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Dark, darker, social media: dark side experiences, identity protection, and preventive strategies of micro entrepreneurs on social media

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media has been gaining importance in recent years as an integral part of entrepreneurs' business and marketing strategies. At the same time, the entrepreneurial use of social media can lead to dark and negative consequences. This aspect has received less attention in the literature so far. The purpose of this study is to advice entrepreneurial practitioners to balance the sides of pros and cons as being an inherent reality to acknowledge the full scenario of business life and the interplay of diverse influences.

Design/methodology/approach – The qualitative interviews focused on the dark side experiences of micro-entrepreneurs on social media and on strategies to protect their private identities and businesses from those dark side effects. For the theoretical classification of dark side experiences, the framework of Baccarella *et al.* (2018) was used and adapted based on the experiences reported.

Findings – To the best of the authors' knowledge, the study is one of the first to provide an understanding of the negative experiences micro-entrepreneurs face on social media. The research showed the relevance of five out of the seven dark-side building blocks and identified time as a further influential aspect. Thereby, the authors learn to comprehend the negative sides of social media for micro-operated businesses. The findings highlight the need to understand entrepreneurial social media use with simultaneously negative hazards and economic and social challenges. Addressing the entanglement of the entrepreneurial and private selves of micro-entrepreneurs, the findings demonstrate entrepreneur's attempts of distancing or cleaning the negativity from their private identities and their businesses.

Originality/value – This paper problematizes dark sides as critical elements in entrepreneurial practice, which are too often neglected when discussing entrepreneurial marketing in general and entrepreneurship in social media specifically. The self is always captured between two sides, including the problematic ("dark") and the bright.

Keywords Social media, SME marketing, Dark side, Identity protection, Digital marketing, Entrepreneurship

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

In recent years, digital technologies have increasingly become a basic prerequisite in the field of marketing and entrepreneurship (Kollmann *et al.*, 2022; Sahut *et al.*, 2021; Olanrewaju *et al.*, 2020), creating both new entrepreneurial opportunities (Davidsson, 2015) and digital entrepreneurial ecosystem (Sussan and Acs, 2017). As part of these digital technologies (Nambisan, 2017), it is social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have created new foundations for entrepreneurial activity (Sawy and Bögenhold, 2022; Troise *et al.*, 2022; Fischer and Reuber, 2011). Looking at the digital development of European enterprises, it is striking that one in two businesses uses social media as an online advertising tool (Eurostat-Database, 2019). Social media platforms offer advantages and chances for businesses from various industries and are becoming an integral part of business strategies (Secundo *et al.*, 2021). The importance of digital technologies, and social media, in particular, has increased significantly since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Modgil *et al.*, 2022; Fritsch *et al.*, 2021). This has also led to the development of many new entrepreneurial strategies to circumvent the negative consequences of the pandemic (Sadigov, 2022). The pandemic caused society to rely more heavily on digital technologies and social media platforms to stay in touch with one another. As a result, businesses also had the opportunity to reach customers through social media, which led, among other things, to an increase in the importance and growth of social media marketing (Mason *et al.*, 2021; Syaifullah *et al.*, 2021).

To date, most entrepreneurship research has emphasized its benefits, leading to a skewed view of entrepreneurship and neglecting a full consideration of a range of negative outcomes, side effects and hazards (Bandera *et al.*, 2020). Our understanding of social media platforms and their operators have changed from seeing only the bright and positive sides to recognizing their dark and negative sides as well. These dark sides can be seen in issues such as insufficient data security, influences on users' mental health or waves of negative publicity affecting a company's reputation.

Our research focuses on a more specific aspect of entrepreneurial development, media use and the entrepreneurial self. In doing so, we are targeting social media, which "employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generate content" (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011, p. 241). The technical design of social media platforms opens up new functions that are used by online users in both the private and entrepreneurial spheres. In our study, we focus on those functions of social media platforms and relate this to micro businesses. This article aims to understand the dark sides of social media functions for micro businesses and how those dark side experiences impact on the identity of micro-entrepreneurs. We apply Baccarella *et al.*'s (2018) dark side framework of social media functionality with regards to micro-entrepreneurship to identify which social media functions result in negative experiences for micro-entrepreneurs. Subsequently, we examine what strategies entrepreneurs use to prevent such negative effects.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we outline the theoretical background of the research field and describe the methodology behind data collection and data analysis. Secondly, we present the research findings, organized into dark side experiences, identity disengagement strategies and the management of dark side consequences. Thirdly, we discuss the main results and conclude with the limitations of our paper as well as future research implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Entrepreneurship on social media platforms

The influence on the research fields of entrepreneurship and marketing is particularly evident in the case of contextual influencing factors because factors such as digitalization

and technological progress have a strong impact on market processes (Welter, 2019). Digitization and the advancement of digital technologies have led to the expansion and growing importance of social media as part of the digital infrastructure (Nambisan, 2017). The concept of *External Enablers* presented and introduced by Davidsson (2015) focuses on the aggregate-level circumstances which create new spaces for marketing innovation, entrepreneurial ideas and venture creation. Social media takes on the role of an *external enabler* and allows new opportunities to be discovered, acting on the market to be simplified and entrepreneurs to exploit their potential with fewer resources (Schjoedt *et al.*, 2020). Yet, the successful implementation of these new business structures is not guaranteed (Davidsson, 2015).

Due to the constant development of social media, including platforms and functions, they provide many unexploited entrepreneurial and marketing-related opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) for entrepreneurs and micro-entrepreneurs. Troise *et al.* (2022) have shown that the use of social media positively influences the creation of entrepreneurial opportunities, giving entrepreneurs access to larger network groups and, thus, increasing information exchange. These findings are congruent with the work by Ceptureanu *et al.* (2020), who demonstrated that entrepreneurial opportunity recognition is directly and positively impacted by social media. While Park *et al.* (2017) acknowledge the importance of social media for finding new opportunities and business ideas, they also point out that much random information is disseminated online, making this knowledge gained no more valuable than entrepreneurs' specialized knowledge or personal experience. Moreover, there is the risk of coming across fake news or untrustworthy information that is not recognizable as such and thus hinders the identification of opportunities (Park *et al.*, 2017). To classify and assess that information, it is crucial that entrepreneurs are open to social media and digital technologies in general (Morris and James, 2017) and that they are able to gain a solid understanding of the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem (Audretsch and Belitski, 2021; Acs *et al.*, 2017).

The increasing importance of social media use and the entrepreneurial potential provided have rendered them an integral part of most business strategies for entrepreneurs in recent years (Guha *et al.*, 2021; Bauman and Lucy, 2020). Social media business strategies focus mainly on communication (Bauman and Lucy, 2020) and marketing: compared to the use of traditional media and the control orientation on the part of the company, a shift towards customers and online users has been identified (Alarcón-del-Amo *et al.*, 2018). Recommendations, opinions or experiences in relation to services or products are disseminated on social media via a wide variety of channels, over which entrepreneurs have little to no influence compared to traditional direct marketing (Alarcón-del-Amo *et al.*, 2018). However, there is further potential that supports the implementation of social media in the business strategy, such as the possibility of working on collaborative projects, accessing content communities and improving business transparency (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Considering small business management and social media use, research shows that using social media improves both the financial and non-financial performance of small and medium-sized businesses, including customer service and access to information (Ainin *et al.*, 2015). Crammond *et al.* (2018) have found that social media use increases the creativity of small business owners and the immediate knowledge they gain. Customer management can be positively impacted by social media use by enabling a better understanding of inquiries, maintaining or building customer relationships and developing a global customer network (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2015).

2.2 The dark sides of social media functions

Perceptions of the influence of social media have changed significantly in recent years (Pescott, 2020; Charoensukmongkol, 2018; van Zoonen *et al.*, 2016; Chou and Edge, 2012),

shifting from seeing only the bright side to recognizing negative, dark effects of social media (Dhir *et al.*, 2021). Well-known dark sides of social media are *fake news*, which unconsciously influences people's beliefs (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) or destroys companies' reputations, *cyberstalking* (Winkelman *et al.*, 2015; van Laer, 2014), *trolling* (Hannan, 2018) and *privacy concerns*, especially regarding tech-companies (Malik *et al.*, 2016).

Thus, it becomes apparent that the range of dark sides is broad; they occur in various degrees of severity and can affect both the private and the entrepreneurial context. To structure and organize the different dark sides, Baccarella *et al.* (2018) developed the dark side framework of functionality (Figure 1), which we will use to classify the dark side experiences of micro-entrepreneurs. This framework is a further development of Kietzmann *et al.*'s (2011) framework of social media functionality, which was created to understand how social media platforms are used to engage with others. Each of the seven building blocks describes one feature of social media: revealing one's own identity (*identity*), communicating with others (*conversations*), sharing content (*sharing*), revealing one's presence and location (*presence*), forming relationships (*relationships*), knowing and creating reputations (*reputation*) and forming communities (*groups*).

Baccarella *et al.* (2018) explored the dark sides of each function and developed corresponding dark side blocks: *Identity* refers to the exploitation of the online self and affects the transparency of an impact on the personality and character of the user. The *conversations* function relates to misinformation, disinformation or aggressive behaviour, meaning that destructive engagement in the form of bullying or harassment can arise. *Sharing* refers to the inappropriate distribution of content and may cause intellectual property rights to be violated or damaged. Location tracking and monitoring belong to the *presence* function and incorporate the risk that location-related information is tracked

Figure 1.
The dark side framework of social media functionality (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018)

without the knowledge or consent of the social media user. The development of *relationships* is a fundamental process on social media platforms, but at the same time, it can lead to negative effects in the form of threats, coercion, abuse or intimidation. Following Baccarella *et al.* (2018) again, consequences such as shaming and defamation concern the *reputation*-building block and entail risks in terms of sharing true or false content online that may destroy a reputation. The concept of *groups* refers to in-group/out-group bias and includes the risk of being in a virtual echo chamber of one's own viewpoints and principles.

Micro-entrepreneurs are affected by these potential dark sides of social media functions in a way that differs from large or established companies. The consequences of online reputation destruction are much more severe for such small or micro-companies, as the resources to deal with and mitigate these consequences are often relatively less than for large companies (Amin and Khan, 2021). Depending on the activity of the micro-entrepreneur, this can lead to a greater dependence on social media, which can have a negative impact on the micro-entrepreneur and their business (Amin and Khan, 2021). Such dependencies can, in turn, result in excessive social media use, which can lead to the development of addiction (Spivack and McKelvie, 2022; Shahzad *et al.*, 2021). When distinguishing between micro and corporate entrepreneurship, it becomes apparent how strongly the private and personal level of a micro-entrepreneur is affected compared to the level of large companies. It is not about the chances of being affected by negative experiences (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018) but about the possibilities and means to act on these negative experiences. Micro-entrepreneurs will usually have to deal with the effects themselves, which can lead to stress (van der Schuur *et al.*, 2019) in contrast to hiring a social media department in large companies. In micro firms, the owner is often identical to the firm. Criticism and all negative forms of social assaults hit the company and the individual actor synonymously so that the social ego can easily be targeted.

2.3 Virtual identity construction

In addition to the opportunities for entrepreneurship on social media platforms with their functions and the associated negative effects, identity construction on social media is also of particular relevance for entrepreneurs and especially micro-entrepreneurs. Individuals are not only confronted with becoming aware of their own identity in the offline world but also in the online world on social media platforms. In the online world, they can present themselves in a much more conscious and controlled way. This can aim at presenting oneself in a good light, but it can also be used to mask aspects and thus protect oneself. Identities are conceived as "the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves" (Brown, 2015, p. 23). These identities "may be understood as individuals" answers to fundamental existential questions such as "who am I?", "who do I want to become?," and "how should I act?"' (Brown, 2021, p. 2). Regardless of the developmental stage of an individual, identity can be described as a person's expression of particular characteristics, which creates a distinctiveness from other individuals but at the same time allows them to belong to selected social groups (Guenther *et al.*, 2020; Papouchis and Eisenach, 2020; Kneidinger-Müller, 2015; Erikson, 1994). The same approach to identity construction can be found in virtual space as entrepreneurs in an online environment also strive to highlight special features of their person but at the same time show group belonging as a component of identity (Kneidinger-Müller, 2015). Through the creation of individual profiles and avatars or the sharing of photos and content (Krämer *et al.*, 2017), social media platforms offer the possibility to create a desired online identity and self-presentation in the entrepreneurial context. In this respect, micro-entrepreneurs are faced with the challenge of drawing a line between their private and entrepreneurial selves (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021),

deciding to what extent private aspects should be included in their entrepreneurial impression management. As small or micro businesses do not have a corporate infrastructure (Astner and Gaddefors, 2021; Moschieri and Mair, 2017; Audretsch *et al.*, 2008) or a marketing department to create a specific brand (Tewary and Mehta, 2021; Duffy *et al.*, 2017), they need to consider identity and self-presentation aspects more closely as it affects them on a private level.

In his theory of self-presentation, Goffman (1990) emphasizes the structures and patterns of interpersonal interactions using the theatre as a metaphor where each individual takes on different roles. Goffman's theory distinguishes between stages where interactions take place: the front stage and the back stage. Appearances and actions on the front stage are shaped by the expectations and demands of the context concerned but are also determined by the reactions of the audience. Backstage, on the other hand, following Goffman (1990) again, individuals can take off their masks and are mostly unobserved, allowing for a more unconstrained performance. Considering social media platforms to be the front stage created by the possibilities of digitalization, it is notable that micro-entrepreneurs can also consciously create a desired identity and representation of the self through visual factors and are influenced by the reactions, comments and likes of other users (Kneidinger-Müller, 2015).

Another concept of identity development that finds application in the virtual identity construction is found in Mead's (1934) work "Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist", in which he assumes that communication with individuals shapes a social being. Mead divides the self into an active phase of social action, the "I", and a reflective, awareness-raising phase, the "Me". The "I" symbolizes autonomy and an individuals' own active patterns of action, whereas the "Me" refers to the past and the attitudes conveyed there, thus relating the expectations of "generalized Others". These expectations of "generalized Others" or society also become relevant in the context of social media platforms when assessing the effect of social media profiles created on them (Kneidinger-Müller, 2015).

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design exploring the experiences and strategies used by micro-entrepreneurs to overcome the dark side of social media. Figure 2 highlights the steps in the research process.

A qualitative approach was chosen because qualitative research aims to understand the perception of an event as well as the meaning this creates for the individual and what motives for action arise (Gläser-Zikuda, 2011). We conducted twelve semi-structured qualitative interviews with micro-entrepreneurs from the province of Carinthia in Austria in the spring 2021.

Due to the paucity of research in this field, we sought entrepreneurs able to offer diverse perspectives. We applied a purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014) to ensure that entrepreneurs with specific characteristics formed the sample. We chose the following categories: entrepreneurial social media use, balanced gender distribution, backgrounds from different industries and a wide age range in the sample. Table 1 contains information about the interviewees.

Contact to the micro-entrepreneurs was established through the *Carinthian Chamber of Commerce* and with details provided by entrepreneurs we had already interviewed (snowball sampling). Verbalizing social narratives and experiences leads to the creation of authentic transcripts that are verifiable through the recording process (Lamnek and Krell, 2016; Aghamanoukjan *et al.*, 2009). With regards to the three research questions, we created

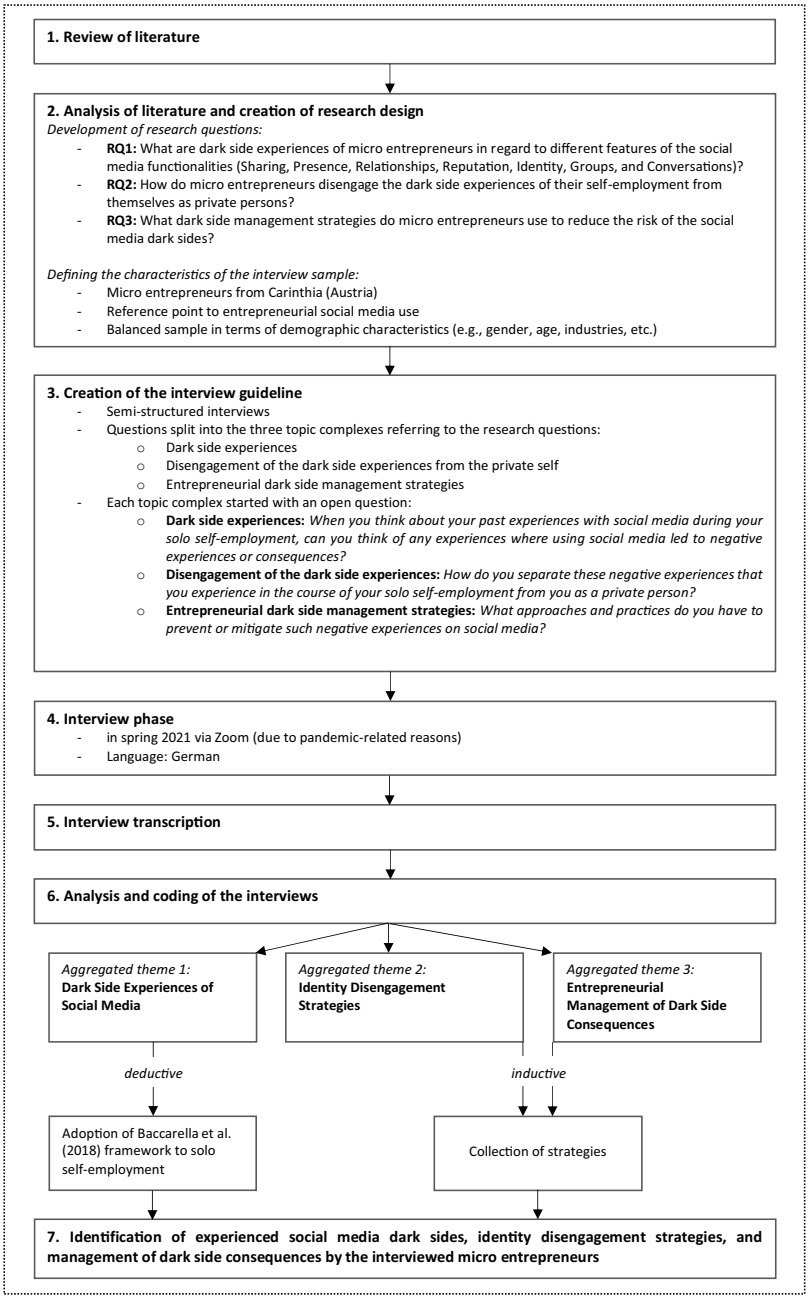

Figure 2.
Research process

Table 1.
Key Facts about the Micro Entrepreneurs (names are anonymized)

The Micro Entrepreneurs on Social Media

No.	Interviewee	Sector	Business and year established	Gender	Age	Education	Main social media platform	Entrepreneurial social media presence	Followers
1	Dennis	Trade and Craft	Photographer – 2015	Male	31	University Degree	Instagram	1h daily	10,000
2	Richard	Information and Consulting	Business Consultant – 1995	Male	71	Apprenticeship	Blog	2h daily	–
3	Emilia	Tourism and Leisure	Hotel Owner – 2010	Female	47	Apprenticeship	Facebook	20 min daily	1,000
4	Erik	Tourism and Leisure	Tour Guide – 2014	Male	48	High school diploma	Facebook	2h daily	4,000
5	Emma	Information and Consulting	Advertising Specialist – 2008	Female	45	University Degree	Facebook	daily	700
6	Nina	Information and Consulting	Advertising and Business Consultant – 2007	Female	41	University Degree	Facebook	8h daily	3,000
7	Walter	Retail	Newspaper Shop Owner – 1996	Male	58	High school diploma	WhatsApp	20 min daily	–
8	Kira	Trade and Craft	Life and Social Counselor – 2016	Female	47	University Degree	Facebook	2h daily	4,000
9	Esther	Information and Consulting	Advertising Specialist – 2017	Female	42	University Degree	Instagram	6h daily	360
10	Marlena	Trade and Craft	Photographer – 2018	Female	37	University Degree	Instagram	2h daily	270
11	Mike	Traffic and Transport	Cab Driver – 2012	Male	30	Secondary School	Facebook	1h daily	700
12	Carlos	Information and Consulting	Advertising Specialist – 2018	Male	29	University Degree	Instagram	1h daily	700

Note: In addition to the platforms mentioned, all micro entrepreneurs maintain a website, except Mike and Walter

the topic complexes dark side experiences; identity disengagement strategies; and entrepreneurial dark side management strategies in the interview guideline. The interviews took place online, with the interviewees in their offices, and averaged 90 min.

The transcribed interview material was analysed and evaluated using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015) and the software MaxQDA. Qualitative content analysis is a category-guided analysis of text materials in which each step of the analysis process is based on reasoned decisions, facts and procedures (Mayring, 2015). To reduce subjectivity, the coding process was conducted by two researchers. Regarding the first topic complex, the dark side experiences, we followed Baccarella *et al.*'s (2018) dark side framework of social media functionality and approached the analysis deductively to apply this framework to the field of micro-entrepreneurship. We analysed the interview material in terms of the reported negative experiences and coded them accordingly as a sub-category. In the next step, these were then assigned to the superordinate categories. These superordinate categories emerged from the framework as we proceeded deductively. When analysing the second and third topic complex identity disengagement and entrepreneurial dark-side management strategies, we chose the inductive approach to develop the codes and categories from the interview material. In total, we identified three aggregated themes, including five to eleven categories with several codes. The coding scheme (Table 1), with more detailed information about the coding procedure and examples of the codes, can be found in the appendix.

4. Findings

The findings of the study commence with the dark side of social media experiences as reported by the micro-entrepreneurs, followed by entrepreneur's strategies for disengagement, which enabled them to separate themselves from those negative experiences, and finally, this enabled the identification of social media management strategies to prevent or mitigate the negative effects of social media experiences.

4.1 Dark side experiences of social media functions

For the theoretical classification of dark side experiences on social media, Baccarella *et al.*'s (2018) framework was used and adapted based on the experiences reported by the micro-entrepreneurs. Figure 3 shows which features of social media led to how many negative experiences for the micro-entrepreneurs, as indicated by the different shades of the blocks.

Frequency was established from the number of codes (experiences) that could be assigned to a category (block). In our study, the interviewees reported on various negative experiences that were assigned to the blocks *presence*, *conversations*, *identity* and *relationships*, indicated by the dark background. There were fewer negative experiences regarding the *sharing* function (grey) and no impact at all concerning *groups* and *reputation* (white). One aspect which appeared during our interviews and the analysis and which was not taken into account in Baccarella *et al.*'s (2018) framework is the element of *time*. The time aspect influences all functions in the use of social media; hence we added a circle around the honeycomb in Figure 3 to represent this aspect. Table 2 contains the code frequencies for the different building blocks as well as the dark side experiences discussed by the micro-entrepreneurs.

4.1.1 Sharing. Social media allows content of any kind to be created, shared and distributed by micro-entrepreneurs and other platform users. At the same time, however, there is a risk that content, posts or advertising ideas that the micro-entrepreneurs have created themselves will be adapted or taken over entirely by competitors. Due to the vastness of platforms, it is very easy to copy ideas and pass them off as one's own. Nina,

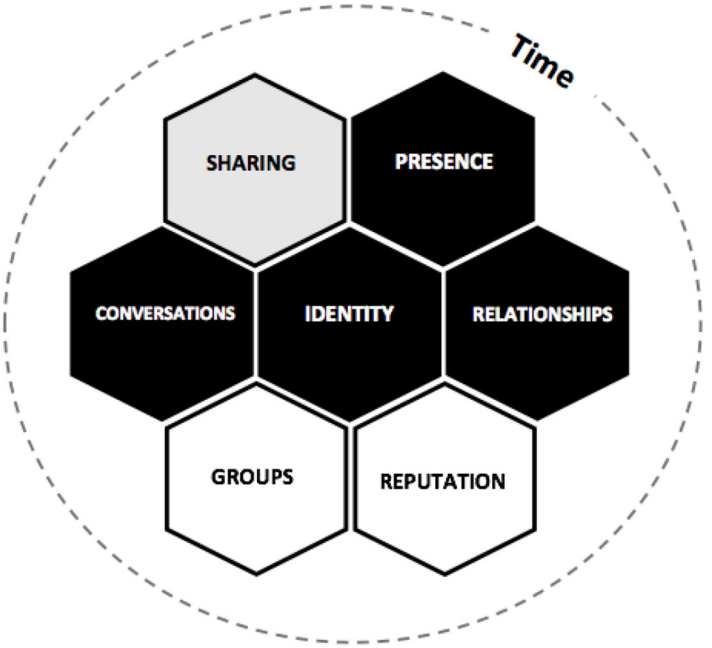

Figure 3.
The dark sides of social media affecting micro businesses [inspired by the work of Baccarella *et al.* (2018)]

Table 2.
Dark side experiences for each building block in the functionality framework [frequencies in brackets; inspired by the work of Baccarella *et al.* (2018)]

	Dark side experiences for each building block
Sharing (4)	Stealing ideas from competitors
Relationships (20)	Threats - insults - dubious requests
Conversations (20)	Aggressive, critical, or negative comments - trolling - fake posts - criticism of work
Identity (19)	Stress - depression and envy - addiction potential - hacked profiles - decrease in self-awareness - competitive thinking - a lack of personal contact - availability
Presence (25)	High number of data protection regulations - privacy concerns - platforms difficult to run - posted information retained - user disappearance - a lack of transparancy - frequent changes to privacy policy - change in platform functions
Groups (0)	None
Reputation (0)	None

who is a consultant in the advertising industry, observed this behaviour with a direct competitor on Facebook:

> What I find really unfortunate is when obvious copying takes place. Recently, I had a competitor who, for three or four weeks on the trot, came up with almost the same wording as I had two days later. (Nina, Pos. 94).

4.1.2 Relationships. As the term "social" in social media already suggests, the use of platforms is about establishing contact with other users. The micro-entrepreneurs reported receiving threats and insults, mainly via the comment function. Those threats and insults

differed in nature and content depending on the activity of the entrepreneur. Kira, who works in social and life counselling, reported threats and highly personal insults more often than the other entrepreneurs in our sample: "But of course, when such high-grade insults come like [. . .] I don't know [. . .] there's all sorts of things, 'we'll beat you up' or 'burn down your practice', or something like that." (Kira, Pos. 87). She explained those reactions with the fact that her work and, therefore, also her posts deal with specific aspects such as stress or burnout, which trigger people on a certain level. Dennis, the photographer with the most followers in our sample, was exposed to other types of insults. Some were primarily related to his work: "We once had a very thin model for a gym photo shoot and then I was accused of retouching her to make her even skinnier. Then I explained, 'no I have not made her thinner, she is just very slim'. And that led to insults, like why am I not telling the truth and you can see that it's been retouched." (Dennis, Pos. 56). Dennis also runs a YouTube channel with a friend where he uploads photography-related videos. Here, he reported on insults of a more personal nature: "But often also very personal. I don't know, like how often you say 'um' [. . .] the big thing with our channel was [. . .] because I shoot with Canon cameras, I always say, 'with the Canon' and then under every video quite a lot of people write 'That's called Canon' [English pronunciation] and not 'Canon' [German pronunciation] and then they also get very [. . .] they also insult you, and say, 'what an idiot you are to say Canon! How stupid do you have to be to say Canon!'" (Dennis, Pos. 56).

In addition to the insults and threats they received, the interviewees reported a high number of dubious requests via their social media profiles. Emma, who runs an advertising and communication agency, stated:

> What I notice from time to time is that in public posts, some strange people write some kind of offers where you can somehow get loans, and of course I delete them immediately and then I also report them. (Emma, Pos. 50).

4.1.3 Conversations. Regarding the dark sides of conversations on social media, the micro-entrepreneurs talked about critical, aggressive or negative comments. Erik, who works as a tour guide in the tourism industry, emphasized that he is now more careful in his own posting behaviour to limit such negative comments:

> Well, I would call Facebook [. . .] I would rename it "Shitstorm.com", because all you experience is [. . .] you can't say hardly anything anymore. [. . .] I actually find that very bad. Well, I don't post anything in such a way that it could be linked to an attitude or an opinion or anything else because 50% of the readers would immediately attack you anyway. And therefore I post quite neutral advertising actually, yes. (Erik, Pos. 12).

Additionally, Mike, a cab driver, pointed out that those comments also include direct criticism of his work:

> It depends, many people get upset just because they have waited so long, such arguments come up, or it was a new cab driver who then just got lost and then still charged the same price and things like that. (Mike, Pos. 84).

The dark sides of conversations can also be related to trolling activities that are independent of an individual's work and only serve to spread negative sentiments or posts on social media (Seta, 2018). Despite the fact that Dennis was accused of retouching his own pictures, he emphasized the aspect of fake posts:

> Of course, I'm also aware of a lot of faking through my job. I sometimes have to create photos and clips of hotels for social media. There's a lot of faking going on. (Dennis, Pos. 88).

4.1.4 Identity. Regarding the dark side of social media related to identity function, the stress issue was pointed out frequently. This sense of stress can relate to different aspects of social media use. Marlena, who works as a photographer, mentioned stress in terms of posting content:

> So this feeling, I know it. So, I've always known that I want to post something but how do I do it properly? I might start something, and I don't have the red thread yet. So, I've borne that in mind, that it should also look attractive somehow to me. That I look at it and stand behind it. It doesn't have to be perfect, but I didn't want to write any old text and some nonsense, because we know that it's stored for ever. And that's why it was often stressful in the past. (Marlena, Pos. 107).

Erik, in contrast, highlighted his stress in relation to his response to requests:

> It was a bit difficult to always look. Is there something on this channel? Has someone written me something now? Oh God, he has written something, have I answered him now? So suddenly messages came in through so many channels. And then I often tried to redirect the people, along the lines "No reservations please via WhatsApp", but rather tried to redirect that back to emails. (Erik, Pos. 106).

Along with this, constant availability was also highlighted as a negative experience, making it difficult to distance oneself from a business activity outside of working hours.

Besides the sense of stress, the micro-entrepreneurs also reported feeling depressed and envious due to using social media. Despite his high number of followers, many years of self-employment and reported satisfaction with his job, photographer Dennis also talked about this feeling of envy:

> Such a competition mode. I've noticed that often now, during the winter season, that I've seen other photographers from the area, that they all have the cool ski and tourism shoots with skiers and ski tours and whatever else. And yes, I really want that now. Because I barely have that in my portfolio, except that I can't ski at all and I don't really like that at all. (Dennis, Pos. 90).

Consequently, these thoughts and feelings seem to lead to a decrease in self-awareness and an increase in competitive thinking. Marlena and Emma also reported that social media holds an addiction potential for them:

> Well, I'll put it this way, there's a very high addiction potential, because then you just check again, oh someone has liked it and now you just look at your cell phone and you also want to know who it was, ok, yeah, cool. Joy. Yes, you get these positive emotions. Yes. It's really like that. (Marlena, Pos. 109).

Other negative experiences in the identity block included the hacking of profiles, where the platform operators had to intervene or the lack of personal contacts via social media use.

4.1.5 Presence. The *presence* block featured the greatest number of named experiences in our study, focusing on topics such as data, security and platform operators. The micro-entrepreneurs reported that they felt the need for greater transparency on the part of the platform operators, easier handling of the platforms and more consistency with the platform functions:

> But that's just what we have to live with, unfortunately, and it's so that you can't see which algorithms are behind it, and you have to act again and again, and sometimes I'm reluctant to do that. (Marlena, Pos. 123).

As someone who did not learn to use technologies, computers and the internet until adulthood (Wang *et al.*, 2013), Nina admitted that she wished for:

> [. . .] less rearranging. Definitely the desire at some point to stay with what we have. Because to look for some buttons every two weeks, because they are somewhere else again or because suddenly things no longer work. (Nina, Pos. 110).

Likewise, frequent changes to privacy settings were reported as negative experiences on the platforms.

A further negative aspect that worried many of those interviewed was privacy concerns:

> In terms of data protection, it would of course be great if it were so secure that people no longer had to be afraid and perhaps many people no longer had to be afraid. (Carlos, Pos. 120).

It was the same with comprehensibility and the information shared by the platform operators:

> It's the same with WhatsApp, because now [. . .] that's generally not in line with data protection for entrepreneurs anyway. I've now read this new data protection policy with my husband, which is coming in May [. . .]. I don't know, I'm not a stupid person, but I didn't understand it. (Esther, Pos. 114).

At the same time, however, interviewees emphasized that the scope of the data protection rules is too large and too confusingly structured: "It already has excesses that are morbid. Who reads all that stuff? Who follows the data protection regulation?" *(Richard, Pos. 60). Erik's view was also in line with this*:

> To be honest, I'm always very quick there. You scroll down there right away and accept it. So, I save myself reading these long texts, I just hope that they have already been pre-tested by some institution, so to speak (Erik, Pos. 84).

Similarly, many of the micro-entrepreneurs we interviewed were concerned that the information shared and published on social media will remain there forever.

Another aspect they mentioned was their fear that other users or providers of services can easily disappear from the platform without it being possible to find them in the offline world.

4.1.6 Groups and reputation. The micro-entrepreneurs did not mention experiences regarding the block's *groups* and *reputation.* They explained this by having strong offline networks and contacts, which also help to secure the reputation in the online context.

4.1.7 Time. The issue of time pressure was mentioned frequently during interviews. The micro-entrepreneurs reported that they see social media as an important part of their business strategy but at the same time were aware that all the tasks involved, i.e. maintaining customer contact, answering inquiries or preparing posts, are very time intensive. Here, the infrastructure of micro businesses plays an important role, as Carlos pointed out:

> In any case, I'm convinced that the effort certainly pays off, but especially if you're a one-person company, you don't just have to deal with the areas you're good at, but you do everything, you do accounting, you do the taxes, all sorts of things. And of course, also customer acquisition, providing the service, all the invoicing and this huge area, which actually impacts one person and takes up so much time that actually, even something as important as social media is neglected even by a company like a marketing agency (Carlos, Pos. 28).

4.2 Identity disengagement strategies

After investigating the dark side experiences of the micro-entrepreneurs, we explored the strategies they used to separate these negative experiences from their private selves. Four

strategies were identified, which can be seen in Figure 4: learning and maturity processes, exchanging of experiences, profile and content separation and social media distancing.

The learning and maturity processes include having life experiences, going through personal development, having a specific habit and learning to find distance. Regarding social media distancing, it was Kira, in particular, who talked about negative experiences on a very personal level and who said that it was a learning process in which gaining professional experience was relevant, but so was learning to distance oneself from it mentally:

> So that has nothing to do with me as a person, I mean you just have to find that distance for yourself, and that you just have to learn to deal with it, that you say to yourself, that has nothing to do with me personally. (Kira, Pos. 113).

Nina, in contrast, emphasized that the use of social media has changed and that more experience has been gained in posting behaviour:

> When Facebook was first launched, we posted something like "Yay, I'm eating a burger from McDonalds!". Back then we really [. . .] when I look at what we posted back then, that was ridiculous. Then how it really took off, or how I noticed, this is going to be something, then I really started to change [. . .] to consider what I post, who sees it. (Nina, Pos. 80).

Discussing the exchanging of experiences, the micro-entrepreneurs reported that it helped them to communicate with other entrepreneurs in the same situation and to share each other's experiences in dealing with it: "Yes, I'm talking about that, we do that among our colleagues, especially in terms of how far we can go and how far we can't go with what we post." (Kira, Pos. 139). Dennis, for example, explained that he communicates with others when posting specific content or when sharing a picture with someone else in it.

To separate those experiences from the private self, the micro-entrepreneurs either maintain different profiles or separate the shared content. This means that two different profiles are created on the platforms, which are strictly separated into private and professional use. Due to current platform functions, it is also possible for business owners to separate content instead of creating separate profiles for both groups:

> That means [. . .] I'll say on the "business friends" that I don't really count as friends' [. . .] I put them on a status so that they only see official posts and not the ones that are really geared towards friends. (Emma, Pos. 12).

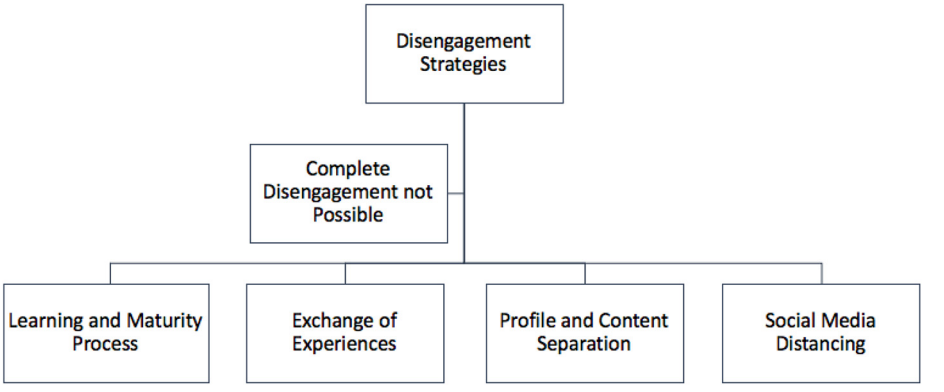

Figure 4.
Overview of the disengagement strategies of micro-entrepreneurs

Additionally, the micro-entrepreneurs reported that they minimize or do not participate in critical discussions and do not communicate private opinions.

Another approach to disengage from negative experiences is distancing from social media use. To implement this, it was reported that time is set aside to do social media work and, in some cases, only from certain premises: "We got along without that as well, the world will not end, only because I do not see a message immediately." *(Walter, Pos. 87). Marlena stated that she uses this strategy to focus on her work*: "And for me, I consciously put my cell phone away from time to time, because it's a stress factor, even when I'm working." (Marlena, Pos. 111). In addition, some of the micro-entrepreneurs even do a social media detox, where they consciously withdraw from social media for some time and do not scroll through the platforms. Esther also indicated that when posting online, she always tries to have a solid and strong offline network to protect herself from negative online experiences:

> To prevent this, if it can be prevented, I make sure that I have good contacts in the offline world, yes. I also have competitors who weren't happy that I was on the market, and now, after three years, I've managed it so that we can look each other in the eye. That they have no problem with me. That we can get in touch. I'm looking for the balance in the offline world so that something like this doesn't happen to me online. (Ester, Pos. 120).

Nevertheless, it was also emphasized that it is not always possible to be completely free of negative experiences on a private level and that the experiences can still affect the individual outside the business.

4.3 Entrepreneurial management of dark side consequences

Following on from our examination of the separation of negative experiences from the private self, we dealt with management strategies for dark side consequences to prevent or reduce the negative effects of the business in the third part of our investigation. As can be seen in Figure 5, 11 strategies emerged in our sample that were used by interviewees to control the dark side effects.

First strategy – fraud detection – micro-entrepreneurs emphasized that they make very strong use of their common sense in unusual or suspicious situations. As Walter pointed out: "If any order seems odd to you, it's always your common sense and intuition". (Walter, Pos. 69). Likewise, Kira noted: "These are often in this direction, but as I said, I think if you have a bit of common sense then you can recognize that". (Kira, Pos. 99). In addition, the

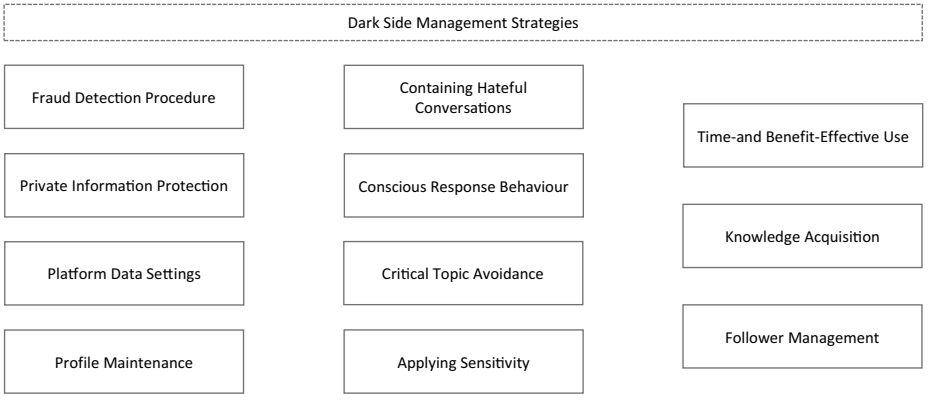

Figure 5. Dark side management strategies

micro-entrepreneurs revealed that they also use social media or other digital platforms to detect fraud to protect themselves and carry out checks:

> Of course, the social media channels are very important, how active someone is on social media, whether they can be found on social media at all and whether there is actually a person behind it or whatever. Of course, there are ways to check UID numbers. To look at the social media channels, how long the whole thing has been around. And who that actually is. And maybe even read comments or texts on Google my Business or wherever. (Carlos, Pos. 84).

Furthermore, they reported that they actively sought personal contact with those people when in doubt. The last resort in case of doubt is to use the blocking function on the platform.

The second strategy is protecting private information, meaning deliberately deciding what information to release. Emilia, a hotel owner, said:

> For example, there are booking portals from the region where you also introduce yourself with your hobbies and interests, and that is always identical to the content that I have on my profile, for example. That is already well thought out. (Emilia, Pos. 35).

She goes one step further, explaining: "It's almost a bit created, actually. Not faked, but it's already just a conscious content, which I then deliver again and again." (Emilia, Pos. 35).

The business owners also mentioned how they dealt with the platform and its data settings. They pointed out, for example, that they avoid using Facebook Messenger to communicate with customers or other platform users. Furthermore, they make use of the two-factor authentication function in the platform settings, create safe passwords and have strict privacy settings. Along the same lines, they talked about profile maintenance, including consideration of their own profile. Here, they check the impression their own profile makes on others as well as regularly clean up posts and comments:

> Cleaning up, perhaps removing content that was relevant to me two months ago but no longer has any relevance, because if you network with other people [. . .] you can assume that these people also examine and view your profile and that you always have to or should pay attention to what I represent with my contributions, how much I actually reveal, what makes sense in terms of my opinion or my interests. (Emilia, Pos. 105).

A further strategy is the containment of hateful conversations. In this context, the micro-entrepreneurs mentioned that they do not justify themselves or discuss matters with other users in the event of threats. Likewise, they report, delete or ignore comments and switch off certain platform functions if necessary. Accordingly, they mentioned conscious response behaviour as another strategy they used. This means no impulsive posts, consciously taking time after a post is made, and anticipating possible comments before posting, such as: "And if I decide to send something critical on its way, then I have to brace myself for something to come back, yes". (Emma, Pos. 68). It was also very clearly emphasized that thoughtful behaviour is necessary when posting on social media: "And that's why, if you're in charge of the whole thing, you should also do it very conscientiously and with a common thread, really think about it, so that it looks good". (Carlos, Pos. 94). Kira also emphasized:

> Let me just say that when you post these typical words of wisdom, you usually don't get anything negative back. So, I think it's always related to what I post and how I post it. And that's why, for the most part, you can just deflect that. (Kira, Pos. 135).

Another similar strategy they used is avoiding critical topics, that is, not posting on certain topics or critical opinions. They also mentioned that they themselves do not write negative comments on other people's posts. As Richard empathized:

> Everyone must set this guideline for themselves. Because I know what comes out of it. Even if my finger itches, so I burst in front of the computer, but think to myself, no, it won't work. It doesn't get me anywhere. (Richard, Pos. 78).

To prevent those dark side experiences, we found out that they tend to apply sensitivity in terms of monitoring developments on social media, having a feeling for others, searching for personal contacts and taking care with their choice of words:

> Well, then you also have to deal with it openly and consciously, also with the waves of negative publicity. Really go here and say, I'll deal with it openly. Not to shoot back in an offended or grumpy or angry way, but to take the wind out of their sails. (Nina, Pos. 108).

Time- and benefit-effective usage of social media was also noted as a management strategy in that the business owners create a specific time window for their social media work. Regarding the time aspect, they prefer using less time-consuming tools, such as the story function with its 24-h availability. Furthermore, they try to deal with the dark sides of social media using the knowledge they have acquired in workshops, from accumulated expertise, and through support from experts. Experts from the IT field are increasingly being consulted to provide assistance with technical problems and security settings: "I have the advantage that my son is an IT specialist, and he handles everything for me, so I'm quite secure" (Kira, Pos. 101). With regards to knowledge acquisition in workshops, the entrepreneurs rely heavily on the Chamber of Commerce and use their workshop offers or place great value on official instructions for action issued by the Chamber of Commerce.

The final strategy in our sample can be described as follower management, where the business owners do not accept all friend requests, avoid contact with unknown people and check their profiles before accepting them as friends. Although the micro-entrepreneurs in our sample had experienced the dark sides of social media and had also developed and applied appropriate strategies, it turned out, nevertheless, that the dark sides can also have positive aspects. Photographer Dennis with his YouTube channel, pointed out: "And as I said, sometimes it also has positive aspects, that there is a lot of interaction and so on, because you can perhaps generate greater reach." (Dennis, Pos. 78). Additionally, the reflection option was pointed out as positive effect, as Marlena explained:

> Even if I get negative feedback via Facebook, I find that positive, because I think there are also people in this world who don't dare to say what they think and find it easier to write something. And for that I'm completely grateful to Facebook because you can give dissatisfied customers an answer somehow, because how else are you going to do it. (Marlena, Pos. 82).

5. Discussion

The majority of observable phenomena in society, including social media, cannot be classified as either explicitly positive or explicitly negative, which has both positive and negative consequences for society (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018). It is all about understanding and acknowledging both sides, especially in relation to new technologies, to use them in the most profitable way for the business.

The characterization of entrepreneurs often follows a very heterogeneous understanding and does not recognize diversity among entrepreneurs (Bögenhold, 2019; Dvouletý, 2018). However, micro-entrepreneurs, small business owners, independent professionals and freelancers (Knapp *et al.*, 2021; van Stel *et al.*, 2014) have different structures and characteristics than the classic Schumpeterian entrepreneur (Schumpeter, 1942; Bögenhold, 2021a) who receives more attention in the social and academic discourse.

Our study focused on a group of micro-entrepreneurs, exploring the dark sides of new media and digital technologies by using the example of social media. Regarding the dark sides of social media functions for micro-entrepreneurship, our study showed the relevance of five out of the seven building blocks defined by Baccarella *et al.* (2018) and identified time as a further influential element. The time aspect relates to all relevant building blocks, such as creating thoughtful posts, responding to negative messages and comments, understanding platform changes and corresponding policies, as well as self-presentation and the creation of profiles. Compared to corporate entrepreneurship, the focus in a micro business lies on the owner of the company dealing with all responsibilities and tasks (Skrzek-Lubasińska and Szaban, 2019; Cieślik and Dvouletý, 2019). This particular aspect became clear in our study: social media creates many opportunities for micro-entrepreneurs, which would not be available without digital engagement but simultaneously, using social media is time-consuming, and their time is limited due to their specific business structure. Therefore, time limitations may impact an entrepreneur's ability to effectively carry out social media marketing. Accordingly, micro businesses need to weigh up how much they want to invest in their social media operations, not just financially, but in terms of working time.

Compared to other European countries, Austria is characterized by many rural regions with a few large urban areas, such as Vienna. The micro-entrepreneurs interviewed are from the province of Carinthia, which is one of the more rural regions of the country. Especially for micro-entrepreneurs in rural areas, the use of social media can yield benefits for the business, which, in turn, is only possible with a serious and high-quality online presence. Designing and implementing this is time-consuming. Therefore, especially for Carinthian micro-entrepreneurs, the opportunity arises not only to operate locally or Austria-wide but also in terms of language, to expand to the rest of the German-speaking market, such as Germany and Switzerland. Thus, it would require increased use of social media to reach a larger audience, but at the same time, this creates the risk of experiencing more negative comments on the entrepreneur's social media profile.

Another specific consideration due to the close entanglement of the entrepreneur and business is the extent to which dark side experiences of social media can be kept away from the private self. Goffman's (1990) theory of self-presentation uses the metaphor of a theatre and the playing of different roles. This is particularly relevant for micro-entrepreneurs, who, on the one hand, face society as a private person (James *et al.*, 2021) in roles such as a parent, spouse or friend and, on the other hand, appear on the stage as a business owner representing their own micro business. This illustrates the proximity of identity between the enterprise and the micro-entrepreneur. The results showed that the participants had already adopted strategies to try to keep the dark sides of social media distant from their private selves but without a full guarantee of success. To implement the distance from the private self, the interviewed micro-entrepreneurs create the desired identity (Krämer *et al.*, 2017) that highlights the private characteristics appropriate to the picture of the business. Thus, micro-entrepreneurs create a selected entrepreneurial identity that deliberately releases information that benefit the business. Only those details of the private self are presented that are individually considered supportive of one's business activity. This identity creation helps to separate negative experiences from the private self, knowing that a complete separation is not possible.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, has contributed to a wide discrepancy within society regarding the acceptability of pandemic containment measures. This discourse is increasingly being played out in social media, which, in turn, leads to more negative or insulting comments, which micro-entrepreneurs also have to deal with and reconcile their

own opinion with. In this context, each micro-entrepreneur must weigh up individually the extent to which they wish to communicate their own opinion to the outside and when they want to keep their views to themselves.

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that in our sample, concerns about destroying or damaging their reputation (Fischer and Reuber, 2007) through social media use did not matter to them. This was primarily justified by strong offline networks and contacts. Especially in regions like Carinthia, it is meaningful for businesses to be networked and to have useful contacts. Particularly the entrepreneurs who grew up in Carinthia tend to have long-standing contacts that they can use for their business. This partly stronger cohesion among contacts illustrates why the interviewees rely heavily on their offline network when it comes to social media difficulties.

In their research, Sands *et al.* (2020) present various strategies to reduce dark side experiences of social media, including balancing perspectives, minimizing usage, masking identity, self-regulating shared content and reporting inappropriate posted content. These strategies can also be found in the results of our study, except for balancing perspectives, which were not mentioned. The relationship between social media and micro-entrepreneurs is not simply linear but highly complex, including different disengagement strategies and other dark-side management policies, which were revealed in the study in detail. Identity creation has several dimensions (Brown, 2021; Walker and Lynn, 2013). The perception of human beings in a virtual public sphere must also be seen as oscillating between the "Me" and the "I" (Mead, 1934) to create a balance where processes of destruction, theft or manipulation may damage the creation of an intended image of an entrepreneurial self (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). Mead (1934) points out that the social being is formed by communication with individuals, which gains further relevance in the online context, where communication is possible with a larger number of people from all social backgrounds, yielding new challenges for entrepreneurs. The micro-entrepreneurs need to be conscious of this when operating on social media. Here, entrepreneurs needed to be aware of who they were communicating with and how this affected their social being. During the interviews, it appeared that the entrepreneurs have adopted strategies to counteract negative effects on both the private and the entrepreneurial self. In this context, participants also indicated that the micro-entrepreneurs who pursue a marketing or advertising-related activity use many of the above strategies to avert negative experiences. However, compared to the other entrepreneurs in the sample, they do not have increased use of strategies, nor do they exclusively use strategies. We can assume that the size of the micro business plays a role and the associated lack of time regarding social media, which means that while entrepreneurs with social media or marketing experience may have strategies, they still cannot deal with the dark sides of social media better than other entrepreneurs.

The creation of business opportunities does not occur in a vacuum but in different societal contexts, of which the use and functioning of social media are but one element. The dark sides of organizational evolution processes (Linstead *et al.*, 2014) and the dark sides, downsides and destructive sides of entrepreneurial action (Shepherd, 2019) are part of the game as an inherent element of the capitalist process. Merely looking at the bright side of opportunity creation processes does not acknowledge the "neglected links in economics and society" (Bögenhold, 2021b) and perpetuating the semi-informed state. Conventional media research raises questions like "What do the media do with the people?" or – depending on the perspective – "What do people do with the media?". Our research is located between these two competing and alternative questions, asking, "What do people do with other people using (social) media tools?", which emphasizes less the conventional cause-effect relationships but rather an interactive virtuous circle.

6. Conclusion

The effect of social media as an external enabler (Davidsson, 2015) for future and innovation-oriented entrepreneurial processes can be taken as given. However, the dark sides of social media, among other things, can contribute to this process being prevented or weakened. To counteract this, the negative consequences must be considered and understood in addition to the positive ones so that social media can exploit its full potential in terms of external enabling and opportunity creation. Especially the consequences and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the perception of digital technologies and social media show that the handling and entrepreneurial use of social media platforms and their functions are becoming increasingly important, which is why both the bright and darker side of this technological development should be considered.

Businesses are always governed by media and act in a way that influences media and social media platforms in turn. The duality of agency and structure (McMullen *et al.*, 2021) reflects the interaction of entrepreneurial opportunity creation, corporate marketing and social media as a means of addressing both consumers and competitors.

This study explored the interface between micro-entrepreneurship, marketing, social media functions and the dark effects of social media on actors, which could damage their perception of social credit, performance and competition processes. Identity formations are manifold, but the self always exists in an interplay of the "Me" and the "I". If processes of destruction, fakery or manipulation intervene, the dialogue becomes distorted or difficult at least. Our research showed that there are social media functions that lead to increased negative experiences for micro-entrepreneurs. At the same time, however, our interviewed business owners had developed strategies to keep these negative experiences away from their private selves as well as from their businesses.

Chambers of commerce or business support institutions could address the dark sides of social media in more detail and develop recommendations for action in common cases, such as dealing with hate comments or waves of negative publicity. Likewise, they could provide technical support for common social media challenges of micro-entrepreneurs. With regards to the development of recommendations for action, it is also useful to focus on platform-specific instructions with specific usage options to save the micro-entrepreneur's time. This should be updated by the institutions at the same time as the respective platform carries out updates, e.g. on the user interface.

Our investigation of the dark sides of social media functions raises questions for further research. Limitations in our study can be found in regards to the number of interviews conducted and its regional scope, namely, the province of Carinthia in Austria. Referring to the selected qualitative methodology, the results are not generalizable and representative. Due to pandemic-related regulations, interviews could not be conducted in person but had to take place via Zoom. However, our heterogeneous sample offered a wide range of issues and in-depth insights from rural businesses.

This study creates the basis for further quantitative research to provide a representative view of dark side experiences and the strategies of micro-entrepreneurs. Firstly, future research could advance our findings by focusing on micro-entrepreneurs from other regions or cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, further research may also encounter interplay between the *bright* and *dark* sides of social media, where users multiply positive images and try to exaggerate views. The creation of images in the public sphere by social media can be the result of intentional or non-intentional acts of media participation, which may be a further research outlook.

Thirdly, the *identity aspect* (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021) is becoming increasingly relevant in the entrepreneurship and media field, which raises the question, particularly for social

media, of how the private and entrepreneurial selves of the micro-entrepreneurs are shaped and how they differ from one another.

Fourthly, the question of the significance of *reputational damage* through the use of social media is likewise another direction for future research. Thus, it is necessary to find out how the relationship of offline networks influences online contact and reputation and what effects result in social media behaviour, both positive and negative.

Fifthly, it is important to better understand the *group of micro-entrepreneurs* and their use of social media. Future research should draw comparisons with other groups of entrepreneurs to find out, in a representative way, where similarities and differences in social media use and positive and negative online experiences lie. Qualitative research would also lend itself to this to investigate the role of digital support for micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Finally, different social media strategies should also be considered with regards to the heterogeneity within the group of micro-entrepreneurs. The usefulness of social media strategies varies depending, among others, on the industry or target group of the micro business; for example, the age of the target group must be precisely defined to understand on which social media platforms to act on and which social media strategies are most useful. For quantitative research, group comparisons are useful to obtain details about the characteristics of micro-entrepreneurs and their strategy choices. Likewise, due to their particular business structure, it is also important to research the *personality* of micro-entrepreneurs to understand which strategies are used on social media, especially with regards to negative experiences. Quantitative research using psychological models such as the OCEAN model (McCrae and Costa, 1999) could explore the extent to which different personality traits support the application of the social media strategies found.

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Appendix

Aggregated theme	Category	Sub-category	Selection of examples for the most frequent codes
Dark side experiences	Sharing	Stealing ideas from competitors	*What I find really unfortunate is when obvious copying takes place. Recently, I had a competitor who, for three or four weeks on the trot, came up with almost the same wording as I had two days later. (Nina, Pos. 94)*
	Relationships	Threats	*Well, threats are common such as "We'll mop them up". (Kira, Pos. 87)*
		Insults	*But often also very personal. I don't know, like how often you say 'um' . . . the big thing with our channel was . . . because I shoot with Canon cameras, I always say, 'with the Canon' and then under every video quite a lot of people write "That's called Canon" [English pronunciation] and not "Canon" [German pronunciation] and then they also get very . . . they also insult you, and say, "what an idiot you are to say Canon! How stupid do you have to be to say Canon!" (Dennis, Pos. 56).*
		Dubious requests	*What I notice from time to time is that under public posts, some strange people comment where you can get loans or something. Of course, I delete them immediately and then I also report them immediately. (Emma, Pos. 50)*
	Conversations	Aggressive, critical, or negative comments	*Well, I would call Facebook . . . I would rename it 'Shitstorm.com', because all you experience is . . . you can't say hardly anything anymore. . . . I actually find that very bad. Well, I don't post anything in such a way that it could be linked to an attitude or an opinion or anything else because 50% of the readers would immediately attack you anyway. And therefore I post quite neutral advertising actually, yes. (Erik, Pos. 12)*
		Trolling	
		Fake posts	*Of course, I'm also aware of a lot of faking through my job. I sometimes have to create photos and clips of hotels for social media. There's a lot of faking going on. (Dennis, Pos. 88).*
		Criticism of work	
	Identity	Stress	*It was a bit difficult to always look. Is there something on this channel? Has someone written me something now? Oh God, he has written something, have I answered him now? So suddenly messages came in through so many channels. And then I often tried to redirect the people, along the lines "No reservations please via WhatsApp', but rather tried to redirect that back to emails. (Erik, Pos. 106)*

Table A1.
Coding scheme

(*continued*)

Aggregated theme	Category	Sub-category	Selection of examples for the most frequent codes
		Depression and envy	
		Addiction potential	*Well, I'll put it this way, there's a very high addiction potential, because then you just check again, oh someone has liked it and now you just look at your cell phone and you also want to know who it was, ok, yeah, cool. Joy. Yes, you get these positive emotions. Yes. It's really like that. (Marlena, Pos. 109).*
		Hacked profiles	
		Decrease in self-awareness	
		Competitive thinking	
		Lack of personal contact	
		Availability	
	Presence	High number of data protection regulations	*To be honest, I'm always very quick there. You scroll down there right away and accept it. So, I save myself reading these long texts, I just hope that they have already been pre-tested by some institution, so to speak. (Erik, Pos. 84)*
		Privacy concerns	*It's the same with WhatsApp, because now . . . that's generally not in line with data protection for entrepreneurs anyway. I've now read this new data protection policy with my husband, which is coming in May . . .. I don't know, I'm not a stupid person, but I didn't understand it. (Esther, Pos. 114)*
		Platforms difficult to run	
		Posted information retained	*. . .because to trace it all back and . . . I don't know in ten years I want to be mayor and then they say "Here you wrote that". (Marlena, Pos. 88)*
		User disappearance	
		Lack of transparency	
		Frequent changes to privacy policy	
		Change in platform functions	
	Time	Time consuming	*In any case, I'm convinced that the effort certainly pays off, but especially if you're a one-person company, you don't just have to deal with the areas you're good at, but you do everything, you do accounting, you do the taxes, all sorts of things. And of course, also customer acquisition, providing the service, all the invoicing and this huge area, which actually impacts one person and takes up so much time that actually, even something as important as social media is neglected even by a company like a marketing agency. (Carlos, Pos. 28)*

(*continued*)

Table A1.

Aggregated theme	Category	Sub-category	Selection of examples for the most frequent codes
Disengagement of dark side experiences	Learning and maturity process	Habituation	
		Learning to find distance	*Well, I think that's part of it, that's just the way it is as a micro entrepreneur and you have to develop a strategy that you don't suffer from it or take it personally. (Marlena, Pos. 113)*
		Experience	
		Personality development	
	Profile and content separation	Avoidance of critical discussion	
		Separation into private and professional profile	*That means . . . I'll say on the "business friends" that I don't really count as friends' . . . I put them on a status so that they only see official posts and not the ones that are really geared towards friends. (Emma, Pos. 12)*
		No communication of private opinion	
	Social media distancing	Solid offline network	
		Conscious time and space management	*For me, I have found a way when I consciously do not let this self-employment into all areas of my life, I feel better with it. I go for a walk without my smartphone because I don't want to photograph this stupid tree for social media, but because I want to experience it at that moment. That's my self-care, so to speak. (Esther, Pos. 80)*
		Social media detox	*And for me, I consciously put my cell phone away from time to time, because it's a stress factor, even when I'm working. (Marlena, Pos. 111)*
	Exchange of experiences	Exchange with colleagues	*Yes, especially among our colleagues, we do that very often, especially in the area of how far we are allowed to go and how far we are not allowed to go with what we post. (Kira, Pos. 139)*
		Exchange with others	
	No complete delimitation	Personally affected	*Yes, so that makes a little bit of experience and I think you lie, I think if you say that every now and then things don't get under your skin, I think you would be dishonest. (Kira, Pos. 129)*
		Weighing up the advantages and disadvantages	
Entrepreneurial dark side management strategies	Fraud detection procedure	Blocking	
		Common Sense	*Yes, through that . . . the advantage that I really know a lot and I am very keen. So, I notice immediately if there is some message that cannot be true. (Richard, Pos. 58)*
		Checking Google and social media results	*So, the possibility always exists, you have to. Verify. Who is behind it? Doctor Google, you enter the phone number and get the information. (Walter, Pos. 67)*
		Search for personal contact	

Table A1.

(*continued*)

Aggregated theme	Category	Sub-category	Selection of examples for the most frequent codes
	Private information protection	Deliberate release of information	*It's almost a bit created, actually. Not faked, but it's already just a conscious content, which I then deliver again and again. (Emilia, Pos. 35)*
	Platform data settings	Avoiding the use of Facebook Messenger	
		Two-factor authentication	
		Strict privacy settings	*I think I have my settings too strict for that too, these privacy settings. (Emma, Pos. 50)*
		Safe passwords	
	Containing hateful conversations	No discussion in case of threats	
		Switching off functions	*. . . but of course, there are comments, yes I don't necessarily have to keep those comments on my profile, now and then I just hide them. (Erik, Pos. 86)*
		Reporting comments	
		Ignoring comments	
		Comment deletion	
		No justifications	
	Conscious response behavior	Thoughtful posts	*Yes, definitely, the posts with private content, you think beforehand what you post and what not. (Dennis, Pos. 41)*
		Assessment of possible comments	*And if I decide to send something critical on its way, then I have to brace myself for something to come back, yes. (Emma, Pos. 68)*
		No impulsive posts	
		Consciously taking time after a post is made	
	Follower management	Checking profiles	*Of course, that's great if you can see that on social media, their profile or at least see the people who contacted you. (Carlos, Pos. 92)*
		No contact with unknown people	
		Limitation of friend requests	
	Time- and benefit-effective use	Time window for social media work	*So no, so I always have the mornings where I really say, I'll take care of that. (Kira, Pos. 125)*
		Use of less time-consuming tools	
	Applying sensitivity	Personal conversation	
		Choice of words	*Well, then you also have to deal with it openly and consciously, also with the shitstorm stories. Really go here and say, I'll deal with it openly. Not to shoot back in an offended or grumpy or angry way, but to take the wind out of their sails. (Nina, Pos. 108)*
		Monitor development on social media	
		Empathy	

(*continued*)

Table A1.

Aggregated theme	Category	Sub-category	Selection of examples for the most frequent codes
	Critical topic avoidance	No negative comments	
		Avoidance of posts about certain topics	
		No sharing of critical opinions	*. . . that I'm taking a political position or on the crisis, those are just things that I avoid. So I offer, let's say, little surface for attack. (Marlena, Pos. 119)*
	Knowledge acquisition	Workshops	
		Support from experts	*I have the advantage of having my son as an IT specialist, who does all the work for me, so I'm quite secure. (Kira, Pos. 101)*
		Expertise	
	Profile maintenance	Checking the impression of the own profile	
		Regular cleaning of posts/comments	*And every now and then I check, about once a year, whether everything is still up to date, I also throw out the ones that are not active or that I don't notice at all. I keep the nest clean, let's say so. (Emma, Pos. 52)*
	Positive effects of dark sides	Interaction	*And as I said, sometimes it also has positive aspects, that there is a lot of interaction and so on, because you can perhaps generate greater reach. (Dennis, Pos. 78)*
		Reflection option	*So that if a complaint comes in, via the Internet or social media, I can respond. So that I can take a look. (Mike, Pos. 62)*

Table A1.

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