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# The identities of employed students: Striving to reduce distinctiveness from the typical student

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## Abstract

Endorsement of the employed student identity can provide social support for employed students or protection from negative intergroup comparisons. However, not much is known about what identity aspects or characteristics comprise the employed student identity and how they become important and central to that identity. Using data from 215 employed university students in the UK, we investigated two research questions (RQ's) in this mixed-method study. RQ1. What are the identity aspects that participants ascribe to the employed student identity? RQ2. Are identity aspects that distinguish employed from non-employed students, and are considered more suitable for employed versus non-employed students, more central and more important to the employed students' self-concept? A thematic analysis categorized the identity aspects that participants self-generated into 14 distinct categories, with the most important categories being hard-working, being organized, having motivation, and discipline. Multilevel analyses of identity aspects within individuals revealed that distinctiveness was negatively associated with the importance and centrality of aspects, whereas suitability for employed students was positively associated with the importance and centrality of aspects. We offer practical

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value through revealing important identity aspects which inoculate employed students against negative intergroup comparisons, and theoretical value through suggesting future avenues for employed students' identity construction.

**Public Significance Statement:** Being an employed student carries a social cost but defining as one can help in obtaining social support or protecting from negative comparisons with non-employed students. We identify fourteen categories of aspects that can define oneself as an employed student (e.g., motivation, hard work) with employed students experiencing those aspects which are more suitable to them as more identity-defining, and those aspects which differentiate them from non-employed students as less identity-defining.

## INTRODUCTION

Combining employment and studying is a phenomenon that is rapidly growing in the UK (Endsleigh, 2015; Quintini, 2015) as well as in Australia (Chu et al., 2021), the US (Eastgate et al., 2021), and many other OECD countries (OECD, 2012). As the sheer number of employed students has increased, researchers have considered the negative impact that the combination of working and studying has on employed students' academic achievement (Callender, 2008; Curtis & Shani, 2002; Richardson & Woolley, 2003), students' social life (Curtis, 2007; Kuh et al., 1995; Robotham, 2013), and on mental and physical health outcomes (McGregor, 2015; Roberts et al., 2000). Altogether, the majority of work conducted on employed students has rightfully placed a focus on how employment negatively impacts students' adaptation to university.

Nonetheless, much of the aforementioned work has largely neglected the larger social contexts that employed students find themselves in. Although employed students immerse themselves into two domains (that of work and of university; Broadbridge & Swanson, 2006), surprisingly little work has considered the relations between employed students, their colleagues, and non-employed students as predictors of students' adaptation to university life (Christie et al., 2001; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Outerbridge, 2016). Participants in those studies reported how experiences of exclusion due to combining working and studying are *self-defining*; that being *employed* meant that they were not able to participate in student-normative social activities with their friends. As such, we can infer that, beyond practical detriments, being an employed student can carry with it a social disadvantage that is based on the perception that employed students are not "typical" students.

Despite these findings, our previous work has also indicated that identifying as an employed student can carry certain advantages when employed students compare themselves favorably to their work colleagues or non-employed students (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a, 2022b). Indeed, if employed students experienced severe financial necessity to work, then being employed reminded them of their core values of studying and working hard (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a). Similarly, in comparison to non-employed students, who valued fun, employed students took solace

in their productivity and in studying hard (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b). Due to these results, we posit that the employed student identity can act as a protective mechanism for employed students' larger self-concept when students define themselves in terms of core positive aspects of their employed student self-concept.

At this point, however, little is known about which possible identity-aspects are important or central to the employed student identity, or about why different aspects become important or central to the employed student identity. The present research sought to address these gaps in the literature. The following sections first outline literature that explains how students come to identify as employed students—the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), as well as literature that reveals why employed students become motivated to identify as employed students. Next, we introduce the motive of distinctiveness through the lens of Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT; Vignoles et al., 2006) as a potential explanation to why aspects of the employed student experience could become important or central to that identity, and two other factors—superordinate group identity and intergroup differentiation—which we expect to serve as moderators of the relationships between distinctiveness and importance and distinctiveness and centrality of aspects. We then report the results of a rare empirical investigation into this topic.

## The social identity approach

Within the social identity approach (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987), social identification is the process which stems from being a member of a meaningful social group and integrating the group as part of one's overarching self-concept. The resulting social identity motivates the individual to achieve *positive distinctiveness* for that identity (Tajfel, 1978), that is, the group compares positively to relevant outgroups, which can then enhance one's own self-concept and provide a sense of self-esteem. Social identities are context-dependent in that they become salient and relevant due to contextual factors and positive distinctiveness can vary according to which outgroups are salient and relevant within the particular context (Oakes et al., 1994). When a social identity does become activated in a particular context, the individual embodies the norms and the values of the group (Turner, 1991). In this sense, social identities are a form of collective self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) that ignite self-categorization processes, which lead to group members being perceived as depersonalized (Turner et al., 1987), so that friendship and social support can become based on group membership alone (Brewer & Yuki, 2007; Hogg & Hains, 1998; Levine et al., 2005). People may also extend prosocial behavior to a member of a specific in-group or an overarching collective when the relevant social identity has been made salient to them (support in biker gangs, Johnson et al., 2013; food bank collection, Shipley, 2008). Individuals also adopt the norms and attitudes of the groups that they identify with, to the extent that those who identify with a political party may support the party's policies even when they personally disagree with them (Cohen, 2003; Verkuyten & Maliepaard, 2013). Social identification can also have positive effects for health and wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2018), and identifying with a new group as part of social prescribing can also help long-term ill patients to seek more primary care (Kellezi et al., 2019). Finally, in higher education, identifying as a conscientious student can help to mitigate the stigma associated with being from a non-traditional study status and to succeed in one's studies (Thunborg et al., 2012). However, although most of the research into social identity has been conducted in WEIRD cultures, the motivations to identify with different identities may differ across cultures, such that individuals from collectivistic cultures might extend relations and support to only those with whom they have personal relationships (Smith & Easterbrook, 2017).

In the case of employed students, the student might have their employed student identity activated if non-student work colleagues or non-employed students (as important outgroups for employed students) are discussing events that the employed student was not present for (Outerbridge, 2016), or, if the student is speaking to other employed students about their experiences at work (Kiernan et al., 2015; Ziskin et al., 2010). In such situations, identifying as an employed student can help the student to positively distinguish oneself from members of the other groups, or seek social support from other employed students (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b).

## Motivation to adopt an employed student identity

Nonetheless, the global motivation behind employed students identifying strictly as *employed students* (instead of identifying as *colleagues* or *students* in those respective domains) is not as clear. In the workplace, one can easily see the benefits of employed students foregoing the *student* part of their self-concept—when both full-time colleagues and students identify as employees, they can become united against outgroups such as management (Lammont & Lucas, 1999). Similarly, if social support is given strictly within group lines (Levine et al., 2005), then identifying as an employee is key to receiving such support from one's colleagues (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b). In the university context, identifying as simply a student could, in spite of their practical commitments to work, help employed students feel as though they belong to the overarching category of students, which might be the identity they strive to fully adopt (Dumas, 2003; Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a).

However, we contend that the employed student identity can also have a protective function for the employed student's self-concept in their relations with their colleagues or with non-employed students. For example, if an employed student is reminded of their student status in the workplace by their colleagues (perhaps due to being scapegoated for poor workplace performance, Agervold (2007)), then the employed student identity can serve to remind the student of their long-term education goals and the transitory nature of their current employment (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b, Winkler, 2009), providing solace and affirmation. In the university context, while employed students could be at a social disadvantage due to restricted participation in social activities with non-employed students, we have previously found that identifying as an employed student stems from perceived differences in values between the two groups (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b). Indeed, some of the participants in our previous work discussed how understanding the value of money or having more motivation were important employment-related factors which positively differentiated them from non-employed students. Altogether, identifying as an employed student has a protective function against frictional relations with colleagues and serves to positively differentiate themselves from non-employed students.

## How do aspects become central and important to the employed student identity

For employed students, identification is dependent on feeling that some aspects of being an employed student can positively differentiate them from non-employed students and non-student work colleagues. Thus, it is critical that certain aspects of the employed student experience become meaningful to the employed student and, in being so, also become central and important to that identity. However, it is currently unclear as to which aspects of the employed student experience are central and important to the employed student identity and the mechanisms that

push these aspects to become central and important to that identity in the first place. Therefore, the first aim of the present research will be to investigate which aspects of the employed student experience students consider central and important to their employed student identity.

To shed more light on the second issue, we used insights from motivated identity construction theory (MICT; Vignoles, 2011; Vignoles et al., 2006). Although MICT discusses identity construction more broadly, we have chosen to lean on the insights from MICT to discuss social identities exclusively here. Within MICT, potential identity aspects become important or central to a person's identity if those aspects satisfy one or more of six key identity motives, however, in the present research we focused exclusively on the motive of *distinctiveness* (Becker et al., 2012), which is the degree of differentiation that the individual has from members of important outgroups (Brewer, 1991).

We chose to focus solely on the *distinctiveness* motive as, in accordance with our previous research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b), we theorized that the employed student identity becomes activated in response to, or in the presence of, non-employed students. Because our previous research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b) did not suggest that employed students compare themselves to work colleagues to the same extent as they did to non-employed students, we zoned in on the relations between employed students and non-employed students as the key comparison in the current study. Thus, identity aspects that are important or central to the employed student identity might be those aspects that help employed students to positively differentiate themselves from non-employed students. Therefore, we investigated whether ratings of distinctiveness would positively predict how central and important the identity aspects were to the employed student identity.

Therefore, by drawing on the Social Identity Approach and Motivated Identity Construction Theory, we expect that the identity motives that distinguish employed students from non-employed students may be more important and central to their overall self-concepts. In doing so, we depart from more traditional underpinnings of MICT (e.g., Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012), which investigated motive satisfaction as a predictor of the formation of a particular identity and instead place our focus on exploring how the different identity aspects which employed students select become central or important to their employed student identity.

## Other factors which could influence the importance and centrality of identity aspects to the employed student identity

However, it is also possible that satisfaction of the motive of distinctiveness might not be the only condition that influences how important or central aspects are to the employed student identity. Thus, we sought to include two other factors, which could predict how core the identity aspects are—superordinate group prototypicality and intergroup differentiation. Due to the influence of these two factors on intergroup relations and the employed student self-concept, we aimed to explore whether they moderate the effects of distinctiveness on aspects' importance and centrality.

Superordinate group prototypicality refers to the extent to which a group (employed students) is deemed prototypical of its overarching category (in this case, students; Wenzel et al., 2008). In this sense, superordinate group prototypicality is distinct from a sense of distinctiveness between two alternative groups—whereas the former concerns the belief that the norms, behaviors, and characteristics of the ingroup represent the superordinate group better than those of an alternative subgroup, distinctiveness implies a desire for being different from the alternative group. Thus, distinctiveness implies active differentiation from another group, whereas superordinate group prototypicality is more about a competition between subgroups for who defines the

overarching group. Indeed, the employed students in our previous research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b) often ascribed non-employed students a higher status within the overarching category of students, which was accompanied by feelings of envy and frustration towards non-employed students. In accordance with the social identity approach, it is possible that such attribution of higher status has led employed students to seek identity aspects that allow them to positively differentiate themselves from non-employed students (such as motivation or awareness of the value of money). Thus, we anticipate that, if employed students ascribe the non-employed student group a higher superordinate group prototypicality, then satisfaction of the motive of distinctiveness would matter more for how central or important the identity aspects are.

Similarly, intergroup differentiation is the extent to which the employed student feels different from non-employed students. Intergroup differentiation is how distinct a student feels the employed students are from non-employed students, in general, whereas our measure of distinctiveness captures how much specific identity-aspects contribute to distinguishing the two groups. Previous research suggests that feelings of overall distinctiveness from non-employed students through differences in experiences can lead to employed students feeling a sense of isolation and a lack of adaptation at university (Christie et al., 2001; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Outerbridge, 2016). Indeed, participants in our previous research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a) also felt different from non-employed students, which could have, in turn, forced them to seek identity aspects that positively distinguish them from non-employed students. Therefore, we expected that, if employed students felt a higher sense of intergroup differentiation from employed students, then satisfaction of the motive of distinctiveness would make those identity aspects more central and important to the employed student identity.

## The present study

The current research aimed to investigate what identity aspects did employed student consider central or important to their employed student identity through conducting a codebook thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Secondly, we explored whether the themes of aspects we extracted were also associated with the importance and centrality of aspects. We then tested our main hypotheses as to whether satisfying the motive of distinctiveness predicted aspects' importance (H1a) and centrality (H1b) to the employed student identity. Finally, we explored whether the effects of distinctiveness on importance and centrality of aspects were moderated by employed students' sense of superordinate group prototypicality and intergroup differentiation. In order to achieve these aims, we constructed a mixed-method study with employed students from UK universities that sought to answer these research objectives. The full details of our present investigation follow in the Method section.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two-hundred and twenty UK university students were recruited between February and November 2021<sup>1</sup> to take part in an online questionnaire about how they feel as employed students in

<sup>1</sup> As per our pre-registration plan (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/T37VF>), we intended to close data collection in June 2021. However, we opted not to do so, as we did not reach our pre-specified amount of 200 employed students and wanted to enrich the dataset.

comparison to their non-employed friends. Five participants opted to exclude their data from the final dataset, which left us with 215 employed students. The remaining participants were between 18 and 54 years of age ( $M = 22.29$ ,  $SD = 6.03$ ). The sample was predominantly female (83.30%,  $n = 179$ ), 14% ( $n = 30$ ) of respondents identified as male, and 2.70% ( $n = 6$ ) of respondents identified as other gender. The majority of the students in the sample ( $n = 167$ , 77.70%) were studying Psychology and were either in their first ( $n = 60$ , 27.90%) or second ( $n = 101$ , 47%) year of study. On our measure of employed student identification (*I identify with working students*, adapted from Postmes et al. (2012)), the majority of participants either agreed strongly ( $n = 53$ , 26.90%), agreed ( $n = 76$ , 38.60%), or agreed somewhat ( $n = 43$ , 21.80%), signifying that the majority of participants identified as employed students. The students in our sample were working 15.58 ( $SD = 10.20$ ) hours per week on average.

## Procedure

All participants were recruited via an online link, which was either distributed in classrooms on campus in the form of a QR code, or via an online study participation system (SONA). Recruitment was further boosted by asking lecturers to give the online link to their students in seminars. Ethical consent for this study was granted by the researchers' home institution. All data were handled in accordance with the University's data protection principles. At the beginning of the questionnaire, all participants indicated that they gave their consent to participate and their rights to confidentiality were presented. Then, the main blocks of the questionnaire were presented in the order outlined in the Materials section below. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were thoroughly debriefed about the purpose of the study and invited to include their email for one of the four £50 prizes. At this point, participants could also specify if they wish to withdraw their data from analysis.

## Materials

Every participant completed an online questionnaire using Qualtrics, which assessed the constructs described below. Furthermore, the questionnaire formed part of a larger study and, thus, only the variables that were used in the current analyses are presented. The full measures are included in the [supplementary online material](#) to this article.

### Demographic information

Participants were asked to indicate their age, gender, study course, and year of study as well as which UK university they attended. They were then asked if they currently held a paid position and if so, how many hours did they work per week on average (participants were asked to combine all of their hours if they were employed at multiple workplaces).

### Free-form and preselected identity aspects

Participants were asked to provide five identity aspects of the employed student identity by answering the question "Who are you as a working student?" This procedure was adapted from

Vignoles et al. (2006), who, by altering the original 20 Statements Test procedure (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), asked their participants about the identities that they used to define themselves. For the purposes of the present investigation, we altered the wording of the question “Who are you?” to ask our participants about the identity aspects that comprise their employed student identity. We did so by telling them that:

In the numbered spaces below, please write 5 characteristics that define you as a working student. You can write these characteristics as they occur to you without worrying about the order, but together they should summarise the image of yourself as a working student. You might include characteristics that other people know about, as well as your private thoughts about yourself. Some of these characteristics you may see as relatively important, and others less so. Some may be things you are relatively happy about, and others less so.

On the page after prompting these five self-generated identity aspects, we listed five additional identity aspects (being motivated, being hardworking, having fun, having money, and pride in work) that our previous research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b) indicated were relevant to employed students. We opted to have participants freely list five identity aspects first and to only then be presented with our five preselected aspects (being motivated, being hardworking, having fun, having money, and pride in work) to avoid biasing the participants in their selection of identity aspects. All respondents were then asked on the next page to rate these 10 aspects—the five self-generated ones and the five pre-selected ones on the four aspect-level variables described next. Thus, every employed student self-generated a maximum of forty ratings on the aspect-level variables of interest, which we considered appropriate in order to prevent participant fatigue, but still have sufficient quality of data (in line with Thomas et al., 2017).

#### *Centrality of aspects for employed students*

The participants were then asked to answer the question “How much do you see these characteristics as central or marginal to your identity as a working student?” by rating the ten identity aspects on an 11-point Likert scale with anchors [1] *Extremely marginal*, [6] *Neither marginal nor central*, and [11] *Extremely central*.

#### *Importance of aspects for employed students*

The participants were next asked to answer the question “How important is each of these characteristics to your identity as an employed student?” by rating the ten identity aspects on an 11-point Likert scale with anchors [1] *Extremely unimportant*, [6] *Neither important nor unimportant*, and [11] *Extremely important*.

#### *Distinctiveness of aspects from non-employed students*

Next, participants were asked to answer the question “How much do you feel that these characteristics distinguish working students from non-working students?” The employed students rated the aspects on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from [1] *Working students are extremely similar to non-working students on this characteristic*, [6] *Working students are neither more similar nor more different than non-working students on this characteristic*, and [11] *Working students are extremely different to non-working students on this characteristic*.

### *Suitability of aspects for employed students*

Finally, participants were asked to answer the question “Are these characteristics more suited to non-working students or working students?” to distinguish symbolic distinctiveness (measured above) from practical distinctiveness. Employed students rated the aspects on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from [1] *Non-working students are extremely more like this than working students*, [6] *This characteristic applies equally to working students and non-working students*, and [11] *Working students are extremely more like this than non-working students are*.

## Intergroup differentiation

To measure the extent to which employed students felt as though they differed from non-employed students, we appropriated the pictorial measure of self-other discrepancy as devised by Aron et al. (1992). Participants could select from seven pictures of overlapping circles (one circle representing the self as an employed student, and the other circle representing non-employed students). The degree of overlap between the circle indicates the extent to which participants perceived non-employed students as more distinct from themselves with less overlap between the circles indicating higher sense of intergroup differentiation. Participants felt, on average, closer to non-employed students than not ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ,  $\min = 1$ ,  $\max = 7$ ).

## Superordinate group prototypicality

Participants were then asked to answer the question “Do non-working students or working students represent better what being a student is about?” as a measure of the prototypicality of the employed student group for the overarching student identity. Participants answered the question on a 7-point Likert scale with anchors [1] *Non-working students represent what being a student is about much better than working students do* to [7] *Working students represent what being a student is about much better than non-working students do*. On average, participants felt that non-employed students represented the overarching category of students slightly better than employed students did ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ,  $\min = 1$ ,  $\max = 7$ ).

## Data and transformations

First, in line with our pre-registration plan, we checked whether there were strong correlations between the distinctiveness and suitability for employed students ratings, and between the importance and centrality ratings of all identity aspects, respectively. This was not the case as the distinctiveness and suitability for employed students ratings had only a medium-sized correlation ( $r(1906) = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The importance and centrality ratings also had a medium-sized correlation between each other ( $r(1929) = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Because of the size of these correlations, we opted to keep the distinctiveness and suitability for employed students ratings separate from each other as well as to keep the importance and centrality ratings separate from each other. In line with our pre-registration plan, the ratings of differentiation and suitability for employed students were group-mean centered in order to keep the effects of level-1 and level-2 variables statistically independent. The following analyses used the group-mean centered indices of distinctiveness and suitability for employed students as predictors of importance and centrality.

We also used full maximum likelihood as our method of estimation in all following analyses as per our pre-registration plan. Doing so allowed us to remove all missing values from the constructs of interest. All multilevel model analyses and exploratory analyses were then conducted by the first author.

## Coding of categories

The first author and a research assistant coded the first 100 identity aspects and identified preliminary categories to insert the aspects into. Upon consultation with the second author, these categories were then refined, and all aspects were then coded into the new categories by the first author and the same research assistant. The first author and the research assistant also coded whether the self-generated aspects overlapped in meaning with the pre-selected ones. Any discrepancies between the two coders—in respect to placing aspects in categories and in respect to whether they overlapped with the pre-selected aspects—were resolved by the first author after multiple consultations with the second author. Finally, the first author created dummy variables in the dataset which corresponded with the names of the categories we will present next. The dummy variable for each category was coded as 1 if the aspect formed a part of that category and was coded as 0 if the aspect formed a part of another category.

## RESULTS

### What are the defining aspects of the employed student identity?

#### Categories of shared meaning between the identity aspects

We combined the self-generated aspects into 14 overarching categories (see Table 1 for the complete list and descriptive statistics on the aspect ratings). All identity aspects that comprise the categories, and details of the process we adopted to categorize them, are discussed in full in the [supplementary online material](#) to this article. Out of the 1010 self-generated aspects, 108 (10.70%) overlapped in meaning with the preselected identity aspects. Three of the categories formed from all self-generated aspects—being *hardworking*, having *motivation*, and positive *monetary consequences*—were judged to overlap conceptually with the preselected aspects of *hardwork*, *motivation*, and *having money*. For all analyses, we are keeping the categories created from the self-generated aspects separate from the pre-selected aspects.

#### Are some categories of shared meaning rated as more central and important to the employed student identity?

Next, we also explored whether each of the 14 categories was rated as significantly more important and central to the employed student identity than the aspects in all other categories on average. To test for this, we conducted 28 two-sample *t*-tests – 14 for categories' importance, and 14 for categories' centrality. Because we conducted multiple consecutive comparisons, we adjusted the alpha-value for a significant result to a more stringent  $p < .001$  to safeguard against type-1 error. This adjustment is more stringent than Rubin (2021) who would recommend adjusting to

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics for all identity categories on the aspect-level variables.

	<i>n</i>	Centrality		Importance		Distinctiveness		Suitability	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	71	9.18	2.19	9.82	1.58	5.10	2.98	7.43	2.00
Organized	72	9.04	2.35	9.76	1.73	5.83	3.22	7.93	1.86
Motivation <sup>b</sup>	85	9.06	1.97	9.69	1.24	5.50	2.93	7.13	2.02
Discipline	64	9.06	1.64	9.50	1.50	5.03	2.84	7.29	1.62
Positive monetary consequences <sup>c</sup>	27	8.96	2.67	9.38	2.45	6.81	2.84	7.96	2.19
Skills	46	8.93	2.25	9.30	2.30	4.72	2.78	7.37	1.87
Role identity	12	9.92	2.94	9.09	3.21	7.09	3.18	8.64	2.25
Positive emotion	33	7.15	2.56	8.88	2.19	5.65	2.40	6.36	1.93
Personal characteristics	238	8.18	2.54	8.55	2.41	5.23	2.98	6.87	1.85
Positive consequences	30	8.10	2.14	8.33	2.62	6.43	2.71	7.77	2.24
Busy	76	8.56	2.27	7.01	2.61	7.14	3.01	8.72	2.09
Negative consequences	110	8.43	2.22	5.83	3.46	6.02	3.26	7.67	2.48
Negative emotion	93	8.15	2.63	5.58	2.97	5.78	2.91	7.71	2.13
Necessity for money	13	7.54	2.70	5.50	3.00	7.00	2.66	7.42	2.61
<i>Preselected aspects</i>									
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	197	9.11	2.26	9.56	1.79	5.47	2.69	7.12	1.60
Having fun	196	6.75	2.65	8.06	2.39	5.54	3.20	4.82	2.08
Having money <sup>c</sup>	198	8.32	2.77	8.71	2.36	7.22	3.03	8.18	2.23
Motivated <sup>b</sup>	197	7.96	2.60	9.15	1.99	5.02	2.82	6.98	1.84
Pride in work	197	7.94	2.51	8.38	2.30	5.23	2.92	7.02	1.77

Note: Superscripts indicate a category that overlaps in meaning to one of the pre-selected aspects.

an alpha-value of  $p < .0017$  in this instance, however, this difference does not affect the presented results.

In terms of aspects' Importance, we found that the categories of being *Hardworking*, being *Organized*, having *Motivation*, and having *Discipline* were rated as significantly more important than aspects that did not belong to those categories. In contrast, aspects related to being *Busy*, experiencing *Negative Consequences* or *Negative Emotions*, and having a *Necessity for Money* were rated as less important than aspects which were not part of these categories. The preselected aspects of *Hardwork* and *Motivation* were rated as more important than aspects that did not form part of these categories, whereas the aspect of *Having Fun* was rated as marginally less important than aspects not part of that category. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Aspects referring to being *Hardworking*, being *Organized*, and having *Motivation* and *Discipline*, were ranked as marginally more central than aspects which were not part of these categories. In contrast, experiencing *Positive Emotions* was rated as marginally less central than aspects not part of this category. Within our preselected aspects, *Hardwork* was rated as more central than aspects not part of that category whereas *Having Fun* was rated as less central than aspects not part of that category. These results are presented in Table 3.

**TABLE 2** Two-sample *t*-tests on whether each category was rated as more important than aspects not part of the category.

Measure	Aspect part of the category		Aspect not part of the category		<i>F</i> (1,1942)	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	9.82	1.58	8.45	2.58	19.77	.01	<.001
Organized	9.76	1.73	8.46	2.57	18.27	.01	<.001
Motivation <sup>b</sup>	9.69	1.24	8.45	2.59	20.87	.01	<.001
Discipline	9.50	1.50	8.47	2.58	10.72	.01	<.001
Positive monetary consequences <sup>c</sup>	9.38	2.45	8.49	2.56	3.13	.002	.08
Skills	9.30	2.30	8.48	2.56	4.62	.002	.03
Role identity	9.09	3.21	8.50	2.56	1.03	.001	.31
Positive emotion	8.88	2.19	8.50	2.57	.65	.000	.42
Personal characteristics	8.55	2.41	8.51	2.58	.03	.000	.86
Positive consequences	8.33	2.62	8.51	2.56	.14	.000	.71
Busy	7.01	2.61	8.56	2.54	27.14	.01	<.001
Negative consequences	5.83	3.46	8.66	2.41	134.88	.06	<.001
Negative emotion	5.58	2.97	8.64	2.45	128.76	.06	<.001
Necessity for money	5.50	3.00	8.52	2.55	16.76	.01	<.001
<i>Preselected aspects</i>							
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	9.56	1.79	8.39	2.61	38.97	.02	<.001
Having fun	8.06	2.39	8.55	2.58	5.76	.003	.02
Having money <sup>c</sup>	8.71	2.36	8.48	2.58	1.59	.001	.21
Motivated <sup>b</sup>	9.15	1.99	8.43	2.61	15.04	.01	<.001
Pride in work	8.38	2.30	8.52	2.59	.51	.000	.47

Note: *p* < .001 indicates a significant result. Superscripts indicate a category that overlaps in meaning to one of the pre-selected aspects.

## Does satisfying the motives of differentiation and suitability for employed students make the identity aspects more central and important to employed students?

To investigate H1a, we first fitted an unconditional multilevel model with Importance as the outcome variable and a random intercept (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). This model used 1944 identity aspects from 196 employed students. Fitting this model allowed us to calculate the intra-class correlation, which suggested that 24.30% of the variance in Importance ratings was located between participants (i.e., at level-2). Then, we included the fixed effects of Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students as predictors of Importance in our next model. Due to missing values, this model used 1902 identity aspects from 193 employed students. Although the models were not nested due to missing values in the second model, the model comparison statistics revealed that the second model was an improvement over the unconditional model ( $\Delta AIC = 185.2$ ,  $\Delta LL^{-2} = 94.6$ ). The model revealed that both Distinctiveness ( $B = -.06$ ,  $p = .01$ ), and Suitability for employed students ( $B = .06$ ,  $p = .03$ ) were significantly associated with aspect Importance, suggesting identity aspects were more important to employed students the less those aspects distinguished them from non-employed students and the more those aspects were suitable to employed students.

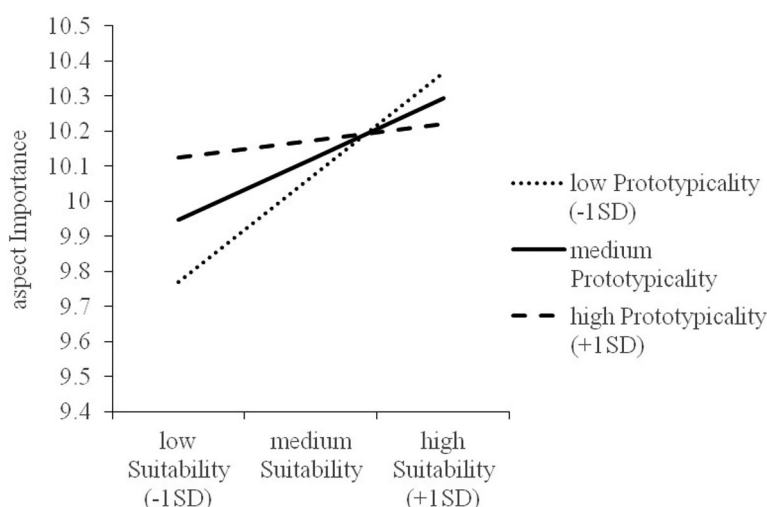
**TABLE 3** Two-Sample *t*-tests on whether each category was rated as more central than aspects not part of the category.

Measure	Aspect part of the category		Aspect not part of the category		<i>F</i> (1,2002)	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	9.18	2.19	8.23	2.56	8.32	.004	.004
Organized	9.04	2.35	8.23	2.56	7.10	.003	.008
Motivation <sup>b</sup>	9.06	1.97	8.22	2.57	10.05	.005	.002
Discipline	9.06	1.64	8.23	2.58	6.80	.003	.009
Positive monetary consequences <sup>c</sup>	8.96	2.67	8.25	2.55	2.07	.001	.15
Skills	8.93	2.25	8.24	2.56	3.29	.002	.07
Role identity	9.92	2.94	8.25	2.55	1.89	.001	.17
Positive emotion	7.15	2.56	8.28	2.55	6.22	.003	.01
Personal characteristics	8.18	2.54	8.28	2.56	.96	.000	.33
Positive consequences	8.10	2.14	8.26	2.56	.12	.000	.73
Busy	8.56	2.27	8.25	2.57	1.08	.001	.30
Negative consequences	8.43	2.22	8.25	2.58	.52	.000	.47
Negative emotion	8.15	2.63	8.27	2.55	.25	.000	.62
Necessity for money	7.54	2.70	8.26	2.56	1.04	.001	.31
<i>Preselected aspects</i>							
Hard-working <sup>a</sup>	9.11	2.26	8.17	2.57	23.44	.01	<.001
Having fun	6.75	2.65	8.42	2.50	75.08	.04	<.001
Having money <sup>c</sup>	8.32	2.77	8.26	2.53	.01	.000	.93
Motivated <sup>b</sup>	7.96	2.60	8.29	2.55	2.89	.001	.09
Pride in work	7.94	2.51	8.29	2.56	3.29	.002	.07

Note: *p* < .001 indicates a significant result. Superscripts indicate a category that overlaps in meaning to one of the pre-selected aspects.

Next, we fitted an unconditional multilevel model with Centrality as the dependent variable and a random intercept to investigate H1b. This model used 1891 identity aspects from 192 employed students. The intraclass correlation suggested that 37.40% of the variance in Centrality scores was located between students (at level-2). We then included the fixed effects of Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students as predictors of Centrality in the next model. Due to missing values, this model used 1891 identity aspects from 192 employed students. Although the models were not nested due to missing values in the second model, the model comparison statistics revealed that the second model was an improvement over the unconditional model ( $\Delta AIC = 495.3$ ,  $\Delta LL^{-2} = 249.6$ ). The model revealed that both Distinctiveness ( $B = -.11$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and Suitability for employed students ( $B = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were associated significantly with aspect Centrality, suggesting that identity aspects were more central to employed students the less those aspects distinguished them from non-employed students and the more those aspects were suitable to employed students.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The number of hours students spent in part-time employment was significantly associated with identification as an employed student ( $B = .03$ ,  $SE = .009$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% BCI = [.009;.047]), which prompted us to check whether the inclusion of the number of working hours as a fixed-term covariate would change the reported results. However, the number of hours



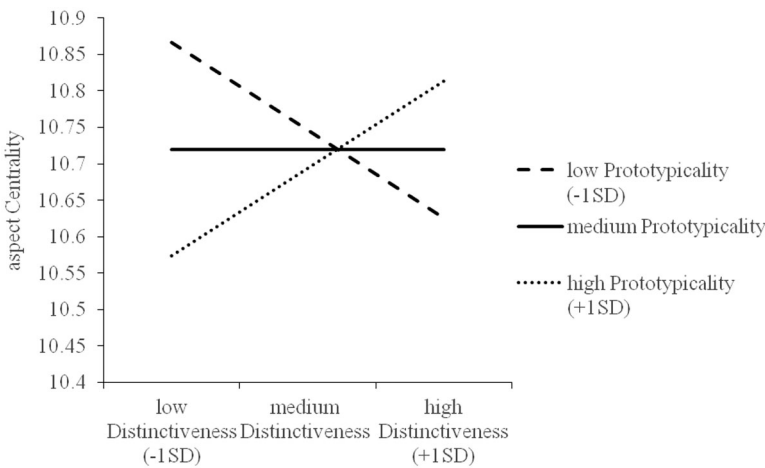
**FIGURE 1** The effect of aspect suitability for employed students on aspect importance as moderated by levels of superordinate group prototypicality.

## Do superordinate group prototypicality and intergroup differentiation moderate the effects of distinctiveness and suitability on ratings of centrality and importance?

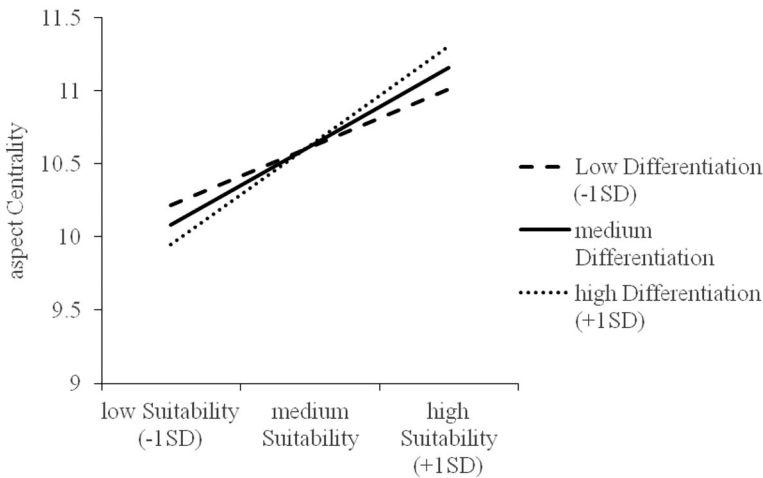
We sought to test whether the effects of aspect Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students on Centrality and Importance were dependent on employed students' levels of superordinate group prototypicality. To do so, we included superordinate group prototypicality as a cross-level moderator of the effects of Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students on Importance and Centrality ratings. Indeed, levels of superordinate group prototypicality marginally moderated the effect of Suitability for employed students ratings on aspect Importance ( $B = -.05, p = .06$ ), such that the effect of Suitability for employed students on Importance ratings was stronger if students perceived that employed students were better representative of what it means to be a student (see Figure 1).

Similarly, levels of superordinate group prototypicality marginally moderated the effect of Distinctiveness ratings on aspect Centrality ( $B = .03, p = .09$ ), such that Distinctiveness ratings were associated with *increases* in ratings of aspect Centrality when students perceived that employed students were better representative of what it means to be a student (see Figure 2). However, levels of superordinate group prototypicality did not significantly moderate the effect of Distinctiveness on Importance, or the effect of Suitability for employed students on Centrality.

Finally, we explored whether the effects of aspect Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students on Centrality and Importance were dependent on employed students' levels of intergroup differentiation. Akin to superordinate group prototypicality, we included intergroup differentiation as a cross-level moderator. Nonetheless, intergroup differentiation did not significantly moderate the effects of Distinctiveness and Suitability for employed students on aspect Importance. Similarly, intergroup differentiation did not significantly moderate the effect of Distinctiveness on aspect Centrality. We did find, however, that intergroup differentiation sig-



**FIGURE 2** The effect of aspect distinctiveness on aspect centrality as moderated by levels of superordinate group prototypicality.



**FIGURE 3** The effect of aspect suitability for employed students on aspect centrality as moderated by levels of intergroup differentiation.

nificantly moderated the effect of Suitability for employed students on aspect Centrality ( $B = .05$ ,  $p = .02$ ), such that the effect of Suitability for employed students on aspect Centrality was stronger when students perceived that non-employed and employed students were more distinct groups (see Figure 3).

## DISCUSSION

The current research sought to discuss what the core identity aspects of the employed student identity are, as well as whether satisfying the motives of distinctiveness and suitability for employed students was associated with making these aspects more central or important to the employed student identity. Through the results of our study, we revealed that employed students

selected identity aspects that fitted into 14 unique categories of shared meaning—in order of importance, those were coined as being *hardworking*, *organized*, *motivation*, *discipline*, *positive monetary consequences*, *skills*, *role identity*, *positive emotions*, *personal characteristics*, *positive consequences*, being *busy*, *negative emotions*, *negative consequences*, and *necessity for money*. We are confident that these fourteen categories represent the bulk of the employed student experience, as well as representing identity aspects which varied in their importance and centrality to the employed student identity.

We then conducted exploratory analyses, in which we checked whether belonging to the categories makes aspects more important and central to the employed student identity. Those analyses revealed that aspects related to being *Hardworking* and *Organized*, or having *Motivation* and *Discipline*, were rated as more important and central to the employed student identity whereas building *Skills* was only rated as more important, but not central, to the employed student identity. Indeed, these categories represent aspects which stem specifically from, or are being fostered by, being employed while at university. Thus, the benefit of these exploratory analyses lies in unearthing such positive (and highly suitable to employed students) aspects, which can then be used by practitioners to help employed students to identify more strongly with this identity. Practitioners can do this by conducting workshops, engaging employed students in CV consultations, or distributing materials to employed students, as all these activities will be aimed at familiarizing employed students with the aforementioned positive aspects of their employment experience.

Regarding the second aim of our research, our results revealed that the ratings of aspects' distinctiveness were negatively associated with the ratings of aspects' importance and centrality. Therefore, our results suggest that if aspects of the employed student identity make employed students more distinct from non-employed students, then these aspects are also rated as less important and central to the employed student identity. Although this is a surprising finding, we can offer a potential theoretical explanation for this effect. Because students might find themselves distinct from non-employed students due to differences in experiences, normative behaviors, or values, it is likely that they often experience such differences as aversive and, in fact, *want* to view themselves as typical students. This proposition is supported as the employed students on average ranked the non-employed student group as more representative of the general student populace. As such, if the non-employed experience is preferred and desirable for employed students, then it is understandable that aspects that differentiate the two groups in a more symbolic manner are experienced as less important or central in the employed students' self-concept. However, future research should consider more explicitly whether employed students actively *want* to be distinctive from non-employed students, or whether certain aspects of their experience simply allow them to protect their self-concept against negative intergroup comparisons.

Conversely, our results revealed that suitability for employed students ratings were positively associated with centrality and importance ratings. This and the previous result paint an interesting picture—whereas aspects which differentiate employed from non-employed students in a more symbolic manner are experienced as less central and important to the employed student identity, more practical aspects of the employed student experience become more important and central to that identity. Thus, we opine that those aspects to which non-employed students are less or not privy to at all could form the protective mechanisms that shield employed students from negative intergroup comparisons. Thinking ahead, the results indicate that future research and employment practitioners should focus more on raising the awareness of aspects of the employed student experience which are deemed more suitable for employed students. In line with our pre-

vious research (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b), such aspects could serve a vital protective role against negative intergroup comparisons and associated detrimental social consequences such as exclusion, loneliness, and leaving university.

Our exploratory moderation analyses then revealed some boundary conditions, which could prevent or enhance the adoption of suitable and distinguishing aspects to the employed student self-concept. Indeed, we found that superordinate group prototypicality (or the extent to which employed students thought that their group is better representative of the category of being a student in comparison to non-employed students) was a marginally significant moderator of the positive effect of suitability for employed students on ratings of Importance, as well as the negative effect of Distinctiveness on ratings of Centrality. Taking these two results in turn, we first found that endorsing strong superordinate group prototypicality—that is, considering employed students to be prototypical of students as a whole—made the effect of suitability for employed students on Importance stronger. This suggests that students would rate suitable for employed students aspects as more important to their employed student self-concept if they thought that their own group is more prototypical of the overarching category of students. Looking to the future however, enhancing or manipulating the superordinate group prototypicality beliefs of employed students could serve as a double-edged sword. Although our results reveal that believing in the prototypicality of one's own group in comparison to non-employed students could be beneficial for making suitable aspects more important to the employed student self-concept, changing students' prototypicality beliefs could also lead to further intergroup categorizations (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022b), which could in turn lead to negative intergroup comparisons and the withdrawal of social support from non-employed students to employed students. Thus, we encourage future research in this area to explore the boundary effects of superordinate group prototypicality further, but to do so in a responsible way so that it does not lead to negative outcomes for employed students.

Superordinate group prototypicality also marginally moderated the effect of distinctiveness ratings on aspect centrality. We found that endorsing superordinate group prototypicality actually led students who rated aspects highly on their distinctiveness to also rate them as more central to the employed student identity. This finding is in line with our previous suggestion that employed students may want to be treated like non-employed students and follow their experience. That is, for those who consider employed students to be prototypical of the overarching student category, more importance is placed on aspects that distinguish them from non-employed students. Nonetheless, if employed students perceived that their own group was better representative of who students as a whole are, then it is reasonable that aspects that make them feel like more of an employed student would be rated as more central. This proposition further cements the importance of superordinate group prototypicality beliefs as an important lever through which employed students could perceive more and more diverse aspects of their employment experience as central and important to their employed student identity and in turn lead to positive outcomes for employed students, such as improved social adaptation at university and better employability outcomes post-graduation.

Finally, we also found that intergroup differentiation (or the employed students' perception that employed and non-employed students are distinct groups) significantly moderated the effect of suitability for employed students on aspect centrality. We specifically found that the positive effect of suitability for employed students on aspect centrality became stronger when participants thought that the two groups were more distinct. This finding thus suggests that perceiving the two groups as two distinct entities can make certain highly suitable aspects very central to the employed student experience, perhaps as a mechanism of differentiation. Although we

caution that manipulating or enhancing students' sense of intergroup differentiation can backfire, our evidence suggests that doing so would cement highly suitable aspects as central to the employed student identity, and, in turn lead to higher endorsement of the employed student identity. Therefore, future researchers can assess the level of intergroup differentiation between the two groups naturally and consider whether aiming to enhance it would lead to positive outcomes for employed students in that particular context.

## Limitations and considerations for future research

Our results could have been impacted due to three methodological considerations. Firstly, we asked participants to give us five identity aspects of their choosing in line with Vignoles et al. (2006). However, participants were not able to provide us with additional context as to why these aspects were (or were not) central and important to their employed student identity or why they chose these specific aspects over other aspects of their employed student experience. Although we kept the information we provided to participants to a minimum, which allowed participants to select from a large variety of relevant aspects, the dearth of context associated with their choices could have impacted our categorization of aspects into categories of shared meaning. In order to circumvent this issue, we opted to categorize aspects *prima facie*, however, that might not have necessarily been the meaning that participants ascribed to those aspects. To exemplify this, it is possible that what we classified as a *personal characteristic* (responsible) might have been meant by the participant as a *positive consequence* of employment. Thus, the growth that employed students undertake after commencing employment should be taken into account by future research as it is possible that employed students' identity processes change after commencing employment and as they settle into their work routine (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a). Similarly, it is possible that what we termed *negative consequences* or *emotions* could have been aspects that students use to build their resistance as participants in our previous research did (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2022a). Altogether, we suggest that future research allow their participants to provide more context in order to establish why they selected the identity aspects that they did.

Secondly, we diverged from previous studies and split the *distinctiveness* motive into measuring the aspects' distinctiveness and suitability for employed students, respectively. In doing so, however, we acknowledge that our measure of suitability for employed students should be interpreted with some caution. Although we aimed to emphasize the comparison between non-employed and employed students when measuring how suitable an aspect is for employed students, our measure does not discriminate between whether an aspect is suitable at all for employed students or whether it is more suitable to either group. To exemplify this, our preselected aspect *Having fun* was ranked as more suitable for non-employed students (see Table 1 for more information), yet our measure does not allow us to ascertain how suitable that aspect is for employed students only. We thus implore future research to separate the comparative aspect of suitability from its valence aspect methodologically in order to provide more evidence for the effect of suitability on aspects' importance and centrality.

Finally, we also focused on just the motive of distinctiveness from the six different identity motives for identity construction (Vignoles et al., 2006). Our results then suggested that distinctiveness was negatively associated with both importance and centrality ratings—as such, it is possible that employed students *want to* be treated similarly and actively belong to the non-employed student collective. If this is indeed the case, then future research should also consider measuring the motive of *belonging* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We contend that, if employed stu-

dents do want to be treated on par with non-employed students, then identity aspects that satisfy the motive of belonging (but not distinctiveness) could be cognitively experienced as more central and important to who employed students are.

## CONCLUSION

Using data from 215 UK university employed students, this study sought to examine what aspects are important and central to the employed student identity, and whether the motives of distinctiveness and suitability for employed students predict the importance and centrality of aspects. We identified 14 distinct categories of identity aspects and identified categories which contained aspects that were rated as more and less important or central to the employed student identity. We also found that satisfying the motive of distinctiveness was negatively associated with both aspect importance and centrality, whereas suitability for employed students was positively associated with aspect importance and centrality. Finally, we also found that superordinate group prototypicality and intergroup differentiation were important boundary conditions for the effects of distinctiveness on aspect centrality and for the effects of suitability for employed students on importance and centrality.

The combination of these results has thus offered important theoretical and practical underpinnings for future research. Firstly, we have advanced the discussion of identity aspects in the formation of the employed student identity and offered an extension of current theoretical avenues for social identity formation. We have also found specific categories of aspects which were rated as more important and central to the employed student identity and can be used by practitioners to enhance the student's sense of being an employed student, and, with it, important social adaptation and post-graduation employability outcomes. Finally, we also suggest that manipulating or enhancing employed students' sense of superordinate group prototypicality and intergroup differentiation can lead to the further adoption of highly suitable identity aspects and associated beneficial outcomes for employed students. It is our hope that future research will explore these considerations in further detail, all with the aim of improving the experience of employed students and their social and employability outcomes.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors acknowledge no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets associated with this article and the analysis code can be located at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/T37VF>

## OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data and Preregistered Research Design badges. Data and the preregistered design are available at (<https://osf.io/ng2vz/files/osfstorage> and <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/T37VF>).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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