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Paper proposal

The intertwining of gender identity and entrepreneurial identity in entrepreneurship in the digital age.

1. Topicality of the study

Within entrepreneurship field, gender is associated with the idea that male is the norm and female is the "other" (Marlow, 2020). Gender is treated more as a demographic than an attribute that is constructed socially and culturally not only in entrepreneurship studies but also in management studies (Koveshnikov et al., 2018). Foundational studies on gender in entrepreneurship have been essential to recognizing the social aspect that shapes assumptions about who is/should be an entrepreneur (Marlow, 2020). This study contributes to this knowledge by aiming to explore how gender is constructed at the pitching stage, adopting the epistemological perspective that views gender as social practices and representations associated with femininity and masculinity (Acker, 1990).

It is at the pitch that the entrepreneurs send different types of signals to communicate the quality of their venture to the investors (Alsos & Ljunggren, 2017). Entrepreneurial pitching and gender have been studied by other scholars, for example, Balachandra et al.'s study (2019) shows that there are biases against feminine-stereotyped behaviors at start-up pitch. However, scholars suggest that investment pitches deserve more research attention, especially from the pitching as social practice perspective (Teague et al., 2020). The pitching stage is the outcome of the practice, where individual behaviors, speeches, and thoughts are performed. The process to prepare for the pitch performance could be related to the process to construct the entrepreneurial identity.

The recent pandemic navigates the world towards a new direction where digital services become an essential aspect both in business ideas and in daily interactions (Mmbaga et al., 2020). Following the call for more research on entrepreneurial identity in the digital world (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), post-structural feminist theory and

identity theory are adopted to understand the practice of masculinity and femininity in online start-up pitches.

2. Objectives and research questions

The first objective of this study is to discover how the entrepreneurial identity is constructed when people prepare for the investment pitch. The second objective is to explore the image of the "ideal" entrepreneur, which is supposed to be a masculine figure and could have a similar revelation as the "ideal" worker from the gendered organization literature (Acker, 1990). Correspondingly, the research questions I am contemplating are:

1. How do masculinities and femininities (re)construct entrepreneurial identity within a start-up pitching context?
2. What is the figure of the 'ideal' entrepreneur and how is this figure gendered?

3. Main literature strands

Gender is a social structure – a feminist view of gender

Many gender studies in management and entrepreneurship regard gender as a demographic variable, which relates to the biological, genetic distinction that categorizes a person as a man or a woman. A person's gender, however, is socially constructed and embraces masculinity and femininity (Ahl, 2006; Acker, 1992). Masculinity and femininity are not fixed to the sexed bodies and are (re)constructed depending on the way a particular society understands and acknowledges gender at a particular time (Holmes, 2009). Nonetheless, gender stereotypes and norms are so engraved with the idea of how men and women would behave and are often internalized individuals (Wood & Eagly, 2012). For example, women are believed to hold such qualities as nurturance, caring, and support in the relationship, while men are attached to decisions, growth, taking charge, and being in control (Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019).

In specific, the (re)production of gender structure is integrated into three dimensions: the individual gendered selves, the interactional dimension where men and women might face different experiences, and the institutional dimension where norms and systems are gendered (Risman, 2004). In the process of socially constructing the world, we (re)construct and (re)do layers of socializing elements, such

as characteristics, behaviors, and ideas (Wade & Ferree, 2015). Thus, it is important to view gender as a social structure as a recursive process with multiple levels of analysis (Risman, 2004). In this study, I view gender as a social structure to explore how gender is constructed in entrepreneurship in the context of start-up pitching. This direction follows suggestions that feminist theory could be used to encourage different perspectives on gender issues in entrepreneurship (Marlow, 2020).

Entrepreneurship as practice

Entrepreneurship can be understood as an instrument for economic growth (Schumpeter, 1934). Yet, it can also be viewed as a collaborative social achievement (Tatli et al., 2014). The notion that entrepreneurship is a social phenomenon opens opportunities to apply other theories than the mainstream economic and psychological ones. Specifically, sociological literature has gained a grounding position in developing a critical discourse that entrepreneurship involves a complex web of interactions that identify who is the "ideal" entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurship as practice (Gartner et al., 2016; Teague et al., 2020) has roots in social practice theory literature and involves social interactions that are reproduced by individuals. In other words, this literature strand is interested in exploring the "sayings and doing" (Schatzki, 2016) that are repeated patterns and routinized behaviors (Hui et al., 2017; Teague et al., 2020). With the practice theory lens, the pitching context is understood as a social practice (Teague et al., 2020). The pitch is a performance stage, where routinized ways of body movements, objects, and texts are expressed and legitimized. The results of one performance become the resource for another (Nicolini, 2012). By adopting this perspective, this study's focus is on the 'doing' of entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007), and the knowledge observed from the practice is valuable to interpret the social act between involved individuals.

Identity theory

Identity theory originates from sociology and is mainly built on the idea that identities are constructed (Mmbaga et al., 2020). According to this literature stream, identities develop out of social roles which individuals internalize. The construction of identity in entrepreneurship is conceptualized by Radu-Lefebvre et al. (2021) as entrepreneurial identity (EI) as Process, in which research predominantly focuses on identity work (Newbery et al., 2018). Identity work reflects how individuals engage in behaviors,

attributes, narratives, and thoughts to construct, maintain, and revise their identity, or identities.

From the identity work perspective, entrepreneurial identity is identified as "the product of, and realized in, narrative accounts of individuals' past, present, and future" (Hytti, 2005, 598). At a sociocultural level, interactions can shape an individual's identity construction process, consequently, it would be fruitful to explore how the interactions construct and reconstruct entrepreneurial identity. In relation to entrepreneurship, it is suggested that future studies could explore how masculinities and femininities shape the reconstruction of entrepreneurial identity for both males and females (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

4. Methodology and analysis

For this study, the empirical data is semi-structured interviews, and the research follows the interpretivist stance (Goulding, 2005). By choosing this point of view, I expect to engage in the narrative creation. Interviewees would be start-up founders and investors. The focus is on early-staged start-ups, or start-ups that still have to pitch for investment. Additionally, interviews with pitching coaches and representatives of entrepreneurial organizations could provide interesting details regarding the pitching context, as well as how gender is viewed and practiced in entrepreneurship in general, and at the entrepreneurial pitch in detail.

In 2020, I conducted some pilot interviews to gain more insights on the topic. The pilot interviews opened up some topics that I will focus on. The main topics from the pilot interviews are: the lack of role models, the pressure of being the token, different treatments, the entrepreneurship environment is risky for the future, and women initiate to interact and be a member of the community. From Autumn 2021 to Spring 2022, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the entrepreneurs and pitch coaches. So far, I have done 6 interviews and continue to approach potential interviewees. The focus is again on the context of start-up pitching and the interview process continues now.

The first part of the interview discusses the journey to become an entrepreneur. Here I also want to explore how gendered norms and identity overlap with each other by asking the respondents to talk about the role model, and the image of an 'ideal' entrepreneur. I want to unfold the effect of social gendered practices on how people identify themselves as start-up founders. The 'ideal' entrepreneur, assumingly, is a

masculine portrayal. It shows that the individuals' interpretation of an entrepreneur is gendered and promotes more masculine traits.

The second part specifies on the context of pitching. I ask the respondents to talk about the pitching context, for example, how do they prepare for the pitch, how do you feel before and during the pitch, and what are important elements to create and deliver a good pitch. Through these questions, I expect to explore how gender roles affect the way people prepare for the pitch and what kind of strategy they use at the pitch. In summary, pitching is not just a static, physical space, where gender is being performed. Pitching could be understood as social practice, a process of "doing" gender and constructing identity to prepare for the pitch and achieve the goal of the pitch.

Narrative analysis

I plan to apply narrative analysis to the interview data. Narrative analysis helps to make sense of cultural and social happenings. IT has a dialogical and a performative dimension (Meretoja, 2018). I want to implement the combination of structural and rhetorical narrative analysis (De Fina, 2008; Meretoja, 2018) because I want to report a structural plot for the narrative, at the same time, I also want to include the performative and reflexive elements in the analysis. Specifically, I adopt the conversational analysis approach, which views narrative as talk-in-interaction (De Fina, 2008). The narrative data arise naturally in conversations that might happen in daily practices, in informal and formal contexts. The narrative tellings unfold "moment-by-moment in here-and-now of interactions" (De Fina, 2008, p.381) and are co-constructed by individuals and their roles, social experiences, and their selves.

In narrative interviews, tellers perform numerous social actions, such as interactions, dialogues, speeches, and texts. Thus, the role and the perspective of the researcher are important throughout the process, not only for narrative analysis but also for the processes and methods of data collection and transcription. I think it is valuable to include not only small stories but also social interactions, dialogues between the interviewers and the respondents, and the activities of the narration.

5. Expected findings and contribution

This is one of the sub-studies of my doctoral study that delves into the entrepreneurial identity construction within the pitching context and the intertwining between identity and gendered practices. I want to hear the description of the "ideal"

entrepreneur from the respondents to see if the figure is gendered, and if so, it shall play a role in the identity construction of people who are in the entrepreneurship field, as well as people who want to enter the field. Also, gendered assumptions and norms construct the discourses that women and men should enact certain traits of masculine characteristics to legitimize their entrepreneurial identity (Mmbaga et al., 2020). By understanding the performance and construction of masculinities to perform well at the pitch, I hope to bring the notion of how gendered the process of constructing and maintaining entrepreneurial identities that individuals experience when they engage and interact in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

For the contribution, this study contributes to gender and entrepreneurship research follows the suggestion to bring in feminist theories and gender theories when studying gender issues in entrepreneurship (Marlow, 2020). Furthermore, it contributes to the ongoing discussion that entrepreneurship is a gendered space, where masculine patterns are more naturally practiced (Marlow & Swail, 2014) by addressing the daily practices of individuals in the ecosystem that are gendered. Thus, there is a certain identity frame that is preferred and prioritized over other types of identities. On a societal level, it delves into gendered stereotypes in the entrepreneurship field, through which it encourages efforts to address unconscious biases and supports entrepreneurship's diversity.

Key references

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