

Power between emotions and identities: how designers navigate M&A processes

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Summary: 1. Introduction – 2. Theoretical background - 3. Research Design – 4. Findings – 5. Discussion – 6. Limitations and Future Research - 7. Managerial Implications - References.

Abstract

Drawing on literature on emotions management and identity work strategies, in this study we investigate how, following an M&A process with a consulting firm, emotion and identity work strategies might explain the patterns of change in the designers' identity. In this regard, we focus on the political nature of the relationship between emotions and identity. Relying on data from 64 in-depth interviews with designers and consultants, as part of a broader ethnographic study, this manuscript elaborates a theoretical model which illustrates the political processes underpinning the relationship between emotion management and identity work strategies. Through this research, we contribute to extant literature emphasizing a processual view of the link between emotions and identity, by providing a more fine-grained explanation of power-based processes underlying emotions and identity strategies. We highlight how emotions could be managed for the political purpose of influencing the status of professional groups within an organization, and we illustrate how this emotions-political processes might lead to different identity strategies, ranging from identity affirmation to diminishing and renouncing to one's own professional identity.

Key words: identity strategies, emotions, designers, power, political processes

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1. Introduction

The intertwining of emotions and identity work has been the focus of different studies, adopting a variety of theoretical perspectives, methodological stands, and organizational contexts (Empson, 2013; Coupland et. al, 2008; Ahuja et. al, 2019; Huber & Brown, 2017; Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019).

Winkler (2018) in his review on the topic, analyzes how emotions have contributed to the understanding of identity work from different standpoints, and he suggests the main gaps that could still be addressed in order to advance our knowledge of this relationship. Emotions have been adopted to describe identity work (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2007; Blenkinsopp and Stalker, 2004); furthermore, identity work tactics have been analyzed as being triggered by certain emotions (Beech, 2011; Empson, 2013; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2007); emotions, emotion talk, and emotion management strategies have all been identified as possible resources to shed light on the issue of identity and, in turn, on the spaces in which emotion management may occur (Coupland et. al, 2008; Ahuja et. al, 2019). The extant literature has also begun to elaborate upon the processes that felt emotions and the regulation of emotions might generate (Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019). These studies have highlighted the role of the processes of sense-making and rationalization, as well as the pattern of social interactions (Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; O'Brien and Linehan, 2019), and power issues in the analysis of the role of emotions in accounting for identity work (Huber & Brown, 2017). However, understanding how emotion management strategies are connected to identity work tactics still merits further investigation, as this will help us to define the nature and the characteristics of the multi-faceted processes underpinning the relationship between emotions and identity work strategies in the workplace.

In this study, we argue that power-oriented processes deserve further investigation and that they constitute a promising lens to advance our knowledge about the relationship between emotions and identity (Jacobs, Kreutzer and Vaara, 2021; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2016; Rodrigues & Child, 2008). The challenge to professional identity can be read as a political process, where actors engage, through emotions management, in influencing the perception of their status with respect to competing professional groups, to elaborate an identity work strategy.

Thus, our research questions are as follows: what are the nature and the features of the power-oriented processes underpinning emotions and identity work strategies? What kinds of emotions and identity work strategies are these processes connected to, and why?

To address our research questions, we carried out qualitative interviews as part of a broader ethnographic study, carried in two design studios acquired by a consulting company, involving designers and consultants from all the studied organizations. This context, and a focus on designers, is a particularly suitable setting for our research goals, since the M&A process challenges the identity of the designers from the two studios, with the proposal of another preferred professional self, that of management consultants. Data for this research were gathered through

64 in-depth interviews with 46 designers and 18 consultants, as well as other professionals working in the merged company.

In this study we contribute to extant research which proposes a more processual view of the link between emotions and identity work management strategies. This research contributes by enucleating different identity work strategies, which range from those where individuals work to keep the focus of their identification both on the organization and the profession of reference, to those where individuals have surrendered to a 'diminished' identity. In doing so, this study analyzes in greater detail the patterns of idealization, integration, and detachment from the preferred identity (Ahuja et. al, 2019; Huber & Brown, 2017), as driven by emotions management strategy meant to influence the status perception of competing professional groups.

2. Theoretical background

Extant research has elaborated different conceptualizations of identity work strategies related to identity threats, starting with identity protection and identity restructuring responses (Petriglieri, 2011), where individuals either try to maintain, or to engage in changing their identity. Other studies have pointed out further identity work strategies in the presence of identity threats, taking a more contingent perspective on identity work strategies. For instance, in their conceptualization of identity work complexity, Beech et al. (2008) illustrate that individuals might implement multiple identity work strategies, depending on the perceived risk of the situation and the resources they feel that they possess in order to pursue an identity work process.

Studies focused on identity work have usually associated this process with a negative connotation, regarding it as being characterized with intense self-questioning, apprehension, and vulnerability (Fineman, 2008). In struggling with these challenges, individuals engaged in identity work have thus been connoted as being problematic. However, beyond the seminal study by Ibarra and Petriglieri (2007) on identity play, the importance of exploring identity work strategies, highlighting also the possible positive aspects and outcomes, along with the more troubling ones, has been scarcely investigated (Fachin & Davel, 2015).

In this respect, emotions and emotion management strategies have been regarded as fruitful ground in which to complement and advance our understanding of the dynamics and outcome of identity work, and to illustrate its different nuances in terms of both positive and negative outcomes and generating processes (Winkler 2018; Coupland et. al, 2008; Brown, 2015).

How employees regulate their emotions has been investigated from various theoretical perspectives, with the elaboration of numerous classifications and theoretical models (for a review: Troth, et al., 2018). Research connecting identity work strategies and emotion management has relied on different frameworks, in order to develop theoretical insights into this linkage, ranging from drawing from emotional dissonance (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Tracy, 2005), to the established

classification from the seminal work of Gross (1998), to considering the features and dynamics of single, discrete emotions (Huber & Brown, 2017).

To build our theoretical background, we rely on those studies that analyze the relationship between emotion management and identity work strategies, and which seek to understand the mechanisms underlying this relationship. First, we discuss those studies grounded in discourse approaches to emotions and identity, centered upon the mutual influence between these two concepts, and which regard them as resources with which emotion and identity strategies can be constituted respectively (Coupland et. al, 2008; Ahuja et. al, 2019). These studies identify salient emotions and emotion management strategies in the quest to understand identity work and outcomes, and they elaborate different typologies of identity work in response to emotion dynamics (Zembylas, 2005; Empson, 2013; Ahuja et. al, 2019; Huber & Brown, 2017). Second, we rely on those studies that have begun to elaborate more precisely the processes that emotions and emotion management strategies might generate when considering identity work strategies (O'Brien & Linehan, 2019; Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012; Hayward & Tuckey, 2011). In discussing all these seminal studies, our argument is that they have established the territory in which this subject may best be studied and have emphasized the importance of more precisely articulating the link between emotion management and identity work strategies, by unveiling why these strategies are connected.

When regarding emotions and identity as intertwined discourse resources, extant studies highlight how professional identity can be considered as a resource that individuals rely upon in order to claim, deny or distance themselves from emotional experiences (Coupland et. al, 2008; Zembylas, 2005; Marsh & Musson, 2008). Adopting this perspective, different emotion management strategies have been elaborated, taking into consideration that individuals might engage in the upgrading or downgrading of their emotions, depending on their perception of what might be most appropriate for their role in the organizational context of reference. According to this perspective, identities define the space and the rules that drive the recognition of a professional as a legitimate emotional subject. Accordingly, an individual's emotion management strategies reinforce or question the related identity conduct they rely upon. In this vein, Hayward and Tuckey (2011) elaborate the concept of emotional boundaries management, which means the ability to change and adapt an emotional boundary with regards to an interlocutor, in order to exert control over the creation of an emotional distance or connection. In the setting of nursing, this strategy is theoretically connected to an identity work strategy aimed at maintaining an individual's authentic self, by controlling their engagement with work-related emotions. In this understanding, emotion management elicits intermediate processes with respect to identity work activities, aimed at building a protective barrier for the subject, and at generating personal resources such as self-esteem.

While theorizing about the importance of considering the constraints and opportunities that emotions and identities strategies offer to each other, extant studies also argue that, between emotions and identity work, there exist power-based processes that could usefully be further investigated. According to this

perspective, various authors illustrate how certain typologies of emotions, such as guilt or enthusiasm, could constitute the experience of identity threats, and could be related to certain typologies of identity strategies such as, for instance, expanding one's own identity (Empson, 2013; Zembylas, 2005). In this research, the focus on the elaboration of nuanced and highly detailed identity tactics, the illustration of certain emotions related to them, and the analysis of 'intermediate' strategies when experiencing identity struggles have opened up an avenue via which we can investigate the mechanisms that explain the relationship between emotions and identity work. In relation to these studies, different identity work strategies have been theoretically recognized, and they have been connected to the emotion talk in which individuals engage.

For instance, Ahuja and colleagues (2019) pinpoint precise identity strategies, including idealizing, reframing and distancing identity, when accounting for how these strategies may rely on emotions as a discursive resource. The opportunity to enact certain identity-related processes has been traced back to how individuals talk about their emotions, for instance illustrating that an emotion talk aimed at idealizing a profession is the ground for workers to elevate the commitment and the heroic component of their own job, and to avoid a state of emotional struggle related to it. In this regard, Huber and Brown (2017) focus on humor in order to understand how talking about such emotions can shape identity work, by identifying different identity work mechanisms (homogenizing, differentiating, personalizing) and practices of talking about emotions (being a strong identifier, being respectful, being a flexible rule-follower, not being 'too' serious or self-righteous, being oneself). This study illustrates the relationship between identity strategies and emotions, emphasizing the role of power in identity and emotion regulation. By elaborating on the role of power, both these studies further highlight how emotion management strategies are connected to identity work strategies. In particular, they focus on the disciplinary effect of identity (Ahuja et al., 2019), and how emotion talk practices can influence the adopted identity work mechanisms, by disciplining their occurrence (Huber & Brown, 2017).

The valence of political processes to explain identity construction or rework have analyzed also in separation with respect to emotions management. Kenny et al. (2016) illustrated that identity work could be interpreted in terms of consensus and conflicts dynamics underpinning it, as driven by the interests of organizational members. Alvesson and Willmot (2002) illustrated how the regulation of identity can work as a control system within the organizational context. Jacobs et al. (2021) highlighted how identity reconstruction could articulate according to different stages, influenced and driven by the intent to influence contrasts and consensus over organizational identities.

Considering the state of research as described above, in this study we focus on understanding the unexplored dynamics connecting how political processes could explain the relationship between emotion management and identity work strategies.

3. Research Design

Consistently with the aim of our research, we conducted a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, part of a broader ethnographic study.

A preliminary qualitative investigation for this study was carried out at the beginning of our research process, to have the opportunity to reflect exploratively and openly on the phenomenon of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) of design studios by major consulting companies, and to understand how our preliminary theoretical intuitions could be developed. In the preliminary stage, three cases of acquisitions of design studios by three multinational consulting companies, with their branches located in Chicago, were studied. The authors had the chance to conduct visits to their buildings and to observe their work environment. In total, 17 in depth interviews were carried out in this stage.

After this preliminary work, we conducted further in-depth interviews, participant observations and analyzed documents in two design studios in Italy (hereinafter referred Organization 1 and Organization 2), both acquired by the same consulting firm, which was involved in the research activities as well. The acquirer is an Italian management consulting company, hereinafter referred as the Consulting Company, which is quickly expanding worldwide because of fast business-expansion and a strong M&A strategy. The Consulting Company can be considered a good illustration of the phenomenon of M&A between consulting companies and design studios; in addition, its business model implies that designers work alongside business consultants in their daily work activities, avoiding the complete 'separation' that would have prohibited a deep analysis of identity reflections and tactics' elaboration.

Organization 1 is a consulting "boutique" focused on digital transformation and change management. The company has a strong presence of designers in its workforce. Organization 2 is a strategic design studio developing cutting edge projects and deliverables for many clients in different industries. Today, the studio aims at supporting other organizations in developing their businesses through strategic and sustainable solutions combining different kinds of design methodologies.

The first round of interviews began November - December 2019. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the time needed to reflect and iterate between data and theory, the second round of interviews was conducted between May and August 2020. A total of 64 individuals, 46 designers and 18 non-designers were interviewed.

When possible, the interviews were conducted by two authors. Before each interview, the purpose of the research and the involvement of the authors were explained, and the interviewees were provided with the academic context of reference. Even when the authors conducted the interviews together, they exchanged notes and thoughts on interviewees' attitudes and responses, immediately following each interview. The interview protocol covered the following areas: 1) the exploration of the identity of the interviewees and of the phases/process of work on identity they have carried out; 2) the emotional valence

of their work on identity and how they managed their emotions in relation to their identity work; 3) the illustration of key episodes for the development of their identity,

The authors independently went through different stages of analysis and coding of the transcriptions, and they checked their interpretation and results after each stage. In this regard, the data analysis and the coding strategy can be articulated according to the following stages:

Stage 1. In the first stage of data analysis, authors approached the data to uncover the discrete emotions and their management patterns along with the related identity strategies. The primary codes emerged in this stage revolved around the oppositions 'suppression/expression' of emotions and of identity construction/identity deconstruction. These codes emerged resonating with literature on identity work strategies and emotions considered according to a power-based perspectives, where they can be considered as mechanisms of control of the self at work (Huber & Brown, 2016).

Stage 2. In the second stage, the coding led to the emergence of more defined concepts related to the emotions and identity management strategies, also illustrating how emotion suppression and emotions communications are related. In this stage, the codes 'giving in emotions', 'communicating emotions', 'suppressing emotions' emerged, together with 'identity idealization', 'identity struggling', 'identity decoupling'.

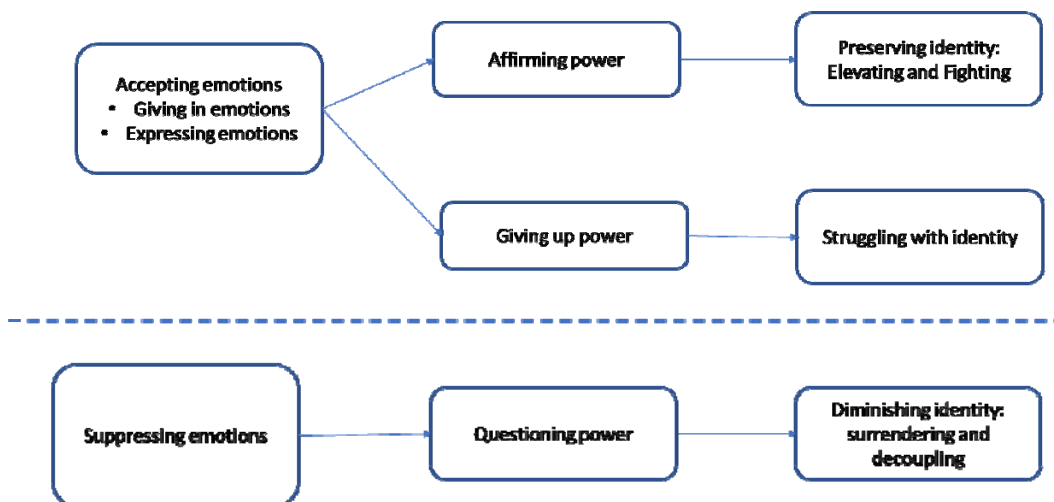
Stage 3. The third stage of coding aimed to understand how emotion management strategies could be related to certain identity strategies in terms of political processes. In this stage, codes about emotions and identity management strategies were further refined and the political processes underpinning their relationships emerged through specific codes, revolving around the areas of 'affirming and defending one's own power', 'debating/doubting about one's own power, and 'renouncing/giving up power'. These codes illustrated more or less defensive political processes designer put in place to defend, elevate or to renounce to their power and to their identity.

Stage 4. In a final stage, the authors analyzed the theory and the emerging theoretical models, to determine more precise definitions and relationships, especially for the political processes explaining the reasons why individuals engage in emotions management and with what results in terms of identity. Data analysis in Stage 4 resulted in the theoretical model proposed in Figure 1.

4. Findings: Power-based processes - affirming, questioning, and giving up designers' power

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical model, as emerged from our findings.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model



Source: our elaboration.

The emerged theoretical model addressed our research questions, by pointing out three main political process underlying the dynamics between emotions and identity work strategies. Our model illustrates that fighting for the defense of professional identity, and idealizing this identity are related to a political process meant to influence the perception of organizational members of the status of a professional group, to establish this group as 'superior' in terms of the contribution it could bring to the organization. This affirmative political strategy can be traced back to the acceptance and embracement of the negative and positive emotions at the workplace, compared to their suppression. On the other side, according to our model, accepting emotions is also a strategy to renounce to power and to engage in identity struggling, in order to question the opportunity to reconstruct a challenged identity at the workplace. Finally, the suppression of emotions can be conceived as way to question and debate about the power of a professional group and to detach its professional identity from the organization, by *surrendering* or *decoupling* strategy.

More in details, according to our analysis, in the emergent power-based processes, different sub-dimensions could be retrieved, tied to three different goals that designers expressed they would have liked to pursue in terms of identity work, based on their emotion management strategies. First, designers talked about

managing emotions to affirm designers' power with respect to that of the consultants within the organizations, emphasizing their inner creativity, innovativeness, and ability to envision holistic solutions as qualifying properties of their identity, as compared with the 'narrower' managerial, client-oriented identity of consultants, and with respect to how consultants value designers' expertise in understanding clients and their needs. When talking about affirming their power, designers used terms such as "demonstrate", "sustain design", "make people understand", "raise awareness", "make people perceive our work", or "defend our work".

Connected to this process of affirming the designers' status, there are identity work strategies aimed at asserting this by elevating or by fighting for their own profession. When elevating their profession, designers talked about their constituent features as being positive for the business world as well as for society, attaching to themselves an intrinsic value to help innovation to thrive within and outside the organization (e.g. "strategic vision", "awareness", "freedom to express", "methods".) When fighting, designers talked about these positive aspects of their profession to defend their identity from a threat they perceive consultants represented when they considered the designers' role to be ancillary to the main management activities, or as that of a *deus ex machina* to solve a situation or to produce an unexpected result. Some of them defined these fights as "satisfactory", and they were described as "challenging" but "necessary". Designers focusing on this power-based process to affirm their own identity talked about emotion management strategies that could be traced back to both accepting emotions, by giving in to them (such as frustration), and to expressing them, by communicating them (such as both exhaustion and satisfaction).

For example, a designer talked about giving in to frustration and engaging in a debate to affirm the status of designer by fighting for it when confronted with managerial consultants.

"It was a Friday and it was 6pm. I had just finished this call with a partner of the Consulting Company, and I was so frustrated that I punched my cushion twice. I had never done that before in my life. [...] I felt a lot of frustration...frustration because I fell into an argument and I lost control [...] I felt frustrated, because you can be an important partner, but to me you do not have the adequate intellectual capacity and the professional standing you deserve. [...] I felt I was fighting against a logic that was not mine, in a foreign territory."

In this case, giving in to frustration provides the ground to engage in a robust discussion: not to let designers be conceived as something 'lesser' than a consultant, and ending up defending designers' work, as if in a battle within the organization.

In another example, a designer talked about affirming their own power with respect to consultants who always "skip creativity", as if it was not an integral part of the project, but merely an add-on. This designer describes his fight for designers' status and power, but he traced this process back to the different emotion management strategy of expressing felt emotions, in terms of communication:

"For us, consultants are like internal clients. We manage to find our place but fighting, fighting a lot. [...] You are pushed to express a bit of that repressed anger you are constantly used to feeling while you are in the consultancy process. Sometimes, you do this simply not to freak out and go crazy from being part of your current work team. [...] These things happen routinely and have major emotional implications for me. However, in the long run, this cloud has a silver lining: it is helping us to gain something [in terms of recognition]."

Designers' experiences that can be traced back to these emotions and identity management strategies are felt by professionals who still believe that the organization is their main source of identification. Indeed, they elevate and fight for their power by giving in to and expressing their emotions, still envisioning a potential overlap between their own beliefs and those of the company.

Secondly, designers talked about managing emotions to question their power with respect to that of the consultants, to cast doubt on the strategic contributions they could bring to the consulting world, and about their status in the company. Frequent terms used by designers to describe themselves when questioning their status were "personal crisis", "out of place", "in a corner". Connected to this process of power questioning, designers discussed the identity work strategy of struggling between their identity as designers and what the consultants' identity would require of them. When struggling, designers described an internal fight: "What am I doing here?"; "Do I still have a voice?"

The emotion management strategies connected more frequently to questioning and struggling were those related to suppressing emotions (anger, frustration). For example, a designer describes, as follows, how he had to suppress his anger, wear an emotional mask, and engage in questioning his status, his own competences, and contributions.

"When dealing with people, you have to put on a mask of friendliness and kindness. I think that this is necessary in order to live together, but at the same time it's an obstacle to the most creative expression. If you need to have a free mind, you need an environment that has as few conventions and boundaries as possible. [...] Personally, this troubles me, because in the long run this atrophies these competences that I do have... I had... I might have...I should have."

Third, designers talked about managing emotions to give up their power and status with respect to the requests of the consulting world, pinpointing the futility of explaining their roles and activities to other professionals, and of fighting to establish the importance of design to the company. Frequent expressions associated with this process were "let it go", "being indifferent", and "being resigned". The identity work strategies most frequently associated with this process were surrendering and decoupling. When designers talk about surrendering, they refer to the fact that they have submitted to being the executors of a request from the clients and the consultants, thereby acknowledging that they have neither power nor status in the organization. Furthermore, there was no consideration for their knowledge or

expertise, save for their role as mere executors of required tasks. When they talk about decoupling, designers refer to the fact that they look outside the organization, to other activities, to find the source of their professional identity as designers. Accepting emotions by embracing them (desperation, resignation) is the emotion strategy most frequently cited by these designers. For example, one designer, when talking about giving up his own status and power, and surrendering to the execution of elementary tasks, culminating in a diminished identity, mentions how he embraced his own frustration and anger.

"I felt very frustrated at constantly having to put aside my job, as if it were secondary. [...] I was not satisfied with my work, I couldn't even express my opinion, I was angry too. [...] During the presentation with the client, I was talking while this guy, this manager of the Consulting Company, told me: "No, no, you just share the screen with me. I'll tell you what to show and I'll do the talking." I had really become "hands" and nothing more. I hit the "mute" button while he was speaking in my place. Because, apparently, he knew design way better than me. I really felt diminished in the job I was doing."

In another example, a designer illustrated the sterility she felt and accepted in executing tasks, the absence of willingness to assert or defend her status. This time the designer referred to the identity work tactics of decoupling, by engaging in many other design-based activities outside the organization.

"Emotionally, when I do work outside the Organization, I feel really good. [...] I love doing these things, they are opportunities for me to learn something new that does not have to follow a method, and it is all extremely spontaneous. [...] It is very different from what I feel here. Projects are like an engineered machine to me; they make me feel dry, like a cow that has been completely milked."

With respect to surrendering, decoupling implies an identity work strategy where the source of identification has been shifted from the organization to the external and wider professional group of designers.

According to these overall findings, professionals, when challenged with respect to their identity, might engage in emotion management strategies to shape their status within the organization and to articulate consequent identity work strategies. Our findings illustrate that, while still identifying with the company, individuals might manage emotions to assert or to doubt their own status. In addition, managing emotions could be connected to an identity strategy driving the individual further and further away from the organization, and closer to the self. This has been analyzed with designers' giving up their status and their engagement, by decoupling the identity, by surrendering to not to pick any professional available selves.

These multifaceted, power-based processes and identity strategies can be traced back to accepting, expressing, and suppressing emotions. This highlights that, while more theoretically expected patterns do emerge in our analysis (suppressing negative emotions - giving up power - surrendering to a diminished identity), our

focus on power-based processes has also unveiled a less explored relationship between emotions and work identity strategies. For instance, we illustrate how giving in to negative emotions, such as anger, allows designers to affirm their power within the organization, and to fight avoid confusion between the professional identity of designers and the identity of others.

5. Discussion

In this article we have analyzed the power-based processes underpinning the relationship between emotion management strategies, with regards to designers experiencing an M&A process that has challenged their own professional identity with the introduction of another, different, professional self, that of management consultants. Thus, we have focused on investigating the mechanisms explaining how emotion management strategies can be connected to identity work.

The fact that the relationship between emotion management and identity work strategies could be explained in the light of more or less conscious goal-oriented processes is not new to the extant literature in the field: 'Emotion regulation in one's work is not simply a reactive process, but a process that can be strategically and proactively engaged and is linked to employees' intrinsic goals to protect, motivate and develop their professional identity and personal resources' (Hayward & Tuckey, 2011:1518). Power issues (Coupland et. al, 2008; Ahuja et. al, 2019; Huber & Brown, 2017), sense-making processes (O'Brien & Linehan, 2019), and patterns of social interaction (Empson, 2013, Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012) have all been analyzed or discussed in order to interpret the relationship between emotions and identity. However, such analyses, whilst seminal, have yet to create a theoretical model explaining the relationship between the enactment of these processes, their outcomes in terms of identity strategies and the emotion regulation activities that they can be traced back to.

The roles of power and status in understanding the relationship between emotions and identity strategies have largely been analyzed by research rooted in discourse approaches to identity and emotions (Watson, 2009; Coupland, 2001; Brown, 2017). These studies focus on the disciplinary power of identity work on the self (Ahuja et al., 2019), on the norms disciplining the management of certain discrete emotions (Huber & Brown, 2017), on the regulation of emotions as a space in which to contest or resist the established power structure of the organization (Coupland et al., 2008), and on how organizational hierarchy and status might generate certain rationalization and identity strategies (Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012). Building on these arguments, our research contributes by refining and detailing this disciplinary aspect of emotion and identity strategies (Mumby & Stohl, 1991; Townley, 1993; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Our research illustrates that these controlling processes can range from asserting to giving up power and status, and that they can be associated with different identity strategies, ranging from those connected with both the organization and the profession as the source of identification, to those associated with a diminished self at work.

When considering identity work strategies, our research is consistent with those studies which emphasize that, when challenged with a competing self, professionals might engage in idealizing their own identity by stressing its more future-oriented and desirable traits (Ahuja et al., 2019). With respect to this stream of research, our study makes a contribution by illustrating that identity idealization could be carried out not only by elevating and magnifying these ideal features of the identity, but also by fighting for them, with actions and thoughts oriented to establish them in a more competitive way against another ideal model. Identity assertion, and its ability to provide individuals with self-esteem and an attractive perspective towards the workplace (Kaiser et al., 2008), could be enacted through both aspirational and more 'combative' strategies, which are equally important to find a source of identification within the organization. We have illustrated that designers engaged in elevating and fighting for their status had usually engaged in processes of affirming their position with respect to consultants, protecting the emotional climate of their team, and pursuing a project up to the standards of an ideal design. All these processes revolve around the idea of remaining productive within, and contributing to, the organization, yet starting from different standpoints, related to the power of a profession, the well-being of team-mates, and the idealized collaborative performance of designers.

When examining identity work strategies that express the work aimed at detaching the individual from the organization, our study pinpoints that this detachment might occur by engaging in more or less decisive processes of separation from the organization and the available competing selves in the workplace (struggling, decoupling and surrendering). This detachment could also occur in an extreme way, and culminate in the professionals abdicating to both their organizational and professional identities, in order to overlap with the technical tasks they perform routinely (surrendering). However, with respect to this extreme identity work, we believe we have made a contribution by emphasizing that, before distancing themselves from the organization and the profession (Huber & Brown, 2017; Wieland, 2010), individuals might engage in maintaining their identity 'in transition', struggling between their own profession and the competing one. Thus, while this kind of identity work, representing different typologies and degree of detachment, is not associated with complete satisfaction and well-being at the workplace, our findings nevertheless illustrate that there might be an authentic inner debate that could lead both to more organization-centered identity work (complementing, fighting, elevating) or to a more detached one (decoupling and surrendering).

We believe that our model, while focusing on the intermediate processes underpinning emotions and identity work strategies, could contribute to provide a more nuanced representation of identity work strategies, and to trace them back to a multi-faceted explanation of the conscious and unconscious goals of the individuals enacting them. In addition, we believe this notion could account for the less taken-for-granted associations between identity and emotion strategies, for instance illustrating that accepting emotions could be related to both elevating and idealizing identities, as well as to more detached strategies such as decoupling and

surrendering. This is due to the fact that acceptance might provide self-esteem, satisfaction and the courage to give up power and recognition within the organization.

6. Limitations and future research

In this study we have focused on explaining the relationship between emotions and identity work strategies by elaborating a classification of the power-based processes underpinning this link. While our findings have allowed us to identify these processes and their association with different strategies, future research could usefully examine the relationship among these processes, in order to understand how cognition, power, emotions and routines interplay to define the space in which certain identity work strategies can be enacted. In addition, in our theoretical model, we rely on Gross's model (1998) of emotion management strategies, and we have focused on how the acceptance, expression, reappraisal and suppression of emotions might be related to processes and identity work. Future research could usefully contrast different models of emotion regulation, in order to better understand the role of emotional dissonance (Hochschild, 1983) and affects' regulation (Niven, et al., 2009) in this theorization. Furthermore, we did not elaborate on discrete emotions in order to ground our theoretical model, instead focusing more on the strategies of emotion management. Future research could focus on gaining a better understanding of the discrete emotions that could be accepted, expressed, suppressed or reappraised, when certain processes and identity work are in place.

7. Managerial Implications

Through our research, organizations in which competing identities are at play, especially following decisive organizational changes such as M&As, might have access to the tools necessary to interpreting identity dynamics among their employees, by referring to power relationships among groups. In addition, such organizations may be better able to grasp what kind of emotion management policies can contribute to formulating identity strategies and change in a particular way. According to this perspective, organizations might also understand the drawbacks and the benefits of intervening to support certain emotion or identity work strategies through HR policies. For instance, while promoting a practice of emotion acceptance and expression might be tempting when organizations consider the implications in terms of status affirmation, they also should consider the consequences for those employees whose identity will not be affirmed, or the fact that accepting emotions could also provide employees with the resources necessary to engage in decoupling their own identity.

These considerations are even more applicable in the context of identity challenge, as provoked by an M&A. In this context, the comprehension of the

connection between emotion strategies and identity work may support organizations in understand the root causes of certain patterns of identity management, as well as the associated identification and willingness to remain and contribute to the company. In particular, our research could support management practice by establishing the need for a nuanced and critical approach to the dynamics of identity work and identification, where HR policies intended to diffuse emotion management practices, or the psychological contract model of the acquiring company, should be considered only after understanding the complexity of the processes explaining how and why emotions and identities in the workplace are linked.

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