

Exploring Entrepreneurial action through a Queer lens

Abstract

This study critically examines entrepreneurial action theory through the lens of queer phenomenology, focusing on how the complex 'coming out' process of a transgender woman entrepreneur can reconfigure entrepreneurial action. While entrepreneurial action theory traditionally focuses on decision-making within uncertain environments, it rarely accounts for the experiences of transgender women. Transgender women often navigate the social space dominated by heteronormative. The complex nature of the 'coming out' process can vary greatly depending on personal and social circumstances. This research focuses on the lived experiences of Ann, an Australian and successful entrepreneur who has started to experience a decline in the business after her 'coming out' as a transgender woman. The conservative views of society led Ann to conceal her identity over 10 years after starting the business, which eventually led to a mental breakdown. This highlights the need for future research on entrepreneurial action theories to account for diverse gender identities. For policymakers aiming to foster economic growth amid volatility, supporting transgender women entrepreneurs' mental health during transitional periods is essential for sustained business success.

Exploring Entrepreneurial action through a Queer lens

Introduction

This article critically examines and integrates two distinct discourses: gender in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial action theory (EAT) through the lens of a transgender woman entrepreneur. With the increasing recognition of the impact of entrepreneurship on economic growth (Pradhan et al., 2020), scholars are interested in understanding the actions entrepreneurs take to create new ventures. Entrepreneurial action is "purposeful and consequential human activity in which entrepreneurs engage to introduce something new to the world" (Wood et al. 2021, p. 148). EAT predominantly involves intentionality in decision-making in entrepreneurial activities, often within an uncertain environmental landscape (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). However, little research addresses how this landscape changes for transgender women entrepreneurs and how the differences in their experience reconfigure the EAT.

The focus of this paper is on transgender women due to the high levels of discrimination and increased reports of depression compared to other LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual persons; the plus sign signifies the inclusion of other diverse identities) communities (Bretherton et al., 2021; Strauss et al. 2020; Moreno et al., 2024). There is only sparse literature on the transgender community in the gender in entrepreneurship literature.

Decades of gender in entrepreneurship research have explored male domination in this space and the obstructions faced by women (Brush et al., 2006; Lewis, 2021; Swail & Marlow, 2018; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). Marlow (2020) draws attention to this narrow perspective of analyzing gender through the lens of heterosexual women, often ignoring other non-binary gender identities, such as entrepreneurs belonging to the LGBTQIA+ communities. Transgender individuals in the past have pursued entrepreneurial activity to

create a workplace that aligns with their identity (Cavalcanti & Ferreira, 2022; Oosterhoff & Hoang, 2018). Given the discrimination transgender women face, we draw on queer phenomenology to understand that transgender entrepreneurs' relationship with the space around them is crucial in understanding the scope of entrepreneurial action.

In queer theory, phenomenology examines how our experiences shape our sense of belonging (Ahmed, 2006). The space is dominated by normative social action (where heterosexual relations between a man and woman are considered to be normal). If we decide to inhabit the space differently (i.e., in contrast to the social expectations, i.e., transgender women), then it is often labeled as "offline" and stigmatized by society. Thus, queer phenomenology offers a lens to understand the experiences of a transgender woman entrepreneur. The research question explored here is "how the disorientation with the space can disrupt the entrepreneurial action of transgender women entrepreneurs?".

This research focuses on a single case study because the experience of transgender individuals can vary. Many factors can influence an individual to be a transgender person, which can include experiences either early in life, later in adolescence, or adulthood (APA, 2024). In addition, a transgender person can have a different gender identity and sexual orientation. A transgender individual's sexual orientation can be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual; thus, there are a myriad of journeys throughout their life that will define and redefine the space they orient (APA, 2024). Given the complexities and diversity of transgender individuals, to gain a nuanced understanding of the entrepreneurial actions of a transgender woman entrepreneur, the best option is to focus on a single case study. This approach captures the nuances of a transgender woman entrepreneur's life, from family expectations to revealing gender identity at the latter stage of her life.

This research can advance the field of gender in entrepreneurship, contributing to a better understanding of the constraints associated with entrepreneurial action. This paper is

also deemed helpful to policymakers who face challenging economic conditions and are exploring avenues to encourage entrepreneurial activities. The paper is structured as follows. First, research methodology, data analysis, and findings of this research. Practical implications are presented before the conclusion of this paper.

Methodology

This research uses the narrative inquiry lens and visual method to collect data. Narrative inquiry records an individual's lived experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2012). A participant's lived experience from childhood is captured that outlines their journey to becoming an entrepreneur. Each journey of an individual in the LGBTQIA+ community will have a different narrative experience because the social space they are dominated by heteronormativity. To adapt to the heteronormative space, everyone goes through a different identity disclosure process, and disclosing gender identity and sexual orientation to the public involves a constant navigation of the social implications (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). Given the diverse and complex histories of transgender individuals shaped by their unique coming out journey, it is most effective to focus on a single case study

Understanding entrepreneurs' experiences remains underdeveloped, so two methods are used to capture imagination and emotions. Building on Clarke and Holt (2019), drawing is used to access the non-linear understanding of entrepreneurial experience. Drawing is one of the ancient forms of human communication (Stiles, 2014). Pictorial representation, such as drawing, encourages participants to freely draw emotions and experiences, thus providing an opportunity to be creative (Stiles, 2014).

Clarke and Holt (2019) asked entrepreneurs to draw an image of their organizational venture. The participant was asked to draw their feelings before and after starting their venture.

Data Collection and Analytical Strategy

The participant was approached through the LGBTQIA+ association in Tasmania, Australia. Tasmania has been reported to have some of the nation's lowest average income, high unemployment, welfare dependency, reduced health outcomes, and is the last Australian state to decriminalize homosexuality (Grant, 2021). The first author of this article interviewed Ann (pseudonym), a transgender woman business owner. Ann was born as male and later transitioned as female within the 36-45 age-bracket, who owns a business in northern Tasmania. She started her business in 2009. Before becoming an entrepreneur, Ann was an Australian defense personnel member.

The analytical process in this paper is similar to Marlow and McAdam (2015) and Swail and Marlow (2018). In the first stage, the author team repeatedly reads the interview transcript to familiarize themselves. The first two authors listened to the interview a number of times to ensure that it was consistent with the transcript. In the second stage, broad categories of themes were developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on queer phenomenology and EAT.

Analysis

Initialization

Initialization is the first meaningful step toward a venture (Wood et al., 2021). Initialization often unfolds alongside the chronology of events. In Ann's case, this initialization was accompanied by a series of events in her life. Initially, Ann worked as a small engine mechanic in the Australian Army. Mechanic jobs are staples of masculinity, so being a mechanic, Ann was able to prove to herself that she was not a female. Besides, Ann and her father used to invest money into buying collectible cars. The father-son relationship was valuable to Ann, and because of her mechanical background, they decided to start a lawn mowing business. She started her own business after her father passed away. The lawn

mowing business was very lucrative in rural areas, with many retired people with little disposable income, so they were interested in repairing the lawn mower rather than purchasing a new one. They came to Ann to fix the mower, and through word of mouth, she started to get younger families as her customers. Thus, her business venture began to grow.

Ann was asked to draw an image of her identity prior to starting a business. With a booming business, Ann looked happy before starting the business. Ann elaborated how prior to starting the business, she used to hide her gender identity and live her life as a man with a buttoned-up shirt, pants, shoes, and a smile on her face. The smile on her face does not reflect how she feels; she used to smile to align with social expectations.

Orientation and Space

Starting a business helped Ann realize she was no longer a little boy. She did not have to prove it to anyone, as she built her own business from nothing. By the time she started her business, her father passed away. Her father wanted her to take care of the family, which Ann started doing.

When Ann realized the misalignment with her position as a man in relation to the space she occupies. She decided to reveal her gender identity to her family and the public. She lost some friends as they realized Ann was a different person from what they knew her as. Her brother was very supportive and still provided her with financial support. Even though her brother supports her, the rest of her family has "thrown her aside." Ann mentioned that her family turned on her when she had no more money to give. She even told her mother not to visit her anymore. This represents the image she drew, where she is wearing a dress but has a sad expression. It is challenging to reveal an identity that misaligns with social experience.

The entrepreneurial activity enabled Ann to be brave and disclose her identity. She need not worry about her colleagues, and her loyal customers gave her the confidence to reveal her identity.

Mental Health

Suppressing Ann's identity for years started to impact her business. Ann was afraid to reveal her gender identity for fear of living in a mental hospital. Ann was raised in a family that held traditional beliefs, which regarded people with her 'transgender' identity as unusual or strange or abnormal. Hearing those disrespectful comments, she thought her family was calling her 'abnormal', which negatively impacted on her well-being. Moreover, not completely healing from the loss of her father contributed to her emotional crisis.

The interview was conducted in 2021 when Ann was transitioning from a man to a woman. She revealed her identity two years before the interview. Due to the emotional toll, she reduced her business hours to two and a half days a week. Suppressing her true identity for so long had impacted her business. Ann no longer works full-time and knows she will not achieve the financial success she once had. However, Ann acknowledges that as long as she can generate enough income to maintain her subsistence, that shall be deemed adequate for now.

Practical Implications

The practical implications section will focus on government policies because of increased economic volatility. Businesses can help to regulate economic disruptions through employment, spending behavior, and investment. Dwyer et al., (2021) found that among individuals experiencing gender transitions, 75% of the community hid their gender from society due to abuse, and 95% of the participants said that their gender identity was due to trauma or pathology. Such an unfavorable attitude of society further creates mental illnesses in the population, which disrupts their entrepreneurial success.

One of the challenges Ann is facing is that she is still going through the transition process; the government could provide both financial and non-financial support to ease the transition process and impact on mental health. Ann is currently in her 40s; as she concealed her identity for 40 years, it started to significantly affect her mental health. This study indicates that policymakers could provide inclusive entrepreneurial and social spaces to celebrate diverse identities, so concealing the identity would not have an adverse effect on business sustainability and individual's mental health.

Conclusion

While gender identity space is evolving, it is pertinent to note the complex nature of EAT. Scholars have often evaluated the theories through objective reality and overlooked the potential entrepreneurs from diverse gender identities to contribute to the economy. The limitation of this study is the focus on a single transgender woman entrepreneur, with no observed impact of sexual orientation in the data. We highlight policymakers' importance in providing an inclusive space for entrepreneurs to embrace their gender identity to reduce the risks to entrepreneurs' mental health and business sustainability. Future research may include studying the lived experiences of a greater number of men-to-women transgender entrepreneurs. Additionally, comparing the lived experiences of women-to-men transgender entrepreneurs with men-to-women transgender entrepreneurs also offer unique insights to scholars and policymakers.

Bibliography

- American Psychological Association, 2024, July 8, *Understanding transgender people, gender identity and gender expression*. <https://www.apa.org>.
<https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression>
- Bretherton, I., Thrower, E., Zwickl, S., Wong, A., Chetcuti, D., Grossmann, M., Zajac, J.D. and Cheung, A.S., 2021. The health and well-being of transgender Australians: a national community survey. *LGBT Health*, 8(1), 42-49.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0178>
- Brumbaugh-Johnson, S.M. and Hull, K.E., 2019. Coming out as transgender: Navigating the social implications of a transgender identity. *Journal of homosexuality*, 66(8), 1148-1177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253>
- Brush, C. G., Carter, N. M., Gatewood, E. J., Greene, P. G., & Hart, M. M. (2006). The use of bootstrapping by women entrepreneurs in positioning for growth. *Venture Capital*, 8(1), 15-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691060500433975>
- Cavalcanti, A.L. and Ferreira, J.J., 2022. The entrepreneurial orientation of LGBT Brazilian start-ups: Context and antecedents. *Strategic Change*, 31(4), pp.415-425.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.2512>
- Clarke, J.S. and Holt, R., 2019. Images of entrepreneurship: Using drawing to explore entrepreneurial experience. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 11, p.e00129.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2019.e00129>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V. (2013). Narrative inquiry. In D. J. Clandinin & V. Caine (Eds.), *Reviewing qualitative research in the social sciences* (pp. 166-179). Routledge

- Connolly, M.D., Zervos, M.J., Barone II, C.J., Johnson, C.C. and Joseph, C.L., 2016. The mental health of transgender youth: Advances in understanding. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(5), pp.489-495. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.012>
- Darden, B.B., Kellermanns, F.W. and Best, E.L., 2022. Entrepreneurial fear of failure: Transgender versus cis-gender entrepreneurs. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 18, e00332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2022.e00332>
- Dwyer, A. Grant, R. Mason, R and Barnes A. 2021. *Just Listen Properly like with Intent: LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians Telling us the Story*.
https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0025/247147/LGBTIQ-Tasmanians-Telling-Us-the-Story-Survey-Report-May-2022.pdf
- Freeman, M., Lerner, D. and Rauch, A., 2024. Dopamine and entrepreneurship: Unifying entrepreneur personality traits, psychiatric symptoms, entrepreneurial action and outcomes. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 21, p.e00461.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2024.e00461>
- Grant, R., 2021. Not going to the mainland: queer women's narratives of place in Tasmania, Australia. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 28(8), pp.1130-1150.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2020.1784101>
- Herz, M. and Johansson, T., 2015. The normativity of the concept of heteronormativity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62(8), pp.1009-1020.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1021631>
- Hunt, R.A., Lerner, D.A., Johnson, S.L., Badal, S. and Freeman, M.A., 2022. Cracks in the wall: Entrepreneurial action theory and the weakening presumption of intended rationality. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 37(3), p.106190.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2022.106190>

- Israel, J., 2006. Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67(3), pp.523-545. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30141040>
- Kaur, V. (2024). Mirror neurons and neuroplasticity: The dyadic neurological foundations bridging entrepreneur-level and enterprise-level capabilities. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 22, e00497. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2024.e00497>
- Lewis, K. V. (2021). 'In the night kitchen': Gender, identity and artisanal work. *International Small Business Journal*, 39(7), 662-680. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026624262110051>
- Marlow, S., 2020. Gender and entrepreneurship: past achievements and future possibilities. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 12(1), pp.39-52. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-05-2019-0090>
- Marlow, S., & McAdam, M. (2015). Incubation or induction? Gendered identity work in the context of technology business incubation. *Entrepreneurship theory and practice*, 39(4), 791-816. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etap.12062>
- Marlow, S., & Swail, J. (2014). Gender, risk and finance: why can't a woman be more like a man?. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 26(1-2), 80-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2013.860484>
- McMullen, J.S. & Shepherd, D.A. (2006). Entrepreneurial action and the role of uncertainty in the theory of the entrepreneur. *Academy of Management review*, 31(1), pp.132-152. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2006.19379628>
- Moreno, A., Belhouari, S., & Dussault, A. (2024). A Systematic Literature Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Health of LGBTQIA+ Older Adults: Identification of Risk and Protective Health Factors and Development of a Model of Health and

Disease. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 71(5), 1297-1331.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2169851>

Mulaj, J., 2019. A Critique of Queer Phenomenology: Gender and the Sexual. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 20(3), pp.189-203.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1641946>

Narendran, R., Reveley, J. and Almeida, S., 2021. Countering transphobic stigma: Identity work by self-employed Keralan transpeople. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(4), pp.1220-1236. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12670>

Oosterhoff, P. and Hoang, T.A., 2018. Transgender employment and entrepreneurialism in Vietnam. *Gender & Development*, 26(1), pp.33-51.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1429102>

Pellicane, M.J. and Ciesla, J.A., 2022. Associations between minority stress, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts in transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 91, p.102113.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102113>

Pradhan, R.P., Arvin, M.B., Nair, M. and Bennett, S.E., 2020. The dynamics among entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic growth in the Eurozone countries. *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 42(5), pp.1106-1122.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2020.01.004>

Rasmussen, M.L., 2004. The problem of coming out. *Theory into practice*, 43(2), pp.144-150. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4302_8

Stiles, D.R., 2014. Drawing as a method of organizational analysis. In *The Routledge companion to visual organization* (pp. 227-242). Routledge.

- Strauss, P., Cook, A., Winter, S., Watson, V., Toussaint, D.W. and Lin, A., 2020. Associations between negative life experiences and the mental health of trans and gender diverse young people in Australia: Findings from Trans Pathways. *Psychological medicine*, 50(5), pp.808-817. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291719000643>
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Tlaiss, H.A. and Kauser, S., 2019. Entrepreneurial leadership, patriarchy, gender, and identity in the Arab world: Lebanon in focus. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 57(2), pp.517-537. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12397>