



Entrepreneurship and Coming Out: Exploring the Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Entrepreneurs

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship has long been cited as an alternative path for minority groups, albeit more commonly discussed in relation to highly visible minorities. The gay community is no exception with entrepreneurship celebrated by authors since the 1990s when Lukenbill (1995) claimed that 10% of gay people in the USA were engaged in entrepreneurship. This higher propensity for entrepreneurship has since been dispelled, thanks primarily to Marlow et al. (2018), but the field remains primed to further explore how gay people navigate the experience of being an entrepreneur as very little is still known about this topic. The literature to date has noted that entrepreneurship is a non-traditional pathway and hence attractive to gay people who may value autonomy and independence more than their heterosexual counterparts. Some work has explored the propensity for gay people to be more creative, asking questions about the industries that gay people enter and their sensitivity to opportunities. Membership of a minority community often affords an entrepreneur access to unique networks of customers, investors and employees and although the cultural capital perspective has been widely

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applied to other minority groups, it remains relatively under-explored in relation to the gay entrepreneur. Various authors have explored the ways in which gay entrepreneurs might experience discrimination, but there are many gaps in the current understanding of what it means to be a gay entrepreneur. Furthermore, there is little comprehension regarding how being gay might influence a person's entrepreneurial experience and even whether it is appropriate to continue to view the gay entrepreneur through the lens of minority entrepreneurship. This chapter will explore the literature on what it means to be a gay entrepreneur and how coming out might influence their experience of entrepreneurship. As a gay entrepreneur can choose whether or not they wish to be identified as such, the chapter will examine the various approaches to coming out in business and how this may or may not influence one's business. The purpose of this chapter is to build a better understanding of the experiences of gay entrepreneurs when or if they choose to come out.

Gay Entrepreneurship

Gay entrepreneurship is an under-researched area in minority entrepreneurship literature. Authors have noted that this lack of visibility is likely linked to an assumption that the experience of gay and straight entrepreneurs may not differ much (Galloway 2008; Willsdon 2005). While early commentary examined the differences between gay and straight entrepreneurs (Lukenbill 1995; Levin 1998; Varnell 2001), more recent academic work has begun to unpick what the value of a gay entrepreneurship lens may be and discussed the visibility of the gay entrepreneur in relation to their identity—coming out and what this means for the business (Schindehutte et al. 2005; Willsdon 2006; Galloway 2008; Redien-Collot 2012). The most recent work in the study of gay entrepreneurship has addressed the issue of gender and heteronormativity, addressing the male and heterosexual norm at the centre of traditional entrepreneurship discourse (Marlow et al. 2018; Rumens and Ozturk 2019). Ragins (2004) suggested that heterosexism in the workplace could push gay people towards self-employment as an alternative to a career path where one might expect to experience discrimination. Discrimination towards gay people in the workplace has been widely discussed in the literature, sometimes termed the 'lavender ceiling', as the existence of heterosexism in work may create a negative experience for gay people (Herek 1996; Croteau and Bieschke 1996; Ragins and Cornwall 2001; Sears and Mallory 2011). However, Schindehutte et al. (2005) challenged this understanding as their study explored the motivations of gay people for starting

a business, finding that push motivations were not the primary driver for this group as freedom and financial independence ranked higher on the list. In a later study, Willson (2006) set out to establish whether homosexual entrepreneurs held the same entrepreneurial traits and motivations as their heterosexual counterparts and concluded that while the catalysts of entrepreneurship were similar (e.g. unemployment), the motivations (e.g. autonomy) to be an entrepreneur can differ.

Wood et al. (2012) suggested that gay entrepreneurs were likely to have experience with discrimination and noted that there could be negative consequences if an entrepreneur were to reveal their sexuality in a professional context. Similarly, Galloway (2008) noted potential disadvantages of being an openly gay entrepreneur such as less opportunities for networking, limited access to suppliers and being subjected to homophobic discrimination and harassment. Rumens and Ozturk (2019) noted that the literature to date has shown how heteronormativity can be manifested in homophobic business stakeholders, societal prejudice towards gay people, plus discrimination from customers and clients of a business, all of which has resulted in some entrepreneurs concealing their sexual identity from customers and suppliers. Several authors have focused on the question of coming out as a gay entrepreneur, with some meaningful discussion connected to the relationship between the business and the identity of the gay entrepreneur (Levin 1998; Schindehutte et al. 2005; Redien-Collot 2012). The limited research on the subject finds that entrepreneurs express their sexual orientation as a part of their identity in varying degrees. What is clear from the literature is that coming out is not a one-time event, but rather it is a series of ongoing decisions made by an individual which may or may not be consistent. Common language used to discuss this is to 'reveal', 'conceal' or 'pass' (as heterosexual) depending on the situation or preference (Clair et al. 2005). In studies related specifically to the gay entrepreneur, Schindehutte et al. (2005) noted that there are those who 'identify' with and those who are 'independent' from their sexuality as an entrepreneur. Further work examined the political identity of gay entrepreneurs and how they reconcile, transcend or resist their gay identity (Redien-Collot 2012). So when, where and how do gay people come out in their entrepreneurial journeys? What makes a gay person hide their sexuality or link it to their business? Is being gay irrelevant to entrepreneurship? This chapter will explore these questions, examining the relevant literature to date and illustrating the issue with the experiences of real gay entrepreneurs.

Coming Out

To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or to not let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case to whom, how, when and where. (Goffman 1974, p. 42)

The phrase ‘coming out’ is used to describe when a person reveals their sexual orientation to other people. Research has indicated that those who positively accept their sexual orientation tend to be psychologically healthier and less exposed to psychological stress (Meyer 2003). However, it is not always the case that a gay person will want to be identified as such. Gay people often do not express their sexual identity in their behaviours, which is discovered by most before or during early adolescence and generally precedes any sexual experience. This means that many people do not reveal their sexual orientation for several years. Some gay people find it less intimidating to ‘*go through the motions of heterosexual behaviour*’ (Rahman and Wilson 2003, p. 15) than to deal with the perceived consequences of being openly gay. There are various approaches that can be taken in viewing how, when and to whom a gay person comes out. Mohr and Fassinger (2000) developed an ‘Outness Inventory’ which was designed to assess the degree to which a lesbian, gay or bisexual person is out to the people around them (family, society and religion). Brenner et al. (2010) identified the levels of outness which are relevant to the workplace as: supervisors, subordinates, co-workers and clients. Brenner et al. discussed the complexity experienced by gay people when reflecting on the cost–benefit associated with coming out in the workplace. Levin (1998) too suggested that a gay entrepreneur will need to consider his or her outness in relation to customers, employees, suppliers, competitors and local communities, making ever wider the field of consideration for an entrepreneur when considering coming out.

‘Stigma Management’ is a term used to explain the disclosure of an invisible stigma (e.g. gay, religion, pregnancy, disease, ex-prisoner, etc.), such as identifying oneself with a ‘devalued group’ in society (Crocker et al. 1998). Social stigma management strategies are ‘passing’ in the case of a gay individual as this would be passing as straight and ‘revealing’ in the case of the gay individual coming out. Herek (1996) described three aspects of passing that an individual may encounter: fabrication, concealment and discretion. Fabrication is the creation of a false identity or false information such as pretending to have a heterosexual partner in order to avoid stigma (Woods 1994). Concealment occurs when preventative measures are taken to ensure

that sexuality is not revealed. Woods termed this strategy 'avoidance'. Discretion is simply eluding questions which could reveal stigma. Chrobot-Mason et al. (2001) noted that this included speaking in an ambiguous language and not engaging in conversations which are deemed risky. Clair et al. (2005) highlighted that people in the workplace rely on varied strategies for coming out: signalling, normalising and differentiating. Signalling is an indirect way of coming out through dropping hints without the need to be explicit. Woods (1994) stated that this strategy is used to prompt the discovery of one's sexuality by others. Normalising is the assimilation with the norm in tandem with revealing one's sexuality so as to suggest it has little bearing on how 'normal' a person exists. Differentiating is the emphasis on how stigmatised characteristics differ from the norm; this strategy is used to test the perceptions of those around the individual. Described by Taylor and Raeburn (1995) as 'deploying one's identity' this concept is similar to the 'identifiers' suggested by Schindehutte et al. (2005) and is situated in the public sphere. Passing, concealing and revealing may have both positive and negative consequences for an individual (Croteau et al. 2008; Chaudoir and Fisher 2010). Psychological strain may result from passing or concealing, and a feeling that one is not being true to oneself. Ragins et al. (2007) stated that serious negative consequences can occur as a result of passing or concealing, especially in the workplace where lower job satisfaction, less commitment to the organisation and high job turnover can result. In addition, the social benefits of sharing personal information in the workplace can be limited and may lead to isolation and a lack of opportunities for advancement (Herek 1996; Day and Schoenrade 1997). On the other hand, revealing can reduce the psychological strain associated with passing, yet can create the outcome of a stigmatised identity. Fundamentally, it can be argued that one is more open to heterosexism (Clair et al. 2005) and resulting prejudice.

The literature suggests that the expectation of heterosexism is the main reason for not identifying a business owner's sexual orientation with the business. Levin (1998) discussed both the advantages and disadvantages involved when identifying a business with its owner's sexuality. Business from within the gay community may increase as gay consumers may feel more appreciated and accepted. She suggested that the business may run the risk of enduring religious boycotts, stigma and could even suffer hate crimes in a hostile environment. It was suggested that the industry of the business be evaluated (with discretion advised in more traditional areas such as manufacturing), the length of custom and level of intimacy with customers, sophistication of the market and understanding of diversity, and physical location of the business person (proximity to potentially anti-gay establishments/institutions). Levin

also suggested that the degree to which a gay entrepreneur will come out in business will be closely linked with the particular personal situation. The context for studying the gay entrepreneur has shifted in the last 20 years. Where there was once a complete dearth of study there is now compelling discussion and opportunity for research. This minority community has experienced lessening institutionalised heterosexism in many parts of the world with the decriminalisation of homosexuality and in some countries the legalisation of gay marriage. While this context continues to change, there is still significant heterosexism and homophobia at large. Even in those countries most advanced in the protection of gay people, there are still many challenges and stigmas which might influence the decision of a gay person to come out or not as they navigate entrepreneurship. While the institutional context changes, there remains uncertainty for people of minority identity and this may cause continued flux regarding how an individual considers coming out or not.

The Experiences of Gay Entrepreneurs

The remainder of this chapter explores the experiences of gay and lesbian entrepreneurs who participated in a study on gay entrepreneurship undertaken by the author. They have shared their views on coming out and how they interact with the world around them in business. The participants spoke about their approaches to stigma management (Clair et al. 2005) as they make decisions about to whom, how and when they come out. The existing literature provides tools through which the 'outness' of participants can be viewed. The section further uses the structure of Redien-Collot (2012) to examine the categories of 'reconcile, resist and transcend' which describe whether a person is likely to identify as a gay entrepreneur, avoid being identifiable as gay or if they feel it is irrelevant to their entrepreneurial identity. The entrepreneurs stated that within their private sphere, friends were not a concerned group in relation to coming out. Most of the entrepreneurs described how supportive their family and friends had been throughout the process of coming out for the first time. However, there were participants who had very negative responses from their family, some of whom were not aware they were gay or were estranged from their relatives as a result. Many of the entrepreneurs linked religion and homophobia, describing religious families or communities who would not accept them as gay. Others described being bullied as children for being perceived as effeminate or butch by their peers. The 'otherness' of being gay was a clear theme in discussion with the

entrepreneurs, being in the minority and not adhering to the heteronormative narrative of all those around them (Table 1).

The language used by the entrepreneurs themselves was moderately negative about coming out, although in some cases it was quite negative about other gay people and often valued the optic of the heteronormative experience over the ‘otherness’ of being viewed as a gay entrepreneur. The tension between the two states of identity in entrepreneurship was not apparent with those individuals who were completely out to all personal and professional connections in their life. The entrepreneurs spoke about coming out and what it would mean for their business. A common thread in this discussion was the default assumption that it would be damaging for others to know that the owner of a business is gay. The words ‘barrier’, ‘damaging’, ‘hassle’, ‘sensitive’ and ‘risk’ were used to describe the impact of coming out to the customers, clients and other stakeholders of a business. Taken together, this suggests that some of the entrepreneurs feared the repercussions for the business if their sexuality was publicly known. This was not always the case as the participants in this study displayed the full range of identities as laid out by Redien-Collot (2012). For the purposes of this discussion, the entrepreneurs who could be classified as reconcilers appeared to leverage being gay to their advantage as an entrepreneur, most commonly targeting other gay people for marketing purposes. The significant factor for reconcilers was that they viewed being

Table 1 Perspectives: coming out in business

The fact is that it is a given that you are straight. Would I be more likely to get a raise if I were gay or get an opportunity in the work place if I were gay? No.
None of this stuff is going to happen because you’re gay. I mean, is anything better going to happen because you are gay? But a lot of negative things could happen. So there is an imbalance in terms of risk
I’m very open about it—you have to be sensitive to people, you don’t want to ram things down people’s throats. I try to get the balance right
In my experience everybody has been pretty much supportive; maybe it’s because I’m not very camp and I’m not a screaming queen. That’s why I wouldn’t get a lot of hassle. I would say that maybe people who provoke it would get a lot more hassle
Especially being gay and going to a small village. Like I grew up there and I know what it’s like and it’s not easy
So I’m not going to go into a meeting and say I’m gay and I don’t want people to think differently or talk differently. So I don’t want to create a barrier, a potential barrier to business that might be there if I turn around and say what I did
The thing is, once you are out what are they going to do? Once you’re out there is no power over you. You just get on with it. [...] I suppose the obvious challenge is to be out without damaging your business

Table 2 Perspectives: reconciling gay entrepreneurship

I think being gay will help me [in entrepreneurship] in some cases
[Using the gay audience] it has been good for us... Speaking the same language and knowing the right people
I kind of want to tap into the gay market with the weddings, the ceremonies
Certainly if there was any opportunity to target the gay audience, I would
I know myself if I'm a gay customer, if you have got something good, then you are loyal to it. They don't call it the pink pound for nothing
I'm dying to get into [gay marriage] I'll be looking at that area and it will be interesting to see will I be able to put something together

gay as an opportunity to access networks and ideas that other entrepreneurs could not (Table 2).

A trend in previous studies is that a gay-owned business is often patronised by other gay people, where the organisation provides niche products/service to the gay market and is more likely to market towards gay people (Levin 1998; Schindehutte et al. 2005; Redien-Collot 2012; Wood et al. 2012). Arguably, a gay-owned business is well positioned to target a gay audience as a gay entrepreneur will be well informed and knowledgeable about the gay community. The entrepreneurs in this study who felt there was untapped potential in the gay market were excited by the opportunity to reconcile their gay identity and spoke about the ways in which they connect with other gay people. This included a range of opportunities such as advertising in the gay press, networking to use their knowledge of the gay community and providing niche products and services. Most of the entrepreneurs in this study, whether they were reconcilers or otherwise, employed other gay people as they believed that their network in the gay community was a good source for talented employees. While many of the participants felt there were advantages to being a gay entrepreneur who had come out, there were also those who resisted the association with their sexuality and either chose to pass or conceal their sexuality. Those who 'resisted' being out had experiences with heterosexism and held the view that something negative would happen if their sexuality was linked with the business. Some feared that their business would be seen as less professional (or in some cases morally questionable) if identified with their sexuality. These entrepreneurs had experienced discrimination and homophobia in their personal lives as a result of being out, suggesting that they expected this experience to be replicated in their professional life (Table 3).

Those who 'transcend' their sexuality as an entrepreneur were less frequent in the discussion. These individuals were for the most part casual and passive in relation to their sexuality, they felt it was irrelevant to their professional life

Table 3 Perspectives: resisting gay entrepreneurship

Being out as an entrepreneur, it's not something I would really think I would like to, a route I would like to go down. Like, nah. I wouldn't really be into it

Looking after vulnerable children in care, there would be an assumption that there would be something sexually wrong about the company and that we wouldn't be safe to look after children

I don't intend on telling my clients in that I can't see it coming up in conversation I wouldn't go after it [being an out entrepreneur] because I don't think there is any money in it

But in a work environment people haven't got a clue that I'm gay, I come across as a very professional person

It's nobody's business but my own

Table 4 Perspectives: transcending gay entrepreneurship

I'm out in both [professional and personal life], but I don't think it matters I'd rather not sort of do that—discriminate between being a gay and straight business

It's something I honestly never think about. I guess in work everybody is kind of different anyway

and the business that they were running. However, in most of these cases the industry of the business was considered open and typically celebrated diversity. On the other hand, one of the participants had previously experienced homophobia in the workplace and for that reason felt that person's sexuality should be transcended in the workplace (Table 4).

Schindehutte et al. (2005) proposed that there was a dichotomy between those who were independent and those who identify with their sexuality. The entrepreneurs who 'transcend' would align with the independents in the 2005 study. Taken together, the discussion with the entrepreneurs suggests that to be independent of or to transcend one's sexual identity is dependent on the unique experience of the entrepreneur. It is arguable that it is more likely that an individual might transcend their sexual identity if they are more likely to 'pass' for heteronormative and not experience any negative consequences through heterosexism.

What was apparent from the experiences of these entrepreneurs was that Redien-Collot's (2012) lens was useful for understanding the identity of the gay entrepreneurs, but each category was not mutually exclusive. The participants were strategic about how they revealed, concealed or passed with their sexual identity in varied scenarios. The most rudimentary analysis of this study suggests that entrepreneurs will reveal where advantageous and pass when they predict a negative experience may ensue. This illustrates the consequences of real or perceived discrimination in the experience of participants

during the entrepreneurial process. The entrepreneurs showed that there are in fact many levels of outness for an entrepreneur who is gay. It was common that the participants would control who did and did not know that they were gay. This varied, based on the risk of a negative experience, between various stakeholders in the business including employees, local communities, clients/customers and suppliers. Stigma management was related to risk management as the individuals were constantly assessing the cost–benefit ratio associated with revealing their sexuality and the potential impact this could have on their business. Gay and lesbian people share many experiences and traits with other minority communities, they are in a sense different but the same from other minorities, such as those addressed in this book. In fact, a trope often used in the title of literature about gay people is ‘the same but different’. Often an invisible minority, this creates a tension between the projected expectation of a heteronormative or heterosexual experience on the entrepreneur, placing them in a situation where they must pass, reveal or conceal. The political viewpoints on this (as used to view the experiences of the participants) were useful, but emphasised that in fact it is in different situations rather than ideology that a gay entrepreneur must decide to resist, reconcile or transcend their sexual identity.

Conclusions

Coming out in business is different for every gay person. The experiences explored in this chapter revealed that there are nuances within the notion of coming out and that this is not a one time or even a necessary event for the entrepreneur. The discussion with entrepreneurs revealed that discrimination is not always external and can often come from the self and even other gay people. It was further found that coming out in business can bring with it the benefits of cultural capital through engagement with the community. It was clear from this work that coming out is a decision that is made constantly throughout the entrepreneurial experience. Apart from those for whom their identity is a central part of their business, the participants in this study would make their decisions on whether or not to come out as the moment required, assessing how appropriate, safe or otherwise it was to do so.

In the landscape of minority entrepreneurship literature, gay people represent an area of modest advancement. Yet, there remain many gaps in the study of gay entrepreneurship. There are important areas for study such as intersectional perspectives or indeed in-depth study of areas other than gay male entrepreneurship. Little quantitative work exists in the field, but this

is to be expected as the area develops. However, there are extensive, rapidly growing, gay business networks which could be useful for researchers in this area. The shift in narrative from heteronormative male is an area ripe for further development. The gay entrepreneur can mean many different things and there needs to be a study of all the dimensions and intersections of queer identity to further enrich our understanding. In conclusion, this chapter joins other researchers in calling for better understanding of how heteronormativity influences the experience of gay entrepreneurs (McAdam 2013; Marlow 2014; Marlow et al. 2018; Rumens and Ozturk 2019).

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