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Entrepreneurial identity development through digital media

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ABSTRACT

The use of digital media enables entrepreneurs to develop their startups in strategic manner. However, how entrepreneurs develop their identity through digital media is currently underexplored. Therefore, our focus is on how entrepreneurs describe and reflect on their communication with their audiences over digital media and, in turn, how that shapes their becoming as entrepreneurs. Our empirical data consists of 29 qualitative interviews and close observations in the start-up incubator neudeli at the Bauhaus-University Weimar. Through our analysis we show how the practice of strategic sparring and the practice of brand co-creation facilitate the development towards three alternative identity types, which are “solution-driven”, “purpose-driven” and “lifestyle-driven” identity. Ultimately, our study highlights how media management can be seen as a practice of self through communication over digital media.

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Introduction

Digital media are important for entrepreneurs and startups. They enable connecting with external audiences and customers through diverse channels and modes of communication, as well as facilitate internal communication, decision-making and organisational development (Baptista, Wilson, Galliers, & Bynghall, 2017; Kraus, Palmer, Kailer, Kallinger, & Spitzer, 2019; Li, Su, Zhang, & Mao, 2017; Shen, Lindsay, & Xu, 2018). In particular, social media platforms create the space to develop brands and enhance brand loyalty in interaction with audiences (Bange, Moisaner, & Järventie-Thesleff, 2019; Hidayanti, Herman, & Farida, 2018). For example, through sharing new ideas, publishing updates on prototypes and receiving feedback from followers, entrepreneurs can develop and leverage their organisational knowledge (Kane, 2017) and openly co-create products with their customers, thereby enhancing value creation (Hidayanti et al., 2018). In doing so, social media is changing *how* “organizations do business” (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016, p. 47). In turn, and despite critical voices about the expected benefits for entrepreneurs (Martinez Dy, Martin, & Marlow, 2018), it becomes unthinkable not to be on social media (cf. Duffy & Hund, 2015). This is underlined in the record growth of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or WhatsApp that connect billions of users (Price, 2019).

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However, the way in which entrepreneurs use social media and what that means for the processes and practices of entrepreneurial development and their outcomes is underresearched and under-theorised (Achtenhagen, 2017; Giones & Brem, 2017; Horst & Murschetz, 2019; Kraus et al., 2019; Martinez Dy et al., 2018; Nambisan, 2018; Shen et al., 2018). This is evident in recent calls to bring mainstream entrepreneurship and predominantly industry-focused research on media entrepreneurship closer together to advance theory-building (Achtenhagen, 2017) and, in turn, create new theoretical constructs that enable capturing and investigating interdisciplinary topics (Horst & Murschetz, 2019). Similarly, Nambisan (2018, p. 1029) calls for the explicit theorising of concepts related to digital technologies which can better address how these digital (media) technologies are transforming the nature of entrepreneurial processes and outcomes as well as how entrepreneurs act.

In particular, we need to enhance our theoretical understanding of entrepreneurial identity development (Leitch & Harrison, 2016, p. 178). This is shown in a recent special issue (see e.g. Alsos, Clausen, Hytti, & Solvoll, 2016; Lewis, 2016; Yitshaki & Kropp, 2016) and more current studies that ask whether and how entrepreneurs develop an entrepreneurial identity. They find that self-reflection, communication and interaction with other entrepreneurs are the main drivers of identity development (Werthes, Mauer, & Brettel, 2018). Furthermore we learn that individuals becoming entrepreneurs see themselves as acting ethical subjects (Poldner, Branzei, & Steyaert, 2018), which are often motivated by their passions and inspired by their context (Bhansing, Hitters, & Wijngaarden, 2018). In sum, as entrepreneurship scholars concerned with processes of organisational emergence and development, the interaction between identity formation and change as entrepreneur and of their organisation is an important but still relatively unexplored research avenue (Leitch & Harrison, 2016, p. 178). This underlines, we need to know more about how entrepreneurs develop their identity through and in respect to social media. Therefore, we draw on the concept of mediatisation, which describes the role of various media as part of the process of the communicative construction of social and cultural reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 196), and investigate how entrepreneurs and small startups employ social media and digital media technologies for both their individual and organisational development. Our initial research question is: *How do individual identity work and entrepreneurial strategies “co-evolve” through social media?*

We employ a qualitative methodology to analyse data from an empirical context: the start-up incubator neudeli at the Bauhaus-University Weimar. The data consists of both observational data from living and working in that context from 2016–2018, as well as interviews with 26 founders and 3 startup consultants about developing as an entrepreneur, acting strategically and using digital media for building a brand.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we describe how mediatisation impacts our understanding of organising and managing. Second, we build our perspective of individual identity work, which we link with entrepreneurial strategizing. Third, we outline our empirical materials and describe our analytical process. Ultimately, we illustrate our key findings and draw conclusions based on the study.

Mediatisation: the frame for seeing media management more broadly

In this research we see media management as both the management of media organisations (Lowe & Brown, 2016) and the management of various forms of media, through

which organisational actions are achieved as a form of practical engagement (Deuze, 2012). This combination enables researching the way in which entrepreneurs use digital media, because it offers a more comprehensive frame for “media management”. This way we respond to calls for moving beyond a pure “sector approach” (Rohn, 2018, pp. 429–430) and utilise our knowledge of media management for researching “media-relevant areas in terms of digital transformation of society” (Ots, Nyilasy, Rohn, & Wikström, 2015, p. 104).

To continue, we draw on the concept of mediatisation, and define *media management* as a reflective social process in which people use digital media platforms and networked media to communicate with one another and thereby create and sustain social reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, 2017; Hjarvard, 2013; Kember & Zylinska, 2015; Lindgren, 2017). Media have become an integrative aspect which impacts a multitude of dimensions of organisational and social life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Deuze, 2011; Lindgren, 2017). This becomes clear as Couldry and Hepp (2017, p. 2) explain that media are more than specific channels of centralised content: they comprise platforms which have become, for many people, literally the spaces where they enact the social. This means, media have become tools, channels, platforms and strategies for obtaining, producing, and sharing knowledge about the world through communication and interaction (Lindgren, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, living and working in a mediated world means that our activities, forms and patterns are, in part, sustained in and through media and their infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 15). While this does not mean that all we – currently – do is influenced by media, it still means that media are fundamental reference-points, platforms and resources for the horizon of our practices in this social world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). This is consequential for us because media may not just enable us to say, think and do things, or reflect existing information and particular knowledge claims about a phenomenon, but essentially involve possibilities as well as limitations for how we can act and interact in current organisational contexts through communication (Lindgren, 2017).

“Media offer us the possibility to communicate across time and space, developing a shared understanding of the social world and representing the social world for further reflection and action” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 18).

This is important, because these processes and practices around working with and managing digital media are altering the interactions of individuals and groups, and influencing how individuals form their identities (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Fornäs & Xinaris, 2013).

Entrepreneurial identity work in a mediatised environment

Generally speaking, identity refers to subjective meanings and efforts to find answers to questions “Who am I?” and “How should I act?” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011). In any context, this self identity is constituted out of the process of interaction with others (Gergen, 2009, p. 61; Weick, 1995, p. 20). This takes into account that the individual as a social self has a continually emergent quality (Fletcher & Watson, 2007, p. 12). In this process, the formation of any individual identity involves the discursive articulation of an ongoing iteration between social and self-definition (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). This means, if you shift among interactions,

you may shift definitions of the self. In this way, the entrepreneur is an “ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate (Weick, 1995, p. 20). In other words, “the appearance of stability in any given ‘identity’ is, at best, a transient accomplishment” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301). Therefore, identity formation becomes a “complex, multi-faceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301).

This is connected with the idea of identity work (Brown, 2015; Watson, 2008), which “refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of [their] sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). This ongoing ‘working on identity’ pertains to the fact that identity work involves mutually constitutive processes through which people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of self-identity and, in turn, struggle to come to terms with how others see them, which relates to the various social identities of them present in different milieus (Watson, 2008, p. 129) – or today on digital media platforms.

The dynamics of developing an identity through identity work change because of the way they are “mediated” by digital media platforms (Baldauf, Develotte, & Ollagnier-Beldame, 2017; Battin, 2017; Deckers & Lacy, 2018; Dooly, 2017; Fornäs & Xinaris, 2013; Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019; van Dijck, 2013). This becomes important for entrepreneurs’ communication over digital media and their identity work because, as Lindgren (2017) argues, the development of identity is no longer manifested with reference to something natural. Instead, digital identities are rather partial, contradictory and impermanent, because mediated communication enables us to construct potentially multiple digital selves or identities (Lindgren, 2017, p. 73).

The affordances of social media enable us to document, display, and share our lives, and to do this in more than one fixed and specific way. Identities are always open to negotiation and [...] a key element of being in society is the management of our identities in relation to others – showing some aspects, hiding others – depending on audience, context, and situation. (Lindgren, 2017, p. 82)

These identities are essentially multiple, because the hypermediated and networked self consists of multiple selves; one is the self that is doing the networking, and the other are the selves (or interpretations of the self), which are present on the network (Bolter, Grusin, & Grusin, 2000; cited from Kember & Zylinska, 2015, p. 131). Thereby, social media platforms act as infrastructures for entrepreneurial identity work because they provide the space for specific figurations to be sustained or created (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 74), for example entrepreneurial identities (Alsos et al., 2016; Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Werthes et al., 2018). This means, when managing and organising as an entrepreneur today, the opportunities to construct an identity are generally open, flexible and mediated.

Entrepreneurial identity work happens over digital media, which offer opportunities of organising our lives as selves, through digital devices that help the self cope with multiple expectations of contemporary life and new possibilities of self-representation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 145–147). Being someone shifts from being associated with a certain

quality that can be abstracted from the stream of everyday habitual action, to being continuously managed projects (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Within these ongoing projects the entrepreneur has a responsibility to its followers for presenting the newest products, the latest sketches, sharing ideas and seeking feedback and input. This means, the quest for building an entrepreneurial identity becomes the task of managing all strategic and brand-related activities in ongoing manner. This is shown in the way the entrepreneur and the startup strategically use social media (Hassan, Nadzim, & Shiratuddin, 2015), including its followers to improve their product (Hidayanti et al., 2018) and building their brand identity (Latiff & Safiee, 2015). On this basis, “the self is constructed through new figurations that are highly mediated” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 147). Through posting, commenting, sharing, and creating and upholding profiles, entrepreneurs are actively constructing who they are, or at least who they want to be and how they want to be seen by others (cf. Lindgren, 2017). This means, we need to shift our attention towards the processes and practices of communication across media platforms, the way in which audiences respond to their posts, their reflections about their “input”, and how people reflect upon their entrepreneurial development in the light of using social media. This is important for strategic types of identity performance, such as creating an entrepreneurial identity, because developing an identity becomes a process of managing opportunities and threats around the communicative events through which the entrepreneurial identity and the emerging strategy become co-constructed with the audience.

The connection between strategy and identity becomes apparent in the work that entrepreneurs do, which has implications for the image, appearance and identity of the organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Laine, Meriläinen, Tienari, & Vaara, 2015; Oliver, 2015). Here, “the identity work perspective draws on past, present, and future temporal orientations, as one’s desired future identity (on varying levels of analysis) is dynamically informed by one’s historical and present circumstances” (Oliver, 2015, p. 339). This means, identity work may be seen as an element of strategizing, while processes and practices of strategy contribute to the construction of identity (Oliver, 2015, p. 340). In this sense, entrepreneurial identities are also occupational identities, because “what entrepreneurs do” becomes a defining aspect to their sense of “who they are” (Kenny et al., 2011, p. 70). However, as this literature is currently growing, we still need a better understanding of how an identity develops over time, what practices may be associated with this construction and how different levels of identity in organisations interact (Oliver, 2015, p. 342). Therefore, we argue that studying entrepreneurial identity work and strategy work in a mediatised environment can offer new insights for research on processes, patterns and practices of entrepreneurial identity work, as well as outcomes of entrepreneurial identities (cf. Gehman et al., 2017).

Methodology

The empirical context: neudeli

Our study draws on qualitative data from start-up incubator *neudeli* at the Bauhaus-University Weimar established to support different entrepreneurs and newly forming organisations. This start-up incubator aims at creating a vibrant culture for innovation by creating free space, enabling interdisciplinarity and project work. Since 2001, the start-up

incubator invites creative thinkers, inventors and practical creators to pursue their projects and ideas in the shared and office spaces of an old villa (neudeli, 2018). It offers a relaxed, but productive environment for innovative thinking and acting, and facilitates the start of self-employment through increasing reflection about combining ideas with business needs. The *neudeli* team gives critical feedback, helps to create a viable business model, supports creating contacts with network partners and investors, and assists in applying for funding.

At the same time, the context is quite unique because of the reflective and alternative attitude of the city and the university, which boosts a long history of culture and design. This is shown in how the spirit of the traditional Bauhaus is kept alive today, fostering an interdisciplinary atmosphere to tackle problems in the world, often in unconventional ways. Therefore, in line with the educational approach of Bauhaus University Weimar, *neudeli* supports playful exploration towards answering interdisciplinary challenges in practical, artistic and sustainable manner. Because it is attached to the Faculty of Media many people share a high sensitivity for the importance of media in the context of entrepreneurship.

The founders and creative entrepreneurs come from various disciplines and faculties (neudeli, 2019). These range from engineering to building construction, to design focused backgrounds like architecture, urban regional planning or cultural studies and media. Many entrepreneurs are at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey; some are active in the market, while others are still developing functional prototypes, are refining their business ideas and building their expertise and networks. Nevertheless, all entrepreneurs share the drive to use and reflect upon how social media impacts their brand and brand communication (Horst, 2019), which shifts the emphasis towards identity formation and entrepreneurial identity work (Watson, 2008).

Data gathering

This study builds on an extensive in-depth investigation of strategy, media branding and entrepreneurship from 2016 to 2018. The data consists primarily of semi-structured interviews, which are complemented by experiences from having lived and worked in that context. This includes countless unrecorded reflections and talks with the founders and consultants about the process and challenges of entrepreneurial development. Interviews have been conducted with 26 founders and 3 startup consultants about developing as an entrepreneur, acting strategically and using digital media for building a brand (see Appendix: Table A1). These interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and correspond to over 600 pages of transcribed text.

Data analysis

To analyse the data we apply the “Gioia Method” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Langley & Abdallah, 2011) which essentially aims at building a process model of how people make sense, organize and develop over time. It combines constructivist grounded theory with narrative analytical representations that are informed by the experiences from the context (Ravasi & Canato, 2013, p. 189). We addressed how people describe their development as entrepreneurs, how they manage strategically towards developing their

products, how they connect with their audiences over digital media, and how these, in turn, help them in developing their ideas, their self and their direction. This means we began with “open coding” of data extracts, and then grouped these into “first-order concepts” through constant comparison between different extracts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). After that we sought linkages between first-order concepts to arrive at “second-order themes”, which are situated at a higher level of abstraction. Through further comparisons of the data, we arrived at “aggregate dimensions” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 21). This entire procedure took place iteratively, with constant moving back and forth between data, codes and interpretations. This helped us to (1) distinguish evidence of different constructs related to entrepreneurial identity development, (2) organise the analysis of a large body of data, and (3), build a convincing story that fits with the researcher’s interpretation and experience. Essentially, this analysis proceeded iteratively through three successive stages.

In the first stage, we carefully read and reread all interview transcripts and coded how the interviewees described the development as entrepreneurs, how they manage strategically towards developing their products, and how they connect with their audiences over digital media. This produced a long list of open codes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 14). It included descriptions of e.g. how everyday work was perceived, what work situations need to be dealt with, with tasks and competencies the young entrepreneurs need to have, how they structure their days, and how they reflect on their communication, decisions and aspects of their development. The analysis of these first order concepts was divided into two. First, we focused on the way the interviewees described their behaviour in the social media and identified four narrative themes that described the mediated nature of strategizing and branding. These mediated interaction practices could be labelled as “*strategy sparring practice*” and “*brand co-creation practice*”.

In the second stage, we returned to the data and focused on co-creation of entrepreneurial identity work and strategy work. We could identify five narrative resources: *strategy-related issues*, *organisational issues*, *values-based topics*, *creativity-related issues*, *life-style based issues*. We built on the idea of entrepreneurial identity development in mediated contexts (Leitch & Harrison, 2016) and the connection between strategy and identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Laine et al., 2015; Oliver, 2015). This contributed both to our understanding of the way the aspiring entrepreneurs perceived working in mediated reality and shed light on how the individuals could build on these themes as narrative resources in their identity work.

In the third stage, our emphasis was in answering our research question on “*How do individual identity work and entrepreneurial strategies ‘co-evolve’ through social media and what identities do they develop?*”. Ultimately, we constructed three narrative descriptions of entrepreneurial identities, each of which built on a distinct combination of the five narrative themes. These themes function as narrative resources for the three distinct entrepreneurial identities, which are: 1. *Purpose-driven identity*, 2. *Solution driven identity* and 3. *Lifestyle-driven identity*. Next, we are going to depict our findings, divided into two sections.

Findings

Our study shows how the interviewees use narrative resources to construct and negotiate entrepreneurial identities and start-up strategies and elaborates on the outcome of that

process. We see that digital media, in particular the network-oriented social media technologies such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, play a crucial role in developing and defining the development of the individual entrepreneurs and their organisations. The entrepreneurs focus on developing their products, creating networks and connecting with audiences and consumers through various forms of communication, often mediated through social networks, which make their strategic development possible. They strategize in creative and emergent manner in order to build their individual identities and develop their entrepreneurial strategies over time. We first describe the two emerging interaction practices and continue by describing the three unfolding identities in narrative form.

Practices of mediatised interaction

Based on our analysis, the interaction practices could be divided into “*strategy sparring practice*” and “*brand co-creation practice*”. The analysis is illustrated in the figure below (see Figure 1).

When studying strategy practices, the focus is on the doings and sayings of strategy practitioners (Horst, Järventie-Thesleff, & Baumann, 2019). In this study, we see strategy as a reflective practice that emerges in the mediatised interaction with potential customers and other stakeholders over time. We find that the entrepreneurs practice strategy in emergent fashion. They may not have a clear plan, but rather an intuitive understanding of what needs to be done. This means, they have created a habituated way of acting in strategic manner. This is shown in how they engage with future goals, develop their products, and make decisions to respond to current challenges. In other words, their strategy becomes a way of “responsive coping” with the demands of their audiences (Chia

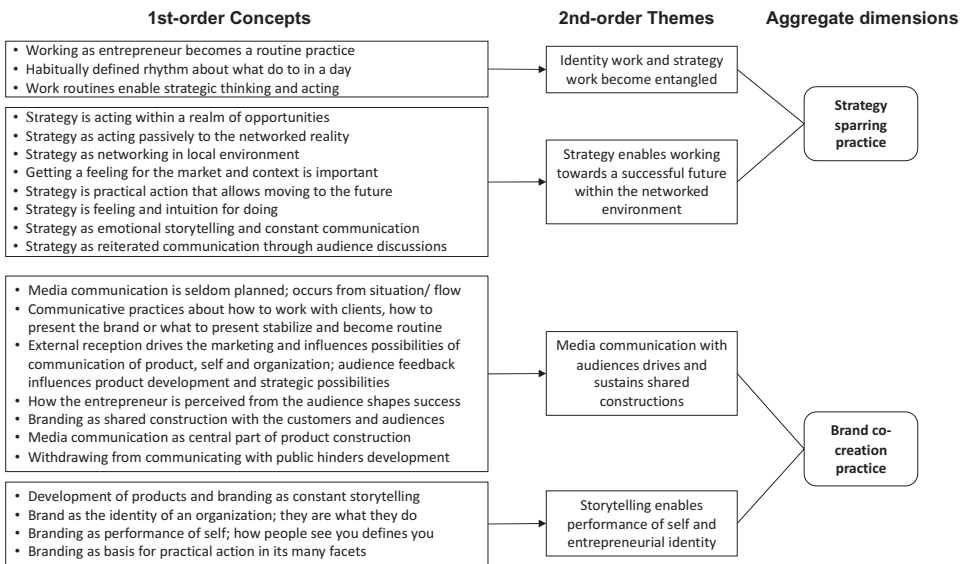


Figure 1. The mediatised interaction practices.

& Holt, 2006). Their actions are closely linked to the way in which their communication over digital media facilitates brand building and the co-creation of shared meanings. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

We don't have a clear plan for the [branding narrative], but we are continuously working on developing our network. I am working on making contacts over Facebook, and find friends of friends. (JJ, founder, 2016)

You can give the people the feeling of being included in the production process without them being included. You show a picture of something you work on or make a short video how you are standing in front a large machine building another prototype. You have so many possibilities [communicating] cheap and quick, and it can even look cheap and quick, it doesn't even have to look perfect. [You simply tell your story] (SV, founder 2016)

Strategy and branding become ubiquitous aspects in the practices of entrepreneurial identity development. In turn, these internalised ways of acting propel them forward. They know the rules of the game, and have become attentive to the way in which their products, ideas, and their identities as founders are closely linked. A creative founder explains:

Strategy is like a system – a mechanism – ... or maybe a game or rules of the game that you have to participate in, like your charisma is part of your strategy. If you make branding or people see you, they also see your products like that. (FF, founder 2016)

The entrepreneurs were actively engaged in social and communicative processes with their potential stakeholders through which they started to co-create their brands. The contemporary networked, mediatised environment offers multiple touch-points for potential customers to experience and interact with their brand and co-create brand knowledge.

We don't have a concrete concept for building our brand, but we [communicate] a bit over our homepage, Facebook, and Instagram. We try to channel this in a broad direction. (MT, founder, 2016)

Customers have an influence on the branding process, because you realize if the strategy works or if it doesn't work. And if it doesn't work, you have to think: 'do I narrate wrongly? Do the customers in this segment actually exist? And how do I need to adapt my product to the client?' (LN, founder, 2016)

Overall, we find that the narrative fragments of and reflections about their entrepreneurial strategy work and identity work are enacted in their daily practices of communicating over digital media. Their interaction with media audiences, potential customers and other stakeholders through their strategy sparring and brand co-creation practices becomes the springboard for the development and dynamics of three ideal entrepreneurial identities.

The emergence of entrepreneurial identities

In our analysis, we identified five different themes that functioned as narrative resources for the identity work of the entrepreneurs (cf. Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These are: (1) Strategy for reacting to continuous, open-ended changes and unplanned circumstances; (2) Organisational issues structure work, clarify decision-making and enable

development; (3) Value-based motives relate to sustainability, attitude, and critical reflection; (4) Creativity focusing on the need to accentuate ideas, novelty openness & knowledge sharing; and (5) Lifestyle-based topics to highlight the enjoyment of what it means to be an entrepreneur.

On this basis, we constructed three alternative entrepreneurial identities that were clearly linked with the entrepreneurial strategies available for the individuals. We named these identities as follows: *Solution-driven identity*, *Purpose-driven identity* and *Lifestyle-driven identity*. The analysis is illustrated in the figure below (Figure 2). After the figure, we are going to depict these identities separately.

Solution-driven entrepreneurial identity

The *solution-driven entrepreneur* is characterised by strong emphasis on the need to react to problems he identified. His focus is on strategically conducting short-term activities for achieving long-term goals. The construction of the identity of a solution-driven entrepreneur draws mainly on strategic and organisational themes, which emphasise goal-orientation, jointly performed strategic discussions, clear tasks and timing, as well as working with the network to source capabilities. This means, strategy is practiced as a broad framework for

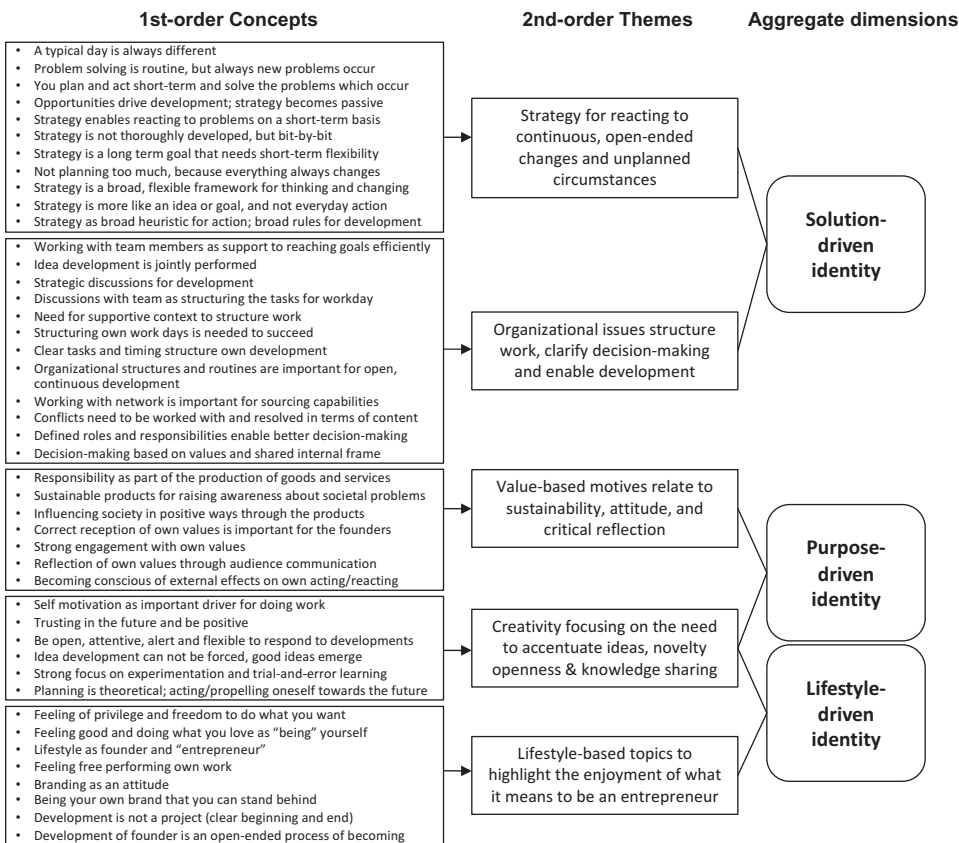


Figure 2. The emerging entrepreneurial identities.

thinking and changing. However, there is less focus on planning as one might normally expect, because it remains a creative-aesthetic context (cf. Nielsen, Norlyk, & Christensen, 2018). Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs show a strong drive on goal-orientation, jointly performed strategic discussions, clear tasks and timing, as well as working with their network to source capabilities. This is closely connected with having a clear goal or vision towards which their actions help building towards. For example an entrepreneur states:

[Our mission] is to make the best ecological baby-diaper that exists, which combines design, functionality and ecology without compromises. (SV, founder, 2016)

To achieve their mission and ideas, they predominantly build on strategy and organisational themes to drive decision-making, creating structures in their work context, and respond to continuously changing environmental conditions. Strategy supports their ways of narrating their self-identities in coherent and goal-oriented manner. This is shown in their statements talking about consciously using strategy and employing strategy talk:

We always talked strategically every day and said: 'This is where we want to go. How do we make that happen? How do we get to them? Can we compete with these rivals? So strategy was always there looming above us. (AS, founder, 2016)

In doing so, they aim to achieve their goals, such as getting to the market and connecting with audiences in strategic manner.

And we said: 'Ok, we have to be simply faster, we have to be better, and we have to communicate earlier with the market about what we are and can do.' This means, 'we have to get into the magazines, we have to show that we are those, who make shoes and that we do it very eco-friendly.' (AS, founder, 2016)

Surprisingly, and despite this goal-orientation, they are well aware of how their relationship with their audiences and future customers impacts their thinking, affects their product development and contributes to jointly constructing their sense of self. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

[We are definitely a brand], absolutely. But I have to say, with the turn we made, away from the end-consumer market toward B-to-B, [...] the importance of branding goes down. But before, it was extremely important for me that even optically we present everything in coherent manner. (NH, founder, 2016)

What this means is that they aim to work attentively with changing circumstances and react to the unfolding organisational realities they find. These involve complications in their entrepreneurial development such as having other important tasks to do before being able to continue focusing on their product development.

We had clear phases, where we could not actively pursue our ideas [of developing the products and for establishing our organization], because we worked on our normal semester-tasks in parallel. (AB, founder, 2016)

As part of their identity work, they express positive feelings of joy and happiness but also negative sensations such as pain, anger and frustration that come with mis-judgments, problems and difficulties, especially when they might be hard to solve.

You are making a plan and most times, you throw it overboard again and again. And at the end of the day, you leave the office amazingly happy or entirely downtrodden, because something went wrong or totally fine. (SV, founder, 2016)

Realising how much is out of their control is a negative experience, especially when their communication with their audiences through social media does not work the way they expected. It makes them question pragmatically if their strategy and their ways of communicating their product, service or brand were well-planned.

Customers have an influence on the branding process, because you realize if the strategy works or if it doesn't work. And if it doesn't work, you have to think: 'do I narrate wrongly? Do the customers in this segment actually exist? And how do I need to adapt my product to the client? (LN, founder, 2016)

In addition, these complications and turning points the entrepreneurs encounter make them question and reflect on their organisational set-up more broadly. Do they function well? How can they work better? These practical moves drive broader strategic reflections and narrative complications towards individual and organisational learning towards unfolding identities. Pragmatically speaking, they help preparing for future developments.

Looking backwards, it probably is the case that you don't need to have finished products before you start thinking about the branding and communicate with customers. (SO, founder, 2016)

[Looking back on our story], to be more successful today, I would much earlier and quicker create a clear organizational structure in the team and the firm. If I had an idea now, I would know very quickly over which channels I would communicate with my team or with my colleagues, how and how quickly decisions could be made, and how everything can be documented in transparent manner. (NH, founder, 2016)

From these statements we learn that strategic engagement with organisational issues is key for having a clear basis from which to communicate with audiences, make decisions and create the conditions for constructive development. Towards these goals, the interviewees express that networking becomes an essential practice, because it enables them to make connections that can be used for future development, even though the current value might not be clear.

Currently, I am in Berlin. I meet a lot of people and companies that want to do something with us or simply talk. That is a widely shared practice here. Yeah, that is actually it. I try to represent and brand us and especially uphold the contacts with the first client. (NH, founder, 2016)

Furthermore, the hallmark of the unfolding process towards a solution-driven identity lies in its pragmatic and clear engagement with what you want to achieve. What are the methods you want to employ? How will you relate to your audiences? What could be a potential contribution to the story you are telling? A founder explains:

'We have design, functionality, and ecology', and then you search for ways to sound authentic and communicate with your target audience. Behind every communication event, with every communication channel, you always focus on the brand and have to carry [that story] along. (SV, founder, 2016)

Our analysis of the data suggests that the basis of acting strategically towards their entrepreneurial development is a pragmatic engagement with a clear goal in mind to move forward. This can be shown in the following expressions.

We simply did it. And then everything went really quick. We had the homepage and everything else, and we could communicate well with it. In addition, we kept the logo simple. (AS, founder, 2016)

The open-ended process of developing this entrepreneurial identity drives towards three pragmatic resolutions of the unfolding narrative. This is shown in the founders' acceptance of their current conditions and yet progressively working with their ideas, resources and network towards jointly constructing success.

We communicate very little [right now], because we have the feeling that we want to have something to show, when we communicate. If we communicate today, only because we want feedback. (FD, founder, 2017)

From these statements – and in conclusion of this first entrepreneurial identity narrative – we can see that their practice of communicating with their audiences through social media platforms is network-centred, open-ended but very much hopeful to achieving joint success. These actions contribute to building a “solution-driven entrepreneurial identity”, which in turn was linked to a structured approach to achieving long-term strategic goals.

Purpose-driven entrepreneurial identity

The *purpose-driven entrepreneur* is characterised by the urge to raise awareness of societal problems and to influence society through sustainable products and services. It can be seen as the entrepreneurial identity, which most strongly reflects the core values that are special about the context *neudeli* and Bauhaus University Weimar. This is shown in a strong belief in one's own values and responsibility towards making a difference in the world and creating a more sustainable and livable place for all, coupled with a motivation and energy to build a business. To achieve this, the development towards a purpose-driven entrepreneur draws mainly on themes emphasising values and creative development issues. Together, these themes create a strong focus on responsibility, sustainability, making a positive impact on society, as well as a focus on self-motivation, trusting in the future, experimentation and trial-and-error learning.

The beginning of the story of unfolding entrepreneurial development is shown in narrative fragments and reflections about communicating to future clients, other founders and stakeholders. Across the interviews, we observe that there is a strong drive present in all the founders who describe that their intention is to start their own enterprise with values of justice, responsibility. Their motivation is to do something against injustice, environmental destruction, or poor working conditions. This is exemplified in the following fragments:

Our story begins, so to say, with [...] our founder, who worked on the professor chair for waste-management and garbage in Weimar at the university. And she found out that diapers make a huge portion of waste. [...] When she received a child, she said: 'I don't want to make this pile of garbage even bigger.' [...] And then she started questioning ... and from that emerged an idea for a ecologically sustainable, circular system for diapers. Because this didn't exist, she said: 'Okay, I will do it myself.' (SV, founder, 2016)

This exceptional drive is exemplified in the idea to change the world, to make improvements and contribute to society through adhering to principles and values that guide their actions towards forming as entrepreneurs.

[The purpose of our organization] is quite broad. We have seen: 'Ok, you can actually run an organization environmentally and socially sustainably, and be making money.' So we wanted to show: 'Look here, it doesn't always have to be like this, but it can actually be nice, friendly and beautiful'. (MT, founder, 2016)

Surprisingly, their entrepreneurial actions convey a spirit of being self-sufficient, while at the same time knowing they need others to develop as a startup. But just “doing” what they are good at and “practice what they like” keeps them going. This creative action and motivation is reflected in the following statement:

I have never once on my way thought about 'being a start-up'. It never occurred to me. I simply wanted to make ice cream. (FB, founder, 2016)

However, despite their focus on values and enjoying their creative work, they need to respond to and make due with the organisational circumstances they encounter. These difficulties could be related towards working and strategizing in emerging contexts, working with continuous and open-ended change, and essentially having to do many things by themselves and responding quickly. What they do to work responsively and creatively as entrepreneurs, is presented by how they talk about these coping actions. They state that planning needs to be flexible and emergent:

With planning, I need to be completely flexible. I have to be able to change my last in the last minute and do something else. (FB, founder, 2016)

A complication appears when they are trying to include others in the ongoing process of their development. This could mean that instead of doing everything themselves, they work with students for facilitating their media communication. However, this is not straightforward because making their underlying values clear and sharing with their audiences what they stand for is immensely difficult through the mediated construction of entrepreneurial identity. Many things are essentially out of their control. This is exemplified by the following expression:

We have worked with a group of students to produce a marketing plan for our organization, and even after narrating our values for a long time, they never understood what we are about. This means, even when I explain our values like this, a person needs to have the right attitude for understanding them. Only then can the media communication work well. (AS, founder, 2016)

But as the founders are strongly value-driven, highly motivated and committed to having a positive effect on their environment and through that be perceived as successful, the problem is to make due with this mediated construction of entrepreneurial identity. A response could be to make the entire processes of organisation and product development open and accessible.

[Transparency is key for us.] We are an open-source company, I mean, we do a lot for transparency. Our internal [processes] are completely open. (BB, founder, 2016)

Nevertheless, working as open-source software startup may not be a meaningful practice for entrepreneurs producing consumption goods like shoes, recycled handbags or clothing. Similarly, working with high knowledge-driven processes that could easily be copied, such as coding a new music-app or creating a new fitness instrument. However, these practices they talk about relate to what it means to be human, to be reflective of your own

values and having a lot of discipline for pushing your product forward, even if struggling through the process of entrepreneurial becoming is not easy. This is exemplified by the following statement:

It is not only about production, but attitude is in everything. Not only in relation to the product, but the attitude for what it means to be human, with particular values that you want to communicate. (AS, founder, 2016)

From this understanding of self and entrepreneurial attitude, the founders work flexibly and focus on trial-and-error learning for how to best use media communication in performing their unfolding entrepreneurial identities. This emerging resolution is exemplified in their beneficial product offerings and experiences around their new products. The practices they choose to develop their unfolding entrepreneurial identity are centred around positive storytelling, building on their values and creating meaning for their audiences and customers.

We always wanted to tell a positive story [about our organization and our values]. That's why we focused on the emotionalization of a robot. [...] Something that is likeable and cares for your plants. That's why our homepage reads: 'What is robots and nature ...?'. (BB, founder, 2016)

From these statements – and in conclusion of this second entrepreneurial identity narrative – we can see that the communication with their audiences over social media platforms continues to be driven by a strong value-orientation and intention to change the world. These are continually performed and co-constructed with their audiences in their process of forming a “purpose-driven entrepreneurial identity”, which is linked to a strategy focusing on tackling societal problems and on finding ways to improving society through sustainable products and services.

Lifestyle-driven entrepreneurial identity

The *lifestyle-driven entrepreneur* can be characterised by an appreciation of the way to organise one's life, work and time, and to facilitate one's connections. The lifestyle-driven entrepreneur enjoys the spirit and feeling of being an entrepreneur. This identity development builds on the social, creative and lifestyle issues in this context. It is supported by creative development issues that harness an openness towards change, being attentive, enable experimentation, and trusting in the future. Oftentimes the life-style driven entrepreneurs were characterised by relying on branding themselves, what they do, their life and their business activities. This culminates into practices of enjoying the flow, being oneself, and self-branding through which they mobilise the open-ended process of becoming as an entrepreneur.

The story often begins quite unexpectedly from an occurrence by chance and with a positive reaction to the opportunities presented. This is shown by narrative fragments which surface in interviews situations in which the founders reflect on their own story's beginning.

Originally, we made music instruments for children and then we searched for ideas and then we found our product. [...] It was a discovery. But this is how it started. (MZ, founder, 2016)

I don't know [how I developed the idea]. I simply woke up one morning and thought: 'I will make ice cream.' I had a book with recipes, from a friend and I didn't like it. I have experimented and bought a small ice-machine and it was immediately delicious. [...] So bit-by-bit the story developed. (FB, founder, 2016)

From our interpretation of the data we see that the founders are enjoying the lifestyle of being an entrepreneur. They enjoy the freedom, the openness and quality of determining their own life. What this does not mean is that they don't work and only party. Actually, and contrary to expectations, they work quite a lot. However, they integrate their work into a meaningful conduct of life through which they cultivate this entrepreneurial lifestyle. This is shown in starting early at home, thinking about their ideas, products and unfolding developments. This is exemplified in the following statements:

I get up in the morning, eat breakfast, cuddle my child and so forth. And then, about ten, sometimes earlier, I am in there [in the office]. I start programming, answer emails. Actually, for three years, I have not been doing anything else than programming, a little bit design in between and always feedback with the team. (BB, founder, 2016)

Mostly I start around 9. I sit in front of the computer, check emails, and then I work on whatever I am then working on. Mostly like this, I don't know. Lunch isn't really set, and in the evening I work until 6-7, depending on what is going on. [...] Whatever happens, if I like it, it can also be that I work longer. (FD, founder, 2017)

Our analysis suggests that the hallmark of the lifestyle-driven entrepreneurial identity is about "being in the moment" and enjoying the quality of life that the entrepreneurial phase brings. Moreover, it is not about following particular structures of work, but instead focusing on just "being and doing". Indeed, even if the day is over, the founder observes this with regret towards "having to go home", because being in the office, working on something of one's own choice, and receiving income – maybe from a stipend or because they have student funding –, is an enjoyable way of being.

A typical day for me as an entrepreneur? I wake up early, go to the office, sit around the entire day and then the day has to finish. (MZ, founder, 2016)

Sometimes these entrepreneurs struggle with difficulties about what it means to create a product and work towards founding their own organisation. This is driven by the attitude of creative work, which is perceived as a process of chance, flow and becoming which you cannot force.

But we also work well when we say: 'Today we don't do anything'. [...] Especially with creative things, you can't sit down and force yourself to have a good thought. (MZ, founder, 2016)

At the same time, a complication arises for forming a vision for the organisation. This is because they realise what the vagueness of a future that continuously changes means for their unfolding development. However, a response to this challenge is presented through having internalised the values and ideas into "having a feeling and sensibility" for how to communicate with audiences. This is exemplified by these expressions:

It is quite difficult to state our vision. It became more difficult, especially in the last months, to say: 'Okay. This is clearly our product and this is what we are going to sell for the next ten years.' It can simply change so quickly. (NH, founder, 2016)

Communicating with customers even though you may not have a clear picture in mind is challenging, but should not refrain from communicating per se. What the founders observe is that they reduce communication to small settings, in which they perceive that nothing can go wrong. At the same time, they try to engage a broad network of people that could be relevant. This does not entail product or solution-focused communication but simply building personal connections with people that could potentially work with them.

You have to approach people openly where you think they could be of use to you. [...] You talk with people and learn new names of other companies that could be relevant, and then the network grows automatically. (AB, founder, 2016)

While strategy practices, such as structured work and flexible goal orientation, are very dominant in the “solution-driven entrepreneurial identity”, this is not to say that they are unimportant or not employed in the other types of entrepreneurial identity development. In fact, strategic actions play an important part for all three entrepreneurial identities. Nevertheless, the focus within e.g. the lifestyle-driven identity is greater on issues of enjoyment, being creative and combining work and life.

The contribution of strategic elements lies in their connection with “being in the moment” and focusing on “being yourself” in a manner of emergent strategy. This is shown in the data as strategy providing a broad mechanism through which individual conduct is enabled. Whatever they do to communicate ideas, products, organisation or their selves to the audiences, it reflects back on who they are and how people see them as entrepreneurs:

Having a company name wouldn't do it for me, not because I am a company, but because people want [me] and they trust me. (AB, founder, 2017)

This pushes the founders to respond creatively within their organisational and branding abilities to communicate with their audiences. The focus for moving forward is people-focused, inclusion-driven, and aims to convey a feeling of what their product and processes of development are about. This is shown in several statements of the founders:

We actually have a guy that runs around and is on the phone all the time. [...] We have a frontboy that does everything [around media communication]. (BB, founder, 2016)

I have simply talked with people, again and again, and made a lot of connections. [...] From this emerged a dynamic [of becoming more successful], these are good contacts. (FB, founder, 2016)

This shows the immense opportunities and importance of communicating their products, ideas, selves and organisational brands to their audiences for jointly creating meaning and a mediated representation of who they are, and how they want to be seen (cf. Baldauf et al., 2017; Dooly, 2017). Despite this “loss of control over meaning”, the identity work that goes into constructing the lifestyle-driven entrepreneurial identity is felt to be quite enjoyable. Even though it is an open-ended process of becoming, the founders don't fear the future, but have confidence that things will unfold well, that ideas will come, and that their development in being an entrepreneur will ensue. This is demonstrated with the following statements:

It feels great to be a founder, doing your own thing. [...] It is super that you are completely free. You have to think every day or maybe every week: 'What is most important? What do I do now? This is some pressure and responsibility, but you can do what you want. (AH, founder, 2017)

I think, in the end, I am a very happy person because I can do what I want and what I am able to do. There are no regulations from any side, and being able to determine your own rhythm and timing is superb. (BB, founder, 2016)

Overall, the statements and reflections convey what it means to be a “life-style driven entrepreneur”, which in turn was linked with a strategy that emerged and evolved from the entrepreneurs’ personal strengths, interests and abilities. Furthermore, from these statements –and in conclusion of this third entrepreneurial identity narrative– we can see that they emphasise branding as an attitude and the importance of being your own brand. There is no perceived end to the process of their becoming, maybe because some of them may lack a marketable product. However, as an idealised identity-type, the lifestyle-driven entrepreneurial identity shows the entanglement between communicating with audiences, narrating their own sense of self, and joint construction of the entrepreneurial identity through digital media.

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to further our understanding of entrepreneurial identity development. In particular our focus was on *how individual identity work and entrepreneurial strategies “co-evolve” through the use of and reflections about social media and what identities entrepreneurs develop in this process*. Towards this aim we built a theoretical framework of entrepreneurial identity work in a mediatised environment. With this we analysed qualitative interview data from the context of a small startup-incubator at a German university.

Based on our analysis, we identified two mediatised interaction practices that the entrepreneurs enacted in their work. We called these “*strategy sparring practice*” and “*brand co-creation practice*”. Furthermore, we identified five narrative themes that the entrepreneurs used as resources in their identity work. These were: (1) strategy issues, (2) organisational issues, (3) value-based motives, (4) creative development motives, and (5) lifestyle-focused motives. Based on different combinations of these themes, we constructed three types of entrepreneurial identity which link with their entrepreneurial strategies. We named these identities as follows: *Solution-driven entrepreneur*, *Purpose-driven entrepreneur*, and *Lifestyle-driven entrepreneur*. These findings can be synthesised into an empirical model about the “Process of entrepreneurial identity development” (see [Figure 3](#)).

Based on our work we make three contributions. *First*, we advance media management research by showing how media management can be used as a conceptual frame for understanding the “management of media” in the context of entrepreneurship. The calls to broaden our understanding of media management emphasise that as we move from traditional publishing-broadcasting towards a platform approach, what we call a ‘media organisation’ changes (Hess, 2014). Instead of producing and distributing content to users, media organisations support the exchange between and co-production by consumers and organisations (Hess, 2014, p. 5). Of course, entrepreneurs more generally are not “media companies”, but yet they “manage media” to

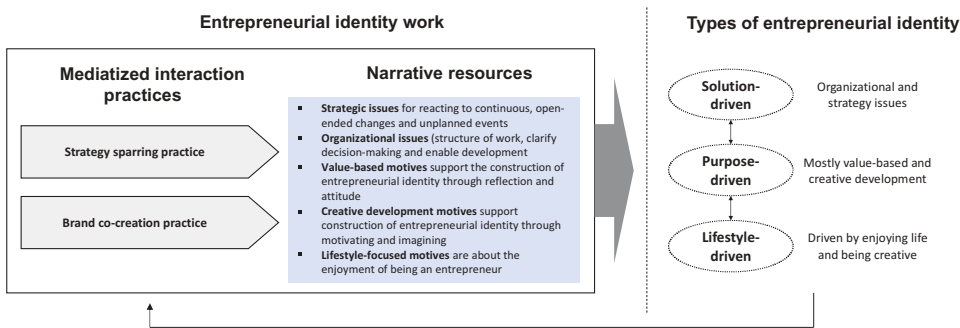


Figure 3. Process of entrepreneurial identity development.

support the exchange with their followers who use and provide content. They are not themselves media platforms, but yet they manage their media over these platforms for organising and conducting business. Nevertheless, while this “opening up” may attract critics from the media management field, we believe that there is room for this trajectory, because it allows us to move beyond a pure sector approach (Achtenhagen, 2017, p. 6; Rohn, 2018, pp. 429–430).

We have confidence that a broader definition of media management is beneficial for us as a field. This is because utilising the frame of “media management” in other contexts (Ots et al., 2015, p. 104) may allow developing new theory and carving out what makes media management special (Lowe, 2016). Furthermore, creating (new) theory, which has the potential to explain processes and practices across media and contexts, may allow increasing the relevance of our scholarship for other fields (cf. Picard & Lowe, 2016, p. 63). But only through making conscious choices and including open ontological and epistemological reflections (Achtenhagen, 2016, p. 119) can we push the quality of our scholarship and help explain how media works at the individual, organisational and societal level, how people make use of it, and with what consequences. In our case, we draw upon our understanding of media management and connect it with the cultural concept of ‘mediatisation’ (see e.g. Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lindgren, 2017). This shifts our view to processes of mediation that move people, data and things (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). This allows us to analyse and present what the entrepreneurs do with media, as a “self-reflective commentary and positioning vis-à-vis the media” (Deuze, 2012, p. 223). Thereby, we show that media management can be seen as a practice of self in mediating those intentional and responsive actions by which entrepreneurs seek to transform themselves and their organisations.

Second, we advance our understanding of the process of entrepreneurial development in a mediatised environment. In focusing on the conception of entrepreneurial identity work, we show that in this case the entrepreneurs consciously as well as unconsciously draw on the mediatised interaction practices called “strategy sparring practice” and “brand co-creation practice”. These two practices are the locus through which they enact their entrepreneurial identities and develop their strategies. As the entrepreneurs work towards and continuously uphold their identities through communication, they make use of a variety of narrative resources. In our case, we find that issues of strategy and organisation, as well as values, creative ideas and life-style elements become

significant motives that function as their narrative resources. Their entrepreneurial self-identities are described as a process of becoming which highlights the processual nature of their development. This enriches our theoretical understanding of identity formation because, as Leitch and Harrison (2016, p. 178) sustain, it addresses the relationship of identity to entrepreneurial processes, practices and activities. This is important because much empirical work and their conceptions of identity offers a static picture of how people respond to identity challenges they experience at a particular point in their lives (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012).

Contrary to that static conception, entrepreneurial identity development is never that smooth. Entrepreneurs struggle, question and refine their understanding of who they are. For example, Werthes et al. (2018, pp. 300–306; emphasis added) describe that cultural entrepreneurs often see themselves in binary terms, such as “I am *not* an entrepreneur” vs “I *am* an entrepreneur”. Driven by a strong motivation they communicate with others, self-reflect and define values which allows them to develop an entrepreneurial identity in the cultural and creative industries. In extending these findings, our research dives even deeper and describes which practices of identity work our entrepreneurs employ, and which narratives resources they appropriate.

The empirical concept of “narrative resources” we derive from our study is similar to concepts existing in the literature. For example, it may relate to Swidler’s idea of a “toolkit”, which he sees as “habits, skills and styles from which people construct strategies of action” and which they modify to varying degrees with experience (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). More recently it may relate to Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010, p. 144) and Kroezen and Heugens (2012, p. 98), who describe that people draw on “self-narrative repertoires”, like previously told stories, and organisations on “identity reservoirs”, such as brand names, equipment, personnel, the mission statement or sales targets, as a set of claims for social interaction. We extend this work and demonstrate how entrepreneurs appropriate “resources” in their entrepreneurial identity work drawn from both the individual and organisational sphere. We show that at times our entrepreneurs focus on organisational and strategy issues, which allows them to face continuous open-ended changes, structure their work and make decisions. At other times, they appropriate values, creative ideas and lifestyle-related motives for enacting their entrepreneurial identity in different situations. This accentuates that identity work is an essential practice for creating a self-identity as an entrepreneur, which remains negotiated over time (Watson, 2008). It is a process in which entrepreneurs tell multiple stories about themselves, concerning different aspects of their self-identity depending on their audiences (cf. van Dijk, 2013, p. 211). Furthermore, these outcomes suggest that the more attentive and reflective entrepreneurs are in acting and communicating with others, the better they can draw on their values, ideas and reasons for becoming and being an entrepreneur and, in turn, shape their entrepreneurial identity development.

Third, we advance our understanding of the outcome of entrepreneurial identity development by constructing three alternative types of entrepreneurial identity. Our study shows that the “solution-driven entrepreneurial identity” was linked to a structured approach to achieving long-term strategic goals and acting in rather pragmatic ways to the task at hand. Correspondingly, the “purpose-driven entrepreneurial identity” is linked to value-based motives with a strong creative component. These entrepreneurs want to “change the world” and “make the world a better place”. They

focus on solving societal problems and on finding ways to influence society through sustainable products and services. The “life-style driven entrepreneurial identity” is linked to entrepreneurs who enjoy the feeling of being an entrepreneur. They like attending conferences, chatting with others over new products, socialise with their peers and develop their network in emergent fashion. However, while this may appear very clear cut, we also find that these entrepreneurial identity types are empirical-based theoretical abstractions. This means, in reality the entrepreneurial identities are much more fragmented, fluid and changing. Through our theoretical lens we produced analytical coherence in the transient and fragmented account of entrepreneurial identities (Kember & Zylinska, 2015, p. 129). Furthermore, our analysis reveals that the entrepreneurs show different facets of these identities depending on the situation and circumstances. Sometimes they need to focus on the strategic task at hand; other times they need to remember why they are “trying to change the world” or simply why they aim for developing a particular product or service; and at times, they all enjoy the spirit of being an entrepreneur and connecting with others. This highlights that entrepreneurial identity types are multifaceted. They are outcomes of an emergent process which is never complete. In particular, as our study shows, this process gains another level of complexity when we see identity as “mediated”, e.g. over social media (cf. Deckers & Lacy, 2018; Dooly, 2017; Fornäs & Xinari, 2013). This means, entrepreneurial identity types become a transitory phenomenon which is co-constructed through communication over digital media platforms with an ever-changing audience. Therefore, constructing coherence and receiving attention are core aspects that entrepreneurs need to sustain in creating their entrepreneurial identities. This shows how our understanding of media may inform a more reflective development of entrepreneurs and an appreciation for the practice of creating and sustaining entrepreneurial identities.

Next, we wish to acknowledge some limitations of our research. For example, our focus in this paper was on understanding the process of entrepreneurial identity development with a particular emphasis on entrepreneurial work. We approached this phenomenon by looking at how the individual identity work and entrepreneurial strategies “co-evolve” through the use of and reflections about communicating on social media. Our three entrepreneurial identity types were an unexpected finding complementing this process. While we could have looked at the communicative interaction on social media with audiences and e.g. analysed instances of audience engagement on Instagram or Facebook with conversation or discourse analysis, we choose to focus on understanding the mediated process of entrepreneurial identity work. We strongly concur that analysing instances of entrepreneurial identity enactment with audiences are an important aspect of understanding entrepreneurial identity work. Furthermore, our findings are produced from a single context, which creates a “contextual” description of entrepreneurship (Zahra, Wright, & Abdelgawad, 2014). Therefore, our three identity types might or might not surface in other contexts.

We envision that future research may explore three questions through comparison and adaptation to other contexts: (1) What other “mediatized interaction practices” or even more foundational “drivers of identity work” can be found? (2) What “narrative resources” do other entrepreneurs draw upon to enact their entrepreneurial identities? (3) What kind of “identity types” can be found in this context? In emphasising theory building, future research may ask: (4) What other conceptual frames can be applied to better understand

the process of entrepreneurial identity development? (5) What broader implications do digital media have for the development of entrepreneurship in society? These questions show the potential for further research to explore the effects of digital media technologies on entrepreneurship and the opportunities for (inter-)disciplinary theory-building (Achtenhagen, 2017; Giones & Brem, 2017; Nambisan, 2018).

Conclusion

Overall, we conclude that researching the development of entrepreneurial identities is imperative. It contributes to a better understanding of the ongoing changes taking place in the media industry and more broadly in society. Our research provides an example for how to ‘push’ our theories and develop our conception(s) of media management. We feel that this is essential because “media management” can say something important and relevant about the conditions we experience today. Living up to this spirit of joint knowledge creation as part of a community of media management scholars, we may co-produce sustainable responses for the pressing questions of individual, organisational and societal development of our times.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Table A1. Interview data (goes into appendix).

No.	Founder (anonymised)	Industry	Team structure		Legal Form	Active on market
			Alone	Team		
1	AS, Founder co	Sustainable Fashion		x	GbR	x
2	SO, Founder, cn	Software		x	GbR	x
3	AB, Founder bw	Architecture		x		
4	MT, Founder ir	Sustainable Fashion		x	GbR	
5	MZ, Founder vo	Music Business		x		
6	BB, Founder pm	Digital Agriculture		x	GmbH	
7	NH, Founder pm	Digital Agriculture		x	GmbH	
8	FB, Founder be	Food	x			x
9	SV, Founder pp	Personal Care		x	UG	
10	FD, Founder vo	Music Business		x		
11	FF, Founder bi	Design, Marketing, Communication	x			
12	AZ, Founder mv	Software		x	GmbH	x
13	MP, Founder el	Media Industry		x	KG	x
14	JJ, Founder hf	Sport Business		x		
15	AC, Founder pp	Personal care		x	UG	
16	AB, Founder ed	Design, Marketing, Communication	x			x
17	VS, Founder rw	Sustainable Fashion		x	GbR	x
18	LN, Founder rw	Sustainable Fashion		x	GbR	x
19	KH, Founder ir	Sustainable Fashion		x		
20	EK, Founder ha	Sport Business		x		x
21	DS, Founder km	Media Industry		x	GmbH	x
22	PL, Founder ls	Software		x	GmbH	x
23	CW, Founder aw	Design, Marketing, Communication	x			x
24	AH, Founder ca	Architecture		x	GmbH	
25	RH, Founder hh	Medical Industry		x		
26	PS, Founder op	Funeral Services		x		
27	AS, Consultant	at the startup incubator <i>neudeli</i> 2014-2017				
28	JS, Consultant	at the startup incubator <i>neudeli</i> since 2015				
29	MD, Consultant	at the startup incubator <i>neudeli</i> since 2016				