

Developing an Authentic Personal Brand using Impression Management Behaviours: Exploring Female Entrepreneurs' Experiences

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Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into how female entrepreneurs develop and communicate an authentic personal brand. We examine the entrepreneurial marketing (EM) activities undertaken by female entrepreneurs and identify the Impression Management (IM) behaviours and tactics employed. We explore the risks associated with self-promotion to gain a better understanding of how female entrepreneurs market themselves and their businesses.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Using semi-structured interviews, we explore the experiences of female entrepreneurs as they engage in IM behaviours. The sample is drawn from female entrepreneurs who have small-scale businesses which span a range of specialist service sectors. All participants are engaging in personal branding activities. Participants were recruited via a gatekeeper and invited to take part in the study. Data from eleven female business owners was collected and analysed using IPA. Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed for broad patterns and then initial codes developed which allowed for themes to emerge, with a number of core themes being identified. These core themes are presented, together with verbatim quotes from participants to provide a rich insight into the marketing activities of these female entrepreneurs.

Findings – The findings reveal the complex challenges faced by female entrepreneurs as they engage in self-promotion and IM to market their business. Four key themes emerge from the data to explain how female entrepreneurs engage in managing their brand both online and offline: experimental; risk; authenticity and supplication. The study identifies in particular that female entrepreneurs use the tactic of supplication in combination with self-promotion to communicate their brand. Additionally, it was found that female entrepreneurs share their personal fears and weaknesses in an attempt to be seen as authentic and manage the risk associated with self-promotion.

Originality/value – We contribute to the EM literature by extending our understanding of the risks associated with self-promotion for female entrepreneurs. The study also contributes to the IM literature by providing a better understanding of IM beyond organisations and applied to an entrepreneurial domain. The study highlights a number of important implications for entrepreneurial practice and policy.

Introduction

Marketing is one of the greatest challenges for all entrepreneurs (Franco, de Fátima Santos, Ramalho, and Nunes, 2014) and a particular challenge for certain female entrepreneurs, with many lacking the knowledge or confidence needed to develop marketing activities for their business (Bamiatzi, Jones, Mitchelmore and Nikolopoulos, 2015; Entrepreneursuk.net, 2017; FSB, 2015).

Unlike larger firms, the success of a start-up will depend largely on the marketing skills or competencies of the owner (Franco *et al.*, 2014; Hills and Hultman, 2013). The entrepreneur often personifies the marketing activity with personal branding indicated as a form of differentiation for the business which cannot easily be imitated by competition (Resnick, Cheng, Simpson and Lourenço, 2016). Ward and Yates (2013) link such personal branding activity to self-promotion and Impression Management (IM). The IM literature has identified that women in organisations are often reluctant to promote themselves, showing low levels of self-promotion with self-promotion even identified as a risk for females (Bolino and Turnley, 2003; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Singh, Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2002; Smith and Huntoon, 2014). However, less is known about female entrepreneurs and self-promotion or of how they manage any risks associated with promoting themselves.

Our objective therefore is to explore the entrepreneurial marketing (EM) activities undertaken by female entrepreneurs. In particular, we seek to identify the IM behaviours and tactics employed by female entrepreneurs as they engage in personal branding as a way to market their business. This study contributes to the EM literature by extending our understanding of the dimension of risk

management identified by Morris, Schindehutte and LaForge (2002). Specifically, this study explores the risks associated with self-promotion for female entrepreneurs. The paper also contributes to the currently underdeveloped stream of research which extends IM literature beyond organisations and applies it to entrepreneurs (Nagy, Pollack, Rutherford and Lohrke, 2012; Parhankangas and Ehrlich, 2014).

Female entrepreneurship is seen as key to driving the global economy and delivering social change (The World Bank, 2017). However, while the ratio of female entrepreneurs has increased in many countries (GEM, 2016), even in developed economies, such as the United Kingdom (UK), women are only half as likely as men to start their own business (Women's Business Council, 2016). Increasing the number of female entrepreneurs to equal that of men would contribute over £100bn to the UK economy in the next 10 years (Deloitte, 2016). While boosting the "birth-rate" of female-led businesses is vital, it is only part of the story. Start-ups must also be encouraged to grow if their economic contribution is to be realised (RSA, 2014), with sales and marketing considered essential to business growth (Nwankwo and Gbadamosi, 2011). Prior research found marketing is different for small entrepreneurial ventures when compared to large organisations (Resnick *et al.*, 2016) with EM emerging as a domain to help explain the challenges of the Entrepreneurship/Marketing interface (Crick and Crick, 2015, 2016; Kilenthong, Hultman and Hills, 2016; Miles, Lewis, Hall-Phillips, Morrish, Gilmore and Kasouf, 2016; Morris *et al.*, 2002). Morris *et al.*, (2002, p.7) argue that EM is characterised by creativity, intuition and insight leading to a different marketing consciousness which contrasts with the more rational decision making that underpins traditional marketing approaches. Risk management is identified as one dimension where this new approach to marketing may have a role in mitigating or sharing risks with greater levels of collaboration and working with lead customers being suggested. This study explores how female entrepreneurs are using new approaches to marketing to manage risk.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section the existing literature on personal branding and IM is reviewed. We then describe the methodology, including our approach to the sample strategy and data collection. In the following section we report on the findings and then discuss the implications of

these to both the literature and entrepreneurial practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for entrepreneurial policy, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Personal branding

Previous research has identified that traditional marketing activities are seen by entrepreneurs as impersonal and personal branding offers a better way to leverage the specialist knowledge or unique contribution of the individual entrepreneur (Resnick *et al.*, 2016). This personal means of marketing is also fuelled by new media platforms which offer unprecedented opportunities for individual self-expression and self-presentation. Individuals need no longer be tied to media agencies and can undertake marketing activities designed to market both themselves and their products and services whilst building an audience for their personal brand (Chen, 2013; Harris and Rae, 2011; Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011).

Within the branding literature the extension of the branding logic beyond products and services to now include people is widely acknowledged (Arvidsson and Bandinelli, 2013; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). To date, there have been very few studies in the field of personal branding underpinned by branding theories. Prior studies have identified two main challenges with the application of branding theory to people. Firstly, whilst products and services are relatively fixed and stable entities and therefore lend themselves to branding processes, people brands are much less so, making it potentially difficult to consistently deliver on a unique promise of value (Bendisch, Larsen and Trueman 2013). Secondly, the process of personal branding encourages individuals to engage in self-promotion activities to achieve visibility in the marketplace, communicating a unique promise of value, based on personal strengths and assets (Shepherd, 2005). This is referred to as an “inside-out” process (Chen, 2013; Khedher, 2014). The latter part of this process leads some critics to argue that a personal brand is built to satisfy the market (Khedher, 2014) and may present a challenge for individuals who wish to remain authentic (Shepherd, 2005).

While for some authors authenticity in personal branding is emphasised and considered vital (Harris and Rae, 2011), critics writing in the socio-cultural field perceive personal branding as simply the

elevation of image over substance and an exercise in self-packaging (Lair, Sullivan and Cheney, 2005). Hearn (2008) conveys her distaste for a process that is self-consciously creating a detachable image of the self for market consumption, while Gehl (2011) argues that those seeking to build a personal brand are cynically invited to expose their private lives as a way of enhancing authenticity.

The use of social media and online tools for self-promotion is attracting academic interest. Harris and Rae (2011) refer to a new digital divide which distinguishes between those who have the skills, time and confidence to use digital tools effectively and those who do not. Individuals with digital skills who can create an authentic personal branding both on and offline can widen their audiences and career opportunities. This is an idea supported by Chen (2013) who finds that media amateurs, including entrepreneurs, have the opportunity to use these new platforms to manage and project their profile and build an audience for a personal brand. A study by Ruane and Wallace (2013) found that social media, including Facebook and Twitter, allows individuals to engage in self-presentation, creating online identities. Developing a holistic authentic online brand however, which transcends social and professional distinctions is a challenge (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011), as is the question of how to control that profile in a dynamic environment in which both the site and other parties can affect and contribute to an individual's online brand. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) argue that this should not be seen as a lack of control. Instead, they conceive of brand building through social media as collaboration and liken the process not to a traditional performance but to improvised theatre where both the audience and the performer work together to co-create the brand. E-marketing activities are seen as an effective means to expand EM activity and an opportunity to co-create a personal brand for entrepreneurs (Miles *et al.*, 2016).

Previous research has identified personal branding as a means to achieve visibility in; academia (Noble *et al.*, 2010), accountancy (Vitberg, 2010), librarianship (Gall, 2012) and modelling (Parmentier *et al.*, 2013). Khedher (2014) suggests personal branding is a logical response to an increasingly competitive and uncertain economic climate. Critics perceive an implicit invitation to self-commodification (Hearn, 2008), shifting responsibility away from society to the individual (Lair

et al., 2005). In a time of economic precarity the discourse of personal branding is now pervasive (Vallas and Cummins, 2015).

A search of the extant literature has not identified an exploration of the personal branding activities of female entrepreneurs or the challenges they face in communicating an authentic personal brand both on and offline. If the application of branding theories is problematic, then IM may prove a useful lens through which to explore these activities.

Impression Management

Similar to personal branding, IM refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions that others form of them (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1995). IM is attributed to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical view of social interactions whereby individuals are conceived of as social actors generating positive external impressions (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). IM is still regarded as one of the most influential theories regarding reputation (Srivoravilai *et al.*, 2011).

Individuals are more motivated to engage in IM strategies when their behaviours are public and their image is seen as important in achieving their goals (Bolino, Long and Turnley, 2016). IM is often utilised within the organisational literature to identify how well an individual presents themselves, directly impacting on their ability to get a job, secure promotion or a pay increase (Bolino *et al.*, 2016). However, there is limited exploration of IM behaviours adopted by entrepreneurs as they seek to positively influence others, including potential investors (Nagy *et al.*, 2012; Parhankangas and Ehrlich, 2014).

Both the direct and indirect techniques used when constructing an image are discussed in the literature. Direct techniques might be used when presenting information about personal "traits, abilities and accomplishments" (Cialdini, 1989, p.45) and indirect techniques might be employed to

manage information about the “people and the things with which one is associated” (Cialdini, 1989, p.46). A further distinction is made in the literature between assertive and defensive strategies (Bolino and Turnley, 2003). Assertive strategies are considered to be initiated by the individual seeking to create a particular image and defensive strategies are seen to be employed in response to an undesirable image which may have been formed (Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984). Five different IM behaviours with descriptions (see Table 1) are associated with assertive IM strategies (Jones and Pittman, 1982).

IM strategy	IM behaviour	Description
Assertive strategy – individuals proactively manage impressions about themselves to create a desired image	Ingratiation	Seeking to be likeable, showing oneself to be of benefit to others
	Self-promotion	Mention of abilities/accomplishments
	Exemplification	Doing more than necessary, going beyond call of duty
	Supplication	Showing weaknesses or limitations
	Intimidation	Threatening/bullying

Table 1 Assertive strategies associated with IM (Jones and Pittman, 1982)

The literature has mostly focussed on the use of assertive strategies with an emphasis on the use of self-promotion and ingratiation behaviours (Bolino, *et al.*, 2016). These are most often used to create a positive image in the minds of a target audience while negatively valued images are avoided (Gardner and Martinko, 1988). One exception to this is provided by Becker and Martin (1995) who investigate deliberate attempts to create a negative impression in the workplace which they attribute to a variety of individual motivations including a desire to reduce expectations and avoid responsibility. However, relatively few studies appear to have explored behaviours which might make people seem less desirable. Parhankangas and Ehrlich (2014) found when entrepreneurs risk seeming less desirable by revealing their weaknesses (which might be thought of as a supplication technique), it can increase trustworthiness and increase their chances of funding, introducing an interesting avenue for exploration.

Any deliberate attempt by an individual to develop or cultivate a desired image is not without risk. Similar to critics of personal branding, some see IM as manipulative and inauthentic (Bolino *et al.*, 2016). Goffman (1959) sees people as social actors but warns that there must be no discrepancy between front and back stage, or in other words, between the desired image projected to an audience and the reality. Discrepancies between the two can result in damage to an individual's reputation. In addition, the IM behaviours employed to create a particular desired image may equally create an undesired image. Attempts to ingratiate oneself with a target audience in order to be liked might be seen as sycophantic, whilst promoting oneself in order to be seen as competent may equally be seen as bragging (Bolino *et al.*, 2016). Parhankangas and Ehrlich (2014) found that when entrepreneurs seek to gain legitimacy for themselves and their ventures, just enough self-promotion is required. Both excessively low and excessively high levels of promotion should be avoided leading to the "self-promoter's paradox" (Bolino *et al.*, 2016. p.385). Sezer, Gino and Norton (2015) also caution against the indirect tactic of "humblebragging", a unique IM behaviour whereby individuals might combine a supposed weakness with bragging, e.g. *"It's been 10 years but I still feel uncomfortable with being recognised. Just a bit shy still I suppose"* (p.5). Combining self-promotion and supplication may seem an attractive solution to the "self-promoter's paradox" however Sezer *et al.* (2015) found it to be ineffective and inauthentic with effective responses to this paradox warranting further investigation.

While there is some consensus that utilising IM strategies effectively and authentically is a challenge regardless of gender, self-promotion behaviours may present an additional challenge for women. Bird and Brush (2002) highlight the gendered perspectives on the entrepreneurial process. Previous research has highlighted the differences between personality traits for men and women entrepreneurs, with women noted to be more risk adverse (Sexton and Bowman-Upton, 1990). Additionally, the literature highlights that women possess lower levels of entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Kickul, Wilson, Marlino and Barbosa, 2008), indicating that women have less belief that they are capable of performing entrepreneurial activity. Rudman and Phelan (2008) refer to gender stereotypes indicating women are expected to demonstrate a concern for others rather than themselves, presenting; modesty, submissiveness, warmth and selflessness. In contrast, men are expected to present more agentic

behaviours communicating; self-confidence, assertiveness and self-reliance. These supposed male leadership qualities are seen as less desirable and typical for women, resulting in, “women’s impression-management dilemma” (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Women presenting these attributes are seen to be subverting prevailing gender stereotypes and consequently are viewed as less likeable or hireable (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) similarly highlight the restrictions that the accepted norms of “feminine” can present when women construct their identities. Expectations of gender appear to put women at a disadvantage when it comes to using assertive IM behaviours in the workplace, unless, they are employing these behaviours on behalf of another party (Amanatullah and Morris, 2010).

It is not surprising therefore, women in business settings are seen as more passive, using relatively low levels of IM behaviours (Bolino and Turnley, 2003). Smith and Huntoon, (2014) found that women are also reluctant to promote themselves and break what they term the “modesty norm” for their gender. Women are more often inclined to let their work speak for itself and believe this to be enough to achieve success and recognition (Singh *et al.*, 2002). If the contribution of female entrepreneurs to the economy is to be realised then an exploration of female IM behaviours, particularly self-promotion, is long overdue.

The literature suggests that for many entrepreneurial ventures the owner-manager comes to personify the marketing of their business with many engaging in personal marketing or branding in order to promote their business. However, self-promotion is identified as a challenge for women within the IM literature. The objective is therefore to: explore the EM activities undertaken by female entrepreneurs focusing on IM behaviours and tactics.

Methodology

Henry, Foss and Ahl, (2013, p.9) found a prevalence of large-scale quantitative surveys relating to female entrepreneurial research despite “repeated calls for research methods that acknowledge the complexities of the female entrepreneurial endeavour”. Our aim was to explore female entrepreneurs’

perceptions using a phenomenological approach to examine their experiences, acknowledging that there is more than one way to view an event (Willig, 2013). Within phenomenology there are differing approaches namely *descriptive* and *interpretive*. The descriptive view would enable us to analyse the participants' accounts of their experiences as entrepreneurs, whilst an interpretative approach seeks to develop a greater understanding of the quality and meaning of the experience, facilitating interpretation of their perceptions (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014).

We therefore adopted a qualitative research method to explore those complexities and highlight the “more silent feminine personal end” (Bird and Brush, 2002, p.57) of female entrepreneurship utilising an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith, 2015). IPA provides the opportunity to bring together phenomenology and hermeneutics, enabling the data to be interpreted and acknowledging the idiographic approach to explore every single case study (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p.8).

The population of interest comprises female entrepreneurs who work for themselves and are engaged in building a personal brand. Their businesses span a range of specialist service sectors and include entrepreneurs who variously described themselves as a doula, a story archaeologist, two confidence coaches, elite performance coach, sugar addiction specialist, story party host, a business guide for introverts, coach for creative and a TEDx public speaking coach. Each of the businesses are based at home and therefore small-scale with few or no employees and their marketing and personal branding efforts are directed by the founding entrepreneur and their personal resources (Anwar and Daniel, 2016).

In order to enable an appreciation of the participants' experiences, the sample for IPA is typically small with publication samples of one to fifteen (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p.9). It was considered that female entrepreneurs who had participated in an innovative public speaking course, designed to help them communicate a personal message, would be an appropriate sample for this study. This

research aims to explore the experiences of female entrepreneurs as they employ IM behaviours to communicate an authentic personal brand.

A purposive sampling strategy was initially employed (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016) via a known gatekeeper, the owner of the company that delivered the public speaking course, who held the database used to access the population and invite participants. Five participants were identified who matched the study's requirements and were willing to be interviewed. Subsequently, a snowballing approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2016) was adopted whereby the initial participants were asked to identify others who would fit the requirements of this study. Adopting this strategy, a further ten participants were identified. We approached these potential participants by email to invite them to be part of the study. Six additional participants were recruited providing a total sample of 11 key informants. We are precluded from providing additional demographic or descriptive data about the participants to protect their anonymity.

Data collection

Data collection took the form of eleven semi-structured interviews which lasted approximately one hour and provided the in-depth data that this study sought to capture in order to explore IM behaviours of female entrepreneurs. This number was considered acceptable to allow for initial conclusions to be drawn from this exploratory study and small enough to allow for a substantial amount of qualitative data to be compared (Eisenhardt, 1989; Crick and Chaudhry, 2013). Some structure was provided by preparing an interview guide which enhanced reliability as it ensured that the same topic areas were covered with each of the research participants (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). However, the format of the semi-structured interview still allowed for a degree of spontaneity and enabled the interviewer to probe and explore responses (Bryman, 2012). The questions were drawn from the underpinning literature but kept purposely broad, for example, "What marketing activities do you undertake for your business?" and the order of topic areas was not fixed to facilitate the narrative flow of the interviewee (Hamilton, 2006). This encouraged participants to tell their story in their own way, consistent with a narrative interviewing approach (Bryman, 2012; Anwar and

Daniel, 2016). Member checking was implemented by sending transcribed data back to participants to enhance accuracy and credibility (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Harper and Cole, 2012).

Data analysis

The interview transcripts and field notes were then subjected to separate interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2015) by two researchers to increase reliability (Fielden and Hunt, 2011) with both looking for broader patterns, themes and concepts across the data set (Silverman, 2013) and commonalities in responses through manual coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Themes from the literature review suggested initial codes with additional themes coming from the challenges and issues discussed by the research participants with the researchers playing an active part in constructing an interpretation of the data (Lee and Lings, 2011; Smith, 2015). The research team identified the following core themes: experimental; risk; authenticity and supplication.

Findings and Discussion

Consistent with previous research which indicated entrepreneurs personified their business (Resnick *et al.*, 2016), these women saw little separation between themselves and their businesses (Shepherd, 2005). They rely extensively on their own backgrounds, skills, qualifications and experiences as a basis for their personal branding and their marketing (Resnick *et al.*, 2016). For one woman, this meant developing her brand around being from Lapland, for another using her experiences of mental health to explain her insights into addiction. With no employees, our participants demonstrated IM behaviours to create an image both of themselves and their businesses with one impacting the other. As one interviewee says, *“I think my business is me, I think it’s just an expression of me”* thus highlighting the challenges of business growth and scale, these issues were recognised by all the respondents. Another participant commented, *“I am the core of my business, and I can’t leave this business and leave anything in it because I am it”*. As a consequence of this interdependence between the personal and the professional, all of the women recognised that they need to engage in self-promotion in order to market their business. This is consistent with previous literature which found

that people may be even more motivated to engage in IM strategies when their behaviours are public and their image is seen as important in achieving their goals (Bolino *et al.*, 2016). This was not however, without its challenges and risks. In what follows, the IM behaviours and challenges encountered by the respondents as they develop and communicate a personal brand will be outlined through the themes emerging from the data.

Experimental

Consistent with previous research, all the participants were taking an experimental approach to their online marketing activities (Anwar and Daniel, 2016). This was partly attributed to a lack of skill or “know-how” about how to effectively use these tools, with three participants reporting having websites and social media accounts that they never touch, *“my website designer ...designed me this beautiful website and I haven’t really developed it properly, and I don’t quite know how to do that”*. However, this experimental approach is also attributed to a commitment to only do those things that *“feel right”* and are true to themselves. As one respondent reported, her website *“doesn’t quite suit”* her anymore and she spoke of needing *“re-branding”* while another said she was tired of her marketing and spoke not of re-branding but, *“de-branding”*. Seven of the participants also discussed the importance of offline marketing activities particularly in relation to credibility. They cited public speaking, TED talks and networking and writing a book is, *“an important thing to do if you want to be perceived as an expert”*. Additionally, two of the participants mentioned clothing as an important part of their personal brand with one saying, *“I like clothes a lot and I like a kooky styleso if anything comes up about that people will send me a message, they see it as part of my brand”*.

Risk

All participants commented that self-promotion through any media means being *“out there”* which they saw as posing a particular challenge for women, *“any time a woman puts her head above the parapet she’s in danger of receiving negative, unpleasant... feedback”*. All participants recognised the

risk of social media. Concerns about engaging in self-promotion and being “*out-there*” were attributed to fears of rejection, a desire to be liked and a resistance to being seen as “*pushy*”. Perfectionism is also blamed for procrastination around marketing and personal branding activity. Eight commented on fears of judgement and rejection to the point that three knew of other female entrepreneurs who were thinking of giving up and going back to employment. All but one of the women spoke of the need for emotional resilience and a network, even a “*health-team*” around them as potential coping strategies. They saw these issues to be of particular relevance to female entrepreneurs and negotiating challenges appears to lead to an experimental and reflexive approach to their marketing communications. Nine of the women described typical IM behaviours including being, “*direct*”, “*proactive*”, “*action-oriented*” and “*single-minded*” as male and reported finding these uncomfortable, while four of the respondents described these behaviours as “*inappropriate*” for women.

In addition, these same women highlighted the gendered nature of entrepreneurs, “*being an entrepreneur you just see that as a very male dominated role*”. All reported not identifying themselves as entrepreneurs which six attributed to the size of their ventures with five of the women expressing reluctance to even use the term. The majority also described much of the marketing training available to entrepreneurs as male-oriented and based on what they saw as a conventional way of doing business. Additionally, all of the participants mentioned networks as important sources of support.

Authenticity

How best to engage in self-promotion while remaining authentic was a key consideration for all. All but one of the participants identified a tension between wanting to appear professional, competent and credible, while at the same time being real, genuine and authentic for their audience. Managing the tension between the two emerges as a central theme. Seven of the participants reported that social media and in particular, blogging, allows female entrepreneurs to test and experiment with the line between competency and authenticity in order to find what one respondent terms, “*appropriate*

balance". The majority reported that more authenticity in their posts results in bigger responses noting, *"one of the really amazing things I learnt"*. The women are testing the boundaries of authenticity while still wanting to be seen as credible and attractive to clients. The participants were aware that too much authenticity might be seen as "over-sharing". As one female entrepreneur reported, *"If I share a little bit and the sky doesn't fall, then I can maybe share a little bit more"*.

Supplication

This study finds that all female entrepreneurs are experimenting with the IM behaviours of supplication – sharing their weaknesses and imperfections with their audiences- to mitigate the fears and risks they associate with self-promotion. This is also consistent with a desire to remain authentic. This tactic allows them to promote themselves and their business whilst at the same time avoiding being seen as pushy or unlikeable. This builds on the findings of Parhankangas and Ehrlich (2014), with respondents reporting the benefits of showing the *"messiness"* and *"imperfection"* of themselves and their businesses. They report a conviction that when they say, *"here's the crazy"*, it can be a key part of attracting their audience, building trust and rapport. Another sums this up by saying, *"if somebody is prepared to show the underbelly then they're just immediately more trustworthy"* Another reported, *"I need to be vulnerable, I think that's really important because, it's part of your brand I guess, it makes it honest about the human condition"*.

Instead of wishing to control every element of their personal brand, they also indicated that they seek collaboration with their audiences akin to the improvised theatre approach described by Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) and suggested by Morris *et al.*, (2002). Here brand owner and audience are engaged in co-creation. The collaborative nature of their relationship with clients is highlighted by one of the women when she commented, *"we're all developing, and actually I don't want clients who just want the answers, they need something different"*. Again, this mitigates the risk of self-promotion and the associated fears that the entrepreneur is pushing themselves forward as someone who has all the answers because of their abilities, accomplishments or experience.

However, all the women reported feelings of vulnerability associated with this tactic as they feel that they are taking risks when sharing their weaknesses and imperfections with their audiences. Although, an authentic approach appears to build trust and rapport with their audience, this study also finds that this tactic is associated with vulnerability and risks to reputation.

Conclusions

Four key themes emerge from the data to explain how female entrepreneurs engage in managing their brand. In particular, it can be concluded that the tactic of supplication, which is associated with sharing limitations and weaknesses, is being used by female entrepreneurs in combination with self-promotion to communicate an authentic personal brand. While the literature suggests that negative images are generally avoided (Gardner and Martinko, 1988), we contribute to the IM literature by suggesting that supplication, which risks creating a negative image, is being deliberately employed by female entrepreneurs to enhance authenticity.

Furthermore, female entrepreneurs are not simply using self-promotion tools and behaviours to communicate competency, but are instead inviting their audience 'back stage' to share their imperfections and weaknesses (Goffman, 1959). In contrast to Sezer *et al.*, (2015) who found self-promotion combined with supplication to be inauthentic, our findings suggest female entrepreneurs are using this combination as a strategy to establish greater levels of trust and engagement with their audience.

The study also concludes that supplication is used by female entrepreneurs to inspire collaboration and co-creation with their audience. Rather than seeking to tightly control a personal brand and fear feedback from the audience, supplication effectively invites the audience back-stage. By adopting this strategy, these female entrepreneurs are engaging in what Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) described as improvised theatre. It is not necessary to have all the answers, instead supplication used in this way offers the opportunity to build rapport and collaborate with clients, thereby co-creating not just solutions but also the entrepreneur's personal brand.

This study found the sharing of personal fears and weaknesses to be commonplace among female entrepreneurs and even expected when communicating an authentic personal brand. Rather than simply replicating EM behaviours, which may be more reflective of ‘male-norms’ of entrepreneurship and uncomfortable or inappropriate for women, our findings support the conclusion that these women are developing their own set of EM behaviours to attract an audience and build a trusted business. Although how best to combine self-promotion and supplication is still a matter of individual experimentation.

Morris *et al.*, (2002) highlight greater collaboration and in particular, working with lead customers as a means to share risk. While the findings suggest that female entrepreneurs are managing risk in this way, this study also highlights the additional risks inherent in adopting this strategy. Allowing your customers ‘back-stage’ raises concerns for female entrepreneurs about reputation and credibility in conjunction with fears of judgement and rejection, demonstrating their vulnerability. Self-promotion tools, in particular social media platforms, allow feedback to be freely given and this study indicates that female entrepreneurs who develop and communicate an authentic personal brand are faced with an ‘impression-management dilemma’ (Rudman and Phelan, 2008) of their own. They are presented with the choice of either censoring themselves or having the courage to put themselves “*out there*” and risk not being liked or harshly judged by their audience. Emotional resilience and a supportive network are indicated as important coping strategies.

Our research supports the notion that these female owner-managers are being innovative, managing the risks of self-promotion by putting what Goffman, (1959) saw as the hidden back stage, firmly front stage. They are using the IM behaviours of self-promotion together with supplication to communicate an authentic personal brand for themselves which is seen as a vital contribution to the marketing of an SME (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010; Franco *et al.*, 2014; Merillees, 2007; Resnick *et al.*, 2016) and is consistent with the creativity and intuition, driven by deeply felt convictions and passions, which characterise EM (Morris *et al.*, 2002).

Implications

The study highlights a number of important implications for entrepreneurial practice and policy. In particular, the findings reveal the complex challenges faced by female entrepreneurs as they engage in self-promotion and IM to market their businesses. Using the four key themes of: experimental; risk; authenticity and supplication which emerge from the study, female entrepreneurs can audit their current IM behaviours to shape their entrepreneurial practice. Becoming aware of their IM behaviours could help them achieve a balance of EM activities which more effectively support greater authenticity and enhance trust and engagement with their audiences.

However, providing more targeted support for female entrepreneurs would be useful in helping them manage the challenges they face in achieving the balance between self-promotion and supplication. As such, the findings of this study should be of interest to the many business support agencies acting on behalf of public policy makers who are keen to support the growth of female-led businesses.

Government-funded agencies are in a position to offer this support to female entrepreneurs at a lower cost than private sector providers, making this support more widely accessible to small-scale entrepreneurs. In particular, the study has highlighted the gendered norms associated with entrepreneurial practice. Challenging women's existing perceptions of "an entrepreneur" and associated marketing behaviours are necessary first steps. Support agencies and business schools should seek to develop new styles of marketing education and training based on the valued qualities of authenticity, empathy and rapport as found in this study. These could provide an alternative to more conventional marketing training which these women currently see as dominated by male-norms. Within this training, recognition must be given to the perceived and felt risks of authentic communication and self-promotion for women. In particular, marketing training in social media and public speaking are recommended with networks and mentors seen as key to providing on-going support.

- For many female entrepreneurs, the notion of a personal and a professional life are increasingly blurred. Training which considers how to develop a holistic online media presence consistent with their personal brand is recommended. Whilst the use of social media is pervasive, there are still gaps in knowledge and experience. Understanding the differing

styles of individual social media platforms including for example; Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, may help female entrepreneurs develop their tone-of-voice and online personality. In addition, they may gain greater confidence in developing an authentic brand online and finding their audience to build an online brand community. In particular, the risks of being “out there” and possible backlash should be openly considered and discussed.

- Support for female entrepreneurs to develop their brand offline is also warranted. Public speaking has emerged as a surprising alternative to more traditional means of marketing and focussed training in this area could provide the means to both develop confidence and hone a message or idea.
- Networks and mentors can be particularly useful in allowing women to share experience and knowledge. Additional opportunities and encouragement for female entrepreneurs to engage in these activities are needed. This could also be embedded into marketing education curricula with women encouraged to seek a marketing mentor that does not necessarily have to come from their own sector. In any case, care should be taken to provide safe and supportive relationships to help manage reported issues of confidence and vulnerability and to help develop on-going emotional resilience.

Limitations and future research

This paper has provided rich insights into how female entrepreneurs develop and communicate an authentic personal brand employing a combination of self-promotion and IM behaviours to market themselves and their businesses. Future studies could consider using a larger sample size to overcome the limitations of small sample sizes and examine the generalisability of the current findings.

Additionally, a longitudinal study to investigate whether IM strategies for entrepreneurs change over time would be beneficial. Furthermore, research could be undertaken with the consumers and

audiences of female entrepreneurs to see which behaviours, tactics, and combinations of these, they judge to be effective in establishing authenticity, credibility, trust and rapport.

The combination of IM tactics and behaviours used by entrepreneurs from different market sectors and different countries is also warranted to identify the transferability of these findings. A cross-cultural study would provide rich insights into the dynamic of culture when developing a personal brand. For example, research undertaken in male dominated cultures such as the Middle East would provide insight into how female entrepreneurs manage their personal brand and utilise IM behaviours, to market their business in a patriarchal society.

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