Students’ Entrepreneurial Identity Construction: Role and Social Identity Influences

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Abstract
Identity directly impacts how university students behave and make decisions in entrepreneurial practice. Therefore, it is significant to explore the factors influencing the identity construction of student-entrepreneurs to understand how processes are internalized by students, which may then affect their entrepreneurial identity. This article interrogates the formation and transition of the entrepreneurial identity of student-entrepreneurs in a Chinese research university. This paper argues that identity formation is a dynamic and nonlinear process where both role and social identities are involved in its development. Factors that would promote the desired identity formation would include, among others, a tolerant atmosphere across universities, integrating identity issues into the process of entrepreneurship education, and providing university-wide support for entrepreneurship which will be beneficial to improving and sustaining entrepreneurial identity among students.

Keywords
entrepreneurial identity, role identity, social identity, China

Introduction
In the past decades, the broad influence of entrepreneurship is noted, from trends in higher education where entrepreneurs play essential roles in an increasingly global economy and to public policy shifts that encourage and support graduates that would not only become job seekers but also job creators (Sá & Kretz, 2015, pp. 4–9, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1998, 2015; Brock, 2014). Furthermore, the mobilization of interest groups around entrepreneurship in higher education, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, and alumni; and the sociocultural support for entrepreneurship alongside government policies that push for the utilization of entrepreneurship for development have instigated in making the Entrepreneurship discipline a desirable career choice (Mei & Symaco, 2020; Sá & Kretz, 2015). In addition to the significant traction in post-university activities, 9% of all students intend to be entrepreneurs directly after studies, while 34.7% plan to be entrepreneurs 5 years after completion of studies (Siegert et al., 2019).

This trend in entrepreneurship is also mirrored in China (referring to mainland China in this paper) since the late 1990s, where higher education institutions (HEIs; defined in this paper as universities) have echoed the global consensus of viewing entrepreneurship as an essential approach in solving the global challenges of the 21st century. The promotion of the “Mass Innovation and Entrepreneurship” strategy and the push for university-wide entrepreneurship education in China have increased awareness and interest among university students in entrepreneurship. According to the latest national survey, more than 75% of the surveyed students have entrepreneurial intention, of which 25% have a high entrepreneurial intention (Mao, 2020). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) China Report results also found that over the past 15 years, the proportion of under-educated entrepreneurs in China has gradually decreased, and young people aged 25 to 34 are the most active group of entrepreneurs driven primarily by opportunities (Bosma & Kelley, 2019). In 2016 alone, there were 615,000 newly registered university student entrepreneurs in China (Wen et al., 2019). However, although the failure rate for entrepreneurs in China has declined, recognition of entrepreneurial abilities has also decreased while fear of failure has gradually increased (Bosma & Kelley, 2019).

But despite the growing consensus in the role of entrepreneurship in development, there is little attention given to the
transition from student to entrepreneur (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). Studies have mainly focused on the students’ entrepreneurial intention, the macro development of entrepreneurship education, and the impact of entrepreneurs’ social identity on entrepreneurial behaviors (Alsos et al., 2016; Mei & Symaco, 2020; Thompson, 2009). Few studies have probed deeply into the influencing factors and processes that may lead to university students’ thriving entrepreneurial identity construction (Jin, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). It is important to note at the onset that entrepreneurial identity, as will be discussed in other sections, helps to answer the question of “Who am I” (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), while the entrepreneurial intention is a crucial predicting element of complex entrepreneurial behavior (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). While both identity and intent may predict and contribute to actual behavior, we define identity here as the “onset” to any entrepreneurial intent, where the latter is shown to manifest a more conscious behavioral pattern in terms of entrepreneurial activities (e.g., opportunity vs. threat, see Kreuger et al., 2000). A more nuanced look at identity formation thus provides a critical account of prospective intentions along the entrepreneurial venture process.

Identity directly affects the behavior and decision-making of entrepreneurs in situations, and some studies argued that entrepreneurial activities are, to some extent, the expression of entrepreneurs’ identity (Chen et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2019). Entrepreneurship is a process involving the shaping and development of entrepreneurs’ identities. For university student entrepreneurs whose self-identity is still in the developmental stage, the construction of entrepreneurship identity is particularly complex and vital (Holt, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Students need to embed the entrepreneur’s identity into their original student identity and negotiate between the two identities between a “student” and “entrepreneur,” wherein different manners, a struggle with balancing university belonging and entrepreneurial distinctiveness may be involved (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017).

In terms of identity construction and transition, a scientifically-designed entrepreneurship education program can help enrich students’ entrepreneurial knowledge and skills and drive them to explore such student-entrepreneurial identity and its related transitions (Harmeling, 2011; Wen et al., 2019). However, limited studies have been conducted to link student entrepreneurs’ identity construction with entrepreneurship education (Chen et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2019). Some of these studies include Nielsen and Gartner (2017) conceptualization of a framework that suggests four identities in the process: identity following, identity differentiating, identity devouring, and identity expending. Additionally, based on Marcia’s (1966) four statuses model of entrepreneurial identity construction (i.e., identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement), Wang et al. (2017) conducted a narrative analysis study on Chinese university student entrepreneurs and proposed that the process of identity construction and transition includes identity cognition, identity conflict, situational interaction, and identity remodeling.

Identity processes are also discussed by Fauchart and Gruber (2011), wherein they suggested three types of founder identities which may focus on (a) competition with other firms and are driven by their economic self-interest; (b) view of business firms as social objects that support and are supported by a particular community because of mutually beneficial relationship; and those that (c) recognize such firms as political objects that can advance a particular cause for the benefit of society at large. Related studies have also found out that transition from student to entrepreneur identity is primarily based on the effectiveness of the social environment and its elicited interactions, where the role of significant others and institutional support influence such student entrepreneurs (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). These also prove beneficial and may heighten students’ self-reflection when they are met with conflict, confusion, and difficulties during the entrepreneurship process (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017; Wang et al., 2017; Wei & Pan, 2014).

In this study and in line with entrepreneurial identity formation, we take in both role identity theory and social identity typology (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Hogg et al., 1995; Lewis, 2015) in interrogating the factors influencing the development of such. Functioning in spectrums where we identify the perceptions that come with role identity and the impact of institutions and support in social identity formation, we categorize the different levels influencing student-entrepreneurial identity construction as it contributes to its development and interaction of practice. This paper investigates the factors influencing the identity construction of student-entrepreneurs in China and explores the dynamic process of students’ entrepreneurial identity construction, which may provide implications for entrepreneurship education reform and entrepreneurial environment improvement in the country and others.

**Student Entrepreneurial Identity: Role and Social Identity Influences**

The university years are a crucial phase of the life cycle for identity construction. Though students in this period experienced a growing occupational and ideological commitment (Erikson, 1956), identity uncertainty still abounds to a great extent (Erikson, 1968; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). This student identity role transition underscores the significance of feedback from and interaction with significant others, their perception of the opportunities to access relevant skills required for this identity formation, and their perception of how the institutional environment is supportive or not (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Nguyen, 2021; Schweisfurth, 2013). Contextualizing this to student entrepreneurial identity, we seek to identify the factors that influence developing university students’ entrepreneurial identity.
formation and practice. With the rising trend of globalization, coupled with the fast development of technologies, the new generation of university students is emerging as advocates for innovative approaches to modern problems where “their standards of intellectual achievement, technological facility, social commitment, and entrepreneurial outlook, make them ideal partners in attacking great problems in a practical and timely manner” (Thorp & Goldstein, 2010, p. 15).

With more students initiating startup activities alongside pursuing Entrepreneurship discipline courses, students may face identity issues like “who am I?”; “am I a student and/or entrepreneur?”; and “who I am going to become” (see Moshman, 2005; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). Under this context, the identity perspective has been regarded as a bridge to connect external entrepreneurship policies and education analysis with university students’ internal role transition (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017; Wen et al., 2019). Identity refers to the individual’s concept of self (Cardon et al., 2009), and research on entrepreneurial identity focuses on “how a person defines the entrepreneurial role and whether he or she identifies with that role” (Hoang & Gimeno, 2005, p. 87). In highly uncertain situations, identities are more likely than business plans to construct specific meanings for entrepreneurial activities (Chen, 2019, p. 28).

Entrepreneurial identity-related research focuses on how individuals understand themselves as entrepreneurs (Alsos et al., 2016). There is heterogeneity regarding students’ entrepreneurial identity because student entrepreneurs have preferences for particular roles in the entrepreneurial process (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Cardon et al., 2009). For example, Sá and Holt (2019), in exploring students’ reasons for pursuing entrepreneurship education, identified four different patterns, namely those “seeking experience,” “exploring entrepreneurship,” “engaging with entrepreneurship,” and “pursuing venture creation.” Additionally, student entrepreneurship has increasingly benefitted from government-sponsored policies, highlighting the increasing influence of entrepreneurship inline state development initiatives (Mars et al., 2008).

Role and Social Identity Influence

Working on a general theory of the self, we take on Stet and Burke’s (2000) argument on the identity (role identity as defined in this paper) and social identity theories where a more integrated approach in terms of identity may be achieved by co-liaising the two concepts. Given adherents to each respective theories and overlaps (see Hogg et al., 1995), we contend Stet and Burke’s (2000) premise that such difference is a “matter of emphasis rather than kind” and the possible merger and examination of both may achieve a “macro-, meso-, and micro-level social processes (…) [and where] a complete theory of the self would consider both the role and the group bases of identity as well as identities based in the person that provide stability across groups, roles and situations” (p. 234). This take is not to discount arguments that account for the deference of one theory over the other or to oversimplify such accounts (e.g., Burke, 1997; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). As we aim to ascertain student entrepreneurial-identity formation and its influences, we acknowledge the different role and social identity functions. Here we investigate the effects on both because, despite possible differences, overlaps that may reinforce, and constrain the self are realized (Stets & Burke, 2000).

From the perspective of role-identity theory, entrepreneurial identity is regarded as the different perceptions and actions associated with a role (Alsos et al., 2016). Nielsen and Gartner (2017) argued that in the process of student entrepreneurship, students negotiate between the two identities of “student” and “entrepreneur,” both demanding in time, effort, and commitment. Marcia (1966) also proposed that entrepreneurial identity construction stages (from initial diffusion to achievement), while Cardon et al. (2009) explored the role of passion in entrepreneurship. They suggested three role identities that underlie a passion for different kinds of activities, namely an inventor identity (passion is for activities involved in identifying, inventing, and exploring new opportunities), a founder identity (passion is for activities involved in establishing a venture for commercializing and exploiting opportunities) and a developer identity (passion is for actions related to nurturing, growing, and expanding the venture once it has been created). Hoang and Gimeno (2010) also explored the transition from previous work to startup activities. They viewed the startup process as involving a role transition. The entrepreneurs were challenged to adjust to novel skills and integrate the entrepreneurial role identity into an overall self-concept that may consist of contradictory or competing identities (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010, p. 41). The construct of identity as fluid (Lindgren & Währin, 2001) sustains the argument of its indistinct nature as predisposed by the social world, among others and how such interaction would generate entrepreneurial behaviors crucial in business development.

On the one hand, from the perspective of social identity typology, Hoang and Gimeno (2010) points to it as “self-definitions based on collective memberships such as organizational affiliations (…) or social categories” (p. 44). During this process, entrepreneurship education and support play an essential role to impact student entrepreneurs identity construction (Hytti & Heimonen, 2013; Mei & Symaco, 2020).

Identity construction is also an evolving process in which individuals use feedback from social interactions to adjust, support, or abandon their existing identity perceptions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Wang et al., 2017). As manifest from organizational affiliations, we argue that entrepreneurial identity is formed by a myriad of social practices where “identity is continually in the process of construction and does not comprise a single static entity” (Leitch & Harrison, 2016, p. 182). The contribution of developmental assistance (e.g., through relationships formed) also contributes to the social identity role
crucial for the student-entrepreneurship formation and other transitions to entrepreneurship. Such affinities can be leveraged to create business connections, financial capital, information, motivation, and emotional support to enhance a new venture (Tergesen & Sullivan, 2011, p. 497). In the student-entrepreneurship transition, social identity here may be formed as evident in the larger ecosystem of higher education institutions (HEIs), developing from mentors, policy, and resources support as universities provide.

As described above in rough, social identity theory focuses on “who one is,” while role identity theory emphasizes “what one does” (Zhou, 2008). But there is a clear relationship between the two because “in order to be (some identity), one must act like (some identity)” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 90). Both also emphasize the importance of social constructivism (Zhou, 2008), which regards identity as emergent and fluid, a process of becoming (Alsos et al., 2016; Hyt & Heinonen, 2013) and is constructed through the interactions between individual, society, and culture (Jones et al., 2008). In the following sections, we see the possibility and necessity of integrating the two perspectives when discussing students’ entrepreneurial identity construction. We contend that to gain a more holistic assessment of the entrepreneurial process, it is crucial to recognize the role of identity construction of entrepreneurs to anticipate the varied processes involved in their practice.

The formation of entrepreneurial identity is influenced by individual factors and sociocultural factors (Chen et al., 2019; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2017; Wei & Pan, 2014). At the individual level, studies found that intrinsic motivations influence students’ entrepreneurial identity formation (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). At the sociocultural level, students’ entrepreneurial identity is mainly affected by successful entrepreneurs’ role models (Wei & Pan, 2014), family members’ expectations (Essers et al., 2013), peers’ interactions (Falck et al., 2010; Wei & Pan, 2014), education and support from colleges (Chen et al., 2019), regional culture (Bergmann et al., 2016), among others. In line with the role identity concept, influences from self-efficacy notions through representations (Clarke, 2011), the construction of a narrative of the enterprise (Down & Warren, 2008; Welter, 2011) and the initial experience of entrepreneurial ventures (Newbery et al., 2018) are also identified. Continuous learning as exhibiting the formation of a role-identity in entrepreneurship practice through initial mentoring is highlighted by Newbery et al. (2018) where “for those students with a role model, which suggests the importance of the initial experience as a foundation for entrepreneurial development” (pp. 24, 25). Additionally, role models in the whole process of entrepreneurship are also acknowledged (Linan et al., 2011). Experience, as linked to positive feedbacks which may influence self-efficacy and orientation of the entrepreneurial self, is also addressed (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994), relating to more nuanced self-categorizations.

The long-defined role theory (see Merton, 1957) also stresses the influence of other social institutions in role centrality as earlier defined, where group collective processes and beliefs play a conscious role in entrepreneurial identity formation (Down, 2006; Watson, 2009). Reconciling ideals within the self (i.e., self-categorization and distinctiveness) and others (e.g., family, culture, and peers) result in identities of the entrepreneurial identity (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Hyt, 2005). The discourse and narratives aforementioned are also utilized to gain a more legitimate concept of the entrepreneurial self (Clarke, 2011) “as part of the socialization process and induction into a collective identity” (Donnellon et al., 2014, p. 493). The varying influences to identity formation in entrepreneurship are thus acknowledged, where dynamic and emergent processes (Hyt, 2005; Kašperová & Kitching, 2014) continue to affect the facility to engage in such practice.

**Methods**

This study interrogates students’ entrepreneurial identity construction and how their multiple identities influence the entrepreneurship process. A qualitative approach is utilized in this paper to account for the dynamic, non-static, and evolving processes of entrepreneurial identity formation. A semi-structured interview was done using purposeful sampling of 10 student entrepreneurs. Interviewees selected in the study should have entrepreneurial experience (independently or cooperated with others) and formally register a company before graduation. To reflect the samples’ heterogeneity and further add to the study’s reliability, sample representativeness and typicality were considered by covering as many different majors and entrepreneurial fields as possible. Table 1 below lists the interview participants.

All interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions, augmented by follow-up questions that served to clarify or supplement answers and questions that allow further exploration (Chen, 2018, pp. 190, 191). The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that the researchers have both controls of the interview structure and can make flexible adjustments in questions based on the participants’ answers (Seidman, 2012). Questions addressed the following broad issues: (1) student entrepreneurs experience involving the entrepreneurship process, including their motivation in entrepreneurship, how they came upon their initial idea of entrepreneurship, and the current situation of their startups; (2) student entrepreneurs self-concept of an “entrepreneur” and evaluation of their personality; (3) student entrepreneurs significant events of the entrepreneurial process, to explore the possible external elements (entrepreneurship education, social interaction, among others) that may shape their entrepreneurial identity; and (4) the influence of entrepreneurship on students.

Open-ended questions were used to encourage the interviewees to describe their entrepreneurial process. All interviewees are anonymous to encourage candour. All the
interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, accompanied with self-memos to avoid the loss of important information and ideas (Chen, 2018, pp. 178; Seidman, 2012). Identity-related information was transferred to a common file to make it readily available for data analysis (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). Thematic analysis was utilized to transcribe and analyze the interviews (Lichtman, 2013) to determine a systematic interpretation of the findings (Akyol & Garrison, 2013). Codes were then arranged into two main categories (i.e., role and social identity), while selected policy documentary analyses were also employed to triangulate data.

This study follows Corbin and Strauss’s (2015) Grounded Theory to analyze the qualitative data. First, the authors conducted an initial rapid reading to build a sense of the whole and better understand the depth and breadth of the content (pp. 101, 102). Memos were then written down, and the overarching narrative was created based on the initial readings. Second, the authors used open, axial and selective coding to analyze data and where themes from such coding emerge (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The process of “constant comparison” was utilized to develop and identify codes. Marginal notations that may not be easily classified into one category were noted through dimensional analysis (Schatzman, 1991). This allowed us to “elaborate on the complex nature of the phenomena in terms of their various dimensional attributes (Lal et al., 2012, p. 4). In addition, policy documentary analysis is also used to contextualize the recent innovation and entrepreneurship education reform in China, as may affect the context of identity formation of student-entrepreneurs. It is important to note that data saturation was achieved at the 10th participant. Some of the interviewees were students of the researchers, thus making it possible to observe the study participants further and add informal discussions in line with the study for further triangulation, thus adding to its reliability.

Findings

The functions of an integral role-identity (inherent through self-categorization and the influence of continuous learning), alongside the social identity through organizational affinities (i.e., team formations and institutional support), are realized to influence how student-entrepreneurs transition into entrepreneurial practice. The following sections will discuss the processes involved in both perspectives as defined through entrepreneurial identity formation and effect.

Role-Identity Influence

The following sections discuss the roles of self-categorization and the influence of continuous learning in role-identity influence.

Self-categorization. The role-identity of student-entrepreneurs investigated in this study shows a spectrum-like characteristic. On one end, the student-entrepreneurs are powerfully motivated by their self-concept of an entrepreneur exhibiting higher achievement motivation, internal control, and risk propensity. But, on the other hand, when meeting entrepreneurial opportunities, they have a higher entrepreneurial tendency and can easily form an entrepreneurial identity.

“I am a very indomitable person. I like to do all my best and surpass my expectations. I am also a good leader in various groups of the university. So I think the path of entrepreneurship is quite consistent with a lot of my personal characteristics.”

“I am an achievement-driven person. Therefore, I have a natural yearning and desire for entrepreneurship, which can assume social responsibilities and give me a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement.”

“An entrepreneur needs to do everything. You need to be a generalist. You need to consider the rent, personnel recruiting, salary, performance appraisal”

### Table 1. Interview Participants.

| Name   | Gender | Study major          | Area of startup                          | Years of company (years) |
|--------|--------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. ZSY | Female | Public management    | Online education                         | 3                        |
| 2. SRY | Female | Industrial design    | AI music APP                             | 1                        |
| 3. LLL | Female | finance              | Self-service coffee machine              | 3                        |
| 4. WJH | Male   | Information engineering | Learning materials integration and sharing platform | 2                        |
| 5. NZH | Female | Public management    | Amateur tennis tournament hosting service | 2.5                      |
| 6. ZYX | Female | Pedagogy             | Education                                | 1                        |
| 7. WQM | Male   | Animal science       | Design studio                            | 0.5                      |
| 8. ZWL | Male   | Computer science     | Big data                                 | 1                        |
| 9. SWM | Male   | Electrical engineering | Energy IoT                              | 1                        |
| 10. XRH| Male   | Agricultural science | Fruits and vegetables                    | 1.5                      |
On the other end of the spectrum, the entrepreneurial identity may be low, and the motivation is minimal. However, most of the students’ entrepreneurial identity interviewed in this study is between the two extremes. Some student entrepreneurs may also enter into this area by chance; for instance, some student-entrepreneurs regard entrepreneurship on campus as an “experiment.”

“Personally, I think it’s a very good experiment. When I am going to start a more complicated business 5 or 10 years later, I will remember that I did something similar when I was an undergraduate, so it’s easier for me to take the step than other people without the same experience.”

“In the process of exploring entrepreneurship, I find that my knowledge and knowledge couldn’t make the process more successful. So I will continue to do the part-time entrepreneurship while knowing where my deficiencies lie. I plan to continue my studies after graduation to be more professional in the field. I will surely pursue an entrepreneurial career in my life.”

Such self-conceptions mirror what Hoang and Gimeno (2010) characterize as “identity centrality” where one’s view of self features transitions to “founder” roles of entrepreneurs. Similarly, we see how such self-categorizations influence further actions in startup activities of student entrepreneurs, were parallel to founder roles, such identity centrality “facilitates the role transition by contributing to the attractiveness of the (. . .) role, and by reducing the associated anxiety and stress due to role novelty and confusion” (p. 45).

Continuous learning. Additionally, in our study, we find that the function of role-identity is further categorized through the inherent capacity to lead as expressed by the interviewees. They acknowledge the significance of continuous learning and problem solving, coupled with the multifaceted leadership roles they deem crucial in the process.

“I am more a lifelong learner than an entrepreneur. You will find that entrepreneurs have a ‘base of color’, which is constantly learning from books or from other people. So it might be more appropriate to call me an entrepreneurial learner.”

“If I met a problem and I can deal with it by myself, then I will deal with it; if I cannot deal with it all by myself, then I will build a team to solve it.”

“I regard myself as a leader of the team. In an entrepreneurial team, the vision, executive ability and their personality charm are very important. They will influence not only the rhythm, but also the culture of the team. So I consciously develop these abilities.”

“Starting a business requires multitasking abilities. You can handle different types of tasks at the same time without being overwhelmed. You need to know technology, planning, propaganda, writing and so on.”

“I play almost all the roles of a founder, making decisions, doing the marketing, business connection, communicating with customs, etc.

The concept of role identity and how individuals behave according to that perceived role (Jain et al., 2009) illustrates the significance of identifying such transition processes. The quotes above show how the student-entrepreneurs valued their role as the situation describes it, gaining traction from the ideals of what an entrepreneur is and categorizing the various functions that go along with the practice. This heightened self-awareness of abilities also allows for the flexibility required in their entrepreneurship practice since identity “helps individuals orient to their context, give meaning to their experience, and provide guidelines for action” (Gecas as found in Jain et al., 2009, p. 923). The link between life-long learning and the entrepreneurial process is also defined (Lee, 2008). The changing role of higher education provides for this crucial nexus as contextualized in the social identity formation discussed in the following sections.

Social Identity Influence

The following sections define the social identity influences of student-entrepreneurs through the formation of a team and institutional support.

Team formations. When students decide to pursue an entrepreneurial career, they may get into a unique community comprised of team members, other student-entrepreneurs and mentors. Therefore, the interaction with those key players is of significant importance to students’ entrepreneurial identity construction. We see how social identity is formed in the student-entrepreneurship transition, ranging from organizational affiliations to social-categorizations as earlier defined. For instance, an entrepreneurial team makes a more detailed division of members possible, allowing the founders to focus more on leadership and give organizational spirit and culture, which helps maintain entrepreneurial enthusiasm, positive vision, and a sense of belonging akin to organizational affiliations.

“If we do not build a team, the whole thing will lose its meaning.”

“When the team was built, everyone is very enthusiastic. This atmosphere drove us to establish a company and commercialize our products.”

Team establishment also provides the needed affinity for social identity and legitimizes a project, adding a higher sense of entitlement to the entrepreneur. As a founder or legal representative of a company, the entrepreneur gradually commits to their identity where such a sense-making process strengthens the entrepreneur role (George & Bock, 2008).

“Before the establishment of the company, I was not so serious about the entrepreneurial activities. But after that, I represent a company so I must do everything from the interests of the company.”

“As student-entrepreneurs, we still lack experience and technology. Therefore, in order to make our entrepreneurial team steady, we adopt a mindset of ‘try, explore and iterate’.”
Institutional support. As defined through higher education institutions, social identity also exhibits meaningful affinities gained through relationships between student and mentor (university academic staff). For the former, relationships and networks established through entrepreneurship competitions and courses allow for sharing similar identities (student-entrepreneurs), and experience-sharing is vital in confirming their role-identity.

“We are all working towards our goals and are important monitors of mutual progress.”

“Sometimes it feels like a family, who understand your confusion and difficulties.”

Similarly, for mentors, the support is given to students in their transition to entrepreneurs also acts as a bridge between the university and society, where mentors provide resources, networks, visions, and encouragement. This mentoring allows for a more profound identity experience in the initial stage of entrepreneurship exploration. The larger ecosystem of the university also provides for relations to flourish, given the often business-incubators focus of some institutions and the formation of viable teams within the campus (Boh et al., 2016). In addition, existing entrepreneurship projects also allows student-entrepreneurs to meet and interact with more mature entrepreneurs and investors, widening their network of influence and allowing for a more dynamic exchange of ideas and outlook.

“Our mentor gives us a lot of help. He likes to combine students from different majors into a group. And he always encourages new ideas, always says ‘you have good ideas, just try to make it happen.’ In addition, the mentor’s laboratory can provide us with necessary data, equipment, which are very helpful for our entrepreneurship.”

“They have some mature thinking to adapt to the development of the market. So we can learn from them. For example, what should be the situation when we communicate or negotiate with different kinds of people; how to deal with the different challenges when we meet; how to make the decision, etc.”

This imparting of “inside experience” from mature entrepreneurs to early student-entrepreneurs is very valuable as it adds to what can be learned beyond the confines of the classroom. It also promotes their identity transition as entrepreneurs. This access to other entrepreneurs also forms the developmental assistance similar to that of faculty academic staff in universities. The lack of such developmental assistance in their transitions to entrepreneur can be crucial in the viability of their startup practice. Tergesen and Sullivan (2011) note that entrepreneurs without proper mentors realized how the absence of this could harm their venture’s viability (p. 497). The value of a supportive institutional environment is also emphasized as aforementioned, where opportunities to train and network allow for a more involved practice experience. Universities’ policies and resource assistance can also allow for a student-entrepreneur transition to thrive.

“In fact, I didn’t think about it (entrepreneurship) too much at the beginning. I participated in the university’s research training; then I participated in the entrepreneurial training and some competitions. We also received many guidance and suggestions in the process. It was during the process of participation that I felt that entrepreneurship is not so far away and I could also try to start my own business.”

“In order to devote myself to starting my own business, I applied for suspension from university. About half a year. Because you know, after getting the financing, if I take courses in weekdays and go to the market on weekends, I may not able to keep up with the changes in the supplier market. As a student entrepreneur, we need to learn to trade-offs. The suspension policy is important for this decision.”

“Each year, our university has a certain amount of funding to support innovative and entrepreneurial ideas.”

“After the introduction of ‘Mass Innovation and Entrepreneurship’ strategy, many makerspaces and incubators emerge very quickly. And in the propaganda of these policies, we can see the entrepreneurial atmosphere has improved a lot. And we feel that college student entrepreneurship is strongly advocated by the government, which is very inspiring.”

Discussion and Closing Remarks

Despite the various attempts to explore the role of entrepreneurship education (EE) in constructing students’ entrepreneurial identity (Hytti & Heinonen, 2013; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017), literature is dearth in terms of exploring the transition and formation of student-entrepreneur identity. In this paper, we argued that the entrepreneurial identity construction of university students is a nonlinear, interactive, and explorative process, echoing previous studies (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017; Wang, Han & Du, 2017). We also see that role and social identities figure in its development (see Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006; Wei & Pan, 2014). In our interviews, we found out that from the perspective of role-identity, students’ entrepreneurial identity construction is a process of self-understanding and self-definition of entrepreneurship (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). Successful identity construction can effectively connect previous and present experiences, leveraging this to optimize future involvements and practices. The ideal of their construed identity also serves as a buffer for student-entrepreneurs to better cope with the external entrepreneurial worlds with risks and uncertainties (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Ranging from an esteemed self-concept to “entrepreneur by accident,” we see the composite role identity formations in our study, all bearing the need to evolve constantly to the needs of the practice. Donnellon et al. (2014) also discuss the various influence and themes to such identity formation. The concepts of socialization and collectivity, strategic
positioning, among others, as relevant to this study are similarly discussed.

About role-theory processes, identity centrality and complexity are two fundamental tenets in explaining the entrepreneurial identity construction (see Alsos et al., 2016; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), the former referring to the individuals’ strength of attachment to the entrepreneurial role. As above, we see how an esteemed entrepreneurial self-concept can provide adaptability to situations. This illustrates similar studies point that the more salient and central one’s identity is, the more motivated individuals are, and the more frequently individuals behave according to entrepreneurial role identity with more persistence and perseverance (Cardon et al., 2009). On the one hand, the identity complexity context reflects the diversity and richness in student-entrepreneurs’ definition of an entrepreneurial role (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). Both archetypes, as reflected in the interviews, show the facility of student-entrepreneurs to connect their self-defined entrepreneurship roles to greater roleplaying flexibilities, also supported by studies that point out the dynamic role identities of entrepreneurs as founders, developers and innovators (Cardon et al., 2009). Comparative research also suggests that holding multiple self-views can act as a buffer when facing pressures and challenges (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010, p. 49).

This motivational aspect also asserts that the highly-placed importance of starting a business at the initial idea / venture is crucial to sustaining successful business practices in the future. Chu et al., (2011) maintain that the “perceived importance attributed to motivational factors will later determine the direction, intensity, and perseverance of the success-related behaviours” (p. 86). Therefore, it is crucial to value individual-level differences and recognize optimal role-identity practices for student entrepreneurs who can influence their future behaviors. Considering further educators’ intervention can enhance the probability of business success for these student-entrepreneurs (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Such situational interactions account for the non-static and dynamic evolution of entrepreneurship transition where other social factors can also readily influence the core role-identity perception of student-entrepreneurs.

Social identity as influenced by organizational affinity (e.g., member affiliations, mentors, institutional policies defined in such organization) also play a decisive role in identity formation. For instance, in this study, we found out that the establishment of entrepreneurial teams provides a sense of belonging and responsibility for student-entrepreneurs. In contrast, mentors and other entrepreneurs provide resources and networks, encourage students’ entrepreneurial ideas, and sustain their passion for entrepreneurship. These social identity roles draw drive from the larger ecosystem of the university. This also asserts the need for a supportive institutional environment where policies and resource assistance provided by HEIs can also help construct an entrepreneurial identity. This support in Entrepreneurship Education (EE) and practice in the higher education sector resonates with the call of the Chinese government in its desire to build entrepreneurship as part of its development process. For instance, in 2015, China’s State Council issued the “Implementation Opinion of Deepening the Reform of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education in Higher Educational Institutions,” which proposed nine tasks of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education (IEE) and marked the Chinese government’s determination to promote IEE (State Council, 2015) comprehensively. Three years later, the “Opinion on Promoting High-Quality Development of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and Creating an Upgraded Version of “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” was then issued by the State Council, which further emphasized the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship, and clarified the responsibility of different ministries, also promoting collaborations to improve entrepreneurship environment and services in the country (State Council, 2018). Such policies support the institutional mechanisms needed that further reinforce the role of social identity construction of student entrepreneurs.

Such central policies have a rippling effect in HEIs, and the broader entrepreneurship environment in China since the quality of IEE and university students’ performance in innovation and entrepreneurship has gradually become an important indicator to evaluate HEIs leaders’ work. This has resulted in a more entrepreneurship-type of leadership in the higher education sector in the country. With this, universities introduced more relevant entrepreneurship courses (including MOOC courses) and practical platforms and reformed organizational structures to promote IEE (Mei & Symaco, 2020). It is estimated that more than 28,000 entrepreneurship courses have since been provided by HEIs in China (Fu, 2019), where students from different academic backgrounds are given a chance to access them (Mei, 2020). The role of interdisciplinary courses also provides a more sensible and gradual transition to an entrepreneurial career, alongside a more solid content that focuses on the different stages required for this practice (Morris, 2017). According to Burke’s identity theory (Burke, 2006; Burke & Stets, 2009), social expectations and the standards of behavior in a social context may affect an individual’s identity construction (Elliott et al., 2021). China’s “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” strategy and other policies of promoting entrepreneurship education positively affect students’ entrepreneurial identity formation. Taking the Chinese State’s centralized and socially inclusive role, policy orientations are strongly observed in institutions on the brand for more significant development for all. This unique influence manifests, among others, in EE arrangements as earlier discussed which significantly encourage student-entrepreneurial identity formations. This national drive for development through EE promotion inherent in China, as manifest in the findings, contribute to the entrepreneurial incline of students, where student-entrepreneurs are not only shaped by context but can
also exert a powerful influence over it (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2016). Such influences draw in rough the role and social identity factors described in this paper, as shown in Figure 1 below.

The issue of promoting an inducive setting for the smooth transition to an entrepreneurial identity is a recognized concern, where transitioning to an entrepreneurial role may produce an "identity-confusion" phase (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). Therefore, it is vital to have detailed mechanisms to support and introduce a student-entrepreneur identity formation, both internally (i.e., role identity) and externally (i.e., social identity). We have seen in this paper that the promotion of Entrepreneurship courses has considerably influenced the constructive transition to this practice. China’s state initiatives have also decreased the proportion of under-educated entrepreneurs in the country (Bosma & Kelley, 2019). Such initiatives have given the younger generation the opportunity to opt for this career given the increasing access to relevant courses in HEIs. The larger ecosystem of a university thus becomes an important "incubator" for students to learn, experiment, and carry out innovative and entrepreneurial ideas. This paper looks at the role and social identity influences in students' entrepreneurial identity construction, providing implications for further improvement to broader entrepreneurship practice in China and other countries. While studies looking at related identity formation of entrepreneurs are covered in the literature (Alsos et al., 2016; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Wei & Pan, 2014), little has been discussed in terms of this transition and identity formation among students. As in China’s case, the increasing policy formations that distinguish the critical role of entrepreneurship for development acknowledge the need to optimize such initiatives by examining influences that would affect such transitions to actual practice.

To provide a conducive identity formation among students, we acknowledge the importance of creating a tolerant atmosphere across HEIs to discuss the meanings and prospects of what a student-entrepreneur is, which can then shape the salient features of role-identity formation. Current entrepreneurship practices tend to focus on enhancing entrepreneurship knowledge and competence, which may lack attention to students’ internalization of entrepreneurial importance, confidence, and determination as an entrepreneur (Chen et al., 2019). Besides establishing entrepreneurship courses and platforms, flexible structures and systems are needed to facilitate identity thinking, goal setting, self-reflection, prospect planning, and group communication (Chen et al., 2019). We also recognize that while managing the student-entrepreneur identity, student-entrepreneurs will experience identity transitions that need support processes to identify the dynamic stages of entrepreneurial identity construction (Holt, 2020). This support highlights the importance of social identity as envisaged through organizational affiliations and support. Our study also shows how entrepreneurship may be seen as an “off the cuff” instance rather than a pre-determined career choice. Illuminating from the “entrepreneurs by accident” situations mentioned here, social identity connections may be strengthened further in university settings, reinforcing the desire to pursue this career (Chen et al., 2019). University-wide support for entrepreneurship will benefit students with a solid entrepreneurial identity at the onset and those who lack it (Siivonen et al., 2020).

There are two main contributions of this study. Firstly, this study has affirmed the role of identity centrality and complexity (Alsos et al., 2016; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010) in the process of entrepreneurial identity formation, while on the other also supplementing the role of identity centrality by exploring the

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**Figure 1.** Role-identity and social identity influences.
importance of lifelong learning for those “entrepreneurs by accident.” Dimensional analysis was also taken into account to verify marginal notations in the findings. For instance, where interviewees mentioned that they did not have clear entrepreneurial ideas initially, it was found out that entrepreneurial ideas emerged or their decision to be an entrepreneur became firm under the impetus of a seemingly accidental factor. Another example is the complexity and multi-dimensions of student-entrepreneurs’ personality and motivation, which may lead to different influences to entrepreneurial identity formation (i.e., self-categorization). Secondly, this paper made an innovative exploration by combining both the role and social identity theories while explaining the formation of entrepreneurial identity as a continuous process through the interactions of both internal (self) and external (institutional, environment) factors. The primary role of institutional policies as inherent in centralized systems such as China confirms the significant influence on the identity formation of student-entrepreneurs. This feature may point to an interest in similarly centralized government systems or the difference this may bring in other forms of governance of states. And while this paper focused mainly on a research-intensive university that may pose a possible limitation, further studies may explore university variations or other student factors (e.g., study levels, majors, etc.), which may affect students-entrepreneurial identity formation. Additionally, further studies on the actual practice resulting from such entrepreneurial identity formation in learning spaces (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) may be identified, where abilities for entrepreneurial ventures may be achieved. Factors influencing role and social identities as specified in this paper also merit a more thorough study, investigating how specific themes (e.g., self-categorization, social support, among others) may influence actual entrepreneurial practice.

This paper has discussed that identities may be multiple, mutable, and socially constructed (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The negotiation between various identities and the interaction between student entrepreneurs with the university context are common problems university student entrepreneurs face in identity construction (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Rigg & O’Dwyer, 2012; Wen et al., 2019). Murnicks et al. (2014) proposed two dimensions of multiple identities: centrality and salience. The former refers to the importance an individual attaches to some sort of focal identity in the light of other identities (role-identity as exhibited in this study); the latter means the readiness an individual hold to act out an identity (or as may be affected by social identity constructs and influences). Hoang and Gimeno (2010) also put forward that though the degree of role novelty and role conflict may significantly affect the entrepreneurial role transition, such related identity centrality act to moderate their effects (Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). Identity centrality (and complexity) refers to the subjective importance of the entrepreneurial role to an individual’s self-concept, which suggests individuals’ different motivations to act entrepreneurially.

In contrast, identity complexity captures the diversity and richness in an individual’s conceptions of the role, which explains patterns in how and when persistence occurs—drawing this in rough to social representations of such influence (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). Outlining such constructs in our study, we see how self-categorizations and continuous learning define our role-identity influences, while team formations and institutional supports highlight related social identity influences. Taking on Stets and Burke’s (2000) integrated theory of the self, we argue that both role and social identity influences provide an overlapping construct that reinforces however different but necessary factors in identity formation.

We see the necessity of integrating the two perspectives of role and social identities in constructing students’ entrepreneurial identity. While an individual’s role identity may differ significantly from the onset, the crucial function of social identity, which can further consolidate an existing perceived self-identity, is defined. This paper acknowledges its findings and resonates with the responsibility of the broader ecosystem of universities to introduce and integrate the entrepreneurial identity issues into the campus so that relevant students can successfully transit through their entrepreneurial practice. Furthermore, by carefully understanding the processes that help and hinder students as they struggle to become entrepreneurs, we can better design and improve policies and settings to improve entrepreneurial praxis.

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