



## Imagery of ad-venture: Understanding entrepreneurial identity through metaphor and drawing



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### ABSTRACT

We examine how visual metaphor can reveal the tacit assumptions entrepreneurs use to make sense of their lives. While metaphor is often equated with linguistic metaphor, here we argue that metaphors created through the modality of drawing can offer a more nuanced insight into how entrepreneurs make sense of their entrepreneurial identity. From an analysis of images drawn by entrepreneurs and accompanying interviews, metaphors emerge that are much more complex, nuanced and messy than their linguistic equivalents. The images allow the entrepreneurs to isolate salient meanings about being in business, but refrain from simplifying what remains a multifaceted and at times contradictory and paradoxical experience.

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### Executive summary

In this paper we seek to understand how entrepreneurs use metaphor to make sense of their entrepreneurial identity. Metaphors play an integral role in how entrepreneurs negotiate the ambiguity and uncertainty of their environment and create meaning out of their experiences (Dodd, 2002; Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). Existing studies have tended to concentrate on the metaphors commonly used by others (e.g. the media, academics, general public) to describe and understand the entrepreneurship process, and have shown that the entrepreneur is often metaphorically framed as a heroic figure motivated by assertive self-concern and striving for economic prosperity (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005; Ogbor, 2000). Our study is of entrepreneurs' own use of metaphor to express their identity. A grounding concern was the ubiquity of standard 'heroic' metaphors of entrepreneurship that do not account for the fact that there are potentially multiple salient founder identities that evolve and change over time (Cardon et al., 2009; Mathias and Williams, 2017; Powell and Baker, 2014). Metaphors can generate new connections and novel insights but overly pursuing one dominant metaphor can also conceal meaning by emphasising certain interpretations and restricting our ability to gain an alternative view (Kemp, 2016; Morgan, 2006; Weick, 1979).

In this paper we begin from the theoretical perspective that metaphor 'is not a figure of speech, but a model of thought' (Lakoff, 1993, p. 210; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) which means that while metaphors are often equated with linguistic metaphors, metaphor is not necessarily grounded in words. Rather metaphor is the mapping of meaning from the familiar to the less familiar, and as such metaphors can be expressed in modalities other than speech and writing. In this paper, we seek to bypass preponderant linguistic metaphors of entrepreneurship by asking entrepreneurs to use drawings to illustrate their entrepreneurial identity. Our sample of 20 high-growth entrepreneurs was asked to draw a visual image of their business venture and were

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interviewed about the subsequent images approximately two to four weeks later. Since our aim was to access alternative insights to what language alone can provide, this time lapse was important to help avoid the phenomenon of ‘verbal overshadowing’ which occurs when participants are encouraged to frame visual experiences into linguistic terms too soon resulting in reduced visual insight (Kantrowitz, 2012; Chin and Schooler, 2008). The semiotic analysis of the images and the textual analysis of the interviews were conducted separately and then both sets of findings were integrated (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

What emerges is a sense of entrepreneurial identity that is quite different to the heroic individualistic ideal, instead the entrepreneurs expressed identities associated with continuous and sometimes precarious movement; nurturance and caregiving; and transformation and growth through ‘rootedness’ in the wider community. Their entrepreneurial identities were neither singular nor fixed and the images and accompanying verbal descriptions evoked many competing even paradoxical identities. We argue that working with identity fluidity is an important capacity of being entrepreneurial and as such entrepreneurship cannot be understood through one singular or dominant metaphor (Morgan, 2006; Weick, 1979). Our study is the first in the sphere of entrepreneurship to take ‘drawing’ seriously as a methodology. It builds on and adapts this methodology from drawing-based research in the field of organization studies, adding to and extending this tradition (Vince and Broussine, 1996; Zuboff, 1988). In terms of practical implications entrepreneurs themselves or those who work in supporting entrepreneurs can use the drawing technique described in this paper as a means to help entrepreneurs consciously and deeply reflect on their experience of entrepreneurship (Feinstein, 1982; Schön, 1983). This can allow them to surface and ‘stay with’ the tensions inherent in the entrepreneurial process while at the same time making better sense of their realities, clarifying their thoughts and guiding their future actions.

## 1. Introduction

Metaphors ground the creation of entrepreneurial identities by bringing concepts from different, better known domains into conversation with the ambiguous experience of being an entrepreneur (Dodd, 2002; Perren and Adkin, 1997). Existing studies have tended to take a macro focus, combining metaphors used to depict entrepreneurs from a range of sources (including media journalists, lay people, and entrepreneurial support agencies) (Dodd and de Konig, 2015; Koiranen, 1995; Nicholson and Anderson, 2005). These studies show entrepreneurship being collectively and culturally constituted through metaphors that portray the entrepreneur ‘within a heroic mould (warrior, superman, explorer, battler)’ where ‘mythical, magical and supernatural imagery is evoked: wolfish charmers, wizards and supernatural gurus’ (Down and Warren, 2008, p. 7). Metaphors influence the connections we make but also the connections we don’t make, and by emphasising certain interpretations, dominant metaphors tends to force others into the background resulting in partial understandings (Kemp, 2016; Näslund and Perner, 2012). Existing work on entrepreneurial identity has shown there are potentially multiple salient founder identities (Cardon et al., 2009; Powell and Baker, 2014). For example, Fauchart and Gruber (2011) identify founders who aligned with the prototypical ‘heroic’ entrepreneurial identity focused on economic self-interest (what they term the ‘darwinian’ founder identity), but they also found entrepreneurs’ identities being framed around supporting and being supported by a particular community (the communitarian) and advancing a particular cause for the benefit of society (the missionary). Moreover, such identities need not be mutually exclusive, over time and within a venture different identities can be experienced (Mathias and Williams, 2017). Therefore, while some entrepreneurs may identify with common heroic metaphors of entrepreneurship, they may not reflect the experience of many entrepreneurs and this dominant perspective may be limiting insight into the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial identity (Dodd, 2002; Morgan, 2006).

In this paper we examine the metaphors entrepreneurs themselves use to make sense of their experiences of being in business. It is often assumed metaphors are primarily verbal without due consideration being given to the possibility of accessing metaphors in different modalities (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009). Here we argue that visual metaphors, especially through the modality of drawing, have the quality of being thoughtfully created in a way that is direct and personal, without the resulting meaning ever being considered definitive or complete. We argue these drawings and the accompanying discussions with the entrepreneurs about the images, offer a unique insight into the metaphors entrepreneurs use to interpret and understand their world and make sense of their entrepreneurial identity (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010; Philips et al., 2014). As the backdrop for our investigation, we draw on the theoretical perspective that metaphor is ‘not a figure of speech, but a model of thought’ (Lakoff, 1993, p. 210) as what constitute metaphors are not any particular words or expressions but rather a mapping across conceptual domains, from the familiar source domain to the less familiar target domain. We propose researchers should think about metaphors independently from a specific modality, instead seeing metaphor as not just a matter of language but of thought, understanding and communication. This offers the opportunity to move beyond an unreflective use of dominant linguistic metaphors of entrepreneurial identity that potentially conceal as much as they reveal about entrepreneurship (Morgan, 2006).

We use a sample of twenty entrepreneurs, whose ventures were identified as ‘high growth’, taking part in a development programme at a leading UK University. We focus on so-called ‘high growth’ firms, those assumed to be the epitome of what entrepreneurial businesses should be both in academic literature and government policy (Gundry and Welsch, 2001). The entrepreneurs were asked to draw an image exemplifying or evoking their business venture and were subsequently interviewed about their images. The aim was to allow a more ‘nuanced depiction of lived realities, while simultaneously empowering the research participants and placing the agency literally in their own hands’ (Literat, 2013, p. 12). The findings show little evidence of the ‘entrepreneur as hero’ metaphor, or in Fauchart and Gruber’s (2011) terms the ‘darwinian’ founder identity. Instead the metaphors elicited reflected the entrepreneurs’ sense of social embeddedness and their ventures as cooperative endeavours, evoking ‘communitarian’ or ‘missionary’ identities (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). The valence of the images (whether the images had

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