

Discover and Dream: Appreciating Women Entrepreneurs' Innovation

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Abstract: The intersection of gender and innovation is increasingly explored in entrepreneurship research. However, the existing literature on women's entrepreneurship often focuses on challenges and gender disparities. Despite the growing participation of women entrepreneurs, barriers to their innovation persist. Previous studies highlight that gender operates as a limiting factor in innovation systems, and the overall construction of innovation carries masculine connotations. Our research seeks to delve into the personal meaning's women entrepreneurs attribute to innovation. Specifically, we pose the question: How do women entrepreneurs conceptualise innovation? Employing Appreciative Inquiry (AI), we conducted interviews with 12 Finnish women entrepreneurs, emphasising strengths and positive aspects rather than problem-solving. The AI process included four stages: discovery, dream, design, and delivery. Each participant underwent two interview rounds, covering different stages. The analysis, conducted through discourse analysis, identified three discourses in women entrepreneurs' constructions of innovation: 1) Innovation is me, 2) Touch of something new, and 3) Vague concept. While prior research has often associated innovation with masculine traits, our results reveal a nuanced perspective. The positive approach of AI uncovered constructive views of innovation, such as the strong identity formation with innovation depicted in the discourse of "Innovation is me". By providing rich qualitative insights, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs engaged in innovation, challenging conventional notions and highlighting positive constructions of innovation.

Keywords: Gender, Discourse, Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Appreciative Inquiry

1. Introduction

In general discussion, entrepreneurship is perceived as an equal opportunity for all genders (Lewis, 2014). However, feminist entrepreneurship research has highlighted structural problems that do not make entrepreneurship equal for all genders. The findings of Devine et al. (2019) indicate that women-led businesses generally achieve high growth less frequently than those led by men. Devine et al. suggest that although female entrepreneurs have the capabilities to achieve high growth, they might decide against pursuing it. There are many, complex reasons for this. For example, women are particularly affected by gender stereotypes, which hamper both their access to and willingness for top positions (Lämsä et al., 2014). Young women especially suffer from gender stereotypes undermining their self-confidence and limiting their ability to assess their potential (Kniveton, 2008). In other words, both externally imposed gender stereotypes and those adopted by women themselves can lead to female entrepreneurs refraining from pursuing high growth.

This study focuses on female entrepreneurship and in particular innovation by women entrepreneurs. The influence of gender on innovation and growth has insufficiently been addressed in prior research (Alsos, Ljunggren and Hytti, 2013; Strohmeyer, Tonoyan and Jennings, 2017). This unfortunate gap means there is also limited scientific evidence available for policymakers and investors interested in encouraging and supporting women entrepreneurs' innovation. Gender appears to have an impact on how innovation or its meanings are perceived in businesses. For instance, a study by Strohmeyer et al. (2017) claims that innovation in women-owned businesses is lesser, both in quantity and quality, compared to businesses owned by men. Meanwhile, studies have found a clear connection between the development of something new (innovation) and business growth (Sorama et al., 2015). Development of the new is related both to growth intentions and realised growth (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022). Studies also show that women both apply for and receive less financing, especially risk financing, and there are many gendered reasons for this (Alsos and Ljunggren, 2017), leading to lower innovation funding. While there is little evidence of direct discrimination, gender differences in financing persist (Alsos, Isaksen and Ljunggren, 2006; Carter et al, 2007; Alsos and Ljunggren, 2017). By understanding the meanings women attach to innovation, we can better support female entrepreneurs in paths of innovation and growth in the future. Further research is needed on women's innovation, taking into consideration normative frameworks and structural factors.

The objective of this paper is to analyse innovation discourses constructed by women entrepreneurs. The study contributes to research on gender equality and entrepreneurship by examining how outward gender equality in

the workplace and entrepreneurship is reflected in women entrepreneurs' discourses about innovation. We also aim to illustrate how the prevailing discourse on gender equality in the workplace and entrepreneurship contradicts real experience, and how navigating this space can produce inconsistencies. However, we argue that this contradiction can also provide women with an opportunity to act against deeply rooted gender inequality, emphasising the agency of female entrepreneurs.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Feminist Perspective on Entrepreneurship

In the media, political discussions, and post-feminist debates, there's a prevalent image of more and more women adopting entrepreneurship to fulfill their potential (Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2023). Business media actively promote this notion, reinforcing the prevalent idea that entrepreneurship serves as a route to women's liberation and the capability to manage their work-life balance (Orgad, 2019; Villesèche et al., 2022; Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2023). This kind of post-feminism can be defined as a line of thought containing neoliberal traits, to simultaneously take into account the principles of feminist thought and position oneself outside of feminism by labeling feminism as outdated and unnecessary (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007). The ideological foundation of post-feminism lies in neoliberal individualism and the philosophy of personal responsibility, suggesting that everyone should be solely responsible for themselves and their success (Gill, 2007). The post-feminist ideal is an actor who is an individualistic, ostensibly free neoliberal agent, whose actions are not hindered by inequality (Gill, 2007). Hence, post-feminism encourages women to be individualistic, self-controlling, and individually responsible women who constantly strive to conform to prevailing notions of heteronormative femininity (McRobbie, 2009, 18-19; Gill, 2007, 153-156). In post-feminist thinking, a woman's failure or unfulfilled career goals can easily be interpreted as simply a lack of ambition rather than examining the societal structures that influence women's opportunities (McRobbie, 2004). In a sense, post-feminism embodies elements of both feminism and antifeminism. It recognises the significance of women's equality while simultaneously adopting the premise that some level of equality has already been attained. Entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted as gender equal (Lewis, 2014) although many studies confirm that entrepreneurship discourse is strongly masculine (Jennings and Brush 2013; Marlow and McAdam 2013; Swaila and Marlow, 2018) and thus unequal to those that are not highly masculine.

Consequently, this research like many gender researchers and critical management researchers takes a more critical stance towards women's freedom of opportunity in the workforce and entrepreneurship than post-feminism (Gill, 2007; Lewis et al, 2017). The feminist perspective highlights how post-feminist commentaries offer a sense of normality that guides behavior in neoliberal working life and gendered subjects that depict women as entrepreneurial and liberated (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). Adamson and Kelan (2019) state that this post-feminist discourse may have very limited effects on women's actual advancement in the workforce. Their research shows that behind women's "heroic role" are three discursive repertoires: trust, control, and courage, and if women just mimic this ideal, they can leap over, master, or push through gender-based barriers in work life. Such a discourse promotes the notion that women can succeed if they are merely (over)actors, who maintain strict self-discipline and always make the right decisions. In other words, women can "choose" to overcome gender-related barriers (Gill, 2007; Gill, Kelan and Scharff, 2017). However, this post-feministic discourse overlooks the need to question the deeper structural and organisational barriers that maintain the prevailing inequality in work life.

Meliou and Ozbilgin (2023) note that current entrepreneurship research pays insufficient attention to the mechanisms that maintain the narrative of gender equality in entrepreneurship. They argue that this neglect is damaging because it perpetuates and ignores the root causes of gender inequality, making it increasingly challenging to identify these issues. This may be because the prevailing research literature has examined the prevalence of postfeminist discourses without adequately addressing the complex and multifaceted power mechanisms that institutionalise these discourses in women's agency. Such an approach fails to explore how different meanings and symbols of power shape women's interests and the mechanisms through which women adopt these dominant discourses. In contrast, critical feminist entrepreneurship studies, where we position this study, emphasise the problematic nature of discourses that do not address structural barriers that influence individual women's choices.

Recent research in feminist and critical management studies critically examines the influence of neoliberal values and practices on gendered work life (Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al, 2017). For example, Ahl and Marlow (2021)

examined policy documents related to entrepreneurship and found that they simply adopted an equality perspective, viewing entrepreneurship as a field promoting gender equality. According to them, recognition of structural barriers in these texts is rare, and the solutions offered seem to be heavily influenced by post-feminist concepts, such as self-reflection and women's self-transformation to correct deficiencies and conform to entrepreneurial ideals. Such assumptions stem from a general belief that women and men have equal opportunities to succeed if women just invest enough energy and enthusiasm into entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2014). In this line of thought, women adopt entrepreneurship to succeed, liberated from gender-related restrictions (Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2023).

On the other hand, Lewis (2013) also demonstrates how navigating between discourses emphasising femininity and those emphasising professional masculinity can offer female entrepreneurs an opportunity to challenge gender-bound restrictions while shaping their entrepreneurial identity. Situations, where individuals (e.g., women entrepreneurs) redefine discourses (Lilia and Vinthagen, 2013), can be interpreted as challenging them (Deutsch, 2007; Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2023). In other words, recognising and acknowledging the dominant "equality" discourses in society, work life, and entrepreneurship and thereby resisting them can enable women's genuine agency (Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2023).

2.2 Women Entrepreneurs and Innovation

Dodgson and Gann (2010) define innovation as an event occurring when organisations successfully adopt and value new thinking. They note that the many ways of understanding innovation offer a variety of views: is the change incremental or radical, how does it sustain or disrupt existing practices, and does it occur in entire systems or their parts. Kahn (2018) points out that innovation can be understood as a result, a process, but also as a way of thinking. At the individual level in small businesses, the entrepreneur's way of thinking is significant (e.g., Marcati et al, 2008).

Previous studies have shown that gender is a structure that limits innovation systems (Sundin, 2012). According to Wang and colleagues (2018), women and men leaders lead their companies differently and achieve different results. Jabeen et al. (2019) note that women entrepreneurs' innovation practices and decisions are influenced by family support, availability of financing, social networks, and allocation of funds. Madison and partners (2022) found that small and medium-sized businesses owned by women can produce better innovation results by empowering the female workforce to share and utilise collectively favorable resources for innovation. Nair (2020) suggests that women entrepreneurs' innovations can be promoted through stakeholder engagement.

On the other hand, women's ideas are not pursued as much as men's (Foss et al, 2013), and innovation is generally viewed as having stereotypically masculine traits (Pettersson and Lindberg, 2013). Furthermore, male-dominated sectors are understood as innovation targets, automatically associating technology and innovation (Wajcman, 2010). These masculine discourses are also evident in open innovations (Wikhamn and Knights, 2013). In particular, the combination of technology and entrepreneurship involves barriers related to perceptions and meaning structures at both the micro and macro levels (Wheadon and Duval-Couetil, 2019).

Strohmeyer, Tonoyan and Jennings (2017) emphasise that there is little prior research on how and why an entrepreneur's gender affects innovativeness and, through it, growth. Thus, there isn't enough research-based knowledge on how and by what means women entrepreneurs can be encouraged and supported in innovations and growth. Previous research on women and innovations has mainly focused on demonstrating gender differences (Alsos, Ljunggren and Hytti, 2013), which does not help understand what factors facilitate the emergence of women's innovations or how innovations can be supported. However, Cheraghi and partners (2019) have shown that entrepreneurial barriers are related to life stages in a gendered way, even in relatively egalitarian cultures.

3. Methodology

The research approach is qualitative. A total of 12 women entrepreneurs were selected for interviews, taking into consideration both the age of the entrepreneur and the age and location of the business. All the interviewed women entrepreneurs had employees and were growth-oriented. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method, considered an action research method, was utilised in the interviews. The method has been successfully used both in supporting organisational change (see Cooperrider and Whitney, 2011) and in individual change processes (e.g., Stulz et al, 2021). Through the transformative method, new knowledge is generated, but at the same time, the entrepreneurs participating in the interviews are active actors in developing their activities. The

AI method utilises dialogue through which participants find resources and strengths and identify opportunities. Interviews conducted with the method produce deep and rich research data. The AI method consists of four phases: 1) discovery, 2) dream, 3) design, and 4) delivery (Cooperrider et al, 2003). The interviews were conducted in two phases so that each entrepreneur was interviewed a second time 2–4 weeks after the first interview. The interviews took place in the spring of 2023. The first interview covered the discovery and dream stages, and the second the design and implementation stages.

The analysis of the material was data-driven, with previous theoretical discussions serving as a conceptual framework for interpretation. The analysis utilised discourse analysis (DA). By discourse, we refer to a relatively consistent system of meaning that reveals the essence of the subject (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). With DA, it is possible to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. After thoroughly reading the material, we made notes on the different ways the interviewees described innovation and their innovation processes. From these, we constructed three innovation discourses that variously bring to light women's understanding of innovations and innovating.

4. Results: Innovation Discourses

The discourse analysis resulted in the construction of three innovation discourses among women entrepreneurs, discussed next.

4.1 The Vague Concept Discourse

This discourse emerges from the speech of female entrepreneurs when they articulate innovation as somewhat vague, challenging, or unfamiliar to them.

"When you mentioned it earlier, I wondered if I should Google what it means. Does it tell anything? I've heard it and probably used it, but when it's something you don't come across often, and then when you mentioned it earlier, I wondered if I should Google what it means." (Holly)

"I perhaps think those who manufacture that fiber, who can make it, it's their innovation. So, if we turn it into, say, a pillow, is that... Is that innovation?" (Felicia)

In this discourse, the term "innovation" appears as inoperative – the women entrepreneurs did not perceive it as a term that describes their own actions or thinking. Hence, in this discourse, innovation is seen as a technical and alien term for women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs are cautious about using the term "innovation" to describe their development activities.

"It's kind of a papery-tasting word..." (Betty)

"Yeah, but somehow... it's perhaps difficult to call one's own thing an innovation." (Felicia)

Hence, in this discourse, the women entrepreneurs are positioned as non-innovative. The discourse stresses that innovation as a concept is something that is disconnected from their business. To encapsulate, the discourse underscores the notion that innovation, as a concept, is perceived as unrelated to the nature of their businesses and actions. This discourse thus implies a disconnect between the women entrepreneurs and the innovative aspects typically associated with successful business ventures.

4.2 The Something New Discourse

In this discourse, innovating is described as a skill to combine elements to create something new – be it ideas, services, products, or operational models. Women entrepreneurs describe how they draw on their skills and experience to create new services or products.

"It is sort of development work, where there's at least a hint of something new, a bit of novelty. Maybe not inventing an entirely new wheel, but a new perspective." (Dina)

"But then, when you think more broadly, I also see innovation or innovativeness as the use of existing knowledge and things, maybe in a new way, or tailored to specific clients." (Erica)

Innovation is seen as a skill or a way to utilise personal knowledge and expertise to produce something novel.

In this discussion, women are perceived as open to experimentation, self-assured in their expertise, and consider it a crucial aspect of innovation. Innovation appears strongly as a goal-oriented activity in this discourse.

"I'm not locked into doing things in a specific way, so I try many things. I experiment with combining different things. This has led to new innovations, entirely new ideas, new products, new models." (Ann)

"Creating something new. Thinking about what we might offer a year from now, three years from now, what kind of products we might have. Anything that changes the current operations of the company. I think all of that is innovating. Innovations." (Cora)

In this discourse, the essence of innovation is articulated through a mindset that embraces experimentation and a willingness to explore various approaches. Women entrepreneurs emphasise the pursuit of novel ideas, products, and models by avoiding rigid methodologies and fostering a creative environment. Additionally, innovation is linked to forward-thinking, envisioning offerings for the future, and fundamentally altering the current operations of the company. The overarching theme revolves around the transformative nature of innovation in both the exploration of new possibilities and the strategic evolution of the company.

4.3 The Innovation Is Me Discourse

This discourse is formed in the entrepreneurs' talk of their vivid imaginations and continuous exploration of new opportunities. Women entrepreneurs position themselves as innovators in their speeches.

Well, I'm good at innovation, because I'm a real visionary. I never run out of ideas. (Dina)

I'm definitely the kind of innovation character. (Isabel)

In this discourse, entrepreneurs discuss how they often contemplate future possibilities - stating innovation happens all the time. In this discourse, the women are constructing a capable actor's subject. They depict themselves as visionaries, consistently spotting and mapping out new business opportunities.

"Well, innovation relates to constantly looking for new opportunities in the environment, partners, always developing based on the feedback you get and adapting the business according to that feedback. You must have your antennas out." (Grace)

"I am more of a service provider. I innovate in service delivery. I always strive to find something new and move forward." (Isabel)

In the discourse at hand, innovation emerges as a dynamic, adaptive process characterised by an ongoing exploration of opportunities, a heightened responsiveness to feedback, and a preparedness to evolve in harmony with the ever-changing landscape. Above all, this discourse emphasises women's strong belief in their own ability to innovate.

5. Discussion

The three discourses we interpreted are in line with Kahn's (2018) modeling in that innovation can be understood as a result, a process, or a mindset. The *Vague Concept* discourse leans strongly on the idea that innovation is an outcome or model. For instance, if an entrepreneur operates in service production, where the end product lacks tangibility, the entire concept of innovation may seem unfamiliar. It is also worth exploring whether this discourse stems from the emphasis on masculinity and technical aspects in societal discussions about innovation. As Pettersson and Lindberg (2013) have noted, the whole concept of innovation and the related discussion has stereotypically contained masculine characteristics. If the concept of innovation itself appears masculine and technical, it might unintentionally alienate women entrepreneurs or feel unsuitable for describing their own actions. The *Something New* discourse reflects the idea of innovation as a process, in this case, a process where women entrepreneurs combine something existing or previous knowledge with a new idea or model, thereby producing innovations. In this discourse, the women position themselves as professionals for whom innovation is part of the job, a central element of business operations. The process perspective leans on individual capabilities the women entrepreneurs identify in themselves and enact in their business operations, and thus sidesteps on a micro-level the barriers created through technology-oriented meaning structures (see Wheadon and Duval-Couetil, 2019). The *innovation Is Me* discourse highlights how women entrepreneurs incorporate innovation as part of their identity, meaning that for them, innovation is a characteristic way of thinking and acting. They do not separate innovation as something distinct from themselves. The future-oriented perspective of this discourse suggests a powerful sense of creating the future rather than facing it, highlighting the active role adopted by these entrepreneurs.

Both the *Innovation Is Me* and *Something New* discourses challenge the stereotypical gender identities. In the *Innovation Is Me* discourse women entrepreneurs describe how they continuously come up with new ideas and challenge themselves to create, perceiving these as a natural part of their being. Similarly, in the *Something New* discourse women portray themselves as purposeful actors who consciously experiment with their professional skills and their company's expertise in various ways, thereby seeking new opportunities for their businesses. Challenging oneself, determination and daring experiments have traditionally been seen as masculine traits, thus traits more characteristic of men. Thus, by breaking this traditional meaning system, these discourses of women entrepreneurs' innovations challenge the masculine innovation discourse. Hence, in these two discourses women entrepreneurs challenge stereotypical gender roles while building their entrepreneurial identity (Lewis, 2013), whereas in the *Vague Concept* discourse, women express their alienation from – and implicit acceptance of – the traditional, masculine-oriented meaning of innovation.

Overall, the women entrepreneurs verbalised their innovation extensively, although the concept of innovation was given very diverse meanings. Therefore, the study's results do not support the idea that firms owned by women would be automatically less innovative than those owned by men, as was the result of the Strohmeier, Tonoyan, and Jennings' (2017) study. It may be that women entrepreneurs conceptualise innovation differently than men, and their innovating and innovation thus more often remain invisible in the masculinity-driven view. Additionally, one might consider whether the lesser funding for innovation and risk financing for women (Alsos and Ljunggren, 2016) could in part be due to the language in which investors and financiers talk about innovations and the criteria set for financing. The interpreted discourses revealed that women entrepreneurs may perceive innovation as an alien or misguided concept, reducing their ability to engage in the sort of innovation talk expected by financiers. This can severely limit their opportunities to sell their expertise or innovations to entities where innovations are conventionally perceived as technical and masculine terms. Balachandra et al. (2021) explored how entrepreneurs use language during pitches and concluded that the gendered use of language influences investors' funding decisions. However, their study revealed that women entrepreneurs tended to use a more masculine language style than feminine, yet an excessively masculine style failed to persuade investors as well.

The diverse approaches of women in expressing innovation deserve recognition and should be more thoroughly considered in both innovation research and funding. It is encouraging that while the discourses reveal a repulsion to the traditional conceptualisation of innovation, the analysis also highlights that women entrepreneurs can own innovation as an integral part of their own identity.

In utilising the results of this study, it is important to note that there were no male-owned companies included for comparison and the interviewed women entrepreneurs all exhibited a growth mindset. Additionally, it is worth noting that the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method is oriented towards seeking solutions and envisioning possibilities rather than dwelling on constraints. Consequently, this approach yields more positive and optimistic perspectives compared to many other interview methods. Nevertheless, the women entrepreneurs involved in this study expressed their innovation processes with considerable enthusiasm and detail, even if the overarching concept of innovation did not entirely align with their discourse.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the study effectively challenges the prevailing assumption that businesses owned by women are inherently less innovative by highlighting the diverse perspectives of women entrepreneurs on innovation. The findings not only illuminate this misconception but also draw attention to the potential impact of language in innovation conversations, suggesting a correlation with funding decisions and contributing to gender disparities in innovation funding. Importantly, the research underscores the agency of women entrepreneurs in navigating and defining innovation, emphasising the crucial role of inclusive language in recognising their contributions. By acknowledging the diverse ways in which women engage with innovation, the study advocates for challenging stereotypes in discussions related to innovation and entrepreneurship. It urges a heightened awareness of language choices to prevent inadvertent exclusion of certain groups, thereby fostering an environment that embraces diversity and inclusivity in innovation discourse. This study serves as a call to action for recognising and empowering the agency of women entrepreneurs within the broader landscape of innovation.

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