

**The path to success – The challenges female entrepreneurs in
the creative industries face**

And the strategies they utilize to overcome them

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Master Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to generate a better understanding of the challenges female entrepreneurs in the creative industries face, from an initial filter of gender, but also expanding into other areas and comparing them to the same findings when it comes to the opposite gender. Recently, there have been many developments in gender equality in the workplace, but many women would still argue that there is still a long way to go. Roles have been changed, and now males contribute more in the home, while women are also busier in the workplace. My theoretical framework based the challenges faced by entrepreneurs on three initial pillars: the concept of gender; immigrant status (when the person would start a business outside of their home country); and self-doubt. While previous studies have demonstrated that there are challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in these areas, they were not specifically and systematically applied to understand and analyze highly-educated, highly-skilled female entrepreneurs that work in the creative industries. To achieve this goal, as a researcher, I conducted 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews with females and males who have started their own businesses in the creative industries. The analysis shows the level of understanding the interviewees have of the creative industries, and how they perceive their business to be a part of it, as well as what they consider being creative; it also demonstrates that females felt judgement for being such during certain periods of their life, especially when working on larger companies, and how running their own business gave them more freedom to choose who to work with. They also explained how they deal with the gender issue in their day-to-day work, by choosing who to work with, balancing work/personal life (including family and motherhood) and manage how they are perceived via their physical appearance. When interviewing males, the research demonstrated that they also face some of the same challenges, albeit not the ones specifically related to their gender, such as self-doubt, lack of focus, and the need to seek help. They also share some of the same strategies for coping with them: building a strong network, being coached, among other things. While the reason explained behind entrepreneurship is similar in some ways (following your dreams, and having freedom), some women expressed that in entrepreneurship came as a solution for having a family and being able to work, given its flexibility compared to working for a company that is not their own. The research concludes by explaining these challenges and strategies in detail, humbly aiming at inspiring other female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, increasing awareness about gender-related issues, and devising a tried-and-tested model for dealing with challenges.

Keywords: female entrepreneurship, challenges, stereotypes, gender bias, creative industries, gender gap, self-doubt

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1. INTRODUCTION

The combination of being female and a successful entrepreneur in the creative industries is a recipe that some women have managed to master. There are some noteworthy examples of this, especially in the show business. Taylor Swift, for example, is referred to not only as a professional singer but also as a business genius. “Swift has shown the sort of business savvy that could teach even the most seasoned CEOs a thing or two” (Palmer, 2014).

Swift herself wrote a song, *The Man*, in which she highlighted the challenges women face to succeed, that are not, in her opinion, faced by men. She wrote the song based on her experiences, but also on what she heard from other women in the industry, calling out deeply ingrained beliefs and criticisms of women that are not usually directed at men (Lipshutz, Jason, 2019):

*“I’m so sick of running as fast as I can
Wondering if I’d get there quicker
If I was a man

And I’m so sick of them coming at me again
’Cause if I was a man
Then I’d be “The Man” [...]

They’d say I hustled
Put in the work*

They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve

What I was wearing

If I was rude

Could all be separated from my good ideas and power moves?"

(Swift, 2019, 00:26-00:10)

But what about female entrepreneurs in the creative industries that are not mega-celebrities? Landry et al. (1995, p. 4) tentatively predicted that “the industries of the twenty-first century [would] depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation”. According to this prediction, we are witnessing an increasing academic interest in the topic of media entrepreneurship (Achtenhagen, 2017). The advent of the creative industries has motivated many creators to become entrepreneurs (Mylonas et al., 2018) but it can be challenging to start as an entrepreneur in this industry (Albinsson, 2018; Cameron et al., 2018; Lange, 2017).

The creative class, according to Florida (2002) is a group of highly educated individuals who provide services in the form of knowledge and ideas. Therefore, this group faces different challenges than other types of entrepreneurs that have to deal with, for example, a lack of education or access to resources (Mustapha, 2016), and deserve to be researched separately. I aim to establish a link between female entrepreneurship and the creative industries, uncovering the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in these industries, and finding out which strategies they utilize to overcome them.

The topic of female entrepreneurship relates to my own experience as an entrepreneur. I started freelancing in 2015, in my native country, Brazil, after having had a series of regular jobs. I was looking for freedom and for the opportunity to work for different types of companies, including abroad. That resulted in working from home for companies all over the world. Since moving to the Netherlands in 2021 to pursue a master's degree, I have started my own company in the Netherlands as well.

Working for companies in different countries, as an employee and as a freelancer, has brought all sorts of rewards and challenges, and I wondered if 1) Some of these challenges were related to the fact that I am a woman, and 2) If other female entrepreneurs faced similar challenges. A lot has changed in my self-perception since I started, but I have asked myself many times if I was doing the right things, presenting

myself in the right way, and when (and if) I could consider myself successful. Conducting the interviews and analysis for this research paper has allowed me to connect with different people, share experiences and increase my confidence as an entrepreneur.

This thesis is societally relevant for several reasons. One of them is that female entrepreneurship contributes to economic growth and reduction of poverty, and promotes social change (Caro-González et al., 2021). On the other hand, female entrepreneurship in the creative industries is an under-explored topic that deserves further research. While previous studies have demonstrated that there are challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, they were not specifically and systematically applied to understand and analyze highly-educated, highly-skilled female entrepreneurs that work in the creative industries.

Studies demonstrate that female entrepreneurs still represent less than 50% of all entrepreneurs in Europe (Caro-González et al., 2021). While previous studies have used interviews with women in the creative industries (Mylonas et al., 2018 and Mylonas, 2020) and the attraction factors that draw women to the creative industries (Henry, 2009), female entrepreneurial identity (Essers et al., 2010), and female entrepreneurs in developing countries (Mustapha, 2016), they did not focus on the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries as a whole.

This research project aims at explaining these challenges and strategies in detail, humbly aiming at inspiring other female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, increasing awareness about gender-related issues, and devising a tried-and-tested model for dealing with challenges.

Because the topic of entrepreneurship in this paper is related to personal experiences and perceptions, I made use of semi-structured interviews with established entrepreneurs in the creative industries, who were willing to share their experiences. The insights obtained from the interviews helped me to uncover recurring themes in terms of challenges, and the path to success for female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, and possibly serve as an inspiration for aspiring female entrepreneurs.

So, without further ado, this research starts with the following research question:
What are female entrepreneurs in the creative industries face, and what are the strategies they utilize to overcome these challenges?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Entrepreneurship can be defined as the activity of setting up a business while taking most of the risks if the business fails, and getting many rewards if it is successful (Hayes, 2021). Because of its risky nature, entrepreneurship is not for everyone. However, female entrepreneurship is on the rise in many countries. The Netherlands, for example, has seen a big growth in the numbers of female entrepreneurs in recent years, according to an analysis by the Dutch Chamber of Commerce (KVK, 2019).

Previous studies have shown that successful immigrant female entrepreneurs develop their own techniques and strategies to deal with the unique challenges they face (Chrysostome, 2010). Using previous literature on female entrepreneurship, I developed the theoretical framework for this research. I have utilized these themes as a guideline for the interviews, mixing up and matching the themes to obtain insights. The interview topics and possible follow-up questions will be explained in more detail in the method section.

2.1 Entrepreneurship in the creative industries

The creative industries are a wide range of business activities focused on the use and exchange of knowledge and information. In some countries, they are referred to as cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2002) or creative economy (Howkins, 2001). According to Howkins (2001), this industry includes advertising, architecture, arts, crafts, design, fashion, film, advertising, architecture, art, music, performing arts, publishing, R&D, software, toys, games, TV, and radio, and video games. Some studies also include the education industry, which makes the definition vary (Hesmondhalgh, 2002).

Florida (2002) categorizes the creative industries as formed by a class of professionals that include scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and architects, designers, educators, artists, and music and entertainment professionals, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or creative

content. The abstract, more artistic characteristic of the creative industries and how success and performance are measured in them, make entrepreneurship in the creative industries a specific type of entrepreneurship, different from the more conventional types (Mylonas et al., 2018).

Having a clear understanding of the type of professionals that form the creative class allowed me to correctly define my sample of interviewees to participate in this study, and this common thread will allow me to draw conclusions that could apply to more professionals, possibly.

2.2 Challenges female entrepreneurs face

There are not many studies that explore the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, specifically. Before starting with the interviews, I hypothesized that female entrepreneurs (in all industries) have to deal with at least some similar challenges. I also hypothesized that some of the challenges women faced, men did too.

Previous studies have shown that female entrepreneurs have to deal with **gender bias**, stereotypes about their **immigrant status**, and **self-doubt**. I plan to make use of these topics in my interviews. The theoretical framing for this study is focused on an individual (micro) level, on a person's perception of self and her social context, and, in some instances, on how groups interact with each other at the organizational (meso) level (Vaara, 2010)).

2.2.1 Gender bias

Women and men tend to start different types of businesses (Kepler et al., 2007, p. 10 as cited by Caro-González et al., 2021), even though entrepreneurship used to be viewed as a mostly masculine activity (Gupta et al., 2009).

Some of the challenges faced by women in work settings have to do with their struggle with gender stereotypes. Stereotypical perceptions persist, in the form of beliefs that women are less competent than men, which makes women report having to work harder than men to prove their competence (Buttner, 1993, Heilman, 2012). Some of the strategies devised by women in these situations include forming a strong network that they can trust (Constantinidis, 2021).

Also, women who are perceived as attractive, or who are mothers, characteristics that emphasize and reinforce their gender, are evaluated more negatively in professional settings when compared to other women without these attributes. On the other hand, women can be penalized for achieving success in predominantly masculine positions (Heilman, 2012).

The topic of gender lays the foundation for this study. Questions about this topic during the interview have allowed me to draw conclusions about the specific challenges posed to females as entrepreneurs, making the connection with entrepreneurship and gender bias.

2.2.2 Immigrant status

Another challenge female entrepreneurs face is related to their immigrant status (Halkias et al., 2016) or ethnic background (Essers et al., 2010). The world has become increasingly globalized, and in recent years, many immigrants have arrived in western countries to start a new life (Eurostat, 2022).

Previous research has shown that women from an ethnic background face different challenges than men or women from a different background (Essers et al., 2010). Initiatives focused on the advancement of women from minorities, or who are immigrants, can have the opposite undesirable effect of reinforcing stereotyped perceptions and contributing to negative evaluations (Heilman, 2012).

Some of the entrepreneurs I have interviewed (female and male) are immigrants that started their businesses in the Netherlands. This topic helped me understand if their immigrant status in a country represented a challenge for them as entrepreneurs in the creative industries, and if so, how they deal with it in their daily life. Also, the interviewees who have established businesses in their native country could provide suggestions for immigrant entrepreneurs on how to navigate the business world in their country.

2.2.3 Self-doubt

Another challenge women in the workplace face, according to Heilman, 2012, is their insecurity about their ability to succeed. The focus here is not on how society perceives them, but on how they perceive themselves.

Heilman explains that women tend to describe themselves professionally in a more self-effacing way than men. They usually assess their competence more negatively, saying that they are “not good with numbers” or “do not have the killer instinct”. They also tend to approach typically male tasks with less confidence than men. Other findings suggest that women are less willing to take the due credit for their work and might hesitate in participating in negotiations because they expect their requests to be met with a negative response (Heilman, 2012).

Self-doubt is a common issue faced by entrepreneurs in general (Alvesson, 2010). Here, instead of focusing on external perceptions, I aimed to discover if the entrepreneurs I interviewed also had to deal with internal enemies on their path to success. By comparing the content of interviews between females and males, I could find if there were any similar feelings that they experienced in their path to success.

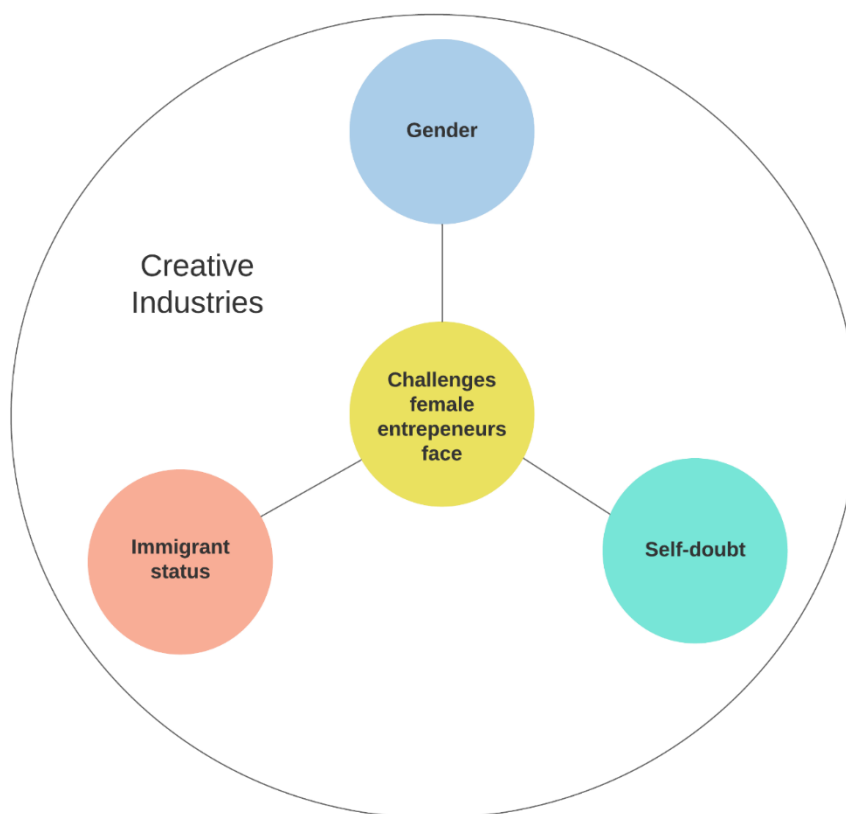


Figure 1 – Research framework about the challenges that female entrepreneurs in the creative industries face

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

To answer the proposed research question, I have used a qualitative research design, with in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data for analysis. This type of research is appropriate for the topic being considered, which accounts for personal experiences and perceptions. Qualitative methods of research are suited for analyzing and describing meanings between entities, and for understanding how people in certain situations make use of their resources to achieve certain desired results (Moisander et al., 2006).

To find out which are the challenges faced by this group, and the strategies developed to deal with them, I have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews based on a topic guide with a few sample questions to be discussed, while the interviewees were allowed to deviate a bit from the main topic when talking about personal experiences, and I could come up with follow-up questions.

The interview collection aims to analyze the material to come up with recurring themes among the interviewees. What are the common challenges they face? How do they overcome them? Can the sampling group be divided into categories?

3.1 Sampling

Following Robinson's (2014) sampling process for qualitative interviews, I have narrowed down my study to highly educated women, and later, men, who have started their businesses, mainly in the Netherlands, but also in Denmark and Germany. Some of these people were immigrants in the country they started their businesses, others were natives. Women and men from different backgrounds were invited to participate.

To be able to draw conclusions about female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, and possibly find recurring themes between participants, the women (and men) I have interviewed are mid-senior to senior-level entrepreneurs (who have achieved a certain level of success) who run a business in the creative industries. The total of people interviewed for this study were thirteen: ten women and three men. The reason I interviewed more women than men is that this study is focused on the challenges they face. The interviews with men were made to get their perspective on the

same topic and be able to compare if there were any differences in perception of the challenges, and strategies utilized to deal with them, between the genders.

When conducting this research, I took a broad approach regarding the creative industries (Mylonas et al., 2018) by including professionals that have online businesses, coaching practices (because they provided services in terms of knowledge and created content for training), marketing agencies, tech companies, and even one participant that has a staffing/hospitality company, because her business employed highly skilled professionals and contained an element of performance and creativity.

3.2 Data collection

Some of the women and men who can take part in the interviews are part of my network, but I have also asked for referrals from others. However, the strategy that proved to be the most effective was using LinkedIn to contact them and schedule the interviews, either in my existing network or through a LinkedIn search.

This is in line with Flick's (2007) sampling strategies: **critical sampling** (interviewing experts in the field) and **snowball sampling** (asking participants to refer another participant that fits the sampling criteria). I have not, however, found to be able to interview participants referred from previous participants, mostly due to schedule and time constriction issues.

To make it possible to record the interviews, while taking into consideration Covid-19 concerns, most interviews took place using video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, unless requested differently by the interviewee. The goal was to come to a place of data saturation when the new interviews no longer come up with new concepts (Lincoln et al., 1985).

3.3 Interview questions

The topic guide for the interviews and the questions can be found in the Appendix. Whenever appropriate (for example, when interviewing males) gender-specific words and terms were changed to suit the interviewee.

3.4 Method of analysis of the interviews

I have utilized thematic discourse analysis to analyze the interviews. Thematic discourse analysis has the goal of finding recurring themes in the discourse, allowing to determine patterns (Braun et al., 2006). Thematic analysis can occur in a deductive or inductive manner. That means that some categories can be pre-determined using the theoretical framework and literature review, and others might emerge from the text itself (in this case, the transcribed interviews). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded, for thematic analysis, which can be done in four stages, according to Braun et al. (2006):

1. Immersion in the data (reading and re-reading, writing down initial ideas).
2. Generating initial codes (coding all data).
3. Merging similar/ related codes: placing them into larger categories leading to the initial themes.
4. Revising and improving the themes (refining each theme, developing a clear definition of what each theme relates to, and checking for nuances, contradictions, and differences within each theme).

The categories were defined using grounded theory (Glaser et al., 1967), allowing categories to emerge from the possible recurring themes mentioned by the interviewees. Coming up with these categories has allowed me to draw a series of strategies devised by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries to deal with the challenges they face.

4. REFLECTION ON ETHICS AND QUALITY

In qualitative research, a concern with ethics when dealing with personal and possibly sensitive information is necessary (Pascoe Leahy, 2021). For that reason, I have sent the interviews a consent form and a copy of the interview topic guide and let them choose if they wanted to be quoted using their real name or a pseudonym. Both can be found in the appendices section.

This way, they could prepare themselves mentally and organize their thoughts for the interview. Reflecting on my role as a female researcher and entrepreneur in the

creative industries, I have identified with some of the comments made by the interviewees, but I tried my best to keep myself from possibly influencing their answers by leading them on, and asking for clarification and further explanation whenever I saw fit. I let them express themselves freely, only guiding them concerning the topics of the interview, and without expressing my personal opinion.

5. RESULTS

The content of the interviews was transcribed and analyzed with the use of software. While doing the content analysis, some themes started to emerge from the data. The final coding tree utilized to analyze the data can be found in Appendix D.

5.1 Entrepreneurship in the creative industries

5.1.1 Views on being part of the creative industries

Some of the professionals interviewed already had a clear view that their type of business belonged to the creative industries. Since I applied the concept of creative industries broadly (Mylonas et al., 2018) according to Florida (2002), who categorized the creative industries as formed by a class of professionals whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or creative content, I wanted to find out if all interviewees thought of their business as a creative activity.

The interviewees were founders of various types of companies: tech companies, marketing agencies, staffing companies, coaching practices, and start-up incubators. Some of them had already sold their companies and continued their entrepreneurial endeavors by being advisors to their previously-owned businesses.

When asked if they thought of themselves as creative professionals, or if their business was part of the creative industries, however, most of them asked me to explain what I meant by it. There seemed to be an overall confusion about the term “creative.” Some participants mentioned that talking about “creative” prompted in them an idea of creating art, some type of handicraft, or painting. Some of them even considered themselves creative in an artistic way, but all of them considered themselves as having creativity in terms of problem-solving skills:

“I think so. It's not that I can create. I'm not a painter or anything, not an artist like that, but I, I do have this ability, I guess, to for creative thinking. And this,

that's what brought me this far, I guess.” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

“I have a problem with the word creative because it, you, phrase, this in such a way that you trigger with me, the idea of let's say creativity in the sense of art. But if it's about, let's say building a company and, and because if you are an entrepreneur you need to build from ground zero. There's nothing. So, you need to be very creative in solving problems. You need to be creative in thinking about your solutions.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.1.2 Reasons for becoming an entrepreneur

When asked about the reasons for becoming entrepreneurs, a recurring theme among participants (men and women) was the desire for freedom and control (over their time, schedule, workmates, and clients). Other reasons mentioned included recognizing a need in the market that they could help fill in, and therefore a sense of mission and passion for what they were doing:

“I can't imagine myself being at an, working at an office for like, eight or 10 hours a day. So, I had to do something creative and then I thought like, well, this can give me [that]. If I start my own company, it can give me, um, certain freedom, um, because I can decide my own... Well, I can decide everything, basically.” – Debby [female, Dutch], Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company in the Netherlands

The reasons given for exercising this desire for freedom and control included: frustration with having to work for a boss, boredom from regular jobs, being “boxed up” in a regular job description, a desire to have more flexibility to spend time with children, having seen examples of other entrepreneurs (in the media or the family) and having a natural skill for entrepreneurship:

“Mainly because I didn't want to work for a boss anymore. Never. I was fed up with working for somebody else. And the other part of me was, I was looking for freedom and I didn't know exactly what it was, but I only knew that I was looking for it at the time [...]” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

“Because I felt that my job description didn't answer, did not reflect everything that I am, and also my skills. And I saw that I was not being able to explore everything that I'm capable of doing.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

5.1.3. Changes in self-perception

Entrepreneurship is a mental and emotional journey, according to the interviewees. Most of the entrepreneurs (females and males) have noticed changes in their self-perception since they started their businesses. They have reported learning about themselves, their qualities and limitations, and gaining more self-confidence in the process. Others have reported having low self-confidence in the beginning, but then developing it with time:

“I would say that I feel more like, yeah, I would say maybe more self-confident I know who I am. I know what I want. So, it's every day a self-discovery.” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

“Massive. Absolutely massive differences. I think the main change, the main difference, is the fact that I'm completely able to explore my skills and my limits, not only on hard skills, but also soft skills and social skills.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

Entrepreneurs from both genders mentioned that it is very difficult to be an entrepreneur, but they believed that the challenges helped them to become stronger and more resilient in the long term.

“When you, when you start creating companies and ventures and all of that you've learned you learn a lot about yourself. Also, about resiliency, how important it is to be relentless, and so on.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

5.1.4. Becoming successful in the creative industries

After setting the stage by talking about the creative industries, and their own reasons for becoming entrepreneurs, I wanted to know if the interviewees thought it was difficult to become successful in the creative industries. Most of the interviewees did not

think it was potentially harder to become successful in this area, compared to other areas, but at the same time, they mentioned some challenges that come with the uncertainty of the industry itself, as well as the challenge that some creatives have with understanding their finances and managing a company (which will be discussed later).

When I asked the entrepreneurs if there was a moment when they thought they “made it” or could consider themselves successful, some of them could come up with anecdotes of specific moments, while others said they do not think they have “made it” yet, or that “making it” is an everyday process.

5.2 Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – Gender

The research question and main topic of this thesis is: *What are the challenges that female entrepreneurs in the creative industries face, and what are the strategies they utilize to overcome these challenges?* To answer this question, I have asked my female and male interviewees some questions to uncover their understanding of gender issues, if they have gone through any issues related to gender in their work-life, and, if that was the case, which strategies they utilized to deal with them. To that aim, I asked them a series of questions focused on gender-related topics, such as physical appearance, being a mother (or a father) and having to take care of children, and any other possible challenges that they have experienced in this topic.

Regarding the issue of gender, central in the discussion of female entrepreneurship, the women interviewed for this research had much to say. Whereas some women have actively noticed the bias and made the connection to the fact that they were female, others did not make that association right away. As a researcher, I tried to gather the information as accurately as possible, in the form of their perceptions, and not try to influence their answers in any way:

“And, but like thinking of judgments people might have, I'm not sure if it's a judgment, because I'm a woman, or it's just a judgment because people have judgments and they judge others. And if I would have been a male, it could have been, like, the same judgment.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

Some women recalled specific incidents that made them realize they were being judged and treated differently because they were female (those will be reported in the subsections below). Others did not pay too much attention to the judgements of others:

“So, I think there's, I have never, I think, faced directly that [gender] limit. But I also have never paid attention or that limit.” Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

The men who were interviewed, though, did not mention facing any specific challenges when it came to their gender. When asking men if they notice gender bias, or if they think female entrepreneurs face more challenges, they mostly said that they think everybody faces challenges, and people are different from one another, and are, therefore, judged differently:

“And it doesn't matter if you're a woman or if you're a man, it just is what it is. And if you want to make it, it's the same for, for each gender.” – Adrian, Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

“[The] difference between males and females in their challenges, the way they perceive challenges, and the way how they treat them, and how to solve them, that could be different. Everybody has the same challenges.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.2.1. Challenge – Being underestimated

Some of the women interviewed said that their professional skills were underestimated and they were discriminated against because they were female, especially by men:

“I mean, we had a comment from an investor, one saying, ‘You know what? What am I investing into, two ladies and a website?’ And we're both like, ‘Really? Would you say that to a man?’” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

“I think female entrepreneurs, first of all, challenge, I mean the [...] patriarchy, you know, it's the fact it's, it goes, I think it's all tied to the fact that we are not educated to become entrepreneurs, to be self-starters, to believe that we have

skills, even we are so marginalized on the job market.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“I can share an example of a person on this coaching platform. It was yeah, maybe a person, a Finance Director, 55, 57 years old, and then always ask, ‘Okay, why did you choose me as a coach?’ And he said: ‘Well, to be honest because you’re the only person available. But I wanted a man, and you are very young.’” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

In regards to getting funded, women have commented that they know or have experienced that it is harder for women, compared to men, to raise capital for their businesses:

“I never really noticed, but I read some articles about women getting the, I’m having a hard time getting finance from banks, for example. And I think I have encountered that too, but never realized that for men it would have been different. Yeah.” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

“I can measure, you know, how we’re doing, and I can measure how much funding they [the men] are able to raise and how much funding we [the women] are able to raise [...] and I think it’s more difficult, both as a woman and also as an old entrepreneur, to actually attract investment.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

Surprisingly, a male interviewee mentioned that he encountered difficulty in raising capital for his company because there were no female founders in his founder team. He believes that happened due to the ongoing focus that has been given to gender equality:

“Especially in the last years, I saw a huge shift here, and I think that’s a bit that’s. I was surprised, to be honest, like the way, yeah. I’m in Germany [...], I had funds that were not invested in me because, because of that quota, so female quota was not there and like, ‘We loved it. We loved the value proposition. We love your company. What you do is amazing. You help people, you know, with predictive health management, but you don’t have a woman, so we can’t invest.

I'm sorry.'" – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

5.2.2. Challenge – Balancing physical appearance

Following my theoretical framework, I wanted to investigate which role physical appearance played in the way the entrepreneurs were viewed by others. When it comes to this topic, it seems like women have to find a delicate balance between enhancing their physical appearance or downplaying it. Some women, for example, said that paying attention to the way they look is important in business and that other women, potentially might miss out on business opportunities for not taking good care of their appearance:

"Oh, I think it's let's say yes, it [physical appearance] helps. If you, I mean, you need to take care of yourself. Being a nice person, but you also have to be representative. So, if you go to a job, you'll make sure you are properly dressed in a way nice and sophisticated matching the occasion. Never underdressed, never." – Debby [female, Dutch], Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company in the Netherlands

"Yeah, absolutely [...] I got someone calling me for advice and she's in the same field as I am. She does similarly the same thing. And when I look at her, I see that she's, she does not follow society's standards of beauty or whatever [...] that might be also my judgment, you know from what she said, she's been approached in different, in like similar ways, approaching clients and she's not being successful [...]. Also, I cannot advocate for that, but what I, like I said, like, this [physical appearance] could be a factor." – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

While some women mentioned that dressing up well gives them self-confidence and shows respect for their clients, others expressed frustration with feeling like they have to conform to society's standards in the way they present themselves:

"I never wear high heels, for example, I hate them. Okay. Last week I went to a conference and I was talking to my girls and I said, oh, these are all those media girls. And they're walking on high heels and it curls in their hair. And I have to dress up too. And for me it's a stress[ful] situation, you know." – Jessica [name

has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

While other interviewees mentioned that some people were initially surprised by learning that they had their own businesses. “You?” is the question they got, followed by: “Oh, the face and the brain.” This was correlated with what I found from a male interviewee, who spoke about how he perceived women in business:

“[Physical appearance] would be a drawback if, for example, either probably you're too pretty or, or the opposite where you're not attractive. And then the, let's say the polar opposites can somehow affect a person's opinion of you in a negative and positive way where, maybe, you were like let's say, you're blonde and pretty. And then that has a negative connotation towards, oh, maybe you're, you know, you don't have what it takes, because others that I've seen around are not that smart, for example.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

Interestingly, while most men commented that physical appearance does not play a big role for them, some commented that they might be judged negatively for being males, and for having some specific traits, such as being bald, white, blond, tall, or having more built. But in general, it was not such a sensitive topic for them as for females:

“Some people I feel like maybe it's an advantage for me that I'm standing here as a man with one-ninety [cm] and blonde hair, they think, okay. Maybe I, my appearance helps some in that moment. Can be, but for other people, I also feel the other way around.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

5.2.3. Challenge – Responsibility with childcare

Some of the women who were interviewed for this project had children/families, while others did not. The same for the males who were interviewed. In the case of the women who had families, they mentioned different situations as part of this challenge, for example, initial difficulty asking for help from their partners at home, their desire to stay home after having children, and therefore work less, society’s construct that the

man's career is the one that should be prioritized, and the pressure to bring home the money for their families:

“In a way, as a woman, you're still considered as having to take care of, well, almost everything is in the family. And especially if you work from home, yeah, which is fine. But which should be shared whether you work from home or not [...] it required a lot of dialogue, not always heard or not always heard immediately [laughs].” – Mary [name has been changed, female, Korean/French], Founder of a Coaching/Training Company in the Netherlands

“So, I think financially it's a big hurdle of being a mother and a, and having a family, also have the obligation you have to, to your spouse for bringing in the revenue.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

“I think it always starts with children. Once women get pregnant then, of course, our minds get a little bit, ‘oh, I want to stay home.’” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

Mary [name has been changed] mentioned above, said that she coaches men who, once had to work from home during the pandemic, they faced similar challenges. I also talked about this subject directly to men who had children, and men who did not, and they all agreed that raising children while running a business is challenging, but an extra motivation to succeed because of the need to provide for the family. However, they had much less to say about the topic than women. I also asked men if they think the possible expectation that men should participate more in childcare in recent years creates an extra challenge for them, and one of them answered the following:

“I don't think it makes an, like, it brings an extra challenge. [It] just levels out the playing field a bit more as it should've been in the first place.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

5.3. Strategies utilized by female entrepreneurs – Gender

For every challenge that I found during this research, I tried to look for a strategy, or multiple ones, utilized to deal with it. I assumed there were strategies in place because these women have all experienced a certain level of success in their

entrepreneurship journey. This demonstrates, therefore, that there is at least something that they are doing right. I have listed below the strategies utilized to deal with the challenge of gender bias.

5.3.1. Strategy – Turning being underestimated into an advantage

I found that female entrepreneurs have devised multiple strategies to deal with the challenge of being underestimated by men. One interviewee mentioned that she felt discriminated against for being a woman in her previous career as an employee, but she learned to turn the tables by letting people make their judgments, and buying time to get more prepared for meetings and negotiations, which gave her the upper hand at the end, an ability she carried with her when she started her own business:

“I used it [being underestimated]. I mean, I'm very, also very trained to deal with adversity and, and under high stress [...] But then a supplier came to the table or, or a customer came to the table and they were not as prepared as I was. And that meant that I always had an advantage. And it's in the preparation, was also in the fact that they underestimated my skills.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

Nina, mentioned earlier hearing from an investor that she and her business partner were “two ladies and a website” said she used this a motto from then on:

“We, we took it in as our motto and since then we kind of joked about it. You know, we're just ‘two ladies and a website’. And then I think we became extremely hellbent on wanting to succeed [laughs]. So, I think for us, it was kind of [a] fuel.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

She also mentioned that she starts investor meetings by citing some data from investments in Denmark, where, according to her, only 1% of venture capital goes to female founders. By doing this, she expects to raise awareness about the unconscious bias and let investors see past the fact that she is a woman:

“I would call it out, to begin with, I would basically open every investor meeting going. ‘Do you know what 1% of all venture funding goes to females? Now, can we just start by getting that on the table? And then if you wanted the 99% already now, just let me know, and then we can stop.’ [...] Kind of make the other party a bit more aware of particularly, unconscious bias, [...] but all the

unconscious bias is definitely present.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

She also mentioned that she thinks venture funding should have a fifty-fifty ratio between males and females. Robbert, the owner of a start-up incubator in the Netherlands, agrees with that. In his company, he now has a ratio of one female founder out of four founders. He says they use artificial intelligence to pick the applicants to join his program, to try to be as gender-neutral as possible in the selection process, but the problem is that still, not enough female founders apply for the program. He thinks, however, that women should not be using the gender equality topic as a way to get funded:

“Gender currently is used to create a box to make stuff happen. So, I see that the venture I see now, venture funds run by females, which is a cool thing. In the past, it was not there. It did not exist. So, it's good that they do it, but they focus over limitlessly on female founders and they use it as a marketing machine to raise capital, and then it's wrong.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.3.2. Strategy – Surrounding yourself with the right people

Many of the women who were interviewed mentioned that they did face gender bias, but mostly when they were working for other companies (instead of running their own businesses). Once they started their business, they were able to choose who to work with and this problem was solved. A recurring theme among almost all female interviewees was the need to “find the right people.”

I asked them to explain further what they meant by that. As it turns out, they were talking about choosing the right employees and customers to work with. Mainly, people who were not biased against the fact that they were women, and who were supportive:

“First, I choose my customers. Second, if you have an issue with a female business coach, then you shouldn't be my customer. It's very easy.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

“Yes, there are males, who think about, you're like, ‘Oh, you're just a female.’ They exist in life, and in business as well. And I don't do business with those

kinds of types. They are not my ideal customer and that's one of the major things of being an entrepreneur.” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

“I don't do business with every customer. I'm asking high prices and I select my customers. I go for them, but I find them, or they find me through other customers that have already worked with me. And there is a selection process.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

“Find people who, who to back you up, who don't care about who you are, what you look like, but interested in the case and in being on this journey with you, they don't see your color or your gender.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

“Finding the right people” was not a recurring theme among male interviewees, but it seems to be an effective strategy utilized by female entrepreneurs to have some control over their environment, in a way that is not possible in corporate environments, where they cannot, most of the time, choose their colleagues or clients.

5.3.3. Strategy – *Playing with physical appearance*

One aspect most women (and men) seemed to agree on is that physical appearance matters. To deal with the challenge of striking the right balance when presenting themselves, a common theme among interviewees is that they do their best to try to look and feel confident in the way they look:

“I think you are attractive if you are confident. So, work on your confidence, whatever makes you less confident, whether this is your appearance or something else and your physical appearance, or whatever makes you less confident. If you work on it, probably you're going to come across the way you want.” – Mary [name has been changed, female, Korean/French], Founder of a Coaching/Training Company in the Netherlands

While others explained that they play a little with their looks to make them look more serious or older, or to take people by surprise and confuse their expectations, by increasing their attractiveness or downplaying it, and changing their dress and grooming according to different scenarios and stages of negotiations, for example. Others

mentioned that they adapt their appearance to their clients and that as they became more successful, they felt more relaxed and able to choose more freely how they present themselves:

“I have to say I played with that, as well, since the beginning of my entrepreneurship career, because I was young when I started, I was 27 when I started my [business], yeah. I was playing with that. So, people would [take me] a bit more seriously or [for] a bit older, you know [...] Nice jacket. Okay. Makeup.” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

“I am conscious about it, you know, but, but I think it's just a game you're playing and I understand it. And I use it to my advantage, basically [...] You know, there's this sort of perception of what you should be looking like or who you should be. And then there's reality. And I think it's a bit fun to play around with that, to be quite honest.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

“Now, I have the money. I have independence, right? I, I am the owner of myself today. And that's why I can dress in the way I want.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

Although men mentioned that they could, potentially be judged by their appearance, during the interviews I did not find any strategies they utilized to deal with this challenge. Suggesting, perhaps, that it is not that big of a challenge for them.

5.3.4. Strategy – Having substance

While most interviewees agreed that the way they present themselves could potentially help them to succeed in business, some entrepreneurs mentioned the need to have a solid business plan and track record to back them up:

“I think it's also very important to have the business and the case behind you because otherwise it becomes very hollow and people will see through that quite quickly. So, it's a balance, I think.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

When talking about the physical appearance of women, and how attractiveness could be a drawback for them, a male interviewee said that it is important to have substance and a personality to make a better first impression:

“If you act like somebody perceives you in a negative way and you go with it, then it's your fault. Unfortunately, I think. But I mean, you see, it's always not, I guess, never black and white, right. So, I would say you have to try your best at creating your personality within the or say, showcasing your personality within the next 10 minutes. No matter your appearance.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

5.3.5. Strategy – Making use of female attributes

While some women commented that the business world is a male-dominated field and that they sometimes were the only woman in the room, and felt a certain pressure to look and act like a man in their business dealings, they learned that making use of their female attributes, such as being caring, nurturing, their feminine charm, and even the fact that they were females could give them a business advantage:

“There are two sides, um, being a female, um, you have your female charm as well. And, uh, I don't want to misuse it, but you definitely want to use it in a very friendly and [in] all the positive ways there are.” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

For example, they mentioned that they conducted negotiations differently than men, and that led to better results in the end, while others mentioned that, in their line of business, it is better to be a woman than a man.

“I used my femininity in negotiations very much, so it was an advantage [...] the way I go about things, I would do different types of negotiations than my male colleagues. Very much so.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

“I don't know any company like this, which is run by men, because I think you need a kind of female touch, because it's really about taking care. [...] And I think this caring part is also a part of being female. [...] I think in this particular job, it's better to be a woman.” – Debby [female, Dutch], Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company in the Netherlands

“I think females are like quite warm in how they are in their business and maybe more connecting. So, I think it's a strength, also, to have enough female entrepreneurs, also to bring balance into, like, the very target-oriented and hard business that there also is.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch]
Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

When it comes to diversity, some interviewees mentioned that they believe they were able to get more opportunities to speak in conferences and discussion panels because they were women:

“There is one positive thing, because if I apply to be speaker somewhere, then you also have to fill it, fill in that if you're a man. [...] ‘So are you. lesbian, gay, or are you all those things?’ And then I always get to check one box and that's ‘I'm female’[laughs].” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch],
Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

“I mean, they're not that many of us, so those of us that are, we have more easy access to, to PR and to opportunities to come out and speak. I mean, I'm not sure I was selected for that panel debate [in London] because I'm extremely clever. I'm pretty sure they needed a female panelist, [...] but again, [...] I may actually be really brilliant and that may be why they chose me.” – Nina [female, Danish],
Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

5.3.6. Strategy – Setting boundaries and sharing responsibility with childcare

Some women found in entrepreneurship the possibility of combining childcare with a professional activity. In fact, among the reasons for becoming an entrepreneur, some women who had children mentioned that the flexibility that exists in entrepreneurship allowed them more time for their children.

“So, the goal of me becoming an entrepreneur was to be more with the children and to be traveling less.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

Setting boundaries at home with children, and the partner, to share the workload, was essential:

“It has an extra layer of challenge because you have to be much more assertive at home [...] assertive in saying, ‘Hey, this is what I can do. This is what I’m, what I won’t do anymore.’” – Mary [name has been changed, female, Korean/French], Founder of a Coaching/Training Company in the Netherlands

All of the female interviewees who had children mentioned having an agreement with their partners or extended family members for sharing responsibilities with childcare, while one even mentioned not having to step a foot in the supermarket for years. They all said it would have been impossible to combine their life as an entrepreneur without help with childcare:

“See, my husband helped me. He just did his part, which would be making 50% taking care of the house, 50%. He just did his part. But from where I come from, this is tremendous. So, I really give it the value, because it wasn’t common. And I would say, I must say, maybe more difficult for other women, if they don’t have the help.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

“Yeah, because if I hadn’t [had help] then I would, if I was needed more at home, I guess [...] If one of the kids is sick, ‘Okay, who has the most important presentation or whatever?’ [laughs], and that one can go in the other one fixes the rest.” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

One of the men who were interviewed and had children mentioned making the same type of arrangements:

“It’s never easy. It was impossible in the past to combine. Now it’s not impossible anymore. You can combine, but it’s never easy. And primarily on the logistics [...], I make arrangements with my spouse, on who’s doing what, when.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.4. Overview of all the challenges and strategies in relation to gender

Below is an overview of the challenges that female entrepreneurs face concerning gender, and the coping strategies they utilize to overcome them:

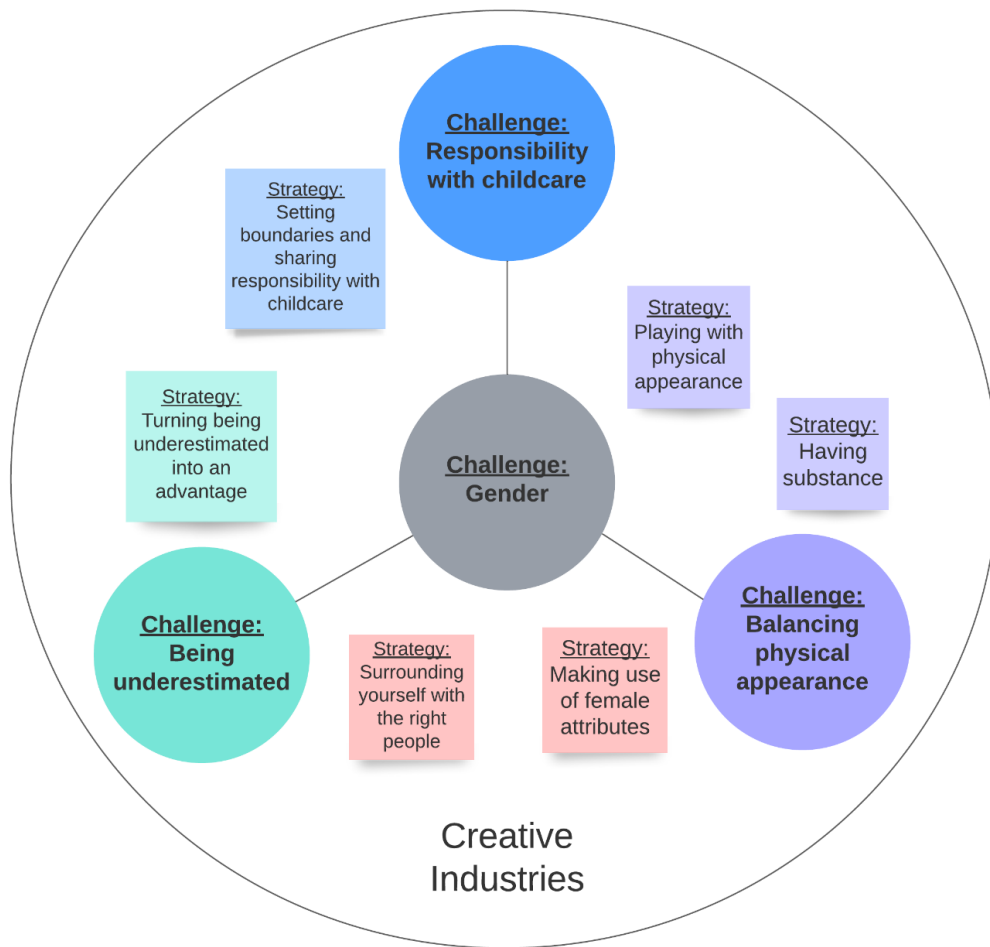


Figure 2 - Challenges that female entrepreneurs face that are related to gender, and the strategies they utilize to deal with them

5.5. Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – Immigrant status

In my research, I have also asked questions related to starting businesses as an immigrant in a western country, and what that meant in terms of challenges and opportunities. For that, I asked a series of questions about successfully navigating the business world in another country as an immigrant, that participants that were immigrants could answer regarding their own experiences and perceptions, but also, participants who have started their businesses in their native country could comment on what they have observed to be effective for other entrepreneurs that are also immigrants.

5.5.1. Challenge – Dealing with cultural differences

Moving to a different country can bring a lot of new challenges in terms of culture. Some entrepreneurs who have started their businesses in a country where they are immigrants mentioned that they had to get used to a new culture and, sometimes, a

different way of doing business. Immigrants who came to the Netherlands mentioned that they have learned that the Dutch are very straightforward people. This was also confirmed by other Dutch interviewees, male and female. Surprisingly, two female interviewees told me that that is not always the case:

“Oh, yes. I always say the Dutch are, they seem, straightforward, but they are not [laughs].” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

“Be aware that the Dutch pretend to be nice. But a lot aren't. Be very aware that.” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

When it comes to bragging about their business and accomplishments, a female founder told me that the country's culture can also pose a challenge, even for native founders:

“I mean, I don't really see a lot of male entrepreneurs having trouble with that [bragging]. But I think it goes against some sort of a society thing about who is allowed to say what, and bragging is. Of course, bragging is, is not very well thought of in the Nordics.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

The comments above, made by native entrepreneurs, demonstrate that we should not take first order perceptions of a country at face-value, and it can be challenging for a newcomer to understand the nuances of the business culture they find themselves in.

5.5.2. Challenge – Having an immigrant background

Speaking of their background as immigrants, some interviewees mentioned that the difficulties they faced in their home country initially made it difficult for them to gather the courage to start as entrepreneurs in a new country, and expressed some fears of not being trusted, or taken seriously enough because of their origin:

“Of course, I was very scared, but because, you know, again, as a societal issue, as a Brazilians, as a society, you know, we have really like, as women, we're very demeaned in our society. We're really told that we cannot do anything. So, I really have to challenge all of those ingrained and institutionalized patterns and

thoughts that I had.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“So, yeah, having a company like this [...] it's kind of, I think it's a big achievement, especially for me, you know, from Brazil, it's we are not recognized as technology producers, developers, there's no trust whatsoever in any technology coming from Brazil. So, I'm a big fan of Embraer because they were able to put an airplane on the entire planet. Nobody knows it's a Brazilian company. Because if they know, they don't buy it.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

On the other hand, a male interviewee commented that coming from a background in a western, rich country can make people too comfortable, and give up easily when facing challenges:

“I think in my experience, sometimes they [native founders] also give up faster, because they, they had everything from the beginning. So, they don't have to fight. They have a pillow they can bounce back on.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

5.6. Strategies utilized by female entrepreneurs – Immigrant status

5.6.1. Strategy – Integrating into the new country as an immigrant

While some of the interviewees in this study were immigrants and have started their business in a new country, the majority of them were not. However, they did give some advice about integration in a new country, which, sometimes, included contradicting advice, for the same country.

Some of the advice given included understanding the country's culture, by reading a book about cultural differences, for example, or by simply being aware of them. In the Netherlands, some immigrant interviewees (female and male) said that learning Dutch, although not necessary to do business in the country, helped them to network more effectively, while a female Dutch entrepreneur said it is not necessary to learn Dutch if you are in the Netherlands, as everyone speaks English.

“Learning a language does help to break the ice. So, I say that's the only purpose of, of being treated differently.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

Considering cultural differences also helped some founders in successfully navigating the business world in a new country:

“Being used to reading straightforward people, so not to take it personally. Yeah. And at least you don't the positive side of it is actually don't waste time.”
Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

In dealing with Dutch people, two female interviewees mentioned the need to ask further questions, more in-depth questions to grasp what the other person is trying to say (as per the challenge mentioned earlier):

“So instead of answering all their questions, you could reverse the question and say, ‘Ah, where are you from? Where is that?’ And so that you get to know them. So, to say, rather than answering their questions.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

When it comes to ignoring certain aspects of their culture, such as looking down on bragging, for example, a female interviewee told me that it is important to promote yourself as an entrepreneur, even if that goes against Danish culture:

“So, I think, you know, as Danes, we should probably just, you know, try to overlook that whole culture thing and just to push on with the bragging path.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

5.6.2. Strategy – Using the immigrant background as an advantage

In regards to having come from a different country, Adrian, one of the male entrepreneurs I interviewed, commented that he believes that fact can be turned into an advantage, even though he is not an immigrant himself. He believes immigrant founders are potentially more prepared to deal with the challenges that come with entrepreneurship:

“I think that coming from somewhere else, like, let's assume you're coming from a third world country and then getting a chance, you're not taking it for granted.”

[...] There are so many problems, you have to sacrifice [to be an entrepreneur] so, so much, [...] and I think it's, it's very hard for people who never saw, faced difficulty in their lives, and never faced like, real problems in their life, for them to, overcome that. It's almost impossible, but for somebody who comes from a different background [...], this is another kind of drive. This is another kind of motivation.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

Nina, a female founder in Denmark, commented that the immigrant status can also be used as an advantage to get funding:

“I think actually I've been on a few, sort of, accelerator programs with immigrant founders. And I think it's actually worked to their advantage. I think there's a bit of a positive bias when you speak of investments because they're not that many immigrant founders. So, I think it's actually a huge advantage too, to present that side because it also gives a whole diversity.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

5.7. Overview of all the challenges and strategies related to immigrant status

Below is an overview of the challenges that female entrepreneurs face concerning immigrant status, and the coping strategies they utilize to overcome them:

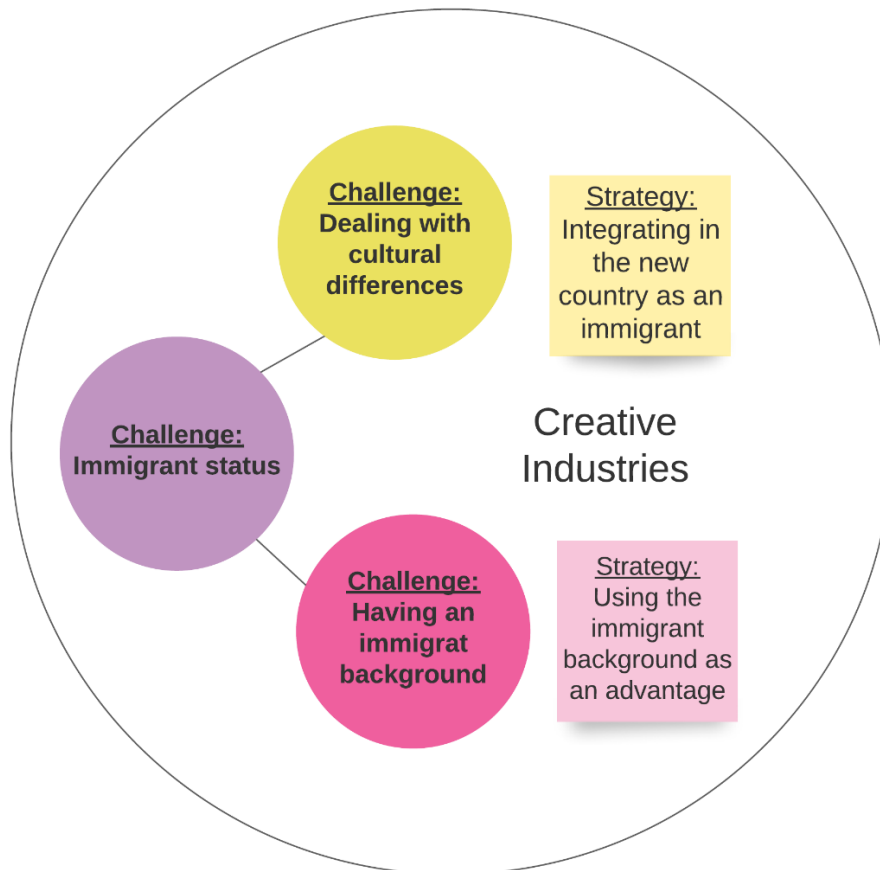


Figure 3 - Challenges that female entrepreneurs face that are related to immigrant status, and the strategies they utilize to deal with them

5.8. Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – Self-doubt

The last challenge in the framework was the issue of self-doubt. To discover if the entrepreneurs interviewed had had any issues with self-doubt, I asked questions to understand if they had experienced self-doubt at different points of their career as entrepreneurs, mainly when they started, and during their time as entrepreneurs.

Also, what advice they would give to other entrepreneurs who deal with this issue while commenting on how they themselves have dealt with it. In my interviews, I could notice that self-doubt is something that plagues entrepreneurs of all nationalities and backgrounds.

5.8.1. Challenge – Self-doubt prior to getting started as an entrepreneur

The difference I have noticed, however, is that while some entrepreneurs doubted that they could start their own business, or “sell themselves”, most entrepreneurs said they experienced no feelings of self-doubt prior to starting as entrepreneurs, only after, throughout their careers:

“I didn't have much of that, actually, because I was, I was already very much an entrepreneur in the group where I was employed. So, I knew even very difficult stuff.” – Mary [name has been changed, female, Korean/French], Founder of a Coaching/Training Company in the Netherlands

“Not prior, because prior, I was just too young to have self-doubt. I was too young and too busy with college and everything to have self-doubt, and I was a good student. So, because it was a good student, you are always very confident.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

Some, however, mentioned feeling insecure about their ability to make money as entrepreneurs, after quitting their jobs to start their business, and having no backup plan:

“Self-doubt? Yes, obviously, for sure. As everyone. But it was more like, ‘will I be able to pay my rent?’ ‘Will I be able to survive?’” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

“Of course, like, you have the anxieties. [...] We were three months into the pandemic, and I quit my job and I started it [my business]. So, to me, almost like, I got no back-up, I've got like no parents that I can just go for money or any kind of financial support.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

Some of them expressed that they had had haughty views of themselves and their knowledge, which were then replaced by more realistic views of themselves over time:

“[In the beginning, I had] very high thoughts about myself, thinking, you know, ‘I'm the best in the world, no matter what, I'll conquer it, we'll figure, find a way

out'. And it's, I think those two were kind of coming together with more real trust in myself, but also a more realistic picture of how the reality looks." – Nina, Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

This was also expressed by male entrepreneurs:

"I think I have more doubts in life now than before, because in the past, I said, I know everything. That's what young people do. They think they know all, and then slowly, over time, they actually know what they don't know. And then the doubt kicks in." – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.8.2. Challenge – Self-doubt during time as an entrepreneur

As explained previously, the entrepreneurs interviewed mentioned facing self-doubt throughout their careers as entrepreneurs. That was the same for men and women. Feelings of self-doubt seem to pop up in their minds about almost every aspect of their business: their skills as entrepreneurs, decisions they have made, and financial concerns about being able to generate enough revenue and paying their bills:

"The self-doubt comes also, but when it comes, especially it amplifies in times where you have difficulties of making enough revenue, and profit to be able to sustain yourself. So that's when it's critical." – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

"Over my career, I faced this a lot [of self-doubt], to be quite honest. However, over time, that, it has improved." Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

"Yeah. Because everybody says that you're wrong. Did you make, that you maybe make a wrong decision, that you should treat your people differently [...] Everybody has something to say about what to do." – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

A common theme among women is that some of them expressed self-doubt about their skills to deal with numbers or the financial aspect of their business. I did not hear the same comments from the men who were interviewed:

“I often struggle with understanding and also finding ways in which I can get help with finances, for instance, because, well, I wasn't, [I've] never been good in mathematics.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“I learned that I am one [entrepreneur], but I used to say, ‘I'm not a good entrepreneur because, because of the numbers’, you know...” – Jessica [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency in the Netherlands

“I wasn't thinking in cash flow or profits, I knew nothing and I thought: ‘I'm going to be bankrupt.’” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

To deal with this ongoing challenge of self-doubt, the entrepreneurs interviewed explained to me that made use of multiple strategies, which are discussed below.

5.9. Strategies utilized by female entrepreneurs – Self-doubt

Most entrepreneurs understood the need to develop self-confidence to be successful as entrepreneurs:

“Work on it. You cannot afford to have self-doubt, mean, if I am a customer of a, an entrepreneur that has self-doubt, I have to convince that entrepreneur that I can buy from her. And I don't want that [...] you cannot afford to ask your customer to give you self-confidence.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

Below are some of the strategies they mentioned to deal with this challenge.

5.9.1. Strategy – Partaking in activities to alleviate feelings of self-doubt

In the interviews, male and female entrepreneurs commented that they took part in different types of activities to alleviate their feelings of self-doubt. Female interviewees mentioned reading self-help books, getting a coach or mentor, joining a female entrepreneurship program, giving themselves a pep talk, doing meditation, talking to friends, and relying on a strong network:

“I do loads of meditation. Loads of, you know, looking back in, and the part of that, I love the most. Like I consult with my peers, I have my mentors still. And whenever I feel that my friends, I have a group of friends who are the people I rely on the most to really help me declutter my brain, and we call it ‘the declutter call.’” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“Reading, reading, reading, reading, reading, failure after failure, trying, some things went well, a lot of things didn’t go well, and trying and failing forward.”
– Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

Male entrepreneurs mentioned meditation, coaching, and spending time with friends and in nature as their go-to strategies for dealing with self-doubt, and both genders mentioned the need to just keep going, and keep working, despite having feelings of self-doubt:

“I just have to keep going, but definitely seek help in terms of coaching and both from your friends, but also from professionals in terms of business coaches, life coaches, but also coaches from the industry.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

“Learn to live with it. Honestly, it will not go away.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

5.9.2. Strategy – Knowing your finances

One of the female entrepreneurs interviewed mentioned she got tricked into selling her first company in a deal that turned out to be bad for her because she was naïve about finances. She then said it is important for all entrepreneurs to understand their finances:

“The advice to every entrepreneur I have is: know your finances. Know all about what it is to have better sheets to, um, know what your profit is, what your needs, what's you're going after.” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

Another female entrepreneur mentioned that she felt disrespected by her accountant and judged for asking clarifying questions to better understand her finances. She then mentioned she was looking for a new accountant, which ties in with the previously mentioned strategy, of surrounding yourself with the right people:

“I feel like it was one of the challenges I faced and, and as a woman, yes. Because I got an accountant that I'm actually firing him now, because he's, he talks to me in a way that he's like, ‘Oh, you can just like, you know, leave it to me. You don't have to think about it’ [...] And he's just kind of challenging my intellect with the way he talks. [...] And I don't like that attitude.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

5.9.3. Strategy – Trusting your gut

Given the uncertainty that is typical of the creative industries, a common theme among participants was trusting your gut feeling, or internal guiding system, when making decisions. It was interesting to see how often this topic would come up, with men and women:

“This little thing that tells you, like, it's just this gut of yours that speaks? Trust it, because you are a very instinctive person. You will find that out. And you also find out that every single time that it starts to itch. It's right. Listen to it and go for it because you can do so much.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“You have to be also able to, you know, have a good gut instinct and rely on your gut instinct, go for it.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

“Well, I think for female entrepreneurs, I would say, stay true to your own intuition, because that will guide you, and also stay true to yourself. Don't let others bring you down.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

“I was hoping for advice. But in the end, it's better to do, to find things out yourself, because if other people tell you what to do, it will never be you, you know what I mean?” – Debby [female, Dutch], Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company in the Netherlands

5.9.4. Strategy – Keeping a positive mindset

While decisions based on gut feeling come from natural inclinations and instincts, keeping a positive mindset, while, according to the entrepreneurs interviewed, is essential, it is also something that does not always come naturally. It is a strategy to cope with self-doubt, and it requires identifying and changing self-limiting beliefs to keep growing.

“If a woman believes in herself, she knows who she is. She knows she deserves it. She knows that she can do it. She will do it. You know, even if there are some obstacles around, they're on the road, it's about how do you create from the obstacles instead of reacting from the obstacles.” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

“Well, your mentality, if you are willing. If you are willing to learn, if you're willing to fight, if you really believe in what you want to do and you think you can be different, and you can be the best, then you can succeed everywhere. That, maybe that's not true, but that's my belief.” – Debby [female, Dutch], Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company in the Netherlands

Some of the female entrepreneurs interviewed have mentioned that looking back at the challenges they faced and their lack of self-confidence, they would have told themselves to have a more positive view of themselves and their abilities:

“I would tell myself and look in the mirror because I have been very insecure about almost everything and ‘look in a mirror and really see who you are and what you are doing and what's your worth is.’” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

Men also commented on the importance of having a positive mindset:

“You have to be able to deal with, but face thing that, and always looking at it from a growth mindset and putting in the hours, and always be able to bounce back and it's like, you know, fall down seven, stand up eight.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

5.10. Overview of all the challenges and strategies related to self-doubt

Below is an overview of the challenges that female entrepreneurs face in relation to feelings of self-doubt, and the coping strategies they utilize to overcome them:



Figure 4 - Challenges that female entrepreneurs face that are related to self-doubt, and the strategies they utilize to overcome them

An overview of all the challenges that female entrepreneurs in creative industries face, based on the framework of this study can be found in Appendix E.

5.11. Other challenges faced by female entrepreneurs

During this research, I asked the entrepreneurs to talk about any other challenges they have faced as entrepreneurs, and how they deal with them in their lives. They were also invited to share their “formula of success” their biggest joys and regrets as entrepreneurs, and what they wish for the future. A recurring theme was having focus, and knowing which activities to prioritize. This was also true for males:

“[My] biggest regret is maybe to not have a straightforward, aligned, clear goal of the direction I want to take because sometimes I was taking a bit more in that direction. And then going back to this and maybe losing a little bit of focus and when you're alone, this tendency of losing focus.” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

“I would say the biggest one for me though, as an entrepreneur is the importance and urgency kind of trade-off so understanding what is important, what is urgent and then prioritizing.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

Other female entrepreneurs commented that their concern at the moment was to expand their business, either by hiring a new team member, or by taking over other markets, or countries. Making enough money (and sometimes, getting funded, as mentioned previously) to keep their businesses afloat was a common concern among both female and male entrepreneurs.

One female and a male entrepreneur commented that it is lonely on top, and they wish they could have someone to share the journey with. One female entrepreneur mentioned that she got burned out by working too much. Work-life balance, even for entrepreneurs without children, and males were also a common theme in the interviews.

Other challenges that were mentioned, but not extensively among participants, included difficulties with keeping their business afloat during the pandemic; ageism that made it difficult to raise capital, on top of being female; and selling themselves, advocating for their businesses.

5.12. Other strategies utilized by female entrepreneurs

To deal with the strategies mentioned above, for example, the lack of focus, the entrepreneurs said that they learned to prioritize their time and work smart:

“Are, they [the steps you take] really bringing value to where you want to go to right now? And if not, then you shouldn't be working on it.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

“So, one, prioritize your time, you only have 24 hours in a day. So that's the most important thing. Then work hard, keep pushing and don't waste any time

and three, work smart. So, whatever you can automate, automate and delegate, you're not the best at everything. So, focus on what you're good at. You'll get everything else.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

In dealing with the challenges of expanding their business, and taking over new markets, the women interviewed said they were working on achieving these goals. On feeling lonely as an entrepreneur, a female interviewee mentioned that she realized she needed a sense of community, and then became part of an association for female entrepreneurs. The male who faced the same issue did not say what he planned on doing to tackle this problem.

The female entrepreneur who mentioned having burned out said she now listens to her body and tries to have a better work-life balance. Other entrepreneurs mentioned that setting priorities and boundaries have helped them with having a better work-life balance.

Other strategies that were mentioned regarding the challenges of being a female entrepreneur included “just doing it” which means, just starting the work and continuing with it, despite the challenges, and listening to your client.

6. DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted during this research made it possible to identify the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries, their understanding of the creative industries as applied to their business as a broad term, and helped to understand the challenges faced by them, even to a lesser extent, comparing them to the ones faced by males in a similar situation. That analysis now allows the comparison between the findings and previous literature on the topic.

The study confirms that, while many people have become motivated to become entrepreneurs in the creative industries in recent years (Mylonas et al., 2018) it is still challenging to get started as an entrepreneur in this industry (Albinsson, 2018; Cameron et al., 2018; Lange, 2017):

“It's been like, a self-conscious journey, standing, becoming an entrepreneur and, and learning to, but it's also been extremely tough and it still is extremely

tough. So, it also tested the limits of how much you, as a person, can handle.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

“Becoming successful nowadays is really hard. It's really hard because you need to do everything right.” – Haley [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of a Marketing Academy in the Netherlands

Success and performance, in the creative industries, are difficult to measure (Mylonas et al., 2018). When I asked the entrepreneurs what was the turning point when they realized they had “made it,” most of them asked me what I meant by “making it” and that they still had to make it, that it was an ongoing process.

When it comes to gender bias, the central topic of this research, the findings from the interviews partially confirmed what I found in the theoretical framework for this study, while bringing in new topics and insights.

6.1. Gender bias

The question about gender bias is usually tied to personal experiences and perceptions. So, if a person is female, they cannot fully grasp how the experience is for a male, and vice-versa. That is why I made use of semi-structured interviews, to try to learn more about the experiences of female entrepreneurs in the creative industries. The interviews with males were posed as countering data, to understand if the issues mentioned were indeed related to the gender aspect, or if they were experienced by the opposite sex as well.

Previous literature on entrepreneurship mentioned that females and males tend to start different types of businesses (Kepler et al., 2007, p. 10 as cited by Caro-González et al., 2021), however, some of the participants in this study ran very similar types of businesses, even though they were of the opposite gender. One participant, who was quoted previously, said that in her line of business, it is better to be a woman because the business required being caring and nurturing, which she believed to be female attributes.

While entrepreneurship used to be viewed as a mostly masculine activity (Gupta et al., 2009) and female entrepreneurs are still the minority (Caro-González et al., 2021),

most entrepreneurs interviewed mentioned that their female attributes gave them an advantage that men did not have, as explained in the results section above.

The theoretical framework of this study showed that stereotypical perceptions of gender persist in the workplace, and that was found to be true for the female entrepreneurs interviewed in this study. They mentioned being underestimated, judged, and misinterpreted, but did not give up and continued to run their businesses. Some women who have held positions in companies before starting their businesses reported being penalized for achieving success in a predominantly masculine position, and that is per research by Heilman, 2012.

It is important to say, though, that some of the women interviewed did not immediately make the association between gender and the struggles that they were facing, although they sometimes wondered if others were facing similar challenges.

According to Heilman, 2012, women who are mothers or who are perceived as attractive (characteristics that reinforce their gender) are evaluated more negatively in business settings when compared to other women without these attributes. The research found this to be true, to some extent, concerning physical appearance. Women who were perceived as attractive felt, at times, misjudged and underestimated by others. However, they all agreed that emphasizing their physical appearance has helped them, to some extent, in their careers. The key, according to them, is finding the right balance, and having a substantial business plan and track record to back them up.

When it comes to the topic of being mothers, the entrepreneurs I interviewed did not mention being discriminated against or treated differently for that reason. They mostly mentioned challenges when it came to the logistics of childcare, getting help from others, and sometimes discussing with their partners to be able to have more time to dedicate to their business. As previously mentioned, some entrepreneurs said that they started their businesses as a strategy to have more time to spend with their children, given the flexibility of entrepreneurship.

Having a strong network is one of the strategies women entrepreneurs utilize, according to Constantinidis, 2021. That has proven to be true for this study as well, as illustrated by the quote below:

“I never had many female friends and my female entrepreneur friends, they became my friends, from my female entrepreneurship, from Female Ventures. They became a group. They became a support system and yeah, [are]definitely my biggest joy.” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

One interesting finding on the issue of gender is that some men interviewed felt like the gender topic had to do with competition, that women were against men, and that using the “gender card” was a bad idea. Indeed, previous studies have shown that focusing too much on the advancement of minorities could have the potential effect of reinforcing stereotypical perceptions (Heilman, 2012). That is exemplified by a male participant who expressed his frustration for not getting funded because he had no female founders on his team:

“And now we speak so much about gender and that's super important, don't get me wrong. But we confuse that topic a little bit, at least in, in Central Europe, but for my understanding, but that's, that's maybe, a personal one.” – Adrian [male, German], Founder of a Health Tech Company in Germany

Another male participant made the following remark during the interview:

“Stop blaming us [...] the white, male man [laughs].” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

Both of the men above mentioned co-creation and collaboration with women, while one of them did not show concerns about women competing with men, as he understood the gender topic as being more about leveling the playing field for both genders. This is what most women who were interviewed reflected in their answers as well: a desire to collaborate with men, not to compete with them:

“Well, I would say for my, for my female perspective, just being open their openness to female entrepreneurship and female visions and views on a business instead of only the one yeah, the one-sided male vision, Because I think if, if it comes together, you can create magic, but if you do, one vision is overruling the other, then yeah, you get a disbalance.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

“My big dream [is] about that, because I also love all the topic linked to women empowerment and leadership is about like, so women will believe in themselves, so they will be more like, co-creating with men.” – Sandrine [female, French/Polish], Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company in the Netherlands

6.3. Immigrant status

Since the world has become increasingly globalized a huge influx of immigrants has arrived in new countries to start a new life (Eurostat, 2022), when it comes to being an entrepreneur and an immigrant in a western country, the entrepreneurs interviewed for this study were mostly interested in mixing with and integrating into the new country they found themselves in, instead of only sticking together with members of the same nationality. That is in accordance with studies conducted by Florida (2002), who explained that the creative class likes to be in environments with people from all walks of life.

Also, previous studies have shown that immigrant women were determined to succeed in their businesses in a new country (Essers et al., 2010) and I found that to be the same for the female interviewees in this study, and also by comments made by a male entrepreneur, cited previously in this study, who said that immigrant entrepreneurs potentially value their chances to succeed more than native entrepreneurs, and for that reason, they work harder to succeed.

Developing a strong network when arriving in a new country (Constantinidis, 2021), should be a top priority, according to the female and male entrepreneurs interviewed:

“I would say network and really build valuable connections from day one, immediately from the get-go [...] I think relationships first, and find people who are relevant for your field, for your industry, that you want to make it and connect with them on LinkedIn and start like that.” – Kristian [male, Czech], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

6.2. Self-doubt

Previous studies have discussed the issue of self-doubt amongst female entrepreneurs (Heilman, 2012) which also exists among entrepreneurs in general

(Alvesson, 2010). The entrepreneurs interviewed in this study, regardless of gender, have all expressed having experienced, or still experiencing, feelings of self-doubt.

The women I interviewed tended to be more forthcoming in naming their feelings of insecurity as self-doubt, while some men tended to say these were feelings of doubt (without the “self”) and uncertainty about the future. As explained in the results section, some women also mentioned struggling with understanding numbers, and were more open to discussing the real state of their business finances, than the men interviewed:

“Well, the main challenge for me is making money [...] I have more like, [an] honest and open personality. So, where some of my male friends, entrepreneurs, tend to have more like the mentality of [...] just already pretend it's there.” – Anne [name has been changed, female, Dutch], Founder of an Online Platform in the Netherlands

This is in agreement with the study conducted by Heilman, 2012, who said that women tend to describe themselves professionally in a less confident manner than men, and underestimate their competence to start a business, or to understand numbers, for example. Robbert, one of the male interviewees, hypothesized that one of the reasons men seem more confident is that they tend to worry less about risks:

“I think if you want to be an entrepreneur or our entrepreneur, that raises certainty of risk involved. And I think the threshold of risk or the way we treat risk is different from males and females [...] what I actually see is I see male founders make a decision to do just do it, without actually knowing all the consequences of the decision. I see female founders also say, ‘I'm going to do it’, but they made their checklist.” – Robbert [male, Dutch], Founder of a Start-up Incubator in the Netherlands

This is an interesting finding because most of the female entrepreneurs who joined this study expressed high tolerance to risk, but that could be different for women in general who are not entrepreneurs, which could potentially be a topic for further research:

“I measure risks, but I'm not risk-averse. I take the risk, I face the risk, right. So, much easier than traditional execs. So, if I compare myself to my former [male]

executive colleagues, oh, they really take a long time to make decisions. [...] So, I'm not too much concerned with not achieving certain results.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

6.1. Practical implications

A common theme amongst some female interviewees was a desire to succeed in their field. And despite all the challenges involved, some of them regretted not having started earlier as entrepreneurs, or not trusting themselves more in the beginning:

“My biggest regret is that I worked so long on discovering who I am. That is, an entrepreneur. If I had known then what I know now, I would have been a successful entrepreneur much quicker.” – Jacqueline [female, Dutch], Founder of a Business Coaching Company in the Netherlands

While some interviewees, male and female, got inspired to become entrepreneurs because they had examples of entrepreneurs in their families, other female entrepreneurs commented that, at certain points, they had no support from their families or partners. But all of them mentioned that being part of a supportive environment was key to their success.

Given the importance of female entrepreneurship for countries and communities (Caro-González et al., 2021), and the importance of the creative industries for economic growth (Florida, 2002) it is key that organizations (governmental, non-profit, or educational institutions) create programs, or include in their existing programs for female entrepreneurs the specific challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries. The reason for creating programs that include these topics is not to compete with men, or to increase the gap between the genders, but to tackle the specific challenges that female entrepreneurs face, so they can be better prepared to deal with them when they come up.

In fact, one of the interviewees who, during her career, took part in a female leadership program commented that the program discussed some of the challenges she would face as a female leader, and having that awareness helped her to overcome them:

“It was a leadership program tailored for female leaders and it's, it took me a year, of study, coaching [...] and they touched on almost everything, normally, women will comment: 'I'm not comfortable with speaking in public', 'I'm not comfortable building my network', whatever. So, in that, during that time, I reflected myself a lot about self-confidence, right. And why I still had some moments where I was not confident enough just to say something, and a man would come and say what I was thinking.” – Sarah [name has been changed, female, Brazilian], Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company in the Netherlands

It would also be interesting if the topics discussed here also became part of programs for entrepreneurs in general, to raise awareness about gender bias and to help them have a better understanding of what the entrepreneurial arena looks like, from the female perspective.

6.4. Limitations

There are some limitations to be discussed in this study. Studying the challenges female entrepreneurs face is open to the perception and interpretation of these challenges by the interviewees. Asking about challenges in regards to gender required the female interviewees to recall incidents from the past, and their perceptions of those incidents. Recounting things from memory is not a perfect process, because memories can also change and be reshaped over time. Also, participants sometimes commented on what they thought the experience of the opposite gender was. Since it is not possible to fully comprehend the experience of someone from the opposite gender, those comments could be called for speculation.

My role as a researcher could have played a role in the answers I received, from women and men, in different ways. First, my role as a female, immigrant, and creative entrepreneur interviewing women, and sometimes identifying with some of their struggles, could have led them to become comfortable sharing about them more openly than men. It is also possible that they tried to shape their answers to gain my approval. Because of my background, I could have assumed I understood certain things that perhaps needed more clarification, even though I tried to ask follow-up questions as much as possible. When interviewing men about the topic of female entrepreneurship, it is possible that they felt defensive about the topic (being members of the opposite

gender), and that could have made them perhaps open up less than women, feel more uncomfortable with the questions, and shape their answers to sound respectful in relation to the topic of gender (or to me, as a woman) than they would have been if the interviewee was a man.

Also, for practical reasons, all the interviews were conducted in English, which is not my first language, nor the first language of any of the interviewees. Even though we are all very much fluent in English, it is possible that some comments did not accurately express what the interviewer or the interviewee actually had in mind.

6.5. Further research

Further research could focus on different topics that were discussed in these interviews, and go deeper into them. In this study, some women commented on the differences between gender bias when working for a company, compared to when they became entrepreneurs. It would be interesting to go deeper into this topic and study female entrepreneurship in the creative industries, compared to regular industry jobs, interviewing women in both situations and trying to learn about the differences between them and the challenges they face.

Risk aversion has been cited by a male interviewee who runs a start-up incubator as being one of the reasons women take longer to become entrepreneurs, or prefer not to become entrepreneurs. Since some women in this study commented that they are not risk-averse, and that is why they started their businesses, it is an idea to conduct further studies comparing tolerance to risk and female entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurship in general.

7. CONCLUSION

Female entrepreneurship makes it possible for women to have the freedom to follow their dreams, to choose their environment, and gives them the flexibility to have children. It allows them to make use of their feminine traits positively, bring a female touch to businesses, contribute to the economy of their communities, and exercise their rights as citizens.

For female entrepreneurs to succeed, they need to be able to let go of their mental blocks, develop self-confidence, have access to resources, be in a supportive environment, and collaborate with men in positive ways.

This study aims to raise awareness to the topic of female entrepreneurship, and potentially inspire women and men to deal better with these challenges, and open up the path for more businesses run by women.

It is critical, therefore, that those female entrepreneurs get the support they need from the governments, educational institutions, their communities, their peers, their families, their partners, and so on. I will finish this study with two quotes from my interviewees:

“‘Don't believe them’. You know, I think that that's what I would say [to myself when I started].” – Giovana [female, Brazilian], Founder of a Creative Strategy Company in the Netherlands

“I think my biggest joy is looking at people thinking, you know, ‘Really? Is she the founder?’ and every time I'm like, ‘Yep, no, my husband [is] not coming. I am the one.’ [...] I kind of love, love that moment of surprise.” – Nina [female, Danish], Founder of a Media Platform in Denmark

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Gender	Occupation	Company Industry	Place of residence	Nationality
Sandrine	Female	Founder of a Coaching/Recruiting Company	Coaching/ Recruitment / Training	The Netherlands	French/ Polish
Mary (name has been changed)	Female	Founder of a Coaching/Training Company	Coaching/ Training	The Netherlands	Korean/ French
Anne (name has been changed)	Female	Founder of an Online Platform	Online How-to Platform	The Netherlands	Dutch
Jacqueline	Female	Founder of a Business Coaching Company	Business Coaching	The Netherlands	Dutch
Debby	Female	Founder of a Hospitality Staffing Company	Staffing/ Hospitality	The Netherlands	Dutch
Hailey (name has been changed)	Female	Founder of a Marketing Academy	Marketing/ Tech	The Netherlands	Dutch
Sarah (name has been changed)	Female	Founder and Advisor of a Health Tech Company	Healthcare/ Tech	The Netherlands	Brazilian

Jessica (name has been changed)	Female	Founder and Advisor of a Marketing Agency	Marketing	The Netherlands	Dutch
Nina	Female	Founder of a Media Platform	Media/Tech	Denmark	Danish
Kristian	Male	Founder of an Online Platform	Consulting/ Media/ Tech	The Netherlands	Czech
Robbert	Male	Founder of a Start-up Incubator	Consulting/ Tech	The Netherlands	Dutch
Adrian	Male	Founder of a Health Tech Company	Healthcare/ Tech	Germany	German

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries and strategies utilized to deal with them

Note: When interviewing male participants, the term “female” was changed to “male” as well as other gender-specific terms, such as “mother.”

Warm-up

1. Could you describe what you currently do as an entrepreneur? What is your company’s main activity?
2. Why did you decide to become an entrepreneur?
3. How do you feel different now than before starting your business? Did you experience a lot of changes in your self-perception?

Entrepreneurship in the creative industries

1. Do you consider yourself a creative entrepreneur? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the activity your company does is part of the creative economy?
3. In your opinion, is it easier or more difficult to become successful in this field?
4. How did you become successful in this field?
5. What was the turning point for you when you realized that you “made it”?

Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – gender

1. Is it difficult to become or be an entrepreneur?
2. Can you give an example?
3. Do you face challenges in your everyday work?
4. Can you describe what these challenges are?
5. Do you feel that female entrepreneurs face more challenges? Why or why not? Can you explain that?

6. What role do you think physical appearance plays? Do you feel you are being judged differently depending on how you look? What would you suggest to others who are facing this challenge?
7. Do you feel it is easy to combine being a founder/entrepreneur and being part of a family, being a mother? How do you manage this? What would you suggest to others?
8. Do you feel that gender plays a big role in your being an entrepreneur? What kind of struggles do you feel female entrepreneurs face?
6. Do you have any suggestions on how to deal with the challenges of being a female entrepreneur? What would you suggest or tell a younger version of yourself?
7. Is there something you would like to change? What is that? And why?

Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – immigrant status

1. Where are you from?
2. When did you move to this country, and for what reason?
3. How was it for you to get started as an entrepreneur in the country you are at now?
4. Are there any lessons you had to learn to successfully navigate the business world in this country as an immigrant?
5. What would you tell yourself when you first arrived in this country?

Challenges faced by female entrepreneurs – self-doubt

1. Did you experience any self-doubt prior to becoming an entrepreneur? How did you overcome it?
2. Do you experience feelings of self-doubt now? How do you deal with it?
3. What advice would you give to aspiring female entrepreneurs whose self-doubt makes them procrastinate and not get started?

Conclusion

1. Are there any other challenges that you faced, or still face, as a female entrepreneur in the creative industries, that were not discussed during this interview?
2. How did you successfully deal with them?
3. Do you think there is a formula for success as a female entrepreneur in the creative industries? What does it take to succeed?
4. What are the lessons you learned as a female entrepreneur that you wish to pass on to others?
1. Do you think that the differences in perception between female and male entrepreneurs are going to change? Why do you think that?
5. What is your biggest joy as a female entrepreneur? And your biggest regret?
6. If you could wish for anything, what would that be?

APPENDIX C – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research project: The path to success – The challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in the creative industries and how they overcome them (master thesis)

Research investigator: Priscila de Almeida Antunes

Master thesis supervisor: Sven-Ove Horst

Research participant name:

The interview will take around 30-40 minutes. We don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken by students at Erasmus University Rotterdam require that interviewees explicitly agree to be interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used.

This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you, therefore, read and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- The transcript of the interview will be analyzed by Priscila de Almeida Antunes as a research investigator
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to Priscila de Almeida Antunes and academic colleagues and researchers with whom he might collaborate as part of the research process
- The final project (master thesis) will be published and made available to the public and might be cited or used in other publications with or without the researcher's authorship or knowledge
- You also understand that your words may be quoted directly. **With regards to being quoted, please select the statement that you agree with:**

Selection	Statement
<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to be quoted directly, along with my real name, company name, and industry. Example: <i>Mary Smith [your real name], Job title, Company name, Location</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used. Example: <i>Anna (name has been changed), Job title, Company industry, Location</i>

All or part of the content of your interview may be used:

- In academic papers, policy papers, or online articles
- In an archive of the project as noted above
- In website texts
- In other types of media citing the research, such as spoken presentations

By signing this form, I agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time;
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above;
3. I have read the consent form;
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality;
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Name of researcher: Priscila de Almeida Antunes
 Tel: +31 649779460
 E-mail: 575356pa@student.eur.nl

You can also contact Priscila's supervisor:
 Name of researcher: Sven-Ove Horst
 E-mail: 67592sho@eur.nl

APPENDIX D – CODING TREE

Main categories	Subcategories
Entrepreneurship	Company activity
	Reason for becoming an entrepreneur
	Creativity
	Entrepreneurship compared to regular jobs
	Changes in self-perception
Challenge: Gender	Being underestimated
	Balancing physical appearance
	Responsibility with childcare
Strategies: Gender	Turning being underestimated into an advantage
	Surrounding yourself with the right people

	Playing with physical appearance
	Having substance
	Making use of female attributes
	Setting boundaries and sharing responsibility with childcare
Challenge: Immigrant status	Dealing with cultural differences
	Having an immigrant background
Strategies: Immigrant status	Integrating in the new country as an immigrant
	Using the immigrant background as an advantage
Challenge: Self-doubt	Prior to getting started as an entrepreneur
	During time as an entrepreneur
Strategies: Self-doubt	Partaking in activities to alleviate feelings of self-doubt
	Knowing your finances
	Trusting your gut
	Keeping a positive mindset

APPENDIX E – FINAL FRAMEWORK OF ALL THE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

