From the Beach to the Sahara

A qualitative study of junior management consultants' identity work between billable projects

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Abstract: The recent economic downturn has largely affected businesses around the world, resulting in decreased demand for management consultancy services. In combination with recent years' aggressive hiring strategies, this has put many junior management consultants in a position where their utilization rates have plummeted and time between billable projects has increased notably. As management consulting is an industry often associated with long work hours and high tempo and the phenomenon of underutilization is an area without much previous research, this creates an important question to study from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. Through a qualitative multiple case study, this thesis explores why underutilization may threaten the identities of junior management consultants at elite firms, and how they, in turn, handle this threat through identity work. We develop a theoretical lens inspired by, among others, Ahuja et al. (2019), to investigate the identity composition of the consultants, why the time between billable projects threatens these identities, and what identity work strategies they utilize to cope with the situation. Our findings imply that the consultants' identities are amalgamations of professional, elite, and performance-based identities, which are threatened by three aspects of time between billable projects in particular - task expectation dissonance, concerns for career implications, and being in low demand. In turn, these are handled through four main identity work strategies - idealizing, reframing, distancing, and relinquishing control. Furthermore, the study finds that the identities, extent of identity threat, and choice of identity work strategy are all affected by organizational and cultural aspects of their employers. With our findings, we contribute to an increased understanding of identity and identity work among high-performing young professionals and an increased practical understanding of management consultancies on how their organizations and company culture may affect their employees experiencing underutilization.

Keywords: Young Professionals, Professional Service Firms, Management Consulting, Underutilization, Identity, Identity Work

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Definitions

Concept	Definition
Young Professionals	People between ages 21-35, early in their professional career pursuing white-collar professions (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010).
Professional Service Firms (PSFs)	Service firms providing customized specialized knowledge to organizations, solving specific problems (O'Higgins et al., 2021).
Management Consulting	A type of PSF often classified as neo-PSFs providing strategic and financial advice to management teams (Ibarra, 1999; Christensen et al., 2013; Von Nordenflycht, 2010).
Underutilization	The utilization rate of a consultant is usually calculated as the percentage billable hours make up of total work hours (Campbell, 2020). In this thesis, underutilization is used to describe a situation where this percentage is lower than desired.
Time Between Billable Projects	A situation where a management consultant is not on a client project, instead conducting internal assignments – often administrative tasks or project proposals for clients. Sometimes referred to as "The Beach".
Identity	An individual's subjective interpretation of who they are based on demographics, role, group belonging, or attributes (Caza et al., 2018).
Identity work	The continuous process of individuals "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" their identities in work contexts (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Caza et al., 2018).
Identity Threat	Feelings, thoughts, actions, or experiences that in any way challenge one's identity. Identity work intensifies as individuals face identity threats (Breakwell, 1983; Petriglieri, 2011).

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The recent global economic downturn has created pressure on numerous industries (World Bank, 2023). The recession has not spared the professional service industries, such as Investment Banks, Management Consultants, Accountants, and IT Consultants. The rising inflation and corresponding hike in interest rates have also led to a slower Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A) market, further slowing down activity. The overall decrease in demand for Professional Service Firms has led to mass layoffs and a slower employee turnover rate with fewer exit opportunities. This has consequently led to the nature of work, formerly associated with high intensity and pace, and long working hours, being transformed by the decrease in the number of billable projects. In combination with recent years' aggressive hiring plans, this has left many employees in these firms uncertain about the future (O'Dwyer & Walker, 2023). The people in question are often newly graduated Young Professionals entering their first jobs with high ambitions and performance standards, often expecting to work long hours in a high-paced environment. They are often drawn to these industries to expand their skill set, develop and put themselves in a future positive prospective career path (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009).

This highlights a potential problem – what happens when these people do not get the chance to live up to the expectations associated with the role they have pursued? Research on Identity construction indicates that people early in their professional careers are more prone to revising their identities as they are earlier in their identity construction process, increasing the dynamism of their identities (Modestino & Ladge, 2019; Levinson, 1978). Identity Work intensifies as the individual faces Identity Threats or conflicts at work, meaning that the current high level of uncertainty in Management Consulting could provide an exciting opportunity to research how the identities of these young, high-performing professionals are affected in their professional setting as the number of projects undertaken by their employers decrease, and instead being met with the high pace and hard work synonymous with management consulting, instead is met with an uncertain reality with less work and lower pace (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; Petriglieri, 2011; Tomo & De Gennaro, 2019).

1.2 Previous Research & Research Gap

In recent years, professional service firms have been getting an increasing amount of attention in research on management and organizational science, which can be explained by their increasing importance to today's knowledge economy (Sokolov & Zavyalova, 2022). In this research, one of the more common themes is identity theory (Ahuja et al., 2019; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Gill, 2015; Ibarra, 1999; Reid, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Walker & Caprar, 2020).

Management consultancy firms emphasize hard work, delivery, competence, promotion, instrumentalism, elitism, and career (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Therefore, previous research has often focused on the high demands management consulting environments place on the consultants, facilitating the formation of elite identities the consultant has to work hard to maintain (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Some research has also investigated the nature of work within management consultancy and its implications for identity work (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). However, one aspect that has not received much attention from previous research is how junior management consultants and their identities are affected by decreased work and project opportunities, where the environment does not allow the consultant to maintain a high-performing identity.

This thesis aims to complement previous research by investigating how junior management consultants' identities may be affected by Underutilization. The recent economic downturn provides an excellent opportunity to do so, as time spent between billable projects likely has increased for many consultants. To our knowledge, research has yet to focus on this aspect of PSFs. This constitutes a research gap, where this thesis intends to explore underutilization through time between billable projects.

1.3 Purpose & Expected Contribution

Considering the identified research gap, this thesis investigates how underutilization amongst junior management consultants may pose an identity threat. Identity threats can be triggered when a person’s reality is incongruent with their identity, and we must therefore also understand the identity composition of these individuals, after which we will try to establish how it may pose an identity threat and how identity work strategies may help them cope. Lastly, we will assess how contextual factors around the individuals may affect the identity threat and how the consultants handle it. To fulfill this purpose, research questions are specified in Section 3.6.

Theoretically, this thesis aims to contribute theoretical insights to PSFs and identity theory, where current literature has given little attention to underutilization. Practically, we aim to contribute to the management consulting industry by providing insights and a deepened understanding of how underutilization affects the company's most valuable assets – the consultants themselves. We believe these contributions to be especially relevant as though the current economic situation may be extreme, recessions are bound to occur again, and research on their effects are therefore important.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore identity work amongst junior management consultants between billable projects. This section brings up previous research on Young Professionals (2.1), PSFs (2.2), and Management Consulting (2.3) to establish the context of this study. Subsequently, we will present relevant research on Identity Theory (2.4-2.7), Identity Threat & Identity Work Strategies (2.8), and how Underutilization may pose an identity-threatening experience (2.9).

2.1 Young Professionals

Young professionals are white-collar professionals early in their careers (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Young people generally experience a higher level of career dynamism, which can be internally and externally complex to navigate (Levinson, 1978). Furthermore, research finds that while often constructing careers based on their respective industry boundaries, young professionals also require meaningful work and family relationships (McDonald, 2018). As young professionals inherently are earlier in their professional life, they are also earlier in constructing their self-concept, a process heavily influenced by new challenges, environments, social groups, and relationships. This creates a need for young professionals to both develop a consistent self-image and stay flexible in their career development (Modestino & Ladge, 2019). Looking at young professionals' professional development, Blokker et al. (2019) find that young professionals that develop high career competencies show higher satisfaction with their careers, leading to organizational commitment and a higher sense of job security. Cohen-Scali (2003) shows that social integration determines whether young professionals develop a professional identity, and, finds many possibilities for how an individual develops social recognition and knowledge of oneself. These unique case-by-case possibilities have a higher determinant than the characteristics of the context, speaking to the complexity of understanding young professionals' identity work and therefore making them an interesting group of people to study.

2.2 Professional Service Firms

Wilkins et al. (2014) defines professional service firms (PSFs) as “occupations requiring special training in the arts or sciences” providing customized and knowledge-intensive services by highly educated professionals to help other parties solve specific problems. Professional services can refer to occupations such as lawyers, accountants, engineers, and management consultants. These companies usually depend highly on their professionals and the skills, knowledge, and network they possess (O'Higgins et al., 2021). Generally, the primary activity of PSFs is transforming their superior human capital into solutions for both other businesses and society as a whole (Sokolov & Zavyalova, 2022), and the firms are essential for the business environment providing specialized knowledge to large enterprises and governments (Sturdy, 2011).

Four areas have been the main focus of attention in previous research on PSFs: Human Resource Management (HRM) (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Kühn et al., 2016; Sokolov & Zavyalova, 2022; Vaiman, 2008), knowledge creation (Haas & Hansen, 2005; Lahti & Beyerlein, 2000; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003), governance (Empson & Chapman, 2006; Harlacher & Reihlen, 2014), and client-related concerns (Hausman, 2003; Walsh et al., 2015). As aforementioned, the value of the services offered by PSFs is to a large extent related to their employees and their human capital (O'Higgins et al., 2021; Sokolov & Zavyalova, 2022), meaning that understanding how to manage their employees is vital to the success of the firm – something that is further amplified by the strong bargaining power and high mobility of PSF employees (Coff 1997; Coff 1999; von Nordenflycht, 2010). While a high employee turnover is common in some types of PSFs, such as management consultancies (Morrison, 2021), having a level of control over the turnover and retaining key professionals in the organization is critical to avoid deprivation of organizational competencies and client relationships (Vaiman, 2008). Furthermore, the survival and growth of many PSFs are determined more by their success in competing in the labor market than their output. Since PSF employees possess unique individual expertise and personal brands, individual employees can be sources of client relationships themselves. These factors pressure PSFs to maintain high salaries and attractive working conditions for their employees. However, despite the high bargaining power possessed by PSF employees, many PSFs demand long working hours, a high level of flexibility, and constant employee motivation (Kaiser & Ringlstetter, 2011). Other research on PSFs has found that financial pressure creates career anxiety and uncertainty amongst partners, making them aggressively engage in career protection strategies such as empire-building to expand client relationships. This undermines what the author describes as "professional logic" (Allan et al., 2019).

Another recurring theme in research on PSFs is identity theory (Ahuja et al., 2019; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Gill, 2015; Ibarra, 1999; Reid, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Walker & Caprar, 2020). Research has shown that identity work among professional service workers is a complex process affected by both internal and external factors (Walker & Caprar, 2020). Historically, the main targets of PSF research have been classic PSFs, with extra attention spent on companies and professionals within law, engineering, and accounting. Meanwhile, management consulting firms have still not received considerable research attention (O'Higgins et al., 2021), justifying further research within the field and indicating the existence of an academic gap.

2.3 Management Consulting

While management consultancies share the high knowledge and low capital intensity of the classic PSFs, they lack a protected and regulated profession with precise requirements and norms. They are therefore classified as Neo-PSFs (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Global management consultancies have human capital as their primary assets, and minimal fixed investments mean they are archetypical knowledge-intensive firms (Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). Management consultants conduct project and client advisory work and mainly operate by being hired by firms to provide specialized knowledge, input, and capabilities (Ibarra, 1999; Christensen et al., 2013). Management consultants usually work on projects to solve situation-specific problems that are uncertain and unpredictable, requiring the employees to possess problem-solving skills (Christensen et al., 2013; Adesi et al., 2015; Creplet et al., 2001; Visscher, 2006). To provide non-standardized and personal services, consultancies recruit qualified individuals with academic degrees and high expectations regarding their tasks' complexity. However, research indicates that the tasks performed by newly hired consultants are sometimes far more repetitive and less creative than many expect (Costas & Kärreman, 2016).

Looking into previous research on management consulting, some of the more thoroughly investigated themes are knowledge and knowledge sharing (Anand et al., 2007; Haas & Hansen, 2005; Hansen et al., 1999; Wang et al., 2013; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003) and competition, trust, and relationship management with clients (Coulter & Coulter, 2003;

Glückler & Armbrüster, 2003). According to Glückler and Armbrüster (2003), competition in management consulting occurs differently than in many other business sectors. Rather than being driven by measurable quality or cost, competition often occurs through experience-based trust and reputation built through networking. Therefore, many companies allocate significant resources to personnel and recruiting. In a typical management consulting firm, newly hired junior employees mainly perform analytical work and provide research support to superiors. After around two years, the tasks transition towards team-leader responsibilities in relatively small projects, where they translate information from clients into problem diagnoses and action plans and delegate work to their junior colleagues (Ibarra, 1999). While it is rare for management consultancies to have an explicit "up-or-out"-policy, those not performing at a level appropriate for their cohort are often encouraged to leave the firm (Batchelor, 2011; Ibarra, 1999). Looking at the so-called "MBB" firms – McKinsey & Co., Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Co., generally seen as the three most prestigious management consulting firms worldwide – they typically complete performance reviews every six months. If a consultant is in the bottom performance bracket without positive tendencies, they are often asked to leave. On an average year, this happens to approximately five percent of a given class (Loos, 2022). However, while the consultancy sector is often treated as a homogenous mass represented by sizeable global consulting firms, it is essential to acknowledge that there are many different kinds of management consultancies with variations in size, geographical market, and specialization (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Focusing on the upper echelons of the industry, the culture fostered at certain management consulting firms may affect the identity construction processes of the employees due to factors such as high performance standards and a well-established elite discourse (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015; Ibarra, 1999; Reid, 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

2.4 Identity Theory

Identity is a construct through which individuals perceive who they are. This perception is affected by several factors, both external and internal to the individual, such as demography, group belonging, personal characteristics, and role (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Identity can be distinguished from terms such as image and persona as these terms are more focused on conveying qualities they want others to ascribe to them (Ibarra, 1999). The individual's perception of one's identity is a subjective and dynamic process in which identities change over time and are challenged by external factors (Horton et al., 2014). This dynamic process of identity is referred to as identity work, which according to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), refers to the process of "...people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". Individuals are involved in a limited network of social relationships, creating fluid and possible conflicts between multiple identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

As presented in Section 1, this thesis will focus on young professionals in management consulting. Therefore, professional identity may be an interesting area as it integrates multiple identity theories such as role, social and relational (Caza et al., 2018). Furthermore, the management consultancy discourse employs elite identity formation, which might be an important factor in understanding the individuals entering this industry (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015). Lastly, as presented, management consultancy firms focus highly on performance, and the individuals entering these environments are often considered high-performers. Thus, the review will present the concept of performance-based identity developed by Walker and Caprar (2020). To summarize, while acknowledging that possible sources of identity are endless, this study will mainly emphasize these three identity sources due to their relevance for the contextual setting and the individuals of the study.

2.5 Professional Identity

Several work-related sources, such as organization, work activity, and profession, can derive identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Ramarajan, 2014). Schein (1978) defines professional identity as “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role”. Professional identity can be assumed to form over time as an individual collects experiences and feedback (Ibarra, 1999). According to Pratt et al. (2006), work-identity integrity violations, i.e. an experienced mismatch between what the professionals do and who they are, can trigger the construction of a professional identity. These mismatches trigger identity customization processes, which help further construct the individuals’ professional identities. Professional identity is likely to affect motivation and job performance since individuals identifying with their profession tend to be instilled with a desire to represent the prototype of it (Mühlhaus &

Bouwmeester, 2016). Professional identity is inherently related to the concept of role identity, as the professions with which individuals identify, in many cases, affect the roles they have in their everyday life. According to Katz and Kahn (1966), how people see themselves depends on their roles and expectations associated with the roles in question – something that often is affected by their profession and the organizations around them.

2.6 Social Identity Theory & Elite Identity

Josselson (1994) expressed, "Identity is at its core psychological: self and other: inner and outer: being and doing: expression of self for, with, against, or despite; but certainly in response to others". Social Identity Theory emphasizes the role of the collective as an influence on identity. Identity work occurs as the individual identifies either more or less with the collective of which they are part (Caza et al., 2018). Collective identity can happen through imitation as the individual adopts specific collective or organizational properties into their own identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Pratt, 2000). Furthermore, individuals usually define themselves as part of a group sharing values and norms with the collective, where belonging to the group strongly informs the subjects' self-perceived identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014) found that collective identity is stronger than professional identity.

Organizational identity is "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization", derived from social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Since an individual's organizational membership is often relatively well-defined and stable over time, it tends to be less ambiguous than other forms of identity (Walker & Caprar, 2020). The organization of which an individual is a part can be seen as embodying the characteristics of its members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and positive and negative comparisons between groups have been shown to have a subsequent impact on the self-esteem of individuals in the groups (Oakes & Turner, 1980; Wagner et al., 1986). Organizational social identity is not only derivable from the organization as a whole, but also from a workgroup, department, age cohort, and fast-track groups (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

While historical literature has seen organizational elites as small minorities controlling the majority from the apex of organizations (Farazmand, 1999), identifying as a part of the elite can also exist across entire organizational entities. In some consulting firms, elite organizational identity construction has been observed. The elite social identity generates "neoliberal" governance in the company, ensuring that the consultants can be trusted and behave in line with firm interests, indicating clear incentives for the employer to encourage the formation of such identities (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Costas and Kärreman (2016) find that management consultants with top university backgrounds tend to see themselves as "elite individuals entering an elite environment" when they are hired. This self-definition as not only an elite consultant but an "elite individual" indicates that their identity is not only based on the profession or organization but their performance or prestige in relation to others. In line with the findings that the prestige of a group increases organizational identification (Chatman et al., 1986; March & Simon, 1958; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it can be argued that it is logical that people entering elitist organizations are more likely to make this a central part of their identities. According to Gill (2015), elite identity development in management consulting may lead to anxiety regarding the possible loss of this elite identity. While it may seem counterintuitive, the enhanced status and confidence that can come from employment in elite consulting firms may also increase anxiety since the subject now has more to lose - something that might further increase the pressure to perform well.

2.7 Performance-Based Identity

Performance-based identities are often found amongst elite athletes, where the individual's performance strongly affects the athlete's identity. For example, Dunn et al. (2010) find a link between athletes' elite identity, performance, and satisfaction. In part, self-awareness of one's performance comes from becoming knowledgeable of one's performance in the form of external cues that validate the individual's self-conception (Deaux, 1993; Turner, 1991). Performance in a professional setting can be tracked by many feedback measures, either quantitative, for example, a promotion, or socially derived, e.g., praise (Walker & Caprar, 2020). They further argue that the level of centrality the profession or organization has for the individual's identity will impact whether they develop a performance-based identity. This relates to being part of an elite organization or profession, informing the individual to see themselves as a top performer, which fuels the identity work towards developing a performance-based identity. They find that the performance-based identities of individuals, while positive, are often uncertain and might create feelings of self-doubt when people experience periods of poor performance or failure, potentially causing chronic anxiety and depression. When the environment around individuals fails to validate their performance-based identities, it may generate a threat to their identity, leading to potentially unpleasant emotions and worsened self-esteem (Walker & Caprar, 2020).

2.8 Identity Threat & Identity Work Strategies

An identity threat can be defined as "Any thought, feeling, action or experience that challenges the individual's personal or social identity" (Breakwell, 1983). Petriglieri (2011) argues that identity-threatening experiences inflict potential harm to the present and future identity. There is a wide acceptance across theories that identity work intensifies as the individual faces threats or tensions (Caza et al., 2018). Using sports literature as a lens for management and organizational research (Day et al., 2012), Brown and Coupland (2015) study elite sports professionals and performance-based threats such as being placed on the bench. The athletes cope with this through appropriations by employing an aspirational identity that relieves attention from the present failure to a self-image related to the occupational identity of being a successful elite athlete. They also argue that using identity threats to construct a self-image opportunistically can be seen as a means for identity construction (Brown & Coupland, 2015). These identity work strategies can be linked to research by Ahuja et al. (2019), where young elite architects cope with the mismatch between professional identity and lived experience at work using the idealization of a future professional identity. They also engage in reframing and distancing as strategies for identity work (Ahuja et al., 2019).

Similarly, Costas and Kärreman (2016) study management consultants handling discrepancies between role expectations and their professional reality, perceived by many as tedious. This leads to a sense of "arrested identity" where the subjects' coping mechanisms included clinging to aspirational identities enacted by the elite environment they were part of (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Thus, narrative theories on identity work, where a suboptimal current situation is coped with by focusing on a longer storyline, can be an interesting lens for how individuals cope with identity threats (Caza et al., 2018).

2.9 Underutilization as an Identity Threat

According to Morales and Lambert (2013), tasks not having the characteristics presumptively held or normatively associated with one's profession can be considered shameful and impact the self-image negatively. These tasks are referred to as dirty work. This concept integrates the individual-held beliefs of one's self-image and professional identity with organizational influence and pressure to perform these tasks. It, therefore, encompasses both an internalized feeling that the job does not offer what is expected and a social dimension where the work is perceived as demeaning or shameful in the eyes of the collective, leading to the management accountants in the study experiencing an identity conflict, making them engage in identity work. They further explore the concept of dirty work by introducing unclean work, representing tasks that are incongruent with one's identity and therefore become "symbols of their misrecognition", creating an identity threat (Morales & Lambert, 2013).

Using the aforementioned benching of elite athletes (Brown & Coupland, 2015) as an analogy for the reality faced by management consultants, being between billable projects is similar to the bench in that the individual's ambitions are halted and their identity threatened due to indications of poor performance and a lack of validation, facilitating a liminal phase which can create self-doubt and anxiety (Reed & Thomas, 2021). This may cause the individual to experience feelings of alienation from the collective and can also impact the individual's self-conception, as the internally held beliefs of what makes one's profession oppose the collective belief, creating identity tensions and intensifying identity work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Caza et al., 2018; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). High-performing individuals identify strongly with their working relationships. Being between billable projects could alter these and create a situation where their relational identities face tensions or diminish (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Being between billable projects and engaging in dirty work could also create a mismatch between professional role expectations and reality, where a consultant expecting work to be dynamic, complex, and intriguing is instead faced with repetitive and dull tasks (Adesi et al., 2015; Ibarra, 1999; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This expectation mismatch can be threatening to one's professional identity and intensify identity work (Caza et al., 2018; Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Moreover, the environment surrounding management consulting often intensely focuses on performance at the individual, group, and company levels (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). When between billable projects, the consultant is placed in a context that does not provide positive feedback, possibly causing internal self-doubt and challenging the self-image of being a "top performer", further intensifying the identity work (Caza et al., 2018; Walker & Caprar, 2020).

3. Theoretical Lens

In this section, we outline the theoretical concepts – to a large extent developed in the research presented and discussed above – used in this study. The theoretical concepts used are Identity (3.1), Underutilization (3.2), Identity Threat (3.3), Identity Work Strategies (3.4), and Contextual Influences (3.5). After presenting these concepts, we present the thesis' Research Questions in 3.6.

For this study, a theoretical lens has been developed (Figure 1). It has been inspired by and based on theoretical concepts and models within several areas, with the core focused on various dimensions of identity theory. The lens has four main overarching factors: identity, underutilization, identity work strategies, and the context. Identity covers the individuals on which the thesis focuses, underutilization focuses on the ways it threatens different parts of the consultants' identities, identity work strategies – inspired by Ahuja et al. (2019) – cover different kinds of strategies used by the consultants to handle the threats they face, while the context represents the external factors affecting them and how this can affect both how the threats are perceived and how the consultants eventually handle them.

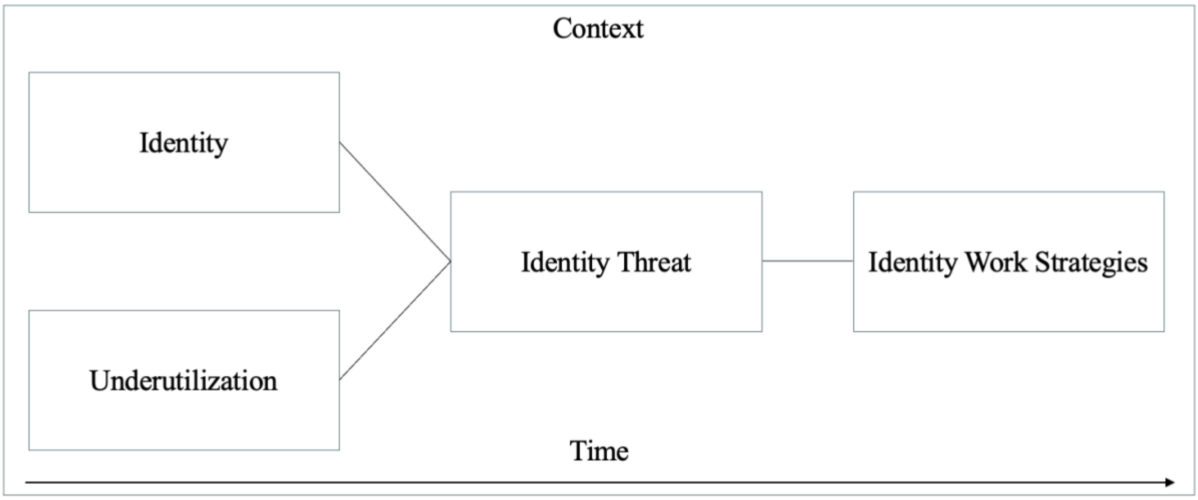

Figure 1

3.1 Identity

This part of the lens focus on young professionals entering their professional lives early in the process of constructing their identities, making them more susceptible to a host of influences.

The identity construction of young professionals' identity is often fluid, malleable, and experimental between multiple identities, and the sources impacting identity work are often a complex phenomenon to understand (Cohen-Scali, 2003; Modestino & Ladge, 2019). According to previous research, these come from both socially derived influences such as collective norms, values, and expectations (Pratt, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and internalized perceptions of one's self-image, which is related to one's traits, abilities, and motivation (Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Lord et al., 1999). Furthermore, while a professional identity can be seen as a stable sense of self (Schein, 1978), it is a long-term process constantly revised as experience is collected (Ibarra, 1999). Other research has looked towards performance as an integral part of one's identity and that the level of performance can influence how an individual sees him or herself (Walker & Caprar, 2020). Furthermore, a performance-based identity is often derived from organizational influences, where the prestigiousness of one's environment can fuel a performance-based or elite identification (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Kärreman, 2016). In summary, one of this study's objectives is to understand and establish a view of young high-performing professionals' identities to understand how they are formed, maintained, and revised as they enter their professional lives and are met with possible adversaries.

3.2 Underutilization

The second part of the lens focus on underutilization, in this study represented by the consultants spending time between billable projects, and how this can represent professional adversity by being a mismatch between one's professional role expectations and reality (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Pratt et al., 2006). Though limited, some research on situations in which one's professional life is not synonymous with one's professional expectations finds identity tensions that make individuals engage in identity work (Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Morales & Lambert, 2013). As seen in Section 2, performance can influence how individuals view themselves (Walker & Caprar, 2020). Whether time between billable projects indicates poor performance is uncertain, some employees may make this interpretation in line with the previous bench analogy (Brown & Coupland, 2015). Thus, this part of the theoretical lens aims to understand why and how underutilization, represented by time between billable projects, may pose an identity threat to the study's interviewees.

3.3 Identity Threat

The third part of the theoretical lens relates to identity threats. As mentioned, any experience or feeling that somehow challenges one's identity can be a threat (Petriglieri, 2011). Identity work often occurs due to, for example, changes in collective perceptions, a quest for reclaiming agency, or role misunderstandings (Caza et al., 2018). Therefore, whether underutilization is a threat to the consultants is inherently connected to both the situation and the identity composition of the consultants themselves.

3.4 Identity Work Strategies

Expanding on identity threats, we develop the fourth part of the lens using Ahuja et al. (2019) for how individuals cope with identity threats in their professional setting by engaging in emotion talk. The framework puts forward three forms of identity work strategies. Firstly, they found idealizing to be a way of looking towards one's future or ideal version of the self when faced with challenges at work. By engaging in idealizing, employing aspirational identities, and seeking narrative identities of the positive aspects of one's broader professional and future life, the individual can cope with identity-challenging experiences (Brown & Coupland, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Secondly, reframing works by individuals attributing different meanings to one's profession, making it more congruent with one's self-image. By using reframing as an identity work strategy, the individual can mentally reduce mismatches between their ideal and actual work experiences to mitigate the threat to their identity, for example, by framing a tedious task as a "learning experience". Thirdly, distancing is when individuals cynically refrain from identifying with their professional reality and distance themselves to relieve tensions and protect their self-image. By finding camaraderie with colleagues in a similar situation, individuals can distance themselves from agency, thereby shielding their identity from the threat (Ahuja et al., 2019). These are not definitive, and the study is not limited to proving these strategies. They guide potential ways the individuals in the study may cope with possible identity threats.

3.5 Contextual Influences

Contextual influences represent external factors that may impact how individuals view themselves and are influenced by values and norms shared with the organization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Elite discourses like those used by management consulting firms tend to emphasize prestigiousness and elite status to ensure the employees act in line with the firm's interest to signal high performance standards (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). This can result in a stronger identification with the firm (Chatman et al., 1986; March & Simon, 1958; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Another interesting lens to analyze the contextual influence is the organizational structure and its implications for ways of working (Martínez-Costa et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2008). Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) study HRM systems as identity-aligning projects used to integrate organizational identity with individual identity regulation. Furthermore, the normative pressure at management consulting firms to constantly perform and subordinate to the hierarchical structures may cause tensions between autonomy (control of one's life) and ambition (adherence to culture and following) amongst junior consultants, creating "resistance to resist" complying to the ambitious culture of the consulting firm (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). In summary, this part of the lens will investigate how contextual factors may influence the individuals' experience of being between billable projects and its implications for identity work strategies.

3.6 Research Questions

First and foremost, to understand time between billable projects and its implications for identity work amongst junior management consultants, we first need to establish who they are and their current sources of identity. The first research question is, therefore:

RQ 1: What are the primary identity sources of the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms?

Secondly, we aim to understand how they perceive and experience time between billable projects and why it may or may not give rise to identity tensions. The second research question is, therefore:

RQ 2: Why may time between billable projects represent an identity threat to the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms?

Thirdly, we seek to understand, given their primary sources of identity and if time between billable projects creates a perceived identity threat, how they, in that case, cope with and mitigate identity threats. The third research question is, therefore:

RQ 3: How do the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms employ identity work strategies to mitigate the possible identity threat of being between billable projects?

4. Methodology

The following section outlines the methodological approach chosen for our study. The sections are divided as follows: Theoretical Research Approach (4.1), Research Context (4.2), Research Design (4.3), Interviews (4.4), Data Analysis (4.5), and Trustworthiness (4.6).

4.1 Research Approach

Identity work relates to the individual subjective experience of the self and its construction, given internal and contextual implications in their role as management consultants. Therefore, this study's focal point is the individual and their experiential interpretation. The study aims to understand how they experience and cope with potential identity threats. The thesis is therefore based on an inductive study, where the subjective interpretation by the authors will inform the study's findings. Therefore, this study should be viewed as one version of reality and cannot be seen as definitive (Barbour, 2014; Bell et al., 2019). Epistemologically, the study's objective is to explore and understand how individuals experience underutilization in their professional context by being between billable projects and understanding its implications for identity work. It, therefore, requires a deeper understanding of the subject's interpretation of the phenomenon, and through that understand identity work (Bell et al., 2019: Ibarra, 1999).

4.2 Research Context

This study focuses on junior employees at the Stockholm offices of global top-ranking management consultancy firms. The reason for choosing management consultants as subjects for the study is twofold. First, the influence of professional service firms in general, and management consultancies in particular, on society have been steadily increasing, making them an interesting subject (Sokolov & Zavyalova, 2022). Second, the project-based nature of management consulting makes it an interesting scene to study how the current economic climate and the decreased utilization rates it causes might affect high-performing young professionals.

As the authors of this thesis are based in Stockholm, Sweden, where the study is conducted, and both speak the native language, there are practical reasons for choosing Sweden as the context of the study. Because the interviewees also speak Swedish as their first language, the interviews can be conducted in Swedish, facilitating a more relaxed setting and avoiding the risk of nuance and emotion getting lost in translation, thereby helping the subsequent analysis of the interviews (Bell et al., 2019).

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Multiple Case Study

A multiple case study is used to gather the empirical data used for the thesis (Bell et al., 2019; Darke et al., 1998). Using case studies is suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions in a context with a high degree of uncertainty regarding a certain complex phenomenon (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). Furthermore, case studies allow for investigating subjective experiences and perceptions regarding real situations concerning a chosen phenomenon. Because of this and the evident research gap in studying underutilization among management consultants, a case study is deemed suitable for the thesis. We chose a multiple case study to enable further analysis regarding factors affecting the phenomenon and provide strong and reliable evidence (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Allowing for analysis within and across situations and organizations will hopefully give a more holistic understanding of how underutilization affects management consultants and other factors that affect this relationship (Yin, 2003).

4.3.2 Data Collection & Sample

4.3.2.1 Selecting Case Companies

A purposive sampling method is used to select companies for the case study (Bell et al., 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Purposive sampling is deemed a suitable method in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases to study when researchers want to maximize the utilization of the resources available (Etikan et al., 2016).

We focus our attention on contacting interviewees working in the Stockholm offices of three of the largest and highest-ranked global management consulting firms, a strategy we choose both because we believe that the larger employee counts of these offices will help us in our data collection and because we believe that the prestigiousness of these three firms will make their employees especially interesting to study from an identity standpoint when facing what could be perceived as professional adversity. Furthermore, we make a conscious decision to select firms with different staffing models to be able to study whether these variations in models affected the interview subjects.

The staffing procedures and policies within management consultancy firms can differ widely depending on the firm's location, origin, and cultural influences. The institutional theory makes a distinction between two primary forms of management consulting firms – Professional Partnerships (P2) and Managed Professional Business (MPB) (Martínez-Costa et al., 2019). The consultants often manage the staffing policies in P2 firms and include a level of socialization and "adherence to common values", according to Richter et al. (2008). Furthermore, P2-type consulting firms more often employ an up-or-out promotion system, turnover as an objective, and non-detailed long-term planning. Meanwhile, MPB-type firms provide more centralized HRM staffing procedures in line with traditional corporate structures, with a more flexible promotion step, no intended turnover objective, and more detailed planning (Martínez-Costa et al., 2019; Richter et al., 2008). While the companies in this study are more similar to P2 firms, the staffing models used vary.

Lastly, we also select firms in which we have a relatively broad network, improving the chances of successfully scheduling the interviews. The final sample includes three case companies, all global and high-profile management consultancies. Due to privacy concerns, the names of these companies have been anonymized, instead being presented as Company A-C.

4.3.2.2 Selecting Interview Subjects

When selecting interview subjects, a purposive sampling method is again used (Bell et al., 2019). The interview subjects are management consultants with six months to two years of tenure. We select them because they are high-performing young professionals, likely early in their identity construction. It is also of interest to interview people currently or recently spending time between billable projects to gain valid answers about their experiences, something more likely among junior management consultants.

In the purposive sampling, the initial sourcing and selection of interview subjects is made through contacts and relationships in our networks. By mainly interviewing people we have a previous relationship with, we are exposed to the risk of having some selection bias regarding personality and background. However, we believe it may also pose an advantage in the interviews, as the interviewees with whom we have a previous relationship may be more inclined to open up regarding sensitive subjects such as identity tensions, self-doubt, and anxiety. Furthermore, the junior employees hired by the type of companies this study is focused on almost exclusively have similar backgrounds.

All interview participants are contacted through social media, telephone, or email. The sampling is based on two main criteria: 1) They are working as associate consultants in the Swedish management consulting sector, and 2) They are working at one of the three selected case companies. These criteria are followed to ensure the relevance of the information the interviewees can provide. Furthermore, our ambition is to create a relatively even distribution regarding employer, tenure, and gender, for us to discover any eventual effects these factors may have on the results. In total, 23 people were approached for the study, with three unavailable for an interview. Thus, our final data comprises 20 interviews with 20 employees at three management consultancies in Sweden. The interviewees are presented in Appendix 1, sorted by interview date. To even out the distribution, snowball sampling is used to some extent to complement the initial network-based sourcing based on recommendations from interviewees (Bell et al., 2019).

4.4 Interviews

4.4.1 Interview Process

All interviews were conducted between February 18th and April 14th, 2023. Based on the preferences of the interviewees, the setting varied between interviews in person and video conferences. One of the interviewers leads each interview, while the other takes notes and adds questions as they arise during the conversation. All interviews are recorded and later revisited to ensure that everything important is included and the responses are correctly transcribed. After transcription, the audio files were deleted to ensure the privacy and integrity of the interviewees.

The interviews are between 30 and 72 minutes long, with a mean average length of 58 minutes. The difference in time between different interviews is almost exclusively due to the comprehensiveness of the answers received and the respondents' general talkativeness.

4.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews follow a semi-structured approach (Bell et al., 2019), a setup chosen to allow the interviewees to talk and elaborate freely about their feelings and experiences and allow us to ask follow-up questions regarding interesting themes and answers while still providing an interview guide to ensure coverage of the most important themes. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview approach can reduce the risk of asking leading questions, which may be critical for adequately exploring a subject's reality and experience while avoiding bias. On the other hand, the semi-structured interview technique has the possible disadvantage of reducing the comparability between the various interviews (Bell et al., 2019), a disadvantage possibly worsened by the variations in length between the interviews.

The interviews follow a mix of romantic and localist interview techniques. The interviews aim to establish trust and commitment between the interviewers and the respondent, as this can help explore and navigate the interview subjects' experiences, feelings, and intentions. This is primarily done by ensuring anonymity and facilitating comfort to express themselves freely among the interviewees. The interview subjects need time to freely elaborate on the question without pre-conceptions from the interviewers. Furthermore, we use the localist technique of making the individual self-position in certain situations since the respondents might find questions and suggestions around identity work difficult to discuss. By asking the respondents to elaborate on hypothetical scenarios and speaking about other people, it can be viewed as a projection of how one views themselves, which is valuable when studying identity work (Alvesson, 2003).

The interview guide is created in three steps. Firstly, we explore earlier research and established concepts and frameworks related to identity, young professionals, and management consulting to provide us with a robust theoretical foundation and inspiration regarding valuable information. Secondly, we compile a long list of questions, later shortened substantially and structured in a way we believe will provide as valuable and sincere answers as possible. After testing this interview guide on the first two interviewees and having received insights regarding what parts were more and less informative, we continue with a revised interview guide during the rest of the interviews, as is natural in a study with an inductive nature. The revised interview guide is presented in Appendix 2.

4.5 Data Analysis

When processing the data acquired through the interviews, a thematic analysis focused on identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes from the data set is conducted (Bell et al., 2019). Since its high degree of academic freedom enables both flexibility and detailed data accounting, this type of analysis is helpful in the examination of perspectives collected from a wide range of research participants (Nowell et al., 2017). Additionally, the thematic analysis allows for summarizing critical aspects found in larger data sets because it requires a well-structured approach (King, 2004).

In the analysis, the first step is familiarizing ourselves with the data. This is done in parallel with the interviews and consists of both authors relistening and transcribing the interviews. Thereafter, the process of coding the answers is initiated. Initially, the authors independently process and sort the data into first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013), which in practice meant going through all interview notes and transcripts. These are then inserted into separate Excel sheets, with the whole process done individually to avoid biases and ensure quality (Barratt et al., 2011; Nowell et al., 2017). Afterwards, the concepts are compared and synchronized, after which 61 first-order concepts remain. From these, 32 were selected based on the frequency of responses connected to the codes and subsequently clustered into 12 second-order themes. Because of the inductive nature of the thesis, the themes are constructed with previous literature and our theoretical framework in mind. However, most of the inspiration for the themes is derived from the empirical data. Lastly, the second-order themes are organized into four aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). These are presented in the section outlining the empirical data and structured with the theoretical framework in mind, as with the second-order themes. Appendix 3 lists all concepts, themes, and dimensions, with illustrative quotes from the interviews.

4.6 Trustworthiness

We focus on five criteria to ensure adequate trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and integrity (Beeler et al., 2017; Bell et al., 2019). Follow-up questions are asked if anything needs to be clarified, ensuring the interviewees are understood and interpreted correctly to increase credibility. Furthermore, relistening to the interviews and transcribing quotes in detail ensures that the data used for the analysis is based on the respondents' exact answers. Transferability – referring to the applicability of the findings to other contexts – has been argued to be problematic in qualitative research since these often utilize small samples and case studies (Beeler et al., 2017). With the ambition to increase transferability, the research context is provided in section 4.2. Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the findings over time across locations (Beeler et al., 2017). This is a problematic factor in qualitative research since the social setting and circumstances of the study are very difficult to export precisely to new studies. Therefore, this should be considered if future studies are investigating a similar phenomenon. Individual initial data analysis is done before any comparison to increase inter-observer consistency. The open questions and dialogue of the semi-structured interview format used in the thesis also help us improve the conformability, reducing the risk of personal values or theoretical inclinations affecting the conduct of the research (Bell et al., 2019). Finally, the interviewees and their employers are all ensured anonymity and that the data and recordings will be protected, increasing the data's integrity, and thereby improving the trustworthiness (Beeler et al., 2017).

5. Empirical Results & Analysis

In the following section, we will present and analyze the data obtained in the interviews. Firstly, we will analyze the Contextual factors and differences between the case companies (5.1). Secondly, we will analyze the sources of the interviewees' current Identity construction (5.2). Thirdly, we will focus on why time between billable projects may pose an identity threat (5.3), and lastly, how the consultants use identity work strategies to cope with this (5.4).

5.1 Context

The context represents external factors influencing everything from the individual's identity to how they perceive and handle identity threats. The external context can, in these cases, be assumed to be the company and workplace of the individuals. Therefore, relevant factors range from intangible factors such as firm culture and norms to very tangible things like organizational structure, staffing procedures, tasks and working conditions faced by the consultant when between billable projects.

5.1.1 Organizational Factors

Something brought up by numerous interviewees is the different staffing models used by the firms, something many see as a key differentiating factor. At Company A, being staffed on a project is mainly handled by the consultants. While a central staffing department exists, the primary way to get assigned to a project is by contacting partners and other senior employees, who will reach out when they need an associate consultant. This creates an internal labor market, where having previously proved yourself to senior colleagues is often critical to getting new projects – especially in times like these, when the supply of associates far outweighs the demand. Meanwhile, Company B operates very differently – its staffing model is almost fully centralized, with partners and associates having little say, instead having associates assigned to projects by the central staffing department. Lastly, the staffing model of Company C is a mix of Companies A and B. While they officially use a centralized staffing system similar to Company B, the interviewees claim that the partners and associates handle a large part of the staffing and then communicate to the staffing department. Most interviewees agree that the models have different strengths and weaknesses and suited different personalities and situations to varying degrees. However, many believe the Company A staffing model can be challenging for those recently employed in the current economic landscape.

"The staffing model is a huge difference between us and our competitors. It's like an internal labor market, where most projects don't even reach the official channels – you have to get to know people to hear about them. Sometimes the mingling and networking feel like a part-time job, and whether you're successful or not can greatly impact your chances at the firm – positively or negatively. For me, the staffing model has been great, but I think it depends a lot on both luck and what kind of personality you have." - Interviewee 4, Company A

Another interesting finding is the apparent difference in what being between billable projects means in terms of tasks and workload. At Company B, being between billable projects often means being entirely free or, at times, working on internal projects. Correspondingly, the Company B interviewees think being between billable projects is far more pleasant, with those employed by the other firms expressing some envy towards the Company B conditions.

"I envy the people on the beach! When I am on the beach, I am usually at home. During my time at the beach, I'd estimate I've been 100% free about 70% of the time. The more time I have spent on the beach, the more I have viewed it as time off – even making plans with friends even though I am aware that some tasks might come up." - Interviewee 3, Company B

In contrast, Companies A & C expect their employees between billable projects to be at the office from 9 to 18, ready to take on assignments ad-hoc on short notice, creating a higher level of stress and uncertainty amongst the employees.

"Until recently, beach time in the way they have at Company B barely existed at Company A. Beach at Company A means client development projects, which are not very nice – there's much pressure to prove yourself to get staffed. The expectation is that you should always be ready in case they get a task for you." - Interviewee 4, Company A

"You'd think being on the beach is nice, but you're constantly stressed that someone can email you at any second. It's like you have time off but can't do anything. Sometimes you

don't hear from work for two days, you go to the gym, and suddenly when you're on the treadmill, you're expected to be ready to join a meeting in 15 minutes." - Interviewee 6, Company A

The consensus among the interviewees is that the past year has been extreme regarding the prevalence of time between billable projects among associate consultants. The main reason for this is said to be the overall state of the economy and the slow M&A market. At Company A, however, this has happened simultaneously with the company hiring an unprecedented amount of new junior employees to the Stockholm office according to our interviews. This is said to have amplified the effect of the slowed-down market and increased the number of new hires between billable projects. However, this has not had the same effect on the consultants with a tenure of at least a year, which is said to be because they can work more independently than the new hires.

"We're currently in a unique situation where the company has hired an extreme amount of people while the economic climate has been cooling down a lot. This means that there's an unprecedented number of people at the beach who don't get any experience. The whole promotion cycle will be slowed down. The current situation is definitely not good for anyone." - Interviewee 1, Company A

"What's unfortunate with the current situation is that a lot of very talented and competent people are falling through the cracks. After two months, you're not seen as new anymore because new people are being hired, which means staffing won't prioritize you. If you haven't gotten any opportunities by that time, it can be very difficult to get your foot through the door." - Interviewee 1, Company A

5.1.2 Cultural Factors

While the people interviewed have a lot in common, most think that while similar, some cultural differences separate the firms. While the interviewees have not worked at their competitors, most of them have friends or partners working for their competitors, providing them with some knowledge about the other firms.

"I think the people at Company B in general, are… a bit more fun. I'm generalizing here, but from my experience, the people at Company A are smarter and nerdier but less charismatic. Of course, this affects the culture of the firm – I feel the people at Company B are closer in general." - Interviewee 1, Company A

Something expressed by multiple interviewees is that Company B stands out compared to its competitors with its focus on company culture and charismatic people, something the interviewees believe makes its employees closer to each other.

"Company B focuses more on culture in recruitment and everyday work. Company C recruits are nerdier, and Company A people are more cutthroat. The main thing Company B is selling is the culture, which I think is quite effective with our generation" - Interviewee 5, Company B

At Company C, the culture is demanding, with the widespread notion that being between billable projects for extended periods can be viewed as negative.

"I once had a project leader who used [being between billable projects] for a long time as an argument to persuade me to return to a case even though she knew that I did not want to, saying that it might reflect badly being [between billable projects] for too long" - Interviewee 11, Company C

Among the interviewees, there is a general consensus that while there is no explicit "up-or-out"-policy, it is very much enforced, although more subtly.

5.2 Identity

In our empirical data, we found signs of all three sources of identity investigated represented among the interviewees – *Professional Identity*, *Elite Identity*, and *Performance-Based Identity*. As theorized when constructing our framework earlier, these different identities are not mutually exclusive, and most interview subjects have identity amalgams based on several Identity sources.

5.2.1 Professional Identity

The absolute majority of the interviewees tend to introduce themselves with their profession rather than their company, indicating that they saw their primary affiliation not with their employer but with their profession – in line with the literature on the subject (Ibarra, 1999; Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2014; Ramarajan, 2014; Schein, 1978). Personal development is named as a key reason for entering management consulting and an essential career driver, as the fast tempo and client exposure in management consulting facilitates a steep learning curve.

"At least early in my career, I want to learn as much as possible. Management consulting is extremely wide, so I get to try out different things. Right now, it is largely about figuring out what gets me going, so to speak" - Interviewee 9, Company A

A large share of the interviewees believes that the prestige associated with management consulting is not very high to the vast majority of society, as many either do not know what management consulting is or see it as detrimental. However, practically every person interviewed says that management consulting – together with investment banking, private equity, and a select few other sectors – is seen as quite prestigious within their "social bubble".

"I think many people look down on us, they think of Karolinska paying BCG ridiculous sums and believe consultants just write pointless reports. However, in our world and our social bubble, I would say it's seen as a pretty prestigious industry." - Interviewee 5, Company B

Furthermore, several interviewees say that while management consulting might not be seen as very important, they believe that most people have respect for the intellectual and professional capacity of the consultants themselves. The empirics show how the consultants want to live up to the high standards they believe are set by their colleagues, in line with Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester's (2016) findings that individuals identifying with their profession tend to be driven towards representing what they believe is the prototype of it.

"I would say that prestige-wise, management consulting is quite highly regarded – especially for the people working in the industry, who are known to be high-performers." - Interviewee 7, Company A

Most interviewees believe their employer is in the upper echelons of management consultancies. When applying, however, they were not particularly focused on that specific company as long as they ended up at one of the top firms. While most are happy with their current employers, they say that before their time there, they thought of them as outright substitutes for each other.

"I applied to all of the top-ranked management consultancies, and when Company B gave me an offer, I withdrew my applications from the others. To be honest, I saw them as substitutes for each other – I am super happy that I ended up at Company B, but I can't say I knew how they differed from each other back then." - Interviewee 2, Company B

Meanwhile, the interviewees also stress the important distinction between management consulting at their level and management consulting as a wider profession, indicating that while they identify as management consultants, they do not identify with *all* management consultants. Considering how the consensus seems that the top firms in the business are, to a large extent, substitutes, the conclusion is that there is a prevailing professional identification among the subjects as "management consultants at a top firm". Combined with the fact that the interviewees, in general, see management consulting as a prestigious profession, this is in line with how the prestige of a group increases how much an individual identifies with it (Chatman et al., 1986; March & Simon, 1958; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This indicates a possible connection between their current professional identity and a possible elite identity.

5.2.2 Elite Identity

Elite identity represents the individual's belief of being part of an elite, in this case, through their employer and wider professional or social circles. This draws from various aspects of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The prestige of a group increases organizational identification (Chatman et al., 1986; March & Simon, 1958; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and management consultants with top university backgrounds – the people examined in this study

– have been found by Costas and Kärreman (2016) to see themselves as “elite individuals entering an elite environment”. This is particularly relevant for this study, as all three of the interviewees’ employers almost exclusively recruit top students from elite universities, cultivating an image of only employing the best of the best.

In line with the aforementioned identification among the subjects as “management consultants at a top firm”, a notable finding from the interviews is that every single interviewee sees their respective company as one of the top-ranked companies in the industry. Furthermore, we see an overrepresentation of people ranking their specific employers as *the* top-ranked consulting company, indicating a certain level of bias. Many interviewees see their employer, together with a select few other companies, as so far above other consultancies that you can barely consider them to be in the same industry – most do not even mention other firms than those included in this study when asked about competitors.

“Naturally, I think my employer is the best in the industry. [...] Then again, there is management consulting, and there’s management consulting. I feel that there’s some inflation in regards to who calls themselves management consultants.” - Interviewee 8, Company B

Almost all interviewees name the brand and status of their employers as one of the most important reasons for choosing them – firstly, because they believe it will provide them with better future professional opportunities, and secondly, because they were attracted to the company’s prestigiousness.

“The brand and high status of Company A were extremely important when I chose them. My biggest nightmare was ending up at, say, [Big Four consulting firm]. That might sound superficial, and maybe I am. But the brand is super important, and it gives you opportunities later.” - Interviewee 6, Company A

“The brand was extremely important. All strategy consultants I know do basically the same things and have similar salaries. It’s not as if I do a lot cooler things than at other places – in reality, by far the biggest difference is the brand” - Interviewee 2, Company B

Many interview subjects emphasize prestige and status as essential drivers, and the work environment provides these. However, while Gill (2015) finds that people adopt elite identities when entering management consulting, our empirical data find that while the consultants use their employers as a source of elite identity, most already saw themselves as elite individuals before joining. Therefore, our findings align with Costas and Kärreman (2016).

"Status is important – I want to have fun on the job and be surrounded by smart young people. Me and Agda [symbolizing a generic old lady] will not have fun. For example, I could never see myself working at Swedbank's back office. Money has some importance, but it is more of a hygiene factor. You want to be able to do what your friends do." - Interviewee 4, Company A

Another interview subject is even more explicit and refers to her educational background, where seeking status and prestige was standard.

"Prestige matters. Everyone from Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) has more status anxiety than the next one." - Interviewee 8, Company B

Many interviewees mention or refer to “Our social bubble” – a group of people they see themselves as part of and identify with. When asked to specify that bubble, most describes something akin to “People with high career ambitions who studied at either SSE or an industrial engineering program at a prestigious Swedish university”. Further specifying the group, it is especially focused on people working in management consulting, investment banking, or private equity, forming a perceived elite group of people with whom the interviewees identify.

“It depends on whom I talk to – if they are not in the corporate bubble with me, I might say that I work with business strategy. Otherwise, I’ll probably just say Company B. [...] With the corporate bubble, I mean people from the elite universities in Sweden, either SSE or industrial engineers.” - Interviewee 8, Company B

While most interviewees already had a level of elite identity before joining their employers, the employer still plays an important role as a source of confirmation and reinforcement of their elite identity, in line with the findings by Alvesson and Robertson (2006). Many interviewees describe that they had been able to go through the hiring process and get a job offer from their current employer as something that validates their self-image.

"There's definitely a sense of security working for Company A – I feel that I've proved to myself that I can perform at this level." - Interviewee 9, Company A

Additionally, several interview subjects talk about how their employer not only gives them the internal security of being high-performers but also ensures that people around them – especially people in the same social circles – see them as successful.

"Considering what I've studied, I would say that being at Company B is proof of success." - Interviewee 5, Company B

Somewhat surprising considering the expressed desire for status and prestige, several interviewees mention an unwillingness to tell people who their employers are due to fear of being perceived as boastful. However, most say that it depends on whom they spoke to and the social setting. This can be interpreted as the interviewees seeing themselves as part of an elite group of people, which the people to whom they introduce themselves, therefore, are likely to be jealous of. This is further supported by how several people compare their employers to their previous high-ranking educations in terms of prestige and how many still use their education as a source for their elite identity.

"It feels awkward [telling someone where he works] – you don't want to seem like a boastful person. Nevertheless, it [his employer] has so much prestige that you seem a bit like if you explain to someone that you are filthy rich. It's hard to tell someone you have a huge house in the Bahamas without sounding like bragging. A bit of Jante [Law of Jante]. It also depends on the person on the receiving end – it's hard to explain to those without higher education." - Interviewee 1, Company A

Interestingly, this further reinforces the idea of the elite social bubble the interviewees see themselves as a part of, where there is a self-perceived high level of prestige to work for their respective employers. However, there is also, paradoxically, some shame associated with it as they believe others will see it as bragging. The fact that the interviewees believe the mere act of telling others where they work is boastful supports the interpretation that they believe themselves to be a part of an elite.

5.2.3 Performance-Based Identity

Based on the empirical data, performance-based identity is our interviewees' most dominant identity source. Due to the combination of a relatively high level of centrality of the professional identity of the subjects and a widespread elite identity among them, it is in line with previous research by Walker and Caprar (2020) that a large share of the subjects has developed a performance-based identity.

The interviewees consider themselves high-performers, with most having a long history of high performance – not just academically and professionally but also in areas such as sports and social status.

"I have always performed well in school, relatively high in sports – it might be hard to evaluate my social performance, but I would say I perform well there as well" - Interviewee 3, Company B

Another interviewee confirms this notion.

"I think I've always defined myself by my academic achievements, but that changed when I started working. You get in a room with many excellent people, and I don't think you'll feel very good if you base your self-esteem on your performance – lately, I try to distance myself from my performance. I am trying to figure out that what defines me is not how I perform because there are so many impressive people here." - Interviewee 9, Company A

A common theme that emerged when discussing drivers, failures, and success is internal pressure, where consistent high performance over time has created a need to continue performing at that level.

"Yes, I would say it [being a high performer] is important. Somewhere you have an image of yourself, and that image is probably related to how other people view me. I think it started early, back in school – you build that identity in the classroom, and now you want to maintain it." - Interviewee 3, Company B

This identity maintenance is vital among the interview subjects where much of the pressure to perform comes from internal expectations, and very few mentions external sources such as parents, friends or monetary goals. However, while the drive to be high-performers is mainly internal, achievements in the form of, for example, receiving a job at a top consultancy is a source of maintaining or validating their idea of themselves.

Given the fact that the interviewees, in general, are high-performing people with high ambitions, it is no surprise that a vast majority have previous employment within other industries they see as prestigious – mainly investment banking and private equity.

"[On why Company A] You mean… instead of, for example, [slightly less prestigious consulting firm]? I think you pursue what you think you deserve, and I guess I've felt I deserve the best. Without knowing anything about the school, I chose SSE because it was the hardest to get accepted. I did investment banking and private equity because it was hard to get, so if I were to become a consultant, I wanted to work at the firm that was hardest to get into." - Interviewee 1, Company A

When asked why they went into management consulting, many interviewees compare it to investment banking. Interestingly, many interviewees almost seem to think those were the only real options they had.

"I see management consulting as the lesser of two evils compared to Investment Banking." – Interviewee 7, Company A

While this is not the case, it is interesting as it reflects how the interviewees, all former top students at top schools, felt that while they had endless opportunities after their studies, only a select few jobs were considered good, prestigious, and well-paying enough to be considered. This might indicate that their career choices, to a large extent, are based on the level of prestige associated with a profession rather than an urge to do that specific profession – something exemplified by how one interviewee chose management consulting over investment banking because she did not want to move to London, signaling that only the London-based banks were prestigious enough to be relevant.

"I had originally planned to do investment banking, but as time passed, I realized I did not want to move to London. Honestly, I did not have a super positive image of management consulting, but the work-life balance was better than in banking, and I wouldn't have to move. But now I like it a lot!" - Interviewee 4, Company A

Several interviewees mentioned "good exit opportunities" as a reason for joining their current employer, something that indicates that professional identity may support their performance-based identities rather than being important in itself.

"Why I became a consultant? Haha, because I studied at SSE! No, but to be honest, I did not enjoy investment banking, and I wanted a job with good exit opportunities – consulting seemed like a good choice" - Interviewee 5, Company B

Further support for this can be derived from the finding that while many name "professional development" as an important career driver, very few of the interviewees have specific professional goals, indicating that they seek success itself rather than success within a specific profession. While the lack of plans may seem logical considering their young age, it creates an interesting contrast to how many talk about the importance of learning and developing for the future.

"I want to stay here for the foreseeable future, then maybe go into private equity or a business development role. But I have no idea. It's a choice between more spare time or

money, even though there is a conventional path – private equity. It's easy to go for what people expect from you, but as you start caring less about those superficial things, you need to turn inwards – and then it suddenly becomes harder and more complex to decide what you want to do." - Interviewee 8, Company B

Many interviewees say that while being generally high-performing is important, a mediating factor is the performance of people around them. Several consultants say that while failure can be hard to deal with, it is not nearly as tough if people around them are failing too. Therefore, most important to many of them is not just performing well in general but performing well relative to others.

"Failing feels awful, but not if other people fail too. There's this proverb – 'If God can't make me skinny, I pray he makes my friends fat.' If I've applied for a job or an internship that a friend gets instead of me… that hurts quite a lot. It's as if I'm objectively worse than that person. While I understand intellectually that it isn't that simple, it's still very hard to understand it on an emotional level." - Interviewee 1, Company A

5.2.4 Centrality of Identities

The consultants show signs of possessing all three abovementioned identities to varying degrees, with performance-based identity seemingly being more central than the others as it is talked about more extensively. This speaks to the dynamism of their identity construction. Consequently, no interviewees have just one of the identities, but parts of all make up an amalgamated identity (Modestino & Ladge, 2019). The empirical analysis shows that professional identity is a vital source of validation for both performance-based and elite identity, as their employment's high status provides a stamp of approval. Thus, we see an interrelated relationship between all identities, with the primary role of the professional identity being to support the other two identities.

As many interview subjects compare the elite status of their employers with that of their previous educations in line with Costas and Kärreman's findings (2016), their elite identity construction is likely to have been going on for a longer time than their professional identity construction, being a possible explanatory factor for why the professional identity is not as strong. Since they describe being high-performing in various subjects as long as they can remember, this also explains why the performance-based identity is as pronounced as it is. Furthermore, the relative lack of centrality of the respondents’ professional identities may be related to the very nature of management consulting, since it is an industry many enter with the plan to leave for other sectors after a few years.

5.3 Underutilization as an Identity Threat

After having established the identity composition of the interviewees, the next step of our analysis is investigating why underutilization in the form of time between billable projects may pose a threat to the identity sources described.

5.3.1 Task Expectation Dissonance

Task expectation dissonance covers the extent to which the professional life and tasks the consultants face differ from their expectations before entering the industry. As shown by Costas and Kärreman (2016), newly hired consultants are often surprised by the repetitiveness and lack of creativity in their tasks – something that seems to be further amplified by not being on a billable project, as the interviewees almost unanimously agree that the complexity and creativity of those tasks tend to be lower. This relates to Katz and Kahn's (1966) research, which states that how people view themselves is often affected by the expectations associated with their roles.

In general, many of the consultants' tasks between billable projects have some characteristics of dirty work because they do not live up to the pride and virtues associated with consulting – working in close teams, working at a high pace for long hours, and solving problems for clients. The dissonance is worsened by a widespread notion that the tasks, in general, are insignificant, sometimes even having the characteristics of busywork made up solely to give the employee something to do, wasting the employee's time in pointless tasks in line with what Morales and Lambert (2013) describe as unclean work. Rather than being met with challenging, complex, and dynamic tasks, tasks between billable projects are seen as dull, repetitive, and uninspiring – to the degree that it does not feel like management consulting, causing tension with their professional identity. The findings align with Costas and Kärreman (2016), showcasing arrested identity.

"Sometimes on the beach, I don't even feel like a management consultant. Yesterday I just translated a document from English to Swedish. A stupid monkey could do that. [...] One week on the beach, they gave me the assignment to find data that no one had found, but they wanted me to double check – and of course, I did not find anything because the info did not exist, which they knew. And in that case, I felt like, 'What am I doing here?' You don't feel like it's a real job, especially when they make up assignments to put you to work. It's quite depressing" - Interviewee 6, Company A

The dissonance between what the consultants feel their employers were selling to them before they started and the actual reality of the work itself can have significant implications. According to Pratt et al. (2006), work-identity integrity violations such as these can trigger the reconstruction of professional identity, threatening the interview subjects' identities. In the results, the task expectation dissonance is interpreted as an identity threat mainly directed at the interviewees' professional identity because of the mismatch between their professional role identity and their lived experience at work.

5.3.2 Concerns for Career Implications

Concerns for career implications are concerns consultants may have that time between billable projects may hurt their career prospects, threatening the future maintenance of the elite identity the consultants believe themselves to have, which corresponds with previous research findings indicating that an elite identity can lead to anxiety regarding the possible loss of it (Gill, 2015). Therefore, overextended time between billable projects can have consequences for their planned career trajectories and threaten their elite identities – something especially problematic considering that the expectation going into the industry was often to learn fast, develop, and climb hierarchically. This is further worsened by the up-or-out philosophy employed by the firms, as not climbing hierarchically indirectly can mean de facto losing your job.

"When you are on the beach, you get less exposure and less work experience, and promotions depend on how much experience you have. How many different types of analyses or client meetings you've done, how many bad cases you've been on, and how many good cases you've been on." - Interviewee 3, Company B

This disruption of personal development is associated with anxiety and stress attributed to external expectations to gain experience and constantly improve.

"For me, it's more the stress that I don't learn that much – I am worried about my learning curve and not being promoted. In a year, the senior people expect me to have a certain skill set. I am worried people will be disappointed with me". - Interviewee 6, Company A

According to the interviewees, time between billable projects can hurt their career prospects in several ways. Firstly, it will give you fewer chances to showcase your abilities, slowing the promotion cycle. Secondly, it can slow down the development of your professional skills, thereby indirectly hampering your career prospects. This effect is evident in all investigated case companies, where the faster development of some colleagues creates a feeling of falling behind, thereby threatening the maintenance of a future elite identity.

"After a while, you start to feel that you don't want to be worse than your colleagues. I just started a new role, and I haven't yet put that role into practice." [...] "For example, I have a colleague from my cohort who's done two market models while I've done zero. He/She has led 50 expert interviews, while I have led two. How good you are going in is one thing, but much is about what you do when you are here. It's supposed to be a stepping stone. These should be the dog years – you want to learn." - Interviewee 8, Company B

Another interviewee confirmed this notion.

"[...] I think being on a project is when you develop the most. The hard thing with that [being on the beach for an extended period] is that colleagues develop faster than you. And that's tough because you want to be on par with your peers." - Interviewee 13, Company A

Lastly – but sometimes most importantly – consultants spending more time between billable projects have fewer opportunities to build relationships with partners and colleagues, implicitly reducing their opportunities to find future projects and putting them in a negative spiral – especially in companies using more entrepreneurial staffing models. Many interviewees say that the first months can have a significant effect on your overall success later. This is an even more decisive determining factor at Companies A and C since their staffing model means that if you are not on projects early on, you lose opportunities to build the relationships that in their staffing models are vital for future opportunities.

"In reality, you'll only get promoted if you've proven yourself consistently. If you spend much time on the beach early on, you'll learn less, which risks becoming a negative spiral. If you lack project experience, fewer people will want you on their projects, further reducing your learning opportunities. It's a Catch-22. On top of that, you get to know fewer senior colleagues if you're not on a project, making your chances even worse." - Interviewee 1, Company A

Since there are studies on the people we are studying – employees at elite consultancies – it is no surprise that we can make similar observations in our empirical data to previous researchers. However, while prior research has focused on a fear of losing the elite status because of not being able to live up to high expectations, our findings are focused on the stress caused by not even getting the opportunity to live up to the expectations. While our interviewees acknowledge that they most likely would not have a hard time obtaining another job, they argue that most other companies would be a step-down status-wise, in line with the findings of Gill (2015). Having to leave what the consultants themselves perceive as an elite environment in which the consultants likely have been encouraged in their elite identity formation (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas & Kärreman, 2016) would therefore deprive them of the status reinforcement they have described it as, thereby exposing them to the risk of losing their elite status.

5.3.3 Being In Low Demand

Being in low demand refers to a mainly emotional aspect of being between billable projects. While not necessarily the case, not being staffed on a project can seem as if no one wants to work with the consultant in question – a signal to the individual that they are currently not performing at a level expected of them, threatening their performance-based identities, in line with Walker and Caprar (2020). Several interviewees describe both their colleagues and themselves as "Insecure overachievers", providing further support that they may be susceptible to the anxiety caused by this kind of identity threat. In the empirical data, the consultants say that the primary source of validation at the firms is the standardized and widely used review system from superiors. When between billable projects, this system is used differently, depriving them of their primary source of validation.

"If someone has much time on the beach, it's generally considered a huge red flag. I know for a fact that partners look a lot at this. If you have a lot of beach time, it means that people don't want to work with you – you're in low demand." - *Interviewee 4, Company A*

"I think quite a few people look down on people on the beach. It might be unconscious because of their neuroticism, but it's not nice feeling that people look down on you when you're already a bit stressed by not being on a project." - *Interviewee 10, Company C*

Aside from the formal source of validation provided by the review systems, an area where the opinions of the interviewees differ is whether a lack of time between billable projects is validation in itself. Interestingly, this is partially determined by the consultancy firm on which the interviewee works. Generally, those working for Companies A and C see extensive beach time as a sign of being in low demand and that not spending time between billable projects is a sign of having performed well.

"The best way to determine whether you're performing well is to look at your staffing opportunities. If you have to fight to get some beach time because people are throwing projects at you, you're in high demand – then you know you're doing well." - Interviewee 1, Company A

Meanwhile, the consultants at Company B disagree – according to them, time between billable projects is determined by external factors outside the consultant's control, such as the economic climate and the performance of the firm's staffing function.

"At Company B, the culture is more relaxed than at our competitors – my performance has nothing to do with whether I get staffed. It's not my responsibility. It's the staffers' job." - Interviewee 8, Company B

Whether or not this is because of actual differences between the firm's staffing functions is uncertain. However, the staffing models will likely impact how much an identity threat time between billable projects is to the consultants. This identity threat is, consequently, more prominent amongst the consultants in Company A and, to some extent, Company C. The phenomenon above is also reflected by how many interviewees stress the importance of not being alone between billable projects. Most focus on how important it is to have someone to talk to as a substitute for a team, but there is another reason – the more people you have in the same situation, the less it seems and feels like a failure on an individual level. Most interviewees see their colleagues as high-performing people; if other high-performing people are in the same situation as you, it is easier than it otherwise could have been.

"There is no worse feeling than being on the beach by yourself. It's like going to school and not having any friends, no one to sit with at lunch." - Interviewee 10, Company C

This is further enhanced by the competitiveness among the junior consultants, where receiving a project becomes an achievement and, therefore, the opposite is a failure. Even though it is possible to argue that the economic climate is to blame and that new project opportunities are limited and, therefore, out of the junior consultants' control, they still feel a level of agency and responsibility over their situation. The staffing model of Companies A and C can therefore be argued to have a significant impact on how and why the time between billable projects becomes an identity-threatening experience, in line with research by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), who find HRM systems have a substantial impact on influencing control and identity within management consulting firms.

Aside from the organizational factors, another influential factor is the culture of these firms. Research indicates that management consulting firms facilitate elite identity construction to promote high performance standards, creating a high-performing culture (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). The symbolic negative value of being between billable projects for an extended period is largely created by collective norms. The internalized identity tensions become a performance-based threat in response to this cultural belief (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This is in line with social identity theory, as collective norms are said to significantly influence individuals' identity construction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This effect is seen mainly in Companies A & C. In the interviews, overextended time between billable projects is explicitly said to be something that can "reflect badly" on the consultant, further indicating a widespread view in Companies A and C of its negative signaling value, failing to validate the junior consultants' image as high-performers and causing tensions with their performance-based identities (Turner 1991; Deaux, 1993; Walker & Caprar, 2020). This confirms that while the elitist discourse in which management consultants belong can have a positive effect on performance standards (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), it may also lead to anxiety and identity tensions stemming from fear of not living up to the high expectations, something being between billable projects can represent (Gill, 2015).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, in Company B, it did not have any negative connotation, something largely explained as a consequence of the limited control the junior consultants have over their staffing opportunities and the egalitarian staffing procedures supposedly not taking previous performance into account. Company B is also described as generally having a softer culture, which may further explain the collective view of time between billable projects not being particularly negative. Arguably, whether there are cultural negative or positive associations of time between billable projects, the findings support the notion that management consultancy firms intentionally and unintentionally engage in identity-aligning projects. This can therefore explain why the investigated companies' culture, norms, and values, to some extent, moderate the perceived identity threat individuals feel when between billable projects (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

5.4 Identity Work Strategies

5.4.1 Reframing

Reframing covers how individuals rephrase their occupational characteristics, making them more congruent with one's professional identity and self-image. In essence, it is similar to idealizing but differs as reframing concerns the change of meaning attributed to the work characteristics. This integrates one's current professional identity with an aspirational identity (Ahuja et al., 2019). In our empirical data, support for this identity work strategy is differently used depending on company. Among the Company B respondents, the time between projects is reframed as "relaxing" or "free time off". This seems to be a relatively effective identity work strategy, as the consultants at Company B generally seem to have a more positive view of time between billable projects.

"I wouldn't say being at the beach is negative – they are the real winners! They have the same prospects as the rest of us, but without all the work." - Interviewee 2, Company B

When asked, many consultants refer to the time between billable projects as "The Beach", a conceptual rephrasing that places a positive symbolic value on what it means to be between billable projects. This simple play of words signals that time between billable projects is relaxing, pleasant, and desirable. Therefore, as used in Company B, reframing can be seen as a professional identity protection strategy as The Beach is desirable to them. By attributing this positive meaning to it, the professional identity threat becomes mitigated as it becomes positively aligned with what they expect from their profession. These positive attributes may be somewhat valid, as they are professional perks in times of high activity. However, the absolute majority of the same employees say that some of the main reasons for pursuing a career as a management consultant are the high-paced work environment, long hours, the steep learning curve, working in tight project teams, and being exposed to clients within many different industries – factors that are unfulfilled when between billable projects, especially considering that the beach tasks of Company B seem to be the least challenging of the three companies. Therefore, while there most likely is some level of truth in that being between billable projects is more relaxing than on a client case, being as optimistic about it as most of the Company B employees seems to bear many similarities to the reframing used by some of the architects in the study made by Ahuja et al. (2019).

Several interviewees also mention how being between projects can be an opportunity to distance oneself from work and reconnect to their private life. This is also a form of reframing a negative and possibly identity-threatening situation to one's professional identity to something that instead is helping the individual limit the centrality of one's professional identity and connect with their relational identity to people outside of the office, something found to be essential for young professionals requiring meaning in their everyday life and a work-life balance (McDonald, 2018).

"When I am not on a project and get time off, I try to truly be off and maybe catch up with other life administrative tasks, painting doors at home or getting a haircut. A few days on the beach is just a nice perk.". - Interviewee 3, Company B

Some interviewees, mainly from Companies A and C, also mention how the tasks performed at the beach are developing because of other factors. For example, an unstimulating Excel or PowerPoint assignment can be reframed as "high-level analysis" or conducting "expertise advisement". While most interviewees from these companies focus on the negative aspects of time between billable projects, some of them also bring up ways it can be more developing for the consultant than time on actual live projects, mentioning a higher degree of ownership of the tasks and getting the opportunity to work with partners directly.

"Of course, you miss some things while on the beach, but some of the tasks can actually be quite developing – you get to work closely with experienced partners, and you have ownership of the task to a larger extent than you would have had if you were on a 'real' project" - Interviewee 11, Company C

While they seldom get the opportunity to be creative, having some self-perceived control aligns the tasks with their self-images, thereby finding new value in these tasks. Though this may be true, the discrepancies between this reality and their reasons for why they enjoy consulting are evident. They may indicate the usage of reframing as a way to cope with the adversity many expresses when being between billable projects. Furthermore, the consultant's actual degree of control over their tasks between billable projects is questionable since they also describe close monitoring by their supervisors. Thereby we interpret this as reframing their time between billable projects. By reframing either the time itself or the actual tasks, the consultants protect their professional identities by attributing meaning and positive aspects to their work life despite not being what they said to be what they wanted and expected before their employment. This negates the threat posed by task expectation dissonance and helps them still see themselves doing meaningful work aligned with their professional self-image. By doing so, they maintain their professional identity as management consultants at a top firm, an important factor for their overall identity.

5.4.2 Idealizing

Idealizing is a strategy used to cope with adversities, both as a coping strategy for handling the insecurities of being between billable projects and as general protection and maintenance of the consultants' identities. Many interview subjects express pride regarding where they work, both because of the company brand and because of their colleagues, which many describe as intelligent, driven, and high-performing. By attributing these traits to their colleagues, they implicitly link these traits to themselves, thereby appropriating the environmental cues as a reinforcing mechanism of identifying as an ideal self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It also aligns with the feelings of privilege mentioned as typical for idealizing by Ahuja et al. (2019). Many of the Company A interviewees mention that while their staffing model might seem harsh from the outside, the benefits outweigh the costs as it eventually will provide them with opportunities to shine if they work hard enough. Several interviewees from Company A express that while being between billable projects is tough, they still value being at Company A highly as it will pay off in the long term.

"I would say our staffing model is a bit more 'American' in that high-performers are rewarded for doing well – it gives people a chance to control their careers. The model used by Company B is more communist, so to speak – it increases the equality." - Interviewee 9, Company A

Generally, idealizing seems to be a strategy widely used among the respondents from companies A and C. Many interviewees express that while the current situation is challenging, with much time spent between billable projects, they still have faith that eventually, their ambition and work will pay off. In the short term, this could happen by the staffing models working to their advantage as they got to know more people and got recognition as high-performers. In the longer term, they believe the "Company A/C stamp of approval" will be critical to their future career endeavors.

"Despite the situation, I would say that joining Company A was the right choice – it will give me many opportunities in the future. I would much rather be at the beach here than on a project at [Big 4 Consulting Firm]" - Interviewee 6, Company A

Interestingly, however, very few interviewees can specify future career goals or aspirations. While uncertain of the future, they stress that their current profession is a “good trajectory” and that a few years in consulting will open doors for them. Therefore, though not able to specify their career plans, they have an idea of a prosperous life after management consulting – just not what it holds. This implies that rather than employing an aspirational identity or idealized future version of themselves as a coping strategy for identity threats, as found by Costas and Kärreman (2016) and Ahuja et al. (2019), which can be seen as a more well-defined version of their future selves, the subjects of our study employ a “Visionary identity” - a vaguer definition of the future self. The visionary identity can be interpreted as “being successful in general” being more important than becoming successful in a specific area. This aligns with the idea of narrative identities, where the end of the story is a future successful self (Caza et al., 2018). By idealizing their situation, the consultants can protect their elite identities because even though the current situation is not optimal, the concerns for career implications in the future are lessened by persuading themselves that, eventually, it will all pay off and that the time between billable projects is merely a temporary bump in their positive career trajectory. Therefore, the threat of losing their elite identities is mitigated – they are still consultants at a top firm, and the “Stamp of approval” they get from their current employment will always be there no matter what.

5.4.3 Distancing

Distancing reflects a cynical view of one's situation, possibly even questioning one's career choice when faced with failure or challenges. It becomes a coping mechanism for identity threats as it protects one's self-image and future aspirational identity. Thus, when a mismatch between professional expectations and reality occurs, expressing a pessimistic and cynical distance to one's professional situation can relieve tensions and help neutralize identity threats. In the interview responses, we find several examples of distancing among the consultants exposed to a relatively high amount of time between billable projects – especially among the respondents from Companies A and C. The emotions include disillusionment, cynicism, and dejection; many appear to feel a level of resignation over the situation.

"You feel like you're outside society. You don't feel that you contribute with any value. You are not where it happens. When you don't work with what they are selling, it's a bit… underwhelming. Nothing in the schedule, only working with partners that usually don't have time for you. [...] It's unmotivating doing something that's not prioritized – of course, you have more free time, but you get a bit stressed" - Interviewee 10, Company C

While many of the interviewees express how the situation makes them doubt themselves and their performance, there is also notable frustration directed towards the conditions and lack of opportunities they have gotten from their employers, with some outright saying that they feel hate and anger directed towards the staffing models used by their companies. For the interviewees employing distancing, getting staffed on billable projects is, to a high degree, outside their control because of external factors, causing feelings of hopelessness, even though most interviewees cannot seem to fully acquit themselves of responsibility and agency. This duality of self-doubt and disillusionment is in line with what is seen by Ahuja et al. (2019) among the professionals using distancing.

"Honestly, I hate our staffing model. They say it's transparent and have priority lists, but no one believes them. Everything happens behind the scenes – networking is the only way you get projects. Therefore, many people get quite aggressive in their project searching, which amps up the pressure even more and makes the beach time more stressful." - Interviewee 6, Company A

One of the most telling examples of distancing among the Company A interviewees following the increased prevalence of time between billable projects since the fall of 2022 is the emergence of the terms "The Sahara" and "The Desert". While the historically used term for the time between billable projects at the company has been "The Beach", this has gradually changed towards "The Sahara", indicating a change in how the situation is viewed.

"Recently, a new term for the beach has emerged – 'The Desert' or 'The Sahara'. That's when you're technically on the beach, but in reality, you're just waiting by the computer for people to reach out. You're constantly emailing people about your availability, but people don't even answer." - Interviewee 4, Company A

While The Beach indicates a pleasant situation characterized by relaxation and calm, vacation-like breaks between intense projects, calling it “The Sahara” has a symbolism of a barren, harsh climate characterized by desperation and a fight for survival, with future projects appearing like distant mirages only to fade away when reached for. Therefore, this change in terminology indicates that while the beach was once seen as something relaxing, the current reality is very different. Distancing might seem negative because of the associated disillusionment and cynicism, but it can help the consultants protect their performance-based identities. While it includes accepting the negative aspects of the situation, it can still help the consultants protect their identities since it removes most of the blame from the individual. Therefore, though the situation is still threatening, it is not because of their performance. It may be a critical factor for individuals basing much of their identities on their performances. Another factor of The Sahara is the collective symbolism and the possibility of finding companionship with others in the same situation. The consultants find camaraderie similar to the architects studied by Ahuja et al. (2019). Being alone in The Sahara thus seems far worse than being together with others. This is concluded based on the junior consultants' emphasis on performing well compared to others and the importance of not being alone between billable projects, and the performance-based identity threat becomes mitigated.

5.4.4 Relinquishing Control

A fourth identity work strategy, seen amongst many interviewees from Company B, is that whether they are between billable projects or not is not up to them – it is entirely the firm's responsibility.

"... it's not your fault if you don't get staffed. I think it's a bit different at Company A because you staff yourself. But here at [Company B], it's the partners' fault if they have not sold enough, so I would say it's out of my control" - Interviewee 2, Company B

This aspect of self-perceived control to become staffed on billable projects is also low among the interviewees from Company C as they used a similar staffing model to Company B. However, there is a broad consensus from the interview subjects in Company B that the control of staffing was low, and thus could relinquish their responsibility. In Company C, despite not having control, they still attribute time between billable projects to their performance, which seems more related to company culture.

"...I mean, I really can't decide on what projects I will be staffed, even though I can make requests. However, I think if you spend much time on the beach, then others may view it as if you are not doing well enough. And that's quite funny because I know it's not my fault, and it's probably a coincidence, but you still feel as if you are not wanted." - Interviewee 11, Company C

Overall, this represents an identity work strategy not described by Ahuja et al. (2019) but something best described as a less cynical version of distancing. We have decided to call this *Relinquishing Control*. As with distancing, this strategy involves blaming external factors for the time between billable projects. However, distancing involves a high degree of disillusionment and cynicism, possibly stemming from how those interviewees, as mentioned, cannot seem to acquit themselves of all guilt. Meanwhile, the interviewees relinquishing control over the situation seem to genuinely think that they do not have any agency in the situation, making the experience more pleasant and thereby helping them protect their performance-based identity from the threat posed by time between billable projects. They do not attribute any responsibility to their performance for spending time between billable projects, so it becomes a positive form of distancing.

6. Concluding Discussion

This thesis set out to answer three research questions: "What are the primary identity sources of the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms?", "Why may time between billable projects represent an identity threat to the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms?", and "How do the junior management consultants at elite consulting firms employ identity work strategies to mitigate the possible identity threat of being between billable projects?". In the section below, we aim to answer these and bring forward the thesis' theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, we present a Conceptual Model of Identity Work in Management Consulting (6.1). Secondly, we present our Theoretical Contributions and answer our research questions (6.2). Thirdly, we present our Practical Contributions (6.3). Lastly, we present Limitations and Implications for Future Research (6.4).

6.1 A Conceptual Model of Identity Work in Management Consulting

A conceptual model has been developed based on the empirical data and analysis. In this model, we have extended and specified the theoretical lens developed in Section 3 based on empirical data and previous research. While the broader outline is kept from the original framework, Figure 2 offers a more detailed model analyzing how underutilization threatens the identity of junior management consultants and the identity work strategies they use to handle the situation. We believe that underutilization becomes a threat due to the identity composition of the consultants, who then employ one or several of the listed identity work strategies to cope, protect or revise their identities. Lastly, the organizational and cultural context around them has to be taken into account, as this affects their identities, the environment around them, and which strategies are employed. Considering the lack of current research on underutilization, the model contributes to the literature on identity work among management consultants. Furthermore, we believe it can be applied more broadly to research on young professionals, as underutilization can be substituted for other types of professional adversity representing an identity threat.

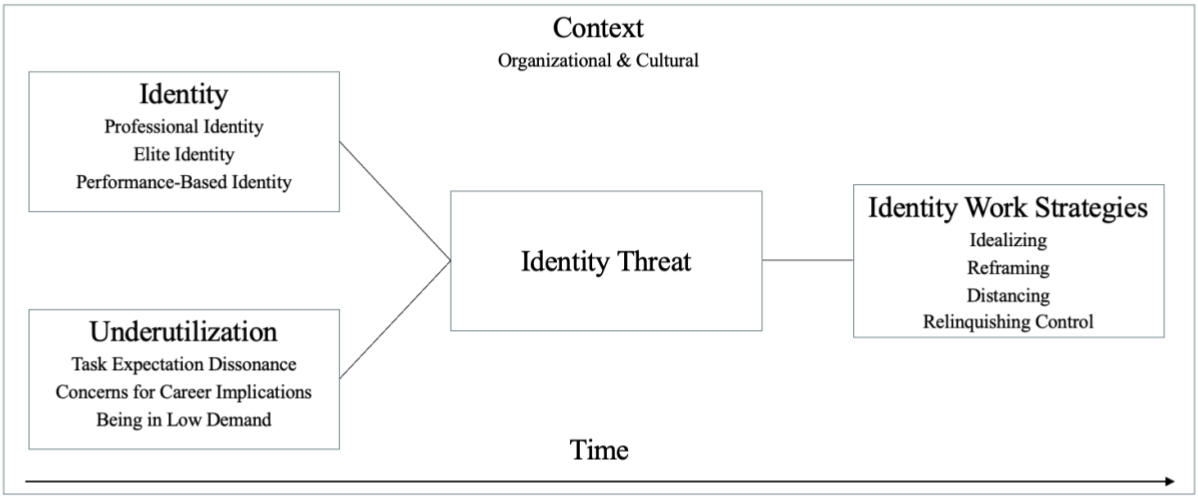

Figure 2

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

This study has investigated how junior management consultants' identities and identity work are affected by underutilization at elite consulting firms, an unexplored area in the extant literature. As demonstrated in the background and literature review, research on management consulting, in general, is relatively limited – as is identity and identity work among high-performing young professionals facing professional adversity. Furthermore, how management consultants in these settings experience time between billable projects is an area where the literature is, to the best of our knowledge, non-existent.

This thesis contributes to filling the identified research gap in four ways. Firstly, we contribute insights into the identity sources and composition of junior management consultants. Secondly, we suggest that junior management consultants perceive time between billable projects as an identity threat and possible reasons for why this may be the case. Thirdly, we contribute by analyzing how the consultants utilize identity work strategies to handle the threats. Lastly, we suggest that the context in which the consultant operates, i.e., the company by which they are employed, may substantially impact how the threat is perceived and handled by the consultant and what the underlying factors for this may be.

While previous literature on identity among management consultants exists, this thesis contributes to the literature by establishing three primary sources of identity – *Professional Identity*, *Elite Identity*, and *Performance-Based Identity*. Though these are previously researched, performance-based identity is a relatively new concept by Walker and Caprar (2020) to which we contribute with further research and an empirical investigation on the concept. Based on our findings, we suggest that the formation of performance-based identities is not something that started when the consultants joined their current elite employers but something that is often a lifelong process that is foundational for their identities, drivers, and choices – they have not constructed a performance-based identity because of their employers but instead joined their employers because of their performance-based identities. Subsequently, the data suggests that performance-based identity is the most dominant identity source for most consultants, followed by elite identity, with professional identity mainly serving as support supporting the performance-based and elite identities. The thesis also contributes to the research on elite identity through our findings that the elite identities of the consultants, while reinforced by their employers, originate from earlier in their lives – in line with research by Costas & Kärreman (2016), but in contrast to the findings of Gill (2015).

Given previous literature on identity among management consultants, our empirics contribute by showing that underutilization, represented in this thesis by time between billable projects, can threaten all three identity sources investigated in this thesis. This is mainly due to three underlying factors. Firstly, we see *Task Expectation Dissonance* between what the consultants believe to be the expected prototypical consulting work and the reality between billable projects. This mainly threatens the professional identity of the consultants, as it does not allow them to replicate what they strive to become (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016), but can also cause boredom (Costas & Kärreman, 2016) and feelings of shame in line with research on dirty work by Morales and Lambert (2013). As the second reason, we identify *Concerns for Career Implications*, as many consultants mention fearing that extensive time between billable projects may hurt their career prospects. Although the consultants would most likely not have a hard time finding other employment, "most other places would be a step down" in line with the findings by Gill (2015), thereby threatening their elite identity in the long term. Lastly, the feeling of *Being In Low Demand* is a third underlying reason why being between billable projects can be an identity threat. Especially prominent in Companies A & C, using more entrepreneurial staffing models, not being assigned to billable projects may be experienced as failure professionally, thereby representing a threat to performance-based identities as it deprives them of positive feedback and validation.

Investigating how the consultants handled the threats they face, we found the framework developed by Ahuja et al. (2019) applicable as its outlined identity work strategies match our empirical data well. Firstly, we identify *Reframing* as an identity work strategy used by many consultants to handle the task expectation dissonance threatening their professional identity. By either reframing tasks between billable projects as developing and stimulating or the time between billable projects itself as relaxing and pleasant – "The Beach" – the consultants shield themselves from the identity threat, even though the reality between billable projects is very different from what they say is important to them professionally. Secondly, we see *Idealizing*, especially among the respondents from Companies A & C. By focusing on a future ideal situation, the consultants handle identity tensions stemming from the threat against their elite identities posed by the career implications time between billable projects may have, in line with previous research (Ahuja et al., 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By focusing on how their employments keep them on a positive career trajectory, the consultants mitigate the identity threat posed by the risk of eventually losing their elite status, protecting their elite identity. Thirdly, we see *Distancing* used by many interviewees, especially those from Companies A & C. Representing a duality of self-doubt and disillusionment, employing a cynical view and distancing themselves shields the consultants by shifting the blame from themselves to external factors outside their control. This protects their performance-based identities from the threat posed by being in low demand, as though the situation is not ideal, it is not because of poor performance from their side. In the empirical data, this is perhaps best exemplified by the emergence of "The Sahara", a term which, to the best of our knowledge, is an entirely new finding representing the current economic climate and the challenges it causes. Lastly, the thesis identifies a fourth identity work strategy used by the consultants – one not described by Ahuja et al. (2019). We call this strategy *Relinquishing Control*, referring to a more upbeat version of distancing seen among the respondents from Company B. While distancing involves disillusionment and cynicism, relinquishing control lets go of agency without these negative emotions. As this removes blame and responsibility from their performances, it helps the consultants protect their performance-based identities, similar to distancing.

Looking at the context around the interviewees, while generally similar, there are some differences between depending on employer – most notably in how much of a threat time between billable projects is perceived as and how the consultants handle it. Thereby, this represents a finding that can also be seen as a contribution to the model developed by Ahuja et al. (2019), as it may explain why different identity work strategies are used. Judging by the answers, there are three main explanatory factors. Firstly, an organizational difference is the staffing models employed by the firms. The empirical data indicates that the higher level of staffing responsibility placed on the consultants in Company A especially, but also in Company C, causes the time between billable projects to be far more identity-threatening than at Company B as this increases the perceived connection to poor performance. Secondly, what the time between billable projects entails regarding tasks and workload seems to affect the degree of identity threat. Yet again, the model employed by Company B seems to be less threatening, possibly due to the consultants having to do less dirty work (Morales & Lambert, 2013). Thirdly, company culture also has substantial implications. How time between billable projects is viewed affects how threatening it is to the consultants, even when removing the organizational factors from the equation. For example, despite Company C having a staffing model more similar to Company B than Company A, the empirics indicate that time between billable projects at Company C is normatively seen as negative. This aligns with research by Alvesson & Robertson (2006), who argue that consultancy firms are incentivized to create company cultures where the individual is encouraged to take a high degree of responsibility for his development, regardless of how much control they have in reality.

6.3 Practical Contribution

Firstly, this thesis' general practical contribution is a deepened understanding of how underutilization affects junior management consultants. This group of employees is the largest in these firms, and understanding the effects of underutilization is, therefore, of value for the employers. Secondly, this study showcases how the organizational structure of consulting firms shapes the time between billable projects. The interviewees describe the internal labor market created by Company A as having several benefits, such as sparking an entrepreneurial mindset and giving more control to the consultants over which projects to undertake, enabling career crafting and specialization. However, in times of economic downturn, where project opportunities are limited, this organizational structure fuels internal competition, something said to cause excessive reach-outs to supervisors and partners. Like in the findings of Allan et al. (2019), this may be a career protection mechanism similar to empire building, driven by uncertainty and anxiety from spending time between billable projects. Furthermore, this generates an organizational belief that spending little time between billable projects indicates high performance and that the opposite indicates poor performance. Therefore, given the dominance of performance-based identities, the staffing model partially explains why the time spent between billable projects is seen as a performance indicator and consequently becomes an identity threat. Meanwhile, at Company B – using a central staffing function with little to no responsibility from the junior consultants – the time between billable projects is seen as out of the consultants' control and not performance-based. It is worth noting that this study does not aim to establish whether or not any of the staffing models are better than the other and acknowledges that each case company has its business objectives and uses the model of preference for those. However, the study does, in this case, find support for the organizational differences' effect on why underutilization may spark identity tensions among junior employees. Hopefully, this can practically guide how management consultancy firms think of their staffing model in response to identity development, which research has shown to be important in the management consulting discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015).

Thirdly, this thesis provides a practical understanding of the nature of work for junior consultants between billable projects and how it often fails to validate the junior consultants' professional identity. It is important to emphasize that the tasks provided to junior consultants when between billable projects, such as producing business proposals to potential new clients, may be of value to the company. However, we suggest that management consultancy firms be cautious of the nature of these tasks and work towards ensuring that they do not become considered unclean tasks (Morales & Lambert, 2019). It is important to note that most professions have elements of dirty work and that it is probably impossible to avoid them. However, this thesis finds that excessive unclean work can generate identity tensions to the extent that junior consultants may feel a level of resignation, indicating that management consultancies may need to consider this aspect of underutilization to ensure the junior consultants do not lose motivation and thereby impede their development. A potential consequence of this can be a lowered quality of their most valuable asset, namely human capital, which could hurt firm performance in the long term.

Lastly, this study finds that elite company cultures strongly affect how individuals experience professional adversity. While elite, high-performing company cultures are likely to be in the firms' interest (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), they also risk increasing anxiety and identity tensions. This study does not find any silver bullet for how management consultancy companies should foster their culture in times of economic downturns to mitigate anxiety and Identity tensions for their employees but merely note that it could be valuable to consider and reflect on it.

6.4 Limitations & Implications for Future Research

Firstly, one limitation is the narrow geographical scope, as this thesis has only investigated the Stockholm offices of the selected case companies. Therefore, future research could examine whether our findings are similar in other regions or countries and if any perceived cultural differences exist, as PSFs often tailor their organizational structure and culture to regional norms (Martinez-Costa et al., 2019). Secondly, this study is limited to junior consultants, and interviews with partners, HR staff, and senior employees could provide a more nuanced explanation of the time between billable projects. Furthermore, this research is limited to the very elite firms within management consulting. Future research can therefore investigate identity work amongst junior employees in other kinds of management consultancies and other PSF industries such as law, banking, or IT, employing our conceptual model. Thirdly, this study lacks quantitative evidence for its findings. It is based upon the subjective qualitative reasoning by the authors of the empirical results. It can, therefore, not be seen as definitive, acknowledging that this is one version of reality (Barbour, 2014). Therefore, future research could use quantitative research to find causal links between identity types and perceived identity threats and conduct deeper on-site research to understand its implications for workplace dynamics. Lastly, the current economic climate is extreme, and it is reasonable to assume that more junior employees spend more time between billable projects than usual, likely affecting the results of this study. However, the economy is cyclical, and more recessions will come, meaning that findings on their effects are still relevant. Furthermore, we believe the conceptual model may be used with other professional adversities and therefore stress its general application.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1: List of Interview Subjects

Interviewee	Company	Gender	Tenure (Years)
1	Company A	Male	1-2
2	Company B	Male	<1
3	Company B	Male	1-2
4	Company A	Female	1-2
5	Company B	Male	1-2
6	Company A	Female	<1
7	Company A	Male	1-2
8	Company B	Female	1-2
9	Company A	Female	1-2
10	Company C	Female	<1
11	Company C	Male	1-2
12	Company A	Male	1-2
13	Company A	Female	<1
14	Company A	Male	<1
15	Company C	Female	1-2
16	Company C	Male	1-2
17	Company C	Male	<1
18	Company B	Female	<1
19	Company B	Female	<1
20	Company B	Female	<1

8.2 Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Introduction of interviewers, research topic, and administrative details:

- Presentation of research topic
- Ensuring anonymity and that the company name is not mentioned
- Do you agree that we record the interview for transcript purposes?

Background, employer, and role:

- Can you tell us about yourself?
  - What education do you have?
  - Can you tell us about your previous career?
  - How long have you worked in your current organization?
  - What is your title?
- Do you enjoy your current job?
  - Why / why not?
- What does a typical workweek look like when on a case?
- How many hours do you typically work during a week when on a project?

Professional Identity:

- Why did you choose to become a Management Consultant?
- What do you think junior Management Consultants should expect professionally when entering your firm?
- What did you expect when entering your role?
- How did your expectations differ from what you believe new consultants should expect?
- When you speak to others outside of your profession, what do you say that you do?
  - Do you introduce yourself with your company or just your profession?
  - How would you describe your profession to someone that is not familiar with what you do?

Organizational Identity:

- Why did you choose to work for your employer?
- What other companies did you apply to?
- Do you think there are any notable differences between you and your competitors?
  - If yes, what differences?
- How much importance did the company brand have when you were applying for this position? Why?
  - Is the company brand as important to you today as it was when you first applied?

Relational Identity:

- Do you generally attend social events with colleagues in a private setting?
- Would you say that at times, you have had to down-prioritize social relationships outside of work because of your profession?

Performance-Based Identity:

- How would you describe a high-performing colleague compared to a low-performing colleague?
- How would you rank your company compared to its competitors within the industry?
- How would you say Management Consulting is "ranked" compared to other jobs?
- What are your most important drivers careerwise?
- Would you describe your colleagues as high-performers?
- Would you describe yourself as a high-performing person?
    - If yes, since when, and in what aspects?
- How do you know when you perform well at work?
- Can you give an example of a time you failed and how it felt?
- Would you say that being a high performer is important to you?

Being between billable projects:

- What term(s) is/are used at your company for being between billable projects?
- What does it mean to be between projects in terms of tasks and workload?
- How are people with a lot of Time Between Billable Projects seen by their colleagues?
    - Do you agree with your colleagues?
- Would you say that being between billable projects has any negative connotations?
- How do you feel when being between billable projects?
- Has Time Between Billable Projects made you question your career choice in any way?
- Would you say spending some Time Between Billable Projects can have positive effects?
- Would you say spending some Time Between Billable Projects can have negative effects?

- Do you want to spend some of your Time Between Billable Projects?
- Would you say that spending Time Between Billable Projects was something you expected when entering this role?
    - To what extent?
- When you are between billable projects, do you still participate in social events with your co-workers?
    - Do you feel that they are as important when you are not staffed on a project?
- What future goals and ambitions do you have career-wise?
- Do you think excessive time on the bench can have a negative impact on a future career?
    - If yes, how?

Final comments:

- Is there anything you want to add?
- Do you have any questions for us?

8.3 Appendix 3: Data Structure

Illustrative Quote	First Order Concepts	Second Order Themes	Aggregated Dimensions
"I would say that prestige-wise, management consulting is quite highly regarded - especially for the people who work in the industry, which are known to be high-performers." - Interviewee 7, Company A	Thinks management consulting is a prestigious industry	Professional identity	Identity
"I applied to all of the top-ranked management consultancies, and when Company B gave me an offer I withdrew my applications from the others. To be honest, I saw them as substitutes for each other - I am super happy that I ended up at Company B, but I can't say I knew how they differed from each other back then." - Interviewee 2, Company B	Lack of preference between top-ranked consultancies		

"For me at least now early in my career, I would say to learn as much as possible. Management Consulting is extremely wide so I get to try out different things. Right now it is largely about figuring out what gets me going so to speak" - Interviewee 9, Company A	Personal development		
"Status is important if I should be honest, I want to have fun on the job surrounded by young smart people. Me and Agda [symbolizing a generic old lady] will not have fun. I could never see myself working at Swedbank's back office for example. Money has some importance, but it's not the most important. It is more of a hygiene factor. You want to be able to do what your friends do." - Interviewee 4, Company A	Prestige vs money	Elite identity	
"Naturally I think my employer is the best in the industry. [...] Then again, there is management consulting and there's management consulting. I feel that there's some inflation in regards to who calls themselves management consultants." - Interviewee 8, Company B	Seeing the employer as a top ranked company in the industry		
"It feels a bit awkward [telling someone where he works]- you don't want to seem like a bragging person. But of course, it [his employer] has so much prestige that you seem that way. A bit like if you are explaining to someone that you are filthy rich. It's hard to tell someone that you have a huge house in the Bahamas without it sounding like bragging. A bit of Jante [Law of Jante]. It also depends on the person on the receiving end - it's hard to explain to those without higher education." - Interviewee 1, Company A	Awkwardness		
"There's definitely a sense of security working for Company A - I feel that I've proved to myself that I can perform at this level." - Interviewee 9, Company A	Company Brand reinforcing high-performer identity		

"It depends on who I talk to - if they are not in the corporate bubble with me I might say that I work with business strategy, otherwise I'll probably just say Company B. [...] With the corporate bubble I mean people from the elite universities in Sweden, either SSE or industrial engineers." - Interviewee 8, Company B	The Social Bubble		
"The brand and high status of Company A were extremely important when I chose them. Ending up at, let's say [Big 4 consulting firm], was my biggest nightmare. That might sound a bit superficial, and maybe I am. But the brand is super important, and it gives you opportunities later." - Interviewee 6, Company A	Brand importance for choice of employer		
"I have always performed well in school, relatively high in sports, and it might be hard to evaluate my social performance but I would say I perform there as well" - Interviewee 3, Company B	High-performing individuals	Performance-based identity	
"Yes, I would say it [being a high performer] is important, it almost becomes philosophical when I reason about it. But somewhere you have an image of yourself, and that image is probably related to how other people view me. I think it started early already in school, you build that identity already in the classroom and now I want to maintain that identity" - Interviewee 3, Company B	Internal expectations and motivation		
"Of course, failing feels awful, but not if other people are failing too. There's this mom proverb - 'If God can't make me skinny, I pray he makes my friends fat.' If I've applied for a job or an internship that a friend gets instead of me… that hurts quite a lot. It's as if I'm objectively worse than that person. While I understand intellectually that it isn't that simple, it's still very hard to understand it on an emotional level." - Interviewee 1, Company A	Importance of performing well compared to people around them		

"[On why Company A] You mean… instead of, for example, [slightly lower ranked consulting firm]? I guess you pursue what you think you deserve, and I guess I've felt that I deserve the best. Without knowing anything about the school, I chose SSE because it was the hardest one to get accepted to. I did investment banking because it was hard to get and private equity because it was hard to get, so if I were to become a consultant I wanted to work at the consultancy that was hardest to get into. If you always go for the most competitive surroundings, I believe you maximize your future opportunities." - Interviewee 1, Company A	History of pursuing prestigious jobs		
"I see management consulting as the lesser of two evils compared to investment banking." - Interviewee 7, Company A	Management consulting as opposed to investment banking		
"I had originally planned to do investment banking, but as time went by, I realized that I did not want to move to London. To be completely honest, I did not have a super positive image of management consulting, but the work-life balance was better than in banking and I wouldn't have to move. But now I like it a lot!" - Interviewee 4, Company A			
"I think I want to stay here for the foreseeable future, maybe go to private equity or a business development role. But I have no idea. It's a choice between more spare time or more money, even though there is a conventional path - private equity. It's easy to go for what people expect from you, but as you start caring less about those superficial things, you need to turn inwards - and then it suddenly becomes harder and more complex to decide what you want to do." - Interviewee 8, Company B	Lack of future career plans		

"When on the beach I sometimes don't really feel like a management consultant, yesterday I sat translating a document from English to Swedish. A stupid monkey could do that. [...] One week on the beach they basically made up an assignment for me to find data that no one had found but they wanted me to double check - and of course, I did not find anything, because the info did not exist. Which they knew. And in that case, I felt like, 'What am I doing here?' You don't feel like it's a job, especially when they make up assignments to put you to work. It's quite depressing" - Interviewee 6, Company A	Uninspiring tasks and boredom	Task expectation dissonance	Identity threat
"It's a bit unmotivating doing something that is not priority, then of course you have more free time, but you get a bit stressed" - Interviewee 10, Company C			
"If someone has a lot of time on the beach, it's generally seen as a huge red flag. I know for a fact that partners look a lot at this. If you have a lot of beach time, it means that people don't want to work with you - you're in low demand." - Interviewee 4, Company A	Negative connotations of being between billable projects	Being in low demand	
"I think quite a few people look down on people on the beach. It might be unconscious because of their neuroticism, but it's not nice feeling that people look down on you when you're already a bit stressed by not being on a project." - Interviewee 10, Company C			
"There is no worse feeling that's worse than being on the beach by yourself. It's like going to school and not having any friends, no one to sit with at lunch." - Interviewee 10, Company C	Importance of having company when between billable projects		
"The best way to determine whether you're performing well or not is to look at your staffing opportunities. If you have to fight to get some beach time because people are throwing projects at you, you're in high demand - then you know you're doing well." - Interviewee 1,	Time between billable projects as consequence of bad performance or not		

Company A			
"For me, it's more the stress that I don't learn that much - I am worried about my learning curve and that I won't get promoted. In a year, the senior people will expect me to have a certain skill set. I am worried people will be disappointed with me". - Interviewee 6, Company A	How time between billable projects may affect future promotions	Concerns for career implications	
"After a while, you start to feel that you don't want to be worse than your colleagues. I just have a new role and I haven't yet put that role into practice." [...] "For example, I have a colleague from my cohort who's done two market models while I've done zero. He/she has led 50 expert interviews and I have led two. One thing is how good you are going in, but much is about what you do when you are here. It's supposed to be a stepping stone, these should be the dog years - you want to learn." - Interviewee 8, Company B	Learning when between billable projects		
"[...] I think being on a project is when you develop the most. The hard thing with that [being on the beach for an extended period] is that colleagues develop faster than you. And that's tough because you want to be on par with your peers." - Interviewee 13, Company A			
"In reality, you're only going to get promoted if you've proven yourself consistently. If you spend a lot of time on the beach early on, you're going to learn less, which risks becoming a negative spiral. If you lack project experience, fewer people will want you on their projects, further reducing your learning opportunities. It's a Catch-22. On top of that, you get to know fewer senior colleagues if you're not on a project, making your chances even worse." -	Either a positive or negative spiral created depending on initial success		

Interviewee 1, Company A			
"I would say our staffing model is a bit more 'American' in that high-performers are rewarded for doing well - it gives people the chance to control their careers. The model used by Company B is a bit more communist so to speak - it increases the equality." - Interviewee 9, Company A	Future self	Idealizing	Identity work strategies
"Despite the situation, I would say that joining Company A was the right choice - it will give me a lot of opportunities in the future. All things considered, I would much rather be at the beach here than on a project at [Big 4 Consulting Firm]" - Interviewee 6, Company A			
"I wouldn't say being at the beach is something negative at all - they are the real winners! They have the same prospects as the rest of us, but without all the work." - Interviewee 2, Company B	Envying people between billable projects		
"When I am not on a project and get time off, I try to truly be off and maybe catch up with other life administrative tasks, painting doors at home or getting a haircut. A few days on the beach is just a nice perk.". - Interviewee 3, Company B	Reconnecting	Reframing	
"Of course, you miss some things while on the beach, but some of the tasks can actually be quite developing - you get to work closely with experienced partners, and you have ownership of the task to a larger extent than you would have had if you were on a 'real' project" - Interviewee 11, Company C	Development through tasks when between billable projects		

"You feel like you're outside society, you don't feel that you contribute with any value. You are not where it happens. When you don't work with what they are selling, it's a bit… underwhelming. Nothing in the schedule, only working with partners that usually don't have time for you. [...] It's a bit unmotivating doing something that's not prioritized - of course, you have more free time, but you get a bit stressed" - Interviewee 10, Company C	Cynicism	Distancing	
"Recently, a new term for the beach has emerged - 'The Desert' or 'The Sahara'. That's when you're technically on the beach, but in reality, you're just waiting by the computer for people to reach out. You're constantly emailing people about your availability, but people don't even answer." - Interviewee 4, Company A			
"...it's not your fault if you don't get staffed, at Company A I think it's a bit different because you staff yourself. But here [at Company B] it's the partners' fault if they have not sold enough, so I would say it's out of my control" - Interviewee 2, Company B	Lack of agency	Relinquishing control	
"...I mean, I really can't decide what projects I will be staffed on. Of course, I can make requests. But I think if you spend a lot of time on the beach then it can maybe be viewed by others as if you are not doing well enough. And that's quite funny because I know it's not my fault, and it's probably a coincidence but you still feel as if you are not wanted." - Interviewee 11, Company C			
"I think the people at Company B in general are… a bit more fun. I'm generalizing here, but from my experience, the people at Company A are a bit smarter and nerdier but less charismatic. Of course, this affects the culture of the firm - I feel the people at Company B are closer in general." - Interviewee 1, Company A	Difference between firm culture	Cultural context	Context

"I would say Company B focuses more on culture, both in recruitment and everyday work. Those recruited by Company C are nerdier, and the Company A people are more cutthroat. The main thing Company B is selling is the culture, and I think that it is quite effective with our generation" - Interviewee 5, Company B			
"I once had a project leader who used [being between billable projects] for a long time as an argument to persuade me to return to a case even though she knew that I did not want to, saying that it can reflect badly being [between billable projects] for too long" - Interviewee 11, Company C			
"I envy the people at the beach! When I am on the beach I am usually at home. During my time at the beach, I'd estimate I've been 100% free about 70% of the time. The more time I have spent on the beach, the more I have viewed it as time off - even making plans with friends even though I am aware that some tasks might come up." - Interviewee 3, Company B	The difference between firms when being between billable projects	Organizational context	
"Until recently, beach time in the way they have at Company B barely existed at Company A. Beach at Company A means client development projects, which to be honest are not very nice - there's a lot of pressure to prove yourself to get staffed. The expectation is that you should always be ready in case they get a task for you." - Interviewee 4, Company A			
You'd think being on the beach is nice, but you're constantly stressed that someone can email you at any second. It's like you have time off but can't do anything. Sometimes you don't hear from work for 2 days, you go to the gym, and suddenly when you're on the treadmill you're expected to be ready to join a meeting in 15 minutes." - Interviewee 6, Company A			

You'd think being on the beach is nice, but you're constantly stressed that someone can email you at any second. It's like you have time off but can't do anything. Sometimes you don't hear from work for 2 days, you go to the gym, and suddenly when you're on the treadmill you're expected to be ready to join a meeting in 15 minutes." - Interviewee 6, Company A	Thinks staffing model are key differences between firms		
"We're currently in a unique situation, where the company has hired an extreme amount of people while the economic climate unfortunately has been cooling down a lot. This means that there's an unprecedented number of people at the beach who don't get any experience. The whole promotion rate will be slowed down. The current situation is definitely not good for anyone." - Interviewee 1, Company A			
"What's unfortunate with the current situation is that there are a lot of very talented and competent people falling through the cracks. After 2 months you're not seen as new anymore because new people are being hired, which means staffing won't prioritize you. If you haven't gotten any opportunities by that time, it can be very difficult to get your foot through the door." - Interviewee 1, Company A	Refers to this as an extreme period in terms of time between billable projects		