

Legitimacy to explain women entrepreneurs' business strategies

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Extended Abstract (*working paper*)

While research shows that female entrepreneurs (FE) do not communicate about their entrepreneurial project in the same way as men (Huang et al. 2021; Lazar, 2014), social networks appear to offer FE access to resources and opportunities that were previously harder to reach. On the other hand, the GEM 2023 report, which looked at digital tools mobilized in business management, highlights that more than half of FEs in Egypt (59.1%), Guatemala (63.2%), Poland (53.1%), Romania (51.7%) and Togo (82.5%) said that digital tools are not necessary to manage their business, in 27 of the 49 countries surveyed. Digital tools may not be very useful for entrepreneurs with one or a few customers and are limited in usefulness in contexts where few customers are online. The same report calls on researchers to investigate this point further to shed light on the issue.

In this research project, we aim to answer this call. In particular, we're interested in the communication strategies put in place by FEs to promote their products and/or services, as well as their companies. Social networks are one of these communication tools. However, our research does not focus on FEs who launch an entrepreneurial project specifically on social networks. We assume that the differences in communication between FEs and their male equivalents are underpinned by a question of legitimacy to speak out, and that social networks would be a framework in which FEs feel more legitimate to communicate about their project. In this research, we attempt to identify the communication strategies that arise from this lack of legitimacy specific to FEs.

Entrepreneurship and FE legitimacy

When talking about legitimacy, it's first necessary to point out that two concepts are central: identity legitimacy and entrepreneurial legitimacy (Paillot et al. 2015). The former is a self-centered concept referring to the feeling of self-confidence, while the latter refers to the recognition of FE's legitimacy by stakeholders. Paillot et al (2015) have shown that these two concepts are mutually nourishing and do not need to be differentiated. In this work, we therefore consider both concepts when we talk about legitimacy, both identity legitimacy and entrepreneurial legitimacy.

When we talk about legitimacy, particularly entrepreneurial legitimacy, we're talking about the influence of stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the FE ecosystem. In

this ecosystem, it seems that stakeholders become an obstacle to the recognition of FE legitimacy. We can see that the legitimacy of FEs is acquired through customer recognition, i.e. through the market and the success of the project. As a result, FEs seem to wait for their project to reach a certain level of maturity before feeling legitimate to talk about it, preferring before that to “let the product speak for itself”, to reassure themselves with customer satisfaction, or to wait for funding that will give external legitimacy to their project and consequently reassure them about speaking out (Tornikoski and Newbert, 2007).

Entrepreneurial identity and communication

Entrepreneurial identity is defined not only by the individual's personality, but also by the interactions between the individual, the company, society and culture (Down and Warren, 2008). This entrepreneurial legitimacy is also used to define organizational identity in the early stages of a company's development. In this regard, women seem much less likely to believe they have entrepreneurial abilities than men (Thébaud, 2010), not least because of a negative self-assessment of their entrepreneurial skills.

From legitimacy to entrepreneurial identity

To explain this negative self-assessment of FEs' entrepreneurial skills, Swail and Marlow (2018) put forward the existence of tensions between feminine identities such as “wife” and “mother” and those of the entrepreneur. This dissonance prompted women to undertake specific forms of identity work to bridge the gap between femininity, legitimacy and entrepreneurship. The authors thus support the postulate that the pursuit of entrepreneurial legitimacy during business creation is a gendered process that disadvantages women and constitutes a potential negative impact on the development and future construction of their businesses. This gendered disadvantage has a major influence on the communication strategies of these FEs, especially in the early stages of their projects' development (start-up and launch).

To better understand the achievement of such FE legitimacy, it would therefore be necessary to adopt a gendered perspective in order to reveal how biases are produced and reproduced (Swail and Marlow, 2018). In contemporary entrepreneurial debate, masculinity dominates as the legitimate prototype of the entrepreneur, which in turn positions femininity in opposition to the norm (Ahl, 2006). Such gender blindness (Lewis, 2006; Gupta et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2014) has contributed negatively to the social construction of FEs, positioning them as secondary to men and evoking a lesser importance of their businesses (Ahl, 2006: 595), thereby diminishing their ability to establish their own legitimacy.

Entrepreneurial identity and gender

From the outset of new venture creation, entrepreneurial identity is important for achieving legitimacy (Hytti, 2005; Marlow and McAdam, 2015), belonging (Stead, 2017) and positively standing out from others (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Entrepreneurial identity continues to inform entrepreneurs' decisions, actions and feelings (Alsos et al., 2017; Cardon et al., 2009; Down and Reveley, 2004), build their organizations, including through resource acquisition (Kromidha and Olson, 2016), indicate the extent to which they devote time to their ventures (Murnieks et al., 2020), and even their passion (Cardon et al., 2009).

However, we notice that communication strategies have not attracted the attention of researchers and have not been the subject of research linked to legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity. Yet communication remains crucial to the survival of companies. It is therefore interesting to see to what extent communication strategies adapt to the level of legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity. This question is all the more interesting in that the legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity of FEs seem to be concepts that are constructed at the same pace as the entrepreneurial project itself, whereas the latter are constitutive of the archetypal male entrepreneur.

Methodology

To address our research problem, which seeks to explain FE communication strategies as a function of legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity, we have opted for a qualitative methodology with a constructivist approach. We rely on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) for data analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2008; Sudabby, 2006). This approach is particularly useful for examining situated processes and helps to study complex entities thanks to its ability to produce a multidimensional account of individual action in context. In addition, it enables individuals to understand their own situation, thus linking results to practice. Finally, it is a recommended method when the field of study is not well studied.

To facilitate analysis, interviews with the 11 FEs were recorded and transcribed in verbatim. The data were organized and coded using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (NVivo), enabling concepts and categories to be identified and explored, to find the best fit or most plausible explanation of the relationship under study (Sudabby, 2006). The FEs interviewed had set up businesses in different sectors (architecture, guest house, training, translation, etc.).

Results

Analysis of the life stories has enabled us to highlight direct and indirect elements in the communication adopted by FEs about their companies and their products and/or services.

Word of mouth: a better strategy

Initially, we note that communication and marketing seem to be secondary for FE. They prefer to focus their efforts on the quality of the product and/or service provided, and on maintaining good relations with customers. Admittedly, this quality, both tangible - in relation to the product - and intangible - in relation to the customer relationship - does not appear to be directly linked with communication, but if we listen closely to the stories of the entrepreneurs, we realize that this is what lies at the heart of their communication strategy. Indeed, they prefer the quality of what they offer to be what gets people talking about their business. They therefore focus on customer satisfaction and customer relationship management to ensure that customers speak positively about their product and/or service. For FEs, positive word-of-mouth is the most accessible strategy, and the one most in line with their level of legitimacy. It is shared by all the FEs in our sample.

« ce serait ça qui fait qu'il y a des affaires qui rentrent, les clients sont contents avec les projets, qu'il y ait une bonne réputation. » (Audrey)

« Donc, moi j'ai jamais fait de pub ! j'ai juste mon site internet c'est tout ! il y a des gens qui font des pub, des flyers etc. moi j'ai rien fait de tout ça. » (Anne)

« Pour les entreprises j'ai tout fait : du mail, du porte à porte, des flyers sur les voitures sur les parkings mais c'est vraiment difficile à se mettre en route donc je me rabats plus sur le domicile. Mnt sur le domicile c'est du bouche à oreille. C'est ce qui marche hélas le mieux. J'ai un petit peu de mal. Bon, Sinon c'est mettre dans les boîtes aux lettres mais je crois que les gens, de toutes les pubs ils font pas forcément attention. Donc voilà c'est beaucoup ça. » (Marion)

Networking for communication rather than support

In addition, FEs take advantage of women's networks and other personal or professional networks to make themselves known and find customers. In fact, they turn more readily to these networks than to technical or financial support for their projects.

« Oui ça aide certainement. Après, je pense que j'ai déjà un très bon réseau entre les associations et la CCI. Mais c'est des contacts et pas d'affaires. Il faut trouver le bon moment sur le marché. Le réseau personnel/professionnel n'est pas tellement bien développé en fait. » (Audrey)

Communication: a special skill

Some FEs are aware of the importance of social networking and new technologies, but some believe it's still difficult to master, especially when it comes to setting up an advertising campaign. It's a skill that some don't find the time or means to develop.

« Ce n'est pas seulement une question de temps mais c'est qu'on ne sait pas faire. Et qd on ne sait pas faire, on perd des occasions de se faire connaître de communiquer, il y a des moyens de communication aujourd'hui ; Twitter, Facebook, etc... et on ne peut pas tout savoir. Faut être bien entouré avec les bonnes personnes qui savent communiquer autour. » (Anne)

Nevertheless, some FEs are inspired by others and are training in new technologies and technological tools to promote their businesses.

« J'ai une idée sur comment je veux voir mon Ese, la technologie qu'il faut. Là je suis en train de me former sur la pub payante en ligne. Dans mon réseau j'ai vu qu'il y a des gens qui arrivent à attirer les gens sur FB donc je choisis ceux qui ont les meilleurs résultats pour faire comme eux. » (Ivonne)

Conclusion

The aim of this work was to study FE communication strategies and try to explain them through the concepts of legitimacy and entrepreneurial identity. The latter are constructed and formed, among other things, as a function of social ties. Entrepreneurship remains a gendered notion, and the image of the male entrepreneur contributes to weakening the legitimacy of FE. Indeed, it has been shown that FEs have different communication techniques, particularly during pitches, indicating a lesser legitimacy to put forward their project than their male counterparts. Garcia and Welter (2011) point out that women tend to lock themselves into gender stereotypes by following different social protocols from men when negotiating with customers, banks or suppliers, for example. Our study has shown that, to make themselves known and sell their products and/or services, FE women opt for rather “passive” and indirect strategies. They move

slowly, waiting for the first sales before customers recommend them. Through these customer-centric communication strategies, FEs seek to reassure themselves of their entrepreneurial legitimacy by having the success of their project validated by external stakeholders, primarily customers. As they acquire entrepreneurial legitimacy, FEs build their entrepreneurial identity. This lack of legitimacy and slow identity-building are in line with Thébaud's (2010) work on FEs' negative self-assessment of their entrepreneurial skills. For this reason, they consider that mastering their digital tools is a bit complicated, or that it requires an investment in terms of time and money, demonstrating once again their reluctance to put forward their entrepreneurial project with confidence. Calling on other people, either professionally (collaborator, employee) or personally (spouse, friends, family), can be a solution for implementing an effective communication strategy. A more assertive legitimacy and identity could transform the passive strategies adopted by many FE. Indeed, social networks offer new spaces where women seem more inclined to communicate. For example, they create online communities to help each other, share experiences and support each other. Social networks are also a means of creating new markets in which FEs can launch themselves more easily. In this respect, it is essential to complete this work to deepen our knowledge of the subject. To this end, we plan to broaden the sample of FE studied.

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