

## **Female Social Entrepreneurship: Identity Strategies, Legitimacy Acquisition, and Performance Impact Study**

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### **Abstract**

Identity serves as the starting point for the entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes of female social entrepreneurs, and holds significant importance for addressing the key challenges they face—gaining legitimacy and enhancing entrepreneurial performance. However, research remains scarce on the relationship between female social entrepreneurs' identity strategies and legitimacy acquisition, as well as the underlying mechanisms through which identity integration improves social entrepreneurial performance. Therefore, this study follows a progressive logic of “identity strategy—legitimacy acquisition—performance impact” to conduct three sub-studies: First, based on identity theory, it investigates the influence of identity strategies on female social entrepreneurship decision-making through conjoint analysis experiments; Second, from an institutional logic perspective, it examines the configurational effects of identity strategies on legitimacy acquisition utilizing fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA); Finally, based on identity theory, it constructs a theoretical model of how female social entrepreneurs' identity integration affects social entrepreneurial performance, revealing the mediating role of legitimacy and the moderating role of social bricolage. The research findings can help guide female social entrepreneurs in developing clear self-awareness and making sound entrepreneurial decisions, successfully acquiring legitimacy, and consequently enhancing social entrepreneurial performance.

### **Full Text**

## **Female Social Entrepreneurship: Identity Strategies, Legitimacy Acquisition, and Performance Impact**

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**Abstract:** Identity serves as the starting point for the entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes of female social entrepreneurs and is crucial for addressing the key challenges they face—gaining legitimacy and enhancing entrepreneurial performance. However, research on the relationship between female social entrepreneurs’ identity strategies and legitimacy acquisition, as well as on the underlying mechanisms through which identity integration enhances social entrepreneurial performance, remains scarce. Therefore, this study follows the progressive logic of “identity strategy—legitimacy acquisition—performance impact” to conduct three sub-studies: First, based on identity theory, we examine the influence of identity strategies on women’s social entrepreneurial decision-making through experimental conjoint analysis. Second, from an institutional logic perspective, we employ fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to explore the configurational effects of identity strategies on legitimacy acquisition. Finally, grounded in identity theory, we construct a theoretical model of how female social entrepreneurs’ identity integration influences social entrepreneurial performance, revealing the mediating role of legitimacy and the moderating role of social bricolage. Our findings can help guide female social entrepreneurs in developing clear self-cognition and making informed entrepreneurial decisions to successfully acquire legitimacy, thereby enhancing social entrepreneurial performance.

**Keywords:** Female social entrepreneurship, identity strategy, legitimacy, social entrepreneurial performance, social bricolage

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## 1 Problem Statement

Female social entrepreneurship refers to entrepreneurial activities led and undertaken by women that focus on solving social or environmental problems, demonstrating particular effectiveness in addressing complex and intractable social issues (Wang et al., 2020). While traits such as empathy and care ethics in women may be viewed as deficiencies in commercial entrepreneurship, they become key success factors in social entrepreneurship. Moreover, compared to men, women bear more family responsibilities and participate more frequently in community activities, making them more sensitive to social problems and better equipped to identify social entrepreneurial opportunities (Wang et al., 2020). Female social entrepreneurship offers a more inclusive approach to solving social problems, thereby transforming the traditional growth-focused development model. For example, two women, Qiao Wanshan and Su Zhijun, created the social enterprise SHOKAY (the world’s first yak wool textile brand), which not only increased income for Tibetan herders but also used profits to conduct women’s health training, support vulnerable communities, and promote community devel-

opment. Female social entrepreneurship embodies the policy requirements and development orientation of inclusiveness, co-construction, sharing, and equal development. It represents an important pathway to achieving common prosperity and a practical implementation of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda regarding women's empowerment and the integration of social, economic, and environmental development.

However, female social entrepreneurs still face numerous obstacles that hinder the development of female social entrepreneurship. First, female social entrepreneurs confront an identity paradox. On one hand, they must balance dual role identities—being a woman and being an entrepreneur. Female identity represents feminine gender role expectations (such as being a good wife and mother), while entrepreneur identity signifies masculine entrepreneurial “prototype” norms. These two identities exhibit inconsistencies and may even conflict in terms of principles, beliefs, and values (Li & Yang, 2020), creating a role identity paradox. On the other hand, female social entrepreneurs must also reconcile two value identities—social value and commercial value. Social value identity emphasizes humanitarianism and social value creation, whereas commercial value identity focuses on maximizing economic benefits (Li et al., 2018). These two value identities contradict each other in mission orientation, value orientation, and behavioral approaches (Yuan et al., 2020), forming a value identity paradox. Although scholars have found that identity compartmentalization and identity transformation can alleviate identity paradoxes in female entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship (Costanzo et al., 2014), female social entrepreneurship is not merely a simple superposition of female entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Instead, it faces nested role identity paradoxes and value identity paradoxes that require simultaneous coordination of multiple identities, exponentially increasing complexity and difficulty. Existing identity strategies for female entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs may not be fully applicable to female social entrepreneurs. Identity issues constitute a fundamental challenge that female social entrepreneurs must address. Without a clear self-positioning of “who I am,” women may hesitate to engage in social entrepreneurship, and even if they do, they may face extremely high failure risks. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply explore how female social entrepreneurs' identity strategies (i.e., the ways in which female social entrepreneurs seek balance and coordination among multiple identities) influence entrepreneurial decisions, behaviors, and outcomes.

Second, female social entrepreneurs face a legitimacy gap. Legitimacy reflects stakeholders' recognition and support for entrepreneurs' actions. Identity is considered an effective means of acquiring legitimacy (Drori et al., 2009), as entrepreneurs adjust their identity to align with stakeholders, enabling stakeholders to form reasonable expectations about entrepreneurial practices and thereby granting legitimacy. However, female social entrepreneurs face particular difficulties in gaining legitimacy. On one hand, to obtain legitimacy as entrepreneurs, female social entrepreneurs need to conform to and imitate masculine traits (Li et al., 2019), which may lead to the “devaluation” of their female

identity, creating the first legitimacy barrier. On the other hand, social enterprises operate in the ambiguous boundary between pure commercial enterprises and pure non-profit organizations, making it difficult for stakeholders to accurately assess their nature. The dual value proposition of social and commercial values is difficult to measure and can easily trigger mission drift, creating a second legitimacy barrier (Li et al., 2018). In summary, female social entrepreneurs face diverse interests and behavioral expectations from multiple stakeholders (such as family, business partners, beneficiary groups, and the public), which may be compatible or conflicting. Female social entrepreneurs must not only secure support from multiple stakeholders to achieve dual social and commercial missions but also gain recognition from family and society to ensure the legitimacy of their entrepreneur identity. Compared to pure social entrepreneurship or female entrepreneurship, female social entrepreneurs face greater difficulty in acquiring legitimacy. Since legitimacy is crucial for organizational survival and development, its absence can lead to organizational demise. Therefore, only by bridging the legitimacy gap and securing support from multiple stakeholders can female social entrepreneurship develop better. However, current research on the relationship between identity strategies and legitimacy acquisition remains unclear, representing both a practical challenge and an academic hotspot.

Current research exhibits deficiencies and areas for improvement in addressing the aforementioned identity paradox and legitimacy gap. Notably, research on the internal mechanisms that trigger positive social entrepreneurial performance and performance differences among female social entrepreneurs remains lacking. On one hand, although there is broad consensus that women are more suitable for entering the social entrepreneurship sector (Nicolás & Rubio, 2016) and may be more successful in social entrepreneurship than men (Lortie et al., 2017), current research has not provided clear answers on how female social entrepreneurs achieve positive social entrepreneurial performance or how they balance commercial value while creating social value. On the other hand, although research interest in female social entrepreneurship continues to grow, most studies to date have been based on a “homogeneity” assumption, treating female social entrepreneurs as a single homogeneous group, either comparing them with male social entrepreneurs or analyzing the overall characteristics of female social entrepreneurs (Dickel & Eckardt, 2021). Such research obscures the heterogeneity among female social entrepreneurs in terms of entrepreneurial cognition, behavior, and performance. Given that identity serves as a micro-level clue to understanding differences in entrepreneurial decisions, behaviors, and outcomes among female social entrepreneurs (Li & Yang, 2020), it is necessary to use identity as an entry point to deeply investigate the internal mechanisms through which female social entrepreneurs enhance social entrepreneurial performance.

To address these practical challenges and theoretical gaps, this study focuses on three core questions: (1) How do potential female social entrepreneurs coordinate multiple identities to establish clear self-cognition and make decisions to engage in female social entrepreneurship (i.e., Who am I)? (2) How can female

social entrepreneurs effectively coordinate multiple identities and respond to the behavioral expectations of diverse stakeholders to successfully acquire legitimacy from multiple stakeholders (i.e., What should I do)? (3) How can female social entrepreneurs generate positive social and economic performance based on identity integration (i.e., How well am I doing)? First, drawing on identity theory, we use experimental conjoint analysis to examine how potential female social entrepreneurs adopt different identity strategies to form clear self-cognition and make decisions to engage in social entrepreneurship. Second, based on the institutional logic perspective, we employ fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis to explore the configurational effects of identity strategies that lead to successful or failed legitimacy acquisition among female social entrepreneurs. Finally, grounded in identity theory, we deeply investigate the mechanisms through which female social entrepreneurs' identity integration influences social and economic performance, revealing the mediating role of cognitive legitimacy and the moderating role of social bricolage. Through these studies, this paper provides in-depth theoretical insights and practical guidance for addressing the critical issues faced by female social entrepreneurs.

## 2.1 Female Social Entrepreneurship

Female social entrepreneurship is entrepreneurial activity focused on solving social or environmental problems, led and undertaken by women (Humbert & Roomi, 2018). Therefore, female social entrepreneurship can be viewed as the intersection of female entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Although women play a central role in social entrepreneurship practice (Datta & Gailey, 2012), research on female social entrepreneurship remains in its infancy. Current studies typically address female social entrepreneurship in three ways.

First, from a “gender comparison” perspective, analyzing topics such as: (1) whether women are more likely than men to engage in social entrepreneurship. For instance, Nicolás and Rubio (2016) examined gender gaps in social and commercial entrepreneurship, finding relatively smaller gender gaps in the social entrepreneurship sector. (2) Why women are more likely than men to engage in social entrepreneurship. Primary reasons include sustainability orientation (Dickel & Eckardt, 2021), gender self-schema (Lortie et al., 2017), and specific national cultural factors such as cultural tightness, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Uzuegbunam et al., 2021). (3) Differences in resource acquisition between female and male social entrepreneurs. For example, Yang et al. (2020) found that when economic and social credibility are indicated, female-founded startups are less likely to be accepted by social impact accelerators than male-founded startups.

Second, viewing social entrepreneurship as a means of promoting women's empowerment and a platform for achieving gender equality (Datta & Gailey, 2012). For example, Pareja-Cano et al. (2023) revealed how entrepreneurial practices drive women's empowerment and how power is accumulated in this process, enabling women to better access and control resources. Haugh and Talwar (2016)

noted that social entrepreneurship not only empowers women but also helps change women's status in social structures, thereby promoting overall societal transformation.

Third, focusing on the individual characteristics of female social entrepreneurs or the unique aspects of female social entrepreneurship (Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016). For instance, Halberstadt and Spiegler (2018) studied the personal networks of 11 female social entrepreneurs in South Africa through egocentric network analysis, finding that social networks play an important role in influencing the idea formation process of female social entrepreneurs. Spiegler and Halberstadt (2018) focused on female social entrepreneurs in Namibia, exploring how relationship networks make women more sensitive to social problems and opportunities for sustainable innovation.

Overall, although research on female social enterprises is increasing, current studies tend to treat female social entrepreneurs as a single homogeneous group, either comparing them with male social entrepreneurs or focusing on the overall characteristics of female social entrepreneurs. While these studies reveal the group characteristics of female social entrepreneurs, they obscure the differences, complexity, and diversity in entrepreneurial cognition, behavior, and outcomes.

## 2.2 Identity Strategies

Identity refers to a universal personalized cognitive framework formed and maintained through social interaction (Pan et al., 2019). It involves answering the core questions of "Who am I" and "What should I do" (Navis & Glynn, 2011) and constitutes the micro-foundation that triggers differences in entrepreneurs' decisions, behaviors, and performance. Identity strategies refer to the ways in which individuals coordinate, integrate, and unify different identities or roles when facing multiple identities (Li & Yang, 2020).

### 2.2.1 Identity Strategies in Female Entrepreneurship

The identity paradox is a key issue for female entrepreneurs because they must simultaneously balance the masculine trait norms represented by the entrepreneur identity and the feminine gender role expectations represented by the female identity. The conflict between the norms and expectations attached to these two role identities forces them to adopt identity strategies (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Existing research has explored four different identity strategies employed by female entrepreneurs: First, accepting the female identity and societal expectations of femininity while rejecting the entrepreneur identity prototype. They emphasize feminine traits and view the entrepreneur identity merely as a means of empowering women. Second, rejecting the female identity and gender expectations while accepting the entrepreneur prototype. They engage in entrepreneurship by conforming to and catering to the masculine norms of the entrepreneur prototype, imitating male behavioral patterns. Third, simultaneously accepting both female identity and entrepreneur prototype, engaging

in entrepreneurial activities within the scope of meeting societal expectations for women's roles (Nadin, 2007). Fourth, simultaneously rejecting both female identity and entrepreneur prototype, challenging traditional gender divisions and social norms that portray the entrepreneur prototype as masculine, and redefining the female entrepreneur identity in entirely new ways (Chasserio et al., 2014).

### 2.2.2 Identity Strategies in Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship faces identity paradoxes under multiple institutional logics (Liu et al., 2019). Social entrepreneurship aims to solve social problems while achieving commercial sustainability, possessing dual identities dominated by both business logic and social logic, and needing to respond to demands from different stakeholders under two different institutional logics (Yuan et al., 2020). The business identity dominated by business logic requires social enterprises to participate in market competition, maximize economic benefits, and sustainably “self-fund”; whereas the social identity dominated by social logic advocates that social enterprises solve social problems and actively engage in social value creation activities such as poverty elimination and environmental protection. Therefore, social enterprises face challenges brought by dual logics and dual value identities. Strategies used by social entrepreneurs to manage multiple identities include: First, identity compartmentalization, which retains multiple identities without seeking synergy among them (Costanzo et al., 2014). Through this approach, the multiple identities of non-profit social missions and for-profit commercial missions are maintained but separated through physical, spatial, or symbolic means to reduce the possibility of conflicts among multiple identities. Second, identity deletion, which involves divesting oneself from competing identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Third, identity integration, which refers to the process of synthesizing multiple identities. This strategy sets comprehensive goals by retaining a meta-identity (Fiol et al., 2009).

### 2.2.3 Summary

Existing research primarily focuses on the identity strategies of female entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs, with relatively limited research on the identity strategies of female social entrepreneurs. Notably, the identity strategies of female entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs are not entirely applicable to female social entrepreneurs. This is because the challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs are not limited to addressing role identity paradoxes or value identity paradoxes but require simultaneous coordination of multiple identities. This situation makes the identity work of female social entrepreneurs more complex and exponentially more difficult. Therefore, in-depth research on the identity strategies of female social entrepreneurs is essential.

## 2.3 Identity and Legitimacy Acquisition

Legitimacy is a cognitive measure of whether an actor's behavior is desirable within a particular socially constructed system of norms, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is a critical factor for organizational growth and survival. Stakeholders are most likely to provide resources to individuals or organizations they consider appropriate or suitable. Identity not only enables entrepreneurs to form self-positioning but also serves as a vehicle for communication and strategic dissemination with stakeholders. Entrepreneurs adjust their identity to align with stakeholders (Drori et al., 2009). By adopting appropriate identity strategies, entrepreneurs can enable diverse stakeholders to form reasonable expectations about entrepreneurial practices (Navis & Glynn, 2011), thereby providing legitimacy and resources. Therefore, identity and legitimacy acquisition are closely connected.

### 2.3.1 Female Entrepreneurs' Identity and Legitimacy Acquisition

Female entrepreneurs' acquisition of legitimacy is both important and complex. First, they face the so-called "legitimacy gap." To gain legitimacy as entrepreneurs, female entrepreneurs need to imitate masculine traits, which may lead to the devaluation of their female identity (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Conversely, under the dominance of masculine entrepreneurial norms, overly emphasizing feminine traits can cast doubt on their entrepreneur identity (Li et al., 2019). Second, compared to other types of organizations, female entrepreneurial enterprises rely more on family and external support (McDowell et al., 2019). Female entrepreneurial enterprises operate across multiple institutional domains with conflicting rules of the game. Because stakeholders hold conflicting or contradictory beliefs about the appropriateness of organizational actions, this leads to conflict, goal ambiguity, and organizational instability (Glynn et al., 2000). Female entrepreneurs need the ability to handle these conflicts—that is, the ability to gain legitimacy in complex, multi-institutional domains—which is considered crucial for organizational survival.

### 2.3.2 Social Entrepreneurs' Identity and Legitimacy Acquisition

Social enterprises with dual identities have ambiguous boundaries, which makes stakeholders question their dual identities and dual missions. The difficulty of legitimacy acquisition for social enterprises is much higher than for traditional organizations (Santos et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2022). Difficulty in gaining stakeholder recognition can trigger legitimacy crises in social enterprises, hindering their development (Chen et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary for social enterprises to actively engage in legitimacy construction work (Ruebottom, 2013).

### 2.3.3 Summary

Existing research primarily focuses on the relationship between identity and legitimacy acquisition for female entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs but overlooks the legitimacy dilemmas induced by multiple nested identity paradoxes in female social entrepreneurship, which is more complex than either female entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship. Gaining legitimacy is crucial for organizational survival, and female social entrepreneurs need to coordinate the compatibility and conflict points between nested role identities and value identities while simultaneously addressing more complex and diverse stakeholder relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply investigate how female social entrepreneurs' identity strategies influence legitimacy acquisition.

### 2.4.1 Research on Outcomes of Female Entrepreneurs' Identity

The literature discusses both positive and negative outcomes of emphasizing entrepreneur identity while downplaying female identity in female entrepreneurship (see Table 1). Entrepreneur identity can enhance women's self-esteem, sense of personal value, and career independence (Bowen & Hisrich, 1986), providing opportunities for women to connect with communities, improve social relationships and status, and better integrate into society (Robinson et al., 2007). However, opposing views suggest that strengthening their entrepreneur identity may cause husbands from patriarchal societies to feel a loss of masculinity, triggering potential resentment, spousal abuse, or divorce (Kim, 2012). If they reject their female identity and choose to conform to the masculine entrepreneur "prototype," entrusting childcare to others to pursue entrepreneurship, they face not only reputational concerns about maternal absence but also fears of challenging the male breadwinner role, leading to family tension (Heemskerk, 2003).

Research on outcomes of emphasizing female identity while downplaying entrepreneur identity in female entrepreneurship has also yielded inconsistent conclusions. Female identity makes female entrepreneurs more likely to hire other women and provide them with development opportunities (Collins & Low, 2010). These entrepreneurs are also more likely to express ethics of care, engagement, empathy, and maintaining harmonious relationships, and more likely to prioritize social and environmental goals over economic ones (Hechavarria et al., 2017). However, some scholars argue that female entrepreneurs "underperform" on traditional economic performance indicators such as sales, number of employees, and profitability (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011). Female entrepreneurs who emphasize female identity typically start businesses in traditional service retail sectors such as beauty, food, and domestic services, and usually on a smaller scale (Chreim et al., 2018).

#### Table 1 Research on Outcomes of Female Entrepreneurs' Identity

	Emphasizing Entrepreneur Identity, Downplaying Female Identity	Emphasizing Female Identity, Downplaying Entrepreneur Identity
<b>Positive Outcomes</b>	Enhances women's self-esteem, personal value awareness, and career independence (Bowen & Hisrich, 1986) Improves social relationships and status, better integration into society (Robinson et al., 2007)	Increases employment, hires other women, provides opportunities for career skill development (Collins & Low, 2010) Creates social and environmental value (Hechavarria et al., 2017)
<b>Negative Outcomes</b>	Potential resentment, spousal abuse, or divorce (Kim, 2012; Espiritu, 1999) Reputational concerns about maternal absence, family tension (Heemskerk, 2003)	Low sales and profitability, "underperformance" (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011) Small business scale (Chreim et al., 2018)

#### 2.4.2 Research on Outcomes of Social Entrepreneurs' Identity

Research findings on multiple identities and social entrepreneurial performance show some divergence (see Table 2 ). Some scholars argue that multiple identities positively impact social entrepreneurial performance. Specifically, the dominance of social value identity makes it easier for social enterprises to gain support and recognition from diverse stakeholders, helping them acquire resources and thereby promoting social performance (Battilana et al., 2015) and financial performance (Nicholls, 2010). The dominance of commercial value identity, meanwhile, encourages social enterprises to actively participate in market competition, thereby promoting financial performance (Dees, 2012).

Other scholars argue that multiple identities may negatively impact social entrepreneurial performance. In social enterprises dominated by social value identity, the potential neglect of economic sustainability can negatively affect financial performance (Battilana et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2016). In social enterprises dominated by commercial value identity, the risk of mission drift may adversely affect the survival and growth of social enterprises (Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017). Additionally, some studies have found that when commercial value identity dominates and emphasizes a competitive orientation, its impact on financial performance is not significant (Liu et al., 2016).

**Table 2 Research on Outcomes of Social Entrepreneurs' Identity**

Representative Studies	Social Value Identity Dominance	Commercial Value Identity Dominance
Battilana et al. (2015); Nicholls (2010)	Easier to gain legitimacy and resources, promoting social performance	-
Dees (2012)	-	Forces participation in market competition, promoting financial performance
Liu et al. (2016)	Focuses on social value, neglects economic sustainability	No significant impact on financial performance
Ramus & Vaccaro (2017)	-	Focuses on economic interests, mission drift

### 2.4.3 Research on Outcomes of Female Social Entrepreneurs' Identity

Previous research has revealed several non-economic outcomes of female social entrepreneurs' identity (see Table 3 ). First, conceptualization of success. The social value orientation of female social entrepreneurs influences how community needs are operationalized and ultimately affects the definition and measurement of success. For example, Addicott (2017) found that female social entrepreneurs primarily view entrepreneurial success from the perspective of community and local development. Second, leadership style. The female identity of female social entrepreneurs leads social enterprises to adopt co-leadership and participatory decision-making styles (Addicott, 2017). Périlleux and Szafarz (2015) found that female-led social enterprises exhibit less directive styles and are more democratic than their male counterparts.

Some scholars have also studied economic outcomes related to female social entrepreneurship identity. First, financial performance. Humbert and Roomi (2018) found that when female social entrepreneurs center on social value identity, they may feel they have successfully achieved their social goals; however, self-interested commercial value identity shows a strong negative correlation with revenue. Second, number of employees. Based on statistical data, Warnecke (2018) noted that female identity enables women-run social enterprises to attract a considerable share of female collaborators, colleagues, and employees.

**Table 3 Research on Outcomes of Female Social Entrepreneurs' Identity**

Identity Focus	Non-economic Outcomes	Economic Outcomes
<b>Social Value Identity</b>	Views entrepreneurial success from community and local development perspective (Addicott, 2017)	Negative impact on revenue (Humbert & Roomi, 2018)
<b>Female Identity</b>	Co-leadership, participatory decision-making (Addicott, 2017; Périlleux & Szafarz, 2015)	Attracts more female employees and collaborators (Warnecke, 2018)

#### 2.4.4 Summary

Previous research has drawn many inconsistent conclusions regarding the outcomes of female entrepreneurs' identity and social entrepreneurs' identity. Meanwhile, research on the internal mechanisms of female social entrepreneurs' identity outcomes is quite scarce, leaving our understanding of the outcomes and mechanisms of female social entrepreneurs' identity insufficient.

### 2.5 Literature Review

Existing research on female social entrepreneurship has largely followed the tradition of female entrepreneurship research, treating female social entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group and assuming they share similar entrepreneurial processes and experiences. While these studies help reveal the group characteristics of female social entrepreneurs, they obscure the differences, diversity, and complexity in entrepreneurial cognition, behavior, and outcomes.

- (1) Although existing research recognizes the importance of identity for entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes, studies on female social entrepreneurs' identity strategies remain incomplete. First, previous research has primarily focused on how female entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs address identity paradoxes but has paid less attention to female social entrepreneurs who face more complex identity paradoxes. Second, prior research has focused more on how entrepreneurs coordinate different identities but has examined less the impact of different identity strategies on entrepreneurial behaviors and outcomes. Identity is the micro-foundation for differences in female entrepreneurs' behaviors and performance. Therefore, Study 1 will use identity as a starting point to reveal how potential female social entrepreneurs coordinate different identities to form a clear cognition of "who I am" and make

decisions to engage in female social entrepreneurship. Studies 2 and 3 will further explore the deeper reasons why identity influences behavioral and performance differences among female social entrepreneurs.

- (2) Although existing research recognizes the importance of legitimacy for female social entrepreneurship, there remain blind spots in understanding legitimacy for female social entrepreneurs. First, current literature primarily focuses on legitimacy dilemmas triggered by dual identity paradoxes in female entrepreneurs or social entrepreneurs, neglecting the legitimacy dilemmas induced by multiple nested identity paradoxes in female social entrepreneurship, which is more complex than either female entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship. Female social entrepreneurs simultaneously face nested role identity paradoxes and value identity paradoxes, where compatibility and conflict exist between role identity and value identity. Therefore, a holistic perspective is needed to examine how configurations of multiple identities influence legitimacy acquisition. Second, research has mainly focused on how entrepreneurs gain legitimacy from a single type of stakeholder, without distinguishing different types of stakeholders. Different types of stakeholders under different institutional logics have different interests and demands, which produce different effects on entrepreneurs' behaviors and outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to further distinguish different types of legitimacy granted by different types of stakeholders. Third, existing research lacks theoretical explanations for the mechanisms of legitimacy acquisition failure. Failed legitimization efforts are not simply the opposite of successful ones; they may involve adaptive processes consistent with successful practices but produce failed outcomes. Therefore, Study 2 will deeply explore what female social entrepreneurs “should do” to effectively coordinate multiple identities and respond to diverse stakeholder demands, thereby successfully acquiring legitimacy and avoiding legitimacy acquisition failure.
- (3) Research on the internal mechanisms that trigger performance differences among female social entrepreneurs is lacking. On one hand, a few scholars, based on empirical data, argue that female social entrepreneurship challenges the “female underperformance” hypothesis, suggesting that women are more suitable for entering the social entrepreneurship sector and may be more successful than men in social entrepreneurship. However, the internal mechanisms through which female social entrepreneurs' identity generates positive entrepreneurial performance remain unclear. On the other hand, although numerous studies have analyzed the outcomes of female entrepreneurs' or social entrepreneurs' identity, they have produced many inconsistent conclusions, possibly because existing research has overlooked the influence of important mediating paths or boundary conditions. Therefore, Study 3 will deeply analyze how female social entrepreneurs “perform”—that is, how they generate positive social entrepreneurial performance based on identity integration—and reveal the underlying mechanisms.

### 3 Research Framework

Identity is the starting point for female social entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes. On one hand, female social entrepreneurs' identity shapes the guidelines that direct their behaviors and practices; on the other hand, it enables diverse stakeholders to form reasonable expectations about entrepreneurial practices, providing legitimacy and resources. This study uses female social entrepreneurs' identity as the fundamental starting point to construct a research framework examining how identity strategies influence entrepreneurial decisions, legitimacy acquisition, and social entrepreneurial performance, attempting to open the "black box" of the identity coordination process and its practical utility.

This study focuses on female social entrepreneurs in the startup and development stages, investigating three main aspects: (1) how to coordinate the paradoxical relationships between role identity (female identity and entrepreneur identity) and value identity (social identity and commercial identity) to form clear self-cognition and make decisions to engage in female social entrepreneurship; (2) how to respond to external diverse stakeholder demands and acquire legitimacy through identity strategies; and (3) how to generate positive social entrepreneurial performance by integrating multiple identities. The overall research framework is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

#### 3.1 Study 1: The Influence of Identity Strategies on Female Social Entrepreneurial Decision-Making (Who Am I?)

Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] Overall Research Framework

Identity influences women's entrepreneurial decisions (Li & Yang, 2020). In the process of choosing to engage in social entrepreneurship, conflicts exist among different identities. However, it remains unclear how women weigh these conflicting factors to form clear identity cognition and thereby engage in social entrepreneurship. Therefore, it is necessary to study the female social entrepreneurial decision-making process from women's perspective. To fill this research gap, this study synthesizes research and theories related to identity strategies in female entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and employs experimental conjoint analysis (Douglas et al., 2021) to explore the likelihood of women choosing specific industries or business domains for social entrepreneurship under different combinations of role identity (female identity and entrepreneur identity) and value identity (social value identity and commercial value identity).

Based on identity theory, this study posits that identity is formed through the interaction between entrepreneurs' own role cognition and society's cognition of their roles, creating self-identity and positioning that help entrepreneurs make entrepreneurial decisions (Belenzon et al., 2016). In this theoretical framework, role identity refers to the cognition of responsibilities, cognitive schemas, and values assigned to individuals by social division of labor (Yuan et al., 2020). For

female social entrepreneurs, role identity reflects the different responsibilities and values they undertake in the two roles of being a woman and being an entrepreneur. Value identity, meanwhile, refers to individuals' commitment to the mission orientation, value orientation, and ideology of specific practices. For female social entrepreneurs, value identity reflects their orientation toward social value and commercial value (Yuan et al., 2020).

On one hand, female social entrepreneurs need to balance the role identity paradox between female and entrepreneur identities (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Female identity assigns them expectations in roles such as wife, mother, and daughter, requiring them to demonstrate feminine traits in family responsibilities such as gentleness, thoughtfulness, and care (Hechavarría & Brieger, 2016). Entrepreneur identity, however, expects them to exhibit masculine traits such as competitiveness, autonomy, and aggressiveness in roles as founders and leaders, conforming to the entrepreneur “prototype” (Chasserio et al., 2014). On the other hand, female social entrepreneurs must also coordinate the value identity paradox between social value and commercial value (Liu & Xu, 2020). Under social value dominance, they focus on solving social problems and engage in social entrepreneurship based on humanitarian values and care ethics (Li et al., 2018). Under commercial value dominance, they aim to maximize economic benefits and achieve self-value. In summary, female social entrepreneurs face the dual challenges of role identity paradox and value identity paradox, while certain elements of role identity and value identity may be compatible or contradictory.

Potential female social entrepreneurs adopt different coordination strategies for compatible and contradictory identity elements (see Table 4), which reflect their self-cognition and directly influence their decisions when engaging in social entrepreneurship. By adopting identity strategies that create synergies, potential female social entrepreneurs can clarify “who I am” and “what my responsibilities and value goals are,” thereby helping them choose specific forms and domains for female social entrepreneurship. Conversely, if they adopt identity strategies that fail to create synergies, women may face cognitive confusion or even severe identity “tearing,” ultimately leading them to choose not to engage in female social entrepreneurship.

**Table 4 Potential Identity Strategies of Female Social Entrepreneurs**

Conflict Level	Description
Broad conflict	Simultaneously coordinating multiple identities and interest demands
Moderate conflict	Social entrepreneurship related to family context, weak commercial sustainability
Mild conflict	Commercial entrepreneurship related to family context, weak social orientation

Conflict Level	Description
Mild conflict	Social entrepreneurship related to family context
Mild conflict	Commercial entrepreneurship with social responsibility
Mild conflict	New type of social entrepreneurship breaking norms with both social and commercial value
No conflict	Masculine commercial entrepreneurship
Mild conflict	Masculine non-profit organization
Mild conflict	Feminine commercial entrepreneurship
No conflict	Feminine non-profit organization
Mild conflict	Traditional female entrepreneurship, weak social and commercial orientation
No conflict	Commercial entrepreneurship breaking current norms, weak social orientation
No conflict	Social entrepreneurship breaking current norms, weak commercial sustainability
No conflict	Masculine entrepreneurial orientation, weak social and commercial orientation
No conflict	Feminine entrepreneurial orientation, weak social and commercial orientation
No conflict	Non-entrepreneurship

*Note: Female social entrepreneurs' identity includes four dimensions (female role identity, entrepreneur role identity, social value identity, commercial value identity), each with high (+) and low (-) levels, forming 16 ( $2^4$ ) possible combinations.*

### **3.2 Study 2: The Configurational Influence of Identity Strategies on Legitimacy Acquisition (What Should I Do?)**

Identity work not only helps form self-positioning but is also a strategic communication effort aimed at establishing organizational legitimacy. In this process, strategic thinking about how to effectively communicate identity characteristics with various stakeholders is particularly important. By communicating organizational identity with diverse stakeholders, a good reputation can be formed,

and a deeper understanding of different stakeholders' expectations about organizational behavior—"what should be done"—can be achieved. Through carefully designed identity strategies, organizations can respond to these expectations in a targeted manner, thereby ensuring stakeholder acceptance and legitimacy. Female social entrepreneurs' identity strategies not only indicate action directions and value orientations but also reflect, to some extent, their cognition and attitudes toward different stakeholders' demands and expectations. Study 2, grounded in the institutional logic perspective and focusing on resource providers, aims to explore which identity strategies of female social entrepreneurs help effectively respond to different stakeholders' demands and achieve legitimacy (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]).

The institutional logic perspective refers to "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which actors produce and reproduce their material existence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Therefore, institutional logics provide a set of guidelines that define actors' goals and legitimate behaviors within specific fields while building bridges between actors and institutions. Because actors handle different logics differently and institutions vary in compatibility, their behaviors exhibit diversity (Besharov & Smith, 2014). The institutional logic perspective provides key arguments for female social entrepreneurship research: female social entrepreneurs are influenced by different institutional logics when taking action in social environments (Greenwood et al., 2011). Given that female social entrepreneurs face dual role identities and dual value identities, this study posits that different female social entrepreneurs may emphasize different institutional logics, their goal priorities may differ, the identity information they communicate to stakeholders may vary, ultimately leading to differences in legitimacy acquisition outcomes.

Female social entrepreneurs face multiple challenges in meeting the demands of competing institutional logics, primarily encompassing family logic, professional logic, social logic, and commercial logic. Family logic (feminine social expectations) centers on fulfilling family responsibilities, emphasizing feminine traits such as empathy, sensitivity, and gentleness (Hechavarría & Brieger, 2016). Professional logic (masculine entrepreneurial prototype) highlights achieving personal value, advocating devoting all time and energy to one's career (Liu et al., 2020). Social logic emphasizes solving social problems and improving social welfare. Commercial logic, meanwhile, focuses more on the economic dimension, stressing autonomy, dominance, and aggressiveness (Chasserio et al., 2014). These four domain logics are supported by different institutional actors. Although family logic and social logic both value feminine traits and appear somewhat similar or overlapping, they are not identical. Family logic demands meeting and improving welfare within the family, while social logic advocates meeting and improving external social welfare; they also compete for time and energy. Professional logic and commercial logic are somewhat compatible but not identical. Professional logic emphasizes personal career development, while commercial logic focuses on maximizing economic benefits. Natural tensions

exist between family logic and professional logic, family logic and commercial logic, and social logic and commercial logic.

Different combinations of coping strategies adopted by female social entrepreneurs to address the four institutional logics will produce varying effects on their legitimacy acquisition. For example, when female social entrepreneurs choose to follow family logic and social logic while violating professional logic and commercial logic, they accept gender expectations and social missions, committing to improving family and social welfare. In such cases, female social entrepreneurs typically leverage practical knowledge of the family environment or skills learned from family (such as cleaning, cooking, and sewing) to engage in social entrepreneurship, enabling them to balance domestic labor and social entrepreneurial activities. Such female social enterprises are usually commercially vulnerable and more likely to gain internal legitimacy from family but less likely to acquire external legitimacy in commercial environments. Similarly, female social entrepreneurs have multiple potential combinations when facing multiple institutional logics.

Given that existing knowledge cannot explain which combinations enable female social entrepreneurs to gain or lack legitimacy, Study 2 will employ fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to explore the configurational effects of different identity strategies of female social entrepreneurs on internal and external legitimacy acquisition and absence.

### **3.3 Study 3: The Mechanism of Identity Integration's Influence on Social Entrepreneurial Performance (How Well Am I Doing?)**

After deeply understanding “who I am” and “what I should do,” female social entrepreneurs gain clearer recognition of their identity roles, become more willing to take entrepreneurial actions, and enhance social entrepreneurial performance. Study 3 aims to explore the impact of female social entrepreneurs' identity integration on entrepreneurial outcomes and related mechanisms (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). This study includes three questions: (1) the direct effect of female social entrepreneurs' identity integration on social entrepreneurial performance; (2) the mediating role of cognitive legitimacy; and (3) the moderating role of social bricolage.

Female social entrepreneurs' identity integration is a strategy that coordinates and integrates multiple identities—including female role, entrepreneur role, commercial value, and social value—to create a consistent, organic overall identity (Guo et al., 2019). Female social entrepreneurs' identity integration is closely related to social entrepreneurial performance. On one hand, identity integration helps alleviate inconsistencies in logic, behavioral norms, and values between the two role identities and two value identities. This reduces identity conflicts in the female social entrepreneurial process, encourages female social entrepreneurs to engage in social entrepreneurial activities with legitimate identities, and promotes social performance. On the other hand, identity integration effectively

combines female and entrepreneur identities, providing knowledge and resources for social entrepreneurship and promoting commercial activities, thereby enhancing economic performance. In empirical research, the identity integration scale developed by Guo et al. (2019) and Lin et al. (2022) can be revised and improved to measure female social entrepreneurs' identity integration.

Cognitive legitimacy refers to key stakeholders' assessment of an organization's comprehensibility or acceptability (Nagy et al., 2012). Internal legitimacy involves recognition, support, and assistance from family, friends, and organizational insiders such as employees and volunteers for female social entrepreneurs (McDowell et al., 2019). External legitimacy includes recognition, support, and assistance from commercial partners, customers, and other market stakeholders, as well as the public, for female social entrepreneurs (Kibler et al., 2014; McDowell et al., 2019). Whether for internal or external stakeholders, winning and maintaining their support requires commitment to their expectations and demands and providing what they value (Yang & Wu, 2016). Identity integration helps female social entrepreneurs clearly respond to the interests and behavioral expectations of internal and external stakeholders, thereby winning acceptance and positive evaluation from both internal and external stakeholders and enhancing internal and external legitimacy. Furthermore, high-level internal legitimacy provides advantages for female social entrepreneurs in resource acquisition and utilization, while high-level external legitimacy helps reduce transaction costs, expand social networks, accumulate social capital, and alleviate financing constraints. These factors help female social entrepreneurs achieve high-level social and economic performance (Yu & Ji, 2021). Therefore, female social entrepreneurs' identity integration enhances social and economic performance through the mediating role of internal and external legitimacy.

Social bricolage refers to the innovative use of resources at hand to solve social problems that traditional organizations cannot adequately address (Deng et al., 2018; Di Domenico et al., 2010). Social bricolage plays a key moderating role in the relationship between cognitive legitimacy and social entrepreneurial performance, divided into internal social bricolage and external social bricolage (Tasavori et al., 2018). Internal social bricolage primarily involves how entrepreneurs and their teams innovatively utilize existing internal resources. Given that female social entrepreneurs often face resource scarcity and low legitimacy, through internal social bricolage, they can find innovative solutions with limited resources and legitimacy, thereby enhancing social entrepreneurial performance. External social bricolage, meanwhile, involves how female social entrepreneurs creatively utilize existing resources in the external environment. Female social entrepreneurs with stronger external social bricolage may establish cooperative relationships with governments, communities, NGOs, and other stakeholders to gain more resources and legitimacy support. Through external social bricolage, female social entrepreneurs can not only use creative solutions to overcome barriers of low legitimacy and recognition but also enhance their social entrepreneurial performance. In summary, social bricolage moderates the relationship between cognitive legitimacy and social entrepreneurial perfor-

mance.

## 4 Theoretical Development

Female social entrepreneurship plays a key role in innovatively solving social problems and creating social value. However, female social entrepreneurs currently face a series of severe challenges, particularly identity paradoxes and legitimacy gaps, which greatly impede the development of female social entrepreneurship. To address these practical problems and fill theoretical gaps, this study adopts identity theory and the institutional logic perspective, following the logical thread of “identity strategy—legitimacy acquisition—performance impact” and focusing on three core questions: “Who am I—What should I do—How well am I doing” to conduct three sub-studies. The main theoretical contributions are as follows:

First, exploring the influence of identity strategies on female social entrepreneurial decision-making. The “identity paradox” is an extremely common problem faced by female social entrepreneurs, hindering the survival and development of female social enterprises. Identity is an important clue to explaining differences in entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes; however, research on how identity influences female social entrepreneurial decisions, behaviors, and outcomes is relatively scarce, fragmenting the logical progression of “identity—behavior—performance.” Existing research has not provided clear answers on how to effectively coordinate “identity paradoxes” to meet the needs of female social entrepreneurship. Based on research on identity strategies in female entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship, this study seeks to reveal potential identity strategies of female social entrepreneurs. From the internal perspective of female social entrepreneurs themselves and grounded in identity theory, this study deeply explores the impact of multiple nested identities on female social entrepreneurial decision-making. Based on in-depth interviews with female social entrepreneurs, this study will design specific experimental scenarios for the conjoint analysis and operationalize research variables. A one-on-one data collection method will be used to enhance participants’ authentic perception of the conjoint analysis scenarios. The study will then conduct reliability analysis of the conjoint analysis, decomposing the likelihood of female social entrepreneurship (dependent variable) into the utility of multiple nested identity element levels. Based on this, the study will cluster the decision preference information of 16 potential identity strategies corresponding to female social entrepreneurship, divide them into different subcategories, and compare the heterogeneity among different categories.

Second, exploring the influence of identity strategies on successful and failed legitimacy acquisition. Based on the institutional logic perspective, this study excavates the identity configurations that lead to legitimacy acquisition (success) and absence (failure) among female social entrepreneurs. Although identity work is considered a way to acquire legitimacy, very few studies have examined the relationship between identity strategies and legitimacy acquisition. Under

the guidance of multiple institutional logics, multiple identities have compatible and conflicting relationships, and different combinations of these relationships directly affect the interaction between female social entrepreneurs and diverse stakeholders, thereby influencing the success or failure of legitimacy acquisition. Current research fails to provide sufficient theoretical reference, highlighting the need for deeper understanding in this area. This study breaks through the limitation of previous research that only focused on legitimacy granted by a single type of stakeholder, dividing female social entrepreneurs' legitimacy into internal legitimacy (provided by family, friends, employees, volunteers, etc.) and external legitimacy (provided by business partners, customers, beneficiary groups, the public, etc.). By exploring and comparing different configurations that achieve legitimacy acquisition and absence, this study further transcends the limitation of previous research that only focused on successful legitimacy acquisition while ignoring failed legitimacy acquisition. In the process of female social entrepreneurs coordinating multiple competing institutional logics to gain legitimacy, there may be multiple paths to success and failure. This study will understand how multiple institutional logics work together to produce both positive and negative outcomes. fsQCA emphasizes that combinations of multiple antecedent conditions jointly lead to outcomes, allowing for asymmetric solutions for the presence and absence of specific outcomes. Therefore, this study uses fsQCA to explore the joint influence of family logic, professional logic, commercial logic, and social logic on legitimacy acquisition in female social entrepreneurship, separately exploring and comparing the configurations that achieve legitimacy acquisition (success) and absence (failure).

Finally, examining the mechanism through which female social entrepreneurs' identity integration influences social entrepreneurial performance. To this end, this study constructs a theoretical model aimed at revealing the impact paths of female social entrepreneurs' identity integration on social entrepreneurial performance, including the mediating roles of internal and external legitimacy and the moderating roles of internal and external social bricolage. Although existing research generally views the social entrepreneurship sector as a "natural environment" suitable for women, it has not yet provided sufficient empirical evidence to support this view. Particularly, the mechanisms through which female social entrepreneurs can enhance social entrepreneurial performance remain somewhat unclear. This study focuses on heterogeneity among female social entrepreneurs, emphasizing that identity is the micro-foundation triggering performance differences. Unlike previous research that treats female social entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group, this study reveals the deeper reasons for cognitive, behavioral, and performance differences among female social entrepreneurs. While academia and practice typically view women as vulnerable groups in need of help, this study highlights the potential of female social entrepreneurs to drive more equitable and sustainable socioeconomic development. This study examines the direct effects of female social entrepreneurs' identity integration on social and economic performance, the mediating effects of cognitive legitimacy, and the moderating effects of social bricolage. The study will collect

data through questionnaire surveys. To avoid common method bias, a two-wave evaluation design will be adopted. The first wave will be completed by female social entrepreneurs themselves, covering basic demographic variables, identity integration, and social bricolage items; the second wave will be evaluated by key stakeholders regarding legitimacy and social entrepreneurial performance.

The innovations of this study are reflected in three aspects:

First, this study focuses on resolving the internal “identity paradox” of female social entrepreneurs. From the perspective of “who I am,” this study uses interviews and conjoint analysis experiments to examine the influence of different identity strategies on female social entrepreneurial decision-making, further categorizes identity strategies based on participants’ different choice preferences, and analyzes the heterogeneity of different identity strategies. Compared with existing research, this study has unique value in expanding and enriching identity theory research. By guiding potential female social entrepreneurs to form clear self-cognition and make reasonable entrepreneurial decisions, it is expected to generate theoretical and practical innovations.

Second, this study focuses on bridging the external “legitimacy gap” of female social entrepreneurs. Based on the institutional logic perspective and using fsQCA methods, this study analyzes the substitutive and complementary relationships among multiple identities to explore their configurational effects on successful and failed legitimacy acquisition from different stakeholders. Compared with existing research, this study provides a new research perspective on legitimacy acquisition mechanisms and offers useful guidance for female social entrepreneurs on “what they should do” to successfully acquire legitimacy from different stakeholders and effectively avoid legitimacy acquisition failure, expecting to generate theoretical and practical innovations. Future research could attempt different perspectives to further enrich legitimacy acquisition mechanism theory.

Finally, this study opens the “black box” of how female social entrepreneurs enhance social entrepreneurial performance. This study deeply analyzes how female social entrepreneurs’ identity integration works through the mediating mechanism of legitimacy and the contingent influence of social bricolage on social entrepreneurial performance, thereby unveiling the “black box” from identity integration to performance. Compared with existing research, this study not only enriches theoretical research on identity outcome influences (how well they perform) but also provides guidance for female social entrepreneurs in the startup and development stages to help them achieve positive social entrepreneurial performance, expecting to generate theoretical and practical innovations. Future research could track how to enable female social entrepreneurs in the Chinese context to achieve more positive social entrepreneurial performance.

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