

# Entrepreneurial identity and context: Current trends and an agenda for future research

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## Abstract

Despite a burgeoning literature on entrepreneurial identity and context, there are still many uncharted research avenues requiring more elaboration. This special issue of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* will try to answer some of the challenging issues on entrepreneurial identity and context by examining the topics through taking different empirical and theoretical approaches. The research gaps in the field and emerging trends in this area are discussed in terms of the themes of the articles in the special issue. The editorial concludes by discussing remaining areas worthy of attention and potential research pathways. While the research on entrepreneurial identity and context continues to make progress, it is clear from the articles in this special journal issue there are many more ways that research can develop and extend current thinking.

## Keywords

context, entrepreneurial identity, societal change

## Introduction

Entrepreneurial identity is context-specific and subject to interpretation based on culture, beliefs and societal norms. Barrett and Vershina (2017: 440) state ‘entrepreneurs, likely an individual, actively construct their identity through what is and is not available to them (ie capitals) and what is and is not possible or can be done in the context in which they operation (ie habitus)’. This means that entrepreneurial identity is part of an individual’s ‘super’ identity as there are larger contextual factors that influence behaviour (Newbery et al., 2018). Identity theory suggests that behaviour is linked to the concept of self (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Thus, identity is individualized but is also evident in membership of a social group. To understand identity, there needs to be an understanding about how it

is formed and sustained through social interaction (Gioia, 1998). An individual’s identity is not innate but dynamic and changes based on their social interactions (Hall and Du Guy, 1996; Kreiner et al., 2006). Individuals have multiple identities that are based on experience and self-reflection, which influence past, present and future behaviour (Chas-serio et al., 2014).

To understand the nature of entrepreneurial identity, it is important to focus on the context in which it takes place. Context can be described as including ‘the socioeconomic

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environment consisting of institutions, norms and culture as well as availability of finance, knowledge creation in the surrounding society, economic and social policies, the presence of industry clusters, and geographic parameters' (Carlsson et al., 2013: 915). There has been a neglect of contextual influences in entrepreneurship research, which is surprising as an understanding of context is needed to make appropriate decisions (Shin and Kim, 2015). Contexts influence entrepreneurship in different ways depending on the need for interaction with other environmental factors (Ratten and Jones, 2018). Donnellon et al. (2014: 496) states 'context is an important contributor to entrepreneurial identity, as it provides the social cues that influence the individual's sense of belonging and/or differentiation from their social groups'. This results in context being studied from a number of perspectives including from the individual, industry, organization and regional perspective (Garud et al., 2014).

Anderson et al. (2018: 15) states 'socially legitimate identity is contingent upon who enterprises, where, and how they do it'. Gruber and MacMillan (2017) suggest that the social identities of entrepreneurs can be viewed from a Darwinian, communitarian and missionary perspective. Darwinian entrepreneurs have a traditional business logic and pursue economic gain. They conduct entrepreneurship due to self-interest and focus on competition. Communitarian entrepreneurs have a community-driven logic and want to support and be supported by a group of individuals that share common beliefs. This means they are interested in sharing business ideas based on trust that help to advance their community. Missionary entrepreneurs are interested in advancing a cause that effects society at large. More individuals are focused on political and social responsibility issues, which affects their business projects.

Additional research is required on how transnational and increased multiculturalism in society are changing entrepreneur's identity in order to address changing societal norms. When becoming an entrepreneur, an individual needs to determine how it fits into their existing identity based on societal expectations. This is due to identifying as an entrepreneur requiring competence about innovation and risk-taking, which are traits associated with being an entrepreneur. Werthes et al. (2018: 295) states 'an entrepreneurial identity evolves over time and affects entrepreneurial capabilities and activities'. The studies in both these special issues (see also Jones et al., 2018) present opportunities for scholars to both create and shift the knowledge regarding entrepreneurial identity and context. Studies examining entrepreneurial identity, for instance, may change the existing assumptions regarding the difference between entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs. Similarly, the assumptions about context can be challenged by new research findings. The ways contextual factors influence entrepreneurship is still an unexplored area in the literature despite its importance in the literature. Therefore,

the first research question addressed by this special journal issue is:

1. What is the current status of entrepreneurial identity research and what areas of development are needed for future advancement?

The role of context is part of the process for understanding entrepreneurial identity, so more research is needed about the different contexts. Thus, in this special journal issue, we build upon existing research by incorporating additional insights into context research from new studies. This helps in developing a better research approach that highlights the unique contexts for entrepreneurs. Hence, the second research question addressed by this special journal issue is:

2. What are the new ways of understanding context in entrepreneurship research?

As the research on context has emerged as a priority in terms of understanding entrepreneurial behaviour, scholars have examined the concern regarding the tendency to view context generally rather than taking into account distinct environmental differences. Responding to these concerns, entrepreneurship scholars have increased the research devoted to context. Given that entrepreneurial identity is dominated by the context, there is still a long way to go before adequately understanding the identity–context nexus. Being mindful of this gap between entrepreneurship research and practice, we focus on this topic in this special journal issue and hope to move forward the research in this area.

### **Articles in this special journal issue: Expanding entrepreneurship research to incorporate identity and contextual factors**

Entrepreneurship scholarship has advanced significantly in the past decade, but there are still gaps to fill in the research. The research on identity and context has been studied from other disciplines including psychology and sociology but more is needed in the entrepreneurship field. Individuals identify with being an entrepreneur for a range of reasons that are influenced by contextual factors. This suggests that the issues of identity and context have broader implications for entrepreneurship scholarship and practice. The four articles in this special issue critically discuss the issues of entrepreneurial identity and context taking a mixed-methods approach.

These articles examine issues around what we know and areas yet to be discovered in this distinct yet linked topic area. These articles examine (1) how institutions influence entrepreneurship and the contradictions between regulation

and practice, (2) how an entrepreneurs role in society is a by-product of their identity and can guide a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial identities, (3) how an entrepreneurs motivations and opportunities are influenced by context, (4) how entrepreneurs use storytelling to craft their identity, (5) how different inputs influence an entrepreneurs decision-making and (6) how knowledge transfer is impacted by context. Each review of these articles stated below reveals way to progress the research on entrepreneurial identity and context including opportunities for future research.

### **Article 1: Context and entrepreneurship in knowledge transfer partnerships**

Wynn and Jones (2018) discuss how contextual factors can support entrepreneurial activity. They identify the socio-cultural and small business enterprise environment as being important for knowledge transfer partnerships. As there has been an increased interest in the knowledge economy, the paper makes an important contribution to the literature about the role of knowledge in influencing entrepreneurial contexts. The authors suggest that the factors supporting entrepreneurial activity in knowledge transfer partnerships can be distinguished in terms of low and high intensity. They suggest that regional knowledge production and regional access to financial capital are crucial contextual factors that are influenced by social and human capital. Thus, in terms of knowledge creation it is helpful to have industry clusters that are supported by local universities that impact on technology opportunism. The study contributes to entrepreneurial theory by arguing context often has an invisible nature. As new technologies enter the market, the speed of their adoption influences entrepreneurial action. Thus, having an entrepreneurial spirit in a region is a result of contextual influencers from changing market environments.

### **Article 2: Facilitating work performance of sustainability-driven entrepreneurs**

Biberhofer et al. (2018) focus on how entrepreneurs who initiate sustainable innovations are driven by an action-oriented process. This enables an understanding about how ecological and social concerns form part of sustainability driven entrepreneurship. The paper focuses on understanding how values and world views influence sustainability. Based on the views of 48 entrepreneurs from five different European countries, the paper provides an analysis of the sustainability-driven entrepreneurship competences. The paper identifies key competences for sustainability-driven entrepreneurship, which are systematic, anticipatory, normative, strategic and interpersonal.

Visual and oral symbols form part of an entrepreneur's identity. Donnellon et al. (2014: 493) state visual symbols

include 'setting-office furniture, space and external surroundings; props-pictures/paintings, displays of prototypes, framed patents/historical documents, dress-formal or informal, to impact an audience; expressioniveness visually conveyed emotions or thoughts through body of facial movements'. As there are a variety of visual symbols entrepreneurs can use, choosing the right ones is dependent on training and context. In some cultures, more ostentatious groups and furniture might be more symbolic of status but in other cultures, a more subtle approach is needed. Thus, there is a degree of dichotomy between the level of visual symbols needed in order to signify authority. In addition, body language is important for entrepreneurs but its usage will depend on the context. Oral symbols involve 'a discursive means by which to explore the possibilities of incorporating new or otherwise unfamiliar experiences into the individuals ontological narrative' (Donnellon et al., 2014: 493). The use of specific words associated with entrepreneurs will depend on the context.

### **Article 3: Exploring entrepreneurial roles and identity**

Bell et al. (2018) discuss role identity among entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom and China. As part of their study, the authors utilize social identity theory to understand entrepreneurial identity. This enables an explanation for the reasons why entrepreneurs have multiple identities. By suggesting that entrepreneurial identity differs across cultures, it helps in unlocking the social factors affecting entrepreneurship. As the paper highlights, there needs to be more research on the industry contexts in terms of entrepreneurial identity. The building of an identity occurs through the sharing of knowledge among a group of individuals (Donnellon et al., 2014). This process involves individuals reflecting on their experiences and how it has shaped their sense of self. This can occur through education and learning or life experiences. Socialization can take place in a number of settings including through cultural and social contexts, which influence an individual's sense of belonging. There are social norms that individuals need to abide by to be part of a community. Some entrepreneurs find it hard to differentiate their individuality with their need to belong to a social group. This can be psychological as entrepreneurs compete based on their distinct identity but still need to feel a sense of belonging (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). While it is necessary to form an identity associated with entrepreneurship, the literature has not fully explained how it evolves over time (Donnellon et al., 2014).

### **Article 4: Institutional contradictions and community emergence**

Zheng and Chok (2018) study how the music industry represents a unique context to study entrepreneurship. They

suggest that in creative industries, there is more artistic expression, which influences the higher level of entrepreneurship compared to other industry contexts. This helps to understand how institutions facilitate or hinder entrepreneurial behaviours. As part of their study, the authors propose an alternative context to understand entrepreneurial identity. This is evident in the community emergence process that fosters creativity through social engagement. An intriguing line of research from this paper would be to explore whether the creative industries context further fosters a different type of entrepreneurial identity based on strategic position.

Strategic positioning involves an individual taking the role of an entrepreneur in order to help progress business decisions. As entrepreneurs are perceived as innovative and forward thinking individuals, it helps to take this identity due to positive associations. When others see an individual viewing themselves as an entrepreneur, they are likely to be perceived as more competent and competitive. Identity is relational and depends on an individual's interaction with others in society (Rigg and O'Dwyer, 2012). By disseminating information to others, entrepreneurs can utilize their network to increase their status. This involves the use of social networks that shape the identities of entrepreneurs.

### **Open questions and future research**

The special issues offer a roadmap for future research focusing on entrepreneurial identity and context and proposes an ambitious research agenda that has future implications on the directions general entrepreneurship research will go in the future. Due to the increased interest in interdisciplinary entrepreneurship research, it may be difficult to initiate new theoretical paths but it is important research on entrepreneurial identity tries to do this by suggesting new potential theoretical explanations. This can be conducted by applying the theoretical underpinnings from other areas such as psychology to better understand how entrepreneurs develop their identity based on context. It is our hope that the articles in this special journal issue encourage future studies to consider different types of context to develop a improved understanding of entrepreneurial identity.

Current research on entrepreneurial identity and context highlight the need for further research on these topics. Most entrepreneurial identity research focuses on the different occupational and social contexts; however, there should also be more linkage to other contexts that have an impact on the process. As stated in the introduction to this special issue, current research on entrepreneurial identity in new contexts is rather scant and most of the existing studies focus on a general overview of identity theory. There are few studies exploring other themes, namely changing societal contexts and environmental influencers or the role of stakeholders in affecting overall identity.

Future research needs to link more with the practice of entrepreneurship to address questions about how identity changes and is impacted by technological innovations. For instance, how the Internet-of-things and social media may affect entrepreneurial identity and whether online identities affect entrepreneurship. An underestimated research area is in relation to the Internet and emerging technology in terms of how this influences entrepreneurial identity. Thus, new research is required on developing improved theoretical conceptualizations because the management of an entrepreneurial identity requires different contexts to be taken into account. There is a need for further research on these topics, which is the reason why many manuscripts were submitted to this special issue. While the papers in this special issue go towards filling the research gap, there are still several issues requiring more attention in future research, such as:

- The role of entrepreneurial ecosystems in fostering entrepreneurial identity.
- The role of the environmental and sustainability in influencing entrepreneurial identity.
- The impact of regional competitiveness on an individual's entrepreneurial identity.
- The influence of culture and social norms on entrepreneurial identity.
- The importance of industry connections, business experience and education on entrepreneurial identity.

The articles in the two issues of the special issue offer several future research directions and insights into how entrepreneurial identity and context research can progress. To capitalize on these research opportunities, entrepreneurship researchers must articulate how their work will increase knowledge on the contextual influencers affecting entrepreneurial identity. This will enrich the literature but also challenge the existing notions of what we know about entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship researchers might respond to these challenges by designing complex studies that encompass multiple entrepreneurial identities. Building on past research, it is our hope that the articles in both the special journal issues will be leveraged and cemented with further empirical work. This will enable the conversation about entrepreneurial identity and context to reach new places and create additional research opportunities.

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