

EXPERT CAPITAL AND PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY: FEMALE-RUN ENTREPRENEURIAL VENTURE SIGNALING AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown female entrepreneurs face unique barriers to entrepreneurial success such as procuring funding and being perceived as credible. Limited past theory has addressed how these challenges can be met effectively by female-run entrepreneurial ventures. As a result, effective strategies for female entrepreneurs to meet them are unclear. To address the need for research in this area, we utilize signaling theory to guide an empirical study utilizing panel study data based on 711 entrepreneurial ventures (334 female-run; 377 male-run). We examine signals perceived by outsiders pertaining to risk preference, legitimacy, and social capital of female-run ventures and relate them to venture funding, net worth, and longevity outcomes. Results, based on non-parametric analyses and statistical modeling, suggest *expert capital* (social capital from experts) leads to perceptions of higher legitimacy and funding success for female-run ventures.

Female-run entrepreneurial ventures have generated value and fueled innovation on community and global levels. In recent years, the increased presence of female-run entrepreneurial ventures has had a remarkable impact on employment and on business environments. For example, such firms now comprise approximately 25-33% of all businesses in the formal business economy worldwide and are reasoned to play an even larger role in

informal socioeconomic and market systems (NFWBO, 2001). Research in this area has increased considerably as scholars and policymakers have begun to devote greater attention to understanding and supporting female entrepreneurs (Gundry, Ben-Yoseph, & Posig, 2002).

Examinations of entrepreneurship in gendered contexts have revealed barriers that constrain the establishment and growth of ventures run by females (Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998). Such barriers include access to credit and financial capital, technology and intellectual property, new customers, perceptions of legitimacy, and critical market or business information (Greve & Salaff, 2003). Although both male and female entrepreneurs are unable to communicate all relevant knowledge about their ventures to outsiders (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001), females face unique challenges, particularly regarding perceived legitimacy (Finnegan, 2000). In contexts where legitimacy is questionable, social capital (e.g., key relationships with other individuals) is a resource particularly valuable to entrepreneurs as it sends signals of credibility and potential value (Busenitz, Fiet, & Moeser, 2005; Murphy, 2004).

Our purpose in this paper is to examine the effects of a particular kind of social capital deriving from relations with experts or individuals with considerable experience that is highly relevant to the venture. We refer to this form of social capital as *expert capital*. We build on prior theory and develop hypotheses for the effects of expert capital on performance outcomes of funding success, net worth of venture, longevity in female-run ventures. Our study draws from signaling theory (Busenitz et al., 2005; Deeds, Decarolis, & Coombs, 1997) and is intended to shed light on the roles of expert capital and perceived legitimacy in female entrepreneurship contexts. This study represents the first large-scale research using signaling theory to explain the dynamics of female entrepreneurship contexts.

The features of gendered entrepreneurial contexts include female conformity to social norms, values, and expectations, which can all be signaled to outsiders by female-run ventures (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Stuart, Hoang & Hybels, 1999). As such features appear to influence the viability and performance of entrepreneurial ventures (Riding & Swift, 1990), signaling theory is one framework for explaining that influence.

SIGNALING THEORY AND FEMALE-RUN VENTURES

Signaling theory in entrepreneurial contexts describes signs of viability, competence, and potential value of a venture as they are perceived by observers amidst uncertainty (Busenitz et al., 2005). The theory is based on the role of information signals (Deeds et al., 1997). In entrepreneurial contexts, the full set of information that is required to evaluate future venture success is never at hand. Thus, observers of a venture, which include investors, potential customers, partners, and team members, utilize signals to navigate the asymmetry between what they know and what they need to know (Spence, 1974; Janney & Folta, 2003). Signals convey information about a venture to outsiders. If signaled information about a venture is unfavorable, it can increase equity costs, dissuade potential customers, or halt funding processes (Busenitz et al., 2005). Signaling theory is concerned with the perceptions of entrepreneurs and whether they are expected to succeed based on perceived legitimacy in social contexts (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Moran & Ghoshal, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Experienced observers, such as venture capitalists (VCs), assume that perceptions are frequently based on specious signaled information that is not actual. Thus, it is important for ventures to signal value to outsiders as they become increasingly viable (Prasad, Bruton & Vozikis, 2000: 168). With positive information signals, observers can arrive at favorable perceptions similar to those based on due diligence with reduced time and effort (Harvey & Lusch, 1995).

Prior research on female-run ventures delineates a process emergence, growth, and eventual viability. This research has shown that, from a gendered perspective, the entrepreneurial process includes particularly complex arrays of motivators, propensities, and intentions. For example, research has shown strategy formulations of female-run ventures to be particularly complex because female entrepreneurs recognize unique circumstances around information seeking and planning (Gundry & Welsch, 2001). However, as there is a paucity of theory to explain those circumstances, empirical examinations that focus solely on female-run ventures are limited and the body of research is stratified. Existing work does not draw from a base that is commonly amenable to gendered contexts. In what follows, we review concepts of risk preference, perceived legitimacy, and social capital and explain the roles of those factors based on signaling theory. Finally, we develop hypotheses to guide empirical examination of a sample of female-run ventures.

Preference for Risk

Individual risk preference consists of a general desire to pursue or avoid situations when the eventual outcome is unknown and cannot be inferred (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). It is a direct determinant of risk propensity, which is the expressed tendency to prefer risk in particular decision contexts. When faced with different situations, individuals exhibit different behaviors in response to risk. As well, different individuals in the same situation can and do exhibit different risk preferences (Mullins & Forlani, 2005; Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). Risk preferences correspond to a kind of disposition which, if combined with contextual factors, can forecast attitudes about risk in context. In this paper, we use the terms risk preference in relation to our empirical measure and risk propensity as it is used more commonly in the literature. Past research has hypothesized that entrepreneurs have higher risk propensities than non-

entrepreneurs, but the results of those studies have been middling (Brockhaus, 1980; Busenitz, 1999; Palich & Bagby, 1995). Instead, research indicates that context plays an important role in the risk-taking behavior (Delmar, 1996; Hogarth, 1987; March & Shapira, 1987).

When it comes to the risk propensities in gendered contexts, research findings are mixed. Early research on risk-taking indicated that women are more risk averse than men in organizational and business situations (Pettigrew, 1958). Whereas that early research reflected general notions, recent research provides evidence that women are not more risk-averse than men in specific situations, such as when making financing decisions (Schubert, Brown, Gysler, & Brachinger, 1999). Other recent research offers evidence that women are less likely to turn to banks for financing due to risk-aversion and also less likely to assume debt (Chaganti, 1986; Collerett & Aubry, 1990). Still other research reports no difference between risk-taking propensities of men and women in business and entrepreneurial situations (Masters & Meier, 1988). Although the relation between gender and risk is unclear, risky decisions are certainly germane to entrepreneurial activity. As indicated by the prevalence of research supported by the Office of Advocacy, the role of gender in entrepreneurial contexts continues to inspire research on female-run entrepreneurial ventures (Small Business Administration, 2005).

One stream of research suggests risk preference may differ in females not because of innate characteristics, but because of female perceptions of their circumstances in entrepreneurial contexts. As mentioned, female entrepreneurs do appear to face less favorable business conditions, such as higher interest rates, stricter co-signatory requirements for loans. As such, there is evidence those external conditions compel women to rationally seek equity financing instead of debt financing, which may be misinterpreted as an internal tendency to avoid risk (Chaganti, DeCarolis, & Deeds, 1995). By showing that women pursue low-risk financial

strategies because of unique obstacles, this work qualifies person-centric entrepreneurship research targeting gender.

Taking a signaling theory perspective in research on female-run ventures can help mitigate the tradeoff between internal and external locus of risk preference. The approach holds that female entrepreneurs, when reflecting comfort with risk, send signals to observers that they are able to make sound entrepreneurship and management decisions in high risk venture contexts. In circumstances where possible outcomes include a positive funding decision from an investor, whether preference comes from person-centric traits or calculated decisions is less important than the investor's perception of the relevant signals. Simply put, to the degree observers perceive risk preference as important to the viability of a venture, they are more likely to see that venture as potentially viable.

Risk preference can influence the perceived legitimacy of female entrepreneurs to the extent it fosters confidence and self-efficacy. Krueger and Dickson (1994), for example, show an increase in perceived self-efficacy to be associated with higher risk taking by affecting perceptions of external opportunities and threats. Positive self-efficacy beliefs may also signal to potential investors and other observers that a female entrepreneur is capable of doing what she claims she and her venture will do.

Perceived Legitimacy

Being perceived as a legitimate business-person with credibility can serve as a resource for promoting a venture's viability, especially during early and growth stages (Suchman, 1995). Information signals indicating credibility and legitimacy are instrumental to procuring resources (Busenitz et al., 2005). They can herald relevant industry experience, relationships with key industry players, access to information, and possession of expert knowledge. Male and female

entrepreneurs have varying affordances in terms of these dimensions. There is evidence female entrepreneurs are more highly conscious of threats to legitimacy (Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998). As a result, their intentions to establish entrepreneurial ventures can seem less strong than male counterparts. Beliefs about one's abilities have also been shown to affect entrepreneurial intentions, opportunity perception, and risk taking (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994, Krueger & Dickson, 1994; Wilson, Marlino, & Kickul, 2004). Perceived legitimacy of female entrepreneurs is liable to affect their sense of affordances and drive lower self efficacy, thus sending information signals indicating lower levels of confidence in their venture.

The legitimacy of a female entrepreneur signaled to outside observers is tied to the values and other aspects of the context in which she is functioning. Where females have not occupied a entrepreneurial roles as frequently as males, signals of legitimacy are difficult to convey to outsiders (Eagly, 2005). Inability to convey signals that one is legitimate is not related to whether one is aware of external barriers or less confident or capable. Thus, from a signaling theory perspective, environmental logic determines, to a large degree, whether female-run entrepreneurial ventures are perceived as legitimate. Perceived legitimacy thus does not derive solely from person centric factors, but from the overall set of values shared by members in a social system.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to connections with other individuals that provide access to various kinds of resources. It includes structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions. The structural dimension includes interaction processes with other individuals and is germane to perceptions of legitimacy (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In this dimension, the location of an entrepreneur in a social network provides various advantages by virtue of their level of access the various areas of

the social system in which they are embedded (Granovetter, 1983). Some entrepreneurs, for example, are able to use informal personal friends and potential customers in addition to consultants and venture capitalists to obtain valuable information or access information and financial support. Other entrepreneurs, with less social ties, are not able to procure such resources (Witt, 2004). The value of social capital, once procured, has been shown to be relatively equal for male and female entrepreneurs in a variety of industry sectors. The number of contacts appears to be less important to venture viability than having the right contacts, such as industry experts (Liao & Welsch, 2005).

Social capital research pertaining to the viability of woman-run ventures offers middling results. Some studies find no relation between female entrepreneurial success and social capital (Carsrud, Gaglio, & Olm, 1987). Other studies target specific social activities through phases of venture development in network contexts. For example, Greve and Salaff (2003) reported that female entrepreneurs use different kinds of social capital across entrepreneurial stages. Though informal contacts were found to be instrumental in all phases, women generally used such contacts much more than men, including even those men who inherited their business. Other research has found reliable relations for all types of entrepreneurs between information signals and innovation activity in social networks (Julien, Andriambelason, & Ramangalahy, 2004).

A signaling theory perspective on social capital can help address some of the gaps conceptually. The content of information signals to observers varies in terms of richness and relevance (Busenitz et al., 2005) whereas there is evidence that certain kinds of social contacts are more valuable than others to venture viability. As such, female-run ventures may send stronger and more positive information signals when they are socially linked with industry experts and high-credibility others. Research has shown that ventures that receive advice from

business advisors and industry experts incur higher growth and performance (Berry, Sweeting, & Goto, 2006). As explained, signaling theory posits in such circumstances that information signals to outside parties are important to the perceived legitimacy of the entrepreneurial venture. Thus, observers external to a venture may receive stronger information signals to allay information asymmetry, including the perceived legitimacy of a female entrepreneur, when experts help makeup the social capital of the venture.

Our review of risk preference, perceived legitimacy, and social capital in female-run venture contexts utilized a signaling theory foundation. In what follows we build on that foundation and develop hypotheses for how the key variables relate to entrepreneurial outcomes and describe an examination of expected effects.

Development of Hypotheses

A signaling theory approach pertains to how observers perceive and judge female-run entrepreneurial ventures. Investors, alliance partners, and other observers evaluate signals reflecting venture characteristics (e.g., founder management style, expertise, legitimacy) instead of those characteristics themselves because it saves time and resources (Busenitz et al., 2005). For entrepreneurs, therefore, information signals sent to potential investors and customers can lead to varying levels of eventual venture funding, net worth, and longevity. For female entrepreneurs in particular, who incur unique circumstances and are perceived differently than male entrepreneurs, signaling theory is especially applicable. In what follows we present an empirical study integrating those notions. The undertaking examined relations between antecedents of risk preference, perceived legitimacy, and social capital with female-run venture outcomes of venture funding, net worth, and longevity.

Past research has long cast decision-making in risky circumstances as part of entrepreneurship (Knight, 1935). From the standpoint of observers, inferences about actual risk preference of an entrepreneur based on signals are important. For female entrepreneurs, who have been posited as more risk averse than male entrepreneurs, perceptions of risk based on information signals are particularly salient. Thus, to first establish the role of risk preference in female-run venture performance, we hypothesize that risk preference leads to venture outcomes of formal funding success, net worth, and longevity.

Hypothesis 1_a: Female entrepreneurs preferring high risk procure venture funding.

Hypothesis 1_b: Female entrepreneurs preferring high risk realize high net worth ventures.

Hypothesis 1_c: Female entrepreneurs preferring high risk incur greater venture longevity.

The perceived legitimacy of female-run ventures affects their viability and success because outsiders such as potential investors and customers are critical resources. Such outside individuals will not invest or patronize a venture that they do not perceive as legitimate. Thus, when a female-run entrepreneurial venture is not perceived as legitimate, they are less likely to procure formal funding and therefore more likely to absorb high startup costs that hinder net worth and fail sooner. We thus hypothesize that perceptions of legitimacy by individuals external to the venture leads to outcomes of formal funding success, net worth, and longevity.

Hypothesis 2_a: Female entrepreneurs perceived as legitimate procure venture funding.

Hypothesis 2_b: Female entrepreneurs perceived as legitimate realize high net worth ventures.

Hypothesis 2_c: Female entrepreneurs perceived as legitimate incur greater venture longevity.

Social capital is important to the success of female-run entrepreneurial ventures because it provides access to information and affordances that allow entrepreneurs to take options otherwise not available to them. The benefits of social capital can include funding and entrepreneurial venture performance outcomes. In the case of female-run ventures, social capital can serve to mitigate some of the unique circumstances facing entrepreneurs regarding their

perceived legitimacy. Therefore, we hypothesize that perceived legitimacy leads to female-run venture outcomes of formal venture funding success, net worth, and longevity.

Hypothesis 3_a: Female entrepreneurs with high social capital procure venture funding.

Hypothesis 3_b: Female entrepreneurs with high social capital realize high net worth ventures.

Hypothesis 3_c: Female entrepreneurs with high social capital incur greater venture longevity.

Recent work suggests that a lack of social capital from experts can also reduce the credibility signals offered by entrepreneurs (Berry et al., 2006; Busenitz et al., 2005).

Particularly in gendered contexts, female entrepreneurs are sensitive to being perceived as not having legitimacy (Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998). We thus reason that aspects of the relational dimension of social capital pertaining to expert content (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) are especially effective for enabling female-run ventures to send strong information signals instrumental to valued outcomes.

Female entrepreneurs have been found to rely on informal contacts more frequently than male entrepreneurs (Greve & Salaff, 2003). Female-run entrepreneurial ventures are also known to face less favorable venture funding circumstances (Riding & Swift, 1990). Studies of social networks show that relationships with experts can be informal (e.g., mentors) as well as formal (e.g., paid consultants) in social contexts (Granovetter, 1983). On these grounds, we parsed venture funding into informal (e.g., friends, family) versus formal (e.g., banks, venture capitalists) types to examine both kinds of linkages. This rationale leads directly to a model encompassing a set of five hypotheses (Figure 1).

Hypothesis 4_a: Female entrepreneurs with expert capital procure greater formal funding.

Hypothesis 4_b: Female entrepreneurs with expert capital procure greater informal funding.

Hypothesis 4_c: Female entrepreneurs with expert capital incur greater venture longevity.

Hypothesis 4_d: Female entrepreneurs with expert capital are perceived as more legitimate.

Hypothesis 4_e: Female entrepreneurs perceived as legitimate procure greater informal funding.

Insert Figure 1 about here

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

The Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics (PSED: projects.isr.umich.edu/psed) involves over 100 entrepreneurship scholars and researchers (Reynolds, 2000). The PSED built on earlier research at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (Curtin, 1982; Reynolds & White 1993) and examines the entrepreneurship process with a view toward comprehensive description and explanation (Shaver, Carter, Gartner, & Reynolds, 2001).

Compilation of the PSED dataset began with a random telephone survey of 64,622 adults in the United States. Cases had to meet three criteria to qualify for inclusion: (1) the individual had to expect to own all or part of the venture, (2) start-up activity (e.g., renting space, hiring employees) must have occurred during the past 12 months, and (3) the venture could not have generated income to cover operating expenses for more than three months.

Sample

Data were provided by various individuals associated with entrepreneurial ventures across time (Reynolds & Curtin, 2004: 468). The usable PSED sample consisted of 1,261 cases and included a mail survey (Shaver, et al., 2001) that provided primary data for this research. Of the 711 cases reporting starting an NBV on their own, 334 (47%) indicated female and 377 (53%) indicate male as their gender. We targeted these cases and coded them for gender.

Study variables were operationalized by PSED survey items. The independent variables (IVs) included risk preference, legitimacy, and social capital. The dependent variables (DVs,

outcomes) included venture funding, net worth and longevity. The wordings of the items and response options appear in the section reporting study results.

Nature of Study Data. The PSED data feature turbulent variation patterns that necessitate careful consideration when conducting empirical examinations. Ignoring these considerations will lead to violations of common analysis assumptions and specious findings in empirical work (Murphy, 2004). For instance, of 132 valid responses for venture net worth, 29 of these (27.4%) were \$0, the lowest value on the scale. The remaining variable scores were distributed erratically and included values greater than ten standard deviations above the mean, yielding an extremely skewed and kurtotic distribution. Whereas a skewness statistic value more than twice its standard error (SE) indicates a departure from normality (SPSS, 2002), the skewness statistic for the venture net worth scores was 6.56 (SE = .235); a 27.9 multiplier difference and evidence of extreme skewness.

Assuming random selection, the central limit theorem holds that samples of sufficient size ($n > 30$) tend to approximate normal frequency distributions regardless of the population distribution (Winer, Brown, & Michels, 1991: 21). The normal distribution is vital to parametric statistics based on least squared estimates such as multiple regression and analysis of variance (Hays, 1994: 244). Departures from normality and outliers jeopardize the conclusion validity of such tests (Tabachnik & Fidell, 1996: 327-330). We responded to violations of normality via dichotomous recoding (using median splits) in light of statistical analysis requirements. Most study variables lent themselves directly to dichotomization. For example, the item for risk preference queried directly which of two more or less risky NBV options was preferable to the entrepreneur.

Statistical Analyses

Our study data required a statistical method robust to violations of normality. The issue is important because such violations have been cited as especially relevant to entrepreneurship research due to the volatile nature of entrepreneurship data (Robinson & Hofer, 1997).

Distribution free (i.e., non-parametric) statistics offer a method to avoid violations of parametric analysis assumptions (Murphy & Shrader, 2004; Robinson, 1996). As a flexible analysis technique (Siegel & Castellan, 1988: 3), nonparametric methods do not rely on reference to a functional form such as a population-derived univariate or multivariate normal distributions of scores. Instead, they utilize sample-specific multinomial distributions to forecast membership in theoretically-derived categories. The assumptions of non-parametric methods are general and satisfied in most settings, whereas violations of parametric analysis assumptions are common and bear directly on the validity of research results (Hardle, 1994: 4).

One way to avoid violations of analysis assumptions is to execute logarithmic transformations of variables in attempts to yield the normalized score distributions that allow parametric tests. For the PSED data used in our study, however, the amount of missing data frustrated such attempts. Thus, the greater capacity of a non-parametric approach to handle such missing data (Hardle, 1994: 13) warranted and justified our decision to safeguard conclusion validity by dichotomizing variables and conducting non-parametric frequency analyses employing χ^2 test statistics.

A non-parametric approach does not require the use of weightings to correct for sample differences from the population (Curtin & Reynolds, 2004: 492-493). As explained above, unlike the logic of parametric approaches, the logic of non-parametric approaches does not statistically relate sample data to population data based on the nature of the sample distribution.

Whereas sample weightings are thus required logically for parametric analysis approaches, there is no logical or mathematical reason for sample-specific non-parametric analyses to employ weights for results to better reflect the population from which the sample data were drawn.

RESULTS

We report study results in two stages corresponding to hypotheses 1-3 and hypotheses 4a-4e. The first stage examined variables with male and female comparisons. The second stage integrated expert capital as a variable. Table 1 presents verbiage from the items and response options, recodings, and frequency counts for all variables used in both stages.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Tests of Analysis Assumptions

The frequency analyses required cell frequencies to be independent. Examination of Table 1 suggested that no case contributed values to multiple cells in our design and no count totals exceeded valid sample size. For purposes of statistical power, our analyses required a multiplier difference of five between sample size and the number of cells (Tabachnik & Fidell, 1996: 243). As well, expected cell frequencies based on two-way associations had to exceed five (Milligan, 1980). Due to a small total number of variable levels ($k = 16$) combined with sample size ($n = 711; 334; 377$), none of the χ^2 tests violated these assumptions. These observations supported frequency analyses using χ^2 test statistics as an acceptable analysis method.

Tests of Effects

We first executed three analysis runs (overall, female, male). For all cases ($\chi^2 = 3.61; p = .039$) and for men entrepreneurs only ($\chi^2 = 2.78; p = .069$), high perceived legitimacy related

positively to venture longevity. Perceived legitimacy had no relation ($\chi^2 = .804; p = .246$) with venture longevity for female entrepreneurs and all other tests were non-significant. Thus, we found support only for hypothesis 3_c in the case of men entrepreneurs. Table 2 presents results for all three analysis runs in study stage one.

 Insert Table 2 about here

Next, we executed three parallel analysis runs to assess the relations illustrated Figure 1. For female entrepreneurs only, high expert capital was found to relate positively ($\chi^2 = 3.43; p = .061$) to formal venture funding. High expert capital was also found to relate positively to perceived legitimacy for all entrepreneurs in general ($\chi^2 = 8.84; p = .003$) and for women ($\chi^2 = 6.63; p = .008$) as well as men ($\chi^2 = 3.10; p = .057$) in particular. High perceived legitimacy, in turn, related positively ($\chi^2 = 3.81; p = .070$) to informal venture funding for women only. Thus, we found support for hypotheses 4_a, 4_d, and 4_e. Table 3 presents the results of study stage two for all three analysis runs.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Statistical modeling. We examined the model fit of Figure 1 with sample data to provide further evidence for the validity of study findings. A non-significant test statistic ($\chi^2 = 10.07; df = 5; p = .073$) indicated that departure from sample data was not significant. Drawing from research on model fit (Wheaton, Muthén, Alwin & Summers, 1977), we calculated χ^2/df as a discrepancy index and found the ratio of 2.01, indicating the model reflected sample data well

(Byrne, 1989: 55; Carmines & McIver, 1981: 80). Finally, an RMSEA statistic of .038 indicated close fit of the model to the data in relation to its degrees of freedom (Browne & Cudek, 1993).

DISCUSSION

We examined multiple antecedents and outcomes for the purpose of generating theory-driven empirical findings that illustrate the specific context of female-run entrepreneurial ventures. By incorporating a relevant conceptual framework, our findings hold heuristic value for explaining a complex set of variable interrelations. In what follows, we discuss our findings in conjunction with past work, giving special attention to what female entrepreneurs can do to procure resources, send signals of legitimacy to the business community, and achieve entrepreneurial success.

The Role of Expert Capital

Social capital for female-run entrepreneurial ventures comes frequently in the form of social contacts that facilitate resource procurement (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Female entrepreneurs who rely on expert capital are perceived as more legitimate. Thus, expert capital procures an intangible resource that can be *essential* to NBV outcomes. Intangible resources can include information for entrepreneurs to recognize opportunities (Hills, Lumpkin, & Singh, 1997), support for decision making (Bruderl & Preisendorfer, 1998) and, as found by our study, perceived legitimacy (Deeds et al., 1997). Our study thus shows it is critical for women to utilize such contacts, thus contrasting with research describing such contacts as having little effect on outcomes (Carsrud et al., 1987).

Expert capital promotes perceived legitimacy because it brings the intelligence, education, and reputation of experienced professionals to bear on critical issues facing an entrepreneurial venture. We argue that procuring expert capital is particularly important to the

legitimacy of female entrepreneurs. Our findings suggest the presence of expert capital sends signals that female and male entrepreneurs are equally serious contributors to the business community. Expert capital relationships can be seen as “conduits” through which female-run ventures signal to the business community they are reputable and legitimate as well as procure additional social capital.

Our study replicates research showing expert capital provides access to tangible resources and helps explain financing patterns of female-run ventures. We offer evidence that female entrepreneurs with expert capital are more likely to procure funding through formal channels such as banks or venture capitalists. Interestingly, current work in the area shows that fast-growing female-run ventures are significantly more likely (32% versus 21%) than male-run counterparts to rely on informal sources such credit cards for funding (NFWBO, 2001). As well, they are less likely to receive commercial bank loans than their male-run counterparts (39% versus 52%). Quoting Teri Cavanagh, primary underwriter of the NFWBO and Director of the Women Entrepreneurs Connection at FleetBoston Financial (now Bank of America):

This reliance on personal debt is holding women business owners back. This study clearly indicates that women who understand how to leverage debt and equity have a far greater chance of becoming owners of fast-growing – or gazelle – businesses.

To this point, our findings suggest procuring expert capital is an effective way for female entrepreneurs to gain understanding of how to leverage debt and equity. Such procurement is important to sending signals of legitimacy in business communities.

The likelihood of entrepreneurial success can be increased by the nature and structure of an entrepreneurial network. Structural holes, for example, are amenable to opportunity identification as they are easier to manipulate when seeking resources. Because venture funding

appears to be associated with expert capital, our study offers at least one way for female entrepreneurs to seek venture funding.

The Role of Legitimacy

Our results for model fit revealed that legitimacy can function as an antecedent of informal venture funding for female entrepreneurs. Drawing from Burt (1982), informal contacts such as family or friends are more likely to relate positively to entrepreneurs. However, our results show informal contacts may be especially more likely to support female entrepreneurs when they are perceived as credible. Thus, signs of legitimacy may build confidence in informal contacts and sway them to invest in the venture independently of the informal relationship. Whereas family and friends are in fact personal relations who know the entrepreneur well, our study shows signals of legitimacy are still important. This clear evidence of the “extra hurdle” woman entrepreneurs need to clear when seeking funding goes beyond the informal relationship (Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, & Hart, 2004). Although informal contacts can offer support, it seems woman entrepreneurs still face the potential obstacle of establishing legitimacy in the eyes of informal contacts when it comes to procuring funding.

Like past research, we did not find clear results for the impact of risk preference on entrepreneurial outcomes. We believe risk is a relative concept and tied to idiosyncratic circumstances of individual entrepreneurs. As Chaganti et al. (1995) show, an entrepreneur incurs risk for internal and external reasons. In light of such variation, our results may not indicate relations involving risk preference because the survey item did not capture the variable fully. Theory-driven research on risk in female entrepreneurship contexts perhaps stands to make significant discoveries in this area using qualitative research.

Another aspect of our findings for risk preference is consistent with the past work on risk taking showing evidence of context-dependence (Hogarth, 1987; March & Shapira, 1987; Mullins & Forlani, 2005; Slovic, Fischhoff & Lichtenstein, 1982). This work explains entrepreneurial behavior in terms of risk perception (not risk propensity) and cognitive heuristics and biases (Busenitz & Barney, 1997; Busenitz, 1999; Keh, Foo, & Lim, 2002; Palich & Bagby, 1995; Simon, Houghton, & Aquino, 2000). Risk is inherently subjective by virtue of its cognitive processes and social comparisons. As PSED data do not capture such cognitive and social dimensions of risk, it is likely our results do not show clear evidence of an effect on entrepreneurial outcomes. Another explanation, particularly concerning the role of legitimacy and risk preference on entrepreneurial outcomes stems from the “illusion” of greater risk-taking that attaches itself to entrepreneurs (Janney & Dess, 2006). This kind of perceptual bias is acute when an entrepreneur’s specialized knowledge is difficult to observe. Thus, knowledge asymmetry shifts risk perceptions and can diminish the role of person-centric variables such as risk preference. Specialized knowledge is essential to entrepreneurial discovery and opportunity recognition (Murphy, Liao, & Welsch, 2006; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, the related information asymmetry can generate differences in risk perceptions and also affect the perceived legitimacy of the entrepreneur. Signals given by entrepreneurs in these contexts can contribute to reducing information asymmetry, building legitimacy and qualifying perceptions related to risk. Our findings in this area build on Aldrich and Fiol (1994) who explored information asymmetry and legitimacy in emerging industries. Specifically, our findings suggest the same issues are faced by female entrepreneurs, who may have to share greater information than male entrepreneurs to build legitimacy or procure venture funding.

Study Limitations

Our empirical methods warrant a minor degree of care when interpreting study findings for practical application. First, by using a non-parametric analysis approach robust to data turbulence (Robinson & Hofer, 1997), our analyses are expected to have high validity. However, non-parametric analyses do not rely on reference to ideal functional forms as they are based on multinomial sample-specific distributions instead of population-derived univariate or multivariate normal distributions. Due to the rigor of the PSED data collection process (Reynolds, 2000), we believe the integrity of the sample data is intact and generalizations based on our findings are reasonable. Second, as we drew all data from the same large sample, there is risk of single-source bias confounding our results. We believe this limitation is also mitigated as the data collection was not a one-shot procedure and longitudinal. For example, venture longevity was a longitudinal outcome variable collected one year after the first wave (Shaver et al., 2001).

Future Direction

Forthcoming research can build on our study by focusing on differential roles of expert capital versus general social capital in the context of gendered entrepreneurship. Given our findings, future research could investigate how general social capital is instrumental to developing networks of expert capital (or vice-versa). One forum offering such potential is the “Promotion of Women Entrepreneurs” (ProWomEn) launched by the European Commission. ProWomEn includes contributions of representatives from twenty regions in European Union member countries. Collaborators share policies and actions to support women in entrepreneurship. Such projects also promise to foster networks of expert capital and social capital for female entrepreneurs.

Female entrepreneurs can use various techniques to establish networks. For example, they may seek other women more often than men for information, assistance, encouragement, or moral support (Smeltzer & Fann, 1989). Ironically, most of these kind of resources derive from occupations dominated by males, such as banking, accounting, and legal services. The results of our study regarding expert capital, therefore, beg the additional question of whether this important form of capital comes more frequently from men or women experts.

Our study suggests female entrepreneurs rely more than men on informal contacts. Tiggles and Green (1994) also found male business owners as more likely to utilize lawyers and CPAs for support, whereas women relied more on family and friends. As female entrepreneurs seek financial support, other kinds of concurrent support provided by informal contacts may remain important to them. Given our findings for legitimacy and informal funding, future research thus has an opportunity to clarify the role of legitimacy in seeking social support.

Finally, our results hold implications for public policy initiatives, such as entrepreneurial assistance programs supporting the development of social capital networks for female entrepreneurs. Programs such as ProWomEn or those offered by the Small Business Association are designed for start-up ventures like the ones targeted in our study. The results of our study offer information pertinent to supporting the overall mission of programs that assist female entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

Our undertaking is the first large-scale field study of female-run entrepreneurial ventures. Our results provide evidence useful for examining the unique circumstances of female entrepreneurs. We analyzed data carefully with a view toward the process of leveraging, developing, and growing resources for female-run ventures. Our findings point to the kinds of

steps aspiring or actual female entrepreneurs can take to chase entrepreneurial success more effectively. Such steps especially include procuring expert capital as means of signaling legitimacy and achieving funding success. Implications offer understanding of gender in modern economic systems; wherein recognizing market opportunities, surviving periods of upheaval, and enhancing venture growth and sustainability on a level playing field are essential for all entrepreneurs.

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Table 1. Recoded Study Variables Included in Analyses (N=711)

| | response option | count | percentage |
|-----------------------|--|-------|------------|
| Gender | | | |
| | Female | 334 | 47.0% |
| | Male | 377 | 53.0% |
| | total | 711 | |
| Risk Preference | | | |
| | little risk of failure and little likelihood of making you a millionaire | 407 | 82.4% |
| | more likely to make you a millionaire but much higher chance of going bankrupt | 87 | 17.6% |
| | | 494 | |
| Legitimacy | | | |
| | Taken seriously as a business person | 170 | 44.9% |
| | Not taken seriously as a business person | 203 | 55.1% |
| | total | 373 | |
| Social Capital | | | |
| | Opportunity related to relationships with other people | 288 | 68.1% |
| | Opportunity not related to relationships with others | 135 | 31.9% |
| | total | 423 | |
| Expert Social Capital | | | |
| | Absence of expert mentors was not a problem | 161 | 44.0% |
| | Absence of expert mentors was a problem | 205 | 56.0% |
| | total | 366 | |
| Venture Funding | | | |
| | High informal funding success (spouse, partner, friends, family - including employees' spouses, partners, friends, family) | 50 | 46.3% |
| | Low informal funding success (spouse, partner, friends, family - including employees' spouses, partners, friends, family) | 58 | 53.7% |
| | total | 108 | |
| | High formal funding success (employer, bank, venture capitalist) | 164 | 70.7% |
| | Low formal funding success (employer, bank, venture capitalist) | 68 | 29.3% |
| | total | 232 | |
| Venture Net Worth | | | |
| | Upper half (>\$10,000) | 56 | 42.4% |
| | Lower half (<\$10,000) | 76 | 57.6% |
| | total | 132 | |
| Venture Longevity | | | |
| | Active (one year later) | 274 | 62.6% |
| | Inactive (one year later) | 164 | 37.4% |
| | total | 438 | |

Table 2. Hypothesis Tests¹ for Overall ($n = 711$), Female ($n = 334$), and Male ($n = 377$)

| | | overall | | | female | | | male | | |
|------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------|------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| hypothesis | | valid n | χ^2 | p | valid n | χ^2 | p | valid n | χ^2 | p |
| Risk Preference | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal Venture Funding | 1 _a | 159 | .011 | .570 | 68 | .020 | .630 | 91 | .000 | .637 |
| Venture Net Worth | 1 _b | 114 | .067 | .491 | 59 | .203 | .451 | 55 | .138 | .532 |
| Venture Longevity | 1 _c | 345 | .033 | .483 | 158 | .001 | .585 | 187 | .066 | .472 |
| Perceived Legitimacy | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal Venture Funding | 2 _a | 101 | .401 | .339 | 45 | .616 | .318 | 56 | .000 | .620 |
| Venture Net Worth | 2 _b | 75 | .191 | .420 | 40 | .100 | .500 | 35 | .276 | .440 |
| Venture Longevity | 2 _c | 231 | 3.605 | .039 | 107 | .804 | .246 | 124 | 2.782 | .069 |
| Social Capital | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formal Venture Funding | 3 _a | 140 | .199 | .405 | 59 | .045 | .556 | 81 | .633 | .305 |
| Venture Net Worth | 3 _b | 97 | .099 | .548 | 49 | .183 | .451 | 48 | .879 | .295 |
| Venture Longevity | 3 _c | 296 | .689 | .241 | 137 | .001 | .571 | 159 | 1.214 | .176 |

¹significant one-tailed effects ($p < .10$) appear in bold

Figure 1
Expert Capital and Perceived Legitimacy: Hypothesized Relations with Outcomes

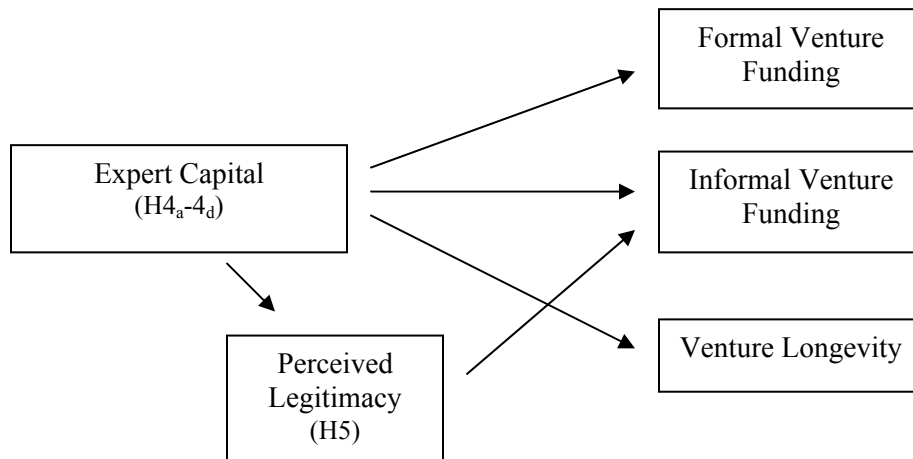


Table 3. Hypothesis Tests¹ for Overall (*n* = 711), Female (*n* = 334), and Male (*n* = 377)

| | | overall | | | female | | | male | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| hypothesis | | valid <i>n</i> | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | valid <i>n</i> | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | valid <i>n</i> | χ^2 | <i>p</i> | |
| Expert Capital | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Formal Venture Funding | 4 _a | 107 | .093 | .432 | 47 | 3.426 | .061 | 60 | 1.482 | .178 |
| | Informal Venture Funding | 4 _b | 49 | .299 | .401 | 18 | .012 | .648 | 31 | .797 | .306 |
| | Venture Longevity | 4 _c | 259 | .225 | .366 | 119 | 1.843 | .122 | 140 | .352 | .337 |
| | Perceived legitimacy | 4 _d | 243 | 8.842 | .003 | 116 | 6.629 | .008 | 127 | 3.101 | .057 |
| Perceived Legitimacy | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Informal Venture Funding | 4 _e | 53 | 1.128 | .220 | 20 | 3.810 | .070 | 33 | .017 | .590 |

¹significant one-tailed effects (*p* < .10) appear in bold