# **Social Identity regulation of the “entrepreneur worker” for information systems employees and implications of its hybridization for inter-group power relationships**

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** We identify the specifics of a new ideal social identity (SI), an “entrepreneur worker”, constructed by top-down regulative forces and mechanisms of neo-normative control.

We demonstrate how hybridized forms of normative control regulate competing SIs and the political consequences of this regulation on manager-employee inter-group relationships.

This focuses on top-down managerial ideology, as opposed to the majority of critical management studies (CMS) that trace the ideal types of bottom-up sense-making in response to powerful top-down mechanisms.

**Design/methodology/approach**: The article stems from exploratory research, based on a case study using qualitative methods, conducted at the information systems (IS) division of a long-standing low-tech plant for the production and distribution of beverages.

**Findings:** Under a neo-normative regime IS division are expected to identify with the “entrepreneur worker” SI prototype implemented by Human resources management (HRM) feedback to influence IS employees’ self-identification.

IS employees seem to have the capabilities to manage and evaluate their role missions from this feedback to “be themselves”, while drawing from personal values and the culture of the Information technology (IT) field.

Additionally, top-down sense-giving with the “entrepreneur worker” SI intersects with the preexisting family member SI. The resulting competing dual SI has political consequences for the manager-employee relationships in the IS division.

**Originality:**

We adopt a power-based relational view to demonstrate: (1) Defining the specifics of a new “entrepreneur worker” SI. (2) The political implications of a hybridized SI on intra-organizational relationships.

Keywords: neo-normative control; normative control; social identity regulation; entrepreneur worker; IS employees; critical management studies

# **Introduction**

Social identity (SI) ‘provides contextually appropriate answers to the question “Who am I?” or “Who are we?”’ related to a social group and an organization (Ashforth *et al.* 2008, p.327). “Social Identity regulation encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” **(**Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.625). Cardador and Pratt )2006) suggested three successful fundamental top-down mechanisms of SI regulation: relationships, behaviors, and symbols, and Kraft, Sparr, and Peus (2015) two: discursive (e.g., meetings or newsletters) and non-discursive symbolic (e.g., rituals or workshops). Through these top-down mechanisms organizational leaders “influence how individuals come to understand the organization and their place within it” (Ashford and Schinoff 2016, p.128).

Social identity regulation as a modality of power relations in post-bureaucratic organizations has been largely conceptualized in the field of critical management studies (CMS) (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson 2001, 2004; Thomas 2009). Furthermore, researchers in the field of CMS have noticed that contemporary forms of managerial regimes (such as bureaucratic, normative, or neo-normative) have been interwoven into hybridized mechanisms of managerial control intended at regulating hybridized SI. This hybridized SI manifests in contradictory practices, structures, and expectations, enabling the coexistence of multiple institutional logics (Lok, 2010) and value systems (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). For example, Foreman and Whetten (2002), examine a dual-identity organization with dual value-based systems: *Normative*—emphasizing corporate imagery of family—and *utilitarian*, that advances business-driven values (such as profit maximization, self-interest, and economic rationality).

The CMS literature distinguishes analytically between two managerial regimes that regulate SI (or hybridized SI) based on power relations in the post-bureaucratic era. The normative regime first appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, defined as a managerial regime emphasizing psychological and socio-cultural dimensions, which is enacted in organizations by corporate culture management to shape employees’ minds and hearts (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Casey, 1995**;** Costas 2012; Kunda 1992). A neo-normative variant—which departed from normative control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, 2004)— appeared at the turn of the millennium.

Both types of normative control aim to define employees’ SI in reference to an espoused corporate identity (Sturdy *et al.*, 2010). Whereas normative efforts intend to instill in employees’ identity common and unitary corporate values, though, the neo-normative regime aims to regulate employees’ SI by harnessing extraorganizational values and identities of employees (such as employees’ professional values) derived from non-work sources (such as family and lifestyle) (Sturdy *et al*., 2010). The metaphorical image of the organization developed under normative control is a unitary “family” (Casey, 1995; Costas, 2012; Kunda, 1992). Contrarily, CMS shows that under a neo-normative regime, the organizational identity becomes more heterogeneous while advancing notions of individualization and self-authenticity (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010).

However, CMS researchers have not yet developed a model that illuminates the characteristics of the ideal type of SI that top-down mechanisms of neo-normative control construct a priori in order to influence bottom-up sense-making, or rather, the process in which employees ‘construe who they are or “should be” becoming’ (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016, p.128). However, SI regulation does not take place in a vacuum; managers have a crucial role as significant sense-givers in motivating bottom-up sense-making (Pratt 2000).

A main reason for this lack of SI models that are shaped by the neo-normative regime in the literature is because in the majority of CMS research, **“**the individual subject is a central player in identity construction” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p.18). That is, most CMS researchers discuss SI regulation from the employee’s subjective perspective (e.g.,Bardon *et al.*, 2012).

Similarly, CMS mainly focuses on hybridized SI regulation by power mechanisms and its implications for the “manufacturing of subjectivity” (Thomas, 2009, p.173). Thus, we only partially understand the implications of hybridized SI for inter-group power relationships in organizations.

Inspired by the illuminations of, and the gaps in, the CMS literature on SI regulation, this article has a dual purpose. First, we identify the specifics of a new SI we term the “entrepreneur worker”, constructed by the top-down regulative forces and mechanisms of neo-normative control. Accordingly, we address the following first cluster of questions: What are the aspirations and expectations of corporate managers regarding the SI characteristics that employees are demanded to absorb, and by which top-down HRM mechanisms of control is this accomplished? For this inquiry, we focus on the managerial ideology aspect, as opposed to the majority of CMS research (Bardon *et al.*, 2021; Brown, 2019; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Thomas, 2009). In developing a specific SI prototype, we also contribute to the CMS literature by examining the current trajectory of the neo-normative regime related to SI regulation in current organizations.

Our second cluster of research questions focuses on how hybridized forms of normative control regulate competing SI, and what the political consequences of this regulation are on intra-organizational relationships in the context of power asymmetries, rather than on individual employees’ inner sense-making experiences.

We contend that two interwoven types of market-based discourse (Bardon *et al.,* 2012; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Doolin, 2002) and (self) authenticity (Husted, 2021; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010) consolidate into entrepreneurship language, motivating the SI regulation for employees under the neo-normative regime. Under cover of a neo-normative regime, employees seemed to be free entrepreneurial individuals and independentthinkers **(**Husted, 2021). We demonstrate that under the influence of the underlying entrepreneurship language emphasizing liberal and (self) authenticity notions, the current ideal type of SI has transformed into the “entrepreneur worker,” with which employees are asked to identify in post-bureaucratic organizations.

We demonstrate our argument based on an illustrative case study in the information systems (IS) division of an Israeli low-tech plant (*Bubbly*) that produces and distributes beverages. The “entrepreneur worker” SI prototype is propounded by former new high-tech mid-high managers at Bubbly’s information systems (IS) division and is implemented by HRM assessment and feedback procedures. We demonstrate that the “entrepreneur worker” SI contrasts with the existing family member SI, with the intersection between the two SIs bringing about a hybridized SI of Entrepreneur–Family Member.

To fill the gap in the CMS literature, we suggest a power-based relational view, not just to demonstrate SI regulation based on power relations but also to examine the political implications of the Entrepreneur–Family Member SI for employee-manager relationships. That is, we examine how a hybridized SI affects intra-organizational relationships, rather than the way individual employees experience their workplace through sense-making.

Following a review of the relevant CMS literature on (neo-) normative control, we discuss the qualities of a distinct SI we term an “entrepreneur worker” and the regulation of this, along with the influence of entangled managerial normative regimes. In the results section, we demonstrate the SI regulation of IS employees at Bubbly. Finally, in the discussion section, we explore the contribution to the literature from two power-based relational aspects, before concluding with a suggested direction for future research.

# **Literature review**

*SI construct*

An individual’s SI, as opposed to a role, does not merely position them in a specific social array, but rather evokes a sense of identification (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004) "exhibited when individuals incorporate into their self-definitions impersonal or abstract features of groups to which they belong” (George and Chattopadhyay, 2005, p.69).

In that vein, SI might associate an individual with predominant and unifying attributes of an entire organization (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), or with parts of an organization, such as a sub-organizational or cross-functional unit (Parker 2000), subsidiary (George and Chattopadhyay, 2005; Reade, 2001) or professional group (Gill and Larson 2014).

## Combined normative management controls as a means of SI regulation

Researchers in the field of CMS examine the dynamics by which SI regulation is exercised within contemporary organizations from two theoretical aspects: (1) The role of top-down corporate elites and discursive regimes (managerial ideology aspect). From this point of view, researchers in the field of CMS ask: “How does identity regulation operate within contemporary organization?” (Bardon *et al.*, 2012, p.353). (2) The consequences of top-down sense-giving on bottom-up sense-making (employees’ subjective aspect; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Thomas, 2009). From this point of view, researchers in the field of CMS ask: “How do individuals actually construct their identity in reference to the prescribed corporate identity?” (Bardon *et al.*, 2012, p.353).

CMS researchers point out that top-down sense-giving intended to influence bottom-up employees’ identification with SI is exercised via top-down disciplinary power which prescribes what employees should desire to be as well as ensuring compliance (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). As mentioned previously, a distinction is made Sturdy *et al*. (2010, p.130), consider neo-normative control as a “hybridized extension” of the preceding normative regime, which exists alongside traditional mechanisms such as bureaucratic controls. Indeed, there are similarities between the two types of normative control, since both aim to define employees’ identification with reference to an espoused corporate identity (Sturdy *et al.*, 2010).

The metaphorical image of the organization developed under normative control is a unitary “family” (Casey, 1995; Costas, 2012), nurturing an extremist loyal “family member” SI, whereby employees obediently conform to espoused well-established value systems (Kunda, 1992). As opposed to this image of the organization as a unitary collective, CMS researchers show that under neo-normative regimes the organizational identity becomes more heterogeneous while being influenced by notions of individualization and self-authenticity (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010).

However, CMS researchers have not yet developed the characteristics of the ideal type of SI that top-down mechanisms of neo-normative control constructs a priori in order to influence the bottom-up sense-making of employees, possibly since the majority of CMS discuss SI regulation at the level of employees’ subjectivity (e.g.,Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Bardon *et al.*, 2012; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, 2004). Accordingly, CMS generally focuses on the influence of top-down forces and the actual mechanisms of control (such as managerial and HRM procedures) rather than on the consequent SI these top-down mechanisms prescribe (a managerial ideology aspect). That said, CMS have already laid a theoretical foundation that helps us to identify and refine the qualities of a distinct SI that we term an “entrepreneur worker”, evolving under the neo-normative ideology.

***The SI of an “entrepreneur worker” under neo-normative regimes***

The contextual SI of an “entrepreneur worker” emerges in the context of two interrelating discourses evolving at different levels, establishing the neo-normative control:

(1) The macro (societal) level market-based discourse (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Doolin, 2002). Under the influence of neo-liberal notions of individualization and competitiveness, current post-bureaucratic organizations have become competitive internal markets and, consequently, employees have been perceived as free, competitive, empowered, and self-managed entrepreneurs (Bardon *et al.*, 2012; Doolin, 2002).

Post-bureaucratic managerial programs based on market logics (e.g., Total Quality Management or Business Process Reengineering) and typical HRM procedures of assessment and standardization began to place entrepreneurial individuals in competition with each other, giving them a sense of freedom (Bardon *et al.,* 2012). Doolin (2002) showed how managerial expectations were presented to employees in terms of their own empowerment, being constituted “as subjects of management discourse” (Doolin, 2002, p.386).

(2) The meso (organizational) level. Personalized notions of (self) authenticity (Husted, 2021; Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017; Sturdy *et al*., 2010) advanced the authentic self-expression of employees in the workplace (Cable *et al.*, 2013). These personalized notions of authenticity allowed employees to “be themselves” (Bardon *et al.*, 2021; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), “and to think independently instead of obediently conforming to any kind of well-articulated ideology” (Husted, 2021, p.148) directly related to their roles and tasks. Under neo-normative regimes, self-disciplined employees (Sturdy, 2010) are expected to make discretionary decisions regarding their work assignments, drawing from their own interpretations as a way to articulate themselves authentically (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010).

The role of interest groups (e.g., management or professional groups) as “crafters of institutions” (Muzio *et al.*, 2013) is not simply to function as socialization agents who craft an employee’s identity to become a “corporate clone” (Sturdy *et al.*, 2010, p.118) or “embodiments of the organization” (Pratt 2000, p.476), but to impose SI by top-down culturalism (Parker, 2000) as a way to accumulate and achieve power (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Powerful and significant sense-givers, such as organizational leaders and other influential intra-organizational groups (Cardador and Pratt 2006;Kraft *et al.,* 2015) convey information and interpretations to their members about the prototypical role of SI “to influence how individuals come to understand the organization and their place within it” (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016, p.128).

Inspired by the extant CMS literature (Jenkins, 2017; Husted, 2021), we examine the consequent SI we term an “entrepreneur employee”, molded by mechanisms of neo-normative control. However, scholars acknowledge that managerial regimes are entangled in organizational practice, creating a hybridized SI.

## Hybridized SI in the contexts of entangled managerial regimes

Scholars have already noted that contemporary turbulent, post-bureaucratic organizations enact interwoven mechanisms of managerial control, and consequently, SIs become entangled (Bardon *et al.,* 2021). Some studies show that organizations increasingly seem to be “a melting pot of multiple identities”(Bartels *et al.*, 2007, p.186), drawing from different practices, structures, expectations, and value systems (Foreman and Whetten, 2002; George and Chattopadhyay, 2005; Reade 2001).

Although the field of hybridized SI is relatively well-developed in itself, there is much need for critically scholarly discussion on hybridized SI. Recently, a few CMS researchers have begun to close this gap in the literature. Bardon *et al.* (2021) contend that competing hybridized SI in current organizations articulate the tensions between the normative injunction to conform to values associated with a unitary corporate culture and the neo-normative injunction to “be yourself”. As discussed in the previous section, the neo-normative injunction to “be themselves” (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011) motivates employees to incorporate into their routine tasks extra-organizational values such as professional values and out-work identities (Sturdy *et al.,* 2010), which are derived from cross-cutting expertise and knowledge regardless of any formal authority and specific workplace.

Like the majority of CMS research on SI regulation, CMS research on hybridized SI focus on bottom-up employee sense-making by exploring “the relationship between managerial control and employee agency" (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017, p.59). In this, they devaluate the implication of competing multiple SIs, underpinned by combined mechanisms of normative control, on manager-employee power relationships. In other words, CMS concentrate on the implications of competing SIs on the bottom-up sense-making of individual employees, rather than on the relational power dynamics of intra-organizational groups in which SIs are recurrently regulated and validated.

**Methodology and design**

The article embraces an epistemological view based on power-based relations to examine two different elements. The first element is the SI regulation of “entrepreneur worker” based on power relations. The second element is the political implications of an emergent competing Entrepreneur—Family Member social identification for employee-manager relationships across the IS division of the Bubbly Company.

This article reports exploratory research, based on a case study using qualitative methods, conducted at the IS (information systems) division of a long-standing Israeli low-tech plant for the production and distribution of beverages. The IS division at Bubbly employs 90 people and comprises two units: Application Department Information Systems (ADIS) and Infrastructure Department Information Systems (IDIS), each divided into six work teams. At the upper echelons of the IS division, there are a division manager and two department managers. Six mid-level team managers then answer to each department manager.

The current article is based on 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Eleven interviews were with staff in the IS division: six mid-high team managers (three team managers from each department) and five employees (three from IDIS and two from ADIS). The remaining eleven interviews were with six mid-high managers and five employees in the Bubbly headquarters (i.e., not in the IS division). The interviews were each approximately one and a half hours in duration and were transcribed verbatim.

This exploratory research took place as part of a broader study, which included forty-four interviews conducted in diverse functional units of Bubbly by a team of five scholars, including the authors of this article. Their objective was to explore corporate ethics and its manifestations in organizational culture and employee behavior. The interview questions generally focused on the participants’ subjective experiences regarding their professional and social experiences in the workplace, as well as their relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors.

Please see the interview guide used:

1. What are the challenges you experience in your job missions?
2. Describe the atmosphere in your organizational unit and in Bubbly in general?
3. How do you define your relationships with your managers and associated colleagues (or subordinates - in reference to managers)?
4. How do you think that your managers and colleagues (or subordinates referring to managers) perceive you, and how does this manifest in workplace relationships?
5. Do you feel valued by your managers and colleagues, and how does this affect your relationships with your colleagues and managers?
6. How do managers evaluate your achievements and how do you feel and think about the feedback process in Bubbly?
7. What do you think your superiors expect of you as an IS employee?

8. What are the expected characteristics of an IS employee and what are the unexpected characteristics (a question for managers)?

During analysis of the IS division employee interviews, two groups (veteran employees—who have worked at Bubbly for over 10 years—in both departments and most of the workers in the IDIS department) claimed they experienced incivility in the context of an emergent top-down dual organizational identity. As a result, these 11 interviews were analyzed separately, and a different conceptual focus was applied.

At this point, we returned to the CMS tracing of a prototypical SI under a neo-normative regime. After identifying its qualities and discursive roots, we returned to our data, then analyzed and interpreted it in light of the Ideal type of SI entrepreneur worker we identified in CMS (as will be demonstrated in the following analysis section.) Our analysis corroborates the specifics of the emerging SI of the “entrepreneur worker”.

After that, we decided to analyze the 11 additional interviews outside the IS division, which established the emergent theme of the coexisting familial organizational controls that previously had been established at Bubbly as a whole.

## The first stage of data analysis consisted of a coding process, conducted by each author separately, based on our two sets of research questions. In the second stage, each author reviewed the thematic analyses of the other. Afterward, the authors discussed the thematic analyses to establish a consolidated analysis structure. This joint procedure of review, discussion, and determination of mutually acceptable themes safeguarded research validity. Supplementing the corporate ethics themes of the original study, the process produced new dominant themes: Established familial normative control in conjunction with bureaucratic structure; Managers as sense-givers of a new entrepreneurship language; The SI of entrepreneur worker compared to SI of family member worker; Top-down mechanisms used to form the self-managed ideal “entrepreneur worker” SI; and the political implications of the hybridized SI of Entrepreneur—Family Member on intra-organizational relationships.

# **Results**

## The established familial normative control in conjunction with bureaucratic structure

As a veteran low-tech firm of considerable size, Bubbly has a robust bureaucratic structure, manifested in a steep hierarchy and strict role definitions. The IS division managers noted that bureaucratic procedures at the firm stifled innovation, which is a requirement in any IS division work environment, regardless of the company. As one manager stated: “Bubbly has a very conservative view, an old-fashioned perspective. Bubbly is not a hi-tech company; it has an old manufacturing plant economy.”

Managers complained that they spent much of their time on routine administrative work, such as reading and replying to emails. They indicated that such assignments did not allow them the time to think creatively about long-range professional issues. One manager described his routine agenda as follows:

Fifty percent of my time is spent at various meetings and 40% to 50% on office work […]The rest of the time, which is roughly ten minutes, I engage in professional or technical work.

The bureaucratic structure exists in conjunction with established normative control, based on a family set of values**.** Many IS division employees have worked at Bubbly for more than 20 years and have tenured status. Furthermore, the employee turnover rate is low. Bubbly has a well-developed corporate-welfare policy, intentionally creating employment security. As some participants indicated:

Manager: Yes, people are proud to say that they work at Bubbly. The company tries to create a positive experience for the employees. […] You feel that the company invests in its employees.

Employee: Bubbly conducts many social events that connect our family to the company: couples’ trips, family trips, even a company excursion. We look forward to these events. […]

With this long-standing atmosphere of care and consideration, it is not surprising that a corporate culture based on family practices and conventions has evolved. Employees and managers often indicated that they consider Bubbly as a family. A team manager said:

First and foremost, Bubbly is a family-oriented company. All the employees and middle managers feel like a family—and I say this with full confidence. […] I like the people at the company very much.

IS division employees depicted warm and close relationships among peers and between employees and their managers in each of the IS units (Infrastructures and Applications). Employees from the same work team or department usually meet at social and family occasions held at the workplace or elsewhere after working hours. As one employee explained:

In our department, the atmosphere is excellent, and it is fun to come to work […]. This means that we order food and eat together, celebrate birthdays, go to lunch in the dining room together. […] Sometimes we meet together with the families…

***Managers as sense-givers of entrepreneurship based on extra-organizational professional culture***

New IS division mid-high managers, who have much previous professional experience in the hi‑tech industry, seek to regulate a new SI which employees are expected to absorb into their identities. By virtue of their professional specialization and high prestige, they seek to publicize and inaugurate new entrepreneurship-based ideas. A work-team manager described these new managers as carriers of “a new spirit of innovation and initiative”.

One of those new managers differentiated the IS division, as a hi-tech entity, from the other Bubbly divisions, as low-tech production plant components:

Bubbly is a long-standing organization with many employees and steep hierarchical structure... But, from my point of view as an IS division manager, it [the IS division] is a hi-tech division even if it is not officially defined as such.

The new IS division managers are aware of the emergent tension between the two models of control in Bubbly: the old family and the new entrepreneurship they seek to initiate in the IS division. The legitimate power of these new managers and their cultural knowledge and interpretations regarding this tension influence the way they performed their top-down sense-giving strategy (see Kraft, Sparr, and Peus, 2015).

The new IS division managers strive to influence IS employees to embrace notions and values of innovation and entrepreneurship which they draw from an external cross-cutting professional group with which they identify. Feldman (1979) suggested that peer workgroups, departments, and divisions form organizational nested identities. The hi-tech professionals at Bubbly differ from their intra-corporate peers in that they identify with their perceived professional group more than their organizational nested identities.

One of these new managers referred to the emergent notions of entrepreneurship as a ‘world culture’ rather than an intra-corporate culture:

I think that most of the principles [of corporate culture] are irrelevant. All of us are part of a much broader culture. […]. This culture belongs to a world culture in which, as professionals, we have to assign responsibility and assume responsibility. I expect them to be available regardless of time and place and … to figure out independently problems …

By “world culture”, this new manager referred to new expectations and practices that belong to information technology (IT) professional culture. It may be inferred that when this manager said: “I expect them […] to figure out independently problems …”, he actually expected that IS employees would not blindly commit to the espoused corporate values. In a theoretical sense, the manager distinguishes between the existing normative demands for differentiation and the prospective neo-normative demands for conflation between components of the workplace and non-workplace lives (Bardon *et al*., 2021). He contrasted Bubbly’s low-tech values (such as narrow obedience to the corporate directives), which refer to family member SI, with IT values (such as self-responsibility) based on extra-organizational professional and personal values, which refer to a new SI we term the “entrepreneur worker". In the following section, we will contrast the two distinct characteristics of the new “entrepreneur worker” SI with those of the established family member SI, on the basis of empirical data analysis.

***Entrepreneur worker vs. family member worker***

The self-identification of veteran and older employees is perceived by Bubbly’s management as consistent with the family member SI. However, under the influence of recently employed IS managers, IS employees are now expected to behave according to the “entrepreneur worker” SI principles. Thus, although the “entrepreneur worker” SI reflects the managers’ expectations of the ideal IS employee, the preexisting family member SI reflects the managers’ perceptions of the typical employee. An analysis of these two distinct attitudes enables us to trace the individualization that the SI of employees has recently undergone at Bubbly.

*Entrepreneurial Generation Y versus familial Generation X.* “Entrepreneur worker” SI employees are 30 to 40 years old and belong to the Gen-Y subculture. They are well-educated, with academic degrees in engineering disciplines; techno-savvy (see Martin, 2005); highly motivated; and hold opportunity for employment mobility in the IT industry.

Further, they have characteristics associated with entrepreneurship, such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, and innovative attitudes. These entrepreneurial characteristics are identified with Generation Y employees (Seaton and Boyd 2007).

Family member SI employees are 41-65 years old and characterized by the Gen-X subculture: veteran workers that have tenure with Bubbly, conservative attitudes, and out-of-date technological capabilities. They are perceived as having high motivation and willingness to maintain their positions at Bubbly for as long a time as possible.

In the following quote, a work team manager differentiated between Gen-X and Gen-Y employees. That is, between the ideal and typical IS employees:

Generation X employees can do routine jobs, while Generation Y employees require high maintenance. They need interesting work, positive feedback, bonuses, a good word from time to time and occasional perks. They are impatient; they do not accept ‘no’ for an answer.

*Task discretion based on professional and personal values versus espoused corporate values*

Our analysis demonstrates that the new type of “entrepreneur worker” SI articulates expectations of IS division employees to be creative human beings that independently think about their role missions and suggest creative solutions for handling daily professional issues or problems. Additionally, regardless of work time or the workplace, IS division employees are expected to interpret work assignments while they draw from their professional knowledge and personal experience, which were not necessarily accumulated in Bubbly.

As one employee reported:

I go back home and think to myself about how to solve problems, I [constantly] think about creative solutions while I usually rely on my own professional knowledge and experience. […] I am expected to do that…

The “entrepreneur worker” SI has a robust commitment to an out-of-work cross-cutting professional group rather than to other associated intra-corporate groups (such as a team or department). At the IS division level, entrepreneur workers are seemingly separate as individuals, but at the out-work professional peer-group level, they are a collective. Kunda (1992) showed that, above all, hi-tech engineers expressed commitment to their professional ethics rather than the ethics of the organization that employed them. Following Kunda (1992), we contend that working for Bubbly is considered by the “entrepreneur worker” SI as a station on a path of professionalization, rather than a goal in itself. Membership in a professional group equips a person with a cosmopolitan sense, which in turn opens up worldwide job opportunities.

The family member SI is perceived (by employees/employers) as part of a unified collective with a robust commitment to family-based conventions that reflect the corporate identity. In the current case, family member SI employees’ first priority is to Bubbly as a whole and their second priority is to identify with their respective functional organizational units. Further, family member SI employees pursue a long career trajectory at Bubbly. They obediently exhibit conformity to prescribed corporate values and norms directed at their respective tasks and roles, rather than to any extra-organizational values or SIs with which they are associated.

A veteran team manager who has worked at Bubbly for more than 20 years described the low level of loyalty of new employees with traits of the “entrepreneur worker” SI:

The new young employees who come to Bubbly from Hi-Tech do not understand me when I talk about loyalty… […] If someone offers them another meaningful position with a slightly higher salary, they will leave Bubbly…

In this section, we discussed the perceptions and notions of the IS division managers and practitioners about the “entrepreneur worker” SI characteristics compared to those of family member SI. In the following section, we show how managerial mechanisms of neo-normative control increasingly promoted by HRM procedures of measurement and feedback are intended to infuse IS employee identification with the “entrepreneur worker” SI.

### *Measuring and feedback: Top-down mechanisms used to form the self-managed ideal entrepreneur worker SI*

Critical scholars have noticed that the ‘manufacturing of subjectivity’ (Thomas, 2009, p.173) within (neo) normative regimes is backed via top-down HRM procedures of assessment and standardization. These procedures articulate the interpretations and orientations of the managers and employees who utilized them (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Thus, HRM procedures that are produced by significant sense-givers, such as managers or colleagues (Cardador and Pratt, 2006;Kraft *et al.*, 2015), are not simply technical and bureaucratic components intended to regulate members’ direct actions but serve as disciplinary mechanisms to regulate contextual SI (Alvesson and Thomas, 2008; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Thomas, 2009).

In recent years, new high-ranking managers in the IS division at Bubbly have enacted neo-normative mechanisms of control by introducing cross-organizational HRM assessment feedback tools. Twice a year, the manager and employee fill out the feedback form separately before their joint feedback meetings. As a result of this joint discussion, both manager and employee agree on either immediate or long-term feasible work goals. For this organizational procedure, the employee is expected to be a proactive partner. At the end of the feedback procedure, the manager grades the employee on a scale of one to ten; a low rank could result in a reprimand or threat of dismissal.

One IS employee noted the change he underwent following feedback. In his own words, he demonstrated the management’s expectations of the SI that we identify as an “entrepreneur worker”. Under cover of the feedback, he became an autonomous thinker who manages himself based on his judgment regarding his work assignments, and thus he is empowered:

For example, in the project, I do not know if I was considered dependent or not, so I would share what I did. I informed my manager about a minor accomplishment of mine and she responded: ‘You don’t have to show me every little thing that you do. You can exercise your own judgment and show me from time to time.’ I decided […] address her only with things that are really necessary. […] We are adults. They trust us and believe in us.

While employees are expected to be totally involved in evaluating themselves throughout the feedback procedure, they have no control or input regarding the consequences of the procedure. Contrary to the management’s intentions, some IS employees articulated their dissatisfaction and inconvenience with the self-ranking and self-evaluation process:

I find the feedback process embarrassing, especially because I have to fill it in myself… On the one hand, I don’t want to say that I do not do anything or that I fail to do things because of the results of that, but on the other, […] I don’t want people to say that I think too highly of myself… […]

This quotation demonstrates that the feedback procedure reflects a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, with this HRM procedure employees are expected to self-rank their accomplishments as a way to express themselves based on their own interpretations and personal values, but on the other hand, they are afraid of the results of their own decisions and are threatened by them.

The HRM mechanism of feedback at Bubbly demonstrates that the SI in current organizations undergoes individualization and personalization. The feedback process serves as a type of ‘self-disciplinary control’ (Sturdy *et al.*, 2010, p.129) that, in employees’ failure in self-assessment, seems to be a personal difficulty that employees experience with their own values, personal traits, or identities, rather than a difficulty in conforming to any espoused corporate value systems. (Sturdy *et al.,* 2010).

## The political implications of hybridized SI on intra-organizational relationships

*Dual identification as Entrepreneur–Family member*

The intersection of the two types of normative control, each based on different value sets and directives, creates the competing dual organizational identity of Entrepreneur–Family Member. On the one hand, result-oriented managers expect their IS employees to manage themselves while drawing on out-work professional and personal values in a way that gives them a sense of empowerment. On the other hand, the company safeguards feelings of belonging and commitment through a well-developed welfare and entertainment strategy. A veteran team manager described these competing expectations:

They say that the new managers harmed the cohesive family atmosphere at Bubbly. They concentrate only on results[…]. The truth is that Bubbly is a pleasant work environment. The company cares about its employees. […]…

In the following section, we will trace the political implications of top-down hybridized identifications of the Entrepreneur–Family Member on relationships within the IS division on two inter-connected aspects. The first is the relationship between veteran employees (in both departments within the IS division: ADIS and IDIS) and the IS division management. The second relationship is between the IDIS employees and the IS division management. Many veteran employees were employed in IDIS, and many of the new employees were employed in ADIS. Thus, the two aspects of analysis overlap to a great extent.

*Relations between veteran employees and IS division management.*

Both veteran and new employees are expected to embrace the preexisting family member SI, thanks to Bubbly’s well-developed welfare strategy. All IS division employees are also expected to follow the “entrepreneur worker” SI model, but the IS division management perceives veteran employees as incapable of doing so. Consequently, these veteran employees are often threatened with dismissal. The result is the emergence of tension between veterans in both departments (ADIS and IDIS) and new IS division managers.

A work-team manager described the attitude of the IS division management towards veteran employees who fail to acclimate to the “entrepreneurship revolution” that the IS division has undergone in recent years:

Employees who did not adapt to the new work atmosphere left Bubbly or were politely requested to leave. Previously, there were employees who just did not fit... In my view, they were not good enough; they didn’t assume responsibility and were slow ... You should be dynamic the way hi-tech requires you to be. […]

A veteran employee referred to the challenge of adopting the “entrepreneur worker” SI in the context of a longstanding and enduring family corporate identity, when he pointed out his difficulty coping with the loss of veteran employees who were dismissed:

The employee was fired because he failed to adapt himself to the innovations that the IS division has undergone. He did not get used to that new atmosphere. […] Many veteran employees felt that his dismissal damaged Bubbly’s unique character. Bubbly always was like a family to its employees... You do not dismiss a family member just because he is slower than you expect.

A veteran team manager described the negative aspects of the “entrepreneur worker” SI on workplace relationships and climate:

Previously we had respect to each other and mutual support regardless of your rank in the hierarchy. Today, we have a factory: people come, attain their goals and leave… […] … You are not loyal to your workplace and your peers, because you are only an individual pawn.

### *Relations between IDIS employees and IS division management.*

Our findings show that there is a relationship between the cultural capital identified with entrepreneurial capabilities that each department (ADIS and IDIS) of the IS division has at its disposal and the treatment that the employees received from the IS division management. The IS division management perceives IDIS employees as less customer-oriented and therefore less reflexively adaptive to changing professional demands—characteristics that are expected of the “entrepreneur worker” SI —than ADIS employees. This managerial perception has become an accepted convention at Bubbly, causing top managers to consider ADIS employees as more capable of carrying out the “entrepreneur worker” SI directives.

The structural position of IDIS employees in the IS division distances them from the direct needs of the internal customers. They find themselves taking a defensive position when malfunctions occur, rather than acting as equal professional partners in planning and arranging technology initiatives in advance. An IDIS work-team manager declared:

We feel that the management does not care about us. […] Sometimes, the management blames us: “Why didn’t you alert us that a malfunction could happen?” We respond that we did not do so because we were not involved and were not updated about the details from the outset. Unfortunately, when we do become involved, it is already too late.

IDIS employees believe that the management maliciously disseminates rumors concerning their alleged incapability to cope efficiently with sophisticated professional challenges that are—according to our analysis—expected of the “entrepreneur worker” SI employees. IDIS employees are aware of their inferior position in the IS division and the respective treatment they receive from the IS division management. An IDIS work-team manager spoke about the pejorative name used in reference to IDIS employees:

One high-ranking division manager decided to refer to us as “Infrastupid”. Instead of the Infrastructure Department, we are called the Infrastupid Department. […] It is not fair. We work very hard and do a good job, all of us.

The conceptual distinction that the IS division management creates between the employees of the two IS departments provokes and exacerbates conflict between employees of the IDIS division and employees of the ADIS division. The tension between the two departments that IS division management inflames causes suspicion and hostility among IS division employees. As one IDIS team manager described the situation:

[…] ADIS managers complain about IDIS employees’ work: “Why didn’t you do it?” “Why didn’t you do it on time?” They constantly gripe about IDIS employees to high-ranking managers at Bubbly instead of talking to us [IDIS work-team managers] about it. We [the IDIS work-team managers] feel that the IS Division management is waiting for our downfall.

ADIS employees are perceived by the IS division management as more capable of conforming with the “entrepreneur worker” SI and are professionally valued accordingly. In contrast, most of the IDIS employees and the veteran employees of both departments (ADIS and IDIS) in the IS division, who are thought of as unable to observe the “entrepreneur worker” SI directives, are subjected to threats and a depressing work atmosphere, as we have shown in this section. Furthermore, the tension that occurs between IDIS employees and the IS division management consequently evokes conflict between the employees of both departments (ADIS and IDIS).

# **Discussion**

Inspired by the illuminations from, and the gaps in, the CMS literature on SI regulation, we suggest a power-based relational view to demonstrate two contributions: (1) an ideal type of “entrepreneur worker” SI, and (2) the political implications of the hybridized SI of Entrepreneur–Family Member on intra-organizational relationships. Each contribution will be discussed in the following sections.

***The SI regulation of an “entrepreneur worker” under a neo-normative regime***

The first theoretical contribution of this article to CMS is that it enriches CMS by identifying the specifics of a new SI we call the “entrepreneur worker” SI which is constructed by top-down regulative forces and mechanisms of neo-normative control. In developing a specific SI prototype, we also contribute to CMS by examining the current trajectory of the neo-normative regime related to SI regulation in current organizations.

Our empirical contribution is the analysis of our data in light of the Ideal type of “entrepreneur worker” SI we established, refined, and developed based on CMS, and by demonstrating its specifics through a case study of the IS (information systems) division of a long-standing low-tech plant at which beverages are produced and distributed.

We contend that under the influence of the entrepreneurship language underlying neo-normative control, the current SI of employees in post-bureaucratic organizations has undergone individualization and personalization and transformed into what we term the “entrepreneur worker” SI.

We demonstrated that, under the cover of a neo-normative regime, employees seem to be free entrepreneurial individuals and independentthinkers **(**Husted, 2021) who have the capabilities to independently manage and evaluate their role missions (Bardon *et al.*, 2012; Doolin, 2002) in a way that allows them to “be themselves”. This neo-normative movement directed at empowering employees occurs in dynamics that Sturdy *et al.* (2010) describe as when “the outside is brought in” (p.130) to the organization. Previous CMS literature shows that employees’ own interpretations of their work assignments are increasingly drawn from extra-organizational professional and personal values and identities rather than from well-articulated corporate values (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2017; Sturdy *et al.*, 2010).

Specifically, our analysis demonstrates that while the family member SI expressed the division management expectations for employees to obediently conform to prescribed corporate values, the ideal “entrepreneur worker” SI embodies the expectations that employees can asymmetrically conflate components (such as values, attitudes, and SIs) of workplace and non-workplace lives (see Bardon *et al.*, 2021). In this vein, IS division employees are expected—as creative human beings regardless of work time or the workplace—to interpret work assignments and issues while they draw also from their out work professional culture and personal values.

Another empirical contribution of this article is to demonstrate that top-down sense-giving with the “entrepreneur worker” SI occurs in the contexts of power relations. We show that a new professional group of new mid-high managers in Bubbly’s IS division use their position of power, cultural capital, and corporate materials to disseminate new professional notions of entrepreneurship. These new managers are inspired by an external cross-cutting professional culture. Thus, we may assume that their bearer and purveyor function in translating entrepreneurship ideas into the IS division exists independently of any concrete corporation that employs them.

As such, these managers try to influence IS division employees to identify with the “entrepreneur worker” SI by significant managerial mechanisms of neo-normative control which are increasingly promoted by HRM procedures of measurement and feedback.

The feedback procedure enacted in Bubbly is a kind of subjectification (Alvesson, 2001; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017): A modality of neo-normative control that normatively articulates the IS division management’s sense-making regarding the “entrepreneur worker” SI capabilities, such as self-management and assessment, self-responsibility and initiative taking.

Like any other management team, the IS division management’s espoused intention is that self-evaluation will ensure efficient control of employees’ accomplishments and performance. Furthermore, the IS division management think that the freedom of self-management and ranking, which is bestowed on employees through feedback procedures, will give the IS division employees the freedom to express and empower themselves. The IS division management acknowledges that this leads employees to construct their own interpretations which are highly unlikely to match the directives of the workplace.

With HR mechanisms such as feedback, employees of Bubbly are ostensibly considered autonomous individuals by the management. Under the neo-normative discourse of entrepreneurship, a sense of freedom at the workplace has two meanings. Freedom does not refer only to the neo-liberal, political-economic meaning of autonomous thinkers who compete with each other to maximize the common corporate interests; it increasingly refers also to the psychological-sociological meaning of subjects to express themselves authentically while maximizing their task achievements at the workplace. However, employees’ latitude of freedom is, in fact, severely limited in the organization. Employees and their managers interact within power relationships that have demarcated and limited symbolic boundaries, within which SIs are created and enacted.

In this vein, by top-down meaning-loaded HRM mechanisms emphasizing self-management and self-assessment, the “entrepreneur” employees are not simply free individuals who intend to self-manage. And, thus, empower themselves; concurrently, they are controlled and evaluated, in fact, by corporate elites who scale the standards and prescriptions of their tasks “in a manner that resonate[s] with organizational objectives” (Sturdy *et al.*, 2010, p.118).

## The political implications of hybridized SI for intra-organizational relationships

The CMS literature shows that current organizations enact woven neo-normative and normative managerial control which in turn shapes competing hybridized SI. We contend that it is necessary not merely to characterize the current managerial expectations as they are embodied in the ideal “entrepreneur worker” SI, but to explore how competing managerial expectations regulate a hybridized SI which in turn influences intra-organizational power relationships.

In most CMS on multiple SIs, **“**the individual subject is a central player in identity construction” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p.18). Thus, CMS primarily focus on employees’ inner sense-making experiences as a result of top-down, hybridized SI. However, using a power-based relational view, this article illustrates the political consequences of a top-down hybridized SI we term “Entrepreneur–Family Member” for inter-group relationships, rather than on the bottom-up sense-making of subject individuals.

In this regard, this article also contributes to the literature on multiple SIs in organizations. The previous literature on multiple SIs in organizations treats SI construction as an orchestrated process that leads to neutral hybrid identities(Foreman and Whetten, 2002; George and Chattopadhyay, 2005; Reade, 2001(. On the contrary, we argue that the intersection of SIs in Bubbly creates controversy between them rather than accommodation.

Our findings show that the resulting hybrid SI has political consequences for the relationships between managers and employees in the IS division in Bubbly in two ways:

1. between IS management and veteran employees (in the two IS departments) and
2. between IS management and IDIS employees.

The IS division management expects the IS employees to conform to the “entrepreneur worker” SI as well as the competing and pre-existing family member SI. However, veterans (from both IS departments) and most IDIS employees are all perceived by the management as incapable of adopting the new “entrepreneur worker” SI.

IS division managers consider most ADIS employees’ dispositions to be more appropriate to the “entrepreneur worker” SI considering their ability to adapt to the prevailing family member SI). Veterans are either threatened with dismissal or replaced by new employees recruited from hi-tech industries. The conflicting relations have deteriorated, creating a workplace atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hostility. Furthermore, the tension between IDIS employees and the IS division management exacerbates conflict between the employees of both departments (ADIS and IDIS).

Finally, we should note that our work is based on exploratory research with a limited data corpus. To further enrich our knowledge of top-down sense-giving, it would be fruitful to conduct additional research. Specifically, we recommend utilizing a power-based relationships view, which considers inter-group relationships, for analyzing the political consequences of conflicting top-down sense-giving. For a meaningful comparison with the current article, the focus should be on the political consequences for the relationships between IS management and employees that work at low-tech manufacturing plants but are associated with professional ethics that stress entrepreneurship.

**Practical implications**

We demonstrate how dominant groups in organizations impose a prototypical SI of “entrepreneur worker” on subordinate groups. We also demonstrate the political implications of a hybridized Entrepreneur—Family Member social identification for employee-manager relationships across the IS division of the Bubbly Company.

Our findings show that the resulting hybridized SI brings about conflicting relations and tensions between managers and IS employees (veterans from both IS departments and most IDIS employees), who are perceived by the management as incapable of adopting the new “entrepreneur worker” SI.

To reduce these consequences in organizational practices, IT managers in low-tech manufacturing plants are advised to examine the suitability of imported high-tech models that emphasize entrepreneurship and innovation to a work environment, while using human resources procedures of mentoring, training and organizational development.

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