

# Little lady or CEO?

*Which identity strategies do young female entrepreneurs use in male-dominated industries?*

*Master Thesis Innovation & Entrepreneurship*  
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## **Abstract**

Often in theory regarding female entrepreneurship, the female entrepreneurs are treated as one homogeneous group. This research studies young female entrepreneurs who operate in male-dominated sectors, to get a closer look at their experiences, identity and entrepreneurial processes. Ten interviews with young female entrepreneurs are discursively analysed, and five themes are found to answer the question of which identity strategies are used by the young female entrepreneurs to be successful in male-dominated sectors. Young female entrepreneurs emphasize their uniqueness in the sector to gather goodwill and acquire social capital. Also, they use multiple identities to make sense of complex situations. Furthermore, they are very conscious about their use of language. Moreover, the young female entrepreneurs show assertive behaviour when they have to deal with (negative) assumptions. And finally, they emphasize the benefits of their young age and relative inexperience and use it to their advantage. This study contributes to the stream of research in female entrepreneurship that emphasizes heterogeneity in that particular group. It also contributes to the ongoing discussion about the role of age in entrepreneurship.

**Keywords:** female entrepreneurship, identity work, intersectionality, age, sex, gender

## **Preface**

Dear reader,

I proudly present you my Master Thesis: **Little lady or CEO? Which identity strategies do young female entrepreneurs use in male-dominated industries?** This Thesis is part of the Master's program of Business Administration with the specialization in Innovation and Entrepreneurship as taught by the Radboud University Nijmegen.

In September 2016 I started my academic career with the Bachelor of International Business Administration. After I had earned my Bachelor's Degree, I took a gap year to figure out which Master's specialization matched my ambitions and aspirations. This led me to start the Master's program of Innovation and Entrepreneurship in September 2020. Since the end of November 2020 I have been working on my Master Thesis and after eight months of hard work I am able to close this project, and with it, a chapter of my life. The process of writing my Thesis has gone with its ups and downs. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the closing of the university, most of this Thesis was written at home. All the meetings I had with my supervisor occurred via Zoom, as well as the meetings with my interviewees. The lack of personal contact was hard sometimes, but it makes me even prouder of this accomplishment.

Before you start reading, I would like to take a moment to appreciate all the people who helped me during this project. First of all, I would like to thank Dr. C. Essers, who managed to provide fantastic and personal supervision of this Thesis, in the very impersonal setting that was forced upon us due to the pandemic. Thank you for taking the time to always ask how we were doing, before giving us extensive feedback. Secondly, I would like to thank all the entrepreneurs who took the time to talk with me about their experiences, and who did so with infectious enthusiasm. And finally, I would like to show my gratitude towards my family and friends, who never stopped believing in me and were always ready to help me wherever they could.

I hope you enjoy the read.

*Eva Valkenburg*

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction of the topic, cause and relevance of the problem

Since the end of the twentieth century, female entrepreneurship has gained a lot of attention in research (Henry, Foss & Ahl, 2016). This literature stream started out with an emphasis on the phenomenon ‘women as entrepreneurs’, and has now moved towards an analysis of the influence of gender on entrepreneurial practices (Henry et al., 2016). Many researchers used to assume that entrepreneurship and its accessibility and opportunities were neutral and available to all. There was no awareness of the masculine dominance over the phenomenon of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). And consequently, there used to be little attention to the problems that came from disadvantages related to gender inequality, such as the lack of access to entrepreneurial resources, segmentation on the labour market and responsibility in the household. These issues were seen as the shortcomings of the individual woman, and this view was supported by comparing male and female entrepreneurial activities while using several performance indicators that positioned women’s enterprises as the lesser of the two. Also, the female-founded enterprises were set aside as ‘home-based’, ‘part-time’ or as a life-style business (Ahl, 2006; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). An assumption that rose from this stream of research was that women should act and be more like men, because that would ‘fix’ women for showing lack of entrepreneurial potential (Taylor & Marlow, 2009, as cited in Dy & Marlow, 2017).

Then a change occurred in literature on female entrepreneurship (Dy & Marlow, 2017). Ogbor (2000) and Ahl (2006) expressed critique on the institutional biases that lay on entrepreneurship and the genderedness of entrepreneurship. This introduced a new stream of theory challenging the perception that entrepreneurship is a gender-neutral phenomenon, and that women fall short in the field of entrepreneurship (De Bruin, Brush & Welter, 2007; Calás, Smircich & Bourne, 2007; Marlow & Patton, 2005), which has led to a general change in the way gender is now studied. The new focus lies more on socio-economic disadvantages for women, and thus also women in entrepreneurship (Henry et al., 2016). This so-called ‘gender turn’ has characterized literature on entrepreneurship and the academic debate is fuelled by this.

However, society still views the stereotypical entrepreneur as a white, middle-class, middle-aged male. This belief limits the conceptual and empirical understanding of entrepreneurs and their behaviour. For example, when putting the word ‘female’ in front of entrepreneur, it is automatically implied that this type of entrepreneurship is opposing something else, in this case ‘an entrepreneur’. In general, the specific naming of ‘male’ entrepreneurs does not happen often (Henry, Nelson & Lewis, 2017). This difference indicates

that a general understanding of sex exists, that positions women as ‘the other’ (de Beauvoir, 1953). And even now, “... the construct of gender ‘sticks’ to women.” (Kelan, 2009, p. 460), while men are still seen as ideal entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is important that knowledge about the biased concept of entrepreneurship is tested and challenged by scholars analysing female entrepreneurs and their experiences (Dy & Marlow, 2017), which is exactly what is done in this research: female entrepreneurs are studied and asked about their experience as a female in the entrepreneurial field.

Moreover, in this research, there is an emphasis on the difference within the group of female entrepreneurs. Often in existing literature, this group is considered homogeneous based on their sex (Marlow, 2014). However, nowadays, the phenomenon of intersectionality also exerts its influence in the theory of entrepreneurship (Dy & Marlow, 2017). Intersectionality, as described by Essers and Benschop (2007), is the phenomenon that all people, thus also entrepreneurs, are situated along different social axes at the same time. These social axes can be gender, age, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, etcetera. All these different social axes bring a variety of chances, opportunities and resources to the disposal of that person, or in this case, the entrepreneur. Consequently, this influences the behaviour, identity and relations an entrepreneur has, and thus affects the experience and success of an entrepreneur. Accordingly, intersectionality can be used to explain the heterogeneity, and more issues, that exist within the group of entrepreneurs (Dy & Marlow, 2017). In literature on entrepreneurship, intersectionality has been used to research several intersections, for instance class and gender (Harvey, 2005, as cited in Dy & Marlow, 2017), gender, ethnicity and religion (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Essers, Benschop & Doorewaard, 2010), and gender, ethnicity, national origin and national context (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). In this particular study, the intersections of two social axes, gender and age, are studied, in combination with the context of female entrepreneurship in male-dominated industries.

When one studies the process of entrepreneurship, the importance of context cannot be understated, which thus far has gained little attention in the academic field (Wright, 2012). Several types of context will influence the experience and success of the entrepreneur. The focus of this research lies on male-dominated industries, which are found to influence the behaviour of young women active in that industry (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Based on Catalyst (2020), three male-dominated industries are selected, namely ‘construction’, ‘manufacturing’ and ‘transportation and storage’. There will be more elaboration on these sectors in Chapter 2.

In this research, ‘identity’ is used to study the young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors. “Identity refers to subjective meanings and experience, to our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, ‘Who am I?’ and – by implication – ‘how should I act?’” (Cerulo, 1997 as cited in Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008, p. 6). The concept is widely used in psychological and sociological literature and has now found its way to business literature as well (Alvesson et al., 2008). Several popular streams of identity literature are the social identity theory, identity work and identity regulation and control. All address the influence of the individual on its self-perception and the influence of the individual’s context on this process (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Atewolugun (2014) has shown in his study that gender, ethnic, and senior organizational identities are perceived differently in relation to each other, dependent on social context. Because of the different social contexts and spaces, there are dynamic resources available for individuals to perform identity work (Simpson, 2014). Hence, in this research, we look at the intersection of several identities (age, gender, female entrepreneur, male-dominated industry) and see how this is experienced by the entrepreneurs.

## **1.2 How is the problem framed in terms of academic literature?**

Some research has been done on female entrepreneurship in male-dominated industries. Research in the early stages of female entrepreneurship literature is for instance that of Olson and Currie (1992), who performed research on the personal value systems and business strategies of female entrepreneurs in a male-dominated industry (construction). Also more recent studies can be added here, for instance Marlow and McAdam (2013), Marlow (2014) and Henry et al. (2016/2017).

Moreover, in 2019, S. Beerens conducted research for her Master Thesis on how female entrepreneurs make use of creative identity work to succeed in male dominated sectors. To add to these prior studies, in this Thesis, the focus will be on an additional social category, namely: age. Age is an interesting axis to add to this research for the following reasons. Entrepreneurial willingness and intention are found to reduce as age increases (Lévesque & Minniti, 2006; Van Praag & Van Ophem, 1995). However, Lee and Vouchilas (2016) found that entrepreneurial opportunities increase with age, due to the increased chances of accumulating physical, social and human capital that come with age. Youth can thus be a barrier for success due to the decreased accessibility to resources that a young age brings. On the contrary, Azoulay, Jones, Kim and Miranda (2020) express that a common and long standing view regarding young entrepreneurs is that young people generally create big ideas. There are some advantages to

being young, as well as some disadvantages (Azoulay et al., 2020). The literature on age and entrepreneurship shows more inconclusiveness, for example in literature regarding entrepreneurial propensity, there is an ongoing debate about the relationship with age. Where some authors indicate a rising relationship (e.g. Fairlie, Morelix, Reedy & Russell, 2016; Zissimopoulos & Karoly, 2007), others find a decline (e.g. Parker, 2009). This unclarity of the role of age makes it interesting to research in the context of female entrepreneurship in a specific industry.

### **1.3 Contributions to theory and society**

For this research, the focus lies on young female entrepreneurs. In 2017, almost half of all entrepreneurs that started a venture in the Netherlands were younger than 35, indicating a rise of young entrepreneurs (CBS, 2017). Based on this, when the term ‘young’ entrepreneur is used in this research, the age category referred to is 18 years - 30 years. This research on the intersection of sex and age in entrepreneurship, adds to existing literature on intersectionality in entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, this research will provide insights about both positive and negative consequences of being a young female entrepreneur in male-dominated sectors. It contributes to literature about the influence of intersectionality in entrepreneurial activity and experiences. Also, it helps young women prepare for situations they might encounter when they start a business in male-dominated sectors, while also giving insights into successful identity strategies to cope with these situations.

Moreover, as mentioned before, the focus of this research will be on male dominated industries. This contributes to existing literature because the influence of context on entrepreneurial activity is in need of greater recognition and exploration (Zahra, Wright & Abdelgawad, 2014). There is little recognition for the way sex influences certain contexts, while (re)producing stereotypes and assumptions based on a person’s sex. The focus on the context of male-dominated industries and its embedded stereotypes and assumptions, will add to existing literature concerning female entrepreneurship, trying to recognize and explore these influences. For companies operating in and clients of male-dominated industries, this research can provide insights into which existing (institutional) structures need to be broken, and in which areas female contributions could provide a fresh perspective to long existing procedures and practices.

Concluding, the goal of this research is to contribute to existing literature on identity work and female entrepreneurship by studying identity strategies of young female entrepreneurs

in male-dominated industries. Research on female entrepreneurship and identity work have so far been generalized to be applicable to all (females). Here, the study subject is narrowed down to research more concrete phenomena. By doing so, this study hopes to provide insights for young women on developing their identity as an entrepreneur, also in contexts that come with biases and difficulties, and hence encourage them to start their own enterprise.

Based on the above, the following research question will be answered in this study:

*What kind of identity strategies are being used by young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors in order to succeed?*

#### **1.4 Outline of the thesis**

This Master Thesis is built up as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of relevant existing literature on the topic, including elaboration on identity theory, intersectionality, female entrepreneurship and male-dominated industries, and the influence of sex and gender. This is followed by a chapter on methodology, where the qualitative method used in this research will be discussed, as well as the data sources and analysis procedure. The chapter finishes with an indication of the limitations of this research and how the standards of research ethics will be upheld. In Chapter 4 the results of the interviews will be provided. These will lead to an answer to the research question of this study in the final chapter, where a conclusion and discussion of the results can be found. This Thesis finishes with a personal reflection and at the bottom there is a list of references used throughout this research and an Appendix.

## Chapter 2 - Theory

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for this study. It starts by discussing identity and more specifically, identity work. Then it moves on to intersectionality, its history, meaning and how it should be used in research. This is followed by theory on female entrepreneurship, with a subsection on female entrepreneurship in male-dominated industries. The chapter is concluded by theory regarding the influence of sex and age on entrepreneurship, and the role of gender.

### 2.1 Identity

The concept 'identity' has turned into a popular framework used for researching a large number of events (Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity is encountered by individuals, who are seen as "social beings embedded in organizational contexts." (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 5-6). "Identity refers to subjective meanings and experience, to our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, 'Who am I?' and – by implication – 'how should I act?'" (Cerulo, 1997 as cited in Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 6).

The definition of identity as defined by the psychological literature, entails the claims of membership by an individual, and the meanings an individual associates with certain social categories (Shields, 2008). A distinction can be made between visible and invisible social categories or identities. Visible identities are for example race and ethnicity, whereas invisible are for instance sexual orientation, social class, religion and disabilities (Jones, 2009; Bowleg, 2012).

A sociological perspective on identity distinguishes between the self-identity, a person's own perception of who he/she is turning into, and social identities, which are cultural phenomena relating to several social categories that occur societally. These are inputs into self-identities, as opposed to being elements of self-identity (Watson, 2008). These social-identities involve "the self's projections towards others, others' projections towards the self and reactions to received projections" (Beech, 2008, 2011 as cited in Corlett & Mavin, 2014). In constructing a self-identity an individual might refer to distinctive social groups or traditional social categories (for example man, woman, black, white) that help meaning making (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Regarding theoretical perspectives on identity, three streams can be viewed as the broadest and most dominant streams (Alvesson et al., 2008). Firstly, the social identity theory, which

discusses how individuals view themselves as social and organizational beings. It stresses that an individual belongs to social groups and, consequently, is defined by these social groups (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Secondly, the theoretical perspective on identity is one of regulation and control: how it is accomplished through power forces (Alvesson et al., 2008). The theory focuses on managers that control their workers through their identity by appealing to their self-image, feelings, values and identifications (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993).

And finally identity work, which is the stream that this research follows. It focuses on the "[...] specific processes and situations of identity construction in and around work and organizations" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). Identity work is defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as the engaging of a person to form, repair, maintain, strengthen or revise the constructions that make a person feel part of a group or the opposite: stand out. This process is continuous and takes place all the time, in times of crisis and in times of stability. A person can have a contradicting set of personalities to use in different contexts such as work and personal life, but eventually a person strives for comfort, significance and unification by searching for similarity between his/her self-definition and a work context. This can be done by constructing a narrated self-identity (pro-identity), with a deeply personal nature that narrates belonging to specific social groups. On the contrary, a person can express him- or herself by developing an anti-identity, taking distance from certain aspects that this person does not want to be part of (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Identity work does not only involve processes of self-reflection and talk, but may also be something that can be explicitly observed, like a person's physical appearance and the selective association with specific people or groups (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or by displaying some dramaturgical performances (Down & Reveley, 2009).

Moreover, Alvesson et al. (2008) provide several reflection points when discussing identity. They start with the reasons why people perform identity research (the 'why'). Firstly, identity research is done to provide possible solutions for organizational problems and for optimization of positive forces. Also, it is done to comprehend human experiences of organizations, adding to existing knowledge of organizations with detailed and empathetic insights. The final reason is to expose difficulties linked to political and cultural irrationalities.

Furthermore, during the process of developing identity, it is important to know who the key agent in this process is and who is influencing this process (the 'who'). The extent to which the individual is seen as the key player in existing literature can vary. Some scholars view

‘extra-individual’ forces as drivers for identity construction. These forces can be sub grouped under organizational agents, organizational discourses and social, institutional and cultural contexts (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Next, the ingredients (the ‘what’) used to craft identities play a role. These ingredients consist of resources or materials, such as embodied practices (Barley and Kunda, 2001), material and institutional arrangements, discursive formations, story-telling performances, groups and social relations, and anti-identities.

Moreover, the timing (the ‘when’) of constructing identity plays a role. Some see the identity construction as an ongoing process, whereas others view identity as a result of critical incidents, like major changes but also recurring micro-level incidents. Another stream of identity research sees the ‘when’ as an irrelevant question, believing that in a normal situation one has a stable relationship with one’s identity (e.g. Dutton et al., 1994).

Finally, Alvesson et al. (2008) address where and how researchers should go about to study identity. According to Dingwall (1997), researchers can use three qualitative techniques to study social phenomena: interviews, observations, and reading texts.

## **2.2 Intersectionality**

Between 1977 and 1995 a group of black feminists called The Combahee River Collective composed a manifesto that is often regarded as (one of) the earliest use(s) of intersectionality. In this manifesto, they expressed the following: “We ... find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995, p. 234). Literature from the early 1980s addressed intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality (Cole, 2009). The credits for the term intersectionality go to Kimberlé Crenshaw (Cole, 2009). Crenshaw (1989/1993) addresses three important permutations in literature. Firstly, there are ‘similar experiences’ where black women experience discrimination that feels similar to white women’s experiences, or black men’s experiences. Secondly, there are combined effects which is double discrimination or double jeopardy, and experiences specific to the status of being, in this example, a black woman (Crenshaw 1989/1993, p. 385 as cited in Cole, 2009). Thus simply put, intersectionality refers to experiencing multiple social statuses simultaneously, including both the advantages and the disadvantages these statuses bring (Cole, 2009).

A distinction can be made between structural and political intersectionality. When inequalities and their belonging intersections are directly applicable to the experiences of people

in a society, structural intersectionality is meant. Political intersectionality is used to indicate political strategies that cause inequalities and intersections of inequalities (Crenshaw, 1994).

Where Crenshaw mainly uses intersectionality to address gender, race and class inequalities, other researchers (e.g. Schippers, 2000; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Adib & Guerrier, 2003, Brewer et al., 2002) apply this theory to other intersections, but the concept is rarely used outside feminism, gender, and anti-racism literature (Verloo, 2006).

Cole (2009) proposes three questions to ask when using intersectionality in research: “First, who is included within this category? Second, what roles does inequality play? Third, where are there similarities?” (p. 171).

The first question accentuates that there is diversity within a category and it avoids taking a subcategory as a representative for the whole category. Thus, it prevents that those who are initially overlooked, are excluded from the literature. This question further helps to develop measures based on the perspective of the sample, takes ingroup diversity into account in the analysis and avoids findings to be interpreted as universal or normative experiences (Cole, 2009).

Secondly, by asking what role inequality plays, the researcher becomes aware that due to being a member of multiple categories, the position of individuals and groups and their relation to each other, is asymmetrical, which affects perceptions, experiences and outcomes of the individuals and groups. If these roles of inequality are comparative, differences in perceptions, experiences and outcomes may be conceptualized as stemming from structural inequality (Cole, 2009).

Finally, in order to check the assumptions of differences by the researcher, one can also ask whether there are similarities as to include the connection between diverse groups by their common relationships to social and institutional power (Cole, 2009).

### ***Identity work and intersectionality***

Intersectionality describes “social identities, which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another.” (Shields, 2008, p. 302). Important to note here is that intersectional identities are thus defined in relation to one another (Shields, 2008). An individual feels like a member of certain social categories, and attaches personal meaning to those social categories, forming an individual’s identity (Ashmore et al., 2004). “Identity in psychological terms relates to awareness of self, self-image, self-reflection, and self-esteem.” (Shields, 2008, p. 301).

Corlett and Mavin (2014) discuss several shared principles of the identity (work) theory and intersectionality theory. In literature about identity (work), there is the perception that multiple and mutually constitutive social-identities intersect. The intersecting of these social identities is complex and that leads to the development of numerous and co-existent self-identities (Alvesson et al., 2008; Beech, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Kondo, 1990). These identities can be contradictory due to their variance in origin (Kondo, 1990). A study on intersectionality by Diamond and Butterworth (2008) expresses how intersectionality is a framework that can be used to analyse the various social locations and identities, and the way that they reciprocally create each other. Furthermore, intersectionality helps to understand that the subjective understanding of an individual's identity is "[...] continually transformed, re-enacted, and renegotiated..." (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008, p. 375) as a way to deal with varying (and sometimes conflicting) aspects of different social situations. This perspective is referred to as a process perspective, and this view allows scholars to study how identity changes in a specific social context (Corlett & Mavin, 2014).

### **2.3 Female entrepreneurship**

Because of their biological sex, women are placed in different positions in the socio-economic context, which will influence their tendency to become an entrepreneur and their experiences as an entrepreneur (Dy & Marlow, 2017).

Furthermore, in the majority of existing literature on female entrepreneurship, women are generally considered as a homogeneous category. However, women that are entrepreneurs primarily only share one aspect of their identity, namely their sex (Marlow, 2014). Female entrepreneurs often receive and replicate treatment as one group, which is problematic, since this reinforces the view that females are the subordinate group of the two sexes. At the same time it homogenises women based on a presumed common biological identity (Dy & Marlow, 2017). This should be recognized when doing empirical research.

When trying to understand the process of entrepreneurship, it is critical to study entrepreneurs in the context they are in. This has not yet received a lot of attention in entrepreneurial literature (Wright, 2012). Welter (2011) and Wright (2012) have categorized four dimensions of contexts: (1) spatial, concerning place, location and geography; (2) institutional, which are the rules, regulations, policies and status of entrepreneurial activity; (3) social, being the culture, norms, media representation and networks; (4) time, which are the attitudes to entrepreneurship and the life cycle of the firm. Dy & Marlow (2017) add finance (the access to (in)formal funds that can be used to finance the enterprise) and economic (the level of competition and market volatility) to this list.

### ***Male dominated industries***

A study from 1999 by Gardiner and Tiggemann found that in organizations with a larger number of men than women, women tend to behave more similar to men. This is because women working in male-dominated environments have to adapt to fit male behaviour styles, to not lose authority over the men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Consequently, female leaders in male-dominant industries are found to have worse mental health compared to men when using the same interpersonally oriented leadership style (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) used these findings to suggest that gender, as well as the gender ratio of an industry, influences leadership styles, stress and mental health. Also, the findings added to the understanding of the hesitance of women to take on leadership roles in male-dominated industries. Thus, when women want to be successful leaders in male-dominated industries, they feel pressure to adapt themselves (Deal & Stevenson, 1998). This relates to identity work, namely to fit in a certain social context. This research tries to find out if the same occurs for young female entrepreneurs.

In Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) it is mentioned that bias can also be found in the selection of women to work in a male-dominated industry, either by themselves or by managers. Pre-selection by women themselves entails that women already in the possession of a masculine style are more likely to want to work in male dominated industries. At the same time, an organization can wish for a more masculine style to fit their organization. Both add to the view of the pre-selection of women fitting the male-dominated industry already.

Based on Catalyst (2020), three main male-dominated industries can be identified, namely 'construction', 'manufacturing' and 'transportation and storage'. The data of the CBS (2020) shows that in the Netherlands in 2019: (1) in the construction industry, there were 446.000 men working in that industry, as opposed to 52.000 women; (2) in the manufacturing industry, there are 623.000 men and 179.000 women; (3) in the transportation and storage industry, there were 312.000 men and 99.000 women. These industries can thus be rightfully classified as male-dominated.

## **2.4 The influence of sex and age**

### ***2.4.1 Sex***

There is an important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. The two concepts, as well as sex differences and gender differences, are sometimes wrongfully used in academic literature: the

term gender is used where sex is meant, and vice versa (Borna & White, 2003). However, there is a difference. “Sex refers to biologically based categories of male and female.” (Borna & White, 2003, p. 90). The difference between male and female stems from whether one produces egg cells, which makes one belong to the category ‘female’, or whether one produces sperm cells, fitting one under the category ‘male’. Additionally, obviously evident physical attributions, for example breasts or facial hair, contribute to the basis of the aforementioned distinction (Money, Hampson & Hampson, 1955).

Contrary to this biological determination of the sex, gender is culturally and socially determined (Borna & White, 2003). The term ascribes what is culturally appropriate for the two sexes, and assigns social labels to being female and male (Bem, 1994; Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

In this study, there is referred to the biologically based categories ‘male’ and ‘female’, thus using the term sex as a descriptor of sex differences.

#### *2.4.2. The role of gender*

Even though this study refers sex as the distinctive category, the role of gender can not be neglected. Gender is used as a term to describe “[...] nonphysiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate for males or females.” (Borna & White, 2003, p. 90). The same holds for traits that are regarded to fit the gender classification. Also, the terms feminine and masculine are used as labels for social categories (Bem, 1994; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). The feminine qualities are believed to be more communal, as opposed to men who are seen as more agentic. This belief is not only descriptive, but also prescriptive (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004; Schein, 2001).

The perception of gender is created by society’s expectations of appropriate gender behaviour (Borna & White, 2003). The expectation of society regarding entrepreneurs, is that they are generally perceived, by both men and women, to have masculine traits. Only women, not men, also see a substantial connection with feminine qualities and entrepreneurship. Moreover, individuals with a higher male gender identification, but not per se the male sex, had a higher entrepreneurial intention compared to those with a low male gender identification, regardless of having a male or female sex (Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009).

The role of gender can even shadow a negative perception of female entrepreneurs, with the assertion that they are under-performing. A gendered-based bias illustrates women as inadequate entrepreneurs, however, there is no convincing data to show gender-based

differences in entrepreneurial performance of men and women (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Thus, the role of gender is one of bias, created by society.

### *2.4.3 Age*

The relationship of age and entrepreneurship has been examined by Zhang and Acs (2018). They found that the inclination to become an entrepreneur increases along with age, until the age of 80. Novice entrepreneurs represent the group of entrepreneurs who are first-time entrepreneurs. They tend to have limited information and networks. On the contrary, non-novice entrepreneurs possess significantly different skills, competencies and information (Anokhin, Grichnik & Hisrich, 2008). Also, the tendency to be an inexperienced entrepreneur (novice), as opposed to an experienced entrepreneur (non-novice) shows a U-shaped age trend, with a dip around the age of 60. The same holds for unincorporated entrepreneurs as opposed to incorporated entrepreneurs. However, there are differences about the propensity of incorporated versus unincorporated entrepreneurs between different generation groups. Concluding, there is an effect of age on the type of entrepreneurship, however, this article does not mention whether age influences success.

A common and long standing view regarding young entrepreneurs is that young people generally create big ideas (Azoulay et al., 2018). Furthermore, there are several advantages linked to youth. First of all, youth is sometimes seen as a criteria for venture capital firms to invest (Azoulay et al., 2018). An extreme example is that of Peter Thiel (co-founder of PayPal), who set up a program that grants young entrepreneurs \$100,000 under the condition that they are under the age of 23 and will drop out of school (Azoulay et al., 2018). Moreover, young people are perceived to be cognitively sharper, have less distraction from family or other responsibilities and tend to bring about more transformational ideas (Azoulay et al., 2018; Dietrich & Srinivasan, 2007; Planck, 1949).

However, some disadvantages of youth can be found as well. For instance, older entrepreneurs tend to have better and more access to human, social or financial capital (Azoulay et al., 2018). Compared to older entrepreneurs, younger people possibly lack experience in running a company, which affects their effectiveness and legitimacy in managing operations, sales/marketing, finance, human resources and culture. Furthermore, young entrepreneurs might lack sector-specific knowledge (Kline & Rosenberg, 1986).

It is not clear whether the disadvantages mentioned actually impose constraints for young entrepreneurs, since there is a possibility for young entrepreneurs to overcome these

disadvantages by assembling a great and effective team around them, turn to third-party financing and use social networking (Azoulay et al., 2018).

To summarize this chapter, the concept of identity is the meaning and experience of an individual when trying to answer the question of who he is and how he should act. A stream of literature of identity focuses on identity work, the ongoing process of identity construction and by doing so, the referral of that individual to social groups. Intersectionality describes the phenomenon of belonging to multiple social identities, creating several intersections for an individual on these social axes. The belonging to multiple groups can be both constitutive and contradicting. Furthermore, female entrepreneurship literature has mostly treated women as a homogenous group, without taking into account more social groups of the individual. Moreover, taking into account the context of an entrepreneur is critical to study him or her. In this research, the context of male dominated industries is explored, as it tends to influence women who work in these environments. Lastly, the role of sex, gender and age are also taken into account to study the entrepreneur.

## Chapter 3 – Research Methods

Chapter 3 contains a description of the method of research. It begins by describing qualitative research and why it is used for this study. Then the process of sample selection is described, as well as the method of data collection. After that, a description of the data analysis is given and the chapter finishes with notes on research ethics.

### 3.1 Adopted methodological approach

This research follows a qualitative research approach because this is a good fit when researching the identity strategies of entrepreneurs. As McKenzie (2007) states, asking entrepreneurs to fill out questionnaires results in inaccuracy when collecting data. Usually, entrepreneurs are busy and have little time for extra paperwork. Moreover, it is difficult to reach concise measurement with questionnaires, limited by the linearity of these measurements (Bygrave, 1989). Besides, according to McKenzie (2007), entrepreneurs generally like to share their experiences and stories with narratives.

“Qualitative studies, [...], use methods that are well suited to describe phenomena in context and, against that background, provide an interpretation that leads to a greater understanding of the phenomenon.” (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012, p. 16). A qualitative approach is suitable to deal with complex situations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) (as cited in Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012) mention, the word *qualitative* implies that the focus lies on qualities and on processes and meanings, which cannot be measured in quantitative terms (quantity, amount, intensity or frequency). In this study, a small group of women is interviewed personally and the interview material is then interpreted by the researcher, which is a qualitative methodology. Another characteristic of qualitative research is that it always takes the context into account that forms the framework of the studied phenomenon (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012), which is also the case in this study.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) have stressed the importance that qualitative research should not be judged by the standards used to evaluate quantitative research. Instead, the authors propose naturalist terms to accurately assess the quality of a qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Throughout the rest of this chapter explanations can be found regarding the ways these criteria are met in this research.

### **3.2 Sample selection**

This study looks for female entrepreneurs in specific sectors. In total, ten women have been interviewed. This sample consists of both women who started their own company, and women who have taken over an existing company and now lead that company.

The requirements for participants to be selected is that they are under the age of 30 when they became an entrepreneur, are female and their firm operates in male-dominated sectors. The sectors selected for this research are, as mentioned before, construction, manufacturing and transportation and storage.

The participants of this research have been gathered from the network of the researcher. On LinkedIn, Facebook and other platforms, a request for participants was posted. Also, the researcher has actively searched for companies operating in the selected sectors led by a young female entrepreneur via search engines. Furthermore, the researcher has used snowball sampling, by asking if she can use the network of an already found participant to find more participants.

Furthermore, in order to meet the criteria of transferability, thick case descriptions are given at the start of chapter 4 (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This must be done so that a reader can understand the context well enough to judge whether it is applicable to his or her own situation, and thus whether the findings are useful on a personal level.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The data in this research is collected through semi-structured interviews. This method is suitable for studies that want to generate new knowledge and to encourage reflection by interviewees on themes that were chosen beforehand (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). The researcher has used an interview guide in which themes and key issues are pre-defined. However, the researcher can deviate from the interview guide when the conversation switches to unanticipated but interesting topics (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012). This research follows Gillham's (2005) approach where the aim is to ask all interviewees the same open questions (perhaps with a few adjustments suited to the situation of the interviewee), which will make it easier to compare answers.

The interviews have been recorded, but only after the interviewee has given her permission. Furthermore, the researcher must take notes of the context of the interview (including herself) (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012) and reflect upon this in the data analysis phase.

During the interview, it is important for the interviewer to be aware of three points (Gillham, 2005). First, before the interviewer asks questions, the interviewee should feel comfortable, and have the opportunity to talk whilst knowing the purpose of the interview. The interviewer should explain about the structure and duration of the interview. Secondly, when asking (the main) questions, the interviewer should provide some context. It is also important to wait a little after asking the question, to give the interviewee time to respond. When the question is unclear or the interviewee does not know what to answer, the researcher can rephrase the question but she should pay attention that no answers are suggested by doing so. When listening to the answer of the interviewee, sub-questions can then be posed. And thirdly, after briefly checking the interview guide to see if all questions have been answered, the interviewer should indicate the end of the interview, showing that she is satisfied with the given answers. The interviewee should be given the opportunity to add anything that she wishes. The interview closes with thanking the participant for her time and the exchange of contact details. These points by Gillham (2005) have all been taken into account, as can be seen in the interview guide (*Appendix 1*).

### *3.3.1 Operationalization*

#### Identity Work

An overview of research on identity work has been given by Caza, Vough and Puranik (2016). Based on this overview, the interview questions regarding identity work have been defined. There are four main modes in which identity work activities occur, and these modes interact. First, there is **cognitive identity work**, which includes mental processes used to subjectively interpret and evaluate an identity (Killian & Johnson, 2006). The focus lies on self-reflectivity in terms of questioning the self, reflexive sense-making, and changing the self (Beech, MacIntosh & McInnes, 2008; Fletcher & Watson, 2007). Furthermore, cognitive identity work takes place when a person builds a network of identities (Ramarajan, 2014), switches between these identities (Essers, Doorewaard & Benschop, 2013), deals with the differences between identities and the difficulties that might bring (Carollo & Guerci, 2017), and creates identity hierarchies (Kreiner, Hoolensbe & Sheep, 2006). Cognitive identity work is not only a conscious process, but can also occur unconsciously (Caza et al., 2016).

Secondly, people use **discursive identity work**, comprising “ [...] what is verbalized and how it is verbalized.” (Snow & Anderson, 1987 as cited in Caza et al., 2016, p. 891). Word choice and tone of voice (Allen, 2005), as well as language dexterity of a person, for example humour and metaphors (Alvesson, 2001; Einwohner, 2006) belong to this group. Also the use

of jargon (Gagnon, 2008) and expressions (Kuhn, 2006) belong to discursive identity work. Important to note here is that the used discourses are influenced by the contextual discourses, making a person the producer and product of discourse at the same time (Lawless, Sambrook & Stewart, 2012).

Thirdly, individuals make use of a **physical identity work** (Caza et al., 2016). This can either be by using one's own body (Courpasson & Monties, 2017), or by using certain objects or materials in one's physical environment with the goal of influencing the impression of others towards a desired self-meaning (Caza et al., 2016).

And finally, there is **behavioural identity work** that contains the actions used by people to "[...] build, revise and maintain their identities." (Caza et al., 2016, p. 893). Certain interactions with others can be shaped in such a way that it reinforces a certain self-meaning over a person, while simultaneously influencing the perception of others regarding that person.

### Experience

In the interview, questions will be asked about the experience of the entrepreneur with regard to their sex, age, and the intersection of the categories. Furthermore, environmental factors suiting the industry of the entrepreneur's firm are discussed. The factors included are spatial (location), institutional (rules/regulations), social (culture, norms), access to funds and economic factors (competition) (Welter, 2011; Wright, 2012; Dy & Marlow, 2017).

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The semi-structured interviews have been analysed by a categorical content analysis, and then specific parts of the narratives based on the categories formed by the content analysis, will be analysed discursively, as is done in the paper by Essers and Benschop (2007), who have studied the narratives of female ethnic minority entrepreneurs. First, the narratives that are collected will be coded openly, as to find themes and patterns between the different stories of the entrepreneurs (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998 as cited in Essers & Benschop, 2007). Then, after careful selection based on the executed categorical content analysis, specific parts of the narratives will be analysed for subthemes. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of what is told by the entrepreneurs, by not only analysing what is said, but also the manner in which it was expressed. Also the context in which the narrative is delivered is taken into account (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, as cited in Essers & Benschop, 2007).

Essers and Benschop (2007) stress that the narratives in their research are “[...] linguistic constructions made in close interaction with the researcher.” (p. 56). This makes the narratives a combination of expressions by the interviewee, and interpretation by the researcher.

During both the analyses, the researcher will develop a code book, where all codes are gathered and grouped. This will help the researcher to keep track of the analysis, as well as letting others follow the way of thinking by the researcher. Also, it helps to meet the two criteria of dependability and conformability, as proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989). The dependability criteria is met when a good demonstration of methodological changes is given and when an outsider can understand how meaning is constructed during the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Furthermore, one must show where the data came from in the code book, to meet the criteria of confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The goal of the data analysis phase is to show that the ‘stories’ told are not capricious, but that they include underlying variables and that these variables are not disembodied, but have connections over time, so that a theory can be formed. Important to remember here is that the traditions and cultural position of the researcher will always act as a filter during the analysis (Ashworth, 1997).

A careful data analysis should contribute to the credibility of the research, where a good fit between constructed realities of respondents and reconstructions attributed to them should be demonstrated (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This is reached through meaningful coding and showing how the coding is done.

### **3.5 Research Ethics**

In order to uphold ethical standards before, during and after the research, the researcher must be aware of professional, institutional and federal standards when working with human participants (Smith, 2003).

Firstly, it is important to be aware of your role as researcher, since this can have a significant effect on the research. By asking certain questions, discussions may arise where one must uphold the role of researcher (Sword, 1999). Also, a researcher cannot, for the sake of the research, withhold information and must always tell the truth (Smith, 2003).

Secondly, according to the APA Ethics Code, a researcher must follow a set of informed-consent rules, meaning that all participants join the research voluntarily. They also must be fully aware of the related risks and benefits. All information that can influence a person’s willingness to participate must be available and understandable. Concrete, this means

that the researcher will inform participants about the goal, expected duration and procedures of the research (Smith, 2003). The researcher will state this information at the start of the interview and ask whether everything is clear for the participant. Also, the researcher will clearly point out to participants that they can decline from participating in the research and that they can withdraw from the research at any time during the research. Furthermore, a researcher must ensure participants that their input will be treated with confidentiality and will remain anonymous (Smith, 2003). At the start of the interview, the interviewee will be asked whether she agrees with the interview being recorded. Also, before the interview takes place, the interviewee is informed about the way data is used in this research and it is shown that code names will be used to ensure anonymity. If during the analysis process, the researcher comes across a quote that she wants to use, but is unsure about what the participant meant to say, or if the information could be sensitive to the participant, the researcher will contact the participant to check for its correctness before putting it in the research. Finally, participants must be able to contact the researcher for questions and therefore, the researcher will give out her email address and phone number to the participants (Smith, 2003).

Moreover, this research might address sensitive topics, for example stories of failure, discrimination or intimidation. Thus, the researcher must ask participants beforehand whether they are willing to talk about those topics, without causing them to feel uncomfortable. A way to deal with this is to provide detailed interview questions beforehand and letting participants stop when they don't feel comfortable (Smith, 2003).

Finally, once the research is completed and has received grading, participants will be informed about the results of the research by e-mail or a phone call.

## Chapter 4 – Results

This chapter contains the key findings of this study after analysing ten interviews given by female entrepreneurs that stood at the head of a company operating in various male-dominated industries at a relatively young age. In analysing the interviews, several patterns were found, as can be seen in the code book. This brought forward five themes: perks of the intersection, go with the flow, conscious discursive identity work, dealing with assumptions and pros and cons of inexperience. Before discussing the themes, a short introduction is given to clarify the contexts in which the entrepreneurs operate.

### 4.1 Introducing the entrepreneurs

In this section, a brief description of ten female entrepreneurs is given. To guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms are used here.

**Ariel** is 33 years old. She started as an entrepreneur in the real estate sector at the age of 24. She owned a big real estate company from 2014 to 2019. After that she sold the company and started a new company for herself, where she also works as a real estate agent, but without any employees. She promised herself to only take on projects she really enjoys doing. She lives together with her boyfriend and child.

**Bella** is 23 and started her own company in the production industry when she was only 20 years old. She and a male friend from her Bachelor study co-owned the company that focused on sustainable packaging. When her friend stopped, she tried to continue on her own but found out that she did not like it that much after all. She currently works for a food production company, where she works as junior manager innovation and packaging.

**Chloe** is a 29-year-old entrepreneur and director of an operating crane rental company. She started operating the crane herself at the age of 19 at her family's business and after about 4 years she was asked to take over from her parents together with her brother. Next to her position on the board, she follows the study technical business administration. She also has a lot of followers on several social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, where she shares some insights about her workday.

**Demi** is 29 and is an industrial ecologist. After working at an engineering company, she started a company together with her father. The company focused on sustainability in the urban and neighbourhood planning sector. They consult municipalities about the technical aspects of creating sustainable neighbourhoods. They have also created a webtool for other bureaus to use. Next to this, Demi is politically active at Volt where she helps write policies.

**Ella** and **Grace** are both in their 40s and have taken over their family business at a young age. Ella started working at her parent's car damage repair company when she was 22, which she later took over with her sisters, as well as the other car company her parents owned. Next to that, together with one sister, she founded a new car company: a full service car shop specifically focussed on women. She lives with her husband and three daughters.

Grace is married and the mother of two daughters. She started working at her family transport business at 29 and took over the reins together with her brother. A few years later, their nephew joined them. Next to the transport business, they also took over the property company.

**Felice** is 23 years old and founded her company three years ago together with a same-aged woman. As she said so herself, to put it simply: we make tiles out of dredge. They want to emphasize circularity in the dredge/construction industry. Felice finished her Bachelor's degree and currently lives with 2 flatmates.

**Hannah** is a 33-year-old entrepreneur who owns two companies. One is a consultancy business focussed on start-ups and one is specified in essential body oils. She started her consultancy firm in 2012, at 22, right after she graduated. She helps new entrepreneurs start their business and existing entrepreneurs to develop themselves. She lives together with her boyfriend.

**Irene** is 34 and has a background in corporate recruitment. She owns a platform for female workers in technical jobs, who operate in all kinds of businesses and technical branches. She started eighteen months ago, and now works together with two other women. The community she creates works together with organizations and educational institutions to increase the number of women in technical branches and support those who are already in the sector. She has two young kids.

**Judy** is a successful 41 years old entrepreneur in the IT sector. She started her own company in 2008, at the age of 28. The company makes video games to help elderly recover from illness or injuries. She no longer plays an active role in management but is still a shareholder. She now invests in the IT sector, buying companies and building a bigger whole. She lives with her husband and four children.

#### **4.2 Perks of the intersection**

As a young female entrepreneur in a male-dominated sector, one thing is certain: you stand out. All interviewed entrepreneurs view this as a positive consequence of their situation. For example, Ariel says:

*“It is actually very positive if you are the odd man out (Dutch: vreemde eend in de bijt). Just keep being that odd man out. Be different from the rest, because you will stand out.”*

Ariel emphasizes here that as a young female entrepreneur your ‘misfit’ with the image of a mainstream entrepreneur might be viewed as something beneficial. She advises every young female entrepreneur to embrace their differences from their older male colleagues and be proud to stand out. This view contrasts the gender blindness stream that can be found in previous literature. Lewis (2006) mentions that some female entrepreneurs treat entrepreneurship as gender-neutral to avoid being viewed as an outsider by men. Marlow and Swail (2014), for example, argue that the acknowledgement of the influence of gender in entrepreneurship can create negative associations regarding perceptions of female entrepreneurs, such as weakness and lack. Some types of framing of the gender difference brings (even) more deficit to women. Nonetheless, several entrepreneurs in this research suggest that they consciously emphasize their deviation from the status quo, and that this has assisted them to become successful entrepreneurs. Moreover, Jaimy mentioned that she has received a lot of media attention due to her uniqueness in the industry, which opened doors for her that would not have opened otherwise.

Furthermore, Belle expressed that, as a young woman, it is important to show that you possess the proper industry-related knowledge. Ariel, Ella and Judy confirm this in their interview, and all of them mention a certain turning point.

*“As a girl, they will try and test you sooner, but once they realise, gosh, she really has a knack for it, they will never forget you.”*

This quote by Ella illustrates a juncture, where, as a young woman, you are initially tested for your knowledge by the established people in the sector. However, once you have shown that you possess the right knowledge (see paragraph 4.4), or have the proper skills, those people will never forget you. This position, in which the entrepreneur has proven her knowledge and is viewed as something unique in the sector because of her knowledgeable status combined with her sex and age, is described by the entrepreneurs as a competitive advantage. People go from testing and distrusting you, to wanting to help you or do business with you. Ella mentions that people are more willing to teach you things, or mentor you, because you are a young girl.

You can ask people whatever you want. This ‘goodwill’ Ella describes was mentioned by five out of ten other entrepreneurs, for example by Felice:

*“[...] And what I really notice is that because we are so atypical in this sector, we are allowed to ask more questions than generally are allowed, so we have an incredible amount of goodwill.”*

Felice says that it came to her attention that being an irregular presence in the industry gave her and her partner a free pass to ask a lot of questions, which they would not have gotten if they looked more like the stereotypical entrepreneur of the sector. This quote by Felice is an interesting point of view, which can be related to existing literature. In general, women need to put in more effort to start a business and be successful in male-dominated industries compared to men. And therefore, women need to rely more on their social capital (Yetim, 2008). This ‘goodwill’ Felice mentions can be linked to social capital. Social capital is created by a change in the relation among two, or more, people that enables action (Coleman, 1988). The uniqueness of young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated industries brings a shift in the relation between the female entrepreneur and, in this case, a successful, older man in the industry. As a consequence of this shift, the man is more willing to help this particular new entrepreneur. Thus, the young female entrepreneur’s social capital increases, which benefits her chances of success, namely:

*“I think in general people assume that you understand things less well, which is annoying. On the other hand, they explain much more because of this, causing you to learn much better how things work, and also you learn very fast.”*

Felice’s quote explains the upside and the downside of this goodwill. On the downside, the goodwill young female entrepreneurs receive comes from the assumption they do not have as much knowledge as others, specifically older males, in the industry. The assumption is solely based on the sex and age of the entrepreneur, which can be perceived as offensive. However, as Felice illustrates, this assumption causes people to give more elaborate explanations to the young female entrepreneurs. These extra clear explanations can make some difficult matters more understandable, which eventually benefits the learning process of the entrepreneur.

To summarize, the intersection of the female sex, a young age and entrepreneurship in the context of a male-dominated sector, is perceived as something remarkable. This reputation generally leads to an increase of ‘goodwill’ towards the success of the young female entrepreneur, which helps her expand her social capital. A successful identity strategy that young female entrepreneurs use in male-dominated industries is thus to use their unique intersection to stand out and acquire social capital.

#### **4.3 Go with the flow**

As mentioned in paragraph 3.3, a specific section of identity work concerns cognitive identity work. When the entrepreneurs were asked about several mental processes regarding their identity, an important similarity surfaced, namely the use of the word ‘level’. The definition of ‘to level’ in English is literally: ‘to make equal or similar’ (Oxford Languages, n.d.). In Dutch, it means to ‘get on the same page’ (Luna, 2017). To achieve this, six out of ten entrepreneurs mentioned that they adapt themselves based on the situation. Ella says:

*“It’s not that I’m different as a person, it’s just that you always level towards the person you speak with [...]”*

Ella illustrates here that she does not change her personality or identity when adapting herself in interaction with another person, but that she merely tries to get on the same page with the other by creating a sense of similarity. Beech et al. (2008) state that through interaction with others, one creates a dynamic and complex identity. In complex and change-oriented situations, the relatively stable narrated identity of a person can be submerged to identity work in order to make sense of the situation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). In situations where one ‘levels’, the entrepreneurs were often interacting with a (potential) client or business partner. In these situations, where entrepreneurs needed to be successful, identity work occurred in the form of ‘levelling’. By ‘levelling’ the entrepreneurs hoped to create a sense of similarity, much like Coupland (2001) detected amongst new organisational members in her research. Moreover, Alvesson (1994) used the term ‘habitus’, which is the skill to correspond with practices and regulations of a group by demonstrating specific verbal symbols.

Furthermore, although all entrepreneurs mention that they ‘level’ with the person/situation and thus adjust their identity a bit, they do not feel like they consist of multiple identities. Demi explains this as follows:

*“You could say that one has many identities, that you very much adapt to the identity of another. But actually that might just be one identity, since you possess an adaptive capability. So, I would rather see it as part of my one identity, to be able to adapt to others.”*

The quote of Demi shows two sides of her reflection. On the one hand, she views that by adapting towards the identity of another, a person can have a lot of identities. On the other hand, she believes that the possession of many identities can be seen as one large identity, and that one can simply develop the skill of modifying themselves in particular situations.

Hannah adds:

*“It feels like one core with..., yeah, what’s the word, different ways of expression.”*

This quote of Hannah agrees with the last part of what Demi mentioned, namely that she believes in one overarching identity that has diverse utterances. Looking at literature describing multiple identities, some connections can be seen. Social identity theory describes how one dominant identity, based on a social group, stands at the top of a hierarchy and it restrains other identities from coming out. However, current literature is more focussed on the idea of multiple identities and identity switching (Ramarajan, 2014). Instead of identifying as an unique individual, a person can tend to a role identity, derived from aspects of one’s membership to a certain social group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Moving forward, if people are members of more than one social group, it can result in multiple social identities which affects the behaviour and cognition of those people (for example: Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Briley, Morris & Simonson, 2005). In contrast to this view, there are also studies that suggest that the several social identities derived from several social groups provide one way of understanding the way people deal with complexity (for example: Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). This matches the view of the entrepreneurs, who feel like they are one core with an adaptive capability, rather than viewing themselves as a person with multiple identities.

Furthermore, self-verification theory believes that a person actively constructs his social reality by interacting with others to seek validation or verification about who they are (Swann, Polzer, Seyle & Ko, 2004). In the situation of multiple identities, where there are multiple contexts to validate oneself, this theory suggests that people find self-verification by being different things to different people in relevant relationships (Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002).

This is what many entrepreneurs have described in their interactions, namely by ‘levelling’. Thus, even though the entrepreneurs do not regard this as having multiple identities, previous research suggests that this actually is the case.

Concluding, an identity strategy that is used unconsciously by entrepreneurs is to employ different identities for different situations. This is done by ‘levelling’, where the entrepreneur wants to create a sense of similarity with the people with whom she interacts. To ‘level’ with a diverse set of people, the entrepreneur must switch between multiple identities. Once a sense of similarity is established, the entrepreneur can build useful relationships that help her be successful.

#### **4.4 Conscious discursive identity work**

The third theme that reoccurred in the stories of the entrepreneurs was their conscious use of discursive expressions of identity. Many entrepreneurs are consciously making choices about the way they talk, the words they use and the themes they discuss. For example, Felice mentions that she carefully selects the subjects she discusses with some people. She describes the way she communicates with important men in the industry as follows:

*“So I sort of consciously select topics of conversation, but also which words I pick by which I indicate that I understand what kind of world they find themselves in. Or with which I acknowledge their existence, or well, that sounds really harsh but give them that feeling, you know?”*

The quote of Felice illustrates that she is very aware of her behaviour in interactions. Her selection of topics and words during the conversation indicate her knowledge of the sector. At the same time, she uses this conscious selection to acknowledge the sector and the role of her conversational partners in that sector.

By using discursive expressions of knowledge in social interactions, the entrepreneurs are performing identity work, as is explained by Alvesson (2001). According to him, there are four ways in which discursive identity plays a role. First, it is a means to create a community and social identity. A shared language is used to relate to each other and each other’s worlds (Alvesson, 2001). As Felice mentioned, she consciously chooses certain topics of conversation with the aim of acknowledging a certain world or community that the men are in. Next to that, she explicitly uses words to participate in a particular rhetoric style or language in order to

create the feeling that she also belongs in that community and that they share the same social identity. By acknowledging their existence, she creates an opening for herself to become a member of that social community.

Secondly, according to Alvesson (2001) discourse can be used as a persuasive marketing tool towards customers and in interaction. And thirdly, by verbally expressing knowledge, the entrepreneur can create legitimacy and a sense of honest intentions concerning actions and outcomes. On this subject, Demi expresses that at certain critical moments with a potential customer or business partner, she is very aware that she needs to show her knowledge in her way of talking:

*“Sometimes they assume that the tooling, so the more arithmetic aspect, is my father’s area [...], so then I feel as if now I have to show that I know quite a lot about that as well.”*

This quote by Demi shows that she experiences some prejudice regarding her knowledge about very technical aspects of her own business. She feels like she has to prove her knowledge in situations like this, so potential clients trust that she has the right qualities and will hire her. She reacts by showing that she does have the proper knowledge by consciously using technical jargon. In this way, she is using her knowledge as a marketing tool and as a way to gain legitimacy at the same time.

However, fourthly, claims of knowledge can also camouflage aspects of ignorance the entrepreneur has and prevent critical reflection (Alvesson, 2001). Felice, unknowingly, gave a good example of this camouflaging:

*“[...] when I talk to contractors, I am never going to be able to tell a perfectly technical story because initially that is not my background. But I can connect better with them by making all kinds of jokes or talking about football. I can talk about football just fine.”*

As can be seen in the quote above, at Felice’s company, the technical knowledge regarding dredging is the specialty of her co-owner, and only she can thus provide the critical reflection on that topic. However, Felice’s area of expertise is the front-end of the business and thus keeping in contact with existing clients and partners, and connecting with new potential clients and partners. To cover up her lack of technical knowledge, she consciously expresses

knowledge about non-work-related issues such as football. By creating a connection in expression knowledge about certain other topics, she makes up for her aspects of ignorance, just like Alvesson (2011) describes.

To summarize, conscious discourse as described above is an identity strategy by which the entrepreneurs indicate their belonging to a community. This creates legitimacy for the entrepreneurs. Furthermore, strategic discourse is used as a means of marketing. By tactically expressing knowledge at the right time, one convinces clients to work together with the entrepreneurs. Also, if an entrepreneur cannot use technical discourse, she uses her speech in other ways to express her identity.

A different kind of discursive identity work is used by Belle, namely discursive identity expressions in written messages. She and the other co-founder of the company mentioned the following about their online/written communication:

*“We always gave it an informal touch, that defined us better, that it was not always perfect and that it did not comply with what was always done, you know. ‘Dear’ or ‘Kind’, or ‘Yours sincerely’. No we were not like that at all, we kept the youthfulness alive, which was appreciated.”*

As can be seen in the quote above, Belle and her companion used a casual style in their emails or online posts, which was different from most others in their sector. However, this fits nicely with their young identity and was received well by their clients. This type of expressing your identity, showing you are different from the others in your group, is called associational distancing (Snow & Anderson, 1987). This can be defined as managing one’s image by creating differences between oneself and the people or group of people with whom one does not want to be defined with (Anderson, 1976, as cited in Snow & Anderson, 1987). In a fairly formal sector, Belle and her companion expressed their informal identity in written discourse by using youthful expressions. This suited their personal identities well and made them more unique in the industry. She distanced herself from the mainstream communication style, with success as she explains that their way of communicating was well-received. Again, this shows that standing out has helped the case of a young female entrepreneur.

#### 4.5 Dealing with assumptions

Female entrepreneurs experienced plenty of bias in their everyday work. Seven out of eight entrepreneurs mentioned that they have had to deal with certain incorrect assumptions.

Firstly, Chloe, Demi, Ella and Grace all mentioned that they were frequently not seen as the boss, but as a regular employee or secretary.

*“The most frequently heard comment, especially in the beginning, to our workshop chief was: ‘Gosh that girl at the reception, that’s a good one, you have to protect that one’. [...] They don’t realise that a couple of women in a truly male business can also be the owner or director.”*

Ella’s quote indicates that, without any malicious intention, people assume a woman is not in charge of a car company and that she works at the reception, especially when the woman is young. Ella mentioned that she or her sister, with whom she is co-owner, never correct people who make that mistake, and they just chuckle about the misconceptions, because they actually find it amusing. On the contrary, Chloe and Demi both correct people if the misconception occurs, and leave it at that. Grace starts with subtly stating she is the owner of the company, and thus avoids misconceptions to take place. These different strategies to deal with the misconception can be viewed as a personal preference, and may change or develop over time. All entrepreneurs seemed to be content about their chosen strategy, and thus for this specific part there is not one successful strategy to deal with the situation.

Secondly, Ariel and Felice both mentioned that people, especially men, sometimes use diminutives when talking to or about the entrepreneurs. The choice to use a diminutive can be explained in the interactional context, for example to mitigate a speech, or to add an emotion, both positive and negative. The emotion of the speaker sets the tone (Ponsonnet, 2018). Given the context and way of speech of the person in front of them, the female entrepreneurs experienced the diminutives as an expression of contempt. In Ariel’s narrative, a diminutive was used to address the entrepreneur herself, such as by referring to her as ‘meisje, dametje, vrouwtje’. There is no literal translation to English, but in essence it means ‘little lady’. Her reaction in the example she gave was telling the man in question who used the diminutives, that she was not interested in working together because she felt they were not a match.

Moreover, Felice experienced that people use diminutives when they talk about her firm: ‘bedrijfje, projectje’. Again, there is no literal translation but ‘little company, little project’

grasps the essence. Felice mentions that she deals with this by reciprocating that use of language to the user:

*“... what follows is that I do what they do: I use diminutives just to sort of show what kind of effect that has.”*

The quote of Felice indicates that by copying condescending behaviour she wants to create awareness for the effect that specific language use has. She uses reverse psychology here, or strategic self-anticonformity (SSA). By going along with the behaviour she actually opposes, she advocates the behaviour that she desires (Hajjat, 2016).

Finally, in some situations the physical appearance of an entrepreneur caused some uncomfortable situations. For example, Belle mentioned a situation in which she was talking to the boss of a big company who said the following to her:

*“Cute face and a nice laugh and she will get everything done.”*

Stunned, Belle responded to him: *“I get it done because I do what I do, and what I do is good. And you should not say something like that to me, that’s weird.”*

As can be seen from this quote, Belle experienced that her competence and skills were not seen as the reason for her success, but her ‘cute and nice’ physique were the explanation for her achievements. Existing literature generally describes biases in favour of attractive people in financial and prosocial areas, such as the labour market or everyday social transactions (Maestripieri, Hendry & Nickels, 2017). This “taste-based” discrimination describes that attractive people are preferred over unattractive people, without considering their productivity (Hamermesh, 2011). Research regarding the effects of attractiveness has found that the face of an individual is often linked to certain personality traits, credibility and professional competence. However, this link is complex since particular facial characteristics can be perceived as both positive and negative, dependent on other factors such as age, sex, and familiarity of the face (Maestripieri et al., 2017). A study showed that being an attractive male manager related to higher perceptions of competence, whereas attractive female managers were seen as less competent (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). In Belle’s case, she was not perceived as incompetent because of her looks, but in her situation, Belle’s competence was not even considered.

In these types of uncomfortable, or uncivil situations, there are several coping behaviours: conflict avoidance, minimization, assertion, informal social support seeking, informal organization support seeking, formal organizational support seeking (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Research reported that avoidance strategies are most frequently used in uncivil workplace situations (Salin, Tenhiälä, Roberge & Berdahl, 2014). However, Belle coped by confronting the person and told the person in question that she did not like what was happening, thus showing assertive behaviour (Cortina & Magley, 2009). The same holds for Ariel and Felice, who actively showed they did not agree with the behaviour of their interactional partner. Herschovis, Cameron, Gervais and Bozeman (2018) found that both avoidance and confrontation do not stop incivility from reoccurring. But, confrontation increases the psychological forgiveness of the target, which is defined by Herschovis et al. (2018) as the mental condition that comes when the target has let go of anger towards the perceived wrongdoer. Furthermore, avoidance behaviour can cause emotional exhaustion (Cameron et al., 2018). Thus, we can conclude that a successful identity strategy used by young female entrepreneurs is to be assertive in uncomfortable or uncivil situations, for the sake of the entrepreneurs own emotional health.

#### **4.6 Pros and cons of inexperience**

In Chapter 2 it became evident that there is an ongoing discussion regarding the effect of age on entrepreneurship. This inconclusiveness was also seen in this study. Several entrepreneurs addressed a different aspect in the debate of the influence of a young age. For example, Bella mentioned that she and her business partner were often viewed as inexperienced and that this was perceived as something bad. She mentions:

*“My experiences are not at all relevant in what I have to offer now, namely change. I don’t need experience for that. You especially don’t need experience to think differently than you [experienced people]. [...] People who have been in the industry for ages who say they know how it’s done, they are the people who got us where we are right now. So you need people with a different mindset, who will kick some shins and say ‘No, we don’t accept you any more’. So, you need the future generation to change something.”*

Bella’s quote illustrates that, as a youngster, she does not agree with the general view that people need experience to bring about change. She emphasizes fiercely that when there is a need to change, new, fresh minds are needed to change the course that is currently sailed.

She says that the experienced people in the industry are the ones that cannot offer many new things to the current situation they created. Being young and not being used to the way ‘it is always done’, helps to bring fresh and transformational ideas, as can be seen as well in existing literature (Azoulay et al., 2018; Dietrich & Srinivasan, 2007; Planck, 1949). She herself perceives inexperience as a pro, but people in her sector view it as a con.

On a different note, Felice views inexperience as a pro and explains it as follows:

*“Because you are young and because you don’t fit the status quo in the industry, it is easier to try again. The more you know, the less you know. If I would have been a 60 year old man who had this idea, I probably would have seen too many obstacles on the road to pursue it.”*

The quote of Felice illustrates that being inexperienced means being naive, which she sees as something positive. This naivety brings an infinite range of possibilities and more importantly, it does not let possible difficulties or barriers hinder the course of action. Dietrich and Srinivasan (2007) address this in their research, as they have found that creativity excels better at a young age, because they are cognitively sharper. Also, having transformational ideas to which one can fully commit is easier to do when one has less responsibilities, for example family (Azoulay et al., 2018).

Next to that, an older entrepreneur in the same sector with the same would not have been as untroubled, which could eventually have hindered the entrepreneur in pursuing the idea. This is in line with existing research on entrepreneurial willingness and intention, which are found to reduce as age increases (Lévesque & Minniti, 2006; Van Praag & Van Ophem, 1995).

Although inexperience helps the open mindedness, inexperience can also be in the way of handling certain situations, as is mentioned by Ella:

*“It can be very tough. You don’t have the life experience [...]. On a human level, sometimes it is pretty hard as a youngster to face some employees.”*

Ella explains that a young entrepreneur has not yet experienced (many) difficult situations with employees yet, for example misbehaviour or firings. These can be challenging for a young person, especially because the people you have in front of you in these situations are probably older. This is thus a disadvantage of being a young entrepreneur. As Azoulay et

al. (2018) write: compared to older employees, youngsters have less human, social and financial capital. Human capital is the collection of all skills and competences of a person (Estrin, Mickiewicz & Stephan, 2016). With less experience in handling difficult situations with employees, young entrepreneurs have not developed the right competences yet, which can be experienced negatively (Lee & Vouchilas, 2016). However, it is possible for young entrepreneurs to overcome this negative consequence of inexperience, by for example assembling a team that complements the competences of the entrepreneurs and covers what he/she still lacks (Azoulay et al., 2018).

To summarize, a successful identity strategy is to embrace the open-mindedness that comes from being inexperienced. Although experience is often requested, it can be beneficial to emphasize inexperience and the open mind that comes with it. However, inexperience in workplace situations can be tough and it would be wise to keep in mind ways to cover for this.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion & Discussion

The final chapter of this Thesis contains a conclusion and discussion. It begins with concluding an answer to the research question. Following, implications for theory and practice are given. And finally, the chapter closes with a discussion containing limitations of this research and recommendations for further research.

### 5.1 Conclusion

This research aims to answer the question: “*What kind of successful identity strategies are used by young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors?*”. In answering that question, ten female entrepreneurs who stood at the head of a company at a young age were interviewed for their experience and identity work. In order to gain a broad understanding of this subject, both women who started their own company were interviewed, as well as women who took over a (family) business. The entrepreneurs also operated in a broad selection of sectors. The answer to the research question can be concluded with the five themes that have been found after analysing the narratives of the entrepreneurs.

The first theme is *perks of the intersection*. Young female entrepreneurs make use of their unique presence in male-dominated sectors to stand out. This opposes traditional female entrepreneurship literature that argued for more confirmation to the status quo due to the belief that women otherwise would be viewed as an outsider in negative light. However, this research has found that standing out creates goodwill for the young women, which consequently is used to build social capital. Moreover, several entrepreneurs were able to seize unique opportunities because of standing out.

Furthermore, the second theme ‘*go with the flow*’ shows that young female entrepreneurs unconsciously use multiple identities to anticipate diverse situations. When asked about the multitude of their identity, the entrepreneurs deny having more than one identity. However, in order to achieve something in a certain situation, the young female entrepreneurs try to get on the same page with their environment and create a connection, or as they call it ‘levelling’. This builds trust and eventually leads to success. This phenomenon confirms behaviour that has been studied by existing literature already. Where several researchers label this behaviour as the use of multiple identities, others describe it as a means to make sense of complex situations. The young entrepreneurs see this type of identity work more as an adaptive quality of themselves instead of the conscious switching between identities, thus conforming more to the latter way of labelling.

The third theme however, is something the young women are aware of, namely *conscious discursive identity work*. Young female entrepreneurs purposely use discourse as a successful identity strategy, confirming what is already researched by Alvesson (2001). By carefully choosing words and topics, young female entrepreneurs indicate a certain belonging to the sector. Next to that, this conscious discourse displays the knowledge they possess, which in turn benefits their legitimacy. Moreover, this conscious discourse can be used as a marketing tool, or to cover up the lack of knowledge on particular topics. Discursive identity work can also be used in written communication, either by conforming to industry standards or by distancing from those standards and using a new style to stand out, showing again .

Next to that, the fourth theme, *dealing with assumptions*, describes how young female entrepreneurs deal with assumptions and difficult situations. In dealing with incorrect assumptions, the entrepreneurs all have a different style that fits their personality. There is not one correct response. In dealing with uncomfortable or even uncivil situations, assertive behaviour is seen as the most successful strategy by both the entrepreneurs and existing literature. However, the way this behaviour is expressed also depends on the preference of the entrepreneur and on the situation. According to literature, by displaying assertive behaviour, for example confrontation, it does not necessarily stop incivility, but by avoiding confrontation, emotional exhaustion can grow.

And finally, in accordance with existing literature, not one consensus can be found amongst the entrepreneurs whether or not it is beneficial to be young. But, concluding the fifth theme: *pros and cons of inexperience*, the entrepreneurs find that embracing youthfulness can be beneficial for the transformational ideas of young female entrepreneurs which can also be seen in existing literature. However, inexperience in areas of management should be accounted for by the young female entrepreneurs, as there can be tough situations to deal with at a young age.

## **5.2 Implications**

### *5.2.1 Implications for theory*

Over the recent years, more and more scholars have directed their attention towards female entrepreneurship (Henry et al., 2016). Still, new research directions are to be explored in this field (Hugh, Jennings, Brush, Carter & Welter, 2012). This Thesis has aimed at contributing knowledge to existing theory about the influence of context in entrepreneurial activity, as is called for by several scholars (e.g. Zahra et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2016; Yousafzai, Fayolle, Saeed, Henry & Lindgreen, 2019). This research studies identity strategies while taking into

account the context in which the entrepreneur operates, namely male-dominated industries, but also the personal context of the entrepreneur, or intersectionality, namely sex and age. It contributes to the stream of literature that views the group of female entrepreneurs as heterogeneous.

First of all, this study thus contributes to the ongoing discussion in literature of the effect of age on successful entrepreneurship. Existing research shows that increasing age leads to a higher amount of social capital, due to the higher number of weak and strong ties, which in turn leads to more successful entrepreneurial activity (Yetim, 2008). However, this research proposes that the goodwill young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors receive, should be taken into account here. As Rob, Coleman and Strangler (2014) suggest, when starting a business, a role model or mentor is essential. This study found that the previously described goodwill creates an opening for easy accessible mentorship, which in turn will lead to success. Furthermore, in line with existing literature on age and entrepreneurship, both benefits and disadvantages have been found of being a young entrepreneur. On one hand, unlimited possibilities and transformational ideas due to a young age can advance the success of the entrepreneur (Azoulay et al., 2018). On the other hand, a lack of human capital due to inexperience can be a barrier for success (Lee & Vouchilas, 2016).

Secondly, this research adds to theory on multiple identities as a result from intersectionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2014). In particular, this research confirms the process perspective, which allows the study of identity and how it changes in a specific social context (Corlett & Mavin, 2014). In this research, this change was seen by the display of 'levelling'. Although unconscious, the entrepreneurs display characteristics of the constitution of multiple identities, in line with previous research, in order to make sense of complex situations (Alvesson et al., 2008; Beech, 2008; Collinson, 2003; Kondo, 1990).

Furthermore, the use of discourse as a means of identity work was found to be a conscious process performed by young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors, as a way to be successful. This confirms existing literature regarding the use of shared language to express possession of appropriate knowledge (Alvesson, 2001).

Often in uncivil workplace situations, avoidance strategies are used (Salin et al., 2014).. However, young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors strategically use confrontational strategies to deal with uncomfortable or uncivil situations. This assertive behaviour is used perceived as the best option and successful by the entrepreneurs, in line with existing research (Cameron et al., 2018).

### *5.2.2 Implications for practice*

This Thesis has offered a chance to young female entrepreneurs to talk about their experience in male-dominated industries. By telling their stories, these women can be an inspiration for other young women to start their own journey as an entrepreneur. Also, this Thesis has provided several insights for young female entrepreneurs who already operate in male-dominated industries to use in practice.

First of all, as the entrepreneurs have indicated in their interviews, it works best to embrace that you are different from the status quo in the industry. This contrasts traditional views, for example that of Aldrich, Reese and Dubini (1989), who argue that in order to create diverse personal networks, women need to adapt themselves to be like male entrepreneurs. The female entrepreneurs in this Thesis oppose that belief. Especially the more experienced entrepreneurs advise against changing yourself and your behaviour to be 'one of the boys'. Young female entrepreneurs should embrace their uniqueness and even use it as a marketing tool.

Secondly, it became evident that young women create goodwill with experienced people in the male-dominated industries. This is something that young female entrepreneurs can make good use of in practice. It will help to create an extensive network which the entrepreneurs can and should use to ask questions. The goodwill allows them to ask about inside information that is normally not so easily accessible. Also, if the entrepreneurs are looking for a mentor, this goodwill people have towards them will help them in finding one.

Thirdly, this Thesis has shown that discourse plays an important role in everyday business and the demonstration of knowledge. Young female entrepreneurs should be aware of their use of language in interactions with clients or potential business partners. By consciously displaying knowledge in their speech the entrepreneurs indicate that they are part of the industry community. Next to that, it indicates towards the people that they interact with, that they possess over industry-related knowledge, which creates trust. It enhances their legitimacy. Moreover, discourse is a useful tool to display a unique identity, for example by using a youthful discursive style.

Finally, in the case of rude, uncomfortable, or condescending behaviour young female entrepreneurs should show assertive behaviour. They should do this to create awareness for unpleasant behaviours. More importantly, speaking out against unwanted behaviours and situations benefits their mental health.

Not only young female entrepreneurs can put the findings of this research to practice. Also for others in male-dominated industries these insights can be valuable. This study gave voice to the young women in male industries. Their stories can inspire established male entrepreneurs to be more aware of industry bias. It can create an open-mind to the input of the women and encourage more dialogue with the unique entrepreneurs within the sector.

Besides, many men might not even be aware of some behaviours that are perceived as out-of-line by young women. This study can raise awareness for those behaviours.

## **5.3 Discussion**

### *5.3.1 Limitations*

First of all, this study has provided the narrated story of ten women who talked about their experience as a young female entrepreneur. However, the ten women who were interviewed do not represent the entire population of young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors. It is thus possible that not all findings are applicable to every entrepreneur in that group. This Thesis takes into account gender, sex and the masculinity of the industry. However, this group is not homogenous and a lot more diversity can be found within the group of young female entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors. For example, Yetim (2008) found that migrant status has an effect on the acquisition of social capital by entrepreneurs, just like professional training and work experience. Therefore it is important to ask the question: who is included? This helps to adequately take into account group diversity and avoid findings to be interpreted as universal experiences (Cole, 2009). This study has taken into account the quality criteria of transferability by Guba and Lincoln (1989) in order to avoid that this limitation will have too much impact on the outcomes of this research. By giving thick case descriptions and providing context of quotes in section 4.1, the context of the findings is made clear and a reader can judge whether a finding fits his/her situation as well.

Moreover, the entrepreneurs who were interviewed come from a more diverse set of male-dominated industries as has been previously indicated. Some extra sectors have been added, such as the car industry and real estate business. However, these industries were only added after careful reflection of the researcher. Also, to ensure the industries were rightfully added to the sample, the entrepreneur always had to confirm that she saw the industry she operates in as a male-dominated sector. Furthermore, the researcher checked with the Central Bureau of Statistics in the Netherlands, whether this judgement was accurate (*see Appendix*

2). By addressing this change in methodology, the researcher tries to meet the criteria of dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Furthermore, the difference between companies should be taken into account when interpreting the conclusion of this research. The size of a company can affect the experience of an entrepreneur, as well as the location or area the company is established. Also, some entrepreneurs started their company from scratch, while others took over an existing company. Therefore, more in-depth research is suggested in order to find out whether this influences the way the results of this research should be interpreted. For now, the researcher has kept a code book to show the quotes of one entrepreneur per main topic, as to show the view of the entrepreneur in her context.

Finally, this research only takes into account the gender role as prescribed to women who were born as female. It does not include the influence transgender or other queer identities. In general, there is very few empirical research done regarding transgender- or other queer-based discriminative influences on entrepreneurial activity and there is a call for more attention regarding this subject (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018).

### *5.3.2 Recommendations*

In the light of this study about the intersection of sex, age and entrepreneurship in male-dominated industries, several recommendations can be given for further directions of research.

First of all, this research looks at the intersection of sex and age, but the separate effect of age in identity strategies by entrepreneurs has not been fully explored. Therefore it might be interesting to compare young men and young women in male-dominated industries, or young women and older women. Next to that, this research takes male-dominated industries as one group. However, within that group a lot of differences can be found. It could be interesting to research young women in one specific industry, for example construction. Moreover, entrepreneurship is also generalized, but researching differences between several types of entrepreneurship and identity strategies might bring interesting findings. The differences in identity strategies between for example women who took over a company, or women who started a company from scratch can be explored. Finally, this research explores the field of women among a majority of men. But what about the opposite situation? Little research has been done on identity work of young men who own a business in traditional female industries.

Furthermore, this research adds the concept of 'levelling' to the process perspective of theory regarding multiple identities. Future research can go more into depth about what actually happens when people unconsciously 'level' and why actors actively express this as part of one identity, instead of accepting that they have multiple identities.

## Reflexivity

When doing research, one must be aware of the researcher's role. The researcher can influence the research object, process and outcomes of the research (Haynes, 2012). This section contains several points of reflexivity by the researcher.

First of all, this research has started with a personal interest in entrepreneurship by young women, because the researcher is a young woman herself. The researcher often works together with men, although the industry is not traditionally viewed as masculine. Based on this experience, the research object of young female entrepreneurship in male-dominated industries emerged. However, due to her own situation, the researcher can never view this research object as totally objective. In interpreting the outcomes of this research, one should be aware of this position of the researcher.

Naturally, the researcher had several expectations prior to performing the research. First of all, the researcher expected that the majority of entrepreneurs experienced negative situations concerning sexual harassment/intimidation or inappropriate comments. Secondly, the researcher expected that young women were often questioned for their knowledge and not taken seriously. These expectations could have influenced the tone of the interview, causing interviewees to give certain answers. But, as Haynes (2012) mentions, the object of study also influences the research. After three or four interviews, the researcher was better able to ask more neutral questions due to the experiences with the interviewees and insights their answers had given her. However, total objective interpretation of the answers is not possible due to the subjective influence of the interviewees and researcher on the research process.

Furthermore, there should be reflected upon the context of the interview. Eight out of ten interviews took place in an online setting (via Zoom), one over the phone and one took place live. The plurality of the interviews had an impersonal nature, because it felt like a meeting due to the online setting. Also, no analysis could be done about the work environment of the entrepreneurs, because the researcher never got to see it. Sometimes, unstable internet connections caused trouble and disrupted the interview, making it hard to follow through on certain topics.

Next to that, in some interviews a lot of jargon was used. The researcher often had no prior knowledge of the industries in which the interviewees operated, making it hard to dive deep into an answer sometimes. The researcher tried to make up for this by looking up several technical aspects. If the answer was still not clear or if there was cause for follow up questions, the researcher contacted the interviewee again to ask them.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### Interview guide

##### **Introductie**

*Om te beginnen wil ik je hartelijk bedanken voor je deelname aan dit onderzoek. Zoals je waarschijnlijk al weet, ik studeer Innovation & Entrepreneurship aan de Radboud Universiteit en ik schrijf op dit moment mijn master thesis. Voor mijn onderzoek interview ik jonge, vrouwelijke ondernemers die actief zijn, of waren, in mannelijk gedomineerde sectoren. Ik onderzoek de identiteiten die ze hebben ontwikkeld en hoe deze worden gebruikt om succesvol te worden binnen hun sector.*

*Om de informatie uit deze interviews te verwerken, wordt dit interview getranscribeerd. Daarom zou ik jouw toestemming willen vragen om dit interview op te nemen.*

*\*Start opname apparatuur\**

*Geef je mij toestemming om dit interview op te nemen?*

*Geef je mij toestemming om jouw antwoorden anoniem te gebruiken voor dit onderzoek?*

*Ik wil je er op wijzen dat je op elk moment gedurende het interview vrij bent om te stoppen.*

*Mocht je je niet comfortabel voelen met bepaalde vragen, laat dat dan alsjeblieft weten.*

*Ook als een vraag onduidelijk is. Heb je zelf vragen vooraf?*

*Ik zou nu graag officieel het interview willen beginnen. We starten met paar achtergrond vragen over jou en het bedrijf. Vervolgens gaan we praten over identiteit en we eindigen met vragen over jouw ervaring als ondernemer.*

*Laten we starten!*

##### **Personal background**

*Persoonlijke achtergrond*

- Kun je jezelf even kort introduceren?
  - o Naam, leeftijd, etc.
  - o Educatieve achtergrond
  - o Werk achtergrond
  - o Persoonlijk/sociale leven?
- Wat is jouw rol binnen het bedrijf?

##### **Organizational background**

*Organisatorische achtergrond*

- Kun je me iets vertellen over het bedrijf?
  - o Wanneer en hoe is het opgericht?
  - o Waar houdt het bedrijf zich voornamelijk mee bezig?
  - o Wat is de missie/visie van het bedrijf? Waar sta je voor als bedrijf?
  - o Hoe zou je cultuur binnen het bedrijf omschrijven? Hoe is de sfeer? Wat wil je uitstralen naar klanten?

*Voordat we beginnen met praten over identiteit, zal ik je een definitie geven wat ermee wordt bedoeld in dit onderzoek. Deze definitie komt van Cerulo (1997) en heb ik als volgt*

*vertaald: Identiteit verwijst naar subjectieve betekenissen en ervaring, naar onze voortdurende inspanningen om twee vragen te beantwoorden, namelijk: 'Wie ben ik?' en 'Hoe moet ik handelen?'. Hierbij gaat het voornamelijk om normen en waarden. Probeer deze definitie in je achterhoofd te houden terwijl je de volgende vragen beantwoordt.*

<p><b>Identity in general</b>  <i>Identiteit in het algemeen</i>          Note: Stel 'waarom' vragen na het antwoord.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hoe zie je jezelf? Wat is je identiteit?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Bij welke sociale groepen hoor je?</li> <li>o Hoe zou je jezelf omschrijven als ondernemer?</li> <li>o Vanuit welke normen en waarden acteer je?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Hoe denk je dat mensen in jouw omgeving jou zouden omschrijven?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Zit daar verschil in tussen je persoonlijke en professionele omgeving?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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*We zullen het nu hebben over verschillende aspecten van identiteit en wat details. We beginnen met het mentale proces rondom identiteit.*

<p><b>Cognitive identity work (in thoughts)</b>  <i>Cognitief identiteitswerk (in gedachtes)</i></p> <p>Na antwoorden vragen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Waarom</li> <li>- Wat werkte wel/wat werkte niet?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In welke mate ben je bezig met je identiteit? (Normen en waarden)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Twijfelen aan jezelf, jezelf aanpassen etc.</li> <li>o Hoe wil je overkomen? (Normen en waarden)</li> </ul> </li> <li>- In welke mate pas je jouw gedrag aan op bepaalde situaties?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Wat voor situaties?</li> <li>o Hoe gebeurt dit?</li> <li>o Bewust/onbewust?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- In welke mate zou je zeggen dat je meerdere identiteiten hebt (met verschillende normen en waarden)?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Hoe switch jij tussen deze identiteiten?</li> <li>o Komen hier ook ongemakkelijkheden/tegenstrijdigheden uit?</li> <li>o Zijn er meer prominente identiteiten ten opzichte van andere? Zijn er identiteiten die je zelf hoger zou plaatsen dan andere identiteiten?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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*We gaan verder met identiteit die geuit wordt in taalgebruik.*

<p><b>Discursive identity work (in talk)</b>  <i>Discursief identiteitswerk (in gesprek)</i></p> <p>Na antwoorden vragen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Waarom</li> <li>- Wat werkte wel/wat werkte niet?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hoe uit je jezelf door hoe je praat? (Toon, woordkeuze, jargon)</li> <li>- Hoe gebruik je bepaalde stijlen die bij jouw identiteit passen? (formeel/informeel, humor, metaforen, uitdrukkingen)</li> </ul>
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*Laten we doorgaan over fysieke expressies van je identiteit, zoals symbolen.*

<p><b>Physical identity work (in symbols)</b>  <i>Fysiek identiteitswerk (in symbolen)</i></p> <p>Na antwoorden vragen:  - Waarom</p> <p>Wat werkte wel/wat werkte niet?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hoe gebruik je jouw uiterlijk om je identiteit uit te drukken?</li> <li>- Hoe gebruik je je omgeving om je identiteit uit te drukken? (fysieke voorwerpen, layouts, indelingen etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><i>We zullen het nu gaan hebben over hoe jij je identiteit uitdruk in je gedrag en acties.</i></p>	
<p><b>Behavioural identity work (in actions)</b>  <i>Gedrag identiteitswerk</i></p> <p>Na antwoorden vragen:  - Waarom  - Wat werkte wel/wat werkte niet?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Op welke manier acteer je passend bij je identiteit? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Bewust of onbewust</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Hoe gedraag je je in interacties met anderen in je sector? Hoe kun je dit linken aan je identiteit? Lichaamshouding?</li> </ul> <p><i>Als de vraag te onduidelijk is, geef voorbeelden zoals een priester die deelneemt aan spirituele acties, expats die locaties bezoeken die ze doet denken aan thuis (supermarkt).</i></p>
<p><i>Ontzettend bedankt voor alle antwoorden tot nu toe.  Het nieuwe onderwerp waar we over zullen praten is jouw ervaring als ondernemer. Je kunt bij deze vragen je voorgaande antwoorden gebruiken om verder op door te bouwen als dat passend is.</i></p>	
<p><b>Entrepreneurial experience</b>  <i>Ervaring als ondernemer</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wat is jouw ervaring om als jonge vrouwelijke ondernemer te werken in de [SECTOR]?</li> <li>- Hoe zou je de sector omschrijven? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o In welke mate speelt vrouw zijn een rol?</li> <li>o In welke mate speelt jong zijn een rol?</li> <li>o In welke mate speelt een jonge vrouw zijn een rol?</li> <li>o In welke mate ervaar je dat het zijn van een jonge vrouw van invloed is op jouw ondernemers identiteit?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Op de kruising van vrouw, jong en ondernemer zijn, wat voor een positieve gevolgen ervaar je, en wat voor een negatieve? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Hoe ga je hier mee om?</li> <li>o Hoe wordt hierop gereageerd?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Wat is de stereotype ondernemer binnen de sector? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o In welke mate lijkt je hierop of juist niet?</li> <li>o In hoeverre wil je hieraan spiegelen?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- In welke mate is jouw omgeving van invloed op jouw ervaring als ondernemer? (locatie, instituties, sociaal, beschikbare middelen, competitief)</li> </ul>
<p><i>We zijn door al mijn vragen heen. Heb jij nog vragen voor mij? Zijn er nog dingen waar je op terug wilt komen of nog iets aan wilt toevoegen?</i></p>	

*Dan wil ik je graag hartelijk bedanken voor je deelname aan mijn onderzoek. Mocht je het graag willen zal ik de resultaten met je delen als ik klaar ben.*

*Ik kan het transcript van het interview met je delen zodat je er nog even naar kan kijken. Mocht ik nog vragen hebben over het interview, mag ik je dan contacteren?*

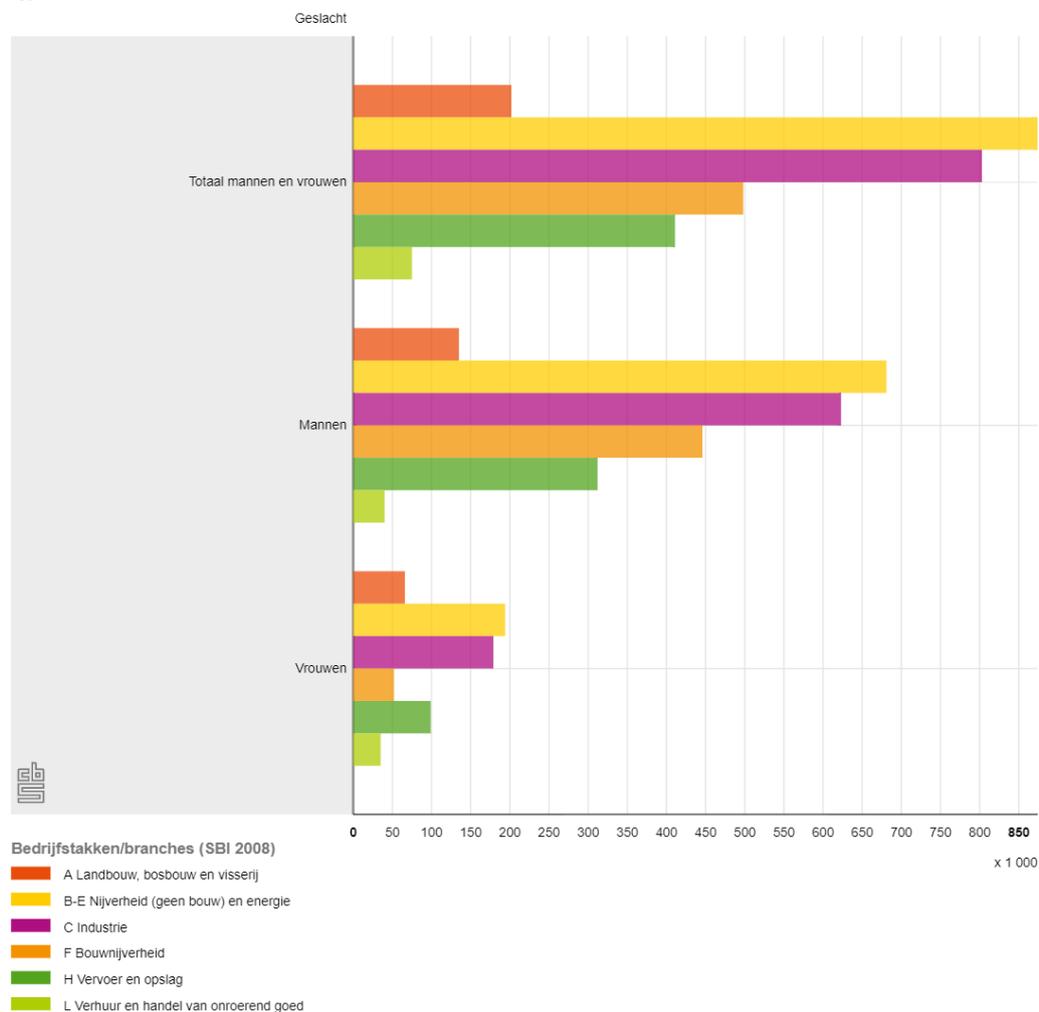
*Je kunt uiteraard altijd contact met mij opnemen als je nog vragen of opmerkingen hebt.*

*Nogmaals bedankt, ik stop nu met opnemen.*

## Appendix 2

### Arbeidsvolume; bedrijfstak, geslacht, nationale rekeningen

Onderwerp: Werkzame personen  
Perioden: 2019  
Type werkenden: Totaal



Source: CBS, 2020.