

Entrepreneurship Theory

Paper proposal

What should I do? the wretched entrepreneur and liminal identity work on social media

Trang Dinh – Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki

Background

Entrepreneurship research has increasingly employed the processual perspective on entrepreneurial action that focuses on understanding the interactions between entrepreneurs and their social and institutional environments (Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert, 2015). From this perspective, entrepreneurial life and organizational creation continuously unfolding overtime can render entrepreneurs a permanent liminal state of being “in-between” (Anderson, 2005), in which their identities are embedded and socially constructed (Dowing 2005), continuously contested (Clarke and Holt, 2017) and fluid (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). As such, it is necessary to study entrepreneurial identity in liminality. Beech (2010) formulates liminality as a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) that creates a new and meaningful identity for the individual and their community. This definition is specifically relevant to early-stage entrepreneurs who transition from an organizational career to an entrepreneurial career. How they work on their identities during a period when they are “in between two identity constructions: when they are neither one thing or the other” (Beech, 2010) is thus an important inquiry.

As research in liminality has been limited and relatively invisible (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2017), several scholars (Dodd, Anderson & Jack, 2021) have recently called for entrepreneurship to be embedded in the in-between. This paper responds to this call by studying liminal identity work on social media. While research on entrepreneurial identity has been thriving, how entrepreneurial identity is formed or performed through social media is emerging. Social media has been shown to prompt individuals to construct and negotiate their identities online (Stets & Serpe, 2016). Interestingly, joining virtual groups to express their identities, people can enact multiple identities and often have their professional and personal identities overlapped, complemented, and intertwined in various ways (Jameson, 2014; Papacharissi, 2012). Thus, social media open doors to rich and diverse data for understanding entrepreneurial identity construction and reconstruction.

Purpose of the study

The paper focuses on the identity work of a wretched entrepreneur [in his own words] through a longitudinal case study based on his posts on Facebook communities of interests, his Facebook accounts which are visible to the public, and messages between him and the researcher. Specifically, we examine how he has embarked on various identities overtime and how his posts on social media reflects his repeated and earnest desperation to justify his in-between identities and consequential entrepreneurial actions. By repeatedly portraying his struggles as an entrepreneur and a person and sometimes hatred towards society, he shows his resistance to the dominant norms and wished-for identities obsessing him. This case study contributes to the understanding of how social media plays a role in entrepreneurial identity processes and warrants further investigation into whether and how social media, e.g., Facebook interpersonal support and support groups, may fuel perpetual liminality in entrepreneurs.

Method

The data have been collected since 2018 as part of a netnography project on rural returnee entrepreneurs. By that time, this entrepreneur, who is growing things and doing agriculture related businesses, had been returned home for three years. His first posts on various entrepreneurial Facebook communities introducing about him and asking for advice on doing entrepreneurship attracted much attention, triggering sympathy and encouragement but also perplexity among observers and members. Longitudinal data offer rooms for much thinking and reflections on how the researcher makes sense of what is going on with the subject. Among thousands of entrepreneurs, this entrepreneur stands out as an outlier who is not shy from discrediting and hating himself. He closed one account by 2019-2020. He did not post in the communities for about one year. The researcher tried to contact him via his last Facebook account, but never got any reply. As the pandemic came, he started to post again with a different account but same voice and style of writing. However, the posts have become even more negative. The researcher contacted and exchanged messages with him in 2022 after observing his public posts for another period. The life-narrative approach (Reissman 2002), capturing the longitudinal and fragmented aspects of the data, is used in the data analysis.

Preliminary findings

Throughout over three years of observation, the entrepreneur exhibited three dominant identities. In 2018-2019, he appeared as a newly returnee to rural place and an aspiring entrepreneur. This identity was attached with his status of being a highly educated rural returnee entrepreneur and a dream to grow and do good entrepreneurship. He wanted to become a responsible business owner who does not place profits before the customers. In 2019, he changed his account name, from a person name to a pseudo name “poor man”. In this time, he was struggling with his business that did not thrive as he hoped and this identity renders his frustrations of being a nobody entrepreneur and an individual who, despite having a good education, performed worse than those who do not. In 2020, he started to post again with another person name. His identity has become worse as he called himself a wretched man. The identity has been constructed through all sad incidents in his life, from childhood, to student hood to entrepreneur hood. People commented on his posts trying to tell him to get out of negative thinking and being positive. However, these supportive comments seemed to have never worked in the past four years. This entrepreneur is very consistent in his writing and thinking. He reacts to all the comments (liking the comment) and sometimes reply to them, but his overall state of well-being has changed for the worse. Is this because of the pandemic that has made things harder for many people? Or it this because he is in a perpetual state of liminality?

By 2022, he has been an entrepreneur for seven years and he thought this job is suitable for him. His business is doing ok, but he is not an aspiring entrepreneur as he was in the beginning. He is now a miserable entrepreneur who does the job to pass each day. A miserable entrepreneur who disregards all his achievements and finds only sadness in his life. That is because the loneliness of being despised by his own parents for coming back and living like a nobody instead of working for a company, for his poor background that he cannot thrive like other friends who have better backgrounds, for he cannot get married as no girl is interested in him, a poor self-employed man, and for the injustice and humiliation he faced when trying to do his business in honest ways. He hates his life, he found himself abominable, he hates to see

others' happiness, and he wanders around, having no desire and motivation to make his business more thriving but at the same time being obsessed by others' possessions and successes.

As for the researcher's reflection, the fact that he is continuing to post and talk with other people (he has nearly 1000 followers as people love his roses and want to buy seeds and other things from him) shows that he is not hopeless. From the posts, he knows his ability and that people want to support and buy his products. He thinks his life is meaningless but meanwhile is still trying to overcome the liminality by dismantling the social norms that put pressures on his life and acknowledging that he is enjoying the autonomy this entrepreneurial life gives him. The conversation between the researcher and the entrepreneur has just started, thus much is still open.

References

- Anderson, A.R. 2005. Enacted Metaphor: "The Theatricality of the Entrepreneurial Process." *International Small Business Journal* 23 (6): 587-603
- Clarke, J., and Holt, R. 2017. "Imagery of ad-venture: Understanding entrepreneurial identity through metaphor and drawing." *Journal of Business Venturing* 32 (5): 476-497.
- Dodd S., Anderson A., & Jack S. (2021) "Let them not make me a stone"—repositioning entrepreneurship, *Journal of Small Business Management*.
- Riessman, C.K. 2002. "Analysis of personal narratives." In: Gubrium, J.F., and Holstein J.A. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research*, 367-379. Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage.
- Downing, S. 2005. "The Social Construction of entrepreneurship: Narrative and Dramatic Processes in the Coproduction of Organizations and Identities." *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 29 (2): 185-204.
- Jameson, D. A. (2014). Crossing public-private and personal-professional boundaries: How changes in technology may affect COE's communication. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 77(1), 7-30.
- Hjorth, D., Holt, R., and Steyaert, C. 2015. "Entrepreneurship and process studies." *International Small Business Journal* 33 (6): 599-611.
- Leitch C.M, & Harrison R.T (2016) Identity, identity formation and identity work in entrepreneurship: conceptual developments and empirical applications, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 28:3-4, 177-190,
- Beech N. (2010) Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction. *Human Relations*. 64 (2), 285-302.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2012). Without you, I'm nothing: Performances of the self on Twitter. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 1989-2006.
- Stets, J. E., & Serpe, R. T. (Eds.). (2016). *New directions in identity theory and research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.