



It's all about identity: The identity constructions of LGBT entrepreneurs from an intersectionality perspective

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Abstract

This article illustrates how lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) entrepreneurs engage in identity construction from an intersectionality perspective. Our empirical findings suggest that the sexual identities of our interviewees are essential aspects of their daily business lives in terms of their entrepreneurial identities and their motivations, key success factors and the barriers they face. By analysing their experiences from an intersectionality perspective, we illustrate how the sexual minority entrepreneurs in our study internalise and respond to dominant societal ideas characterising ‘the entrepreneur’ as masculine, heterosexual and male, vis-à-vis ‘the homosexual’, constructed as feminine, weak and different. We discuss two predominant manifestations of their responses to these contextual forces, portrayed in their identities as entrepreneurs and sexual minorities simultaneously and the ways these identities are experienced. Our study contributes to the literature on minority entrepreneurship, specifically the LGBT entrepreneurship literature, and on intersectionality and career sustainability, focusing on *how* LGBT entrepreneurs conduct entrepreneurship at the intersection of their sexuality and gender.

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Introduction

Generally, the literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) entrepreneurship has focused on how entrepreneurs target gay consumers and the gay market (Haslop et al., 1998; Kates, 2004; Sender, 2001), their motivations and their experiences as entrepreneurs (Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2021; Galloway, 2007, 2011; Kidney, 2021; Schindehutte et al., 2005). In this article, we go beyond explaining the motivations and experiences of LGBT entrepreneurs, examining how their experiences can be understood through their identities. Using an identity perspective, we gain a deeper understanding of how LGBT entrepreneur backgrounds, biographies and sense of self contribute to them becoming an entrepreneur and their experiences of entrepreneurship.

While entrepreneurial identity is an established field, it has been argued that we need a stronger entrepreneurial identity research agenda (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). For instance, Radu-Lefebvre et al., (2021: 1550) discuss how entrepreneurial identity is an important concept to denote the process of entrepreneurship, given that it helps individuals make sense of questions like ‘Who am I?’ and how entrepreneurs achieve legitimacy and belonging (Essers et al., 2021; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial identity is also deployed to gain a better insight into how entrepreneurs make decisions, their actions and how they build organisations, including how they acquire resources (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). In this article, we extend this literature by using an intersectionality approach within the context of sexual minority entrepreneurs. In so doing, we are able to include broader societal structures, such as gender and sexuality, in scholarly work on entrepreneurial identity. We go beyond functionalist, essentialist and individualist approaches (Ahl, 2006; Cooney, 2021), which would typically compare the characteristics of ‘deviant’ entrepreneurs with ‘mainstream’ entrepreneurs. Accordingly, we intend to counter the stereotypical views of entrepreneurs as masculine, heroic and heterosexual as, though outdated, they still inform many norms against which entrepreneurs are judged. Indeed, it is these stereotypical views with which LGBT entrepreneurs are compared – constructing them as deviant (Hamilton, 2013; Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Welter et al., 2017).

For this purpose, we use the concepts of identity and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1998; Holvino, 2010). Identity involves the representation of an individual’s self-image, values, norms and beliefs (Chasserio et al., 2014; Gatersleben et al., 2012). We consider identity as the process of becoming – a fluid and multiple state – rather than one of stability constructed against various social systems (Essers and Benschop, 2009). We also contend that people, including entrepreneurs, have multiple social identities that intersect and position them in society (Gatersleben et al., 2012). Intersectionality has been central to the discussions of inequality, discriminatory practices, identity questions and power relations (Cha et al., 2013). It highlights the inseparability of categories of social identities such as gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality. The concept of intersectionality has been applied to several groups of other entrepreneurs, such as Muslim women entrepreneurs, Emirati women entrepreneurs (Branagan et al., 2018; Essers and Benschop, 2009) and ecopreneurs – men and women – in an Indonesian context (Gunawan et al., 2021). However, with few exceptions (Pijpers and Maas, 2014), there is a lack of empirical work from an intersectional perspective on LGBT entrepreneurs and the ways entrepreneurial identities intersect with others, such as sexuality and gender identity.

The research question underpinning this article is: *how do LGBT people in the Netherlands engage in identity construction as entrepreneurs, at the intersection of their sexual and gender identities?* In addressing this question, we contribute to the scholarship on minority entrepreneurship, particularly

on sexual identity in entrepreneurship, and earlier research on intersectionality in professional and entrepreneurial contexts (Dennissen et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Romero and Valdez, 2016; Zander et al., 2010). We show how, on the one hand, structural discrimination can inhibit one's gender and sexual identities within the expression of entrepreneurship. On the other hand, it can create empowering avenues to perform and express oneself as an entrepreneur. Accordingly, our work reveals that there is a variety of reactions to structural challenges as well as entrepreneurial identities among LGBT individuals.

This article is structured as follows: we commence by discussing the literature concerning LGBT entrepreneurship and combine this with intersectionality theory. Next, we elaborate on our methodological, sampling and coding/analytical approach. Then, we illustrate how we made sense of our empirical data, followed by a discussion of our findings. We discuss two predominant manifestations portrayed in their identities as entrepreneurs and sexual minority individuals simultaneously. The first observed manifestation concerns under-emphasising their sexual identity, as opposed to their entrepreneurial identity, since these identities seem to collide. The second concerns a manifestation in which sexual and entrepreneurial identities are constructed as mutually strengthening. Finally, we outline our conclusions within which we reflect upon our contributions, limitations and avenues for further research.

Theoretical approach

LGBT entrepreneurship

As noted, earlier studies of LGBT entrepreneurs have focused almost exclusively on motivations and the success factors they encounter as sexual minorities. Chung (1995) suggested that personal (interests, work-related values and skills) and environmental factors (job discrimination, homophobia/negative stereotypes/societal stigmas and fear of AIDS in the workplace) interact when a gay or lesbian person considers starting their own business. Of course, we must historically contextualise these barriers as the 1990s was a notably homophobic period given the hostility invoked by the AIDS epidemic, wherein gay men were often vilified as being perverse and diseased (Herek et al., 2007). Accordingly, many such men experienced employment discrimination with an atmosphere of fear and shame related to homosexual people (Morris, 2016).

Reflecting on Chung (1995), Galloway (2007, 2011) discussed the key entrepreneurial motivations of sexual minority entrepreneurs. She distinguished between push (necessity) and pull (opportunity) factors, the latter comprising the opportunity to pursue individual and political/social entrepreneurial interests using insider knowledge to target specific niches for gay and lesbian people, such as pensions, life insurance, and mortgages. In addition, there was the attraction of gay-friendly areas in cities where a diverse 'gay market' had emerged over time (ibid., 2007: 276).¹ We should contextualise these pull factors by noting that by this point, social and political movements had moved LGB (less so the T) rights forward and that there was a move towards reclaiming a positive sexual identity (Morris, 2016). Galloway's push factors refer to harassment in employment and the desire to escape career discrimination and the 'pink ceiling' in a 'macho culture', and the heteronormativity and prejudicial behaviour evident in imposed heterosexual standards often expressed in homophobic jokes. Galloway (2007, 2011) also suggested that entrepreneurs within this group emerged less from primarily business reasons but more to provide products and services to the gay community, supporting and connecting their grassroots community organisations.

An identity perspective has rarely been applied, and where it is apparent, it focuses on the motivations of LGB (rather than T) entrepreneurs and explores 'being gay' as an identity marker in general terms. For instance, from her data, Galloway (2011) stated that being out as gay seemed

easier as an entrepreneur than as an employee. However, most of her respondents did not want their sexual orientation to be common knowledge among their customers or to be identified as a 'gay firm'. Moreover, she posited that gay entrepreneurs may consciously avoid involving their sexual identity in their businesses for fear and/or the experience of homophobic behaviour. Schindehutte et al. (2005) reported that most of their respondents indicated that their sexual identity did not benefit their businesses. However, at the same time, they also related management values, such as sensitivity, compassion, tolerance, social consciousness and non-discrimination, to being gay. Collins (2004) and Haslop et al. (1998) found that LGBT entrepreneurs targeted the gay market, purchased from gay vendors, sponsored the gay community, explicitly sought out gay investors and identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual owners. Galloway (2011) specified that the businesses of gay and lesbian entrepreneurs were mostly in the service and retail sectors, from where they were often pushed into alternative sectors where it was easier to be out. She suggests that gay and lesbian entrepreneurs, as a reaction to stigmatisation, sometimes develop a specific distinguishing identity and target new markets.

Contemporary research often focuses on the relationship between entrepreneurial and sexual identities. For instance, Rumens and Ozturk (2019: 671) shed light on 'how heteronormativity shapes the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities, showing how heteronormativity retrenches both the heterosexual/homosexual binary and the male norm at the core of dominant entrepreneurial discourses'. Analogously, Marlow et al. (2018) criticised the normative ideal of the entrepreneur as male, masculine (see also Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017) and heterosexual and investigated how heteronormativity disturbs the everyday lives of LGBT entrepreneurs. Drawing on in-depth interviews and conceptual resources from queer theory, they illustrated the effects of heteronormative entrepreneurial discourses evident in the types of gay male sexualities which are discursively mobilised to (re)construct 'normal' gay male entrepreneurial identities (Marlow et al., 2018: 671).

Finally, Ahmed and Hammarstedt (2021) explained how LGBT entrepreneurs in Sweden face various inequalities in society, particularly among workers and customers, which can ultimately lead to economic and managerial implications for labour and business outcomes and the well-being of individual entrepreneurs. Kidney (2021) explored the impact of LGBT people's coming out experiences on their businesses, reflecting on the external and internal discrimination linked to this process. However, she also found that coming out could benefit businesses through the cultural capital acquired by engaging with the wider LGBT community.

To gather a more fine-grained insight into such specific experiences, Kidney (ibid.) stated that an intersectional approach would be a good avenue for further research. Hence, building on the above-mentioned reflections and insights and following the lens of entrepreneurial identity, we propose an intersectionality perspective on identity construction. Such a perspective will enable a better understanding of how LGBT entrepreneurs deal with the complexities of simultaneously being an entrepreneur and being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and how they experience being and becoming an entrepreneur while coping with highly heteronormative, cisgender structures (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019).

An intersectionality perspective

The entrepreneur's social identity reflects their belonging to social groups and their experience of certain values, norms, rules and behaviours (Chasserio et al., 2014). Entrepreneurs, like anyone, have multiple social identities which can overlap and complement or contradict one another (Essers and Benschop, 2009). The concept of intersectionality demonstrates the (in)separability of inequalities and identities, such as ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality in specific social, cultural and institutional

contexts (McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Hence, as Collins (1998: 63) stated, ‘intersectionality does not engage in an analysis of separate systems of oppression (gender, race, class), but explores how these systems are mutually constitutive, that is, how they “articulate” with one another’. Accordingly, applying an intersectionality lens in our research enables us to scrutinise the simultaneous and dynamic interaction between different ‘axes’ of identity (Holvino, 2010) within an entrepreneurship context and unravel the relations of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1995).

In the field of entrepreneurship, several studies have explored the intersections of gender, ethnic and religious identities (Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Romero and Valdez, 2016). For example, in their work on female Muslim entrepreneurs of Turkish and Moroccan descent in the Netherlands, Essers and Benschop (2009) analysed the boundary work these women performed at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion. This entailed crafting identities to extend the boundaries of what was allowed for these women to resist traditional, dogmatic interpretations of Islam. Hence, they demonstrated that the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and Islam required extensive identity work to cope with structural inequalities and create room for entrepreneurship.

Although the concept of intersectionality within an entrepreneurial context is not new, *sexuality* as a category of inequality and identity is relatively underexposed and far less understood. Noting the significant role of heteronormativity in entrepreneurship discourse, we argue that including this category may shed further light on how an identity approach can be utilised in entrepreneurship studies. Heteronormativity concerns gender and sexuality and legitimises inequalities regarding both categories (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019) at individual and societal levels. Heterosexuality is the implicit norm against which gays and lesbians are considered ‘deviant’ and ‘other’. In line with this, Holvino (2010: 255) stated that in organisations, ‘lesbians, because of their lack of alignment with heterosexist privilege, may participate less in the dynamics of seduction’. In her view, articulating stories of organisational actors across different axes of power and identity practices is an important intervention directed at changing dominant organisational discourses which privilege, among others, heterosexuals (Holvino, 2010).

We also extend this thinking to transgender entrepreneurs, given their deviance from cisgender, heteronormative ideals (Fletcher & Marvell, 2022). We claim that Holvino’s (2010) perspective also applies to entrepreneurship as several dominant categories are implied in the mainstream construction of entrepreneurial identity, resulting in the archetypical entrepreneur as a western, masculine and heterosexual man (Collins and Moore, 1964; Perren and Jennings, 2005). From the perspective of the hegemonic masculine discourses on both entrepreneurship and sexuality, gay and lesbian entrepreneurs are ‘other’ (see also Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017). Studying LGBT entrepreneurship from an intersectionality perspective and how entrepreneurial identities dynamically interplay with LGBT identities will deepen our understanding of how these minority entrepreneurs experience inclusion and exclusion within this highly gendered, heteronormative construction of entrepreneurship.

Methodology

We contextualise this study in the Netherlands, a relevant setting, given that the visibility and social acceptance of LGBT people have increased over recent decades (Kuyper et al., 2016). For example, the country was ground-breaking in legalising gay marriage as early as 2001 (Kollman, 2017), compared with other EU countries. Despite this, LGBT people in the Netherlands still experience high levels of discrimination, including physical/verbal attacks, and the Dutch government is still investing considerable funds into activities that increase their acceptance in schools, sports and the workplace (Fric, 2021).

Table 1. Overview of interviewees.

Respondent	Sexuality	Age	Education	Industry	Years as business owner	Employees (size of the firm)	Average weekly hours
Keri	♀♀	57	College	Law Consultancy	10	0	30–35
Gina	♀♀	54	Secondary	Hospitality and Catering	32	7	50
Harriet	♀♀	49	College	Publishing Industry	11	0	40–45
Jessica	♀♀	31	College	Multi-Media Consultancy	7	0	20
Ingrid	♀♀	43	Secondary	Hospitality and Catering	9	10	50
Eric	♂♂	23	College	IT Consultancy	6	5	60
Fred	♂♂	61	College	Retail trade	25	4	40
Dan	♂♂	50	University	HRM Consultancy	4	10	45
Chris	♂♂	37	University	Hospitality and Catering	9	10	80
Alex	♂♂	53	University	Business trade	7	7	50–55
Bert	♂♂	67	Primary	Retail trade	34	4	40

We consider the interviewees as active agents who choose, or choose not to mobilise certain aspects of their identities in particular circumstances. As such, both positive and negative deployment of identity categories were possible, meaning that a person can both be advantaged and, simultaneously, disadvantaged. To understand these processes, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 LGBT entrepreneurs (see Table 1 for details). In analysing the interviews, we do not assert generalisations but rather explore the nuances of intersectional identity construction. We contacted interviewees through our networks and those of a research assistant (identifying as LGBT himself), then through sampling from existing interviewees (see also Browne, 2005). We considered these useful ways to enhance the willingness to discuss complex and sensitive topics.

Our sample consisted of five lesbian (including a trans woman who identifies as a lesbian) and six gay Dutch entrepreneurs, all of whom were White. This sample is not meant to generalise the whole population of Dutch LGBT² small business owners, nor was this our intention. Rather it enables us to gather more in-depth insights into a specific group of individuals and how they experience their gender, sexual and entrepreneurial identities. We explicitly sampled some LGBT entrepreneurs situated in the so-called ‘gay market’, as well as some that were not, given previous evidence that some LGBT entrepreneurs cater more specifically towards, and are more embedded within, their own gay or LGBT community (Galloway, 2011; Schindehutte et al., 2005). Moreover, as we saw patterns and similar themes in the 11 interview findings, we concluded that it is likely that we had reached a sufficient sample or saturation point (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall, 1996).

The 11 in-depth interviews were performed by a research assistant, following a life story interview protocol (McAdams, 2012), which entailed asking the interviewees to think about their lives as if it were a book, including chapters. They were asked to focus on the messages they received from their families and peers regarding sexuality, gender and entrepreneurship and to discuss the most important scenes in each chapter related to identity construction. The interviewees were also invited to elaborate on the most important events and people in their lives (Essers, 2009). Each participant was interviewed once for an average of 1.5 hours. For this purpose, we prepared a list of

open-ended questions. Some examples were: ‘Could you tell me something about your background?’; ‘What made you start your own business?’ and ‘Could you tell me about your latest success?’ If necessary, at a later stage of the interview, questions were more specific. For example, we asked, ‘How would you estimate the role of your homosexuality with respect to . . .?’; ‘Did being a male gay person play a role in your entrepreneurship, would you envision?’ and ‘To what extent did you experience something entrepreneurial in this life-chapter?’

The interviews were, with permission, audio-recorded and conducted on a one-to-one basis and mostly took place at the entrepreneur’s place of business. We stressed that all information would be anonymised and dealt with confidentially. Therefore, we used pseudonyms in the findings. The collected narratives were transcribed verbatim and analysed using narrative analysis (McAdams, 2012) to distil and reveal how the narrators made sense of what happened in their lives. We coded using the programme ATLAS.ti. First, we conducted a content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), then applied open coding to uncover the main themes mentioned by all 11 participants in their life stories (Peters and Wester, 2007). Following an intersectionality perspective, we focused on those interview fragments that reflected on how the interviewees experienced and constructed their identities at the intersection of sexuality, gender and entrepreneurship.

Second, we returned to the material and searched for appropriate excerpts to illustrate how these LGBT entrepreneurs made sense of these topics. We organised the codes into four relevant sub-themes, all revealing the meaning and significance of an entrepreneurial identity. The themes – *becoming an entrepreneur and the role of sexual identity, internalising and reproducing dominant entrepreneurship discourses, turning barriers into strengths, and birds of a feather and imagined community* – were thoroughly discussed with the second and third authors of the article. For the empirical section, we selected excerpts from seven interviewees since we considered these the most compelling cases, rising from the collective analysis. These cases reflect the essence of the themes and processes of intersectionality while also incorporating the context within which these identity constructions occurred. Table 2 shows examples of interview fragments at the level of quotes and examples of sub-themes or in other words: thematic or analytic codes, from which the main themes, pattern codes, emerged, following Peters and Wester (2007).

Third, we conducted a discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) of the main themes to interpret these quotes and deepen our understanding of the interviewee’s identity construction process. When conducting this discourse analysis, we focused on what they said in specific contexts and how they made sense of their experiences related to their entrepreneurial identities. Besides transcriptions, we also used interview notes, for example, the brand’s logo, decorations of the firm and emotional expressions, as extra data to reflect on their identity construction processes.

We should note that our data analysis represents our interpretations of each interviewee’s meaning-making stories. In this respect, we must be aware of the impact that our role as researchers may have had upon the research process. As a researcher, it is essential to adopt an empathetic stance to understand the interviewee’s world from their perspective. Having similar identities might contribute to the process of meaning-making, as this might create a more equal atmosphere (Essers, 2009). For instance, the interviewer, being gay himself, may have put the stories, regarding, for example, the coming-out period of the interviewees, into perspective, because of his own experiences. Therefore, for the sake of analysis validity, his interpretation was discussed with the first author of this article – a Western, heterosexual, feminist, female researcher and the third author, a Western, gay researcher.

Analysis and empirical findings

In the analysis, we demonstrate how interviewees made sense of the intersections of gender, sexuality and entrepreneurship in their daily business experiences. We show the differences within

Table 2. Analysis of coding.

Main themes (pattern codes)				
Example of:	Becoming an entrepreneur and the role of sexual identity	Internalising and reproducing dominant entrepreneurship discourses	Turning barriers into strengths	Birds of a feather and imagined community
Sub-themes (thematic/analytic codes)	(a) Having experienced gay related discrimination in former careers	(a) Experiencing stigmatisation and one's own stereotyping	(a) Identifying new market niches based on background	(a) Influence of being part of LGBT and other minority networks
	(b) Key success factors and sexuality	(b) Experiencing conflicts in entrepreneurial situations	(b) Constructively reacting on negative reactions	(b) Deploying ones gay background/relations
Quotes	(a) 'I have worked in companies where the management consisted mostly of men and they were very into the women jokes. I felt weird between them (. . .).'	(a) 'When I participate at network conventions where heterosexuals' entrepreneurs are, it is usual that you tell in what kind of business you are situated. At the moment you are telling them –publisher of lesbian novels – the reactions are 'oh okay. . .' There is always a kind of threshold. . . I notice that it is different; people do not expect it'. 'Recently my client was at my place, and then I slipped of my tongue and said "honey" to my partner; I sensed a very hostile reaction. I feel that straight entrepreneurs are more able to express their identities in front of their customers, than LGBT entrepreneurs, so I am more careful to reveal my sexual identity in these instances'.	(a) 'I believe that you can profile yourself, because you can be of service to other groups that have it difficult (. . .)'. 'Expectations are sometimes very stereotypical and you can occasionally play nicely with that. Customer expectations. If you that does good, that's part of your success'.	(a) 'We have organised a network meeting for lesbian entrepreneurs and that way you are looking for each other to be able to support each other, you can reinforce each other'. 'It's a nice bonus, it's also who you drink with, assignments come out of that. I also look for gay drinks, but I don't want to be judged on my sexuality, but on the quality of the work. Don't position as gay unless it's really a customer benefit'.
	(b) 'Sympathising and having empathy . . . I have been thinking about life, reflected on . . . It means that you made a choice that is obviously not easy, that is why having empathy is of importance . . ., being open about sexuality, to look different to your own life, in such a way, you can draw attention to other people'.	(b)	(b)	(b)

intersectionality and its dynamics by focusing on the dominant themes among diverse LGBT entrepreneurs, using an intersectional lens to explore identity.

Becoming an entrepreneur and the role of sexual identity

Besides being motivated by opportunities in so-called gay markets, our empirical material showed that entrepreneurial motivations were related to sexual identity. For instance, some interviewees did not feel they could autonomously be themselves in their previous careers, for example, by openly expressing their sexual identity. Dan explained:

A colleague was openly gay and [he] always was confronted with gay jokes about men and sexual situations, while I behaved in a very neutral way (. . .) it means that I did not expose myself, because I regarded it an unsafe environment.

And Alex said:

I have almost lost my job because they discovered that I was gay (. . .) afterwards I decided to keep my sexuality in the background (. . . this) unconsciously influenced me to go into self-employment.

Both Dan and Alex indicated that they did not feel free to express their sexuality in their former heteronormative and even homophobic employment contexts and witnessed the negative consequences when they or a colleague revealed their sexual identity. This links with the notion of an unsafe working environment, as noted above. Consequently, these interviewees choose to hide their sexual identity to avoid possible negative employment consequences in their former careers. In this respect, heteronormativity at the workplace had clear consequences for how Dan and Alex expressed themselves. Alex confided that this environment influenced his decision to become self-employed, believing that an entrepreneurial identity would enable him to express, rather than hide, his sexual identity. In a similar vein, Dan explained:

Homosexuals have chosen for the freedom, the coming-out, to choose for your own life and being deviant and that makes you think ‘how important is my career anyway’?

For Dan, coming out as gay and deciding to become an entrepreneur were closely linked to the concept of freedom. It seems that, although there is a cost in the decision to be deviant and to, more or less forcibly, leave a career as an employee, Dan connected the independence of an entrepreneurial identity to the freedom to be out as a gay and, therefore, be(come) oneself, stressing ‘how important is my career anyway?’ Reflecting on this conceptualisation of freedom, we notice that combining a gay identity with an entrepreneurial identity enables some interviewees to align who they want to be with the normalised boundaries of existing organisations. The latter was recognised by the third author of this article, who had prior discussions about this experience in previous research on LGBT entrepreneurs and networks and empathised with them, given his own sexual identity.

Several interviewees elaborated on the connection between being gay and experiencing freedom through disconnecting gay and lesbian identity from parenthood. Dan, for example, clarified:

You know, if you have four children, that is quite expensive, and you are responsible for them, but I do not have to nurture children (. . .) I don’t have to do it, as I do not have any, so do not need the financial security.

Dan stated that if he had children, he would have needed financial security to fulfil his obligations as a parent and would have perhaps chosen another career path. By connecting his sexual identity with not being a parent, he stressed that he can take financial risks, and to be an entrepreneur. Interestingly, in the empirical literature, a reverse idea is suggested. For instance, Marlow et al. (2018) showed a positive, albeit low, correlation between having children and lesbian and gay self-employment, explaining this by the higher degrees of flexibility inherent in some forms of entrepreneurship. An additional idea about how the process of becoming an entrepreneur might be linked to, in this case, not having children, was offered by Eric:

As a heterosexual, you can have children, how obvious that is for some this can differ from others, like homosexuals (. . .) this has been a drive for me to leave something behind, as a legacy, such as my own company or a book (. . .) just to leave my footprints behind (. . .) this definitely plays a role.

Eric presumed that having children for gays and lesbians is less obvious, hence a parental identity is generally associated with a heterosexual identity. Yet, he expressed determination ('definitely') to leave behind ('footprints') some creations of himself ('my own company or a book') through his entrepreneurship, suggesting that he will be remembered through his work rather than his children. In a sense, he seemed to partly construct his identity as a gay entrepreneur as a compensating identity for parenthood, a way of leaving behind a legacy or history of his existence. Deliberately choosing and constructing an entrepreneurial identity seems to support his identity as a childless person. Furthermore, another interviewee, Chris, suggested that banks perceive gay entrepreneurs as low risk due to them not being parents. The discursive connection between gay identity and freedom, both in the sense of having liberated oneself and of having no strings attached, is 'so powerful in the Netherlands, precisely because gay men –as unattached and autonomous subjects – stand for the ideal citizen of neoliberal modernity' (Mepschen et al., 2010: 970). The gay male entrepreneurs interviewed for this study seem to have internalised this discursive connection. From our material, it seems that this connection influenced their entrepreneurial identity more than it did for the lesbian entrepreneurs we interviewed. For them, being parents appears more socially accepted.

Internalising and reproducing dominant entrepreneurship discourses

Some interviewees also elaborated that they experienced barriers in their former professions and society more widely, such as the stigmatisation of homosexuality. Fred reflected on how he dealt with the stereotyping he perceived among his employees:

Look, I work with heterosexuals in my office a lot. I make sure that I am the one who has the authority and the money. You know, if I tell heterosexuals that I have a driver's license, the reactions are, 'do YOU have a driver's license?' They have an image about gays that cannot drive (. . .), so what would they think about a gay entrepreneur? I need to have power.

While Fred is the manager of his own business, he reasoned that, due to his sexual identity, it is not self-evident to his employees that he is the one with authority. He stated that heterosexuals, particularly in masculine, entrepreneurial sectors, have negative impressions of gays as weak. This association with gay identities, intertwining sexuality and gender identity, contradicts the traditional, hegemonic image of entrepreneurs as strong and masculine. To position himself as an entrepreneur who occupies power in his own office, Fred tried to contradict the image of gays being weak; he did so both on the level of the specific image as well as on the general level, namely by unequivocally taking the position of the person who is in charge (saying 'making sure that I am the one who

has the authority and the money'). Here, we notice an intersection with gender as the image of weakness, that is, femininity, is commonly associated with gay men. To position himself as an entrepreneur and sustain his entrepreneurial career, Fred finds he needs to counteract the image of gay men as feminine men. He expressed concern that his counterparts cannot picture an affirmative connection between a gay and entrepreneurial identity. Doing so, Fred constructs an entrepreneurial identity that aligns with and even reproduces a heteronormative, masculine entrepreneurship discourse, given that aspects of authority, power and wealth seem to be reflected in Fred's account. This may signify to Fred what constitutes an ideal masculine male leader. However, it also implies more than a gendered perspective, reflecting a capitalist and neoliberal ideal of what a successful entrepreneur is, or should be.

As another example, Harriet indicated how uneasy she felt when she spontaneously called her partner 'honey' in front of a customer. As we see it, openly revealing her sexual minority identity within an entrepreneurial context made Harriet feel uncomfortable. Dan went somewhat further into the meaning of such day-to-day incidents:

I would not be quick to say 'I am Dan and I am gay' when approaching my customers. While, as a heterosexual, you can easily say: 'My wife is at home and she prepared dinner and the children need to go to bed.' That is more or less the stereotypical story. And if you had a rough weekend, but I do not have a rough life, you are not going to say 'I had such a rough party last Sunday, guess what I experienced in the darkroom (. . .) people have strange ideas about it, it has a sexual mark.

Dan explained that he would not reveal his sexual identity when approaching customers but instead, prioritises his entrepreneurial identity in public settings. While heterosexuals may not explicitly reveal their sexual identity during customer interactions, they may easily and without any fear of negative consequences implicitly disclose it by referring to their private situation (for instance by mentioning 'my wife is at home', as Dan noted), which would not damage their entrepreneurial identity. Dan explained that disclosing his sexual identity by talking about his private relationships might have negative consequences. He thought that his customers might have an image (as Dan formulated it: 'strange ideas') of gays leading turbulent sexual lives (Dan stating 'it has a sexual mark'), an image he seemed to have internalised, suggesting he did not have such sexual predilections for 'a rough life', in Dan's own words. Again, there is an intersection with gender as the alleged image of engaging in 'rough' practices pervades images of gay men being perverse, rather than lesbian women. As the LGBT community is not as restricted by the traditional, linear heteronormative relationship sequence (dating, engagement, marriage, children etc.), the ambiguity and availability of different options and routes for LGBT relationships mean that they can easily be rendered perverse and sexualised rather than natural and romantic (Herek et al., 2007). Moreover, given that LGBT people were historically, and still are in many countries, unable to express their love without fear of being criminalised or shamed by religious dogma, some forms of sexualised behaviour persist, not just because of the availability and freedom to express different forms of sexuality, but because it becomes a negatively internalised self-fulfilling prophecy (Grov, 2004).

Turning barriers into strengths

As a lesbian, transgender entrepreneur, Keri has faced numerous physical attacks and severe intimidation:

I have been insulted and beaten (. . .) every time it happens, it is very painful. However, tolerance must be created by people themselves (. . .) and I know that people do not choose me as a consultant, due to the way I look (. . .). Recently, a person called me, saying 'I know where to find you', in other words, I will

be beaten up. My reaction was ‘well, coffee will be ready’, and the man did not have anything to say in return.

From Keri’s comments, it appeared that much of this was related to her physical identity, her outer self, as she stated, ‘the way I look’, enabling her to cope with the distress this caused her. For trans people, the issues around passing as an affirmed gender can be complex and engender mixed feelings and responses. Importantly, individuals who do not always ‘pass’ will be visible to others, so the self-determination surrounding disclosure and managing one’s identity at work can be restricted (Beauregard et al., 2018). Despite this, Keri seemed to have accepted that some customers cannot reconcile her physical identity, which relates her sexual and gender identities to her entrepreneurial identity. She was aware that her appearance made her lose customers, making it more difficult for her to sustain her career as an entrepreneur. However, she recognised the serious impact of the attacks she experienced (saying ‘Every time it occurs, it is very painful’) because of not conforming to gender norms. Simultaneously, she implied that she resisted feeling intimidated and, on the contrary, asserted that people like her should help to stop discrimination by creating tolerance. She provided an example of how to do this in her response to the person who threatened her. She refused to react the way her intimidator expected her to, replying ‘coffee will be ready’. She constructed her identity as a strong and positive female entrepreneur. However, Keri’s experiences show that at the intersection of gender, sexuality and entrepreneurship, keeping expressions of identities separate is not an option. This suggests that turning to entrepreneurship is not necessarily the way out of unemployment or discrimination in the labour market, as the fear of being beaten up might still be there.

When conducting the interview, the interviewer got the impression that Keri, although authentic to herself and with a sense of strength from her sexuality, gender and entrepreneurial identity, had to persist in the face of prejudicial and discriminatory behaviour. We discussed this within our author team and sensed some connection with emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979) and, more specifically, the notion of surface acting, namely displaying emotions that are not authentically felt to perform one’s role as required by institutional norms. We reflect that in this case, even if what other people around you are saying and doing hurts, offends, or angers you, you cannot let it show. Keri felt that she must keep going and still smile. Although emotional labour has been studied extensively within the context of employment, less attention is focused on it within the entrepreneurship literature (Burch et al., 2013). Reflecting on her business, a law firm, Kerri might have been acting within a more conservative, traditionally masculine sector. This reflection made us think that the specific operating sectors might either complicate, or ease, the challenges of the intersections of gender, sexuality and entrepreneurship. This is highlighted by empirical evidence that certain stereotypes about LGBT people (deviant, sexualised) may be more active in particular occupational and industrial contexts. As such, susceptibility to prejudice and discrimination may vary across different contexts (Mishel, 2020).

Keri is not the only interviewee who suggested that negative experiences may strengthen their entrepreneurial identity. Chris explained how the difficult experience of coming out as gay may turn out to be an asset in the context of entrepreneurship:

What also plays a role is the coming-out period. One of the most difficult things in life is telling your parents you are gay and being attracted to the same sex (. . .) Eventually, it makes you stronger, that’s for sure. Before the coming-out, many homosexuals are very anxious, quiet and withdrawn (. . .) After the coming-out, they notice that they can be themselves, more social and open and very direct, and these are necessary factors as an entrepreneur.

Chris asserted that coming out enables gays and lesbians to overcome insecurities about their sexual identity and become themselves. He considered that facing the difficulties associated with

coming out encourages the capabilities and behaviours necessary to be an entrepreneur, that is, being ‘social and open and very direct’. This reflects the positive benefits that can accrue from an entrepreneurial identity in becoming generally more open and authentic about one’s stigmatised identity at work, even though it may come with some costs and challenges (Fletcher and Everly, 2021). Chris argued that his initial coming-out process was very significant as it helped him establish a self-confident homosexual identity, an asset for an effective entrepreneurial identity. Other interviewees also stated that the coming-out process made them stronger and contributed to the decision to become an entrepreneur; hence, the development of their sexual identity seemed to have added to their entrepreneurial identity. Several more interviewees explained how they considered their gay and lesbian identities an asset for their entrepreneurial identities due to the specific consciousness homosexual identity induces. Eric, for example, explained:

As a homosexual, you see that the environment is different and you realise that there are minorities, which makes you more open-minded, and I do perceive this as a form of intelligence (. . .) you are being confronted with differences, your thinking process and perspectives start earlier (. . .) because you can view things from a distance.

Eric connected his gay identity to a specific way of perceiving and thinking, resulting in greater open-mindedness. He suggested this was an asset for his entrepreneurial identity, enhancing his capacity to understand a diversity of customers. Keri aligned with his view, explaining that she has ‘been thinking about life and [has] reflected on feelings’, enabling her to ‘focus on other people’. She asserted that sympathising and having empathy are useful in business, so reflecting on her identity as a transwoman has furthered her entrepreneurial identity because, for an entrepreneur, it is valuable to build strong relations with diverse stakeholders.

Hence, some of our interviewees suggested that the skills and abilities they perceived as arising from their sexuality and gender identities helped them focus on their environment and strengthened their entrepreneurial identities. Such skills were also recognised by a gay entrepreneur, who, although not a participant in this study, had been a guest lecturer for the first author and read our paper. We argue this may relate to the temporally dynamic nature of sexual identity management. Many LGBT people will have to make everyday decisions about the extent to which they disclose and are open about their sexuality and gender identity to those with whom they interact (Mohr et al., 2019). Therefore, an LGBT entrepreneur may decide to disclose and be open with some of their closest clients, suppliers and stakeholders yet, withhold some personal information from others about whom they were unsure, for example, in new business dealings. As such, LGBT entrepreneurs are regularly and actively scanning their external environment for cues that signify whether it is safe or not for them to disclose and be more open and authentic (Fletcher and Everly, 2021). This ability to effectively understand and process cues in the external environment might be useful for entrepreneurial learning and innovative behaviour (Politis, 2005). Accordingly, some interviewees considered gay and lesbian identity to be a positive factor for their entrepreneurial performance.

Birds of a feather and imagined community

Several interviewees explained how they acquired gay customers because of their knowledge of, and inclusion in gay culture. Some noted that they often networked with other LGBT entrepreneurs offering mutual assistance. For example, Keri and Harriet reported that they are involved in a lesbian internet network, wherein they find lesbian entrepreneurs in other branches and acquire customers. Most interviewees acquired customers through their personal gay networks. Fred commented:

. . . if I can acquire an order, I will deploy my sexuality (. . .) if I sense that the other person is a homosexual, as well, I would take advantage of it (. . .) you are an entrepreneur, aren't you?

Fred not only hinted at addressing a potential customer in terms of a common gay identity in general but also by deploying his so-called erotic capital. We suggest that, by saying, 'you are an entrepreneur, aren't you?' he legitimised using this aspect of his gay identity, referring to the higher goal of his entrepreneurial identity. Accordingly, using one's sexual identity can help sustain an entrepreneurial career. Yet, some interviewees seemed to feel the need to contradict the heterosexual stereotype that narrows down gays and lesbians to sexual practices to protect their careers. For instance, they explicitly stated that they did not have sex with customers.

From our analysis, it appears common that customers choose one of our interviewees as a supplier because of a perceived commonality in their identities. For example, Chris explained that, while he did not run a stereotypical gay bar (we again observe to some degree an internalisation of the heteronormative entrepreneurship discourse), lesbian and gay customers are attracted to his bar because of his sexual identity, which is known to his public, and which allegedly contributes to making the bar a gay-friendly environment. Eric provided another example:

The guys from COC [Dutch interest organisation for LGBTs; authors] knew that I was gay, and they knew I had expertise with [name software, AUTHORS], and they automatically came to our organisation. Afterwards, we got several gay organisations [as customers], because we delivered quality work. We do have gay customers, but we are not actively searching for them. Apparently, these gay organisations prefer to work with gay suppliers. I feel honoured, but I do not want to be chosen because of my sexuality but rather because of my expertise.

While Eric does not specifically target gay customers, he reported that they are attracted to doing business with his company due to his sexual identity (sharing 'The guys from COC knew that I was gay'). Eric described this as self-evident (stressing 'they came automatically') and suggested he appreciates it too (saying 'I feel honoured'). While he estimates that, in these cases, his sexual identity strengthens his entrepreneurial identity, he distances himself from actively connecting his gay identity to his entrepreneurial identity, explicitly stating that he does not actively search for gay customers. He maintains this position because as an entrepreneur, he wants to be chosen because of his expertise rather than his sexual identity.

We suggest that Eric's position parallels women's and minority groups' ambivalence towards preferential treatment. As he resisted exclusion from businesses, jobs, networks and so on, based on his perceived identities, he also resisted being included on this very basis. This may reflect an anxiety about being perceived as a gay man who primarily does business with gay organisations. Reflecting on other conversations and interviews undertaken by the third author with LGBT entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom, it seems some LGBT entrepreneurs might be concerned about potential negative connotations related to nepotism or cliques (privileging one's family as it were, being insular) and, therein, stereotypes of feminine gay men within such cliques, which may tarnish their businesses' brands, for example, being 'bitchy' and gossiping with themselves. Additionally, it may create the impression that the business is gay-specific, which may narrow its market. In this sense, there may be an effort to separate the personal entrepreneurial identity (Fred for instance stating 'I am a proud gay businessman') from the business itself (Eric emphasising 'my business is not exclusively a gay business'). Otherwise, there can be tensions between the identity of the person and that of the business. The business will have a brand and image to which the entrepreneur wants to relate to complement their identity. The two may be aligned or in tension. We also suggest that community organisations view businesses run by lesbian, bisexual, gay or

trans entrepreneurs as part of their own beneficiary/stakeholder community and, therefore, find it necessary to support them. While this may more strongly apply to visibly LGBT-oriented shops and venues, such as bookshops and bars, there may well be an extension of this perceived support (from the LGBT community for LGBT-oriented businesses) to other sectors where LGBT entrepreneurs are active.

Discussion: LGBT entrepreneurship; is a sustainable career possible at all?

In this article, we have sought to understand how eleven LGBT entrepreneurs in small Dutch firms construct their entrepreneurial identities at the intersection of their sexual and gender identities. We have explored how they cope simultaneously with the complexities of being entrepreneurs and sexual, and in some cases gender, minorities. Our findings reflect the desire of LGBT entrepreneurs for autonomy and independence and the ability to spot an opportunity in the market. Accounts of stigmatisation and discrimination in earlier paid jobs was more prevalent in our study than in previous research (Galloway, 2007, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Schindehutte et al., 2005). We believe our findings challenge prior works as we analysed how gender and sexuality, being categories both of in- and exclusion, collide with professional, entrepreneurial identities.

A novel aspect of our study is that it shows how motivations, obstacles and success factors experienced by LGBT entrepreneurs are related to their identity construction. In line with Rumens and Ozturk (2019), we found that the interviewees cautiously align practices and utterings concerning their identities with heteronormative entrepreneurship discourses. Our analysis demonstrated how these minority entrepreneurs feel they need to react to dominant societal ideas concerning the image of an entrepreneur as masculine, heterosexual and male and that of a homosexual as feminine, weak and different. Accordingly, we went beyond earlier findings on LGBT entrepreneur experiences, finding two essential manifestations of intersectionality faced by the interviewees, arising from the surrounding structures, and expounding their relation to the identity categories of sexuality and entrepreneurship. In so doing, the LGBT entrepreneurs in our study resorted to various strategies to deal with discourses revolving around these identity categories and hence, with the stereotyped and contradictory expectations concerning who and what they are, protecting the sustainability of their career (De Vos et al., 2020). In particular, our empirical work indicates that by taking important stakeholders from their surrounding context into account, they deliberately considered how manifestations of their identity would be evaluated by these stakeholders and, through this, their success as an entrepreneur. The latter might imply that to protect their business success – a core outcome of one's career sustainability as an entrepreneur – they sometimes choose to put their well-being second and not openly share their identity categories. Following the process model of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020), while this might not be a problem in the short run, not being able to express oneself over a longer period might harm career sustainability.

More specifically, first, we observed a manifestation in which some of our interviewees appeared to want to understate their sexual identity, as opposed to their entrepreneurial identity, since these identities seem to collide. In our analysis, we observed a need to address taken-for-granted heteronormativity in their day-to-day entrepreneurship by not showing their sexual identity as entrepreneurs. Such visibly cautious strategies may be explained by their experiences living as openly homosexual, still a contested identity in Dutch society. They seemingly try to avoid the negative consequences of stereotypes of gay and lesbians as Other/Deviant because they consider these preconceptions detrimental to their entrepreneurial identities. Accordingly, we observed a

manifestation in which sexual and entrepreneurial identities were co-constructed cautiously. Others were equally conscious of these stereotypes but actively conformed to heteronormative standards echoing Rumens and Ozturk's (2019) 'entrepreneurial gay masculine identity', reproducing a heteronormative, masculine entrepreneurship discourse. They actively demonstrate that they do not fit in with the stereotypes of gays and lesbians they observed in their employees or customers. Others tried to separate their expressions of sexual identity vis-a-vis entrepreneurial identity to avoid the negative consequences of dominant views on homosexuality on their entrepreneurial identities; they contended that their sexual and entrepreneurial identities are unrelated. Instead, they mentioned general prerequisites and conditions for being a successful entrepreneur.

Analogously, some interviewees did not want to be judged as entrepreneurs based on their sexual identity but rather, their expertise as entrepreneurs. Extending earlier work on LGBT entrepreneurship, several interviewees for example, Eric, seem to simultaneously connect and disconnect a gay and lesbian identity and an entrepreneurial identity. This may also highlight tensions between one's identity as an LGBT person and the business brand/image they want to project externally. Thus, aiming to obtain entrepreneurial legitimacy (Essers et al., 2021) from external stakeholders, they appear to experience limits in expressing their sexual identity. In some sense, by saying what makes them successful entrepreneurs is more about good business acumen downplays the role of the specific qualities and interests of the entrepreneur and their salient gender and sexual identities. This reinforces the dominant capitalist/neoliberal logic within entrepreneurial narratives of taking strategic advantage of a gap in the market.

Second, we saw a manifestation in which sexual and entrepreneurial identities are constructed as mutually strengthening. This is partly accomplished by connecting both identities to their notion of freedom; becoming an entrepreneur is linked to liberation from dominant heteronormativity in organisations. Several interviewees perceived that being an entrepreneur enabled them to be out as lesbian or gay. Whether they consciously employed their sexual identity as an entrepreneur, or not, the interviewees no longer felt the need to conceal it as they had done so, when an employee. Several interviewees constructed their sexual identity as an asset for their entrepreneurial identity. For example, they considered that being lesbian or gay in a heteronormative society enabled them to develop their competencies and a social consciousness that strengthened their entrepreneurial identities. They reported that their emotional capabilities and empathy developed due to their deviant societal position. Similarly, they considered coming out as gay, lesbian or trans, and the struggle this involved, also made them stronger as entrepreneurs. These are new findings that our intersectionality approach enabled us to demonstrate.

Additionally, the sexual identities of the interviewees enabled them to target new niches, as they were seen as part of the wider local LGBT community. This corroborates Galloway's (2001) argument that gay entrepreneurs may develop a particular identity that strengthens their entrepreneurial abilities to target new markets. Likewise, it supports the wider entrepreneurship literature showing how entrepreneurs often focus on networking within communities that reflect their identities and social groups (McKeever et al., 2015). Indeed, over the past decade, LGBT business and professional networks have become established across many European countries that help to create a knowledge-sharing community, strengthening links between one's sexual/gender identity and being a successful entrepreneur (EGLCC, 2022). We also suggest that community organisations view businesses run by lesbian, bisexual, gay or trans entrepreneurs as part of their own beneficiary/stakeholder community and therefore, find it important to support them. While this may apply more to visibly LGBT-oriented shops and venues, such as bookshops and bars, there may well be an extension of this perceived support from the LGBT community for LGBT-oriented businesses to other sectors where LGBT entrepreneurs are active.

Our findings illustrated that when a sexual identity was seen as mutually beneficial for an entrepreneurial identity, interviewees expressed an entrepreneurial identity that contradicts the stereotyped normative, masculine entrepreneurial image. This expression reflected a broader entrepreneurial

identity that enabled them to integrate capabilities, such as empathy and care, deemed feminine, into their entrepreneurial identities. Another novel finding suggests that some constructed parenthood as an obstacle to the freedom and the risks of entrepreneurship, arguing that being childless is enabling as it releases more capital for the venture, which is itself less risk averse, not needing to generate stability and a steady income. Interestingly, business appeared to have a mitigating effect on the lack of children, standing in for creation, pride and legacy. This association between sexual identity, liberation from oppression and being childless is also very much discursive; it echoes an intersection between heteronormative discourses about gender and family and the neoliberal discourse of active citizenship (see Mepschen et al., 2010).

Reflecting on these points and the fact that interviewees frequently discussed their careers encourages us to think more about how and when decisions to become an entrepreneur take place in one's career and how this contributes to career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020). For example, where a gay or lesbian identity misaligns with an entrepreneurial identity, the meaning of one's sexual identity might be constrained by prior negative experiences within earlier careers, even if prejudicial, discriminatory experiences were not a motivation for starting a business. In these cases, sexual identity was not experienced as a source of pride and affirmation but rather a detriment to be concealed. Just like they feared repercussions from management and co-workers (Galloway, 2007: 278), the interviewees felt the needed to conceal identity to protect future career sustainability (see also De Vos et al., 2020) and economic value (Galloway, 2007) as an entrepreneur. Given that concealment and internalised stigma can damage well-being (Riggle et al., 2017), we argue that this is worrying.

Where a gay or lesbian identity and an entrepreneurial identity are viewed as mutually strengthening, it seems that sexual identity is a positive motivational source for an entrepreneurial career. Accordingly, a sexual identity is claimed and owned by the individual, whereby previous negative experiences or deviant personal qualities can be positively reframed as valuable resources/skills utilised in their career as an entrepreneur. As such, this self-determined embracing of one's sexual identity, as a means of offering specific strengths and new perspectives, might strengthen the choice of an entrepreneurial career. Our research suggests that the experience of coming out might make gay and lesbian entrepreneurs more resilient, and the atypical life/sexual orientation and its emotional and psychological burden in a heteronormative environment might offer additional qualities for sustaining an entrepreneurial career. Furthermore, we argue that the business might offer symbolic power that allows challenges to normative stereotypes. In addition, an authentic identity may be in tension, or accordance, with the business brand (Cha et al., 2019). If experiencing a sense of authenticity as an LGBT entrepreneur is centrally important, the entrepreneur may want the business to reflect that authenticity. On the contrary, if the business is shaped in ways that deflect or attenuate any signifying cues or values related to their sexual/gender identity, it may cause inner existential tensions and a sense of alienation from the business over time. Additionally, there may be pressures to conform and be resilient in the face of prejudice and discrimination, as Keri noted. There may be a need to enact emotional labour strategies (Hochschild, 1979), such as faking emotions to maintain one's perceived external image as a positive and successful LGBT entrepreneur.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As this study follows up on the research agenda of entrepreneurial identity, the success and performance of LGBT entrepreneurs were not the focus of this particular article. However, it would be interesting to explore how LGBT entrepreneurs use different, potentially competing or contradictory judgements to evaluate their own success and performance in business. Moreover, our study did not investigate the psychological thinking processes related to the coming-out period that could potentially make LGBT entrepreneurs stronger and more resilient. It would be interesting to explore

this psychological process. This has potential, given that personality traits, personal resources and environmental context may intersect in ways that produce particular effects on entrepreneurial behaviour (Korunka et al., 2003). This trajectory also opens up avenues for future research that may further explore the tensions between striving for freedom and authenticity as an LGBT entrepreneur versus striving for business and entrepreneurial success within a heteronormative commercial environment.

Another issue is our adoption of a narrative approach from an individual perspective that limits our exploration of wider environmental and structural factors to help make sense of this group of minority entrepreneurs. Therefore, we recommend future research explores the potential role of LGBT-specific business and professional networks in facilitating a mutually strengthening set of identities and developing the resources and capabilities needed to sustain entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, additional research is needed to understand how these networks may foster entrepreneurial behaviour that pushes LGBT entrepreneurs away from their own markets and into the wider heteronormative mainstream and how LGBT entrepreneurs express their sexual and gender identities as they transition into these markets. Likewise, more research is required to provide insight into the industry contexts wherein negative stereotypes about LGBT people are likely to be prevalent and require more effort to address. There is also a need for research to interrogate how LGBT entrepreneurs make everyday decisions about the extent to which they disclose and are open about their sexual and gender identities when undertaking day-to-day entrepreneurial activities (Mohr et al., 2019).

Finally, in line with an entrepreneurial identity approach, we did not explicitly look at the total careers of LGBT people and their sustainability. Therefore, we strongly recommend future research into LGBT entrepreneurs' identity constructions across career structures and over time to view this phenomenon holistically, addressing influential factors associated with relevant stakeholders, such as relatives, close friends, colleagues, previous employers, and, once established as entrepreneurs, customers and suppliers (De Vos et al., 2020). Stressing that the agency of a person and their ability to protect and enhance their career sustainability also depends on and interacts with their context, we also welcome studies that further explore the role of contexts, such as culture, legal frameworks around LGBT rights, and the visibility of LGBT communities. Finally, we need to ascertain whether these minority entrepreneurs experience their careers as more sustainable compared to when they were in employment. Overall, our findings highlight the need for more empirical work investigating how these manifestations exist and unfold across countries and occupational settings.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the heteronormative and gendered nature of entrepreneurship. We contribute to studies in the field of minority entrepreneurship and, in particular, to the limited LGBT entrepreneurship literature, illustrating how heteronormativity in society and organisational settings shapes the identities of LGBT entrepreneurs (Romero and Valdez, 2016), and how heteronormativity is active and regulates the sexual and gender identity constructions of LGBT entrepreneurs (see also Rumens and Ozturk, 2019: 683). Our study contributes to the field of intersectionality within the workplace (Holvino, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Romero and Valdez, 2016) by showing how the dominant images of entrepreneurial identity, as Western, masculine and heterosexual, and stereotypical views on LGBT identity are still prevalent. We reveal that sexuality may be constraining and/or empowering one's entrepreneurial identity, and vice versa, and we illustrate how LGBT entrepreneurs employ their agency to deal with these complexities. Our findings also inform the literature on sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) and the inclusion of LGBT workers in the labour market (Trau and Härtel, 2004). Although entrepreneurship can be perceived as a strategy to avoid labour market and career disadvantages, it does not remove the societal, cultural barriers of heteronormativity and homophobia (Galloway, 2011). However, our findings show how

reactions to these barriers vary across LGBT entrepreneurs. Some react in ways that enable them to feel empowered through entrepreneurship, such that they find a sense of freedom, autonomy and authenticity in themselves and their careers.


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Notes

1. However, it is important to mention that we cannot generalise these gay markets; as neither all gay entrepreneurs target gay communities nor all gay communities/markets are being served by gay entrepreneurs.
2. Using the wider LGBT umbrella term, which acknowledges and reflects a broader range of sexual and gender identities, we are also aware of the fact that LGBT as a collective term might sometimes be contested too, grouping people with many different backgrounds and identities in one category, in which some individuals might not recognise themselves.

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