

From Pirates to Professionals: Retaining a Sense of Integration During Venture Scaling

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Our paper explains how organizations can build and sustain internal member identification during rapidly scaling transitions. Using a longitudinal case study of a UK scaling firm, we show how organizational members follow a recursive process of retaining and forgoing the past and foreseeing the future to create a transitional organizational identity through transitional identity work. Key to such identity work is identification-based trust, which embraces being valued, having confidence in colleagues and being aligned with company values. Such identification-based trust generates positive emotions and holds a scaling firm together while it changes. Our study contributes to the literature on identity transition, showing how integration can be achieved in underexplored settings of chaotic and unstable change.

Introduction

Transitioning from a new venture to a high-growth, scale-up firm is a journey of uncertainty and complexity (European Scaleup Institute, 2023; Felzensztein and Bagheri, 2024; Kearney and Lichtenstein, 2023; Schou, 2023). This process challenges leaders who must attract and retain founders, managers and employees (Tripsas, 2009), align their roles and values with the firm's strategy and culture (Snihur and Clarysse, 2022), and integrate new and existing members into changing working teams (Es-Sajjade, Pandza and Volberda, 2021). Research has begun to show how growing ventures can build and retain organizational identification (OI) – defined by Mael and Ashforth (1992, p. 104) as ‘perceptions of oneness or belongingness to an organization’ (Es-Sajjade, Pandza and Volberda, 2021; Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020; Oliver and Vough, 2020; Schou, 2023; Snihur and Clarysse, 2022). However, this literature has yet to explain how organizations can cultivate, reinforce and sustain members' OI during rapid scaling (Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020). Addressing this gap is the central aim of our research. By its nature, scaling is a process of ‘becoming’, which complicates how organizational members connect their past, present and future identity claims to a coherent and distinctive organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). The entrepreneurship literature

offers limited insight into the ongoing construction of organizational identity during the post-startup phase of venture development (Boers and Ljungqvist, 2019; Jansen *et al.*, 2023; Mmbaga *et al.*, 2020), aside from limited attention to organizational characteristics, policies and practices (Weisman *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, there is a notable gap in research exploring identity transition during the characteristic ‘instability’ and ‘chaos’, of rapidly-scaling ventures (Gioia *et al.*, 2013a). Thus, we seek to understand this integration dilemma by answering the question: *how can organizational members create and maintain a strong sense of OI in the transitional context of a rapidly scaling venture?*

Answering it is important because organizational identity is a valuable cognitive structure representing ‘what an organization stands for and where it intends to go’ (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p. 13). Strong identification with such cognitive structures can improve staff attraction, motivation, retention, team convergence and employees' ability to cope with ambiguity in the broader organization studies and human resources literatures (Weisman *et al.*, 2023). These outcomes are key requirements of successful scaling ventures (Smith *et al.*, 2012; Tanghe, Wisse and Van Der Flier, 2010; Wright, 2009) because they impact economic and social policy, sources of new jobs, and innovation (Jansen *et al.*, 2023; OECD, 2021). Consequently, shedding light on the OI processes that facilitate

scaling is of major interest to policymakers and practitioners who seek guidance on how new ventures grow and become ‘professionalized’ (Gulati and DeSantola, 2016).

We address our research question using a case of a UK venture specializing in mobile application development and the Internet of Things (IOT) applications for the corporate market as it scaled up during 2017–2021. Digital, a pseudonym, engaged in multiple scaling activities, including extensive recruitment, new market entry and professionalizing processes to transform the venture from a floundering start-up to a UK market leader, growing from 12 employees in 2017 to almost 300 in 2022. We adopted a longitudinal qualitative research design to unpack its identity dynamics, thus addressing calls to understand both scaling and OI processes over time (Belitski *et al.*, 2023; Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020).

Our main contribution lies in unpacking the transitional ‘identity work’ organizational members undertook to integrate past and future organizational identities, so creating a sense of ‘who we are becoming’ in response to the tensions created by scaling (e.g. Clark *et al.*, 2010). This process is captured in a new model for retaining an integrated sense of identity during the transition to a scale-up in the discussion (see Figure 2). Such identity work refers to ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). In the entrepreneurship literature, identity work has focused on the perspective of founders (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; O’Neil, Ucbasaran and York, 2022) but, with a few exceptions (e.g. Boers and Ljungkvist, 2019), there is less focus on how managers and employees influence organizational identity. We show how transitional identities are the active social constructions of those organizational members who seek to maintain organization integration, particularly managers and employees. We also highlight ‘identification-based trust’ (Kasten, 2018) as a key OI process in scaling ventures, which is founded in self-definitional processes such as shared values, motives, desires and sensemaking (Legood *et al.*, 2023; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Such trust is critical to hold organizations together during scale-up (e.g. Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020; Snihur *et al.*, 2022) and in showing how integration can be achieved in chaotic and unstable contexts (Genedy *et al.*, 2024; Gioia *et al.*, 2013a).

Theoretical background

Much of the extant research on how start-ups become scale-up firms has focused on exogenous factors (e.g. competition, investors, regulatory changes, sector-specific factors and entrepreneurial ecosystems) that

shape a firm’s growth trajectory (Gilbert, McDougall and Audretsch, 2006; van Dijk *et al.*, 2025). These factors have important influences on organizational members’ enactment of their environment. Our focus, however, is on key endogenous factors, most notably managers and employees’ language and actions, which hold the organization together during the characteristic ‘instability’ and ‘chaos’ that distinguishes rapidly scaling ventures from high-growth ones (Genedy *et al.*, 2024; Gouvard and Durand, 2023; Gioia *et al.*, 2013a). We believe three linked research streams best inform our research question. These are (a) organizational identity, (b) organizational identification and (c) identification-based trust.

Organizational identity

Existing literature on scale-up firms has pinpointed their enduring and changing features (De Santola and Gulati, 2017; Gouvard and Durand, 2023). The endurance-oriented literature emphasizes founder identity in shaping venture trajectory by imprinting the values, characteristics and strategic decisions of founders on organizational culture (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Mathias, Williams and Smith, 2015). It explains how founders develop their sense of personal entrepreneurial identity (O’Neil, Ucbasaran and York, 2022), why some ventures and founders pursue or reject growth (Knox and Casulli, 2023; Marcia, 2002; Solomon and Mathias, 2020), and why decisions are taken to influence growth trajectory (Mathias and Williams, 2017; Oliver and Vough, 2020; Zuzul and Tripsas, 2020). In contrast, the change-oriented literature emphasizes how growth transforms the internal organization of a scaling venture (McDonald and Eisenhardt, 2020; Snihur and Clarysse, 2022) by explaining how they pursue growth opportunities (Levie and Lichtenstein, 2010), including strategically positioning themselves in nascent markets (McDonald and Eisenhardt, 2020), pivoting their business models to meet market demands (Snihur and Clarysse, 2022) and confronting organizational identity challenges arising from ownership change (Boers and Ljungkvist, 2019).

Organizational identity has been defined as the central, distinctive and enduring features of an organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Boers and Ljungkvist, 2019; Gioia *et al.*, 2013a), which embodies ‘what an organization stands for and where it intends to go’ (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p. 13). These are viewed as self-referential for organizational members – ‘who we are as an organization’ (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Internal stakeholders’ sensemaking of organizational identity is important because it situates their organization, guides their interactions and behaviours to align with key values and beliefs, promotes the organization as a good place to work (Brown, 2017) and, through their performativity, navigates the conflicting demands

for organizations to be ‘optimally distinctive’ (Gouvard and Durand, 2023). Thus, organizational identity represents a cognitive schema that ‘act(s) as a rudder for navigating difficult waters’ (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, p. 13) because it anchors shared perceptions, language and behaviours, so motivating organizational members to act, think, feel and talk in specific ways (Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

The literature draws conceptual parallels between individual identity and organizational identity (Ashforth, Schinoff and Brickson, 2020; Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020). Individual identity comprises *personal identities*, representing unique defining characteristics; *relational identities*, representing role relationships with significant others; and *collective identities*, representing internalizations of reference categories that define an individual as a member of a group (Brewer and Garner, 1996). Similarly, organizations can make these three claims about their identities (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020): *attribute-based claims*, which mirror personal identities as the distinctive features of an organization, for example, being innovative; *relationship-based claims*, which mirror relational identities and focus on the organization relative to important others, for example, competitors or employees, and; *category-based claims*, which reflect collective or legitimizing identities and focus on the organization as belonging to a broader social group with similar characteristics, for example, a ‘high-tech’ company. Taken together, these three claims create the central, enduring and distinctive elements of organizational identity.

Organizational identification

OI is the process by which individuals define themselves with reference to organizational membership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008; He and Brown, 2013). Internal stakeholders’ OI is important because it helps situate an organization, guides individuals’ behaviours consistent with organizational values and beliefs, and promotes the organization to others as a place to work (Brown, 2017). Strong employee identification with an organization generates significant benefits for scaling ventures, including attracting and retaining new staff (Smith *et al.*, 2012), team convergence (Tanghe, Wisse and Van Der Flier, 2010) and coping with ambiguity during change (Wright, 2009). Thus, it represents an important consideration when transitioning from start-up to scale-up.

Since scaling involves rapid and often chaotic growth, it can have a disruptive effect on an organization’s collective sense of ‘who it is’, ‘who it is not’ and ‘who it wants to be’ (Boers and Ljungkvist, 2019; Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020; Domurath, Patzelt and Liebl, 2020; Schou, 2023). As new organizational members join a venture during scaling, its identity is often decoupled

from the founder identity, shifting from a sense of ‘who I am?’ to ‘who are we?’, which can be especially disrupting (Powell and Baker, 2017). When ventures scale, they recruit new members with different values and expectations, often resulting in mission drift and identity fragmentation (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2021; Schou, 2023). Moreover, as the workforce expands, in-group conflicts, ineffectual integration and temporal leadership voids often occur, so resulting in identity ambiguity (Es-Sajjade, Pandza and Volberda, 2021; Oliver and Vough, 2020). Such internal identity challenges are inherent in scaling ventures (Fisher, Kotha and Lahiri, 2016; Gioia *et al.*, 2010; Tracey, Dapiaz and Phillips, 2018; Tripsas, 2009). Thus, a primary task of leaders during scaling-up is to hold the organization together while it ‘comes apart’ (De Santola and Gulati, 2017; Schou, 2023). This task challenges those leaders who seek to align employees behind a coherent or integrated organizational identity (Snihur and Clarysse, 2022). As such, a key academic and practical concern is explaining how internal stakeholders, especially key employees and managers, come to identify with a scaling venture when its organization’s identity is most unstable and malleable (Gioia *et al.*, 2013a; Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020). This process of OI involves different types of identity work by organization actors to change or maintain an organizational identity (Brown, 2017).

Identification-based trust

OI is a dynamic process during which people constantly revise their relationships with their organizational identity (Brown, 2017). Thus, OI needs persistent ‘managing’ (Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020). Identification-based trust is critical in this regard because it is a form of ‘depersonalized’ trust’ (Brewer, 2008), founded in self-definitional processes, including sharing values, motives, desires and sensemaking (Legood *et al.*, 2023; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Thus, identification-based trusting helps individuals (trustors) to believe in other organizational members (trustees) without having first-hand experience or observation of them as ‘trustworthy’ because these trustees are perceived by trustors to belong to their social group (Ashforth, 2016). Such trusting relies on the judgements of significant others, including leaders, fellow employees and customers of the organization. These judgements include widely shared cultural knowledge about an organization or the sector to which it belongs, especially its reputation and legitimacy in the community (Bitektine *et al.*, 2025). Thus, identification-based trusting has been used at a relational level to understand how trust expectations and trustworthy conduct between group members are maintained (Kasten, 2018; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Since its roots lie in a shared social identity that allows organizational members to develop positive

expectations without engaging in deliberate reasoning (McEvily, 2011) or developing strong emotional attachments (Bitektine *et al.*, 2025), identification-based trusting can also be destroyed when key members breach accepted group, organizational or sector values and behaviours (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Kasten, 2018). Thus, the existing identification-based trust literature can provide important insights into how established organizations can manage employee identification by reaffirming a positive organizational identity and establishing internal processes to re-establish trust between members (Petriglieri, 2015).

Summary

In conclusion, scale-up research has not explored identity transition in contexts of ‘instability’ and ‘chaos’ where the enduring, central and distinctive elements of organizational identity are harder to discern and are in a continuous state of change (Gioia *et al.*, 2013a). Ventures transitioning rapidly and sometimes chaotically from being led by a small team of founders to professional management teams with large workforces represents such a context (Clark *et al.*, 2010). This is further complicated because in normal growth situations members can draw from the past to create coherent organizational identities (Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022). However, in the case of scaling ventures, future identity claims over ‘who are we going to be?’ are vital legitimating narratives (Clark *et al.*, 2010; Garud *et al.*, 2014; Gioia, Corley and Fabbri, 2002) because scaling venture do not have extensive past narratives to draw from. Thus, we do not have an in-depth understanding of how employees, managers and founders relate to these past, present and future identity claims of scaling organizations. This gap can be regarded as a ‘thorny dilemma’ for scale-up leaders because they must attract new audiences to a new approach while avoiding alienating existing stakeholders (Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020). Moreover, during rapid scaling, new and old members must be integrated into a transitioning organization without necessarily having a situated identity schema to guide their attitudes, behaviours and emotions (Oliver and Vough, 2020; Schou, 2023). We have argued organizational identity, OI and identification-based trusting intersect to explain this process.

Methodology

We used a longitudinal case study to answer our research question. Single cases are considered appropriate for theory generation if they provide in-depth insights into organizational dynamics (Yin, 2014). Digital was founded in 2008 by three university graduates with backgrounds in video games entrepreneur-

ship. It experienced minimal growth until 2014, at which point the founders faced an existential crossroads: either wind down operations or secure new funding and markets. The appointment of a new chair and CEO, who also invested in the company and introduced professional management practices, marked a turning point by catalysing rapid scaling of the business in the mobile app development and IOT markets.

Revenues grew exponentially from £0.5 million in 2014 to £30 million by the end of 2022, which was accompanied by employment growth from 12 to almost 300 employees, mainly due to securing two major contracts and acquiring a competitor firm. Staff were mostly employed in highly paid software development, managerial and administration roles. The company was headquartered in a small Scottish city, where 30% of its staff were located, although this was forecast to decline to around 15% as Digital opened new offices in Glasgow, Edinburgh and London, as well as having developers based in their corporate clients’ offices.

Data collection

For longitudinal case studies, purposive sampling is an effective data collection strategy (Chetty *et al.*, 2014). This involves selecting participants who can speak directly to the research question based on their knowledge, experiences and understanding of the topic. It also must reflect diverse viewpoints. Thus, we captured the views of employees, managers and founders using multiple methods – semi-structured interviews, group interviews, follow-up interviews and participant observations – between 2017 and 2021 when Digital scaled rapidly. Utilizing multiple methods aided triangulation and provided rich accounts of the organization’s scaling journey (Patton, 2015). A summary of our data collection is presented in Table 1.

Questioning was designed to provide insights into the breadth and depth of organizational values, identity, experiences and unfolding activities. Since venture scaling was triggered in 2014, these interviews also enabled retrospective accounts of events between 2014 and 2017 to inform real-time data from 2017 onwards (Ott and Eisenhardt, 2020).

Group interviews enabled us to understand interpersonal communications within Digital, revealing (sub)cultural values and group norms. Data from participants were then fed back to them in group sessions for their verification and to gain further insights, where detailed notes were taken. Interview protocols were developed to guide the interviews, which strengthened interval validity (Yin, 2014). All individual and group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, which typically lasted between 60 and 90 min.

Table 1. Summary of data collection

Data source	Purpose	Frequency and identifier in analysis
Semi-structured interviews with founders and CEO (2017)	Provide insights into the breadth and width of organizational values, identity, experiences, strategic plans. Provide high-quality retrospective accounts of transition from start-up to scale-up	3 semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 90 min Founders are labelled F1–F3
Semi-structured interviews with managers (2018)	Provide insights into the breadth and width of organizational values, identity, experiences and unfolding internal activities	13 semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 and 60 min Managers are labelled M1–M13
Employee group interviews (2018)	Provide insights into organization values, identity, internal activities and interpersonal communications, revealing (sub)cultural values and group norms	4 group interviews lasting 60 min (labelled FG1–FG4) with 17 participants labelled E1–E17
Follow-up interviews with CEO and managers (2018–2021)	Understand the enactment and evolution of specific values and actions that were discussed in the initial interviews	6 follow-up interviews in 2018 3 follow-up interviews in 2019 3 follow-up interviews in 2021
Participant observation (2017–2021)	Detail the on-going changes occurring in the organization across the core units Participant observation in senior management meetings provided insight into real-time decisions and concerns Feedback to participant groups and interaction with managers and founders sense check the validity of data and emerging explanations	50 h in total

Throughout the research, the lead author participated in approximately 50 hours of senior management and individual meetings in Digital, acting as an academic advisor on the development of organizational structures and HR practices and policies. While we acknowledge the lead author's participation in these meetings may have shaped interviewees' accounts and behaviours (Johnstone, 2007); nevertheless, they provided unique access to real-time decisions, values and challenges as they were enacted. Although we do not formally use them in this report of our findings, these participant observation insights provided a sense check on our interpretation of the interview data (Ott and Eisenhardt, 2020).

Data analysis

We used a standard template coding approach for inductive data analysis to generate explanations of how organizational leaders draw on identity narratives to facilitate scale-up (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013b). Our analytical insights emerged iteratively from the multiple data collection methods as early data analysis drove subsequent analysis in a constant comparison approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This process moved repeatedly between data and emerging codes, patterns and constructs.

The first step involved verbatim transcription yielding 350 double-spaced pages. Transcripts and field notes were read and re-read, with initial comments noted in

the margins. This allowed us to identify initial concepts in the data, which were grouped in accordance with the interviewees' narratives (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013b; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We proceeded to manually code by identifying first order themes that represented key words, phrases and sentences (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We refined this initial list during axial coding by combining, expanding and eliminating codes to a more manageable 19 first-order codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The second step involved second-order theoretically driven coding by searching for connections among these empirically driven first-order codes. During this step, some constructs were evident from the outset of data collection and analysis – particularly the different types of transitional identity work and various challenges to the identity of the organization – while the constructs for identification-based trust emerged after multiple rounds of iteration and refinement as we sought underlying explanations for integration. Finally, we developed an ordered set of constructs representing the three overarching aggregate theoretical dimensions – identity ambiguity, transitional identity work and identification-based trusting (see Figure 1).

Data analysis was conducted independently by the second and third authors during the initial two stages. In the final stage, all three collaborated to discuss and consolidate emerging themes. This approach enhanced the rigor, credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis by minimizing individual bias and promoting transparency

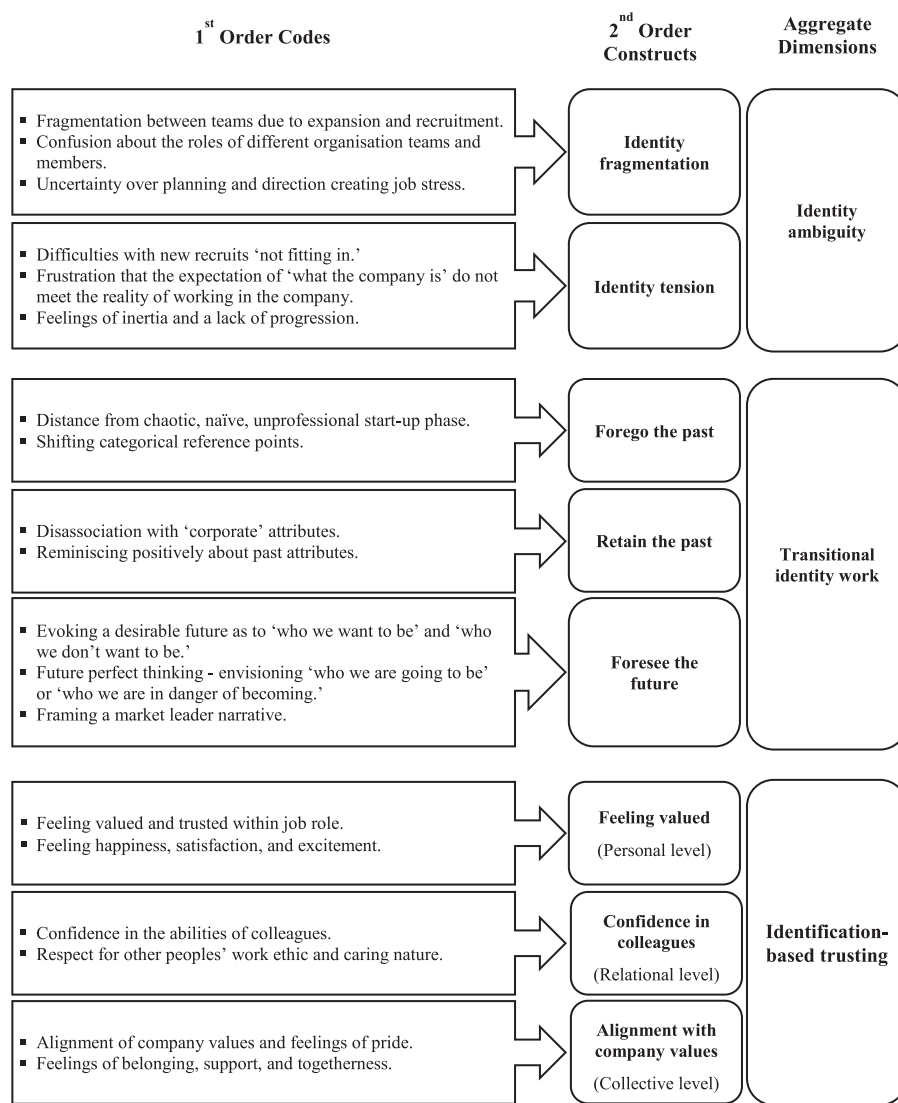


Figure 1. Data structure

(Reinhardt *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, having the second and third authors, who were not involved in data collection, lead the coding process mitigated confirmation bias by avoiding the influence of the first author's preconceptions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

Findings

Our interviewees showed Digital transitioning from a start-up venture to a 'grown-up' company, which gave rise to our characterization of 'pirates' becoming 'professionals'. Organizational members narrated a transitional identity of 'who we are becoming'. Illustrative examples are presented in Table 2. To explain the extent to which employees identified with this transitional identity and how they collectively retained a sense of stability, our analysis uncovered three main dimensions – ambiguity created by transition, transitional identity

work collectively enacted and identification-based trusting as a key to creating a sense of stability. Although these dimensions and their components were recursive and overlapping, for clarity we present them separately.

We summarize our findings diagrammatically in Figure 2. Moving from the upper left to the lower right of the figure, the top three boxes depict the growing tensions that recruitment, restructuring and entering new markets created during scaling. These tensions fragmented the organizational identity, so eliciting uncertainty and negative emotions among organizational members. These included confusion, frustration and job stress, which combined to reinforce identity ambiguity. To cope with such identity ambiguity, members engaged in transitional identity work (middle boxes in Figure 2) aimed at making sense of 'who we are becoming'. Such identity work involved foregoing elements of their past identity ('who we were') while retaining others. It also involved efforts to foresee a

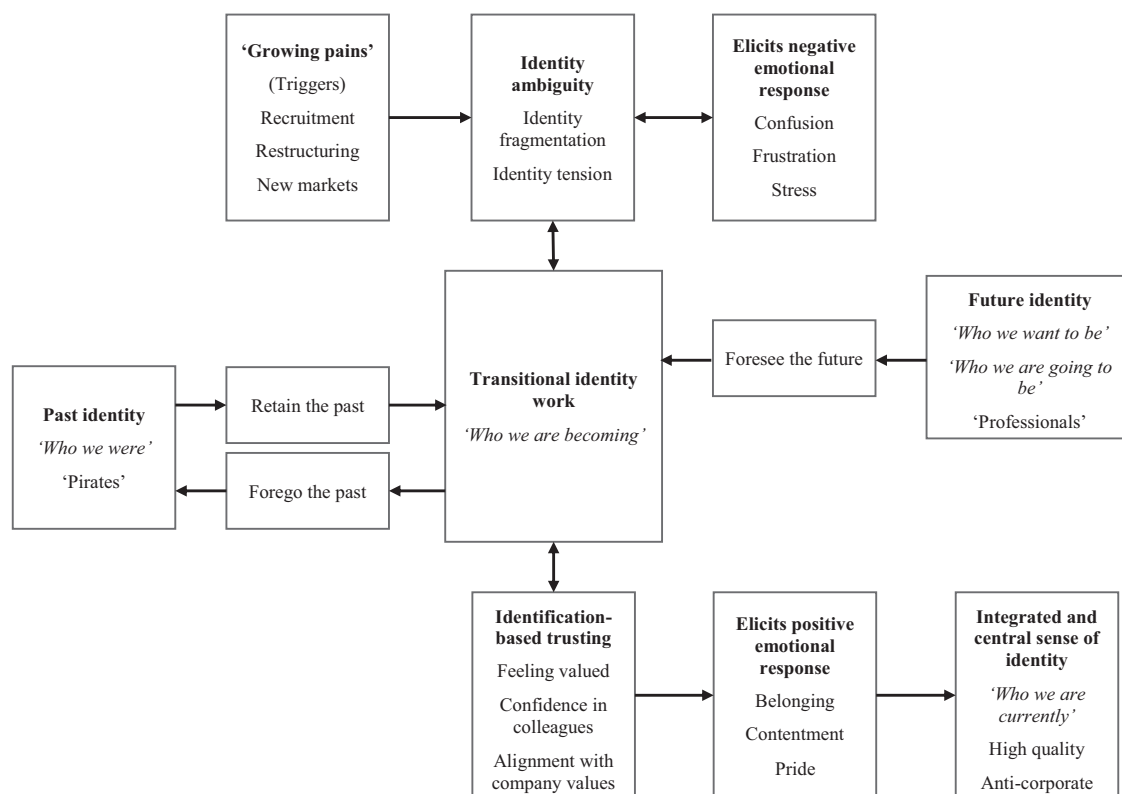


Figure 2. Emergent model for retaining an integrated sense of identity during transition to a scale-up

Table 2. Illustrative examples for the identity transition

'Well, I think what it was, it was a kind of pirate ship of young guys who wanted to make their way in tech; dreams of being billionaires and being the next sort of Mark Zuckerberg, a spirit of kind of sort of adventure and not quite knowing where you're going but wanting to see where you can get to' (F1). 'You know, the more useful thing for me was it changed the dynamic from being a sort of host, student start-up into being you know, a professional organisation with some sort of sales coverage into other enterprises where we knew we could make money' (F3). 'We are trying to focus on mobile applications development, but we also do other work for clients. We change the things since I started so even if it's just over the year it was more, we were more focused on getting clients, many clients, small clients as well. Now, I think we've moved towards bigger clients, more stable work' (M1). 'I don't think we are a young start up struggling business, we're not that, nor are we a large consulting type company. I think we're finding our feet of what this next step is; we're absolutely at a point where (CEO) will talk about, you know, growing up or moving to the next stage and we are absolutely in that space' (M3).
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future desirable identity ('who do we want to be'), which were sometimes expressed as a 'future perfect' identity ('we are going to be').

While transitional identity work helped organization members generate a sense of 'who we are becoming', strong identification-based trusting was crucial in generating feelings of 'who we are currently', rooted in the present simple tense. Most of our interviewees recounted strong identification-based trust, although accounts of low-trust were evident. For example, when F3 took over as CEO, he opined that the founding team was a 'shambles', which revealed low relational-based trust in the competence of colleagues. In such cases, the trusting process fed back into identity ambiguity and efforts to make sense of 'who we are becoming'. We use the term 'trusting' to emphasize its processual na-

ture, and indeed in the example of the CEO and the other original founders, trusting was later restored when the leadership capabilities of the organization improved. The identification-based trusting process elicited positive emotional responses amongst organizational members that generated an integrated sense of identity with an understanding of the organization as both trusted and high-quality on one hand and anti-corporate on the other. In the following section, we present our aggregate dimensions and how they interact (see Figure 1).

Identity ambiguity

Organizational members discussed Digital's 'growing pains', typically focusing on the constant recruitment of new members, restructuring of teams and entry into

new services and labour markets. These challenges led to fragmentation and member tensions that generated ambiguity over ‘who we are’ as an organization. We refer to ‘identity ambiguity’ as uncertainty over who they are, what they stand for and what they do. This ambiguity evoked negative emotional responses, such as confusion, stress and frustration. Together, these elements created the conditions from which members attempted to shape a transitional identity to make sense of ‘who we are becoming?’ Illustrative examples of identity ambiguity are presented in Table 3.

Identity fragmentation. Organizational members perceived teams to be fragmenting as they scaled to new locations. We define ‘identity fragmentation’ as a process of a coherent identity being pulled apart. Fragmentation caused frustration among managers because they lost touch with what was going on across locations remote from the centre. As one manager put it: ‘it’s a black hole for me...I try and pick things up about what’s going on but I’m not intimately aware of what’s happening in the teams, ...I find that very frustrating’ (M7). Frustration was also acutely felt by employees in newly opened locations: ‘I think I’m getting a different experience being on a different team because I feel that I do know what’s going on, but I also worry...our team’s getting a bit disjointed from the rest of the team’ (FG1, E1).

Fragmentation was attributed to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of different teams and employees. This created confusion. As one team leader noted: ‘I don’t... know the ins and outs of what these guys do. I know we make apps for people but what the apps are, I’ve no idea. Should we know? ...’ (M10). Another source of fragmentation arose from managers and employees being unclear about the vision for the organization. Often, this translated into a need for transparent leadership in Digital: ‘What I mean for structure is not just managers, who is your line manager, which is also important, it’s leaders in areas of the business, so you can be driven ... to achieve something that is important for the company’ (M1).

This lack of structure, consistency and direction was regarded by employees as a source of stress and uncertainty. As one employee lamented: ‘At the moment I can’t really say there’s many positives. I’ve been thrown around three different projects in three months...it’s just thrown into something with a date that’s already behind the deadline and expected to put under pressure until you do the work’ (FG4, E15). Collectively, these feelings helped create a sense of Digital being ‘dis-jointed’ or ‘siload’.

Identity tension. Organization members also experienced identity tensions associated with incompatibility. We define identity tension as a strain experienced when organization members consider aspects of multiple identity conflicting and overlapping. This occurred,

particularly for managers, when new recruits did not fit into teams, so becoming disruptive presences: ‘I think it’s about halfway to where we want it to be... there are key people (with) different attitudes, and they tend to “poison the well”... cause disruption around the office. We’ve done our best to stop that’ (M7). Partly due to constant recruitment, onboarding processes had not caught up with Digital’s fast growth. Thus, managers would make judgements on the ‘cultural fit of people’ to adapt to the fast-paced and ambiguous work demands. For example, one of the founders sought tolerance of ambiguity as a quality for new recruits:

...we thrive when bringing people in who can deal with a certain level of ambiguity... people who don’t need to know exactly what the structure is ... it’s that sort of pirate spirit, jump onboard, we don’t necessarily know where we’re going but we’re going to try and do it well (F1).

Tension was also caused by a gap between the expectations and lived experience of new recruits to Digital, which sometimes elicited negative emotional responses such as frustration: ‘I don’t actually think that the stuff we do is as amazing as we portray it to be or as amazing as we want it to be, and I think that is part of the staffs’ frustrations... we talk all this amazing talk but it’s not the reality’ (M7).

Frustration was also expressed over a sense of inertia particularly felt by founders and new senior managers at the start of the transitional period. One of the founders condemned the lack of initial progress: ‘So we had to somehow drift the prices up to make sure we could recruit good enough people to do a good enough job because otherwise we were in a vicious cycle of doing shit work and not getting paid’ (F3). Among the founding team there was a sense they were initially stuck in a ‘circle of mediocrity’, with ‘mediocre people’ producing ‘mediocre products and services’ generating little income to re-invest in ‘better people’ (F3). This was a major source of tension between those ‘professionals’ who were keen for growth and progression and the ‘pirates’ who were more resistant to identity change.

Transitional identity work

Ambiguity over ‘who we are’ as an organization eventually triggered a need to make sense of ‘who we are becoming’. Members thus drew on transitional identity work to understand their present position through their past identity (‘who we were’) and future identity (‘who are we going to be’). Significant efforts were made to forego elements of the past, retain elements of the past and foresee the future. Illustrations of these constructs are presented in Table 4.

Forego the past. Founders and managers attempted to distance the organization from negative attributes asso-

Table 3. Illustrative examples for identity ambiguity

Second-order concept	First-order code	Illustrative quotes
Identity fragmentation	Fragmentation between teams due to expansion and recruitment	'I think part of that is because the company's got so many people that have been around for a long old time, you're kind of just slipping away, you know, and when companies start to grow, we've got these other people that maybe actually should be in, and you just get the little... I don't want to say clique because that makes it sound bad, but you know what I mean' (M8). 'We are starting to get siloed as they... because we've moved away to a few big clients so each client gets its own team so they will... you do feel a bit siloed. Like, say, on a Tuesday when everyone comes in you're like "oh yeah, it's so and so working on Roche" and you don't see them ever' (FG1, E4). 'I'd say like we also, even though they do look after us and stuff, we don't feel as part of the company as we could, like as the people in this city for example. They have a lot of like end of month meetings about the company' (FG3, E13).
	Confusion about the roles of different organization members	'I mean my sort of... my exposure across the company has obviously diminished; when we were growing, you knew everyone, you know, and now it's like there's people in here who I've never met, never spoken to; there's people in Glasgow and Edinburgh and even in here, people turn up and you kind of don't know who they are' (F1). 'It's sometimes not clear who (oversees) what. I remember from my time not on Roche that certain things would get stuck in a bit of a bottle neck, waiting for one person to approve or respond' (M4). 'So, to me the company still feels like it's still only 30 people, whereas the company is almost 100 people, and I have awareness of several people in the teams, and I have great interactions with them, but not with a lot of them, and that... yes, I would prefer that to change' (M7). 'I think my last negative is kind of part of that. So, it was only the other day that I had full confirmation in my head of who is now my line manager, who I report to; it all seemed to be a bit blurred because I've moved teams and there's been a bit of a structural change and I wasn't sure whether I was still reporting to the last person or who; I was ill and I sent an email saying I was going to be off and I put about four people in it because I wasn't sure who needed to know that information' (FG1, E1).
	Uncertainty over planning and direction creating job stress	'But there comes a point when no one is in charge and you just want someone to tell you what to do. I'm not for a moment saying that's like Digital. But there are sometimes times when you just want someone to say, "I'll do it. That's my job"' (M2). 'I did feel at one point, probably when I first joined the company there was a lot of people all joining at the same time, there was probably about seven of us all joined in the space of three months, all from the same background and I probably felt that people who'd been with the company for five years or whatever, probably looked to say "who are all these people coming in?"' (M9). 'When there's ever a problem they take the problem straight down. They don't really... it doesn't seem, I mean, I've no idea how bad upper management is so I don't know how much filtering they really do but it does seem that pressure just trickles down straight onto the developers' (FG4, E17).
Identity tension	Difficulties with new recruits 'not fitting in'	'It grew so fast it didn't have the processes to back up the staff and the new development and I think we hit, at some point, a level where people were leaving because there was no structure and it was just because we grew so fast' (M1). 'Here it's quite the opposite and where we have hired fresh, which we increasingly do, it's tricky. It can be tricky in terms of... I don't know. I've been pondering this as to why it is because I think we don't have quite the rigorous process we need to on-board someone, and give them lots of coaching, and counselling, and we don't have manuals or things that we can direct them to. Equally maybe our culture is a little bit jarring or different for people and they kind of need to be coached' (M3).

Table 3. (Continued)

Second-order concept	First-order code	Illustrative quotes
		'I remember having this conversation about a chap called XXX, who was like XXX and I (said) to our CEO, "what the fuck are you doing? Do not fucking hire that man". I mean he was like "he could be really good". I was like, "he's not a good fit for the company. I know what people thought of him before, companywide, not just a few people. You bring someone like that in and he will trash this place". But three weeks later, "yeah you're right, he just totally wasn't a good fit" and I was like "phew", because that would have been an expensive hire that we would have had to turf from... he would have upset a few people' (M11). 'I think probably it's to do with the fact that we were hiring aggressively during that period and there was probably a lot more work than there was manpower and probably coupled with the sort of culture shock and lack of experience that comes with bringing on so many new people at once. That was sort of cumulative in its effect and probably a lot of people found that time a bit stressful' (FG1, E4). 'So I think again there's just that kind of disconnect between what the people in the company actually want and what we perceive that they want, because I think that you probably think that people are more like you than they actually are' (F1). 'I think it's a company self-delusion... But I do think that a lot of people do think that, which is why it feels like we do, because a lot of people are really innovating and I think they do have amazing ideas, but it's a very small percentage of the company' (M7). 'I think we spend a lot of time on LinkedIn, on social and everything else, creating this... "oh the best place to work". Is it? I wouldn't say it's massively different from any other kind. I mean there's quirky things that go on, like bake offs and everything else, but fundamentally it's a company trying to make money' (M11). 'Why is there a perception that we're this amazing cool company, it's because we're all working hard to share on LinkedIn and say, ah come and work here, it's amazing. Because we know there's a £1,000 bonus in it, but nobody else knows that you know' (M11).
	Frustration that the expectation of 'what the company is' do not meet the lived experience of working in the company	
	Feelings of inertia and a lack of progression	'I wasn't particularly interested in their service business, but I realised that their service business was never going to amount to anything because they were in a too crowded market and they needed to put a different suit of clothes on it' (F3). 'I think for the owner's growth is just inbuilt and some people within the company growth is just like nobody questions it, it's just what you do; you just grow, you try and grow as big as you can, whereas some people are like "why do we need to grow? It's fine the way it is", you know?' (F1). 'But also, kind of, maybe clear plans for everyone...there aren't really any clear plans for, like, training or where do you see yourself in three years' time within the company, you know, there's no clear progression. Everyone is kind of just stuck in their ...' (M5).

ciated with the start-up phase. The past identity of Digital was described as chaotic, naïve, unprofessional and a 'shambles' (akin to 'pirates') and founders were keen to place this period firmly in the past tense: 'We were... like a team of amateur football players going into a game against Chelsea' (F2). However, a legacy of this start-up environment remained, despite founders' best efforts: 'We were very young, very chaotic, still quite chaotic, still quite immature in our "dev" ways' (F2).

Founders and managers also attempted to forego the past by emphasizing shifts in categorical membership of the tech sector and national identity. An initial change

in direction was made to leave web-development behind and focus on the emerging mobile applications market. Later, the decision was made to distinguish themselves in the emerging IOT market. Another effort to forego the past was aimed at de-regionalizing the company to signal its transition from a small, local agency to a larger national/international player. For example, the CEO stated that 'I mean our main strategic goal is to de-Scotlandise the company' (F3) to help recruitment. Other founders and more experienced managers emphasized shifts in frames of reference from small 'boutique' organizations to a larger 'corporate', signifying their transitional journey from a small start-up:

Table 4. Illustrative examples for transitional identity work

Second-order concept	First-order concept	Illustrative quotes
Forego the past	Distance from chaotic, naïve, unprofessional start-up phase	'They didn't have any accounts to speak of. They were doing no management accounts at all, and their statutory accounting was out of date. They weren't accounting for anything properly whatsoever. It was a shambles' (F3). 'That was quite difficult for our predecessor because a lot of the chaos, the predecessor was chaotic in his very ways. That works for what he's doing which is going from zero to something. So, from zero to first or second gear you need that kind of... that attitude, but getting from second to third, I think, the predecessor struggled with that whereas the current CEO, he came in, he regimented things [laps table] and fixed a lot of the problems and allowed the company to slowly start growing' (F2). 'There's growing pains and there's some corporate governance stuff that we've been working on that will frighten people, I think. I think some of the old guard would rather it was the way it used to be in the old days when it was our predecessors who were sitting around a table and... that kind of company. I don't think it is anymore. The people that we hired more recently, they're coming at it fresh, they just see this. They don't have the same history and they're fine with it. I think there's still a tension' (M6). 'I think a lot of the developers might have the opposite to say from our early days when we were very disorganised and we were small, jumping from thing to thing, and we didn't necessarily quote enough for projects so we kind of rushed them and didn't end up doing a very good job in the early days' (M7). 'Exactly and that positioning has been key because it's a very easy ready-reckoner, in that we're not very small kind of like digital agency; we're also not one of the big guys who's going to sort of take the piss out of you, we're right in the middle, we're experts, we have a great culture, we can help enthuse that culture into your business and we genuinely care about the kind of outcomes' (F1). 'The web market was saturated; there was space in mobile to do good work and it was work that we enjoyed doing; there weren't many other people doing it. Quite quickly, we became one of the very few companies in Scotland that were doing it' (F2). 'I would probably say couple of years, two or three years back we'd project that image to anyone we can. I think nowadays we're trying to narrow that down a little bit, even though things like the level, the complexity of projects we're taking on. Before we were taking relatively small projects, like 10k, that sort of thing, but now we're almost at a stage where do we want to step up and start avoiding or pushing these techy projects to possible partners or... that are there as well. I think the identity or the nature of that identity's changing to a more narrow set of industries' (M2). 'I think they might, like a customer would probably have issues with quality from time to time, and/or quirks that they've got issues with, but yes I think they would. I think we position ourselves in the market away from agencies that do more of the style side of things. We very much want to position as sound and engineering organisation' (M3). 'So I think that's still central to the company, and I think a lot of the people that work in here like working for Digital because it's fairly flat hierarchically... you're expected to be a professional but you're not expected to turn up in a suit and tie and speak in a stupid way, so it's got that level of informal-ness and I think it still has that kind of gang-like mentality that we're slightly different, we're slightly unique, there's definitely a different personality than when you look at other digital companies in our city, here in Scotland or elsewhere' (F1). 'We're not like a Deloitte where it's like you've got all these sales guys that are going around with... you know what Deloitte sales guys are like, they're all hyper-aggressive, hyper-slimy, yeah. But they could be selling photocopies, it doesn't matter. They'd have the same tactic. It's all bullshit' (F2). 'I wouldn't say they're quirky, but they are sort of... they have quirky characteristics. They do attract a certain type of character don't they? We're having board games, or we'll go and do something quite fun, or we're going to host something mad like we're all dressing up for Halloween. We're emitting an image that we're not dull, we're not boring but it's a recruitment drive as well, to think about the reason behind emitting an image and that works well, but that all contributes into the sort of bracket of quirky' (M2). 'I just said that it was fun and friendly most of the time but, yeah, that's a big thing, the fact that we can have a bit of a laugh and it's not just serious business 100% of the time, that's important because you spend a lot of your life in an office. So, it must be worth it otherwise, I don't know, you're probably wasting your time. It's like you said, you must get something out of it otherwise you might as well go work in [big corporate]' (FG1, E3).
Retain the past	Disassociation with 'corporate' attributes	Shifting categorical reference points

Table 4. (Continued)

Second-order concept	First-order concept	Illustrative quotes
Reminiscing positively about past attributes		'Exactly and basically from what I gathered at GFI, it was a similar kind of thing to Digital, small team, built up, was acquired and then the acquirers created it into a much more kind of global, more corporate business, so you've had these people that have been on a start-up journey, sold into a kind of corporate business, who are now maybe getting a bit fed up and who now maybe yearn for what it was like building a start up again' (F1). 'What we did have is we had this kind of upstart kind of humble culture and this kind of mantra that is "we just do good work; we are just honest guys that just want to do a good job; and we're technically we know what we're doing". And having come from a world where we had to fight to keep the doors open every week on very modest incomes gave us a kind of different perspective which I think clients like' (F2). 'We're quite good at hiding that and that's because of our size. We've been so small as a team and... when we were at Tay Street we were that small we often used to say we punch well above our weight. That's a great position to be in when you're able to do that' (M6). 'Well I think that's quite interesting about Digital because part of what makes us unique is that culture that we have now, but I think that's stemmed from us being a really small company and being a family company, I mean even not being part of the main family; I've always felt like that was a family-run company and I think we've kept that despite our size, but trying to hold onto that now is difficult, and especially trying to... that's what makes us appealing for people to come in and work for us, but it's hard with the processes and compliance that we now have to go through to try and retain that small family feeling I think, and that culture that we've bred over the years, but we can, you know, influence that to some extent' (M7). 'At the moment our identity is around builders, we're the best builders in the world, whereas we need to be, or we need to say more about being the architects' (F1). 'I think we should have because we're dealing with larger customers, that's the kind of history that they want. We want to be trusted, known to get a job done and be trustworthy to work with, be good to work with. That would be great' (M6). 'I want us to be known for doing really innovative stuff, that we are the experts in healthcare, IoT, banking to a lesser extent because that's where we're heading, and that we will be the thought-leaders for... [the industry]' (M7). 'Yeah, because they're embedded with bank people and bank culture is (E4) ...And that's not necessarily a culture that we want! (E3) ... Yeah, we don't want to become a bank! (E4)' (FG1). 'I don't object to or particularly dislike that persona of just being the engineers who know what we're talking about, but that seems to be the conversation we're having in the company at the moment is do we need to shout more about this front end stuff because it acts as a funnel, it's a bigger... you can expose yourself to a bigger market, you might get involved in different things as opposed to just being very narrow and sort of mobile engineering' (F1). 'We've got a few things going on in Ireland....there's no doubt we'll be in Ireland within a month or two. Things are just gearing up... (F3). 'We are a chosen partner for so many different organisations across different sectors for larger or smaller projects. And the fact that we're going global, now as well, it's just insane' (M5). 'I think as is my mode anyway we've kept an extremely low profile. We have done... nobody really knows about what we do. But I think people have now switched onto the fact that I suspect we've got the biggest developer community in the country and now people are targeting our staff' (F1). 'I think with (Digital) we're trying to be on top of the game. We're trying to learn about new technology for other devices. We're trying to use the latest mobile devices as well when we develop. So, we're not just a leader but we're trying to also improve things' (M1). 'We've done a couple of projects but we're the leader in that area. It's amazing how much perception marketing can give you and we know in here that we've maybe done a couple of little projects in that as well' (M2). 'IoT is internet of things, so that's all the stuff we do with Scottish Power, Smart Technologies and that kind of thing; the electric vehicle, we're dealing with that sort of thing, and then all the voice stuff is to do with Alexa, Amazon etc., so yes... We've been at the forefront of that so yes' (M13).
Foresee the future	Envisioning a desirable future as to 'who we want to be' and 'who we don't want to be'	
	Future perfect thinking – envisioning 'who we are going to be' or 'who we are in danger of becoming'	
	Framing a market leader narrative	

So we used to operate or compete alongside small boutique...digital agencies that do website and apps...; once we won the (name of major bank) deal, which was...pivotal in terms of our model, because it meant that we weren't restricted to surviving on individual mobile projects; we were plugged into big companies delivering big programmes...' (F1).

Retain the future. While organizational members attempted to forego the past, they also sought to retain its key elements, particularly the 'start-up culture' and identity of 'anti-corporateness' – 'I said [it] became a start-up, retained aspects of start-up culture, flexibility, open, forgiving, you know every day is a new day. You can have a bad day without getting fired and that's not a comment you can make about a lot of companies' (FG1, E4). Employees would pinpoint negative attributes of corporations and, de-facto, identify with Digital as 'anti-corporate':

That's one of the reasons why I moved to (Digital) from JP Morgan because they were exactly the opposite of (being) corporate, very corporate... (FG3, E12).

Founders sought to retain Digital's anti-corporate identity to foster belongingness amongst members:

I think the end goal is cash but it's not necessarily what motivates you...it's the desire to be seen to be doing something different and disruptive...so I think, yes, it was that kind of Band of Brothers, pirate type of thing.... that's subsequently attracted people of a similar mindset who didn't necessarily want to go into a big corporate company ... (F1).

Longer-serving members reminisced about the past idealising this "start-up culture" – "I think it wants to be... how can I say this? Kind of snubbing its nose at the world. Punching above its weight. There's...a group of friends working together, bashing... that kind of start-up mentality" (M6).

Foresee the future. Organizational members also engaged in future sensemaking of the organization they wanted to be. Notably, managers wanted the organization to be known for its professionalism and expertise: 'I'd like it to be known for its professionalism and its delivery, and its ability to do the difficult exciting work....' (M6).

Beyond expressing a desired identity, the founders and senior managers would often use the present perfect tense to make an identity claim about who they would become or what they would do in the future. This future perfect thinking envisioned 'who we are going to be' and 'what we are going to do' in the future, even though it was technically uncertain. For example, the CEO claimed 'Next year our suit of clothes is digital products, which will be mobile, web, augmented reality and voice. So, we're broadening out what we do into in-

dustrial IOT...' (F3). This was a distinct type of transitional identity work because it created clarity over 'who we are becoming' and reassured members about a future attained as distinct from a more ambiguous 'desired' future. Importantly, however, the future was also expressed by 'who we are in danger of becoming'. Leaders foretold specific future identity challenges, which also became a part of the transitional narrative:

So yes, maybe there is...ambivalence because...that ambition almost defies the kind of cool culture because... you're heading on a trajectory that's almost bringing you closer to these corporate guys, but your kind of calling [them] out, so I think that's kind of [going to be] difficult (F1).

This envisioning of the future identity of Digital sometimes clashed with claims regarding desired identities (i.e. 'who we want to be'), thus creating a sense of 'this is going to happen so let's be pragmatic about it. One founder lamented: 'Oh, I'd love to have a product and not be a service company, that would be wonderful. But, that ain't going to happen. We...(will) always will be a service company' (F2).

While this work to envision the future identity was a feature of accounts by more senior organizational members, employees built on the envisioned identity to form an claim of being the 'market leader' for mobile applications and IOT development in the UK: 'We are the biggest mobile application and IOT company in the UK now so and the fact that we've talked about IOT and voiced things like that consistently over the last year... We've been at the forefront of that, so yes' (M13).

Identification-based trusting

Identification-based trusting enabled organizational members to develop a tolerance for ambiguity during identity transition (Kasten, 2018). We define this as a form of de-personalized trusting based on a mutual understanding of shared goals, values and emotional connections that underpin on-going transitional identity work. This resulting sense of shared social identity occurred across three levels – personal, relational and collective. Thus, most organization members expressed feeling personally valued, had confidence in colleagues' competence at a relational level and were collectively aligned with company values. This notion of trusting elicited positive emotional responses regarding Digital, such as feelings of belonging, contentment and pride. Illustrative examples for these constructs are presented in Table 5.

Feeling valued (personal level). Feeling valued was a key theme among employees '... we're...trusted to do our job. We're not on the clock or anything like that; they don't monitor us, super-hard about coming in when we need and things. We're just trusted to do our jobs

Table 5. Illustrative examples for identification-based trusting

Second-order concept	First-order code	Illustrative quotes
Feeling valued (personal level)	Feeling valued and trusted within job role	'It's more like herding cats and trying to get people involved and feel that they're valued and feel that they're contributing and creating something in the company. If you can... that's great for us, we can have these fresh ideas' (M6). 'I don't even have to run it up the chain, either; I just say to (names to colleagues) I sit across from, I'm heading out for an hour, I'll be off, or back online in an hour, or whatever. And it's cool (E4) ... And that's trusting each other (E3) ... Exactly. I think the line I always think it is, if the work gets done it doesn't really matter when it gets done. Some people like 9-5, other people I've worked with hate it and don't do their best work until like four in the afternoon and then they work till midnight and they're superstars. But some corporate places you would... like my first job was frowned upon if you went in by nine o'clock and your timesheets were every five minutes. It was quite ... it wasn't... there was no trust, that's why I don't work there anymore [laughs] (E4)' (FG1). I think, yeah, your voice is heard throughout different projects. You know, I'm not technical in any way shape or form and yet you can go to ideas, to the technical team or the creative team and say 'I think this will work' and everyone is receptive to hear your opinion, you know, right, and take on what you're saying which is crucial to client success (FG2, E7). 'The company tries to keep a work/life balance. I think that's very important because when I said that I wanted to move somewhere else, go abroad, that's exactly what I was looking for and that I thought I could find at Digital and that's exactly what I found. So, I think there's a great respect for the employees' (FG3, E14). 'I think it's the culture as well, the environment. People really like to work here. And you can feel when people are in the office, I think Tuesday is the busiest day of the week, everyone is in the office, and you can feel that buzz around people talking to each other and so you can feel it' (M1). ""Come in. Do good work. Go home happy". That's very important to me. Obviously, work does define people because it's what we do for a third of the day' (M6). 'He made me feel really important and, like, part of the company and he was like "what do you want to do with your career; what do you want to do; where do you see yourself; how can we get you there; how can we give you the confidence to get there"' (M3). 'I think the job satisfaction is higher (E4) ... Especially if you enjoy who you're working with (E3)' (FG1). 'F3 particularly I think wants to do right by people and that absolutely comes across, and he's also... he and the other directors are very respecting that other people have got skills that they can bring to the table and use them as well, and are accepting that we're at that stage where the next few steps are going to be different and, you know, might change the profile of the company, but they are desperate to try and hold on to the essence' (M3). There's that element of trust there that you have with people that if you're asking someone in another team to do something, you can rely on them' (M8). 'I do think that everybody does their job well and tries, has the best, like tries to do their best for what it is they're trying to do. I think that's good' (FG2, E6). '[We are] a bunch of hard-working smart people trying to create smart products as solutions. Basically, everybody just wants to work' (FG2, E8). There's no arseholes, and I think again that's a kind of cultural thing that arseholes in here are quickly kind of... we've had a couple of people in the business that we instantly regretted bringing them in, just negative, just the type of person that, I don't know, just doesn't fit and I think there is that sort of band of people that you know that you bring people in and they can just work together and get on' (F1). I think the company from what I've seen in the past six months, every single person out there cares about what they're doing. So, they care about the end product and it being done well and they are all very highly good at what they do' (M5). 'I put down warm and honest, and whatever has been mentioned, I have received nothing but honesty from anyone, I think' (FG1, E2). 'Yes, technically good people but approachable people as well, people that are ... no-one is selfish, everybody is happy to help each other, so far anyway. So, I think that's a good thing' (FG4, E15).
Confidence in colleagues (relational level)	Confidence in the abilities of colleagues	
	Respect for other people's work ethic and caring nature	

Table 5. (Continued)

Second-order concept	First-order code	Illustrative quotes
Alignment with company values (collective level)	Alignment of company values and feelings of pride	'I want our guys to be happy. I want our guys to be proud of who they work for, and I want to create that. I think that a lot of them are, or at least a lot of them realise that they're happier than they would be in a lot of other jobs or previous jobs that they've been in, certainly, in jobs that pay as well as this for a lot of them. Yeah, but I want them to feel like they're happy and they're satisfied that we've given... that's what I want' (F2). 'I think there's a sense of... not a sense of duty, that sounds very formal, but there is a sense of I guess the company you work for and you know, they're good to their staff so why wouldn't you be good to the company in that sense, to make sure of it' (M9). 'I'll never take the piss. I'll work... if I need to I'll work late because I want to, because I want to do it for the client. I want to do it for the founders. I want to do it for Digital. I want to do it for me. Whereas I worked in other companies and they... you need to be in at nine, you need to... you very rarely leave at five, if you do it's noted and used against you' (M12). 'But as Digital, I agree with the guys, work/life balance, trust to the employees and I think Digital tries to protect employees from whatever mess might be happening with the clients' (FG3, E14). 'I think it needs to be done in combination of creating the identity and feeling of belonging for those people that aren't based here, along with a little bit of commercial awareness as well, particularly when they're sitting in a customer site, but they actually represent Digital' (M3). 'I think it's just good to know everyone. Obviously, when a company gets to a certain size that's impossible but, yeah, the more people you know and the more people you can speak to on a Monday, it's better. I think that's like with the HR and stuff like that, the good thing is you're not, you never speak to a department, you always speak to a person, which is a lot better than in big companies, you send an email to some random department and get an email back a week later. Whereas, with us, we speak directly to people that are good at sorting stuff out and the more people you know in the company the easier, it just makes for a friendlier atmosphere' (FG3, E13). 'For me, not only the people from the HR have offered to help with these things but even people that, you know, do something else, like Ben for example, has always offered "okay, let me know..." anything, help with this or that. So, everyone has been very supportive with everything for me coming from another country' (FG3, E14). 'So, I think that's a big attraction is if there's good people there you want to work with good people, so you see that's one of the company's identity, almost, is they have good people. Haven't met someone yet that I would think would be a bad... someone "oh you shouldn't have hired them; they're not a very nice person". So, everyone has been fine in terms of what Digital means' (FG4, E15).

Table 6. Illustrative examples for an integrated and central sense of identity

Integrated (anti-corporate, corporation)	'So yes maybe there is a bit of ambivalence because it's like that ambition almost defies the kind of cool culture because it's like you're heading on a trajectory that's almost bringing you closer to these corporate guys but your kind of calling [them] out' (F1). '(referring to corporates) It's all target driven bullshit and that's not what we're all about. We're more about, you know, obviously, we have targets, we're a commercial enterprise; but we're cut from a different cloth, we're slightly more liberal' (F2). 'I think what tech companies tend to do nowadays is try and emit an image where we're as anti-corporate as possible whilst still retaining a lot of the corporate quality side' (M2). 'Yeah, I was going to say, I don't think it's necessarily that much of a bad thing being "corporate" because it's like the start-up mentality' (FG2, E8).
Centrality (trusted, high-quality organization)	'We often refer to ourselves like an engineering company, it's like building a bridge, you know, and it's like that heavy weight kind of robust expertise' (F1). 'What is the company's identity? I think the company's identity is unaggressive, technical excellence, honesty. I think is what I would... words I would choose' (F2). 'If Digital has the reputation of that company that delivers what you want and it's high standards, I think that would be close to definitive' (M1). 'This sort of notion that come from (the CEO) and (Founder) as well speaking to them initially was, dish out quality work, get the invoices in, that's all it is, and have fun in between. There's nothing simpler is there when you think about it that way? That sort of concept evolved to the mantra of come in, do great work, go home happy, that sort of thing, which it's kind of culture statement that everybody tries to make' (M2). '[We are a] relaxed and flexible company with strong values and commitments to their clients' (FG1, E2).

well' (FG3, E13). Several HR practices were associated with being valued, including flexible working, outcomes focus rather than time spent at work and enabling employee autonomy and voice during projects. These practices were linked with the cultivation of 'anti-corporate' spirit. Feeling valued and trusted in job roles also led to job satisfaction amongst employees and managers:

I think the slogan on the wall behind me which says something "do good work go home or whatever, have fun, go home" type thing. It is generally an enjoyable place to be... there's never any animosity (M10).

Confidence in colleagues (relational level). High levels of relational trust among colleagues were frequently expressed throughout the organization. Even though members experienced fragmentation across the organization, which contributed to ambiguity, a high trust dynamic across the organization generally prevailed. As one manager reflected: 'I would say, yes, we have a bunch of competent people here. I trust people, not just in my department but in other departments as well' (M1). The importance of leadership in generating such trust during scaling was recounted by another manager:

I think it's probably massive evolution...that's happened over quite a short space of time. I think the company itself is something that's evolving and just finding itself and is on its way to be quite substantial. I think it's just run by people that know how to find opportunities and act on them' (M12).

While members trusted colleagues' abilities to deliver, mutual respect for other's work ethic and caring nature was evident across all levels of the organization and ultimately helped shape Digital's identity. As one manager reflected: 'What is (Digital)? I think.... who is (Digital)?

I think it's all central to the people. If you ask people why they're still here I would say, you know, if you had casual chats with people, it's like...they really like working with people' (M11).

Alignment with company values (collective level). At the collective level, there was a sense of strong identification with company values, mutually shared by organization members. The sense of Digital comprising a collection of people doing good work elicited palpable feelings of pride: 'Yes, it's a business, we need to make the money but if you make money helping other people, you can talk with outside and say "we do, we do this and we are proud of doing this"' (M1).

Managers and employees, new and old, appeared to identify with Digital's 'anti-corporate' values:

It was...(F2) and (F1) that started this company, how they went at starting this themselves, and you see where it's grown ...putting together ideas, and you can see where they've got to, through growth and through hiring people. I have a lot of respect for that type of business. I like working for that rather than a big corporate (M9).

As previously discussed, this identification was particularly important to retain as employees had a de-facto tendency to disidentify with and distrust large 'corporates' culture: 'I don't trust corporate entity, no, definitely not' (FG1, E4). Ultimately the alignment of values generated a sense of belonging and togetherness within Digital: 'You just have to trust that because we're all focused on quality, we're all working together' (M2); 'Well, we like to put good quality out the door... there's never a blame thing ... they look at the team as a whole if there's an issue' (FG1, E1).

Outcome: An integrated and central sense of identity

Thus, we found identification-based trusting as a form of transitional identity work resulted in an integrated and central sense of identity. This allowed organizational members to make sense of ‘who we are’ and sense the organization as stable during sustained change. The central features of this sense of identity were of Digital as a trusted and dynamic organization that produced high-quality work. Paradoxically, however, it managed to dampen many members’ ‘anti-corporate’ sentiments with acceptance of a need for greater professionalism as it grew, thus integrating anti-corporate and corporate narratives. The ‘corporate’ narrative took time for established members of the organization to accept. For new organization members, however, the sense of integration was seen as important and helped Digital to stand out as distinct within the industry and an attractive place to work. Illustrative examples for this integrated sense of identity are presented in Table 6.

Discussion

We began by asking: how can organizational members create and maintain a strong sense of OI in the transitional context of a rapidly scaling venture? This question is important to answer because the literature is yet to show how new ventures can create and retain internal member identification while growing rapidly which has important theoretical and practical implications (Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020).

Theoretical implications

Our findings make three contributions to the firm growth literature. First, we have developed an emergent model for retaining an integrated sense of identity during the scale-up process (see Figure 2). We believe this model is unique in unpacking the transitional identity work undertaken by managers and employees to create a sense of ‘who we are becoming’ as a response to the tensions created by rapid growth. ‘Who we are becoming’ is a constantly evolving dynamic, with organizations and employees mutually constituting each other’s organizational and personal identities over time (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth, Harrison and Sluss, 2014; Harding, 2007). Our findings suggest this mutual constitution process in a scale-up context involves a recursive process of (a) retaining and forgoing the past, (b) transitional identity work and (c) future identity work, with individuals and organizations striving to foresee a future of who we want to be and who are we going to be.

This process shows transitional identities are active social constructions, dynamically generated by internal stakeholders to create a sense of integration. Such a

finding contrasts with existing research on transitional identities that highlights their temporary, relatively fixed and functional nature as an organization moves from one state to another (e.g. Clark *et al.*, 2010; Xu, Lu and Gu, 2014). In the context of a scale-up, organizational identity and OI are constantly in flux. Thus, we argue stakeholders must engage in persistent past, present and future identity work to maintain a sense of integration. Consequently, and in contrast to existing literature that focuses on identity work to create external legitimacy (e.g. Cavotta and Dalpiaz, 2022; Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020), we stress the internal integration work founders, managers and employees must engage in transitioning organizations. Ensuring internal integration to ensure an organization does not ‘come apart’ during scaling (Schou, 2023) is a necessary condition for external adaptation and legitimacy (Schein, 2010) because growing ventures must align internally to minimize members’ perceived rhetoric-reality gap between ‘who they are’ and ‘who they say they are’.

We also stress the importance of future-orientated work that organizational members must enact during transition, so supporting Garud *et al.*, (2014) proposition that young firms must build their legitimacy based on expectations of the future rather than the past successes. Thus, we highlight the importance of ‘future perfect thinking’ in identity work (e.g. Gioia, Corley and Fabbri, 2002). Distinct from the commonly explored aspirational identity where organizational leaders evoke a clear notion of ‘who we want to be’, we identify the importance of their more deterministic claims of ‘who we are *going* to be’. Such claims to foresee the future as a completed event are unknowable, yet they act as powerful cognitive and rhetorical devices in shaping organizational members’ sensemaking of identity and strategizing (Logue and Grimes, 2022; Weick, 2001). For example, Digital claimed ‘we are the market leader’, which was embraced by managers and employees well before Digital became a market leader. Our findings show future perfect thinking by managers and employees framed a desired future to secure stakeholders’ commitment to scaling-up by overcoming their resistance and inspiring action consistent with such ambitions.

Second, we contribute to the existing literature on OI during venture scaling by identifying the importance of ‘identification-based trusting’ in facilitating scaling-up (Hampel, Tracey and Weber, 2020; Snihur and Clarysse, 2022). This is a form of affect-based trust (Legood *et al.*, 2023; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996), based on the idea of a shared social identity acting as a cognitive scheme that enables organizational members to develop positive expectations of leaders and founders without engaging in complex or deliberate reasoning (McEvily, 2011) or by developing strong emotional attachments to them (Bitektine *et al.*, 2025). Such trusting is often amplified by repeated interactions with founders and leaders’ dis-

plays of normative behaviour and values (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Kasten, 2018).

Our findings evidenced a widespread sense of a shared social identity in Digital occurring across three levels – personal, relational and collective. Thus, organization members typically felt valued at a personal level, had confidence in colleagues' competence at a relational level and aligned with company values at the collective level. Such trusting elicited positive emotional responses, including feelings of belonging, job satisfaction and pride. Thus, identification-based trusting enabled identity integration and alignment among *all* stakeholders in the firm during scale-up. Previous research by Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2013 found that newcomers trust in their colleagues had an important influence on OI and role-related performance, but trust in leaders had no significant impact. In contrast, our findings suggest employees' evolving trust in both their work colleagues and leaders, and reciprocal trust in employees by the senior team, were essential to building an integrated organizational identity during scale-up. They also suggest that high identification-based trusting was important because leaders' future perfect claims laid the foundations for other managers and staff to align with Digital's organizational identity and direction.

Third, our findings and theorization on identification-based trusting align with previous research on employees' reactions to planned organizational culture change (Tasoulis *et al.*, 2024). These showed employees were more likely to respond positively when two core and complementary factors were present – perceptions that leaders valued their contributions and cared about their welfare (so-called perceived organizational support), and empowerment. Similarly, they found employees were more likely to respond negatively when these two factors were absent, leading to employees' disillusioning and dissociating from planned culture change. Our findings, especially on feeling valued and being cared for support this research but extend it by pointing to the importance of being confident in colleagues' competence, benevolence and integrity, and leaders (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995).

Practical implications

Our research holds several practical implications for stakeholders involved in high-growth ventures. The first is the often-overlooked issue of OI during the critical transition from start-up to scale-up. This research offers a framework and guidelines for understanding and managing these internal dynamics through transitional identity work and the cultivation of identification-based trust during rapid growth. In contrast to mature firms, scale-ups lack stable, deeply rooted identities. As organizational membership diversifies and structures evolve, uncertainty over 'who we are' can generate

confusion, disengagement and cultural drift. This study identifies three interrelated identity work processes that support cohesion: preserving core elements of the founding identity, discarding misaligned or obsolete attributes and articulating a future-oriented vision. These processes foster a dynamic and coherent sense of 'who we are becoming', which is essential for sustaining alignment and motivation during organizational transformation.

A second implication is the critical role of trust-building, particularly identification-based trust, in maintaining organizational integrity amid change. Such trust is grounded not only in interpersonal relationships but in a shared sense of purpose, values and identity. When employees perceive alignment with organizational values, believe in the competence of their colleagues and feel personally valued, they are more likely to remain engaged during uncertain transitions. Accordingly, scale-ups need to implement leadership and HR practices that reinforce these dimensions of trust, for example, participatory governance and robust job, team and organizational engagement strategies. Finally, our study implies effective scale-up leaders must align trust-based identity integration and performance outcomes. This may require developing leaders' skills in identity work, trust-building and trust-repair.

Limitations and future research

We recognize our study has limitations, which, nevertheless, offer opportunities for future research. First, it is restricted to a single case in a specific context and time. Thus, it may have low empirical generalizability to other contexts and time periods, particularly for projecting continuous scale-up into the future. A multi-case, cross comparison approach may help address this criticism. Second, we must acknowledge the limitations of our study in excluding exogenous factors from our analysis. The likelihood of companies such as Digital continuing to grow in the future is unlikely. Few companies can 'buck' macroeconomic, regulatory and market trends without facing major challenges and periods of decline. Consequently, we believe case study research would benefit from continued investigation over even longer periods to capture the impact of time and such external factors. We also trust engaged, longitudinal research is more likely to inform users of scale-up research, especially if it can answer the question: how can changing narratives in scaling contexts be aligned with an 'enduring' organizing identity as proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985)? Gioia *et al.* (2013a) challenged the need for an enduring organizational identity being essential in a growth context. So shedding light on how organization leaders can maintain a clear sense of 'who we are' during continuous flux is a key future research direction.

Conclusions

Our study explored how organizational members can retain a sense of identification in the transitional context of scaling ventures. Our findings show that in the face of ambiguity and negative emotions associated with scaling, organizational members follow a recursive process of retaining and forgoing the past and foreseeing the future to create a transitional identity. Underlying this transitional work is the concept of identification-based trusting, a multi-level concept which generates feelings of being valued, confidence in colleagues and alignment of company values which generates positive emotions and facilitates a sense of integration. In doing so, we believe we have advanced an understanding of how organizations retain identity integration as scaling pulls them apart.

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