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“Really being yourself”? Racial minority entrepreneurs navigating othering and authenticity through identity work

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Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on an intersectional perspective on racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities, this paper investigates the identity work of racial minority entrepreneurs with native-born and migrant backgrounds, confronted to experiences of othering in a White entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Methodology: The study takes a qualitative-interpretivist approach and builds on six cases of racial minority entrepreneurs in nascent stages of venture development within the Dutch technology sector. The dataset comprises 24 in-depth interviews conducted over the course of one and a half year, extensive case descriptions, and online sources. The data is thematically and inductively analysed.

Findings: Despite strongly self-identifying as entrepreneurs, the research participants feel marginalised and excluded from the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which results in ongoing threats to their existential authenticity as they build a legitimate entrepreneurial identity. Minority entrepreneurs navigate these threats by either downplaying or embracing their marginalised racial and/or migrant identities.

Originality: The study contributes to the literature on the identity work of minority entrepreneurs. The paper reveals that, rather than “strategising away” the discrimination and exclusion resulting from othering, racial minority entrepreneurs seek to preserve their sense of existential authenticity and self-worth, irrespective of entrepreneurial outcomes. In so doing, the study challenges the dominant perspective of entrepreneurial identity work among minority entrepreneurs as overly instrumental and market-driven. Moreover, the study also contributes to the literature on authenticity in entrepreneurship by highlighting how racial minority entrepreneurs navigate authenticity threats while building legitimacy in a White ecosystem.

Keywords: minority entrepreneurs, racial migrant entrepreneurs, othering, identity work, authenticity, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Minority entrepreneurs experience identity work—the “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising” constructions of the self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165) to gain entrepreneurial legitimacy—as particularly challenging in the light of exclusionary forces emanating from the dominant normative ideal of the White, male, venture capital-backed, Silicon Valley-based entrepreneur (Welter *et al.*, 2017). Constructing a legitimate entrepreneurial identity is even more difficult for those who are plurally marginalised (Romero and Valdez, 2016; Knight, 2016; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021) because of multiple markers of difference—e.g., their skin colour, gender, accent, or migration status. These markers are hard or impossible to “shake off”, thus ontologically positioning them as the “Other” in relation to the majority group within the society (Bruton *et al.*, 2022). The intersectional perspective suggests that these identity markers are not simply additive, but cumulative as each constitutes a specific marginalised experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021).

A wealth of research documents minority entrepreneurs’ sophisticated tactics of “heroically overcoming difficulties” while struggling for legitimacy and access to resources (Thoelen and Zanoni, 2017, p. 146). Extant studies highlight how minority entrepreneurs enact agency to reject or reverse prejudice, marginalisation or exclusion in their entrepreneurial endeavours. While insightful, the currently dominant lens runs the risk of over-emphasising the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship (Brattström and Wennberg, 2021), paying less attention to how racial minority entrepreneurs cope with the lived experience of othering through identity work. When entrepreneurs embark on an overly instrumentalist quest for legitimacy, they may come to feel that they are drifting away from “who they really are” and, in turn, they may seek to rebalance strategy and authenticity while building their entrepreneurial identity. If “the problem of the twenty-first century is the

problem of Othering” (Powell and Menendian, 2016, p. 14), there is momentum to explore and theorise the subjective, lived experience of othering in the field of entrepreneurship. This paper takes up this challenge by asking: *How do racial minority entrepreneurs in the Dutch technology sector navigate experiences of othering whilst maintaining a sense of existential authenticity?*

This paper adopts an intersectional perspective to investigate the identity work of racial minority entrepreneurs who face prejudice, marginalisation, and exclusion—i.e., othering (Essers and Benschop, 2007)—at the intersection of racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities. Intersectionality draws attention to how multiple identities shape the experience of minorities (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008). This perspective paves the way for theorising racial minority entrepreneurs’ lived experiences, contemplations and social manoeuvres while confronted with othering in entrepreneurial settings. The present study draws on the cases of six racial minority technology entrepreneurs in the Netherlands to answer the research question. In the context of this study, we consider racial minority entrepreneurs as those entrepreneurs who self-identify as non-White. Three of our research participants are born in the Netherlands, while three others have recently migrated to the Netherlands from Zambia, Egypt, and Sri Lanka via Australia. The dataset includes 24 semi-structured interviews and extensive case descriptions, complemented by online sources such as company websites and LinkedIn posts.

The inductive, thematic analysis of the data reveals that participants strongly self-identify as entrepreneurs, yet feel like outsiders, disdained and discriminated, which leads to diminished entrepreneurial opportunities. Treated with either patronising sympathy or open contempt, participants convey feeling depicted as the “Other” rather than equal participants in technology entrepreneurship. Their experiences of othering involve facing prejudice, marginalisation or exclusion as a result of racial, cultural, and linguistic differences, and

induce distinct responses enabling racial minority entrepreneurs to cope with the various ways in which they are othered by stakeholders belonging to the White, native Dutch, majority group. The study highlights how the intersection of racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities informs the ways in which entrepreneurs downplay or embrace their marginalised identities to cope with authenticity threats.

This paper brings two main theoretical contributions to the literature on the identity work of minority entrepreneurs and the role of authenticity in entrepreneurship. First, it reveals that in situations of authenticity threats coming from members of the majority group in society, minority entrepreneurs do not merely enact their identity strategically to gain legitimacy as entrepreneurs—as previous studies on minority entrepreneurs’ identity work have observed (Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023)—but also seek to preserve their sense of existential authenticity and self-worth, irrespective of potential entrepreneurial outcomes. In so doing, the study challenges the overly instrumental and market-driven interpretations of entrepreneurial identity work. Second, the study extends the literature on authenticity in the field of entrepreneurship (e.g., Frederiksen and Berglund, 2020; Lewis, 2013; O’Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016; O’Neil *et al.*, 2022) by revealing the authenticity threats experienced by racial minority entrepreneurs as well as their responses to these threats resulting from their efforts to balance legitimacy in the eyes of the majority group’s stakeholders and their desire to preserve a sense of “existential authenticity” (Charmé, 2000). In so doing, the study empirically documents entrepreneurial identity as “an intersectional site of identity negotiation” (Korede, 2019, p.58), thus answering calls to uncover the complexity of intersectional identities (Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2014) and more closely scrutinise the impact of discrimination and exclusion (Ram *et al.*, 2017).

The paper starts with a description of the literature on racial minority entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial identity and existential authenticity. Next, the paper outlines the methodology

of the empirical study and its findings. A discussion of the main contributions of the study closes the paper.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Race and entrepreneurship: an intersectional perspective

In this study, we focus on how racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities intersect to uncover the lived experience of othering of racial minority entrepreneurs in the Dutch technology sector. Whereas studies on entrepreneurship and ethnicity abound, entrepreneurship research largely overlooks issues of race (Bruton *et al.*, 2022). Ethnicity describes “a collective within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood” (Schermerhorn, 1978, p. 12). Race is a rather ill-defined, historically bounded social construct that refers to social groups sharing certain physical characteristics and is mainly structural in its impact (Wingfield and Taylor, 2016; Gold, 2016). From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, racial disparities and white hegemony are considered products of histories of slavery and colonialism, and are omnipresent yet not fully recognised in majority White societies (Gold, 2016). As such, although implicitly claiming a race-neutral perspective, entrepreneurial discourse historically reinforces the normative portrayal of the entrepreneur as a White man, while simultaneously silencing the challenges of racial minority entrepreneurs confronted with the hegemonic image of the White man entrepreneur (Garcia and Baack, 2022).

Indeed, evidence exists that entrepreneurs belonging to racial groups other than White entrepreneurs experience entrepreneurship differently than the majority White group (Knight, 2016). Documented experiences range from clear-cut racial discrimination, exemplified in the

experimental study of Younkin and Kuppaswamy (2018)—who show that in the US, Black men are less likely to receive funding than their White counterparts based on the same venture idea, to more nuanced forms of “covert racism” (Nkrumah, 2022), “everyday racism” (Essed, 2018), or “aversive racism”, defined as “a modern form of prejudice that characterises the racial attitudes of many whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalizable ways” (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1996, p. 55). We label these collective experiences of racial minority entrepreneurs as lived experiences of othering, with othering characterised as the experience of being objectified and seen as the “Other” based on group characteristics whilst individual complexities and subjectivities are ignored by those enacting othering (Dervin, 2012). Experiences of othering not only generate negative emotions in those who experience it, but also inflict financial costs upon racial minority entrepreneurs (Zubair and Brzozowski, 2018; Nkrumah, 2022).

Race intersects with “additional structures of inequality” (Martinez Dy and Agwunobi, 2019, p. 5) that affect the lives of entrepreneurs and trigger a diversity of experiences and outcomes (Romero and Valdez, 2016). Studying race from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) allows for a deeper understanding of how different marginalised identities inform the lived experience of entrepreneurship (Essers *et al.*, 2010; Knight, 2016; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Entrepreneurial experiences of racial minority women, for instance, are uniquely shaped by additional gendered and class-based “histories of oppression” (Knight, 2016, p. 311; Crenshaw, 1991). Similarly, migrant racial minority entrepreneurs encounter additional challenges related to settlement and assimilation such as obstructive government policies, harmful political discourse, and discrimination due to their foreign name, language proficiency, or accent (Garcia and Braack, 2022; Mustonen, 2021; Warkentin, 2020; Zaami and Madibbo, 2021).

2.2 *Minority identity work in entrepreneurship*

Extant research on entrepreneurial identity work emphasises the “actions that people enact to build, revise, and maintain their identities” (Caza *et al.*, 2018, p. 893) in such a way that their entrepreneurial identity fits the stakeholders’ normative expectations while also standing out in the market (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009; Abd Hamid *et al.*, 2019), thus increasing entrepreneurial legitimacy and access to entrepreneurial resources (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). This is considered of major importance for entrepreneurs who do not fit the hegemonic entrepreneurial stereotype, which may also explain why a focus on these groups is a mainstay of the literature. A recent review of immigrant women entrepreneurs’ experiences in the technology sector (Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022), for example, identifies several strategies that migrant women entrepreneurs adopt to mitigate the barriers they face while engaging with entrepreneurship. Individual-level strategies include adopting masculine traits and emphasising knowledge and expertise in the field. Similarly, Giazitzoglu and Korede (2023) illustrate how Black African male immigrants in the United Kingdom engage in “compensatory identity work” to ensure that their businesses “*appear white* at an operational and reputational level” (p. 7, emphasis in original). Additionally, migrant entrepreneurs might also use culturally accepted “White” business names and “compensate” for their migrant, racial identity by dressing a certain way to belong.

Notwithstanding the important contributions of these studies, the dominant focus on the individual strategies enacted by entrepreneurs to overcome discrimination might encompass a risk of over-emphasising the instrumentalist and market-based behaviour of minority entrepreneurs (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017; Verduijn *et al.*, 2014) while ignoring parallel socio-emotional phenomena—such as the quest for authenticity—occurring when entrepreneurs are forced to forsake their identities. Moreover, the scholarly focus on the discourse of minority entrepreneurs engaging with identity work might trigger an additional

unforeseen side-effect, that of unintendedly creating the image of a “disembodied entrepreneur” (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014) while in reality identities engage the body as much as the mind, because they “operate through visible physical features and characteristics, and one cannot simply rise above or ignore them” (Alcoff, 2006, p. ix).

To sum up, extant literature portrays minority entrepreneurs as agentic entrepreneurial heroes (Ogbor, 2000) able to overcome othering through strategic identity work aimed at gaining legitimacy and securing business survival. Such strategic efforts, however, may violate the entrepreneurs’ self-perceptions and sense of authenticity, which is a dimension that is entirely overlooked in literature to date. The current study addresses this lacuna by investigating and theorising how experiences of othering influence the identity construction of racial minority entrepreneurs as they engage with their socio-business context while simultaneously trying to stay “true to themselves”. To better understand what “staying true to oneself” means (Charmé, 2000), the paper now turns to the concept of existential authenticity to examine its connections with the entrepreneurial identity of racial minority entrepreneurs.

2.3 Entrepreneurial identity and existential authenticity

Authenticity is commonly defined as “a commitment to self-values” (Erickson, 1995, p. 121) or as “the loyalty of one’s self, to its own past, heritage and ethos” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 117). The notion of authenticity has re-gained popularity in both scholarly and popular discourse in the last century (Tracy and Town, 2020). In a recent review on authenticity in organisations, Cha and colleagues (2019) distinguish between the notions of “externally perceived authenticity” (being seen as honest with oneself) and “experienced existential authenticity” (the feeling of being honest to oneself) (Charmé, 2000). O’Neil *et al.* (2022) state that most entrepreneurship studies conceptualise authenticity as a means to attract

legitimacy or appreciation from outside audiences—that is, as a construct requiring entrepreneurs to engage with effective impression management (Goffman, 1959). According to this conceptualisation, entrepreneurs are expected to show others that they are authentic and honest in order to gain the stakeholders' confidence, for example by using “authenticating narratives” that connect their business to their personal identity (Powell and Baker, 2014, p. 1424).

While acknowledging the use of authenticity work as impression management, the notion of authenticity in this paper primarily refers to the second approach to authenticity—the experienced existential authenticity “as felt” by the entrepreneur and “rooted in emotion” (Erickson, 1995, p. 125). These two kinds of authenticity are certainly connected as individuals always construct their identities in relation to others (Huen, 2009). However, the analytical focus of these two approaches is distinct: while the first kind of authenticity is perceived and assessed by others, the second kind of authenticity is perceived and evaluated by the individual herself, in her inner world. Moreover, the notion of existential authenticity refers to self-identity and not to social identity. In a study on contemporary Jewish identities, Charmé (2000) differentiates between “essentialist authenticity”, which equates authenticity with fully embracing the social identity of one's (ethnic) group, and “existential authenticity”, which requires the individual to “rise above and surpass designated social identities” (Lewis, 2013, p. 254) in an effort to be true to oneself. That said, Charmé also acknowledges the tight relationship between authenticity and context, recognising that existential authenticity is fundamentally bounded to cultural, political, historical, and economic factors. In other words, whether one experiences existential authenticity is inextricably linked to how this identity is externally perceived and assessed by others, both within and outside one's social group. The interplay between the self and the social is critical to the construction of identities, as emphasised by Watson (2009, p. 257):

Identity work comprises the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and strive to shape the various social identities that emerge in relationship to others in the various milieux in which they live their lives.

Furthermore, as convincingly argued by Tracy and Town (2020), current discussions of authenticity as referring to a “real self” opposed to a “fake self” go against the process perspective of identity as fluid, ongoing, and fragmented, which the current study also adopts. However, while one might admit that entrepreneurs experience instances of authenticity while also “faking till they make it” (Luca and Zervas, 2016), identity work scholars notice that individuals do speak about their identities as if there is an authentic inner core or a “true self”, even if this core may only consist of “stabilised moments in an ongoing process of identity formation” (Ybema *et al.*, 2009, p. 305). Costas and Fleming (2009) consider existential authenticity not as an analytical tool but rather as a discursive vehicle used by individuals in the construction of their identities (Brown, 2021), a perspective also embraced in the current study.

Within the entrepreneurial identity literature, this second approach to authenticity—existential authenticity as experienced from the inside—is hardly examined, with two notable exceptions. O’Neil and Ucbasaran (2016) show that environmental entrepreneurs experience tensions between their own values and beliefs (“what matters to me”) and the values and beliefs of their audience (“what matters to them”). Closest to our study is the work of Lewis (2013), who discusses the authenticity-driven identity work of a group of women business owners resisting the dominant masculine discourse of entrepreneurship. Viewing their identity work through an authenticity lens allows an understanding of “why some female business owners go against the main discursive practices and resources of the discourse of enterprise”

(Lewis, 2013, p. 263). These studies certainly contribute to revealing the role of authenticity in the construction of entrepreneurial identities. However, even the studies investigating existential authenticity seem to conceptualise the construction of an authentic identity as a largely instrumental process in which entrepreneurs play the role of agentic individuals able to “achieve” an authentic identity in line with external demands.

The current study builds on these few studies on authenticity in entrepreneurial identity research to offer an alternative view of identity construction by racial minority entrepreneurs, focusing on how their experience of othering in the entrepreneurial space generates persistent threats to their existential authenticity, which they navigate through identity work.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretivist research methodology to uncover the identity work of racial minority entrepreneurs in the Dutch technology sector. Before describing the data collection and analysis, the ensuing subsection outlines the research context.

3.1 Othering in the Netherlands

The intersectional focus on racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities is particularly suitable as our research participants do not fit the hegemonic image of the White entrepreneur that is dominant within the Dutch technology sector. In the Netherlands, a well-functioning entrepreneurial ecosystem to foster tech and tech-based start-ups is being developed for several decades, but at the same time there is a lack of gender and ethnic diversity among founders (Techleap, 2023). A recent report on the Dutch start-up ecosystem

notes that residents with non-Western, immigrant backgrounds represent 14.5 percent of the total Dutch population but only around 7 percent of start-up founders (Henz *et al.*, 2022).

Approximately 25% of the Dutch population is born abroad or has one or more parents who were born abroad (CBS, 2023), and amongst these there are citizens belonging to racial minority groups whose family's migration history traces back to former Dutch colonies such as Suriname and the Caribbeans Islands, or whose (grand)parents came to the Netherlands as migrant workers in the 1960s and 1970s from Morocco and Turkey. Moreover, the number of so-called "knowledge migrants" or expats (labour migrants with a high level of education) from outside of Europe has been growing in the last decade, with newly established immigrants coming from India, China, and Turkey (CBS, 2022). Migrants have significantly less opportunities in the Dutch labour market due to discriminatory hiring practices amongst other issues (SCP, 2020).

Although the Netherlands has a history that is rooted in colonial violence, the existence of racial discrimination is often passionately denied. This paradox, described by Gloria Wekker as "White innocence" (2016), results in the ubiquitous presence of "everyday racism" (Essed, 2018) whilst maintaining a dominant narrative of the Netherlands as a "tolerant" or "ethical" nation. This tension is most tangible in the ongoing public debate about the use of blackface during the traditional Sinterklaas celebration, which every year results in clashes between activists who advocate for the abolishment of these racial stereotypes and groups of Dutch-born individuals who claim defending Dutch traditions (Hilhorst and Hermes, 2016). The tacit omnipresence of racial hierarchies in the Netherlands is visible in the narratives of our native-born research participants.

3.2 Data collection

This study draws on the stories of six racial minority entrepreneurs (see Table I) who founded technology start-ups less than five years before the start of the field work. The participants were identified via convenience sampling. The first author visited events geared toward technology entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and did online desk research—e.g., joining “Black Tech Netherlands” LinkedIn groups—to identify non-White entrepreneurs with new ventures. A total of 31 entrepreneurs have been identified via these events and on LinkedIn groups. Among them, we reached out to 18 potential research participants selected based on their origin (12 native-born and 6 migrant entrepreneurs) and their gender (10 men and 8 women entrepreneurs). After informal conversations, eight entrepreneurs were asked to be followed more extensively and six of them agreed, of which 3 native-born entrepreneurs and 3 migrant entrepreneurs, and 1 women entrepreneur and 5 men entrepreneurs. The first author followed the entrepreneurs over the course of one and a half year and conducted four interview rounds. This approach not only allowed the researcher to witness how entrepreneurs respond to threats to their existential authenticity over time, but also provided an opportunity to build rapport and open up discussions on sensitive subjects such as racial and migrant identities and discrimination. The first interview round (April–May 2021) focused on the venture founding story as well as on the role of entrepreneurship in the participants’ lives. The second (June–July 2021) and third (September–October 2021) interview rounds were used as check-in moments and as an opportunity to ask follow-up questions. Themes included childhood, education, career, business development, entrepreneurial role models, racial, migrant and entrepreneurial identities, and experiences in the Dutch start-up ecosystem, including interactions with various stakeholders such as investors, co-workers, and clients. Although the research participants were selected based on their racial entrepreneurial identities, we maintained an intersectional lens throughout data collection. This meant that the

researcher stayed open to collecting unique individual life stories from the participants, focusing not only on their racial entrepreneurial identity but also on other identity dimensions that emerged when discussing entrepreneurial experiences with our participants. Already during data collection, this approach yielded additional insights pertaining to the importance of their migrant, and gender identities in addition to their racial identities, and we continued to build on these themes in successive rounds of interviewing.

After the third round of interviews, the first author built six extensive case descriptions based on the personal narratives of the participants (comprising approximately 25 pages each). Offline and online observations informed these descriptions as well, which ensured triangulation and strengthened the external validity of the collected data (Denzin, 1970). The researcher analysed available videos of external interviews or recorded pitches, the company website, the LinkedIn profiles of the entrepreneurs, podcasts, and other online sources. Besides the personal narratives initiating the start of the analysis, these data also formed the basis of the fourth and final interview round and allowed the researcher to identify data gaps. In the fourth interview round (May–June 2022), the researcher and the participants reflected on these extended case descriptions together and the interviewer asked for clarifications, for instance on quotes or LinkedIn posts, which allowed for more explicit and in-depth discussion about the participants' multiple identities.

---- Table I around here ---

3.3 Data analysis

Writing down these case descriptions allowed the first author to identify common themes in their stories (e.g., venture development, entrepreneurial identity, migrant identity, racial identity, entrepreneurial role models), which facilitated cross-case comparison (Ayes *et*

al., 2003). The inductive analysis comprised of critical reading and re-reading of the narratives as the authors engaged with the constant comparison method (Anderson and Jack, 2015), which meant “comparing and contrasting patterns of activities to determine categories” (Jack *et al.*, 2015, p. 31). To do so, the authors iteratively moved between the accounts of the participants, emerging themes, and the literature (Locke, 2011). The authors also had intensive discussions throughout the process of analysis where collective “conjectural activity” took place, meaning that “observations are explored, hunches occur, perspectives are considered, ideas are tried out or set aside, and so on” (Locke, 2011, p. 630).

The authors specifically focused on articulations of identity, looking at how research participants described themselves (“I like to take risk”) as well as at how they reflected on their identities in interactions with others (“In private I am casual, but in the office, I don’t like to make jokes”). They paid attention to how the participants’ entrepreneurial and racial and/or migrant identities intersect, exemplified in narratives about entrepreneurs “having to prove themselves” or “not being taken seriously” by stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem to understand how participants handled these experiences through identity work. Despite the initial focus on identity work strategies, what was especially striking in the narratives of the participants was that the experiences of othering could hardly be “strategised away”. These experiences of othering ignited a process of identity work filled with emotions, doubts, and anxieties which signals the complexity of the identity construction of non-White entrepreneurs who must handle authenticity threats to who they are while struggling to achieve legitimacy as an entrepreneur in a White ecosystem.

The new analytical focus on the lived experiences of othering brought to the surface the participants’ perceived “risk of losing themselves” and desire to “be themselves” when confronted with othering in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and hence the authors turned to literature on authenticity, identity, and entrepreneurship. This literature urged the authors to

adopt an existential authenticity lens, which in turn yielded insights into how research participants—informed by their individual migrant histories and entrepreneurial journeys—navigated authenticity threats by downplaying and/or embracing their racial identities.

4. Findings

The six subsections below detail the stories of our six participating entrepreneurs. Each subsection shows how racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities intersect and constitute unique experiences of marginalisation that inform how entrepreneurs negotiate othering and authenticity through identity work. As will become clear, the six entrepreneurs are differently positioned on the spectrum between downplaying and embracing racial and/or migrant identities. We start with the stories of Asim and Peter, who downplay their racial and/or migrant identities by rationalising or ignoring experiences of othering to protect existential authenticity. Romeo, whose story features in the third subsection, instead constantly moves between downplaying and embracing his racial identity. The last three subsections tell the stories of Taylor, George, and Manisha, who over time have shifted from downplaying to embracing their racial and/or migrant identities, openly displaying who they are in the public space. The discussion section revisits the six stories and consider why some entrepreneurs shift from downplaying to embracing marginalised identities whereas others do not. Before moving to the six stories, the first subsection below sets the stage, documenting that the participants strongly self-identify as entrepreneurs while also describing their experiences of othering as reflected in feelings of perceived alterity and illegitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders.

4.1 The lived experiences of othering

The participants unanimously identify with the label “entrepreneur”. They consider themselves “entrepreneur at heart” (Asim) and claim that entrepreneurship is “not a career, but a lifestyle” (Manisha). This is further exemplified in their stories about how they would find it “impossible” (Taylor) to ever work for a boss again. Peter even states that he is “scared of being employed and that someone tells me what to do”—he does not want to “face that fear”. Characteristics that are often associated with entrepreneurship, such as freedom, flexibility, and impact, align with their personal values and goals. Romeo claims that his “life goal” is to have “maximum freedom” and independence; entrepreneurship enables him to take responsibility for his “own happiness” instead of “working for someone else’s dream”. Similarly, Asim states that “through entrepreneurship, you’re free to do whatever you want, and this is what makes it appealing”. Taylor and Asim describe themselves as “problem-solvers”: “I always see a problem somewhere and I try to solve it or make it more efficient” (Asim). Manisha emphasises how entrepreneurship gives meaning to her life: “The impact of your business relies on your fuel and energy, and thinking. It doesn’t exist without you. [...] I think that is so powerful, because [...] your work could mean something.” Similarly, George makes the analogy of entrepreneurship with an exoskeleton: “These robot suits that help people to lift very heavy things. This is how I feel about entrepreneurship. [...] It makes you feel good, you can achieve things you could never imagine.” Moreover, participants emphasise that the entrepreneurial space gives them “the freedom to really be [themselves]” (Taylor).

Whereas participants self-identify as entrepreneurs, they also relate feeling othered, which confines their capacity to display their authentic selves in the market. Manisha recalls a conversation with an investor who “was just asking inane questions over and over again [...], because we were females, and he wasn’t sure if we knew what we were doing”. Similarly,

Taylor reflects on the time that a prospective client chose not to use his services until they had done “some background checks on him”, which he felt to be unnecessarily distrusting. Many authenticity threats, however, do not typically emerge in clear-cut situations of discrimination or unequal opportunity but are rather subtle and hard to pin-point. For example, participants talk about their awareness of the inequalities that permeate the Dutch entrepreneurial ecosystem. Manisha reflects: “When it comes to funding; if you’re female led, you get one percent or two percent. If you’re a woman of colour: even less. [...] I’m aware of it.” Similarly, Taylor warned his co-founder at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey: “If we are going to do this, you need to know that I’m Black, and fundraising will be difficult. If I’m going to be the CEO, there’ll be so many things that would make it difficult to succeed.” Romeo similarly ascertains that “he knows what it’s like to stand in a room full of White investors.” He relates:

In those moments [...] it has quite an impact [on you] because you are face to face with people who you’d like to see invest in your business. And you don’t feel like you are talking to someone with whom you can compare yourself, or level with. [...] It has everything to do with the fact that I always needed to work harder than others, because I’m always in a White environment where you feel like you stand out, and you need to prove yourself. [...] Institutional racism is still there. It’s part of the Dutch culture. And you take this information with you when you talk to a White investor. [...] You try to gauge someone. Is there someone in front of me that has a certain image of me?

When feeling their identity is threatened, participants confess trying to conform to stakeholders’ expectations by diverting their attention to the venture and less to themselves. Expressing authenticity in such conditions is, naturally, not on the agenda. Thus, they find it

important to over-prepare and “stick to the facts” (Manisha) when promoting their ventures. Taylor explains that he deliberately tries not to come across as a “social justice warrior”. Rather than talking about his experiences as a Black CEO and putting the spotlight on himself, he tries to “focus on [business-related] numbers”. Manisha uses a similar approach. She says that in her career she “always tried to be prepared, to know things, and move in well-informed. [...] I like to level the playing field as much as possible”. Most research participants describe authenticity threats as challenging but “part of life” (Peter). Hiding oneself behind numbers and facts in the hope that others will forget who you are, however, leaves Taylor feeling “demotivated” as “switching personalities” can be “exhausting”.

When confronted with these experiences of othering, participants face common authenticity challenges: should they conform or should they embrace their difference, and at what cost? Is it even possible to be yourself as a racial minority entrepreneur in a White social setting? The next subsections expose how entrepreneurs negotiate authenticity threats at the intersection of their racial, migrant, and entrepreneurial identities.

4.2 Asim

Asim is a 32-year-old entrepreneur from Egypt who arrived in the Netherlands in 2019 to pursue a university master’s degree. He now owns a voice recognition software company in the capital city of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, where he lives with his partner. Downplaying his racial identity, Asim explains that he does not “identify” with the idea of being a minority entrepreneur, and that this “does not affect him”. He says: “I know myself pretty well. So even though you get these types of things [racial discrimination] sometimes, I really don’t identify with it at all. I don’t let it bother me at all.” Asim thus suggests that self-confidence allows him to stay authentic in the entrepreneurial ecosystem without having to account for his racial and immigrant background. This approach yields opportunities, he argues:

Once you know your authentic self, you're going to express yourself in your own authentic way. And this is where you're going to have your own uniqueness that's really going to distinguish you. [...] Once you get to tap into this authentic self, you will be creative and you will express yourself in your own way. And that's why I really strive for this, because I think it's really beautiful.

Being authentic also helps in terms of “business growth and business development” because it shows people “what we're really like”, and it makes it easier for an entrepreneur to “convince investors what kind of person they are investing in”. Even more telling, according to Asim, entrepreneurs who do express their racial or gender identities as entrepreneurs are inauthentic (sic):

I see a lot of people, even one of my co-founders, she's a female and from Iran. And she actually does these kinds of posts [social media posts highlighting racial or ethnic background], but sometimes it's just a bit too much for me. It seems that people are just following and not really having... They're not being authentic anymore.

Part of the explanation of why Asim is able to downplay experiences of othering in the Netherlands relates to his migrant identity. Asim explains that he grew up in Egypt and moved to Kuwait at a young age, before re-settling in the Netherlands. He experienced severe racial discrimination in Kuwait due to local racial hierarchies:

In Kuwait, it's really not nice at all. I hear a lot of minorities in the Netherlands complain about racism in the Netherlands and stuff like this. And I always tell them: ‘Man, if you go and live in Kuwait, you are going

to see the real racism', you know? [...] I wouldn't generalise of course, but in Kuwait people are very racist, and especially against other Arabs.

As such, despite having experienced racial discrimination in the Netherlands—he recalls an instance where someone asked him whether he came “swimming” from Egypt—Asim made a conscious effort to “adapt” to Dutch culture, and made foreign friends: “I just wanted to integrate with internationals [...] and Dutch people and Dutch culture and stuff.”

4.3 Peter

Similar-yet-different mechanisms of downplaying marginalised identities can be found in Peter's case. Peter is born in the Netherlands and from Surinamese descent. He identifies as a Black man. At 27, Peter is building an online marketplace platform for fitness facilities. Like Asim, Peter does not “identify with the minority entrepreneur label”. In fact, he is rather agnostic about his identity as an entrepreneur:

Honestly, whether I am an entrepreneur or not – it doesn't define me as a person. That's why I say: First, I just am. I am. What comes after that, comes after that. [...] I don't think I am defined by the things that I do. [...] Maybe this sounds very cryptic, but it's just how I see it.

Peter does not deny the existence of structural racism in the Netherlands. When the researcher asks him whether he has had experiences of racism he laughs and says: “I think that everyone I know with a non-White ethnic background has had those experiences.” He recalls instances of being stopped by the police, seemingly without any reason. Yet, in Peter's view racism does not threaten his authenticity:

I am sure racism happens. But there are people who are a lot more competent who can fight for this. [...] I just want to be the best version of

myself. [...] You often have to work harder because your skin has a different colour, or whatever. But it is what it is. I can't change this, right? [...] Again, I just try to be the best version of myself and better myself. It's as simple as that.

This mindset allows Peter to take a pragmatic stance towards operating in the Dutch entrepreneurial ecosystem without the risk of losing himself. This way of seeing things surfaces when he is asked how he will navigate his fundraising journey: “What I understand is that the Dutch entrepreneurial landscape is very White. If I do start to look for funding, I think it is sensible to have a White person in my team.” Peter also considers the legitimising power of his native background and ability to speak Dutch. He believes that “foreign founders” face challenges that he does not. For example, he reflects on a pitch competition he participated in:

I am 100% certain that there is a very big difference in the entrepreneurial landscape between me now versus a version of me not speaking Dutch. It's already different if you're not White and blonde. Let alone if you're not White, blonde, and Dutch-speaking. You are immediately put in a box. [...] There were African founders and I found that they received other questions than non-African founders. [...] For example, ‘how do we know we are investing in a serious business in Africa?’ [...] I hear from founders that people ask really weird questions, like ‘how come you speak English so well?’

4.4 Romeo

Romeo is a 44-year-old entrepreneur who owns a project management software company. At a few months old, Romeo—a native-born Black man from Surinamese descent

—was adopted by a White family. Romeo’s adoption “runs like a thread” through his life. Partly, the self-reliance that came out of his adoption trauma functions as a catalyst for his entrepreneurial behaviour: “Where I’m at now, would not have happened. If I look at my friends, they don’t have this incentive at all. It must have something to do with it.” He recognises, however, that his adoption has negative consequences as well, especially since it intersects with his racial identity: “I kind of grew up in a White world where I always needed to prove myself more—and still need to.” He continues: “In my case, on top of everything I have a different skin colour. I always experienced some form of discrimination. Not all the time, but institutional racism is still there and that affects me as well.”

Romeo explains that although it is “never fun” to be a minority individual, he has learnt to “adapt to White environments [...] by doing what is expected of you in a certain way. You make sure you don’t colour outside the lines, you don’t stand out too much.” Romeo finds the constant awareness of “being different” “annoying” but also something that he is “used to.” He tries to “let it go” and to “not become insecure”. Romeo continuously negotiates the need for adaptation and that for expressing his authentic identity as entrepreneur. He argues that his Dutch background “forces” him to engage in this permanent self-negotiation:

This is who I am, what I am capable of, and where I come from. Sure, I could try and set up a business in Africa. At least I would be around people with the same colour as me. [...] But there they have other norms and hierarchies [...]. It’s about how you deal with it.

An exemplary instance of Romeo explicitly embracing his racial identity is when he considers removing his photo from his company website and e-mail signatures, and instead displaying the photo of his White co-founder at the forefront:

I thought: ‘Should I maybe ensure that I am not linked to my business?’ My picture is not on the website, but you can easily figure out who I am. All e-mails are signed with my name. We are with two, but I am the one that is presented to the outside. Not my partner. Should we turn this around?

Romeo nevertheless decided to go against hiding who he is and decided to keep his photo on the official company website. While he was aware that his photo might “threaten” his business—the company might lose clients, especially from more conservative parts of Europe—he would rather stay close to who he is: “this is who I am. [...] Take it or leave it. I am not going to pretend to be someone else just to sell a product to White people.”

4.5 Taylor

Taylor is a *Zambian-born Black start-up founder* who visited the Netherlands to participate in an accelerator programme in 2017 and decided to stay to develop a machine learning model. He met his current co-founder in a subsequent accelerator programme. Whereas Taylor previously had “never been really conscious of his skin colour”, his arrival in the Netherlands coincided with an increased awareness of his identity as a Black man. Getting used to “being very conscious of yourself” was difficult for Taylor, who admits that he “lost his confidence” during that time. Taylor tells the story of how, due to his skin colour and immigrant status, investors seem to worry about his previous experiences and reputation in machine learning:

It’s always like: ‘Okay, you want to do a machine learning start-up, but how do you know anything about machine learning?’ And I’m thinking: ‘Oh my goodness, I’ve been doing this since 2012. This is nothing new for me.’ [...] It was difficult to have those conversations with people who do not know

you, and you don't have a track record in the host country to rely on, so you don't have any supporting information or success stories to convince investors.

Taylor explains that investors “tone down” when they speak to him “because they think you won't understand all those VC terms” since he is “from Africa” and adds that “if people think so little of you, nothing you say will matter because they'll just conclude that you probably won't get it”. In his attempts to mitigate these categorisation biases leading to discrimination, Taylor “finds all these funny tricks to navigate” and “tackle the political issues that exist out there”. For instance, when talking to investors, he “uses a different tone” because he knows that they are looking for “certain key words such as business model, budgeting, or opportunity:”

You need to speak in a tone that gives them the impression that this person knows what he's doing and what he's talking about. [...] These private investors want to hear all these fancy Harvard words, and I am like: ‘Okay, I am going to use those fancy Harvard words.’

In a subsequent interview, however, Taylor explains that he tries to be more “casual” when approaching investors. When facing experiences of othering that pose a threat to his authenticity, Taylor tries to find “different ways to really focus on who [I am] as a person” and stopped being “overly prepared”. He wants investors to “get the human side of him” instead of having to act “all McKinsey-like”. He describes this new attitude: “Hey, this is [Taylor]. What you see is what you get. Let me laugh a little bit about life in general and let me talk about money.” Perhaps even more telling, Taylor decided to stop focusing on raising money from investors, and instead started to build a strong customer base by leveraging on bootstrapping. This can be interpreted as a symbolic decision to stop “playing the game”.

Taylor found that the perception investors had of him was that he was “a bit risky to invest in” and that he needed to be “re-educated on how to manage their money”. This means that investors “will be missing out on my actual talent and what I can actually bring to the table as an individual” and as such, limiting his space to express his authentic self. In the third interview, Taylor elaborates what he means:

I just developed this sort of resentment about raising money [from investors] because it is so predictable. You know, I listen to the questions that other founders are being asked, White founders. It’s all hopeful and promising. But on my end, it’s like they just want to see where it’s going to fail. So, I just decided, you know what, stuff it.

Taylor hopes to make an exit in the next few years. In the future, he wants to “open [his] own small VC fund” that invests in “underrepresented people”. Taylor feels current VCs are missing out on many different groups due to biases, and he wants to “become a better version of all the VCs that [he has] seen out there.”

4.6 George

George is a Black man born in Amsterdam, where he grew up with his Surinamese mother and four siblings. He started a system management company in the 1990s. George sold this company in 2013 and went on sabbatical. He came back in 2020 and started a technology business incubator. His re-appearance in the entrepreneurial ecosystem coincided with the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent rise of Black Lives Matter movement, which also made its way to the Netherlands. This made a huge impact on George’s life:

I didn’t believe it at all that people would go to the protests. [...] I thought: ‘Surely nobody is going there. It’s someone in the US who died through

extremely cruel police violence. But here, in the Netherlands, if you look at how those discussions are waved away, no one is going.’ It was very emotional to see how many people protested, with different colours and sizes and genders. Then I started to reflect and look back on what I have been through as well.

Through the confrontation with the Black Lives Matter movement and subsequent reflections on his own experiences of racial discrimination, George recognises that he now also occupies a specific role within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Due to his previous successes in business, he started to ponder the importance of his position as a racial minority entrepreneur. George explains that before he did not recognise any challenges in entrepreneurship and downplayed the relevance of his racial identity:

I wasn’t concerned about this at all. And it didn’t bother me. Of course, people said strange things from time to time. But I knew other people who were told strange things, like women. [...] It was just part of it.

George’s more established position within the entrepreneurial ecosystem led him to consider his racial identity more explicitly and also aroused interest from others. He started to be seen as a role model: “Before, I heard Surinamese people complain about racism and I would think: whatever. But in the last few months a lot of Dutch entrepreneurs of colour approached me to tell their story.” He was also approached by a wealthy businessman in the Netherlands: “This billionaire was curious about me. ‘Who is this guy? I have never seen a Black, succesful businessman in the Netherlands.’ He wanted to know more about that.”

George realised that his position allowed him to discuss his own experiences of racism more openly. He shared many of his experiences in national newspapers and became more vocal about inequalities in the Dutch ecosystem:

I am a fervent networker. I can sit at the table with the highest boss at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and opportunities like that come with a certain responsibility. [...] I notice that I am becoming a coach more and more. I spend my time giving many people personal advice on how to navigate the ecosystem.

4.7 Manisha

Manisha is born in Sri Lanka but moved to Australia at a young age. She moved to the Netherlands to work at a large consulting company and decided to stay after meeting her current (Dutch) partner. She now lives in The Hague with her husband and two daughters. Together with New Zealander Sandra, Manisha founded a HR software company in 2020. Within 1.5 years, Manisha successfully raised 1.6 million Euro, doubled her team from six to twelve employees and got accepted into a prestigious global accelerator programme.

Manisha considers her Sri Lankan background as a prominent part of who she is: “I am a very proud Sri Lankan. I’m first and foremost Sri Lankan.” Manisha experienced harsh racial discrimination growing up in Australia and is aware of the inequalities that permeate the Dutch entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, she refuses to let these experiences affect her “moral fabric”. She also states that her Sri Lankan background does not play a role in her entrepreneurial endeavours. Manisha purposefully downplays her identity as a female racial minority founder within the start-up ecosystem. Manisha recalls a conversation with potential investors, who asked whether she and her female co-founder would be interested in applying for a female-founder-only investment fund:

We’re aware that we’re females, but we also need to be a little bit careful about how we are perceived. If we can associate ourselves with

something— because whether you like it or not, you do get typecast—I would prefer to be typecast as SDG, impact, and wellbeing, rather than as female-led, female, female. [...] So, yes, we're female-led, but it's secondary to what we're trying to achieve.

Manisha does not want others to focus on her identity as a woman belonging to a racial minority group because she is anxious that this may distract from her entrepreneurial mission. This reminds her of a well-known start-up in the Dutch ecosystem, led by two female founders of Asian descent:

You can see how they are being typecast into this female minority. Everything that I keep seeing is connected to that, you know? And it's unfortunate, because the topic that they are talking about gets lost in all of that.

As time passes, however, it becomes clear that Manisha is trying to bring more of “who she is” into her entrepreneurial projects. She relates that the potential impact of her presence as a woman of colour in the entrepreneurial landscape is “starting to dawn on her”. She thus increasingly uses her growing platform to “appeal to that particular group of immigrant women who are moms”. This is exemplified in a personal LinkedIn post Manisha shared on Women's Day, which reads:

I'm a Sri Lankan immigrant who was educated in Australia. I'm an Australian immigrant who developed her career in the Netherlands. I'm a career-consultant who is now a tech founder. I'm a mother of two. The impossible happens when conviction meets opportunity.

When asked about this post a few months later, Manisha explains that displaying her racial and migrant identities is more appropriate at this later stage of her entrepreneurial journey:

When we [the researcher and she] first started talking, I was relatively unknown, but now, after getting into [the accelerator programme], being the first female-led start-up to get in, and after so much media attention, people are watching. So therefore, I need to be a little bit more conscious about what I'm saying.

She rationalises her prior behaviour of downplaying her identity as a woman and racial minority entrepreneur by arguing that although these aspects of her identity were always there, she now feels more comfortable displaying them because she gained public attention and thus feels less vulnerable and more responsible. She proudly states: "I am who I am, and I've always been sharing some aspects about myself [pertaining to her gender, race, and motherhood]. But now that everyone is watching me, I'll say more stuff [about myself] and more people will see it." Manisha also wants to "start giving back" and become more involved in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Sri Lanka in the future.

5. Discussion

The present study illuminates how the lived experiences of othering of racial minority entrepreneurs result in perceived threats to their existential authenticity (Charmé, 2000). All the participants consider entrepreneurship as central to their identity and coherent with their personalities and values in life. In a sense, entrepreneurship allows them to achieve their "desired selves" (Markus and Wurf, 1987). At the same time, their narratives showcase challenges pertaining to the quest for belonging, in addition to perceived discrimination

within the Dutch tech ecosystem affecting, among other things, their funding opportunities, which echoes previous work on the experiences of racial minority entrepreneurs (Zubair and Brzozowski, 2018; Nkrumah, 2022). Thus, while participants consider themselves entrepreneurs at heart, the context in which they find themselves—a majority White entrepreneurial ecosystem—complicates their entrepreneurial journeys and jeopardises their capacity to “be who they are” and express their authentic selves (Erickson, 1995).

Regarding our research question—*How do racial minority entrepreneurs in the Dutch technology sector navigate experiences of othering whilst maintaining a sense of existential authenticity?*—the study highlights that some entrepreneurs (Asim and Peter) downplay their racial and/or migrant identities. By ignoring or rationalising their lived experiences of othering, they manage to achieve a sense of legitimacy as an entrepreneur while also preserving some perceived authenticity. Another entrepreneur (Romeo) continuously balances downplaying and embracing his racial and/or migrant identities. Yet others (Taylor, George, and Manisha) downplay their racial and/or migrant identities initially, but shift to embracing these identities as time passes. We may wonder what explains these empirical differences, and why some entrepreneurs shift from downplaying to embracing their racial and/or migrant identities while others do not. The answer to these questions can be found in the ways in which the articulation of racial identity intersects with (1) migrant identity and (2) entrepreneurial identity. We discuss both intersections below.

With regard to migrant identity, the most apparent difference is between native-born (Peter, Romeo, and George) and migrant entrepreneurs (Asim, Taylor, and Manisha). However, this difference does not seem to explain the dynamics of downplaying and embracing racial identity. After all, both migrants and native Dutch entrepreneurs downplay marginalised identities, and both move to embracing them more openly over time. Perhaps this is because experiences of othering are severe for both categories. On top of race, migrants

might face additional disadvantages due to limited Dutch language abilities, lack of formal education, and unfamiliarity with cultural codes (Garcia and Braack, 2022; Mustonen, 2021; Warkentin, 2020; Zaami and Madibbo, 2021). Native-born participants may not face these additional disadvantages but seem to experience othering as even more insulting because they are born in the Netherlands and thus legally “belong” to this place as much as those who enact othering in relation to them.

Rather than the migrant identity per se, it seems that a more nuanced reading of the participants’ migration histories—broadly interpreted, including actual migration, adoption, the migration of (grand)parents, and settlement in the Netherlands—better explains these empirical patterns, particularly when considering their experiences of othering throughout these histories. Asim and Manisha experienced contexts in which racial hierarchies were more pronounced (Australia and Kuwait) and they therefore seem more inclined to downplay lived experiences of othering in the Netherlands. Taylor, in contrast, arrived in the Netherlands from a context in which he was not a minority (Zambia), and thus experienced racial hierarchy in the Netherlands more intensely. He explicitly embraces his racial and migrant identities to retain his sense of existential authenticity in entrepreneurship. The default attitude in the narratives of native-born entrepreneurs seems to attest what Wekker (2016) describes as “White innocence”: they recognise and accept the racial hierarchies in the Netherlands as “part of life”. Yet, nuanced differences can be found between the narratives of the three native-born participants. Peter rationalises his experiences of othering arguing that “migrants are worse off”, thus downplaying his racial identity. Romeo, growing up in a majority White environment and highly aware of his racial identity, constantly balances downplaying and embracing marginalised identities. George initially downplayed experiences of othering, but shifted to embracing his racial identity paralleling the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement that heightened his awareness of his marginalised identity.

The other intersection is between racial identity and entrepreneurial identity, which also reveals the temporal dimension of navigating authenticity through identity work. Research participants seem to become more comfortable to express their authentic selves in the entrepreneurial ecosystem once they think they achieved legitimacy as entrepreneurs. This mechanism is prevalent in the story of Manisha, who started expressing her racial, migrant and gender identities more explicitly over time because “people are listening now”. Similarly, George explains that people now see him as a “role model” for Black entrepreneurs and Taylor aspires to open an investment fund for underrepresented founders, which inclines them to foreground their racial identity.

In sum, while the stories of the six entrepreneurs are partly idiosyncratic, the intersectionality lens enabled us to identify surprising or counterintuitive patterns related to existential authenticity, detailing how minority entrepreneurs respond to experiences of othering at the intersection of racial, migrant and entrepreneurial identities. If participants experience current othering as especially severe or pronounced compared to earlier experiences, and/or if they have acquired legitimacy as entrepreneurs, they seem more inclined to shift from downplaying to embracing their racial and migrant identities.

The present study brings two main contributions to the literature on minority identity work in entrepreneurship . Focusing on how racial minority entrepreneurs navigate authenticity threats through identity work, we re-interpret processes of identity work among minority entrepreneurs as encompassing not only instrumental attempts to reach legitimacy (Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022; Thoelen and Zanoni, 2017; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023) but also responses emanating from frustrations, doubts, and anxieties triggered by perceived threats to the self. In situations of authenticity threats inflicted by members of the majority White group in the society, racial minority entrepreneurs do not merely strategise or “rise above” (Alcoff, 2006) their identity to develop the legitimacy necessary for resource

acquisition (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). In emotionally charged experiences of othering, they also aim to “be themselves” and preserve their sense of authenticity and self-worth, irrespective of potential entrepreneurial consequences. This counters the dominant perspective of entrepreneurial identity work as instrumental and market-driven (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017; Verduijn *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, even when non-White minority entrepreneurs do attempt to “strategise away” their racial and/or migrant identities, they are hard-pressed to do so, which reveals the limits of “strategising away” visible identity markers such as race and underlines the embodied nature of entrepreneurs’ identity work (Kašperová and Kitching, 2014). This paper thus also addresses calls to further explore entrepreneurial identity as embodied identity (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021).

Second, this study extends the literature on authenticity in the field of entrepreneurship (O’Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016; Frederiksen and Berglund, 2020; O’Neil *et al.*, 2022) by revealing the authenticity threats experienced by racial minority entrepreneurs. Indeed, considering the precarious position of minority entrepreneurs, especially those with intersecting identities that cumulate multiple forms of marginalisation (Essers *et al.* 2010; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021), this study demonstrates that racial minority entrepreneurs face unique challenges regarding their experienced existential authenticity. Whereas general agreement exists that “becoming an entrepreneur is fraught with unknowns and uncertainties that may challenge one’s sense of self” (O’Neil *et al.*, 2022, p. 2), this study shows that this is even more true for entrepreneurs experiencing discrimination and unequal opportunities. Unprompted, participants tell stories of how their minority position within the broader start-up context circumscribes their capacity to act authentically in relation to members of the majority White group (Lewis, 2013). The relative inescapability of identity traits such as skin colour, accent, or migrant status predicates particularly complicated authenticity work. This article will hopefully encourage future research into the role of authenticity in the construction of

entrepreneurial identities, especially focusing on those entrepreneurs who do not fit hegemonic entrepreneurial images prevalent in Western societies (Welter *et al.*, 2017).

This study inheres several limitations that might be fruitfully addressed by future research. Our sample comprised entrepreneurs in the early stages of venture development, when the focus is mainly on product development, attracting funding, and gaining traction—practices that require a high degree of legitimacy (Fisher, 2020; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). An interesting future pathway would be to uncover the role of authenticity in the identity work of established minority entrepreneurs and investigate whether—as the present study suggests—increased legitimacy indeed enables entrepreneurs to prioritise authenticity over conformity. In addition, while the small sample of the study allowed for an in-depth exploration necessary to answer the research question, this might also be seen as a limitation. There are opportunities to employ larger samples of entrepreneurial experiences of othering, which might reveal whether the mechanisms here identified can be generalised across broader populations and types of entrepreneurs. Lastly, the small sample of the present study does not allow comparing the experiences of women and men entrepreneurs, although Manisha’s narrative hints at gender identity as an important site of authenticity work. Future research might explore and theorise the role of authenticity threats for entrepreneurs with different intersectional identities.

Further, variances in racial background might also be relevant for how entrepreneurs experience and enact authenticity. In this study, Romeo and Taylor struggle most with feelings of belonging and experiences of racial biases and discrimination, and interestingly, they both have a Black skin colour, whereas Manisha and Asim are from Asian and North-African backgrounds, respectively. They might experience these tensions to a lesser extent because their skin colour allows them to “pass” as White or “native-born” Dutch entrepreneurs. More research is needed on the role of the body and specifically skin colour of

entrepreneurs and how this affects their authenticity work at various stages of the entrepreneurial journey. Minority identity work literature has to date paid little attention to how physical characteristics and subsequent lived experiences of othering play a role in entrepreneurial experiences, and future studies might benefit from perspectives that specifically highlight the consequences of racial disparities, such as Critical Race Theory and studies rooted in (neo-)colonial epistemologies.

Our findings also have societal implications for founders and entrepreneurial support organisations (ESOs). Most notably, our findings raise awareness about the importance of existential authenticity—or the sense of “being yourself”—for entrepreneurs operating in contexts in which they face othering. We urge entrepreneurs to reflect on these issues to mitigate the risk of “losing yourself”. How much of themselves are they willing to give up? We also deem our findings useful for Dutch ESOs working with minority founder groups. ESO programs should refrain from relying on “deficit thinking” (Davis and Museus, 2019), which often manifests in a primary focus on teaching minority entrepreneurs basic entrepreneurial skills or “the art of networking”. Programs based on deficit thinking run the risk of preparing minority entrepreneurs to “strategise away” their marginalised identities whilst failing to recognise the frustrations, doubts, and anxieties that result from lived experiences of othering and structural marginalisation. We hope that this study acts as a catalyst to start conversations between founders, ESOs and other ecosystem stakeholders about the importance of authenticity and the ability to “be yourself” in entrepreneurship, and about how to navigate entrepreneurial spaces where there is not (yet) room for this.

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