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Business accomplishments, gender and entrepreneurial self-image

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Abstract

Drawing on Bem's psychological theory of self-perception, this paper presents and tests a model that examines the impact of business accomplishments and gender on entrepreneurial self-image and explores the definition of entrepreneurship according to Vesper's entrepreneurial typology. Regression techniques are used to identify those business accomplishments that university alumni associate with self-perceptions of entrepreneurship. Experience as a small business person (founding, running, and/or owning a small business) most clearly predicts entrepreneurial self-image. Results also support predictions of both direct and indirect effects of gender as well as direct effects of education and business degree. Results of a separate expert panel study are used to rank business accomplishments according to degree of entrepreneurship. Results of both studies reveal stark contrasts in the implied definition of entrepreneurship between entrepreneurship experts (academic and practitioner alike) and the general business community (as represented by the alumni). This raises questions about the

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meaning of the term “entrepreneurship”, what the word “entrepreneur”, in particular, conveys to the general public, and the implications for practice and future research.

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1. Executive summary

The objective of the paper is to further our understanding of the concept of “entrepreneur”. It provides insight into the perception of the concept by members of the *general business community* (business people) and compares this perception to that of *entrepreneurship specialists* (academics, policymakers and other professionals in the field of entrepreneurship). The paper seeks an answer to the following research question: “Do certain characteristics of individuals influence their *entrepreneurial self-image*, i.e., the extent to which they perceive themselves to be entrepreneurs?” The primary set of characteristics, the respondent’s business accomplishments, is derived from a typology of entrepreneurial activities as proposed by Vesper (1999). The paper draws upon Bem’s (1972) psychological theory of self-perception, positing that behavior influences self-image. Gender is used as a second individual characteristic to predict entrepreneurial self-image. The study tests for both direct gender effects (controlling for entrepreneurial activity) and indirect gender effects (through entrepreneurial activity) on entrepreneurial self-image.

The relationships between gender, business accomplishments, and entrepreneurial self-image are investigated using an exploratory study based on a nonrandom sample of 207 alumni of a large Midwestern U.S. university. As a measure of entrepreneurial self-image, respondents are asked whether they would call themselves an entrepreneur. They are also asked which of a series of business accomplishments they had either done in the past or are currently doing, representing different aspects of Vesper’s entrepreneurial typology (i.e., Founder, Acquirer, Runner, Take-Off Artist, Turnaround Artist, Intrapreneur, Innovator, Industry Captain, and Champion) as well as selected additional categories (i.e., Owner, Service Provider, and Family Business). For further analysis, the number of business accomplishments is reduced to meaningful scales using principal components analysis.

Regression analysis is used to identify those business accomplishments that university alumni associate with self-perceptions of entrepreneurship. We find that entrepreneurial self-perception is influenced by certain business accomplishments defined in the literature as being entrepreneurial but not others. Business owners, founders, and small to mid-sized business managers (combined in this study’s Small Business Person scale) are most likely to describe themselves as entrepreneurs. On the other hand, Corporate Entrepreneurs (including intrapreneurs, innovators, and champions) are not likely to call themselves entrepreneurs.

A separate expert panel study is set up to rank business accomplishments according to degree of entrepreneurship. Comparing the results of the expert panel study to that of the alumni study reveals a divergence of opinion in what is entrepreneurial according to the

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