

# **Heteronormativity and the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities**

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## **Introduction**

Heteronormativity is seldom acknowledged and examined empirically by entrepreneurship studies scholars (Galloway, 2007, 2011; McAdam, 2013; Marlow, Greene and Coad, 2018; Wood, Davidson and Fielden, 2013). Yet heteronormativity is a widespread normative regime that is sustained by sexual (heterosexual/homosexual) and gender (male/female; masculine/feminine) binaries that constrain how heterosexuals and members of sexual minority groups are constituted as sexual and gendered subjects (Butler, 1990, 1993; Warner, 1993, 1999). One major problem with heteronormativity is the normative status it assigns to heterosexuality against which other sexualities (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other non-normative sexualities and genders [LGBT+]) are understood as ‘abnormal’. Acknowledging this, a small number of scholars have examined the impact of heteronormativity on LGBT+ entrepreneurs (Bendl, Köllen and Steinbacher, 2012; Galloway, 2007, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Schindehutte, Morris and Allen, 2005). This literature shows how heteronormativity can be manifest in homophobic investors and suppliers, societal prejudice towards LGBT+ people, discrimination from customers and in the responses of LGBT+ entrepreneurs, such as concealing their sexual identities from customers and suppliers. However, this scholarship has yet to examine the implications for (re)constructing LGBT+ entrepreneurial identities when discourses of heteronormativity overlay discourses of entrepreneurship. This article addresses this knowledge gap and contributes to LGBT+ entrepreneurship research by showing how heteronormative

entrepreneurial discourses can normalise gay male entrepreneurial identities that, problematically, retrench the heterosexual/homosexual binary. This is demonstrated in our analysis of how study participants display misogynistic attitudes, denigrate ‘feminine’ gay male and female entrepreneurs, endorse gender conformity and deploy heteronormative tropes such as the nuclear family.

Additionally, this article engages with queer theory literature and concepts (e.g. Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1986; Warner, 1993, 1999) to develop a theoretical contribution, in particular showing how heteronormativity can provide insights into how gay male entrepreneurial identities can reinforce the heterosexual/homosexual binary. More specifically, dominant discourses of entrepreneurship are problematised as heteronormative in how they may be used to (re)construct gay male entrepreneurial identities as normal, without rupturing the sexual and gender binaries that sustain them as such. In so doing, this article extends and enriches the theoretical repertoire available to entrepreneurship scholars wishing to study sexuality and entrepreneurship. As some researchers note (Marlow, 2014; Marlow et al., 2018), the neglect of queer theory in this endeavour represents a missed opportunity to undermine the dominance of heteronormativity within entrepreneurship studies (McAdam, 2013) which, according to Marlow (2014: 106), is ‘uncritically accepted as a normative stance’. The theoretical contribution of this article challenges this norm, expanding the reach of entrepreneurship so that it may nurture future research trajectories that explore how heteronormativity reproduces significant variations in the experiences of LGBT+ entrepreneurs.

In light of the above, our principal research question is: how does heteronormativity shape the discursive (re)construction of entrepreneurial identities among UK gay male small business owners? We proceed by discussing the concept of heteronormativity in the context of queer theory, deriving theoretical insights from the seminal scholarship of Warner (1993,

1999) and Foucault (1979, 1980, 1982, 1986), before reviewing the literature on heteronormativity and LGBT+ entrepreneurship. Next, we outline the study's methodology followed by our empirical sections. The discussion and conclusion tease out the main contributions of this study and flag new avenues for future research.

## **Heteronormativity**

Conceptually, heteronormativity has its origins in queer theory (Warner, 1993), the latter understood here as a loose constellation of conceptual resources variously drawn from poststructuralism, feminism and gay and lesbian studies (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 2011; Halperin, 1995; Jagose, 1996). Foucault's writing has been pivotal in the development of queer theory (Spargo, 1999), in particular the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (1979, 1982, 1986) which showed how sexuality is not a fixed property of the individual, but a culturally constructed category of knowledge. Foucault's notion of discourse as a regulated set of statements that 'systematically forms the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 54) is key to Foucault's treatment of sexuality. As the quote illustrates, discourse is active in how it (re)produces what is (not) sayable about a topic such as sexuality. This is because power relations operate within discourse that structure not only how we speak about sexuality, but also how it is experienced and understood.

Foucault's work on sexuality occasioned opportunities for queer theorists to explore how LGBT+ sexualities (and genders) are discursively (re)produced in particular moments in time, how they vary culturally in the forms they take and how heteronormativity organises sexuality in a heterosexual/homosexual binary (Berlant and Edelman, 2013; Edelman, 2004; Musser, 2018; Warner, 1993, 1999). Crucially, much of this literature explores also how heteronormativity can be problematized so non-normative sexualities and genders can

emerge. For our purposes, Warner's (1993, 1999) work has been invaluable for providing insights into heteronormativity as a pervasive normalising regime, conceptualised as: 'the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist' (Warner, 1993: vii). In other words, heteronormativity is a normative regime that reproduces the heterosexual/homosexual binary, which, Warner (1993) submits, normalises heterosexuality as natural, neutral and healthy, while LGBT+ sexualities are discursively constituted as abnormal, unhealthy and deviant. The emphasis Warner places on heteronormativity as a field of normalisation converses with Foucault's ideas about how power can operate through discourse to normalise some sexualities but not others. The normalisation of LGBT+ sexualities can occur in cultural contexts characterised by, for example, institutional reforms to protect LGBT+ people, where same-sex marriage is legal, where social attitudes toward homosexuality are liberal and where there is an emphasis on recognising LGBT+ people as citizen-subjects (Drucker, 2015; Rumens, 2018; Warner, 1999). Still, as Warner (1993, 1999) avers, many of these progressive advances are structured by heteronormativity, seen in the discursive identity of the 'good gay' citizen, as someone who fits into a heteronormative order based on monogamy, domesticity, whiteness, capitalist consumption and conservative politics.

In summary, Foucault's (1979) treatment of sexuality as a discursively constructed category of knowledge and Warner's (1999) writing on heteronormativity as a normative regime enable us to explore how heteronormativity can discursively (re)shape gay male entrepreneurial identities. Understanding identity as a discursive construction (Foucault, 1980), we derive theoretical insights from both Foucault and Warner to examine how gay male entrepreneurial identities are constituted and sustained in gendered and sexualised ways.

## **Heteronormativity and LGBT+ entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship studies has been roundly criticised for its heteronormative assumptions that have stymied research on LGBT+ entrepreneurship (Galloway, 2007; Marlow et al., 2018; Marlow, 2014; Wood et al., 2012). For example, Marlow et al. (2018: 118) highlight that gendered critiques of entrepreneurship assume women are heterosexual, rarely exploring how, for example, lesbian sexualities can problematize the ‘metonymy of the “female entrepreneur”’. Equally, research that involves male entrepreneurs (e.g. Carland and Carland, 1991; Giazitzoglu and Down, 2017; Powell and Eddleston, 2013), typically fails to incorporate gay, bisexual and trans men. By focusing only on heterosexual men who are not trans, the normative ideal of the entrepreneur as male and masculine but also heterosexual remains unchallenged (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Galloway, 2007, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2012).

Combatting the heteronormativity of entrepreneurship studies, a small number of scholars have sought to address LGBT+ entrepreneurship as a serious research topic (Bendl et al., 2012; Fresnoza-Flot and Pécoud, 2007; Galloway, 2007, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Shepherd and Hatzelt, 2015; Schindehutte et al., 2005; Willsdon, 2005; Varnell, 2001). One focal point has been the impact of heteronormativity on the motives, paths and success of LGBT+ entrepreneurs (e.g. Shepherd and Hatzelt, 2015; Schindehutte et al., 2005). For example, Schindehutte et al. (2005: 33) found that ‘57.6% of their 300 respondents’ reported impediments in ‘obtaining suppliers/vendors, obtaining licenses and approvals, marketing and advertising, obtaining premises, hiring employees, and obtaining business loans from bank’. Shepherd and Hatzelt (2015: 276) describe a ‘double-edged sword’ concept as a unique feature in LGBT+ entrepreneurial decision-making. While LGBT+ entrepreneurs may exit paid employment to seek autonomy and thus avoid possible undesirable treatment by

discriminatory peers and/or supervisors, the harsh standards of evaluation applied to them as business owners can create equally strong negative pressures. This research shows that it is too simplistic to conceptualise LGBT+ entrepreneurship as a reliable escape route or sturdy shelter from the effects of heteronormativity. As an expansive and persistent normative regime, it is not the case that LGBT+ entrepreneurs can simply step outside of it to avoid its effects.

Studies that investigate how heteronormativity permeates the everyday lives of LGBT+ entrepreneurs, in how they construct entrepreneurial and sexual identities, are rare. Shindehutte et al's (2005) US study, based on a survey of 300 gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) entrepreneurs, does not mobilise heteronormativity as a concept but focuses on stigmatisation to examine the implications of, rather than *how* a 'gay identity' is (re)constructed, in the 'venture-creation experience' (2005: 27). The study data revealed two subgroups of GLB entrepreneurs: the identifiers (those participants who indicated a strong identification with the gay community in the conduct of business) and; the independents (who identified gay issues as less central to their entrepreneurial ventures). Unlike the independents, a gay identity was more strongly manifest in their businesses (e.g. in vendors, investors, marketing and business values). Independents were more likely to view being gay as a 'non-issue' (2005: 38) and less likely to suggest GLB entrepreneurs faced unique barriers. While this study represents one of the first to undertake a cross-section analysis of GLB entrepreneurs, the concept of a 'gay identity' tends to be operationalised as a variable and does not account for variation in how such an identity can be discursively produced. Furthermore, it does not fully attend to how power relations within discourses of sexuality and entrepreneurship can generate a normalising effect on GLB sexual identities, which a queer theory and discursive approach can foreground.

Galloway's (2011) UK qualitative study of 11 gay male entrepreneurs yields richer study findings. It starts on the premise that gay male entrepreneurs may not fit the heteronormative ideal of the entrepreneur, identified and critiqued in feminist scholarship as male, heterosexual and masculine (Bruni et al., 2004; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Lewis, 2006; Stead, 2017). Galloway (2011) examines the reasons why gay men become entrepreneurs and their experiences of being entrepreneurs. Heteronormativity was seen to have a more pronounced effect on the experience of gay male entrepreneurship. Study findings demonstrate that, while all of the 'respondents claimed it was easier to be "out" as a self-employed business owner than as an employee' (2011: 900), homophobia continued to be a problem. This emanated from customers but, as Galloway found, 'most emerged from the wider business community', such as tradespeople and potential partners who, Galloway's study participants believed, 'would not do business with them because they were gay' (2011: 901). Additionally, the study provides insights, albeit limited, into the identity work of her study participants. Several articulated how they managed their gay identities with discretion with clients and consumers: 'I don't throw it in their face' and 'I don't come in here with a tiara and sling-backs' (2011: 900). In these statements, gay entrepreneurs can be seen to deprioritise their sexual identity to elicit tolerance from heterosexuals. Equally, they suggest how gay entrepreneurs can be acutely aware of how gay male sexuality requires managing as an identity, given its historical association with promiscuous sexual activity and femininity (Eliason, 1996). Still, the study stops short of exploring fully the normalising effects of heteronormativity on gay male entrepreneurs, in particular how such identities are discursively worked out and what they might reveal about the heteronormative terms and conditions that permit their possibility.

In summary, our study develops extant research on heteronormativity and entrepreneurial gay male identities. While our study converses closely with Galloway (2007,

2011) on that issue, it addresses some of the issues omitted in Galloway (2011) and the wider scholarship on LGBT+ entrepreneurship, such as the normalisation of gay male entrepreneurial identities. In so doing, we provide a richer qualitative account of how heteronormativity is at work throughout the entrepreneurial identity making process.

## **Methodology**

Our research question (how does heteronormativity shape the discursive (re)construction of entrepreneurial identities among UK gay male small business owners?) is exploratory and as such enabled the generation of rich, in-depth qualitative data involving 21 gay male small business owners in the UK (see Table 1). We sought to generate data on any aspect of heteronormativity in gay male entrepreneurship but, as the interviewing commenced, identity quickly emerged as a major theme. As such, we became attuned to how heteronormativity discursively normalised some gay male entrepreneurial identities but not others.

The demographics of the sample can be broadly summarised: while three of the participants started their businesses within the last two years, the majority had been running their businesses for more than 5 years. Four of our participants described their businesses as ‘gay businesses’ (i.e. those primarily aimed at a ‘gay’ market). Study participants frequently defined themselves as ‘openly gay’, although how such openness is understood and experienced within different entrepreneurial contexts can vary (Galloway, 2011).

[insert table 1 about here]

At this juncture, a note on terminology is useful. We treat entrepreneurship as a heterogeneous construct (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Bruyat and Julien, 2001). Therefore, we allowed our participants to define their status as business owners and entrepreneurs in their own words.

The participant recruitment strategy involved a combination of convenience and snowballing techniques, usually deployed in research on LGBT+ people as they constitute a sensitive group to access (Browne, 2005). The primary strategy involved contacting various LGBT-owned businesses across the UK, either in person or by telephoning to outline the rationale and aim of the study. Names of potential businesses were found in the LGBT+ business directory Gay to Z and various commercial advertisements sourced in the local and national magazines and newspapers aimed at a LGBT+ readership (e.g. Attitude, Boyz, GT, Out and QX). Supplementing this, business owners were located through contacts of both authors. Initially, we intended to recruit across the LGBT+ acronym, but it soon became clear that our identities as openly gay male academics seemed to attract more interest from gay male business owners, so we focused on recruiting from this group for the remainder of the study. While similar sexual identities can generate relations of trust within the research process, aiding recruitment and knowledge generation (Kong, Mahoney and Plummer, 2003), they cannot be relied upon for that purpose. For example, one participant asked the first author: ‘they [the university] pay you to do this stuff?’ and ‘do you get to have sex with the men you interview?’ The first author felt these questions problematised his academic identity, creating awkward moments during the recruitment stage that required him to spend much longer justifying the rationale of the research and the ethical issues around engaging in sexual relations with participants.

As LGBT+ people are a sensitive research group, sample sizes tend to be small (Browne, 2005), illustrated in qualitative research on LGBT+ entrepreneurs (e.g. Galloway, 2011 [n=11]; Pijpers and Maas, 2014 [n=5]). Our relatively small sample size was primarily determined by data saturation. Specifically, we agreed that we had reached data saturation at the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Data saturation can be difficult to determine (Bowen, 2008), but our

agreement was informed by independent (re)readings of each other's analysis of the data. We then cross-examined each other about how we had identified and substantiated codes and themes in the interview data. This process enabled us to negotiate a consensus about interview codes, themes and data saturation.

Regarding method, we chose semi-structured interviews for their capacity to enable interviewers and interviewees to shape and direct the flow of questions and conversation (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The interviews were conducted in the interviewee's preferred venue (e.g. at home, at their workplace, in a quiet café) and ranged from an hour and a half to three and a half hours in length. They were digitally-recorded and transcribed fully. Each participant was interviewed individually and the majority of the participants were interviewed more than once to not only further enhance the depth of the data, but also to seek responses to questions that arose in our minds throughout the data analysis process. Adopting an exploratory approach, the interview questions were wide-ranging and open-ended, with an emphasis on participants leading us down avenues of discussion of their choosing<sup>1</sup>. These typically stimulated extended and in-depth conversations about the identity work they undertook as gay male entrepreneurs.

Our post-interview reflections suggested that our identities as gay male academics were in a state of flux during the interviews. In particular, we realised that when confronted with hyper-masculine participants who articulated prejudice towards other gay men as well as women, we both tended to engage in heavy self-censoring, altering our behaviours and speech to fit in with their expectations. For example, we underplayed our own expressions of normative 'femininity' such as when the first author, slightly intimidated by one overtly masculine participant, refrained from questioning the misogynist attitudes expressed by this interviewee. The same participant made very derogatory remarks about effeminate gay men,

which the first author also found difficult to probe as a topic of discussion. We recognise this can limit the depth of data collected.

Discourse analysis techniques were deployed for analysing the data. Henry, Foss and Ahl (2015) propose discourse analysis as an innovative advance in gender (and sexuality) entrepreneurship research since, methodologically, it is dominated by large-scale empirical studies. We adopted an approach associated with ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’ (FDA) (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Kendall and Wickham, 1999; Springer and Clinton, 2015). There is debate as to whether Foucault’s work elaborates a ‘method’ of data analysis (Cheek, 2008), but we implemented some of the techniques used by discourse analysts who have developed specific approaches based on Foucault’s work. There are variations in the approaches and techniques used by FDA researchers (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008), which partly depend on what parts of Foucault’s writing they are influenced by (Springer and Clinton, 2008). As mentioned previously, we adhere to Foucault’s conceptualisation of discourse (Foucault, 1972: 54) but rely also on his later work to place emphasis on how ‘[d]iscourse transmits and produces power’ (Foucault, 1979: 100). In other words, we do not view discourse as wholly deterministic but understand discursive power relations as productive, holding the capacity to (re)construct identities (Foucault, 1980).

Our data analysis approach was an iterative process of note taking, coding, reading and re-analysing the data to search for traces of discourse in the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities. In that regard, we found Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine’s (2008) advice on the procedural aspects of FDA invaluable. First, we selected our object of study carefully (heteronormativity) because our reading of the LGBT+ entrepreneurship literature enabled us to speculate that specific problems are likely to be formed when gay male entrepreneurs self-identify and are identified by others within its discourses. Next, we searched for traces of heteronormative discourses in the data. In so doing, we identified a

major theme (identities) and this was analysed by identifying discourses that could be seen at work in the participants' accounts of their identities as gay men and entrepreneurs. At this stage, we identified minor discursive themes around which our data is organised into three sections: entrepreneurial gay masculinity; the entrepreneurial (gay) 'family type guy' and; repudiating the feminine in women and other gay men<sup>1</sup>. Our agreement of codes was reached by multiple, independent (re)readings of each other's annotated interview transcripts and coding of the data. We then cross-examined each other about how we had identified and substantiated codes and themes in the interview data. This iterative and interrogative process enabled us to negotiate a consensus about interview codes and themes. As with other discourse analysis studies more generally, including those in entrepreneurship studies (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Essers and Benschop), we present fewer data extracts in order to develop depth of analysis. We recognise, however, our selection of interview quotes and analysis is subjective and partial.

Finally, in our reflections on the study data, we note that all but two of our participants were white gay men, which rendered race a blind spot in our study. As heteronormativity reinforces gay white male privilege, evident in how whiteness is (re)produced in LGBT+ sexualities that are normalised (Drucker, 2015), we acknowledge that our data is coloured by the specific experiences and social positioning of our participants. Our post study reflections reveal our complicity in (re)producing whiteness as normative in the research process. For example, by neglecting to interrogate whiteness in the interview data, we may have inadvertently upheld whiteness as an invisible norm that underpins entrepreneurship studies (Ogbor, 2000). As we acknowledged in the conclusion, race is an important research topic for entrepreneurship scholars (Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela, 2017). Before we proceed to the analysis, it is important to state that participants appear in this article under pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

## **Entrepreneurial gay masculine identities**

In this section, we present and analyse data that reveals how heteronormative entrepreneurial masculinity discourse is drawn upon for (re)constructing gay male entrepreneurial identities. The data demonstrates the significance of gender conformity as a way to normalise gay male entrepreneurial identities but also how unstable these identities are.

Joseph is in his mid-forties, openly gay and is the owner of an online business that sells cakes for special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. He self-identifies as a 'normal' entrepreneur:

I don't see myself as any different from, say, a straight guy making a tidy income from selling cakes online...you wouldn't know I'm gay...I'm normal, like any straight person...I'm an entrepreneur who just happens to be gay. . . I have a niche core product range...I'm not afraid to take risks...be forceful...I stand out in my market...early on I took the plunge. I expanded the business over a very short period of time, against the advice of my friends and bank manager. But I persuaded him to back me...it was sheer force of personality that did it. I showed him I had balls...you know, not a limp wristed fag who couldn't take risks...after a while, I employed three assistants, hired another baker and re-mortgaged the house. I took a huge risk but I held my nerve and eventually it paid off. I just things would work out...a gut feeling about it all...it takes a certain kinda of guy to do that. To risk it all...you have to be single-minded and made of steel so you don't have too many sleepless nights worrying about the mortgage payments. I don't think a lot of women have the stomach for that.

In the extract above, we can see how Joseph's entrepreneurial identity is (re)produced within heteronormative discourse that is sustained by a gender binary (masculine/feminine) that privileges masculinity. This can be observed in how Joseph places emphasis on his masculine entrepreneurial character as a risk taker who is able to hold his nerve and also, by showing his bank manager that he has balls. In this way, Joseph's text can be read as an example of how male entrepreneurs can depend on a dominant discourse of entrepreneurship to serve as a site for normalising entrepreneurial identities in masculine terms. Joseph's deployment of a discourse of masculine entrepreneurship is significant, not only for strengthening his identity as a male entrepreneur, but specifically as a gay male entrepreneur. As Warner (1999) maintains, gay men have often been positioned in deficit within heteronormative masculinity that valorises control, aggression, rationality and independence. As such, it is not always easy for gay men to engage with discourses of heteronormative masculinity to claim a masculine identity. However, this can be seen in how Joseph exercises a form of gendered power encoded in stereotypical masculine tropes such as male steeliness and resolve. More than this, what might be construed as folly – going against the advice of the bank manager – is dismissed by Joseph, who appears to win over the bank manager by force, highlighting his physical aptitudes that are traditional markers of masculinity.

Additionally, the heteronormativity of the entrepreneurial discourse in which Joseph is positioned is laid bare in how he discursively evokes the ideal entrepreneur construct as someone who is 'straight' (Wood et al., 2012). Crucially, we can see how his entrepreneurial identity is prioritised over and disassociated from his identity as a gay man. One way in which Joseph attempts to achieve this is in how he positions himself in a relationship of equivalence with heterosexuality. Contemporary discourses of heteronormativity have been read by scholars as affording some gay men (typically those who are white, affluent and

middle-class) the opportunity to approximate heterosexuality (Drucker, 2015). This can be seen in Joseph's claim to normality, particularly in the assertion above, that he is 'normal like any straight person'. In so doing, he mobilises heterosexuality as the norm by which he identifies as a 'normal' gay male. Notable here is that Joseph relies on heterosexuals rather than LGBT+ people to signify an ideal standard of normality. In positioning heterosexuals as normal, we can see heteronormativity at work, not least in how Joseph relies on its long pedigree as a sexuality and sexual identity that is 'normal' and 'natural' (Ahmed, 2006: 69) to strengthen his claim to normality. More precisely, it is a 'straight' male, not a heterosexual female entrepreneur, who is discursively evoked as a normative entrepreneurial ideal. This is important because the emphasis Joseph places on his masculine entrepreneurial identity, and accompanying behaviours and characteristics discussed above (e.g. risk taking, resolve), increases the credibility of his claim to normality, particularly as it involves rejecting heterosexual female entrepreneurs as undesirable role models and comparators.

While normal gay male entrepreneurial identities can be (re)produced in and through heteronormative masculine entrepreneurial discourse, this is not say that such identities are stable (Foucault, 1980). This was revealed in the following excerpt:

I recognise that some people might think that selling cakes online is a particularly gay thing to do. It's one reason I don't market specifically to a gay market. I'm not a gay business...there are certain connotations associated with that, that you're political, into sponsoring gay events and all that...I' don't do any of that...I did a job for some gay guys who wanted cupcakes for a gay cupcake party. In our email exchanges they asked if I was Okay with doing cupcakes with rainbow frosting on them, and that's when I said, 'sure, I'm gay, so, it's no big deal'...they were really pleased with the cakes and posted lots of comments on my company's Facebook page, like 'the

cupcakes were so gay’, ‘Joseph is the man to go to for full on gay cupcakery’...I really cringed because it undermined my credibility...potential customers looking at these comments would obviously think I’m a poof who just bakes cakes for a living...I’m just a business owner who happens to be gay.

In this example, Joseph acknowledges how his entrepreneurial venture (i.e. a business that sells cakes) can be constructed as ‘feminine’. The discourse of femininity associated with the activity of baking cakes has sometimes diminished female entrepreneurs in this field by identifying them as ‘kitchen-table entrepreneurs’ (Zulfiqar et al., 2016). Joseph is vulnerable to being positioned within a similar discourse of entrepreneurial femininity, noted in his concern that a ‘poof’ who bakes cakes is not a credible entrepreneurial identity as it encourages a feminine reading of gay male sexuality. His preference for self-identifying as a ‘business owner who *happens to be gay*’ (emphasis added, from the quote above) underscores not only the incidental position of gay male sexuality in such entrepreneurial identities, but also the negativity associated with gay male sexuality and femininity and, by implication, the role of femininity in entrepreneurship.

Overall, it is striking that Joseph acknowledges how his entrepreneurial identity is threatened by heteronormative discourses that circulate negative associations about gay male sexuality but, in seeking a solution to this problem, he relies on a competing heteronormative discourse of entrepreneurial masculinity. While such a discursive ploy may (re)produce the type of entrepreneurial identity Joseph desires, heteronormativity and the gender and sexual binaries upon which it is sustained remain intact.

## **The entrepreneurial (gay) ‘family type guy’**

In this section we analyse data generated from our interview conversations with Benjamin (white, divorced, in his forties), an entrepreneur in the food service industry. Specifically, we trace the power effects of a discourse of heteronormativity that is centred on the ‘family’, examining its identity effects.

Benjamin owns, in his words, a ‘farm to table restaurant’, and like Joseph he self-identifies as an entrepreneur within a heteronormative discourse of entrepreneurship that circulates the construct of the ideal entrepreneur as white, male, masculine and heterosexual (Ahl, 2004; Wood et al., 2012). Unlike Joseph, Benjamin spoke about an entrepreneurial hero he was inspired by:

I’ve always thought of myself as a Pat Boone guy...you know Pat Boone?...the American guy who had a pop career in the 50s, he started a company called Pat Boone All American Meats...I like Pat’s emphasis on family values... I embody that, you know the family type guy who runs a restaurant...when I was a kid it was all about eating meals around a table together every evening, not on trays sat in front of the TV...I wanted to recreate the family feeling of mum, dad, kids, sitting round together eating good wholesome food...I admit the whole Christian ideology of the Pat Boone industry isn’t my kind of thing, I don’t agree with it because it doesn’t agree with me being gay, so we don’t promote it in the restaurant, but I’m a conservative guy who isn’t interested in gay rights, isn’t flamboyant or camp...I think gay men have a part to play in that these days. The family is relevant to gay men, I have a son and he helps in the restaurant, so it’s a family run business that I’d like to pass onto my son one day.

In this quote, a heteronormative discourse of the family can be traced in how Benjamin seeks to self-identify as a Pat-Boone entrepreneurial equivalent. Pat Boone is a former successful pop singer in the US (during the 1950s and 1960s) who strongly self-identifies in his published writing as a heterosexual, committed Christian and family man (Baehr and Boone, 2007). In his later career ventures, Boone established Pat Boone All-American Meats in 2010, a company supplying gourmet-quality steaks in the US. Benjamin's engagement with Boone's heteronormative ideal of family life, underpinned by Christian values within an entrepreneurial context, reveals how this discourse of entrepreneurship can be reworked by Benjamin to converse with his entrepreneurial and family circumstances.

For example, when heteronormative discourses of the family and entrepreneurship intermingle, opportunities open up for Benjamin to self-identify as a 'family type man' (quoted above) within an entrepreneurial setting. Notably, they circulate specific heteronormative tropes. One such trope is the nuclear family and the importance of parents and children sitting together to eat food, in order to reproduce familial relations based on a notion of wholesomeness (e.g. consuming wholesome food that implies maintaining a wholesome heteronormative familial life). Another trope relates to the concept of inheritance, illustrated in Benjamin's wish to pass on the family business to his son. As such, the accumulation of capital through entrepreneurship and its transference through inheritance sustains heteronormative family arrangements (Halberstam, 2011).

That gay men can be proponents of heteronormative family arrangements is not new (Warner, 1999), but our data exposes how heteronormative discourses on the family and entrepreneurship demand (re)adjustments from gay men who identify through and within them. As a single father with full custody of his son, one reading is that Benjamin personifies a growing number of 'queer' fathers who are raising children in family arrangements that do

not fit a heteronormative nuclear family unit ideal (Langdridge, 2013). Indeed, recognising that Boone's Christian family values do not accord with his own, Benjamin's is creative in his adoption of Boone's Christian centred discourse of entrepreneurship. Benjamin rejects the Christian element of Boone's entrepreneurial discourse, opting to focus on the ideal of sharing family meals. As Benjamin went on to say, when the first author questioned him on Pat Boone as an unusual role model, the Christian family values Boone upholds reminds him of his late parents who held similar familial religious beliefs. There may well be a sense of nostalgia at work in Benjamin's entrepreneurial role modelling which thwarts a reading of Benjamin's entrepreneurship as less a queer rupturing of heteronormative entrepreneurial discourse, and more a retrenchment of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. This can be seen in how Benjamin normalises his sexual identity so it is compatible with a heteronormative family-themed discourse of entrepreneurship. He appears to adopt a conservative outlook, declares that he is not flamboyant or camp and espouses his disinterest in LGBT+ politics. In so doing, Benjamin disassociates himself from gay identities that can be discursively coded as feminine, queer and radically political, which in a heteronormative entrepreneurial discourse appear to have no legitimate place.

Overall, Benjamin's interview text provides insights into the terms and conditions upon which entrepreneurial identities are normalised, in particular at the conjunction of heteronormative discourses of the family and entrepreneurship. In order to maintain a position at this site, to enable specific identities to be reproduced (i.e. Benjamin as the family entrepreneur who just happens to be gay), requires Benjamin to fit into particular heteronormative ideals of culturally acceptable male homosexuality (Warner, 1999).

## **Repudiating the feminine in women and other gay men**

In this section we interrogate the power effects of heteronormative discourse that expose how study participants engage in the repudiation of the feminine (in women and in other gay men) to sustain identities as ‘normal’ gay male entrepreneurs. This represents a problem for how such identities are understood and experienced because they reproduce unchallenged misogyny and (re)create gender hierarchies.

In that regard, some of our interview conversations produced data that was challenging and, at times, disturbing to read and analyse. Examples of misogyny and verbal attacks on other gay men were identified in our analyses of how study participants reproduced the heteronormative ‘male norm’, understood and experienced as exclusionary by women (Bruni et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2013) and some gay men (Galloway, 2011). One illustration of this was drawn from an interview with Vincent (white, in his thirties), who owns a catering company:

I can’t choose my customers, but I can control my own behaviour... When I started this business, I consciously made a choice to be as neutral as I can be in my behaviour... I am not obviously gay or obviously heterosexual. I’m just me, just a man...not like a woman...Okay, this is not PC [politically correct]...but the thing with women is they’re drama queens, everything’s a fucking drama...like the girls who work for me, if they break a nail it’s fucking tragedy...one’s on the menopause, one’s having a hot fucking flush every five minutes...the girls are catty to each other too...such bitches. Can you imagine trying to run a catering business when you have a hissy fit about a broken nail? I mean, you have to be rational about this...women are a nightmare, they need to be kept in their place...makes me glad I’m gay.

In this extract, Vincent demonstrates self-awareness of the ongoing need to self-regulate as a sexual and gendered subject. We can see how Vincent engages with a heteronormative discourse of ‘neutrality’ that, as Ahmed (2006) reasons, constitutes heterosexuality as a non-sexuality, as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. In so doing, Vincent’s sexuality is discursively constituted to minimise the risk of pejorative meanings being attached to it (e.g. as ‘abnormal’). However, one way in which this is achieved is through a discourse of misogyny that Vincent reproduces in his views about his female employees.

When the first author pressed Vincent on what he meant by identifying as ‘just a man’, he articulated his misogynist attitudes. The women he employs are discursively constructed as Other in different ways: some are referred to as ‘catty’ and bitchy in the workplace; others are denigrated as ‘drama queens’ who cannot cope if they break a nail and; one is chided for living with the symptoms of the female menopause. A discourse of misogyny is traceable also in how Vincent infantilises his female employees, referring to them as ‘girls’ and rationalising his prerogative to keep them in their place (see also Hamilton, 2013). Gay men can be misogynistic (Ward, 2000) but, as Hale and Ojeda (2018) aver, it is often overlooked, giving the impression that it is acceptable. In our analysis, Vincent acknowledges his misogyny and consciously deploys it to discursively construct women and femininity as a discursive Other against which he can identify at one and the same time as masculine and an entrepreneur. However, the interview quote above sounds a note of irony, for gay men have also been maligned in similar ways, as more interested in consumption, body issues and therefore unfit to hold down a job (Drucker, 2015; Halperin, 2012). Yet, in this text it is the defamation of women that holds sway.

In other interview accounts, gay men tapped into heteronormative discourses of gender conformity to disassociate themselves from other gay male entrepreneurs whom they

disparaged as 'effeminate'. As with the interview accounts of misogyny, the verbal attacks on these gay men were difficult to listen to. Lee (white, in his sixties), an owner of a bed and breakfast business aimed at a LGBT+ clientele, illustrates this vividly:

I belong to a local gay and lesbian chamber of commerce...I've met other gay B and B owners there and I felt very uncomfortable in their company. Some were very camp and flamboyant which is not how I am at all. I'm very straight acting, very masculine, like any straight bloke...I want to be known as a business-minded entrepreneur, so I keep my distance from the other gay guys who are giving the rest of us a bad name, by acting like women...goodness knows how they're successful. I can't imagine how they're taken seriously. Can you imagine it mincing into the bank to ask for a loan? Who in their right mind would give them the time of day?

In contrast to Vincent's account, a heteronormative discourse of homophobia can be traced in addition to a discourse of misogyny that, together, discursively constitutes Lee's identity as a 'business-minded entrepreneur'. In particular, heteronormative discourses of masculinity and homophobia converge at a site that (re)produces specific entrepreneurial identities whereby gay men who are effeminate are Othered. For example, effeminate gay male entrepreneurs are caricatured to the extent they are barely human, referred to as 'it' in some passages of the text. They are said to 'mince' (old fashioned term to disparage how gay men walk in an affected manner that is coded as feminine) and hold few if any credentials to warrant entrepreneurial funding. In contrast to Vincent's example, an overlapping heteronormative discourse of homophobia and masculinity serves to repudiate the feminine in other gay men, acting as a regulatory mechanism (Foucault, 1980) that establishes a hierarchical gender

binary (masculine gay males/effeminate gay males) *between* gay men. The implications of this are mixed but ultimately problematic.

On the one hand, a binary of this kind permits Lee to closely approximate the normative characteristics of the ideal entrepreneurial figure, who is heterosexual, male and masculine. In turn, this may confer credibility onto gay male entrepreneurial identities. On the other hand, it establishes divisions among and within LGBT+ entrepreneurs who constitute a minority group that, together, face formidable barriers to successful entrepreneurship (Galloway, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Schindehutte et al., 2005). Here, then, opportunities may be foreclosed to benefit from securing and sharing resources through networking within and across LGBT+ entrepreneurial groups (Pijpers and Maas, 2014).

Overall, the presence of misogyny and homophobia in the interview texts give us reasons to be concerned, not least because they appear to have a role to play in (re)constructing normal gay entrepreneurial identities. As the examples presented above reveal, heteronormative discourses perpetuate the male norm within entrepreneurship that disadvantages women and some gay men.

## **Discussion**

In this article we have explored how heteronormativity shapes the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities. The study data has sought to demonstrate the importance of heteronormativity as an analytic concept for entrepreneurship studies scholars. Illustrating this, we have shown how heteronormativity is active within discourses of entrepreneurship and sexuality, regulating the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities. As such, the contributions of this article to entrepreneurship studies are as follows.

The principal empirical contribution this article makes is sited within LGBT+ entrepreneurship research (Bendl et al., 2012; Fresnoza-Flot and Pécoud, 2007; Galloway, 2007, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Shepherd and Hatzelt, 2015; Schindehutte et al., 2005; Willsdon, 2005; Varnell, 2001). Specifically, this article adds further depth to the limited research on the impact of heteronormativity on LGBT+ entrepreneurial identities (Galloway, 2011; Schindehutte et al., 2005). More precisely, our study findings expose how heteronormative discourses on sexuality, gender and entrepreneurship can provide openings for our participants to identify as ‘normal’ entrepreneurs. Unlike Schindehutte et al. (2005) and Galloway (2011), our data reveals the discursive work involved in (re)constructing these identities, which has allowed us to shed light on how study participants engage with heteronormativity in specific ways. For many, heteronormativity provides an important normative standard to aspire to within entrepreneurial contexts, evident in how they seek to engage with discourses of gay male sexuality enwrapped in heteronormative tropes of conservatism, gender conformity, family values, and in some instances, misogyny and homophobia (Drucker, 2015; Warner, 1999). Notably, these discursive constructions of gay male sexuality appear to be compatible with aspects of the white, heterosexual male norm at the heart of dominant discourses of entrepreneurship. The implications of this are complex.

On the one hand, the data underscores the possibilities to create openly gay male entrepreneurial identities that can be read as credible and normal within heteronormative discourses of entrepreneurship. We reason that such opportunities were vanishingly small, perhaps impossible, decades early, even though forms of LGBT+ entrepreneurship have been flourishing for countless years (Walters, 2003). For gay men especially, who continue to be discursively (re)positioned as not ‘real’ men (Halperin, 2012), and the various struggles this involves for gay men in work contexts (Rumens and Kerfoot, 2009; Tilcsik, 2011), the possibilities of achieving credibility and success as openly gay entrepreneurs is not to be

underestimated. As manifest in the data, participants' identities as entrepreneurs who just happen to be gay can be read as a progressive sign that gay men may be defined less by the pejorative meanings affixed to gay male sexuality and more by their work-related activities. Indeed, the normalisation of some LGBT+ sexualities and genders within specific cultural and social contexts has enabled some gay men to gain recognition as citizen-subjects capable of making valuable contributions to society (Drucker, 2015; Warner, 1999). Openly gay men's entrepreneurial activities and identities, particularly those regulated and normalised through and by heteronormativity, may be a significant illustration of how specific gay men are being normalised within heteronormative society.

On the other hand, the data reveals how heteronormativity can establish sexual hierarchies within the gay male identity category. Gay male sexualities discursively tagged as feminine, radically political and non-normative (queer) are shunned or rejected by study participants as a basis for identifying as an entrepreneur who just happens to be gay. The positioning of gay male sexuality as incidental to entrepreneurship appears crucial for the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities within heteronormative discourses of entrepreneurship. In some cases, heteronormative heterosexual entrepreneurial identities are fetishized as markers of how to fit into heteronormative entrepreneurship and society. However, the gay-queer sexual hierarchy within which many of our participants' identities are (re)constructed retrenches the heterosexual/homosexual binary because such identities are (re)constructed within a heteronormative regime. As such, they appear to represent no threat to heteronormativity. For our study participants, the heteronormative contingencies upon which such identities are dependent (e.g. gender conforming, politically conservative) render them unstable. For example, some participants exhibited vulnerability when discussing how they could be misidentified as feminine, regarded as particularly damaging to their masculine entrepreneurial identities. Thus, the over emphasis some study participants place on gender

conformity through adopting entrepreneurial masculine discourse reinforces the white, male norm at the core of dominant discourses of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2002; Lewis, 2013; Ogbor, 2000; Wood et al., 2012). In the worst cases, participants galvanise misogyny and homophobia as discursive resources to bolster their entrepreneurial identities but in so doing, they oversimplify the ways in which gay men differ from each other and from women more generally.

Overall, the discursive construction of the openly gay male entrepreneur as it is manifest in the data appears to stifle the possibilities for (re)imagining other forms of gay male entrepreneurship, especially those that might rupture and transcend heteronormativity. What is more, is that in practice, some of our participants may be closing doors that would otherwise allow them to connect with other LGBT+ entrepreneurs, through which valuable resources can be shared and, perhaps, non-normative modes of LGBT+ entrepreneurship can be nurtured. Indeed, the data shows how openly gay male entrepreneurs can be active in how they denigrate and exclude others in order to reinscribe their identities within heteronormative entrepreneurship discourse. More broadly, at stake here is the ongoing imperative to challenge heteronormativity in entrepreneurship (Marlow et al., 2018).

Theoretically, our study contributes to the nascent literature that mobilises queer theory to challenge the heteronormative assumptions that buttress entrepreneurship studies (Galloway, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018). This article responds to the call to queer the entrepreneurial agenda (Marlow et al., 2018) by deploying queer theory to mobilise heteronormativity as an important analytical category (Warner, 1993, 1999). Heteronormativity is an entrenched feature of entrepreneurship studies which if left unchallenged will continue to marginalise LGBT+ entrepreneurship research. For those entrepreneurship studies scholars who wish to study LGBT+ entrepreneurship, queer theory is distinctive in how it forces thinking not only about heteronormativity in entrepreneurship

and organisational contexts (Marlow et al., 2018; Rumens, 2018; Ozturk and Rumens, 2014), but also about what is taken-for-granted and normative (Parker, 2002; Warner, 1993, 1999). As such, queer theory can function as a set of conceptual resources for entrepreneurship scholars to interrogate not just the workings of heteronormativity within dominant discourses of entrepreneurship, but also the norms and bodies of knowledge that constitute entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship studies more widely. It is important that further work strives to build a rich body of queer scholarship within these entrepreneurship domains.

### **Conclusion and future directions for research**

In this article, we have sought to show how heteronormativity is an important topic of study within entrepreneurship studies. Expanding research in this area will play an important role in contesting the heteronormative assumptions that circulate within this academic field. More research on gay men's entrepreneurship is needed, in particular studies which examine the variation within this field, especially the forms of gay male entrepreneurship that may be characterised as non-normative (queer). We encourage research that explores LGBT+ entrepreneurs more widely. For example, scholars could examine whether and how lesbian women experience the deficit heterosexual female entrepreneurs encounter just because they are not men. Furthermore, lesbians of colour will likely face additional structural obstacles due to race that white lesbians do not (Bowleg, 2008). Another site of research concerns trans entrepreneurship, in particular the identity work of trans entrepreneurs within transphobic entrepreneurial contexts. As well, future studies are needed that address race and ethnicity as a central analytical dimension in sexuality and entrepreneurship research, with a view toward understanding how homonormative entrepreneurial identities might reproduce whiteness. Research agendas that explore how LGBT+ entrepreneurship is shaped by class, age and

(dis)ability are also desirable. Notably, the domain of LGBT+ entrepreneurship remains empirically open (Galloway, 2011; Marlow et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2012), and it is our hope that more entrepreneurship scholars will venture into this field of research.

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## **Endnotes**

**1** Further information about the codes used in this study may be requested from the corresponding author.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the participants and their businesses

Pseudonym	Age bracket	Context	Industry	Age of business	Ownership stake	Organisation size	Targeted business market
Graham	30-39	Urban	Retail	> 5 years	100%	1-10	Gay
Phillip	30-39	Urban	Retail	2 - 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Adam	40-49	Urban	Consultancy	> 5 years	100%	11-20	General
Edward	30-39	Urban	Retail	2 - 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Jason	40-49	Semi-urban	Hospitality	2 - 5 years	50%	1-10	Gay
Joshua	30-39	Urban	Marketing	2 - 5 years	100%	1-10	General
Mick	30-39	Urban	Legal	< 2 years	25%	11-20	General
Colin	20-29	Semi-urban	Retail	> 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Harry	30-39	Urban	Finance	> 5 years	100%	1-10	General
Drew	30-39	Semi-urban	Retail	> 5 years	50%	1-10	General

Andrew	40-49	Urban	Hospitality	2 - 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Christian	20-29	Urban	Fashion design	< 2 years	100%	1-10	General
Reece	20-29	Semi- urban	Landscape design	< 2 years	25%	1-10	General
Vincent	30-39	Urban	Catering	> 5 years	100%	11-20	General
Gordon	30-39	Semi- urban	Hospitality	2 - 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Chad	30-39	Urban	Construction	> 5 years	50%	1-10	General
Anthony	20-29	Urban	Massage therapy	<2 years	100%	1-10	Gay
David	50-59	Urban	Animal healthcare	>5 years	100%	1-10	General
Benjamin	40-49	Urban	Food service	<5 years	100%	1-10	General
Joseph	40-49	Urban	Bakery retail	>5 years	100%	1-10	General
Lee	60-69	Urban	Hospitality	>5 years	100%	1-10	Gay

Major theme	Minor discursive themes	Codes
I D E N T I T Y E S	Entrepreneurial gay masculinity	Heroism High risk tolerance Resolve Self-aggrandizement* Sexual normality
	Entrepreneurial (gay) 'family type guy'	Anti-promiscuity Apoliticality** Conformity Domesticity Impression management Respectability
	Repudiating the feminine in women and other gay men	Homophobia Othering Misogyny*** Suppression

\*We merged our initial codes 'bravado' and 'pretension' into 'self-aggrandizement' at a later stage of analysis, because we eventually agreed that the two initial codes picked up different aspects of 'self-aggrandizement'. Merging the two codes enhanced the efficacy of our analysis.

\*\*We replaced our initial code 'individualism' with 'apoliticality'. After iterative readings and re-analysing the data, we realised 'apoliticality', an aspect of 'individualism', came out more clearly and pre-dominantly in the talk of our participants.

\*\*\*One of our reviewers usefully suggested 'misogyny' as a more appropriate reading of the overt and strong 'sexisms' in some of the interviews. We realised that we had been coding instances of 'misogyny' as 'sexism'.