ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

# Tracing networked images of gendered entrepreneurship online

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the importance of visualization online and the gendering of entrepreneurship in contemporary neoliberal times. We investigate how understandings of entrepreneurship are shaped by online imagery. Applying visual critical methodology, we trace and analyze 248 commercial images. Our analytic work explicates the visual construction of male and female entrepreneurs, leading us to further examine appearance, (in)action, and interaction aesthetics. Through detailed visual analysis, we unpack masculinities and femininities to theorize the resulting gendering of entrepreneurial aesthetics. In doing so, we consider the role of image networks in the reproduction of neoliberal ideals.

**KEYWORDS**
digital research, entrepreneurship, femininity, masculinity, online research, visual repertoire, visual research

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Our research generates insights into the visual construction of entrepreneurial femininities and masculinities in online spaces. Visual repertoires, cataloging the range and detail of images, have been theorized as significant in understanding the role of imagery in processes of social construction (Van Leeuwen, 2005). We extend this theorization by applying Rose's (2016, p.25) critical visual methodology, with a particular focus on "sites" of both the image (features and content) and circulation (spread and flow). This leads us to propose how these connected networks of images impact meaning, here of the entrepreneur. Our conceptual and empirical attention to these images enables us to

theorize the ways in which gendered assumptions are visually replicated in the production of normative male and female entrepreneurial actors.

Our focus reflects the increasing importance of visualization online (Aiello & Parry, 2020), recognizing that images circulate across multiple sites (Pritchard, 2020; Rose, 2016). This circulation is facilitated by easy access to commercial images online, so that many different users (including mainstream media, company websites, informal news, and personal blogs) can use visuals purporting to represent the everyday subject, here the entrepreneur (Machin, 2004). We use the term commercial to include stock and library images, but also a range of professionally produced images made available online (Machin, 2004; Thurlow et al., 2020). While access to such images was once restricted to those with significant budgets, they are now easily accessed via search engines, tagged for free use, or used unofficially without credit (Pritchard, 2020). Through tracing this extensive use of commercial imagery, we can map connected networks of images and analyze their impact on the visual production of subjects.

To begin this endeavor, our research identifies popular images of entrepreneurs online. We then traced related (suggested by the search engine) and additional (found alongside the popular image being traced) images, resulting in a data set of 248 images. Through this empirical project, we address the theoretical question: How do networks of commercial images online produce gendered entrepreneurs? Our research thus extends the line of enquiry examining media representations of gender in organizations (Jernberg et al., 2020; Nadin et al., 2020) and of entrepreneurship in particular (Smith, 2021).

Organization studies has long attended to gendering and visual representation (Duffy & Hund, 2015) and there has been much consideration of entrepreneurial aesthetics in particular contexts (Elias et al., 2017). However, scholars highlight that gender needs further examination beyond an either/or approach (Connell, 2020) where men are often studied in relation to masculinity and women to femininity (Maaranen & Tienari, 2020). Indeed, it is uncommon that the nexus of gender and entrepreneurship research explicitly examines both to further expose relational complexities. More nuanced approaches are therefore needed as gender, and associated understandings of masculinities and femininities, are situated, reflexive, and mutually reinforcing (Messerschmidt, 2019). Traditionally conceptualized as a dyadic binary—male/female—gendering is not simply a process of labeling. It is a pervasive social, cultural, and economic system within which we position ourselves (and others) in relation to expectations and norms across different realms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Much research has unpacked these norms; exploring how individuals align, resist, or renegotiate gender identities in different contexts. While the potential of "simultaneous and multiple enactments of masculinities and femininities" (Patterson et al., 2012, p.691) is acknowledged, explorations of complexity remain rare yet are critical to our explication of gendering in relation to contemporary entrepreneurship (Lewis et al., 2022). Recognizing concerns arising from this empirical lacuna, our research contributes to theoretical development in proposing how connected networks of images shape understandings of the gendered entrepreneur. Furthermore, we empirically demonstrate how the resulting positionality of masculinity and femininity signifies entrepreneurial ideals.

We attend to entrepreneurship as a focal context for gender studies, perhaps due to the traditional equation of successful, innovative, and growth-oriented entrepreneurship with men (and masculinity). This is additionally significant as the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial endeavor have become extensively valorized within contemporary neoliberal economies (Ahl & Marlow, 2018). Lauded entrepreneurial values have been transposed to all aspects of work and are held as the solution to economic and unemployment pressures, thus entrepreneurial aspiration pervades all aspects of our lives (Bröckling, 2016; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2017; Littler, 2017). Indeed, as we consider across our paper, this spread of aspirational entrepreneurship mirrors the ways in which commercial images permeate online spaces. Both are a constant presence across the wider political economy (Bergeron, 2001), further highlighting the significance of our research in examining image networks. Yet the ways in which gendered assumptions are visually replicated in this production of normative entrepreneurial actors remains underexplored (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018), particularly across online spaces. Nevertheless, as we explore further below, research has usefully progressed understandings of the visual in entrepreneurship, principally in relation to postfeminist aesthetics (Swan, 2017); situated both femininity and masculinity as relevant to female entrepreneurs (Lewis et al., 2022) and

broadened the range of contexts under consideration (Ahl & Marlow, 2018). However, despite recent examinations of visual representations (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Pritchard et al., 2019; Smith, 2021; Swan, 2017), there is a need for further research which attends to both entrepreneurial masculinities and femininities (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018) while reflecting contemporary concerns with imagery online (Aiello & Parry, 2020). To extend this line of enquiry, we review visual representations of both men and women entrepreneurs, unpacking the range of masculine and feminine performances, and propose how connected networks of images shape understandings of the gendered entrepreneur. We next attend to the existing literature, first in relation to visualizing gender and then regarding the visual representation of gendered entrepreneurship. Thereafter, we present our research approach and findings before summarizing our contribution within the discussion and conclusion section of our paper.

## 2 | VISUALIZING GENDER AND GENDERING VISUALIZATION

Gender research has often been (incorrectly) associated with researching women and their gender difference from men. However, research increasingly considers femininity and masculinity as "diverse, differentiated and shifting" (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011, p.634). These complex, nuanced understandings are embraced in our research. This commitment is critical considering post/popular feminism's touting of "'new men' and 'empowered women'" (Pecis & Priola, 2019, p.1414). Concern with female performance of appropriate femininity, characterized by modesty and neatness at work (Mavin & Grandy, 2019), has been accompanied by increasing attention toward male performances of masculinity (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017). Such research has largely addressed confident masculinities and bounded femininities (Lewis et al., 2022) as socially constructed, dynamic, and always located within society (Rumens, 2017). Research converges in its analysis of men doing normative, or "un-doing", masculinized practices (Kelan, 2018), and examining how particular masculinities become socially valued and how they can be accomplished (or not) by both men and women.

Recent research considers masculinity as a contested site whereby hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019) shapes acceptable gendered behavior. This "guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p.77). Theoretical developments have been accompanied by empirical studies scrutinizing gender performances in power lists (Stead & Elliot, 2019), autobiographies (Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2017), television comedy (Pullen & Rhodes, 2013), and media discourse more broadly (Hamilton, 2014). Much of this research has interrogated textual representations, utilizing various forms of discourse analysis to expose power dynamics and subject positioning, while also recognizing the importance of a wide range of media across various online spaces as means of resistance and subversion (Kelan, 2018; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). Such research highlights the discursive connections enrolled in constructing gender (Pritchard et al., 2019).

Since Goffman's (1979) classic work on gender display in commercial adverts, there has been increasing interest in analyzing visual media with lines of enquiry extending across many fields (Davison, 2010; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2016; Rose, 2016). There is widespread recognition that visual media are not innocent bystanders in processes of social construction (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Meyer et al., 2013). Rather, visual presentation is core to these processes. Relatedly, Van Leeuwen's (2005) notion of cataloging highlights the importance of extending investigation beyond particular images in specific contexts, to explore networks of images comprising visual repertoires. Previously attention focused on, in Rose's terms (2016, p.34), "sites of image" in which visual composition (features and content) of a small number of images in a particular context are examined. The gendering of compositional features such as hair (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2021), gaze (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Martínez, 2020), and gesture (Kendon, 2004) has also informed understanding of the role of the visual in social construction. Davison's (2010) portrait analysis (of CEOs in annual reports) is a classic illustration of how focused compositional analysis provides the foundation for semiotic interrogation. Her work analytically extends from the visible to offer a view on how this

can be interpreted and the significance of such interpretation for understandings of gendered visualization (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2016).

Recently, just as discourse analysis has ventured into online spaces to explore textual interconnectedness, so visual studies have followed, not least since, as Banet-Weiser observed, gender has become "hypervisible" (2018, p.7). For some time, this interest focused on visual representation in specific online news media (Mavin et al., 2019) and imagery was seen as contextually fixed (Meyer et al., 2013). However, contemporary considerations of visual media now emphasize on fluidity, highlighting how images spread and flow through both sanctioned and unofficial usage online (Aiello & Parry, 2020). To this end, Rose's critical visual methodology further provides for the consideration of "sites of circulation" (2016, p.34); offering a compelling argument for tracing image networks (Pritchard, 2020). This highlights that images are often no longer fixed in specific contexts, but travel across online environments. In relation to gender, research has focused mainly on social media and self-identified posting of imagery (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Drenten et al., 2020) rather than analyzing wider visual repertoires. However, as we outline below, research thus far points to the relevance and significance of visual modes of understanding and its impact on how entrepreneurship is constructed as a gendered project.

## 3 | THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF GENDERED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There has long been concern that representations of entrepreneurship normalize men and masculinity such that women, and many men, fail to meet the gendered entrepreneurial ideal (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017; Smith, 2021). Moreover, media portrayals of women's entrepreneurship have been found to reinforce gender stereotypes, focus on appearance (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011), and highlight image as instrumental in securing entrepreneurial identity (Pritchard et al., 2019). Indeed, as Mayes et al. (2020) suggest: "constructions of entrepreneurship as a gendered field are not only produced through male and female bodies: equally important are images and representations" (p.1472). Enterprising ideals, such as working on oneself, led Elias et al. (2017, p.5) to suggest we are all "aesthetic entrepreneurs" in these neoliberal times (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Yet perhaps in part because of the presumed association with men and maleness, entrepreneurial masculinity remains largely unexplored (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017). Marlow and Martinez Dy (2018) go so far as to say men are portrayed as "genderless" (p.4). Certainly, when considering male entrepreneurs, visual analyses have often focused on high-profile examples (Boje & Smith, 2010). For example, Smith (2021), used semiotic analysis of visual and textual data from an online blog to explore how elite male entrepreneurial identities are operationalized through aesthetic artifacts of success.

Visual research similarly has unpacked considerations of aesthetics for female entrepreneurs. Swan (2017) presents an in-depth multimodal consideration of a woman's entrepreneurial website drawing attention to "post-feminist stylistics" (p.286). Alexandersson and Kalonaityte (2021, p.416) offer a similarly detailed consideration of "girlhood" suggesting this comprises a "distinct enterprising femininity". Duffy and Hund's (2015) review of online self-presentation of female entrepreneurs noted a lack of diversity and the prevalence of glamorous, thin, white, and young women who were "bound to a capitalist system" (p.9). Relatedly, Smith (2014) utilized montage, noting six visual stereotypes across entrepreneurial websites (business woman, matriarch, diva, CEO fashionista, pink ghetto girl, and poor girl made good). While considering a variety of entrepreneurial contexts, these studies concentrate on selected imagery generated by self-identified entrepreneurs and in some cases, related media coverage.

Thus, while there is a useful line of enquiry developing regarding the visualization of entrepreneurship, this has separated the examination of men and women, focused on particular image sites and on celebrity or self-identified entrepreneurs. Indeed, despite recent examinations of visual representations (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Pritchard et al., 2019; Smith, 2021; Swan, 2017), there is a need for visual research that attends to both masculinity and femininity (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018); while also broadening the types of imagery examined. Here we focus on commercial images, a term which encompasses stock or library images, along with images that might be professionally produced or commercially sourced for a variety of purposes (Machin, 2004; Thurlow et al., 2020). Such images are

often photographic but include graphic representations or combine visual forms to present a recognizable scene using a variety of compositional devices to convey a particular activity, relationship, or mood (Machin, 2004). Commercial stock images are designed to enable the viewer to translate the composition appropriately for the particular topic for which it is used (here, entrepreneurship). Recently we have seen a step change in the range and volume of these images circulating online, not only through authorized use, but also as unofficial use has spread across a wide range of online media (Pritchard, 2020). Commercial images are a critical component of contemporary aesthetic capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), embedded in a neoliberal system, which monetizes aesthetic ideals, the value of which is reinforced through such unofficial use. Indeed, the spread and flow of valued aesthetic assets, even if payment for use is sidestepped, continually reinforces a cultural market place driven by capitalist logic (Bergeron, 2001). The value of imagery spreads beyond a specific instance or a particular use and shapes our understandings of aesthetic norms for subjects such as the entrepreneur (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Elias et al., 2017; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2017).

This is particularly important with the increasing entrepreneurialization of social and political economy (Williams et al., 2021), some suggest binary gender disadvantage has disappeared partly due to feminism's success but also as in neoliberal meritocracy gender difference is, apparently, unimportant (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this meritocracy, "we need to work hard and market ourselves in the right way to achieve success" (Littler, 2017, p.17) while entrepreneurial ideas are held to light the way to health, wealth, and happiness. Neoliberalism thus emphasizes individual autonomy as being, or aspiring to be, entrepreneurial; individuals are accountable and must continually self-regulate and self-improve (Bröckling, 2016). Personal success across all spheres of activity, but particularly economic activity, rest on entrepreneurial achievement (Williams et al., 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that online spaces overflow with entrepreneurial role models, advice, inspiration (Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Smith, 2021; Swan, 2017), and related imagery. Such spaces "are inevitably an influential part of that cultural discursive milieu, shaping, reinforcing, and legitimizing a stereotypical entrepreneurial identity" (Anderson & Warren, 2011, p.592). The increased availability of commercial imagery related to entrepreneurship is therefore not coincidental, rather it is bound within a capitalist logic that drives our pursuit of enterprise as a means of freedom and fulfillment (Williams et al., 2021). This is the context for our own empirical endeavor as set out below.

## 4 | RESEARCH APPROACH

Our approach was inspired by various visual theorists (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Davison, 2010; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2016) and particularly informed by Rose's (2016) critical visual methodology and analytic framework, highlighting the need to attend to both sites of image and circulation. Our approach thus involved identifying popular commercial images then tracing networks of images online, using a three-stage process:

1. Selecting "top ten" images via an image search engine, using the search terms "male entrepreneur" and "female entrepreneur".
2. Tracing search engine recommended "related images" offered for each top image.
3. Tracing top images to their appearance online and collecting "additional images" from entrepreneur-related online media.

We used Google's image search, as the most common search engine, thus replicating typical search practice and entry to online image networks (Aiello & Parry, 2020). After testing, "male entrepreneur" and "female entrepreneur" were used as the search terms. Given we planned to trace these images, it was practical to start with top or popular results here rated by Google's algorithmic criteria. We recognize an inherent platformization and note that we cannot escape algorithmic influence, rather we follow the advice to carefully detail our research process (Pearce et al., 2020; Pritchard, 2020). Specifically, we cleared browser history before and between searches and sourced a device that was not actively used by any of the authors at the time of the study. Each of the above three stages was repeated twice,

first for images of female entrepreneurs and then for male entrepreneurs. Institutional ethical approval was granted with an agreed protocol to be sensitive to different online spaces. Two of the top female images were of named entrepreneurs, and in line with our ethical approval; these images were removed from the data set. This further reflects our interest in tracing networked images across a variety of online spaces, rather than focusing on specific or self-identified entrepreneurs as per Swan's (2017) or Smith's (2021) approach.

Stage 2 involved tracing image networks first via Google's recommended "related images" link for each of the top female and male images. From the search results, selecting a top image allows you to open a new window showing the first 12 "related images"; we downloaded these for each top image. This provided a related image set, which after removing duplicates, comprised of 145 images for analysis. In stage 3, we further followed image networks using Google's reverse image search (uploading jpeg files) to trace the top images, resulting in many potential sites for investigation. We excluded links to photographic sources (i.e., repeats of image only), use on social media or other web profiles (e.g., avatars), results not in English, results where the image was not evident, duplicate results, pages/posts not found, flagged as private, deleted, secure, and/or warnings of malicious content. From the remaining 238 sites, we downloaded the online material (images, text, video, etc.). After cataloging, all authors reviewed this material and coded those related to entrepreneurship resulting in 86 sites, which encompassed mainstream news, entrepreneurship-focused news, service, funding and training sites focused on entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial organization websites and other entrepreneurial online media. While these overall data are part of a wider project, here our analysis focuses on imagery. Of these 86 sites, the original top image traced was the sole image in 60 cases. From the remaining 26 sites, 85 additional images were downloaded. As per our discussion of ethics above, we continued to exclude images of clearly named individuals, removing six female and three male images from our analysis. Given the potential copyright control and cost of images of well-known entrepreneurs, it is perhaps not surprising that these did not feature more widely in our data; however, there was considerable unofficial (without credit, see e.g., Figures 3 and 4) use of images across many sites. The data set is summarized in Figure 1.

Our analytic undertaking draws on qualitative approaches to analyzing images combining compositional, thematic, and semiotic considerations (Davison, 2010; Pritchard, 2020; Rose, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). We retained a focus on the visual by actively working with image montages rather than converting images to textual or numerical representations. Montage refers to the making of patchworks or galleries as images are continually sorted and resorted during the analysis process (Smith, 2021). Initially, this is based on an overall visual impression but as analysis becomes more detailed, montages focus on specific features or bring together contrasting representations. First, we produced six digital montages that mapped composition and visual features for gender/stage combinations (Rose, 2016). Having reviewed this mapping, we applied Davison's (2010, p.165) "visual portrait codes" (see Table 2; these codes enable consideration of the physical, dress, interpersonal, and spatial/prop aspects of images) to further unpack top images. We further interrogated gaze (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Martínez, 2020) and gesture (Goffman, 1979; Kendon, 2004) across all images. The findings from this analysis provide a compositional overview of the visual



Total Visual Data Set: 248 Images

145 related images
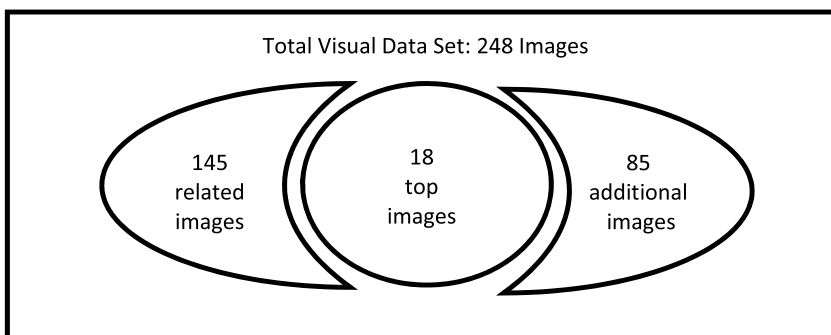
18 top images

85 additional images

FIGURE 1    Visual data set overview

repertoire. In line with our attention to sites of circulation, we further examined how compositions evolved across the network of images encountered among the related and additional data. These analyses are presented in Section 5.1 below.

Next, we undertook further thematic visual (Rose, 2016) and semiotic analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2005). This involved remaking montages in new ways; foregrounding and backgrounding different visual features for consideration (Pritchard, 2020), applying Rose's (2016) key areas of compositional analysis (feature, color, spatial organization, light, and mood) as a prompt. Through our collaborative and iterative analytic process, challenging and questioning each other's interpretations, we homed in on entrepreneurial appearances, (in)action, and interaction as thematic foci in relation to our research question. These were analytically further interrogated via semiotic analysis, applying Van Leeuwen's (2005) suggestion to focus on what is visible, how this can be interpreted, and the significance of these interpretations. We used these as prompts in developing analytic notes as we revisited each montage in turn. These analyses are presented in Section 5.2 below.

There is much discussion about how researchers present visual research in publications, from both an ethical and copyright perspective; and in sum, there is no commonly accepted approach. We illustrate our findings below, using a visual extract approach (Aiello & Parry, 2020), allowing us to quote images as part of our analytic argument, and enabling us to draw on a range of images; this falls within fair use from a copyright perspective (Pritchard, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that our approach reflexively engages with research subjectivity. With this in mind, we acknowledge that our own subjectivities and personal experiences shape this research and our analytic process. Analytically, reflexivity involved independent engagement with these visual data followed by collective discussions. Reflecting these discussions, we aimed to have included a reflexive thread through our analysis and we return to this in our discussion.

## 5 | FINDINGS

We present our findings in two parts, offering an initial overview of these visual data before unpacking key aspects in more detail.

## 5.1 | Overall visual repertoire

We first review the 18 top images before unpacking the related and additional image sets in examining this compositional network. All the top male and female images were solo photographs, presenting the lone entrepreneur. These were also young, well-groomed, attractive individuals—whether male or female. However, we identified differences in terms of subject gaze, pose, and activity between male and female images (Table 1).

Subject gaze is compositionally critical (Thurlow et al., 2020), guiding viewer attention (Aiello & Parry, 2020). Gaze is classified by direction and engagement as intradiegetic (within image, on stage, and toward seen feature), extradiegetic (outside the image and off stage) or extradiegetic direct (demand gaze, the subject makes eye contact with the viewer) (Martínez, 2020). Demand gaze dominated male images, often combined with a folded-arm stance, but always with the figure compositionally foregrounded, portraying confidence and authority. Two male images achieved a portrayal of confidence via an extradiegetic gaze, one looking from a window while commanding space with a wide pose (see Table 1), the other looking over a cityscape (while adjusting his cufflinks). These offer alternate but equivalent presentations of dominant masculinity (suit, commanding space, and posture) to the folded-arm, demand-gaze poses. These men all stood apart from, and in front of, their background (office or cityscape), shown in command of their settings. However, they are not shown engaging in any work activity related to these settings.

One female image mirrored the male folded-arm, demand-gaze pose, while a second showed demand-gaze composition but seated behind a desk, half-hidden by a screen. This containment (by furniture and technology) was

**TABLE 1**  Top images

| | Male | | Female | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Solo, young, attractive Folded-arms, demand-gaze, no activity (4) |  | Solo, young, attractive Demand-gaze, no/unclear activity (2) |  |
| | Solo, young, attractive Demand-gaze, no activity (4) |  | Solo, young, attractive Not-to-camera with tech in office (3) |  |
| | Solo, young, attractive Not-to-camera, no activity (2) |  | Solo, young, attractive Not-to-camera, other office activity (3) |  |

*Note*: Table 1 Image Credits starting top left: Getty, Getty, Shutterstock, No credit, Shutterstock, AyaImages: Adobe.

characteristic of female imagery. Four top female images featured an intradiegetic (within image) gaze drawing our attention to their activity: office-based, at a desk or whiteboard writing, and using a laptop. Such activities (reading, typing, and writing) dominated these compositions, with women sitting behind desks and laptops, in contrast to the foregrounding of male figures. We note the presentation of office activity in female images to convey entrepreneurship. In contrast, compositionally the confident pose can stand for entrepreneurship on its own within male images. These analytic observations were subsequently developed via portrait analysis; see Table 2 below.
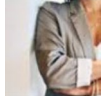
Business wear dominates and clothing was generally monochrome or muted across male and female images. There was a similar use of light coupled with smiling faces, which created a positive atmosphere. In addition to these attractive young men and women, we noted some ethnic diversity. However, any diversity was backgrounded due to consistency of presentation (smiling, well groomed, similar style and color clothing, and lighting). Through portraiture analysis, contrasting gaze and activity were further confirmed as significant differences between male and female representations. Both montage and portrait analysis highlighted how image cropping obscures some aspects of the entrepreneur while also accentuating other aspects for scrutiny; we return to this below.

We now extend our analysis, tracing composition across both the related and additional image sets, beginning with the male images (Table 3) below. This starts with top image composition (from Tables 1 and 2 for male and female data respectively), then extends to include detail from related and additional montages.

For male images, the three main compositions of top images continued across both related and additional images. Demand gaze, folded-arm or other non-active pose continued; however, there was an increased range of "solo not-to-camera, no activity" featuring new outside settings and more use of windows. Compositionally, windows represent creativity and imagination, and provide for (literal and metaphorical) reflection. Moreover, the categorization of "no activity" became more complex as subjects moved outside. Images featured men in business attire, sometimes holding a file and appearing to pause while walking. This outdoor-but-work context was unique to male images, and contrasts with women contained within offices and behind desks; although as explored below, some male images included office technology.

As we analyzed male-related and additional images, we identified three further compositions. The first of these, "solo with technology" highlighted work activity for the first time, but this did not extend to the wider range of office activities found in female images. Technology appeared in various forms (phones, tablets, and laptops), usually accompanied by a smiling man (sometimes demand gaze and sometimes directed to the technology) particularly in the related images. While there was less technology in the additional images, a small montage we labeled "always working" featured men and laptops in unusual settings for example, on a rooftop or in bed. This composition did not appear in female images.

**TABLE 2** Portrait analysis

| Male | Female |
|---|---|
| **Physical** | |
| Individual shots. The majority are young, and at least seven are white. Short, generally slicked back, hair with eight showing close-cropped, tidy, facial hair. Arms are folded or hands are placed, only two men hold items (a tablet and a folder). Static poses, mainly waist up with two full length shots. | All head and shoulder shots, with one to the waist, all but two are sitting (behind desks). Half are white, all appear youthful and attractive. Hair is neatly styled, and four have long hair draped over their shoulder as they lean forward, one twirls her hair in her fingers, three have shoulder length curly hair. |
| **Dress** | |
| Three in formal suits, four in smart shirts and three more casually dressed (t shirt/jumper), mainly black or pale colours but one bright jumper and one red shirt. | Clothes are all plain, one colour. Either white/light or black, business casual with two wearing jackets. Little jewellery, three wear glasses. |
| **Interpersonal** | |
| Eight demand-gaze and two off-camera (extradiegetic). Those looking to the camera are smiling or positive, although three have a more serious expression. | Two engage with the viewer (demand-gaze), four focus on work (intradiegetic), two look off-camera (extradiegetic). Four are smiling, including the two demand-gaze poses. The others seem to be concentrating. |
| **Spatial** | |
| Light filled backgrounds, four outdoors or near a large window. Men are foregrounded, four in front of busy spaces, a lot of desks indicating an office or a retail context. The men seem situated, but in front of the action. No images show activity related to the setting. | Four concentrate on tasks, on laptops, reading or writing on a whiteboard, interacting with objects and contained by their space. Two sit behind laptops. In three images, light plays off glass windows and walls. Coffee cups feature in three images, three women hold pens. The backgrounds are generic offices, one featuring stacked boxes. One graphic background. |

*Note*: Table 2 Image Credits starting top left: Getty, Getty, no credit, PeopleImages, Shutterstock, AyaImages: Adobe, Getty, no credit.

Two further compositions represented a fundamental change of form. First, the individual portrait is transformed by additional characters (with others). However, this category included only five images, two being comedic poses (shouting through a megaphone and yoga on desks). These potentially present group work as a less serious aspect of male entrepreneurship, as team working is mocked. A second change is the addition of graphics, objects, and symbols.

**T A B L E 3**  Tracing composition across male images

| Top | Related | Additional |
|---|---|---|
| <- Solo, demand-gaze, folded-arms, no activity -> | | |
| <- Solo demand-gaze, other pose, no activity -> | | |
| <- Solo not-to-camera, no activity -> | | |
| | Solo with technology | |
| | | With others |
| | | Graphics, objects, and symbols |

**T A B L E 4**  Tracing composition across female images

| Top | Related | Additional |
|---|---|---|
| <- Solo, demand-gaze, no/unclear activity -> | | |
| <- Solo with tech in office -> | | |
| <- Solo not to camera, other office activity. -> | | |
| | With others (office or specific work) | |
| | Graphical background | Graphics, objects and symbols |

Here male hands hold chess pieces, clocks, money, and in one case, a plant. Thus time, money, strategy, and even growth become symbolized, representing entrepreneurial success.

We now consider the related and additional female images (Table 4). Across these data, the situated woman (particularly in an office) continued to be a significant visualization. In contrast to male images, women were contained inside when working, the only two "outdoor" images showing leisure activities. Women remained active, busy even, using technology but also writing (including on whiteboards) and reading. While laptops were the dominant technology, phones and tablets also featured. Some women were shown concentrating or puzzling over their work, with poses such as head in hands, chin propped on hands, and a finger to the lips. This presentation of puzzlement contrasts with representations of thoughtful reflection in male images, as we explore further below.

However, we also found seven instances of women in the demand gaze, folded-arm pose that is often prevalent in male images. We noted that this more masculine pose was seemingly desirable for reinforcing the image of the female entrepreneur. There were also many more group compositions than in the male data. As for so many female images, these were set within an office; however, alternative work depictions (in additional images) included childcare, education, medical (including elder care), food, and personal care. Caring is thus positioned as a dominant alternative entrepreneurial context to the office. While graphics and objects appeared in additional images, these were both less consistent and fewer than in male images. They included infograms, quotes, word clouds, and cartoons, some of which were explicitly feminine (e.g., shaped as a pink stiletto, and as a pop art image, see Figure 3). In tracing these images, we highlight both the continuation of visual form and divergence as we extended our consideration of data types. These images taken together form a networked visual repertoire of entrepreneurship, which we unpack further below.

## 5.2 | Entrepreneurial appearance, (in)action, and interaction

In this section, we focus on three key aspects: appearance, activity (and inactivity), and interactions. We first consider appearance and these images of young, well-groomed, and attractive individuals. As previously mentioned, we

viewed ethnic diversity as subtle, blended, and backgrounded by the consistency of dress, pose, and spatial composition. This sameness allows a claim of diverse representation but within a safe and familiar visualization. For example, while there were images of black women, there was no variety of black hair styles (such as braids or knotted styles).

From our viewing, we did not identify any significant markers of age or disability. Across all 248 images, only three men and one woman had gray hair displayed. All bodies appeared fit, slim, and healthy with glowing skin, glossy hair, and upright body posture. This suggests that other bodies risk interrogation or rejection in relation to entrepreneurial identity. Moreover, presentational homogeneity seemed at odds with the entrepreneur as exceptional or extraordinary; particularly, given the prevalence of the dark business suit and muted business casual (beige and gray). Such unremarkable clothing allowed the fit, young body wearing it to stand out. Thus, we locate and imbue these fit and healthy bodies with entrepreneurial success.

Well-groomed, attractive physical appearance featured across both male and female images, with styled hair and white teeth particularly visible. Grooming is a typical focus of self-improvement within a neoliberal frame; thus, it is perhaps unsurprizing these entrepreneurs appear so highly groomed. As they so visibly succeed in this neoliberal performance of the self, they can be presented as credible entrepreneurs. This fits with wider notions of success, as these individuals appear to have time and money to spend ensuring they look good. While attractive appearance featured across the images, we suggest that masculinity and femininity remain significant visual markers for the male and female entrepreneurs, respectively.

Shiny and glossy hair was a marker of femininity in female images (Figure 2), featuring long, loose styles, often falling over their shoulders. To us (having longer hair ourselves), this accentuated hair as a visual presentation of femininity, while being impractical for everyday work. Such hairstyles do more than signify femininity; they act to undermine the seriousness of women's work. In male images, well-groomed facial hair drew our attention. Facial hair has long been associated with presentations of masculinity, here reinforcing the masculine entrepreneur (Herrick et al., 2015). Since excess hair remains taboo for women, they are excluded from appropriating this aesthetic.

Having highlighted the visual significance of gaze, activity, and pose, we extend consideration of (in)action by unpacking relational placement to others, objects, and contexts. Across all 248 images, only men appeared outside, often depicting progress literally (climbing steps and walking into or across a setting). The body is placed in a context that is both representational and symbolic of entrepreneurial activity to confirm the subject position. If men are striding out or in control, the women seemed comparatively less agential, less in charge. As noted previously, women were altogether more situated and bounded, more frequently presented with others, within an office, or behind a desk. Perhaps this related to a perceived need to situate working women outside the home, away from domesticity. However, the combination of office work, feminine appearance, and less confident poses, appeared in stark contrast to the portrayal of male entrepreneurs. Further, when other work contexts were introduced, they were stereotypically gendered; for example, a male was shown in an engineering context, whereas a woman was shown in a care role or applying make-up. These images thus steer us toward accepting gendered forms of entrepreneurship and of confirming traditional associations of femininity with women and masculinity with men.

Hands and gesture are significant in depicting both activity and interaction (Goffman, 1979; Kendon, 2004). Female images were differentiated in how hands held apparently inconsequential objects (particularly cups), touched their hair, or faces. In these instances, hands emphasize femininity, while the inclusion of cups reintroduce domestic references. Although there was only one image of a woman playing with her hair (Figure 2), the dominance of long
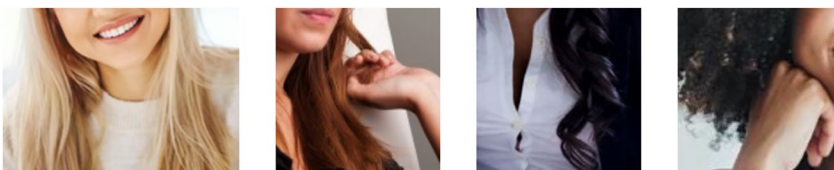


FIGURE 2    Glossy hair. Image credits from left: Getty, no credit, Shutterstock, no credit
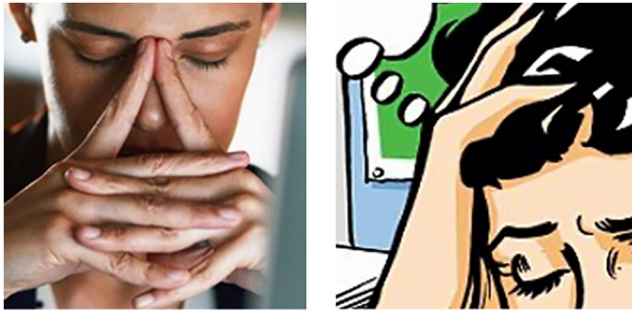
**FIGURE 3**   Female hands. Image credits from left: no credit, no credit
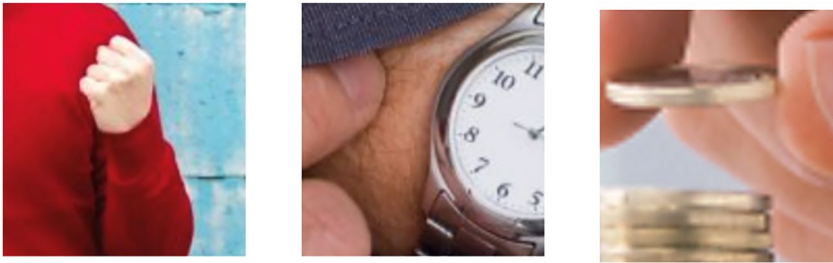


**FIGURE 4**   Male hands. Image credits from left: no credit, no credit, no credit

hair flowing forward across the shoulder implies this as an ever-present possibility, further emphasizing femininity. Moreover, women's hands often reinforced the emotive content of the image, to show tiredness, frustration, or puzzlement (Figure 3), emotions that were absent from male images.

Men never touched their hair or held their head. Hands were folded or placed to claim ownership of a space (see also Table 1). Furthermore, objects generally associated with time or money were often being held by male hands (Figure 4).

Male hands demonstrated success, highlighting the criticality of achievement for the neoliberal entrepreneur. Such success was also reflected in men's expansive stance, arms spread wide, or in a nonchalant stretch with the head leaning back on cupped hands. In contrast success, in female images was a more constrained (feminine and dainty) affair, with arms kept tight to the body and a small fist slightly raised in victory. We suggest that these depictions soften female but underline male entrepreneurship, while also reinforcing stereotypical gender boundaries.

# 6  |  DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We now explore how our findings answer our research question: how do networks of commercial images online produce gendered entrepreneurs? We highlight the aesthetic idealization of entrepreneurship and how commercial imagery's representation of "ordinary" men and women intersects to produce entrepreneurs as gendered subjects. Embracing Rose's (2016) sites of the image and circulation, we mapped networks of commercial images. Starting with Google's popular images, we followed connections by tracing entrepreneurial representations across different online spaces. Our examination of both male and female images generates insight into how this visual repertoire (Van Leeuwen, 2005)—specifically the (re)presentation of appearance, (in)action, and interaction—reproduces gendered assumptions of the normative entrepreneurial actor. We suggest these networks shape how we should

"market ourselves" (Littler, 2017, p.17), reinforcing valued aesthetics within contemporary neoliberalism. Below, we further explicate our contribution by expanding on three aspects of our research:

- Shaping the entrepreneur: the impact of networks of images.
- Unpacking femininities and masculinities.
- The gendering of entrepreneurial ideals.

## 6.1 | Shaping the entrepreneur: The impact of networks of images

Existing research has aptly evidenced how images of celebrity and self-identified entrepreneurs in particular online spaces reproduce stereotypes (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Smith, 2021; Swan, 2017). Our work extends these existing conceptualizations by demonstrating how networks of commercial images online reproduce neoliberal agendas, resulting in the pervasiveness of particular entrepreneurial ideals (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2017). We trace how these visual constructions permeate online, explicating how visual repertoires are not static caches of knowledge, but are continually reproduced through their interconnectedness (Aiello & Parry, 2020). These networks of images do not simply reflect but reinforce entrepreneurial ideology across the wider political economy (Bergeron, 2001).

We offer insight into the mechanisms of this visual reproduction of entrepreneurship. For example, we show how the dominance of solo portraits was visually significant in confirming entrepreneurship as an individual endeavor (Nadin et al., 2020; Swan, 2017). This extends discussions highlighting the impact of neoliberalism on forming a distinctively acceptable subject: the entrepreneur (Bröckling, 2016); a subject who is held accountable, must continually scrutinize and work on all aspects of themselves, including appearance (Ahl & Marlow, 2018; Jernberg et al., 2020). Here such scrutiny is confirmed in the visual composition of these portraits, often cropped to enable close inspection of face, body, hair, and teeth. As we unpack further below, these detailed features become significant to understandings of entrepreneurial femininity and masculinity.

Moreover, we show how images offer accessible representations of "everyday" entrepreneurs (Lewis et al., 2022). At first glance, these images conform in their foregrounding of gendered identity, muted tones and symbols of growth, money and success. This accessibility provides the foundation for networks of images to be a source of meaning making, shaping what a real, everyday entrepreneur looks like and how this can be achieved (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Elias et al., 2017). For instance, image composition works in reproducing the entrepreneur as an aesthetically gendered subject. Below we explore this through a discussion of how images construct distinctive entrepreneurial femininities and masculinities (Lewis et al., 2022).

## 6.2 | Unpacking entrepreneurial femininities and masculinities

Our findings demonstrate how entrepreneurs are constructed as aesthetically replicable. However, through our detailed analysis of 248 images, we go further in explicating the often-complex ways femininity and masculinity are visually produced. We contribute to existing work on, and understandings of, images of female entrepreneurs (Smith, 2014, 2021; Swan, 2017) by evidencing the detailed visual gendering of entrepreneurship; considering both masculinity and femininity (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Hamilton, 2014).

Our analysis of hair provides a complex consideration of the (re)presentations of masculinity and femininity. The visual representation of male facial hair, and the femininity of long, flowing hair, reinforced gender norms (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2019). For example, while there were images of men without facial hair, there were none of longer haired men, who might have been read as more feminine within this visual repertoire (Herrick et al., 2015). Additionally, while there were images of black women, there was no aesthetic variation (there was no braided hair e.g.,). This visualization offered a means of showing diversity without straying too far

from the dominant feminine aesthetic of long hair. Indeed, this highlights the invisibility of difference in these images beyond gender binaries, as there was very limited representation of diverse bodies (Pecis & Priola, 2019).

However, femininity is more than luscious locks (Mayes et al., 2020; Swan, 2017); gaze, pose, and material composition were significant in the constructions of appropriate feminine and masculine performances. We analyze how hands, their gesture, placement, and touch acted to further establish gender boundaries (touching hair, holding clocks, etc.) (Goffman, 1979; Kendon, 2004). Men were more often in the foreground, looking directly and standing with arms folded, presenting the confident masculine entrepreneur (Giazitoglu & Down, 2017; Smith, 2021), reinforced by graphic imagery of time, money, and growth. While there were instances of this confident pose in female images, these were exceptional and not reinforced across image networks. Indeed, female entrepreneurs are more frequently presented in group compositions, bounded by office furniture, and performing mundane tasks. Collaborative images of women reinforce assumptions about women's strengths (i.e., good communicators, caring, and collaborative), while also suggesting they need support to succeed as an entrepreneur (Ahl & Marlow, 2018; Swan, 2017). Such imagery is in juxtaposition with neoliberalized entrepreneurial discourses that construct entrepreneurship as an individual (and empowering) endeavor (Ahl & Marlow, 2018; Bröckling, 2016). Instead, images produce a visual repertoire that works in legitimizing the normative entrepreneur as male and alone (Hamilton, 2014). This emphasizes a traditionally dichotomous portrayal of gender (Connell, 2020), since while men and women are both subjected to the same idealized body representation, they are also gendered.

## 6.3 | The gendering of entrepreneurial ideals

Here, we combine our insights on networks of images and the detailed explication of entrepreneurial masculinities and femininities to outline the impact of this gendering of entrepreneurial ideals. We have offered insight into how the visualization of entrepreneurs online permeates meanings of who or what an entrepreneur should (or should not) be (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Banet-Weiser, 2018). This normatively affirms heightened entrepreneurial masculinity (Connell, 2020; Maaranen & Tienari, 2020) via networks of commercial images that are easily accessible, both via their widespread availability online, unrestricted and accessible by search engines, and their visual relatability. Therefore, we suggest entrepreneurial meanings proliferate and become idealized through these interconnected networks.

Since enterprising discourse positions us all as "aesthetic entrepreneurs" (Elias et al., 2017, p.5) these images set clear goals for us all to work toward if we are to be seen as successful (Baker & Walsh, 2018). We propose that these goals regulate appearance, weaving a web of gendered entrepreneurial ideals that we must all achieve. Moreover, we extend understandings by showing how detailed aesthetics play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial ideals. Comparatively, despite seemingly representing the everyday at a surface level, via detailed analysis, we show how these images are so far removed from the diversity of everyday experience as to be unachievable. This enables scrutiny to be leveled, though differently, at (and crucially by), both men and women who do not conform. In this way, we will always find ourselves and most others, entrepreneurially vulnerable, setting up a never-ending pursuit of self-improvement (Bröckling, 2016). By making these ideals analytically visible, we evidence how achieving an appropriate gendered aesthetic legitimizes who a successful entrepreneur should be in neoliberal times (Elias et al., 2017). This confirms the work involved in achieving a recognized performance; work that is more complex and more challenging for those who find it difficult or resist conforming (Kelan, 2018).

In summary, we highlight our overall contribution to studies recognizing the importance and impact of visualization online (Aiello & Parry, 2020; Thurlow et al., 2020) and develop understandings of a complex visual repertoire by tracing networks of images online. As recommended for online research, we provided a detailed account of our approach, recognizing the challenges of accessing, working with and publishing web images, and the inherent platformization of research (Pearce et al., 2020).

Throughout we have actively engaged with our subjectivities as researchers (Rose, 2016). We are White Western women, diverse at the intersecting levels of identity (e.g., age and sexuality) and fully recognize that our personal

experiences shape the research process from inception to publication. Across this project, we have engaged in much discussion with each other and, particularly facilitated by presentations at academic and practitioner conferences, with others. Through continuous reflexive discussion, we learned more about these images, ourselves, and each other. By including visual extracts, we also ask readers to engage reflexively, recognizing that our account is but one story that can be told. We hope that our reflexive methodological approach will provide support for other researchers exploring online imagery (Pritchard, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are also opportunities to extend our story through further research which considers the use of different image forms across various sites (such as social media), alongside multimodal analysis that considers how images, singularly and together, work in combination with textual representations. Additionally, future research could further consider the impact of this at the individual level across different contexts (Kelan, 2018), including our own use in academia as we often supplement our research and teaching with hastily sourced images from the same popular Internet search engine used in our study. This work has prompted us to review our own practice in this respect. Overall, this highlights the need for gender, work, and organization scholars to attend to networks of images within academia as well as exploring visualization across different online sites of practice.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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