

Yes, people are often resistant to adopting a new identity, especially when change threatens continuity, status, or belonging.

Are people often resistant to adopting a new identity? N = 8

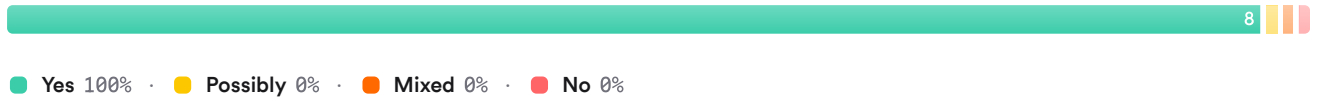


FIGURE 1 Research consensus on resistance to new identity adoption

The literature is broadly consistent that identity change often triggers defensiveness and resistance rather than smooth adoption, across behavior change, organizational change, technology, migration, health, and group contexts (Murtagh et al., 2012; Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026; Kroeper et al., 2026). The main qualification is that resistance is common, not universal: people become more open when a new identity preserves continuity, feels safe, and connects to valued groups or roles (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025; Moroney et al., 2025; Bullock et al., 2023).

Strength of Evidence

Evidence

Strength

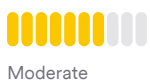
Claim



Threats to an existing identity consistently predict **resistance to change** across behavioral, organizational, and technology contexts (Murtagh et al., 2012; Craig et al., 2019; Eilam & Shamir, 2005)



Resistance often reflects efforts to protect **self-continuity**, self-esteem, efficacy, or valued group membership, not mere stubbornness (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025; Breakwell, 2021; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013)



Openness to a **new identity** increases when change is framed as compatible with the core self and supported by belonging, agency, and continuity (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025; Ballentyne et al., 2021)

FIGURE 2 Evidence strength for core identity resistance claims

Core Mechanism

A central mechanism is identity threat: people resist when change appears to harm the value, meaning, or enactment of who they are (Petriglieri, 2011; George et al., 2023; Yashika & Prakash, 2024). Identity Process Theory further specifies that threats to continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem shape coping and resistance responses (Breakwell, 2021; Jaspal et al., 2020).

Self-continuity stands out across many domains. Smokers were more resistant when change felt self-discontinuous, and more willing to adopt an ex-smoker identity when they believed their essential self would remain intact (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025). National identity studies similarly show that threats to group continuity increase in-group defense and opposition to change that could undermine identity (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013).

Context	Identity Threat	Resistance Outcome	Enabler of Change
Smoking cessation	Self-discontinuity (■ Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025)	Rejecting new identity (■ Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025)	Assure continuity (■ Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025)
Organizational change	Threat to “who we are” (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026)	Resistance, fragmentation (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026)	Preserve identity continuity (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026)
AI adoption	Professional capability threat (Jussupow et al., 2022)	Resistance to AI (Jussupow et al., 2022)	Reduce threat, add enhancement (Jussupow et al., 2022)
Migration/refugee transition	Threats to worth, continuity, control (Wehrle et al., 2017)	Protect old identity (Wehrle et al., 2017)	Build connections and resources (Wehrle et al., 2017)
Rural community change	Threat to local identity norms (■ Ham, 2022)	Defend status quo (■ Ham, 2022)	Induction into local codes (■ Ham, 2022)

FIGURE 3 Identity threat and resistance across five contexts

Evidence Across Contexts

Behavior-change studies support the claim directly. In travel behavior, experimentally triggered self-identity threat predicted resistance to changing travel habits even after controlling for past behavior (Murtagh et al., 2012). In environmental communication, identity-threatening messages increased reactance, counter-arguing, anxiety, and sometimes boomerang effects rather than persuasion (Yanni & Hmielowski, 2021).

Organizational studies show the same pattern. Employees resist change when initiatives threaten work-based identity or self-concept, including self-determination, self-distinctiveness, self-enhancement, and self-continuity (■ Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; ■ Eilam & Shamir, 2005). Reviews of mergers, downsizing, relocation, and digitization conclude that undermining organizational identity raises the risk of resistance, whereas resetting identification and buffering adaptability can move resisters toward support (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026; ■ Sun et al., 2025; ■ Illia, 2006).

Technology adoption research also aligns. IT identity threat predicts resistance to information technology in university samples (Craig et al., 2019), and later work argues resistance to IT is best understood through how people feel about themselves as technology users (Craig et al., 2023). Among medical students and physicians, threats to professional recognition and especially professional capabilities increased resistance to AI systems (Jussupow et al., 2022).

Migration and life-transition studies show that people often try to protect older identities while struggling to build new ones. Refugees in Germany coped by protecting previous identities and/or restructuring them to fit the host context (Wehrle et al., 2017). Syrian refugees in Brazil struggled to reconstruct and align older identities with new lives, and successful adaptation depended heavily on whether the context allowed those identities to be explored and expressed (Ballentyne et al., 2021).

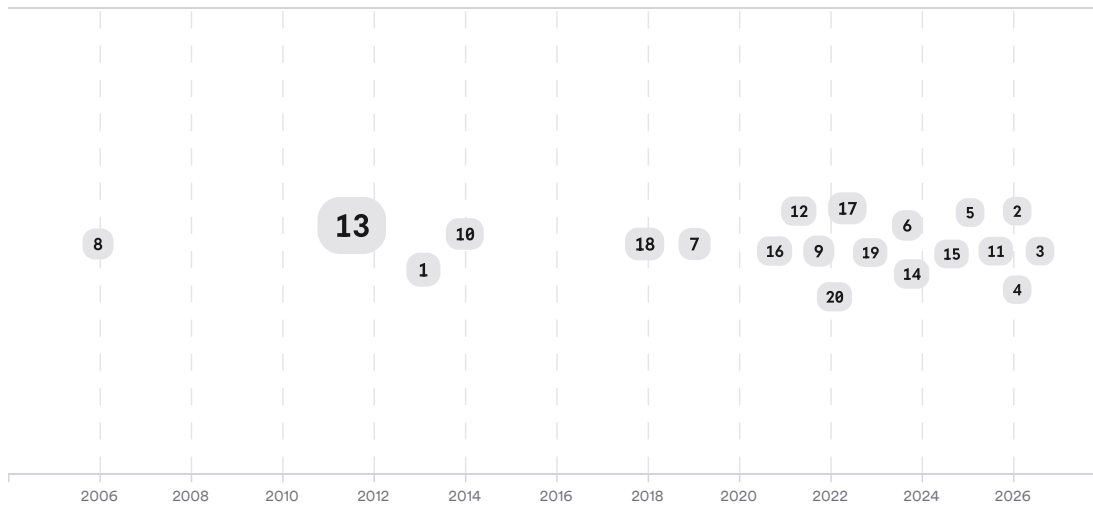


FIGURE 4 Timeline of identity resistance research across domains

The timeline shows a stable arc: early work framed resistance as self-threat and self-esteem defense, mid-period work tied it to organizational and group continuity, and recent studies extend the same mechanism to AI, digital health, and intersectional identity contexts (vanDellen et al., 2011; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; Birati & Tzemah-Shahar, 2026). The field has broadened in context more than in conclusion.

Resistance Is Not Inevitable

Several studies show that adopting a new identity becomes easier when people can see continuity with the old self. In smoking cessation, enhancing perceived continuity increased ex-smoker identity and cessation behavior (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025). In post-merger organizations, identification was stronger when pre-merger identity felt preserved, and weaker for members whose identity felt discontinuous (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026).

Social support and compatible group memberships also help. SIMIC-based work on athlete retirement finds that continuity, compatibility, and access to multiple group memberships support adjustment to new roles (Zhang et al., 2025). Adoption research similarly suggests that unsettling transitions can be buffered when people form a new, valued group-based identity that supports self-redefinition (Moroney et al., 2025).

Identity safety matters in educational and stigmatized settings. Medical students described identity safety as being able to exist authentically without constant self-monitoring, and linked it to agency, personhood, and belonging (Bullock et al., 2023). Among people with serious mental illness, stigma resistance strategies such as distancing, education, and activism were associated with better well-being, suggesting that identity negotiation can shift from defense to adaptive resistance (Marcussen et al., 2021).

Condition	Tends to Increase Resistance	Tends to Reduce Resistance
Self-continuity	Change feels like “not me” (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025)	Core self remains intact (Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025)
Group belonging	Exclusion or ostracism (Moroney et al., 2025)	New valued membership (Moroney et al., 2025)
Role competence	Threat to autonomy or capability (Jussupow et al., 2022)	Buffer space and adaptability (Sun et al., 2025)
Social context	Identity-constraining environment (Ballentyne et al., 2021)	Identity-safe environment (Bullock et al., 2023)

FIGURE 5 Conditions that increase or reduce identity resistance

Important Limits and Exceptions

The statement is true at a broad level, but the literature does not support a simple claim that people always resist new identities. Some people actively seek new identities when old ones are painful, unsafe, or uncertain. Uncertainty-identity theory argues that changing worlds can make strongly defined new groups and identities attractive because they reduce self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2020).

Resistance also depends on the form of identity change. Military veterans transitioning to civilian work fell on a spectrum from active identification with new institutional logics to complete resistance (Chaturvedi & Nambudiri, 2025). Refugee and migrant studies likewise show ongoing adaptation rather than a one-time choice, with identities continually reconstructed in response to context (Cormos, 2022; Ballentyne et al., 2021).

Some identity change is not resistance to adoption but difficulty integrating loss, stigma, or narrative disruption. Traumatic brain injury research identifies loss of autonomy, loss of valued roles, and stigma as major challenges to self-identity (Villa et al., 2020). Adoption studies describe acquired “adopted” identity as sometimes bringing marginalization, contested membership, and social identity loss rather than straightforward acceptance or rejection (Moroney et al., 2025).

Bottom Line

Yes: people are often resistant to adopting a new identity because identity change commonly threatens continuity, competence, status, belonging, or self-worth (■ Blondé & Falomir-Pichastor, 2025; ■ Eilam & Shamir, 2005; Birati & Tzemah-Shahar, 2026). The most important shift in the evidence is from treating resistance as irrational stubbornness to treating it as a predictable response to identity threat across many domains (■ Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009; Birati & Tzemah-Shahar, 2026; vanDellen et al., 2011). The biggest open question is not whether resistance exists, but which interventions most reliably convert threatened identities into identity gain without erasing the old self (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2026; ■ Sun et al., 2025; Kroeper et al., 2026).

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