

## **Identity work in the backstage: Exploring the role of expatriate bubbles in identity work of self-initiated expatriate engineers through a Goffmanian lens**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose-** While there is vast research on expatriate adjustment, we still know very little on how self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in particular might cope with identity conflicts and how they engage with identity work. What is more, although there is some literature on the existence of expatriate bubbles, this does not cover how these bubbles might impact identity work. The purpose of this paper is to explore identity work that is taking place within expatriate bubbles and thus advance our knowledge on both expatriate bubbles and expatriate adjustment.

**Design/methodology/approach-** Our paper reports on the analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interview data collected from 37 self-initiated expatriate Engineers from Greece, Spain, and Italy, currently residing in Bristol, UK.

**Findings-** Previous studies have argued that expatriate bubbles impede adjustment. Our analysis, however, shows that expatriate bubbles can be not only a powerful mechanism for coping with foreignness and strengthening their sense of belonging, but also act as identity workspaces where SIEs engaged with identity work and navigated identity conflicts.

**Originality/value-** The present study addresses two empirical gaps: the paucity of literature on the identity work that self-initiated expatriates engage with and the paucity studies on self-initiated expatriate engineers. The study also has a theoretical contribution as, drawing upon a Goffmanian dramaturgical framework sheds light on the back regions of performance taking place within expatriate bubbles. Thus, showing how SIEs relax but also rehearse their performances in order to reduce any identity gaps triggered by the new organisational and national context.

**Keywords:** self-initiated expatriates, expatriate bubbles, identity work, engineers

## Introduction

For at least two decades, the UK government and industry have expressed concerns about the skills shortage in engineering (EngineeringUK, 2020). As a result, many engineers were attracted to the UK from EU countries. Although there are no accurate figures about the exact number of EU engineers in the UK, statistics show that around 5.5% of people in professional, scientific, and technical activities are EU nationals, with Engineering organisations reporting 10-20% of EU employees (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2016). Large numbers of EU nationals came from South European countries, like Italy, Spain, and Greece, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014; Varriale, 2019). These Southern European engineers in the UK could be characterised as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), that is, professionals who have chosen to work and live in another country on a voluntary and self-initiated basis for a temporary period (Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010; Thomas et al., 2005). Taking into consideration that adjustment to new working environments and job demands can be very stressful and challenging (Zhang *et al.*, 2021), especially for those moving to countries which are culturally different (Lauring and Selmer, 2009) such as Southern Europeans to the UK, it is very important to understand how SIEs adjust and the impact of this on their work identities.

As with all work transitions, adjustment depends to a great extent on how individuals change their self-definitions and create new repertoires of possibilities, in other words on the identity work they engage with (Ibarra, 1999). Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) note that despite numerous studies on identity processes in organisations, we still know little about how work identities change. We would also add that we know *even less* about how expatriate work identities change, as many more questions with regards to *how* expatriates adjust are yet to be answered (Brewster *et al.*, 2021; Kraimer *et al.*, 2016). What is more, scholarship calls for a more holistic understanding of the experiences of expatriates and their multiple and complex identities (Brewster, 2021; van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015). Considering that “work identities are created, deployed, and altered in social interactions with others” (Ibarra *et al.*, 2005, p. 363), we turn our attention to another crucial but missing piece of the expatriate experience jigsaw puzzle: ‘expatriate bubbles’, the temporary communities of SIEs (Fechter, 2007), and their role in navigating the tensions and conflicts among SIEs’ multiple identities (i.e., national, professional).

This paper aims to address the aforementioned gaps by adopting a Goffmanian framework of dramaturgical analysis. Goffman's dramaturgical framework has been used to offer insights into how professionals socialize, especially during training in clearly bounded professions (e.g., medical students) (Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018), and for this reason, Bourgoin and Harvey (*ibid.*) encourage researchers to use this framework for knowledge workers, such as, in this case, engineers. By adopting Goffman's dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1959; 1967), we can emphasise the situatedness of identity work, and examine how SIE engineers interpret the new norms and working patterns (Kirkegaard, 2020) and prepare to 'stage' their own 'performances'/ present themselves to their new audience, their British colleagues.

In what follows, we discuss the existing literature and theoretical framework. We then provide our research questions and our methodological approach and move to presenting our data and findings. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature and highlight our contribution to the field of SIEs.

## **Literature review and conceptual framework**

### ***Identity, identity work and SIEs***

Our paper focuses on the identity work SIEs do in the workplace. We see identity as socially constructed (Bamberg *et al.*, 2011; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), shaped and negotiated in professional and everyday interactions (Ochs, 1992) and acquiring meaning only in relation to other social actors (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). People construct their identities through positioning themselves in relation to multiple others, using as guides for their navigation their similarities to and differences from them (De Fina, 2011), [their biography \(Giddens, 1991\)](#) and [through drawing upon available discourses around them \(Brown, 2015\)](#). For example, [Kunda's \(1992\) seminal study suggested how discursive practices may exert pervasive control over employees thus colonizing them from the inside to create 'engineered selves'](#). Identities are seen as rarely continuous (Baumeister, 1986) and often liquid (Bauman, 2000) and can take the form of [narratives \(Giddens, 1991\)](#) or [dramaturgical performances \(Goffman, 1967\)](#).

The creation of an ‘us’ versus a ‘them’ is considered one of the main mechanisms of identity construction in many different settings ‘since differentiation is a fundamental process of self-affirmation’ (De Fina, 2011, p. 271). For SIEs, identity categories such as nationality and language for example, appear to play a particularly important role in establishing and maintaining self-esteem, mostly through comparing the in-group with others (Lauring, 2008; Lauring and Selmer, 2009), and thus group membership becomes central to self-conception. SIEs are required to navigate multiple identities simultaneously: national, professional, organisational. In order to settle down to an unfamiliar organisational and cultural context effectively, they need to resolve questions related to social identity and belonging in relation to their host country (Colic-Peisker, 2010; Mao and Shen, 2015). This activity is referred to as *identity work*, “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). In stable conditions, identity work can come as automatic and instinctual (Giddens, 1991) but when the conditions shift dramatically, like in the case of SIEs, identity work becomes more conscious and at times even painful (Layton, 1995).

Identity work requires “*a struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them*” (Watson, 2008, p. 129, italics in original). People in organisations work continuously on developing ‘plausible’ patterns of action and understandings of their selves/ ‘identities’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown and Toyoki, 2013; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) through continuous “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Identity work is undertaken especially during transitions into new roles or organisations (Ibarra, 1999; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010), when negotiating a tension between different identities (e.g., professional and personal) (Kreiner et al., 2006; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), or experience identity threat (Elsbach, 2003), uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). In this context, SIEs could be considered quintessential ‘identity workers’, considering that they hold multiple social identities (Gibson *et al.*, 2021; Ramajaran *et al.*, 2017), and experience transition into new roles, organisations, and national/cultural contexts.

Identity work depends on both *who* is conducting it and *where* it is conducted, as “[t]he people around us are active players in the cocreation of who we are at work” (Ibarra *et al.*, 2005, p. 363). As Ibarra (1992) highlights though, ethnic minorities (such as SIEs), and women, tend to rely on

homophilous networks (i.e., within-group) for social support. This preference becomes stronger in demographically skewed organisational settings (Ibarra, *ibid.*), such as the Engineering sector in the UK: women comprise 14.5% of all engineers in the UK (Women's Engineering Society, 2021) and only 7.8% of engineering professionals are from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2018). For this reason, we now turn our attention to 'expatriate bubbles' and how they might facilitate identity work.

### *Expatriate bubbles as identity workspaces*

As Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) highlight, since identity work can render the individual fragile, confused and anxious, it can be further facilitated by a supportive holding environment, what they call 'identity workspaces'. Identity workspaces encourage individuals to either consolidate an existing or transition into a new one (*ibid.*) through offering vital rites of passage, a sense of belonging and also a social defense against upsetting experiences.

There is extant –but mostly anecdotal- evidence showing that internationally mobile workers, tend to avoid the “problem of strangeness” and “stranger anxiety” by retreating into “prefabricated enclaves” (Nash 1969, pp. 574–7) and build temporary communities amongst themselves (Fechter, 2007; Luring and Selmer, 2009; Shimoda, 2017) based on shared national identities, but also shared language and experiences (Butcher, 2010; Harrington and Seabrooke, 2020). Expatriate 'bubbles' have been characterised in the literature as “gated communities”, which provide expatriates a safe space where they can feel at home (Castells, 2000, p. 447) and protect expatriates from 'otherness' in the host country (Guttormsen, 2018). More specifically, they have been related to providing “protective functions whereby psychological security, self-esteem and sense of belonging are enhanced, and stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness and alienation are attenuated” (Ward et al., 2001, p. 86). Staying in contact with home country nationals has also been argued to help expatriate feel less isolated and more secure but also provide continuity of ties with the home country (Bayraktar, 2019), diminishing thus potential conflicts between different social identities. In other words, expatriate bubbles appear to involve many elements of rites of passage, such as separation from the past, collective isolation, as well as a strong element of transition (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) and at the same time, they provide 'social defenses' as

they reinforce and often supplement their resilience and individual defenses. What is more, expatriate bubbles appear to contribute to the strengthening and maintenance of national identity, which according to Zhang et al. (2021, p. 58) is considered an important “emotional resource”, which aids the fulfillment of fundamental needs such as belonging and developing a favorable self-image (see also Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Hence, they facilitate sense-making and identity work within a holding environment through providing reassurance, feedback, and targets for social comparison (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010).

### ***Theoretical framework: dramaturgical analysis and ‘backstage’ performances***

Goffman (1959) observed that all social roles, such as being an engineer, carry certain expectations regarding appropriate self-presentations, that is about how individuals behave and convey social images that conform to the prototypic characteristics of the ‘role’ they play. The closer individuals adhere to these expectations, the more legitimate they appear to their audience (Goffman, *ibid.*). However, considering that “[a] primary objective of identity work [...] is acting and looking the part, so as to be granted the claimed identity” (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010, p. 12), we can immediately see the affinity between Goffman’s framework of dramaturgical analysis and identity work.

According to Goffman (1959) the presentation of self is undertaken in two areas: frontstage and backstage. These two regions of performance are not separate as one influences the other, and do not refer to particular locations or compositions of participants, but rather *functions* (*ibid.*). The front stage consists of the ‘setting’, but also ‘appearance’ and ‘manner’, and it is what is visible to the audience (1959, p. 33). The ‘expressive mask’ adopted by actors at the frontstage has also defined by Goffman as ‘face’ (1967, p. 5), “an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes”. Maintaining face has been found to affect cross-cultural interaction and relationships (White *et al.*, 2004). Especially while adjusting to a new setting, maintaining face might be unclear and/or overwhelming, due to lack of information about how to sustain interactions and elicit audience responses, as might happen in the case of SIEs, especially during the first months of their adjustment. There is also evidence that people entering new settings, such as SIEs, might be reluctant to seek information “for fear of losing face” (Morrison, 2002, p. 233). When their face is

threatened, people might respond negatively (Goffman, 1967) due to the direct link between ‘face’ and self-esteem (White *et al.*, 2004). For this reason, as identity work tends to be triggered by identity threat, uncertainty, and anxiety (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Elsbach, 2003), we consider ‘threats to face’ as an essential part of our theoretical framework as they will enable us to understand the reasons behind identity work.

As Bourgoin and Harvey (2018) note though, when both sides struggle, “or intend to test each other’s capacity”, as might be the case with SIEs and locals, face-work might require more careful preparation, and for this reason they suggest that it is important to pay attention also on the ‘backstage’ regions of performance (Goffman, 1959). The back region of performance is the place where ‘illusions’ and impressions are constructed, where actors can prepare their ‘scripts’, conceal their errors, choose their ‘props’ to sustain their performance, but also where the performer can relax, drop their front and ‘step out of character’ (Goffman, *ibid.*). As Ibarra (1999, p. 765) highlights, as new roles, such as this of SIEs, “require new skills, behaviours, attitudes, and patterns of interactions” might encourage people to “elaborate or create new repertoires of possibilities”. Therefore, we find that Goffman’s backstage region of performance is particularly suited to the understanding of the identity work happening ‘backstage’, within expatriate bubbles, as this is where SIEs do ‘dirty work’, conceal errors and prepare their ‘scripts’ (Goffman, *ibid.*), their new ‘self-definitions’/SIE engineer work identities.

## **Research questions**

Drawing upon the literature and our conceptual and theoretical framework, this paper aims at answering the following questions:

**RQ1** What are the threats SIE engineers experience to their ‘face’?

**RQ2** How does membership to expatriate bubbles help SIE engineers to adjust to the host country and their organisations?

**RQ3** What is the role of expatriate bubbles in supporting SIE Engineers to engage in identity work?

## **Methods**

The research design of the study follows principles of qualitative inquiry, which is considered an appropriate choice given the concern of qualitative research with structures and with how things get done (Silverman, 2010) and the fact that it enables us to understand their multi-layered and complex realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Following the advice of Silverman (2010), the research design was guided by the research questions of the project.

### ***Setting the 'scene': Engineering in Bristol***

The present study focused only on Engineers in Bristol, UK. Bristol has a strong history of engineering and is particularly for its aerospace sector: Nine of the top aerospace companies are found in the region (e.g., Airbus, Boeing, GKN and Rolls-Royce), representing a third of the UK's aerospace and defence GDP: 26,600 people in Bristol have jobs in aerospace and advanced engineering (BS24/7, 2016). Many of these companies encourage their employees to relocate and are in general active in recruiting graduates especially from Southern European countries. Although, we could not get accurate and official statistical data, a rough idea about the sizes of the three communities we focused on, can be give of three major Facebook groups: Greeks in Bristol: 2.2 K members; Españoles en Bristol UK: 25.6 K members; Italiani a Bristol: 14.3 K members.

### ***Participants, access and research ethics***

The participants in this study (n=37) were recruited by both authors. The study used purposive sampling (i.e., Italian, Spanish and Greek self-initiated expatriate engineers living in Bristol/having lived till recently in Bristol) and access was sought via personal contacts, social media (e.g., Facebook groups such as Greeks in Bristol, Italiani a Bristol and Españoles en Bristol and LinkedIn) and snowballing. Participation was voluntary. In terms of ethnicity, there were 10 Spanish (3 female, 7 male), 16 Italian (5 female, 11 male) and 11 Greek (4 female, 7 male), and they were all of White background.



Ethics approval was granted by the university Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The research did not pose any ethical challenges and the large number of SIEs from these countries as well as the size of Engineering organisations in Bristol facilitated the anonymity of the participants.

### ***Research method and data collection***

In order to explore the identity work participants do in the context of expatriate bubbles, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews constitute the most common instrument for eliciting data in qualitative research and this is partly due to their adaptability and flexibility as a method as well as to their familiar character as most people have been in interview situations in their life and know what to expect from such a genre (Dornyei, 2007). Interviews are an appropriate way to study complex social phenomena from the perspectives of participants (Edley and Litosseliti, 2010), while they are also valuable for providing the space for the development of a sense of rapport between the researcher and the participants (Denscombe, 2010). This becomes particularly significant for projects like this one which yield personal insights on phenomena that would be difficult to discover through other methods.

The interviews opened with questions on interviewee's careers in engineering and their narratives around expatriation/ coming to the UK and Bristol specifically and then proceeded with questions around how they experience working in the UK and then how they socialise within and outside the workplace. The interview schedules were slightly modified during data collection to take advantage of emerging themes (Spradley, 1979). The interview process was flexible to allow participants to expand upon themes and issues not considered in advance. Regularly and at appropriate points, participants' responses were summarised and restated to confirm the validity of the data. The interviews were all conducted online, due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions by the first author between February and April 2021 and lasted 62 minutes on average. Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim.

## ***Data analysis***

The data analysis began with extensive data immersion (Witz and Bae, 2011). Following Pratt (2009), coding evolved in two stages. First order codes were derived from participant responses to get a general overview of the data. Then we developed a theoretical framework drawing upon Goffman's work on dramaturgical analysis (1957) and backstage performances (1959) from which second order codes were drawn. From the codes we identified emergent themes (Richards and Richards, 1994) such as trust, safety, belonging and friendship as indicative of 'coping with foreignness' backstage performance, while knowledge exchange and mentoring as indicative of 'mastering the information game' backstage performance.

## **Findings**

This section is organised as follows: the first part looks at the 'threats' SIEs' experienced to their 'face' in their organizational context. The second part focuses on the backstage performance and the functions of 'bubbling' which we argue help SIEs to mitigate the aforementioned threats.

### ***Threats: being an (Italian, Spanish or Greek) Engineer in a foreign context***

Nearly all the participants encountered the same threat: difficulty in socialising and as a result, being accepted, in the workplace. Especially at the beginning, most of the participants struggled to build relationships with their colleagues, not only because of cultural differences but also because they were at a different stage in life (i.e., they were younger than most of their colleagues):

“it was very, very hard for me to integrate there [...] and also the age difference was big, so I was not close to the age that other people were in the office [...] I found it very difficult to make personal connections with people” (female Greek participant 2, academia)

Interestingly, many participants used the same metaphor to describe their experience in the workplace and they said that often they felt as if there was a 'wall' between them and their British colleagues:

“I’m a very social person when I go back to Italy [...] I think we have a different mindset on socialising [...] Here [UK] it’s a bit more complicated [...] people tend to keep... you know, if they don’t know you, they don’t bother” (male Italian participant 4, aerospace)

This social distance has been so intense to an extent that participants reported feeling often ‘invisible’:

“I found the difference in behaviour with the locals shall we say, how sometimes they ignore you to the degree you become invisible. So, you may have a colleague or something and you have been talking to him maybe or whatever and you cross in the corridor, and they don’t look at you” (male Spanish participant 3, aerospace)

This acceptance threat seemed to be further accentuated by differences in the communication styles of participants, such as being direct/indirect, loud/quiet etc.:

“just culturally we [Italians] are very loud and in everything like not only in like the voice but also like in actions or you know, behaviours [...] at the beginning it was a problem for me because I was used to, you know rushing and behave as an Italian [...] and trying to I’m not saying like attack, but you know just being a little bit rude” (male Italian participant 7, R&D)

“I know that um some other good friends that I’ve got living here in Bristol and they had problems with [speaking directly]. They’ve been warned not to be that direct or to what they call, they call it soft skills and it’s like um trying to be yeah more careful with the way you say things because people get totally offended [...] I probably was like that in the first year or so.” (male Spanish participant 3, aerospace)

Different styles of communication can cause misunderstandings in situations of intercultural communication (Hua, 2013). Studies in the field of intercultural communication have shown that language is culturally bound, and the communication styles of people are affected by the norms, perceptions, and values of the communities in which they have lived (Holmes, 2008). These differences in style are not always visible in interactions, as for example inadequate linguistic proficiency would be, but still cause clashes and lead to tensions in the relationship of interactants from different cultural backgrounds (Bailey, 1997; Holmes, 2008). This seems to be the case in

our data as well, as the participants reported concerns about being perceived as rude and causing offence to their colleagues, which can have a detrimental effect on their communication and working relationships. Closely related to the above, the participants reported misunderstandings stemming from the use of humour:

“the awkward moment, I was supposed to make a joke, and for them it was not a joke”  
(male Italian participant 1, construction)

Humour is also culturally bound and what is perceived to be funny and amusing for members of a particular social group in one context might appear obscure to outsiders. Humour is a multifunctional resource in the workplace and its main functions include easing tensions and creating solidarity and a sense of belonging to a group (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). Laughing at the same jokes highlights common ground and shared norms, which contribute to harmonious relationships among colleagues (ibid). Not perceiving the same jokes as funny, or even worse, being perceived as offensive when joking can negatively affect group solidarity and belonging, causing feelings of distress and uncertainty to SIEs.

The participants interviewed also seemed cautious about these communication style differences and their potential effect on being perceived ‘different’ or evaluated negatively. In fact, some participants put conscious effort into not ‘acting’ like foreigners and avoided their co-nationals in the workplace in order not to be associated with negative stereotypes:

“a lot of Italians [...] tend to stay all together, like even for lunch breaks, the coffee break and so on. And I always try to avoid that. I really don't like it now [...] Because it's like ...I don't want to be associated for like, oh, look at Italians being noisy. And I think you need to respect the way of the country you go” (female Italian participant 3, aerospace)

These efforts are also coupled by a need to get integrated into the workplace, to ‘blend in’, as participants were aware of the construction of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and try to be perceived insiders by their local colleagues in order to be more positively evaluated:

“with Italians you know, I go for the standard coffee obviously that’s one thing but sometimes [...] you need to make an effort and I think it’s important for us that in this

country to make an effort to also to embrace this kind of different um yeah custom, yeah different approach” (male Italian participant 8, oil & gas)

Another threat identified was a *competency threat*, due to differences in formal training and approach to engineering. The participants’ identity talk was ‘insecure’ (Ybema *et al.*, 2009): all participants argued that their training in Greece, Italy and Spain respectively tended to be more theory-focused and this resulted in a different approach to engineering and a potential threat to their professional identity.

“in Greece, everything is very theoretical from school to university, and we do really theoretical stuff and the hardcore stuff [...] Here, they do focus on practical stuff and develop different skills. And it can be frustrating at times, but at least I feel frustrated [...] I have a different skill set. I see things slightly differently” (female Greek participant 4, aerospace)

As we know from Kunda’s (1992) study, social and formal organisational roles, as well as the professional culture, Engineers tend to perform in accordance with role-appropriate qualities. These qualities are reinforced through the process of professional socialisation, as Engineers, since they are students, learn which traits are most expected, valued and rewarded within their profession (Cech, 2015). Therefore, since the participants have been socialised in different contexts, they appeared to have developed and valued a different set of role-appropriate qualities.

This different approach to engineering coupled also with different ways of working: Italian engineers for example commented upon the pressures that exist in Italy to work fast and produce a lot, while in the UK they find the environment more relaxed:

“We’re used to do things faster [in Italy] [...] you have to produce a lot constantly [...] Here it might be taking a little bit more time because what you’re doing needs to be done accurately [...] giving more time for relaxing so taking your time. So, you know there is less pressure, it’s easier (male Italian participant 7, R&D)”

but also, specific behaviours encouraged in order to get promoted:

“I would say more [i.e., found challenging] in the way of working, the way of expressing and talking. I think that has an impact directly to wherever you are so then once you are in the path of your growth and development, I think there is another hit there that you need to be in a certain manner [...] somehow different ways of communicating are difficult to digest” (male Spanish participant 3)

As shown, most participants experienced a degree of *pressure* to behave and work/approach work in a certain way to conform to the ‘local’ way of doing things at work but also *insecurity*, which stemmed from different communication patterns and the difficulty of establishing relationships with the locals, or what Bourgoin and Harvey (2018) defined as ‘learning-credibility tension’.

In order to address this tension and deal with the two threats, namely, acceptance and competency, the participants appeared to engage in two types of backstage performance preparation: bubbling to cope with foreignness and mastering the information game. Backstage performances revolved mostly around rituals of socialisation of their home country/ Mediterranean. For example, many participants said that they preferred to go with other co-nationals for a coffee or lunch as this allowed them to ‘switch off’ from work, ‘relax’ from speaking English all day but also talk more openly and share more personal information. In other words, or to be more accurate, in Goffman’s words, SIEs in the back region of their performance, when were interacting with each other, far from their ‘audience’ (i.e., British colleagues) were relaxing (i.e., catharsis) and at the same time training, ‘prop gathering’ and rehearsing their performances (Goffman, 1959).

### ***Backstage performance 1: Bubbling to cope with ‘foreignness’***

Most interviewees reported that ‘bubbling’ with other co-nationals provided them with support at multiple levels: from coping with the trauma of displacement:

“changes can be quite scary, traumatic in a way, especially in the first three to six months, and especially if you move to a country which is significantly different to the country, from the country where you come from [...] I think it was a kind of a, a social support like a kind of a parachute or knowing that you are going through some difficult times, but you're not alone” (male Italian participant 10, aerospace).

to feeling alone, without a network of support:

“we come here, in a foreign country, we have nothing when we come, no friends, nothing. We need to socialise so it’s easy to meet people that have the same needs” (male Italian participant 4, aerospace)

The participants found it easier to build friendships with co-nationals, thanks to their cultural affinity:

“it’s the culture maybe the whole language, it’s the way you joke [...] the connection maybe happens with Italians here is maybe because a lot of us are far from your country, from the culture [...] because all of us are outside of our country (male Italian participant 5, civil)

but also, with other SIEs as they had more experiences (and concerns) in common:

“I have a really good French friend at work, and it would talk a bit more about the difficulties that we have as expatriates and that, something that maybe I would share more with an Italian or a foreigner was, I know the extent what that means, you know, about your parents ageing and yet you will be back here? (female Italian participant 3, aerospace)

Even participants who have been living in the UK for many years said that when they change jobs or departments, they always found easier to socialise with other co-nationals, even if they do not necessarily share the same habits:

“I don’t particularly fuss about coffee, a lot of my Italian friends they have a coffee break together and I don’t tend to join, but probably at the beginning where I move to a different building [...] so just do this because at the beginning when you get there um I think it’s easy to talk to the Italians, so then with time you get to know everyone but at the beginning there are the Italians” (female participant 4, aerospace)

Thus, our findings indicate that expatriate bubbles in the workplace are important –to varying degrees- for SIEs’ adjustment (not only to the host country, but also to new teams/departments etc.) independently of the length of their stay in the host country, as they acted as a ‘safety net’ and provided a sense of continuity and belonging. Sharing the same national identity appeared as

a source of identity construction for SIEs through the creation of an ‘us’ versus a ‘them’ (e.g., we Italians are more open than the British) (De Fina, 2011), highlighting thus the relational character of identity (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

Sharing the same language –or even accented English- and sense of humour was also central in these ‘backstage’ performances, as it allowed them to ‘relax’ and foster group solidarity and sense of belonging (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). More specifically, some participants preferred to socialise more with their compatriots in their native language:

“When I worked for the first company, I was surrounded by more Spanish people even though it was lovely obviously because you get to talk to people in your own language, you feel more confident” (female Spanish participant 1, construction)

Not only because of initial linguistic limitations, but also because speaking their mother tongue was seen a practice that allowed participants to perform their national/ethnic identity (i.e., being Italian, Greek, Spanish) and construct a collective identity with their compatriots abroad. Claims about the association of language and group memberships have been well backed up by previous research (De Fina, 2013; Gumperz, 1982; Luring, 2008) and it is widely accepted among scholars that speaking a language becomes an index (Silverstein, 1976) of belonging to the specific group and carrying the social identity associated with it (De Fina, 2011). In the context of our data, constructing a strong collective identity with their compatriots affords SIEs to feel at ease and cope better with the ambiguity stemming from identity conflicts (e.g., being a competent Engineer in Spain but not being able to express the same ideas in the UK). Even in situations where they could not speak in the mother tongue, participants found it easier to mingle with other expatriates as well whose first language was not English:

“communicating with other foreigners is more relaxed you are not always worried about what you are saying and how you are saying it and you ask that people just speak whatever they can and that’s enough. People are not judging you or you are not judging yourself all the time I think, for me doesn’t want to find problems that when I speak with British people I always catch, I judge myself constantly for my English” (male Spanish participant 3, mechanical)



as they felt less 'judged'.

Hence, expatriate bubbles in the workplace appear to provide emotional (House, 1981) and psychosocial support more widely, as they addressed the participants' need for affection, friendship and belonging. Our findings, therefore, are in line with expatriates' literature that being part of a close-knit group, whose members share the same values, attitudes, and needs, helps alleviate the stress of strangeness and unfamiliarity (Ward et al., 2001). What is more, through providing this sort of support, expatriate bubbles become at the same time a 'safe' identity workspace (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) where SIEs can do their identity work. In other words, their native languages or their accented English acted as what Goffman would refer to as 'backstage language' (1959), transforming any venue into a back-region of performance. This backstage language (and accompanying behaviours, such as louder tone of voice, direct ways of communication etc.) allowed the participants to relax and reflect on their experience in the workplace and living abroad, thus enabling them to navigate their multiple identifications and potential conflicts (e.g., being SIEs/Spanish/Italian, etc., being an Engineer, different cultural values, etc.).

### ***Backstage performance 2: Mastering the information game and preparing the script***

The other main threat that expatriate Engineers seem to face, as we saw, was this of *competency*. In order to be 'accepted' as professionals and progress within their organisational context the participants had also to understand the locals' ways of approaching engineering. As extensive literature already suggests, when expatriates move to a different country, they might experience isolation and a feeling of not belonging as they are cut out from their pre-existing social support networks (Bayraktar, 2019). For this reason, most participants, in their effort to adapt to the local professional norms/ways of working and develop their membership at professional and organisational level, at least initially, relied on other co-nationals and other foreigners/SIEs, as they felt that they could be more open about their experiences, the difficulties they encountered, and their uncertainties:

“I think the reason why you tend to reach out is because being abroad and not knowing so you don’t have like a network of relationships which can give you tips [...] you’re kind of outside the, or seeing that you are outside the company culture so that you can be more uncertain about how things are, how things are working and that sort of things [...] and that’s why you rely on other Italians who have been here longer” (male Italian participant 9, R&D)

but also, ask for linguistic help with technical terms:

“moving to a new job is difficult sometimes because you need to develop new knowledge you need to develop a network you need to understand all the acronyms and all the terminology which is used. And on top of that, you would have to do it in a different language” (male Italian participant 10, aerospace)

and guidance around patterns of interaction (see the quote on helping each other being less ‘direct’ in the previous section). In other words, the participants felt that their British colleagues might interpret any direct inquiries as a sign of incompetence and for this reason, they trusted their in-group:

“it’s definitely easier to communicate [...] there are kind of things that you, when you are in your country you probably not saying a lot to anyone than when you’re out and you try to do a lot of things to help each other” (male Italian participant 7, R &D)

in an attempt to master the ‘information game’ (Goffman, 1967) and appear ‘competent’ and ‘professional’ in their new environment. This finding is also confirmed by other studies on expatriates which highlights that expatriates might avoid asking for support from their new supervisors or colleagues at work as this involves the risk of being viewed as unskilful, and as a result, they seek alternative sources of support (Canhilal *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, expatriate bubbles also appear to offer informational support (House, 1981) which includes not only ‘everyday’ information (e.g., technical terms, etc.) but also insights into cultural differences (e.g., direct vs. indirect ways of communication) and organisational culture (see quote above about “how things are working here”). Thus, through exchanging information, expatriates engaged in identity work trying to ‘bridge the gaps’ between information and image (Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018),

address any conflicts between their national identities with their accompanying professional identities (e.g., Italian engineer) and the organisational identity (e.g., through different ways of working or communicating), their ‘face’.

Within their ‘bubbles’, and through common ‘rituals’, like having an espresso or having lunch later, the participants also seemed to be able to share information more freely and honestly, as they managed to establish closer, more personal, bonds with their co-nationals:

“to catch up and speak about um how are things um families, what we have been doing um and things like that and also to share some information maybe with regards to work how you know any opportunities and things like that and its I don’t know difficult to explain but sometimes you feel you have more like um you know circle there you have more honesty I would say and you can share that opinion more freely” (male Spanish participant 2)

but also communicate more directly, ‘transparently’ and ‘naturally’:

“In, in my culture, the Italian culture, it is quite easy to talk, both on professional and personal topics, quite straightforward, quite in a detailed way quite in a transparent way. Whereas, obviously, if you have to interact with, with an English person, it might be different. It is really a different approach. So, it is quite normal that within the Italian community [...] You get to know about opportunities you get to know about, you know, advantages or disadvantages of specific positions. It is something that happens quite naturally” (male Italian participant 10, aerospace)

What is more, as SIEs tended to trust each other more, they also helped each other with providing mentorship and career support advice:

“[we, Italians] look after each other I think so you know, you kind of assume that because you share a nationality that in a sense, they will understand you [...] it’s just a matter of just being extra nice or extra understanding [...] it’s just a level of support for a non-Italian person it would depend on how well I know the person. For an Italian person it would generally happen anyway no matter how well I know [...] because I know that they are

here and they're not in their country and they need a bit of extra support" (female participant 5, aerospace)

The quotes above further illustrate the interrelationship between shared group membership and trust. Shared group membership acts as a 'basis for presumptive trust' (Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; Loh *et al.*, 2010) and serves for "defining the boundaries of low-risk interpersonal trust that bypass the need for personal knowledge" (Brewer, 1981, p. 356). This is because in-group members tend to attribute positive characteristics to fellow group members, which leads to a depersonalised type of trust towards them (Kramer and Lewicki, 2010).

What is more, they also highlight that within expatriate bubbles the participants received and provided significant instrumental support (House, 1981) as they had access to key information that could support not only their adjustment but also their career progression within the organisation. This function of the expatriate bubbles is particularly important considering that expatriates receive little mentoring or career advice (Mezias and Scandura, 2005). Therefore, what we can observe is that within their expatriate bubbles, through trusting patterns of relationships, support, open communication and shared language and goals there were opportunities for *collective learning* (Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011). In other words, through exchanging experiences and information, through 'rehearsing' their performances, the participants expanded further their identity work and progressively shaped relatively coherent professional identities through coming to terms with, and within limits influencing, how their national identity and different professional preparation might influence their career/professional identity (Watson, 2008), and thus 'mastered the script'.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper contributes theoretically and empirically to the literature on SIEs [and their adjustment in new professional contexts](#). Empirically, it offers rich data on how engineers engage in identity work within expatriate bubbles in a specific context, the city of Bristol. Engineers constitute an understudied group of SIEs within the wider expatriate literature, which has so far paid attention to very few professions, including academics (Brewster et al, 2021). The paper contributes also theoretically to the existing literature, through its application of Goffman's dramaturgical analysis

as a framework to shed new light on expatriate adjustment and the central role of expatriate bubbles in encouraging identity work in the back regions of performance. The focus on the back regions of performance, as this occurred in expatriate bubbles, enabled us to clearly show the threats SIE engineers experience to their ‘face’ and how, through seeking and gaining information through the bubble engage into identity work in order to address the learning-credibility tensions.

With regards to the first research question, our findings indicate that the main threats to their face SIE engineers encounter are acceptance and competency. As far as the acceptance threat is concerned, most of the participants struggled to socialise, in their usual way, in the workplace: some of them felt ‘invisible’ or that there was a wall between them and their British colleagues, while others encountered significant differences in terms of communication styles. This was perceived as a threat to them as it impacted the development of personal relationships with colleagues, which, in their respective cultures, went ‘hand-in-hand’ with being collegial and professional. What is more, the fact that they felt as outsiders rendered asking for support from their British colleagues ‘riskier’ to their face, as they did not want to be viewed as unskillful (Canhilal *et al.* 2022). The second threat, this of competency, revolved mostly around the different professional training of SIE engineers and the different ways of approaching work. More specifically, Greek, Italian and Spanish SIEs, due to their mainly theoretical prior training, felt the British more ‘hands-on’ approach as a threat to their established professional identity and ways of working/approaching an engineering problem.

Our second research question sought to explore how expatriate bubbles help SIE engineers to adjust to the host country and their organisations. Our analysis shows that, within their ‘bubbles’ the participants felt ‘safe’, accepted, and competent, which led them to exchange information and advice more freely, and share their experiences and uncertainties more openly. In Goffmanian terms, their participation in expatriate bubbles gave them the opportunity to ‘rehearse their performance’, to later ensure approval by their British colleagues. It seems, thus, that expatriate bubbles, by bringing SIEs together as a close-knit group, lead to positive behavioural practices and contribute to the development of working environments characterised by collegiality, in the sense of good citizenship behavior (Macfarlane, 2007), and high levels of trust (Loh *et al.*, 2010; Brewer, 1996; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010). What is more, expatriate bubbles in the workplace appeared to be a valuable source of informational, instrumental, and emotional/psychosocial support. In line

with previous studies, we found that through using ‘backstage language’, that is, either their native language or accented English, SIEs felt more relaxed, built close personal relationships, and provided insider’s knowledge to one another, which supported not only their cultural adaptation and transition into the host country but also their career development (e.g., see also Bayraktar, 2019). Lastly, through this collective learning process (Gerlak and Heikkila, 2011) SIEs prepared carefully their ‘scripts’ and established together new paths (Bayraktar, 2019), which helped them address the identity conflicts they faced due to the multiple identities they hold simultaneously.

The final question that the paper sought to answer focused on the role of expatriate bubbles in supporting SIE engineers in identity work. Our data suggest that expatriate bubbles actually serve as ‘identity workspaces’ (Petriglieri and Petriglier, 2010). They act as helpful means in coping with identity conflict (e.g., different ways of working as an Engineer or different ways of approaching work in general) as compatriots acted as a bridge between the home and the host culture (Bayraktar, 2019), but also with ‘emergent’ identity work, in the sense of a “*collective process that involves multiple cycles of interactions between external and internal identity work through action, learning, sense-making and role boundary expansion*” (Leung et al., 2014, p. 424 italics in original). Expatriate bubbles in the study provided the space for SIEs to share experiences and make sense of their working abroad experience, reflect on the differences between cultures, deal with identity conflicts and test different ‘scripts’ they prepared together backstage, thus expanding their initial role boundaries (e.g., the ‘theoretical’ engineer) and embracing elements from both cultures (e.g., speaking directly and indirectly when needed, being theoretical and practical).

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

Collecting data during the pandemic had both strengths and weaknesses. In terms of strengths, we observed that all participants were keener to participate, perhaps because of the novelty of being interviewed and offering the opportunity for social interaction. What is more, all the participants appeared to be more critical and reflective of their experience as they managed to examine it more ‘objectively’, perhaps because of the ‘distance’ from the workplace. A limitation of our study though was the fact that we did not have the chance to observe interactions within bubbles as they

took place, neither how SIEs experienced any threats to their face in the interactions with their British colleagues. For this reason, we would like to invite researchers to use our Goffmanian framework and further develop research on expatriate bubbles of SIEs, across professions, using *also* ethnographic visual data in order to capture more accurately backstage performances and language. It would also be interesting to capture how the locals react to these expatriate bubbles and how they develop this invisible ‘wall’ between them and SIEs. Lastly, since our participants were all White and from similar backgrounds (ethnic and socioeconomic), it is crucial that future research also looks at the impact of race and class on the formation of expatriate bubbles as well as the identity work that these bubbles encourage.

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