrepreneurs?" This knowledge will help to inform any entrepreneurs about the benefits of adopting these identities, as they are more likely to lead to business survival and growth. The paper will first discuss the wider literature on identity, identity transitions and business growth. It will use Van Gennep's (1960) Identity Theory as a framework to show the link between an entrepreneur's identities and business growth using interpretivist analysis of the findings. It will end with a conclusion, managerial implications, limitations, and future research suggestions.

Identity

A commonly used definition of identity addresses the question ‘Who am I?’ (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008, p. 327) by advising individuals “what to do, think and even feel” (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fúgate., 2000, p. 417) so that they might become “who I want to be” (Powell & Baker, 2014, p. 1430). Individuals therefore use this information to navigate reflexive thought and adapt their behaviour so to survive and develop in a changing environment (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Hoang and Gimeno (2010) discuss three different types of identity: role, personal and social. More specifically, role identity is based on the behavioural expectations held by society but they are internalized differently by individuals when they acquire their role. Personal identities consist of self-definitions based on characteristics, experiences, attributes and values that distinguish an individual from others (Thoits & Virshup, 1997); whilst social identities refer to the relationships and roles that individuals are born with (e.g. daughter-mother) and that they choose to commit to (e.g. being an entrepreneur). Individuals may also change their roles and adopt different social identities, which will affect their personal identities. This shows how the three identities are connected and can change. This is supported by Powell and Baker (2014), who hold that entrepreneurs have mixtures of social and role identities. This research will explore if this also holds for entrepreneurs but with the inclusion of personal identities, along with beyond the start-up and during the growth stage.

There is support in the literature about multiple identities existing for entrepreneurs. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) identified three different types of founder

identities that are reflected in entrepreneurial behaviours that influence key decisions in the creation of new companies. A Darwinian identity is driven by economic success gained via the profits their company makes, and increasing their own personal wealth. A communitarian identity contribute to the community with their innovative products and value the support they receive from fellow community members in their entrepreneurial endeavours. Missionaries use their company as a political vehicle to drive a particular cause and benefit society in general. They conduct their business in a responsible, transparent and empathetic way (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011).

Cardon et al. (2009) also developed three different kinds of entrepreneurial identity that are linked to passion, have distinct characteristics and relate to different entrepreneurial outcomes. An inventor identity has a passion for activities linked to recognizing invention and exploring new opportunities such as new product development (NPD) and market-disruptive opportunities. A founder identity has a passion for activities related to starting the business and exploiting opportunities, such as establishing funding, and finding employees and board members; and a developer identity has a passion for activities related to growing the business through market development, such as attracting new customers and value creation, for example.

Both typologies (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011) are consistent with showing that multiple identities may exist at the same time but with different degrees of importance, which is also supported by Hoang and Gimeno (2010), Mathias and Williams (2012), Murnieks and Mosakowski (2007), Murnieks and Mosakowski & Cardon (2014) and Shepherd and Haynie (2009). Additionally, identities may differ in terms of their hierarchy or emphasis at different stages, and they motivate entrepreneurs

to engage (or disengage) in certain activities and interact with people in a way that confirms their role (Cardon et al., 2009; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). However, identities evolve throughout an individual's work life, with the different positions the individual holds (Ashforth, 2001). The business environment is unknown due to the markets being ambiguous, customers' needs constantly evolving, and competition being unpredictable (Schindehutte, Morris & Allen, 2006). This requires a different set of skills to launching a business (Ling, Zhao & Baron, 2007; Hofer & Charan, 1984). It would therefore seem plausible to assume that an entrepreneur's identities will be different from when the business starts to when the business grows.

Identity Transitions

Van Gennep (1960) is commonly cited in academic literature for explaining the changes in the different stages involved in transitions such as birth, graduation, starting a new job, marriage, retirement, and death. Transitions can be triggered by events (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988), trauma (Maitlis, 2009), or work changes (Pratt, Rockman & Kaufmann, 2006), and they are shaped by a variety of individual, situational, and role characteristics (Ashford & Taylor, 1990). Role transitions may drive changes in behaviours because of the nature of the activities involved in a role, along with the relationships that facilitate it. Additionally, this can be due to individuals adopting the perspective, attributes, time perspective, and norms associated with the role (Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen & Schein 1979). Previous research has used Van Gennep's theory in diverse contexts, such as company directors' responding to the increased institutionalization of board practice (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018), employee workplace rituals linked to owners' core values (Erhardt, Martin-Rios & Heckscher, 2016), non-traditional entrepreneurial

locations (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014), daily role transitions involving the social domains of work, home, and third places (Ashforth et al., 2000).

Within this research, the transitions mark an entrepreneur’s change in roles when they acquire additional roles such as SBO or manager, with their associated identities within their business. The three phases consist of (a) *separation*, when an individual disengages from prior roles, (b) *liminality*, when he/she transitions to new roles, and (c) *integration*, which occurs when roles and their respective identities are weakly differentiated (Ashforth et al., 2000). This can be applied to entrepreneurial businesses, with separation occurring when the business is launched and is different in form to the previous planning and testing stages. Liminality occurs when the business is trying to survive by becoming established. Individuals are said to hold uncertain or temporary identities during the liminal stage because they are navigating from one role to another. There may also be a delay in the changeover of roles, so that two role identities exist at once, and may be incompatible and therefore compete (Sieber, 1974), which can prove challenging for entrepreneurs and therefore affect their behaviours and values (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). Integration occurs when the business is growing so the conditions in which the business operates in is different than before. Business growth can be in terms of employment, premises, operations or finance, for example. This change will require entrepreneurs to adapt and change their behaviours, which will result in their identities evolving (Ashforth, 2001) with their business because they are exposed to different priorities (Ibarra, 2003), new interactions, and new experiences that will influence their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). The entrepreneurs may have previously launched the venture (Gartner, 1988), which supports the likelihood of

integration occurring between similar roles (Ashforth et al., 2000) such as SBOs and managers, along with having integrated identities rather than distinct ones due to sharing similar values, beliefs, norms and interaction styles (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). Individuals have a strong desire to adopt identities in terms of their self-image (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hogg & White, 1995). An entrepreneur therefore applies a new meaning to their new work identity upon integration, when they have adopted their new role and incorporated it into their self-identity. Van Gennep's theory of Identity Transition is used as a framework to analyse the data in this research.

Business Growth and Entrepreneur's Identity

Business growth can either be profit-orientated by focusing on return on sales, cost efficiency or operational activities; or it can be market-orientated by focusing on market share; sales growth or unit cost economies (Zhou, Park & Ungson, 2013).

Picken (2017) identifies business growth as occurring in third stage of the entrepreneurial firms' life cycle known as 'scaling'. This follows after start-up, which lays the foundation, and transition, which completes the development of the offering, establishes a solid foundation, and positions the organization for rapid scaling. Scaling occurs before final exit stage when the firm is harvested through the Intellectual Property Office (IPO), private sale, merger or acquisition. The objective of scaling is rapid growth in order to achieve competitive scale and establish sustainable market leadership. It requires differences in the organization's structure, process, and discipline. Brush et al. (2009) found that companies display four different rates and patterns of growth. 'Rapid growth patterns' display some rapid growth trajectories whereas 'incremental growth

patterns' display slower and more measured rates of growth. 'Episodic growth patterns' display periods of quick growth followed by sharp retrenchments, while 'plateau growth patterns' involve some points of stagnation.

The distinguishing character is that most entrepreneurs take on the management role, so influence the performance of the business and growth (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Lin, 1998; Montserrat, 2002). Resources available to the firm are important components as they help the business meet the demands of the market and therefore tackle complexity as the organization grows. Furthermore, the entrepreneurs' attitude directs the company in moving forward towards growth itself (Wiklund, Patzelt & Shepherd, 2009).

Entrepreneurs are central to the growth path (e.g. Baum, Locke & Smith, 2001; Mintzberg, 1992). Their ability to implement and then manage their vision, strategy and direction are the essential first reference points in terms of business growth (Brush et al., 2009). They need to learn and evolve their personal plan as the business grows, which is often cited as difficult to achieve (Davidsson, Kirchhoff & Hatemi, 2002; Gibb, 2000). Different skillsets are required to start, manage and respectively grow a business (Juntunen, Sarniemi & Halttu, 2010). Entrepreneurs need to start trusting their employees when they themselves move away from the daily running of the business. They need to ensure that their team are on board with growing the business (Greening, Barringer & Granger, 1996). It is the entrepreneur's mindset, behaviour, and ability to implement a strategy that are key to developing the brand and driving future business growth.

An entrepreneur's identities are important for the growth of a business because they tend to be the key decision maker who shapes how the company emerges and grows

(Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). However, they may encounter difficulties in integrating their identities into contradictory or competing identities (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). Boyd and Gumpert (1983) state that, as businesses grow, entrepreneurs spend less time doing and more time managing through delegation. However, this depends on their willingness to delegate and manage the activities of others. Therefore, business growth and the development of the business identity can be attributed to an entrepreneur's role, specific competencies, mindset (attitude and behaviour), motivations, and the competitive strategies developed. Hence, existing literature supports that their role is vital for the growth of a business, in terms of their personal and business goals, along with their informal management style (e.g.; Hills, Hultman & Morgan 2008; Lindman, 2004; Singh et al., 2008).

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This research adopted an interpretivist approach because it aimed to understand entrepreneurs' subjective perceptions, experiences, and behaviours before and during the growth stages of their businesses (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). This research was exploratory in nature, whereby the authors sought to understand whether certain types of identities were more likely to be present before and during business growth by collating different perspectives rather than trying to explain this.

All participants were entrepreneurs, who were recruited from the personal network of one of the authors, who himself was an entrepreneur and had therefore actively participated in this environment, which gave him an insider's view (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). This notion of the researcher as an instrument, where their understanding

arises from their direct personal experience, has been discussed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1986). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the entrepreneurs' place of work because it was their natural setting, which meant that it would be relaxing and convenient for them. Each interview was in-depth and lasted for around two hours. The entrepreneurs were asked to speak about their business journey, from their initial idea to present day. The author also explored business growth, by discussing different growth parameters they themselves had set. All interviews were then fully transcribed verbatim to prevent any key experiences being missed. They were analysed using an iterative strategy, to enable the authors to gain a holistic understanding of the entrepreneurs' views (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Themes were then identified within the interview passages, which merged and formed more general categories later in the analysis (Spiggle, 1994). Van Gennepe's theory of Identity Transition was then applied as a framework to the key themes to highlight the three different stages of transition; separation, liminality and integration.

The purposive sampling criteria was that all entrepreneurs had experienced business growth and business transformations. They were selected due to their representation of a wide and diverse set of characteristics, including shareholdings, turnover, number of employees, industry sector, and number of years trading. They were from different industry sectors, including professional services, wholesale, print and media, manufacturing, law, and automotive. All of the companies were limited entities, with between 5 and 25 employees, and annual turnovers ranging from £150,000 to £20 million. A small sample was specifically chosen within this in-depth, interpretivist research to gain an insight into a targeted subset of entrepreneurs who were surviving and

had gone through transitions. This decision was made to avoid using a random range of entrepreneurs who potentially had not been involved in business growth. The aim of the research was to remain focused by achieving both specificity and depth in terms of the identities of entrepreneurs.

There are no rules specifying what the size of the sample should be in interpretivist research (Patton, 2002) because it should be determined by the needs of the research (Morse, 1998), which here was to gain an in-depth understanding of whether certain types of identity are more likely to be present during business growth. The authors were therefore confident that a sample size of six entrepreneurs would provide sufficient insight to increase the authors' understanding of this research area.

The themes identified from the data were structured according to Van Gennepe's theory of Identity Transition. The themes are the headings used and are presented below. The data illustrates some of the different types of identities that were discussed in the literature review section.

Separation - business start-up

The findings show that the entrepreneurs initially set their businesses up for various reasons, including ambition, being tired of working for someone else, striving to fulfil a 'sense of achievement', and having specific personal goals. This portrays the social identity that they have chosen to commit to (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010), along with their founder identity by looking to start a new business (Cardon et al., 2009). Respondent 5, for example, expressed how "*Despite my lack of education, I wanted to do something ambitious and achieve something.*" At the beginning, they felt powerless,

anxious, and worried because they were unsure about external pressures that were outside of their control, which reflects a manager identity. The uncertainty in the industry in which their business operates has also been recognized by Bennett (1993), while Schindehutte et al. (2006) state that this is due to the markets being ambiguous, customers' needs constantly evolving, and the competition being unpredictable. The uneasy feelings recorded in this research were found to be common among entrepreneurs who were naturally more ambitious, thus even more eager to attain a sense of achievement, which represents their entrepreneurial identity due to them being willing to take risks, having a stronger motivation to achieve and being goal-oriented (Cardon et al., 2009; Stewart et al., 1999). They confessed to being 'extrovert thinkers' yet 'social introverts', by their own definition. This often resulted in them feeling lonely at the top due to shouldering the entire burden and resulted in them questioning themselves, with "Am I doing the right thing?" at start-up. This challenged their personal goals and dented their confidence, which displays the personal identities gained from acquiring their entrepreneurial roles.

Liminality - business growth

All of the interviewed entrepreneurs had growth aspirations for their business, irrespective of their business's structure or sector; "*I now have a clear path to grow the business*" (Respondent 5), which reflects their developer identity. Their role and social identities consisted of a common set of life goals, a sense of recognizing a dream, wanting to fulfil their need for a sense of achievement, and striving for financial security whilst seeking a balanced lifestyle. This can be described as the basis of their founder identity. All respondents genuinely believed this could not be achieved when working

for someone else. They were driven by a positive outlook and having a clear mind and roadmap to drive the business forward, which highlights both their developer and entrepreneurial identity. The end goal for all the interviewees illustrates their personal identity of wanting to reach a position where they could achieve their personal aspirations and goals, whilst remaining true to themselves and achieving the growth plans they had for the business.

The decision to aim for business growth was found to be either a personal choice made by the entrepreneurs in “wanting to do it well”, or “forced” because the business “was vulnerable in its current state”. Both reasons were due to their social identity and resulted in them feeling empowered and more confident through “the power of choice”. Additionally, they understood the importance of people being at the heart of their business.

Integration - entrepreneur's identity vs. business identity during growth

The entrepreneurs believed that growth was the result of determination, honesty, hard work, and knowledge of their profession, which demonstrates their role identity. This is linked to their personal identities, in terms of how they expected their family members to describe them – as being ambitious, analytical, workaholic, spontaneous, and creative. A driver behind their personal identity of the entrepreneurs was disclosed by Respondent 1 who expressed that they had “*ambition and sense of achievement*”, which shows their entrepreneurial identity.

The entrepreneurs recognized that their own personal identity formed the foundation of their business identity, specifically what their business represented and how

it was perceived, both internally and externally; a reflection of their manager identities. This is supported by Omilion-Hodges and Baker (2014) who hold that a businesses' identity is based on the attitudes of their stakeholders, along with Powell and Baker (2014), who hold that "Founders use their firms as vehicles through which they affirm and defend their identities" (p. 1430). The findings in this research show that their SBO and entrepreneurial business identities were sustained through their personal networks, in that they provided a very credible, highly personable, and customized service that helped to establish and build their reputation.

A common theme was found to occur during business growth; the role that the entrepreneurs adopted at start-up changed, which therefore transformed their role and social identity. All interviewees agreed that their role had to change. The findings support that a move occurred, from the manager's identity to the entrepreneurial identity, during business growth and now represented their developer identity. Initially, the business was based on their personal and founder identity but when this transitioned into the business identity during the growth stage, it was found to cause friction in the relationship between the entrepreneurs, the developing business culture, and the newly forming identity. This therefore challenged their managers' role and position in the business, as well as their personal and role identities; *"In the past I would just make a decision and worry about it later. There is a saying from a leading business coach - 'Just do it and seek forgiveness later or work it out later'. However, now I have the feeling of slight restrictiveness and frustration"* (Respondent 3).

Possible role identities have similar properties to actual role identities, and they can guide and motivate goal-oriented behaviour so that the role becomes an actual one

(Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, all respondents agreed that this decision was tougher than they initially expected it to be. Their businesses had represented their identities and values at start-up but needed to evolve when the business started to grow. The identity had now adopted a different form as it represented both the business and themselves. Therefore, many soon realized that their business was now bigger than they were.

When the business infrastructure grew organically, it resulted in a growing team with changing identities. The data shows the managerial and leadership choices open to the entrepreneurs were (a) to embrace this change as part of business transformation or (b) to resist change with the potential of causing friction among their personal identity, manager identity and entrepreneurial identity. The changes in their identities prompted their personal reflection and learning (Roberts, Dutton & Spreitzer et al., 2005), as they moved to a position of strategic leadership, thereby altering all of their identities (role, personal and social). This supports the idea of an entrepreneur's role being critical for business growth because it is linked to their personality, skills, and ambitions (Carson & McCartan-Quinn, 1995; Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003), and to their identities. Additionally, it shows the importance of the entrepreneurs in enabling business growth (Carson & Stanley, 1990).

All of the entrepreneur's identities were found to become diluted as their business increased in size; *"It's much more about the team, not just me"* (Respondent 1), as this was found to reduce their ability to influence the business (Powell & Baker, 2014). Business growth was, therefore, found to create a new business identity no longer based on the original core values of their personal identity, because this was not sustainable within the new business environment and conditions. This research found that some

entrepreneurs therefore adjusted their role from being fully operational, to either strategic and operational, or purely strategy-led, to facilitate this change, thus transforming all of their identities; *“However, I realise that at this time operational management is also part of my role to get things moving. My role is now split between operational management and leading the strategic direction of the business” (Respondent 5).*

This transition during business growth had the advantage of providing some entrepreneurs with a sense of feeling in control. For example, Respondent 4 expressed how *“Adjusting my role helped increase the level of certainty in delivery”*, whilst Respondent 2 revealed that *“If you make a decision - you need to take the team with you”*. As the businesses grew, their teams were also found to increase. The new business culture had therefore evolved into larger identities than those initially shaped by the entrepreneurs or the idea originator.

Table 1. Types of multiple identities adopted during business growth

Types of identity		Separation: Business Start up	Liminality: Initial Business Growth	Integration: Continuing Business Growth
Entrepreneurial identity		X	X	X
Manager identity		X	X	X
SBO identity		X	X	-
	Role	-	X	X
	Personal	X	X	X
	Social	X	X	X
	Founder	X	-	-
	Developer	-	X	X

Table 1 summarizes the identities that were present at each of the stages leading to business growth. It shows how multiple identities exist from business start-up through to the growth stage. The highest number of identities occurs during the liminality phase of business growth. This shows how the entrepreneurs respond to the changes in business environment and so they can adapt accordingly to grow their businesses. The identities that exist in all three stages are not static but also evolve and transition with the changes of entrepreneurial life-cycle, which shows how adaptable entrepreneurs are to change so they can survive and grow. Their entrepreneurial identities are represented by the entrepreneurs taking risks and their desire to be successful by moving the business forwards and grow, whereas the manager identities are represented by adapting both internally and externally to the changing business environments. The change in personal and social roles is perceived as enabling the entrepreneurs to achieve their priorities at the different life cycle stages. We would also expect this to be true for role identities even though the data did not show this.

VALUE OF THE STUDY

This study explored whether certain types of identities are more likely to be present leading up to and during business growth, according to Van Gennepe's (1960) Theory of Identity Transition. It found that multiple identities are present at different business stages and that business growth challenges an entrepreneur through their identities, as they aspire to achieve their personal goals and reach self-fulfilment.

This research has built on previous research by showing that in addition to multiple identities existing at both the business start-up and growth stages, identities are present in the stages leading to business growth. Specifically, entrepreneurial identities, manager identities, personal identities and social identities evolve from business start-up,

through to business growth. This shows the relevance of these identities, along with building on the work by Powell and Baker (2014) by including personal identities. Hence, it provides a deeper insight into the identities of entrepreneurs, by revealing their motivations and emotions at these key survival and growth stages. It has highlighted that business growth can challenge their core identity. Furthermore, it contributes to the academic literature by increasing an understanding of the combination of identity, leadership and growth, by providing a more holistic view of growth within entrepreneurial research. This is highlighted by the internal struggles and complexity that entrepreneurs encounter whilst balancing an operational and/or strategic role during business growth. The combination of both is fundamental to business growth as operational planning is considered as an essential tool for business survival (Duncan et al., 2011) and it has been credited by enabling companies to overtake their competitors when linked to strategies (Carson & McCartan-Quinn, 1995; O'Donnell, 2014; Singh et al., 2008).

This research found that the business consists of the entrepreneur's personal and founder identities at start-up, as they are the key person responsible for establishing the business. They determine the company's vision (Slater & Narver, 1995), objectives and strategies, which are essential for the survival of the business (Sadler-Smith, Hampson & Chaston, 2003). They naturally adopt the role and social identities associated with this role. A new entrepreneurial business therefore adopts the personality, beliefs, ideals, preferences, expertise, experience (Becherer, Halstead & Haynes, 2001; Morris et al., 2012) and identities of the entrepreneurs. Their identities assist the business through their forming of new relationships and acquisition of new customers at the beginning. Entrepreneurs often have the advantage of knowing their customers personally by

regularly interacting with them, which can result in higher customer satisfaction and innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Business survival and growth is driven by their ambition and contributions, which represents their developer identity. Furthermore, both passion and fear of failure drive an entrepreneur's resilience in challenging situations. Snell and Lau (1994) also agree that the entrepreneur's personal qualities, attitudes and outlook positively contribute to the effectiveness of small firms. The identities of the business then start to transform after the business starts growing and overcomes external pressures, as it is now operating in a different environment and under different conditions from when it started. This study shows that this change was received differently by entrepreneurs; they either accepted it because they recognized it was essential if their business was to flourish and, in turn, help them achieve their personal goals, or they opposed it, because this changing or altogether new identity was quite different to theirs. This had the potential to create friction in the relationship between themselves and their growing business. Those who saw their owner role as central to their identity would find the transition into a less strategic role more difficult, and be more resistant to change. This frustration had the potential to cause business strangulation as the entrepreneur felt 'personally' challenged and refused to let go. Their internal acceptance of and openness to change can therefore be considered as the key identity success factors that facilitate both the new business identity and eventually business growth.

This study suggests that business growth is not only dependent upon availability of financial resources but also the entrepreneur's identities. A combination of both personal and business support will boost the endurance and entrepreneurial spirit of the entrepreneurs, especially for the less experienced and during more uncertain, highly

pressured, and more complex times, when they are more likely to have self-doubt and question the existence of their business. The personal challenges faced by entrepreneurs that emerged from the findings highlight the need for policy makers, who encourage growth, to provide mentoring and training support schemes that consist of both business training and individual personal coaching, to support entrepreneurs during their transition into growth. This will assist them in setting realistic expectations before and during the business growth phases.

This study contributes to the growing literature that explores how role identities help facilitate career transitions (Ibarra, 2003), by suggesting that the entrepreneur's identities change before and during business growth success. In order to support the business growth trajectory, the following decisions may be considered by SBOs at different stages of the business growth lifecycle:

1. To step aside and adopt a more strategic role within the business. This will encourage business growth by creating suitable conditions for change and the birth of a new business identity, which will be based on the developing culture of the business.
2. To restrain the business by maintaining their current role and retaining full control without delegating key operational roles and decisions. This will restrict the identity of the business from developing, which could potentially inhibit sustainable growth in the future.
3. To exit the business. The business retains the business owner's legacy of success and uses this as a foundation to assist business growth, whilst evolving the business identity to adopt a more developed, improved and relevant form.

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