

**PLUG IN, PONDER, OR PAUSE? HOW GLOBAL PROFESSIONALS' PRIOR IDENTITY TENSIONS
AFFECTED THEIR RESPONSES TO PANDEMIC-INDUCED DISRUPTIONS**

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Abstract

COVID-19 altered employees' work worldwide and drastically reduced international mobility, affecting millions of global professionals. Drawing on repeated interviews with a sample of 30 global professionals before and after the start of the pandemic, we explored how global professionals' prior experiences and specific characteristics of the pandemic influenced their interpretations of and responses to the disruption. We discovered three response pathways. First, participants who recounted tensions in how they related to distant others at work before the pandemic viewed the globally shared nature of the disruption as an opportunity to alleviate these tensions by *plugging in* to bond with others. Second, respondents who had experienced ambivalence regarding their work interpreted the pandemic-induced travel restrictions as an opportunity to ease the ambivalence by *pondering* over their work identity. Third, participants who experienced discrepancies between their local self and their mobile aspirational self pre-pandemic interpreted the pandemic and the associated travel bans as a threat to their aspirations and momentarily *paused* their identity work during the pandemic, in keeping with the event's temporariness. Through our discoveries, we develop a process model of how individuals address their prior identity tensions following major work disruptions, and we advance the identity and global mobility literatures.

Keywords: identity work, identity threats/opportunities, global mobility, change, prospective research design

"I think an international job like this one is beautiful and not everyone can do that, so I've been benefiting from that privilege. Of course, if anything happens in the world, that whole system would stop or be slowed down. In that sense what I'm seeing is the other side of that coin [...]. How do I fit into that change? I don't have answers."

Sancho, Japanese professional

Sancho is a 38-year-old Japanese professional working in the Education sector in Tokyo. He has been managing the Asian operations for an international business school for eight years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of his work, Sancho spent 25% of his time traveling globally. In the above quote, he describes how beautiful his international job was, and how privileged it used to make him feel. Then, COVID-19 struck, and with the propagation of the virus came drastic changes—including restrictions on mobility—that radically altered his working conditions. Sancho struggled to adjust to these pandemic-induced changes, in part because he experienced loss from the absence of travel.

Like Sancho, an increasing number of organizational members can be referred to as global professionals, i.e., professionals whose work requires travel to collaborate across national boundaries (Choudhury, 2022; Dimitrova, 2020; Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2011). Before the pandemic, an industry survey identified more than one million individuals whose work entailed international business travel among 703 surveyed companies (Santa Fe Relocation, 2019). As such, for millions of professionals, COVID-19 resulted in major disruptions to their ways of working. Pre-pandemic, these professionals would regularly travel internationally to meet with stakeholders; however, as countries closed their borders and grounded transportation to prevent the spread of the virus, they faced unprecedented travel restrictions.

The pandemic's effects on organizational members have garnered scholarly attention. To date, management and organizational psychology scholars have explored how the pandemic has affected individuals' emotions, work attitudes, behaviors, and—to a lesser extent—career outcomes (for a review, see Newman, Eva, Bindl, & Stoverink, 2022). For example, the pandemic has created feelings of anxiety, especially in regions where the number of cases and deaths were rapidly increasing (Fu, Greco, Lennard, & Dimotakis, 2021). Additionally, COVID-19 has impacted individuals' work behaviors (e.g., in-role and extra-role behaviors; see Chong, Huang, & Chang, 2020), creativity (Takeuchi, Guo, Teschner, & Kautz, 2021), and career-related behaviors such as job search (Gabriel, MacGowan, Ganster, & Slaughter, 2021). Scholars have also called for attention to how this major disruption challenged individuals' sense of who they are (Ashforth, 2020; Christianson & Barton, 2021), leading to identity work, that is, to activities aimed at “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective, role, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of [one's] social contexts” (Caza, Vough, & Puranik, 2018: 895). Initial empirical evidence suggests that individuals' identities shifted due to the pandemic (Hennekam, Ladage, & Powell, 2021).

To further uncover how major disruptions like COVID-19 affect individuals' identities, we focus on the extreme case of global professionals for whom pandemic-induced travel restrictions represented a radical change to their ways of working (Eisenhardt, 1989). We initially set out to understand how global professionals manage the tensions inherent in their global work roles and began our field work shortly before the pandemic struck. As COVID-19 upended global professionals' work lives, we pivoted toward examining how they interpreted and navigated the pandemic-induced disruptions (including, but not limited to travel bans), and whether and (if so) how their narrated experiences pre-pandemic explained their subsequent responses. With its prospective design based on interviews conducted with a diverse sample of professionals before and after an unexpected adverse event (see Maitlis, 2020), our research provides a rare opportunity to study three important yet underexplored identity processes.

First, through our data, we can explore factors that lead individuals to perceive an identity-implicating experience (e.g., a change event) as an identity threat or as an identity opportunity (Bataille & Vough, 2022). It is possible that some global professionals interpreted the pandemic as a threat while others viewed it more positively. Indeed, while international travel tends to be an important part—and often an explicit perk—for global professionals (Dimitrova, 2020; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012), it is also a considerable source of stress (Jooss, Conroy, & McDonnell, 2022). Our prospective design allows us to tease out whether experiences before the pandemic explain why global professionals would have interpreted it as threatening or not (Maitlis, 2020). Gaining an understanding of the antecedents to threat and opportunity appraisals is crucial because individuals' affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions differ dramatically when they perceive an experience as a threat or an opportunity. Threat appraisals tend to result in negative affect, reduced cognitive flexibility, narrower focus, and exhaustion whereas opportunity appraisals incite hope, creativity, and divergent thinking (Bataille & Vough,

2022; George, Strauss, Mell, & Vough, 2023). As such, uncovering the circumstances under which people are more or less likely to interpret an experience as a threat or an opportunity will help pave the way for interventions aimed at preventing threat from occurring.

Second, understanding the circumstances under which a largely negative event evokes opportunity appraisals sheds light onto the mechanisms that trigger growth during adverse experiences at work (Maitlis, 2020). Unpacking these mechanisms is warranted because adversity is pervasive in organizational life (Petriglieri, 2011) and many people struggle to overcome identity threats (Shepherd & Williams, 2018). In this vein, identity work (e.g., Haynie & Shepherd, 2011) and global mobility (e.g., Jonczyk Sédès, Miedtank, & Oliver, 2023) researchers have overwhelmingly focused on how adverse events trigger identity threats. However, major disruptions like the pandemic, albeit negative, could be perceived as identity opportunities (Maitlis, 2020). Unearthing the conditions under which an identity-implicating event interacts with prior experiences to trigger opportunity appraisals is therefore both theoretically and practically meaningful.

Third, given the nature of the pandemic and the extent of the changes global professionals faced during this time (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020), we would expect their responses to yield new insights into identity work (see Ashforth, 2020). According to extant research, experiencing drastic changes can cause people to engage in identity work, including identity protection (e.g., identity concealment and derogating the source of threat; Creed & Scully, 2000) and identity restructuring (i.e., shifting the meanings and importance of an identity or exiting it altogether; Petriglieri, 2011). However, these findings emerged from studies focusing on unforeseen events that concern a single individual (e.g., a disabling accident [Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Maitlis, 2009] or job loss [Kira & Klehe, 2016]) or a single organization (e.g., an organizational scandal; Eury, Kreiner, Trevino, & Gioia, 2018) and

that are typically permanent (c.f., Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). By contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic is a major unexpected change that came with unprecedented travel bans, was shared across organizational and national boundaries (Caligiuri et al., 2020), and was temporary (Hennekam, Ladge, & Shymko, 2020).

Findings to date suggest that working parents who experienced the pandemic as a work-life identity threat shifted towards identity reflection and reconstruction, changing their beliefs about what it means to be a good parent and a good worker (Hennekam et al., 2021). It is possible that global professionals would also have engaged in identity reflection and reconstruction. However, it is also plausible that identity work would differ under temporary or globally shared circumstances. Temporary experiences like the pandemic can be perceived as moments between moments and times between times (Bell, 2021), and often, these liminal periods do not come with available response templates (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). One intriguing possibility is that temporary events would not necessarily spur identity work, instead leading people to remain passive and wait for the event to end.

We observed three distinct identity tensions (i.e., opposing forces; Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012) in global professionals' Time 1 accounts that set participants down different Time 2 pathways. Our Time 2 interviews subsequently elucidate (1) how global professionals interpreted the pandemic due to their prior identity tensions and the specific characteristics of the disruption, and (2) how their identity work evolved. Participants who recounted tensions in how they related to distant others at work before the pandemic tended to view the globally shared nature of the disruption as an opportunity to alleviate these tensions by *plugging in* to bond with others at Time 2. Respondents who had experienced ambivalence regarding their work interpreted the pandemic-induced travel restrictions as an opportunity to ease the ambivalence by *pondering* over their work identity at Time 2. Lastly, participants who

experienced discrepancies between their local self and their mobile aspirational self pre-pandemic interpreted the pandemic and the associated travel bans as a threat to their aspirations and momentarily *paused* their identity work during the pandemic, in keeping with the event's temporariness. Based on our discoveries, we develop a process model explicating when and why professionals interpret identity-implicating events as identity opportunities or threats and highlighting their subsequent responses during a major changeful event. Our discoveries invite us to reconsider prior assumptions and open new research avenues in the identity and global mobility literatures.

INDIVIDUALS' INTERPRETATIONS OF AND RESPONSES TO DISRUPTIONS

Crises and changes are as ubiquitous as they are challenging for organizational members. Such events have implications for individuals' identities—i.e., they can impact individuals' perceptions of who they are, which include their personal and demographic characteristics, group affiliations, relationships, and roles in society (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). When facing drastic changes, individuals interpret their experience as an identity threat or opportunity (Bataille & Vough, 2022). Generally, such events spark identity threats, that is, the perception that the experience indicates “potential harm to the value, meanings, and/ or enactment of an identity” (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). However, individuals can also see such events as an identity opportunity, that is, as an experience indicating “potential for growth in the value, meanings, and/ or enactment of an identity (Bataille & Vough, 2022: 97). The interpretation of the event as an opportunity or a threat partly determines how individuals respond to the experience—i.e., their engagement in identity work.

For global professionals whose work entails physical mobility through business travel to achieve their work objectives (Costas, 2013; Shaffer et al., 2012), the pandemic and its related curbs to all travel represented a drastic and potentially identity-implicating disruption. However,

it is unclear whether global professionals would have interpreted the pandemic and the associated changes as an identity threat or opportunity. This is because physical mobility is a double-edged sword for professionals. While travel is often conceived as glamorous and status-granting (Cohen & Gössling, 2015; Costas, 2013), it also comes with significant personal and social costs, such as intense workload, stress, and exhaustion (Choudhury, 2022). This is particularly the case for global professionals engaged in cross-border mobility. For these individuals, travel is often a perk, especially if it offers additional amenities such as business class service and allows for some discretion around travel schedules and destinations. At the same time, global professionals also experience increased personal and social demands that longer distance travel brings about, including the need to adjust to time zone differences and related sleep problems, extended time away from family and other adverse impacts in the non-work domain, and exposure to cultural and linguistic barriers (Hinds et al., 2011; Jooss et al., 2022; Shaffer et al., 2012). Thus, some global professionals may have interpreted the pandemic and the associated travel bans as threatening because travel is a valued aspect of their work identity, while others may have interpreted them as a welcome change to their hectic and stressful routines. In other words, global professionals' *prior* experiences with travel may have played an important role in determining their responses to pandemic-induced changes.

Few researchers have focused on the factors that explain why some people appraise an identity-implicating experience as threatening while others do not. In fact, most models begin with the identity-implicating experience (e.g., Bataille & Vough, 2022; Petriglieri, 2011). Some notable exceptions include work on threat sensitivity and threat vigilance. This research has shown, for example, that individual differences in suspiciousness of other people's motives increase the likelihood of interpreting an experience—even a positive one—as threatening (Kunstman & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Moreover, identity theorists have argued that identification with

a target increases sensitivity to threat but research findings around this relationship have been mixed, with some studies highlighting that identification impacted threat (e.g., Settles, 2004), and others indicating it did not (e.g., McGonagle & Barnes-Farrell, 2014). In other research, threat sensitivity is primarily related to the context in which a triggering event is occurring (e.g., in contexts where people are reassured that their treatment is not connected to their group membership [Emerson & Murphy, 2014]; during developmentally sensitive periods in a person's life [Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012]). While these examples are informative, they focus on individual traits and contextual features rather than on experiences prior to the unexpected event that may explain why people make sense of it in a certain way (Maitlis, 2020).

Relatedly, an especially interesting yet under-explored question lies in the reasons why people interpret an adverse event as an opportunity to grow (Maitlis, 2020). Indeed, researchers have overwhelmingly focused on how such negative events trigger identity threats, but there are reasons to believe that individuals can view them as opportunities (Bataille & Vough, 2022). For example, Wehrle, Klehe, Kira, and Zikic (2018) found that refugees' initial appraisals of identity threat gradually transformed into opportunity appraisals over time, as they learned more about their new environments. In short, people's willingness and ability to learn may impact why they interpret an adverse event positively. In a rare example of a study focusing on events that occurred prior to a change, Maitlis (2022) found that differences in early parental relationships partly explained dancers' interpretations of and responses to interruptions in their artistic careers. Gaining an understanding of how more immediate, less distal, experiences interact with characteristics of the change event to shape opportunity appraisals will offer a more complete picture of growth in adversity (Maitlis, 2020).

Lastly, interpreting an experience as a threat or an opportunity yields different identity work responses (Bataille & Vough, 2022). When facing identity threats, people engage in two

broad categories of responses: identity protection and identity restructuring (Petriglieri, 2011).

Identity protection does not involve a change to one's identity; instead, the individual directs their efforts onto the source of the threat, by discrediting it, by presenting threat perpetrators with positive information about the threatened identity, or by concealing or downplaying said identity.

Identity restructuring, by contrast, implies a change to the concerned identity. For example, individuals can work to decrease the importance of the identity or can revise the meanings they attach to it. Alternatively, the individual can rid themselves of the threatened identity and transition out of their job or occupation (i.e., role exit, see Ebaugh, 1988).

By contrast, when facing identity opportunities, individuals tend to engage in identity play (Bataille & Vough, 2022), i.e., in an open exploration of different possible future selves (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). In short, identity work following identity opportunities tends to be a creative, open process, during which people draw on a broad set of options and meanings. Given the nature of the pandemic and the extent of the disruption to global professionals' ways of working, we expected that studying professionals' responses would shed new light on identity work processes following threat and opportunity appraisals. Indeed, extant research has yielded insights on identity work, but these studies focused on events that were not shared across national boundaries (Caligiuri et al., 2020) *and* temporary in nature (Hennekam et al., 2020).

In sum, the pre-pandemic period and the pandemic itself serve as fertile contexts to study the following two inter-related research questions: ***How did global professionals interpret and navigate the disruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about? And how did global professionals' previous experiences affect their subsequent responses to these disruptions?***

METHOD

We were initially drawn to understanding how individuals manage the tensions inherent in their global work roles. Specifically, we wanted to examine in depth the experiences, challenges,

and identity-related implications of engaging in work that requires physical mobility to interact with dispersed colleagues (Hinds et al., 2011; Shaffer, et al., 2012). To this end, we compiled a diverse pool of 30 global professionals and interviewed them between January and early March 2020 (see details about our participants below and in Table 1). Shortly after, COVID-19 spread worldwide and upended our informants' lives. We became interested in exploring their perceptions of and responses to pandemic-related changes. We thus contacted them for another interview in May and June 2020. Except for one informant who sadly passed away after contracting COVID-19 and another informant who could not be reached, all participants agreed to be interviewed again. This resulted in 58 interviews across the two time points. We employed open-ended questions and analyzed the data as it was collected; these analyses guided subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Repeated interviews with the same informants represented a suitable approach for exploring their reactions to the changes the pandemic brought about and possible reasons for these responses (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016; Maitlis, 2020). To analyze these longitudinal qualitative data, we followed an inductive analytical approach based on grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Informants

Since we were interested in individuals' experience of their global work roles, we adopted a purposeful sampling technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). In line with common definitions and corporate practice of global work (Hinds et al., 2011; Shaffer et al., 2012), we contacted individuals who were based in their country of origin (i.e., their local context) and whose jobs involved recurring cross-border movements. We initially accessed individuals through our networks and then used snowball sampling, asking each person at the end of the first interview to suggest other informants who fitted our criteria. In building our

participant pool, we ensured diversity in terms of nationality, gender, age, industry, and job title. To protect informants' anonymity, we use pseudonyms as listed in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Data Collection

Following standard procedures for conducting semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), we organized the two interview protocols for our study in two key sections, respectively (see Appendix A for excerpts of relevant questions). At Time 1, the first section covered background information including demographics and informants' current work roles (e.g., nature of their global work role, time spent traveling abroad, time spent interacting virtually with international colleagues, general work demands). In the second section, we asked open-ended questions to understand participants' motivations for engaging in global work, their experience with global work, as well as implications for their identity and well-being. For example, we invited our informants to share how they dealt with potential incompatibilities between local demands (e.g., tasks and interactions in their local context) and their global work role and explored how important the global aspects of their work role were to them.

Before each of our second interviews, we reread the corresponding Time 1 transcript. This allowed us to remind each informant of the date and focus of the first interview as well as to build rapport with them. Our Time 2 interview protocol included questions about potential changes to informants' job status and work role due to the pandemic and follow-up questions delving into how informants dealt with these changes. Additionally, we asked participants open-ended questions to understand the pandemic's impact on their work role perceptions, their career plans, and more broadly, their behaviors and attitudes. Throughout, we repeatedly probed our

informants about how they responded to the pandemic-induced changes they had experienced at work. We also posed grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979), e.g., we invited interviewees to recount a typical workweek to elicit details about pandemic-related changes.

To diversify the research team's perspectives, each author conducted half of the interviews. Interviews at both time points were conducted in English or in French, one of the co-authors' native language, and lasted between 35 and 90 minutes (apart from one 20-minute interview at Time 2). They were recorded and then professionally transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 700 pages of data. For convenience, our results section presents the translated quotes from all French interviews.

Data Analysis

Consistent with recommended practices for inductive qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 2008), for each data collection wave we coded interview transcripts by comparing the emerging codes within and across interviews to elaborate and refine our coding scheme. Our sample was determined at Time 1. As we approached 30 Time 1 interviews with a diverse set of global professionals, we noticed that the new data could be well categorized with already existing codes and no new codes emerged anymore, suggesting that we had reached theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in our original quest to explore how individuals manage the tensions inherent in their global work roles. At Time 2, we coded the 28 new interview transcripts and developed a new set of codes specific to the Time 2 data.

Following recurrent approaches to longitudinal qualitative data analysis (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016), we analyzed and stabilized our codes for our Time 1 interviews before conducting the Time 2 interviews. As we were finalizing our Time 1 coding structure, the pandemic struck, and we decided to return to the field to study how this disruption impacted the respondents. Upon conducting our Time 2 interviews, we therefore circled back to our Time 1

data to look for information that could explain our Time 2 findings. In doing so, we also refined some of our Time 1 codes. For example, we had initially coded some respondents' accounts at Time 1 as indicative of "self-questioning." Upon analyzing our Time 2 data, we realized that these Time 1 accounts reflected that the respondents had wrestled with how they perceived their work roles, which led us to modify our initial code to "feeling both negative and positive about work."

We followed a two-step approach to derive codes inductively at Time 1 and Time 2. First, we read word-for-word and independently coded each transcript. During this stage, the author who had conducted the interview wrote detailed memos recording their emerging observations. Second, we analyzed batches of two to three transcripts in joint meetings to compare and discuss our independent codes and arrive at agreed upon codes. This procedure makes traditional intercoder reliability measures impractical because new codes may emerge during the process that are not defined a priori. However, the process ensured that different perspectives were considered for each transcript, thereby reducing the potential of researcher bias in the analysis (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006).

In part one of our two-step approach, we each started with open coding, a procedure in which data is "broken down in discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 102). We used descriptive codes to capture every instance when informants explained how they navigated their global work role (Time 1) and how they responded to the work-related changes resulting from the pandemic (Time 2). While assigning the emerging descriptive codes, we began to link data fragments from differing but related categories. We also moved back and forth between data analysis and the literature to make sense of our emerging findings. For example, at Time 1, we identified patterns in some of our interviewees' narratives suggesting they had always been striving to travel internationally,

which led us to develop a category labeled “aspiration for mobile self.” When analyzing the Time 2 transcripts, we noticed that different informants mentioned enhanced relationships with colleagues through connecting on a more personal level, and we subsequently established a category labelled “improving personal connections with colleagues.”

We next assessed how the various categories related to one another to determine the underlying theoretical dimensions. For example, at Time 1, we had identified statements that reflected informants’ “perceived distinctiveness from others” and other statements about “struggles to connect with cultural others”. As we went back and forth across our interviews, we realized that these categories reflected tensions in interviewees’ relationships with distant others at work. In the Time 2 data, the emerging categories suggested different identity work responses to the pandemic-induced changes. Some themes pointed to informants’ motivation to affiliate with others (e.g., “developing psychological bonds with distant others” and “improving personal connections with colleagues”). Other themes suggested that informants paused their identity work in response to the pandemic (e.g., “waiting for disruption to pass” and “postponing thoughts and actions about aspirations”). We captured our emerging codes in Excel tables (for a similar process, see Williams & Murphy, 2022), where the rows reflected the informants and the columns the emerging codes at Time 1 and Time 2. Through this comparative process, we noticed differences across our sample, which led us to split the sample into three pathways.

We evaluated multiple conceptual models that could explain our research findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001), drawing on theoretical concepts we found in the literature (e.g., psychological bond with others [Leach et al., 2008]; cosmopolitan identity [Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018]; ambivalent experiences [Ashforth, Rogers, Pratt, & Pradies, 2014]; identity tensions [Beech et al., 2012]). Additionally, we returned to our Time 1 data to search for indications for why respondents engaged in one identity work response relative to another. For

example, we noticed that informants who pondered about their work identity at Time 2 had previously experienced ambivalence toward their work and interpreted the pandemic-induced travel restrictions—and the additional time they had on their hands—as an opportunity to alleviate this ambivalence. By contrast, respondents who paused their identity work during the pandemic had mentioned a tension between their local and their mobile aspirational self. The pandemic threatened this aspirational self, causing them to pause identity work.

For conceptual clarity, we present the Time 1 identity tensions and the corresponding Time 2 interpretation of the disruption and emerging identity work responses as distinct pathways. However, six informants fit both the plugging in and the pondering pathways, as indicated by the superscripts in Table 1. By contrast, we did not find indications that respondents who paused were also on another pathway. Below, we present both actual words from our informants as exemplary quotations, and more abstract concepts in the form of second-order categories and aggregate dimensions that we developed based on the linkages and themes present in the first-order accounts. We indicate for each quotation whether it stems from our Time 1 (T1) or Time 2 (T2) interviews.

FINDINGS

Pre-pandemic, all our respondents described tensions—i.e., opposing or pulling forces (Beech et al., 2012)—between different elements of their work role identities. Researchers have pointed out that the experience of such tensions elicits identity work (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006). We discovered three distinct identity tensions in global professionals' Time 1 narratives that led participants to engage in different interpretations of and identity work responses to the pandemic. Briefly, participants who experienced tensions in how they related to distant others at work pre-pandemic viewed the globally shared nature of the disruption as an opportunity to ease these tensions by *plugging in* to bond with others.

Respondents who had recounted ambivalence in relation to their work interpreted the pandemic-induced travel restrictions as an opportunity to alleviate these feelings by *pondering* about their work identity. Finally, participants who experienced discrepancies between their local self and a mobile aspirational self at Time 1 perceived the pandemic and the associated travel bans as a threat to their aspirations and momentarily *paused* their identity work during the pandemic, in keeping with the event's temporariness. Below, we develop each of the pathways delineated above. We then explicate how these tensions relate to participants' interpretation of the pandemic and their corresponding identity work responses. Table 2 provides additional representative quotes from the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews. We present the pathways in order of frequency in our data.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Pathway 1: Alleviating Pre-existing Tensions by Plugging in

In our Time 1 interviews before the pandemic, 14 informants pointed to tensions regarding their relationships with distant others at work, either because they perceived themselves as distinct from their colleagues, or because they struggled to connect with cultural others. At Time 2, these respondents viewed the globally shared nature of the pandemic as an opportunity to restore this imbalance in their relationship with others and described two ways in which they plugged in: by developing a bond with a global collective, and by connecting on a more personal level with colleagues. Research evidence is mixed regarding whether, during changeful times, people connect (e.g., del Fresno-Díaz et al., Estevan-Reina, Sánchez-Rodríguez, Willis, & de Lemus, 2023; Flade, Klar & Imhoff, 2019) or focus on themselves and disconnect (e.g., Dinić & Bodroža, 2021; Jo, Harrison & Gray, 2021), and scholars have called for a better understanding

of global professionals' experiences in that regard (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Our data suggest that individuals' desire to affiliate or detach in response to a disruption is not monolithic. Instead, the people who plugged in at Time 2 had a prior, unfulfilled, need to affiliate and the change event presented them with an opportunity to address this need.

Pre-pandemic tensions in relationships with distant others at work. The participants who later plugged in all experienced tensions related to their relationships with distant others pre-pandemic, which manifested in two different ways. First, several informants expressed *a strong sense of distinctiveness from others*. Prior research has identified several sources of distinctiveness, including position (distinctiveness in one's place within social relationships), difference (distinctiveness in an individual's qualities), and separateness (distinctiveness in terms of psychological distance or separation from others; see Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2002). According to this research, distinctiveness is always in tension with the countervailing identity motive of belongingness (feeling of closeness and acceptance; also see Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollidge, & Scabini, 2006). Our respondents' accounts conveyed a sense of separateness from other colleagues, be it from global or local colleagues. For example, Leila, a Moroccan customer service manager who interacted regularly with stakeholders in Africa and Europe, noted:

To feel like a citizen of the world? Sincerely, no, for the simple reason that it is not true, we are not equal compared to someone who has the same job in Spain or in France, we are not the same in terms of the rights we have, we are not the same in terms of the hours we work, we are not the same in terms of the management we have, the management is nicer in France or in Spain. I speak from experience, we are not in the same position, I feel that I work in Morocco, I do not forget that I work in Morocco. (Leila, T1)

The quote conveys that, pre-pandemic, Leila drew a clear separation between her and her global colleagues due to unequal rights and poorer management styles while emphasizing that management is nicer abroad and that, in Morocco, "we still have a long way to go, there are many

things we need to work on” (T1). The latter suggests a desire for less separateness, a tension which was also present in other informants’ accounts (see Table 2).

For other professionals, their perceived distinctiveness was most pronounced toward their colleagues working in jobs that do not involve global tasks and interactions. For instance, Khadija, a Moroccan entrepreneur, differentiated herself from local colleagues because they would “prefer stability, don’t like challenges, don’t take risks, don’t have an encouraging environment” (T1). Similarly, Beatriz, a Spanish professional working in fundraising who had previously lived abroad, explained how she felt disconnected from her local team members, despite sharing the same cultural origin:

I feel much more comfortable with my team in Munich and in New York, for example, than sometimes with my Spanish team [...]. I feel more comfortable with that global culture. For example, Madrid is very local. Our team in Madrid, they’ve always lived in Madrid... sometimes it’s much more difficult. (Beatriz, T1)

At the same time, Beatriz was acutely aware of the need to connect with local stakeholders to do her job, while emphasizing the effort it took her. When discussing both colleagues and potential donors, she disclosed the following: “I have to prepare much more a meeting with local people than with an international. For example, here in Spain, you talk a lot about personal things” (T1). She went on to discuss how difficult it was for her to entertain donors: “Talking about Barça, the soccer, talking about Real Madrid, you need to know these things and I have zero interest. [...]” (T1). The tension resides in her perceived distance to—and discomfort in—connecting with local stakeholders in a context where it is a requirement.

Second, respondents described *struggling to connect with cultural others*. Cultural differences were a salient obstacle to identifying personally with others at work at Time 1 (i.e., personal identification, Ashforth, Schinoff, & Rogers, 2016). For example, before the pandemic,

Heather, a British IT professional working in a pharmaceutical company, viewed her work as “breaking down those boundaries between countries” (T1). However, she noted:

I find in Chennai in India, there’s a lot more respect, and I find that can sometimes be a negative because people don’t want to offend you or feel that they have said no to something, even if they can’t do it. It takes a long time to break down those cultural norms and build that rapport to make it clear that I do want honest feedback, I do want you to tell me if you can’t do something or you need some help. (Heather, T1)

As the above quote exemplifies, Heather was trying very hard to pull down cultural barriers to fulfil her job. Cultural barriers also instilled a sense of loneliness in some respondents, weakening their personal identification with cultural others. Teresa, a French HR executive who was based in Europe and regularly travelled to the firm’s Japanese headquarters, recounted challenges to connect with her Japanese colleagues, even during her trips to Japan:

When I’m in Japan, I’m not physically alone, because I’m in open space, so I am surrounded by people. [...] I still feel sometimes very alone, because I’m the only Westerner in the entire office in Japan. [...] It’s very striking to me that they have this open space and, in the corner, there is a kitchen and a place where you can sit. There are tables and you can have a coffee or tea. They go there, they get their coffee or tea, and then they go and sit back at their desk. They never take five minutes to just chat with a colleague about what they’re going to do for the weekend or how’s the weather today or how’s your family. They don’t do that. (Teresa, T1)

In sum, several informants experienced tensions in how they related to others pre-pandemic. Although their work roles required them to connect to local and global colleagues, these professionals felt distinct from their colleagues and found it difficult to relate to them.

COVID-19 as an opportunity to rebalance relationships with others. In our Time 2 interviews, informants who had previously experienced tensions in their work relationships with others interpreted the shared aspect of the pandemic as an opportunity to rebalance relationships with them, which subsequently eased pre-existing tensions. For example, Heather explained how the pandemic-induced changes presented her with a chance to know her colleagues better, because they all had the same experience of working from home:

In terms of just general day-to-day working, obviously everybody's working from home. I think the only country where we've got team members who are back to normal is China. They're back in the office now, but certainly, in Mexico and in India, where most of our team are based, everybody's still on lockdown. It's been a great opportunity in many ways to get to know my team members a bit better. I've met pets, children, partners, parents. It's been really nice. (Heather, T2)

In a similar vein, Fausto, an Indian professional working in logistics, explained that the pandemic allowed company leaders like himself to focus on shared pending issues, including financial analyses, setting common objectives, training, and communication:

One good thing is we were able to focus on what we could not focus on during our day-to-day humdrums: the issues. We were able to finalize our objectives agreed for 2020, very clearly, more specifically. We were able to delve deeply into some more analysis, and we were able to do an assessment on people which was pending, we could do that. [...] Each one of us are making sure that we are communicating, we are training our team members. Not only team members but others in the company. [...] This period, this is a very golden opportunity in that way. [...] Because we have spent more than 30% of our time in terms of training, we created a learning community. (Fausto, T2)

Relatedly, Teresa, the French HR executive, described how she found an opportunity to better connect with others by sending them a note after newly established video calls, and how this improved her spirits:

My organization sets up a Teams call every week for the managers, where they give an update on countries or business units or the general situation. Initially, I was not included, but when I found out that it happened, I asked to be included. It's not always the same people presenting. [...] What I've done is, after they present, I took the habit of sending them a little note to say, 'Great presentation. How are you?' and making a connection [...] That, for me, has been super important for my mental health. It's just to have interactions with different people in the organization, to be able to know how they're doing, what they're experiencing; which is also good for me to know as an HR leader. (Teresa, T2)

As Teresa elaborated, making these connections not only improved her well-being but also provided a chance to obtain a better understanding of different departments, which helped her fulfil her work role. In other words, Teresa, like other informants, saw the shared nature of the pandemic-related disruptions as an opportunity to better connect, which allowed them to alleviate pre-existing tensions.

How global professionals plugged in. Upon analyzing our Time 2 data, we noticed that the 14 informants who had experienced tensions regarding their relationship with others repeatedly indicated how they plugged in to bond with others (Vignoles et al., 2006), both global and local colleagues. These global professionals gained connectedness in two, sometimes co-occurring ways: (1) by developing psychological bonds with distant others, and (2) by improving personal connections with colleagues.

First, during the pandemic, many participants started to *develop psychological bonds with distant others* due to a sense of being in the same difficult situation. These individuals described a connection with humankind instead of with communities tied to a nation, a perception which is commonly referred to as cosmopolitan identity (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulsen, 2017). When activating a cosmopolitan identity, informants viewed themselves as parts of an encompassing, superordinate group rather than as members of less inclusive collectives such as country- or region-based groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009). For these informants, developing a cosmopolitan identity represented a marked shift in self-meanings. While they had perceived themselves as distinct and disconnected from their global and local colleagues pre-pandemic, at Time 2 these respondents felt on equal footing with others and subsequently started to affiliate with a worldwide community. Leila, who had noted during our Time 1 interview that she was very distinct from her colleagues abroad painted a markedly different story at Time 2:

In the end, the whole world is affected by this crisis. Whether we are Spanish, Moroccan, or American, we are all affected, and we are all wondering about our future. Everyone is in the same state of mind where we live from day to day, we try to be as optimistic as possible about what will happen. There is this dimension of solidarity in relation to this crisis where we all think a little bit the same. [...] It's true that the management of this crisis has unified us a little bit by telling us: 'Well, we are all in the same boat, we must all find a solution to get out of it because otherwise it won't work.' [...] We are all human beings, vulnerable in the same way, no matter where we come from, what our social status is. It doesn't matter who we are, what our skin color is. (Leila, T2)

Leila's use of the word 'solidarity' indeed suggests that she developed a psychological bond with distant others, thereby creating a sense of belongingness to a global collective (Leach et al., 2008). Khadija, the Moroccan entrepreneur who had conveyed a strong sense of separation and differentiation from local colleagues pre-pandemic, underwent a similar change and evoked a psychological bond with others, both globally and locally:

With COVID, frankly, I say that the world has become very small, we have become like a small family because we invite each other to our homes, everyone talks to you from their homes today [...] We are all concerned by the same subject, by the same problem. We all start from the same theme, we all try to find the solution for this problem, and it is not only in one city, in one sector, it is really in the whole world, the whole globe. So, for me, we have become almost like a family, all of us. (Khadija, T2)

In other words, in these global professionals' eyes the pandemic broke barriers and had a levelling effect. In our second interview, Fausto, the Indian professional who had previously struggled to relate with global colleagues (see Table 2) and had emphasized his South Indian identity, also conjured the image of sitting in the same boat by observing:

Today, there's no difference because whether I deal with my Indian counterparts, or my Italian counterparts, or Chinese, or Vietnamese, I have the same lockdown the same way that I talk to you. [...] Today, this COVID has broken the barrier very easily. Today you are an individual connecting immediately to the world. (Fausto, T2)

In sum, the pandemic allowed these global professionals to alleviate their pre-existing connectedness tensions by casting their identity in terms of commonalities with—instead of distinctiveness from—a superordinate collective.

Second, global professionals experienced *improved personal connections with colleagues* after the pandemic started. Due to COVID-19, all our respondents shared the experience of working remotely and interacting with others in a similar situation. Our participants' interaction partners were suddenly surrounded with their family and pets and were often working from informal settings, such as their kitchen or their living room. This degree of shared informality, in

turn, helped remove pre-existing tensions and allowed our informants to connect with colleagues and collaborators on a more personal level than they were able to before the pandemic. For

Heather, the British IT professional, the pandemic had a positive effect in that regard:

People are far more likely to turn on their cameras now than they ever were [...]. I think in a way just getting a little snapshot of people's homes and them in their comfy clothes and no makeup, no hair done. You do feel more of a rapport. I think people are more human to you. It does feel as if we've had a bit more time in some ways to get to know people just through talking about their environment or their kids walking in or a cat jumping on the desk. The professional mask drops away and that's been a really positive thing. Not just with my managers and my peers, but also in my team as well. I work quite a lot with the more junior team members in Chennai, and Guadalajara. Particularly in Chennai, there's often a real sense of hierarchy and respect. I've always had to work quite hard to try and break that down because I don't manage like that. I want to be pulled up on things by anyone and I want people to speak up. I think it has been very beneficial in fast-tracking that breaking down of the hierarchy and the barriers. (Heather, T2)

In the same vein, Teresa, the French HR executive who had expressed her frustration about relating to her Japanese colleagues, perceived noticeable improvements. At Time 2, she recounted how her relationships with the same colleagues had become friendlier. This was even more remarkable as she was not able to travel physically to Japan:

I also initiated, with the younger [Japanese] members of that team, more of an informal chat once a month [...]. It took two hours once a month, but still, that's something new that I'm doing with them. We've done it three times now, and the third session was like a breakthrough moment where they started opening up more as individuals and sharing things more on a personal level, which, in fact, they had not done yet even when I was there physically. (Teresa, T2)

Echoing the difficulty to connect, other participants had similarly described their struggles to bond with team members in our Time 1 interviews. These challenges seemed to feed into global professionals' sense of separateness. However, when the pandemic struck, these informants' work relationships took a more personal turn. They seemed to be increasingly aware of other people's personal situations. For example, Beatriz, the Spanish professional working in fundraising, described how, in sharp contrast to her usual preference for segmenting work and personal life, she connected with colleagues personally due to the shared context:

I do feel closer to my clients, to my donors... much closer because you talk to them, they're in their house, you get another perspective or when you talk to the different people in the different companies, our partner companies, you talk to the head of HR and they are in their houses, you are in your house. It gets closer somehow, although you are farther away because you're not having lunch together, it's quite interesting. [...] I feel more global in the sense that with my team in New York or in Munich, I always have my calls on Skype or Teams or Zoom. Now, I do the same with my local team. Suddenly, I feel like my local team is more international. Why? Because we are in the same space which is here on the laptop. [...] Another thing that I felt with my team is that you get closer and inevitably you get into more personal things, which I was sometimes a little bit careful about [before]—because I thought when I went to America it was about separating work [and personal life]. But now, I think it's important also to know personally what people are going through because people deal with this crisis in a different way. (Beatriz, T2)

Interestingly, coming from a more relationship-oriented country (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) Beatriz had learned, through her professional experience in the US, to segment work and family, and had to reconsider her stance due to the pandemic. Like the other global professionals in this pathway, she seemed to view the collective experience of the pandemic as a chance to connect, thereby easing her earlier tensions in her relationships with distant colleagues.

Pathway 2: Alleviating Pre-existing Tensions by Pondering

Before the pandemic, 12 global professionals—six of whom also plugged in—experienced ambivalence regarding their work. For some, this ambivalence is best described as a tension between how they viewed themselves at work and how they thought relevant others viewed them. Other participants described an internal conflict wherein they felt positively about some elements of their work and felt negatively about others. At Time 2, the pandemic-induced travel restrictions provided them with more time than they normally had, which presented them with the opportunity to ponder. The second identity work response induced by the pandemic was 'self-reflection', a type of identity work that characterizes liminal periods (Beech, 2011) and changeful times (Caza et al., 2018). While people often self-reflect when facing a major disruption (Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, & Ybema, 2016), our data suggest that such pondering was not ubiquitous. Instead, only informants who had experienced ambivalence prior to the disruption

and hence craved self-reflection seemed to engage in it. These global professionals described two ways in which they pondered: by finding more meaning in their work, and by envisaging identity change aimed at opening options for more meaningful work in the future.

Pre-pandemic ambivalence toward work. Pre-pandemic, the informants in this pathway were all experiencing ambivalence, that is, both positive and negative emotional or cognitive orientations—including identification—toward their work, resulting in feelings of tension and conflict (Ashforth et al., 2014). While ambivalent experiences do not always lead to negative outcomes, they invoke emotions and attitudes that are complex and contradictory, and individuals often seek to resolve them (Rothman, Pratt, Rees, & Vogus, 2017). At the time of our first interviews, the global professionals in this pathway all had busy work schedules, filled with long-distance travel and meetings with international colleagues and stakeholders, which allowed them little cognitive space to address their felt ambivalence. For example, Kilian, a Spanish CFO in the laundry equipment industry, indicated that he traveled internationally “120 days per year” (T1), while Irena, a Spanish sales executive “travel[ed] internationally 40% of [her] time” and experienced her “agenda full of meetings,” leaving her with “no time for thinking” (T1). A French consultant described his typically heavy workload while traveling as follows:

Usually, we travel on Mondays. We leave at 10 or 11 AM and then we land there at 6 or 7 PM, and then from 8 PM to midnight, you will have to work from home. It’s something you can expect (Patrick, T1)

Ambivalence was twofold. First, several global professionals described *discrepancies between their own and others’ perceptions of themselves at work*. For example, Beatriz, the Spanish professional working in fundraising, experienced such contradictory thoughts. At Time 1, she shared how much she “really believed in the mission of [her organization]”. However, she then went on to state:

I never thought I would like this job because I was asking for money. Maybe in the US it's more common but in Europe still and in Spain, when I tell people what I do they're like, 'What?' (Beatriz, T1)

Beatriz experienced opposing orientations towards her work that are suggestive of ambivalent identification (Ashforth et al., 2014): She felt a strong pull toward her organization's mission, but a strong push from her own and other people's negative evaluations of her job.

Patrick, the French consultant, described similarly ambivalent identification:

I'm just doing [this job] because, let's say, it's stimulating intellectually. I chose the job not because I wanted to do it, but basically because I didn't know what I wanted to do. When I thought of people out of business school, they basically do consulting, so I did it [...]. When I explain to my friends what I do for work, they don't understand it, or they just don't consider me as a person who would do this. My personal life is more like I'm doing a lot of music and then I'm interested in cinema a lot, lots of artistic stuff and people would never depict me as a consultant working in an environment with the stakes that we're dealing with. (Patrick, T1)

Khadija, the Moroccan entrepreneur, was also torn between her natural products company that she seemed passionate to launch while at the same time continuing to be steeped in her current consulting job. She described how others seemed to know her through her consulting activity and how it made it difficult for her to see herself as a cosmetics entrepreneur:

With my other job as a consultant, I still can't manage to detach myself, that is to say, if I'm asked to do another training course, I don't say no and sometimes I wonder if I should really detach myself from what I knew before to devote myself entirely to my new project. But I can't really manage to detach myself because people knew me first with my consulting hat... besides, when I introduce myself, I always introduce myself like that, first, and then I say that I'm launching this new company... maybe because the activity of this new natural products company is quite recent but, in any case, I can't yet detach myself from my consulting activity and that's a bit difficult [...] I know that for me it will be difficult to do both because if I want for example to remain very well-known and active in this field, I will have to multiply the activities, the interventions. (Khadija, T1)

Khadija explicitly noted the multiple, "difficult" demands on her time to maintain her consulting job while developing her new venture, which left her with little space to step back and reflect on how to resolve this perceived ambivalence.

Second, several participants recounted internal struggles that had to do with *feeling both negative and positive about their work*. For example, François, a French media and entertainment entrepreneur, regularly switched from projects he was passionate about to others that made him depressed:

In the video shootings abroad, there is often the field aspect, there are associations or people who carry out actions where there is a human link, where there is specific help, creation, it's really lively but when it's in Paris, a cocktail party, an event on blockchain because it's a buzzword, same for [Startup 1], same for [Startup 2]. That's a big difference in the type of mission, clearly. [...] I have a hard time finding it rewarding, I was at the point where maybe I'm going to change jobs, maybe I have to leave, but I have to turn to the social and solidarity economy a little more to make videos that have a meaning, [...] except that the job is so important to me that it clearly involves periods of a bit of depression, what the hell am I doing, it's not right. (François, T1)

He further explained that his corporate projects allowed him to make a living but clearly were not meaningful to him, leading him to experience ambivalent identification with his work. Others similarly felt both positive and negative about their work. Irena, the Spanish sales executive, shared her thoughts about having a great team, but was disappointed in her organization for not sufficiently valuing the team members, and in her managers for imposing unrealistic objectives:

For me, my dream since I arrived at [my organization] was the opportunity to set up a sales department where people could work hard, and get the objectives, but without the level of stress. I think that at this moment I have a sales team with incredible people, super devoted, and I said this to HR many times, 'You have people you don't deserve.' Because they're people who go far beyond what [the organization] gives them. [...] Objectives are not reasonable for what you have... If you are asking me for these objectives, I can tell you already that this is not going to be achieved because this is the historical data of how these people have been selling. The maximum these guys can do is this. I can tell you already. If you're pushing this, you are hiding a salary decrease for everyone in one year. This is a conversation that I had in the last two years, because this is the thing, and I can't do it. (Irena, T1)

The unrealistic objectives not only resulted in additional stress for Irena but also raised demands on her time to schedule additional meetings with her sales team on top of international travels, thereby leaving her with even fewer moments to think, as alluded to earlier. Alejandra, a

Mexican professional working in financial services, similarly harbored mixed feelings about her work. At Time 1, she explained:

At first, when I started working at [Company], I had an issue with my values because I was making [Tobacco product]. For me, it was an immoral thing. I'm doing something that kills. That was my first impression. I was like, 'This is not me.' [...] But for me it was also a moment of being proud to be working here because we got a lot of diversity; they don't care about race, sexual preference, disabilities, there are people in wheelchairs. I love that about my company. It's like, 'We support everyone.' For me, it was a change of mind, not because they're making a product that is unhealthy and they're a bad company and it's making me a bad person. Also, I need to see all the good things they are doing. (Alejandra, T1)

Despite the misgivings about her employers' products, she conveyed pride about various positive aspects of her work, including that she "really like[d] the culture" (Alejandra, T1). In sum, the informants in this pathway faced ambivalence regarding their work, either in the form of a tension between their own and others' perceptions of themselves at work, or in the form of struggling with both negative and positive emotions at work. However, these participants were too busy to address this ambivalence.

COVID-19 as an opportunity to alleviate ambivalence toward work. In our Time 2 interviews, the global professionals who had experienced ambivalence at Time 1 interpreted the pandemic-induced changes—and especially the lockdown and absence of travel—as an opportunity to reflect upon their work identity. In turn, self-reflection alleviated their pre-existing ambivalence toward work. Specifically, participants viewed this period as an opportunity to think about their work, about who they are and who they want to become, something that does not come naturally to most individuals (c.f., Wilson, Reinhard, Westgate, Gilbert, Ellerbeck, Hahn et al., 2014).

At Time 1, the global professionals had busy schedules, filled with frequent, long-distance travel and meetings with international stakeholders. When listing the pandemic-induced changes, the informants in this pathway all noted that they suddenly had more time on their hands. The

absence of travel and office commutes as well as the lockdown imposed in most countries freed many hours in our participants' workdays. Indeed, they seemed to view travel restrictions as a positive side effect of the pandemic. Beatriz, the Spanish executive, highlighted the excitement she experienced:

I'm quite excited about this new opportunity [...] to be able to think more. [...] When you are running to catch a plane, when you are on a taxi from meeting to meeting, there is no time to think. (Beatriz, T2)

Interestingly, our informants acknowledged that travel had not always been a requirement before the pandemic but often served as a temptation. As such, travel bans forcibly removed these global professionals' choice to travel and paradoxically enabled them to better control their time, as François, the French entrepreneur, noted:

It's also very rich in itself to have a time when you no longer have the choice, you travel less, and you are a master of your time with less possibilities and temptations to travel. So, it's also interesting for that. (François, T2)

Echoing the unpleasantness of self-reflection (Wilson et al., 2014), another informant noted that having so much time to think was initially a source of stress. Having gradually eased into and being comfortable with it by the time of our second interview, this participant observed:

[The pandemic] has given me some time to look out into the future, given me a lot of time to think. Initially, that was a bit stressful, [to] have a lot of time to think. I'm used to being a very reactive guy and I'm an operation-type of guy, but I got used to it and I feel comfortable with it now. (Christian, T2)

Making sense of the pandemic as an opportunity to think, the professionals embarked on an in-depth exploration of who they are and experimented with relatively immature (that is, not fully elaborated) possible selves or even ideal selves (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). For example, Vladimir, the Bulgarian executive who was traveling "more than 50% of the time" pre-pandemic observed in our second interview:

Because I was not traveling, I had a lot of time to think and to go deeper into my personality, my inner self, and of how things are going to continue from now on. [...] I

was thinking a lot about how this change, this transformation is going to affect my profession and I'm seeing certain implications, I'm not sure how exactly that is going to happen but I'm trying to prepare. [...] Reinvention during our careers is something which I'm now convinced of more than ever. (Vladimir, T2)

In short, our informants interpreted the pandemic as an opportunity to self-reflect, an activity which had previously been crowded out of their busy work schedules. They considered the gained time to think as a positive side effect of the pandemic. This allowed them to alleviate their pre-existing ambivalence in relation to work, as we will outline next.

How global professionals pondered. For the 12 global professionals in this second pathway, the pandemic resulted in changes that provided a welcome break in an otherwise fast-paced world (e.g., no international travel, lockdowns) which allowed our participants to self-reflect. Specifically, our interviewees used the extra time on their hands to resolve their prior ambivalence. Pondering manifested in two related ways: Our informants reframed their work roles in a way that increased their meaningfulness, and they described how this crisis led them to reflect about their work-related identities and envisage self-change.

First, our participants' self-reflective identity work entailed taking time to think about how their work positively influences others (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In so doing, participants came to *find more meaning in their work*. "By signaling [...] that their efforts influence[d] the well-being of other people" (Grant, 2008: 109), global professionals were able to reduce their pre-existing ambivalence. This response was especially salient in people who previously felt torn between their own and others' perceptions of themselves at work. For example, when asked whether he had experienced changes to his job due to the pandemic, Patrick, the French consultant who had described how his friends could not understand why he would do this job, offered a markedly different narrative:

I think [my job] has become more important. I think [my company] and the [Saudi Arabian] clients, they were completely panicking because we couldn't travel. They had to

be reassured that some people were still working for them and helping them. I actually played an essential role, and we were there all the time, answering the phone, picking up the calls, etc. I think we've become, maybe, more important. [...] I'd say that we really became essential. (Patrick, T2)

Increased work meaning often came alongside feeling responsible for others. Respondents underlined their duty to help others around them, their duty to soldier on and support the organization's financial health, and their duty to their employees and/or subordinates. For example, Beatriz, who had previously recounted struggling with others' negative evaluations of her fundraising job, explained how the crisis had rendered her job more essential for her organization:

The thing is that the job that I have right now, I'm in fundraising, so it's looking for funds. Right now, that's when the [institution] needs my department the most, and because, of course, in terms of crisis, there are still very wealthy people and people who want to do things for others. That's why we are working so hard now because we know that we are essential for the [institution]. [...] I do feel very much a sense of responsibility. (Beatriz, T2)

She continued by stressing that "right now it's acceptable to ask like this, it's up to me and my team to be creative to try to get more funds" (Beatriz, T2). In her eyes, others had become more understanding of her activities to engage in fundraising, a perception which eased her previous ambivalence.

In addition to contributing to others' well-being, finding more work meaning also seemed to boost respondents' own well-being. Pre-pandemic, Khadija, the Moroccan entrepreneur who had founded two separate businesses—an international HR consultancy and coaching business, and an export company—had shared how conflicted she felt between the two businesses and how difficult it was to detach herself from the consulting business because others continued to see her primarily as a consultant. However, she had started to view her consultancy business as "very routine" and had shared her intention to focus more on her export company. Considering the pandemic, she found renewed meaning and satisfaction in her consulting activity:

It's that in relation to the consulting, coaching, accompanying people who are in difficulty in this period, that is, how they perceive this change, how they adapt, etc., people have been seeking my services and I see that I bring something. It's a pleasure that despite the difficulty and the fact that I myself am going through something that I needed to work on, it's a pleasure to see that I can bring something to others and help them in this period. (Khadija, T2)

In reflecting about how their jobs served others, global professionals were able to alleviate their ambivalence and improve their subjective well-being.

Second, several informants' self-reflective response entailed *envisaging identity change in the future*. Pre-pandemic, the global professionals in this pathway had recounted their internal struggles and ambivalent identification toward their work. Having had the opportunity to think during the lockdown, they contemplated switching occupations, careers, or sectors, revealing a desire to reinvent themselves. Projecting themselves into a different future allowed them to alleviate their prior ambivalence. For example, François, the French entrepreneur who had previously harbored misgivings about many of his work projects, now felt ready to take more risks and dedicate himself to projects that were more meaningful:

I decided that I was ready to take risks professionally, to go towards content that makes sense. [...] Now, I just have to avoid staying too much on commercial missions, because otherwise I can do that for three – four – five – six years, but I will finally be at about the same point with maybe, I don't know how many thousands of euros more in my bank account, but I think that's not what interests me the most. I've come to terms with the fact that finally, there was something I really liked about this job, that it's a job of passion, and fortunately I've managed to make a living from it and turn it into a commercial job, but that's not all. A big change. [...] It reinforces me in the idea that it's possible to plan for projects like these rather than continuing. Why? Because for a lot of people, the Coronavirus and the lockdown were a rupture, you realize what is a bit illusory, the things you run after that are not necessarily interesting, and it makes me even more comfortable with the idea of saying to myself that I already had things in mind that seemed viable, but seemed complicated to go there, because they implied changing a daily routine that can be reassuring, that reassures those around you. When you see that this daily routine is put into question, or in any case, is stopped, it finally removes this feeling of normality and therefore it opens doors. (François, T2)

It is worth noting that François already had alternative professional ideas in his mind pre-pandemic but had not yet pursued them because they required difficult changes from his daily

routine. The pandemic pushed him to follow through with these ideas in the future, to find more meaning in his work, and reduce his prior ambivalence.

Other participants who had experienced ambivalence pre-pandemic were able to define more clearly who they wanted to become at Time 2 (i.e., their future self had reached a higher degree of salience of elaboration; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). For Alejandra, the Mexican financial services professional who had displayed ambivalent identification about her organization and its products at Time 1, the pandemic-induced disruption offered a new perspective on her work and led her to consider leaving her current job and starting her own company:

Since I started my career, I always thought, ‘I want to have my own business,’ and when I started working, I was like, ‘I love the corporate stuff, the environment and everything.’ [Over the past few weeks] when I was alone, it was like, ‘I would love to be as stressed for a dream of mine, for my dream, not for the dream of another person.’ It’s been like, ‘Now that I have the feeling again, don’t let it go. Start to plan what I want to do to have a business for myself.’ (Alejandra, T2)

Similarly, Irena, a Spanish executive who had struggled with her organization’s objectives and the mismatch between how she and her organization valued her sales team pre-pandemic, engaged in thoughts about the future and emphasized the need to reinvent oneself. She described her desired future self as an expert and explained her plan to obtain a PhD degree. She further highlighted how this would allow her to be prepared for the next step in her career:

I see it as an opportunity because there are many people who need to re-invent themselves at some point. [...] I definitely have plans. I was thinking that I’m going to do a PhD. I don’t want to do an academic PhD because I don’t want to go into academia. I really want to have that part of my professional life that is deep enough to be able to publish a book on something that is interesting, [...] so that I’m an expert in something. I was thinking ‘That’s perfect. These are the three years that I can do the PhD.’ [...] Because the opportunity cost of being somewhere else making money is going to be lower, let’s use this time to do research, study, be prepared for what’s coming after this period. (Irena, T2)

In sum, several participants viewed the pandemic-induced travel restrictions as an opportunity to have more time to ponder about their work identity. Self-reflection remained a

relatively open process wherein people re-considered how their jobs impact others and envisaged identity change in the future. Notably, several informants who pondered also plugged in.

However, the global professionals who pondered did not pause identity work (the third response we uncovered) and vice-versa. This is likely because in contrast to self-reflection, which entailed thinking about how their current work influenced others and considering identity change in the future, pausing identity work involved postponing identity work until after the pandemic, as we will detail next.

Pathway 3: Alleviating Threats to Pre-existing Aspirations by Pausing

Before the pandemic, eight informants were experiencing tensions between a local self and a mobile aspirational self (Beech et al., 2012). When the pandemic struck, borders were closed, and international travel came to a halt. These changes posed a threat to respondents' aspirations. In response to this threat, the informants in this pathway put a temporary stop to their identity work regarding their pre-existing aspirations, and imagined a time, after the pandemic, when they would resume such identity work again. Given the extent of pandemic-induced changes, this response is surprising: Research suggests that in turbulent times and in the face of unexpected events people normally work intensely on their identities (Caza et al., 2018). Pausing identity work is also counter-intuitive when considering extant research on identity threat responses: Existing scholarly work suggests that threats always trigger active responses (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). Below, we describe the tensions these respondents experienced at Time 1, explain how they interpreted the pandemic as threatening, and provide illustrations of the temporary pausing response.

Pre-pandemic discrepancies between local self and mobile aspirational self. In our Time 1 interviews, all eight informants conveyed discrepancies between a local self and a mobile aspirational self. For some, this discrepancy materialized in a hoped-for expatriate self that would

be even more mobile than their current self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). For others, it was evidenced in a fear toward a local self that would not engage in international travel and cross-cultural exchange (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). First, several respondents who later paused identity work had expressed an *aspiration for a mobile self*, often in the form of an expatriation project. For example, Berat, a Turkish executive working in an international organization, discussed his wish of moving to another country as he felt it would make him happier and truer to himself than being in Turkey:

To be honest I think I would be happiest based in either New York or Geneva or Vienna working for, well at the [international organization's] headquarters where everyone is from some place, and everyone is far away from their families and their home countries, and you're sort of common in that. You're sort of equal in that you're sort of away from home. That's the place I feel comfortable... Like being back home, being here, I'm having to act a lot more local than I am. Let me put it that way. [...] I've been considering moving back to Europe again. (Berat, T1)

In the same vein, Marie, the French press and digital communications officer, shared her intention to move to another country: "My boyfriend and I are thinking about going abroad, but I want to work in French, even abroad, as a writer" (Marie, T1). So, too, did Ahmet, a Turkish key account manager, who was based in Turkey but whose job did not involve any operations in his home country. He discussed this disconnect between the reality of his work and his current location, and how he would have liked to be based in Europe:

I might be relocated to the United Kingdom in a few months because, as you see, there's no organic reason which connects me here other than being Turkish [...]. If this was my own company, I would put myself in the US though I prefer Europe. (Ahmet, T1)

In a related way, Charles, a French consultant, described his hope of expatriating, while acknowledging that his current job kept the expatriation "door" open:

I always have the hope for the project to go in another country, which is possible and for my position I used to receive propositions on LinkedIn. Like in the [Software] area. The job market is like that. I used to receive job propositions for working in England, in the Netherlands. So, I know that those positions keep the door open for working in other countries, so I like it. (Charles, T1)

Second, other respondents in this category expressed a *fear toward a local self*. For example, Sancho, the Japanese executive, shared the following:

If I were 100% in Tokyo, I wouldn't like that. If I go overseas, I feel as part of a broader international community, and I could see different things and that also excites me, it is a learning opportunity for me. I feel to some extent proud of doing something that others cannot do. I think traveling to some extent also is something I like. (Sancho, T1)

Similarly, Bryan, the US executive, described feeling “lucky getting to go on adventures” and getting “some nice interruptions to do some different stuff” regarding travel. He then invoked a contrasting story in which he would not be traveling internationally and would instead go to New York for work every day from his home in Connecticut: “If I had to do that every day of the year, that local commute, that would be less ideal” (Bryan, T1). Relatedly, Benoit, a French consultant, described his frustration whenever he was not traveling or working on an international project and contrasted it with the importance of making the most of his global culture:

When I'm in Paris and I'm not travelling, or not working on any international project, I feel frustrated... not all the time of course but I've made a lot of studies to be able to work in an international environment. You learn English, I speak a bit Spanish also. You spend hours and months learning this at school and if you cannot freely use it or develop it in your professional life, I think maybe sometimes it's disappointing also. [...] I think there is some kind of frustration of thinking that I could do more, I could learn more also because as I said at the beginning for me that's learning about other people and other cultures, that's really something I think is valuable [...]. I guess in this context, I feel that I'm not making the most of my global culture. (Benoit, T1)

Taken together, the global professionals in this pathway experienced discrepancies because they held onto a desirable, mobile future self or because they strived to avoid an undesirable self that does not travel internationally.

COVID-19 as a threat to mobile aspirational self. With the pandemic-induced travel bans, the participants who aspired for global mobility interpreted the pandemic as “indicating potential harm” to their aspirational self (Petriglieri, 2011: 641). For example, before COVID-19, Sancho had emphasized how important his international job was to him, and how he liked to

travel. At Time 2, he saw the move to telework and absence of travel as potential threats to his current and future work:

The other thing is, obviously, if you conduct everything online, there is certain uncertainty over the question of the business model of [my company] itself. The business model of my work is under question in the long term. [...] [COVID-19] is impacting [my] personal financial situation as well as shedding uncertainty on [my] future career. (Sancho, T2)

In a similar vein, Bryan, the US executive who cherished traveling and felt that a local job would be less ideal than his global job, described his fear of never traveling again:

It's only been two months [...] I'm starting to ask, 'Am I ever going to go to Spain again? Will I travel? Will I go anywhere? Was that the last time I got to go down and walk the Ramblas?' There's that creep. There's a little bit of doubt that creeps in. (Bryan, T2)

For Charles who had harbored hopes of expatriating given the opportunities in his sector, the COVID crisis posed a clear threat to this aspirational self:

Another international aspect of my job is the opportunities. My job really meant something that can be transferred to any country which has this technology that I am a consultant for. Every country in which there is [this technology], I can settle there... I could be, before the COVID crisis, a consultant there quite easily because you would get hired easily. I had opportunities to work in the Netherlands, in the UK, in Germany. I could move to almost any country as a consultant because the mobility as a [technology] consultant is very high. This is not related to my skills; this is related to this market even in Kenya. Now maybe this will be different. Maybe now, with clinical consequences, there will be fewer employment offers. Maybe the job will be less transferable to the international space. [...] It's a comeback to the reality that there are actual countries and frontiers. [...] That's what I feel when I say that I feel less international in the sense that there is less possibility to be international. (Charles, T2)

In short, these global professionals viewed the pandemic as a threat to their aspirational identity, which led them to temporarily halt their identity work, as we will outline next.

How global professionals paused identity work. Our data suggest that, in response to identity-threatening situations, individuals can—at least temporarily—refrain from activities aimed at strengthening, repairing, changing, or maintaining the threatened identities in the present while envisioning when they will do so in the future. Paradoxically, at a time when our informants were unable to project themselves into the future due to ongoing uncertainty, drawing

a future horizon in which forming plans would be possible allowed them to deal with the threat. In other words, by pausing, global professionals were able to uphold the possibility of addressing their pre-pandemic discrepancies at a later point in time. The pausing response shares some overlap with Dahm, Kim, Glomb and Harrison's (2019: 1200) identity enactment "time-bending" strategies, the "strategies through which individuals mentally travel to the past and the future". For example, to cope with threat to their family identity, Dahm et al.'s (2019) early achievers envisioned a time when they would be able to fully enact their family roles in the future (e.g., during the holidays, in the summer). Yet, our informants' response differs from this time-bending strategy in that the focus is not on future identity enactment (i.e., the engagement in activities that allow an identity to become manifest; Obodaru, 2017), but on future identity work (Caza et al., 2018). Identity work suspension as a time-bending strategy was twofold. Our informants expressed feelings of being in a holding pattern, waiting for the pandemic to pass. Participants also described postponing thoughts and decisions about their mobility aspirations until the situation would improve.

First, participants who paused offered vivid descriptions of *waiting for the disruption to pass*. For example, Sancho, the Japanese professional who had voiced fears about a local self at Time 1, drew parallels between the lessons he had learned from his surfing hobby and the sanitary crisis. He described how, when a wave hits and surfers fall off the board, they cover their head, hold their breath, and wait until the wave passes before starting again:

I practice surfing [...]. When you go into the water for surfing and fall off the board, and then waves hit you and you don't know which direction is the air or bottom of the sea, you lose your sense of direction in the water. When that happens, what you can do is cover your head and then because your body is lighter than the water, automatically your body goes up and if you wait for a few seconds, you can breathe. Cover your head and then wait for nature to calm down, and then you can breathe and start again. That lesson is very basic for people who do surfing. That lesson has been very much on my mind since the very beginning of this crisis. (Sancho, T2)

Relatedly, Marie, who had shared her plans to move abroad pre-pandemic, compared her experience to a ‘parenthesis’, a bracket, when she stated: “Right now, we’re holding our breath before going back to normal life. As long as we haven’t finished this parenthesis, everything seems blurry to me” (T2). In a similar fashion, Bryan described being “in a holding pattern” (T2). Interestingly, he invoked the image of a long-haul flight to explain his current inaction and envision future action:

If I know I’m getting on a 15-hour flight to Hong Kong, I have prepared myself and I know I’m not going to do anything for 15 hours and I’m not going to feel guilty about not opening my computer or being super productive. I’m just going to get through these 15 hours and then, when I get off the plane, I’ll switch gears. It’s sort of like that. It’s like I’m on a long-haul flight. (Bryan, T2)

In waiting to get through this period, the participants highlighted the temporary nature of the pandemic, which made identity work in the present impossible, yet allowed them to envision a time when they would engage with the threatened aspirational self again.

Second, pausing consisted of *postponing thoughts and actions about aspirations* until after the pandemic. For instance, Sancho had been reflecting about his aspirations before the pandemic struck but felt it unwise to do so at the time of our second interview. He also described his decision not to act as long as the pandemic-related uncertainty remained:

I’m 38 now and [before the pandemic] I was thinking what should I aim for in the next 10 years? Let’s say from 40 to 50. Now I cannot imagine what I’ll be doing in the next three years. [...] I don’t have any plan B. Still the world is very uncertain so any kind of investment or move can have a probability of winning or losing 50-50. [...] I don’t want to make any move or investment of time or money. (Sancho, T2)

In the same vein, before COVID-19 struck, Berat, the Turkish executive, saw himself “being overseas again” in the future (T1). At Time 2, he recounted his decision not to apply for positions in other countries until the pandemic would end:

There were a bunch of jobs that were advertised that I could have applied for, and I was considering applying for them, the tab’s open, but I have been putting it off, and I think it’s a bit because of this. It really doesn’t feel like a good time to be moving in this

environment. [...] Until this stuff is sorted out. Then I will be open to do applications and try to move away. [...] Now, under these circumstances, it's not a good time for sure. (Berat, T2)

Informants also avoided thoughts about the future. For example, Charles, the French professional who had harbored hopes about expatriating, was no longer in the mood to engage in proactive career behaviors and career-related thoughts at Time 2:

I would say it is really difficult to project myself into the future. [...] I'm not thinking anymore about anything in the future for my work. I cannot imagine what my work will be in one year. I don't have any motivation to—I don't know how to say—to take control of my career. [...] I'm not in the mood of thinking about that. (Charles, T2)

In the face of this crisis, participants appeared to lack control and chose to stand by and wait until the crisis would recede to begin planning again. This attitude echoes findings about passivity as a response to uncontrollable conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), yet the counterpoint to passivity in our respondents' case was the notion of momentariness: that pausing identity work and related decisions was not a permanent response, but rather, a temporary one, in keeping with the finiteness of the pandemic.

Unlike participants who plugged in or pondered, those who paused evoked the possibility of starting to engage in identity work again after the crisis. Interestingly, some pausers noted that, if the crisis continued for too long, they would need to start self-reflecting regardless of whether the pandemic was over. For example, Charles depicted pausing as a short-term response and pondering as a long-term consequence:

As long as possible, we will work from home, so maybe I will work from my home for one more year. I think the main consequence is that I will lose a lot of motivation for my job. [...] I really don't like to work [remotely], and the distance, the fact that you're alone, it makes you do more what you really like and what you are actually interested in. [...] I feel like the motivation will be a bit dampened and that I will be more thinking about, "Shall I create another company? What shall I do? What will I do in 10 years?" Other existential questions that you never have the time to ask yourself, they will come up more easily. That will be the consequence, but it's more like a long-term consequence than a short-term consequence. (Charles, T2)

Sancho, too, seemed to feel the pressure to ponder and engage in identity work. He described the need to carve out time to reflect about the future of his work while noting that this effort would be a vain struggle against nature. He highlighted his belief that, in the face of the pandemic, the only thing that humans can do is wait:

I need to spare some time to think about the future, how we renew our business model and remain relevant for companies. [...] Of course, if you manage a team or organization, you cannot always say ‘Just hold your head and then wait!’ In that sense, in my work, I’ll have to look for some other revenue sources. But at the bottom of my heart, if nature is behind, what you can do is hold your head and wait. (Sancho, T2)

In brief, several pausers seemed aware that they could ponder but they remained in suspension, possibly because of the perceived temporariness of the situation and the threat to their aspirational selves. The above data suggests that global professionals’ responses might evolve over time, from pausing to either one of the other responses uncovered in our data.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we explored how global professionals navigated the drastic changes COVID-19 brought about. We further examined how their experiences *before* the crisis—particularly their identity tensions pre-COVID—affected their subsequent responses. We discovered three distinct identity tensions in global professionals’ Time 1 accounts that evoked different Time 2 responses, leading respondents to (1) plug in, (2) ponder, or (3) pause. Participants who plugged in and pondered interpreted the pandemic as an opportunity, while those who paused viewed it as a threat; whether the interpretation was positive or negative seemed to depend on the identity tensions global professionals experienced prior to the drastic change. Further, specific characteristics of the disruption (i.e., globally shared event, absence of travel, temporary nature) interacted with respondents’ interpretation of the disruption and their identity work responses. Through our discoveries, we develop a process model reflecting how professionals address their prior identity tensions following major disruptions at work (see Figure

1). We do not suggest a causal relationship between respondents' interpretations of the pandemic and their identity work responses but rather note that these likely evolved iteratively, as indicated by the bilateral arrows. The thin, dotted arrow indicates how characteristics of the disruption interact with respondents' interpretation of and identity work response to the disruption.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Theoretical Implications

Our discoveries invite us to reconsider several theoretical assumptions and empirical findings in the identity and global mobility literatures.

Contributions to the identity literature. Our study advances the conversation on identity-implicating experiences (see Bataille & Vough, 2022) and extant identity work theory in several ways. At the most fundamental level, we uncovered factors that lead individuals to interpret an identity-implicating event as an identity threat or an identity opportunity. Specifically, we discovered that global professionals interpreted the pandemic-induced disruptions in light of their prior identity tensions as either a threat or an opportunity to address these tensions and responded accordingly. This finding opens avenues for future research into other identity-implicating events. For example, researchers interested in organizational change could explore change recipients' experiences *before* implementation and make predictions about how these are likely to interact with characteristics of the change to influence people's appraisals. When possible, researchers should use prospective designs which allow for an assessment of causality and a better understanding of the mechanisms and contextual factors that shape people's responses to change (Maitlis, 2020). When prospective designs appear too difficult to put in place, scholars could ask respondents to recollect their pre-change experiences retrospectively.

To this point, our findings contribute to a better temporal understanding of identity threat and identity opportunities. While scholars have suggested that we need to understand how threat unfolds over time, *after* an identity-implicating event (e.g., Bataille & Vough, 2022; George et al., 2023), our work shows that an assessment of experiences *before* a change has occurred is key to evaluating whether people will appraise it as threatening and how they will respond. Our prospective design allowed us to uncover that, while the global professionals we interviewed shared many characteristics, they did not respond in the same way to the pandemic and their different responses can be traced back to their prior identity tensions.

The first response pathway that emerged from our data—the plugging in pathway—challenges existing assumptions regarding people’s answers to anxiety-provoking events in two ways. First, evidence is mixed regarding whether, during changeul times, people connect (e.g., del Fresno-Díaz et al., 2023) or disconnect (e.g., Jo et al., 2021). One implication of our findings is that prior research inconsistencies could be due to differences in people’s pre-change tensions regarding their relationships with others. Second, scholars predicted that global professionals would create stronger ties with their global team members because the pandemic was a shared event across countries (Caligiuri et al., 2020). However, only those global professionals who had a prior imbalance, i.e., a need to connect or perceived distinctiveness, viewed the pandemic’s global nature as an opportunity to address this tension and plugged in.

Relatedly, our work contributes to an ongoing discussion in the identity work literature regarding the need to seek an optimal balance between two opposing drivers of identity construction: distinctiveness and inclusion in social groups (Brewer, 1991; Kreiner et al., 2006). Prior research has focused on how people attempt to strike a balance between distinctiveness and connectedness over time (Buis, Ferguson, & Briscoe, 2019; Kreiner et al., 2006; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Our study suggests that major external shocks can be an opportunity for

individuals to swiftly re-establish their balance. Several participants viewed their global role as a source of distinctiveness pre-pandemic. Additionally, some informants struggled to connect with cultural others before the pandemic struck. By contrast, in our second wave of interviews, these participants strived to build connectedness at work and saw the shared event as an opportunity to deal with prior tensions in their relationships with others. Our discovery invites scholars to reconsider how people seize exogenous shocks to (re)establish optimal balance. Future research could examine how a range of difficult events, such as organizational restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, and broader societal events (Leigh & Melwani, 2019) can paradoxically help individuals fulfil unsatisfied connectedness or distinctiveness needs.

Our data also revealed a second response pathway: pondering. While it is expected that people would engage in self-reflection during changeul times (Beech, 2011; Beech et al., 2016), we discovered that only those participants who had experienced ambivalence prior to the pandemic pondered. This invites us to reconsider the assumption that self-reflection is a ubiquitous reaction to change. In a rare example of research focusing on the pandemic's effect on people's identities, working parents slowly shifted from appraising the pandemic as a threat to viewing it as an opportunity to self-reflect and change their identities (Hennekam et al., 2021). Like Hennekam et al.'s (2021) study participants, several of the global professionals we interviewed seized the opportunity to reflect that the pandemic afforded them. The added contribution our paper makes is in mapping the pondering response to pre-pandemic data. Our research uncovers the role of previous ambivalent experiences in leading people to contemplate their current careers during times of crisis (Newman et al., 2022). Interestingly, the absence of travel freed up participants' time, providing them with an opportunity to address their prior ambivalence. As such, if these global professionals had experienced a change that had further crowded out their schedule, it is plausible that they would have seen this change as a threat and

would have engaged in a different response. Research could focus on formally testing various configurations between characteristics of an identity-implicating experience and prior identity tensions and how these yield threat or opportunity appraisals. For example, we would speculate that identity-implicating events which provide relevant resources to address a prior tension are more likely to evoke opportunity appraisals.

Importantly, we uncovered a new identity work response to change: pausing. For several global professionals, pandemic-induced threats to a mobile aspirational self spurred identity work suspension. This response consists of waiting for the disruption to end and postponing thoughts about the threatened identity, and thus serves as a time-bending strategy (Dahm et al., 2019). This discovery challenges the assumption that identity work is an ongoing process (Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018): in fact, it may be temporarily discontinued. Additionally, beyond identity-protection and identity-restructuration responses (Petriglieri, 2011), our findings suggest that individuals can also pause identity work when the event causing a threat to their identity is appraised as temporary. Several global professionals abstained from identity work during what they viewed as a parenthesis, i.e., a finite and temporary period. Yet, they envisaged a time, after the pandemic, when they would do so again. Many other situations may lend themselves to suspension in today's economy where careers are less institutionalized than before (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, & Wood, 2018). Based on our discovery, researchers could explore identity work pausing in various settings and formally test whether suspension occurs when individuals experience an identity threat but perceive the identity threat trigger as temporary. A range of disruptive events may (fleetingly) impact people's aspirational selves. For example, new migration quotas may cause potential harm to a person's possible self as a migrant. Yet, a candidate to migration may view quotas as inherently temporary and dependent upon

various dynamic and unstable factors (e.g., future elections, economic stability). In turn, this individual may pause identity work.

Not only does the pausing response challenge the assumption that identity work is ongoing, but it also suggests that disruptive events do not necessarily stimulate thoughts about one's identity and subsequent activities. While we would expect that a major shock like COVID-19 triggers thoughts about one's career (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020) and identity (Ashforth, 2020), our findings indicate that, for some participants, the pandemic did not spur conscious identity work, at least temporarily. This runs counter to the assumption that identity work is inevitable during major changes. Recently, scholars have proposed that uncertainty-producing events like role transitions do not always warrant identity change: In an economy where gig work is increasingly common and role change ubiquitous, identity change may be a costly response (Wittman, 2019). Our research suggests that investing in identity work during uncertain times may similarly be costly and unnecessary when the disruption is interpreted as temporary. Additionally, it is possible that, just as taking breaks by not engaging in work helps replenish people's resources (Lyubykh et al., 2022), taking breaks from identity work could also be a functional response when individuals are momentarily uncertain about the future. In this vein, researchers could investigate whether people who have paused identity work return to it with greater clarity after having "rested".

One key takeaway of this research is that organizational members can view a largely negative, adverse event, as an identity opportunity. Informants viewed two features of the change—the travel bans and shared nature of the pandemic—as particularly helpful for addressing their prior tensions and seemed to grow from this experience. While others have similarly identified occasions in which adverse events are viewed as opportunities to grow (e.g., Zikic & Klehe, 2006), our study provides an explanation for why this may be happening. As

such, we hope that our work paves the way for interventions aimed at helping people cope with difficult experiences. Such studies could provide individuals with tools to interpret characteristics of a difficult event as potentially helpful to realize prior desires or alleviate prior tensions.

Contributions to the global mobility literature. Our findings also contribute to the global mobility literature in several ways. Mobility has been characterized as a double-edged sword in previous research, both in the international management domain (e.g., Dimitrova, 2020) and mobility research more broadly (Choudhury, 2022; Cohen & Gössling, 2015). While it is important to take stock of mobility's various positive and negative consequences, the variety of experiences documented in the literature highlights the need to understand *when* mobility—whether physical or virtual in nature—is more likely to incur beneficial or adverse side effects. Our findings suggest that whether global professionals interpreted a disruption as positive or negative depended on the experienced tensions prior to the disruption, and specific contextual characteristics of the disruption, such as its globally shared or temporary nature. We therefore encourage global mobility scholars to further examine how professionals' prior experiences shape their perceptions of work-related mobility, and how radical changes can either alleviate or potentially amplify previously experienced tensions. This has relevant implications not only for major external shocks like the pandemic but also for sudden increases in travel risks due to geopolitical crises, permanent shifts in travel routes, or changing corporate travel policies.

Further, we uncovered how work-related identity tensions shape the experience of adverse events and the resulting identity work for professionals whose work collaborations involve travel. While scholars have begun to explore global professionals' identity work (Gibson, Dunlop, & Raghav, 2021; Kraimer et al., 2022), we still know little about when and how such identity work occurs. The global professionals we interviewed experienced salient identity tensions regarding their relationships with other colleagues, the meaning of their work, and the perceived

discrepancy between their local and mobile aspirational self. We further discovered that a major disruption like the pandemic can evoke both positive and negative interpretations, and that this valence depended on the type of identity tensions they previously experienced, involving distinct identity work responses. One key takeaway is that global professionals are unlikely to uniformly interpret disruptions to their ways of working—be they external shocks like the pandemic or internal shocks like changes in staffing policies—and their identity work responses are unlikely to be monolithic either. We thus call global mobility scholars to conceptualize and measure pre-change factors that may determine change responses through prospective designs, whenever possible. Understanding when and how global professionals engage in identity work will also advance our understanding of identity work more broadly because global professionals tend to have a diverse set of identification targets (Kraimer et al., 2022). While they juggle their work and non-work identities, they also regularly navigate different national, cultural, and linguistic sources of identification. It is therefore plausible that global professionals encounter a wider array of identity tensions, and we would encourage researchers to examine these, and the resulting identity work responses, in greater detail.

Additionally, our study invites us to reconsider the antecedents of developing superordinate identities (Dovidio et al., 2009; Lee, Masuda, Fu, & Reiche, 2018), including cosmopolitan and global identity. Thus far, researchers have examined how a culturally superordinate identity develops over time, for example through multicultural experiences, global virtual team membership, or multicultural training (Erez, Lisak, Harush, Glikson, Nouri, & Shokef, 2013; Lee et al., 2018; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018). Before COVID-19, several participants did not identify with a superordinate collective, suggesting that multicultural experiences and global virtual teamwork are not a sufficient condition for developing a cosmopolitan identity. Paradoxically, it was the sudden shock of the pandemic and the shared

character of this disruption, coupled with individuals' previously experienced tensions in their relationships with relevant others, that sparked feelings of belonging to a superordinate community. In fact, many informants highlighted a sense of connection not necessarily to their fellow citizens but to people from *other* cultures due to COVID-19. This finding opens avenues for future research into how certain events (e.g., elections, political crises) may trigger changes to people's superordinate identities and subsequently affect their work.

Our findings also point to a silver lining of global work during the pandemic. While our informants all experienced some anxiety, participants drew at least two benefits of working from home with colleagues from various countries. Telework allowed several informants to connect on a more personal level with their colleagues, thereby overcoming previously existing barriers in cross-cultural collaboration and improving their spirits (e.g., Heather, Teresa). We thus address recent calls to examine whether and when collaborating through major disruptions like the pandemic reinforces relationships among colleagues from different cultures or, on the contrary, increases emotional distance (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Further, compared to informants' Time 1 accounts, our Time 2 interviews point to improved virtual collaboration: Several respondents were more aware of other people's surroundings and showed more authentic versions of themselves to their collaborators during virtual interactions. In short, for many informants, having a global work role seemed to be an asset, allowing them to feel connected and comforted despite *less* physical contact. Our study thus highlights additional benefits that virtual mobility can provide in the workplace (Selmer et al., 2022), and prompts scholars to reassess the relative distribution of physical and virtual mobility for achieving organizational objectives.

Taken together, our findings contribute to a nascent literature stream highlighting the positive aspects of global mobility, which complements the predominant stressor–stress–strain paradigm in the literature (e.g., Jooss et al., 2022; Stahl, Tung, Kostova, & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2016).

This positive perspective may also more accurately reflect the many advantages—and privileges—that global mobility has to offer, including the potential to learn from cultural others (Dimitrova, 2020) and the opportunity to clarify and revise one's self-meanings (c.f., Adam, Obodaru, Lu, Maddux, & Galinsky, 2018). Indeed, our findings suggest that salient shocks and disruptions—to the extent that they yield opportunity appraisals and positive identity work responses—may facilitate global professionals' interpersonal connections, motivation, identity work, and well-being.

Practical Implications

Our findings provide several insights relevant to professionals and their employers. First, our work uncovers the role of employees' prior identity tensions in their interpretations of a disruption. In a similar vein, managers looking to implement a change initiative would benefit from gauging employees' pre-implementation tensions and how these might interact with characteristics of the proposed initiative to ensure that the change is perceived positively. Relatedly, many global professionals interpreted the pandemic as an opportunity to rebalance their relationships with others and alleviate their ambivalence toward work. In turn, plugging in (e.g., Heather, Teresa) and pondering (e.g., Khadija), seemed to improve their subjective well-being. During adverse events, organizations would thus be well-advised to help organizational members recognize the upsides inherent to the disruption, for example by appealing to relevant commonalities among employees, encouraging time for self-reflection, or actively promoting employee exchanges about their respective responses to the event.

Additionally, our discoveries highlight the need for individuals who perform work roles that foster distinctiveness or in which building effective relationships is challenging to gain greater self-knowledge. Specifically, to the extent that entrepreneurs and founders feel disconnected from other organizational members (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009), that those with

formal power perceive themselves as socially distant from their less powerful counterparts (Neeley & Reiche; 2022), or that international assignees see themselves as outsiders (Maertz, Takeuchi, & Chen, 2016), helping them build stronger connections with others or fostering identification with a collective may enable these individuals to experience greater balance between their needs for distinctiveness and inclusion.

Further, while organizations tend to focus on developing their employees' skills and competencies, they could also support employees' identity work. Specifically, organizations can provide temporary assignments (Rogiers, De Stobbeleir, & Viaene, 2021), job rotations, or cross-functional project work as liminal spaces for professionals to gain awareness about how their work influences others, or to reflect on and envisage future identity change. Offering these spaces may benefit not only the individual but also the wider organization, especially during periods of ambiguity and uncertainty. Our results suggest that this may be particularly effective if individuals previously experienced discrepancies between their own and other people's perceptions of themselves at work or held ambivalent perceptions about their work. By contrast, individuals for whom a given radical change threatens their aspirational self could benefit from coaching to learn to temporarily put identity work on hold.

Finally, our findings have implications for work design. Certain work arrangements may be more sensitive to drastic changes to the work role, such as travel bans and restrictions on mobility. Hence, it would be important to devise alternative ways to conduct such work to prepare for potential future disruptions. This may involve the shift from short-term business travel back to longer-term relocations, or a more systematic use of virtual forms of mobility (Selmer et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our research provides valuable insights into how global professionals manage their work identities in response to the pandemic and in light of their pre-existing identity tensions, it has at least four limitations that future work could address. First, while we conducted repeated interviews with our informants to examine how they coped with the disruption, we collected our second wave of data shortly after COVID-19 struck, in May and June 2020. Consequently, we cannot make any claims about global professionals' long-term responses or the extent to which their identity work may have evolved over longer periods. For example, it is possible that after a year of living with the pandemic, those who initially paused their identity work would have decided to re-engage in identity work. Although some informants who suspended identity work believed that the pandemic would last two or three years (e.g., Berat), they still viewed the pandemic as inherently temporary. To extend our work, researchers could study professionals over longer periods, with more data collection points, or include assessments after a disruption has subsided.

Second, while our prospective design allows us to consider pre-pandemic tensions as antecedents of identity work responses during the pandemic, we cannot determine whether respondents' interpretation of the pandemic preceded their identity work responses. It is likely that the interpretation and identity work responses evolved interdependently. Indeed, radical events like the pandemic may motivate individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance or seek social connection instead of dealing with the complex situation at hand. These activities, in turn, affect individuals' appraisal of the event (e.g., Christianson & Barton, 2021). To gain insights into whether interpretations co-evolve with responses, scholars deploying survey designs could measure both at various time points.

Third, a boundary condition of our theorizing is the extent to which it applies to more local work roles, and with less cultural variation. The global professionals we interviewed held

roles that involved tasks and interactions with physically distant people from significantly different cultures. Professionals in local work roles also had to cope with drastic changes during COVID-19 but it is possible that their identity work responses differed. Specifically, during the pandemic, professionals in local roles may have suffered less from abrupt travel disruptions or from threats to a mobile aspirational self. We would encourage future research to capture professionals' identity work before and after major unexpected disruptions to their local jobs—and in organizations with varied levels of cultural diversity.

Fourth, our data collection choices allowed us to examine global professionals' perspectives, but not those of relevant others, including colleagues or family members. For example, colleagues' affective, cognitive, and behavioral experience of COVID-19 may have influenced how global professionals narrated their identities during the pandemic. Future work could examine in greater depth how others affect a focal individual's identity work during turbulent times.

In the current economy in which global disruptions such as climate change, future pandemics, geopolitical crises, and the fourth industrial revolution loom large, it is critical to understand how people cope with exogenous shocks that affect their work experiences. “How do I deal with major events that radically change how I perform my work? And how do I adjust my sense of self as a result?” Professionals across occupations and industries will have to grapple with these questions over the course of their careers. We hope our study paves the way for more work that can better equip scholars and managers to help employees navigate changing work roles and uncertain workplaces.

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TABLE 1
Informant Characteristics

	Pseudonym	Nationality	Age	Gender	Industry	Job title
1	Ahmet ³	Turkish	39	Male	Oil and gas	Key account manager
2	Alejandra ²	Mexican	26	Female	Tobacco	Financial analyst
3	Beatriz ^{1,2}	Spanish	40	Female	Education	Director, Institutional Development
4	Benoit ³	French	27	Male	Professional services	Strategy consultant
5	Berat ³	Turkish	37	Male	Intergovernmental organization	Financial officer
6	Bryan ³	US American	57	Male	Education	Director, US
7	Carlos ²	Mexican	28	Male	Banking/insurance	Wealth consultant
8	Charles ³	French	31	Male	Professional services	IT consultant
9	Christian ^{1,2}	Danish	40	Male	Oil and gas	CEO
10	Fausto ¹	Indian	49	Male	Industrial products	Director, Purchasing
11	François ²	French	28	Male	Media and entertainment	Founder and CEO
12	Franck*	British	57	Male	Technology	HR Director
13	Heather ¹	British	42	Female	Pharma	Project manager
14	Irena ²	Spanish	46	Female	Education	Director, Executive Education
15	Juan ^{1,2}	Spanish	33	Male	Education	Director, Innovation Hub
16	Khadija ^{1,2}	Moroccan	47	Female	Professional services	Entrepreneur and consultant
17	Kilian ^{1,2}	Spanish	47	Male	Laundry equipment	CFO
18	Kofi ²	Ghanaian	35	Male	Private equity	Senior investment manager
19	Laura ¹	Bulgarian	30	Female	Professional services	Lead consultant
20	Leila ¹	Moroccan	29	Female	Telemarketing	Customer service manager
21	Marie ³	French	28	Female	International aid	Digital and press officer
22	Mohammad ¹	Moroccan	46	Male	Professional services	Consultant
23	Patrick ²	French	28	Male	Professional services	Strategy consultant
24	Sancho ³	Japanese	38	Male	Education	Director, Asia
25	Satya ³	Korean	44	Male	Electronics	Principal consultant
26	Sonja ¹	Bulgarian	34	Female	Tourism	General manager
27	Teresa ¹	French	52	Female	Medical equipment	Senior VP HR
28	Toni*	Ghanaian	41	Male	Private equity	Founder and CEO
29	Torsten ¹	German	56	Male	Banking/insurance	Director, Asia
30	Vladimir ^{1,2}	Bulgarian	40	Male	Agribusiness	Director, Operations

* Only interviewed at Time 1. Numbers in superscript denote the response pathways for each participant (1='plugging in' pathway, 2='pondering' pathway, 3='pausing' pathway).

TABLE 2
Representative Data from Time 1 and Time 2 for Each Second-Order Category

Theoretical dimension	Aggregated dimensions	Second-order categories	Exemplary quotations
Alleviating pre-existing tensions by plugging in (N = 14)	Pre-pandemic tensions in relationships with distant others at work (T1)	Perceived distinctiveness	<p>“My life in my function as an international manager is not different from that of my peers here in [the company]. It’s definitely not different from what peers at [another global bank] are doing. It’s significantly different from the job of most people.” (Torsten)</p> <p>“I feel [different] because here, given the low level of understanding of what we do—and it’s a little bit harsh to say—but I feel the team is much more superior than what the local stakeholders could do. You can tell that this is their perception as well. [...] I try to surround myself with people who are hardworking, but at the same time, I see that the majority of people in Bulgaria or Sofia are the exact opposite. Compared to internationals, they have very different standards. [...] It’s the mindset primarily that I don’t appreciate, I try to surround myself with people that are completely different from that, but that would be the majority. [...] I think that when you work locally, you encounter this type of people a lot more frequently, and it impacts your way of work, and the joy you feel from what you do. In that sense, I do feel differently because I have the opportunity to avoid that and [my network in local jobs] can’t.” (Laura)</p>
		Struggling to connect with cultural others	<p>“In India, I understand the challenge face to face. Sometimes I do not understand the challenge of what is going on day to day in China or in Vietnam. They face it day to day. I do not know it at all. [...] Maybe I need to spend time sitting in their office, doing my job there so that I slowly become acclimatized with respect to the local situations. So that they know I’m not a person sitting somewhere and asking for some data, but they understand who I am, I am trying to provide some support to you also. That emotional connect is needed. That is what is running through my mind. I should do that.” (Fausto)</p> <p>“With most managers in the other countries, I was a peer. At one point, I had to put on my new hat as their boss and a couple of them are above 60, older than me. It was challenging and I tried to observe how that was affecting me. It took a few months to reestablish my connection with them, and with myself of course. It was not easy, it was challenging. Also, my colleagues in Sofia, we were peers before my new position [...] and it was also a transition that took time for me to handle, it was quite an experience.” (Vladimir)</p>
		Developing psychological bonds with distant others	<p>“You’re in Madrid, you’re in Barcelona. You only see your reality, but then somebody joins the call and talks about Munich or New York, talks about how they are living the same thing because this is one of the crises that is equal everywhere. Everyone you talk to in the world, we are all in the same situation [...]” (Beatriz)</p> <p>“If I have to say with what type of people I identify the most, it wouldn’t be based on anything regional. It would mainly be with those people who consider the situation as serious as it is, but with a calm manner, and trying to evaluate what would be the best for the group not for oneself. Let’s put it like that. [...] At the moment, that would be the group of people I would put myself into, but it’s not Bulgarians, it’s not Spanish, it’s just people all over the world that have the same attitude.” (Laura)</p>
	Activating a sense of connectedness (T2)	Improving personal connections with colleagues	<p>“It became more personal. Although there are no face-to-face contacts, they shared more, I shared more, and I think that’s shortened the distance and now even though it might sound crazy because we didn’t see each other for almost three months and probably we are not going to see a lot more, it is not affecting the relationships so far.” (Vladimir)</p>

			<p>“I am also doing, with my second level, at least once a week, these mini-town halls where I talk to the people and let them talk. It gives them the feeling we are still there. Another thing I’m doing, and this is very specific to my job because I have many people from Asia who live here alone, without family, is help people who come from Asia [...] What I really try to do, as crazy as it may sound, is to do social things on teams, on webex, a tea or a coffee, or a common lunch because we also have a work-from-home policy, but it needs to give them the feeling we are still there. I personally am some kind of social service.” (Torsten)</p>
<p>Alleviating pre-existing tensions by pondering (N = 12)</p>	<p>Pre-pandemic ambivalence toward work (TI)</p>	<p>Discrepancies between own and others’ perceptions of oneself at work</p>	<p>“[The subsidiary staff] perceive you as someone coming from the executive committee. Part of the behavior is because of professional respect. The ones that don’t meet me, they take more distance than the ones that have a relationship with me. I am the CFO and then they say this is the big boss in the company. [...] They are a bit afraid to be in a meeting with you because they feel strange. [...] As I was in the subsidiary side for nine years in my previous job, I always have more... How do you say? I have more empathy than other colleagues here. I know that someone who is working 6,000 kilometers from here and is eight hours behind, they need your support. When they are asking for something, they cannot wait 24 hours.” (Kilian)</p> <p>“Many criminal activities in South Africa are done by [Eastern European] people so the overall image of this region of the world is of people who are dangerous and deal with bad things. Then all of a sudden, because usually in these assignments, people from bigger countries are going because it’s an expert position [...], I figured out that they had difficulties even knowing where Bulgaria is. I knew about another context a lot of people are going to because they’re not chased by the law. I tried to explain that first, we have nothing to do with Albania neither in terms of religion nor values and that there is nothing good or bad about any of these countries, they are just different. The Czech Republic is different from Bulgaria, and Russia and Ukraine are separate countries and so on. With time, they began to see that there are other people except criminals living in these countries.” (Vladimir)</p>
		<p>Feeling both negative and positive about work</p>	<p>“There’s a physical well-being downside in terms of jet lag and things like that. It’s tough to travel a lot. I had a period where I was commuting between Houston and Doha every two to three weeks; and at the end of the day, you get really, really physically tired. Then there’s clearly an impact, for me, by being separated from my family. That can seem a bit bizarre since I’ve done it for 20 years now and it actually works fine, but there’s some well-being that is sacrificed on that account. [...] The positive side is that I travel out into the world, into the global role, to deliver stuff and it works and people are pleased to see me when I arrive, so that of course increases the well-being. It’s rare that I have to travel somewhere because of something that is not value-adding.” (Christian)</p> <p>“I have always enjoyed more to be outside. I love to [travel], I love it. However, in this new role, I have to be in [company office] more. One is what you enjoy the most and the second one is where you have to invest more time. That depends on the role. Before was dramatically to be outside and that’s why I was almost not using this office. Now I have to be more here but doing more Skypes. [...] I think we are running a marathon, not a sprint and that is not sustainable, so before I was pushing more, let’s say, in those kinds of things, but physically, I think it’s not good to continue doing that, but on the other hand we want to travel and continue with the expansion. I would say the more you travel, the more the sense for other cultures and the more you like it. So the more you travel, the more you like it.” (Juan)</p>

	Engaging in self-reflection (T2)	Finding more meaning in work	<p>“We are trying to improve as much as we can the current situation, because we have a responsibility over 1,000 employees. And we have to try to keep their work, their jobs as long as we can. [...] We have been working closely with many hospitals. We have given them washing machines and dryers to be able to wash all the linen that they had at the hospital with a special process and special chemicals to disinfect the linen, and we’ve been doing this for free. We are trying to contribute to society in one way or another.” (Kilian)</p> <p>“[Our company’s] services were recognized as essential, and it made me realize that what we are doing is good for the people and for the communities and for the environment.” (Vladimir)</p>
		Envisaging identity change	<p>“I always thought of myself as an operating CEO. Once the portfolio was up and running, the vision, mission, and strategy were implemented, then I would switch more towards the future and organizational development and things like that. It will come a little earlier now. [...] I’m also more comfortable doing it now and letting go of the day-to-day stuff because the Corona period has shown that people can actually manage themselves, they’re competent and have a desire to do it themselves.” (Christian)</p> <p>“This time has also helped me because I always pictured myself as an entrepreneur. I’ve been working on the side on a business that I want to start. Even though I’m enjoying the work that I’m doing right now, it has also been an opportunity to focus on something else that I wanted to do. It has made me think that time is a precious asset. You don’t want to waste time doing what you really like. [...] I’m thinking of quitting my job by the end of the year to focus 100% on my projects.” (Carlos)</p>
Alleviating threats to pre-existing aspirations by pausing (N = 8)	Pre-pandemic discrepancies between local self and mobile aspirational self (T1)	Aspiration for mobile self	<p>“I was expecting something very global after my MBA. Before my MBA, I was also working overseas in marketing roles, and as analyst for an IT consulting company. I had a lot of travel to the US, to China, and stuff like that. It was a very international context, so I was expecting something similar or at least similar or a bit more international after my MBA because the MBA is supposed to be networking and doing something more global. The reason I went to the US, it’s a very global perspective there. Yes, I was expecting a bit more global thing.” (Satya)</p> <p>“The first time I’ve been overseas, I was two years old, my mom was posted to New York. [...] I started school in New York as well, and then came back to Turkey for a few years, about three, four years and then went overseas again to Malaysia. Then I finished high school in Malaysia and started university in the US. Then I came back to Turkey and ended up finishing university here. So, we were all over the place. They actually have a name for people like me, they call them third culture kids [...] So this creates this kind of community where I can get along with anyone who’s grown up like this, doesn’t matter which country they’re from. But yes, it just follows through that I would want to work in an international environment. I’ve worked in [local] companies before, but there was something lacking.” (Berat)</p>
		Fear toward local self	<p>“When I start speaking English or Spanish, I feel more confident, I don’t know if that makes sense. It’s not my own language, but I feel more confident to do something because in the Korean context, I have to think many things that relate to work as well, so I feel a bit less-- I don’t know how to explain that, but I do feel different in an international setting. I feel more, let’s say, on the same level with my colleagues.” (Satya)</p> <p>“The local country team members refer to us as global marketeers or global team. That becomes my tag, ‘Ahmet from the global team.’ [...] Sometimes, we are referred to as the central team. We always have this underlying message of ‘You’re a member of the central team. You’re a member of the global team,’ which actually makes it difficult for me to think of myself as the Turkish Ahmet talking to local colleagues around the world.” (Ahmet)</p>

Suspending
identity work
(T2)

Waiting for
disruption to
pass

“I’m not sure that the COVID situation will be a long-term change. I’m very sure that one year from now we will work the same as we used to before the crisis...” (Benoit)

“I guess in terms of planning, there’s not much that individuals can do right now but wait for the vaccine or the cure to come out. In the meantime, I think the only thing we can do is try to be careful.” (Satya)

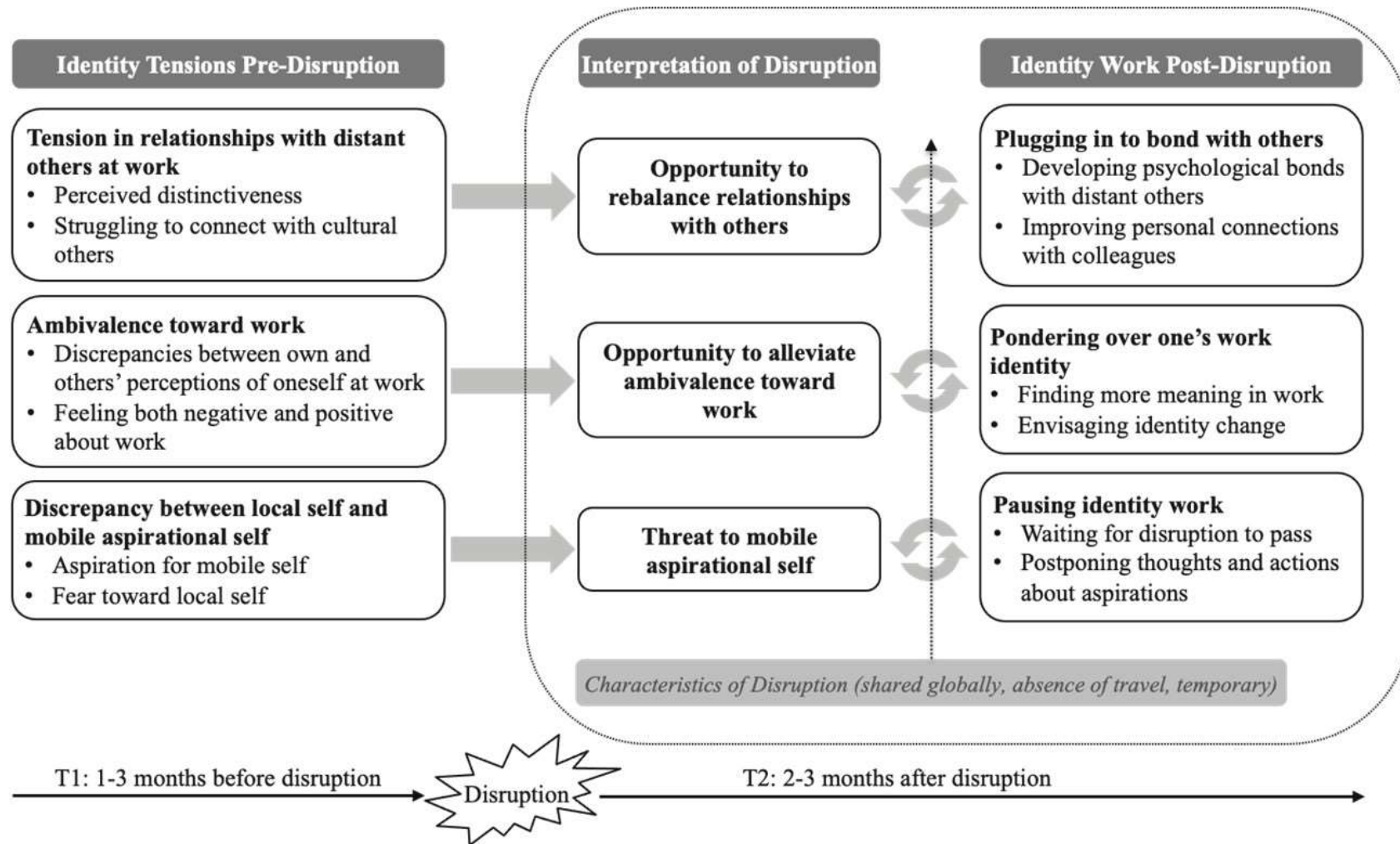
Postponing
thoughts and
actions about
aspirations

“It’s thinking shorter term. The next three months, what are we going to do for the next three months? If I start thinking about, “What am I going to do a year from now if this all goes down the toilet?” That’s depressing. If I start thinking about that I stop right away because it’s too scary.” (Bryan)

“It is complicated to project yourself as long as you are confined.” (Marie)

FIGURE 1

How Global Professionals Addressed Their Prior Identity Tensions After a Major Disruption



APPENDIX

Relevant Portions of Semi-structured Interview Protocols

Time 1:

1. Please explain what you currently do. How long have you had your current job?
2. How much time do you spend (on average) in your global work role per year, physically or virtually? How important are the global aspects of your job to you?
3. How much does your job define who you are?
4. Have you always wanted a job that is international? Why?
5. Does your image of yourself change when you are in your global work role? Do you ever find yourself acting or thinking differently in your global work role compared to how you would act and think in your local context?
6. Do you ever feel that local demands are interfering with those of your global role (and vice-versa)? How do you handle these situations?
7. Are there any people in your personal network who have jobs that also involve an international dimension? How similar or different do you feel to these people?
8. Overall, is your experience of performing a global work role positive or negative? In what way?

Time 2:

1. What role has COVID-19 played in your work? Have there been any changes to your job since the COVID-19 outbreak? Can you elaborate on these changes and how you have responded to them?
2. How has the international dimension of your job been affected by the pandemic?
3. Please describe a typical workweek since the start of the pandemic.
4. Which aspects of your work do you find the most challenging at the moment? Why?
5. How are you managing your relationships with your colleagues? Your subordinates?
6. Has the way you think and feel about your job changed in any way?
7. How important is your job to you at the moment? Has it become more or less important to you in the current context?
8. How important is your job to other people at the moment? Has it become more or less important in the current context?
9. To which extent has COVID-19 affected your well-being?
10. Have you changed your behaviors at work to adjust to the implications from COVID-19? In what way?
11. When speaking to colleagues or friends, do you find yourself talking differently about your global work role? If so, how?