

From Imposter Fears to Authenticity: A Typology of Women Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

Research has established that entrepreneurship is a masculine domain in which women are likely to experience identity conflict due to the diverging meanings and behavioral expectations of being an entrepreneur versus being a woman. In this study we adopt a social identity perspective to investigate how women entrepreneurs perceive their gender in the face of this potential identity conflict. By analyzing the narratives from 20 in-depth interviews with women

entrepreneurs, complemented by three focus groups with 44 further women, we contribute to entrepreneurship literature by offering a typology of women entrepreneurs. Based on their perceived gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset, we characterize these entrepreneurs as experiencing Imposter Feelings, Acceptance or Authenticity. Through this typology our research illustrates that there is variation in women's perception of their gender in entrepreneurship, indicating that, while some women entrepreneurs experience imposter feelings from the identity conflict of being both a woman and an entrepreneur, others avoid or overcome such an identity conflict, finding ways to benefit from being different in the face of male dominated views of entrepreneurial success.

TWEETABLE HEADLINE

We illustrate how women perceive their gender in the face of a possible identity conflict in entrepreneurship. Depending on their perceived gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset, they experience imposter feelings, acceptance or authenticity.

PLAIN ENGLISH SUMMARY

Although more women are becoming entrepreneurs, the entrepreneurship field is still dominated by men. One of the reasons may be the fact that women often feel they do not 'fit in' as entrepreneurs and consider themselves (and are seen) as being less legitimate and successful than their male counterparts. In our study we propose a typology of women entrepreneurs, which we classify as experiencing Imposter Feelings, Acceptance or Authenticity depending on their perceived gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset. Thus, the principal implication of this study is

to shed light on how women see themselves as entrepreneurs and offer evidence that can help us better understand and support women's entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; gender; social identity; authenticity; imposter phenomenon

JEL Classifications: J24; L26; M14

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to add to the limited research on how women see themselves as entrepreneurs (Ladge, Eddleston, & Sugiyama, 2019; Verheul, Uhlaner, & Thurik, 2005) and offer evidence that can help us better understand and support women's entrepreneurship. Even though women are entering entrepreneurship at increasing rates across the globe (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006; Elam, Brush, Greene, Baumer, Dean, & Heavlow, 2019), entrepreneurship continues to be viewed as a masculine domain (Bird & Brush, 2002; Eddleston, Ladge, Mitteness, & Balachandra, 2016; Liñán, Jaén, & Martín, 2022; McAdam, Harrison, & Leitch, 2019; Shinnar, Giacomini, & Janssen, 2012; Ughetto, Rossi, Audretsch, & Lehmann, 2019). Scholars have accordingly started to dedicate their attention to how the gendered nature of entrepreneurship influences women (Gimenez-Jimenez, Edelman, Dawson, & Calabrò, 2022; Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Poggesi, Mari, & De Vita, 2016). The general conclusion from this growing body of work is that women may experience a 'lack of fit' in entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin et al., 2006; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Lee & Huang, 2018), whereby they tend to be seen as less legitimate and successful than male entrepreneurs in terms of standard economic indicators, such as financial profitability and growth in particular (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Marlow, Henry, & Carter, 2009; Murphy, Kickul, Barbosa, & Titus, 2007).

According to social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), women's perceived lack of fit in entrepreneurship can be explained by the conflicting meanings and behavioral expectations inherent in the identity of being an entrepreneur versus those inherent in the identity of being a woman. The prototypical entrepreneur is expected to behave in 'masculine' ways (e.g., being competitive, a risk taker; Ahl, 2006; Jennings, Greenwood, Lounsbury, & Suddaby, 2013), which creates tensions for women entrepreneurs who are also expected to behave in 'feminine' ways in line with the traditional norms of their gender identity (e.g., being communal, caring; Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann & Sczesny, 2020; Ritter & Yoder, 2004). However, the entrepreneurship literature has not offered clear insights into women's experiences during the entrepreneurial process and their perceived lack of fit as entrepreneurs.

Prior literature on this topic has at least two key limitations. First, studies have reached contradictory conclusions with regard to the entrepreneurial behavior of women entrepreneurs in the face of male dominated expectations, with some scholars finding that it benefits women to act in gender incongruent ways (Balachandra, Briggs, Eddleston, & Brush, 2013; Hmielski & Sheppard, 2019; Rey-Martí, Porcar, & Mas-Tur, 2015) and others suggesting it is better for them to act in gender congruent ways (Chadwick & Raver, 2019; Lee & Huang, 2018), engaging in behaviors that better correspond with the 'traditional' social roles of being a man versus a woman (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Second, from a methodological perspective, the majority of these investigations have been large-scale empirical studies comparing male versus female entrepreneurs thus considering women as a homogenous group (Henry et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a need for more in-depth investigations into women's self-views of their gender as entrepreneurs to help shed light on this phenomenon.

Keeping in mind these limitations, with this study we investigate how women perceive their gender in the entrepreneurial process. Through an interpretive research approach, based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 64 women in Canada, we find that women's experiences of the entrepreneurial process are nuanced by the awareness that gender identity is underlying their entrepreneurial stories. Based on our analysis, we identify four second order themes – identity conflict, identity complementarity, fixed mindset, and growth mindset – which we synthesized into two aggregate dimensions – gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset. This allows us to propose a typology of three categories of women entrepreneurs that we label as experiencing Imposter feelings, Acceptance or Authenticity.

Our research offers both theoretical and methodological contributions. From a theoretical perspective, our proposed typology contributes to entrepreneurship literature by adding further nuance to the social identity perspective on women's views on the role of their gender within entrepreneurship as a male dominated domain (see calls for using social identity in entrepreneurship in Gruber & MacMillan, 2017; Sieger, Gruber, Fauchart, & Zellweger, 2016). Through the typology we illustrate different ways in which women entrepreneurs perceive their potential identity conflict depending on their gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset. This allows us to distinguish among women entrepreneurs, considering their heterogeneity, based on how they evaluate their gender and potential identity conflict as women and as entrepreneurs.

From a methodological perspective, our main contribution is to offer a richer and deeper understanding of women's experiences by asking for insights from women entrepreneurs themselves (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2007; Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter, & Welter, 2012). We do so by conducting a study of women's personal narratives about the role that their gender plays in entrepreneurship, looking at the diversity of these perceptions among

women rather than relative to their male counterparts, and highlighting three different categories of women entrepreneurs each with their unique characteristics. Overall, our research brings to the forefront women entrepreneurs' own voices about the role of their gender and their perspectives on fitting in.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research has shown that entrepreneurs experiencing identity conflict can be associated with negative outcomes, including lower well-being, legitimacy perceptions, and job performance (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin et al., 2006; Eddleston et al., 2016; Settles, 2004). It is therefore critical to refine our understanding of ways in which women cope with the conflicting expectations of their dual identities as women and entrepreneurs, as this will also encourage and support more women to succeed in entrepreneurship.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982) delineates how individuals classify themselves into social categories as a way to define and understand who they are within their social context. By classifying oneself and others into ingroups versus outgroups of social categories, individuals seek to understand 'who am I' and 'who are we' (Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Social categories, including ascribed categories, such as gender, and achieved categories, such as occupational membership, are defined by prototypical attributes and characteristics based on what is expected of exemplary members in those categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). When identifying with a social category, therefore, individuals seek to align themselves with the meanings and behavioral expectations of that category. For example, stemming from the historic division of labor between men and women (Eagly, 1997), men are expected to be more agentic, such as being competitive and assertive,

while women are expected to behave in ways associated with communality, such as being warm and considerate (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Since individuals tend to identify with multiple social categories, however, their self-concept includes different social identities that may be more or less complementary with one another. In a situation where there are competing pressures and behavioral expectations from different identities due to the specific values, norms, beliefs and meanings inherent in those identities, an individual is likely to experience an identity conflict (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Settles, 2004). Identity conflict can be threatening to a person's self-concept (e.g., am I too much in line with one social category to be able to effectively fit within another, competing social category?) and tend to be cognitively taxing to deal with, leading to negative effects for individuals' well-being overall (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Settles, 2004).

Considering that entrepreneurship is a social activity in which entrepreneurs' self-concepts influence their behaviors, social identity theory is a theoretical framework with great potential for helping us better understand entrepreneurs in general (Gruber & MacMillan, 2017; Sieger et al., 2016) and women entrepreneurs in particular. Entrepreneurship has been labeled a gendered phenomenon in which successful entrepreneurs are characterized by male stereotypes (Jennings & Brush, 2013) and entrepreneurship theories are described as having been "created by men, for men and applied to men" (Holmquist & Sundin, 1989, p. 1). The prototypical entrepreneur is accordingly seen as embodying masculine traits and behaviors (Ahl, 2006; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Entrepreneurs are often depicted as being strategically and competitively focused (Bird & Brush, 2002), as 'heroic' figures with 'masculine' personality attributes such as having a propensity to take risks and "survive in a Darwinian world" (Ogbor, 2000, p. 618). Furthermore, the stereotypical entrepreneur's career satisfaction is based on

measures of ‘masculine’ success relating to business size or growth and financial performance, rather than socioemotional career satisfiers relating to, for example, interpersonal relationships with employees and customers and social goals, which are considered to be more ‘feminine’ measures of success (Bird & Brush, 2002; Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Lewis, 2013). This poses a particular problem for women in entrepreneurship as the demands of their gender identity – i.e., the extent to which they hold characteristics associated with traditional gender stereotypes – are in conflict with the demands of the male dominated entrepreneurial identity – i.e., the extent to which they hold characteristics associated with traditional entrepreneurial stereotypes (Ahl, 2006; Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009; Ladge et al., 2019).

The gendered nature of entrepreneurship, in which women’s gender identity and entrepreneurship generate conflicting expectations and meanings, is thus likely to make women feel like outgroup members, making this one of the key factors (others being, for example, lack of financing, cultural context, or caring responsibilities; Elam et al., 2019; Feldmann, Lukes, & Uhlaner, 2020) holding women back from pursuing entrepreneurship in the first place (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013). This claim is supported by statistics indicating that, globally, entrepreneurship rates among women are growing but are still only three quarters of those among men (Elam et al., 2019).

Perceived Identity Conflict

Women who nevertheless choose to become entrepreneurs are often in turn negatively impacted by this perceived identity conflict whereby they are seen as being less legitimate and committed as entrepreneurs, receive less funding and support for their businesses, and are less likely to succeed in terms of standard economic indicators (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin et al., 2006; Eddleston et al., 2016; Greene, Brush, Hart, & Saporito, 2001; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Kanze,

Huang, Conley, & Higgins, 2018; Lee & Huang, 2018). Furthermore, women are more likely than men to approach entrepreneurship for socioemotional motives, including a focus on family, employee relationships, and the ability to have a positive societal impact (Allen & Curington, 2014; Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Jennings & Brush, 2013). While these motivations are more consistent with the social category of being a woman, they fall outside of the scope of financial metrics by which entrepreneurial success is typically gauged, illustrating why women are viewed as being ‘less successful’ as entrepreneurs. In light of all this, scholars have found that women are less likely to define themselves as entrepreneurs due to the male connotations of this term (Delmar & Davidsson, 2000; Verheul et al., 2005), which is concerning considering the numerous benefits having such an identity can have for entrepreneurs, e.g., increased passion and business growth (Ladge et al., 2019; Murnieks, Mosakowski, & Cardon, 2014). Correspondingly, a small but growing body of work on women entrepreneurs’ social identities suggests that these entrepreneurs face unique pressures to engage in identity work, such that they tend to either downplay their femininity to fit entrepreneurial expectations and gain legitimacy (Liñán et al., 2022; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Swail & Marlow, 2018), or they emphasize their femininity as a way to reject or transform stereotypes (Chasserio, Pailot, & Poroli, 2014; Lewis, 2013).

Research on social identity and the gendered nature of entrepreneurship helps us understand why women tend to approach entrepreneurship differently than men – and how this process may be particularly demanding due to male dominated expectations and performance metrics – yet it does not clearly offer insights into the different ways in which women entrepreneurs perceive or respond to the potential identity conflict of being a woman in entrepreneurship. For example, some scholars have found that women benefit when they adopt prototypical entrepreneurial behaviors that are more in line with masculine characteristics as

doing so can increase their financial success and subjective well-being (Balachandra et al., 2013; Hmieleski & Sheppard, 2019; Rey-Martí et al., 2015). In contrast, other scholars have found that women instead suffer when they act in gender incongruent ways, whereby they face more psychological distress (Chadwick & Raver, 2019) and more gender biased evaluations (Lee & Huang, 2018). This emerging research leads to juxtaposing conclusions, indicating that there are still many question marks around the role of gender in entrepreneurship. In particular, how do women perceive their gender as they pursue entrepreneurship and is there variation among them? Are women entrepreneurs aware of their potential lack of fit in entrepreneurship, and, if so, how do they manage their perceptions and behavior to fit or reject the masculine norms of entrepreneurship? Importantly, these questions are best addressed by asking the individuals most familiar with the role of the female gender in entrepreneurship, namely women entrepreneurs themselves. Their voices are largely missing from the above studies that are generally large-scale empirical investigations comparing men and women entrepreneurs (Henry et al., 2016; for exceptions see, for example, García & Welter, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). This lack of knowledge about women entrepreneurs' self-views hinders us from gaining more in-depth insights into how we can help them alleviate identity tensions and ultimately make entrepreneurship more gender inclusive. As such, the goal of our research was to conduct an inductive, interpretative investigation of women's experiences in entrepreneurship by asking the following research question: *How do women perceive their gender in the entrepreneurial process?*

RESEARCH DESIGN

We used a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis, which is appropriate because this is a relatively new research area (Eisenhardt, 1989), allowing the researcher to get

close to the phenomenon being studied (Bansal & Corley, 2011) and increasing the potential for discovering new insights (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Our data collection, as explained in greater detail below, was based on letting entrepreneurs tell their stories, or narratives, through individual interviews. In order to go beyond individual entrepreneurs' experiences and gain a broader perspective, we also conducted focus groups to deepen our understanding of ideas and themes emerging from the interviews. For our data analysis, we relied on interpretive methodology, whose purpose is to develop knowledge from the 'bottom-up' by observing the 'lived world' (Cope, 2005), and by capturing the way individuals describe their experience and perception of a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). By relying on continuous and iterative comparison of the rich empirical data collected, our research process allowed for the emergence of theoretical categories, resulting in the development of a theoretical framework (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Our main goal was to illustrate "the participants' sense making in the research situation" (Leitch, Hill, & Harrison, 2010, p. 78). In doing so, we were answering calls in the entrepreneurship literature focusing on women by moving away from the prevailing analytical techniques whose aim is to find statistically significant differences between groups (e.g., women and men, and the size or growth rates of their ventures). These types of analyses have typically focused on comparing women and men, which implicitly means that women entrepreneurs are being treated as a homogenous entity. Instead, by focusing on variations among women entrepreneurs, rather than on how they differ from men entrepreneurs, our approach allowed us to move beyond the "unintended consequence" of the prevailing analytical techniques, that is "policy prescriptions that suggest women must change... in order to improve their entrepreneurial success" (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 431).

We conducted our study in Canada between 2017 and 2019. Our level of analysis was the individual, seeing that our research question focuses on the entrepreneurial process among women. Our purposeful sampling of participants who identified as both women and entrepreneurs was based on two main criteria, with the aim of obtaining information-rich stories and yield meaningful insights (Patton, 2002). First, we selected women entrepreneurs who had started their business at least 12 months prior to the interview, including both sole-operating business owners and business owners with partners and/or employees. Second, we sought to achieve a heterogeneous sample in terms of age, entrepreneurial experience, and industry in order to ensure a broad perspective.

Informants were first selected through the alumnae network of the co-authors' academic institution. We received a list of female graduates pursuing entrepreneurship and from this we reached out to a diverse group of potential participants via LinkedIn, asking for their participation in our research if they identified as (a) a woman and (b) an entrepreneur with at least 12 months of entrepreneurial experience. We then proceeded through a snowballing technique, accessing contacts of contacts (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Overall, our aim was to select information-rich cases for our in-depth study (Patton, 2002). We selected 20 women entrepreneurs at various stages of their venture and operating in a variety of industries (e.g., coaching, finance, tech, marketing, health and well-being) for the individual interviews. We then followed the same procedure to select 32 more women entrepreneurs and 12 women professionals working with and supporting entrepreneurs (in governmental agencies, multinational organizations, and not-for-profit organizations) for the focus groups. This gave us a total sample of 64 respondents (20 for the individual interviews and 44 for the focus groups). None of the entrepreneurs and professionals we approached refused to participate in the study,

suggesting significant interest in this topic also among practitioners. Please see Table 1 for more information on the participants.

- - - Insert Table 1 about here - - -

Data Collection

Our data collection consisted of two phases: semi-structured interviews and focus groups. We decided to pursue two different types of data collection methods in order to gain different points of view to understand the phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and triangulate our data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Interviews (phase one) and focus groups (phase two) were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In phase one, after an initial contact by email to introduce our study, we conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with 20 women entrepreneurs (average length was 65 minutes, for a total of approximately 22 hours of interviews). The average age of our participants was 42.5¹ (ranging from 35 to 62 years). These entrepreneurs had approximately 10 years of entrepreneurial experience in total (ranging from 2 to 17 years), with approximately 8 years of tenure in their current venture (ranging from 2 to 13 years). They included both sole-operating business owners (7) and business owners with partners and/or employees (13). To ensure consistency, the co-authors discussed each interview before and after conducting it. Overall, our aim was to let the participants tell the story of their entrepreneurial journey from the beginning and until the day of the interview, through a narrative approach (Garcia & Welter, 2013; Gartner, 2007). We had a standard interview protocol with open-ended questions to guide the interviews and prompt the entrepreneurs about a new point or to provide more details (see Appendix 1). The

¹ This makes our sample representative of entrepreneurs overall, seeing that the average age of founders is 41.9, based on the 2.7 million founders in the U.S. who started businesses between 2007 and 2014 (Azoulay, Jones, Kim, & Miranda, 2020).

interview was structured in three main parts, although we allowed for flexibility to let the entrepreneurs narrate their experience and story (Byrne & Shepherd, 2015). In the first part we asked the participants to tell us why they became entrepreneurs, how they measured success, and what were the most satisfying and challenging parts of their work as entrepreneurs. This allowed the participants to start telling their story as entrepreneurs and establish a rapport with the interviewer. In the second part the focus was on whether the participants' gender played a part in their entrepreneurial experience and, if it did, whether it helped or hindered them. Finally, the interview concluded with a discussion of what the participants would do differently if they could do it over again and what advice they had for women aspiring to become entrepreneurs.

In phase two, we organized three focus group discussions with 44 women, selected in the same way as in phase one, who were either entrepreneurs (32) or professionals (12) working with or supporting entrepreneurs (in government agencies, incubators or diversity units in global corporations) whose broader perspective, based on working with several women entrepreneurs, allowed us to go beyond the individual entrepreneur's experience. Average length of each focus group was 125 minutes, for a total of over 6 hours. Our aim was to deepen our understanding of ideas and themes that emerged during phase one. The focus groups were structured in three parts, to guide discussion around the motivation for women to become entrepreneurs, their entrepreneurial process and experience, and ways to encourage more women to become entrepreneurs and/or facilitate their entrepreneurial experience. The focus groups were run by a trained moderator based on a series of planned questions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In order to reduce moderator bias, she was also a woman (Carter, Shaw, Lam & Wilson, 2007) and had extensive experience working to support women entrepreneurs, ensuring the moderator had a

similar background to the participants (Smithson, 2000). The two co-authors participated as observants.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data inductively as we proceeded through data collection (Corley & Gioia, 2004). To reduce potential subjective bias, initially each co-author, as well as two research assistants, independently open coded the interview data from phase one by identifying initial concepts and grouping them into first order concepts, using language and terms mentioned by the informants (Gioia et al., 2013). The team then met regularly to compare and discuss the coding until they reached a consensus, after which the co-authors went back and finalized the coding accordingly.

We looked for similarities and differences among the first order concepts in order to group them into higher-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013). Our analysis of the interview data was supported by relevant theoretical frameworks (Eisenhardt, 1989) from entrepreneurship literature as well as the discussions emerging from the focus groups (phase two of data collection), which helped us retain the connection between our data and their original context (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). Then, we grouped second order themes into overarching or aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). We pursued the three steps (first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions) in an iterative and recursive manner, from the data to our emerging dimensions (Eisenhardt, 1989), in order to ensure we had a clear understanding of theoretical dimensions and relationships among them. We continued our data collection until it stopped providing us with new data and relationships (Corley & Gioia, 2004) and a theoretical framework had emerged (Eisenhardt, 1989). To validate this theoretical framework, we shared

our findings with a subset of our participants who confirmed that these indeed resonated with their experiences (Patton 2002).

FINDINGS

As a preliminary step in our analysis, we ensured that our respondents referred to their social identities as women and as entrepreneurs. Whilst these were two key criteria for selecting respondents, we wanted to verify that these social identities came through in the interview responses. Indeed, these social identities were evident and explicit for all our respondents. Respondents referred to themselves as “entrepreneurs”; for example, E6 said: *“Why did I become an entrepreneur then? I was making clothes and I really enjoyed it and I got a lot of compliments on what I was doing so then I thought, “Well why don’t I start making these for other people?”. So... with some friends and we decided to start a business together”*, or E18 said: *“I became an entrepreneur because I think I had a passion.”* All respondents also identified as both women and entrepreneurs as exemplified, for instance, by E7: *“I think that being a woman definitely is a huge role in being an entrepreneur”*, E12: *“you’re an entrepreneur, but you’re also a mother”*, or E19: *“if I’m successful, it’s because I evolved as a woman. Because, if I stay in the same place where I am right now, I’m not evolving. So, it’s for me, it’s really a personal success. An evolution of my personality, my skills as an entrepreneur, as a wife, as a woman.”*

Next, in order to contextualize our analysis, we illustrate how our informants narrated their entrepreneurial stories, including their explanations for how and why they became entrepreneurs and how their entrepreneurship had evolved over time, through the individual interviews in phase one. These stories conformed, in many ways, to the entrepreneurial process described in the literature (e.g., Ardichvili, Cardozo, & Ray, 2003). Entrepreneurs reported starting a business for a variety of reasons, ranging from necessity (i.e., lack of work) to

following a passion to finding alternatives to current employment in order to have more control or flexibility over their work. For example, E1 told us “*I became an entrepreneur because that’s where I felt that I would have the most freedom, and also where I will be able to be creative.*” and E13 said “*I became an entrepreneur for a lot of reasons.*” They did so alone or with the support of a spouse and/or family and friends, who provided psychological and financial support. The entrepreneurial venture followed a growth pattern involving some improvisation and lack of planning earlier on with greater structure and formalization over time. This growth pattern was often facilitated by undertaking business studies or seeking advice, despite difficulties in finding female role models due to the lack of women entrepreneurs overall (e.g., E8 said: “*You need to find role models, and that’s very difficult as a female entrepreneur.*”)

Guided by our research question, we then paid particular attention to the parts of the participants’ stories in which they talked about how they perceived their gender in the entrepreneurial process. We identified and categorized the relationships among emerging constructs (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) and, from our analysis, emerged four second order themes (identity conflict, identity complementarity, fixed mindset and growth mindset), which we synthesized into two aggregate dimensions (gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset). Figure 1 illustrates our coding and Appendix 2 includes additional supporting data. Below we illustrate the narratives from the interviews in phase one and complement them with the discussions in the focus groups from phase two.

- - - Insert Figure 1 about here - - -

Gender-Entrepreneurial Fit

Participants’ narratives were characterized by two second order themes relating to gender-entrepreneurial fit: identity conflict and identity complementarity. These themes

respectively reflected the perceived lack or presence of fit between gender and entrepreneurial identities.

Identity Conflict

The first theme arising from our analysis was identity conflict and it emerged from two first order concepts – gender stereotypes and working in male dominated environments – which expressed some of the entrepreneurs’ struggle with being a woman and an entrepreneur. Being an entrepreneur whilst facing gender stereotypes and working in male dominated environments may lead to a sense of discrepancy between the meanings, beliefs, norms, and expectations held by women due to their different identities (in this case the social identity of being a woman and of being an entrepreneur) being simultaneously activated and giving conflicting behavioral direction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Horton et al., 2014; Yu & Zhang, 2022). This led us to label this theme as “identity conflict”.

First, participants talked about persistent “gender stereotypes”, which created challenging expectations of them as entrepreneurs. For example, E17 said:

“I do what is required in the business, even if it requires travel... [but] that’s really tough... Whereas my husband, our world lives around his travel schedule and he doesn’t think twice. I guess maybe that’s part of a gender piece.”

The impact of gender stereotypes was particularly evident in the presence of a partner/spouse and, especially, children. In this case the entrepreneurial journey was tightly intertwined with family life, which often caused the entrepreneurs tension in terms of work/life balance, as echoed in the focus groups:

“We [women] need more support... with our families,... [we need] more control in our lives, and not having to be a superwomen,... [women entrepreneurs] managing it all... why not be just a normal working human being that doesn’t have to be superwoman at home and at work.” (FG3)

Gender stereotypes also presented themselves as gender role expectations, which presented hurdles for the participants as entrepreneurs. For example, E8 said *“You have to be assertive in a polite way, otherwise you’ll be termed a ‘bitch’.”* This was reiterated by E13: *“I do feel that [as a woman] sometimes I’m taken less seriously.”*

Second, some entrepreneurs contextualized their experiences as working in a “male dominated environment”; for example E9, an entrepreneur in technology/computer systems, said *“I just sometimes feel that it’s hard being a woman in such a male dominated sector”* and, along the same lines, E2 (fashion design and manufacture): *“It’s a man-controlled trade.”*

In sum, the first key theme that emerged from our analysis of the narratives was related to the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, deriving from gender stereotypes and working in male dominated environments. These participants’ narratives revealed an identity conflict due to competing expectations of them as women and entrepreneurs.

Identity Complementarity

The other second order theme relating to gender-entrepreneurial fit was identity complementarity, which emerged from two first order concepts – gender as an advantage and nurturing other women – that described how some participants were able to balance their identities as women and as entrepreneurs and wanted to encourage other women entrepreneurs to do so too. As a woman entrepreneur, perceiving one’s gender as an advantage suggests a complementarity between the social identities of being a woman and being an entrepreneur. In addition, those individuals who view the two social identities as being complementary may want to encourage and support other individuals to perceive a similar complementarity and pursue entrepreneurial endeavours. Indeed, research based on social identity theory suggests that taking pride in group qualities motivates group activism and that “gender as a social identity may

stimulate gender equality efforts on the part of women” (Burn, 1996; Burn, Aboud, Moyles, 2000, p. 1082). First, whilst all of the entrepreneurs in our study remained aware that their gender was seen as ‘different’, several perceived their “gender as an advantage” to their entrepreneurial experience. For example, E2 saw it as a chance to stand out in a positive way: “*A lot of people were curious to know about me because [being a woman entrepreneur is] such an uncommon thing.*” Or E12 said: “*Because of the nature of my work, for me, it was positive. It was a good thing that I’m a woman.*” This concept, revolving around gender as an advantage to women and giving them strength as a way of disrupting masculine norms and biases (Ladge et al., 2019), strongly emerged from our focus groups too: “*We are agents of change and the world needs change. We need our voices heard and what better than entrepreneurship to create change.*” (FG2).

One particular aspect of “gender as an advantage” that emerged from the interviews was the importance of social impact for the current business landscape above and beyond a focus on financial profitability and growth. This emphasis on social value goals for entrepreneurial ventures is indeed more typically expressed by women than men (Gruber & Macmillan, 2017; Hechavarría, Terjesen, Ingram, Renko, Justo, & Elam, 2017), and our informants suggested this is a much needed direction for the future of business.

“[In] our economy right now we know we need to diversify what our bottom line looks like and that sustainability and the giving back and all of that, this is the way we have to move forward. We know what crisis we’re in right now. So I think women can clear the way for that.” (FG1)

This was also highlighted by E5: “*Obviously there’s a measure of financial success. But, more importantly, we’re very driven by purpose as an organization. So we have a very clear vision of bringing humanity into the workplace, creating [a] more humane environment.*”

Second, another aspect of identity complementarity between being a woman and being an entrepreneur was expressed through “nurturing other women” in business, as some of our respondents wanted to help other women by supporting them as entrepreneurs. This was exemplified by E7: “*I really have a serious commitment to helping women*” or by E10: “*entrepreneurial women work[...] together, they’re very supportive. We do a thing called glow, like if you have an event coming up, we all get together and kind of promote it to make you glow.*” Our focus groups in particular highlighted opportunities to explicitly support other women, through more role models and networks as well as additional education and funding. For example, participants spoke of the need for:

“...role models that are visible, boosting women’s confidence through that, and also just like through TV shows and movies and books. If we can see women in there who are entrepreneurs and succeeding, eventually it will become something that is more normal, more accepted, I just think of the [TV] show Silicone Valley for instance, it did so much for start-ups, but there’s not a single woman in there.” (FG2)

Support was also articulated in the form of helping women entrepreneurs thrive through safe spaces in which they can vent their frustrations and challenges and make up for the presence of fewer role models and the limited assistance available to them: “*The best environment would be if we have a place for women to meet entrepreneurs, so we can sit, exchange, maybe ... have a place where our kids can play together ... you have your safe space*” (FG2).

In sum, the second key theme that emerged from our analysis of the narratives was related to experiencing identity complementarity between being a woman and an entrepreneur, despite the gendered nature of entrepreneurship. These participants’ narratives suggested that gender could be experienced as an advantage, which was also expressed as wanting to nurture other women in their entrepreneurial journey.

Mindset

The second aggregate dimension emerging from participants' narratives related to their approach to coping with challenges as an entrepreneur. We labeled this dimension mindset, which was the synthesis of two second order themes: fixed mindset and growth mindset. Research on implicit theories suggests that individuals' underlying beliefs about whether their abilities can be developed or not characterize a fixed mindset (abilities as innate) or a growth mindset (abilities as malleable) (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). These mindsets create meaning frameworks that influence how entrepreneurs interpret and respond to challenges (Burnette, Pollack, Forsyth, Hoyt, Babij, Thomas, & Coy, 2020).

Fixed Mindset

A fixed mindset emerged from two first order concepts in our data: fear of failure and lack of confidence. First, narratives illustrating "fear of failure" came, for example, from E6 who told us: "*I'm always terrified going into a presentation and I always worry that it's not going to be good enough*"; and from E13 who said "*It's so scary. It's risky. Part of me says 'take the leap and do' and part of me is like, 'no somebody needs to have a steady income and a real job'. I don't know. Part of me hopes I would, but part of me knows it's such a struggle.*" Such fears were also linked to the respondents' gender as illustrated by one entrepreneur and further reinforced in our focus group:

"I'm emotional about it. So I have a lot of difficulties, I'm feeling bad, I'm always scared to lose the job. So it plays a big role into the business. And I always question myself, is it the fact I'm a woman?" (E18)

"Women have this tendency to worry about 'Will I fit?' ... it seems to be something holding us [women] back" (FG1). Whilst the literature has indicated that fear of failure is a reason for women not to become self-employed more so than for men (Wagner, 2007), we should keep in

mind that our participants were women who had already made the decision to become entrepreneurs, yet some displayed fear of failure nevertheless.

Second, “lack of confidence” represented another aspect of a fixed mindset. As E6 told us: *“I don’t know that I’m ever confident to be honest with you, but I have to pretend that I am.”* Our focus groups highlighted this theme further, suggesting it was quite prevalent among women entrepreneurs:

“I think what women are really missing is a culture of courage. It takes courage to launch yourself into entrepreneurship, it takes courage to push, to take your place... I think it’s really a question of attitude.” (FG1)

In sum, the third key theme that emerged from the narratives was related to experiencing fear of failure and a lack of confidence as an entrepreneur. Collectively these exemplify a fixed mindset whereby individuals believe that they are not able to change their attributes and tend to focus their energy on avoiding negative perceptions (rather than on finding ways to adapt). This mindset has shown to increase worrying and negative thoughts (Burnette, O’Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Chadwick & Raver, 2015; Vandewalle, 2012) as illustrated by our respondents.

Growth Mindset

The other second order theme relating to the entrepreneurs’ mindset that emerged from our analysis was associated with a growth mindset, which indicates a belief that one is capable of changing, growing, and succeeding, even in the face of obstacles (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This theme emerged from two first order concepts: learning from challenges and learning from emotions. First, participants indicated the importance of seeing their experiences, especially challenging ones like dealing with mistakes or failures, as opportunities to learn during their entrepreneurial journey (“learning from challenges”). For example, E19 said: *“At the beginning,*

failure, it's not good. What I changed, [is my] mindset, it's a learning process. So, it's not a mistake. It's... just learning... I'm more comfortable about that.” Corroborating this view, E11 stated: *“I've made a lot of mistakes, but mind you, I don't see the mistakes as something bad. Like mistakes to me were meant to happen because you learn even faster.”* Focus group discussions further emphasized the importance of women using their entrepreneurial failures as learning opportunities, while recognizing that this is an area where many women entrepreneurs may need support to ensure these failures do not become the reason they instead exit entrepreneurship:

“To be an entrepreneur is to fail. I've failed different businesses, in different industries and I still woke up in the morning and go 'I'm gonna do this'... I think, failure is one of the key components of why women... not only learn, but one of the reasons that stops them from learning. So I think that's the thing.” (FG1)

“... I think if we can walk the next generation through that, that acceptance of fear, and kind of like you're afraid, were going to try things, were going to fail some things, it's okay because this is what we're going to do afterwards, so maybe walking them through that process.” (FG1).

Second, some respondents indicated that they were “learning from emotions”. For example E19 reported: *“I know there is a reason I have an emotion, positive or negative. I know it's there for me to show me something... there is something to take care of and evolve.”* Similarly, E14 said: *“So the emotions actually help to direct. If I listen to them without getting absorbed in them and use them as a little signpost”* and E10 said: *“If the emotions are channeled in a creative way, it could help you find different business plans, different business models. You can evolve. You can just be more creative, more focused.”* Through the use of words such as ‘evolve’, ‘direct’, ‘be more creative’, these quotes suggest that emotions can help in the learning process.

In sum, the fourth key theme that emerged from the narratives was related to entrepreneurs' growth mindset. This fits with research indicating that a growth mindset tends to trigger more constructive and mastery-oriented responses to challenges and feedback (Burnette, et al., 2013; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Vandewalle, 2012), such as learning from challenges and emotions here.

A Typology of Women Entrepreneurs

Based on our coding and preceding analysis, as a final step in our analysis we propose a typology of women entrepreneurs along the two aggregate dimensions of gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset (see Figure 2). We found that some entrepreneurs' narratives suggested identity conflict and a fixed mindset; we labelled these entrepreneurs as experiencing Imposter feelings. Some entrepreneurs' narratives implied identity conflict and a growth mindset; we labelled them as experiencing Acceptance. The largest group of narratives (half of our respondents), which we labelled as experiencing Authenticity, displayed identity complementarity and a growth mindset.

- - - Insert Figure 2 about here - - -

Imposter Feelings

We categorized as displaying Imposter feelings the four entrepreneurs who reported experiencing a conflict between their identities as women and entrepreneurs and having a fixed mindset. For example, E16 explained: *"I don't know if I'm an entrepreneur ... maybe I'm just a different brand of entrepreneur, maybe I'm just a hybrid. But yeah, I do feel like a little bit [of an] imposter sometimes."* And E6 echoed a similar outlook: *"I think our clients take my [male] business partner more seriously, to be honest. So I don't know that I would be as successful as I am without him in this business."* These narratives point towards the imposter phenomenon, which describes an individual's self-doubt about their capabilities and success (Clance,

Dingman, Reviere, & Stober, 1995). This phenomenon is further exemplified in E13's comment: "You see all these people that are so successful and it's hard not to think like, 'What's wrong with me?'" Hence, these participants' awareness of their gender identity as being in conflict with their entrepreneurial identity, combined with a fixed mindset characterized by fear of failure and lack of confidence, fuelled imposter feelings.

Acceptance

We labelled the six entrepreneurs who reported experiencing identity conflict as women and entrepreneurs and who displayed a growth mindset as exhibiting Acceptance. Similar to those displaying Imposter feelings, these entrepreneurs reported experiencing identity conflict, however their mindset was different as they tried to make sense of the conflict and the masculine norms in entrepreneurship. These entrepreneurs did not talk about fear or a sense of giving up, instead they expressed a willingness to accept their experienced identity conflict without being passive, hence the growth aspect of their mindset, through a recognition of such conflict and a sense of 'pulling through'. For example, E4 reported how she perseveres in the face of her identity conflict: "*I find that women, because we've lived situations where we've been taken advantage of because of, I think, our gender, to us we've lived it and we know that, 'yeah, I've been taken advantage before and I bounced back and it's not that bad.'*" And E9 stated: "*I don't think [my gender] helped or hurt my career progress. I just sometimes feel that it's hard being a woman in such a male dominated sector, but it hasn't really hurt my career.*" E14 expressed similar thoughts when she said: "*Stop second-guessing and comparing yourself to men, and you don't have to be like a man to be successful. It's just that we're still figuring out what that looks like for women.*"

Authenticity

The largest group was made up of 10 entrepreneurs (half of all interview participants) whose accounts of their entrepreneurial journey displayed identity complementarity combined with a growth mindset. We labelled them as experiencing Authenticity. Through identity complementarity, these participants demonstrated a gender-entrepreneurial fit that was perceived as a match between their social identity as a woman and their work context. Entrepreneurs in this group felt that they could be authentic as entrepreneurs, i.e. trusting themselves and aligning with their values (Erickson, 1995, Harter, 2002, Kernis & Goldman, 2006). For example, E1 said: *“Sometimes I think, oh, I should be tougher. I should look more confident, or even arrogant... But it’s not me.”*. And E15 stated: *“I may not be as forceful as some may want to, but I don’t want to be that. I want to work with those who accept me as I am.”* These individuals did not see their gender identity as being in conflict with their entrepreneurial identity and they appeared to realize that their gender did not have to be a disadvantage or something they had to mold or adapt to be seen as more of a typical entrepreneur. Realizing that they did not have to oppose their gender identity and abide by the stereotypical mold of the male entrepreneur to be successful gave the entrepreneurs the courage and confidence to be themselves. Illustrating this, E5 said: *“I really have come into a place where I don’t shy away from it. I’m not worried about being perceived as emotional or whatever.”* Similarly, E1 expressed: *“Probably, being a man is a different game. But I don’t mind. I love my game, I love my path, and the people I’m surrounding myself with. So I just respect who I am.”*

Interestingly, apart from only a couple of participants, who reported never experiencing it at all, most of the entrepreneurs in this group reported a sense of overcoming imposter fears over time, which corresponds with their growth mindset. For example, E15 said: *“... there was a time when you tried to fit yourself and be that thing or that person... No, no more.”*

DISCUSSION

The goal of this exploration of the gendered nature of entrepreneurship was to add further nuance to our understanding of how women entrepreneurs perceive their gender in the entrepreneurial process. Based on rich data from interviews and focus groups, we propose a typology of women entrepreneurs that allows us to illustrate that gender matters for women's perceptions and emotional responses in entrepreneurship, albeit in different ways depending on their perception of gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset. Accordingly, this study offers new insights about positive social identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Karelaia & Guillen, 2014) and implicit-theory mindsets (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) revolving around gender in entrepreneurship and how women can not only avoid or overcome identity conflict, but even benefit from being different in the face of male dominated views of entrepreneurial success.

Theory and Research Implications

Building on social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), our study adds to research on the gendered nature of entrepreneurship (Eddleston et al., 2016; Gupta et al., 2009; Jennings & Brush, 2013) and on norms around entrepreneurial success being more masculine than feminine (Ahl, 2006). We make four main contributions. First, rather than thinking of women entrepreneurs as a homogenous group, we propose a typology of women entrepreneurs emerging from our participants' narratives, along two dimensions of gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset. Some entrepreneurs experiencing identity conflict (Settles, 2004) negatively evaluated their gender identity as they saw their gender as the 'cause' of this lack of fit, which, together with a fixed mindset characterized by fear of failure and a lack of confidence, led them to experiencing imposter feelings. The imposter phenomenon has been shown to be more prevalent among successful women than men because men are more likely to view success

as something related to their inherent qualities and ability than women and because women (and other members of marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities) tend to face more negative stereotyping (Clance & Imes, 1978; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ladge et al., 2019). Individuals who experience the imposter phenomenon view themselves as being phony or incompetent despite their success and this is often fueled by social expectations (Clance & Imes, 1978), which in this context is likely to stem from competing demands between the two roles of being an entrepreneur and a woman (Ladge et al., 2019). Individuals with imposter feelings are unable to internalize their success, which limits their entrepreneurial identity reducing their career ambitions and desire for business growth (Clance & Imes, 1978; Ladge et al., 2019).

However, while this finding is supported by research indicating that gender incongruity poses a unique challenge for women entrepreneurs' well-being and success (e.g., Chadwick & Raver 2019; Lee & Huang, 2018), our research indicates that this does not necessarily have to be the case. Other entrepreneurs were able to accept their identity conflict through a growth mindset, whereby they capitalized on their challenges and emotions as a way to learn, which allowed them to approach entrepreneurship without fears or imposter feelings holding them back. Although these entrepreneurs still experienced identity conflict, they were able to somewhat reconcile their gender identity with their entrepreneurial identity reaching acceptance of such conflict.

A final group of entrepreneurs evaluated their gender identity more positively as they recognized the many entrepreneurial benefits of being a woman entrepreneur, including opportunities to make a social impact and make entrepreneurship more inclusive, actually experiencing identity complementarity. This, in combination with a growth mindset, led this group of entrepreneurs to embrace their whole self, not seeing their gender and entrepreneurial

identities as opposing but as complementary, which helped them pursue entrepreneurship in more authentic ways. In general, feelings of authenticity increase entrepreneurs' satisfaction and reduce their stress, burnout, and intentions to exit the venture (Brigham & De Castro, 2003). These benefits are linked to individuals feeling that they are authentic in the business context, in other words being 'who they really are', committed to their self-values, and being true or genuine to themselves (Erickson, 1995; Harter, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), allowing them to achieve a better match between their thoughts and emotions and their social identity – in this case as women entrepreneurs.

Second, we found that some of the entrepreneurs experiencing identity complementarity had learnt to see their gender as valuable for their entrepreneurship over time and that this led them to feel more authentic (i.e., they indicated that they used to feel more of an identity conflict and imposter fears earlier in their career). Identity literature has addressed pathways for positive identity construction among employees (Dutton et al., 2010). Through our typology of entrepreneurs, ranging from those experiencing identity conflict and imposter fears to those experiencing identity complementarity and authenticity, we shed light on one such pathway among entrepreneurs by showing characteristics of women who have found a way to avoid or overcome their potential identity conflict in entrepreneurship. More specifically, from a structural perspective, individuals can construct a positive social identity by forming complementary connections between various facets of the self, such that holding one identity facilitates the roles carried out by another identity; this complementary identity structure in particular has been proposed as promoting authenticity (Dutton et al., 2010). Supporting this view, many of our entrepreneurs had come to a place where they interpreted their gender and entrepreneurial identities as complementary in that their gender helped them as entrepreneurs;

this realization, in combination with a growth mindset, allowed them to feel more authentic. This insight allows us to contribute to entrepreneurship literature by identifying such a pathway for entrepreneurs' positive identity construction. At the same time our research also extends organizational studies by broadening the idea of positive social identity construction among employees (Dutton et al., 2010) to a different context, that of entrepreneurship. Positive work-related identity helps employees develop social resources that facilitate adaptation at work, increase access to mentoring by colleagues, ultimately helping them gain trust and respect from co-workers and progress in their career (Dutton et al., 2010). Our findings indicate that entrepreneurs, who operate in a very different context that does not imply career progression, can also benefit from balancing their identities and ultimately experience them as complementary (Dutton et al., 2010).

Third, our work extends insights about implicit theory-mindsets (Dweck, 2000; 2017; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) in entrepreneurship. The implicit theory framework suggests that individuals' mindsets, stemming from their beliefs about attributes and abilities, influence the meaning they assign to situations and how they respond. Individuals with a fixed mindset believe that their attributes are unchanging and therefore focus their efforts on proving their competence or avoiding signs of incompetence; this mindset generally leads to more maladaptive or "helpless" responses. In contrast, individuals with a growth mindset believe that attributes are malleable and thus they approach situations with a focus on learning and adapting, which tends to trigger more constructive "mastery" responses (Burnette et al., 2013; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Vandewalle, 2012). While this rich body of work on implicit theory-mindsets originated in educational psychology (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), it has more recently gained traction among entrepreneurship scholars who have found benefits of growth mindsets for entrepreneurs' self-

efficacy and motivation in particular (e.g. Billingsley, Lipsey, Burnette, & Pollack, 2021; Burnette et al., 2020; Lynch & Corbett, 2020). We build on this work by illustrating the role of these different mindsets for women's entrepreneurship. That is, our research illustrates that a growth mindset may motivate women entrepreneurs to find more constructive ways to respond to a potential identity conflict whereby they are less likely to experience imposter fears and more likely to feel authentic, as compared to those with a fixed mindset. These insights also address calls for research on how women can overcome imposter fears – i.e., through the development of a growth mindset here – considering the many negative implications such fears are associated with (Ladge et al., 2019).

Lastly, we add to the limited body of work on women's self-perceptions as entrepreneurs (Ladge et al., 2019; Verheul et al., 2005) by adopting a qualitative approach in our research. Since the majority of research insights about women's entrepreneurship comes from quantitative investigations comparing women to men (Henry et al., 2016), it is easy to assume that women are a homogenous group of entrepreneurs with similar characteristics. However, through our research methodology, we are able to highlight different categories of women entrepreneurs helping us better understand how to support all types of women in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Overall, our findings complement prior work on identity and, in particular, gender identity in entrepreneurship by illustrating different women's perceptions of their gender in entrepreneurship. For example, García and Welter (2013) examined how Spanish women business owners construct their gender identity as a strategic device by either supporting or challenging the status quo of gender differences in entrepreneurship. Similarly, Marlow and McAdam (2015) illustrated the pressures for women to engage in identity work that downplays

their femininity to gain legitimacy as entrepreneurs (see also Swail & Marlow, 2018), while Lewis (2013, p. 265) found that women who seek to create an authentic entrepreneurial identity have to move “between the feminine discourse of difference and the masculine discourse of professionalism”. Our research builds on these insights in that women may change how they behave in the face of gender challenges as a function of their mindset and evaluation of their gender identity over time. More specifically, experiencing identity conflict and imposter fears in entrepreneurship suggests some women feel pressure to engage in gender incongruent behaviors to avoid such a conflict and to feel like less of an outsider (i.e., act more male in line with the prototypical entrepreneurial identity). In contrast, perceptions of gender complementarity and authenticity suggest that certain women believe in the value and importance of acting in more gender congruent ways to stay true to themselves and to reap the benefits of being a woman in entrepreneurship. In other words, there is no general conclusion or recommendation for how women (should) behave as entrepreneurs overall – and also in other male dominated contexts more broadly – as there is variation among them depending on their perceptions and mindset that may also change over the course of their career. Our work contributes to this emerging body of work that emphasizes the importance of challenging the normative assumptions around entrepreneurship today to alleviate some of the current disconnects between the entrepreneurial and female gender identity that many women face as they search for legitimacy in entrepreneurship.

Practical Implications

Since women who see their gender as being complementary to their entrepreneurial identity are more likely to feel authentic, our research suggests there is a need to better highlight the benefits of having more women entrepreneurs. Efforts should accordingly be made to

emphasize their value as a way to disrupt the current masculine norms and biases around what is entrepreneurship. For example, the promotion of more female role models and a broader definition of success in entrepreneurship are factors that reduce triggers of an identity conflict and even imposter fears for women. This recommendation has been corroborated in recent literature indicating the potential benefits of promoting a female advantage for entrepreneurship (Ladge et al., 2019).

It is important to note that we do not want to imply that women's obstacles as entrepreneurs can be overcome by simply changing their own views about their gender. Instead, we need to foster a more inclusive mindset about entrepreneurship more generally, including the celebration of women in addition to those of men. Similar to what Foss and colleagues have cautioned (Foss, Henry, Ahl, & Mikalsen, 2019), we encourage educators and policy makers to move away from individual solutions to women's entrepreneurship. For example, we need to tackle the problem of promoting an identity conflict for women in the language used in entrepreneurship, in education and policies in particular. Research has found that universities tend to use predominantly masculine language in their course descriptions of entrepreneurship classes, possibly discouraging women from developing an entrepreneurial identity as they are forming their career goals and identities (Jones & Warhuus, 2018). Correspondingly, it is likely that current policies, financial institutions, and other relevant entrepreneurial networks are discouraging women from embracing their gender due to the male insinuations used in their language. Efforts need to be made to better understand the scope of this problem and how linguistic changes can be made in response.

Building on the above, and in light of the benefits of a growth mindset for women entrepreneurs shown here (i.e., more constructive responses to challenges in general and to

gender identity threats in particular), it is also critical to recognize that mindsets are domain-specific and can be triggered through situational cues or interventions (Burnette et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship educators who work with current or potential women entrepreneurs (e.g., through programs, incubators, and coaching) should therefore consider including interventions promoting a growth mindset or at least be aware of the cues they are signaling that may evoke a fixed versus growth mindset, such as framing challenges as threatening or as opportunities for growth, respectively. These considerations may also be relevant, more generally, for top management teams or various professional careers in which a growth mindset (as opposed to a fixed mindset) may be helpful to resolve potential identity conflicts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, our theoretical framework was grounded in the literature on social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), which can help us better understand women's perceptions of possible identity conflicts and identity complementarity as entrepreneurs due to the competing expectations of these different social identities (i.e., what it means to be a woman versus an entrepreneur). According to this literature, social identification "is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate", for example "a woman may define herself in terms of the group(s) with which she classifies herself (I am a Canadian; I am a woman)" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). We correspondingly only interviewed women who self-identified as both women and entrepreneurs in our research to ask them about their perceptions of their gender in the entrepreneurial process and whether and how this helped or hindered them. Moving forward, we encourage research that incorporates different and more nuanced theoretical frameworks as well as more diverse participants to take into account the role of identity for entrepreneurship,

including different identity orientations (e.g., personal, relational, collective identity orientations; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brickson, 2000), social motivations as well as intersectionality more broadly.

Second, with regard to our sample, we only included active entrepreneurs in this study, who for the most part had made peace with a perceived identity conflict as entrepreneurs. It is plausible that, by not finding ways to overcome such a potential conflict or the undesirable feelings associated with negative evaluations of their gender, women choose to exit entrepreneurship. Future research should investigate gender identities and the imposter phenomenon in women who have experienced entrepreneurial exit or failure, to better understand when and why this may be the reason for women opting out of being entrepreneurs. We also encourage longitudinal studies and the inclusion of more diverse entrepreneurs in future research on this topic, such as entrepreneurs in other countries outside of North America and including developing economies, so that we can better understand the underlying processes through which a positive gender identity is constructed across contexts (e.g., Acs, Bardasi, Estrin, & Svejnar, 2011; Liñán et al., 2022). By taking into account contextual factors, relating to society and culture, researchers will be able to highlight and compare the role of society- and family-based gender norms across countries as they relate to gender identity and career choice, including becoming an entrepreneur (Feldmann et al., 2022).

Third, we only interviewed women in this study, and thus we do not know if and when men are likely to experience an identity conflict and imposter feelings in entrepreneurship. Our findings suggest that women's imposter feelings stemmed from the conflicting expectations of being a woman and entrepreneur, which has received theoretical backing (Ladge et al., 2019), yet it is nonetheless possible that men feel similar feelings as entrepreneurs. We would expect this to

be less likely as their gender is more congruent with the entrepreneurial role as they have more male role models and masculine societal expectations about what it looks like to succeed in entrepreneurship, which would trigger fewer concerns about fitting in. However, men may experience identity conflicts, and also imposter feelings, for reasons other than their gender, which would be an interesting research area to explore further. Similarly, our research suggests that a growth mindset encourages more constructive and learning oriented responses to challenges in entrepreneurship for women, but it is also likely that men would benefit in similar ways, although their challenges may not be gendered as they often were for our participants. Considering the value of a growth mindset for individuals in general, therefore, more research on its implications for all types of entrepreneurs (and business professionals in general) would be highly beneficial moving forward.

Lastly, we interviewed 64 women in this research. While we reached theoretical saturation in our analyses, offering support for our results, we recognize that these are foundational and possibly context-specific findings that we expect will inspire more research into the role and consequences of gender for women's entrepreneurial experiences. We followed several steps to ensure rigor in our research, including having four different coders for our data to reconcile differing interpretations and ensure reliability of our data analysis, sharing our findings with a subset of our participants to confirm the validity of our conclusions, adopting an interpretive approach by using established analytical and synthetic devices proposed by Gioia and colleagues (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004) to ensure a 'dialogue' between researchers and (interview and focus group) texts (Steyaert, 1997), and presenting our research and analysis systematically by showing the links between data and analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). Moving forward, we encourage replication and extension of our findings in other settings and with other

types of entrepreneurs, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Also, although there were no noticeable differences in age, entrepreneurial tenure, sole operators versus partnerships, or industry in the three categories of entrepreneurs we identified, future studies with larger samples may shed more light on variational differences in these variables. For example, does having the support of a spouse/partner, other family members, or role models/mentors affect the gender-entrepreneurial fit and mindset of women entrepreneurs? Is it possible that certain cultural contexts or entrepreneurial situations are more or less likely to trigger the possibility of an identity conflict by being more explicitly masculine or male dominated? In addition, future research should look at other factors that may help to distinguish between women entrepreneurs who do or do not experience identity conflict in entrepreneurship to help us better understand this important phenomenon, above and beyond the critical role of gender identity evaluations and mindset illustrated here. For example, positive versus negative affect or the presence versus absence of family support in entrepreneurship may drive different perceptions and responses. Alternative methodologies may also address limitations of retrospective sensemaking, which by definition characterize the use of narratives (Weick, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

To help us better understand how to make entrepreneurship more inclusive, our study illustrates a typology of women entrepreneurs, shedding light on different women's perspectives on the role of their gender in the entrepreneurial process. Moving forward, we call for more work in this important research domain of women entrepreneurs to ultimately remove these gendered challenges all together.

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TABLE 1
Participant Profiles
Phase 1: Interviews (20 Individuals)

Participant	Industry	Age	Entrepreneurial tenure (total)	Entrepreneurial tenure (current venture)
Entrepreneur 1 (E1)	Cosmetics (manufacture and retail)	35	4	4
Entrepreneur 2 (E2)	Fashion (design and manufacture)	37	9	3
Entrepreneur 3 (E3)	Online nutrition	62	13	13
Entrepreneur 4 (E4)	Health and wellness, therapy (clinic)	39	9	9
Entrepreneur 5 (E5)	Management consulting	48	17	8
Entrepreneur 6 (E6)	Management consulting	35	15	4
Entrepreneur 7 (E7)	Marketing, branding	36	10	10
Entrepreneur 8 (E8)	Health and wellness, coaching	41	15	8
Entrepreneur 9 (E9)	Technology (computer systems)	35	2	2
Entrepreneur 10 (E10)	Management consulting	49	13	7
Entrepreneur 11 (E11)	Health and wellness, therapy	37	4	4
Entrepreneur 12 (E12)	Marketing, design	52	13	13
Entrepreneur 13 (E13)	Photography	37	3	3
Entrepreneur 14 (E14)	Yoga	38	10	10
Entrepreneur 15 (E15)	Financial consulting	47	12	12
Entrepreneur 16 (E16)	Digital marketing	44	15	15
Entrepreneur 17 (E17)	Coaching, training	45	11	11
Entrepreneur 18 (E18)	Architecture (construction, design)	48	12	12
Entrepreneur 19 (E19)	Business coaching	34	3	3
Entrepreneur 20 (E20)	Training, coaching (digital marketing, sales, etc.)	51	12	12
Average		42.5	10.1	8.2

Note: Age, Entrepreneurial tenure (total) and Entrepreneurial tenure (current venture) are in number of years

Phase 2: Focus Groups (44 Individuals)

Focus Group	Participants	Entrepreneur Industries
Focus group 1 (FG1)	9 entrepreneurs	Sports equipment, journalism, human resources, branding and communications, mentoring, web marketing, online recruitment, translation services, clothing
	4 from entrepreneurship support organizations: unit within global corporations (4)	
Total number of informants: 13		
Focus group 2 (FG2)	11 entrepreneurs	Yoga, coaching (2), change management, psychology, management consulting (2), immigration consulting, web design, tax planning, journalism
	4 from entrepreneurship support organizations: unit within global corporations (2), government agency (1), incubator (1)	
Total number of informants: 15		
Focus group 3 (FG3)	12 entrepreneurs	Photography, language services, coaching (2), wellness, doula agency, management consulting, media technology (2), graphic design, journalism, law
	4 from entrepreneurship support organizations: unit within global corporations (1), government agency (2), incubator (1)	
Total number of informants: 16		

FIGURE 1
Data Coding

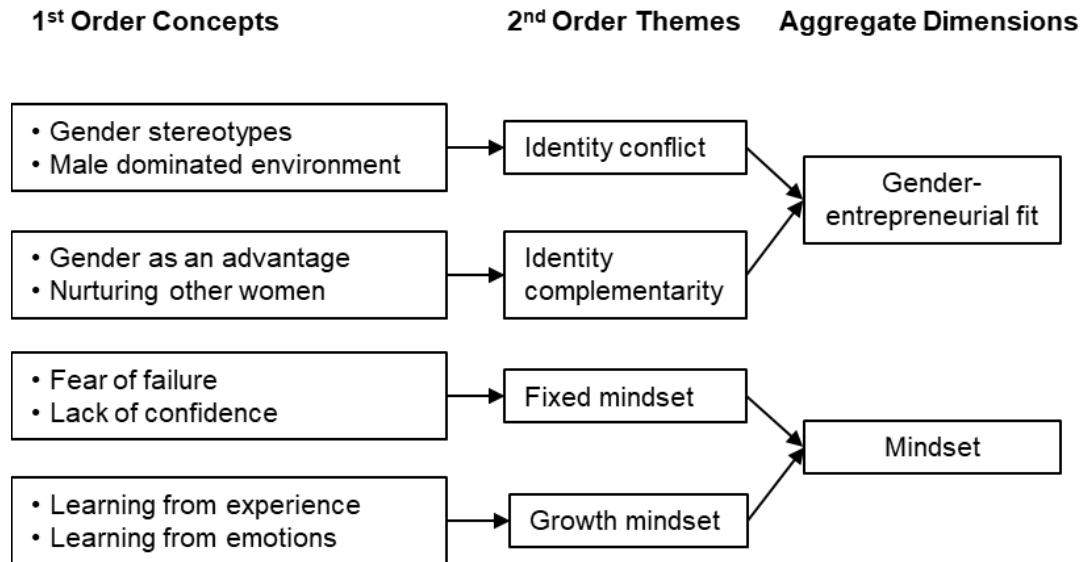


FIGURE 2
Typology of Women Entrepreneurs

Gender- entrepreneurial fit	Identity complementarity		Authenticity E1, E3, E5, E7, E10, E11, E12, E15, E19, E20
	Identity conflict	Imposter feelings E6, E13, E16, E18	Acceptance E2, E4, E8, E9, E14, E17
		Fixed mindset	Growth mindset
		Mindset	

APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

Why did you become an entrepreneur?

What has your experience been like so far?

How do you measure success?

What is the most satisfying part of your job?

What is the most challenging part of your job?

As a female entrepreneur, has gender played a role in your career?

What's the key to your success as an entrepreneur? How would this be different for a man?

If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?

What advice or recommendations would you give to women aspiring to become entrepreneurs?

APPENDIX 2
Supporting Data

Aggregate Dimension: Gender-Entrepreneurial Fit		
1st Order Concepts	Representative Quotes	2nd Order Themes
Gender stereotypes	<p>It's a continual struggle, I think, of the balance of how can I be a business person, but I got to take Thursday afternoon to take my kid to the dentist, or my kid is sick, picking him up for school every day at 3:30. That kind of thing, which is the tough part, I find. (E17)</p> <p>The problem is we still are very gender stereotyped. And when you look at even being in front of a banker, you almost feel like they look at you differently, you know? And why do I say that? I don't know. It's just a feeling. Right? And yet the evidence is there. Women are being under financed. (E5)</p> <p>I have one friend [and] her husband took six months off, she took six months off but it's very rare... it's okay to have two parents in entrepreneurship; just because the dad is entrepreneur the woman, the mother, can be as well and just to have the freedom to choose and get away from these traditional roles that are so ingrained in us. (FG3)</p>	Identity conflict
Male dominated environment	<p>It's a male dominated environment... As a woman you know you're going to be taken advantage of. It's not a matter of if but when... so I was prepared. (E4)</p> <p>I get the impression that, what gets financed by banks and all these days, it's mainly in areas that are, that men are interested in. Such as technology, this that, large opportunities for profitability... Of course, the banker is also a male, so of course he will go towards the guy that is more ambitious because if you're just asking for \$60,000, "oh, is she really serious?" (FG1)</p>	
Gender as an advantage	<p>So, we develop, as a woman, the skills, already in our life. So, it's a plus to be a woman in the business, because the planning and optimized time, it's a plus. So, I think we have a plus, but we don't realize. Most of the time we see it as a problem, but at the end it's a plus because we have already some important essential skills. (E19)</p> <p>We know we need to diversify what our bottom line looks like and that sustainability and the giving back and all of that, this is the way we have to move forward. We know what crisis we're in right now. So I think women can clear the way for that. (FG1)</p> <p>Women have a social responsibility awareness and are bringing that to the way we are developing our businesses... we are going to be incentivizing the next generation... we're sort of paving the way in a lot of senses, right? (FG1)</p>	Identity complementarity
Nurturing other women	<p>The first thing would be [to] put forward some role models, successful women so the new generation can be inspired... if we grow up looking at women doing it big, we will think instantly that we can do it too. (FG2)</p> <p>Because it's all starting with you know, partnership, lending money, you know that's the way men do it. They don't necessarily do it all on their own. When we reach out to financing, partnership, collaboration... women need to have some kind of, I don't want to say security, safety net, but they need to be empowered by women business owners to help them succeed in business. (FG1)</p> <p>I think what's hard for me is sometimes I see the strength of the women, but they don't see it. Darn it, they don't see it. And sometimes I have to pull it out of them. (E20)</p>	

Aggregate Dimension: Mindset		
1 st Order Concepts	Representative Quotes	2 nd Order Themes
Fear of failure	You're always afraid. Like, when things are going not good you're afraid. When things are going very good you're afraid. I don't know if it's normal. (E18) I think failure is one of the key components of why women, well it's one of the reasons that stops them from learning. (FG1)	Fixed mindset
Lack of confidence	I've been having a very hard time, all this time I'm like finding that right balance between being firm but not weak and not too strong. But I'm very nervous and that's what it came down to, I'm very nervous because if it's a woman that actually is firm, she's a bitch. And so women aren't allowed, there's huge backlash whenever women take on those characteristics but at the same time, if we don't, we're not strong enough as leaders. We're too weak. It's like how do you...There is no way of winning. (E16) We're talking a lot about confidence, right? Like having the confidence, understanding that you have to sell yourself first. So there's almost that element of we have to be selfish and think about yourself and then think about others, but women, we're not wired to do that right? (FG1)	
Learning from challenges	[I enjoy] the ability to choose, the variety, ability to develop expertise... ability to see my growth, this builds confidence... the full circle... the experiences of being intimidated... and having to learn how to deal with it... going outside of your comfort zone... worse case it doesn't go, but hopefully it's a learning experience... hopefully it will be easier next time... just do it... as scary as it was... that led to better projects... I feel very satisfied. (E15) As women we are used to please, and to be more obedient. Being an entrepreneur is to learn to just do your best and not to listen to other people. So it's the same when you have a child, you learn along the way. (E1) We have to learn to dial it down, be humble and say, hey, I need help, can you help me? (FG2)	Growth mindset
Learning from emotions	When I'm in a situation where the [customer] is a little bit more demanding or it's a little bit more negative, because that emotion is so connected to my work... I understand them in their frustrations. I understand their more negative states, at that moment. And that negative emotion, because I've lived it, it fuels me. It's to channel it in a constructive way, I guess. (E4) So, when things are rough, I think that the biggest [thing] I've learned is that my tendency is towards anxiety, and so the anxiety is telling me something. It's telling me something's off track, so instead of freezing and going, "Oh, my God. I'm anxious. I just want out. I just want to quit," to go, "Okay, what is the anxiety actually trying to tell me? And how much of it is true?" So something needs to change, yes, but is the whole world falling apart? No. (E14)	