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# Identification as a challenge in key account management: Conceptual foundations and a qualitative study

Leonore Peters[a], Björn Sven Ivens[a,*], Catherine Pardo[b]

[a] Otto-Friedrich-University, Feldkirchenstraße 21, D-96052 Bamberg, Germany
[b] EMLYON Business School 23, avenue Guy de Collongue, 69134 Ecully Cedex, France

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ABSTRACT

Managing business relationships requires that boundary-spanning actors, such as key account managers, perform their task at the interface between two relational networks, the internal firm network and the network on the side of the key account. Several streams of research have suggested that similar situations raise questions of identification, but the business-to-business literature has not yet paid much attention to this issue. This study focuses on key account management (KAM) as a typical task of inter-organizational interface management. The conceptual foundations of identification in a sales-related interface context, such as KAM, are first discussed. It then pursues with a qualitative exploratory study that uses data gained through 40 semi-structured interviews with key account managers to identify their identification anchors. The qualitative data suggest four identification foci, namely organizational identification, key account identification, leader identification, and occupational identification, which are illustrated in a conceptual model. The study concludes with a discussion and avenues for future research.

## 1. Introduction

Firms in business markets need to handle multiple inter-organizational relationships with value-creation partners, such as suppliers, alliance partners, research and development partners, or customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ring & van de Ven, 1994; Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004). Key account management (KAM) refers to the management of a specific subset of these inter-organizational relationships, namely relationships with those customers of the firm who have the highest level of strategic importance for the firm's long-term performance (Ivens & Pardo, 2007; Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson, 2014). While these relationships may represent a small number of all the relationships within the firm's relationship portfolio, they typically make a substantial contribution to firm revenue and profit. Stable relationships with key accounts (KA) potentially represent valuable and rare intangible resources for any firm in business markets (Hunt, 2000). As a consequence, recent KAM research has highlighted how KAM can be seen as an essential firm-level capability (Ivens, Leischnig, Pardo, & Niersbach, 2018; Jean, Sinkovics, Kim, & Lew, 2015; Shi, Zou, & Cavusgil, 2004) and how it requires specific resources and capabilities (Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals, & Marcos Cuevas, 2018).

KAM typically involves the creation of a dedicated function or unit that is differentiated from other customer-facing functions or units (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010; Pardo et al., 2014; Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson, 2013), and it encompasses the development of specific routines (Homburg, Workman, & Jensen, 2002; Storbacka, 2012). In most firms, KA managers and KAM teams constitute the central actors (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Davies & Ryals, 2013; Jones, Dixon, Chonko, & Cannon, 2005; Vafeas, 2015) in these routines, although Homburg et al. (2002) identify some exceptional cases of KAM programs in which actors who are not a KA manager or part of the KAM team assume responsibility for KAM (e.g., manager-owners in medium-sized companies). A main difference between KAM and classical sales management lies in the critical role that KA managers play within and at the interface of two distinct networks—the internal firm network of actors they integrate into the relationship with the KA and the external network of relationships inside the KA firm that they must establish and nurture (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Pardo, 1999). In this role, they manage a set of complex multi-actor relationships between their own company and the KA. Guesalaga et al. (2018) find that, in the extant KAM literature, KA managers have often been identified as tangible human KAM resources who have a decisive impact on KAM effectiveness. Against this background, much research has focused on KA manager selection, skills, and evaluation; additionally, other research has examined aspects of identity (Ivens, Pardo, Niersbach, & Leischnig, 2016).

KAM and KA managers have been a topic of academic research for

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* leonore.peters@uni-bamberg.de (L. Peters), bjoern.ivens@uni-bamberg.de (B.S. Ivens), pardo@em-lyon.com (C. Pardo).

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over thirty years (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010; Ivens & Pardo, 2016; Kumar, Sharma, & Salo, 2019), with conceptual discussions as well as empirical research focusing on a variety of aspects. For example, prior work has examined dimensions of KAM (Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014; Guesalaga, 2014; Sharma, 1997), actors such as the individual KA manager or KAM teams (Atanasova & Senn, 2011; Speakman & Ryals, 2012), and the organizational implementation of KAM in structural dimensions, in processes, or in a specific organizational culture (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Leischnig, Ivens, Niersbach, & Pardo, 2018; Storbacka, 2012). However, while the implementation of KAM programs has been widely explored (Davies & Ryals, 2013; Davies, Ryals, & Holt, 2010; Friend & Johnson, 2014; Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014; Hakansson, 2014; Sharma, 1997; Shi et al., 2004), the complex work of KA managers and the challenges it represents for such individuals have been rather neglected in academic research [exceptions include Atanasova & Senn, 2011, Mahlamäki, Rintamäki, & Rajah, 2019, and Speakman & Ryals, 2012]. This is surprising because highly skilled KA managers constitute "a rare breed" (Guesalaga et al., 2018) and firms practicing KAM must deploy considerable efforts in order to retain and motivate them (Böhm, 2008). In particular, little research has explored how KA managers perceive their own role and how they identify with elements of the complex environment in which they work.

This study argues that additional research is required to better understand KA managers and their work between various reference points (such as superiors, their company, or their KA). It posits that such an understanding is required for various purposes, such as selecting KA managers, explaining their role to them, enabling KA managers to explain their own role in their internal and external networks, and defining the interplay between KA managers and their work interfaces. We propose that adopting an influential and critical school of thought from the field of social psychology may elucidate both the challenges of KAM as a task for the individual KA manager and the challenges firms face when attempting to integrate KA managers into their overall structure and processes. Specifically, we draw on the broad and fast-growing stream of literature on individual identification in intra-organizational and inter-organizational contexts (e.g., Ellis & Ybema, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Korschun, 2015; Schotter, Mudambi, Doz, & Gaur, 2017). Thus far, this school of thought has not received much attention from KAM scholars. This requires correction because KAM, inherent in its very nature, is a concept in which individuals play a key role.

The identification concept assumes that an individual simultaneously has or uses multiple identification anchors. The literature suggests that different identification anchors result in different relational behaviors (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Böhm, 2008; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; van Dick & Wagner, 2002; van Knippenberg & Schie, 2000). As a consequence, determining and understanding KA managers' anchors of identification are relevant for the management of KA managers and KA programs in general. This study argues that identification represents a major individual challenge for KA managers and that several constellations of identification likely exist between their own firm and their KA. The literature suggests that identification in an organization entails both risks and positive effects on work behavior. Various studies provide evidence for effects of identification in organizations on organizationally relevant outcomes (e.g., Bartel, 2001; Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Riketta, 2005; Riketta & van Dick, 2005; van Dick & Wagner, 2002; van Knippenberg & Schie, 2000; Wieseke, Kraus, Ahearne, & Mikolon, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the identification construct in a KAM context through investigation of whether the concept of identification plays a role for KA managers, which identification anchors are relevant in a KAM context, and how the anchors may be related to KA managers' work. For this purpose, this study follows an exploratory research approach using qualitative interviews. Data were collected through 40 semi-structured interviews with KA managers.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: First, we review the literature on KA managers as well as on social identity. Second, we present the methodology of our qualitative study. Third, we present the results from the semi-structured interviews. Finally, we conclude with managerial and theoretical implications and develop avenues for future research.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual foundation

### 2.1. Research on key account managers

KA managers have a significant impact on firm success through their role in the company (Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Guesalaga et al., 2018). They are highly qualified employees who are responsible for key customers and form the interface between their own company and the KA company (Ojasalo, 2001). KA managers differ from regular sales people because of their focus on strategically driven objectives that include the establishment and maintenance of the long-term relationship with the KA, and not necessarily the objective of sales volume maximization in the short term. To fulfil their objectives, KA managers require different skills and behaviors than typical salespersons (Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007; Mahlamäki et al., 2019; Sengupta, Krapfel, & Pusateri, 2000; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015).

Unlike typical salespersons, KA managers play an essential role in the coordination of internal and external networks of relationships (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Ivens et al., 2016; Mahlamäki et al., 2019; Ojasalo, 2001). Of special relevance are relationships with the company internal network, namely employees involved in the value creation process for KAs (Atanasova & Senn, 2011). Bundling and management of information, which are decisive components of the performance of KA managers, therefore depends significantly on the cross-functional cooperation of other organization members. This constitutes a major challenge for KA managers since they often lack formal authority over their colleagues (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Homburg et al., 2002).

Because of the lack of formal authority vested in KA managers, the involvement of top management is critical for the effectiveness of KAM and the performance of KA managers. Top management should ensure the support of other units for KA managers and actively contribute during decision-making processes or rather grant KA managers the necessary authority, resources, and coaching to provide customized solutions (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015; Pereira et al., 2019; Tzempelikos & Gounaris, 2015; Workman, Homburg, & Jensen, 2003).

### 2.2. Social identity theory, social categorization theory, and the concept of identification

Tajfel and Turner (1979) incorporated research approaches by Foote (1951), Kelman (1958), Brown (1969), Lee (1971) and Hall, Schneider, and Nygren (1970) to develop social identity theory (SIT) in the 1970s. Their theory laid the foundation for a wide variety of research on identification. Rooted in social psychology, SIT suggests that individual social identity has a relevant impact on self-perception and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They found evidence that the social identity of individuals is based on membership in various social groups and that individuals strive for a distinction between their own group identity ("in-group") and another group identity ("out-group") with the aim of improving their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005). Three key assumptions of SIT are that (1) individuals strive for an increase of their self-esteem, (2) membership in groups is associated with positive or negative values, and therefore, social identity is evaluated either positively or negatively, and (3) individuals compare the evaluation of their own group with that of other groups, which leads to increasing or decreasing self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The behavior of individuals can be traced back to the motivation of comparing between in-group and out-group: "What seemed to matter was not doing well as such, but doing better than the other group" (Haslam, 2004, p. 19). These findings underpin self-categorization theory (SCT; SCT represents an extension of SIT), which states that individuals categorize themselves into social categories/groups in order to simplify their environment. The category-building process simultaneously causes "de-personalization", which entails the replacement of individual characteristics with group characteristics (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 2010; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994).

The concept of identification, rooted in SIT and SCT, is the perception of individuals of who and what they are based on proximity—for example, proximity with certain groups. We follow the view of Ashforth et al. (2008, p. 326) that individuals build a "landscape, and identification embeds the individual in the relevant identities." Accordingly, individuals define and identify themselves with groups or entities to advance their pursuit of affiliation, self-esteem, and other social needs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The more specific concept of social identification is described by Cheney (1983, p. 342) as "active progress by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social sense." While Cheney (1983) conceptualizes social identification as a process, Ashforth and Mael (1989, p. 21) define social identification as a cognitive construct: "The perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate." In line with the latter conceptualization of identification, this research views social identification as a perception construct.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) transfer the concept of social identification and categorization into an organizational context and determine organizational identification as a specific manifestation of the phenomenon. Pratt (1998, p. 172) proposes, "organizational identification occurs when an individual's beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining." It is critical to highlight the focus on beliefs. Individuals identify with targets they perceive to be self-defining. They build their beliefs on characteristics that they attribute to the target. Two different individuals may identify with different characteristics of the very same target. The definition by van Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006, p. 572) specifies the targets of organizational identification: "The more people identify with an organization, the more the organization's values, norms, and interests are incorporated in the self-concept."

Subsequent research has suggested that identification does not only refer to the organization itself but to different levels of it. In their work, van Dick and Wagner (2002) differentiate between the following levels in the organizational context: (1) Personal level—an individual's own career, (2) group level—different subunits within the organization, and (3) superordinate level—the organization. Their findings find support in, among others, the work of Ashforth et al. (2008) who distinguish between collective (organization, team) and role (occupation, network) identification foci. Hence, individuals may identify with different foci simultaneously. These identification foci are independent, although they might be correlated to a certain degree (Ashforth et al., 2008; van Dick & Wagner, 2002; van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2004; Wieseke et al., 2012).

### 2.3. Organizational identification and organizational commitment

From an organizational perspective, the concept of identification is closely intertwined with organizational commitment. Because both concepts focus on the same research object, namely the psychological relationship between the individual and the organization, difficulties concerning differentiability, confusion, and hence discrepancies often result in the literature. The relationship between commitment and identification is not easily clarified; in some cases, definitions include the *respective other* concept (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Nevertheless, various studies have highlighted significant differences (Riketta, 2005; Riketta & van Dick, 2005; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).

According to van Dick et al. (2004, p. 185) "commitment focuses mainly on the attitudes that an individual holds towards his/her organization because of exchange-based factors." The most important distinction between identification and commitment is how they relate to an individual's self-concept. The concept of organizational identification entails integrating organizational norms, beliefs, and values into an individual's self-concept, whereas organizational commitment describes an individual's attitude towards organizational norms, beliefs, and values (Pratt, 1998; Riketta, 2005). Additionally, organizational commitment is relatively stable and difficult to change. Even in exceptional cases, such as downsizing or radical changes in organizational structure, such as acquisitions or mergers, commitment is not volatile but gradual. In return, measures to increase organizational commitment should essentially be long-term rather than short-term oriented (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; van Dick et al., 2004; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). By contrast, identification with an organization or group is strongly dependent on the individual, situation, and context. Thus, depending on the circumstances of the situation or changes in individual perceptions, the importance of belonging to a group may quickly rise or fall, be temporarily displaced by simultaneous membership in another social group, or outbreak through a perceived rivalry with a comparable external group (Böhm, 2008; Gautam, van Dick, & Wagner, 2004; Pratt, 1998; van Knippenberg, 2000; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).

### 2.4. Key account managers' organizational identification

To the best of our knowledge, the concept of KA managers' organizational identification has not received conceptual or empirical attention. However, several studies from related disciplines have suggested that the concept may play an important role in boundary-spanning tasks such as KAM. Moreover, this stream of research provides valuable findings for the conceptualization of KA managers' organizational identification. Table 1 presents these implications as well as limitations regarding the KAM context.

Research by Korschun (2015) built on SIT and stakeholder theory (focus on the network of actors which whom a company interacts to create value). The combination of both these theories and the resulting behavior of boundary-spanning employees was the study's focus. Korschun (2015) proposes that organizational identification of employees influences the attitude towards external stakeholders with respect to "organizational identity orientation" and "construed membership of stakeholder." Cardador and Pratt (2018) as well enriched research on organizational identification in marketing by conducting a study on multilayered employee–customer relationships. They conducted a qualitative study with credit union workers and developed a multilayered construct (employee–customer identification). Netemeyer, Heilman, and Maxham III (2012) conducted a quantitative study in a business-to-consumer context and analyzed two specific identification constructs (employee organizational identification and customer–company identification) with regards to sales associates.

The main difference between KAM and regular sales management lies in the important role that KA managers fulfil in which they operate between and at the interface of the internal and external networks of relationships (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Pardo, 1999). In this role, they manage a set of complex multi-actor relationships between their own company and the KA, which increases the potential anchors of identification. With respect to these complex challenges, a more differentiated consideration in a KAM context is necessary.

A study by Rockmann, Pratt, and Northcraft (2007) analyzed the determinants of identification in inter-organizational teams through an experimental approach involving a student sample. In particular, this study examined the concepts "home organization identification" and "inter-organizational team identification" against the background of communication media usage. Results showed that the negative effect of strong home organizational identification, operationalized by affiliation with different fraternities, on team identification could be reduced

**Table 1**
Overview.

| Author(s) (Year) | Article | Journal | Implications for our research | Research gap |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cardador and Pratt (2018) | Becoming who we serve: A model of multi-layered employee–customer identification | *Academy of Management Journal* | - Conceptualization of employee–customer identification on four layers<br>- Impact of identification with customers on work meaningfulness and service effectiveness | No analysis of antecedents/roots of customer identification, no consideration of the interplay between organizational and customer identification, business-to-consumer (B2C) context |
| Korschun (2015) | Boundary-spanning employees and relationships with external stakeholders: A social identity approach | *Academy of Management Review* | - Proposition based on literature that organizational identification has an impact on employee–stakeholder relationship<br>- Proposition of an impact of stakeholder "identification" on employee–stakeholder relationship | No analysis of antecedents/roots of organizational identification, conceptualization without qualitative or quantitative data |
| Netemeyer et al. (2012) | Identification with the retail organization and customer-perceived employee similarity: Effects on customer spending | *Journal of Applied Psychology* | - Evidence for the effect of organizational identification on customer spending<br>- Effect of customer-perceived employee similarity on customer identification | B2C-context, consideration of customer identification with the retail company, research focus on sales associates in an apparel retailer |
| Rockmann et al. (2007) | Divided loyalties | *Small Group Research* | - Evidence for the effect of organizational identification on inter-organizational team identification | Laboratory context, student sample with a limited context (e.g., without a leader), focus on small inter-organizational teams |
| Stock (2006) | Interorganizational teams as boundary spanners between supplier and customer companies | *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* | - Analysis of inter-organizational teams with respect to power and team composition<br>- Findings show effect of team inter-organizationality on team effectiveness | Focus on inter-organizational team effectiveness, no analysis of identification or identification foci |
| Vesalainen, Rajala, & Wincent (2020) | Purchasers as boundary spanners: Mapping purchasing agents' persuasive orientations | *Industrial Marketing Management* | - Quantitative results on boundary-spanning behavior in a supplier–buyer relationship<br>- Results show the importance of relational orientation | Behavioral analysis of purchase managers in a regular supplier–seller relationship with a focus on communication |
| Wilson and Millman (2003) | The global account manager as political entrepreneur | *Industrial Marketing Management* | - Conceptual model of organizational and customer identification | Conceptualization without qualitative or quantitative data |

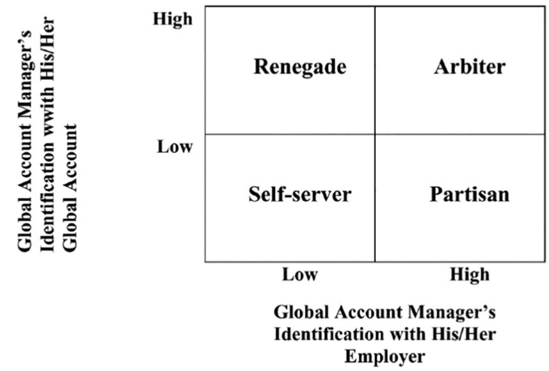



**Fig. 1.** A model of boundary-spanning behavior (Wilson & Millman, 2003).

through physical arrangement and rich communication usage (Rockmann et al., 2007). The laboratory experiment by Rockmann et al. (2007), characterized by a one-time task with low complexity and a student sample, represented a first step in exploring the interplay of different identification foci in an inter-organizational setting. To transfer the results to the context of KAM, several additional considerations must be taken into account, namely the boundary-spanning role of KA managers and their special role within the company.

Wilson and Millman (2003) aimed to elucidate the role performed by global account managers. Drawing on boundary-spanning literature, they considered the organization as the internal interface and the global account as the external interface. In order to examine the behavior, the necessary skills, and the stages of relational development, they conceptualized a four-field matrix classifying the interplay between "global account manager's identification with his/her employer" and "global account manager's identification with his/her global account." Additionally, they suggested particular roles and behaviors that result from the degree of the two types of identification. Fig. 1 shows the four-field matrix with the four roles: Self-server, renegade, partisan, and arbiter. The authors describe their own work as a "scratch on the surface" and encourage scholars to further explore KA managers' role and identification (Wilson & Millman, 2003, p. 157).

We aimed to investigate this promising topic using qualitative data and build on the approach of Wilson and Millman (2003), using it as the foundation for our data analysis.

## 3. Qualitative study

### 3.1. Study design

Pedersen, Ellegaard, and Kragh (2020) emphasized the necessity of research on managerial action, behaviors, and thoughts. Several researchers have highlighted the potential and the importance of qualitative methods (i.e., interviews) in business-to-business research to elucidate managers' actual behavior and thinking, particularly in less-explored fields (La Rocca, Hoholm, & Mørk, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2020). Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013, p.19) suggest using qualitative research built around semi-structured interviews to obtain "both retrospective and real-time accounts by those people experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest."

To the best of our knowledge, the concept of organizational identification of KA managers has not been explored empirically or through exploratory means to date. The lack of empirical studies suggests taking a qualitative research approach in order to grasp the shape and variety of thoughts of KA managers regarding their own identification. Hence, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of KA managers' actions within, feelings and attitudes towards, and reflections about an organization by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method is particularly appropriate when collecting data on personal experiences and emotions (Booth & Mann, 2005; Coupland, Brown, Daniels, & Humphreys, 2008). We offered to conduct the interviews either by telephone or face-to-face. Interviewees had the opportunity to make their decision according to individual preferences, convenience, and practicality. Further, we were able to save resources and include respondents from a wider geographical range. Previous research on qualitative research methods have found no effect of interview mode on quality of data (Cachia & Millward, 2011; Cassell, Symon, Buehring, & Johnson, 2006; Holt, 2010; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). The interviewees were asked about central tasks and processes, internal networks and collaborations, performance and behavior, and their evaluations of their own organization and their key customer(s). We also included general and open questions on anchors of organizational identification (i.e., perceived organizational support, job satisfaction), which reflect established constructs in identification research.

### 3.2. Sample

In total, we included 40 interviews in our data analysis. The managers we interviewed all work in the field of KAM. Their job titles express this either directly (e.g., junior key account manager, key account manager, head of key account management) or are equivalents (e.g., national account manager, corporate account manager). The language of all interviews was German. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone/Skype between May and August 2019 and lasted between 45 min and 2 h. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The composition of the sample was diverse regarding descriptive variables such as size and industry sector. In total, we analyzed the data of 12 female and 28 male respondents with ages ranging from 24 years to 58 years. In analysis, we took duration of employment, experience in KAM, and hierarchy level into account. The sample reflects typical distributions for German industrial companies. Regarding size and industry of the organizations, we followed the general allocation of the German market. Medium-sized companies (50 to 500 employees) are often referred to as the backbone of the German economy. However, only larger medium-sized companies or medium-sized companies in specific industries (such as automotive supplies) differentiate between KAM and regular sales management. Therefore, we included 20 medium-sized and 20 large and multinational companies (> 500 employees) in our study. The vast majority included are international companies, including foreign companies and German companies with international networks, customers, and/or subsidiaries.

### 3.3. Data analysis

We followed the problem-centered approach to management research (Pratt, 2008). Problem-centered research starts with the observation of an occurring phenomenon or real-life issue rather than from gaps in one or several theories. Hence, we applied an inductive qualitative content methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt, 2008). In the first-order analysis, we analyzed all interviews by organizing the data into categories (first-order concepts). In a subsequent step, we analyzed the content within the categories further. We reduced the number of categories by clustering the content according to similarities and differences. This led to a total of 38 categories (Gioia et al., 2013). In a second-order analysis, we analyzed the data with theoretical lenses. The main objective was to cluster the categories at an abstract level. According to Gioia et al. (2013, p. 20), this objective is reached by "asking whether the emerging themes suggest concepts that might help us describe and explain the phenomena we are observing." In total, we identified 15 second-order themes. Finally, in a third step, we organized the categories further into aggregate dimensions [third-order dimensions of data structure as suggested by Corley & Gioia, 2004]. We identified four of the latter dimensions: (1) organizational identification, (2) key account identification, (3) leader identification, and (4) occupational identification. In the following section, we describe the aggregate dimensions and their categories, which are additionally illustrated.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Organizational identification and key account identification

Our qualitative data suggest that four different foci operate regarding KA manager identification. According to Wilson and Millman (2003), two main foci of identification are mentioned and sometimes combined: identification with the company (internal identification) and identification with the KA (external identification).

Hereafter, we describe these different identification foci: i) Identification with the key account, ii) identification with the organization, iii) identification with the key account *and* the organization, and iv) no identification, neither internal nor external.

#### 4.1.1. Identification with the key account

Some of the respondents mentioned a strong identification with the KA customer they are responsible for. In our interviews, nine interviewees expressed such views. For these interviewees, the KA customer is a source of motivation:

> "How do I say this best… My first motivation is actually the customer relationship."
> – I-3, Client Service Director, large company, market research industry

In addition to being a simple source of motivation in the workplace, KA managers also reported strong feelings of positive connection to "their" KA. Several respondents opined that these emotions constitute a strong foundation for their identification with the KA:

> "That I felt more connected with [customer] than with the [company]? There are moments, yes. (…) yes, if the [company] is in general not customer-oriented, not as customer-oriented as I would like. Then I feel more connected to [customer] than to [company]. Or when [company] says we're allocating resources and [customer] represents a strategic customer, but instead we'll treat them all the same. Well, then I would say, hey, now I would see myself more connected to [customer] than to the [company]."
> – I-38, Regional Key Account Manager, multinational company, chemical industry

> "Yes, as a salesperson, there is always the fact that you 'team up' with your customer to enforce things … as I said, sometimes internally it is really difficult to enforce things that you would like to enforce or where you are convinced… then you sometimes feel closer to the customer, yes, because you think he understands that better."
> – I-39, Global Key Account Manager, multinational company, chemical industry

Consequently, the KA is a strong focus for KA manager identification:

> "I often say, and almost to everyone when I introduce myself to people who may not know me, that I am actually working for my customer. Not so much for the company. In effect, I get my salary paid by the customer, albeit indirectly. So, sometimes I feel more of a customer employee than an employee of the company."
> – I-27, Principle Corporate Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

> "Someday, you see it like this: This is the work of one alone, of the KA manager… [speaking of the thing accomplished]. Sometimes you experience the instance of saying, 'What is the company for?'"
> – I-24, Key Account Manager, medium-sized company, professional, scientific and technical services industry

This situation exemplifies 'Renegade key account managers'

Gioia table ‘organizational identification’.

| First-order categories | Second-order themes | Third-order dimensions |
|---|---|---|
| My company supports me in my career goals.<br>My company acknowledges and appreciates my work.<br>My company has trust in my work. | **I appreciate and support my organization.** | Organizational identification |
| I consider my company´s success as my own success.<br>The values of my company reflect my own values.<br>I work oriented towards my company.<br>"We" or "the company"? | **My attitude towards my organization.** | |
| I am with my company for X years.<br>I do not have tunover intentions. | **General organization** | |
| I care about the opinion of others on my company.<br>It affects my personally, when someone critizes or praises my company. | **I value the view from outside.** | |

described by Wilson and Millman (2003). Renegades are employees with a high level of KA identification in combination with a low level of organizational identification. They work as agents of their KAs. From an employer perspective, this entails the risk that the manager prioritizes the KA's interests, e.g., when negotiating prices (Wilson & Millman, 2003).

#### 4.1.2. *Identification with the organization*

Several interviewees (10 in our sample) expressed a strong identification with the organization (their own company). There were several facets to this identification focus.

Some of the KA managers did not hesitate to hierarchize the importance of the partners:

> “The importance of my company is significantly higher than that of my key accounts. My company first, customers second.”
> – I-40, Key Account Manager, multinational company, sports industry

> “Plus, I am also a shareholder and co-owner of [company], and that's why I actually think of the well-being of the entire company in everything I do. Therefore, I would not make any deals with the customer that would get me closer to the customer but overall would harm the company.
> Negotiating means to get the best possible result for us, which is still acceptable for the opposite side. This means a customer is hopefully teeth grinding, just barely satisfied with me. Now, if my customer calls and says the name X is a great guy and is brilliant and makes everything possible for us, then I'm doing something wrong.”
> – I-27, Team Manager Key Account, multinational company, retail industry

Some KA managers clearly indicated what they are “ready to do” for “their” company, even if it is at the expense of the KA.

> “The best negotiation is when you fool the negotiating partner without him noticing it. And that also applies to customers. You do what is in the interest of your company, but you give the customer the feeling that you are doing everything for him.”
> – I-34, Global Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

Such KA managers can be categorized as the “Partisans” described by Wilson and Millman (2003). Partisans are KA managers who exhibit a high level of organizational identification and a low level of KA identification. Typically, they work in favor of their own company while neglecting long-term opportunities that would result from a balanced relationship (Wilson & Millman, 2003). However, our interviews particularly suggested that partisan KA managers are highly attached to and convinced by the values and attributes of their own organization. They highlighted the importance of acting on behalf of their company.

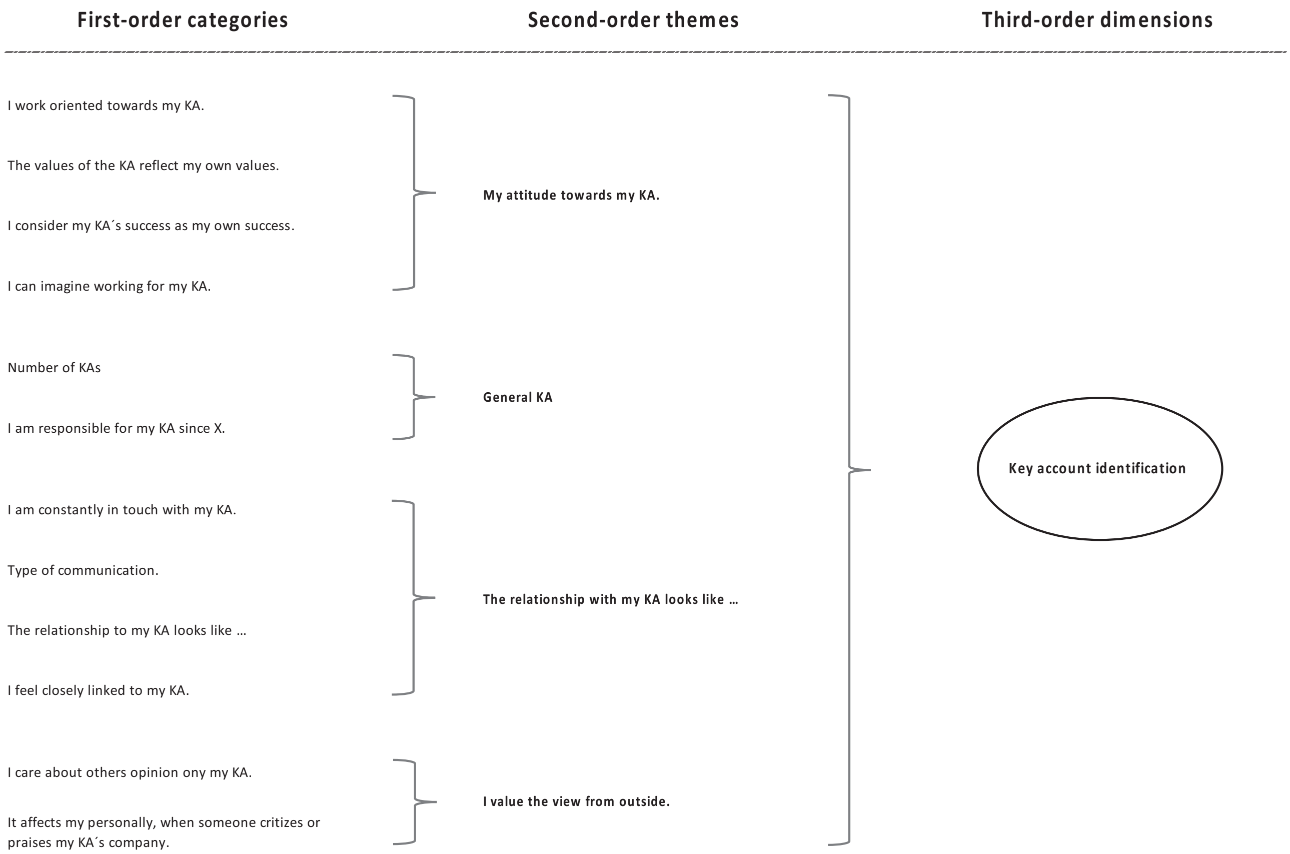
#### 4.1.3. *Identification with the key account and the organization*

Most of the managers we spoke to (15) emphasized the importance of a healthy and balanced relationship between employer and KA. Additionally, some highlighted the long-term effects of a trusting relationship. Note, however, that the responses suggest that organizational identification tends to be somewhat higher than KA identification.

> “One customer once told me that the crucial point for him is that I was still responsible for him. I mean, you build trust, build up reliability, and that is what the company stands for. The reliability.”
> – I-18, International Key Account Manager, multinational company, healthcare industry

Those KA managers exhibit similarities with the “Arbiters”

Gioia table ‘key account identification’.

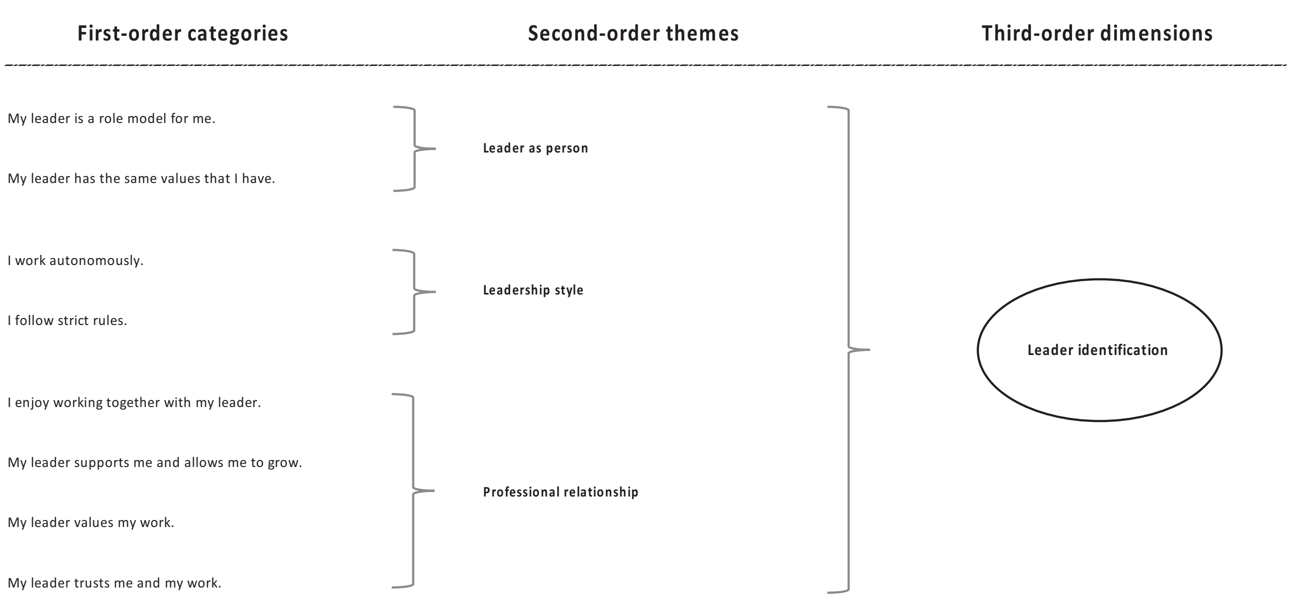



classification presented by Wilson and Millman (2003). Arbiters are employees who identify highly with both entities, their organization and their customer. Such KA managers aim to create value for both sides and are likely to exploit the full potential of a supplier–buyer relationship (Wilson & Millman, 2003).

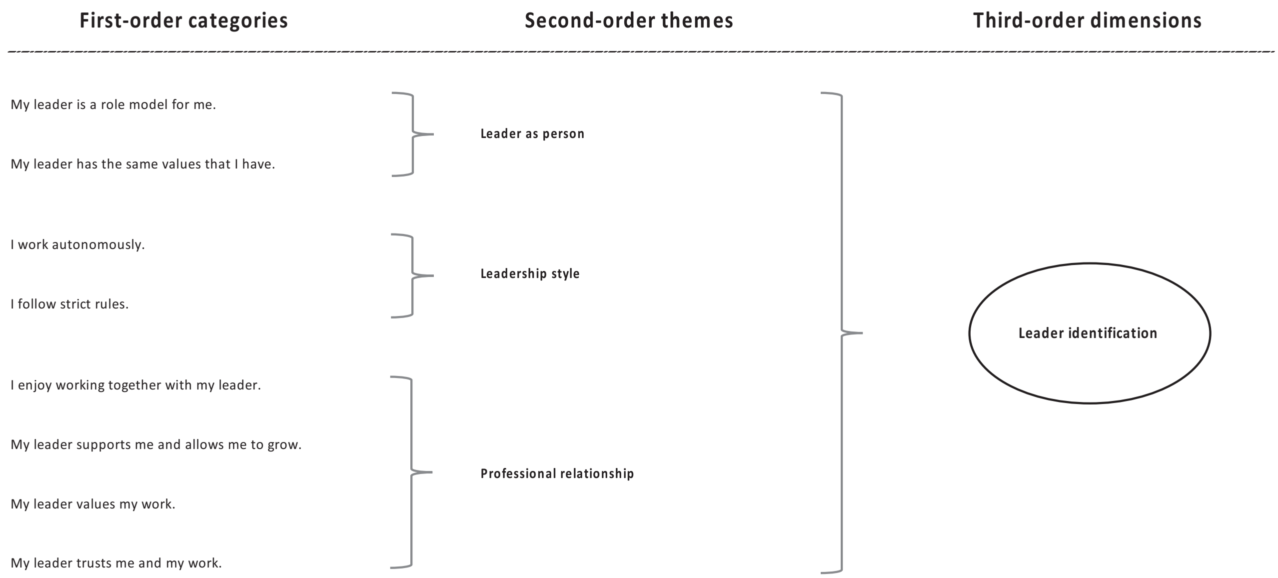
#### 4.1.4. No identification

Finally, some of our respondents, even when asked explicitly, did not mention any type of noticeable identification. They described their own active search for future positions and/or improved career opportunities as well as a lack of career development and planning regarding their current positions as their main foci. In our sample, we identified

Gioia table ‘leader identification’.



Gioia table ‘occupational identification’.




six individuals who can be seen as representatives of this group.

First, their identification lies outside the internal and external foci and instead relates to, for instance, their career:

> “I would say I've been looking for a new position actively for over two months…
> Unfortunately [my employer does not support me] with further education or training, seminars. Unfortunately, we have no training offer, which I think is a pity. This should just be part of it, it's important, too.”
> – I-15, Key Account Manager, multinational company, manufacturing industry

Second, they see the position of KA manager as merely an intermediate step in their career paths:

> “It [the company] offers a good platform and I believe each person must set goals in many areas and act independently for their own good. Be it in networking, be it professionally, be it in personal development or in making new contacts.”
> – I-21, Partner Manager Retail, medium-sized company, professional, scientific and technical services industry

Third, they feel dissatisfied with the way they are perceived by their own leaders and they openly criticize their superiors:

> “… from my senior manager, who is also managing director for the region [location], I don't receive support.”
> – I-35, Key Account Manager, medium-sized company, building technology industry

These respondents are characterized by both low organizational and KA identification. Instead, identification with and focus on their own career are especially high. These circumstances can cause risk for both employer and KA because the self-centered focus could potentially entail turnover intentions when attractive personal career development opportunities arise. These cases of KA managers can be compared to the ‘Self-servers’ as described by Wilson and Millman (2003).

### *4.2. Interplay between organizational and key account identification*

Two of our aggregate dimensions encompass elements related to the interplay between KA managers' organizational identification and their identification with their KA. Considering the special role of KA managers as boundary-spanning employees working in a field of tension between their own company and its internal network as well as the customer firm and its network, the interplay between organizational and KA identification becomes highly relevant. Previous research disagrees on the configuration of the cause-and-effect chain (Cardador & Pratt, 2018; Dekker, Donada, Mothe, & Nogatchewsky, 2019; Habel et al., 2020; Korschun, 2015; Wilson & Millman, 2003).

On the one hand, authors have reported that customer identification increases organizational identification, stating that employees who are customer oriented perform best and receive prestige and power in their own company, which in turn increases organizational identification (Habel et al., 2020; Korschun, 2015). In our qualitative database, we found evidence for this interrelation, as demonstrated by the following quotes.

> “I orient myself toward the customer. Because in the end it is like that, if I do this, and help and support him, what comes inevitably? The business for my company.”
> – I-27, Principle Corporate Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

> “But in the end, it is important that you are honest and that you can look in the mirror and it is not always about selling something, but you have to act in the interests of the customer. And if you do that and have a true interest and a solution (…) and if the customer is satisfied, the company is satisfied, too.”
> – I-13, Key Account Manager, medium-sized company, professional, scientific and technical services industry

> “One thing determines the other. If my customers are not satisfied with my work, then my employer will not be happy with my work anymore. Therefore, it is equally important for the customer to be satisfied with my work to ensure that my company is satisfied.”
> – I-20, Senior Partner Manager, medium-sized company, professional, scientific and technical services industry

On the other hand, a high level of organizational identification is a strong driver of high KA identification. This means that employees define themselves by the same values the organization follows. Customer orientation as one of the central values in supplier companies creates a strong foundation for higher KA identification. The following quote provides a practical illustration.

"Yes, normally the delivery time is four months. [And the customer says], but I need it in two. You can say, you know, that is not possible. Or you can say, I'll try it, I'll get in touch with you. I always refer to that as this is the time to shine. Since we can show the customer we are complicated. But no. (…) We are [company]. In that moment, you are [company]. Can you deliver the engine to me in half the time? Yes, we can, these are the conditions."
– I-34, Global Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

Finally, especially in service marketing literature, there is evidence that interaction, collaboration, and co-creation with customers is key (Heirati & Siahtiri, 2019; Ordanini & Parasuraman, 2011). KA managers must work in the best interest of two sides, and both companies' interests are often inextricably linked. Moreover, KA managers understand that against this background it is very important to identify to a certain level with both companies.

"It takes two to tango. (…) Because, of course, if the company is happy with the work, then you also get the resources. And with that you can help your customers."
– I-37, Vice President Global Key Account Management, multinational company, chemical industry

"Both must be wrapped up ... So sometimes that is a balancing act. Sometimes you have to prefer one direction, sometimes the other, but the bottom line is that you have to try to reconcile both."
– I-36, Senior Key Account Manager, multinational company, logistic industry

"And the satisfaction derives, I believe, only from the balance of the two entities. Namely, that you go together in one direction; sometimes, of course (…), that is not necessarily the only strategy, but there is a give and take over the journey through time, which gives a balance and secures the future for both sides."
– I-11, Senior Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

Hence, the two identification foci, organizational identification and key account identification, for many KA managers are closely related. While they remain independent and a high level of one focus does not automatically imply a high level of the second focus, many KA managers feel that without being fully able to solve the inherent "hen and egg problem" they must enhance the positive effects that both sides can have on each other to reach their objectives.

### 4.3. Leader identification

In addition to organizational and KA identification, which both are already known in the KAM literature, our qualitative research suggests that an additional identification focus exists for KA managers, namely leader identification.

Although extant articles on KAM do not mention such a focus, research on identification in organizational contexts in general provides evidence that leadership style is related to employee identity (Peesker, Ryals, Rich, & Boehnke, 2019). In particular, scholars have distinguished between transformational and transactional leadership. McColl-Kennedy and Anderson (2002, pp. 546–547) define transformational leadership as "guidance through individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence." Various studies have suggested that nowadays many highly skilled employees expect a transformational leadership style. Such a style encompasses specific expectations of the respective manager. Leaders using this leadership style become role models for their employees, which results in increased identification with the leader (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; van Dick, Hirst, Grojean, & Wieseke, 2007).

In our interviews, we also found evidence that a large number of KA managers do not receive direct instructions from their direct line managers or top management on a regular basis. Instead, most of the respondents mainly approach their leaders when facing strategic decisions or problems. For these KA managers, having a personal relationship with and confidence in the manager plays a crucial role. Regular professional guidance is not of central importance because their objectives are reflected in key performance indicators (i.e., revenue).

"So, when I feel the need to include him, I include him. Apart from that, I can work quite independently. Except if I have certain offers that exceed a certain value, in which case he needs to be included necessarily because he needs to give an authorization. Otherwise, the trust from that side is so high that I can act freely on my own."
– I-35, Key Account Manager, medium-sized company, building technology industry

"We are very flexible in the way we handle our responsibilities because it depends on the customer of course. Otherwise, we have a very simple objective (…) of course key account management also has a very clear sales target…"
– I-25, Key Account Manager, large company, market research industry

KA managers at different hierarchical levels expect their managers to be a role model, either from a professional or personal point of view, or both. However, the topic of manager as personal role model was controversial.

"From a professional point of view, I would say he is a role model for me. He knows how to handle customers and do sales. From a personal point of view, it is difficult because I would assess him as a 'stab-in-the-back' type of person."
– I-15, Key Account Manager, multinational company, manufacturing industry

"So, we make 200 million (...) and, honestly speaking, to not lose the general overview is somewhat difficult. And he is one… I must admit that (smiles) he's simply damn good, yes. Of course I have my strengths too, but he's really damn good."
– I-34, Global Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

SCT (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Turner, 2010; Turner & Reynolds, 2012) argues that individuals categorize their self-identities into different groups and thereby integrate some of the collective characteristics. According to empirical research, the collective characteristics of a work unit are highly influenced by the leader of the group (van Dick et al., 2007). This suggests that not only the leadership style but also values and attributes of the leader are connected with subordinates' identity.

"My boss is [company]. She is 1 million percent representative of the [company]. From her head to her toes. Basically, there is no one in the company who represents it more."
– I-16, Account Manager, medium-sized company, software development and support industry

"What has characterized us for a long time is that we are very close and bonded with each other. We have been very loyal because we have all been on board for a long while and also in this composition."
– I-3, Client Service Director, large company, market research industry

### 4.4. Occupational identification

Our research suggests the existence and relevance of a fourth identification focus. Occupational identification describes a KA manager's general perceived identification with the nature of his/her task

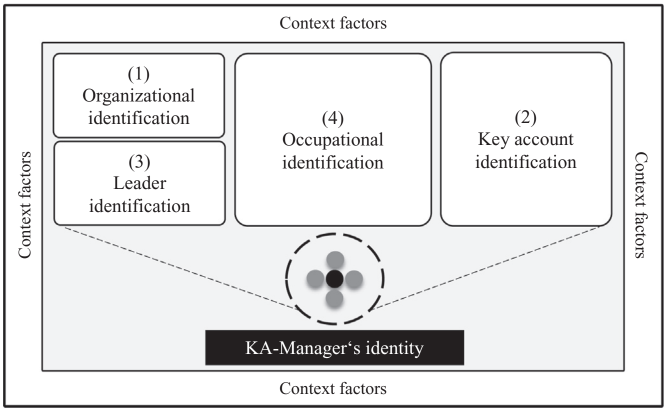



**Fig. 2.** Conceptual model of key account managers' identification foci.

(e.g., the long-term impact of KAM on business development, the role of KAM as either support or supported function). Previous research has suggested that the type of work an employee performs as well as its impact on the organization's strategy are directly connected to identification with an occupation (Becker & Carper, 1956). Several researchers assume that an employee's occupational identification rises with the importance and prestige of responsibilities as well as having an impact on job satisfaction and performance-related outcomes (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003; Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; Sager & Johnston, 1989; Stock, 2006). Most of our interviewees reported perceiving their position as being significant for the success of their company.

> "I am, because of my role as manager, part of the Sales Lead Team, and of course we also discuss strategies that affect the whole company. I do not only give input to my client but also influence the whole company strategy."
> – I-27, Team Manager Key Account, multinational company, retail industry

Hence, the fact that KAM units are often seen as important and "special" departments confers prestige to KAM employees. In particular, the differentiation from "regular" sales employees was a consistent topic to emerge in our interviews. Quite a few of our interviewees highlighted their level of responsibility as well as the special set of skills required in KAM as key differences.

> "And the sales managers are always part of the project team. But they do not have the lead. The leadership always lies with key account management."
> – I-34, Global Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

> "Yes, I have to have other competencies and I have to have better foreign language skills, I guess; as someone in the regional segment, I have to cope with the size of the business somehow, yes. And, yes, I have more responsibility when the business is big, [and I] (…) need more knowledge (…); moreover, because of the size and the importance of my account being a strategic customer and being a key account, I need the appropriate training."
> – I-38, Regional Key Account Manager, multinational company, chemical industry

Additionally, our respondents highlighted the special role of their function in the hierarchical organization of the company. Some experience this as complicated and exhausting; others expressed the opinion that the loose connection with the organizational line functions (often in the official form of a matrix structure) makes their job interesting and meaningful. Most of our interview partners expressed their occupation as being a function that receives support and can draw upon company resources (instead of being a support function).

> "In 80% of cases, I have to scream out loud and chase after people. In the other 20% of cases that come up to me, they've screwed up and need my help in telling the client something that does not sound all that bad."
> – I-40, Key Account Manager, medium-sized company, manufacturing industry

> "I mean (…), you are not really part of anything… what I do, with whom, and where I do it is up to me. When asked, 'How many employees do you have?,' then I always say 375,000. It's a bit of fun, but it's serious too, because in the end it's just that. I do not know. I mean, when a topic comes up again, the customer has something or a story ... This morning I had a conversation, it was about a logistics consulting offer for my client. And then suddenly, colleagues come into play with whom I have never had anything to do before. Neither I have never heard of them, nor knew we have someone like this with us. And then, of course, you know your network over time. So, it really always depends on what fits best or what know-how or which colleagues I need—it always depends on it. I cannot say who I have something to do with tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, that's the great thing about it."
> – I-28, Principle Corporate Account Manager, multinational company, engineering industry

### 4.5. Conceptual model

Our analysis revealed the existence of four different identification foci: (1) organizational identification, (2) key account identification, (3) leader identification, and (4) occupational identification. Fig. 2 represents these four different foci as potential building blocks of a KA manager's overall identity.

Drawing on SIT and the identification literature, we suggest that these identification foci may co-exist—a KA manager may identify strongly with all four foci. Additionally, our qualitative data suggest that KA managers can also show higher levels of identification with one, two, or three of the foci while their level of identification is low for the remaining foci. Hence, our model suggests that the four foci represent the possibilities of identity creation and that individual KA manager identities represent different combinations of higher or lower levels of these four identity foci. In this model, foci (1) and (3) relate to the KA manager's own company. Both organizational identification and leader identification have their roots in elements that are linked to the employer, albeit at very different levels and with different characteristics. Focus (2), alternatively, is related to the customer that the KA manager is responsible for. Hence, this is an external element situated at "the other end" of the dyad. Focus (4) is related to KAM as a task and has no connection with the KA manager's own company or the customer company. Instead, it is rooted in the very nature of KAM as an activity. Note that contrary to the other three foci, (4) is not dependent on the current buyer–supplier relationship in which a KA manager works. He or she could switch to another employer, continue working as a KA manager, and maintain this occupational identity while the other three identity foci would necessarily undergo change. Put differently, from an A-R-A model (actors-resources-activities model) perspective (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), foci (1), (2), and (3) are linked to specific KAM actors while (4) is linked to the activity of KAM.

Finally, our model is surrounded by contextual factors. These contextual factors refer to elements that shape a KA manager's specific identification profile—the specific combination of foci. Although (because of space limitations) we do not explore the determinants of KA manager identity in detail in this article, our data provide a number of hints that several antecedent variables are likely to influence both the level of identification with each focus as well as the interplay between these foci. For example, when KA managers refer to their individual objectives, they mention characteristics of their function (such as available resources) as well as organizational and industry-specific determinants. Hence, a number of context variables are relevant for KA manager identity.

Against this background, we discuss our findings and we provide what we view as avenues for future research on KA manager identity.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This research extends prior research on KA managers in general and KA manager identification in particular. The results make four theoretical contributions to the KAM literature.

First, our data enable verification of the typology proposed by Wilson and Millman (2003). The two foci of identification that they posited to be of relevance, namely identification with the account and identification with the account manager's employer, both were clearly evident in the interviews conducted in this study. Hence, we obtained evidence that supports the conceptual proposition made by Wilson and Millman (2003). Moreover, although the initial model was developed to describe identification in the context of global account management, our interviews suggested that the two identification foci are relevant across different contexts, including national, regional, and corporate account management.

Second, this study suggests that there is an interplay between the two identification foci (internal = organizational identification, and external = KA identification). While the two foci can be seen as independent dimensions, as suggested in the Wilson and Millman (2003) typology, our qualitative data suggest that there are links between both—for example, some KA managers mentioned that developing one identification led them to strengthen the other over time. A possible mechanism for this is that high levels of organizational identification enable KA managers to obtain access to internal resources that facilitate the development of customer-directed activities, which in turn lead to successes within the relationship, and these successes consequently strengthen the KA manager's identification with the KA.

Third, in addition to the two dimensions described in the typology that have thus far structured our thinking about KA manager identification, our research suggests the existence of a third identification focus, namely leader identification. Several respondents mentioned their direct line manager and his/her leadership style as a relevant focus. In our interviews, it became apparent that leadership style, behavior, and values of direct managers play a significant role in the identification process; they were a source of motivation for several KA managers and provided them orientation. Leader identification is distinct from organizational identification, meaning that KA managers can identify with their direct boss but not with their organization as a whole (or vice versa). Their leader is a source of inspiration for the manner in which they approach their KA. The KA literature, to the best of our knowledge, has widely ignored the relationship between KA managers and their superiors, such as the head of sales or, in certain cases, a more specialized head of KAM. Perhaps the independent nature of the task has led scholars to view the link with the direct superior as less important in KAM. Instead, the variable that has been studied more often is top management involvement in KAM (e.g., Guesalaga, 2014; Homburg et al., 2002; Tzempelikos, 2015; Workman et al., 2003). However, the C-level that constitutes top management in this perspective is typically not the direct leader to whom KA managers report. Hence, our research suggests that future studies analyze in more detail the interactions between KA managers and their superiors across different hierarchical levels.

Finally, this research found evidence for the relevance of an additional identification focus that, just like leader identification, has not been discussed in the KAM literature thus far. Occupational identification highlights that the nature of KA managers' tasks constitutes a focal point in itself. Our respondents described this activity-focused identification as being distinct from the aforementioned identification foci that are related to internal and external actors. This distinction is theoretically interesting insofar as it is in line with the model used by Homburg et al. (2002) to identify KAM configurations. These authors distinguished between KAM actors and KAM activities and, on this basis, identified eight different configurations of KAM as a practice. Our research mirrors these two dimensions with regard to the mental identification of KA managers. In fact, KA managers are responsible for managing a set of complex multi-actor internal and external relationships. They work with numerous departments inside their own company and at the KA. This makes KAM a highly interactive, communication-focused, and cross-functional task. Additionally, most of our interviewees highlighted their special position in the company: fulfilling the role of trouble-shooter and strategic planner at the same time. Some respondents described themselves as identifying much more with their task itself than with the concrete actors (their leaders, their own company, or their KA).

The different identification possibilities identified in this research reflect the tremendous variance that exists in the field of KAM. This variety is not only attributable to the different labels (e.g., national, regional, strategic, corporate, global account management) used in organizations. It is also due to the different definitions, missions, forms of implementation, and other factors involved in KAM in firms' practice. Moreover, because KAM is focused on adapting activities to specific account needs and situations, even several KA managers in the same firm may not exhibit identical identification profiles. This demonstrates the necessity to take KA manager identification into account in future research on KA managers, their roles, and performance. While extant KAM research has drawn on various theoretical foundations, integrating SIT and related frameworks into KAM research may prove valuable. In particular, our research stresses that while firms can and need to create organizational foundations for KAM through structures, processes, resources, and objectives, they also need to take account of the socio-psychological elements that affect KAM.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

For companies, building and running KAM programs represents a major investment. This investment in relationships with the company's most strategic customers will only pay off if the central actor in any KAM relationship—the KA manager—works with a mindset that allows value creation for both his own employer and the KA. A KA manager's identification with relevant foci represents the backbone of the mindset that will shape the strategic relationship he or she is in charge of.

This research contributes to a more fine-grained understanding of the concept of identification in the context of KAM. Many KA managers face fragmented identification situations because they are caught between two sides, their company and the KA. This highlights how managers who are responsible for introducing new or running and developing existing KAM programs must take the time to determine what exactly their individual KA managers' identification profiles are and what challenges specific combinations of identification foci may cause.

It is almost self-evident that it is critical to monitor whether some KA managers exhibit a tendency towards becoming a renegade in the sense of Wilson and Millman (2003). Trying to rebalance their identification focus and transform it towards, for example, an arbiter-type identification profile is a task that KA leaders will face from time to time. However, other foci also represent challenges. For example, the occupational focus that our research has explored reflects a high level of identification with KAM as an activity. If a high occupational identification occurs paired with low levels of identification with the actor-related foci (organizational, leader, or KA identification), the KA manager is highly likely not to hesitate to leave his or her current position and switch for a similar activity in another organization. KA managers with high levels of occupational identification and low levels of actor-related types of identification love their job regarding the tasks of a KA manager, but they would be just as happy if they performed this same job for a different employer, taking responsibility for a different KA. Because KA managers represent highly specialized human resources and the key customers usually desire stability regarding the person who is their primary point of contact on the supplier side, companies should also try to detect constellations of high levels of activity identification that are paired with low levels of actor identification. The aim should be to increase the KA managers' identification with their own organization and/or their leader.

More generally, our research suggests that KA managers have quite detailed thoughts about their own identification with different foci. In many companies, recruitment and training processes for KA managers focus on individual skills that candidates or current KA managers possess or are evident in their background (education, industry experience, functional experience etc.); the somewhat "softer" aspect of KA manager identification seems to receive less attention. On the basis of our qualitative study findings, we suggest that companies take matters of identification more strongly into account in their KAM-related human resources management practices.

Finally, regarding hierarchical relationships within a company, our research suggests that leadership style should not simply be top-down but participatory to facilitate exchange of opinions and values transparently and openly. KA managers need and appreciate a certain level of freedom of action, trust, and self-determination. However, they value inspiration and guidance from leaders with experience in and understanding of KAM. This is the context in which leaders can attract KA manager identification when they practice a participatory style. Therefore, a managerial implication is to consider a participatory approach with the leader as role model to strengthen leader identification among KA managers.

### 5.3. Limitations and avenues for further research

In a first step, we concentrated on the two dimensions, organizational and KA identification, based on the model by Wilson and Millman (2003) as well as their interplay. Our research demonstrated that in addition to their two dimensions (organizational identification and KA identification), other anchors of identification can be identified, namely identification with the leader and identification with the occupation, which we included in a new conceptual model. In this research, we focused only on the central foci of identification. However, some of our interviewees suggested there are other contextual factors that are relevant for identity building among KA managers, such as company image. To supplement our conceptual model, we would like to focus on contextual factors in a next step.

Further, we would like to include the outcome perspective in our data analysis. Given the nature of our conceptual model, we would like to analyze the model with a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). This analysis builds on configuration theory and proposes that multiple causal factors explain the occurrence or absence of a particular outcome. The theory further takes into account that different causal factors interact with one another. This can potentially result in identification of several alternative causal paths with the same outcome. Therefore, fsQCA follows the idea of equifinality. Further, configuration theory considers causal asymmetry, meaning that a causal factor may have positive and negative effects on an outcome, depending on how this factor connects with other causal factors (Fiss, 2007; Gresov & Drazin, 1997; Leischnig, Henneberg, & Thornton, 2016; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). We expect to reveal meaningful insights into effects of different identification configurations on KA managers' performance and behavior intentions (i.e., turnover intentions) and additionally contribute to extant research on relationship quality and/or profitability effects in KAM research (Badawi & Battor, 2020; Gupta, Kumar, Grewal, & Lilien, 2019).

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