A Detour from My Dreams? How gendered self-concepts and possible selves intertwine with teenagers' interest in entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Despite decades of policy efforts, the gender gap in entrepreneurship remains persistent across national contexts. Recent research suggests that these disparities begin early in life, many years before labour market entrees. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 23 Danish adolescents aged 13–15, this paper explores how gendered self-concepts and possible selves contribute to the shaping of young people's perceptions of entrepreneurship. Using a sociological framework that combines theories of doing gender, self-concept, and future orientation, the study finds that girls' disinterest in entrepreneurship is not rooted in lack of ambition or ability, but in identity misalignment. While girls tend to articulate detailed and socially validated futures, often linked to professions related to care, entrepreneurship appears incompatible with these roles unless it is shown to reinforce who they already want to become. In contrast, boys are more likely to describe vague or flexible future selves, leaving room for entrepreneurship to emerge as a possible option. The findings challenge deficit-based understandings of gender gaps in entrepreneurship and call for a rethinking of how entrepreneurial roles are communicated to adolescents. Rather than asking how to prepare girls for entrepreneurship, the study suggests we should consider how to prepare entrepreneurship for girls by reframing the role itself to better align with the diverse futures young people already imagine as part of their identity work.

1. Introduction: A new lens to a well-known problem

Why do so few girls grow up wanting to be entrepreneurs? Despite decades of policy interest in promoting entrepreneurship, and explicit efforts to encourage women's participation, the gender gap remains strikingly persistent, even in countries with strong emphasis on egalitarianism such as Denmark (ref). Women are consistently underrepresented among entrepreneurs, particularly in high-growth sectors, and structural barriers such as funding inequality, gendered perceptions of competence, and limited access to networks continue to shape entrepreneurial opportunities (Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Kanze et al., 2018; Ahl, 2006). Although political reforms designed to enhance women's participation in entrepreneurship target adults, the disparities show signs of beginning much earlier. As early as teenage years, gendered differences emerge in how young people relate to entrepreneurship, both in terms of self-efficacy and interest (Wilson et al., 2007; Shinnar et al., 2014). While boys may express entrepreneurial ambitions, girls are often more hesitant, or uninterested altogether. Understanding this early divergence is crucial if we are to meaningfully address gender inequality in entrepreneurship.

Existing research on youth and entrepreneurship often focusses on individual factors such as entrepreneurial competences, confidence, or personality traits such as risk willingness, drawing on psychological models like the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) or constructs such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). While these approaches have yielded important insights, they offer limited tools for understanding why entrepreneurship might not resonate with some young people in the first place. What makes the idea of being an entrepreneur feel relevant or irrelevant to a 14-year-old girl who imagines herself as a future psychologist, teacher, or doctor? Why does it feel possible for a boy who has never thought much about a concrete

career path? Such questions require a shift in perspective, from competences and intentions to identity and meaning making. With this follows the acknowledgment that gender is not merely a background variable but a central organising principle in how young people make sense of themselves and their future possibilities. Drawing on gender as performative and interactional (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Risman, 2004), disinterest in entrepreneurship among girls can be viewed through identity trajectories that are already gendered by early teenage years.

This paper contributes to that understanding by drawing on sociological and social psychological theories of gender and identity to explore how Danish teenagers aged 13–15 make sense of entrepreneurship in relation to who they are, and who they hope to become. Combining insights from the sociology of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Risman, 2004; Ridgeway, 2009) with the concepts of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006) and self-concept (Cech, 2014), I examine how gendered self-concepts and future dreams shape the way entrepreneurship is perceived, evaluated, and either embraced or dismissed as a possible future career choice. Through 23 single interviews with a diverse group of Danish teenagers, I suggest that disinterest in entrepreneurship among girls is not rooted in lack of ability or aspiration, but in the ways which entrepreneurship aligns, or fails to, with their socially grounded identity projects. In doing so, the study offers a new lens on a well-known problem: rather than asking why girls lack entrepreneurial intentions, it explores how young people's imagined futures serve as both reinforcers of gendered stereotypes and opportunity windows for change in relation to early gender gaps in entrepreneurship interest.

Gender and teenagers' interest in entrepreneurship: a literature review

1.1. Gender gaps in entrepreneurship: the adult context

Research consistently shows a gender gap in entrepreneurship. Women are less likely than men to start businesses, especially high-growth ventures, and they face systemic biases in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Kanze et al., 2018; Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Jennings & Brush, 2013). For example, Kanze et al. (2018) find that startup investors pose different questions to female entrepreneurs, focusing on how women will prevent failure, versus how men will achieve success, which contributes to disparities in funding allocation. Such biases reflect a broader pattern in which entrepreneurship remains culturally associated with masculine traits and norms. Jennings and Brush (2013) argue that entrepreneurship is fundamentally a gendered phenomenon, with gendered social structures shaping women's experiences as entrepreneurs. Women often encounter a mismatch between feminine gender expectations and the perceived image of an entrepreneur, leading to barriers in credibility, financing, and support (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). These structural and perceptual gaps help explain why women entrepreneurs tend to have lower access to capital and are more likely to run smaller, necessity-driven businesses (Marlow, 2012).

Recent work by Ahl and Marlow (2021) reinforces that even apparent improvements in women's entrepreneurial participation can mask persistent inequalities: prevailing discourses still position the male experience as the norm, which sustains an illusion of gender neutrality that downplays ongoing gendered barriers. In short, the adult entrepreneurship landscape remains unequal for many reasons, and fully understanding the roots of this gap requires looking at earlier stages of life when career interests and self-concepts take shape.

2.2 Youth and entrepreneurial intentions

A small but growing literature has turned to teenage years to explore when and why women begin to diverge from men in entrepreneurial interest. Even in the teenage years, boys express higher entrepreneurial aspirations than girls. Early studies by Kourilsky and Walstad (1998) show that while adolescent girls and boys possess comparable levels of business knowledge and skills, girls feel less prepared to start a business. In their survey, girls understate their entrepreneurial competencies despite no actual deficit, indicating a confidence gap emerging in youth. This lack of confidence is crucial because entrepreneurial self-efficacy, one's belief in the skills needed to succeed in entrepreneurship, is known as a key determinant of entrepreneurial intentions (Wilson et al., 2007).

Wilson and colleagues (2004, 2007) find that adolescent girls have significantly lower self-efficacy regarding entrepreneurship than boys, and this difference in confidence translates into lower entrepreneurial interest among young women. Moreover, the influence of self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intentions appears to be stronger for females than for males. Kickul, Wilson, and Marlino (2004) report that feeling capable is especially important in shaping girls' entrepreneurial career preferences: teenage girls are unlikely to aspire to entrepreneurship unless they felt highly confident in their abilities, whereas boys with relatively lower self-confidence are still more inclined to consider an entrepreneurial career. Shinnar, Hsu, and Powell (2014) note that part of the issue is that the very notion of an entrepreneur aligns with male stereotypes, which can discourage girls from identifying with entrepreneurial roles.

This matters because entrepreneurial intentions formed in teenage years can be a strong predictor of actual entrepreneurial behaviour in adulthood. Longitudinal research confirms that an individual's intention to start a business significantly predicts later startup activity. In a large two-wave study, Kautonen et al. (2015) find that entrepreneurial intentions (along with self-perceptions of behavioural control) in youth years explains business launch years later during adulthood. Thus, the lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy and interest observed among teenage girls are not only an immediate inequality but may also translate into the enduring gender disparity in entrepreneurship seen in adult life.

2.3 Gendered career socialisation and expectations

What drives the emergent gender gap in entrepreneurial interest during teenage years? Although few studies address entrepreneurship specifically, a body of literature explores the gendered career socialisation processes by which boys and girls internalise cultural expectations about gender and work, which later affects their actual career choices (Alm, 2015). From childhood through the teen years, girls receive both explicit and subtle messages about which careers are appropriate or realistic for women. Eccles (2009) emphasises that stereotypes, biases, and societal expectations significantly shape adolescents' career choices, especially for young women. In addition, Hoisl and colleagues (2022) find that parents tend to calculate the return on investment of potential career paths on behalf of their children. As a result, they are more likely to encourage innovation-related careers for boys than for girls, based on their perception that women face greater obstacles and lower rewards in these fields. Survey research by Karimi and colleagues (2016) illustrates that young women's entrepreneurial intentions are shaped more by social approval and normative beliefs than young men's. Female students are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship if important others (family, mentors) endorse it, and they are also more dependent on having role models to bolster their confidence and interest. This suggests that women's entrepreneurial choices are sensitive to social context;

without encouragement or examples of women entrepreneurs in their everyday lives, many girls simply will not envision entrepreneurship as part of their future (Bell et al, 2019).

Charles and Bradley (2009) observe an interesting paradox: in societies with greater freedom of choice, young people's career aspirations become more gender-stereotypical rather than less. In affluent contexts, girls "indulge" gendered preferences, and often gravitate towards traditionally female-coded occupations to express their identities. This means that even when structural barriers recede, cultural influences can lead girls (with high academic ability and opportunities) to self-segregate away from fields like entrepreneurship, while prioritising fields that align with feminine identity goals (e.g. helping professions). Fernández-Cornejo et al. (2015) adds to this dynamic with evidence of gendered selection processes: in a study of university students in Kenya, Spain and Iceland, they find that women's career inclinations are strongly tied to their perspectives on the work-family interface, a pattern far less evident among men. This indicates that young women, more than men, weigh potential identity trade-offs between successful careers and successful family lives. If the identity of an entrepreneur seems to clash with other valued identities (such as being a present parent or having a balanced life), girls may pre-emptively rule out that path.

2.4 Integrating gender sociology and early entrepreneurial interest

Taken together, these studies indicate that the gender gap in entrepreneurship could be rooted not only in adult experiences or business contexts, but in teenage years, as girls develop identities and expectations that steer them away from entrepreneurial paths. This review highlights a critical insight: teenage girls' disinterest in entrepreneurship can be understood as an outcome of gendered identity construction. Prior research on youth and entrepreneurship has illuminated gender differences in self-efficacy, intentions, and the effects of education, while the sociology of gender provides rich theories about identity and socialisation. The contribution of my study is to bridge these fields, linking how young teenage girls and boys "do gender" through their self-concepts and imagined futures with their willingness to engage in entrepreneurship. By bringing identity theory into conversation with entrepreneurial intention models, we gain new perspectives on why the pipeline of women entrepreneurs is so narrow by adulthood.

Overall, this study proves how gendered expectations and identities in early teenage years act as a filtering mechanism for entrepreneurial ambition. Recognising this opens new avenues for research and practice. For example, reconstructing the image of the entrepreneur, or the structure of opportunities in schools, may expand girls' sense of what they can become. This sociological lens on early entrepreneurial interest offers new insights into a widely debated problem, suggesting that closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship may demand intentional representation and communication of entrepreneurship at the very stage when girls are first figuring out who they are and aspire to be.

2. Theoretical framework

4.2 Self-concepts in teenage years

Self-concepts theorise the perceptions and beliefs individuals hold about themselves through their lives (Markus and Oyserman, 1989). Teenage years are a pivotal period for identity work: teenagers actively craft a self-image by trying on different roles and attributes while responding to the feedback they receive from their surroundings. For example, a girl might present herself as caring and socially skilled, while a boy might emphasise being independent or "good at tech," mirroring common gender stereotypes. These self-

concepts are not necessarily innate differences, but reflections of identity work. Often, teenagers' self-concepts align with gender norms, illustrating how societal beliefs become personal beliefs.

Erin A. Cech's work provides a valuable lens for understanding the link between gendered self-concepts and identity formation. Cech argues that individuals' self-concepts filter which identity traits they adopt (Cech, 2015). In her study of young engineers, she finds that people tend to embrace aspects of a professional identity that match their pre-existing self-conception and ignore or downplay aspects that do not. Importantly, because self-conceptions themselves are gendered, this mechanism can relay societal gender differences into different identity outcomes. In practice, this means that if a young person's self-image has been shaped by gender norms, it will guide them toward roles and behaviours deemed congruent with those norms. For instance, a teen who regards herself as "people-oriented" and empathetic (characteristics often culturally encouraged in girls) may gravitate towards collaborative or caregiving activities, whereas a teen boy who sees himself as assertive might feel drawn to leadership roles. Empirical evidence supports this pattern: students with more emotional or people-focused self-conceptions are more likely to enter female-typed fields, even after accounting for their explicit gender beliefs (Cech, 2015). This means that when youths strive to "be true to themselves," that self has been partly constructed by gendered socialisation, so the pursuit of an authentic self can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender paths.

Self-concept functions as an internal compass: teenagers make choices about extracurriculars, academic focus, or social roles that "feel right" given their self-image (Wilgenbusch and Merell, 1999). At the same time, they seek validation from others by aligning their presentation with what society rewards for their gender. A young woman who views herself as enterprising yet also senses that society expects women to be communal might negotiate her identity by envisioning a career that combines leadership with helping others. A young man, internalising that he should be ambitious and confident, may pursue competitive domains to affirm that identity. In each case, the teen is performing identity work that both expresses their self-concept and meet social expectations. This dynamic shows how societal expectations and self-concepts become intertwined: teenagers internalise cultural messages about gender, which then shape the kinds of selves they try to become. Crucially, these present self-conceptions do more than define current identity. They also influence how young people imagine their futures, which leads to the concept of possible selves.

This framework aligns closely with theories of gendered identity work, emphasising how gender norms are internalised through ongoing interaction and become embedded in young people's self-conceptions (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Risman, 2004). Because girls are often encouraged, both explicitly and implicitly, to adopt caring, responsible, and emotionally attuned identities, these traits frequently appear in their self-concepts. As a result, professional roles that align with these traits, such as teacher, psychologist, or doctor, may feel more authentic or socially affirmed, while others, including entrepreneurship, may appear mismatched or even inappropriate. This does not mean that girls lack ambition or capacity for leadership, but that the identity of "entrepreneur" may not resonate with the gendered scripts embedded in their sense of self. As Ridgeway (2011) notes, gender functions as a primary frame through which new roles and situations are interpreted, and this framing can shape which identity options feel plausible or appealing. Thus, self-concepts are not only filtered through personal experience but also through culturally available narratives about gender.

4.3 Possible selves and future orientation

Extending identity into the future, the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) explains how people envision themselves in years to come. Possible selves are essentially the future-oriented components of

self-concept: they encompass what one hopes to become, might become, or fears becoming. These imagined future identities are a powerful motivator during teen years, when youths begin to seriously consider their paths in education, careers, and adulthood. Notably, possible selves do not develop in a vacuum; they are socially shaped. As Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) emphasise, possible selves are "inherently social," shaped by cultural stereotypes and feedback from others. Teenagers draw on what they see and hear in their environment to construct visions of their future. For example, if the popular image of an entrepreneur is a bold male innovator, a boy may more readily picture himself in that role, whereas a girl, lacking relatable models or facing stereotype-based doubts, might not include "future entrepreneur" in her repertoire of possible selves. These social influences mean that possible selves often reflect the gendered expectations surrounding young people. Through interaction and media, teens get signals about which futures seem attainable for "people like me," and they internalise those signals into their own future aspirations (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006).

These dynamics are particularly relevant in light of gendered identity development. Because girls' self-concepts are often more coherent and socially anchored at an earlier age (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006), their possible selves may also be more constrained by normative expectations. Entrepreneurship, when culturally framed as individualistic, high-risk, or detached from care-oriented values, may appear incompatible with the future selves girls imagine. Even if not explicitly seen as male, the role may still feel misaligned with the gendered identity work they are engaged in. Conversely, boys' identity work may leave more room for interpreting entrepreneurship as an option. This difference is not simply a matter of choice, but a reflection of how gendered structures and cultural narratives shape the horizon of the possible during formative years.

Research on gender and possible selves suggests that early youth is a period of especially intense future-thinking for girls. Oyserman and Fryberg's study of diverse teens argues that girls tend to engage with possible selves more avidly and effectively as a motivational tool during early teenage years compared to boys. In practice, this might be seen in a 13-year-old girl who imagines herself as a successful university student or professional and therefore studies hard and avoids trouble to keep that possible self on track. Boys, on average, may show a relative lag in using possible selves as a guide at the same age, perhaps because their socialisation encourages a more present-oriented or less feedback-sensitive approach. The result is that girls' possible selves often function as a stronger compass for behaviour in early teenage years.

The possible selves framework highlights how teenagers' future orientations are closely linked to their social context and internalised identities. A young person will gravitate toward envisioning futures that align with their current self-concept and the roles they consider realistic. If certain paths (like entrepreneurship or STEM careers) are culturally framed as masculine, girls who cannot see themselves fitting that frame may simply not envision those futures or may do so only if they have support to expand their sense of what is possible. Conversely, boys might shy away from possible selves that conflict with masculine norms (e.g. imagining a future in a caregiving profession) unless those norms are challenged. In this way, possible selves serve as a bridge between present identity and future goals, consolidating the influence of gender.

Cumulatively, these theoretical strands provide a cohesive framework for examining teenagers' perceptions of entrepreneurship, identity, and gender. Together, these lenses suggest that a teenager's view of an entrepreneurial career will be profoundly shaped by gender: by how they have learned to do gender, how they view themselves as a result, and whether they can imagine themselves in the entrepreneurial role.

This theoretical framework will inform my analysis of how teenage identity and gender dynamics intersect in the space of imagined entrepreneurship careers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and case selection: Why Denmark?

Denmark offers a compelling context for examining how gendered identity and career aspirations take shape during teenage years. Although the country is widely regarded as a global leader in gender equality, especially in areas such as education, parental leave, and political participation, the Danish labour market remains highly gender-segregated (Gupta et al., 2008; Charles & Bradley, 2009). Women continue to be overrepresented in public-sector occupations associated with care and administration, while men dominate technical and leadership roles. Despite strong formal equality, occupational choices remain patterned by gender in ways that resist simple explanations of structural constraint. In addition, the gender gap in academic achievement between girls and boys continue to grow (source: PISA), indicating that something substantial is at stake as early as lower-secondary school years. This paradox makes Denmark an especially relevant setting for investigating how adolescents begin to internalise and navigate gendered career trajectories. Entrepreneurship in particular provides a useful case: it is not tied to a specific educational path, and it holds symbolic associations with agency, ambition, and independence. By exploring how Danish teens understand and relate to entrepreneurship, we gain insight into the early identity work that shapes gendered life courses, even in egalitarian contexts.

3.2 Sample and recruitment

The study draws on interviews conducted in Danish during the spring of 2024 with 23 young people (13 girls and 10 boys) aged 13 to 15, all attending 7th or 8th grade in Danish public lower secondary schools. The interviews took place at the participants' schools in private settings, usually in meeting rooms or empty classrooms. Participants were recruited from 12 schools across Denmark to ensure variation in geography (urban, rural, capital) and school performance (based on national GPA statistics UVM). Participant selection was facilitated by teachers, who were asked to randomly draw one girl and one boy per school to avoid selection biases. This worked in most cases, although occasional cancellations (and one chess tournament) resulted in a slightly uneven gender balance, and there seems to be a slight overrepresentation of participants with strong interest in entrepreneurship, which could indicate that some of the teachers picked students based on knowledge rather than random draws.

This sampling strategy, grounded in principles of maximum variation (Miles et al., 2014), allows for exploration of common grounds of how gendered perceptions of entrepreneurship emerge across different local and social contexts. The sample reflects a wide range of social backgrounds, from working-class to higher middle-class families, as well as different cultural backgrounds. However, it is important to note that all participants had at least one parent with some labour market attachment. As such, the sample does not include teenagers from the most marginalised families experiencing prolonged unemployment or severe economic precarity. This absence, not a choice on my part but maybe a matter of sampling strategy through teachers, should be considered when interpreting the findings, as these young people may relate to work, identity, and entrepreneurship in different ways (ref).

3.3 Interview design and researcher position

All participants took part in single semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were designed to feel conversational and age-appropriate, encouraging participants to speak freely about their everyday lives, future aspirations, and understandings of entrepreneurship. The interview guide (see appendix x) included open-ended prompts on school, interests, hopes for the future, and views on entrepreneurship, both as concept and possible career choice, as well as follow-ups designed to invite elaboration or clarification. Halfway through the part of entrepreneurship-oriented part of the interview, I played a video, lasting 1,5 minutes, from my laptop showing a young female entrepreneur with a value-based business idea. This was to prompt reflection upon different types of entrepreneurships. Throughout all interviews, I drew on best practices for youth interviewing to establish trust and minimise adult–child hierarchies in the interview space (Eder & Fingerson, 2003).

However, despite best practice efforts, the relationship between researcher and participant is not neutral. Drawing on interactionist perspectives (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2020), I acknowledge the interview process as a co-constructed encounter in which participants made sense of themselves in dialogue with me. Presenting the concept of entrepreneurship, often initially unfamiliar or only vaguely defined to the participant, acted as a form of gentle intervention. It prompted reflection on how such a path might or might not fit with participants' emerging self-concepts. In this way, the interviews became spaces for identity work: moments where participants tested out ideas about who they are and who they might become. My role was not to extract stable truths but to observe the meaning-making process as it unfolded in real time.

Ethical considerations

In Denmark, there is no legal or institutional requirement to seek formal ethical approval for qualitative interview studies involving adolescents, as long as no biomedical intervention or deception is involved. Instead, researchers are expected to follow established laws for responsible conduct of research, including principles of informed consent, data protection, and care for vulnerable participants.

In this study, informed consent was obtained from both participants and their legal guardians. All participants received written and verbal information in age-appropriate language and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. All data has been anonymised and stored securely in accordance with GDPR regulations.

3.4 Analytical approach

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I began by constructing thematic displays to explore patterns in how participants talked about the future, entrepreneurship, and themselves. These initial categories (e.g. "imagined futures," "concept of entrepreneurship," "key sentences about identity") were developed inductively, and I revised them iteratively in dialogue with theory and data material. While I included questions related to self-efficacy and risk-taking in the interview guide, my analysis was driven by an underlying theoretical interest in gender as an interactional and identity-related process. Rather than treating gender as a fixed variable, I analyse how gendered identities are constructed and negotiated in relation to career aspirations and future-oriented thinking in line with West and Zimmerman's (1987; 2009) conception of gender as something participants do and are held accountable for.

Although the data material also showed patterns along different dimensions, such as social class, cultural background, and school context, I deliberately centred gender as the primary comparative axis to remain with the study's initial orientation.

4. Analysis

The analysis is organised in three parts. First, I show how the participants construct a shared image of the entrepreneur as a highly driven, self-reliant individual. An image that is not explicitly gendered, but still narrowly defined. Second, I explore how girls' future aspirations tend to be more detailed, socially anchored, and gendered, functioning as identity anchors that shape what kinds of careers feel possible. Third, I examine how girls' disinterest in entrepreneurship is less about lacking confidence or ambition and more about a mismatch between the entrepreneurial role and their evolving sense of self, though small openings for realignment do appear.

5.1. Entrepreneurship: narrow, but not explicitly gendered

Although none of the teenagers in this study have experience with entrepreneurship themselves, they all manage to define it when asked. Their definitions tend to align closely: someone who "starts something on their own," "has an idea and makes it happen," or "builds their own business." Many describe entrepreneurs as people who create something new and try to "make it big" with it. Their understandings are clearly influenced by media sources, which most mention somewhere along our conversations: Dragons' Den, Instagram, TikTok. They rarely mention family or school contexts, although it is clear from the participants with parents who are entrepreneurs that this enhances their knowledge about the concept. However, possibly because most of the participants' exposure is so indirect, entrepreneurship appears as a slightly one-sided concept. One boy said he thought of "someone who builds things," while another imagined "someone doing business stuff and trying to sell it." Others mention "planning," "being a boss" or "packing orders." Despite their young age and lack of direct contact with entrepreneurial life, the participants tend to describe the entrepreneur with surprising confidence. It is a personality rather than just a job title. This is perhaps not surprising given that most of the participants' exposure to entrepreneurship has been curated by media, making the entrepreneur more of a tv character rather than a person with an everyday job.

As table 1 shows, the entrepreneur is almost always described as someone with vision, drive, and determination. Traits like "being creative," "having discipline," and "working hard" are frequently mentioned. One girl noted that "you have to have an overview," while another commented that entrepreneurs "make their own decisions." Many describe entrepreneurship as a kind of ongoing self-direction; not just coming up with the idea but being in charge throughout.

Table 1. Entrepreneurs are…

Rich on ideas – hardworking – passionate – opportunity minded – good at planning – big picture-minded – determined – bossy – individualistic	**EXAMPLES:** "So you have to make decisions, and you need to have an overview." " I think it's the ones who have good discipline. Hard workers."

	"Thinking outside the box, being very creative and open."

Entrepreneurial work is rarely seen as relaxed or ordinary. Instead, it is imagined as relentless and high-pressure. Participants repeatedly use phrases like "working all the time," "always being busy," or "having no one to help you." One girl said: "You can't just take a break. It's your thing. You have to keep going." Another imagined it would feel like: "If it fails, it's all on you." These descriptions, though speculative, reveal how entrepreneurship is perceived less as a job and more as a full-time identity. Some described entrepreneurs as "smart with money" or "good at making things work." The characteristics mentioned are rarely emotional or social. Very few participants describe entrepreneurs as people who work with others, help others, or prioritise work-life balance. This is not to say that such associations are impossible, but they are not the dominant ones. Even when shown the short video of a value-driven entrepreneurs, most participants latch onto the founder's initiative and determination, rather than her mission or social goals.

A surprising feature across the interviews is that entrepreneurship is rarely described in explicitly gendered terms. Despite extensive research highlighting entrepreneurship as a male-coded domain, the teenagers in this study largely reject the idea that entrepreneurs look a certain way or belong to a particular gender. As one girl put it: "Entrepreneurs don't look a certain way. Anyone can be one.", while one of the boys says: "You wouldn't just be able to pinpoint an entrepreneurship walking on the street." This reluctance to gender the entrepreneurial role is notable, especially given how dominant the internalisation of masculine ideals is in both academic literature and public discourse on entrepreneurship.

This too could reflect that the teenagers' main sources of entrepreneurial exposure are social media and tv shows like Dragons' Den. These platforms feature a relatively gender-balanced cast of entrepreneurs, at least in visual terms, pitching various categories of products, which may help explain why participants do not associate entrepreneurship with men in any explicit way. At the same time, these media often portray entrepreneurs through highly individualistic and performative scripts, focused on confidence, hustle, and visionary drive, which are not inherently gendered in appearance, but nonetheless align with traditionally masculine-coded traits (Radu and Redien-Collot, 2008; Duong, 2025). However, the participants do not appear to acknowledge this. Another possible explanation is that participants are too unfamiliar with entrepreneurship to interpret it through normative gender categories (Ridgeway, 2011). Gender appears to clearly guide their identity work, but prior studies show that occupational gender stereotypes grow as children and teenagers gain more knowledge about specific jobs (Stockard and McGee, 1990; Solbes-Canales et al, 2020). No matter the reason, the image of the entrepreneur the participants paint is not neutral. It is consistent and narrow, requiring alignment with a particular set of characteristics that may still exclude those who do not already see themselves reflected in that mold.

5.2. Gendered future dreams

The interviews reveal a clear pattern in relation to future reflections and the way they are presented. As table 2 shows, many of the professions the participants mention draw clear gendered patterns in relation to the broader labour market: many of the girls want to work with care, many of the boys are interested in vocational work and business. Further, when asked about their future, many of the boys give short or open-

ended answers. They imagine doing something with sports, something technical, or something "fun." When they mention specific careers, their responses are often brief and unspecific. For example, one boy describes his interest in becoming a craftsman:

Interviewer: "Why you would like to do that?"

Participant: "Because I think it's boring to be inside."

It appears that the idea of becoming a craftsman perhaps functions more as a rejection of office work rather than a dedicated dream. Although more than half of the boys mention possible future jobs, they rarely elaborate to larger extent than that they are motivated by factors as money, building things or avoiding boring jobs. This does not mean that their future reflections are unrelated to their self-concept; indeed, there are strong matches between statements such as "I'm someone who often gets in trouble at school because I just can't sit still" and "I want to own a shop because then I'll always have stuff to do", but few of the boys describe what their futures will look like, or how they are going to get there.

By contrast, in addition to describing clearly defined occupational goals, the girls' responses are longer, more detailed, and often include reflections on personal fit or motivation. The most common career ambitions are related to caring for others in one way or the other, aligning with well-known social expectations about care, empathy, and interpersonal skill. When asked why they want these jobs, girls often refer to "liking people," "helping others," or being "good with animals" or "good with kids", revealing gendered self-concepts at work (Cech, 2014). Further, the way these future plans are narrated suggests that they are more than just career ideas. They function as identity anchors: concrete, socially recognisable, and normatively supported images of what kind of person one is becoming. For example, this is clear when one 13-year-old girl describes her future dream of becoming a hairdresser and mother:

"I would love to do that. So, I kind of work as a hairdresser and have my own salon like that. And then having kids and having fun with them, too. And have fun at work. I think it's just easier to be an adult. And then have some... You don't have to be a millionaire just to be comfortable, for example. I have the money I have, and I have to spend it wisely. […] I like people and I'm almost always happy and I'm not the angriest person in the world, so it fits."

In this case, the career goal contains a strong representation of present self-concept and visions of adulthood: this girl sees herself as an emotionally stable people's person, and she plans to become a fun and responsible parent who prioritises happiness over wealth. Several girls talk about having had the same dream for years and how they prepare for it through conversations with friends or watching videos in their spare time. Others refer to confirmation from parents or teachers telling them they would be good in that role. Their career choices are often justified through both personal characteristics and external recognition.

This does not mean that girls are passively reproducing social norms. On the contrary, several show signs of negotiation. They evaluate different options, weigh their interests, and reflect on what fits them best. As one girl explained, "I've thought about being a nurse or a kindergarten teacher, but I think I'd rather work with smaller kids. I've tried both, and I like that more", while another responds to entrepreneurship with the statement: "It could be cool. I think I could be okay at it, but I just don't think it's my passion". Such statements suggest that their future selves are not chosen blindly, but they are selected from among recognisable options based on what is perceived as socially and personally appropriate.

Table 2. Participants and their imagined future jobs

Participant's imagined future job	Participant gender	Labour market distribution, women	Labour market distribution, men
Hairdresser	Girl	93.3%	6.7 %
Carpenter	Boy	1.6%	98.4%
Architect	Boy	66%	34%
Some kind of craftsman	Boy	1.6%	98.4%
Real estate agent	Girl	52%	48%
Psychologist	Girl	77%	23%
Salesperson	Boy	56%	44%
Self-employed/business owner	Boy	24%	76%
Doctor or psychologist	Girl	53%/77%	47%/23%
Kindergarten teacher	Girl	74,4%	25,6%
Economist	Girl	37%	63%
Kindergarten or special needs teacher	Girl	74,4%	25,6%
Entrepreneur/investor	Boy	24%	76%
Scientist or journalist	Girl	49%/50%	51%/50%
Lawyer/doctor/pilot	Girl	66%/53%/5,8%	34%/47%/94,2%
N/A	Boy	-	-
Craftsman or chef or handball player	Boy	1,6%	98,4%
Entrepreneur	Girl	24%	76%
Veterinarian	Girl	72%	28%
N/A	Boy	-	-
Kindergarten teacher	Girl	74,4%	25,6%
N/A	Boy	77%	23%
Doctor	Girl	53%	47%

Note: Data from xxx. The first two columns show the participant's gender and imagined future job, the last two columns show the actual gender distribution of this job in Denmark.

Many of these identity projects include imagined family roles as well. Several girls speak of wanting a job where they "can also be there for their family" or where they "don't have too much stress." One says: "If I have children, then I'll make breakfast and walk them to school before I go to work". Another reflects: "The most important thing is that you're happy in your job, because then it passes on to the family". These are more than visions of career, but also visions of everyday life, structured around future caregiving and emotional responsibility. "It will definitely be a life with a good family, where everyone fits together," said one girl, when asked to describe what kind of adult she hoped to become. The affective tone of these statements suggests that the imagined job is often part of a broader ideal of being a wholesome person and living a good life, where emotional balance and care for others are central. These findings resonate with research showing that girls, already in early teenage years, are more likely to articulate socially embedded possible selves (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006). The jobs named, the ways of describing them, and the values attached to them reflect widely recognised scripts for femininity. While girls clearly reflect on what suits them personally, the range of possibilities they draw on remains strongly shaped by what is socially legible and affirmable.

A few girls stand out by actively positioning themselves outside this family-driven pattern. One says she wants to become a researcher or journalist and imagines travelling internationally, living in different places, and not having "a normal job." She talks about being curious, wanting to see the world, and not knowing exactly where she will end up. In addition to the content, what distinguishes her response is also the way she anticipates and responds to its atypicality. She justifies her ambitions through references to her personality and learning preferences. She says she knows it is not a "normal job," but that it fits who she is: someone who "sometimes likes to be alone". The nature of this statement almost sounds excusing; like she is accustomed to having to justify her abnormalities. Thus, her way of framing her future reveals a clear awareness of normative expectations and a deliberate stance of difference.

Across the interviews, then, we see a gendered division not only in which futures are imagined, but in how they are narrated and justified. Girls articulate socially affirmed self-concepts and possible selves that align with care-oriented adult identities. These futures appear to provide meaning, coherence, and stability. But they also delineate what kinds of futures feel realistic or desirable. Girls who imagine something else must do more work to make those futures credible. Among boys, the pattern is less coherent. Their imagined futures are often less detailed, less stable, and less oriented toward existing occupational identities. Their answers leave more room for improvisation, but less visible structure. They rarely mention visions of future families, and when they do, it is merely descriptive rather than planning, for example when one boy says how he would like to road trip across America with "a few children and a sweet and pretty wife". The identity work boys are doing in relation to future selves may emerge differently, or later. But the contrast in how clearly girls describe future selves, and how strongly those selves align with gendered expectations, is central.

In sum, most of the girls imagine futures that are both recognisable and affirmed (Ridgeway, 2011). These futures are not just occupational; they are identity work. They reflect internalised ideas about what kind of adult they will become and what kind of life they will lead (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006; Cech, 2014). The strength of these identity anchors helps explain why other roles, such as that of the entrepreneur, may not immediately appear relevant.

5.3. Identity-based disinterest and opportunity windows

As I have shown, the participants in this study rarely framed entrepreneurship as something gendered or exclusive to boys. But when asked if they would consider doing it, most girls dismiss it at first as something that does not quite fit with who they are. Several girls describe entrepreneurs in terms that contrast with how they see themselves: individualistic, constantly working, and bossy. Some explicitly state that they do not see themselves as the kind of person who would start something. One girl explained: "I'm more someone who helps than someone who leads." Others simply express doubt or a quiet disconnection. However, it is worth noticing that when asked about trust in their own abilities to pursue entrepreneurship, almost all the girls responded something like "I would probably be good at it if I decided to try", often adding a reflection on what it would take to get there. "It would just take a lot of practice, but I could do it", one girl puts it. Thus, the issue appears not to be ability or ambition, but alignment. The misalignment appears partly rooted in their self-concepts. As shown in the previous section, many girls associate themselves with traits like empathy, helpfulness, and social responsibility. These self-understandings are tied to the roles they imagine occupying later in life, and entrepreneurship, high-pressure and individualistic as they describe it, often clash with those expectations. One girl addresses it this way: "I think you have to be a special kind of

brave", indicating that this sort of braveness belongs to someone else. Even when not rejected outright, entrepreneurship feels like a deviation from the self they are building.

That sense appears reinforced by their relationship to school. Unlike many of the boys, who often mention that they find school a bit tedious, most girls describe themselves as doing well in school and enjoying it. One explains: "I'm good at concentrating, and I try to do my best", while several share how they are praised by teachers for their work and encouraged to pursue academic jobs. It then appears that they have learned what kinds of futures are valued within school settings, and that they are succeeding by following that structure. Entrepreneurship, which is rarely addressed in school, and often appears absent from family conversations, simply does not feature in that frame. As one girl noted: "We haven't had anything about it at school… and it's not something we talk about at home either". Again, this does not mean that the girls are passively rejecting entrepreneurship. On the contrary, several demonstrate reflection and negotiation. They weigh options and ask themselves what would make sense in their lives. But their possible selves are already relatively fixed (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006). For many, entrepreneurship seems to disrupt that coherence rather than support it. "It's my dream to work in the psychiatric department for children and adolescents", says one girl and glances knowingly at me. Indeed, it seems obvious: why would I ditch my well-planned, and benevolent, dreams to work late hours and boss people around?

Still, the disinterest is not absolute. As table 3 shows, in several cases, girls begin to reconsider when entrepreneurship is presented as something that could reinforce, rather than replace, their existing plans. This happens throughout the interview, often after we have watched the short video featuring the value-based entrepreneur and discussed whether starting a business could build on one's existing interests. The girl who wants to be a hairdresser again offers a particularly clear example. At first, she tells me how entrepreneurship does not interest her, justifying her words with the notion of being a "people's person". But by the end of our conversation, after having reflected upon the opportunity to manage her own salon, she says: "I'd really like to have my own salon. Yes, I think I'm going to do both! […] I could also invest in other businesses as well," and notes that she would probably wait to have children until the business was running. Here, entrepreneurship is not a separate role but becomes part of the life she already imagines. It aligns, rather than conflicts, with her self-concept and possible self.

Other girls similarly soften their position when I ask if entrepreneurship could be linked to their current aspirations. A girl, who dreams of being a psychologist, imagines opening her own clinic. Another talks about starting a dog hotel. The term 'entrepreneur' is rarely used by the girls themselves, but the entrepreneurial role becomes thinkable when it supports what they already want. Although not dramatic shifts, they appear to be small openings. Moments where something previously unthinkable becomes possible, because it no longer feels like a threat to who they are. A girl who plans to work as a vet reflects:

Interviewer: "Yeah, and so, after you've tried to think about this and we've talked about it, do you think it's something that you might want to try to work with at some point in your life, this entrepreneurship thing?"

Speaker B: "Mmh, it probably could be. […] I think you have to pay a lot of attention to getting the right kind of employee, and with money, and getting it all set up properly, so it's like a proper foundation that's there and stuff. […] But I could open my own clinic, probably."

It appears clear that this girl has not changed her future plans, but she has reflected on how it would be possible to integrate entrepreneurship into them. Certainly, she has not yet decided if she wants to, but it seems that a window for reflection has been opened.

Such openings are, however, far more common among boys, which table 3 clearly shows: only one boy remained uninterested in entrepreneurship by the end of the interview. Many of them express openness to entrepreneurship without any further reluctance. One boy said: "I don't really have a plan but starting something could be fun". Another remarked: "Maybe I'll try something out first, just to see what it's like". Their possible selves are more tentative, less crucial for their identity work, and thus entrepreneurship can be slotted in without displacing anything. It is an option, not a detour. In addition, many of the boys express self-concepts which are more aligned with how they imagine entrepreneurs. "I'm like… I keep going even when things get tough", says one boy, while another smirkingly admits that "I have way too much energy for school, [but] I could probably start a business and invent stuff".

Table 3. Participants, their initial entrepreneurship interest and their entrepreneurship interest by the end of interview

Participant's imagined future job	**Participant gender**	**Initial entrepreneurship interest**	**Interest by the end of interview**
Hairdresser	Girl	Not interested	Interested
Carpenter	Boy	Interested	Interested
Architect	Boy	Not interested	Not interested
Some kind of craftsman	Boy	Not interested	Interested
Real estate agent	Girl	Interested	Interested
Psychologist	Girl	Interested	Not interested
Salesperson	Boy	Interested	Interested
Self-employed/business owner	Boy	Interested	Interested
Doctor or psychologist	Girl	Not interested	Not interested
Kindergarten teacher	Girl	Not interested	Not interested
Economist	Girl	Interested	Interested
Kindergarten or special needs teacher	Girl	Not interested	Interested
Entrepreneur/investor	Boy	Interested	Interested
Scientist or journalist	Girl	Not interested	Not interested
Lawyer/doctor/pilot	Girl	Not interested	Interested
N/A	Boy	Interested	Interested
Craftsman or chef or handball player	Boy	Not interested	Interested
Entrepreneur	Girl	Interested	Interested
Veterinarian	Girl	Not interested	Interested
N/A	Boy	Interested	Interested
Kindergarten teacher	Girl	Not interested	Interested
N/A	Boy	Not interested	Interested
Doctor	Girl	Interested	Interested

The contrast highlights the role of self-concepts and possible selves in shaping entrepreneurial interest (Oyserman and Fryberg, 2006; Cech, 2014). For girls, stronger identity commitments, particularly those that are school-aligned and socially affirmed, make it harder to imagine alternatives. When they do, the importance of remaining true to existing possible selves endures. Entrepreneurship does not feel unwelcoming, but it does not always feel necessary or fruitful either. Unless the entrepreneurial role is reframed in a way that preserves identity continuity, it remains outside the realm of possibility. Even so, the interviews reveal moments where girls reflect differently, prompted not by persuasion, but by the framing of entrepreneurship as identity-consistent. The continuity is what matters most. These girls are not passively reproducing expectations. They are reflecting, planning, and actively pursuing goals. But the frameworks available to them are shaped by what is institutionally visible and socially encouraged in the settings they are in, and entrepreneurship seems to rarely enter those frames (Ridgeway, 2011). However, it appears that when it does, the entrepreneurial role becomes something other than a foreign identity. It becomes a possible future self. Not because the girls change who they are, but because the role itself is repositioned.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore how gendered identity processes intertwine with teenagers' perceptions of entrepreneurship. Based on qualitative interviews with 23 Danish 13-15-year-olds, the analysis suggests that girls' disinterest in entrepreneurship is not rooted in a lack of ambition or confidence, but in how entrepreneurship aligns, or fails to align, with their evolving self-concepts and socially anchored possible selves. While entrepreneurship was not explicitly gendered by the participants, it was often associated with traits, lifestyles, and futures that clashed with the coherent, care-oriented life plans described by many of the girls. By contrast, the boys more frequently articulated open-ended or loosely defined future aspirations. For many of them, entrepreneurship did not appear to clash with their existing self-concepts or imagined futures, and thus could be tried on as an option. The girls, however, tended to describe futures involving stable professions, relational commitments, and predictable routines: walking their children to school, building a home "where everyone fits together, becoming a teacher, psychologist, or veterinarian. They saw entrepreneurship as a destabilising detour from a carefully constructed sense of self, rather than a viable or exciting opportunity. That is, unless they were able to imagine entrepreneurship as a means of realising the dreams and interest they already had, in which case interest was awakened.

These findings add to dominant approaches in the youth entrepreneurship literature by pointing to what happens in the early stages of entrepreneurship selection or deselection. Although perspectives on self-efficacy have provided important insights to the entrepreneurship field (Wilson et al., 2007; Kickul et al., 2004), they tend to focus largely on entrepreneurship as the common "end goal" rather than one out of many viable career options (Burton et al, 2016). Most girls in this study expressed a strong sense of confidence, describing themselves as clever or socially competent, and they generally believed they would be able to succeed as entrepreneurs if they decided to try. But because they had different futures planned, many did not feel like trying. In this light, self-efficacy appears most relevant in contexts where interest has already been established; it may be critical for young women who already aspire to entrepreneurship, especially in male-dominated contexts where confidence may be undermined (refs). However, for teenage girls who never identified with the role in the first place, self-efficacy is perhaps not the core issue.

A similar contribution can be made to how risk-taking is conceptualised within the literature on entrepreneurial competencies (for example, Caliendo et al, 2009). Risk is often treated as a core trait or skill for entrepreneurs, presumed to be unevenly distributed depending on gender. However, the girls in this study

did not avoid entrepreneurship because they feared uncertainty in general, but rather because they had valuable futures to lose. In this light, perhaps what is commonly framed as low tolerance for uncertainty may instead reflect a situated reaction to imagined identity disruption. This supports a growing critique of decontextualised understandings of risk in different settings (Nelson, 2013). Entrepreneurship, from this perspective, is not rejected due to lack of courage, but because it carries different identity consequences for different young people. Additionally, entrepreneurship also appeared as an identity resource for some boys. In line with Howie and Campbell's (2015) notion of *entrepreneurial selfhood*, it offered a way of performing autonomy and resistance to school scripts in which they did not feel successful.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study, particularly doing gender-informed perspectives on gender and the concepts of self-concept and possible selves, have proven useful in making sense of the observed patterns. Doing gender approaches shed light on how gendered expectations shape identity work in consequential ways. Girls are often expected to be responsible, caring, and well-organised, traits that align with school success and future family roles, whereas boys are more often permitted, and sometimes expected, to be disorganised, disruptive, or independent (refs). These contrasting expectations help explain why the participants' identity projects take such different forms. Meanwhile, the concepts of self-concept and possible selves help articulate how entrepreneurship becomes more or less viable depending on how it fits with these gendered trajectories. They show the ways in which gendered identities, or in some cases resistance to them, are negotiated through choices about what kinds of futures feel both desirable and possible. At the same time, these perspectives do not fully account for how structural factors, such as institutional pathways and class-based opportunity structures, shape what kinds of futures feel accessible or desirable. Nor do they explain how the entrepreneurship discourse itself is culturally encoded in ways that may resonate differently across settings. Finally, gendered identity work may vary with age; the same individual may negotiate identity differently when they are 14 compared to when they are 18. Future research could usefully explore these dimensions through a combination of identity theory and structural analysis emphasising teenagers.

Building on this, I suggest these directions for future research: First, larger quantitative studies are needed to test the generalisability of the patterns found in this study. Are these identity-based refusals of entrepreneurship widespread, and do they systematically correlate with gender, class, or academic self-concept? Second, more qualitative work is needed with older age groups. Identity development is not linear, and the meaning of entrepreneurship as well as gendered identity work may change as teenagers grow older and encounter new contexts. Third, comparative studies across national contexts could help determine how cultural narratives and different structural settings shape the role of entrepreneurship in young people's imagined futures.

Methodologically, the study also raises important considerations. The fact that I, an adult female researcher who could easily be mistaken for a school authority, conducted the interviews may have influenced the interactional dynamics. Girls, accustomed to performing maturity and responsiveness in school-like settings, may have been more willing to elaborate on their future reflections. Some boys, by contrast, may have responded with strategic vagueness or resistance, not due to an absence of future plans, but as a performance of autonomy or defiance (Skelton, 2001; Renold, 2004). As Francis and Skelton (2005) point out, expectations of maturity and school behaviour are gendered, and such dynamics may shape how boys and girls articulate their futures. The same applies to reflections on entrepreneurship. It is plausible that the girls would have been even less likely to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career option had they not been confronted with it in the interview situation. Yet this may in fact strengthen main parts of the

argument: even when girls might feel expected to perform interest in entrepreneurship, they initially do not, while boys, despite being confronted with an interviewer to whom they might feel some reluctance, were still willing to engage with the idea. Still, it is important to remember that the interest expressed by the participants in these interviews was situational, and there are no guarantees of how it may unfold once they left the setting.

In sum, with this study, I offer a fresh perspective on existing research on youth interest in entrepreneurship by exploring how gendered identity processes shape interest and disinterest already in the early teenage years, before entrepreneurship becomes a concrete or expected option within young people's educational or occupational pathways. My analysis suggests that the participants largely relied on television and social media to inform their understanding of entrepreneurship, and that girls' disinterest is not rooted in a lack of confidence, but in how entrepreneurship appears misaligned with their self-concepts and with the care-oriented and coherent futures they imagine for themselves. In contrast, many boys, who often describe more open or undefined futures, find more space to consider entrepreneurship as a possibility, sometimes even as a means to support their existing self-concept. However, some girls became more open to the idea when they began to see entrepreneurship not as a detour, but as a way of realising the dreams and interests they already held. The findings nuance dominant explanations of early gender gaps in entrepreneurial intentions by proposing that the key question is not just whether young people believe they can succeed as entrepreneurs, but whether entrepreneurship aligns with who they are and who they wish to become.

Ultimately, the study contributes to understanding why gendered patterns in entrepreneurial interest emerge so early and highlights the importance of future research that examines how it develops with age and across contexts. It highlights that closing the gender gap may require other actions than preparing girls for entrepreneurship by enhancing their entrepreneurial self-efficacy and boosting their entrepreneurial competencies. To raise interest, entrepreneurship must be made relevant for girls. Maybe if it becomes a tool for realising dreams and interests rather than an estranged tv persona, it can begin to align with the values and life paths young people already find meaningful.

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APPENDIX

A: Interview guide

B: Table of pseudonymised participants, specifying age, gender, parents education, geographical location, and school gpa.