



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Breaking into the boys club: negotiation of gender and entrepreneurship in social media“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science (MSc)

Wien, 2023 / Vienna 2023

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 550

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium Communication Science

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Katherine Sarikakis

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Abstract (DE)

Diese Studie untersucht die nuancierten Überschneidungen von Geschlecht, Unternehmertum und Online-Kommunikation und konzentriert sich dabei auf die professionelle Social-Media-Plattform LinkedIn. Frühere akademische Forschungen haben die Bedeutung von Plattformen wie Facebook und Instagram für Unternehmer dokumentiert, um soziales Kapital zu erwerben. LinkedIn stellt jedoch eine andere Landschaft dar, die eine professionelle Fassade verlangt, die oft im Widerspruch zu dem Wert der Authentizität eines Unternehmers steht. Diese Dichotomie bildet den Kernpunkt unserer Untersuchung.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass LinkedIn zwar ein wesentliches Instrument zur Förderung von Geschäftsvorhaben ist, aber andere Konventionen als andere soziale Plattformen verkörpert. Unternehmerinnen nehmen LinkedIn als eine digitale Erweiterung traditioneller beruflicher Räume wahr, in denen die Einhaltung etablierter, oft maskulinisierter Normen erwartet wird. Dies schafft Spannungen für Unternehmerinnen, da sie zwischen der Präsentation ihrer einzigartigen unternehmerischen Identität und der Einhaltung dieser Normen der Professionalität schwanken müssen.

Diese Untersuchung zeigt vier wichtige Themen rund um die Verhandlung von Geschlechterfragen in diesem Online-Raum auf. Unternehmerinnen auf LinkedIn verfolgen einen strategischen, aber ambivalenten Ansatz in Bezug auf ihre Geschlechtsidentität.

Während sie sich dafür entscheiden, ihr Geschlecht in ihren beruflichen Profilen herunterzuspielen oder sogar zu distanzieren, sind sie sich auch der Vorteile bewusst, die ihr Geschlecht ihrem Unternehmen bringen könnte, und setzen diese strategisch ein, während sie gleichzeitig versuchen, sich in die normative Vorstellung von der Wahrung feministischer Ideale einzufügen. Schließlich befinden sich Gründerinnen oft in der Zwickmühle, wie sie sich selbst treu bleiben und gleichzeitig die ungeschriebenen Regeln der Plattform einhalten

können. Die Studie enthüllt den komplizierten Tanz der Identitätsverhandlungen, den Unternehmerinnen bei ihrer professionellen Online-Präsentation vollführen. Da sich die digitale Landschaft ständig weiterentwickelt, ist es von entscheidender Bedeutung, diese Verhandlungen anzuerkennen und zu verstehen. Sie prägen nicht nur den individuellen unternehmerischen Werdegang, sondern beeinflussen auch das breitere unternehmerische Ökosystem und die Geschlechterdynamik darin.

Stichworte: weibliches Unternehmertum, unternehmerische Identität, soziale Medien im Beruf, Aushandlung der Geschlechteridentität.

Abstract (ENG)

This study explores the nuanced intersections of gender, entrepreneurship, and online communication, centring on the professional social media platform, LinkedIn. Previous academic research has documented the importance of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram for entrepreneurs to earn social capital. Yet, LinkedIn presents a distinct landscape, demanding a professional façade that often juxtaposes with an entrepreneur's value of authenticity. This dichotomy forms the crux of our investigation.

The findings indicate that while LinkedIn serves as an essential tool for advancing business ventures, it embodies different conventions from other social platforms. Female entrepreneurs perceive LinkedIn as a digital extension of traditional professional spaces, where well-established, often masculinized norms are expected to be upheld. This creates tension for women entrepreneurs, as they must oscillate between showcasing their unique entrepreneurial identities and adhering to these norms of professionalism.

This research highlights four significant themes around gender negotiation in this online space. Women entrepreneurs on LinkedIn employ a strategic yet ambivalent approach towards their gender identity. While they choose to downplay or even dissociate their gender from their professional profiles, they also are keenly aware of the benefits their gender could bring to their business and are strategically employing them, all while trying to fit in the normative notion of upholding feminist ideals. Finally, female founders often find themselves in a predicament – how to be true to themselves while also playing by the unwritten rules of the platform. The study unveils the intricate dance of identity negotiations that women entrepreneurs perform in their professional online presentations. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, it becomes crucial to acknowledge and understand these negotiations. They not only shape individual entrepreneurial journeys but also influence the broader entrepreneurial ecosystems and gender dynamics therein.

Keywords: female entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity, professional social media, gender identity negotiation.

Introduction

Femininity is often considered a disadvantage in a business context. Despite growing evidence showing that companies with women in management and founding teams outperform male-only enterprises (Abouzahr et al., 2018; Hoogendoorn et al., 2013), it remains harder to get funding and legitimisation for female business owners (Färber & Klein, 2021). Critical research found that the contemporary image of a prototypical entrepreneur is still that of a man (Hamilton, 2013). Cultural stereotypes ascribe qualities which are considered to be necessary for entrepreneurial success (e.g. assertiveness, competitiveness, and task orientation) to the male gender, making women automatically “other” in the context of entrepreneurship (Amanatullah & Morris, 2008; Eddleston et al., 2006; Justo et al., 2018; Kikooma, 2011; Moore, 1984; Schein, 2001; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Tinsley et al., 2009; Tinsley & Amanatullah, 2008). So women founders are bound to fight an uphill battle to advance their businesses and themselves as entrepreneurs. Multiple studies on female entrepreneurship have already shown various forms of communication strategies that female entrepreneurs use to offset the disadvantage of their gender (Chasserio et al., 2014; Diaz Garcia & Welter, 2011; Lewis, 2015).

The pervasive reach of social media has turned it into a powerful tool for generating social capital, offering entrepreneurs greater visibility, expanded networks, and opportunities to establish the legitimacy and uniqueness of their ventures (Ellison, Vitak, et al., 2011; Lans et al., 2015; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2008; Steinfield et al., 2008). A strong digital presence has been associated with greater fundraising success, specifically for small businesses and first-time entrepreneurs, emphasising the crucial role of digital platforms in entrepreneurial endeavours (Banerji & Reimer, 2019; Ellison, Steinfield, et al., 2011; Karlsson & Williams-Middleton, 2015; Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014).

As McRobbie (2018) highlighted, these gendered entrepreneurship discourses in social media are evolving and becoming increasingly complex. For female entrepreneurs, the intricate performance of their digital personas necessitates an additional layer of gender identity work. Within the traditionally masculine realm of entrepreneurship, they navigate and negotiate their gender identity, making conscious or unconscious choices about their gender representation to accrue social capital on social media. As a result, women adopt a wide array of strategies to negotiate their unconventional status. Recent studies on women entrepreneurs' self-presentation on social media highlight a strategic embrace of femininity aligning with market goals while upholding a postfeminist ideal of "having it all" (Adamson, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). These portrayals often mirror idealised feminine norms shaped by societal power structures, including elite-class and heteronormative influences. While many women entrepreneurs showcase authenticity by sharing personal experiences, there is a discernible reluctance to overtly market themselves, rooted in modesty and commercialism (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Scharff, 2015). This dilemma is termed the "digital double bind," capturing the tension between traditional gender roles and digital visibility demands (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

While the performance of entrepreneurship and femininity has been studied within the context of Instagram and Facebook (ex.: Duffy & Hund, 2015; H. Heizmann & Liu, 2020), LinkedIn remains relatively unexplored. This presents a unique research opportunity: LinkedIn's professional focus could yield distinctive insights into how female entrepreneurs perform and negotiate their identities in a business-centric digital environment (Lotankar, 2022). Hence, this study aims to understand how women entrepreneurs use professional social media to negotiate their entrepreneurial identity.

To answer this question, this study employs a qualitative approach. Fourteen semi-structured interviews have been held with European female entrepreneurs from different sectors. The interviews have then been analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The following paper begins with an introduction to the theoretical framework that served as a base for the research. The following section describes the methodology and procedures of data gathering and analysis. Finally, the results and discussion describe the takeaways from the analysis, situate them within existing literature and give suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to understand how women entrepreneurs negotiate their gender and entrepreneurial identity on LinkedIn. Drawing from gender theory, gender is considered a socially constructed identity, that is not static but one that is being done and redone in everyday actions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This study explores how women entrepreneurs are doing and redoing their gender on LinkedIn and their personal experiences of this process, what this study calls negotiation of gender. At the same time, their identity as entrepreneurs is also seen as the one to be done or performed, not a static entity (Greene & Brush, 2018). This research also draws on impression management theory, viewing LinkedIn as a space where women entrepreneurs strategically curate their online image to align with societal expectations and professional goals. Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a rich framework for understanding the complex negotiations of gender and entrepreneurship taking place on LinkedIn.

Negotiating Gender and Entrepreneurship

This research views both gender and entrepreneurship as identities that one holds and performs (Greene & Brush, 2018). This approach is derived from SIT and identity theory. SIT views identity as a collection of "social categories" or schemas derived from the individual's identification with particular groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Turner, 1985). Identity theory perceives identity as being shaped by the interplay of multiple overlapping roles individuals assume in their lives, such as "a mother," "a student," or "an immigrant" (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Hogg et al., 1995; Meister et al., 2014; Stryker, 1987). All of our identities ultimately affect how people act and make decisions, including entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial identity is defined by Navis and Glynn (2011) as "the constellation of claims around the founders, organisation, and market opportunity of an entrepreneurial entity that gives meaning to the questions of 'who we are' and 'what we do'" (p. 480). It shapes beliefs, values, and attitudes towards entrepreneurship (Greene & Brush, 2018), which results in the decision-making process (Crosina, 2018); this includes aspects such as their management style, organisational structure, and governance (Orser et al., 2013) as well as strategic presentation to external stakeholders (Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Entrepreneurial identity is shaped by a complex interplay of personal factors, such as experiences (Chasserio et al., 2014), cultural background (Erogul & McCrohan, 2008; Farmer & Kung-Mcintyre, 2008; Gill & Larson, 2014; Kikooma, 2011), as well as and the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem (Jain et al., 2009; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2008).

Entrepreneurial identity significantly shapes the process of legitimization. As Suchman, (1995) defines legitimization as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p 574). When a business is still in the nascent stages, it's

crucial for its leaders to actively secure external resources actively, reinforcing the venture's legitimacy (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Stakeholders, during this phase, judge the business's attractiveness, fit, and ability to deliver value in the future (Prochotta et al., 2022). It's a balancing act for entrepreneurs: they need to emphasize what makes their venture unique yet adhere to industry norms to ensure its potential and relevance (Navis & Glynn, 2011; Zott & Huy, 2007). Given the lack of a proven track record for start-ups, this challenge is more pronounced, as noted by Marlow and McAdam (2015: p.5). Entrepreneurs, in this scenario, act as the legitimizing face of their ventures (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Prochotta et al., 2022; Swail & Marlow, 2018). Their personal reputation and credentials often serve as a benchmark when assessing the venture (Fisher, 2020). Many stakeholders, especially investors, look to the entrepreneur's history and reputation to estimate the venture's chance of success. Achievements from the entrepreneur's past and their professional networks play pivotal roles in fostering trust and attracting necessary resources (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Prochotta et al., 2022; Swail & Marlow, 2018). The entrepreneur's capacity to convey their vision and instil trust significantly affects how others perceive the venture's legitimacy and its potential for longevity (Fisher, 2020). Thus, in the early days of a venture, the identity and reputation of an entrepreneur are inextricably linked to the venture's perceived legitimacy and promise. For female entrepreneurs, legitimising their entrepreneurial selves in the eyes of the external stakeholders plays a significant role, as they not only have to prove the plausibility of their venture but also deal with the bias of the masculinised entrepreneurship space. Although the process of business legitimisation is frequently depicted as gender-neutral, critical scholars contend it is a gender-biased activity (Greene & Brush, 2018; H. Heizmann & Liu, 2020; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Orlandi, 2017; Orser et al., 2013; Swail & Marlow, 2018).

For women, their entrepreneurial identity could often conflict with their personal identities, as the cultural view is due to traditional gender role stereotypes that categorise women as communal, while men are viewed as agentic (Chapman, 1975; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Competency, leadership potential and managerial skills needed for business ventures are consistent with agentic characteristics typically associated with male gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Moore, 1984; Schein, 2001; Schein & Mueller, 1992). To establish legitimacy as female entrepreneurs, women employ strategic identity work to bridge the gap between their devalued feminised identities and the masculinised prototype of an entrepreneur (Bruni et al., 2004 as cited in Swail & Marlow, 2018). Various strategies are adopted to negotiate their identities within the entrepreneurial sphere. Contextual factors can activate core feminine stereotypes, exposing women to increased scrutiny and potential penalties for challenging these stereotypes (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2008). Tinsley et al. (2009) propose three coping strategies: minimising stereotype activation, conforming to social norms, or negotiating identity with society by emphasising the irrelevance of stereotypes in assessing professional competence. This is in line with the work of Diaz Garcia & Welter (2011), who examined how Spanish women entrepreneurs engage in "doing" and "redoing gender" by either working with and within masculinised norms or challenging them. Chasserio et al. (2014) found similar results, highlighting that women often also integrate their non-professional identities to maintain legitimacy and authenticity without challenging their femininity. The notion of "juggling" multiple identities or "oscillating" between femininity and entrepreneurship is evident in other studies as well (Crosina, 2018; Diaz Garcia & Welter, 2011; Marlow & McAdam, 2015).

Social Media and Female Entrepreneurship

The digital age, characterised by the widespread use of social media, has transformed the dynamics of entrepreneurship. Notably, social media plays a pivotal role in generating social capital, amplifying visibility, and fostering the growth of entrepreneurs (Ellison, Vitak, et al., 2011; Lans et al., 2015; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2008; Steinfield et al., 2008). The essence of attention has been marked as a prime commodity driving the digital economy (Goldhaber, 1997), intertwined with the marketing tenets of advanced capitalism (Hearn, 2008) and underscored by the imperatives of self-branding on social platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2010).

The self-presentation of women entrepreneurs on social media has become widely studied in recent years. Much work has been done in the realm of aspirational, highly feminised sectors (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Additionally, certain studies have examined how female entrepreneurs make sense of their identities through studying phenomena of the digital culture such as the "Girlboss"(Adamson, 2017; H. Heizmann & Liu, 2020; Mastrangelo, 2021; Roivainen, 2023) or the "Mumpreneurs" (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013; P. Lewis et al., 2022).

On a more general level, previous studies have shown that women entrepreneurs on social media often strategically embrace femininity in a manner that aligns with market-oriented goals, all while preserving a postfeminist ideal of "having it all" (Adamson, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). These online personas often manifest as idealised feminine representations.

Another representation of adherence towards the feminine stereotype is the prevalent tendency of women entrepreneurs to perform authenticity in their online communication by offering glimpses into personal life, emotional struggles, and imperfections, thus portraying 'realness' and attainability (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018).

However, underlying this is a gendered hesitation to overtly market themselves, stemming from deep-rooted notions of modesty intermingled with commercialism (Duffy, 2017; Scharff,

2015). This balancing act is characterised as the "digital double bind" - a predicament where women are caught between traditional gender expectations and the demands of digital prominence (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017).

Through current state of research gives insights into how modern female founders balance gendered ideals and their entrepreneurial status online. The present research is mainly focused on social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which strongly focus on personal life (Van Dijck, 2013), while professional social networks such as LinkedIn still need to be explored. LinkedIn, being a network focused solely on one's career, provides a digital manifestation of a "professional" space, which leads to the difference in approach to self-presentation and identity on this "professional" and more "personal" social media (Van Dijck, 2013). This distinction very well illustrated by the viral trend "LinkedIn Facebook Instagram Tinder (Bazaar, 2020) that showed how online personas tend to differ from one social network to the other. Despite the growing body of research on self-presentation and identity formation on LinkedIn for career purposes and recruitment, the notion of entrepreneurship, especially female entrepreneurship, is yet to be explored.

Methodology

Research design

Previous research on female entrepreneurial identity primarily employs various types of qualitative analyses based on semi-structured interviews (Chasserio et al., 2014; Elliott & Orser, 2018; Marlow & McAdam, 2015, 2015; Surangi, 2022). This study, too, employs the "big Q" qualitative paradigm (Clarke & Braun, 2021). It uses semi-structured video interviews with European female entrepreneurs and a reflexive thematic analysis with a mix of deductive and inductive approaches (Sharp et al., 2019; Surangi, 2022). This design was

selected because it provides rich, detailed insights into the research topic, which is particularly beneficial when studying complex social phenomena.

Sampling and Participants

The study focused on people who identified as women and entrepreneurs and were either currently involved in a business venture, recently engaged in one, or in the process of starting a business. They also had to have an active LinkedIn page, regardless of the activity level, to capture a broader range of the platform use scenarios and goals. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. This technique was employed due to the hard-to-reach nature of the population of interest (Parker et al., 2019). An initial set of participants meeting the study criteria were identified via LinkedIn. Though the population was easy to identify, recruiting participants through cold outreach was ineffective. Participants who initially agreed to participate in the interview were then asked to refer the researcher to other potential respondents. This method, while not probabilistic, was an efficient and practical approach given the nature of the study and the specific population in question. The sample consisted of 14 European women entrepreneurs, primarily Austria-based. They could be broadly characterised as belonging to the upper-middle class and the racial majority. They represented a variety of professional backgrounds and entrepreneurial experiences, ranging from first-time founders to serial entrepreneurs.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs. The semi-structured format was chosen as it allows for flexibility during the interview process, letting the researcher explore new paths of discovery as they emerge while also providing a clear structure to ensure that critical topics related to the research question are covered. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each, with some variation. All

interviews were recorded, capturing audio and video and automatically generated transcripts were manually verified for accuracy against the recordings. A predefined questioning route guided each interview. This route was carefully designed to elicit comprehensive responses about the participants' entrepreneurial journey, their identity, the role of gender in their career, and their goals, strategies and tactics for using LinkedIn. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility during the interview process, accommodating adjustments to the questions based on each participant's specific context and understanding. In addition to the predefined questions, the interviews took on a conversational style, enabling the interviewer to probe deeper into specific areas based on the participant's responses. This approach provided a richer understanding of the participant's perspective and ensured that each participant felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using an adapted reflexive thematic analysis procedure proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021). This six-phase process was followed:

1. Familiarisation: Several read-throughs of the interviews were done to achieve an intimate understanding of the data.
2. Initial Coding: The process of coding involved assigning meaningful tags or labels to the data that succinctly summarised the essence of the data piece.
3. Searching for Themes: Here, initial themes were developed. This involved looking for broader patterns of meaning that went beyond the codes and encapsulated the overall insights offered by the data.
4. Review and Refinement: This step involved reviewing the themes and refining them. This ensured that they not only accurately represented the coded data but also the

overall data set. Some themes were merged, others were broken down into separate themes, and some were discarded at this stage.

5. Defining Themes: Each theme was defined and named. This involved writing a concrete description for each theme, marking its limitations and central focus.
6. Writing the report: As suggested by Clarke & Braun (2021), the analysis was still being developed at this stage.

The identification of themes was performed using both inductive and deductive approaches, with the deductive approach looking for patterns informed by prior research and the inductive approach aiming to uncover new, medium-specific insights. This process was reflexive, with the researcher taking an active role in interpreting the data. The researcher acknowledged and contemplated their active role in interpreting and making sense of the data. This reflexive process acknowledged the co-constructive nature of qualitative research, where the participant's responses and the researcher's interpretations shape the analysis and the resulting themes.

Reliability and Validity

Several measures were employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings. The research used a diverse sample and open-ended, non-judgmental questioning techniques. The researcher maintained a research diary to document personal experiences and reflections throughout the research process. Member checking was informally incorporated during the interviews, and self-reported data was interpreted in the light of the broader context and existing literature.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical consideration of the study was to ensure the anonymity and data privacy of the respondents, especially since participants were public figures and disclosed potentially sensitive information about themselves and their businesses. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, the nature of the data to be collected, and the intended use of this data. The text explicitly stated that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and each participant had the right to withdraw at any time without any negative repercussions and opt out of specific questions or strike their answers from the record. To maintain participant anonymity, each participant was assigned a code used in all written materials related to the study.

Results

This study examines a sample of 14 European female entrepreneurs, primarily from Austria, representing various age groups from the late twenties to late fifties. Participants have a diverse range of professional backgrounds and have businesses in various sectors. While two participants identified as mothers, most of the sample did not have children. Notably, each entrepreneur is a member of female business and professional communities.

All respondents recognised the importance of LinkedIn presence for their businesses and personal brand. However, their attitudes, goals, and behaviours varied. While some actively use LinkedIn for personal branding and business promotion, others opt for minimal presence for various reasons, such as lack of personal fit with LinkedIn's culture, personal privacy preference, and being in the background of their business. Almost every entrepreneur has mentioned using LinkedIn for various forms of networking and giving the business more

exposure. Other use scenarios included sales, investor relations, and using the LinkedIn profile as a public CV for when potential clients, partners, or investors look them up.

The analysis of the interviews resulted in the development of four themes which shed light on how these entrepreneurs negotiate their gender on LinkedIn and what assumptions about gender, entrepreneurship, professionalism and conventions of professional online presence these negotiation strategies rest upon. Theme “See No Gender, Speak No Gender” examines how various degrees of “gender blindness” (Lewis, 2006) resulted in them seeing their femininity as something not worth commenting on online and upholding a masculinised, “neutral” form of professionalism. Notably, the willful ignorance of gender often collided with the latent belief that a woman, especially a female entrepreneur, is supposed to uphold feminist ideals. And that there is a correct way of doing that, which sometimes does not match the actions and/ or beliefs, which ultimately is explored in the second theme, “Being a Good Feminist”. The third theme, “Female Empowerment is a Business Opportunity”, illuminated a third component of how these women negotiated their entrepreneurship with their gender. “Female Empowerment is a Business Opportunity” examines a shared belief that there is currently a window of opportunity for women to start a business fueled by the empowerment movement, and, notably, it should be taken advantage of, even if one is not strongly invested in the cause. Together, These three themes illustrate a complex negotiation of female and entrepreneurial identities, which find their manifestations online and offline. The fourth and final theme, “To Be or Not to Be (Yourself)”, inspects how these practices manifest in these women’s LinkedIn use and presence as they strategically harness opportunities the social network provides. The central concept of the fourth theme is the contradiction of authenticity, which is central to all the entrepreneurs’ identities and the implied conventions of LinkedIn. The following sections describe these four themes in more detail.

See No Gender, Speak No Gender

The theme See No Gender, Speak No Gender explores the idea that gender is not a significant factor in one's personal, professional and entrepreneurial journeys and identities, thus not worth highlighting. An essential aspect of this theme was an intellectual acknowledgement of gender as a potential factor, but one that either (1) does not affect them personally, (2) has a much lesser impact than other factors, and (3) is surmountable with enough dedication and right personal qualities.

In several cases, gender was perceived as a factor of lesser significance compared to others, such as nationality or educational background, thus resulting in discounting its influence altogether:

“I never thought it was my gender. I thought it is my name. Because I have Croatian roots and it's not a typical Austrian surname which is [surname], and I do not know... While my gender was kind of okay, I actually had good experiences... This was... I don't know. No, actually, not on my gender. It was rather my name. I think.” - E11.

“Nobody ever asked me how it is to be a scientist and an entrepreneur. Nobody ever said: 'Oh, your scientific entrepreneur, how's that going for you?'. But that's a much stronger identity to me because if you grow up as a scientist, you'll just always be one. You cannot just let it go. And, I guess you can also not let go of being a female, but it's just different. Because that's something about my personality or my identity that people are aware of because I tell them, but it's not something that I have to constantly think about. [Being a scientist] Influences me much more than being female because every decision ... is rational, and I need a lot of data to make decisions. And it is very hard for me to make quick decisions, which is not very good business... So, that influences me on a daily basis, much more than being a female.” - E8.

“It’s a hard question. and yes and no because I mean from a business perspective, no, but at the same time, I feel that as a woman, I am less risky, and maybe it takes more time for me To jump into some opportunities, and when I look at how men do the same, they are more risky, and they are less afraid of doing stuff. So, from a business point, there was no difference and absolutely no difference.” - E3.

Throughout the interviews, a common, seemingly contradictory pattern emerged. Some entrepreneurs denied that gender had any noticeable or meaningful effect on their journey, only to provide examples of how it did in upcoming sentences.

While some women actively used feminist discourse to make sense of their experiences as entrepreneurs, others opted for willful ignorance of their own gendered experiences and identity, adopting a “there is nothing to talk about” mindset. As a result, they felt like their gender is not something worth commenting on or actively underlining in their online presence.

Being a ‘Good’ Feminist

A common implicit idea across many entrepreneurs was that there is a right way of being a feminist, which often manifested itself in statements around the importance of gender issues and awareness of them. In this case, being a feminist, or, in some cases, also a “woke” person, is a social norm that one has to uphold, especially as a woman. A “Good Feminist”, in this case, acknowledges structural issues and recognises their manifestations, and does not discriminate based on gender, nationality or ability.

An essential aspect of this theme is that one's gender becomes intellectualised, not a personal experience. Women distanced themselves from the structural issues, talking about it as not something lived but as factoid, a statistic to "acknowledge" and "be aware of":

"I have seen statistics that say that if you are seeking investment, You are far less likely to receive traditional types of Investment as a female entrepreneur." - E13.

Gendered experiences were presumed to be negative, often inflicted by "old white men". In many instances, when asked about the role of gender in the entrepreneurial journey, participants equated gendered experiences with discrimination. Among those, who reported discriminatory experiences, the source of them was often generalized as "old white men".

"Being aware" of the structural issues is then presented as an implicit norm that women have to comply with. One manifestation of such normative beliefs was the presence of disclaimers and identity work of "being a feminist".

" ...when I go and speak about my product about my brand, I speak it as in an individual and as well for my company. So as it's like, when I work I see everyone, even my colleagues as individuals not as men or women. So then maybe this is very strange thing to say but it's a way of how I deal with it so far, I didn't have any problems. ...I think I need to hear more about this matter from women. Only, now I started to be a bit closer to these two, or to be aware about these factors to understand how to identify where to identify when this happens. And so far, In my opinion, I never faced Anything like these, everything that I faced was regarding my professional performance and that's it and... I see it like that. yeah. But it's good to be aware about, the fact that you are a female and how far you can go and you should

go in order to show that independently if you are a man a woman, you are there to war or you are there to do business and that's it..."

Female Empowerment is a Business Opportunity

This theme is built around the repeatedly occurring idea that there is a window of opportunity at the moment for women founders to gain an advantage in the form of governmental support, accelerator programs, communities and additional PR value. They were sometimes accompanied by doubt in whether it is “fair” to have such an advantage “only because [they are] a woman” (E13). This, in turn, leads to the strategic deployment and performance of the identity of a female entrepreneur to secure these benefits.

In one of the interviews, the entrepreneur spoke about how her choice to have a female-only team was based on her personal preference to work with women, though it sometimes serves her as a unique selling proposition for some clients:

“...I only have female employees. And I don't write it in my job descriptions when I'm looking for people, but I actually always love to work with the women and that's why we are a girls team actually. And I wanted to stay on those terms. ...And there are a lot of men, especially in online marketing. So it's also like a USP and around where and a young female agency. ...And that's already something people appreciate. And especially women when women want to work with us.” — E11

Later, she adds that, though she does not feel the need to highlight it anywhere, she would if she knew it would give her an advantage in her business.

“And Yes, honestly maybe if it would somehow enhance the business, or I don't know, get me more clients, maybe I would do that. That's again a capitalist decision, ...not emotion. ... So I think that's fine enough. I don't need more Feminism here.” — E11.

In another case, an entrepreneur spoke at length about the discrimination she and her female partner faced because of their gender. However, when asked why they chose to highlight that their business is female-owned, she admitted to using the identity of a female entrepreneur strategically to attract opportunities and loyalty of customers:

“...We've come to notice that for other women, they love the story behind it and it makes them more likely, maybe, to purchase a product. Men don't really care. But our main buyers, our female anyways.” - E1

To Be or Not to Be (Yourself)

Central to this theme is the contradiction between the value of authenticity and the implied conventions of LinkedIn. Authenticity, integrity and the importance of showing up as the true self in business spaces were core values and significant parts of an entrepreneurial identity for many respondents. They spoke at length about not separating their professional and business selves, perceiving them to be synergetic. Every entrepreneur perceived their personal and entrepreneurial selves as inseparable and fueling each other.

“I think it's a complicated question because I never really thought about my identity as an entrepreneur. I think my personal identity is my entrepreneurial identity because who I am personally is who I am as an entrepreneur. I would say it reflects me as a person.” - E5.

“I think it would be very hard to have two totally different [identities]. Personalities or value systems that you would base your decisions on.” - E8

“It's really hard for me to distinguish between. my entrepreneur self and my other self because my entrepreneurship defines who I am. It's not like a nine-to-five job, and you just stop being an entrepreneur at night... I am an entrepreneur, and I don't have a different me.” - E2.

LinkedIn, however, is viewed as a platform with its own ground rules and implied conventions which, for some, conflict with the strive for authenticity and integrity.

The most commonly perceived “rule” of LinkedIn is the performance of professionalism and personal expertise. Another custom that was commonly brought up is a tendency to oversaturation and explicit self-promotion. These conventions are then negotiated in three ways: (1) accepted as is, even with a normative notion that “LinkedIn is not Facebook” and thus “is not a place for holiday pictures”, with no conflict between values and presence seen:

(2) compliance with compromises, where the perceived values of the platform are disapproved, but presence is upheld; and (3) “being human”, where personal themes are incorporated and perceived as an inseparable part of one’s professional self. In the case of compliance with the norms, “appropriate” professional topics are chosen: personal achievements and milestones, significant business news and original expert content. Some members even engaged in policing this order, which was reflected in the “LinkedIn is Not Facebook” code:

“I think I like LinkedIn because it's more professional and not Facebook. And I think there's a huge discussion about this also where this is the line because we're all individuals we all have personalities and personal life, that affects our business. Understand that. But at some point it's just Weird. And I don't want to know everything about my business partners like this personal stuff. I'm not interested” - E8

“LinkedIn. Is a social network only for professional purposes. In my point of view, I know that other people also share the vacation image with some professional twist, but this is not necessarily for me.” - E3

In the case of the second negotiation strategy, where norms are upheld, but strong dissatisfaction is present.

“To be honest, I sometimes scroll through the feed, but I do not really like the content on LinkedIn because it's all about. I'm excited. I'm thrilled to share and blah. So yeah. I don't know, I'm just not offense.” - E5

“And sometimes I just read through the feed and find some success stories as always, people who try to, I don't know, to say, it's not a success story, but then to tell you something, I don't know. it's not authentic, and I don't like this, it's not real.” - E11

The platform is then perceived as not a place for the most authentic selves, where one feels the most natural to be, yet “necessary evil”. Some entrepreneurs, whose careers are connected with visual arts and lifestyle industries, have compared the platform to Instagram, where, by their account, they could be more authentic and express their ‘true views’.

And in the case of the third negotiation strategy, entrepreneurs found a way to express their version of authenticity and “being human” in their content because their professional pages could not be complete without a personal touch.

“...I want to be a human still. and I think this needs to be portrayed and we are all humans and I feel like I mean, of course I can post a lot of stuff about conferences that went to or people that have met that are interesting and inspired in inspiring, but yeah, in the end, we're all human. So I think it's fine to post personal things. I'm, yeah, social media as well. Even if LinkedIn is a professional one.” - E12

Discussion

Multiple academic studies have already highlighted the importance of social media presence for entrepreneurs (Cunningham, 2013; Horst et al., 2020; Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014; Steinfield et al., 2008), and present study support that notion. Entrepreneurs see social media in general, and LinkedIn in particular, as an essential tool for advancing their businesses.

Central to the study's argument is the distinctiveness of LinkedIn compared to other social networks, specifically regarding the representation and negotiation of gender by women entrepreneurs. Unlike other social media with a higher emphasis on personal life and identity, in the eyes of female entrepreneurs LinkedIn serves as a digital continuation of a traditional “professional” space, where masculinized norms of professionalism have to be performed.

The findings showed that LinkedIn’s mandate of professionalism and self-promotion conflicts with the entrepreneurs’ value of authenticity.

The analysis suggests that women entrepreneurs see LinkedIn differently than other platforms and negotiate their gender in a different way than has been previously described in literature

on social media. At the same time, findings still correspond to insights about offline forms of gender negotiation that happen in professional spaces.

Earlier studies highlighted how women business owners leverage their femininity and image of “having it all” to achieve success on the platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Duffy & Hund, 2015; H. Heizmann & Liu, 2020). In this regard, LinkedIn seems to have completely different conventions: the platform is viewed as a place to be “professional”. The tension between professional and personal is inherently gendered, reflecting the divide between the stereotypically female and masculine qualities that have already been highlighted in studies of female entrepreneurship (Bruni et al., 2004; Greene & Brush, 2018; P. Lewis, 2006). In this way, LinkedIn becomes a digital continuation of traditional offline professional spaces that were discussed in earlier studies (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Tinsley et al., 2009). Like in the previous research (Chasserio et al., 2014; Crosina, 2018; Diaz Garcia & Welter, 2011; Marlow & McAdam, 2015), there seems to be a divide between personal and professional, reflected in the notion that LinkedIn is a place for talking about your achievements, professional interests and expertise, not “pictures from vacations”, emotional struggles or other personal topics. This implied rule of conduct contradicted the notion of entrepreneurial and personal selves being inseparable and authenticity being the core of entrepreneurial identities. Reconciling these two value systems has been a topic of significance across the data, with three patterns of negotiation emerging: complying and upholding the status quo, complying and compartmentalising and challenging the notion of professionalism through introducing more “humanity” and personal life. This pattern corresponds to the previous research, where the traditional norms of entrepreneurship and gender have been either “done”, i.e. upheld, or “redone”, meaning challenged and renegotiated.

In previous studies, using “Women’s Weapons” have been a way of “doing gender”: harnessing internalised femininity as a tool to gain the upper hand in the “boys club” (Diaz Garcia & Welter, 2011) through, for example, employing a more compassionate approach. Even though the same notion has appeared across the interviews, a notable distinction from the previous studies was the idea of using the status of a female founder as an asset. The new perspective brought by this study is that entrepreneurs strategically used this status of a “female entrepreneur” to gain support from the government, support organizations, or PR value, whether they subscribed to the identity of a or not. In general, this intellectualised, somewhat distanced approach to gender was the most characteristic difference from the previous research. Across the interviews, women have, at the same time, tried to acknowledge and distance themselves from their gender and its implication, all the while trying to use the advantages it provided.

This study provides a new perspective on the role of gender in entrepreneurship and its online communication. However, the insights and results have limited capacity for extrapolation due to both sample and the study method. This research relied on self-reported data, often subject to various biases. The social desirability factor has to be especially considered: the topic seemed to prime the respondents to perform specific values and behaviours, such as underlining their commitment to feminist values. Furthermore, this research employed reflexive thematic analysis, which makes the researcher an active part of the analysis, employing their subjectivity to make sense of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2021). The sample, though comparable to other field studies, is still too small to be representative.

Moreover, snowballing approach to recruitment resulted in heavy skewness towards entrepreneurs based in Austria and on a relatively narrow class of women, all of whom were educated and belonged to the upper-middle-class racial majority. From the intersectional perspective, the sample does not represent minorities and marginalised groups, despite

including immigrants and queer people. Last but not least, the interviews were held in English, which is not the native language for either of the respondents and the researcher, which may result in several subtleties being lost to translation.

Conclusion

This study was aimed at understanding how gender is negotiated in online entrepreneurship communication within the context of professional social media. LinkedIn appears to be a space where women entrepreneurs both strategically employ their gender identity and try to distance themselves from it. The analysis revealed a complex relationship between beliefs about gender, feminism, entrepreneurship and professionalism, ultimately manifest in negotiating these identities in LinkedIn presence. Women entrepreneurs are at least partially oblivious to the effects which gender plays in their experiences and identities, trying to minimise its role in their journeys. This led to a disassociation of their gender from their entrepreneurial selves, especially in the context of the “professional” space of LinkedIn. At the same time, a high level of intellectualised awareness of gender was present: both in the sense of obligation to uphold feminist ideals and of the identity of a female entrepreneur as a source of business opportunities. This trifecta of somewhat controversial yet, coexisting themes around gender provide a glimpse into the identity negotiations that modern women entrepreneurs face both online and offline. The fourth and final theme augments understanding how entrepreneurs approach their online presence by examining the strategic approach to “(not) being yourself” in their LinkedIn and beliefs about authenticity, professionalism and norms that underline these decisions.

While this research provides valuable insights into the gendered dynamics of professional identity on LinkedIn, its limitations warrant consideration. The reliance on self-reported data

and the inherent subjectivity of reflexive thematic analysis might introduce biases. Notably, the skewness in the demographic sample, concentrating largely on upper-middle-class women entrepreneurs from Austria, calls for caution in generalizing these findings. Furthermore, the linguistic barriers introduced in conducting interviews in English—a second language for both respondents and the researcher—might have obscured certain nuances.

Future research might broaden the scope by diversifying the demographic range, thus capturing the experiences of entrepreneurs from marginalized and minority groups more extensively. Employing mixed methods, beyond reflexive thematic analysis, could further triangulate and enrich our understanding of the subject. Moreover, exploring how men entrepreneurs negotiate their identities in similar settings can offer comparative insights, elucidating the gender-specific strategies employed in professional self-presentation.

In conclusion, this study underscores the intricate tapestry of identity negotiations women entrepreneurs navigate in their professional online presentations. Today, in the digital age, women entrepreneurs are carving a distinct identity, subtly yet strategically negotiating the interplay of gender, professionalism, and entrepreneurship. It's imperative to acknowledge, understand, and celebrate these complex negotiations, as they form the bedrock of modern entrepreneurial landscapes.

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Appendix 1. Questioning Route

Data Transparency Informed Consent

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Before we begin, I would like to provide some important information about our discussion today.

The topic of our interview involves exploring your experiences as an entrepreneur and specifically how you represent yourself and your business on LinkedIn. I will be asking you questions about your experiences, so there is no right or wrong answer, I am only interested in YOUR opinions and experiences.

I want to assure you that your privacy is of utmost importance. The data collected during this interview will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Your responses will be anonymized, which means that any information that could potentially identify you will be removed or changed.

Our conversation will be recorded to ensure that your views are accurately represented and then transcribed. The video will not go anywhere, but an anonymized transcript may be attached as a supplement.

You can stop the interview or refuse to answer any question at any time without giving a reason. If, at any point during or after the interview, you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask.

Do you have any questions before we start? And are you comfortable proceeding with the interview under these conditions?

Main questions

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself?
2. Now, could you briefly tell me about your business?
3. Could you describe your entrepreneurial journey? How did you end up doing what you do?
4. In your view, has your gender played a role in your entrepreneurial journey? If so, could you share some examples?
5. Do you feel your gender played a role in your professional career before you started your own business?
6. How would you describe your entrepreneurial identity?
7. Does your entrepreneurial identity overlap with other roles and identities you hold in your life? If so, could you share some examples?
8. How do you express your identities in professional spaces?
9. Let's talk about LinkedIn. How do you use it, and in what scenarios?
10. What are your main goals when using LinkedIn? Do you have a specific strategy behind your use of the platform?
11. How do you represent yourself on LinkedIn? What messages or impressions do you aim to convey through your profile?
12. How do you decide what to share on LinkedIn? What factors influence your decisions?

13. Could you talk about the various topics you cover in your LinkedIn posts?
14. How do you navigate the presentation of your gender identity on LinkedIn?
15. Do you have any affiliations with women-focused entrepreneurial support organizations? If so, how do you represent these affiliations on your LinkedIn profile?