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Identity Threat in Early Career Professionals: A qualitative investigation on their coping mechanism repertoire in the workplace

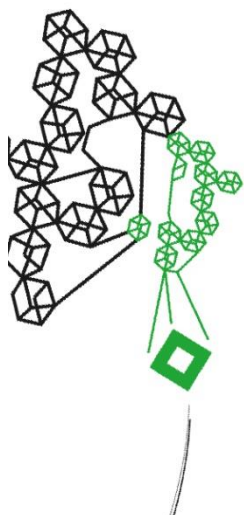
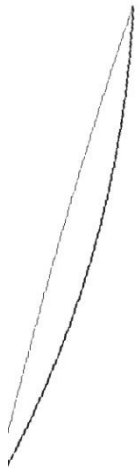
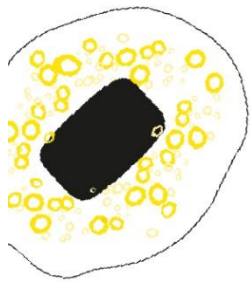
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ABSTRACT,

Within this paper, a deeper look at Early Career Professionals (ECPs) and related identity threats at their workplace were made. The main focus was on finding out how their repertoire was created and how they cope most effectively with threats. In total 16 people living in the Netherlands and Germany were interviewed. With the help of those interviews, it was discovered that ECPs experience different kinds of identity threats at their workplace.

A contribution to existing literature was being made because current research does focus on identity threats at the workplace, but rather on experienced professionals than ECPs. With the help of developing different kinds of coping mechanisms, ECPs are better able to cope with threats better and more efficiently. Building relationships, incremental learning, and learning through reflection and the unconscious were the repertoire of coping mechanisms developed. Coping mechanisms include communication, increasing the existing knowledge, building groups with colleagues and in the worst case quitting the job and leaving the negative environment behind. An interesting and unexpected finding was the fact that emotions do play a significant role when an identity threat is taking place.

ECPs do experience negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and surprise. These emotions either trigger them to actively change something or they can also trigger them to understand that a threatening situation takes place. Hence, it is also a new contribution to existing literature.

All in all, ECPs do learn to cope with identity threats at the workplace. Even though it can be a struggle, in the end, all agreed that due to the threat, they somewhat became robust and better able to communicate clearly what they want.

Table of Content

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theory	7
2.1 Identity and identity threat	7
2.3 Professionals and their identity	11
2.3.1 Professional	11
2.3.2 Professional identity	12
2.3.3 Early Career Professionals (ECPs).....	13
2.3.3 Early Career Professionals' Identity.....	14
2.4 Coping Mechanisms for Identity Threats	14
3. Methodology.....	16
3.1 Research design	16
3.2 Sampling and data collection	17
3.3. Research Instrument.....	18
3.4 Data analysis	20
4. Findings	20
4.1 Background information	20
4.2 Development of coping mechanisms.....	22
4.3 Most utilized coping mechanisms.....	25
4.4 Emotional Responses due to Identity Threat.....	31
5. Discussion	34
5.1 Theoretical Contributions	34
5.1.1 Types of Identity threat experienced by ECPs.....	34
5.1.2 Development of coping mechanisms.....	36
5.1.3 Most utilized coping mechanisms	39
5.1.4 Emotional responses due to identity threat	41
5.1.5 Research Model.....	42
5.2 Practical Implementations	43
5.3 Limitations and Future Research	45
6. Conclusion.....	46
7. Acknowledgements.....	46
8. References	48
9. Appendix.....	57
Appendix A.....	57
Appendix B.....	57
Appendix C	61

1. Introduction

During times of need, individuals often seek out professionals to assist them in overcoming their difficulties. Whether it will be legal, medical, or consulting advice, some experts can provide crucial guidance and support. Similarly, architects and engineers are called upon to reshape the physical environment, while educators and journalists are relied upon for the dissemination of information. These professionals play an important role in society, utilizing their expertise to address various challenges and facilitate change (Gardner, & Shulman, 2005). Hence, professions do play a dominant role in society (Gardner, & Shulman, 2005; Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013).

Upon closer examination of various professions, Klass (1961) emerges as one of the pioneering authors who conducted a comprehensive study, forming the foundation for subsequent research in the field. A professional belongs to a group of individuals who have chosen a discipline which is then publicly performed, the individual has special skills and expertise and knowledge within the field (Klass, 1961; Fitzgerald, 2020). The individual received skills through education and training (Klass, 1961). Today the knowledge about professions is much more extended than what it was decades ago (Gardner & Shulman, 2005). Hence, another definition from Gardner and Shulman (2005) describes professionals as individuals who gain prestige as well as autonomy from their performance/service which serves society in an altruistic way.

Individuals who define themselves as professionals embrace the set of values and principles belonging to that profession and enact them (Fitzgerald, 2020). In that sense, they have and develop their professional identity (Fitzgerald, 2020). Individuals possess multiple identities which help people to make their inner and social worlds more manageable and coherent (Petriglieri, 2011). When an individual has a strong identification with their behaviour and activities as a professional, their professional identity can become stronger (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Professional identities are constructed through the interaction of identity work, emotions as well as discourse (Ahuja et al., 2019). The formation of professional identity is an evolving process that is contingent upon both genetic and environmental factors, with the social environment playing a crucial role in shaping and forming one's identity (Fitzgerald, 2020; Cook et al., 2003; Curren et al., 2019). Identities are being formed over decades (Monrouxe, 2013) through unconscious as well as conscious processes (Winkler, 2018). This formation can begin with birth and continue through childhood, and adulthood (Monrouxe, 2013), which indicates that the development of identities never stops. One defining point in the life of an individual is when he/she must decide which kind of profession they want to perform and whom he/she wants to become (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Recent research has explored the fact that a change within organizations is taking place and a deeper look at professions (Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013) and the connected identities is being made (Fitzgerald, 2020; Brown, 2015). While the importance of identity in shaping an individual's sense of self is widely acknowledged, there is a persistent need to deepen our understanding of identity dynamics (Brown, 2015). A greater focus on identity work and the well-being of individuals has been addressed (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Brown, 2017). According to Winkler (2016), identity work became more established within different management studies as well as organizational studies during the last couple of years. A reversal within the minds of managers/researchers is taking place. Hence, it is important to look at identity work within cooperations. Identity work has been defined as the set of activities in which individuals engage that can help them to then generate, present, and preserve personal identities (Brown, 2022; Fitzgerald 2020). These identities then help to be congruent with the self-concept as well as support it (Brown, 2022). Another definition from Winkler (2016) describes identity work as the process of sense-making between a social identity (given by others) and the individual's self-identity (given by oneself).

Employees may (un)consciously engage in identity work, when they feel that their identity is being threatened, which can lead to a range of emotional responses, such as fear, anxiety, and anger (Winkler, 2018). On the other hand, experiencing intense emotions can also make individuals more vulnerable to identity threats, as they may become less able to effectively manage their responses in these situations (Timošćuk & Ugaste, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for organizations to recognize the link between emotions and identity, and to take proactive steps to create a supportive and inclusive work environment that values diversity and respects individual identities.

The identity of professionals can be threatened through assimilation, insults, humiliating actions, or even just contact with others. All of these factors can contribute to a perceived threat to one's professional identity (McNeil, Mitchell, & Parker, 2013). Identity threat can be defined as "any overt action by another party that challenges, calls into question, or diminishes a person's sense of competence, dignity, or self-worth [...]" (Aquino & Douglas, 2003, p. 196). A threat can result from different sources. In early research, four types of identity threats were identified, namely categorization threats, distinctiveness threats, threats to the value of social identity as well as acceptance threats (Branscombe et al., 1999). More recently, Petriglieri (2011) identifies three types of threats. Identity threats can come through social interaction (Winkler, 2018). When an individual feels threatened different outcomes may follow (Petriglieri, 2011). A threat, in general, can decrease the performance, self-esteem, desire etc. of the individual (Smith, 1991).

When an individual experiences a threat, coping mechanisms can help to get through it (Petriglieri 2011). The coping mechanisms depend on the experience of an individual. Those coping mechanisms are either behavioural efforts or/and cognitive efforts which will serve the purpose to decrease the potential harm (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Petriglieri (2011) created a theoretical framework for how different individuals could respond to certain identity threats. This model is based on theory, cognitive and clear decision-making on which kind of mechanism to use depending on the situation. If one problem arises the individual can draw on a certain response. This seems to assume that the more experience a person is, the more promptly he/she can react to the threat and manage it. Hence, in this sense, a senior professional may be more equipped than an early career professional and draw from experience and expertise to solve difficult contexts (Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003).

Early career professionals (ECPs) are individuals who are in a transition phase between being a student and a professional (Mattick et al., 2019). In other words, early career professionals are an individual who just entered the working environment after finishing their studies (Mattick et al., 2019). Since they are starting their professional career in a company, their experience and needs are different from those of experienced professionals. They may be unfamiliar with the norms and the culture of the company (Mattick et al., 2019) which could create different identity threats perceptions (Ahuja et al., 2019; Mattick et al., 2019; Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003). Indeed, even though there are theoretical frameworks on coping mechanisms for identity threats (Petriglieri et al., 2019), ECPs must first experience such threats in order to come up with personal identity threat coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, strong emotions can be more frightening for early career professionals than for senior professionals. Emotions can indeed influence individuals' decision-making (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). In threatful situations, decision-making for humans is not rational (Heracleous, 1994). Incidental emotions can not only influence decision making and judgment but also the decrease of altruism, risk-taking etc. of an individual (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). Hence, a theoretical model with clear directions may not work for everyone. Including emotions in the model could provide new insights. According to Li & Rukavina (2009), emotions can influence coping mechanisms and decision-making. Emotions like anxiety, discomfort, uncertainty, and social isolation can arise when individuals experience identity threats (Winkler, 2018). More specifically, these emotions seem to be particularly powerful when people experience career changes. Individuals who just started their professional careers have different experiences than professionals who are already in their profession for some years (Mattick, Brennan, Papoutsis, & Pearson, 2019).

Since little research has been conducted on early career professionals' identity work and identity threat coping mechanisms (Ahuja et al., 2019; Mattick et al., 2019), this thesis aims to address the following research question (RQ):

RQ: How do early-career professionals develop their repertoire of coping mechanisms to identify threats in the workplace, and what types of coping mechanisms are commonly utilized in such situations?

With this thesis, a contribution to the current literature on ECPs and their identity dynamics is being made in two ways. Firstly, this research extends existing knowledge by exploring how ECPs develop their repertoire of coping mechanisms and use it to overcome identity threats. Secondly, a deeper look at which kind of coping mechanisms ECPs use when they are exposed to identity threats. The findings of this study could be valuable for employers who seek to enhance their support for employees experiencing identity threats in the workplace. Specifically, employers could consider ways to increase sensitivity towards employees' identities and provide them with effective coping mechanisms. Similarly, for ECPs, this study could serve as an initial resource to help them develop strategies for managing identity threats at work.

In the following sections, a detailed theoretical background will be provided for each dimension, including professionals, identity, identity threat, and ECPs. This will involve taking an in-depth look at the relevant literature and theories. Following this, the methodology used in the study will be described. The results will then be presented, and their implications, limitations, and future research directions will be discussed. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

2. Theory

This section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical background surrounding the topic of identity and identity threats. Initially, the concept of identity will be looked upon, along with a short discussion of various identity threats that humans may experience. This will be followed by an exploration of the connection between identity and the working environment, with a particular focus on the identities of professionals. Furthermore, a distinction will be made between early career professionals and senior professionals, as the former group may face different identity challenges than more experienced professionals. The section will be concluded by elaborating on coping mechanisms that can be employed to decrease the effects of identity threats.

2.1 Identity and identity threat

Within organizations, identity work became more important because the role of identities has been recognized as essential for comprehending the processes of organizing (Brown, 2015). Yet, the term identities can either apply to a group or an individual (Petriglieri,

2011). In this thesis, the focus is on the individual level. Individuals' identities serve as the foundation for their feeling of self-worth. The more an individual draws upon certain identities the higher the value of the identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Hence, there is a kind of hierarchical level of the identities within an individual. It depends on the value which is given to certain identities on which hierarchical level the identity is (Petriglieri, 2011). “[...] Giving up a professional identity may be hard but letting go of a gender or racial identity is even harder [...]” (Petriglieri, 2011, pp. 643-644).

In the research of Petriglieri (2011), it is mentioned states that there are four ways in which the malleability of identities threat can appear. The first option is changing the *significance of identity*. This is also explained by Shamir (1991). For instance, if a task fails to yield rewards, it may lose its perceived significance over time. Hence the level of importance might shift (Shamir, 1991). This can also happen with identities. The second malleability of identity would be to *change the meaning ascribed* to the identity (Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). This can take place when a transition in careers, for example, takes place. “[...] throughout their careers, individuals must move or transition into new roles, and that these transitions facilitate changes [...]” (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 236). Rather than altering the significance of one's identity, the meaning is revised in such cases. For instance, an individual who previously identified as a bachelor's student in computer science may now assume the identity of a master's student in the same field after graduation. The third possibility is to *let go of a persona* (Petriglieri, 2011). An example would be to not take part anymore in sports, hence the identity of being a, for example, volleyballer does not fit anymore. The last option would be to *take on a new identity* (Petriglieri, 2011). Becoming a mother could be one example. This is important when it comes to professional identity. As soon as a person does start a new job, he/she can become a professional within the area.

Identity threat is a phenomenon that has gained significant attention in the academic literature (Winkler, 2016), as it is a pervasive issue that can impact various aspects of individuals' lives, including their self-concept, emotional well-being, and performance in academic and professional domains. According to Petriglieri (2011), there are two main responses when identity is threatened. The first response tries to protect the threatened identity by targeting the source. The second possible response tries to protect the identity by making it less of an object (Petriglieri, 2011). 55% of male participants and 45% of female interviewees stated that they experienced identity threat “[...] due to their political affiliation (23%), occupation (27%), age (29%), ethnicity (13%), gender (9%), nationality (7%), family identity (16%), sports identity (11%) or other reasons (8%) [...]” (Nikolova, 2023, p. 408). When emotions are felt due to identity struggle, conflicts, or identity change (Winkler, 2018), identity threats for the individual can arise.

Within the academic literature, there is not one single definition of identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Within Table 1 different examples of identity threat definitions are displayed.

Source	Definition
Sinclair, & Carlsson (2013)	“The idea of experiencing threat when one’s position within the group is questioned is consistent with social identity theory [...]” (p. 466)
Major, & O’Brien (2005)	“Stigma-induced identity threat results when an individual appraises the demands imposed by a stigma-relevant stressor as potentially harmful to his or her social identity, and as exceeding his or her resources to cope with those demands.” (p. 402)
Petriglieri (2011)	“A review and synthesis of the literature lead me to define individual-level identity threats as experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity.” (p.644)
Craig, Thatcher, & Grover (2019)	“The IT Identity Threat offers a variance-based approach to resistance to IT that integrates social, task-related, and personal perceptions of threat, caused by an IT.” (p. 278)

Table 1 Definitions of Identity Threat

According to Branscombe et al. (1999), there are four types of social identity threats. These types affect attributes as well as behaviour within groups (Branscombe et al., 1999; Xiao, & Bavel, 2012). An additional differentiation would be intergroup threats. Such as symbolic intergroup threats (norms, values, culture etc. in danger) (Xiao, & Bavel, 2012). Branscombe et al.’s (1999) work is used as a model in this thesis because still a lot of literature is reviewing his work. Petriglieri’s (2011) research serves as the foundation for this thesis, with the main theory built upon his findings. At first, a look at Branscombe et al (1999) work will be made and later a look at the work of Petriglieri will be made and see which connections can be drawn from both types of research. There is a significant overlap between the threats identified by both authors, such as personal identity threats and value threats, which can affect an individual’s self-esteem and motivation. Both authors’ work emphasizes the crucial role of appraisals in response to identifying threats and the importance of understanding them for stress management and coping mechanisms (Branscombe et al., 1999; Petriglieri, 2011). While Petriglieri (2011) focuses on personal, relational, and collective identity threats,

Branscombe et al. (1999) discuss categorization, distinctiveness, the value of social identity, and acceptance threats.

A *categorization* threat occurs when an individual is being categorized against his/her will. Self-esteem can be affected by the categorization threat. This can be caused by the categorization of individuals by their group membership (Branscombe et al., 1999). Individuals are in such cases classified according to their gender, ethnical background etc. Those individuals are being judged on categories and they can be not seen as an individual (Branscombe et al., 1999). Those are “[...] contextually undesirable social categorization [...]” (Branscombe et al., 1999, p. 41).

When the distinctiveness of a group is being denied or prevented so-called *distinctiveness* threat occurs (Branscombe et al., 1999). In such situations, the identities of individuals are not distinct from others. Attempting to organize the social environment can give rise to the aforementioned identity threat. While social categories may aid in organizing and imbuing meaning to the world, they may also pose a threat to one's sense of self (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Threat to the *value* of social identity is created when the group's value is eroded (Branscombe et al., 1999). Negative social comparison is the reason for the identity threat. While positive comparison does provide positive feelings about the group belonging, to a certain extent (Branscombe et al., 1999). “[...] The outgroup is often the ‘object’ of the identity threat, but it can also be the source in a more direct or active sense, such as when the threatening information or behaviour is intentionally directed at the ingroup by the outgroup. [...]” (Branscombe et al., 1999, p. 46). While the ingroup threat is unusual, it can result from prior actions of the ingroup.

The last threat is the *acceptance* threat. This threat happens when the position of an individual within a group is undercut (Branscombe et al., 1999). Alternatively, in certain groups, the threat to one's identity stems from the ingroup. The attainment of group acceptance during entry into a group can serve as a potential threat source. Meeting entry requirements entails not only comparisons with those within the group but also with appropriate outgroups. “[...] a certain set of skills must be obtained, or milestones passed (e.g., a high-level degree for academic promotion), a probationary period must be served [...] or particular acts undertaken, which are often personally dangerous but can convey loyalty to the group [...]” (Branscombe et al., 1999 pp. 50-51).

The threat often depends on the context as well as the content of the social identity etc. (Branscombe et al., 1999). Responses to identity threats which are involuntary but can occur are anxiety, arousal, and an increase in blood pressure (Major, & O’Brien, 2005). When the

threat took place, the individual will pass through two types of appraisals. The primary appraisal (significance of well-being) and the secondary appraisal (response) (Smith, 1991; Petriglieri, 2011). The process of appraisal is crucial for psychological stress and coping (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019).

The three types of identity threats described by Petriglieri (2011) are personal identity threats, relational identity threats and collective identity threats. *Personal identity threat* is the type of threat which occurs when an individual's sense of self is called into question. Personal identity threat can arise when an individual is faced with a situation that challenges their beliefs, values, or sense of purpose, leading to feelings of confusion, anxiety, and a loss of direction. This can be particularly challenging when an individual's sense of self is closely tied to their work or profession. Personal identity threats can have negative consequences for an individual's well-being and motivation and can lead to a loss of confidence and a sense of purpose (Petriglieri, 2011).

The second type is the so-called *relational identity threat*. This type of threat occurs when an individual's relationships with others are called into question. Relational identity threats can arise when an individual is excluded from a group or when their relationships with others are threatened in some way. This can lead to feelings of alienation, social isolation, and a loss of social support. Relational identity threats can have negative consequences for an individual's well-being and can lead to a loss of motivation and self-esteem (Petriglieri, 2011).

The third type is the *collective identity threat*. This type of threat occurs when an individual's sense of belonging to a larger group or community is called into question. Collective identity threat can arise when an individual's membership in a particular social group is challenged or when the group as a whole is marginalized or devalued by society. This can lead to feelings of marginalization, isolation, and a loss of a sense of shared purpose. Collective identity threat can have negative consequences for individuals and groups, including decreased motivation, lower self-esteem, and reduced well-being (Petriglieri, 2011).

2.3 Professionals and their identity

2.3.1 Professional

Professionals are needed in all kinds of life situations so much that it is difficult to envision our era without the physicians, lawyer, and accountants to whom we turn for help at crucial times (Gardner, & Shulman, 2005). Yet the lack of clear definitions for terms such as professional identity, professionalism, and professional socialization can create misunderstandings. (Fitzgerald, 2020). According to Gardner and Lee (2005), a profession is being performed by an individual to serve society (Klaas, 1961; Abbott, 1983) in an altruistic way, while additionally gaining prestige and autonomy. Generally, professionals are individuals who perform certain jobs (Gardner, & Lee, 2005; Klaas, 1961). Next to the goal to serve society

Abbott (1983) explains that professionals also have a corporate obligation. The corporate obligation is governed by formal and informal rules (Abbott, 1983).

To understand the concept of “profession” Gardner and Lee (2005, p. 14) declared that professionals show at least six different characteristics. These include the dedication of professionals to work in the best interest of their clients and society, their possession of specialized knowledge and principles, unique professional skills, and the ability to make informed judgments in uncertain situations while maintaining integrity. Additionally, it involves an organized approach to individual and collective learning from practice, resulting in the creation of new knowledge. Finally, it includes the establishment of a professional community that monitors the quality of professional education and practice (Gardner & Lee, 2005). These characteristics are important since they try to describe professional identity from a group perspective or from the view of an individual from that group (Fitzgerald, 2020).

To summarize, a professional is someone who performs certain activities, which were achieved through specific training and development, and which serves societies, organizations and/ or the common good.

2.3.2 Professional identity

All groups of professionals have unique identities (Ahuja, 2023). One possible identity for professionals is their work-related identity, which can be defined as their professional identity. Technical skills and interpersonal skills alone do not create and ensure the development of a professional identity (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). Through training and education, individuals can develop strong professional identities (Ahuja, 2023). Professional judgment and reasoning as well as self-evaluation and self-directed learning are also part of creating a professional identity (Trede et al., 2012). Professional identity can be defined as “[...] self-image which permits feelings of personal adequacy and satisfaction in the performance of the expected role [...]” (Trede et al., 2012, p. 374). Furthermore, professionals can form their identity by adopting attitudes, beliefs, and standards that uphold their role as practitioners and contribute to their sense of being a part of a profession with a comprehensive comprehension of the obligations that come with being a healthcare professional (Trede et al., 2012). Professionals gain prestige and autonomy through an exchange of performing their work (Garnder, & Shulman, 2005).

In the literature review, Trede et al. (2012) underlined that most of the articles concerning professional identities do not make a connection between the university and work. Although there are limited articles on the subject, some do suggest that professional identities may begin to form during the university years, as students undertake their studies and gain initial work experience (Kaartinen-Koutaniemi, & Lindblome-Yläne, 2008). These studies indicate that students can create/develop professional identities from their curriculum with a

combination of work (Karttinen-Koutaniemi, & Lindblome-Yläne, 2008; Trede et al., 2012). Multi-community membership as an addition can help students to develop professional identity, by accepting the fact that students are pre-accredited professionals (Trede et al., 2012). Even though a lot of articles do not see the connection or do research about it, the university does play an important role in providing students with preliminary professional identities (Trede et al., 2012).

Petriglieri (2011) states that identities will and can change. Stability in the life of individuals is achieved through maintaining an identity. Upon the transition from university to the workforce, individuals often relinquish their student identity and establish a new professional identity within a specific context. This transformation may engender an identity threat.

For instance, McNeil et al (2013) take a deeper look at how professional identity is being made. In this paper professional identity is a long-lasting aspect of an individual's social identity. This is demonstrated by members of interprofessional practice in their reactions to situations that challenge their professional identity (McNeil et al., 2013). Professional identity refers to the collective and individual aspects of an individual's social identity within an interprofessional practice. At the macro level, professional identity encompasses the status, privileges, duties, and self-image of the profession, whereas, at the micro level, it pertains to the tacit behavioural norms of individual professionals (McNeil et al., 2013). A threat to professional identity occurs when there is a perceived risk of devaluation or neglect of the profession's role or expertise. In such instances, professionals may feel their reputation or standing is being challenged, which can lead to a defensive response to protect their professional identity (McNeil et al., 2013). These insights hint at the topic that Early Career Professionals (ECPs) may have difficulties encountering identity threats differently than senior professionals.

2.3.3 Early Career Professionals (ECPs)

Recent research has pointed out that there is little research that specifically aims at exploring ECPs and how they face challenges at work (Mattick et al., 2019). Being unfamiliar with the working place, the present systems, norms, culture, importance of hierarchical levels (Mattick et al., 2019) can increase identity threats for early career professionals (ECPs). The experience of an ECP may be different from those of an experienced professional (Mattick et al., 2019). Current research is inconsistent in defining ECPs. Three examples of definitions can be taken from Mattick et al. (2019), Tong et al. (2014) and Ahuja et al. (2019). An ECPs is a professional who has been in practice for less than two years since graduating (Mattick et al., 2019), but in the paper, from Tong et al. (2014) early career cardiologists are those who finished their training program within the last 10 years and Ahuja et al. (2019) define ECPs

who have five or fewer years of professional work experience. Within this research, the middle of those three opinions will be used. Hence, ECPs who have less experience than five years will be the target group.

It is especially important to gather more information about ECPs (Winkler, 2018; Mattick et al., 2019; Ahuja, Heinzmann, & Cegg, 2019) because they ECPs may as they navigate their work experiences and often encounter discrepancies between their idealized notions of professional identity and the reality of their situation. Emotions are an additional discursive resource for them (Ahuja et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Early Career Professionals' Identity

Since the identity of ECPs may be different from those of senior professionals, these young professionals may encounter identity threats differently than older professionals. In their study on counsellors and therapists, Rønnestad and Skoyholt (2003) noted that these young professionals experience professional development differently. When starting their career, these ECPs experienced a sense of being by themselves. Whilst beforehand they were always guided by their professors or fellow students, as soon as they left the guided environment, they had to find a way by themselves. During this period, they seek confirmation through the validity of their training (Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003).

This kind of challenge can be faced also by other ECPs in other professions. Experiencing professional challenges that are not adequately mastered can lead to a period of disillusionment with both professional training and oneself. This can spark a more intense exploration into oneself and the professional environment. It is often surprising how difficult it can be to navigate these challenges without proper preparation and support, according to one interviewee (Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003). Many novice professionals feel scared and overwhelmed by the lack of guidance from their professors and supervisors. Despite the hard work and anxiety that went into graduate training, individuals may still feel unprepared for the realities of their profession, leading to a sense of disillusionment (Rønnestad, & Skovholt, 2003).

2.4 Coping Mechanisms for Identity Threats

In practical situations, individuals facing identity threats typically do not rely solely on a single coping strategy, such as denial, or cope only at one level, such as within themselves. Empirical studies conducted in different contexts of identity threat have revealed that people employ a range of coping strategies they perceive to be accessible to them to alleviate or resolve the threat.

When ECPs start a new job, they thus need to learn how to navigate the new work environment, which may cause several threats to their relatively unripe professional identity.

Research has shown that individuals can respond to such identity threats through several coping mechanisms (Petriglieri, 2011) which are labelled as threat responses. Indeed, as soon as the individual experiences a threat, the first so-called primary appraisal takes place. This is followed by the secondary appraisal of coping responses. This model of response mechanisms was developed by Petriglieri (2011) (the model can be seen in Appendix A) and was selected due to its focus on defining identity threats and its consolidation of theoretical works from a multitude of scholars.

More specifically, according to the model, the perception of the threat depends on experience, which is lower for ECPs (Winkler, 2018; Ahuja et al., 2019), and identity (Petriglieri, 2011). The process of appraising an experience as a threat to one's identity can trigger a response aimed at reducing the likelihood or severity of potential harm. Once the primary appraisal has taken place, a secondary appraisal process follows in which individuals evaluate various response options to determine which one is most likely to be effective in reducing the perceived threat to their identity. This assessment allows individuals to select the most appropriate response that aligns with their desired outcome (Petriglieri, 2011). While the desire for stability in one's identity is significant, individuals' identities can change when faced with threats to their sense of self. The initial condition that influences this process is the presence of strong threats. Such threats can arise when the perceived potential harm to an individual's identity is substantial, or when they experience such threats frequently (Petriglieri, 2011). But according to Winkler (2006) "The particular focus of literature on identity work is on situations and periods where identity is threatened [...]" (p.120) ignoring the fact that individuals are neither rational nor emotion-free. And no literature does look at how the coping mechanisms are being created.

According to Petriglieri (2011), there are two options from which individuals in threatening situations can choose. Either "Identity-protection responses" or "Identity-restructuring responses". Under each option are again three responses. The three strategies used to protect threatened identities - derogation, concealment, and positive distinctiveness - involve taking action against the individuals responsible for the threatening experience (Petriglieri, 2011). Derogation refers to the act of criticizing the opinions or beliefs of a person or group, which can be done without the need for direct interaction with them. While the other two involve interaction with other individuals. Concealment is the act of hiding or minimizing one's threatened identity when facing those who pose a potential threat to it. Positive distinctiveness is a technique that involves highlighting positive aspects related to a threatened identity, to educate and alter the perspectives of individuals who may pose a potential threat to that identity (Petriglieri, 2011).

Identity-restructuring responses are identity exist, meaning change, and importance change (Petriglieri, 2011). To exit an identity, one must disengage from the threatened identity and any associated role or social group. This process involves not only psychological disengagement but also physical disengagement from the social relations and context that support the identity. The result is the actual deletion of the identity. Which can be easier if another identity to which the individual can transition more easily (Petriglieri, 2011). This can be the case if a student finishes their study and has to exit their identity and change to being a professional. Changing the meaning or importance of the identity does not have such a big effect on the individual (Petriglieri, 2011).

The outcome of the threat is either maintenance of the threat or elimination of the threat (Petriglieri, 2011). however, this model seems to take for granted that humans are rational and know in which situation which type of response is appropriate. At the end of her research, she states “an interesting question to pursue is whether and how it is possible to push people toward these responses [...]” (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 655). At the same time, emotions can also influence individuals’ decision-making (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). In threatful situations, decision-making for humans is not rational (Heracleous, 1994). Incidental emotions can not only influence decision making and judgment but also the decrease of altruism, risk-taking etc. of an individual (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). Hence, a theoretical model with clear directions may not work for everyone. Including emotions in the model could provide new insights. According to Li & Rukavina (2009), emotions can influence coping mechanisms and decision-making. Emotions like anxiety, discomfort, uncertainty, and social isolation can arise when individuals experience identity threats (Winkler, 2018). More specifically, these emotions seem to be particularly powerful when people experience career changes. Individuals who just started their professional careers have different experiences than professionals who are already in their profession for some years (Mattick, Brennan, Papoutsis, & Pearson, 2019). Hence, this research tries to understand how ECPs create their repertoire of coping mechanisms as well as how they can come to the point of understanding in which situation which coping mechanism is best.

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology employed is discussed in detail. The first subchapter focuses on the research design, followed by a subchapter on data collection and research instruments. The remaining subchapters delve into quantitative measurements, quantitative data analysis, and qualitative data analysis.

3.1 Research design

Within this master thesis, an inductive qualitative research design was opted for. Qualitative research aims to understand the social phenomenon and “studies, documents,

analyses, and interprets how human beings construct and attach meanings to their experiences” (Azungah, 2018, p. 383). The benefit is that already a smaller number of participants is enough to receive high-quality results/insights (Azungah, 2018). The main goal of this thesis was to gather more insights from early career professionals on their way to creating coping mechanisms when experiencing identity threats. In addition, the research focused on uncovering the underlying reasons and motivations behind participants' behaviours, hence a qualitative approach is best suited for this purpose (Al-Busaidi, 2008). By allowing the interpretation of the subjects' narratives, a qualitative approach is enabling to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of the values and beliefs that shaped their behaviours. The inductive qualitative research approach involves a diverse range of data collection methods and analytical tools that aim to derive themes or concepts from raw data (Al-Busaidi, 2008). In this thesis, data is collected through interviews.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The goal of this thesis was to find out how ECPs create their repertoire of coping mechanisms. Hence, participants must have at least one year of working experience, but not longer than five years, otherwise, they can be considered already as senior professionals (Ahuja et al., 2019). Having less than one year of experience will not be an exclusion criterion if they experienced some kind of identity threat. Since the ECPs will be mainly from the north of Europe, they should have at least a bachelor's degree. The reason is that in the north of Europe, a lot of people already start working after receiving their bachelor's degree and a master's degree is not necessary. In case a participant has a higher degree, it will not be an exclusion criterion.

All participants were found through the Alumni network of the University of Twente or the personal network of the author. The sampling was done through purposive sampling. This method was chosen because this non-random technique does not require any underlying theories or a predetermined number of participants (Etikan et al., 2016). In addition, the snowball sampling method will be used. It is one of the most popular methods of sampling in qualitative research (Parker et al., 2019). Typically, researchers commence their study by selecting a limited number of initial contacts (referred to as "seeds") who meet the research criteria and are invited to participate. If the initial group of participants is willing, they are asked to suggest other contacts who also meet the research criteria and might be interested in participating. These subsequent contacts then recommend additional potential participants, and the cycle continues (Parker et al., 2019).

Essentially, the researcher determines the information needed and seeks out individuals with relevant knowledge or experience who are willing to provide it (Etikan, 2016). Qualitative research often employs this method to identify and select cases that contain

valuable information while making the most efficient use of available resources. The process entails pinpointing and selecting individuals or groups with expertise in a particular phenomenon of interest (Etikan, 2016).

Since in the current academic literature the paper on ECPs concentrates on identity threats either on healthcare professionals (Mattick et al., 2019) or on architects (Tong et al., 2014), this thesis it was decided to extend current knowledge by considering the target group of ECPs computer scientists and engineers. Computer science can be described as the science of computers and their functions as well as their application (Brandhofer et al., 2010). In the “fundamental/applied computer science” the focus is primarily on scientific knowledge related to issues of primarily machine-based information processing, while in the second case “engineering-oriented computer science”, the emphasis is on solving specific information processing tasks under commercial and technical constraints (Broy, & Schmidt, 1999). The main tasks of engineers are to create effective solutions which are related to technical problems as well as to develop new technology (Ingenieurwesen-studieren.de, 2023; Sondermann, 2016). The development requires control and prudence, whilst the engineers need deep knowledge to understand the complexity (Sondermann, 2016).

3.3. Research Instrument

The research tool for this thesis was semi-structured interviews. Due to geographical distance most of the interviews were conducted online, through video calling applications. Even though there are some drawbacks, such as interviewees dropping out, because there is no relationship, ethical issues due to video or audio tapping and technical issues (Deaking, & Wakefield, 2014). But due to the limited time frame and distance, it was the only option to conduct the research online. Interviews were chosen not only because they represent one of the best instruments to answer the research question of this thesis, but also due to their higher response rate in comparison to surveys (Zwaafink, 2022). To provide greater precision, the author opted for a semi-structured interview as the data collection method. This prevalent form of the interview involves the use of a pre-designed interview guide comprising pre-set themes or questions, which are systematically covered during the interview process (Zwaafink, 2022). A benefit of conducting semi-structured interviews was the researcher's ability to ask spontaneous follow-up questions, in addition to the pre-determined interview protocol. This enables the collection of more comprehensive and detailed information during the interview process (Miles, & Hubermann, 1994). Unstructured interviews were not chosen since there would be a lack of structure and an increase of possibilities to not gather all important information (Mueller, & Sengal, 2014). In Appendix B the questionnaire is presented.

In total 16 interviews were conducted either directly in English or German since the researcher is proficient in both languages. 11 were from Germany (interviews were translated

into English), 4 participants were from the Netherlands and 1 from India (both directly conducted in English). But all participants either lived in Germany or the Netherlands. The interviews lasted between 38 minutes and 19 minutes, with a mean of 30 minutes. Once the interview was recorded, it was transcribed verbatim using Atlas.ti software, and subsequently reviewed for potential errors. In instances in which personal data formed part of quotes, appropriate concealments were made to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Ethical approval to conduct this research was obtained by the University of Twente Ethics Committee.

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality	Current Field	Tenure
#01	30	Male	German	Engineering	1
#02	21	Male	Dutch	Engineering	2.5
#03	30	Male	German	Computer Scientist	2
#04	31	Male	German	Engineering	4
#05	34	Male	German	Engineering	3
#06	30	Male	German	Computer Scientist	2
#07	28	Female	German	Engineering	2
#08	25	Male	German	Computer Scientist	3.5
#09	29	Male	Dutch	Engineering	4
#10	26	Male	German	Computer Scientist	3.5
#11	29	Male	German	Computer Scientist	2.5
#12	31	Male	German	Engineering	0.5
#13	27	Male	Dutch	Engineering	3.5
#14	28	Female	Dutch	Computer Scientist	2
#15	29	Male	Indian	Engineering	4
#16	31	Female	German	Computer Scientist	5

Table 2 Information about Interviewees

3.4 Data analysis

The approach selected to analyze the qualitative data was Thematic Analysis, utilizing an inductive reasoning method (Braun & Clare, 2016). This method was chosen for its ability to allow the researcher to explore the interconnections and patterns among various topics and the research question, while also facilitating a quick and efficient summary of extensive data (Braun & Clare, 2016).

4. Findings

In this section, the results of this research are presented. The initial research question was “How do early-career professionals develop their repertoire of coping mechanisms to identify threats in the workplace, and what types of coping mechanisms are commonly utilized in such situations?”. For each section, a separate table depicts the data structure of the findings. The data consist of 43 first-order themes, 14 second-order themes and 3 aggregate dimensions. The aggregate dimensions are “development of coping mechanism”, “utilized coping mechanism” as well as “Types of emotions due to identity threat”. Quotes from computer scientists are identified by “CS”, whilst quotes from engineers are indicated by “E”. The table with the corresponding quotations can be found in Appendix C.

4.1 Background information

Before diving into the crucial information required to address the research question, it is important to acknowledge that ECPs encounter various forms of identity threats. To gain a deeper understanding of the subsequent development of coping mechanisms and their underlying factors, it is essential to examine the types of threats that emerged during the interviews. In Figure 1 the data structure can be found in which a deeper look at the different types of threats experienced by ECPs is being made.

To structure the data, this research utilized Gioia's first-order concept, as well as second-order themes, along with aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). This Thematic Analysis involves six distinct stages. The initial stage entails becoming acquainted with the gathered data, achieved by transcribing and reviewing the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the second stage, initial codes are systematically generated, reflecting Gioia et al.'s (2013) first-order concept. These codes are derived from the words and quotes of the study participants. A subsequent round of coding is conducted to evaluate the similarities and differences between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al.'s, 2013). The third stage involves identifying second and third-order themes by examining the codes for common characteristics (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al.'s, 2013). In the fourth step, the themes were reviewed and evaluated for their relationship to the extracted codes and the complete dataset. The fifth step involved defining and naming the distinct themes. Finally, in the sixth and final step, a report was produced by analyzing the data, selecting examples that

support codes and themes, and providing a response to the research question (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al.'s, 2013).

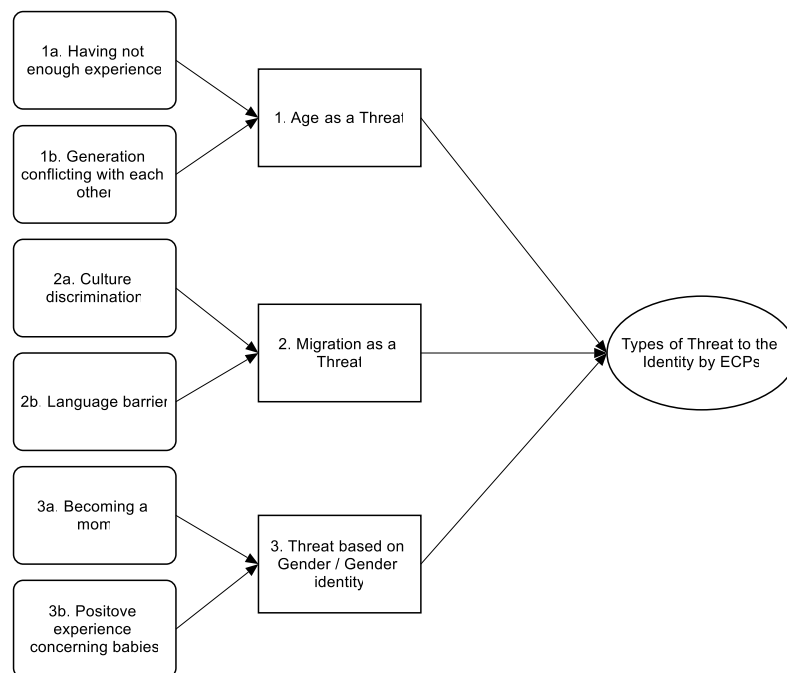


Figure 1 Types of Threat to the Identity Experienced by ECPs

One of the most present threats identified by almost all the participants was the information gap between management and computer scientists/engineers. These groups possess distinct knowledge backgrounds, which can result in difficulties in mutual understanding and divergent perspectives. Another significant threat connected to the age gap is the lack of experience across hierarchical levels. While the older generation adheres to established work practices, the younger generation brings (due to their recent education) modern skills and approaches. Consequently, the younger generation often feels disregarded or undervalued. Some participants mentioned:

CS6: "We have a very high age average in the company"

E8: "I often think the problem is [...] age."

CS13: "the client did not work with me, but rather with a colleague do to the reasons that he had more experience"

A less frequently mentioned, yet important, threat was the lack of effective communication among colleagues and different hierarchical levels. Insufficient or ineffective communication can make ECPs feel unwelcome, unrecognized, or demoralized. Additionally, interviews with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds revealed that heritage and culture also served as sources of threat. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the present culture, and

difficulties in comprehending cultural norms hindered seamless integration. Instances of racism were frequently reported in this context.

E2: "And then the professor told me; not everyone has to become an engineer"

E9: "was discriminated against because of my place of birth"

E15: "language was a huge barrier at the beginning"

Especially, females mentioned during the interviews that according to them they felt also threatened based on their gender. One of them explained during the interview, that she recently got engaged. Since that moment, she is often being questioned about when the babies will come. On the contrary, a male explained that he never had a similar problem, even though the second child is already on its way to being born. At the same moment, he mentioned that his wife does experience a lot of threats due to her pregnancy at her workplace.

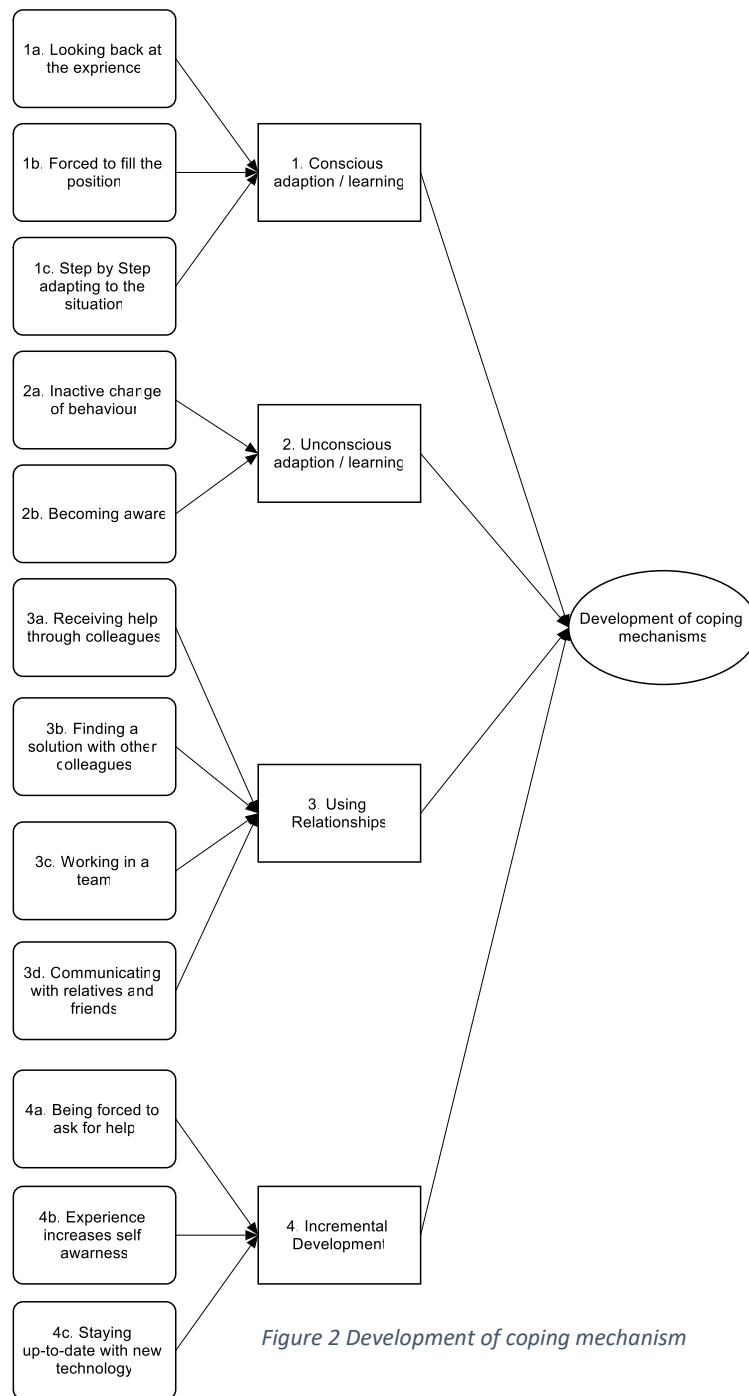
E8: "My experience with my current employer has actually been consistently positive. We are becoming our second child in September. [...] That is very unproblematic, also for all other colleagues here in the company, so there are also many colleagues who have children, who have also taken parental leave, although they are all men."

E7: "I am 28, am engaged and the question of when the babies come is there almost every week."

However, for this thesis, it is imperative to focus on the subsequent sections that will explore the relevant aspects in greater detail.

4.2 Development of coping mechanisms

The primary dimension identified is the "development of coping mechanisms". Within this dimension, several 2nd order themes can be associated, including learning through reflection, unconscious adaptation, utilizing relationships, learning during an experience, and incremental development. These 2nd-order codes can be further broken down into a total of 15 1st-order codes. In Figure 2 a look at the different codes can be made.



The process of developing coping mechanisms can be a time-consuming and reflective journey. Participants seemed to have encountered a challenging situation or threat at the beginning, which prompts them to reflect on and make sense of what has transpired. Over time, through this process of reflection, they begin to gain a deeper understanding of the situation and how to effectively cope with it. According to E11 and E8:

E11: “[...] mainly afterwards that I saw what went wrong instead of the moment itself.”

E8: “I look back and I was like, ah, there. I made a super big mistake [...]”

These statements not only demonstrate the adaptability of behaviour but also highlight the ECPs' tendency to acknowledge when something has gone wrong. However, it is important to note that this change can occur unconsciously. In other words, ECPs may transform without actively or consciously realizing it. Which is pointed out again by E11:

"I don't think I actively changed anything. But some weeks later, she told me you really changed. So, I don't know what happened."

Also, by the choice of wording from CS 9:

"So I would say I'm still very reserved, but before that it was just supposed to be more extreme. Perhaps, I assume that this changed a bit. But I don't know exactly when I changed."

The inclusion of the word "perhaps" already suggests that the ECPs are uncertain about the specific nature of the changes that occurred, but it is possible that they became more extroverted. In both cases, the ECPs experienced unconscious shifts in their ways of working and thinking. Another avenue for developing coping mechanisms was through the utilization of different relationships and learning from them to effectively deal with threats. The interview revealed that various forms of relationship building, and utilization could be beneficial. These include seeking assistance from colleagues, collaborating as a team to find solutions, engaging in staff meetings to discuss and address issues collectively, or forming cohesive groups to voice concerns and obtain support. Additionally, seeking help from external sources was identified as a potential strategy for coping by almost all participants. For instance:

CS6: "but a colleague has always nudged him a bit and supported him."

E8: "I then make sure that I always [find] a solution together with my colleague."

CS5: "that we do that in the group anyway [...]. That actually works quite well for them. Most of them have about the same attitude. [...] And that we can then basically collect and then also appear as a mass, if there is something"

CS1: "really try to work together, so that now, for example, in the field of information technology, we do screen sharing and work together on something."

E3: "I also have former fellow students, or family and relatives, with whom one occasionally exchanges information."

E3: "I would like that the supervisor would approach me about a staff meeting."

However, there are instances where conversations or advice from relatives or co-workers may not be effective in helping ECPs develop coping mechanisms. For some participants, the most valuable approach was learning during an experience. One participant specifically mentioned that being pushed into challenging situations proved to be highly

beneficial. When faced with no alternative but to perform or seek assistance, they were able to learn and develop coping mechanisms effectively through this experiential process. This is learned during the threatful situation while reflecting on the situation will take place later.

CS9: "you locally get forced to ask for help because, [...] In in a good development cycle you have. First, I make something, then a colleague looks at it says OK that's well made or you can improve here and there and then that's that thing gets added to the main product."

E12: " It was basically expected to directly fill out the whole post with the requirements. [...] That was quite a lot of pressure all at one."

Another method of developing coping mechanisms identified through the interviews was the enhancement of the ECPs' skill sets as a result of their experiences. Additionally, incremental development was recognized as another approach to coping. One ECP highlighted the effectiveness of starting with small steps and gradually working towards accomplishing larger goals. For instance, E8 concurred with this approach, emphasizing the importance of developing skills and expertise progressively. E8 noted: "when it's only small changes at first [...] compared to a big deal" or "you just go there in small steps". Furthermore, staying updated with the latest updates, technologies, and industry advancements was also mentioned as a means of developing coping mechanisms. By continuously learning and adapting to changes, ECPs can effectively navigate and cope with various challenges they may encounter.

E12: " I see it personally so. [...] That I just stay on the ragged edge of time, so to speak, because in the technical field there are currently so many upheavals that are happening so quickly. [...] I believe that I then in principle simply collect the information, carry it together and then take it with me into the professions, in order to be up to date there and then so to speak also to prove his competence [...]. It is important to be up-to-date"

4.3 Most utilized coping mechanisms

ECPs developed during their work time different coping mechanisms of how to deal with different identity threats. For the aggregated dimension "utilized coping mechanisms" in total 21 1st-order codes were found from the collected data and in total five 2nd-order themes were detected. Those codes include "reflection upon experience", "learning from the experience", "deviance", "patience" and "quitting the job". Once again, the codes can be found in figure 3.

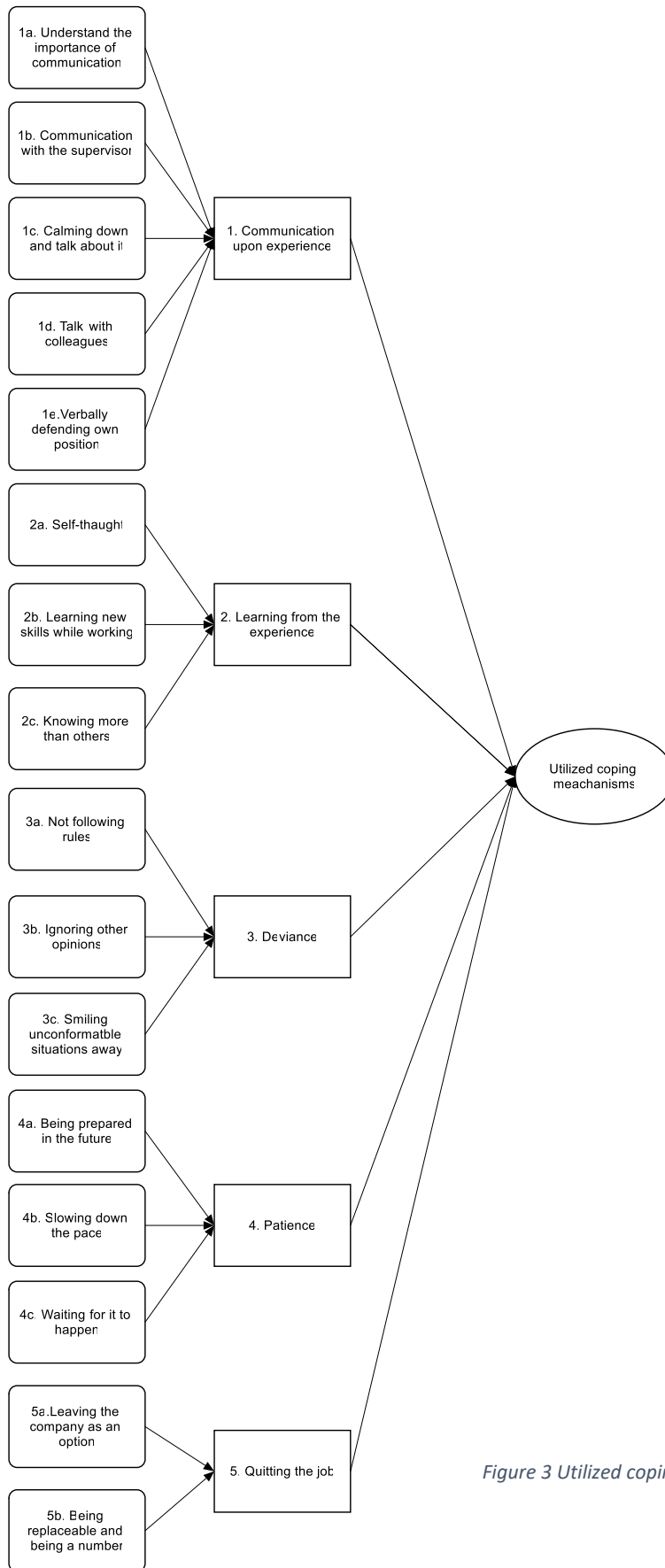


Figure 3 Utilized coping mechanism

In almost every interview conducted, participants mentioned at least once communication as a coping mechanism. Either communication with friends, family, colleagues or supervisors. Hence, several aspects emerged that contribute to the aggregated dimension reflection upon experience with others. Participants highlighted the effectiveness of asking for opinions, which allowed them to gather diverse perspectives and insights about the topic. Learning to openly discuss and articulate their thoughts and emotions was recognized as a valuable skill for coping. Here, ECPs do actively reflection with others or with oneself upon experiences. Which does also correspond to the 2nd order theme “using relationships”.

E11: “But later I went to my manager, [...]. And I asked him, like, what do you think?”

CS6: “So in that situation he just accepted it as it is, couldn't cope and then only eventually learned to talk about it and communicate that.”

Since communication could be connected to building relationships, addressing problems directly was emphasized as a crucial step in dealing with challenging situations. This could also be to engage in effective communication with supervisors. Someone mentioned that it plays a significant role in finding resolution and managing stress in a better way. Sometimes going directly to the supervisor was not an option. Then seeking support and engaging in conversations with colleagues proved beneficial. It was providing an opportunity for sharing experiences and seeking guidance.

CS5: “But you don't have the feeling that it's always in favor of the employees, but sometimes it's just what suits them very well or something [...] We had actually then partly somehow addressed a few things and there was still no positive feedback.”

E3: “I would talk directly with my boss if something like this happened and I'll [...] ask for feedback for me”

E9: “With the current employer, I would actively seek communication”

Participants also emphasized the importance of taking a moment to calm down before engaging in conversations, enabling them to communicate more effectively. Instead of being driven by emotions. Lastly, verbally defending their positions and perspectives emerged as a strategy for coping with threats through effective communication.

CS13: “We have a [...] well, I wouldn't say a fight. But something close [...]. And then after the emotions were settled, we were talking about it.”

E7: " Ok and was shown to you directly somehow already okay, you are a woman. You have no idea, you have no business here or you can't, have you experienced something like that? Yes, but then you have to show that you can counter. "

E12: " I think. There will be the teasing remarks and then just the question of whether you should then perhaps seek other technical advice."

Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted role of communication as a coping mechanism in various aspects of personal and professional life. But it is not the only coping mechanism used by ECPs. Another active response can be when the young professional starts to increase their set of knowledge and skills to cope with potential threats.

Education and knowledge are invaluable resources that participants exploited as coping mechanisms when faced with identity threats, as mentioned by the participant of this study. For instance, both engineers and computer scientists underlined:

E12: "That's what I taught myself and learned [...]"

CS6: "[...] if you then no longer study, but are a full-time employee, then you have to learn very quickly that you can still not know things. [...] and that's okay."

These statements highlight the empowering nature of self-directed learning. Someone has to be committed to proving that he/she is better than the threat, by showcasing the determination and commitment to acquire knowledge independently. Moreover, the mention of learning a special programming language by CS1 illustrates the significance of an effort to expand one's skill set and expertise to navigate and mitigate the impact of identity threats.

CS1: "if I now say, I have desire to learn somehow a special programming language is however straight no tasks gives, where one would apply that now, it is difficult to argue, [...] one must use these."

Learning new skills while working is an effective strategy for coping, as it can enable individuals to adapt and develop the necessary competencies to overcome challenges related to their identity. Furthermore, the phrase "knowing more than others" (E16) implies a sense of mastery and advantage gained through continuous learning, providing individuals with the confidence and resilience to confront identity threats head-on. Here the participant pointed out multiple times, that being a "Kopfmonopol" (someone who has all the relevant knowledge, and not the others; making oneself valuable for the company) can be quite helpful to fight potential threats.

E15: " That person has a very strong accent. I really don't follow it. It's a dialect or something. [...] But, but I also learn at the same time."

E16: "so far I have made the most use of being a Kopfmonopol"

Finally, the ability to come up with new ideas illustrates the creative potential that education and knowledge offer, enabling individuals to think innovatively and come up with novel solutions to counter identity threats. In essence, education and knowledge serve as transformative tools, equipping individuals with the intellectual capacity, adaptability, and problem-solving skills needed to effectively cope with and transcend identity threats.

CS13: "I was knowledgeable, I came up with new ideas"

Another way of reacting to the threat was to be patient, which also must be learned by the ECPs. During the interviews, it became evident that future progress and the need for patience are important skills for our participants to cope with threats in the long run.

E15: "But in the near future, it's already working"

This quote hints at a sense of anticipation and confidence in the future success of their efforts. It reflects the optimistic outlook and belief that their efforts and investments will yield positive outcomes if he/she does keep fighting for themselves. During another interview, the participant mentioned that sometimes learning afterwards and then being seen to slow down and be more patient can be another way to fight against potential threats. The computer scientist mentioned that exercising patience and adapting a slower pace can help to navigate challenges more successfully.

CS13: " But it was interesting to hear about it. And then there identity changed because they had to slow down and be more patient so."

Sometimes all the pushing does not help. Here, one interviewee mentioned that all the hustle and pushing were not helpful to fight against the threat. The only successful way was to wait and let it happen in the "right" time.

E3: " Then certain aspects were addressed, such as an adjustment of the title and Co. [...] And they are just as I said not yet done and indeed so discussed. But I'm still waiting for it. "

It signifies their willingness to remain patient and allow events to unfold in their own time. Together, these insights demonstrate a balanced approach to future progress, encompassing a mix of anticipation, patience, and the acceptance of waiting as part of the journey toward achieving desired outcomes. Sometimes the young professionals are also able to ignore the threat and move on.

E8: " In general, I just don't like it that much when people work inefficiently and actually put obstacles in each other's way. [...] I didn't follow it simply. "

One approach to ignoring or mitigating identity threats is to consciously choose not to adhere to the imposed rules or expectations that contribute to the threat. This can be seen under the code “deviance”. By not following the rule, participants tended to assert their autonomy and prioritize their own beliefs and values. Here the participant actively mentioned that the rule did not make sense for him/her and their colleagues. While the others were too afraid of getting a written warning, he/she ignored it and nothing bad ever happened. Hence, he/she continued ignoring the threat. In this case, it worked in his/her favour.

E2: "I learned that you have to pursue your goal and just follow through and ignore the other opinions."

Some participants mentioned disregarding or intentionally overlooking the opinions and judgments of others that contribute to the identity threat. Here, their own opinion was more important to the participant. In another extreme case, the interviewee mentioned that the participant would just smile during the situation and try to ignore it as well as possible. By smiling off or making the situation lighter, individuals aim to minimize the impact of the threat and maintain a positive mindset.

E7: "now I also enter into discussions that perhaps I had not done in the past I might have smiled away."

These strategies demonstrate individuals' efforts to shield themselves from the negative effects of identity threats by consciously choosing to disregard imposed rules, ignore external opinions, or employ humour and positivity. By redirecting their focus and maintaining a resilient mindset, individuals aim to diminish the influence of identity threats on their overall well-being and professional identity.

If all of those mechanisms do not work, many participants mentioned that the last way out of the harmful situation was by leaving the company by quitting the job. One interviewee mentioned that if the threat occurs more than once, he/she would part from the company as fast as possible.

E9: "Pretty direct and consistent. I parted company very quickly."

CS10: "But I was only there for a short time, maybe 3 months, and then I changed jobs."

For some, quitting became the primary course of action, as indicated by phrases like:

CS5: "So there is no other instance now to which one could somehow turn to de-escalate this. [...]Accordingly, yes, then let's see alternative is just to quit."

E3: "[...] I say honestly, then I would go. [...] That has somewhere also a bad taste and if one is treated like that; then in the long [...] run, I would go."

Here, the ECPs want first to give the company a second or even third chance before leaving the company. But having the possibility to always leave the company, does provide the ECPs a safety net. In one interview the young professional mentioned:

E4: " It sounds a bit harsh, but everybody is replaceable, and everybody is a number, so I accept that and at least that's my perspective "

Which was fine in this case. But for him/her it was also quite important to know and understand that he/she is replaceable. This allowed him/her to say the same to the company. It was a two-way relationship, and both were with the fact fine. This response underscores the participants' determination to protect their professional identity and find an environment where their unique qualities and contributions are valued. Quitting the job emerges as a coping mechanism that enables individuals to regain a sense of autonomy, preserve their self-worth, and seek opportunities that align more closely with their desired professional identity.

4.4 Emotional Responses due to Identity Threat

One surprising outcome from the conducted interviews was that all kinds of identity threats and the related coping mechanisms were somehow connected to emotions. The role of these emotions experienced by the participants in the context of identity threats is multifaceted. Firstly, these emotions serve as indicators or can be a signal of the presence of a potential threat to their (professional) identity. Mainly negative emotions were mentioned during the interviews involving being sad or feeling emotions such as anger and/or negative surprise. This can be seen in the data structure (figure 3). ECPs mentioned that due to threats they experienced different emotions. These emotions did shape the emotional response as well as the response to the threat.

Secondly, these emotions can be experienced by the participants as indicators that something needs to change to address the identity threat. The negative emotions act as a catalyst for reflection and action, prompting individuals to consider how they can navigate the threat and regain a sense of alignment with their professional identity. The emotions may motivate them to seek solutions, either by actively confronting the source of the threat, seeking support, or making changes in their work environment. During not-as-threatening situations, emotions can be the only response and then the threat will be ignored. In summary, the emotions experienced by the participants play a role in signalling the presence of an identity threat and serve as a motivation for individuals to acknowledge and address the threat, prompting them to take necessary actions or make changes to protect and restore their professional identity. Participants often expressed feelings of disappointment.

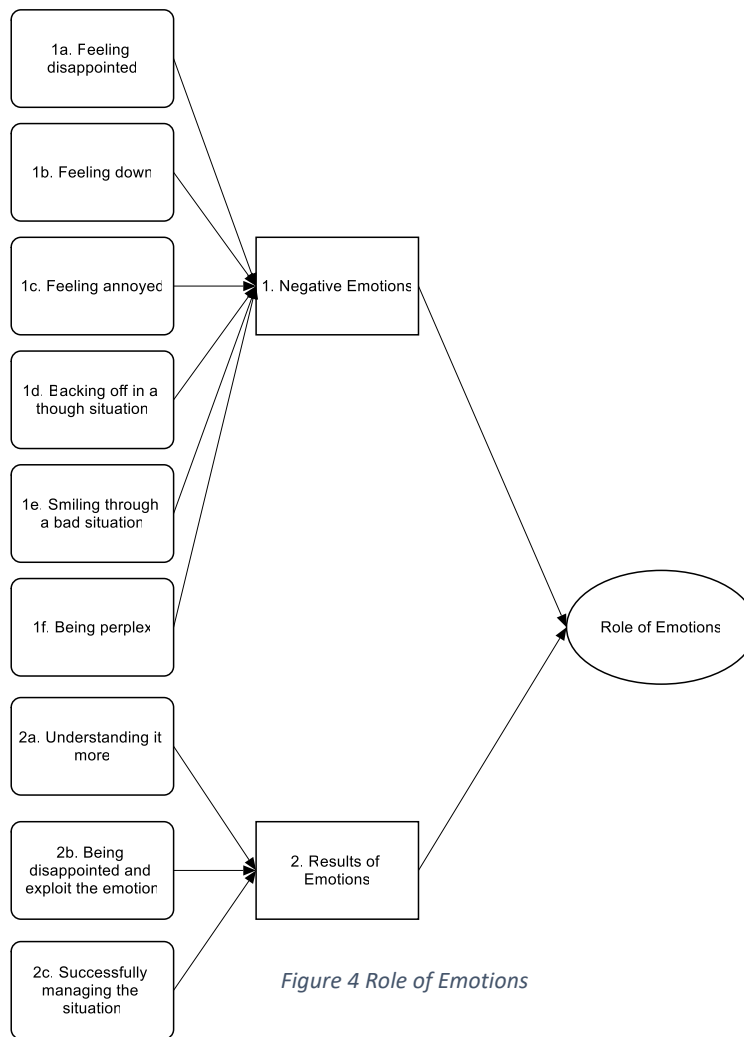


Figure 4 Role of Emotions

CS13: " Disappointed? [...] because I felt like I was also doing a good job and I was not even. Consider it or be given a fair chance for this opportunity. It was from one date on the other. "

E11: "Sometimes it just disappointed, I think because I really didn't understand why"

When they experienced a threat, they were most likely disappointed by the way how the opposite reacted when the threat was happening. Frustration was another common emotion reported, with participants expressing sentiments like

CS5: " Yes, already a little frustrated. Of course, so I mean. [...] I have a request and I would like to have that the person on the opposite accepts it somehow. "

CS1: " I don't want to say directly pejorative but I, I would say there is a lack of appreciation, yes the appreciation for what you do or even what you have learned."

It did indicate a sense of being undervalued or unrecognized. Especially this motion lined up with the coping response of quitting the current position in the company. The experience of feeling down was also mentioned, reflecting the emotional toll of navigating identity threats.

CS1: "However, now a huge time investment from my side was [...]. Yes, so during the moment a bit down"

E15: "it's quite mentally exhausting because. You're you're doing a 3 way translation. You'd listen to it and that's that. You translate to to English and then to your mother tongue and then back. [...] And in my thought process is is layered on top of a very technical discussion about a project or something. So I feel like I'm spending 2X more energy or 3X more energy than the other people."

Individuals described situations as tough and found themselves insanely annoyed by the situation and the threat, leading some of the interviewees to choose to back off to protect themselves.

E8: "Fundamentally unfair. [...] But I kind of don't expect anything else. Is it nothing that it surprises me [...]"

E11: "I just backed off"

E8: "I found it insanely annoying. Especially since the external service providers - not only the service provider who employed me, but also the other service providers who operated the test stands - did virtually all the work [...]. "

Due the different emotional responses, as described above triggered the ECPs to actively change/adapt their behaviour. However, participants also demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity, as indicated by the ironic smile and the feeling of happiness that followed challenges. Some individuals mentioned being initially perplexed but expressed gratitude for gaining a deeper understanding of the situation. Due to these emotional triggers, they started to understand that something does go wrong.

E16: "So I was used to it, I wasn't surprised, I smiled at it." [ironically]

E7: "first time I was actually a bit perplexed"

CS1: "Yes, but as I said a bit of understanding full, because of course it is not a classical economic experience"

CS13: "[...] I was disappointed. [...] talking with him about what he knows and doesn't know opened my eyes [...]"

CS14: "after the challenge it is happiness"

Especially the quote from CS13 illustrates, that being at first shocked/ disappointed then motivated the ECPs to actively do a step and talk with colleagues. Overall, these responses reflect the complex emotional landscape individuals navigate when confronted with identity threats, encompassing a range of feelings including disappointment, frustration, being

down, annoyance, perplexity, and ultimately finding strength, resilience, and happiness through understanding and overcoming challenging circumstances.

5. Discussion

The findings of this thesis provide interesting points on various facts which help to answer the research question. To remember the aim of this study is to explore how early-career professionals acquire and develop various coping mechanisms to recognize and address threats encountered in their work environment. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the most commonly utilized coping strategies employed by these individuals when confronted with challenging situations. By examining the coping mechanisms utilized by ECPs, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how individuals in the early stages of their careers navigate and cope with workplace threats. First, an interpretation will be made and then it will be connected to the findings from the theoretical framework and existing research. Then, presented practical implications, as well as limitations and further research.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

In the introduction of this paper, a look at different existing theories about ECPs, identity and identity threat were made. Based on the results new theoretical contributions can be made. The perception of threat is subjective and can vary in how individuals evaluate it. While the duration and intensity of identity threat may differ, it is generally considered harmful to psychological well-being (Jaspal, Lopes, & Wignall, 2020). Hence, everyone copes with threats differently.

The first theoretical contribution aims at understanding which types of threats ECPs experience. These findings are quite novel because most of the existing literature focuses on experienced professionals (Winkler, 2016). Secondly, a deeper look at the coping mechanisms will be made. Emotions will be also included as a surprising outcome.

5.1.1 Types of Identity threat experienced by ECPs

To fully understand how ECPs cope with threats, it is important to first understand which types of identity threats ECPs experience in their working place. The results pointed out that ECPs were exposed to various types of threats, namely information gap, communication, age gap and migration/gender. Research has shown that different kinds of threats do have a significant impact on well-being, sense of belonging and overall job satisfaction (Najafi et al., 2017; Hunger et al., 2015; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Most of the threats are somehow explained by other researchers, but none of them connect them to ECPs.

One often-mentioned identity threat identified in the interviews is the information gap between management and computer scientists/engineers. This threat arises due to distinct knowledge backgrounds between the management and employees which could lead to

difficulties in mutual understanding and divergent perspectives (Ma & Hmielowski, 2022). This gap can hinder effective communication, collaboration, and decision-making within the organization (Khalid, 2011). These facts do highlight the importance of bridging this gap through improved communication channels, knowledge sharing, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding. According to Khalid (2011), ineffective communication within an organization can result in unfavourable emotions, which will be discussed later. At the same time, ineffective communication can also trigger threatening environments, which can result in breakage between the employee and employer (Khalid, 2011).

Another notable identity threat is the age gap and its impact on ECPs' experiences in the workplace. Research has shown that the presence of an older generation which already established their work practices, and a younger generation with modern skills and approaches, can often lead to tension and a sense of being undervalued among the younger ECPs (Oliveira & Cabral-Cardoso, 2017; Jones et al., 2018). Here a collective threat according to Petriglieri's work (2011) is happening. The sense of belonging to the age group is being questioned. This highlights the need for exchange between both generations as well as collaboration, knowledge exchange, and creating opportunities for ECPs to contribute their unique perspectives and skills while respecting the wisdom and experience of older colleagues (Oliveira & Cabral-Cardoso, 2017; Jones et al., 2018).

According to Oliveira and Cabral-Cardoso (2017) viewing age diversity as a strength instead of a threat can safeguard one's self-perception from the negative impacts of age-related stereotypes. These stereotypes primarily affect how one's group is perceived. Hence, a workplace in which all generations are valued is important to foster productivity (Kapoor et al., 2011). Here, a connection to Petriglieri (2011) can be made. This type of threat can be connected to the important change of identity. Here, both generations should try to focus rather on other aspects of their identity than on their age and try to collaborate more effectively. Hence, the threat is being eliminated.

The demand for managers and employees who can thrive in multicultural environments is rising due to globalization. Although some of this demand arises from international contexts, the aging and diminishing population have also contributed to increased immigration (Orsini, 2020). The findings also reveal that cultural differences and heritage serve as identity threats for ECPs, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the prevailing culture, and difficulties in understanding cultural norms can hinder their integration and sense of belonging (Yang et al., 2013). The results did also highlight that instances of racism reported by participants highlight the need for creating inclusive and multicultural work environments where diversity is celebrated, and cultural differences are respected. Once again, this immigration threat can be connected to the different identity threat

types explained by Branscombe et al. (1999). On the one hand, there is the categorization threat. ECPs were categorized against their will. On the other hand, is the value of social identity. According to their background, they were negatively socially compared with other people from their country of origin.

Another threat which was quite present in the research was gender-related threats. Gender threats arise when one's identification with a specific gender is challenged and/or questioned their membership within that gender (Leavitt et al., 2022). Gender-based identity threats are also evident, with females experiencing challenges related to gender expectations and pregnancy. The pressure on women to balance professional and family life, coupled with intrusive questions and potential discrimination, can negatively impact their work experience and well-being. This highlights the need for gender equality, supportive policies for work-life balance, and addressing gender biases within the workplace. This can be connected to the types of threats explained by Petriglieri (2011). Here the collective identity threat does take place. Females do feel threatened by their sense of belonging to a larger group which is called into question. Once again, ECPs were categorized according to their being, against their will. Hence Branscombe et al. (1999) categorized identity threats that took place.

Overall, the findings suggest that identity threats faced by ECPs can significantly impact their job satisfaction, well-being, and professional growth (Najafi et al., 2017). To address these threats effectively, organizations should focus on fostering open communication (Khalid, 2011), bridging knowledge gaps, promoting intergenerational collaboration (Orsini, 2020), fostering inclusive and multicultural environments, and implementing policies that support work-life balance and gender equality.

Proposition 1: Open communication, bridging knowledge gaps, promoting intergenerational collaboration could foster inclusive and multicultural environments, and implement policies that support work-life balance and gender equality within companies.

Once again, these findings are only explained in more detail to understand the following sections better.

5.1.2 Development of coping mechanisms

Overall, the results of this study provide support for several aspects of the theoretical background. The interviews demonstrated the relevance of reflection, unconscious adaptation, relationships, experiential learning, incremental development, and staying updated as important factors in the development of coping mechanisms for young professionals. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence that supports and extends the theoretical framework of coping mechanisms for early-career professionals. The

findings point out the reflective and complex nature of coping strategy development, and the significance of relationships and learning, as well to develop continuously.

The literature highlights the importance of developing coping mechanisms to effectively cope with identity threats encountered by ECPs. According to Petriglieri's (2011) model, individuals can respond to such threats through different coping mechanisms, including either an identity-protection or an identity-restructuring response. In which the threat response outcomes either maintain the threat and /or eliminate the threat.

Considering the obtained results, it is evident that the development of coping mechanisms for ECPs is a complex and reflective process. Here the most used coping responses are reflection, unconscious adaptation, relationships, experiential learning, incremental development, and staying updated. In the next paragraphs, the results are analyzed in more detail.

The findings revealed that ECPs often engage in reflection, where they assess and make sense of challenging situations after the fact. This aligns with the theoretical emphasis on learning through reflection as a coping mechanism. This can be connected to the experiential learning cycle created by Kolb (McLeod, 2017). It states that an experience will lead to reflection on the observation, which will lead to concluding and learning from the experience, while the next step includes planning and trying out the newly learned, which will lead again to the experience (McLeod, 2017).

From the results, the reflection process is the most relevant step of the cycle. According to Wain (2017), reflection does involve learning through everyday experience. Reflection does involve thinking, mediating and/or pondering the event (John, 2009). In other words, "[...] active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends." (Dewey, 1933; p.9). According to our findings, recognizing mistakes or shortcomings and demonstrating adaptability were important elements indicating a willingness to improve and grow professionally.

Interestingly, our results also underlined the presence of some unconscious changes in people's coping mechanisms. This finding challenges the assumption in the theory that individuals are fully aware and deliberate in their coping strategy development (Algorani & Gupta, 2022). It suggests that coping mechanisms can also evolve unconsciously, influenced by various factors such as experience and external feedback. This is in line with Van Gaal, Lamme and Ridderinkhof's (2010) study in which the authors showed that even without conscious awareness, unconscious information can influence cognitive processes over some time. In their research, they even pointed out that conflict adaption is also quite present after

unconscious adaptation (Van Gaal et al., 2010). This illustrated that ECPs most likely will adapt their coping response after the identity threat. Especially, an adaption will be made, when the ECPs have enough time to learn from the threat.

The results of this thesis further highlighted the significance of relationships and social support in the development of coping mechanisms. The literature illustrates how ECPs often search for assistance from colleagues, collaborated as a team, participated in staff meetings, and formed cohesive groups to address and overcome threats (Ryff, 1989). Ryff (1989) explained that the well-being of a person increases if the individual has positive relations with others. Hence, it could be supposed that interpersonal relationships can make the threat easier to cope with. Therefore, this finding aligns with the idea of utilizing relationships as a coping mechanism (Algoranu & Gupta, 2022). Social support plays a crucial role in enhancing individuals' self-esteem and providing them with valuable assistance in mitigating stress (Long et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that according to our findings, not all interactions or advice from colleagues or non-work-related people such as relatives were effective in helping ECPs develop coping mechanisms. This indicates that the quality and suitability of the support network can impact the efficacy of coping strategies. Hence, through building relationships coping mechanisms are developed.

Moreover, the results revealed that learning during experiences and incremental development were prominent approaches to coping. ECPs mentioned the value of being pushed into challenging situations, where they had to learn and adapt on the spot. This finding supports previous research according to which learning during experiences can contribute to the development of coping mechanisms (Jaspal, Lopes, & Wignall, 2020). Similarly, when faced with threats to their identity, “[...] an individual experiencing threats to self-esteem will likely employ a variety of coping styles, although mainly those focusing on the self (such as denial), to restore appropriate levels of this identity principle [...]” (Jaspal, Lopes, & Wignall, 2020, p. 11). Additionally, the results highlight that ECPs emphasized the importance of starting with small steps and gradually progressing towards larger goals, as well as staying updated with industry advancements to achieve/ restore an appropriate level of identity principles. These findings align with the theory's concept of incremental development and the need for continuous learning and adaptation (Kraemmerand, Møller, & Boer, 2023).

Proposition 2: Coping mechanisms for early-career professionals are intricate and introspective processes. ECPs acquire coping skills for managing identity threats through reflection, unconscious adaptation, and the integration of experiential learning and external feedback.

5.1.3 Most utilized coping mechanisms

The results of the study revealed several coping mechanisms utilized by ECPs in response to identity threats. Communication emerged as a prominent coping strategy, according to the above-mentioned results. Emphasizing the importance of engaging in open discussions and seeking opinions from friends, family, colleagues, and supervisors. Directly addressing problems and engaging in effective communication with supervisors or seeking support from colleagues were identified as beneficial approaches, which is also stated by Wheelless et al. (1984). Taking a moment to calm down before engaging in conversations and verbally defending their positions and perspectives were also highlighted as effective strategies within the realm of communication. These findings align with existing literature highlighting the fact that job satisfaction can increase if there is effective communication within the organization (Wheelless et al., 1984; Usman, 2019). Satisfaction can also be increased by the leader-member exchange. Here, a meeting between the employer and employee will be held to try to solve as many problems as possible (Usman, 2019). In other words, the LMX is about the quality of the relationship between the leader and their followers or subordinates within an organization. It focuses on the unique and differentiated relationships that leaders form with each of their subordinates. LMX theory emphasizes that leaders develop distinct relationships with their followers, resulting in varying levels of trust, support, and communication (van Breukelen, Schyns & Le Blanc, 2006).

Education and knowledge were identified as invaluable resources for coping with identity threats. Participants recognized the empowering nature of self-directed learning and the importance of continuously expanding their skill set to navigate and mitigate the impact of threats. Learning new skills while working was seen as an effective strategy, enabling individuals to adapt and develop the necessary competencies, hence ECPs try to adapt to the changing conditions (Bathmaker, 2007). The ability to showcase mastery and advantage gained through continuous learning was associated with increased confidence and resilience in confronting identity threats. These findings support previous research that emphasizes the transformative role of education and knowledge to stay on track (Bathmaker, 2007). Of course, increasing knowledge can also result in identity formation, which means that meaning and identity can be constructed in social contexts (Bathmaker, 2007).

The importance of patience as a coping mechanism was evident in the interviews. Participants recognized the need for patience in dealing with identity threats and acknowledged its role in long-term progress. Being patient allowed them to navigate challenges more successfully and maintain an optimistic outlook for future success. According to Bartling et al. (2009), patience does provide better verbal skills. In some cases, waiting for the right time and allowing events to unfold naturally was seen as a successful approach to coping with threats (Kato, 2022). Reassessing coping involves exercising self-restraint and

refraining from taking immediate action to address a stressful relationship. It means intentionally delaying one's response to effectively manage the stressors within the relationship and patiently waiting for the right opportunity to address them through cognitive processes or behavioural adjustments (Kato, 2022; Cheng, Lau & Chan; 2014). These insights demonstrate a balanced approach to future progress, encompassing anticipation, patience, and the acceptance of waiting as part of the journey toward desired outcomes.

Participants also highlighted the coping strategy of ignoring or disregarding identity threats. By consciously choosing not to adhere to imposed rules or external opinions, individuals asserted their autonomy and prioritized their own beliefs and values (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Ignoring the threat or employing humour and positivity were mentioned as ways to minimize the impact and maintain a positive mindset. These strategies reflect individuals' efforts to shield themselves from the negative effects of identity threats and maintain their overall well-being and professional identity. This can be connected to Petriglieri (2011). The importance of identity was changed to protect oneself. Humour as a coping mechanism is already employed by school-age children (Dowling, 2002). According to Dowling (2002), humour can enable ECPs to view threatful situations from another perspective and reappraise it as less harmful /stressful events.

In cases where other coping mechanisms were ineffective, quitting the job emerged as a coping strategy. Participants mentioned that leaving the company became the primary course of action if the threat persisted. Quitting provided a way for individuals to regain a sense of autonomy, preserve their self-worth, and seek opportunities that align more closely with their desired professional identity. As well it erases negative stress and gives the ECPs the power of deciding themselves (Bateman, 2009), The possibility of leaving the company served as a safety net, allowing participants to prioritize their well-being and protect their professional identity (Bateman, 2009). In this case, identity exits do take place (Petriglieri, 2011). Being part of the companies is not as important, hence the identity as being part of company XYZ is being quit.

These findings align with existing literature on coping mechanisms and provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by ECPs in response to identity threats. The use of communication, education/knowledge acquisition, patience, ignoring threats, and quitting the job highlight the diverse approaches individuals take to cope with and manage identity threats. It is important to note that the effectiveness of these coping mechanisms may vary depending on the specific context and individual preferences.

Proposition 3: Communication has emerged as a prominent coping strategy, alongside other effective methods such as education, patience, deviance, and the decision to quit a job.

5.1.4 Emotional responses due to identity threat

The results of this work also pointed to the importance of emotions do shape coping mechanisms. Yet, the role of emotions seems to be rather neglected by research (Zeelenloerg & Pieters, 2013). Previous literature has shown that emotions such as anxiety (Dickerson, 2008; Tipples, 2011), discomfort, and uncertainty can arise when individuals experience identity threats (Tipples, 2011), which may impact their coping mechanisms (Andrade & Ariel, 2009). Thus, incorporating emotions into the theoretical model could provide new insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the coping process for ECPs.

It became evident that emotions played a at least dual role in the context of identity threats experienced by the participants. The theoretical model by Petriglieri (2011) assumed a rational decision-making process and did not explicitly consider the role of emotions in shaping coping mechanisms. But, during the interviews, it became clear, that while experiencing and also afterwards, ECPs do experience a huge variety of emotions.

Firstly, according to Nigina (2021), there are six types of emotions: anger, fear, disgust, surprise, joy, and sadness. Among these emotions, sadness and anger are typically associated with negative emotional states, while joy is more aligned with a positive emotional state (Nigina, 2021). However, within the context of identity threats, joy tends to emerge after the threat has been resolved. On the other hand, surprise can have both negative and positive connotations, but in the context of identity threats, it is predominantly viewed as a negative emotion (Noordewier & Breugelmans, 2013), given the threatening nature of the situation. These emotions serve as important cues for individuals to recognize and respond to the challenges that pose a risk to their professional identity. Hence, emotions can act as indicators or signals of potential threats to their professional identity.

Secondly, these emotions were experienced by participants as symptoms that prompted the need for change to address the identity threat. Negative emotions acted as catalysts for reflection and action (Kross, Ayduk & Mischel, 2005), compelling individuals to evaluate how they could navigate the threat and restore alignment with their professional identity. These emotions motivated them to seek solutions, whether by directly confronting the source of the threat, seeking support, or making changes in their work environment. However, in less threatening situations, emotions could be the sole response, resulting in the threat being ignored.

In summary, the emotions experienced by the participants played a significant role in signalling the presence of identity threats and served as a motivation to acknowledge and address these threats (Kross et al., 2005). This motivation led individuals to take necessary actions and make changes to protect and restore their professional identity. The participants often expressed feelings of disappointment, particularly when they felt they were not given a

fair chance or were undervalued. Frustration was also commonly reported, reflecting a sense of being unappreciated or unrecognized. These emotions were closely aligned with the coping response of considering leaving their current position in the company. Additionally, participants mentioned feeling down, indicating the emotional toll of navigating identity threats.

However, the interviews also revealed the participants' resilience in the face of adversity. Some interviewees described an ironic smile and feelings of happiness that emerged after facing challenges. They expressed initial perplexity but later expressed gratitude for gaining a deeper understanding of the situation. This resilience was evident in their ability to find strength and happiness through understanding and overcoming challenging circumstances. According to Howard (2006), emotions can help ECPs deal with challenges and threats. By setting new goals to learn new behaviour and draw on others for help. They stimulate interests, direct attention, signal the necessity for change, and motivate to take action (Howard, 2006).

Proposition 4: Negative emotions motivate ECPs to seek solutions, confront the source of threat as well as to seek support, and/or make changes in their working environment. Emotions act as indicators of identity threats and drive individuals to protect and restore their professional identity by taking necessary actions.

5.1.5 Research Model

Based on the findings discussed earlier a comprehensive model has been formulated to create the dynamics of coping with identity threats among ECPs. This model, visually represented in Figure 5, provides a detailed depiction of the sequential process that unfolds when an ECP encounters an identity threat.

The model underscores that the experience of an identity threat triggers a response within the ECP, which can be influenced by their emotional state. This emotional response plays a role in shaping the subsequent actions and coping strategies employed by the ECP. Here, a cognitive response may be triggered. After the first response, a behavioural response is triggered. The ECP will act in a certain way to cope efficiently with the threat. Between the cognitive and the behavioural response, emotions can once again influence the response. Over time, through reflection and learning from these situations, the ECP develops a diverse repertoire of coping mechanisms that enable them to effectively manage and mitigate identity threats.

As the ECP gains more experience and encounters additional identity threats in their career journey, they draw upon their accumulated knowledge, skills, and coping strategies to respond proactively and adaptively. This iterative process of encountering, reflecting, learning, and applying coping mechanisms contributes to the growth and enhancement of the ECP's

overall coping abilities. By leveraging their developed repertoire, ECPs are better equipped to confront future identity threats with resilience and confidence. Hence, in the model is a second line between identity threat and behavioural response. Experienced ECPs may use their knowledge and respond directly in a certain way to the threat, instead of having a cognitive response first.

In summary, this model provides a comprehensive framework that captures the interplay between identity threats, cognitive response, behavioural response, and the constant growth of coping abilities among ECPs. As well as the influence of emotions.

Key:

Green line: not experienced with Identity threat

Yellow Line: the threat is completed, if a new identity threat does take place

Blue Line: ECPs already developed a coping repertoire and can directly cope with the threat

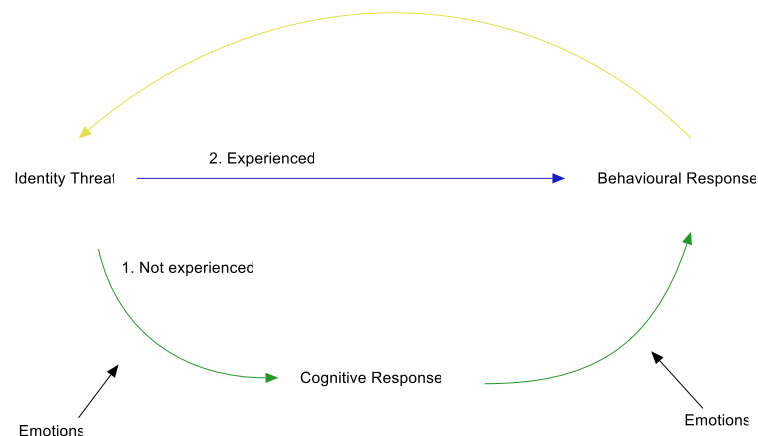


Figure 5 Research Model

5.2 Practical Implementations

There is a variety of practical implementations for young professionals as well as for their (potential) employers. On the one hand, this research could increase the awareness of identity threats that ECPs may encounter during their first job. Thus, it could be important to increase their understanding of what their first years of work entail in terms of challenges to their identity. Becoming aware of the difficulties they may face could facilitate a smoother transition into the workplace. On the other hand, these results could benefit companies and ECPs to cope better with identity threats. Here, the employer could try to implement different orientation programs or different workshops, which provide insights into the typical challenges, expectations and opportunities for ECPs at the workplace. This could also help to set realistic expectations of what the new workplace will look like. As well as offering guidance, to the organization. This could empower ECPs to navigate their early career experiences.

Secondly, the findings of this thesis could also promote identity threat awareness. This awareness could lead to a better set of coping skills for ECPs and companies. To develop the awareness of ECPs' they should increase their ability to recognize and manage identity threats. This could take place already at the University level, by following different courses. Such as a course about identity threats in the workplace. By giving the ECPs the chance to learn different coping strategies, such as stress management and emotional intelligence, the company could empower them to effectively address and navigate identity threats.

By developing different skill sets in stress management, ECPs can effectively recognize and manage the negative impact of identity threats on their well-being and professional identity. They can learn techniques to regulate their emotions, maintain a positive mindset, and cultivate resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, understanding emotional intelligence allows ECPs to enhance their self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills, enabling them to navigate conflicts, build supportive relationships, and seek appropriate support when facing identity threats. Overall, equipping ECPs with knowledge and strategies in stress management and emotional intelligence empowers them to navigate identity threats more effectively, protect their professional identity, and thrive in their early career journeys.

It is also possible that ECPs do feel lonely in their threatening situations. Especially, if they just moved to a new city for the job and do not have an established network yet. Hence, a supportive network could enhance them to better cope with identity threats. Bigger companies could facilitate the formation of peer support networks or mentorship programs, where ECPs can connect with more experienced professionals who can provide guidance, share experiences, and serve as role models. While smaller companies could create a network with other smaller companies from the same sector to help ECPs. Creating a sense of community and belonging can reassure ECPs that they are not alone (Carpiano & Hystad, 2010).

Lastly, recognizing the fact that identity threats can contribute to ECP's decisions to leave the company, employers should implement retention strategies specifically tailored to this group. These strategies may include mentorship programs, career advancement opportunities, tailored training and development programs, and regular check-ins to satisfy and address any concerns. As well as regular feedback sessions (at least twice a year) can help the ECP to understand that he/she is seen and understood as well as listened to. By actively supporting and investing in the professional growth and well-being of ECPs, employers can foster long-term commitment and loyalty.

Overall, practical implementation plays a crucial role in supporting ECPs in navigating identity threats and optimizing their early career experiences. By enhancing their understanding, promoting threat awareness, fostering support networks, and implementing retention strategies, organizations can create an inclusive and supportive environment that

empowers ECPs to thrive and contribute to their fullest potential. Employers have a responsibility to prioritize the well-being and development of their ECPs, recognizing that an investment in their success ultimately benefits both the individuals and the organization.

Proposition 6: Employers should offer orientation programs, workshops as well as guidance and support to the ECPs. This will lead to more effective coping with identity threats. These measures will create an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters ECPs' well-being, development, and long-term commitment to the organization.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, this study builds on voluntary participation and the researchers' network. Hence, only people living in Germany and the Netherlands were interviewed. Since it would have been interesting to also interview people outside of those two countries given that cultural influences could affect relational dynamics (Hofstede, 1984), further research should include at least one country with different cultural values based on the dimension that would have been valuable to research.

Secondly, another potential limitation could be the small sample size of 16 participants. Consequently, the generalization of the results is also limited (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This restraint can also be connected to the research method employed, namely interviews. In-depth interviews typically involve small samples, which limits the ability to utilize the random sampling method (Boyes & Neale, 2006). Yet, saturation was reached to address this limitation in future research, conducting a bigger number of interviews with both Germans and Dutch participants would help to ensure an ample amount of data analysis.

Thirdly, only three female interviewees were involved. This is not a surprising outcome. According to Mayer (2006), there is a huge gap between the percentage of females and males in the high-tech sector. Hence, the results are not as heterogeneous as they could be. 50% of each group, would ensure a higher level of heterogeneity. Hence, future research should aim for a more representative sample. If the sample lacks gender diversity or is overly focused on specific areas of expertise, it may hinder the generalizability of the results, limiting our understanding of the potential impact of expertise (Saunders et al., 2009; Visnevsky & Beanlands, 2004).

In the research model, the blue line illustrates that ECPs, and professionals in general, do already have a developed repertoire of coping strategies. But in this research, it did not become evident that there is an emotional response/influence. Hence, future research could investigate whether emotions influence the response or not.

Lastly, since only one person did code the outcome of the interviews, the perspective of the coder could have shaped the overall interpretations of the results. Although thorough

discussions were conducted with the first supervisor, future research should try to include at least two people who code the outcome to ensure, that no perspective is somehow influencing the outcome.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis examined how ECPs can cope with identity threats in their workplace and how they do create their repertoire of coping mechanisms. In a diversified range of coping responses, it seems that most of the repertoire is established through learning through reflection or unconscious adaption. These findings are consistent with the results of different studies. A novel contribution to the existing literature is the fact, that very few papers focus on ECPs and how they cope with types of identity threat. These findings also confirm that ECPs do experience a range of different threats and do learn fast how to cope with threats. The most dramatic step taken by ECPs to leave the company to protect their identity and leave the threatening situation behind. ECPs need also their surroundings to cope with such situations.

Another novelty is the fact that emotions due trigger different kinds of responses. Hence, the work of Petriglieri (2011) is an important base to study identity threats, but it should be taken into account that emotions can trigger some types of response. Additionally, companies also should try to help ECPs as much as possible and teach them how they could efficiently cope with threats. It should also be taken into consideration that as mentioned before the emotions of ECPs can influence their response. Hence, emotional awareness and emotional intelligence should be of high value in all companies.

To summarize. ECPs do experience various types of threats at their workplace. To efficiently cope with identity threats, they learn through reflection, relationships with others, unconscious adaption and incremental change how to cope with threats the best. After they employed different types of responses, they start to build their repertoire of coping mechanisms. Such as building groups with others, clear and open communication, patience and/or performing better. If these coping responses do not work, they will try to either ignore the threat or quit the job. All of those responses are also in some way connected with emotions. Either the response is triggered by the emotion or emotions help them to cope with the threat better.

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9. Appendix

Appendix A

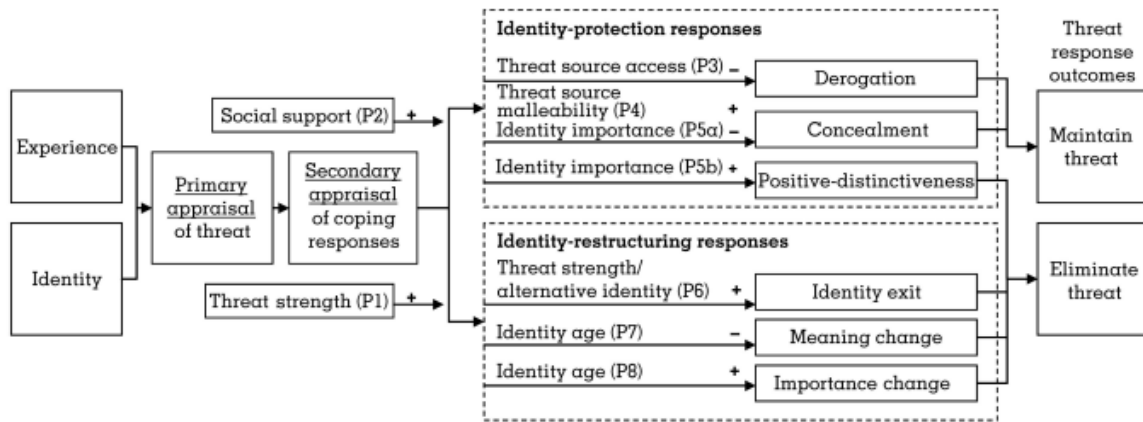


Figure 6 Theoretical Model of Identity Threat Process and Response (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 649)

Appendix B

Short Survey

1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality?
3. In which country are you currently working?
4. Which study did you follow as a student?
5. Which degree did you obtain?
6. When did you obtain your degree?
7. How many years are you already been in your profession?

Interview questions in English

Introduction Questions	Key-Questions	Probing Questions (collaborating with the Key-Question)
1. What inspired you to pursue this particular field of study?	1. What are the personal challenges that you experience at work?	- How did you respond? - Who did you rely on, to overcome such challenges?
2. In your eyes as a student would you give me a few characteristic qualities of what you would consider to be a typical xxx? (skills, identity traits) - How was your identity shaped during your study?	2. What did you feel during this challenge?	- Were the emotions either helpful or harmful within the situation? Please explain in more detail.

<p>3. Have your attitudes changed over time since working in the field?</p>	<p>3. How did you handle the situation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why did you choose this strategy? - What did you do? - How did you deal with it?
<p>4. Which position do you have currently at the company?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the qualities of being an xx? 	<p>4. How did your identity change after the threat?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did you change anything in your behaviour? - What did you think now; of what a good software developer is changed?
<p>5. How does your daily work routine look like?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think the tasks are appropriate to your degree? - What would you like to change? And why? 	<p>5. In case you will experience an ID threat once again, how will you cope with such situations?</p> <p>OR</p> <p>If something similar happens again, how would you face that?</p>	
	<p>6. Please, recall an event, in which you felt you were challenged. Or you thought you were challenged?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you do?
	<p>7. What would you have done differently, when looking back now at the IDT?</p> <p>OR</p> <p>If it would happen again, what would you change? what would you have done differently</p> <p>How would you arrive at doing this...?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you had to change something, what would it be? - What made you decide to ...(example: refuse) etc.? - What would you have done differently? - What about feelings? Do you think they will play a different role when it comes to ID threats?
	<p>In case the participant cannot recall any situation:</p>	

	Do you have a colleague who may experience such a difficult situation?	
Finishing Questions		
1. Do you want to add something, about what you think I missed?	2. Do you have any general advice or tips for me as I work on my master's thesis?	3. Is there anyone else you would recommend I speak with to gain further insight or perspectives on this topic?

Short Survey in German

1. Wie alt sind Sie?
2. Welche Nationalität haben Sie?
3. In welchem Land arbeiten Sie derzeit?
4. Welchen Studiengang haben Sie als Student absolviert?
5. Welchen Abschluss haben Sie erworben?
6. Wann haben Sie Ihren Abschluss gemacht?
7. Wie viele Jahre sind Sie bereits in Ihrem Beruf tätig?

Interview questions in German

Einführungsfragen	Schlüssel-Fragen	Sondierungsfragen (in Zusammenarbeit mit der Schlüsselfrage)
1. Was hat Sie dazu inspiriert, dieses spezielle Studienfach zu wählen?	1. Was sind die persönlichen Herausforderungen, die Sie bei der Arbeit erleben? - im Bezug auf Identitätsbedrohung	- Wie haben Sie reagiert? - Auf wen haben Sie sich verlassen, um solche Herausforderungen zu meistern?
2. Würden Sie mir ein paar charakteristische Eigenschaften nennen, die in Ihren Augen einen typischen xxx ausmachen (Fähigkeiten, Identitätsmerkmale)? - Wie wurde Ihre Identität während Ihres Studiums geprägt?	2. Was haben Sie während dieser Herausforderung gefühlt?	- Waren die Emotionen in der Situation entweder hilfreich oder schädlich? Bitte erläutern Sie dies genauer.
3. Haben sich Ihre Einstellungen im Laufe der Zeit verändert, seit Sie in diesem Bereich arbeiten?	3. Wie haben Sie die Situation gemeistert?	- Warum haben Sie sich für diese Strategie entschieden? - Was haben Sie getan? - Wie sind Sie damit umgegangen?

	Wieso haben Sie sich für diese Lösung entschieden	
4. Welche Position haben Sie derzeit im Unternehmen inne? - Was sind die Qualitäten eines xx?	4. Wie hat sich Ihre Identität nach der Bedrohung verändert?	- Haben Sie etwas an Ihrem Verhalten geändert? - Wie hat sich Ihre Meinung darüber, was ein guter Softwareentwickler ist, verändert?
5. Wie sieht Ihr Arbeitsalltag aus? - Sind Sie der Meinung, dass die Aufgaben Ihrem Abschluss angemessen sind? - Was würden Sie gerne ändern? Und warum?	5. Falls Sie noch einmal eine Identitätsbedrohung erleben sollten, wie werden Sie mit solchen Situationen umgehen? ODER Wenn etwas Ähnliches noch einmal passieren sollte, wie würden Sie damit umgehen? ODER Können Sie sich an einen persönlichen Kampf, ein Dilemma erinnern, das Sie bei der Arbeit erlebt haben?	
	6. Erinnern Sie sich bitte an ein Ereignis, bei dem Sie sich herausgefordert fühlten? Oder bei dem Sie dachten, dass Sie herausgefordert wurden?	- Was haben Sie gemacht?
	7. Was hätten Sie anders gemacht, wenn Sie jetzt auf die Identitätsbedrohung zurückblicken? ODER Wenn es noch einmal passieren würde, was würdest du ändern? was hättest du anders gemacht?	- Wenn Sie etwas ändern müssten, was wäre das? - Was hat Sie dazu bewogen, ...(Beispiel: ablehnen) usw.? - Was hättest du anders gemacht? - Was ist mit Gefühlen? Glauben Sie, dass sie eine

	Wie würden Sie das anstellen...?	andere Rolle spielen, wenn es um ID-Bedrohungen geht?
	Für den Fall, dass sich der Teilnehmer an keine Situation erinnern kann: Haben Sie einen Kollegen, der eine solche schwierige Situation erlebt hat?	
Fragen zum Abschluss		
1. Möchten Sie etwas hinzufügen, was ich Ihrer Meinung nach übersehen habe?	2. Haben Sie irgendwelche allgemeinen Ratschläge oder Tipps für mich, wenn ich an meiner Masterarbeit arbeite?	3. Gibt es noch jemanden, den Sie mir empfehlen würden, um weitere Erkenntnisse oder Perspektiven zu diesem Thema zu gewinnen?

Appendix C

Table 2 Codes including Quotations

Quotation	1st Order Code	2nd Order Code	Aggregated Dimension
E11: "he said you're a young dog like you are, have super much energy and you want to go for it"	Having not enough experience	Age as a Threat	Types of Threats to the Identity Experienced by ECPs
CS13: "[...] reasons that he had more experience"			
CS6: "We have a very high age average in the company"			
E8: "I often think the problem is [...] age."	Generation conflicting with each other		
E9: "was discriminated against because of my place of birth"	Culture discrimination	Migration as a Threat	
E2: "Not everyone has to become an engineer"			
E15: "language was a huge barrier at the beginning"			
E7: "The question of when the babies would come came up all the time. [...] it was every week"	Becoming a mom	Threat based on gender/Gender identity	
E8: "My experience with my current employer has actually been consistently positive"	Positive experiences, concerning babies		
E11: "mainly afterwards that I saw what went wrong instead of in the moment itself"	Looking back at the experience	Conscious adaptation/learning	Development of coping mechanisms
E8: "I look back and I was like, ah, there. I made a super big mistake"			

E12: "directly fill in the whole position [...] with the requirements"	Forced to fill the position				
E8: "when it's only small changes at first [...] compared to a big deal"	Step by step adapting to the situation				
E8: "small steps along the way"					
E11: "I don't think I actively changed anything"	Inactive change of behaviour	Unconscious adaption/learning			
CS9: "perhaps I have become a bit more outgoing"	Becoming more outgoing				
CS6: "but a colleague has always nudged him a bit and supported him."	Receiving help from colleagues	Using Relationships			
E8: "I then make sure that I always [find] a solution together with my colleague."	Finding a solution with other colleagues				
E3: "approaching me about a staff meeting"					
CS1: "really try to work together, so that now, for example, in the field of information technology, we do screen sharing and work together on something."	Working in a team				
CS5: "can occur as a mass"					
E3: "I also have former fellow students, or family and relatives, with whom one occasionally exchanges information."	Communication outside work with relatives and friends				
CS14: "you locally get forced to ask for help"	Being forced to ask for help	Incremental Development			
E9: "through this experience I have become smarter"	Experience increases self-awareness				
E12: " That I just stay on the ravages of time"	Staying up-to-date with new technology				
CS5: "a few things once addressed"	Learning to talk about it	Communication upon experience	Utilized coping mechanism		
CS6: "At some point, I learned to talk about it and communicate it"					
E3: "I went directly to my supervisor [and said]"	Communication with the supervisor				
E9: "With the current employer, I would actively seek communication"					
CS13: "after the emotions were settled, we were talking about it"	Calming down and then talk				
CS14: "discussion with my colleagues"	Talk with colleagues				
CS1: "Exchange [information] with the one"					
E11: "I asked him [...] what do you think?"					
E7: "you just show that you can give counters"	Verbally defending own position				

E12: "there will be teasing remark"			
E12: "That's what I taught myself and learned"	Self-taught	Learning from the experience	
CS6: "then you have to learn very quickly"			
CS1: " learn a special programming language"	Learning new skills while working		
E15: "you also learn at the same time"			
E16: "so far I have made the most use of being head monopoly"	Knowing more than others		
CS13: "I was knowledgeable, I came up with new ideas"			
E8: "I didn't follow it"	Not following rules	Deviance	
E2: "ignore the other opinions"	Ignoring other opinions		
E7: "I would have smiled it off"	Smiling uncomfortable situations away		
E15: "But in the near future, it's already working"	Being prepared for the future	Patience	
CS13: "had to slow down and be more patient"	Slowing down the pace		
E3: "I am now also waiting"	Waiting for it to happen		
E9: "Pretty direct and consistent. I parted company very quickly"	Leaving the company as an option	Quitting the job	
CS10: "then I left the company"			
CS5: "Alternative is to quit"			
E3: "then I would leave"			
E4: "Everyone is replaceable, and everyone is a number"	Being replaceable and being a number		
E11: "Sometimes it just disappointed"	Feeling disappointed	Negative Emotions	Emotional Responses due to Identity Threat
CS13: "felt pretty disappointing to me"			
CS5: "it was frustrating"	Feeling frustration		
CS1: "not valued at all"			
CS1: "in the moment down a bit"	Feeling down		
E15: "it's quite mentally exhausting"			
E8: "I found it insanely annoying"	Feeling annoyed		
E8: "that was tough"			
E11: "I just backed off"	Backing off in a situation		
E16: "I smiled at it" (ironically)	Smiling through a bad situation		
E7: "first time I was actually a bit perplexed"	Being perplexed		
E1: "it opened my eyes and I was glad that I understood it more"	Understanding more	Result of Emotion	

CS13: "[...] I was disappointed. [...] talking with him about what he knows and doesn't know opened my eyes [...]"	Being disappointed and exploiting the emotion		
CS14: "after the challenge it is happiness"	Successfully managing the situation		