
**Organizational Identity Implications of Cross-Sector Partnerships:
A Nonprofit Perspective**

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M.Sc., India Jana Kandel
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Referent: Prof. Dr. Erk P. Piening
Koreferentin: Prof. Dr. Christina Hoon
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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations frequently cooperate with profit-oriented businesses in order to fulfil their goals and mission. Although collaborative activities such as nonprofit-business partnerships can benefit both non- and for-profit organizations, they are also a potential source of inter- and intra-organizational controversy, conflict, and even disruption when social objectives clash with business interests. Taking on the perspective of nonprofit organizations and their members, this tripartite dissertation investigates one particular risk associated with nonprofit-business partnerships: organizational identity threats (i.e., experiences that call into question members' perceptions of their organization's identity).

Building on and connecting research on inter-organizational collaboration, nonprofit organizations, and organizational identity, this dissertation first develops a conceptual model that outlines the conditions under which nonprofit-business partnerships may arise as organizational identity threats. Second, a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews explores nonprofit members' sensemaking and organizational identity threat appraisal processes in the context of nonprofit-business partnerships. Third, a subsequent qualitative study investigates how nonprofit members manage potential identity-related tensions arising from these partnerships through identity work. Taken together, this dissertation provides insights into how members of nonprofit-organizations perceive, evaluate, and manage potential identity threats in cross-sector partnerships with corporate actors.

Keywords: Nonprofit organizations, cross-sector partnerships, organizational identity threats.

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Introduction

Organizational identity (e.g., “who we are as an organization”) matters to individuals as it provides guidance and meaning in today’s ever more fragmented organizational landscape (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). While personal identity strives to provide answers to the question of “who am I?”, organizational identity addresses this question on a collective level, e.g., “who are we?” (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). By extension, organizational identity does not only indicate individual’s understanding of their organization but also provides guidance for action suggesting “where the organization intends to go” within its specific social context (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000). In answering these questions, social identities reduce uncertainty by creating a systematic order of one’s social environment and determining one’s individual and collective position within it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As such, organizational identity is the result of an inherently social process, which is why adequately assessing and studying organizational identity requires considering not only the focal entity but also the organization’s networks and environment (e.g., Jones & Volpe, 2011).

Traditionally, organizational identity has been defined as the aspects of an organization’s character that are central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert & Whetten, 1985). However, one of these defining features has been the center of considerable and ongoing criticism, that is, organizational identity as static and enduring over time (for a review see Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton & Corley, 2013). This stream of research conceptualizes organizational identity as being in constant flux and shifting through diverse influences from both inside and outside the organization (Jones & Volpe, 2011). Consequently, an increasing amount of scholarly work has been devoted to identifying and assessing influences on organizational identity formation and change (Gioia et al., 2013; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). Previous research has highlighted organizational image (e.g., Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000), image and culture (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2002), external stakeholders and networks (e.g., Brickson, 2005; Scott &

Lane, 2000), and inter-organizational partnerships (Cornwell, Howard-Grenville & Hampel, 2018) as factors that may trigger changes in organizational identity. With respect to the latter, it has been argued that other organizations in an organization's network may influence, shape and even change organizational identity in multiple ways. First, since organizational identity is based on processes of social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1982), partnering or competing organizations may serve as a point of reference and target of social comparison in terms of status and prestige (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Specifically, organizational members may compare their own organization with others in their field to gain an understanding of where their organization stands in relation to other, similar organizations. In addition, an organization's relationships to others in their network can also serve as an important marker of organizational identity in terms of "how do we relate to others" (e.g., organizational identity orientation; Brickson, 2005, 2013).

As indicated above, previous research suggests that the way in which an organization engages with others has the potential to affect both organizational identity and identification through mechanisms of social comparison (Gioia et al., 2000). Thereby, it has been proposed that inter-organizational partnerships play an important role in these organizational identity processes as by partnering with another organization, a focal organization links itself to their partner, which may accentuate, suppress, and possibly even substantially change aspects of its organizational self, i.e., organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018). This notion is supported by research that shows that the structure and strength of relationships with others play a key role for actively shaping organizational identity and identification (Jones & Volpe, 2011). Along these lines it has also been proposed that, in comparison to vertical inter-organizational partnerships, identity dynamics in horizontal partnerships follow peculiar patterns. First, the identity of an external partner may substantially differ from those of the focal organization. Second, organizations are likely to have very limited or at least much less control over actions

and behaviors of their horizontal rather than vertical partners (Cornwell et al., 2018), which may cause concerns of losing the ability to control one's image and identity. This may pose a challenge for organizations in the light of potential negative spillovers from partnering organizations, for instance, in the case of scandals (Galloway, Miller & Liu, 2023). Taken together, these findings stress that horizontal, inter-organizational partnerships constitute a distinct form of inter-organizational interaction which have high potential for shaping organizational identity processes (Cornwell et al., 2018). Regarding these processes, similarity and dissimilarity between partnering organizations can be expected to play an important role.

Previous research has suggested that inter-organizational partnerships between dissimilar organizations may lead organizational members to reevaluate both their organization's identity as well as the value of their organizational membership (Cornwell et al., 2018). By blurring organizational boundaries, partnerships between organizations with diverging rather than similar logics may create confusion amongst members of either or both organizations, e.g., regarding what their organization stands for and the direction in which their organization is heading (Reissner, 2019). This may be particularly pronounced in partnerships between organizations with not only diverging but also competing organizational logics such as public, for- and nonprofit organizations (e.g., cross-sector partnerships; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Generally speaking, cross-sector partnerships can be defined as cross-sector projects that are formed explicitly to address social issues (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Despite this seemingly common focus, cross-sector partnerships are far from uniform and vary considerably in size, scope and structure (e.g., Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, & Herremans, 2010; for an overview of different types and typologies of different cross-sector partnerships see Appendix 1), which may have very different implications for organizational identity. Prior work on cross-sector partnerships has placed particular emphasis on partnerships between nonprofit and governmental organizations (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Gazley &

Brudney, 2007). Fewer studies focus on nonprofit-for-profit partnerships or include all three sectors in their analysis (for an overview see Gazley and Guo, 2020). To address this gap, as well as for various theoretical reasons I outline below, this dissertation project focusses on nonprofit-business partnerships.

From a corporate perspective, management research attests mostly positive effects of nonprofit collaborations for businesses. Nonprofit-business partnerships were found to enhance company image or status, financial performance, employee satisfaction (Wang, Choi & Li, 2008; Wang & Qian, 2011; Kim, Kim & Qian, 2018) and potentially provide a shield for businesses against activists and activist campaigns (McDonnell, 2016; Odziemkowska, 2022)¹. Studies adopting the perspective of nonprofit organizations have been more critical, highlighting issues such as power imbalances (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; O'Brien & Evans, 2017) as well as tensions and conflicts in these types of partnerships (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Markman, Waldron & Panagopoulos, 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Young, 2000). As indicted by the latter, relationships and interactions between nonprofit organizations and other sectors, are not always collaborative or even harmonious but often characterized by tensions and even rivalry (De Bakker, Den Hond, King & Weber, 2013; Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). These rivalries are generally motivated by value differences, as businesses and non-profits seek to gain control over certain practices (such as labor and/or environmental standards) and supremacy in values domains (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; also see values-based rivalries; Waldron, Navis, Aronson, York, Pacheco, 2019). Notably, these rivalries may still persevere in situations of collaboration. Farrington, Bebbington, Lewis and Wellard (1993) observed that even when nonprofit organizations engage in collaborative partnerships with other types of

¹ Notably, relationships between nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses or the state are often antagonistic rather than collaborative with nonprofit organizations specifically targeting these organizations to undermine their legitimacy, challenge their status, or reduce their profitability (Yaziji & Doh, 2009; Young, 2000). While this dissertation focuses on collaborative engagements, it is important to recognize the multidimensionality of cross-sector engagements for an adequate analysis of cross-sector relationships.

organizations, they may still maintain a confrontational rhetoric over fear of identity loss. This suggests that part of a nonprofit's identity may actually be based on opposing rather than collaborating with other sectors, meaning that partnering up with businesses or institutions could lead to identity conflicts and identity loss. Consequently, nonprofit members may perceive nonprofit-business partnerships as identity threats, i.e., "experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity" (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). Indeed, nonprofit-business partnerships can become sources of inter-organizational controversy, conflict, and disruption when profit motives clash with social interests (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; O'Brien & Evans, 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005). In terms of organizational identity, this can lead to these partnerships being perceived as identity threats when they threaten nonprofit core values and identity traits (Herlin, 2015).

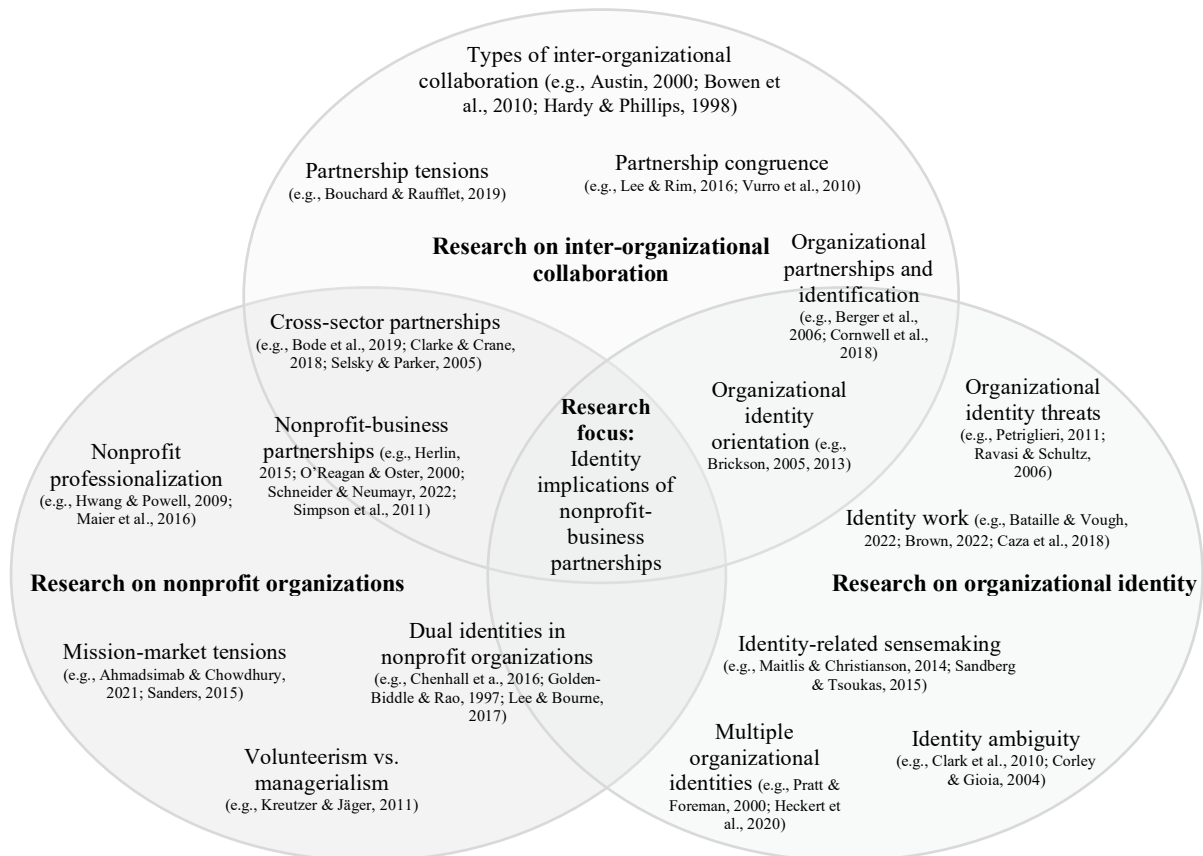
Based on the above as well as prior research and theorizing on nonprofit-business partnerships and nonprofit organizations, it can be argued that nonprofit organizations are likely to experience several context-specific identity dynamics in cross-sector partnerships that warrant special attention. Outlining these influencing factors not only aids in better understanding nonprofit-business partnerships, but also illustrates the potential of the research context for gaining a better understanding of identity implications of inter-organizational partnerships. In the context of nonprofit-business partnership, factors shaping organizational identity dynamics include diverging values, goals and approaches between the partners (Young, 2000; Selsky & Parker, 2005), as well as differences in member motivation and identification (Tidwell, 2005; Kelemen et al., 2017), all of which may heighten identity-related tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships. First, nonprofit-business partnerships differ from for-profit partnerships with respect to their social-issue focus as well as their more intangible, non-performance outcomes (Simpson, Lefroy & Tsarenko, 2011). Further, although congruence or fit between partnering organizations has been identified as an important

prerequisite for inter-organizational identification (Cornwell et al., 2018), partners in cross-sector collaborations rarely ever converge in values, goals, and approaches (Young, 2000; Selsky & Parker, 2005), bringing issues of organizational alignment to the forefront. Studying the dynamics between nonprofit and for-profit partners can thus help to gain a better understanding of the areas in which alignment is crucial and provide a contextualized perspective on how organizational dissimilarities affect identification processes.

In addition, nonprofit organizations differ from other types of organizations with respect to factors that influence how members evaluate and respond to social identity threats. Factors that shape these processes include a heightened importance of the collective identity to one's self-concept (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011) and the permeability of group boundaries (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish & Hodge, 1996; Bettencourt, Charlton, Dorr & Hume, 2001). Hereby, the importance of the collective, i.e., organizational, identity to one's self-concept can be expected to be particularly pronounced amongst nonprofit members (e.g., Kelemen, Mangan & Moffat, 2017; Lee & Wilkins, 2011), potentially also increasing their awareness of and sensitivity towards issues of organizational identity threats (Eury, Kreiner, Treviño, & Gioia, 2018). Previous studies have highlighted that the sense of belonging, attachment and resonance with the organization that comes with organizational identity (Ashforth et al., 2008), are key to satisfying volunteer relatedness needs, enhance volunteer satisfaction, and ultimately volunteer intention to stay (Tidwell, 2005; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009). On the other hand, identity ambiguity, tensions, and threats may lead to negative outcomes such as disidentification and member turnover (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020). Given a higher permeability of group boundaries in nonprofit organizations, member turnover is likely to be a negative result of identity threats in nonprofit organizations as many nonprofits do not have contractual ways of preventing members from leaving, making it easier for members to disassociate from the organization in case of perceived identity threats (Tidwell, 2005). Taken

together, this may amplify member perceptions of and responses to partnership-induced identity threats, which allows for drawing out identity-related implications of inter-organizational partnerships in this research context.

Building on current research and theorizing on organizational identity, in this dissertation, I study implications of inter-organizational partnerships for nonprofit member perceptions of organizational identity, and particular, organizational identity threats. Using this research context is empirically and theoretically justified as it provides various opportunities for gaining a better understanding of organizational identity implications of inter-organizational collaboration between dissimilar organizational actors. Specifically, as member perceptions of and reactions to organizational identity threats are likely to vary between organizations, e.g., nonprofit and for-profit organizations, research identifying and analyzing contextual factors that can aid in explaining these differences can provide valuable insights into inter-organizational identity processes. In doing so, this dissertation draws on and adds to research on organizational identity, inter-organizational collaboration, and nonprofit organizations. An overview of the three research fields is shown in Figure 1. Each field is represented by one of the three intersecting circles. Central concepts and works this dissertation draws on are depicted within these three intersecting circles. Interconnections between the research fields are illustrated by the overlapping areas. Since the research focus of this dissertation is located at the intersection of the three research fields, it is shown in the center of Figure 1.

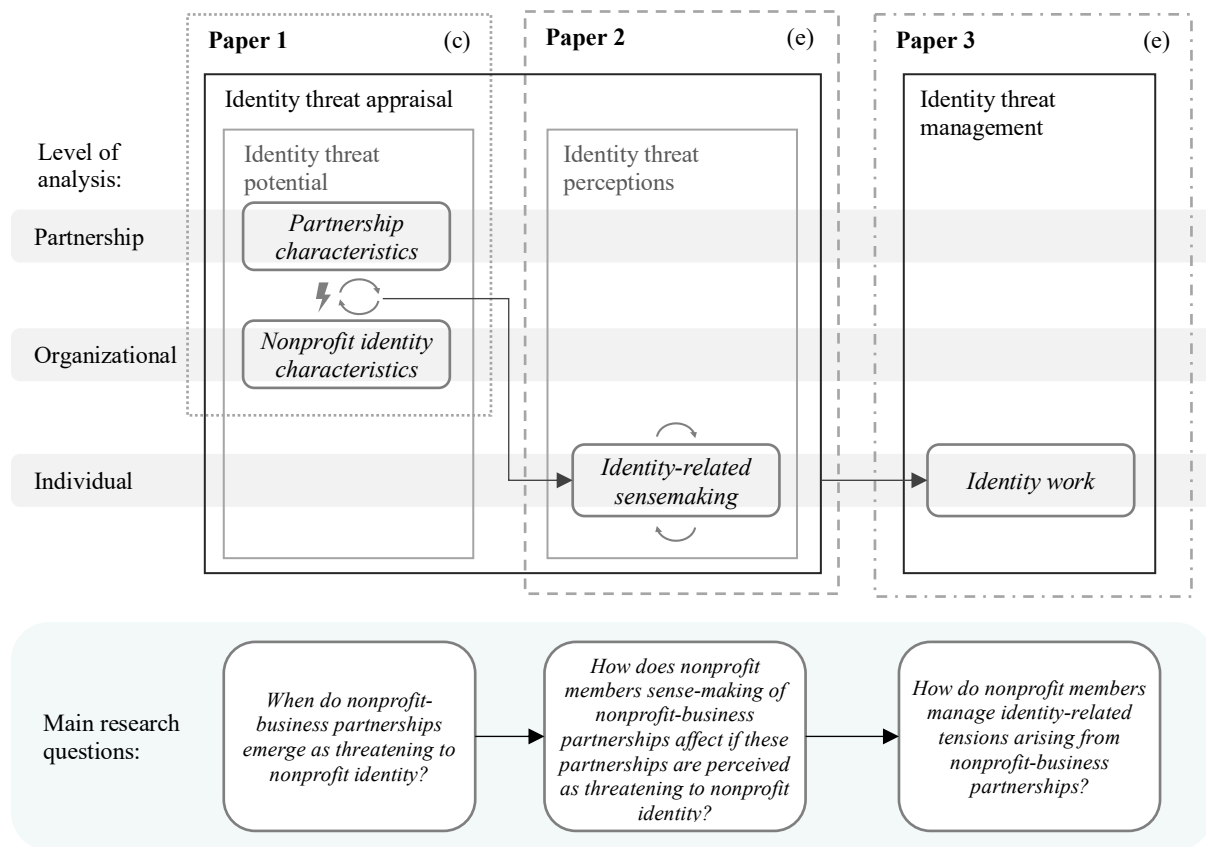
Figure 1. Research Fields and Research Focus

While this dissertation can be regarded as one research project, it is comprised of three papers that seek to provide insights into how members of nonprofit-organizations assess, evaluate, and manage identity implications of partnerships with corporate actors. Specifically, I studied the conditions under which nonprofit members may or may not perceive nonprofit-business partnerships as threatening to their organization's identity (Paper 1 and 2) and how they manage potential identity-related tensions arising from these partnerships (Paper 3)². Figure 2 provides an overview of the three papers in terms of central concepts and main research questions. As illustrated in Figure 2, Paper 1 is mainly focused on the partnership and organizational level, whereas Paper 2 and 3 center individual level perspectives. Notably, all

² Although my dissertation work is single authored, I use the plural 'we' to describe the three studies and in the text of my three studies to highlight the valuable feedback of my advisor Erk P. Piening and Alina McCandless Baluch, who have helped me to improve Paper 1 and Paper 3 for submission at international conferences and who have been working with me during the peer review process of Paper 2.

three levels of analysis are considered throughout the three papers, as they are interdependent and interrelated. In terms of research focus, Paper 1 and Paper 2 focused on identity threat appraisal processed in terms of congruence and relevance evaluations. Specifically, Paper 1 provides an overview of partnership and nonprofit identity characteristics that shape if a certain partnership may emerge as threatening to nonprofit identity, whereas Paper 2 is concerned with individual sense-making processes within this context. Further, Paper 1 and 2 studied how nonprofit-business partnerships emerge as threatening to nonprofit identity, i.e., experiences and appraisals of identity threats, while Paper 3 examined how members manage potential threats arising from these partnerships, i.e., identity threat responses (also see Petriglieri, 2011) through identity work. Below, I briefly summarize each paper.

Figure 2. Foci of and Interrelations between Research Papers



Key: ⚡ = Identity threat / ↻ = congruence/relevance evaluations
 c = conceptual work / e = empirical study (qualitative)

To begin with, Paper 1 provides a conceptual framework for assessing the identity threat potential of nonprofit-business partnerships from the perspective of nonprofit members. Based on previous research and theorizing on inter-organizational relations and organizational identity (e.g., Brickson, 2013; Cornwell et al., 2018), organizational identity threats (e.g., Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and nonprofit-business partnerships (e.g., Austin, 2000; Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Selsky & Parker, 2005) we identified three *partnership characteristics* (i.e., *value fit*, *level of integration between the partnering organizations*, and *power imbalances*) and three *nonprofit identity characteristics* (i.e., *identity orientation*, *identity domain*, and *prevalent member identity*) as important factors that shape the identity threat potential of nonprofit-business partnerships from a nonprofit perspective. Specifically, we showed how these factors influence member evaluations of partnership congruence and relevance and in turn, the identity threat potential of these partnerships. In doing so, we provided a contextualized perspective on organizational identity threats that can aid in refining current understanding of the complex phenomenon of organizational identity threats.

Although organizational identity is a collective construct, identity perceptions and sense-making occur at the individual level (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Hence, departing from Paper 1, which assessed the identity threat potential of nonprofit-partnerships based on influencing factors on the organizational and partnership level, Paper 2 examined how individual nonprofit members make sense of nonprofit-business partnerships and how these individual appraisal processes shape if they perceive these partnerships as threatening to organizational identity. Paper 2 employed a qualitative study that built on prior conceptual work on the importance of congruence and relevance assessments in member evaluations of inter-organizational partnerships (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2018). In order to dive deeper into members' understanding of nonprofit-business partnerships we conducted 21 semi-

structured interviews with members of 15 different nonprofit organizations. Our interview data supported that nonprofit members' evaluations of partnership *congruence* (i.e., fit with members' organizational identity expectations) and *relevance* (i.e., prominence in members' perceptions of their organization's identity) indeed do shape member perceptions of organizational identity threats arising from nonprofit-business partnerships. As a second step, we zoomed into these appraisal processes and identified *organizational*, *project*, and *personal congruence* as relevant sub-dimensions of partnership *congruence*, and *public*, *organizational*, and *personal involvement* as important sub-dimensions underlying the appraisal of partnership *relevance*. Gaining a better understanding of member's identity threat appraisal processes and thus learning when partnerships arise as threatening to organizational identity in the minds of nonprofit members also allowed us to identify conditions under which this may not be the case. Specifically, this allowed us to theorize on when nonprofit-business partnerships could be perceived as identity affirming, rather than identity threatening.

While Paper 1 and Paper 2 granted insights into when nonprofit-business partnerships may arise and be perceived as threatening to nonprofit identity, the interviews from Paper 2 also suggested that nonprofit members engage in identity work to mitigate potential negative effects of organizational identity threats. Therefore, Paper 3 examined how members of nonprofit organizations manage identity-related tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships through identity work (e.g., Bataille & Vough, 2022; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Drawing on 31 semi-structured interviews with members from two nonprofit organizations operating in the environmental sector³, we first highlighted identity-related tensions arising from corporate partnerships (*operational*, *ideological*, and *reputational tensions*) and then identified four identity work tactics (e.g., *demarcation*, *reconciliation*,

³ As the interviews from Paper 2 served as the starting point for our inquiry into nonprofit member identity work in nonprofit business partnerships, there is a slight data overlap between the three studies. Three of the interviews from Paper 2 were also utilized in Paper 3, as they comprise three of the 22 interviews from our first case study.

affirmation and *retraction*) that nonprofit members engage in to alleviate these tensions. We further outlined how the identity work frames of *organizational identity orientation*, *partnership salience*, and *member role identity* influence the ways in which nonprofit members apply these identity work tactics. Finally, our findings indicated that member's application of the four identity work tactics follows certain temporal structures, thus adding to and refining prior research on time and temporality in identity work (e.g., Brown, 2015; Brown, 2022).

In the following, the three above-mentioned papers are presented. This dissertation then concludes with an aggregated discussion of the key findings of the three papers. Specifically, I outline implications of the findings of this dissertation in the fields of organizational identity, inter-organizational collaboration, and nonprofit organizations. Finally, I conclude with a research agenda for studying identity implications of cross-sector partnerships with a particular focus on non-collaborative types of organizational interactions, the role of the media, as well as organizational identity and identification in a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected organizational landscape.

Paper 1: Good or Bad Company?

An Organizational Identity Perspective on Nonprofit-Business Partnerships

India Kandel

Abstract

Nonprofit-business partnerships are an increasingly common form of cross-sector partnerships. Despite these developments, partnering with business organizations is not always perceived as positive or beneficial by members of nonprofit organizations. In this paper, we adopt an identity threat perspective on cross-sector partnership and assess the conditions under which these partnerships may emerge as threats to organizational identity within nonprofit organizations based on previous literature. Integrating arguments from the literature on organizational identity, organizational identity threats, strategic alliances and cross-sector partnerships, we present a conceptual model that highlights how partnership characteristics and nonprofit identity characteristics interact to create, heighten or ease perceptions of organizational identity threats arising from cross-sector partnerships. In doing so, our theorizing on cross-sector partnership identity threat potentials adds to current understanding of how nonprofit interactions with a corporate partner shape how nonprofit members perceive their organization's identity.

Keywords: Nonprofit organizations, cross-sector partnerships, organizational identity, organizational identity threats.

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Introduction

Nonprofit organizations often fulfil crucial societal roles and address complex issues such as poverty, the climate crisis, or pandemics. As these are not tasks for one entity alone and frequently require the collaboration of multiple societal actors (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Selsky & Parker, 2005), many nonprofit organizations engage in cross-sector partnerships with profit-oriented businesses (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019). However, while cross-sector partnerships usually seek to benefit all parties through the exchange of tangible and intangible resources, they are also inherently challenging (Lister, 2000; O'Regan & Oster, 2000). Contrasting values, goals, and imperatives of nonprofit organizations and profit-oriented organizations may lead to tensions between the partners, which often pursue different, if not diverging, goals (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Specifically, nonprofit organizations are generally motivated by instigating change for the good of society, whereas businesses are guided by commercial aims (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Young, 2001). Divergence in organizational structure and modes of governance may further complicate the development and maintenance of stable partnerships (Clarke & Fuller, 2010).

In this study, we focus on an issue of nonprofit-business partnerships that has only received limited attention thus far: the potential of cross-sector partnerships to threaten organizational identity. Organizational identity threats have been defined as events that prompt individuals to question their beliefs about central and distinctive attributes of their organization and – by extension – perceptions of their own individual selves (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Corporate scandals (Eury et al., 2018), environmental or organizational change (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), and mergers and acquisitions (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010) are examples of identity-threatening events that have been examined in the literature. Although previous research has recognized that horizontal partnerships between organizations can likewise accentuate,

suppress, or change aspects of organizational identity (Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, & Hampel, 2018), we still lack a comprehensive analysis of the conditions under which members perceive certain inter-organizational partnerships (e.g., cross-sector partnerships) as threats to their organization's identity. However, as organizational identity threats can lead employees to distance themselves psychologically and physically (i.e., deciding to quit) from an organization (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Petriglieri, 2015), a better understanding of their emergence is of great theoretical and practical importance.

Based on research showing that – depending on contextual factors such as characteristics of threat events and organizational attributes (e.g., Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020) – employees may or may not experience certain events as threatening to their organization's identity, we argue that a contingency perspective that considers the specifics of nonprofit organizations' cross-sector partnerships is key for understanding when these partnerships may be perceived as organizational identity threats. Indeed, there are certain characteristics of nonprofit organizations that merit special attention with regard to organizational identity threats. To begin with, research has shown that nonprofit organizations often struggle with dual and competing organizational identities, as they find themselves caught between normative (i.e., purpose driven) and utilitarian (i.e., business driven) identities (Chenhall, Hall, & Smith, 2016; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Lee & Bourne, 2017). Engaging in cross-sector partnerships may drive nonprofit organizations to emphasize their 'business side' to meet partnership and funding requirements (Hwang & Powell, 2009), potentially increasing conflict between these competing aspects of nonprofit identity (Austin, 2000; Herlin, 2015). In addition, even more so than employees of business organizations, members of nonprofit organizations may experience cross-sector partnerships that question an organization's identity as threats to their own self-concept. Especially volunteers tend to highlight mission-related aspects of nonprofit identity (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011), and have been found to strongly

integrate volunteering in their own self-concept (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007, 2009; Tidwell, 2005). The latter argument also applies to many nonprofit employees, who often chose their work as part of a vocation from which they derive deep meaning and are thus more willing to sacrifice their personal time and pay (Lee & Wilkins, 2011).

In this paper, we adopt a contingency perspective on organizational identity threats arising from cross-sector partnerships. Integrating arguments from the literature on organizational identity, strategic alliances, and cross-sector partnerships, we develop a model for evaluating the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships from a nonprofit identity perspective. Our analysis offers three important contributions to the literature. First, by analyzing the role of contextual factors in the appraisal of identity threats, we provide new insights into *when* individuals perceive events as threats to their organization's identity – an issue that has been largely neglected in previous research (Piening et al., 2020). We specifically use Brickson's (2013) concept of identity congruence as a theoretical framework for conceptualizing how and why certain characteristics of cross-sector partnerships may prompt members to reevaluate their perceptions of their organization's identity. Second, by theorizing about the ways in which partnership and nonprofit identity characteristics interact in shaping perceptions of organizational identity and identity threats, we enhance current knowledge on inter-organizational co-constructions of organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018). Third, in offering a better understanding of how nonprofit members evaluate cross-sector partnerships, we provide nonprofit organizations with a basis for analyzing the risks associated with certain cross-sector partnerships. In summary, recognizing the specific characteristics of nonprofit organizations and cross-sector partnerships, we argue and show that a context-bound analysis is required to better understand the complex phenomenon of organizational identity threats.

Organizational Identity Threats in Cross-Sector Partnerships

The literature on cross-sector partnerships is multifaceted, multidisciplinary, and fragmented (Selsky & Parker, 2005), as is reflected in the use of a realm of different terminologies such as social partnership (Waddock, 1991), social alliance (Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright, 2006; Liu & Ko, 2011), intersectoral partnership/alliance (Gazley & Brudney, 2007), collaborative alliance (Stone, 2000), and corporate community involvement (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). Nonetheless, several common themes have emerged in this research field, namely initial conditions, informal and formal processes, structure and governance, contingencies and constraints, as well as outcomes and accountabilities of cross-sector collaborations (Bryson et al., 2006). Thereby, research on cross-sector partnerships has overwhelmingly focused either on nonprofit collaborations with public sector organizations (e.g., Gazley & Brudney, 2007) or potential benefits for profit-oriented businesses (Kim, Kim, & Qian, 2018; Wang & Qian, 2011). Studies adopting nonprofit perspectives have been more critical, highlighting issues such as power imbalances (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; O'Brien & Evans, 2017) or tensions and conflicts in partnerships (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Markman et al., 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015). In applying an organizational identity threat perspective to the study of partnerships between profit-oriented and nonprofit organizations, we seek to expand this focus.

We first explore how cross-sector collaborations may alter perceptions of organizational identity and how this may lead to perceptions of organizational identity threats. Generally speaking, social identity can be described as the part of an individual's self-concept that is based on their membership of a social group (e.g., organization, occupational group) together with the value and social significance attached to this membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identities matter to individuals as they reduce uncertainty regarding the systematic order of one's social environment and one's position within it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). They also aid

in creating a positive self-concept, but only if individuals are able to make favorable comparisons between the social group they belong to and a distinct but relevant out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity threats arise when individuals appraise an experience as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity (Petriglieri, 2011). This may occur when individuals are assigned a group membership against their will, when their position within a group is challenged, the group's distinctiveness prevented or undermined, or the group's value undermined (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999).

In an organizational context, the value of belonging to a certain organization is particularly likely to be undermined if members believe that their organization either does not match their own identity or that it compares unfavorably to other organizations (Brickson, 2013). In order to answer these questions, individuals make two types of identity comparisons. First, individuals compare their own identity to their organization's current identity to address the question of whether or not they can be "true to themselves" within their organization, i.e., if they are allowed to express values and qualities that are essential their self-concept (Brickson, 2013). Secondly, individuals compare their organization's current and expected identity, thereby assessing if the organization and their members are living up to expectations about "who they should be" (Brickson, 2013: 228). If members perceive an incongruence in either of these comparisons, they are likely to question their organization's identity and the value of their organizational membership (Brickson, 2013). We argue that these identity comparisons are a valuable tool for assessing whether and how cross-sector partnerships may threaten nonprofit member perceptions of organizational identity, as they aid in understanding when and why cross-sector partnerships may create discrepancies between current and expected nonprofit identity. In the following sections, we identify, categorize and evaluate aspects of cross-sector alliances that mitigate or amplify these discrepancies and thereby increase or

decrease the likelihood that these partnerships are perceived as threatening to nonprofit identity.

Towards a Conceptual Model of Identity Threat Potentials in Cross-Sector

Partnerships

Studying the influence of cross-sector partnerships on members' perceptions of organizational identity and identity threats is complex, which is why we argue for a contingency perspective on organizational identity threats. Whether or not cross-sector partnerships emerge as threats to nonprofit identity is shaped by a variety of factors at the intra- and inter-organizational level. Specifically, organizational members not only have to assess if partnering with a specific *partner* may threaten their organization's identity (e.g., through challenging organizational legitimacy; Herlin, 2015), but also if the type or enactment of the *partnership* could pose a threat (e.g., by inducing organizational change; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Drawing on and extending Brickson's (2013) identity congruence framework, we first argue that whether or not nonprofit members perceive cross-sector partnerships as threatening to their organization's identity is largely dependent on the degree to which they regard the partnership to be *congruent* with the nonprofit organization's identity. Recognizing the importance of expectations in members' evaluations of organizational identity (Brickson, 2013), we posit that perceptions of partnership *congruence* are based on evaluations of the fit between a) their understanding of what the nonprofit stands for as an organization, and b) what a specific partnership implies about their organization. In other words, does the partnership support or hinder the nonprofit organization and its members in living up to expectations about what they should be? (e.g., Brickson, 2013). How members answer this question determines the likelihood of the partnership being perceived as threatening to organizational identity.

Secondly, we propose that while evaluations of incongruence may evoke perceptions of identity threats through feelings of misalignment between organizational identity and organizational actions (Brickson, 2013), an incongruence also needs to be perceived as *relevant* to actually be regarded as threatening (Petriglieri, 2011). Based on arguments from organizational identity theory (e.g., Scott & Lane, 2000), we posit that the *relevance* of the partnership for organizational identity is mainly determined by the partnership's capacity to influence core aspects of the nonprofit organization, i.e., what the nonprofit organization is or stands for as an organization.

Assessments of *congruence* and *relevance* are thus at the heart of the cross-sector partnership identity threat appraisal process, which we argue to be informed by partnership and nonprofit identity characteristics. Based on a thorough literature review that focused on key contingencies, constraints, and inter- and intra-organizational identity dynamics in cross-sector partnerships, we identified two sets of factors that shape nonprofit member perceptions of cross-sector partnerships as threats to their organization's identity, which are presented in Table 1. The first set of factors is specific to a certain *partnership*, whereas the latter captures relatively stable aspects of *nonprofit identity*. On the partnership level, 1) value fit, 2) the level of integration between the two partners in the partnership, and 3) power imbalances are key factors to be assessed. On the nonprofit identity level, we explore the role of 1) identity orientation, 2) identity domain, and 3) prevalent member identity in influencing identity threat perceptions. These identity characteristics help to develop an understanding of who the nonprofit organization is in relation to others, their cause or main area of operation, and how its members define themselves.

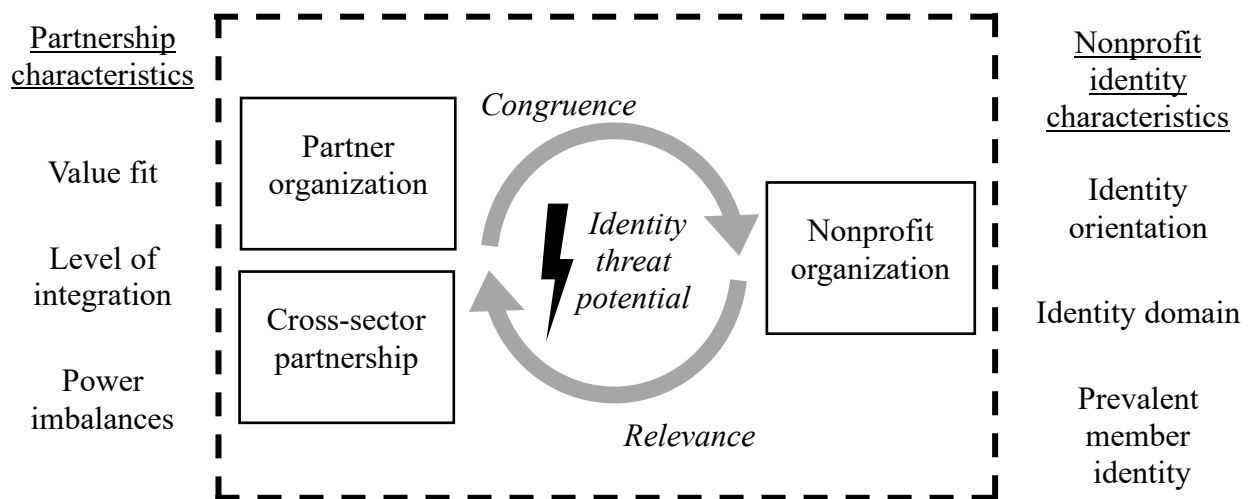
Table 1. Key Factors for Cross-Sector Partnership Identity Threat Appraisal

	Factors	Definition	References
Partner(ship) characteristics	Value fit	Core values of the partner organization and motivations for engaging in the partnership, e.g., self-serving (selling more products) versus altruistic (advancing a social cause).	Austin, 2000; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Dickinson & Barker, 2007; Markman et al., 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Vurro, Dacin & Perrini, 2010.
	Level of integration between the two parties	Degree to which partner's missions, organizations and activities are integrated in the partnership.	Austin, 2000; Herlin, 2015; Jones & Volpe, 2011; Rodell et al., 2017; Schiller & Almog-Bar, 2013.
	Power imbalances	Ability of one partner to exercise power 'in', 'through', 'over' and 'against' the partner organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2014).	Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Elbers & Schulpen, 2011; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; O'Brien & Evans, 2017; Scott & Lane, 2000.
Nonprofit identity characteristics	Identity orientation	How members see their organization in relation to other organizations (Brickson, 2013).	Cornwell et al., 2018; Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Brickson, 2005, 2007, 2013.
	Identity domain	The nonprofit's chosen cause or main area of operation.	Balser & Carmin, 2009; Livengood & Reger, 2010.
	Prevalent member identity	Degree to which business imperatives, efficiency, and accountability are emphasized over nonmanagerial logics.	Chenhall et al., 2016; Glynn, 2000; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Lee & Bourne, 2017.

As we outline in Figure 3, which depicts the interaction between nonprofit identity characteristics and partnership characteristics, the joint evaluation of *congruence* and *relevance* determines whether and how cross-sector partnerships will emerge as threatening to a nonprofit's identity. For instance, even though two partners may be highly *incongruent* due to their values diverging, this may not be *relevant* to organizational members if the partnership consists of a low-involvement interaction such as a one-off donation. Likewise, although highly

integrated partnerships may trigger evaluations of organizational identity through prompting relevant organizational change, members may not perceive their organization's identity to be at stake if the partners are highly compatible and considered to be sharing the same values (*congruence*).

Figure 3. Identity Threat Appraisals in Cross-Sector Partnerships



Lastly, we note that while partnership characteristics are dependent on the partner and the type of partnership, nonprofit identity characteristics provide a relatively stable frame of reference that partnerships can be measured against. Although we assume a certain stability of nonprofit identity characteristics, we also do recognize that partnerships may change aspects of nonprofit identity during the course of their collaboration (Cornwell et al., 2018; Jones & Volpe, 2011). Below, we present our theorizing on how these factors shape organizational members' evaluation of the *congruence* and *relevance* of cross-sector partnerships.

Partnership Characteristics

Value Fit

First, we argue that the identity-threatening potential of cross-sector partnerships is determined by the value fit between collaborating partners. In cross-sector partnerships,

organizational fit is most often studied with respect to the goals and values of the respective organizations (Bryson et al., 2006). Interestingly, even partners that diverge greatly in values may find some common ground in shared goals. For instance, the co-management of forest areas where environmentally low-impact methods were used was made possible by the collaboration between the environmental conservation organization The Nature Conservancy and the lumber company Georgia-Pacific (Austin, 2000). These rival-turned-partner cases of cross-sector collaboration are particularly interesting, as they show key issues of tensions and rivalries between commercial and nonprofit organizations (Markman et al., 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015), which often arise when nonprofit and for-profit actors seek to gain control over certain practices – such as labor and environmental standards – and supremacy in values domains (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). If unresolved, misalignments in the partner’s mission and values can even threaten nonprofit core values and identity traits (Austin, 2000; Herlin, 2015). Indeed, while The Nature Conservancy and Georgia-Pacific became partners, the collaboration also required both organizations to shift their values; the former had to become more of an economic pragmatist and the latter had to incorporate environmental stewardship in their values (Austin, 2000). While this shift may have helped Georgia-Pacific employees to align their commercial with their moral identities (see Berger et al., 2006), the opposite may have been true for members of The Nature Conservancy. Nonprofit member engagement is strongly driven by values and commitment to their organization’s cause (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Kelemen et al., 2017), which is why they are likely to respond strongly to value differences between the collaborating parties. Indeed, nonprofit supporters often criticize their organizations for selling out to corporate partners and betraying their values when collaborating with a former ‘enemy’ (e.g., Herlin, 2015).

To avoid negative implications of value incongruence, many nonprofit organizations have policies in place that seek to establish common ground through partnership value

requirements. For example, Oxfam's partnership principles state that as a minimum for collaboration, partners "must share both a belief that people living in poverty should enjoy their fundamental human rights, and an organizational commitment to gender equality and respect for diverse identities" (Oxfam, 2012). Oxfam thereby seeks to eliminate value incongruences which could not only jeopardize the partnership but also lead to members doubting the alignment between their own and Oxfam's identity (e.g., Petriglieri, 2015). Lastly, we acknowledge that although we assume that organizational values will be shared rather homogeneously among members of the nonprofit, organizational members may well differ with respect to the organizational values they perceive to be important (Besharov, 2014). We later return to this point in our theorizing on prevalent member identity. In summary, incongruences between corporate and nonprofit values can prompt members to fundamentally question their evaluation of nonprofit identity, leading us to propose that:

Proposition 1: The lower the congruence between the values of the nonprofit organization and the for-profit partner, the higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Level of Integration between the Partners in the Partnership

Second, we propose that the level of integration between cooperating partners is a determinant of the degree to which partnerships may cause perceptions of organizational identity threats. As organizational identification is actively shaped through partner interaction – particularly the structure and strength of relationships with others (Jones & Volpe, 2011) – the level of integration between two partners is an important factor that increases the salience of a partnership and thus its relevance for evaluations of organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018). We argue that varying degrees of integration not only affect the relevance of the partnership for member perceptions of organizational identity, but also the subsequent identity threat potential of the partnership.

Austin's (2000) collaboration continuum provides a useful framework for assessing the level of integration between the partners, as it allows for a gradual assessment of inter-organizational nonprofit-business relationships. This continuum describes partnerships between for-profit corporations and nonprofit organizations as ranging from philanthropic (largely unilateral donations), to transactional (explicit resource exchanges focused on specific activities) and integrative (collective action and organizational integration). Philanthropic partnerships are most commonly characterized by unilateral donations or grants paid to the nonprofit organization (Austin, 2000); whereas, transactional partnerships often involve event sponsorships or cause-related marketing (Austin, 2000). Third, integrative collaboration includes actions such as corporate volunteering programs, where company employees spend part of their time working with an external nonprofit (Rodell, Booth, Lynch, & Zipay, 2017).

Moving along the continuum has important implications for the level of integration, the importance to the mission of the parties involved, the magnitude of resources that are employed, the scope of activities, the level of interaction, managerial complexity, as well as strategic value for both actors (Austin, 2000). Thus, the level of integration will affect the degree to which a partnership is visible to organizational members and the centrality of the partnership to the nonprofit organization, i.e., how *relevant* the partnership is. As the level of integration between the partners increases, a partnership gains prominence in member's perceptions of their organizational identity (Herlin, 2015). Low levels of interorganizational collaboration such as donations may even go unnoticed by organizational members who are not directly involved in the transaction; whereas, high levels of involvement such as corporate volunteering programs are highly visible, as members of the partnering organization will be closely working with members of the nonprofit. The more integrated and more present a business partnership is to members of the nonprofit organization, the stronger the need for members to evaluate the partnership and its potential identity implications. Further, the more

integrated the partners become on an operational level, the stronger the call for aligning (inter-)organizational actions. In creating the need to change ways of doing things for the nonprofit organization, partnerships instigate organizational change (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011) which may create perceptions of identity threats (Clark et al., 2010; Corley & Gioia, 2004). Hence, we propose that:

Proposition 2: The higher the level of integration between the nonprofit organization and the for-profit partner in the partnership, the higher the relevance of the partnership to organizational identity, and thus the higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Power Imbalances

Third, we turn towards an analysis of how power may shape perceptions of organizational identity (e.g., Scott & Lane, 2000) and organizational identity threats. Implications of power are particularly relevant in the context of cross-sector collaborations, as it has been emphasized that unequal power dynamics often shape the relationship between the parties involved (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019). Nonprofits, which are typically under-resourced, frequently highlight the power imbalances they experience with their partners and how they impact their ways of acting (O'Brien & Evans, 2017). Thereby, power 'in', 'through', 'over' and 'against' organizations may be exercised through coercion, manipulation, domination and subjectification (Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

Power imbalances equip one of the partners in a partnership to exert influence over the partnering organization. Indeed, given the wide power disparities that frequently occur between donors and receiving organizations, some authors have even questioned whether these types of cross-sector collaboration should be called 'partnerships' at all (Lister, 2000). Specifically, meeting partner requirements may require the nonprofit organization to become more business-like, which in turn heightens conflicts between business and altruistic organizational identities

(Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Thus, the more power a partner has in terms of acting to achieve certain outcomes such as organizational change, the higher the likelihood of a partnership emerging as highly *relevant* to nonprofit identity in the minds of their members, particularly if the partnering organization has intentions of acting upon its powers. This is likely to enhance perceptions of identity threat as it has been suggested that the “perception of threat in intergroup conflict is a function of power asymmetries between groups” (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007: 744), whereas a sense of shared identity can reduce these tensions (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007). This once again highlights the role of and interplay between power dynamics and identity.

However, we note that although it is commonly assumed that power asymmetries favor businesses and put nonprofits at risk, it may also be the other way round, e.g., when a nonprofit threatens to quit a partnership, causing reputational damage to the business’s image. In some cases, nonprofits may even have more power in terms of finances and funding such as large international nonprofit organizations collaborating with local partners from developing countries (Elbers & Schulpen, 2011). On balance, we propose that:

Proposition 3: The more power a business partner has over the nonprofit organization, the higher the relevance of the partnership for organizational identity, and thus the higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofit Identity Characteristics

Identity Orientation

In our analysis of how nonprofit identity characteristics shape member perceptions of cross-sector partnerships as organizational identity threats, we first focus on the nonprofit organization’s organizational identity orientation, i.e., the way an organization understands its role in relation to other stakeholders (Brickson, 2005, 2013). Organizational identity orientation captures members’ associations between their organization as a whole and its

stakeholders and determines if and how members derive meanings from organizational partnerships (Brickson, 2005). Exploring a nonprofit organization's partnership-focused identity orientation regarding profit-oriented businesses as stakeholders can thus aid in better understanding how organizational members will evaluate business partnerships and whether or not they regard them as congruent with what their organization stands for.

Organizational identity orientation is mainly determined by whether and how other organizations are integrated in the activities and functioning of an organization and how these relationships are communicated to other stakeholders, both inside and outside of the organization (Brickson, 2005). In the context of cross-sector partnerships, the nonprofit organization's partnership portfolio may be an indicator of organizational identity orientation. The partnership portfolios of nonprofit organizations may differ largely in size, scope, and purpose, and while some – often smaller – nonprofit organizations may have just one or even no partnerships, others manage a diverse mix of philanthropic, transactional, and integrative collaborations with small to large businesses (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2005). In the latter case, nonprofit members may even *expect* their organization to collaborate with businesses, expressing a highly partnership-focused organizational identity orientation. Indeed, previous research suggests that nonprofit organizations with multiple corporate partners are distinct from nonprofit organizations with single corporate partners, for instance with respect to the scope and area of their operations (O'Connor & Shumate, 2014). We argue that in case of a strongly partnership-focused identity orientation, members are more likely to perceive partnerships as *congruent* with their organization's identity. Moreover, it can be argued that nonprofits with a high partnership-focused identity orientation are likely to have larger partnership portfolios, as they actively seek out business partnerships. Large portfolios will decrease the likelihood of a single partnership emerging as salient for organizational identity evaluations, as they may make individual partnerships less accessible (Cornwell et al.,

2018). Therefore, single partnerships are less likely to lead members to reassess organizational identity, reducing the potential of organizational identity threats. In summary, there is strong ground to believe that:

Proposition 4: The less partnership-focused the nonprofit organization's identity orientation, the lower the congruence of a partnership with nonprofit identity, and thus the higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Identity Domains

Next, we explore the role of organizational identity domains in the identity threat appraisal process. As previously outlined, organizational identity threats occur when members interpret certain situations or events as potentially harmful to organizational identity (Petriglieri, 2011), i.e., what is *central*, *enduring* and *distinctive* about the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Here, it has been proposed that threats that affect *central* attributes of organizational identity hold a higher identity-threatening potential than those that affect peripheral aspects (Piening et al., 2020). Thus, evaluating threat centrality is crucial for understanding the degree to which certain cross-sector partnerships may threaten member perceptions of organizational identity. We define central attributes as those that determine what the organization stands for (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), or – in reputational terms – what it is known for (Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011).

The concept of identity domains offers an analytical tool for assessing threat centrality with respect to cross-sector partnerships. Identity domains have been defined as “*members' consensual understanding of the competitive arena that best demonstrates and reinforces organizational identity in the marketplace*” (Livengood & Reger, 2010: 48). Firms will respond more strongly, more quickly, and more diversely to competitive actions within than outside their identity domain (Livengood & Reger, 2010). With regard to nonprofits, we propose that member perceptions of identity threats will be most pronounced when the partner or partnership

affects core aspects within the nonprofit organization's identity domain *or* inhibits the organization's ability to operate within their domain, i.e., their chosen cause or main area of operation. For instance, the identity domain of the German nonprofit organization Sea-Watch encompasses sea rescue of refugees (Sea-Watch, 2020). Thus, if a partnership were to interfere with Sea-Watch's ability to carry out or support rescue missions, perceptions of organizational identity threats would be high. The nonprofit organization's identity domain thus sets a frame of reference for which partners, partnerships, and partner behaviors are deemed acceptable, i.e., the degree to which they are congruent, while simultaneously also heightening the relevance of incongruence within this domain.

According to this logic, we argue that minor 'offenses' by the business partner that fall within the central aspects of the nonprofit organization's identity domain may result in stronger perceptions of identity threats than seemingly larger offenses that do not touch the central attributes of the nonprofit organization. This is also in line with Brickson's (2013) identity congruence framework, which argues that identity comparisons between expected and current identity will be based on attributes that members perceive to be central and thus highly *relevant* to their organization's identity. In summary, the identity-threatening potential of a partnership will be higher the more a partnership infringes on what members perceive to be core features of the nonprofit organization, which is why we propose that:

Proposition 5: The more the nonprofit organization's members perceive a partnership to affect its identity domain, the higher the relevance of the partnership for organizational identity, and thus higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Prevalent Member Identity

Lastly, we turn towards analyzing the implications of member' prevalent identity. In a nonprofit context, we define prevalent member identity as the degree to which nonprofit

members collectively define themselves and the organization through a purpose-driven versus a managerial lens that highlights business imperatives, such as efficiency and accountability (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). In particular, we focus on the effect that an emphasis on either business or nonmanagerial logics will have on nonprofit members' perceptions of partnerships as threatening.

Previous research suggests that evaluations of organizational identity, and thus of events that potentially threaten this identity, are not perceived uniformly amongst organizational members (e.g., Corley, 2004). While organizations are considered to possess some identity traits that are commonly perceived as salient and important across all members of the organization, other traits will be specific to certain groups within the organization (Hsu & Elsbach, 2013). Which traits emerge as salient for organizational identity is based on both self-enhancement motives and everyday experiences of individual organizational members (Hsu & Elsbach, 2013). Arguably, this is even more applicable in the case of nonprofit organizations, where nonprofit employees are purpose-driven and find their work to be meaningful (Lee & Brudney, 2015) and volunteers feel pride as they make an important contribution to society (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007). However, the literature points to differences between volunteers and employees working in nonprofit organizations not only in their intrinsic need satisfaction and job attitudes, but also with regard to how and to what degree the organization's identity matters to them (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009). Indeed, volunteers and managerial staff frequently diverge with respect to their identities and the way they relate to the nonprofit organization (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). While volunteers frequently stress the organization's social mission, managerial staff may focus more on the administrative and business side of the organization (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). The struggle between these identity elements and subsequently for gaining authority over what defines the organization frequently leads to conflicts between volunteers and managerial staff (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011;

Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). These conflicts may be exacerbated by members with a managerial focus advocating for engaging in corporate partnerships, e.g., to increase funding, which members following nonmanagerial logics may resist protect organizational identity. Based on the above, we argue that a nonprofit organization's prevalent member identity affects the degree to which individuals perceive the partnership activities of a nonprofit organization to be congruent with the expected organizational identity (i.e., "is it living up to who it should be?"; (Brickson, 2013), and propose that:

Proposition 6: The more nonmanagerial logics constitute the prevalent member identity within the nonprofit organization, the lower the congruence of a partnership with nonprofit identity, and thus the higher the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships for nonprofit organizations.

Discussion

In this paper, we adopted an organizational identity threat perspective on nonprofit-business partnerships. In identifying key factors in the partnership appraisal process of nonprofit organizations, we shed new light on the mechanisms behind evaluations of organizational identity threats in collaborative inter-organizational interactions. We argued that whether or not partnerships arise as threatening to members' organizational identity is dependent on the degree to which partners and partnerships are perceived to be *congruent with* and *relevant to* organizational identity. We then identified three *partnership characteristics* (i.e., value fit, level of integration between the partners in the partnership, and power imbalances) as well as three *nonprofit identity characteristics* (i.e., identity orientation, identity domain and prevalent member identity) that influence how organizational members evaluate the congruence and relevance of cross-sector partnerships, and thus determine their identity threat potential.

Implications for Research and Theory

Our paper makes three important contributions to the nonprofit and organizational identity literature. First, by providing a comprehensive model that evaluates the identity threat potential of cross-sector partnerships as perceived by nonprofit members, our research contributes to the literature on cross-sector partnerships from a nonprofit perspective. Although previous studies on cross-sector partnerships have begun to explore how cross-sector partnerships may affect nonprofit identity (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Herlin, 2015; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011), this research has been largely fragmented and lacking a coherent theoretical foundation. Synthesizing and systematically integrating cross-sector and organizational identity research, we here present a theoretically grounded model of how partnerships and nonprofit identity characteristics shape member perceptions of organizational identity threats. In particular, we show why nonprofit specific identity characteristics such as the dual and often competing nature of nonprofit identity, which we included in our theorizing on prevalent member identity, merit special attention (e.g., Chenhall et al., 2016; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Lee & Bourne, 2017). Overall, our analysis underscores the value of adopting a contingency perspective on this phenomenon and helps to better understand why nonprofit members may respond differently to various partnerships.

Second, our analysis contributes to a better understanding of an understudied issue in the literature on organizational identity threats, namely member's perceptions of potentially threatening events (Piening et al., 2020). Thus far, existing conceptual models of identity threats in organizations (e.g., Leavitt & Sluss, 2015; Petriglieri, 2011) have focused on responses to and consequences of identity threats, rather than on how employees perceive and makes sense of potentially identity-threatening events. In applying Brickson's (2013) identity congruence framework to the threat appraisal process, we provide insights into this puzzle and advance current understanding of how organizational members perceive potential threats to

their organization's identity. We highlighted two important mechanisms through which organizational members evaluate organizational identity threats, namely identity *congruence* and *relevance* of an event (here: a cross-sector partnership). Our approach acknowledges that these mechanisms cannot be considered in isolation, as they may cancel each other out. For instance, even if an event or partnership does not seem to be compatible with how members perceive or expect an organization to be (e.g., fundamental value differences), this incongruence may not be relevant under certain circumstances (e.g., low involvement partnerships). In recognizing these interactions, we showed that a context-bound analysis is indispensable for understanding the complex phenomenon of organizational identity threats.

Third, by analyzing how partnership characteristics and nonprofit identity characteristics interact in challenging an organization's identity, we highlight the importance of adopting a relational perspective on organizational identity and organizational identity threats. Although it is increasingly recognized that the formation of member perceptions of organizational identity is a relational process that shifts through diverse influences from both inside and outside the organization (Brickson, 2007; Jones & Volpe, 2011), to date, only limited attention has been paid to the role of organizational characteristics in shaping member evaluations of organizational partnerships from an organizational identity perspective. By identifying and theorizing about inter-organizational partnership and organizational identity characteristics relevant to shaping member perceptions of organizational identity, we contribute to advancing existing relational network perspectives on organizational identity (e.g., Brickson, 2007; Scott & Lane, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). In studying cross-sector partnerships specifically, we add to the emerging literature on the role of horizontal partnerships in shaping perceptions of organizational identity (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2018), and more so, organizational identity threats. As our research emphasized that partnerships provide an important point of reference

that organizational identity is measured against, we conclude that it is indispensable to include this relational perspective in further research and theorizing.

Future Research

Our theorizing suggests various directions for future nonprofit and organizational identity research. First, our analysis deliberately focused on influencing factors on the *organizational* level as main determinants of perceptions of organizational identity threats, thus leaving *individual* characteristics out of our analysis. That said, individual employees' perceptions of organizational identity and identity threats are likely to vary depending on their personal characteristics (e.g., personality, values, functional background, position) and attitude towards the organization (e.g., Corley, 2004). In particular, previous research has highlighted the importance of individuals' levels of identification for perceptions of and reactions to organizational identity threats (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999; Piening et al., 2020). Thus, future research should systematically examine whether individual characteristics influence the extent to which cross-sector partnerships are regarded as identity threats. For instance, it would be interesting to explore potential differences in the perceptions of volunteers and managerial staff, because these two groups may differ regarding the degree to which they emphasize nonmanagerial logics over business imperatives (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011).

Next, although our research highlighted the importance of a relational perspective on perceptions of organizational identity and organizational identity threats, our model focuses on a single, dyadic partner relationship. Nevertheless, as we acknowledged in our theorizing on partnership portfolios, nonprofit organizations often simultaneously engage in multiple partnerships with profit-oriented businesses (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). This stresses the need to include network perspectives on how partnerships may affect organizational identity and perceptions of organizational identity threats that go beyond the analysis of a single dyadic relationship. Here we suggest paying special attention to power relations and influence (e.g.,

Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Hardy & Philipps, 1998), and reputational network effects (e.g., Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Dowell, 2006; Scott & Lane, 2000), as well as their interactions with structural factors such as network centrality and the level of inter-organizational involvement and integration (Scott & Lane, 2000).

Third, we encourage nonprofit researchers to examine how public discourse and public portrayals of the partnership affect whether and how organizational members perceive a partnership to be threatening to organizational identity. Visibility and publicity play a key role for organizational identity perceptions, as they provide feedback on organizational attributes, image, and prestige (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In the wake of increased individual access to social and other online media, individuals have gained more opportunities for engaging in public debates or publicly voicing their opinions, also with respect to cross-sector partnerships (Boyd, McGarry, & Clarke, 2016). If nonprofit members perceive a discrepancy between how their organization or the partnership is portrayed in the media, and how they themselves see their organization, they may question their previously held beliefs about their organization (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2015), potentially leading to perceptions of organizational identity threats. Furthermore, increased publicity, e.g., through press releases or social media posts, may also increase the salience of the partnership – and thereby also the salience of potential identity threats – to nonprofit members (Petriglieri, 2011; Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Cornwell et al., 2018).

**Paper 2: Mate or Menace? Exploring Identity Threats in Nonprofit-Business
Partnerships**

India Kandel^a, Alina McCandless Baluch^b and Erk P. Piening^a

^aLeibniz University Hannover; ^bUniversity of St Andrews

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations frequently engage in partnerships with profit-oriented businesses in order to fulfil their goals and social mission. Although nonprofit-business partnerships can benefit both parties, they are also a potential source of intra-organizational controversy and conflict, especially when social objectives clash with business interests. An increasingly recognized risk of cross-sector partnerships lies in organizational identity threats (i.e., experiences that call into question members' perceptions of their organization's identity). Adopting an individual sensemaking perspective, we investigate how nonprofit members make sense of nonprofit-business partnerships and how these appraisal processes influence their perceptions of identity threats. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we show that nonprofit members' evaluations of partnership *congruence* (i.e., fit with members' organizational identity expectations) and *relevance* (i.e., prominence in members' perceptions of their organization's identity) influence whether they perceive partnerships as identity threats. By providing in-depth insights into these appraisal processes, we extend research on identity implications of cross-sector partnerships.

Keywords: Nonprofit organizations, cross-sector partnerships, nonprofit-business collaboration, organizational identity threats, sensemaking.

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, nonprofit-business partnerships have gained considerable importance for both nonprofit organizations and for-profit businesses. Company donations, public sponsorships, and partnership events such as social days may aid nonprofit organizations in accessing personal, financial, and reputational resources, and increase private or public engagement with a cause (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Lister, 2000). While there are numerous benefits associated with these types of collaborations, members of nonprofit organizations such as employees and volunteers do not always react favorably when their organization collaborates with corporate actors. On the contrary, nonprofit-business partnerships can become sources of controversy, conflict, and disruption (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; O'Brien & Evans, 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005), particularly when social values, aims, and imperatives collide with business-oriented practices (Chenhall et al., 2016; Lister, 2000). Nonprofit members may also voice concerns over 'greenwashing', 'selling out' to companies, or the nonprofit organization being 'used' for publicity (Bocquet, Cotterlaz-Rannard & Ferrary, 2020; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). As a result, nonprofit-business partnerships may challenge the organization's legitimacy and raise questions about nonprofit identity among its members (Herlin, 2015).

Previous research on organizational partnerships and organizational identity has argued that organizational members make sense of their organization's identity by considering not only attributes of the organization itself (i.e., values, goals, practices, etc.), but also its roles, relationships, and interactions with external stakeholders such as partnering organizations (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000; Brickson, 2013; Cornwell, Howard-Grenville & Hampel, 2018). "Who we interact with" can thereby enhance but also challenge members' perceptions of "who we are as an organization" and whether the organization is living up to expectations about "who we should be" (e.g., Brickson, 2013; Cornwell et al., 2018). If partnerships call

into question members' perceptions about central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of an organization, such that the organization no longer matches their own sense of self, they may constitute *organizational identity threats* (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Disidentification and voluntary turnover are consequences of such negative experiences (e.g., Leavitt & Sluss, 2015; Petriglieri, 2011; Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020). This is an important issue for nonprofit organizations, as prior research has shown that organizational identity and identification are key for nonprofit member engagement with and commitment to their organization (Tidwell, 2005; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Rho, Yun & Lee; 2015). Volunteers have been found to strongly integrate volunteering in their own self-concept (Kelemen et al., 2017), and employees of nonprofit organizations often choose their work as part of a vocation from which they derive deep meaning and for which they are willing to sacrifice pay when compared to their industry counterparts (Lee & Wilkins, 2011).

While there is some evidence that nonprofit-business partnerships may be perceived as threatening to nonprofit identity (e.g., Herlin, 2015), the majority of research concerned with understanding member perceptions of organizational identity threats is focused on for-profit organizations (e.g., Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2006; Rodell, Breitsohl, Schröder & Keating, 2016). At the same time, this research is far from conclusive, showing considerable variance in how individual employees perceive and respond to potentially identity-threatening events (e.g., Piening et al., 2020). Along these lines, previous theorizing indicates that cross-sector partnerships can not only challenge or suppress, but also accentuate or enhance aspects of organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018). These ambiguities and the special characteristics of the nonprofit context (e.g., motivations, attitudes and behaviors of nonprofit members, mission focus and social objectives, resource constraints; e.g., Buonomo, Benevene, Barbieri & Cortini, 2020), suggest a need for empirical studies that provide a more nuanced

understanding of the implications of nonprofit-business partnerships for organizational identity perceptions in nonprofit organizations. Recognizing that cognitive appraisal processes are key for understanding individuals' perceptions of and responses to events that indicate potential harm to their organizational identity (Piening et al., 2020), we investigate the following research questions: How do nonprofit members make sense of nonprofit-business partnerships and how do these appraisal processes affect whether or not nonprofit-business partnerships are perceived as threats to their organization's identity?

To address these research questions, we use a qualitative study of semi-structured interviews with 21 nonprofit members from 15 organizations engaged in different causes and nonprofit sub-sectors. We specifically focus on individual-level evaluations of nonprofit-business partnerships. Our study suggests that there are two main appraisal mechanisms that shape members' assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships as causing potential harm to their organization's identity, namely *congruence* (i.e., fit with members' organizational identity expectations) and *relevance* (i.e., prominence in members' perceptions of their organization's identity) evaluations of business partnerships. Extending previous research on organizational partnerships and organizational identity (e.g., Brickson, 2013; Cornwell et al., 2018), we identify sub-dimensions of these appraisal processes and shed light on the interplay between congruence and relevance assessments.

Adopting an individual sensemaking perspective that brings nonprofit members' perceptions of nonprofit-business partnerships to the foreground, our research offers three important contributions to the literature. First, we provide context-specific evidence on the identity implications of cross-sector partnerships. Our empirical observation that there are conditions under which such partnerships affirm rather than threaten nonprofit members' perceptions of their organization's identity contributes to a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon (see Cornwell et al., 2018). Second, by drawing on and examining individual

member's sensemaking processes (i.e., congruence and relevance evaluations) we provide insights into individual's organizational identity threat appraisal processes (Petriglieri, 2011; Piening et al., 2020), e.g., *when* individuals perceive certain events (e.g., business partnerships) as threats to their organization's identity. Here our main extension of the literature on identity-related sensemaking lies in providing contextualized insights into members' *congruence* and *relevance* assessments. Thereby, we show that individuals evaluate the identity fit of partnerships at different levels (i.e., organizational, project, and personal level), and consider factors such as public visibility of and own involvement in organizational partnerships. Third, we shed new light on the interplay of congruence and relevance appraisals (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2018). Developing an empirically grounded model that specifies the identity implications of four combinations of congruence and relevance assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships, we highlight that it is necessary to analyze both appraisal processes in combination rather than isolation.

Theoretical Background

Previous research on identity in nonprofit organizations found that working and volunteering for a nonprofit organization can provide individuals with deep meaning and a sense of identity (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Kelemen et al., 2017; Lee & Wilkins, 2011). Organizational identity matters to individuals because it provides both the content and the structure of an identity that is prized by society (Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). This particularly applies to individuals who volunteer or work for nonprofit organizations, as doing something for the public good can aid in creating a positive sense of self (Kelemen, Mangan & Moffat, 2017). Knowing what is central, enduring, and distinctive about their organization, and thus having a clear sense of "who we are as an organization" (Albert & Whetten, 1985) thereby serves as a basis identification with the organization. Identification with an organization can then give meaning and stability to an individual's self-concept, reduces uncertainty regarding

one's place in the world, and fulfills the desire for belongingness (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Piening et al., 2020).

However, having a clear sense of what an organization stands for is not a given, especially since it is increasingly recognized that identity is “not enduring and the same over time, but is instead fluid, in flux, and arguably unstable” (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013: 140). Identity-related ambiguities and questions are particularly likely to arise in nonprofit organizations, which frequently struggle with dual and competing identities, i.e., find themselves caught between normative (i.e., purpose driven) and utilitarian (i.e., profit driven) organizational operatives and attributes (Chenhall, Hall, & Smith, 2016; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Lee & Bourne, 2017). If members' perceptions about key organizational attributes are challenged, this may lead to feelings of confusion or even threat. Identity threats arise when individuals appraise an experience as indicating potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity (Petriglieri, 2011). They are often caused by disruptive events such as environmental change, mergers, acquisitions, or scandals that make employees believe that the organization no longer matches their expectations and compares unfavorably to others (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Even relatively minor events such as partnerships with other organizations may lead members to reevaluate and possibly revise their understanding of what the organization stands for (Albert et al., 2000; Cornwell et al., 2018; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Spillover effects are a possible explanation for why collaborating with firms (not only those accused of wrongdoing) can result in a negative evaluation of an organization by its members and other stakeholder groups (e.g., Lee & Rim, 2016).

Perceptions of and responses to identity threatening events can vary substantially among organizational members. While some members may experience an event as highly threatening to their own self-concept, the same event may be irrelevant to others (Petriglieri, 2011; Piening

et al., 2020). This raises the question of when certain events emerge as salient to member evaluations of organizational identity, and when they lead to perceptions of organizational identity threats. We argue that applying sensemaking perspectives (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995) to the study of nonprofit member perceptions of nonprofit-business partnerships can aid in better understanding how and why certain partnerships with for-profit business may arise as organizational identity threats.

A Sensemaking Perspective on Identity Threats

Sensemaking describes the process through which individuals seek to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing issues, events, or situations with ambiguous meanings or uncertain outcomes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). According to sensemaking perspectives, individuals have the desire to understand why these events have occurred and what their implications are for them moving forward (e.g., Vough & Caza, 2017). Sensemaking can be triggered by major or minor, planned or unplanned events (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) such as organizational change (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Stensaker & Faklenberg, 2007), crisis, and conflict (e.g., Weick, 1988; Mikkelsen, 2013). Partnerships with other organizations are a prime example of events that give rise to sensemaking efforts, as they may indeed lead to change, crisis or conflict (Cornwell et al., 2018; Scott & Lane, 2000). Notably, it is not necessarily the unexpectedness of events that trigger sensemaking, but rather the discrepancy between what one expects and what one encounters (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

A review of the literature on sensemaking in organizations shows that identity can be a major influence on sensemaking (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), as sensemaking is both informed by and informs organizational identity (Rerup, Gioia & Corley, 2022). Identity guides how individuals make sense of the world around them and when a valued identity is threatened, individuals engage in sensemaking efforts to restore their sense of self (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Not only organizational identity

threats (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), but also devaluations of individual (e.g., denied promotions) and professional (e.g., changes in the public image of a profession) identities may trigger sensemaking efforts in which employees reflect upon their organizational membership (Dahm et al., 2019; Vough & Caza, 2017).

Conceptual work has begun to explore how organizational partnerships are implicated in such sensemaking processes (Cornwell et al., 2018). This research and theorizing provides the basis for our in-depth empirical analysis of identity-related sensemaking processes in the context of nonprofit-business partnerships. In particular, we draw on the concepts of identity *congruence* and *relevance* to assess whether or not nonprofit-business partnerships may trigger nonprofit members' sensemaking efforts (see Turner, 1999; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher & Christ, 2005). Congruence reflects the fit of an event (e.g., partnership) with members' expectations of organizational identity, whereas relevance refers to the prominence of an event in members' perceptions of their organization's identity. Congruence assessments involve comparing an organization's current identity and expected identity, that is, members' perceptions of how the organization should be (Brickson, 2013: 228). If members perceive an incongruence in this comparison (i.e., the organization does not meet their identity expectations), they are likely to question their organization's identity and the value of their organizational membership (Brickson, 2013). Events that violate members' identity expectations, such as public scandals which often raise questions about organizational values and moral integrity, can lead to psychological distancing from the organization (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

While perceptions of identity threats may be evoked through feelings of misalignment between organizational identity and organizational actions (Brickson, 2013), this may not always trigger extensive sensemaking efforts. As noted above, we argue that perceived incongruences also need to be considered *relevant* to emerge as threatening. If an experience

is deemed irrelevant to their organization's identity (i.e., does not play a prominent role in their perceptions of what the organization is and stands for), individuals are unlikely to engage in identity-related sensemaking efforts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Petriglieri, 2011). Horizontal partnerships with organizations from other sectors may be experienced as relevant to organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018), for instance when a nonprofit organization enters a partnership with a for-profit business for the first time, when the type of partnership changes, or when a partnering business is involved in a scandal, all of which potentially make the partnership more accessible in the minds of individual members. Partnership salience may also arise as the result of high partnership visibility, for instance through media attention, or prolonged exposure to a partnership, e.g., due to personal involvement in a partnership or a longstanding partnership commitment (Cornwell et al., 2018).

While both congruence and relevance are relatively well-established constructs in the organizational identity and sensemaking literature, empirical insights into these appraisal processes and their contingencies are still limited. In particular, previous conceptualizations do not take the context (e.g., the nonprofit sector) in which these appraisals occur into account. Hence, seeking to provide a more specific and contextualized understanding, we focus on how members of nonprofit organizations determine the congruence and relevance of nonprofit-business partnerships with respect to their organization's identity. Building on previous work on organizational identity and sensemaking (e.g., Brickson, 2013; Corley & Gioia 2004, Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), we conduct a qualitative inquiry to fill the conceptual categories of *congruence* and *relevance* with meaning in the context of nonprofit-business partnerships.

Method

To gain a richer, contextualized understanding of individual nonprofit members' evaluations of business partnerships and their identity-related sensemaking efforts, we adopted

a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews of nonprofit members working in nonprofit organizations in Germany. Following a heterogenous sampling approach (Patton, 2002) to access those working in a wide range of nonprofit organizations, we started by selecting nonprofit organizations from the list of the German website of Transparency International (2022). We used Transparency International as a starting point since the organization requires nongovernmental organizations that sign up to their transparency initiative to publicly provide information on their HR structure, finances, and an annual report. In order to select the nonprofit organizations, we screened their respective websites for information on corporate partnerships. Analyzing publicly available documents (i.e., strategy, mission, and values statements, funding, ties to other organizations, and annual reports) enabled us to identify and contact organizations that engaged in some sort of cooperative activity with for-profit businesses such as sponsoring, project partnerships, and cause-related marketing (e.g., Austin, 2000; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). We then complemented this list with contacts from organizations from our personal networks. Our final sample included 21 nonprofit members working across 15 organizations who were identified as having responsibility for making decisions about business partnerships. The size of these organizations differed considerably, ranging from one small, local charity with no paid staff to large national and multinational nonprofit organizations with more than 600,000 employees. An overview of the respondents, their positions, information on the approximate number of paid employees and the organization's main area of operation is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of Interviewees*

Interviewee	Position	Organizational Area of Activity	Organization	N° of Paid Staff	Main Region of Operation
Alex	Project Coordinator	Animal Protection and Welfare	Alpha	≤ 100	national
Ben	Volunteer Group Leader	International	Beta	100-999	multinational
Charlotte	Fundraising	Civic and Advocacy Organization	Gamma	≤ 100	national
Dana	Communications and Fundraising	Social Services	Delta	≥ 10,000	national
Emma	Project Coordinator	Social Services	Delta	≥ 10,000	national
Fiona	Project Coordinator	Social Services	Delta	≥ 10,000	national
Gaby	Engagement Coordinator	Social Services	Delta	≥ 10,000	national
Helen	Engagement Coordinator	Social Services	Delta	≥ 10,000	national
Ian	Board Director	Income Support and Maintenance	Epsilon	1,000-9,999	national
Jay	Executive Director	Housing	Zeta	≤ 100	local
Kasey	Project Leader	Civic and Advocacy Organization	Eta	≤ 100	local
Laila	Board Member	Social and Community Development	Theta	0	local
Max	Executive Director	Income Support and Maintenance	Iota	≤ 100	local
Nate	Project Management and Fundraising	Health	Kappa	≤ 100	local
Oliver	Executive Director	Housing	Lambda	≤ 100	local
Paul	Board Representative	Animal Protection and Welfare	Mu	≤ 100	national
Quinn	Leader Communications	Health	Nu	≥ 10,000	national
Richard	Fundraising Coordinator	Social Services	Xi	≥ 10,000	national
Simon	Campaign Coordinator	Environment	Pi	100-999	national
Talia	Managing Director	Environment	Pi	100-999	national
Uri	Executive Director	Environment	Pi	100-999	national

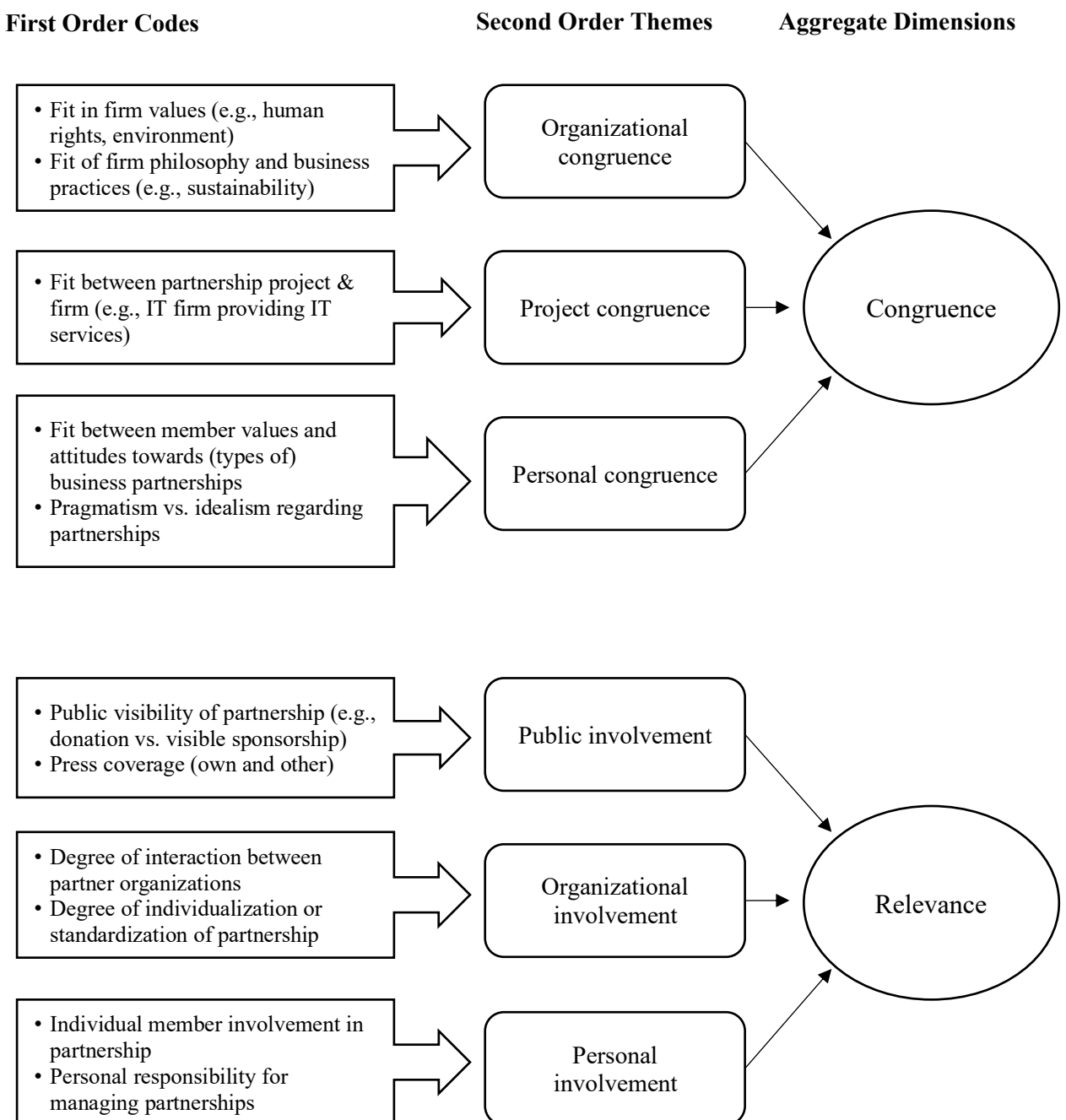
**For data protection purposes, names of interviewees and organizations were anonymized and numbers of paid staff were rounded*

We began by asking all interviewees about their professional background, their role in the organization, and what they regarded as the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of their organization (i.e., organizational identity; Albert & Whetten, 1985). To assess individuals' perceptions of partnership congruence and relevance, we started with general questions regarding their organizations' collaborative activities (e.g., "does your organization currently cooperate with businesses and if so, in which ways?", "what are key words that come to mind when you think of nonprofit-business partnerships?", "how does your organization decide which business partnerships to engage in?"). Based on their answers, we added further, more specific questions such as "what is important to you when your organization collaborates with businesses?" (e.g., congruence), "are business partnerships important to the work you do and who you are as an organization?" (e.g., relevance), and "what do you personally think and feel about your organization collaborating with business X and why?" (e.g., asking about specific examples for congruence and relevance evaluations).

To ensure continuity in the interview process, all interviews were conducted by the first author, recorded and later transcribed. Informal notes were taken during the interviews, which were subsequently complemented by memos that were written during interview coding (Charmaz, 2006). We began our data analysis with each researcher looking for patterns in the data around member perceptions of nonprofit-business partnerships, potential identity threats arising from these partnerships, and member evaluations of partnership congruence and relevance. We adopted a flexible pattern matching approach (Bouncken, Qiu, Sinkovics & Kürsten, 2021; Sinkovics, 2018), which involves defining constructs or dimensions a priori (here: *congruence* and *relevance*), while also allowing for both the research questions and the dimensions to shift by the end of the analysis (Sinkovics, 2018). We chose flexible pattern matching as it is aimed at identifying and describing patterns as accurately as possible (Bouncken et al., 2021). Following this logic, we categorized and condensed our overarching

categories of congruence and relevance into themes that represent sub-dimensions of members' evaluations thereof. This iterative process involved several rounds of going back to our interview data from which we generated initial categories, refined tentative categories, and, finally, stabilized categories into the identified sub-themes (Grodal, Anteby & Holm, 2021). The first and second- order coding and the aggregate data dimensions are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Data Structure



Findings

Our findings outlined below show that nonprofit members' perceptions of business partnerships differ considerably, ranging from perceived identity threats to identity affirmations (i.e., events that reinforce members' existing view of their organization). We also found support for the assumption that varying congruence and relevance assessments provide an explanation for these differences. Here we provide in-depth insights into how nonprofit members make sense of business partnerships by identifying sub-dimensions underlying the appraisal of partnership congruence and relevance. Based on the observation that members' perceptions of relevance strengthen the influence of evaluations of congruence on identity threat perceptions, we show how members' *congruence* and *relevance* appraisals are interrelated.

Business Partnerships: Nonprofit Identity Threats and Affirmations

We first examined members' sensemaking of business partnerships as potentially threatening to their organization's identity. We identified differences in evaluations with members perceiving business partnerships as a threat to nonprofit identity (e.g., due to reputational risks), but also more positive perceptions of partnerships as identity affirming (e.g., when members felt their organization was being recognized and supported by others). The line between threats and affirmations was fluid, for instance when assessed with respect to the perceived (in)authenticity of partnering organizations. Partnerships were seen as threats when members felt a (potential) business partner was disingenuously using their organization for greenwashing. In contrast, if members thought that the business' intentions were authentic (e.g., exemplifying similar core values of the nonprofit organization, showing genuine interest in the cause of the nonprofit organization), partnerships tended to reinforce their existing view of the organization.

I think their willingness shows how deeply social responsibility is integrated in the company. For us, that's an indicator of how it [the partnership] will develop, if it's

worthwhile. It's relatively early on, in the first discussions or so, that you do notice if it's, let's say, a social 'fig leaf' (...) or if it's truly deeply anchored. (Richard)

While many of our interviewees had a general level of skepticism regarding the intentions of business partners, they acknowledged that this was not always warranted. In some cases, organizational partnerships could create positive sentiments regarding the cause and mission of the nonprofit organization.

There are many companies that really do want to support you, wholeheartedly, and where you notice that they are honestly interested (...). If they are really convinced and you notice that you have been able to inspire them with your work. Personally, that's a very nice element (...) to be able to inspire others. (Quinn)

Thus, our evidence suggests that nonprofit-business partnerships could be perceived as either identity threatening or identity affirming. In order to understand these differences in assessments of partnerships and when partnerships emerge as salient to member evaluations of nonprofit identity, we examine how nonprofit members appraise potential partnership threats according to their congruence and relevance.

Member Assessments of Congruence

Members' assessments of partnership *congruence* seek to answer the question of "is this partnership in line with who we are?". Partnership congruence was used to assess whether or not members felt like they or others perceived their organization to be selling out to businesses or if the business was misusing the nonprofit organizations' reputation or instrumentalizing their clients. Our respondents noted that a 'fit' between the values of their organization and those of the business partner was a prominent consideration in deciding whether or not to enter a business partnership.

Our values align pretty well. I think, ultimately, that's what makes the difference, that you have a common set of values. (Richard)

Our findings indicate that three different dimensions influence members' congruence assessments, namely *organizational*, *project*, and *personal congruence*. Table 3 provides further illustrative quotes for the dimensions we outline below.

Table 3. Additional Representative Data for Congruence and Relevance Dimensions

Congruence (i.e., fit with members' organizational identity expectations)

Organizational congruence

(e.g., 'fit' between the nonprofit and partnering organization, for instance regarding values, area of operation)

- *We have very high standards in terms of consistency. There are very few companies from which we could expect the same. (Paul)*
- *Even if we could, we would never cooperate with a company, which - in some way - doesn't go hand in hand with the values we represent, that's pretty clear. (Ben)*

Project congruence

(e.g., 'fit' between a specific project and the partnering organization, for instance by focusing on a common issue)

- *We often talk to insurance companies because they do a lot of prevention work (...). It's very important work; the earlier you help people, the lower the damage that occurs, and maybe the lower the costs of the insurance companies. (Quinn)*
- *They contacted me, and then I researched them: What kind of company is it, anyway? Are they building industrial plants or similar things? (...) but they are actually an ecological company working with natural stone (...). So it's very nice, very fitting. And their name also fits our project. (Dana)*

Personal congruence

(e.g., 'fit' between a person's personal values and/or attitudes towards partnering with businesses)

- *Personally, I'd say I am a bit more reserved than [my organization] when it comes to entering cooperations, because, personally, I sometimes do find it difficult to distinguish between, like, greenwashing and a real will to change, because I sometimes feel like: David against Goliath. (Talía)*
- *Well, we are quite pragmatic about this [business partnerships], and I am also pragmatic. So both our organization and the vast majority of people working for it are very pragmatic. (Alex)*

Relevance (i.e., prominence in members' perceptions of their organization's identity)

Public involvement

(e.g., partnership visibility and publicity, media reports about the partnership)

- *There are the types of companies that really only use it for internal communications, so that the employees know what their company is doing. But of course, there are also those that are like: yeah, we really want to print that somewhere. (Gaby)*
- *I'd say the real partnerships are those that are publicly known, the ones we communicate publicly (Alex)*

Organizational involvement

(e.g., level of integration of the partnership; one-off, transactional donation vs. highly integrated long-term project)

- *Well, that's is not a real cooperation then, just a selective donation. (Max)*
- *It's also about financial value, but it's also a bit different from that part, where it's only about donations. This [joint project] was more, it was about cooperation. (Oliver)*

Personal involvement

(e.g., member's personal involvement in partnership, for instance communications, coordination, decision making)

- *In my case it's also because I got pretty good industry connections. (Helen)*
 - *Whenever people ask basic questions, for instance this one about business cooperations, then that's my area. (Paul)*
-

Organizational congruence can be understood as the level of fit between the nonprofit organization and the partnering organization, for instance, regarding values, ethics, and locality. Our interviewees often highlighted that while they did not – or as some mentioned could not – expect businesses to share all of their values, there was a minimum level or threshold of agreement on values and organizational practices (e.g., not engaging in certain harmful business practices such as child labor) they would expect from their partners.

The ethics and the morals have to fit. It just can't be that we're trying to help people, those who need help, and that the companies are exploiting the same people who we are trying to help. It does have to match these principles. (Quinn)

Members also mentioned that they would not collaborate with organizations involved in certain industries such as weapons, or, in the case of one children's advocacy organization, adult films. Notably, congruence was not only assessed with respect to values, but also regarding the location of the business. Many of our interviewees agreed that that small, local businesses were often a better fit for them or more congruent with what they stood for than large, national or even international corporations. This particularly applied to smaller nonprofit organizations where being locally active and serving the local community was considered key to their work and identity, and one which could be amplified by building connections with local business partners.

It's rather this regional, local connection that is important for us; for our orientation, for the people who seek help from us, as well as for the companies. So small, medium-sized companies are pretty interesting for us. (Dana)

The second dimension of members' assessments of congruence we identified was *project congruence*, which refers to the congruence between a specific nonprofit project and the business partner, for instance an IT company providing notebooks to children in need, or a company specialized in providing first aid kits donating to a disaster relief charity. Members also used 'win-win' situations as an indicator of a good 'match' or fit.

Whenever we talk to companies, whenever we are entering partnerships, we also try to understand what's important to them (...), in order to create win-win situations whenever possible. (...) We don't necessarily try to force them into projects (...) That's pretty much the baseline of our contacts and cooperations with businesses. (Richard)

Congruence on the project level not only helped to generate win-win situations, but also partnership credibility as clearly establishing what each party would gain through these kinds of partnerships was seen to counteract perceptions of greenwashing.

I think it always depends on the individual case. (...) If it's only greenwashing, then that's nonsense (...) but if it's about certain, very specific things, and that was part of this specific cooperation, then I think it's worthwhile. (...) However, as an organization, we still decided not to do the partnership. (Simon)

Lastly, as indicated in the previous quote, nonprofit members assessed the *personal congruence* of business partnerships, i.e., whether or not the partnership was congruent with their own personal expectations of a partnership. Here, members would often evoke their own values, for instance with respect to human rights or environmental protection.

I'd much prefer to only cooperate with companies that use gender-inclusive language, ones that pay attention to the environment, and well, those that act according to my personal values, but (...) if I only look at myself and those firms that fit my values, I can almost forget about it. (Laila)

These values were not always in line with the expectations of other members of their organization. However, even though personal values were used when assessing business partnerships, it was acknowledged that the organization's partnership requirements would trump personal reservations. This is an important finding as the analysis indicates a divergence in personal values which were used to assess the partnership:

As a team, we did have a pretty heated discussion about whether or not we could cooperate with [the company]. I was in favor, because I thought that the way in which they had distanced themselves from it [incident with CEO] was very credible, (...) but the majority of the team was against the cooperation (...) so we didn't do it. (Kasey)

Member Assessments of Relevance

In addition to partnership congruence, partnership *relevance* played a role in how nonprofit members perceive and make sense of business partnerships. Partnership relevance refers to the perceived importance of the business partnership for assessments of what the organization stands for. We found that relevance is not only assessed with respect to members' personal evaluation of a partnership, but also in terms of how they feel the partnership is perceived by others. Perceptions of relevance were largely tied to partnership accessibility and the perceived or actual involvement in the partnership, on both the organizational and personal level. In particular, we found that members' assessments of partnership relevance were influenced by three dimensions: *public involvement* (i.e., partnership visibility), *organizational involvement* (i.e., the level of integration of the partnership), and *personal involvement* (i.e., members' own involvement in the partnership) (see Table 3).

First, *public involvement* refers to the public visibility of the partnership, i.e., how 'close' or involved the nonprofit organization and the partnering business appear to others, which also determines the ease of accessibility of partnership information, and how 'involved' the public is in the partnership. Member perceptions of partnership relevance were heightened when partnerships were highly visible to others, e.g., via press releases or mentions on the nonprofit organization's website. This particularly applies to partnerships with large, well-known firms, which were highly visible in their own way. Highly visible partnerships were deemed more relevant for both internal and external perceptions of nonprofit identity, as members stressed that these partnerships were at higher risk of being subject to public criticism and scrutiny.

There we difficulties, just regarding the looks of it. (...) If you want to read something bad into it [the partnership], if you want to write a sensational headline or newspaper article about it, it's easy. (Simon)

Demands of visibility and publicity were also used as an indicator of business intentions for nonprofit members. Businesses that did not request publicity were perceived as more

credible and genuinely interested in the cause of the nonprofit organization. On the other hand, interviewees often had reservations about a partnership, if an interest in publicly mentioning the partnership was expressed early on in the partnership process.

I've recently had a conversation with an entrepreneur who basically wanted to put us on his website, as a big social project, and use us for marketing. Those are the negative experiences. (Oliver)

Second, *organizational involvement* refers to the degree of involvement of the partnering organizations in the partnership. This dimension influencing partnership relevance concerns the extent of integration of the partnership on both an organizational and dyadic partnership level. On an organizational level, partnership relevance was strongly tied to how members generally understood business partnerships to form part of what they did as an organization, i.e., how involved or invested the organization was in partnering up with businesses. While some organizations had strongly integrated cooperating with businesses in their mission and strategy, for instance, as a means of “influencing the influencer” (Alex), others saw business cooperations as rather peripheral to their work, and hence less relevant.

We're not that interested in business partnerships, but if an organization makes that their business or organizational principle, they may have to think that way too. Fortunately, we don't have to. (Max)

On the partnership level, involvement was assessed in terms of the specific type of partnership the partnering organizations engaged in, e.g., simple and rather transactional exchanges such as one-off donations versus highly integrated, long-term partnerships with mutual goals (e.g., Austin, 2000). Notably, less integrated partnerships such as donations were deemed less relevant – and if perceived negatively, less critical – than highly integrated partnerships. Interestingly, various interviewees stressed that they viewed one-off donations as rather separate from and sometimes not even as a form of ‘partnerships’:

We differentiate between a donation and a cooperation, these are two completely different fields. (Charlotte)

Highly integrated partnerships were deemed more relevant or more critical. A similar logic applied to partnerships that were loosely integrated but high in impact, i.e., when an organization received a large as opposed to a small donation. Indeed, many organizations set a threshold for business donations, for instance, a maximum percentage of incoming funds stemming from businesses.

You don't want to become dependent, that's always a bit challenging. There are other organizations, that do a lot more [business partnerships], but that's also because, financially, we're doing okay, we're not desperate for supporters. (Ian)

The higher relevance of integrated partnerships such as joint projects can also be attributed to these partnerships requiring nonprofit members to invest more time and resources. This in turn leads to members questioning if this partnership does enable or hinder them in fulfilling our mission, and if they are indeed 'selling out' if they assign too much time and resources to these partnerships.

With whom do we collaborate? Who really wants to change? And well, when is it worthwhile to invest our resources, which are limited, indeed... We discuss this all the time. (Alex)

Highly integrated partnerships could also be identity affirming, as members felt like the business partner was genuine in its intent to support the nonprofit organization's cause, which was often upheld by personal relations and conversations with members of the partnering organization.

We actually only have one long-term business partnership, it's very important (...) We did get a lot of support from them, including financially, which we didn't really expect. That's when we noticed that on part of the company, our contacts, the people we talk to, were really committed to support us. (Helen)

The quote above stresses the importance of the third relevance sub-category we identified, namely members' *personal involvement* in the partnership. Personal involvement refers to the degree to which an individual is involved in a partnership, for instance, due to their position in the organization or involvement in decision making. Members who were strongly

involved with business partnerships often attributed a high sense of importance to them. Sometimes, this higher sense of importance also included beliefs that partnerships were important to achieving the nonprofit's mission and lead to efforts of developing additional business partnerships.

I also do a lot of voluntary work for the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and that's also how I try to maintain connections with the companies, and to bring business and charity closer together. (Helen)

Especially those members who were directly involved in the partnership decision making process often felt a sense of responsibility for protecting their organization against reputational damage from business partnerships, leading them to investigate whether or not the partnership was a good 'fit'. However, when members were not directly involved in the partnership decision making process, they felt less responsible and sometimes even less critical of the partnerships that were entered as they felt like due diligence was already accomplished.

I know that [colleague] makes sure that company's values and ideals do fit. (Emma)

Interplay between Congruence and Relevance Assessments

Lastly, our findings suggest that members' assessments of the identity implications of nonprofit-business partnerships are also affected by the ways in which congruence and relevance appraisals relate to each other. This important finding lies in the observation that members' assessment of the degree of relevance of the partnership had consequences for how they appraised its congruence, and in turn, for the subsequent risks of the partnership being perceived as threatening to nonprofit identity. We found numerous instances in the analysis that highlighted that an increased perceived relevance of the partnerships mattered for the weight that members assigned to partnership congruence. For instance, if a partnership is perceived to be highly relevant in terms of how involved the nonprofit organization and the partnering business appear to the public, the congruence of said partnership appears more important to members of the organization to avoid potential backlashes.

Of course, there are companies we don't really want to be seen with in public communications (...) these are lines we frequently discuss and re-evaluate internally. (Alex)

We further identified that in these cases when members perceive partnerships to be highly relevant, partnerships were subject to a more rigorous assessment of congruence. The following quote illustrates that this strengthened the influence of evaluations of organizational congruence in terms of values on members' identity threat perceptions.

Well, in that case we accepted the donation because we were in a time of crisis. However, it is also a company that, given our value system, we really do have to critically analyze, whether or not to enter a collaboration. (Helen)

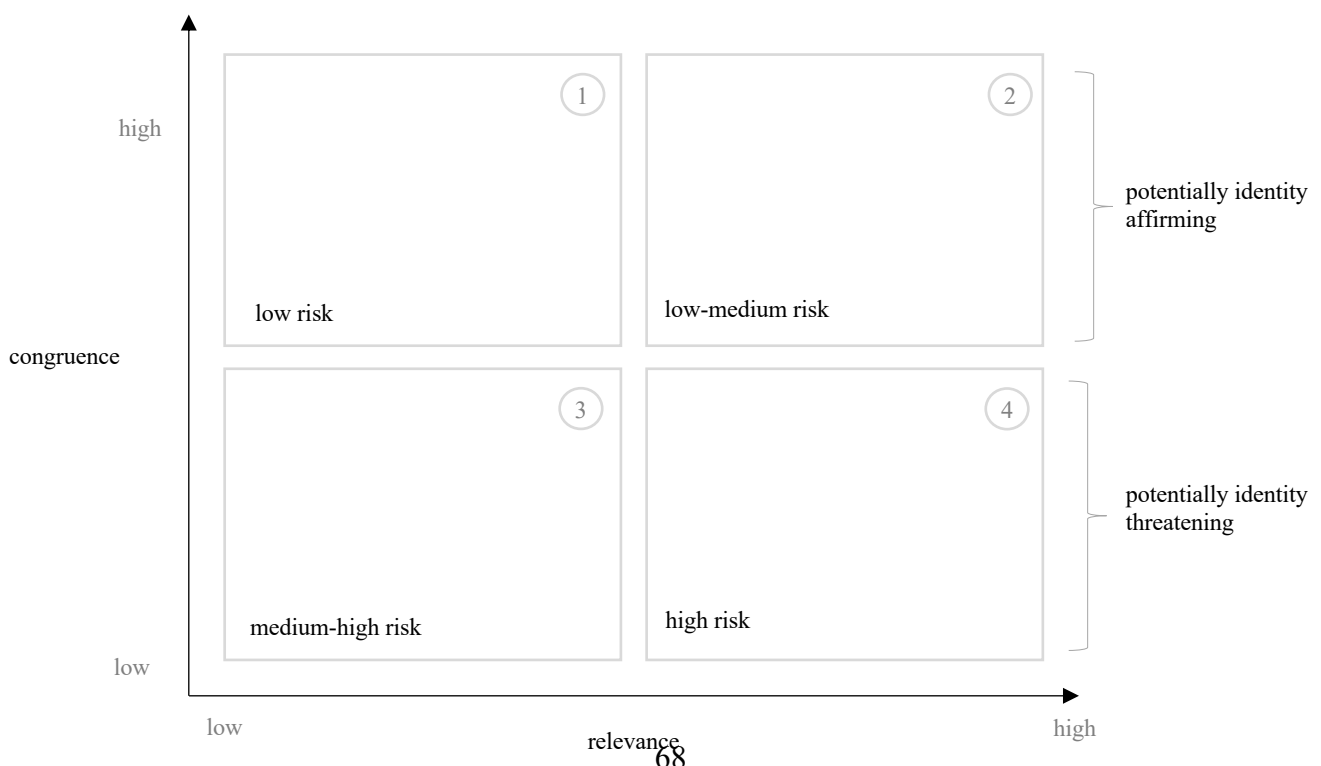
In light of the above interplay between relevance and congruence, our findings indicate that considering the amplifying and weakening effects of both mechanisms is important for understanding member's assessment of organizational identity threats arising from nonprofit-business partnerships.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to shed light on how nonprofit members perceive and make sense of nonprofit-business partnerships. Previous work on individual's evaluations of nonprofit-business partnerships largely proceeds from the for-profit perspective, focusing mainly on corporate employees (e.g., Berger et al., 2006; Rodell et al., 2016) or external stakeholders such as cause-related marketing customers (Thomas, Kureshi & Vatawala, 2009). In turn, relatively little is known about nonprofit members' perceptions of cross-sector partnerships (Harris, 2012; Schneider & Neumayr, 2022). Given the centrality of organizational identity and identification for nonprofit member engagement and commitment (e.g., Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Kelemen et al., 2017; Lee & Wilkins, 2011), this paper's concern with how and why certain nonprofit-business partnerships may arise as organizational identity threats addresses an important gap.

Building on the organizational identity threat and sensemaking literature, we conducted a qualitative study to gain a more nuanced understanding of identity implications of nonprofit-business partnerships. We found that evaluations of *congruence* and *relevance* play a major role in members' assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships and provided in-depth empirical insights into these appraisal processes. Here we identified *organizational*, *project*, and *personal congruence* as relevant sub-dimensions of partnership *congruence*, and *public*, *organizational*, and *personal involvement* as important sub-dimensions underlying the appraisal of partnership *relevance*. We also observed that congruence and relevance appraisals are interrelated. While congruence forms the baseline for partnership assessments, perceptions of high or low relevance may exacerbate or weaken potential effects of partnership (in)congruence, thus amplifying or weakening the influence of congruence evaluations on identity threat perceptions. Figure 5 illustrates how partnership congruence and relevance appraisals interact in shaping identity implications of nonprofit-business partnerships.

Figure 5. Interplay of Congruence and Relevance and Implications for Member Assessments of Identity Threats



Based on our findings, we postulate that perceptions of high (low) relevance may strengthen (weaken) potential effects of perceived partnership (in)congruence. We specifically expect partnerships perceived as high in congruence but low in relevance to have the lowest identity threat risk, whereas those perceived as low in congruence and high in relevance are particularly risky. In cases where nonprofit members perceive a high congruence but low relevance, partnerships can even be expected to be nonprofit identity affirming (1). If, however, members regard the partnership as highly relevant, potential identity risks may arise, even given a high degree of congruence, resulting in a low to medium risk (2). On the other hand, if congruence is low, there is a medium to high risk of the partnership being perceived as identity threatening (3). Lastly, the highest risk would be attributed to partnerships where congruence is low and relevance high (4).

Research Implications

Our research draws on and connects the literature on cross-sector partnerships with arguments from the literatures on organizational identity threats (e.g., Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2011; Petriglieri & Devine, 2016; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), identity-related sensemaking (e.g., Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rerup et al., 2022; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), identity salience (e.g., Van Dick et al., 2005), and organizational identity comparisons (e.g., Brickson, 2013). Our findings are in line with and support previous literature in this realm (e.g., by providing empirical support for the conceptual idea that congruence and relevance evaluations matter for cross-sector partnership evaluations; Cornwell et al., 2018), while simultaneously adding a more contextualized perspective on how, why, and when events emerge as salient to (re-)evaluations of organizational identity. In doing so, our paper makes three important contributions to nonprofit research, organizational identity threat, and identity-related sensemaking literature.

First, we contribute to the nonprofit literature by exploring identity implications of cross-sector partnerships from the perspective of individual nonprofit members. Although it is increasingly recognized that perceptions of organizational identity are influenced by various factors inside and outside the organization (Brickson, 2007; Jones & Volpe, 2011), only limited attention has been paid to how organizational partnerships shape these perceptions. Building on the emerging literature on organizational partnerships and organizational identity (e.g., Brickson, 2007; Scott & Lane, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008) and a growing body of work on cross-sector partnerships of nonprofit organizations (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007; Selsky & Parker, 2005), we empirically show that responses to business partnership vary considerably, ranging from perceptions of organizational identity threat to identity affirmation (see Cornwell et al., 2018). This contributes to a differentiated understanding of how collaborative activities shape nonprofit members' perceptions of organizational identity. Especially the observation that there are conditions under which such activities affirm their organizational identity challenges the assumption that nonprofit members tend to have a negative attitude towards business partnerships (e.g., Bocquet et al., 2020; Herlin, 2015; Yaziji & Doh, 2009).

Second, our analysis provides insights into why and when individuals' responses to organizational partnerships may vary. Here we focused on an understudied issue in the nonprofit and wider management literature on organizational identity threats, namely the cognitive appraisal processes of individual organizational members confronted with potentially identity-threatening events (Piening et al., 2020). Investigating these processes from a sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1995), our findings support the idea that the perceived congruence and relevance of partnerships play a key role in determining identity outcomes (Cornwell et al., 2018; also see Brickson, 2013). Our qualitative approach allowed us to delve into these largely understudied appraisal processes and fill them with contextualized meaning.

By identifying empirically-grounded sub-dimensions of congruence and relevance appraisals (e.g., *organizational*, *project*, and *personal congruence* as well as *public*, *organizational*, and *personal involvement*), we refine existing conceptual work in this realm (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2018) and enhance our understanding of these constructs in a nonprofit context. For instance, perceptions of *personal* congruence (or incongruence) provide a novel explanation for why individual nonprofit members may respond differently to various partnerships.

Lastly, an important contribution of our research lies in showing how congruence and relevance appraisals interact in influencing whether events are perceived as organizational identity threats. While previous conceptual research has begun to discuss how the perceived congruence and relevance of cross-sector partnerships jointly affect employees' organizational identification (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2018), at least to our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically examine identity implications of this interplay. With respect to nonprofit-business partnerships, our results indicate that negative identity-related implications of partnership incongruence can be either amplified or weakened by perceptions of high and low partnership relevance, respectively. Our study implies that it is necessary to investigate the interrelations of these sensemaking processes, e.g., through feedback loops, rather than viewing them as parallel or even isolated occurrences. While the nature of our data did not allow us to make claims about whether there is a point at which the two mechanisms may cancel each other out, our empirically grounded model (see Figure 5) offers a platform for further research into these interaction effects.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, this research has limitations that suggest various directions for future research. First, although we identified stable patterns across nonprofit members working in different organizations in Germany, the composition of our sample indicates that this study might be vulnerable to generalizability challenges. A more diverse sample would allow for

diving deeper into members' sensemaking processes by accounting for the role of both individual member attributes (e.g., values, attitudes towards business partnerships) and organizational characteristics (e.g., size, cause, experience with business partnerships, etc.).

Second, future research should go beyond the individual level analysis of this study by exploring the collective sensemaking efforts around organizational identity when nonprofit members are confronted with potential identity threats emanating from business partnerships. For example, it would be interesting to analyze how the characteristics of an organization's collective identity (e.g., its strength, that is, the extent to which identity perceptions are widely shared and densely articulated by members; see Ashforth et al., 2008) shape individual members' evaluations of business partnerships and other events that may pose organizational identity threats. This would be a valuable area for further studies, as neither organizational identity nor identity-related sensemaking in organizations occur in isolation but are rather shaped and informed by other members of an organization (Rerup et al., 2022).

Lastly, as our analysis focused on congruence and relevance appraisals, we did not evaluate other potentially relevant factors. Specifically, future studies could investigate the role of power, as perceptions of power have been found to be involved in shaping perceptions of organizational identity (e.g., Scott & Lane, 2000). Further, in cross-sector partnerships, unequal power dynamics often influence the relationship between the parties involved (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Lister, 2000), and nonprofit organizations frequently highlight the power imbalances they experience in nonprofit-business partnerships and how they impact their ways of acting (Eid & Sabella, 2014; O'Brien & Evans, 2017). Conversely, there are also instances in which nonprofits have more power than businesses, e.g., in terms of finances and funding, e.g., when large international nonprofit organizations collaborate with local businesses (Elbers & Schulpen, 2011). Thus, more research is needed to better understand how other influences

such as power relations in partnerships shape identity-related member assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships.

Conclusion

In this article, we empirically examined how nonprofit members make sense of nonprofit-business partnerships to clarify the conditions under which they perceive these partnerships as organizational identity threats. Our analysis based on semi-structured interviews supported the idea that members' assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships in terms of their identity *congruence* and *relevance* play a key role for threat appraisal and extended previous research by providing empirical insights into factors shaping these appraisal processes. Building on the observation that congruence and relevance appraisals interact in influencing identity threat perceptions, we advanced an empirically grounded model that specifies the identity implications of four combinations of congruence and relevance assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships.

Paper 3: Red Lines and Green Lights: Identity Work in Nonprofit-Business Partnerships

India Kandel^a, Alina McCandless Baluch^b and Erk P. Piening^a

^aLeibniz University Hannover; ^bUniversity of St Andrews

Abstract

Recent years have seen an intensification in collaborative efforts between for-profit businesses and nonprofit organizations. Yet, nonprofit members do not always react favorably when their organization engages with profit-driven organizations, as partnering up with corporate actors may lead to perceptions of “selling out”, mission drift, or even questions over “who we are as an organization” (i.e., organizational identity). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with members from two nonprofit organizations, this study identifies identity-related tensions arising from corporate partnerships and highlight four identity work tactics (e.g., *demarcation, reconciliation, affirmation, and retraction*) that nonprofit members engage in to deal with these tensions. We then offer an empirically grounded model of identity work in cross-sector partnerships. In doing so, we advance a nonprofit perspective on identity work in potentially conflict-laden inter-organizational relationships.

Keywords: Nonprofit organizations, cross-sector collaboration, nonprofit-business partnerships, organizational identity, identity work.

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Introduction

“Who does Earth collaborate with? That says a lot about us and our contents. And that’s why, naturally, we think very carefully about who to collaborate with or with whom we make public appearances. It’s also a process, which we observe very carefully and that’s assessed over and over again. What’s in it for us? Is it good? Is it bad? How is it perceived?”
(E2)

“Who we are” as an organization has important implications for “what we should do” and subsequently, who “we” should associate with (Anthony & Tripsas, 2016). Alignment between “who we are” and “what we do” is crucial, as misalignment between current and expected organizational identity may cause dissonance, discomfort and conflict amongst organizational members (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000; Brickson, 2013) and could even prompt them to leave their organization (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020). Negative implications of tensions and conflict over organizational identity may be particularly challenging for organizations that largely rely on identification for member acquisition and retention, such as nonprofit organizations (Rho, Yun & Lee, 2015). Indeed, nonprofit members such as volunteers may be quick leave their organization if their identification decreases (Tidwell, 2005). Here, we focus on one potential source of identity tensions and conflict in nonprofit organizations: nonprofit-business partnerships.

Prior research has highlighted that relationships or interactions with partnering organizations have the potential to shape organizational identity (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Brickson, 2005), for instance by challenging or suppressing aspects of organizational identity (Cornwell et al., 2018). This can be particularly pronounced in nonprofit-business partnerships, as these partnerships can lead to perceptions of mission drift (Grimes, Williams, & Zhao, 2019) if nonprofit members feel like their organization is prioritizing partnerships at the expense of the nonprofit’s mission. As a result, collaborating with businesses may lead to

identity conflict or even perceptions of identity threats when concerns over or perceptions of mission drift lead members to question what their organization stands for (Grimes, Williams, & Zhao, 2020). This can be exacerbated when these partnerships challenge nonprofit core values and identity traits, or even organizational legitimacy (Herlin, 2015). However, the rise of collaborative efforts between non- and for-profit organizations (e.g., Odziemkowska & Dorobantu, 2021) suggests that this potential for controversy and conflict does not always translate into negative outcomes.

In this paper, we explore how nonprofit members manage potential identity tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships through identity work. Identity work is here defined as the sum of discursive, physical and behavioral activities aimed at creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identities (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018). Prior research has shown that individuals may engage in identity work to reduce perceptions of identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011) and thereby soften or even avoid negative results of identity tensions such as disidentification or turnover (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Piening, Salge, Antons, & Kreiner, 2020). Specifically, identity work can aid in strengthening internal legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013) and manage boundaries between different organizational domains (Knapp et al., 2013), all of which can be considered to be key for alleviating identity-related tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships.

We adopted a qualitative research design and conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with members from two nonprofit organizations in the environmental sector. Based on our interview data, we identified three identity-related tensions (e.g., *operational*, *ideological*, and *reputational* tensions) and four identity work tactics that nonprofit members engage in to reduce these tensions, namely *demarcation*, *reconciliation*, *affirmation*, and *retraction*. Further, our findings suggest that members' use of these tactics is largely shaped by what we call identity work frames, i.e., factors that shape or 'frame' if and how members engage in

identity work tactics. The three identity work frames we identified in our study are *organizational identity orientation*, *partnership salience*, and *member role identity*. Our analysis highlights that identity implications of corporate partnerships for nonprofit identity are not necessarily inherent to certain partnerships, but rather dependent on how members make sense of corporate collaborations and how they use identity work to alleviate potential partnership tensions.

By providing an empirically-grounded model of identity work in nonprofit-business partnerships, our study offers three important contributions to the literature. First, by identifying four identity work tactics nonprofit members engage in to manage identity-related tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships, we advance a contextualized, inter-organizational perspective on identity work (e.g., Eury, Kreiner, Treviño, & Gioia, 2018; Kreiner et al.; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). In doing so, our research aids in better understanding when and how certain partnerships arise as threatening to organizational identity. Second, our findings on how identity work frames shape members' identity work refine current knowledge on why individuals' responses to potentially identity threatening events (here: nonprofit-business partnerships) may differ both within and between organizations. Here we particularly highlight how an organization's as well as an individual's position within their organizational network influence member evaluations of organizational identity. In doing so, we add to research on how relations to internal and external stakeholders shape organizational identity (e.g., Brickson, 2005, 2007; Cornwell et al., 2018). Third, by identifying temporal patterns in member's identity work processes, we add to research and theorizing on temporality in identity work (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Specifically, we show how temporal factors such as the stage of the partnership can explain some of the variance in members' use of certain identity work tactics.

Nonprofit-Business Partnerships, Tensions and Identity Work

Previous work on cross-sector partnerships, or more specifically, nonprofit-business partnerships, has highlighted both opportunities and challenges arising from these types of inter-organizational collaborations. Research that centers for-profit perspectives has often focused on financial and reputational benefits businesses may gain from collaborating with nonprofit organizations (e.g., Kim, Kim, & Qian, 2018; Wang, Choi, & Li, 2008; Wang & Qian, 2011). Conversely, studies adopting a nonprofit perspective often draw attention to the ‘dark side’ of these collaborations, including tensions, conflicts (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Markman et al., 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Young, 2000) and power imbalances between the collaborating parties (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; O’Brien & Evans, 2017). Power imbalances in particular may lead to identity-tensions in cross-sector partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005), since less powerful partners such as small environmental advocacy organizations may feel that their identity is being threatened by more powerful partners, e.g., large corporations (Selsky & Parker, 2005). These feelings may be exacerbated by cross-sector partnerships creating confusion about what an organization stands for and the direction in which the organization is heading amongst organizational members (Reissner, 2019).

We propose that partnership induced challenges to organizational identity may be particularly pronounced in nonprofit-business partnerships rather than other cross-sector collaborations, as the competing organizational logics of nonprofit and for-profit organization may translate into partnership tensions (Bode, Rogan & Singh, 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Young, 2000). Tensions arising from these partnerships may also exacerbate already existing identity conflicts in nonprofit organizations, which often find themselves caught between normative, i.e., social or mission driven, and utilitarian, i.e., business driven identities (Chenhall, Hall, & Smith, 2016; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Jäger & Beyes, 2010; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Specifically, partnerships with for-profit businesses can

push nonprofits to strengthen their “business side”, e.g., when they are required to become more “professional” and adopt certain business practices such as financial auditing and strategic planning to meet partnership and funding requirements (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Markman et al., 2016; McKay, Moro, Teasdale, & Clifford, 2015). These organizational changes may then threaten nonprofit values and core aspects of organizational identity (Austin, 2000; Herlin, 2015) and create member perceptions of the nonprofit organization “selling out” (Yaziji & Doh, 2009).

In order to manage tensions between competing organizational discourses and institutional logics, which ultimately lead to questions of “who we are as an organization”, organizational members may engage in identity work (Caza et al., 2018). Identity work consists of cognitive, discursive, physical and behavioral activities aimed at creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identities (Caza et al., 2018; Snow & Anderson, 1987) and spans multiple streams of research and theorizing on identities, including identity (role) theory, social identity and self-categorization theory, narrative theory, psychodynamic theory, as well as dramaturgical or symbolic theory (for a review see Brown, 2022). Individuals often employ identity work tactics to reduce perceived identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011), strengthen internal legitimacy of organizations (Brown & Toyoki, 2013) and manage boundaries between different organizational domains (Knapp et al., 2013), all of which applies to managing tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships. While most research has studied identity work with respect to single identities, recent work has also highlighted the importance of inter-connections between multiple identities with respect to identity threats, opportunities and identity work (e.g., Bataille & Vough, 2022). This stream of research is particularly relevant to our work, as it recognizes identities as both interrelated and in constant flux (Bataille & Vough, 2022), two perspectives we also adopt in our paper. Building on and adding to previous research on multiple identities, identity threats and identity

work, this paper adopts an identity work perspective to advance current understanding of how members of nonprofit organizations manage tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships. Specifically, we identify four identity work tactics members engage in in order to alleviate potential tensions arising from these types of partnerships.

Methods

Data Collection

In order to explore how members of nonprofit organizations perceive and manage identity-related tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships, we employed a qualitative research design and conducted 31 semi-structured interviews across two nonprofit organizations, which we call *Nature* and *Earth*. We selected the two organizations and the interviewees within these organizations on the basis of purposeful and theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002). We first screened publicly available information and statements on business collaborations on the webpages of potential case organizations. In order to reduce variance in our sample (Patton, 2002), we decided to select and contacted nonprofit organizations operating in the environmental sector. We choose two organizations operating in the field of environmental protection, as interactions between environmental nonprofits and corporations are often shaped by conflicting interests (Lyakhov & Gliedt, 2017). This allowed us to draw out areas of tension and conflict between the partnering organizations.

We were ultimately able to conduct 22 interviews at *Nature* (N1-N22) and 9 interviews at *Earth* (E1-E9), both of which engage in collaborative activities with for-profit organizations. While *Nature* generally adopted a more collaborative approach to interactions with for-profit businesses, *Earth* was less open to collaboration and partnerships and had more restrictive guidelines for collaboration. These varying degrees of openness to collaboration was why we chose our respective case organizations, as this allowed us to compare and contrast different attitudes towards partnering with businesses across the two organizations. Further, in order to

more accurately capture member perceptions across the respective organizations, we purposefully selected and contacted interviewees from different administrative levels of the respective organization as well as different regions across the country (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We spoke with both paid employees and volunteers, all of which held some kind of official position at their organization, either as group leader, regional manager, or volunteering coordinator. Some respondents even held multiple positions, such as leading a small, local group while simultaneously engaging in nation-wide expert committees. Table 4 provides an overview of the two organizations and interviewees in terms of members' descriptions of the two organizations, the organizations' respective partnership philosophy (i.e., understanding of and attitude towards nonprofit-business partnerships), as well as the number of members interviewed at each organizational level.

Data collection took place between May 2021 and November 2022. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the majority of interviews was conducted via videocall, a small number via telephone, and one interview in person. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for coding. We asked all interviewees about their history of personal involvement at their organization and how they would describe and define the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics of their organization (e.g., organizational identity; Albert & Whetten, 1985). We then introduced questions regarding the types of business partnerships their organization engages in, the benefits and challenges of collaborating with businesses, their personal attitude towards partnering with businesses how they dealt with tensions arising from partnering with for-profit organizations. To ensure continuity in the interview process, all interviews were conducted by the first author.

Table 4. Overview of Case Organizations and Interviews

Organization	Nonprofit description	Partnership philosophy	N° of interviews	
Nature	<i>Well, of course, our central values are nature, environmental protection, species protection, biotope conservation. (N6)</i>	<i>Collaboration rather than confrontation. (N16)</i>		
	<i>I mean as an organization, we're just not that radical. (N10)</i>	<i>Basically, we're open to all companies (...) but it's important that we implement common goals, define common goals. (N22)</i>		
	<i>You can draw attention to problems at different levels. Nature is very, very quiet and is rather trying to achieve something through political participation. (N11)</i>	<i>It's crucial that these collaborations are neatly regulated and don't contradict our goals. (N21)</i>	National: 3 Country: 7 Regional: 4 Local: 8	
		<i>We do have very strict guidelines, regarding these collaborations. (N3)</i>	<u>Total:</u> <u>22</u>	
Earth	<i>Our topics include pretty much everything that has something do with nature conservation and climate protection. (E7)</i>	<i>Well, I think there's a much more critical stance towards the economic sector. (E6)</i>		
	<i>I think we're pretty much considered critics and all. The 'classic' environmental organization that's always against everything. (E2)</i>	<i>Greenwashing and sponsoring, we're very sensitive to that. And of course it has to be comprehensible when you collaborate with someone. (E7)</i>		
	<i>We are renowned, we are somebody. We are not for sale, we are neutral. Sometimes, we address sensitive issues. (E9)</i>	<i>There are very strict rules. And I think it makes sense to be careful there. (E3)</i>	National: - Country: 3 Regional: 3 Local: 3	
			<u>Total:</u> <u>9</u>	

Data Analysis

Our data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We chose grounded theory as it is a practical method for research that seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning in real settings by focussing on interpretations of their own subjective experience (Suddaby, 2006). It is also most suited for building theories in the absence of elaborated theoretical domains (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and a preferred method for delving into individuals' sense making efforts (Charmaz, 1996; Suddaby, 2006). During

and shortly after the interviews, we took informal notes, which were later complemented by memos, we wrote while coding the interview transcripts. We used both as a reference during further data analysis and coding (Charmaz, 2006). We started generating codes from the interviews using open coding using MAXQDA software. Our codes consisted of in-vivo codes (i.e., language used by our interviewees; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and our own description to categorize and capture interview themes. We then derived 1st order codes from our descriptive codes by comparing and contrasting emergent codes, i.e., the empirical patterns from our data analysis, which we then grouped and regrouped in 2nd order codes, i.e., our “theories” about what was going on (Van Maanen, 1979). This process involved several rounds of going back to our interview data to generate initial categories, refining tentative categories, and, finally, stabilizing categories (Grodal, Anteby, & Holm, 2021).

We first analyzed all interviews from *Nature*, generating, refining and stabilizing categories across the 22 interviews. We then repeated this process with the 9 interviews we conducted at *Earth*. This sequential process allowed us to draw out identity-related differences with respect to identity boundary management in nonprofit-business partnerships between the two organizations. For instance, while the majority of the mechanisms aimed at alleviating identity tensions with respect to nonprofit-business partnerships we identified at *Nature* were also widely applied by members of *Earth* (e.g., reconciliation), others (e.g., integration) were not, as the organizational identity orientation (more confrontative) did not allow for this. Thus, we changed the change the label from integration to “affirmation”, which allowed for highlighting either cooperative or confrontative as well as pragmatist versus idealist views. Comparing and contrasting the “controversial categories” in interview data, we refined and stabilized the previously generated categories across the two case organizations.

Findings

Before proceeding with our findings, we want to briefly highlight the types of collaborations the organizations in our sample engage in, motives for collaborating with businesses, as well as the main differences between *Nature* and *Earth*. The collaborative activities discussed by our interviewees ranged from donations, to sponsorships and co-branding, consulting and social days, to joint projects and project development. Partnerships did not only vary in type, but also size and scope, e.g., local partnerships such as a small donation from a local shop versus nationwide forms of collaboration with substantial investment on both sides. Motives for engaging with businesses our interviews mentioned were access to finances, personnel and publicity, aiding businesses in reducing their environmental impact through specific projects and actions or by instigating change in the business as a whole, and reaching potential new members and volunteers. Some interviewees also disclosed that they felt like business partnerships are important social signals, i.e., a way of showing to other societal actors such as politics that businesses are willing to adopt more environmentally friendly practices. These reasons were often mentioned with direct reference to achieving the nonprofit's social mission, either by directly enabling the organization to do what it does (e.g., through financing) or to indirectly fulfil their mission by changing businesses through joint projects or consulting.

While both organizations in our sample apply very similar principles, guidelines or 'ground rules', when it comes to collaborating with businesses (e.g., staying independent, staying true to who they are as an organization, being transparent), they differ with respect to the types of partnerships and the general scope of collaborative activities with business organizations they engage in. While *Nature* generally applies a more collaborative approach, *Earth* is more restrictive with partnerships, oftentimes leaning more towards confrontative tactics, such as protesting or pressing charges against environmentally harmful company

practices. Interestingly, our interviewees frequently compared and contrasted their organizations with others operating in the field of environmental protection as a way of highlighting the position or role of their organization within that specific sector. Across both organizations, words like ‘greenwashing’, ‘independence’, ‘funding’, ‘fit’, ‘perceptions’ and ‘expectations’ were frequently mentioned by our interviewees when asked about their thoughts on nonprofit-business partnerships. As one interviewee noted regarding business partnerships:

Well, the first word that comes to mind, interestingly enough, is ‘be careful’. (E5).

We also find it important to note that although our analysis focused on how nonprofit members perceive and manage tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships, not all members perceive nonprofit-business negatively. Interviewees frequently mentioned that they do have “good” partnerships, with common goals, a similar philosophy, clearly defined and communicated expectations, and mutual respect, trust and credibility on both the personal and professional are level. Further, our interviewees highlighted the importance of business collaborations for their organization and shared that they expected this form of interaction to become even more important in the future. Yet, members of both organizations also unanimously agreed that collaborating with businesses is “difficult” and “complicated” and that partnerships need to be managed with great care as they can also potentially damage a nonprofit’s reputation.

Overall, our data suggests that partnerships have the potential to reinforce but also to challenge organizational identity and image. Below, we explore these opposing findings by detailing how members assess, evaluate, and make sense of business partnerships and how “who we are” and “what we do” is reconciled through identity work. These identity work tactics can aid in explaining how individuals cope with tensions resulting from inter-organizational partnerships, thereby avoiding negative outcomes of identity tensions such as disidentification and member turnover (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Piening et al., 2020). In the following, we

present our findings along the categories of identity tensions, identity tactics, and identity work frames, which correspond to the aggregate dimensions of our data structure (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Figure 6 provides an overview of the first- and second-order themes, as well as the aggregate dimensions of our data, which served as the basis of our findings. Table 5 provides additional representative data for the second-order themes.

Figure 6. Data Structure

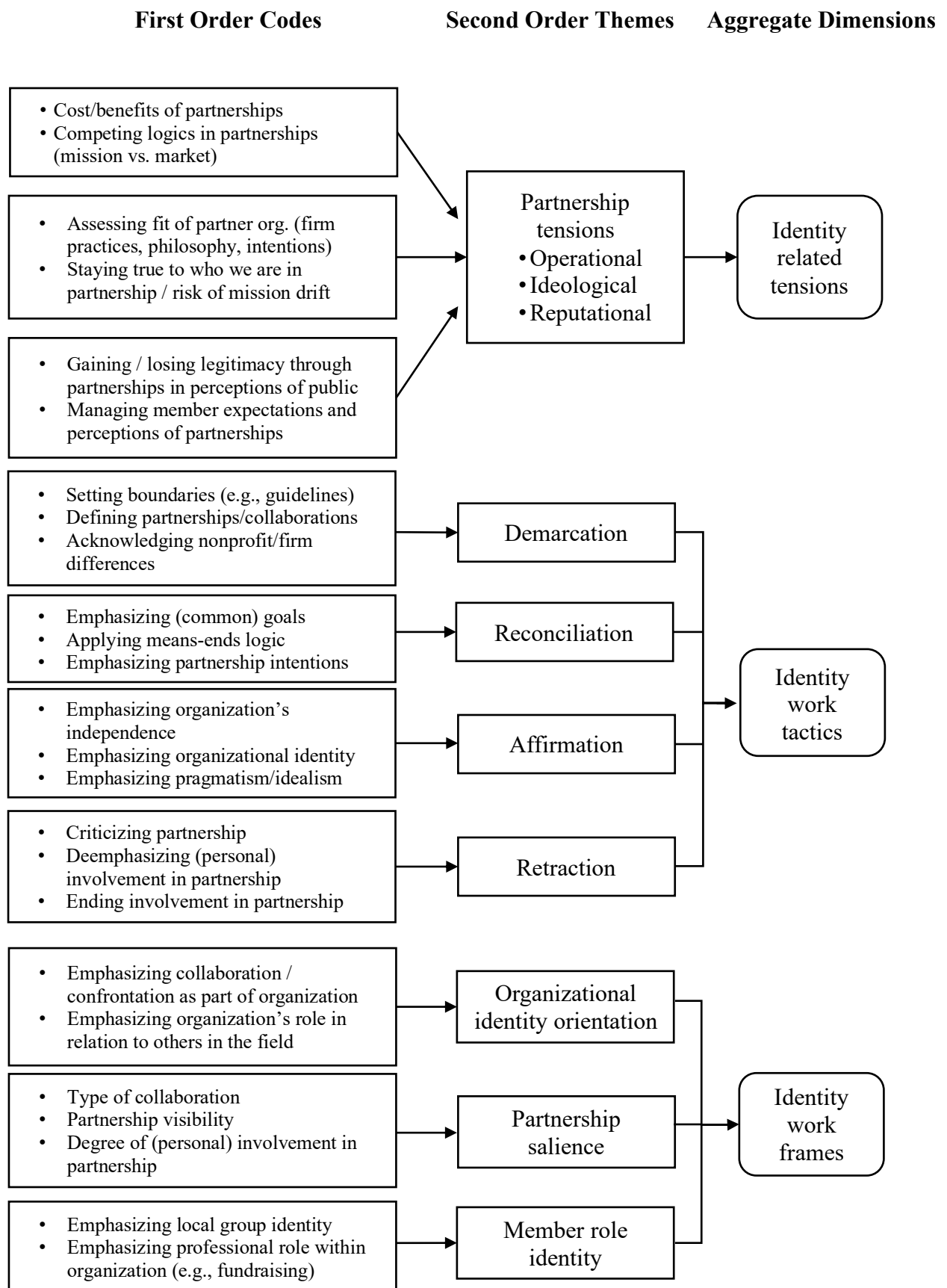


Table 5. Additional Representative Data for Second-Order Themes

Partnership tensions

- **Operational:** *For the company, of course, it's first and foremost about the market and profitability. (N6)*
- **Ideological:** *...we know that they massively support the coal industry. So this simply needs to be said: we can't support them with their greenwashing, that's impossible. (N20) / Naturally, you only want to accept donations or collaborate with them if you're sure that the company is 'clean'. If it matches your own ideas, your goals, and those of the organization and if it's not diametrically opposed to them. You don't want to, somehow, promote an environmental polluter. (E8)*
- **Reputational:** *So you really have to be careful that you don't, let's say, put your foot in your mouth somewhere. We always have to remain credible, externally, and it's very, very important that what we do is transparent. (N22) / [You need to] be careful not to do anything that jeopardizes credibility. (E5)*

Demarcation

- *In any case, I would also describe our board as very critical, because I've often said, 'oh look, here's a project' and then they said no, we don't do that. (N15)*
- *I guess for now it's kind of an unwritten law what kind of things we take on, where we're active, where we're not active. (N16)*
- *This is the rough guideline for business collaborations, nationwide. But how it's handled is very, very mixed. (E1)*

Reconciliation

- *Well, you have to make sure that you can connect the goals of this company with your own goals as well. (N17)*
- *Of course, you have to make sure that the companies do not have the feeling that they are only good for giving us money. On the other hand, we cannot feel like we're only the green dot on the company website. (N16)*
- *It's more like, maybe you'll do some joint project, do something together, so to speak and then be like "Maybe we can support each other here". (E2)*

Affirmation

- *We stand for cooperative nature conservation, which sometimes means that we talk to everyone (...), because it's about achieving the best for nature. While other organizations would rather strike alarm. (...) the strategy to work more cooperatively is just another approach which sometimes means that you have to swallow a bit more, make many compromises. (N10)*
- *You can't always just complain and say you're stupid and you're destroying nature and you're the bad guys (...) For Nature in particular, which is, well, not so radical, that's also a building block, I think. To not just complain, but also to get together and look what you can achieve together. (N11)*
- *And of course we'll also have to explore this market a bit, check with companies, to see which new forms of collaboration may be possible without selling our souls. (E1)*

Retraction

- *Now if you ask any volunteer who's been around for a long time, they'll say we don't need business collaborations, or that they can hurt us and that they're, well, that they're not that good. (N13)*
- *... there were also some reports about it in the media that Nature recently broke off a cooperation with [company], which is not entirely uncontroversial, and our organization did not think it was okay, well, also because our own members said that it was not okay (...) to cooperate with this company. (N4)*
- *That really caused quite a bit of outrage among the members, so that was ceased pretty soon. (E1)*

(Table 5 continued)

Organizational identity orientation

- *Nature definitely stands for cooperation, for talking to each other. (N6)*
- *I mean as an organization, we're just not that radical. (N10)*
- *Earth is one of the few organizations that is truly very, very restrictive regarding partnerships and collaborations with businesses. It's out trademark. (E2)*

Partnership salience

- *Simply put, the difference is that I don't have a company logo anywhere, but that the employees support the project, which the company facilitated, but without advertising for the company. (E9)*
- *Well, I can't really say anything about [business collaborations], because we've never actually had to deal with that kind of stuff here. (N21)*
- *I have to say that I didn't really hear anything about it here in our district; that probably went through the federal level. (N18)*

Member role identity

- *Personally, I'm a bit more reserved than Nature. (N6)*
 - *I'm a rather pragmatic, rational person. I manage our finances and I can see how much is in our bank account. And I know, oh, that'd be a good project, but I can't do it unless I get the money somehow. (E4)*
 - *There is no general agreement [on business partnerships], there are different opinions. There are people who say we shouldn't do anything at all. And there are people who say that we should be doing a lot more. (E5)*
-

Identity Related Tensions

As highlighted above, while our interviewees stated the importance of collaborating with businesses, they also pointed out several challenges. We aggregated these partnership tensions into the categories of *operational*, *ideological*, and *reputational* partnership tensions, which respectively pose questions of “what can we do”, “what should we do”, and “what do others expect us to do”? These three questions are reflected in the central question of “how should we act to stay true to who we are as an organization”, i.e., “how do we protect our identity as an organization”? First, *operational tensions* are often results of time and personnel constraints. Members expressed that they frequently do not have the capacity to engage in business partnerships, especially when collaborative activities go beyond simple transactions such as donations, e.g., when businesses are interested in tailored, individual types of partnerships that require a large amount of work on the side of the nonprofit organization.

Genuine collaborations are incredibly time-consuming because you really have to define and develop them individually. (N16)

Interviewees also noted that they had to carefully assess costs and benefits of each partnership as to not spend too much time on partnerships at the expense of their mission.

In terms of cooperating with businesses, content wise, both sides have to really want it, otherwise it's too tedious to develop. Otherwise, we're moving too far away from what we're there for, nature conservation, and not to make any companies happy. That's pretty much the line. (N13)

Second, *ideological concerns* describe issues of partner (mis)fit, specifically when the practices and philosophy of a potential partner organization are perceived to be at odds with the nonprofit's mission. For instance, members highlight organizational commitment to sustainability as an important requirement for collaboration and pointed out that they refuse collaborating with certain industries such as military, oil and gas.

If you want to say it in one sentence: all companies that, in comparison, recklessly destroy or massively endanger nature, the environment, and people's health through their business activities, are companies we would never consider as partners. (E5)

Lastly, *reputational concerns* were frequently brought up when discussing business partnerships. As one interviewee responded when asked where they saw the risks of business partnerships: "*Reputation, definitely.*" (N20). These reputational risks are often linked to fear of being used for greenwashing, which was one of the main concerns of our interviewees. Risks associated with greenwashing include both "being used" by businesses but also being accused of "selling out" by important stakeholders, e.g., current and potential members and the general public.

The reason we are so restrictive with working with businesses is that it would very much affect our image, in a negative way, if we... well, at least that's what we assume, if we'd sell ourselves to these companies. Yeah, that's why we tend to be overly cautious. (E2)

Interviewees stressed the importance of transparency in partnerships as well as remaining independent to overcome these concerns. However, there is also a fear of hidden reputational

risks, often linked to difficulties in assessing true business intentions and issues of limited control when it comes to larger companies.

I tend to be extremely cautious with these large companies. They're very complex, so there's a good chance there'll be something somewhere that will hurt us when it comes out. And that'll damage our image a lot more than the company's. (N1)

In summary, members acknowledge that collaborating with businesses is an important, yet difficult topic for their organization that comes with tensions and feelings of unease amongst nonprofit members. Common to all these tensions is a certain fear of mission drift and putting their organizations reputation, internal and external legitimacy and integrity at risk by entering the wrong (types of) partnerships. As a result, partnership concerns and tensions also lead to organizational identity tensions. We define *organizational identity tensions* in business partnerships as the stresses and strains experienced by organizational members as a result of a perceived dissonance between expected organizational identity, i.e., “who we as an organization should be” (Brickson, 2013), and what a certain partnership would imply about their organization. Identity tensions often emerged as a result of competing nonprofit and business logics, and a fear of focusing “too much” on business partnerships (e.g., mission-market tensions; see Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Sanders, 2015). Thereby, a main tension is potentially achieving “more” by collaborating with businesses (e.g., through funding) without jeopardizing their mission by over-prioritizing businesses.

On one level, we'd really rather not have to. If we... well, it's always this conflict between keeping our financial independence and collaborating with companies, if you want money from them. (E1)

Remaining true to themselves in interactions with others (internal perception) and the importance of preserving organizational reputation and credibility (external perception), highlight both internal perceptions of organizational identity and externally construed image of the organization as guiding principles for partnership efforts. In the following section, we

turn towards our analysis of the types of identity work nonprofit members engage in to balance and alleviate these tensions.

Identity Work Tactics

After describing common concerns and tensions in business partnerships, we now turn towards analyzing how individual nonprofit members deal with these tensions. Our data suggested that there are four identity-work tactics nonprofit members use for managing and alleviating tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships, namely *demarcation*, *reconciliation*, *affirmation*, and *retraction*. While we distinguish between these four tactics, we would like to highlight that they are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary and even interdependent. Based on the type as well as stage of the partnership, members would engage in one or the other tactic, sometimes sequentially or even simultaneously. We highlight these temporal patterns at the end of our findings section. In addition, we found that members' use of these tactics differed both between and within organizations. Here we identified *organizational identity orientation*, *partnership salience*, and *member role identity* as important influencing factors, which we describe in detail in our section on identity work frames.

Demarcation. The first identity work tactic is *demarcation*, which can be described as setting partnership boundaries, both on the ideological and the practical level. When asked about how they managed the previously outlined tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships, all interviewees highlighted how they tried to prevent these tensions from arising in the first place by only entering partnerships with businesses that fit the organization's cooperation guidelines (e.g., no cooperation with military, oil or gas corporations) and where benefits (e.g., access to funding or personnel) exceed the costs (e.g., time invested in partnership, potential reputational damage). Setting boundaries aids in bridging the competing logics of businesses and nonprofits within a defined inter-organizational space and serve as a mechanism for preventing over-

prioritizing business logics (also see Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015). In other words, partnership boundaries reinforced members in their own understanding of their organization, while simultaneously allowing for dialogue. As one interviewee noted:

I'm a representative of a nature conservation organization, why should I move away from that? And they are companies. Yes, I expect them to move in our direction, but I also have to acknowledge, that they have a different outlook on things; that's their role. I can't condemn them for that or for saying 'but that's how I make my money'. (N1)

To avoid over-prioritizing the needs of the business partner and potentially risking mission drift by doing so, members often anchor their assessment of which collaborations are safe to enter both in the type of effort involved and their organization's mission.

Although both *Nature* and *Earth* had set and even shared common guidelines regarding business collaborations, boundaries were often defined and re-negotiated case by case. While these case-by-case decisions allow for a more individual approach to collaborations, they also introduced uncertainty, which members sometimes reduce by setting personal boundaries based on their previous experience. Depending on the type and scope of the cooperation, interviewees will also involve other members higher up in the organization to reinsure the boundaries they had set. Our interviewees also noted that boundaries for business partnerships are not only negotiated within their organization, but that other stakeholders were also consulted in these processes – albeit indirectly.

It [business partnerships] does get noticed, certainly. That's exactly why it is all the more important that every collaboration is clearly regulated and does not contradict our goals. So, I certainly know that it does get noticed by the public, or the media, and that it's observed and commented on, yeah. (N21)

Although many collaborations are negotiated case by case, repeatedly posing the question of “where do we draw the line” in partnerships, an important and non-negotiable red-line is that of remaining (financially) independent from businesses, thus counteracting accusations of “selling out”. As one interviewee noted:

It just is and also remains a very fine line. Precisely because we draw very clear lines or boundaries on the one hand. And to find this boundary, to walk a path that outsiders will also understand, and where you can say, okay it's pretty clear that Earth is not influenced or bought by external third parties, by companies... it's difficult. (E7)

Notably, while some interviewees were often conflicted about where to draw the line, others were rather firm in their stance.

I'm pretty firm and consistent with the companies (...) because there are red lines, and once you cross them, there are no more red lines, only orange ones. (E9)

In summary, by setting the boundaries, the frame or the space in which collaborating with businesses are regarded as adequate *demarcation* set the boundary conditions for engaging in the second identity-work tactic we identified: *reconciliation*.

Reconciliation. The second tactic, *reconciliation*, describes members efforts to divert partnership tensions by defining and focusing on common goals. This involves weighing costs and benefits, or motives and concerns of partnerships, or thinking of collaborations as means to an end. Notably, even when applying this tactic, members remain conscious of tensions and even potential risks, such as defining common goals in partnerships that are not necessarily their own.

The great risk with these collaborations is that there are certain agreements, meaning in our case, we as Nature define common goals with the people from [business]. However, in defining these goals, I am then involved in things that are not my goals at all, specifically economic aspects. I can recognize them in practice, but they are not my goals, they are means. (N1)

Members often weight costs of certain partnerships against their contribution to the nonprofit's mission, i.e., doing something good for the environment. Adopting this means-ends approach allows members to frame partnerships as congruent with organizational identity. Members may also be willing to withstand criticism from outsiders, if they are convinced that a certain partnership can do good for the environment (i.e., achieving their mission), which their organization would have to forgo if there was no such cooperation.

We can contribute something positive there, that's why we accept that some people say yes, [business] just wants to put on a green coat (...) if we can have a positive influence (...) then that's okay. (N21)

Further, members often seek to “match” businesses with certain projects that are deemed fitting to heighten perceptions of credibility on both sides. This means-end narrative often includes a rather pragmatic focus on common goals and benefits for both sides, i.e., a win-win situation.

There is a very clear, a very clear match in terms of benefit from both sides and we get some money. (...) They do their business, they do it with us, and we profit from each other. (N13)

However, means-end logics cannot always alleviate tensions, as it is not only the core purpose (i.e., ends), but also what are the ways in which this purpose is pursued (i.e., means) that is important for defining “who we are” as an organization (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). Thus, members sometimes felt unease regarding collaborations that were entered, albeit not being an ideal fit.

Yes, that is a small sore spot, as you'd say. You know exactly that you are vulnerable [to criticism] at this point. Of course, this is also circumvented a bit, but it's quite a classic cost-benefit consideration. (N16)

In summary, in order to assess whether or not the “ends” would justify the “means”, members often circle back to the organization’s mission, as well as costs and benefits of the partnership, thus requiring a constant process of evaluation and negotiation with internal and external stakeholders.

Affirmation. The third identity work tactic we identified was *affirmation*. While *reconciliation* tactics focus on aligning the sometimes contrasting goals and motives of both organizations (i.e., collaborations facilitate “what we do”), *affirmation* tactics are aimed at asserting that organizational identity does not change as a result of certain partnerships, often with specific reference to how an organization relates to others’ (e.g., organizational identity orientation; see Brickson, 2005). This may involve repeated statements of the organization not “selling out”

and talking about the organization as being more collaborative or more confrontative respectively. Thus, *affirmation* tactics largely depend on the organization's identity orientation (i.e., collaborative versus confrontative), highlighting organizational identity as an important influencing factor and reference point for evaluating nonprofit-business partnerships. For the more collaborative organization, e.g., *Nature*, this involves actively framing the practice of collaborating with businesses as part of "what we do", e.g., something that members of *Nature* perceive as central, enduring and distinctive about their organization (e.g., key aspects of organizational identity; Albert & Whetten, 1985).

Cooperation, having conversations, interaction, definitely. I think that will remain at the heart of our 'brand'. (N6)

Specifically, this mindset distinguishes *Nature* from more "radical" organizations in their field. These cooperative principles also show in member interpretations of their organization's role vis-à-vis other organizations (e.g., organizational identity orientation; Brickson, 2005). Notably, members do not use this tactic to explain away potential tensions and even highlight potential risks of cooperative approaches, such as having to compromise more and even negative press from outsiders. Despite acknowledging these difficulties, members felt that their organization is "playing their part" by cooperating with businesses, while other environmental nonprofits are doing theirs by opposing them. Members of *Earth* considered their organization as one of the more critical ones, often opposing rather than working with companies. Yet, some highlighted that although their organization was highly critical of business partnerships, there were some ways of cooperating with businesses that did not infringe on this important part of their organization's identity:

There are ways to cooperate with companies that do not involve greenwashing or losing your critical stance on companies. (E5)

Lastly, while *affirmation* focuses on stressing organizational identity as enduring in or sometimes despite partnerships, others also acknowledged that their stance on cooperating with companies was fluid and in constant change and being discussed repeatedly.

At Earth there is this urge to talk about it, independent of certain collaborations. And these discussions sometimes do last hours. So there is this general desire to talk about it, do we do business partnerships, under which conditions, or at all? (E5)

Retraction. Finally, *retraction* as an identity work mechanism refers to active or passive distancing from a partnership. Active retraction involves voicing concerns and pushing for not engaging with a certain partner organization (anymore), while passive retraction involves cognitive forms of distancing.

There are these collaborations where you do have to pull the plug at some point, and I think that's always – especially with public collaborations – it's always a back and forth between what's useful to us and to making our understanding of environmental protection and to stimulate something in people and where do you encounter restraints, because people think negatively about us cooperating with someone. (N6)

Maybe unsurprisingly, members are especially likely to engage in active retraction in the case of scandals. In one case, *Nature* was being supported by a business which was subsequently involved in a scandal, upon which the partnership was cancelled.

So, [company] supported this project with money, and of course that money was then missing in the budget somewhere. Nevertheless, I thought it was good that back then they said, no, we can no longer support this, morally, we have to cancel the partnership and yes, that's what we did. (N21)

Less active forms of retraction involve distancing from collaborations, even those the organization does not choose to cease, for instance by being restrictive with or excluding companies using their logo for public communications.

Of course, any company can donate to us. But they don't get anything other than a confirmation of donation. (...) They are not allowed to use it for publicity either. They are not allowed to use our logo nor use our name in their press releases. That's pretty much how we distinguish sponsoring and donations, the way I'd understand it." (E1)

Other members acknowledged that while they will not actively oppose a certain partnership, they are personally very critical when it comes to collaborating with businesses and that they would prefer engaging in fewer collaborations. Thus, retraction can also include distancing oneself from partnerships, especially those one is not directly involved in. Interviewees often referred to and trusted decisions being made by other members of the organization, thus retracting from the decision-making process involved in partnerships. Although our interviewees talked about how these tactics aided in alleviating identity tensions resulting from partnerships, many also acknowledged that there always remained a certain level of tension and uncertainty. When being asked if and why their attitude towards business partnerships had changed over time, one interviewee responded:

I can see that you can achieve positive things by working with companies or other organizations. Partially, however, I think I'll always carry this unease or uncertainty.
(N6)

Identity Work Frames

Our findings highlight, that while there are four generally identifiable identity work tactics which nonprofit members employ to manage identity-related tensions arising from nonprofit-business partnerships, members' use of these tactics varies, often considerably. In the following we highlight three factors that shape if and how members engage in the aforementioned identity work tactics, namely *organizational identity orientation*, *partnership salience*, and *member role identity*. To begin with, *organizational identity orientation* serves as a reference point for assessing the partnership activities of an organization, i.e., for assessing whether or not certain partnership activities are in line with "who we are as an organization". Secondly, *partnership salience* influences the degree to which partnerships emerge as relevant to member assessments of organizational identity, thereby affecting member perceptions of tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships, and the degree to which identity work tactics are deemed necessary to alleviate them. Third, *member role identity* in terms of

managerialist/pragmatist versus volunteer/idealist can aid in explaining differences in assessments of nonprofit-business partnerships between members of the same organization. Since these three factors set the stage or ‘frame’ for perceptions of identity tensions and the use of identity work tactics, we call these influencing factors *identity work frames*.

Organizational identity orientation. As we described in the previous section, members frequently refer back to the organization’s core values, their mission and the organization’s ways of relating to others when speaking about nonprofit-business partnerships (e.g., organizational identity orientation; Brickson, 2005). These guiding principles then shape the ways in which identity work tactics can be applied. For instance, the organizational mission of environmental protection guides which partnerships are acceptable (e.g., no partnerships with fossil fuel firms, e.g., *demarcation*) and also how means-ends logics can be applied in partnerships (e.g., *reconciliation*; “...if we know that, in the end, we can get less out of it for the environment [if we do not engage in partnerships], we are very pragmatic.” (N13)

Related to the above statement (e.g., pragmatism), interviewees also often talked about the degree to which partnerships with others were part of what their organization did or did not stand for as a basis for reaffirming their organization’s identity in and through partnerships (e.g., *affirmation*; “Cooperation, having conversations, interaction, definitely. I think that will remain the core of our ‘brand’.” - N6)

While cooperating with others was thus deeply ingrained in how members of *Nature* perceived their organization in relation to others, *Earth* had a slightly different approach:

Earth is one of the few organizations that’s really very, very restrictive regarding collaboration and businesses and working with businesses. That’s our trademark. (E2)

These guiding principles shape how members apply identity work tactics in several ways. For instance, members of *Earth* tend to be more restrictive regarding the partnerships they would consider engaging in (e.g., *demarcation*) and were also less likely than members of *Nature* to heighten partnerships as part of what their organization did (e.g., *affirmation*). We

thus conclude that an understanding of the organization's role in relation to others, i.e., organizational identity orientation (Brickson, 2005, 2007), is an important part of an organization's identity, and one that is often activated in and guides how organizations and their members navigate inter-organizational relationships.

Yes, well, I think we are... I think we're very much considered critics and all that. A classic environmental nonprofit organization that's always against everything. Well, and in a way that's pretty much our role, naturally, and you've gotta take it, even if you don't always want it. But that's the way it is on that spectrum, someone has to stand on the far left in that line. (E2)

Partnership salience. The second identity work frame we identified was *partnership salience*, which we define as the degree to which partnerships emerge as salient to member perceptions of the organization. Here we identified the type of the partnership, partnership visibility as well as member's involvement in the partnership as main factors associated with partnership salience. To begin with the type of the partnership in terms of the way of collaborating (e.g., donation, sponsorship, social days, etc.) as well as the size and scope (e.g., amount of personal and financial resources involved, timeframe, etc.) affect how members perceive partnerships to emerge as relevant to or come under scrutiny by others. As one interviewee noted:

If it's [business donations] small amounts, it's far too little to be greenwashing. (E5)

Further, interviewees often highlighted, that they regarded the types of collaborations that focused on employees rather than the firm (e.g., social days) as less 'objectionable' than those involving public sponsorships and collaborations. Here they pointed out that in these types of collaborations, they were mainly concerned with employees as individuals, and that they saw the company as mediator, rather than a direct partner.

Well, one of these terms is always greenwashing. That you don't want that the companies are just doing that to kinda give themselves a green coat. But I don't really see that danger as much with those personal kinds of events, when we're directly working with the employees. (E3)

This was different for other types of partnerships, especially those involving images such as logos for public communications:

This is very important to us because of our independence, that we do not give away our logo for any economic cooperation that gives a financial advantage or leads to an image transfer, because we simply want to be independent in our criticism, in our interpretation, in our overall presentation. (E2)

This leads us to the second factor of partnership salience we identified, namely partnership visibility. As indicated by the previous quotes, the way in which partnerships are presented and/or visible to others as well as oneself affects the way in which they may lead to member's having to engage in identity work. Partnership visibility is often closely tied to the type of the partnership, since donations are generally less visible than sponsorships or co-branding. Several of our interviewees pointed out, that they learned about a certain partnership of their own organization or those of other environmental nonprofits, by coming across co-branded products in their personal lives, for instance at the supermarket. Partnership visibility is relevant to how members engage in identity work related to partnerships, since if members are unaware of partnerships, they do not need to engage in tactics to alleviate potential tensions. Secondly, visibility also plays a major role for public perceptions of the nonprofit. Highly visible partnerships may lead to the nonprofit and the business being closely associated in the minds of others, or even suggest that the nonprofit is endorsing the company and their products, which was a major point our interviewees would bring up. Notably, associations with business may or may not be favorable, depending on the public image of the firm.

It's always a mix between how environmentally damaging or socially reprehensible their business is and how the company is perceived by the public. It's important to consider that. Nobody gains anything if our members just run away after the fact [entering a business collaboration]. (E1)

Further, negative events such as scandals can heighten the public and internal visibility of a specific partnership, but also increase members' awareness of partnerships on a general level. Indeed, one of our interviewees mentioned that public coverage of a scandal the

organization was involved with at the time, made them think about how their organizations engaged in partnership for the very first time. Thus, the scandal increased salience of the practice of business partnerships.

I'd say up until this [company] scandal, personally, I've never thought about [business collaborations] at all. This event practically had me thinking about it for the first time, created a perspective on it. (N21)

Lastly, we found that the salience of partnerships is often nested in members' personal involvement with partnerships in their immediate organizational context, a factor which is also closely related to partnership visibility (e.g., being aware certain partnerships existed).

At the same time, those on the regional level can start partnerships, with companies for example, which we don't really hear about at our level. (...) Those are really these larger projects. (N18)

This is exacerbated by most members across both organizations being strongly rooted in their immediate or local organizational context rather than the overarching organization. While interviewees acknowledged the importance of business partnerships, these types of partnerships often do not play a key role for their local operations and are therefore perceived as peripheral rather than core for what they were trying to achieve, a notion we will draw upon in the following section on *member role identity*.

Member role identity. The third and final identity work frame we identified in our study was *member role identity*. Member role identity refers to the roles or positions members saw themselves in within their organization and which of their role identities they would evoke in certain situations. As outlined above, we noticed considerable differences in perceptions of partnerships on the national versus the local level. This is exacerbated by members often identifying more strongly with their local group rather than the overarching organization. Notably though, strong identification on the local level did not always equal a low identification with the overarching organization. However, as pointed out above, local members feel less

responsible for and also often less affected by nonprofit-business partnerships occurring in other places, making it more likely for them to engage in *retraction*.

It's [cooperation guidelines] followed pretty strictly on the upper levels, and on a more regional or local level, I noticed that many don't find it as crucial. (E2)

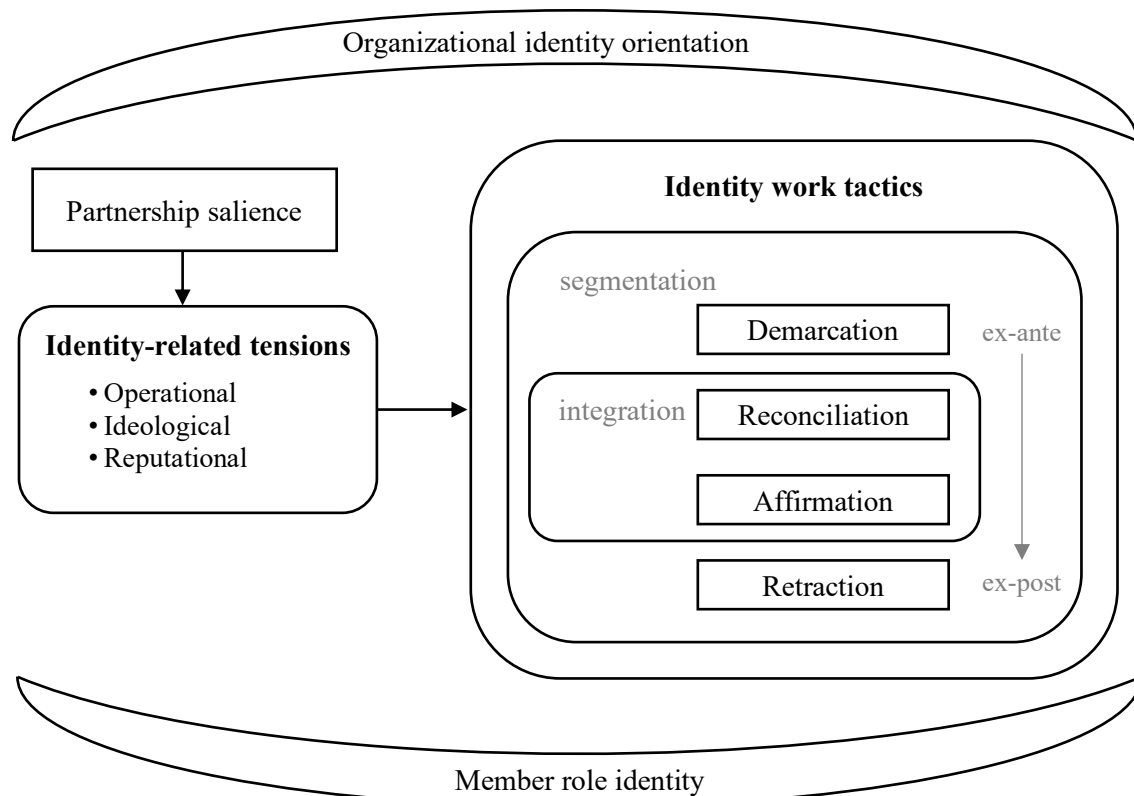
Further, members in certain positions such as fundraising, finances or marketing would adopt a more 'pragmatist' approach to business partnerships than their peers. Members in these managerial roles would often engage in tactics such as *reconciliation*, while also being mindful of *demarcation* tactics, or by highlighting that the motives of the potential partnering organization.

Our volunteers have this reflex of 'companies are only doing it because they're doing greenwashing'. That means, if we, as board, or me personally, if we are convinced that a collaboration with a company is good and useful, have to convince everyone who is involved, especially those on the local levels, that it's not greenwashing. (E5)

Towards a Model of Identity Work in Nonprofit-Business Partnerships

Drawing together the findings from our analysis lead us to develop a model of identity work in nonprofit-business partnerships, which is visualized in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Identity Work in Nonprofit-Business Partnerships



The left side of our model shows *partnership salience*, and *identity-related tensions* arising from partnerships, as they form the prerequisite for members engaging in identity work around nonprofit-business partnerships. We posit that nonprofit members will only engage in identity work if partnerships and tensions emerge as salient with respect to members' evaluations of their organization's and their own individual identity (which we consequently describe as *identity work frames*). The four identity work tactics we identified, namely *demarcation*, *reconciliation*, *affirmation*, and *retraction*, are depicted at the right side of our model. While we note that there is no strict temporality to members' use of these tactics, we found general tendencies regarding the stages of a partnership at which members would engage in certain tactics. Demarcation tactics were often employed before engaging in partnership or collaborations, thereby defining the space in which collaborations can occur ex-ante. On the other hand, retraction tactics reduce tensions through avoidance ex-post. Retraction tactics can

reinforce boundaries set through demarcation in the light of new information, such as a business scandal. Thus, these two tactics are aimed at reducing tensions by clearly setting boundaries in partnerships, and thus defining the space in which collaborations can occur ex-ante and ex-post. Within that frame, members may engage in tactics we classify as integration tactics: reconciliation and affirmation. Both tactics seek to reduce tensions by integrating and aligning business partnerships with what their organization stands for, either by reconciling partnership goals (e.g., partnerships *help us* do what we do) or by affirming their organization's identity, for instance by highlighting that business partnerships are an important part of their organization's identity (e.g., partnerships *are* what we do). Notably, the degree to which nonprofit organizations engage in business partnerships differs across organizations, which is also reflected in our sample. This stresses *organizational identity orientation* (e.g., the degree to which partnerships and collaboration form an important part of an organization's identity) as an important reference point for identity work tactics related to nonprofit-business partnerships.

We therefore highlight organizational identity orientation as well as member role identity as important *identity work frames* (e.g., frames within which identity work occurs). While organizational identity orientation is tied to how an organization relates to other organizations, member role identity is tied to how an individual relates to their own organization in terms of their position and/or role within their organization (e.g., local group versus national level, or fundraising, marketing, project management, etc.). As such, the two identity work frames of *organizational identity orientation* and *member role identity* affect the degree to which members engage in certain identity work tactics as well as the direction these tactics may take (e.g., emphasizing pragmatism versus idealism or collaborative versus confrontative strategies).

Discussion

In this study, we analyzed how organizational members perceive and manage tensions pertaining to nonprofit-business partnerships through an organizational identity lens. Based on our research findings, we developed a model of identity work in cross-sector partnerships that provides empirically grounded insights into how members of nonprofit organizations manage tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships, i.e., tensions resulting from partnering with organizations with diverging dominant logics (e.g., AhmadSimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Savarese, Huybrechts, & Hudon, 2021). To this end, we first outlined common tensions that emerge from nonprofit-business partnerships from the perspective of nonprofit members (i.e., *operational*, *ideological* and *reputational* tensions). Second, we identified four identity work tactics that nonprofit members employ to alleviate these tensions, namely *demarcation*, *reconciliation*, *affirmation*, and *retraction* and outlined how these may be used sequentially or simultaneously. Third, we highlighted *organizational identity orientation*, *partnership salience*, and *member role identity* as important identity work frames that shape how nonprofit members engage in identity work. In doing so, our research answers calls for developing a context-specific and temporal understanding of identity work (e.g., Brown, 2015; Brown, 2022). We also add to literature and theorizing on how relationships with other actors (e.g., other organizations or the public) in an organization's environment shape identity construction and identity work in organizations (e.g., Brickson, 2005; Cornwell et al., 2018).

Implications for Research, Theory and Practice

Our study makes three important contributions to the literature on organizational identity and identity work in the context of potentially conflict-laden inter-organizational relationships with a particular focus on nonprofit-business partnerships. First, our main contribution lies in providing a model of identity work in nonprofit-business partnerships that offers contextualized, empirically grounded answers to the questions of how nonprofit members

perceive and alleviate identity-related tensions resulting from corporate partnerships. Although studies on cross-sector partnerships have touched upon the various ways in which cross-sector partnerships may alter or threaten nonprofit identity (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Herlin, 2015; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011), there has been limited evidence on how members of these organizations actually manage resulting identity tensions. Our research showed how nonprofit members use both integration (e.g., *reconciliation* and *affirmation*) and separation-based mechanisms (e.g., *demarcation* and *retraction*) (e.g., Knapp et al., 2013; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016) in their identity work to alleviate identity-related tensions arising from these partnerships, thereby also reducing organizational identity conflict and perceptions of organizational identity threat. In doing so, our research aids in better understanding why even potentially highly conflict-laden inter-organizational relationships may not always lead to member perceptions of organizational identity threats (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011; Piening et al., 2020).

Second, by identifying organizational and individual factors that shape members' use of identity work tactics (i.e., identity work frames), our findings aid in explaining why member responses to organizational identity threats may vary both across and within organizations. Specifically, we showed how members' understanding of their organization's position within its network (i.e., organizational identity orientation) as well as their own, individual position within their organization (i.e., member role identity) shape identity work processes. Based on their position within their organization and associated member role identity (e.g., treasurer, volunteer, group leader), members of two different organizations may use similar identity work tactics to alleviate potential identity tensions in partnerships. Likewise, based on their organization's identity orientation, member responses may well differ across organizations, even if they share the same or a similar role. This highlights how relations with internal as well as external stakeholders shape member perceptions of organizational identity (e.g., Brickson,

2005, 2007; Cornwell et al., 2018) and subsequently guide responses to potential identity threats. In emphasizing these processes, our findings help to refine inter-organizational perspectives on identity work (e.g., Eury et al., 2018; Kreiner et al., 2006; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

Third, our study adds to research on the temporal dynamics of identity work (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Our analysis highlights that identity work is a constant and ongoing process and that individuals' use of identity work tactics follows temporal patterns and sequences. *Demarcation* tactics are generally employed before entering a certain partnership, *reconciliation* and *affirmation* tactics during a partnership, whereas *retraction* involves distancing oneself from a partnership or even ending a previously entered partnership. For instance, members may respond differently to similar threat inducing factors in a partnership (e.g., misalignment in values), once a partnership is established, in the sense that they are more likely to engage in reconciliation or even retraction rather than demarcation tactics. By extension, our research also highlights issues of subjective and objective time (e.g., Shipp & Jansen, 2021) in identity work as partnerships first need to emerge as salient to trigger identity work. As individual members may only become aware of a certain partnership after it is established or even only once it is ceased, subjective partnership timelines may or may not align with actual (e.g., objective) partnership timelines. In summary, this suggests that some of the variance in member responses to organizational partnerships can be explained by temporal factors such as partnership timelines and individual perceptions thereof.

Lastly, our insights on how nonprofit members perceive cross-sector partnerships have implications for practitioners seeking to avoid negative outcomes of tensions in cross-sector partnerships. By outlining four identity work tactics individuals employ to navigate these tensions, our study provides guidance to both non- and for-profit managers, who wish to engage in nonprofit-business partnerships, for instance regarding inter- and intra-organizational

communication in partnerships. For example, as *reconciliation* relies strongly on adequately defining and communicating the goals and benefits of each partnership, much attention should be paid to not only transparently communicating the types and scope of partnerships but also the reasoning behind them, both internally and externally. Next, *affirmation* requires a clear definition of the nonprofit's tactics regarding engaging with businesses, i.e., either relational or confrontational. Lastly, regarding *retraction*, providing all members with the opportunity to voice concerns regarding certain partnerships and following through with ceasing them if necessary is highly recommended.

Avenues for Future Research

As with any qualitative research that develops theory based on specific cases, our study has limitations, several of which suggest promising directions for future research. To begin with, while we were able to draw on data based on two cases rather than one single case, both nonprofit organizations in our sample were operating within the environmental sector. Although this homogeneous sampling approach aided us in reducing context-based biases, it may also limit the generalizability of our findings. For instance, interactions between environmental nonprofits and corporations are often shaped by conflicting interests (Lyakhov & Gliedt, 2017), potentially to a greater degree than those between businesses and refugee organizations. While we intentionally chose this specific research context to investigate areas of potential tension, our results may also overstate the degree of identity-related tensions between non- and for-profit organizations. In addition, for much of the same reasons, both the identity-related tension and the tactics aimed at alleviating the tensions we identified may only be partially transferable to other types of inter-organizational partnerships. Hence, future research provides the opportunity to extend the generalizability of our findings beyond the specific context we investigated by studying the identity work model we proposed (see Figure

7) in partnerships between organizations within and across the nonprofit, business, and public sector.

Another possible constraint of our data is that we were only able to interview each respondent once, thus not being able to accurately depict individual perceptions of partnerships over time. While we aimed to counteract this shortcoming by asking interviewees to recall past incidents and partnerships and if and how their perspective on partnerships had changed, these accounts can be subject to hindsight-bias (Tavory, 2020). Therefore, future research on time and temporality in identity work would benefit from longitudinal case study approaches to increase both the theoretical and empirical generalizability of our findings (Tsang, 2013). Utilizing this method with a temporal focus would allow for drawing out changes in individual responses to inter-organizational partnerships over time and would greatly aid in increasing the validity of our theorizing on temporal patterns in identity work.

Lastly, our research highlighted the ways in which nonprofit members seek to alleviate identity tensions resulting from business partnerships, thereby focusing on processes rather than outcomes for organizational identity and identification. Identification outcomes could include higher identification due to perceptions of higher organizational prestige in the case of partnerships with well-known and highly regarded businesses, however negative outcomes like disidentification may also occur, particularly when partnerships are perceived as threats to organizational or individual identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Previous research has highlighted threat responses such as social distancing, social change and social creativity (Piening et al., 2020), or more generally, support and withdrawal (Eury et al., 2018). Here it is important to point out that we only interviewed nonprofit members who had some sort of official position at their chosen nonprofit organization, either as voluntary yet elected leader of a local group or as paid employee. As a result, all our interviewees can be considered to be highly involved with their organization and/or their social cause. However, we still know little about how less

involved members make sense of these partnerships. Thus not only assessing how partnerships may affect member identification but also how identification affects member perceptions of organizational partnerships may prove a fruitful area for further investigation.

Conclusion

Organizational identity is becoming ever more important in today's fast changing, fragmented, and yet highly inter-connected organizational landscape, as it can provide individuals with a sense of meaning, belonging and stability in an unstable world (e.g., Petriglieri & Devine, 2016). However, these fast paced changes can also lead members to reevaluate and even renegotiate how they perceive their organization's identity (Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith & Kataria, 2015). Thereby, not only member perceptions of but also organizational identity itself is fluid and evolves as a product of various influences internal and external to the organization (Bataille & Vough, 2022; Gioia et al., 2000; Jones & Volpe, 2011). One of these influencing factors is an organization's inter-organizational relations. Although organizations are becoming ever-more connected, to this date, knowledge about how relations with other organizations shape how organizational members perceive and make sense of their organizations' identity is relatively limited; two notable exceptions being the works of Brickson (2005, 2007, 2013) and Cornwell, Howard-Grenville and Hampel (2018). While Brickson (2005, 2007) highlighted the way in which an organization forms part of an organization's identity (e.g., organizational identity orientation), Cornwell et al. (2018) theorized on how inter-organizational partnerships may accentuate or suppress aspects of organizational identity. Even so, we know little about specific, contextual factors that shape member perceptions of organizational identity and identity threats in inter-organizational relations such as horizontal partnerships.

This dissertation sought to add to current research on implications of interactions with other organizations for member perceptions of organizational identity by studying nonprofit-business partnerships. The findings from the three studies that comprise this dissertation provide a nuanced, contextualized understanding of how organizational members perceive and make sense of partnerships with other organizations, the conditions under which these

partnerships may be perceived as identity threatening or enhancing, and how individuals deal with potential identity-related tensions in these partnerships through identity work. Paper 1 outlined how both partnership and nonprofit (e.g., organizational) characteristics shape identity threat appraisal processes (e.g., congruence and relevance evaluations) in nonprofit-business partnerships, whereas Paper 2 zoomed in on these appraisal processes and identified dimensions of congruence and relevance evaluations drawn on by individual members. Lastly, Paper 3 empirically investigated how nonprofit members manage potential identity-related tensions arising from these types of partnerships by engaging in identity-work tactics. Taken together, the findings of the three studies reveal an interplay of organizational, partnership, and individual level factors that shape how organizational members perceive and evaluate their organization's identity. By highlighting how these factors interact and influence each other, this dissertation refines previous work on organizational identity threats (e.g., Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), and specifically, the currently understudied cognitive appraisal processes of individual organizational members confronted with potentially identity-threatening events (Piening et al., 2020). In providing contextualized insights into these appraisal processes, this dissertation project adds to current understanding of member perceptions of organizational identity, organizational identity threats and lastly, why and when individuals' responses to organizational partnerships may vary significantly.

In the following, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my dissertation in the light of current research on organizational identity. I then provide an agenda for studying implications of inter-organizational partnerships for member perceptions of organizational identity that centers non-collaborative types of organizational interactions, the role of external feedback from the media, as well as implications of a changing and increasingly values-driven organizational landscape.

Implications for Theory and Research

This tripartite dissertation project provides valuable implications for current research with a particular focus on individual perceptions and appraisal of organizational identity threats, time and temporality in organizational identity processes, inter-organizational collaboration, as well as multiple identities in organizations. While these insights are particularly relevant in the nonprofit context, they also extend beyond this particular setting.

To begin with, this dissertation provides insights into individual member perceptions of organizational identity, organizational identity threats, and the factors that shape these perceptions. In doing so, this dissertation has important implications for research on organizational identity threats (e.g., Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). While prior research has greatly enhanced our understanding of antecedents and responses to organizational identity threats (Branscombe et al., 1999; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2011) research on the underlying sensemaking processes in organizational settings has been limited (Piening et al., 2020). In providing insights into these processes, specifically by identifying dimensions of congruence and relevance evaluations (Paper 2), this dissertation refines current understanding of member's sensemaking processes in the light of potential identity threats in several important ways. First, throughout the studies it emerged that evaluations and perceptions of potential organizational identity threats are contingent on various factors both internal and external to the organization (e.g., *partnership* and *nonprofit identity characteristics*; Paper 1; *organizational, project, and personal congruence, and public, organizational, and personal involvement*; Paper 2; *partnership salience, organizational identity orientation, and member role identity*; Paper 3). Thereby, the findings from the three papers suggest that these factors do not act in isolation but are rather interconnected and interdependent meaning that individuals draw on them either sequentially or even simultaneously throughout the identity threat appraisal processes. Further, these factors may

either strengthen or weaken one another and potentially even cancel each other out (see Paper 2, specifically). This suggests that better understanding interconnections between different factors in identity threat appraisal processes as well as moderating effects can greatly enhance our current understanding of how individuals perceive and make sense of organizational identity threats. This highlights the need for multi-level, network approaches that take into account various sources of information internal and external to the focal unit of analysis (e.g., individual, team, organization, etc.) as well as their interactions in future research on organizational identity and organizational identity threats (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Kump, 2019).

Secondly, adding to recent theorizing on identity threats and opportunities, whereby – in line with Petriglieri's (2011) definition of identity threats – identity opportunities are defined as *experiences appraised as indicating potential for growth in the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity* (Bataille & Vough, 2022: 97), the findings from this dissertation indicate that whether or not a certain experience is appraised as harmful or valuable for organizational identity may depend on much of the same influencing factors. Specifically, the findings suggest that the question of differences in factors leading to an event being perceived as identity threatening or affirming is much rather be one of degrees rather than kinds. For instance, if congruence is perceived to be high, events may be perceived as identity affirming, if congruence is low, they may be perceived as threatening to identity (see Paper 2). By extension, this also means that identity implicating events could be regarded on a continuum of threats and affirmations, rather than as separate incidences with either positive or negative outcomes. This stresses the need for nuanced analyses of identity implicating events.

Third, this dissertation contributes to research and theorizing on time and temporality in organizational identity perceptions and construction (e.g., Ravasi, Rindova & Stigliani, 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Throughout the three papers, it was found that it was often not a

direct, pronounced threat arising from partnerships with for-profit organizations, but rather the anticipation of the emergence of potentially identity threatening events that guides member's attitudes towards nonprofit-business partnerships (e.g., what others may think about the partnership). We also discovered that the prior anticipation and avoidance of potentially threatening events informed member's identity work tactics, in particular *demarcation* tactics (Paper 3), and identified a certain temporal structure to the application of identity work tactics by members (Paper 3). The results indicate that ex-ante anticipation of identity threatening events may be as effective in guiding member's actions (e.g., entering a partnership), as actual events classified as threatening to organizational identity. By extension, this also suggest that actual and subjective timelines in identity threat perceptions may well differ among individuals, leading to differences in organizational identity threat perceptions. Taken together, this can aid in better understanding differences in perceptions of and responses to organizational identity threats among individual members of the same organization while also providing explanations for potential time lags between identity threatening events and individual and collective identity threat perceptions.

Fourth, with respect to research on inter-organizational collaboration, this dissertation stresses the importance of inter-organizational partnerships for member perceptions of organizational identity. This aids in understanding how an organization relates to others shape organizational identity processes, but also how organizational identity shapes inter-organizational relations. Particularly, the findings from all three papers stress that how an organization relates to others is an important part of organizational identity (e.g., organizational identity orientation; Brickson, 2005, 2007, 2013), thereby also adding to research on organizational identity as relational (e.g., Smith, Meyskens & Wilson, 2014). Further, the findings suggest that organizational members may assume certain role identities for their organization that shape how their organization relate to others, as expressed in statements such

as “we’re all about working with others” or “we’re critics”, potentially anthropomorphizing their organization (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000). These organizational roles and attached role expectations may also prompt members to switch organizations when they want to change their ways of relating to other stakeholders. For instance, interviewees who were members of a ‘less radical’ organization mentioned that if they wanted to engage in more confrontational tactics, they would not do so as member of their primary organization (Paper 2). This could aid in explaining member movements between different organizations, especially in the nonprofit sector.

Fifth, this research adds to theorizing on cross-sector partnerships with a focus on nonprofit organizations (e.g., Herlin, 2015; Kreutzer & Jäger, 2001). By uncovering the conditions under which nonprofit-business partnerships arise as threatening or potentially even affirming to organizational identity, the three papers aid in understanding why nonprofit organizations engage in these types of collaborations despite the issues and conflicts associated with them. Specifically, by outlining how potential negative effects in dissimilarities or incongruences between business and nonprofit organizations may be mitigated by evaluations of relevance (e.g., Paper 1 and 2) as well as project and personal congruence (e.g., Paper 2), or reduced through identity work (Paper 3), this dissertation provides insights into why even partnerships between seemingly dissimilar organizations may not always lead to tensions. This is particularly valuable for research on nonprofit-business partnerships, which has traditionally characterized these partnerships as highly conflict-laden (e.g., Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Markman et al., 2016; O’Brien & Evans, 2017; Pacheco & Dean, 2015).

Lastly, this dissertation extends and refines previous work on organizational and individual member identity, as well as multiple identities in nonprofit organizations (e.g., Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). As outlined in Paper 3, member perceptions of organizational identity

(e.g., “who we are”) did not always lead to uniform beliefs about “who we should associate with” (e.g., Anthony & Tripsas, 2016). Further, Papers 2 and 3 provide insights into how individual level factors such as member role identity (Paper 3) as well as personal involvement in the partnership (Paper 2) shape individual perceptions of nonprofit-business partnerships. Taken together, these findings can explain rather diverging individual perceptions of nonprofit-business partnerships in the light of a rather uniform and shared understanding of organizational identity. Findings on member role identity (Paper 3) in particular highlight the importance of considering a members’ social positioning within their organization for understandings of and evaluations of organizational identity. This is also in line with prior research that posits that different groups within an organization may have different perceptions of organizational identity as the salience of identity categorizations across member groups depend on both self-enhancement motives and everyday experiences (Hsu & Elsbach, 2013).

Taken together, this research provided insights into how contextual factors such as characteristics of threat events and organizational attributes (e.g., Piening et al., 2020) shape if individuals experience certain events as threatening to their organization’s identity. In doing so, the findings from this dissertation aid in better understanding identity-related sensemaking and organizational identity threat appraisal in organizations and inter-organizational partnerships. In summary, this suggests that a contingency perspective that considers the specifics of certain partnership contexts is key for understanding when organizational partnerships may be perceived as organizational identity threats and that taking these context-specific factors into account can provide several explanations for differences in perceptions of and reactions to potentially identity threatening events.

A Research Agenda for Identity Implications of Inter-Organizational Partnerships

During the past decades, there has been an intensification in collaborative efforts between nonprofit organizations and for-profit enterprises (Odziemkowska & Dorobantu,

2021). Driven by societal grand challenges such as the imminent climate crisis, biodiversity loss, global hunger, or human rights violations, which are too large to be addressed by one organization or even one sector alone (Bryson et al., 2006; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016; Waddock, 1991), not only the prevalence of inter-organizational, and specifically cross-sector partnerships, but also the number of organizations involved in these partnerships has been on the rise. In order to tackle these issues, organizations have been and increasingly are engaging in multi-stakeholder cross-sector social partnerships, i.e., partnerships between not only two but multiple organizations from the non-profit, for-profit, and public sector aimed at addressing social issues (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Clarke & MacDonald, 2019; MacDonald et al., 2019). Although these partnerships provide many opportunities for social and systemic change, they also come with various challenges associated with larger organizational networks which may prevent those involved in them from achieving their goals (Clarke & Crane, 2011; Dentoni, Bitzer & Schouten, 2018). While previous research in this realm has been mostly concerned with questions of network governance (Clarke & Crane, 2018), this dissertation has drawn attention to another potential area of controversy and conflict in inter-organizational partnerships: organizational identity. Building on and extending prior research on identity implications of inter-organizational partnerships (Brickson, 2005, 2007, 2013; Cornwell et al., 2018), this research project has highlighted how organizational identity may shape how an organization relates to others and how, simultaneously, who “we” as an organization associate and collaborate with, has important implications for organizational identity (e.g., Anthony & Tripsas, 2016). While studying implications of nonprofit-business partnerships for nonprofit organizations from an identity threat perspective allowed me to add to theorizing in this domain, I was only able to examine a small area of a large research field. Below, I suggest possible directions for future research regarding the identity implications of inter-organizational partnerships with a particular focus on non-collaborative types of

organizational interactions, identity, image and the media, as well as changing organizational landscapes.

To begin with, this dissertation project focused mainly on collaborative activities between nonprofit and business organizations, largely leaving implications of confrontative interactions, such as targeting businesses with specific activist campaigns or leading legal cases against businesses to encourage or enforce certain business actions or the termination thereof (Arnold, 2022; Waldron et al., 2019), out of the analysis. Yet, as indicated by previous research (e.g., Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Markman et al., 2016) as well as frequently mentioned by the participants in this research project, the majority of interactions between nonprofit and for-profit organizations falls on a continuum between collaboration and confrontation. Additionally, some interactions cannot be exclusively classified as one or the other. For instance, even within an inter-organizational collaboration, nonprofit members may actively confront a partnering organization or potential business partner about certain business practices. Indeed, some of the nonprofit members who were interviewed for this dissertation pointed out that they would sometimes intentionally engage in rather challenging and sometimes confrontational conversations with businesses in order to push businesses to change their practices (for an investigation of partnership motives and partnership integration see Spitz, van Kranenburg & Korzilius, 2021). This suggests that confrontation and collaboration in nonprofit-business partnerships does not need to be mutually exclusive, but may well be inherent to interactions between these types of organizations due to the divergence and convergence of certain organizational goals. In addition, the findings from this dissertation suggest that confrontation may be an important marker of or anchor for organizational identity and organizational identity formation in partnerships between different organizations. Previous research has highlighted, that even if nonprofit organizations engage in collaborative partnerships with organizations from other sectors, they may still maintain a confrontational

rhetoric over fear of identity loss (Farrington et al., 1993). Maintaining this confrontational stance may aid in clarifying organizational boundaries by heightening perceptions of “us vs. them”, thereby potentially counteracting issues of identity ambiguity (e.g., Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Indeed, some of the interviewees (Paper 2 and 3) mentioned that, at times, it was ‘easier’ to remain in a confrontational or antagonistic position in relation to businesses (also see Yaziji & Doh, 2009) as this signified less infringement on what their organization stood for. However, this also meant foregoing potential collaborations which may aid them in achieving their mission. Thus, as indicated by prior studies on implications of confrontation and collaboration in firm-activist interactions (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007), decisions on whether or not to engage in collaborative or confrontative tactics have far-reaching implications for how members and others see their organization. Therefore I suggest that future research should take into account various types of interactions between organizations when studying implications of inter-organizational relations for organizational identity formation, change, and threats and identity boundary management in organizations (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Knapp et al., 2013; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016). Specifically, building upon concepts such as Brickson’s (2005, 2007) organizational identity orientation, future research could investigate how the patterns of confrontative and collaborative relationships with other organizations in an organization’s network shape organizational identity, as well as their implications for identity ambiguity, clarity, and salience (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Hsu & Elsbach, 2013). Further, I would encourage scholars to study if and how organizational identity may shift in relation to different stakeholders such as partnering organizations, and how various organizational identities may be evoked and become salient in interactions with different organizational stakeholders.

Second, studying the role of the media in shaping internal and external perceptions of organizational partnerships and subsequent implications for organizational identity provides a

promising area for future research. Throughout this research project, participants have highlighted the importance of media reports, in particular in online and social media, for the perception and management of partnerships. In Paper 2, public involvement, e.g., partnership visibility, partnership publicity, and media reports about the partnership, was identified as one of the three components of member evaluations of partnership relevance. In Paper 3, reputational tensions emerged as one of the key identity-related tensions in nonprofit-business partnerships. As indicated by the nonprofit members interviewed for Paper 2 and 3, oftentimes it was not the partnership itself that was perceived as threatening to organizational identity but rather how these partnerships were perceived by others, generally external to the organization. This is in line with prior work on how visibility and publicity shape organizational identity perceptions by providing feedback on organizational attributes, image, and prestige (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) as well as research that identified public appraisals or media coverage as common sources of organizational identity threats (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Piening et al., 2020).

With respect to current developments in the field, research has pointed out that organizations are increasingly exposed to critical voices, e.g., as a result of facilitated access to media, in particular online news platforms and social media (Etter, Ravasi & Colleoni, 2019). This may lead organizations to struggle with developing and maintaining organizational identities, especially when the media is devoting more time to exposing divergences between corporate images and organizational actions (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Indeed, recent studies have picked up on this notion analyzed the role in social media in evaluations of cross-sector partnerships as well as how partnership disclosure affects public evaluations of nonprofit organizations (Dong & Rim, 2019, 2022). Taken together, I suggest that studying actual rather than anticipated feedback from external media sources would provide valuable insights in assessing identity-related implications of inter-organizational

partnerships. For instance, comparing and contrasting both external and internal reports and communications on specific nonprofit-business partnerships would allow for examining nonprofit reactions to media reporting and potential resulting changes in collaborative activities or reporting of these activities over time. On an individual level, researchers could analyze nonprofit member responses to nonprofit-business partnerships on social media to gain insights into member perceptions of and reactions to these partnerships. Further, since disidentification and member turnover have been identified as negative outcomes of identity ambiguity, tensions and threats (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Piening et al., 2020) studying member flows as well as private donations following both positive and negative reports on nonprofit-business partnerships could aid in refining research on organizational identity implications of media reporting (Kjærgaard, Morsing & Ravasi, 2011; Zavyalova, Pfarrer & Reger, 2017).

Lastly, I would encourage future researchers to take into account changing organizational landscapes in the study of inter-organizational relations and organizational identity. As outlined above, societal “grand challenges” are increasingly promoting collaboration between organizations from different societal sectors (Bryson et al., 2006; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016; Waddock, 1991). These developments have not only fostered collaboration between these sectors, but have also led to the rise of new types of collaboration, for instance, through social innovation (e.g., Drucker, 1987). Driven by technological advancements, the field of social innovation has seen a rapid increase in both practice and research over the past decades, particularly since the early 2000s (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010; Logue & Grimes, 2022; Van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). This is also mirrored by the emergence of new or adapted business models guided by managerial and entrepreneurial activism, and impact entrepreneurship (e.g., Carrington, Zwick & Neville, 2019; Markman, Waldron, Gianiodis & Espina, 2019; Steiner, Jack, Farmer & Steinerowska-Streb, 2022; Vedula, Dobliger, Pacheco, York, Bacq, Russo, & Dean, 2022). On an organizational level,

this may lead to an internalization of mission-market tensions in organizations, potentially leading to the development of dual or even multiple organizational identities and identity ambiguity (for a discussion of mission-market tensions see Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Sanders, 2015). Further, across organizations, these changes in the field may also contribute a homogenization of certain organizational practices, business models, and even sectors, as public pressures to act more sustainably increase (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Pedersen, Lüdeke-Freund, Henriques & Seitanidi, 2021). Taken together, these developments may heighten struggles of maintaining organizational distinctiveness (i.e., one central aspect of organizational identity; Albert & Whetten, 1985). While this may decrease identity-related tensions in cross-sector partnership due to better alignments of partnership goals and organizational logics (Reissner, 2019; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016), it may also heighten identity ambiguity for partnering organizations. Organizational partnerships blur or even transcend self-other distinctions between a focal organization and its social environment (e.g., Whetten & Mackey, 2002) via mechanisms of association, which is likely to be more pronounced in partnerships between similar actors. Taken together, this provides various opportunities for studying organizational identity and identification in organizations and inter-organizational partnerships. For instance, future research could examine how similarities and dissimilarities between partnering organizations affect the development of a shared partnership identity (e.g., Reissner, 2019; Öberg, 2016) and how partnership identities are embedded in or kept separate from the focal organizations' identities. In a similar vein, scholars could investigate if and how the development of partnership identities and identification with an inter-organizational partnership or even the partnering organization (e.g., Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2006) influences member identification with their own organizations. Doing so would contribute to research on multiple

organizational identities and their implications for organizational identification (e.g., Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Heckert, Boumans & Vliegenthart, 2020).

In summary, current developments in the fields of inter-organizational, cross-sector, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, as well as in the areas of social innovation, social and impact entrepreneurship, and managerial and entrepreneurial activism strongly suggest that organizational partnerships for social impact are going to become ever more-important in the upcoming years. However, while these partnerships provide various opportunities for tackling societal challenges, they are also characterized by conflict and tension between the collaborating parties (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Markman et al., 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Young, 2000). Drawing on the insights from this dissertation project, I suggest that studying identity implications of inter-organizational and specifically cross-sector partnerships may aid in better understanding and potentially alleviating these tensions. Thus, in summary, I hope that my dissertation encourages future research on organizational identity processes in today's complex, highly interconnected and increasingly values-driven organizational landscape.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Typologies of Cross-Sector Partnerships

Study	Typology	Categories	Basis for Typology	Method
Austin, 2000	Collaboration Continuum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Philanthropic partnership - Transactional partnership - Integrative partnership 	Level of integration of collaborative practices, value creation, alliance drivers, alliance enablers	Case studies of five nonprofit-business partnerships
Bowen et al., 2010	Continuum of Corporate Community Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transactional engagement - Transitional engagement - Transformational engagement 	Continuum ranging from least to most involvement	Systematic literature review (206 sources)
Hardy & Phillips, 1998 ⁴	Strategies of Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration - Compliance - Contention - Contestation 	Strategies used by stakeholders to change or maintain parameters of their inter-organizational domain	Case study of UK refugee system
Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007	Forms of Corporate Community Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Corporate philanthropy - Benefaction - Patronage - Commercial and socio-sponsorship - Cause-related marketing 	Form of interaction in the partnership; i.e., which (inter-)actions define the partnership?	Historical literature review of nonprofit-business partnerships
Schiller & Almog-Bar, 2013	Fields of Action Typology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mission-related collaborations - Marketing collaborations - Learning collaborations - Infrastructure collaborations - Political collaborations - Marginal collaborations 	Fields of action of the partnership; i.e., purpose or focus of the partnership from a nonprofit-perspective	Case study of a collaboration between an Israeli nonprofit and a pharmaceutical company
Waddock, 1991	Typology of Social Partnership Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programmatic partnership - Federational partnership - Systemic partnership 	Organizational characteristics and expected outcomes of partnerships	Literature review
Wymer & Samu, 2003	Typology of Nonprofit-Business Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Corporate philanthropy - Corporate foundation - Licensing agreements - Sponsorships - Transaction-based promotions - Joint issue promotions - Joint ventures 	Alliance type	Literature review and case study examples

⁴ In contrast to the other typologies presented here, Hardy and Phillips (1998) did not limit their focus on collaborative interactions but also included confrontational interactions in their analysis. Their work was included here to more accurately reflect existing types and typologies of cross-sector interactions.